

SPURS WEST



An outstanding anthology of high-caliber Western stories
by members of The Western Writers of America,
featuring all the winners of the coveted annual Spur Award.

edited by S. OMAR BARKER

S. W.
\$3.95

A wagon train, a scout crouches, watching a young Indian steal silently through the inky blackness among the hobbled wagon horses; a retired lawman sees the badge he once wore thrown in the dust by his unwilling successor; a young cowboy learns that it takes more than big talk and waving a gun to make you a man—these are among the memorable moments of dramatic action and danger in

SPURS WEST

This eighth annual anthology by the members of the Western Writers of America contains eighteen of the best contemporary Western stories, featuring seven winners of Spur awards, given annually to the best of Western fiction. Written by today's most popular Western writers, these top-notch stories echo with the sound of cattle drives, Indian war, and the Colt .45, bringing to life the color, the danger, and the drama of the Old West as it once was.

The Western Writers of America is a group of professional writers devoted to the writing of better-quality Westerns. S. Omar Barker is a past president of the W.W.A. and a noted Western writer in his own right.

Jacket design by Adrienne Blair

SPURS WEST

SPURS WEST

by Members of
the Western Writers
of America

edited and with an introduction by
S. Omar Barker

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK 1960

All of the characters in this book
are fictitious, and any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, is
purely coincidental.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 60-15196
Copyright © 1960 by Western Writers of America
All Rights Reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

*Dedicated to the memory of Norman A. Fox,
top-hand Western writer and much beloved
fellow member of Western Writers of
America.*

NOTE

The Western Writers of America is an organization of professional authors whose aims are to promote their common interests, encourage the writing of better-quality Westerns, and bring them more effectively to the attention of the reading public. One part of WWA's extensive program has been the publication of an annual collection of stories by its members. There have been seven such volumes prior to this one: *Bad Men and Good, Holvers and Heroes, The Fall Roundup, Branded West, Hoof Trails and Wagon Tracks, Wild Streets, and Frontiers West.*

CONTENTS

Introduction	S. Omar Barker	11
Bad Company <i>a Spur Award story</i>	S. Omar Barker	17
The Warhorse of Spotted Tail	Amelia Bean	34
Wine Without Price	Bill Burchardt	55
The Brushhoff <i>a Spur Award story</i>	Peggy Simson Curry	68
One Night in the Red Dog Saloon	Hal G. Evarts	81
Army Wife	Kenneth Fowler	98
Homesteader's Wife	Norman A. Fox	118
My Sister and the Gunman	Ray Gaulden	131
Hostage Trail	Fred Grove	146
Thief In Camp <i>a Spur Award story</i>	Bill Gulick	161
The Last Gunman	Donald Hamilton	180
Lost Sister <i>a Spur Award story</i>	Dorothy M. Johnson	201
Grandfather Out of the Past <i>a Spur Award story</i>	Noel M. Loomis	215

10 CONTENTS

Big Man From Texas	Ed Montgomery	246
Killer's Conscience	Stephen Payne	260
Man Afoot	John Prescott	278
Gun Job	Thomas Thompson	294
<i>a Spur Award story</i>		
Blood on the Sun	Thomas Thompson	316
<i>a Spur Award story</i>		

INTRODUCTION

S. Omar Barker

At a national convention in June of each year, Western Writers of America awards handsome bronze WWA Spurs for the preceding year's published "bests" in five separate categories: Western novel, Western historical novel, Western non-fiction book, Western juvenile book, and Western short story.

Without consulting each other, three judges in each category separately score the entries on a percentage basis. These ratings are separately reported to a WWA Awards Committee. The Committee totals each entry's ratings and the author of the highest scoring entry in each category is awarded a Spur.

Recognizing that there can be no infallible method for determining the absolute best of anything as intangible as writing, WWA nevertheless believes that this simple system produces a verdict that is reasonably accurate as well as fair and impartial. This belief stems from the quality of carefully chosen Spur Awards judges. Space will not permit a listing of the names and credentials of the more than one hundred judges of Spur competitions since their beginning in 1954.

But on such a list there would be distinguished editors, publishers, book critics, professors of history and of literature, historians, specialists in Western research, university librarians, archivists, and authors—from coast to coast.

The Spur Award competition is not limited to members of Western Writers of America; it is wide open to all comers. While Spurs have been won by non-members in other categories, it so happens that in the Western short story field all winners to date have been WWA members. This is not so remarkable when you consider that WWA is a professional organization with one hundred and fifty active members and seventy associate members.

WWA is proud to present here the seven prize-winning stories, along with eleven other Westerns of similar high caliber, all written by our own members. Of these, three are by Spur winners in the Western novel, Western historical novel, and Western juvenile book categories, respectively.

This is the eighth annual anthology of top Westerns by members of Western Writers of America. It has been preceded by *Bad Men and Good*, *Holsters and Heroes*, *The Fall Roundup*, *Branded West*, *Hoof Trails and Wagon Tracks*, *Wild Streets*, and *Frontiers West*. There have also been three collections mostly for boys: *Wild Horse*

Roundup, Hound Dogs and Others, and *A Saddlebag of Tales*, with another coming up.

Again in this present collection WWA offers the reader the red-blooded essence of the Old West dramatically distilled in entertaining and authentic fiction, its color and courage, its rugged adventure, its fabulous romance, and its salty humor—all caught in pulse-stirring people-stories as widely varied as was life on the old frontier.

My thanks are due to my fellow WWA members for contributing their stories, to Frank Robertson, Harold Kuebler, and Elsa Barker for their counsel, and to Mrs. Wayne C. Lee for invaluable assistance in preparing the manuscript.

We have “topped the herd,” as the cowboys say, to give you, story-wise, the Best of the West for 1960. As our hearty Kiowa brethren say: “Ah-HOI!”

SPURS WEST

BAD COMPANY

THE 1956 SPUR AWARD WINNER

S. Omar Barker

This Saturday Evening Post story netted its author the much coveted WWA Spur Award at the Santa Fe convention in 1956. S. Omar Barker (note the initials) is a native of New Mexico. His cowboy stories and poems have been widely published in numerous magazines. Author of Songs of the Saddlemen, on his home range Omar is often called "The Cowboy's Poet." He is a past president of WWA. As an Honorary Chief of the Kiowa tribe his name is Pa-la-tau-kau-gah, meaning "Man Who Talks Good." Pa-la-etc. and his brown-eyed wife, Elsa, also a successful writer of Westerns, live in Las Vegas—New Mexico, that is.

"Swaller big, kid," said Chugwater. "That panther milk will put whiz in your gizzard!" The straw-haired youngster on a sweaty cow pony hesitated. For two days he had been out whooping around with this curly-wolf cowboy from Wyoming and the two Bonnadeen boys,

Copyright © 1955 by The Curtis Publishing Company.

and he had a pretty good idea what punishment his Uncle Tate would have in store for him when he got back to the ranch. Uncle Tate was a quiet-spoken, gristle-necked old bachelor with stern, old-fashioned ideas about how a boy should be raised, and he had promised this one a wallop the next time he ran off to "hell around," as he called it, with Chet and Smoky Bonnadeen.

Willie Shelton knew he would be needing some "whiz in his gizzard" when he got back to the T 8, but he soberly doubted if the kind that came in a bottle would help very much. Yet sometimes nothing can seem more important to a nearly-sixteen-year-old than not to be tagged as a sissy. Willie leaned his lankness from the saddle and took the proffered bottle.

"Here's to long ropes and loose hobbles!" he proclaimed. "Let the he-wolves howl and the pant'ers prow!"

Big-enough talk, just right for a bold, booted buckaroo. At least he hoped it sounded that way. He stuck the neck of the bottle inside his mouth and pretended to swallow a lot more than he actually did.

"Woo-hawl!" With a sudden squall, Chet Bonnadeen poked the chestnut horse in the flank with the butt end of his quirt.

The four of them had spent a good part of the day match-roping on T 8 yearlings over on Potrillo Creek and their horses were pretty well ridden down. But the chestnut pony still had enough life in him to jump almost from under his rider when Chet poked him.

"You get me throwed, you bangtailed buck idiot," said Willie, "and I'll come over you like a bullwhacker's bad dream!"

He made it sound tough, but there was no real anger in it—just the kind of rawhide talk Chet and Smoky were always swapping around. It gave him a swaggery feeling to be able to swap it right back at them.

Chet and Smoky were local cowboys, around nineteen and twenty, with restless black eyes and wildcat ways. In Uncle Tate Murdock's tally book they were bad companions for the nephew he had taken to raise after an epidemic of typhoid fever had orphaned him some

three years before. But Willie, with the disquiet of oncoming manhood in his blood, had lately taken to running with them anyway, just as any high-spirited colt may take to running with the wild bunch. They called him "Bill," not "Willie," and he liked that too.

Chugwater was older, a ruddy, moonfaced cowpoke with a sandy bristle of mustache and yellow-green coyote eyes. He hadn't been around the Black Mesa country more than a few weeks. If he had any name but Chugwater, he had never bothered to mention it. He said he owned a horse ranch up in Wyoming, and was just out on a *pasear* to see what kind of cayuses grew in New Mexico, and maybe kick up his heels a little in fresh pasture. He rode a fancy rig and had money to spend. He carried a long-reach lass rope and was just as handy with it as he seemed to be with six-gun, rawhide talk, and rye whisky. It never occurred to Willie that there might be anything odd about a stranger of Chugwater's age taking up so readily with the much younger Bonnadeens, whooping around with a trio of youngsters as if they were just as much man as he was.

Now, after a couple of days of comparatively harmless high jinks, Willie was headed for home, the others on their way back to Black Mesa.

When they came in sight of the Otis place on Tusa Creek, Willie challenged Smoky to a race, saddle-stand style, as far as the bridge beyond the Otis house.

"Shucks, you couldn't stand up in a wagon bed!" scoffed Smoky.

So Willie showed him. His chestnut pony was half a length ahead as they fogged past the Otis gate. Willie let out a long-drawn cowboy yell. He couldn't see whether Letha Otis was watching from a window or not, but he couldn't help hoping she was.

Where the road turned off to the T 8, Chugwater offered his bottle again, but Willie shook his head.

"Too close to home base, Chug." His grin had an uneasy look about it. "Uncle Tate'll be mad enough as it is!"

"Here, Bill!" Smoky Bonnadeen handed him a piece of gum. "Chaw

that if you're scared the ol' gristle-neck will sniff likker on your wind!"

"Let him sniff," shrugged Willie. "If he gets too rollicky, I'll quit him and take out for Texas!"

"Make it Wyoming," said Chet, with a wink at Chugwater, "and you might have company. I hear that's curly-wolf country up there."

"But tough on pups!" Chugwater batted his coyote eyes at Willie as if sizing him up for caliber.

"You ain't talkin' about me!" Willie batted boyish blue ones right back at him. "I'm a growed he-wolf with a hanker to howl!"

"Then maybe you'd just as well ride on in with us. There ain't no law says you got to check in ever' few minutes, is there?"

Willie sensed challenge in it, but he hesitated only a second. "No law, I reckon," he said. "But I'm goin' to—this time, anyway. So long, you saddle bumpers!"

"So long, gopher gizzard!" Chet poked Willie's chestnut in the flank again. "See you in Wyoming!"

Willie wondered about that Wyoming talk as he rode away from them. Maybe it was all just cowboy hurrawing, maybe it wasn't. He wished he knew. He wondered some about himself, too, trying to remind himself that he ought to be grateful to Uncle Tate for furnishing him with bed, board, and a place on the ranch roller towel for the past three years. In those three years Uncle Tate and his right bower, a wizened old *vaquero* named Policarpio Mascareñas, had somehow made him over from a raw kid roustabout into a copper-bradded cowhand, ready and able to ride for the brand. For that he owed them.

But he wished Uncle Tate could get it through his head that he was now old enough, and man enough, to pick his own company—and too old to take a whipping. Not that Uncle Tate had walloped him any more than his own father probably would have if he had lived; five or six times in three years, mostly for bad talk, and all but one of those wallopings had been more than a year ago. That was all right. He'd been just a kid then, and maybe needed that kind of daddying.

But Uncle Tate's last application of a doubled lead rope, only three weeks ago, had been for drinking beer with Chet and Smoky Bonnadeen. Willie had wanted mighty bad to warn Uncle Tate right then that the next time he tried it he'd have a fight on his hands. But he had lacked enough courage to get it said.

All right, Uncle Tate. You've got your ideas, and I've got mine. I reckon you might as well find out right now that they don't always tally. That was what he was planning to say this time.

The man waiting by the saddle-shed door with a doubled lead rope in his hand was medium tall, built like a thong of rawhide, with a bony, weather-leathered face. There was little about his appearance to remind Willie of his dead mother except the quiet, steady look that stayed in his deep-set blue eyes, no matter what kind of humor he was in. Right now they looked at the sweat-caked horse more than at the boy.

"Willie," he said, "you been helling around with them no-account Bonnadeens again?"

He didn't raise his voice any more than if he had been asking about some stray cow he'd sent a cowhand out to look for. But Willie knew what was up. He got off and unlaced his saddle without answering. He wished he knew some way to make Uncle Tate understand about the big feeling it gave him to be accepted by Chet and Smoky and Chugwater as their rough, tough, rawhide equal. But it wouldn't be any use to try.

He put up his saddle and started to go turn his pony out.

"Poley will turn out your horse, Willie," said Uncle Tate quietly. "You come here."

"I'll turn out my own horse," said Willie. "I ain't crippled."

He started off with the pony, but old Policarpio came hobbling over from where he was wedging rags into a leak in the water trough and took the reins.

"Take easy, Weellie," he advised. "More queeck you cry, more queeck he don't wheep no more!"

"Cry, my foot!" The boy turned and went back to the saddle shed, flapping his chaps defiantly.

"Willie," said Uncle Tate, so quietly that his voice almost sounded kind despite its sternness, "I promised your mother I'd try and make a man out of you, but I won't never get the job done as long as you slip off and run around with rubbish."

"They ain't rubbish! They're——"

"I know what they are. You want to stand for your whippin' or have I got to hold you?"

"Neither one, Uncle Tate." Willie was tall enough to meet the older man's eyes almost on the level. "I've took my last whippin'. I'm headin' out for Wyoming—and you've lost you a cowhand!"

The look in Uncle Tate's eyes betrayed neither anger nor surprise.

"All right, Willie," he began, "if that's——"

"That's another thing!" the boy broke in hotly. "A man old enough to punch cows don't have to be called 'Willie!'"

"Willie," said Uncle Tate slowly, "I've broke a heap of broncs in my time, but I never did whip a horse except to learn him right from wrong—nor a boy either. Only a whippin' won't do you no good if you don't know you need it." He tossed the rope inside the saddle shed. "If that's the way you see it, you might as well saddle you a horse and git goin'!"

"Never mind a horse!" Willie tried to put all the man-sized don't-give-a-hoot into his voice that he could. "I'll make out afoot till I get one!"

"No, by ginger, you won't!" It was the first time Willie had ever heard Uncle Tate sound sure-enough mad. "I never have set a cowhand afoot, and I don't aim to start now! Ol' Gravy's your horse. You take him—and that duckfoot dun to pack your bedroll on if you want him." He fished out a pocket-worn wallet. "Here's fifty dollars due you in wages. I don't give a hoot how you spend it, but I won't have no nephew of mine sneakin' off broke and afoot like a hobo sheep-herder! Either you leave the T Eight up in the saddle like a white

man, or else you stay and take your whippin'. And remember what I tell you: whatever trail you take from now on out, you've got to pick it yourself!"

Willie wound up by taking Gravy and the fifty dollars, but not the pack horse. He already had his own saddle.

After Uncle Tate went in the house, old Poley came out to where Willie was saddling up, with some cold biscuits in a flour sack.

"Gwyoming putty far place," he said.

"So's the hot place," shrugged the boy, "but I reckon the trail's open!"

"The Ol' Man don't got no keeds hees own, Weellie!"

"Well, that ain't my fault!"

"You be good boy, Weellie. Someday you come back *mucho hombre!*"

"Don't look for me right quick!" Willie managed to put on a good-by grin. This horse-warped old *Mejicano* had been mighty good to him.

Old Boojum Johnson, the cook, and a T 8 cowboy called Tack Akers stood in the cookshack door and watched him bundle his war bag on behind the saddle, but neither of them made any comment.

It was around sundown when Willie came riding past the Otis place. Letha Otis was standing just inside the gate, teasing a pup with a long switch. She kept her back turned to the road, as if she didn't see him. Willie leaned over the gate and gave one of her gold-yellow braids a yank. She whirled around and whacked him, not very hard, with the switch.

"Shame on you, Willie Shelton!" she said. "Don't you ever do that again!"

"Likely I won't, taffy-top," Willie told her. "I'm quittin' the country—for good."

Letha was just a little ranch girl, hardly a day over fourteen, with freckles and a snubby nose, but the surprised way her big blue eyes looked up at him gave Willie's heart a twist.

"Don't talk silly!" she said.

"Silly, my foot! Me and Uncle Tate had a showdown, and I'm on my way!"

"Good riddance!" Letha flipped her braids in a sassy gesture, then abruptly sobered. "Not—not sure 'nough, Bill?"

"Sure as cockleburs on a coyote!" Willie sat straight in the saddle. "A man's got to pick his own trail, Letha, and I'm Wyoming-bound!"

The girl didn't say good-by, but when he looked back from on down the road, she waved to him.

Chet and Smoky Bonnadeen had folks over on Tejón Creek, but they didn't stay with them much. They had a little shack on the outskirts of Black Mesa where they batched most of the time, and where Chugwater had thrown in with them the past several weeks. Willie felt sure he would be welcome there.

But first he rode into town. At Horseshoe Higgins' store he bought a couple of soogans, a horsehide jacket with fringes on it like the one Chugwater wore, a secondhand .45 in a black leather holster, and some cartridges. Horseshoe Higgins hesitated a little about selling the gun.

"Your uncle know you're buyin' this weapon?" he asked.

Willie shrugged. "He will when you tell him."

"You sure you know which end the bullets come out of?"

"I'm fixin' to study up on it," Willie told him. "You goin' to sell me this pistol, or ain't you?"

The fat storekeeper shrugged and let him have it. Willie added some dry salt pork, sardines, crackers, and dried prunes to his purchases. Welcome or not, he didn't intend to sponge on anybody.

He thought about stopping at the Bullhorn Saloon for a bottle of whisky, but he was afraid Brocky Jones might not sell him hard liquor, and there might be cowboys around to josh him about it. Besides, now that he was riding his own trail, with no one to forbid him, he had already decided it might be a good idea not to drink much more than might be necessary to keep from looking like a sissy.

It was dark when he rode up to the Bonnadeen shack. Even with his horse loaded like a sheepherder's burro with soogans and sacks, it gave him a big feeling to arrive well supplied and with a six-shooter on. He reined up and let out what the cowboys call a squall. Both the Bonnadeens came out.

"You holler wicked for a tenderfoot," grinned Smoky. "Fall off your horse, so we can drag you in and see how bad you're shot!"

"Woo-haw-w-w-w!" squalled Willie again. He stepped off his horse, drew his new gun, and banged away a couple of times in the air.

"You want Constable Ellers rompin' out here to see who's shootin' off firecrackers?" Chet demanded.

Willie waited till he had put up his horse and sat down to biscuits and gravy before he told them how he had slipped his hobbles and come to throw in with them.

"Big feller!" Chet walloped him on the back. "Let's have a drink of bob-wire extract on it!"

Smoky got a jug out from under one of the bunks.

"Here's to the three muskrat ears!" he declaimed. "One for all, all for one—unless he gets caught!"

Brash, breezy talk. Willie liked it, but he made his turn at the jug a light one.

"Chet," he inquired, "where's ol' Chugwater?"

"Gone to the wilderness to look for the ol' gray mare," said Chet. "We're fixin' to meet him at some old corrals at the mouth of Torcido Canyon about Sunday mornin', with our beds all rolled and grub in a sack."

"What about Wyoming?"

"Why? You goin' with us?"

"Try and stop me!"

"All right, but don't go blabbin' it around, you savvy!"

Willie wondered if he ought to tell them that he had already bragged to Uncle Tate and Poley and Letha Otis about being Wyoming-bound,

but as long as they hadn't robbed a bank or anything, he couldn't see that it mattered.

He and Chet and Smoky spent part of the next few days shoeing horses, rigging pack saddles, readying gear for packing, and part of it in Black Mesa. No high jinks that would get Constable Ellers after them. Just Junin' around, as the cowboys say.

His first afternoon in town, Willie saw Boojum Johnson with the T 8 supply wagon. On a sudden impulse he helped the old cook load some hundred-pound sacks of salt. For a while Chet and Smoky stood around, hurrawing him for being a flunky, then strutted off, spurs ajingle, to the Bullhorn Saloon.

"I heard you and them two no-accounts had took out to Wyoming, Willie," Boojum grinned. "You back already?"

"You can hear a heap of things when you got big ears," shrugged Willie.

The next morning Willie came across Tack Akers just lighting down at the Bullhorn hitch rack.

"Hi, Tack," Willie said. "How come you townin' on a weekday?"

"I come lookin' for an egg to suck," grinned Tack. "How's Wyoming?"

"A foot wide and open in the middle," Willie breezed back at him. "Same as a cowboy's mouth. How's the ranch?"

"Better," said Tack. "I ain't seen a dirty place on the roller towel since you left. Say, you wouldn't know the whereabouts of a feller called Chugwater, would you?"

"He's gone to the wilderness to look for the old gray mare. You want him for somethin'?"

"Nothin' important," Tack shrugged. "I punched cows up around the Chugwater country one summer. Just wonderin' if he was some jasper I'd met up there. You headin' for Wyoming west of the mountains or east up the flats?"

Willie couldn't think of any reason why Tack might want to pump

him, but he remembered what Chet had said about keeping his blab shut.

"Who wants to know?" he asked.

"Not me, Willie." The T 8 cowboy shrugged and went on into the Bullhorn.

That night after supper Chet saddled up and rode away by himself. After he was gone, Willie asked Smoky where Chet was headed for, that he had to ride by night.

"To help Chug look for the ol' gray mare," said Smoky.

"Doggone it, Smoky!" Willie flared up at him. "You talk riddles to me and I'll come over you like a wet saddle blanket! What's all this about the old gray mare?"

"Keep your shirt on," Smoky advised him with a grin. "Chet's gone to help gather some horses Chug's been buying for us to take along to Wyoming, whenever we go."

"Buyin'?"

"What else? You don't think a big ranch owner like Chug would be borrowin' 'em, do you?"

Willie didn't know for sure what to think. But what he did know was that he had thrown in with this outfit of his own free will, and as long as they continued to treat him good, he sure didn't aim to raise a fuss over something that really was none of his business.

"It ain't nothing to me where Chugwater gets his horses," he said. "Let's wander down to Brocky's and shake for the beers."

The next afternoon the two young cowboys met Tate Murdock and old Poley coming out of Horseshoe Higgins' store. Uncle Tate nodded to him as casually as if he were a stranger and walked on down the street. Old Poley didn't even nod.

"Ol' gristle-gut!" shrugged Smoky. "You're lucky you quit him!"

Willie restrained an unaccountable impulse to warn Smoky to mind his tongue where Uncle Tate was concerned.

"Sure," he said, instead. "You ain't heard me cryin' about it, have you?"

He was trying a new saddle blanket on his horse out back of the store a few minutes later when old Poley showed up with a brand-new rope in his hand. Smoky was still inside the store, probably teasing Horseshoe's none too pretty daughter.

"How you makin', Weellie?" The old *vaquero's* sharp black eyes seemed to be appraising the boy's new six-shooter in its black leather holster. "Whassamatta you don't went to Gwyoming?"

Willie started to say "None of your business," but something like shame stopped him. This was a man who had never spoken an unkind word to him in his life.

"We'll be pullin' out," he said instead, "as soon as Chugwater finds the ol' gray mare. How's things at the ranch?"

"Joost same. Water trough still leakin'." Poley shrugged, batting wrinkle-bound black eyes. "Señor Chugwater, he's nize man, eh? Geeve you good job in Gwyoming, Weellie?"

One thing sure, Willie didn't want Poley—or anybody else—feeling sorry for him.

"Sure," he said. "On his horse ranch. Forty a month. Same as he's payin' me to help trail a bunch with us. We're fixin' to pick 'em up at Torcido Canyon, Sunday mornin'. I'm my own man now, Poley, and— Hey, what you think you're doin' with that rope?"

Poley finished tying a fine new lariat on Willie's saddle.

"Leetle borthday's present, Weellie," he grinned. "You forget you sixteen years today?"

Willie gulped. "I sure had," he said. "Gosh! Much obliged! I'll sure try to keep the kinks out of it!"

"*Buen cabestro, vaquero honesto!*" Policarpio Mascareñas spoke the words with a certain dignity. "Adiós, Weellie!"

Good rope, honest cowboy. He don't have any call to preach at me, thought the boy. I'm a man grown now, and able to pick my own trail.

He hadn't meant to blab, but he was tired of getting giggered about still not being gone to Wyoming. Anyhow, why should it matter?

That night he and Smoky got to trying to see which one could do a better job of tilting a jug one-handed, with the result that Willie swallowed a little more barbed-wire extract than he meant to. He woke up the next morning with a ratty taste in his mouth and all his clothes on, and for the first time, stayed away from the two dusty streets of Black Mesa all day.

Both Willie and Smoky were surprised when Chugwater and Chet came riding in late Saturday evening. Chet said they had got the old corrals patched so they would hold the ol' gray mare overnight, so had decided they might as well ride in and help pack out.

Chugwater's ruddy face bristled like a porcupine with a week's growth of sandy whiskers. After a long pull at the jug, he lathered up and shaved them off, including his mustache.

"You look like moonrise over a cowpen, Chug," Willie told him.

"You can't insult me, kid." Chugwater's laugh was short. "I wasn't put together for purty, like you. Chet tells me you've slipped your hobbles an' lookin' for passage to Wyoming."

"You heard him right. From now on, I'm skinnin' my own wolf. You see my new six-gun?"

Chugwater took the .45, spun it expertly on his finger, and handed it back.

"Totin' a hogleg don't make you a curly wolf, kid. Not till you learn when, where, an' how to make it talk for you. You sing the right tune till we git to Wyoming, an' maybe I'll give you a few pointers."

They packed up and pulled out by moonlight, leading three pack horses. From the wrecked condition in which Chet and Smoky left their shack, it looked to Willie as if they were not expecting to come back. Well, neither was he.

It was a twenty-mile ride to where Torcido Canyon twisted its way out of the rimrocks in such poor grass country that nobody had ever bothered to fence it and few stock ever ranged there. Eighteen of those twenty miles were already behind them when sunrise began to spread an orange-red glory over rimrocked buttes and mesas.

Willie had never ridden this far east of the T 8 before, but yonder, westward some fifty miles away, he could recognize La Ceja—the long “eyebrow” of mesa rim that marked off his Uncle Tate’s main summer range—with the golden broom of sunrise slowly brushing away its purple haze.

Willie was wondering if sunrise would ever be like this in Wyoming, when, topping a low rise, they came upon a little bunch of loose horses: a mare with a colt, some twos, threes, and full-grown geldings. Eleven head, all golden chestnuts but two. Willie didn’t have to look twice to recognize them for T 8 horses, some of Uncle Tate’s best. What they were doing off here forty miles from T 8 headquarters, thirty from the nearest T 8 fence, Willie had no idea. But here they were.

Tate Murdock had never raised his horses wild. These put up their heads and circled a little, but didn’t run. When the four riders came close enough to read brands, Chugwater reined up. He looked as surprised as Willie felt.

“Hell’s a-hootin’!” he exclaimed. “Where did these nags come from? That T Eight’s your uncle’s brand, ain’t it, kid?”

Willie nodded. He took a deep breath, unconsciously straightening a little in the saddle as he remembered what Uncle Tate had said about picking his own trail.

“Boys,” he said quietly, “here’s where I quit you. I’m goin’ to take these strays back where they belong.”

Chugwater swung his horse around to face the boy, a coldly calculating squint in his coyotelike eyes.

“I don’t know how these strays got here, kid,” he said, “but there ain’t no sense kickin’ luck in the face. They’ve got the same brand as the horse you’re ridin’. What’s to keep us from throwin’ ’em up the trail, sell ’em, an’ split the take?”

“Not a damn thing,” said Willie, “except that I’m takin’ ’em home!”

“Don’t be a knucklehead, Bill!” That was Chet. “You’ve done thrown in with this outfit, and by gulliver——”

“I’ll ’tend to this, boys,” Chugwater cut in dryly. He turned again

to Willie. "I ain't foolin', kid. I want these horses. You goin' to be reasonable, or ain't you?"

Willie stared at the six-shooter that had appeared with sudden ease in Chugwater's hand.

His own gun came out of the holster awkwardly. It shook when he tried to point it.

"You horse thieves can go to hell!" he said between white, tight lips. "I'm takin' these horses home!"

"You double-crossin' little so-and-sol!" said Chet. "Let him have it, Chug!"

If I shoot first I'll miss, thought Willie grimly. And if I don't—

"Chet," said Chugwater without taking his eyes off the white-faced boy in front of him, "if you think I'm fool enough to put myself on the murder list for shootin' a pucker-brained pipsqueak, you're crazy! A few horses just ain't worth it! Let's git goin'!"

They went. So did Willie, in the other direction. He was shaking all over. He wondered how Chugwater knew he hadn't been going to shoot unless he had to. He was short a bedroll and some stuff in the departing packs, but it didn't matter. All he wanted now was to get these strays started back to the T 8.

He pushed them up a little draw, then cut back over the next ridge north and found a rimrock from which he could get a good look down at about twenty horses in the old Torcido Canyon corrals. If he saw even one T 8 chestnut among them, he knew he would have to go back down there. He was glad that he saw none.

Willie ran into some rough country getting back to the T 8, but by using his new rope to catch a fresh mount a couple of times and pushing right on by moonlight, he managed to hit headquarters with his strays a little before sunup the next day. Always an early riser, Uncle Tate saw the drive coming and opened the gates. Willie shoved the horses on into the horse trap beyond the corrals.

"Must be some fence down someplace," said Uncle Tate when he came riding back through the trap gate. "Where'd you find 'em?"

He sounded like a man who had sent a cowhand out to look for some strays and was passably glad he'd found them.

"Over east," Willie told him. "'Bout a mile south of Torcido Canyon."

"You've made a good ride, Bill." Uncle Tate's leathery face looked no different from what it had as he stood there at the saddle shed a few days ago, with a rope in his hand. "Turn out your horse and we'll go in to breakfast."

It was the first time, as far as Willie could remember, that Uncle Tate had ever called him Bill. The man-to-man, matter-of-fact sound of it was in itself a promise and a testimony of new understanding between them.

Still the boy stayed on his horse. Blabbing on those he had so lately counted as friends was not going to be easy. But they had picked their own trail, and now he had picked his.

"Some fellers had a bunch of horses penned in them old corrals, Uncle Tate," he said. "I reckon maybe——"

"Sheriff Ortega's keepin' tabs on 'em," Tate Murdock broke in quietly. "It ain't your fault if everybody can't be honest, Bill."

He didn't say "like you," but Willie knew what he meant. If it turned out that some of those horses were stolen, he hoped the law wouldn't be too hard on Chet and Smoky—specially Smoky.

But now he still had his own gully to jump. He got off his horse and took down the new rope old Poley had given him.

"I'm still due that whippin', Uncle Tate," he said. "Here's a rope."

Uncle Tate didn't take the rope, nor even look at it. It was almost the first time Willie had ever seen anything like a twinkle in his eye.

"Horse or man," he said, "sixteen is too damned old to whip! Let's go in to breakfast. Then you better rest up awhile."

Along toward noon Willie took a notion to ride over to the Otis place and see how Letha was making out with her pup. Old Poley was out there, wedging rags in a water-trough leak, when he came out to saddle up.

"How you makin', Beell!" he grinned. "Those new rope ketch putty good?"

"It sure did," said Willie earnestly.

Because now he understood how it was: why Boojum and Tack and Poley had tried to pump him; why those T 8 strays had turned up where they were—not wholly by accident. And when an old gristle-neck like Uncle Tate would risk losing some of his best horses on the chance that a runaway kid's finding them would put him back on the right trail, it sure did give a man a fine, big feeling!

THE WARHORSE OF SPOTTED TAIL

FROM THE 1959 SPUR AWARD-WINNING
NOVEL, FANCHER TRAIN

Amelia Bean

A librarian by profession, Amelia Bean won a WWA Spur for the best Western historical novel of 1958 with her first novel, Fancher Train, from which this short story has been excerpted. Her second novel, The Tewksbury Feud, was serialized in The Saturday Evening Post early this year. Hardcover book editions of both novels are published by Doubleday & Company. Herself a lady of mild and modest mien, Amelia re-creates dramatic violence of the old western frontier with a sure touch backed by a tremendous amount of painstaking research. Besides researching and writing, Mrs. Bean keeps house for her husband, Bill, and one son in Riverside, California.

Jed Smith felt driven to near murderous rage at the downright viciousness that seemed to crop up so regularly with the Missouri bunch that had attached itself to the Fancher Wagon Train. When

From *The Fancher Train*, by Amelia Bean. Copyright © 1958 by Myrtle Amelia Bean. Used by permission of Doubleday & Company, Inc.

they weren't bragging around camp trying to egg someone into a brawl they thought up some other form of devilment. Like what they were up to, now.

Nightly they set up a dice game on a blanket. That was fairly harmless, when they gambled and fought drunkenly among themselves. But this night some Sioux braves had wandered into camp and the bunch had first got them drunk on uncut corn liquor, now they were gambling for their horses. The Indians were too drunk to notice when they switched to loaded dice. It was a twice-dirty deal, for a couple of the animals were not just Indian ponies, they were fine, good conformation.

Jed decided against speaking out. It wasn't his business, he'd only signed on to scout for the wagon train. But he settled in shadow, where he could watch. The Sioux were unarmed or they wouldn't have been let into camp, but one of them might pack a knife under his shirt and if they caught on, or were pushed too far . . .

By the time some woman, upset by the drunken squalling of the Indians, had complained to Captain Fancher, they'd won four of the five horses. All except a buckskin pony ridden by a tight-faced stripling who'd taken no part in the drinking or gambling. Likely he'd seen the older men get cheated, for the black eyes in his thin, proud face were smoldering.

Captain Fancher showed up but he stood perplexedly to one side. He was a man who hated trouble, God knows what it would take to get him on the prod, Jed thought. But then Fancher shared most white men's views on Indians. The emigrants didn't hold a redskin to be hardly more account than an animal, sure not to be considered same as a man. An awful lot of hair had been lifted off just such people.

The gambling blanket had been spread close enough to catch the light from a fire. Now one reeling, slobbering brave was using wide gestures, making some sort of protest. Jed, who understood Sioux talk, made out that the man hadn't understood what the stake was, this last time. He had not wagered the horse, it was the warhorse of Spotted

Tail, his brother-in-law, and not his to lose. Spotted Tail was in the white man's prison in Leavenworth. It was a family honor trust that the horse be kept safe against his release. A war chief must have his warhorse and his brother-in-law would soon return to his lodge. The thing was a mistake, therefore he would take the horse now and return to his people. He reached an unsteady hand to the animal's bridle.

The hand was knocked aside and the sodden Indian found himself staring up into the contemptuous gaze of a big red-bearded man. Solomon Ward, heavily booted feet truculently spread, beefy hands on hips, sneeringly dared the Indian to start something. The red-beard's arms and shoulders were immense, his barrel chest wore a mat of thick red hair, which protruded through the opening of his dirty shirt. A wide leather belt rode below his bulging belly and supported a sheath which held a knife.

The Indian reeled, stared confusedly up at the man, and reached for the bridle again. Sol Ward grinned and put a hamlike hand on the Indian's chest and shoved, sending him sprawling. While he was down, Sol kicked him, hard. The other Indians clamored protestingly but now the other men, roaring with brutal mirth, joined in the fun. Kicking and shoving, they drove the Indians out of camp.

The watching youngster at the edge of light cast by the fire sat his pony, his gaze on the man, Sol Ward, who stood holding his belly as he laughed.

Jed saw that the set young face was murderous with hate and outrage. Good thing for Sol Ward that the young pup was unarmed, he'd likely been dead before he finished his belly laugh. The slitted black eyes memorized the look of the red-beard before he wheeled the buckskin and followed the staggering braves.

Jed followed along at a distance, wanting to make sure they got out of camp with no further trouble. He saw the boy rein up alongside the reeling group and help two of the kicked men onto the pony. Taking the halter rope, he led the horse away into the night, thin shoulders bowed under the weight of humiliation.

Jed returned to camp for a short, blunt word with Captain Fancher, with the result that more guards were dispatched to the horse herd and around the encamped train. Captain Fancher then notified the Missouri bunch that he would put up with no more gambling with Indians.

They had been noisily boasting over their winnings. Sol had won the warhorse—an unusually handsome animal. It was a "paint" horse, satiny black on the thickly muscled neck and shoulders with a white blaze between the eyes. The powerful hindquarters were also black, there were white ovals on the belly, and the strong, nervous legs were deeply white-stockinged. From the thickness of the proud, arching neck Jed guessed it was a stallion in the prime of maturity, seven or eight years old. He could understand well the Indian's panic, there was nothing valued higher by a warrior than a spotted, trained-for-war horse.

Sol Ward's heavy face was quarrelsome, he did not like Captain Fancher's edict about their gambling. "Guess you didn't like our little game either, Smith," he said belligerently.

