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FIFTEEN

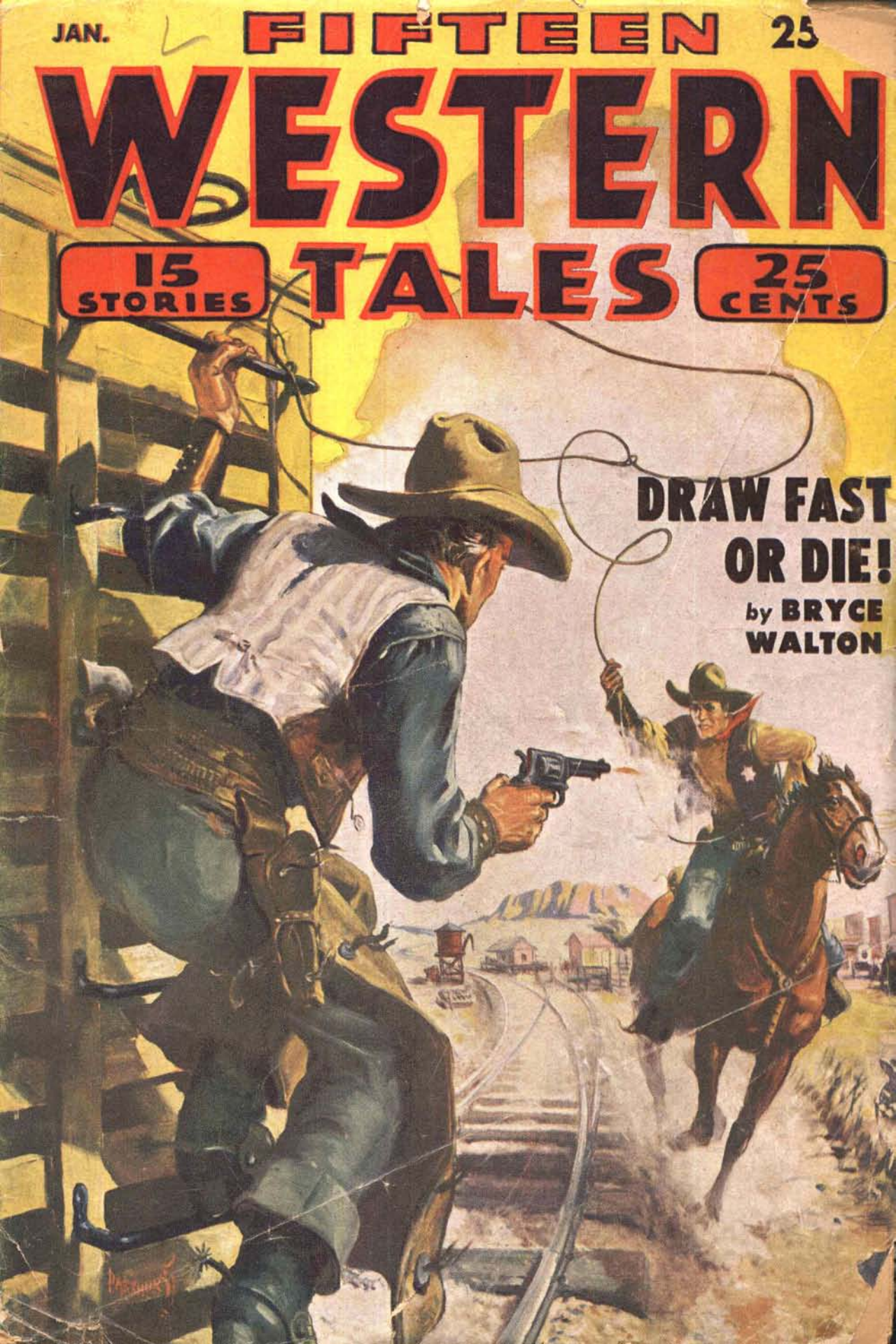
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WESTERN

15
STORIES

TALES

25
CENTS



**DRAW FAST
OR DIE!**

by **BRYCE
WALTON**

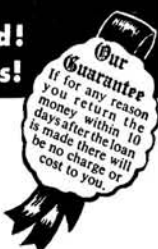


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VOLUME 26, No. 3



JANUARY, 1953

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They called Gunther the nester's greatest leader—but one sodbuster knew him as traitor.
 2. **DRAW FAST—OR DIE!** **Bryce Walton** 52
Blacky Jethro's code was tough and simple: "Shoot first and live longest!"
- Thrill Packed Short Fiction**
3. **THE DEADLY SECOND** **Henry Carlton Jones** 28
A peace loving man—but a trigger-quick lawdog was Painted Rock's sheriff!
 4. **THE BUSHWHACK BARGAIN** **Richard Ferber** 35
Jesse was a hungry killer-for-hire but could even he shoot old Mark Clayburn?
 5. **NEVER SELL YOUR SADDLE!** **H. A. De Rosso** 43
When a man loses his saddle, he loses himself!
 6. **THE MEDICINE WIRE** **Bennett Foster** 63
Andy Curtis, fighting brass-pounder, was one of the unsung heroes of the frontier.
 7. **OVER THE HILL TO HELL** **Robert Trimmell** 68
A wagon train of mutinous greenhorns challenged Big Bill Shawn.
 8. **WHILE THE GALLOWS WAIT—** **Dave Sands** 74
Toby Miles only wanted to be as brave as the outlaw he worshipped.
 9. **SAD NOSE JOE—RAIN-MAKER!** **Harold Helfer** 81
The saga of a good Injun who tried to rope himself a rain-cloud!
 10. **BRING HIM BACK DEAD!** **John C. Colohan** 85
The sheriff had never faced death from a friend.
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 11. **GUN-MEETING AT MIDNIGHT** **Jonathan Craig** 92
What chance had Steve, a desperate, hunted lawman, to win the town's loveliest girl?
 12. **INJUN LIST** **Walt Coburn** 98
A broken derelict, the Judge fought his greatest battle on boot-hill's brink!
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Departments and Features

13. **THE PROSPECTOR** Gem-mining lore **Vic Shaw** 6
14. **HELL ON WHEELS!** Dramatic fact story **Bart Cassidy** 8
15. **CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ** Western know-how **Hallack McCord** 51
16. **TALES OF THE OLD WEST** Mossman of the Rangers **Lee** 66
17. **NEXT ISSUE (Illustrated)** A Preview **The Editors** 73
18. **WHEN DODGE WAS WILD!** factual story **John T. Lynch** 77

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By VIC SHAW

Mr. Shaw is a well-known authority in the fields of mining and mineralogy, with nearly a half-century of practical prospecting beside him, and with numerous published works, as well as a lifetime service as consultant on pertinent matters to his credit.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES is both pleased and proud to add him to its roster of regular contributors—and hopes the additional service Mr. Shaw enables us to perform for our readers will result in profit to all concerned—in funds, fun and health!

Mr. Shaw will answer all queries gratis—simply enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your letter. Address all queries to Vic Shaw, Lake Hughes, California : Star Rt.-2.

BIG HORN BONANZA

Query: Two of us are planning an extended prospecting trip in the Big Horn and the Vulture mountain ranges in Maricopa County, Arizona. We are thinking of making Wilkenburg our starting point.

We would greatly appreciate any information regarding these mountains, particularly what minerals and semi-precious stones might possibly be located in the vicinity.

Very sincerely,
J. E. Miller, Michigan

Reply by Victor Shaw:

The Vulture Range and gold mine are some 14 miles to the southwest of Wickenburg by road, and this range tends northeast and southwest. You go 6½ miles west of Wickenburg on US-60-70, to a dirt road on your left that runs southwesterly along the eastern side of this range. The old Vulture Mine is on this eastern side too.

As for the Big Horn Mts: My latest map shows it to lie farther southwest of the Vulture Range about 12-14 miles, which means they're in plain sight from the Vultures. This range tends north-west and southeast near the west boundary of Maricopa County. At their north-western end they nearly join the Harquahala Mts. and may be a spur from the latter range. All this region is a sage desert.

I've been past the Vultures and Wickenburg a dozen or so times going to Phoenix; also to Prescott via US-89, which comes into Wickenburg from Ash Fork on US-66 to the

(Continued on page 110)



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By **BART CASSIDY**

Even when old Cheyenne was a real "man for breakfast" town, the classic feud between Jed Mink and Pike Welch created gun-smoke history!

CHEYENNE became the "Hell on Wheels" town in the fall of 1867, and it was a foregone conclusion that either Jed Mink or Pike Welch—or both—would be too dead to celebrate the meeting of the transcontinental railway tracks which were bound to meet in the near future. That one man would kill the other even before the next "end-of-track" point would be reached was not doubted by any of the track-layers, gamblers, saloon keepers, or general camp followers who made up the main, but very temporary, population of one terminus settlement after another. As the Union Pacific thrust its steel ribbons farther and farther into the West, the deadly feud between Mink and Welch was fast reaching a definite breaking point. But what the payoff would be, and who would kill whom, were moot questions. You could get an even bet any way you wanted it.

The bad feeling between Jed Mink and Pike Welch started in a friendly poker game. At that time, the terminal point was North Platte, Nebraska. Mink happened to produce an extra and convenient ace at the wrong time and Welch took exception to the play and cracked him over the head with a broken beer bottle. Mink retaliated with a quick knife thrust that grazed Welch's cheek. . . .

The two adversaries were quickly called to account for their seemingly rowdy conduct by the section superintendent in North Platte. "We've got enough trouble as it is, with this floatin' population," the superintendent pointed out, "without you two section hand foremen settin' a bad example to the men. It's up to you to stop fights and such—not to start 'em. Remember, you're leaders of men, as far as the Union Pacific is concerned. Behave yourselves."

The pair of chastened foremen saw the light, but only for a short time.

In Julesburg, Colorado, Mink, once again,

came up with an unaccounted for ace in a delicate game. Then, with fists and knives, the two men had a set-to that lasted for an hour. Spectators called it a draw, and cheered wildly.

But it was in Cheyenne that the two "leaders of men" had a gunfight on the main street. It was bloody, but far from fatal for either Mink or Welch. However, it now became apparent to all that one man or the other did not have much longer to live. They had already indulged in three battles, each worse than the previous one, but all had ended on an even score. Fate was being tempted too far.

Suddenly, the betting started. Big Tim Malloy, proprietor of a highly portable saloon, became stake holder for hundreds of bets. At even money, supporters of the opponents were laying heavy wagers on their favorite. It was a case of betting on which of the two quarrelsome foremen got buried in the "boneyard"—as end-of-track cemeteries were called—first.

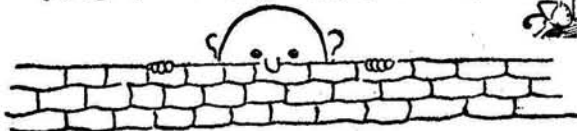
On placing a bet with stakeholder Malloy, the regular procedure was to lay your money on the line and say, "Fifty dollars that Mink gets in the boneyard first." Or, "Ten clams that Welch makes the boneyard before Mink does."

Malloy, a happy and prosperous business man, merely deducted five percent of all monies, as his fee. Personally, he didn't care which killed which, or who made the boneyard first. The feud was making him an especially rich man. Soon, he figured, he could retire from this hectic railroad building riot of a life, take his profits from saloon and stakeholding, and retire to the quiet of the East. Malloy, although avid to take their money for the rankest of whiskey, always felt himself far above the railroad workers, their foremen, and other denizens of the floating town, "End-of-the-Track,"

(Continued on page 10)



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WOT NO LUCK!



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In several million booklets you may have read extracts from testimonials received from as far back as 1930. We just take them at random. We possess more than twelve thousand unsolicited testimonials, and we know from chance remarks that many who swear by Joan, never trouble to report to us. Having so many we can't possibly publish them all, nor can we constantly be changing our advertisements, and we have been content to keep to those originally published, but such is the immense interest being displayed we thought we would depart from our rule in a small measure and just publish 3 or 4 of the huge number that have come in recently. Remember, similar testimonials have been coming in unceasingly since 1930.

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and I will send you both History and Mascot.



(Continued from page 8)

no matter where it happened to be. He was merely out to get some quick money, and let the boneyards fill up as they may. He had nothing but contempt for railroad builders—but great respect for the money they earned. To him, a tracklayer was the lowest form of humanity, except when he paid an exorbitant price for a drink of Malloy's special rotgut. But Malloy was an honest stakeholder, as he had proved many times. Providing he got his five percent.

When the track-town became Benton, Wyoming, the feudists, Mink and Welch, resumed their private war. But it did not last long. Jed Mink, armed with a .45, and getting weary of the whole business, settled the matter by shooting to death the unarmed Pike Welch. The fact that there had been bad blood between the two for so long made it necessary for a hastily summoned coroner's jury to decide it was a matter of self-defense. Hell on Wheels was a broad-minded place at all times.

That evening, as the dead Mike Welch's friends made arrangements for a fine funeral the next morning, Jed Mink's faction happily collected their bet winnings from the stakeholder, Big Tim Malloy. He cheerfully paid out approximately \$15,000—after deducting his legitimate fee—to the lucky ones who had bet that Welch would wind up in the boneyard before Mink did.

The following morning, a Sunday, gave the defunct foreman's friends a chance to give their champion a fitting burial. Acquiring, for the purpose, a two-wheeled cart, drawn by a mule, from the local butcher, the mourners placed the body in a long box and placed it on the cart.

While one of the number went to find some rope to make fast the coffin for its ride through some mountainous country to the town's boneyard, a few miles away, the other mourners repaired into Big Tim Malloy's saloon to drown part of their sorrow at losing both their bets and their friend. As the rope procurer was gone quite a while, the burial party got fairly well organized. Orations were made, and toast after toast was offered in memory of Mike Welch.

The mule, left free at the hitchrack, got tired of waiting. Pulling his macabre burden, he slowly ambled off toward the hills. Two hours elapsed before the mourn-

ers realized that the cart, with its coffin, was missing. And, what was the sense of going to the boneyard if you had nothing to bury? Joined by the rope getter, who finally came back, minus a rope, the party resumed their drinking, in touching tribute to the departed friend; who had now departed in more ways than one.

EVENING had arrived, then darkness, by the time anybody thought it might be fittin' to go out and look for the mule, the cart, and Welch.

A quick check with the mule's owner informed them that the beast had returned to its home a few hours before sundown, pulling the cart, but definitely minus the long box containing the deceased foreman.

"Now, if you was a mule," asked one puzzled mourner of another, after the group had once again gathered at Malloy's bar, "what would you do if you wanted to get rid of a coffin on a cart hitched to you?"

"Don't rightly know," came the answer. "Let's ask Slim Loper. He's more like a mule than any of the rest of us."

When asked the weighty question, Slim Loper allowed as how he would pull the burden up the mountain road until he came to a spot where the unfastened coffin would just slide off, and down into a deep gully, under its own power. Then he'd head for the home barn.

When it was proved, the following morning, that Slim's mule-like thinking was correct—the long box, lid partly off, had been sighted from the road by an early rising farmer on his way into town with produce. Slim modestly disclaimed any credit. "Hell," he said. "Any fool jackass would've thought of that."

Pike Welch's friends decided to let the body rest in the deep gully until the following Sunday—the best day for a nice funeral. So long as Welch had to go to the boneyard, he might as well wait until the thing could be done up proper-like.

The demise of Pike Welch left a void in the daily, and nightly, life of his killer, Jed Mink. Becoming bored, Jed found it necessary to pick someone else with which to quarrel. He made the slight error of picking on a man who was very quick and handy with a knife. By the time Mink learned of his mistake, he was dead, the dire and fatal result of a jagged opening in his throat.

(Continued on page 111)

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RIDE WITH THE GUNSMOKE JUDAS

By
THOMAS THOMPSON

To everyone but Chet Wainsworth, Gunther was the greatest leader the nesters ever had. But Chet knew that both he and the sodbusters could expect more mercy from the cattlemen's guns than from the deadly "friendship" of their champion.

TO LOOK at them, no man could guess that they had started as farmers. They were bearded and dirty, armed with knife and gun and rope, and one of them always stood near the camp, on guard, ready to kill if need be. They were wanted in a dozen places. And they were welcome in a hundred scattered dugouts and soddies.

The leader of the band, Les Gunther, leaned back on his elbows with a grass straw in his mouth, and his lizard eyes looked across the shimmering heat waves of the valley. He was a long, thin man with an angular jaw, the knots of his knuckles the only

remaining sign of the years he had spent grubbing in worthless soil that had never raised a crop. His wife had left him for a man with money; there was a hideous scar on his neck where a cattleman had burned him with a rope. "That's it, Chet," he said quietly, looking out across the valley. "Here's revenge, finally, and along with it a home for a lot of good people—and we're the ones that will get it for 'em."

The man called Chet was young. Like the others he was bearded and dirty and had the furtive look of a hunted man about him, but there was also rebellion in his pale

He whirled to face Chet, a
gun in his hand. . . .



blue eyes. He laughed shortly. "You're beginning to believe it, aren't you Les?" he said.

Anger was like a drawn curtain across Les Gunther's eyes. "You forgetting?" he said.

"Not likely," Chet Wainworth said.

"Don't ever," Gunther said. "It's Pete Bryan that claims that valley. Does that mean anything to you?"

Chet Wainworth stood up. He was tall and well built and the grace of his movements betrayed his youth. "I said I remembered, didn't I?" he said. He walked off into an oak thicket, passing the four men stretched out in the new grass, coming at last to the lookout stationed in a nest of rocks at the crest of the knoll. "Well?" Chet said.

"Tonight," the lookout said. His voice was the voice of an old man and there was a sprinkle of gray in his whiskers. "The cowboys will be out at the ranch. We can ride in and take over the town and come morning the wagons will be in the valley and the claims will be staked out."

"Then comes the slaughter," Chet said. "But we won't be there to see it."

"What's the matter, boy?" the old man said quietly.

"Maybe I'm tired," Chet Wainworth said. "Or maybe I'm sick of lying to myself."

"We're giving the folks in that wagon train a chance," the old man said. "That's good land down there. Free land. They got a right to it."

"Funny how convincing a man can get when he decides to become a saviour," Chet said. "Les has even convinced you."

"You better get some rest, Chet," the old man said.

Chet shook his head and a tired grin lifted one corner of his mouth. "Maybe I better get some sense," he said.

HE HADN'T heard Les Gunther come up behind him. He turned and Les was standing there, that lazy, loose jointed slouch making him look half asleep. He was grinning. "That's a good thought, Chet," Les Gunther said. "A little sense wouldn't hurt you." Gunther straightened suddenly. "General meeting, all hands," he said. He snapped the order like an army officer.

Another month of this, and you'll expect us to call you Sir, Chet thought disgustedly. He followed along with Nate Williams, the lookout, and presently, the other four members of the gang joined them under an oak tree. Les Gunther took his place in front of them, ramrod straight now, his hands laced behind his back. He paced back and forth, his eyes on the ground, while the men waited, tolerant half-grins on their bearded faces.

"Men," Gunther said finally, "down there is the free land we promised these settlers. They paid us to bring them here and we haven't failed 'em. There's a cowman by the name of Pete Bryan claims that valley." He paused dramatically. "I know that name means something different to every one of you, but to all of us, it means land grabbing. Pete Bryan won't like us moving into his valley." Gunther's voice took on a deeper tone. "There's women and kids depending on us, men. The law will call us raiders and even killers, but God is on our side. Don't ever forget that even when things go against us."

Chet Wainworth felt disgusted. He had come from a deeply religious family, and it was this sacrilege that had first driven him to examine Les Gunther's real motives. He knew now what Les Gunther was after, and there was nothing noble about it. They would ride down into that valley to plunder and steal anything they could get their hands on. Beyond the hill a dozen wagons waited; farm people who had been driven from their land and who now followed the shadowy figure of Les Gunther and his raiders in blind faith. By morning, those wagons would be in the valley; men and women would be kneeling in prayer, blessing the name of Les Gunther. And by nightfall, those farmers would be lucky if they were alive.

Chet didn't listen to the rest of Gunther's speech. He had heard it a dozen times. It was the only salve Gunther ever used on his conscience.

Les Gunther had been a self-styled preacher in the Kansas cooperative community that had once been home to the men in this band. He had a persuasive way of talking and after that bloody night when every building and nearly half the members of the community had been wiped out, revenge had been an easy commodity to sell. Chet Wainworth, only nineteen, had buried his

parents and joined up with Gunther's raiders.

At first there were more than fifty men in the band, an outfit pledged to land reforms and justice for the nesters, who were spilling west in ever increasing numbers, lured by the Homestead Act and the cheap railroad land. The National Grange was just starting to form. Les Gunther called himself its enforcement arm. One by one though, the members of the band dropped out as they saw Gunther bloat with his own importance, but they still supported him in his reign of blood and violence. In a few, the seed of hatred and revenge was too strong, so they remained with the band, and with the others, the chance for plunder was the only motive for remaining. Chet looked at the men, knowing them well. Old Nate Williams. Metzger, there by the tree. Cluny, Breckinridge, Kraft. And himself.

It was the end of the trail, and Chet knew it. Of the remaining band, Chet was the only one not wanted for crimes that had nothing whatsoever to do with land reforms. This was an outlaw band now, different from others only in that it could find sanctuary in the homes of farmers. For, Les Gunther knew a good thing when he saw it. He had never let the farmers forget that he was a martyr to a cause, hunted because he had fought for farmers' rights. Chet looked at Les Gunther now, seeing the hypocrisy in the man and hating him for it. He saw Gunther turn his head and open his shirt, exposing the scar of the rope burn. Once, the sight of that lynch noose had fired Chet Wainworth to the point of blindness. Now it disgusted him, for he knew that like everything else Les Gunther did, this too was a pose.

"This land is open to homestead," Les Gunther said. "You've seen the maps and you know it's so. Once we get our claims staked there ain't no law can put us off except the kind of law you carry in a holster and Pete Bryan himself taught us how to handle that kind of law."

"We're finally going to fight, then, are we?" Chet said. He saw Nate Williams glance at him nervously; he saw the quick anger in Les Gunther's eyes.

"We're claiming homes for them that need homes," Les Gunther said. "We're always ready to fight for the rights of our own folks."

"You've said it so damn often you believe it yourself," Chet said.

Gunther's anger came to full flame. The other men avoided Chet's eyes. "There's something on your mind, Chet," Gunther said quietly. "You better get it off your chest."

"All right," Chet said, "I will. I'm sick of your speeches, that's all. I joined up with you because a cowman killed my mother and because I figured folks like my folks wasn't getting a square deal."

"The rest of us are here for the same reasons, Chet," Gunther said convincingly.

Chet laughed harshly. "Look, Gunther," he said. "If we're gonna rob the bank in that town and loot the stores, let's do it. But let's don't make out like we got guts enough to fight Pete Bryan, because we haven't, and let's don't drag a bunch of farmers down there with us and then leave 'em there to fight it out alone."

ALL the slackness was back in Les Gunther's frame. Those lizard eyes of his came veiled and smoky. His voice was a lazy drawl. "I've never stopped a man from quitting if he was of a mind to quit," he said. "I reckon you can find your horse, can't you?"

"Damned easy," Chet said. "And I can protect my back, too." He turned, and walked rapidly away.

There was tenseness in his muscles, and he had trouble with his hands when he saddled his horse. He saw Nate Williams coming toward him and he busied himself with the cinch, trying to avoid Nate's eyes.

"Don't do it, boy," Nate said quietly.

"I've got to, Nate," Chet said.

"Even if you get out of this camp alive," Nate said, "you'll be dead inside a week. If the law don't get you right off, some cattleman will. The nesters won't cover up for you soon's they find out you quit Les Gunther. Gunther is like a god to 'em." The old man laid his hand on the boy's arm. "We've gone too far, son," he said kindly. "There ain't no turning back once you've gone as far as we've gone."

"Then go ahead," Chet said savagely. "But don't pull a bunch of dirt farmers into it with you. Go down there and loot and burn the town, but tell those farmers to turn back. Tell 'em you made a mistake bringing 'em here. Tell 'em the land ain't open."

He clamped his jaws and spoke through his teeth. "Or tell 'em Les Gunther ain't got the guts to face Pete Bryan."

Nate's old eyes softened and it was as if he were seeing things a long time gone. "Would it be because of Lorraine Pettigrew?" he asked.

Chet's blustering denial betrayed him.

"She's a pretty little thing," Nate said. "I noticed you talking to her a lot the last week or so when we was bringing the folks out here." His eyes clouded. "Maybe I don't blame you," he said, "but I've come to think of my own skin first. Gunther's crazy on a lot of things, I know, but he's right when he says we can't afford to have a man quit the band." Nate's eyes turned hard and he gave Chet a flat stare. "I agree with him there, Chet."

"Not you, Nate," Chet said softly. He reached down and took old Nate's hand briefly and for a moment he felt a strong companionship, remembering the days when this band had started out with such high ideals and purposes. "Let one of the others do it."

Nate Williams clung to the boy's hand. "I'd watch myself there at the end of the canyon if I was you," he whispered. "That's where I'd lay for you if I had to do the job."

"Thanks," Chet said briefly. He touched his spurs and rode across the grassy ridge and into the canyon that led to the tiny valley where a dozen wagons were drawn up in a tight camp, awaiting the signal to pull across the ridge and claim land they could call their own. They waited there, knowing there was trouble ahead, willing to face it because they were following Les Gunther and his raiders, secure in the knowledge that Les Gunther and his men would help them fight for their rights.

But Les Gunther wasn't going to fight. He would use the invasion of the nesters as a cover-up for his own operations and when the shooting started, Les Gunther and his raiders would be long gone.

Chet thought of the nesters, people who were like his own people. "You fools," he said softly. "Damn blind fools, all of you, but my kind of fools."

He rode into the canyon, and now, he had a rifle in his hand. He had seen men try to quit Les Gunther's band before. He had helped bury three of them.

FOREWARNED by old Nate, Chet rode cautiously, alert to every movement in the rocky canyon ahead of him. He started once when a ground squirrel skittered across the trail, straining his ears intently to hear above the sound of his horse's hooves.

Somewhere there ahead of him, a man who had been a saddle mate was waiting now to kill him. It would be Breckinridge, Chet figured. He had always liked Breckinridge; he felt no real malice toward him now. Breckinridge was a tool, just as a rifle was a tool. The crime of murder, if murder was a crime, rested on the shoulders of Les Gunther, a man who had started with a shining dream and then twisted that dream to fit his own purposes. And the betrayal of that dream was the real crime.

The ears of Chet's horse pricked forward suddenly and Chet tightened his grip on the reins. The sun beat down in the little canyon, its heat intensified by the reflection from the rocks. Chet felt the burning of his skin and knew it was partly from tension.

He didn't want to kill Breckinridge; he didn't want to kill anyone. But there was no choice. It was kill or die, and again it was Les Gunther who had brought that condition into being.

For a moment, Chet considered sinking his spurs and trying to make a run for it through the canyon. A man on a running horse made a mighty poor target. He might be able to get away with it. But before he could completely decide, he saw the movement in the rocks above the trail and knew that Breckinridge had already drawn a bead on him, Chet's shout echoed back and forth across the narrow canyon. "Don't do it, Breck." And immediately, shattering the echo, came the blast of the rifle.

The lead tore savagely through Chet's shoulder, nearly knocking him out of the saddle. He fought to regain his balance while he jerked his own rifle waist high and fired. He heard his lead screaming off a rock and then, an answering blast from Breckinridge. Chet kicked his right foot free of the stirrup and dropped to the ground, using his horse for a shield.

He fired twice across the saddle before the horse dropped without a sound, shot directly through the head. Chet stood there, blood streaming down his left arm. He heard Breckinridge say, "I'm sorry, Kid. I'm sorry as hell."

There was a smash of sound that exploded into darkness. Chet felt himself falling into a bottomless pit and a dark, dizzying cloud kept rolling down and piling up on him, smothering him in the moist blackness. He remembered the night the cattlemen had come to the Kansas community. He remembered burying his mother and his father and he remembered following the loose-jointed avenger, Les Gunther, a man of God who would lead grasshopper and drought starved people, a man who would grind his heel on land grabbing, murdering cattlemen. *An eye for an eye*, he remembered, and he could see his father reading from the huge, illustrated Bible. But even now, he couldn't forget that same Bible taught a man to turn the other cheek.

Everything seemed terribly real. The dark pit into which he was falling had slimy stone walls. He gripped at the walls until his fingernails were torn and the pain was alive in his arms. He lost his grasp and fell into total darkness.

And there, in the rocks above the trail, Breckinridge looked at his still smoking rifle. He knew that he should pump one or two more shots into the body that lay there below him. That was the way Les Gunther would have done it. But Breckinridge couldn't bring himself to do it. "Damn it, Kid," he said softly. "You shouldn't never have tried it." Shaking his head, he mounted his horse and turned back toward camp. . . .

It was deep night when Chet Wainworth opened his eyes. The velvet dome of heaven was spangled with brilliant stars and there were silver shafts of light reaching down toward the black outline of the rolling hills. It made him remember the pictures he had seen in his father's Bible. He lay there quietly, feeling a strange contentment as the soft breeze funneled down the rocky canyon and bathed his face.

For those seconds, it seemed to him that he should expect the fiery angels to be standing above him, the ones with blazing eyes and flaming swords; the avenging angels. The thought remained but a second and then, with a great physical shock, he realized that he was alive. Immediately, he tried to move and a searing, wracking pain tore at him, pinning him to the ground. A voice said, "He's coming around. Do you have any more of that whiskey, Sam?"

A huge, dark shape hovered over him. He

felt a bottle pressed against his teeth. He fought against it momentarily, then swallowed, and the hot, stinging liquid trickled down his throat and built a fire in his empty stomach. The dark shape spoke with a deep, rumbling voice. "I don't like ghosts, Miss Jane. I never did like ghosts."

"The man's alive," the soft voice said.

"Maybe he is," the man said, "but he's close enough to being dead that he might still be a ghost. And, if he ain't a ghost, he's one of them Gunther raiders that shot up the town. I tell you, Miss Jane—"

CHET'S eyes focused momentarily and he saw the girl. She was like an angel bending over him. He saw the dim outline of her face, the soft contour of her hair under a flat brim hat. "He couldn't be one of the raiders, Sam," the girl called Jane said. "He's five miles from town, isn't he? He must have been one of the settlers and he was shot by the raiders for some reason."

"What you aim to do with him, Miss Jane?" the man asked.

"Take him up to the line shack with us," the girl said. "Can you lift him?"

"Miss Jane," the man said with conviction, "there ain't nothing Sam can't lift."

The darkness came again and now there was a soft swaying movement and Chet Wainworth gave in to it. He was not sure if he had dreamed these things or if they were so. He only knew that at the moment, he didn't care. It didn't make that much difference. Death, he decided, was sometimes easier than living. A long time later, voices awakened him.

He stared up at rough, hand-hewn rafters and light trickling through the cracks between shakes. He was in a bunk of sorts. His clothes had been removed and he was wearing a man's shirt that was big enough to serve as a nightgown. He stirred uneasily and realized that his torso and left shoulder were bound tightly with bandages. He let his right hand stray to his face and found a thick, matted growth of beard, and when he touched his lips, they were dry and cracked. His cheeks felt sunken and hollow.

Presently a door opened, the light momentarily blinding him, and then the opening of the door was filled with the tremendous bulk of a man, with a body like the trunk of a tree, and huge arms and shoulders that

sloped up into a bull neck. Chet's eyes moved up and the man grinned, exposing a mouthful of solid gold teeth. "You a little late for breakfast, Mister," he said.

"You're Sam, aren't you?" Chet said.

The big man threw back his head and laughed and the sound rumbled all through the room of the cabin. "Doggone I guess you ain't a ghost after all," Sam said. "Leastwise I ain't never had a ghost call me by name before. Miss Jane! Doc!" he bel-lowed.

Two more people came into the cabin. One was a tall, sparse man and Chet thought of him immediately as a preacher. The other was the girl, and now Chet started searching his mind, wondering if there had been dreams scattered through the blackness, or if this was an actual person and she had really bathed his face and brushed the hair off his forehead. The girl came to the bed smiling. "It's been a long time," she said.

"How long?" Chet asked.

"A week," the girl said. "I'm Jane Bryan. And this is Doctor Acton. It's lucky for you and the rest of your people that he was around."

"It's more than luck," the doctor said. He had a deep, resonant voice. "This boy had the Man upstairs on his side. You go on out, Jane. I want to have a look at him."

Thoughts started building in Chet's mind; they were almost tangible, as if he could see them; they were like an inverted pyramid. The small thought at the apex was the name of Bryan, focused and sharp, and then, there was another row of thoughts and another and another, always building, always expanding, until suddenly, he was remembering Les Gunther and Breckinridge and old Nate and he was remembering the twelve wagons in the little valley. The farmers who were going to claim free land, land that was already claimed by Byran, the cattleman.

The doctor was fumbling with his bandages. "Thinking about something, son?" the doctor said.

"Jane," Chet said. "Jane Bryan. She's a cattleman's daughter."

"That's right," the doctor said, going on with his work. "Why?"

"A cattleman's daughter," Chet Wainworth said. "She saved my life."

"Any reason why she shouldn't?" the doc-

tor said, his voice firm and low and sure.

Chet thought of the cattleman who had killed his father and mother and the name of Bryan kept drumming against his ears. He squeezed his eyes tightly closed. "I don't know, Doc," he said. "There's so damn much I don't know."

He opened his eyes and the doctor was staring at him intently. "Admitting that this is the first step toward learning something," the doctor said quietly.

CHAPTER TWO

An Eye for an Eye

CHET sat on a stump in front of the line shack, the good sun pouring into his mending body. There was a basin of warm water on his lap and the girl was standing by him, her left hand against the side of his cheek. She dipped the straight razor in the basin and shook the water free and smiled at him. "If shaving is such a painful process," she said, "I should think all men would wear full beards." The razor scraped noisily against his cheek.

"I feel like a darn fool," Chet said. "I never had a woman shave me before."

"Well," Jane Bryan said, "I've never shaved a man before, so we're even."

"Why do you bother with me?" Chet said.

The girl looked at him intently. She had blue eyes, the kind of blue that sometimes comes in the twilight when the shadows lay thickly against a bushy slope. "Curiosity," she said, and he knew it was more than that. "I want to see what you look like under that beard." She puffed out one cheek, distorting her face. "Do that," she said.

He felt a soft, langorous contentment such as he had never known in his life, and then like a wedge, splitting his peace of mind, came the thought of the settlers who had taken their wagons into the valley. He had avoided talking about it, but now he had to know. "What happened that night?" he said. "The night you found me."

She paused now and looked straight into his eyes. "A band of raiders shot up the town and tried to rob the bank."

"Tried?" he said quickly. "They didn't get away with it?"

She was still watching him closely, trying to read his thoughts. "No one accom-

plishes anything by force," she said. She waited for him to argue that, and when he didn't, she said, "Doc Acton was ready for them."

"Doc Acton?" he said, puzzled.

"Doc is the marshal as well as the town doctor," she said. She moved directly in front of him and spoke as if she wanted to shock him into some confession. "Doc killed two of them." She waited expectantly but he held his questions, grimly silent. "One man was quite short," she said. "He had red hair. The other was a fat man with two fingers missing on his left hand."

Clunny and Breckinridge, he thought to himself. He felt no real emotion. "I was thinking about the farmers," he said. "What about them?"

He saw the gladness come into her eyes. "They're your people, aren't they?" she said.

"I have no people," he said brusquely.

"You talked a lot when you were unconscious," she said quietly. "I know they're your people."

He stared at her, wondering how much he had said, wondering how much she knew, and suddenly, he was seeing her as a cattleman's daughter prying into his affairs. "Why did you save me?" he said. "So your dad would have somebody to hang in the middle of Main Street?"

There was no responding anger in her eyes but there was something deeper, a hurt. "If my father knew you were here, you wouldn't be alive," she said softly. "He hates nesters the same way you hate cattlemen, and just as unreasonably." She turned swiftly, hearing a sound down the slope, and following her gaze, he saw the six riders in the flats below them. She snatched the basin from his lap and spilled the water. "Get in the cabin," she commanded.

"I've got nothing to run from," he said, a deep anger in him.

"Nothing but a lynch rope," she said. "Get in the cabin!"

He stood up quickly and felt the pain in his side and realized he would be completely helpless to defend himself. Reluctantly, he went to the cabin and closed the door and stood there, breathing heavily, remembering old Nate's warning that he would be an outcast, hated by nester and cattlemen alike, wanted by the law. . . .

There was a breech loading rifle hanging

on pegs on the wall and underneath, a box of shells on a little shelf. He took the gun and loaded it and stood by the front window, peering between the rough curtains.

The riders were coming slowly up the hill, led by a giant of a man with a fierce red beard. Chet's mouth went dry and an old hatred consumed him. All the men were armed with rifles and they had six-shooters belted around their middles. There were coils of rope on their saddles. He saw the girl standing there in front of the door, her arms folded, a completely defiant figure. The red-bearded man reined up close to her. "I've come to take you home, Jane," he said.

"I'm not going, father," the girl said quietly. "I told you that. Not as long as you try to be God."

"If I find rattlesnakes in my bed, I kill them," Pete Bryan said. He spoke across his shoulder. "Bring that horse up here, Stinson. If she won't get on it, put her on it."

A thick-set, brutish man rode forward, leading a saddle horse. "You better come along, Jane," the man called Stinson said. He was grinning wolfishly.

"No," the girl said.

"I said put her on the horse, Stinson," Pete Bryan said.

Stinson stepped out of his saddle. He was a thick man, his sleeves rolled back to expose hairy arms. He started moving toward the girl and Chet, from his vantage point, could see a growing excitement in the man's eyes, as he passed by. Then, he stood beside the girl and grinned. "Don't run from me, Jane," he said. "I've got your dad's permission this time." He reached out quickly and put both arms around the girl, pulling her close to his own body, deliberately prolonging the struggle. The glass crashed as Chet Wainworth pushed the rifle barrel through.

"Get your hands off her, Stinson," Chet said.

AT THAT moment Big Sam, who had been out gathering wood, came around the corner of the cabin. He stopped dead still, his eyes going wide, and then he gave a bellow of rage. He rushed in and his mammoth arms gripped Stinson from behind. Lifting the heavy man as if he were a child, he smashed him down against the ground.

Big Sam's chest was heaving, his eyes wild. "Don't you never put your hands on Miss Jane," he murmured.

"Why you devil!" Stinson exploded. His hand reached for his holster and Chet's rifle exploded.

The bullet sprayed gravel in Stinson's face and stopped his draw. Pete Bryan sat there, rage flooding his face, peering at the cabin. "Who you got in there?" he said finally.

"No one you know," the girl said defiantly.

Stinson picked himself up from the ground. "It's one of the nesters, boss!" he shouted. "Who else could it be? Doc Acton has been takin' care of the ones that got away and she's been helpin' him!"

"Surround the cabin!" Pete Bryan commanded.

Chet Wainworth had reloaded the rifle. "I'll kill the first man that makes a move," he said softly. "I'm not one of the nesters. I'm one of Les Gunther's raiders, and I learned the hard way how to deal with cattlemen! I been looking for you a long time, Pete Bryan. Ever since the night you burned out a town in Kansas just because nesters owned it. Do you remember that night, Pete Bryan, or shall I tell you about it?"

Pain that was greater than the wounds in his body dragged at Chet Wainworth. He stood there in the darkness in the cabin with the rifle thrust through the window, the bore centered directly between Pete Bryan's eyes. His finger tightened against the trigger and all the old memories and the old hatreds were strong in him. Then the girl moved directly between him and her father and Big Sam's hand reached into the waist band of his trousers and came up with a cocked six-shooter. "Mr. Pete," Sam said, "I worked for you a long time. Don't make me turn against you."

