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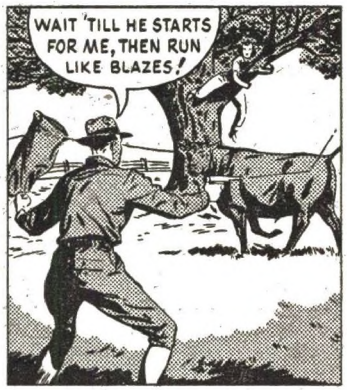

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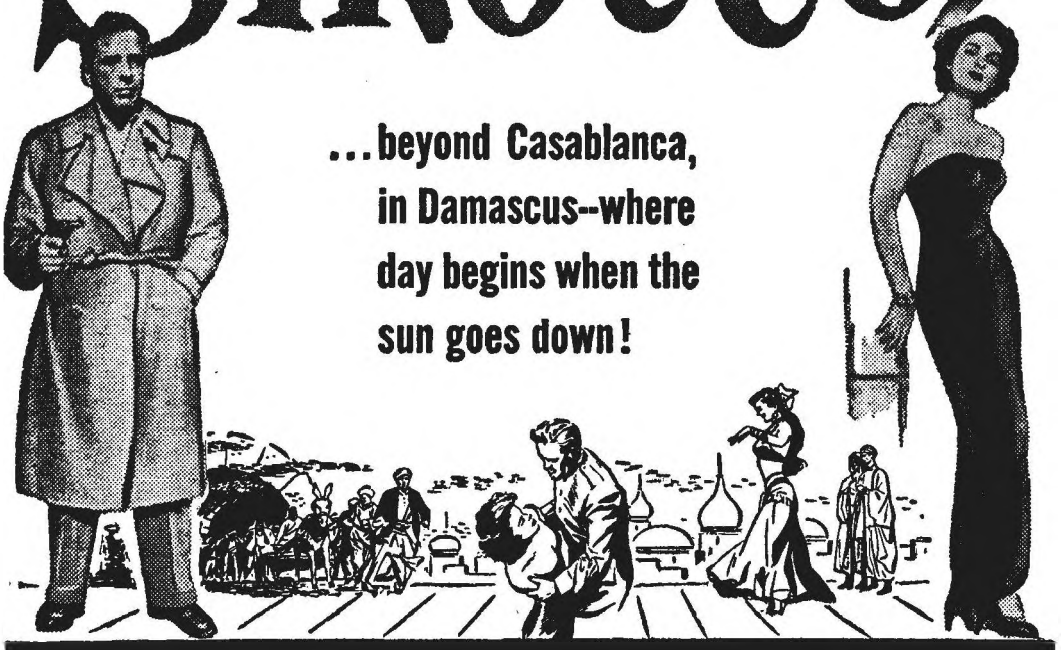

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KING OF BOOTSTRAP

Tom Kinsella was the poorest rancher in Bootstrap Valley . . . he had money, land, cattle . . . everything—except a friend.

By BART CASSIDY

THE main trouble with Tom Kinsella was that he'd moved too fast. From a kid bronc-buster in Texas, he'd risen—by dint of hard-sweating work, a ruthless domineering nature, and shrewdness—to be king of Bootstrap Valley in Idaho. All that—in ten years!

Tom Kinsella was pretty much like the wild and wilful broncs he'd snapped, the money from which had given him his start. He'd never beaten a horse; he reserved all the fire and iron of his flaring temper to use against men over whose bodies he'd climbed to his success.

Now, still a young man, he owned not only the lush Bootstrap range, but, through the banks in which he held an interest, he owned mortgages on most of the little spreads thereabouts. Yet his only acquaintance with his neighbors was seeing their names written on the mortgage contracts.

Bill Evans was one of those small-spread ranchers, fighting desperately to keep his foothold in the Valley. A slow and simple man, Bill Evans rode one day to the big ranch house to ask Kinsella a favor. He wanted Kinsella to join them all in helping the Widow Hargraves round up her small herd.

Kinsella all but laughed in the man's face. Evans had a hell of a nerve, Kinsella thought, to ask that kind of favor from a gent as big and busy as he was! As for Evans, it was all he could do to keep from bending the barrel of his old hogleg over the arrogant head of the range-boss.

Yet, for all his vast holdings, Kinsella was not satisfied. He wanted something more: to be looked up to by men—not as a friend, for he had little knowledge of friendship—but as a leader, a powerful living force to be felt throughout the cattle frontier. To that end, he ran for sheriff against fat, easy-going old Lars Mainwearing, letting the range know that it was time old Lars stepped down and Kinsella took his place. And out of deference to future voters, he let the interest-dates on his mortgages slide until after the election.

Yet, at the outcome, Mainwearing polled over a thousand votes; Kinsella less than a hundred.

Kinsella was the first to shake old Mainwearing's hand, and tell him that the best man had won. But Kinsella was used to having to fight for what he got. And in this case, his first attack was directed at the voters who had failed him—and who'd fallen behind in the interest they owed to him.

He took one family's herd. Another—a man and his frail, overworked wife—saw their ramshackle log cabin and a few horses go under the sheriff's hammer. Then it was that Bill Evans made his second call on Kinsella.

Evans' stubbled face was red, as his heavy, work-muscled shoulders pushed through the door. He threw a sweaty wad of bills on the table.

"Here's your money for the interest on my place, Kinsella. The only reason I'm payin' it is because I want to give them poor folks a place to stay until they get on their feet. But I got a bullet-welcome for you, waitin' with your name on it!" He slammed outside.

Tom Kinsella had other things to keep him busy after that. Something was happening to the range, and to cattle. Beef prices were going to hell. During that year, Kinsella saw his vast fortune dwindle. Then his range began to go to support his wild, frantic attempt to recoup his money.

He sold off his winter feed, stacked and under tarpaulin, for just enough to see him through. His cowhands he'd long since let go.

Then it happened one late September dusk when he was riding back from town.

(Please continue on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

Just as Kinsella reached the crest of the trail, he saw that red glow against the star-studded velvet sky. He jammed in the spurs.

The blaze he'd seen was the feed, all right. Kinsella was out of the saddle, running like a madman into the house for blankets and water. He'd save that feed, and then take blood-settlement from Bill Evans!

It was a mad, insane thing to do—to try to fight that raging fire single-handed. But Tom Kinsella fought that desperate, losing fight, cursing and reviling Evans' bunch of ranchers as long as he had any breath left.

Then he stopped, staring from smoke-red eyes. The fire was actually checked, and it wasn't burned out! Wildly he ran around to that part of the stacks where clouds of steam were rising. There were Bill Evans, Len Murcheson, Frog-Eye Thompson and half a dozen others working like grim demons. *For him!* Fighting his fire!

When, at last it was over, when only a small bit of feed remained, he went over, his knees shaking, his tongue dry in his mouth, to thank those fire-blackened, weary men. He invited them to the house for a bottle.

They heard him out silently, then Bill Evans said, "I'd rather drink from a poison well than touch a bottle of yore likker, Kinsella. And never bother to thank us, neither. We'd of done the same for a yellow dog. Mebbe you can't get it through your thick, conceited skull, but we weren't helpin' *you* —we were helpin' the range. A fire like this—"

But Tom Kinsella, his shoulders bowed, his eyes strangely stinging, had turned away and was walking slowly and alone up the hill. . . .

That winter Tom Kinsella lost his ranch and what was left of his cows. He stayed drunk in town. Then he came back to the ten little acres of land he still owned. He started building a small house from logs that he cut himself. He got lame and sore and more exhausted than he'd ever been since he could remember. But he discovered the rare exultation that comes with sweating work and seeing something that a man makes with his own hands rise from the ground.

One time when he'd left his half-finished cabin, he rode down, dead tired, to the valley. Seeing signs of life in old Len Murcheson's little spread, he stopped to watch a few rough broncs that Len was trying to get halter-broke.

Len had gotten thrown, but gamely rose up on his ancient bowed legs and tried again. When Tom asked Len if he could lend him a hand, Len grinned wryly.

"Heard you got down to your last million acres, Mister Kinsella. I can't pay nothin', but come ahead—if you think you got the stuff to stick."

Tom Kinsella came on. And he stuck through three of the toughest fighting outlaw fuzz-tails he'd ever tried to fork. When he was through, old Murcheson was grinning and calling him Tom, and inviting him to dinner.

It was funny, Kinsella thought, putting the finishing touches on his rude little cabin, but now—when he was really busy—he had time to work with his neighbors. As when he showed the Widow Hargraves how to build the little house she was trying to nail together. . . .

Tom Kinsella, primarily a cowman, gentled half-broke broncs for five dollars a head, instead of breaking them for ten. And most of that money was paid in calves or yearlings, none of which were too sound.

At the end of the first year he was running part of his cattle on shares and leasing land with only his promise to pay for it. But somehow, he was making progress.

Then, early one morning when Tom was putting on the fire-blackened coffee-pot, a bunch of riders called on him. Bill Evans was in the lead.

"Sheriff Lars Mainwearing told me he wants powerful to resign, Tom," said Evans. "We was wondering if you'd like the job. If it was plumb necessary, I reckon maybe your neighbors would help you. . . ."

"Who—me?" asked Tom Kinsella, who now didn't want the office of sheriff for the glory, but who desperately needed the money.

"Yes. We want a lawman who'll help folks, like old Lars did, instead of killin' 'em," Bill Evans said. "You, bein' sort of the friendliest man on the range. . . ."

Then Tom Kinsella, ex-range king, smiled for the first time in long, bitter months. For he knew then that he'd really come back. . . .

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Soft-spoken, dynamite-fisted Jim Green wanted only the hide of Lee Sanker, but he found that first he'd have to lick a brawling, lawless boomtown, and tame a girl as tough as the town.

A BOOMTOWN —

While a hundred eyes bugged, he touched the burning end of the cigar to the fuse.

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

CHAPTER 1 Dangerous Dude

There were lots of men that made a bigger fuss on entering Garson City than Jim Green did. But few stamped the place harder with their brands.

It took a lot of man to stand out in Garson City. The opening of the silver mines had made it into a boomtown that needed a lot of anchoring to keep it from flying away some wild and brawling Saturday night. Until Jim Green came, it had no anchor. And Jim Green didn't look like an anchor.

He looked like a dude. A nervous dude, at that.

The porch loafers at the stage station spotted him. For a moment they were silent, shocked into a dumb, open-mouthed silence. They watched him step out of the stage, straighten his black bowler hat. He dusted off his immaculate cutaway coat. His shoes glistened, his striped pants had a knife edge. He was slim, but not skinny. On his upper lip was a narrow black mustache, and he was leaning on the one article that could shock the loafers into silence. A cane.

He didn't see them at first. He was looking at Garson City, at the raw, unpainted buildings, the wide muddy streets, the pillars of smoke coughing out of the smelters on the mountainside.

"Not pretty," he murmured. Still, he liked it, in spite of the twitch of nervousness at the corners of his mouth. For a long time the West had beckoned to Jim Green. He wanted the wild, raw energy of towns like Garson City. Only one thing had kept him from coming before. Until now, it had held him back. But now he had no choice. The trail of Lee Sanker led here. He had to follow that trail.

At last one of the porch loafers found his tongue. "My Aunt Sally's sister!" he howled. "Boys, it carries a cane!"

Green turned slowly toward him. He lifted his slender, handsome nose and sighted down it at the porch loafer. Slow anger boiled within him and came out as narrowed gray eyes.

"What jackass is that I hear braying?" he said.

There was no reply. The porch loafer choked on his cud of tobacco. Green twirled his cane and walked leisurely toward a sign hanging over the boardwalk, one with big gold letters. *The Nugget.*

Being thirsty, he walked calmly in through batwings. He paused and peered through the gloom of the place. It was large, a long bar at one side, a clear space for dancing at the far end. Gambling tables lined the walls.

Green smiled. This was how it should be. The bar was a solid wall of backs and elbows, and the arching handles of holstered guns. Green's mouth went dry. He did not like guns.

However, his thrist could not wait. He walked to the bar, swinging his cane with practical elegance. He stopped behind the broad red-flannel back of a man who occupied, by reason of his width and elbows, enough space for several. Green lifted his cane and gently prodded the man's shoulder.

Like an enraged bull, the man spun. He was wide-faced, with a bristly brown beard. He fixed a pair of agate-blue eyes on the dude, sputtered, and let out his breath in one howl.

"Are you the mangy son that—that—"

"I am," Green said politely. "May I present myself? James Bullis Green, at your service, sir, and requesting room at the bar." Green did not wait for an answer. He stepped past the big man, hooked his cane over the bar and put a slender foot on the rail.

"Scotch," he said in a quiet, easy voice.

The bartender, a broadly-built, graying man, made feverish movements with his lips, but no words came out. He shuddered, knowing in advance what was going to happen. Finally his hands worked better, and he got a bottle and jigger and poured a drink without too much trembling.

Green turned slightly toward the man he had displaced. The wide face was going red, the agate eyes flickering murderously. Green ignored what anyone could see. The big man was bent on murder. Everyone knew it. Bran Hawkis was not noted for his kindness to men smaller than himself.

But Green was not afraid. He smiled quickly at the big man, and that disconcerted him for a moment longer. Green lifted his glass, silently offered a toast to the house, and gulped it down. His eyes watered only slightly. He spoke to the bartender.

"May I ask, sir, if Lee Sanker is in Garson City?"

The bartender was watching Bran Hawkis's big muscles swell, and the veins in his neck bugging out like cords. He nodded weakly.

"Mr. Sanker is here, and so is Bran Hawkis. Bran is about to knock your head off."

Suddenly Green's derby dropped six inches. At that moment Bran Hawkis's great hairy fist came from behind him. It roared out toward Green's face, but the face was not there. The derby hat was. Bran let out a bellow of surprise as his fist hit

the hat and sent it sailing across the room. He stumbled against the bar, struggling to regain his balance.

Green seemed to have a knack of moving without effort, cat-fashion. He took his cane from the bar now, and with a flick of his wrist placed the tip against Bran's stomach. With a cool, easy motion, he drove it forward and the tip of the cane disappeared between ribs and stomach.

Bran had been winding up his fists for another blow, but he stopped dead. His eyes bulged, his huge mouth opened, gasping. He bent double and staggered toward a table and collapsed into a chair.

GREEN replaced his cane, hooking it again over the bar. "I was asking you about Lee Sanker," he said to the bartender. "Does he infest this city?"

"Infest?" the bartender said, too shocked for words to sink in well. "Infest? Listen, buster, you got a knife on the end of that cane?"

Green waved his hand carelessly. "Merely a metal knob. I struck his solar plexis, a meeting place of the nerves—hardly less sensitive than the brain. A cleverly-placed blow will often cause unconsciousness."

He turned toward Bran Hawkis, crouched over the table, gasping for breath. "A well-built man. Others would be unconscious." He turned back to the bartender. "You see, I study medicine in my spare moments. Now, this matter of Lee Sanker. I asked if he infests—"

The bartender had recovered somewhat. "That ain't the word for Mr. Sanker, Buster. Infests is for people like Bran Hawkis. Mr. Sanker is our most respected banker." He struck the bar with his fist, to emphasize the town's opinion of Lee Sanker The crowd nodded.

Green sighed. "Well, I think Mr. Sanker will be less respected when I am through with him." His voice was not so calm when he said that. He turned toward Bran Hawkis, with the surness of one who has decided it is time to attend to certain unfinished business.

But he had misjudged. Bran was on his feet, and he lunged forward like a wild bull. His hairy fist came roaring up at Green, and he ducked feverishly. He was not quick enough. The fist caught the side of his head and he went down. Bran let out a bellow of laughter and raised a big boot to tromp his opponent.

Green squirmed out from under and danced to his feet. Danced was the word, everyone would agree to that. He moved like a cat with dancing feet. He was away from the big man, peeling off his tight coat. Bran came rushing forward, trying to hook him while his arms were caught. Green ripped out of the coat and stopped retreating.

He bored in. Head down, taking the crashes of Bran's giant strength. He slipped underneath. His fists chopped short blows so fast they were blurred to the onlookers. They made Bran back. But Bran could take them, and he got set and blasted out a fist that took Green's forehead and again laid him flat on his back.

But Bran had no time to jump him. Green was up again, underneath, and chopping Bran's belly to pieces. The crowd saw blood on his forehead and his nostrils flaring wide, sucking in air. Bran swung over him, missing, hitting, missing, but the misses became more frequent. Slowly he backed, quivering with the blows, howling with pain. And suddenly the smaller man's target changed. He came upright, and with him an arm that straightened, with the weight of his whole body behind it, like a steel post jumping up out of the ground at Bran's jaw.

Bran took it with a slight backward lean, but he kept on leaning until he went down like a ten-pin. Like a ten-pin, he stayed there.

The crowd in the Nugget Saloon gasped. They stared at the prone body of Bran Hawkis. They stared at James Bullis Green.

He stood against the bar, breathing hard. His white shirt was smudged with blood and a thin trickle of it came down from his forehead. They saw his shoulders then, not big, but rock-solid, and the way his chest bulged against his shirt.

The bartender caught on first. Dude or not, he sized up this man who stood against the bar, nostrils flaring as he sucked in air.

"My name's Pop Daley," he croaked. "Sorry I figured you for a dude. But one thing, we don't go in for fancy names in these parts. I reckon you'll be known as Jim Green."

Green rubbed his sweaty palms over his pants. He grinned. "A pleasure, sir, to be

known as Jim Green." He reached a hand across the bar and clasped that of Pop Daley. Then he picked up his coat and put it on, noting that the sleeves were torn. Pop handed him the derby. It was badly crushed. His cane had to stay on the floor. One of Hawkis's big feet had snapped it in two. When rearranged, Green looked like a slightly battered dude, but still a dude. The crowd in the Nugget, though, hadn't forgotten those chunky shoulders and the swelling chest.

"Jim, you lookin' for a job?" Pop Daley said.

Green shook his head. "I'm looking for Lee Sanker."

Pop Daley reached up to a shelf and brought down a five-pointed silver star. On it was etched, *City Marshal, Garson City.* He handed it to Green.

"If you can lick any man in the Nugget you can wear this tin brooch, Jim. Hundred dollars a month pay. You can do it while you're makin' your business with Lee Sanker."

Green took the star and flipped it in his hand. Suddenly he grinned. He turned toward the crowd.

"Gentlemen, my former profession was boxing, that is, fighting professionally for cash prizes. Do any of you wish to try your fists against me?"

They grinned at him. "Hell no," said a burly miner. "Bran Hawkis was 'Mister Muscle' in this town. Nobody'd take that badge before, because Bran didn't like havin' lawmen around."

HE STOOD there a moment, marveling at how quickly he had gained a new profession. Once he had been a dynamiter, and once a professional boxer. Now, suddenly, he was a city marshal. He had started well in Gason City. Grinning, he set off down the boardwalk.

But he had only gone ten feet when he stopped dead, and his face went white as chalk. Coming toward him was a tall, rangy man. That was all Green saw of the man. Strapped to each hip was a giant Colt.

The man said something in passing, but Jim did not hear it. The twin guns still loomed before him when the man was gone. Jim drew a shaking hand across his mouth. Guns—he could remember nothing but the rifle his father had given him at the age of six. And how the first time he fired it, it exploded in his face. He never tried to fire a gun again.

For that, he had delayed going West all his life. The West was full of guns. And almost half of them seemed to be in Garson City. Slowly, the realization of his position as city marshal of a gun-ridden town grew, and his face lost even more of its color.

He tried to forget that for the moment, but his hands were still quivering when he entered the Cactus House Hotel. Perhaps, he thought, the business of getting a room would quiet his nerves. He went immediately to the desk on one side of the lobby.

A girl sat behind the desk, on a chair tilted back against the wall. A large book was open on her lap. It was a bit dark in the Cactus House, but Green sized her up quickly. A turned-up nose, golden brown hair tied at the nape of her neck with a small red ribbon. He could see a blue dress that might have been made more amply. After noting her figure, he decided that the skimping on material was justified. After a minute of staring at her, he coughed politely.

"All filled up," she said, without looking up from the book.

"Another discouragement!" he sighed.

She looked up at him. He glimpsed blue eyes that flicked at him, then became crinkled and soft as she burst into laughter. It was hearty laughter, but not especially pleasing to James Bullis Green.

"Have they seen you around town in that outfit?" she said, her blue eyes catching the battered bowler, the torn coat, and the immaculate stiff collar underneath. Then she saw the silver star, and one eyebrow arched up.

"Yes, I am now the law," he said. He smiled.

She leaned a bare arm on the counter, a husky-looking arm, he noticed, and squinted into his face. "I've heard Bran Hawkis swears to wallop anybody that takes a notion to wear that badge," she said.

"Bran is now sleeping peacefully. He was not acquainted with the modern methods of boxing."

The eyebrows arched, then subsided. Her blue eyes raked him over. Finally they rested on his mustache.

"Shave that thing off," she snapped.

Green blinked. He touched his mustache

with his fingertips. Then he felt anger flood through his shoulders. He glared at her.

"And why should I shave it off?"

"It's sporty," she said. "I don't like sporty men."

Green leaned on the counter, put his face six inches from her and glared into her eyes. "That dress, young lady. That's sporty too!"

She blinked and drew back. A blush reached up from her throat, engulfed her face, disappeared into the golden brown hair. Then it retreated, leaving an angry white. Too late, Green realized that he was too close to her. A fist soared out from behind the counter and mashed squarely into his nose. Suddenly he was sitting on the floor and his chin was dribbling something sticky. It turned out to be blood. He looked up.

She was leaning across the counter, smiling with triumph. The fine golden color was back in her face. "We got no rooms to rent here," she said.

Green touched his nose. It hurt, and was beginning to swell. Also, his collar was wilting as blood soaked in. He managed a grin, because he'd be damned if he'd let a woman think she'd hurt him.

"You Westerners play rather roughly," he said.

She laughed again. "I bet you used to be real pretty, mister. Stand up."

Green scowled, but he stood up. She looked him over carefully. "I like 'em pretty," she said. "Might even marry a man that I don't have to close my eyes when I want to kiss him." She held up a hand and counted on her fingers. "Man I marry has to be pretty, got to have enough money that I don't have to run this flea trap for a living, and he's got to have more sand in his craw than I have."

Green looked at her, frowned, studied her words. He marveled at the plain speech of the West. He thought of society girls back East who flicked their fans and murmured gently. Of one that he had almost married. He had tried to kiss her one night, and she was horrified. That was when he went to work in the stone quarries.

"My name's—" He started to give his full title. "Jim Green," he corrected, making his voice gruff.

"I'm Jerry Jenkins, and don't ever call me Geraldine," she told him, smiling.

"You own this imposing edifice?" he said, waving a hand over the hotel.

"Lock, stock and barrel. My dad won the shack in a card game two months ago. Five minutes later he pulled a gun too slow."

Green's mouth dropped open. "You speak rather casually of his death."

She shrugged. "He had no regrets. He lived hard and died with a snootful of whiskey and big winnings in his pocket. It was hard on me, but it's the way he wanted to go out. Why should I be selfish?"

Green thought that one over, and decided it made some sense. He stood there thinking, eyeing Jerry Jenkins' tight dress and absently taking a slender cigar from his pocket.

"Have a real smoke," she said. She reached into a drawer and took out a short, fat, black cigar. "Dad said they're pretty good once you're used to the stink. I'm used to the stink of 'em, anyway."

Green smelled the cigar carefully. It didn't smell bad, but then his nose was too plugged with blood to tell. Suddenly he remembered what he had come to the Cactus House for.

"Say, I still need a room. Does Lee Sanker live here?"

"Sure. I've got all the best trade in town. Being a banker, he pays plenty for the only suite in the house."

Green scowled. "Sanker is handling people's money, eh? Hmm. Well, I'll take his room. I'm going to throw him out of town as soon as I see him."

"I don't like him either. Some people here think he's red hot, though. Be careful, Jimbo."

"Why?" He stuck the cigar in his mouth and looked straight into her eyes. She didn't flinch, but looked straight back at him. "Why are you interested in my welfare?"

"Why," she said. "Because if you get rich enough and show enough guts, I might take a notion to marry you. You're pretty enough, so that's one count for you. A girl has to watch every likely chance, Jimbo."

Green felt like laughing, but he didn't. He also felt something flip inside his chest. It flipped dangerously, in a way he had never before experienced. He decided this had to be thought over carefully. He smiled instead of laughing.

"Your honesty is most admirable, Miss—er—I mean, Jerry. And now, where does one eat in Garson City?"

"*One gets grub* over at Joe's Beanery, across the street," she said, leaning heavily on 'one gets grub.' She jerked a thumb toward the door. Green smiled at her, tipped his hat, and set off, whistling.

For some reason or other, he tripped over the doorsill on the way out.

CHAPTER 2 No-Gun Marshal

Mr. James Bullis Green had a busy afternoon. There were beans to be eaten, blood to be washed off, and new clothes to be bought, as well as the law of Garson City to be learned. Pop Daley was helpful. He explained the law. He suggested a soft-crowned black hat with a fairly narrow brim, turned up at the sides. That was what Jim bought.

He said he would feel like a fool in a wide-brimmed hat. He was not yet a Westerner and he wasn't going to put on an act. Reluctantly, Pop Daley agreed with him. Green had to give up the idea of carrying a cane. They were not sold in Garson City.

"Now, Jim," Pop said. "You hadn't ought to wear a hideout gun. A marshal should have his gun out where folks can see it."

Jim gave him a blank stare. "What gun?"

"Why, your gun!"

Jim frowned. "I have no gun, Mister—er, Pop."

"Reckon I can loan you mine until you buy one," Pop said. He jerked his Colt .45 out of its holster and shoved it into Jim Green's hands. And then he saw a terrible change come over the man who had beaten Bran Hawkis. His face went blank white, his hands trembled and he backed away, his mouth quivering.

"No! Don't please!"

If Pop Daley was surprised by the change that came over Garson City's new marshal, it was nothing to what Jim felt. His insides turned over twice and changed to ice. His hands were burning hot and shook uncontrollably. He looked feverishly toward the window, with the view of jumping out.

"Pop!" he gasped. "How would you like me to throw a rattlesnake at you?"

Pop Daley went white at the mere mention of the snake. Slowly, he dropped the gun back into the holster. "Jim, you mean you're a-scared of guns?"

"Afraid of them!" Jim Green reared up, leaned over the table, his hands shaking. "Pop, I could chew a live rattlesnake. I've worked as a dynamiter and they used to say I should learn to respect the stuff. It's like kindling wood to me. But guns!" He sank back into his chair. "Ever since my father purchased a rifle for me when I was six years old."

Pop said, "You want to give me the star back again? Nobody'll think hard of you, Jim."

Green straightened and regained his poise. "I need the position, from the financial standpoint. That is, as you say here, I'm broke."

Pop chewed his cigar for a moment. "This town's got more guns than brains."

"But the job is very necessary to me." Indeed, that was so, for Jim knew he had to eat, and had to support himself until he had settled with Lee Sanker.

Pop said, "I've heared of two-gun marshals, and I've seed some awful fast one-gunners, but I don't reckon there'll ever be a no-gun marshal. Not when every man on the street packs iron."

Jim rapped his slender fingers thoughtfully on the table. "You are entirely correct, Pop. As long as the people carry guns—but didn't we just read in the charter that it is against the law to carry firearms within the city limits?" He brightened at that, and grinned at the aging bartender.

Pop scowled. "All you got to do is take their guns away. And you know Bear Mountain, on t'other side of town? Well, that'd be pure silver if it wasn't for all the rock and dirt mixed in."

But Jim Green was smiling. He could not become a gunslick. That he knew.

It was Garson City that would have to change.

HE ARRIVED at The Nugget at nine o'clock that evening. The Nugget being the largest and most frequented roughhouse in Garson City, he figured it as the place to center his operations. He strode in and began pacing toward the bar. Suddenly he stopped, momentarily shaken. Leaning against the bar was Lee Sanker.

For a second Green stood stock-still. He

plucked Jerry's fat cigar from a coat pocket, slipped it into his mouth. Seeing Sanker numbed him so that he couldn't even taste the cigar.

Sanker had not changed. There were the same eager blue eyes, continually moving with nervous energy. Most people took those eyes as merely searching, energetic. Jim Green knew better. He remembered the man's bull neck, short, heavy-muscled body. The big hands stuffed in the pocket of a loose black coat. There was a small gun in that pocket, Green knew. The pearl-gray Stetson was new. They did not wear Stetsons back in Missouri.

But they wore the same bland smile—the kind that had made a young boxer believe that there would be an honest payoff after the fight. A payoff of five thousand dollars for beating a bigger man. Only thing, Lee Sanker wasn't there when the fight ended, nor was the five thousand, plus a lot of money that people had deposited with him as bets.

"Ah! The new city marshal. Welcome!"

It was Sanker talking, his mouth spread in a big grin, his hand outstretched. Surprised by the maneuver, Jim Green found his hand being wrung and Lee Sanker's big false grin pointed at his face.

"Brown in the name, correct?" Sanker said in that rich, booming voice of his. "Mine is Sanker. President of the Lee Sanker Miners' Trust Bank. What I've been telling people is that this city needs some law, Mr. Brown!"

Jim Green's eyes narrowed and he jerked his hand out of the other's grip. "My name's Green and you know it!" He took a step forward. Sanker backed. He called to Pop Daley.

"Pop Daley! What does this mean?"

"You don't know me, Sanker?" Jim said levelly. "You don't remember?"

Sanker frowned, stroked his chin. "San Francisco, perhaps? Could you have been a client of mine there? Perhaps under a different name?"

Green felt blood begin to pound into his head. His hatred of Sanker shattered his ease. Desperately he cried, "You're a cheap crook, Sanker! I'll tell everybody about you, how you ran off with my five thousand dollars while I was still boxing and—" He gasped, blind fury tying his tongue.

Sanker frowned. "Pop Daley, is this the kind of man you have chosen as marshal of our fair city? I will sue him, unless you think he is insane, and thus not responsible for his speech!"

Jim clung to the bar for strength. Sanker's trump card was his golden voice. And the gun in his pocket. Green could see it moving in his hand. At last he said, "Firearms are prohibited in Garson City, Sanker!"

There was a hubbub, but that much was heard. Voices dropped. Green found his voice returning. "Yes, firearms are prohibited by the city charter, especially such hidden weapons as you have in your pocket, Lee Sanker!"

Sanker backed away from him. "We count on our guns, heavy." He turned to the crowd. "Right?"

"Right, Mr. Sanker!" somebody yelled out, and there was a chorus of assenting voices. All eyes switched to Jim Green. He glanced at Pop Daley. The old bartender whispered, "They're workin' on you, Jim."

Green looked at the gun-filled holsters around him. He felt the blood drain from his face. In his pocket he had a stick of dynamite. He'd intended to use that. Now his hands were trembling and he could only squirm back against the bar and wait for speech to come around his tied tongue.

SUDDENLY, the silence was broken. A man vaulted up on the bar. He was long and lean, wearing a miner's red shirt and cowboy's high-heeled boots. In one hand he waved a bottle of whiskey. In the other was a cocked sixgun. He let a yell out of his hawk-like face. Then he fired the sixgun into the ceiling.

"I'm a curly wolf from Bitter Creek!" he yelled. "It's my night to howl!" He recocked his gun and laughed down at Jim Green.

Green almost laughed back into his face. For a moment he forgot the gun the Curly Wolf was waving at him. The man was so ridiculous. But then the crazy face seemed to dissolve behind the gun, and again Jim felt fear.

"One of Sanker's men," Pop Daley whispered. "They're trying to laugh you out of town, Jim."

The man up on the bar was laughing, but there was a grim set to his hawkish face. This wasn't just a game to him. He went

on with his act, shooting another hole in the ceiling.

"I'm wild and wooly and full of fleas!" he roared. "I never been curried above the knees!"

The crowd roared. Lee Sanker laughed with the rest, more loudly than most, clapping men on the back to stir more excitement. Jim saw that, and seeing Sanker's false laughter gave him courage. So, they were going to laugh him out of town! He got mad, then, and had trouble controlling his voice as he spoke to the Curly Wolf.

"Do you wish to engage me in a duel with deadly weapons?"

The man's eyes narrowed down over his hawk nose. He planted his cowboy boots firmly on the bar and waved his gun.

"Haw!" he laughed. "A dew-ell!" he mimicked. "My deah, name your weapon!"

The audience howled. Jim smiled grimly. He still had that stick of dynamite in his pocket. He hadn't spent the afternoon thinking of the problems of a no-gun marshal for nothing.

"Mr. Curly Wolf!" he said, and heard the laughter die. They were listening carefully, for nobody wanted to miss an inch of such prize entertainment. Jim paused just a moment for effect, and also for time to straighten his voice out. Every time his glance touched the pistol he paled and his stomach went icy, and his tongue got stuck. "Mr. Curly Wolf, could you shoot my weapon from my hand?"

The Curly Wolf frowned. It looked like he'd rehearsed his act well, but this was an unexpected development. He glanced at Lee Sanker, who apparently did his heavy thinking for him. The banker nodded, and the Curly Wolf put the nod into words.

"I can do it six times on Sunday!" he howled.

"Then start shooting," Jim Green said softly. From his pocket he pulled a twelve-inch stick of dynamite, already rigged with cap and six inches of fuse sticking out.

The Curly Wolf sucked in his breath. His thumb had climbed to gunhammer. It stayed there. Somebody in the back of the room let out a gurgle. In a mine town, men understood dynamite. One shot would blow the Nugget Saloon across the mountains. A few backed toward the door. The entertainment had taken a rougher turn than they cared for.

"Afraid?" Green said quietly. Even as quietly as he spoke, his voice was like a roar, for most men present were not even breathing. It was hard to speak quietly, for he was still trembling with fear of the pistol that the Curly Wolf was pointing at him. The dynamite was nothing. But the gun. . . .

He pushed his advantage. "Perhaps, Mr. Curly Wolf, you lack—sand in your—er, craw?"

The man gulped. His eyes strayed to Sanker. Sanker looked away. He had no answer. Jim saw that. He'd called their hand and they had no aces. He took Jerry's cigar from his mouth. While a hundred eyes bugged, he touched the burning end of the cigar to the fuse. It spat orange flame. A couple of men raced for the batwings.

Jim grinned. It was his show, now. He said, "Gentlemen of Garson City! Guns are now prohibited within the city limits. All men will deposit their guns with Pop Daley upon entering town. Except for—" He paused, glanced once at the sputtering fuse. An inch was gone. "Except for those who have the—the sand in their craw—to stay with me and watch this fuse burn!"

That took their breath away. They stared at the slim, dapper, city marshal, at the fat cigar protruding from his mouth, the soft black hat at a jaunty angle, the stick of dynamite sputtering in his hand—they stared and gulped. Their feet scratched toward the batwings. They looked at the Curly Wolf.

The Curly Wolf looked at Lee Sanker. Sanker's mouth was open and he was trying to speak, but no sound came out. The Curly Wolf took matters into his own hands.

"Green's went loco!" he screamed. He leaped off the bar and began running. By the time he reached the batwings, twenty men were racing out ahead of him.

The threatening gun gone, Jim Green was master of the situation. He smiled at the remaining men. He turned to Lee Sanker.

"You, Sanker," he said gravely, "are a swindler, a cheat—" He shook the stick of dynamite and its half inch of remaining fuse toward the banker. "A liar, probably a killer—"

But Sanker was no longer listening. He was just one of the crowd bolting for the swinging doors. Jim's words fell on an empty saloon.

"Put it out!" It was Pop Daley screaming from behind the bar. "We're alone, for the love of Pete, put it out!"

Jim Green walked to the bar and dipped the fuse into a shotglass of whiskey. A spume of smoke rose up. Green tucked the now-harmless stick of dynamite back into his pocket.

"How about a shot of Scotch for each of us, Pop?"

Pop Daley was way ahead of him, gulping frantically from the bottle. Holding it by the neck, he leaned over the counter, breathing hoarsely.

"Jim!" he gasped. "Would you of blowed her if they hadn't run?"

Jim thought that over, puffed on his cigar, and drank the shot Pop's shaking hand set before him. "Really," he said, "I prefer not to think of that."

CHAPTER 3 Dynamite Justice

A half hour later a shelf behind the bar was denuded of bottles and piled high with firearms. Colt .45's, Derringers, a couple of old side-hammer cap-and-balls, and a sawed-off shotgun that a guard at the mines carried hung by a shoulder strap under his coat.

A couple had tried to re-enter the saloon boldly wearing their guns. They looked at Green, leaning against the bar, smoking casually and giving them a flat gray stare. They grinned sheepishly and handed in their guns.

It was strange, Jim Green thought, how friendly these men were once they respected his courage. He thought they might prove fickle. But for the moment, above mere physical strength, they respected—sand in the craw. Sand in the craw—that reminded him of Jerry Jenkins.

He had trouble leaving. They all wanted to slap him on the back, and drinks were lined up all along the bar waiting for him. He grinned and said a lot of words, but he was thinking solely of Jerry.

The night was fine, the moon bathing the town in the clear ghostly light of the high country. He whistled as he strode down the boardwalk. The air was so quiet he tried to blow smoke rings. He wondered what he was so excited about that he couldn't puff a good ring.

Jerry was sitting behind the counter. He saw that she had another dress on, not as tight as the one of the afternoon, but cut much lower in front, and of a soft, clinging material. There was something festive about it; he told himself she had worn it expressly for him, because he wanted to believe that and was afraid she had just worn it by accident. She was bent over, fingers together, very studiously watching her hands.

She looked up. "Hi, Jimbo."

Then he saw that she had a cigarette paper in one hand, a small sack of tobacco in the other. "Rolling your own?" he said.

"Trying to. Not as easy as it looks." She bent down over the makings again, painfully twisted the paper around a wad of tobacco big as her thumb. She squinted at it, looked in each end of the tube, and licked the paper. It didn't stay closed.

"Give it here," Jim said. She handed him the monstrous cigarette, sighing with relief. He shook out half the tobacco, whipped it into a tight tube and licked it closed. "Who's going to smoke it?"

"I am," she said. "Always wanted to try and never got around to it." She hung the cigarette out of the corner of her mouth. She puffed hard and gravely from the match he held. She breathed the smoke out slowly, one eyebrow cocked up, savoring it.

"Is this good tobacco?" she said suspiciously.

He glanced at the bag and smiled. "It's what everybody smokes."

"Why?" she said. She sucked once more on the cigarette, blew out the smoke, and pitched the quirly into a spittoon. "All men are fools," she said. "All men that smoke that stuff. Sometime I'll try one of your long thin cigars. Must be better'n that." She put her elbows on the counter and chin on her hands, stared straight into his eyes. "I heard about the stick of dynamite. You've passed on number two, Jimbo. You're pretty and you got sand in your craw. Now if you just get rich you'll have to marry me."

Green blinked. "Are all Western women like you, Jerry?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You seen any that are?"

He glanced over her from golden-brown hair to where the counter cut off his view. "No." Indeed, Jerry Jenkins was something special. His chest revolved. He gulped.

"Jerry, I tried to kiss a certain girl once and she was shocked. I went to work as a dynamiter in a stone quarry."

"Hmm," she said. She took her elbows off the counter and reached her arms out. She slid them around his neck and pulled him close. With her lips feeling like velvet, he didn't notice the counter cutting into his stomach. It was only after she had pushed him away and the spinning in his head subsided, that the cramp in his stomach made itself felt. Then it didn't matter.

"Now you going to work in the quarries?" she murmured.

Green heard somebody come in through the door. "No," he said, ignoring the new arrival.

"Then you go out and get rich in a hurry," she said. "Number three, he's got to be rich so I can give this flea trap to some poor but honest miner who don't know any better." Her voice dropped off at the end. She was staring over Green's shoulder.

JIM turned. Lee Sanker was standing there, his thin lips twisted tightly to one side of his mouth. As always, his right hand was hidden in the roomy pocket of his coat.

"A nice scene," he said.

Jim scowled. "If I had gloves to keep my hands clean, I'd work you over, Sanker."

The banker's smile remained twisted into a tight hooked line. The front door flung open. Sanker did not turn. As though he had been expecting it, he went on smiling. There were three of them, three men, each with a gun in his fist, and the three guns were leveled on Jim Green's chest.

The guns made his spine rubbery, but they weren't as bad as the three faces behind them. One was badly scarred; a big bent nose and a bandage over one cheek. Bran Hawkis. Next to him was the long bony face of the Curly Wolf, more confident over gunsights now than he had been when Jim Green asked him to shoot dynamite out of his hand. The other, Green did not know; a fat face with squinted eyes and a cigarette hanging out of thick lips.

Bran Hawkis rumbled, "You come with us, Green."