Jed shrugged. "One of 'em wasn't drunk, he knew how come they lost. They could give us trouble, if they're a mind to."

"Them stinkin' bastards?" Sol snorted. "Hell, they ain't hardly got enough spine to hold themselves up, not a one of 'em would stand and fight!" Sol was disgusted at having been done out of a brawl.

Jed bit back his anger. "Half the Sioux Nation is camped over there"—he waved toward the northern hills—"they're headin' for a big council in the Tetons. That little bunch that was here could likely find a hundred relatives anxious to help give us trouble."

"Well, hell, let 'em!" Sol was scornful. "We got enough rifles to take care of the whole damn pack of 'em!"

"You ain't likely been in a wagon-train fight, Ward, or you wouldn't just as soon start one. Trouble is, it ain't always the fightin' men gets it. Sometimes a woman or a little kid winds up with a bullet or arrow in 'em."

Among the listeners a woman muffled a scream and Jed went hastily on. "I don't think they'll attack the train—they ain't on the warpath, they've got their women and kids along. And they been mighty leery of exposin' their folks to trouble after what Squaw-killer Harney done. But they might jump the horse herd or figger out some way to even things up. Sioux warriors got a hell of a lot of pride. They get even when they can."

"Warriors? Hell, them draggel-tail punks didn't look like warriors to me!" Sol spat contemptuously.

Jed wanted to smash his fist into the sneering, bearded face but the echo of old Jim Bridger's advice slowed his anger. Bridger had gotten him the scouting job and he'd warned him he'd find emigrators a stupid, pigheaded lot, seldom willing to take the guidance they paid for. "But don't let an emigrator have room to rile you, boy," he'd said. "They don't any of 'em appear to have what you'd call horse sense. Just kinda nurse 'em along like a passel of idiots and pay no mind to what they say."

"They're warriors," Jed repeated, "one of 'em was Iron Shell and he's already packin' a grudge, his wife and son was killed by white soldiers. And the kid on the buckskin, I know of him. He's the son of Crazy Horse, the Oglala Holy Man. Nobody's got more influence in the tribes than a Holy Man."

Captain Fancher looked unhappily at the two men who faced each other, hard dislike evident on both of them. "Well," Fancher tried to put an end to the strain, "we put more guards out, all around. Maybe that'll do it. Anyway, what's done is done."

Jed spat and turned away. "That's right," he said, "it's done."

The next morning Jed scouted over toward where the Indian encampment had been, five or six miles from the wagon train. They had moved on and he returned, noticing he followed the tracks of the group which had visited the train. The tracks were deep in soft dirt, because of the double load the pony had carried. Jed saw that the

buckskin left an odd left hind print. It splayed out a little, the hoof must have been split and healed a little crooked.

Since Jed had started courting Melissa Boller he was usually invited to eat supper with her and her brother, David. That night Jed informed Melissa that she must not ride her mare away from the wagon train for a spell, nor could she accompany him on his scouting, as she had been doing at times.

"You mean," Melissa sputtered, "that just because ol' Sol Ward cheated an Injun out of a horse that I can't ride out at all?"

"Yep."

"But *you* can look after me——"

"Not proper, you never know what might come up." He was nettled at her rebellious attitude, which seemed to question his judgment, but his gaze softened as he looked down at her. She was mighty pretty.

The ruby-red calico she wore with its rows of little ruffles across the bosom was becoming, flattering. The rich color made her cheeks rosy, her eyes seem darker. She had wound the thick blond braid into a coronet high on her head and it made her seem taller, more womanly.

"The Sioux are travelin' just a few miles north of us, Melissa," he said, "in the same direction. And some of the braves would take a lot of chances to even the score. I won't have you skylarkin' around on a horse, even close to the train. You stay on the wagon, hear?"

Melissa appealed to David but her brother only grinned, he was enormously tickled at Jed's assumption of authority and, knowing his headstrong little sister, interested in the outcome. David only shook his head. "Time for me to get on over to the herd," he said, "my turn to night-wrangle." He got lazily up and ambled off across the encampment.

Melissa switched tactics. Her slanting eyes teased up at Jed where he lounged against the wagon, sipping coffee. "Aw, please, Jed——" This was accompanied by her most promising smile.

He emptied the coffee grounds into the embers of the cook fire and set the cup down. "Nope."

"You're not running this train," Melissa flared, "or *me!* I guess I'll ride if I want to!"

"Just you do—" Jed said coldly, "and see what you get! You act like a little kid—and I'm liable to whip you—like a little kid!"

Melissa was infuriated because she believed that he actually would. "Or maybe like you'd whip a squaw?"

"Like I'd whip a squaw. Except I never knowed a squaw that would act that damn silly!"

"I guess you know a lot of squaws——"

"Yep."

"Well, I'm not a squaw, Jed Smith—and if you lay one dirty paw on me, I'll—I'll—— I'm not your property!"

Jed did not answer, he looked at her, unsmiling, a long look from her small button shoes up her body to her face. She felt the intimacy of his stare like a searching hand and a scarlet wave of color crowded flushingly to her cheeks.

A deep knowing was in Jed as he looked at her. He was remembering all the women he had known but it was not until now that it was the one he wanted to keep. The other had been only to ease a momentary need, brighten a day, an hour. What he felt now, bound up in this small, strong-spirited girl, was the big thing that a man could search for all his life. And maybe never find.

The changing temper of Jed's thoughts matched a similar realization in Melissa. And she was glad to have it so, she knew a surge of fierce joy in his mastery but she dropped her eyes, unwilling to meet his gaze.

His hand reached for her chin, raised her face. "You'll do like I say—" he said. It was not command, nor question, but something between.

When she nodded he leaned and kissed her parted lips. He felt the tremor of response from her soft mouth and he grinned crookedly, tenderly. He was unaccountably pleased at the stormy nature of her.

The next few days Jed grew to feeling vaguely uneasy as he scouted

ahead of the wagon train. Things were too peaceful but there were no signs, although he took to making ever widening circles. But no red-skin, or the slightest sign of any, was to be found near the emigrant road. The hordes of Sioux had turned north, away from the trail, toward Bear Butte, where their Great Council was to be held.

Days later, when he scouted the first crossing of the Sweetwater, he came across the fresh hoofprints of an unshod horse—and the shape of an odd track leaped at him. The left hind hoofprint splayed out, it had been made by the little buckskin ridden by the son of Crazy Horse. And maybe now ridden by one of the men of the dishonored lodge of Spotted Tail.

Jed grinned, knowing now what had caused his uneasiness. That itching sensation along his spine, the watched feeling that'd caused him to make like a deer combing the wind with its nose. All the time he'd taken to riding wide, watching jumpy-like for sign, this lone buck had dogged him, more than likely anticipating his every move. They were damn cagey, Injuns, when it came to a deal like that. But he'd been raised by mountain men and he'd felt a prickling uneasiness, eying every clump of cover like a spooky squaw, swinging his gaze, hunting untoward movement. And not finding a thing that didn't belong. The quick, startled leap of antelopes maybe or the peevish flurry of sage hens—but nothing he hadn't kicked up himself.

The hair on his neck could stay down now, for the lone buck didn't have designs on Jed or he'd have jumped long ago, there'd been plenty of chance. He'd bet money on it that it was the warhorse he was after. And that was Sol Ward's lookout.

That night after the cook pots had been emptied Jed sought out Ward. The big man looked at him sourly. "Where you keepin' that paint horse nights?" Jed asked.

"With the horse herd. Why?"

"If I was you I'd sleep with him wrist-haltered, less'n you wanta take a chance on losin' him."

Sol stared suspiciously at the scout. "What makes you think I might lose him?"

"I seen sign at the Sweetwater ford this mornin'. Tracks of the buckskin that young'un was ridin' the night you got the paint."

Sol's look was first incredulous, then it hardened into a sneer. "You seen sign—and you kin tell by a *track* it was the buckskin? So you want I should sleep with that big brute trompin' round my head? D'you take me to be a fool, Smith?"

Jed stiffened, he should have known better than to bother warning this stupid, pigheaded bully. "I don't take to you at all, Ward," he said flatly, "I got a heap better things to do than fret over you losin' a horse, specially one you got crooked. I've warned you. What you do, or don't do is your own lookout."

Jed turned away but Ward's heavy hand fell on his shoulder, violently swung him around. He shoved his coarse, bearded face up close. "I don't let no man call me crooked!" he prodded. "You'll take back the word—or stand and fight!"

Jed looked expressionlessly at the big man while he considered briefly. Then he nodded. Leaning his Hawken against a wagon wheel, he unbuckled his belt with its sheathed knife, hung it beside the rifle. He removed his buckskin shirt, hung that also on the wheel. Looking around to a dusty clearing lighted somewhat by a big fire, he motioned toward it. "Over there all right?" he asked.

An expression of almost unbelieving joy had come on Sol's brutal face. He hadn't thought for a minute the scout would dare take him up on it and the lean-built man looked like a cinch. There were no holds barred when Sol Ward fought, kicking, gouging, anything went. He took off his shirt, baring the huge shoulders and arms, the hairy barrel chest. His teeth gleamed through his red beard, nothing Sol enjoyed as much as a fight, especially when he had an edge on the outcome.

Jed knew what Ward was thinking—and knew also the way he would fight. Behind the casual, almost indifferent cast of his face Jed was

calculating. The red-bearded giant had height and reach on him and possibly forty pounds of weight. But also at least fifteen years of age, and he was ponderous-moving as a fat bear, his bulging lard belly might not stand heavy punishment. And he was too sure of himself.

Sol might not have met up with a trick or two and obviously underestimated the strength of the lean arms and shoulders that were solid with hard layers of muscle. Jed's habitual easy slouch was very misleading. And fighting was second nature to the scout. His boyhood rough-and-tumble days had been spent with the Indians. He had been schooled in the peculiarly vicious Indian style of hand-to-hand combat, where the single motive was to kill, and quickly. Short of that, the goal was to maim, disable your opponent with no thought for anything as unrealistic as gallantry. Jed had survived several broken bones before the grim lessons were finished. The redskins didn't pamper their fledgling war hawks, the training was severe—and enormously effective. Now, slightly crouching, eyes on Sol's big hands, Jed waited.

As if by magic a crowd had gathered. Someone rushed off to get Captain Fancher to stop so unevenly matched a fight. Melissa and David were among those pushing through the forming circle. "David—" she cried, "don't let Jed— Stop them, David!"

David turned on her savagely. "Shut up!" he ordered, "and get back to the wagon—you got no business here."

She retreated from her brother but she didn't leave. She moved off to edge up and peer between two intently watching men. She was shaking with sickened fear.

David's stern face did not show that he, also, was afraid for Jed. He knew there could be no stopping of it, but David was resolved to interfere if things got too bad. There'd be help from another man or two, should Sol's cronies want the red-beard left unhindered.

David looked across the excited circle at Les Prichard, whose weasel face was a-grin with anticipation. Les was a measly sneak, always toadying around Ward and Jake Tibbetts, Sol's most constant companion. Tibbetts was there, stolidly watching, the usual dead expression on

his hoglike face. He was an obscenely fat, dirty man, uncommunicative beyond grunts. Sol Ward did not bully Jake as he did Les, there was a viciousness about the lardlike man for all his seeming lethargy, he seemed capable of monstrosities.

Sol Ward laughed, a great bellow that shook his belly as he charged, bull-like, at the scout. One great fist struck out toward Jed's head, it would have been bone-shattering had it landed, but Jed moved fast, escaped with skin rubbed off one cheek. As the red-beard's arms flailed wide Jed's hands found a hold on Sol's belt. Using an Indian wrestling trick, he exploited the rushing weight and momentum of Sol's charge plus his own complete strength in a great, heaving throw. The astounded watchers saw Sol seem to dive across Jed's suddenly crouching form and land with terrible force on his belly, his face plowing dirt. It hurt Sol Ward, it was a punishing shock to his big body. Gasping for knocked out breath, brushing at dirt blinding his eyes, he scrambled up and located the scout, who was waiting for him, a half grin on his face. Sol charged again but more cautiously, the bearlike arms reaching. Jed maneuvered, feinting until Sol straightened, before he let the huge grip encircle him. The scout knew a moment of strangling panic as he experienced the powerful savagery of their crushing strength. But his shorter stature helped, he was able to work downward, bending his knees slightly. As Sol's brutal vise tightened, sought to bend him, crack his spine, the red-beard spread his legs to steady his stance. Like a steel spring, Jed's bony knee came up without mercy in Sol's groin.

Agony shot up through the thick body, loosened the hairy arms, and Jed's fists buried themselves piston-fast and hard in the protruding belly. While Sol reeled, rendered flaccid momentarily, Jed punished the belly again and again. The red-beard faltered to one knee, his shaking hands sought his tortured crotch, his shaggy head shaking. He raised blurred eyes to see the scout crouching, watching.

"Call it off, Ward?" Jed asked.

The terse question infuriated Sol beyond all reason. He drew a knife from his boot, the wicked blade glinting in the firelight.

A woman screamed, a low murmur growled through the crowd. "Here, now——" It was Captain Fancher's voice, he had started forward. David was moving to interfere, also.

But like a swift, leaping cougar, the scout came in on Sol. As the red-beard came to his feet one moccasined toe shot out, connected with the knife hand. There was a cracking sound, the knife dropped, and Sol bellowed, reaching for his broken wrist as Jed's foot, toe rigid, came up again, deep into his lower belly. The huge man went back, his head thudded on the ground. And Jed kicked him again, in his thick neck just below the ear.

Sol shuddered once and lay still, his eyes rolled whitely under half-closed lids. A trickle of blood came from his mouth, seeped through his beard, and dripped onto the ground. Still in a crouch, Jed waited, his eyes on Sol. Then he straightened to glare around at the watchers. "Anybody want to take up for Ward?" he invited angrily.

No one answered. Jed reached a long arm, picked up Sol's knife. "Tell Ward when he comes to that I stopped fightin' for fun when I was still a kid. Tell him the next time he starts somethin', I'll kill him. I can use a knife some, too." He flung the knife and it struck so close to Sol's head that the shaggy hair parted to receive it. "I got no use for crooked gamblers," he said, "tell Ward I said it again—*crooked!*"

There was stunned silence as he reached for his shirt, took his rifle and belt from the wheel. There was respectful admiration in the eyes of the men who hastily moved back to allow him passage. Eyes shining, David watched him go and then turned a suddenly narrowed stare on Les and Jake. They had looked at the prone mound that had been their vaunted champion and now sent a planning, venomous glare after the scout. David stepped forward. "Anyone takin' it further with Jed Smith had best figger on me, too." The usually genial face of the stocky man was hard, dangerously set.

"Count me in on that." The drawl came from lanky Joel Mitchell, who stepped up to stand spraddle-legged alongside David. His cheerful bony face looked eagerly across at Les and Jake.

"And me!" Lawson Mitchell stood happily belligerent beside his brother.

The crafty faces turned sullen. "Aw, whose takin' it any further?" whined Les. "Come on, Jake, give me a hand here." Ungently heaving and hauling, they dragged the beaten man to his wagon. Sol's wife, Sairy, a thin, tired woman with a bitter face, surveyed him and malicious satisfaction appeared in her faded eyes as she took in the extent of the damage.

"One of these first days," she said sourly, "he's gonna have to learn to keep his big mouth shut. He's a-gettin' too old and fat to fight ever' tough young'un that calls his hand." She got a basin of water and rags and with untender thoroughness began to mop him off.

Melissa had pushed her way out of the crowd to run after Jed. He heard the quick pattering and turned as she came up with him. She was breathless. "Oh, Jed!" she gasped, "are you all right?"

He nodded, frowning at her. There was something about her appearance that startled him. "Were you there?" he asked disapprovingly.

"Oh, yes! And I was so scared, at first! But when you beat him, I—oh, Jed!"

Now he recognized the look of her. He'd seen this exultance in the faces of Indian women, welcoming their men home from battle. Fierce, proud-lusting, woman-strong, hungry to passionately reward a strong warrior.

Jed was surprised—and shocked. Squaws, now, they enjoyed a brawl, but he'd thought white women carried on, fainted, maybe, or something. This small one held surprises for him at every turn. She'd not only stood and watched, she was glorying in the winning, there was shared triumph in every line of her. Her hands raised now, brushed dirt from his bare chest, gently touched his bloody face. "You're bleeding, Jed, and it's dirty. Come over to the wagon—let me wash it—"

Her touch triggered away his control and his arms went swiftly around her, lifting her. The rifle, still in one hand, bruised her as she was held crushed against him, feet off the ground. Savagely his mouth came down on hers, which was still open and surprised—but instantly responded. One arm was pinned against him but the other went around his neck, clutching, holding on. The whole warm length of her answered, arching, pressing frantically closer. It was a long, hurting, glorying kiss and a wonder of ecstatic delight ran shaking through her body and legs.

Jed set her down on her feet, staring down at her with astounded eyes. Her face was flushed, lovely with adoration. She was smiling delightedly and moved to come closer in his arms again. But he held her off. "Get off to your wagon"—it was a husky growl, belied by the shine of his eyes, the tenderness of the crooked grin—"before I drag you off in the bushes like the bloody little squaw you are!"

Her smile was pixyish. "I'll go in the bushes with you, Jed," she announced, "you won't have to drag me!"

"I believe you would, you little hussy," he said, "and then I'd have your brother on my neck. Get off with you now——" His hand turned her, slapped at her calico rear. He hastily took off in the other direction, not daring to test his control by prolonging the contact.

Later, making his final round of the camp, Jed noticed that the paint warhorse had been picketed near the wagons, with the mounts used by the herders. He grinned mirthlessly, the horse's being picketed wouldn't likely hinder a horse stealer who'd proved so crafty thus far. But it just could be that the redskin was ready to make his try for the horse—there'd been no sign close to the emigrant road until this day.

Jed moved his bedroll to a place deep in the shadow of some willow bushes from where he could see the horse herd and also the picket line. It was a dark night, moonrise would be well after midnight. If the Indian made his try it would be after the camp settled down and before the moon made light. There was still movement in camp, some people sitting around fires, so Jed decided to catch a nap. He dropped

off instantly, waking as though at an alarm when all was finally silent.

The night was inky black, thick with quiet. Jed's eyes adjusted, cat-like, and sought the picket line. The warhorse stood quietly, head down, among the shadowy shapes of the other horses, but he was a big horse and his rump was higher than the others. Silently, Jed sat comfortably cross-legged, facing the herd and the picket line. The only sounds were the slow, muffled movement of hoofs, the somnolent crunching of leisurely jaws. He knew he would not hear anything unusual, but as his eyes made wide circles which began and ended with the warhorse, his ears strained for the slightest whisper of activity.

He sat motionless for well over an hour. Then his gaze riveted on the fringe of the quiet herd. Two animals grazed out a little apart from the rest. One of them seemed to be moving naturally, but gradually it was nearing the picket line. After a very long while the lone grazer cropped grass a few feet from the picketed horses.

Jed grinned with admiration, this redskin was truly an accomplished horse stealer. Not once had the scout glimpsed him, there had been no untoward movement, even to his practiced eyes. But Jed knew where the Indian now was, as if he looked full at him—behind the herd side of that grazing horse. His arm would be crooked around its neck, his hand reaching up under the mane. His head would be flattened against and below the ridge of the animal's shoulder. His moccasined feet moved only in synchronization with the horse's slow, infrequent stepping. The unalarmed horse would respond to the pressure and drift, apparently aimlessly, wherever directed.

This was indeed a master horse stealer—among the tribes it was an ancient, well-studied science and a proud skill, for it could only be acquired dangerously. Jed could knowledgeably appreciate the proficiency he was seeing, for he had learned the art from old Red Feather himself, long considered to be the greatest horse stealer of all time. Not only among the Flatheads, of whom he was chief, but among all the tribes.

When the exchange of horses took place, Jed caught his first glimpse

of the Indian, and then only a shadowy figure that imperceptibly blended and was lost as the big warhorse commenced moving slowly, grazing back toward the herd.

Jed had stiffened with surprise. The shadow had been very small, slight. He frowned in puzzlement and then it dawned on him. By God, the thief was that youngster! That bitter-proud stripling with the banked embers of hate in his wild black eyes. The half-grown son of Crazy Horse!

Jed sat motionless, his mind racing, marveling, his heart suddenly full to suffocation with an emotion he could not down. That skinny, half-starved-looking kid. Well, by God!

The big horse and its invisible guide gained the fringes of the herd, mingled, and was lost in the shadowy outlines. Jed reached for his saddlebags, which he used as a pillow, and searched their contents. He checked the revolver he kept there, making sure all five chambers were filled.

The dark pool of shadow under the willows seemed unchanged but Jed no longer used their shelter. Quiet as a drifting hawk, he faded past the sleeping wagon train and its somnolent guards. Circling, he headed north and east toward a high, wooded knoll. He had probed the area all about the camp before sundown and knew without thinking about it that the buckskin was likeliest hid out on the highest point near the wagon encampment. Jed would have bet money on it that the youngster had likely watched the picketing of the warhorse.

Jed knew he had plenty of time to find the buckskin. The boy would graze the warhorse slowly along the edge of the herd, alert for the night guards as a stalking cougar. When he neared a line of trees along a little creek the horse would be slid past them at the moment the slow-moving guard was the farthest away. He'd walk the horse slowly, circling to come up the knoll on its far side. Then, with two mounts to alternate, he'd be fast, running miles beyond pursuit, come sunup. It was a good, well-thought-out plan—but the boy wouldn't have counted on Jed watching from the start.

The buckskin was there on the knoll, tethered under a tree, a hunting bow and quiver of arrows hung from a branch. The night was still black but the moon would soon rise, there was faintly lighter sky above the eastern hills. Jed moved off a ways from the patient little buckskin and settled in shadow to wait.

The rising moon had just bared a narrow curve above the mountains when Jed heard faint sounds. His mouth slitted into his crooked grin, the kid all but had the big brute of a warhorse tiptoeing. Then they appeared, the slight boy leading the slow-moving big horse. The boy halted and turned, put both arms about its neck, his face was hidden in its mane. Jed could see the deep sigh shudder across the bony young shoulders.

The scout made no more than a whisper of sound as he moved but the boy whirled like a cat, his hand whipping to the knife he carried. It gleamed wickedly before him as he half crouched, his slender muscles tight as a coiled steel spring.

Jed had taken only a couple of steps. He halted, stood with both hands extended, palm up. "The son of Crazy Horse," he said in the Sioux tongue, "goes lightly armed to make the big coup."

Seen close to, like this, the boy looked very young. His skin was pale for a Sioux, his hair was brown, not black, and Jed recalled that his boy-name in the tribes was "The Light-Haired One." Under-sized for his fifteen years he might be, but not frail, Jed knew. Those lean muscles would have the swift lash of a whip, he was plenty dangerous. Jed hoped he wouldn't throw the knife before they could talk. The boy spoke.

"I take back the honor of my uncle, Spotted Tail!" It was a challenge, the manner of it. He remained crouched and ready; he'd fight to the death before relinquishing the warhorse.

"My younger brother," Jed said softly, "is indeed an accomplished horse stealer. I saw him take the warhorse of Spotted Tail from near the wagons. I, who was the pupil of Red Feather, have never seen more skill than shown by the son of the great Crazy Horse."

Surprise, confused uncertainty, crossed the thin face. The term "younger brother" had great significance in the tribes. The boy straightened a little from his threatening crouch, his eyes were still wary but the frenzied defiance had abated.

Jed spoke again. "I have heard of the Light-Haired One from Hotoa-Quaihoois, Tall Bull, who is blood brother to Jim Bridger, my foster father."

The boy knew him now, he sheathed his knife and acknowledged the identification with a compliment delivered with the dignity of a patriarch. "Word has reached my people of Jed Smith, pupil of Red Feather. Loud have been the praises of Bridger and the Bad Hand."

Jed's grin crooked. Sure, Bad Hand Fitzpatrick, old mountain man, now government agent to the Indians on the upper Platte, would have bragged. He and Jim Bridger took on big over anything Jed did passably—these two tough old roosters had raised him from a pup.

The boy went on. "And there are still those among the Old Ones who speak of Singing Ax. They say that his son, Little Ax, now follows fittingly in his proud tracks."

Jed bowed his head with honest pride. Any place he set foot the deeds of his father, mountain man Jedediah Strong Smith, lived in legend and firelit chant. The proud title of Singing Ax had been bestowed by his enemies. Old Jed had been deeply religious—but a mighty fighter. Deadly in a hand-to-hand fracas, his usual weapon was a short ax and always, as he hewed mighty havoc, he chanted prayers for the dying, whose demise he sought to make mercifully swift. The deep bell of his voice ringing above the clamor of battle had created mighty big medicine about his person and the superstitious redskins took to avoiding a brush with mountain men if Singing Ax was known to be present. They believed that the powerful God of the white man sat on his big arm, breathing invincibility into him as he fought.

Ceremoniously Jed returned the compliment. "We have heard much of the son of Crazy Horse. His warrior-teacher, High Back Bone, has told that he killed his first buffalo before his head reached as tall as

his father's shoulder. We have heard that his naming ceremony will soon give him the proud name of his holy father, Crazy Horse."

Now the moon cleared the heights and the two young men saw each other plainly, their eyes met with warmth and mutual respect. It grew late and Jed wanted the youngster away from here.

"The moon has risen to make light your path to the Great Council," he said. "I would send word to the tepee of your father, if you will carry it."

"The words of my brother, Little Ax, will be carried in my heart and spoken straight on my tongue."

"Say to your father," Jed ordered his message with care, "the wise and holy Crazy Horse, that some men of our race shame us all. The red-beard who cheated to win the warhorse is one of these. Say to Crazy Horse that Little Ax was made glad by the manner of the return of honor to the lodge of Spotted Tail. I send a token of friendship to Crazy Horse—and greetings to all in his lodge."

Jed took up his saddlebags and held out the revolver. "It carries five shots," he said, "for the enemies of Crazy Horse. In the saddlebags there is grain for the horses and some jerked meat. The Light-Haired One must eat, but he should not pause to hunt now."

It was most evident that the boy could have had little to eat during his days of stalking vigilance. About the breechclout and knife belt, which were all he wore, his ribs curved gauntly. He accepted the revolver with both hands, his eyes shining boyishly. He examined it with delight before sticking it carefully through his belt.

The boy placed a hand on Jed's shoulder, the smile on his high-boned thin face was wildly beautiful. "The lodge of my father, Crazy Horse, is the lodge of my brother, Little Ax, from this night forth. The day will be good when he brightens it with his coming to us."

He settled his bow and quiver back of his shoulder, slung through one arm. Jed untied the buckskin as, with one lithe movement, the

boy mounted the warhorse. Jed slung the saddlebags across the pinto and handed him the halter line of the buckskin.

"Ride fast, younger brother," he said, "and take no thought for your back trail. Little Ax will not be able to discover any tracks and there be none down there"—with a scornful gesture toward the wagon train—"who could track a fat squaw through a snowbank."

A smile flashed white across the dusky, narrow face. "It will be as you say. And as I ride toward the rising of the Great One, I will sing a morning song for my brother."

Jed gave the black shoulder of the warhorse a farewell slap and stepped back. Wheeling the big animal, the buckskin trotting alongside, the boy rode out of the clearing, heading off the knoll toward the north and east.

Jed moved to the brow of the hill and watched. The slender rider was dwarfed, tiny on his powerful mount. They crossed into shadows at the base of the hill and then into a long meadow bathed, now, in moonlight. Jed saw the strides of the horses lengthen, reach swiftly out, flowing into a full run. Faintly as the echo of a drumbeat the rhythmic rumble of swinging hoofs came drifting back on the night wind. They had reached the far side of the meadow, now they rushed into enveloping trees and were gone from sight.

A shadow slipped down from the knoll and drifted toward the wagon train. Jed circled silently back toward his bedroll, pausing at the picket line. Tethered in place of the warhorse was a tall black gelding. Driven into the ground in front of its nose was a Sioux war arrow, its slender shaft ceremoniously dark with dried blood. The son of Crazy Horse had observed with warriorlike care all of the traditional details of the coup.

Jed thought, with some wistfulness, of the triumphant entry the boy would make into the encampment of his people. Proudly riding the great warhorse between the rows of tepees, startling them into rejoicing. He'd have given a lot to see it, maybe he'd one day hear tell of it from Tall Bull. It would be a story retold, of that he was sure,

holding all the makings of great legend, always so dear to the Indian heart.

He felt a wave of great satisfaction over this night's business, he smiled up at the peaceful moon. And as he settled down to sleep he dreamed, his heart mounted and rode with fierce pride in the moonlight above the thundering hoofs of the warhorse of Spotted Tail.

WINE WITHOUT PRICE

by Bill Burchardt

As editor of the Oklahoma State Magazine, Bill Burchardt has done much to encourage Indian art and to preserve Indian folklore. As a writer, he has contributed to numerous magazines. "Wine Without Price" won first place in the 1959 short story contest of the Oklahoma State Writers' Association. As a member of WWA, with a big assist by Mrs. Burchardt, he organized the WWA convention of 1959 at Oklahoma City, in which both Indian City and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame collaborated. He is currently vice-president of the WWA. Bill is a qualified band director and choir director, sings tenor, and talks Indian sign language. He is an Honorary Chief of the Kiowa tribe with the name of Payl-tah-gyah-d'keah, which means "Man Who Thinks Good." Always a popular couple at WWA roundups, Bill and his petite Denise live in Midwest City with their three lovely young daughters.

Her first impression was the webs. Cobwebs, spider's webs between the logs, obscuring the corners, and floating in glistening traces from the low, cedar-shake roof. Clare stood by the leather-hinged door,

Copyright © 1960 by Bill Burchardt.

breathing the strong wood smell of old blackjack logs . . . desperately rejecting the lonely dismay that clutched at her. David was out of the wagon now, waiting behind her, and the timber was silent except for the tired, hot singing of the locusts. One of the horses blew impatiently and stamped a heavy shod hoof in the dry blackjack leaves.

Clare lifted off her sunbonnet; "Where did we load the broom, David?"

"At the back of the plunder," he replied, "somewhere around that bedding by the endgate."

Clare McDaniel turned then, away, so that he could not see her face, and walked to the wagon. She did not go at once for the broom, but climbed a front-wheel spoke and looked down at the baby. He was sleeping, quietly, shaded by the high spring seat and the wagon cover. She secured the mosquito bar again, thinking that the baby had weathered the hot miles better than herself.

As she stepped down, she saw that David still waited beside the door of the log hut; but she said nothing . . . and he came to the wagon and began to unhitch the team.

The cabin was old, deserted by some hide hunter; dim, unused, musty, dirt-floored. David had said it would do for the first year, until he could get some land broken and find time to build them a proper home.

The August heat was stifling in the cabin. By the time she had brushed the cobwebs from the low ridgepole and swept down one wall she was wet and stinging with perspiration. There was no window in the hut. She used the broom handle to punch out some of the loose, cracked chinking where the logs bent crookedly near the fireplace. A faint, hot wind stirred through the opening.

Clare went outside then to clean her broom and David had the team unhitched, leading them off toward the creek and tugging at the cow's lead rope. She was a Guernsey and a good milker, but gaunted and weary from the dusty plodding behind the wagon.

Clare left her broom against the door and went back in to tug at the

charred, decay-molded logs in the fireplace. One of them turned suddenly and a large yellow-orange centipede rushed from beneath it. Turning, it raced directly at Clare's skirts. A spasm of sheer terror choked and shook her . . . and she was still quivering with fright when she had killed it and swept it outside with the cinders and ashes.

David was coming up from the creek now, a blond man burned by sun and wind, ill-fitted by the rough gray clothing he had bought for work. He saw the fright in her eyes . . . and the dead centipede on the ground.

"I hobbled the team and loosed them to graze," he began, and paused, and clumsily took her shoulders and drew her to him. His voice was thick and uncertain when he spoke again, slowly, "I'll take you back, Clare. It was a mistake. I don't know what I was thinking about."

She said nothing. Resting there against the rough weave of his shirt, she could feel him shake his head.

"It was a fool thing . . . it seemed all right when I was here by myself, but for you and the baby . . ."

She said quietly, "We'll stay."

"For tonight," he agreed. "Come morning, we'll load up and head back for Kansas."

"There's nothing there for us," she said. "If we can stay one night, we can stay another—and another."

"Clare, you've got to be sure."

"It can't be worse than the trip out here," she said. Five days and sleepless nights in a chair car of a wood-burning train. Heat, grime, smoke and stench, nervous fatigue, and a tired and restless baby . . .

"There's more work than we can possibly do," David said. "Barnett says he can't stop us from homesteading here. But he's been grazing here since sixty-five and he swears it won't grow anything but grama grass. I'm sure it will grow cotton, but we'll have to fence every foot to keep his steers out. They'll eat cotton—bolls, seeds, and all."

Clare listened, understanding his strong desire to stay even as he argued against it . . . "Then there's the Indians. The Comanches are less than fifty miles south, just across the Washita. They're supposed to be tame, but Barnett says the soldiers can't keep the young bucks from breaking out once in a while. You saw Dean's store when we came past; the place is an outright fort against raiding war parties."

Clare moved away from him then, taking the broom from where she had left it in the doorway. "We'll stay," she said. "There'll be opportunity for young David here as he grows up. If Dean manages to keep his children here without even a wife to help him, we'll make out."

"You haven't seen those children though, Clare. Old Dean was a squaw man. The boy is about seventeen and looks more Indian than white. He moves like a ghost and won't look you in the face. Old Dean calls him Andy, I think. The girl is maybe a year or so younger and looks like a Wichita squaw."

"They're human though, just as we are. If they can live in this wilderness, we can too." Clare attacked the webs and dust of the south wall with vigor.

After the cabin was cleaned and swept, Clare began to think of supper. David brought the cradle from the wagon and carried the baby in. He was wide awake now and smiled with pink-gummed delight, waving his warm moist arms, as Clare changed him. She took clean things from among the tiny clothes she had sewn, then flopped him on his tummy, where he watched with bright interest as his daddy repaired the only piece of furniture the cabin had contained; a lopsided table of split blackjack logs.

Clare fried potatoes and salt pork in the intense heat before the open fireplace. She boiled creek water for the baby and made coffee, refusing to let her mind dwell on the number of meals she must cook in the terrible heat of this hearth before late fall brought a cool relief.

She ate then, with David, though weariness had blighted her ap-

petite. Later, as dusk faded into the cabin, Clare arose to light a tallow dip and clear the table. David carried an armload of bedding in from the wagon, and returned to get his Bible; a great heavy book severely bound in leather, which he placed on the table.

They sat together then and Clare held the baby in her arms as David leaned near the tallow dip and read:

“. . . everyone that thirsteth, come to the waters, and he that hath no money . . . come, buy, and eat; yea, come . . .”

The busy days moved on toward the fall. David sawed post-oak puncheons, floored the cabin, and built a bed by lacing rope from the walls to uprights set in the floor. He split rails to fence the cabin clearing and plowed a fireguard outside the new fence.

Equally busy, Clare cooked and mended and kept her family and helped David clear twenty acres of timber for fall planting. She watched the lowering supply of salt pork in its wooden tub, observed the fast diminishing supply of flour and potatoes, and wondered, and worried a little. David spoke of depending on wild game for meat during the winter months, and as the days grew shorter he sat one evening peering through the opening where Clare had punched the loose chinking from the logs. Suddenly he exclaimed softly and took his rifle from its hangings over the mantel. As he poked the long barrel through the opening he whispered, “Look here, Clare!”

Excited by the tension in his voice, she moved across and knelt beside the opening. Sighting along the side of his rifle, she saw a dark silhouette against the dusk, perched in a walnut tree at the clearing's edge. The rifle spoke then, deafening her, and the hot powder burned her neck as the great bird fluttered and fell.

David leaped up and was gone, returning jubilantly a moment later, carrying a wild turkey that seemed as big as a yearling calf. “You see! There's deer and antelope, and as soon as frost, there'll be every kind of bird you can mention. I'll hitch up and make a trading trip to old

man Dean's next week. We'll need sorghum, and flour, and what all. . . . I think we'll miss no meals this winter."

On the next Monday, the first of November, David harnessed the team and drew the wagon up before the cabin. He sat on the high seat with a foot on the lever and checked the list once again with Clare. She stood in the doorway, her hands folded beneath her apron, for there was a slight chill in the day, and watched him pull away out of the clearing and onto the trail.

He was back by midafternoon; and the wagon was still empty.

Clare watched from the doorway as the team ran through the yard, seeing the hard set of his face as the wagon plunged by. He was past then, driving straight to the pole-and-brush barn he had built by the creek. It was an hour before he returned.

He came, bringing the cow up from where she had been grazing beyond the timber; driving the slow-moving heifer before him into the clearing, her bell clanging dully as she plodded in. He closed the gate rails then, tying them so that the cow could not hook them down, and came on to the cabin.

Even then he did not speak, until Clare asked, "What is it, David?"

David McDaniel lowered his stare and sat heavily in a willow-woven chair beside the table. "Dean won't sell to us," he murmured, and expelled a long, sighing breath.

Astonishment struck her and her face clouded with surprised curiosity; "Won't sell to us! Why, forevermore?"

"He says we don't belong here. He says this is cattle land and he won't have any part of ruining the country."

"Well, forevermore!"

In an abrupt surge of anger, David struck the table with his knotted fist and came to his feet. "We can't stay here if we can't eat!" he cried.

The baby came awake in his cradle, his tiny body wrenching as the shout frightened him, and he began to cry. Clare ran to take him up,

then took David's arm gently, chiding, "Here, now . . . we'll make do somehow . . ."