Pete Bryan was suddenly an old man. He was tired and his shoulders slumped and he stared instantly at his daughter. "Don't do this thing to me, Jane," he said softly.

"I can't stand any more, father," the girl said, and the tears were close.

The old man's shoulders straightened and there was hatred in him too, and old memories. "I aim to wipe out every nester that was in that bunch that came into the valley," Bryan said. "As far as I'm concerned it makes no difference if they're just dirt

farmers or part of Les Gunther's raiders. To me they're one and the same and you and Doc Acton won't change my mind. If you and Sam and Doc Acton go on protecting 'em, Jane, I'll count you as one of them."

"All right, father," the girl said quietly. "Then we know how we stand."

A sound that was half way between a curse and a sob broke across Pete Bryan's lips. He wheeled his horse savagely and signaled to his men with a wave of his hand. He rode back down the slope toward the flats, spurring his horse wickedly, and the riders followed him. A deathly quiet settled around the little line shack.

The girl ran a short distance, as if she would follow her father, then stopped and stood with her hands gripped at her sides. She was sobbing so bitterly that Chet could hear her. He leaned the rifle against the wall and walked out into the sunshine. "You were a fool to get mixed up in it, Sam," he said. "There was no need of it."

The mammoth man looked at Jane Bryan and he looked at Chet Wainworth. "Whatever Miss Jane does is right, Mr. Chet," Sam murmured. "I like to be right. It's the only way a man can live with himself." He thrust the six shooter back in his waist band and walked rapidly around the cabin.

For a long time, Chet Wainworth stood directly behind the girl as the memories that were part dreams and part realities became totally real. In his mind, she was standing over him, bathing his face, pressing cold towels against his forehead. The memory of her eyes was strong on him. Then he broke away from his thoughts and said "I'm sorry, Jane, Your father won't change and neither will I. What I said just now was the truth. I'm not a farmer looking for land. I'm one of Les Gunther's raiders. I'm an outlaw and a killer and it makes no difference to me if a man runs cows or digs in the dirt just so I get what I'm after."

She turned swiftly and she was facing him, the tears bright in her eyes, the torment that was in her plain on her face. "That isn't so, Chet," she said. "I told you you talked a lot when you were unconscious. I sat by your bed and held your hand and you talked to me as if you knew I was there. You told me everything you believed."

"A man can lie," he said.

She shook her head slowly. "Not when he's telling his dreams. Not when he's tell-

ing of having his own land and building his cabins and marrying and settling down and raising children."

"I never thought such a thing," he said bitterly.

"You did, Chet," she said. "And you had talked about it before with a girl. A girl named Lorraine Pettigrew."

HIS nostrils flared and the muscles were tight knots at the butts of his jaw. He had talked, then. And he had told the truth. The real truth that lay deep within him, smouldering and churning, the dream of peace that was at constant war with his hatreds and his thirst for revenge. "I lied to her then," he said. "I told her what she wanted to hear." There was deep resentment in his voice. "I've ridden a long ways, Jane, and my one thought was to kill your father. Anything I have done or said was building toward that one thing. I came here for that reason and that reason alone. If you thought you could change me, I'm sorry about it, because you can't."

"I can't change you," she said, "but a man can change himself."

"It's a woman's way of thinking," he said. "It's broken a lot of hearts."

She seemed tired—too completely tired to even raise her voice. "You fool," she said sadly. "You pitiful men. You and my father both. If you kill my father will it end your memories? If he kills you will he sleep better?"

"Pete Bryan sleeps well," he said, "and he eats well."

She shook her head. "There's no understanding in you, is there?" she said. "You don't see that what tortures you could torture another man do you?"

"I know what I know," he said.

"Do you?" she said. "Do you know that my father made a mistake once because he believed a lie? Do you know that he had a brother—a brother he loved very much? My uncle. My uncle was found there in Kansas, stripped, beaten and hanging from a limb. Some said it was the farmers who did it and my father was part of a band that killed and slaughtered and burned because of it."

She moved in front of Chet Wainworth and made him meet her eyes. "My father has never had a full night's sleep since, Chet Wainworth. I've seen him sit in front of the fire by the hour, rubbing his hands together,

twisting them and turning them, trying to rub the blood away. And instead of getting down on his knees and admitting his mistake to God, he keeps fighting, swearing that every farmer that ever lived brought this thing on him when it's only his own conscience that bothers him." A short sob broke her voice and she shrugged her shoulders as if it didn't matter any more. "Go ahead, Chet Wainworth. Take a horse from the corral. I'll give you your gun belt and your gun and I'll give you the rifle and the ammunition, too, because you'll need it. Go ahead, Chet Wainworth, keep building a fire under you revenge and your hatred and sometime when it has consumed you completely, think of Lorraine Pettigrew and the dream you had—"

The tears spilled over and she ran toward the cabin. She paused at the doorway and glanced at him briefly. "And think of me," she said bitterly.

She hurried inside the cabin and threw out his gun belt and his six-shooter and the rifle and its shells. They landed in the dirt in the yard and the cartridges scattered and he had to pick them out of the dust. Then, the door slammed and through the shattered window, he could hear her sobbing. Chet Wainworth took the weapons and started walking slowly toward the corral. He saw Big Sam standing there, waiting for him, and then he saw the saddled and badly used horse in the corral. Presently Doc Acton came out of the shed and started unsaddling the horse. He didn't look at Chet Wainworth. He spoke across his shoulder. "You leaving, Chet?"

"You intend to stop me, law man?" Chet said.

Doc Acton turned and looked steadily at Chet, his cavernous eyes serious, his thin, drawn face grey with tiredness. "Why, Chet?" he asked. "Do you want to be stopped?"

"I seem to have run off at the mouth," Chet said. "I figured maybe you'd want to be a hero. You could set up a scaffold in the main street of the town, hang me and leave me there for a day or so. That ought to set you in pretty good with Pete Bryan."

"I suppose it would," Doc Acton said. "I suppose it would at that." He stared steadily at Chet. "But I'm most interested in setting good with myself, Chet. That bay there is a good horse. You'll find what's

left of the settlers in the little valley at the end of the canyon and I reckon you'll find Les Gunther there too. They're about ready for a leader like him, in spite of anything I can tell them." He turned, ignoring Chet completely. "Or maybe you'd do as their leader, Chet. Sam will saddle up for you."

Big Sam moved woodenly. There was a great weight inside Big Sam. It puzzled him and tormented him. Big Sam's thoughts were simple and direct. He had seen Jane Bryan cry softly in the night during that time when they didn't know if Chet Wainworth would live or die. He had seen Jane Bryan stand against her own father because of Chet Wainworth. That was a mighty big thing to Sam. That was a woman, choosing her man, standing against the world because of her man. That was the biggest thing there was, Sam figured. He shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doin', Mr. Chet," he said. "You better know, Mr. Chet, because if you don't know, I reckon I'm gonna have to kill you."

CHET rode away from the cabin slowly. He had put an arrogant set to his shoulders for he wanted to show his contempt for these people who seemed to be obsessed with the idea that the world could be right.

He was fighting hard now to protect himself, knowing that if he let down for even a moment—if he dared to discuss this thing with Doc Acton—he might be forever lost. Again it was that old childhood struggle and the complete inability to understand whether a man should claim an eye for an eye or whether a man should turn the other cheek. He rode away and when he was out of sight of the cabin, his shoulders slumped and the pain inside him hurt him until he wanted to cry like a baby.

He made himself think of that night in Kansas and of those burning cabins and the meetings that had followed. He saw again Les Gunther standing on a box shouting his curse against all cattlemen into the torch lighted night. Such talk had been food once to Chet Wainworth, and balm for his grief. It had been blood in his veins, the something a man needed, to go on. A man had to have a cause and a belief, and a strong belief was one that was sired by blood and revenge and the blind charge behind a flag.

Chet's shoulders pained him. Perspiration was thick on his face and it ran down

his neck and down the crease of his back. He thought of Jane Bryan, and not wanting to think of her, immediately thought of his own father and mother and how they had lived and worked together, always striving for something, always struggling. And getting nothing, he thought bitterly. Nothing but flame and death for a lifetime of effort. And immediately he knew that was a lie. They had had each other; they had had their happiness. They too had had a belief, a cause to follow, and they had followed it. A belief that was imbedded in basic love. If fate had been cruel to them, he supposed that, in their way, they had turned the other cheek and built upon those disappointments and gone on. But damn it, they were dead. Or were they?

He came at last to the canyon and the scraps and remnants of the campsite where he had broken with Les Gunther. Down the trail, he saw the very spot where Breckinridge had shot and wounded him and he saw the place in the trail where he had fallen.

It gave him a feeling of great apartness. He sat there on his horse and stared down at the spot where for a time, at least, he had lain in death. It was as if, suddenly, he had become two different people; one the dead shell there on the ground, the other this whole man riding a horse and trying to make a decision. The feeling obsessed him and tormented him until it was almost as if he had a choice to make, right here, in this very place. He could pick up that dead body, that empty shell, and wear it again and ride on; or he could leave it there in the trail, start anew, and make his decisions all over again. He rode down the trail, glad to be rid of the feeling that had been so strong on him.

The little valley was a pleasant place. Its grass carpet was sprinkled with wild flowers that blared in the bright sunlight. But now there was a feeling of tension and hatred that sullied the very air. There were two wagons there in the valley, two out of twelve. Suddenly, Chet knew the tragedy that had hit this band of settlers.

He spurred his horse into a run, forgetting the pain in his shoulder, and he searched the faces upturned toward him. He counted them by the dead rather than by the living. Ten men missing, ten out of nineteen. He saw the women around the community cook fire and by reading their faces he knew his

count had been correct. He dismounted stiffly and stood there, waiting to be invited in or rejected, not knowing which it would be. Old Luke Pettigrew came forward. "Chet Wainworth," he said. "Thank God you're alive. How about Mr. Gunther and the others?"

The title of respect told Chet that these people hadn't recognized their betrayal by Gunther. They still believed Les Gunther was their leader and that he had fought for them and been driven off. "I got separated from the others," Chet said. "I don't know how they are, except that Breckinridge and Cluny are dead."

"Good men, both," Pettigrew said. "Damn good men." His white beard trembled with his rage and he shook his fist at his God. "If Les Gunther's alive, he's got ten more raiders to ride with him, I promise you that! Ten more now, and in time, we'll have ten times ten, because there'll never be no peace until every cattleman is driven off the plains."

There was muttered assent, and glancing at the men, Chet recalled again that first night when Les Gunther had talked his way. This was the dream stuff, the building of the fire, the ideal that blinded a man until there was no right except this one way. It was just a forward movement without thought, a stampede without reason.

He saw Lorraine Pettigrew detach herself from the group by the fire and walk toward one of the wagons. He went to her and she looked up at him, her gladness unmasked in her soft, brown eyes. "I've prayed for you, Chet," she said quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

Their Type of Man

HE TOOK her arm and walked away from the wagon, across the end of the little valley where the wild flowers were thick and the deep, moist heat of late spring lay over everything. The fragrance of the grass and growth was in their nostrils, needing only the scent of newly turned sod to make a completeness. "It must have been bad," he said, nodding his head toward the wagons.

"It was terrible, Chet," she said. "We were met by a blast of rifle fire." Her eyes grew puzzled. "If you and Mr. Gunther

and the others could have gotten to us—"

He took both her shoulders and turned her toward him. "Look at me, Lorraine," he said. "Look at me and listen. I couldn't get to you because I wasn't there in the first place. Breckinridge shot me because I wanted to quit Gunther's band."

"Quit?" she said, not believing.

"Gunther had no intention of helping you. He wanted to rob the town, get what he could get and go on. Gunther doesn't care whether you ever get that land or not. He doesn't care about anything except himself."

He saw the disbelief in her eyes and then something that was almost anger. "You have no right to talk that way about a man who has dedicated his life to helping us," she said. "Why do you talk this way?"

"Because it's the truth," he said.

She stared at him, wanting to believe him because she loved him, not wanting to believe him because, if he were telling the truth then everything they had done was wrong. "But Pete Bryan," she said. "You told me about him and of how you had to fight him. How you could never rest until you found him—"

"I found him," he said. "And it was Pete Bryan's daughter who saved my life."

Lorraine Pettigrew was staring deep into his eyes. She smiled, but it was a smile that trembled. "I see," she said softly. She turned quickly so that Chet could not see her face. "I bless her for helping you, Chet," she whispered.

He stayed in the camp that night and was fed and treated like a hero, for no one but Lorraine knew that he had tried to desert Les Gunther's band and the name of Les Gunther was on every tongue, almost like a prayer.

"If Les Gunther got away, he'll be back," Luke Pettigrew said. "I reckon if I know Les Gunther, he's out rounding up extra help and we'll smash Pete Bryan and everything that's his. We'll clean a wide swash behind us and let folks come in and settle and then we'll move on to the next place. Wherever there's a cow on free grass, we'll move."

Chet Wainworth listened, a sickening conviction growing within him. Old Nate Williams had been right. He was an outcast. Even among his own people, for, as soon as they discovered that he had turned against Les Gunther, they would turn on him with a savage hatred. For they were strange,

these settlers. They were individuals, every one of them, and yet they could be happy only in a group. They started making laws before they unpacked their wagons, for they were a peaceful people, but if any man broke one of their laws, their justice was wickedly swift. They avoided trouble and violence, but if trouble and violence came to them, they could fight back with the ruthlessness of an Indian.

"We'll wait two more days," Luke Pettigrew said. "If Les Gunther ain't back by then, I say we go it alone."

"We need a leader," Pers Legal said. "A man can't jump on his horse and go off in six directions all at once."

"We've got Chet Wainworth," another said. "You, Mary, pour Chet Wainworth another cup of coffee."

"Chet Wainworth is the likely one," Luke Pettigrew said.

Chet drank his coffee and stared at the fire and the warm glow of being wanted as a leader fell across him like a warm shadow and then, was gone. "Maybe if we formed a committee," Chet said carefully. "Maybe if we went under a flag of truce and talked with Pete Bryan."

There was a long silence and then Luke Pettigrew laughed uproariously and slapped his knee. "Danged if you ain't got the sense of humor, Chet Wainworth! You're shot half to hell but you can still joke!"

The rest of the men roared their laughter and it filtered out across the valley, a strange sound mingling finally with the weeping of women whose husbands were dead.

So, for two days they waited, their impatience growing as they saw their horses and their cattle strip the little meadow clean and saw their own food supply dwindle away to nothing. During those two days, Chet heard much of the way Doc Acton and a nameless giant had helped after the battle there in the valley. If it hadn't been for them, they all agreed, they could have been trapped and wiped out. The giant had packed in additional food and the doctor had taken care of the wounded.

"The Doc worked as hard as if he was gonna be paid for it," one man said. "How a man as fine as him can stomach livin' in a cow town, is more than I can see."

"The only reason he helped us is because he's got an eye for business," Luke Pettigrew said, always the cynical one. "He

knows if us farmers move in here there'll be that much more business for him." Luke laughed shortly. "Farmers have lots of kids."

Chet got up and moved away from the men. Then he saw Lorraine Pettigrew coming across toward him.

IT WAS difficult for him to talk to Lorraine now, for there seemed to be so little he could say to her. Every time he tried to talk to her he found himself wanting to explain about Jane Bryan. He wanted desperately to discuss his feelings with her, the way he knew he could have discussed them with Doc Acton or with Jane herself. But he had no such basis of discussion with Lorraine and he found himself suddenly lonely when he was with her.

They walked together silently, arm in arm, until they were a good distance from the camp. Lorraine stopped suddenly. She was a pretty girl. A small breeze stirred her chestnut hair. She looked up at him and said quite seriously, "You've never kissed me, Chet."

"A man don't make a promise until he is sure he can keep it," Chet said.

"Kiss me," she whispered, and she moved close to him and tilted her face toward him and he could feel the warmth of her, the longing.

He had dreamed of this girl a hundred nights and he had seen her in the flame of his campfire. The fragrance of her flesh was a memory in his nostrils and sometimes he thought of her with a savage, man hunger. For a swift second, the possibility of fulfillment was there in his eyes and she saw it and waited expectantly and then she saw the light die. He leaned forward and kissed her on the lips without taking her in his arms. She closed her eyes tightly and he did not see the two tiny tears that squeezed from between her lids. "Thank you, Chet," she said. "It's not a promise. Don't ever think of it as such."

She turned and ran quickly back to the wagon and he stood there, tormented in his mind, knowing that in some way he had hurt her, not knowing exactly how.

A tremendous tumult rose over by the camp. Chet looked that way and saw a horse running erratically down the slope. A man was clinging to the saddle, swaying to one side and then the other. One foot

was out of the stirrup and the leg dangled as if it had been shattered with an ax. A choking fear rose inside Chet and he went running headlong, stumbling across the close cropped ground. The rider's hat was gone, exposing the iron grey hair. It was old Nate Williams.

Because he had been further up the valley Chet was able to reach Nate well ahead of the men from the camp. He pulled the horse to a stop and turned to help the old man out of the saddle, but he was too late. Nate had already fallen. He hit the ground heavily and he lay there panting, blood bubbling across his lips. He kept staring up at Chet, his pupils round and bright. "I tried to quit, Chet," he panted. "Glad to see you made it."

"Where's Les?" Chet demanded. "Kraft and Metzger? They still with him?"

The old man fought to answer, his eyes rolling wildly now. His tongue licked the blood from his lips. "Kraft, Metzger, Les," he said. "They're coming here. Les figures he can organize a new band with these men—" The old man coughed, fighting for breath. "It's wrong, Chet. I tried to quit. After you left I knew I had to quit, because you were right, Chet. Don't ever forget you were right—"

It was the last words Nate Williams said or ever would say. The men from the camp came running up, their breathing noisy and heavy in the sudden silence. "Nate Williams, ain't it?" Luke Pettigrew said. "What'd he say? What'd he say about Gunther?"

Chet Wainworth turned and looked at the men and he looked beyond them to the wagons and saw the women around the fire and he saw Lorraine Pettigrew standing alone. And suddenly he knew that this thing that had happened was not a fight that belonged to these people or to any other group. No fight was a group fight, but a struggle that started in the individual and then spread. These folks were chips swept up in a tide, the same way he had been swept up, and they were wrong to be carried along this way because they were not making up their own minds to anything. They were letting someone else do their thinking, and that, he realized suddenly, was the same thing that had happened to Pete Bryan. He had let others do his thinking and he had ridden along on a raid and because Pete Bryan was a rich

and powerful man, his name had been remembered when other names had been forgotten.

"What did Les Gunther say?" Luke Pettigrew demanded again.

"He sent word for you folks to wait right here," Chet Wainworth said.

"Wait?" Luke Pettigrew said. "Then what?"

"You'll know by tomorrow," Chet Wainworth said. "I'll get word to you." He started toward where his horse was picketed.

"And you?" Luke Pettigrew said. "What do you aim to do?"

"I aim to go see Les Gunther," Chet said. "Him and me have got a couple of things to talk over."

"Good!" Luke Pettigrew said explosively. "Then we can get things straightened out around here."

"That's what I figger," Chet Wainworth said softly. "You take good care of Lorraine, Luke."

HE WAS able to back track old Nate's horse far enough to make sure that Nate had ridden down the canyon. From there he rode by guess and hope until he came to Les Gunther's original campsite and there again he picked up the trail and saw that it led across the hogback down toward the line cabin where Jane Bryan and Doc Acton and Big Sam had been staying. He felt a quickening of his pulse as he thought of Jane, but his real mission drove the emotion from him.

He would circle around the cabin, he decided. He didn't want Jane nor the others to see him, for he knew now that this was a thing he would have to settle alone.

He dropped into the swale and climbed the low, rolling hill, and had reached the top before he heard the first crack of rifle fire coming from a great distance. He reined up sharply, a sickening panic inside him, and then he sunk his spurs and rode furiously down the slope, his urgency putting all thoughts of bodily pain from his mind.

Presently he came to the clearing. He could see across to the line shack and the corral, a good distance away, and now there was a rapid firing from the side window of the cabin which he recognized as pistol shots. The answering fire from the corral was slow and confident. Nearer, on this side of the

cabin, he saw three horses and knew that one of them was Les Gunther's grulla dun. The horses stood spread legged, heads down. They had been ridden to death and that explained to him the reason for Les Gunther's stop here at the line shack. "Why in the devil didn't you give him horses, if that's what he wanted?" Chet thought fiercely. "Why did you have to get mixed up in this?"

He saw a man run from one cover to another out there in the corral and he thought he recognized the man as Metzger. Chet jerked his rifle from the saddle boot, shoved in a shell and rode straight in toward the cabin, intending to thrust himself between the cabin and the men there in the corral.

At that moment Les Gunther and Kraft broke from cover and ran straight toward the cabin, crouched low, ducking from side to side. There was no answering fire from the cabin and Chet remembered with a sickening realization that he had let Jane Bryan give him the only rifle. Big Sam had a six-shooter and probably not much ammunition. Chet saw Gunther and Kraft plunging their shoulders against the flimsy door as he raced toward them and he was positive he heard a woman scream.

Chet threw himself from his horse, ripping open the old wound in his shoulder. He felt the throbbing pain of it, felt the blood seeping through his shirt. He ran on foot, the rifle still gripped in his hand, and now he was yelling Les Gunther's name.

Gunther half turned and in that second, the door opened and Big Sam came rushing through, his tremendous fists flailing. "Stand back, Sam," Chet yelled, unable to fire now for fear of hitting Sam.

But Big Sam didn't hear. Miss Jane was in danger and Big Sam knew only one thing to do. Chet saw the big man's hands lock around Kraft's neck. He saw Kraft jerked from the ground and swung from side to side and then Sam threw him half way across the yard. Kraft lit in a crumpled heap, his neck broken, and Sam turned toward Les Gunther.

There was a muffled sound of a pistol shot and Sam kept pushing forward, bearing Gunther down to the ground, still fighting with every ounce of breath that was in him. Chet heard Gunther scream. There were two shots from the corral and dust puffed from Big Sam's shirt as the bullets tore into him.

Big Sam got to his feet and Les Gunther darted inside the cabin. There were three more shots from the corral and Big Sam stood there, taking the lead, shaking like a tree under an ax with each smash of a bullet. He seemed to be totally blind and totally unable to realize his position. He started to walk directly toward the rifle there in the corral. He walked with a steady, determined gait that became a long shuffle and Chet could stand it no longer. He too started running toward the corral, calling Sam's name.

Bullets kicked around Chet's feet and now Big Sam had reached the corral fence. He tried to climb it. He got one foot on the bottom rail and that was as far as he could go. He fell that way and hung across the fence, his feet touching on one side, his finger tips touching on the other. Chet threw himself flat on the ground and started firing, reloading, firing again. He had never known he was capable of the savage rage that was in him now.

There was the sound of furious struggling inside the cabin but no shots from that direction. Over in the corral, Metzger was fighting to keep cover behind a double corner post. Chet saw the man's shoulder. He snapped to his feet, threw the heavy Springfield to his shoulder and fired. Metzger spun out from behind the post, gripping his shoulder, and Chet fired again. Metzger fell and Chet loaded and deliberately put another shot into the man's body before running toward the cabin.

Les Gunther had knocked Jane to the floor. At the sound of the door flinging open, he whirled to face Chet, a gun in his hand. Chet swung the rifle barrel and crashed it across Gunther's shoulder. The impact knocked the six-shooter out of Gunther's hand and in the second he was off balance, Chet swung the rifle again.

This time Gunther was ready. He reached up and gripped the rifle barrel and twisted savagely, tearing it out of Chet's single hand grip. Chet's left arm hung uselessly at his side. An evil grin distorted Les Gunther's face. He came rushing in and Jane, there on the floor, reached out and gripped one of his ankles.

Gunther fell hard and Chet was on top of him, slugging with his right fist, beating at the face of the man who had turned a dream into senseless slaughter.

A DIZZYING blackness seeped over Chet and he could no longer tell what he was doing. The pain of his wound and the weakness of his sickness overcame him. He fought against it and he heard his own breath sobbing in his lungs, trying to gulp in new strength. He knew that Jane was there with him, fighting with him, doing what she could. He saw Les Gunther's face and he smashed his fist against it and he knew he could not raise his arm again. There was not that much endurance in a man.

When he regained consciousness he was still there on the cabin floor. The place was a shambles, the planks blood-splattered. He saw Jane first, her clothing torn, her hair hanging loose, a wicked bruise spreading across her cheek. She was kneeling beside him, her hand caressing his face. He looked at her, and knew he loved her, and knew that love was stronger than the hatred between a cattleman and a sodbuster. He realized suddenly that there were other people in the room. He turned his head and looked directly into the eyes of Pete Bryan.

The old cattleman stood there, his red beard giving a fierceness to his appearance, but his eyes now were the eyes of a defeated man. Pete Bryan too knew that love was stronger than hate. He turned and stalked swiftly out of the cabin, a man who, regardless of what came, would have to keep his pride.

Doc Acton came forward then. He knelt down beside Chet Wainworth. "There's damn little use in patching you up, boy," he said. "You just get yourself torn open again."

Chet tried to get to his feet. "Les Gunther," he said. "How about Les?"

"He's outside," Doc Acton said. "Taken care of."

"How'd you get here?" Chet asked.

"I had gone over to the settler's camp," Doc explained. "I cut through town to pick up some things and missed you that way, I guess. Jane and I decided that if we could get the settlers up here to a meeting so we could all talk we might be able to work out something. We couldn't go to their camp because Jane's dad was watching for that, so I brought the settlers here."

"They're here now?" Chet interrupted.

"They're outside with Les Gunther," Doc Acton said, and by the way he said it, Chet knew what it meant.

"They decided to believe the truth about Gunther," Chet said.

It was Big Sam that made them decide," Doc Acton said. "Big Sam was a friend to them. When Jane told them what Sam had tried to do and how Gunther had shot him."

"Don't talk any more," Jane said. She reached out and smoothed Chet's hair.

Doc Acton got up and left the cabin and Jane and Chet were alone. She leaned closer and kissed him on the lips. There was a small sound that might have been a sob, and when Jane and Chet looked up Lorraine Pettigrew was standing there in the doorway.

Some instinct given only to women told Jane the identity of this girl. Jane stood up slowly, unable to meet the other girl's eyes, and then she said quietly, "I'll go, Lorraine. It's your place here with him."

Lorraine Pettigrew managed a smile. She shook her head slowly from side to side. "No, Jane," she said.

"He told you?" Jane said.

"That's right," Lorraine Pettigrew said, and now her smile was genuine. "He told me." She turned and went outside.

On a tree, a hundred yards from the cabin, the body of Les Gunther twisted slowly on the end of a rope. Luke Pettigrew and the other settlers stood silently, not proud of what they had done and not ashamed. They were strong men, men who hated violence, but men who would never run from it.

Pete Bryan saw them, and in this moment of rough justice he understood them and knew them to be men of his own calibre.

"If you come hellin' and roarin' back into that valley," Pete Bryan said, "me and my boys will meet you with hellin' and roarin'. And if you think we give you a fight the last time, wait'll you see the next one." He spat through his red beard. "If you come into that valley quiet and peaceful like decent folks," he said, "you'll be treated like decent folks. If you want to keep my cows out of your corn, you better build yourselves some damn fences."

He jerked his horse around and rode down the hill and the settlers looked at each other and nodded their heads, knowing that here was a man they could understand.

Inside the cabin Chet Wainworth and Jane Bryan heard none of this. But they held to each other tightly, knowing that whatever had been wrong was now right; knowing for sure that it would always be so.

By
**HENRY
CARLTON
JONES**



It was bloody showdown hour in Painted Rock, and the sheriff's wife could only count off the seconds, and hope she'd won her desperate battle to stay . . .

The hands of the clock still had several long minutes to creep before they reached the deadline!

THE DEADLY SECOND

THE knot under Mattie Cameron's heart tightened as she entered the Hunsaker store and read the pity in the eyes of Will Hunsaker. And when Pamela Hunsaker darted a quick look at her husband and began to chatter about the new gingham they'd just received from St. Louis, she knew it was true.

For the Hunsakers were her friends, a

kindly pair . . . friends of Andrew's too. She knew that well. And she knew they were sorry for her. It was easy to see in their eyes, in their embarrassed manner, for they were simple people, not skilled at pretense.

She listened to Pamela's too-rapid discussion of the new gingham and fingered their textures lovingly with fingers that were numb. And she, too, tried to pretend, as the Hunsakers were trying. But her mind was racing.

"So it's a showdown," she thought. "Andrew's going to fight him. In spite of his sore arm." And she knew, with awful certainty, that Andrew could not win. Not with his draw slowed down by that stiff arm . . . hurt two weeks ago when he'd stopped a runaway horse on the public square.

"That pink and white check'd look awful pretty on you; goes just right with your blue eyes and yellow hair." Pamela was holding up a bolt of cloth for her to admire. But Mattie wasn't listening any longer. She was through pretending. She had to talk. To try. Had to do something before she snapped inside.

She pushed back the bolt of gay cloth. "Pam . . . Will . . ." she began. Then, rushing on. "Can't somebody stop it? Andrew's in no condition to fight. It's all he can do to hold a gun . . . or even use his hand to feed himself." She stopped, staring at them, from one face to the other.

It was hopeless. She saw it in their faces. Andrew was the sheriff. He'd ordered Bob Dell to leave Painted Rock. She'd overheard scraps of conversation, broken off abruptly when she appeared, at the post office earlier in the morning. Now she knew Bob Dell hadn't left town, didn't intend to leave. He intended to stay and fight it out with the sheriff . . . Andrew.

And, stiff arm or not, Andrew would face him, meet him for the showdown to see who was boss in Painted Rock . . . law or outlaw. There was nothing she could do. But she had to try.

Will Hunsaker was squinting out the front door of the store. His leathery, lined face wore an expression of acute unhappiness as he stared over toward the new yellow brick courthouse in the square. Gazing over his shoulder, Mattie saw that the clock in the tower said six minutes before ten.

The store keeper shook his head and turned toward her. "Andy's our sheriff,

Mattie," he said softly. He added, "And a good one."

"And he's also my husband . . . and I don't want to lose him." Mattie said through stiff lips.

"I know. I know." Will said gently. Then he shook his head, sadly this time. "But he figures he's got his job to do. I don't reckon he'd want anybody interferin' in his affairs. And if he's made up his mind he won't change it. He never does."

Mattie broke in hotly. "But what difference does it make whether Bob Dell leaves town or not." Her voice was high, strained. "Suppose Andrew *did* order him to leave . . . and he doesn't go? What of it?" She felt Pamela's hand, in a gesture meant to be soothing, sympathetic, on her arm but she shook it off. "Why does it matter? Why?"

WILL HUNSAKER tried to explain patiently. "Bob Dell's a gunfighter. A mean man. He's like a diamond back rattler. Apt to strike anytime and at anybody in reach. And he's lookin' fer trouble. If he stays in town somebody's apt to get killed . . . That's why Andy told 'im to get out of town. Figured it was his job to make him leave before Bob decides to throw down on somebody."

"That isn't it." Mattie cried. "You know it isn't. Bob Dell's been trying for a year to get a showdown with Andrew. When he'd have an advantage, like now; when Andrew's arm is still stiff." She twisted her hands nervously. "Oh, when *will* this country start being civilized?"

Pamela answered as Mattie knew she would. "Don't you see, honey?" she said, and her voice was low, soft, intense, "That's why Andy's standing up to Bob Dell. Andy's part of what you just called civilization. He's the Law and the Law means civilization. And if the sheriff lets an outlaw gunfighter back him down—" She hesitated, then pointed to the new courthouse. "Well, that new courthouse over there just wouldn't mean a thing."

But Mattie didn't want to listen. She pushed past her, eyes blind with sudden tears. They didn't attempt to stop her. They'd tried to help, tried to make her understand, but she couldn't. She didn't want to. She just wanted to save Andrew—her Andrew.

Outside her little heels beat an angry

tattoo on the plank sidewalk that ran around the square. She rushed blindly, not knowing where she was going.

Then she wheeled suddenly, held up her skirts above the dust of the littered street, dodged between two teams, and started across the street toward the courthouse. In crossing she met Mr. Stapleton, the T & P stationmaster, who bowed and tipped his hat politely but she hurried past him.

Zack Burnside, Andrew's only deputy, also jailer, was alone in the sheriff's office. Tilted back in his chair, with his feet on the desk, he was reading an El Paso newspaper. She saw him gulp and hastily remove his booted feet from the desk.

"Why, howdy, Miz Cameron. This here's a unexpected pleasure." Zack said uncomfortably. He lurched to his feet, removed his battered hat to expose a damp fringe of mouse-colored hair around a bald pate of startling whiteness.

"Is Mr. Cameron around anywhere?" she asked, trying to smile. She never referred to Andrew by his first name in public and seldom came to the office.

"Why, no ma'am. I'm afraid he ain't." Zack answered slowly. "Seems like he said he was goin' over to Sam Sawyer's liver' stable. Somebody stole a set of harness off Sam th' other night."

Something told her Zack was lying. Andrew was somewhere else, keeping an eye on Bob Dell, watching to see if Dell left town or not, making sure no trouble broke out. She came to the point with a swiftness that left Zack no defense.

"How long did he give Bob Dell to get out of town?" Her voice was hard and brittle.

"One o'clock." Zack looked distressed and fingered his bald spot nervously. Then he unconsciously hitched up the heavy pistol that sagged at his belt. He frowned and stared at the worn toes of his dusty boots.

"What time is it now, Zack?" she asked.

Zack tugged out a thick silver cased watch. He sprung open the cover and deliberately studied the dial. "One minute before ten," he said. Not many men had watches in Painted Rock but Zack was one who did. Clocks were scarce, too, in this frontier country. Such things were expensive luxuries. An idea began to form in Mattie's mind.

"Do you think Dell will leave?" she asked quickly.

"No ma'am. I don't." Zack's tone was

blunt, his voice rough with some deep emotion. He continued to stare at his boots.

"Then there's no way to stop it?" she said hopelessly.

Zack shook his head. "Not unless Bob leaves town before one there ain't. Andy Cameron never changes his mind or loses his nerve. If Bob ain't gone at one, he'll be right out there by them South steps, lookin' for 'im, like he told Bob this mornin'." He lifted his head and she looked into his eyes, eyes that held that faded, bleak look she saw in the eyes of so many Western men . . . and hated every time she saw it.

She tried another possibility. "Is Judge Musgrove upstairs?" She indicated the district court room on the second floor over their heads. The old judge, with his calm good sense, might know how to prevent the battle.

"No, ma'am. Court ain't in session this week an' I guess he's out at his ranch lookin' after things." Zack took a deep breath. He went on. "I reckon I know how you feel, Miz Cameron. But they ain't anything anybody can do t' stop it. Andy told 'im t' leave an' if he don't pull freight outa here by one—well—there'll be trouble. But I'll be around t' make certain everything's fair." He paused and looked away.

There it was. The Western code. Nobody could interfere to stop a gunfight once it was fated. All anyone could do was "be around to make certain everything was fair." But there wasn't anything fair about this. She knew it and Zack knew it . . . and Bob Dell knew it.

Wearily she turned away. "Thank you, Zack. It's nice to know you'll be around . . ." she swallowed . . . "To be sure everything's fair." She went out, aimlessly and halted in the barren emptiness of the deserted corridor. Down the corridor, she could hear voices in the county clerk's office but she knew no one there she wanted to see.

One o'clock. The fateful words rocketed through her mind. One o'clock. One o'clock! One o'clock! Clock! *Clock!*

THEN the idea came to her. A plan so desperate she hardly dared believe it might succeed. She darted a quick glance back into the sheriff's office to see if Zack were watching her but he had already re-seated himself and was staring at the El Paso paper again with a troubled expression

on his tanned face. She gathered her skirts and stole quickly up the stairs.

When she reached the upper floor, she ignored the closed doors of the courtroom, she hurried instead to the ladder leading to the attic which opened into the clock tower. She scrambled breathlessly up the ladder and crouched in the hot darkness of the attic, feeling for the narrow plank walk laid across the rafters that led to the base of the square tower containing the huge clock.

It was the second time she'd been there. Once, only a year before, when the courthouse had just been completed and the clock was being installed and tested Andrew had brought her, his bride, up to see its great gears and mechanism at close range. They'd even watched, by lamplight, while the clocksmith who'd come all the way from Philadelphia, had installed the clock and adjusted the hands of the four faces so they'd keep the same time.

Fumbling in the semi-darkness of the tower's base, she found the heavy key, a steel shaft two feet long with a square end that fitted into the winding gear. She hefted it in her hand, wondering if it would serve her

purpose. She started the swing that would smash the gears of the clock.

Then, slowly, sick with dismay, she lowered the heavy key.

To smash the clock and stop it would not accomplish her purpose. Out here in the West, a man who didn't own a watch or clock could take a quick squint at the sun and calculate instantly, within a few minutes, the exact time of day. The brief exultation she had felt a moment before died away and she sank down on the plank runway, head buried in her hands.

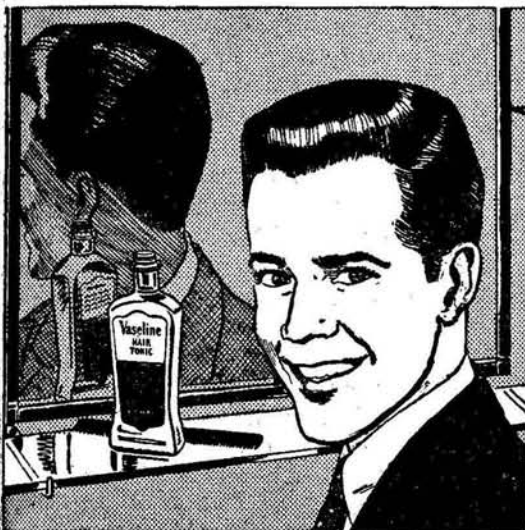
Four feet from her ears, she could hear the heavy, steady whirring and clicking of the clock's gears. Somewhere in that intricate mass of brass and steel something squeaked faintly, pleading for a drop of oil.

As she huddled there in her misery, conscious of that relentless recording of the passage of Time so near her she began to grapple with yet another scheme. It seemed almost too fantastic . . . but there might be a way Time could be made to serve her in this crisis. Hardly breathing she fumbled for the tiny door in the North face of the clock. Something clicked and it swung open, leaving



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."



*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff . . . keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical, too!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
on CBS Wednesday nights.

an aperture just big enough for a man . . . or woman . . . to thrust out an arm and reach the hands of the clock. She felt for the hands.

"It might—just barely might work," she muttered as her fingers closed over one of the big metal hands . . . the long one . . . the minute hand. She pulled stoutly on the hand, moving it forward a few inches. She paused, tugged it a little further. Then she snapped shut the little door and turned to the south face.

Opening the little door facing south she peered out, searching. In front of one of the bars and saloons along the south side of the square she saw what she sought. Bob Dell's big red chestnut gelding with the white stocking on its right rear foot was tied to the hitch rack in front of Tim's Bar. She recognized the horse instantly because it was famous for its speed and Dell was mighty proud of it. She made a clucking sound with her lips. If the horse was there, Dell was bound to be inside . . . where he could see the South face of the clock . . . and the South steps of the court house every time he looked out. Even if Dell owned a watch he wouldn't bother to look at it with the big clock staring at him from across the street.

She reached out a hand that trembled a little, grasped the minute hand of the clock's South face and pulled it back . . . hard. Then she slowly closed the little door and climbed down the ladder and stole out of the courthouse.

