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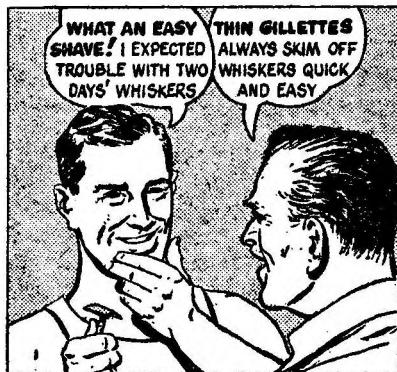
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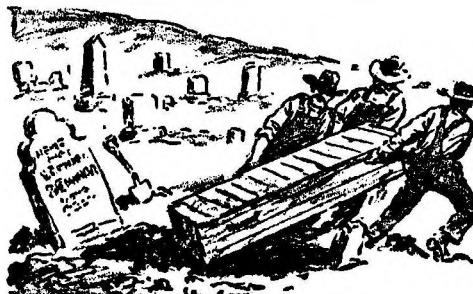
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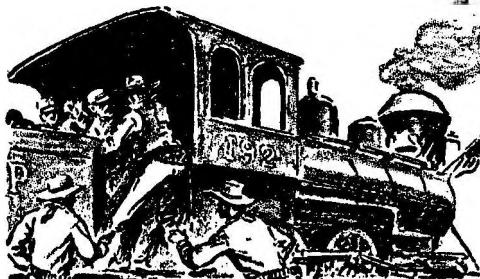
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



Undeniably mean and tight-fisted, Banker Lemuel Seward probably deserved everything that the population of Cutbank, Montana, chose to say about him, for when it came to the mortgage business, Seward had a stone where a man is supposed to have a heart. In 1889, however, he foreclosed on the wrong man. The banker died the week after he had dispossessed farmer George Pierce from his house and land and from then on, Pierce lived and labored for only one thing. Ten years later, he achieved his goal—he bought the cemetery where the banker lay buried and, with many legal flourishes, dispossessed the body from its coffin and plowed the field in corn.

Saul Eustis, grizzled and graying prospector, made the strike that turned Roark from a spot on the desert to a roaring boomtown in 1869. Although fortunes were being made all around him, however, Saul's claim, never a very good one, gradually petered out. Brooding over his bad luck, he became convinced that the other miners were draining ore from his claim. "If they'd only let the land alone," he insisted, and then he thought of a way to restore his early solitude—drawing his sixguns, he ran amok through the town and killed the seventeen men who were working the claims nearest to his—the same seventeen who had just agreed to reward the impoverished founder of the great strike by giving him a slice of each of their mines!



When Ulysses S. Grant made his famous tour of the Southwest in 1877, elaborate precautions were taken to protect him against assassins and other hot-heads who might still cherish a Mason-Dixon-line grudge against him. There was no shooting, but all the guards in the world did not prevent the tactful but firm way the predominantly Southern town of Yuma chose to demonstrate that the Union Army chieftain had come where he was not wanted. As the special train rolled into the station, three cattlemen overpowered the engineer, took the throttle, and transported the prominent visitor as rapidly as possible out of Yuma and into the next town.

Raymond Crown was only a very small-time gunman, and such an extremely likeable fellow that every man of good will in Tucson, from the sheriff to the influential Baptist minister, earnestly labored to reform him. They rejoiced, therefore, when an orphaned nephew, aged twelve, was sent from the East to live with Crown. The preacher spoke that Sunday on, "A little child shall lead them," and the gunman swore he would go straight. And he tried. He really tried. But his nephew, when he arrived, proved to be a hardened and hopeless juvenile criminal. Within a week after Crown's vow to reform, he was so thoroughly corrupted by his adopted child that he allowed himself to be talked into robbing the Tucson bank and gunning down two deputies who stood in his path.



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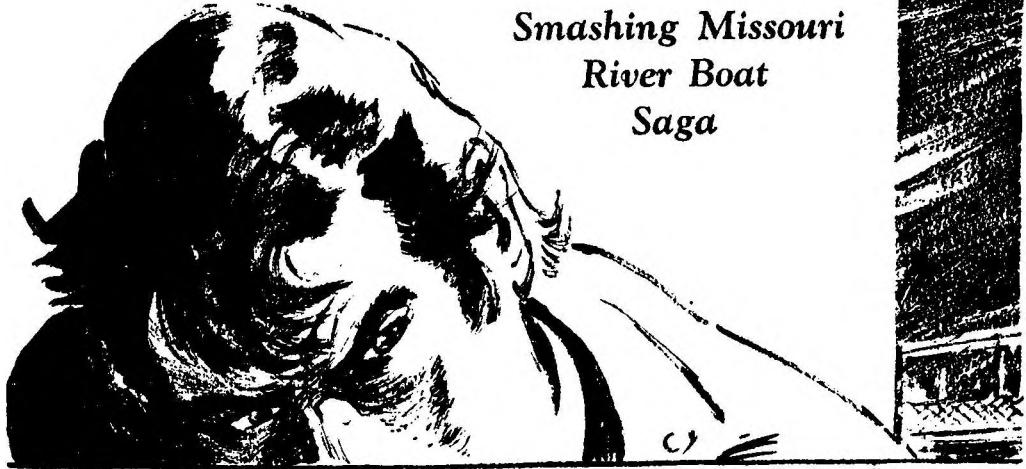
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BIG MUDDY GUN-



By
**CLIFF
FARRELL**

Chapter I

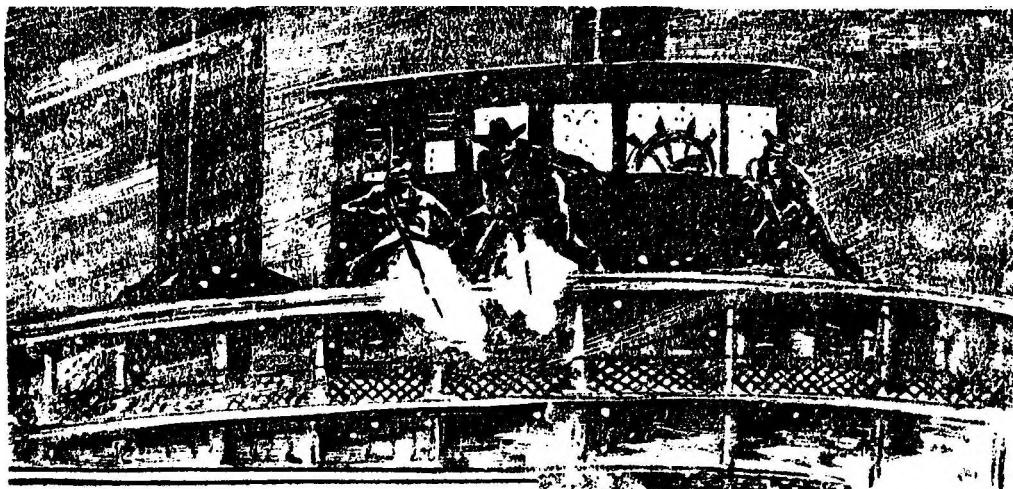
BACK FROM THE DEAD

SHANLEY MALONE waited until full darkness had come before venturing into Pierre, for he had heard that his old friend Big Bill Benbow had put a price on his head, dead or alive.

A bright moon was skittering through broken, pot-bellied clouds overhead as he worked his way through the rough frontier settlement that huddled along the rim of the Missouri River.

More than once the moon broke unexpectedly from the clouds, catching him in the open. Each time he thought he'd surely be recognized, for Pierre was crowded and noisy on this chill spring evening, and every steamboat man and buffalo hunter from St. Joe to Fort Benton knew—by personal acquaintance or word of mouth—the description of Shan Malone, who had once been the bucko captain of the proud steamboat *Jesobel*.

He breathed a trifle easier when he had safely run the gauntlet of the lighted saloon line, and reached the cluttered darkness of the steamboat landing, which



BUSTER!



They felt and heard the snap of bullets past them, and then finally they reached the protection of the Texas.

A golden-haired girl held the destiny of Shan Malone in the palm of her hand—and that hand was sold out to the conniving killer-boss of the wild Missouri. . . . Shan Malone knew that to help her, he must blast down those gun-bought river-buccaneers one by one, in an odds-on pistol-point payoff. . . .

was almost always deserted at this hour.

He paused in the shadow of a barge that had been drawn up on the ways during the winter. Running ice growled sullenly in the river. The spring break-up had come. The ice run was thinning now and soon navigation would be open to Fort Benton in the shadow of the Rockies, nearly a thousand miles upstream as the Missouri flows.

Two steamboats were moored to the levee back of a boom of logs that protected them from the ice. Lamplight glinted from the officers' quarters in the *texas* of each craft and in the enginerooms. Otherwise the steamboats, which had wintered at Pierre, were dark.

The nearest packet was a two-hundred-foot sidewheeler, painted a neutral dun hue, and named the *Corsair*. Beneath that in bold letters was painted:

KEACH NAVIGATION COMPANY

A door opened on the *Corsair's* *texas*, letting out a lance of lamplight. Owen Keach—big, handsome, with pale yellow hair, stood outlined against the light. He had on a fine, gleaming white shirt and fashionable breeches.

Keach's voice sounded impatiently, "Zeno, damn your worthless hide! Where are you? I can't find my pearl shirt studs."

"Comin' Mistah Keach," a darky's voice chattered, frightened. "I'll find 'em fo' you."

Hurrying footsteps sounded, shadows danced and the door closed again. There was a hungry, promising twist to Shan Malone's mouth as he stood looking at that lighted window on the *Corsair*.

Then he moved on down the levee to the other steamboat. This was the white-painted *Jezebel*, which held the record for the Benton-Council Bluffs run.

Once—in another lifetime, though it had been only half a year ago—Shan had been captain and chief pilot of the *Jezebel* which was the queen of Big Bill Benbow's river fleet. Shan had carried himself with a swagger in every river port, and had worn fine broadcloth and beaver hats and hand-made boots as soft as gloves.

Now he was clad in a weather-shrunken hunting shirt, buckhides breeches and moccasins that were blackened and scarred by

the smoke and wear of many blizzard-bound camps on the plains. In place of a hat he had a strip of black cloth around his head, Indian-fashion, to keep his long, unbarbered black hair out of his eyes.

He carried a navy pistol and a skinning knife in his belt. His hunting skirt hung slack from his wide, rawboned shoulders, but he was beginning to gain back some of the forty pounds he had lost when he had lain for weeks at the point of death in a Crow lodge far up on the Yellowstone.

Banjo music and the rumor of revelry drifted from the hangouts on the front where the hunters and rivermen were celebrating the spring breakup. Pierre, this remote outpost on the Dakota plains, was the jump-off for the buffalo country, and for the gold camps in the Black Hills, and in the far Rockies.

The laughter of a dancehall woman came clearly. Shan grinned in sour reminiscence. It had been a long time since he had heard a white woman's voice.

He studied the *Jezebel* for long minutes while he waited for the moon to drown itself in clouds. He had an eerie feeling that, in spite of his caution, he had been recognized, and that hidden eyes were watching him.

It was a chance he had to take. The moonlight faded, and he darted across the stageplank and reached the darkness of the *Jezebel's* empty cargo deck.

He waited again, his six-shooter cradled in his hands. Warmth came from the engineroom. A fireman was on duty there, no doubt, but the lack of sound indicated that the man probably was asleep.

He went above without sound, and reached the top deck. He peered through the lighted window of the captain's cabin. This had once been his own cabin. Now old, block-jawed Obie Frame, who had been Shan's first mate, sat alone at a table, dealing poker hands to imaginary opponents.

Obie Frame had a captain's cap slung on his shaggy gray hair. A blue uniform coat was draped over the back of his chair.

Shan opened the door, stepped in quickly, and closed it. "Still trying to learn that ace-palming trick, hey, Obie?" he chided. "It's no use. A blind man would catch you at it."

Obie's seamed, mahogany-hued face was a show-window for a sudden rush of shift-

ing emotions. Stunned disbelief was replaced by an upsurging elation. That, in turn, faded into dubious disapproval.

"I figgered you was dead, you black-whiskered imp," Obie complained. "Leastways I held a wake fer you last winter. Started it Christmas Eve an' didn't sober up till after New Year's. I might have knowed I was sheddin' tears in vain."

SHAN MOVED into a corner where he could not be seen by anyone who happened to pass the window. He felt a trifle easier in mind. At least, old alligator-voiced Obie hadn't turned entirely against him. Shan and Obie Frame had been friends. Close friends.

"Cuss the luck," Obie added querulously. "If it was anybody else I could earn a thousand dollars bounty money mighty easy."

"Only a thousand?" Shan scoffed. "Hell! I understood my scalp was worth ten thousand."

"Don't git no high-toned notions," Obie sniffed. "That ten thousand is offered for information leadin' to the recovery of certain cargo that was stole from this steamboat the night of last October ninth. You, in person, are worth only a thousand in cash, delivered on the hoof, or in a coffin, to the Benbow Packet Company."

"This missing cargo," Shan said, "amounts to three hundred thousand dollars worth of raw gold, I take it?"

"You ought to know," Obie said grimly. "You was captain of the *Jezebel* on that trip. It was you that disappeared, along with the gold, the night the *Jezebel* was held up off the Yallastone fork."

"So she *was* held up! Tell me about it, Obie. Tell me what happened the night of October ninth."

"I reckon you know that, too," Obie said warily. "A gang o' masked outlaws laid for the *Jezebel* at a woodchopper's camp near the fork. When we stopped for fuel that night they swarmed aboard. They cleaned out the pursuer's safe, an' lit out. You was on deck that night. After the outlaws left, you was gone too."

"Did anybody see me pull out with the robbers?" Shan asked.

"It was too dark to see much of anythin'," Obie snapped. "An' you don't see much of a man's face under a mask. But facts speak for theirselves. When a cap-

tain opens a safe fer outlaws, then drops out of sight, there's only one thing to think."

"There were three of us aboard that knew the combination to that safe, Obie," Shan said. "You knew it. I knew it, and Harry Jessup, the purser, knew it."

"I didn't open it fer them outlaws," Obie bristled. "An' they killed poor old Harry Jessup."

Shan was startled. "What? They killed the purser? They killed Jessup? When? Where?"

Obie was taken aback by Shan's vehemence. "Why— why, jest before they pulled out," he stammered. "I found Harry's body with a slug in his back down on the cargo deck." Obie paused a moment, then added stonily, "That makes the charge that's ag'in you read murder as well as robbery."

Shan sat for a long time thinking hard. "Did you see the outlaws take the gold ashore?" he finally asked abruptly.

"How'n blazes could anybody see anything?" Obie countered. "It was midnight an' rainin' hard. Such of us as was awake, was herded into a cabin an' locked in at gun's point. All we know is—"

"Was anything else missing from the *Jezebel*?" Shan interrupted.

"Jumpin' hell, wasn't it enough they got away with nigh onto half a ton o' gold, without—?

"Was anything missing from the cargo when you checked it overside at Leavenworth?" Shan insisted.

Obie blinked. "Come to think of it we was short three bar'l's of flour. It was part o' that shipment of forty bar'l's we took aboard at Fort Benton. The colonel of the army post at Benton had rejected that bunch of flour because it was full of weevils. He shipped it back to the quartermaster at Leavenworth. Don't you remember that?"

"I remember. Am I accused of stealing that spoiled flour too?"

"You got a hell of a sense o' humor. Big Bill had to pay for the flour. Full price too, but what did the damage was havin' to raise three hundred thousand dollars to pay off the miners who had shipped that gold. That just about busted Big Bill. This steamboat is all that's left of the Benbow Packet Company."

"What happened to the rest of the fleet?"

"Big Bill sold 'em to raise money," Obie snapped. "Packets, tow barges, warehouses, an' boatyards all along the river. All he's got left is the *Jezebel* an' his home here in Pierre. He even had to bring back that high-toned daughter of his from Europe after he had spent a pile of money makin' a lady out of her."

"Who bought the other packets?"

"You know damned well who bought 'em. Owen Keach. He's been after Big Bill's scalp for two years. Keach is top dog on the Missouri River now. He owns every boat in the Benton trade except this one. An' he'll own this one too, after he marries Big Bill's daughter."

"What? Say that again, Obie!"

"You heard me. Owen Keach an' Lizette Benbow are thick as thieves. Everybody says they're goin' to be spliced soon."

Shan stared. He had seen Lizette Benbow only once, briefly, five years in the past. She had been about seventeen then, and he had tabbed her as pretty much of a spoiled brat. Her mother had died when she was a child, and her father had lavished money on her. She had spent the biggest part of her life in expensive Eastern schools, and had then been sent to Europe to finish her education.

"Owen Keach is forty years old or more," Shan said. "Lizette Benbow can't be more than twenty-two or three. Doesn't she know that ever since Keach moved into the Missouri River trade that Big Bill has been hitting bad luck? Packets and barges sunk in collisions or burned by fires that nobody could explain. Boiler explosions. All these things were logged as accidents.

"But they weren't accidents. Keach had a reputation for fighting foul when he steamboated on the Mississippi River, and he began using the same system when he came up the Missouri with his packets. He hired thugs and wreckers in his crew—men no decent owner would allow aboard a boat. Doesn't she know these things?"

"She knows," Obie said wearily. "I told her. But it didn't make any difference to her."

"What does her father think about her marrying that mealy-mouthed pirate?" Shan demanded.

"Big Bill don't know about it. He's flat on his back in Santa Fe."

"Santa Fe?"

"Big Bill folded up after havin' to sell everything he owned in the world but this packet," Obie said. "He's sixty-five, an' that was a tough pill to swallow. An' it wasn't much of a help to have a guy named Shan Malone, whom he had treated like a son, turn ag'in him, rob him, an' help ruin him."

If Obie expected Shan to quail, he was disappointed. "Big Bill collapsed," Obie added. "First it was pneumonia, an' then jest weariness, I reckon. The doctor ordered a change o' climate. Lizette took him to Santa Fe in a special stagecoach two months ago. She stayed until she made sure he was gettin' along all right, then came back to Pierre."

"Lizette Benbow is here—in Pierre?"

"She's actin' as head of what's left of the company," Obie nodded. "Lizette is the one that offered that dead-or-alive bounty money for you."

SHAN looked swiftly at Obie. "Thanks, Obie," he said softly. "Thanks for telling me that. I thought it was Big Bill himself who had put a price on my head. Where is Lizette Benbow staying?"

"Ashore in the big house with a colored mammy to wait on her," Obie sniffed. "She'd starve to death in a galley unless there was somebody to cook the grub fer her, an' serve it on fancy china, with the forks lined up in the right formation. Owen Keach takes her ridin' every afternoon back of his pacin' team. He calls on her most every evenin'. Wears a boiled shirt an' one of them monkey suits like the head waiter wears at the Plantation House in Saint Lou. An' she dresses in one o' them skimpy gowns that don't leave much to the imagination. It's a cryin' scandal."

Shan moved to the door. "Thanks for the information, Obie. You're on my side, at least."

"Where you goin'?"

"Calling on Lizette Benbow."

"Hold on, you wild idjit. Damn it, Shan, you saved my life once when I fell overboard in the rapids below Wolf Point. I owe you a lot. You're wanted not only for robbery, but for Harry Jessup's murder. I never believed you killed Jessup, but Lizette Benbow believes it. She'll turn you over to the law. You'll get your neck

stretched hard all the way up to the sky."

"I want to take a look at a girl who'd marry her father's worst enemy," Shan said.

He paused, and changed the subject abruptly. "We hired two roustabouts at Benton when we shoved off on that last run downriver in the fall," he said. "Name of Sam Gotch and Luke Fowler. What happened to them?"

Obie rubbed his jaw, trying to make something of that question. "They're here in Pierre," he said. "I fired 'em when we made Pierre on that trip. They didn't earn their salt. Lazy an' mean. A couple of rats, if I ever saw a rat."

"Did you see these outlaws that night, Obie?" Shan asked. "With your own eyes?"

"Yeah. There was six of 'em, all told."

"Did one of 'em happen to be about my height? A little heavier in the paunch? An' maybe he had eyes that were about the color of a wet slate roof? About the same color as Owen Keach's eyes?"

"Maybe," Obie said slowly. "But it was dark an' they wore slickers an' gunny-sack masks. I couldn't swear to what I think I saw."

Shan opened the door, and peered out. The moon was submerged by clouds, and the deck was dark, deserted. He went out quickly, and made his way below through the dark steamboat.

He crossed the stageplank to the levee. As he stepped ashore he heard the faint sound in the shadow of a boatway. Someone had drawn a quick, decisive breath.

That warned him, for it was the sound a man makes when he has come to an irrevocable purpose.

Shan was dropping flat as the gun roared from the darkness. He felt a hard impact on his left forearm.

He flipped out his own pistol as he fell, and began throwing lead back into the spot where the murder gun had blossomed.

He fired three times, then rolled over and over and reached the protection of the stageplank.

Another gun opened up from a flanking position to his left. Shan swung his six-shooter around and fired twice in that direction.

He could hear a bubbling, whimpering sound to the right where he had sent his

first slugs. And now he heard the second assassin running away.

Shan arose and raced in pursuit. But the black levee, cluttered with boat ways and sheds and lumberpiles, was a rabbit warren. He did not sight his quarry.

He rounded an obstruction, and stopped abruptly. The moon had emerged from the clouds. Just ahead was Owen Keach's moored steamboat, the *Corsair*. Keach, himself, was standing on the stageplank. They were no more than twenty feet apart, and recognition was instant and mutual.

Keach wore a light cape coat over full evening dress. Pearl studs gleamed in his starched shirt. He had a short-muzzled pocket gun in his hand, and had been peering warily around.

However it was clear to Shan that Owen Keach was not the man he had been pursuing. Keach evidently had been in the act of coming ashore when the shooting started, and had paused there on the stageplank to wait.

Keach made a motion as though to lift his gun, but Shan gestured with his own weapon. "Uh-uh."

Keach let his gun hand dangle at his side again. "So help me," he said coolly. "It really is Shan Malone, isn't it? I couldn't believe it at first. Everyone took it for granted you were in South America by this time, with your share of Bill Benbow's gold."

Shan walked up, took the pocket gun from Keach's fingers. "Did you happen to see a fellow running ahead of me?" he asked.

In the moonlight Keach's eyes were as opaque as wet slate—and as impenetrable. He was Shan's height, but beefier. "No," he said easily. "Who were you chasing?"

Keach lied. Shan was certain the man had sighted whoever Shan had been pursuing.

Shan listened. Those bubbling sounds had faded away. He walked cautiously to the scene of the ambush. Owen Keach followed him.

Obie came hurrying from the *Jezebel*. They found the body of a man sprawled face-down at the corner of a shed. Shan dragged the roughly-dressed body out into the open moonlight and they stared down at the hard, bearded face.

Obie's eyes lifted to Shan. "Sam Gotch,"

he said slowly. "One o' my crew. Remember?"

This was one of the two roustabouts Shan had been inquiring about a few minutes earlier. Now Sam Gotch was dead, two bullets in his chest.

Chapter II

THE BENBOW JEZEBEL

SHAN NOW became aware of a throbbing pain in his left arm. His sleeve was sticky with blood and it dripped from his fingertips. That first bullet had scoured a gash across his forearm. Obie silently handed him a neckerchief, and he wound it around the injury.

The shooting had attracted attention. Men were hurrying from the saloons toward the levee.

Shan handed Keach's pistol to Obie. "Give it to him later," he said. "Maybe he'll need it another day."

He left them, and retreated into the shadows. Avoiding the scattered arrivals, he worked his way off the riverfront. Circling through Pierre he reached the fringe of the settlement and made his way to the house that Big Bill Benbow had built on a rise of ground overlooking the river.

It was an ornate, two-story, gabled structure, built in the grand manner, with stained glass windows, a wide veranda, and gingerbread woodwork along the eaves. Lamplight gleamed back of lace curtains and drawn velvet drapes.

The surroundings were deserted. Shan walked boldly up the veranda steps to the stained-glass reception door. He spun the polished brass key, and heard the door gong send a musical note through the house.

The door opened, and a plump Negro woman, wearing a maid's cap and apron, stood looking at him. She had a fixed smile on her good-natured face, as though she expected someone for whom she held no real liking. That smile shattered into dismay as she stared at Shan's wild buckskin garb and unshaven face.

"Oh, Lawdy!" she moaned. "An Injun!"

She tried to slam the door in his face, but Shan put a hand against it, held it open. "Now, is that polite, mammy?"

She backed away tremulously. He stepped in, closing the door. They were in the reception hall. A parlor opened to the left, furnished in the horsehair and bric-a-brac manner. Beyond, another door gave a glimpse of a table set for two with gleaming linen, fine china and crystal ware.

"Tell your mistress I've dropped in to pay my respects," Shan said.

The Negro woman was speechless with terror. She only kept backing away, staring at him, petrified.

A clear feminine voice came from the wide stairway which led to the upper house. "Is that Mr. Keach, Juba? My goodness, I'm not half ready!"

"Tain't Massa Keach," the maid wailed. "It's a wild man!"

There was a rustle of garments above. A young woman appeared at the head of the stairs, wearing a wine-red dressing gown which she evidently had hastily pulled on.

She descended the stairs without undue haste. The Negro woman retreated behind her. Lizette Benbow, whatever else she might be, was distinctively attractive. Her hair, done in an intricate high coiffure, was tawny gold with highlights of bright copper. Slender of waist and ankle, she had long, slim features and high cheekbones, and a straight mouth. Her eyes were strikingly dark beneath plucked brows.

She inspected Shan with deliberation, and no fear. "Who are you, and what do you want?" she demanded. She was disconcertingly blunt.

"Sorry, I didn't bring my calling card," Shan shrugged. "I misplaced my cardcase somewhere last winter up on the plains. The name is Shanley Malone."

Lizette Benbow's glance traveled over him again, more in a questioning appraisal than alarm. Her gaze rested speculatively on the red-stained bandage on his arm.

She spoke to the Negro woman, without turning her attention from Shan. "Go bring the United States Marshal, Juba," she said.

"Stay here, Juba," Shan said. "Your mistress really doesn't want to do that. She's too smart to spoil the chance of getting back three hundred thousand dollars worth of gold that belongs to her father."

Lizette Benbow studied him narrowly. "It happens that a matter of murder is involved," she said.

"To convict a man of murder you generally have to have evidence that would convince a jury beyond a doubt," Shan said. "What evidence have you got—outside of mere suspicion?"

Their eyes clashed. "You've figured it all out, I see," she said scornfully. "You just admitted stealing the gold. The other crime goes with that outrage."

"I admitted nothing," Shan corrected. "I only said you were too smart to overlook any chance of getting that gold back."

Lizette Benbow glared at him, angered by the irony in his tone. Hoofs sounded faintly in the unpaved street outside, and halted before the house.

"Oh, lawsy," Juba breathed fearfully.

Shan spoke lightly. "You evidently were expecting someone for dinner. Owen Keach, perhaps. He seems to have arrived."

Lizette Benbow made her decision swiftly. She turned to the stairs. "Follow me," she ordered crisply.

To the Negro woman she said, "Juba, ask Mr. Keach to wait until I've finished dressing. And get that sick-cat look off your face. Don't embarrass me by having Mr. Keach suspect something out of the ordinary has happened."

She led Shan upstairs, and down a wide hall to a comfortable big bedroom which occupied the width of the house at the front. It was her own room, dainty with polished floors, warm rag rugs, a four-poster bed with a chintz canopy and two easy chairs. There was a dressing table, a full length mirror, and a big dressing closet in which Shan glimpsed a formidable array of feminine garments. A fire burned cheerily in a formal fireplace between two long windows which were shielded by flowered drapes.

The doorbell pealed below. Lizette Benbow waited at the half-closed door of the bedroom, listening to what went on. There was a brief murmur of voices below. Then Juba came panting upstairs, bearing an envelope.

"'Twasn't Massa Keach, missy," she gasped, glancing fearfully at Shan. "He sent his stableman wid dis note."

Lizette Benbow opened the envelope, read the enclosed note, and said, "All right, Juba. Mr. Keach can't dine with us tonight. He sends his regrets. He has been detained on business."

She closed the door on Juba. She listened as Keach's carriage was driven away. "So he stood you up," Shan remarked with a grin.

She ignored that. She again eyed the red-stained bandage on Shan's arm. "You seem to have been hurt?" she remarked. "How?"

"A whickerbill bit me," Shan said.

She walked up to him, lifted his arm. Shan winced. She unwrapped the improvised bandage, and coolly inspected the injury. It was a two-inch gash just below the elbow. The slug had torn only through muscle. Painful but not too serious.

"Better not stand too close to me," Shan said. "I lived in a Crow village up on the Yellowstone all winter."

"I've smelled Indians before," she remarked. "I can believe you're telling the truth in that respect, at least."

She left the room. After a few minutes she returned, bringing a basin of warm water, bandages and antiseptic. She placed the basin on the dressing table.

"Stand here," she ordered. She sponged the injury clean. Then she used the antiseptic, which stung so that Shan swore softly, sincerely. With a woman's neatness she bound the injury. She was a cool one.

"I HEARD shooting from the direction of the levee some time ago," she commented. "Several shots were fired. Is that when the whickerbill bit you?"

"Just about," Shan admitted.

"What were you doing down there?"

"Fishin'."

"For information, I suppose. And you used Obie Frame for bait. He's an old tillicum of yours, I believe."

Shan said, "Tillicum? That's river lingo. Was that included in your education in Paris?"

"No. I'm taking a postgraduate course here in Pierre. Don't change the subject. You talked to Obie Frame. What about?"

"You. He told me you were going to get married. You seem to like it here in Pierre?"

Lizette Benbow flushed, her lips clamping tight. "I don't care to discuss that," she said impatiently. "I know Obie thoroughly disapproves of me. Was I the only subject of discussion?"

"I asked Obie what happened the night

of October ninth up there near where the Yellowstone flows into the Missouri."

"No one knows that better than you," she said icily. "You arranged that robbery. You signalled the outlaws that night as the *Jezebel* neared that woodchopper's camp. A passenger remembered afterward having glimpsed a light flashed from the upper deck. A bullseye lantern was found in your cabin. You opened the safe and rode away with those masked men you had planted at that landing."

"And now I'm back in Pierre," Shan challenged.

"I confess I'm curious to know why," she admitted. "Did your pals doublecross you? Are you here trying to claim the reward by betraying them?"

"Those masked men didn't find any gold in the purser's safe," Shan said quietly. "They rode away empty-handed."

That brought her up straight, broke through her cool assurance. Finally she forced an amused smile. "You are an ingratiating scoundrel, aren't you?" she shrugged. "For an instant you almost had me believing you. No wonder my father put such faith in you."

"Big Bill seems to put too much faith in too many people," Shan said deliberately.

That went home too. Lizette Benbow had a fiery temper beneath that air of sophistication.

"Go on," she said with an effort. "I like to hear tall stories. If the outlaws didn't take the gold, where is it? Or have you thought up an answer to that one?"

"Maybe, if I knew the answer I'd be telling it to the wrong person. Whose side are you on?"

Her chin went up. "What are you insinuating?"

"Do you intend to marry Owen Keach?" Shan snapped.

"That's for me to decide."

Shan gazed around the room. "Obie told me that Big Bill Benbow had lost about everything. But his daughter seems to have kept her nest well feathered. Who's paying for all this?"

She moved swiftly. She slapped him so hard it staggered him. "You filthy, insulting—squawman!" she blazed.

The mark of her hand stood out white, then slowly turned livid on Shan's unshaven cheek. They stood glaring furiously

into each other's eyes, their faces set hard.

Downstairs the doorbell jangled violently. Then a heavy hand pounded the door. "This is Bill Simms, United States marshal," a loud voice called. "Open the door."

Shan heard Juba utter a screech of fright. Lizette turned, moved swiftly to the bedroom door, and opened it an inch. "Let Mr. Simms in," she called.

Shan drew his pistol as he heard Juba go scurrying to admit the officer. He met Lizette Benbow's eyes challengingly, sardonically.

"There'll be no need for that," she murmured, glancing at the pistol. "I'm not ready to turn you over to the law—yet."

She pushed past him, hurried down the hall to the head of the stairs. Shan heard the heavy footsteps of more than one man clumping into the reception hall.

"Mercy!" Lizette Benbow called. "Is that you, Mr. Simms? What in the world is the matter?"

The marshal's voice came deferentially. "Howdy, Mis' Benbow. I didn't want to give you a skeer, but somebody pushed a note under my door a few minutes ago, sayin' thet Shan Malone had been seen skulkin' around your house. I rounded up some help an' come as fast as I could."

"Sh-Shan Malone!" Lizette Benbow was a good actress. "Good heavens! What would he be doing in Pierre? There's a price on his head!"

"He's up to some deviltry," the officer said. "He was mixed up in a gunfight down on the levee less'n an hour ago. A stevedore from your own packet was killed. Name of Sam Gotch. Owen Keach seen Malone runnin' away after the killin'."

"A killing?" Lizette Benbow wasn't acting now. Her voice was shaky. Then she said hurriedly, "Search the grounds by all means. Juba, you come up and stay with me while I finish dressing. I'm frightened."

"Needn't be skeered now," the marshal assured her gallantly. "We'll smoke him out if he's around."

Juba came puffing upstairs. Lizette Benbow pushed her ahead of her into the room, then closed and bolted the door.

Juba's eyes rolled in Shan's direction, and she sagged fearfully into a chair.

Shan lowered the pistol. He eyed Lizette

Benbow speculatively. She didn't speak for a time. She stood against the door, listening. The marshal and his posse were searching the house. They came tramping upstairs.

"This is my room at the front," the girl called. "Juba is with me, so I'm safe enough. But go through every other room. And the attic too."

The search rumbled through the rooms for a time, and then moved outside to the gardens.

Lizette Benbow relaxed a trifle. She looked at Shan. Her voice was even. "I had a few pieces of jewelry and some furs that Dad has given me from time to time. I sold them for cash. Does that answer your question as to how I'm supporting myself?"

Shan understood that it had been a bitter concession to her pride to tell him that. She added, "I believe I can be trusted with any information you have to give. If the outlaws didn't get that gold, then where is it?"

"I only wish I knew," Shan said grimly.

Her face fell. "If you don't know, then who does know?"

"The whickerbills, maybe," Shan said. "Two of 'em. But only one knows now. The other one is dead."

"You—you did kill Sam Gotch tonight in that gunfight?" she asked.

"After he tried to bushwhack me. I didn't know who I was shooting at until I got a look at him after it was over. The other one got away."

"I don't understand. Why—?"

SHAN was staring at something. He walked past her to the windows, over which the drapes were drawn. The drapes were parted a trifle at the top and he had seen a red glare in the sky through that slit. Like a flash of heat lightning.

But it hadn't been lightning. Shan parted an eyehole in the drape and peered out. The river lay in the full radiance of moonlight. A steamboat was swinging into the channel. The red glare from an opened firebox had attracted Shan's attention.

The craft steadied in the river, and then her prow swung upstream as her wheels took hold. It was Owen Keach's big, dun-colored packet, the *Corsair*.

Shan stepped back from the window, for

searchers were prowling the vicinity. Lizette Benbow was at his elbow. She had seen the packet in the river.

"Did you know Keach's packet was shoving off tonight?" he demanded.

"Hardly. I was expecting Mr. Keach to call. Remember? I imagine that this sudden decision to sail is why he stood me up—as you put it."

Shan stood scowling, thinking hard. When he had seen the *Corsair* earlier in the evening there had been no indication the craft was making ready to shove off. But steam had been made hurriedly in the meantime, and now the craft was bound upriver—empty—without passengers or cargo.

Footsteps ascended the stairs. Bill Simms tapped on the door. "We searched high an' low but found nary a trace of Malone, Mis' Benbow," he called. "I'll stick around awhile, but the rest o' the boys might as well pull out."

"Just a minute, Marshal," Lizette called. She murmured to Shan, "I'll have to see him and be sociable, or he might become suspicious. Juba, get out my black dress."

Shan turned his back. Presently she whispered, "All right. Stand out of sight."

She opened the door. Juba scurried out with her mistress. The marshal was waiting at the stairs, and Shan heard them all descend.

"Juba," Lizette said. "Bring the marshal a hot toddy. It's a chilly night."

Shan moved into the hall. The marshal had been escorted into the parlor. A narrow back stairway opened at the rear of the hall. This led downward to the rear outside door of the house, off the kitchen.

Shan descended, a slow step at a time to avoid any betraying creak. He reached a small entry hall adjoining the kitchen. He opened the outer door a fraction at a time, and slipped out.

Lizette Benbow had her own reasons for shielding him from the law for the time being, no doubt. But she was an enigma to him. He breathed easier once he was clear of the house. Avoiding the moonlight, he crossed a winter-killed garden, vaulted a picket fence and reached tree-shadowed open lots.

Then he headed for the riverfront again, making his way by a careful, circuitous route through the backwash of Pierre.

Only the *Jezebel* rode at her moorings. Owen Keach's *Corsair* had long since vanished into the darkness upstream.

Activity resounded in the *Jezebel*'s fire-room. Shan ran swiftly aboard, and peered into the place. Obie Frame, stripped to the waist, was acting as his own fireman as he fed fuel to the boilers. The old man's blocky shoulders glistened with sweat in spite of the chill river breeze that swept through the open gangway.

Shan stepped into the fireroom. "Things have come to a hell of a pass when the captain has to do his own stoking," he said.

Obie eyed him morosely. "Shake a laig," he ordered. "It's time you showed up."

"So you expected me to show up."

"Figgered you would 'less you was in jail. I had a hunch you'd come rackin' in pretty soon, hollerin' fer steam in a hurry so we could foller the *Corsair*."

Shan eyed the old man narrowly. "Any particular reason why I ought to follow that steamboat?"

Obie spat deliberately. "Luke Fowler's aboard the *Corsair*," he said. "Him an' Sam Gotch was mighty close pals."

Shan's eyes were grim. "Are you sure Fowler is on the *Corsair*?"

"Seen him go aboard with Owen Keach. An' he never come ashore ag'in. They was arm in arm when they walked up the stageplank, but Luke didn't act exactly happy. It looked sort of odd, seein' Keach in his fancy clothes bein' so chummy with a roustabout. Fact is I had a feelin' that Keach had the muzzle of that gun o' his jammed into Luke Fowler's ribs."

Shan stripped off his ragged hunting shirt and began passing fuel. "Why should I be interested in trailing Luke Fowler?" he asked.

"Maybe you're interested in askin' Luke Fowler why him an' Sam Gotch tried to stop your clock a couple hours ago. Then ag'in, maybe you're only searchin' for three bar'l's o' flour that disappeared from the *Jezebel* somewhere between the Yellowstone fork an' Leavenworth last fall. Maybe that's it."

Shan grinned faintly. "You do a lot of figuring, don't you, Obie? Two of us can't handle the *Jezebel* alone. We've got to round up a crew. Men we can trust. And you'll have to take on fuel."

"Pete Harmon, the engineer, is in Pierre. I've already sent the night fireman to fetch Pete an' to get a couple more boys who've crewed for me an' you in the past. They ought to be showin' up soon."

Shan looked at the steam gauge. "It'll be two hours before we make working pressure. Another two or three hours to stop at the fuel dock to take on wood. The *Corsair* must have been fueled beforehand. She'll have a fifty-mile start on us."

"The *Jezebel* is a heap faster'n that tub," Obie sniffed. "We'll smell their smoke before dark tomorrow night after we git rollin'—if they're still on the river."

Footsteps sounded on the plank. The crew was arriving. Shan didn't want to be seen while the boat was still at Pierre. He picked up his shirt, retreated through the cargo deck and went above to Obie's cabin.

He was bone-weary. The bandage on his arm was soiled now. The wound throbbed dully. He glimpsed himself in Obie's shaving mirror. He stared broodingly at his sun-blackened, unshaven face.

He thought of Lizette Benbow's soft, high-bred refinement and the clean smell of her hair and the creamy purity of her skin.

He blew out the lamp, pulled himself wearily full length on the bed, too tired to shed his buckskins. It was the first white man's bed he had known in months. Its softness was a shock to him. He finally moved to the floor, wrapping himself in blankets. He fell into heavy sleep, still resenting the things he remembered about Lizette Benbow.

Chapter III

CRACK-UP!

SHAN awakened as the *Jezebel* came to life and got under way. The packet moved upstream to the fuel dock, and he slept fitfully as the commotion of fueling went on for hours. Then he aroused as the craft got under way again. He heard the engine bell clang full ahead, felt the surge of power as the wheels bit deep into the river. The *Jezebel* began to drive against the muddy current of the rising Missouri.

Again his thoughts swung to Lizette Benbow. Damn that girl! She was so vivid in his mind he could even imagine again the perfume of her hair.

He dropped asleep again. Obie would be in the pilot house and would not need relief for hours. There was nothing to do now but wait until they picked up the smoke of the *Corsair*.

He slept ten hours without stirring. When he awakened it was past noon, but the day was gray and stormy. Sleet squalls beat against the cabin window, and he could see the clammy streamers of fog racing along the deck. The engine vibration came plainly. The *Jezebel* was bucking one of those throwbacks of winter that sometimes ended in a real blizzard.

He arose hastily. Hanging from a wall hook was a suit of captain's blues, along with shoes, clean socks and underwear and a slicker and rainhat. They were his own clothes, from the luggage he had left aboard the night he had disappeared from the *Jezebel*.

His razor, shaving mug and strop were also laid out, ready for use. He decided that Obie had performed this service. He went on deck, drew hot water from the boiler line. Returning he shaved, taking a vast satisfaction in watching the sure, aggressive lines of his lean face as it emerged from the bristle of beard. He trimmed his hair as best he could with a pair of shears, and got into the blues.

He stood preening himself with a vigorous man's vanity. A hand tapped the door, and a voice asked, "Your breakfast is ready."

Shan didn't move for an instant. That had been Lizette Benbow's voice.

He opened the door. She stood in the lee of the Texas, wearing a mackinaw and heavy woolen skirt. A tam o' shanter was set jauntily on her hair. The fog and wind had whipped high color into her cheeks. She bore a tray, covered with a linen cloth.

She eyed him quizzically from head to foot. "My, my!" she said. "Juba should see you now. She'd be really impressed."

She entered, placed the tray on the table and began setting out ham and eggs, flapjacks and coffee.

"You were in this cabin last night, weren't you?" Shan demanded, annoyed. "I thought I only imagined it."

"I came in just before we shoved off," she said evenly. "I wanted to make sure you were still with us. You awakened, then went back to sleep."

At least, Shan reflected, he hadn't imagined that perfume.

Shan began eating. "When did you come aboard?" he asked carefully.

"Early in the game. In fact I was aboard even before you arrived."

Shan stopped eating and glared. She smiled. "You actually thought you had put one over on me by slipping out of the house last night. I knew you would leave. I gave you every chance to go. And I knew you would head for the *Jezebel* to talk to Obie again."

She was enjoying his irritation. "I let Juba entertain the marshal with another hot rum, and I stole out the back way too. I didn't have to be careful, so I came directly through town to the levee. I came aboard five minutes ahead of you. But even Obie didn't know I was hiding on the cargo deck listening."

Shan began chewing mechanically again. "Eavesdropping. All right! What did you hear?"

"Something about Owen Keach and Luke Fowler. Something about barrels of flour. I didn't quite follow it all. I tried to pump Obie later. But he won't talk. He doesn't trust me."

"Should I trust you?" Shan asked.

"From a man accused of murder and robbery that sounds a little inconsistent. I would say that the burden of proof is on you when it comes to deciding who to trust."

"Maybe Obie figured anything he told you would be the same as telling it to Owen Keach," Shan said. "He likely learned a long time ago never to trust a woman in love. They aren't sane."

"Sane?" she exploded. "Is there anything sane about this whole affair? Why is a common rousabout like Luke Fowler so important that you and Obie Frame take a steamboat that doesn't belong to you and go steaming up the Missouri River through a storm and floating ice that might send us all to the bottom any minute? And now—"

A hand tapped the door. Shan opened it. The arrival was a lanky, old-time deck-hand known as Memphis Jim. He had steamboated with Shan in the past, and evidently Obie had told him who was aboard, for he grinned broadly and touched his rainhat respectfully.

"Cap'n Obie asks if you kin come to the pilot-house right away, Shan," he said.

Shan pulled on his slicker, strode out on deck and mounted the steps to the wheelhouse. Obie, weary after hours on duty, was balancing the big, mahogany wheel. For the sake of better vision he had opened the fore window and wore slicker and rain-hat as he faced the driving rain and sleet which would have blinded the glass. The *Corsair* was pushing steadily into a gray mist that reduced visibility to a few hundred yards.

Obie gave Shan an approving glance. "You look better," he observed. "Smell better too. I jest got a whiff o' woodsmoke from upwind."

"Where are we?" Shan asked.

"Jest passed Webfoot Crick. The river makes a big horseshoe bend. That smoke come across the neck. I figger they're steamin' the other end of the bend, which puts 'em still five miles ahead of us."

"I'll take over," Shan said. "Get some rest, Obie. I'll slow down after I pick up their smoke a little stronger. We've got one thing in our favor. We'll be downwind from 'em for the next fifty miles the way the river runs—if the wind doesn't shift. They can't smell our smoke, but we can pick up theirs."

Obie went tiredly below, leaving Shan at the wheel. Shan found that he had his work cut out. The rain came slatting in blindingly, and at times it turned to sleet. He had borrowed Obie's gloves, but had to beat his hands on the wheel to warm them.

The fog would thin under the drive of the wind, giving brief, wavering glimpses of the storm-tossed river. At other times it would settle so gray and bleak that he was forced to ring the wheels down to mere steerageway.

The main run of ice had gone down the river, but big, water-worn floes still were afloat, presenting a constant menace. The margin of the river was fringed with grounded ice cakes that had been piled up by the main breakup. The river was rising steadily now, and this shore ice was beginning to float away.

AFTER an hour Shan turned, suddenly realizing that Lizette Benbow was standing in the pilothouse. She must have come very quietly. She wore a slicker.

"Growing colder," Shan commented. "This may turn into a real snorter before morning. It'll be a tough night on the river. Keach will have to tie up before long and wait for better weather."

"What happens when we overtake the *Corsair*?" she asked.

"Don't want to overtake 'em—yet," Shan said shortly.

She was rebuffed. She stood in silence, watching him fight the river and the rising storm. Twilight of the lowering day was settling now.

She tried another tack. "I noticed a purple scar on your back right between the shoulder blades last night when you were helping Obie in the fireroom. It looked like a wound that was nearly healed. A—a knife wound."

"What would you know about knife wounds?"

"Quit evading me," she burst out. "It was a knife wound! Quit treating me like a baby. Did a whickerbill do that too?"

"Maybe."

She glared at him as though she wanted to hit him in the face, and beat the truth from him.

"You—" she began bitterly.

Shan lifted a hand. The smell of woodsmoke came in sudden, unmistakable volume out of the wind-torn fog.

And then something else loomed gigantically out of the murk, close to starboard.

It was the *Corsair*, her prow lifting a muddy curl. She was bearing down full ahead, directly upon the *Jezebel*'s beam in a deliberate collision course.

Shan did many things in the few seconds' grace that he had. He shouted down the speaking tube.

"All hands on deck. We're in collision!"

He tripped the whistle treadle. The *Jezebel*'s siren lifted a deafening, despairing bellow. He spun the wheel, trying to bring the packet around so as to take a glancing blow. But that was impossible.

Before the *Jezebel* could respond the *Corsair* was upon her. Shan heard Lizette scream. He glimpsed Owen Keach's face, steely hard and ruthless in the open pilot-window of the *Corsair*.

The *Corsair*, bigger and heavier, had been equipped with a makeshift ram, made of logs and boiler plate which were cushioned with bales of grass or willows.

The *Corsair* towered gigantically in the fog. Then her armored prow drove into the *Jezebel's* vulnerable flank, just forward of the engine room.

The *Jezebel* heeled far over, taking water as far as her fireboxes. A burst of steam gushed from below. The grinding of tortured planking sounded.

For seconds the packets clung together. Then the *Corsair's* wheels, spinning in reverse, took hold, and she clawed clear of the sinking *Jezebel*.

Shan felt the power gutter out of the *Jezebel's* wheels. He kept spinning the helm, hoping to drive her ashore on momentum before she went under. But shore was more than a quarter of a mile away. Too far.

The sideglass shattered around them. Shan saw the pinkish dart of gunfire from the decks of the *Corsair*. They were shooting, trying to pick him off in the pilothouse. And they were shooting at Lizette, though Shan doubted if they knew she was a woman because of her oilskins.

He pushed Lizette to the floor. The *Jezebel* had obeyed her helm, and was careening sluggishly through the mist. The fog was closing in heavily now, shutting out the shoreline, and the *Corsair* was but a dim, ghastly gray shape in the mist to larboard.

Shan felt the last of the life go out of the *Jezebel*. He grasped Lizette's arm.

"Time to get out of here," he panted.

They raced down the steps to the top deck. They felt and heard the snap of bullets past them and then they reached the protection of the *texas*.

Obie Frame lay there, groaning, blood streaming from a bullet wound at the base

of his neck. He had been shot as he rushed from his cabin where he had been asleep.

Shan glimpsed two sprawled figures on the lower deck. One was the good-natured Memphis Jim. With him lay a second fireman. They had also been killed as they emerged from the engineroom.

Then the *Jezebel's* prow dipped under, and the lower deck was a fading vision as muddy water closed over it. Shan only had time to strip off his slicker and pick up Obie's dazed body. Then the river came up slowly, almost gently, and they were in it.

The *Corsair* had drifted off into the fog. That, at least, saved them from further gunfire. Lizette Benbow was at Shan's side, as he swam, supporting Obie.

She had stripped off her oilskins. "I can swim," she gasped.

But the icy water was the touch of death. Shan knew none of them would live many minutes in its freezing embrace. He could feel the numbness tearing through him.

THE current saved them. Shan felt his feet touch bottom. The river had swept them into a fog-shrouded tongue of grounded ice that extended off into the mist—to shore, Shan hoped.

Lizette was too numbed to take advantage of the shallows. She would have drifted on past into deep water again, but Shan managed to tangle his numb fingers in her thick hair. He pulled her beside him. With his last strength he pulled himself onto the ice. Then he tugged the girl clear, and between them they finally got Obie's dazed weight out of the river.

The wind, icy as the river itself, had its way with them now. The fog was like a



TOPS FOR **QUALITY**

BIGGER AND BETTER

shroud around them, swirling in close.

Shan mumbled, "We've got to keep moving."

Lizette struggled to her feet. They lifted Obie. With their arms locked around him they staggered over upended floes, and now Shan made out the shadow of the shore. They fell several times. But each time they got up. Lizette Benbow did her share.

They reached shore. A sparse growth of willows fringed the bleak rim of the river channel. Beyond that lay the hostile, open plains, swept by the storm.

They staggered into a gully where they at least had respite from the bite of the wind. They bent over Obie. A bullet had drilled him just at the base of his neck. An ugly injury.

Shan pulled off his shirt, wrung the water from it. Tearing it in strips, they managed to staunch the flow of blood. The bullet had passed entirely through, and Shan saw that the wound was fairly clean. The shock was hitting Obie now.

He said to Lizette. "Wring the water out of your clothes, then put them back on. It'll be a little warmer that way. I'll do the same for Obie and myself."

After this was done they huddled together, the girl locking her arms around Obie, warming him with her own body. Obie finally stirred, and after mumbling for a long time, he came back to full consciousness.

"How about Pete Harmon an' Memphis an'—?" Obie asked.

Shan shook his head. "We're the only ones. Keach's bunch picked 'em off. They tried for us too. The fog saved us. But they probably think we're dead."