"Make do!" He sat down abruptly, his clenched fist rigid against the table.

She quieted the baby, and the silence ran on. At last she said, "Yes, we'll make out. Tomorrow morning you'll start for Kansas."

David shook his head dismally. "We'll have to wait a few days before we leave . . ."

And Clare broke in sharply, "We'll not leave! I will not be driven out by a snuff-dipping old man who doesn't have enough gumption to attend to his own business."

David leaned to look up at her, his face darkening; "Do you mean that you want me to go alone to Kansas for supplies?"

"Of course. The nights are too cold to camp out with the baby."

"That's out of the question, Clare. You'd be left alone here for more than a week. This country is hardly safe for a well-armed man, let alone a woman with a baby. Perhaps we can come back in the spring——"

"You know that's nonsense, David. We have to stay the winter to prove up on the claim. If you start right soon perhaps you can make it back before freeze. Remember, you'll be carrying potatoes and other things that must not freeze or they'll spoil."

She let her voice run on, feeling that her best argument was just to take it for granted that the trip would be made. Yet, for the two following days, David went ahead with his plans to pack up and abandon the homestead. He talked of trying to get some work in Kansas . . . he had heard the railroad was building south; perhaps . . .

Clare made small changes in the list of purchases and continued urging. Then, on the third evening as they sat down to supper, David said, "Clare, do you really think you'd be all right?"

"I don't know what's to bother. I haven't seen a living soul in the three months we've been here!"

"Well—I'll chop some more wood after supper to be sure you'll

have enough——” And Clare was suddenly not at all sure that she was glad she had won.

He considered, thoughtfully; “You’d best get the cow up a good while before dark every evening. Better take her bell off too, just in case some wandering savage might hear it. I can be back in six, maybe five days. Get down the rifle.”

Arising before dawn, he repeated again his instructions on how to load and fire the rifle; then he climbed into the wagon. Somehow, as the wagon drew out of sight and sound, the homestead became a different place than it had ever been before.

Throughout the day, she kept determinedly busy. When she became still on the completion of some task, the silence seemed deadening, heavy and pressing in upon her. As evening came on she brought the cow inside the fence and removed her bell. The timber seemed strangely, forbiddingly silent.

Thinking that she would not be plagued by meaningless fears, Clare went inside and built the fire to crackling brightness and made the baby comfortable for the night. She checked the latch, and finding it tightly set, drew in the latchstring. Then she heard the whistling.

It was a high, tuneless, meandering sound. Clare stood there, listening, her flesh chilled and rough. She knew that she could not shoot the rifle. . . . There was the sound of an ax thunking solidly into the chopping stump outside the door.

The steps sorted carelessly through the dead leaves and stopped before the door. A softly accented voice called, “Ma’am? I’m Andy Dean. Pap and me saw your man leavin’. Pap says this ain’t no place for a woman by herself. I come a-whistlin’ so as not to scare you. I’ll shoulder my ax an’ go back if I ain’t needed.”

Moved by a deep impulse of relief, Clare McDaniel lifted the latch and opened the door. The youth there was slouching, backward, clad in worn ragged-fringed buckskins, his darkly alert eyes always an instant ahead of her gaze.

“Andy Dean?” she said.

"Yes'm. Looks like you don't need no wood cut."

"Will you come in?"

"Well, fer a spell. I'll sleep out here somewheres, though. Ain't much used to sleepin' inside." He came in and squatted before the fire, and talked. With the strange eagerness of a boy unused to company, he loved to talk.

"Pap ain't so ornery as he made out to your man, t'other day. He gets contrary spells. I reckon he's regretful of the way he used you folks. He says if you're so set on stayin' you'll go clean back to Kansas fer necessaries, he might as well have the business. I see you'ns got a baby."

He arose and looked into the crib, then returned and squatted once more before the fire; "I took the sojers through when they was huntin' Mrs. Larabee an' her baby. The Injuns caught her from some settlement down near the border. We was too late to save the baby, though. The lady said they'd rode hard all day, headin' for the cedar-brakes country. It was hot and dirty an' rough an' the baby kept cryin' an' the lady kept wantin' the Injuns to stop so the baby could rest. Then one of the bucks said he'd rest the baby, and he took an' threw it up in the air. It's real dry and hard over there in the staked plains, an' by the time he'd throwed the baby up an' let it hit the ground two or three times, it was dead. The Injun took the dead body then and tied it onto her saddle horn with a piece of leather . . ."

Cold with horror, Clare managed to break in; "I'm very tired," she cried almost hysterically. She did not know what to say then, for this boy, inured to the brutality of the frontier, could not know the effect of his story upon her. She murmured, half coherent, "Perhaps in the morning—we can talk, again—"

He was perplexed at her manner but he said, arising, "I reckon I'll be gone afore you're up in the morning. But I'll be back, after noon."

Clare loosened her hair then, and lay beneath the quilts; awake, feeling secure in the protection of the part-Indian plains boy, knowing that she should sleep. Yet each time her eyes wandered to the sleeping

baby the chilling flesh of a creeping horror came upon her. For the first time, she fully understood why David had said this was no country for a woman. The baby awoke, crying out a little. She took him to her breast, comforting him, and his warmth and nearness let the fatigue in her overcome her tension and she slept.

Andy Dean came trotting down the trail almost as soon as baby David had gone to sleep after his midday meal. They spent the afternoon searching the timber at the clearing's edge for roots and herbs for winter medicines. They gathered wild-cherry bark, stillingia root, and prickly-ash bark to be boiled together for tonic. Seedling peach stones to be rendered down for earache oil; black-walnut hulls, sassafras, and sage. The next day, Andy Dean showed her how to cook wild sand plums, colander out the seeds, and preserve the pulp by drying it in thin sheets he called "plum leather."

Clare spent much time each day in playing with the baby. Sometimes she felt guilty, knowing that she took time from necessary chores. She remembered her sister-in-law back in Kentucky, who always seemed to be wishing that her baby was "a little older" . . . so that there would be no more diapers . . . so that he could feed himself . . . then so he could be "out from underfoot." Clare somehow wanted young David to grow in his own time, without hurry or halting either. She felt that he needed much of her time and affection. And she knew that she was storing up memories for herself; and then the evening came when Andy Dean did not come at his usual time.

Darkness came early, then faded into the brilliant white glow of a rising full moon. Clare worked at routine tasks until all were done, then placed her shawl over her head and stepped from the cabin for one last, deeply concerned look. The chill air held the bite of early winter and a lone screech owl quavered somewhere in the nearby timber. As Clare stood, waiting, a coyote yapped shrilly—the high, yipping howl seeming to come from no certain direction.

She was about to step inside again when she thought she saw some

vague movement cross the trail. Clare turned suddenly then as fright came upon her, then the moving figure seemed to come directly for the poles of the gate. Clare hesitated again—it might be Andy.

But she knew it was not, for this was some bulky thing, in contrast to Andy's slender, supple movement. It seemed to stagger and weave almost to the point of falling, yet it came on, reaching and hanging upon the gate bars. Clare moved quickly toward it then, for some obscure shift of its silhouette had become the swirl of a heavy skirt.

The figure fell across the fence rails and into the clearing. Holding her shawl firmly, Clare ran toward the heaped shadow on the ground, reaching the strange, dark-faced girl as she staggered erect. Clara grasped her weaving shoulders, and the frightened girl strangled out a single word: "Indians!"

Clare helped her inside, closed and latched the door. The exhausted girl fell into a chair at the table, her dark copper face round with fear and shining with sweat.

"The soldiers—" she panted, "—this afternoon—war party—Comanches"—the story came in half-strangled gasps—"off reservation. Andy—go with them. He knows—places where they hide. I am Emma; Andy's—sister."

Emma Dean sipped the glass of warm milk Clare poured for her, gradually regaining her breath as she talked on; "Comanche strike quickly. I think of this and am foolish with fear"—the dark girl smiled sheepishly—"afraid of a stump, or a shadow that moves with the wind—even the sound of a familiar animal——"

The coyote spoke again from the timber, seeming nearer, and a distant whippoorwill called, almost in answer. Clare could not remember having ever heard the cry of a whippoorwill after dark; and some vague sound stirred the leaves in the clearing outside the cabin.

Emma Dean pointed silently to the opening between the logs where Clare had punched out the chinking. It was admitting a shaft of light out into the night. Clare took up a cotton quilt from the bed and

stuffed it into the crack. She banked the fire on the hearth then until only the faintest shadowy glow came out into the room.

The baby cooed softly in his cradle and Clare took him up, holding him against her and soothing him quiet. Then, into the long and pendant silence, there came again the vague motion in the dry leaves beyond the door. Emma Dean arose from the table and moved silently back against the wall—as a gently brushing hand seemed to touch the outside of the door, pushing, and finding it solid; then moving down as though seeking some handle or latch.

Clare McDaniel watched the half-Indian girl's face drain to chalk; and listened to the sound of a gently exhaled breath against the log wall outside. The body scraped along the bark then, coming to the corner and turning it, seeking, Clare knew, a window or some opening. Clare could feel the muscles within her turn to milk, and her heart was a thudding and churning violence.

Her head became light as the searcher reached the place where the quilt stuffed the opening. He seemed to pass it, then came slowly back. She swayed against the table as the quilt began to be slowly drawn away.

Sudden and vivid in her memory, Clare saw again the turkey David had shot through that opening, fluttering, falling; . . . as the last, tenacious edge of the quilt was pulled out of the crack. Yet no weapon was thrust in; and no savage Indian face appeared there.

For Clare could see now—in the bright whiteness of the full moonlight—the Guernsey cow, chewing at the cotton quilt, moving back slowly with her prize. "We'll have to fence to keep Barnett's steers out. They'll eat cotton—" David's remembered words flooded back to her now, and Clare McDaniel giggled.

Sidelong, she glanced at Emma Dean, and her giggle became a laugh in the tension—a noisy laugh—and she must be more quiet, Clare told herself, for there might yet be danger. But the laughing shook her body now, loud and strident, as her muscles drew taut and hard, and the laughter became a wild, crazy sound in her own ears.

The wailing cry held on and on, possessing her, and her arms suddenly jerked in spasmodic helplessness. But as Emma Dean ran forward to take the slipping, falling child Clare locked her arms again. The girl before her was Indian—and she was trying to take her baby. The baby was crying now, from the pain of Clare's choking grasp, but its sharp little cries became confused and meaningless in Clare's dulled hearing.

Emma Dean clutched at Clare's arms, futilely trying to ease their clasp on the choked and blackening child. Clare kicked and fought her away. Yet she was eager to release the baby—confused, seized, and hysterical, and somehow she broke the tautness in her back and the Indian girl took the baby from her arms.

Clare gave way then—kneeling at the table's edge, forcing her head down against her clenched hands; and the hard wailing tension became warm, releasing, sobbing.

Somewhere then, off in the night, there was the sound of a wagon . . . iron wheels jarring, clattering sideboards, and the beat of running hoofs. Emma Dean moved to the door and opened it, and stood holding the baby in the shaft of moonlight as the wagon came down upon the clearing.

"It is your man," she said quite calmly. "And my brother is with him. The soldiers must have found the Indians, or Andy would still be out with them."

Clare McDaniel stood slowly. She brushed away the hair that had fallen across her eyes; then, gently, she touched the Bible that lay there on the table before her.

". . . everyone that thirsteth, come to the waters, and he that hath no money . . . come, buy, and eat . . . buy wine and milk, without money—and without price!"

THE BRUSHOFF

THE 1958 SPUR AWARD WINNER

Peggy Simson Curry

For her Saturday Evening Post story "The Brushoff," Peggy Curry was awarded a WWA Spur for the best Western short story published in 1957—the second woman to win in that category. Besides many magazine stories and a book of poetry, she has published several novels, most recent of which are So Far from Spring and The Oil Patch. Western to the core, Peg's vigorous fiction is well flavored with sun and sagebrush and peopled by the kind of pioneer folks she knows so well in her own Wyoming and Colorado. She has served on the WWA executive board during the past year. She and her husband, Bill, live in Casper, Wyoming.

It was a summer when ranchers in the valley wrote to relatives they didn't give a darn about, and asked them to come for a visit. The ranchers mentioned how good the fishing was and how many young sage chickens had hatched out and would be of eating size by haying season. The idea was that some of these shirttail relations might be persuaded to hook up a team and help put up hay, for hired men were hard to find.

The boss didn't write any letters. He said all his relatives were

Copyright © 1957 by The Curtis Publishing Company.

women and scared of horses. Instead, we went to Denver when we got ready to put up the hay. We had some men at the ranch, but not enough. We had the old steadies—the Madson brothers from Steamboat Springs, Slim the stacker, the Swede sickle grinder, and Old Jack Patton, who drove a lead rake. And we had our share of the drifters who'd happened along at the right time.

The boss and I went down on the street in Denver where the newspaper had said men would be waiting for hire, and there they were, standing around in the sun. It was a seedy-looking outfit, I can tell you—some sobering up from the night before, some too old and frail for any kind of work, and some who looked as if they'd walked out of the hoboes' jungle.

The boss gave them the eye and was about to go on past when this kid came walking up the street and stood off by himself near the other men. He was a big, mean-looking kid with thick blond hair that was greased flat to his head, and eyes that were as clear and cold as our mountain lakes. He took out the makings and built himself a cigarette and let it hang in the corner of his mouth while he sized us up. His overalls were clean and faded, and I judged him to be around seventeen. He didn't have any fuzz on his cheeks yet.

"Well," the boss said in a low tone, "it's husky and alive. Wadda you think, Jeff?"

"Y'know that wild steer that was always bustin' outta the pasture? That's what it is, only two-legged. You finally had to butcher that steer, boss."

"Yeah," the boss muttered, "and even the meat was tough." He gave a tired sigh and started to move away.

Just then a little girl came running up the street, with her mother yelling behind her. The little girl was carrying a small doll, and when she got in front of the kid she dropped it. The doll broke and the little girl began to cry. The kid got down on his knees and tried to put the doll's head together, but it kept falling apart. The little

girl kept watching him and whimpering, and the little girl's mother said, "Oh, shut up, Lindy! I'll buy you another doll."

The kid got up and looked at the broken pieces on the sidewalk. "It don't stay together no more," he said. Then he reached in his pocket and brought out a tiny figure of an Indian doll. It looked old and dirty and he handed it to the little girl and said, "Here, you keep this."

The little girl smiled, and her mother yelled, "Put that filthy rag down!" But the little girl went skipping on up the street with the Indian doll in her hands, and the mother ran after her.

The kid looked at us, and his lips drew tight and thin. "It didn't cost me nothin'," he said coldly. "I swiped it at a carnival."

The boss walked over to him and said casually, "Ever make any hay, stranger?"

"Yep," the tight lips barely moved.

"Know how to handle horses?"

"Yep."

"You want a job working in the hayfield up at my ranch?" the boss asked.

The kid shrugged. "Why not? I got nowhere else to go."

"Well," the boss said, "we'll pick up your stuff, then."

"You're lookin' at it," the kid said, and something glared at us from the green eyes, a light that dared us to ask if he didn't have a coat or a jacket or a suitcase or something.

"Let's get moving," the boss said, and the three of us walked up the hot, bright street to where we'd parked our car. The kid got in and he never said a word all the way to Laramie, Wyoming. We picked up three men in Laramie; they were talkative, smelled like whisky, and had battered suitcases. They spoke to the kid, but he just gave them a nod and acted as if they weren't around.

We went to the café to eat, and the boss said the meal was on him. The kid looked at the menu a long time, and finally the boss said, "Order anything you want, boy."

The kid finally said to the waitress, "Just a hamburger. I don't care how it's cooked."

He tried to eat it without hurrying and his face got red. He didn't order any pie and, when the pie was in front of the other men, the kid got up and walked out to the car.

"He's been in reform school," one of the new men said. "I can spot 'em a mile off."

"That so?" the boss asked politely.

"Why, sure. And if you don't mind, mister, I ain't bunking in the same place with that kid."

It turned out that nobody had to sleep near the kid. When we got to the ranch, he took a shine to the old sheep wagon the boss had parked by the river. "Anybody livin' in that wagon?" the kid asked.

"No, it's not much of a wagon any more," the boss replied.

"I'd like to be by myself," the kid said.

"Help yourself," the boss answered. "I'll rustle you up some bedding."

The next morning at the corral, the boss said to the kid, "You know how to harness a team, boy?"

The kid nodded, but when he got in the barn he put the first collar on upside down, and the men began to snicker and make talk. Old Jack Patton straightened the kid out. He came walking through the barn, thin and sour and bowlegged. A scowl settled over his lined face, and his gray hair stuck out in uncombed tufts above his ears.

"Well," he said dryly, "at least you got it on the right end of the horse, and that's more than some dumb city kids know." Old Jack Patton set the collar right and said, "You and me are going to be lead rakin' in the hayfield. I give the orders. You take 'em, see?"

Nobody in the hay crew ever got along with Old Jack Patton, but he was the best hayraker in the country. When a man worked with him Old Jack set the pace; if he drove slowly, he wanted the man following him to go at the same pace; if he speeded up, he expected the

man with him to speed up. Old Jack Patton said when it was time to start and when to quit.

That first day the kid raked he was as mad as a hornet when we stopped for the noon meal that was always sent out hot in the lunch wagon. "What's goin' on around here?" the kid asked angrily. "Everybody else gets to quit and gets their teams unhooked and we make two or three more passes at that grass."

"Old Jack Patton believes in outworkin' the rest of the crew," I said. "He wants to keep a lot of hay raked up so the stackers can be busy."

"Bossy old devil," the kid muttered.

We didn't see Old Jack Patton come up beside us until he spoke.

"Listen, you city punk," he said harshly to the kid, "if you don't like the way I do it, you can quit—see? I don't need you. I don't need anybody. I can handle any job and handle it myself—see? Don't get the idea I want you around."

"And I don't want to be around you," the kid shouted back at him.

Old Jack Patton's strange yellow eyes glinted. "Good! Suits me. Run and cry to the boss, then. You tough reform-school kids gotta cry about the world."

The kid stiffened and his fists came up. His face was mean and ugly. "You call me that again and I'll beat your head in!"

Old Jack Patton spat at the kid's feet. Then he turned with slow deliberation and sauntered toward the lunch wagon.

The kid stood clenching and unclenching his fists. "I could break that old man in two," he said.

"Wouldn't change him none," I said. "He'd be the same in two pieces or one."

That night the kid was late for supper. As usual, Old Jack Patton made a couple of rounds with his rake after the other men had unhooked their teams and started for the house. When the kid came into the cookshack, the crew began to ride him about playing nursemaid to Old Jack Patton. Lola, the peroxide-blond cook, said, "You guys

shut up. Lay off." And she let her big blue eyes get soft as she looked at the kid.

Everybody knew what was happening; wasn't that she felt sorry for the kid or anything like that. She just had him marked for a sucker, and Lola always had suckers in every hay crew. I figured since the kid was so tough and had been in reform school, he wouldn't fall for the line. But he looked up at her as if she might be some kind of angel.

Old Patton leaned close to me and muttered, "Reform school didn't teach him nothing. He's so soft inside it's pitiful."

It seemed to me that, after that, Old Jack Patton set out to make life hell for the kid. He worked the tail off him and bawled him out in front of the men. The kid didn't say a word, but his eyes got hotter and brighter, and sometimes the look in them scared me. Every night at the supper table Lola gave the kid the soft soap plus an extra-big piece of pie. And the first chance he had to go to town, he spent all his wages buying her candy and perfume and a red silk handkerchief.

"I'm gonna ask her to go to the haymaker's ball next week," he told me one night when I stopped by the sheep wagon. He was sprawled out on the bunk. In the light from the kerosene lamp, he didn't look mean and hard. He only looked young and lonely.

"Look, kid," I said, "there's some women do a man good because they want good to come to a man. And there's other women who don't care a hang for anything but the money that's spent on 'em."

"Lola's not what you think," he said in a low tone. "She's had a hard time, like me. And nobody understands her, just like nobody understands how I am inside. She stands for something; she's not fulla lies, like most people. She stands for being good to me."

"I guess if a man's thirsty enough he'll drink poison and think it's good," I muttered. I sat quiet and still and heard the river murmuring by, and the river said that some people were born to trouble and had it always because they never got things straightened out. I looked at the kid again and I knew he was thinking of Lola and how, to him, her greedy eyes looked kind. I said, "Ain't you got no folks, kid?"

He made a choked-off sound, and for a while there was silence. Then he said, keeping his voice low and steady, "If I still got 'em, I wouldn't know where they are. Both of 'em run off with other people. That's when I got drunk, and I don't mind tellin' you I broke in a liquor store to find the whisky. After I had enough of it, I stole the cash I could find. That's why I got sent to reform school." Again he was quiet. Then he said in a small tone, "Yeah, and when Christmas come, neither one of 'em even sent me a card. Every other kid there—no matter what bad thing he had done—got something from someone who remembered him, a card or a present or something." He began to laugh. "I made myself a card, but it didn't fool nobody."

Old Jack Patton stuck his head in the doorway then and said in his usual hard tone, "You didn't bathe the horses' shoulders. You drive a team with me and you take some care of your horses or I'm askin' the boss to tie a can on you."

I heard Old Jack Patton's footsteps echo away. The kid said, "I hate the old buzzard! If he wasn't so sure he could make me quit, I'd have gone long ago."

"Better men than you have quit because of him," I said. "But I want to tell you something, kid; Old Jack's not hard inside. He's only lean and tough and honest. He wants to make a man out of you."

"Yeah?" The kid laughed. "Don't give me that stuff. He's like all the rest of 'em around here. I smell reform school and no matter what I do, it won't make any difference. But I can be as mean as he can." The kid rolled off the bunk. "I'll see to those horses, but I swear there ain't a mark on their shoulders. They don't need their shoulders bathed any more than I do."

The next week was the haymaker's ball in town, and the kid asked a couple of days in advance to borrow my car. "Lola said she'd go with me," he said, "and I'll be real careful with your car."

We were standing by the barn, and the evening light was creeping in over the meadows. "Sure," I said, "sure, kid." He walked away

toward the sheep wagon, and Old Jack Patton came out of the barn and stood beside me.

"I wonder where he'll get a suit," Old Jack Patton said. "He can't take her in them thin overalls he's been washing out at night and putting on half wet in the mornin'."

"I've got no suit," I said.

The next night I stopped by the sheep wagon, and the kid was whistling and polishing his old work shoes. "I'm gonna clean your car early in the mornin' so's it'll look nice," he said.

"That's good," I said.

"Hey, kid!" It was Old Jack Patton calling from outside.

"Yeah? What do you want?"

"Just wanted to be sure you're there." And Old Jack Patton tossed a big box into the sheep wagon. I heard him walk away.

"What's that?" the kid asked suspiciously.

"You can look," I said.

It was what I had figured. It was a fancy suit and it was the right size. The kid kept turning it over and over and staring at it. Finally he said, "Where'd he get it, anyhow?"

"I figure he had the boss's wife buy it for him in town," I said. "Lord, kid, Old Jack Patton hasn't put on a suit in forty or fifty years."

The kid's head went down and he said in a low voice, "I guess he wanted me to look right, didn't he?"

"I guess he did."

"A fella's father wouldn't do more," the kid said wonderingly.

The next morning at the corral the kid tried to thank Old Jack Patton, and Old Jack glared at him and said, "It's moth-y. Only time I ever wore it was to a funeral. It's ready to fall apart. I'd a-given it to the trash barrel before now if I'd thought about it." And he turned and led his team from the corral, shouting back at the kid, "Get the lead out! We got hay to rake."

When we came in from work that night, all the younger men started cleaning up for the haymaker's ball. They shaved and scrubbed

themselves in the creek and took their good pants or suits out of their suitcases. Slim, the pusher driver, was the handsomest man in the outfit, and that night he spent a lot of time sizing himself up in the mirror. "A big night coming," he said. "I'm taking cooky."

"You mean our cooky?" I asked.

"Only one around here, ain't she?" Slim asked innocently.

"Don't, Slim. Don't take her."

His mouth came open and he stared at me. "Why? You got a shine for her, Jeff?"

"She promised the kid," I said.

"Y' mean the reform bird? I'm not steppin' aside for that stuff."

"I'm asking you to, Slim."

Slim put down the comb. "You want me to tell you something, Jeff? You're a softhearted old fool. You been kiddin' yourself along, telling yourself he isn't so bad. Well, you're wrong. That kind don't change."

"Who don't change?" The words came cold and hard from the doorway of the bunkhouse, and there stood the kid in his fine suit and his hair all slicked down and his eyes ablaze like July lightning.

Slim told him and told him hard and fast. The kid went after Slim, then. We got them separated, but not before the kid's eye was black and his lip cut and blood spattering the white shirt that had come with the suit. The kid started for the cookhouse and I ran after him, shouting, "Wait a minute, kid!" He went up the steps in two long strides and me right after him.

Lola was frying the supper potatoes. She turned and looked at us, and the kid blurted out, "You're goin' with me to the dance. You promised!"

Lola yawned and stretched and she looked like a sleek, happy cat. "That was a while ago, honey," she said. "I got a right to change my mind."

The kid turned and walked out. He went to the sheep wagon and he didn't come in for supper. I told Lola off in words a gentleman don't

use to a lady, but as the boss sometimes says, "A man can't spit enough to water a dry ground."

I waited around the bunkhouse that night until they'd all gone, and in the quiet there was only the smell of hair tonic and shoe polish and whisky. I waited until Lola had gone with Slim, and the darkness lay deep on the meadows that smelled of the cut hay. Then I walked down by the river to the sheep wagon. There wasn't any light, but I knew he was there. I said, "Kid?" There was no answer, and I stepped inside and sat in the dark and I could hear him breathing there on the bunk.

After a while I said, "You may not think it, but you're better off she turned you down. She never was anything but a——"

"Shut up!" It was a snarl of sound. "I get it, see? I get the picture like I got it before. Nobody tells the truth; nobody stands for what they pretend to stand for. Nobody's anything real and steady; they all change into something lyin' or mean or ugly. They told me in reform—the big guy said, 'The world will treat you right. Nobody'll hold a mistake against you.' He lied and he knew it, see? First I believed him, and then I believed Lola, and it was the same. Nobody's what they pretend. It's all pretend."

"Wait a minute, kid. Not all of us. The boss and I and Old Jack—some people stand for things they believe. Some people——"

"Get out! Get out and leave me alone."

I went back to the bunkhouse, and there sat Old Jack Patton reading a story about cowboys and rustlers. He looked up and said, "Well, she give him the run-around, didn't she?"

"He didn't have it coming," I said.

"A man's got to have enough inside to take anything that's coming—trouble, death, and lyin' women. Until he's got that inside, he don't amount to nothing."

"But he's only a kid," I said.

"The hand of cards life dealt him, he better grow up fast," Old Jack Patton said, and went back to his reading.

The next morning the kid got some whisky from the men and got drunk. He was already sick when we reached the hayfield. He hooked up his team and then he leaned against the wheel of the rake and looked terrible.

Old Jack Patton walked up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him hard. He said, "Get on that rake and rake hay. If you got a job to do, you do it, see? You do it whether you're sick in the belly or in the head. And you do it right. Straighten up, you weak punk! Straighten up, damn you!"

The kid called him names, and Old Jack Patton laughed in his face and said, "Get on that rake and get to work." The kid dragged himself onto the rake and began to make the windrows.

We had only a few days of work left, and the kid and Old Jack Patton were just as they had been in the beginning, the man driving the boy as hard as he could, and the boy hating him. The kid looked more mean and sullen than when he'd first come to the ranch, and even the boss thought Old Jack was going too far.

"Lay off the kid, Jack," he said. "He can only take so much."

"He's got to take everything," Old Jack Patton said grimly.

That was the day Lola quit, and the boss sent the kid to the house to help get supper for the men. "My wife needs you," he told the kid. "You give her a hand. Old Jack can finish up that piece of meadow he's laid off to work."

The kid nodded and said, "Well, this is one day I'll get to leave the field ahead of time, and it's killin' that old buzzard's soul."

"He won't have nobody to chew on the rest of the afternoon," I said.

"Tough, huh?" And the kid suddenly grinned at me.

Old Jack Patton was still raking, as usual, when we left the field. The kid helped the boss's wife dish up supper, and we finished eating, but Old Jack hadn't come. The men went back to the bunkhouse, and the boss and I stood by the cookstove while the kid washed dishes.

"I better have a look," the boss said. "Old Jack didn't have much raking left to do. It's taken too long."

The kid swung around from the dishpan. There was something I had never seen before in his green eyes. "Nothing's wrong with him, is there?"

"I couldn't say, kid," the boss answered. . . . "You want to come with me, Jeff?" he said, turning to me.

Before I could answer, the kid had yanked off the dish towel he had tied around his middle. "I'm a-goin' with you," he said.

"I reckon that's all right," the boss replied.

There was moonlight, the kind of moonlight that makes the world almost as bright as in daytime. We rode up the meadow in the wagon and none of us said anything. Then we saw the team standing dark and still, and we saw the little piece of meadow where the cut grass was flat and silvery between the shining waves of the windrows. There wasn't much left to rake there, maybe half a dozen trips back and forth with the rake.

The boss stopped the wagon and wound the lines around the wheel so the team wouldn't walk off. We went across the little space between us and the rake, our feet swishing through the grass. It was so still I could hear my heart beating loud. Or maybe I was just scared.

Old Jack Patton lay by the rake wheel, and the lines were there in his hand. His face was toward the sky, and it was so peaceful that I knew before the boss knelt beside him that he'd never cuss the kid out again.

The boss didn't speak for quite a while, and when he did his voice was husky. "He was a good man, one of the best I ever had. And he was old—older than he ever let on to any of us. It came to him where he would have wanted it, and it came easy and natural." And the boss gently took the lines from Old Jack Patton's quiet hand, and he lifted Old Jack Patton in his arms and carried him to the wagon.

The kid stooped and picked up the lines. He climbed on the seat of the rake and just sat there. After a while he said, "I'll finish up

what he started." And then I saw the shine on the kid's cheeks, and I heard the sound he was trying so hard to hold in. "He was a man stood for something," the kid said. "Like you—and the boss."

As the boss and I drove down the meadow toward the ranch, I could hear the silvery clanging of the rake. It rose clean and sure in the still night. That was when I knew the tough kid was going to turn out all right.

ONE NIGHT IN THE RED DOG SALOON

by Hal G. Evarts

In Western fiction Hal Evarts is a quintuple-threat man, equally handy with plot, characterization, lucid writing, dramatic action, and the dry, salty humor of the Old West. Besides his short stories in The Saturday Evening Post and other magazines, he has a shelfful of novels to his credit, among them The Long Rope, Ambush Rider, The Man from Yuma, and Jim Clyman. Hal has been active in WWA affairs since the organization's inception, having served as chairman of the Membership Committee, vice-president, and member of the Executive Board. Hal, Dorothea, and their two sons and one daughter are enjoying a new home in La Jolla, California.

No charge, gents. Drinks are on the house. Every round, yes sir. It's all free, all the likker you can hold. Liquidatin' our stock, so to speak. Sober? Me? No, I don't own this here saloon, I just tend bar. Step up, friend, the whisky won't last forever. Strangers in Red Dog, ain't you? Thought so. Otherwise you'd know about Lucky Lew Zane.

Copyright © 1953 by The Curtis Publishing Company.

Lewis Leslie Zane. Lucky 'cause he's still alive, I reckon, after that last Apache ruckus. Not a quieter, milder gent in all Arizona than Lew Zane. Almost shy-like when he's sober. But when he's got a skinful, man, look out! Every six months or so he throws a real stemwinder. Don't blame him none either, considering how he prospects in 'Pache country for his beans and bacon. Man can work up a sizable thirst dodging redskin arrows and a-hanging on to his scalp out in that desert yonder. Folks hereabout allow that Lew owes himself a first-rate blow-out whenever he comes to town. They're glad to see him have a bit of harmless fun, kinda look forward to his visits.

No, thank you kindly. Never touch the stuff myself. But fill your glass, pardner. Here's the bottle. Costs a dime a shot across the street in the Silver Dollar.

As I was saying, it started one afternoon last fall when Lew rode into Red Dog and tied up out front. Soon as word spread, the boys smiled to themselves and got ready. Merchants put up their window shutters, the bartenders took down their mirrors and fancy glasses. Just in case. Lew hadn't hardly more than got settled in the Golden Nugget here when Long Jim Lannigan ambled up to his table.

Maybe Long Jim ain't the best sheriff we ever had but he's a stickler for the law. A tall lanky party, he's as big and tough as Lew and almost as close-mouthed. The difference is, he don't drink, not even a sociable nip. Matter of principle. So now and again he gets a mite impatient with Lew's shenanigans. "Hoddy, Lew," he said.

"Hoddy, Sheriff," Lew said.

"How's the Injuns this trip?"

"Pesky. Had to pacify a few."

Long Jim sighed and looked at the two six-shooters in Lew's holsters. He knew Lew was fixing for a ripsnorter. Lew was too darn unnatural quiet, even for Lew. "You're among friends now," Long Jim said. "How's about letting me keep your guns tonight?"

"I don't reckon, Sheriff," Lew said. "Might want to shoot out some windows later." That seemed reasonable but, like I say, this

Lew is a very honest, peace-loving citizen. He pulled a buckskin bag out of his pocket and dumped a trickle of gold dust on the table. "Like to pay in advance," he said. "For the windows, I mean."

Long Jim gave him a sorrowful look and shook his head, then walked out. The sheriff's attitude hurt Lew. It was a point of honor with him to pay his debts. Always did. He just couldn't understand that reproachful look of Long Jim's. Got to brooding so it sort of spoiled his fun. So he wasn't rightly himself when a pair of sharpers drifted over to the table and suggested a game of penny ante. They'd seen that poke of gold dust too.

Well sir, one thing led to another, and pretty soon Lew had cleaned out every gambler in the house, not caring a hoot. The more he drank the soberer he got, the wilder he bet the more he won, until chips were stacked up chin-high in front of him. Then Acey-Ducey Dugan dealt himself into the game.

Acey-Ducey Dugan was real artistic with a deck of cards. He owned two saloons, a pearl stickpin, the flashiest diamond ring in town, and he couldn't abide lucky amateurs like Lew. When he took a hand we looked for action. First off he lost his cash, next his stickpin, then his ring, and when the next big pot came up he tossed in his deed to the Golden Nugget. Lew called him.

Acey-Ducey laid down four aces and reached for the pot, but Lew smiled and turned up a straight club flush, six high. That's when Dugan made the worst gamble of his life. He reached for his gun. When the smoke cleared away, Mr. Acey-Ducey Dugan was face down on the barroom floor and I had a new boss.

Lew felt terrible. Here the evening was barely started and he'd gone and made a peck of trouble for his good friend Long Jim Lannigan. Being such a teetotal dry, Long Jim might be some put out with him. So, to save embarrassment all around, Lew bid the customers good night, tucked a spare quart under his coat, and meandered out to his horse and climbed aboard. Riding down the street, he shot out what few store windows wasn't shuttered, but even that didn't raise

his spirits. He done it because it was expected of him and Lew Zane wasn't a man to disappoint his friends.

Heading back for the hills, he got awful blue thinking about all the pleasurable times he'd had in town before. Now and again he tipped up the bottle to cut the dust, but his heart wasn't in it. Likely Long Jim would be downright peeved.

Near sunrise he stopped at a spring to water, planning to hole up in the rocks come daylight, lest some stray Injun cut his trail. He wasn't much popular with the 'Paches, being as how he'd served a hitch as army scout a couple of years back when the cavalry rounded up Chief Black Eagle's tribe and stuck 'em on the reservation. They'd purely love to lift his hair. So he climbed on up the ridge but his horse started acting skittish. Lew gave her a cuff and all of a sudden a big black shape reared off the ground and let out a bellow. The horse jumped straight up in the air and Lew, all loose in the saddle, went sailing off and cracked his head on a rock.

When he woke up, the sun was beating down in his face and his head was pounding like a tom-tom. He felt the lump behind his ear, then felt in his coat for the bottle, which somehow had been spared. Grateful for that, Lew took a snort and sat up to look for his horse. Instead he saw a big brown shaggy critter watching him with mournful eyes not ten yards away. Too big for a bear and too rank-smelling for a cow. Besides it had a green beard and a humped back.

Lew shut his eyes tight, spit out his mouthful of whisky, and flopped back on the rock. When a man got to seeing camels in the middle of the desert it was time to quit. Past time, 'way past. John Barleycorn was panting down his neck. Lew lay there shivering and sweating but by and by he noticed a strange thing: that animal stink was strong as ever. Cautious-like, he opened one eye a crack and sure enough that camel was still a-staring at him.

A weaker man might've cracked right there, but not Lew Zane. He got up shaky on his feet and circled round the beast. It was real,

a genuine one-hump camel, hunkered down on its knees. An old male, he guessed, ganted in ribs and flank and ugly as sin. All the teeth was gone and saliva had dribbled down its chin like a moss goatee, but them big soft eyes had the most piteous look Lew had ever seen, almost human. Someways that look reminded him of Long Jim Lannigan. Finally Lew stepped in close and put a hand on its neck. The camel rolled over on one side and whimpered like a sick dog. Then he saw what the trouble was. A prickly-pear cactus had stuck in the left hind footpad like a pin cushion and the leg was beginning to swell. The poor old brute couldn't walk.