If anyone had seen her tampering with the clock, there was no way she could know. She just had to take a chance on that. Sooner or later someone would notice the clock faces did not show the same time but it might go undetected for a day or two . . . at least long enough for her purpose.

With renewed hope she made a dignified circuit of the square, covertly observing each of the four faces in turn, trying mentally to estimate how many minutes it took her to walk around the little square.

The hands on the South face showed ten-six. Those on the North ten-fifteen. Allowing a minute or so for the time it took her to walk around that meant the North face was approximately ten minutes faster than the South face.

There was nothing more she could do just then, so murmuring a little prayer she turned North and walked the three blocks to her

home, where Andrew Cameron, according to his custom, would eat his noon meal at his own table.

As she walked swiftly, gazing straight in front of her, she hoped she had not overplayed her scheme, had not changed the time so much the difference would be obvious. She realized her entire plan was founded on a slender thread of Time—ten minutes—and if the thread snapped— She shook her head, refusing to think.

She had his meal ready even before she heard his firm step on the little front porch. Then there he was, looming big and tall in the tiny dining room.

"Howdy, honey," he greeted her quietly and she ran for his kiss, holding him to her, feeling the hard muscles of his arms and chest. Then she backed off, looked up at him, a hand on his right arm. "How is it today, Andrew?"

He was taking off his coat, then the heavy belt with the big gun and cartridges. He laid the gun carefully on a chair before he answered. "Better," he said. "Almost well."

But she knew it wasn't true because she'd felt him flinch a little when he held her to him for that kiss. She turned away silently, bringing food to the table.

She hurried because she knew he wouldn't eat until she had everything on the table and was seated with him. That was just one of the things about Andrew she liked, a quiet, natural courtesy.

AS SHE brought food to the table she studied this big beloved man of hers. At thirty-two, Andrew Cameron was easily the best looking man in Painted Rock. There was a clean, rugged strength about him that revealed itself in every little gesture. Now, he was offering her the meat platter, holding it carefully in a big, brown hand. Not awkwardly but competently and carefully. It was his way.

She looked at his broad forehead. Wide jet black brows, over deep-set intensely blue eyes. Rather long naturally wavy black hair. The long, hard jaw, the strong tanned neck. But the nose was what marked him. It was a strong man's nose, high arched but perfectly straight. And on each side of it, two faint lines were beginning to etch themselves down the cheeks toward the corners of the wide, firm mouth. It was the face of a strong man, a leader, the face of a man to inspire con-

fidence—and hold it. As he turned his head, there was something commanding in the movement. Then he smiled, showing the white, even teeth she had always admired.

The words they exchanged were routine, casual. Andrew was not a talkative man and she always tried to match his mood.

“How you feel, honey?” His voice, for such a big man, was not especially deep but it had a pleasant resonance that always thrilled her.

“Oh, all right. Just fine. Try the green beans.” She held the bowl toward him. “We won’t get many more unless it rains.” The beans had come from their own little garden patch, carefully tended in the backyard.

“They’re good!” he complimented, chewing. His eyes were watching her. She noticed he’d hardly taken his eyes from her face since he’d entered the house. One o’clock! He, too, was probably thinking this might be all they’d ever have together—just one wonderful year. Yes, that was it. Why his eyes were on her so constantly. Like his eyes were memorizing her face.

She realized then he’d stopped eating, was just sitting there looking at her, quietly. He started to say something, appeared to change his mind and picked up his fork again, handling it carefully because of his sore arm.

“More steak?” She pushed the plate toward him invitingly. He shook his head, smiling.

“Then how about some hot coffee?” She refilled his cup carefully and set the pot back on the stove.

She sat back down and toyed with her food, not eating, almost shuddering at the thought of food. She looked up and met his eyes again. There was love and kindness and a great hunger in them . . . and sadness.

“Andrew,” she choked. “What made you take the job as sheriff?”

A flicker of something came over his face. Then it was gone and he was composed again. But there was a strange darkness deep in his eyes.

“Somebody had to. They thought I was the man.”

“But why you, Andrew? Weren’t there other men?”

He shifted uneasily in his chair. “Sure. Plenty of others. But most of ’em were too quick on the trigger or liked the bottle too well or. . .” He paused and she saw that bleak expression she hated come into his

eyes, that look she couldn’t understand.

She didn’t know how far she dared to go. In spite of the love between them there was something at times about Andrew that warned her not to go too far, not to tamper with man business.

“This’ll be my last term,” he said finally. “Think I might study law. Judge Musgrove has offered to loan me some of his books.”

Mattie gave a little cry. “Oh, Andrew! I think that would be wonderful. I’ll bet you’ll make an awfully good lawyer.”

“But in the meantime,” he went on, his voice suddenly flat and toneless, “I’m the sheriff.”

Mattie thought for a minute he’d tell her about Bob Dell and the showdown. But he didn’t. He didn’t ever talk about such things. And if one o’clock meant the end, he didn’t want to worry her about it ahead of time. Andrew was like that.

They finished their meal and Andrew went to rest a few minutes in his big chair while he read a book. The chair faced the front door and through the front door the courthouse clock was clearly visible. She saw him glance at the clock as he sat down and she looked too. The hands said seventeen minutes until one.

She stacked the dishes quickly, then joined him. She always waited until he’d left the house to do the dishes. She never tried, as so many wives did, to impose on his masculine pride by wheedling him into drying them for her. She felt his few minutes at home during the noon hour meant too much to both of them to be wasted on such a trivial task. And today, of all days, she wanted every second of his companionship.

As she sat, eyes alternating from the distant clock back to Andrew she took an embroidery hoop in her hands and made listless motions with a needle.

She saw him glance up again, staring at the clock, then felt his gaze on her, felt the fierce intensity of it. She steeled herself to remain calm.

Then he was rising reluctantly to his feet. “Almost one. Gotta go, honey.” He stood there for a moment, flexing the stiff fingers of his right hand.

She flew to him, suddenly wild. “Don’t go yet,” she begged. She felt him drawing away. “Don’t go,” she whispered. She put all the seduction and appeal at her command into her invitation. “Stay here with me.

Don't go back this afternoon." She clung against him, her body close against his, begging him.

SHE could feel him quiver; knew he wanted to stay. Then his hands were removing her arms from around his neck; gently, but with a strength she could not resist. He kissed her tenderly, buckled on his gun belt, slipped his coat on.

All her life she had been contemptuous of those useless, helpless women who sit and wring their hands in time of distress but now she found herself doing it. Sinking down on the edge of Andrew's big chair she sat, gripping her hands together, staring at the clock in the distant courthouse.

The hands of the clock now pointed squarely at one. That meant Andrew, not suspecting the clock on the North face was fast, was already at the courthouse, standing at the South steps waiting for Bob Dell.

And if her plan had worked . . . as she had planned . . . Bob Dell would still be in Tim's Bar, thinking he had ten or eleven minutes left . . . waiting . . . watching the slow minutes creeping past . . . and seeing Andrew standing out there by the South steps waiting for him.

That was what she was counting on—Dell seeing Andrew there early, according to the hands of the clock's South face, standing there . . . early; waiting for him.

She tried to project her thoughts into Bob Dell's mind; make him wonder, worry. Make him weaken in the face of Andrew's calm appearance of confidence. Maybe his arm isn't bad after all. He looks too confident." That's what she wanted Bob Dell to be thinking to himself as he looked through the door of the bar and saw the sheriff over there waiting for

him . . . while the hands of the clock still had several long minutes yet to creep before they reached the deadline . . . one o'clock. But suppose Bob Dell didn't weaken?

While she tortured her brain with these thoughts, Mattie's own eyes were staring at the creeping hands of the same clock . . . the North face. In a breathless agony of uncertainty, she watched those iron hands and her lips moved silently as she counted off the slow seconds and minutes, trying to steel herself against the sound . . . if it came. Finally she shut her eyes, unable to look. . . .

At last she opened her eyes. There had still been no sounds of shots. Fearfully she looked at the clock. One-thirty!

Then something broke inside of her and she was running, out of the door, down the street . . . running frantically, all thought of pride or dignity forgotten.

She found Andrew in the courthouse corridor calmly talking with a group of men. But he drew away from them when he saw her coming and came to meet her. He didn't try to pretend now but just opened his arms.

"His nerve broke. He left town." Andrew said, his lips against her cheek.

Zack's gruff voice spoke at their shoulders. "The boys over at Tim's said Bob was full of fight right up to a minute or two before one. Then the strain of waitin' so long got too much for 'im. He pulled out. Probably won't ever be back. Once a man don't stand up for a showdown, he's through."

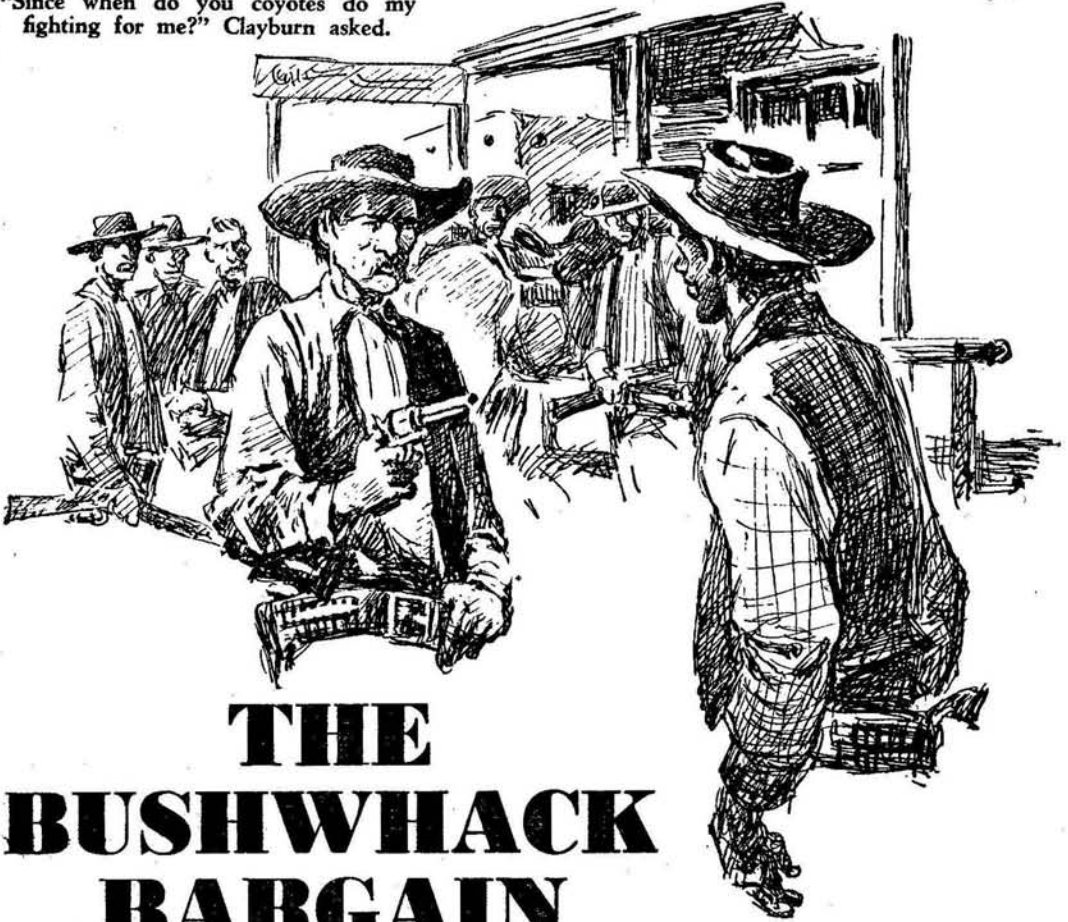
But Mattie hardly heard him. Her face was buried against Andrew's chest and all she could hear was the steady, measured beating of his heart, that faithful heart she knew would always be true to her and to all the things he felt were his duty . . . such as the Law and Civilization. ❄ ❄ ❄

— EXPENSIVE VICTORY —

Pioneers took strong views on such things as free elections. Here's how one town kept them free, in the simplest sense of the word. Officials of Appomatox, Kansas, facing a county-wide vote that would determine which village should be the county seat, signed a written agreement with the officials of other towns to refrain mutually from fraud. They agreed also that the winning community should pay all expenses.

In those days, it was as much as their lives were worth—let alone their job. When Appomatox won, and news of the agreement got out, the citizens suggested elevating their leaders to even greater heights . . . top place on a lynch pole, to be exact. Only by making up the expenses from their own pockets, did the people's servants survive.

"Since when do you coyotes do my fighting for me?" Clayburn asked.



THE BUSHWHACK BARGAIN

By RICHARD FERBER

A killer-for-hire and in need of a job could hardly turn down that easy offer to make himself a hundred dollars merely by shooting an unarmed lawman right where his suspenders cross!

JESSE HARDER tied the sorrel pony to the rail and took two long steps across the walk to the swinging doors of the saloon. Inside, he paused briefly, his tall, angular body relaxed, his eyes moving leisurely about the almost empty saloon. Behind the long, wooden bar, the barkeep watched him indifferently; the two other customers, storekeepers by their dress, turning momentarily to scrutinize him. Harder moved up to the bar, nodded his head at the barkeep and dug in the pocket of his jeans for a coin. He found one and felt it tentatively. Except for a few smaller coins, it

seemed singularly alone. This would have to be a fast job.

"Where do I find the sheriff of this town?" he asked casually.

The two storekeepers turned to eye him again.

"If you mean old man Clayburn, stranger," one of them said, "he'd rightly be sleeping this time of day."

"A good idea," Jesse said.

"You a friend of Mark's, son?" the storekeeper said.

Jesse laughed a little. Despite his forty years there was always some old man to call

him son. But how much longer could that last?

"I don't know the man," he said.

He kept his eyes away from the two storekeepers. He had seen them when he came in and that was enough. He knew their kind. They were harmless, useless little men and when trouble started, they'd dive for the nearest table. And the barkeep was the same . . . except for the shotgun under the bar and the right, safe opportunity to use it. The man was checking the shotgun now, he noted, for his eyes were moving from Jesse's face to a spot under the bar and back again nervously. Harder smiled significantly at the man, but the man was stupid—he didn't understand.

The whiskey had made Jesse sweat and he pulled a soiled bandanna from his jeans and wiped his forehead carefully, leaving an edge of caked trail dust along the hair line.

"It's hot," he said.

"Sure is, stranger," one of the storekeepers said, laughing. "It ain't likely you'll be able to wake up Mark Clayburn on a day like this."

Jesse didn't answer. He turned half-away from the men and leaned his elbow on the bar. Outside, under the swinging doors, he could see the street of the little town. It was late afternoon and the street was empty, the dust lying thick but undisturbed. He stared at it for a long time, then sighed and turned back abruptly to the two men.

"Will one of you tell the sheriff I want to see him?"

The smaller man looked start'ed for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders.

"It's like I say, mister, on a day like this he ain't likely to want to be waked up."

Jesse smiled thinly, but there was a look of impatience on his face. This was always the hard part, the preparation. It was easier, more painless, if it was done quickly. It was a cleaner, neater job.

"Wake him up," he said curtly. "Tell him I want to see him. Tell him there's a man over here that wants to kill him."

The storekeeper's jaw dropped, but he recovered quickly and started to laugh, a giggling, high-pitched woman's laugh. Then he stopped suddenly, his mouth open again.

"That's a bad joke, mister," he said.

"Tell him," Jesse said. He turned away from the man, planting his elbows loosely on the bar. Behind him he heard the man fidgeting and then the quick, nervous sound of his

boots as he went toward the door. In a moment his companion had followed him.

Jesse took the remaining change from his pocket and put it on the bar. He looked up at the barkeep and found that the man had moved away from him slightly.

"Pour me a drink," he said. "Then go down to the other end and stand in front of that shotgun. If you see anything that you don't like, grab it. But grab it fast."

THE man poured the whiskey, his hand shaking a little, his breath wheezing loudly in the stillness of the saloon. Jesse watched with indifference as he moved down the bar. He took a sack of tobacco out of his cotton shirt and began making a cigarette, slowly and methodically. He frowned once when a few grains spilled out one end of the paper, for his sack of tobacco was almost empty. But in a few hours, he thought, it wouldn't matter. A hundred dollars would buy a lot of tobacco. It would buy a lot of whiskey, too, and a shave and a good bath, and a steak and maybe after that a woman. Not here, though. In some other town where he wasn't known, or was already forgotten. It was always that way.

HE'D been in Little Butte, fifty miles to the south, when he'd met the Tolman brothers and the other man, the little half-breed named Ramos. The half-breed had seen him near Gila Bend once after he had killed a couple of Apaches for a Mexican rancher, and had heard his name. That was a long time ago, before his name had gotten around, but the Mex recognized him all right.

The two brothers had come up to him. They needed a man, they said. He hadn't tried to deny that he was Jesse Harder, the same Jesse Harder that killed men for a price, he had simply said:

"What's your proposition, gents?" It wasn't only because he was broke; it was the easiest thing to do.

The Tolman brothers were thick, burly men, fair-headed, and the proportions of their bodies were so identical that, except for their faces, they might have been twins. They were well past their prime and the pale flabbiness of their faces indicated a life of softness and inactivity. The leaner one spoke first.

"I'm Cole Tolman," he said. "This is my

brother Jack, in case you're curious."

"I didn't ask," Jesse said, but then shifted his eyes to the Mexican inquiringly.

"That's Ramos," Cole Tolman said. They had moved to a table in the saloon now and the two brothers arranged their chairs so they were facing Harder. The Mexican sat far to the left so that Jesse had to turn his head to watch him.

"You need a job, Harder?" the brother said. He watched Jesse out of small, crafty eyes.

"I asked, what's your proposition?" Jesse said, annoyed at the man's lack of direction.

"I like you, Harder," Cole said. "You're a man who comes right to the point." He smiled, exposing the gold teeth, and glanced warily around the saloon. "There's a man in Beeker's Gulch, a sheriff. It's an easy job. A gun slinger like you shouldn't have any trouble."

"I never did a job on a sheriff before," Jesse said. He looked at the two brothers casually.

"It's like any other man," Jack Tolman said. It was the first word he had spoken and his voice was sharp and cutting.

"If he's this easy, why don't you do it yourself?" Jesse said. He looked over at the Mexican and found him staring at him with black, expressionless eyes. "This Mex here ought to be able to do the job, even if he has to use an alley."

The Mexican started out of his chair, but at a look from Cole Tolman he sank back again. His mouth was set in a cruel, menacing sneer and his lips twitched for a moment, but he didn't speak.

"We're known in Beeker's," Cole said. "It's too risky. If we have to, we'll do it ourselves, but this way there ain't no trouble."

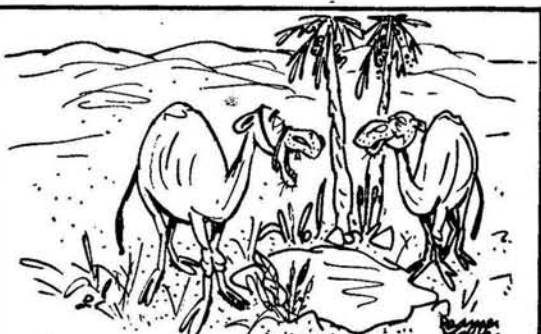
"I never killed a sheriff before," Jesse said thoughtfully. "The price will be high."

"We figured a hundred dollars," Cole said, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands over the fatness of his belly.

"That's too low. That's Injun money," Jesse said. He reached his hand into the pocket of his shirt for tobacco and then stopped. The sack of tobacco was almost empty, only a few grains left. There wasn't enough for a good smoke. He was trying to bring his hand down again unobserved when



"And now to my nephew, Eugene, I leave my bottle of Wildroot Cream-Oil, my hairs best friend!"



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"I'll bet 29¢ Wildroot Cream-Oil does it better!"

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BEST FRIEND**

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Jack Tolman threw a sack onto the middle of the table. As he did so Cole said: "A hundred dollars, Harder."

Jesse looked at the sack and then at the man's face. It wasn't a decent price; not what he was used to. He shouldn't have shown Cole and Jack Tolman that he was out of tobacco. But they were no dummies. One look at him had told them he was hard up. He sighed heavily, moved his hand slowly across the table, and picked up the bag of tobacco. He rolled the smoke deftly but carefully and when he was about to lick the paper down, he looked up suddenly at the two brothers. They were watching him patiently, but there was a flicker of amusement in their eyes. Jesse licked the paper down, twisted the end and put it in his mouth. He scratched a match under the table with a long, sweeping motion and looked up at the men again.

"A hundred dollars," he said disgustedly.

"Fine, fine," Cole said, leaning across the table. He spoke in a lower voice now. "The name's Mark Clayburn. We don't care how you do it, as long as we're not figured up with it. Beeker's Gulch is about fifty miles north of here. We'll ride up with you tomorrow as far as The Forks and make a camp. You got all the next day to make your move. We'll meet you again that night. On the east side of town there's a cottonwood grove, near the river. There's an old broken-down fence that some nester put up once. You can't miss it. We'll pay you off there."

Jesse sat up straighter in his chair and stared reflectively at a spot somewhat above Cole Tolman's head. His eyes narrowed a little and a thin smile came on his face.

"You'll be there, Mister Tolman?" he said.

The Mexican came up out of his chair. His hand rested on his pant leg, in front of the tooled gun holster, poised and ready to draw.

"Sit down," Cole Tolman snapped. Jesse smiled broadly at the Mexican but there was no humor in his eyes. Ramos hesitated for a moment and sat down again, but his body remained tense and rigid. The two brothers stood up then.

"We'll be there," Cole Tolman said.

"I know you will," Jesse said without looking up at them.

"But remember," Cole said, "this is your

show. If anything goes wrong, don't look to us."

"Did I ask?" Jesse said, and met the stare of the other man. Cole Tolman watched him for a moment, a sure unfriendliness showing in his eyes, then nodded his head and the three men moved away.

Jesse watched them thread their way through the tables and go out the door of the saloon. For a split second, he wondered why the Tolman brothers wanted the old sheriff of Beeker's Gulch killed, but he pushed the thought back. He didn't want to know.

That was the only code that he had, if he could call it a code. It was a simple thing to kill a man, and knowing why it had to be done only complicated the matter. It made you think, and in his business he had decided long ago that to think was a thing to be avoided. He got up slowly, took the sack of tobacco from the table, and went out of the saloon.

THEY rode out the next day and that evening made camp at The Forks, in the low foothills where the Maria fanned out into three smaller, more sluggish streams. The next morning he had taken his time in covering the remaining ten miles to the little town of Beeker's Gulch. He had ridden into it that afternoon, down the only street, indifferent to the houses and buildings and the few people that he saw.

Even now in the saloon, while he waited for old Mark Clayburn, the sheriff, there was a manner of total indifference about him. He seemed oblivious even to the barkeep and the hidden shotgun. It had taken him many years to develop this indifference, but he had done it well, so that now, they hardly seemed like people to him, but more like the stray cow that he passed on the trail, an unknown, cardboard figure on the landscape. He had learned long ago that the less he knew, the less he would care.

But still, sitting in this saloon, in this town that he didn't know, and where he was not yet known, a faint curiosity was working at the back of his brain. He thought of the man that he was going to kill, old Mark Clayburn and that all he knew about him was that he was an old man with a fondness for sleeping in the afternoon. There was more to a man than that. And what had he done that Cole and Jack Tolman and that

little greaser Ramos should want him killed? And once he was killed, who would care? A wife? A family? There were many questions that needed answers and suddenly, for the first time that he could remember, he wondered at those answers.

But outside, he heard the tapping steps on the board walk and he knew that it was too late. It was too bad maybe, but he would never know. He listened to the footfalls, deliberate and unhurried. The man had guts. He watched over the swinging doors and saw the man's head, the black, tall-crowned sombrero, and then the old man was inside. Harder pushed himself back gently from the bar, balancing on his heels, his right hand hanging loose and relaxed at his side. He studied the old man's face, saw the long gray hair and the hard-set, but gentle mouth, then let his eyes move slowly downward and noticed with a start that there was no gun holster on the old man's hip. He looked back into the sheriff's eyes and smiled thinly. Perhaps Clayburn was a coward after all. He had seen men before who wouldn't wear their guns. It was a way of looking brave without ever having to prove it.

"You the man that wants to see me?" he heard Clayburn say, breaking his chain of thoughts.

"That's right, Mr. Clayburn," Jesse said slowly.

"What did you want?" Mark Clayburn asked. He was standing loosely, his thumbs hooked over his belt, his eyes calm and searching.

"I thought I said, Mr. Clayburn," Jesse replied impatiently. "I thought I already spoke my business."

Clayburn shifted his weight from one foot to another and watched the younger man.

"Who sent yuh here?" he asked.

"It ain't my right to say," Jesse answered.

The sheriff wrinkled his brow and brought one hand up to rub slowly across his chin. Then the softness went out of his eyes and he spoke deliberately.

"We don't want no trouble here, son. I been running a peaceful town. We got troubles enough. I'm asking you to leave peaceable like and don't cause us no commotion."

"I'm telling yuh, old man," Jesse said sharply. "I came here to do a job and I got until sundown to do it. Next time, you better be wearing a gun."

"Suit yourself, son," Clayburn said. There

was a look of weariness on his face. "Yuh see, I got a job to do too. I'll be where you can find me. But if yuh come lookin' for me, don't take any chances."

Before Harder could answer, the old man had turned about and was striding out of the saloon. He pushed through the swinging doors with both hands and turned down the sidewalk. Jesse listened to his boots rapping on the boards until they faded out in the distance. He turned, found the barkeep still standing white and motionless by the shotgun, and cursed softly to himself. It was just his luck to come up against a man without a gun. Otherwise, it could have been over by now, the job finished. He disliked the prolonged complications, the waiting, but it seemed as though things had been going that way lately. Perhaps it was because he was getting older, or softer. But you couldn't kill a man who wasn't wearing a gun. He had never done *that!*

He went out of the saloon and stopped on the sidewalk, looking up and down the deserted street. His horse was still standing at the rail, head down under the broiling heat of the sun. He untied the reins and led the sorrel across the street to an alley that ran alongside the hotel. The sun had moved west some now and there was a thin line of shadow along the unpainted side of the building.

He found a ring set in the boards, hitched the pony again and thought for a moment of removing the saddle. But there was no telling when he might need it. He went back into the street and went down it until he found the window with the sign "Maria's Cafe" painted crudely on it. He paused for a moment, looking in the window, and then went inside.

THE restaurant was empty. A narrow counter and stools ran to the back of the building and at the end, near the stove, a woman was standing with her back to him. When she turned Jesse was surprised. He had expected a Mexican woman, the Maria of the sign outside, but despite this girl's black hair, her skin was purely white. He took off his hat, nodded to her and leaned against the counter.

"You Maria, Miss?" he said politely.

"No," she said, smiling. She had clean, white teeth—the type he saw infrequently in the places he had been.

"Where can I find her, Miss?" he asked.

"You can't," she said, still smiling. "It's just a sign. But I'm the owner. Can I help you?"

He hesitated for a minute, watching her, then put his hand in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a watch. He put it carefully on the counter, shrugged his shoulders, and smiled.

"I need a meal," he said. "I want to pay for it with this."

The girl picked up the watch, examined it casually, and put it down again.

"That's a lot of watch for beans and a piece of steak," she answered. She spoke softly, with a note of kindness in her voice that rang unfamiliarly on Jesse's ears.

"It's all I've got," he said, trying to dismiss the subject. "And a man don't need a watch to know when it's day and night."

She laughed at that, a low, throaty laugh and for a moment her eyes met his, then moved instantly away. She went down the counter toward the stove, leaving the watch lying where it was, and while she worked Jesse watched her. When she was through, she put the food in front of him and stood by the window a few feet away, looking out into the street.

"Are you out of a job?" she asked, her voice quiet and interested.

"I reckon you could say I was on one now," he answered. "But I don't get paid until it's done."

"Then you can pick up your watch?" she said hopefully.

"I don't know when I'll be back this way," he said. He laughed a little to himself, humorlessly, because he knew he would never be back. There were many places he had left behind. She seemed to welcome him now, but by sundown it would be a different matter.

She had stopped speaking and was looking out into the street, and despite the near-fullness of his stomach he watched her with an empty-bellied feeling. She was tall for a woman, with long black hair and a rare gentleness about her mouth and eyes. She was younger than he, not yet thirty perhaps, but the difference in the ages seemed slight. And she had the body of a woman, he thought, although her dress revealed nothing. She turned suddenly, catching him watching her, and although she smiled understandingly he felt the flush of embarrassment

along the roots of his hair. It annoyed him a little and he forced his mind to think of something else.

"Do you know two brothers, Cole and Jack Tolman?" he said. He had been suddenly uncomfortable and was trying to make conversation now, but by the abrupt change on her face, he knew that he hadn't succeeded. She looked at him intently, a hardness in her eyes that he hadn't seen there before.

"Why?" she said sharply. "Are they friends of yours?"

"No, Miss," he said quietly. Despite his curiosity about those men, he regretted that he had spoken. "I heard tell of them."

"They're gamblers," she said. "They run the Lucky Spot down the street. Dad's been trying to run them out of town now for two years."

"Your dad?" Jesse said, bewildered.

"Yes," she said. "I'm Mary Clayburn. My father's the sheriff of Beeker's Gulch."

He was holding the cup of coffee and he let it down abruptly onto the counter top. For a long moment he watched it, hoping that she hadn't noticed his startled action. When he glanced up she was looking out the window again and her face had changed; there were thin, worried lines under her eyes that he hadn't noticed before.

"That's why I'm afraid," she was saying. "Dad's given them two weeks to pack up. They've sworn they're going to kill him."

"Talk's cheap, Miss," he said uncomfortably.

"You don't know the Tolmans," she said. There was a tone of bitterness in her voice. "They'll stop at nothing, not even killing an old man."

"I'm sorry, Miss," Jesse said. He wanted to leave now. He had enjoyed the coolness of the cafe, and more especially the warm comfort of this woman's presence, but all that had changed now. He was sorry he had stopped here, even though it might have meant going hungry until morning. He was sorry he had seen this girl and talked to her, and he tried to push the thoughts of it back in his mind.

"Don't be sorry," she was saying. "I shouldn't bother you with my troubles."

"No bother," he said, standing up. He watched her for a second, seeing the soft steadiness of her eyes and then said, "Good day, Miss, and thanks for the meal."

She returned the stare and moved up to the counter.

"Here," she said, picking up the watch. Her smile broadened. "You'll need this. We're having a dance tonight, down at the old barn near the river. It's at eight o'clock. You'll need this to tell the time."

He looked at the watch as though he had never seen it before, and then up into her eyes for a moment, hesitating, forgetting for an instant that he hadn't the choice of yes or no.

"That's a right nice invitation, Miss Clayburn," he said slowly, "but I can't accept."

"Then take the watch anyway, Mister . . . Mister?" She looked at him questioningly.

"Thanks, Miss," he said. He ignored her request for his name. She would know it soon enough, he thought. She would hate him then, and hate herself for having been such a fool. "I always pay for what I get," he said, and started for the door.

"But come anyway," she said. "It's your choice." She wasn't urging him now, only being friendly, warm and friendly in a way that he had forgotten.

He stopped, turned about, and for a fleeting instant met her smile. "There is no choice," he said and went out the door.

OUTSIDE the sun had left the street and off to the west, in the foothills, it was going down in a red-orange glow in the sky. There were a few men on the street now, hurrying to their homes or toward the saloon. Old Mark Clayburn should be around somewhere. He shouldn't be hard to find. Harder hitched at his gun belt and started up the sidewalk, his face tightened now and his eyes narrowed a little against the final brightness of the sun.

But he was careless. The job had seemed too easy at first. When he came to the corner of the alley and stepped off the high way with a thud he saw too late the group of men standing by his horse. His hand made an instinctive movement toward the holster but the men had their guns out and he stopped short, cursing to himself.

"That's the man," he heard someone say. He recognized the little storekeeper and his companion of that afternoon in the saloon. There were two or three other men, men that he didn't know. He tried to back up a step, but he collided with the walk and stopped abruptly.

"Let him have it," the storekeeper said. A man next to him raised his Winchester and Jesse started to leap aside, toward the corner of the building. The shot went wide but his boot heel caught on the edge of the walk and he crashed into the building and rolled back again into the street. The man levered home another shell and Harder got to his knees, his hand jerking at the Colt, when he heard the voice yell, "Hold it men!" He looked up and saw Mark Clayburn coming up the alley from the rear. He had his gun out, held steadily in front of him, and there was a look of quiet anger in his eyes.

Jesse got to his feet and Clayburn came toward him, then stopped half-way between him and the group of townsmen.

"Since when do you coyotes do my fighting for me?" he said back over his shoulder.

"This man's a killer, Mark," the storekeeper said. "He's Jesse Harder, a hired gunny."

"Sure, and I know who hired him," Clayburn said quietly. "But I'm the law in this town, not you. This man ain't done nothing but talk and it's my job to see that's what he keeps doing."

"Don't count on it, Sheriff," Jesse said, his eyes fixed on the muzzle of the old man's Colt.

Clayburn noted the direction of Jesse's eyes, smiled, and slipped the gun into its holster.

"Lookee, Mister," he said. "We all know you. I got a dozen posters on you down at the office. You're a tough man. But there ain't no man so tough that he needs killing as bad as these fellas think you do. For me, maybe I would a thought different twenty years ago, but times have changed. I'm old now and I'm peaceable. You're no pup yourself. There'll come a time when killing a man won't be so easy to swallow. It'll stick in your craw; it won't go down and you won't be able to spit it up. You'll learn that. Right now, I'm givin' you your chance. Get on that horse and start riding. And someday give a man the same chance that I'm givin' you."

"You don't give me any choice, Mister Clayburn," Jesse said, shrugging his shoulders indifferently.

"That's right, son, there isn't any choice."

Harder looked at the old man once and then moved passed him, pushed his way

through the group of men, and mounted the sorrel. He kicked it and trotted it out into the street, riding stiffly, his eyes set ahead unseeing. When he had gone some distance, he reined in the pony gently and turned it half-around. Clayburn was standing where he had left him, his gun still holstered at his side. Jesse measured the distance with his eyes. Forty yards. It was an easy shot for him. He could drill the old man before he got his gun up. Then, hooked around the neck of his horse, he'd be a small target for the townsmen. There probably wasn't one in the pack who could shoot him before he got out of range. He needed that hundred dollars bad, as bad as he'd needed anything in his life. After all, the man was armed now. He had his chance.

He wavered, his right hand motionless on the horn of the saddle, then suddenly reined the horse about and kicked it into a gallop. At the end of town he looked back again. The old man was still standing in the street, and he saw the door of Maria's Cafe open and saw the girl come out. She'd been watching, he thought, and the sharp doubt of his actions left him. It was with a feeling of relief that he forded the river and turned toward the spot where the Tolman brothers would be waiting.

IT WAS almost dark when he found the stand of cottonwood and the old, rotting fence. He rode along it slowly until he could make out the dim forms of the three men at the edge of the trees. Not knowing why, he loosened the gun in its holster before he swung his pony out of the shadow and rode into the clearing.

"That you, Harder?" he heard Cole Tolman yell.

"Yeah," Jesse answered. He reined in and waited for the three men to come out to him.

"I've got your hundred dollars," Cole Tolman said softly. They stopped their horses in a semi-circle around him.

"I wish I could take it," Jesse said. He tried to make out Cole Tolman's face in the half-light.

"What's that mean?" Cole said quickly, his voice rasping and suspicious.

"I didn't do the job," Jesse said evenly. "The old man outsmarted me."

"I don't get it, Harder," Cole said, the same disbelief in his voice. "Old Clayburn's an easy man to kill. I could do it with my

left hand and that's for sure, piker."

"Don't try it," Jesse said softly. He edged the sorrel off sideways, bringing the three men into fuller view. Even in the darkness he could see the smoldering anger in Tolman's eyes.

"Let's move, men," Tolman said. "We'll have to do this job ourselves."

He started across the clearing, the two men falling in on each side of him.

"See yuh, Harder," Cole Tolman said.

Jesse didn't answer. He watched them go across the clearing, waiting until they were at the edge near the fence. He slipped the Colt out of the holster before he called softly:

"I said, don't try it, Mr. Tolman!"

But as soon as he said it, he knew he had waited too long.

The Mexican had already taken his gun out, and at the words he spun in his saddle and fired. The shot whined by Jesse's head and crashed in the cottonwoods behind him. In a split instant Jesse had the Colt up. The gun exploded alongside the neck of the horse, causing the sorrel to jerk over, but Jesse saw the Mex double up, gut-shot, and fall thudding to the ground.

Two shots plunked into the hard dirt below him and then another, higher up, whined off to his left. He brought the Colt up farther, trying to steady the horse with his left hand. The gun jumped twice; he heard Jack Tolman let out a yell and saw him crumple in the saddle.

He swung further to his right, found the dim silhouette of Cole and fired two shots, rapidly, but from the long whine of the bullets he knew he had missed. He brought the pony around, then peering into the darkness, waited for the returning shots that would tell him where his man was. He heard the two quick explosions and felt a hot, searing pain graze along his shoulder. He fired instantly and missed again and in one swift, jerking motion threw open the cylinder of the gun. He knocked the empty shells out and reached down to the cartridge belt, not looking, fighting against the panic, the blood beating violently in his swollen temples.

He saw Cole Tolman come along the fence line and turn sharply toward him, and then he saw the horse stumble against the broken fence log and go down, throwing the rider

(Continued on page 113)

By
H. A.
DEROSSO



It was at moments like these that Clinton regretted he'd sold his gun!

NEVER SELL YOUR SADDLE!

When your stomach thinks your throat's cut, and you're set afoot on a strange and hostile range, you've got one thing you never let go—your saddle. And if you're as lucky as Ernie Clinton, you have one more asset—a fierce and unconquerable pride!

WHEN young Clinton awoke, he found the white mare lying on her side, dead. This did not surprise him too much. The mare had been rather old and young Clinton had been fully aware the day before that the mare did not have long to go. Still, she was all the horse he'd had and her death left him feeling sad and bitter.

There was not much that he could do. He would have liked to have buried her but he lacked the tools. He thought of covering her with rocks but, after looking around, he concluded there were not enough stones in the vicinity. The mare would have to

be left to the natural inclinations of the scavengers. This made young Clinton a little angry but then, he told himself, this was in keeping with the way his luck had been running lately. Nothing turned out right for him any more. Nothing would ever turn out right for him again. He was positive of this for he had reached that degree of despondency where he expected only the worst.

It was one of those tough years in the cow country. The bottom had dropped out of the cattle market. With beef selling for as little as thirty cents a head, the hide was worth more than the cow.

He could always ride the grub line. He was not the only one doing that these days, but now his horse was dead and he'd have to drift on foot, unless some rancher made him a gift of an old crow bait. That was how he had acquired the white mare. However, Clinton did not want charity. He had pride, and he wanted to earn his way.

There was nothing to be accomplished hanging around so Clinton lifted his old, battered McClellan saddle on his shoulder and started walking. He wanted to turn for one last look of the mare because he had liked the horse, but he forcibly restrained himself. He just kept on walking. He could feel the pebbles through the worn-out soles of his boots.

The saddle became a dead, oppressive weight. Clinton could not see much of a point in carrying it. He had no idea how far he was from the next town or even the next ranch. Perhaps he could sell the saddle like he had sold all his other possessions. This was all that he owned in the world—the clothes on his back and a saddle that had seen its best days.

Still, a saddle was the badge of his profession. A man was no longer a cowpuncher if he did not own a saddle. However, Clinton's pockets hung limp and empty. His stomach twinged now and then from hunger. The saddle would have to be sold—if he could find someone willing to pay him something for it. Thinking this left him mean and bitter inside. It was at moments like these that Clinton regretted he had ever sold his gun.