Obie's glance turned accusingly to Lizette Benbow. She met his gaze levelly. "I know what you're thinking," she said. "I never said I would marry Owen Keach. I detest him. I've never let him kiss me. Whether you believe that or not, it is true."

She looked at Shan. "I'm fighting for my father," she said slowly. "I tried to prevent Keach from destroying what little we had left, which was the *Jezebel*. I had only a woman's weapons to fight with. I deliberately let Keach become interested in me. I played the part of a lady, while I was also playing for time in the hope I could raise money to fight him with his own weapons—violence. Anything is fair in

war—and love. And this is war, not love, as far as I'm concerned."

Shan remembered his first impression of her—soft, vain, pampered. Now she stood shaking in the chill of the storm, her wet skirt clinging to her figure, her hair hanging in damp disorder. There was nothing weak or pampered about her now—and no yielding nor complaint.

"I was too sure of my charm and beauty," she added with a wry attempt at a smile. "Evidently gold was more alluring to Keach in the final showdown. For I've lost the *Jezebel* now. That's the finish of the Benbow Packet Company."

"I lost the *Jezebel*," Shan corrected. "I under-estimated Keach. He's got a shrewd mind. He's the one who sent the marshal to your house. He guessed I'd go there. He wanted me in jail where I'd be out of the way. But he knew if that missed fire that I'd follow him in the *Jezebel*. So he pulled off the river, to see if the *Jezebel* showed up. I should have thought of that. I'm the one to blame for losing your packet."

"Why did he know you'd follow him?" Lizette asked quietly. "I've told you where I stand. I've admitted I've been a shameless woman, using my wiles on a man I despised. Isn't it time you trust me? Dad trusted you. He never believed you were guilty. I'm the one who offered the reward for you, for I didn't listen to him."

"But I couldn't help remembering Dad's faith in you. That's the real reason I didn't turn you over to the law when you first came to the house last night. Isn't it time you told me what really happened the night of October ninth up there at the Yellowstone Fork?"

Shan said, "Keach and his tough crew robbed the *Jezebel*. I'm sure of that, but doubt if I could ever prove it in court. But they didn't get the gold. Harry Jessup, our purser, was in on the deal."

"Jessup!" Obie croaked. "Hell's flames! Now wait—"

"Jessup flashed those signals with the bullseye lantern," Shan said. "I saw him do it. I suspected what was up, for I remembered having seen Jessup hobnobbing with Keach at Fort Benton when we were laying over there. Keach knew we were carrying that gold. He had bid on the insurance too, but I overbid him. And then

he pulled out of Benton a day ahead of schedule. He was that much ahead of us in starting down-river.

"I smelled a holdup. I waited until Jessup had gone to his cabin. Then I opened the purser's safe and moved the gold down to the cargo deck. It was near midnight and everybody was asleep except the watch. You were at the wheel, Obie. I had to make eight or nine trips. You'd be surprised how heavy that stuff is.

"I drilled a hole with a two-inch augur in three flour barrels, dumped some of the flour overside and poured the gold into the barrels. Then I plugged up the augur holes.

"I thought nobody had seen me, but I was wrong. Just as I finished the job I heard a sound behind me. The last thing I remembered was seeing the shadows of two men against the gangway light. Sam Gotch and Luke Fowler.

"They must have used a sandbag. The next thing I remembered I was in the river with a knife in my back. They had used a knife to make sure of the job.

"I remember getting ashore. I didn't remember anything more for a week. When I finally came out of it, I was in a lodge in a Crow Village.

"A Crow hunting party had found me lying on the riverbank. They thought I was dead at first. They did what they could for me. The medicine man worked me over. Even that didn't kill me, but it was more than a month before I was sure I would make it. It was mid-winter before I could stand on my feet again.

"I lived with the Crows until a month ago when I was strong enough to travel, and came down the plains to Pierre. I met a renegade whom I had done a favor for once. He told me I was wanted for robbery, but he didn't mention the murder of Harry Jessup. That was news to me."

Lizette had been listening breathlessly. "Who killed Jessup?"

"Keach or one of his bunch, probably," Shan said. "Maybe they thought he had run a sandy on them when they found that safe empty. That likely was Jessup's first crooked deal. He was a soft little man and his conscience might have bothered him later. Keach couldn't afford to let any softies alive."

They were silent a moment. Then Obie

asked, "What do you reckon happened to the gold, Shan?"

Shan shrugged. "That was the secret that only Luke Fowler and Sam Gotch knew. They spotted me when I came into Pierre last night. They knew their goose was cooked if I stayed alive, so they tried to rub me out.

"Keach saw that shooting. He spotted Luke Fowler running away. Keach guessed it must have had something to do with the gold. He likely had been trying to figure out all winter what happened to the stuff, and why I had dropped out of sight. So he grabbed Luke Fowler, after I was out of the way, and made him talk. Keach knows now what happened to the gold. You can bank on that."

Again there was a silence. "You traveled all the way from the Yellowstone?" Lizette asked. "How?"

"Hoofed it," Shan said indifferently.

She sighed a little, ruefully. "I'm sorry I called you a—a filthy squawman," she said. "I have a vile temper."

"I had the wrong slant on some things, myself," Shan admitted.

"Shake!" said Lizette. Shan took her hand. He was keenly aware of its slimness and grace in contrast to his own big palm. He withdrew his hand, swiftly, almost resentfully.

It would be so easy for a man to make a fool of himself over those dark eyes and tawny hair and soft lips. Owen Keach had demonstrated that. Lizette Benbow was from a world of silk and satin and refinement. Shan was a Missouri River bucko, self-educated, self-sufficient. He didn't intend to carry any more scars, if they got out of this alive.

Chapter IV

GOLD IN HELL'S ICE-BOX

WIND drove icy rain upon them. "We've got to move," Shan said. "The wind is shifting around dead into the north. It'll be blowing a blizzard before morning. We'll freeze to death if we stay here. Think you can travel, Obie?"

Obie said casually. "I'll stay here 'til you young folks fetch some help. I'd slow you up on the way to Pierre."

"Pierre is more than a hundred miles

away," Shan said. "We've got to find shelter before morning. There's only one chance. A steamboat can't travel in this weather. Keach has tied up the *Corsair* by this time. I'm hoping I know where he put in."

Obie lifted his head excitedly. "Squaw Crick! That's the best mooring near here in a storm."

Shan nodded. "That's my guess, too. Squaw has high cutbanks. We laid over there a couple of times to ride out storms. It can't be more than five or six miles west of here. Do you think you can hold out that long, Obie?"

Lizette uttered a dismayed sound. "I prefer to try for Pierre," she burst out. "We'd all be better off dead than to surrender to Keach. You, above all, Shan Malone."

"That's right," Shan said. "We won't surrender. But they think we're dead. They may all be asleep by the time we find the *Corsair*—if we find it. Chances are we won't. But it's worth the try. A steamboat is big. There are hiding places on a steamboat, provided we can get aboard without being seen."

She subsided. "Again I'm sorry," she said meekly. "I seem to be in the habit of under-estimating you."

Stormy darkness was upon them. They helped Obie to his feet. Supporting him between them, they started.

The wind hit them with brutal power the instant they emerged from the gully. It pierced their wet garb. Stinging sleet lashed them at times. But exertion warmed them, kept them alive.

In his heart Shan knew that he and the girl would have had a fighting chance of making it to Pierre. But Obie could never have made it. Now they had turned their backs on Pierre and were striking out into the storm, gambling for Obie's sake on a thin chance of survival.

Shan was sure Lizette understood this too. Her agreement to the gamble, like all her decisions, had been swift, unhesitating, once she understood that this was not surrender.

They followed the river bottom, taking advantage of what shelter the cutbanks afforded. Full darkness came, and they had to feel their way almost step by step.

Often they carried Obie bodily through

the rougher going. Occasionally they had clear sailing. Then again they would find themselves trapped in exhausting tangles of willows or driftwood that forced them back, causing long, maddening delays as they felt for a clear route.

The girl helped with Obie's increasing burden. She was amazingly lithe and tireless. But it was heart-breaking work. They were forced to pause and rest often, in the lee of some windbreak, while their strength revived. At such times they huddled together for warmth. Then they would arise and struggle ahead again.

They had to stay with the river, for that was their only hope of locating the mouth of Squaw Creek. Often they were forced to travel over the grounded ice along the margin of the stream.

Obie gave out after an eternity of struggle. Shan shouldered his weight then, and carried him bodily, with the girl giving him what help she could.

The rain was changing to wet snow, and the temperature was falling. Shan felt new ice crunch underfoot now and then whenever they blundered into shallows along the river.

He had lost all track of time, for exhaustion numbed him. The end was not far away, when the wind brought plainly the faint tang of woodsmoke, and the greasy, oily smell of an engineroom.

Lizette uttered a little, sighing sound, and that was the first intimation that she had given up hope.

Galvanized, they pushed ahead through the snow that was driving now in a blinding wall. Shan realized they had turned away from the main river. The stream they were following now was Squaw Creek, which flowed in from the west.

Then, startlingly close, they saw a red flare of light through the storm. Again it was the glow from an opened firebox.

The *Corsair* was moored at a point where high cutbanks protected it from the main drive of the storm. The ice had gone out of Squaw Creek, but its fringe was lined with grounded floes, and the steamboat lay almost against the floes on their side of the stream.

Only the engineroom showed light. Above decks the boat was dark.

Shan left the girl and Obie, and crawled over the ice to the prow. He pulled himself

aboard into the dark cargo deck. He prowled for a time, then returned.

"Only one fireman below to make steam," he said. "Looks like they're all asleep. I saw no sign of a deck watch."

The storm was an ally now, offering a comforting shield as they helped Obie through the driving snow to the steamboat. Praying that the fireman would not chance to look out, they boarded the craft by way of the forward deck.

Shan again left them and explored above. The *Corsair* had a score of passenger cabins on the second deck. He was gambling that none of these would be occupied, for the only men aboard were steamboat men who should be occupying their usual crew quarters in the Texas above, or below.

He passed through the dark lounge, and felt his way to the swingdoors that opened into the gangway serving the passenger cabins. He was at home on a steamboat, and darkness was no obstacle. Cabin doors opened off the gangway on either side. He halted, listening to his own breathing. He became certain finally that he had been right. All these cabins were unoccupied.

He went below. Obie had strengthened a trifle. With Shan and the girl supporting him, they ascended the companionway silently.

Then they were inside a cabin, well abaft. The cramped little room was warm—deliciously, marvelously warmed by the boilers nearby.

THEY placed Obie on a bunk. The first pallid glimmer of daybreak showed at the single little window that overlooked the narrow outside promenade where the blizzard moaned in torture. Shan had not realized that it had taken all night to travel those few miles.

He heard the girl sigh again. There was a broken, quivery catch in that sound. She had been driving herself, keyed up by excitement. Now the reaction was hitting her. Shan suddenly was aware of that same limp, washed-out sensation.

There were two tiers of bunks, equipped with hard mattresses and blankets. A wash-stand with a tin basin and pitcher completed the furnishings.

"Turn in," Shan murmured to the girl. "There's nothing we can do now but trust to luck. There's no reason why anybody

should wander into this cabin. So get some sleep. Shed those wet clothes, so they can dry. I'll take care of Obie."

Shan left the cabin, and was gone nearly a quarter of an hour. When he returned he had his arms loaded.

Lizette had climbed into an upper bunk. Her clothes were hung to dry, and she was sitting up, a blanket wrapped around her. In the gray light he saw the vastness of the anxiety in her eyes that looked enormously dark and big against her wan face.

"Where have you been?" she choked, and she was suddenly weeping quietly.

"I raided the galley," he whispered exultantly. "Got us some jerk, biscuits, molasses and a chunk of left-over buffalo roast. It'll keep us from starving. No telling how long we'll be here. I didn't take enough to be missed."

She sank back on the bunk. "Don't—don't ever leave me—us—without telling me what you're up to," she sighed. "I was frightened."

Shan chanced one more sortie, and brought back the pitcher filled with water. Obie was now slightly feverish. He drank gratefully as Shan held a cup for him.

"Damned if we ain't as snug as a cat on a pillow," Obie mumbled, gamely trying to grin. "Next time see if you kin raise a jug of rum, Shan. Cussed water always rusts my pipes."

Shan stretched out on a bunk also. He was conscious of every sound aboard. Weaponless, except for his fists, he was ready to leap up to fight for their lives if anyone approached their hiding place.

Outside the storm was blowing harder. He heard sounds aboard that indicated the crew was wakening. The cook was busy in the galley which was just abaft their cabin. The savory aroma of breakfast worked its way through the boat.

Now and then footsteps clumped down the gangway past their door. Each time Shan sat up instantly. Lizette and Obie awakened too, for he could hear them stop breathing as they lay in taut silence.

But the footsteps always passed by. Then the girl and Obie would sigh a little. Shan would lie back, feeling the nerve tremors running through his weary body. Between such alarms they slept, drugged by the narcotic warmth of their hide-away.

The storm howled steadily as the day

advanced. Now and then the paddlewheels broke into brief action, breaking up the new ice that was forming around the moorings.

They aroused from their broken sleep at mid-afternoon. Clad once more in clothes that were dry, though torn and shrunken, they made a meal on the food Shan had brought.

That lifted their spirits. Even Obie was able to sit up. His hickory-knot physique was throwing off the shock of his wound, and though he swore at times in pain, he was out of danger—on that score at least.

But the strain was always upon them. In their minds was the certainty that, sooner or later, their presence aboard would be discovered.

Lizette arranged her hair deftly in two plaited pigtails that hung down her back. She inspected the result in the cracked shaving mirror. It was plain that even this little matter of added neatness increased her confidence in herself.

Obie eyed her. "Durned if you ain't a looker, even in a squaw hairdo, an' a dress that looks like the packrats had drug it in," he commented. "So help me I wish I was thirty years younger."

She laughed softly. "Keep talking, Obie," she said. "I could listen to things like that for quite a while."

She gave Shan a quick, sidelong glance.

Obie chuckled. "He thinks you're purty as a red wagon too, but he's too mule-headed to say so."

She peered at Shan mischievously. "Speak for yourself, sir," she said.

Shan said easily. "Sure. You're not bad looking."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "A rather negative statement," she said accusingly. "Don't you think so, Obie?"

"He always was a hard cuss to please," Obie assured her.

"So I understand," she nodded. "I was told that Shan Malone left a trail of shattered feminine hearts in every port on the river. I can believe it, after seeing him in his blues and brass buttons yesterday."

She was prodding him, baiting him. This was the way, no doubt, that she had brought Owen Keach to heel. It was the vanity of an attractive woman. He could understand that. She just couldn't help it. But it would mean nothing to her. She'd go back east

to her own kind, and he would have his river and what it had always been to him.

A poker game had started in the deck lounge. It went on all afternoon. Now and then they heard Owen Keach's mellow voice among the rougher, profane comments of the other players.

"Seven or eight men aboard," Shan finally estimated.

The storm dwindled as darkness came. The wind shifted around to the south. The temperature climbed with that surprising about-face that was characteristic of the Dakota plains at this season.

The poker game broke up. By midnight the boat was asleep again, except for the engineroom and themselves. That, at least, gave them the chance to leave the tiny cabin which had become a cage to them. Shan raided the galley again, and the girl helped him. They were careful to take only food that was not likely to be missed.

What Shan wanted above all was a gun, but there was none in the galley. He did arm himself with a thin-bladed meat knife.

AT DAYBREAK they heard Keach rousing out the crew. Thin fog hung over the creek. The *Corsair* got underway, backing through the thin ice that had formed.

Reaching the main river the craft turned her prow upstream and began heading through the gray fog deeper into the plains.

Shan felt the vibration of the engine through the deck. "They're pushing this boat with every pound of steam she'll carry," he said. "The river is rising. Wherever we're going Keach wants to get there in a hurry. My guess is that he's racing the river. She's rising faster than he wants."

The shore, changeless in its monotony of distant cutbanks and mudflats, slid past hour after hour. The day remained misty and chill, with occasional rain squalls.

It was late afternoon when Shan arose suddenly from the bunk. For the first time in hours the engine had slowed to half speed. He moved to a window.

The *Corsair*'s prow was turned toward shore. Here the river was more than a mile wide, spreading out between banks that were imperceptible in the misty distance. As far as the eye could see the plains stretched endlessly beyond either shore.

Lizette was at Shan's side, pressing her shoulder against him as she peered.

Slowing to mere steerageway the *Corsair* felt her way through shallowing water to shore. The stageplank went down and men raced to land with mooring lines.

"Antelope Bend," Shan murmured.

The place was an uninviting stretch of flood channel, bearing a scant speckle of dead weeds and willows, and piled with driftwood and studded with sand bars and bogholes. That dismal flat would soon be under water when the river reached a higher stage, for the true north bank of the Missouri lay half a mile or more beyond.

Owen Keach went ashore, accompanied by five men. One of the party was the squatly, bullet-headed Luke Fowler. They were all carrying picks and shovels and gunny sacks.

Fowler didn't seem happy. He kept glancing nervously at his companions and tried to hang back. One of the hard-faced men pushed him ahead, and cursed him.

The six climbed over grounded ice, and driftwood, and vanished among the sand-bars across the flat.

Shan turned to Obie. "Did the *Jezebel* make a landing here last fall on that down trip after the robbery?" he asked.

Obie nodded. "We laid over here all night," he said. "It was rainin' and stormy, so we tied up 'til the weather cleared. But the river was high then. There was ten feet o' water on that flat. We tied up further north to the true bank o' the river."

They waited. Once, a distant gunshot sounded far off. Then silence again.

Twilight was not far away when sweaty men, mud-stained and excited, appeared. They were staggering under heavily-burdened gunnysacks. Even Owen Keach was muddy and weighted down. But their attitudes were wild and exultant.

"There's your gold," Shan said, as the burdened men, came aboard, panting under the weights they carried.

Only five men had returned. Luke Fowler did not come back. Shan remembered the reluctance and fear with which Fowler had gone ashore. He remembered the gunshot, and he knew that Fowler never would return.

"Fowler and Sam Gotch rolled those three flour barrels overboard that night when the *Jezebel* was tied up here," Shan

said. "I sort of had a hunch something like that had happened. They knew they wouldn't have much chance of spiriting half a ton of gold off the *Jezebel* without being caught.

"So they cached it in shallow water at the moorings. They were gambling that they'd be able to find it again when the river was at low stage—probably this summer, but it was worth the chance. Barrels as heavy as those would stay where they sank. Fowler must have led them right to the spot, and it didn't take 'em long to dig the barrels out of any mud that had settled on them."

He added quietly. "Now both Fowler and Gotch are dead and Keach has the gold."

Keach and his men went ashore again, and returned after less than an hour lugging another load of treasure.

Sounds of jubilation and drinking arose in the lounge where the gold was being divided.

"There'll be a big poker game tonight," Shan said, grinning mirthlessly. "Keach will stay sober and pluck them like you'd pick a chicken. That's his way. All we got to do is sit tight. He'll get a surprise when we dock at Pierre. Then we'll do some plucking on our own hook."

Back in the galley the cook had started an evening meal, and he was rattling the pots and pans with vigor, and singing.

They waited in darkness, listening to all these sounds. Now the strain was heavier than ever upon them.

Footsteps came from the galley, heading down the gangway past their door.

And then, Obie—still none too certain on his feet—blundered against the washstand as he tried to move toward his bunk. He knocked the pitcher off the stand, and it crashed on the floor, rolling and rattling at their feet like the crack of Judgment Day.

Their luck had turned against them at last.

Chapter V

BUSTED FLUSH

THE FOOTSTEPS paused. A man muttered something in half-drunken surprise. Then the door opened.

A lamp had been lit in the gangway. The intruder evidently was the cook. He was a thin-necked man, with straggly hair, a drooping straw-colored mustache, and wore a floursack apron.

Shan grasped him by his thin neck, snagged him entirely through the door into the cabin. His right fist crashed into the man's jaw. The cook had started a frightened squawk, but Shan's knuckles cut off the sound.

Shan struck again, and again, and the man sagged. She held his suddenly limp body, and stood listening.

No sign of alarm came. The outcry the cook had started had not been heard forward.

Lizette was at Shan's side, breathing hard. His own heart was thudding.

"What can I do?" she murmured.

Shan handed her the knife he had filched from the galley. "Cut up a blanket. We'll tie him up."

They bound the man. When he showed signs of regaining consciousness Shan gagged him.

The pungent tang of scorching beef and burning biscuits drifted from the galley.

"It would have to be the cook we bumped into," Shan said bitterly. "He'll be missed soon, with the grub burning. We've got to get out of here."

The acrid odor was heavier from the galley. Shan peered out. Just abaft their cabin, a side gangway led out on the aft promenade.

"Come on!" he murmured. They steadied Obie, as they made that twenty-foot rush into the side gangway. Shan opened the door, and looked out on the promenade.

The deck was unlighted, except for the glow from the windows of the lounge.

Somewhere below a man bawled, "Where'n hell's that damned cookee? Supper's burnin' up. Ike! Ike! Where in blazes air yuh?"

Two men came down the main gangway from the lounge past their hide-out, and into the galley. One or two others must have come from below. There was profanity and some laughter in the galley as men hustled to jettison the spoiled food.

"Ike's drunk an' has likely holed up somewhere's," someone said. "An' me hungry as a wolf. Let's find him, an' we'll turkey-walk him back to his job."

Footsteps sounded on deck. A man in a mackinaw and corduroy cap had descended from the top deck, and was heading for the galley, by way of the side promenade gangway.

Shan pushed his comrades back into the darkness of the opening as the man came walking toward them. The man loomed up in the darkness, and Shan took a stride, and swung a fist to the stomach, and then to the jaw. The first punch suffocated any outcry, and the second dropped him dazed on the deck.

This time the victory was more profitable. Shan arose, with a navy pistol in his hands.

"Two down, and not more than five or six more to go," he said softly.

There was a lift to his voice. Lizette, standing close, looked at him swiftly, and the same thought, the same sudden hope, was in both their minds.

They still had one advantage. Their presence had not yet been suspected. But that advantage would not last many seconds longer. The cook or this second stunned man was certain to be found, for men were now moving through the boat, shouting for the cook.

Shan drew Obie and the girl with him, and moved forward down the deck. He peered into the lounge. It was empty. Evidently everyone had moved back to the galley, or below, in search of the cook.

The companionway to the top deck led from the open promenade. He pushed the girl and Obie toward that ascent.

"Take Obie above," Shan murmured.

She held back. "What are—?"

"Do what I say," Shan insisted. "I can work faster, better alone. I want Obie out of the way. And I want you out of the way."

She continued to look at him, her face pale. He suddenly pulled her against him, kissed her on the lips.

"All right," he said. "So you put the chains on me after all. Just like you did on Keach. It's you I'm worried about. I don't want you to get hurt. If you get out of this alive you can go back east and tell it big how you tamed Owen Keach, the killer, and how you made Shan Malone fall in love with you too."

He again pushed her toward the companionway. He spoke in Obie's ear. "If

my luck runs out, make her go overboard. She'd be better off dead in the river."

Then he left them. He heard Lizette say, "Shan—you don't—"

But he didn't turn back.

For someone was bellowing wildly in the cabin line. The bound and gagged cook had been found.

Shan entered the lamplit lounge. As he did so the swing door from the cabin gangway burst open. Owen Keach came striding through—and halted.

Keach had been shouting, "Search the boat! Somebody's—!"

Keach stood there for a motionless instant, his opaque eyes on Shan. And he had sized up the situation instantly.

Behind him the face of an unshaven tough crewman showed in the swing doors.

Then Keach, who had a pistol in his hand, leaped aside, swinging up his gun and tripping the trigger. Shan moved and fired an instant previously.

Shan's bullet struck Keach in the chest. Keach's shot scoured along Shan's ribs.

Keach was falling. The whiskered face shouted something, and the swing doors flapped farther open.

Shan shifted his sights, fired a second time. The report came as a bellowing echo to the first two shots that fogged the room with stinging powder fumes. He placed his bullet squarely into the face of Whiskers.

Shan raced out on deck. A man opened fire from the aft gangway, but Shan backed away from that contest, for he had no shots to waste.

He descended to the dark, echoing cargo deck, and listened to the excited, uncertain movements of men above who were suddenly demoralized.

He moved aft to a ladder that the crew used in going above from the engineroom. A man was descending the ladder, and when he stepped on the deck Shan hit him across the back of the neck.

That rabbit-punch dropped its victim, but the man had a gun in his hand, and reflex action touched off the weapon, sending a reverberating shot into the deck as he fell.

Shan picked up the dropped gun, which still had five loads in the chamber.

There could be no more than two or three men left on their feet aboard.

"All right," Shan shouted. "We've got you cross-fired. Do you come down to the foredeck with your hands raised, or do we come after you, and dig you out with bullets?"

Someone shouted plaintively, "Keach!"

"You'll find him in the lounge with a bullet in his guts," Shan shouted. "Take a look. There's another of you boys lying in the cabin gangway. He's dead. And a third on the aft promenade deck. And here's a fresh victim at the bottom of the engineroom ladder. This is Shan Malone talking. And I've got help. Speak up."

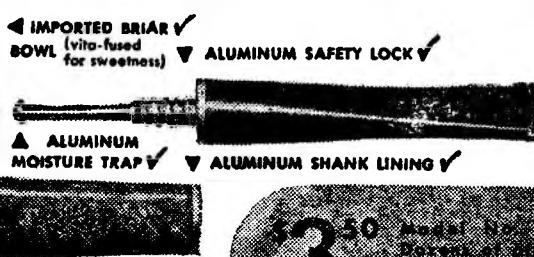
Obie took his cue from above. "No use tryin' the top deck," he shouted. "I've got the companionways covered. Make up your minds. Cut bait or fight."

The survivors had no way of knowing what odds they were facing. Presently a can called shakily, "Hold your fire. I'm comin' down."

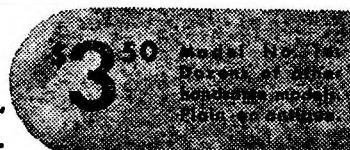
"No guns," Shan warned.

After a time a shuffling figure came down the forward stairs, and stood on the dimly lit foredeck, his arms raised.

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Shan kept talking to them as he moved out of the darkness. He searched them for weapons, found that they had discarded their guns.

Lizette appeared, carrying a pistol. It was Keach's gun.

Between them they got the three prisoners tied up. Shan searched the boat. He dragged the dazed cook, and the other two men he had slugged, into the lounge and also tied them up.

They had six prisoners. Owen Keach was still alive in the lounge, but the whiskered man Shan had shot lay stone dead in the cabin gangway.

Shan knelt beside Keach and moved him to a more comfortable position. Keach didn't have long to go. He looked up at Shan with his flat eyes. Then he saw Lizette bending over him too. And Obie Frame.

"Just three of you?" he murmured. "You played it smart—but you got the breaks."

He tried to smile at Lizette. "You thought you had fooled me, didn't you?" he said jeeringly. "But I was on to you from the first. I knew you hated me, and were trying to play me for a sucker. What I really wanted was that gold. I believed Malone knew what had happened to it. I had a hunch that, if he was alive, he'd try to get in touch with you or your father. I made love to you, so I could keep an eye on you, in case Malone ever showed up."

Keach's voice was growing fainter. He fought to hold on a moment longer. "I guessed the whole answer after that gunfight on the levee," he murmured. "And I almost got away with it. Damn the luck! Damn all of you, and damn the lu—"

Keach quit talking. After a moment Shan arose. He looked at Lizette. She turned suddenly away, shaken.

Keach was gone. Seeing him die had been seeing evil die. He had passed on, unrepentant, cursing his luck, boasting of his shrewdness. He had robbed, killed, and had died with his boots on.

"A strange man," Obie Frame muttered. "May the river never see the likes of him ag'in."

The *Corsair* steamed into the river at daybreak the next morning. Obie sat in the fireroom, a gun in his hand, directing the sullen, leg-chained men who were feed-

ing the furnaces from the depleted store.

All of the gold had been found and was stored in the cabin. The cook, the weakest individual among the prisoners, had admitted that it was Keach and the *Corsair's* crew who had held up the *Jezebel*. The cook was willing to talk in the hope of escaping punishment.

Shan was in the pilothouse. Lizette had not come from her cabin since locking herself in the previous night.

With the current to help, the return trip to Pierre was a matter of routine now.

Presently Lizette appeared on deck. She wore her shrunken dress, but she had piled her hair in a severe coil on top of her head. She mounted the steps to the pilothouse, and stood a long time in silence, looking at the river.

"The Benbow Packet Company is back on the river again," she finally said. "Any court will give dad damages from Keach's estate. That, in addition to the recovery of the gold, will make up the biggest part of our losses, at least."

She paused a moment. "But dad can't take active charge again. His health won't permit it. I won't permit it. I want you to take charge of the company, Shan."

Shan nodded, "That would be an honor. But Obie would make a better manager."

"I'm not asking you to be the manager," she said.

Shan looked at her. She was smiling at him, a tremulous, fearful little smile.

"The company is yours," she burst out tremulously. "If—if you'll marry me. You—you said you loved me. Last night. When you kissed me."

She began to weep. She wailed, "I'm proposing to you. And I'm not ashamed. I'm never going back East. I want to stay here—with you. You did say you love me. If you didn't mean it—I don't know what I'll do."

Shan forgot that he was at the wheel of a steamboat. It was some time before he remembered. He brought the *Corsair* around just in time as she was heading for a mudbank. Lizette Benbow kept her arms around his neck, however. And she wasn't weeping now. She was clinging to him.

"I meant it," Shan said. "I meant it plenty."

By HAROLD F.
CRUICKSHANK

Acheeta sprang,
and landed on
the colt's back.



FURY STALKS THE FIRS

Did that maddened cougar-queen dare face the deadly thunder of her human enemy, to exact blood payment for the slaughter of her young ones—so that she might hold forever her undisputed sway as Empress of Evergreen Empire?

ACHEETA, the she-cougar, twitched her long black-tipped tail as she stole through the grim forest. Usurpers had come to her range, making it difficult for her to watch her young and find sufficient food for the maintenance of her strength. Patiently, with great cunning, she hunted while her young ones hugged the craglands lair. The wild hinterland mother carried her kittens from one den to another, seldom leaving them longer than a night in the same den.

For years she had weaved about her foothills range haunts, a queen of the tawny big cats, hunted by man and dogs, by wolf pack, by silver tip and fighting elk bulls. Her sleek coat carried the telltale silver streaks of battle scars—the mark of antler

and fang, but Acheeta had emerged from her battles victorious, seldom seriously hurt.

This evening she gave out soft, almost inaudible throat sounds as she picked up the scent of a young muledeer buck.

On her big pads she sifted through the underbrush, sleekly avoiding cracking dead twigs. When her pads struck a tinder-dry windfall, she rolled over it, seething her body along without noise.

Suddenly she came to a sharp halt, her back arching as she caught the scent of one of her own kind.

Acheeta felt an impulse to screech her curses of protest, for the scent was that of a big barren female, the type which was always a menacing fighting unit of great speed and power. Acheeta was not now in

her best fighting form. Her young had vigorously exacted too heavy a toll of her strength.

Her jaws, which a moment or so ago drooled in expectation of kill and succulent feast, now seemed dry as she peeled her lips back exposing her terrible fangs.

She raised her head and sniffed sharply. Her keen sense of smell informed her that the intruder lioness was hot on the heels of a yearling buck. Every muscle in Acheeta's supple form rippled and the twitching of her tail became sharper. She would not be denied the kill or the feast. Suddenly she bunched her paws under her and bounded forward through a port in the underbrush. She eased around to her left knowing the buck had started to circle back.

The buck, a terrified young creature, leaped a wild rose thicket. He bounded high, swinging his head sharply from side to side. It was a characteristic scouting action for his kind. He dropped from his high bounding leap, quivering; he had glimpsed the long, tawny shape gaining swiftly on him.

Blowing hard, the buck could scarcely maintain rhythm in his stride and his body gave off strong fetid stench—the sign of increasing fear as his strength waned.

Suddenly, in desperation, he struck through an open glade in the upland spruce area. Then he gave a thick grunt of terror, dropping almost to his belly; cutting him off was a second cat—a bigger lioness.

Quivering, he stood, eyes wide, nostrils flared and blowing sharply as the cougar crept toward him. Utik now wheeled, but he had taken no more than half a dozen bounds when he crashed to earth, a heavy weight on his back.

Acheeta jerked a powerful forepaw forward to hook her talons in the buck's muzzle as her strong fangs sank deep into his spinal cord. With a sharp backward jerk of her paw, the buck's neck was broken.

Swiftly Acheeta leaped clear to slash the throat. As the blood oozed into her mouth, she snarled in a savage lust of possession.

Her ecstasy was shortlived. Without preliminary warnings the big barren cat bounded into the clearing.

Acheeta whipped from the kill, her tail tip waving jerkily, directly over the head of the fallen buck. Her deadly eyes spit flame, and it was the flame of a killer's

challenge which attended her guttural snarls.

Snarling counter-challenges, the other lioness crept forward—a powerfully-built creature whose terrible fangs were fully displayed. The tang of the buck's blood was strong and inviting.

Suddenly she sprang, expecting Acheeta to hurl backward, but at this time of the season Acheeta's underparts were vulnerable and she must protect them at all cost. She whipped to one side and as her enemy shot by, lashed out with a set of fore-talons which ripped the side of the cat's face. The stranger was swift. She whirled and struck, her claws ripping the side of Acheeta's mouth.

Badly hurt, Acheeta screeched. She was now tasting her own blood and it stirred a devil's brew inside her. But wisely she realized that against this swiftly moving creature she must act with caution. She could not afford to expend all her reserve fighting energy. She must adopt defensive tactics.

Again the other cat rushed in and slashed Acheeta savagely across the muzzle. The very speed of the stranger cat was baffling, and again and again Acheeta felt the slash of those tearing claws.

But Acheeta was possessed of a great wisdom. Her body had many times been scarred before. She must bide her time and strike at the proper split second.

Hideous now were the battle sounds which rang through the timber belts, sounds which sent the smaller wild habitants scuttling fearfully to deeper cover. In all the hinterland fastness there are no more terrifying sounds than the snarls and screeches of battling cats. Nor is there a creature possessed of greater fighting skill than Acheeta and her kindred.

Suddenly she whirled, and caught the ambitious young female a terrific shoulder blow full in the flank. The stranger toppled sidewise and before she could recover, Acheeta struck.

Both sets of her fore-talons slashed in rapid succession, laying the other's uppermost flank wide. Acheeta, jaws agape, thrust forward to seize her enemy by the nape of her neck. Her fangs sank in while her enemy struggled desperately. Acheeta retained her fang hold, fastening a steady-ing hold on the stranger's back with her hind claws.

Surely, steadily, those fangs sank deeper and deeper. Acheeta was all ready close in on the spinal cord and snap back her head, when, with an amazing maneuver, utilizing her last reserve of strength, the enemy cat rolled and jerked, pulling herself free. As she came back she coiled. Her right fore-paw struck upward in a slashing arc and her talons found their mark—the near side eye of Acheeta.

Snarling horribly, Acheeta leaped backward, whirling in a mad frenzy of anger. Her face was a horrible mask, her near side eye socket an empty, gaping well of horror. Through her one blinking good eye she glared at her opponent.

In savage fury she leaped, catching the almost spent barren female in the act of turning. Throating fiendish snarls, Acheeta struck and dug her fangs swiftly on down. She was forcing out all her reserve strength in this last supreme effort.

Suddenly her powerful head snapped back and she gave out a shrill cry of victory—costly victory.

AS THE SLAIN cat twitched in her death throes, Acheeta whirled about, spitting, slashing down with a set of fore-talons, plucking at the badly mutilated form of her victim.

A soft, piteous whimper now sounded from Acheeta. She shook her head to rid it of that terrible pain. She raced to the bole of a birch tree and stretched her forepaws high. As her talons gouged the bark, she sank her fangs and ripped and tore at the paper-like covering, scattering the fragments about her.

More soberly, she whirled to bound off to a small trickling spring creek, into whose depths she sank her head, seeking the medicinal aid of its sulphur waters. In time there was a lessening of pain, especially that in her throbbing, empty eye socket.

Blinking, Acheeta weaved back to her kill. No longer did she mince in with that delicacy of movement associated with her kind, but rushed, savagely, hungrily, to slash with her fangs and talons to disembowel the little buck.

On her belly she thrust her muzzle deep into the offal and fed to complete satisfaction.

When her feasting was done, she rose and scraped leaves and twigs and other

rubble up about the remnants of the carcass. Then she whirled, and bound off, loping back to her den—mouthing continuous curses as she moved.

Thus it was that Acheeta became the One-Eyed Devil of the foothills and valley-land ranch country. She was a creature who, but for her great wisdom and cunning, would easily have gone down to her death at the weapons of the man creatures, or at least to the fangs of their hunting dogs who incessantly haunted her trails.

Bitterly, Acheeta roamed her range. One of her eyes was gone, and now she must hunt in those avenues of supply which called for a minimum of scouting. She struck swiftly, ruthlessly, at the home pastures and on the open range, taking a sharp toll of young cattle. Often she killed far more than she required. The loss of her eye had filled her with spite and hatred for all creatures. As she hunted and killed with all her vigor, her young thrived, growing into handsome well-formed creatures.

Never did the powerful wilderness mother fail her brood. Even though some distance from her den area, she would whirl at the faintest cry from a cub. Even from the chase of a kill she would bound back to protect her young. In all the hinterland there was no creature more sagacious, more ready at all times to leap into battle action against any odds.

Today, Acheeta made soft throaty sounds, as through her deadly one eye she blinked at four tumbling well-grown youngsters playing close by. She lay stretched at her full superb length, muzzle quivering. Suddenly, from her prone position, Acheeta sprang alertly to all fours. One of her young cubs had strayed. He was shrieking with pain.

Like a streak of forked lightning Acheeta cut through a thicket. A few prodigious leaps brought her to her young one—her biggest son, a magnificent lion. He was down, writhing, pawing at his muzzle. Swiftly Acheeta rushed toward him, but just as swiftly whirled to attack a dull, yellow-black ball.

The ball was Pog, a big porcupine—slothful dolt of the hinterland. Pog had been gnawing contentedly on a set of shed antlers when attacked by the young cougar. And Acheeta had given him no chance to scuttle to cover. He dug his claws in the

ground beneath his body and tucked in his head.

Acheeta, despite her agitation, minced in cautiously. She was wise to Pog and his kind and realized the terror of those quills. She stretched out one forepaw, claws extended. Suddenly, she half rolled her paw, then with swift flick whipped old Pog over on his back. Before he could roll into defensive position again, her fangs had struck. In an instant the mutilator of her son was dead.

Snarling, Acheeta whipped about the dead Pog, then rushed in to her young one. He was rolling on the ground, forcing the few quills in his muzzle deeper into the flesh.

Acheeta struck him a sharp blow in the shoulder which sprawled him out on the ground. Before he could whisk away, her heavy paw bore down on him, pinning him there. Her teeth nipped at the end of a protruding quill. She guttured strange throat sounds and the furious action of the young one subsided. Slowly, patiently, Acheeta worked the harmful barb out, spitting it from her teeth with a savage snarl.

Again and again Acheeta performed her amazing surgery, removing each quill which in time might have brought about the death of her cub. Through at last, she punched the adventuresome young male and spat fiercely, sending him off before her to her favorite sulphur spring creek where she forced him into the healing water. Not for some time did Acheeta permit him to whirl away. Here, more than once, she had rendered herself first aid.

Back at the lair zone, she fed her young and then sent them with sharp cuffs deep into cover. The time had come for her to launch forth on another hunting expedition. The young ones now demanded green bone and solid food, for they were about to be fully weaned.

Acheeta stretched her neck, lifting her head high as she searched wind.

A low whimpering sound escaped her: she had caught the scent of a man creature. She slunk forward to the slab rock to scout the valleyland below.

Her short ears flicked sharply back and forward as she heard the bawling of a calf and the answering low of its mother. Her jaws began to drool, but she settled down to blink into the lowering sun. In her brain

there was fixed a determination to carry out her hunt as soon as the first shades of dusk sifted down on the ruggedly beautiful hinterland.

Now, more than ever before, she was faced with continuous danger. As helpless kittens, her young ones could be kept under control, but more than half-grown, they were capable now of careless movement during her absence. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to guard them and at the same time steal down to plunder cattle. Man and his kind were ever on the watch—ever ready to strike her down. More than once she had outwitted them, the ranchers whose snares and traps had been set with great skill.

The sun was gone, leaving an aftermath of shuddering plum-tinted light which bathed the valley and rolling foothill range-land in a sea of beauty. But quickly the dusk curtains quivered down, to cast deep purple shadows.

Acheeta stirred. She stretched herself, flexing her strong, supple muscles before at last weaving on down an old game trail.

She was in good condition now, for her young exacted less of her strength. They had for some days been eating solid meat and green bone. It was the loss of her left eye that bothered her most of all. Every now and then as she moved along, she stopped, whirling to her left side at the slightest sound. The discovery of no threat only served to excite her anger more, and she gave out softly snarled notes at the repeated scares.

Now her lips curled. On a gentle westerly breeze she picked up the tantalizing scent of horse. She paused to enjoy its fragrance a moment, then suddenly she bounded forward.

IN A FENCED pasture, studded with cottonwoods and scrub willow, a handsome little sorrel mare proudly stood guard while her foal romped and capered.

Acheeta's glaring eye now glimpsed the young one and she flicked her mouth corners with her tongue. The young foal reared, coming down awkwardly, almost losing balance.

With great patience the queen cougar snaked in, taking her time as she continued to watch the capers of the young horse creature.

She watched the colt spin away, galloping from his mother's side, lashing out as if to test the power of his hind limbs. Now and then the little mare snuffed. The foal whirled, but since the wind favored Acheeta, no sign of danger was evident.

The young one now stood beside a tall clump of green willows. He rubbed his neck up and down the limbs, then reached high for some of the tender leaves.

Acheeta slid through the fence poles. Belly down, she paused a brief moment, her paws bunched under her. Suddenly she sprang, and in three magnificent bounds landed securely on the colt's back.

Almost before the little chestnut could send out a scream of terror, his neck was broken. Acheeta's fangs were like shot lances striking in to slash his throat.

But the mare had heard. Screaming, she hurricaned in to rear and chop. Acheeta bounded nimbly to one side. None better than she knew the fighting power of a mother whose young had been cut down.

The mare wheeled and struck with lightning speed, but it was a speed which could not quite match the speed of Acheeta. The she-cougar whipped to one side then whirled as the mare came striking down with deadly forehoofs. The mare's head was shaking savagely when Acheeta suddenly struck a terrible side-slashing blow with a forepaw, almost ripping the little sorrel's nostrils from her muzzle.

Screaming with pain fear and anger, the mare reared and whirled clear. Lather formed on her flanks as she watched the twitching, bunched form of the big cat poised to spring. She realized that she faced an enemy far too swift and powerful to fight.

Shrilling a wild whinny she whirled away. Acheeta made a few threatening leaps. Shortly, Acheeta was driving her fangs deep into the hide and flesh of the colt and by a powerful display of her amazing strength, dragged him into the cover of the nearby willow thicket.

Savagely hungry, she disembowled the foal and feasted a few moments on his succulent liver, sucking blood through her teeth with great relish.

It was her custom to bury the carcass and whip back to the lair zone. Soon she would return, bringing her young with her. It was part of their education to accompany

her to the kill. It gave them ample food, but taught them never to gorge themselves.

Now she bounded forward, cleared the fence with magnificent ease, and struck into a long lopet toward the den area. Within a quarter of a mile of the den she sensed that death had struck her brood. She caught the fresh, sharp scent of a man creature mingled with that of dogs.

She wheeled to fetch in on the den by a circuitous route. Shortly, she was creeping in to sniff the dead form of one of her young females. The little one's throat was badly torn. Acheeta bounded to another form, a male, whose throat was similarly slashed. Two of her five younglings were dead. She searched for the other three and caught at last their live scent. Man and his dogs had taken up the trail of the young ones, and Acheeta, the greatest killer of all the hinterland, quivered with a storm of mixed emotions not often attributed to her kind.

She whined piteously. Almost in the same breath she broke into a series of savage snarls coughed up from her belly. Acheeta was a killer because of an instinctive urge to slay food for survival and the welfare of her young. Man had killed merely to destroy.

Her one eye flashing deathly flame, she bounded forward and broke into her full stretching lopet on the trail of her hunted young.

Soon she heard the baying of the dogs, a sound which told her that her young ones had been treed.

Carefully now, Acheeta moved through a wild cherry thicket and the limbs closed in softly behind her. At the thicket's edge she saw the dog creatures, fierce snarling hounds. She watched one lunge at a tree bole, his great paws reaching up. She lifted her one-eyed gaze and caught the flash of a pair of eyes—the eyes of one of her cubs.

Then came a sudden crash of thunder. Acheeta shuddered as she watched her young one topple from the tree. The cub whirled and slashed at a rushing dog. The hound yelped with pain, but quickly the man was in and again there was a stab of sharp lightning and a crash of that strange thunder. The young cougar stretched out in death.

Now the man gave out sharp voice

sounds to his dogs which whirled away to go howling on through the timber—hot on another fresh cougar trail.

Acheeta made an inaudible cough, whipping off to her left, stealing swiftly through underbrush. For a brief moment the man creature caught the flash of her one eye.

"Old—One-Eye!" he gasped, jerking up his rifle. But before he could squeeze the trigger, the devil's eye had vanished and after it, throating full cries, leaped the dogs.

Cougar Price had been hired by the ranchers of the lowland cattle range to hunt out Acheeta and destroy her. Price had killed many lions in his time. It was when the little sorrel mare was due to foal that he asked the owner of the big Flying J outfit to allow him to segregate the mare in a small pasture.

Cougar Price did not try to catch Acheeta as she came in for a kill. He had other plans. He had picked up the sign of her young and through the young lions he had gone on to get at the mother. That time had come. His plan so far had worked perfectly. They had done well so far: three cougars killed. It was now only a matter of time—it might take a couple of days—before Cougar Price could proudly take back the hide of Acheeta to claim a good bonus. He could depend on his three dogs. There was none better trained in the whole of Wyoming.

But Acheeta had roamed her hinterland range long before any of these hunting dogs had been whelped. Two of her young ones still lived.

She melted from one thicket to another, wheeling now and then, to circle back in a most baffling manner, as the hounds confusedly hunted for her freshest sign.

But the man creature was also wise. Cougar Price could tell by the actions of his dogs that Acheeta was confusing them, and at the same time gradually pulling them away from the timber belt where the other young lions had treed.

Suddenly Acheeta heard a shrill whistle. It was not within her instinctive powers to understand the portent of that whistled call, but because of its strangeness, she cut sharply to the south, streaking toward a stately line of Douglas spruces. Here she treed, but not at bay. These trees ran in a line of close formation, as if man's

hand had planted them there in pattern.

Like a huge flying squirrel, she poised; then suddenly she shot from one tree to its neighbor, and then to another. Below the farthest tree lay the rock bank of a brawling creek. Acheeta could hear the noise of the fast water which was now her objective.

But it seemed that the man had anticipated her move toward the water. He had whistled up one of his dogs to cut off her escape.

This hound, a sleek female, was Price's favorite. She worked silently as she ran toward the spruce line. At the bole of the first tree she stretched her paws upward and the man at her back chuckled as he pulled back the hammer of his Winchester. But a frown replaced his smile as he searched the foliage in vain for a flash of that deadly one eye.

It was while thus stalled that the dog suddenly whipped about to point toward the creek. Cougar Price called sharply, and sent her bounding off.

A HALF MOON sent its light over the rugged wilds and Acheeta's eye reflected the moonlight. The man glimpsed them, but there was no opportunity to shoot. His other two dogs were roaming the back woods, leaving him no choice but to send his favorite in alone.

"Get 'er, baby!" he called and the hound leaped forward to go hurtling into the fast water. Acheeta had already gained the opposite bank. She whipped into full speed along a shelf of rock before cutting sharply into the uplands.

Now she whirled and weaved about in a circle, to catch the scent of the pursuing hound. Her lips peeled back and her one eye flashed evilly as every muscle of her tired body sparked to life. She had picked up the scent of a single dog, and her agitation of hatred and anger mounted swiftly with her determination to make a stand.

Slinking into the shadows of a jackpine belt, she dropped her tail tip to the ground and stood alert, frozen.

The shadowy form of her pursuer streaked across a clearing, nose close to the ground.

Suddenly Acheeta's devil's eye flashed as she jerked up her head. Her superb form stretched. The hound skidded to a

halt and attempted a quick whip to left, but a lightning-like set of curved talons caught her in the side of the face and ear, ripping sharply.

Cougar Price heard the sharp yelping of his dog as he hurried along.

The hound, though terribly ripped about the ear and face, was game. She rushed and struck, hoping to send Acheeta to tree; but Acheeta, the mother, her brain fired with a desire for vengeance, struck back.

Now horribly torn, the hound freed herself, swaying, jaws agape.

Before the man creature could align his sights, the big cat's jaws closed.

The rifle crashed. At its thunder, Acheeta rocked back.

Cougar Price made strange half-sobbed sounds as he dropped to his knees to lift the horribly torn head of his hound. He laid the dead thing down and slowly got to his feet. He raised his Winchester and bellowed his curses far into the timber.

But Acheeta, her back muscles twitching at a sharp pain, bounded from one rock shelf to another.

Acheeta loped easily for a couple of miles, then suddenly, as she neared the timber belt, she galvanized to action.

In a small glade she saw a flurry of tumbling forms. Two dogs were yowling and snarling over Acheeta's biggest son.

Acheeta leaped and landed on the back

of a snarling hound, sending him crashing to the ground. Her fangs sank swiftly into the area of his spinal cord and she growled savagely as she tasted his blood.

It was the young male lion, the big son of Acheeta, who saved her. Uttering a screeched cry, he leaped and slashed.

Acheeta shook her head fiercely, then leaped from her dying victim. She licked her chops as she twitched her tail grandiosely, giving expression to her majesty.

An hour or so later she led them into the willow thicket where she had partly covered the carcass of the young foal. For a moment or so she weaved about the kill, sniffing sharply, treading with light, gingerly-placed steps, searching for man sign.

Now she closed in and soon she and the young ones buried their muzzles in succulent offal and flesh.

As the first faint glimmer of dawn light nudged the night gloom aside, Acheeta made thick purred sounds to her young.

Suddenly she spun, stretching her neck as she tanged the man scent.

But Acheeta had nothing to fear. Cougar Price slouched along his home trail muttering curses. At his heels there limped a badly whipped hound, the sole survivor.

Acheeta turned and called to her young. Gracefully, she led them up into the crag-land country, there to rest in peace and contentment.



"TEXAN—SHOW YOUR COLORS!"