Jim eyed the three big black guns pointed at him. He shuddered and there was the block of ice inside of him again. He cursed his weakness. Here, in front of Jerry, he was going pale at the sight of guns! He tried to speak, and it came out thinly.

"Sanker, are these three in your employ?"

Bran Hawkis snarled, "Shut up, Green," and the Curly Wolf echoed him. Bran said, "You come with us or we'll blow you through that wall!"

Jim closed his eyes for a second, so he wouldn't have to look at the guns. The game was up. There was no place in Garson City for a no-gun marshal. You had to have a gun here. The stick of dynamite in his pocket couldn't take the place of a gun any more than his fists could.

He couldn't look at Jerry. And he didn't open his eyes. He wanted to get it over.

"Shoot," he said thinly. "Shoot, because it is the same if I die here as if I occupy some unmarked grave on the mountainside."

"He called it," Bran Hawkis rumbled. His meaty thumb eared back his gunhammer. The Curly Wolf let out a howl and banged the heel of his hand against his gunhammer. Jim closed his eyes and fell to the floor. He wasn't sure if he'd fainted or ducked. The hotel seemed to explode around him. Something tagged the side of his head and seemed to tear it off. He opened his eyes to have one more look at the world, and as he did something cannon-sized roared from behind him. Flame belched out over his head. He saw the fat-faced man between Bran and Curly Wolf spin, yell, and crash out the doorway, as though struck by a giant fist.

The lights were dimming for Jim Green. He looked back. Jerry had an enormous pistol on the counter, the butt clutched in both hands. A Dragoon revolver, he thought. The enormous pistol roared again. And that was the last he saw, for the world went black and he fell into it.

HE FELT one of them pick up his feet and another take his shoulders. Then he didn't feel anything for a long time. At last he found he was laying on the ground and he could dimly see the bright moon above.

He heard voices, the rumbling growl of Bran Hawkis, for one. The other seemed to be the nasal twang of the Curly Wolf. After a while his mind swam out of the darkness but he was still laying limp as a

rag. He opened his eyes part way, resolved to 'possom for a bit, to see what was going on. And plenty was going on.

On three sides of him were bushes. On the fourth side, a building, with an open door facing him. The Curly Wolf was coming out of the door carrying several small bags in his arms. They seemed to be terribly heavy for their size, from the way the man staggered. Green could think of only two things that would be that heavy. Gold or lead. And the Curly Wolf would have little interest in that much lead.

There was another man laying on the ground, and he wasn't moving any more than Jim. The bullet from Jerry's Dragoon revolver had found one mark, at least. Also, there was a growing pile of sacks. Jim's guess was that this was the back door of a bank, that it was being robbed, and that he wasn't going to share in the profits.

"You got it all out?" The voice came from the darkness, and then Lee Sanker strode quickly into the moonlight. He was not smiling now, nor orating. He was all action, like the time he left that boxing match in Missouri while Jim Green was still fighting desperately in the ring.

"We got it all out, Lee," Bran growled. "Not a penny left in the bank."

Sanker stopped for a moment, surveyed the gold and the two men laying on the ground. He smiled. "I told you, Bran. I told you if you threw in with me that you'd get even with Green for that beating he gave you. Well, here's how it'll go. You two will take your half in greenbacks and ride south. Just keep going and don't come back, because the girl knows how you stand in this. I'll cache the gold. Since I've insured with the territorial bank, the Lee Sanker Trust Bank will go on as before, except that I'll have a bunch of my own capital out in the bushes. We'll get rid of this troublemaker Green by putting a bullet through his head and Pudgy's, and let them lay. The girl didn't punch Pudgy's ticket all the way through. But they'll both be finished when people find this, and we'll let them figure it out. Which may be bad for you two, unless you put a lot of mountains between you and Garson City."

Jim Green heard it all. He lay there numb. The burning streak alongside his

head didn't bother him. Nor the aching in his ribs, where another bullet seemed to have done its work. What bothered him was the thought that the marshal of Garson City was laying helpless while three bandits discussed their business. A no-gun marshal. The no-gun marshal! He wished a bullet had hit the stick of dynamite in his pocket and blown them all to kingdom come.

All but Jerry. He thought of her holding the big Dragoon revolver in her fists and squinting over the sights. He groaned silently. She wasn't afraid of guns. He though again of the Dragoon revolver. Somehow, it didn't bother him to think of that. His stomach didn't turn to ice. He thought about it some more. It was a nice gun.

A nice gun! Well, he thought, that's a funny way for a no-gun marshal to think! Could it be—no, you couldn't be cured just like that. Cured of guns maybe? He lay there and heard the rumble of voices above him, and he was suddenly tired of laying there and taking it. He crawled to his knees, then stood up.

Three guns were centered on him. Sanker, Bran Hawkis, and the Curly Wolf.

"Shall we do it now, Boss?" the Curly Wolf said.

Jim looked at the guns. He was afraid. And suddenly he thought, *heck, anybody would be afraid, looking at three gun muzzles!*

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have heard that a condemned man is allowed a smoke before execution. May I?" He didn't wait for an answer, but plucked a slender cigar from his vest pocket and lit it.

They glared at him sullenly. Finally Lee Sankers grinned. "Sure, you can have a puff. Three puffs. Then we shoot, eh boys?"

The other two grinned wolfishly. His cigar lit, Jim Green sucked in on it, as though with great pleasure. It wasn't that good, but he wasn't so numb with fear that he couldn't taste it. He knew he was done with that stark, paralyzing fear of guns. He blew a smoke ring at the moon. "One," he said.

They grinned. This should be good fun. They eared back their gunhammers.

"That was a good ring," Jim said calmly, nodding upward toward a ring that spiraled its way toward the moon. As he had calculated, they glanced up, which gave him a moment to snatch the stick of dynamite from his pocket. And as they looked back at him, he touched the half-inch long fuse to his glowing cigar. It sputtered. He blew out another ring of smoke.

"Two. Now as to the third ring, gentlemen, you might possibly have time to shoot me and run. Even speaking as an expert on dynamite, I would not know."

The Curly Wolf knew. He began running.

Green blew a third ring of smoke out. "I won't count," he said. "There's only seconds until this stick of dynamite explodes, and—"

Sanker was screaming. "Green, Green! Take half the money here, take—"

"Better run," Jim said, eyeing the fuse, and noting that in some three seconds it would explode the cap and the cap would explode the dynamite.

They ran. Jim spotted a hole in the stacks of gold-filled bags. Aiming carefully, he dropped the stick of dynamite into it. He knew better than to run. He flopped down beside the stack of gold and put his arms over his ears.

WHEN you are that close to an exploding stick of dynamite, it seems awfully big. Jim Green felt the world rise up, topple, and plop down on top of him, most landing on the back of his head and mashing his face into the dirt.

He did not see the stack of gold bags explode, one racing like a bullet, hitting Bran Hawkis's head, laying him down cold as a pole-axed steer. Nor could he see the blast pick up Lee Sanker and push him twenty feet until he met the side of the bank and stopped with a bone-breaking thud. The Curly Wolf he could not have seen anyway, because that gentleman was covering twenty feet at a stride until he hit the saddle of his horse, and the animal vanished in a cloud of dust.

What he did see was Jerry Jenkins's big blue eyes as she bent down over him. He saw the enormous pistol she still held in her hands. Accidently, the pistol was peering down his throat.

He looked calmly down the barrel of it. "Throw that away," he said, and she pitched it away.

"Look what you've done!" she cried.

"Mashed your pretty nose! How can I marry a man with a flat nose?"

He touched a hand to his nose. It was bent and caked with bloody dirt. "It will not again be a thing of beauty," he said. "But I think I can mold it into fair shape."

"You got an awful lot of money, though," she said. "You're rich, in fact. Look."

He looked. They were surrounded by gold and silver, spread around them as though it were sand. Dust, nuggets, milled coins. Also, they were surrounded by some fifty citizens of Garson City. And three unconscious men.

"Jerry told us how they tried to shoot you back in the Cactus House," Pop Daley said. "She 'scaped them by runnin' out the back way. But we was searchin' all over town for you, until we heard the blast. What'll we do with 'em?" As though just remembering, he added, "Marshal?"

Marshal Green sighed. "Put them in jail, if we have a jail in this city." He turned back to Jerry. "You mean you're not going to marry me, because my face is battered a little? This money here isn't mine either. I'm not pretty and not rich."

She chewed her lip thoughtfully. "You've got an awful lot of sand in your craw though, Jimbo. I might make an exception in your case." That was when she threw her arms around his neck and began mopping those velvety lips over his face. After a long time, Green looked up to where Pop Daley was standing.

"Pop, you Westerners play the game awful rough."

Pop Daley was thinking about dynamite. He shook his head dazedly.

"Marshal," he said, "are you sure you wouldn't like to just use a gun?"

"Shut up, Pop," Jerry told him. "I want to talk about that suite of rooms at the hotel that Lee Sanker won't be needing any more. The bridal suite, that is."

Jim Green was ahead of both of them. He'd picked up two twenty-dollar gold pieces from the loot of the Lee Sanker bank. One he figured to use to buy a sixgun. The other was for a preacher. He wondered if twenty dollars was enough to pay a preacher for marrying people.

He didn't know so he picked up another gold piece, just to make sure.

THE END

PLAINS TALK

The first Indian newspaper was started by the Cherokee Nation in 1828. Known as the Cherokee Phoenix, its purpose was to stir up opposition to the whites who were depriving the Indians of their lands.

Tsa-la-ge Tsi-le-hi-sa-ni-hi (Cherokee Phoenix) was a weekly whose first issue came off the press in a log building at New Echota, Georgia, on February 21, 1828. Its editor was Elias Boudinot.

The paper was printed in English and Cherokee. The latter was possible because of the Cherokee syllabary invented by Sequoyah with the help of missionary Samuel Worcester.

The paper had a six-year life, died when the Cherokees were driven out of Georgia. They revived it at Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in 1844, where it carried the masthead, *Cherokee Advocate*.

The original *Cherokee Phoenix* attained world renown. Copies of it exist today in the British Museum and the Library of Congress.

* * *

Within their own tribes the Sioux Indians had organized crime. About 100 Sioux outlaws and criminals forbidden to associate with their own people organized the renegade band known as "Dog Soldiers". Often Sioux chiefs accused of violating peace treaties in attacks upon settlers blamed the depredations upon the "Dog Soldiers". They'd shake their heads and invariably state that the "Dog Soldiers" were beyond their control. At times this was a shifting of blame, while on other occassions it was the gospel truth.

—J. W. Q.

Lawman Purvis owed everything he had to the man who had once been the fabled Bat Bethune, and the only payment he could offer the old man . . . was to send him to his death.

Uncle Billy lay sprawled in the street, his guns aimed at the man in black.

OLD MARSHALS NEVER DIE

By JOHN H. HOLLAND

PURVIS sat at the breakfast table on the morning of the ceremony out at the dam, his plate pushed to one side and the last of his coffee cold in his cup. There'd been surprisingly little tension in the brief sentences Martha and he had exchanged as they ate, and now, watching her at the stove—a tall woman, dark-haired and dark-eyed with firm shoulders and a practiced ease of motion—he'd began to think that, with her usual tact, she was going to allow him to leave the house without any mention of the whiskey. But he couldn't be sure. And it wasn't until she shifted the

eggs she'd fried to a plate and poured a cup of coffee that he began to feel easier.

"All right, Con," Martha said.

Purvis rose smoothly from his chair, a tall, angular man in his middle thirties with large hands and feet, clear gray eyes and a rich brown mustache. He bent and picked up the bottle of rye that stood on the floor by his leg and, straightening, he stepped across to her work table by the stove. He laid the bottle on its side on a tray she'd put out. Then the eggs she'd fried and the coffee. He was careful not to look at her.

She stirred faintly behind him.

"Con, do you really think this is best? Isn't there some other way?"

"No," Purvis said and wondered instantly at the tone of his voice.

He'd intended to sound indifferent so that Martha would understand she was crossing the line. But the word was too short, and he'd managed only to sound abrupt. That irritated him as much as he resented having her ask. He'd thought this out carefully and it wasn't right that Martha should select today, for the first time in eight years, to begin to question his judgment in a matter that was chiefly concerned with his duty as marshal. Even if it did involve Uncle Billy.

"But couldn't you just give him money?" Martha said. "Wouldn't that be better for him than to have to take whiskey from you? And to have to take it today?"

"I'm giving him money. But no one will sell him a bottle even if he can pay. So it's up to me to provide him with one. He won't keep going without it."

"But he still has feelings, Con."

"So?"

"So maybe you'd better stop and think."

She said this with an undisguised strength of feeling that was surprising. In the time they'd been married, Purvis had rarely known anything to shatter her calm and looking at her now, seeing the high color and the flash of will in her eyes, it came to him as something of a shock that she was actually planning to interfere.

"Now wait a minute, here, Girl," Purvis said. "I've done some thinking on this. I've thought on it more than you know. It's my job. I know something about it."

"Yes and who taught you?" Martha snapped.

Purvis stiffened.

There was a shocked half minute, there, in which they faced each other, glaring. He didn't—couldn't—understand why this should be coming from her. It was he, Purvis, not Martha, who was closest to this thing. He was the marshal. It had been he who had learned his job from Uncle Billy . . . he who had once thought of him as some kind of god . . . and it had been he, Purvis, who'd been most hurt having to watch his decline. Martha had never known Uncle Billy when he wasn't a bum. Yet there she stood, farthest from it, but snapping with anger anyway.

"Well aren't *you* a big help," Purvis said.

He turned his head back to her and covered the tray with a napkin. Then he picked it up and crossed to the door, his jaw set and his ears hot.

"Con . . ."

Purvis stopped at the door.

"Con I'm sorry," Martha said. "I know what you must be feeling. Really I do."

"That's a comfort."

"But can't you see what I'm trying to say? Is Uncle Billy really so dangerous he has to be run out of town?"

"He is."

"Then put it off, Con. Wait until you've had time to think it over. Can't you do that?"

"No," Purvis said.

He opened the door and stepped through. Then he turned back to face her.

"Be ready in an hour. I'll be around to pick you up."

Martha didn't answer.

And as Purvis backed out the door and closed it, she stood there, glaring at him, her lips set and her chin high.

HER attitude kept him boiling most of the way down the alley. There wasn't any excuse for what she'd done. They'd reached a wordless understanding early in their marriage that there were some aspects of his job it was best she know nothing about. And he'd managed successfully to keep most of the unpleasantness that arose to himself. This wasn't any different. The fact that it involved Uncle Billy didn't make it more than a simple matter of duty. Regardless of what Uncle Billy had been to Purvis in the past and regardless of what Purvis had been to him, there was no way around the fact that he was dangerous.

Uncle Billy had begun to see things, now, when he drank, and as long as he couldn't keep from drinking and as long as no one else could keep him from it, he had become a menace to the safety of the town Purvis was sworn to defend. He wasn't just a harmless drunk any longer. Now, when he drank, he saw things that weren't really there. He thought he saw two men dressed in black.

Twice now, the first time a month ago and the second only four days back, he had shot at these men he thought he saw because, drunk as he was, he imagined that he was still marshal and that he'd caught these ghosts of his robbing Simpson's General Store. Only there weren't any men dressed in black. And there wasn't any Simpson's store. Now, next to the bank where the store had stood, there was only a weed-grown lot. Nothing remained of the building there'd been back in the days when Uncle Billy was marshal.

And nothing remained of Bat Bethune . . . the man Uncle Billy had been.

But drunk or sober, bum or marshal, Uncle Billy had his right to what dignity he could muster. Purvis agreed with Martha there. But she was wrong about wanting to put it off. If Uncle Billy had to be run out of town, today was the day to do it. Today the town would be empty. There'd be no one to line the boardwalk to watch him go. Instead, everyone from town would be gathered in a tight knot a mile to the west, straining to hear Senator Bryant make his speech at the dedication of the Wounded Knee dam. And if all this bothered Martha, there was nothing Purvis could do. In time she'd find the same brand of indifference he had found.

Purvis clamped his teeth together and turned the corner at the end of the alley. He moved along side the bank, taking the path he'd worn through the weeds in the lot where Simpson's store had stood, and he crossed the street and walked against the flowing crowd, down to the jail.

He found Uncle Billy sitting on the end of the bunk in his cell, his shoulders rounded and his hands clasped between his knees where they wouldn't tremble. The loose flesh around his eyes was puffed and swollen, his thin, grayed-brown hair was matted like dead winter grass and his skin had the soggy color of a wet newspaper. But he'd shaved. Purvis noticed that right away.

And the fact that he had, the fact that Uncle Billy had chosen this morning to show any interest for the first time in the four days he'd been locked up, didn't make Purvis feel any softer. It didn't prove anything to him in the way he knew Uncle Billy had intended it should. It only irritated that much more because he knew that if Uncle Billy had shaved, then he meant to make an appeal. But it wouldn't work. Today Uncle Billy left town—shaved or not.

Purvis shifted the tray to his left hand and fitted his key to the lock on the door of the cell.

"All right. Breakfast," he said. He swung back the door and stepped through.

" 'Mornin', Con."

Uncle Billy's voice came from deep in his throat and was rusty and thick with disuse. But there was a strong note of apology and hope in the sound of it and hearing this set Purvis' teeth on edge. He moved across the cell and put the tray on the bunk. Then he lifted the napkin.

Uncle Billy's breath hissed in.

"What's the bottle for?"

"It's yours," Purvis said and straightened and used the napkin to mop the sweat that had gathered on his palms.

"Maybe you better not. Maybe you better take it away, Con."

"No."

"But that ain't fair, boy. I'm in no shape for a fight with myself this mornin'. You know what'll happen.

"I know."

"Then get it outa here. Take it someplace where I don't have to look at it. I don't want it around me."

"You will. After you've left town you won't keep going without it."

"Then give it to me later," Uncle Billy said. "I don't want it around me now."

"All right."

Purvis tossed the napkin on the bunk. He wasn't impressed. He knew Uncle Billy was refusing the bottle only to show he could. He knew too, that there wasn't any real will back of his refusal. He was only trying to show he had a new-found strength that didn't exist . . . that he was worth another chance and that he ought to be allowed to stay in town. But it was senseless to believe in him.

Purvis picked up the bottle and moved across to the cell door and stepped through it into the hall.

"Con?"

Purvis faced him.

"Con, I been sittin' here thinkin'. You got me jammed between a rock and a hard place, boy. I don't know what I'll do. I don't have no place to go. So I was kind of wonderin' if you could see your way clear to let me stay in town. You could keep an eye on me and lock me up when it gets too bad."

"You know how that works," Purvis said.

"But can't we try it again? I'll swear off. I swear right now, Con. I promise I'll never touch another bottle. I mean that."

Purvis snorted.

"You couldn't do it," he said, his lip curled. "You'd get lonesome for your friends dressed in black."

He expected Uncle Billy to look away, at that, and give it up. But he didn't. He only flinched. Then he sat there, matching Purvis' gaze for a long half minute until Purvis' ears began to burn.

Uncle Billy nodded.

"All right, boy," he said. "All right You're marshal now. Not me."

PURVIS squeezed the neck of the bottle. Then he stepped back abruptly and slammed the door and took out his key to lock it.

"Marshal?"

Purvis looked up.

"I was thinkin' . . . Marshal," Uncle Billy said. "As long as it don't help none to promise, maybe you better gimme back that bottle."

Purvis swallowed. "All right," he said. He finished locking the door. Then he pocketed the key and held the bottle through the bars and Uncle Billy stood up and came across and took it. Purvis looked down at the floor.

"I've got to go out," he said. "I'm going to give you my horse and I've got to go to the bank to get you some money. I'll be back in half an hour."

"Take your time . . . Marshal," Uncle Billy said. "Don't feel rushed none. I'll be right where I am."

Purvis left him, then, moving across the hall and through the office to the front of the jail.

He hadn't expected to come off on top with Uncle Billy. But he'd expected to be able to handle things. He hadn't counted on feeling strongly, one way or the other, once he'd started things rolling. But he felt it, all right, and he resented the fact that between them, Martha and Uncle Billy had touched him where he was tender. But there wasn't anything he could do about that. And he'd worked up momentum. He pulled in his chin and stepped through the office door, onto the boardwalk. There he stopped short.

He was trapped.

Thomas Jefferson Whitney was hanging by his knees from the hitch rail, looking at Purvis from upside down. The boy wore wash-faded denims, patched at the knees, and was barefoot and he had pinned on the star Purvis had cut him a few days before from the top of an old tomato can. Seeing him hanging there, seeing the air of expectancy that was unmistakable in every line of his twelve-year-old awkward body, even upside down, Purvis wanted badly to run.

Not that he didn't like Tommy or that the lad would be a nuisance on any day but this. Nothing like that. It was only that with all the things he'd had to think about, Purvis had forgotten that school was closed for the day because of the Senator's speech at the dam. And he knew what Tommy would want to do with his holiday. He'd want to tag along.

He was new in town and was awkward and shy and he hadn't found any friends his own age. Instead, he'd attached himself to Purvis in exactly the way Purvis had attached himself to Uncle Billy when he was twelve and Uncle Billy was Marshal Bat Bethune. Ordinarily, Purvis liked having Tommy along. Having a youngster around where a man could tease him was as much a part of being marshal as wearing guns and it wasn't until a month ago that Purvis had had this. But he didn't want it today.

Purvis glanced past Tommy and moved abruptly away from the door of the jail. He headed east along the board walk.

"Hey, Marshal!" Tommy yelled. "Wait! Lookee here!"

Purvis moved on without looking back.

He felt in his vest pocket for a cigar and lighted it, his glance directed off across at the bank. The crowd that had already begun to gather was moving, now, with an aimless kind of haste. There was a strong sense of holiday in the air and Purvis envied these people who were free to feel it. To them, the dam meant water which meant ease and wealth and one kind of security. But they were only lucky. And Purvis wasn't. If, from now on, the dam was to mean one thing to most people and another to him, that wasn't his fault. He had his duty. He got paid.

"I guess you didn't know me upside down," Tommy said. He had dropped off the hitch rail and had come up behind. "I guess I looked different, hangin' there. Didn't I?"

Purvis bit deeper into his cigar.

"I guess maybe you were thinkin'," Tommy said.

Purvis didn't answer. And the feeling of being trapped began to be a real thing that seemed to have settled between his shoulder blades where it itched. He began to hope that if he ignored Tommy altogether, why then the lad would get the notion that he wasn't wanted and leave. But that was expecting a lot.

"I been practicin' with a brick, Marshal," Tommy said. "I bet if we was to try it I could do it today."

Purvis grunted. Tommy was talking about learning to shoot. Purvis had told him he'd teach him when he was strong enough to hold a .44 at arm's length without too much trembling and it wouldn't be long before he could do it. But right then, Purvis wasn't in any mood to teach Tommy to shoot.

"I bet you'd be surprised," Tommy said. "I could hold it real steady if you'd let me try."

"Not today, Tom," Purvis said. "Now don't bother me. I've got a lot to do before I go out to the dam."

"You mean you're goin' out *there?*"

"I'm marshal. I have to. Now run along."

"Oh," Tommy said.

But he didn't leave. He stayed at Purvis' side and a little to the rear and when Purvis stepped off the boardwalk to cross to the bank, Tommy's bare feet came padding after him in the deep dust of the street.

Purvis fought down an impulse to turn on the boy and shake him and he lengthened his stride, hoping to outdistance him. Tommy picked up to a trot and stuck at his heels, on across the street.

PURVIS stepped up to the bank porch and tried the door, but it was locked and the blinds were pulled behind the glass. He moved to his left and, shading his eyes, peered in through the big front window.

Walt Sylvester stood inside at his desk. Purvis tapped the glass and Sylvester turned and saw him. He waved and came to the door and opened it.

"Good morning, Con," he said. "Trouble?"

Purvis shook his head and stepped through the door and closed it against Tommy.

"No. No trouble. But I want to draw a hundred dollars."

Sylvester pursed his lips. He was a thin man, slightly older than Purvis, clean-shaven and growing bald, cautious and reserved in his judgments.

"But you don't have that much on account, Con."

"Who would, on my pay?" Purvis said. "But I can write."

"Then you want a loan?"

"That's about it."

"I see," Sylvester said, thoughtfully. "But you'll have to wait until this afternoon, Con. We're closed this morning."

Purvis shook his head.

"I need it now."

Sylvester thought for a time, studying Purvis. Then he nodded. "All right," he said. "How do you want it? All in one or broken up?"

"Give it to me in silver," Purvis said. "In a bag."

Sylvester nodded and turned away. He moved back to the safe and opened it. He took his time counting out the money and Purvis stood irritably cooling his heels by the door until Sylvester came slowly back, his face solemn and thoughtful. He handed the sack to Purvis and then brought up his hand, palm turned in and the fingers curled, to examine his nails.

"I don't think I'll need a note, Con," he said. "We'll just call this a personal loan between the two of us. With you being in such a hurry and wanting it in silver and all, I think I can guess what you're planning to do. And if I'm right . . . if you want to give it to Bethune, so he can get out of town . . . why I agree. He's a bum and he's dangerous."

"And you're a banker," Purvis snapped. "Find your pen and paper."

Sylvester stiffened and lowered his hand, knotting it into a fist. He drew up to his full height and glared at Purvis with icy eyes.

"I think not," he said acidly. "If you don't want this between us, that's fine with me. I can afford a hundred dollars . . . for civic improvement."

Purvis bit his lip and mashed the money bag against the palm of his left hand. He turned abruptly, his nostrils flared, and going out, he wasn't careful about not slamming the door.

Tommy stood leaning against the porch post, waiting, his head down, polishing his tin star with his shirt-tail. He looked up and moved away from the post as Purvis came out the door.

"Marshal, I thought of somethin' maybe you didn't," he said, stuffing in his shirt.

"Well I'm much obliged."

"Yes, sir. But what I was thinkin' was that you better stick around town. You better keep an eye on things while folks are gone and I'll stay with you so you won't get lonesome and you can teach me to shoot."

"No," Purvis said hotly.

He turned away, to his right, and moved off toward the livery. He was getting damn fed up with people who could think and if he had to be gruff with boy, he was far past the point where he cared. He ignored Tommy the rest of the way down to the livery. But Tommy stuck right at his heels.

Charlie Ardmore was a middle aged, turkey-necked man, talkative, usually, and needing a shave. He wore his galluses down, his faded red underwear was stained with sweat and when Purvis turned into the livery, Charlie looked up and nodded and stepped back from the mare he was saddling.

"'Mornin', there, Marshal," he said pleasantly. "Man, man, but that Senator's good for the livery business! Seems like every one in town wants a horse or a rig to go out—"

"I'm here for that buckboard," Purvis

said curtly. "And I've changed my mind about my horse. I want him saddled. Now. Without any talk."

All the pleasantness washed out of Charlie's face. There was shock back of his eyes and he frowned slightly.

"Why, Marshal," he said reasonably, "you didn't tell me. You said yesterday you'd be wantin' a buckboard for you and Martha. So you got it waitin'. But I left your bay out to the pasture."

"Then get him."

"But Marshal! I can't do that!" Charlie protested. "I got my mind set on hearin' the Senator speak. I can't go traipsin' all the way out . . ."

"The hell you can't!" Purvis said. "Now do like I tell you!"

Charlie flushed. A thick, hard vein stood out on his forehead and he opened his mouth to say something. But he got control of himself with a visible effort and wound up chewing air. Then he leaned against the mare, relaxing elaborately, and eyed Purvis hotly.

"C'mere, boy," Charlie said, looking hard at Purvis, but beckoning to Tommy.

"Yes, sir."

"You wanta earn a dollar, boy?"

"Well . . . maybe," Tommy said.

"Then suppose you skip out to my pasture and catch the marshal's horse. Seems his feet are killin' him."

"Well . . . all right," Tommy said. There was a pause, then, and Purvis could feel the boy's eyes on him. "Can I ride him back when I catch him?"

"Why sure you can, boy," Charlie said. "And you can saddle him, too. I'll leave it here, right by the door."

"All right."

Purvis heard Tommy turn, then, and walk slowly out of the livery, his bare feet slapping at the hard-packed, swept dirt floor. Charlie shot a last hot glance at Purvis and turned back to the mare and began to work at the cinch on her saddle. Purvis just stood there, feeling empty and frustrated.

But looking at the stiff, frozen expression on Charlie's face, he wanted suddenly to set things straight with the man. He couldn't help what he felt, but he knew, too, that there wasn't any excuse for jumping a man as harmless as Charlie. Purvis opened the bag Sylvester had given him and took out one of the silver dollars.

"Look, Charlie," he said and had to stop to clear his throat. "Look, I didn't mean what I said. Not the way it sounded. And a dollar's too much money for you to give a kid just to catch a horse. You better let me pay."

Charlie looked up at Purvis and then down at the dollar.

"Why, Marshal," he said mildly, "you needn't worry none about *me* spendin' a dollar. Not when you ain't paid your hire on the buckboard yet."

PURVIS found the buckboard behind the livery and got in and drove down the alley, sitting stiffly with his hands between his spread knees and the back of his neck red hot. He turned the corner and drove around to the front of the jail and drew up at the hitch rail. He dropped the reins and picked up the money and went into the office.

He opened his desk and took out Uncle Billy's gun belt and slammed it onto the desk top with the money beside it. Then he took out his key and stepped across the hall to Uncle Billy's cell.

He was sitting on the end of his bunk in much the same way he had been earlier. Only now his hands were on his knees, the bottle stood half full on the floor between his feet and his skin had taken on color. The dank jail air was thick with the sweet smell of whiskey.

"All right, dammit!" Purvis said.

Uncle Billy looked up, his head swaying slightly. He squinted against the light from the street at Purvis' back. He mumbled something and snarled and finished it off chewing his gums.

Purvis unlocked the door and stepped into the cell.

He stood spread-legged with his hands on his hips and watched Uncle Billy sway ahead and grope for the bottle. He fumbled it to his lips and took two full swallows and half of what he'd aimed at his mouth went dribbling down his chin.

"You're missing it," Purvis said and Uncle Billy swallowed, blinking, and shook his head.

"Nozir," he mumbled, "nosiree, George! Not ole Bat. Ain' nevr' miss."

"All right. Then hear what I've got to say," Purvis said bitterly. He pointed to-

ward the office. "There's money out there and your guns and in a little while Tommy Whitney's going to bring my horse to the livery. Now I don't give a damn how drunk you get or what you do or where you go. But by Heaven, you better not be where I can see you when I get back from the dam. You understand?"

Uncle Billy waved a hand. Elaborately. Drunkenly.

"Nevr' miss. Not a thing. Not ole Bat."

"Then that's it," Purvis said.

He turned and strode stiffly out of the open cell, through the office to the buckboard. He got in and snapped the reins and drove through the emptying street, around to the house to pick up Martha.

Nothing about Martha had changed but her dress. Purvis saw that instantly when he turned the corner and caught sight of her standing rigidly on the mounting block in front of the house, wearing her plum-colored Sunday best, her head turned to watch him come up the street. He drove the buckboard smartly to the block, eyed her defiantly and held out his hand.

Martha met his eyes and looked through him.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

She sniffed curtly and tossed her head. Then she gathered her skirts and stepped into the buckboard, ignoring his hand.

Purvis gripped the reins until his knuckles grew white. He snapped up the heads of the team and drove away from the house, around the corner and down to Main. Then he turned west out of town, brought the team to a trot and headed out to the dam, ignoring Martha but acutely aware of her, the air between them taut and crackling like the hour before an afternoon storm in August.

Some two hundred yards west of town the road rose sharply into the sun-baked foothills. Dust hung in the air and as he rounded the first turn, Purvis caught a glimpse of the last of the crowd winding up to the dam. The team began to pull unevenly against the rise, fighting at the reins to lower their heads and fall back to a walk. Purvis snapped them up and drove on.

Then, ten minutes later, just as he rounded the second turn a quarter of a mile below the dam, Martha caught his arm.

"Con! Stop!"

Purvis shook his head.

"But Con! You've got to! Look!" And she pointed back and to Purvis' right.

Below, cutting across the loop in the road, fighting the deep grass and the rise, was Purvis' big bay. Tommy was riding him, bare back, clinging with both hands to his mane, gripping him with his knees. The boy's face was turned up-slope and when he saw Purvis looking his way, he brought his right hand up from the bay's neck, waved jerkily, and grabbed again at the mane. Purvis drew up and sat waiting grimly.

"Marshal! You gotta come!" Tommy yelled as he put the bay onto the road. "Uncle Billy's drunk again! He's shootin' at those two men dressed in black!"

Purvis knotted his fists and drove them into his knees. He looked to the front and sat there rigidly, boiling mad, until Tommy came along side and drew up.

"Marshal? Ain't you comin'?" he said urgently.

"Hell no I'm not!" Purvis snapped.

Then he slapped the reins at the team and started to drive off. Martha reached across and pulled them up.

"But Con! You can't do this!"

"No? Just watch."

"But Con! Something might happen."

"How?" Purvis said. "He can't shoot himself and the men in black aren't real. All he can do is maybe bust a couple of windows."

"But Marshal," Tommy protested. "That ain't right! They are too real. I *saw* 'em!"

Hackles rose on the back of Purvis' neck.

He looked at Martha, but she was turned to face Tommy and Purvis couldn't see her face, so he looked up at the boy. And one look there was enough. Tommy was honestly scared. His face was white and he still clutched at the bay's mane. There was real fear in his wide eyes and something like disappointment and doubt. Purvis dropped the reins and sprang from the buckboard.

He caught the bay's mane with his right hand and pulled Tommy off with his left. Then he vaulted up, sank his heels into the animal's ribs and turned him back down the slope Tommy had taken coming after the buckboard.

A STRONG fear washed over Purvis as he raced toward town. The tall grass caught at the bay's legs and held him back and Purvis drove his heels into the animal's ribs and leaned ahead, knowing he'd been wrong in giving Uncle Billy the bottle. He hadn't counted on anyone staying in town . . . especially two men dressed in black. But he understood, now, that it could happen. There wasn't any law against wearing black and no one had said that all the ranchers in the area had to go out to the dam. So Purvis knew that if Uncle Billy shot one of these men it would be he, Purvis, who was at fault. He was responsible. And he was a fool.

And as he hit the road coming off the hill just west of town, and looked ahead along the street, Purvis' heart sank.

Uncle Billy lay sprawled in the middle of the street, his head up and his guns aimed at one of the men in black who stood on the porch of the bank. As Purvis watched, one of Uncle Billy's guns flared and there was a vast black cloud of smoke and the man in black on the bank porch went suddenly limp and fell against a pillar and clutched it and then swung slowly out over the edge of the boardwalk, pivoting on his heel, and then fell on his face in a crumbled ball.

Purvis leaned ahead, punishing the bay with his heels, and raced into town and drew up at the bank. He leaped off and ran to the man dressed in black.

And as he ran, he saw the second man in black lying sprawled on his face on the boardwalk in front of the lot where Simpson's store had stood.

Purvis knelt in the deep dust. But he saw at a glance that the man who'd fallen into the street was dead. So he straightened and ran to the man who lay on his face on the boardwalk. He bent and turned the man onto his back and started to kneel beside him. Then he stopped.

On the boardwalk, red with blood, was this man's gun. And next to that, a leather-topped canvas bank bag and a green strong box, the lock shot off and the money that had been inside lying out on the walk.

Purvis stood there, numbly, looking down, seeing these things and understanding came to him slowly. But in the end he knew. These men had waited, and, when the town had at last emptied, even of its

marshal, they had robbed the bank. And it had been Uncle Billy—the drunken, wasted wreck of Bat Bethune—who had stopped them while he, Purvis, marshal of the town, had driven away from his duty out to the dam.

Purvis turned and walked slowly into the street, across to where Uncle Billy lay. He knelt beside him and turned him gently, the smell of the whiskey strong in his nostrils. But if there was anything in Purvis' mind to say, his chance was gone. He slipped his arms under Uncle Billy and lifted him and carried him out of the hard sunlight, into the cool of the jail.

The whiskey bottle stood half full on the desk, and the money, and Purvis swept these to the floor with the back of his hand. Then he laid Uncle Billy on the desk and turned away from him and went back into the street and picked up his guns. Then he went back to the edge of the boardwalk and sat down, the guns hanging loosely in his hands.

After a time, he became aware of the sounds about him and he looked up and to the west and saw Martha and Tommy driving into town in the buckboard. He stood, then, and faced them and looked at Martha as she drove up to him and stopped.

There was a long moment of silence as she faced him and then Purvis cleared his throat.

"He's dead, Martha," Purvis said. "They were trying to rob the bank and he saw them and tried to stop them."

Martha brought the back of her hand to her mouth, her eyes full of pain.

"Oh Con," she said. "Con I'm sorry."

Purvis stepped toward her and brought up his hand with Uncle Billy's gun in it and squeezed her arm.

"Did you shoot 'em, Marshal?" Tommy said. "We could hear, all right, but we couldn't see. I said I bet it was you."

Purvis looked away from Martha, first at the gun in his hand and then at the boy. Then he shook his head.

"Get down from there, Tom," he said and turned abruptly and went into the jail. He found the bottle on the floor and picked it up. Then he undid Uncle Billy's gun belt and went back to the street.

Tommy still sat on the wagon seat and Purvis beckoned to him.

"Come on. Come down here, Tom," he said and stood there, waiting, while Tommy crawled down off the buckboard and came across to the boardwalk.

"You see these guns, Tom?"

The boy nodded.

"Well these are the guns I learned to shoot with," Purvis said. "They used to belong to Bat Bethune. Here." And he handed the one in his right hand to Tommy. Tommy took it and Purvis turned and walked down the street and stood the bottle in the dust. Then he moved back.

"All right, now," he said. "Let's see how steady you are. Take your time and breathe easy and remember, squeeze. Don't pull."

Tommy turned his side to Purvis and closed one eye. Then he raised the gun, bringing it up at arm's length, slowly, steadily, the tin star on his chest glistening in the sun.

LAW—AND DISORDER

Until the railroads started to build toward El Paso, Texas, in 1879, it was a sleepy unproductive little place that centered around Ben Dowell's saloon. There was some irrigation farming and a law which forebade the citizens to bathe naked in the ditches.

When word came that four railroads were heading toward El Paso the news brought such an avalanche of gamblers, adventurers, criminals, speculators and other assorted characters, male and female, that in four months the place was a stewing hell that boasted dozens of saloons, gambling houses, dance halls, Chinese restaurants and even a pair of theatres. Only one man was responsible for law and order—a drunkard. It wasn't until the Texas Rangers arrived that the hell of El Paso was finally bridled.

—J. W. Q.

THE FATAL DUST

The terrible gold poisoning had already killed one man and infected two others, and even if rancher Chantry seemed immune, he was liable to die of lead poisoning. . . .

He charged Emmet head on . . .

By GIFF CHESHIRE

PRINCE CHANTRY rode into Lang's Ferry in the tail of the afternoon. He forked a big buckskin and led two pack horses and he searched hungrily for a pair of dark eyes as he pulled up before the tavern. The town was only this structure and the store across the road and the ferry behind him at the river. Ahead ran the California Trail on its wild reaches through the Siskiyous. Prince let his gaze swing to the trail. A horse was coming on at a running trot, its rider slumped in the saddle.

Mark Lang's voice called, "Howdy, Prince! So you finally dragged yourself off that Grave Creek homestead!"

Prince swung about, a big man but quick moving. He grinned at the tall, dark young fellow who had come to the tavern door. "I ran so plumb out of everything it was come to town or live on venison. Where's Gretchen?"

"In the kitchen." Mark frowned. Not that he had anything against Prince; he knew how things stood with his pretty sister. "She'll be glad to see you, Prince. We were talking about you last night."

"Say," Prince said, pointing at the oncoming horse, "that fellow's about to pitch out of his saddle."

The moving horse slowed as it drew near. The rider had regained his balance and straightened up. Then, as the horse pulled in, he let go and would have tumbled from his seat had not Prince caught him.

The man was dying. His chest, belly and upper trousers were soaked with blood. Mark swung down from the porch, but Prince had already lifted the fellow from the saddle. The newcomer opened his eyes but they had the all-gone look a frontiersman learned to recognize. He tried to speak but only made a gurgle. He went limp.

"Gretchen, fetch that old canvas!" Mark called. "No use messing up a good bed."

"No use going that far," Prince grunted. "He got here, but that's all. He's dead." His hand on the bloody chest had felt the feeble heart stop. He saw the twisted suffering relax on the drained face as he carried the form over and laid it on the edge of the porch. "There's old bleeding and new," he said. "He got it quite a ways down the trail. I've seen 'em go that way, carried by will power until they get where they can let go. Then they go all the way out."

Harley Emmet had come out of his store. He called from across the road, "What've you got there, boys?"