HE WAS walking along, wincing every time a sharp pebble dug into his feet and trying not to heed the pangs of hunger,

when he heard the sound of a horse coming up behind him. Pride would not let Clinton turn to see who it was or allow him to come to a stop. He walked on, trying to pretend that the saddle was feather-light on his shoulder and that he'd been partaking of his three-squares-daily with regularity.

The rider rode up beside Clinton and slowed his horse down to Clinton's pace. The rider said nothing for a while. He was squinting far ahead as if he could see something interesting at the edge of the horizon.

Finally the rider spoke. "That your mare back there a piece, son?"

Clinton stumbled as a particularly sharp piece of rock stabbed up through a break in his boots. He made out that it hadn't hurt a bit and shrugged.

"That's right," he said.

The rider still stared at the horizon. "I thought you'd like to know I roped your mare and dragged her to a cutbank and caved enough down on her to cover her."

"I'm much obliged, mister," said Clinton. His throat ached and his eyes stung as if some grit had got into them. He supposed he felt this way because he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning.

"I see you've still got your saddle," said the rider. "Would you be interested in a riding job—if I furnished the horse?"

Young Clinton came to a halt. He set his saddle down on the ground and lifted suspicious eyes up to the rider. There was resentment in Clinton. He needed help. He needed it badly but he did not want pity.

The rider had reined in his mount. It was a sleek and wiry blaze-faced black that looked cat-quick in its movements. The rider took his glance off the horizon and laid it on Clinton. His eyes were black and opaque and hard. They seemed to hold as much feeling as two lumps of coal. The rider was tall and gaunt. His face was lined and seamed with many wrinkles and the skin was burned almost black by sun and wind. He looked like he had Indian blood in him.

"I'm not looking for a hand-out," said Clinton with stiff pride.

There was no emotion on the rider's face. He stared at Clinton as if he were looking at a fence-post or a rock. "This ain't a hand-out," the rider said in his quiet, toneless way. "I need a man and I'm on my way to town to hire one and I see you and I'm

thinking I can save myself a ride. You want the job, son?"

Clinton had known so much adversity he could not believe his ears. The suspicion lingered in him that it was pity behind the rider's offer but then Clinton took another look of the face and figured there could be nothing soft about the man. Nobody with eyes as cold and dead as that could know of such a thing as pity.

"What's the job like?" Clinton asked.

"Why don't you come and find out? You can always quit if you don't like it, son."

Clinton reckoned he had nothing to lose. After all, he did want a job more than anything else on earth. Maybe this was the beginning of the change in his luck.

"You've got yourself a hand, mister," he said, trying to keep the jubilation out of his tone.

The rider told Clinton to climb up behind him on the black and Clinton did. He braced his old McClellan kak against a thigh and they started off, riding double. The rider smelled of horse-sweat and woodsmoke which to young Clinton were the sweetest odors in the world. Looking down, he saw the

gun in the man's holster. The weapon was a .44 Colt with a long seven-and-a-half inch barrel. The handle was black and worn very smooth as if it had seen much use.

After they had ridden about a mile, Clinton said, "I'm Ernie Clinton, mister."

"I'm called Valverde," said the rider.

After that, they had nothing to talk about. The only sounds that rose were those of the black's hoofs on the trail . . .

Valverde's place lay at the edge of the badlands. It did not look like much of an outfit. Valverde's brand was double V and to Clinton, the few cows he saw wearing this iron were sleek and fat despite the sparseness of the graze. But this, he figured, was probably because Valverde did not have too many head and so, what little graze there was sufficed to put weight on the animals.

This set Clinton to thinking. If Valverde's place was rundown and he did not have too many cows, what did he want a rider for? Valverde had just felt sorry for him, Clinton thought, and it made him angry to think that he was getting charity again. But he told himself it wouldn't be for more than one meal. He'd see to that.



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Valverde seemed to read Clinton's mind. When they had dismounted, he waved a hand towards the ramshackle buildings and corrals and smiled.

"It ain't much," he admitted, "but I got business that keeps me away a lot. I need a man to fix up those corrals and to look after the stock." A frigid interest seemed to enter those expressionless eyes. "You'll earn your keep, son."

Young Clinton said nothing. He'd just wait and see. If the job was bona fide, he'd stay on. If it was charity and pity, he'd pick up his saddle and start walking. . . .

VALVERDE had a partner, name of Duke Bedford. He came out of the house, yawning and stretching as if he'd just roused from a deep sleep. He listened while Valverde said that he'd hired a hand. Then Bedford said:

"We don't need no hand!"

Ernie Clinton pulled up short. He was carrying his saddle to the saddle shed and Bedford's statement halted Clinton in his tracks.

Valverde said something soft which Clinton could not understand. Then Bedford spoke again. He had a high, twanging voice that carried afar and he was making no effort to keep it toned down.

"You gone soft, Val? Give the kid a meal and then tell him to move on. We got no need for no hired hand."

Wrath and resentment ran through Clinton. Carrying his saddle, he walked over to the two men. He felt Valverde's eyes flick at him with something more than impersonal in them but young Clinton was not interested in that. He knew only the swift coursing of the anger in him.

Bedford looked at Clinton with unconcealed contempt. Something of a dandy, his high-peaked stetson was cream-colored and he was wearing a flashy red plaid shirt under a brown and white calfskin vest. A blue silk scarf was tied around his neck. His trousers were pearl gray in hue and the legs were tucked into the tops of ornate, white-stitched boots. The gunbelt slanting across his waist also had a lot of white-stitching and the .45 in the holster had an ivory handle. However, despite this fanciness of appearance, Bedford's clothes all carried a layer of dirt. It was stuck on like grease, on his hat and vest and shirt and trousers and on the

skin of his face and hands. It was as if Duke Bedford had never heard of washing.

Young Clinton directed his words at Bedford. "I wouldn't take a hand-out from you if I was starving," and, as if in mockery, Clinton's stomach gave a twinge. He shouldered his saddle and started away.

"Hold on, son," said Valverde. "I thought you were going to give the job a try. Now you're walking off without so much as seeing what it's like."

Clinton's stride broke; he stopped. But he kept his back to them.

Valverde said quietly, "You're not being fair to me, son. If you hadn't told me you were taking the job, I'd have gone on to town and hired myself a man. Now I've got to make that trip all over again."

Clinton turned and lowered his kak to the ground. His eyes were defiant as he stared at Bedford. "I won't stand for no shoving around," Clinton said stiffly.

"You won't be shoved around," said Valverde. "I rod this place."

A small, ugly smile played with Bedford's lips. "Don't be a fool, Val. What do you know about the kid? What's he like? How do you know you can trust him? Besides, we don't need no help."

For the first time, a bit of emotion showed on Valverde's face. The line of his jaw tightened and his voice came quietly but with a deadliness to it that was like a knife-point jabbing against a rib.

"I'm rodding this outfit, Duke. Any time you don't like it, you know what you can do. . . ."

Ernie Clinton never saw too much of Valverde and his partner. They were gone almost every night, returning at dawn and sleeping most of the day. It was in the evenings before he rode off that Valverde gave Clinton his instructions for the next day.

The job seemed genuine enough to young Clinton. The ranch apparently had been neglected for some time and he never idled for lack of something to do. He repaired the sheds and the corrals. He kept an eye on the stock. The place really needed a hand and Valverde and Bedford seemed to have no time for it.

Still, Ernie Clinton could see no point to it. The times were bad and beef on the hoof was practically worthless. It certainly did not pay any one to keep a hand on at an outfit like the double V. Wages had not

been mentioned when Clinton had been hired and he did not expect any. He was perfectly satisfied with his three-squares a day, this, and the knowledge that the job had probably prevented him from doing something wrong. He had been on the verge of going bad the day Valverde had picked him up.

ON THIS evening, Valverde came over to Clinton and said, "You could stand some new clothes, son. Here's an advance on your wages. Run into town in the morning and get yourself a new outfit. You've earned a day off."

Young Clinton thought of the holes in his boots and of the patches he had sewed on to keep his clothes together and he flushed a little. He could feel Valverde's eyes on him. They were keen and piercing as if they were looking right into the maw of his heart. When he spoke, Valverde's voice was strangely gentle.

"A man needn't be ashamed of being poor. It's bad only when a man has to be ashamed of how he got rich. Remember that, son."

Duke Bedford came out of the house and he and Valverde mounted their horses. They rode off together. Ernie Clinton watched them go. He knew it was none of his business but he wished Valverde wouldn't do so much night-riding. . . .

The new clothes and new boots made young Clinton feel right good. He could not quite put it into words as he tried explaining it to himself. All he knew was that the new outfit had boosted his feeling of self-respect, not so much because it was new but because he had earned it rather than having received it as a gift.

On the way back to the double V, he was overtaken by two riders. They told Clinton to pull up and then they arrayed their mounts side by side in front of Clinton. One of the riders was a short, beefy man with a red face and a tawny mustache. The other rider was tall and slat-thin with a gaunt, hollow-cheeked face.

The red-faced one said, "My name's Fred Aderhold. That there is Bruce Partridge. We're Valverde's neighbors."

Clinton nodded in acknowledgment. He said nothing. His heart was pounding a little, as if in anticipation of something unpleasant.

"You been working for Valverde a month now, ain't you?" said Aderhold.

Clinton nodded again.

Aderhold's eyes swept Clinton's brand new clothes. "Doing all right, I see," Aderhold murmured.

Resentment and anger flared in young Clinton. "I bought these clothes out of my wages. Anything wrong with that?"

"No-o," drawled Aderhold, with exaggerated indifference. "Only, we can't see how an outfit the size of the double V can pay the way of three men in times like these."

"I don't see where it's any of your business," snapped Clinton.

"I'll show you where it's our business," said Aderhold, the color of his face deepening, the timbre of his voice thickening. "We're warning you this time only, kid. Maybe you don't know it but Valverde and Duke Bedford and some others have been running off our stock to some secret place in the badlands. There they butcher the cows and skin them and dry the hides. The hide right now is worth more than the cow but it won't last like that. When the day comes that beef prices go up again, we want to cash in on that to make up for these poor times. We won't be able to cash in if we don't have any stock. You understand, kid?"

"I never stole another man's beef in all my life," young Clinton said indignantly.

"I'm not asking you to own up to it," said Aderhold, his tone flat and uncompromising. "I'm just telling you that if you're smart, kid you'll get out of the country. We're going to find that trail into the badlands one of these days and when we do, there's going to be a bunch of hombres kicking out their lives at the ends of ropes. . . ."

Duke Bedford rode in alone one morning. He was driving a couple of calves and he herded them into a corral. "They must have strayed from their mummies," he told Ernie Clinton. "I thought I'd drive them in so you can brand them."

"With our brand?" asked Clinton.

"Whose did you think?" said Bedford, dismounting. He unsaddled and turned his tired buckskin into a corral.

"Where's Valverde?" asked Clinton.

"Val's away on business," said Bedford. "He'll be back in three-four days." He was eyeing Clinton's new clothes. "You buy yourself a gun?" he asked casually.

"There are things I need worse than a gun," said Clinton.

"I don't think so," said Bedford. "One of these days you're going to wish you had a gun."

He yawned, and started for the house. Clinton watching him go, kept thinking about what Bedford had said of Valverde. Valverde could have gone to sell some hides. The thought made Clinton angry and sick. He didn't want it like that. He wanted Valverde to be honest and respectable but Clinton realized sadly that there was nothing he could do about it. He could leave, that was about all; but he owed something to Valverde. . . .

WHEN Valverde returned, four days later, he looked angry. There was a hard, bright glint in his black eyes and his mouth was pinched tightly. A muscle kept twitching at the base of Valverde's jaw.

Duke Bedford had done no night-riding while Valverde was gone. Clinton had begun to hope that that part of it was over for good. He wished for that, even if it meant that he would no longer be needed then at the double V.

Valverde planted his boots firmly on the ground, his legs spread a little. His thumb was hooked in his cartridge belt. When he spoke, he looked neither at Clinton nor at Bedford.

"I've come across a couple of our calves following two of Fred Aderhold's Rafter A cows. Who did that branding?"

The pulse began to pound in Clinton's throat. "I did," he said.

"Why?" said Valverde.

There was sadness in Ernie Clinton. He could see how it stood. There was only trouble for him here now and it would be best if he left, but he hated the thought of going away.

"I thought they were ours," he said simply.

Valverde's eyes moved now and fell on young Clinton. Valverde was squinting so hard his lids almost touched. His glance was practically a palpable thing on Clinton.

"Couldn't you read the brand on their mummies?" asked Valverde.

"Their mummies weren't around," said Clinton. He wanted to explain the all of it but there was a strange reluctance holding him back. He had been tricked by Duke Bedford but he was not going to cry about it.

Valverde's stare switched to Bedford.

"Why did you do it, Duke?" Valverde asked. He must have known his partner very well, Clinton thought.

Bedford made no effort to deny it. "It's about time the kid started earning his keep," said Bedford. "I thought I'd break him in this way." A cunning smile curved the corners of his mouth. "He's no longer clean, Val. He can get sent to the pen for what he did. So he might as well start giving us a hand in the badlands." Bedford spat. "I'm sick and tired of the dirty, stinking work while he's here living on hand-outs."

"I told you to leave him alone, Duke," said Valverde. "This finishes us. First, though, I owe you something. I'm leaving the choice up to you, Duke. Either pull your gun or drop your shell belt. Which is it going to be?"

Bedford's mouth twitched, baring his teeth in a grimace of rage and hate. His hand started to move toward his gun but then he caught the gelid, uncompromising glint in Valverde's eyes and paled a little. The snarl left his mouth. Then with a display of bravado, it came back, wavered a little, disappeared. He reached for the buckle of his belt.

Almost simultaneously the two heavy belts hit the ground. Valverde turned a little dropping his and, in that instant, Bedford rushed. He loosed a wild swing that caught Valverde on the side of the head and sent him sprawling. Bedford leaped in, boots seeking Valverde's face.

Valverde swore with hurt and fury. Grabbing one of Bedford's kicking legs, he pulled and twisted. Bedford cried out as he lost his balance and went crashing to the earth. But he was up instantly to meet Valverde's charge.

Bedford started another prodigious swing but Valverde ducked under it and with his head still down butted the dandy in the stomach. The breath whooshed out of Bedford; his face turned green. Before he could recover, Valverde was raining blows at him, his fists cracking with sounds as sharp as gunshots. At first, Bedford tried to retaliate but he could not stand up to Valverde's insensate fury. He worked on Bedford's face with a single-minded savagery. The flesh began to split and the blood dripped from Bedford's features to his clothes, spattering the close working Valverde.

Bedford was grunting with pain and fu-

tility. He no longer tried to hit back. Raising his arms, he sought to bury his face in them for protection but Valverde smashed them aside and hit Bedford flush on the mouth.

He fell back, moaning with hurt. Then Valverde smashed him again. Now Bedford's face was just raw, bleeding flesh. Another of Valverde's blows struck him and he went sprawling. He was not unconscious but he lay where he had fallen, face buried against the earth. Duke Bedford had quit.

Valverde stood there, breathing hard, sweat dripping off his chin. The mask had slipped from his emotions and now his face was a contorted grimace of pure and utter ferality.

"Don't ever let me lay eyes on you again, Duke," said Valverde, "because if I do, I'm killing you! . . ."

THE sad and bitter part of it for Clinton was that Valverde still rode at night. Clinton was tempted several times to tell Valverde of the warning that had been delivered by Fred Aderhold, but then Clinton figured that Valverde knew what it was all about, and he was just simply taking a calculated risk. Besides, Clinton thought, it was none of his business. Valverde had never once offered an explanation of his whereabouts after dark and so Clinton let the matter lie. But he felt ill at ease and apprehensive about it.

This night Ernie Clinton awoke with the sound of a running horse beating in his ears. He sat upright in his bunk, his heart starting to pound hard, ears straining as he listened to the thrum of the hoofs drawing nearer.

There seemed to be a sense of urgency and merciless haste in the pounding run of the horse and a thousand wild, frantic fears flashed through Clinton's mind. Then he was out of bed and pulling on his trousers and his boots. The horse came to a halt now and there was only the sound of its labored breathing just outside the door.

Clinton opened the portal and looked out. A full moon was riding high and Clinton instantly discerned the slumped figure on the ground.

"Valverde!" Clinton cried. The sound strangled in his throat. "Valverde!"

The man's head lifted as Clinton reached him. He was trying to struggle to his feet and Clinton reaching down, grabbed him un-

der the armpits, and experienced the sickening feel of blood-soaked cloth under his fingers.

Valverde could not help himself to any extent. Clinton dragged the man inside and boosted him up on his bunk. Then Clinton lighted the lantern. In its feeble light, Valverde's face looked drawn and gray.

CLINTON stood there, staring down at Valverde. Some of the smoke from the lantern must have got into his eyes for they began to sting. Valverde lay quietly, eyes closed, his chest rising and falling. The blood from the wound in his back was already soaking the blankets.

"What happened, Valverde?" asked Clinton.

A spasm ripped a small moan out of Valverde's clenched teeth. Then he seemed to relax. "That damn Bedford," he muttered.

"Was it Duke who shot you?" asked Clinton.

"Duke's skipped the country," said Valverde, eyes still closed, "but before he left, he sold us out. Aderhold and Partridge and I don't know how many others were there waiting for us. They strung five of us up, son. I was the only one who got away." His eyes opened now and fixed on Clinton. "I had to get away."

"You're safe now, Valverde."

Valverde's mouth curved briefly in a gentle smile. It was the first time Clinton had ever seen anything like this on the man's face. Then the smile died and a look of anxiety came into Valverde's eyes.

"They'll be here after me," he said, reaching up a hand and digging the fingers into Clinton's arm. "You've got to run for it, son."

"I can't leave you, Valverde."

"Don't start anything like that, son," Valverde said in his old, hard way. "Aderhold and his friends are in a hanging mood tonight. They're out to put an end to hide-rustling for good. They find you here with me, they'll string you up."

"But I'm clean, Valverde. You know I never was in it!"

"Try telling that to Aderhold," said Valverde. His fingers dug with a fierce urgency into Clinton's flesh. "Look, son. I know Duke Bedford and I'll bet anything that when he sold us out he told Aderhold you were one of us. That's why I ran for it. I

came to warn you, son. Now get on a horse and beat it. Take the blue roan. I'm giving him to you."

There was a cloying thickness in young Clinton's throat. He saw how inevitable it was and grief rose overwhelmingly in him. "I'm taking you with me, Valverde," he said. "I owe it to you."

Again that strange and gentle smile touched Valverde's mouth. "Forget about me son. You can't help me any more, no one can."

"Don't talk like that, Valverde."

A spasm of coughing hit Valverde and when it passed, he was weak and shaken. Blood edged the corners of his mouth and his voice was barely audible in the quiet room.

"Listen to me, son," he whispered. "Forget about what's going to happen to me. It'll only be something I've got coming. I don't hate Aderhold or those others. They're only doing what I'd do if I was in their boots. I've got a gun and when they come, I'll shoot back but I won't try to hit any of them. You understand what I'm trying to tell you, son?"

"You helped me when I needed it, Valverde. Now I want to help you."

"Look, son," said Valverde, "the only way you can help me is to get on a horse and beat it before Aderhold gets here. When I was a kid, I was broke and hungry one day. I was at the fork in the trail that day and I took the wrong turn. Lots of times I've tried riding back to take the other turn but it was too late for me. You were at the same fork the day I picked you up. Do you understand now, son?"

It was beginning to dawn on Clinton's mind. All the inexplicables were beginning to unfold before his comprehension. For the first time he was seeing clearly the reason for his job and the reason Valverde had never taken him into the badlands—and it hurt.

"Some men have sons," Valverde went on when Clinton did not speak. "For them, dying is not too hard because they leave something behind them. They have sons to do something good and fine after they've gone. Some men don't have anybody. That's when dying comes hard. A man makes mistakes and he knows he can never fix them up. But if he's got somebody to leave behind him and to live a good and clean life, then

it kind of balances things and that man isn't afraid to die any more. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you, son?"

It was crystal clear to Ernie Clinton now. It all made sense to him now. He could feel a mixture of emotions inside—regret and sadness and grief, but above all a great pride that he had known a man like Valverde.

"You don't have much time, son," said Valverde. "Aderhold should be here any minute."

"Sure, Valverde, sure," said Clinton in a soothing voice.

He kept his back turned while he put on his shirt and his jacket. He did not want to let Valverde see the moisture in his eyes. Clinton picked up a few belongings and went to the door.

When he turned, he showed Valverde a smile. It was an effort for Clinton but he managed it. "Rake him and don't grab leather, Valverde," he said.

"Thanks, son."

Then Clinton was outside. On the clear night air he thought he detected a distant murmur like the throb of galloping hoofbeats. Clinton hurried to the corral and saddled the blue roan. He mounted and raced away.

On a rise, Clinton reined in the horse. In the moonlight he could see specks deploying about the buildings of the double V. Then the shooting broke out. He could see the winking of the gunflames and the sounds of the shots were faint and crisp. After a while the shooting stopped. There was only silence now. Clinton turned the blue roan and rode away, the throb of the roan's hoofs keeping time with the sad beating of his heavy heart.

Not long afterward, times took a turn for the better. Ernie Clinton caught on with a large outfit far to the north. He made a good hand. He worked hard and saved his money and when he figured he had enough, he quit his job, bought a gun and rode off in a hurry.

He knew how his life would be. He would settle down and live out his days in honesty and peace but first he had a chore. He would not rest until this chore was done in full.

In the seventy-two years that he lived, Duke Bedford was the only man Ernie Clinton killed. . . .



CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 62)

WHEN it comes to Western know-how, are you in the top-hand class . . . or do you rank among the phildoodles? Following are twenty questions on cowpoke topics which are resigned to separate the oldhands from the greenhorns. Answer seventeen or more of them correctly, and you rate excellent. Answer fifteen or sixteen and you're good. But answer fourteen or fewer and you land in the phildoodle group. Good luck!

1. True or false? In the old West, a man was known as "cat eyed" when his eyes resembled those of a panther.

2. True or false? "Gold colic" is a stomach disorder that one gets from handling too much gold.

3. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "gone to Texas"?

4. If a cowpoke friend of yours referred to a "goose drownder," which of the following would he be talking about? A heavy rain? A device used for killing geese? A vicious Western fish?

5. In the language of the cowpoke, what is a "grub spoiler"?

6. True or false? A "hooden" is a place where bachelor cowpokes sleep during rough weather.

7. True or false? The term "hornswoggling" refers to the twisting and turning motions of a roped steer by which he manages to escape.

8. True or false? The term "Indian whiskey" refers to cheap whiskey sold to early-day traders.

9. True or false? "In the gate" is a term used in the gambling game known as "monte."

10. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he had just seen a horse "jack-knifing," what would you think the horse had been doing?

11. True or false? A "jug handle" is a mark of ownership cut into livestock and which resembles the handle of a jug.

12. If a cowpoke acquaintance told you he was going to put on his "low-necked clothes," which of the following would you think he was planning to don? Clothes suitable for calf roping? Clothes suitable for use during a shooting match? Clothes for dress up purposes?

13. In the language of the West, what is known as "Mormon brakes"?

14. If an outlaw friend mentioned the term "pants rats," which of the following would he be talking about? Body lice? Trade rats? Large black mine rats?

15. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "riding the bag line"?

16. True or false. The Spanish word *si* means "I doubt it."

17. True or false? A "spinner" is a horse which bucks in a tight circle.

18. True or false? "Stirrup leathers" are a form of Western food made from tough meat.

19. "Teepee" is a slang term that old time Westerners sometimes used in referring to their houses. Yes or no?

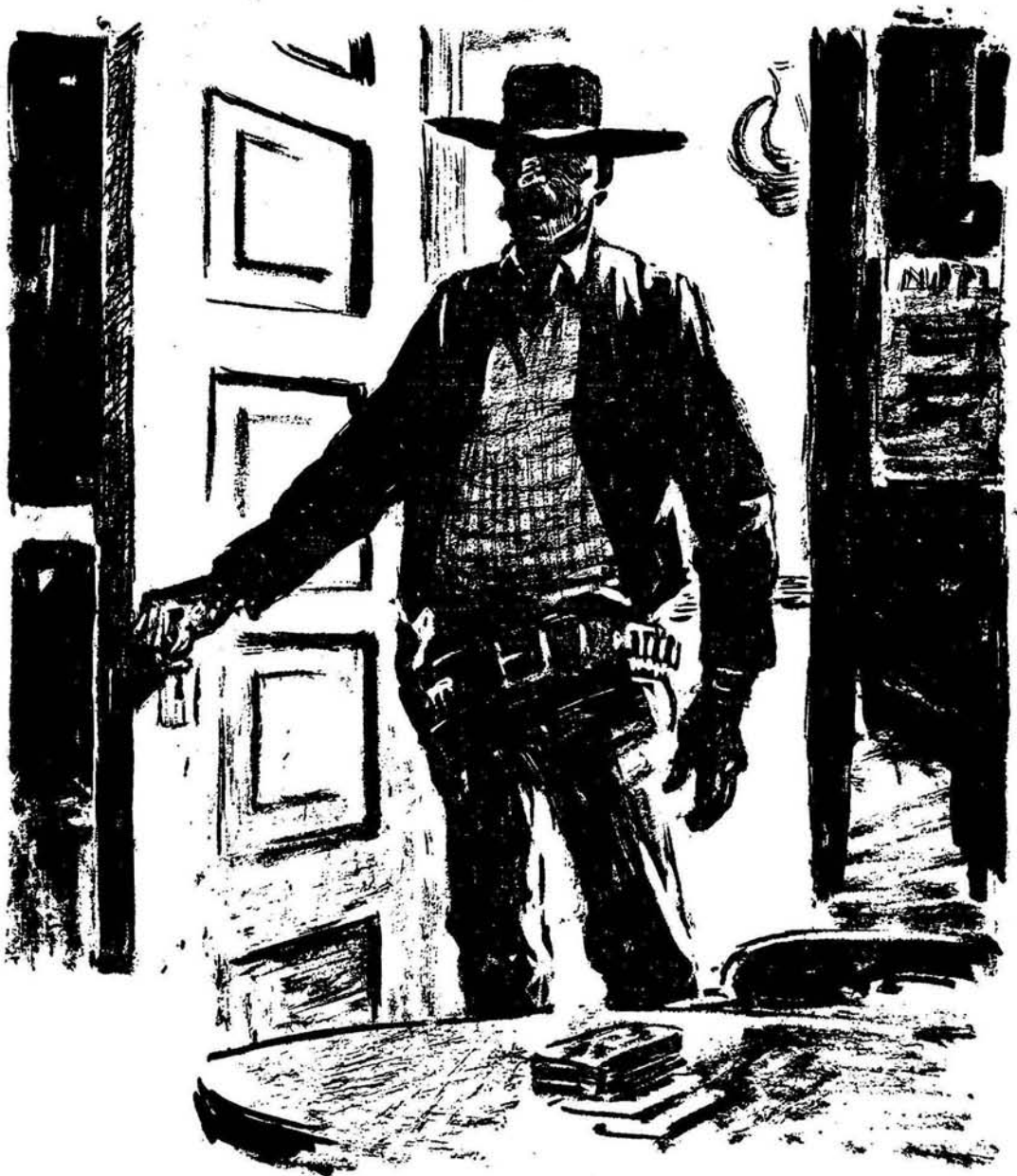
20. What is the meaning of the slang expression to "throw down" on a man?



Blacky Jethro was a boot-tough hombre—and all bad. His eye was hard, his heart was ice, and his six-gun warned Barney to . . .

DRAW FAST—OR DIE!

By BRYCE WALTON



The broad shoulders, the tall rawboned frame. The vest and hat would be gray if it were light. . . .

IT WAS getting along toward dawn in Dodge City, and young Barney Stevens was getting tired. Tired handing out rotgut, wiping glasses, watching the bloody shoot-outs. Tired of the Texans, in from the Chisholm Trail, who fought the Civil War over every night in the Brackson-Begbie Saloon.

Seth Brackson strolled up the bar and Barney gladly poured him a shot of his spe-

cial reserve. He studied Barney from kindly eyes beneath thick grey brows. Through thick tobacco smoke and the smell of stale beer, the roaring sound circled round and round Barney. His head ached. His hands weren't steady.

"Still a hard town, ain't it, Barney?" Brackson said softly. He was a small, delicate old veteran in a swallow-tail coat, and a black string tie and striped vest.

"Hard as hell," was Barney's answer. "If you hadn't give me this job, Seth, it'd have finished me. An' I sure don't know what poor Clara would have done either."

"How is Clara?"

Barney's throat tightened. A kind of sick hopelessness hit him at the thought of his invalid wife. He shook his head. "Getting worse, Seth. She just wastes away a little at a time. This town's killing her, Seth."

Brackson sighed. "Yôu'll have to have a mighty big stake to take her back East."

Barney nodded. "I appreciate you taking me in and giving me this job, Seth. You pay me good, but a man can't save any money in this inflated town. I don't know what to do."

Brackson leaned forward. "This town knocked the courage out of her. And it did the same thing to you, Barney. You ain't a gunman. You ain't a cattleman. You're a farmer, an' that's what you came out here to be. I gave you a job when the Texans busted up your wagon an' stampeded your team. But you need guts, Barney. I can't give you that."

Barney flushed. "It's money I need. That's all. Clara's got to be taken out of here, and back where we can get a doctor, a specialist. She'll die in this country, and I got to get the money to take her out of it."

Brackson fondled his long black cigar. "Maybe she just needs some courage, Barney, an' ain't gettin' it from you."

Barney tried to smile. "I know you're tryin' to help me, Seth, but I know what Clara needs. I got to get her back East. I was a damned fool for bringin' her out here. But I thought I was gonna be a big pioneer, an' start me up a nice farm. My dad was a farmer and it's all I know. But what chance has a man got when the Texans come in and ride rough-shod over your land an' bring in cattle ticks and disease? They never gave me a chance, anyway. They got me before I even got unloaded."

It had been about six months since he'd come into the outskirts of Dodge. A bunch of Texans, just in with a big beef drive from Texas, had shot up his wagon, run his team off, insulted Clara and scattered his supplies all over the plains. Then they'd made him take off his boots, and had chased him through the main street of Dodge, firing, 45 slugs at his heels.

Barney had a six-shooter on him then, but

he didn't know how to use it well enough, he'd figured, to fight back at that band of wild-yelling Texans. But he remembered the leader was a big, raw-boned man with a thick black mustache, who had worn a grey stetson and a gray buckskin vest. He couldn't forget him.

And he'd never forget Clara either: the way she'd stared, her eyes getting big and dark, and how she'd fainted, when he'd come back, sneaking through the dark like a starved coyote. Then he'd gotten drunk, and stayed drunk for weeks, and gambled away all their money. He'd been in a kind of a daze, until one night, he woke up and shook it off, and taking stock, realized what had happened to himself—and to Clara. And then he'd found out that even in a wild town like Dodge City, one man can be the friend of another.

It was Seth Brackson who gave him a job bar-hopping. That's where Barney had been ever since, licking his wounds. Behind the bar, he earned a bare living, and spent his spare time hating the West, and above all, hating that nameless Texan who had insulted him.

"THIS town ain't so bad, in its way, Barney," Brackson was saying. "And all Texans ain't untamable hellions. That big fella who broke up your wagon and shot the ground from under your feet was a gunman. Blacky Jethro. A damned good gun rannie, but not a thing to make friends with."

"There's too much money in this saloon of yours," Barney mumbled. "I need money, and I see all this raw gold dust, eagles an' double eagles going back an' forth, an' I think of Clara up there wastin' away, an' it drives me crazy."

"Money is something you can use only if you've already got the qualifications to use it," Brackson said. "An' as I said afore, Barney, that Texan bunch put the fear in your bones, an' that's what you've got to rid yourself of."

Barney ruffled then. "I ain't a coward, Brackson. But who the hell would want to stay and fight a town like this, in his right mind? This town just don't make a pretense a' being a place to live in."

Voices blurred in over the roaring volume of course laughter. There was the tinkle of glass and tinny music blared from the piano

at the end of the sawdust floor. Several gamblers came from the card rooms upstairs and sauntered down the bar and stood beside Seth Brackson to order drinks.

Barney served them and his heart swelled and his stomach felt empty as he saw their rolls of green and yellow bills, big enough to choke a longhorn steer. One of the gamblers, a lean tall dude in a frock coat, with a bowler hat set back on his bald head, was Corey Begbie, Brackson's partner, an Easterner who had helped finance Brackson's saloon venture. He was the brains. Brackson the front.

As a tip, Begbie contemptuously tossed Barney a ten dollar bill. Barney slid the wet paper off the bar and stuffed it under his apron, into his levi pocket.

Another gambler, a whiskey peddler who made his pile sneaking in sugared alcohol to the Indians, swore and pounded the bar. "Lost my damned dirty shirt ag'n!" he yelled.

Barney stared at the big roll of bills another gambler was counting off casually. His fingers twitched on the bar rag, and he licked his lips. The gambler who always lost sneered at Barney.

"You got a real good racket, you have, Barney. Can't recall Brackson or Begbie here ever hiring a dude tinhorn for a bar-jumper afore. Don't even carry a gun, do you? A fine racket. Big tips every night, all the free rotgut you want, maybe filchin' the till here an' then. What a setup, Barney. You know, I think I'll get me a nice little wife, an' spread the word around that she's fainty-sick near to dyin'; then, maybe, Brackson'll take me in, an' set me up with a soft job. If—"

Brackson's usually kind face went hard, and his blue eyes iced over. His right hand flashed across the air, the heavy diamond ring glinting. The gambler who always lost swore and stumbled back, a red gash appearing across his forehead, blood running down into his eyes.

Brackson rubbed his ring thoughtfully. "You been riding the kid too much," he said. "Go out an' peddle your alcohol, and stay out a' here. The kid's all right, but you're not. Now, keep yore claw away from thet hoglaig—and git!"

But Anson didn't move. Instead, he bent in a half crouch, snarling, his hand hooked above the walnut butt of his six-shooter.

Barney's throat was dry as his hands clenched the bar. Then he saw Begbie and the other gamblers step back out of range as Brackson flipped back his coat and dropped his hand to a double-barreled deringer in a shoulder holster.

An expectant quiet filtered down the length of the long room and slid up the unpainted stairs above the piano. The little fat man who had been playing the same jig tune over and over, stopped and turned around. Tables and chairs in the mud-colored sawdust of the floor scraped back. Men backed away from the bar. The busy roulette wheels and dice tables in the far corner went momentarily out of business.

Barney felt sick in the stomach. In his nostrils, the smell was thick and rancid and hot, the smell of Dodge, the smell of death and stale beer and bad whiskey. A drunken woman with faded blond hair looked up from a table and laughed tonelessly, then dropped her head back down in her arms, overturning a bottle of whiskey.

Barney had seen it too many times to be bothered much, except that now he thought of Seth Brackson going down with a bullet in him, and it made him cold inside. He thought about how now, if he had any guts, he might step in and repay Brackson for all he'd done for him. A .45 was under the bar.

But Barney just stood there, frozen, his hands gripping the bar edge.

And Anson said. "Your crooked house-boys have high-staked me to hell fer the last time, Brackson. You've taken me fer every cent I ever hauled in here. You run a crooked game here, Brackson, an' I'm callin' your dirty hand!"

Barney took a sharp breath. Everyone knew Brackson and Begbie's honesty. Everyone knew what happened when Brackson was accused of the contrary. He was honest and square, and handled his own scrapes, though there had been very few run-ins between him and Dodge. He wasn't a gunman, and he wasn't the type of man to draw the fire of others. Just a fair and honest man seldom crossed.

But now the showdown had come. Anson was lightning fast on the draw. And Brackson was short on practice.

BARNEY'S hand crept down beneath the bar. The .45 kept there by one of the other bar-jumpers touched his wet fingers.

His hand jumped away from it like the metal was red hot. He blinked sweat out of his eyes, and felt his lips stretch into a thin sour line. Brackson was right. Brackson had staked a yellow-bellied coyote, and could expect nothing in return from Barney Stevens.

He heard Begbie say calmly. "Don't play with him, Seth. I've hired a man." Begbie's voice rose. "All right, Blacky!"

Barney moved his eyes, and the sickness in his stomach curdled.

A big raw-boned man was walking across the sawdust from the stairs. A big man with a gray vest, wearing a grey stetson, and a black mustache, and two low-thonged .45's. Barney remembered; he could never forget. Blacky Jethro!

Everyone followed the big rangy gunman as he walked up and stood a little to one side of Brackson. Brackson's eyes narrowed. "I handle my own plays, Jethro. Get him out of here, Begbie."

Begbie said. "Don't be a damned fool, Seth."

Blacky Jethro moved in front of Brackson. He moved with a powerful rangy ease, and his eyes shone with a black, bright eagerness.

He said in a soft drawl. "Holster up and rabbit out a' here, Anson. An' don't come back."

"You ain't talkin' to me," Anson said. He wiped the blood out of his eyes with his left hand, but his right still hung over his gun butt.

"I'm sayin' it to you, Anson, but only once more. Flag out."

Anson ran his tongue over his lower lip, and for an instant his eyes looked longingly at the batwings. Then he spoke and his voice was low and tight. "You put me out, an' then I reckon I'll stay."

Few saw Blacky's draw. When the lead caught Anson in the shoulder, he was still sliding his gun free. Then his hand froze, and he groaned as a sudden blood stain spread on his buckskins.

But Blacky wasn't finished. His right fist smashed into Anson's jaw, and his left fist made a sickening slap in Anson's belly. Then he kicked Anson's leg, and the peddler sprawled out in the sawdust, and lay there coughing and grunting.

After a while, Blacky dragged him to his feet and started him toward the half-doors.

He threw him outside into the street, and then returned and leaned against the wall just inside the doors.

For a moment, Barney couldn't take his eyes from Blacky. He licked his lips and rubbed his hands together but couldn't turn away. Then Begbie said. "We need a man like that here, Seth. There's too much money here and we got to take care of it now. I should have asked you, but you know how it is."

Brackson buttoned his coat. "All right, Begbie." He glanced at Barney, his face expressionless. "Reckon we do need a gunshark. But keep him out of the card-rooms. Keep him here on the floor an' no place else."

Looking at Brackson, Barney wondered whether he imagined disgust in Brackson's eyes and in his voice, but dropped the thought as Brackson said:

"You can go see your wife now, Barney. Be back at five this afternoon. Got a lot a' cleanin' to do."

Barney went out the back door when he left. Blacky Jethro was still standing by the main half-doors up front. . . .

Barney was free now. He hurried along the boardwalk of Dodge, down the long block that took him every morning at dawn back to that stuffy little room where Clara was. He walked fast past the line of unpainted, leaning, clapboard shells facing the railroad on Front Street and cursed the town as a blight, a blot, a lumped scar on the belly of Kansas.

Then he thought of the money, pouring through Brackson's saloons in glittering floods, and how, if he had even a small share of it, he could take Clara and go back to Pennsylvania in style, and in a way that no one back there could laugh at.

There was plenty of money in Dodge. He had watched it make the big gambling tables groan, watched the dregs of the plains from Canada to Mexico, the buffalo hunters and whiskey peddlers, Eastern tourists and English lords and Russian grand dukes, all with big fat rolls of bills. And all Barney got was a measly weekly pay check, and a tip now and then, tossed unseeingly at him like bones to a dog.

He had to have his share, had to get Clara out of here. He climbed the dusty stairs through the dim light, and hesitated outside the warped cracked door to their

room in the Tarryington Hotel thinking of the woman who could only lie in the half darkness of a hot lonely room, and listen as the guns flared and funeral processions passed on to Boot Hill.