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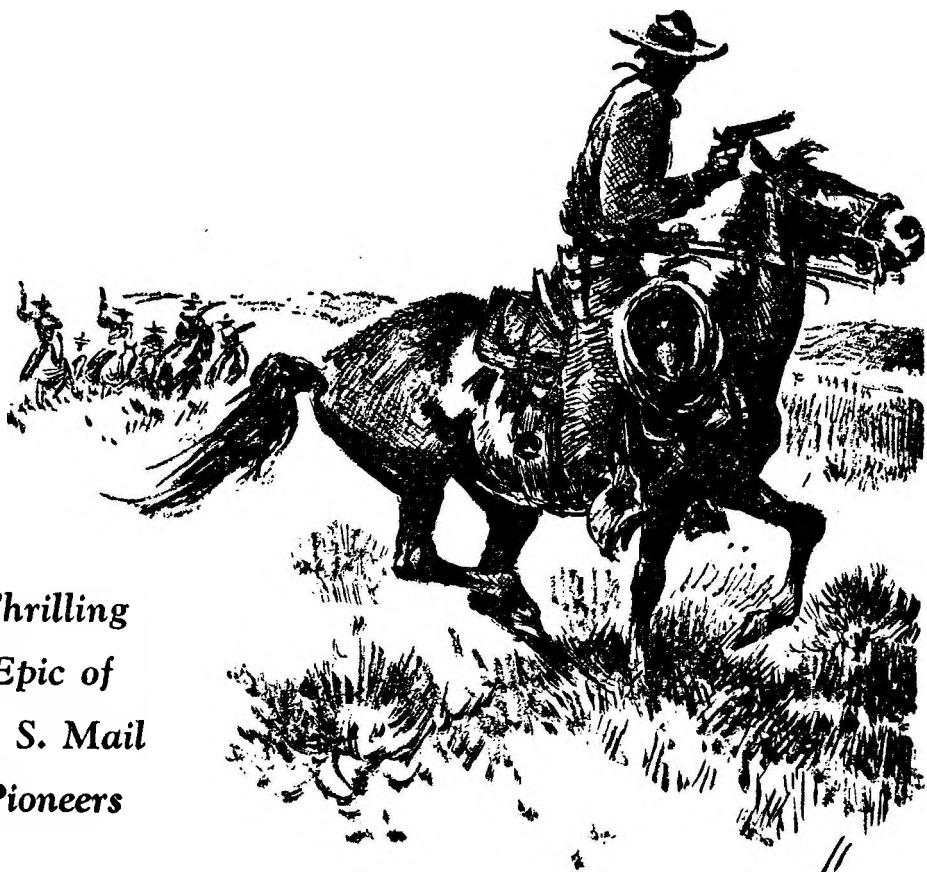
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MAGAZINE

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Chapter I

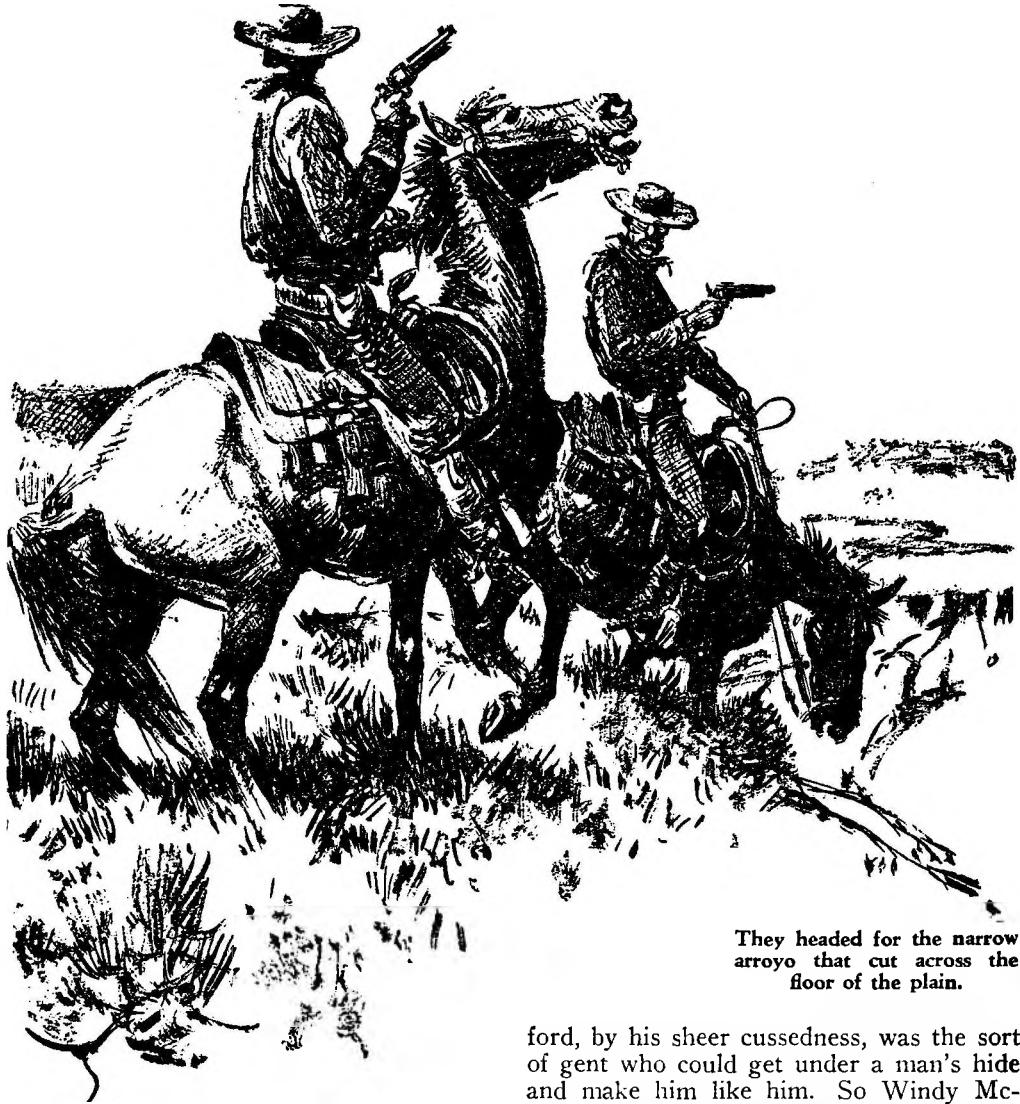
HELL'S THE STAR ROUTE

IT HAD BEEN said that old Bob Hafford never stopped being a soldier even after the war ended and he took off his uniform. That was the reason he turned down Texas cows as a means of making a million dollars and took up carrying U.S. Mail. While the LE's and the rest of the big ones were slicing out six county chunks of the Panhandle, old Bob carried letters from Dodge to Tascosa at four bits per

each and quickly went in the hole doing it.

But he had a taste of the mail business, and he liked it. So when the Mobeetie-to-Fort-Bascom run was started and the government began handing out Star Routes with lavish abandon it was natural old Bob would want a piece of the business. Standing here now, watching a construction camp burn to the ground while Bob Hafford's eighteen-year-old niece used unladylike

DEATH CARRIES THE MAIL



They headed for the narrow arroyo that cut across the floor of the plain.

words, wind-burned and Pecos-born Windy McCloud caught himself wondering if old Bob had picked such a good business.

Ordinarily it wouldn't have made a lot of difference to Windy McCloud; he could take a job or leave it alone and a man's troubles were his own private affair. But there had been more trouble than any one man could handle on this job and Bob Hafford,

ford, by his sheer cussedness, was the sort of gent who could get under a man's hide and make him like him. So Windy McCloud, drifting yonderly, had run a three day grub stake job into a two-month project—a sort of a record for the lanky redhead—and he still had no intentions of quitting. At least not until he found how come Trask Wilson had disappeared so pronto once this fire got going.

Three tents, two wagons and a tool shed don't make much of a fire. It was about out. And so was Bob Hafford, Windy figured.

Back in frontier Texas, powerful politicos waxed fat on rural mail contracts . . . buzzards, also, would thrive on honest men like Bob Hafford . . . and dine on Windy McCloud for dessert!

It hadn't been hard to see that the old man couldn't take many more setbacks like this, and this was the third in the two months Windy had been with the Star Route known as the Hafford Lightning Mail.

The girl had a few more choice words to say about the situation in general, then Windy pushed back his hat, scratched his head and said, "Now Miss Betty, that ain't no way for a lady to talk. You know your Uncle Bob wouldn't like that."

She said, "I don't give a blue painted damn whether he'd like it or not. When the Post Office Department sits on their smug behinds and lets a skunk like Senator Man-waring fleece them of a half a million dollars of the tax payers' money delivering mail to towns that don't exist and pays for the burning out of people who are trying to do an honest-to-God job of delivering the mail—" She stopped there, gritting her teeth and letting the light do things to those wide-set eyes of hers. Windy reckoned she was about as pretty a girl as he had seen for a long time.

All of a sudden she got even prettier and without looking Windy knew what it was. She always looked like that whenever Len Rawlings was around and Windy was getting so he didn't know whether he liked Len Rawlings or not. Outside of his power over Betty Hafford, there was nothing about the young surveyor to dislike.

Rawlings had managed to get his transit and a couple of cases of equipment out of the shed before it burned. Windy had been kept too busy saving the mules and the half dozen saddle horses to give Rawlings and the others a hand. From the looks of him now, Rawlings had had the tougher job of the two.

The kid was tall. He had blue eyes that belonged to a man who dreams a lot. Close-set curly blonde hair went well with his face. Right now that hair was frizzed like the pin feathers on a singed chicken. His eyebrows were missing and his shirt had more holes in it than a Sacramento River Chinaman's lottery ticket.

But he seemed to forget all that when he saw Betty standing there and Windy noticed that Betty didn't use any more swear words. She never did around Len Rawlings. For just a second Windy got an ornery desire to stay right there and mess things up for them, but he had bigger things

to do, and they were probably better things.

Motioning with his head he called the crew of six men over to where he had picketed the saddle stock. Most of them he knew only by last name or names they chose to use—Stowell, Walsh, Tie Hard, Latigo and Romero. The only exceptions had been old one-eyed Beaver Benson and the missing Trask Wilson, and the exceptions had been for exactly opposite reasons. Windy trusted and liked Beaver Benson. Taking a gander at the soot-smearred sorry looking lot Windy said, "Who's quittin' this time?"

The little round Mex called Romero showed his teeth in a grin; Stowell—long and lanky as Windy and half the weight—kicked a rock with his toe. Walsh, muddy-eyed and foul tempered, tried to stare the redhead down. Old Beaver Benson, smoke tears still streaming from his one good eye, cussed steadily while the bowlegged little waddie called Tie Hard hunkered and rolled a quirley. Latigo was the only man who made any kind of an answer. He said, "Why, McCloud? You figger you're the boss-man or something?"

"I don't figger nothing," Windy said softly. "I jest don't like my new sugans gettin' burned up is all."

"I guess that stove he had in the tent house wasn't worth a damn," Latigo said. Windy couldn't tell whether the man was laughing or not.

Old Beaver Benson had run out of cuss words. He said, "For forty years now—"

"—I've fought Injuns and trapped beaver," Windy finished for him.

"And I ain't never—" The old man started over.

"—found a squarer shooter than Bob Hafford," Stowell completed it.

"Go to hell," said Beaver Benson.

Everyone laughed except Walsh and Latigo, and Windy figured he knew who he could count on. He said, "I was just thinkin' we couldn't let a fire stop the mail from going through. Somebody will have to take Trask Wilson's run. Seems the fire was too hot for him."

"I'll take that run," the muddy-eyed Walsh said. "I had a day off last week."

WINDY couldn't figure whether it was a challenge or not. He saw the tenseness come into the faces of the men. He

said, "Reckon you'd get there all right, Walsh?" He said it so it could be taken a couple of ways.

Walsh said, "I reckon." Then he turned and went over to where the saddle horses were picketed. Old Bob himself was due in within the half hour and Walsh would have to take the mail over the next thirty-mile stretch. They were running it through on horseback now, but if they ever got the road finished Old Bob figured to run a regular stage line from Tascosa down to the fast booming town of Wheeler.

With his Star Route mail franchise from the government plus the freight and passenger business he'd have a good thing. Right now about all Bob Hafford had was a Star Route franchise and a \$4,000 forfeit bond in case somebody's letter from Aunt Susie failed to get through.

Between that and the realization of better times was fifty-nine hours of relay horsebacking, two hundred miles of Staked Plains and a mighty big man known as Senator Manwaring who figured he should control every Star Route in the Southwest. It didn't make for easy sleeping, but it was the sort of thing that made Windy McCloud take an interest in his work. More and more he was beginning to like the mail business and he was beginning to wish he could find something tangible to take a shot at.

It was starting to get under the redhead's hide, seeing old Bob being beat down this way, and he didn't like to think of what would happen to Betty Hafford if this scheme fell through. The Panhandle of 1879 wasn't a good spot for a woman to be left alone unless she had a man who knew a lot about cows. Len Rawlings wasn't that kind of man, and Windy had no intentions of cutting in, even though he might have liked to.

He glanced at his watch anxiously. Bob was already overdue and it wasn't like him. The thirty-mile stretch he was riding was the easiest one on the route, for the road had been finished that far. Maybe it was the fact that Trask Wilson wasn't around where Windy could see him and maybe it was that "accidental" fire getting on his nerves that made Windy decide to ride back down the new road to meet old Bob. It would give them a chance to talk and would ease Bob's shock at seeing himself burned

out again. Whatever it was, he went.

Like some men can smell rain, Windy McCloud could smell trouble, and it kept chewing his insides and making him skittery. And then, just six miles out of camp, he found the cause of it—the horse, standing there, cropping at the short grass; the mail sacks still tied to the saddle. Ten feet away old Bob Hafford lay in the middle of the road with a bullet hole through his head.

In a case like this he figured the U. S. Mail could go to hell, then he remembered how much old Bob had given to it. Along with that he thought of Betty and a \$4,000 forfeit bond. His face was thin and drawn as he stood there, popping the knuckles of his hands.

Then he took Bob's sheepskin coat and spread it over the old man's face. After that he took the mail bags, tied them to his own saddle and led Bob's horse back toward the still smouldering camp. Somehow he kept thinking of Betty and it seemed to him it would be easier for her to see the empty saddle first and then hear the rest.

He hadn't realized before just how much he had taken to old Bob Hafford and his young niece. He hadn't realized before how it could come to mean everything to a man to get a handful of letters through to where they were going. Now all of a sudden he remembered Latigo asking if Windy figured he was the new boss man, and Windy decided that was just what this mail line was going to need. So there on the spot Windy McCloud named himself straw boss of the Bob Hafford Lightning Mail and he figured that from here on out he'd be doing a hell of a lot of the construction work with a pair of six-shooters.

Back at camp Windy managed to get hold of Len Rawlings, the young surveyor, before Betty had seen the empty saddle. The men grouped around quickly, and Windy said, "Would you rather I'd tell Miss Betty, Len?"

Len Rawling's face had drained of all color. He kept closing and unclosing his hands. He stood there a long time and then he said, "Thanks, Windy, but maybe I better tell her myself. We planned on telling Bob tonight that we figured on getting married."

The lanky disjointed Stowell said nothing. He had taken a six-shooter out of his

coat pocket and he was standing there, looking at it. Tie Hard, the bow-legged little puncher, said, "Maybe old Bob would like to be buried right here alongside the road. He struck me as that kind of man."

Romero, the round little Mexican, spoke softly in Spanish as if talking to himself. Then he said, "Mr. Bob was a good man. I better go see him now. I know a prayer to say."

The silence got thick, and Latigo, his barrel body close-set to the ground and somehow not as soot-stained as the others said, "Who in the hell's gonna pay our wages now?"

Walsh, his eyes deep-set in his head, a scar suddenly showing through the black stubble of his beard, took a step forward and smashed his fist into Latigo's mouth. Latigo hit the ground hard and lay there, spitting blood. His hand went toward his back pocket and Walsh tromped his foot against the man's stomach. "Maybe you better get the hell out of here, Latigo," Walsh said suddenly. He turned quickly, ripped the mail bags from the back of Windy's saddle, threw them on the back of a small mouse-colored dun and without another word rode off in the direction of the next stop.

"Hard man to know, that Walsh," Stowell said laconically.

Latigo got to his feet, cursing foully, and Windy, one hand resting lightly on his gun said, "Maybe you better take Walsh's suggestion."

"Maybe you're sticking your nose into something that ain't no damn affair of yours, Redhead," Latigo said. But he walked away, brushing the blood off his face with the back of his hand and in a little while he was mounted and riding at a full gallop down the new road.

WINDY looked at the hard-faced men around him. Old one-eyed Beaver Benson, seventy-six if he was a day; Romero, with the mind of a child and the soul of a woman; Tie Hard, good-natured, devil-may-care: long-legged and soft-spoken Stowell. And suddenly these men were not a bunch of drifters riding out lean times on a road building job, but a bunch of men to ride the river with. He had seen the same thing happen on the open range, when men became tied to a brand and lived

and died for it. And it had happened here.

Windy spoke softly then. He said, "Boys, Len Rawlings has more book learning and know-how than all the rest of us put together and he's got a lot of guts to go along with it. I guess he's just naturally number one man here now. He'll be needing a straw boss to help him out and unless somebody has got a good reason it should be different I reckon that straw boss will be me."

He waited and saw that all had agreed with him, then he said, "Right now I'm going to trail along after Latigo and see where he's headin' in such a hurry. Him and Trask Wilson always was talkin' too much and doin' too little to suit me and I got a sudden hankering to see where them skunks nest."

"Until I get back, Beaver, you see that things keep going. We got some picks and shovels left and me and Rawlings will see about getting new tools. When Walsh comes in from his run you boys take it easy on him. He's got something eatin' on his guts but it looks like he wants to play on our side. Anybody got something to say?"

"Yes. I have," Stowell said softly.

The men turned toward him, not knowing what to expect. Stowell stretched his long disjointed frame and yawned, took off his hat and held it out. "I figure we ought to take up a collection," he said. "If Windy gets up Mobeetie way maybe he can pick up a few boxes of shootin' ammunition. I figger old Bob would like that better than flowers."

Hands dug into pockets and coins and bills chunked into the hat. Windy took it without comment, but as he remounted and struck out at a fast trot up the new road he somehow knew that there wasn't enough gunsmoke in Texas to stop Bob Hafford's Lightning Mail from getting through to Wheeler. He speculated on how it was that men could become so damn big in such a little time and he decided they must have been big right along—just keeping it to themselves. He turned his attention to Latigo's tracks.

He wasn't surprised when they stuck right to the road and turned east on the Fort Bascom trail and lost themselves in the dust that turned off toward Mobeetie. He remembered that Senator Manwaring had his headquarters there in that cross-

trail cowtown and he had a hunch that Manwaring had the kind of money that would attract men like Trask Wilson and Latigo. Almost unconsciously he felt himself shifting around in the saddle, letting his gun belt drop down to a more comfortable position.

It was mighty dark morning before he raised the lights of town. It was gray in the east by the time he had seen to cooling his horse and getting it stabled. But it might as well have been seven at night, for in Mobeetie men rode a long dusty way to "Whoop 'er up, Liza," or "See the tiger and twist his tail." A man could sleep when there was nothing else to do.

The town wasn't hard to see once you got the dust pushed aside. Windy took it all in, slow and careful. He drank as much as he wanted in each place he visited, and he felt nothing from it except the warm glow in the pit of his stomach and the sharpening of his faculties. For the talkative redhead had a way of turning the effects of whiskey on and off like other men turned a water tap.

At the fourth saloon he had just checked his guns at the door when he saw Latigo at the far end of the bar. One side of Latigo's mouth was swollen all out of shape and it looked as if maybe he had been trying to get rid of some of the pain by sluicing himself down with whiskey. He was talking loud and having trouble with those around him.

Windy elbowed up to the bar and he heard a Texan drawl, "Boy, if you can't learn to keep your remarks to yourself you better get out of here before I tromp you into the pine floor."

Latigo let out a senseless bellow and said, "You and who else, Rebel?"

"Me and the rest of Texas if need be," the Texan said slowly. "But I don't reckon I'll need to bother the rest of the boys. Either behave yourself or get on north where they ain't got manners."

Latigo made a lunge forward and Windy stepped in, grabbed him by the shirt front and shoved him back against the bar. Softly he said, "What the hell's the matter with you, Latigo? You're always going off half cocked and getting into trouble. Settle down peaceful and I'll buy you a drink."

Latigo's whiskey-fogged eyes took a while to focus. Then the prospect of a

drink won out over any decision he might have been going to make. The Texas cowboy grinned and said, "How come you play with Yankees, Redhead? You talk like home folks."

"I figger Yankees gonna be extinct some day," Windy said amiably. "I'm collectin' me a few and aim to set me up a side show at the capitol the day Texas annexes the rest of the United States."

Trouble passed that quick, and Latigo and Windy were left to themselves. Windy poured drinks freely, and when Latigo's knees started to bend Windy put his arm around the heavy man's shoulder and led him over to a table. As he was backing him into a chair Latigo let his arm linger around Windy's neck and said, "You ain't a bad guy, McCloud. I never did say you was a bad guy. What the hell you doing workin' for a chicken outfit like Hafford's?"

Windy poured himself a drink and thought carefully before answering. He said, "Who the hell says I'm working for Hafford? I'm in town ain't I?"

Latigo laughed boisterously. "You're drunk, McCloud," he said. "You think you're gonna get me to do a lot of talkin'. You're drunk."

"Sure, I'm drunk as hell," Windy said.

"You ain't got no more sense than Walsh," Latigo said, leaning across the table. "Walsh used to be all right, then old Bob Hafford helped him get out of a jam and now Walsh figgers he's a white lily. Hell, man, there's warrants out for Walsh all across New Mexico and Arizona. Who the hell he think he is?" He stopped suddenly, swinging his head from side to side, then jerking it up sharp. He banged his fist on the table and yelled,

"That's right! Who the hell he think he is, hittin' me in the mouth? I'll kill that dirty son. I told Trask a long time ago we ought to kill that dirty son! That damn Trask. He's just as bad, he is. Trask is afraid of the Senator. That's what's the matter with that damn Trask. Trask is so damn scared of the Senator—"

Latigo was having trouble forming his words now. His lips hung loose and he kept weaving his finger back and forth in front of his eyes. Suddenly his elbows slipped off the table and he fell forward, hard, his chin striking the table top with a resound-

ing smack. Two or three men turned, saw, and grinned. Windy grinned back.

After that Windy poured himself a mighty long drink. He paid for the bottle, got his guns from the checker and went back onto the street. It looked like the sun was going to get itself up before too long.

Chapter II

GET OUT OF TOWN!

WINDY had a leisurely breakfast of steak, fried potatoes and six cups of coffee to take up the slack the booze had left sloshing around in his belly. After that he smoked a couple of cigarettes, sunned himself in front of the restaurant for a half-hour and made his plans.

What he would have liked to do would be get Trask Wilson, Latigo and Senator Manwaring together and have a good heart-to-heart talk with them over a pair of six-shooters. But he realized that with a man as big as Manwaring that would be a right quick way for a redhead Texan to get a rope around his neck. And in the long run it wouldn't do much to help Betty Hafford and her Star Route mail line.

With that solution out of the way it didn't leave him much to go on. There was no doubt in his mind that Trask Wilson had dry-gulched Bob Hafford. Wilson had had just the right amount of time out of camp. But Windy figured that would wind up being a personal discussion between himself and Wilson. Right now he was concerned with seeing that Betty Hafford kept that mail road building so the banks wouldn't cut off her credit and the Post Office Department wouldn't be asking for that four thousand dollar forfeit bond.

So it seemed it couldn't hurt anything to have a good palaver with this Senator Manwaring to find out, if he could, just what way the wind was blowing. Such tactical manipulating was a little out of Windy's line, but he figured if he could prove some way that Manwaring was hiring gunmen to stop Bob Hafford's and other independent Star Routes maybe there'd be a way of getting the United States Marshal's office interested.

Of course if he couldn't stop it from this end. . . . Windy blinked his gravelly sleep-starved eyes at the sun and let the hint of a

smile crawl across his homely face. Stowell and Walsh and Tie Hard. Romero and old Beaver Benson. Right smart of a fighting crew if a man had occasion to use them. They seemed like boys Windy had known a long time.

He had settled himself in a spot where he could keep an eye on the building down the street that displayed Manwaring's sign modestly proclaiming the Senator to be lawyer, cattle broker, land-locator and surveyor in addition to being the United States Mail.

A little after eight Windy saw a portly gentlemen in polished boots, a high buttoned coat and a sweeping Stetson hat take a key from a long gold chain and open the door of the building. This, he figured, was his man. Best give him time to look important before walking in on him. Ten minutes later he was being greeted by the booming voice of Senator Manwaring.

The Senator looked a lot like a magazine picture. Windy couldn't recall for sure whether or not the man had actually been in Washington, D. C., in an elected capacity, but whether he had or not the Senator had stamped himself with the mark of the nation's capitol. Pink-cheeked with fluffy white mutton chop whiskers and flowing white hair, the Senator resembled an overgrown cherub.

The Senator's voice boomed on and on, saying nothing. "McCord, you say the name is? Oh, McCloud. Yes, McCloud. Sit down, McCullen, sit down. Cigar? Drink? Little too early for a drink, I guess. Now then, McClure, what was it? Speak right up."

"McCloud," Windy said.

"Of course, of course. Land? Or maybe you have some cattle to sell. Market's good right now. Mighty good, McCord."

"The name's McCloud. Windy McCloud," Windy said, getting to his feet. "I work for Bob Hafford's Lightning Mail—the line that's running between the Fort Bascom trail and Wheeler. We're putting a stage road through there. Maybe you've heard of us."

The smile faded slowly from the Senator's face and his pop eyes cleared themselves under the sweep of his heavy lids. "Yes," he said, his voice softer now. "I've—ah—heard of the project."

"I'm looking for a couple of men used to

work for us," Windy said. "One's named Trask Wilson. Other goes by the handle of Latigo."

Senator Manwaring took the gold chain from his vest pocket and started winding it around his finger. After awhile he said, "Why did you think I might know these men?"

"Because you're the biggest man in this part of the country," Windy McCloud said easily. "You seem to know about everyone."

"Yes, yes, yes," the Senator said, laughing, pleased. "I do manage to contact quite a number of people. What did you say the names were, Mr. McCullen?"

"Never mind," Windy said softly. "Let's you and me quit playin' with each other."

"Well, Mr. McCord," the Senator puffed. "I don't know as I quite follow you."

"McCloud's the name," Windy said. "Use it."

The Senator's face did not seem so round. The lids closed down over his eyes and his nostrils flared slightly. He said, "All right, McCloud. I'm a busy man. What's on your mind?"

"We had our third fire yesterday," Windy said. "Your boy Trask Wilson made a mistake by bowing out too quick so he could dry-gulch Bob Hafford. Latigo is a hell of a poor poker player. His face shows what he's thinking and he talks too much when he's drunk."

THREE WAS the hint of a smile around the lips of the Senator now. He said, "You're wasting a lot of words, McCloud, and if you expect me to say something you want to hear you're wasting a lot of time. If Trask Wilson and Latigo work for me—and I don't say that they do—then I hired them after they left you. Everybody knows I'm hiring every man I can get my hands on. If Trask Wilson shot Bob Hafford—and apparently you're not sure that he did—I don't see how it concerns me. Now if you'll excuse me, Mr. McCloud, I'm very busy."

"Ever hear of a man who calls himself Walsh?" Windy said, taking a stab in the dark.

He saw a quick betraying movement in Senator Manwaring's eyes. Windy stretched and said, "Walsh is really serious

about going straight, ain't he?" Then he started to leave the office.

Windy was surprised at the crack of authority in the Senator's voice when he said, "Sit down a minute, McCloud. What are you after?"

Windy did not sit down. He turned, faced the Senator and said, "I want that Hafford Star Route left alone. Starting now. Anything between Trask Wilson and me I'll keep personal."

"If Hafford's Route has more trouble?"

Windy put both hands on the edge of the desk. "We'll blast our way straight through every damn gunman you can hire, Senator Manwaring!"

The Senator laughed shortly. "For a minute I thought you were dangerous, McCloud. I can hire men like you for a dime a dozen."

Windy felt the color draining out of his face. He said, "And while we're shooting our way through your gun crew I'll spread your Star Route list over every newspaper in the country. Maybe the Post Office Department might be interested in the difference between the mail they're paying you to deliver and the letters you actually pack."

The Senator got up slowly and said, "Look, McCloud. Bob Hafford spent the last two years trying to prove that my lines were delivering mail to towns that existed only on maps. There was an investigator out here once. He went back satisfied."

"You bought him off," Windy said.

"The point is he went back satisfied," Manwaring said. "I believe you said Bob Hafford was dead?"

Windy McCloud's mind was running ahead. This fraud he was carrying on was Manwaring's only weak spot. It was common knowledge that the Senator, paid by the government according to the number of deliveries on a route, was padding some of his routes. Delivering the mail was a tough enough job at best and no one had cared much one way or the other. The only man to get hurt was Bob Hafford who was trying to cut in on the Senator's monopoly.

Too much competition and the Post Office Department would start checking into the Panhandle mail routes too often for a grafter's comfort. If a man could get Manwaring's Star Route lists as he submitted them for payment and then opposite these run the actual population along the

routes. . . . Maybe with a six-shooter in his paunchy belly the Senator might talk business.

Windy saw the Senator's eyes flick up slightly, then saw the smile and the color come back to his face. Manwaring said cheerily, "Good morning, gentlemen? Were you looking for work?"

It was not a bluff, Windy knew. He turned and saw Trask Wilson and Latigo standing in the doorway. Latigo was still weaving and unsteady, his eyes were red puddles in the darkness of his face. He was blinking stupidly into the room. Trask Wilson was as calm and possessed as the Senator himself. He took the toothpick from his mouth with his left hand and said, "Yes, Senator. We were looking for work. Understand you're hiring men." Then to Windy he said, "Hello, McCloud. Didn't know you were in town."

"Yeah. I'm in town," Windy said softly. "I came in to tell you the fire was a success. And in case you didn't look, you got Bob Hafford through the back of the head."

There was no longer any indecision in Latigo. His eyes had focused and he stepped aside slightly. The Senator was on his feet, close to the desk. Trask Wilson's smile never left his face. He said, "Nice of you to take an interest in my business. You aim to carry it further?"

He was about six feet tall, well built and completely handsome in a dark slicked-down way. He wore one bone handled .45, carried rather high on his right hip. He had a reputation he talked about freely and a reputation that men hinted at. Windy measured the distance between them and said, "Can't we talk in private?"

Trask Wilson laughed. He said, "I never did like you much, McCloud. You never did scare me, either. You was just leaving, wasn't you?"

"Yes, he was just leaving," the Senator put in. He was standing behind the desk now, his hand resting in an open drawer. To a passerby or casual drop-in, it would have looked like nothing more than four men exchanging morning pleasantries. But Windy knew that the slightest move on his part would send death crashing at him from three directions. Even Latigo was dangerous now. His feet were wider spread, and his hand was on the gun which he now wore openly. His eyes were small and mean

and he kept pressing the tip of his tongue against the center of his lips.

Windy raised his right hand shoulder high, made a mock wave and said, "Hasta la vista, gents."

"Yeah. Till we meet again," Trask Wilson said, grinning.

Windy walked straight through the door and out onto the sidewalk. The blast of tension seemed to follow him down the street.

THE FEELING of comradeship that hung around the saloons was gone now. Men knew that this homely, easy-talking Texan was here on business, and when he stood at a bar there was room on either side of him. When he walked down the street men stayed out of his way.

Word spread through the town. Some speculated and some shrugged, not wanting to know what it was about. It was sometimes safer that way, as these men knew, for it wasn't the first time death had walked in the streets of Mobeetie.

But as the day wore on the tension within Windy McCloud grew. Trask Wilson wasn't choosing to meet him openly. He could see now that the brain of Senator Manwaring was taking too big a part in this thing to let it flare into an open gun issue between his henchmen and Windy McCloud. The man who controlled over half the Star Routes in the Southwest was playing for big stakes and he wasn't letting a hireling's personal affairs draw unnecessary attention to his activities.

Thinking of Len Rawlings and the grief-stricken Betty, Windy wondered if they would be able to handle any situation that might come up out at the camp. He felt strongly that he should be out there keeping an eye on things, but leaving town now would mean that he had run from Trask Wilson and Latigo, and it would weaken his position here.

By sundown he was openly leaving word in first one spot and then the next that he wanted to see Trask Wilson. It did nothing more than heighten the tension that was gripping the town. Then, two hours after dark, that tension was shattered by a quick rattle of gunfire from the far end of the street. Windy kicked back the chair in which he was sitting and made a quick run.

Already a crowd was forming around the

double doors of the Texas House Saloon. Windy didn't check his guns before pushing his way inside. He saw Walsh, the mail rider, lying there on the floor, a bloody froth bubbling out over his lips. Near the bar Latigo was trying to keep on his feet. He was doubled over, clutching his middle with both hands. The town marshal was covering the room with his guns. Senator Manwaring stood at the marshal's elbow.

Defying the marshal's guns, Windy McCloud dropped to his knees by the dying Walsh. Walsh opened his eyes, looked into Windy's face. "They figured you'd be carrying the mail," Walsh managed to say. He was having trouble breathing. "They were laying for you at Cross Creek. I was in on it, and knew what was coming, so I got in behind them and got them both."

Windy looked up and saw Manwaring whispering something into the marshal's ear, then the marshal bellowed, "If you're siding that hombre shuck those guns, Red-head. I ain't havin' no troublemakers ridin' in shootin' up my town."

The marshal was just a figurehead. Windy saw, taking his cues from Manwaring. Windy said, "You got any charge against me just state it, Marshal."

The marshal hesitated, breathing through his long drooping mustache. Walsh was trying to say something, and Windy leaned close to catch his words. "I—got back to camp—Told Rawlings everything I knew. Me and Rawlings didn't have time to find you when we got to town tonight." He gave a quick gasp of pain. "Latigo plugged me—Least I could do for Bob Hafford. Good man—"

The surly ex-outlaw died with those words, and the feeling of death moved around the circle of men and brought a moment of unreality, as death does. In that second Windy McCloud rocked back on his heels, drew both guns and started backing out of the saloon. The wounded Latigo started to cough convulsively, then his knees folded and he fell forward. Walsh had managed to pay part of his debt to old Bob Hafford before he went out.

But by now the marshal had recovered his composure. Men tumbled over themselves to get out of the way and the marshal's gun blazed twice, ripping jagged holes in the doors a foot on either side of Windy McCloud. Windy's twin guns made

a blasting roar as the Senator and the marshal ducked for cover. And then Windy was out on the street into the protection of the darkness.

Behind him voices swelled and crashed out against the night. The doors of the Texas House flung open throwing a spear of light into the street. There were two more gunshots and the lights inside went out. Then there was a heavy pounding of heels against the board porch. The steady cursing of men. The high-pitched yell of the marshal.

Windy slipped in between two buildings and worked his way around to the back. Before he had died Walsh had mentioned that Rawlings was here in town and Windy wanted to find him before the fool kid got his head shot off his shoulders. Sweat was starting to run down the creases of his cheeks and he was cursing steadily as he darted from shadow to shadow, working his way up toward the livery stable where he had left his horse. With a gun pressed against the back of his head the stableman wouldn't have much trouble remembering whether or not Len Rawlings had been there.

Complete confusion was still gripping the mob in front of the Texas House. It would be a good fifteen minutes, Windy figured, before the marshal got any kind of a search organized. He bunched his legs and made a quick run across an open space between the restaurant and the building twenty feet away. His foot caught in the handle of a slop bucket and it spilled with a loud clatter.

There seemed to be an interval of complete silence, then from nearby a shout and a clattering of feet. He was behind the big building, feeling his way along the wall, and he came to a back door, standing open. He ducked inside, cocking his guns as he did, and it wasn't until then that he realized that he was in Senator Manwaring's office.

Windy McCloud was a good gambler. He had found sometimes that when a man's luck was going bad it was just as well to shoot for the sky. Suddenly those tricked-up Star Route lists of Manwaring's seemed like a hell of a good jackpot to play for. He softly nudged the door closed and backed on into the office. He had seen the small safe behind Manwaring's desk earlier that morning. It looked like something that a couple of shots in the right place might

open. He had just turned to look for it when he felt the unmistakable prod of a gun gouging between the last two ribs on his left side.

Instinct made him bring his right elbow back sharply, and he felt it smash into a man's muscle-hard middle. It was enough to relieve the pressure of the gun on his ribs. He twisted aside to follow through, brought the gun in his right hand swinging down in a chopping arc. Then he pulled his blow as the man in the dark rolled away and yelled, "Windy!"

"Rawlings!" Windy said, and he followed it up with a string of cuss words. "What the hell you trying to do, you young half-wit? Get yourself killed?"

"How about yourself, McCloud?" Rawlings asked calmly.

Windy felt half sick to his stomach. But young Len Rawlings was as calm as if he had been pitching horseshoes. He had a way of talking with the methodical exactness of an engineer. Windy felt like shaking the words out of him as Rawlings took time to explain that Walsh had told him all about Senator Manwaring's fake Star Routes and the crew of gunmen he had hired to keep competition out of the Panhandle.

"I know all that, you ninny," McCloud said. "Walsh is dead and Manwaring has got his marshal trying to dream up a reason for putting me in the pokey. Us snoopin' around a man's office after dark should give him what he wants."

For the first time Len Rawlings seemed to become aware of the fact that he couldn't just walk out of the place and go about his business. He said, "One of us has got to get out of here in one piece, Windy. I got Manwaring's lists and I'm going to see they get back to Washington, D. C., if I have to send them all the way on hot lead. It's the only chance Betty has of coming out on top."

Windy felt his jaw drop open, but he also felt a new admiration for the young surveyor. He caught himself thinking that it would be a pretty empty victory for Betty Hafford if she lost her uncle and Len Rawlings both. His eyes became accustomed to the darkness, and aided by the thin trickle of light that came through the front window he found the safe. The door was hanging by one hinge. Len Rawlings had a sheaf of

papers clutched tightly in his left hand. Windy said, "How the hell?"

He liked the sound of Len Rawlings' voice when the kid said, "An engineer learns all kinds of things. About how to handle black powder, even. While Walsh was raising a ruckus up the street nobody even heard the little noise I made. That Walsh was a damn fine man, Windy."

A key turned in the lock of the front door. A silence had spread over most of the street. Windy McCloud took a deep breath and said, "Yeah, he was a good man. You and me better be, too. It's gonna be a littie rough gettin' out of this town tonight."

Chapter III

SHOWDOWN IN THE SWALE

WINDY could tell by the sound that more than one man had come in through that front door. Whether or not the wily Manwaring was merely placing guards here or someone had seen Rawlings enter the building, Windy had no way of knowing. If it was the latter, there'd be company out of the back door, too.

He moved cautiously, opened the back door a crack and tried to see out. There was nothing but a wall of blackness. He motioned for Rawlings to keep in behind him and he stepped out onto the ground. Immediately he heard a rustle of sound to his left and a voice said, "That you Jake?"

Windy's gun barrel located the sound. The impact shook his arm as the gun connected and a man groaned. Twenty feet away another voice said, "What was that?"

"Stubbed my toe," Windy said, muffling his voice against his sleeve.

"Find anything in the office?" the same voice asked.

"Shut up," Windy said.

He touched Rawlings' sleeve and together they were starting to move away along the row of buildings. The talkative lookout said, "Say, where you going?"

There was no sense of pushing luck by answering again, so Windy, ducking low, increased his speed. He had pulled himself around behind Rawlings while he talked to the lookout and by now Rawlings had picked up a fifty-foot lead. Windy could hear his running feet there ahead. The

lookout grew suddenly suspicious. He said, "Gus! That you?" Then, "Hold up there, dammit, or I'll shoot!" Along with that he let out a yell. Windy half turned and blasted twice in the general direction of the voice.

He heard his man running for cover, and then from behind one of the buildings a gun started streaking, twice, three times, emptying itself. None of the lead came close to him but the shots awoke the town. Windy could hear Len Rawlings turn back and come running. The redhead yelled, "I'm all right, Len. Keep going. Grab the first horse you come to and ride like hell. Don't wait for me!" He ducked down and headed full-tilt in the general direction of the livery stable.

But Len Rawlings was there ahead of him, waiting to see that everything was all right. He had a gun jabbed in the livery man's face. After that the livery man was an easy gent to convince. Windy added one gun against the old man's Adam's apple and threatened to beat him over the head with another one. The livery man produced their two horses, quick, and Windy put on an exhibition of fast saddling.

Fast as he was, it had taken time, and in that time the town had anticipated their move. When Windy and Len rode through that wide door it seemed that every gun in Mobeetie was waiting for them. "Hold your fire, keep low and ride fast," Windy instructed. "We'll do our fighting some other day. If the Senator gets a-hold of us and you with them papers we'll hang high and kick fast." A bullet drilled his hat and cut his conversation short. A second one brought a yelp of pain from young Len Rawlings.

It was one of those black starless nights that come to blot out the prairie. But tonight it was a godsend, for in it Windy McCloud and Len Rawlings lost themselves from the howling mob that followed the dictates of Senator Manwaring. Windy figured rightly that the Senator couldn't hire every man in town and those who weren't directly on his payroll would tire of the chase as soon as the whiskey wore off.

After an hour of zig-zagging into black nothingness, Windy called for Len to pull up and they took time out to make their plans. "Keep heading due north," Windy

told the surveyor. "When you get to the Canadian, head upstream until you come to the old Comanchero crossing. Pete Spears has got a store there. Tell him I sent you and he'll see that you get a fresh horse and get the right trail for Dodge City. When you get to Dodge look up Lem Emery at the Cattlemen's Bank. He was loaning old Bob money and he'll advance you enough to get you a train ticket back to Washington, D. C. when he finds out what you want it for."

Len Rawlings reined his horse close and he leaned out of the saddle. His hand found Windy's there in the darkness and held a minute. He said, "Windy, I'm counting on you to take care of her. I wouldn't trust the job to another man on earth— Senator Manwaring and the U. S. Mail could go to hell first."

"Don't you worry about that none," Windy said, not missing the compliment. "Me nor none of the boys are gonna let anything happen to that girl. You just get on back there quick and make big talk. The sooner the Senator's name is in every newspaper in the country the quicker you and Betty are gonna be smellin' roses and listenin' to the bluebirds. Don't get yourself lost, now. Keep heading due north."

"I've done enough surveying to know my directions," Rawlings laughed.

When the hoofbeats of the surveyor's horse had died away it seemed to Windy that the prairie had suddenly become a mighty big and empty place. He didn't know whether he had fooled Rawlings or whether Rawlings was trying to fool him, but he knew for sure that Manwaring wasn't going to take the looting of his safe lightly. Windy figured that unless he missed his guess the Bob Hafford Lightning Mail would have a lot more than fires to contend from here on out.

He rode slowly west and south, back toward the Fort Bascom trail. By morning he had intercepted it and come to where old Bob's stage road angled off due south toward the boomtown of Wheeler. He stopped here to breakfast with the keeper of the stage station.

"Nope," the stage man said. "Nothing very exciting been going on around here. Ammunition? Sure, reckon so. Got a couple boxes of .44's and a couple boxes .45's I can let you have. I can get more

fetched in from Mobeetie. You gonna take the mail down to the end of the road?"

"Yeah," Windy said absent-mindedly. "Might as well." He was thinking of how old Bob Hafford had probably had breakfast here just like this, two days before.

A few hours later he rode into camp and passed the mail bags to Stowell whose turn it was to take them over the next thirty-mile run. "You shouldn't have any trouble," Windy said tightly. "That boy Walsh did a little clean-up job down that way yesterday."

"So I hear tell," Stowell said, and he said it in a way that made Windy feel Stowell wasn't going to let Walsh down. The lanky rider added, "I'm a gonna ride on back after I hand the mail over. Jest in case you boys rig up a game or something."

"Thanks," Windy said. He saw Stowell off, then he went over to the make-shift tent the boys had put up for Betty. He called her name, and she asked him to come inside.

She had been crying, he saw, and the unspilled tears left sparks of light in her eyes. Windy always had a half-way guilty feeling when he was around her. He couldn't help it if she was the kind of a girl who just naturally did things to a man's insides. He said, "Me and Len met up in Mobeetie. We got things pretty well laid out and got hold of the information we needed on Manwaring's manipulation of the Star Routes. Len went on east to talk to the Post Office officials and unless I miss my guess the Senator is going to wake up one of these mornings soon with a right fine scandal staring him in the face. After that it will be clear sailing for you, Miss Betty."

"Providing we can keep things going until that happens," she said. "I can't ask men to get themselves killed for me."

It was the first time he had ever heard her sound pessimistic. He felt he had to be a little rough with her. He said, "It don't take much guts to feel that way, Miss Betty. Your uncle Bob was willing to get a bullet in his head for this mail line."

"And that's all it got him. A bullet in the head," she said viciously.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Windy McCloud said softly. "There was an owl-hooter by the name of Walsh working for your uncle. Last night that man walked

into a Mobeetie saloon with less chance than a snowball in hell. He took a belly-full of lead because he figured he owed something to your uncle and to what your uncle was trying to do. I figure if a man like Walsh can do that maybe the rest of the boys wouldn't want to back down."

"They killed Walsh?" she said softly. It was as if maybe she couldn't take any more.

"That's right," Windy said. "I don't know who pulled the trigger on him but Latigo and Trask Wilson and the Senator were all old side-kicks of Walsh. They figured he knew too much."

"Why those dirty—" She finished the sentence nicely, in an unladylike manner.

Windy McCloud grinned. He put his arm around her shoulder and gave a little squeeze. "That's more like it, Miss Betty," he said. "I don't figure your uncle Bob would object too much to your talk."

He took his arm away quickly. Holding her close like that he could catch the perfume of her hair and feel the yielding softness of her body. He coughed uneasily and started toward the flap of the tent. He saw Romero coming in from the corral, as fast as his legs would carry him.

Half in Spanish, half in English, the Mexican said, "Señor McCloud! Where in the hell you put those ammunition? Stowell he just come back and he say a half dozen *banditos* got the trail blocked. I think everybody pack the mail today, no?"

WINDY had known for sure that this was going to happen, and yet he hadn't been prepared for it to take place so suddenly. With those incriminating Star Route lists stolen and a probable national scandal staring him in the face there was only one move for Senator Manwaring to make. That was to put the Bob Hafford Lightning Mail completely out of existence. With the political power at his disposal and no interested parties to press a specific charge the Senator probably figured he could pull strings in the right places and get the whole thing hushed up before he wound up in a Federal penitentiary. He had been saving Trask Wilson for a possible move like this, and if what Romero said was right Trask Wilson had gone to work.

There was a familiar vacant feeling in

the pit of Windy McCloud's stomach as he rallied his crew around him. It was a feeling of fear that wasn't fear; a feeling that told a man it was time to fight now and it was a feeling that didn't let him stop to consider whether or not he'd be alive the next day. It would go away soon, Windy knew, because he had experienced it too many times before. It would stay with him until the first gun made its snarling outcry and then it would go and he would be a machine without a heart or a soul. He knew too that out there, someplace down the trail, Trask Wilson had the same sort of feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he knew too that before this thing was over he and Trask Wilson would have to meet face to face to see which man was the better.

Stowell had dismounted and was hunkered down, making himself a cigarette. He didn't spill one particle of tobacco. When he saw Windy he looked up and said, "Figured you'd be mad if I took care of 'em all myself and didn't give you a chance to join in on the fun."

Tie Hard, the bowlegged little cowpuncher said, "That was right nice of you, Stowell. Watchin' you eat the way I have, I calculated you'd jest naturally try to hog it all."

One-eyed Beaver Benson had his lips curled away from his protruding front teeth and was lovingly patting a Sharps .50. "Only damn gun ever made that was worth totin'," he vowed.

Romero had taken a rosary from around his neck. He looked up, saw Windy watching him. He tucked the rosary back inside his shirt and said, "You know, I theenk I gonna have to kill me some peoples today."

It was the kind of a crew Windy McCloud liked. Maybe not the perfectionist's picture of what fighting men should be and maybe none of them represented the ambitious man's idea of success. But they were men with a heart inside them and guts enough to tackle an army. It was men like these, he thought, who had sweated it out at the Alamo. The vacant feeling was lessening in his stomach.

Stowell confirmed his suspicion that Trask Wilson was leading the band of gunmen who were coming up the trail. Windy said, "Trask is taking orders from Senator Manwaring. And Senator Manwaring is a

mighty smart hombre. He figures dead people don't hire lawyers and he'll go whole hog—even to ordering a stray bullet for Miss Betty. On top of that he'll want to see to it that something happens to these mail sacks because there'd be no quicker way to get a raggle-taggle outfit like this in hot water with the Post Office department than to have us lose a couple sacks of mail." He saw the men figuring out their own jobs.

Old one-eye Beaver Benson spoke softly, his hand caressing the Sharps. He said, "Windy, maybe I do stretch the truth a little now and then but you're pretty handy at it yourself. But when I told you about hidin' myself in grass three inches high to get away from Injuns I was speakin' the gospel. I've done it before and I can do it again. You give me them mail bags and I'll see they get down to Wheeler on time."

Windy picked up the mail bags and tossed them to the old man. He felt like he should make some kind of a fancy speech, but there just wasn't anything to say. He took a quick swipe at his nose with his forefinger and said, "Keep your hind end down, you old rannihan."

Stowell and Tie Hard made a couple of disparaging remarks that were about as fine a compliment a man could earn if he lived a long time. Stowell and Tie Hard were fighting men and they knew it was their job to take their place with Windy.

But little barrel-round Romero was cut out for different things. He looked at Windy, a grin splitting his child-like face and said, "You know one time I knew a Mexican fellah could throw a knife. Like this." There was a glitter in his hand and then a knife was quivering in a block of wood, twenty feet away. "Somebody try to touch Miss Betty I theenk I cut his belly," the Mexican said.

"That's your job then, you chili-eatin' son of a gun," Windy said. Then to Stowell and Tie Hard, "Reckon there ain't much sense standin' here waitin', is there? There's a little arroyo on down the trail. At least we'll have a few rocks to lean against if we get tired."

They mounted and rode openly, not trying to hide their movements, hoping only to draw attention away from old Beaver Benson who somehow already had managed to blend in with the level landscape. He'd

have thirty miles on foot, or maybe on hands and knees, but Windy knew the old mountain man would make it even if he had to lug an extra load of lead along with him. It was the kind of thing that made a man want to do some first-class fighting. He knew that Stowell and Tie Hard had caught the feeling too.

A few miles down the trail they saw six horsemen riding slowly in their direction. Even at that distance Windy was sure he recognized Trask Wilson riding in the lead.

"Want a chew?" Tie Hard said, producing a dusty twist from his hip pocket.

"Don't mind if I do," said Windy McCloud. He bit off a big hunk and handed the twist over to Stowell.

The lanky Stowell looked like a skeleton on horseback. He bit off a sizable cud and patted his six shooter. "Never did put much store in rifles," the lanky rider said. "Let's get 'em in close."

They spurred their horses then and a rebel yell, sired in The Wilderness, tuned to an ear-splitting fineness in the thickets of Texas, split the air as the three men rode for the narrow dry arroyo that cut its way across the floor of the plain. Trask and his riders, seeing the movement, headed in the same direction, cutting loose with a fusillade of ineffective lead as they did. Three men against six now.

The arroyo twisted and turned, its jagged red clay banks jutting water-scarred fingers out into its course, and along its side, holes gouged out by the spring floods made shallow caves. One of Trask's men, a fraction too slow, stood for a second on the lip of the arroyo and Windy's gun sent him tumbling down for cover, cursing like a madman. The vacant feeling was completely gone from McCloud's stomach now.

There was a good half-hour of total silence as the men sparred around for position. From time to time Windy had to risk his head to peer over the edge of the arroyo, trying to make sure that Trask hadn't split his crew to circle them. The first concentrated firing came when Trask did just that. Three men broke away and made a run across the flat prairie. "Good huntin'!" Windy yelled, and Stowell and Tie Hard clambered up to his side.

THE THREE men there on the prairie were making a hopeless try and they seemed to know it. They fired wildly at

first, spouting dust off the lip of the arroyo, registering a nasty flesh wound at the base of Stowell's neck. Then they flattened themselves in the scant protection of a low swale. Windy, raising himself for a better shot, felt the hot bite of lead crease his ribs. Out there in the swale a man stood up staring foolishly straight ahead. Then he fell on his face and Windy blew the smoke from his gun.