"Another miner who tried to ride the California Trail alone," Prince answered.

Some of the grimness left Mark's face. He gave Prince a half grin and said, "It beats me how you can live way out there on Grave Creek and ride all these trails with a country full of hostile Indians and never get scratched."

"I've come close to getting worse," Prince muttered. He looked down. The figure on the porch was bearded, weathered and clad in ragged clothes. A thousand men just like him had quit their Oregon land claims to try for gold in the new California fields. Prince knelt beside him and began a search of the pockets, saying, "Ever see him before, Mark?"

Mark shook his head. "I've seen all kinds, but not him. Likely he's from the Willamette and was taking home his stake or his disappointment."

"Nothing on him to tell who he is," Prince grunted. His gaze touched the door then. Gretchen Lang stood there, staring at the figure on the porch. She nodded Prince a sober greeting, a poor one when he wanted to swing her in his arms and kiss her till her lips blistered. It had been four months since he had visited Lang's Ferry. She turned swiftly and disappeared inside, taking a piece of his heart with her.

Harley Emmet had come across the road and was examining the miner's saddlebags with interest. The heaving horse was sweat-lathered and the saddle was bloody. Prince wondered what urgency had flogged the miner over the Siskiyou trail alone. There was heavy traffic between Oregon and the new gold fields. With patience a man could arrange to come through with a party strong enough to discourage trouble from the Siskiyou tribes.

Emmet let out an exclamation. A gaunt man with a cool reserve of manner, he had opened the store here after the ferry and tavern had been established. Now he had pulled a wadded shirt out of a saddlebag and put it back. He drawled, "Well, I'll put up his horse, Mark." He lifted the reins.

"Wait a minute!" Prince said. He stepped forward, a frown deepening on his face. He felt the pouch and detected its hardness through the leather. "So he had a stake." He grinned at the quick frown of annoyance from Emmet's face. Walking around the horse, he discovered that both bags were heavily loaded. Fishing under a little wadded clothing, he extracted a dust poke.

"He sure must have hit it big!" Mark breathed.

"Or stole it," Emmet muttered. His eyes had turned bright and there was a quiver in his voice. The gold dust had roused him.

"Mark's got the body," Prince said. "I reckon he'd better take care of it all." He took the reins from Emmet.

"Blast you!" the man breathed. He wasn't a small man but he seemed so as he glared up into Prince's bland face. Then he shrugged and walked back to his store.

"Go in and see Gretchen," Mark said. "I'll take care of the horses."

"I'd better take those saddlebags in with me." Prince unstrapped and swung them over his shoulder, feeling their surprising weight, then went up the tavern steps. He was aware that Harley Emmet was watching from the store porch.

GRETCHEN was in the big tavern kitchen, at work on the evening meal. From the lack of strange horses in the tavern corral, Prince guessed that there were no wayfarers to be fed. She gave him a warmer smile now, and said, "You're looking fine, Prince. How's it going on the homestead?"

"There's only one way it could be better," he said, and watched a flush creep under her skin. She had her brother's darkness, his supple slimness, and the same Gypsy spirit that Mark said was the Lang failing. Prince stood there a moment taking her in, enjoying the things his words, his presence were doing to her.

"Prince, you mustn't pester me," Gretchen said.

He laughed. "What have I done?"

She had to smile again. "Well, don't look at me like that." This was the girl who couldn't go off miles from nowhere to live with a man, even though she loved him and admitted so in all but words. A love of conviviality had prompted Mark to start this tavern on the busy trail instead of hunting free land in the hinterland. That, too, was shared by this girl.

"It's too bad about the miner," Gretchen said hurriedly. "I hope we find out who he is so his people can know."

"Harley Emmet hopes we never do," Prince grunted. "There's a fortune in gold dust in these saddlebags. Mark had better put it in his strong box or it'll give him trouble." He spoke idly for he was thinking, *I could make her change her mind and maybe I will. . . .*

He heard Mark come in and returned to the tavern's big public room. Mark had pushed back his hat and looked thoughtful. They emptied the saddlebags on the tavern bar. Prince whistled. Except for a change of clothes it was all gold dust.

"There's a fortune there!" Mark breathed. "More than you or I'll ever earn for ourselves!"

"And it's not ours," Prince said and wondered why his voice turned rough. "It's hard telling what the fellow was or who shot him or anything about it. He could have been a miner going home to the Willamette and jumped by Indians. Or he could have been a road agent like Emmet hinted. We'll have to wait for somebody to come along hunting the man."

"His hand don't show much hard work," Mark said. He had gone through the clothing, shaking his head. "Emmet could be right. There isn't a thing on the cuss to identify him. Prince, what happens if nobody ever claims this dust?"

"How do I know?" Prince growled. "You and Emmet are getting too interested in that angle. You keep your senses, Mark. You'll have to bury him and wait for information." He helped take the body out to the shed and cover it.

Afterward he went across to the store to order the provisions and tools he had come in for. The storekeeper had turned surly and suspicious, though they had been on friendly terms until then.

Emmet snapped, "If there's no claimers, who gets that dust?"

"That's getting too big a question," Prince answered.

"I found it first!" Emmet said.

"In another man's saddlebags."

"Just the same I've got first claim. I didn't think fast enough or I'd never have let you turn it over to Mark Lang. That man's loose-footed. For enough money he'd kite out and thumb his nose at you and me."

"Watch it," Prince warned. "He's a friend of mine."

"So you're backing him!" Emmet growled. "Because of that girl!"

Prince put his hand on Emmet's chest and his fingers clutched. "I said watch it, Emmet, if you don't want me to hang you on that bacon hook on the rafter. I've got an order for you to put up if you're still interested in honest trade."

He left his order, told Emmet he would be ready to load it the next morning, and left the store. He was uneasy. Something ugly had come afire in Emmet, a raw and hostile avarice. The same thing in a subtler way had excited Mark Lang. Crossing the dusty street, Prince questioned himself and was a little surprised at his complete indifference to the gold dust. It couldn't buy him a thing that he really wanted, independence, self-sufficiency or Gretchen for

a wife. He grinned but there was little amusement in it. Human nature could be a tricky thing.

Dusk drifted in. Prince watered and fed his horses, then ate a late supper with Gretchen and Mark. Nobody stopped from the trail-to be put up for the night, but the easy intimacy Prince had enjoyed here before was gone. Mark had drawn into himself, was even a bit irritable. Gretchen was preoccupied. Denied the visiting he had looked forward to so long, Prince went upstairs to the room Gretchen had given him, as soon as it was dark, and went to bed. He was an active, healthy man and he fell asleep instantly.

He awakened with a start when the weight of a hand fell on his forehead. He sat up roughly before he recognized Gretchen's slim, robed shape in the moonlight. She held a finger to her lips to silence him and at once dropped to her knees beside the bed so she could whisper to him.

"Prince, I've got to tell you. Mark made a secret search of the miner. He found something in the man's boot."

"What?" Prince grunted. "His name?"

"No. A map. Mark thinks it shows the place where he struck it so rich. Mark wants to go at once and find it before somebody else does. If he does, I'll have to go with him. I couldn't stand it here alone."

Prince groaned. "So he was keeping it secret from me. He's as bad as Emmet."

"He doesn't mean to steal the man's dust," Gretchen said defensively. "But the man's dead and his claim's vacant. The first one that finds it can have it. I see how Mark looks at it."

"You can't go away," Prince said.

"I can't stand loneliness, Prince. You'd ought to know that."

"Then marry me."

Her voice sharpened. "And trade loneliness for complete solitude?" Her tone softened. "I'm sorry, Prince. But that's the way I feel."

Prince sat up in his bed, his shoulders and massive head giantlike in the soft moonlight. His hands moved swiftly to her arms and he pulled her to him.

She gave her lips, and her swift breath was warm. She knew that at any hour Mark might take her away and reluctance

and indecision were at the exact balancing point in her mind.

Something moved in the distance. With a caught breath Gretchen pulled to her feet, turned and fled silently. Prince relaxed in the bed, shutting his eyes. Presently he recognized the scrape of a limb on the tavern roof and nearly laughed. But he knew something for sure now. He could take Gretchen back to the claim with him if he wanted to turn her feelings against her judgment. It wouldn't work out in the end, but he knew it would be a hard thing not to do.

He settled back in the bed and tried to go to sleep. He couldn't make it. Presently he rose, found his pipe, filled and lighted it. When the pipe had been smoked out he still sat in a chair by the window. He could see the road and the darkened front of Emmet's store. Presently he saw a man come out of the store.

Prince dressed swiftly. Emmet was too smart to think he could break into the tavern, which had to be locked against prowling Indians. Before Prince pulled on his boots he left the room and moved cautiously down the stairs. He prowled across the big main room in time to see Emmet pass the window there. He knew then that the man was going to the shed for his own search of the dead man. The awareness put a prickling sensation on the nape of Prince's neck. He didn't like what had been loosed in Lang's Ferry.

He debated whether to surprise the man and throw a scare into him. That would do no good, nor could Emmet's mission do any harm. But the warning sense in Prince stayed as it was. The man in this mood was dangerous. Prince slipped through the kitchen, threw back the bolt on the door and stepped out. He crossed the grass soundlessly on his bare feet. Emmet had got the shed door open and gone in. Prince slipped up, swung it shut and latched the hasp.

Emmet must have thought the wind did it for he made no sound. Prince had a grim grin on his lips as he returned to the tavern wondering what the man would do when he had imprisoned himself with a dead man.

Prince was half way up the stairs when he saw the figure at the top. Mark's voice was tight with suspicion when he said, "What're you doing down there?"

"I'm housebroke, Mark!" Prince snapped. A wave of cold rippled up his spine, anger following. "Did you get it in your head I was making off with the gold dust?"

"No, of course not." Mark tried to make his voice lighter but it still had an edge. "I heard something and thought I'd better take a look."

"You'd better put that dust under your bed so you can sleep." Prince passed Mark roughly and re-entered his room. He didn't hear Mark turn back to his own bedroom and knew that he had grown distrustful enough to want to keep his eye steadily on the treasure.

Prince didn't undress, disturbed now by the night's events, but he stretched out on the bed. It was another scraping sound that roused him next. At first he thought it was the limb, then decided it was a downstairs door. Climbing to his feet, he slipped into the hallway. He could hear nothing now. He moved to the back end of the hall. There was a window there and through it he could see the tavern barn. In a moment he saw Mark moving toward the barn, carrying something heavy. He was hiding the gold dust where he alone would know where it was. Prince swore under his breath.

HE MET the dawn with tired eyes. Rising and dressing fully, he descended the stairs. He was the first one up and he went to the back porch to wash. Not until then did he think of Harley Emmet, whom he had locked in the shed. He crossed the yard, unlatched the door and swung it open.

Emmet cringed back against the wall, staring. Prince brought a look of surprise to his face.

The man growled something unintelligible and stood there. His eyes burned with pure hate. "Somebody latched me in here!" he breathed at last, "and it was you!"

"Did I?" Prince asked. "I figured the wind had blown the door open, so I shut it. Get home now if you've learned better than to prowl on your neighbors. And get my order put up. I want to go home today."

"Taking that gold dust out to Grave Creek with you?" Emmet asked. "Scheming with Mark Lang to get it away from me?" The man was half insane with that fixed idea.

"Get it off your mind, Emmet, before it gets you into worse trouble."

"It's mine!" Emmet said insistently. "I found it and finders keepers!" But he left.

Gretchen was in the kitchen and Prince knew from her face that she had seen him turn Emmet loose. But she said nothing about it. She gave him a tired smile and said, "Will you be going home today, Prince?"

"You hope so, don't you?"

She swung and faced him squarely. "I do."

"Mark'll wait till I've gone before he lights out for California, won't he? And you're anxious to go with him."

"Yes."

"Last night you might have changed your mind."

"But I didn't."

They heard Mark coming down the stairs then. When the man came into the kitchen he had brought a false amiability to his face. "Morning, Prince," he said affably. "You're up early. Figuring on an early start for home?"

Prince shook his head. "A man gets enough of his own company on Grave Creek. You seem to be short of paying guests, so I reckon I'll stay a few days."

He watched the subtle, ugly change in Mark's face and thought, *That's not Mark Lang. It's somebody unreal.* But a quick side glance caught the look in Gretchen's eye. It wasn't dislike of his announcement. It was a veiled but real horror at what she saw in her brother.

With a quick recovery, Mark smiled and said, "Fine and dandy."

Mark disappeared right after breakfast. Gretchen busied herself in the kitchen and Prince went up to his room. Irritation bit into him deeply. He had been there only a few minutes when he heard Gretchen's light, swift step on the stairs.

She burst into his room. "Prince!" she breathed. "Mark rode out just now, heading south! He had those saddlebags on his horse."

Prince stared at her. "Want to catch up and go along?"

It was as if he had struck her. Then she said, "Never! Prince, what has it done to him?"

"It's gold fever."

"Stop him!"

"Mark Lang is a grown man." Prince could hardly bear the shock on the girl's face. It was not only Mark's simmering avarice but his desertion of her, the impatience and distrust that had made it impossible for him to wait. In a milder voice, Prince added, "I saw him switch hiding places last night because he got suspicious of me. Maybe he's only hiding it another time."

"He's going to California to try and find that claim."

Prince followed her downstairs, tempted to saddle and ride after Mark and beat the spell out of him. He knew that wouldn't do. He paced the big public room of the tavern, and then it was that he saw Harley Emmet ride out.

The man swung out from behind the store and tried to keep to the trees. Prince stared in alarm. Emmet had been watching every move over here. He had seen Mark ride out and had detected the contested saddlebags. Prince noted that Emmet had strapped on a sidegun. At a distance down the trail he emerged from the brush and struck out openly after Mark.

Prince said nothing about it to Gretchen. Slipping up the stairs he got his own belt and pistol, then descended and left the tavern by the front door. It was the work of minutes to snake his horse out of the corral and saddle it. He stayed on the blind side of the barn when he hit the California Trail.

Emmet was out of sight. Ahead the trail swung left to follow the river out of its wide gorge. There were half a dozen places where a man could swing ahead of another. Prince knew that was Emmet's intention, to head Mark off, perhaps to gun him from ambush and go on south with the gold.

Prince hurried the buckskin, riding boldly. He didn't try to trail Emmet, who could leave the trail anywhere and made his fast ride ahead. Prince wanted to catch Mark and warn him, perhaps to turn him back before he had run into a gun trap, for he was Gretchen's brother.

HE HAD spilled out of the gorge onto the great flat of the Bear before he saw Mark far in the distance. The man was sparing his horse, for the precious saddlebags were heavy and it was a long way to the nearest settlement. Prince thundered

on and a little later Mark heard him and wheeled his horse in sudden defensive alarm. Prince went on. He had gone only a few paces when Mark turned his mount again, determined to ride for it. In a moment both were thundering south, with the buckskin swiftly closing the gap.

The trail dipped suddenly and Mark disappeared with it. Then the crack of a gun punched out. Prince hit his horse's ribs with his spurs. Pounding over the rise, he saw a riderless horse going on, the stirrups flapping. Mark had ridden into Emmet's gun trap, and now Emmet cut out of a brush clump and streaked forward, trying to catch the horse and its precious saddlebags.

His concentration on the effort seemed to have blinded him to Prince, in the near distance. Emmet lashed his mount and a moment later had Mark's horse by the reins. He swung around then and saw Prince. He dismounted hastily for cover behind his horse.

Prince passed the sprawled figure of Mark on the hot earth and knew he had a killer to face. He charged Emmet head on, his gun up and ready. Emmet fired at him, a hasty, frenzied shot. Prince waited until he had come into range, ducked instinctively when he saw the puff of smoke lift above Emmet's hand, then laid in his own shot. Emmet took a staggering step forward, then went down.

Prince rode on up but the man was out of it, shot through the throat. Prince swung down and took the pistol from a relaxed hand. Emmet had held onto the reins of the precious horses and they were still tangled in his other hand, the horses waiting nervously. Prince swung the man across the saddle of the horse he had been riding and lashed him there.

When he mounted the buckskin he stared. Mark was standing in the center of the trail, coming toward him with a drunken lurch. Maybe he meant to make a fight of it yet. Prince rode toward him, leading the other horses. A moment later he saw that there was no gun in Mark's hand. The side of his head was bloody, his hat gone and forgotten.

Mark stared uncomprehending at Emmet's draped body as Prince pulled up.

"Emmet!" Mark gasped. "He followed me. He tried to kill me."

"Too bad he didn't. I wish you could have seen the look on Gretchen's face when she saw you deserting her. You can have your horse, and you can keep riding south with your precious map, but I'm taking the gold dust back to the tavern."

"He'd have finished me for sure if you hadn't come along," Mark breathed. "I was out for a while. Why did you do it?"

"I'll never know."

"Give me my horse," Mark said. "I'm going back with you."

Prince gave him a long look. Mark's face had changed again, to shock and bewilderment. He had had a brush with death and he had discovered a depth of friendship he had not suspected in Prince Chantry. But an hour from now it might be a different story. Prince was of a mind to order Mark on, to tell him to stay away from Gretchen. But he couldn't do it.

The contested saddlebags were still on the horse he let Mark mount. Prince holstered his gun. It placed Mark in a position where he could exploit that friendship again, wheeling and bolting in trust that Prince would not shoot to stop him. Mark Lang had made no such move when, long later, they drew in sight of the tavern.

It was late that afternoon when two men thundered up the trail and halted at the tavern.

"We're with Macy's Express," one man said. "Three days ago one of our runners was shot on the Trinity Trail. His dust was taken, a lot of it. He'd fired his gun, and we've seen signs that he hit the *bandido*. And we've found more sign of the cuss all the way up here. Have you seen anything suspicious?"

It was another chance for Mark Lang. He had only to say that he had seen the man, who had fogged on through to the north. But Mark said, "He's in a shed outdoors. Dead. The gold dust was in his saddlebags. I've got it in my strong box."

"No fooling?" the man breathed. They both looked enormously relieved. "Well, since we're in Oregon Territory, we'll have to go on and get hold of a marshal. If you'll take care of things till we get back.

"Wait a minute," Mark said. He reached into his shirt pocket and brought forth a folded paper, the one he had found in the dead man's boot. "Does this mean anything to you? He had it on him."

The man looked at it then laughed. "It's a map of the trail our runner used down the Trinity. The road agent must have been a thorough cuss. He studied our man's route and planned it all out on paper." He shoved the paper into his pocket and the pair left.

After a moment Mark said, "How big a fool can a man be?"

"Forget it," Prince said. He knew that the fevers that had burned in Mark had gone out forever. There was nothing more to hold Prince here. Emmet's store was locked and would be until some disposition was made of it. "I'll head on home, Mark. But when the authorities get here I'll have to explain why I killed Emmet."

"Tell them the truth," Mark said. "I tried to steal that gold."

Prince looked thoughtful. "Emmet not only tried to steal it, he tried to kill you. The man wasn't capable of learning what I think you learned. So far as I knew you were taking the gold to California to find out who owned it."

He found Gretchen in the kitchen. He said, "It's been rough but it's over. I reckon I'll be on my way."

The glance she gave him was half shy, half pleading. "Couldn't you stay and make that visit, Prince?"

He stared at her with interest. "Why? I thought you said you were anxious for me to go."

"Not now." The shyness left and her eyes were frank and level. "The circuit rider will be through here at the end of the week to hold services for the settlers. Wait for him, Prince."

"You're upset. And I won't have you making a decision like that while you are."

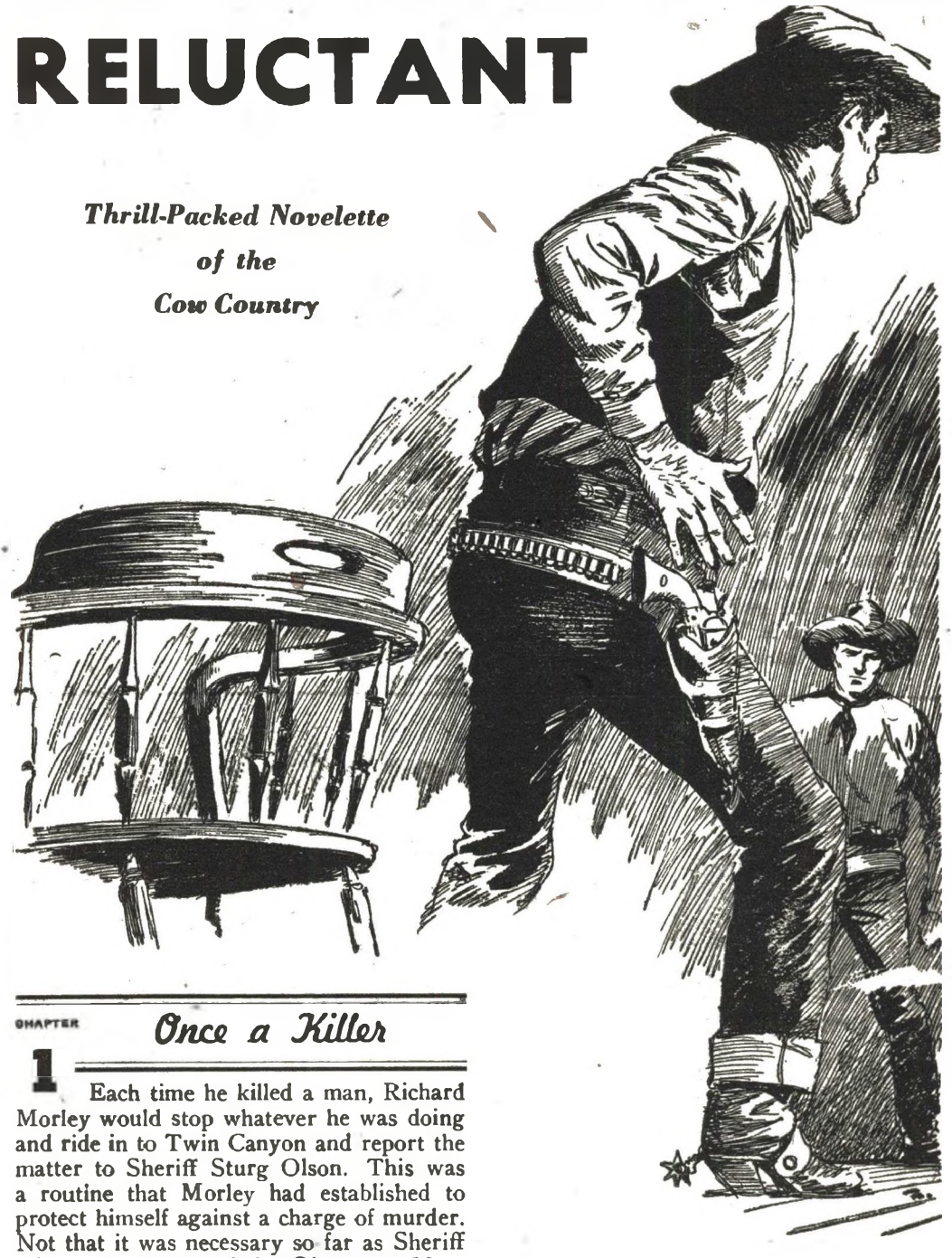
"If you come to Grave Creek it's got to be your real wish."

"It is, Prince. That's why I'm ready to go. You could have forced me to but you wouldn't. It makes a difference. I know I won't be lonely with you. And there'll be lots of company when we have children. Will you wait for the preacher?"

He had no words for that and didn't need them. His big arms and hungry lips made answer.

RELUCTANT

Thrill-Packed Novelette of the Cow Country



"Should I have stood there and let him shoot me?"

CHAPTER 1

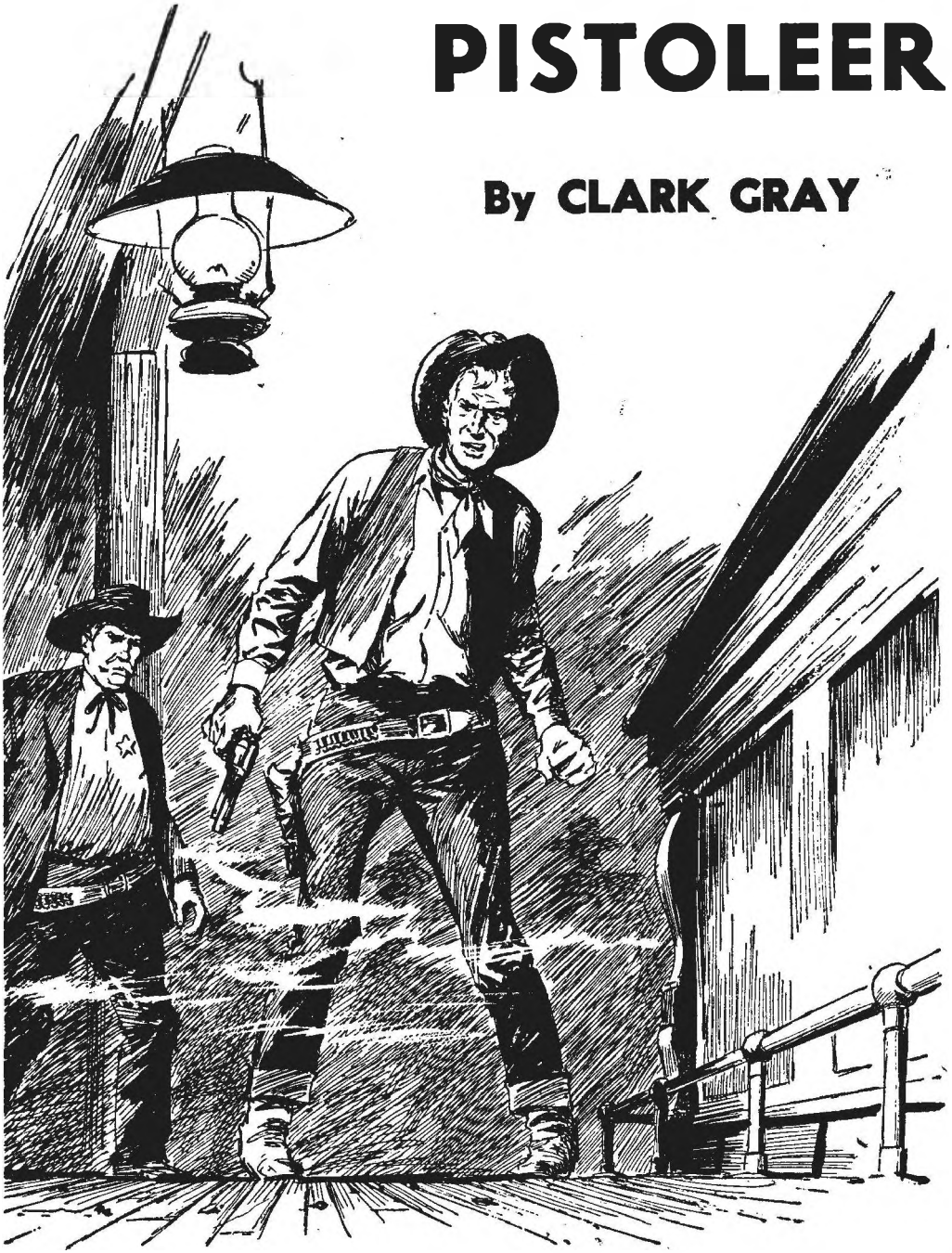
Once a Killer

Each time he killed a man, Richard Morley would stop whatever he was doing and ride in to Twin Canyon and report the matter to Sheriff Sturg Olson. This was a routine that Morley had established to protect himself against a charge of murder. Not that it was necessary so far as Sheriff Olson was concerned, for Olson was Morley's friend. But it looked better.

Morley had been cutting hay when Bub and Harry Johnson cut loose at him from the oak grove with high-powered rifles. He had left his dogs at home that day, which

PISTOLEER

By CLARK GRAY



Not for Richard Morley were the peaceful pursuits of other men . . . a ranch, a wife, children. His only friends were the notches on his gun, his only future—a vengeance bullet.

was why Bub and Harry were able to get so close. Only the fact that the mower had struck a stump, breaking the pitman at the precise moment of the shots, saved Morley's life. He had dived headlong behind the shelter of the stump.

The ensuing battle had lasted a half day. When it was over, Harry Johnson had vanished on his horse into the buckbrush along the creek and Bub Johnson was coughing out his life in the edge of the oak grove with a bullet through his lungs.

Then Richard Morley, being essentially a kindly man, had troubled himself to do the little things for Bub. He had given Bub a drink out of the quart fruit jar of spring water he carried on the mower. He had built Bub a cigarette. He had watched Bub die, and he had noted that even in death the hatred did not leave Bub Johnson's eyes.

After Bub's death, Morley had wearily unharnessed the team and used the leathers to tie the limp body across the back of one of the animals. Morley was a big man with nothing much to distinguish him from other men. A rancher in a country of ranchers. He wore faded blue levis from choice and economy. He wore a .45 around his lean hips because he wanted to stay alive. The lines of weariness in his face were there because it was not easy for Morley to stay alive, even with the gun.

He had left the body at his ranch headquarters and turned loose his dogs and ridden reluctantly to town, thinking with a kind of awe about how easily a man could get blood on his hands.

In town, Morley had checked his horse at the livery and he was walking up Main Street toward the courthouse when the reaction came.

Morley's reaction to a killing was always the same. For the first hour or so he felt nothing. Then the bitter knowledge that had put an end forever to another man's joys and sorrows would strike Morley like a physical, sickening blow. And for a time after that, some obscure mysticism would come to Morley. He saw and sensed things that normally he would not have noticed. It was, Morley thought, as if he were trying to live two lives at once—his own and that of the man who would never feel or see again.

Now, as he walked morosely up Main, Morley was aware of huge horseflies buzzing round the shoulders of the saddled animals which stood patiently in the sun before the pole hitchrail. He caught the overpowering scent of stale beer and sawdust from the barrooms.

People jostled him on the narrow boardwalk at this hour just before sundown, cowhands hurrying home to chores, women doing their supper shopping, barefoot boys returning from the creek with wet plastered hair and clean faces.

A cat leaped past in front of Morley's boots. It flashed under the hitchrail and into the sandy street with terror in the way it held its tail flat behind it. Morley heard the excited barking of a hound dog, and out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a tawny yellow beast emerging from a grocery store in hot pursuit. Without thinking, Morley stepped squarely in front of the dog.

The dog skidded to one side on the boardwalk, nearly lost his footing, then made it around Morley and yipped frantically as he resumed the chase, his tail brushing Morley's knees.

It hadn't been much of a delay, but Morley turned back to the street and saw that the cat had gained the safety of a cottonwood tree that stood over the watering trough. It was facing the dog now from a height of ten feet, spitting angrily. Morley smiled and passed on.

HE FOUND Sheriff Sturg Olson just locking the door of his office on the second floor of the courthouse. Olson had a folded newspaper under his arm. He glanced up quickly when Morley touched him on the shoulder.

"Dick!" Olson's eyes went rapidly over Morley's face, reading it. "Another one?"

Morley nodded. "Bub Johnson. Harry got away."

"Dick, I'm sorry as hell!" Olson unlocked the office door and swung it open. He was a comfortably plump man of about fifty. He had wide moustaches and a quality of loyal friendship unusual in a politician. "Come in and have a swig out of my bottle. You look like you need it."

"Thanks, Sturg." Morley shook his head. "I ought to see Helen, now I'm in town."

Sturg Olson said, "Oh." His blue eyes looked troubled. He said, "Helen will take this hard."

"No harder than usual," Morley answered. "Sturg, I was mowing on that southeast haymeadow of mine. They fired first, and they kept on firing even after I got to cover."

Sturg Olson looked embarrassed. He took his folded newspaper and struck Morley lightly across the shoulder with it.

"Hell, Dick, you don't need to go into details with me."

"I want to keep things straight," Morley said gravely. "Sturg, I left Bub at the house."

"I'll send a deputy to bring him in."

"Could you do it tonight? Before I get home?"

Sturg Olson's voice was unusually gentle. "Sure, Dick. Drop by the house for a game of checkers before you leave. Phoebe thinks she's getting pretty good."

Morley agreed to that and left the courthouse, squared up once again with the law. He knew there would be no legal repurcussions whatever from his killing of Bub Johnson. Olson knew his story, as did the whole town of Twin Canyon. Nobody would blame Morley for doing what he had to do.

Outside, the sun was gone and a hint of coolness was sweeping in off the blueing prairie. Morley walked the two blocks south of Main very slowly, turning in his mind the things he could tell Helen, and rejecting them all.

Nothing Morley could say would change the fact that he had killed six men. Seven now, he amended bleakly. Nothing could make the girl he intended to marry forget for one moment that his hands that caressed her had pulled the trigger of death. How much of that knowledge, Morley wondered, would it take to kill love?

Helen was sitting on the front porch swing, cooling out a little after her hot day's work in the Twin Canyon Hotel. She had slipped her shoes off; her reddish brown hair looked dark and rich in the fading light. She came to her stockinged feet when she saw him, and alarm was in her voice.

"Dick! I didn't expect you tonight! Has something happened?"

Morley kissed her gently. And as always he felt the surge of deep affection for her. But tonight there was another feeling. Grave-faced, he put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length, studying her face, letting the beauty of it pull at him strongly.

He was thinking that Bub Johnson would never enjoy the beauty of a woman again.

"Helen," Morley said, "it's time we had another talk."

Her eyes seemed to darken. "Another killing?"

Morley nodded. "Bub Johnson."

She put her hands to her face and caught back a sudden sob. She moved away from him a step or two. In the semi-darkness Morley caught the glitter of his diamond on her left hand, the diamond that had cost Morley the proceeds from half a carload of steers.

"Could you give me supper, Helen?" Morley asked patiently. "Or would you rather go back to the hotel?"

For an instant she did not answer. She simply stood there with her face in her hands, making her adjustment. A momentary panic touched Morley. But when Helen took her hands away, she had managed somehow to find a wan smile.

"Of course I'll cook your supper, Dick. I think there's a steak in the house."

Morley followed her inside and lit a lamp

for her in the kitchen. Then he sat at the big kitchen table and rolled a smoke and watched her move around the stove, feeling the first beginnings of contentment.

Helen had managed the Twin Canyon Hotel since the death of her father, who had been its builder. It was not a job for most women, but Helen had succeeded in it and managed to keep her own house at the same time. This was all the more unusual, Morley reflected, because she had been educated in the East. Morley had not even known her until two years ago, when she had arrived in Twin Canyon for her father's funeral.

Morley smiled. "You're a good manager, Helen."

She looked at him steadily with her eyes shining. Even with this trouble between them, it was quite plain to Morley that she loved him. The knowledge gave him a distinct throb of happiness. He grinned and accepted a plate from her.

She sat quietly with her elbows on the table, watching him while he ate his steak and potatoes and drank three cups of coffee and consumed two pieces of apple pie.

When he had pushed back his coffee cup for the last time and lit another smoke, she said, "All right, Dick. Now tell me why you had to kill Bub Johnson."

RICHARD MORLEY frowned and broke his burnt match and dropped it into the coffee cup. He was aware that his own future depended on his answer. For Helen had threatened to break their engagement unless he, Morley, stopped killing. Morley could not find it in him to blame her for that.

He sighed and said gently, "Helen, Bub and Harry shot at me from an oak grove, while I was mowing. They tried to kill me. I defended myself. Bub caught one of my bullets in the lung."

Helen's eyes on his face were filled with pain. "But why, Dick? Why did they try to kill you?"

"Because," Morley said wearily, "I shot their brother, Tom, two years ago."

Helen pulled Morley's dirty plate toward her and began to stack his silverware on it. She emptied the burnt match out of his cup into the plate, and she straightened a wrinkle in the tablecloth.

"And why did you kill Tom?"

Morley said, "Because I had a reputation as a gunslick. Tom wanted to try his luck."

Helen shook her head. "And why did you have a reputation as a gunslick, Dick?"

"Because," Morley said harshly, "I believed that was the best way to stay alive. I still believe it, Helen."

He shoved to his feet and paced across the kitchen floor to the big coal range and back again. None of this was doing any good, he knew. He felt the grinding hopelessness of frustration, and he wondered whether he ought not to try explaining to Helen, just once. Even though he knew she would never see this the way he saw it. He laid his burning cigarette on the table's edge and faced her squarely.

"Helen, you listen to me now. I'm going to try to explain to you how an ordinary honest cowman like me can become a gunman. I don't think you will understand, but damn it, I am going to try."

He closed his eyes a moment, collecting his thoughts, marshaling his bitter facts.

"It began," Richard Morley said, "in Abe Slaughter's barroom. I was in there with Sturg Olson and a few of the boys, playing a quiet game of dominoes. There was a young punk there, pretty drunk. He started shooting bottles off the backbar."

Morley's face was haggard. He was seeing again the blond grinning young puncher, sweating with whisky. The boy had been a harmless youth on a spree.

"He wasn't very careful where he shot, and Abe was worried about the breakage. So Sturg and I went up to talk to him, kind of calm him down. And he pulled a gun on me, Helen."

Morley picked his cigarette off the table's edge and puffed savagely at it. "What was I to do? Should I have stood there and let a drunk shoot me?"

Helen said, "Did you have to kill him, Dick?"

Morley closed his eyes painfully. "I didn't mean to kill him. I aimed for his shoulder. But I misjudged a little. The bullet went into his neck."

Morley rubbed a sweating hand across the back of his head. His voice was hoarse. "After that I practiced with a gun, Helen. I didn't want to kill anybody else, accidentally or otherwise. Being an expert shot seemed the best way to avoid it. Most men steer clear of an expert gunman."

"But you didn't avoid it, Dick."

"No," Morley said, "I didn't. That boy had a brother in Texas. When the brother heard about the killing, he sent word he was coming up here to get me."

Helen said, "And you killed him, too?"

"Not the first time. The first time I shot him in the leg. But Helen, when he got out of the hospital he came after me again."

Morley's voice was flat. "That time I killed him."

CHAPTER 2 Gunhand's Girl

He snubbed out his cigarette and threw it into the coal cookstove. His hands were sweaty and shaking; there was a nervous tic over one eye that made the eyelid jerk spasmodically. He stalked back to his seat at the kitchen table and put his head in his hands. Helen's chair creaked, and presently he felt her fingers in his hair.

"Poor Dick." Her voice vibrated richly with trouble and love. "Poor Dick. You've got yourself in a trap and you can't get out."

Richard Morley wanted nothing at that moment so much as to take Helen into his arms. The need for a woman's comfort was so strong it shook him physically. But he did not move from his chair. Any comfort he received from Helen now would be sympathy, and not understanding.

"No," he said. "It's not a trap that I can't get out of, Helen. Let me finish. I had to face trial for that second killing.

"It wasn't much of a trial, really, because everybody knew the story. But the county prosecutor had ambition. He wanted to run for Congress, so he needed his name in the papers. He called me a cold-blooded killer. A gunslick. A man who killed for the love of killing." Morley grinned twistedly. "He got his name in the papers, all right. And he damned near got me hung."

Helen's fingers tightened in his hair. "But it was self-defense!"

"Yes," Morley said. "It was self-defense. It's hard to get any jury in the Territory to convict on a murder charge, Helen, when there's the slightest excuse for a self-defense plea."

Morley was a little calmer now. He leaned back in his chair and rolled another smoke, then turned and studied Helen thoughtfully.

"But I'd been named a killer and the name stuck. Helen, I wonder if you can understand why a whisky-filled young punk who isn't dry behind the ears yet will try to gun down an older man with the reputation I had?"

"I don't know, Dick," Helen said. She left him and picked up the dirty dishes, carrying them to the sink. Morley watched her as she vigorously worked the hand pump beside the sink, filling a dishpan with water. She set the dishpan on the stove to heat.

"Young men," Morley said, "have the habit of trying to prove they're tough. In our day and time they sometimes do it by trying out their gunspeed. It's usually a hell of a fatal way of proving toughness, but it happens, Helen. Just as many of the Indian tribes used to half-kill their young men with torture before admitting them as full-fledged warriors. You can talk all day about it, and still not know where you are. But the fact remains that three young punks, filled to the ears with whisky, tried to beat me to the draw in the last two years. They'd heard I was a killer, you see. They wanted to try their luck." Morley smiled wryly. "Well, all three of them are buried now."

He waited for Helen to speak, but she only stared at him. Morley grimaced and went on.

"It's like a chain, Helen. One link leads to another. You kill one man, and immediately there is a father or brother, or a young punk, ambitious for glory. It's a chain with no end to it. The more you kill, the more you have to kill."

HELEN put a finger in her dishwater, testing its warmth. Then she moved the pan back to the sink and began to pare pieces from a block of soap with a knife. Her face was intent with thought, and she was, Morley knew, thinking of herself. Which was only right.