He stepped in and softly closed the door. On the white bed, the moon shone through the window. She stirred, and he saw that she was awake. She was always awake, waiting, when he came home at dawn.

He dropped to his knees beside the bed. Her hands were like a child's, damp and cold. They seemed transparent to Barney as he held them. She was beautiful, Barney thought, even now. The moon made a golden shine on her hair. Her eyes were sunken in dark shadows, and her voice seemed to drift to Barney from a long way off.

"I've been worried about you, Barney."

Barney buried his head in the damp coverlet. Her hand brushed the back of his neck, softly, gently. Every time her hand caressed him like this, it seemed it would be the last time.

"I heard a lot of shooting, Barney. I thought they might have—"

There was a sob in his voice. "Don't worry about me, Clara. They aren't interested in me, nobody's gonna kill me."

"We don't belong here, Barney."

"We'll leave this town pretty soon now. I'll get the money someday."

"But we don't need much money, Barney."

He jerked his face up and pounded the side of the bed with his fist. "Everybody laughed when we left. Remember that, Clara. They told me I was a young fool for not stayin' there. But what was there, Clara? You always had money. That little piece a' land of my dad's wouldn't ever have done anything for us. How did I know that law an' order went out of this country when the Texas drovers came in? But I'm not goin' back without money. They'll not be laughing when we go back, Clara. I'll see to that."

She sighed and turned her face to the wall. Her voice was muffled.

"I just lie here and worry about you, Barney. I keep thinking every morning that you'll never come back."

He straightened up slowly. He got to his feet and slid back until he dropped into a chair. He stared at the dawn bursting over the town.

CHAPTER TWO

Barney Calls a Bluff

LATE that evening, Barney went back to his nightly grind. His face was haggard, twisted with his thoughts. All he could think of were those thick yellow rolls of bills in the gamblers' hands. All night long he had slept fitfully in a strange yellow rain, a rain of hundred and thousand dollar bills. If he got the money and got Clara out of here, she would forget that evening when he'd run from the Texans, lead slugs whining at his bare heels, his face white and his brain glazed with terror.

Maybe even he would forget that too; even forget how he had stood frozen, paralyzed, while Anson prepared to kill Seth Brackson.

He avoided looking at Blacky Jethro as he mopped up behind the bar. He wondered if Blacky remembered him. He never gave any sign of recognizing him, but then Blacky's face never showed anything. It was expressionless, a kind of bronzed dead mask.

It was pretty quiet in the saloon, not yet late enough for the evening rush. Barney eased around the end of the bar and slipped up the stairs. He stood in the half-darkness of the upper hallway. He'd been here once before the night he'd lost all their stake in an all-night session of black-jack. The hallway was studded with fourteen closed doors. These doors led into the card rooms. At the end of the passageway was an open doorway where an oil light still burned, faintly yellow.

He'd see Brackson. Maybe he'd apologize for turning yellow that morning. Brackson had known there was a .45 at Barney's finger-tips. But what the hell!—there was nothing he could say to Brackson. A door to his right was partly open, and voices filtered through, the sound of glass and the smell of thick smoke.

A poker session, still going, Barney thought. His mind spun dizzily. He knew what kind of a game that would be. Hundreds of thousands of dollars piled on that table like leaves on an Eastern road at fall.

Stumbling a little, Barney went on down the passageway and looked inside Brackson's office. Next to it was Begbie's office, closed and locked and silent.

There, behind a flat desk, Brackson sat.

His chin was slumped on his chest, his hands flat on the table top. The ashes of a dead cigar were like gray dust on the front of his checkered vest.

"Brackson," he whispered hoarsely. "Seth—"

Brackson didn't move. The oil flame flickered in the lamp. From somewhere on Front Street came the staccato sound of revolver blasts.

"Seth—"

He saw the safe against the wall. It was open. He stepped inside the room. "Seth." He stared at the shadowed corner where the opened safe stood.

The voice spun him around. It was Begbie. He stood, tall and expressionless in the doorway, his thumbs hooked in his jeweled belt, his bowler hat on the back of his head. "Maybe he's asleep, Barney. Maybe he don't want to be disturbed. He's always falling asleep like that at his desk."

"Sure," Barney mumbled. He went past Begbie, and back downstairs, and went to work behind the bar. As the time passed, he thought of Brackson, of that opened safe, of Brackson sleeping with his chin buried in dead cigar ash. Self disgust and fear was a big lump in Barney's stomach, growing bigger and thicker. He'd gone up there looking for money, he knew that now. Then Begbie appeared at the bar, chopping off Barney's thoughts.

The gambler leaned across the bar, his pale face tight and his eyes too bright. "You musta' wanted the money awful bad Barney."

"What?"

Barney's eyes went through the haze of smoke, the almost visible mist of beer fumes. All at once, the roaring sound of the saloon seemed to slam into his brain. He saw the gray vest and gray stetson of Blacky Jethro standing by the half-doors. Standing there like he'd never moved, would never move again.

"I say, Barney, that you must have wanted the money awful bad. Seth wasn't sleeping, not the kind you wake up from. Somebody gut-shot him."

He smiled leadenly at Barney. "Somebody, Barney—" He held out a button, then let it fall and spin on the top of the bar. It was a button from Barney's shirt. "I found it by Seth's desk, Barney."

Barney's mouth was sticky, the words didn't come out very well. "It was hangin'

loose, Begbie. I musta' lost it up there when I was up there to see Seth. You saw me. I just went up to see Seth."

"You saw him, Barney, didn't you? Maybe your voice was the last he ever heard. What did you say, Barney—'thanks, Seth, thanks for that big dumb heart.' Is that what you said, Barney?"

Begbie began eating slowly from the red cheese and cracker supply on the bar.

"I wouldn't do any harm to Seth Brackson," Barney said.

"No one will, now," Begbie said. "He was a great man, but not for this business. He trusted people. I already sent word to the sheriff."

Begbie turned and hooked his elbows on the bar. The saloon had quieted as a stocky, hard looking man came through the batwings and without looking at anyone, went up the unpainted stairs, with two deputies behind him.

Begbie said. "Bat Masterson's mighty fast with a gun, but I've seen sheriffs with more brains. I'm goin' up and tell him something, Barney. Wanta' come along?"

"Wha—what you gonna tell him?" Barney whispered.

"Don't know, not for sure, not right yet," Begbie said. "Whoever murdered Seth got a mighty big haul out of the safe. What I say depends on what he does with the bills. Guess there must have been a hundred thousand in tapped currency sheafs in that safe, Barney. But it ain't there now. I went back in an' I stood there an' talked with Seth for ten minutes before I found out for sure why he didn't answer. Then I thought of you, Barney, and how much you wanted to go back to Pennsylvania in style. Think Bat Masterson might be interested in that."

Begbie turned and Barney followed him toward the stairs. The piano had stopped, and men watched them, the whisper running from mouth to mouth that Seth Brackson had been murdered; the safe robbed. Then Barney found that .45 in his hand, found himself shoving it under the waist band of his levis.

Begbie hadn't directly accused him of killing Brackson. Merely suggested. Murder and the money; just suggestion. That's all it took in Dodge City. A peculiar sensation stirred in Barney as his legs moved mechanically up the stairs. A terrible feeling that he

was trapped . . . and alone . . . forever.

With Seth Brackson dead and gone, Barney realized how much strength the quiet old man had given him, how much Barney had depended on Brackson. And he remembered what Brackson had said once to him:

"You're something like my son was to me, Barney. He looked a lot like you. He was very young, like you, and he hadn't learned yet to be tough. He never got a chance to learn. A Sherman man shot him down by Kennesaw Mountain."

Maybe he thought Barney'd grow into something, like he knew his son would have if he hadn't been shot down at Kennesaw Mountain. Barney's breath choked in his throat. He was almost glad Brackson had been dead, because now Brackson would never know that Barney had come seeking up here earlier to try to steal a sheaf or two of dirty yellow bills.

Barney stopped, and Begbie went on down the passageway toward Brackson's office, where Bat Masterson and his deputies were looking around. Who had murdered Brackson. Who could have—?

It didn't matter, because they'd stick him with it. Maybe they would; maybe they wouldn't. But anyway, Brackson was dead, and hadn't deserved to die. Barney couldn't face him now, even dead. He slipped out of the passageway into an empty card room.

IT WAS DARK. He stumbled through the dark toward an open window. It was a twenty foot drop or so to the ground. He'd run for it, tell Clara—what would he tell Clara? No—he'd go on anywhere, fade out. Maybe that would be good for Clara. Then she'd know for sure what he was. He tipped over a box by the window.

He started to climb out the window, and his hands brushed against the canvas sack, tied up fast and hard. He knew what was in it, he knew where it came from. He crouched down, his eyes growing accustomed to the light. His fingers fumbled at the heavy cord, and then he spilled the thick sheafs of tapped currency.

Minutes marched past through the darkness of the room as Barney crouched there, a sheaf of yellow thousand dollar bills in each hand. The killer had cached it here, temporarily, hidden it in that box, waiting to make a getaway. Someone in the saloon,

one of the gamblers who knew they wouldn't be using this room for a spell.

He stuffed the money back in the sack and started to tie it up. The door opened slowly. A ray of light fell on Barney's hands, on the sack.

In silhouette, he saw a tall thin outline, and then the door closed and Begbie was standing over him. His jeweled belt glittered, as did the pearl handle of his .41 Colt in its studded holster.

Barney half rose, on one foot and knee, still clutching the sack. He had the money now. All he'd ever need. He could still try to get Begbie, and if he did, he could run with the money. With Clara, he could get out of town tonight. They'd never suspect Barney, not for a while. Maybe he could get free, live free, give Clara all the gold of heaven—

Begbie said. "They're taking his body out now, Barney, carrying it on a door. I didn't say anything to Masterson. I didn't know—but now—"

"I didn't kill him," Barney said. "I couldn't. I was scared and stepped in here because I thought you were going to tell the Sheriff I'd killed him. I was going to try to get away. I found the money and—"

Begbie's laughter came down softly through the dark. "You can't even lie strong, Barney. You sound guilty, guiltier than hell."

Barney dropped the sack. He stood up. "Don't try to jump me, Barney." Barney saw the pearl-handled gun slide free, heard the oily click of the hammer going back.

"Wait a minute, Begbie. I'm tellin' the truth. You got to believe I'm tellin' the truth. Whoever killed him brought the money here to hide it until he could get it out of the saloon. Whoever did it will be here to get the money, tonight, right soon probably. We'll wait here, Begbie. We'll wait together and he'll show up. Then you'll know. If I'm lyin', no one will come."

Begbie was silent for a while. Finally he said. "All right, Barney. A skunk deserves a fightin' chance. We'll wait a while. But not too long. Masterson is the prowling kind."

They waited for what seemed several hundred years. Begbie had moved back into a corner, and gradually Barney could distinguish the highlights of his face, the white shiny bone structure and the hollows and

shadows between. His breath was long and even. Always calm, always smooth, was Begbie, the man from the East, the man from Chicago.

Barney leaned back against the wall by the window, and after awhile he realized that his right hand was gripping the butt of the big .45 he'd thrust into the waistband of his levis. The gun felt clammy and cold under his palm. He felt his fingers curl slowly until he was gripping the butt tight and hard.

He stared at the closed door; he couldn't take his eyes off of it. The sounds of the saloon below seemed to fade. The sounds from the roaring hell of Front Street, that faded too. Nothing existed anymore but that door, and a few scattered memories, the things a man always wants to remember before he dies.

The things Clara had said:

"Barney . . . I've never even been on a farm. . . . I hear it's awfully wild out West. . . . but I know you can handle anything, Barney . . . I know I'll never have to worry as long as I'm with you. . . ."

Barney's lips moved in the dark. "Remember when you said those things, Clara. And then remember tonight. But forget what happened in between."

He remembered the scattered advice Old Seth Brackson had given him, like he would have given it to his own son if he hadn't fallen in bloody Georgia by a blue coat's rifle.

"Every man's a coward up until his first shoot-out. Some men never have that shoot-out, and they never know whether they're strong or weak . . . when a man really dies, it's clean and quick . . . but a coward dies every minute of his life . . . and a coward always lives too long. . . ."

Barney whispered silently, the words echoing back into his brain.

"Where ever you are, Seth, help me. Just stand by, that's all. Just watch, and if something starts goin' wrong, tell me, Seth."

Footsteps went up and down the passageway beyond the door. Voices faded off and on, money-talk. Ten thousand dropped with one card. Twenty thousand on the barrel-head. . . .

Barney's lips stretched painfully. Sweat trickled down his ribs. Again and again he had to swallow to open up his throat. And he finally released his grip on the Colt

handle, and found his fingers paralyzed, numb. He was flexing that hand when the door opened abruptly.

The broad stetson, the broad shoulders, the tall, rawboned frame. The vest and hat would be gray if it were light. Jethro. . . .

The big gunman hesitated, then came forward and closed the door. He stood, breathing heavily, adjusting his eyes to the dark. Barney slid the heavy Colt free, lifted it. He drew in a deep silent breath, sweet rare breath when it's a man's last. And he thought of all the things he'd wanted to do, the big plains farm he was going to build, the waving oceans of wheat that were to be his . . . the kids, wild free sun-blackened kids, they would have been his too. And the thought of Clara made a throbbing vibrant ache in his head.

He waited for that sick, empty fear, that helpless vomity fear. And it didn't come. There was no feeling at all. Just a gray vest and a gray stetson coming toward him through the last twilight.

He heard his voice say. "No use walkin' any further, Jethro. Might as well die right there."

Jethro's huge frame seemed to freeze, then shrink down into a dark tense blob. His voice was harsh. "What'n billy hell," he said.

"It's me—Barney Stevens—the stubble-jumper you never gave a chance to stubble-jump. One afternoon I ran down Front Street without any boots on. A certain wild Texan was shooting at my feet. I'm going to kill you, Jethro."

Jethro's laugh was short and low. "It takes practice to deal that hand, clod-hopper."

"The way you dealt it out to Seth Brackson, shooting him in the belly while he had his hands on the top of his desk."

"Any ole' way at all, clod-hopper, it all plays out the same."

THE DARK blob moved, tiger-fast, swooping to one side, and there was the slap of flesh on leather. Barney had never shot a revolver, even in the light. He'd had practice with a squirrel rifle, that was all. All he could do was stand and keep slamming in shots, slamming them blindly and fast, and he did that.

He'd seen the blasting orange stabbing at him, and dimly heard the blare and thun-

der. Now the sound and the flame stopped. He staggered back and leaned against the wall. The dark blob shrank lower and lower and it fell with a dull thump on the floor.

Now Barney felt the blood searing his flesh, knew the way that bullets burned under his skin.

Begbie moved out of the corner. His voice was tight. "You did for 'em good, Barney. God, but it was short!"

A coughing curse came up from the floor. Begbie swore. "He ain't dead!"

His gun swept up, froze as the voice gasped from the floor.

"Damn your cut-throat soul to black hell, Begbie. . . . you been here . . . you let him get me . . . to shut me up. . . . Hire me to kill Brackson, then . . ."

His voice faded out beneath the sudden blast of Begbie's Colt.

Begbie's body turned slowly. "Now you, Barney. You know too much. I'm damned sorry too."

Barney tried to keep his body erect, keep it from sliding down the wall. That, Barney guessed, was about as far as his short road went. He tried to lift the .45, and then wondered if it hadn't been emptied of power.

Footsteps pounded along the passageway outside, but no one dared open the door.

Barney whispered . . . "You had Blacky kill Brackson so the business would be all yours . . . but maybe Blacky decided to take the money . . . or maybe that was part of your idea . . . a blind . . . and you planned to get Blacky all the time, to shut him up. . . ."

Begbie said softly. "That was the way I had it figured out, Barney. But you weren't figured in. I never thought of you bein' in it. Now you can take all the blame. I can tie you and Jethro in together, and say you both had a shoot-out."

Barney's hand had been closing around the back of the chair. With a final thrust of strength, he hurled it upward. It lifted Begbie's gun arm as the Colt blasted the ceiling.

Barney pitched away from the wall, brought his right hand up and around in a heavy arc. The pistol barrel cracked across Begbie's face. Begbie groaned; he staggered back, and the gun in his hand flashed blindly as Barney struck again.

He felt bone and flesh crunch beneath the heavy barrel. Begbie went backward. He

was crawling and Barney fell beside him. He grabbed Begbie's shirt and held him, and he kept lifting and bringing the pistol barrel down. And he was still doing that, when someone finally worked up enough courage to open the door.

But it was too late then to do anything for Begbie. And after Barney told the story, no one cared.

* * *

They patched him up down below, Barney sitting at a table of honor with everyone gathered around. Bat Masterson was making comments and admiring Barney's nerve for waiting up there like that for Blacky Jethro. And there was U.S. Marshal, Earp, biting a dry cigar. He was a stringy man with the alert, cautious air of a fighting cock and his fingers played constantly with his gun, the nails clicking the metal. And he, too, had complimentary things to say about Barney Stevens' guts. And all Barney could think of was how much he wished old Seth Brackson was around to hear what they were saying, and that he could see Clara's face again.

They took a long time fixing him up. A deep side slash and a punctured shoulder are not easy to patch. Now and then, someone handed him a shot of Brackson's special reserve whiskey. Barney didn't feel any pain.

Mike Barlow, Brackson's lawyer, took the opportunity to read part of Brackson's will, and everybody heard it, and congratulated Barney with loud cheers and roars of approval.

"I, Seth Brackson, hereby bequeath my half of the ownership of the Brackson-Begbie Saloon to Barney Stevens, a lad who should know by now whether or not he can handle it the way I'd want it handled. . . ."

Barney got up, and started across the sawdust floor.

"Think you can handle it that way, Barney?" Mike Barlow called after him pleasantly.

Barney smiled. "I'll be back to see," he said.

He climbed the steps of the Tarryington Hotel, this time with a firm hard stride. He opened the door and went in. He bent over the bed and picked her up, and carried her to the window. A little gasp came from her as she saw the dried blood on his shirt, the bandages.

The rank smell of Dodge City came up and through the open window. Its yellow lights cast a soft misty glow over the ugly buildings. The smell was close to the earth, thick, and it drove out the prairie smell. Stale beer, bad whiskey, and flesh rotting off the thousands of buffalo hides piled twenty and thirty feet high alongside the railroad.

Barney breathed it in, deep full breaths. Clara said, "Let me down, Barney." Her eyes were bright, and color flooded her cheeks. They stood there and Barney's arm was around her. He told her everything that had happened.

She said softly. "I knew it was something like that, Barney. I felt it as soon as you came in." She swayed weakly, but there was strength in her. It had always been there, Barney, knew. And he knew it would always be there from now on into the coming years.

"We'll sell the saloon and buy a lot of land here, Clara."

She nodded.

"You'll be all right now?"

"Yes, Barney. I won't be worrying about you anymore."

"You don't want to—go back. We could do that."

"No, Barney. It's what you want to do that's important."

Barney breathed deeply. In the street below a horse charged wildly, as the swaying figure in the saddle discharged two six-shooters, emptying them aimlessly into the air. The thunder of sound echoed and died between the unpainted buildings. Then, even the hoofbeats faded away and there was silence.

Barney turned. He laughed. As he bent to kiss her, Clara was laughing too, her eyes closed. And it was getting along toward dawn in Dodge City. . . . * * *

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 51)

1. False. A "cat-eyed" man is one who is constantly on the alert for danger. Thus, his eyes are ever shifting about, watching.

2. False. "Gold colic" is a term used in reference to lust for gold or money.

3. "Gone to Texas" is an expression used in reference to one who is at outs with the law.

4. If a cowpoke friend mentioned a "goose drownder," he would be talking about a very heavy rain.

5. In the language of the cowpoke, a "grub spoiler" is the cook.

6. True. A "hooden" is a bachelor cowpoke sleeping quarters.

7. True. "Hornswoggling" refers to the twisting and turning motions a roped animal uses in escaping from a cowpoke.

8. True. "Indian whiskey" was cheap whiskey that early-day traders sold to Indians.

9. True. "In the gate" is a term used in monte.

10. If a cowpoke friend mentioned he had just seen a horse "jack-knifing," he would mean he had witnessed a horse bucking in such a way that its hind feet clicked against its front ones.

11. True. A "jug handle" is an ownership mark cut in such a way that it resembles the handle of a jug.

12. If a cowpoke friend told you he was going to put on his "low-necked clothes," he would mean he was intending to don the best, dress up clothes he had.

13. "Mormon brakes" is a term used in connection with tying a tree behind a wagon. The device was used to cut down the speed of a wagon going downhill.

14. If an outlaw friend—or other Westerner, for that matter—referred to "pants rats," he would be talking about body lice.

15. "Riding the bag line" means riding the grub line.

16. False. The Spanish word *si* means "yes."

17. True. A "spinner" is a horse which bucks in a tight circle.

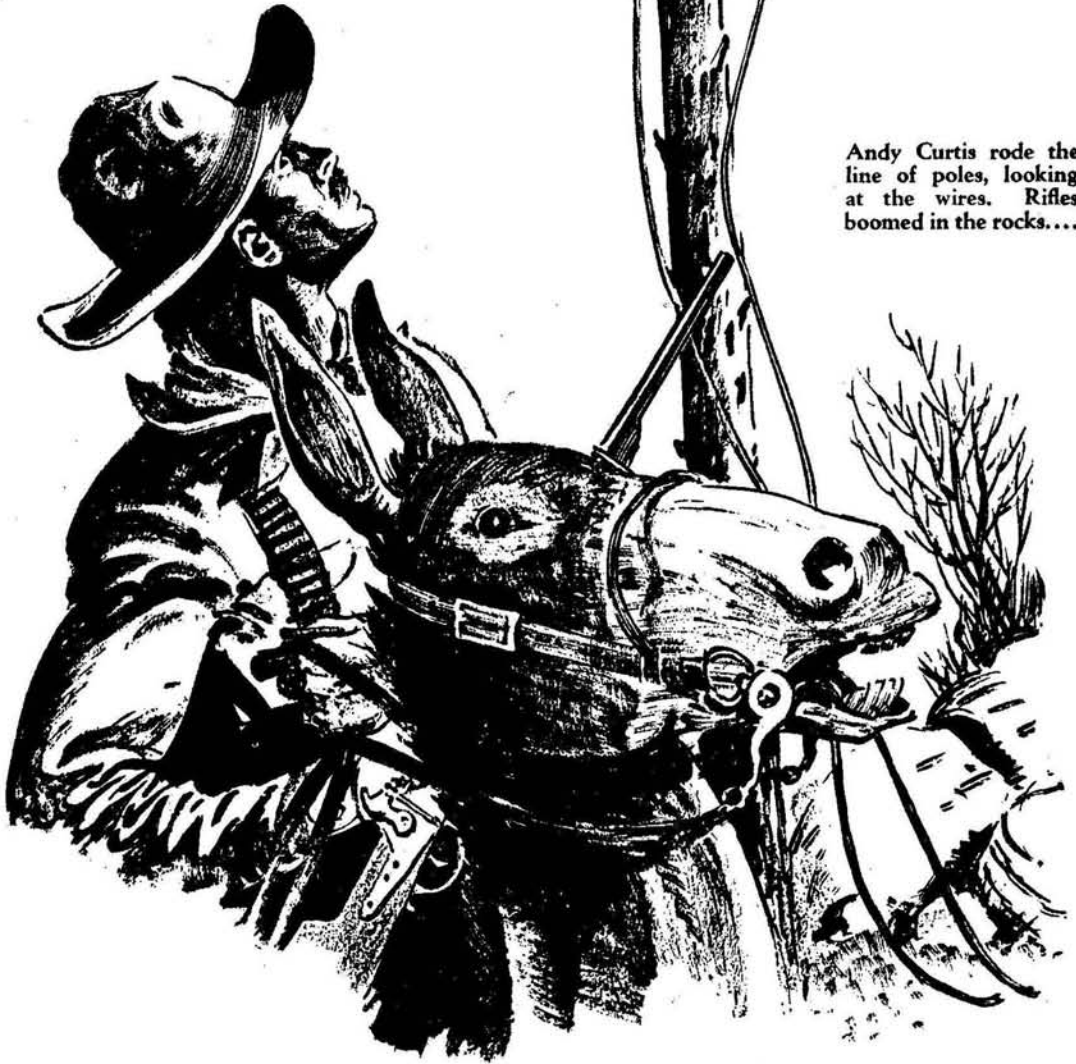
18. False. "Stirrup leathers" are parts of stirrups.

19. Yes. "Teepee" is a slang expression which some old time Westerners used in reference to their houses.

20. To "throw down" on a man means to cover him with a gun.

THE MEDICINE WIRE

By **BENNETT
FOSTER**



Andy Curtis rode the line of poles, looking at the wires. Rifles boomed in the rocks....

Andy Curtis was one of the quiet, unsung heroes of the frontier, where fighting off marauding Sioux and fixing the talking wire, so that a message of peace could inspire the world, was all in the day's work!

THERE was a sharp wind blowing when the three Minneconjou Sioux came down the slope of Crying Woman butte into the valley of the Platte. They argued with each other as they rode south toward the telegraph line.

"It is a medicine wire," Fights His Horses declared. "It carries messages for the white

men. Washakie was at Fort Bridger and Winnemucca was in Smoky valley. They could not see each other, they could not hear, but the white men told the medicine wire and when Washakie and Winnemucca met, each knew what the other had said. It is a medicine wire and I say, leave it alone!"

Black Calf slapped his flintlock rifle in its deerskin case. "My medicine is stronger than the wire!" he boasted. "When the wire is broken, one man comes to fix it. I say, cut it and wait for him!"

Elk Robe made the decision. "Fights His Horses is right," Elk Robe said, "but Black Calf has strong medicine. Do you, Black Calf, ride back and forth under the wire. If nothing happens we will cut it."

In Sand Creek stage station, Andy Curtis listened to the clatter of the Morse relay repeating a San Francisco dispatch. Mrs. Marples, the station keeper's wife, was washing breakfast dishes, Marples, Dad Purcell and Ribidoux, the hostlers, were in the main room. The sounder of the way wire came alive and Andy copied. When the message ended she stepped to the door.

"Dry Wells says the stage is through the Gap," he announced. "There'll be six passengers for dinner."

Marples nodded and, returning to his stool, Andy tried to call Blue Hill but the line was dead. Beyond the window, he could see the poles marching eastward, the through wire and the way wire strung between them, sagging in long curves. Poles and wire were not two years old; the first transcontinental telegraph, spanning the nation.

"Damn it!" Andy Curtis said and tried Blue Hill again.

Intervals during the next half hour he tested the line, always with the same result. It was open to the west, dead to the east. That was the rule: Test for thirty minutes then search, find and repair the break. For twenty-five miles in each direction, Andy Curtis was the Western Union Telegraph Company; operator and lineman, too. The half hour ended and he assembled equipment; climbing irons, tools and a brand new Spencer rifle.

Marples, Ribidoux and Dad Purcell were in the corral when Andy saddled his mule. Dad Purcell grinned toothlessly and said that this never happened when the Pony Express was running; them boys went right on through. Marples, eyeing the Spencer,

suggested that Andy take another rifle.

"You just got her," Marples said, "and you don't know how she shoots. Take mine."

"She shoots seven times," Andy answered, "and that's good enough for me."

He rode off toward the east, the Spencer balanced across his thighs.

Below the slope of Crying Woman, Elk Robe, Fights His Horses and Black Calf, well hidden in a nest of boulders, waited with the patience of their kind. Their ponies were tethered in a coulee and before them, a full pole's span distant, two wires were on the ground.

"He is coming now," Black Calf said. "It is my plan, and I will shoot him."

"If you miss him, he will get away," Elk Robe objected. "Fights His Horses and I will shoot the mule." Each man checked his priming, each pushed his rifle between stones, thumbed back a hammer, sighted, squinting.

Andy Curtis came down the line of poles, looking at the wires. Three pole spans, two—he saw the fallen wires and stopped. Rifles boomed in the rocks, the mule went down. Andy, thrown clear, held to the Spencer, got up, ran and dropped behind the mule.

"You missed him!" Elk Robe accused, "but we killed the mule. Now we must make him shoot and charge him when his gun is empty." He moved cautiously, exposing head and shoulders. From the breastworks of the dead mule, Andy fired.

Instantly the Sioux were on their feet, running, charging in. But this was no muzzle loader that they charged. Behind the mule, Andy Curtis worked lever and fingered his trigger. Elk Robe flinched from a bullet burn across his ribs, wheeled and dodged back into the rocks.

Black Calf dropped and crawled to safety. Fights His Horses hid behind a boulder. Andy Curtis thumbed .56 caliber shells through the trap in the Spencer's butt-plate, filled the magazine, worked the lever and then waited.

There was no movement in the rocks, no sign of life, at all. The wires lay on the ground, almost touching the dead mule. Wind whipped the grass and overhead clouds scudded by. Then, on the slope of Crying Woman, well out of rifle shot, Andy saw three riders. They went up the slope, diminishing, growing smaller, rounded a shoulder and disappeared. . . .

IT WAS nearing sundown when Andy returned to Sand Creek station. East and west bound stages had come and gone. Wearily—for twelve miles on foot will tire a man—he told Marples, Ribidoux and Dad Purcell the happenings of the day. Still weary, he called Blue Hill and Dry Wells, informing the operators that the circuits were repaired. Andy Curtis had done a day's work, but food restores a man.

After supper, he sat on his stool, listening to the clatter of the through wire relay. The hostlers and the station keeper entered the office.

"What's the war news, Andy?" Dad Purcell asked.

"There's a dispatch coming now," Andy Curtis answered and, dipping his pen into the inkwell, began to copy.

Gettysburg, Pa. Nov. 19, 1863: A portion of this great battlefield, so bitterly contested last July, was today dedicated as a National Cemetery in an impressive ceremony. . . .

"Gettysburg," Marples read over Andy's shoulder. "That's where your General Lee took a lickin', Purcell."

"He never neither!" Dad Purcell's voice was outraged. "He never run, did he? He . . ."

They wrangled back and forth, Marples, Purcell and Ribidoux. Andy's pen scrawled on. As can any good operator, he followed the clatter of the sounder with half his mind, the rest was free.

. . . at the conclusion of Mr. Everett's

oration, the President was called upon for a few appropriate remarks. Mr. Lincoln spoke as follows:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation . . .

"Yaaah!" Dad Purcell shrilled. "What about ol' Stonewall? What about Manassas? Tell me that!"

. . . But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead . . .

Beyond the butte called Crying Woman, north of the Platte valley, Elk Robe, Fights His Horses and Black Calf pushed steadily along through the night. Elk Robe and Fights His Horses were blanket wrapped against the November cold but Black Calf wore a fur cap and an old army overcoat.

"It was a new kind of gun!" Black Calf said. "A gun that shoots many times. We saw only one man! It was a new gun!"

Fights His Horses shook his head. "We could not see behind the mule," he refuted. "The medicine wires were on the ground and he called to them for help. There were seven men behind the mule. No gun shoots that many times!"

Black Calf and Fights His Horses looked at Elk Robe, awaiting judgment. Elk Robe was a famous warrior, older than his companions, a leader.

"It was the medicine wire," Elk Robe pronounced and, freeing his hand from the blanket, swept it in an all inclusive circle. "A white man speaks and the medicine wire tells the whole world what he says." ❖ ❖ ❖

— PRACTICAL PIONEER —

One old timer, questioned about new methods of plowing and planting, let out a stream of good old Texas trail language when he answered the interviewer's question.

"No, sir," he said between breaths. "I ain't never stuck a plow into a piece of land yet, and I don't intend to. When you plow a piece of ground, the first thing you do is to take a turning plow and turn the land upside down. It is my firm opinion that when the Lord made the land He knew which side of it he wanted up in the first place. And I don't intend to be changing it from the way He made it."

—Allan K. Echols

TALES of the

by LEE

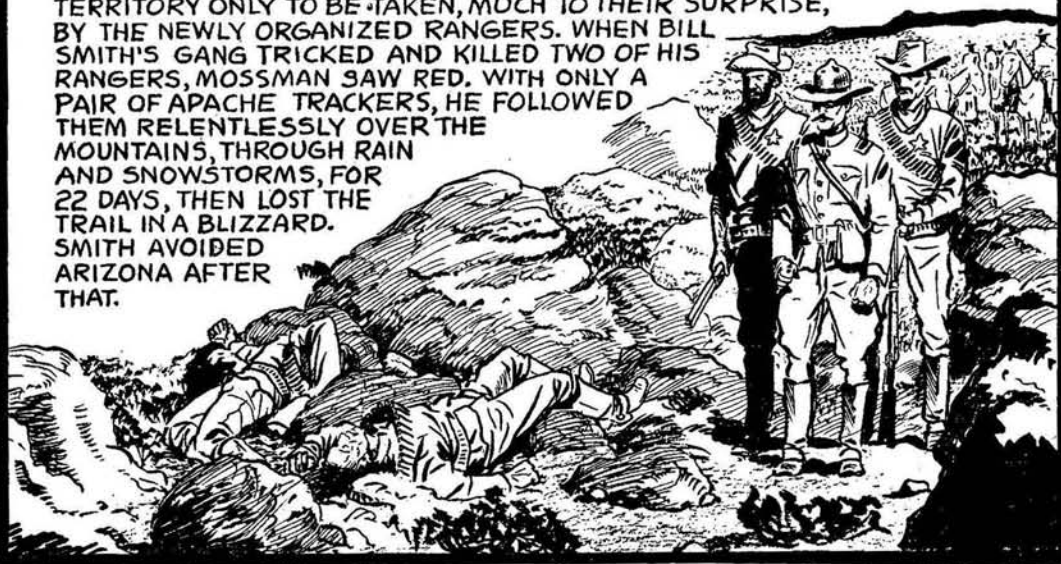
MOSSMAN of the RANGERS

THE NAME BURTON C. MOSSMAN IS WRIT LARGE IN THE ANNALS OF THE ARIZONA TERRITORY. A SMALL MAN, FASTIDIOUS IN DRESS AND MANNER, WITH STEEL-COLD EYES AND ICY NERVE, HE WAS SUPERINTENDENT OF A CATTLE OUTFIT WHEN, AROUND 1900, GOV. MURPHY COMMISSIONED HIM TO ORGANIZE THE ARIZONA RANGERS.



THE TERRITORY SWARMED WITH BORDER RUNNERS, RUSTLERS, HIGHWAYMEN AND BANDS OF OUTLAWS WHO SWEEPED DOWN FROM HIDE-OUTS IN THE MOUNTAINS, RAIDING AND MURDERING. WITH HIMSELF AS CAPTAIN, MOSSMAN TOOK A SERGEANT AND 12 RANGERS CHOSEN FROM OLD COWHANDS AND TEDDY ROOSEVELT'S ROUGH RIDERS, AND SET OUT TO CLEAN THINGS UP.

BANDITS BOLDLY ROBBED A POST OFFICE AND FLED INTO THE TERRITORY ONLY TO BE TAKEN, MUCH TO THEIR SURPRISE, BY THE NEWLY ORGANIZED RANGERS. WHEN BILL SMITH'S GANG TRICKED AND KILLED TWO OF HIS RANGERS, MOSSMAN SAW RED. WITH ONLY A PAIR OF APACHE TRACKERS, HE FOLLOWED THEM RELENTLESSLY OVER THE MOUNTAINS, THROUGH RAIN AND SNOWSTORMS, FOR 22 DAYS, THEN LOST THE TRAIL IN A BLIZZARD. SMITH AVOIDED ARIZONA AFTER THAT.



— OLD WEST



ALONE OR IN PAIRS, THE RANGERS PATROLLED THE VAST WILDERNESS. THE MEXICAN BANDIT SALIVARAS WAYLAIED AND MURDERED A MINE SUPERINTENDENT CARRYING PAYROLL GOLD. MOSSMAN TRACKED THE KILLER TO A DESERT WATER HOLE. A BULLET CAME UP OUT OF THE GROUND AND CAUGHT HIM IN THE SIDE. SALIVARAS HAD BURIED HIMSELF UP TO THE NECK IN THE WATER HOLE. THE RANGER'S RETURN FIRE KILLED THE BADMAN—AND SALIVARAS WAS LEFT IN HIS IMPROMPTU GRAVE.

AUGUSTIN CHACON, OUTLAW KILLER OF AT LEAST 30 MEN, HAD ESCAPED JAIL AS HE WAS ABOUT TO BE HANGED. CAPT. MOSSMAN, DECIDING TO USE TRAIN ROBBER BURT ALVORD AS A DECOY, WENT ALONE AND UNARMED TO ALVORD'S MOUNTAIN HIDEOUT AND INTRODUCED HIMSELF

IN RETURN FOR A PROMISE OF HELP IF HE GAVE HIMSELF UP, THE TRAIN ROBBER LED CAPT. MOSSMAN, WHO POSED AS A CONFEDERATE, TO CHACON. MOSSMAN AND CHACON WATCHED EACH OTHER LIKE HAWKS FOR 24 HOURS UNTIL THE RANGER, IN LIGHTING A CIGARETTE, MANAGED TO DROP HIS HAND TO HIS GUN AND COVER THE OUTLAW. BROUGHT IN, CHACON WAS PROMPTLY HANGED THIS TIME.



IT TOOK THE INDEFATIGABLE MOSSMAN AND HIS LITTLE BAND OF RANGERS LESS THAN TWO YEARS TO RUN THE BADMEN OUT OF THE ARIZONA TERRITORY.

OVER THE HILL TO HELL

The endless prairie, the burning desert, the stark mountains, and the hostile savages were easy enough for big Bill Shawn, for in his years as a wagon scout he'd conquered them all . . . but God save him from this caravan of mutinous greenhorns, who'd lose their way anywhere—except on the road to hell!



Kalder cried, "I'll stop you, Shawn, from leading us to ruin!"

By **ROBERT
TRIMNELL**

THE mountains had been before them for so many days that their eyes had shriveled from squinting at them through the glitter of sun on the alkali flats. Their skins were burnt black or blistered to a fiery red, but still, they made their way through the burning wastes, intent on their goal.

It was rough in the heat. The spokes dried out and rattled and the wheels shrunk until their iron tires suddenly clattered off. But not until the wagon tongues snapped, did their tempers go.

The brunt of abuse was heaped on Big

Bill Shawn, but that red-haired giant, riding at the lead, let the insults break on his broad back. He was big, this man in buckskins, and little things didn't often faze him. Nearing forty years of age, and at the height of his physical powers, a score of trails had burnt his body into tight ropes of muscle and hardened his mind to many things.

He knew what they were saying, but he didn't care. They were saying that maybe he'd run twenty trains into Santa Fe but they'd passed the Santa Fe Trail a long time back. They might even be betting that he didn't know the way to Oregon any better than they did. It didn't matter. He knew his own bullwhackers were loyal and that was the important thing, even though the newcomers had twenty-five wagons against his ten and stood as a greenhorn majority against his seasoned trail men.

Once he had dared them. "All right, go off North to the regular trail if you want," he had said. "We're through the Pawnee country now and they say there's no bad Injuns ahead. But remember, I'm takin' this trail."

That had riled them. He knew well enough, they said, that they couldn't go it alone. It was clear to them that he was trying to trick them. Any fool *knew* that there were horrible Injuns everywhere. So they'd mumbled and grumbled through a meeting in which Joel Kalder, the lawyer, had delivered a fire-side speech against Shawn and splitting up the party and that had been all. Except that Kalder had somehow established himself as spokesman for the immigrants. But even that was negligible, for, by hook and by crook, and by cursing and cajoling, Bill got them to the mountains.