Another man lost his nerve and tried to make a run for better protection. Stowell fired once, spit over his chin and said, "This old hogleg shoots pretty straight." The blood from the wound in his neck was running down over his chest and trickling down his arm.

The lone man out there in the swale gave it up and concentrated on keeping his head down, but the strategy had worked. Trask Wilson and the two with him had moved up the arroyo and from behind one of the jutting fingers of clay they began pouring a concentrated fire toward the exposed position of Windy and Stowell and Tie Hard.

Grabbing Stowell by the sleeve Windy tumbled himself down the bank, pulling the lanky fighter with him. Tough little Tie Hard, seeing the move, beat them to the shallow cave, but not until lead had ripped flesh from his thigh. It was one hell of a nasty wound.

Trask and his men, confident now, sprayed lead like shot from a scatter-gun and the dust spurted up and made a hazy swirl and the gunsmoke lay heavy in the bottom of the arroyo. "Hold your fire," Windy ordered hoarsely. "They may get anxious and come out to see what's happened."

For fifteen minutes then they lay huddled in the shallow cave, not daring to breath. It sickened Windy to see the way the blood was pumping out of Tie Hard's leg. The little puncher's face was turning a bluish white, but he managed to grin and he kept chewing away at the cud of tobacco. All eyes were centered on that jut of clay behind which lurked sudden death. Slowly a hat apneared from around the protection of the shoulder. Windy reached out and touched the gun hand of Stowell and shook his head. The lanky Stowell grinned knowingly.

A minute later a man walked boldly upright into the open. Three guns roared,

and the man turned first to the left, then to the right, then stumbled back as if someone had hit him in the chest with a log. A gun hand appeared, and the gun seemed to explode in mid-air. There was a scream of pain as Windy found the target. A body exposed itself and there was a blast from Tie Hard's gun. The man's face was in view when he fell.

After that there was the sound of running feet. "The one out in the swale!" Windy yelled. Tie Hard couldn't make it to the top of the bank, but Windy and Stowell got there. The swale was empty. "He may try to get to camp!" Windy said tightly. "Catch up the horses and get Tie Hard in where Miss Betty can bandage him up! I'm going after Trask Wilson!"

Followed then the nerve-jangling movement from one scant protection to another. Once Windy thought he could hear Trask breathing there ahead and he called out, "What's the matter Wilson? Scared? Or do you only shoot men in the back, like you did Bob Hafford?"

There was a long silence, then Trask Wilson's voice, "Just don't want to cripple you, McCloud."

In back of him Windy could hear the creak of saddle leather, then the sound of hoofs. Stowell and Tie Hard had made it. He moved on around the outcropping behind which he had flattened himself and a bullet splattered against the hard clay as

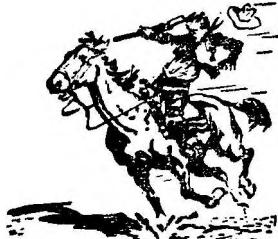
he pulled himself to new cover. "Missed me!" he called to Trask Wilson. Trask didn't answer, but another bullet seared Windy's scalp.

He stopped, trying to figure for sure just where Trask Wilson would be hiding, and he spotted the small mesa-like island that stood in the next bend of the dry arroyo. Watching it closely he saw a thin splinter of blue gunsmoke.

He waited a long time, sucking his breath deep into his lungs. Then he made a headlong dive for that island. Wilson's bullets kicked sand at his feet. Windy flattened himself against the eroded sides of the tiny mesa and started working his way around, slowly. There, not fifteen feet across from him he knew that Trask Wilson was doing the same thing.

He worked easterly, a dozen steps or so, then immediately reversed his field and started back the other way. Feeling his way along his hand touched the fabric of a man's shirt. He jumped aside, and then he and Trask Wilson were standing there, facing each other, not three feet apart.

Windy could see the killer lust in Wilsons' gray eyes; he saw the smile that pulled the thin lips back from the perfect white teeth. All this in a thousandth of a second. Then two guns were roaring, muzzles pressed against flesh. Windy knew he was hit, and hit bad, but Trask Wilson was staggering back. His hand opened and



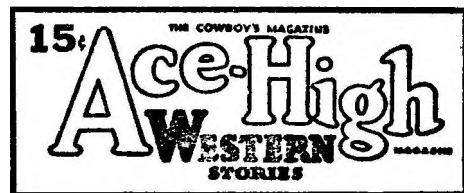
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he dropped the gun, then his fingers clawed at the clay bank, refused to hold, and Wilson slid down into the arroyo.

Windy McCloud looked stupidly at the gushing hole, low in his left side. His knees went out from under him and he started crawling back toward where they had left the horses. Before he was half way he knew he'd never make it. . . .

Somehow he wasn't surprised when he opened his eyes and found himself in Betty Hafford's tent. Stowell, his neck piled with bandages, was sitting there across from him. Windy grinned and said, "If you ain't a hell of a lookin' aspect."

Stowell said, "Damn wonder you wouldn't shave, with women being in camp."

A voice from outside groaned and said, "Good Lord, is that dern McCloud talkin' again? Jest as I was beginning to enjoy the quiet." It was Tie Hard.

Windy waited then, listening for the soft musical voice of Romero. Stowell didn't look at him when he said, "Miss Betty knew all the church words and the Mex said that's all he cared about. It didn't seem so tough seein' the little devil go. He acted like he was almost happy about it."

Windy found out later how it had happened. The one man who had got away from them out there in the swale had made his way to camp. "When we found him he was too carved up to do any damage," Stowell said, "but he'd put a half a dozen slugs into Romero. That damn Mex was still on his feet, his knife in his hand, grinnin' like sin when me and Tie Hard got back. Soon as he saw we was here to look out for Miss Betty he just folded up quiet like."

"The mail?" Windy asked, not wanting to talk any more about Romero. He saw a gleam of pride in Stowell's eyes.

"That Betty girl sure takes after her Uncle Bob. She rode up to the Fort Bascom trail herself, corralled a half a dozen of the orneriest lookin' cowpunchers you ever clapped eyes on and the mail's been goin' through here on cow ponies like soup through a tin horn, them yahoos whoopin' and yellin' like Comanches. She done told 'em there'd be a dance down to Wheeler and I reckon that's all they wanted to hear."

Ten days went by, and Windy met the punchers who were carrying the mail. They were part of a fence-building gang, working for one of the big syndicates. They were so far away from headquarters that their Eastern boss would never know they were taking a couple of weeks off and Windy figured that nobody here was going to tell on them. There were a dozen more men at the fence camp, they said, and Windy knew that if Manwaring wanted to match gunsmoke again the Bob Hafford Lightning Mail would more than hold its own.

But Senator Manwaring never got a chance. It was in one of the mail bags that a puncher called Piggy brought into camp one afternoon. A Washington newspaper, a Kansas City newspaper, a Fort Worth newspaper and a Dodge City newspaper. They all said about the same thing:

BIG STAR ROUTE MAIL SCANDAL UNCOVERED IN TEXAS PANHANDLE

Senator Manwaring and Post Office Official Implicated

And along with the papers there was a letter from Len Rawlings, but apparently it was private because Miss Betty didn't let any of the boys read it. She just stood there, her eyes shining like they did sometimes when she was about to cry and she didn't say any cuss words.

A week later Windy McCloud was up and riding.

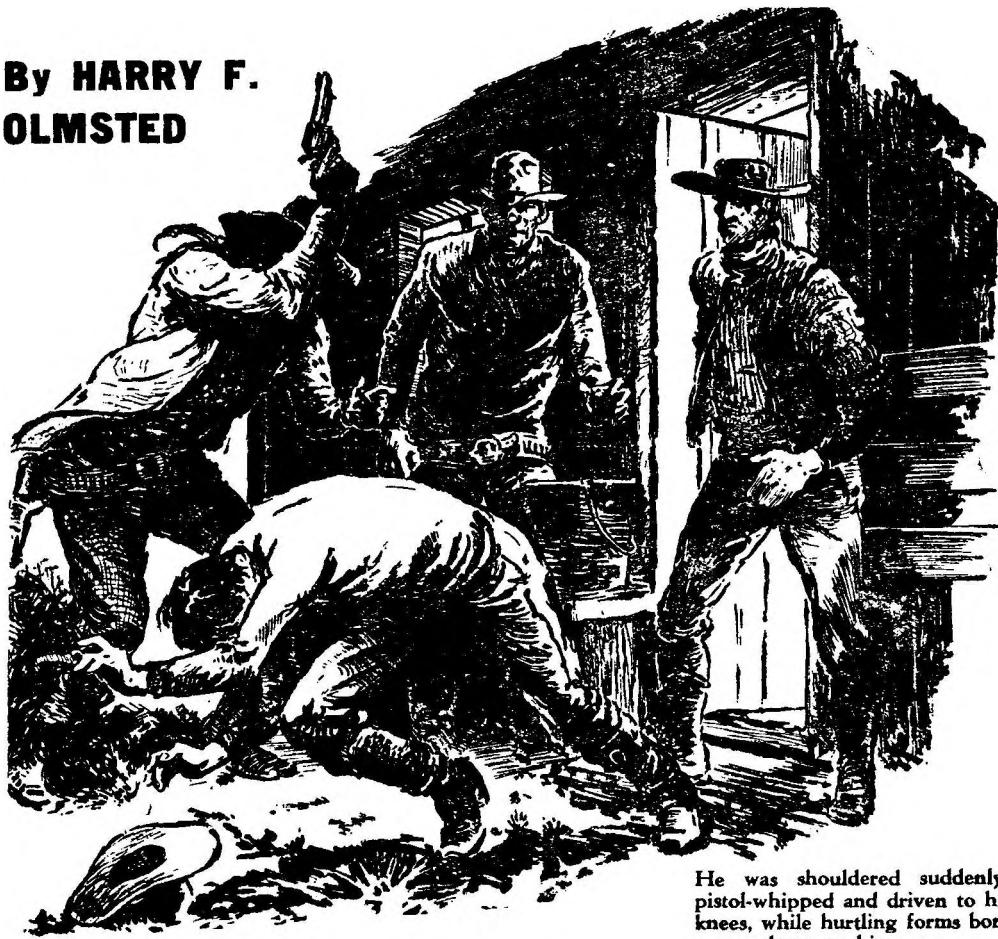
He said goodbye to Betty and she stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth, longer then she should have. He kept thinking a woman didn't have any right to do that to a man. What the hell did she think he was made of—stone?

But as he rode north toward Tascosa he knew he was doing the right thing, for he could see how it would be. The stage road would go through and things would be run from an office. In time the railroad would come chuffing even here and Len Rawlings would probably open an engineering office or own a store down in Wheeler or some other civilized place. Probably even be a bunch of little Len Rawlings running around.

None of that for Windy McCloud. . . .

"Too soft," those boom-camp miners called him; "too damned soft to live long in this roaring camp!" Yet when the chips were down in a live-or-die game with the pistol-king of Gold Flake, Abel Downers' "softness" assayed a hundred percent—in live-or-die guts!

**By HARRY F.
OLMSTED**



He was shouldered suddenly, pistol-whipped and driven to his knees, while hurtling forms bore down on him. . . .

One Red Night in Gold Flake

WHEN THOSE four men entered Abel Downers' Mountain Inn, Abel smelled trouble. It would be more of the same old thing that had plagued him since he'd first become a part of booming Gold Flake. These men upset the hot repose of the dining room. Mama Brissac, overflowing her easy chair at the kitchen door, hissed to waken fat Jacques, the cook. Lala Cariaga laid down a month-old Sacramento *Argonaut*, smoothed her flowered

apron and poised to serve the trade when it found table.

The prospect of four more dinner checks should have pleased the host, who stood attentively behind the gold scales at the cash desk. He had served only ten meals during this supper hour—two of them charity. But his pleasure was only outward, a pose to mask his surprise. Madison Mulford belonged on the lee side of Don Placido Street.

Mulford's short legs, fuming cigar, black clothes and silk hat made him resemble nothing so much as a smoky cookstove. Full fed, now, judging from the poised toothpick, he veered toward the desk. At the kitchen door Mama Brissac snorted: "Finish napping, Jacques. These swine have been slopped."

Planted before the host, Mulford removed his plug hat and mopped his florid face. "Damned hot here, Downers. Won't your windows open?"

The host's cool eyes shadowed, drilling across the desk in a silent, sullen scrutiny, knowing this man for what he was and hating him because of it. This boss of Gold Flake lived in the big house set back among the pines, off El Dorado Street. Casually respectable, he ran his busy Gold Flake Commission House—staking placer men, banking and shipping dust, brokering gold claims—and always demanding his pound of flesh. It was no secret that he had a string on every enterprise in camp, one way or another. Nor was it any secret that he habitually violated mining laws by planting hireling dummies on stolen claims.

Now he tucked a moist silk handkerchief into his breast pocket, eyeing the host with a truculent sneer. "Scared of fresh air, Downers?"

"I like it hot," said the host.

"You'll get it hot, by God!" Towering Gar Fullwider stepped up beside Mulford. Owner of the local stage and freight lines, he was unpleasantly lean, split to the neck as the saying went. His clothes were fine but ill-kept. His figured vest was gravy-stained. An English bowler tilted far back on wild, colorless hair. By habit an evasive, cheerless man, he was now motivated by a strong hatred. "Yeah, you'll get a bellyful of heat."

Mulford snapped: "Silence, Gar. Know about the latest in robberies, Downers?"

The host laughed. "Latest? Who keeps track? Somebody's robbed every day."

"Mostly us; never you," said the boss. "Ever think of that?"

The host had and, being reminded, smiled. A faro dealer in San Francisco, he had recoiled from the sordid waterfront life and come to the placers. Broke, too, as a sucker for a hard-luck story usually is. On the Barbary Coast they called him soft-hearted. Only a soft heart could account

for his three derelicts—Jacques, Mama Brissac and Lala.

Jacques had been chef at the Palace, before Chinese hop got him. Mama ran a delicatessen until hoodlums, paid by a competitor, smashed her out of business. Lala, daughter of a Don whose lands were forfeit to a Yankee shyster, came to the City after her father's suicide, seeking work. She would have found it in Mayhem Alley cribs if Abel hadn't found her a place with Mama Brissac. When the delicatessen went smash, Abel wagoned them all to Gold Flake, setting them up in the Mountain Inn.

The Inn had not paid, would not pay. Fronting the lusty side of Don Placido, it backed against the cribs of Wildcat Alley and was wedged between Curly Crocker's Rendezvous and Zeb Sorrel's Sluice Box, both bucking him with their lunch counters. Aside from miners seeking his custom in other matters, the host found small patronage.

The River Trail, west to Hangtown, and North Trail—to Downieville—swarmed with highwaymen. Hangtrees graced Dutch Flat, Gold Run, Michigan Bluff and Forest City, and there many men had swung. By concensus, the wrong men. Robberies continued. Stages and freight outfits were periodically halted and despoiled. Small placer men lost heavily. So the hotel man set about to serve both them and himself.

He trained two pack horses to travel secret ways to a hidden corral near Shingle Springs, where he picked them up. He had been stopped on his way to meet them, but never with gold in the saddlebags. They called him the Gold Ghost and he was besieged by scores he could only serve in turn. Refusing dust before the loading date, he hadn't lost an ounce. His cut of the deliveries, banked in Sacramento, paid for provisions for his inn.

His success had made friends—and enemies. Madison Mulford burned that Downers refused his dust. His boycott of Mountain Inn extended from would-be patrons through tradespeople wearing his yoke and even to Gilhooley's Slaughterhouse. Yet Downers could smile, now that the boss was coming to him.

"Yes, Mulford," he said proudly. "I've considered it. We're alike in our planning. But you've bulled over men and I have favored them. You fail; I succeed. What

about this last robbery just pulled off?"

Mulford reddened, spoke with sharp bitterness. "You get gold out; I don't. Who knows—you might get mine out, too!"

The host glared at him, eyes chill and rigidly set. Without search, he saw the things charged to this man—the struggle over wherever he had been or might go; the gray ghosts of little people who had trusted and been smashed or, failing to trust, had died. He saw the bent backs of drenched men gleaning the rivers to swell Mulford's wealth, cruelty and power. And the host's soft heart had hardened.

"Who knows, Mulford—might be you rob your own shipments to beat the regular ten percent."

Mulford's companions sucked a breath. Mulford swallowed his fury, eyes slyly thoughtful. "No use calling names. I came to tell you a bandit stopped Fullwider's four o'clock stage at Pidgeon Rock. Bullwhip Klatchy must have tossed out the dust and shot the bandit, judging by blood in the road. The coach rolled into Grasshopper with Bullwhip dead in the boot. The gold is gone—a thousand big ounces."

"And you came to see if I had the bullet bellyache, is that it?"

Before Mulford's answer, Mama Brissac screamed. "You look for trouble, Mister! Downers has been here all day."

Mulford blinked, ignoring her. "I came to warn you, Downers. The man was tracked into Grizzly—probably one of those sluice-robbing independents. You deal with them, stake them and deliver their gold. The man may come here—"

"With a thousand ounces?" scoffed the host.

"Offering all or any part to get patched up," rapped Gar Fullwider. "We're watching Doc Valentine. There's nobody else in Gold Flake but you. Don't try it."

The host studied the transportation man, weighing his greediness, his passionate desire for violence. He held the man's glance, withholding both judgment and fury. Mulford tossed away his cigar. "That's it, Downers."

And, noting the host's quizzical survey of Crocker and Sorrel: "That dust belonged to Curly and Zeb. They want it back. We'll depend on you if you hear anything. Goodnight." He turned away, imperiously beckoning his mates from the inn.

When they were gone, Mama Brissac cried: "That devil will smash you, Abel, unless you kill him."

"Shut up, Mama!" Lala, standing with hands clasped at her breast, clenched them into fists now, burning the older woman with her scorn. "You, safe in your chair, ask the *patrón* to fight four, maybe a hundred, men. For what?"

She came to the host, dark, shapely, graceful, her round eyes warm. "Forget her and those men," she begged. "Attend to your business and let them wail like coyotes at the moon." She touched his face, as if to smooth away the lines of loneliness.

The host had looked at Lala and he had seen her. She, in the old wisdom of California women, had read his want, waiting for him to decide while she filled his need for mothering. Something touched his eyes now, and passed. "Do n't worry, Lala," he smiled. "They can howl, and welcome. I'm too busy to be bothered."

THAT WAS about eight. Until nine, the host worked with his accounts. Mama Brissac and Jacques cleaned kitchen and retired, quarreling. About ten, two miners came for their deposit reports, chatted awhile and left. Lala, writing an aunt in Sonoma, said wistfully: "Anything more tonight, *patrón*?"

"Lock up, Lala. Go to bed." His head bent over his papers. His cigar smoke wreathed the lamp. Lala stood rapt, lips parted, eyes diamond-bright, scarcely breathing. Dreaming dreams. Shaking herself, she went to the door. There was faint sound outside, a hand on the knob. Startled, Lala put her strength against the panel, then jerked it open.

A girl lurched into the room, gasped "Oh!" straightened and smoothed her gingshams. She glanced at Lala, then at the host and back to Lala. Something deepened the color in her cheeks, dimming the freckles around her nose. Lala knew her thoughts and the knowledge brought its moment's pride, regret and envy.

She watched the girl cross to interrupt the host, critical of her straight, boyish body and lithe outdoor strength. No softening touch of good living. No fullness for a man's comfort. Very young and eager to see him. What was her interest? She was swaying across the desk, her hands on the

host. "Mister Downers, I—I'm in terrible trouble. I must talk with you."

The host stood, his smile betraying pleasure. "You're trembling. What is it?"

"I'm Drucilla—daughter of John Leebbrick. Grizzly Claim twenty-one. I must have work, quickly. I know what you've done for our miners. Can't I work here? I'll sweep, cook, wash dishes—anything."

She was hysterical, her voice a wild gale. The host studied her, stroking his hard chin. "A Grizzly claim should pay well," he mused. "Why must you work?"

She dropped her eyes, squirming under his glance. Looking around, she caught Lala's critical eyes on her. It brought a calm hardness. "Can't we talk alone?"

The host nodded. "Leave the keys in the door, Lala. I'll lock up."

Lala's dark eyes flashed. *He wants to be alone with her*, she thought. *It's not decent*. She stuck the key in the lock, left the ring dangling and stiffly left the room.

"Now," said the host.

Drucilla's courage had failed, leaving her tiny, crushed. "Dad," she murmured, "held up the coach to reclaim gold that twice—no, three times, they stole before he could ship—"

"Who stole it, Drucilla?"

"Roughs, wearing masks and riding horses." She shivered. "I don't know who, but one came later, unmasked, bearing Mulford's order to sell our claim at his price. I—I recognized his voice."

"So Leebbrick robbed a Mulford shipment?" The host spoke gently, his eyes pitying. She stamped her foot.

"I know it was wrong, but dad had suffered, brooding until he was desperate. I must have decent work, Mister Downers, and I thought of your place. But, more important," she looked around, dropping her voice, "dad's badly hurt. He insists he's all right and refuses to see the doctor. About dark I went to him. He was asleep but his breathing was bubbly, frightening."

"Where is he?"

"Abed in the brush, uphill from our cabin and to the west."

"It's dangerous," the host mused grimly. "If he's caught, he'll hang. But somehow I'll get the doctor to him." He donned his hat, came around the desk to face her. She noted his height and breadth; her young eyes were grateful and her wish drew her

close to him. Lala, watching from a slitted door, saw his hand reach out and retreat. She saw the moment pass and the two draw apart. She thought, *All men are alike. She's too young for him, too thin and unformed*.

The host said: "I've a spare bed here for you."

"Can't I go with you, Mister Downers? I'm not afraid. I can help with—"

"Come!" He took her arm, hurried her back, opened a rear room and pushed her inside. "Matches beside the lamp, Drucilla. Sleep well. I'll see you tomorrow."

Turning, she watched him cross the dining room and let himself out. Sighing, she shifted glance and caught the flash of Lala's stolen scrutiny. Her heart quickened. *That woman*, she thought. *I wonder what she is to him?* Looking down at the toes of her scuffed shoes, she turned into the room, quietly closed the door.

Pausing beneath his awning, Abel recalled Fullwider's warning. "We're watching Doc Valentine." That means guards. If they watched the inn and could couple Drucilla's arrival and his departure. . . .

He probed the night and, observing nothing threatening, glided along the front and back between the inn and the Sluice Box. At the rear, he surveyed, right and left, the red-lighted reaches of Wildcat Alley. Somewhere guitar notes accompanied a man's bawdy refrain. Down toward California Street a woman laughed, high, forced. A man, early drunk, reeled past, muttering. Revelry along Don Placido pulsed like a strained heart.

Spotting no watcher, the host moved east along the Alley at a studied pace. He crossed California, passed Wong's Laundry and Miner's supply. At Del Norte, open fields lay before him, heavy with smells of baked earth, river growth and Gilhooley's Slaughterhouse burning pit. He took a moment to keen the backtrail. Nobody followed.

At a long, fast stride, he turned past Louis' Corral, past Faro Nell's Deadfall and so to Placer Street, paralleling the murmuring river and bordering the camp on north and west. This he followed, pausing at the foot of Don Placido. Doc Valentine's sign flapped in the wind, scarcely a hundred yards up the main drag.

The host approached cautiously, watching for guards and surprised at their wariness.

ness. Nobody intercepted him; nobody challenged. Valentine's door, not quite closed, emitted light and the taunting voice: "Hit the hay, Doc. No business tonight."

"You'd let an injured man die at my door?" That was Valentine.

"Better'n that, Doc. I'd kill him if he happened to be the stage robber."

The host entered, his light footfall failing to rouse the guard. The closing door pulled the fellow around, reaching for his pistol. The host's solid knuckles took him alongside the jaw, snapping his head, dumping him backward and down across a chair that splintered and collapsed. The guard lay still and shapeless in the wreckage.

Doc Valentine, a little man with a love of whiskey, regarded the host with eyes made morose from looking at violent and shameful death. "My friend," he ran the edge of his forefinger along his doleful mustache, "you shouldn't hit so hard."

"Get chloral into him, Doc. Long odds call for attrition. Hurry!"

Valentine, framing a stubborn refusal, sensed the hard and frightening impetuosity in the inn-keeper. He shrugged, got the knockout drops, counted some into the unconscious guard and washed it down with whiskey. Then he rose, desperately uneasy. "Now what, Downers?"

"Your bag. We're taking a walk."

"But I—" The host's glance silenced Valentine. And, when Downers smiled, he chuckled, turned for his hat and bag. "When boys play with fire," he murmured, "they usually get burned."

The inn-keeper snuffed the light, led the way outside. Don Placido Street echoed to careless, cheerful chatter along the walks, a block away. Raucous dance fiddling came from E. Clampus Vitus Hall, where couples filtered in and out. Life moved gay and lusty through Gold Flake's center, but here at the lower border all was dark, quiet, lonely.

Restlessly, Abel hustled the medico down dingy Yuba Street, past Epsom's Gun Shop and the darkened canvas of the Revival Church, across El Dorado—lined with homes of the town rich and so into the brush and the trail across Grizzly Ridge.

Valentine tired rapidly, the host almost carrying him at times. Often the doctor rested, wheezing and groaning while Abel paced. It took an hour, that climb, and a

half hour more to descend to the Leebrick claim. When Valentine complained, the host mimicked him. "Don't let an injured man die because he can't reach your door, Doc."

"I'm a fool," moaned the medico, "for not resisting. And you're a fool for bucking Mulford. Unless that fellow in my office dies, Mulford will learn what happened and kill us both."

Abel laughed startlingly, and paced up into the brush west of the deserted Leebrick cabin. Guardedly, he called: "John! Here's the doc, John."

No answer; no sound save the soughing of the pines. A ten minute search turned up the miner. He lay on his pallet and he was dead. He had cheated the dreadful accounting foreordained for highwaymen.

Failing to locate the stolen dust, the host said: "We'll leave him as he is. Funeral Bogg's can have him tomorrow."

THE RETURN by Grizzly Road was longer, but without hills. Somewhat after midnight, the host paused to watch Valentine trudge wearily up Don Placido toward his office. Against the saloon lights, the host saw two men angle to meet the doctor. Long legs flashing, he sped to interrupt their fun. They did not suspect his presence until he tore them from the man they cuffed around, knocked their heads together and hurled them into the dust. He stood over the cringing pair and, just as he had surprised them, he too was surprised.

Shouldered suddenly from behind, he was driven to his knees. Hurting forms bore him down, pinned his arms and stilled his struggles. Heaving, straining, he was jerked erect to face Gar Fullwider's wicked eyes. "Well, Downers! Too stubborn, eh? Too crooked to listen? Leebrick's girl came to you. You took Doc out to attend her father—"

"No," protested Valentine. "I didn't attend him."

"Mulford," said the host, sourly, "will never judge Leebrick."

"Where's that dust?"

"Search me."

"Think hard, Gold Ghost."

"I am, Fullwider. But not to help you add to your Grizzly steals."

Fullwider struck him in the face. The host's fury broke the hold of those beside

him and he flung himself at Gar. A blow from behind felled him. He turned Fullwider's swinging boot, caught his leg and jerked him to a fall. They grappled and clung together, clubbing. Then something thudded against Abel's skull, dragging him down into darkly swirling sleep. . . .

Unable to sleep, Drucilla Leebrick slumped in the darkest corner of the dark dining room. She heard the host's stumbling step, saw him enter and light the lamp. He rummaged in his desk, produced a pepperbox pistol and verified the loads before dropping it into his pocket. White with nameless fear, Drucilla saw Lala glide from her room, her olive face flushed with sleep.

Lala was not shy. She knew her gifts as she pressed against the host, smiling up into his face. Her fingers caressed his puffed lips. *"Pobreñito!* I do not sleep from fearing for you, *patrón*. Put the gun away and let Lala comfort your feelings. If you should die—" She choked, fell silent.

Recklessness touched the host's eyes. She was beautiful. Willingness rode her full lips. He touched her curving waist, parted his lips to speak. Dreading this, Drucilla closed her eyes, her shoulders settling. Then she heard the host say, "I'm surprised, Lala. You must have learned I do the worrying here. Be a good girl and get to bed. I'll be all right."

Not the words but the tone pulled Drucilla's eyes open. It was as if he spoke to a child. The look had left his eyes. His hand was away from Lala's waist. Self-possession was a strength in him. This Drucilla saw and she rose and came to stand beside Lala, not looking at her. The host smiled at her, called her name. She tried to read his eyes. "Dad—?"

"Be brave, Drucilla. We were too late."

Tears filmed her eyes. Her lips trembled. She stared at him and he at her, neither speaking. At that moment, they were alone in the world. Lala, seeing this, turned dejectedly, shuffled toward her room. Neither saw her go.

Presently, Drucilla said: "The gold?"

"I found nothing. Your father took his secret along."

"I'm sorry. I'd like to return it."

A flash burned across his eyes. "Save your sympathy, girl. They split as much every week—dust consigned by trusting men, dust they'll hang innocent men for

stealing. Don't worry about returning it."

"How terrible," she breathed, suddenly understanding. "Something should be done."

"Something will be," he promised. "When it happens, Gold Flake can thank you for coming here, Drucilla. I thank you, too." He released her, shyness entering his face. "If you care to, you can stay." He found difficulty with words. "After the ugly business is finished, I mean. I'd like you here running the inn, with me."

He spun about, left her there staring after him. As he jerked the door open, she called his name: "Abel!"

Maybe he didn't hear, for the door closed solidly.

The host hesitated outside the door, probing the tempers of Gold Flake, savoring the early morning chill that eased the burning flame in his chest. Music and dancing still shook E. Clampus Vitus Hall. Camp revelry had abated to murmurs of laughter and the sharp calls of gamblers in the saloons. The host too had a gamble. The odds, hopelessly long, depended upon the miners, to whom the word if not the spirit of the law was a fetish.

He drew a long breath, thoughtfully moved the few yards to the door of the Sluice Box. Zeb Sorrel, proprietor, and Curly Crocker of the Rendezvous, stood at the bar with men who howled as Crocker clowned Abel's defense of Valentine, and his subsequent beating. The host saw and heard and he walked in on it.

Laughter died away. Men fell back from Curly and Zeb. Abel shouldered through, stood before Curly who was suddenly sour, frightened, probing the host's intent. He ground out: "Decide to tell where that stolen dust is, Downers?"

"I don't know," said Abel.

His mildness stimulated Curly. "Another bull session might help, eh?"

The host laughed, and struck. Shock of the chin blow ran pleasantly up his right arm. Curly's star-bright eyes dimmed. He slumped, fell back against the top bar rail and tumbled, limp and shapeless, into the sawdust.

Astonished, Zeb Sorrel, a bigger, tougher man, yelled: "Hey!" cocked his fists and charged. Abel met him shoulder on, struck down his defense and hurled him back. "Call for help, Zeb," laughed Abel, caught

and lifted the struggling man. Zeb grappled his head but Abel tore him loose, heaving him across the bar. Zeb described an arc, arms and legs flying, and smashed into the backbar. He caught at the edge, lost his hold and pulled the stand over, striking the floor in a rain of glassware.

Made of stern stuff, Sorrel came up, bleeding, dripping whiskey. Lunging, he elbowed the bartender down, reached and straightened with a shotgun. The host, matching his move, dove across the counter, smashing at him. Both tumbled into the aisle.

To the watchers, astounded by this sudden warfare they couldn't understand, came sounds of rasping breath, meat-axe blows, an agonized cry. Then the host rose, bleeding from a brow cut, to stare at red-shirted miners who fought for gold, asking no quarter. They couldn't guess what lay back of this entertainment and Abel avoided wakening their mob spirit. "Good boy!" applauded one. "They'll sleep nice."

Abel set up bottles from the aisle. "Thanks, boys. Drink?"

They came, whooping. Abel emerged, feeling their palms against him as he pressed through. Again before Don Placido he paused, pressing the hurt that swelled and darkened his eye. His glance found light splashing the walk, across and a few doors beyond California. The Gold Flake Commission House! Light meant Mulford was there.

ANGLING across the roadway, he passed the Hall, Wells Fargo, the Pillars Palace. Idlers before the hall stared, puzzling at his bloody face and stiff stride, one saying: "What ails Downers?" With studied directness, he passed the El Dorado House, crossed California and, beyond the stage station, turned into the Commission House.

The smoky room rocked with conviviality. Mulford sat behind his counter, at a table stocked with bottles. Playing bartender. Ranged along the counter were a dozen men of standing in the camp. Snyder, the express agent; Gilhooley, the butcher; Epsom, the gunsmith. Smutz, of the Emporium; Pastore, corralman; Watson, of the Merc. Unimpressed, Abel moved toward the counter end, where Fullwider sat hugging one knee.

Mirth died away. Men clutched their

glasses, studying this bloody apparition who glared at Fullwider. Mulford saw him and put contempt into his voice. "Look what blew in, boys! He must have bucked a landslide. What happened, Downers?"

Ignoring him, Abel halted a yard from Fullwider, his look level, unreadable. Gar's lips sneered but his eyes were restless, questioning, wary. "What the hell you staring at?" he rapped.

"You," said Abel, quietly. "You gun-whipped me while your hoodlums held me. The job isn't finished, Gar. Get down!"

Whiskey sloshed Abel's face. Gar came leaping off the counter, fists balled. Abel's swinging pepperbox struck his cheekbone, driving him head-first into Mulford's front window. Glass cascaded musically. Gar sprawled, belly down and full length, across the walk. Bawling, he came up, lifting his pistol for the throwdown.

Abel's gun spat flame. Gar grunted, doubled, teetered to the edge of walk and over, thudding into the street. Dust boiled up, but not Gar. Struck square in the heart, he would not rise. Abel turned, eyeing townsmen white-faced and near panic. "If you're his friends," he husked, "you'll take it up. If not, get out."

Voiceless, they strung through the door. Mulford, alone with his pitiful bravado, rasped: "The Committee bell will ring your funeral in about a minute."

"You won't attend, Mulford." The host vaulted the counter, eyes burning. The boss' ratlike courage ebbed. He raised a fat arm, recoiling. "Don't you strike me."

The host laughed, struck those arms down. His pistol barrel rapped Mulford's jaw, knocking him to the floor. He bled like a sheep, crawled to grasp Abel's pants, begging. Abel kicked him loose, lifted him to his feet and, half supporting him, cut a gash in his forehead with another blow of the gun.

"Shut up, you dog," he raged. "You're not hurt yet. You haven't felt anything yet. I'm a gambler, Mulford. I detest a man who wins big and loses small. When you robbed your consigned shipments, you sang big, pouncing on some friendless innocent to hang for your crime. But when a man you've robbed blind, bullied and made desperate robs you back, you cry to heaven and set your hoodlums on poor old Doc Valentine. You made your mistake when you set

them on me. I'm going to beat you to death, Mulford!"

"No, Downers! No!" Mulford was screaming as the host laid the gun to him. And now the big bell at the Hall was ringing, summoning the miners. They would come for him, the host knew that, but until they did....

He hit the camp boss again, and again. Outside, they were yelling for him to stop it, but no man came in to enforce the order. The host smiled as he worked. Those town dads knew Mulford's arrogant power, to their sorrow. Most of them were unwilling tools. Secretly, they knew his games and how he played them.

Mulford was a bloody, blubbering wreck now, moaning offers of money, threats of vengeance, appeals for mercy. "The truth ain't in you," answered the host, and beat him some more. Nor did he halt the punishment until the man collapsed utterly, crying the thing Abel had waited for.

"Don't beat me any more, Downers. I can't stand it. What do you want? I'll do anything you want. Honestly!"

"Good!" The host jerked him up, backed him toward the door. Down the street sounded the roar of the aroused Committee that had formed at the hall. "You're going to tell the miners all about your dirty business, Mulford. If you lie or hold back, I'll cut you to ribbons. Then I'll pour the lead to you, one bullet after another, each where it'll hurt the worst. Get your legs under you!"

Half supporting him, he marched him outside, off the walk and up the axis of the street to meet the miners. They halted, waiting, eyeing the gun poised above Mulford's head. They were still and puzzled, looking beyond this scene to where light from the commission house office fell across the walk and showed the still form of Gar Fullwider. Someone at the head of the column cried: "Hey, what is this, Downer?"

Mulford threw up his head, dragging down a long breath. "This hoodlum," he yelled, "killed Gar Fullwider and beat—"

The host hit him, fore and backhanding him above the ears. The boss screamed: "Help me! For God's sake, don't let him kill me!" The Committee surged forward and, if it had been anybody but Mulford, those hard men would have torn him from

the host's grasp. Mulford's hide was broken and his head was a bloody thing. He sagged and Abel held him up, roaring at him. "Tell them." Over and over. "Tell them, damn you, or, I'll beat your brains in."

He punctuated his words with blows, not too hard but hard enough to break through this stubborn man's will. Mulford cried like a baby and then he had all he could bear. He lifted a gory visage and screamed. "Fullwider made me do it. I had to mind him or he'd have killed me!" He finished, sobbing.

Committeemen swarmed around him and he told them he story of his connection with the man who lay dead in the street, yonder. How they had forced miners into their service, robbed them, accepted their dust for shipment and stopped their own shipments. Even how they had borne false witness against men unfortunate enough to be caught in the dragnet, standing sinfully by while they were hanged.

When it was finished, there was silence save for the blubbering of the once strong man of Gold Flake. Still holding his weak-kneed victim, the host eyed the grim miners. "You gentlemen have any further business with me?" he called.

"None at all," spoke up the Committee leader. "We'll take him off your hands. We've got time before dawn to settle his case in the Hall."

They took Mulford, hustled him away. A red-shirted man touched the host's arm. "Good work, Downers," he applauded. "A good job done. If it's a fair question, how'd you get the business on that fellow?"

"I didn't," grinned Abel. "If he hadn't cracked, I'd be the one you passed judgment on—down yonder in the hall."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The miner, admiration in his eyes, watched the host stride strongly toward home.

Home! Abel was making the word as he neared the Mountain Inn. He had never before thought of it as home. It frightened him now that it had suddenly taken on a greater stature, a responsibility of major significance. Home to lazy Jacques, critically sharp-tongued Mama Brissac, languorously lovely Lala and the slender, eager happily crying figure waiting at the entrance for him.

• • NIGHT-CALL • •

By RICHARD BRISTER

DOC BEACHAM lived in the tiny trail town of Crowfork, and was known and liked throughout half a parched, rock-rubbled county, for he lived in the service of others, being a doctor. He lived to laugh, also, and, generally, if he wasn't out on a case, or resting up at his unpainted frame house on the corner of Main and Spruce, you'd find him at a window table in Jake Morehead's Glass Bottle saloon, down next to Ching Lee's Chop-house, playing a cagey game of stud with

In a bitter midnight vigil, only old Doc Beacham could save the life of his bullet-riddled friend—but out of the night came a gun-hung renegade to pistol-purchase Doc's skill. . . .



In this unceremonious manner he was tied across the saddle of one mount, and carried into the night.

the cowboys in off the range. Or maybe he'd be engrossed in a chess game with Bottlenose Billy Lee, the salty old stage driver.

Whether it was cards with the boys or Doc's first love, chess with Bottlenose Billy, or just a chance to air his views on politics, women, beef prices, or the latest quip of Bill Nye, Doc always had a bottle of his favorite Old Crow close beside him. A hard and steady drinker, was Doc. Crowfork worried about him on that score, for he was a reedy man, small in the chest, and his hollow cheeks were crisscrossed with scribblings of forty-odd years of ministering to the aches and pains of this frontier country.

"Doc ain't been strong fer three year," old Bottlenose Billy growled worriedly. "Not since that dang' no-account boy of his'n went skylarkin' off into nowheres. Broke his heart, that's what. It's jest too bad Doc takes it out drinkin'. Little fella like Doc cain't stand up to this here hundred-proof rotgut like I can."

To which balding, sack-bellied Jake Morehead retorted, "Whose bar likker you callin' rotgut, you mule-skinnin' old range rat? I notice Doc ain't kilt hisself on it yet, an' he's been forty year a-tryin'."

"That ain't no credit to the likker," snapped Billy. "Doc's jest too plumb decent to keel over an' die, knowin' this whole blame county's dependin' on him in time of sickness."

Jake Morehead brushed a frisking fly from his bald spot and nodded soberly, for he shared the whole town's affection toward little Doc Beacham. "Ain't that a fact now? I always figgered that was the main thing that kept Doc a-kickin'. Plain case of will power. He ain't much to look at, but by God they's a whole heap of man inside them spindly little ribs of his'n."

"I'll drink to that," cackled Billy slyly, and reached for the bottle on the mahogany bar before him.

Jake Morehead clamped a massive set of fingers around the old stage driver's thin wrist. It was on the tip of the saloonman's tongue to growl, "Not without forkin' up half a' dollar, you won't, you slippery old weasel!" But some strange impulse forced the owner, usually a hard man with a dollar, to withdraw his hand from Bottlenose Billy's, and to lift his own glass.

"I reckon," said Jake, "they ain't a man in Crowfork that wouldn't drink one to old Doc. Here's one for your holler leg, Billy."

Such was the power the name of Doc Beacham wielded in Crowfork. Bottlenose Billy Lee smacked his lips over his drink and told himself happily he would have to work the Doc's name for a drink up at the Last Chance, and maybe at Wilson's Nugget, before he took the stage over the pass on the daily run to Hall City.

"Where is Doc, you s'pose?" asked Billy. "Might have time t' squeeze in one game o' chess, 'fore I—"

"Why, ya dang' old gopher!" snorted Jake. "Y're gittin' so whiskey-fogged ya can't even tell one day from the other. Doc's up to church, where he allus is, Sundays. Doc ain't no danged infidel like you an' me, t' be spendin' the Lord's day swillin' up likker in barrooms."

"Doc ain't just like anybody I ever knowed, or ever heared tell of," said Bottlenose Billy Lee, rubbing a bristly chin with long bony fingers. "Got more sides to him than a six-gabled house, Doc has. What you'd call a well-rounded man, and an almighty good one. . . . Let's drink on that, Jake."

"Git on outta here," thundered Jake, pushing Bottlenose Billy's hand away from the bar bottle. "You already drunk one free to the doc. But I ain't as easy-natured as the doc is. There's an end to my patience."

"There ain't no end to Doc's patients," cackled Billy. "A specially the ones that ain't got nothin' to pay him."

"Git on outta here," repeated Jake coldly, and placed the bottle behind the counter. "It wa'n't that funny," he added, and watched the thirsty hope die in the rheumy old eyes of Bottlenose Billy.

How could he know that three hours later he would regret this hard-heartedness toward the salty old driver?

Three hours later Bottlenose Billy Lee came careening down Main Street atop a swaying Concord, trying to haul up on six sweat-lathered, pop-eyed horses with one pale hand, while the other hand pressed a soggy bandanna against a gaping hole in his chest.

Jake Morehead watched Billy's dramatic re-entrance into town from the front stoop of the Glass Bottle, and made a gallant stab

at the head of the spooky gray leader, but missed. He was flung cursing into the dust of the street, rolling frantically out of the path of the oncoming wheels, and sat up in time to see little Doc Beacham dash out from the gallery of Ma Spindle's Millinery, where he'd been passing the late afternoon talking, and leap, catlike, to the foot pedal of the fast-rolling stage.

DOC ALMOST went down between the wheels for one breathless moment. Then he got a firm hold on the metal railing atop the cab, climbed up to the box alongside of old Billy, and commandeered the reins from the wounded old timer's bony hands.

Doc had a fight on his hands, checking that pop-eyed six, for he was a bantam-sized man, and physical strength was not in him. He finally pulled the stage to a halt in front of the bank, and at once, townspeople milled and jostled around the dust-mottled Concord.

Doc's thin, wrinkled face was hard with anger, but he was a man who had long ago learned to control his emotion in times of crisis. "Now, just you relax yourself, Billy." Doc looked down at the worried faces below him. "I could use mebbe four sets of strong hands. You, Charley, an' Tod. Come on, Jeff, you're right husky. And you, Willie. Now, easy does it. Don't jostle him, dammit. He's hard hit."

Bottlenose Billy Lee set his teeth, what 'ew tobacco - stained relics remained of them, and tried not to groan as the four lifted him down to the plank boardwalk. The crowd pressed around, being humanly curious, and Doc swore at them. "Get back now. All of you. Give him air." He addressed a tall, important-looking man at the forefront of the onlookers. "Wouldn't happen to have the key to the bank on you, Henderson? I've got to get him out of—"

"Why, sure, Doc," said the bank president. "Should've thought of it myself."

The bank was opened and the four carried Bottlenose Billy within, where it was cool and dark, after the sun-dappled dust of the street. They laid Billy down on the bare, hard floor, and Sheriff Harlan Davis, a mountainous, high-colored man going paunchy by stages, stepped officiously forward.

"Hem," said the sheriff, "reckon I better

put a few questions to him, Doc, just in case—"

"Go down," snapped Doc, "to my house, Sheriff. Take a couple of the boys with you. Get the folding cot from the pantry, and a couple of blankets, and my satchel. You'll find it on the dining room table. Hurry, now. You'll ask Billy no questions until—"

"Now, listen here, Doc," puffed the sheriff, "I got my duty to do. Somebody got away clean with the strongbox off'n that stage, an' shot old Billy, an' Lord knows what they done to the shotgun guard, old Jeb Anders. I got to git up a posse, right quick, an' if Billy here can give me any idee what them sidewinders looked like, an'—"

"He's in no shape to spare the breath for words with you or anybody else, Sheriff. He's got a tough fight on his hands, and I won't have you making it tougher for him. Get up your posse and ride down to the pass and cut sign on the scoundrels that did this, if you must. You don't need the description of an outlaw to trail him."

Bottlenose Billy Lee was staring up with pain-glazed eyes at the two as they confronted each other. Brittle little Doc Beacham and the ponderous Davis squared off like two fighting cocks.

"It's all right, Doc," said Billy weakly. "I ain't so bad off. If I could just git around a slug of hard likker, I could spare a breath or two for Sheriff, I reckon."

Doc glanced at Jake Morehead. "Don't you generally tote a pint on your hip, Jake?"

The saloon man winced at the question, but was forced to sheepish admission of that private sin. He produced a bottle of whiskey from a back pocket and held it to Bottlenose Billy Lee's cracked lips, while Doc supported the oldster.

Billy let a mouthful of the fiery stuff slide down his parched throat, and grinned faintly at Jake Morehead. "Red letter day fer me, Jake."

"Meanin'—"

"Two free drinks off'n you—" started Billy, and choked. He wiped a lone tear off his cheek, and his sandy face flushed in a way that caused Doc to draw breath in sharply.

"You sure you wanna talk to Harlan, Billy?"

The old timer nodded. "I kin tell it all

purty quick. They sprung the trap on me an' Jeb, when we was midway through the pass. Blowed pore Jeb off the box before he knowed what hit him. Slug took him clean through the head. They gutshot me the next minute. Must of took me fer dead. Come up and snagged down the box, and rode out. Three of 'em, they was. All wearin' black masks. Black Hardin's boys, I reckon."

Doc looked at the sheriff. "Guess you can rustle up your posse and ride out, Harlan. Now, just you relax, Billy. I'm gonna dress up that wound and stick right here like a leech, till I've made sure you'll pull through this."

"Why, shush, Doc," grinned Bottlenose Billy, immensely pleased, "you don't have to go to all that dang' trouble fer me. I ain't that important. Besides, if my time's come, I'm ready. Got two free drinks off'n Jake in one day, by gollies. An' I figger I plugged one of them o'ney devils, afore they nailed me." The old man cackled happily at this recollection. Then a spasm of coughing shook his weak frame.

Doc said harshly, "You quit talkin' now, you crazy old mudhen. And who says you ain't important? Who else in this Godforsaken town can give me a good game of chess? I'm gunna pull you through, Billy, just for my own sake."

But there was a pressing weight of sadness behind these brave words, for as Doc spoke, he was inspecting the gaping hole in the old driver's chest. It was a murderous blow that the slug had dealt Billy. Doc fretted and fumed at the skulking devil who had loosed that death-dealing missile at his old friend, for he strongly doubted that the old fellow would pull through.

At two o'clock the next morning, the little man was still trying. True to his word, Doc had not left Billy's side. He sat in a rickety wooden chair beside the folding cot on which the old driver lay, there in the lobby of the Crowfork Bank—he had stubbornly refused to move the old driver—and watched the signals of fever wax and wane in the old man's pinched face. From time to time, Doc dipped clean white cloth pads in a pail of cold water and bathed Bottlenose Billy's hot forehead.

It was going to be a long-drawn-out fight, Doc realized. The old man had a terrific vitality in his leathery frame. It

was truly amazing how little effect the years of heavy drinking had produced in old Billy. Doc watched his good friend, and thought grimly, *Another ten hours. The crisis will come in another ten hours. That'll tell the end of this story.*

It was dark, and drearily quiet, within the hollow confines of the bank. Doc longed for the comfort of his old briar pipe, but hesitated to light up and cloud the air around his patient. He stood up stiffly, for the night had turned bitterly cold, and walked out on to the steps of the bank.

While he tamped a load of roughcut into the beat-up bowl of the briar, he cast a saddened eye toward the stars and mumbled bleakly, "Give him a break, Lord. He's a good sort, old Billy. Oh, he roasts around a good bit. He's reckless, and he never had any sense when it comes to the likker. Me, neither. But there's no meanness in Billy, Lord. Help me to pull him through this one. I'm not being just selfish about this, Lord. Henderson's a pretty fair chess hand. Although—" and Doc cast this line aside, to ride the night winds, for the thought seemed undeserving "—although there ain't a good-natured laugh or even a friendly grin in him."

HOWDY," drawled a voice, several yards up the shadowy street from him. Doc jumped halfway out of his chilled skin, and swung abruptly toward the sound.

"An old heart like mine," he announced, with more resignation than rancor, "doesn't take kindly to surprises like that, friend." He peered through the dark, trying to make out the man's features, for the voice had not been familiar to him. The man neither moved toward him, nor made any reply, and Doc continued, conversationally, "Fact is, folks have died with less cause than that. Reason I know is: I'm a doctor."

"Doc Beacham?" the voice said. "You're Doc Beacham, ain'tcha?"

"I am."

"Now I call that right obligin' of ya, Doc. Bein' as I've been sent into town to fetch ya. Saves me the trouble of huntin' all over Crowfork. Though I'd heard you'd prob'ly stick the night through with old Billy here in the bank."

There was a nasal hardness to this man's voice which grated on Doc's ears. Instinc-

tively, he put the owner of this voice down as a man to avoid.

"And you are—?" he suggested.

"Why," drawled the man, stepping forward into a patch of pale moonlight slanting over the high roof of the bank, "I don't reckon my name's any importance, Doc." He was a tall, raw-boned man, with a lean, hook-nosed face, and long, loose-hanging arms. Doc felt in this fellow's presence as he imagined he'd feel confronting a predatory hawk, or an eagle. The man said, "Reckon yore kit's inside the bank, ain't it, Doc?"

"It is. Also a good friend of mine on the verge of death. I can't very well leave him."

The stranger laughed in his throat, as another might cough. "Loyalty's a purty thing, Doc. I reckon any man worth his salt's got a streak o' that in him. Take me, f'r instance. I'm loyal my ownself. Friend of mine's come down mighty sick just this afternoon. I says to myself, 'I got to git this poor man to the doctor.' On'y he's so bad off I can't move him. So, you bein' the only doctor in the whole bloomin' county, as I know of, I've come ridin' to fetch you."

Doc felt the hand of fear tracing a cold line down his backbone. "This afternoon," he suggested, "was twelve hours ago, friend. I mean, of course, yesterday afternoon, it being about two-thirty a.m. now. I might ask why you didn't ride in to town sooner."