Lew felt relieved to learn he didn't have the fantods after all but he was mighty puzzled. How come a camel to be way out here? Near as he could recollect camels belonged in Africa, a far piece from Arizona Territory. Runaway from a circus, he thought, but that was silly. He just couldn't figure an answer. One thing sure, old Green Beard had scared off his horse, which meant a long, hot chase on foot, and he'd best be getting at it.

But he couldn't leave the critter all crippled up to die of thirst. Lew was too tenderhearted for that. Had to get it down to the spring. Well sir, he tried everything he knew, but that camel wouldn't budge. He coaxed and wheedled and cursed and kicked, but the camel just kept watching him with those big sad eyes. After an hour of that his temper frazzled out and he pulled a gun. "You stubborn orn'ry fool!" he shouted. "I'm tryin' to help you."

The camel grunted and rolled over on the other side. Lew felt mean and lowdown but there was only one way to end its misery. He put his muzzle against its head and cocked the hammer and shut his eyes, willing himself to squeeze the trigger. Couldn't do it though, and lucky for him. Sure was his lucky day.

The camel heaved up on its front legs and let out a squall that unnerved Lew so he jumped. Right then a bowstring twanged and an arrow bounced off the rock where he'd been standing a second before. Ducking behind a boulder, he glimpsed a swarm of redskins

up on the sky line. They'd sneaked up to ambush him but now their ponies was bucking and plunging and neighing crazy. Injuns couldn't control 'em. Before Lew could shoot more than a couple the whole bunch stampeded and raced over the ridge like the U. S. Cavalry was on their tails. He swallowed hard and mopped his face and looked around, but there was just him and old Hump Back.

Soon as he was breathing again Lew crawled up the ridge. The Apaches was hightailing across the desert in a cloud of dust, carrying off their two dead brothers like Injuns do, and they didn't look to be coming back real soon. Some of Black Eagle's braves jumping the reservation, Lew supposed, but he had other problems aplenty to worry him. He was afoot a long way from nowhere and his head hurt bad. He wished he'd never gone to town.

The camel had settled back on its haunches, looking all forlorn. Lew couldn't bear to shoot it now. "You mangy old buzzard bait," he said. "No wonder them horses lit out when they got a whiff of you."

Then he noticed a kind of scar on one hip. It was furred over but he squatted down close and saw the brand USA had been burned into the hide. He got to remembering his grandpappy, who'd been a soldier on the frontier 'way back in the fifties, before the war. His grandpappy had seen camels, some of the bunch Jeff Davis had shipped over for the War Department to haul mail out West. Lew scratched his head, trying to recollect the story.

Seemed like the experiment hadn't worked. The camels scared the cavalry mounts, the soldiers hated the camels, and the Army cussed Jeff Davis proper. So they sold 'em off and turned 'em loose and the camels disappeared. This one, Lew allowed, must've been wandering around on his lonesome for close to thirty years. Didn't seem possible, but there was a U. S. Army brand to prove it.

"You done me a favor, Moss Face," Lew said. "Looks like I got to doctor you up."

So he got out his knife and started on that cactus. It was a messy job prying the stuff loose and Lew got all stuck up himself, but the

camel never let out a bleat, though the spines had worked in deep. Gamest thing he ever did see. But he'd doctored enough horses to know there was still a danger of infection. What he needed was a disinfectant. That's when Lew Zane showed he'd got a heart as big as all creation. Quite a tussle with his conscience but he done it. Picked up his bottle, near half a quart left, pulled out the cork with his teeth, and poured it all on Hump Back's punctured foot. Old Hump blubbered a little but took it like a soldier, like a real old army trooper. Made Lew feel right proud.

The camel lumbered to his feet this time and limped down to the spring. Lew had a drink too but the water tasted flat. Gave the beast a friendly slap on the rump and set off to shag his horse. Hadn't gone a hundred yards before the camel hobbled up behind him. "Look," Lew said, "you're in no shape to travel and I got me a horse to catch."

He went on a little ways and old Moss Face limped right after him. Kinda exasperated, Lew stopped again. "We're even, ain't we? Go on back to water. Git!"

He shied a rock but the camel didn't move, just watched him with those weepy eyes. Gave Lew the notion it wanted to tell him something. But he figured that any critter who could outlast the 'Paches for thirty years didn't need no more help from him. Regretful, he said, "So long, pardner. I won't catch that horse till a year from Christmas if you tag along."

He ran then, ran hard over the hill and through some boulders where a cripple couldn't follow, and after a spell he shook the camel. Feeling guilty, he walked on hunting for horse tracks. 'Long about dinnertime he was passing a big rock when Long Jim Lannigan stepped out with a rifle. Behind him stood two horses, one of which was Lew's.

"Hoddy, Sheriff," Lew said.

"Hoddy, Lew," Long Jim said.

Lew hoped maybe everything was going to be all right now that

Long Jim had caught his horse and he said, "I'm sorry about Acey-Ducey Dugan."

"What for?"

"Well," Lew said, "he ran a nice quiet saloon."

"That he did," Long Jim said. "But Acey-Ducey ain't what's botherin' me, Lew. It's the way you sneaked off without payin' for them windows you busted."

Lew could tell the sheriff was riled, the way he kept pointing that Winchester. "Why, plumb slipped my mind, but I'll pay you right now," he said, and shoved a hand in his pocket.

Catch was, he didn't have a nickel. He'd left his money and dust poke on the table in the Golden Nugget the night before. Feeling sheepish, he said, "Reckon you'll have to trust me, Sheriff, till I dig some more dust back in the hills."

Long Jim shook his head. "Hate to say this, Lew, but you own the Golden Nugget now. Never did trust a saloonkeeper."

Lew's face went pale. He knew Long Jim didn't hold with drinking but he'd clean forgot that handsome straight club flush. Just couldn't believe he'd won the Golden Nugget. Great roarin' Jupiter! His own saloon! "Can't you trust me till we get to town?" he said.

"Have to." Long Jim wrinkled his nose. "What's that smell on you? Skunk?"

Lew sniffed at his shirt. "Camel," he said. "Darndest thing happened to me——"

When he got done explaining, a funny look came over Long Jim's face. He tugged at his ear and scuffed his boot in the dirt and coughed loud. "Himm," he said. "You run off a dozen Injuns?"

"Thereabouts," Lew said.

"You and this critter with the whiskers?"

"Yup."

"Then you poured a quart of good whisky on its foot."

"Half a quart," Lew said.

Long Jim's face got longer than a hound-dog's. "Lew," he said, "I'll

be fifty-three next June and I ain't never seen a camel. Let's go take a look."

They rode back, not talking on the way, but when they reached the spring there wasn't a sign of old Moss Face. Lew tramped up and down the ridge but he couldn't find a single track amongst all the rocks. Couldn't even find that 'Pache arrow. "Must be close by," he told Long Jim. "With that sore foot."

Long Jim gave him another sorrowing look and picked up the empty whisky bottle and smashed it on a boulder. "What color you say that beard was?"

"Green," Lew said. "Man wouldn't hardly believe it."

Long Jim sighed and said in a soothing voice, "Sure I would, Lew boy." Then he clipped Lew behind the ear with his six-gun and roped him on the horse.

When Lew came to he was lying on a bunk in the Red Dog jail. Sunlight was streaming through a barred window and Doc Spires was bending over him with a stethoscope. "Acute alcoholic poisoning," Doc said. "Heat prostration and nervous shock. Needs complete rest."

"That's what I calc'lated, Doc," Long Jim said. He was leaning against the door with a toothpick in his mouth. "Sad case."

Doc tapped a finger to his head. "If he goes into deliriums again send for me. Might turn violent."

Lew sat up with a jerk. "You're not talkin' about me, Doc?"

Doc backed off quick and hurried out of the cell. "Lay back easy, Lew," Long Jim said. "Anything you want?"

Lew's head was feeling fuzzy and he said, "Sure could use a drink, Sheriff."

Long Jim took out his toothpick and stared at the end of it. "Nope."

"Ain't my credit good?" Lew demanded. "When a man owns a whole saloon——"

"You heard the doc," Long Jim said. "You're sick, Lew."

"Just one little drink?"

Long Jim shook his head.

That got Lew's dander up then and he said, "I'll be dogged if I pay for any windows till I get out!"

Long Jim talked to him real gentle, like a father to his son. "Lew," he said, "you got the wrong attitude. I'm trying to help you."

"I don't want no help!" Lew yelled. "Lemme out of here and I'll show you who's crazy. That camel——"

"There you go again." Long Jim closed the cell door and stomped into his office, leaving Lew to holler and bang on the bars.

The news spread fast. Next day everybody in Red Dog knew that Lew Zane had slipped his hitch. A pity, folks said. They'd miss his antics, but you couldn't turn a man loose in that condition. Might go clear off his rocker. Long Jim padlocked the Golden Nugget and went around all gloomy-faced. As Lew's good friend it pained him, but he done his duty as he saw it.

That night he went back to the jail for another try. "Lew," he said, "why don't you admit you had one too many and we'll forget this."

Lew was mighty sick of that cell and might've backed down, stubborn as he was, but just then some kid sung out under the alley window:

"Lew, Lew, crazy ole Lew!
Drunk a mess of camel stew!"

Lew's jaw jutted out. Couldn't understand why his friend was treating him so. Got an idea Long Jim might be trying to reform him complete. "I'm still waiting on that drink," he said.

Long Jim drew a deep breath, being stubborn too. "You'll set here a spell then."

"You'll wait a spell for your window money too." Lew glared at him. "I seen what I seen and nobody can tell me different."

So it ended in a draw. Neither would budge an inch. Lew sulked around the jail and Long Jim gave up arguing with him. Lew didn't really want that drink but he figured his reputation was at stake. Maybe

he couldn't prove he wasn't loco, but he wasn't going to admit it, not to Long Jim or nobody else. Never live it down. Old Hump Back had landed him in some fix.

No telling how long it might have dragged on like that but next week the Injuns busted off the reservation again. Came swarming through the hills, burned a couple of ranches, ran off some horses, and headed south for Mexico. Chief Black Eagle himself, cute and sly as a coyote. Cut the telegraph wires so we couldn't send for the Army. Long Jim rounded up a posse to catch 'em.

Trouble was, he needed a scout, and the only man in town who knew the 'Pache country was Lew Zane. Knew every hill and gully, every bush and rock, and talked the lingo too. Even looked Apache. Without Lew along to guide, Long Jim might as well go chase after the wind as Black Eagle.

"Tell you what, Lew," he said. "Let's make a deal."

Lew gave him a sour look, being in no mood to dicker. Had the sheriff over a barrel. What he wanted was a chance to find that camel and prove he was sane and sober as the next citizen. Make Long Jim eat a fair-sized hunk of crow.

"I'm appealin' to you as a red-blooded American," Long Jim said. "Help me corral them hostiles back on the reservation."

Lew tapped a finger to his head. "I'm crazy, Sheriff. You heard what Doc said. You don't want a crazy man."

"'Pears like I was a trifle hasty," Long Jim told him. "Anyways you ain't that crazy."

"I don't walk through that door," Lew said, "till you fetch me a drink."

Long Jim hustled over to the Silver Dollar, where his posse was waiting, and bought a bottle. First drink he'd ever bought in Red Dog. Hustled back to the jail with it. "Now," Lew said, "you write out a notice like I tell you."

That stuck in Long Jim's craw but he done it. Had to. He wrote out, "I'm as crazy as Lew Zane." Signed it, "James Lannigan, Esq.,

Sheriff," and tacked it on his bulletin board alongside the reward dodgers, where all the town loafers gathered.

But Lew wasn't satisfied yet. "No sir, Sheriff," he said. "I don't leave town without them windows is paid for. Folks'd claim I was weaselin' out of my debts."

Long Jim slapped down a handful of double eagles on the bunk. "You got me this time, Lew boy," he said real grim. "But you ever throw another shindig in Red Dog I'll lock you up for keeps."

He meant it too. Lew knew his drinking days in Red Dog was done. Well, there was a lot of other towns with sheriffs not so fussy. He'd made his bargain and he'd keep it. But he hated to have his friend Long Jim rankled with hard feelings.

So that's how come he walked out of jail, strapped on his guns, and led the posse out of town. Nobody cracked a smile. Drunk or crazy or cold sober, Lew Zane wasn't a man to tangle with. He picked up the tracks of Black Eagle's bunch, about twenty strong, and followed 'em south into the badlands all that day. After sundown he turned into a short cut he knew, thinking the redskins would stick to the long route by way of water. When they came to a notch through the hills Lew split the posse in half and spread 'em on either side of the trail and settled back to wait.

It was a good scheme and might've worked, but by and by Lew got fidgety. Couldn't understand what was taking the redskins so long. He was bound and determined to do this right, show Long Jim he hadn't lost his grip. Matter of pride. 'Long about daybreak he sneaked off by himself on a back track toward the next spring to see if Black Eagle had outsmarted him.

He was riding along careful, peering out for Injun sign, when his nose began to twitch. His horse got one sniff, r'ared up and bucked him off, and lit out. Laying on his back, Lew saw old Hump trot out from behind a bush, spry as a pup. "Oh, no!" he groaned, and rubbed his eyes.

No mistake though. Couldn't be two camels that ugly. Moss Face

seemed glad to see him but Lew didn't feel the same. Any minute the 'Paches might come along, which was no fix for a man without a horse. "Dang your worthless hidel" he said. "Ain't you caused me enough trouble?"

But the camel paid his ungratefulness no never-mind. Snuggled up close and gave his face a great bit drooly lick. It came over Lew then that this reunion wasn't a coincidence. These desert water holes was old Hump's home range and he was showing Lew his appreciation. Might not be pretty but sure was one smart camel. Smart and shy, Lew figured. Prob'ly didn't trust white men or redskins neither.

"Listen, pardner," Lew said, "here's your chance to prove I'm not a liar."

He started back toward the posse but old Hump didn't follow. Didn't move a muscle. Stood there watching Lew. Must be awful shy with strangers, Lew thought, and the stubbornest critter on four legs. That's when he got his big idea.

The sky was beginning to pale. No time for a man to be caught by Black Eagle's braves, specially not Lew Zane, who'd killed a gracious plenty over the years. So he climbed up on old Hump bareback, got a tight hold around the neck, turned the head toward where he'd left Long Jim's posse, and give that beast a solid boot in the ribs. But Moss Face had a notion all his own. He swung around and headed north instead of south, straight for the water hole. Traveling fast too, now his foot had healed. Lew tried to turn him back, yanking at his ears, but Hump let out a long wobble-jointed stride and after that Lew was too busy hanging on to steer.

Used to fancy himself as a bronc stomper, Lew did. Gentled quite a few in his day. But he'd never ridden camel flesh before, and never will again. Like to fractured both his legs and shook his insides fierce. Too paralyzed to let go and fall off. So he went a-bouncing and a-jouncing right into the 'Pache camp a mile or so down the pass, just as Black Eagle was crawling out from under his blanket. Pounded

through the horse herd, scattered Injun ponies right and left, and sent 'em squealing flat-eared for the hills.

Then old Hump stopped dead. Right smack in the middle of twenty bug-eyed Injuns. Collapsed on his knees and Lew slid off all dazed and shaky. He'd been in many a tight spot before but not one like this. For a long minute they stared back at him, being too sleepy and surprised to rush and maybe scared too. They'd never seen a camel close up and Moss Face smelled like bad medicine. Bad enough to stampede all their horses.

A shriveled up old codger in a breechclout and raggedy shirt, Black Eagle didn't look to be the most fearsome Apache in Arizona. But he hadn't got to be chief by his sweet forgiving nature. Soon as he recognized Lew his eyes went mean and wicked. He'd lost his horses but he aimed to pay off a few old scores. He grabbed up his bow and motioned his braves to close in.

Automatic Lew's hand dropped to his gun butt. He might squeeze off a shot or two before they stuck him full of arrows. He looked at old Hump and his mouth went dry. Lew wasn't what you'd call a pious man but he decided to turn over a new leaf. He couldn't rightly blame a camel. Whisky and his own mule-headed nature had led him into this scrape. He breathed a little prayer and made his vow. Right then he swore off redevye permanent—if he lived that long.

Black Eagle raised a hand for silence. Lew looked around at the ring of hot-eyed bucks, clutching their bows and rifles and war clubs, and he wet his lips. They'd string this out to torment him 'Pache style unless he got the jump, so he played his hole card first, knowing only one thing had ever licked 'em: Uncle Sam.

"The Great White Chief in Washington is angry with his red brothers," he said. "He sends me to order you to return to the reservation."

Black Eagle's eyes bored into his and Lew said louder, "Fifty blue coats on fresh fast horses are waiting for my signal behind that hill.

One shot from my gun will bring them. Do you want your squaws wailing in your lodges tonight?"

Black Eagle squinted up at the empty hills and grunted. Maybe he believed it but chances were he didn't. Nothing for Lew to do but stretch his bluff. A shot would bring Long Jim's posse on the run but what they'd find was one dead paleface. "The Great White Chief will not punish you for stealing horses," Lew said, "but if you disobey his orders his vengeance will be swift."

The young bucks were getting impatient with all this palaver, itching for the fun to start, but Black Eagle scowled them down. He didn't hanker to be trapped afoot in any blue-coat ambush. "You lie," he growled. "I cut the wire that talks to Washington."

Old Hump heaved up onto his feet with a holler and the 'Paches scattered back. All along that camel had been trying to tell Lew something and at last he got the message. Black Eagle was teetering on the edge, yes or no, but white-men talk wouldn't push him over. What he needed was an Injun sign.

"You cut the wire that talks, yes, but the voice of the Great White Chief is like the voice of thunder over the land when his brothers make him angry." Lew drew a long breath and shoved in his last chip. "My chief has spoken. Here is the great seal of Washington." He pointed to the brand on Hump Back's rump and folded his arms.

Black Eagle stepped up close and clawed at the fur. His eyes got round and he popped a hand over his mouth. The others crowded in to stare, grunting and jabbering with excitement. They knew what that USA meant. They'd seen it on army mounts and stockades and on beef rations their agent handed out. That was the Voice all right, though a camel's hind end might seem a peculiar place to find it.

Black Eagle quieted his boys with a snarl. They muttered and grumbled some but he was boss. "You are the enemy of my people," he said to Lew, and gave him a murdering look. "If you ever come to our reservation we will kill you."

Lew had sense enough not to crowd his luck. Fact was he'd sweated clear through his coat. Kept mum and watched Black Eagle and his bunch shuffle off through the rocks on their long walk home. A few looked back like maybe they were going to potshoot him, chief or no chief, but pretty soon they was out of sight in the hills. If ever a man needed a drink then it was Lew, but he'd made his promise. Also he'd lost that bottle during all the fuss.

He wiped his face and said, "Old friend, you done the U. S. Army proud today. Too bad Jeff Davis wasn't here to see it."

He turned around but Moss Face wasn't there. Loping off through the hills in the other direction. "Hey, come back!" Lew hollered, but that camel never stopped. In a minute he was gone over the sky line. No use chasing him, Lew knew. He could outrun a mustang. He'd done his duty and all he wanted now was to be let alone. Like the song says, "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away," and that's what old Hump done.

Real thoughtful, Lew walked back up the trail. When he came to the pass Long Jim Lannigan and his posse climbed out from behind their rocks. They wasn't in a humor to be trifled with, being some provoked that Lew had sneaked off and left 'em short a guide.

"Hoddy, Sheriff," Lew said.

"Hoddy, Lew." Long Jim gave him the cold eye. "See you lost your horse again."

"Yup," Lew said.

"Didn't happen to see any redskins on the loose, Lew boy?"

"Now you mention it," Lew said. "I did. Black Eagle and his bucks. Walkin' back toward the reservation."

"Well now," Long Jim said, and his voice sounded like a fresh-honed razor, "I reckon you scared 'em off with a quart of whisky."

Lew opened his mouth to explain, then took another look at Long Jim. Sometimes, he figured, friendship is more important than the truth. "Why no," he said. "Me and Black Eagle kinda agreed to call a truce. Had a friendly talk and we both seen the light."

Natural enough, Long Jim was skeptical. But a man can't argue with facts. Black Eagle went back to the reservation and stayed there. Ain't been off since. So Lew and Long Jim are friends again. No bad feelings over them windows. And if Lew ever bumps into old Hump on his prospecting trips into the badlands he don't say so. Learned his lesson in more ways than one. Hasn't touched anything stronger than lemon soda from that day to this.

What's all that racket you hear? I reckon that'll be Lew now, shooting up the Silver Dollar across the street. Red Dog folks expect it of him when he comes to town. Man's privilege to give away his whisky if he gets the notion but he can't hardly shoot up his own saloon. Matter of ethics. Like I say, Lew Zane kept his word.

So pour yourself another drink, gents, before the supply gives out.

ARMY WIFE

by Kenneth Fowler

Kenneth Fowler is a former Yonkers newspaperman who has also done editing for both Street and Smith and Popular Publications, served a hitch in the Air Force, done public relations work for a shipyards company, and reviewed books for the New York Herald Tribune. More than two hundred of his short stories have appeared in a great variety of magazines. Among his several Western novels have been Outcast of Murder Mesa, The Range Bum, and, under his "Clark Brooker" pseudonym, Lone Gun and Fight at Sun Mountain. Ken and his wife, Martha, have recently moved from Copake Falls, New York, to Winter Park, Florida. Some of his neighbors think he is "retired," but his wife and his typewriter know better!

The first threat of danger to the train of four Osnaburg-hooded wagons came at the end of the second day of its eastward-bound journey from Fort Hays to the station of the Kansas-Pacific Railroad at Eagle Tail. Captain Scott Tooner, of the Fifth Cavalry, in command of

Copyright 1952 by The Hawley Publications, Inc.

the train and official guardian of its one civilian passenger, was pressing for higher terrain, a half mile beyond the draw through which they were passing, when the mounted figure appeared on the ridge to the left. In the hazy autumn dusk it seemed momentarily to be no more than a granite statue etched starkly against the darkening sky line.

Riding his sweat-marked dun beside the lead wagon, Captain Tooner felt his spine creased by a faint chill as he made his deliberate study of the silhouette. It vanished like a wraith as the voice of First Sergeant Terence O'Donnell came from behind him.

"Hard to see in this light. You think it was a redskin, sir?"

"Quite likely, Sergeant. But possibly only a skulker."

"Been some latrine rumors Crazy Bear might be off the reservation, sir." The gob of chewing tobacco plugged in O'Donnell's cheek writhed like muscle as he spat. "If there's a band up there—" He let it fall away as the captain's eyes grew cold. "Very good, sir," he said.

Tooner was aware of a meager satisfaction. He knew, as well as O'Donnell did, that if a band of renegade warriors lay hidden beyond that ridge up there, an attack would come before the lumbering wagons could be swung out of the pass. But O'Donnell knew, too, the strict line he maintained between himself and his command. A good thing. A good thing the Army still had a sprinkling of these case-hardened old regulars like O'Donnell—and God pity the kind of replacements they'd been getting lately.

Tooner's mouth locked in a thin line under his gray-ice eyes. He'd shove a ramrod up the backbones of those others. He'd make tough, disciplined soldiers out of them if they died for it—which they would, if he didn't.

"Sergeant," Tooner said, "we halt here. Order the wagons drawn up. If there's a fuss, no firing from the wagons till I pass the order."

"Yes, sir!" O'Donnell saluted and barked the order as he wheeled his horse, and Tooner thought of the woman in the lead wagon and muttered under his breath.

Second Lieutenant Aaron Woodhull trotted his horse up from the rear and reined in beside him, lifting his arm in a limp salute.

"Cheyennes, you think, Captain? There's been talk of a breakout from the reservation at Spotted Tail."

Tooner's eyes made their acerbic judgment of the young West Pointer. A sapling, rooted out of its classroom hothouse and transplanted out here in this arid wilderness, to grow or die. His job: season it.

"I," said Tooner, "do not gaze into crystal balls, Mr. Woodhull."

"No, sir. But——"

"Another thing. Dress up that salute, Mr. Woodhull. Even out here"—dryly—"we endeavor to create the impression that this is still an army."

A dark flush painted Aaron Woodhull's boyish face. "Yes, sir. But Ann. I just wanted to make sure she is——"

"Your sister is my official charge, Mr. Woodhull. Kindly order the trooper detail to dismount and stand by the wagons. That will be all."

Lieutenant Woodhull stiffened in the saddle. His right hand snapped to the dusty brim of his hat. But as he wheeled his horse his eyes raked Tooner, bright with rancor.

Absently, Tooner scrubbed a hand across his brow, easing the band crease from his campaign hat. *Someday they will learn*, he thought, and for a moment, following Woodhull, his eyes grew abstracted, holding the weight and years of his experience. *Yes, they will learn. Even shavetails. But not the way Fetterman learned. Not if I can prevent it.*

His gaze idled over the halted wagons, somber with this thought. Brevet-mad Fetterman, on Massacre Hill. Fetterman storming the ridge he had been ordered not to cross, and leading his troopers into bloody ambush. Fetterman, saving his last bullet for himself. And because he was a brave man, but also a fool, eighty men had died.

A cold anger bit through Tooner. Stay in the Army long enough, get the harsh habit of discipline in your soul and your guts, and maybe you'll live. Maybe you'll never see a trooper whipped into a run by a

band of shrieking savages, with his belly slashed and his blood spurting. Maybe you'll even be one of the lucky ones who will never ride up on a raided settlement and view the ultimate in savage deviltry—a white woman who did not get away. Maybe. Not very likely, though.

Tooner heaved a sigh as he swung his horse toward the lead wagon. Corporal John Delaney, the driver, a rawboned six-footer, had already tied his ribbons and was hunkered down beside the wagon's right rear wheel, examining a cracked felloe, as Tooner reached forward and rapped his knuckles on the wagon seat.

"Captain Tooner, Mrs. Penrose. I'd like to speak with you a moment, if it's convenient."

"Of course, Captain. Give me just a minute, please."

Tooner was stirred. He was always stirred at the unnaturalness of hearing a woman's voice in such surroundings, but the low, throaty-sounding voice of Ann Penrose was something particular. A man had his dreams, wherever he was, and a woman out here was a dream, a beguiling phantasy that oddly palliated his loneliness, and filled his mind with uxorious thoughts.

Presently, when the wagon flaps parted and she stood there behind the seat, her eyes, a clear hazel, held their usual quiet gravity casting down to him, and he was struck anew by her never failing air of serenity. And, today, the roundness at her waist seemed more apparent to him than it had before, although it would be a full four months before she would have her baby.

"I heard you talking with Aaron," she murmured. Her eyes had a quality of remoteness, as if they were always looking back, seeking against a curtain fallen, a play ended. "Do you think there will be trouble?" she asked.

"We can't ever be sure. I think it will be safer, though, if you stay in the wagon."

"Safety!" A smile briefly skirted her pretty mouth. "I did not come out here to the plains expecting safety, Captain. By now, I am used

to excitement." She nodded backward across her shoulder. "I have my husband's carbine in there. I can use it, if I have to."

Tooner's eyes struck measuringly at her. Her face had the lineaments of a finely cut cameo, with little of guile in it, but much of strength webbed into its essential gentleness. His glance lingered on her smooth black hair, with its links of polished braid gathered into a neat oval chignon at the nape of her neck.

Why did she have to speak of the major as if he were still alive, as if nothing had happened to change her relationship to the Army? A faint wryness edged his voice.

"I don't question your ability with a carbine, ma'am. If it comes to a brush, however, I think you can trust my men to handle the situation without support."

Her eyes mocked him gently. "Thank you for putting it so tactfully, Captain. I must ask you to remember, though, that my sex is not easily disciplined."

Tooner flushed. "This is for your own good," he replied stiffly.

"We are not easily disciplined," she smiled, "but we love being pampered. You need not worry about me, Captain. But thank you for being so earnest about my welfare."

When the wagon flaps had closed behind her, Tooner glanced up to the ridge. Quiet there now. No movement. Was it the calm before the storm?

A restlessness ran through Tooner. Why had he felt so unaccountably irked by her speaking of Randall Penrose as if he were just away for a time? The major, killed in a minor scouting foray on the Belle Fourche, and dead now four months. And now Ann Penrose, still Army, was going out. *Against her inclination*, Tooner thought. *She'll hate it, back in the cities. Even with that baby she has coming.*

Tooner dismounted and caught Delaney's eye. "Corporal?"

Delaney swung around, saluted. "Yes, sir?"

Tooner walked his dun to the back of the wagon. He lowered his

voice. "Delaney, you know what to do, if it comes to the worst. Save one shell in your carbine—for her."

"Right, sir."

Tooner led his dun to the rear. Night was coming down. It didn't look as if there would be any stars.

No fires. Cold rations, served out of knapsacks. A half dozen troopers on picket, well out from camp. The dark acid reek of the horses, musk-sharp on the night air. The endless waiting. And perhaps for nothing.

Captain Scott Tooner, sprawled on a saddle blanket within the enclosure made by the wagons, felt the loneliness of command, the isolation of responsibility. And tonight, something else. Something apart from this gnawing impatience within him to get to Eagle Tail and get these wagons loaded for the return trip to the post.

Colonel Wayne Sealy, post commandant, had had a good idea, making this trip serve a double purpose. He could have ill afforded a special guard detail to escort Mrs. Penrose to Eagle Tail, and thence on her way back to civilian life. But this way the same heavy guard that would insure her safe arrival would also insure delivery of the needed supplies these wagons would carry back to the fort.

A post commander, Tooner reflected, had to think of everything. Get the wife to her husband, if she wanted to be with him badly enough to endure the hazards and privations of life in Indian country, on a remote army post. Get her back to where she came from, if anything happened to him. It was all of the same piece—an army job.

A little wryly, dreaming the improbable dream, Tooner considered the grandeur that would be his, if he were married. A married second lieutenant rated only a single room, with a detached shed for use as a kitchen. But his grade would entitle him to three rooms—a palace! A palace that would be papered with copies of the *Army & Navy Journal* in winter, to keep out the cold, and luxuriously decorated with tacked-up illustrations from *Harper's Weekly*. In a captain's quarters

there would even be enough elbow room for kids, if a man had the nerve for that, in this hell-and-gone country.

Tooner thought bitterly, *God pity the kids!* and coming up on his feet suddenly, was conscious of a goading irritability. He looked up at the overcast sky. A few stars, and a splinter of moon hazed over by cumulus. The faint, low murmur of voices, from the wagons. Then, out of the sheltering darkness, a voice, chanting the familiar barracks tune:

*"Oh, go to the stable
All you who are able
And give your poor horse some
hay and some corn. . ."*

Tooner spun around. Sergeant Terence O'Donnell's gangling figure came striding out of the dimness, and Tooner barked at him.

"Sergeant, find that fool and shut him up! And pass the word. The next man who talks above a whisper tonight gets spread-eagled."

"Yes, sir," O'Donnell said, and started walking rapidly toward the rear Number Four wagon, cursing under his breath.

*"For if you don't do it
The Captain will know it
And you'll catch the devil
as sure as——"*

The singing ceased abruptly. The tension in Tooner eased slightly. He started out past the wagons to begin a slow circle of the encampment.

He had a feeling, now, that no attack would come tonight. This was not a good camp from a tactical standpoint, but under the circumstances he'd had no choice but to halt where he had and hope that the night would pass without incident. How many private little

hells like this had he gone through since he had been stationed out here?

He completed his tour and found everything in order: guards posted, the camp quiet now, and the men who should be, rolled up in their blankets.

Re-entering the enclosure, he found Sergeant O'Donnell beside the Number Four wagon, tinkering with the stirrup-strap buckle on the saddle of his bay. Something had been troubling him. Now, as he returned O'Donnell's salute, he suddenly knew what it was.

"I haven't seen Mr. Woodhull, Sergeant. Is he in Number Four?"

"No, sir."

"Then where the devil is he?"

O'Donnell seemed to shrink momentarily into the blot of shadow cast by the bay. A weighted pause. Then: "He said he'd be gone just a minute, sir. I—I believe he wanted a word with his sister."

"Damn!" Tooner spun around. "Follow me, Sergeant."

Lieutenant Aaron Woodhull stood with his right foot planted on a hub of the Number One wagon, his head tilted upward. Above him, Ann Penrose's face was a pale sphere in the half darkness. Tooner's voice went out like a whiplash.

"Mr. Woodhull!"

The lieutenant's boot skidded from the wheel hub as he jerked around. Seeing Tooner, his eyes froze into brief shock, then went blank.

"Yes, sir?"

"I believe I made it clear, Mr. Woodhull, that your duties on this mission do not include parlor games and social chit-chat."

"I only wanted to see that my sister was comfortable for the night, Captain."

"That is my duty, Mr. Woodhull. Yours is to obey orders. You are restricted to quarters until further notice." Tooner's glance tilted briefly to Ann Penrose's stiff-lipped face. Then, cold and precise, his

eyes whipped at O'Donnell. "Sergeant, march him to the rear. If it becomes necessary, post a guard over him."

"Very good, sir."

Above Tooner, Ann Penrose's voice was a soft and incongruous denial to the night's danger and Tooner's own rigid rule of discipline.

"He is only six months out of West Point, Captain."

"Six months or six years," said Tooner harshly, "if he can't learn to take an order, he can still lose his hair."

"Don't think I'm blaming you," Ann Penrose said. "Randall would do it the same way. He——" She stopped, her voice trailing into a sigh. "He was like you," she finished on a soft breath.

"The major," said Tooner awkwardly, "was a fine soldier."

Ann Penrose looked vacantly away. "Yes. But the men hated him for his sternness. As they will you."

Tooner felt the embarrassment of a widening silence for which he had no words. A woman thought of that part, because hatred was an emotion, and in a woman emotion was a basic thing. But what purpose would be served by his telling her that it wasn't hatred, really, but more of a savage resentment. And focused on you, because you were the mark and symbol of an implacable system.

He had seen drunken soldiers doused in icy streams, repeated offenders spread-eagled on a caisson wheel. And, because of poor training and relaxed discipline, he had seen careless troopers with their intestines hanging out and their rooty scalps carried like bloody guidons on swinging tomahawks. Which was worse?

He looked up, but in the dimness he could not see the look of calm assurance on her face, the fatalism etched there by her experience as a bride of the Army. But he knew it was there, and the thought of it moved a pride through him, and then a deep, scarifying sensation of loneliness.

He remembered the night they had brought Randall Penrose in. A thing to remember, a thing to forget. If you could. The feathered haft of the arrow, jutting from the blue tunic. A crimson crater where the

head had been hacked and the scalp torn off. And later, the memory of her proud, straight figure beside the grave as the bugler had blown taps. A brass throat, to spill out the unuttered cry of her heart.

A coolness rippled through Tooner. To her, he needed to explain nothing; nothing. He said, "I hope you will sleep well," but there was no sign in her distance-set eyes that she had heard him.

He added, softly, "I don't think there will be any disturbance tonight," then, before she could speak, before she could weaken him with her nearness, he faced around abruptly and started back to the rear.

Tooner slept fitfully. Every night sound held a preternatural loudness. The dry snap of a twig, out beyond camp. The sudden spinning flutter of a bird. The monotone of the breeze, rustling the verbena weed. On the trail, he was never fully relaxed. Mind and muscle were stretched springs, geared for instant activation, and the problem of command was with him always.

At four-thirty he was up, impatience already ignited in him. Night had passed uneventfully and now fires would make no difference and he ordered them lighted. Soon the pungent aroma of frying bacon and boiling coffee drifted over to him and he was conscious of hunger pangs.

He had coffee and bacon and hardtack, eating alone. He was not quite finished when one of the mules let out a honking bray, a sound that was instantly followed by men's voices, raised in angry altercation.

With controlled tension, Tooner put down his mess plate and rose. Forward, in front of the Number Two wagon, two of his troopers, Jenks and Forbush, stood toe to toe, wrestling for a blacksnake gripped by Jenks.

Suddenly Jenks wrenched free and slashed down with the rawhide across Forbush's shoulders. With a bellow of rage, Forbush threw himself hard against the other trooper and tore the whip from his hand. He hurled it across his shoulder and the butt smacked Tooner in the

shoulder as he strode forward. Tooner coldly ignored it, ignored Sergeant O'Donnell as O'Donnell sprang suddenly from behind him and picked it up.

O'Donnell roared, "Ten-SHUN!" and then Forbush and Jenks stood rigid before Tooner and the abrupt stillness had an electric quality.

"What is this all about?" Tooner demanded coldly.

"Just a little private augerment, sir." Jenks spoke first, a burly, heavy-set man with shaggy black hair and sullen dark eyes. "I won't see a mule beat, sir. It ain't no way to treat a dumb animal."

"You won't see it beat!" snarled Forbush. A rawboned giant with a face shaped like a hatchet, he stared at Jenks venomously. "It's my mule. I'll handle it any damn way I please," he said.

Tooner said icily, "I will correct you. It's the Army's mule. And you will handle it the way I please."

Forbush glowered at him.

"Well?" Tooner said.

"Yes, sir!"

Tooner turned. "Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Hand that whip to Forbush. Then get me another. Give it to Jenks."

"Very good, sir." In a moment O'Donnell returned, carrying another blacksnake. He handed it to Jenks.

"All right," Tooner said to the two men. "Both of you wanted to fight. Now fight!"

The troopers seemed gripped by a shocked inertia momentarily. With an absent gesture, Forbush stroked a hand down the smooth shaft of the whip. Jenks stood motionless, watching him blankly.

Sergeant O'Donnell took a single advancing step. "You heard the captain!" he roared. "Lay it on, ye good-for-nothin' spalpeens!"