They had double-hitched to the first bench. There, the trail seemed to go straight up so Bill Shawn hitched five teams to a wagon and dragged it to the second bench. From there, a bluff rose two hundred feet to the top, where an easy trail led off into the plateau beyond.

The first wagon up was one of Bill's own. He tied the great rope himself to the double trees, then carried it up to the pulley, which had been anchored to a rock outcropping by a logging chain that he meant to sell in Oregon. He reeved it through and for a moment glanced down the hillside.

Below, by the wagon, was the surly gang that was to heave on the rope and below them, a ten-horse hitch was dragging the

next wagon up to the bench. Further down, the rising yellow dust murked where the rest of the train straggled upwards. Bill Shawn growled to himself, "Damn greenhorns!" Then he jerked the rope through and again glowered down the trail.

After a while, he jumped down off the rock with the rope in his big, red-haired hands, and lunged down the hill as the rope shrilled through the pulley. He was down to the others when the rope hauled him up with a jerk, and a cloud of dust burst up around his boots.

A man called out of the crowd, "You notice that rain cloud, Shawn?"

HE HAD noticed it, and now he looked up again. It was gun-metal gray and hanging right over them. He glanced at the speaker. It was Joel Kalder, the lawyer. His long face was cut by a thin smile. He was pleased by that cloud.

"If that cloud breaks," Kalder said, "It will turp this hillside into a river."

Shawn swore. "Then dammit, we'll float the wagons uphill!" Roughly, he turned on his crew. "Now git onto that rope and take a strain. But don't you forget a minute that if you slip, this wagon's goin' to go downhill like a gunshot out of particular hell and blow a hole right through those folks comin' up! Now strain, damn you, strain!"

Grumbling, they seized the rope and arranged themselves along it so each man had space to grip in. It took a long time.

Bill watched, his hands on his hips until they'd finished. Then he roared, "You polers. When we take a strain, yank those poles out of the wheels and go up alongside, ready to pole in, when we get on top. Now, ever'-body! Pull solid! Don't jerk consarn ye! Pu-ull!"

"Pu-u-ll!" he bellowed, and steadily threw his own weight against the rope. "Don't jerk, pu-u-ll!"

The chain up above them grated into rock. The pulley screamed shrilly as steel honed against steel. Poles clattered out of the freed wheels and men grunted, heaving on the spokes. The merest movement raised choking clouds of dust that hid the peaks in the distance and narrowed vision down to the yellowed wheel spokes on which the men hung their weight, or the coarse rope burning at their hands.

Shawn's own fists were fastened on the

rope like twisted roots of some giant tree. He felt the great backward surge of power driving out of his unflexing legs. The wagon was inching forward.

The dust steadily thickened as thirty pairs of boots stabbed at the slope, but the men continued driving their weight back downhill, dragging the wagon with painful slowness up toward the pulley and the rock. The sun burned down hot on their backs and sweat was stinging in their eyes, but, still, no one faltered.

The pulling men were down behind the wagon now. It hadn't more than twenty feet to go and the polers were yelling excitedly and preparing to jam the pole through. They used oak timbers from a wagon that had fallen off a ridge and smashed up for Shawn did not trust green poles to hold the wheels. Up at the lead, he struggled, and they worked like demons to keep pace.

"Git on it, you boys," Shawn bellowed. "Git back there away from Oregon, back away from Oregon, so the wagons can go ahead!" His muscles bunched powerful, but his legs held firm and he chanted in the rhythm of his work, "Git away from Oregon, Oregon!"

They took up his chant until suddenly, the spell was broken by frightened yells behind. In an instant, Bill Shawn felt the rope in his hands come alive and jerk away from him. He felt the rope dance and heard rocks clattering, and saw the yellow dust thicken around him as men below rolled it up. Then somebody yelled, "They ain't holdin' ahind!"

The dust, whirled up from behind, and then a great swath of it rolled down the slope. It was all a yellow nightmare, and Bill Shawn's iron grip on the rope was as secure as a man's hold on a fistful of water. The rope tail whipped his back in passing and ripping through his hands, was greased by his own blood. Then the pulley shrieked and the hurtling wagon crashed down past Shawn and into the yellow cloud of dust from out of which men were fleeing with frantic haste.

Shawn watched a poler jam his wagon tongue into a wheel on the far side, and held his breath so it caught. But then the tip of the pole rammed the wagon bed, the pole smashing out at the struggling poler with a hundred times his own strength. It caught his knee and threw him as if he were a mouse flung by a catapult. He went screaming off

into the dust that hid him from Bill's view.

"Jump clear, jump clear!" Shawn heard himself yelling, but he knew it was too late. Only those who had jumped by instinct could get out of the way.

He watched open mouthed while the wagon careened down the slope, visible as only an occasional spinning wheel jutted out of the booming dust down toward the ant-like forms crawling up from below. He didn't want to imagine what would happen if that spinning hell reached the women and children. He just stood and watched and prayed. . . .

Beyond the dust cloud loomed a giant, wind-twisted pine. The wagon took a sudden swerve and smashed against it and the tree shook like a twanged bowstring as wheels and wagon timbers seemed to spurt in every direction. Then, slowly, the pine tree bent, then wavered for a moment, and crashed to earth. . . .

A damp wind came along and eased the dust away, to show the shattered wagon and tree lying in a crumpled heap far down the trail. . . .

"Your fault, Shawn! What a damn, hairbrained idea! Why, dragging wagons up a sheer cliff, could have killed us all!"

Bill Shawn did not reply. He stood by the fire with his thumbs tucked into the waistband of his buckskin breeches. There was no use to reply. The speaker was Joel Kalder. He was schooled in talking and thoroughly pleased when he got an audience. He could talk rings around Shawn, and Shawn knew it. So he kept his silence. A reply could only give Kalder something to rip apart.

"Here we are eighty miles south of the main pass," Kalder went on. "With just barely time to make it safely across to Oregon before snow comes. You call yourself a wagon master? We'll spend weeks here getting half the freight wagons across, and I'll bet it's your own freight wagon you'll want to take over first. Shorter route, you say, but by the Lord above, man, you'll maroon us here for the winter!"

SHAWN looked around the campfire. Most of the eighty people in the train were present listening to Kalder. Shawn stood with feet braced and took their stares. Kalder on the other side of the fire, stood in front of a wagon wheel and gestured with

long, graceful hands. He was a tall, slender man with quick, flashing eyes that swept the crowd and examined the result of every word he said. Once he had talked of a law practice in Oregon, but Shawn guessed the law was only a stop-gap in Joel Kalder's career. The man was cut out for politics, and his dream was a white-pillared governor's mansion in this new land of Oregon. Shawn shook his head and waited for the onslaught to end.

But Kalder was just warming up. "You want to maroon us here!" he said. "You've probably got Indian friends just waiting for a chance to attack us—"

Shawn's shoulders stiffened. He looked up suddenly at Kalder. He growled, "Shut your damn mouth!"

Kalder's voice rose shrilly. "Ah, so you want to keep off that subject, don't you, Shawn? You'd rather we didn't talk about *that!* I thought there was a reason, and now I've got it! I'll bet my shirt you'd take your freight wagons across and leave us here to the tender mercies of the Indians!"

In spite of the rage burning red in his cheeks, Shawn felt pleased at catching Kalder admitting that they could make it across, but before Shawn could voice his reply, Kalder was summing up.

"I ask," he cried, "can we trust such a man as Shawn to take charge of our lives and destinies? Why, what do we know about him, this so-called Santa Fe bullwhacker?"

A woman's voice called, "He's gotten us this far."

Shawn glanced quickly her way. It was the Widow, Hannah Dailey. He blushed now from new cause. Everyone in the train knew there was something between Hannah and Shawn. He wished Hannah hadn't spoken. Kalder would quickly seize the advantage offered him.

"It seems to me, uh, Mrs. Dailey," Kalder said, "That some things may not seem clear to those of us who are—uh—under the *influence*, of certain others."

At that, Shawn was already striding across the firelit circle swearing under his breath, that no ring-tailed, slick-mouthed shyster gunning for a political career, could talk that way. But before anything developed, a half-dozen men rose up and lunged between him and the lawyer.

Bill stopped, his face red with anger. He

couldn't do what he wanted; twist this lawyer into a knot. Kalder was no match for him physically. All his muscle was concentrated in his tongue.

But Bill spoke his piece. He did it gruffly, and loud enough so that Kalder couldn't cut in. He said:

"If it rains, we can't cross here. If it don't rain, I think we can. And it gives us a bigger chance of beatin' the snows to Oregon than if we head north. Those men that's got the guts to try, can give me a hand come mornin'."

He said that and was gone. . . .

Later, he sat with Hannah Dailey by her fire, after she'd put her two boys to bed. Hannah was some years younger than he, plump cheeked and full bosomed. It was six weeks since she'd lost her husband. A very short time to be courting again, they all said. Shawn agreed it was so. But the trail changed many things, and left other things intact; one being, that Hannah had more need of a man's help than ever.

Hannah's husband had died before the train left Independence. She had gone anyway. To Bill, it had been clear from the start, that she needed more help than the rest could offer from time to time. Since he offered the most help, he was around her the most. And now he had almost forgotten her husband. The trail had that way about it. Past events were like the dust you'd roiled and left to settle behind.

"You see, Bill," she said, "Mr. Kalder wants to be captain of the train. He knows that in Oregon everyone will be so new that they'll all have trail memories. A former trail captain would look big to people—to voters."

Shawn growled, "He can call himself train captain, anything he wants, as long as he don't stick his nose in the way of gettin' us over this hill." He nodded up into the darkness where the glowering mass of the mountain was a black block in the cloudy sky. He squinted at the sky and felt the air on his neck and cheeks. There was a cold tang in it. He shivered, with apprehension rather than with cold. He said, "Why don't we make Kalder commandin' general of this train? Or admiral? That'll sound good to the voters."

Hannah laughed and her hand fell lightly on his arm. But she sobered quickly, "No matter what the title he might have, he

wants leadership. If he hadn't joined the train late, he'd have objected to your being elected captain. He wants no sham titles. He wants leadership, power. You see?"

He shrugged.

"Did you know—it's said that—" she whispered, bit her lip, added, "You won't be angry, Bill?"

"What d'you mean?"

"It's said that Mr. Kalder started the rockslide that broke up the men hauling on the rope. It was just behind his place on the rope that it started. You see—don't say anything, the person who told me is an old gossip—"

"Why, that—that—" he began to bellow.

"It's just talk!" she cried. "Maybe it wasn't that—maybe your pulley arrangement wasn't good enough, Bill. Maybe it just didn't work—maybe it's your fault after all!"

He rose, flaming with anger at Kalder, and now turning it suddenly on her. He bit back his retort, and pounded angrily away.

"Clodfoot sodbusters!" he swore to himself.

IN THE morning, he was up before dawn, and strode up the side of the mountain to where the pulley was still chained to the rock outcropping. There, he watched the gray waves of dawn break over the hills. By God, he thought, if only I'd taken off with my own wagons, alone. We could have run to the north crossing and made it for sure. We got better horses and wagons—and men, too.

He swore and picked up a rock. He hurled it angrily down the slope. It struck a boulder and bounced out into space. For a second it was silhouetted against the hulking black cloud the new light was beginning to outline and then arced to earth.

Now the men were coming up. Walking sluggishly, mistrusting. Their hearts and guts wouldn't be in the job ahead. But Bill Shawn tried his best.

As the first man came within hearing distance, he bellowed, "Where you headed for, friend?"

"Oregon!" the man yelled back.

"Oregon?" Bill Shawn cried back. "Where in blazes is that?"

"Over the hill, friend!" the man panted.

Bill bellowed, "Oregon!" again, and they all took it up until it rang down the line of

ant-like struggling men. Their figures jerked as they climbed, lively now and clawing away at this mountain they meant to conquer. Those on the lower slopes were running up toward the figure of the red-haired man with his legs wide apart, braced firmly as the mountain itself. Bill Shawn boomed, "Oregon's movin' west faster'n you are!"

He took the long rope now and poked it through the pulley. He kicked the pulley and the chain, and was reassured by the heavy clanking of iron. He kicked the chain all the way around, for a faint suspicion lurked in his mind that someone might have tampered with it. An evil suspicion, but it floated in his mind. He thought, a man like Kalder trying to work a whole train of people for his own good, had made him wary. Even thinking such thoughts made him shiver with fury.

It was a long wait. His nerves tingled with impatience. They came so slowly, in spite of the echoing cries of "Oregon!" The polers, careful now, took their posts. The men who'd heave on the spokes assembled. The rest climbed up the steep slope to where Bill Shawn stood with the end of the heavy rope clutched in his hands. He walked it down to them when they had gathered, and they swarmed over the loose end until they looked like a swarm of bees on a dead limb. Soon the rope was lost among them.

Shawn went down, set his wheel men in position and checked the tie of the rope to the wagon doubletree. He glanced once at the pine tree and the wagon wrecked the previous afternoon. Then returned to the rope and bellowed, "Anybody know what's across the hill?"

There was a reply, but quicker than he'd expected, and different. It was a single man's voice, "Hell's across that hill!"

He looked up. Standing on the rock to which the chain was attached, was Joel Kalder. "It's going to rain soon, you better get down the hill—before you can't!" he cried down to them. "Look at those clouds!" He pointed a long finger up at the sky. And they all felt the murkiness of rain wind washing over them and saw it in the flapping of his long-tailed coat.

He cried now, "I'll not have you all killed on this crazy venture! There's an easy way to cross the Divide, and we can easily make it before snow. Why tear our-

(Continued on page 108)

next

FIFTEEN
WESTERN
TALES

issue

Published

January 2nd

Rest your saddles, friends, while we give you a short preview of next month's feature story by Philip Ketchum; the action-packed tale of Jeff Cannard, whose wayside visit with some friendly emigrants, bound for the Oregon territory, was destined to leave him a hunted outcast. . . .



Jeff made his rendezvous with Sam Shem, his hardbitten sidekick and veteran scout, who revealed to him in strictest confidence his belief that a murderous raid on an Oregon-bound wagon train had been the work not of hostile Indians, but of white marauders!



Later, when Jeff rode into Westport, starting point for the West-bound caravans, he met Hilda Weatherby, the girl he'd made a futile trip back East to find. Then things began to pop, for there, on the main street of that seething town, Hilda's father branded him a cutthroat and killer!



The situation tightened when another acquaintance pointed Jeff out as the man who'd raided their camp. Jeff escaped the angry crowd, and then began his desperate and perilous hunt for the leader of the shadowy raiders—Lem Potter, a man supposed to have been buried in an unmarked trail-side grave!



One night, crouched beside a lonely cabin, Jeff tensed to hear his name mentioned as a man to be hunted down and killed on sight. Jeff's great two-way battle to stay alive and to clear his name, makes a powerful and suspenseful story, called "Oregon Trail Outcast," published in the next issue, out January 2nd, 1953.

WHILE THE GALLOWS WAIT-



"Looks like I'll be siding him
again, son—in boothill."

By
**DAVE
SANDS**

*Tough and defiant in his jail cell,
the kid wanted only to be as brave
as his outlaw hero who, even
then, was serving that young bad-
man better than either of them
knew. . . .*

TOBY MILES lay still in the stifling heat of the cell, choking back the nausea from the wound in his thigh and staring through the half-darkness at the old man sitting on the bunk across from him. A single candle flickered from a niche in the adobe wall, casting yellow light onto the man's pale eyes and across the flat planes of his face.

"You ain't exactly a talkative critter," the old man said.

"That can go both ways," Toby said. "They jailed me an hour ago, and you haven't even asked how come I stopped the

lead. So I wouldn't throw stones, if I were you."

The old man shrugged. He took tobacco and papers from a pocket of his frayed shirt and tossed them across to Toby.

"Don't get riled, younker," he said. "You don't want to palaver, it's all the same to me. Otherwise, you can call me Bonner, everybody does."

Toby sifted tobacco dust into a paper, spilling a little on the sweat-soured blanket beneath him. "What the hell," he said bitterly. "You'd know soon enough anyway." He lit the cigarette and sucked the harsh, dry smoke deep into his lungs. "A ranny was sleeping behind the livery. I tried to lift his gun. He woke up and let out a holler like a stuck pig."

Bonner's teeth were yellow in the candle light. "And what would a kid like you be needing with a hogleg?"

Toby let his eyes narrow. He was loose-skinned and big-boned, grown hard and tall for his age.

"I figured it was a thing I'd need," he said. "Unless I wanted to be a dirt farmer's flunky the rest of my life. I had enough of that, mister—back on Pa's place near Connorsville. I cut out two weeks ago, and I'm never going back. Tonight was just a bad break."

Bonner's eyes showed nothing. "Aiming to hit the owlhoot, eh?" he said softly. "I can tell."

Toby took a final drag on the cigarette, flipped it across the cell. "Something like that, old-timer." He lay back, and the sudden movement brought another wave of sickness flooding through him.

He was thinking now of the "Wanted" dodger in the pocket of his levis. There was no need to examine the dodger again; the face of Cole Mallory was engraved in Toby's memory. Mallory—the man the whole territory feared and envied. The man who had robbed a score of banks; killed almost a dozen men. The man who had savvy enough to use his brain and a Colt—instead of a pitchfork and a plow.

Bonner slid off his bunk and moved across the dirt floor slowly to the high, barred window.

"Getting sort of red in the east," he said. "Sun will be busting up over them mountains any minute now. Daylight comes mighty fast in these parts."

"Fine," Toby said. "Maybe they'll feed us."

BONNER laughed tonelessly. "Maybe." He grasped the bars in wide hands and stood there, rigid, a tall man with narrow, sloping shoulders and thinning iron-gray hair.

He said, "A man can just begin to make out the shape of things now. Funny, how you can see so many thousand mornings come and go, and never pay them no notice."

Toby glanced at him sharply. "What's so different about this one?"

Bonner edged closer to the bars. "This is the morning they let me out."

"I wish it was me," Toby said.

"They won't be too hard on you, son—seeing as how you ain't much more than a button."

"Cut that, friend!" Toby told him. "Cole Mallory started even younger than me!"

Bonner laughed drily. "Pull in your horns," he said. He was silent a full minute. Then, "You know what I'd do when I got out, if I was you?"

"Go back to a damn manure fork, I suppose," Toby said.

"Beats a lot of other things I could name." Bonner pressed his face against the bars. "Yonder's a creek and a lot of nice rolling land. Good land for farming. A lad like you could work somebody else's place until he saved enough for one of his own. He could—"

"Save it," Toby said. "You're talking to the wrong gent, Bonner."

"Maybe so. I'm just saying that if a man put his mind to it, he could have himself a right nice place hereabouts. Next thing he'd want would be a little somebody to brighten it up for him. Men ain't built to go it single saddle."

Toby Miles said nothing. Bonner was loco; that was for damn sure. He wondered how long a man had to be penned up before he got that way. He changed his position slightly. The "Wanted" dodger rustled softly in his pocket. He thought again of Cole Mallory.

Bonner made a soft sound in his throat. "Mighty strange I never thought out things, myself, when I was your age."

"A man works hard and stays honest, he can sleep nights. He don't have to grab his shut-eye a few minutes at a time, with his

fingers hooked around a gun, like Cole Mallory and the rest of his breed."

"Yeah," Toby said shortly. "And Mallory don't work no sixteen hours a day—like farmers."

"That's right, son. But when honest folks get up, they can face anybody, and keep right on facing them all day."

Toby grunted. "You should rent a church and have yourself a revival."

From the corridor outside the cell came the clang of an iron door being opened, and then the thud of approaching boots.

Bonner took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

"Funny," he said, "the things I can see out yonder. That creek there, free and pretty and running any place it pleases. And that good rolling land, just waiting to be made into something a man could be mighty proud of. Something a man wouldn't ever have to run away from. But it's only for them that's smart enough to see."

The cell door swung inward. Four men stood there, tense and silent. They did not look at Toby Miles.

Bonner's fingers clinched the bars until his knuckles whitened. Then, slowly, he turned and walked toward the waiting men. At the door he paused, and for a moment his pale eyes locked with Toby's.

"You ought to feel right proud, son," he said quietly. "You're lying on the same bunk Cole Mallory laid on. He didn't get off it until two hours ago. That's when they took him out and hung him." His voice went down to almost a whisper. "I sided Cole on his last hold-up. Looks like I'll pretty soon be siding him again, in boothill."

TOBY MILES lay there a full minute, feeling the pounding of his heart, trying not to be sick to his stomach. Then, his whole body screaming against the pain, he pushed himself off the bunk and onto the dusty floor. Dragging his bullet-torn leg behind him, he inched toward the window, not trying to hold back the tears any longer, knowing only that he had to look through

that barred window, that nothing else mattered now.

He heard the sounds of men moving around outside, and the soft curses and short words of men who talk only because they have to. Then the muffled sound of boots on clay changed abruptly to the louder sound of boots on pine planks.

He clawed at the cell wall, trying to pull himself upright. His fingers slipped on the smooth adobe. Time and again he sank back to the floor, weak from the pain in his thigh and the cramping nausea in his belly.

At last his fingers caught the edge of the window. He hung there a moment, getting his breath. Outside, there was complete silence—and then he heard a sharp sound, a sound very much like the crack of a drover's whip. Moments later, he heard the beat of boots on planking again, then on clay. Then silence once more.

Tight-lipped, he pulled himself up the last six inches to the level of the window.

He stood there, eyes straining at the gallows, at Bonner's body swaying there at the end of a new yellow rope. He watched the early morning breeze stirring the old man's gray hair. The new rope creaked softly on the pine cross beam.

There was nothing else. High adobe walls enclosed the small jail yard that held the scaffold.

There was no free-running creek, no gently rolling land—there was nothing out there but the high adobe walls and the scaffold, and an old man who hadn't had his breakfast, swaying at the end of a rope.

Toby Miles sank slowly to the floor. The pain in his thigh was now only a vague, dull ache. He stared across the heat-filled room toward the bunk where Cole Mallory had lain.

Numbed fingers fumbled in the pocket of his levis and drew out the "Wanted" dodger.

With his eyes still fixed on the empty bunk, Toby Miles crumpled the yellowed paper—slowly and with deliberate care into a small, firm ball and flung it into the far corner of the cell. ☆ ☆ ☆



WHEN DODGE WAS WILD!

By JOHN T. LYNCH



Jim Kennedy, gun in hand, edged to the open window.

A DRAMATIZED FACTUAL STORY

To most of the citizens of roaring Dodge City, he was the most popular mayor ever to boss that godless end-of-trail metropolis. But to Jim Kennedy, His Honor was just another fugitive on the muzzle-end of a long manhunt!

BY THE time Jim Kennedy finally caught up with the man he had sworn to kill on sight, circumstance forced him to change his plan. Not the actual killing part of it, just the "on sight" business. Because, you can't just blow into a town and shoot the mayor, as you could an ordinary citizen. And Dog Kelley had become Mayor of Dodge City, Kansas, in 1878.

For three years, Jim Kennedy had been tracking down his enemy.

Up through Texas, all over Colorado, Ne-

braska and Missouri, Kennedy had followed the dim trail of the man he had originally known as Pitch Willser. But Pitch had changed his course as often as he had changed his name so finding him had been far from easy. Sometimes Kennedy would reach a place where Willser had recently been known. Other times, he would lose months in again picking up the trail. Not that Pitch knew he was being tracked down by Kennedy. He thought Kennedy was dead.

It had been one moonlit night in 1875, down in the Texas Panhandle, that Kennedy and Willser had teamed up to rob a treasure laden stage. The holdup had been scotched by an alert and quick acting shot gun messenger who had succeeded in firing three bullets into Kennedy, and one into Willser's right arm. The stagecoach hadn't even paused. In the dust it kicked up as it rattled on by the would-be and now wounded road agents, Willser took one dim look at his partner, reached down and rolled him over, decided Kennedy was very dead and departed.

When the posse arrived on the scene of the attempted holdup, they found Jim Kennedy lying in the road. It took a close examination to learn that he was still breathing, despite what looked like fatal wounds. Taken into the nearest town he was first doctored up then jailed. Recovering with amazing speed, Kennedy was tried and sentenced to spend the next six months in the local jail. Good behavior, and his pleasant personality, got him off in two months. It was then that he swore to find the man who had deserted him and kill him on sight.

Without a system, without a plan, Kennedy set off to track Pitch Willser down. All he could do, he knew, was to go to as many places as possible and wander around, asking questions and keeping his eyes and ears open. His wanderings got him close to his quarry several times. But not until he reached Dodge City, did he finally see Willser. It was at this first astounding sight that Jim Kennedy realized he would have to be patient. . . .

Jim Kennedy arrived in Dodge City on the Fourth of July. Already, he noted, the townsfolk were lining the edges of the main street, waiting for the parade to come along. Jim took the opportunity to scan as many faces as possible in the crowd, always hop-

ing that one of them would be the hated face of Willser.

The parade came blaring along. The firemen's brass band led the gala procession. Right behind them paraded a fancily decorated buggy, new and shiny, pulled by a pair of matched show horses. In the buggy, one man sat and held the reins while the other, in high silk hat and frock coat, bowed and smiled to the spectators.

Kennedy, too busy scanning the faces of the crowd to pay attention to the bowing and smiling official in the buggy, merely gave a quick glance toward the passing vehicle. Not until he resumed inspecting the faces of the spectators did something register in Kennedy's mind. He gasped and looked again at the silk hatted gent in the buggy. The man everybody was cheering as "Our Mayor!"

"Our Mayor," now known as Dog Kelley, was Pitch Willser. From planning for so long to draw his sixgun and shoot, at first sight of his enemy, Jim reached for his gun. Reason returned, and he thought better of the move. One look at these folks told him that they would not care to have their beloved Mayor shot dead—especially on this great day. And Jim Kennedy had often heard—as had the rest of the country—that Dodge City people were quick to resent strangers who were too hasty in reaching for guns. After you'd lived around there for a while, of course, you could use your own judgment.

WITHIN the next few weeks, Jim Kennedy had made a few friends and was able to ask questions. He learned that Dog Kelley had been living in Dodge City, as a store-owner and then as mayor, for about two years. Dog was popular and well thought of by most of the citizens. Dog Kelley was, in fact, the most beloved person in Dodge, aside from Dora Hand.

"And who is this Dora Hand?" asked Jim Kennedy.

"The queen of all the dance hall girls," came the answer. "Dora is loved and respected by everybody, in spite of her singing and dancing in Ham Bell's Variety Hall. Even the married women in town will associate with her, because they know she's decent, and does a lot of kind things around here. Nurses the sick, helps the poor—things like that."

That night, Kennedy went to Ham Bell's combination saloon and theater to see, with his own eyes, this paragon of the dance hall women, Dora Hand. Jim had been around long enough to be skeptical about the "purenness and decency" of any dance hall dames. There were, he knew, many who were morally above reproach—but they were still very much in the minority, and he couldn't remember ever before seeing one. It was with avid interest that he watched Dora Hand come out on the stage and start to sing her sentimental ballads.

Kennedy, accustomed to the hoarse, whiskey soprano voices of most variety hall lady singers, was first surprised to hear that Dora Hand had a truly beautiful and refined voice. At the same time he noticed that the lady looked as beautiful as she sang.

Within five minutes, Jim Kennedy had, like most others in Dodge, fallen in love with Dora Hand. But unlike most—who loved her from a distance only—Jim decided to do something about it.

Between acts he went to one of the bartenders, gave him a tip, and asked, "How can I get introduced to Dora Hand?"

The bar man laughed. "All strangers ask that. Just introduce yourself, like you do any dance hall girl."

"But, she ain't just any dance hall girl. She is in a class by herself—"

"That's right," said the bartender. "But, you tipped me. Now let me tip you—don't try to get too friendly with Dora. The Mayor won't like it."

"You mean Pitch—er, I mean, Dog Kelley won't like it? Why?"

"Because he's been making a play for her for a long time. He ain't gettin' very far. But he resents anybody else tryin' to horn in. Kind of figgers she is private property, maybe."

On hearing this, Jim Kennedy decided to wait no longer to kill Mayor Dog Kelley. The very thought of such a man making a play for such a lovely woman was enough to edge Jim into his grim decision—even though he had not yet so much as been

within twenty yards of the saloon lady.

Still, playing his hand slowly, and patiently, Jim permitted five days to go by before putting his lethal plan into effect. Meantime, he learned that the Mayor lived in a nice, three-room house on the outskirts of town. He even ascertained which room the Mayor used to sleep in, and found it was the center one, right across the room from the middle side window.

Not necessarily wishing to kill anybody under such sneaking circumstances, Jim Kennedy salved his conscience by telling himself that, in this case, there was no other way. Dog had too many friends in town. Also, it wasn't just for revenge that the killing would be done. It was to protect the lovely Dora Hand from marrying such a crook as Kelley—a man who would run away and leave a pal for dead, in order to save his own skin.

During his entire stay in Dodge City, Jim had kept out of the Mayor's sight. This was easy to do, once he learned which saloons the Mayor preferred. These he kept away from. Even in the variety hall, where both the Mayor and Kennedy went to see Dora's act, Kennedy always was careful not to come into Dog's line of sight. Kelley never knew that Jim was in town.

After three nights of going over the ground, secretly, and laying his final plans, Jim decided to act.

It was shortly after midnight, pitch black on the edge of town, when Kennedy made his way, unseen, to the house of the Mayor. Quietly sneaking around the side of the house on which was the bedroom window, Jim Kennedy, gun in hand, edged up to the open window. Dimly, he could make out the bed on the far side of the room. Bringing up his sixgun, Jim fired four shots into the lumpy part of the bed coverings that told him his quarry was there. As quietly and surreptitiously as he had come, Jim Kennedy made his way back to town. Satisfied with his night's work, he went to his room in the hotel and went to sleep. His long search was over. The mission of three years stand-



ing had been accomplished. And, he had saved a good woman from a bad man. . . . But there'd be hell poppin' in the morning, when the folks found their beloved Mayor dead as hell in his bed!

JIM KENNEDY slept late the following morning. By the time he reached his favorite hangout, the Long Branch Saloon, he realized that the evident grief of the people, gathered along the streets in large and small groups, was more than he had bargained for. Even the men in the Long Branch seemed unduly sad about the passing of one Dog Kelley. There were tears coursing down the weathered cheeks of the bartender.

"What's everybody so gloomy about?" asked Jim Kennedy. "Somebody kick the bucket?"

The barman nodded silently.

"Must be somebody prominent," said Kennedy, playing it cagy.

"It was somebody real prominent," sniffed the bartender. "We all loved her, too. There wasn't nothin' we wouldn't have done for her. She was so good to everybody—"

Kennedy stiffened. "Her? What d'you mean—Her? You mean him, don't you?"

"No—her. Dora Hand was murdered in bed, last night. Poor Dora!"

Kennedy braced himself. He knew the answer before he asked, "What the hell you talkin' about. It was the mayor—"

"No," said the bar man. He was too grief stricken to realize the slip Jim had just made. "It was Dora Hand. The bullets was probably meant for the mayor, because nobody would want to kill Dora. But Dora was sleepin' in the mayor's bed—"

"Did she always sleep in—"

"No!" the barman shouted. "It ain't what you're thinkin'. See, at the hotel where Dora lived they been paintin' and fixin' up her room to make it suit such a pretty woman. Meantime, Dora had to have a place to sleep. Well, the mayor had to go to Omaha, for several days. He left yesterday. So, as long as his house was vacant, he told Dora to use his bed while he was away—until her room was ready for her."

Kennedy, in a horrified daze, had heard enough. The enormity of his crime weighing heavily upon him, he plodded around town until he found Bat Masterson. Calling Bat aside, he said to the famous lawman, "Bat,

I want you to shoot me dead. Right here, Right now."

Masterson, always a cool head, said, "Simmer down, sonny. I got enough trouble here this morning. What's wrong with you?"

Quietly, then, Jim Kennedy told Bat Masterson the entire story.

At this point Bat Masterson made one of those highly original decisions for which he was famous. "Son," he said, "these folks would lynch you right off the minute the news was out."

"Then tell them I killed Dora," said Jim. "I deserve to die. Let them string me up pronto."

Bat shook his head. "Wouldn't do no good, either way. I don't hold with lynchin' at all. And they wouldn't let us hold you for a trial. You sure did wrong—but it wasn't a deliberate killing. Now, you go to the livery barn, get your horse, and light out of town. Go back to Texas. This thing is just between you and me. This way, it'll save trouble all around. Now, be a good feller—and git!"

"But I want to die," persisted Kennedy. "I killed Dora—and I loved her."

"Maybe dyin' would be too good for you, son," said Bat. "You'll be payin' penalty enough just by thinkin' what an awful thing you done. Git your horse and git out afore I change my mind."

Masterson went along to the livery stable and waited while Jim saddled up. Then he rode to the outskirts of town and watched Kennedy disappear down the trail.

Two days later a farmer, bringing vegetables into market, stopped his team on the road and scrambled down a small hill to get a drink of cool water from a little stream about three miles from Dodge City. But he didn't get the drink. Lying in the water was the body of Jim Kennedy. He had shot himself through the head. A clear case of suicide.

Bat Masterson brought to light the fact that the whole thing might have been a tragedy of error. Mayor Kelley emphatically denied that he had ever been known at Pitch Willser, and claimed he had never seen Jim Kennedy before.

"Not only that," insisted the Mayor, "but I absolutely never held up a stagecoach. . . ." He was silent for a moment, then added thoughtfully, "In Texas, that is." ❖ ❖ ❖

SAD NOSE JOE— RAIN- MAKER!



Sad Nose Joe made one last big
toss. . . .

By

**HAROLD
HELPER**

*Not even the Great White
Father could help Sad
Nose Joe, when his drouth-
stricken redskin brothers
ordered him to rope them
a rain cloud!*

DEAR Great White Father in Wash-
ington:

Me Sad Nose Joe. How you?
Hope you fine. Sad Nose Joe not so fine.
Chippewa tribe not so fine. Tell you why,
Great White Father in Washington: No rain
come. Crop get bad. Cows get thirsty.
Everything fine kettle of fish. Without fish.
Not enough water for that. Everybody say,
Long Tail Feathers, you medicine man, why
not you make rain come?

Long Tail Feathers say he work hard as
ever on rain god in sky to make rain come.
Pray overtime. Double up magic herb
potions. Not his fault rain no come. Not
really fault rain god, rain not come.

Fault the town of Gunsmoke!

Everybody say how fault of Gunsmoke?
Answer easy: Fly-um-machine drop stuff in
clouds over Gunsmoke. Rain come down.

Every body say what that got to do with Chippewas? For thousand moons, maybe longer, Chippewa pray to rain god for rain. Always work before. You mean, palefaces in Gunsmoke got better system?

Long Tail Feathers say no, not zakly. He say only Gunsmoke palefaces stop clouds maybe heading for Chippewa territory and make clouds turn to rain over Gunsmoke. Long Tail Feathers say mighty hard for even rain god to make rain without clouds.

Everybody say that make sense, all right. Only one thing. What we do?

Long Tail Feathers, he say only one thing to do. Write Great White Father in White House, Washington, D. C., Capital, United States, And So Forth. Make complaint. Say, please not let Gunsmoke stop clouds. Let clouds make up own mind where they want to go. Then everything be fairer and squarer.

Long Tail Feathers say Sad Nose Joe, you readin-writin' man, and pretty good speller too, except sometimes. How about you write Great White Father in Washington. Xplane everything. So I, Nose Joe, agreeable, all right. If cows get any thirstier, they going to give powder milk.

I have writ down everything, Great White Father in Washington, zakly the way is. All Chippewas preciate you do something about this. Chippewas do not ask lot of things: diamond rings, fancy pens write under water. Just a few clouds once in awhile. That all. Not too much to ask.

DEAR Great White Father in Washington:

Get letter say you do not believe much can be done about cloud matter. Seem to be no visor, state law about clouds one way or nother. You say you have whole thing looked into though; please let know if any developments. Sad Nose Joe will do. Some developments, so Sad Nose Joe write this letter.

First development: Sad Nose Joe read Long Tail Feathers the medicine man your letter. Next development: Long Tail Feathers, he say, well, Great White Father in Washington mean good, but Chippewas can't wait. Long Tail Feathers say if things get any dryer all Chippewa adam's apples turn into adam's prunes. Long Tail Feathers say we got to do something about it.

Everybody tell Long Tail Feathers that he

make good speech with the tongue. Only one thing. What can anybody do? Long Tail Feathers say that good question. Say he give lot of brain turning-over to matter. One thing come to him:

Gunsmoke palefaces stop clouds. But not stop clouds that come over Chippewa territory that come from opposite way? True, quite a good many clouds seem to like to make trip by way of Gunsmoke; but not all.

One Eyebrow Sam speak up and say trouble is that clouds that do come over Chippewa range always seem in big hurry; never have time to stop and be senshibull.

Long Tail Feathers say, ah, that is where we now use big strategee. What is good for goose is good for gander. We stop these clouds just like Gunsmoke stop their clouds.

One Eyebrow Sam say that what Long Tail Feathers say seem to make sense; except maybe one thing. It very hard for us to get up in sky without fly-um-machine. Long Tail Feathers say that tough problem, all right. But he have idea. What about Mountain of the Big Snoot?

One Eyebrow Sam say that so far as he know, Mountain Of The Big Snoot still at same old place mountain always been. What Long Tail Feathers mean, what about Mountain of the Big Snoot?

Long Tail Feathers say just this: Everybody knows Mountain of the Big Snoot real high and tall. Somebody go up peak and lasso cloud from there and make cloud stay put until it turn to rain.

One Eyebrow Sam say never heard of anybody lassoing cloud before. How can anybody lasso and tie up something that's nothing but dark air?

Long Tail Feathers say Sam forget one thing. Mountain of the Big Snoot not ordinary mountain but sacred mountain of Chippewa Indians. No doubt, that being case, mountain make some arrangement for cloud to stay put just to help out Chippewas. Surely, not sacred mountain for nothing.

One Eyebrow Sam say the way things are, anything worth trying. Long Tail Feathers say glad to hear One Eyebrow Sam say that. After all, sacred mountain good enough for our ancestors, and they the only ancestors we are likely to have.

One Eyebrow Sam say only one more problem: Who climb big steep Mountain of the Big Snoot with the tall, narrow peak? Too dangerous. Specially swinging away

into sky with rope. That no laugh-um joke.

Long Tail Feathers say he go himself, such great faith he have in sacred mountain. Only one thing in way: It so happen this is best time of years to pick magic herbs, and Mountain of the Big Snoot so big that no herbs grow up there, magic or otherwise.

Then Long Tail Feathers get idea: Let Sad Nose Joe go. He Chippewas number one Washington correspondent, anyhow. Great White Father write that he want to know all developments. Well, climbing Mountain of the Big Snoot to lasso cloud development, if there ever was one.

Everybody let out big whoop. Fine idea! Even squaws do likewise. Sad Nose Joe wish they not have tears in eyes. They keep looking at Sad Nose Joe like Sad Nose Joe going to happy hunting grounds for keeps.

Sad Nose Joe write you later, Great White Father in Washington. He hope.

Yours truly,

Sad Nose Joe, real Chippewa.

DEAR Great White Father in Washington:

Sorry or delay in writing. Xplane. Next day, after write you last letter, Sad Nose Joe go to Mountain of the Big Snoot. Never see a mountain grow so before.

Overnight seem to double in up-and-down size. Peak so far up, not only take both eyes to see it—but crick in neck. Sad Nose Joe just as soon postpone trip some other time, by and by, but Long Tail Feathers point out there is cloud in sky by mountain, now. Clouds these days, Long Tail Feathers say, scarce as teeth in squaw's chickens mouth.