"You might. If you ain't smart, that is."

"Or," said Doc, "why your method of approach was so cautious."

"I guess," sighed the voice, "you ain't smart, Doc." The man pulled a glinting gun from its holster and idly pointed it at Doc's middle. "Into the bank, Doc. We'll jest pick up that kit of your'n an' ride out. I got two hosses waitin' up Main aways, an'—Move now!" The gun jabbed toward Doc as the old medico stood defiant.

Doc winced, but still stood stubbornly in the face of that threatening sixgun. A man who plays chess for his recreation is capable of imaginative thinking, and it was no mental magic on Doc's part to put this mean-faced stranger down for one of the Black Hardin gang.

There was the fellow's appearance and manner, to start with. There was the mention of a friend coming down "mighty sick," just this afternoon, which tied in

perfectly with Bottlenose Billy Lee's proud statement that he had winged one of the holdup gang before they had nailed him. There was the man's skulking method of approach, for an absolute clincher.

"So," Doc told himself, *sotto voce*, "I'm to be forced to ride out of town with this mean-eyed devil, to dress the wound of his renegade crony. At gun's point, I'm to desert poor old Billy, to lend the helping hand to a man who is partly responsible for Billy's critical condition."

It did not add up, Doc thought. There was nothing in the Hippocratic Oath he had taken at medical school which required a man, in the name of service to humanity, to desert a friend in order to dress the wounds of an outlaw.

But that gaping sixgun muzzle gave the hollow laugh to all such unrealistic conclusions.

"You hear me talk, Doc?" the man grated, coming one large step closer. "Into the bank with you, now. And don't try anything fun—"

Doc had moved, even as ordered. Reaching the door of the bank, he stepped through it quickly, leaped to one side and turned like a lithe little cat. He made his frantic grab for that big gun, but the young stranger was quicker. The gun rose and fell. The heavy barrel crashed down with bludgeoning force against Doc's forehead.

The little medico groaned, and slumped limply to the floor. There was a head-splitting pain crowding his temple, and his eyes ached fiercely. He was plagued with small dots of light, and filmy patches of fire which flickered before him briefly. He was dimly aware of the stranger's hand, pressing his heart. Then he felt the man lifting him, propping a shoulder under his buckling middle, and hoisting him aloft like a small bag of potatoes.

In this unceremonious manner, he was carried down the board walk to where two horses stood tethered. He was tied across the saddle of one mount, unresisting, and shortly there was only the clop-clopping rhythm of two horses' hoofs to beguile his dazed mind.

The blood rushed to his head, and cleared it. After some time, he said feebly, "You're a fool, man."

"How so?" asked the stranger.

"You can't club a man down, friend, and expect him to perform an act of pure kindness in return. I'll be frank with you, friend. The mood I'm in now, I'm more apt to kill this friend of yours than cure him."

The man laughed that coughing laugh again and said, "Mebbeso, under ordinary circumstances, Doc. On'y, this ain't no ordinary set-up, see? You got a big surprise comin', Doc. I'd git set for a big shock, if I was you."

"A shock?" said Doc, puzzled.

"I said all I'm a-goin' to, Doc."

"You might untie me and let me ride like a—"

"You'll do like you are, Doc. You already taught me not to trust you. Beside, we ain't ridin' much fu'ther."

In this, if in nothing else, the surly young stranger was honest. A few more minutes of riding brought the two into a small cup-shaped hollow betwixt wind-whistling fir trees, and there, beside a tiny fire lay a wan, long figure, muffled in filthy horse blankets. Another bulky figure sat Indian-style beside the flame, warming his hands against the pre-dawn coldness. He glanced up with hard, curious eyes, as the two horses approached the fire.

"Got him, hey, Rafe?"

"I got him," slurred that one. "How's the kid doin', Black?"

DOC LOOKED at the man addressed with quickening interest. This, then, was Black Hardin, the notorious outlaw who with his brother Rafe and another unnamed confederate had scoured the countryside these past three years. The man was black, Doc saw, black of chin, black of hair and eyes, and in his present unwashed condition, black of skin. A wild, fierce-looking devil. It came to Doc that he was now the one man of Crowfork who ever had seen Black Hardin unmasked, and he shuddered at the implication of that. It seemed unlikely, on the surface of things, that he would live to give Sheriff Harlan Davis a description of the outlaw.

"The kid's pretty bad," said Black Hardin. "Hard hit. Don't figger he's got a chance t' pull through, unless the Doc here can—"

"Hardin," croaked Doc, "you've pulled me away from the bedside of one of the

best friends I had in this world. What makes you think I'll work to save the life of a man who—"

"You'll try," said Black, and a crooked smile twisted his heavy lips. "You'll try yore damndest, Doc." He swung toward his brother. "You tell him yet, did ya?"

"Just he had a surprise in store for 'im."

"Untie him. Git him down off that hoss. Let him take a good look at the fella that's needin' a doctor's attention."

Rafe Hardin untied Doc and helped him down from the saddle, for the graying dawn was turning increasingly cold now, and the old man was blue with exposure and cramp. He clapped circulation into his withered hands, and stepped toward the fire. He lifted one edge of the filthy blanket and peered at the face of the man who lay there.

The wounded man opened his eyes and smiled awkwardly at him. "Lo, Pop," he mumbled.

"Well, then," said Pop. "Well, then, Jimmy. So this is what became of you. I—I used to wonder, after you'd slipped my traces, where you'd—"

"Ain't—ain't ya even glad to see me again, Pop?" asked Jimmy Beacham. There was a sour note in the brittle voice. Jimmy Beacham had an arrogant pair of brown eyes, and a vicious curl to his thin lips, even in the shadow of death. "I'm yer own son, ain't I? Ain't blood thicker'n water?"

"An outlaw," said Doc slowly. "So Jimmy Beacham ran away from home, at the age of twenty, to join up with Black Hardin's gang of plundering killers."

"Aw, take it easy, Pop. I—I'm hit. Hurt bad. I—I just figgered you might—well, you're the best doctor around, ain't ya? I'm dyin', Pop. You gotta take this slug outta my belly."

"Why?" Pop said bluntly.

Jimmy Beacham looked as if he'd been struck on his vicious young face. "Why, fer old times, Pop. B-Becuz—for Pete's sake, becuz yo're my pop. I'm dyin', I tell ya."

"Jeb Anders," Doc said bluntly, "is dead already. Bottlenose Billy Lee is on the point of cashing his chips in. And not whinin' about it."

"That old rumhound," Jimmy Beacham said feebly.

"He's been a good friend to me, Jimmy. Have you?"

"Aw—"

"I tired to make a man of you, kid," Doc sighed. "I treated you the best I knew how, and what did it get me? A son who bullied all my neighbors' kids—so long as they were small enough to be bullied—and stole money out of my pockets, and even out of my wall safe, and insulted my friends, and refused to work when he came of age. And then ran off on the owlhoot. Did I fail you in any way, boy?"

"Aw—you were good enough t' me—"

"Kid," said Black Hardin gruffly, "me an' Rafe have some dust to make afore sunrise. We done what we could. Now we're ridin' out."

"Black. Black, listen, don't leave me here with him. He—he's gone crazy, Black. He isn't like I remember he was, back in the old days. He's turned hard as a stone. He—I'm scared of him."

Black Hardin stared doubtfully from Doc to the boy. "You want me to cash him out, kid? I'd just as soon, him havin' seen what I look like. It'd mean—well, mebbe you was done for anyway."

"No," said Jimmy Beacham. "No, Black. Go on. Ride out. I'll take my chances with Pop here."

Black Hardin looked at Doc with burning black eyes as he holstered the gun. "I always heard you were a square-shootin' sort, Doc. But damn' if I don't think you'd let this kid of your'n croak without battin' an eyelash. Mebbe blood ain't as thick as some folks like t' think. Let's fan it, Rafe. I smell posse closin' in."

Jimmy Beacham looked anxiously at Doc and said, "Would you—w-would you give a look at my wound, Pop? I'm bleedin' t' death, I tell yah!"

"Why should you get well?" Doc said slowly. "So you can go back to Black Hardin's gang and shoot some more good men like Jeb Anders and Billy Lee from ambush? So the posse can take you and hang you up on the nearest tree. You don't want to get well, boy. You want to lie right here a while longer, till that fire dies out, and the cold sets it. You'll go out easy, kid. Freezin's not painful."

"Pop. Pop! Are you plumb crazy?"

"I'm crazy mad," said Doc softly.

"There's a man lying on a cot down in the Crowfork Bank who has a right to live, kid. Rafe Hardin knocked me over the head and carted me up here to try to save a life that I consider less than worthless. I won't lift a finger to help you, kid. I'm going back where I belong, to Bottlenose Billy Lee." And he turned brusquely away.

"Pop!" screamed Jimmy Beacham. "Don't leave me here to die like a dog. Pop, come back. You're my father!"

Doc turned on his heel and said quietly, "Guess again, kid. You're no blood of mine. When I first came west to Crowfork, there was a train wreck. Both your real parents were killed in that wreck, kid. You were a helpless baby, then, only eight months old. I took care of you, and passed you off as my son, when I settled in Crowfork, seeing no need to worry you with the idea of being adopted. You're no kin of mine, kid."

"Po—Doc. In the name of mercy, don't leave me here like this. Ain't you a doctor? Ain't doctors supposed to help people?"

"That's right," said Doc Beacham, and turned through the firs, walking with swift, purposeful strides back toward Crowfork, to resume his vigil by his lifelong friend's bedside. This was the merciful way, he told himself firmly. The kid couldn't last more than another hour. What good would come of nursing him back to health, only for the hangnoose?

He came out upon a broad path which lead downward into the valley, and he could see the roofs of Crowfork glinting in the gray light of dawn. He walked faster, remembering Bottlenose Billy Lee.

Billy would live—he would see to that—and the Hardins, Rafe and Black, could not much longer escape the posses of Sheriff Harlan Davis. It would be a better world for their passing, Doc thought, recalling the kindly manner and face of Jeb Anders, and was no longer troubled by conscience.

For all of us, Doc reflected, frowning, walk through the days of our lives according to the dictates of our personal codes, prompted in each word and deed by what few deep-seated beliefs we have arrived at through the process of thought or emotion. And if a man is to be a real man, Doc knew, he must act by the code in moments of crisis.

By ROD
PATTERSON



Cullen saw four or five horsemen coming up from the point, rifles glinting in the sunlight. He tried to screen himself by a stampeding bunch of cows.

Gripping Novel of Border Bandidos!

Down on that lawless, strife-torn Border strip, it was treason to side with Mexican vaqueros. Yet, with paisanos branding him spy and Rio rustlers hunting him as a double-crossing traitor, Jesse Cullen made his last lone back-to-the-wall stand. . . . For a range which lives in fear and bloodshed is lost forever, and one which dies for freedom may rise again to give new life to a great cattle country.

= Wet Cattle Heading North! =



Chapter I

TOP DOG IS A DEAD DOG

CUTCHING the slick face of the half-submerged boulder, Jesse Cul len fought to keep his head above the boiling race of the stream—fought silently and fiercely to tighten his slipping grasp before weakness swept him tumbling into the blackness of the canyon.

Oddly enough, he felt no fear. Only a kind of dazed disbelief that this could be happening to him.

The creek poured its thunder over his head and around his struggling body; and that thunder seemed to boom at him out of a pit like the kettle drums of a thousand demons jarring him loose from his uncertain grip on life. He had one solemn

thought: *If I don't make it, they'll never know what happened!*

His temples throbbed; his lungs ached; there was a terrible, knifing core of agony in his shoulder and another at the base of his spine.

I think my back's broke!

The roaring force of the stream jerked at his legs—useless now as two chunks of driftwood. If his boots and spurs were still on his feet, he couldn't feel them; but he could feel the current whipping at his leather chaps.

Gouging for finger holds on the slimy rock's smooth face, his hands and wrists were out of the water. He could feel blood

drying on them. The bullet had smashed into his left shoulder close to the collar bone, searing flesh and muscle. The blood came from this wound.

He risked a glance around him. The canyon's steep sides loomed upward and the sky he could see was star-flecked and luminous with moonlight. He had fallen off his horse and had rolled over the cliff, spinning forty feet into the boiling white water of a pool.

Vaguely he wondered who had fired the rifle as he had sat staring down toward the Mexican camp of exiled cattlemen that lay south of the canyon. Who would wish him dead? Gus Megarr, foreman of Arrowhead, the ranch Cullen had just taken over as a legacy from his uncle? Megarr might have fired the shot, but there were others on the crew who might have, just as well. Or maybe, as he had been told by everyone in the valley, the Mexicans actually *were* rustlers and killers.

It was dark down here in the canyon. There was only faint star-shine and moonlight reflected from above on wet rocks and jutting ebony-colored ledges. And there was the tremendous roaring of the creek over its craggy bed.

This creek was the boundary between the lowlands along the Rio Grande where the Mexican cattlemen had camped and the valley claimed by Yankee herders as their own inviolable property. Cullen was about to drown in Mexican territory though it was still on the American side of the border. And it was a bootless way to die, off his own range and without knowing who his assassin was.

He tried to yell for help, but only a choked gasp came from his laboring lungs. His fingernails slivered on the rock and his body sank instantly, pulled down by the weight of his clothing and his heavy chaps.

In a panic of blindness and desperation he fought back to the boulder, seized it with the raw ends of his fingers, clinging a moment, sucking in gasps of air mixed with icy spray.

Then, somewhere out of the void of blackness and pain, out of the steady, drumming rumble of the creek, a sharp voice cried, "Señor!" There was a pause and it came again: "Señor—*por dios!*"

"Here!" Cullen gasped, then regretted the yell. The owner of that voice was a

Mexican and well might be the rifleman who had just knocked him off his horse. He might be crawling treacherously down the canyon's face, bound to finish him off with another shot. But even death by a bullet was better than drowning like a rat in a rain barrel. He called again, "Here I am!"

His hands slipped off the rock for the second time. He sank beneath the boiling current. Fear made him thrash his arms. His head emerged from the water. He felt something clamp his coat collar and tighten into it. He was being pulled upward over the rounded edge of the boulder. Cullen could see a brown hand, a powerful arm, and he had a dazed glimpse of a weathered, deeply lined face, black, piercing eyes under silvery brows and the broad brim of a concha-trimmed sombrero. The face was not gentle or kindly, but it was not menacing either. Cullen let unconsciousness swallow him, his last rational thought one of all-pervading relief. It seemed blended with the Mexican's voice that said, not without humor, "Señor, you are veree wet!"

When he recovered awareness, he was being carried across a pair of muscular, swaying shoulders, jack-knifed over the Mexican's broad back like a child.

The jolt and jar of the man's walking sent ribbons of sheer agony through Cullen's punished, bleeding body. He gritted his teeth, but did not speak or cry out. The Mexican spoke easily: "I heard the shot and heard you fall into the creek. Only God or the devil knows why you still alive, Señor."

"How—far—" Cullen finally gasped.

"We are home," the man said, heaving his burden for a better hold. Cullen groaned this time. "This is my *jacal*," the man said. Then he called, "Chicha! Open the door! I breeng a man with broken legs!"

Cullen had an upside-down glimpse of a plank shanty and several sheds, a haphazard line of pole corrals with a large remuda of horses behind the rails, and a woman's figure silhouetted against a lighted doorway of the shack. That was all he remembered except hearing a feminine, soft voice say, "Padre, you have brought us an enemy!" That and a confused dream of hands lifting him into warmth and light,

of someone removing his soaked clothing, his gun belt, boots and even his underwear.

Then fever consumed him as in a fire, and time was nothing. All sounds and visual images were blown up to nightmare size along with the suffering in his rangy frame.

In his delirium, the mistakes and sins of his lifetime passed before him like scenes in a kaleidoscope. He suffered like a man in hell and cried out in fury, in an agony of frustration and helplessness. Hours were years, and all of it was in his brain and had no sound.

When he became quieter, his dreams grew less frightening, and he was living again the events of the twenty-four hours preceding the rifle shot and his fall from the cliff. . . .

THE SUN hit down blindingly upon the main street of Indian Wells when Cullen alighted from the stagecoach and paused to view the town. It looked more like an Old Mexican Village than a settlement of Americans founded on the business of beef and hides.

He looked upon mud-walled buildings and patios, on red and green tile roofs, on quaint cantinas with iron grilles, on a fountain of some white stone where flocks of pigeons and swallows circled on the central square.

He gripped his valise and wandered along the street over a boot-trampled walk whose earth was as hard as the adobe of the buildings that fronted upon it. He found one two-story structure which housed the professional men of the town. On a bulletin beside the door of this place, he located the name of the man he sought, Harvey W. Gilson, Attorney-at-Law. He went in and climbed a set of shaky wooden stairs to a second floor hallway.

There was the scuffling of boots inside Gilson's office when Cullen quietly knocked upon the door. A not unpleasant voice said, "One moment, my friend, and I'll be right with you."

Then a key turned in the lock and the door opened slowly to reveal a portly, florid-completed man in his fifties, a man with bland blue eyes and a cherubic chin. The black cigar that contorted one corner of the mouth made the face look like an infant smoking, an infant with cynical eyes.

"Mr. Gilson?" Cullen asked from the dimness of the hall.

"Come in," the fat man nodded, opening the door all the way. He made an ushering gesture and turned ponderously back behind a flat-topped desk near a window. "What can I do for you, Mr. —" He peered at Cullen, smiling around his cigar, his plump fingers hooked into the armholes of his vest. He was dressed in stained and sweaty white duck, and wore a black string tie that gave him a senatorial look.

"Cullen—Jesse Cullen."

"Sit down." Gilson still smiled, but twin lines of puzzlement appeared between his baby-blue eyes. "Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks." Cullen placed his valise on the floor and eased his lean frame into a nearby chair, fishing the makings from his calfskin vest and building a deliberate cigarette. Thirty years old, he looked older because of the saddle-color and the sun wrinkles of his face. His eyes were gray and steady on the lawyer's questioning countenance. "I'm Jasper Connorboy's nephew—from Delhart, Texas. He died two months ago and left me Arrowhead Ranch."

Gilson's eyes darkened visibly as with shock, then he cleared his throat and his smile spread, vanishing as he said, "Of course I knew he'd died. But they told me he'd died intestate."

"He made a will," said Cullen, sorting papers out of his coat pocket and handing one to the lawyer.

Gilson put on a pair of brass-rimmed spectacles and pursed his moist lips as he read the document. Then he looked at Cullen, removing glasses and his cigar. His eyes looked slightly pained.

"This is straight enough, Cullen. I'd been wondering what to do with your uncle's spread, and this saves me some trouble. Don't mind admitting I'd hoped Jasp would remember me inasmuch as I've regulated his affairs here for nearly fifteen years." He gave a broad shrug, adding whimsically, "I'll be satisfied with legal fees and," he added apologetically, "there are quite a few."

"I expected that," Cullen said, inhaling and exhaling blue smoke, returning the paper to his pocket. "I just got in on the stage and thought I'd look you up 'fore hirin' a rig to take me out to the ranch."

Gilson looked gratified. He restored his cigar to the corner of his mouth. "I'm plumb glad you did because there's a lot you ought to know about Arrowhead—about the country." He leaned forward a bit, secretive with his next words, "I don't suppose you know any of the people here—your neighbors in the valley?"

"No. But I have a letter from my uncle to a John Redmond. He runs a spread called JR."

"Can I see it?"

"Why not?" Cullen found the envelope and passed it over.

The lawyer opened it and read half aloud,

Dear John:

This will introduce my nephew, Jesse Cullen, who will rod Arrowhead when I am gone. Anything you can do to help him at the start will be appreciated by an old friend who will be going up the last trail soon. Here's to the old days, John. Adios!

Jasp Connorboy

Harv Gilson gave the letter back, a commiserative look on his pinkish face. "Too bad for Jasp. He was a real old-timer." He cleared his throat, paused, then said, "You haven't heard about the trouble we're having in this neck of the woods?"

"Uncle Jasp told me there was some—over Mexican ranchers and hands," Cullen admitted.

"It's serious," Gilson confided. "The damned greasers've been pushed back to the Rio but they're staging raids on the American ranchmen. Theres' a ring-leader named Esteban Carrizo and we've got a price on his head. A fireball, a damned killer!"

"Times've changed some," Cullen ventured, his lean face grave. "The Mexicans owned plenty of range around this town one time. They even rode for the big ranches, I've heard."

Gilson nodded. "That's done with. We're trying to throw them back across the border before they rustle the country clean as a dog's tooth. It's a big job, and we'll need your help, too."

Cullen frowned. "I'm against it. The thing to do is catch this Esteban and try him for rustlin'. You can't tell me all Mexican's are bad!"

The lawyer's expression turned almost stern. "Young feller, don't let anybody

hear you talking like that around here."

"We shoot a Mexican on sight, I hear," Cullen said coldly. "String others up without a trial. I'll take no part in that, Mr. Gilson!"

The lawyer laughed, and it was a harsh sound coming from one who looked so amiable. "Cullen, you'll change. When you've talked to Megarr and—"

"Who's Megarr?" Cullen asked, then remembered, "Oh, yes, he's our foreman. Well, if he's a Mex-killer, I'll fire him—the whole damn' crew!"

Gilson shook his head in exasperation. "My friend, you're all wrong and you will soon realize it. Look—I own the local paper in this town and I've put money into this campaign to drive all foreigners out. I hope you won't spread your ideas about loving the greasers like brothers because—well, because it would embarrass me and the other cowmen out your way."

Cullen allowed a smile to soften the hard line of his mouth. "Mr. Gilson, the right side always wins—in the long run. We'll see what we'll see." He rose to his full five-feet-eleven, clapped on his dusty Stetson, reached for his bag and started toward the door. "I'll look you up if I need anything."

Gilson jumped up from behind his desk, quick protest on his cherubic face. "One moment, Cullen." When the other man hesitated, he grinned and said, "I'll close up here till tomorrow and drive you out to Arrowhead myself. Megarr's a queer one, and I want to get you off on the right foot."

Cullen's smile turned his mouth askew. "Maybe the boot's on the other foot, but come along. A little tongue oil from you might not do any harm."

Jesse Cullen at thirty was already his own man. He had grown up without benefit of parents to soften the blows of life. An orphan at twelve, he had worked on cattle ranches from Canada to the Gulf, his last job, before being summoned by his uncle, as foreman for a Wyoming beef syndicate. He had always shifted for himself and had become accustomed to his own company in times of trouble, used to his own resources when the pinch of action summoned him. Acquiring this large ranch in Southwest Texas seemed to be his opportunity, and he had resolved to make the most of it. He was a stranger in a new country, but one

without any qualms or fears about taking his rightful place.

At noon that day he sat beside the portly Gilson on the seat of the lawyer's two-bronc buckboard, and watched the land slide past, a view of mesquite and sage and huisache, the low red hills and open meadows of grain-colored grama grass, with glimpses in the south of the Rio Grande's ribboning silver strand.

He felt a queer sense of uneasiness as the yellow-spoked wheels whirled over the grass-grown ruts toward Arrowhead Ranch—nothing he could put his finger on. It seemed to be an instinctive reaction to some threat this rolling country held for him, much as low pressure preceding a violent storm is felt through the pores of the skin, through the nerves.

Gilson, spread out on the blanket-covered seat, kept up a desultory conversation, pointing with the butt of his whip at occasional points of interest. They passed an adobe ranch house, its walls bullet-scarred, its windows glassless and black as the hollowed eyes of skulls. The lawyer said, "That was the hangout of a greaser named Pablo Uvalde—some kind of top dog in his own country. He stole this land years ago and ran a herd of mangy Spanish steers. We choused him back across Canyon Creek where the whole kaboodle's camped near the river."

Cullen showed no interest in the lawyer's vindictive remarks.

Chapter II

HANGNOOSE HACIENDA

THEY ARRIVED at a point above the basin of the Rio Grande in mid-afternoon. Here and there, below them, scattered through the hills and draw-sashed prairies, herds of cattle showed as blots of barely moving shadow. Far to the south a dark lumpy mass of rock separated this part of the valley from a strip of lowland near the river.

Gilson said, "That's Canyon Creek. The greasers are camped with some cattle beyond it. Some day we'll ride down there with a hundred men and throw 'em over into Mexico!"

Coming down a long grade into the valley, Cullen saw the Arrowhead layout in a grove of live oaks and pecans, a scatter of

sheds and strung-out corrals surrounding a pink-walled ranch house with a red-as-rust tile roof.

Cullen mentioned the greenness of the country in all directions and received his answer, "Water. Valley's full of springs that feed into Canyon Creek and then into the big river. There's no better grass in the Southwest!"

They drove into the shady yard at Arrowhead some moments later, and Gilson tied his broncs to an iron ring in a post near the sprawling, cool-shadowed gallery. They went inside the house, Gilson commenting, "Megarr must be out with the boys. We'll find a drink and get the cook to throw us some chuck."

"I can wait till chuck time," Cullen said shortly.

Gilson shrugged, and they moved through the ancient house with its cool pastel-tinted adobe walls, its vivid Indian rugs, its great steer horns over fireplace and archway. They entered the kitchen, a low-beamed room containing a woodstove and rows of copper pots and pans. Gilson found a bottle of whiskey and they sat down at the long table. Cullen still felt uneasy, and was impatient with himself for it.

They had downed a drink apiece when riders came streaming into the yard. Cullen looked out of a window and saw ten men. They held their horses a moment, talk passing back and forth, then six of the riders wheeled and departed westward. Gilson said, "That's Ernie Bentley's outfit. Circle-Bar's on your west line. John Redmond's southeast of here."

The four remaining horsemen in the yard dismounted, one of their number wheeling and striding toward the kitchen gallery. This man was broad and solid, with a square, tough-skinned face and hard blue eyes. "Gus Megarr, your foreman," Gilson said, pouring out another drink for himself. "Handle him with kid gloves, Your uncle always did."

Cullen did not answer, but his glimpse of the ramrod satisfied him that Megarr was a man accustomed to getting his own way. He had the face and mouth of a fighter, of a dangerous man.

Boots and spurs came clanking into the kitchen, and Megarr stopped just inside the door, staring. "Hullo, Harry," he said gruffly, then he saw Cullen and jerked his

head. "How many times have I warned you about bringin' strangers here?"

Gilson, feeling the glow of alcohol, leaned back in his chair at a dangerous angle and laughed softly. "Stranger, hell! He's your boss!"

Megarr blinked his hard eyes, and the lids lowered slowly. "Hary, you're drunk!" The voice was insolent, insulting. "And that's *my* booze you're suckin' up!"

"Have a drink on yourself," Cullen said in a full strong voice. "And have a chair. I want to talk to you."

"Who are *you*?" Megarr came forward, and lowered himself into a vacant chair. Gilson kicked toward him. Megarr's face was blank now, but his eyes seemed so near shut that he appeared to be smiling. "It'll take a good man to boss Arrowhead."

"He's Jasp's nephew," Gilson furnished, enjoying the situation hugely, laughing silently. "Jesse Cullen's his name. And he likes greasers!" This he added as an after-thought, and laughed until his pot-belly shook.

Cullen's eyes locked with the foreman's slitted ones. "Gilson," he remarked with a half smile, "thinks he's bein' funny. I don't."

"Neither do I," Megarr said in a harsh voice. "I call him a pursely-gutted fool—"

The fat lawyer choked on his drink. His expression turned into a hurt stare. "That ain't a nice way to talk," he began, but Cullen stopped him with his own curt voice, saying,

"Megarr, we'll get along all right if we understand each other. I'm goin' to run this spread *my way* and one things's got to be understood—we'll have no greaser hunts and take no part in 'em! Is that plain enough for you?"

The foreman slopped a drink into his glass and downed with a shuddering, "Er-ah-ah!" then set the empty down and looked at Cullen with open and mocking eyes. "When you see the books and I tell you the greasers've run off a thousand head in a year, mebbe you'll talk another lingo!"

Coldness crawled into Cullen's slaty eyes. "You heard what I said, Megarr. No more Mexicans'll be shot by my crew!"

Megarr sneered. "You're a little late. We just got back from hangin' two of 'em near Canyon Creek. We caught 'em ridin' on this range and—"

"I'll report it to the sheriff of this county!" Cullen said, slapping the table with an open hand, staring angrily into the foreman's taunting eyes.

"Hah!" Gilson laughed. "He can't do a thing, Cullen. We put him in office!"

Megarr leaned toward Cullen, squinting and suspicious. "How do I know this is straight—that you ain't a damned faker?"

The lawyer snapped, "Don't be a fool, Gus! I saw his papers! And he's got a letter to Johnny Redmond, to boot!"

Megarr relaxed visibly, a slow, reluctant smile worming along his mouth. His eyes lost a little of their malicious glint and he said, "No offense, Cullen. I just got to be sure, is all."

Gilson acted relieved, too. He reached for the bottle, saying, "Let's have another drink and forget the Mexicans a while. I—"

"Can't be done," Megarr said jarringly. "We can have a drink and start even again, though." His smile was almost affable at Cullen. "You'll come 'round to feelin' like we all feel. This here's a white man's country and we aim to keep it that-away!"

Cullen met the crew an hour later around the kitchen table. Harry Walters, blacksmith and puncher, was tall and ungainly, sullen-eyed, and he chewed tobacco sloppily. Bronc Roscoe, the ranch cook, balding, vague-faced, had run to fat from too much of his own greasy food, and was the friendliest of the lot. Les Marriner and Heehaw Davern were chunky and stolid, the latter nicknamed for his extraordinary pointed ears and braying voice.

When Cullen and Gilson entered the kitchen and its smell of fat frying, Cullen found the crew already at table and waiting. One thing Cullen noted with inner amusement was that Gus Megarr had seated himself at the head of the board, alone. This was the place reserved for the boss of the ranch.

Stepping around the table, he tapped Megarr lightly on the shoulder. He did not speak, but pointed a finger wavily at an empty chair on the side next to Heehaw.

Megarr glanced upward, saw the finger, and opened his mouth to take offense. Then he paused, glared at Cullen for a long moment, and rose and moved to the other chair. He ate his food in a surly way, not looking up again, but the stain on his

cactus-tough face did not subside until he had risen to leave the table. The crew went with him, in a body. Cullen knew then he was in for trouble.

He was rolling a cigarette in thoughtful silence when Harv Gilson murmured, "If it's all right with you I'll stay over till morning. I got to find some way of smoothin' things in this here nest of cranks!"

At sundown, Cullen roped a pony out of the corral, starting a small stampede in the remuda. He picked a saddle off the line-up on the top rail of the starve-out, cinched up, mounted, and turned the sorrel directly southward toward the ranch of John Redmond.

A half hour later, with night folding in the edges of the sunset, he paused at the summit of the cliff above Canyon Creek and stared downward across the gorge, across the misty bottoms along the Rio Grande where pinpoints of light showed the shacks and *jacals* of the exiled Mexican cattlemen.

He was still there as full darkness came and then the rifle shot smacked out of the night behind him. First the report and then the terrible swift impact of a bullet in his shoulder that knocked him sideways off his horse. And he was falling—falling. . . .

OPENING his eyes, Cullen saw a starched curtain blowing against a window against a portion of incredibly blue sky. He was in a wooden bunk under Indian blankets and a Mexican patchwork quilt.

Moving cautiously under the blankets, he found that he was lame and sore. His legs had not been broken, and his spine was all in one piece. Despite the pain in his left shoulder he could move his arm a bit, and this puzzled him; for the rifle bullet should have torn the muscles and nerves and paralyzed his arm clear to the hand. Then he realized that he had lain here for long hours, perhaps days. He felt his chin and was astonished to touch bristly beard.

Slowly, gingerly, he sat up on the edge of the bunk. He was wearing a striped nightshirt of Mexican cloth and it hung only to his knees. He stood up, swaying with dizziness. There was someone in another room of the shanty. A woman's clear soprano was crooning a bar or two of Latin

song. Somehow, it sounded good to him.

Cullen weaved toward a door and knocked upon it, clinging to the frame, his head whirling sickeningly. The door was flung open and he was confronted by a girl—a woman of twenty-five or -six, brown-haired, dark-skinned, black-eyed. Her mouth was full and lusciously curved and as red as cactus blooms.

"Señor!" she gasped, clutching at his good arm to steady him. "You should not do this! You are one ver' seek hombre!"

He straightened determinedly, speaking in a hollow voice unrecognizable as his own: "Seforita, whose house is this? Where am I?"

The girl was lovely as her smile broke. "Why, amigo, this is the hacienda of Pablo Uvalde. I am Chicha, his daughter."

"Hacienda?" He held to the door frame with his right hand. Puzzlement furrowed his brow. "I don't—"

She threw her slim hands up in a gesture of deprecation. "A poor *jacal*, maybe is better. Our real home—our hacienda—is in the big valley to the north." The darkness of sorrow or hate was like shadow in her eyes. "Some day we will go back."

He was suddenly conscious of the night-gown which exposed his knees. She saw his grin come, and laughed. "My father's *camisa de noche*. It does not fit so beeg a man."

Cullen remembered being carried on Pablo Uvalde's back and he said, "Your father is *mucho robusto*, Seforita." Then sudden weakness made him waver and clutch at the door.

She helped him back and into the bunk, covering him with the blankets. "You have been here three days, Sefor—"

Startled, he stared up into her lovely face. "Has anybody been here to ask for me?"

She shook her dark curls gravely. "No cattleman from the valley would dare—unless he came with plenty *caballeros*. What is your name, Sefor?"

He thought he detected suspicion, a kind of wary hardness in her steady gaze on him. He thought swiftly. "Slim," he told her without seeming delay. "Slim Parker." Then he remembered the papers in his coat pocket, the letter to John Redmond. All of these would identify him, perhaps damn him. He stared around the room, saw his clothing folded neatly over a chair, his gun

belt with them, his boots and spurs on the floor beside it, his hat on a hook behind the door.

"You ride for one of those beeg ranches in the valley?" The harsh change in her voice warned him of the depth of her animosity toward the ranchmen beyond Canyon Creek. "Maybe for Arrowhead or Circle-Bar?"

"No," he answered, lying without a blink. "Just a saddle tramp lookin' for a ridin' job."

"Those *gringos*"—she bit her under lip and clenched her hands in a gesture of intense emotion—"they hanged two of our people this morning! Those *gringos*—I would like to keel them with these two hands!" She held tiny fists before her, then dropped her arms hopelessly. "But I am only a woman. What can one do in such a fix?"

He studied her with a hard care from under lowered lids. "All *gringos* are not bad," he told her presently. "I am one, but I do not hate Mexicans."

"No," she said, eyes and voice softening. "You are a good one. I know." Her color deepened and she looked away, confused. "I have nursed you for three days and three nights."

"Chicha," he murmured, "I thank you for that." He reached and took one of her strong, small hands, held it a moment, then let his grip relax. "I will not forget it. Chicha."

They both heard voices and boots come into the house. The girl went to the door and held it open, saying, "Padre, he is not sleeping now. And he is our friend. He tell me so."

Two men entered—one short and solid, Pablo Uvalde of the black eyes and snow-white hair; and a tall, panther-lean Mexican with flashing eyes and almost black skin. This man wore a red-and-green serape like a cloak, and he had the dramatic air of many young men of his race, a swagger obnoxious to *gringos*, annoyingly so to Cullen who stared at him as the old man came to the bunk and said,

"Señor, you are well enough to walk on the legs? That night I theenk they are bust." Pablo waved a brown hand toward the lean man behind him. "This is Esteban Carrizo, a ver' good amigo to us."

Esteban Carrizo? The outlaw. The

rustler. The killer of gringo ranchmen. Gus Megarr and Harv Gilson had called him all of these. Studying the man in the flesh, Cullen could not deny he had the dangerous demeanor attributed to him. There was a steel-bright quality in his eyes, a shrewd and wary nervousness of movement like that of night-prowling felines.

Chicha broke the tense silence that followed her father's words. "Padre, he is Señor Slim Parker. A saddle tramp, *si*."

Cullen lay still, eyes half closed. He was watching the old man's strong-lined face; he was watching the lean, dark one of Esteban. It was an enigma. There was a long-barreled pistol in a cartridge belt beneath his serape, and now, suddenly, he was moving toward Cullen, walking stiff-legged, almost cautiously. His bead-black eyes held a brightness, a threat unconcealed.

"Señor," he purred, "you lie like hell!"

Cullen opened his eyes and gave the man a scornful stare. "Maybe *you're* the hombre who shot me off my horse the other night!"

Esteban laughed harshly. He stood with elbows out, hands on his belt, the brilliance of gems in his black-browed eyes. Then he shoved a rasping question at Cullen.

"Why I want to keel a *patada*—a saddle tramp?"

"You hate *gringos*!"

Esteban laughed again, a savage, defiant sound. "Seguro. But I not keel without reason. Maybe later I have reason to keel *you*!"

"Amigo," said Cullen imperturbably, "I look at you and see the shadow of a tree—the shadow of a rope!"

"You are a spy for the beeg *rancheros*!" the Mexican snarled, his right hand moving downward under his bright-colored serape.

Cullen thought of the papers in his coat and had his moment of alarm. He started to speak, anger rising to his slate-hued eyes. Then Pablo put a lean hand out and touched the bent elbow of Esteban. "Go, amigo. You are wrong. Thees hombre is no spy. Go, and I weel talk to heem."

Esteban stared at Cullen for a long moment, and his eyes were the orbs of a killer, a hater. Then he gave his serape a swirl, wheeled on his spurred boots and left the room. Chicha Uvalde followed him hurriedly, and their voices could be heard excitedly in the outer room.

In the silence, while Pablo eased his body

into a chair near the bunk, Cullen reflected on the strangeness of his presence here in the headquarters of Pablo Uvalde, among people who had every good reason to hate the class from which he came. He and the Mexicans exiled from their ranches in the valley represented the exact opposites of a system, a country and a code.

He was a cattleman whose existence depended irrevocably upon the integrity of all other men who rode the border range. They, the Mexicans, were of a group that had suffered at the hands of the former class, fairly or unjustly, and had no code except to hate the *gringos* and to take their cattle whenever and wherever they could manage it.

No matter how much he, as a cowman, might oppose the ruthless treatment of the Mexicans, he was now accepting the care and hospitality of spiritual and physical enemies. If Pablo and Chicha had searched his clothing and found the legal evidence of his acquiring Arrowhead, or even the letter Jasper Connorboy had given him to be presented to John Redmond, they had not revealed it by word or expression. The girl must have dried his coat along with other items of his apparel, therefore his opinion of her innate honesty burned high.

Pablo Uvalde was speaking, softly, slowly: "Esteban is a hothead, Señor Slim. You must not mind too much his talk."

"He's an outlaw, Pablo," Cullen answered grimly, harshly. "A rustler and a killer!"

The old man pulled his powerful shoulders up and let them fall. His dark eyes held a cool and cynical gleam. "He and his men stand between us and death, Señor. Your people would have shot us all by now if Esteban did not guard the Canyon Creek and the big rocks."

"What about rustling *gringo* beef?"

Pablo frowned. "The truth is this: I and others were driven from our haciendas in the valley. We left at night and with much haste. Therefore the range still holds our cattle in great numbers. Esteban rides the valley with his *caballeros* only to bring back our property. *Sabe?*"

"That," said Cullen, "ain't the way I heard it."

Pablo smiled, searchingly studying the man on the bunk. "What weel you do when you leave here, Señor?"

"Try for a job in the valley. Where else can I go?"

"That is too bad," the other murmured. "You are not the same as the *Americanos*—all those men who bang and shoot. The ranching in thees country is not the same like it used to be. I theenk that maybe it weel not be the same any more again. Unless—" He paused, his black eyes narrowing, then finished, "Unless someone like you, Señor Slim, will understand the truth and take the part of those who are kicked and shot with guns."

Cullen felt uncomfortable under that steady scrutiny of ebon eyes. "What can one man do? Not much."

"One can do *muchedumbro!*" Pablo spread his hands and lifted them slowly. "If one is not a coward." He smiled. "But then why should I ask it of you, a stranger?"

Cullen met that probing gaze unflinchingly. After a long moment, he said softly, "You saved my life."

Pablo waved it away. "I would do the same for an enemy, though perhaps I would keel him later—in my own way."

A coldness settled along Cullen's spine. There was something ominous in those words, although they had been spoken with a smile and without rancor. "I'll do what I can," he said. "Maybe you can lend me a horse tomorrow."

"If you are strong enough to ride—*si.*"

A footstep came at the door and Chicha returned, pausing as she heard her father's words. Cullen saw the protest on her lovely face and heard her say, "If you go, you must do so at night—in darkness. It will not be safe otherwise."

Chapter III

DEATH WEARS A BLACK MASK

JESSE CULLEN left the Uvalde house that night. Astride a bay pony the old Mexican had saddled for him, he headed northward toward Canyon Creek through the thickening curtain of darkness. And he left without a turmoil of thoughts and emotions. Chicha's sweet but spirited eyes had spoken a message as he turned from the doorway to mount. The message was obscure, veiled by long lashes and a sideways glance, but his heart had quickened unaccountably.

Now he was climbing the horse through a region of huge haystack boulders with the roar of the creek before him in the spray-flecked gloom. Behind him lay the bottom-lands of the Rio Grande, covered by layers of mist and the bluish light of the moon just edging up out of the east.

While he had dressed that afternoon, he had seen the camp of the Mexicans two or three miles south of the Uvalde house, had seen some of their cattle strung out on the grassy lowlands near the river. The settlement consisted of long lean-tos and tin-roofed cabins of *jacals*, the remudas of horses visible behind corrals of rope-lashed poles and woven brush. The Uvalde layout was the most remote of the buildings in the basin and stood midway between the river and the rocky gorge of Canyon Creek, on higher ground.

He had found his papers intact, though damp from his dive off the cliff, and was more than ever convinced that Chicha and her father had not perused them. He found a gap in the canyon walls and rode through, finding and crossing a shingle bar some distance above the scene of his struggles four nights before.

In the valley a few minutes later he turned the pony toward Arrowhead with keen and curious speculation as to what his reception would be. During the hours of fever and delirium at the Uvalde's he had known nothing of what went on in the household; and later, when he had recovered consciousness, he had learned but little more. There were far too many things to guess at, but already he had settled on the belief that Esteban Carrizo or one of his *caballeros* had fired the shot that had dropped him into the canyon.

It was true, he had suspected Gus Megarr of plotting against him and his rule at Arrowhead, but later had decided that Megarr, a tough and secretive man admittedly, still did not have any bone to pick with him. Riding toward the ranch through darkness. Cullen imagined what Megarr would say if he told the crew in detail what had happened these past three days. He decided to keep his own counsel and say as little as possible.

He raised the buildings of Arrowhead about half an hour after leaving Canyon Creek; they seemed to spring out of the hills before his eyes, the house, the sheds

and hay barn, the pole corrals. There were lights in the bunkhouse, but nowhere else.

Dismounting and tying the borrowed bay to the hitching post ring near the corral, he made his way toward the lighted doorway and windows of the bunkhouse. As he climbed the grade, there was a perfunctory rifle of whinnying from the remuda in the corral, and immediately afterward the scrape of chair legs inside the bunkhouse.

A silhouette filled the wide-open door a moment later, and Heehaw Davern's raucous voice called, "Who's that?"

Cullen did not answer but went on. Heehaw turned and said hoarsely, "Jumpin' sunfish! It's the boss!"

With the thud of Cullen's boots and the jingle of his spurs up to the bunkhouse steps, Heehaw ducked back inside, and when Cullen came in out of the night, he faced an astonished, staring crew.

Gus Megarr sat at a deal table under a chain-hung lamp. Opposite was Harry Walters in the act of dealing a hand of poker to Megarr and Les Marriner on his right. Heehaw had retreated to his bunk and was sitting on it, hands on his knees, hunched forward as if ready to jump for safety. In another bunk Bronc Roscoe snored obliviously.

Megarr's face had a sweaty shine under the lamp, and his hard eyes narrowed after that first shock of surprise. Marriner and Walters went on staring, open-mouthed, unbelievingly.

Cullen's coat was drawn over his sling, but the left sleeve hung conspicuously empty and limp. He said with cranky violence, "Well, you're all starin' like you expected a ghost! Or maybe you're wishin' I was a spook!"

Megarr covered up hastily. "Hell, Cullen, we'd give you up for a corpse two days ago! We figgered the greasers had got you!" He paused, forcing a smile that didn't spread to his eyes. "Your hoss came back and there was blood on the saddle!"

"You're sittin' around like it was a parlor sociable," Cullen said in the same cranky tone. "Where's Gilson? Why ain't the sheriff out with a posse? What kind of a damned hooraw is this?"

Megarr pushed back from the table and turned on his chair, fully facing Cullen. He laid both hairy hands on his knees and snapped, "We combed every foot of grass

and rocks between here and the canyon. You're hide-out musta been a good 'un. What's the matter with your left arm?"

Cullen met that baleful stare and said truculently, "My horse threw me. I sprained my arm and my ankle. I've been holed because I couldn't walk."

Megarr looked skeptical. "Where you been hangin' out?"

"At our west line shack—waitin' for you to show up."

Walters and Marriner watched Cullen warily, ready to jump back from the table if a ruckus started. Their expressions showed they expected one. Heehaw Davern blinked his eyes and breathed heavily through his nose. Roscoe snored in his bunk, apparently oblivious to the voices around him.

Cullen turned back toward the door. Megarr asked a strange question then. "Seen Johnny Redmond yet?"

Cullen looked around. "I aim to see him tonight."

The foreman shook his head. "Johnny's at the Wells tonight with his boys. There's a special meetin' of the Stockmen's Protective 'Sociation at the town hall. Ev'ry-buddy's gonna be there."

"Why," Cullen asked, "aren't *you* there. Why aren't we represented at that meetin'?"

"Gilson's handlin' our end. This here's our night to patrol the valley and we're relievin' Bentley's men in an hour so's they c'n make the meetin' in time."

It all had a queer, unconvincing sound to Cullen, but, after a moment's hesitation, he turned on his heel and went out. In the kitchen, he lighted the lamps, troubled in every thought. He removed his coat and draped it over the back of a chair, then went on into the living room with one of the lamps.

This room was in disorder. A whiskey bottle, empty, stood on a table. Cigarette butts littered the fireplace. There was a copy of a newspaper on the floor. Cullen's eyes picked out the masthead—The Indian Wells Signal—Harvey Gilson's weekly.

He lifted the paper and saw the headline,

MAN MURDERED BY MEXICANS

There was the following brief account: "... under mysterious circumstances. Cullen, a stranger, vanished somewhere near Arrowhead Ranch, the night of the 23rd,

and has not been seen or heard from since. Roving bands of Mexicans from the river settlement are suspected of having waylaid Cullen. . . ."

There was no mention of his connection with Arrowhead, no details of his contact with Gilson at the latter's office. This was Gilson's paper and the deliberate withholding of information indicated collusion on Gilson's part. It left a bad taste in Cullen's mouth and added to his puzzlement and uncertainty.

He was on the point of beginning a search through his uncle's desk when something almost too soft for sound brought him cautiously back to the hallway leading to the kitchen. The sound came again and moved across the dead and sultry silence of the empty house like the flutter of a bird's wings.

CULLEN STOLE down the hall, cat-footed, balancing on his toes with his good hand bracing the wall. He reached the kitchen door and peered around the edge of it. What he saw startled him, then sent fury flaming through him.

Harry Walters was moving toward the outside door from the center of the big-beamed room. There was no guessing what he had been up to when Cullen had first heard him, but now he was on his way out, leaving with long steps and hovering balance like a man walking a tight rope.

He had almost reached the wide-open door when Cullen sprang with a clumping of boots and caught him by the collar, hurling him back and around. Walter's gasped, "Gawd!" and went bug-eyed trying to duck Cullen's hard-thrown fist at his chin.

Knuckles crunched against bone, and Walters fell with a crash, his long arms flung wide to save himself. His head bumped the floor and his hat fell off; his eyes blinked rapidly and watered. He rose on an elbow, cupping a hand to his bruised jaw. "A helluva way to treat a man!" he said in a hard-breathing way.

"Get out of here!" Cullen stood over him, threatening, anger in his gray eyes like small flints of flame. "Don't let me catch you sneakin' again!"

Walters clambered to his feet and bolted out through the door. Cullen heard his boots thud into the bunkhouse, and after a

bit, voices murmured in the yard. Immediately afterward horses went off into a gallop.

He turned away from the door, a sorely puzzled man. The events of the past days and nights were obscure. Uneasiness now became alarm. Something was going on all around him, something dangerous, something as dark and furtive as the crawling of a rattlesnake.

Then he remembered the papers in his coat pocket over the chair. He jumped forward, bent and ran his fingers over the coat. The letter and the copy of his uncle's will had disappeared. Harry Walters had both, Cullen *knew* now!

His first thought was to ride after his crew and have a showdown now. Caution asserted itself, however. As a matter of fact, he had no other need for the will and the letter than to identify himself to John Redmond, his uncle's old partner and saddle mate. He felt sure he could convince the ranchman himself without documentary proof, but if this was impossible he could obtain that proof by appealing to the surrogate court at Delhart, Texas. Within two weeks he would have written substantiation of his claim to Arrowhead.

His need of the moment was for someone he could trust with the facts he knew and the questions he wanted answered. John Redmond, a man he had never met, was the logical one to approach. But Redmond was at a cattlemen's meeting at Indian Wells, Megarr had said. Perhaps the tricky foreman had lied, though why Megarr would do so Cullen didn't know and he couldn't guess. He decided to ride to JR, ten miles to the northeast, then, if Redmond had taken his crew to the Wells, he would make the twenty-mile ride to town.

He blew out all the lamps, and left the house, a moment later mounting his borrowed bay and heading down the plain trail toward the Redmond spread.

The horse was fast and traveled at a distance-eating pace. For the first few miles, Cullen's mind was occupied by his own dark thoughts. Were the Mexicans actually to blame for the rustling of cattle in the valley? He could not bring himself to the point of believing it, although he knew that Esteban Carrizo had all the earmarks of an outlaw, all the attributes of a border wolf.

Something of the dramatic went with Esteban always, outlaw or hero, and he might be both conceivably. The young Mexican had undoubtedly attained the stature of a leader by his deeds. To his people he must naturally personify the dash and daring of the true *caballero*. Notwithstanding this state of affairs, Esteban was dangerous, perhaps a cold-blooded killer, and he, Cullen, had good reason to suspect the latter possibility.

The moon was barely edging up over the eastern hills when Cullen's horse shied violently and nearly unseated his rider. Cullen's mind snapped back to the present, and his eyes caught vague movement in the trail-side brush. Instantly afterward men and horses swarmed upon him. A voice shouted, "*Alto!*"

Cullen hit steel to his bay, ducking sideways and drawing at his gun. He was too slow. A rider wearing a sombrero and a black mask grabbed at his bridle reins; a gun crashed close to Cullen's ear. The flash of that shot revealed a glimpse of the rider nearest him. He saw strangely familiar eyes; then shadow swallowed the face.

Cullen lunged his horse against this rider. The man's grip broke free of the rein. Then Cullen got his gun clear and fired at the man—and missed.

A second sombreroed, rider came at him from the right. Another voice snarled, "Kill the *gringo*!"

Someone made a hasty throw with a riata. The hard rawhide plait whipped across Cullen's eyes, blinding him. Through a burst of agony, he lashed out with both arms, throwing the loop off his shoulders, firing his sixgun aimlessly a second afterward. Out of nowhere a gun-barrel smashed his temple a glancing blow. He thought the gun had exploded, blowing off the side of his head.

He slashed his spurs home, and the bay lunged forward. He lay over the saddle horn, blinded, stunned, clinging to the horn as the horse went ramming down the trail. Behind him a rifle banged, and afterward came a volley of revolver shots. The bullets went snickering past him into the brush.