Forbush struck first. His lash hissed out and bit at Jenk's sleeve, coming taut with a crack like a pistol shot. With a goaded cry, Jenks

spun his own leather forward. The wiry tip fanged into Forbush's leg, and a patch of yellow piping flew from his trouser. Forbush swore, but when they each struck again the blows were low and perfunctory, aimed cautiously at the leather armor of their boots.

Tooner's flat, even voice evaluated the tactic. "This is no fight," he said. "Either put some tallow in those strokes or I'll have this job done from a caisson wheel."

Jenks's ebony eyes glittered, flicking at him, and the moment was Forbush's opportunity. His arm flew back and the snake streaked out, slashing across Jenks's cheek. Jenks yelped with pain. At the same instant, as if galvanized by the blow, he whacked out with a blind fury and the lash cuffed Forbush's hat, sending it spinning from his head.

Dust boiled under the troopers' scuffing boots. The lashes began to hack and bite, whistling as they flew out, and aimed now with a deliberate and vicious intent.

Tooner watched impassively, conscious of O'Donnell's great granite bulk beside him, like an immovable shield. A worm of blood wriggled down the slant of Jenks's jaw, where Forbush's lash had laid it open to the cheekbone. Half sheared away, the left sleeve of Forbush's tunic dangled from his shoulder like a scarlet guidon. Both men were weaving groggily, circling each other with a feral deliberateness, like a pair of battered wolves, stalking in for the last fanged pounce.

"Captain! In heaven's name, can't you see that they've had enough?"

Tooner spun around and had the sensation of being kicked in the belly. Ann Penrose was standing behind him. Beneath the tar-shine of her black hair her face was a stark white, and a spasm of alarm quivered through him as his glance fell involuntarily to the rounded distention at her waist. A faint fear churned against the expanding spring of his anger. A sudden fright. Then a miscarriage. It didn't take much, sometimes.

But before these men he couldn't draw back. Let discipline rust, let the iron go out of it, and there would be no safety for any woman

out here. Why in the devil couldn't she have stayed in her wagon?

He looked around at Jenks and Forbush. They were still circling, staring at each other out of stupid, oxlike eyes, but barely able now to hold to their feet. It was about finished. But it must not be finished by a woman's intervention.

Tooner turned. "Mrs. Penrose," he said firmly, "please return to your wagon."

"I will not! Not—not until you have stopped this barbaric exhibition!"

Tooner said, without moving his eyes from her, "Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir?" O'Donnell said.

"Kindly escort Mrs. Penrose back to her wagon, Sergeant."

"Very good, sir." O'Donnell swung around. "You had better come with me, ma'am."

Tooner hadn't expected her to break. But she did now. Her dry, heaving sobs were like a dam bursting as O'Donnell gently led her away, and Tooner felt a slow slackening of the compression in him, staring after her.

She would be all right now. She would hate him, as these men would hate him, but he would have his dregs of satisfaction in the knowledge that what he had lost was something he never could have had anyway.

He turned to see Jenks standing over Forbush, who had collapsed and now lay sprawled on the ground, with his head pillowed on an outflung arm. By some last iron fiber of will Jenks reeled around and stiffened to attention, and a little electric shiver of admiration reached through Tooner.

"Fight Indians like that, Jenks, and I'll see that you make corporal."

"Thank you, sir."

"But fighting in the ranks I will not tolerate for any reason." Tooner nodded curtly down to Forbush. "Throw a bucket of water over him," he said, and pivoting, walked back to where he had left his unfinished breakfast.

Sergeant O'Donnell rode beside Tooner, and forward, barely within sight of the advance wagon now, the four mounted troopers with the train scouted the trail ahead, alertly combing the hilly terrain to the left and right of it. The sun stood high and burned down so powerfully that a man could feel it even under the crown of his hat and through the sweat-soaked shoulders of his tunic.

O'Donnell glanced obliquely at the man riding at his side. Captain Tooner's lean jaw line, burnished to a dull coppery hue under the shadow of his hatbrim, was taut, and the compression at his mouth gave his whole face a look of bleak and habitual severity.

The man's lonely, O'Donnell thought, with a faint surprise. But any soldier who will do his job is lucky to serve under him. Pfaugh! The kind we're getting today, though. In the Army, they give you one mold, and every damned man Jack's supposed to fit it. All right, then. Send us more officers like the captain there, and we'll do it. Yessir, by God!

O'Donnell scratched reflectively at the salt rime under his left armpit, then sent a long glance back over his shoulder. At this distance, the smoke signal from the ridge behind them had the look of a scraggly chalk mark drawn against the slaty sky line. O'Donnell's eyes pinched against the stab of the sun as he swung his gaze forward again. A far piece ahead, in answering signal cottoned the sky in rhythmic puffs.

The captain's voice synchronized with O'Donnell's thought. "They'll be joined up in an hour or two," he said. "I think we can get ready for a brush tonight, Sergeant."

"They'll be in for a surprise, sir. Only seven of us mounted. Lucky we've taken care to keep the men in the wagons well hidden."

"Yes." The captain nodded abstractedly. "Too bad, though, we couldn't be on our way back from Eagle Tail. There'd be no complications then."

"Always a hair in the butter, sir."

"Always." The captain's voice had a grimly dismissive sound, and O'Donnell knew that the subject was closed.

Staring ahead, a pondering squint furrowed the sergeant's forehead. Inevitably there had been the usual latrine rumors back at the post about Mrs. Penrose and Captain Tooner. When Mrs. Penrose had lingered after her husband's death, some of the men had been laying odds that after a decent interval the captain would be moving out of bachelor's row and over to the married officers' side.

Delaney was one of those who had been offering two to one that there would be a post wedding, O'Donnell recalled, and come to think of it, he'd covered ten bucks of Delaney's money. Must remember to hit him up for it tomorrow. Shame, though, about the captain. Too damned strait-laced for his own good. But hell, women were scarce out here; a man had to grab his chance when it came, and to hell with the rules.

O'Donnell thought of his own wife and two kids, back on Soapsuds Row. Even in the Army you could have a home, if you wanted it bad enough. . . .

They were coming to higher ground, and ahead O'Donnell picked out a seep where they could water their horses and mules. A cottonwood motte fringed the seep and made a brief break in the monotony of the prairie.

"We'll noon up there." The captain's voice broke the silence between them. "Send a man forward to notify the scouts, Sergeant."

"Very good, sir."

Tooner swung his horse, heading it toward the lead wagon.

The attack came at dusk. Tooner had been in worse brushes, but it was hot while it lasted. The train was encamped on a low hill, but some two hundred yards to the right a brushy ridge afforded the Cheyennes intermediate cover until they were close enough to the wagons to lay a scattering fire into the camp.

Tooner, with his men already deployed, some in the wagons, others barricaded behind them, stood behind the Number Two wagon and made his quick judgment of the Cheyennes as they whipped their

ponies down from the ridge, riding, as they always did, with a magnificent recklessness. Twoscore, maybe a handful more. His own force was half the size. But his men had the newly issued Henry repeaters as an offset, and Tooner knew the worth of those pieces.

Above the swelling thunder of hoofs, a staccato whooping detonated abruptly. A remote part of Tooner's mind pocketed these sounds, ignoring them. The sound that he had been awaiting came—a ragged popping, and this his ear accepted and classified.

Old muzzle-loading Springfields, if I'm any judge. And damned poor powder in the bargain.

Tooner's glance lifted to the back of the wagon seat where Sergeant O'Donnell stood, looking down at him.

"Ready any time, sir," O'Donnell said.

"At fifty yards, Sergeant," Tooner said. "By volley."

In the normal pattern, the attackers had begun to circle the wagons when the first volley splattered them. The crash of the Henrys was a peremptory sound and had a peremptory effect. As if swept by an invisible scythe, the whirling merry-go-round faltered as the troopers' volley smashed at it. Scattered shots from the red wheel, broken now in a dozen places, had a pitifully puny sound as the Cheyennes grimly held rank, and at this moment O'Donnell's riflemen poured their second volley into it. Wild screams tore at the darkness and the ring around the wagons now widened perceptibly.

A quiet satisfaction rose in Tooner. He said, "At will now, Sergeant. See that each shot counts a coup," and turning, he strode forward and mounted to the seat of the Number One wagon.

Corporal John Delaney lay sprawled on the wagon bed, sighting his Henry over the up-chained tailgate. Ann Penrose sat with her back pressed to the wagon seat, and a faint anger ignited in Tooner as he saw the carbine locked beneath her arm.

"You will not need that," he told her sharply. "Put it down."

She glanced up at him, briefly startled, then composed.

"You have bad manners, Captain Tooner."

"I have the responsibility, Mrs. Penrose, of getting you safely to Eagle Tail. I intend putting that ahead of the social graces."

Outside, a few sporadic shots slammed faintly, followed by a diminishing sound of hoofbeats.

Slowly, Ann Penrose stood, facing him, and seeing the lines of tiredness on her face, Tooner felt a stab of remorse. Soon she would be on the outside. Memories of her life as an army wife would fade. But his memory of her would not. And the pang in him would deepen when she was gone.

He was not adept at reading a woman's mind, and now her faint smile was an enigma to him.

"You are a willful man, Captain. Where I am going, men do not snap orders at a woman. They take them!"

He remembered her words of the day before: *We are not easily disciplined, but we love being pampered.* What in the devil had she intended by that remark?

His thoughts turned dark with his loneliness, and then, for an instant, his mind conjured the dream, and she was back at Hays. Lamp-light shining from the window of the little house on Officers' Row, and inside, Ann Penrose, bustling about over some simple domestic chore, or perhaps seated cozily before the fire, leafing through a book of the latest Butterick patterns. The dream burst, like a glittering bubble. A dead fire, an empty house . . .

"Captain, you didn't hear a word I said!"

Her tone, some faint teasing quality in her smile, pricked him back to awareness, and he stiffened suddenly.

"You will have to excuse me. I was thinking of other things."

"A penny for your thoughts, Captain!"

"I am thinking you will be able to sleep tonight. By tomorrow noon we should be in Eagle Tail."

"Ah, yes. Mission completed. You will no doubt be glad to have me off your hands, Captain." Her eyes clouded. Then, abruptly, her mood seemed to change. "Captain, I hope you will not red-line Aaron

in your report. He was naturally concerned about me. Though," she added softly, "he needn't have been."

"Thank you. No, I have no intention of red-lining him. Your brother should make a capable officer, with a bit more seasoning."

"I am sure he will be well seasoned, Captain, with you supplying the condiments!"

Tooner flushed. There were times when he could not tell whether her words were intended to tease or to rebuke.

He said stiffly, "I hope you will spend a comfortable night. Good night, Mrs. Penrose."

"Good night, Captain."

An angry feeling of frustration threaded him as he climbed down from the wagon. Above him, Ann Penrose's black silky hair made a dark mystery around her face. Then she was gone.

Loaded for the return journey to the fort, the wagons were drawn up outside the log trading post at Eagle Tail. With Lieutenant Woodhull, four troopers stood inside the small corral behind the building, saddling their mounts.

In the driver's seat of the lead wagon, Corporal John Delaney was masticating a jawful of his favorite plug. Below him, sitting saddle on his big bay, Sergeant O'Donnell kept casting impatient glances back toward the little adobe station where Ann Penrose was with Captain Tooner, waiting for her train.

"What in time we waitin' for?" demanded Delaney. His grizzled jaw puckered and a tea-brown streak of juice spurted, falling with a soft slap in the roadside dust. "All this army ever does," he grumbled; "wait, wait, wait."

"And bellyache," O'Donnell said.

"You don't, I suppose."

"I do when there's something to bellyache about. Like now. You owe me ten bucks, Delaney."

"Worry about it," said Delaney fondly, "you big mick."

O'Donnell seemed not to hear him. He swung down ponderously from his saddle and tramped across the tracks to the station platform. Hell, why didn't the captain make it easier for himself and get it over with? Wrathfully, O'Donnell booted a tumbleweed out of his path.

Plain as the nose on me face, he thought darkly. *He's got the daunsy for her all right. And it's a bloody shame he must be like a moon-struck gossoon making eyes at the farmer's daughter.*

O'Donnell reached the grimy side window of the station and peered inside. He tensed abruptly. Ann Penrose sat on the waiting-room bench, with the captain beside her. She was crying softly, and as O'Donnell stood frozen, staring guiltily, he saw Captain Tooner's arm hesitantly flank her shoulder, and then possess it.

O'Donnell's eyes popped. Then, like a man rocking gently out of a trance, he stepped back from the window and pulled a stemwinder watch from the pocket of his yellow-piped breeches. Five minutes. No, four. Four minutes to train time. With aching suspense, O'Donnell crossed his fingers.

Maybe, he thought compassionately, *there will be a wreck.*

Back in front of the station, he pulled a cheroot from his tunic pocket and nervously lighted it. Delaney yelled at him from the wagon, and he ignored him. Distantly a locomotive whistled, drawing a mournful slant of sound across the prairie stillness. O'Donnell stiffened. The damned train was on time. The engineer must be a bloody Orangeman!

O'Donnell jerked around as the station door opened. Captain Tooner stepped down to the platform, one hand gripping Mrs. Penrose's arm, the other her traveling bag. A dull weight sank in O'Donnell as he started across the tracks. The captain's voice checked him.

"Sergeant?"

O'Donnell spun around. "Yes, sir?"

"I'll be obliged, Sergeant, if you will take this bag."

"Very good, sir."

"You can put it," said the captain, "in the Number One wagon."

O'Donnell gaped. "In—in the wagon, sir?" he blurted at last.

An unfamiliar grin tugged at the corners of the captain's mouth. He looked down at Mrs. Penrose.

"You see what I am up against, Ann?" he said. "Insubordination in the ranks. A clear-cut case if I ever saw one."

"Perhaps," murmured Ann Penrose, smiling, "the sergeant is a little confused. As I am."

O'Donnell's later recollection was that he had failed to salute—for the first time in his military career. Corporal Delaney was looking at him with a smug expression as he reached the wagon and with a heave of his powerful shoulders hurled the bag up to the seat.

"This ain't on our manifest." Delaney stared down at the bag in mock surprise. "We only carry military supplies in this army, bucko."

O'Donnell let out a roar. "This army carries any damned thing I say it does!"

Delaney spat. "Cost you five bucks, Sarge."

O'Donnell flicked a hand across his forehead and snapped off a spatter of sweat. Slowly, a broad grin spread his big Irish mouth.

"Worry about it, bucko," he said relishingly. "Worry about it—you big mick!"

HOMESTEADER'S WIFE

by Norman A. Fox

In the passing of Norman A. Fox last March, WWA lost one of its best-loved stalwarts, and the field of Western writing an author of well-used talent and great integrity. Norman was a former vice-president and one of the founders of Western Writers of America. Successful Western novels, short stories, and movies under the Fox by-line number in the hundreds, among them such authentic works as Night Passage, The Valiant Ones, Rope the Wind, and, Reckoning at Rimbow. Through the kindness of Norman's widow Rosalea, WWA is permitted to publish here one of the author's best short stories, a sensitive story of homestead hardship and warm hearts on the old frontier.

On this high benchland above the Missouri River breaks the February wind roamed free, slicing thinly at the earth and uncovering the tops of buffalo bones, whipping snow from high ridges and scattering it haphazardly over the low country, filling gullies and cuts to the

Copyright © 1957 by Norman A. Fox.

brim. All day long, Lela had watched from the window, the ranch house shuddering under the wind's fist in spite of the sheltering coulee walls, the tumbleweeds bounding through the yard to pile up against the horse-pasture fence. A cow bawled mournfully down at the barn. At dusk Lela turned away from the window, her eyes smarting. The thermometer, which hung outside, had fallen to zero—twenty degrees in two hours.

She made her prayer and it was simple and silent—*Will, hurry home!*

She was a supple girl, small-boned and wiry, but she moved to the heating stove like an automaton. The winter had done this to her, the winter and the wind, drawing the sap out of her, drawing the spirit. She fed a cottonwood chunk to the flames and wondered as she closed the stove door if the wood would last through the cold weather.

She had lighted the lamp when a gust of wind jerked the kitchen door from her husband's hand. The door banged noisily; the wind drove him into the house, and he forced the door shut behind him. He was a big man, Will Travis, with a face weathered and sharpened to perpetual hunger, and black hair curling above the collar of his thick wool shirt. She'd have to trim his hair one of these evenings, Lela decided. Absurd, when all of her should be thankful that he'd come through another day! He shed his sheepskin and unsnapped his batwing chaps and piled his overshoes and Scotch cap on top of these.

She said, "It's getting colder, Will."

She waited for him to come and kiss her, but he went instead to the washstand and put in a noisy session. She stood watching him. He seemed suddenly a stranger, yet she knew him as she'd known no other man. He'd been a rider and a good one, and that was his first pride; but later he'd had a second, this homestead. He had courted her for three years.

She lifted the dinner from the oven and put it on the table, feeling dull and old. She heaped his plate high with beef and potatoes and sat down opposite him and watched the way his hands broke bread; he had slender hands for so big a man. She waited.

He said, "I made another mistake."

"Yes, Will—?"

"Blossom. I found her dead in a snowbank. I should have cut her to the hospital bunch, but she was such a hearty old thing, I kept putting it off. She was a good cow. Raised a calf every year."

"How many more did we lose?"

"Three," he said.

He ate morosely, silently; he pushed back his plate. Lela said, "Coffee?"

He repeated "Coffee?" absently, as though the word were foreign to his tongue, then jerked himself from his brooding and nodded. "I can't help it, Lela," he said. "We don't have enough hay to pull the whole bunch through. We've got a bigger hospital bunch than ever before. Nineteen head. And that's how many we've lost, counting the four I found dead today. Nineteen from eighty-seven leaves sixty-eight. And we're going to lose more."

"The thermometer is going down fast," Lela said.

He went to the north window and scratched a hole in the frost and had a look. "Ten below," he said. "If it lasts two weeks, we're wiped out. It's not only the money I'm thinking about. I just can't stand to see the stock suffer. I saw range horses today that had chewed the tails off each other."

"More coffee, Will?" she asked.

"Blossom was a damn good cow."

She cleared the table, and he pulled off his high-heeled boots and shoved his feet into moccasins and took an easy chair, his eyes far-away and haunted. Washing the dishes, she glimpsed herself in the cracked mirror; her face was gaunt, too, but that made her more beautiful, and her eyes were large and brown and luminous, and her dark hair needed only a little fixing. He'd told her once that he'd fallen in love with her hair. She thought: *Why, he doesn't even know I'm here! He talks to me as he'd talk to the four walls.*

Will said, "You sure took an awful chance when you married me."

She turned, startled; it was too much like having her thoughts stand naked. She said, "Why, Will?"

"I had a homestead that still belonged to Uncle Sam. I was going to start me a horse-and-cow ranch, remember? Fine start! I owned two horses—both geldings—and no cows!"

"They were good horses," she said. And she was remembering how he used to ride one of them and fetch the other to town for her. He'd pull up before her father's store and she'd come running out. She'd thought then that she'd never seen a man who rode so tall in his saddle.

Will said, "What summer was it I got twenty head of mares from the O-Z outfit on shares? Range-bred 'em and got some good colts. Jake's one of 'em, and there ain't a better horse in the country. I dragged a big cow out of a drift today with him. He can sure pull with the saddle horn. Best horse I ever owned." For an instant the old glow was in him; his face livened. But she couldn't help the thrust of anger. No, she thought desperately, *I'm not going to be jealous of a horse!*

The wind smote the house; the heating stove was burning low. Lela got a chunk and fed the fire.

"How's the wood holding out?" Will asked.

"Not much dry wood left."

He said, "You suppose it was smart to give up the horse idea and just raise cows? Horses got so cheap you couldn't give one away. Had to work one whole summer for the O-Z pitching hay. Made two hundred dollars."

Yes, she thought, *and we postponed our wedding another year on account of it.*

His eyes were dreamy. "I used to think I'd have two hundred more cows like Blossom, only better. The big cow outfits had sold out. I felt there was room for me. But it took a heap of talking to get the bank to stake me to twenty more cows."

Lela went slowly to the window and scratched through the frost. The thermometer registered twenty-five below.

"What's it say?" Will asked.

"Still ten below," she lied. She turned toward him, her voice desperate. "Will, why can't I ride with you tomorrow? There must be something I can do!"

At first she thought he wasn't listening. Then he said, "You got your work; I got mine." He yawned. "Let's go to bed." He walked to the stove and filled it and cut the drafts. "Hope the wood lasts."

He went into the bedroom, but she was slow to follow him; she stood stricken, wondering how winter could bind two people so close together, yet drive them so far apart. And now she sensed how great was the gap; there wasn't any real marriage left; there was only the gibbering ghost of it. For his eternal preoccupation with the cattle, she might have forgiven him; she'd expected no courtship after marriage—not for a homesteader's wife. But she'd wanted to help, and she'd offered and he'd refused her. Not brutally, but absently, as one brushed aside a child's offering. There lay the making of dry tears.

Couldn't he understand that she, too, hated to see the cattle suffer and, worse, hated to see *him* suffer? Couldn't he understand that riding with him would make her days better?

She undressed slowly before the stove and was conscious of her body. She reached for her nightgown and wriggled into it, liking the sensual touch of flannel against her skin. She braided her hair, then went into the bedroom. This room he had built for her as a bride; he had wanted two rooms to start with. He had owed old man Lee all year for the lumber, and he had hauled that lumber thirty miles and built the room in less than three weeks of spare time. She was comforted, remembering that; this room was her bridge to the man she'd married, and when she'd crawled beside him, she waited tensely; she awaited his arms. He brushed a kiss against her cheek and muttered, and sleep overtook him. And she lay in the quivering darkness, listening to the wind, hating the wind.

The water bucket in the kitchen had a thin skin of ice in the morning, and she hurried numbly to get the fire going. When she scratched

at the windowpane, the temperature stood at thirty-seven below. The odor of sausage and hotcakes brought Will from the bedroom. He asked about the temperature and she gave him the truth, and he was silent the rest of the time he was in the house. At the door he hesitated. He came back into the kitchen and took his gun belt and holstered hip gun from a peg on the wall. He avoided Lela's eyes as he went out.

And so she faced another wind-racked day, and all through that day she waited for the sound of gunfire. She wished she knew why Will had taken the gun. She wished she'd asked him. At long last she heard the roll of six quick shots.

He was late that night. It was after dark when he came up from the feed lot. At table, he ate without relish, his eyes full of hurt; and the sight of him drove her own misery away—the sight of him made her ache to reach through to him. He drank three cups of coffee, then asked, "How cold is it?"

"It's been between thirty-five and forty all day, Will."

He rubbed his frost-bitten cheek. "You remember old Mamie, the mare I got from the O-Z?"

"Yes, Will."

His face tightened. "I had to do it, Lela. I couldn't watch her suffer any longer. She was pretty weak. After the first shot, I went kind of crazy—I couldn't stop pulling the trigger."

"I heard," she said.

He sat brooding, and she thought frantically that she had to find a way to reach through to him; he was growing desperate and all she could do was stand helplessly by. After the table was cleared, she got the mail-order catalogue and moved the lamp and drew him to the table to help her prowl the pages. They were knee to knee, but she wasn't sure she'd brought him any nearer. She found the women's section and pointed out an elaborate dress, a formal gown around which a million dreams might be spun.

She said, "Isn't it beautiful, Will?"

He looked at it. He said, "This is Saturday, isn't it?" He was sud-

denly wistful. "There'll be a dance in town. Do you miss the dances, Lela?"

The dances? Her whirling in his arms, and the faces along the wall blurring, and her heart crying: *Look at him! He's mine!* She had thought of town often this winter but, oddly, not of the dances. She had thought of her father's store and herself behind the counter and her mother busy in their quarters behind the store. They were eastern people, the Kenyons, and Lela had been nine when they'd come to Montana. She'd made a good hand around the store; her father had said so many times.

She said now, thoughtfully, "No, Will, it isn't the dances I miss."

It was that wanting to be useful, that wanting to share the work. Sam Kenyon had said, the day of the wedding, "You haven't much experience for what you're going into, Lela. But we'll always have a place for you here."

Foolish man! Spring was in the coulees then, and all the world was a flower to be plucked. Now she thought: *He knew! Dad knew!*

Will had absently turned the pages to the harness section. Here he found a saddle, a three-quarter-rigged roping saddle. One hundred and twenty dollars.

"I've always wanted one like that, but I'd have to sell three cows to get it," he said. "According to that, I've already lost six saddles this winter."

She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. "Someday, Will, you'll have it."

He turned a page. "I hope the old harness hangs together a few more years. I'd hate to pay what they're asking now for a set."

A growing sense of defeat smote her. "Let's go to bed," she said.

She awakened next morning to find him sitting bolt upright in bed; his startled movement had aroused her. "Damn!" he said. "Can you get breakfast in a hurry?" When she came into the cold kitchen, he was already struggling into his out-of-door clothes.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He gave her no answer, gulping his coffee as soon as it was poured, and then he slammed the kitchen door and was gone. Lela heard him ride out of the ranch yard putting Jake to a run. She waited, feeling hurt and lost and wanting something for her hands to do. There would be the endless hours with only the wind for company, and then supper. She shrugged into a heavy coat and ran to the root cellar, fifty feet out in the yard. She struggled with the door; the last three months it had been frozen shut every time she'd tried to open it. Inside, she found a jar of canned beef. She had canned it herself that fall. It was cold to her hand; it was good to her hand.

She ran toward the house, not seeing the bucket lying half hidden in the snow until she tripped over it and sprawled headlong. She got up, pain lancing through her left foot; and at first her fear was of a sprain until she tested the foot and found that it was only wrenched. But tears had come, exasperated tears, and she wanted to fight; she wanted to beat against something with her fists. She had just got inside, furious at her own clumsiness, when he returned. She saw him draw rein at the back of the house, his arms laden with something wrapped in a blanket.

She stood waiting with the kitchen door held open, the cold driving at her; she stood on one foot, stiffened against the pain. He strode toward her; the sheepskin collar of his coat was deeply covered with frost.

"Build up the fire," he said brusquely.

He shoved past her and laid his blanketed bundle on the floor and began unwrapping it. A tiny, white-faced calf lay there.

"A winter calf," he said. "I thought it might happen last night, but I wasn't sure. I think he's alive. His mammy's a bronc cow. I'll have to break her to milk. Get some milk, will you?"

He began moving about frantically; soon the calf was showing signs of life. It took a little milk from a glove finger on a bottle.

Will hovered over it. "I'll have to keep him in here for a few days until he gets some strength. Give him all the milk he'll drink. I'll be

back as soon as I feed." Lela limped nearer. "Say, what's the matter with your foot?"

Something snapped in her then, and she was perversely crazy, for at first sight of the calf her heart had gone out to the creature, but now suddenly she hated the calf and she hated Will Travis and the snow and the wind and the bleak loneliness and the pain in her foot, and all of these were part and parcel of the same thing. Her voice rose shrilly, sounding foreign to her ears. "What do you care about my foot? It isn't enough that you live all day with the stock and have nothing on your mind but them when you do come home. Now you're bringing them to clutter up the house and not even asking if I care! How much do you think I can stand?"

His eyes grew large, first with astonishment and then with hurt. He was a man who'd been slapped. He stared at her until anger stood in his eyes, and then he was fighting to control himself. He said, "It's been a hard winter for you, Lela. You're just not cut out for this kind of life. I think I could get you to the road. The mailman could take you on into town."

She laughed hysterically. "You know the mailman isn't coming through in this kind of weather."

He looked helpless. He said, "Better let me take a squint at that foot."

She said, "Will you get out of here? Get back to your precious cows!"

He turned toward the door; he was gone.

She might have run after him; she even took a step toward the door, but it was too late now. The craziness had gone out of her and she felt wretched and ashamed, and all that had happened seemed childish—even the hurt in her foot. Yet the truth had come out—each had had a say. She wasn't cut out for this kind of life, and he wasn't cut out to be a husband. He had wedded a homestead, not a woman, and the homestead would always be the thing that really mattered. She knew that now.

She turned blindly toward the calf; she spent that day lavishing care upon the calf. Once the thought came to her that Will had started with only one cow. . . .

He came in at dusk, going through the slow ritual of removing his heavier clothes; and she had supper waiting for him, but a wall had been reared and there was no getting over it. She tried once; she said, "How did it go today?"

He grunted. "I turned the stock out on the ridges. Even the hospital bunch. It must be near sixty below."

Only now did she realize that the wind had ceased blowing; the air was deadly still.

Not looking at her, he said, "How's your foot?"

"All right." Her voice turned wooden. "It must be all over up there on the ridges."

"Cattle stand a lot of punishment before they die," he said. "At least forty were still on their feet tonight when I left them. The rest were down. I was out of shells. "That's why I came home." He looked toward the bedroom. "I can sleep in the barn."

"At sixty below! Don't be crazy!"

Shortly they went to bed, but still the wall was there; they were strangers in bed together. She wanted to draw near to him; she wanted to say, "You still have Jake and the new calf." She wanted to say, "You still have me." But that was all changed; that had been changed in anger and bluntness this morning. She felt the tenseness and aloofness of him; she could have touched him with her hand, but he was far gone from her. She fell into fitful sleep and awakened hours later. It was still dark. She listened silently, hardly daring to breathe. Then: "Will! Will!" she cried. "Wake up! Wake up!"

He reared to a sitting position. "What's wrong?"

"Listen! The wind's blowing!"

"Wind! It's too cold for the wind to blow!" He threw back the covers and ran to the window. He cursed.

"Lelal!" he cried. "Light a lamp! Where's the matches?"

She came from the bedroom with a lamp in her hand. He was scratching frantically at the window pane. She peered over his shoulder. The thermometer read forty below. A rise of twenty degrees in . . .

"What time is it?" he demanded.

She found the clock. "Four-thirty."

He rushed outside in his nightshirt; she followed after him. The wind was blowing from the southwest. "Thank God," he said; he said it devoutly.

They were to sleep no more that night. Lela made breakfast, again wanting something for her hands to do; and it was still dark when they finished eating. Recklessly, Will chucked Lela's hoarded wood into the heating stove; he awakened the calf and fed it milk.

"In a few days, young feller, I'll introduce you to your mother," he said joyously; and Lela felt shut out. Then Will turned to her. "I don't want to be a weather prophet, but I think we're going to have a chinook. I'll take a chance and pack some of Jake's hay up on the ridge as soon as it's daylight. It'll be about a mouthful apiece for the stock."

He turned back to the calf. He said over his shoulder, "If you'll get ready, I can get you to the road sometime today. The mailman will make it through."

At first her heart cried *No! No!* But then she knew his way was the way it must be; the chinook might come in time for the stock, but not for them. For the winter wind would blow again, and he would be preoccupied with the cattle, and they would walk the endless treadmill to another day when some trivial thing like a wrenched foot would bring anger and honesty out of them both. She nodded. She said, "I'll be ready."

And something died in her then.

She let him leave and she fell to dressing; she read the thermometer fifty times that morning, and at noon it stood at ten below. The wind blew harder as the day dragged on; it drove the temperature up to zero

before Will returned. He stripped off his coat and said, "The stock must have known it was going to warm up and hung on to life. Tomorrow I'm taking hot mash up to those that are the weakest. I'll use oatmeal and cereals from the house. Anything that's feed. I'm going to save those cows."

He looked about. "Where's the pen and ink?"

She was dressed to leave, but he made no comment; and she wanted to cry out to him, to ask if there couldn't be a second chance for both of them. But her pride held her silent, and she wondered if his pride blocked his tongue, too. He had always been a proud man, proud first of his riding and then of his homestead. Was that what had kept him from letting her share his work? "You got your work; I got mine," he'd said.

She said, "I'll find the pen and ink for you."

She got them, and he fussed with the catalogue and labored over an order blank; when he was finished, he said, "You can mail this in town. You'd better check it first."

She remembered the eternal admonition of the mail-order houses: *Don't forget to state size and color!* and she wanted to laugh, but she'd have cried instead. You didn't state size and color when you were ordering a saddle or a set of harness. This was what the chinook was doing for him—he could make plans again.

She looked at the order because her hands needed something to do. She unfolded the blank and said, "Why, Will! It's for the dress!"

He stood with his hands hanging straight down. He said, "I figure you got it coming."

She turned the envelope over, not understanding, and he said, "I guess we can see our way clear to afford it. We'll have beef to ship next fall."

And now she understood, and the knowledge left her humble and contrite. She had tasted madness made of wind and cold and bawling cattle; and he had tasted it, too. But always he'd been single-minded; always he'd worked to save the stock, for that was his way, his fulfill-

ment of all the pledges he'd made to her, the ones spoken, the ones unspoken. He had courted her once with smiles and soft words, but you didn't build a homestead with those things, or a life together. He had ridden in frost and storm for her sake as well as the stock's, but she had been too blind to see until the proof was in her hand.

She took a step toward him; his arms came out and enfolded her—he could take her in his arms now, with the chinook wind blowing. His time and his strength were hers; their stock no longer needed him. And when at long last she disengaged herself, she tore the envelope across and let it fall.

"I'm not going to town," she said.

He frowned. "But I could have given the mailman the order just the same."

"Silly," she said. "We'll make one out for that saddle, or a new set of harness. Where would I ever wear the dress?"

MY SISTER AND THE GUNMAN

by Ray Gaulden

Texas-born Ray Gaulden is another writer who knows his West firsthand. He has published well over two hundred stories in magazines as well as five Western novels. Two of his more recent novels are The Vengeful Men and Shadow of the Rope. Ray is a charter member of WWA and served as chairman of the important election-canvassing committee last year. With his wife, Thelma, and a redheaded teen-age daughter named Marsha, Ray lives in Denver on a street with the improbable name of South Zenobia.

There wasn't a man I'd rather had for a brother-in-law than Dave Larkin, even if he had been a gun fighter before he came to our part of the country. To me, Dave was a lot better than that no-account gambler Kirby Rell Sis had it in her head to run off with.

I remember the first time I saw Dave Larkin. It was in the middle of summer and I was fishing on the bank of Turkey Creek when he came riding along on a blue roan.

Copyright © 1954 by Stadium Publishing Corporation.

"Howdy," he said as he pulled up on the bank. "Catching anything?"

"Got a couple," I told him, holding them up. "Nothing to brag about."

He was kind of long and loose, and while you couldn't call him handsome, there was something in his gray eyes that warmed you up right away.

"My name's Larkin," he said. "Just bought the Brendell place."

That was enough to make me forget fishing, because it meant he was going to be our neighbor, and right away I began to get ideas about him and Ellie.

"I'm Johnny Evans," I said, pulling my line in. "Since you're new around here, maybe I could show you the country, give you a hand now and then."

"You sure can, Johnny." He had a soft way of talking and a smile that came easy. "You come see me whenever you take a notion."

I went a lot, too much Pa said, but as long as I did the chores, he didn't nag me about it.

Most men were carrying guns in those days and I wondered why Dave never did. He left his in the house all the time, hanging over the fireplace, and when I asked him about it, he said that guns could get you in trouble. I wasn't so curious at first because I liked being around Dave and I had it in my head about him being the right one for Ellie.

It took a little doing getting them together, since Dave was working most of the time, and Ellie just stayed in the house, moping around and waiting for Kirby Rell to come back for her. But Ma finally invited Dave over for Sunday dinner and that got things rolling.

Ellie was pretty. There was no getting around that. Yellow hair and blue eyes and skin that the Colorado sun never had been able to take the smoothness out of.

I could tell Dave liked her by the way he kept looking at her all during dinner, and it made me feel good because Sis had kind of

perked up a little and was smiling once in a while, so I figured it wouldn't be long till she forgot that smooth-talking Kirby Rell and all that nonsense he'd filled her full of.

Of course, Sis had gone to school with Kirby and whether you liked him or not, you had to admit he had a way about him. Well put together and handsome as all get out. I never did like those fancy duds he wore, but I guess the girls did, because he always had a lot of them chasing him.

It didn't seem to matter that he never did anything but play cards for a living. Ellie loved him, or thought she did, and she was always saying she was going to marry him and go away, and she wouldn't listen to Pa when he tried to tell her Kirby wasn't the marrying kind.

Even when Kirby left, saying a two-bit town like ours was no place for a man of his talents, Sis still wouldn't admit she had been wrong about him. I knew that was because of what he'd said the night he pulled out. "You're my girl, Ellie, and I'm coming back for you one of these days."

I remember the way Ellie cried that night and it made me kind of sick to see her taking on over a worthless cuss like him. She didn't get over it, either, even though he'd been gone six months now and hadn't even written to her. Kept waiting and saying he'd come back, but she wasn't happy, so you can see why I was anxious for her and Dave to get together.

After seeing her that first time, Dave came over to our house real often, and it wasn't long till he and Ellie were going for rides together and pretty soon he started taking her to the shindigs. Dave didn't have Kirby's gift of gab, but I could tell Sis liked him, because she was laughing like she used to and those shadows that had been in her eyes since Kirby left weren't there any more.

Things drifted along for a spell and I kept going over to Dave's place nearly every day. He knew a lot about horses and cows and ranch work, but he never talked much about himself or said where he came from. I used to look at the gun he had hanging over the fire-

place and wonder about it. The black butt and the long shiny barrel kind of fascinated me, but Dave always acted a little funny when I mentioned it and he'd usually change the subject.

I heard the sheriff talking to Pa one day when we were in town. "Kind of quiet, that Larkin fellow," the sheriff said. "Never has nothing to say for himself."

We had come in for supplies and Pa was lifting a sack of flour off the loading platform back of the store. He put it in the wagon and leaned against the tailgate while he looked at the sheriff.

"All the folks along the creek like Dave," Pa said. "He's a good neighbor, and far as I'm concerned that's all that counts."