She would be thinking about what happened to women who married gunmen. For one thing there would be the notoriety of it. The whispers that would circle when she passed upstreet on her husband's arm, the looks of fear, of dislike.

But that wasn't the worst. The fact that her man had blood on his hands wasn't even the worst. The worst thing was the knowl-

edge that someday the inevitable would happen, and her man would come home shrouded in canvas over the back of a horse. Her children would be fatherless, then.

These thoughts were not new to Morley, but he sensed that Helen faced them now for the first time.

Morley sat back and inhaled his smoke and gave her time. On the other side there would be love, he knew, and an unmeasured number of months before the final bullet would come. Maybe even years, with luck. But Morley was aware that he could offer no certainty, beyond the certainty of his own love. Helen alone would have to decide whether that was enough.

She washed her dishes very slowly, staring at the plates with unseeing eyes. Morley stretched his legs out under the table into a more comfortable position, waiting patiently.

At length she finished, and hung her dishtowel on the rack behind the stove before sitting down to take his hand. She put Morley's big hand between her two palms and caressed it. Tears stood in her eyes.

"It's the gun, Dick. It's always wearing a gun that does it. If you left it off—"

Gently Morley shook his head. "Helen, last year Paul and Silas Glass tried to shoot me in the back from the roof of the bank. Other men have tried the same. Harry and Bub Johnson tried to pot me with rifles today, when I only had my .45. Going unarmed is not the answer."

"Then let's leave," she burst out. "You can sell your ranch, and I'll sell the hotel. We can—we can even change our names, Dick."

Morley squeezed her hand and regarded her thoughtfully. He believed that this suggestion was one of desperation, that she did not really mean it. "That is the way out of the trap, Helen. But it is a way I will not take. This is my country. I will not run away."

"You're a fool!" Helen snapped. She rose quickly and went to the stove, where she stood with her back to Morley, dabbing at her eyes. Presently she gave a little cry and ran back to him, pulling his head against her chest. "Darling, I didn't mean it! You know I didn't! It's just—"

She broke off, sobbing. Morley smiled and pushed his chair back and took her in his arms. He kissed her on the cheek and patted her shoulders, soothing her as if she'd been a child.

"It's all right, sweetheart, it's all right. You've got a tough problem, but nobody is forcing you. Take your time thinking it over."

"Oh, Dick, I'm afraid!" She clutched at him despairingly. "I'm afraid!"

Morley nodded soberly, "So am I, Helen."

He sensed then that he had said enough. Gravely he released her and found his hat on the peg beside the window. He picked up the lamp and took Helen by the hand and led her through the house to the living room. There by the door he set down the lamp and drew out his gun and checked it.

Helen said, "The gun—"

Morley studied her carefully. "Harry Johnson's still on the loose, Helen. And there are other men who'd kill me if they could. I just wanted to be sure the gun's in working order."

He was conscious of a stricken look in her eyes as he closed the door behind him.

OUTSIDE, Morley assumed the caution that had become second nature to him now. Instead of moving down the porch steps he went to one side and stepped over the railing. There he waited a few moments, huddled in shrubbery, until his eyes became adjusted to darkness. He made a careful search of the street, not neglecting the porches and roofs and darkened windows of adjacent houses. It was five full minutes before he pushed out of the shrubbery.

He advanced up the street without any consciousness of himself at all. Rather he was like a sensitive mechanism recording the impulses of his senses, sorting them carefully for the unusual, the dangerous. He was aware of the sleepy twitter of a bird in the elm tree overhead, of the coolness of the night air, of the distant scent from somebody's field of cut alfalfa, of a slatted area of yellow light from Abe Slaughter's barroom falling across a picket fence.

He reached Sturg Olson's house and knocked quietly on the door. While he was waiting, Morley had a little time to wonder what his life would be like if Helen actually refused to marry him.

Morley saw a brief picture of himself going down through the remaining months,

always hunted as he was hunted now, and always alone. He closed his eyes tight to shut the picture from his mind. When he opened them, Phoebe, Sturg's daughter, was standing in the opened door.

"Evening, Dick. Dad's gone to the courthouse. He'll be back in a few minutes. Come in and play checkers."

Richard Morley looked at the girl with widened eyes. She was scarcely sixteen, a healthy slip of a young thing who should have had a schoolbook under her arm. But tonight she wore a fancily embroidered dress with leg o'mutton sleeves that had obviously been her mother's.

Morley started to grin, then he caught the excited anticipation in Phoebe's eyes, and he changed the grin into a grave smile.

"Howdy, Phoebe. You look pretty as a picture."

Her face was chalky with some material that looked suspiciously like flour, and she had gotten hold of some rouge and applied it unskillfully into two round splotches on her cheeks. But even under the make-up Morley could distinguish her pleased blush.

Turning, she led him into the library, where a checkerboard had been set up. The lamp beside the table had been turned low, throwing the room in shadow. A sofa stood beside the lamp.

Phoebe seated herself at the sofa with a smile which was a little twisted. Morley thought that she had intended the smile to be mysterious. Phoebe stretched her arm across the top of the sofa and leaned back languorously.

"Sit down, Dick," she said in a throaty voice.

Morley looked at the narrow space she had indicated on the sofa. It would be impossible to sit there without touching Phoebe. Morley looked at the shadows in the room, and it was hard to keep from smiling, but Morley managed it.

"Phoebe," he said soberly, "it is only fair that you should know. I am engaged to marry Helen Cline."

"I know that," Phoebe half-closed her eyes and peered at him seductively. "But Dick, there are other attractive women. Maybe you'd never noticed."

"I've noticed," Morley said. "But, Phoebe, we—"

He'd been about to suggest that they'd better play checkers, but it was not necessary, for at that instant he heard the sound of Sturg Olson's heavy step entering the house. Morley lit a cigarette, aware of sudden panic in Phoebe's eyes. Then Sturg entered. He looked at his daughter with amazement.

"What in tarnation—girl, go wash your face! And take off that old party dress of your ma's!"

Phoebe flushed dull red under her make-up. She rose, and her lip trembled.

"But, pa—"

"Go on, dang it! Scat! What's got into you, girl!"

Phoebe fled. When the door had slammed shut behind her, Morley became elaborately casual about breaking his burnt match, dropping it into an ash tray. He heard Sturg Olson cursing, but with a hint of amusement in it. Olson muttered something about not understanding young girls, about it's being a pity Phoebe's ma was no longer alive.

Then Sturg Olson took an envelope from his shirt pocket, and his eyes lost their laughter.

CHAPTER 3

Vengeance Clan

"I picked up Harry Johnson a while ago, Dick. Thought maybe I could throw a scare into him—talk him into leaving the country. But I can't hold him unless you want to go before the grand jury and tell about how he tried to bushwhack you. And I don't suppose you want to do that, damn it!"

Smiling, Morley shook his head. He sat down and moved the checkerboard and put his elbows on the table, regarding Sturg wryly. Sturg's plump face had lines of worry in it. "You know how that would be, Sturg. Soon as he was out of prison, he'd be after me again."

"I know." Sturg Olson tapped the envelope on the table. Morley noted in surprise that Olson's hand was trembling.

"How many men," Olson asked, "want your hide, Dick?"

Morley frowned and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. It hurt, even from Sturg, a question like that, because it reminded him of the times his gun had spewed forth death. But Morley knew that Sturg was his friend.

"There's Harry Johnson. He'll be hotter than ever now. There's Paul and Silas Glass, from Oxhorse County. There's Lyman Holmes, from Texas. That's the ones I know about, Sturg. Nobody can count the young punks who may try to bluff me into a shooting scrape any time, just for the hell of it."

"Uh-huh." Sturg nodded. He unfolded the letter. " I found this in Harry's pocket. Read it, Dick."

The letter was from Lyman Holmes. It was a reply, evidently, to a letter from Bub and Harry Johnson. It said that he, Lyman, would be in Twin Canyon within a week, where he would meet with Bub and Harry, and with Paul and Silas Glass. Together, they would work out the details of their unfinished business.

Morley read the letter twice. He could think of only one item of business that would concern the Glass boys and Lyman Holmes and Harry Johnson. Richard Morley was that item. The death of Richard Morley.

Morley felt his lips flatten out against his teeth, and the odd excitement that was so familiar to him now began to rise. He folded the letter and handed it back to Sturg.

"They couldn't do it separately." Sturg Olson's voice held the savagery of frustration. "So they're going to gang up on you, Dick."

Morley nodded and toyed absently with a black checker in the corner of the checkerboard. He was thinking of Helen, and down somewhere inside of him he felt a sense of despairing loneliness, as if he had already lost her.

"I can let you know when they hit town," Sturg Olson was saying bitterly. "I can give you a couple bodyguards. But I can't stop 'em, Dick, until they violate some law."

"I know that, Sturg." Morley's voice was very gentle. "That makes four more men I've got to kill. And that won't end it. For every man I kill, another rises up. It's like cutting heads off a dragon."

"Yeah." Sturg Olson got out a stubby pipe and lit it with shaking fingers. Then Sturg struck the checkerboard savagely, spewing checkers to the floor.

"Damn it, Dick! What is the way out of this? You have never harmed any man in your life, except under necessity. Why did this have to happen to you?"

Morley shook his head. "I've quit looking for the answer to that one, Sturg. But there is a way out—two ways. One is for me to marry Helen and move away. I will not do that. The second way is for me to be killed." He smiled wryly. "I won't do that either, if I can help it."

"No." Sturg Olson scrubbed a big hand through his hair, then got up, shrugging. "We'll think about it, but it won't do no good. I'll let you know when the boys hit town." Sturg's big mouth shook under his moustache. "Damn it to hell, Dick, you be careful!"

Morley said, "All right, Sturg." He picked up his hat and moved to the door.

IN THE living room, Phoebe was reading a book. She had washed her face and changed into a pair of levis and a shirt.

Morley smiled at her, thinking vaguely that she was really a pretty girl, really the kind to make some young man a fine wife. But that young man, Morley reflected, had better stay away from guns or he would break her heart. At the porch door he stopped. He checked his gun again.

"You want me to tell Helen about the letter?" Sturg asked.

"No." Morley shoved his gun back in holster. "I think she and I are about washed up, Sturg. And who can blame her?"

Phoebe leaned forward in her chair, gripping her book so hard it whitened her knuckles. "I can blame her! A woman ought to stick by her man! If she loves him—"

"You shut up!" Sturg Olson whirled savagely on his daughter. "That's a nasty thing to say, Phoebe, and besides, you don't know any more about love than I do about the King of Siam. Git to bed, girl."

Phoebe shot to her feet and closed her book with a slam. Her eyes filled with tears. "I do know about love, Pa. I'm sixteen. You think I'm just a little girl, but I—"

"You are a little girl," Sturg Olson roared. "And I aim to bring you up proper if I have to paddle you across my knee. Now, Phoebe . . ."

Morley didn't hear any more. He had slipped out the door, grinning.

He rode home. His ranch was seven miles from Twin Canyon, up in the foothills of the Mossback Range. Morley had about three hundred cows and ten squat, white-faced bulls. Each year he saved back fifty heifers for replacements, selling the rest as weanling calves. His steers he grazed till they were fat two year olds.

In the late spring Morley would hire a man for a week to help him with branding and castrating. In the Fall there would be another week of vaccinating for blackleg and shipping. Otherwise Morley handled his ranch alone.

He had a little four-room rock house and a big rock haybarn. A set of pole pens stood beside the haybarn. On the day after his return from Twin Canyon, Morley rode through his cattle once, checking them for screwworm injury, then gave his attention to the fences.

He rode with a rifle in his saddle holster, carrying a sackful of staples, a hammer and pliers in his saddlebags. When he came to a loosened staple or a broken wire Morley would dismount and fix it. At such times he sent his dogs on ahead.

For three days Morley rode fence. On the fourth day he checked his cattle again, more closely this time. He found a baby bull calf with a bad wire cut on its foot. Morley roped it and doctored it in the pasture with its anxious mother sniffing and lowing down the back of his neck.

On the fifth day Morley was just finishing his breakfast when the dogs set up a howling outside. Morley slipped to the window with his rifle in his hand, and he saw Phoebe Olson sitting on her horse in the yard, her face tense and white as the dogs snapped at her heels.

Morley stepped outside and called the dogs to him. He petted them and put them in their pens, then went toward Phoebe, smiling. He was strangely glad to see her. Phoebe's lips were moving soundlessly.

"Those beasts! Dick, they hate the human race."

Morley nodded. "I've trained them to be that way, Phoebe. I've had to spoil good friendly dogs for my own protection."

Phoebe said, "Oh!" and her eyes shadowed. She dismounted, moved toward him. Once again she wore levis and a shirt, with her face shining and her hair drawn into a simple, clean-looking knot. And once again Morley thought that she would someday make a fine wife for some young man.

Phoebe said, "Dad sent me, Dick. He says the clan is gathering. He says he has an idea and he wants you to come to town. What's he talking about?"

Morley said, "You'll know soon enough, Phoebe. Wait and I'll ride with you."

He was not surprised, of course. He had the feeling of a condemned man looking out a cell window, seeing the carpenters drag forth the lumber to build his scaffold. He went inside and washed up his breakfast dishes, and as he performed the familiar chore he wondered if he would ever see this kitchen again.

HE HAD made his will a year ago, leaving everything he owned to Helen. As he caught his horse and saddled it, Morley wondered what Helen would do with his ranch. Sell it, probably. That would be the only sensible thing to do. Yet the thought brought him a pang. He released the dogs and rejoined Phoebe with his face set in bitter lines.

Phoebe seemed to sense his mood. She rode beside him in silence through the early, dewy morning. The only sounds were their horses' hoofbeats and the occasional shrill

piping of a meadow lark. But when the rooftops of Twin Canyon came into view, Phoebe turned toward him suddenly with a pink flush on her cheeks.

"I expect you thought I was a fool the other night."

Morley turned toward her in slight surprise. He had not, in fact, been thinking of Phoebe at all. He said, "Why, no. I didn't think you were a fool, Phoebe."

"I've decided I was wrong," Phoebe tumbled out her words breathlessly. "About Helen, I mean. I can see why she mightn't want to marry you. To see the man she loves—hunted and harassed! I can understand that, Dick."

"Can you?" Morley said.

"Yes." She held her head high, and her eyes sparked with pride. "But I would never be that way. If I loved a man, I'd want to see him happy, regardless of my own feelings. Don't you think that's what love really means, Dick?"

Morley half-smiled, and he felt a sudden tenderness toward this girl. She was trying so hard; she wanted so much to believe in what was right. He reached across the short distance between them and patted her small hand on her saddlehorn.

"Phoebe," he said, "love is a complicated thing. But I reckon you're right as rain."

He left her at the edge of town, riding alone toward the courthouse. The sandy streets were quiet at this hour, with only an early merchant or so sweeping off the boardwalk in front of his establishment. But the town was no less dangerous for that.

Morley felt his skin crawl with the knowledge that his enemies might be looking at him from some rooftop, might have a gun trained on his spine. He was sweating when he dismounted before the courthouse and entered Sturg Olson's office.

Sturg Olson looked up from behind his desk with a sigh of relief. "You made it!"

"I made it," Morley said. He noted that Sturg looked haggard, old. The white of Sturg's eyes was laced with red. Morley was aware of a deep affection for Sturg, and he thought wryly that it was starting out to be an emotional morning. He sat down and began to roll a cigarette.

"Phoebe said you had an idea."

Sturg Olson scrubbed a knuckle across his moustache. "Maybe it's not such a good idea, Dick. I don't know. But I thought of it last night, when Holmes and the Glass boys checked into the hotel. Hell, we've got to do something!"

"All right, Sturg," Morley said patiently. "What's the idea?"

"How about just talking to them, Dick? Telling them the whole story. How you killed Tom Johnson because he was drunk and gun-happy. Same with Leon Holmes, Lyman's boy, and with Carl Glass. How Jim Glass tried to bushwhack you from a saloon door." Sturg Olson rubbed his eyes wearily. "I don't know as talk ever stopped a man from hating, but we can try."

Morley touched a match to his cigarette. His eyes were pinched with thought. He said, "Sturg, you lost a brother in the War, didn't you?"

Sturg Olson nodded. "Killed by a damned Yankee. But that—"

"Would talk keep you from hating Yankees?"

Sturg sighed. "No, blast you, Dick! But we can *try!*"

"All right." Morley kicked his chair back and came to his feet. His voice was flat. "Let's try."

CHAPTER 4 Draw — or Die

The dining room of the Twin Canyon hotel opened through a wide double door into the lobby. So when Richard Morley and Sturg Olson entered the lobby, they could see through the double doors to where the breakfast diners sat clustered thinly about the white-clothed tables.

Richard Morley took one quick look at the diners, then he looked at the counter across the lobby, behind which Helen stood. Helen smiled wanly at him and he nodded, then glanced back toward the diners at a nudge from Sturg Olson's elbow.

"Next to the counter, Dick. At the big table."

Morley recognized four of the five. Harry Johnson, a skinny redhead. Lyman Holmes, a white-haired old man with the tragedy of a lost son in his eyes. Paul and Silas Glass, two dark, scowling brothers. The fifth was a young boy of about sixteen with brown hair and big wondering eyes and a .45 on his hip that looked too big to be real.

"Lyman's boy, John," Sturg said in his

ear. "Why the hell do you suppose he had to bring a kid along?"

"Search me!" Morley swung his gaze back to Helen at the desk. "Sturg, give me a minute, will you?"

Without waiting for an answer he crossed the lobby. Helen looked pale and sleepless this morning. She had her hands atop the counter, and she was twisting Morley's engagement ring on her finger.

"Morning, Helen," he greeted her cheerfully. "Could I see you in about an hour? I'll be busy with Sturg till then."

Helen bit her lip. Morley had the illusion that her eyes were darker than when he had seen her last. "I know about your business with Sturg, Dick. He told me."

Morley said, "Oh?" and quite suddenly the knowledge came to him that it was all over between him and Helen. He could have spoken her next words for her.

"I can't go on this way any more, Dick. I'm simply—not made that way. Maybe I'm weak, but I can't do it."

Morley grinned painfully and rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. He said, "I suppose I'm funny, Helen. When I kill a man, I don't feel it for an hour or so. Then it hits me like a sack of sand." He put one hand on hers, very lightly. "I think this will be like that, too. Good-by, Helen."

Morley turned and walked away. He walked stiffly, not feeling any emotion, not conscious of anything strained or unnatural in his attitude. He felt Sturg's eyes meet him curiously.

"Ready?" Sturg asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Morley said.

Inside the dining room, a few of the breakfast customers were paying their checks. Morley noted without interest that John Holmes, the youthful son of Lyman, had gone, leaving an empty chair. He was aware of Sturg's solid figure tramping beside him as he crossed the floor, and he had the thought that whatever happened, Sturg would be his friend. That was a very comforting thought to Morley. Then he and Sturg were suddenly facing the four men at the table.

Paul and Silas Glass went tense and half rose from their chairs, gaunt dark men who needed shaves. Morley had killed their brother, Carl, when Carl had come through Twin Canyon with a trainload of cattle and gotten drunk and called Morley an unprintable name, drawing his gun at the same time.

Paul and Silas Glass looked at each other, and they looked at the badge on Sturg Olson's brawny chest. And they sat back down.

Lyman Holmes had been lifting a biscuit to his mouth. He flipped the biscuit away from him like a worthless pebble, and he laid his hands flat on the table top, staring at Morley with eyes that were dull and vacant.

Harry Johnson touched his lips with the tip of his tongue. He brushed a hand across his reddish hair, then he glanced quickly at Lyman Holmes, as if expecting guidance.

Sturg Olson's voice crashed heavily through the silence.

"Quite a party. Boys, can I ask your business in Twin Canyon?"

MORLEY became aware that the Glass boys were looking at Lyman Holmes, too. So the old man had been elected boss, Morley thought. Lyman Holmes spoke without moving, without taking his eyes off Morley.

"We're on a hunting trip, Sheriff. Heard rumors of a few timber wolves on the mountains. Any objections?"

Sturg Olson sighed heavily. The air made a whistling sound as it came through his nose. "Come off it, Holmes. We know why you're here. We came to talk peaceful—to prevent bloodshed. Now can we sit down and talk like men?" Sturg jerked his thumb toward the empty chair.

Lyman Holmes shook his head. His voice was utterly without emotion. "Don't reckon we've got room for you at this table."

Sturg's heavy face went rich purple. He gnawed his moustache and his eyes were granite. "Holmes, I never took you for a fool! This killing has got to stop!"

"Sure, Sheriff." Lyman Holmes smiled thinly. "You're still talking about timber wolves, I take it. The killing will stop—but only after the wolves are dead."

Sturg Olson threw up his hands. For a moment Morley thought Sturg was about to strike Holmes, then he saw it was only a gesture of defeat. But Sturg had one more thing to say.

"Boys, I am sheriff here. I enforce the law. But maybe I won't always be sheriff.

Maybe I'll turn in my badge and go on a wolf hunt myself, some day."

Olson turned away, and Morley turned with him. He was thinking as they re-crossed the dining room that Sturg had done all he could, much more than duty required. And Morley was grateful. But there were so many conflicting emotions in him at this moment that he could do no more than touch Sturg's shoulder as they entered the lobby.

Phoebe was in a chair in the lobby, reading a newspaper. She smiled at Morley. Behind her, Helen was still at the counter. Helen called to him.

Morley looked at Helen, and his mouth moved uncontrollably against his teeth Morley was thinking that the bag of sand would hit him at any moment now. He did not want to be here when that happened He shook his head.

"Why hash it over, Helen?"

He walked out of the lobby, hearing her voice behind him, calling him. . . .

As he stepped onto the boardwalk, the reaction came. The certainty struck Morley that if he lived, he would live alone.

He stood against the wall of the hotel with his eyes closed, fumbling for his cigarette papers, waiting for the pain to pass.

Presently he opened his eyes and built a cigarette and lit it. Across the street he caught the sunlit flash of the batwings that led to Abe Slaughter's barroom.

He had always thought of barrooms as places for relaxation, friendship, a comradely game of cards or dominoes. But now, staring at the batwings, Morley recalled that barrooms had other functions. There was forgetfulness to be purchased there.

But Morley shook his head. And at that moment a shadow fell across him.

"You murdering son!" a voice said.

Morley looked up in surprise. He saw that the youth facing him was John Holmes. Holmes had left the breakfast table early. Evidently the youngster had put the time to good advantage, for his face was flushed and the scent of whisky was sickish sweet about him.

"You murdering son," John Holmes said. "You killed my brother! Draw!"

RICHARD MORLEY did not think he was in any great physical danger. The kid was young and lanky, at an age when coordination is naturally difficult. Besides that, whisky would have dulled whatever skill he had. So Morley was not thinking of his safety when he smiled gently and shook his head.

Morley said, "Your dad was looking for you in the hotel, son."

The youth shook his head. His eyes were inflamed with hatred. "Gunslinger," he spat out. "Fast man with a draw! Killer! Do I have to slap you to make you pull it out?"

"You'll have to do more than that, boy," Morley said. Then he tensed suddenly, for behind John Holmes he saw Lyman and the Glass boys and Harry Johnson emerge from the hotel. They stood there for a moment in conversation, and Sturg Olson came out of the hotel behind them.

Morley breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Sturg glance his way and frown and take in the situation instantly. Sturg Olson whipped out his gun, training it on the four.

Morley saw Sturg Olson's mouth move as he spoke to the four, saw Lyman Holmes' white head jerk up. When Holmes glanced his way, Morley noted with a kind of grim enjoyment that Holmes went white as a corpse.

John Holmes, of course, had not seen this. The youth cursed and reached forward suddenly and slapped Morley backhanded across the cheek. The blow jerked Morley's head around, and it hurt. But Morley smiled.

"Son, I ain't going to kill you. It's no use to make me try."

He could give his full attention to the boy now, certain that there'd be no bullet from the back. John Holmes, Morley decided, was just a clean-cut youth, the age of Phoebe Olson. There was nothing essentially vicious about John. He was a little confused, maybe, as Phoebe had been confused. But there was nothing wrong with John except his youth.

Morley glanced once more at the strained group in front of the hotel. Lyman Holmes' lips were as white as the rest of his face, and those lips were shaking with a fear that Richard Morley would kill the thing that Holmes valued most, his son.

John Holmes made a sudden move and came up with his own gun. He rammed the barrel into Morley's stomach. His voice

was shrill with despair. "Now will you draw, damn you?"

Another time, Morley thought, this boy would be dying now. Coughing out his life in red blood on the boardwalk. But not this time. Not at the hands of Richard Morley. Morley felt a sense of thrilling exultation, and he said very gently. "You haven't got the guts to shoot me, John."

That was when the boy dropped the gun. He turned and stumbled toward the hotel. And even before Lyman Holmes caught his son by the shoulder and spun him around with a white, claw-like hand, Morley knew the boy was crying.

Lyman Holmes' face was gnarled and twisted like an old oak tree as he walked forward, guiding the boy. But a change had come to Lyman. Where Lyman's eyes were vacant and dull before, they were shining now.

"John," Lyman Holmes said to his son, and his voice shook with intensity. "John, the only reason you're standing in your boots now is because you just met up against the biggest man you ever saw. And he's a man we've wronged, John. I see that, now. You go up there and shake his hand. You shake it hard, and you remember this. And then you git out of my way, for I'm going to git down on my knees before Richard Morley and beg his pardon."

Time seemed to stand still for Richard Morley as they crowded suddenly about him. He was aware that the change in Lyman Holmes had communicated itself to the others. There were apologies, smiles and a few tears from the boy and from Phoebe Olson, who seemed to be hovering there, trying to speak to Morley.

Morley's impressions were a confused mixture of Sturg Olson's happy chortling, and of the knowledge that the Holmes' and the Glass' and the Johnsons had somehow at last come to the truth. They had not been bad men, Morley thought, but only mistaken. But most of all Morley was aware that miraculously he had found a way out of the trap that had held him, and for the first time in years he felt free.

Then young Phoebe Olson was tugging at his arm.

"Helen went home," Phoebe said. "She was crying and calling your name and acting like a love-sick calf." Phoebe drew up to her full height and sniffed. "Some women don't know their own minds."

Morley heard Sturg Olson roar, "Now, Phoebe, dang it, you git home. Git home, or I'll paddle your—"

Morley said, "Let her stay, Sturg. Maybe she knows more than you think."

And then Morley grinned and left them and walked away, downstreet to the corner. When he reached the corner and turned toward Helen's house, Morley began to run.

THE END

By G. W. BANDY

He flung her against the table as a knife, meant for her heart, whispered close . . .

The day ex-bounty hunter Gil Farrel found a senorita after his own heart, he learned of the two grim hunters after his own hide . . . but Gil swore to lead them a deadly chase, as he captained his wagon train

THE Rocky Mountain House rested away from the main currents of flotsam-life that flowed the streets of St. Louis, as turbulently as the muddy Missouri. Here Gil Farrel had come, wanting seclusion of a fashion. And here in the gateway to the frontier, tedium gripped him, hard and fast.

TO SANTA FE—AND HELL!

Passing by the Planter's House, the river town's principal hotel, he had half-heartedly compromised upon this. It was an attempt at carefulness, brought on by the rumor that had overtaken the steamer up from New Orleans. His alertness was shadow-boxing when road work was needed.

He dined amply, if not to satisfaction, upon the inch-thick steak, and he lighted the Havana, drawing deeply. But the promise of its fragrance was only half fulfilled.

"There's dancing in there."

The aproned, stocky-built waiter nodded toward a door out of which came much shouting and laughter. So Gil moved toward it, his big frame filling the entrance briefly then disappearing inside.

The hall ran to length rather than width, and its ceiling hung low. Flickering lamps, attached to the walls, sent forth unsteady shadows. Gil stood for a moment considering whether to return to the hotel lobby.

Over by the bar a strong-lunged mountaineer, buckskin clad, bellowed a lusty Indian song and emphasized the rhythm with forcible thumps on his stomach with a heavy palm. The smell of dust, made dank by heavy sweating, mingled everywhere with smoke. Tall shadows of outdoor men careened across the floor, partnered by lithesome girls. A screeching fiddle whooped up a tune. A banjo twanged. Energy was being expended in the fandango.

Gil took a stein of beer to a far corner, thinking there would be too much noise for reflective thought, and he sat so he could face the entrance. But the foamed contents of the stein turned to bitters in his mouth.

It had been like this on the boat, the fountain gone dry, the diamond turned to glass, the adventure-seeker up against a box canyon at last. At a mere thirty he had reached a plateau, and from here the descent must begin.

Gil Farrel gripped the stein until the lamp glow played up the whiteness that marked his knuckles. He closed his eyes and hoped for an end to the gone-sour cynicism that had encrusted him like the wheel marks of the ponderous wagons, lumbering out of the river towns, farther west. At least those tracks led somewhere.

When the shadow loomed above him, and the voice spoke softly, Gil jerked to his feet.

Gone now was the listlessness. He was the machine, working with well-oiled smoothness. The mug was left upon the table top, not a foamy fleck spilled and in his hand he held a Colt revolver pointed at a buckskin-coated midriff.

A VOICE said, with good humored remonstrance, "Happens this coon ain't ready to trail out to the happy hunting grounds."

Gil found himself staring full into the gaunt, stubbled face of the late caller of the dance. Amusement touched faded, bleak eyes. The eyes glaced once at the Colt, then back to Gil's face. "Smother yer 'spicion, son. Happens my motive is plumb peaceful. I'm Frank Snell, and I dropped by to make medicine."

"Right friendly," said Gil caustically, "and on such short acquaintance."

"Short or not, I kin tell things youah own mammy don' know, son. Bein' on the dodge leaves signs."

Gil poked the barrel of the Colt a shade toward the other. Snell was a tall, loose-jointed specimen in blackened elkskin breeches, fringed buckskin coat, Indian moccasins. Straw-colored hair fell to his shoulders. A disarming, pup-friendliness now shone from his eyes.

"Why," asked Gil, "do you think I'm on the dodge?"

Snell grinned and exposed yellow teeth. "Little things like cabaging onto a seat whar the entrance is in view. Soon's you histed your bigness over hyear and throwed a 'spicious glance about the room, I knowed it. This coon said, 'Thar's a b'ar avoidin' a trap.' An thet shooter," Snell indicated the gun, "brands you as onusual. Few use 'im here. Mos' depend on the old muzzle loaders."

Gil's eyes narrowed. The oldster—he appeared to be close to sixty—had uncanny ability at observing. Or Gil's own movements had been one blundering giveaway since coming into the hall. Frank Snell—a meddlesome, talk-starved no'count . . . or was he a friend of the Daltons?

"This shooter," said Gil, "holds six loads. I've another in my waist. I learned to use them in Texas while I did a stint with the rangers."

Snell showed surprise. With sudden decision, Gil said, "After that, I put in a stretch as a bounty hunter, but kin of the bounty took personal my apprehending

their late relative. I've got a couple of brothers on my tail name of Dalton. Happens you're their friend, say so and we'll have it out here and now."

Snell brought a big hand upon his thigh and the resulting noise was like the crack of a rifle. "That's a good'n," he exclaimed. "Bounty on the bounty hunter! But as intrestin' as youah past is, I didn't single you out to listen to it. Happens they's a matter, and it'd best be in secret."

"I won't be sucked out to some back alley."

"Be damned!" said Snell, "You'ah the most 'spicious coon, ever I see. Whar's youah room? It'll do."

Before Gil could answer, a sudden silence fogged down upon the hall. The music cut off abruptly, dancers froze, and every eye looked to the entrance.

Through it had swept a girl, a different girl from the local French belles. She was in a long, glistening black skirt and a scarlet shawl was about her shoulders. Blue-black hair fell to the shawl. Her skin was Castilian white and the dark pools of her eyes speared the room with angry glances. Seeming cause of the fury were two short Spanish gentlemen who had followed her inside the door. Like watchdogs, they waited there.

What she did then brought quick intake of breaths. Deliberately, she lifted her skirt, exposing slender ankles in dainty slippers and the white skin of her calves. She tossed her head and her voice was a challenge, "And do I rate a dancing partner, no?"

Gil heard a man swearing in a low voice. The lamps cast still shadows now. Nobody moved. There was respect for the flashily attired watchdogs and their reputed ability for knife throwing.

Like the others, Gil stared. He had known women in New Orleans and in the cattle towns of southern Texas. But none with the impact of this señorita, whose presence was as out of place there as the angry-eyed guards indicated. He had never graced a dance floor, yet Gil moved toward her.

He felt a hand upon his elbow, and Frank Snell's heavy whisper, "You want a knife stickin' in youah gizzard?"

Gil laughed scornfully. "Them flashy toads who choused her in here?" He came out of his coat in a smooth motion, revealing the handles of the Colts. "Twelve slugs against a couple of knives. Odds ain't even." He spoke it loudly, then moved across to her.

IT WAS Frank Snell's voice roaring at the fiddler to make music that broke the tension. The tune came on such high screeching, though, as to further un-nerve the banjo twanger, and he could do nothing but discord a step and a half behind. Snell then put a semblance of rhythm to it by lustily calling an Indian song and, at that, Gil led the girl onto the middle of the floor.

People moved back and held fearfully to the walls, and many a nervous glance was cast toward the door, where the Spanish gentleman kept stony silence.

The floor was theirs—Gil's and the girl's. He forgot everything, the presence of the ominous-faced guards, his own late listlessness. Old at thirty? Plateau? Loss of interest in life?

He laughed at the thought. He became a package wrapped in the promise of her smile and in the dark soft glances she coyly gave and in her breath-taking nearness. The music drew out to its finale, too soon, and she stepped from his arms, flushed and happy.

She flashed him a warm smile and their glances met, lingered, and silence carried a mutual message. What had happened there in that suspense-charged moment was enough.

Finally, she spoke softly, "Thank you." Then, seeming aware of their aloneness in the center of the room, she flushed. Quickly she turned and preceded the watchdogs through the door.

Snell touched Gil's arm and guided him to a stairway. In the small room Gil had taken, the mountaineer pulled no punches. "Them Garcias'll be back and they'll hunt you like a varmint. They'll let out youah guts jes fer the fun of seein' what's inside."

From where he was sitting on the bed, Gil said, "Garcias eh? Know 'em?"

Snell snorted. "Who doesn't that's rode the trails any to speak of? Garcias from Santy Fee, and . . ."

The old man broke off. His eyes showed a glimmer of craftiness as he studied the younger man. He grinned. "So you want her, like them emigrants want Oregon? Wal, how'd you like fer me to tell you

where you mought meet up with her again?"

"Huh?" Gil laid a hard glance on him, but got to his feet.

Snell ran his eyes up and down the strapping size of him, speculating. "Got money, son?"

"Twenty-five hundred," said Gil, "bounty money in a belt under my shirt. Took a spree at bounty hunting after I left the rangers. Got five wanted men at five hundred a head, and a belly full of excitement to last me till the day of doom. Sorta soured on killin's. That's why I ran out instead of taking care of them Daltons. That twenty-five hundred come high."

"Son," beamed Snell, "shake hands with youah new podner."

Gil felt his hand crushed, but he felt none of the exuberance of Snell. He was waiting for the oldster to explain now that money had come up.

Quick to requite the distrust, Snell said, "Happens I wuz looking fer a podner when you came in down there. I sunk all my plew money—a right sma't fortun'—in freight fer Santy Fee. Trinkets, shawls, calicoes, threads, velvets—freight galore to tickle the fancy o' them Santy Fee señoras. They's enough to set us up fer life. Only hitch is I overlooked the cost of wagons and teams for the haul. That's why I'm willin' tuh take you on as podner, tuh buy the vehicles and stock. You'll come in fer an equal share. Willin' son?"

Gil took a turn about the small room. There was, he admitted, sense to it. He had fled New Orleans to keep from killing the Daltons—or from being killed by them—simply because he saw no end to the chain. If he killed them, they would surely have friends to take it personal.

And on top of that, this thing growing in him. Some might call it fatalism. It was just about to make him fair game for the first trouble hunter that showed up. Now Snell offered him change of locale. A chance at a fortune in trading. And, besides, on the Santa Fe Trail he might be able to see the girl again.

Gil grinned at the other. "Shake, podner," he said.

FROM the beginning, Gil Farrel and Frank Snell hit it off without trouble. The rangy, bucksin-clad mountain man was amiable and, delighted with finding someone to furnish money for wagons and oxen, he bent over backward to please.

They left on the *Saluda,* a new steamer on her maiden voyage, and arrived in Independence in record time in spite of the rapid current and having to spend a half day on a sandbar.

Toward the end of the water journey, they sighted in open stretches along the shore white clusters of wagons, being readied for the Oregon Trail. Bright fires twinkled at night. In the day there was the noise and clatter of repair. Before he realized what was happening Gil was drawn into the undercurrent of excitement that gripped the country.

He had heard of the two trails—the Santa Fe and Oregon—of the far reaches of timberless land, the dry stretches, the flowing streams, the high mountains, the great herds of buffalo, the Indians. He had to admit that the prospect before him had its points.

And when he thought of Anita Garcia the blood came a little faster along his veins. According to the rumor that Snell had picked up, she was virtually a prisoner of an unscrupulous uncle's gang who were taking her to Santa Fe to marry a wealthy rogue. She had run away from the prospect, only to have her uncle's men follow her all the way to St. Louis.

Snell had allowed nothing to escape his keen eyes and ears. Like a small boy eager to tell a tale he knows will please, he had got the information from a trapper, a hunter, and from a couple of Osage Chiefs, late travelers from the Mexican villages.

The Narrows, out from Independence and between the Kansas and Osage Rivers, were made treacherous by the sudden storms of drenching rains. Wagons sank into the black mire.

Gil and Snell had to double the oxen to a single wagon. They came along, cursing, shoving, urging amidst pistol cracks of the bullwhip Gil had become expert at using. But night caught them with only one wagon free. They hovered in the downpour, shivering at the prospect of a cold night. The dark shape of a Dearborn carriage drew near, followed by a couple of riders.

The carriage stopped suddenly. There was the sound of argument inside. Then, at a parting of the leather curtains, the face of Anita Garcia appeared briefly.

The riders came alongside, shouting something in Spanish, and the Dearborn jerked away. As Gil stared, a sibilant whisper cut the silence and the blade of a knife slapped into the wood of the Conestoga at his head. At the same time he heard a heavy curse. He jerked out his Colt but did not shoot for fear of hitting the girl.

"Land of the glass mountain!" exclaimed Snell. "And them hosses won't rest till they've got their stickers in youah vitals."

Gil smiled but said nothing. For a moment he closed his eyes. Vision of the fire in her eyes came to him, the challenge of her smile, the clinging softness of her as they had moved across the dance floor. And now he was glad he possessed the skills of the man-hunter. They would come in handy. Anita Garcia was going to be his woman.

He didn't fool himself. She was well guarded by her uncle's hardcases. But somewhere his chance would come. Feeling tension from his tightly clasped fists, he suddenly released them and grasped the knife handle and jerked it wispingly from the wood. He placed it in his belt.

DURING the nine long days from Independence to Council Grove, urgency began building in him and brought creases to his brow and gaunted him to rock hardness. The scorching sun turned him into an Indian, as brown as the begging Kansas tribe that pestered their camps.

At last they reached the coolness of the vine-festooned Grove where they were greeted by hammers ringing in repair, by excited talk of Oregon, by women exchanging gossip as they did the washing for the first time in weeks.

Snell declared, "Grove's worse'n political camp."

Gil found out what the mountain man meant.

The wagon owners—thirty in his group—began to organize, and to elect a captain.

Gil was content to leave such matters to others. He circulated among the emigrants and traders, and asked questions. Here and there bits of information popped out. A stout woman and a small boy had seen the Dearborn carriage join a government train only a short time before.

Gil considered the information. The government wagons were well protected. He had begun to entertain fears for the girl's safety, for past the Grove one could expect Indians more fierce than the meek beggars who had pestered them.

But then a tremor arose along his backbone. He was visualizing long, blue-black hair adorning the tepee of some proud Pawnee brave. . . .

Tormented now, he joined the crowd beneath a large cottonwood. Kelso Firth, large, fat, and who had small, intelligent eyes was haranging the group, unashamedly campaining for the job of captain.

Gil had wondered about Kelso Firth, and about his right hand man, Zeph Fager. The two had joined the traders at Independence and immediately Firth had started jockeying for leadership.

Now Gil remembered the times he had caught their close scrutiny of him when he would pass their campfire, and the subdued tones as he retreated. He had put it down to natural curiosity at the time.

As Kelso Firth's rasping voice came, Gil saw the man's beady eyes halt upon him and, for just an instant, there was the slight narrowing and drawing in of the brows. Putting it down to his overcarefulness, Gil started to move away.