Then the bay was crashing through the chaparral, and snagged limbs tore at his chaps and clawed his face. He lost all sense of direction, lost all coherent reasoning. He

seemed to be floating in moonlight, suspended in a saddle between earth and sky.

He never remembered falling to the ground and climbing back on the horse again. He was weak and dazed, the wound in his shoulder opened and bleeding, the one at his temple burning.

Finally he was aware that the horse was making its own way. After what seemed hours of aimless wandering, he saw a glimmer of light ahead of him. He heard the roar of a stream over rocks, felt spray in his face, then the light was bright before him. He thought numbly, *That's Redmond's*, then knew it was not JR at all. He glimpsed a pole corral, a gate of woven brush. He was dismounting in the yard of Pablo Uvalde.

A door was flung open. A woman's throaty voice queried, "Who is there?" Then, in Spanish, the voice called back into the house, "Father, it is the bay pony come home!"

Cullen clutched at the saddle horn to keep from falling. He said, "Chicha, it's Jesse—" Remembering in time, he corrected, "Slim Parker."

There was a gasp, then the girl was running toward him through the moonlight and shadows in front of the house. "Slim, you've been hurt! Oh, *querido* . . ."

Even through his numbed thoughts, he knew she had called him "*querido*," a Spanish term of endearment. But then, nothing seemed real now. He felt her arm go around him, helping him, and it was strong, gently compelling. "Come, Slim, I will help you in the house.

He did not speak but walked weavily toward the lamplight, leaning on the girl more than he realized. "I'm all right," he said unsteadily, thickly. "Somebody clipped me with a pistol barrel."

"Who did it, Slim?" Chicha's voice was sharp, almost querulous. "Did you see them?"

"Yes," he said. "They looked like Mexicans!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" the girl gasped.

Chapter IV

GUN BAIT FOR BORDER BEEF!

PAULO UVALDE met them at the door, his long straight hair gleaming like quicksilver in the lamplight. "What hap-

pened, amigo? *Por Dios*, you are hurt some more!"

"Bring the tequila, father," the girl said in quick Spanish. Then she made Cullen lie down on a hide-covered couch with a pillow under his head. "I will get hot water and wash the wound!"

Pablo came shuffling back on sandalled feet with a bottle and glass. He poured Cullen a drink, and it burned its fiery course, warming and reviving him. While the girl rustled about, tearing bandages and pouring hot water from a steaming kettle, the old man gravely asked, "You saw them, Señor?"

Cullen had his eyes closed and lamplight beyond the lids was a red glow. "They were or looked like Mexicans," he said slowly.

Chicha's voice stabbed at him sharply. "I do not believe it! Esteban would not dare—"

Cullen murmured, "Why wouldn't he? He threatened to do it, didn't he?"

Pablo argued, "It was not Esteban. He is working with his men in the valley far from here."

Cullen opened his eyes a slit. He saw the worry, the fear on the old Mexican's seamy face. "Up to his old tricks?"

Then he saw Chicha standing over him. Her eyes were dark and steady on his face. "Esteban is no rustler, Slim! I swear it! Tonight he goes to bring *our* beef to the river!"

"Who jumped me, then?" Cullen demanded in sudden anger.

"I do not know," the girl came back in the same sharp, half defiant tone. "But I know for sure that it was not Esteban Carrizo!"

This girl, Cullen knew, was a product of the country and of its ways. Her eyes had looked upon murder and violence, upon brutality and injustice, for all their softness. Could she be blamed for defending a countryman, for lying for one, especially a man who had made the common cause his own and had fought the common enemy—the *gringo* cattlemen—and had risked his own skin repeatedly and with dare-devil courage? Perhaps, Cullen reflected, Esteban was even Chicha's lover! He blurted angrily, "I hope we do not meet again—Esteban and me!"

But Chicha was washing and bandaging

his wounded head, and did not speak or argue any more. Her brown hands flew like the graceful dark wings of fluttering birds. When she had finished, she said, "There, it is done!" Her smile touched him gently, then was gone, and not all the pounding of his pulse was due to the tequila. "You must lie here very quiet," she added firmly. "You must rest a while before you leave again."

Cullen sat up on the couch. His eyes held a stubborn shine. "I got to ride to the Wells," he said, starting to rise.

"You weel stay here." It was Pablo who spoke, and his tone was not soft any more. "Lie down, *Señor!*"

Cullen stared. The old Mexican had left the room a moment before. Now he was back, and he had a rifle in his hands, its muzzle turned downward, covering him steadily. "You weel stay with us," Pablo went on, smiling thinly, "till Esteban returns from the valley with our cattle."

The girl had drawn back, and now, Cullen glanced that way and saw the aloof indifference in her eyes, though she was a shade paler than before. Anger flamed up in him. He hesitated, then relaxed on the couch, his bandaged head resting against the plank wall behind him.

He even managed a smile at the old man. He had no desire to injure Pablo, even less desire to injure Chicha. Furthermore, he understood the motive behind Pablo's covering him with his rifle. Esteban was leading a raid on the valley range, either to rustle *gringo* beef or to drive what was left of the Mexican cattle back to the Rio Grande. Pablo was merely making certain no warning was sent out to the valley ranchers.

Cullen found his makings and made a cigarette, awkward with his left hand. Chicha silently went to her kitchen and returned after a while with a tray of food, and he sat on the couch and ate frijoles, twisting cold tortillas and using them for a spoon, Mexican style.

He felt fit again, though his head and shoulder throbbed. His anger had dimmed somewhat, and in its place was a grim, cold patience, a stolid watchfulness. He had only to bide his time and when the right break came—

Hoofs thundered down out of the night. The dooryard seemed filled with horsemen

suddenly, and the silence was broken by shouts and the clank of spurs and saddle gear and firearms. Pablo rose from his chair and carried his rifle to the door, flinging it open and peering out. Dust whiffed into the lamplight and settled like fine powder to the floor.

Cullen, watching the doorway, saw a movement beyond the old man, then Esteban Carrizo lurched into the room, tall, lean, dangerous, bitter-mouthing. The young Mexican leader's beaded sombrero was thrust back to frame a sharp, shrewd face, a cruel mouth, the black brightness of hawk-like eyes.

Esteban brushed Pablo aside with a grunted word of Spanish, then closed the door behind him, turning with a broad swirl of his red-and-green serape that made the lamp flicker ten feet away. There was a wicked, long-barreled pistol gripped in his right hand underneath the skirt of his cloaking *serape*.

He had been glaring at Cullen. Now he put his keen gaze on Chicha, on his left. The girl had a queer sick expression in her widened eyes, much as a woman looks at a dead man she has loved. Esteban spoke to her, not harshly, but with deadly gravity.

"Little one," he said in Spanish, "we have miserably failed! All this night the *gringo* dogs have been gathering the beef—and ours is with their own! They are moving one big herd toward the Rio Grande—for what good reason I do not know!"

Silence greeted his swift Spanish outburst, then he swung his black, vindictive eyes on Cullen who had not stirred from the couch. "What is thees dog of a spy doing in your house?" he demanded in English. "I shall keel him with—" He started a step toward Cullen.

"Blockhead!" Chicha flung herself in front of him, shielding Cullen with outflung arms. "He is our friend! He is on our side!"

Esteban gave a savage excuse for a laugh. "Why you theenk that, spitfire?"

"I—" She wavered, then touched her left breast with finger tips. "I feel it here!"

Esteban reached for her arm. His brown fingers circled her wrist. The grip made her turn white to the lips. "Fool!" he snarled. "He is a spy, I tell you. They sent him

here purposely to weaken us, to betray—”

Pablo Uvalde was beside him. The old man's face was fierce and unafraid. “Amigo, you are wrong! Thees time you make mistake!”

“Let me talk!” the young man snarled. “I know who thees man he really is! I know because I follow heem this night! He rode to the ranch called Arrowhead and was known by the *gringos* there! And now we are finish! Now we are done! The *gringos* ride the valley trail with one beeg herd of beef! Our cattle run in that herd. Who is the blockhead now?” He flung the girl away from him and clenched his fists dramatically, cursing in Spanish.

There was a second of dead silence following that vituperative blast of words. During that interval, Cullen had a bad moment. He knew that, if Esteban's words concerning a cattle drive were true, then something big was happening in the valley at this moment—something secret and terrible. It meant violence would flame on the border, and death and bloodshed would come with the swiftness of a hurricane.

Then Cullen was on his feet. He faced the three people in the room, speaking more calmly than he felt, “I lied to you. I'm Jesse Cullen, the new boss of Arrowhead. I lied because I could not be sure I would not be killed in this house while I lay helpless. But there is no time for talk now. All of us—”

Esteban stood in a cat-like crouch. He took another step toward Cullen. Then Chicha cried, “I knew he was Señor Cullen! In his sickness he talked to me—wild but full of truth! My father heard his talk! You cannot think he would lie!”

Esteban stared at her in amazement, then with derision. His gun came up in a rigid hand. “Who *does* not lie?” he shouted. “I should keel you all—”

He did not finish his tirade, for yells came from the front yard and after the yells a new sound of hoofs. Rifles barked. Revolvers made small thunder in the night. Voices called in Spanish, beseeching Esteban to leave the house.

Esteban sprang back to the door, a trapped and reckless look in his flashing eyes. But the sound of hoofs came louder as he listened. The shooting went up to a fevered pitch, then stopped suddenly. Horsemen could be heard entering the yard

while others left it, heading south toward the river and the Mexican settlement.

Pablo Uvalde moved swiftly and shot the bolt home. When he turned, they all saw the fierce light in his eyes. “If that is the *gringo* ranchers, we weel all die, *Señores!*” His rifle hammer clicked as he cocked it.

DANGER was bright in the young Mexican's eyes. He moved quickly, stealthily toward the nearest window. Chicha flattened her hand over the lamp and extinguished it. Men were running in the yard. Those were American voices shouting, “He's in the house! Watch the windows!”

They all heard the splintering of a windowpane. It was the one where Esteban crouched. The young Mexican's pistol spat flame an instant later, and the flash illuminated the room like lightning.

Booted and spurred men were at the front door. Rifle butts commenced battering the logs. A voice hollered out, “Open up! We want Carrizo, and we'll git him!”

Then there was a space when the shouting and trampling ceased, and Pablo whispered, “Our men weel come if we can but hold them off a while!”

Esteban's answer was to fire his pistol into the yard through the broken pane. A voice howled in anguish out there, and shouting began again. Cullen had moved toward Pablo, and now he touched the old man's arm. “Give me the rifle.”

Pablo surrendered it and shuffled off in search of a revolver. Cullen went over to the window next to Esteban. Movement was visible but dim in the moonlight of the yard. Horses stood in a cluster near the corrals, how many Cullen could not tell. Then the voice at the door began again.

“You've got one minute to open up or we'll smash this door!”

Cullen tensed and swore softly. That voice belonged to Gus Megarr!

“Thirty seconds!” the Arrowhead foreman shouted. “Give Carrizo up or we'll hang ev'ry damned greaser in the house!”

The battering of rifle butts began again. The thuds shook the room and brought down small showers of dust and plaster.

A rifle was fired close to the window. The bullet slammed into the opposite wall. The flash whipped into the room and

showed Esteban's lean face and the caged and desperate sharpness that lay upon it.

Cullen caught up Pablo's rifle in his left hand and gripped the outlaw's shoulder. "Try one of the back windows, Esteban. There's too many out there for you to handle," he said quietly. "If you can make the corral all their horses are there and you can take your pick. My bay's near the gate. Get goin', amigo!"

The door shuddered under the drive of the rifle butts. Esteban stared queerly at Cullen through the moonlight and shadows in the window. "Don't misunderstand me, fella," Cullen said. "If they were the sheriff's men I wouldn't lift a finger. But that's my own crew out there. They must have found your trail and knew they'd catch you here. Get goin'!"

Esteban straightened away from the window, rifle in both hands. "Chicha called me a blockhead, Señor! Perhaps she tell the truth! *Adios!*"

Then the Mexican whipped his *serape* about him tightly, and disappeared toward the rear of the house. Chicha ran after him, then Cullen heard her return to the room. "Lie down on the couch, Chicha," he ordered from his post beside the window. "There will be shootin' in a minute!"

Pablo was back, and there was the glint of a revolver as he moved toward the door. The battering grew louder on the logs. An alarm was lifted toward the rear of the house. Pistols crashed. Cullen knew then that Esteban was outside and taking his chances. Instantly afterward came the clatter of hoofs and loud, angry cries from the men with Gus Megarr.

"He got away! By Gawd, he made a break for it!"

Other horsemen were in the saddle and galloping. The men remaining at the door cursed their luck vociferously. "I told you he was here!" Megarr's voice cried beratingly. "Come on, we'll knock this door in and teach whoever's in there a lesson they won't forget!"

Cullen sprang to the door and drew the bolt clear. The rifle butts struck at empty air for Cullen had opened the door and had jumped back. Four men came staggering into the room to face the surprise of the tall man with the Mexican rifle held close across his ribs.

There was only the dimness of outer

moonlight through door and windows, but Cullen could see that the vindictive courage had suddenly gone out of the men who faced him. And he noted contemptuously that all four were masked and wore Mexican sombreros. Gus Megarr was the thick-set man on his left. The others he did not know, but they had slitted eyes and the general air of hired gun-slingers.

"Who's goin' to teach who a lesson?" Cullen demanded of Megarr, and saw the foreman flinch as though struck.

"Is that you, Cullen?" Megarr gasped.

"As big as life and twice as natural," Cullen told him ironically. "Put your hands up, the four of you!"

Out in the yard riders could be heard returning, walking their horses. "Might've knowed we'd find you in a greaser nest!" snarled Megarr.

"*You've* got a lesson to learn," Cullen said harshly, gripping Pablo's rifle with perspiring palms. Behind him Pablo and Chicha remained silent, staring at this tableau. "You boys ride around hangin' people and drivin' off their cows. There's supposed to be laws in the State of Texas but you wouldn't know it, judgin' by the way you and some others ride men and women down!"

Megarr had recovered some of his poise. "Look at who's blabbin' about laws, boys!" he said to his men who had their hands up now. "This hombre's my boss—or he was! We'll know what to do if we meet him again on our side of the range!"

"There won't be a next time," Cullen said, "if I put some bullets through your hide!" He paused, peering at the foreman, seeing the eyes narrowed above the mask, beneath the floppy brim of the sombrero. He had seen those eyes before, recently; and then he remembered. Megarr had been in the bunch that had jumped him scarcely two hours ago.

He said, "A lot of things're gettin' plain-er, Megarr. Maybe it was you that knocked me off that cliff the other night! I know it was this gang that tried to rope me a little while ago!"

"Smart, ain't you?" the foreman jeered. "Gettin' some cow sense all of a sudden? Why the hell didn't you get some before and stay the hell where you belong—clean out of this country?"

"Talk up to me, Gus," Cullen said soft-

ly, "or I'll shoot your damn' ears off for you!"

The vehemence of Cullen's threat made the foreman lift his arms and hands above his head. "I'll talk down to you, Cullen," he said sullenly, "when you're pushin' the daisies up!"

"I'm the boss of Arrowhead," said Cullen levelly, "and I'm firin' you right here and now and warnin' you to get out of the valley or take your chances with the law!"

Megarr laughed thinly. "You ain't the boss of nuthin', mister. You're just gun bait for border beef!"

"Pick up your rifles and vamoose!" Cullen said.

The four men obeyed, Megarr lagging a bit behind the others. "Pronto!" Cullen jabbed him in the ribs with the rifle barrel. "Keep out of my way, Megarr, and make big dust!"

The quartet broke into an energetic trot, dragging their rifles by the barrels. Cullen followed them out into the moonlight. Horsemen were streaming into the yard—the men who had pursued Esteban and now were returning without him. There were hard-flung shouts and questions, but Megarr never answered them. Cullen counted eight men. Presently they were all in the saddle and fading northward out of the yard. Megarr's challenge came sailing back, "All right, Cullen, we'll see who's boss!"

Cullen leaned the rifle against the wall near the door. He looked gaunt and somehow older, his stubble of black beard glinting in the lamplight from within. He heard Pablo and Chicha come out and stand beside him, and he sensed the awe they held for him and laughed, "They're all a bunch of tinhorn sports—no guts! You'll see."

Pablo murmured, "They are the no-good hombres, Señor. And now comes Esteban with his *caballeros*!"

As the old man spoke there came the massed rush of riders through the brush that surrounded the yard. They came without yelling, thirty Mexicans carrying their weapons as they charged on the house. Esteban Carrizo led the band. The charge petered out as they found no *gringos* to oppose them.

The dooryard seemed filled with them, a shifting panorama of sweating, dust-streaked horses and grim, flashing-eyed Mexicans. Cullen stood against the house's

wall with Pablo and Chicha and watched the scene, a deep feeling of satisfaction within him. He saw the sombrero brims flapping, swarthy faces stiff-set and resolute, rifles jutting up from under saddle flaps, holstered revolvers slapping lean thighs, the entire party reining up in dust and moonlight that gleamed on guns and saddle trappings.

If these men whom Esteban commanded were outlaws and murderers, they looked the part, Cullen considered grimly. On the other hand, if they were only men defending their homes and families and property, they would look much as these riders looked—sardonic, stern, narrow-eyed, determined. The satisfaction grew greater in Cullen as he watched Esteban ride a black horse toward the spot where he stood.

"Señor Cullen," the dark man addressed him, halting his horse with a twitch of the bridle reins, "I have to make the apology." His big sombrero was swept off his paint-black head in an exaggerated gesture of respect, but his eyes were genuinely acknowledging regret.

"I make the humble bow before my men," he went on eloquently, raising his voice above the racket of saddle rings and bit chains and stamping hoofs. "We ride to the valley, to claim our cattle which the *gringos* have stolen and now drive toward the Rio Grande. You, Señor, have earned the right to join us." There was a challenge in his words, almost a taunt, and he was smiling his white-toothed smile.

Cullen eyed him steadily through the moonlight and the dust cloud that canopied the yard. He saw the waiting, listening riders, saw the black intentness of their narrowed eyes upon his face. These men, he knew, were waiting to see what he would say, what he would do. He would stand or fall by the nature of his answer to Esteban, their leader.

"I will ride along," Cullen said in a natural tone, "on one condition. I am what your people call a *gringo*. Also the *gringos* you hate are of my race and nationality. I will ride if you and your men will take my orders for tonight."

Instantly angry voices rose. The yard became confusion and clamoring. Esteban's men shouted in swift Spanish, showing their disapproval with word and glance.

But Esteban quelled the uproar with a

lifted arm and hand. When quiet came again, and the hubbub of voices and protests had stopped, he said in a tone loud enough for the farthest rider to hear, "The *gringo* shall lead us against the *gringo* dogs! Get on your horse, Señor Arrowhead!"

There was another outburst of protests, but Esteban waved them all away. He held his mount with a high, tight rein and watched Cullen stride toward his horse near the corral gate.

Cullen mounted quickly, thrusting boots straight down in the stirrups. Then he pricked the horse with a spur and led the column of horsemen northward out of the Uvalde yard. The last voice he heard as they galloped up the trail was Chicha's clear voice calling, "Go, amigos! *Vaya con Dios!*"

Chapter V

THAT GRINGO CABALLERO CULLEN

MOONLIGHT lay garish over the sparse mesquite beyond Canyon Creek as Cullen led Esteban and his *caballeros* westward at a long, high lope. The earth drummed in muffled rhythm beneath the flying hoofs of the column of thirty-odd horsemen.

Cullen rode alone, yards ahead of the main body of riders. His lank frame rose and fell in the saddle with the rolling gait of Pablo's tireless bay. During the first mile or two after they had crossed over into valley grass, few cattle were to be seen. Only an occasional scrub steer bolted at their approach. This end of the valley seemed to have been swept clean of all steers of any worth.

Esteban had told Cullen of his discovering an immense herd being driven southward toward the river breaks an hour before. The Mexican had given him the position of that trailing herd, then had dropped back with his men to the rear. Now Cullen felt the need of Esteban's company beside him. He glanced back, hoping for some sign of the lean leader, but there were too many identical swarthy faces in that line of galloping men. Esteban had retired figuratively and literally from his position of prominence.

The moon sailed high against a sky filled

with massive cumulus clouds. Suddenly the panorama of mesquite and huisache ahead altered. A huge gray fog seemed to be drifting northward, pillaring above the brush with the thickness of smoke. Cullen knew instantly that the fog was dust, and that it came from the movement of the missing herd.

The riders behind him saw the dust at the same moment, and harsh, muffled cries came through the jingle of gear and the steady thudding of the hoofs. Cullen turned at a tangent and sent his bay up the grade of a sandy ridge. The whole party followed and a moment afterward, debouched into a small valley.

They climbed a second ridge and Cullen called a halt. Below them lay another valley which was nearly a mile long and about half as wide. Just now the farther edge of this prairie-like strip crawled with cattle in a solid stream. The remote point of the herd had already penetrated the brush to the south while the drag, in the opposite direction, had not yet emerged from the chaparral.

The dust near the ground was too dense to discern whether riders were in attendance, but the steady drifting advance of the cattle indicated that men who knew their trade were moving this herd and losing no time in doing it.

Standing up in his stirrups, Cullen held up his hand for silence, then listened carefully. A shrill yipping could be faintly heard above the rumble of thousands of hoofs and the monotonous moaning of a fast-driven trail herd.

Cullen took the scene in grimly. The size of this herd indicated extensive preparations, and yet he had not learned that any of the valley ranchmen had been preparing for such a massive movement of beef. The fact that the cattle were being hazed southward toward the river was the give-away. None but wet beef—outlaw beef—had ever been moved into Mexico in this fashion.

If this was a steal, then it was one of such magnitude as to stagger even Cullen's experienced imagination. It looked like the plan of someone who knew the country and its ranches, someone whose knowledge of the terrain was complete in detail—not like the plan of a common rustler. This was akin to a migration of cattle, a wholesale

clean-out delivery of the entire region.

Cullen hopped about in the saddle and called for Esteban in a loud, clear voice. The tall Mexican galloped out of the line-up, teeth flashing in a smile. "Señor?" he said, elaborately saluting like a *rurale* officer on parade.

"How many men drivin' that herd?" Cullen asked, ignoring the salute.

"Twenty at least," said Esteban. "May-be forty. Twenty with the cattle—twenty riding in the brush to guard the trail."

Cullen nodded. "I'll ride down close and try and find out who they are. You bring the men and trail me slow—*poco mas abajo*. No shootin' unless you hear shootin'. If that's a legal drive they'll stop and let me cut the herd for my brand."

"Señor," the Mexican answered scornfully, "they weel shoot you down like a *pianano*!"

"I'll take my chances. I got to make sure who we're tacklin'."

"They wear the sombreros," the other said with contempt in his voice. "Like all the *gringo* dogs in thees valley!"

Cullen wheeled his bay and sent it slanting down the grade of the ridge toward the herd. Approaching it a few moments later at an easy lope, he saw two riders, one on his left, the other on the right. These men were patently outriders or guards for they were spaced about three hundred yards apart and moving with the cattle, some hundreds of feet from the column.

Cullen crossed between them, unseen in the dense dust cloud that spread out on both sides of the herd and above it like a heavy fog. The din was huge in close to the herd. Steers bawled incessantly, and the earth shook under the massed assault of all those hoofs. Now he saw other riders moving along with the column of beef. So far they had all appeared to be wearing Mexican sombreros as Esteban had stated.

That this fact disturbed Cullen was putting it mildly. Fury began to burn in him. For these men were not Mexicans. He could tell by the manner of their riding and the shouts they called. This, then, was a tremendous rustling raid, engineered by Americans, by the valley riffraff in the employ of an unknown boss.

Cullen got in close and, still unnoticed, began to read the brands. He saw JR . . . Arrowhead . . . Circle-Bar . . . Hogpen

. . . and a dozen brands unfamiliar to him, ostensibly those run by the Mexicans south of Canyon Creek.

Cattle shied away as Cullen turned with the moving herd. There was a continuous clatter of long, unsweeping horns; the thin moonlight glinted on those horns and on the whites of the big steers' myopically staring eyes. The protesting bellers of the herd grew louder until the uproar actually hurt the ears.

A rider came out of the ruck of dust and racket, galloping straight at Cullen on his bay. Cullen pulled up to face this man and it was Harry Walters' voice he heard challenging him. "Who the hell are you, friend?" the cowhand shouted, circling warily. "Call your brand or I'll put the dogs on you!"

"Arrowhead," Cullen shot back, a savage ring in his voice. "This is Cullen—and I'm goin' to bust this drive to hell!"

WALTERS vented an oath, cut his horse viciously with spurs, and galloped off toward the point of the herd. Now the two outriders were moving in toward Cullen, attracted by the shouts. They came fast, lashing with their quirts.

Cullen drew his gun and fired one shot at the nearest man. He swayed back in the saddle, a hand clapped to his shoulder. The second rider reined up short. A long needle of orange flame showed near his middle as he fired a sixgun. The bullet Cullen didn't even hear go by.

Pandemonium reigned on the flats. The herd, spooked by the shooting, broke its ranks and bunches of steers dove for the brush. But the main body lumbered on at a trot, the dust like a storm cloud over everything.

Steers went high-tailing past Cullen, but he saw four or five horsemen coming up from the point, rifles glinting in the eerie light. He pulled his bay around, chose a stampeding bunch of cows and used it as a screen to hide his retreat.

The shots had given the signal to Esteban and his *caballeros*. Cullen met them charging down the slope. He managed to halt that charge before the Mexicans had plunged into difficulties near the herd. He took the whole party in a quick turn and led them at a gallop on a course parallel with the column of beef.

This was like the Chisholm Trail at its worst; this was like war, like a skirmish before a battle. Strung out behind Cullen came the Mexicans, thirty dark-skinned, wiry riders brandishing rifles and revolvers, silent and deadly in the saddle though every nerve and fiber of their saddle-hammered frames cried out for blood and retribution for the *gringos* who had made them exiles from a land they had called their own.

The party slid down a deep dry wash, climbed a ridge, and came quartering down on the yonder side of it with only the sound of pounding hoofs and jingling saddled gear. They plunged through a stand of post oaks, crossed a small creek, boiling the water into white geysers of froth, and appeared quite suddenly about two hundred yards ahead of the herd's lumbering lead steers.

"Spread out and stop the herd!" Cullen shouted, cutting in sharply toward the point.

Five riders were visible out near the point—one rode toward Cullen. Two others showed on either side of the point, the fifth a little way back on the swing. There was no mistaking the solid way the horseman rode who approached Cullen, no mistaking the burly shoulders and hard eyes glinting above the black mask. Gus Megarr!

But Cullen was not fooled by the foreman's presence here at the point of the stolen herd. Megarr was too slow-witted to ramrod a raid of these proportions. Someone bigger and more important was the man behind this deal. If he was in the rustling party, Cullen knew he would be found before this ruckus was finished with.

Squinting against the blinding drift of dust, Cullen rode to meet Megarr. The foreman's sombrero was pulled down low above slitted eyes, the mask drawn high to cut the dust. Now, suddenly, Megarr reined up. Cullen went on, walking his bay.

"Stay back!" Megarr warned hoarsely. "Call off your greasers!"

Cullen heard the thunder of hoofs and risked a glance to the left. He saw the Mexicans ramming their horses toward the scattering point of the herd, saw Esteban galloping down the far flank with ten men. An instant later rifles opened up at the point and on the swing as other rustlers galloped up from the drag.

The cattle began to jam, at the point and

farther back. There was a wicked dogfight going on where a squad of the Mexicans was attacking several of the outlaws. Shots crashed. Yells came after the shots, then the guns crashed again.

Cullen was still riding toward Megarr. He rode one yard—two—three—four—

Megarr seemed to swell on his saddle. "Cullen, I'll kill you!" His voice cracked out across the fifty-foot gap that separated them. "So help me—"

"You've tried it twice before!" Cullen flung at him. "And three tries is all you'll ever get, Megarr!"

Megarr's answer was to throw himself sideways in the saddle. The movement brought his right hip high and with it the butt of his pearl-handled pistol. Cullen made his draw at the same moment.

Cullen put his bay hard at the man, firing swiftly but aimlessly. His first shot missed the foreman, then a puff of gray-white smoke blossomed from Megarr's revolver. The bullet whiffed air close to Cullen's head. He fired again, rushing within twenty feet of the foreman before he squeezed trigger. This shot went home. Megarr jerked backward as though kicked.

Megarr regained balance and let another shot go at Cullen. This bullet slashed through Cullen's sleeve and stung his arm. His left arm was in its sling, but he used that hand to hold the bay and stopped the animal in a rear. He fired his third shot at Megarr.

Simultaneously, the foreman let go again. Cullen saw the puff of smoke dull the brightness of Megarr's gun, and heard lead slap his saddle, between his right knee and the flap. The bay reared high and nearly unseated him. And he saw Megarr cup his massive shoulders forward convulsively.

Cullen, cursing bitterly, lunged the bay in close and tried to grab the foreman's bridle rein. But Megarr's horse had been hit and was going down. Mount and rider sagged together, the foreman sliding sideways. But the horse fell on him, heavily. There was that solid impact, a sighing breath out of the horse, then animal and man lay dead.

Cullen got off his bay, still cursing bitterly, savagely.

He was bending over the dead horse for a look at Megarr's contorted, stiffening face from which the mask had dropped,

when the quick thunder of hoofs came behind him. He pivoted, revolver at full cock.

A black horse was bearing down on him out of the dust and racket of the herd. The rider was not clearly seen, but bulked high in the saddle, and the glitter of a pistol came from the man's right hand.

Cullen dropped to a knee, firing upward as the rider loomed massively toward him. The rider fired and swept past him with the speed of an avalanche. Cullen felt the blast of heat and smelled the smoke of that shot though the bullet did not strike. He threw himself around but before he could aim, the rider was charging him again, having wheeled his mount with unbelievable agility and speed.

Cullen pulled the trigger. The hammer fell with a sudden click on an empty. Rising, he pitched the weapon at the charging horseman in a desperate attempt to veer the horse or spoil the man's aim.

He started to leap aside, then came the rifle shot behind him. The black reared frighteningly, and Cullen ducked. There came a snarl from the rider and the next instant a body struck the earth and rolled along it. The body hit Cullen's legs and upset him. He went down in a long sprawl.

Stunned, Cullen got on his hands and knees. A man lay only a yard from him, on his back, the mask off, sombrero draped on his chest as though it had been placed there. The face belonged to Harvey Gilson!

Cullen stared, and then heard a voice—the voice of the person who had brought Gilson down with a single rifle shot. It was Chicha Uvalde's voice excitedly crying, "Slim! Slim, you loco—you crazee—" It ended with a sob.

Cullen got to his feet, swayingly. He stared at the girl who had just slid off the saddle of a buckskin horse not ten feet away. Chicha was dressed in man's clothing, jeans and woolen shirt. Her black hair, whipped by wind, was tangled and wild-looking about her head. And her eyes were black and wild, and she carried a still-smoking rifle in both slim hands. She stumbled toward him.

AT THE SAME moment battling riders roared up out of the dust and smoke. Mexicans and rustlers were inextricably

mixed in that galloping group. Guns flamed from it, and one man threw away his rifle and went out of the saddle in a long rolling fall.

Cullen seized the girl and bore her to the ground, hurling his own body over hers to shield her from flying hoofs and flying lead. Then it was over, and all the shooting and shouting died abruptly, like sound muffled beneath a down-flung curtain.

Mexicans were riding in, singly, in pairs, in groups. Bloody men with white-toothed flashing grins, the grins of victory. Esteban Carrizo galloped up as Cullen rose and raised Chicha to her feet. Esteban's dark face was split by a broad white grin. "Señor Arrowhead," he cried, "we have won the fight! Ten men we keel and the others have vamoose like the coyotes!"

But Cullen was staring around at the spot where Harvey Gilson had laid a moment before. The lawyer had vanished. So had his horse. Only trampled and scraped earth showed where he had fallen under Chicha's rifle shot.

Esteban dismounted and went to Chicha. He put his arms about the girl and kissed her tenderly. Cullen saw this, saw the passionate exultation on the girl's dark face. His heart sank.

Then they all heard the brush crashing nearby. A rider was coming out from the chaparral. It was Pablo Uvalde, for his white hair looked like snow above the mesquite tops.

Pablo came on slowly. "Don't shoot, *señores*! It is I, the Uvalde, and I breeng you wan beeg present!"

The old man's horse was moving jerkily, with the peculiar hitching, sidewise gait of a cutting horse in tangled brush. There was a reata strung taut from Pablo's saddle horn. They stared at the oldster, then at the body of a man being dragged on his back out of the chaparral. It was Gilson's body, and he was alive judging by the un-earthly groans and grunts.

Cullen looked at Chicha, at Pablo, at Esteban. He shrugged, saying in a dead, flat voice. "We've got to keep that man alive. There'll be a jury that'll want to hear what he's got to say!"

When the cattle had been milled into a compact mass for bedding down, when the dead men had been covered with blankets and laid out in rows for inspection and

identification by Sheriff Hess, when the Mexicans had made a temporary bivouac on the flats, campfires were built and stoked with mesquite and piñon pine. A reddish glow diffused the moonlight.

The sheriff arrived with a posse and a score of ranchmen along toward midnight. In the big party was John Redmond of JR, the man Cullen had unavailingly tried to meet for three days.

They all dismounted and stood around while Cullen did some curt talking. Chagrin was a common expression on all those wondering faces. Gilson had signed a confession, declaring himself the leader of the rustler gang.

Cullen told them how his own arrival had complicated Gilson's plans to strip the entire region of its cattle in small raids and in this one huge drive which had failed tonight.

Cullen recounted, reading a paragraph from the confession, how Gilson and Megarr, working in close harmony, had blamed the Mexicans for their own crimes.

As the facts were unfolded by Cullen in the firelight, the whole scheme seemed too fantastic to be credible. But it was all there on paper, and there were ten dead gunmen imported from the north stretched silently under the stars, a dead Megarr and a wounded Gilson.

Cullen added the postscript. Gilson had called the meeting at Indian Wells with the express purpose of clearing the valley for the raid of his men, most of whom had been hired for this one job. Gilson had slipped away during the meeting, and strangely enough, had not been missed.

Cullen's letter to Redmond and the will had been stolen at Gilson's orders to prevent Cullen from finding a friend in the JR boss. Redmond, in turn, had been tipped off that an imposter was trying to claim Arrowhead.

Cullen ended his remarks with a warning. "Harv Gilson is goin' to jail if he don't hang for his crimes! Don't anybody in this crowd try to make a necktie party out of it. The law's got to handle this thing, from start to finish. My friends, the Mexicans, will get back their ranches and range or I'll turn this country upside-down, and don't think I won't!"

Later, when Sheriff Hess had left with

his prisoner tied across a saddle, Cullen squatted near one of the campfires and smoked a cigarette. Chicha and Pablo were seated across the flames from him, Esteban on his right.

Esteban piled cow chips on the fire to make a smudge that drove away the clouds of lowland gnats. There had been silence for a long time. Now, slowly, casually, Chicha rose from her father's side and came around the fire to stand over Cullen.

He looked up and saw the teasing smile.

"For a *gringo*," she said in a whispering tone, "you are a fair man—but also a blind one."

Cullen frowned. "Meanin'?"

Her eyes turned very soft, though the red line of her mouth held a deepening curl. "You have asked for nothing, Señor. After all you have done for me—for us—"

Cullen nodded toward Esteban who was grinning in the glow of flames. "Only one thing I want," said Cullen, "and that I can't have."

Chicha's breathing quickened visibly; it shaped and reshaped the curve of her breast under the cowboy's shirt. "But Slim," she teased, "you have not even asked!"

"Even a *gringo*," Cullen said crankily, "don't claim anything he can't legally put his brand on!"

"Señor," she said with a fierce, proud toss of her dark head. "I am a maverick! I bear the brand of no man—not yet!"

Cullen stared at her, rising slowly. Then he looked at Esteban and heard the man breathe, "Madre de Dios, but you are the slow hombre!"

Cullen blinked, then the hard line of his mouth softened in a creeping smile. He stooped, picked a blackened sage stem from the edge of the fire.

"Do not delay," Pablo spoke sharply, impatiently, though he, too, smiled.

Cullen seized the girl's bare, brown arm. He saw her color rise, her eyes narrow a little. Then, deliberately, he stroked the sooty stem across her wrist. It left a jet-black letter on her skin—the letter "C."

She looked at him long and steadily, then jerked away and ran into the shadows.

Cullen looked down at the two grinning Mexicans. "A bunch quitter," he murmured, "must be tamed! Excuse me, gents, while I attend to it!"



A crackling sound breached the night's silence, and he pitched head first into the dark, over his fallen horse's neck. Somewhere out there lay the bushwhacker guns. Where?

Gun-Gamble on Glory-Road

By GIFF CHESHIRE

SMOKE still lifted from the jail, but Sheriff Andy Tremont knew the fire was out. His blond hair was singed, his tanned cheeks blistered, and **his** hatred of Tully Engels rose hot and choking in his throat.

He sloshed a last pail of water on the sodden straw tick in the cell bunk that Engels had somehow set on fire. He walked outside, pulling clean air into his lungs. A sweeping glance told him that Engels was still handcuffed to the hitch-rack in front of Sunday's hardware store where Andy had left him. Looking amused.

The volunteer bucket brigade that had passed the water up from the creek stood around the jail, almost disappointed that the excitement had died so quickly. Andy recalled that old Pat Binnion, who now watched brightly from under the big locust tree, had himself rolled his wheelchair down the hotel steps to get to the fire.

He recalled that Hip Slung, whose job it was to keep Whetstone's dusty streets sprinkled with his nail-punctured oilcan, had tried to tote water to the fire in the leaky container. He saw that old Shep, the butcher's dog, was still stretched out asleep

Tully Engels was the most merciless, cold-deck killer ever to line his sights on an honest man's back. . . . Yet, on a few brief minutes of his freedom, hung the life of a brave frontier girl—and the last gamble of a loyal, die-hard lawman. . . .

in front of the shop, the only creature in town undisturbed by the fire.

None of these things, which ordinarily would have given him amusement now that the emergency was over, relieved Andy. He turned down the street in angry strides, halting in front of Tully Engels, who was scheduled to be hanged a week from Friday. A powerful man only a year older than Andy's twenty-six, Engels watched his approach in apparent indifference. A mocking smile hung around his heavy lips.

"It doesn't matter where you got the match," said Andy. "Likely you found one somebody'd dropped or hid in a crack in the floor. I'd of let you roast alive, Engels, if I wouldn't rather see you hang!"

Engels turned sullen, keeping silent. He had hoped somehow to get a break in the confusion, possibly to get away. He had sworn the jail wouldn't hold him long enough for the hanging. The excitement had started while Andy was eating his supper in the restaurant down the street. Engels, the only prisoner, had been left alone in the jail, locked in his cell. Andy hadn't found a new deputy to replace the one Engels had killed when he'd been captured.

The first thing Andy had done when he took Engels out of the smoked-up jail was to handcuff him to this hitchrail, for he had guessed the man's design. Andy would rather see the jail burn to the ground any day than to have Tully Engels get loose. They had been raised together, but the man had turned wholly bad.

Andy replaced Engels in an undamaged cell and made certain the door was locked. He saw that the town folks were scattering back to their homes. Heck Nylstra was hauling old Binnion's wheelchair back up the hotel steps to Pat's habitual spot on the broad covered porch. Whetstone was quieting down again.

The jail floor was still muddy wet, with the smell of dead smoke heavy in the air. Andy inspected Engels' former cell and saw that the bunk had been ruined and the walls scorched—damage that wouldn't be hard to repair. In his new cell, Engels watched him through the bars, silent and speculative. It was typical of him that he meant to make his last days on earth as much hell as he could for everybody. Andy went out to the office and cleaned it up. He had been sleeping in there every night

unrelieved since he had brought Engels in.

IT WAS a grim, embittering thing that four youngsters who had grown up together should have done so many things to each other. Johnny Valens, Eve Quall, Andy Tremont—Tully Engels. Johnny Valens had been Andy's best friend and later his deputy; he had died under Engels' flaming gun when he had accompanied Andy to take the killer. Eve Quall was Eve Engels now, for she had married the prisoner.

There had been no bitterness in losing her to Engels three years before, Johnny told himself. Tully had been wild and unstable then, but apparently on the level. And he was by far the handsomest of the three men who had been boys together. There was just enough of the old nick in him to appeal to a tomboy like Eve. She had picked him to marry, and for a couple of years afterward Tully Engels had done all right on a little spread.

Gambling had started the trouble. Tully couldn't stay away from cards and, since he was usually two-thirds drunk when he played, he had little luck with them. He had got deeper and deeper into debt, finally sticking up a mail stage to get his hands on some money, killing the driver. It was an old story except that once he had taken the leap he had turned wholly bad, like a spoiling cayuse. He'd blamed every one but himself for his troubles and sought revenge. It had been a clumsy, revealing job, and when Andy Tremont and Johnny Valens went to take him, Engels had gunned Johnny in cold blood. Two murders, for which he was now waiting to be hanged.

There were footsteps on the sidewalk. Old Tom Quall stopped in front of the window, made a gesturing motion, and waited outside the door. Andy stepped out, seeing at once the deep trouble in Tom's face.

"Andy, Eve's taken worse. The doc thinks it's the finish."

Andy straightened, beaten into silence for the moment. They had never told Eve what Tully had done, where he was, or what was going to happen to him. She had been bedridden for months, growing slowly worse. It had started with pneumonia in late winter, and Eve had got out of bed to tend the calves one evening when Tully failed to

return from town. She had never been up since, for it had turned into what the Long Creek country called the wasting sickness.

It had turned the whole country coldly against Tully Engels when at the trial he had complained that a sick wife and doctor bills had driven him to stick up the stage. Driven him out of his mind. Doc Yarnell had testified that he had never collected a cent for his services nor asked for one. Engels' money had slid across the green tables.

But the whole country had entered into the conspiracy to keep it away from Eve. The doctor said she could not live. Her mother and father had moved her back to her own home and told her that Tully had been killed by a fall from his horse. It was the kindest thing.

Andy grew slowly aware that old Tom Quall was talking again. "Somehow, here at the last, she's had the hunch that we been lyin' to her, Andy. It keeps her too excited. She keeps saying she knows that Tully's alive and something's terribly wrong. She claims she's got to see him."

Andy shook his head. He had heard of dying people seeing into the truth of things, that way. It did not surprise him that she seemed still to care for Tully—she had always been like that. Loyal to her last breath—a sticker, no matter how bad the bargain.

"What did you figure we could do, Tom?" Andy asked.

"Well, we had to admit the truth to quiet her. No she wants all the more to see him. Doc says she'll go any hour now, Andy. I—well, I wondered if you'd bring Tully out."

"It's impossible." Andy's lean face was strained. "He's a prisoner of the law, Tom. I'd have no right to do that. He'd do his damndest to break loose and if he made it more men'd die. Sorry, Tom."

"I see how it is." Without another word the old man turned and shuffled off.

Andy remained where he was. The street was quiet now, with night closing in fast. A deep sickness of heart filled him as he thought of the man under lock and key behind him. He didn't know if Eve still loved the creature, but a dying person was filled with strange and powerful needs. She had a right to have the trouble lifted from her spirit in her last hours. What Tully

Engels was didn't matter any more now.

He waited in quietness for a long while. Whetstone was a family town, locking up when the last customer had left the stores and headed back for the desert. He turned it thoughtfully in his mind. It was about five miles out to Tom Quall's Circle Q. He could bring a couple of horses up back and take Engels through the rear door. They could keep to the gully leading through the upper part of town until they were beyond its limits. He could keep Tully Engels handcuffed and lashed in the saddle, with a gun on his back. He could—and he knew he would.

He stepped into the office and lighted the lamp. Standing before the bars of Engels' cell, he said, "Tully, Tom was just here. Eve's dying." He waited, but as far as he could tell this had no effect. "I don't know why, but she wants to see you. I'm taking you out there." This produced an immediate result. Engels lifted off the bunk and straightened, his eyes gleaming. Andy's eyes turned colder. "But I'm telling you this—I'll shoot you dead if you as much as look cross-eyed before we get back."

They escaped detection leaving town so easily that Andy was surprised. Engels rode head, wrists locked together and to the saddle-horn, ankles lashed under the horse's belly. Andy rode with his gun in his hand, determined to drill the man at the first suspicious move. Yet there was a strange, passive obedience in Tully Engels, and before Andy fully realized it they had raised the dim, distant lights of the Circle Q.

ANDY SAW the doctor's buggy in the shed as they rode past. Andy had expected him to be here, and it would make three men to ride herd on Engels. Old Tom had come to the door in response to the approach of hoofbeats, and Andy said briefly, "Bring doc out, Tom."

Doc Yarnell was even older than Tom Quall, a stooped man with a heavy nose and a flowing mane of snowy hair. Andy greeted him, then returned to Engels.

"Tully, Tom's going to be waiting outside her bedroom window. With a six in his hand, and I reckon you know he's a dead shot. Doc's going to be in the bedroom with you. I'll be outside her door with a gun in my hand. But she's going to die at peace. I'm going to take the handcuffs off

of you before you go in. You're going to tell her you been freed, and you're going to stay with her till it's over."

"All right, Andy." Engel's voice was strangely subdued.

They went inside. Nora Quall, Eve's mother, looked at Andy in a way that made him glad he had taken this gamble. Outside the closed bedroom door, he took the handcuffs off Tully Engels. Their glances held for an instant, Andy's cold and warning. Engels broke gaze and stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

Doc Yarnell had gone ahead to prepare Eve for the visit, and Andy dropped into a chair, settling for the wait. He kept his gun in his lap, and he proposed to use it if he had to. Nora Quall brought him coffee, and he drank it with one hand, and afterward smoked in lost silence. He could hear the murmur of voices beyond the door, too low to understand, nor did he want to.

It was nearly two hours later when the door opened and Tully Engels came out. Andy started scrambling to his feet and sagged back when he saw there was a gun in Engels' hand. Amazed, Andy stared at him.

Engels grinned. "Don't start anything, Sheriff! You never figured that gunfire this close to her'd kill her. I'm going out through the front door, and it's up to you if we smoke it out or not." He kept his eyes on Andy, stepping sidewise toward the outer door.

Andy was paralyzed. He hadn't expected anything as totally base as this, nor did he have the slightest idea where Engels could have got the gun. Doc's, probably, but how come there had been no sound of struggle in there? Doc wouldn't have surrendered it willingly.

"Go on," Andy said. "I'll let you get a couple hundred yards away. Then I'm coming after you."

With a grin Tully Engels cut through the front door and pulled it shut. There was no time for Andy to investigate what had happened in Eve's room; he had to see which direction Engels took. He let himself out quietly, softly crossed the porch, then hit the earth in a jump. Engels was racing toward the barns, wanting a horse, on the opposite side of the house from where Tom Quall waited. Tom kept no riders. It was strictly up to Andy Tremont.

He did not try to cross the opening till

Engels had disappeared into the barn, knowing the man would throw a shot at him. Engels was making capital out of depravity now, out of his own willingness to create a ruckus for Eve to die in, out of Andy Tremont's reluctance. Andy cut across to the saddle shed, plainly visible for a moment in the moonlight. He waited a few seconds, then cut a slant to the granary. He sped to the barn door just as hoofbeats clattered beyond the barn. Engels was cutting out bareback, riding a haltered cayuse.

Andy's own horse was still saddled. He got it, stepped up, and shoved it hard after Tully Engels.

Engels took the creek road, which meant that he intended to lose himself in the badlands. In the darkness he probably could do it. Andy's hatred choked him as he bent forward, crowding his horse.

They knew the country equally well, both having been born and brought up in it. Tully headed for the sentinels west of the Circle Q, wanting to get broken country around him. He rode like an Indian, on a fresh horse, bent low over its neck, keeping well out of range. Pounding grimly behind, Andy dared not think of what his break there in the bedroom must have done to Eve.

Then Tully was fading into the deep shadow between the two towering lifts of land. Andy kept on, knowing that at any moment thereafter he would be subject to more treachery. He didn't greatly care. He wanted to kill Engels, to rid the world of him. It was more than a duty, it was a driving thing.

In the canyon the pounding of Engels' horse echoed louder, and Andy could keep his position vaguely in mind as long as Engels remained on its back. He knew that he faced a hopeless proposition unless he wore Engels out or managed to drive him into some blind canyon. He knew that neither would quit this ride until the other was dead.

There came the moment when he realized that he heard no sound beyond that of his own animal's rush. He pulled up, listening intently and hearing only the native sounds of the canyons. Tully Engels had either halted or outdistanced him. Andy knew only that he was on the floor of some broad canyon, and in the night bearing on some familiar elevation was impossible. To go

ahead might be to wander aimlessly till daylight or to blunder into some bushwhack trap. To wait for light might give Engels the advantage of hours of hard riding.

After a moment's reflection, Andy rode on. The canyon narrowed, but he knew it was open on the far end. He picked up no faintest hint of distant hoofbeats. There were towering rocks in this neck, and he knew that his life hung by a thread. He rode with his gun in his hand, hoping his horse would give some sign of recognition if they approached a hidden, waiting mount.

Then a cracking sound breached the night's silence, and his horse went down. It had been traveling cautiously, and Andy was scarcely jarred when he hit hard earth. He scrambled around, toward the big rock that had been on his right, when an order rapped out from the other direction.

"I got a bead on your head, Sheriff. Drop the gun and stand up."

FOR A WILD second Andy had the reckless urge to buck his disadvantage. So Tully Engels had dismounted and sent his horse on. He had stretched out flat behind a small rock on the left rather than to use the obvious rock on the right.

"You always were a good shot, Tully," said Andy calmly. "Howcome you missed me wide enough to kill my horse?"

"I aimed to kill the horse, Sheriff. I don't want you on my tail, but I can't kill you this close in. Sheriff, your friends back there ain't going to be anxious to spread how you took such reckless chances with a dangerous prisoner. I figure they'll give you a fair chance to get back with me before they spread any alarm. Then somebody'll track in. I want 'em to have some work to do before they find you."

"You're afoot," Andy said. "You'll have blisters on your heels getting through."

Engels answered with a nasty laugh. "Horse's rock-tied, up a piece. I left him and walked back. You and me're going to ride double today, Sheriff. I'm going to find a place to kill you even the buzzards'll have a hard time locating. Walk!"

Engels bent and picked up Andy's gun after Andy had stepped away from it, shoving it into the waistband of his pants. On two-inch heels, both found walking hard.

"What do you know! Here's where I left that critter, and he's gone!"

Andy grinned in cold humor. As long as a range horse considered himself attached to something solid by a rope, it would never occur to him to try to move off. Usually a rock weighting a halter rope or reins was enough to hold him.

"He probably jumped when he heard that shot," Andy pointed out. "Then discovered he wasn't really anchored."

Engels stood still for a moment of worried silence.

Andy helped the worry along a little. "So far, even Tom Quall with his bad eyesight could track us. It's my guess he's on his way. Mounted. You don't have a chance, Tully. Another murder won't make you hang any harder, but it won't help you, either. We might as well head back."

Engels swore. "If I'm going to die, it won't be at the end of a rope! Nor alone! Damn it, why didn't I plug you?"

"Because you're a fool, Tully. You've always been a fool."

"Shut up!" Growing fear put a wheedling note in Tully Engels' voice. "Listen, Andy, what if I give you a break? You always put stock in honor and that bushwa. I'd take your word on anything. If I let you walk outta here alive, will you bring me a horse and some water and give me a hour's start? A life for a life."