The sheriff nodded. "Don't figure to pester him none as long as he behaves himself, but I was just thinking he kind of reminds me of a gunman I seen once down in El Paso."

"If Dave was a gun fighter," Pa said, "he was the kind that never killed nobody that didn't need it."

"Maybe you're right, and like I said, I'm not going to kick up a fuss as long as he don't cause any trouble."

Dave wasn't the kind to make trouble, and I knew it. Pa and I talked about it on the way home and he said we'd best forget what the sheriff had told us. Didn't make any difference anyway, because Dave had settled down now and was working hard.

That night Dave and Ellie started for the dance in Dave's rig, and the folks and I followed them in the wagon. Dave suggested all of us go together, but Sis said something to change his mind, and the way she looked was enough to tell me that she was kinda peeved with him.

Pa brought it up as soon as he had the team lined out toward Haines' Barn. "What's the matter with Dave, anyway?" Pa asked, shaking his head. "Acts like he don't know what to do with himself around a girl."

"He's just a little backward," Ma said. "A lot of men are like that."

"Figured he'd ask her to marry him by now," Pa said. "Don't see what he's waiting for."

"He'll ask her pretty soon." Ma gave him a sharp stare. "Are you in a hurry to get shut of Ellie?"

"You know that ain't so," Pa told her. "I just don't want him to put off asking her too long, because I can tell Ellie's getting anxious."

I sat in the back of the wagon, listening to them talk and I felt like asking why they didn't let Dave and Ellie work it out, since it was their problem. I didn't say anything, though, because I knew what I'd get for talking out of turn.

By the time we got to the barn, Dave and Ellie were already there, mixing with the other couples and waiting for Pa to show up with his fiddle and start the music. In no time at all everybody was having a big time and I was sitting up in the loft with Herb Preston, showing him the slingshot Dave had made me, and at the same time watching the folks dance. Pa perspired when he played the fiddle and tonight he had got so worked up that he was wringing wet.

While I was listening to the music and the shuffling feet, I saw somebody coming in from outside. Just a fellow that didn't interest me until I took another look. This time I blinked my eyes, because it was Kirby Rell and nobody else.

Kirby had a walk that let you know he thought he was pretty good, and watching him as he stopped and stood there near the doorway, I couldn't see anything that looked different about him. The same dark face and fancy clothes, and still wearing that tight little smile that just touched the corner of his mouth and never went any further.

Kirby didn't need to say what he was doing here because it was plain enough the way his eyes roved around until they found Ellie, and after he saw her he didn't look at anybody else. I could tell that Sis hadn't spied him yet. She was dancing with Dave, and they were in the middle of the barn now with a lot of other couples around them.

The Preston kid was trying to talk to me, rattling on about something, but I wasn't paying attention. Pretty soon he gave up and left me alone and I sat there with my legs dangling over the edge of the

loft, watching Kirby Rell. The way his eyes stayed on Ellie, moving up and down, made me plenty mad.

The music stopped then and most of the couples were walking away, but Dave and Ellie weren't moving and I knew that Sis had seen Kirby. He started toward her, walking with that same old swagger, his chest pushed out and his Stetson set at a rakish angle.

I guess everybody there remembered Kirby, and most of them knew how things had been with him and Ellie. Folks stopped talking and it got so quiet I could hear my breath coming through my nose.

Kirby spoke in a voice loud enough for everybody to hear. "Hello, Ellie. How's my girl?"

Just like he'd never been away or that he had written and Ellie was expecting him, when I knew blamed well she wasn't. I couldn't hear what Ellie said, but she was looking at Kirby in a way I didn't like. Her face was all lit up and she was smiling.

Dave stood there, looking mighty uncomfortable. He acted like he didn't know what to do or say, and to make it worse, Sis waited a long time before she got around to introducing them. I was getting madder all along, wishing that Dave would tell Kirby where to get off, let him know that Ellie was Dave's girl now, and that he didn't want Kirby fooling around.

But Dave didn't have much to say and all he did was walk away and let her dance the next one with Kirby. I watched them moving around out there, Kirby holding her close to him and talking in her ear. Stirring up all those old memories, I thought, the things that Ellie had put out of her mind now that she was going with Dave. Ellie would glance over at Dave every little while and then look back at Kirby and turn on that bright smile of hers.

I wished that Dave would walk out there and pull them apart, bust Kirby in the nose, and turn Ellie across his knee. But it was plain that Dave wasn't going to do anything like that. He was leaning against the wall, talking to Ma, just as though he didn't know Kirby and Ellie were in the barn.

When the music stopped, Kirby took Ellie over to where Dave was standing and it got quiet in the barn again.

"Ellie and me have a lot to talk about," Kirby said. "You won't mind me taking her home?"

Kirby wasn't asking if it was all right. He was telling Dave how it was going to be and the tone of Kirby's voice let you know that he was hoping Dave would try to make something of it.

"Why, sure," Dave said, smiling. "It's all right with me."

Sis looked like she was a little disappointed when he said that. She kind of tossed her head back and took hold of Kirby's arm and the two of them walked out of the barn with everybody watching them.

I had built Dave Larkin up in my mind to be something kind of special, even if he was a little slow asking Ellie to marry him, and it knocked the props from under me to just see him standing there and doing nothing to keep Sis from going off with Kirby.

Kirby was just a lot of hot air, I figured, a fellow that talked a good fight, but I'd never seen him back it up. Packed a white-handled gun, too, and he used to brag about how good he was with it, but I'd never seen him prove that, either.

There was one thing I was sure of. Dave Larkin wasn't afraid of Kirby Rell, or of nobody else for that matter. He didn't wear a gun, but he had one, and I remembered what the sheriff had said about that gun fighter he'd seen down in El Paso.

On our way home from the dance, Pa brought it up right away. "Figured we had seen the last of that drifting cardsharp, and then he has to show up just when Dave and Ellie are hitting it off real well."

"No need for us to fret about it yet," Ma said. "Kirby might just be passing through on his way somewhere."

"I've got a feeling you're wrong," Pa said, kind of worried. "He told Ellie when he left that he'd come back for her someday." He shook his head. "I don't know what she sees in him."

Ma looked off into the darkness. "Kirby was her first beau and she was taken in by all that sweet talk and those promises about taking her

to the big cities and buying her a lot of things that a girl dreams about but can't usually have."

"Them promises didn't mean nothing," Pa said with disgust. "Kirby's just a tindhorn gambler and he won't ever be anything else."

"I know," Ma said. "But Ellie doesn't."

"Maybe she couldn't see it at first, but she ought to have some sense by now. Dave may be a little slow saying the things she wants him to, but he's the kind that'll make her a good husband."

"Maybe I better give Ellie a good talking to," Ma said.

Pa spoke to the team, trying to get them to move a little faster. "Wouldn't do any good," he said. "Ellie's got a mind of her own and she's gonna do just whatever she blame pleases."

"I guess you're right," Ma said, kind of heavy.

When we got home, I went up to my room, undressed, and climbed in bed. But I didn't go to sleep right away. I lay there looking into the darkness and thinking about what had happened. After a while I decided maybe it wasn't as bad as it seemed. Maybe Sis, a little put out because Dave was taking his time about asking her, had seen a good chance to make him jealous.

She'd gone off with Kirby tonight, but she'd tell him how things were with her and Dave, and Kirby would go on about his business. Tomorrow Ellie and Dave would patch it up and everything would be all right. Thinking along those lines got my hopes up and I was about ready to go to sleep when I heard hoofbeats out in the yard.

I got up and went over to the window, standing there in my drawers while I looked out. Kirby and Ellie were in the yard and they stayed there for a few minutes, talking too low for me to hear them even though the window was up. She let him kiss her and then she came toward the house and Kirby called after her, "See you tomorrow."

Sis nodded and Kirby was whistling through his teeth as he turned away.

The next day was Sunday and Dave usually took Ellie to church, but

at breakfast when Ma mentioned it, Ellie said, "I'm going for a ride with Kirby."

"Folks ought to be in church on Sunday," Pa said.

I guess Ma could see a squabble coming, because she said, "Ellie goes all the time, so I don't think it's going to hurt if she misses this once."

Pa looked like he was going to carry it on and I was wishing he would. Wanted him to lay the law down to Ellie, and tell her she shouldn't be trifling with Dave, but I saw the sharp way Ma was staring at him and in a little bit Pa simmered down and went back to eating.

Dave was at church that morning and after the services I kind of hinted at it until he asked me to ride home with him in his rig. I didn't try to hide the fact that I wasn't very happy, but if Dave knew it he didn't let on.

"What do you say we do some fishing when we get home?" he asked.

"Naw," I told him gloomily. "I don't feel like it."

"Got a hunch they're biting today," he said, just like he didn't have another thing on his mind.

And that made me kind of sore, so I came right out with it. "Dave," I said, "you're gonna have to do something before it goes too far."

"What are you getting at, Johnny?"

"You know blamed well what I'm getting at," I said, talking to him in a way I'd never done before. "You let Kirby Rell come in that dance last night and walk off with your girl."

"Now hold on a minute, Johnny," Dave said, and he was smiling a little. "You didn't expect me to kick up a ruckus right there in front of all those folks over something that didn't amount to nothing?"

"*Didn't amount to nothing?* You took Ellie to the dance and it was your place to see her home. Would have been fine with me if you'd knocked a few teeth down that Kirby Rell's throat."

Dave's face got serious then. "I haven't been here long, Johnny,

and I'm trying to get along with everybody. Don't want to get the name of a troublemaker."

"Folks around here don't like Kirby Rell," I told him, "and they sure wouldn't blame you none if you knocked his block off."

He smiled at me again. "I think you're making a lot out of nothing, Johnny. Ellie's told me about Kirby and how things used to be with them. Of course that's all over now, but she wants to be nice to him."

"She don't have to be as nice as she's being," I said with disgust. "Maybe it wasn't so bad leaving with him last night, but do you know why she didn't come to church with you today?"

"Told me Kirby wanted her to go riding with him."

"And you're still not worried about it?"

He shook his head. "Ellie just went with him for old times' sake. She's not going to get serious or anything."

"Don't be too sure about that. Ellie was pretty stuck on him one time and she might get that way again."

Dave sobered. "Ellie knows how I feel about her."

"You ever tell her?"

He shifted on the seat, a little uncomfortable. "Well, I never got right down to saying anything, but I figure that a woman knows without a man having to make a lot of fool talk."

I wanted to tell him that I guessed a girl still liked to hear it, but I'd already said more than I should have. I shut up, but that didn't stop me from mulling it over and I wondered how a fellow who was so smart about some things could be so blamed dumb when it came to women.

We rode on a ways and then Dave looked over and grinned at me. "Everything'll be all right, Johnny. You wait and see."

I couldn't get my hopes up, but I didn't say any more about it the rest of the way home.

When Dave dropped me off at the house, I started to saddle my pinto, because the folks had gone over to the Prestons for dinner and

I was supposed to go, too. But I saw Ellie standing in the doorway, so I went up to the house. By the time I got inside, she'd gone upstairs and I could hear her moving around up there.

I waited for her to come down and when she didn't I went up to see what was keeping her. The door to her room was open and I found her digging in the dresser drawer, pulling out clothes.

"What you doing, Sis?" I asked, a little uneasy.

"I'm getting some things together," she said without looking around.

I saw the suitcase then and I began to worry. "You figuring on going away?"

She nodded and went on with what she was doing.

I watched her a minute and then I said, "You ain't fixing to leave with that no-good Kirby Rell?"

She put something in the suitcase, still not looking at me. "Kirby and I are going to get married."

That took the wind out of me and all I could do for a minute was stare at her with my mouth hanging open. Finally I said, "You're joshing me, ain't you, Sis?"

"No, I mean it, Johnny. Kirby's coming after me in a little while and we're going away together."

"Going where?"

She kept working fast, stuffing things in the suitcase like she had to hurry up and get it done before she changed her mind. "We're going to be married in town, and then he's taking me to Denver. We're going to stay at the Brown Palace. It's the best hotel in town, Kirby says. He's been there before and he says there's lots to see. Shows at the Tabor Grand opera house, and all kinds of things."

I felt lower than I ever had in my life. "What about you and Dave? I thought——"

She bit her lip and then she said, "Dave doesn't want a wife. He's satisfied with living by himself, with just going with a girl and being friends and never letting it go any further than that."

"You're wrong," I said, desperate now. "Dave just ain't been able to rake up the nerve to ask you."

"I don't want a man like that," she said stubbornly. "I don't know what I saw in him to start with. It's been Kirby all the time, but I wasn't sure till he came back."

"You won't never be happy with that big show-off," I said. "He'll take you down to Denver and leave you for somebody else, and then it'll be too late to come back to Dave."

"Go on, Johnny, and leave me alone," she said, sounding kind of angry now. "I have a lot to do before Kirby gets here."

I stood there a while longer, looking at her and wanting to argue some more, but knowing it wasn't any use. She'd made up her mind and nothing I could say was going to change it. I went downstairs, dragging my feet a little, and when I got to the living room I sat down and started remembering how close Ellie and me used to be, the fun we'd had together, hunting and fishing and going in swimming.

Now she was going away and I might not ever see her again. I thought of Dave and I considered going after him, but I knew what he'd say. Ellie didn't have to go with Kirby.

I looked at the fireplace and I saw Pa's old peacemaker on the mantel. For a minute I thought about taking it down and going outside to wait for Kirby Rell to come along. Waiting till he got close so I'd be sure not to miss and then letting him have it. He'd never been any good and he'd end up breaking Ellie's heart, even if she couldn't see it.

And I'd have been doing a lot of folks a favor by killing Kirby, because he had caused plenty of them grief. . . . I went over and took the gun down and held it in my hand, but then it come to me that I hadn't grown big enough to kill a man, even a worthless cuss like Kirby.

I felt sick and I heard the clock ticking, telling me that Kirby was apt to be here any time. I put the gun back and I was getting more desperate by the minute, and then I looked at the gun and I thought

of the one Dave had over at his place. A gun that he knew how to use if I could just figure out some way to get him to strap it on and come over here. . . . An idea hit me then and I went tearing out of the house, got Pa's saddle horse, and lit out for Dave's place down the creek.

He came to the doorway when I pounded up in front of his house and I looked at him through a cloud of dust. "Dave," I panted. "You've got to give me a hand."

"What's up, Johnny?"

"That paint horse of mine," I said, trying to sound choked up. "Stuck his foot in a gopher hole and busted his leg. I couldn't bring myself to shoot him, Dave, and Pa's not home."

"Well, I reckon I can do it for you," Dave said gently. "Wait till I get my gun."

He was back in a minute, strapping the six-shooter around his waist as he hurried down to the corral. I kept a straight face, but I figured I had pulled it off pretty slick.

When we got back to our place, I saw the rig in the yard, one that I figured Kirby had rented in town, and I knew Kirby was in the house.

Without paying any attention to the rig, Dave said, "Where's the pinto, Johnny?"

I squirmed a little. "Lied to you about that, Dave. Did it to get you to put your gun on and come over here."

He looked kind of baffled.

"Dave," I said, "Sis is fixing to run off with Kirby. He's here after her and she's going because she thinks you don't love her. She's all mixed up, but you've got to stop her."

Dave looked at the house. "Didn't figure it was that serious," he said. "I guess you were right, Johnny."

About that time the door opened and Ellie and Kirby came out. They started across the porch and then they saw us and Kirby put

down the suitcases he was carrying. He said, without looking at Sis, "Ellie, go on and get in the rig."

Ellie acted as if she didn't know what to do. She looked at Dave and I saw her lips tremble.

"Ellie," Dave said, "you stay right where you are."

Kirby stepped off the porch and his hand wasn't far from the butt of his white-handled gun. "Mister," he said, "you're asking for trouble."

Dave stepped out of the saddle and started toward him, saying quiet as anything, "I've met up with trouble before."

Kirby stopped then and he looked at Dave as if he was seeing something he had missed last night.

"Maybe you don't know who I am," Kirby said, making one last attempt to bluff like he was used to doing.

"Don't make any difference to me who you are," Dave said in that same soft tone and he was still walking toward Kirby, walking straight and slow. "Either get in that rig alone and head out of here, or get ready to use that fancy gun."

Kirby swallowed hard and there was sweat on his face. I couldn't blame him for being scared, because I knew he'd never come up against a man like this before, a man who was cool and calm and afraid of nothing.

For just a minute longer, Kirby hesitated, and then he whirled around and went to the rig. I watched him drive out of the yard and I knew we'd seen the last of that tinhorn.

"Gosh, Dave," I said, kind of proud. "You sure scared the daylight out of him, but I guess he knew a real gun fighter when he saw one."

"I'm no gun fighter, Johnny," Dave said, looking at Ellie as she came toward him. "I was just trying to act like one, hoping to fool Kirby."

"But that gun——?"

"It belonged to my brother, who was killed in a shooting scrape

down in El Paso a while back. He was good with a gun, but I never could hit the side of a barn."

"Well, I'll be doggoned," I said, looking at Dave with admiration.

Ellie had reached him then and they were looking at each other and making a lot of talk that let me know everything was going to be all right. I smiled and rode down the creek so they could be alone.

HOSTAGE TRAIL

by Fred Grove

Fred Grove writes principally about southwestern Indians, treating them as people rather than mere stock characters on horseback. He has published numerous short stories and three novels: Flame of the Osage, Sun Dance, and No Bugles, No Glory. A graduate of Oklahoma University, Fred has Osage and Sioux blood in his veins on the maternal side; the rest of him is pure cowboy: his father was a pioneer cowhand in the rawhide Cherokee Strip as well as a trail driver from Texas to Montana. In addition to this background for authentic Westerns, Fred, with his wife, Lucile, and son Bill, lives within a few blocks of unlimited research sources in Oklahoma University at Norman.

Off northwest, dust scuffed low on the brown mesquite-dotted prairie. It kept growing rapidly and Captain Peter Hambrick Cornett,

Copyright © 1957 by Standard Magazines, Inc. Originally published in *Texas Rangers*, April 1957 issue.

Sixth Cavalry, watched with the bleak attention of one who had learned to expect the worst in this unpredictable land.

Sergeant Barney Rudd, his square, homely face apologetic, was saying, "About the quartermaster stuff we're totin', sir. Corporal Jensen says the uniforms were loaded on at the last minute."

"Uniforms?" Cornett, only mildly interested, still eyed the dust.

"Yes, sir. Seems Fort Richardson needed tin washtubs for officers' quarters. But Fort Sill got Richardson's tubs and Richardson got Sill's new C Troop blues. Now we're packin' the whole caboodle back so the C boys won't run around in their shirttails."

"I see."

The distant amber cloud materialized into horsemen. Cornett narrowed his gaze, squinting, and afterward felt relieved when he recognized white men. Then he grew taut again as he saw sunlight glint on rifle barrels.

"Jensen says——"

"Never mind," Cornett said wearily.

"One more thing, sir," Rudd went on, hurrying. "It's old Eagle Heart. He's got another message for you. Claims he's put the war trail behind forever. From now on he follows the White Father's road. He admits he don't exactly love the white man, but he will shake his hand. He's put away his lance and bow. He's gonna quit stealin' Texas horses. His heart is good——"

"What does he want?" Cornett cut in, remembering that yesterday the Comanche had complained of moldy bacon rations.

"I was comin' to that, sir. Been around Injuns so long reckon I talk the same way—in circles." Rudd pursed his cracked lips a moment. "Well, it seems as how he wants you to make him a scout."

"Anything to get out of farming, I guess." The knot of riders veered sharply, setting a course that soon would cut across the line of march, and Cornett added, almost as an afterthought, "Well, tell him he'll have to take that up with the agent at Fort Sill."

Cornett hitched about, throwing the column a stiff size-up. His

Conestoga wagons were creaking toward Red River in single file, twenty yards apart, ready to be corralled on short notice. His hostage Quahada Comanches—disconsolate bucks, squaws, and children—rode skinny ponies and jammed the wagons. Cornett's handful of troopers hung on the flanks, sun-blistered faces canted down.

Ten men made a mighty thin escort through country often traveled by Comanche and Kiowa war parties helling out of the Nations, and Cornett would have questioned the prudence of his mission except that Major Braxton's two troops, on scouts, were to join up. Yet that could mean anywhere within fifty miles, Cornett realized, depending on Braxton's whims.

With a scowl for the heat-hammered space around him, he halted the column. Captain Cornett was fifty-eight years old, two inches over six feet, and he rode with a straight-backed erectness. Almost ten years ago, in the Civil War, he had been a brevet colonel, serving well but without fame. Long ago he had understood that his career would be marked by steady application to duty rather than the flamboyant dash that shot some officers to the top. Men like Braxton, who fancied buckskin jackets and bright bandannas and frequently wrote of his own exploits for the eastern press. So Cornett had patiently accepted his routine lot, a lean, gray-mustached man who took such dirty details as this without complaint—and who still longed for the green Ohio hills of his boyhood.

Now the riders came on in a fashion that warned him. They reined up several rods away, rifles across pommels. Dust settled. Then Cornett, walking his mount toward them, noticed some sat their horses awkwardly, like galled townsmen. Ranch hands filled out the bunch.

One man, tall and thick through the shoulders, came forward. Under his dust-covered hat, bright zealot's eyes peered out over a thicket of brown beard. His uncompromising glance ran over the column.

"Who's in charge here?"

Cornett flushed beneath his heavy tan, but answered evenly enough. "I am. Captain Cornett. Sixth Cavalry."

"My name's Damron," he said, as if Cornett should know. "Where you headed?"

"Up from Fort Richardson to Fort Sill."

Damron's direct eyes locked again on the wagons. He squared one big-knuckled hand on his hip, and Cornett had a premonition of what was coming. "Reckon you ain't heard, Cap'n. Heathen Comanches raided around Lost Spring day before yesterday. They stole plenty horses—shot up some folks. Feeling's runnin' high."

Cornett winced visibly. "I regret to hear that, Mr. Damron."

"I see you got some heathens along."

"These people weren't involved in your raid," the captain said distinctly. "They're hostages, captured some months ago on McClellan Creek."

"Comanches, just the same. Heathens."

Cornett's mouth thinned. "As I told you——"

"Maybe you don't get it," Damron interrupted, his voice brittle. "We're plumb wore out with Injun raids. We aim to stop 'em. And the Army's no help—never around when there's trouble."

"You have a vast country to patrol, Mr. Damron."

"Makes no difference." Damron cocked his head, indicating the horsemen. "Citizens been forced to do their own fightin'. Townfolks—farmers—cowmen. A heap more where they come from. We're organized. We can throw a hundred mounted men in the field. And we got ourselves a law for heathen Comanches and Kioways—we shoot on sight. Now you understand plain English? Or don't damn Yankees get nothin' straight?"

There was a thick silence, then Cornett answered very quietly. "I trust you understand my position as I do yours. I have my orders. Of course, we have no intention of stopping in the vicinity of Lost Spring and stirring up the citizens. We'll push right through——"

"No, Cap'n," snapped Damron with an old bitterness. "You don't go through here."

Cornett became aware that he was biting his mustache. As he con-

sidered Damron's inflexible face a cold anger grew in him. Yet, even now, he could understand why these people ached to fight. He was conscious of detailed sounds. The creak of saddle leather as a man shifted nervously, a horse's snuffle. Somebody coughed.

It was then that he discovered Rudd in the edge of his vision. He didn't recall seeing the sergeant ease up, but he had. He loomed two paces back to Cornett's right, steady as stone.

"We might detour," Cornett heard himself replying, striving for reason. "But the country's too rough east of here. West, it's dry as bone."

"You don't go no place, looks to me. Unless—" Damron let his meaning dangle.

Cornett's chin tilted. "Unless what, Mr. Damron?"

"Just this. I'm a reasonable man. Hand over your Comanche bucks and we let you take the rest on."

A disgust filled Cornett. "If I don't?"

"We take 'em anyway. That's how it is. The way of the ungodly shall perish. I told you we're wore out."

"You'd attack United States cavalry?"

"Don't want to unless you force us. But I never expected to see the day when cavalry protected scurvy savages." Damron's burning eyes roved to the wagon train. "You look pretty scant to me. Don't reckon you could hold us off long."

"That," said Cornett, rising in his stirrups, "is an outcome you'd better not count on."

Damron leaned forward expectantly. "So you'll come ahead? Risk it?"

The riders stirred. One seemed to detach himself unwillingly. He bumped as he jogged. He was a slightly built man dressed in a baggy black suit, now gray with dust. His pointed, sun-reddened face showed the havoc of unaccustomed riding, and the heavy rifle looked cumbersome in his pale storekeeper's hands.

"Now wait a minute," he began, giving them both his uncertain stare. "Damron, let's not rush into anything."

Damron tossed him his acrid scorn. "Volunteered to fight, didn't you, Appleby?"

"I suggest we give him time to consider."

"Time! We've palavered too long now."

"Give him till morning," Appleby insisted. "If he doesn't surrender the bucks by then, I give my solemn word the town boys will help you take them."

Damron seemed to weigh it this way and that. At last he said grudgingly, facing Cornett, "Like I said, I'm a reasonable man. Mornin' it is. And you'll see. We want them bucks. We aim to hang every man." With that, he broke his horse away.

Erect, Captain Cornett watched them go. Some distance on, where the land rose to low, broken buttes, he saw several riders drop out. By that he knew Damron was taking no chances of permitting the column to evade him. Cornett thought of dispatching a messenger to Fort Richardson, but decided the distance was too great. He thought of Major Braxton off after Indians he'd likely never encounter and realized he could never locate Braxton's command in time.

A surge of futile anger had its way in him. He allowed it to flare, and then said, "Corral for camp, Sergeant," and rode thoughtfully back.

Sundown clothed the land in bold, crimson strokes. Purple shadows splashed the distant buttes where Damron's men watched. A breeze stirred, faintly cooling this parched emptiness. Twilight settled down. Around the mess fires, burning as yellow spires, the Comanches nursed their silent hatred of the white man. Horses stamped. Troopers grumbled, the men making blurred shapes in the dusk.

Captain Cornett, outside his tent, caught all these sights and murmurs and found them familiar, fitting a pattern he'd long lived by. When an orderly brought hardtack, bacon, and coffee, he went inside and took his lonely supper under the sallow glow of candle light.

Afterward, he stretched his stiff legs, feeling looseness come to his muscles. It was good not to move. Still in his camp chair, he lighted his stubby pipe and thoughtfully considered the course before him.

It had not changed, he knew. Once again appraising Damron's threat, he figured the man would attack. It was eye for an eye with Damron, the way of the frontier, no matter the guilt where Comanches were concerned. Thus, Cornett could either run or advance. Either way he risked trouble.

Of a sudden he felt all the swarming pressure come solidly against him. For a while he bent to it. Then he straightened and a doggedness took hold. He had another pipe and thought of his wife, waiting for him at Fort Sill, of his one soldier son somewhere in the barren Dakotas. At that, he got up and fumbled in his gear for a map.

He was going over it when Sergeant Rudd entered for evening orders and saluted.

"You know this country, Sergeant?"

"Pretty well, sir."

"Good. We're going to use our imaginations a bit. We can't bull our way out. Not strong enough for that. Besides, I want to avoid a fight."

Rudd's shaggy eyebrows shot up. "We're not turning tail?"

"Not exactly. Now listen. I want these mess fires kept low and steady tonight. Not too high, mind you. Just enough so a man can see from the buttes." Cornett checked himself with a pull at his mustache. "It will be dirty work, but grease every damned wagon axle. Also, I want blankets covering all wheel rims."

Rudd's gray eyes, almost white against his weathered skin, blinked rapidly. The captain found himself studying the man closely, with an unspoken liking. Rudd, who would finish his army days no higher than he now stood, was the kind of noncom who put backbone into a command. He knew Indians; he knew all the dodges of flagging troopers.

Movement at the tent door drew Cornett's eyes away. Rudd wheeled,

then gave the captain an uncomfortable, wearying look. "It's Eagle Heart, sir. Guess he wants something."

Annoyance touched Cornett, but he said patiently, "Tell him to step in."

Rudd muttered and old Eagle Heart came noiselessly into the orange light. He was short and scrawny and naked from the waist up, with long, uncut hair and eyes which resembled polished beads embedded in the broad copper face. He showed a wrinkled, puckered expression, not unlike that of a recruit who had just downed a bitter dose of quinine.

He grunted, blending Comanche and Spanish, now and then thumping his chest. Cornett sensed an unmistakable defiance as the Comanche ceased speaking and stood back.

Rudd's face was very straight. "Eagle Heart thinks we don't savvy this scout business. Says maybe we figure he's afraid like a woman. He says if we'll mount him up like a pony soldier, he'll fight all the Tehannos tomorrow by himself. Out there on the prairie."

Cornett stared, controlling his own smile, his face fixed, inscrutable. He had learned one important rule in dealing with Indians: never step on their dignity. "Explain," he said quietly, "that we know he's a mighty warrior. Therefore, it isn't necessary for him to prove how strong his heart is. Secondly, the pony soldiers are not at war with the Tehannos. Thank him for offering his services."

It was something to watch Rudd. He began speaking slowly and gesturing, his square hands surprisingly graceful and sure. He pointed at Eagle Heart and made the sign for brave, his left forearm flat in front of his chest, his right fist striking downward past the other clenched hand.

Eagle Heart listened raptly. He seemed to grow taller and Cornett noted his fighter's pride. Then, as Rudd finished and dropped his hands, a glimmer of disappointment entered the tobacco-colored face. Eagle Heart pinned a bewildered look upon Cornett.

Without any warning, he started hopping from side to side, swiftly

weaving and ducking, aiming his hands like a rifle. As quickly, he straightened and spoke again to Rudd. In a moment he vanished from the tent.

"Guess I savvied that," Cornett observed dryly. "He was demonstrating how wrong I was in turning him down, what a great warrior he is."

Sergeant Rudd scrubbed his chin. "That's part of it, sir. Only he put it in a different way. Says if we won't make him a pony soldier, then all he can do is show us how to dodge bullets like Comanches. He thinks we ought to adopt the same tactics, instead of standin' still, as he says, to be shot down like buffalo calves."

"He might have something at that. Well——" Dismissing it, Cornett returned to his map. But the sergeant's tone made him glance up.

"Eagle Heart just don't understand. You see, sir, he knows these Texans want his hair. I told him at mess. He can't figure out why, when we need men, we treat him like a woman. Won't let him fight."

Startled surprise made Cornett's normally level voice climb. "Have you forgotten they're hostages, being held in order to draw the other wild bands back to the reservation? Are you suggesting that I enlist them? It's ridiculous and dangerous. Why, only two months ago Eagle Heart was fighting Colonel Mackenzie on McClellan Creek. We might just as well wave red flags in front of these wrathful Texans."

"I see your point, sir, but the Army uses Tonkawa scouts."

"Against Indians, yes. Kiowas and Comanches are their hereditary enemies."

"I reckon, though," said Rudd, carefully selecting his words, "you could take Eagle Heart's word if he gave it."

"Trust a Comanche?" Cornett's snort ended the whole impossible thing. "Sergeant, I'm afraid you've served out West a little too long. It's clouding your judgment."

At eleven o'clock Captain Cornett quit his tent. He'd slept two

hours, his campaigner's ingrained sense of timing rousing him at the proper time.

There wasn't much moon and the night lay sooty and formless, save where the fires still burned low. Cornett's frustration, which had assailed him earlier, was gone. He had a plan now. He would follow it as best he could, as he had always, doggedly to the end.

Sergeant Rudd's raw voice reached him from among the wagons. Cornett stepped across, seeing troopers grouped around a wheel.

"Sergeant Rudd."

He emerged out of the gloom, trailing horse and sweat smell. "We're windin' things up, sir."

"Good. We'll break camp now. Move south about two miles, then west. I plan to circle Lost Spring and come out north. Better get Eagle Heart's people stirring."

Hardly had Cornett finished when Rudd was striding for the wagons.

There followed some anxious moments as a half-wild team, harness dragging, tore loose from a drowsy teamster.

Before Cornett could take half a dozen bolting steps, a square shape shot across the campground. The team hauled up abruptly in a jangle of metal and leather. Then Cornett saw Rudd bringing them back, his thick arms hanging on the bits. His iron voice sledged through the murky light. "Dammit, Brady! Ye're handlin' mules—not hawrses!"

There seemed no end to the hooking up, the milling and saddling, the dejected Indians shuffling like indistinct wraiths. Rudd hurried everybody. He seemed everywhere at once. Confusion ended and order came. Finally, they were stringing out, the white-topped wagons weaving. For another interval, the sounds of the train in motion seemed overly loud to Cornett. But soon the noises settled into a creaking rhythm. They traveled as quietly as lumbering Conestogas could upon blanket-wrapped rims. Yet Cornett felt vaguely uneasy. It was almost too easy.

Past midnight, Captain Cornett sighted the firefly lights of Lost Spring blinking off to his right. He continued north, more by sense,

by feel, wondering what new decision the morning might bring. A chill got into him; he buttoned up his blouse. Twice he ordered Rudd back and the sergeant's hoarse urging carried to him distinctly, "Close up! Close up!"

An hour later Rudd came up. He said, "Jensen heard horses runnin'. Seemed close. He took a look. Couldn't find a thing."

Cornett's jaws clamped together. "Keep them closed up."

Around three o'clock Cornett halted the wagons. They rested briefly and went on. At four o'clock the captain, biting an unlighted pipe, saw the first streak of gray crack through the eastern blackness. He knew a dread, then, and there fell a weight across his shoulders. He stepped the column out faster. Once more Rudd prodded the laggards.

By degrees the blurred land came into outline. The light broadened. It was, thought Cornett, like a blanket being ripped off the naked wagons. Now, with full daylight upon them, he stopped the column and reined his horse. Rudd sided him, his look a question mark.

They were riding past the first wagons when Cornett said, "You take the point. I'm going back."

As Rudd turned, an Indian stepped out. It was Eagle Heart and he went straight to the sergeant. In the fresh light the Comanche's face appeared even more squeezed and shriveled, the skin stretched like ancient parchment. He grunted from his chest; his hands cut swift, fluid signs. There was a bright eagerness in the muddy eyes.

Rudd muttered in return and swung to leave, almost ducking.

Cornett, annoyed, said roughly, "Now what is it?"

"Why, nothing much, sir."

For once, Cornett's patience snapped. "What the hell does he want?"

"Sir," said Rudd, unwilling, "seems Eagle Heart had a dream. About a big fight with the Tehannos." Rudd swallowed, reluctant to go on. "He wants to ride with you, sir."

It happened too quickly for Cornett to voice his exasperation. A horse rushed up from the rear. And a certain cold knowing told Cornett,

even before the trooper got out the words, "Riders, Captain! Coming fast!"

Cornett accepted it without show, except for the knotted angling of his jaws. He said quietly to Rudd, "Corral the wagons at once. You stay here in charge. If they fire—you fire. Understand?" He was already moving before Rudd could reply.

Cantering south with Corporal Jensen and four privates, Captain Cornett saw one solid wedge of horsemen driving toward him a thousand yards away. The sight fired a thrust of anger through him, and quickly a black despair.

The distance closed rapidly. A great drumming rolled over the prairie. After two hundred yards Cornett slowed to a steady trot. Farther on, Cornett could distinguish Damron's burly figure in advance of the sea of faces.

Then Cornett barked a command. The troopers drew carbines and Cornett folded back the holster flap of the .44 Dragoon revolver he wore butt forward. It was one of the worst moments of his career, certainly the most senseless. He had only one thought as he took his position and held up, and that was of the luckless men with him and the all but helpless wagons.

Damron boiled up at hard gallop. He raised his rifle and halted his men in close, making his gelding swerve. Appleby, the townsman, presented a bedraggled shape alongside him.

"Cap'n," called Damron, "you just about got away, but our night scouts spotted you."

"My intention, Mr. Damron."

"You make it hard, Cap'n. I'm all wore out with you."

"I warn you once more," said Cornett, his severe voice distinct for them all to hear. "There are women and children in the wagons."

"You warn us when you give us no choice!" Damron's eyes blazed.

"You give me none. I'm also warning you that Major Braxton will join us at any moment."

"We don't bluff." Damron slapped his rifle stock for emphasis, and

his stare got glittery. "We're goin' in after them heathen bucks."

Behind him the mass of riders nudged forward.

Captain Cornett, who saw how it was going to be, said quietly, "Then you'll have to buy them," and drew his revolver.

Damron looked into the pointed muzzle, his mouth dropping open. In the next instant he caught himself and clenched his rifle.

"Don't!" Cornett ordered.

Something stayed Damron's hands, and Cornett said, "Drop that rifle."

Decision wrestled in Damron's unyielding face. His eyes ranged around in a pleading look.

"If one man makes a move you're dead," Cornett said. Still, he tensed for it to happen. He wondered why Damron's men did not act, then was aware of the troopers spaced to his flanks with carbines ready. Cornett said coldly, "You have three counts to drop your weapon, Mr. Damron. One . . ."

A struggle was going on inside Damron. His neck muscles stood out; he moistened his lips.

"Two . . ."

Suddenly Damron dropped the rifle. As he did, he turned his outrage upon Appleby. His voice choked. "Damn you! You stand there——"

But Appleby wasn't noticing. He was gazing off toward the wagons. He said nervously, "Heap of dust back there," and heaved around at Damron. "Thought you said——"

Cornett discovered that he was sweating. Yet he dared not hope. It was too impossible. But he heard Corporal Jensen's impossible voice, close to a shout. "Looks like Major Braxton, sirl . . . He's forming to attack!"

For a long moment Cornett could not believe. It was incredible. He took a quick look and a tide of blessed relief swamped him. Good old Braxton!