Frank Snell's sonorous tones jerked him about. The mountain man, tall body swaying, arms swinging, was upon the stump and was advancing Gil's name for the captaincy.

There was no time for remonstrance. Snell, who had natural ability for arousing men, had him elected by acclamation. A rolling shout drowned out the few dissenters. The crowd was showing confidence in the taciturn but capable ex-bounty hunter.

Swearing softly, Gil walked away. Now he would be forced into the limelight, and become a target for any who wanted to test his skill against the recognized Colt expert.

Later, accustomed to feeling the responsibility of leadership, Gil had taken Snell to the top of Pawnee Rock. They scanned the trail ahead. But there was no sign of the government train.

"As clean as a skinning knife," exclaimed Snell, his bleak eyes searching Gil's face. When he saw the disappointment he shrugged and, together, they started the descent.

They had taken only a few steps when

the mountain man heard Gil give a quick gasp. When Snell looked, Gil was off a piece and holding a crimson shawl he had pulled from a small mound of loose shale. "I'll be the son of a Pawnee Chief!" gasped Snell, but before he could reach the other, Gil was reading aloud from markings on the sandstone.

"Hurry!" Gil's voice was hoarse. *"Bent's Fort road. Uncle plans to meet us there. . . ."*

Snell saw the younger man jerk upright. He was gripping the shawl and his face had gone almost colorless. Then, without a word, he strode toward the camp, his jaw knotted.

Long after the campfires had dimmed to barely glowing coals, and the exhausted prairie travelers had sought the comfort of buffalo robes, Gil roamed ouside the corral. The French driver's song had died and a lonesome wolf call had taken its place. Still Gil walked.

Her shawl was inside his shirt, right next to his heart. His thoughts were a tumult. How far ahead was the train? What would happen when she arrived at the fort?

Gil pulled up short. Muffled voices drifted from under the dark outline of the wagon.

Surprised that others were awake, he listened absently while his mind wrestled with his problem. Then he jerked alert, recognition of the voice flooding him. Kelso Firth was the speaker.

"It's him all right. We've got him where we want him at last. We'll pay Tom's debt, and at the same time we'll take over the train. . . ."

Rooted to the spot, Gil listened while the big man's voice faded out. After a while there was sound of heavy breathing and snoring. Still Gil held there. Kelso Firth and Zeph Fager—the Daltons! They were after him, and also planned an attack on the train.

Sweat drenched him. As captain he would have to stick by his train now that the Daltons were threatening.

For days they followed the Arkansas River. Grass became scarce. They had been without fresh meat since leaving the rock. One morning, Gil heard Snell's shout ahead. Looking he caught sight of the oldster waving his Hawkins rifle excitedly. When he came to the knoll, he caught his breath sharply.

To their right was an endless procession of buffalo, stretching farther than the eyes could see and slowly moving toward the river.

"What'll happen," said Gil, "if the beasts cross ahead of us?"

Snell stared at the younger man. "This coon hear you say if? Why buffler jes' don't take to bein' outdistanced. They'll cross ahead, and from the looks of 'em we'll be stalled a week. Happens they's herds over a hundred miles—"

He broke off to stare at sight of Gil loping his animal back toward the caravan. Gil was shouting, and he was now spouting flame from his Colts at the oxen.

The slow-footed beasts broke into a shambling gait and the white hoods of the wagons careened crazily.

"Hell," exclaimed Snell, "them buffler won't take to the idear!"

Snell's prediction was right. The buffalo changed their course so as to come out ahead of the wagons, then finally began to run parallel. It was a matter of minutes until they were in mad stampede.

Gil, who had put his animal in advance of the wagons, was surrounded. Before he gave his full attention to escaping the death-dealing, small-eyed beasts, he saw that the Daltons had also been surrounded. They had been following him.

AT BENT'S FORT, the dance was getting under way. That afternoon the inhabitants of the outpost had witnessed the arrival of important figures from Santa Fe. And still later the same day, the government train came in from the states bringing a Dearborn carriage and word of a buffalo stampede to their rear.

Here, in the large room with the table in the center, there was none of the stiff dignity that sometimes marked such occasions in the States. Here giggling Indian squaws were swung in the reel by long-haired trappers or clerks for Bent, St. Vrain and Company. Music was furnished by a scraping fiddle in the hands of a French-Canadian. A dreamy-eyed Mexican thumped a guitar, while a rough-attired trapper stood on the table and yelled out instructions.

Just before one o'clock, the strapping figure of Gil Farrel edged through the door.

The buffalo stampede had swept him along the course of the river and, finding himself at a thinning edge, he had simply ridden on and headed for the fort.

Now, catching a pause in the activities, he moved to the center of the floor, the better to survey the candle-lighted room. It was at that moment he heard cursing, and found himself staring into the unfriendly eyes of the entourage from Santa Fe.

There were some dozen of them, and amidst the group were the two watchdogs he had encountered at The Rocky Mountain House, in St. Louis. The whole lot began edging toward him, dark eyes flashing, hands ready to speed toward the hidden weapons.

Suddenly the group stopped. Across their path had sped the figure of a girl, the belle of the evening—Anita Garcia.

She stopped before Gil as a wave of excitement swept the crowded room. Bent's Fort was quick to sense a shaping fight.

Then she did something that brought a hush upon all and sent quick glances toward the Garcias. Everyone, by now, knew why the entourage from Santa Fe was there. So when she deliberately kissed the lone man in the middle of the floor, a thrill of danger swept the room.

The girl then turned to flash a look at the open-mouthed spectators. "It is a custom for a man to give the girl who kisses him a present, no?" Turning to Gil she said, "I am ready to claim mine, please."

Without a word Gil reached the crimson shawl and tied it about her shoulders. Then he kissed her. "Folks," he addressed the people, "there's been a slight change in wedding plans. Same bride but a different groom—"

Then he flung her against the table as a knife, meant for her heart and flung by the jealous suitor, whispered close and imbedded itself into a far wall. The knife missed a trapper by inches.

The trapper reached the handle and sent it back across the room, pinning the belt sash of the would-be-assassin to a log. The powder-tension exploded then.

Garcias closed upon Gil. Quickly he shoved the girl beneath the table and brought up his Colts. There was smell of powder and dust and sight of dropping bodies while the tall trapper still clung to the table top, swinging his fiddle with a free hand.

The place became a bedlam of screaming, cursing, shouting. Across the room there strode the familiar Daltons, alias Kelso Firth and Zeph Fager, who had followed Gil there.

But before they got half way, dodging a couple of fighters who were taking advantage of the uproar to work off a private grudge, the familiar sound of Frank Snell's shout broke from the doorway. Swinging his Hawkins, the mountain man came through.

Lead seared Gil's thigh and brought him down. He kept his grip on the Colts and, as blood ran from a scalp wound into his eyes, he shot one Dalton down, saw Snell knock the other to the far side of the room where he lay still.

The Garcias—those left on their feet—were gone now. The individual fights petered out. Catching sight of the girl beneath the table, wide-eyed with seeming admiration but little fear, Gil crawled over to her and collapsed with his head in her lap. His blood ran upon the crimson shawl.

HE CAME to in one of the rooms which butted against the stockade wall. Anita's face was bending over him, her dark eyes filled with concern.

He managed a grin. "Your relations still hold notions of taking you to Santa Fe?"

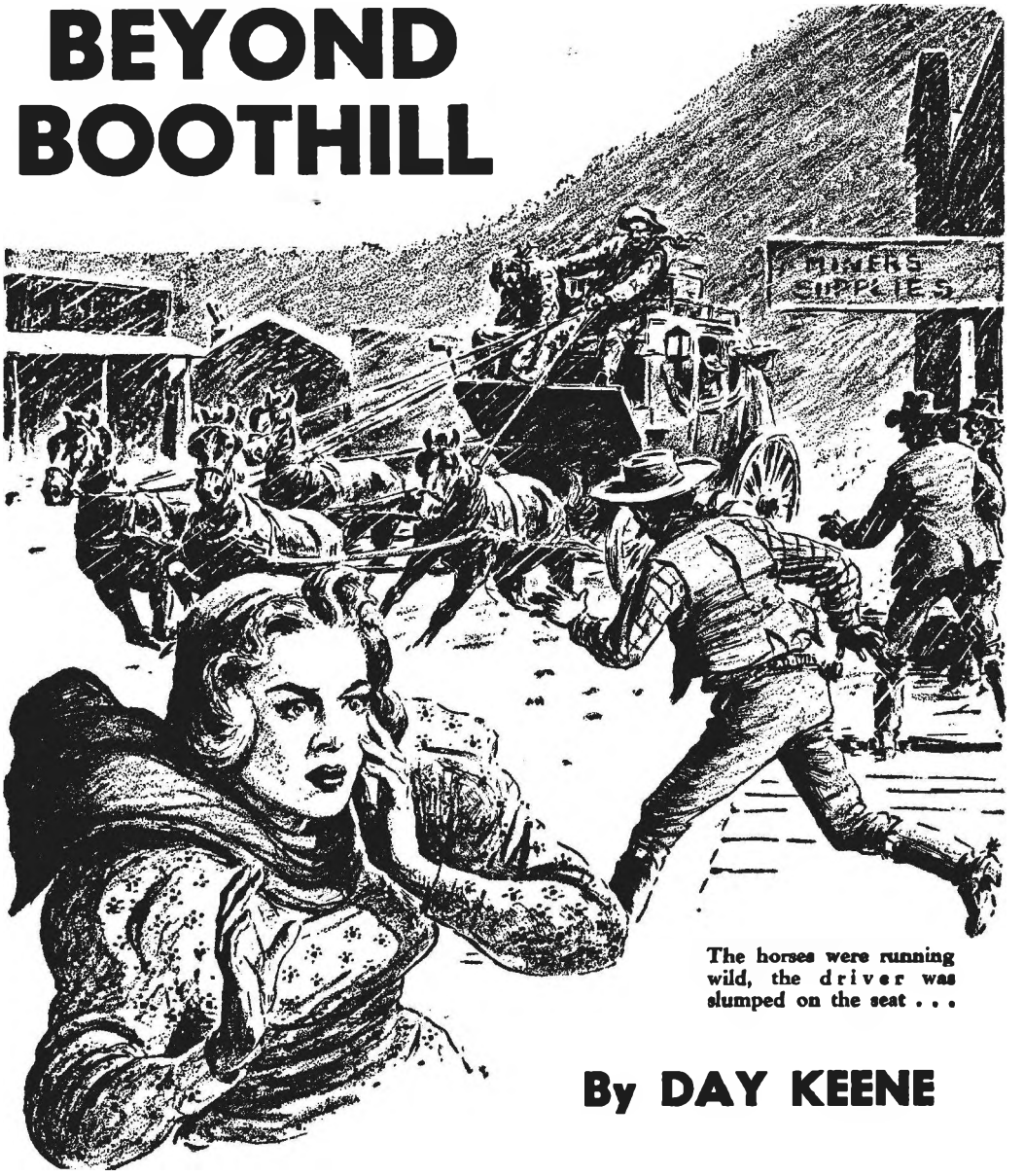
"My relations," she said, "have gone . . . by themselves."

A long minute passed as he glanced hungrily into the depths of her eyes. The concern was gone now, and there was the glow he remembered seeing in St. Louis.

He thought of the time he had gone to the Rocky Mountain House and the slump of spirit he had experienced. And he thought of all that had happened since. He had followed her across desert and wilderness, captain of a caravan but really making the trip for one reason only—for this girl who back there had given him a new reason to live.

He didn't have to ask her if she felt the way he did. He knew. He had known it all the way. Now he was half owner of two wagons of freight, Santa Fe bound. But that was, he reasoned, the least of his possessions.

BEYOND BOOTHILL



The horses were running wild, the driver was slumped on the seat . . .

By DAY KEENE

Somewhere in the ghost town a cowman was waiting for lovely Lou Brandon and her child, and their future hung on the speed of his draw.

IT WAS a beautiful morning. The heat of the sun rising in back of the distant mountains was melting the last of the snow. The cold tooth of winter was broken. During the night Spring had tiptoed north. The day rising from the slot of time would probably be hot.

A tall, well-formed girl with hair the color of raw copper, wearing the wasp-waisted silk dress that Jack had always liked, Lou Brandon clutched Nicky's hand a little harder as she watched the departing train. With the exception of a speckled hen cackling in what once had been the waiting room, she and the boy were alone on the platform.

"Are we going to live here, mama?" Nicky asked her.

"No, darling," the low, throaty, voice that had captivated San Francisco assured him. "Not right here in town. Papa is going to meet us and take us to his ranch."

"And I can have a pony?"

"Yes. You can have a pony." The train disappeared in a draw between the distant purple mountains and Lou turned to look at Rand City. In its day it had thrived, even if it hadn't been beautiful. Booted men had pounded its boardwalks and clustered in its stores and saloons. There had been lights and music and laughter and tears and life and death. It had even boasted a bank and a hotel and a two-story opera house, and Chauncey Olcott and Company had played it, according to the fading one-sheet peeling from the scabrous announcement board.

Now it was nothing. It was dead. A ghost city filled with barely-remembered dreams, slowly crumbling into the dust out of which it had arisen.

"I think I want a white pony," Nicky decided. "Can I have a white pony, mama?"

Lou patted his shoulder. "Yes, darling."

If Jack disappointed her again, if he disappointed Nicky, she—she didn't know what she would do. Lou assured herself, as she had a hundred times, Jack wasn't bad. He was weak. Still, all things had to end some time. Sooner or later every play had to end and the curtain be rolled down.

The rising sun cast a shimmering haze over the ankle-deep dust of the street. As Lou watched, a burro ambled out of a doorless false front labeled McGivney's Saddle Shop, and began to crop unenthusiastically at a patch of purple sage growing through a hole in the walk. The speckled hen continued to cackle raucously over the egg she'd laid.

You and me, sister, Lou thought. No wonder the fat conductor had looked over his glasses at her when she had handed him a ticket for Rand City.

Nicky was hot. He was tired. He was five. He hadn't eaten since the night before in the oil-lamp lighted station lunch room at Barstow. Then he had been too excited, over riding on a train and the prospect of being reunited with the father he hadn't seen since he was two, to more than nibble at his food. "I'm hungry, mother."

Her full lips thinner than they had been, her gray-green eyes narrowing slightly, Lou Brandon picked up her carpet-cloth portmanteau in one gloved hand, clutched her skirts and her son's hand with the other and picked her way gingerly around the holes in the rotting board walk towards the nearest of the two smoking chimneys in Rand City. "So am I, Nicky," she told him. "It would seem your father didn't get our letter. But where there are hens there has to be people."

A WIZENED old man in his middle seventies, Dad Engles, the Santa Fe freight agent, was dropping side-meat in the spider when he heard footsteps on the walk. Pleased at the prospect of company at breakfast, he added four more slices than usual and was reaching for the egg bowl when Lou Brandon rapped on his door. "Come in," he called, and almost dropped the egg bowl at sight of the red-haired girl and the boy. "Where in the name of Ulysses S. Grant did you come from?"

"We came on the train," Lou smiled. "My husband was supposed to meet us and drive us to his ranch but there seems to be some mix-up. I wonder if you could tell us if there's a boarding house in Rand City?"

Engle shook his head. "Ain't been for fifteen years. Me and Gomez and Mis' Gomez is all that's left of the town." He pointed at the rough deal table laid with a spotless white oilcloth. "But if you and the boy are hungry, set. I've got more'n plenty and I'd be proud to have your company." He added, as an afterthought, "My name is Engle. But most everyone calls me Dad."

"Thank you," Lou smiled. "We'll be glad to accept your invitation." Her smile was dazzling. "I'm Mrs. Jack Brandon. And this is our son, Nicky. Say how-do to the gentleman, Nicky."

"How do," Nicky said.

The old man accepted Nicky's proffered hand but seemed, somehow, less cordial. "Well, please to set. I was just about to dish."

Lou laid her hat and traveling veil aside and carefully peeled off her gloves. With as much at stake as they had, if Jack had gotten into another mess, she'd kill him. "You know Mr. Brandon?"

Dad Engles considered his answer. Mrs. Brandon looked like a mighty fine woman,

even if the circuit rider did say all show women were scarlet sisters. She had a nice little nipper, too. He'd up and offered his hand as manly as all get out, Engles temporized. "You're a show gal, I believe, Mis' Brandon?"

"I'm in the theatre," Lou admitted. "I sing. And I've been singing in San Francisco. You do know Mr. Brandon. He's spoken of me to you."

Engles wished he had a drink to brace him. Still, the girl would have to know sometime. And might be he could ease the blow. "Well, yes, I did know Jack," he admitted. "And outside of him drinking too much and chasing Mexican girls and getting hisself suspicioned of being one of the men who robbed the Durango stage and finally getting hisself caught a dealing from the bottom of the deck in a little game in Lopez's back room the other night, Jack wasn't too bad a fellow."

Lou caught at the table to support herself. "Are you trying to tell me Jack's dead?"

"That's right," Engles nodded. "Brad Hanlon killed him the night before last." He cracked more eggs in the spider. "When you get finished with breakfast I'll run you out to the ranch in my buckboard. Brad and Jim Miller are probably out there now a trying to find the stuff he cached from the stage. There's still twelve thousand in gold dust unaccounted for."

Nicky stopped spooning eggs into his mouth. "Does that mean I won't get my pony, mama? Has papa gone away again?"

Lou bit at her lower lip as she fought for self control. She might have known. Jack's letters had merely been a repetition of all the old lies he had told. *'This time I mean it, darling. This time I'll keep my word.'*

"Has he, mama?" Nicky persisted.

"Yes," Lou said throatily. "I'm afraid so. Now hush, Nicky. Please. And if you cry, I'll spank you."

A FAT, pleasant-looking man in his middle forties, Pedro Gomez was sitting with Mrs. Gomez on the walk in front of their Eldorado Bar as Engle's buckboard, its high wheels dripping powdered dust, drove by. Getting to his feet with an effort, the fat man bowed gallantly, *"Buenos días"* —his black eyes flicked from Lou's face to the boy in her lap, *"Señora. Usted es muy simpática."* Again he bowed with respect.

Engles flicked his matched buckskins with his whip and spat tobacco juice at the left front wheel. "Gomez says you are very charming."

Still numb with shock, Lou said, "Thank you. But I speak Spanish." She acknowledged the greeting. *"Buenos días, señor and señora. Muchísimas gracias."*

"You speak the lingo all right," Engles said. "And you can probably get a job at the Eldorado if you want one. It gets right lively at night time with ranchers and riders humping in from as far as fifty miles. Pedro's last singer did all right for herself. Married a man with a two-thousand acre spread up in the Diablo country."

Lou rode holding Nicky tighter than necessary. The way she felt right now she didn't want to meet another man or sing another song as long as she lived. Still, it could be she would need a job. She wouldn't return to San Francisco. That much she knew. It wasn't fair to raise Nicky in a theatrical boarding house. It wasn't fair to force him to play on muddy streets crowded with overloaded drays and dangerous with drunken sailors and miners in from the diggings. A boy needed space to grow in. He needed a horse and a gun—and a father.

She cried for the first time, jolting along in the buckboard, and Dad Engles was embarrassed for her. So Jack Brandon had got himself killed. Most any man in Eagle County would be proud to marry a handsome red-haired widow and raise up her boy. Even if she was a showgirl. He glanced sideways at the thought. A shame this hadn't happened ten years ago when he'd only been sixty-five.

Lou knew the ranch from Jack's letters. There was the river he'd fished in. There were the twin cottonwoods. He'd even white-washed the house and planted the packet of California poppies she'd sent him. Not all of it had been lies. There was even a haystuffed grain sack rigged as a swing for Nicky. Jack had expected Nicky and her to join him.

"How do they know Jack was one of the men who robbed the stage?" she asked Dad Engles.

He stained the dust again. "Well, they don't know for certain. But him and Wade Ferris was mighty thick. And Wade thumbed his nose over the border two steps

ahead of a posse. Just didn't look too good."

There were four horses tied to the hitching rack in front of the long, shaded, gallery. When they heard the buckboard approaching, four men came out on the porch. All four were big men. All four of them were armed. A silver badge on the sweat-stained shirt of a black-haired youth in his late twenties identified him as sheriff of Eagle County.

Engles reined in his team in a cloud of dust and jerked his thumb at the girl beside him. "This is Mis' Brandon, fellows. She and the boy come in on the morning train expecting to join Jack." He inclined his head at the men as he named them. "Mis' Brandon, meet Sheriff Jim Miller, Brad Hanlon, Joe Short, and Bill Heevey."

Miller lifted Nicky from Lou's lap and spatted the seat of his trouser lightly. "You run and play now, son. Have yourself a good swing on that sack your papa fixed up for you." The boy ran off, laughing, all four men smiling after him.

Then, removing his duststained Stetson, Miller helped Lou from the buckboard. "I know what a shock this must be," he sympathized. "And I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for you and the boy, Mis' Brandon. Jack wasn't no towering pillar of virtue but I hadn't the least idea he was going to go plumb bad or I'd have rode closer herd on him."

Lou liked Jim Miller. A shy man, it embarrassed him to speak as he had but he considered it his duty. "Thank you, sheriff," she said. "Jack was killed fairly?"

"Fair and square," Miller assured her. He indicated the blond man standing beside him. "Brad, here, caught him dealing from the bottom of the deck and when he called Jack on it, Jack called him a liar and made the first move for a gun."

A few years older than Miller, handsome as few men are, Brad Hanlon took off his hat. "I don't imagine you want to meet me, Mis' Brandon," he said quietly. "But it was either me or Jack. And just let me say this much. I own the Lazy Y, the spread adjoining your land. And I could have liked Jack fine for a neighbor. He had a lot of good qualities. But he was weak, ma'm, pardon me, weak."

"Yes," Lou admitted. "I know."

She appreciated their attempted kindness. But she wished they would go away and leave her alone with her grief. So Jack had been weak. He had also been her husband. And most of the time, when he wasn't drinking, he had been good to her. She wanted to stop being brave. She wanted to get out of her dress and corset and into something comfortable and sit in a rocking chair and cry.

"Find anything?" Dad Engle asked.

Miller shook his head. "No. The twelve thousand in dust is still missing. And I misdoubt if Wade carried it over the border with him. He was pretty well loaded down with bullion."

Tired of swinging on the grain sack, his chubby face streaked with dirt and perspiration, Nicky rejoined the group and attached himself to Miller.

"I'm not going to have a pony," he confided. "Because my daddy's gone away again. But my mama said she'd spank me if I cried."

The youthful sheriff was gentle with him. "Say. That's a shame. I mean about the pony. Every boy should have a pony." He replaced his hat looking at Lou. "I don't suppose you've made any plans yet, Mis' Brandon?"

"No," Lou admitted. "I haven't. This all happened so suddenly. It's all so different from what I expected. I, well, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Hanlon swung up into his saddle. "I think I can speak for the neighbors when I say you can depend on us for anything we can do."

"Thank you. Thank you very much," Lou said.

SHE stood in the shade of the gallery watching the switching tails of the horses until horses and riders became toy-sized in the thin, clear, air. Then, turning, she tried to find Rand City. But either the ghost town had vanished or a wooded hill blocked it from sight. There was, it seemed, always one more hill she had to climb.

She walked into the leanto kitchen of the ranch house with Nicky tugging at her skirts and wanting her to go with him to see if there were any fishes in the river.

"In a minute, darling," she promised.

For a card cheat and a stage robber, Jack hadn't been living high. There were some beans in a sack, a side of pork, and a quar-

ter barrel of flour. That was about all.

But she wasn't returning to San Francisco. Of that she was determined. Leaning against the flour barrel she looked out the window at the lush knee deep grass that extended as far as she could see. Jack had written he owned the ranch clear. She would stock it and make it grow. She would work day and night if necessary. But meanwhile she and Nicky would, of course, have to eat. And to make the ranch pay would take time.

Opening her string reticule, she counted her money. After paying her way to Rand City and buying some new clothes for Nicky she had less than a hundred dollars. It wasn't much. Still, judiciously expended, with a green garden and the fresh milch cow she had seen in the corral to amplify the food she would have to purchase, eighty dollars would last her and Nicky a long time. When it was gone, she could always sing for her supper.

"You promised, mama," Nicky pleaded.

Lou picked him up and held him to her heart a moment. "I'm sorry. We'll go right down to the river, sweetheart, and see if we can't find a fish."

Enroute to the river they had to pass the corral and the milch cow mooed at them. Nicky was delighted. Lou wished her head would stop aching. She wished she could rid herself of the impression there was something terribly wrong about all this.

Jack was supposed to have robbed a stage of twelve thousand dollars in gold dust. Still he had been living on white bacon, sour dough biscuits, and beans. He was supposed to have sunk so low he would cheat in a game of cards. Yet in a wild and untamed country where few men would bother, he had taken time to gentle a range cow so his son could have fresh milk.

Men. Men were an enigma. . . .

HER song finished in a shower of golden coins, Lou picked them up, dropped them in the pocket of her skirt and retired through a barrage of good natured joshing to Papa Gomez' table against the wall. Mama Gomez was even more voluble in her praise than usual. So voluble Lou couldn't follow her.

"Is part *Italiano,*" Papa Gomez explained. "Mama is come from Genoa. She say you bring us luck." He beamed the length of the crowded bar. "She say you bring Rand City back to life. She say you sing like *flamecita,* which is little flame."

Lou laughed. "I'm afraid the flame is burning low. This riding a line fence and tailing up calves during the day is beginning to wear me down." She kicked off her slippers and wiggled her toes in sensuous enjoyment as she counted the money she'd picked up. She had forty dollars. She could buy two more cows or she could save it to apply on the pedigreed bull Dad Engles had advised her to buy to build up her blood line. One by one and two by two her herd was growing.

The thought made her laugh. How the crowd at Mrs. Leary's would ride her if they knew. Still, singing two nights a week in a ghost town where the train only stopped when flagged and a stagecoach still provided most of the transportation, she made as much in one week as most San Francisco actors made in a month. More, she was building a future.

Powdered snow crusting his black broadcloth coat and black sombrero, Brad Hanlon opened the side door, looked around carefully to see if he was being observed, then, followed by Bill Heevey, made his way toward the back room.

Papa and Mama Gomez were chatting but Lou saw him and stopped him by calling, "How did you like my last number, Mr. Hanlon?"

His hand on the knob of the door of the back room, Hanlon hesitated, briefly, then came smiling to the table. "Fine. It was very lovely, Lou. Bill and I were out on the walk in front but we could hear you very clearly and it was very nice. In fact you're the nicest thing that ever happened to Rand City."

Lou tapped him with her fan. "You tell that to all the girls."

The rancher smiled, white-toothed, at the bearded assortment of ranchers, riders, and miners, bellied to the bar. "What girls? You haven't even any competition, Lou. Maybe that's why you sound so good. How's for driving you home in my buckboard?"

"If you want to," Lou said.

"Fine," Hanlon smiled. "I'll see you a little later."

Shaking melted snow from his hat, Hanlon joined Heevy in the back room of the

Eldorado. Lou put on her shoes and reaching her shawl from its hook made her way through the bar to the walk in front of the saloon. The cold air felt good on her face. It was nice to be away from the fumes of whiskey. She had to make a decision soon. She couldn't go on the way she was forever, singing nights and ranching days. Nicky needed a man in his family. He needed a living example. He needed a man he could look up to. And he admired both Hanlon and Miller. And both Brad and Jim loved her.

True, Hanlon had killed his father. That could cause heartache at some future date. But it had been in self defense. Jack had attempted to cheat. And Brad Hanlon could give them a home and a standing in the community she could never attain by her own efforts.

She walked past the silent lobby of the Daly Hotel, the door to the Golden Nugget, the shattered windows of the Bird Cage. She didn't want to dry up and fade away as Rand City was doing. Once a woman or a town was really dead, nothing could bring them to life again. Once the hot little flame Mama Gomez called *flamecita* was extinguished, all the rest was ashes.

THE night stage rounded the clump of cottonwood on the far side of the single track and the four horses pounded up the snow-filled street toward the Eldorado. Lou started to walk on, stopped as the stage passed her. The horses were running wild. The driver was slumped on the seat, the shot gun messenger tugging vainly on the reins with one hand.

Lou shouted, "Whoa," instinctively and raced back down the walk toward the yellow pool of light spilling out of the Eldorado. By the time she reached the saloon the horses had stopped of their own accord and were panting heavily while a dozen volunteers helped hand down the dead driver and lower Dad Eagles to the ground. One arm broken by gunfire, blood soaking the left shoulder of his fleece-lined windbreaker, the septuagenarian cursed though cold-blued lips.

"Damndest thing I ever saw. They jumped us three miles out of town just as cool as could be. And they knew what we had in the box. 'Kick it off,' they ordered. And just because I was a little slow they killed Pete and winged me." He patted the iron bound box one of the volunteers handed down. "Forty thousand in specie for that new bank up in Elkton. But they didn't get it."

"How come you were riding shotgun, Dad?" Bill Heevey asked him.

The freight agent grinned wanly. "A-trying to save money. Ike Meadows was took sick sudden. And I offered to ride the top instead of paying a fare."

Rad Hanlon lighted a cigar. "Recognize them, Dad?"

The old man shook his head. "Nav . All they said was, 'Kick it off' and all three of 'em was masked. I think I winged me one though."

His thumbs hooked in his gun belt, his face inscrutable, Jim Miller looked at the dead driver on the snow. "Well, let's get a posse together and ride back and look for for sign." He didn't sound very hopeful.

Lou realized she was shivering and walked into the warmth of the Eldorado and stood with her back to the hot blast stove. Feeling eyes on her, she looked up.

"Tough," Brad Hanlon sympathized.

With a sick sinking feeling in her stomach, Lou wondered how she could have been so blind so long. Hanlon had told her he and Heevey had been standing on the walk in front of the Eldorado. But the walk in front of the Eldorado was covered. And both his and Bill Heevey's coats and hats had been covered with powdered snow. She'd let a handsome face deceive her into thinking she could care for this man.

"Tough," she agreed with Hanlon. "How did you like my last number, Brad?"

Hanlon smiled, white-toothed. "I told you. Fine."

"Then you liked *Golindrina* better than the current ditties I've been singing?"

"I did."

"But I sang a current ditty."

The owner of the Lazy Y ran the palm of one hand over his smoothly-shaven cheeks. "You know, I've been afraid of this, Lou. I've been afraid of this ever since you showed up in Dad Engle's buckboard a few days after I had to shoot Jack."

"You murdered Jack."

"I shot him in self-defense."

"You murdered Jack."

"Let's say he was slow on the draw."

Lou looked over Hanlon's shoulder. They

were alone in the bar. Even the Gomez's and the barmen were still out on the walk in the cold watching Jim Miller form his posse. She attempted to brush past Hanlon and he caught her arm.

"I wouldn't, Lou. In fact I'd talk very soft and walk the same way if I were you. You see when the deal went sour tonight because that fool Meadows got sick I was afraid you might spot us come in. So I had Joe Short ride right on out to your spread to keep Nicky company. A shame to leave a kid that age alone at night. Right now Joe is probably telling him a fairy story." Hanlon drew her shawl together. "Now come on. "I'll take you home."

"And then?"

"We'll settle that when we get there."

Numb with fear for Nicky, the redhaired girl accompanied the rancher out onto the walk.

Mama Gomez saw them and smiled. "Goodnight, *flamecita.*"

Hanlon's fingers bit into Lou's arm. "Say good night."

"Good night, Mama," Lou said.

Mama Gomez turned back to watch the posse ride out and Lou knew what she was thinking. Mama was thinking how nice it was for Mr. Hanlon to take her home. And tonight, in bed, she would tell Papa Gomez how nice it would be if Lou married Mr. Hanlon. And Papa would agree. Mr. Hanlon was such a gentleman, so rich.

BILL HEEVEY fell into step a few paces behind them, the snow crunching under his boots. As the last man in the posse rode by he laughed, "Think they'll find us, Brad?"

Without turning his head, Hanlon said, "I doubt it. Not with that young fool leading them. Jim Miller couldn't find his feet when he gets out of bed in the morning if they weren't fastened onto his ankles."

In front of the Daly Hotel he paused and after looking back over his shoulder to make certain they weren't observed, he propeled the red-haired girl into the black, dusty, lobby.

Lou protested fiercely. "Why are you taking me in here?"

"Remember Nicky," Hanlon said. "You wouldn't want him hurt, would you?"

He guided her, sobbing, up the broad grand stairway to the second floor, then up a narrower flight of stairs to the once elegant ballroom that had been built in the spacious attic, Bill Heavy following close behind them.

"We stay or run?" Heevy asked in the dark.

"Let's say we move on," Hanlon told him. "There's always the chance that fool Meadows will talk and I have no desire to stretch hemp."

"And the girl?"

"I'm taking her with us."

A faint crack of light showed under the

ballroom doors. Hanlon opened one of them and pushed Lou into the room ahead of him.

Joe Short sat up on a pallet on the floor. His face looked green in the dim light of the lamp beside the pallet. "I thought you guys would never come."

Breathing hard, Lou twisted free from Hanlon. "You tricked me. You told me Joe was with Nicky."

Hanlon shrugged. "Can I help it if you believed me?"

"And you held up that other stage and pinned the hold-up on Jack. He was keeping his word to me. He was going straight. But you needed a fall guy. So you goaded Jack into drawing a gun on you and called it self-defense."

"That's old history," Hanlon said. He recovered a heavy buckskin poke from its hiding place back of a panel. "I also wanted your ranch. Brandon stepped in and bought my water rights out from under my nose and left me with three thousand dry acres. By marrying you I still could have made the deal come right. But that's old history, too. You think that you can ride, Joe?"

Short spat on the floor. "I don't seem to have much choice."

"That's right," a male voice said from the doorway.

Heevy dove out of the small pool of light. "It's Miller. It's Jim Miller."

Hanlon poised on the balls of his feet, his hand hovering over the butt of his gun. "You rode out with the posse."

"And turned around and rode right back again." Miller's voice was bitter. "I've known for some time, Brad. But knowing and proving a thing are two different matters. You're the owner of the Lazy Y. I'm just a county employee. But now, with that missing poke in your possession, I have all the proof I need."

"The hell you say," Hanlon rasped. "Let's take him, Bill!"

His hovering hand streaked for his gun at the same time Heevey fired. But Miller beat them both to the target.

Heevey died where he stood. One hand pressed to his chest, Hanlon lifted the gun in his other hand as if to beat on an invisible door. But he didn't have a chance. The invisible door opened and he pitched through it, dead.

"How about you, Joe?" Miller asked grimly.

"Dad gave me plenty," Short admitted. "I'll take my chance with a jury. I didn't shoot the driver, Hanlon did. All I did was tag along."

Miller spoke to Lou for the first time. "You're all right, Lou?"

Lou groped her way toward him blindly and as they came together she had a distinct impression of screaming. "Yes. I'm all right now. Just hold me for a minute. Please, Jim."

* * *

Life on the ranch had been good for him. The baby chubbiness was leaving his face. His face brown as a coffee berry, Nicky squirmed as Lou kissed him. Then, coming fully awake, he sat up and, ignoring his mother completely, grinned up snaggled-toothed into the face of the man who was holding the lamp.

"Hi, Jim."

"Hi there, Nicky," Miller said. Then, setting the lamp on the highboy, Miller sat on the edge of the bed and built a cigarette with his capable, spatulate, fingers. "Sorry to wake you up, fellow. But your mother was kinda worried about you."

Nicky was frankly disdainful of the entire feminine sex. "Aw, you know how women are, Jim. Always worrying about something."

"So I'm told," Miller agreed.

Standing at the foot of the bed, Lou watched her two men, smiling. She had climbed her last hill. This was the level trail beyond. Jim Miller would be good to her. Jim would be good to Nicky.

"Say. About that pony, though," Miller said. "I've been studying on that, Nicky. And I think I know where I may be able to get one. You still want a pony?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Jim," Nicky said with juvenile earnestness. "I've been studying on that, too. And while a pony would be nice." He beamed. "A real live brother would be a lot more fun."

His eyes twinkling, Miller looked over his shoulder. "How about that, Lou?"

"Well," the red-haired girl admitted, glad the half-light hid her blushes, "I think that could be arranged."

Next Issue

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Published **October 3rd**

Howdy, folks. Coming up in the next issue is a action-packed novelette by Walt Coburn, "I Wear My Father's Guns." You'll meet young Chad Lee, torn between the warrior traditions of his mother's Cherokee people and the white-man ways of his father. For old Jesse Lee had ridden with Quantrill, and known the James boys and the Daltons.

Trouble began for Chad the day he found his father dying from a bushwhacker's bullets. "Get him, boy," his dad whispered, handing Chad his worn sixguns. Grimly, Chad nodded, and old Jesse died. . . .

It took all Chad's Indian lore to track down the killer, but when he did, his father's guns exacted final vengeance. Then it was time to ride, for the white man would never believe it had been a fair fight.

Down to Apache territory he rode, and there he found the beautiful Fawn . . . and more trouble. For the white men called him half-breed, and Chan was too proud of either half to bow his head. . . .

The lid blew off when Chad was jailed on a trumped-up charge of rustling . . . then it was learned he was wanted for murder. . . . The complete story will appear in the next issue of this magazine.

TRIGGER

Saga of Blazing Sixes

When rancher Van Kendall got up from the piano in Rose Malloy's honkytonk, the night his father's bank was robbed, he didn't know the next music he played . . . would be on his own sixguns.

CHAPTER 1

Doomed Ranch

Van Kendall stood in the doorway of his little one-room shack on Ten Mile Creek and stared bitterly out across the range, at the grass that was brown and dying, and inside him there was a sick, washed-out feeling. He could see the handwriting on the wall and the lonesome moo of a thirsty cow caused his lips to tighten.

TUNE

By RAY GAULDEN

She moved suddenly, striking at the gambler's gun arm . . .

★ ★ ★

From the direction of town a dust cloud appeared. Van Kendall watched it roll slowly toward him and materialize into a red-wheeled buggy, drawn by a sleek black stallion. But Van's attention was centered on the man who sat stiffly on the black leather-covered seat, and as the buggy swept into the sun-baked yards, Van noticed the distaste in the man's eyes as his gaze moved over the crude, unpainted shack.

Stepping out into the sunlight, Van tried to keep the resentment from showing on his brown, high-boned face.

"Hello, Dad. How's everything?"

John Kendall did not climb down from the buggy. He sat there holding the reins loosely in his hands, a big man with a stern

wide mouth and heavy gray hair showing beneath the brim of his expensive black Stetson. His shirt was English broadcloth and Van knew that the well-pressed, pin-striped suit was the best that money could buy.

"Well, Van," John Kendall said bruskly. "It looks like this venture of yours hasn't paid off. I tried to talk you out of wanting to be a rancher, but you wouldn't listen."

"No, because it's what I've always wanted to do, and I know I'll never be satisfied working in that bank of yours, wearing a stiff collar and juggling a lot of figures around."

"Damn it, Van, I've worked hard to get where I am, and I promised your mother before she died that I'd see that you made something of yourself."

Van stared at his father levelly. "How am I going to make anything of myself if it's handed to me on a silver platter? How am I going to walk down the street and listen to folks say how easy I've got it—how I fell into something because my father was a banker?"

"You're looking at it the wrong way, Van. I expect to retire one of these days and I want you to learn the banking business so you can step into my shoes."

There was a stubborn slant to Van's lips. "We've been over all this before and you know how I feel. I just wasn't cut out for that kind of life. Why do you keep trying to force it down my throat?"

"Because I hate to see you making a damned fool of yourself, sinking your savings into a two-bit place like this. And now you're at the end of your rope. It hasn't rained in a long time and what few cattle you've got are slowly dying, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"There is something I could do about it if I had the money," Van's eyes were moody. "I could buy a windmill to supply me water and it wouldn't be long till I had my feet under me."

John Kendall said firmly, "If you're hinting for a loan from the Stockman's National, you just as well forget it because I'm not sinking a dime into this shoe-string outfit of yours."

"Then I'll get the money somewhere else," Van said sharply, and he could feel the heat of temper in his face. "I'll take a riding job for a while—anything to see me through—but I'm not going to be a banker."

A muscle twitched in John Kendall's face and he was unable to keep the anger out of his eyes. "All right, Van, we'll see how you feel about it a month from now. A man can get pretty hungry in a month and I don't think you'll be able to land a riding job. This drouth has hit all the outfits hard and they aren't hiring anybody right now."

John Kendall spoke to the stallion then and the buggy rolled out of the yard, heading back toward the town of Duramosa. Van stared after it, his eyes somber, while the powdery brown dust rose and settled slowly. When the buggy was out of sight, he went to the corral and saddled his horse. There was an obstinate slant to hi lips as he swung aboard and rode out across the range.