Long Tail Feathers say don't forget. You got nothing to worry about. Mountain of the Big Snoot sacred mountain. Of course, try to keep balance, too. Nothing like keeping balance when climb along tall mountain.

Sad Nose Joe thank Long Tail Feathers for advice, say good-by to everybody and with lasso rope, start going up mountain. Sad Nose Joe climb and climb and climb. And the more he climb, the more it seem like he got to climb. Sad Nose Joe can't help but think this not way for mountain to act, sacred or otherwise. By and by people below look like grasshoppers. Then ants. Then midget ants. Sad Nose Joe knows he getting somewhere.

For a fellow not eat too good in long time, Sad Nose Joe sure begin to feel heavy, spe-

cially in the legs. But Sad Nose Joe keep climbing up, up, up and sure enough, Great White Father in Washington, after while, Sad Nose Joe begin to find self getting near tall, skinny peak. Sad Nose Joe sigh, but that not get him anywhere. So Sad Nose Joe keep climbing up, up, up, some more.

And by and by, Sad Nose Joe look up and there is nothing else to climb. Only sky. Sad Nose Joe rest a little then tell self he now try to lasso cloud. Sad Nose Joe feel a little nervous. Not enough space around his feet. Nearly all space going up or down.



NO MAN'S GUNS

By William E. Vance

Across the Donner Pass to play their violent parts in tough Virginia City, they rode. . . . A man who carried his destiny in his holster. . . . A pioneer girl with a will of steel to match the iron in his soul. . . . And waiting ahead on the grim trail no man has forgotten, that bullet-studded day when their trails met and crossed. . . .

This stirring novelette of stagecoach days on the pioneer range, when gold was the lure and death stood guard to hold back all but the swift and strong, will feature the January issue. This and other thrill-packed Western novelettes and short stories on your newsstand now.

25. **BIG-BOOK** 
WESTERN
 MAGAZINE

Sad Nose Joe feel a little silly too. Black clouds all round him, just about even with mountain top. Big question is, how you lasso damp air? Sad Nose Joe remember Mountain of the Big Snoot suppose to be sacred, so maybe something xtra special happen. Who knows?

Besides, after climbing all this way up, might as well do something. Just as silly to climb all way up and then do nothing, as to climb all way up and do something silly.

So Sad Nose Joe begin swinging rope loop round head. He toss to left. He toss to right. He toss to east. He toss to west. To tell the truth, nothing happen. Everything same as before. Maybe even more so. Sad Nose Joe say to self, well, nothing much more to do. Make one last great big toss. Make it straight upward. If nothing happen, not Sad Nose Joe fault. Mountain's fault. Maybe not so sacred after all. Maybe ancestors make slight mistake about it. Maybe nothing very sacred. Or magic. Sad Nose Joe no longer no speak. Seem to be heading downward. Head first mostly. With stones and rocks following right behind, close second.

Then, everything go black. Sad Nose Joe think, So this is way happy hunting ground is. What you know? But happy for who—the deers and the antelope who he can't see in dark. Then Sad Nose Joe not only feel lonely but damp.

Wake up and find self not dead at all. He is laying along side of mountain. Something seem strange. Then it come to Sad Nose Joe, what. The reason he feel damp—it raining!

Sad Nose Joe smile. The mountain is sacred mountain after all. It make rain come. Real wet honest-goodness rain. So what if Sad Nose Joe is dying? You can't have everything. Nothing perfect.

With brave smile, Sad Nose Joe go back to darkness. Look little more familiar this time. Oh well, Sad Nose Joe maybe get used to happy hunting ground by and by. Maybe not even happy hunting ground perfect. Just make best of it.

Sometime, Sad Nose Joe find self wake up from dead again. This time Sad Nose Joe not on side of mountain. On side of bed. In white room. Then lady come in room. She in white too. Then man come in room. He in white, too. What is this? Sad Nose Joe think; everybody got one-trail brain or

something? Well, Great White Father in Washington, it turn out Sad Nose Joe, of all places, in hospital.

It seem that between Sad Nose Joe falling on rocks and stones as he come down mountain, and rocks and stones falling on Sad Nose Joe, he come out second best. But by and by, all Sad Nose Joe's friends come to see Sad Nose Joe and they seem happy enough.

Long Tail Feathers say to Sad Nose Joe, You big hero to Chippewa people now. You save day, make rains come down, prove Mountain of the Big Snoot still sacred. Some paleface scientist say rain come because cloud disturbed by rope but all Chippewa know was because mountain sacred.

Sad Nose Joe say glad to hear this, only wish didn't have to fall down mountain, sacred or not. Sad Nose Joe ache all over. At least. Sometimes even in more places than that. And even the bumps have little bumps.

Long Tail Feathers smile and say he tell something make you forget all about aches. This big news. Hold scalp; this truly something.

He say: "It very good thing you fall down mountain, after all. Know why? Because you bring down many stone and rocks."

Sad Nose Joe hold head and groan.

Long Tail Feathers say not to interrupt. Long Tail Feathers continues. Chippewas go to rescue Sad Nose Joe when he fall. Find big heap stone and rock and know Sad Nose Joe must be somewhere in there. But notice something else too. Some of stone and rock shine funny. Make long powwow. Guess what? Chippewas now own big uranium deposit. Look like when ancestors make something sacred, they not mess around. Anyway now everybody rich. Now don't matter whether ever rain again or not. Get thirsty. drink beer. Cows can do same. Maybe milk come out homogoneyesed.

So, Great White Father in Washington, you can see sure enough been big developments. Sad Nose Joe guess not much more to write about. Guess whole thing is this. Maybe Chippewas not got good schools. Maybe not got good grazin land. Maybe not got good climate, also weather. But Chippewas glad got one thing nobody else got. Chippewas got ancestors.

Yours truly,

Sad Nose Joe, real Chippewa. * * *

Sheriff Sam Fenton had coolly faced the guns of many an owlhooter—but now it was his ex-saddlemate who was leveling a Colt at his heart!



In the face of that leveled gun he was helpless. . . .

BRING HIM BACK DEAD!

By **JOHN C.
COLOHAN**

THEY found a horse with a Three brand at the mouth of Rawhide Canyon, and because the horse was dead, they knew that Clint Farley had failed in his desperate bid for freedom. They knew that they had run Farley down, that the drama begun some two hours before—when Farley had shot his way from the Saddle Rock jail—would end somewhere within the towering walls of the Rawhide.

Mocking walls, they must have seemed to Farley then—to that bitter man playing out a losing hand within the rock-lined trap. For Rawhide is a blind—a great circling amphi-

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under the title: "Manhunt."*

theater rimmed with stone. No man willingly would flee into such a place. But for Farley, afoot, with a posse thundering close behind, there had been no choice.

Sheriff Leonard, lean and melancholy, with drooping sandy moustache, pointed out the obvious fact to the members of his posse. Standing by the Three S horse, dead with a bullet through the brain, the sheriff looked down at ground marked by various little signs which were like so many printed words.

"Hoss broke its leg," he drawled. "So Clint piled up in that clump o' sagebrush yonder. Clint must have killed the hoss, and headed up Rawhide afoot. Musta been jolted some by the fall. He never even stopped to get his hat."

The hat, a battered black sombrero, was half hidden by the brush. Sunlight gleamed on metal, and the sheriff stooped and picked a silver dollar from the dirt. He held it in his hand. "Clint won't be needin' this," he mused, and put the dollar in his pocket.

"He won't need anything—after today," said Jim Blaney slowly.

The old sheriff's glance caught momentarily on the lean, dark face of the big Cross L man. Jim Blaney and Jess McCaulley had been partners in the ownership of the Cross L spread. Clint Farley, hiding now somewhere within the canyon, had been convicted and sentenced to life in the pen for the murder of Jess McCaulley. Blaney had been chief witness for the state at the trial.

From Blaney, the sheriff's gaze went slowly over the faces of those other men caught up in the hasty loop with which he had gathered his posse. Hugh Miller, proprietor of the livery stable in town, small, slightly built, known for courage. Anse Larson of the Box M, crabby, cantankerous, incorruptible. Larson's lean-flanked son, Art. Ed Siminole, rider for the Cross L, who had been another witness at Farley's trial. Riley Hatch, square-faced square-bodied bronco twister. And so at last the sheriff's eyes came to rest on the grim face of Sam Fenton, his deputy.

Perhaps, then, the sheriff was remembering that Fenton and Clint Farley had once been close friends. Perhaps he was wondering how the deputy felt about this job of hunting down a man who had been his partner, for his eyes dwelt long on Fenton's face; but he turned at last to study the frowning walls of the canyon.

"You gents all knew Clint Farley," he said slowly. "You know, having gone this far, Clint's likely to go all the way. He's somewhere in the canyon and I aim to get him. Ten to one Clint will elect to shoot it out."

He waited; no man spoke. They knew Clint Farley—all of them. They knew the recklessness of the man they trailed, the devil-may-care quality of his courage; and every man there knew that Farley would fight until the end and go out smiling, if it so suited him.

"He heaved up the crick bed," continued Sheriff Leonard, "which doesn't mean a thing. He's smart enough to quit the crick without a track and he's nery enough to double back an' steal our horses for a get-away. We'll leave Anse with the horses. He can watch the opening in case Clint tries to double back. The rest of us will go on in afoot. We've got to round him up before dark."

That was true enough, and here and there a head nodded at the sheriff's wisdom.

On the sheer cliffs which rim Rawhide Canyon are seams by which a man willing to gamble his neck might reach the top. By daylight, this opportunity was denied the fugitive, for the trap would be long and slow, and would leave him exposed to rifle fire from any point within the canyon. But if Clint Farley could keep hidden until dark, or if he could hold the posse off. . . .

SAM FENTON, big shouldered, raw-boned deputy, listened with half an ear to the careful last instructions of the sheriff. They would spread out in a line to sweep the canyon, three men to one side of the dry creek bed, three men to the other. They would move on slowly, keeping in touch when possible; they would watch for tracks . . . and then Sam Fenton's thoughts strayed off, and the dry voice of the sheriff was no more than a blur.

It was queer. Clint Farley was a convicted murderer, and he, Sam Fenton, was a deputy sheriff tracking the escaped man down so that the state might exact full payment for the crime. Yet once they had been friends, and partners; they had owned a ranch together, and the beginnings of a brand. But three years of hard luck had left them broke, and other things had broken their friendship. There had been an ugly fist fight, and for two years or longer he had

not spoken a single word to Clint Farley.

But Sam Fenton could find no joy in the task which faced him now.

The sheriff's voice cut through the thick shell of his thoughts. "Fenton, you and Blaney and Seminole can take the north slope. Art Larson and Riley and me will take the other. Mind what I say—go easy. I liked Clint Farley once, and I'd rather take him in alive, but he's on the wrong side in this deal. Don't take no chances with him."

They started. They moved forward in a ragged skirmish line that would sweep the canyon clean from end to end. No chance for Farley to slip past that outspread line; no chance for him to evade discovery. Sam Fenton moved mechanically along the steep slope, a carbine in his hand. Below, a hundred feet or so, was Blaney. Above, an equal distance, was Ed Seminole. Creeping forward slowly, taking advantage of every bit of cover which lined the hillside, closing in on a desperate, dangerous man. Crossing gulleys torn by spring freshets, swinging around rocks, crouching to study the wooded slope ahead, to listen for the chance sound which might betray the fugitive. Then, moving again. . . .

Fenton shook his head. He and Clint Farley had been partners once, and now he was creeping in to slip a noose about Farley's neck. A deputy sheriff, sworn to uphold the law. And yet, before Farley had ever gone to trial, he had tried to mend the breach between them. He had gone to Farley, offering help—and Farley had told him curtly to go to hell!

The sun beat down out of a sky that was like a brazen bowl. The rocks were hot beneath the big deputy's hands as he moved forward, keeping in position in that slowly advancing line. Below, Blaney had been swallowed up by the thick growth of the hillside. He caught a glimpse of Seminole, sliding shadow-swift between clumps of scrub oak. A third of the big box canyons had been covered. He dropped into a gully, circling a tumbled mass of rock where a great chunk of stone had once crashed from the wall of the cliff.

And a voice spoke softly, close beside him. "Hold it, Fenton! Reach for the sky!"

Not six feet away, in a bellow in the rocks, with a ten-foot high cut-bank at his back, squatted Farley. There was a sneer

on Farley's lips. In his left hand was a rifle, in his right a six-gun which hung level in line with big Sam Fenton's chest.

"Collecting some blood money, Fenton?"

The deputy came erect. Standing there, right hand still gripping his carbine, he studied out of pitying eyes the man who had been his partner. The man had aged, changed; he was like a savage animal at bay. His hat was gone; one cheek was scratched; and his face was streaked with blood and dirt. His bloodshot eyes glared.

"Clint," said Fenton slowly. "You better drop that gun and come on back with me."

"Not in a million years!" rasped Clint Farley. "Go to the pen! For something I didn't do—"

And suddenly, standing there, the deputy was glad that the thing had turned this way. He was glad that Farley had the drop on him, that positions were not reversed. He had not planned it so, but, for facing that desperate, driven man, Sam Fenton knew he did not want to be the one to take Clint Farley back to jail. Now the responsibility had been lifted from him. In the face of that levelled gun he was helpless. Yet there was duty—

"Clint," he pointed out. "You haven't got a chance. This canyon's full of men. They'll get you, certain sure."

Farley grinned mirthlessly. "Not alive, they won't! And it's better than going to the pen."

For a moment, Sam Fenton forgot the gun that was pointing at his breast. His mind flashed back to remembered facts in the case which had ended with Clint Farley's conviction on a murder charge.

Convinced of Farley's guilt, the big deputy had been glad when a job in the lower county had kept him from the trial, but he was acquainted with the evidence which had gone to convict the man. Damning enough, in all truth, that evidence had been.

Jess McCaulley, half-owner of the Cross L, had been found dead at the gate leading in his ranch-house. His gun had been in holster, so that it seemed that McCaulley must have been shot down in cold blood. Beneath the dead man's hand the name "Farley" had been spelled out in the soft dust of the road. Because of the enmity which had existed between the two, and because Farley was the last man known to have seen McCaulley alive, the name written in the dust had been

a powerful argument for the prosecution. Nor had Clint Farley, at his trial, denied that he had visited the Cross L man shortly before he was killed. Denial would have been useless, anyhow, for Jim Blaney, McCaulley's partner in the Cross L, and Ed Seminole, a puncher for the outfit, had met Farley as he rode away from the Cross L. Riding on, they had found Jess McCaulley dead beside the gate. So they had testified at the trial.

Accepting the evidence at face value, Sam Fenton had taken for granted the guilt of the man who once had been his partner. Now, looking into Farley's blood-shot, glaring eyes, the deputy remembered that Farley, throughout the trial, had steadfastly maintained that he was innocent of the murder. Clint Farley had been plenty wild. He had drunk too much, gambled too much, but he had never been a liar. . . .

"Clint," said Fenton suddenly, "you got no chance to get away. This canyon's bottled tighter than a drum. Give me your gun. If you didn't kill Jess McCaulley, I give you my word I'll never quit until I clear you."

The fugitive's lips curled back in a savage mocking grin. "Go to hell!" he snapped. "I want no favors from you—now or ever! You and me got all our business caught up long ago. You whipped me once, but this time I got the drop! Cut loose your gun belt!"

"They'll get you, Clint. You got no chance."

"Let 'em!" Farley was snarling now. "I won't go to the pen. Unhook that belt. I'd hate to have to drill you."

HE HAD taken his stand in a hollow in the rocks at the gully's edge, with the ten-foot high cutbank behind him. Now, suddenly, watching that passion-torn face, Sam Fenton caught his breath. At the edge of the cut-bank behind Farley appeared the face, the figure of a man. Jim Blaney!

And a great wave of relief swept over Fenton then, for he saw that they would be able to take Farley alive. Covered by Farley's gun, he watched dispassionately while Blaney leaned far out over the bank. He watched the six-gun level in the big man's hand. He waited for the crisp command that would end the situation.

Clint Farley moved impatiently. "Damn you, unloose that gun belt!" he snapped. His

gun lifted menacingly. "I won't tell you again!"

Still Blaney did not announce himself. Leaning far out over the bank, gun poised in his hand, he still delayed the sharp command that would make Farley prisoner.

Then, all at once, Sam Fenton realized that there would be no command. There would be no word of warning for the man who covered from behind. Blaney's face was a dark mask of hatred, and his mouth was set in a cruel line. He was going to shoot Clint Farley in the back! His thumb was on the hammer—

No time, then, for Fenton to shout a warning. Hardly time for thought. Swifter than thought was the deputy in action. Ignoring Farley's gun, leveled at his breast, the deputy stabbed for his Colt. The gun came up spouting. Blaney, the avenger, smashed off balance by the slug, let the gun slip from his fingers, and stumbled at the very edge of the bank. He grasped desperately for a handhold as he tottered, then tripped and pitched head foremost into the gully. Blaney threw out an unavailing arm in the instant before his head struck against a rock. Then the big Cross L man lay quiet and still.

Farley had spun around as Blaney fell. Now he looked at the deputy. A long moment of silence, and Sam Fenton spoke grimly; "He was going to plug you in the back."

"I had a dead drop," said Clint Farley, and there was a queer look in his eyes. "You went for your gun. You knew you was taking chances. Why did you do it, Sam?"

Sam Fenton grinned at him. "You didn't know Blaney was there," he said. "You must have figured I was drawing down on you. Why didn't you shoot, Clint?"

They studied each other in that sun-drenched hillside. Slowly Clint Farley shook his head. "Let it go, Sam. I'm obliged." He dropped his Colt into the holster. "Call the sheriff and let's get back to town."

Sam Fenton stooped and turned the unconscious Blaney on his back. There was a bump on the Cross L man's forehead where he had brought up against the rock; blood was slowly blotting out the color on the right sleeve of Blaney's shirt. The deputy slit the sleeve, folded it back. His hasty shot had torn a jagged hole through Blaney's upper arm. With a bandage he stopped the

flow of blood. Frowning, he regarded the bare, smooth-muscled arm of the Cross L man.

Across Blaney's forearm, still faintly pink, was the welt of a freshly healed scar, a scar that must have been burned there by a bullet! For a moment he looked at the scar with thoughtful eyes, but when at last he spoke it was about another matter altogether.

"He meant to drill you in the back, Clint," he muttered. "That sort's peculiar. Did he have anything agin' you? Personal, I mean?"

"I've had plenty of trouble with the Cross L outfit ever since I homesteaded next to them," said Clint Farley slowly. "Blaney and McCaulley both! Blaney and me had a fight six months or so ago. I took a gun from him, and whipped him all over a corral. He seemed kinda provoked about it at the time."

"He was the gent who found McCaulley."

Farley nodded. "Him and Ed Seminole."

"How do you and Seminole stack up?"

"Jest a drinking acquaintance. Why?"

But Sam Fenton shook his head. A hunch was troubling the big deputy now—a queer hunch that he was not willing to try to put in words. On the day following the killing of Jess McCaulley, Sam Fenton had gone into the little Saddle Rock bank on business. Jim Blaney had been standing at the cashier's window when he entered, and Fenton had waited at Blaney's elbow while the Cross L man scrawled off a check. And a little fact, meaningless, then, and unimportant, had lodged in a corner of Fenton's mind—a little fact forgotten until now. For Blaney, writing, had moved his hand in slow and careful strokes. So a man with a sore arm might write!

NOW crouching in a gully in Rawhide Canyon, Sam Fenton was adding up the score. Always, heretofore, he had assumed that Clint Farley had killed Jess McCaulley. Now he was not sure. On Jim Blaney's arm was a fresh scar that must be a bullet burn. Blaney had been troubled with a sore arm on the day after his partner was found murdered. Sam Fenton lifted puzzled eyes to Clint Farley, fugitive from justice, hunkered there beside him.

"Clint," he said, "I never got to take in your trial. There was one thing I remember

hearing which seemed funny at the time. Way I heard it, the testimony was that McCaulley's gun was in the holster, but that it had two empty shells."

"That was the how of it," agreed Farley.

"A normal, thoughtful gent carries an empty to cradle his firing pin," mused Fenton. "Only a plumb careless hombre would have two empty shells in his gun. An' Jess McCaulley was never careless."

"Which tallies up to how much?"

"Clint," said the deputy, deadly serious now, "mebbe Jess McCaulley died with the gun in his hand—might be he even got in a shot before he died. That would account for the empty shell. Mebbe the gent what killed him put the gun back in the holster, and then, knowin' you and McCaulley had trouble, wrote your name there in the dust."

Clint Farley nodded agreement. "I figger something like that happened. But you can't make a jury believe that kind of story. Not without knowing who killed McCaulley, or having some sort of proof to back up the yarn."

And that was true. The evidence which had convicted Farley, while wholly circumstantial, was yet so strong that absolute proof would be required to overthrow it. Sam Fenton recognized that fact. Two men had furnished the evidence. One of these was now lying unconscious at his feet. The other, Ed Seminole, was still somewhere higher up on the steep side of the canyon.

A hunch was prodding the big deputy now. The time was short. Blaney was still unconscious, but he might recover at any moment. Other members of the posse might appear, drawn by the single shot. Sam Fenton did not want that to happen—not yet. He had a plan, a wildly fantastic, utterly hare-brained plan.

Lifting his head carefully above the mass of rocks he searched the hillside at the place where last he had seen Seminole. It was some little time before he found his man. Seminole, made cautious, by the revolver shot, crouched in the shadow of a great pinon tree, but even as Fenton spotted him the Cross L man began a slow advance on hands and knees. He was evidently taking no unnecessary chances. He reached a small boulder in his path, crouched there to reconnoiter.

Sam Fenton, completely hidden from Seminole's view by the depression in which

he stood, picked up his rifle. Clint Farley watched him with puzzled eyes. The deputy thrust the rifle barrel between two rocks and glanced at Farley.

"This ain't accordin' to Hoyle," he muttered. "But I never did like Seminole, no-how."

A dead shot with rifle or revolver, he squinted along the sights. Seminole's high-crowned white Stetson appeared above the boulder as the Cross L man scanned the territory before him. Slowly Fenton tightened the pressure on the trigger. The rifle barked. The white Stetson leaped in a little arc, as though jerked by a string.

Clint Farley's face was a study in amazement as the deputy flipped a fresh shell into the chamber. Seminole had dropped from sight behind the boulder. Unfortunately for the puncher, the boulder he had selected was not quite large enough to offer complete protection. One boot projected. Again Sam Fenton fired. The boot twitched slightly, disappeared from view.

Then, a grim smile curving his lips, the big deputy emptied the magazine in a hail of lead which spattered above the stone sheltering the hapless Seminole. The rock offered protection of a sort. Nothing more. No chance for Seminole to return the fire without exposing himself to that deadly fusillade. Lead slugs flattened against the rock, kicked up dust along its edges, plucked at bits of clothing shown by the unhappy puncher. The high-walled cliffs sent back rolling echoes of the gun-fire.

The magazine was empty. Sam Fenton looked at Blaney. The man was still unconscious. Grinning at the puzzled Farley, the big deputy filled the magazine and returned to the bombardment. Spacing his shots, firing with sure accuracy, again he emptied the rifle.

In the direness of his need, Seminole contrived to make the boulder shelter him. He did not offer to return the fire. He was playing dead, wise enough under the circumstances, for he knew that presently other members of the posse would be coming to his aid. Likewise, Sam Fenton knew it.

He turned to Farley. "Slip down the gulley, Clint," he suggested. "There's some brush down there where you can hide. I'm going to make peace with Seminole, and I want you out of sight."

"Sam," murmured Farley, "this heat has

fried your brain. What fool crazy notion—"

"Get outa sight before I take a shot at you," said Fenton. "I got me a scheme."

Sorrowfully Farley shook his head, but he dropped down the gulley to disappear from sight behind a clump of brush. The deputy watched until he was gone. Then he lifted his voice to a bellow:

"Ho, Seminole!"

And Seminole answered hoarsely: "What in hell yuh want?"

"I got him, Seminole," called Fenton. He stood up, facing the man who still crouched behind the rock. After a moment Seminole came warily to his feet.

THE Cross L man's head was bare. There was a bloody smear across his face where a splinter of rock had torn his cheek. One boot heel had been shot away. He stooped to pick up the white Stetson, then came forward, scowling.

"Mister," he said as he drew near, "I'm right damn' glad yuh showed. That buzzard made this canyon plenty hot for me. Shot my damn hat off!"

He came on, limping slightly, dragging his rifle. He reached the edge of the gulley, so that he could look down into the rocks. Slowly the scowl upon his face was blotted out, and incredulity took its place.

"That's Blaney!" he cried. "What the hell! Where's Farley?"

Sam Fenton shrugged. "That's Blaney. He's all I bagged so far. Funny, eh? You an' him blazing away at each other—"

There was a queer expression on Ed Seminole's face as he looked down at the unconscious man. "Yuh mean to tell me—" he began angrily. "Yuh mean to say—"

Sam Fenton tried to explain. "Shucks!" he said soothingly. "He thought you was Farley. 'An' you thought he was Farley."

"Hell!" rasped Seminole. "He knew damn well I wasn't Farley! I was behind him! He shot my hat off—an' Farley never had no hat—"

"You must be wrong, Seminole." Sam Fenton's voice was soft. "That don't tally up. Why would Blaney shoot at you, if it wasn't a mistake?"

"Why?" Seminole's face was venomous. "I'll tell yuh why. Because he owes me a thousand dollars, an' he figgered to pay it off in lead! He thought—"

Another voice interrupted. Jim Blaney's

voice! "What's wrong?" he asked groggily.

Blaney was lifting an arm to shield his face from the sun. A patch of blood showed on his forehead, and his eyes were dazed as he looked up at the two men. Seminole glared down at him.

"What's wrong?", he jeered. "Yore little plan miscarried, that's all! Yuh figgered it cheaper to kill me off than pay me off! Safer, too! Nobody would be left to know that yuh killed Jess McCaulley! An' Farley would get the blame."

And Jim Blaney stared up at that furious man with slowly comprehending glance. Painfully the big Cross L man lifted himself to a sitting position. His dark face twitched as he turned his glance momentarily from Seminole to Sam Fenton. "Smart," he said. "Smart as hell!"

He was unarmed. The deputy had knocked the six-gun from his hand, and now his holster was empty. He sat there on the ground, looking up at Seminole.

"Yuh've said enough now, Seminole."

"Enough!" rasped Seminole. "Yuh're wrong, Blaney! Wait till I tell the story in court! Wait till I tell a jury how yuh cheated Jess McCaulley—an' killed him when he found yuh out! An' offered me a thousand dollars to testify he was dead."

Slowly, painfully, Jim Blaney got to his feet. He was unarmed. He had been tricked, and he knew it, but he could not know the manner by which it had been accomplished. A thin smile twisted his lips.

"I promised you a thousand dollars," he repeated softly. Then, suddenly, swiftly, he moved. His left hand snaked a hide-out gun. For an instant he stood still, gun balanced. "Yuh yellow rat!" he snarled. "I'll pay yuh off—in full!"

He fired. The slug sent Seminole reeling backward, hands clutching empty air. He threw another bullet at the swaying man, and Seminole went down.

Sam Fenton's Colt leaped from his holster. Blaney whirled on him, but Fenton's gun was belching lead. A brace of slugs caught the Cross L man at the belt line. He staggered back. The gun slipped from his fingers. Clint Farley, Colt uplifted rushed up the gulley just as Blaney went down.

Sam Fenton bent above Seminole. The man had been hit twice, and hard, but he grinned faintly at the deputy. "I'm all right," he whispered. "I'll live—long

enough." He tried to raise himself up.

Clint Farley said: "Here's the sheriff."

"Take it easy, Seminole," said Fenton gently. "Blaney's outa the jurisdiction of the court now." He straightened, looked at Farley. "That clears you, Clint."

Clint nodded. "For the second time to day, Sam, I'm obliged."

"Forget it," said the big deputy. "Don't say anything. Seminole is all right. Let him tell the story the way he knows it. Because, sure as hell, if Sheriff Leonard ever hears the truth of this affair, I'll be punching cows again!"



I told my beautiful wife: "All right, I'll get you your divorce, but I'm not doing it for you, or for your racket boy-friend. I'm doing it for me, so thanks for letting me get off the bus."

Exit lines. Big stuff. Bigger lies. I walked out wishing I were dead. And that wish was almost to come true too soon.

Don't miss this tense murder novelette—

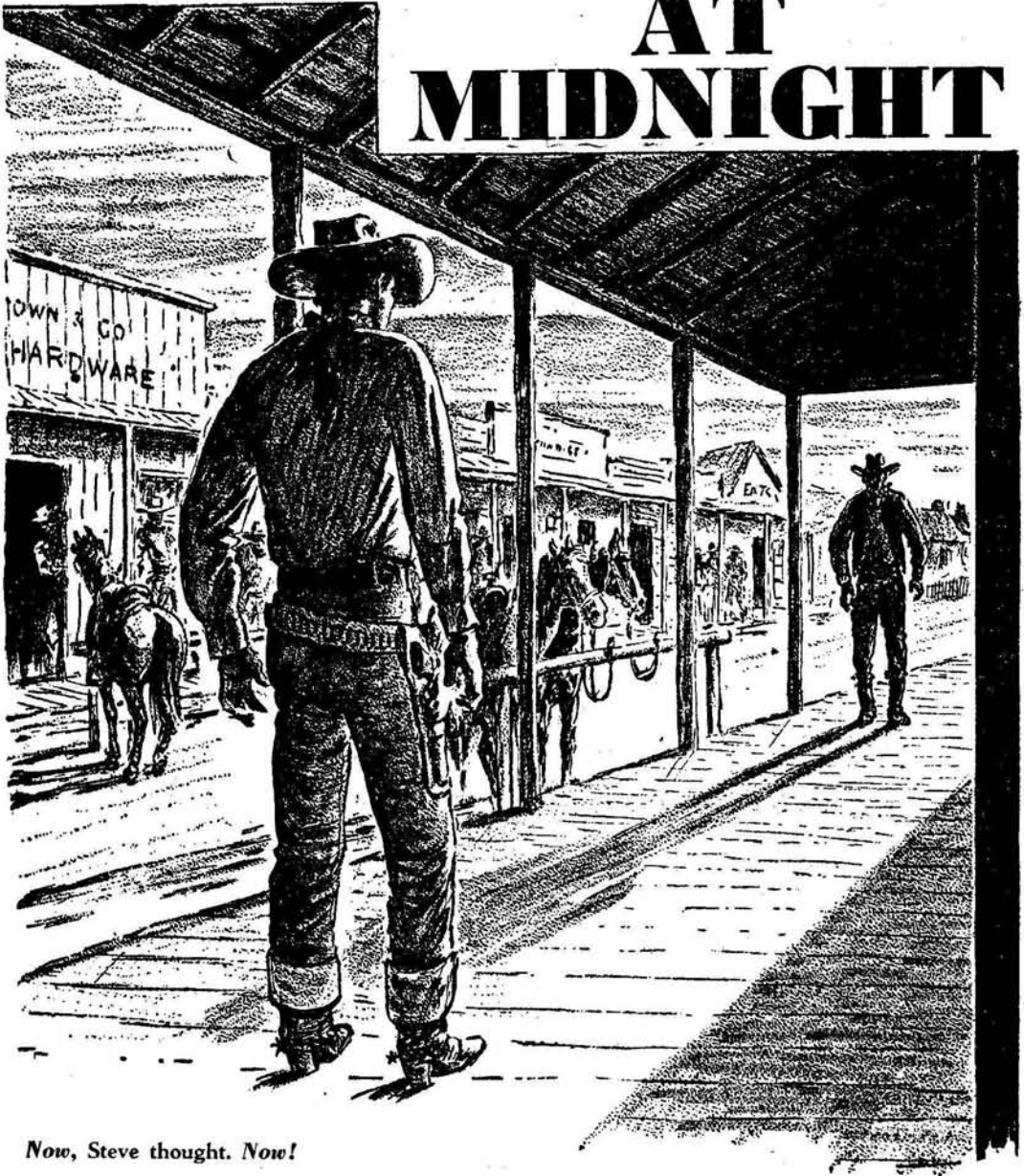
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MAGAZINE

GUN-MEETING AT MIDNIGHT



Now, Steve thought. Now!

Steve had waited two years for the lovely blonde to make up her mind about him. It took just that time for Con Pardee to get out of jail and start stalking him.

HE LEANED back against the front of the Paradise, just beyond the wash of light from the flares, and listened to the excited babble of voices that spilled over the batwings. They were arguing in there about his coming fight with

By JONATHAN CRAIG

Con Pardee, he knew, comparing his gun-speed with Pardee's, making bets on the man they thought would walk away alive. And though he couldn't make out individual words, Steve Jordan knew that most of the bets would be on Pardee.

Con Pardee had ridden into Fever Wells late that afternoon, and since that time the hell-roaring railhead town had talked of nothing else. The town loved a fight like this, the meeting of two quick-draw artists like Con Pardee and Steve Jordan. Pardee, whose specialty it was to let an opponent clear leather before going into his own lightning draw and killing him. And Jordan, the hated lawman, the town-tamer whose reputation stretched back to Dodge and Abilene, whose guns had met and beat the best.

Steve, a tall man, thinner than most, with eyes old beyond his years, pushed away from the front of the Paradise and shouldered through the batwings.

An instant hush came over the Paradise. All motion was suspended. It was a small place, hangout for hardcases, saddle tramps and percentage girls cast off by other saloons.

He moved across the sawdust to the bar. A space opened up for him, as it always did. They hated him, but beneath the hate lay their fear, and they paid him the respect due his reputation.

The barkeep set bottle and glass before him and moved away. Steve poured a drink, sipped it slowly, thinking this drink must be his last—until after the fight. Or maybe, simply his last drink. After a moment, the piano started up again and talk along the bar was resumed. But the talk was quieter now, most of it in careful whispers.

The man beside Steve said, "Evening, Marshal."

Steve nodded. "Evening, Lou." He knew the man well—a man dying of consumption, a soured, bitter man who liked nothing better than to taunt other men,

knowing his sickness was protection from both fists and guns. Steve cursed softly, wishing he'd picked another place at the bar.

"I reckon you'll be drinking light tonight, Marshal," Lou said, loudly enough to carry the length of the crowded bar.

The murmur of voices stopped again, and Steve knew they were listening, enjoying this. He said nothing.

"I reckon a man facing up to Con Pardee would want all his wits about him," Lou said thoughtfully. "Folks say he's even faster than you are, Marshal."

"Folks talk a lot," Steve said quietly. "You, especially."

"They do for a fact," Lou said. "They even say you got Con sent to the pen, just so's you'd have a clear field with Iris Manning. Mind you, I couldn't much blame you. That Iris is about the prettiest little baggage to hit this town in—"

"Shut up," Steve told him, not raising his voice. "You've said about enough." But he knew he was bluffing; he couldn't hit a lunger, a dying man. He glanced at the leering, mocking faces in the yellowed bar mirror, and then back at his drink.

"Don't get riled," Lou said. "You had a job to do, being marshal and all. You was the only witness to that little trouble Con had. You swore he shot that gent down in cold blood, and that's good enough for me."

"There's a limit," Steve said. "You're pushing it pretty hard, Lou."

Lou pretended not to hear. His voice grew louder.

"Guess that *judge* wasn't none too sure, though. He gave Con a mighty short term." He coughed into a handkerchief. "Even so, Con got out a heap quicker than most of us figured he would. Two years. 'Course he got time off for behaving himself." He shook his head sadly. "Damn shame he'll have to go right back for killing another man."

"Shut up!" Steve said again.

"Two years is either a short time or a long time," Lou said. "Depends on whether you're courting a pretty girl like Iris—or rotting in the pen and thinking about somebody *else* courting her. But don't get me wrong, Marshal. *I* think you done right, no matter *what* everybody else thinks!" He tittered, confident in his immunity.

Steve put his drink down slowly, feeling the angry knotting of the hard muscles across his shoulders. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, staring hard at the death-flushed cheeks of the lunger—and then he turned and strode out of the Paradise. No laughter followed him, but he knew it would come as soon as they were sure he was out of earshot.

HE PUSHED through the Saturday night crowds that surged in both directions along the flare-lit boardwalk, walking as rapidly as he could, past the Keeno Bar, the bank, Laird's feed store, the Hi-Lo-Jack, the Nugget, the Granada, the Den, the Unique Cafe, the Blue Chip—and then he crossed the dust-filled ruts of Main Street and paused a moment before the screen door of Iris Manning's millinery shop.

She was alone in her shop, balanced precariously on a chair while she reached high above her head to put a box on the top shelf. Her soft blonde hair was caught at the nape of her neck with a wisp of yellow ribbon; the tip of a tiny pink tongue came out to touch her upper lip as she struggled to push the box back farther on the shelf. Nothing Iris could do, Steve reflected, could ever disguise the lush beauty of her young body. Just now, standing on tip-toe, sideways to him, she presented a picture that helped to wash the turmoil and anger from his mind. She wasn't even trying to conceal her curves tonight, and the bright dress she wore hugged her narrow waist and swelling hips so snugly that Steve wondered it didn't burst.

He opened the screen and closed it quiet-

ly behind him and took a step toward her. "Hello, Iris," he said.

His voice startled her. She gasped and grabbed futilely at the shelf as the chair wobbled beneath her.

He sprang forward, catching her just as the chair skidded away. For an instant she was a soft, warm whirl of flaring skirts and slim silken legs in his arms—and then she wriggled loose and slid to her feet.

"Close," Steve said.

She smiled up at him. "Steve! You frightened me!" But the smile was short-lived, and suddenly the green eyes were cloudy. He knew she was thinking about it too, about the gun fight—about Con Pardee. He reached out and caught her in the loose circle of his arms, and she stood there, looking up at him, trying to smile again. Somehow, holding her for what might be the last time was like holding her for the first time. Everything seemed clearer, more intense, than it had in two years. And she was even more beautiful now than she had been then. Honey blonde hair and warm green eyes and a body that made a man hurt just to look at it. He wished he could prolong this moment, stretch it out through eternity. He breathed in the delicate scent of her, and suddenly he wanted to take her and ride a thousand miles away from Fever Wells and Con Pardee . . . ride away and never even look back over his shoulder.

He said, "I reckon you've seen Con."

She nodded, not meeting his eyes now.

They came out then, the words he had determined not to utter. "You never got over him, did you, Iris?"

Her wide-set eyes came up, slowly, and they held an expression he had never seen there before.

"Steve, I . . . I just don't know."

"It's been two years, Iris."

She moistened her full lips. "Yes."

"That's a long time."

"Yes."

"Time enough for a woman to decide."

She came close to him and her hands

went up to press down on his shoulders.

"I want to be honest, Steve. With you, and with myself—and with Con."

"That's woman talk," Steve said quietly. "It doesn't say anything."

He heard her sharp intake of breath and felt her stiffen in his arms.

"Steve! Please be fair!"

She was on the verge of tears, he knew, but something deep inside him goaded him on, something born of his sickness and hunger for her and the nearness of death.

"Fair!" He tried to choke back his bitter laughter and could not. "Fair, Iris? Is it fair to keep a man waiting two years?"

She pushed his arms away from her, stood quite still before him. "Please try to understand, Steve."

"I understand, all right," he said. "It's a little late, but I understand. You were just marking time with me while you waited for Con."

"Steve!"

"It's true. Admit it."

"No! It's *not* true!"

"You said you'd never got over Con."

"I didn't *say* that! I—"

He laughed shortly. "And all the time you knew I was putting damn near every dollar I earned into the old Frazee place. You didn't figure I aimed to live there alone, did you, Iris?"

"Steve, you've got to listen to me."