Andy Tremont's eyes went cold. "Damn you, Engels! I wouldn't help you turn over in your grave after what you did back there in Eve's room. Using her dying hour to break out!"

Tully Engels' need for a deal was a desperate thing in his eyes. "She never knew, Andy. You've got no call to hate me quite so much. Eve died happy. I done what you told me, and it made her feel good. Then she was gone, which is what give me a chance. Doc was bending over her, and I shoved his face into the pillow so he couldn't make a sound. I didn't kill him. I just choked the squawk outta him and took his gun and come out. There's where I fooled you, Andy. You could've shot it out there, because Eve was already dead."

A feeling of tremendous relief surged through Andy. Then it had not been in vain. Eve had died happy.

Andy tensed suddenly. "Listen! Horsebacker! It's old Tom coming—!"

In his jittery state, Tully Engels could
(Continued on page 130)



"I'm gonna kill him," Riddle squalled. "Git away, girl, or I'll blast you!"

RANGE-LORD OF THE LAND-LOST

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Chapter I

SATAN STACKS THE DECK

FUNNY HOW a man looks when he comes into the world, maybe eight pounds of wrinkled red skin and flesh and blood along with a hefty holler. A piece of white paper, as the saying goes, so the kid can write his own life. That was exactly what Ad Baker aimed to do. The

trouble was, fate handed him a sheet of paper that was marked up before he was old enough to start writing. And the marks were drawn with the lead point of a bullet.

It was early summer with the high thin air already brittle under a hammering sun when Ad, riding back to Skull from the



Ad pushed the girl away just as
the old man pronged back the
hammer of his shotgun.

Action-Packed Novelette of Owlhoot Warfare

To spring a mantrap for the ruthless gun-lord of Skull Range, Ad Baker faced a kill-crazed rancher whose land was being devoured by that preying death's-head spread. . . . But he caught both himself and the girl he loved in a guntrap, with the only way out to ride into a red-hot hail of snarling lead—and pray they'd come out alive!

cow camp on the upper Smoky, was called into Sam Spain's office. Ad's mother had married Spain a good many years before, but the word stepfather had never been anything more than a legal term to him.

"How's everything?" Spain asked in a friendly tone.

"Dry. Ain't more'n a trickle in the river."

Ad sat down and built a smoke. Twelve years of living on Skull had taught him many things about Sam Spain. He disliked them all, and one thing about Spain he particularly disliked was his way of talking in circles, of moving toward his objective in a wide curve so that when he arrived, he could appear as surprised as anyone.

"Too bad." Spain folded his blunt-fingered hands. "Reckon there'll be enough for Riddle and them other nesters, won't there?"

"There is now." Ad flamed a match and held it to his cigarette. "If it don't rain, it'll be dry as hell by August."

"Three dry years." Spain shook his head. "It's got to rain someday. How's the grass?"

"Poor."

Spain shook his head as if it was a hopeless proposition. He was a squat heavy-boned man, green eyes hooded by bushy sandy brows. After all these years Ad still could never read the thoughts that lay behind those eyes.

"I've given up hopes of ever having a son of my own." Spain's voice held the same friendly tone. "So I'm happy to draw up a will that leaves Skull to you after Ann and I are gone. Of course Skull may not be so much in a few years with the range drying up and the damned nesters working on our beef. Hell, maybe we won't last till the next rain."

"It's tough," Ad murmured.

It'd come out now pretty soon. Actually Skull was in good shape. The range was the poorest Ad had ever seen it, but Spain had sold down to the point where he wasn't overgrazing. As far as the nesters went, Old Gramp Riddle and the rest didn't rustle beef enough to count one way or the other.

Spain rose and stepped to the window. He stared for a long moment at the Broken Buttes, then slowly turned to face Ad. "I'm going to ask you to do a dangerous thing,

Ad. I wouldn't do it if your interest wasn't the same as mine. It's up to both of us to keep Skull going."

Ad sat slack in his chair, smoke from his cigarette making a shifting shadow on his lean face. The older man wasn't fooling him a bit. Sam Spain was forty-five, as strong as a bull and so healthy he'd never been in a doctor's office in his life.

It made no difference to Ad one way or the other. He didn't want Skull nor any part of it. He'd have pulled out before now if it wasn't for his mother. He'd fought down his rebellion through the years, taking Spain's prodding taunts and knowing that even his love for his mother wasn't enough to hold him much longer.

Spain stomped back to his desk, the way he always walked when he was angry, took a black cigar out of a box and slid it between his meaty lips.

"I've stood for a lot from the nesters, Ad, but it's finally got to the place where my patience is plumb frazzled. Near as I can figure, better'n a hundred strays have disappeared along the lower river. They're smart—Riddle and the rest of 'em—so smart I've never got any real evidence on 'em. That's why I'm sending you down there. Stay there all summer if you have to."

Spain wagged a thick finger at Ad. "But don't come back till you know enough to send Riddle to the pen. If we can get rid of him, it'll be easy to root the rest out."

That was it. Ad sat very still, the cigarette burned down almost to his lips, anger a rising pressure in him. But he didn't show it. Old memories crowded into his mind, memories from a terrible black night twelve years ago when a nester mob led by Gramp Riddle stood in a half circle around his father's wagon, lantern light glinting dully on their rifle barrels.

"We oughta hang you," Old Gramp had spat at Jed Baker. "You come back and we will. Now get out with your woman and your brat."

Jed had driven off, young Ad behind him in the wagon, staring dry-eyed at the flames shooting upward from what had been their tar-paper shack, his mother softly crying in the seat beside his father. They had camped out there in the sagebrush. Just before dawn Jed Baker, unable to sleep, had walked away from the wagon. Ten minutes later

Ad heard the shot that had killed him. Suicide, the sheriff said, but Spain had always laid the shooting on Gramp.

Maybe Ad should go down to the lower river, plug Old Gramp Riddle, and hunt down every member of that mob who was still alive. Sam Spain had hinted that's what a man would do. But revenge, to Ad Baker's way of thinking, was a pretty poor sort of thing to live for. Besides, he wasn't sure. Maybe Riddle and the rest had something to say for their side.

Ad stepped to the open window, pinched out his cigarette, and tossed the stub outside. He thought about Spain, who had never liked him, sandpapering him in one way or another from the day his mother had married him. She was a woman who saw things as she wanted to see them, not as they were. Probably she had never guessed what was happening to her son. Over the years, Ad's hatred for Sam Spain had grown until it outweighed any feeling he had for Gramp Riddle.

Ad faced his stepfather, a small smile on his lips that did not reach his gray eyes. "I guess it's just another battle of the old war, ain't it, Sam?"

"The last battle," Spain corrected harshly. "The rest come and go on the river, but Riddle hangs on." He rolled the cigar to the other side of his mouth. "I don't reckon you've forgotten what Riddle did to you or your folks. I guess if the chance came right, you'd settle up, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe," Ad breathed, "but I ain't clear on one thing. You're paying three men to do your dirty chores. I'm just a cowhand getting thirty a month and beans. How come you're sending me to do this job instead of Galt, Karnes, or Dill?"

Anger narrowed Spain's green eyes. He jerked the cigar out of his mouth, bitter words crowding his tongue. But he didn't say them. Any other time he would have, because it had always made him furious for Ad to question him. He paced around the desk to a horsehair sofa pushed against yonder wall, picked up a piece of leather and threw it down again. When his anger had cooled, he turned back to Ad.

"I thought you'd want the chore, seeing as you're stacking up man-size now and you never squared up for a job most boys would have handled years ago." Spain's molars worked fiercely on his cigar for a

moment before he made a decision. Then he added grudgingly, "I'll double your wages while you're on this job. There's a hundred dollar bonus in it if you get the evidence I want. That all right?"

Ad hesitated, wanting to tell Spain exactly what he could do with his proposition. But he didn't. Damn it, he just wasn't sure. And there was his mother. He had never known why Spain hated him, unless it was because he had to share his mother's love with him. Skull's owner was the kind of man who never wanted to share anything with anybody.

There was more here than Spain had said, more than Ad could see at the moment. Sam Spain never showed his hand until the play was finished. Chances were nobody would see it then. The bet was usually too high for anyone else to call. Only Old Gramp Riddle, out of sheer cussedness, had stuck like a thorn in Spain's hide.

"Sure, it's all right," Ad said at last. "Only the boys at the camp need grub. That's what I came after."

"I'll send 'em some," Spain promised, amiable now that he knew Ad was taking the job. "I want you to stick right there along the river and watch because the day you ride back here is the day it'll happen." As Ad turned toward the door, "You'll eat with us tonight, but don't tell your mother where you're going."

SUPPER was always an occasion at Skull: lace tablecloth, good wine, candlelight on the silver. Ad could count on his fingers the number of times he'd been allowed to eat there. Usually there was company, important people from the state capital or Washington. Tonight there were just the three, and Sam Spain had never been more gracious in his life.

Questions prodded Ad's mind as they had so often since he had been old enough to think of them, but there was no opportunity to ask them or to talk with his mother alone. Somehow she had held her beauty through the hard years when she'd followed Jed Baker from land boom to land boom. From one tar-paper shack to another. When they were lucky to have a meal of boiled wheat. When their shoes were gone and burlap had to do. Now her life on Skull seemed a fitting reward after all those poverty years.

Ad thought about something else as he covertly watched his mother. Spain had been to see them several times before Old Gramp Riddle had fetched the nesters across the river. After his visits there had always been better food on the table and new clothes. Even presents at Christmas. But Ad never had found a chance to ask his mother about it. Spain had seen to it that he slept in the bunkhouse and ate with the crew and put in more hours forking his black gelding than any other rider in the outfit.

When they had finished eating Ad lingered in the dining room, thinking how perfect his mother was for Spain's purpose. She was beautiful and a gracious hostess. There was talk along the river that the Skull owner was headed for the governor's mansion, and Ann Spain would make an ideal first lady.

Ad knew that his mother had no idea what Spain's wealth and position had cost in human life and suffering. She saw only his best side, knew that he was generous and attentive to her. Shrugging, Ad turned from the table and walked to the bunkhouse. It was not his place to smash his mother's happiness.

There were three men in the bunkhouse playing poker, Spain's hired killers, the kind of men who would never have found a place on an ordinary spread. The regular hands were in the high country with the cattle.

Slab-faced Fandango Karnes looked up when Ad came in. He carried a gun, but he preferred slashing a man's throat with a knife. Messy, he said, but quiet.

"Thought you was in the buttes," Karnes said. "What the hell you doing here?"

"Rode back today," Al said quietly and began picking up a few of his things he hadn't needed at the cow camp. He had a hunch he wouldn't be back.

Gopher Dill snickered. "Didn't expect him to work, did you, Karnes?"

Dill was soft-spoken with none of the usual human sins, but he'd shoot a man in the back for a hundred dollars and never lose a minute's sleep.

"No; just dreaming," Karnes said. "But hell, things like my ma marrying a rich hombre never happen to me. I've had to work since I was a button."

Ad straightened, lips flat against white

teeth. They never lost a chance to prod him, probably at Spain's orders.

"Shut up, Karnes," the third man grated. "You're windy as hell with about as much guts as a morning breeze."

It was Hornet Galt, the gun fighter who packed two black-butted Colts low on his thighs, the fastest man on Smoky River range, folks said, and nobody had tried to disprove it.

Neither Karnes nor Dill liked Galt, probably because they were afraid of him, Ad thought. They looked at each other, and Karnes licked his lips. He said uneasily, "You've got no call to get proddy, Hornet. I figger the kid is going to town to turn his wolf loose. Probably come back roaring afore sunup."

More prodding. Ad never did anything of the kind. Of the three, he figured only Hornet Galt was human, the other two something less. Galt had been on Skull a long time, and he'd given Ad a hand more than once. Even Spain sang low when he was around the gunman. It had been Galt who had taught Ad how to wear his gun for a fast draw, and he'd watched him practice.

Now, for no good reason, Ad blew up. He'd taken more off Karnes and Dill in the past than he was taking now, but the pressure generated during his talk with Spain was too much. He took two long strides across the room. A fist came up from his knees, cracked Fandango Karnes on the jaw and knocked him cold.

Dill let out a surprised squall and grabbed for his gun. He didn't get it clear. Ad reached over the table and dragged him across it, poker chips cascading to the floor. Ad hit him on one side of the head and then the other. He dropped him to the floor and kicked him in the ribs.

Ad stepped back, hand splayed over gun butt. "Hornet, did you ever see a couple of poorer excuses for tough hands than them?"

"Never did." Galt's lips looped into a long grin. "They're hell behind a man's back, though. Was I you, I'd mount up and ride."

"That's good advice," Gopher Dill said. He wiped a hand across his bloody pulp of a nose. "I don't never forget things like this, kid."

"You've got a gun," Ad said coldly.

"Go ahead and make your play now."

"I'll wait," Dill snarled.

Sam Spain stood in the doorway watching. "What's this about?"

"The kid blowed his top," Hornet Galt said. "You sure as hell couldn't blame him."

Spain rubbed his broad blue-stubbled jaw, green eyes showing surprise and, Ad thought, a little respect.

"Better start riding, Ad," Spain said.

Spain walked with Ad to the corrals, saying nothing until his stepson was in the saddle. "Got plenty of shells?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't have busted into Karnes and Dill that way."

"Lost my temper," Ad murmured.

Spain shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Don't lose your temper with Riddle. He's mean and he's smart. You never know what he'll do."

"I'll take care of myself."

"I'll send somebody over with some grub," Spain called as Ad reined his horse away from the corral.

Dusk was thickening when Ad rode out across the sage flat toward the lower Smoky River country. Looking back at the lights in the big ranchhouse, he wondered if he'd ever see his mother again.

Chapter II

CRAZY TO KILL

IT WAS fifty miles from Skull to Old Gramp Riddle's farm by way of the river, but it was less than twenty directly across the sage flat. Ad was familiar enough with the country, although he seldom returned to his father's old claim. Like the rest of the deserted homesteads, it had been thrown back into Skull range. The scene brought back too many memories he'd rather forget: the starving time in the shack, Old Gramp Riddle's nester mob, the shot in the night, and his father's bloody bullet-smashed face.

Now he rode directly across the old homestead, past the spot where his father had made camp. He'd been too easy on himself, shoving these things into the back of his mind. Now he made himself face them directly, and he found that the memories were not so horrible as he'd expected.

There was nothing left of the old shack.

Not even the trees his father had planted. He reined up, the night stillness all around him, the moon and myriad stars throwing a pale light upon the flat.

Ad placed in his mind the way the buildings had stood, the haystack that had been burned, the field that his father had cleared and planted to rye. It had been a long time ago, but his boy's fear-stricken mind had fastened upon the things that had happened those terrible nights. First the rifle shots, bullets slapping high through the flimsy walls of the shack, both Ad and his mother cowering on the floor. When his father came in an hour later, white-faced and shaking, he could only say, "Old Gramp Riddle."

Then the haystack had burned. It was midnight when Ad, awakening, saw the red glow, and got out of bed to find both parents standing in front of the shack, slack-shouldered and speechless. Again Jed Baker had said tonelessly, "Old Gramp Riddle."

The sheriff, Luke Craig, had come the next day. The bank in Whetstone held a mortgage on the hay, and the borrowed money had long since been spent.

"Riddle torched the stack," Jed Baker said firmly. "I saw him. So did my wife."

Ann Baker had nodded, but when Craig's eyes had swung to young Ad, Jed said quickly, "The kid was asleep. He wouldn't know anything about it."

"I woke up," Ad began, "and—"

Jed struck him hard across the face. "Shut up," he said. "You was asleep when Riddle was here."

The sheriff arrested Riddle, but as soon as the old man was released on bail, he stormed across the river, cursing until he was out of breath, his parchment-like skin purple with vitriolic anger.

"You sold out to Spain, you damned skunk!" Riddle had raged. "Just trying to get me off the river, ain't you? So help me, Baker, you pull off one more trick, and I'll run you out of the country."

Sam Spain came after Riddle had gone, smiling and affable, and even Jed was able to laugh at the cattleman's poor jokes. They went outside after supper and walked over to the black ground where the stack had stood. Ad, coming up behind them, heard Spain say, "A thousand dollars will set you up, Jed. They tell me there's some fine land

in Oregon just waiting to be settled. Down in the southeastern part of the state in Harney county—”

Jed heard Ad then. Swinging on his heel, he cuffed the boy, and cursed him. “Get back into the shack,” Jed had raged. “Don’t ever sneak up on me while I’m talking. Do it again, and I’ll blacksnake you.”

He’d have done it, this Jed Baker who was nothing like the father Ad had known in other places. His face was drawn and tight, his nerves taut, his eyes flicking from one thing to another like the movements of a scared hummingbird. It was the memory of those last weeks of Jed Baker’s life that kept Ad from mourning his father as a son should.

Then, three nights later, Riddle had brought the nester mob, gray-faced and grim, had charged Jed Baker with shooting the windows out of Riddle’s house, and had driven him off his claim. The morning Jed had died, Sam Spain had found Ann holding her husband’s head in her lap, dry-eyed and helpless.

Spain had been kind, too kind for a man who hated every nester on the Smoky River range. Sam had told Ann to bring her boy and live in his house. He’d made the funeral arrangements, he’d given her a job keeping house, and a year later he’d married her.

Riding on to the west rim of the river, Ad felt the surge of old memories, a dark flooding stream in his mind. There was so much he didn’t understand because he’d never heard Old Gramp Riddle’s side. He wondered if Riddle was the devil his father and mother had said he was—as Sam Spain still insisted he was.

Ad hadn’t seen the homesteader since the night he’d brought the mob, a tall gaunt man with burning black eyes. Vindictive. Bitter. Crazy maybe. But he had guts. He had to have to stick like he had, and Ad Baker put cold courage at the top of his list. Perhaps it was one reason he didn’t like Sam Spain. He didn’t like any man who hired his dirty work.

Making camp on the rim directly above the Riddle place, Ad slept till dawn, and then with a pair of glasses in his hands began to wait. There wasn’t a Skull cow in sight, and Ad doubted that Old Gramp would have stolen any. The job Spain had given Ad made less than sense, but he didn’t

doubt that somewhere, in Sam Spain’s crooked roundabout thinking, there was plenty of reason for it.

The rising sun slowly dispelled the shadows from the canyon bottom, bringing Riddle’s house, his orchard, and garden into view. A girl came out of the kitchen door for a load of wood and went back in. Ad remembered her, Old Gramp’s granddaughter. Vicky, Ad had called her when they’d been kids. They’d played until the feud started. Waded in the river. Fished with bent pins. She was younger than he was, seven or eight then. That’d make her nineteen or twenty.

An hour or so later Vicky left the house again, this time to hoe in the garden. Bare-headed, her hair was as bright gold as cottonwood leaves in the fall, her body slim and graceful. Old Gramp didn’t show up until almost noon. He was round-shouldered now and walked with a cane, but Ad, studying him through the glasses, saw that his face hadn’t changed. His skin had the dead look of old parchment, but his eyes were still black and wild.

Ad moved back from the rim at noon, made a fire of juniper limbs, and cooked dinner. Then he returned to his watch. Vicky was in the garden again, and she stayed there through the hot afternoon. The shadows were beginning to darken the canyon bottom when Old Gramp hobbled across the shallow river to his strawberry patch, picked a panful, and returned to the cabin. He was in his seventies, Ad guessed. He’d been on the river long before Spain had bought Skull, and he’d made his brag that he’d be there after Spain was gone.

Again Ad moved back and cooked supper, not sure what he’d do, but certain of one thing. He wasn’t going to sit there all summer under a killing sun and watch Old Gramp Riddle and his granddaughter. Mounting, he rode upstream to the narrow trail that twisted down the west wall to the river. Dusk was a blue enfolding blanket when he filled his canteen and let his horse drink, the air motionless and stifling.

For a time Ad stood staring across the river at the cabin. There was a light in the window, and he could see Old Gramp’s bent shoulders hunched over a book he was reading. He didn’t know the girl was watching him until she asked, “Who are you and why are you standing there?”

AD WHEELED, hand automatically dipping to gun butt. It was too dark to see her face clearly. She was standing on the other side of the orchard fence, a bucketful of cherries in her hand.

"You're Vicky Riddle, aren't you?" he asked.

"That's right," she answered tartly, "but don't think you're going to answer a question by asking another one."

"It's been twelve years since I was here," he murmured. "You and the cherry trees have both grown up since then. Remember when we were wading around the bend and you fell down and got your dress wet?"

"Ad Baker," the girl breathed. "You're the skinny little kid who— Your dad sent Gramp to jail. I suppose you're here to kill him for driving your folks out of the country."

"I didn't come back to kill anybody."

"You've had your drink." She motioned toward the trail. "Get out. We heard you'd grown up to be a tough hand. Gramp said he'd kill you if you showed up. Go on now. The Bakers have made us enough trouble."

"I'm not a tough hand and I didn't have any notion about making trouble." He stood close to the fence, trying to see her, a sudden urge firing him. "Vicky, I'd like to talk to Gramp."

"I told you he'd kill you," she cried. "He served a jail sentence because of your dad's lies."

"I want to talk to him."

"If you—"

"I won't hurt him."

They waded the river, almost dry now, Ad leading his horse. He dropped the reins in front of the cabin, and followed her inside. Old Gramp raised his eyes, blacker and wilder even than Ad remembered them. He barked, "Who is it?"

"Ad Baker," the girl said.

They were motionless for the space of a dozen clock ticks, Ad and Vicky by the door, Old Gramp in his chair. Slowly he rose, fury twitching his lips. Wheeling, he lunged to the shotgun on the wall, moving with surprising speed for a man of his age.

Ad, his Colt palmed, said, "If there's trouble, it'll be of your making, Gramp."

But rage and hate touched off a fury in the old man that put him beyond reason. "No Baker ever showed his mug in here before," he screeched. "He ain't going to

show it now and live to tell about it."

"Don't, Gramp," Vicky cried, leaping in front of Ad. "He promised he wouldn't hurt you."

"But I'm gonna hurt him," Riddle squalled. "Git away, girl, or I'll kill you, too."

He was crazy enough to do it. Ad pushed the girl aside and squeezed trigger just as the old man was pronging back the hammer of his shotgun. His scream ripped into the gun blast, the shotgun, stock shattered, dropping from his hands.

"I'm shot," Riddle shrilled. "He shot me."

"You ain't hurt bad long as your tongue can wag," Ad said drily. "Now sit down and no more funny business."

Riddle stared at his gnarled hands and saw no blood. Hobbling back to his chair, he dropped into it. He wiped his forehead with a bandanna and nodded at Vicky. "Feed him if that's what he wants and get him out of here."

"No, that isn't what I want," Ad said sharply.

"A Baker's got no business in my house. I ran your dad out and I'll run you out."

"Maybe you are crazy."

"Crazy." Riddle howled. "Sure, I'm crazy. Likewise I'm a criminal with a jail sentence to my credit in Whetstone."

The old man shook a fist at Ad. "Look, you skunk son of a polecat father, is it crazy to want to build up the country? To send for folks to settle here so a thousand families can live where Sam Spain runs his cattle? That's all I ever done, Baker, but it's made Spain hate me and try to kill me. He bought your father off. Got him to swear me into jail. That make me crazy."

"No," Ad growled. "I don't see anything crazy about wanting to settle folks here."

It was not the answer Riddle expected. He rubbed his narrow chin, gaze whipping from Ad to his white-faced granddaughter. Suddenly he wilted as if the pressure of his anger had been too much for him. "What'd you come here for?"

"Did you ever steal a Skull cow?"

"Hell, no," Riddle bawled, a new wave of fury washing through him. "Get out—"

"That's why Spain sent me here," Ad cut in. "He says he's lost a lot of strays, but it don't add up to much sense because

at about this time of year Skull beef is—”

But Riddle wasn't listening. He was beyond thinking, swept like a drift log down a turbulent stream. He grabbed his shotgun, but this time Vicky was beside him. She knocked the barrel up as he fired, buckshot ripping into the ceiling.

Ad shook his head as he stared into Riddle's insane eyes. “Yeah, I reckon you're crazy all right, Gramp. Spain's done playing this time, and you ain't got sense enough to see I could help you.”

Wheeling, Ad stalked to his horse, mounted, and rode back across the river. He thought of Vicky, suddenly remembering that he'd forgotten to take a good look at her when he had a chance. That was something he'd attend to later.

Chapter III

LOUSY CROOKED FRAME-UP!

THE SOUND of approaching horses woke Ad an hour before dawn. He sat up and, drawing gun, listened. There were two horses moving through the sage, shadowy blobs in the starlight. They stopped at the rim where the trail cut in to the Riddle place, and Ad heard the drone of voices. He bellied toward them, but the riders had dismounted and disappeared down the trail before he'd reached the rim.

He struck a match and cupped the flame in his hands. The horses were Fandango Karne's roan and Gopher Dill's sorrel. Ad drew back and waited. Dawn's half-light was creeping across the sage flat when the two men came back to the rim.

“You sound like a bull on the trail,” Karnes muttered. “Might as well have ridden down.”

Crouching behind a sage clump, Ad watched the men come into view. Dill said, “Reckon Baker's around here?”

“He can wait for that slug you've got for him till he finishes Riddle,” Karnes snapped. “Untie the grub. We'll leave it here beside the trail.”

“Got that note the boss wrote?”

“Right here.”

Dill cursed softly. “Baker's got three days to live. I told Spain that. Then I'm taking care of Riddle and the kid. Don't reckon Spain cares how it's done.”

“You got a brain like a hummingbird,”

Karnes taunted. “Sam's a big man 'cause he uses his noggin. He told the kid Riddle killed his dad, didn't he? Nobody's gonna think anything about it if he drills Riddle. But, if the old fool gets plugged from the rim, everybody's gonna blame Sam for it. You just forget that three day business until—”

They rode off, Karnes voice drowned in the hoofbeats. Ad moved to the trail, found the sack of grub and the note weighted down by a rock. Striking another match, Ad read:

I'll send some more grub next week. Meanwhile, keep your eyes open. If you don't find some evidence in Riddle's barn, I'm badly mistaken.

Sam.

Here it was, as crooked a frame as Sam Spain ever worked. Ad knew what he'd find in Riddle's barn. When he faced Riddle, the old man would go crazy again. It was hard to tell what Vicky would do. The chances were very good that Ad, prodded by his twelve-year hatred of the homesteader, would kill Riddle and get his own neck in a stretcher. As usual, there would be nothing to incriminate Spain. And he'd be rid of two undesirable men.

Ad was right. The hide was there under the litter of hay, the Skull brand unmistakable. Kicking the hay over it, Ad paced the length of the barn. He thought of his mother. He could expose Sam Spain, break him politically. Then Ad Baker could ride on, and to hell with Smoky River range. But, trouble was his mother was bound to take the worst of it.

The sheriff from Whetstone would be there before long. That's the way Spain worked. He was never a man to take a chance on the misfire of his frames. He'd laid this trap so it would catch both Riddle and Ad, but on the off-chance that it might miss, he'd rigged it so it was a sure thing to hook Old Gramp.

Smoke was pillaring up from the cabin's chimney now, and presently Vicky came out for an armful of wood. Ad whistled softly. She straightened, listening, and Ad whistled again. Vicky ran to the barn.

“You fool,” she said when she saw Ad. “You're going to get yourself killed and Gramp hanged for murder. Why can't you leave us alone?”

He grinned at her, one gray eye closing in a quick wink. "Before I die, I'd like to kiss you again. Remember the time—"

"Yes, I remember. For a ten-year-old kid you were—" She stopped, and ended up matching Ad's grin. "All right. Maybe you can have one kiss before Gramp shoots you."

"Come here. I ought to attend to the kissing now, but I'm hoping you won't change your mind. This won't wait."

Ad kicked the hay off the hide and pointed to the brand. Vicky stared, wide-eyed. Then, jumping at the conclusion Sam Spain hoped she and Old Gramp would, she flared. "You're as big a crook as Gramp said you were. The next time he gets a chance to shoot you—"

"You'll load the shotgun for him." Ad shook his head soberly. "Vicky, I didn't put that there. Two of Spain's tough hands rode over before sunup, left this hide, some grub for me, and a note from Sam telling me to keep my eyes open."

She thought it over, her anger dying. She was essentially fair-minded, and she saw he wouldn't be talking this way if he'd planted the hide himself. She asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

She was blue-eyed. Funny he'd notice that now. Her skin was tanned; her slim hands were hardened from her hours in the garden. Her hair, pinned behind her head, made him think again of fall-touched cottonwood leaves.

"I wish I knew," he said finally. "Maybe that kiss—"

She didn't get angry, but her lips came together tightly. "Ad, how do you think your father was killed?"

"The sheriff and coroner said suicide, but Spain claims Old Gramp followed our wagon and shot Dad when he got a chance."

"I know."

"Maybe you know what did happen?" he asked skeptically.

She nodded. "Want to hear the story?"

"I've been wanting to hear it ever since I've been old enough to wonder about it."

"Gramp may be a little crazy, but he's smart. He says Spain gave your father money to stir things up against him, hoping he'd leave or get killed."

"Now hold on. It was Old Gramp who shot into our house first and it was him who burned—"

"How do you know?"

"Why, Dad was outside when the shooting was going on. When the stack was fired he saw Old Gramp."

"Good eyes to see so well in the dark," she said dryly. "I'm telling you Gramp's story. He says your dad shot into your house himself so you and your mother would tell folks about it and he could lay it onto Gramp. He swore it was Gramp who burned the stack so Gramp would be in trouble with the bank that had a mortgage on the hay. Then he shot into our house to scare Gramp after he got back from Whetstone. I remember that, Ad. I was in the cabin with Gramp when it happened."

AD BUILT a smoke, thinking about this and seeing that it could have happened exactly that way. He remembered his father's nervousness when it was going on. Spain's visits. The talk about the thousand dollars. Jed Baker's anger when he knew Ad had heard.

"Dad's rifle was inside the shack when the shooting was going on," he said finally.

"Spain could easily have given him another."

Ad nodded, wiping a match along the wall and touching the flame to his cigarette. "What about dad's suicide, if that's what it was?"

"Gramps says anybody'd be a fool to think he did it. He could have had your father hanged when they burned your house. Besides, he was shot at close range. He wouldn't have let Gramp get that near him."

"Then Spain did it."

"That's what Gramp's always said. Maybe Spain was in love with your mother. Or maybe he didn't want to pay the money he'd promised."

"And it was safer for him to have dad out of the way," Ad said. "It's never made much sense to me for Spain to dog Old Gramp like he has. There's other nesters he's never bothered."

"Some of it's personal. They had trouble in Whetstone years ago when Spain first came into the country. That was before he bought Skull. When he did, he said he'd run Gramp out and Gramp said he'd be buried down here in his cherry orchard a long time after Spain was broke."

"I've heard that." Ad tossed his half-smoked cigarette to the floor and heeled it out. "It'd take more'n that, Vicky. Sam's so damned practical he wouldn't waste time thinking up a frame like this just because he hated a man."

"There's the practical side of it," the girl admitted. "Like Gramp said last night, he's tried to build up the country. He's written to the government about Spain fencing public domain. He had a post office for awhile so the settlers wouldn't have to go to Whetstone. He's written to Eastern papers and magazines trying to get people out here, and when they've come, he's located them for nothing. Ninety percent of the settlers who have made a try at this range came because of him."

"But why do this now?" Ad motioned toward the hide. "There ain't a dozen families on the river, and all the ones on the flat are gone."

"A railroad's coming," she told him, "and Gramp says the dry years are over. You know he's studied the weather cycles all his life. He's been urging the railroad to give colonists' rates because a railroad won't prosper if there aren't people here." She gestured wearily. "When Gramp wrote his first letter early this spring, he said Spain wouldn't let him go this time."

"Vicky?" Old Gramp was standing on the porch, his voice high and querulous. "Where in hell are you? You're fire's out."

"Go on," Ad breathed. "When the sheriff comes, keep a gun out of Old Gramp's hands."

"Coming, Gramp," Vicky called. Running to the woodpile, she gathered an armful and disappeared into the cabin.

Ad's guess that the sheriff would be here soon was right. Luke Craig rode in before the sun was more than an hour high. He must, Ad thought, have left Whetstone in the middle of the night.

Ad watched him lope by, a lank toothless man from whom the fire of life had faded years ago. He was little more than a pensioner, re-elected time after time because Sam Spain delivered the cattlemen's vote, knowing Craig could be handled.

Ad couldn't hear all that was said at the cabin, but he heard Old Gramp's loud blistering oaths, heard the sheriff bellow back the same curses. Then Ad left the barn carrying the hide. A small smile

touched his lips when he stood in the door. He'd never seen angrier men. Riddle was puffing and snorting with rage, crying almost incoherently that nobody searched his place without a warrant, and Craig, his gun palmed, looked pale enough to faint where he stood.

"This what you're looking for, Sheriff?" Ad threw the hide on the floor. "I found it in Old Gramp's barn."

"Guess there ain't no doubt, Riddle," the sheriff said with relief. "You've been a trouble-maker ever since you settled on the river. Now you'll roost in the pen for a spell." He laid his gun on the table and fished knife and a plug of tobacco from his pocket. "I'm taking you to town for stealing Skull beef. You make one move for a gun and I'll take you in face-down across the saddle."

Riddle sank into a chair, wild eyes on the hide, shoulders shaking with the storm of his rage. His face, usually gray, was purple. He pointed a wobbling finger at Ad. "You planted that, Baker. If I ever get a chance to bore you, there'll be a window in your skull."

"You know, Gramp," Ad said coolly, "you'd make a mistake doing that. I'm the only man who can help you."

"Help me?" Riddle fumed. "Why, I'd see you roasting on a forked stick in hell before I'd let you help me. Let him take me to jail. Let him make a martyr out of me. I'll write so many letters that Sam Spain's—"

"If you live long enough, Luke's jug is right easy to bust into. There's a cottonwood tree behind the jail with an awful good limb to throw a rope over."

Craig had trimmed off a mouthful of tobacco and swallowed it with his gums. He was studying Ad, puzzled by what he heard. Now he pursed his lips and spat a brown pool on Vicky's immaculate floor. He wiped the back of a wrinkled hand across his mustache. "What'n hell you driving at, Baker?"

"No secret. Gramp is on the receiving end of one of Sam Spain's frames. That hide was left in the barn this morning by Fandango Karnes and Gopher Dill. If you hold Gramp for trial, Sheriff, I'll say some things that'll get him off and knock the pins out from under you and your boss Spain."

Luke Craig spluttered tobacco juice over

his mustache. "Why, damn you, Baker, which side are you on?"

"No side at all. I've got some ideas about justice. Or maybe you never heard the word?"

"I'll have you in jail—"

Ad laughed. "All right, Luke. Make your arrest."

Craig came close to swallowing his quid. He gripped the door jamb until his knuckles were white.

"Maybe I got no reason to arrest you," he muttered.

"Suppose we had evidence that Sam was stealing Riddle's beef?" Ad demanded. "He's got a few steers under his Rafter R iron."

"You know damned well Sam wouldn't do no such thing," Craig snarled. "Nobody would believe a trumped-up charge like that against him."

"I just wondered," Ad said amiably. "In a day or two you might find a Rafter R hide on Skull's fence. It sure wouldn't do Sam's political notions any good to have that happen."

The sheriff tromped out, mounted, and rode away. Watching him, Ad chuckled softly. "You know Gramp, that was a pretty good idea I just thought of. If you've got a steer you can butcher, it might be a good thing to return Sam's favor."

"If I had a gun, I'd shoot that sheriff for spitting on my floor," Vicky said angrily, bringing a clean rag in from the kitchen.

Turning, Ad pinned his eyes on Old Gramp, utterly sober now. His mother would hate him. She'd have the right to. He couldn't help that. After what Vicky had told him, he had no choice.

Old Gramp actually grinned, his thin, dry-skinned face softening. "It isn't always like father, like son, is it, young fellow? I want you to marry Vicky, and start me some cattle. There's a hundred acres of bottom land we could put to alfalfa. Plenty of range on top of the flat, and a good place to winter 'em down here in the canyon. And I'll tell you something else. You won't catch you a better wife on Smoky River than this here girl of mine."

Ad rubbed his ears, not believing what he'd heard. Then he knew he'd caught it right because Vicky had fled into the kitchen and slammed the door.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST BITTER TOSS

AD SLEPT until after midnight. Rising, he threw gear on his horse, tying the hide of a newly butchered Rafter R steer behind his saddle. Mounting, he headed across the sage flat to Skull. Vicky had visited the nesters along the river that afternoon. Loyal to Old Gramp, they were already gathering in Riddle's yard.

It was a crazy idea, and Ad thought about it now as he rode. He'd blurted it at the sheriff on the spur of the moment, but after Luke Craig had gone, Old Gramp had slapped his thigh and said it was the best thing he'd ever heard. Frame him, would they? All right, he'd frame back.

"We need fresh meat anyhow. You plant that hide before sunup, son, and me and the boys downriver will ride in. Maybe we can't get Spain convicted, but we'll sure put on a good show."

It wouldn't work and it was as crooked as one of Sam Spain's tricks. The right and wrong of the whole thing was as mixed as an omelet. Old Gramp, a little crazed by the long feud, wasn't thinking of anything beyond revenge, and Sam Spain, planning as sharply and cruelly as ever, wanted Riddle and Ad out of his way at all events. And in the middle were Ad's mother and Vicky Riddle. Both of them would get hurt.

If Riddle brought his nester friends to attack Skull, it would end up in a fight when they tried to pin a rustling charge on Spain. Innocent men who had no great stake in the feud would get killed. No, there had to be some other way. As the miles dropped behind, Ad knew there was only one thing he could do—face Spain with what Vicky Riddle had told him. There was no telling what would happen from then on except that if he was still alive, he'd be finished on Skull and his mother would never forgive him.

Dawn was a gray promise in the eastern sky when Ad reined up in front of Skull's ranchhouse. There was a light in Spain's office. Ad pondered that for a moment, thinking that this was one time of day when the cattleman wasn't likely to be up. He dismounted, keeping his position beside his horse on the other side of the poplars,

wondering what his chances were of catching Spain alone. His stepfather appeared in the front door with a lamp held in his hand.

"That you, Ad?" Spain called.

"It's me, Sam." Ad came up the path, eyes probing the gloom for Fandango Karnes or Gopher Dill.

"I guess you got the evidence I wanted or you wouldn't be back," Spain said with satisfaction. "Come on in."

Spain stepped back, and Ad followed, hand on gun butt, gaze sweeping the big room. No one was there. He was jumpy, he told himself. This was between Spain and him. He'd be killed, or he'd kill his stepfather and be on the run the rest of his life. Then his mind, as it always did, returned to his mother.

"I knew you'd get the deadwood on Riddle." Spain led the way toward his office, the lamp still in his hand. "But I figured you'd be there most of the summer."

Spain's voice was friendly as if he were sincerely glad to see Ad. That should have been warning enough. Placing the lamp on his desk, he turned and grinned, as wisked and taunting a grin as Ad had seen on a man's face. Ad, just inside the doorway, had home to a stop. Fandango Karnes was on one side, Gopher Dill on the other. Both held cocked guns in their hands. Here was death, ready to lash out at him.

"So you figured you'd frame me, did you?" Spain queried softly. "Gopher, have a look around. He's probably dropped that hide out there somewhere. If you don't see it, we'll find out what he did with it."

Dill nodded, and motioned for Ad to come on into the living room. "One move, kid," he rasped, his sharp little eyes eager. "Just one move, and we'll drill you. This is a job I'd do for nothing."

Ad stepped to the desk and suddenly stiffened. Hornet Galt lay next to the sofa, a bullet in his back.

"I did that job," Dill said with pride. "That hombre rawhided me too long."

"Looks like your work." Ad turned to Spain. "You made a mistake, Sam. Hornet was your best man."

"Trouble with him was he did his own thinking. That don't pay when you work for me, Ad. Like you're going to find out.

I've known for a long time I had to get you, but I didn't want it to go this way. Then you told the sheriff you aimed to frame me, and I knew I couldn't wait."

He flipped back the lid of his cigar box and took one. "You couldn't make your play stick, but it would kick up a stink. It's the kind of publicity I can't afford."

Dill came back with the hide and tossed it on the floor. "He ain't smart at all, Sam. The damned fool had it on his saddle."

"Then I guess we've got no reason to wait. Take him to the river and dump him over the rim at Riddle's place. That'll be good enough for the sheriff. We'll hoist old Riddle on his own sky-rocket."

"Let's have his gun, Gopher," Karnes said. "He's purty handy with it."

AD TOOK a quick step away, his back to the wall. Time had run out for him, and he could do nothing better than play for another minute. Old Gramp Riddle and his nesters were on their way. Ad had no hope he could stall that long, but it was his only chance.

"I'm licked, Sam." Ad said hotly, "but before these trigger-boys earn their pay, I'd like to be set straight on a couple of things. Like you killing my dad."

Spain shrugged. "Sure, I plugged him. No sense of letting him get away, knowing enough to blackmail me like he did. I hired him to run Riddle out of the country, but it didn't work." He tongued his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "I don't miss on many men, but I sure as hell missed on you. I've worked for years to get you to hate Riddle so one day you'd kill him, but damned if you didn't go over there and throw in with him."

"Let's get moving," Karnes said impatiently. "I ain't gonna feel right till we've done this job."

"Let him have it as soon as you get out of earshot." Spain fished a match out of his pocket. "This is one chore I don't want Ann to know about."

"Get his iron, Gopher," Karnes said sharply. "I'm gonna plug him right here if you don't get that off of him."

Stepping across the room Dill lifted Ad's Colt and laid it on the desk. He motioned toward the door. "Don't make a racket. No sense in worrying your ma."

"So long kid," Spain said. "I figured on

salivating you before you found out I drilled your pa, but I was too damned slow." He shook his head, meaty lips clamped thin. "I've given your mother everything, but you're still the only person this side of hell she loves. She married me so you'd have something to grow up to, not because she loved me. Now with you missing, maybe she'll know I'm around."

It was jealousy then, but more malignant than Ad had thought.

Spain waved toward the door. "Take him—" His words choked off. His wife was standing in the door, a small gun in her hand.

"I've been waiting to see if you'd really do this, Sam," she said tonelessly. "Galt told me what you'd planned, but I couldn't believe it."

This moment offered a small chance. Ann Spain held her pistol on her husband. It might be enough to keep him out of the fight, and Ad played it that way. He lunged to the desk and sweeping up his gun.

Ad was close to them, so close that Karnes, who got in the first shot and missed, took a slug in the side of his face, the powderflame scorching his skin. Dill fired once, his slug knocking into Ad.

But Gopher Dill had no great courage except when he was throwing down for a bushwhack shot. He started to run. He gained the front door in the living room when Ad brought him down.

Through these bullet-riddled seconds the pressing thought was in Ad's mind that Sam Spain could finish him from the back. Now he turned as fast as his shattered leg permitted, but Spain was gone. His mother was still there inside the door, gun in her hand, her face deeply lined.

"I couldn't shoot him," she breathed motioning to the window."

Ad pulled himself to the window, the glass smashed by Spain's dive through it. He looked out, saw Vicky and Old Gramp Riddle and the nesters outside.

"Throw up your hands, Spain," Old Gramp bellowed.

"Go to hell," Spain shrilled in panic.

Ad never knew who killed Spain. Half a dozen nester guns thundered, but Riddle, for some strange reason known only to himself, didn't squeeze the trigger of his shotgun. Spain reeled in the saddle as Ad's

horse began to plunge under him. He let his rifle go and spilled to the ground.

A moment later Riddle, dismounting and kneeling beside him, rose and said without feeling. "Dead. I told him he'd be finished off by the time I was buried."

They came in, Riddle and Vicky and some of the others, and put Ad to bed.

Then Ann looked at Old Gramp.

"I lied and helped send you to prison," she said distantly. "I make no excuses. I've been punished by my conscience in a way you'll never understand. I didn't know Jed shot into our house to make me think you were doing it, and I didn't know he'd shot your windows out. I didn't see who fired our haystack, but Jed said you had and asked me to back him up when the sheriff came. Later, when I found out what really happened, it was too late."

Old Gramp spluttered, shot a glance at Vicky, and spluttered some more. Finally he said, "It's all behind us now."

"Hornet Galt liked Ad," she went on. "and he didn't like the way Sam did things. He told me about Sam's plan for getting you and Ad into trouble with each other. I didn't really believe it until I heard a shot in Sam's office."

"Dill got him," Ad said. "In the back."

Old Gramp spluttered some more, his black eyes not quite so wild as usual. He said, "I still want to build up the country, ma'am, and I reckon I won't have any trouble with anybody now." He motioned to Ad. "He's marrying Vicky and we're going to have a real good outfit."

Vicky's face went scarlet and Ad laughed. "He's taking quite a bit for granted, Ma."

"There'll be no more trouble," Ann Spain said firmly, and she motioned them out of the room.

There was just Vicky beside the bed then. Ad grinned at Vicky. "About that kiss."

Still blushing, she sat down on the bed. He put an arm around her shoulders and brought her lips down to his. When he let her go, he said softly, "I don't remember your kiss being like that."

"When I was a child—" she began.

"You kissed like a child, but now that you're a woman—"

"That's right. We've both grown up, Ad."

BURY THE LIVING AT SUNDOWN

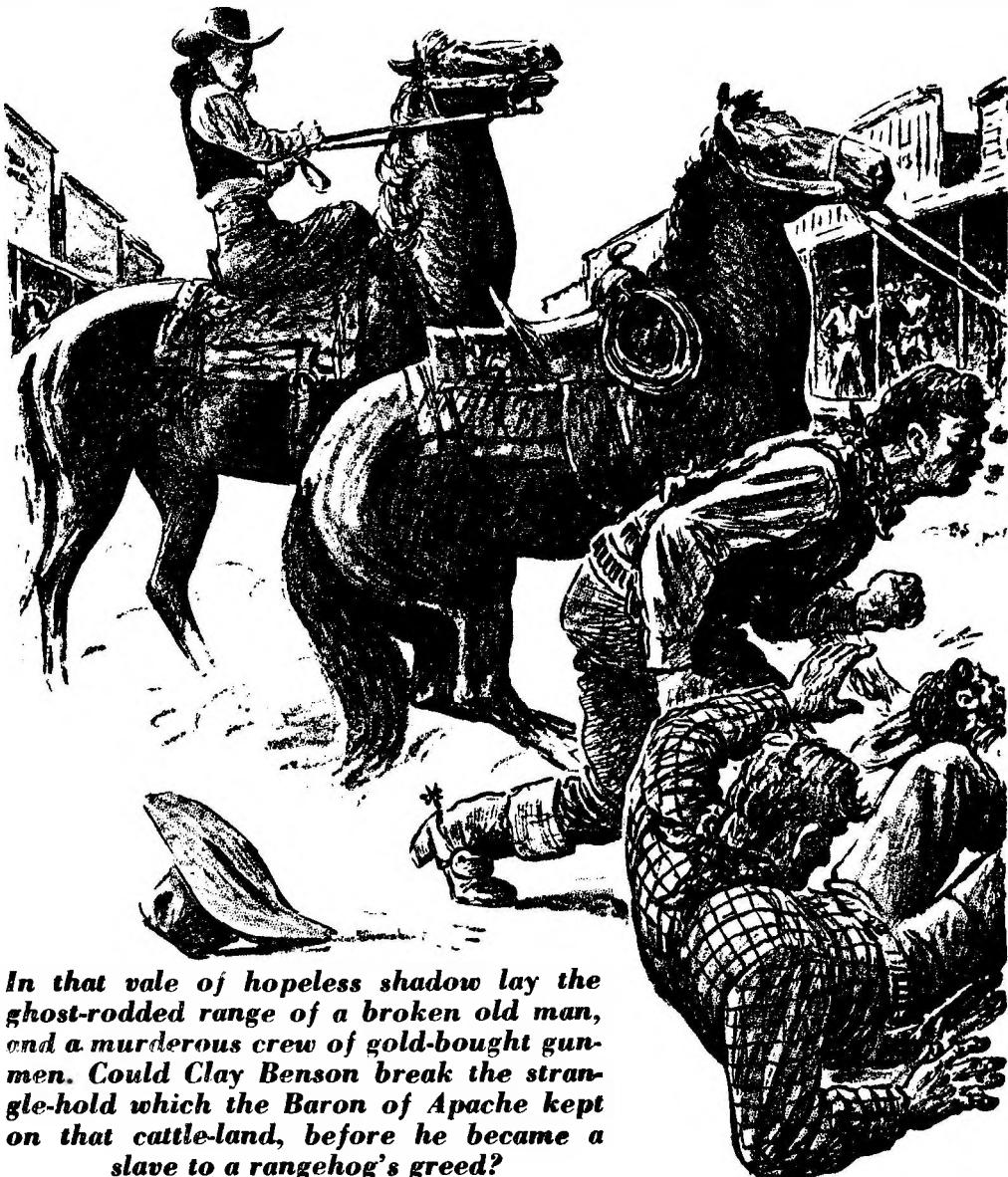
Chapter I

A GRAVEYARD FOR THE DAMNED

CLAY BENSON came up through the valley from the south, out of dry, sunheaten desert land and into green, cool acres of range, shadowed in the

afternoon by the low mountains to the west.

Approaching the huge ranch house with the heavy-timbered gallery, he pulled out his thick silver watch. This must be the



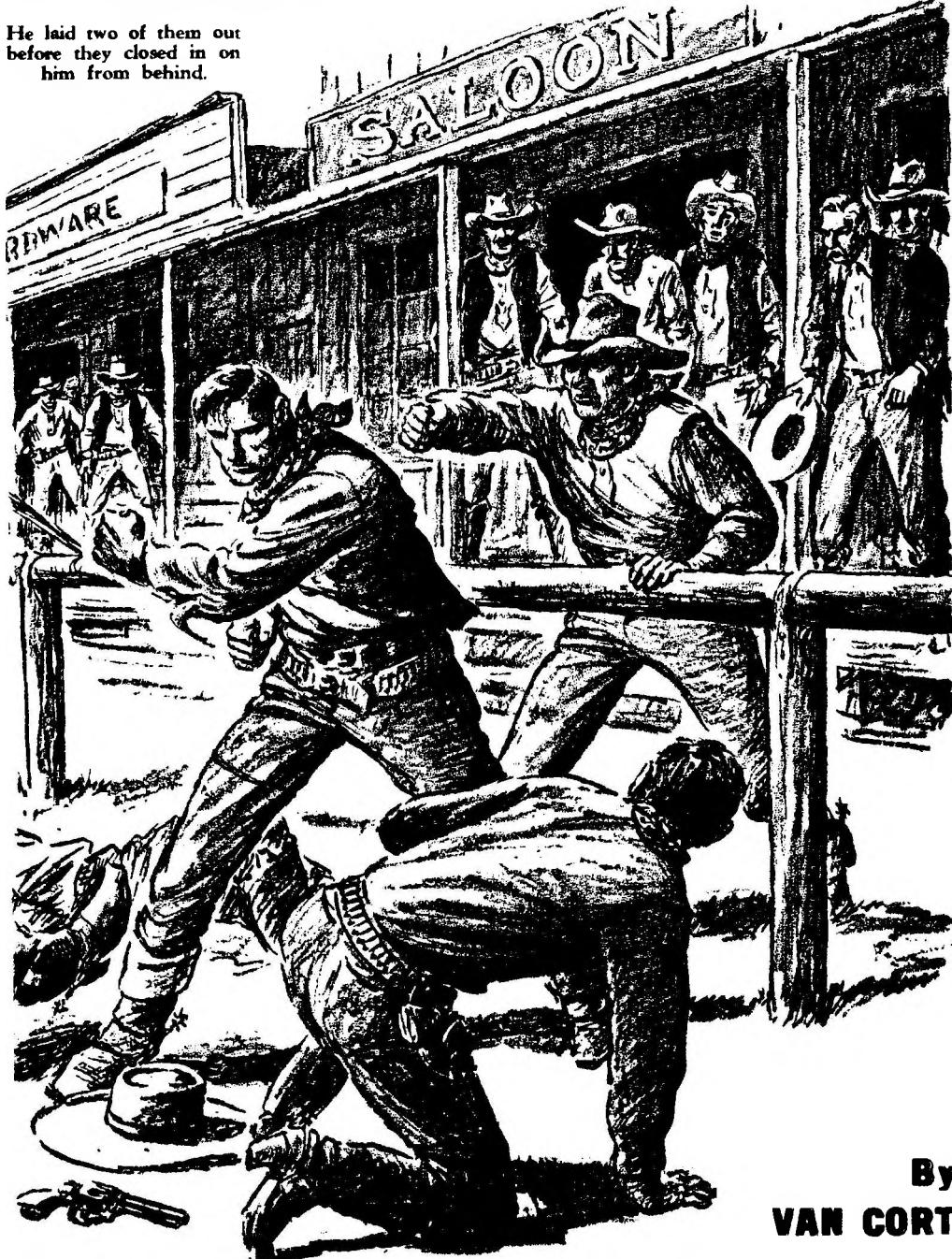
In that vale of hopeless shadow lay the ghost-rodded range of a broken old man, and a murderous crew of gold-bought gunmen. Could Clay Benson break the strangle-hold which the Baron of Apache kept on that cattle-land, before he became a slave to a rangehog's greed?