HE HIT up the Walking W first, but the grizzled old ramrod shook his head. "I'm sorry, Van, and I don't know of anybody I'd rather hire, but we had to let two of our regular hands go last week."

"Thanks anyway," Van said. "I'll ride over and try the Ladder outfit."

The ramrod bit off a chew of tobacco. "Good luck, Van, and I've sure got to hand it to you for stickin' on that place of yours. I figure most fellas would jump at the chance to live in that fine house of your dad's, and have a nice soft job in a bank."

"Maybe so," Van muttered. "But it's not for me."

At the Ladder outfit, Van listened to the same story and it began to look like his father was right. In the late afternoon, he rode into Duramosa and there was a slope to his shoulders for he had hit up most of the big ranches and they just weren't hiring.

He rode down the center of the town's wide street, his horse's hoofs stirring the chocolate-hued dust, his eyes moving idly over the frame buildings on either side of him. Everything was frame except John Kendall's bank and that was built of stone, solid and durable. Van's eyes, flat with resentment, passed over it and lifted to the big house on the hill, the mansion that his father had built overlooking the town, and he remembered how cold and empty that house had seemed after his mother died.

When he came to the alley between Har-

din's General Store and Billings Cafe, Van turned in, trying to shake the dark mood from him. Wanda Billings and her mother ran the eating place and had living quarters in the rear.

Van swung down and rapped lightly on the screen door. Inside a girl was singing in a clear, pleasant voice, but she broke off abruptly and he heard the light tap of her heels as she crossed the room and came to the door.

"Well, Van Kendall, I was beginning to think maybe you had forgotten where I live, or maybe it was that apple pie I served you the last time you were down."

She was an attractive girl, this Wanda Billings, brown-eyed and slender. Not really beautiful and Van had never seen a passer-by turn to stare at her. You had to know the girl, he figured, to really appreciate her, to see the things that lay under the surface, the strength and patience and gentleness.

"Been pretty busy, Wanda," he said as he entered the pin-neat little living room. "It isn't that I didn't want to come down."

She stared at him searchingly. "How are things at the ranch, Van?"

"Not so good," he said heavily and laid his hat down on the oak library table. "This drouth is hitting everybody hard."

"I know, Van."

His eyes went idly over the room and came to rest on the piano against the wall. As he had done so many times in the past, Van crossed the room and sat down on the bench, ran his fingers lightly over the keys. He looked up, smiling faintly when Wanda came over and leaned on the end of the piano, watching him, her eyes serious.

"If you could just hold out another year, Van."

"But I can't," he said and his face was sober now. "A windmill is the only thing that will save my cattle and I haven't got the money to buy one. I thought I could get a riding job for a while, but it doesn't look like there's a chance."

"Have you seen your father?"

"He was out today."

"Does he still want you to come home?"

Van nodded and there was a film of bitterness across his eyes. "But I'm not going to, Wanda. Maybe that would be the easy way, but a man has to go on living with himself."

"You'll work it out someway," the girl said confidently, and her eyes were warm with admiration. "There's bound to be a job somewhere that you can take for a while."

They were quiet for a moment and his fingers remained on the black and white pieces of ivory, playing softly, music that his mother had taught him. But his eyes were on Wanda and he said, "Maybe it's not fair to you, to expect you to keep waiting while I try to build up a spread. If I went to work in the bank everything would be all right, and we could—"

Wanda shook her head, trying to smile, "I would rather marry a cattleman, Van, even if it means waiting another year or so."

He stopped playing then and reached out and took her hands, pulling her down on the bench beside him. They sat there for a moment, looking into each others eyes.

"You think your mother will stay up front long enough for me to kiss you?"

"We can keep our fingers crossed, Van."

AFTER supper, he walked around town, passing a few words with men he knew, but none of them could tell him where he could find a job. Things were pretty dead. A little later, he strolled into the *Laughing Lady*, the largest saloon in town, but there wasn't much of a crowd. The railroad had come and for a while things had boomed. But this was no longer the end of track and Duramosa was once more a quiet little cow-town.

Van was at the bar sipping a beer when the girl came up to him. "Hello," she said. "I haven't seen you in a long time."

Her name, he knew, was Rose Malloy and she had bought this place just shortly before the railroad pushed on. Tonight she was wearing a green dress, cut very low in front, and showing the smooth whiteness of her shoulders. When you got around to her hair you found it was black as midnight, and then you looked into her eyes and saw that they were black too, with heavy lids and long lashes. Sooner or later you noticed her mouth with the full, well-shaped lips and the slow, tantalizing smile that always seemed to be there. You looked and no matter how hard you tried you couldn't keep your breath from catching in your throat.

"This is the first time I've been to town

in a month," Van said, trying to keep his eyes on the beer mug. "Looks like business isn't so good."

Rose Malloy's eyes traveled along the deserted bar and over the many empty chairs at the card table. She said, "If it gets much worse, I'm going to have to close up."

"That's too bad," Van murmured. "Bet this place set you back plenty."

"You're not kidding, cowboy. I sunk every dime to my name into it. Had a tip, a bad one of course, that the railroad wasn't going to build beyond here for a while."

"That's the way it goes," Van said and his roving gaze came to rest on the piano, placed on a little platform in the center of the room. "Maybe a little music would bring them in," he suggested.

Rose smiled. "My piano player left with the railroad."

Van's eyes were suddenly thoughtful. He set the beer glass down and walked over to the platform, sat down at the piano and wrapped his long legs around the stool. After striking a few preliminary chords, he began to play, his long fingers drawing soft, plaintive music from the battered old piano.

Rose left the bar and came over to the platform. There was a dreamy expression in her eyes as she put her elbows on the piano and listened to him play. A moment ago there had been the click of chips, the murmur of voices, but now it was still, the card games forgotten as everyone in the room sat and listened to the music. When the piece was finished, the patrons broke into wild applause. They stomped and whistled and called for an encore.

Van Kendall looked up at Rose, a faint smile on his lips. "How about a job?"

"You don't really mean it?" Rose stared at him, her eyes bright with interest.

"I'm dead serious," Van said. "Am I hired?"

"As of right now," Rose replied and her eyes were moving over his face. "This calls for drinks on the house." She turned toward the bar, calling, "Charlie, set them up for everybody."

Van played their requests, relaxing for a while and forgetting the days of sweat, the long hours spent in saddle as he worked hard to make a go of his outfit. Then he thought of his father and a wry grin pulled at his lips. John Kendall was an important man in this town, a pillar of the church. What would he say when he learned that his son was pounding the ivories in Duramosa's largest saloon?

From the platform, Van had a good view of the barroom and he could see Link Jannace, the gambler who had drifted in with the railroad, playing solitaire at one of the tables. He was a tall man with a face that was too thin and white, but he knew how to dress, and Van had never seen him when he didn't look as if he had just stepped out of a tailor shop. Van felt the man's cold eyes on him and he wondered if Link resented Rose paying so much attention to the new piano player.

Van's eyes were drawn to the batwings as they slapped open and a stranger stomped inside, a big, heavy-shouldered man with his face flushed from drink. Moving a little unsteadily toward the bar, he let out a rebel yell:

"Get out of my way, you pack of rabbits or I'll tromp you under my boots. I'm Big Blake from the south fork of Bitter Crick, the meanest, toughest gent this two-bit town even seen, and this is my night to howl!"

Van grinned and kept playing as the man called Blake staggered up to the bar, howling for a drink and pounding the mahogany with his fist.

Rose Malloy stood at the end of the bar, watching Blake coolly. "So you're plenty tough, eh, mister?" The girl's eyes were faintly mocking.

Blake jerked around, scowling. Then seeing Rose for the first time, a crooked grin caught at his lips and he started moving along the bar, holding onto it with one hand.

"Say, you're kind of pretty, sister. How about giving us a little kiss?"

Rose took a step back, a taunting smile on her lips. Those dark eyes remained on Blake, but it was to someone else that she spoke.

"Dakota!"

Half off the stool and ready to go to the girl's aid, Van sat back and watched Dakota Raines slide off his stool at the far end of the bar. A big, flat-faced man with round little eyes under tangled brows, he moved swiftly for one so large. But there was nothing in his eyes, no expression on

his face, and Van was reminded of a mechanical man, a giant toy that had been wound up and set in motion.

TOO late, Big Blake saw the threat and tried to set himself, but Raines closed in and without a word drove his fist into Blake's stomach, a hard wicked blow that doubled the man over and brought a grunt of pain from his loose lips. He didn't stay bent over long, though, because Raines' right fist whipped to his jaw and straightened him up.

Quick and neat, Van thought as Blake's knees started to buckle. He would have hit the floor, but Raines caught him. Holding the man by the back of the collar, the bouncer dragged him toward the batwings, making a trail in the sawdust. The slatted doors gave to his heavy shoulders and before they had stopped swinging, Raines was back, his face still emotionless as he returned to his place at the end of the bar.

It was the first time Van had seen the bouncer work and he had to admit that Raines knew how to handle the drunks.

"I think we're going to get along all right," Rose said when the crowd had thinned out and they were ready to close for the night. "Are you going to stay here in town?"

"No, I've got a ranch and cattle to look after, but I'll come in every night. And thanks for the job, Rose."

That slow, bewitching smile was still on the girl's red lips and he thought he read a faint promise in her eyes. She said, "I'll buy you a drink, cowboy."

"It's pretty late and I'd better be getting on home. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, cowboy, and thanks for the music."

Heading for the batwings, Van passed the card table where Link Jannace still sat dealing solitaire. The gambler didn't look up, but when Van was past, he could almost feel the man's hard eyes boring into his back, and he thought, *Now you better watch that fella.*

The night was hot like all the nights had been for the past two months and there was no breeze. On the porch of the saloon, Van stood for a moment to roll a smoke. When he had it going, he started up the street to get his horse, but the patter of running feet caused him to stop, and he watched a little Mexican boy come running up to him.

"*Señor* Van," the boy said breathlessly. "Your father would like for you to stop by his house."

"What does he want, Pedro?"

"I do not know, *Señor.*"

Van stared off into the darkness, frowning. Finally he said, "All right, Pedro. And thanks."

He got his horse and rode up the hill, an obstinate set to his face as he pullled up in front of the big white house. An iron fence was built around the place and there was a lawn, green and well kept, on which John Kendall had never permitted his son to play.

Van tied his horse to the fence and walked up the path, lined with rocks and flowers, things his mother had planted, and across the long front porch where she used to sit in her rocking chair, sewing. Nostalgia stirred in him, but he fought it down and went inside.

John Kendall was in his study sitting behind a flat-topped desk made of fine-grained mahogany. Yellow lamplight threw shadows over the ceiling beams and oak panels of the walls.

"You sent for me?" Van asked and stood there a little uncertainly.

John Kendall had been working on some papers and now he pushed them aside, the lamplight reflecting on his stern face as he looked up at his son.

"Van, you can't be serious. You don't really mean to go through with it, do you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"About you playing the piano in that—that honkytonk," John Kendall said sharply.

A thin smile caught at Van's lips. "So you've heard about it already?"

"Of course I've heard about it," John Kendall was scowling. "Why, it's all over town."

The smile left Van's lips and his face turned somber. "What's wrong with me playing the piano? It's a job, isn't it?"

"Sure. But what kind of a job? Working with a lot of card sharks, tinhorns and dancehall floosies."

"All I'm going to do is play the piano," Van said firmly. "I'll get paid for that and money's the only thing I'm interested in right now."

"But damn it, Van, you can't do this to me. Think of my standing in this town. Think how it's going to look to my friends."

Van shook his head and his face was stony. "I can't think of anything except my cattle and how they're going to die if they don't get water pretty quick. I worked hard to get my stake to buy that place. I sweated and slaved and every dime that went into it is my own."

John Kendall half opened his mouth, then closed it tightly and let Van continue.

"Right now I need a loan, just like a lot of other folks need them now and then, but you've turned me down because you want to force me to come crawling back to you, but it's not going to work out that way. Sure, I'm working in a saloon, making music for a lot of drunks, and I'm going to keep right on until I've got enough money to buy a windmill."

Anger darkened John Kendall's face now and the cords stood out in his neck. "I'll have a padlock put on that place," he roared. "And I'll run that painted floosie out of town."

"Go ahead and try," Van said evenly. "But as long as they're running a clean place, I don't think even you are big enough to close them up."

"I won't have you working there, do you hear me?" John Kendall was half out of his chair, but he sat back heavily and there was frustration in his eyes as he watched Van turn toward the door.

With his hand on the knob, Van looked over his shoulder and said mockingly, "Goodnight, sir."

CHAPTER 2 Gunsmoke Melody

At sundown the next day, Van Kendall rode into Duramosa, and after having supper with Wanda, he went to the Laughing Lady to begin his night's work.

An hour later, Yancey Ford, the sheriff's badge winking on his shirtfront, entered the barroom and strolled over to the platform where Van was playing a piece in ragtime.

"Hello, Yancey," Van said smiling.

Ford nodded and returned the smile. He was a little man who looked too light to carry the heavy gun strapped about his waist. His face was like a piece of leather that has lain too long in the sun, old and brown and cracked. But he was well liked, this Yancey Ford, and he had worn a badge in this town for fifteen years. He remained silent until Van finished the number and there was a glint of amusement in his washed-out blue eyes.

"How'd you like it, Yancey?" Van asked as he stopped to roll a cigarette.

"Real pretty, son," Ford murmured and a distant look crept into his eyes. "I remember when your mother used to play at church on Sundays. I used to go there just to listen to her, but of course I got a little of what the preacher said too, and I reckon that didn't hurt none."

Van got the smoke going and ran one hand lightly over the key board, but he kept his eyes on the sheriff. "You've got something on your mind, Yancey, besides my music."

"You're right, son. I saw your father last night. He sent for me after you left, and he was in a pretty bad mood."

"He wasn't very happy when I left him," Van said soberly. "He doesn't like the idea of me working in a place like this."

The sheriff grinned faintly. "I promised him I'd see you, but I told him I didn't know anything I could do. You know, Van, I got a hunch maybe you've done something that'll bring him around to seeing things your way."

"I doubt that."

"Well, we'll wait and see. When he had stopped cussing me and had quieted down a little, I tried to pound some sense into that mule head of his. Anyway, I left him something to think about."

"Thanks, Yancey."

Ford nodded and started to turn away. Then he swung back and when he faced Van again there was a little frown of worry on his seamed face. "Watch yourself while you're here, son."

"What do you mean, Yancey?"

"I mean there's a couple of characters here that I don't like the looks of."

"Jannace and Raines?"

"That's right," Ford rubbed the back of his neck slowly. "I've got nothing on them, but I know my men—and those boys are a couple of bad ones from way back."

The sheriff was gone then and Van concentrated on the piano once more, breaking into a slow, dolorous melody as he spied

Rose coming across the barroom. Tonight she was wearing a red dress, velvet he guessed, and it was cut just as low as the green one. When she reached the platform, she paused long enough to flash him that provocative smile and to say, "Come back to my office when you finish this number. I want to talk to you."

Van nodded, a frown wrinkling his forehead as he watched her move about the room, rolling her hips in a very attractive way and dazzling them with her smile. *Now what does she want to see me about?* he wondered.

When the piece was finished, he took out his watch and flipped it open. It was a big gold timepiece with a little white ivory horse for a fob. His mother had given it to him on his eighteenth birthday.

Stepping down from the platform, Van walked toward the back of the room. There wasn't much of a crowd and he thought, *I don't seem to be packing them in. Maybe Rose is going to give me my walking papers.*

Link Jannace, his thin face emotionless, sat in a card game with two other fellows and if he saw Van, he gave no sign. Dakota Raines was sitting on his stool at the end of the bar, arms folded across his barrel chest, waiting, Van thought, for somebody to wind him up. Not a muscle moved in his flat face as Van walked by him and turned down the hallway. There were several doors opening off it, leading to rooms that were used for private poker games. A flickering lamp in a wall bracket cast dim light over the hall. At the last door on the left, the only one with a crack of light showing under it, Van stopped and rapped lightly.

ROSE called softly, "Come in," and he opened the door, leaving a little smear of sweat on the knob as he stepped inside. He saw at a glance that it was more than an office. It was her living quarters, nicely furnished with a thick wine-colored rug on the floor and heavy silk drapes at the windows.

"Some layout," he muttered as his gaze finally came to rest on Rose.

"Glad you like it, cowboy." Rose was standing beside a little table that held a bottle and some glasses. When she had poured two drinks, she moved to a horsehair covered sofa and motioned to him.

Van hesitated, aware of an odd dry feeling in his mouth. He gave her a quizzical stare. "You didn't ask me back here just to have a drink with you?"

She met his gaze and he swore softly under his breath, wishing that she would open her eyes a little and quit smiling at him that way.

"I like you, Van. I like you a lot." Her eyebrows went up a trifle and she stared at him over the top of her glass. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Maybe I am, a little," he laughed and tried to make it sound light.

"I won't bite you," she said. "Come on and sit down."

The sofa wasn't very big and he had to sit close to her. "You hired me to play the piano," he said and kept his eyes on the amber-colored stuff in the glass Rose had handed him.

"That's right, Van, but it's going to take more than music, even good music like yours, to do this place any good. The town's dead and there's nothing we can do about it. Yancey Ford watches me like a hawk and everything has to be above board, so—" she sighed heavily—"I'm going to have to close up, try to sell out if I can and move on to where things are booming."

"I'm sorry, Rose," Van said, but he was thinking about his windmill. "I hate to see you take a loss here."

"I'm not crying about it, cowboy. There's plenty of other towns and I can always get another stake."

A small silence built up between them and Van set his glass back on the table, untouched.

"Van," her voice was low, not much more than a whisper. "Why don't you come with me? Leave this two-bit town and we'll go where there's something doing, just you and I. We could have fun together, Van. We—"

He came to his feet suddenly and took a step away from her. "I guess most fellas would give plenty to have you make them that offer, but—"

Rose came off the sofa in a hurry and before he knew what was happening, her arms were around his neck and he could feel the warmth and the softness of her body as she pressed herself against him.

"Kiss me, Van," she whispered. "And then see how you feel about it."

He tried to swallow, but it felt as if a wad of cotton had been stuffed down his throat. Desire was stirring in him, but he fought it down, reminding himself that there had never been anyone but Wanda. Gently, he removed Rose's arms from around his neck.

"I better not try it, Rose, because I'm not so sure that I'd be able to turn you down . . . afterward."

For a long moment, the girl stood there and looked into his eyes, studying him. Then her bare shoulders dropped a little and she sat down again, a sigh of regret slipping past her red lips.

"Well, you can't blame a girl for trying, cowboy," she said smiling wryly. "Come on and have a drink with me and I'll let you go."

Van reached for his drink, feeling a little relieved. He grinned at her and they clicked their glasses together.

"To something that might have been," Rose said softly.

Van drained the glass and set it back on the table. He said, "I guess I'd better be going now."

Rose watched him move toward the door and then abruptly she came to her feet. "Oh, Van, before you go would you mind seeing if you can get my desk drawer open? It seems to be stuck."

"Sure," he said and crossed to the flat-topped desk in one corner of the room. The drawer was tight and he worked with it a moment, having a little trouble opening it. When he finally straightened up, his head was whirling and he couldn't seem to get his eyes focused on anything. There was a strange sensation in his stomach.

He took a stumbling step away from the desk and found that his legs were weak, rubbery things that wouldn't hold him. He reached out to grasp a chair, missed and fell to his knees. In that position, he remained a moment, trying to figure out what was wrong. As though from a great distance, he saw Rose, pressed back against the wall, staring at him fixedly. Then everything went black and he fell forward on his face.

HE STAGGERED around in a red fog so dense that he couldn't see where he was going and somebody kept hitting him over the head with a sledgehammer. That went on for days and he was lost, blind, helpless. Maybe it wasn't days. Maybe it was only an hour or so before he came out of it and pried his eyes open wide enough to see where he was. It wasn't the rug in Rose Malloy's room that he was lying on. It was the ground and it wasn't very soft. His fingers dug into the dirt and he pushed himself up, trying to figure out where he was and what had happened to him.

But his head felt as big as a water bucket and he couldn't do much thinking. All he could do was hold his head and try to keep it from rolling off his shoulders. There was a building close by and he stumbled over to it, leaned against the rough boards and was sick. After that, he felt a little better and he reeled over to the corner of the building where there was a rain barrel, almost full of water. He stuck his head in the barrel, splashing the cool water over his face.

That helped some more and he was able to recognize the building. It was the Laughing Lady Saloon and this was the alley back of the place. Somebody had thrown him out here after he had passed out in Rose Malloy's room. His lips flattened as he remembered the drink he'd had. *There was something in that glass besides whisky,* he thought bitterly. *She slipped me a mickey!*

Why he had been doped, he didn't know, didn't even stop to think about it much right then. There was anger in him, growing and spreading, and with a curse, he flung open the back door and stepped into the hall that led to the barroom. There was no crack of light beneath Rose's door now, so he moved on, his bootheels striking the floor hard.

There seemed to be a crowd in the barroom now, a lot of people all bunched up together near the bar, but Van didn't pay much attention to them because he was looking for Rose Malloy. But there wasn't any sign of her and he started toward the crowd, figuring maybe she was there. Then suddenly he stopped and a cold wind seemed to strike him as if an icebox door had been opened in his face. The crowd had turned, every man of them, and their eyes were hot with accusation as they stared at Van Kendall.

Bewildered, uneasiness stirring in him, Van stood there and watched Yancey Ford step out of the crowd and start toward him,

moving slowly as though the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

"I never figured you'd do a thing like that, Van. I sure never did. Knew you needed money, but—"

Van stared at the lawman wildly. His tongue felt like a piece of rubber, but he got it out and ran it over his dry lips. "What are you saying, Yancey. What are you getting at?"

It was very still in the saloon. The only sound was made by the sheriff's boots as he kept walking implacably toward Van Kendall.

"The cashier's in bad shape, Van. Doc don't know whether he can pull through or not. You wasn't satisfied with taking the money, you had to shoot old man Harris, too."

Van's mind was still pretty fuzzy, but it didn't take much figuring to get what Ford was driving at. Old man Harris was cashier in the Stockman's National. The bank had been robbed, and for some crazy reason, the sheriff thought he, Van, had something to do with it.

"Don't be a fool, Yancey," Van said hoarsely. "You know I wouldn't do a thing like that."

Yancey Ford was close now and there was pain in his eyes, a dull, sick expression that told Van this was the toughest job he had ever had to do. Without taking his eyes off Van, he reached in his coat pocket and brought out a little object.

"My watch fob," Van managed to get past a throat that was tight and hurting.

"I found it in the bank where you dropped it beside Harris' body," the sheriff said tonelessly.

There was sweat on Van's forehead and in the palms of his hands. He could almost feel the noose tightening about his neck and he knew that right now talk wouldn't get him anywhere. They wouldn't believe him if he said he had been doped and the watch fob stolen. And he couldn't prove it.

A man in the crowd yelled, "I had every dime to my name in that bank."

"Me too," another man said bitterly. "And there stands the skunk that stole it. Let's get him!"

"String 'im up!" somebody else cried.

They shoved forward and Van had a glimpse of Rose. She was standing against the bar and the crowd had blocked his view of her until now. Silently he cursed her for a double-crossing little wench, but he couldn't do anything about it now. That grimfaced pack was getting close and he knew he wouldn't last long if they got their hands on him. The only thing to do right now was get out of here. Run! Pick up your feet and lay them down.

Yancey Ford was looking worried now and he turned to face those irate citizens, but Van knew the lawman wouldn't be able to stop them. Not the way they were worked up. Van's insides were tight and cold with fear. He had no gun, nothing to fight them with. But he was desperate and he moved swiftly, catching Yancey Ford in the back and shoving him hard into the crowd.

It wasn't much, but it stopped them for a moment, gave him time to whirl and duck through the door behind him. He raced down the hall, not once looking back, but he could hear them yelling and knew they were coming after him. The alley door wasn't far away, but it seemed like a mile. He reached it and flung it open just as a gun roared and lead ripped into the door casing.

"Shoot the dirty son! Don't let him get away!"

CHAPTER 3 Last Showdown

Van ran down the alley, wishing he had his horse, that he hadn't left it at the livery stable. There was no moonlight here and in the darkness he had a chance, but if he crossed the lighted street they would cut him down. He kept running, not knowing where he was going, but getting away. His foot caught in a tangle of wire and he went down, sprawled on his face. He fought to get the wire off his boots, fought desperately while panic began to nibble at his insides. They were coming back there, yelling and prowling through the darkness.

Now he was on his feet again, running, staying close to the buildings.

"There he goes! Up there by the hardware store."

A gun howled again, sending harsh sound into the night, and this time they didn't miss. The bullet struck him in the left shoulder and drove him forward as if

someone had given him a hard shove. There was pain, sharp and hot, but he clamped his teeth and kept going.

Up ahead there were some big empty crates and he went around them, realizing he was back of the furniture store. Relief touched him briefly for the boxes cut him off from their view. Billings Cafe was just ahead. He heard the sceen door open and saw Wanda, evidently drawn by the shooting, peering cautiously out. The white blur of the girl's face caused hope to beat in him. Wanda would have a gun he could use. He could put up a fight, give them a run for their money.

Blood was running down his arm and a wave of dizziness hit him. It was just a few steps to the door, but he thought he was going to fall before he reached it. The darkness was closing in on him, but he heard Wanda gasp, saw her start to jump back and close the door. Then she recognized him and a little cry broke from her lips. It was vague after that, the part where the girl got him inside and down the steps into the cellar below the cafe.

Wanda left him and hurried back up stairs. Van lay there among a lot of food stuff—boxes of canned goods, sacks of flour and potatoes—and half expected the mob to come down the stairs any minute. Dimly he could hear the sound of footsteps overhead, but after a while they went away and Wanda came back, carrying a lamp, some bandages and a pan of water.

"They're gone," she said. "They took a quick look and decided you had taken to the brush along the creek."

"I shouldn't have come here," he muttered. "It might get you in trouble."

"Hush," she said gently. "And let me tend your shoulder."

He lay back, his breath loud in the stillness and watched her as she removed his shirt. Her fingers felt cool against the hot flesh of his arm.

"The bullet didn't lodge," she said. "If we can stop it from bleeding, you'll be all right."

The girl's cheeks were pale, but she worked swiftly and her hands seemed steady enough.

"They must have drugged you and stolen your watch fob," Wanda said when Van had finished telling her what happened.

Van nodded bitterly. "It was probably Jannace and Raines that robbed the bank. They figured Yancey Ford would suspect them, so they decided to put the blame on me."

They were quiet until Wanda finished bandaging the wound. Then Van asked, "Have you got a gun?"

"But Van, you're in no shape to go looking for trouble tonight." Worry shadowed the girl's eyes.

"Tomorrow might be too late," he said firmly. "They might already be gone, and I'll never be able to convince anybody I didn't pull that job."

She stared at him a moment, her face tight with strain. "All right, Van, I'll get you the gun."

He sat up, wincing as a fresh wave of pain stabbed through his shoulder, and put his shirt back on. His legs weren't too steady, but they held him and he managed to get upstairs, his fingers shaking a little as he strapped the gun that had belonged to Wanda's father about his waist. He was ready to go out the door when Wanda stopped him.

"Van, I forgot to tell you. Pedro, that little Mexican boy, was here looking for you. Had a note from your father."

"Nothing important," Van said and his hand was on the door knob.

"He left the note with me to give to you, Van. Maybe you better read it."

He moved back from the door, frowning as Wanda handed him the note. Unfolding it, he read quickly:

> I can't see you working in a honkeytonk, damn it. I sat up most of the night thinking it over. If you're bound and determined to be a rancher, stop at the bank tomorrow and we'll talk about a loan.

Van folded the piece of paper and stuck it in his shirt pocket. A few hours ago that news would have had him singing for joy. But now, with a hide-hungry pack beating the brush for him, he wasn't sure he would ever need a windmill.

"Van, be careful," Wanda said as he moved toward the door again.

He nodded and stepped out into the darkness, moving warily back down alley. A little breeze had come up now and it dried the sweat on his face and cleared his head. Keeping close to the buildings, he reached the *Laughing Lady* and cut down

a passageway between the saloon and Callahan's Meat Market. A side window near the street gave him a good view of the barroom.

There weren't many people inside, just a few broken down derelicts that you found there all the time. They were fixtures and Van's eyes passed over them, came to rest on a red velvet dress near one end of the bar. The girl wearing the dress seemed to be having trouble finding something to do with her hands. She kept picking a whiskey glass up and setting it down again.

A tight little smile twisted Van's lips as he saw her eyes dart toward the batwings every now and then. Then her gaze found Link Jannace at one of the card tables and the gambler flashed her a confident smile, then went on dealing the cards, just as though nothing had happened. And there was Dakota Raines, sitting on the stool, his face as blank as an unpainted wall as he waited for Rose's voice to set him in motion.

From the street came the sound of bootheels on the plankwalk and Van flattened himself against the side of the building, remaining motionless until three men crossed the alley. Part of their conversation reached him.

"He might of got a horse, but I still think he's around somewhere."

They were gone then and Van hurried to the back of the building, slipped quietly inside. There was no light in Rose Malloy's room, but the door wasn't locked and he stepped inside, feeling his way through the darkness. He remembered a closet across the room and without striking a match, he found it, pulled the curtains aside. There were no clothes in the closet and his lips flattened. Evidently Rose was all packed.

HE WAITED, his hand on his gun, and the minutes dragged by. It was hot in the closet and he felt a little sick. Sweat was beginning to pop out on him. Then he went rigid as he caught the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. Presently the door opened and someone lighted a lamp. By holding the curtains apart slightly, Van had a view of the room, and his face tightened as he saw Link Jannace sink down on the sofa. Alongside the sofa, Van could see three suitcases.

Rose Malloy didn't sit down. There was a cigarette between her lips and she kept puffing it nervously, all the while pacing up and down the room.

"Why don't you settle?" Jannace growled. "There's nothing to worry about. Not a thing."

The girl's back was to the gambler, but she whirled around suddenly and faced him. "Oh, sure, everything's just lovely. The whole town's worked up over this thing. You promised me there wouldn't be any shooting and then you had to go and plug that cashier."

"So what?" Jannace said sharply. "They figure that ivory pounder did it."

Dakota Raines

Rose stopped and mashed her cigarette out in an ashtray. She said. "It was a crazy thing to do. I don't know why I let you talk me into it."

"Because you're broke, my dear," Jannace gave her a thin, mocking smile. "And you can't stand being broke. Money means everything to you and you've lost heavily in this place, can't even find a sucker to take it off your hands."

"I can't stand this waiting." Rose wrung her hands and started pacing again.

The gambler glanced at his watch. "The stage will leave in another half hour, and you've got enough money to set you up where things are booming, where there's excitement and men loaded with dinero to throw at your feet."

"And you, Link?"

"I'll make out here for a while and keep anybody from getting suspicious. When you're all set up somewhere, I'll get rid of this place, even if I have to give it away, and join you."

"But you won't live that long, Link," Van said coldly and stepped out of the closet, the gun gripped in his hand, his lips thin and tight against his teeth.

Jannace bounced up off the sofa, his hand starting toward a shoulder holster, but he thought better of it and sank back, staring fearfully at the gun in Van Kendall's hand.

"So they didn't get you?" Jannace murmured.

"No, it didn't work out quite the way you planned," Van said and looked accusingly at Rose. The girl had slumped down on the sofa beside Jannace, her lips colorless and desperation in her eyes. Her lips moved, but she couldn't seem to get any words out. Then her eyes darted briefly toward the door, warning Van, whose back was turned that way. There wasn't a sound, but he whirled around in time to see Dakota Raines' flat face against the partly open door. The big man had a gun in his hand and it was coming up.

Desperately, Van whipped his own weapon up, felt it jump in his hand as he pulled the trigger. Their guns roared almost together and hot lead ripped across Van's left side, but Raines was unable to get off another shot. Van's bullet had taken him in the chest and he staggered back a few steps staring at the crimson stain on his shirtfront. Even then his face showed nothing and his eyes were empty as he twisted around and dropped heavily to the floor.

There was a cold, sick feeling inside Van as he spun back around to face the threat of Link Jannace. The gambler's face was cold with menace and he had whipped a gun from inside his coat. The gun was lined on Van's chest and at that range Jannace couldn't miss.

But Rose Malloy had come to life now. She had sat there with a dazed look on her pretty face, but she moved suddenly, striking at the gambler's gun arm just as he squeezed the trigger.

"No Link!" the girl screamed.

Harsh sound filled the room, but the bullet missed Van by inches. Cursing, Jannace struck at the girl, the sound of his open palm against her face following close behind the gun's roar. Rose lay back, moaning softly, and Jannace, his lips twisted, tried to get the weapon in line again.

The gun in Van's hand felt heavy, but he managed to bring it up before Jannace could get in another shot. Van fired twice, one bullet grazing the gambler's ribs, the other taking him just under the heart. Jannace, his gun making little sound as it dropped on the thick rug, fell back on the sofa. He turned his head slightly and there was a bitter smile on his lips as he looked at Rose.

"I was right," he whispered. "You let that damn ivory pounder get under your hide." And with that, Link Jannace slid off the sofa and onto the floor. He rolled over on his face and didn't move again.

Rose Malloy sat staring at him for a moment, a slight shudder passing over her, and then she looked up at Van. "I guess I'm the biggest fool that ever walked," she said bitterly.

Van grinned crookedly. "You were pretty sweet a minute ago. I wouldn't be alive if you hadn't helped out. You're a funny girl, Rose. One minute you're slipping me a mickey and the next you're saving my life."

Rose looked again at Jannace. "It was his idea. He and Dakota pulled the job. I didn't stop to think that a mob might try to kill you. Link said that nothing would really happen to you, except that you'd go to jail for a while. And I was desperate, Van. A girl like me doesn't like to be broke. Anyway, you can get the sheriff now and I'll tell him what really happened."

For a moment, Van stood and stared at her. "The money's here?"

She nodded listlessly. "In one of those suitcases."

Boots were pounding down the hall and Van said quickly, "When you talk to the sheriff, leave yourself out of it. I figure you paid your debt to me, and maybe you learned a lesson."

"I think I did, cowboy," Rose stared at him steadily. "You're a pretty swell guy."

Van smiled. "Save that kind of talk for somebody who can maybe take this place off your hands."

Yancey Ford and a group of townsmen were pouring into the room then, drawn by the sound of the shots. It seemed that Harris, the cashier, was going to be all right, so Van let Rose do most of the talking and he got out of there as fast as he could. The wound in his side wasn't bad, but he figured he would let Wanda take a look at it, and he wanted to let her know that everything was going to be fine.

THE END

BLIZZARD FEUD BUSTER

The sudden freeze should have cooled the flaming hatred between nester Kilburn and the rancher—but some men just have to get in a last lick.

Kilburn pushed his face deep in the snow . . .

By HAL HAMMOND

AS THE horseman approached, Buell Kilburn was in his little sod barn mending a harness. His gray eyes became wary as he stared at the black-bearded rider, gun-barrel stiff in the saddle.

Black Jack Morgan wasted no time on idle talk as he pulled his big bay to a stop with one smooth, powerful motion.

"I warned you not to build that fence, Kilburn," he said flatly. "Morgan cattle

have always used that graze. They'll keep on usin' it."

"Not while I can still shoot," Kilburn replied slowly, raising his lean, hard length from the milk stool on which he was sitting. "My family's got to eat. I'm plantin' that land to wheat, come spring. I ain't hankerin' to have your cattle tramplin' it in the ground."

"You should of thoughta that before you squatted on Morgan land." The rancher's deep-set eyes were sultry.

"I had a right to homestead it," Kilburn retorted, holding his temper in check with difficulty. "You got more grazin' land than you need."

"Talk won't get you nowhere. The fence comes out."

Buell Kilburn rubbed his left ear, a habit he had when his blood ran hot. His voice was cold.

"From now on I'm watchin' that fence—with a gun."

"I admire a man with guts," Morgan admitted dryly, "even if he is a squatter. Any fightin' will be between me an' you. My men won't interfere, except to get that fence out of there. I built my spread with my two fists an' my guns. I reckon I'm still man enough to handle my affairs myself."

With thoughtful somberness Buell Kilburn's glance followed the rancher's stiff-backed figure. Though he didn't like Morgan any more than he did the two sun dogs flanking the setting sun he had to admit that the rancher could have been a good man to have for a friend. If only he wasn't so dead set against the farmers.

Buell Kilburn frowned, deep lines breaking through the flat planes of his tanned face. He'd heard stories that Black Jack Morgan could kill a running coyote at three hundred yards. A coyote was a darned elusive target.

Buell Kilburn shrugged away these unpleasant thoughts and studied the darkening skyline, his tall form hunched a little forward, his brown hair, graying slightly at the temples, showing below his floppy hat brim. He noted the leaden haze to the west and the coldness of the shifting wind. To his practiced eye these conditions foretold a storm. Unless he brought them in in a hurry, a spring blizzard could be the end of the few cattle he had.

Another figure approached on horseback. This person was small. Recognition calmed a slight uneasiness that had been building up in Kilburn since he had noticed the gray-bellied smudge mushrooming upward on the horizon.

It was his son, Kenneth, just a lad of twelve, but a big help to him. As much help to Kilburn as his daughter was to his wife. A couple of swell kids. Thinking of them and his wife tightened his stomach muscles. They would have a hard time of it if . . .

The youngster approached, riding his mare with easy grace. A couple of pelts were strapped to the back of the saddle. Boyishly he grinned at his dad, pride showing in his blue eyes.

"Got two nice badgers, pa. Fur's still prime but don't 'spect it will be much longer."

"Nice furs, son," Kilburn answered, his eye softening. "Get 'em over in the badlands?"

The youngster nodded. "Met Tim Benson over there."

"He's the son of Morgan's foreman, ain't he?"

"Yup, but he's a right swell fella."

Soft flakes of snow, whipped along by a gust of wind, brushed gently against Kilburn's cheek. In swift alarm he swung about. The smudge to the west had turned into a wall of smoky blackness sweeping rapidly across the unresisting face of the flat landscape.

"Run up to the house and get my sheepskin coat and mittens, son." Kilburn led Ken's mare into the barn. Swiftly he unsaddled her and threw the saddle on his own horse, not bothering to lengthen the stirrup straps. As he was frantically pulling his horse out of the barn door Ken came running to him. With awkward haste Kilburn shrugged his way into the wool-lined coat and mittens and mounted.

"Be careful, pa," Ken yelled after him.

KILBURN rode swiftly but the storm caught up with him, then contemptuously raced ahead of him. Wetly the snow fell, reluctantly turning to cold, liquid drops on the animal's warm body. Around the lone horseman the storm closed in, hiding all familiar landmarks, forcing Kilburn to head for his fence so he would have some idea of where he was going. His cows would drift to the end of that fence.

Into a gray-shrouded world Buell Kilburn pushed his horse as swiftly as he dared, feeling a coldness crawl up his back as the temperature dropped. With wild abandon a frigid, racing blast of belching wind spewed out a vast army of icy pellets that routed the falling snowflakes in irresistible confusion. The rivulets of water that had been pouring down the seams in Kilburn's cheeks congealed into layers of ice.

But finally, out of the swirling gloom of the descending night, shapeless blobs appeared huddled against the fence, backs humped stiffly against the stinging sleet. Kilburn yelled, cracked his whip on their unresisting flanks, snapped off the icicles frozen tightly to their shaggy hides. Sluggishly the cows moved, bawling in pain as the gale-driven pellets of ice smashed headlong against their faces.

Six cows, a man, and a horse, pushing their puny way into the wind. Opening a hole which closed in greedily behind them.

As its fitful speed increased the wind changed to a shrieking whistle playing a wild accompaniment to the bellowing of the pain-wracked cattle.

During a brief slackening of the wind Kilburn's tortured ears heard an alien note, an eerie scream that had a lost and lonely sound. As he rode forward, keeping the stubborn cattle bunched along the fence, the sound came again. Louder. A terrified wail, vaguely human in its frightened, despairing tones.

Through heavily frosted eyelids Kilburn peered, searching the small crack in the storm ahead. Finally he saw a small mound that contrasted oddly with the snow piled around it. The dark mass moved, raised upward, then fell back into the snow.

Kilburn dismounted, grabbed the outstretched arms in his mittened hands and pulled the small body under the fence. The ice-crusted form was small. Kilburn figured it must be Tim Benson.

The youngster wasn't dressed for the ruthless Arctic blasts that pummeled his body. His unprotected nose and cheeks showed white spots where the frost had penetrated. Weakly he said:

"Storm caught me. Figgered I could follow your fence back to your place but my hoss stumbled in a blowout filled with snow an' fell on me. Twisted my ankle. I—I—"

His voice was whisked off by the renewed fury of the wind.