"Sure," he said. "I'll listen. I'll listen real hard. For about ten minutes. Then I've got to go out in the street and play games with Con Pardee. He sent word from the Inferno that he'd meet me in front of there at midnight. I don't mean to keep him waiting."

She clasped her hands in front of her so tightly that the knuckles showed white.

"Steve, you can't go through with it. You and Con were friends once. How can you—why must you want to kill each other?"

"Why? Because it has to be. Con's faster than I am, Iris. You don't have to worry

much. I'll be the one to die, not Con."

"Oh, Steve! You twist everything I say around to please yourself. I can't stand the thought of *either one* of you being hurt!"

"You were going to do some talking, Iris. I'm listening."

SHE was silent a moment. When she spoke her voice was soft, almost toneless. "With you, Steve, everything has to be either black or white, right or wrong, yes or no. Can't you understand how it might be different for some people? How it might be with me and the way I feel toward you and Con?"

"Go on," Steve said drily. "Tell me how hard it is for a woman to resist a handsome, wealthy, smooth-talking gent like Con Pardee. That's something I can *really* understand, Iris."

Her shoulders seemed to slump beneath the thin material of her dress. She let her breath out slowly.

"It's no use, Steve . . . I—" Suddenly her hands came up to her face and she was crying. Her whole body shook.

Almost instinctively, Steve stepped close and took her in his arms. He'd been a fool. A damned, crazy fool! He was seeing the woman he loved for the last time—and yet he'd made it a torture for both of them. Why had he wanted her to suffer? Why hadn't he been man enough to face the facts, the way he was man enough to face Pardee's guns? Why in hell hadn't he stayed away from her?

He put the tips of his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face up to his. He said, "Good-by, Iris . . ." and kissed her.

Her lips were moist and warm—and there was the taste of her tears on them. Her rounded young body was smooth and firm in his arms. He drew her to him, pressing the yielding curves hard against him, almost lifting her from the floor. Slowly, her arms came up and fastened around his neck. Her lips moved beneath his own, hesitantly at first, and then with a demand-

ing insistence that left him a little dizzy. Blood surged through him, pounded his temples, and for a long, abandoned moment Steve was aware of nothing but the burning lips against his own.

When he finally let her go, her face was flushed. Her green eyes seemed darker somehow; they were heavy-lidded, veiled with the dark tangle of her lashes. He watched the rapid rise and fall of her breast as she tried to catch her breath.

He was filled with a sense of wonder. He had kissed her many times before, but never had she responded like this.

She brought one hand up to smooth the blonde hair back from her forehead, smiling at him now with those strangely darkened eyes, her lips a little swollen looking.

"Please, Steve . . . don't go out there! Don't fight with Con! Please!"

So *that* was it! She'd thrown herself into the kiss because she wanted to soften him up! She was afraid for Con Pardee! She had wanted to get him off balance so she could plead with him to back out!

His lips formed words, but he couldn't speak them. The sudden white anger in him choked him, numbed his lips and tongue. He stood there, feeling the cold sweat crawl across his shoulders, his big hands balled into hard fists against his thighs.

Her eyes widened. Her lower lip quivered.

"Steve! Why are you looking at me that way?"

Slowly, very slowly, he brought his hands up to the butts of the .44's tied low on either leg. He tapped his fingers against the cut-out holsters, his eyes locked with hers.

"It didn't work, Iris," he said tightly. "There'll be a fight." His eyes darted quickly to the clock on the wall and back again. "In less than five minutes. In front of the Inferno." The tight knot of anger in his chest made it hard to breath. "And listen, Iris. I'm going to kill Con! He may

get me too—but I'm going to take him with me!"

"Steve! *Don't go!*"

"What do you want me to do? Run?"

"Yes! Run—do *anything*—but don't fight with him!"

He turned and walked to the door.

"Sorry, Iris," he said. "Running from a fight is one thing I just never learned to do."

THE swarming, noisy street seemed even more crowded than before as Steve stepped to the boardwalk and turned his steps toward the Inferno Saloon. He walked with eyes straight ahead, not speaking to anyone, vaguely aware of the curious faces that peered at him from beneath the wooden awnings, catching now and then the guarded mention of his name, and sometimes the names of Con Pardee and Iris Manning.

He came abreast of the Inferno. The street in front of it was deserted, as he had known it would be. This was to be the stage, the arena. He paused, looking across the wagon ruts at the garish front of the Inferno. On either side of the ornate batwings had been painted a red devil eight feet tall. In the wavering, blood-red light of pine-knot flares, the devils seemed almost alive.

It was midnight.

A bright mass of brass-colored curls and a white, powdered face appeared over the top of the batwings.

"Tell Con he's got company outside," Steve yelled at the girl. "And tell him his company's already tired of waiting!"

His hands went down his holsters once more, checking the position of them against his legs. He dried his palms on the sides of his levis and forced himself to take long, deep breaths.

He was thinking of nothing but Con Pardee now, and of the one chance he had to live beyond the next few seconds. Con Pardee was faster, he knew. He was the

fastest man alive. But he had had to sacrifice accuracy for the blazing speed. At a short distance, there could be no beating him. But if he were forced to fight from a distance the width of the street—forty feet from boardwalk to boardwalk—then his slight wildness might be just enough to even the odds.

Steve planted his feet wide apart on the planking, and waited.

The batwings burst open. Con Pardee's tall, wedge-shaped body stood silhouetted against the curtain of light behind him. He was smiling, a dark-haired, dark-eyed man; handsome, but with no touch of weakness in his even-featured face.

Con Pardee stood between the batwings a long moment, smiling at Steve. He seemed to be relaxed, unhurried. He turned his head slightly to the left and said something over his shoulder to the room behind him and someone guffawed loudly. The devils on either side of him writhed in the flare light. The single gun on his right leg glinted dully. It was the first time Steve had ever known him to wear but one gun.

Pardee let the batwings swing shut behind him and stepped out on the boardwalk.

Now, Steve thought. Now! His right hand blurred toward his gun butt, down and up again in almost the same movement. And at the same instant he threw his lean body to one side and felt the buck of the gun against his palm. Over there, across the street, another gun was thundering. Something sledge-hammered into Steve's shoulder and he felt himself jerked almost completely around. The boardwalk tilted and swayed beneath his feet. The flare lights began to revolve lazily, floating slowly away from him, growing dim. And then his face was in the dust of the street and he was choking on it.

The sharp bite of the dust on his tongue brought to him the realization of what had happened. He forced himself to his knees, reaching for the gun in his left holster, his right arm a helpless, bleeding weight

against his side. But the gun was no longer in its leather. His right gun had been knocked from his hand, and now his left gun must have fallen out of its holster when a bullet knocked him to the ground.

He heard a man shout, and somewhere a woman screamed. He jerked his head up just in time to see Pardee rushing him. And now he remembered what Pardee had promised the town he would do to him. He would wing him, he'd said—and then kill him with his bare hands. And he'd winged him, all right! Even with that blazing speed, he'd been accurate as a man could be. And now he was lunging forward to keep the second part of his promise.

Steve watched him coming, sick in the knowledge that his strategy had failed. He hadn't even scratched Pardee. And now he had but one arm against the other man's two—and he was losing blood from his smashed shoulder. He looked for his guns. He saw one of them, half buried in the dust, but it was too far away to help him now.

HE DUG his toes into the dust, and slithered to one side a split instant before Pardee's heavy body crashed into his own. He was knocked flat on his back by one of Pardee's flailing boots, and before he could move again, the bigger man had turned and was astride of him, his fists pounding against Steve's face like pistons. Steve drew his legs up as high as he could and slammed his feet down hard and arched his back. It threw Pardee back over his head.

But Steve was free for only an instant. He scarcely had time to suck in his breath before Pardee was on him again, fighting with his feet this time, kicking at Steve's head savagely with his high-heeled boots. One of the heels caught Steve on the side of his neck—and for a moment he thought the fight was over. But Pardee was too anxious to finish him. He rushed in too fast, too confidently. As his boot went back

(Continued on page 104)

By **WALT COBURN**



The Judge set down his buckets and mop and slipped along the bar.

Injun List

*He had only his pride left.
When that was gone, the Judge
knew, it was time to die.*

THEY called him the Judge. He lived in a little log cabin behind the Last Chance Saloon. It might have been big Pete Enright who started calling him that, because he worked for Pete, swamping in the saloon. Pete owned the Last Chance.

Nobody seemed to remember when the Judge had drifted into the little mining camp of Enright, Montana. Pete always claimed that the Judge had been around

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town maybe a year before anybody ever took notice of him. Pete liked to josh like that. Pete just about owned the town. Big, redheaded, bull-necked, that was Pete. He had discovered the Last Chance Mine and had taken a fortune out of it. He liked to run his own gambling house and saloon. Sometimes he would deal. Other times he would tend bar. He did his own bouncing and boasted that he could lick any man in the Little Rockies. Yet he was good natured and was always jobbing somebody.

It was Pete Enright who put the Judge on the Injun List, which hung above the bottles and glasses on the back bar.

A wife, a mother, a father, a son could put a drunken relative on the Injun List, providing they showed Pete sufficient proof of the charges against the drunkard, and why he should be so publicly listed. Pete, who was a law unto himself in Enright, would pass judgment.

Pete Enright never realized how much he had hurt the Judge when he printed his name at the head of the Injun List. Pete wasn't sensitive and therefore could not understand how any man could be so deeply hurt as he hurt the Judge by his practical joking. Only when it was too late did Pete realize what he had done.

You see, the time had been when this white-hair little old drunkard was a man. Nobody knew who he was, what he had been, or why he had become a saloon bum, cleaning brass cuspidors and sprinkling sawdust on a barroom floor. For that matter, nobody much cared anything about the Judge, one way or another. Mining camps like Enright are made up of hard-rock miners and the sporting element who follow the gold trails. Derelicts like the Judge are brushed aside, ignored.

But somewhere, some time, the Judge had been a gentleman and scholar. Even when he was drunk, which was most of the time, he kept himself clean. His threadbare suit was carefully brushed, his shoes polished, his frayed linen washed and

ironed. He wore an old derby hat, high crowned, many years out of date. And his talk, his manner of speech, was that of a polished gentleman. Drunkard that he was, he clung with a pitiful desperation to that slender thread of gentility. . . . And in the gray hours of dawn he would change to overalls and an old flannel shirt and rusty shoes and, alone in the empty saloon, would clean the cuspidors and mop the floor, now and then helping himself to a nip from the bottle.

In his own uncouth way, big Pete Enright befriended the Judge. He had staked him to grub and blankets and put a camp stove in the cabin for him. When strangers came to town Pete would always include the Judge when they bought drinks for the house. And if the Judge, as was his wont, engaged someone in conversation, holding them by the spell of his oratory, quoting Shakespeare and the Bible and Blackstone, letting his listeners buy more drinks, Pete Enright would enjoy it, as he would have enjoyed a show. After his own rough fashion he liked the Judge. In his own way he was kind to that battered bit of human driftwood he had found and befriended.

The Judge, in his threadbare black broadcloth suit, his frayed white shirt, his black string tie, basked in the warmth of this false prosperity. He drank his drinks, kept up his game of sham affluence with a pitiful heroism. His hours of agony came when, alone in the saloon, he swamped up. Only whiskey could dull that terrible pain of defeat and degradation. To the Judge it was both his curse and his one surcease from mental torture.

Whatever were his hundredfold regrets he kept them secreted in his heart. In the gray dawn the bar mirror reflected the agony written on his face, the light of despair in his bloodshot eyes. When he had discarded his working clothes and later in the day mingled with the men at the bar, he became mellow, loquacious, witty at times. And no man among them ever read what torture, what black despair was so hidden by that gallantry.

How could Petè Enright, roughneck miner and saloonman, have read any such thing in the eyes of the Judge? That is why you can't blame the big saloonman too much for the thing he did through a mis-

Author's Note—

There is a law in the United States forbidding the sale of liquor to an Indian. In some Montana cowtowns, lists of the names of men who, for one reason or another, were forbidden to drink were posted in all the saloons. These lists were called, naturally enough, "Injun Lists."

placed sense of humor. It wouldn't be fair.

THEY had hit a rich vein up at the Last Chance Mine. Pete Enright celebrated. Samples of the rich ore were on the back bar, other samples in his coat pockets. Drinks at the Last Chance were free. Pete Enright was celebrating. His mine was going to make him a millionaire.

"Everybody belly up to the bar!" he roared time after time.

Nobody paid any attention to the Judge. He was carelessly pushed and shoved aside at the bar. The mining camp of Enright was celebrating. It had no time for a derelict swamper. The Judge drank alone, drink after drink, his modulated bits of conversation blotted out by blatant music and loud voices. When he had reached his capacity he staggered out the back door and to his cabin.

Towards morning, when the celebration was at its height, some whim suggested the Judge to the mind of Pete Enright. He wanted him to make a speech about the new gold strike. But the Judge was in his bunk, asleep.

Big Pete Enright reached up and took the Injun List from its place on the back bar. Chuckling, he printed boldly in black letters at the head of the list, "The Judge."

It was after the celebration was over, after Pete Enright had gone up to the mine and the crowd had drifted to their cabins, that the Judge unlocked the front door and brought in his mop and broom and bucket. The place was littered with cigarette and cigar butts. The gray light that filtered through the big windows gave the place a dismal appearance. The stench of tobacco smoke and stale beer hung heavy in the air. The Judge shuddered with nausea. He needed a bracer. He was pouring it with unsteady hands when he happened to notice the Injun List propped against an empty bottle on the bar.

The bottle and glass he had been holding slid from his grip, smashing on the floor. He stood there, bloodshot eyes staring at the list. Disbelief, something akin to horror, showed in his eyes. His face was as gray as the dawn that showed against the windows.

He stood there a long time. Then he picked up the Injun List and put it back in its accustomed place. After that he went

slowly, shakily about his work. Every nerve, every fiber of his wracked body called for whiskey, but he did not take a drink. When his work was finished he went out the back way to his cabin, just as the morning bartender came on shift.

Once in his little log cabin he sat down weakly on the edge of his bunk. He buried his gray face in his hands. Sobs tore his throat.

Pete Enright didn't know. He had left for Butte to be gone indefinitely. In the days that followed nobody in Enright figured it was necessary to write him that somebody had found the Judge, sick, out of his head, locked in his cabin. For a week the Judge hovered between life and death. Then he regained his senses and his strength. When he was strong enough, he went back to work. But he no longer made his appearance in the saloon except when he came with his mop and bucket.

Perhaps a few of the crowd missed him and his speeches. But if they did, they did not take the trouble to find out why the Judge no longer lined up at the bar for his free drinks. In this rush for gold they were too busy to care why an old bar-fly failed to show up. For the most part he wasn't even missed.

But there behind the bar was the Injun List. Every morning, when the saloon was empty, the Judge would come in with his mop and his bucket. His gait was shuffling, old. His hands were atremble with palsy. But his eyes, looking up at the Injun List, were no longer blurred by whiskey. The Judge had not touched a drop since that gray morning when he had found his name on the list. God and the Judge alone knew the never-ending struggle for booze that tore at his vitals like a gnawing cancer. Even as only God and the Judge knew why he no longer mingled with the crowd that lined the bar.

PETE ENRIGHT, still in Butte, did not know what he had done to the Judge. He did not know what humiliation he had inflicted on the whitehaired swamper. It had ridiculed the pitiful show of respectability that he had clung to. It had shown him up for what he was. A barroom hanger-on. A drunkard. Impossible now to play that brave game he had kept up, with his name posted there for all men to see. The

last bit of life left him had been killed. That little glow of false happiness was now a cold thing, as cold as the bleak winter mornings when he made a fire in the saloon stove and fought back the terrible craving for a bottle. Pete Enright might have murdered him and done a more merciful thing.

Sometimes the Judge would stand there in the chill dawn, looking at his name on the Injun List. He would stand there a long time, his mop in his hand, a strange look in his blue eyes, which no longer held the spark of a twinkle. It was as if he were reviewing his past, delving back into buried thoughts, torturing himself with bitter memories. His gaze focused on the Injun List, on the name that headed the list. "The Judge." Then he would go back to work, looking older, his cheeks more gray, the luster gone from his eyes.

There must have been times during those dismal hours when the Judge hated big Pete Enright. Hated him as a man can hate but few men. But there were other times, when he was shut in his cabin, warm, sheltered from the blizzards, his grub supply well stocked, tobacco to smoke, when he remembered that Pete Enright had given him all this. Even the set of Shakespeare, the battered law library, other books that Pete had picked up somewhere and had donated to the cabin, books that had kept the Judge from going mad at times, the gift of the one man in town who had befriended him.

Pete Enright had found him drunk, asleep in a snowbank behind the saloon one night. Pete had thawed him out, staked him to the cabin, given him that last chance to mingle with men once more. Pete Enright had befriended him. The Judge felt that he owed him a debt of honor. Even though Pete had put him on the Injun List. It was hard to hate a man like Pete Enright because Pete never sought the enmity of any man. The Judge knew that. Besides, the Judge had never known how to hate. That was perhaps why he did what he did, right there at the end.

You see, Pete Enright had gotten in some time during the night. It was snowing hard and the town had gone to bed early. Only a few men in town knew that Pete was back from Butte. He had come

back to buy up some mining claims. Because he always made cash deals, he had brought the money with him. Fifty thousand dollars in currency. He had it in his pocket when he let himself into the Last Chance just about dawn. He wanted to put the money in the safe. The night bartender had locked up. The place was empty. Pete turned on the light in the office and squatted on his heels to open the safe. As he swung the door open a voice behind him spoke evenly.

"Up with 'em, Enright. Plenty high. Make a move that looks bad and we'll kill you." Pete raised his hands slowly as he got to his feet. His back was still turned to the man who had ordered him to stick 'em up. He had on a long coonskin coat, its frogs fastened. No chance of getting to his gun in its shoulder holster. Not an easy job to put up a fight in a big fur coat. Nevertheless, Pete took a chance. He didn't care about the money so much. But for Pete Enright, the big mogul in the camp, to be stuck up, that was what rubbed. He ducked and whirled. A gun roared in his face. He felt the hot thud of a bullet in his shoulder. Then he was fighting the three men who piled onto him, clubbing at his head with guns.

The Judge had seen the light in the saloon as he came in the back way. He supposed the night bartender had forgot to put out the lights when he went off shift. Carrying his bucket and mop he came in the back door, then stood frozen in his tracks.

Up in front, behind the frosted-glass partition that marked the office, a terrible fight was going on. The Judge heard the voice of Pete Enright, snarling curses. Other voices calling to each other drowned it out. Then someone said:

"Kill 'im, boys. We got to, now. He knows us. Git Enright!"

There was a gun behind the bar. A single-action .45. The Judge set down his bucket and mop and slipped along the bar. Now he rounded the end of the bar and his hand gripped the gun. He didn't know much about a gun. He had never owned so much as a .22 rifle. But he knew enough to thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger, aiming wildly at the three men who had clubbed burly Pete Enright to his knees.

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WITHOUT thinking, like a man gripped in the icy clutch of a horrible nightmare, the Judge kept shooting. Vaguely he felt the heavy thud of bullets hitting him. There was blood. A man doubling up there on the floor, twisting. Pete Enright on his feet, his big hands smashing down two blood-spattered men, kicking guns from their hands. Then the Judge didn't know anything more. There was a smear of red that turned to blackness.

When he awoke, he was laid out on a card table. Big Pété Enright was working over him with a basin of water and a bar towel. Other men stood around.

"Bring him a drink, one of you," called Pete, who was battered and bleeding. "Whiskey!"

The Judge shook his head. Pete Enright followed the dying man's gaze to that Injun List. Then he knew. All of a sudden he knew. Without being told he knew the thing he had done to this little old swamper who had saved his life.

Pete Enright walked behind the bar and took down the Injun List. He went back to the table where the Judge lay. With his blood-smear hands he marked off that name, "The Judge," from the head of the list.

The Judge smiled and nodded. The look of despair was gone from his eyes now. In the lamplight the lines on his face softened. Happiness was written there. Then the weary lids closed.

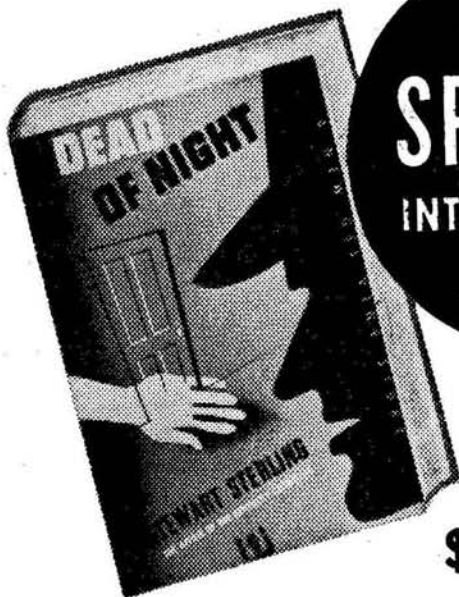
The Judge was off the Injun List for keeps. . . .

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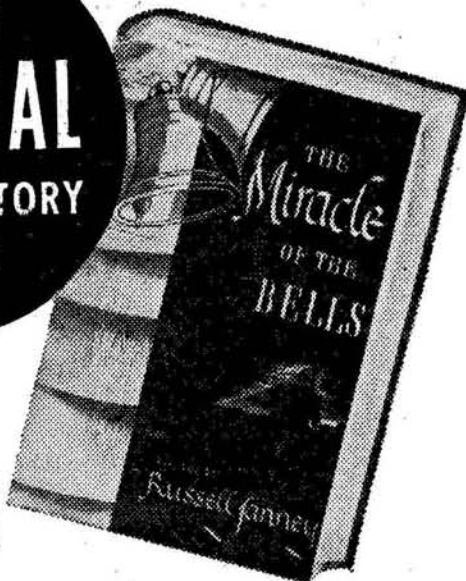
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(Continued from page 97)

again, Steve's left hand snaked out and caught Pardee's other ankle and jerked it toward him. Pardee sprawled in the dirt.

Before Con could recover, Steve threw both legs around his waist and locked his feet together. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth and brought every ounce of his strength to bear on squeezing Pardee's breath from his body. He ground his knees into the ribs of the threshing man between his legs, and then he bent forward suddenly and caught his left arm around Pardee's throat and jerked his head back.

Pardee fought the only way he could, with vicious, powerful jabs of his elbows into Steve's stomach and ribs.

Steve increased the pressure on Pardee's throat. Pardee was choking, he knew. But Pardee was not going to die that way. He was going to die of a broken neck. He pulled the dark head back another inch, listening to the big man gasp, listening to the soft sound of tortured muscles and bones.

And then, over the shouts of the crowd, he heard a girl screaming, and he knew it was Iris Manning.

He opened his eyes. She was nearer than he'd thought, in the street with them, less than ten feet away. One tiny hand was stretched toward them, as if to stop them, and her face was twisted with hysteria. She screamed once more—and then she covered her face with her hands and sank slowly to her knees. For a moment she rocked back and forth, sobbing, and then she fell.

Steve Jordan stared at the small blonde girl who lay there so near him—and slowly the kill-fever drained from him and he was very, very sick. He knew shame, deep and terrible, shame he had never known existed. And he knew hate—but hate for *himself* and for what he had done. Because his own heart was broken, he had tried to break Iris Manning's heart—break it by killing the man she loved.

He looked at the blonde curls splayed out

GUN-MEETING AT MIDNIGHT

in the dust of Main Street and he thought, *It isn't too late. I can give Con back to her—alive. He would have killed me, but I can't kill him. Iris' happiness depends on his staying alive. And that's all that matters. I have to let Con live because my love for Iris is stronger than my hate for him—*

He relaxed his pressure on Con's neck enough for Con to catch his breath.

He said, "Con, listen to me! I know there's one thing more sacred to you than anything else. Your word. Give me your word you'll stop fighting if I let you go."

Moments passed while Con Pardee gulped air into his bursting lungs. Then, "You win, Steve. You've got it."

"And one more thing, Con," Steve said tightly. "I want your word that you'll be good to Iris."

"Yes, yes!" Con rasped. "God, Steve, let go of me!"

Steve loosened his hold and got to his feet. He stood aside and watched Pardee come erect, wary of any false move.

Con turned to face him, naked hatred in his eyes. But there was something besides the hatred, and Steve knew it for what it was: respect. He watched as Con walked unsteadily toward the prostrate form of Iris Manning. The crowd had broken from the boardwalks and was surging into the street. Two older women lifted Iris in their arms. Her eyelashes fluttered and she looked about her wildly.

It was enough to make any woman faint, Steve thought. *But she'll be all right. She'll have Con and everything will be all right.* His whole body ached from the wound in his shoulder. He had to see Doc Greer. And then he had to get out of Fever Wells.

THE first yellow rays of sunlight were slanting through his window when Steve finally buckled the last strap around his suitcase and set it near the door of his room. It had taken Doc Greer a long time to dress his shoulder, and packing with the

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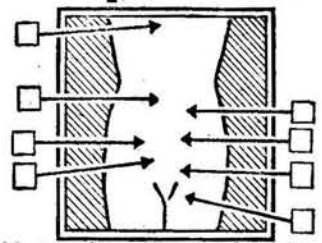
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use of only one hand had been a slow process. But there'd been no real hurry; the first stage to Puma Flat didn't leave until eight.

The knock on his door was timid, hesitant. A woman's knock. He opened the door and stood back and as he looked at the fresh blonde beauty of Iris Manning he wished somehow that he had died down there in the dust of Main Street.

She smiled and closed the door behind her quietly.

"What's this?" he said bitterly.

She slid into the narrow space between him and the window, her warm body touching his, her rounded arms about his slim, hard waist.

"You've packed your suitcase," she said. "Where are we going, Steve?"

He looked at her, at the beautiful face so close to his, at the full red lips.

"We?" he said.

"If . . . if you want me, Steve."

"But—"

"Con left Fever Wells forever last night, Steve," she said. "But before he did, he told me what you'd done. You let him live because you thought I loved him."

"And I was right!" Steve said.

"No, darling. You were wrong. I tried to tell you that last night, but you wouldn't listen. You couldn't understand that a woman could love you and still have a little room in her heart for another man."

"Only women and sky pilots talk like that," he said. "What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

"No fool, Steve. No fool at all. But a man. A hard man. Too hard to understand how I felt about Con. He was kind and gentle to me, Steve. Always. And he loved me. I couldn't forget that. I didn't want you to kill him."

He looked at her, searchingly. "Is that why you kissed me the way you did?"

The color rose in her throat and into her cheeks.

GUN-MEETING AT MIDNIGHT

"Why, then?" She was even lovelier when she blushed, he decided.

Her voice was very low. "Because I knew you were my man."

Somehow he knew—without quite knowing *how* he knew—that she was telling him the truth. And it came to him that Con Pardee must have realized the same thing. He thought of his fight with Con—but there was no anger now, no hatred. Con was a man like himself. He had loved and fought and lost—and stepped aside. And he had paid tribute to Steve by telling Iris what Steve had done. You couldn't hate a man with guts like that. Not any more.

She moved closer to him. Her lips against his cheek were soft.

There was still one more thing to be said—one question remaining in his mind.

"You kept me waiting two years, Iris. Why?"

He felt her arms tighten around him, and with his one good arm he drew her to him.

"Because you were a lawman, Steve. You rode the town every night. And sooner or later somebody . . ." Her voice trailed off. And then, suddenly, her young body straightened and her clear eyes met his. "But I'm not afraid any longer, Steve. I'm proud of you. I'll be the proudest wife in Fever Wells!"

"Maybe," Steve said softly. "But you won't be the Marshal's wife, Iris. Doc Greer said my arm would be all right—some day. But I'll never be able to draw a gun again."

Her eyes were bright with tears.

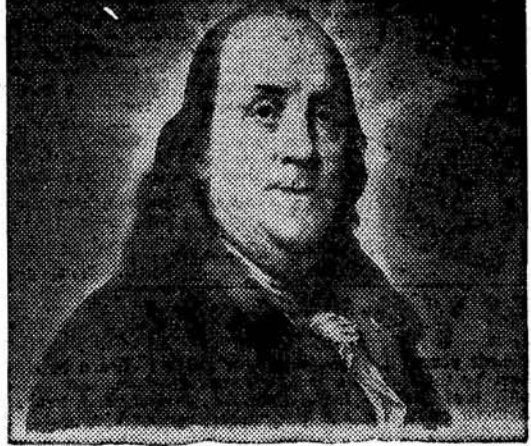
"There's still the old Frazee place, Iris. I was a forty-a-month cowhand a long time before I ever pinned on a marshal's badge. Maybe you'd just as soon marry a *retired* lawman."

Her lips moved across his cheek to his mouth.

"Oh, Steve . . ."

"Yes," he said. "Somehow I think you would." ❄ ❄ ❄

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(Continued from page 72)

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selves to pieces, and then find our caravan is split by a tilted ocean of mud? There's nothing left on this slope but loose dirt; it'll wash and wash you with it. Look down the slope! Look down! I dare you! Do you want to wash down that hill into the valley?"

The wind was stronger now and all felt it pushing them, and felt themselves teetering, as people will in high places. But still, Joel Kalder stood on his perch far above them with the wind whipping at him.

A drop of water spattered on Bill Shawn's forehead.

Something began to flame inside him. There was one thing Kalder couldn't do, and that was, ask the heavens for water. That much, Shawn knew. He could not explain it to them. He hadn't the words. But now he wasn't inclined to talk. He began to climb. He pulled himself up the taut rope, clawing his boots at the slope. He climbed steadily without speaking, looking directly up at the man on the rock. He thought only that they were going to Oregon, and going there now, and no slick-mouthed shyster would stand in the way!

Kalder cried, "You can't touch me—" but his voice quavered as he cried out. He saw Shawn advancing relentlessly, big hands hauling steadily at the rope, lifting himself as steadily and forcefully up the slope as another man might descend. Now Kalder cried, "I'll stop you, Shawn, I'll stop you from leading us to ruin!"

KALDER'S long hand plunged into his pocket. He pulled out a revolver, a heavy, short-barreled weapon. He waved it around his head and then leveled it on Bill Shawn's face and cocked it. "I'll stop you, stop you!"

"Better call for some rain to stop me," Shawn growled, and climbed on. It was only twenty feet now and he saw the man's boots bracing on the rock as wind threatened to topple him. He saw Kalder's coat whip, and then like a sudden blossoming, a red flash at the man's fist. For a second it hid his fist and the gun. With one screaming swipe, Shawn's hat was flung off and the bullet rapped and tore at his head. He shook his head and dragged himself on.

Bill saw that Kalder had been thrown off balance by the kick of the gun and reckoned

OVER THE HILL TO HELL

he wasn't used to it. Gleefully Shawn reflected that a lawyer's best weapon was his tongue, and Kalder was realizing that too late. Like a great ape swarming up that rope, Shawn flung all his strength into a last spurt up to the rock, and hurled himself at the legs of the man standing on it. He heard the deafening blast of the gun, but grasping one of Kalder's boots in his fist, he wrenched at it. The lawyer's weight left him and he went flopping through the air to tumble and crash down below. Shawn looked down and saw Kalder's coattails flapping as the man hurtled down towards the group of men on the rope. Then Kalder stopped falling, and lay gulping for air at their feet.

Shawn panting, nodded grimly. Then brushed his hands on his levis and bellowed, "Git onto that rope, we're headed Oregon way!" And he felt it in his voice again; the sureness, the certainty, that they would make it up this ledge.

He clambered down the rope to the others, and they heaved. They glanced once at the bloodied lawyer sitting against a rock holding his head in his hands, and heaved. Slowly, the wagon began to inch its way up the slope. They heaved, laughing, cheering, wasting breath on yells. The wagon inched up to that open, almost-flat place by the rock. It rammed the rock with a quiver that shook its whole framework, and the poles jammed wagon tongues through from wheel to wheel, until at last, there was a wagon perched on top of the mountain. . . .

Those days when they tooled fast across the plateau fearing snow, Shawn was often with Hannah, riding beside her on the seat of her Conestoga.

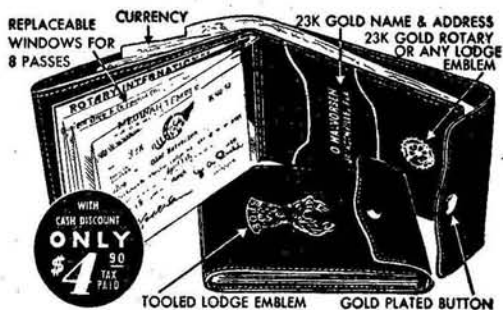
She said one day, "You ruined a promising career in politics, Shawn."

He grinned. "I've seen likelier-looking politicians greasin' wheel hubs every night the last two months. Here's two of the best—a little young yet, though." He jerked a thumb at Hannah's two boys. "Either one of you youngers aim to be President of Oregon one day?"

"Naw," the younger one replied, "we're gonna be bullwhackers!"

Shawn laughed and looked ahead through the heavy green of the spruce forest, off into the blue distance where the land began to fall toward Oregon. * * *

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 6)

north so I'm pretty well familiar with the Vulture gold mine's history as well as its geology.

However, I haven't a record of the Big Horn Mts. geology, but believe it to be similar to that of the Harquahala Mts. close to it. For that matter, the Big Horn rock formations are probably about like those of the Vulture Range, which has gold veins and gold placers that have been mined for a great many years tho new veins might yet be found.

This range is some 3,500 feet altitude above sea level, and rises about 2,000 feet above the surrounding desert. In general, the rocks are gray granit in dikes and irregular masses, that were thrust-up (intruded) into areas of pre-Cambrian schistose sediments, with later Tertiary rhyolitic laval flows. Very promising formations for the "contact" type of ore veins chiefly with quartz-gold. There are in fact a great many auriferous quartz veins, seams, and veinlets scattered widely over this range, with the Vulture Mine on what is the largest vein yet found. At any rate, the weathering of all of these gold veins through centuries has resulted in gold placer concentrations from all the drainage area around the Vulture Mine.

They were first found in 1867 and worked by dry washers, with several hundred men working the washes and arroyos, each permitted only 50 sq. ft. of ground, many getting \$25 to \$50 a day in coarse angular gold and nuggets. But by 1880 the richest was about all worked out; though many came to work in late winter and early in spring using wet-washing methods from the heavy rains, getting most of the gold from bedrock gravels that are always the richest. All ground has been worked, but Gov't report in 1931-32 was \$134 worth recovered from this entire area.

Gold Placers also have been worked around Morrystown, about 12 miles southeast of Wickenburg on US-60-70, on branch creeks of the Hassayampa River flowing in from the south end of Wickenburg Mts., in San Domingo Wash, Old Woman Gulch, Rogers and Sanger Washes, etc.

Now these mountains are known mostly for gold deposits, and there hasn't been very much hunting for semi-precious stones in either region you've asked about. I have the gemstones of all Arizona listed, but with rather little in Maricopa County. However, if you locate any *pegmatite* dikes, you'll then have a good chance of a discovery of many types, topaz, beryl, etc. In any case you'll find good agate cutting-material in the hills near Morrystown, with also some white opal, and *fire opal* at times reported from there! Chalcedony (carnelian) north of Wintersburg; garnets in schists all over.

HELL ON WHEELS!

(Continued from page 10)

Jed was such an unsightly corpse that his former admirers decided to inter him in the boneyard that very night in a torchlight funeral.

Big Tim Malloy's Saloon was half-empty after the funeral party went on its sad and dutiful way. Those left in the saloon had refused, out of respect to their own dead foreman, to join in the midnight burial. They would have their inning in the boneyard, come Sunday—and not before.

Of a sudden, Slim Loper demonstrated that he did not always think like a mule. A slow grin spread over his gaunt face as he drawled, "Men, looks like we collect the bets we made. The minute they sink Jed Mink in the boneyard, out there, we win the money. Jed made the boneyard first!"

Amid howls of glee, and cheers of victory, the Welch mourners descended on Big Tim Malloy, stakeholder par excellence.

"Pay us off, Tim," shouted somebody.

"Whee!" yelled another, pressing up to Tim. . . .

It was some time before Big Tim's protests could be heard. With perspiring brow and shaking hands, he wailed, "But—but—you boys know I already paid off to the Mink crowd. I paid off when Welch got dead. I thought—"

"Thought, hell!" hollered a spokesman for the menacing crowd. "Our bets were plain: We bet that Mink would be in the boneyard, permanent, before Welch would. That's all they is to it. Pay off."

(Continued on page 112)



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Big Tim stalled for time to think. Also, he felt he wouldn't be so all alone in his new misery when the Mink crowd returned from the torchlight funeral. "I don't pay off until the other boys come back and tell me that Jed is definitely buried in the boneyard."

Having learned the lesson about "many a slip . . ." the Welch crowd agreed to wait until proof positive came in that Mink had been duly interred. They had not long to wait.

When the burial party came whooping into the warmth of the saloon they were greeted by Big Tim's anxious, but foolish, question, "Did you bury Mink in the boneyard?"

They had. Tenderly and with grim finality. Jed Mink had, beyond all shadow of a doubt, made the boneyard before Pike Welch.

"In that case," shouted Big Tim Malloy, "all you crooks what I paid off too soon, by mistake, will kindly give me back the money. I gotta' give it to the rightful winners; the ones who bet on Mink."

To the gathered railroaders, this was an hilarious remark. They howled the worried Malloy down. Although they had been split into two separate groups, there were no personal bad feelings. Neither Mink nor Welch had been especially popular—both being foremen—and the two factions were merely split when it came to the betting. Now they had suddenly joined together in a common cause. Railroad builders versus Big Tim Malloy.

It took only a few minutes of rugged persuasion to convince Big Tim that he would have to pay off—again. Tears were rolling down his fat hog-like cheeks as he doled out, for the second time, money to the winners. The new winners.

Big Tim had nothing left, now, but his portable saloon and his stock of cheap whiskey. Later that night one of the whiskey barrels exploded. The resultant fire completely destroyed the saloon and its contents.

Big Tim suddenly found out that he would have to demean himself and go to work, if he wanted to continue eating with regularity. Within a week he was reluctantly at hard labor—as a Union Pacific track layer. ***

(Continued from page 42)

head first into the clearing. He got three cartridges into place and jerked the cylinder shut. Cole Tolman was on his knees then, his gun still in his hand. Jesse's shot was low and he saw Cole's legs slam out from under him. His second shot hit him in the chest and he spun on his side and then fell over on his face. He moved once and was still.

Harder watched him for a minute, reloading the Colt and listening to the quiet of the clearing. In the brush near the river he could hear one of the horses moving aimlessly.

He felt at the wound on his shoulder, but it was just a burn. He slipped the Colt

back into the holster, spoke to the sorrel, and moved slowly up the canyon toward the foothills.

Once in the foothills he found an old cow trail and rode listlessly along it, the fight gone out of his body. When he reached the ridge of the low hills he stopped and looked back into the valley. Down below he could see the few lights of the little town and further down the valley, near the dark outline of the river, he could see the lights of the barn and a few people moving around it. He watched them for a moment, his mind quiet and lonely. One more town left behind, he thought as he turned the horse back onto the trail, but out ahead of him somewhere, in the darkness, was another one. ❄❄❄

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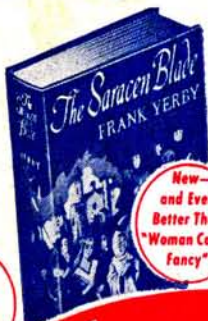
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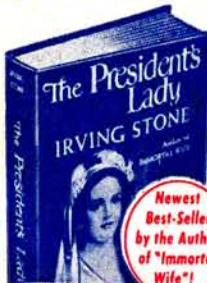
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