— Grim Novel of a Desolate Ghost Range —

place all right; the mountain shadow was just now creeping in across the large empty yard; in a moment it would touch the gallery steps. It was a minute to four.

He laid two of them out before they closed in on him from behind.

There were a couple of moth-eaten horses dozing in a cavvy corral big enough to hold fifty. There had been only a few scattered head of cattle on the ranges as Clay came



By
VAN CORT

through. A deadly still, barren atmosphere prevailed over the whole place from main house to bunkhouse, from barn to pens. This place should run ten thousand cattle easily, Clay thought. There wasn't a bellow or a scrape of a hoof to be heard. "A graveyard," he thought. "A damned graveyard."

A man sat on the gallery staring at him, a heavy, gray man, a newspaper spread over his knees. Clay indicated the pump and trough in the middle of the yard and the man nodded curtly.

He dismounted and worked the pump-handle, and after a long while water rose out of the earth and he was able to wash some of the miles of dust off his face and have a drink. Life flowed back into him. His horse sucked water up eagerly and for a small while this tinkling and sucking were the only sounds to be heard.

Clay loosened the saddle and then walked over to the gallery. "This Sundown?"

The heavy gray man nodded, and Clay went on: "I'm Clay Benson; came here looking for Phil Grey. Knew him down in Socorro; told me to drop in on him sometime."

The other indicated a chair and Clay sat down; something about the old man began eating at his nerves. There was no sound or clatter behind him in the big house. The stillness seemed to ooze out of windows and doors. The old man was scrutinizing him, running his eyes over him, estimating him. Clay stared coldly back, annoyance rising in him. At last the old man spoke:

"I'll give you a foreman's job; two hundred a month and found, a free hand."

Clay did not have to ask if this was Phil's father; the family resemblance was too strong, except that old Grey had none of the softness and carefree expression that had characterized Phil. Phil was a handsome, laughing drifter, a gambler, a ladies' man, but a twenty-four carat friend in a tight.

"Phil here?" he asked.

The old man hesitated a moment, then shook his head slowly.

"Why you offer me the foreman's job?"

"Phil told me about you." There was a heavy sigh in the tone, like the sooughing of the wind in the willows. "I was more or less expecting you." Grey gave Clay another slow penetrating look. "I guess he didn't overtalk."

Clay was in no mood for flattery. By now the mountain shadow had enveloped the whole ranch; a welcome coolness lifted the heat from Clay's shoulders. He recalled Phil telling him about this. "At four o'clock," he had said, "You can begin to live. Saturdays and Sundays we have the barbecues going, the winekegs set out, the neighbors ride in and we have a fiesta. Wait till you see a fiesta at Sundown. The girls.... Mother was Spanish, you know."

But now these empty ranges, this empty yard and corrals. "So Phil kept drifting," he said.

The gray old man nodded; his voice was dry and hollow. "Phil's drifted." Then he said, "Stay over and think about it. If you are hungry Sam will feed you; he's in the kitchen. There's a room and a bed for you upstairs."

Clay got to his feet then. "I'll think about it."

He walked wearily through the front door and stood momentarily in an immense room, two stories high. Cedar beams, Spanish stucco, wrought-iron candelabra, a wide oaken stair leading to a gallery above; animal heads and skins on the walls. At one end a picture of Phil's mother, done in oils, almost alive in the semi-darkness.

And over it all, dust, dust, quiet—an uncanny musty feeling that rattled the nerves. "I'll be riding on soon," went through his mind.

"There's dinner if you wish, suh."

He whirled. He had not heard the ancient white-haired Negro come in to stand at his elbow. The black withered shadow of a man bowed politely and indicated a dining room adjoining. A smell of savory cooking hit his nostrils. He said: "How did you know to have dinner ready?"

"We was waiting foh you suh; I saw you conin'."

He sat down at the end of the table to an excellent meal; but the lonely room seemed alive with ghosts. He was thinking of Phil that night in Telepac in Socorro, when Tomlinson, Durango and McPherson had been gunning for him. Phil had tossed down a good pokerhand, had put on his hat. "Let's go get 'em," he said with a grin.

"This isn't your fight; it's me they're after. Keep out; they play for keeps."

But Phil had grinned. "We're pals, aren't we? You need a drink, Clay. Tell

you something: Don't ever be the hunted. When somebody makes up his mind to go after you, don't wait, turn around and *you* be the hunter. No, no, shut up; they made their brag; we'll make them eat it." And he had only known Phil twenty-four hours then.

That had been the last of Tomlinson and Durango when it might as well have been the last of Clay Benson. McPherson got away, wounded and wiser.

When he was almost through and old Sam was pouring his coffee, he broke the silence. "What's wrong here? Why is this place so dead?"

The Negro looked at him with suddenly tear-veiled eyes. "This place used to be mighty lively, suh. Yessuh, they shore used to be life an' happy days, when—when—" He halted as if some inner force choked off his speech.

"—when Phil was here," Clay continued.

The old man bent his white head. "Yasuh," he said almost inaudibly.

"Tell me," said Clay impatiently. "What happened to Phil? Know where he went?"

But at this the old servant's features froze. "Please suh, don't ask me nothing about Mister Phil, an' please suh, just ever don't ask Señor Grey nothing either." He bit his thick black lip and hurried into the kitchen.

Clay sat drumming his fingers on the white damask table cloth, his mind in a turmoil, his irritation increasing. At last he drained his coffee and went out onto the gallery again. Grey sat in the same position. "Well?" he said and looked questioningly at Clay.

"How much cattle?" said Clay.

"About four thousand head, maybe; anyhow scattered to hell and gone over the hills."

"How big a crew?"

"Two old chorehands. You'll have to hire more men."

CLAY LOOKED out over the vast ranges, the many buildings. Simply because he had once known Phil Grey was it his duty now to tackle something vague and mysterious, to take on a job that seemed to contain nothing but obstacles? After all this was Phil's job—Phil's heritage and duty.

"Job too big for you?" asked the old

man. His eyes were figuring Clay out.

He took his time about answering. This place could be everything or nothing, but what was it to him? What right had this curt old man challenging him? And yet something about the thing intrigued and irked him. This place should be filled with the laughter of Phil, with the sound of music and dancing, and the roar of cattle and men. This magnificent ranch should not lie like a graveyard. "Maybe not," he said sharply, "but I want to know one thing."

"And that is?"

"What happened to Phil? Why won't you talk? Where is he?"

A black shadow descended over Grey's knitted brows; it seemed for a moment that he wanted to explode. "A woman," he said between his teeth. "A damned woman! With the brand of Rostock all over her." His rage was so great that he shook all over.

"Rostock?" said Clay.

"You'll see that brand. Anything in this valley that walks or runs or rides carries that brand—anything except what's mine. That is, what's left of mine!"

The bitterness and frustration in his tone and manner was overpowering; so much so that Clay regretted having spoken. Yet he could not understand how so powerfully built a man could be satisfied to sit in a chair and rage. Suddenly the paper slid to the floor, revealing the old man's right hand. It had only three fingers left; thumb and index were gone. As he stood up out of the chair to lean heavily against a gallery post, a metallic click and a stiff limp revealed that his left leg was artificial. He had been an imposing hulk of a man in a chair, but when he stood he was a tottering wreck.

Clay stared at him fascinated; it was obvious that Señor Grey had not sat a horse for years. But at the moment the rancher ignored him. His gaze was upon a mounted figure which had just appeared at the end of the lane leading to the ranch yard. He let out a roar, lurched forward, reached behind a post and snatched up a rifle. Before Clay could interfere he had thrown the weapon to his cheek and a bullet had whined its way across the space.

"What in hell—" Clay was upon him then, knocking the rifle high and twisting it out of Grey's grip. The old man then drew a pistol; but by now Clay's own gun

was in the rancher's ribs. "Drop it, drop it. What the devil goes on here—?"

Slowly Grey let the gun fall. He sank back into the chair. Clay's eyes then went to the rider who had pulled up across the yard and sat waiting. It was a young woman. "What in hell—?"

Sam was on the gallery, his old face twisted in excitement. "Please suh, gentleman; tell de young lady to go away. Tell her don't ever come heah!" he shouted.

"Lady?" shouted Grey and spat out an epithet.

"Take those guns inside," said Clay to the Negro. "Keep them there." He stepped down and quickly crossed the yard. "You better get out of here quick. Have some sense; the old man is out of his head."

The girl looked down at him curiously. She was striking, with sparkling brown eyes, a skin like alabaster and dark mahogany shiny hair. There was pride and suffering in her manner; her eyes might have had laughter in them once, but there was none now. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"I might ask you the same."

"Terry Rostock."

He winced at the name, then said, "I'm Clay Benson, the new foreman." He could not refrain from adding, "You used to know Phil?"

Darkness came to her features, her eyes shot lightning; she bit her lip. "Yes, I used to know Phil."

"Maybe you better ride," he said. "I can't answer for the old man."

She checked her nervous palomino. "I came here to talk to him."

"Seems he only wants to talk to you with a gun. Better ride."

"The old fool!" she said in a sudden bitter outbreak. "The old fool!" She seemed on the verge of tears. When she bit her lip she showed a set of perfect white teeth.

Something made Clay say, "I'd like to see you; to talk to you. Where? When? There's something I must know."

She wheeled the palomino around. "Don't try to. It's no use." Then, with a quick dig of the spurs, she was gone.

Clay wheeled and returned to the gallery. Grey appeared in the doorway, a Winchester in his hands. "Where is she?" His blue eyes roved the yard.

"Wait," said Clay. "She's gone. You

can't take potshots like that at women."

Grey put down the rifle. "Don't tell me what I can do and what I can't."

"That's right," said Clay and walked off the gallery and headed for his horse. "Thanks for the dinner and the drink of water."

His hand was on the horn of the saddle when the old man's voice reached him. "Phil talked you up some, but I guess he overtalked. Well, *better* men have tried. You wouldn't have the guts anyway."

Clay turned slowly. He remembered Phil again. Phil taking up his fight, Phil's laughter. "A fiesta at Sundown—the girls." *That* girl; he would have to see her again, no matter what. But it was mostly in the way this proud old man stood there and egged him on to stay. There was something almost pitiful about him despite the angry, mad despair in his eyes. Here were nerves strung too taut and a secret suffering . . . a wreck of a man sitting on his gallery and viewing the crumbling ruins of his once-proud empire. What was the matter with this graveyard of a ranch anyhow?

Clay began walking slowly back toward the house. "Remains to be seen," he said tight-lipped. "if any better men tried."

Sefnor Grey seemed to relax but he would not let on that he was pleased. Clay said then, "But one condition: No shooting unless I get the savvy. Agreed? Now what about *her*, the girl? Why and wherefore?"

Black rage came to the grizzled face again. "Her? Forget her, steer clear of her, don't mention her. Don't think about her. You can't ramrod Sundown and bother about her. Savvy? Now come on in; I have some twelve-year-old bourbon."

But I can think about her, thought Clay as he mounted the steps once more. In the door as they went in, the old man stopped and leaned heavily against the frame, his eyes on the distance, bitter and hard. Yet he said grudgingly: "Got to admit, at least she ain't gun-shy."

He went to bed at last in a large bedroom which had all the marks of being Phil's, but knowing nothing about what had happened to the former occupant of the room; knowing only that the boxed R, the brand of Rostock was swamping and engulfing the valley; that to hire a crew would be a task in itself; and that the old man was convinced he was doomed to failure.

He fell asleep thinking of the girl again.

HE RODE down the main street of Apache two days later and saw mostly boxed R branded horses at the rails. Their riders stared insolently at him with thin appraisal, as if they knew who he was and had expected him. He looked at a Rostock Hotel; Rostock General store, Hay and Feed; two saloons with the same name. When he was nearly to the end of the street he hated the name thoroughly.

He stopped at O'Sullivan's, where there were no horses at the rail, and walked into the deserted place. A large solemn Irishman with a battered and noncommittal face moved up behind the mahogany and asked his pleasure.

"Bourbon," said Clay, "I don't see the name of Rostock on your false front. He doesn't own the place then?"

The man gave him a slitted glance. "Not yet."

"Expect him to?"

Another calculating look, then, "Not for some while."

"Make it a double bourbon."

The Irishman almost grinned. "On the house," he said.

Clay weighed his words then said, "Clay Benson; I'm ramrodding Sundown. Give me a lead on where to pick up a crew."

At this the saloon owner gave him a quick glance and shook his head. "Drink hearty," he said as a shadow crossed his face. "Good men have tried; good men have tried."

"I've heard that tune before. Don't care much for it. Where can I get—?" Hoof-beats in the street made Clay turn, cutting his speech.

The girl who had called herself Terry Rostock was riding by on her palomino. She was accompanied by two men, obviously brothers. The one who rode alongside the girl was slim, carrying himself with a mixture of dignity and arrogance. Clay had seen the type before: the greedy, ambitious cattle-empire builder, the kind who bought or crowded out ranches on the downgrade, kept big crews, usually a mixture of plain cowhands and straight gunmen. The other man rode a little behind, pale of face, somewhat satanic of expression, but also foppish of dress in neat coat, whipcord breeches and tooled-leather saddle. Both men reeked of comfortable wealth.

The heavy pale one pointed with his quirt to Clay's horse, which was a Sundown-branded sorrel. The two men shared a glance, the first one baring his teeth in something that looked like amused pity. The girl's face grew dark as she followed their glances and Clay's heart began thumping. There was a challenge about her, an overpowering attraction which neither his blood nor his mind could deny.

He turned to the barman. "Who is that, her husband?"

O'Sullivan shrugged elaborately, "Taylor Rostock has no wife," he said. "At least not in name."

Clay bit his lip and controlled himself. "What then?"

"Third cousins," said the Irishman. "They grew up together. They were sweethearts. They say he's still after marrying her. They say too that she drinks. But then, she never drank in my place, so how should I know? A wild girl—" He shrugged and added philosophically, "A man should never judge a woman by her reputation."

There had been obvious possessiveness in Taylor Rostock's attitude toward his cousin. Clay decided with an effort to close his mind to that. He wanted to see that girl again more than ever. He changed the subject: "How did Señor Grey get crippled?"

"Ten years ago there was a war over a drift fence that Wayne Rostock put across the north end of the valley. He and old Grey shot it out in the street here, just in front of the court house. Wayne died quick, and you've seen Grey. The two boys are killing him slow."

Clay drained his glass and nodded. Grey and Sundown dying a slow death, the old man fading to a ghost on the gallery. But what about Phil? What about Phil and the girl? He wanted to ask, but refrained. He would have to ask someone else. A sickening sadness pervaded him. He got ready to go. "About that lead on a crew?" he said.

O'Sullivan breathed heavily and leaned on the bar. "A Sundown crew don't last long. Bought off, scared off, or—" He didn't finish. "But there's a man name of Tad Larkin, lawyer, upstairs at Yucca and Front who might help you. He does all kinds of commission work."

"That's better," said Clay. "Thanks."

"A moment," said the Irishman, and there was no trace of humor on his face. "Ye leave the proper sum of money with me and I'll have Snyder give you as fine a funeral as they come around here."

"That's kind of you."

"Ye want to watch that shadow of Taylor's, his brother Dave. Very smooth and fast with a gun, is that one!"

Clay's face hardened; he was at the door. "I've met a few who were slower than I," he said and went out.

Chapter II

SHAKE HANDS WITH DEATH

MOUNTING HIS horse he rode back up the main street, found Front and turned down it till he hit Yucca. A group of men loitering outside a saloon under the lawyer's office grew silent as he hitched. A tight-built man with a bulldog face detached himself from the group while the others watched.

"You the new ramrod at Sundown?" he demanded, planting himself in Clay's road.

"Word gets around fast."

"You didn't answer my question."

Clay preserved his calm; measured his distance. "Give me time, friend, and you'll find out. Now let me pass."

The fellow did not move, but the men behind him, by prearrangement, began forming a circle around him. Clay knew the sign; he knew he was in for a beating. "Time is what you won't get, sweetheart," said the bull-headed man.

There was no backing out of this one, so he took the offensive. Pulling his gun would have made it too easy for them. He stepped forward, grasped the man by the shirt front and swung him aside to get his own back to the wall. The bull-head swung at him and a hand lifted Clay's gun.

Stolid unemotional faces stared at him from behind slashing fists and butting knees; faces of men doing a job they were paid to do. He despised them for their passivity. He laid two of them low before they closed in, then managed to get hold of the bull-head's belt, lifted him, tossed him against the others.

That gave him a moment's respite, but someone rabbit-punched him under the left ear and he went to his knees. He barely

had enough strength to roll under the hitch-rail. While he was climbing to his feet someone swung a boot, barely missing his groin. He went down again and saw the bull-headed man, eye swollen and nose bleeding, vault the rail to work him over with his boots.

A boot-toe landed against the palm and he grasped, twisted, kicked upward, got a moment's respite again and worked himself to his feet, swinging blindly. But the wind was going out of him and he saw nothing but flashing white exploding stars. His heart burned. Down again once more and he'd be done for.

"Get out! Get out of the way! Stop it!"

A sinewy leg thrust at him and a heavy dun-pinkish body blocked his view. He looked up to see Terry Rostock on her palomino, quirt lash wrapped around her fist, slashing away at the bull-head with the silver butt.

She drove the man against the rail and rained blows over his face and warding hands, and he took them, mutely, bewildered and raging till he could squeeze under the rail. The others had backed off and were staring at the infuriated girl.

Clay saw his pistol on the boardwalk and dived for it to come up behind its protection. He waved his attackers to a safe distance and stood leaning against the door frame, rasping for breath.

The bull-head was running his hands over his battered bleeding face. The girl's attention was on Clay now and high anger and exasperation ran through her. "Get out, you fool! Don't mix into this town: get on your horse and ride and keep riding. You haven't got a chance."

Clay gave her a weak wave of the left hand; he tried to smile. "Thanks, I guess we're even now." He turned to the bull-head and the men behind him. "Next one of you comes within ten feet I'll shoot to kill, that's from now on, and whatever. Now move!"

They backed sullenly off. Bull-head last. The girl wheeled her horse and loped up the street without another word. From inside the saloon a man said. "Wait till Taylor hears about her making a fool out of Jay. He'll love that."

"A fool? You mean mincemeat. I'll buy drinks."

Clay found the doorknob behind him and

he stumbled through the door and labored up the stairs.

Larkin, a rangy, dark, unkempt man in a faded Prince Albert, sat hunched over his desk like a vulture on a cottonwood limb. He regarded Clay with a pair of shrewd suspicious eyes, which nevertheless were not devoid of humor.

Clay sank into a chair, wiped the blood off his face and recovered his breath and composure. "Mike O'Sullivan tells me you can maybe hire a crew for me. I need about twenty men for a start."

The lawyer grunted and scratched a long jaw thoughtfully. "I saw your little set-to in the street, and the brand on your horse. You're an optimist. I'd say you need about a hundred for a start."

Clay's stomach and brain were beginning to feel stable again. "Twenty will do; twenty who are worth their salt. How about it?"

Larkin got up and walked back and forth, his eyes on Clay as if he were studying a hand of poker. "Dunno; dunno. Maybe I have one for you if you're so set on suicide. He would make a good *segundo*. He would know others. He's a tough man, a gun-slinger."

Clay said, "Guess he wouldn't be a rarity around here. Where do we take a look at him?"

"He's in jail now; trial tomorrow; they're going to hang him the day after."

"That's a help."

"As a matter of form he's held against two thousand dollars bail. If I can see two hundred fifty cash I can spring him for you. I was assigned to defend him."

"Fancy around here," said Clay. "Bothering with a trial! How come?"

Larkin shrugged. "Taylor Rostock is running for state legislature next fall. He wants to set an example with this hombre; wants to kill the talk that people are being hung without a trial in this county."

"Thoughtful of him; and what did this bird do?"

"Headed a gang of rustlers stealing Rostock cattle; shot a man when cornered."

Clay thought for a moment. "Two hundred and fifty," he said eventually, "is pretty high for a man who may not be any good to me."

Larkin sat down at his desk. "Suit yourself," he said impassively.

After a moment Clay counted out two-fifty of the money Señor Grey had given him to operate with. "Let's have a look at him."

Larkin reached for his rusty beaver hat. "Wait here; I'll go fetch him." He picked up the money. When he was in the door Clay said, "Just one thing; the Rostocks are not going to like your bailing their prisoner out; mind telling me, which side of the fence you're on?"

"Not at all; I'm a lawyer with a living to make. I'm *on* the fence. There's money on both sides of it." He stuffed the bills in his pocket and went out.

Clay went over and sat in Larkin's chair, his back to the wall. His head ached dully. He could hardly see his way clear; he put his gun on the desk within handy reach. That rabbit punch had told; pain bloomed in several spots on his chest and his kidneys still ached from a kick. He blinked and shook his head. How did he know that Larkin would not just take the money and send Rostock's men after him here?

He looked up suddenly to see the lawyer re-entering. "Thought these might do you some good." He had stopped in at the saloon downstairs and now deposited on the desk a long drink of whiskey and water and a napkin of cracked ice.

Clay freshened himself, drank the drink, rolled himself a smoke and waited.

IN TWENTY minutes Larkin was back with his client—a huge tough-looking blond man with a red-burned face and pale blue eyes. He kept fingering his empty gunholsters uneasily. "Hell of a town to walk unheeled," he commented, eyeing Clay suspiciously.

"Hell of a town to sit in jail waiting for a noose," retorted Clay.

"Shake hands with Wes Clanton," said Larkin.

Clanton's grip was hard and solid; his glance direct. He listened in noncommittal silence to Clay's proposition. Eventually he had a comment that Clay had heard before: "You ain't the first who tried ram-rodding Sundown for Grey. We'll be far outnumbered; you can't ride against Boxed R legitimate; you have to do it on the owl-hoot."

"What do you prefer," said Clay prodding the man because he liked him, "A

noose around your neck or a gun in your hand?"

Anger geysered in the big man. "You tell me."

"You can do one of two things: Go out and bring in the bunch that you're riding with; I'll hire you all at Sundown and no questions asked. Or you can jump your bail if you're ready to stick your tail between your legs and run. Not that I would blame you."

Clanton scowled; his eyes bored into Clay's as he took a step forward. "You have a strong mouth, friend, but you won't talk like that again to me."

Clay almost chuckled; his judgment had not been wrong. Without a word he lifted his pistol, two-fingered from his holster and handed the butt to Wes Clanton. "You're heeled now," he said. "My horse is down at the rail. Larkin here will pull it into the alley and you go out the back way and make a run for it."

"The horse is already in the alley," said Larkin.

Clay looked at the lawyer in surprise. Larkin moved behind the desk and opened a drawer. "Keep your own gun," he told Clay and produced a weapon for Clanton. The two men stared at him.

"Our friend, the fox who sits *on* the fence," remarked Clay, "has sharp claws."

Together he and Larkin walked Clanton to the corridor and saw him down the back way. The rustler led the horse to the wide back alley and was gone.

They went back into the office. Larkin said, "There's a general somewhere in you; you should be in the army."

"I was," said Clay. "But I didn't like taking orders." He turned to go. "I hope my two-fifty is well invested. Now, where do I find Miss Rostock?"

The lawyer's brows knit. "I don't know why she interfered down in the street. If you're smart, you won't look her up. Stay away from her."

"I didn't ask your advice; but why?"

Larkin gave him a sardonic look. "You're at war with Taylor Rostock, aren't you? Your life isn't worth two bits in this town, as it is."

"What was between Phil Grey and her?" Clay asked them.

"Love, I guess," said Larkin, "and Taylor Rostock. Taylor is between every-

body and anything he thinks is his. Oh yes, and then old *Señor* Grey. He never could stomach his son's going after a Rostock woman. He wouldn't have it. He and Phil never saw eye to eye on that; so I guess Phil gave up trying to take Terry from Taylor, since he didn't even have his old man to back him. He drifted on, just as everybody thought he and Taylor were about to shoot it out."

"Don't sound like Phil," said Clay. "Never knew him to quit a battle." He began to understand the old man's bitterness.

"Looks like he left the old man to sit on the gallery and fight the Rostocks with strange crews, strange ramrods. I guess you're about number six, or so."

Clay had his hand on the doorknob. "Still didn't answer my first question: Where do I find Terry?"

Larkin gave him a queer look. "I see you've looked in those wild eyes too," he said slowly. "All right, it's your own funeral. Up at the north end of Main is the Rostock Mercantile Company—used to belong to her father. It's hers now and she runs it some; she lives in the white house behind it with the fence and the gate."

At that moment his speech was interrupted by a rapid series of shots, coming from the west end of town where Wes Clanton had ridden. As the two men leaned out the back window, listening, Clay's heart thumped wildly. A rifle spoke twice, then all was silent.

"Damn it," he said in despair. "Damn it; there goes my first bet." A feeling of bitter guilt shook him.

"A prisoner out on bail," said Larkin, "is supposed to stay inside the town limits."

Clay whirled on him, taking him by the coat front. "You knew that; yet you let him go."

"He knew it too. The sheriff told him the rules."

Clay's hand sank down. "The rats! They knew he'd make a break for it; that's the only reason they let you bail him!" He felt already almost as if Wes Clanton had worked for him for years. "Well, if it's war they want."

Larkin was putting on his hat again. "I'll go out and inquire around; see if I can learn anything."

As the lawyer put the key in his office

door to lock it, Clay asked him suddenly. "You're on my side of the fence. Why?"

The tall awkward man's face grew solemn, his eyes distant. "Terry was a very beautiful young thing," he said slowly, "when she'd turned just seventeen. That's eight years ago. I always was a very homely, gawky critter." He bit his lip. "But some men ruin and despoil everything they get their hands on." He clicked the lock shut and put the key in his pocket. "Maybe there's something to that one about the mills of the gods grinding slowly. I wish you luck."

Clay was silent for a moment. "Look for me later at O'Sullivan's backroom."

Darkness was falling as he hit the back alley and he made his way warily along it, hand on gun. He had made his brag to the men that he would shoot to kill, but he could still be prey to rifles. He was taking a long chance with every step. Glimpsing Main Street he saw considerable traffic there, with the lights beginning to bloom in saloons and stores, and decided to brazen it out in the street.

He walked along unaccosted and saw in the distance the Mercantile's white-washed walls. Now and again he passed men who looked like they were Boxed R riders, but none of the ones who had ganged him. There was a small corral at the end of the long wagon yard at the Mercantile and he saw the palomino there. He walked in between two freight wagons and mounted the loading platform.

The interior of the building was semi-dark and he stumbled through a maze of baled and boxed goods, hardware, tools, lumber and hung clothing; a heavy odor of spices and dried foods pervaded the vast room. There was a light over a long low counter at the rear of the building and beyond that a thin streak of light from a door ajar. Apparently the help had left for the day.

Clay slid across the counter and opened the door. From a small office Terry Rostock stared at him in open-mouthed amazement. As he stepped inside and closed the door behind him her eyes went wide with terror, her breast heaved. She was suddenly an entirely different person from the infuriated girl he had seen in the street that afternoon.

"Haven't you left town yet?" she de-

manded. "Don't you realize your life—"

"I realize that I want to know why you interfered in the street. You probably saved my life," he insisted. "Now why? I have no intention of pulling out of here without an answer."

She moved toward the door. "Get out; get out, please!"

"No so easy as that," he said, stepping into her way. "I didn't go to all this trouble just to be turned away."

She reached for the doorknob. "If you hurry, maybe you can still make it. Please go."

But he put a hand on her arm, a small anger rising in him. "Not so fast. There's something I want to know: I'm an old friend of Phil's. Where is he? What happened to him? Why did you ride out to see Señor Grey yesterday when he hates your guts?"

Tears suddenly filled her eyes. "Don't ask me anything about Phil." Black despair was written all over her features. Then she implored again, "You must get out of here!"

An electric shock had gone through him as he touched her; she was a strange creature, arousing both irritation and at the same time a wild desire. "Are you still in love with Phil?"

Trembling, she looked down. "I sent him away," she said. He could not imagine that this was the girl who had stopped the street fight; he wanted to take her into his arms.

At this moment the door swung quietly open. "Am I interrupting something? No, don't go for that gun; you're covered."

The voice dripped with cool but impatient sarcasm. Clay was face to face with Taylor Rostock; slim, elegant, a hard handsome face over which a smile played, evil and pleasant at the same time. Beyond him in the semi-darkness of the warehouse, Clay saw Dave Rostock, pale-faced, beady eyes centering on him above the muzzle of his gun.

SO HE HAD walked into a trap. "Some people believe in knocking," he said.

Rostock's glance went sharply searching from Clay's to the girl; there was angry and jealous possessiveness in it. *Whatever success this man has, Clay thought, here's his weak spot.*

Rostock said, with a sharpness which made anger spurt in Clay: "Is this man annoying you, Terry?"

She turned pale, avoided Clay's glance, tried to appear indignant. "Yes, I suppose so. I don't know why he came here. I asked him to get out—"

Rostock said then with a leer. "I don't reckon you know either why you beat Jay over the head with your quirt out in the street a while back, do you?"

She paled a little. "You don't expect me to stand by and see a man beaten to death, do you?"

"Especially not a man who's trying to ride for Sundown, eh?"

Something churned explosively in the pit of Clay's stomach. The sight of this proud girl playing the bird before the snake was too much. He tapped Taylor sharply on the chest with the back of his fingers. "Never mind about Sundown. I don't like your tone. Quit that line of talk."

Rostock's eyes shot lightning. "Do tell!" At the same time, Dave Rostock, beyond the darkened doorway, spoke. "Better lift his gun from him, Taylor."

"Reach for that gun," said Clay, "and I go for it. Take your choice."

"With a woman in the room?"

"That's up to you."

That thrust hit home and made a silence. *Oh, yes, his weak spot.* Clay knew that for sure now.

There was a small back door leading from the room. Taylor stepped over to it and opened it. "I'll talk to you later, Terry. Leave now."

She was white as a sheet now; she hesitated. "Promise me," she began. "You won't—"

"Promise nothing," he said. "Go on, Terry."

She seemed to consider what to do, then walked out of the room. There was, however, a short moment when Taylor's movement in closing the door gave Clay a split-second's chance. He did a side step, there was a flash of his hand and Taylor Rostock suddenly felt a gunbarrel in his ribs. The maneuver was so smooth that Dave Rostock could not fire his gun without hitting his brother.

"Stand still," said Clay. He plucked the gun from under the other's coat.

Rostock drew in his breath heavily. "You

know you won't get away with this."

"We'll see. Now you out there by the door. Toss your gun in on the table here. Do it pronto." He jiggled the gun in Taylor's ribs. "Tell him."

"All right, Dave."

The second gun landed on the table with a thud and Clay pocketed it. Taylor Rostock did not lose his composure. "This is a momentary victory, friend. Don't let it go to your head. Use it smartly. When you get out of here, keep going. I like Sundown the way it is. I'd never let a man live long enough around here to tell the tale that he got the drop on me."

"With a gun in your ribs you talk big," said Clay. "You tempt me."

"You can pull that trigger, but you'd never get away with it. You're a stranger here. You're mixing into business that's not yours. You haven't a Chinaman's chance of making a ranch out of Sundown. Sundown is dead and gone. Your best bet is to ride and keep riding."

His manner was imperious, impatient. Even with a gun on him he seemed to have the calm advantage. He thought in despair of Wes Clanton and had to admit that his own chances were not great. He backed toward the door, found the knob and opened it. "We'll meet," he said.

Outside he walked to the corner of the building, saw no one, and ducked under the loading platform as he rounded into the side yard.

In a moment the yard and side alley were filled with searching steps and voices. Boots scrambled up and down the steps and over the rough planks of the platform; gunhammers clicked in anticipation. Clay heard Taylor's voice: "Damn it, didn't any of you fools see him? Didn't you cover the back door?"

From somewhere a man said, "Miss Terry told us you'd left by the street entrance and was goin' back to the ranch—"

There was silence after that. Clay staying under the platform for an hour, then moved silently across the yard. He found the back alley and laboriously made his way till he came to O'Sullivan's backroom.

The Irishman stared at him, startled. "It's a ghost I thought ye were," he said with a shadow of a smile. He had brought a bottle with him from the bar. "The drinks are still on the house."

"I could use one."

After a moment Larkin entered. "I don't know whether Wes got away," he said. "Somebody was shot, but I have been able to find out no more than that. Whoever got that dose of lead was spirited away."

Clay sat drumming his fingers on the table. "Well, a bullet is quicker than a noose anyhow. Where now for a crew?"

The lawyer shrugged. "Give me time," he said. "We'll bring men in from outside."

Clay remembered the bull-head, Jay's remark: "Time, friend, is what you won't get." That was true; he was up against a wall, and with no chance to get set. It was still a one-man war as far as he was concerned.

"There's many a man drinking in my place who would rally to the colors if the right man blew the bugle," O'Sullivan said.

"A woman had to blow the bugle this afternoon," said Clay acidly. "I saw no men rallying." He got to his feet. "Where can I get a horse?"

"West end of town," Larkin told him. "There's a horse waiting in a clump of mesquite next to Meeker's corral. You turn left at the end of main street."

When Clay was in the alley door, Larkin said, "Maybe that's the way you should be riding—west. Maybe you should keep going. The cards are stacked. A man should be wise. I wouldn't blame you."

Clay thought of Phil Grey, of Sundown and its broken owner, of Terry—Terry that mystery who was like a pawn in this game. And his sudden hatred for that ice-cold empire builder, Rostock. The man who had the upper hand even with a gun against his ribs. He thought of Larkin. "No," he said, "somehow I'm in this. I never start anything without finishing it. I wish Phil was here. He would come in handy. . . . I'll see you."

"Luck," Larkin called after him in the dark.

CHAPTER III

THE FINISHING TOUCHES

SEÑOR GREY was sitting on the gallery in his usual place when Clay rode up. Clay climbed the steps and sank into a chair. Grey listened in silence. At last he said, "You've brought me trouble, but no

crew. You've bungled and blundered. I don't mind the money you've spent, but we'll have Taylor Rostock's men down on us by tomorrow, and we're alone."

"Everything in life is a gamble," said Clay.

"You could have gone somewhere else to look for that crew," said the old man. "I told you that: but you had to stick your head in the lion's mouth before you were even half started. Now what chance have you? What chance have *I*? I took you for a man, but you're a fool! It's that damned skirt! You couldn't stay away from her, could you? I wish the hell she was dead and rotting in her grave where she belongs!"

Clay sat up in his chair. "Those are pretty strong words."

"Not strong enough. I was waiting for a *man* to come along; a *man*, mind you, who could use his brains and run Sundown. Well, I'm still sitting here, waiting for one. You're fired. Get out!"

Clay got to his feet. "You mean that?"

"You heard me. Get out!"

"The trouble is," said Clay slowly, "you're still *sitting* here. That's all you're doing, waiting for somebody else to take up your fight. You ain't got fight or guts enough left to back a man when he does pick up the battle. To hell with you. You're sitting in your own graveyard."

The old man clutched the arms of his chair till his eight remaining knuckles went white; his eyes shone wildly in the moonlight. "What would you understand about that? What have you got to lose but one miserable life? What have *I*? Sundown, my friend; and I'm not giving that up for one stupid, lopsided, hopeless fight just because you can't use your brains!"

"This was a place once, man! I won it from the earth with one small string of cattle and men! It was the biggest ranch around here for thirty years. There was light and laughter and gold and women. There were fun and fight. I had the biggest fiestas, the biggest barbecues, the best cattle, the best horses and the best men." His voice rose to a quaking roar. "You think I'll throw that away just like that? No, my friend. Not Sundown! Not yet! Not yet!"

He had labored to his feet and was roaring the last words against the night, standing at his full height, a sight grand and

terrible. A wave of pity rolled through Clay. Yes, he had understood and felt this when he first saw the place. This ranch had come out of the wild earth, and a man wanted his spawn to carry it on as long as men rode horseback and carried guns.

"You've lost it already. You threw it away! You had a son and you made a drifter out of him to spite a woman's name. You old fool! You couldn't even get along with your own kin. And *you talk!*"

Clay had moved toward the door. Señor Grey's left hand flashed to his hip and steel glinted in the white moonlight. "Don't talk about Phil," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Don't mention him in my hearing, or by God, I'll put a bullet in you!"

"Put it in my back," said Clay. "I'm leaving."

Inside the door he was startled to be confronted by old Sam. The ancient servant was in tears, his hands shaking. "I done ask you and ask you, suh, never to mention Mr. Phil."

Clay stared at him, anger and depression weighing him down. "Phil. I wish the hell he was here now!"

The old man shook his head and looked at the floor. "Mistah Phil is here," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"What!" Clay grasped him by the coat. The old Negro merely beckoned him to follow him into the kitchen.

"What did you say?"

Sam took a lantern from a shelf and stepped out the back door. Clay followed. They crossed a huge unkempt lawn, the tall grass swishing against Clay's boots. Huge cypresses loomed above.

"Where is he? Where is he? What are you talking about?" Sinister shadows danced among the trees as the lantern shook in the withered brown hand.

"Beyond there."

A low iron fence surrounded a family grave plot. Clay read the names of Phil's mother, an uncle, an elder brother—all on the weather-beaten marble slabs. Several foremen, a couple of cousins—

Sam had gone past, on into the bushes. His lantern shone over a grassy grave-mound, marked only by a little crude wooden cross. "Dere's poor Mistah Phil."

Clay shook the old man so he nearly dropped the lantern. "Why didn't you tell me before? Who killed him—Rostock?

Tell me quick, what does this mean?"

The Negro straightened up and removed Clay's hand. "Señor Grey, he don't know. He don't know. Year ago Mistah Phil's horse brung him right to the yard one early mornin'. He roll out of de saddle by de kitchen steps. Der was a bullet in his chest. Last thing he said: 'Well, Sam, I had my try anyhow.' Den he die. It was all over dat Miss Terry."

Tears streamed down the old black's cheeks. "Ah chased the horse off, an' buried Mistah Phil de next night. Lawd have mercy on my soul."

Clay stood in long paralyzed silence. So Phil hadn't quit! He'd tried to kill Taylor.

"And you never told Señor Grey? He'll have to know someday. We can't let him die thinking his son was a quitter."

"Warn't no use for that old crippled man go out get hisself killed. What could he do all alone?" The old darky looked straight at Clay. "When he goes, Sundown goes. Dat's the end."

"Yes," said Clay heavily. "He's the last."

"When dat Taylor Rostock is dead, dat's the time to tell Señor Grey."

Clay looked sharply at the old man. "So you think Sundown will survive Taylor Rostock, eh?"

"Yassuh." Firmly. An odd feeling made Clay say, "And what makes you think so?"

"You, Mistah Clay. You'll save Sundown. You'll kill date Taylor."

There was grim amusement in Clay's tone. "And how do you know that so sure?"

"Ah knowed it when you rode in dat yard. Never was nobody like you heah befoh, Mistah Clay. I jist knowed. Dat's why I had to tell you 'bout Mist' Phil to-night, lest you ride away in a fury."

Clay put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "I wasn't riding away in a fury," he said. "In fact, I wasn't riding away."

HE RETURNED to the house and got his few things from the bedroom. When he passed the gallery on his way across the yard, Señor Grey was still sitting in the deep shadow, collapsed in his chair. Clay stopped for a second, and his hand wanted to reach out, his tongue wanted to speak, but he had to move on.

There was a faint light at one end of the

bunkhouse. The two chorehands were having a slow game of pinochle under a rusty, cracked lantern. Its illumination reached unpromising into a realm of cobwebs, dust and broken furniture. The men looked up silently as Clay approached. "Which one of you went to Apache last night?"

One of them met his glance with an old cowhand's guileless blue eyes; the other squinted a narrow, wrinkled rat-face at him. "Why—nobody, I guess."

There was a moment's silence, then the blue-eyed one said, "Ed, you went right after supper, don't you recall?"

Clay turned on the man. "Get your duffie and get out of here, pronto. I see you again on Sundown I'll kill you. I don't like spies."

Rat-face's eyes wandered over Clay. He met Clay's eyes. Then he said, "Yessir," and got up.

When he had gone, Clay found his own horse and led it to a pasture beyond one of the barns where Grey would not see it. In the barn he found a pile of hay in the mow, moved it to a convenient hole in the wall. With his rifle and sixgun handy he lay watching the old man on the gallery. The last of Sundown, waiting for a son who would never come home. He recalled Taylor Rostock's words: "I like Sundown the way it is." The ruin and deadly desolation of the great ranch was Taylor's trademark, a symbol of his power.

It was early when, a day later, he hitched his horse in the alley behind O'Sullivan's. In a few minutes he was sitting inside at breakfast.

"Eat hearty," said O'Sullivan. "It's lucky ye are to be alive. No, I heard nothing about Wes Clanton. Either he got killed that night or he kept riding. Take my advice, man, ye had better be riding yourself. Go away and get a crew somewhere else; bring them in. Ye can do nothing alone."

Clay drummed his fingers on the table. "And what about your saying that men will rally when I blow the bugle?"

"I have spread the word around," said O'Sullivan. "But ye've got to have some show of strength. Many are sick of Rostock rule; but men do not throw their lives away on small bets. Ye're up against an army and a man with a will. Taylor will play cat-and-mouse with ye as long as it suits him, but he'll play the cat, never for-

get that! Ye'll be through when he wants ye to be."

Clay bit his lip. He was one against the world. But somehow Sundown was in his blood. Because of Phil; because of the old man on the gallery eating his heart out; because of the old Negro. The place had owned him since he rode into that still yard. He would kill Taylor Rostock, crew or no crew. "Mike," he said, "Where do I best find Taylor?"

"It's made ye are. Have sense, man! I like ye too well to see ye finished like this."

"Where?" said Clay. "What's his routine in the morning? Does he go riding?"

O'Sullivan glanced at the kitchen clock. "At eight o'clock about—he rides into the yard of the white house behind the Mercantile to take his cousin for a morning canter."

She was the one thing he couldn't completely rule. *The man's weak spot—Terry Rostock!* Plans began forming in his head. He glanced at the clock and got to his feet. "Got an extra gun?" he asked. "I may need it."

O'Sullivan, still protesting, brought him a six-shooter. "Take advice, friend. Before ye throw yer life away go at least and look up Tad Larkin. Maybe he has some other idea. Maybe he even heard news of Wes Clanton."

Clay nodded. "If you could have someone lead my horse in back of the white house, it would be a help."

"Luck be with you," said O'Sullivan slowly.

Quietly Clay worked his way along the back alley. He glanced up at the back windows to Larkin's office. He was surprised to see the chimney of a lighted lamp, and smoke emanating from it. Swiftly he reached the backdoor to the building and climbed the rickety stairs. Only an ominous silence answered his knock. His heartbeat quickened. He kicked the door open.

The gaunt lawyer was lying across his desk, a bullet in his head. He had been dead for several hours. A piece of paper fluttered in the faint breeze. White rage tearing through him, Clay read the message:

Forfeit For Two Thousand Dollars Bail.

The blunt mocking challenge struck him like a body blow across the chest. Wes Clanton had got away. Well, if the cat

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wanted to play with the mouse, so could Clay be a hunter. He recalled Phil's words: "When somebody goes after you, don't wait, go after them, faster and harder."

A noise on the stairways made him jump swiftly to close the door. Steady steps mounted and he flattened against the wall close by, partly hidden by a bookcase. In a moment the door swung cautiously open and the bull-headed man, Jay, looked into the room. He glanced at the body of the lawyer, and was about to close the door when Clay spoke his name softly.

The man started, grunted and Clay had one hand on his right wrist, another around his throat. He swung him into the room and pushed the door shut with his heel. Despair bulged Jay's eyes; he struggled for breath. He put all his muscles and energy and fear into play to gain strength.

The anger that moved Clay was stronger. His victim slid to the floor, the veins on Clay's forehead stood out with the effort; the sinews of his arms strained like taut ropes.

After a minute he straightened up and stood regaining his wind, looking down at the body. A clock ticked and the hurry of time was on him. With a sudden inspiration he bent down and pulled off the dead man's duck jacket and wide-brimmed battered sombrero.

DOWN in the street Jay's horse kicked up a small fuss when he mounted, but he quickly yanked it under iron-hard control. Spurring, he rode up Yucca, swung out of sight of a small group of Boxed R riders that were approaching along Front street, and rode up a small back lane to the white house on the hill. Two men loitering at the front gate saw him dismount and walk past the corner to the kitchen gallery, but they paid no attention to him.

In the kitchen a fat colored woman was preparing breakfast. "What you want?" she demanded in consternation. "What you doin' here?"

"Quiet," he said. "Where's Miss Terry? I'm a friend of Phil Grey's."

Her expression changed. "She's in de dinin' room I expects."

Clay went through a large pantry and stood in a huge oak-paneled dining room. At the far end, in her riding habit, stood

BURY THE LIVING AT SUNDOWN

Terry Rostock, pouring a drink at a sideboard, her back toward him.

On hearing his spurs a slight shiver seemed to go through her. "You're early, Taylor," she said in a voice in which fear struggled with irritation. "I haven't had my breakfast yet. You know I prefer to eat alone as long as I can't avoid riding with you."

She whirled suddenly, strain and anger on her face. She saw him and a slow flush spread over her features. The glass in her hand shook and its contents spilled. "It's bad to drink alone," Clay said. "And so early."

There was an odd expression in her eyes. "I can't say I'm glad to see you," she said. "You got away last time. You may never have another chance." And yet she showed a strange excitement at seeing him. "The odds are too great against you."

"As they were against Phil," he said. "But maybe my luck will be a little better."

"What do you mean?"

He filled the almost empty glass from the decanter and gave it back to her. "Maybe you better drink this," he said. "Phil didn't drift."

When she had emptied the glass he told her. She sank down on a chair; she buried her face in her hands. Now she knew why Taylor hadn't bothered killing Señor Grey: there had been no need. "So I did not save Phil by sending him away, by telling him I didn't love him." A terrible expression of sorrow and hate mingled in her face. "I saved no one."

"You saved Sundown," Clay said. "You saved the old man."

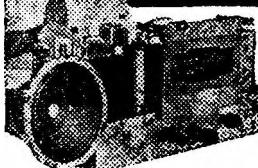
"But he hates me. He hated me because of my name. Much of this is his fault."

"He's paid for it," said Clay. There was a golden clock under a glass bell on the buffet—the third clock he'd seen. Time was getting short. He moved toward the door. Instantly she was at his side.

"But I can't let you," she cried in despair. "First Phil, then Tad Larkin, now you. If you go out into the yard and call your shots, you won't have a chance. Dave is deadly with a pistol. There are always three or four men with them. They never ride alone."

"I never bushwhacked a man," he said evenly. "That's not why I came here. Stay

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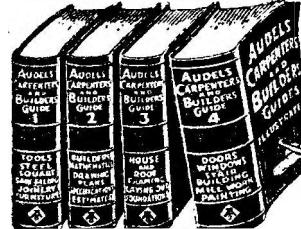
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in the back of the house." He stepped toward her and took her in his arms, pressed his lips down on hers. "I've wanted to do this ever since I saw you."

He walked out of the room and crossed to the front door, *two minutes after eight*.

From the stone front steps he saw Taylor, followed at a distance by two men. The two men who had loitered at the gate before were gone. He was about to call out when a noise down the street took Taylor's attention. He wheeled the horse halfway around to face a man who came running, another who came pounding on horseback. There was the sound of voices. Clay heard the name "Jay."

He was in the middle of the yard then, and before Taylor could ride out of sight he called loudly: "Rostock!"

Taylor whirled in the saddle, saw him, and rolled to the ground in one motion. He came from under the animal's neck, shooting. His first bullet grazed Clay's left arm. Then the horse was down from Clay's second bullet and the two men stood free, firing at each other.

A freak rifle-shot tore the gun from his hand, and he jumped behind the stone gatepost. The men with Taylor opened fire on him. A bullet tore into his shoulder, knocking him down as he pulled the extra gun from his waistband.

Taylor Rostock was on his knees behind the fallen horse. There was a roar from the far end of Main Street. Clay got to his feet, lurching forward behind the stone pillar.

He could not understand why the Boxed R men had stopped firing and were withdrawing to the side alleys.

There was a crash and a scream from the front door. He turned to face Dave Rostock, pistol in hand. A jolt in the chest reeled him against the stone pillar, and he sank down. In a red haze he saw Dave Rostock buckle at the knees, then roll down the steps. Behind him, white as a sheet, smoking derringer in her hand, stood Terry.

He sat there against the stone, his stomach sick, his sight fading. The roar from the street increased till it rose in a crescendo of hoofbeats and rifle-cracks. Clay clutched feebly at the gun, gathering his strength for one last effort. The tide of Rostock riders was rolling over him.

His arm would not lift; his trigger finger

BURY THE LIVING AT SUNDOWN

would not squeeze. Blackness was pushing in on him. . . .

Then he tasted liquor in his mouth, and felt somebody unbuttoning his coat. He heard Mike O'Sullivan's worried voice, "It's proper they shot him up. Run for the doctor, boy, and quick."

He saw the yard filled with the toughest bunch of dirty unshaven men he had ever seen. Wes Clanton loomed among them, a rifle in his hand. "Well, I'm back," he roared at Clay. Señor Grey took his eyes from the girl in the doorway, standing like paralyzed over Dave's body, her gun still in her hand. He climbed laboriously down from the buckboard that old Sam was driving and limped toward Clay, a hot rifle in his hand.

Terry was close now, directing the men. "Carry him inside. Be careful, be careful."

He awoke in a bed amidst a room full of people. The doctor was working on him. Señor Grey was at one corner of the bed-end, Terry Rostock at the other. There was sad knowledge in the old man's eyes, and Clay knew that Sam had told him.

Grey's voice was unsteady as he spoke to the doctor: "How soon before we can bring him out to Sundown?"

The doctor made some answer, and Clay said: "Grey, you make your peace with her first."

And after a moment the old man reached out a hand and laid it slowly over Terry's where it rested on the bed-end.

Clay lay there looking from one to the other, remembering and missing Phil.

"Let's have a fiesta," he said at last. "A fiesta at Sundown."

THE END



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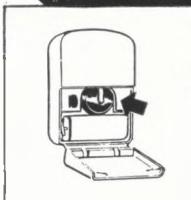
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