As Kilburn raised his eyes from the helpless boy he saw his cows turn, drift with the gale, and vanish from sight. He must get them right away, turn them back toward home.

But he couldn't. Not with the boy needing his help. This weather was no place for a kid. With clumsy haste he tugged off his mittens. Barehanded he rubbed the lad's face. He pummeled his body. Satisfaction flowed through Kilburn as the white spots receded. The boy coughed and tried to sit up.

"You've got to walk, son!" Kilburn shouted to him as he pulled him to his feet. "You'll freeze if you don't!" Clumsily he pulled off his heavy sheepskin coat and bundled it around the lad.

"I can't," the boy moaned. He sank back in the snow. "My ankle. I can't stand on it."

Kilburn lifted him up behind the saddle. He pulled himself up in front so his own body would serve as a windbreaker. He guided the horse with one hand, held the youngster upright with the other while a million needles smashed against him. As he urged the gelding forward through the whirling roaring mass that made his ears vibrate with its steady impact he tried to keep one eye on the fence. With a satisfaction that was almost childish he felt the pain on his face and chest begin to lessen. The wind was dying down, he thought.

Sharp reality tugged at his numbed senses as he felt himself losing his balance. So sluggishly did his muscles respond as he made a desperate grab for the saddle horn that he feared he wouldn't make it. But he did.

Dimly Kilburn realized that the snow and the sleet were being driven past him with undiminished speed. It shocked him into a full awareness of his danger. He, too, was freezing. His numbed body no longer repsonded to the driving pressure of the cold.

Even his eyes were playing him tricks. Before him pale, yellow beams of light shimmered weirdly. Devils' eyes, they were, mocking his weakness, taunting his impotence. The quivering streaks blended into one as a dark shape loomed ahead of him. Ken, it was, a lantern in his hand. From

his lips the boy's words rolled out, wild with welcome and relief.

"Pa! Oh, pa! You're home!"

Kilburn didn't get off. He fell off, spilling with lumpy awkwardness into a snowdrift, the boy he had saved beside him. Ken's voice screaming in his ears drew him back to reality, beating imploringly against his numbed senses.

"Pa, you gotta get up an' walk! You gotta, pa. You just gotta!" Desperately Ken tugged and pulled on the prone man.

With drugged slowness, Buell Kilburn pushed himself to his feet. He began moving his arms, beating them against his chest. The awful deadness slowly gave way to needle-like slivers of pain that sharpened his dulled sensibilities. He picked up the limp form lying beside him and plodded wearily toward the house. His wife's startled exclamation hung in the air as he gently placed the boy on his son's bunk.

BUT sudden emergencies were not new to Martha Kilburn. Her movements were deftly efficient as she took care of Tim Benson. She kept her son and daughter busy as she worked. Her eyes searched her husband's face, concern overriding the tenderness showing in their depths.

"Don't ever come that close to making me a widow again, Buell," she said.

"I'm not hankerin' 'to," he answered. But he thought of Morgan, and he wondered.

Quietly he watched this small woman who meant so much to him. The dexterity with which her slender fingers worked on the lad's injured ankle, easing the pain that showed in his pale face.

Almost delicate in its smooth contour was her profile. Kilburn marveled, as he had many times before, at the quiet fortitude and gentle but firm determination of this woman who was so much a part of his life. His eyes filmed over as once again he thought of Morgan and the trouble he could expect on the next day. He hadn't told Martha. No need to cause her more worry.

He caught himself thinking of the years he had spent in the ring working his way up to the big money. The money he never got because he wouldn't throw a fight that had been fixed. He thought of his marriage and the brief years of happiness on their little eastern farm before the drouth set in. Years of weathered crops. Of drifting sand. It had been Martha who suggested that they come out to this new land on the western plains. Once again they were happy. It was up to him to see that Morgan did not spoil that happiness.

"The cows are still out?" Martha asked. She said it matter-of-factly, but her husband caught the undercurrent of strain in those few words.

Kilburn nodded, not trusting himself to speak. They had worked hard for those few cows. Now they would have to start all over again. Not a chance in a hundred that he would be able to find them again in that whirling cauldren of blackness outside.

"Tim's parents will be terribly worried," his wife said. "Are you going to take him home when the storm lets up?"

"Reckon I better. He's comin' 'round in good shape. We'll bundle him up good. You'll have some sore spots for a while," he said to the boy.

"You ain't at all like Mr. Morgan says you are," Tim said gravely. "More like my dad thinks you are."

"And what does your dad think I'm like?" Kilburn smiled. He took out his pipe and filled it, careful not to spill any of the tobacco.

"He don't say much. He can't, seein' as how he's Morgan's foreman. But he thinks you're all right. He don't like one bit what Morgan's plannin' to do."

"You bet my pa's all right," Ken busted in proudly. "An' he's a fighter, too. Used to be a prize fighter. Bet nobody could lick him in the ring."

"Boasting never got a man anywhere, son. What's past is past. It's best forgotten."

Ruth was sitting at the table. She was a pretty girl with thick black hair hanging down in neat braids. Something in her father's tone made her look up quickly. A note of rebuke. Something neither she nor Ken were used to. But she didn't say anything. Just sat quietly, listening.

Kilburn noticed the worried expression on his wife's face. He knew she was thinking of what Tim had said. She would be wondering what Morgan was planning to do. During the years they had lived together he had reached the point where he could read her mind pretty well. But he knew she wouldn't ask. She would wait for him to do the telling. Always before he had

taken her into his confidence. This, he thought wryly, was one time when he wouldn't. Impatiently he knocked the ashes from his pipe.

BUELL KILBURN rode out the next morning, his old Sharps rifle in its worn scabbard, his thoughts as cold as the snow through which his horse so patiently plodded. Through his mind the thought kept beating with sharp insistence that he might never see his wife and children again. It was something he couldn't bear to think about.

There was only one thing that warmed the coldness in his insides. That was the reception John Benson and his wife had given him the night before when he returned Tim to them. That was something he would always remember. It was good to know that he had some friends on Morgan's ranch, even if they wouldn't be able to help him in his troubles.

Nature, as if in repentance for her wild rampage of the night before, was sending warm spring breezes across the snow-covered plains, gently uncovering little patches of ground here and there. Kilburn found his cows piled up along the fence in a little ravine. They lay as they had died, with the snow drifted like a shroud around their frozen bodies.

Slumped forward in his saddle Buell Kilburn stared at them until the muffled hoofbeats of approaching horsemen broke the dead silence. Then he straightened in his saddle, pulled his rifle and swung his horse around. The sound of his voice carried with quiet distinctness across the space that separated him from the riders.

"That's far enough, Morgan."

Morgan reined in his horse. His men stopped, too, waiting for their boss' next move. When Morgan spoke the sharp gruffness that had been in his voice the day before was gone.

"You know you ain't got a chance, Kilburn," he said quietly. "I could kill you before you ever got that rifle up to your shoulder."

"Mebbe so," Kilburn answered flatly. "You'll have to prove it." His gaze traveled past Morgan to his men sitting emotionally in their saddles. All except one. John Benson's face was pale, almost ashen.

"I admire your nerve, Kilburn," Morgan said breaking the strained silence. I told you once I fight my own battles. I've fought many a man with my fists. I ain't never been whipped yet." He paused.

"Finish your piece," Kilburn answered tersely. If what he was thinking was true it was far more than he'd dared hope for.

"If you're man enough to do it," Morgan continued, his eyes measuring the man facing him, "I'll give you double the number of cows you got layin' there." He indicated them with the flat of his hand. "If you ain't —you pack up your stuff and get out."

Buell Kilburn stared at the burly rancher. The man was a lot bigger and a good ten years younger. It would be a job. Possibly the toughest fight he had ever tackled. But the odds would be more even than they would be with guns. Slowly he slid his rifle back into its scabbard. He dismounted and tossed his sheepskin in the snow.

Morgan's coat was off almost as soon as he hit the ground. With fluid quickness he strode toward his opponent, his boots sinking through the soft snow. On he came, elbows bent, fists swinging in unison with the easy rhythm of his stride, a faint smile playing across his square-featured face.

KILBURN waited cautiously, letting the younger man bring the fight to him. There was too much at stake to take any chances, or to risk losing his wind. He knew he wasn't in condition for a hard fight.

Morgan struck so fast his fist was a blur. Kilburn side-stepped but his heavy boots and the soft snow slowed him down. With a sodden thud Morgan's fist punched into his short ribs. Sharp pain followed quickly. Before he could recover Morgan knocked him to his knees.

Kilburn rocked to his feet, his ears ringing. Cold, consuming anger compelled him to reject his former cautious approach. With set lips he ducked a wide right and slammed a hard left to the rancher's jaw. He followed it quickly with a stiff left to the mid-section as he blocked a left hook.

He worked on the rancher's face tossing rights and lefts to his jaw. Fast hammering blows to his eyes and nose. Rapid punishing blows that made the blood flow darkly down the cleft in Morgan's chin.

The rancher grunted. He found an opening and landed an uppercut on Kilburn's rugged jaw that lifted him off his feet. It

spilled him to the ground with his head weaving drunkenly. Momentarily dazed Kilburn pushed his head deep in the snow letting the feel of its coldness revive him. He rolled over, his muscles bunched for the shock of Morgan's booted feet in his back.

But the rancher hadn't moved. He stood, feet widespread, chest heaving, his breath making rasping noises in his throat. He waited until Kilburn was on his feet, then lunged, arms moving rapidly.

In that barrage of flailing fists Kilburn saw an opening. Flush on Morgan's jutting jaw he landed a solid right that staggered the rancher but didn't drop him. It took four more solidly-packed punches before the rancher dropped. Motionless, he lay in the melting snow.

Warily Kilburn watched him until the rancher began to stir. Morgan slowly, very slowly, raised himself on one elbow.

Kilburn asked softly, "Had enough?"

Morgan nodded his swaying head. "You pack an awful wallop," he said, rising unsteadily to his feet. I'd kinda like to shake your hand. Then I'll leave."

Mechanically Kilburn held out his hand. He stood there, a funny look on his battered face as the rancher and his men rode off. But John Benson had remained. Kilburn turned to face him.

"I don't get it," he said heavily. "Morgan wanting to shake my hand. After what I did to him. Why, the man hates my guts."

"He did," Benson answered. "Morgan ain't got any kids of his own. You'd be surprised how much he thinks of my boy, Tim. Reckon last night taught him what kind of a man he was dealing with. And mebbe a few other things, too."

"Then why did he fight me?"

"You know he's not the kind who'd give up without a fight," Benson smiled. "I think he was about ready to this mornin' 'til Tim mentioned you was an ex prize-fighter. You should a seen the relief on his face. I guess he knew he had a trouncing comin'. 'Spect he figgered you could do it. Reckon he's downright glad you didn't disappoint him. He'd have held you to that bargain if you hadn't won. An' he'd never've been able to live with himself afterwards."

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

There's a trick to every trade. The bartenders of the Old West had many of them. One was the bit of magic that converted whiskey into French brandy. Cod liver oil, nitric acid and burnt peach stones, added to the whiskey in proper proportions, created the synthetic product. It never fooled the connoisseur, rarely the widely experienced drinker. But it did get by with the rank and file. Many a time a "formula" bartender found himself suppressing a grin as he listened to a customer extol the qualities of the "imported French brandy."

* * *

Pony Express riders used three horses to cover three stations and a distance of 33 1/3 miles. Their mounts, ridden at top speed, were usually the tough, half-breed California mustangs, famed for speed, endurance and the sure-footedness of a mountain goat.

* * *

News of one of the battles of the Civil War was delivered to Sacramento by the Pony Express a full day ahead of schedule. The "hat" was passed around and a total of $300.00 was collected as a bonus for the riders.

* * *

Ties for the Union Pacific Railroad were cut in Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania. They cost $2.50 each, delivered to the road's eastern terminus at Omaha, Nebraska.

—J. W. Q.

GUNS OF FURY

Badman Drago was the first to face the stranger's guns, and he learned the lesson the West would never forget—bad luck comes in sixes!

The Comanche cloud whirled and circled back . . .

By CHESTER NEWTON HESS

THE mule-train from Corpus Christi sweated to a halt at the Ranger station on the edge of San Borimo an hour after sundown. Orin Tade, saddle boy and self-assigned orderly to Captain Stephen Welbin, had been watching the party's approach through the twilight—its long furrow of dust a saffron wake on the deepening purple sea of plain.

Orin and Lieutenant Haskell, sharing station duty, stood waiting. A man, from the States by the look of him, detached

from the grimy little caravan and rode up to them.

"Captain Welbin—is he here?" the stranger asked.

"And if he was," said Lieutenant Haskell, "what would you be wanting of him?"

The stranger dismounted heavily. He was a young man and tall. As he squared back trail-weary shoulders, the layers of dust flaked off and cascaded down his ankle-length black coat.

"I have a shipment for Captain Welbin—personally. He's expecting it. We'll unload immediately. The cases are heavy and I'll need your help."

Talks up like a sure 'nough boss, this hombre, Orin thought, and glanced at the lieutenant to see how he was taking it. "How many boxes, mister?" Haskell wanted to know, eyeing the four loads appraisingly.

"Only eight. But I said they weighed high, and my mule man's got a sore arm. That leaves you and the boy and me."

"We'll put 'em in the Captain's quarters, Orin," said Lieutenant Haskell.

Orin recalled afterward how at the time it seemed strange the lieutenant didn't ask what was in the shipment. He remembered too the mere glimpse he got, as they worked with the wooden boxes, of the man's two pistols—one on each side, tucked into the waistband. There was something funny about those pistols. The boy had never seen anything like them, in or out of San Borimo.

The cases stacked at the foot of Captain Welbin's cot, Orin made a belated gesture of hospitality. "Can I get you a cup of coffee, sir?"

The stranger stepped outside the station adobe, slapping the talcum-fine dust from his hat. He looked at Orin and smiled for the first time. "Thanks. A little later, perhaps. Now where do we find Captain Welbin?" He inquired this not of the lieutenant, but of the boy.

Orin grinned. "He's up the street there somewheres, likely," he told him. And then eagerly, "I'll be pleased to go fetch him for you, sir—"

"No, don't bother," the stranger said. "I'll locate him directly."

"Oh, no trouble at all, sir," Orin hastened to say. "You see, I'm sort of his orderly—s'posed to do things like that. I'm saddle boy here, an' do a lot of chores. Captain Steve says fifteen ain't old 'nough yet for a regular. But I say I'm plenty big and handy. Even right now I'd be able—"

"I'm sure you have the enthusiasm," interrupted the stranger. "But I take it you have great respect for your Captain Steve's judgment."

"Yes, sir, a mighty lot," said Orin, his frown fading. "Captain Steve's sort of like a father . . . seein' as mine's dead."

"I'll find Captain Welbin now," the stranger said.

Lieutenant Haskell spoke up stubbornly. "Mister, you wait here with me. Orin, go tell Captain Welbin there's a man with a shipment from the States. Look in at the Wheel first."

The stranger smiled again, indulgently. "It's all right for the boy to go on ahead. I'll follow if I see fit."

Captain Steve Welbin was at the Golden Wheel, as his officer had suggested. He had not gone into one of San Borimo's popular pleasure haunts looking for anyone in particular. But the Wheel was a good place to drop into if you wanted to know who should *not* be in town. That was a Ranger's business.

As Orin Tade approached in the street, Welbin saw a man at the bar he wanted—a border troublemaker named Drago, suspected by the Ranger of having had a hand in a recent raid on a nearly supply station.

"Hello, Drago," he said, soft-voiced. "Suppose you and I take a stroll outside."

Drago made no move, but gave the sign with his eyes to a man, known locally as Clevis, who had been standing at the bar back of Welbin. Clevis jabbed a gun in the Ranger's back, at the same instant jerking Welbin's weapon from its scabbard.

Drago drew one of his own two pistols and covered the crowd.

AT ABOUT the time Welbin first turned toward Drago, Orin had just come in the front entrance of the Wheel and now stood behind the customers fringing the room. When the Ranger officer was disarmed and Drago drew, people moved fast to get out. Orin was pushed violently back out through the doorway to the shallow porch, where he froze for an instant, comprehending what had happened.

Then the boy spun on his toes and ran toward the Ranger station. At fifty paces

he nearly collided head on with the stranger.

"Captain Welbin—they've got him at the Wheel!" Orin gasped, and raced back toward the saloon, the stranger close behind.

At the entrance the man motioned Orin to stay back. Then he stepped carefully through the doorway.

Now the tall stranger was alone in the cleared space, barring exit to the outside.

Drago had started edging toward the door. The outlaw saw the stranger in the way, but he ordered Clevis to march Welbin out ahead of him, while he covered the move.

As Welbin started out, prodded in the back by both the gang member's pistol and his own, he seemed suddenly to see the stranger for the first time, and stopped. The two gazed intently at one another for an instant. The merest play of a smile came momentarily to the Ranger's face.

Drago was a little puzzled by the stand of the man in the long coat.

"Step aside, you!" the outlaw ordered.

The stranger did not move, but kept his eyes on Drago's. At that moment Welbin saw a third man moving up behind the stranger carrying a pistol butt-first. "Look out behind!" he yelled.

The stranger whirled in time to ward off a direct blow and tripped his assailant, who fell sprawling to the floor past Drago, his gun sliding out of reach.

Drago fired when the stranger turned his back to meet the attack from the rear. The heavy ball from the single-shot smoothbore ripped through the low-hanging coat tail and ricocheted off the floor into the wall.

Then a pause of three or four slow counts when there was no sound but breathing, and no person moved.

The stranger's voice was barely audible. "You've got one more shot left—in that other clumsy pistol of yours," he said. "If it makes any difference to you, I happen to be armed. Your move, brave man."

What happened then was all over in a few seconds; but the border country talked about it for years. Drago reached for his other gun. The stranger drew from his waistband and the shot from his strange-appearing weapon shattered the outlaw's gun hand. The man on the floor had nearly reached his pistol when another percussion cap exploded its charge in the stranger's gun, delivering a ball that sent the henchman's pistol spinning off across the room.

Clevis tried to shoot with the Ranger's pistol but Welbin knocked his arm up, sending the lead into the ceiling. The Ranger and Clevis went down in a struggle for the other gun. Drago seized a chair with his good hand and rushed the stranger, whose third shot sprayed the outlaw's face with splinters from the chair. The fourth ball smashed a whisky bottle on a table, as the man who had been on the floor tried to grab it for a weapon.

Welbin had taken the gun from Clevis and jerked him to his feet. The stranger ordered Drago and his other man to line up with the Ranger's prisoner. When Drago made no move to obey, he sent a fifth shot into the floor at the renegade's feet.

But Drago's fight was gone. He had just seen a miracle—*one pistol fire five times without reloading!*

And now the stranger drew another exactly like it.

San Borimo had just seen its first Colt revolvers in action.

RANGER Welbin returned to his quarters from the corral stable that served as guardhouse. The man who had been the stranger was drinking coffee Orin Tade had brought.

"The doc says Drago's hand'll be all right—in maybe a month or so," Welbin said. "I'm sending the three of them to headquarters in Bexar for trial. They'll be lucky if they get off with five years. By that time we'll either be a state of the Union or Mexican soil again."

The captain called to Orin for coffee, and sat down at the table.

"You know, Ambler, when I suddenly saw you standing there between Drago's gun and the door, I somehow figured you were from Colt. But I didn't know a factory man could handle any kind of a gun like that."

"I'm not from the factory," said Shelby Ambler, smiling his thanks to Orin for the second cup. "I was in New York and knew the shipper. Said he was looking for some man he could depend on to see the revolvers through to you personally. Seems that Samuel Colt was pretty particular they didn't fall into anyone else's hands. I took the job."

Orin Tade was so absorbed in this account that coffee was running out of the pot to the floor. "Orin!" said Captain Welbin.

"Aboard ship," Ambler went on, "I had plenty of leisure on my hands. I took the liberty of opening one of the cases, and by the time we got into the Gulf I was getting pretty fancy with a Colt. No one but me left ship at port, so you should be safe for long enough in keeping the guns under cover. I hope the incident at the Wheel won't tip your hand, Captain."

"Mighty fortunate for me you were there—and ready," said the Ranger, looking now at Orin Tade. "Orin," he said, "you understand our possession of these revolving pistols in quantity is a close secret. I think you know why."

"Yes, sir," said the boy.

"Way it is now," Ambler added, "I just couldn't believe in any other gun. You must have felt that way all along, Captain, or you wouldn't have ordered them."

"I didn't order them—exactly," Welbin said musingly. "But you might call it that.

"Three years ago I was in Washington with a Lone Star delegation to petition Congress for passage of a bill to admit the Republic into the Union. Sam Colt was there again, still trying to get the War Department to adopt his revolver. They'd been turning him down ever since '37. The few early guns he supplied the Army in the Seminole campaign were bought on Colonel Harney's own initiative.

"Well, I told Colt we'd sure like to have some of his revolvers down here. At least enough for one company. He didn't forget that. About six months ago I got word the shipment would be made. I've been looking forward to it like a kid to Christmas, ever since."

Orin poured a second cup for Captain Welbin. "Did Lieutenant Haskell know what was comin', Captain Steve?"

"He knew I was expecting something important. But he didn't know what it was. Right this minute, the three of us here are the only ones who know for sure."

Shelby Ambler spoke. "Do you want me to stay on a day or so, Captain, to show your men how to start these weapons off right? A Colt is a mighty different breed from what they're used to."

"I'm glad you offered that. I'd like to have you here from now on forward. But that's up to you."

"I think I'd like that," said Shelby Ambler.

ORIN TADE rapped softly on Captain Welbin's door. The captain had been asleep since late afternoon. At a muffled response the saddle boy called through the panel. "Nine o'clock, sir, like you said—an' I got a little supper here for you. Major Hall ought to be arrivin' from Bexar soon."

"Come in, Orin."

The boy set the tray on the table and started back toward the door. Halfway he halted, his face away from the Ranger.

"Captain Steve—if you move out against the Comanche with those new guns I—I just *got* to go along!"

Steve Welbin seemed a long time in answering. Then he said:

"Orin, I'd like to have you. No one better. And some day you will move out with the rest. But that isn't now. You'll not be the only one left behind. I'm sorry, but you can't go. That's my final word, and I want to hear no more on the matter. Now get out and fix a cot for Major Hall. We may have to sleep him here tonight."

Outside the low station wall several Rangers of the company squatted on their heels in the cube of yellow light from a window. Tade came out to tell them, "Captain Steve's had his sleep. Reckon you can make all the racket you want now."

"Good—but when do we move out? That's the kind o' noise I want," remarked McWain, a graying sergeant. Best hip shot in the company, the man slowly raised an outstretched hand, cocked the thumb and squinted along the index finger with elaborate show of careful aim. "If I ever ketch one o' them devils crossin' the sights o' my new revolvin'—"

The words were cut off abruptly by the frenzied barking of the station dogs, as the entire pack took off full speed into the night.

The sergeant let out a yip of delight that however died short in his throat. He had suddenly remembered something. "That'll be the Major, all right—and arrivin' per schedule, thanks be—but mebbe it ain't goin' t' get us started any sooner," he said, looking significantly at young Orin.

Tade knew what he meant. "Guess Cap-

tain Steve can bring Major Hall 'round to his way, likely," he said.

"That's as may be, lad," agreed McWain. "Now, me—I'm an old dog that can learn new tricks. But the Major, he don't take t' anythin' newfangled."

They listened to the rapidly receding clamor of the dogs. The sound trailed out almost to nothingness, then gradually grew in volume again as three horses and their riders took form out of the blackness.

Captain Welbin, wiping his mouth on a shirtsleeve, stepped out of the door to greet the arrivals.

Major Jason Hall swung down stiffly, handing the reins to Orin Tade. He was about Welbin's stature—something under medium height—dark-haired and dark of eye.

The major clapped hands over his ears to dampen the noise. "Captain Welbin! Do these filthy mongrels have to run wild around this station? Anybody'd think this was a stinking Comanche village instead of Ranger quarters!"

Captain Welbin was fully aware that he had an audience. An audience that wanted action against an enemy who was implacable. He said, "My apologies, Major, for your reception. As it happens, we intend to do some—dog shooting early tomorrow morning. Won't you come inside for some coffee?"

When Orin Tade had left the pot and cups and closed the door, Major Hall came right to it. "Now, then, Steve—what's all this about some revolving pistols? You know we haven't enough men to risk on an unproved weapon—"

"Unproved, Major? Don't forget I used it myself against the Seminoles in '38, along with other officers then. The revolving pistol is already proved in blood."

Major Hall gestured impatiently. "And did the Army ever come even close—then or since—to adopting this gimcrack as regulation? If it was any good, the revolving pistol would have been side-arm issue long before this, Steve!"

"I could talk all night about this," Welbin said with great deliberation, "but the weapon can speak eloquently for itself. I tell you it's exactly what we've needed right along! We haven't had a chance against fast repeated attacks by the savage—with clumsy, slow-loading arms!"

The Ranger captain stood up and carried his cup to the window, drinking from it slowly. Then he said. "Jason, I want your permission to move out tonight—yes, within an hour—armed with revolving pistols and the men's regular rifles, to reach within striking distance of Dead Man's Crossing before light. Somewhere near there we'll flush the Comanche band that two days ago put the fire on all five of the Hilton family. But we *must* go tonight!"

The major's face was a yellow mask in the lamplight. Then his mouth worked as the words formed behind his lips. "Do you mean—the men will leave their regular side arms here? You're asking me to let them go out there with weapons we haven't even used in combat!"

"They may also carry their old pistols if they wish," said Welbin calmly. "But I don't think they will. We've been test-firing and getting the feel of the new arms for nearly a week. No one knows we have these repeaters except my own men and Shelby Ambler, who brought in the shipment from the factory in Paterson. They'll take the revolving pistols, though the choice is theirs, since each man is paying for his own gun."

"But the responsibility's mine—and yours, too—if they're cut down!" the other man insisted. "Steve, you always were too damned sure of yourself."

Welbin came away from the window and stood at the table facing his superior. "I'll take all the responsibility," he said with cold finality.

"You know that's impossible," Major Hall said.

"Meanwhile," the captain said, "the night is slipping away. And tomorrow is the day to show the Comanche he is finished in Texas. My Tonkawa spies can't be far wrong. We're bound to jump the party we're looking for along the Nueces in the Pedernales country." He stepped over and opened the door to his quarters, pointing to the gun cases tiered at the foot of the bed.

"There, by the grace of Sam Colt, is the deliverance of Texas. They've already saved my skin. And the man who brought them is going out with us tonight. He's just as anxious as I am to prove that this is the answer to our problem."

Welbin raised the lid of the top case, took out one of the new revolvers and turned it

slowly under the gaze of Major Hall. "Every cylinder," the captain said intently, "including one extra for each pistol, is a perfect match for the other. Identical, interchangeable parts. Don't you see the tremendous advantage? Ten rounds for each gun, all loaded—and you can't get the cylinders mixed up in any kind of mêlée!"

Steve Welbin went to a chest of drawers and took out a flat polished mahogany box He came toward the major, lifting the hinged top to disclose a presentation pair of the new, caliber .34 revolvers and accessories snugly nested against the green velvet lining.

Smiling, he placed the box in Major Hall's hesitant hands.

"With my compliments and best wishes, sir . . . ." Welbin said.

ORIN TADE counted the riders: Captain Steve . . . Major Hall . . . Lieutenant Haskell . . . Sergeant McWain . . . Shelby Ambler, and the rest. Thirteen. The little column, headed southwest, plunged into the cavern of night.

The boy stole a glance at the face of the second lieutenant left in command. *Wonder what the lieutenant was thinking about? Sorry to be left behind—or glad? I know what I'm thinking. A year—maybe two—and then I can go on missions, Captain Steve said. Said I was working up to it now . . . . But I can't wait! Got to go tonight! I can follow so they won't know. I can take care of myself. Mustn't get caught, though. Captain Steve'd lay me out good! Mustn't get caught . . . .*

The Rangers were traveling fast now. Crowding the animals when the terrain permitted, and crowding again as the way reopened. A stop every two hours to rest men and mounts. And every hour the pace slackening. At the end they would go in at a slow walk.

At the four o'clock halt Major Hall motioned for the men to form around him. There were no secrets among them in this action.

"Captain Welbin has a rendezvous with our scout, Lomond, at Dead Man's Crossing. We will give him fifteen minutes, then follow to meet him there. Strategy will be worked out when we find where the enemy is encamped. I hardly need tell you this must be done before light."

The pecan trees were beginning to stir in the pre-dawn wind from the east. Down by the river a screech owl rasped out. Or was it a screech owl? Welbin had tied his mount yards back from his place for rendezvous, now approached it noiselessly.

There was someone in the deeper gloom of the trees. The Ranger was close now. And then suddenly he knew all was well. When the wind was toward you, there was no mistaking a white man for a Comanche—even when you couldn't see him.

But *two* figures crouched there. Welbin came close to the faces. "Orin Tade!" he whispered.

"Found him sneakin' along th' river bank," Lomond said, barely audibly. "Lucky I didn't throw a knife into 'im or he didn't jump up a Comanche scout."

Captain Welbin whispered, "Orin, you belly into the dirt right in this spot until you're sent for—if that's a week! I'm disappointed, Orin."

The Ranger captain listened to the scout's intelligence with a surging elation. The Indians they sought were encamped in the low hills three miles across the shallow river. The Comanche numbered close to eighty. Lomond had trailed them for two days. Blood of the Hilton family was still upon them.

A plan formed in Welbin's mind quickly. He had thought about such an action for a long time. Jason Hall would agree to it, he felt certain. Nine men under the major would cross the river farther downstream in the darkness and conceal themselves at the south end of the hills. Five, including himself, Lomond and Shelby Ambler, would wait for the light and splash across the stream in full view of possible Comanche sentries.

This was the bait. It should prove tempting enough to draw the Indians out of the higher terrain. The object was to get them committed to an attack on the handful of Rangers along the river bank. The Comanche could then come at them with advantage only from the dry land side. The Ranger captain also knew there was a deep cutbank on the east side of the stream. When the Indians showed themselves it would be their promise of immediate fight.

At this point a single shot from Captain Welbin would be the signal for the balance of the Rangers to come out fast from the

sheltering side of the hills and join the advance party. Welbin was counting strongly on a dependable Comanche trait—when the white man was hopelessly outnumbered, the entire wolf pack would be in ravenously for the kill.

Captain Steve wanted all of the pack there today.

The low, black outline of the land loomed against the faintest tingeing of gray in the east as Captain Welbin finished the instructions approved by Major Hall. "—remember, rifles first. Shoot when you know it's going to count. When they come back they'll expect single-shot pistol fire. Give them one round. When they come on again, expecting reloading and not bullets—give them *revolver* fire!

"And keep on giving it to them! Because the Comanche we meet today will not learn his mistake until it's too late. But this is the lesson his nation must not forget. It *must* be decisive! What happens today may save many future lives . . . both red and white."

YOU could see the Comanche coming. He was taking his time . . . arrogant, overweening in his flouted strength. Then there was something Orin Tade could see, but Captain Welbin could not from the river bank. The Indians were splitting forces. Twenty or thirty, concealed by the lower ridges, filed down out of sight into the draws. There they would wait. They would wait until the Rangers turned back in flight from the main body. Then they would come out to head them off, into the trap between.

Welbin took a long signal shot that missed the leading enemy horseman. Instantly the five white men wheeled about and sped back along the stream bank toward the alerted reinforcing party of their comrades, not yet visible. This flushed the reserve Comanche band, which converged on the Rangers along a sharp-angled tangent from the savages' hiding place.

The race was close to heartbreak. The Indians' flanking movement was an arrow at the Ranger back. Then, when surely it seemed they could not, Major Hall and his eight men joined headlong with Welbin in a great cloud of dust.

As it drifted away you could see how things were going to be. The Rangers were pulling their mounts down on their sides in the sand under the cutbank. Two men were in trouble getting their horses down. The Ranger rifles crashed, almost as one. As the naked Comanche swept past, loosing feathered arrow and lance, he rode over his own dead.

One of the two unprotected Rangers was down now, Lieutenant Haskell, lanced through a shoulder and pinned beneath his mount, which lay kicking futilely with last life. The other, Sergeant McWain, a shaft through his throat, pitched forward slowly and dropped face down in the brown water. The dying man's horse stood bewildered in the gentle current of the river, whinnying shrilly in the sudden lull.

The Comanche cloud whirled and circled back like a gigantic tumbleweed, carried by the wind of hate. It was shrieking again now and rolling once more along the river bank. This was the time for single-shot fire, and it was good shooting. But in this second pause a third Ranger lay sprawled behind his arrowed horse in the awkward pose of abrupt death.

The cloud drifted on down the river and the tawny riders sprang out from it sharply and to the left now, converging swiftly into a charge that would strive to grind Ranger flesh into the earth.

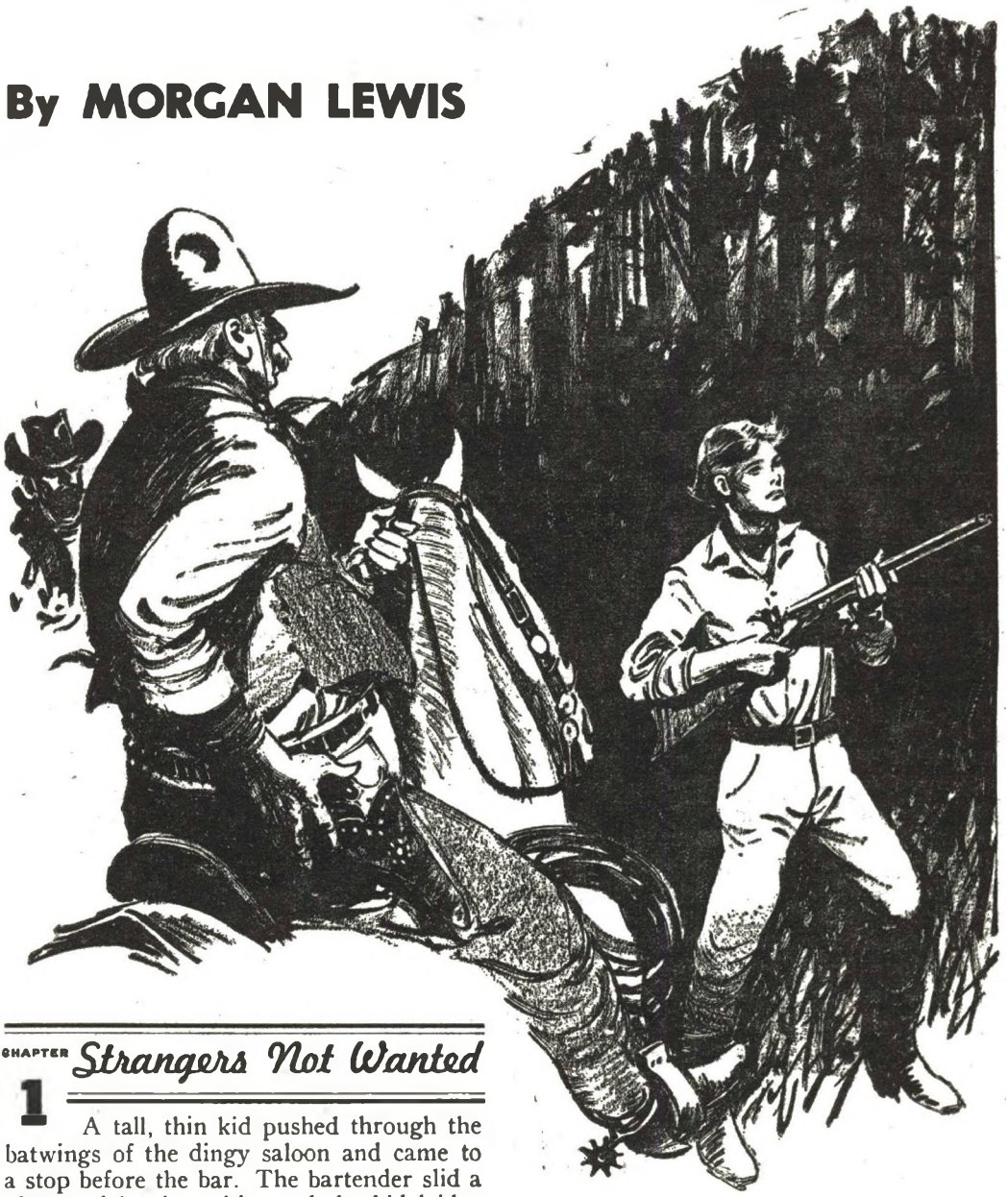
Annihilation! The pitch, the intensity of the warrior battle cry told their exultant blood lust.

How can you tell of such a thing? How find words to describe surprise death as it struck them down so bitterly? Shot through from groin to skull as they rode off the bank over the Rangers' hell fire. Shot in the spine as their screaming ponies thrashed in the water, agony torn. Shot through the head to choke short the beast snarl—silence forever a brave victory paean. Now thirty-three out of eighty in a ghost war party. Massacre? Yes—but no more than the foe often had meted! And a far quicker death . . . .

And, like thunder after lightning, the echo of revolving pistol fire on the Nueces that day in 1844 reverberated across the plains and was heard by Comanche, Tawakoni, Lipan and Apache alike. The white man had fast death in both hands. A gun of unrelenting doom that made one the equal of many.

★ TALL, TOUGH

By MORGAN LEWIS



CHAPTER 1 Strangers Not Wanted

A tall, thin kid pushed through the batwings of the dingy saloon and came to a stop before the bar. The bartender slid a glass and bottle to him and the kid laid a silver dollar on the bar top and poured a drink.

Down at the end of the bar a heavy-set man with iron-gray hair was talking to a wizened, bowlegged puncher.

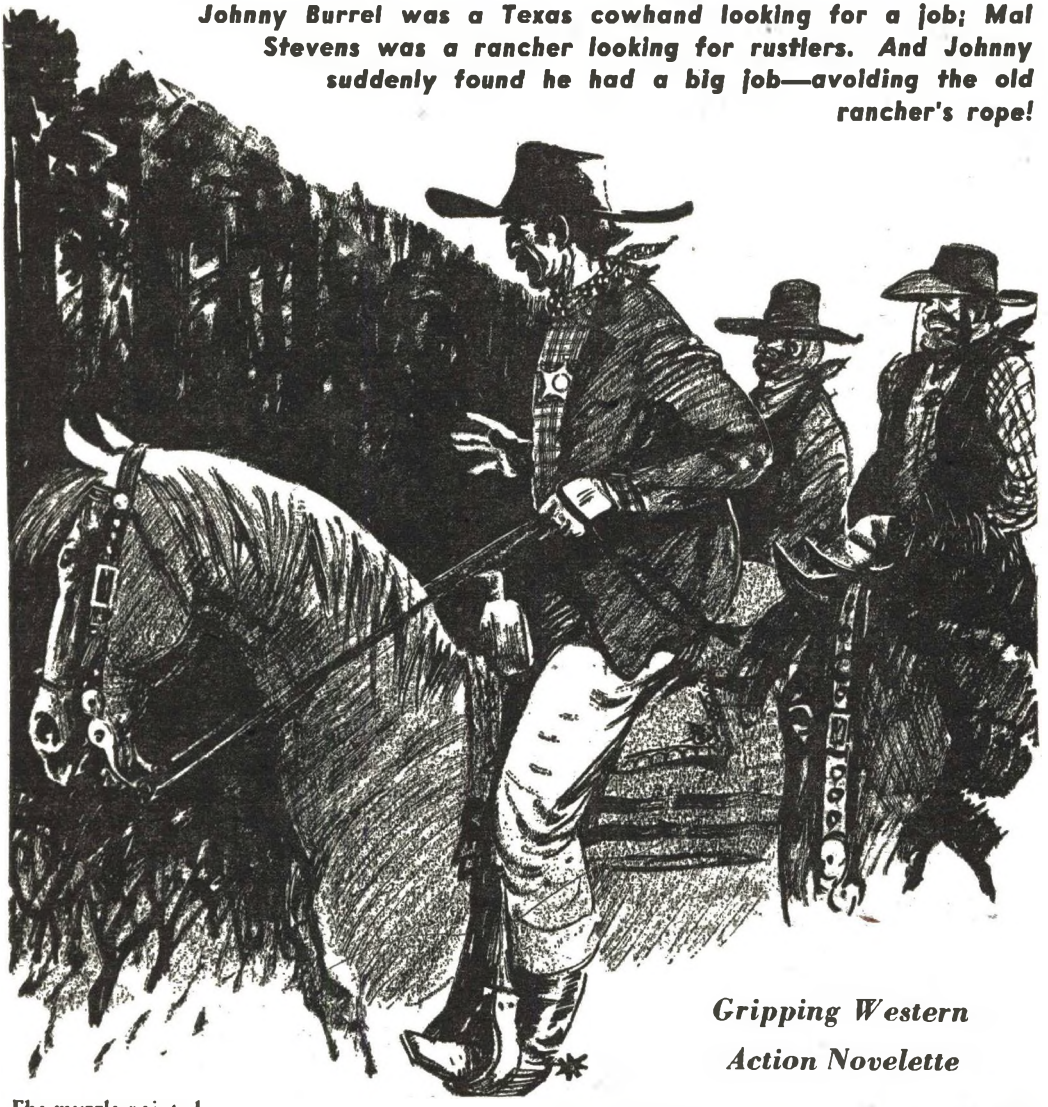
The bartender put the kid's change on the bar.