"There it is," he told Damron. "Just as I warned you."

Damron looked grim, not budging, but he was watching, too.

It was Appleby who broke the tension. "You boys can fight the whole U. S. cavalry if you want to," he said in a sighing, give-out way. "I'm heading for Lost Spring." He seemed glad to go as he turned back.

Several townsmen swapped uncertain glances. In sudden unison they followed Appleby. Their movement became a magnet, drawing more horsemen. At length, only a small, stubborn knot of riders remained. They watched Damron.

"If I were you," Cornett said quietly behind his revolver, "I'd send them home before Braxton attacks."

Damron's will seemed to rise and fall. He glared once, then let out his breath in resignation. "I'm a reasonable man. I know when I'm stumped."

He spurred his horse away. The others swung slowly after him.

Sergeant Rudd rode out to meet the detail, and Cornett, feeling younger than he had in years, said cheerfully, "Well, old Braxton did it. Ride back and present him my respects."

But Rudd, who always followed orders to the letter, still lingered. Cornett let it pass for the moment and turned his grateful attention to the wagons, seeking Braxton. A man sat his horse in front of the drawn-up troopers.

Cornett stopped suddenly, his eyes wide. Somehow the line didn't look right. Sort of ragged. He flung around to Rudd.

"Sir," said Sergeant Rudd, his homely features a penitent red. "It looked bad for you. Remember the uniforms? Well——"

Captain Cornett jerked in front with an exploding comprehension. He saw his own few men with carbines. But the others, the copper-faced, long-haired men in blue, carried sticks and singletrees from the wagons. And just beyond on his skinny pony sat old Eagle Heart, all but lost in his blouse. He pointed now. His hands moved swiftly, knotting.

"Sir," said Sergeant Rudd. "It's for you."

"What in damnation?" asked Cornett, but there wasn't any bite in his tone, only a wonder.

"Why, sir, he made the sign for brave. He means you."

Half a day's march south of Red River, two overtired troops approached the plodding wagon train. At their head rode Major Braxton, debonair in fringed buckskin jacket, yellow bandanna, and rakish hat. He waved boyishly and joined Captain Cornett.

"Sorry you weren't with us, Pete," greeted Braxton, shaking hands. "We flushed some horse-stealing Kiowas. Had a lively run till they slipped us. Any trouble coming up?"

"Civilians delayed us near Lost Spring. Wanted our hostages. But nobody hurt."

Braxton smiled sympathetically. "More dull routine, eh?"

"In a way," said Captain Cornett, breathing deeply. "I guess you could call it that when you consider not a shot was fired."

THIEF IN CAMP

THE 1959 SPUR AWARD WINNER

Bill Gulick

Bill Gulick began his writing career in Oklahoma, and it was in Oklahoma City in June 1959 that he walked away with his best-short-story Spur for this Western published in The Saturday Evening Post, where his entertaining yarns often appear. Author of around 150 short stories and a dozen or so novels, Bill is a past president of WWA and one of its anthology stalwarts. Several of his novels have won high rating as motion pictures. One of his recent titles is The Land Beyond. He is an Honorary Chief of the Nez Percé tribe with the Indian name Me-u-hkart Sekam Hyh Hyh, which means "Chief White Horse." The Chief and South-Wind-Sighing, otherwise Jeanne, live in Walla Walla, Washington.

The morning after the wagon train went into camp on the plain near Fort Laramie, Jimmy Coleman saddled his paint pony Cherokee and was fixing to go for a ride when that nuisance of a Ben Frankfort showed up. Being two years older and a head taller than Jimmy, Ben Frankfort had been making life miserable for him ever since the wagon train left Independence. What started it was that Jimmy's mother had bought him a fine pony to ride to Oregon, while Ben's pa had said

Copyright © 1958 by The Curtis Publishing Company.

riding in the wagon was good enough for any youngster, which had made Ben so jealous he spit green.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ben said.

"Guess that's my business, not yours."

"You know what Pa said. Kids aren't supposed to go out of sight of camp without there's a man along."

"Aw, your pa can't boss me."

"Pa's wagon captain."

"What of it?"

"And you don't even have a pa."

"Well, you don't have a ma, so that makes us even."

Ben took hold of the pony's reins. "Let me ride Cherokee twice around the camp and I won't tell no matter what you do."

"No."

"I whipped you once. I could do it again."

"Not today you couldn't."

Ben shot a look down the slope toward camp. Nobody was watching, but still he hesitated. "Heck, if I did whip you, you'd tattle."

"Only girls tattle. Now get out of my way."

Jimmy gave Ben a shove. Ben shoved back. Tripping, Jimmy fell down, bounced to his feet, and charged at Ben. He managed to catch Ben a good one on the temple, but the older boy's weight and reach soon proved too much for him. Next thing he knew he was lying flat on his back and Ben was swinging aboard Cherokee.

"Yipeel" Ben yelled. "Let's go!"

Cherokee went. His head went down, his back went up, and Ben went sailing through the air, hitting with a thump that knocked all the wind out of him. Jimmy grabbed a stick and made for him. A couple of wild whacks were all he got time for, then Ben got his feet under him and made fast and frequent tracks for camp.

Sobbing with frustrated anger, Jimmy dropped the stick and leaned against the pony's neck. "Big old bully! Someday I'll peel him good! Someday——"

Before he could name half the unpleasant things he was going to do to Ben Frankfort, a quiet voice said, "Howdy, youngster. Kind of a rough game you two was playin', wa'n't it?"

Jimmy turned and stared up at the man, who was tall, gray-eyed, dressed in buckskin, and riding a good-looking sorrel horse. Jimmy brushed hastily at his eyes. "We weren't playing. We were fighting."

"Kind of outmatched yourself, didn't you?"

"I'd fight anybody tried to ride Cherokee without my say-so."

The gray eyes were sympathetic. "Can't say I blame you a mite fer that. Tell me, son, you know whar I kin find a gent name of Theodore Frankfort?"

"Sure, I can take you right to him."

"I'd be obliged, boy, I truly would."

Riding down to camp, Jimmy covertly eyed the man, who had a long-barreled rifle slung across his back, a pistol and knife in his belt, and a powder horn and bullet pouch hung from one shoulder. He was clean-shaven, handsome in a rugged sort of way, and appeared to be the same age as Mr. Frankfort, which would be in the middle thirties. A pungent smell, which Jimmy had noted before as an occupational mark of men who trapped for a living, emanated from him.

When they rode into the enclosure, Jimmy said, "That's Mr. Frankfort. The big man with the black hat."

The man rode up to where Mr. Frankfort was bossing a crew removing a wagon wheel. "Mr. Frankfort?"

"Yes?"

"Heerd tell you're lookin' fer a guide."

"We are."

The man swung off his horse. "Name's Buff Shelley. Rate's five dollars a day."

Mr. Frankfort gave him an appraising look. "Are you acquainted with the trail?"

"Been over it a few times, yeah."

The men crowded in, asking questions, which Buff Shelley answered with calm brevity. Mr. Frankfort nodded. "I guess you'll do. But we'd better have an understanding. I'm wagon captain. You'll take orders only from me. Agreed?"

By now, news that a guide was being hired had spread through the camp, and everybody had come over for a look. Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Jimmy looked up to see his mother standing behind him. She was slim and dark-haired, still pretty enough to turn the head of any man. Jimmy saw Buff Shelley's eyes pause for a moment on his mother's face, saw Mr. Frankfort's sudden frown, then Buff was looking at Mr. Frankfort and nodding.

"That's fine with me. You boss the wagons. I'll guide 'em. Long as it's left that way we'll have no trouble."

As everyone went back to their interrupted chores Jimmy started to ride off on Cherokee, but his mother suddenly noticed the way his clothes and face were dirtied. "Jimmy!" she scolded. "What have you been doing?"

"I sort of fell down."

"After I just put clean clothes on you!"

"It was an accident. I didn't go to do it."

She dusted him off, her tongue clucking chidingly. "You're getting to ge a regular little savage, do you know that?"

"You want me to be a sissy?"

"Not at all. But your father was a gentleman. I want you to grow up to be a gentleman too."

"Dad got dirty sometimes. When we went camping——"

"I'm not asking you to stay clean all the time, Jimmy. But surely you could make some effort to keep your clothes nice. Other boys do. Look at Ben Frankfort."

"You looked at him lately?"

"No, why?"

Jimmy started to say that Ben had fallen a sight farther and harder than *he* had, but he knew if he told his mother that he'd have to tell her why Ben had fallen. So he let it go.

The wagon train lined out for Oregon next morning, and for the next week or so Jimmy spent most of his waking hours with Buff Shelley. He learned a pile of things, too. Like how you trapped beaver, how you lifted a scalp, how you hunted antelope and such. Unconsciously he began to imitate the guide's manner of riding, walking, and speaking. Buff seemed to enjoy his company and they talked about every subject under the sun. One day Buff said, "Your ma's a widow, I take it?"

"Yes, sir. Dad died a year ago."

"Whar you from?"

"Virginia. We're going out to Oregon to live with my uncle—till Mom gets married again, anyhow."

"Oh, yore ma's gettin' married agin?"

"Well, people back home say she's bound to."

"Got a man picked out, has she?"

"Nobody particular. But I guess she's looking around."

Buff's gray eyes twinkled. "What kind of man is she lookin' around fer?"

"A gentleman, I guess. At least she's always talking about how Dad was a gentleman and how I got to grow up to be a gentleman, so I guess that's what she's after."

Buff looked thoughtful. "Would a well-fixed widower like Mr. Frankfort fit the bill?"

"I suppose so," Jimmy mumbled without enthusiasm.

"You don't take to Mr. Frankfort, do you?"

Jimmy scratched Cherokee's neck disconsolately. "He's kind of bossy. But I guess he's all right."

"How'll it suit you to have Ben for a stepbrother?"

"Aw, I ain't afraid of Ben. He's bossy, too, but only because he's bigger'n me."

"Kind of a bully, is he?"

"Tries to be. But I'll show him who lays the chunk."

Buff laughed heartily. "That's the spirit, boy. Size ain't everything. Why, I recollect a leetle booger I used to know name of Kit Carson. Regular runt of a fella, he was, but one time when a great big hunk of Injun jumped him . . ."

Buff was just full of stories about Kit, and that evening Jimmy repeated them to his mother, while she sat listening with a growing look of concern on her face.

". . . an' then this big jigger of an Injun comes bilin' at Kit, fixin' to cut out his gizzard. But you know what ol' Kit done? He jest tripped the booger, jumped astraddle of his back, sunk his knife in clean up to Green River, then—whack—he's lifted hisself a piece of hair! An' another time—"

"Jimmy!"

"Huh?"

"Where on earth did you hear such horrible stories? And where did you pick up such abominable English?"

"Why, me and Buff was jest talkin' and Buff—"

"Mr. Shelley, you mean? Buff Shelley, the guide?"

"Yes'm."

His mother's lips tightened. "Is that all he has to do, fill young minds with fantastic, terrible stories?"

"But they're all true! Buff swears they're true! He's been all over the West and seen all kinds of things!"

"Indeed!"

"Sure! Buff knows more than anybody."

"About what?"

"Why, Injuns and trapping and trailing and hunting—there's nothing he don't know."

His mother frowned. "Jimmy, I'm afraid there are a lot of very important things Buff Shelley doesn't know. Things such as proper grammar, good manners——"

"Aw——"

"And those awful buckskin clothes he wears. Why, they actually smell!"

"All trappers' clothes smell that way. I asked him about it and he told me. It's the medicine they use."

"'Medicine?'"

"That's what they call the bait for their beaver traps. You see, what they do is——"

Mr. Frankfort strode into the circle of light shed by their fire before Jimmy could tell all the details of what trappers did. His mother looked relieved. Removing his hat, Mr. Frankfort smiled graciously at her.

"I don't want to alarm you, Mrs. Coleman, but I feel I should warn you. We're getting into dangerous Indian country. You'd better keep Jimmy close to the wagon."

"Thank you, Mr. Frankfort," his mother said gratefully. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness." She looked at Jimmy. "Tomorrow you must ride in the wagon, dear."

"But, Mom——"

"You heard what Mr. Frankfort said. There are dangerous Indians about."

"Shucks, they're just Crows. Buff says they're harmless as flies, if you handle them right."

Mr. Frankfort bowed. "I felt I should warn you, Mrs. Coleman. Good night."

When Mr. Frankfort had gone, Jimmy's mother gazed at him reproachfully. "Jimmy, that was very impolite."

"What'd I do?"

"You know very well what you did. You flatly contradicted Mr.

Frankfort. You should be ashamed of yourself. After all, he has been very kind to us and is only doing his duty."

"But Buff says——"

"You've been seeing a great deal too much of Buff Shelley," his mother cut in sharply. "Now remember, tomorrow you ride in the wagon."

The thing Jimmy suddenly remembered was that tomorrow when the train halted for its nooning, Buff had promised to take him on an antelope hunt. So he swallowed hard and said, "All day?"

"Well . . ."

Well, next day was as peaceful as could be, with not an Indian in sight, so when the wagons stopped at noon Jimmy's mother said she guessed it would be all right if he exercised Cherokee a little bit. So he hurriedly lugged his saddle out to the horse herd and saddled up, fearful that Buff would ride off without him. How Ben Frankfort happened to get wind of their expedition, he never knew, but he'd no more than got the saddle cinched up than there was Ben at his elbow.

"Where are you riding off to?" Ben asked suspiciously.

"Nowhere."

"Bet I know. Bet you're going hunting with Buff."

"Well, what if I am?"

"Your ma will tan you, she finds out."

"How's she going to find out?"

"Pa will tell her."

"How's he going to find out?"

"I'll tell him."

Heated remarks were exchanged, but before they could tangle Buff rode up. "C'mon, boy, time's a-wastin'."

They rode off, got their antelope, and were back with the wagon train in practically no time at all. But Mr. Frankfort was fit to be tied. Jimmy's mother had been worried sick, he claimed, and who did Buff

think he was, anyway, taking a child out into dangerous country without the wagon captain's say-so? Buff listened indifferently until Mr. Frankfort had run out of breath, then he said, "C'mon, Jimmy, we'll go make peace with yore ma."

Jimmy's mother stared accusingly at him as they rode up. "Jimmy, I thought I told you——"

"Ma'am," Buff cut in, touching the rim of his slouch hat carelessly, "don't jaw at the boy. I took him huntin' with me 'cause I figgered he was due fer some fun. You want to lay on blame, lay it on me. But don't chew on him."

It wasn't often Jimmy's mother looked taken aback. But she sure looked that way now. Her cheeks colored angrily. "I'm quite capable of raising my son without any advice from you, Mr. Shelley. Furthermore——"

"'Tain't advice I'm givin' you, ma'am. I'm jest a-tellin' you some facts of nature as I've observed 'em. This is a prime colt you got here. But you can't picket a yearlin' on a short rope an' expect him to build up his legs an' wind."

And with that, Buff wheeled his horse around and rode off.

While his mother stood in stunned silence, Jimmy tied Cherokee to the tailgate of the wagon and then went to her, ready to take his tongue-lashing. But she was still staring after Buff Shelley. "What a rude man!"

"I don't think so," Jimmy said humbly. "I think he's the nicest man I know."

"You call him nice after hearing how he spoke to me?"

Jimmy scuffed the dirt with a toe. "Well, he takes me hunting and lets me ride with him and he talks to me and answers questions—just like Dad used to do. And when he saw you were mad at me, he tried to get you mad at him instead—just like Dad always did."

The funniest look came over his mother's face. All of a sudden she put an arm around him and pulled him close. "Oh, Jimmy, I'm sorry!

You do need a father sol" She gazed into his eyes. "Would it hurt you terribly, dear, if I were to marry again?"

"Guess that's according to who you picked."

"I'd make sure you approved, of course," she said, trying to make a joke of it. "So if you have anyone you'd like to recommend——"

He stared off in the direction Buff had just ridden. "Well, since you asked me——"

Saturday afternoon they camped in a fine valley where there was plenty of grass, wood, and a clear-water stream. It was decided that they would lie over here for the Sabbath. Buff brought in enough fresh meat for a real feast that evening, and as soon as supper was over out came the fiddles and couples began dancing around a big bonfire. Jimmy was standing watching the fun when he heard Ben Frankfort whisper at his elbow, "Psst, c'mere a minute."

Jimmy followed him off into the shadows and asked him what he wanted. Ben looked around to make sure nobody could overhear, then he muttered, "How'd you like to go hunting with me tomorrow?"

"Just you and me, you mean?"

"And Cherokee."

"What would we do for a gun?"

Ben led him to his father's wagon, rummaged in it, and brought out a brand-new Henry rifle. "Guess we can kill any old antelope in the world with this, can't we?"

"Did your pa say you could use it?"

"He'll be too busy bossing things to notice it's gone."

"But if he finds out——"

"What tattletale is going to tell him?"

It was a sneaky thing to do, but the way Jimmy reasoned, it was Ben who was being sneaky, not him. And it was a compliment, in a way, Ben's asking him to go along, though the main reason he'd done it, Jimmy guessed, was that he didn't know the first thing about hunt-

ng antelope so just naturally had to come to somebody that could show him how it was done.

"Well?" Ben demanded. "You wanta go?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. "Why not?"

It being Sunday and a day of rest, everybody slept later than usual next morning and the sun was an hour high before the breakfast fires began to crackle. Jimmy had done battle in dreams with his conscience all night long, his conscience losing every round, and it was still getting the whey beat out of it now as he sat waiting for the breakfast call. Suddenly there came a clatter of hoofs, and Mr. Tracy, who had been riding guard over the horse-and-cattle herd outside the enclosure, galloped up, shouting excitedly, "Indians! Indians!"

The camp panicked. Women were screaming at children, men were running every which way, but Mr. Frankfort knew exactly what to do. Standing in the center of camp, he roared, "Women and children inside the wagons. Lige, Sam, Ned—take your men and guard the sides you've been assigned to! Step lively, men! It's our lives we're fighting for!"

There was a frenzied scramble for positions. Suddenly Jimmy heard Buff's sharp voice ring out, "Hold it, men! They's no call to spook!"

The Indians were in sight now, some fifty of them, streaming down grassy slope to the northwest. Mr. Frankfort seized Buff's arm. "Are you crazy? Can't you see they're attacking us?"

"I kin see real good," Buff said imperturbably. "They're Crows an' friendly. Ain't a bit of harm in 'em."

"How do you know?"

"See that Injun leadin' the pack? He's an old side-kick of mine. Slept in his lodge many's the time."

As the Indians came galloping down the slope their leader was rein- g his horse this way and that, twisting his body about and waving his arms around in an odd fashion. Buff was doing queer things with his hands and arms, too, Jimmy noticed, and he suddenly remembered

what Buff had told him about the way Indians had of making sign talk with one another as far off as they could see or be seen. Buff grinned at Mr. Frankfort.

"Jest tell yore boys to hold their fire. I'll go out an' palaver with the jiggers."

While Mr. Frankfort and the other men watched suspiciously, Buff climbed over a wagon tongue and walked out and greeted the Indians as calmly as you please, paying no mind to the way they came charging at him. Seeing he wouldn't scare, they pulled up and milled their horses around him, while he and their head man shook hands. Presently the Indian slid off his horse and Buff led him into the enclosure, where Mr. Frankfort was waiting.

"This here is Wolf Runner," Buff said. "Seen our dust yesterday, he says, and decided to ride down fer a look."

"He's a Crow, you say? I've heard the Crows are born thieves and murderers."

"Man's apt to hear most anything, he listens to the wrong people."

"Well, if his intentions are friendly he's welcome. But tell him I won't have his people in camp. Tell him to make them keep their distance or I'll be obliged to——"

Right about then, Mr. Frankfort looked around. The Crows had gotten off their horses and were swarming into the enclosure from every direction. They were friendly, all right, grinning at everybody, lifting up wagon covers to peer inside, stooping to see what was in pots and pans simmering over the fires, fingering knives and axes and anything lying around loose with monkeylike curiosity. Mr. Frankfort frantically tried to put a stop to it.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed, rushing over to a grinning buck who had lifted a steaming coffeepot off a fire. "Put that back!" he cried, wresting an ax out of the hand of another brave, who was testing its edge. "Leave that rifle alone!" he shouted, snatching his new Henry away from still a third Indian, who was hefting it admiringly. Tossing

the gun back into the wagon, he turned in desperation to Buff. "Clear them out of here before they steal us blind!"

Buff made sign talk with Wolf Runner, who issued a guttural order. Spoons, knives, and a miscellaneous collection of small items magically reappeared from their hiding places upon the persons of the Indians and were returned to their owners. "They don't mean no harm," Buff said. "Give 'em some breakfast an' they'll be on their way."

"You mean we've got to feed this whole mob?"

"A hungry Indian's apt to turn mean. Feed him an' he'll ride away happy. It's a cheap way to buy friendship."

The Indians were fed, though from the nervous way his mother and the other whites in the party acted, Jimmy guessed that the hosts enjoyed the meal a good deal less than their visitors did. When breakfast was over the band of Crows rode on its merry way, except for Wolf Runner, whom Buff had persuaded to travel with the wagon train for a few days.

"He's a top dog in the Crow tribe," Buff explained to Mr. Frankfort. "Long as he's with us the Crows won't give us no trouble."

"They had better not," Mr. Frankfort said, tight-lipped.

Now that the excitement had simmered down, the men went to work at their repairing chores and the women settled down to baking and washing. Ben swiped the rifle and a handful of cartridges out of his pa's wagon, Jimmy saddled Cherokee, and the two boys made for the river. The willows growing along the south shore soon hid them from the camp. What they would do, Ben said, was go a mile or so downstream, cross the river, then make their hunt in the hilly country on the far side.

Ben was afoot, carrying the rifle, while Jimmy rode Cherokee. Finding a place where it looked like the river could be forded without too much trouble, they paused. Ben didn't like the thought of getting his feet wet.

"Cherokee will carry double, won't he?"

"Don't know," Jimmy said dubiously. "But we can try him."

Taking the rifle, Jimmy lifted his left foot out of the stirrup and talked soothingly to Cherokee while Ben climbed aboard. Cherokee didn't like it much, but he stood quietly enough. "I'll take the rifle now," Ben said. "Make him go easy."

Jimmy passed the rifle back and urged Cherokee into the water. The current was a sight stronger than it looked. Not liking the feeling of the slick rocks underfoot, Cherokee stopped in midstream.

"Make him go!" Ben commanded.

"Keep your shirt on. He'll go when he's ready to."

"Well, if you won't make him go, I will!" Ben said, and booted Cherokee good with both heels.

Next thing Jimmy knew Cherokee was pitching, then falling. Ice-cold water closed over him. He came up spluttering, caught Ben—who was wrong side up—by the collar, and made for the bank. Mighty disgusted with it all, Cherokee plunged up out of the river. Dumping Ben to the ground, Jimmy went over and calmed the pony down. Ben spit out a mouthful of water and glared at Cherokee.

"Fool horse! Why didn't you tell me he wouldn't carry double?"

"He was doing all right till you kicked him."

"Lucky he didn't drown us both!" Ben complained. Suddenly he remembered something. "Where's the rifle?"

"I dunno. I gave it back to you."

"That's right, you did." He gazed around him. "It's gone!"

Well, they looked for it. First they looked along the bank, but it wasn't there, so then they took off their clothes and waded out into the river and felt around among the rocks with their bare feet. It wasn't there either. Just a few feet downstream from where they had tried to cross was a deep hole that the current had washed out as it swirled against a steep gravel bluff. The water was 'way over their heads and the current was so swift that though they dived time after time it was impossible to examine the bottom with any thoroughness.

They kept trying till they were both near drowned. Finally they

sat down on the bank, spent and gasping. Jimmy shot Ben a look. "Must be in that hole. Isn't that what you figure?"

"Yeah. But we'll never find it. It's gone for good."

"What'll you tell your pa?"

Ben looked scared. "I dunno. But I'll think of something." He started pulling on his wet clothes. "First thing I got to do is slip back to the wagon and get into some dry clothes. Pa finds out I fell in the river, he'll skin the hide off me."

"If he'll skin you for falling into the river, what'll he do to you for losing his new rifle?"

Ben's lower lip quivered. "He didn't see me take it, did he?"

"Well, you got to tell him, don't you? 'Cause he's bound to find out it's gone."

Ben looked mighty sick. While Jimmy dressed, he just stood staring down at that deep hole, as if wishing he had drowned in it, then he turned and gave Jimmy a stricken look. "You won't tell him, will you, Jimmy?"

"Me tell him? Why should I?"

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

Jimmy made the sign and said the words. Then they went back to camp.

If he had tried hard enough, Jimmy might have been able to change into some dry clothes before his mother saw him, but, never having made a practice of lying to her, he went to the wagon wet and dripping and told her the truth. Part of it, anyway.

"Sorry, Mom. I fell in the river."

She frowned at him. "What were you doing down by the river?"

"Trying to cross it."

"Jimmy! You might have drowned!"

"Yes'm. But I didn't."

She sighed and dug out some dry clothes. "Well, at least you're

truthful. Now please try to behave yourself for a little while, dear."

He tried. He wandered around the camp, keeping as far as possible from the Frankfort wagon, where he figured an explosion was due 'most any time now. Inevitably he ended up squatting beside Buff, who was sitting in the shade of a wagon exchanging grunts and hand talk with Wolf Runner. Buff grinned at him.

"Wolf Runner had himself a nap a few minutes ago an' dreamed a queer dream. Seen a couple of white young'uns playin' in the river like they was beaver, he says. Only they was so anxious to git at their game they forgot to take off their clothes."

"Aw, he didn't dream that. You saw Ben and me come back to camp in wet clothes."

"So I did. What happened?"

Jimmy had promised Ben he wouldn't tell Mr. Frankfort but he hadn't said a word about not telling Buff. So he told Buff now, though first he made Buff promise *he* wouldn't tell Mr. Frankfort. Buff scowled and shook his head.

"That's a bad thing, boy, stealin' a gun an' goin' huntin' on yore lonesome. You an' Ben shouldn't've done it."

"I know that now," Jimmy said contritely. "But what's Mr. Frankfort going to do to Ben when he finds out that the rifle is gone?"

"The world'll bring you trouble enough, without you go borrowin' somebody else's. Ben made his bed, now he kin lie in it. Let this be a lesson to you."

Right then Jimmy saw Mr. Frankfort climb out of his wagon, call sharply to Ben, and talk to him for a spell. There wasn't much doubt what they were talking about, because Mr. Frankfort kept gesturing at the wagon and Ben kept shaking his head violently. Jimmy saw Mr. Frankfort stride to the front of the wagon and pick up the bull whip lying on the seat. He felt kind of sick.

But instead of going to work on Ben, Mr. Frankfort called out something to a man working near by, turned, and walked across camp to-

ward the spot where Jimmy, Buff, and Wolf Runner were sitting. Buff grunted something to Wolf Runner and they both got to their feet. The look on Mr. Frankfort's face brought Jimmy to his feet in a hurry, too.

"I'll mince no words, Shelley," Mr. Frankfort snapped. "A brand-new Henry rifle belonging to me has been stolen. Tell your thieving Crow friend I want it back—and quick."

All work in camp had ceased. As the crowd gathered around Mr. Frankfort all eyes were on the tall, silent Crow and the stony-faced white man who stood beside him. The silence was so complete Jimmy could hear his own heart thumping against his ribs. He shot a look at Ben, who had followed his father and was staring glassy-eyed at Wolf Runner. *It's him or me*, Ben must be thinking, *and he's nothing but an Indian.*

Buff said quietly, "You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Frankfort. Wolf Runner didn't steal yore rifle."

"Then some of his people did."

"You're wrong there, too."

"I'm not asking your opinion. I'm telling you. You vouched for him. But the rifle is gone. Now I want you to tell him that I'm going to have him tied up and guarded until the gun is returned to me. He knows where his people have gone and who stole it. He can tell you and you can ride after them." Mr. Frankfort paused, letting the coils of the whip drop free of his hand. "Give him my message."

"No."

Mr. Frankfort beckoned to the men standing behind him. "Joe, Frank, Lige, Ned—seize this Indian and tie him up. Maybe a touch of the whip will make him admit the truth—even to his softhearted friend."

The four men moved forward uneasily, then stopped as Buff said, "You lay hands on Wolf Runner, you'll buy yoreself a bigger hunk of trouble than you kin eat. He didn't steal yore blame rifle, Frankfort,

an' neither did his bucks. Put that whip away 'fore you make a fool of yoreself."

"Shelley, you're discharged!"

"All right. But when I ride out of this camp Wolf Runner is ridin' with me. Any man tries to lay a hand on him is goin' to have big trouble with me."

Jimmy's mother had joined the crowd and was standing with an arm around him, looking on with a puzzled light in her eyes. He felt weak clean down to his toes. He knew that all he would have to do would be to point a finger and say one word and Ben would blubber out the whole story. Or Buff could do it. But they had both promised.

"Men," Mr. Frankfort said, "I gave you an order. Carry it out."

Shaking his head, one of the men muttered, "It's your gun and your quarrel, Frankfort. Reckon we'll let you kill your own snakes."

Mr. Frankfort went livid. "That's just what I will do!" he exclaimed, and raised the whip.

Jimmy heard his mother gasp. He saw Buff grab the upraised arm and twist the whip out of Mr. Frankfort's hand. Stumbling backward, Mr. Frankfort fell to the ground. For a moment he lay there, and then, cursing Buff with words Jimmy had never known existed, he leaped to his feet and charged Buff as if intending to kill him with his bare hands.

There came a sharp, pistol-like crack as Buff's right fist landed, then Mr. Frankfort sagged to the ground like a sledged ox. Rubbing his knuckles and looking sorrowful, Buff stared down at him for a moment, then he turned to Jimmy's mother and said apologetically, "Shore hated to do that, ma'am, but it didn't seem fittin' language fer a lady er young boys to listen to."

Then he went over to Ben Frankfort, put an arm around his shoulders, and said kindly, "No need to blubber, son. C'mon, we'll go down to the river an' you kin show me whar you lost it. Wolf Runner here is one half beaver an' t'other half fish. He'll find the fool thing fer you."

While they were gone, Jimmy went back to the wagon with his mother and told her the whole story. He expected to get a good scolding, but when he was done she didn't have a word to say. She just stood gazing off into the distance with a funny look in her eye, and when Ben, Wolf Runner, and Buff came back to camp a while later with the rifle she still had that look. Buff walked over, took off his hat, and stood sheepishly before her, shuffling his weight from one foot to the other as he glanced at Jimmy out of the corner of his eye.

"Mrs. Coleman," he said finally, "I s'pose Jimmy's already told you, but——"

"Yes, he's told me."

"Wal, I know it must seem queer to you, him not sayin' anything when he knowed the truth an' me not sayin' anything, but the way of it was——"

"We'd promised," Jimmy blurted out.

Buff nodded solemnly. "That's right, ma'am. We'd promised. Kind of gave our word of honor as gentlemen, so to speak. Now I ain't meanin' to give you no advice on how to raise a young'un, 'cause it's plain to see he's gettin' fine raisin' jest the way things stand. But I—wal, I wanted you to know how things are with us men. An' if there's any blame to be laid——"

Jimmy's mother smiled and shook her head. There was a glow in her eyes, a gentle kind of glow that he couldn't remember having seen there since his father had died. "You men!" she scolded, as if she didn't mean to scold at all. "You foolish men!"

Something told Jimmy that when they got to Oregon they wouldn't be living with his uncle very long. Which was fine with him.

THE LAST GUNMAN

by Donald Hamilton

One of the most successful Western novels and Western movies of recent years was Don Hamilton's The Big Country. His Smoky Valley was filmed as The Violent Men. He has published seven mystery novels and three Westerns, with another mystery and two Westerns in the works. It is rumored that Don is growing a beard to compensate for scanting head hair. Following a sojourn in Sweden, Don, Kathleen, and their four children have settled in the center of a region rich in Old West history dating back to Coronado's expedition of 1541, to wit: Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The big man got on the train at Abilene. He came down the aisle with a pair of saddlebags over his shoulder and stopped by Paul Clyde's seat.

"Mind if I sit down, sir?" he asked politely.

"Not at all," Clyde said, a little surprised at the courtesy of the

Copyright © 1959 by The Curtis Publishing Company.

fellow, since he looked rather like a man who'd sit where he darn well pleased.

The stranger stowed his saddlebags under the seat and settled himself comfortably. He leaned back, drew his big hat over his eyes, and promptly fell asleep.

Clyde turned to watch the plains outside the window, wondering if there was any chance, in this year 1882, of seeing a buffalo, or perhaps an Indian tribe on the move. The big man awoke late in the day, sat up, yawned, rubbed a hand over his mouth, and leaned forward to look out the window. As he did so, a lurch of the train threw him against Clyde.

"My apologies, sir," he said; "this roadbed gets worse all the time. I figure they must have laid the rails direct on the prairie grass. I heard you mention Prairie Junction to the conductor."

"Yes, that's my destination."

"My stop too. I live there." The big man held out his hand. "Name's Bannerman. Hank Bannerman."

"I'm Paul Clyde, from Boston." Clyde managed to keep from wincing as his fingers were crushed by the other's powerful grip. Retrieving his hand, he said, "Perhaps you can tell me something about the town. All I know is that it must be big enough to have a bank, since I'm to work there."

Bannerman gave him a measuring look, obviously adding up his pale skin, well-cut eastern clothes, and slight stature and arriving at some sum which he did not reveal, saying only, "A banker, eh?"

"Hardly that. Just the man at the little window."

The big man grinned. "It's about time George Jarvis got somebody into that place who can count."

"Oh, you know Mr. Jarvis?"

Bannerman's smile cooled somewhat. "Yeh, I know Mr. Jarvis," he said in a dry tone. "Well, you'll find Prairie Junction a peaceful and pleasant place nowadays, Mr. Clyde. It was a tough town once, but the country's grown up and the cattle trail's moved still farther west,

taking most of the rough element with it. Of course, there's a few of the old crowd still hanging around trying to make trouble—like this Bannerman gent some folks figure should have been run out of town long since."

He chuckled and leaned back in his seat. He seemed to be about Clyde's own age of twenty-eight. He had a face that was saved from heaviness only by the long and humorous mouth; and his hair was thick and yellow.

"This was a fine country ten years ago, when I first came up the trail—a fine, wild, hell-raising country, Mr. Clyde. But it's grown up and civilized now. Reckon a man should get grown up and civilized, too, in that many years. Even three years ago, coming this way at this season, there'd be herds of Texas cattle as far as the eye could see, awaiting shipment East. Well, the barbed wire killed the trail. . . . There's the old loading pens now; we're coming into town."

He reached down for the saddlebags, opened one, and before Clyde's startled eyes, drew out a heavy cartridge belt supporting a holstered revolver. Standing up, he buckled the belt about him. Then he turned back to Clyde.

"It's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. I hope you'll like our city." He grinned abruptly, reaching into his pocket, and produced a silver badge, which he pinned on his shirt. The badge read: MARSHAL. "You may consider that an official greeting, Mr. Clyde, in case there is no band to welcome you." He moved away down the aisle.

Prairie Junction seemed to be lined up opposite the railroad tracks. There was a wide, dusty, unpaved main street; a school; a church; a long row of false-front frame buildings, and the solid brick building that was the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank, situated on a corner. Up the side street, Clyde managed to read the names on a couple of once gaudy, now faded signs: the Cattleman's Rest and the Bulls-eye Saloon.

He picked up his coat and valise and stepped down to the ground. There was a trunk to be seen to, and he looked around for the proper official, but paused as he recognized the tall, broad-shouldered shape of Marshal Bannerman, standing with a girl only a few yards away. The girl was speaking; and her voice held a hint of amused reproach.

"Well, was it a good trip, Hank? Did you get drunk and disorderly in some other lawman's town?"

Bannerman chuckled. "Why, a man can't give rein to his baser impulses in the place where he wears the badge, Sally. It would lead to disrespect among the citizens. Yes, it was a good enough trip. But the ending was the best of it, seeing you standing here. Although I can't flatter myself you're here for my sake."

The girl laughed. "I might have been, if you'd let me know when you were coming back. No, Dad had some business with the station-master; and I'm supposed to be keeping an eye out for a man he's expecting, to work in the bank. I haven't any idea of what kind of a person I'm supposed to be watching for, except that he's from Boston."

"I can help you there," Bannerman said. "I made his acquaintance on the train." He turned, letting his glance sweep the platform. It came to rest on Clyde, who was already moving forward. The marshal waited for him to reach them, and said formally, "Miss Jarvis, allow me to present Mr. Paul Clyde, your dad's new——"

He broke off. The girl was not even looking at Clyde. Her smile of greeting had died abruptly; now her hand went out to grasp the marshal's arm. "Hank! Isn't that Rios, the man who tried to—— Over there by that wagon!"

The marshal's voice was calm. "I saw him. Yeh, that's Johnny Rios. I'm waiting to see who comes to welcome him home. And here's Jud Haskell, right on schedule. Excuse me."

The girl retained her grip on his sleeve. "Hank, be careful! Rios is wearing a gun!"

"Which is illegal in this town," the marshal said. "It is my duty to

remind the gentleman." When she did not release him immediately, he said gently, "Sally, never interfere with a man's business."

Sally Jarvis flushed slightly. Bannerman raised his hat to her, nodded to Clyde, and moved away. Beyond the marshal, Clyde saw two men shaking hands by a baggage cart. One, balancing a canvas-covered bedroll on his shoulder, was narrow, young, and swarthy. There was a holstered pistol at his hip. The man who had come to greet him was considerably older and had a fleshy white face. Both men turned at Bannerman's approach. The younger one, Johnny Rios, let the bedroll slide from his shoulder in a casual way and set it on the ground.