"Who's that?" The tall kid jerked his head at the two men.

"You must be new," the bartender ob-

AN' TEXAN ★

Johnny Burrel was a Texas cowhand looking for a job; Mal Stevens was a rancher looking for rustlers. And Johnny suddenly found he had a big job—avoiding the old rancher's rope!



Gripping Western Action Novelette

The muzzle pointed at Babson's belly.

served. "That's Mal Stevens, owner of Quarter Circle S, and his ramrod, Gus Ivey."

The kid picked up his drink and walked down to the two men. Mal Stevens broke off his talk and the two stared at the kid without friendliness.

"Mister," said the kid, directing his talk to Mal Stevens, "I'm lookin' for a job. You need another hand out at your ranch?"

Mal Stevens was by nature a kindly man but events were crowding him and he had no time to waste on an unknown, fiddle-footed kid. "See me when you've done growin'," he said bruskly, and turned his attention to Ivey.

The kid stood silent for a space before he remarked matter-of-factly, "I reckon I've quit growin'. I'm most twenty."

Stevens shot a glance from under heavy brows to see if he was being hoorawed but

the kid's long face was perfectly serious. "You from around these parts?"

The kid shook his head. "I come from down-trail—Texas."

"We don't like strangers around here," Stevens said pointedly, and poured himself a drink.

The kid hung irresolute; the five silver dollars in his pocket were heavy but they wouldn't take him far. He needed a job bad. "We'll always be strangers," he said, "if you act thataway."

His face was still long and serious but this time Stevens was sure his leg was being pulled. Red crept into his jowls.

"We hire only tophands on Quarter Circle S," he said with finality. He finished his drink and tramped from the barroom. Gus Ivey gave the boy a long, frosty look and followed his boss through the batwings.

The tall kid turned back to the bar. "Friendly, ain't they?"

The bartender spread his palms on the bar's smooth top. "What's your name, son?"

"Johnny—Johnny Burrel."

The man poured a drink and shoved it to him. "Here's one on the house and I'll give you a little advice to go with it. You get on your horse and ride back to Texas where you come from. All hell is due to bust loose around here and it ain't no place for a stranger to go wanderin' around."

Johnny tossed down his drink and shuddered. "Meanin' what?"

"Some slick gents has been throwin' a wide loop," the bartender said, "and they ain't too particular whose cattle it catches." He paused. "That's why it ain't healthy for strangers."

"Shucks," Johnny said, "I never stole no cattle."

"Maybe not, but if any of these cattlemen was to catch you rammin' around the country you'd have to prove it—if you aimed to stay healthy."

Johnny jingled the few dollars in his pocket. If he left this high north country now and went back down-trail it meant riding the grubline. Outside, the spring sunlight was bright and warm; soon it would be round-up time and the ranchers would be taking on hands. "I reckon I'll stay," he said.

The bartender shrugged resignedly and reached for a cigar. "It's fellers like you," he observed, "that keep time from draggin'."

Johnny grinned and went out.

CROW FORKS was a sad and dismal collection of some two dozen buildings sagging on either side of a rutted, dirt road. It took Johnny less than half an hour to make a tour of the town and decide there was no job here. He came back to his horse, finally.

"Major," he said, "we got to travel around this country, hittin' one outfit after another, 'till we get somebody to give us a job."

Major rolled a jaundiced eye and shifted his weight to the other hip. In his day he had been a top cowpony, but that day was far behind him. Now he was gaunt and sour from age and hard work, and his viewpoint was all on the dark side of life. Johnny's outfit was wrapped in a tattered slicker and lashed to the back of the battered saddle.

Johnny put a foot to stirrup and swung aboard, avoiding the shotgun stuck in the rifle boot. Then he rode out at the north end of town.

The road climbed almost imperceptibly, traveling up to a high and windy upland where it gradually lost itself in rank grass. Johnny shoved straight ahead for the purple hills that rose on the outmost rim of vision.

He stopped by a stream when the sun was straight overhead. He took the shotgun and used one shell to knock over a rabbit. He cooked it over a small fire and ate half, wrapping up the rest for supper.

Major continued to graze while Johnny had his after-dinner smoke, and then they were traveling again towards the purple hills.

By nightfall the country had become much rougher, the rolling land cut and gashed by ravines and dry gulches. Further on, it began to rise in a series of benches to the hills and Johnny judged it might be good country to winter cattle in but it sure would be hell to work at round-up time.

He camped by the side of a little stream, ate his cold rabbit and rolled up in a blanket with the tattered slicker under him to keep out the damp.

He didn't bother to tether Major. To the cross-grained old horse, one place was

as bad as another—so why waste energy running away?

Johnny slept peacefully until something hard jammed him in the ribs. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes—and saw two leather-faced waddies watching him. One was astride a horse and the other was standing a few feet from Johnny's bedroll. In the gray light the trees along the stream looked weird and ghostly and there was an early morning chill in the air.

"What's your business and where you headed?" the man on the ground asked.

Johnny stretched and stood up. "Lookin' for work," he answered.

The two waddies looked at each other for a moment and then the man on the horse said, "You'd better come along with us—it might be the boss could use another hand."

"Sure thing," Johnny said with alacrity and bent over his bedroll. As he was making it up and lashing it behind the saddle, he noticed the two men watching him closely. When he was mounted and again riding north a waddie fell in on either side of him and he began to suspect that they would have brought him along, willing or not.

The two men were not inclined to talk, and after a couple of tries Johnny kept silent. The bartender's talk returned to him and he wondered if he had fallen in with some of the wide-loop artists.

They came to an upgrade and Major fell into his natural gait, a walk. As they climbed, the sun slid up into the sky, and when they topped the rise the brightness of a new day was all around them.

Johnny pulled up to give Major a breather. Before them the sloping ground ran down into a green bowl-like valley, and sprawled in the center was a collection of ranch buildings.

The men fiddled impatiently in their saddles until Major's sides ceased their bellows-like movement. They started down and Johnny saw a rider coming hell-for-leather from the hills on the other side. The rider pulled up his horse in a swirl of dust before the bunkhouse. A minute later figures were swarming around him. A man came striding from the big house and joined the group.

The waddie on Johnny's right grunted, "Must be somethin' up." He touched spurs to his horse.

THEY came through a gateway onto the hard-trampled dirt of the ranch yard and drew rein beside the group of men. A heavy set man in the center made a half turn to face them and Johnny recognized Mal Stevens.

The waddie on his right swung down and walked over to the ranchman. Johnny heard him say, "We found him camped across Pearl Creek—"

Mal Stevens listened and then came up to Johnny. He frowned up at the tall kid for a moment and then his face cleared. "I remember," he said. "You're the fresh kid that hit me up for a job." The frown came back to his face. "What are you doing on my range?"

"Still lookin' for a job," Johnny told him.

Stevens' eyes bored into Johnny and his voice became stern. "You'll have to do better than that. One of my hands was shot and killed last night. . . ."

Johnny felt the muscles of his face tighten. "It couldn'ta been me did it," he protested. "I don't pack a gun."

A red-faced, dust-grimed waddie pushed forward. "Lonny wasn't shot with a hogleg," he said, grief and a hard anger in his voice. "Some lowdown skunk got him from behind with a scattergun." He reached up and dragged Johnny's shotgun from its boot. He snapped it open and a spent shell dropped out.

An ominous silence settled on the crew of Quarter Circle S.

Johnny felt uneasy. "I used that shell to shoot a rabbit," he said, and his voice sounded strange in his ears.

The red-faced waddie holding the gun gave him a hard, close look. "And didn't even take time to reload?" he inquired sceptically.

Johnny shook his head. "Shells are too hard to come by. I never put in a fresh one 'till I aim to use it."

"To shoot another cowpoke in the back?" the waddie inquired grimly.

The bowlegged ramrod, Gus Ivey, squirted a stream of tobacco juice at the ground. "A length of rope will cure him of that habit."

Johnny rubbed moist palms on his levis. "These two fellers that brought me in will tell you that I was camped the other side of the creek." He swung his gaze to Mal

Stevens. "You know I was in Crow Forks yesterday morning." He let his eyes drift around the circle and come to rest on the red-faced waddie holding the shotgun. "It took me all day to get to where I camped—how could I have shot your sidekick?"

The waddie thought a moment. "You coulda gone out and shot Lonny and had time to get back to the creek. How do we know which way you was headin'?"

"Hold on a minute," Mal Stevens said gravely. "We don't want to go off half-cocked. How far out was Lonny when you found him, Curley?"

" 'Bout ten miles north," the waddie with the shotgun answered.

"Ten miles," mused Stevens, "and five miles to the creek makes fifteen. That'd be thirty miles round trip." He swung to one of the waddies who had brought Johnny in. "You reckon he coulda done it, Jim?"

"He could of," Jim said, "if he'd had a decent horse. But with that bag of bones—" he eyed Major and shook his head—"I reck not."

Johnny felt the tightness leave his body; he drew a long breath and dragged a sleeve across his forehead.

Stevens looked at the waddie who had taken Johnny's shotgun. "That satisfy you, Curley?"

But Curley was only partly convinced. "Whoever shot Lonny," he said, "took his fancy gun. You mind if I look through your bedroll?" he asked Johnny.

"Help yourself," Johnny said and stepped from the saddle. He unlashed the roll and threw it on the ground.

Curley bent over and carefully went through its meager contents. He straightened up at last. "I reckon you're all right," he said heavily and shoved the shotgun into Johnny's hands. He pulled off his hat and slowly mopped his bald pate with a big bandanna.

As Johnny was repacking his bedroll, Mal Stevens stepped up to him. "I don't reckon you shot Lonny," he said, "but it's damn funny how you happened to come straight out here. Whoever done the shootin' run off a bunch of my cow critters. I aim to take their trail. You better come along so's I can keep an eye on you 'till we get this cleaned up."

Stevens swung around to the two waddies who had brought Johnny in. "Jim, you and Idaho go on up to the house and get some breakfast. Soon as you're finished we'll get started." He turned back to Johnny. "You might as well go along with 'em. No sense in you starvin'."

Johnny followed them up to the rambling white house and into the built-on kitchen at the end. It was a big room with a huge wood stove backed against one wall and beside it the pump and sink. A long table ran down the center of the rom with chairs scattered about it. At the opposite end was a big wooden dresser holding plates, cups and saucers.

Cooking utensils were hung on nails driven into the wall behind the stove and ther was a warm, pleasant odor of food in the air.

As Johnny went in, a girl, about a year or so younger than he, turned from the stove. The heat had put deep pink into her cheeks and her eyes were a deep gray. Her hair was light and curled about her forehead. Johnny suddenly knew with a mighty leap of his heart that here was the one place above all others where he wanted to work.

"Allie," Jim said, "this here is—" he broke off and turned to Johnny. "Say, what *is* your name?"

Johnny kept his eyes on the girl's face. "Johnny Burrel—from Texas."

She gave Johnny a wide-eyed, appraising look and turned back to the stove as though satisfied with what she had seen.

"You can wash up at the sink," she directed, "and sit down. There are plenty of flapjacks left."

Johnny took his turn with the basin and roller towel. He slicked back his hair with water and a comb he found in a rack beneath the mirror, and sat down next to Jim. Allie put a platter of flapjacks on the table and poured cups of black coffee.

Johnny stacked flapjacks on his plate and reached for the molasses.

CHAPTER 2 Roaring Creek

Fifteen minutes later he shoved back his chair to tailor a smoke, a sense of well-being filling him. It had been many days since he had eaten a meal like that.

Allie regarded his empty plate with an expression of satisfaction and smiled at him. Johnny grinned back at her and took the

first drag of his cigarette. Right then he wouldn't have traded places with anyone. Somehow, he just had to get Mal Stevens to hire him.

The cowpuncher called Jim wiped his mouth and stood up. He spoke for the first time since the meal had started. "Time to go. The boss'll be waitin'."

Johnny got reluctantly to his feet. "That was a right good meal," he said by way of thanks.

"Glad you like it," Allie replied. "Did Pop hire you?"

Johnny shook his head and his sense of well-being evaporated. "No," he said dejectedly. "He says I'm a fiddle-footed kid."

Allie's eyes crinkled faintly at the corners. "I don't know about your being fiddle-footed but you look tall and tough enough to me."

"I wish your pop thought so," Johnny said, and followed Jim and Idaho outside.

Down at the corral, Mal Stevens and Curley were already mounted and waiting. Johnny climbed onto Major's back. Jim and Idaho led out their horses and swung up.

Mal Stevens kneed his bay gelding over beside Johnny's mount. "The way things is now," he said, "you'll have to stick with us 'till we find out if you're tied up with these wide-loop boys or not. When we catch up with them, if they give you a clean bill of sale, you'll be free to ride on."

Johnny nodded soberly and fell in behind Stevens as he wheeled the gelding and rode out. *It was the hell of a note,* he thought, *to have his life depend on the word of a rustler.*

Mal Stevens headed for a long, black ridge that thrust sharply into the grass land. Behind it the hills rose darkly, fold on fold.

Curley had fallen in beside Johnny and now he raised his hand and pointed to where the tip end of the ridge merged into the level land. "That's where I found Lonny," he said. "Him and me was sidekicks —worked together the last ten years." He looked sideways at Johnny. "You can't blame me for suspectin' you when I first seen that shotgun."

Johnny nodded. "I reckon it did look bad at first."

"Sure it did," Curley said as though to justify himself. "About that gun of Lonny's" he continued. "He won it at a shootin' match across the mountains and it sure was a beauty. Was Lonny proud of it!" He shook his head. "It was a double-action Colt .45 with a solid pearl handle and it hung as nice as anything you'd want to see." He sighed. "Lonny promised it to me if anything happened to him."

They forded a shallow, swiftly flowing stream and Major got into difficulties, having trouble making his legs behave in the swift current.

Stevens and the others waited on the opposite bank while Johnny carefully worked the old horse across. He reached the idle backwash at the edge and Major splashed through and came up the bank snorting.

Stevens gave him a disapproving look before he touched his bay with the spur and again led off. They rode over rough country to the tip of the ridge.

Curley swung down and pointed to a heap of rocks. "I didn't have no shovel when I found him—so I done the best I could." He unlashed a shovel from his saddle and set to work to dig a grave.

While Jim and Idaho rode out seeking the trail of the rustled cattle, Johnny dismounted and spelled Curley with the shovel. When a grave had ben scooped out, they took the rocks from Lonny and laid him in it. Curley covered him with a blanket and they shoveled the dirt back in and heaped rocks over the mound.

Mal Stevens sat his bay, watching, with a face as hard and cold as granite.

Curley laid the shovel beside the fresh grave and straightened to wipe the sweat from his face. "I'll pick it up on the way back," he said.

Jim rode over and pulled in beside Stevens. "We found the trail. It leads straight back into the hills. Idaho's stickin' with it."

THEY came upon Idaho sitting his horse impatiently across the trail. He pointed ahead to a gap in the swelling bulge of hills that reared blackly.

"They went through there," Idaho said. "There was three men drivin'."

Mal Stevens moved up beside him and squinted up the grade. "That'll slow 'em down."

The trail led upwards, becoming fainter as it climbed onto hard and rocky ground. They came into the gap and the hills rolled back on either side, steep and timbered.

Curley, riding in the rear with Johnny, muttered, "Looks like a good place for a bushwhack trap."

Here in the gap the signs faded out altogether; but no cattle could have gone far up those steep, brush-lined sides, so they must be ahead.

The upgrade bothered Major and, when the trail dipped for the descent on the other side, Johnny let him stop for a breather. Mal Stevens pulled his bay to one side. He said nothing but waited with black impatience on his face.

Johnny gave him one swift glance and knew he was farther than ever from landing a job with the outfit. The thought depressed him. He had seen enough to know that Stevens was a good man to work for. His crew liked and respected him, and he treated them with consideration and a friendly equality. The picture of the big, homelike kitchen and Allie returned to him. He kicked Major dejectedly in the ribs and followed down the sloping trail.

Occasionally, on patches of bare ground, they could see cattle tracks, but for the most part the descent was hard and stony. They rounded a bulge of rock and saw the ground fall away into a green, rolling valley some miles in extent with a stand of willow and cottonwood down the center. In open spaces between the trees was the distant flash of water.

"Roarin' Creek," Curley observed. He eyed Major and grinned. "You'll need a boat to get *him* across."

The little band rode down into the valley. Idaho suddenly pulled up and pointed to the ground. The rest bunched up behind and Johnny could see where the tracks of another herd joined the ones they were following.

Mal Stevens drew a little apart with Idaho and the two talked in low tones. Curley shifted his weight in the saddle and gazed down valley. "This here stretch," he said, "curves around this hump we just come over and lets out into Cross T range. It looks like these rustlers split up last night and some of 'em rounded up Cross T cattle while the rest was payin' us a visit."

Johnny studied the ground. "The bunch we're trailin' came along after the Cross T bunch," he said. "You can see where the tracks overlap."

Mal Stevens and Idaho walked their horses over to the riders. "There's five or six men ahead of us," Stevens said, his face grim, "maybe more. If we go for help they'll be out of reach when we get back. I'm for goin' ahead just like we are. Idaho says the tracks are so fresh they can't be much beyond Roaring Creek."

Jim's leathery brown face remained impassive. "Suits me."

"Let's get goin'!" Curley said savagely. "I want to get a shot at the bushwhackin' hombre that did for Lonny."

Stevens let his hard gaze rest on Johnny. "Curley will be alongside you," he warned. "If you try any tricks—you'll be in trouble." He wheeled the bay and rode straight for Roaring Creek.

Johny rode in the dust cloud kicked up by the horses ahead and for the first time he felt a stirring of anger against Mal Stevens. This was a free country; what right did this rancher have to brand him a rustler just because he happened to blunder onto his range?

Stevens was setting a fast pace and Johnny wondered if Major would last until they reached the creek. He felt sorry for the beating the old horse was taking.

Curley rode stirrup to stirrup with him and, despite his apparent friendliness, his hand never strayed far from his Colt.

A mile further on he saw the cattle tracks swing off to the right but Stevens held straight ahead.

Johnny swung his hand towards the tracks. "He's leavin' the trail," he said to Curley above the hammer of hoofs.

Curley shook his head. "Don't make no difference. There ain't but one trail out of this end of the valley and they've got to cross the creek to get to it."

Major was beginning to play out fast. He stumbled once or twice and his old sides were heaving. At the end of another mile, Stevens pulled up at the fringe of wood that bordered the creek. Johnny stepped from the saddle and ran his hand down the old horse's neck as Major stood with head dropped low to the ground, dead beat.

Mal Stevens looked at the horse, his face inscrutable. He rode over to Curley and spoke to him in a low tone. Curley nodded. Then Stevens signaled to Jim and Idaho. The three rode into the strip of woodland that screened Roaring Creek, leaving Curley with Johnny.

"Ain't you goin' with them?" Johnny asked in surprise.

Curley shook his head. "The river's too deep and swift right here for that crowbait of yours. The boss wants us to go on up and hit the ford."

CURLEY and Johnny started up along the strip of woods, Curley riding and Johnny walking with the reins looped over his shoulder, and Major plodding behind him. Off to the left they could hear the others going through the creek and then the pound of hoofs on dry ground. The sounds paralleled their own line of march on the other side of the creek, drawing ahead of them.

Suddenly the sounds stopped in a flurry of hoofs as though the horses had been abruptly reined in. Johnny heard voices, sharp and short.

Curley stopped his horse short and his face was suddenly hard and purposeful. "I reckon they've come up with 'em," he said. "Can you swim?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Then I reckon you'll stay here," Curley said. "The ford's a good ten miles up and you can't go far on that cripple."

He touched spurs to his horse and disappeared among the trees.

Johnny stood there after Curley had gone, with Major's labored breathing loud in his ears. It must be pretty serious to make Curley disregard orders and leave him. He could hear Curley's horse as it went into the river but there were no sounds from the other side.

That was queer; if they had come up with the rustlers there ought to be shooting—unless the rustlers had got the drop on them. It couldn't be the other way around, for Stevens and his crew were outnumbered two to one. Curley would be a help, if he didn't ride straight into a trap.

Johnny paced back and forth with short, jerky steps. His anger was evaporating before a feeling of concern. Allie was waiting back there in the big kitchen. It would break her all up if her pop didn't come back.

Now that Stevens and his crew were in danger, Johnny found that he had a friendly feeling for them. He reckoned that the way things lay, Stevens had treated him pretty white. He could have tied him up and lugged him back to jail in Crow Forks, to be held until this rustling business had been cleaned up.

He paused beside Major and pulled shotgun shells from his bedroll. "If nobody will hire me," he told the horse, "I reckon I'll give myself a job." He tore off a piece of the ragged old slicker and put the shells into it, tying up the ends into a water-tight pouch.

He shoved it inside his shirt, took the shotgun from the boot and ran through the cottonwoods to Roaring Creek.

He paused for a moment before wading in over the shelving bank. The creek wasn't over fifty feet wide but, swollen by spring rains, it rolled dark and smooth, save where water boiled whitely over surface rocks.

He went in and the ice-cold water surged around his legs, torturing his feet into cramps that shot clear to his hips. That was the river's first trick.

Johnny set his jaw and waded out into the current. The water rose past his knees and its chill went through his entire body. That river was born in the mountains and the icy coldness of springs was in it. Twenty feet from shore, when the water reached his hips, he realized for the first time the tremendous force of the river.

It pushed at him with a dark power that was like a live thing. He had edged out facing upstream, but now the force of the current swung him sideways to it and the pressure lessened.

Holding the shotgun shoulder high, he forced out into the increasing depth, and the icy ripples about his middle checked the breath in his lungs like a blow under the heart. The river was really opening its bag of tricks now.

The cramps had left his feet and a numbness was creeping up his legs; he braced himself to get his breath and the current tore the sand from beneath his feet. Johnny wasn't used to water and a panicky fear began to rise in him. He gripped the gun and lurched ahead, breathing in short, hard gasps.

He reached the middle and the pressure of that living wall of water was almost more than he could stand. Braced slantwise against it, his body vibrated like a taut bow string. It was up to his armpits now, curling into white ripples where it struck his body, a vicious, living power that strove unceasingly to sweep him from his feet.

He took a step forward and the river, with malignant cunning, placed a hole for his struggling feet.

Johnny went down, and the shock of the icy water over his head drove all thought from his mind. In blind, unreasoning panic, he was picked up and hurled downstream. He swallowed water and then his head came out into the air. At the same time his feet touched an elevation in the river bed and he was able to stand.

For a long moment he was only able to brace himself against the pull while he blew the water from mouth and nose. He was past the middle now and the other bank didn't seem too far away. He started edging for it and felt the ground begin to rise under his feet.

CHAPTER 3 Somebody's Sixgun

When at last he got his breath and staggered up the bank, the first thing he did was break the gun, to see if the barrel was clear, and slip in shells. Then he started moving up through the trees, his soaked clothing sticking tight to his angular body and his boots squishing at every step. His body felt on fire after its icy bath and needle points of flame pricked at his legs.

A hundred feet further on he heard voices and worked his way through the underbrush with more caution. With the voices to guide him he finally came to a stop behind a clump of young growth. Before him. Mal Stevens and his crew faced six mounted men. One of them, slightly in advance, was talking. Johnny saw a star badge pinned to his shirt.

He was a big man with a smooth, reddish brown face and a nose that curved like a beak. He had evidently been arguing with Stevens, for his face looked grim and angry. Stevens was staring at him with his jaw set like granite.

"It looks bad, Stevens," the man with the badge was saying, "to find you and your crew here with Cross T stock."

"Look here, Babson," Stevens said with angry impatience, "I've just told you we were trailing a bunch of our own stock. The sooner you quit this damn foolishness and get after the man who stole these herds the sooner you'll break up the rustlin' that's been goin' on around here!"

Johnny let his eyes drift to the men backing the big sheriff. They were a hard-case crew if he had ever seen one and they were eying Stevens and his men with a hard impatience, as though all this talk served no purpose at all.

The chill of the river was still in Johnny's bones and he shivered and set his teeth to keep them from chattering.

Babson rubbed big fingers over his lean jaw. "That may be so," he said with a show of reasonableness. He paused, "But it's an old trick, driving a bunch of your own stock across a trail to blot it. . . ."

Johnny took a deep breath and felt some of the tension leave him. These men weren't rustlers — they were a sheriff's posse. Even if Stevens gave himself up and went back to Crow Forks with them, he would be able to clear himself. There wasn't much chance that Babson could make a rustling charge stick, not after Lonny had been killed trying to save the herd.

Stevens' heavy jowls purpled with anger. "Keep a curb on your tongue, Babson," he warned. "I never stole any man's cattle!"

Curley and the rest of the crew were ranged behind Stevens, their faces carefully expressionless but their eyes alert and watchful.

Babson shrugged. "Here's your cattle mixed in with Cross T stock," he pointed to the upper end of the valley "and all of them headed for the hills. There's no sign of any rustlers—just you and your crew. What am I goin' to think?"

He let his eyes range over the faces of the Quarter Circle S crew as though seeking their understanding. "You can see how things are," he said gravely. "I've got to take you in. If you can prove you're innocent, we'll come back here and trail those rustlers from hell to breakfast!"

That's fair enough, Johnny reasoned, standing behind the brush. If he believes what he's sayin' he's only doin' what he's got to do.

Babson was wearing a corduroy coat, unbuttoned and with the right side swung back behind his gun handle, but he made no move towards it as he kneed his horse closer to Stevens.

"You'll have to give me your hardware," he said, not threatening but as a matter of fact. His hat was shoved back and the sun was shining full on his smooth, serious face.

One of the men behind him slid a hand to his gun butt and Babson caught the move from the tail of his eye. He jerked his head around to face the man. "None of that, Luke" he said sharply. "There'll be no shootin'! Mal and his crew will give up their guns peaceable and go back to town with us."

The man dropped his hand from his hip and Babson turned back to Stevens. He held out his hand. "Give me your gun, Mal."

Stevens loked at him for a long moment of absolute silence. His eyes drifted from Babson to range along the hard-case crew lined up in back of the sheriff, and his face became bleak.

"I reckon," he said grudgingly, "there's no other way out." His hand moved slowly to his hip.

THE two cow ponies were about three feet apart and Babson leaned sideways in his saddle to span the distance. As he did so, his coat hiked up on the left side—the side away from Stevens—and something gleamed, bright and iridescent in the hot sunlight.

For a split second Johnny stared at it uncomprehendingly, then his breath caught in his chest as full realization shocked him like a dash of cold water in his face.

"Don't do it!" he yelled and crashed forward through the 'brush.

The men, cowpokes and posse alike, stiffened in startled attention. Mal Stevens froze with his hand almost to his gun. Babson jerked around in the saddle, his eyes wild and keen as a hawk's.

Johnny kicked through the last of the brush. He stepped into the clear, the shotgun cradled in his arm. The muzzle pointed directly at Babson's belly.

Johnny was playing with death, not only for himself, but for the ranch crew as well. If a man on either side got jittery and went for his gun, hell would be loose on a holiday.

"Don't make a move for your shootin' irons," he warned the crew in a tight voice, " 'less you want your boss filled full of buckshot!"

Babson looked once into the shotgun's muzzle. He shuttled his gaze to Stevens. "Call him off," he said sharply, "or you'll be in bad trouble!"

"Drop that gun," Stevens ordered curtly, his face dark and drawn. "We don't fight the law!"

But Johnny shook his head slightly and kept the gun trained on Babson. Then Johnny called to Curley, "Get off your horse, Curley. Come over here!"

Curley hesitated. He looked at Stevens, and he swung down.

Johnny heard him approaching. "Go behind me!" Johny said. Curley circled around and came up on Johnny's right side. Johnny kept his gaze on Babson, watching the posse from the corner of his eyes.

"Lift up the sheriff's coat—" Johnny told Curley. "See what you find."

Curley knew his business. He came up to Babson from the back. He reached out his arm and pulled up the coat. For one instant, he stared at the gun as sunlight gleamed on the pearl handle. He ripped out a startled oath and yanked it from the holster. His voice was unbelieving. "By dam'—it's Lonny's!"

Babson sat his saddle like an iron man. The muscles pulled along his reddish jaw and, just once, his hands twitched. Johnny raised his gun muzzle slightly and the sheriff locked both hands around the horn.

Curley circled Johnny and brought up alongside Stevens' horse. "It's Lonny's, sure enough," he said to Stevens. He held up the gun. "You can see his name on the barrel."

Mal Stevens lifted his gaze from the gun to Babson and there was a stern, ominous quality in his voice. "How did you get that gun?"

Babson hesitated before he answered. "I don't aim to talk with that scattergun held on me," he said coolly. "You boys is headin' for a pack of trouble." The posse men strung out beyond him sat erect in their saddles with a wary alertness. Johnny stole a glance at Jim and Idaho and saw that their glances never left the men in front of them. They were too old at the game to get sucked into the argument and have their attention distracted.

Curley took a step forward and there was a cold certainty to his voice. "You took that gun from Lonny after you shot him. Lonny didn't suspect nothing because he knew you. He let you get up close and somebody shot him from behind!"

Babson said nothing; he just watched

with his smooth, red face devoid of expression.

"If you'd found Lonny dead and taken his gun," Curley continued, "you'da knowed we wasn't rustling cattle."

One of the posse men spoke up. "We found that gun back along the trail."

"Like hell you did!" Curley said hotly. "Whoever took that gun woulda kept it—just like Babson did."

Babson shrugged. "Look us over," he said with a cool tolerance. "We all carry rifles—there ain't a shotgun in the crew."

Stevens' voice cracked like a whiplash: "How did you know that Lonny was killed with a shotgun?"

THE suddenness of the question startled Johnny. He shot a glance at Stevens. In that instant, Babson jabbed spurs to his horse and dropped over the off side.

Johnny's gun roared, and it seemed as if he'd been holding a couple of sticks of dynamite. He missed Babson, but that double load of buckshot caught a couple of the possemen and knocked them from their saddles. And Johnny was knocked teakettle over tin cup on the ground; for in his haste, he'd pulled both triggers at the same time and the vicious recoil of the ten-gauge had sent him sprawling, with the shotgun half a dozen yards away.

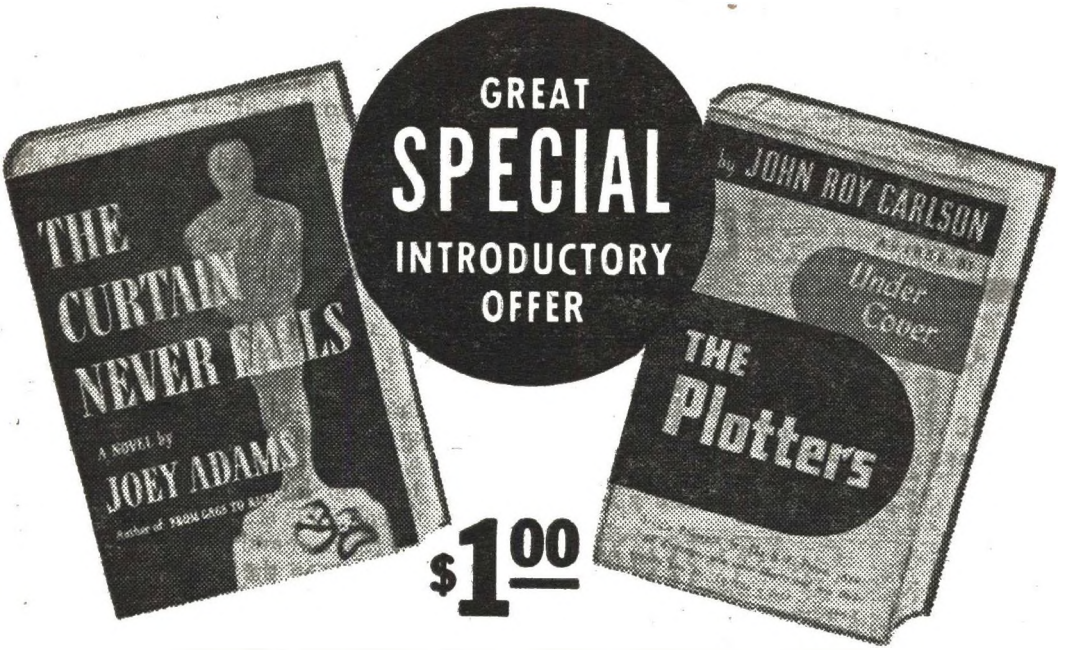
One of the possemen's horses, boogered by the deafening report, was coming right for him, buck-jumping, forefeet raised. There was a confused melee of shots.

Blindly, Johnny rolled aside, moving by instinct. His clutching hand came in contact with something hard lying on the ground; his fingers closed around it. It was a six-shooter dropped by one of the possemen whose body lay near him. Johnny raised himself with his left palm flat against the earth, his right clutching the gun.

He glimpsed Babson's legs under the belly of his horse, caught the glint of Lonny's pearl-handled gun as its muzzle came down. Johnny fired just before Babson pulled the trigger. Babson crumpled, still trying to get in a shot. Johnny's Colt spat flame again, and Babson keeled over on his back, his booted feet beating out death's tattoo on the hard ground.

Johnny looked around, picked up the

(Please continue on page 110)



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(Continued from page 108)

shotgun and broke it, his stiff fingers ramming shells into the barrels. But it was all over.

The two men who had been hit with the buckshot were sprawled on the ground and a third lay near them. One man was pinned under a struggling horse and his screams would later haunt men of nights. The remaining posseman had wheeled his horse and was streaking along the line of brush.

Stevens sat grimly erect, a big Colt smoking in his hand. Idaho was blowing down the barrel of his gun and warily watching the men on the ground.

Jim was slumped a little in the saddle, a dazed look on his face and a spreading patch of red on his shirt.

Johnny ran over and tried to get the horse off of the man on the ground but a bullet had hit the animal in the back, either breaking it or paralyzing the hind legs.

Curley came up and put a bullet through the animal's head. Stevens came over then and they managed to drag the man from beneath the body. They laid him on the ground, but he was too badly smashed to live.

Johnny stayed with him while Curley and Stevens looked over what was left of the posse. They came back later, bringing the body of Babson with them.

"The fall woulda killed him if the bullet's didn't," Curley said. "His neck is broke. The two you got with buckshot'll never rustle no more cattle and somebody polished off the third—put a bullet right between his eyes."

The dying man rolled his head to look at Babson.

"I knowed we was fools to rustle two herds but you couldn't tell *him* nothin'."

Stevens' face was darkly somber as he looked down at the dead lawman. "I'm beginning to see," he said, "how it was the rustlers were never caught."

Idaho was putting a bandage on Jim and Stevens and Curley went over to them.

Johnny heard Stevens say, "You're in no shape to ride, Jim. We'll leave you here and send back a wagon. It can pick them up," he gestured towards the bodies, "and take 'em into town." Curley and Idaho mounted and Stevens walked over to his horse and stepped into the saddle.

Johnny watched them, feeling out of the picture somehow. A feeling of disappointment gnawed at him. Of course, he had been slow on the trigger when Babson had bolted, but he *had* got two of the rustlers. That ought to count for something. Johnny had sort of figured it might be worth a job. Why, they wouldn't even have tumbled to the fact that the posse was rustlers if it hadn't been for him.

Stevens picked up the reins of Jim's horse and rode over to Johnny. "If you'd like a job of horse wranglin'," he said, "climb on this pony and we'll head for the ranch."

He said it so casually that Johnny stared at him, not quite believing he had heard right. "You—you mean you'll give me a job?" His voice was tight with sudden excitement.

Stevens nodded and held out the reins. "Climb aboard."

Johnny stepped into the saddle. Then his face clouded. "I'll have to stop for Major," he said.

"Sure," Stevens agreed. "Bring him along—there's plenty of pasture for an old horse."

Johnny put into words what he had been thinking. "I'm sorry I missed Babson," he said, "but I reckon gettin' the other two made up for it."

Stevens nodded. "Yes," he said, "that was a good job—but you were hired before that."

Johnny stared. "I don't reckon I understand."

There was a little smile around the corners of Stevens' eyes and Curley was openly grinning. "I watched the way you babied that broken-down Major horse," Stevens said. "I reckoned you'd be a good hand with horses. I told Curley to leave you—and if you crossed the creek on foot to side us, the job was yours." He touched his horse and moved off.

Johnny followed, his shotgun stuck in the boot and a new-found content warming his wet body. Trailing Major back to the ranch would slow him down some but he judged that before sundown he'd be in that big kitchen again, talking to Allie and eating some of her good cooking.

THE END

Warrior Ways

By DAVID A. WEISS

OF ALL the Indians who ever raced across the Plains, none were better horsemen than the Comanches. Old timers still shake their heads in amazement at the way they could ride the half-wild mustangs. It was nothing for a Comanche warrior to crouch alongside a horse pounding at full speed, simultaneously steering it with their feet, dodging bullets, and shooting arrows from under the horse's neck.

To a Comanche, his horse was his most prized possession. He would even trade his wife for one. War ponies were given extra special care.

A Comanche's wealth was measured by the size of his horse herd. Next to prowess on the battle field, skill at stealing horses was a warrior's greatest virtue. Old Chief Is-sa-keep once told an Army captain the reason his sons were such a great comfort to him in his old age was because they could steal more horses than any other young men in the tribe.

The Comanches carried with them large horse herds which they used as a medium of exchange in trading. Never were they at a loss to find good mounts. They simply stole them from the settlements of frontier whites. That is the reason for most of their bloody raiding parties on the Texan frontier in the 19th century. Taking of scalps was merely secondary.

Best of all, they loved to race horses. A race was always run in a straight line so no contestant would have an advantage over the others. It was a case of winner take all. Not only did he gather in the wagers, but he also received all the horses defeated in the race.

In one famous race at Fort Chadbourne, Texas, a Comanche chief named Ma-la-que-top took a mustang pony and defeated a Kentucky thoroughbred. He added insult to injury by riding the last 50 yards sitting backwards on his pony and gesturing to the jockey of the stallion to hurry up.

* * *

Quanah, the last great chief of the Comanches, was the Scourge of the Plains. He was also the son of a white woman.

WARRIOR WAYS

Years after most of the Indians had settled down on reservations, Quanah was out on the Staked Plains of Texas leading his fierce Quahada band in a bloody war against the United States Army.

Not until he finally surrendered in 1876 did he discover the details about his mother's early life. He then found out her name was Cynthia Ann Parker. Captured by the Indians when a small girl, she was raised by them and grew up to marry a Comanche chief.

Her son, Quanah, quickly changed his way of life. He turned from a savage Comanche warrior to a shrewd American businessman. And he became so successful that he was known for years as the richest Indian in the United States.

With Geronimo he marched in the inaugural parade of Theodore Roosevelt. And so well did he like the ways of the white men, he added the name of his mother to his own name. For the rest of his life, he called himself Quanah Parker.

* * *

In 1932 in a broken-down hut on the Paiute reservation there died an old Indian by the name of Wovoka. Alone and forgotten, he had once been worshipped and acclaimed by thousands. For he was the Red Messiah.

During the eclipse of January 1, 1889, Wovoka got a vision. He claimed God came down from Heaven to see him and appoint him the Savior of the Redman—the leader who would show them the way to a wonderful happy hunting ground where the buffalo were plentiful and happiness reigned supreme.

Thousands of Indians from all tribes took up the new religion. They accepted its curious mixture of medicine-man mumbo-jumbo and primitive Christianity, and they started to dance its wild Ghost Dance.

So frenzied did they become, the U. S. Army was sent out to quell the excitement. But for a while the Ghost Dances continued. In one disturbance old Sitting Bull was murdered. In another a young Cavalry officer named John J. Pershing was sent out to parley.

After about a year the Ghost Dances were suppressed. Wovoka—the Red Messiah—soon slipped into obscurity.

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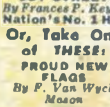

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