The older man, Haskell, spoke to Bannerman. The distance was too great for Clyde to catch the words. He was aware that the girl beside him, watching this scene, had moved closer to him. He heard her breath catch sharply.

"Hank! Hank, watch out!" It was only a whisper, but it had the quality of a scream. She had seen it before Clyde did: the younger man's hand striking snakelike toward the butt of his holstered weapon. What happened next was so nearly instantaneous that Clyde could not be sure his eyes had caught all the details of the action. All he knew was that Bannerman was in motion; his left hand knocking Rios' pistol aside as it cleared the holster, his right whipping out his own weapon and laying the barrel brutally across the younger man's head.

A moment later, everything was still again. Johnny Rios was on the ground, and Bannerman was aiming his pistol at the older man, whose hand seemed to be frozen just inside the lapel of his coat. Slowly, Jud Haskell drew his hand into sight, empty. Bannerman spoke. Haskell hesitated, shrugged, reached inside his coat again, brought out a small revolver, and held it out, butt first. Bannerman took it and dropped it into his pocket; then, almost casually, he turned and kicked Rios in the face.

The wicked sound of the boot going home echoed across the depot. Rios, whose hand had been creeping out toward his fallen pistol, was

lifted into the air and dropped on his back, unconscious. Bannerman scooped up the pistol, bent over the unconscious man, unbuckled the heavy gun belt, and pulled it free.

He straightened up and spoke to Haskell, "Tell your boy, when he wakes up, that he can pick up his property at the marshal's office whenever he decides to leave town. The same goes for you. Don't put it off too long. Good day, Mr. Haskell."

He walked away across the wide and sunlit street, looping the confiscated gun belt over his arm. The people drawn by the rumor of conflict made way for him. The girl beside Clyde had not moved at all and did not move until Bannerman was out of sight; then Clyde heard her pent-up breath go out in a sigh.

"Well, Mr. Clyde," she said, "you have something to write home about."

He was shocked to see on her face only relief that the incident was over. She displayed none of the horror and disgust and faintness proper for a gently reared young lady who had just witnessed a scene of brutal violence. In other respects, also, he found her a disconcerting person. He had come West with the notion that the female population would consist entirely of weather-beaten frontier matrons and buxom prairie belles. Sally Jarvis fitted into neither category. She was of no more than medium height, blue-eyed, and slim-waisted, differing in appearance from the young women he had known back East only in a certain look of vigor and directness, and in being considerably prettier than most of them.

He looked away from her to where Johnny Rios, half conscious, his face streaming blood, was being led away between Haskell and another man. With some revulsion, Clyde said, "I thought that sort of thing belonged to the past."

Sally Jarvis glanced at him sharply. "Out here, the past isn't quite dead yet, Mr. Clyde."

"Your Mr. Bannerman seems to be doing his best to revive it."

There was clear dislike in her voice when she replied, "I might find

some things to criticize if I visited your home town of Boston, Mr. Clyde. But I don't think I'd speak out until I'd been there long enough to know what I was talking about. Here comes my father."

A portly, gray-mustached man was marching down the platform toward them.

"Sally, I've told you——" he burst out.

"Dad, this is Mr. Clyde," she said quickly.

Mr. Jarvis ignored the introduction. "I have strictly forbidden you to have anything to do with that roughneck, and yet I'm informed that you just greeted him like a long-lost friend, with the whole town watching! I hope this latest display of his brutality will bring you to your senses! Bannerman should be shot for having the effrontery to address you; his place is on Texas Street with the people it's his business to control, his own kind of people! As a matter of fact, I don't understand why the city council keeps him on, at his inflated wages, now that we no longer have the yearly influx of cattle drovers to contend with. I shall bring it up again at the next meeting. In the meantime, I must insist that you——"

"Dad," the girl said gently, "this is Mr. Clyde."

"Oh." Mr. Jarvis put out his hand abruptly. "Glad to have you here, Clyde. You run along, miss. I'll speak to you later!" He watched the girl walk lightly away. Then he said in a tired voice, "I don't know, Clyde, do you have a daughter? No, I suppose not. You're not even married, as I recall your letters. Well, let's see to your baggage; and then I'll show you around the bank, if you're not too tired from your journey . . ."

The following days were busy ones for Paul Clyde, since it developed that Mr. Jarvis had for years run his bank as a typically one-man business, keeping half the records in his head. Now, at the age of sixty, urged on by his family and doctor, he was taking steps toward ridding himself of at least part of the burdens of management. Clyde, with his rigid eastern training, found himself continually shocked by the casual

and trusting way this institution had been operated—at a considerable profit, he had to admit. One evening toward the end of the first week, he walked over to the Jarvis house to pick up a ledger Mr. Jarvis had forgotten at home, and incidentally to let Mrs. Jarvis know that her husband would be working late.

It was a pleasant evening, which, Clyde told himself, was why he had volunteered for the errand instead of sending a boy. He knew the way, having been to the big white house for supper a few nights before—Sally Jarvis had been noticeably cool to him, despite her parents' cordiality. He had not consciously been thinking of her as he walked; but when her mother, a small, handsome, white-haired woman, opened the door, he found that he was disappointed.

The discovery startled him; and as he was shown into the living room to wait while Mrs. Jarvis went upstairs for the ledger, he told himself firmly that he could have no possible interest in the headstrong daughter of a small-town banker—a girl with so little taste and modesty that she would let her name become linked with that of a man who, although wearing a badge, was certainly no better than the crude and violent people with whom he had to deal.

Then there were footsteps on the veranda, and, as if in response to his thoughts, a voice he recognized as Marshal Bannerman's came clearly through the open window: "He's tried before. There's nothing to fear, Sally."

"Nothing to fear!" The girl's voice was sharp. "You know why he brought Rios back. And Rios will hate you twice as much now, after what you did to him at the depot."

"I can handle Johnny Rios. And Jud Haskell too. It's what I've been waiting for."

There was a short silence. Sally's voice had a strange, flat sound when she spoke again. "Oh," she said, "is that what you've been waiting for, Hank?"

"I do not like to leave unfinished things behind me. Haskell fought

me all the way down the line when I was cleaning up Texas Street some years back. I closed up his Bulls-eye Saloon until he got in some dealers and girls who'd give the trail hands half a chance. He had men try for me on several occasions; Johnny Rios was the last one, and almost made it. It was in the cards there'd be a final showdown. The Street is dead now except for small sins, and Haskell's pulling out. He's waited a long time to do it. I wondered why. Now I know. He was waiting for Rios. He wanted one more try at me. This time, I think, he'll be out there with a gun himself. Well, I've waited a long time for him to hate me enough for that. It will finish my job here in Prairie Junction."

It occurred to Clyde that he was eavesdropping. He rose and walked across the room to the bookshelf, taking no pains to move quietly; but the two people on the porch were too concerned with their own affairs to hear him.

Sally's voice came through the window, clearly audible: "So all these last months—this last year—you've been waiting around to kill a man?"

The marshal's voice held a smile. "Well, there were some other things to hold me."

The girl spoke swiftly. "And if you succeed—if you survive, what then?"

"There's a town called Lagos Springs, to the west. The Texans coming up the trail take it apart each summer. The citizens have to spend all winter putting it back together again. A committee came to see me the other day——"

"Are you taking the job?"

"I thought I would."

"And after that?"

"What do you mean?"

"After you have—tamed Lagos Springs, where do you go? And was it your thought that I would be with you?"

"It was my hope that you would be, Sally."

There was a silence. It lasted so long Clyde thought they must have moved away; then Sally's voice said, "No. No, Hank. I'm sorry." She paused, as if to let Bannerman speak; when he remained silent, she went on swiftly: "If this were twenty years ago, or even ten years ago, my answer would be different. It was that kind of a country then. It needed your kind of man. But the cattle trail is dying, Hank; and the country's changing, and if you don't change with it, what's left for you—for us, if I should accompany you? Oh, there are a few years left. There will be a few more trail towns, perhaps, trying feebly to live up to Abilene and Dodge City and Prairie Junction. But after that, where do you go? To the gold towns, the silver towns, one or another mining camp that needs a tough man with a gun?"

"Oh, Hank, you've sowed your wild oats, and they've been wild enough, heaven knows, but I don't mind that. But when I get married, it will be to a man who can give me a home and children, not a room above a roaring street of sin in which to wait—wait for my husband to be brought home dead. That may make me less of a woman than you thought, my dear; but this pursuit of violence, for its own sake, also makes you less of a man. You're thirty years old, Hank. If you can't see it yet, I'm afraid there's not much hope for you. I will not be going with you!"

Her footsteps ran along the porch, and the front door opened and closed. Then Mrs. Jarvis was coming down the stairs; and Clyde, crossing the living room, heard her say: "Why, Sally, dear, I didn't know you were home. Is something wrong?"

"No. No; everything's fine, Mother," the girl said, and hurried upstairs. She did not glance in Clyde's direction—he did not think she was aware of his presence—but he saw her face as she passed and read the heartache of the words she had spoken on the porch. He took the ledger from Mrs. Jarvis, thanked her, and started to turn away.

"Mr. Clyde. Paul. Did Mr. Bannerman bring her home?" Sally's mother asked.

Clyde hesitated, but saw no reason to lie. "Yes," he said.

"I see," she said slowly. "Well, as I told Mr. Jarvis, forbidding them to meet was no answer, no answer at all. But——" She drew a long, unhappy breath. "Thank you. Good night, Paul. Don't let Mr. Jarvis work too late."

The following day, Clyde was leaving the bank on his way to lunch when Sally Jarvis came out of her father's small office and started for the front door. Bareheaded, she looked like a schoolgirl. She saw him, paused, and smiled coolly.

"Which way are you going, Mr. Clyde?"

"Up toward the Chinaman's," he said. "Cheap and nourishing."

"Then you can walk with me as far as the corner," she said.

He bowed, and held the door for her. The sunshine struck them solidly as they emerged from the building. Clyde squinted, half blinded by the glare, and the girl laughed at him.

"You've been at your books and ledgers too long; you've got the look of a mole, my friend." She hesitated, and glanced at him in a sudden, speculative way. "I have a suggestion. Being new in town, perhaps you don't know that there's a dance at the schoolhouse Saturday night."

She left it there. He looked at her as they walked. The warm prairie wind was blowing her skirts ahead of her and playing with a few liberated tendrils of her fair hair. Her face was slightly flushed, perhaps from the sunlight. She threw him a quick glance, and he caught the challenge in her eyes.

"Why, it sounds interesting, but I would need a partner, would I not? Unfortunately, I'm acquainted with only one young lady in this town, Miss Jarvis, and she seems to have a fairly low opinion of me."

Sally Jarvis laughed. "But you're a man of the world, Mr. Clyde; you must know that a lonely young lady will put up with just about anybody for the pleasure of an evening of dancing."

Clyde laughed abruptly. "Well," he said, "in that case—will you do me the honor, Miss Jarvis?"

"Naturally," she said. "Why do you think I brought the matter up? Eight o'clock. We can walk if you don't have a rig."

"For such an occasion," he said, "I will certainly rent one."

Saturday evening was quite warm and windless, and the sun had just set red when Clyde drove away from the Jarvis house with Sally Jarvis at his side. The girl turned to wave to her parents, who were sitting on the veranda.

"They approve of you, Mr. Clyde," she said. "Of course, right now they'd approve of just about any man who didn't wear a gun."

"I seem to have come along at a fortuitous time," Clyde said dryly. "I will not question my luck."

She favored him with a sharp glance. "You've a funny, sarcastic way of talking, haven't you? I don't think I like it very much." She hesitated. "Tell me, why did you come out to this country, anyway?"

He looked at her, but the light was already too poor for him to see her clearly. He found himself, instead, visualizing her as she had looked descending the stairs toward him a few minutes earlier, in a blue silk dress that outlined the shape of her upper body, with gentle fidelity, the skirt drawn smoothly back to a generous fullness in the rear, after the fashion of the period. She had no longer looked in any way like a schoolgirl; she had been a poised and breathtakingly beautiful woman, and there was no longer any doubt in his mind about his feelings toward her. However, he had been taught the propriety of keeping his feelings to himself, and when he spoke, his voice was level and impersonal.

"You sound as if you disapproved of my coming here, Miss Jarvis."

She said, "No, but you just don't look like the kind of person—I mean, I don't think you left home to hide a broken heart or a criminal record."

He smiled. "Are those the only reasons for coming West?"

"Some come to find adventure or make a fortune. But you certainly don't look adventurous, and as far as money is concerned, Dad says you were being paid a better salary back there than he's paying you now, with much better chances of advancement in a much bigger bank. He's very pleased to have you here, I must say; but this worries him a little."

"It shouldn't," Clyde said. "Back home, I was one of a row of men sitting at a row of desks. In twenty years, perhaps, I would have worked my way to the head of the row of desks; in another twenty, I might have become a member of the firm. By then, I would have been almost ready for retirement. I would have been a substantial, respected, and very dull member of the community——"

"It's funny," she said, interrupting him. "I must be wrong about you, because my impression is that that's exactly what you'd like."

He grinned. "In other words, you think I'm naturally a dull and pompous fellow, Miss Jarvis?" She did not speak, and he went on: "Granted that I have certain tendencies that way; in my favor, let me say that I do try to overcome them. Which is one reason why I decided to break out of the pattern of my life and come out here. The other reason is that the next few decades of this western land are, I think, going to be very interesting from a financial standpoint. There is half a continent to be opened up; the process has hardly begun. A man on the ground, with a little capital and sound training . . . I don't expect ever to make the fortune you mentioned, Miss Jarvis. I am not a gambling man; and it takes a gambler, usually, to make money in great quantities—or lose it. I do expect, however, to make some small contribution to the country's development, receiving in return enough profit to guarantee a fairly comfortable, as well as interesting, life for myself and such family as I may have."

For a long time the only sound was the chopping noise of the horse's hoofs. At last she turned to look at him directly. "I don't quite understand why you're telling me this," she said.

He said gently, "I think you do." Before she could speak, he went on: "I have a confession to make. I was in your house the other evening, waiting for your mother to bring me something from upstairs, when Mr. Bannerman brought you home. I could not help overhearing the conversation. He was telling you his plans for the future. You did not approve of them. I thought I'd take this opportunity to tell you mine."

It was the first time he had seen her visibly disconcerted. She frowned, and said stiffly, "Aren't you taking a good deal for granted, Mr. Clyde? Just because I talked you into bringing me to a dance——"

He laughed and shook his head. "You had a disagreement with Mr. Bannerman, and decided that it would be well for you to be seen in public with some other man—any other man—so that the marshal would realize that your decision was irrevocable. It was my good fortune; and it gave me a chance to speak to you like this; but I'm giving it no more weight than it deserves, I assure you."

She had been studying him in a half-puzzled way; now she said, "You look like an unadventurous man; still you leave a good job to come out here, and speak like this to a girl on no more than a week's acquaintance. There must be more to you than I thought, Mr. Clyde."

He said, "I usually know what I want." After a little, he added, "I usually get it."

"Indeed?" she said sharply. "At least you have confidence in yourself, that's something. Well, there's the schoolhouse. Do you know, this will be the first time I've danced in well over a year?"

He looked at her in surprise; then he realized that, of course, Bannerman could hardly have escorted her to public functions over her parents' disapproval. They pulled into the schoolyard. There were people around of all ages, dressed in their best; and Sally introduced him to one group and another as they moved toward the open schoolhouse door. She seemed unaware of the glances they drew and the whispers

that were passed behind them; but once inside the door she turned to face him.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "It really wasn't very fair of me to put you in this position."

"They mean no harm," he said. "It's something to gossip about." He looked at her in the yellow lamplight. "Would it be presumptuous of me to tell you that you look very lovely?"

She laughed. "No woman considers that a presumption, Mr. Clyde—Paul. I think I'm going to like——"

She checked herself abruptly; and Clyde realized that the room had suddenly become very quiet. He turned to look at the door. Bannerman stood there. His big frame seemed to fill the doorway. He came forward slowly, and Clyde realized, apprehensively, that he was a little drunk. It made him no less deadly; it only made his deadliness blind and unpredictable.

"Sally," he said, speaking slowly and quite clearly, "I want to talk to you."

She said quietly, "I don't think there's anything more to be said, Hank."

"I want to talk to you," the big man repeated, standing above her. "Not here." He reached out and took her arm.

Sally threw a quick and warning glance toward Clyde, and stepped forward obediently. "All right, Hank. All right."

Bannerman turned and started toward the door. His grip on the girl's arm was strong and awkward, so that she had difficulty in walking erect beside him. Clyde saw her face whiten with pain; suddenly his own chest seemed to be full of something that was not air, something thick and unbreathable; and he took one step after them.

"Just a minute!"

To his surprise, his voice came out strong and distinct. A rustle went through the room, which had forgotten his presence. Sally turned her head quickly.

"No, Paul; no! It's all right. Don't——"

"The lady came with me," he said, looking up at Bannerman. "She will leave with me."

He could see himself clearly, standing in front of the big man, a slight dapper figure with a piping voice, inviting destruction. It was ridiculous, and he expected to hear laughter, but none came.

Bannerman shook his head, as if to clear it of the fumes of alcohol. "Get out of my way," he said.

"You're drunk, Marshal," Clyde said. "Let Miss Jarvis go."

"Little man," Bannerman said, "don't interfere."

He swung an arm to brush Clyde aside. There was no choice, and Clyde ducked and hit him, putting all his strength into the blow, and directing it just above the belt buckle. The man was built of leather, it seemed; nevertheless, the blow knocked some wind out of him, set him back a pace, and caused him to let go of Sally's arm. It also seemed to sober him miraculously; suddenly his eyes cleared and his jaw tightened, and his whole posture became taut and dangerous. His right hand swung casually into the neighborhood of the holstered gun; and the two men faced each other like that for measurable seconds—the longest seconds in Paul Clyde's life—then Bannerman straightened up slowly.

"You are quite right, Mr. Clyde. I've had a little too much to drink. My apologies." He looked at Sally. "To you, too, ma'am. I will not bother you again."

He turned on his heel and strode away. Two steps from the door he came to a sudden halt, listening. They all heard it then, the distant sound of gunfire in town. A horseman was approaching at a dead run. They heard him dismount in the yard and hurry toward the door; then he was in the doorway, a grubby little man with thinning red hair.

"Marshal Bannerman!" He saw the marshal standing there, and caught his breath with an effort. "Haskell and Johnny Rios are shooting hell out of Texas Street. A drunk got hit in the Cattleman, and

one of the girls in Lou Dance's place was cut by flying glass; they'll kill somebody yet if you don't stop them quick!"

A slow smile formed on Bannerman's face; his voice was gentle. "Why, you go on back, Pinky. Tell your boss and his shadow to save their cartridges; I'll be right with them."

The red-haired man flushed. "Ah—" he said, turning quickly away. They heard him run across the yard to his horse and ride off. Inside the schoolhouse Bannerman stood, looking idly about him. Abruptly he grinned, dug into his vest pocket, and produced a small, shiny badge. He tossed this into the air and caught it.

"I'm told this town's too poor to afford a permanent deputy marshal any longer," he said. "Tonight I could use a man to watch my back. Any of you fine, taxpaying citizens want to feel what it's like to wear a badge when the chips are down, here's your chance."

The room was silent. Bannerman laughed, tucked the badge back into his pocket, and walked out. Presently they heard him ride out of the yard at an easy trot.

Clyde heard a man near by speaking to another in an angry voice: "The arrogance of the fellow! They're three of a kind, I say, Haskell, Rios, and Bannerman. Whichever of them goes down, it will be good riddance for the town!"

"Well, it will be Bannerman who goes down tonight. Did you note that he'd been drinking? That's one thing that will make him reckless; and there is another thing also—" His glance touched Sally Jarvis briefly. "He will march straight down Texas Street, taking no precautions. Haskell's a sly and careful one who's never exposed himself before; and Rios never faced a man without big odds in his favor. There'll be a marksman in the alley behind the bank, perhaps, to take the marshal in the rear as he goes up the street. Well, I hold no brief for anyone who lives by the gun, but that man will leave an emptiness behind him, dying. A brave man always does."

Clyde glanced at Sally Jarvis, whose face had gone pale. He touched her arm and said, "Wait here."

"Paul, what——"

"Wait here," he said.

Then he was out of the door, in the darkness, hurrying toward the rented buggy. The livery-stable nag felt the cut of the whip, and broke into a lumbering run as they cleared the yard. Far ahead, Clyde could see the shape of a solitary rider, a big man on a gray horse that looked silvery in the darkness.

To the right, the railroad tracks were pale and shining ribbons in the night. The depot was dark except for a pair of illuminated windows marking the stationmaster's office. Well before he reached the bank, Clyde dragged the panting horse to a stop. He covered the rest of the distance on foot. The lock of the front door yielded to the key he had been given by Mr. Jarvis; he pushed the door open and looked around. Front Street was empty except for his deserted buggy. He stepped into the bank and pulled the door gently closed behind him.

Inside the familiar building, the night lights gave him plenty of illumination. The silence was complete, and his footsteps sounded loud and arresting as he crossed to the teller's cage and found the pistol beneath the counter. There was also a box of ammunition. He dropped a handful of cartridges into his pocket and walked quickly to the side door of the bank. It took a little time to throw off the locks without making a noise; then the door swung open under his hand to let him look out upon Texas Street.

Usually at night one could hear the constant beat of pianos and the sound of drunken laughter. Tonight, the street was silent. Directly across from him, Clyde saw, was the marshal's gray horse, riderless, standing at a hitching rail. Clyde stepped out cautiously. Looking up Texas Street, he saw Bannerman's tall and square-shouldered form striding away from him at a deliberate pace, holding the center of the street. Beyond him, awaiting him, were two men, whose shapes were familiar to Clyde: He had seen them once before, at the depot on his first day here. As he watched, they moved slowly apart, one to each side of the street.

Now there was a rustle of movement much closer at hand. Clyde drew back into the arch of the doorway, lifting the heavy pistol. He knew enough about firearms to have considerable respect for their deadly potentialities, but very little for the knowledge it took to operate one. It was a manual skill like any other. To become really expert took practice, no doubt; but there was nothing mysterious about the mechanics of putting a bullet into a large target at close range.

He watched two men step out from the alley behind the bank. One had a rifle in his hands. The barrel reflected the shine of the lights along the street. The other carried a holstered revolver, which he drew as he came to a halt. This one spoke: "Better take him now. Make it good; he's nobody to fool with."

The man with the rifle put it to his shoulder and sighted carefully. As he did so, Clyde aligned the barrel of the bank's weapon against the rifleman's hunched, black silhouette. His mouth was a little dry, and his voice came out softer than he had intended. "Look this way, gentlemen."

Soft though it was, it was loud enough for them to hear, punctuated by the metallic sound of the hammer of the pistol coming to full cock. They turned instantly, throwing themselves in opposite directions. Clyde had had some thought of disarming them and holding them at pistol point while Bannerman fought his battle at the other end of the street, but he saw at once that it was not going to work that way. He reminded himself that these men had come here for the purpose of shooting an officer of the law in the back, and he pulled the trigger as the rifleman was swinging his weapon around for a shot.

The muzzle flame was a startling thing to a man who had never before fired a short gun at night; it blinded him momentarily. The bright, answering flame of the rifle cut through his blindness, but the bullet came nowhere near him, and he heard the man fall heavily to the ground. Now, as if these two shots had been a signal, the street seemed to pulse and echo with gunfire. A bullet went by high overhead with a strange, sucking sound. He had the pistol cocked again

when something struck him a savage blow in the side, driving him back into the doorway and causing him to discharge his weapon ineffectually. He saw the second man, on one knee in the street, taking careful aim for another shot; and he knew he had no time to recock his piece and fire. This was the man who had carried the message, he saw, whom Bannerman had called Pinky; there was wicked triumph on his face. Then a shot sounded up the street, and the face went slack and dead, and the man fell over in the dust.

Clyde drew a cautious breath. There was some pain, and his side was wet with blood, but he did not think the injury was critical. He pressed his arm against it and straightened up. Marshal Bannerman came striding toward the bank and stopped to look at the two men on the ground and the third standing in the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing here, Boston?" he asked.

Clyde said, "Why, I intend to marry Miss Jarvis if she'll have me, Marshal. She would have blamed herself if you'd been killed tonight. I could not let that happen."

People were coming from everywhere now. A buggy pulled around the corner, and Sally Jarvis jumped out before it had stopped and came running up to them. Bannerman looked at her gravely for a moment and turned back to Clyde.

"Well, my work here is done," he said. "Take good care of her, Boston, and thank you for my life."

He turned and walked to his horse. They watched him mount, lift his hat, and ride up Texas Street past the two sprawled forms that lay there in front of the brightly lighted saloons. Clyde turned to look at the girl beside him. Her eyes were wide and questioning as she answered his look.

"What will become of him, Paul?" she whispered. "Where will he end?"

He knew that she was not thinking of death in a dusty street like this. She was thinking of a time when there would be no more streets like this; she was seeing a great, bowed, shabby figure in a barroom

somewhere, buying another drink to drown the ghostly memories of a past glory, forgotten by everyone but himself. It was this, Clyde knew, that she had not been able to face; it was the reason she was here, with him. He was the tame and prosaic future; the man they were watching ride away was the wild and gaudy past.

Beyond the street and its lights, the darkness swallowed him. They never heard of him again.

LOST SISTER

THE 1957 SPUR AWARD WINNER

Dorothy M. Johnson

Seldom has a Western short story won such wide acclaim as "Lost Sister," for which Dorothy M. Johnson was awarded a WWA Spur at the 1957 convention of Western Writers of America in Great Falls, Montana. Like her story The Hanging Tree, in which Gary Cooper and Maria Schell starred on the screen, this is a tender tale with deep currents of human understanding. In accepting her award Dorothy revealed herself also as a delightful humorist. Besides writing and teaching journalism at Montana State University at Missoula, she is Honorary Chief of Police of Whitefish, Montana, and an Honorary Chieftainess of the Blackfoot tribe with the astonishing name: "Princess Kills-Both-Places."

Our household was full of women, who overwhelmed my uncle Charlie and sometimes confused me with their bustle and chatter. We were the only men on the place. I was nine years old when still another woman came—Aunt Bessie, who had been living with the Indians.

When my mother told me about her, I couldn't believe it. The sav-

Copyright © 1956 by Dorothy M. Johnson. Appeared originally in *Collier's* magazine. Appeared in book form in *The Hanging Tree*. Reprinted by permission of McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

ages had killed my father, a cavalry lieutenant, two years before. I hated Indians and looked forward to wiping them out when I got older. (But when I was grown, they were no menace any more.)

"What did she live with the hostiles for?" I demanded.

"They captured her when she was a little girl," Ma said. "She was three years younger than you are. Now she's coming home."

High time she came home, I thought. I said so, promising, "If they was ever to get me, I wouldn't stay with 'em long."

Ma put her arms around me. "Don't talk like that. They won't get you. They'll never get you."

I was my mother's only real tie with her husband's family. She was not happy with those masterful women, my aunts Margaret, Hannah, and Sabina, but she would not go back East where she came from. Uncle Charlie managed the store the aunts owned, but he wasn't really a member of the family—he was just Aunt Margaret's husband. The only man who had belonged was my father, the aunts' younger brother. And I belonged, and someday the store would be mine. My mother stayed to protect my heritage.

None of the three sisters, my aunts, had ever seen Aunt Bessie. She had been taken by the Indians before they were born. Aunt Mary had known her—Aunt Mary was two years older—but she lived a thousand miles away now and was not well.

There was no picture of the little girl who had become a legend. When the family had first settled here, there was enough struggle to feed and clothe the children without having pictures made of them.

Even after army officers had come to our house several times and there had been many letters about Aunt Bessie's delivery from the savages, it was a long time before she came. Major Harris, who made the final arrangements, warned my aunts that they would have problems, that Aunt Bessie might not be able to settle down easily into family life.

This was only a challenge to Aunt Margaret, who welcomed challenges. "She's our own flesh and blood," Aunt Margaret trumpeted.

"Of course she must come to us. My poor, dear sister Bessie, torn from her home forty years ago!"

The major was earnest but not tactful. "She's been with the savages all those years," he insisted. "And she was only a little girl when she was taken. I haven't seen her myself, but it's reasonable to assume that she'll be like an Indian woman."

My stately aunt Margaret arose to show that the audience was ended. "Major Harris," she intoned, "I cannot permit anyone to criticize my own dear sister. She will live in my home, and if I do not receive official word that she is coming within a month, I shall take steps."

Aunt Bessie came before the month was up.

The aunts in residence made valiant preparations. They bustled and swept and mopped and polished. They moved me from my own room to my mother's—as she had been begging them to do because I was troubled with nightmares. They prepared my old room for Aunt Bessie with many small comforts—fresh doilies everywhere, hairpins, a matching pitcher and bowl, the best towels, and two new nightgowns in case hers might be old. (The fact was that she didn't have any.)

"Perhaps we should have some dresses made," Hannah suggested. "We don't know what she'll have with her."

"We don't know what size she'll take, either," Margaret pointed out. "There'll be time enough for her to go to the store after she settles down and rests for a day or two. Then she can shop to her heart's content."

Ladies of the town came to call almost every afternoon while the preparations were going on. Margaret promised them that, as soon as Bessie had recovered sufficiently from her ordeal, they should all meet her at tea.

Margaret warned her anxious sisters, "Now, girls, we mustn't ask her too many questions at first. She must rest for a while. She's been through a terrible experience." Margaret's voice dropped 'way down

with those last two words, as if only she could be expected to understand.

Indeed Bessie had been through a terrible experience, but it wasn't what the sisters thought. The experience from which she was suffering, when she arrived, was that she had been wrenched from her people, the Indians, and turned over to strangers. She had not been freed. She had been made a captive.

Aunt Bessie came with Major Harris and an interpreter, a half-blood with greasy black hair hanging down to his shoulders. His costume was half army and half primitive. Aunt Margaret swung the door open wide when she saw them coming. She ran out with her sisters following, while my mother and I watched from a window. Margaret's arms were outstretched, but when she saw the woman closer, her arms dropped and her glad cry died.

She did not cringe, my aunt Bessie who had been an Indian for forty years, but she stopped walking and stood staring, helpless among her captors.

The sisters had described her often as a little girl. Not that they had ever seen her, but she was a legend, the captive child. Beautiful blond curls, they said she had, and big blue eyes—she was a fairy child, a pale-haired little angel who ran on dancing feet.

The Bessie who came back was an aging woman who plodded in moccasins, whose dark dress did not belong on her bulging body. Her brown hair hung just below her ears. It was growing out; when she was first taken from the Indians, her hair had been cut short to clean out the vermin.

Aunt Margaret recovered herself and, instead of embracing this silent, stolid woman, satisfied herself by patting an arm and crying, "Poor dear Bessie, I am your sister Margaret. And here are our sisters Hannah and Sabina. We do hope you're not all tired out from your journey!"

Aunt Margaret was all graciousness, because she had been assured beyond doubt that this was truly a member of the family. She must

have believed—Aunt Margaret could believe anything—that all Bessie needed was to have a nice nap and wash her face. Then she would be as talkative as any of them.

The other aunts were quick-moving and sharp of tongue. But this one moved as if her sorrows were a burden on her bowed shoulders, and when she spoke briefly in answer to the interpreter, you could not understand a word of it.

Aunt Margaret ignored these peculiarities. She took the party into the front parlor—even the interpreter, when she understood there was no avoiding it. She might have gone on battling with the major about him, but she was in a hurry to talk to her lost sister.

“You won’t be able to converse with her unless the interpreter is present,” Major Harris said. “Not,” he explained hastily, “because of any regulation, but because she has forgotten English.”

Aunt Margaret gave the half-blood interpreter a look of frowning doubt and let him enter. She coaxed Bessie. “Come, dear, sit down.”

The interpreter mumbled, and my Indian aunt sat cautiously on a needlepoint chair. For most of her life she had been living with the people who sat comfortably on the ground.

The visit in the parlor was brief. Bessie had had her instructions before she came. But Major Harris had a few warnings for the family. “Technically, your sister is still a prisoner,” he explained, ignoring Margaret’s start of horror. “She will be in your custody. She may walk in your fenced yard, but she must not leave it without official permission.

“Mrs. Raleigh, this may be a heavy burden for you all. But she has been told all this and has expressed willingness to conform to these restrictions. I don’t think you will have any trouble keeping her here.” Major Harris hesitated, remembered that he was a soldier and a brave man, and added, “If I did, I wouldn’t have brought her.”

There was the making of a sharp little battle, but Aunt Margaret chose to overlook the challenge. She could not overlook the fact that Bessie was not what she had expected.

Bessie certainly knew that this was her lost white family, but she didn't seem to care. She was infinitely sad, infinitely removed. She asked one question: "Ma-ry?" and Aunt Margaret almost wept with joy.

"Sister Mary lives a long way from here," she explained, "and she isn't well, but she will come as soon as she's able. Dear sister Mary!"

The interpreter translated this, and Bessie had no more to say. That was the only understandable word she ever did say in our house, the remembered name of her older sister.

When the aunts, all chattering, took Bessie to her room, one of them asked, "But where are her things?"

Bessie had no things, no baggage. She had nothing at all but the clothes she stood in. While the sisters scurried to bring a comb and other oddments, she stood like a stooped monument, silent and watchful. This was her prison. Very well, she would endure it.

"Maybe tomorrow we can take her to the store and see what she would like," Aunt Hannah suggested.

"There's no hurry," Aunt Margaret declared thoughtfully. She was getting the idea that this sister was going to be a problem. But I don't think Aunt Margaret ever really stopped hoping that one day Bessie would cease to be different, that she would end her stubborn silence and begin to relate the events of her life among the savages, in the parlor over a cup of tea.

My Indian aunt accustomed herself, finally, to sitting on the chair in her room. She seldom came out, which was a relief to her sisters. She preferred to stand, hour after hour, looking out the window—which was open only about a foot, in spite of all Uncle Charlie's efforts to budge it higher. And she always wore moccasins. She never was able to wear shoes from the store, but seemed to treasure the shoes brought to her.

The aunts did not, of course, take her shopping after all. They made her a couple of dresses; and when they told her, with signs and voluble explanations, to change her dress, she did.

After I found that she was usually at the window, looking across the flat land to the blue mountains, I played in the yard so I could stare at her. She never smiled, as an aunt should, but she looked at me sometimes, thoughtfully, as if measuring my worth. By performing athletic feats, such as walking on my hands, I could get her attention. For some reason, I valued it.

She didn't often change expression, but twice I saw her scowl with disapproval. Once was when one of the aunts slapped me in a casual way. I had earned the slap, but the Indians did not punish children with blows. Aunt Bessie was shocked, I think, to see that white people did. The other time was when I talked back to someone with spoiled, small-boy insolence—and that time the scowl was for me.

The sisters and my mother took turns, as was their Christian duty, in visiting her for half an hour each day. Bessie didn't eat at the table with us—not after the first meal.

The first time my mother took her turn, it was under protest. "I'm afraid I'd start crying in front of her," she argued, but Aunt Margaret insisted.

I was lurking in the hall when Ma went in. Bessie said something, then said it again, peremptorily, until my mother guessed what she wanted. She called me and put her arm around me as I stood beside her chair. Aunt Bessie nodded, and that was all there was to it.

Afterward, my mother said, "She likes you. And so do I." She kissed me.

"I don't like her," I complained. "She's queer."

"She's a sad old lady," my mother explained. "She had a little boy once, you know."

"What happened to him?"

"He grew up and became a warrior. I suppose she was proud of him. Now the Army has him in prison somewhere. He's half Indian. He was a dangerous man."

He was indeed a dangerous man, and a proud man, a chief, a bird of prey whose wings the Army had clipped after bitter years of trying.

However, my mother and my Indian aunt had that one thing in common: they both had sons. The other aunts were childless.

There was a great to-do about having Aunt Bessie's photograph taken. The aunts, who were stubbornly and valiantly trying to make her one of the family, wanted a picture of her for the family album. The government wanted one too, for some reason—perhaps because someone realized that a thing of historic importance had been accomplished by recovering the captive child.

Major Harris sent a young lieutenant with the greasy-haired interpreter to discuss the matter in the parlor. (Margaret, with great foresight, put a clean towel on a chair and saw to it the interpreter sat there.) Bessie spoke very little during that meeting, and of course we understood only what the half-blood *said* she was saying.

No, she did not want her picture made. No.

But your son had his picture made. Do you want to see it? They teased her with that offer, and she nodded.

If we let you see his picture, then will you have yours made?

She nodded doubtfully. Then she demanded more than had been offered: If you let me keep his picture, then you can make mine.

No, you can only look at it. We have to keep his picture. It belongs to us.

My Indian aunt gambled for high stakes. She shrugged and spoke, and the interpreter said, "She not want to look. She will keep or nothing."

My mother shivered, understanding as the aunts could not understand what Bessie was gambling—all or nothing.

Bessie won. Perhaps they had intended that she should. She was allowed to keep the photograph that had been made of her son. It has been in history books many times—the half-white chief, the valiant leader who was not quite great enough to keep his Indian people free.

His photograph was taken after he was captured, but you would never guess it. His head is high, his eyes stare with boldness but not with scorn, his long hair is arranged with care—dark hair braided on

one side and with a tendency to curl where the other side hangs loose—and his hands hold the pipe like a royal scepter.

That photograph of the captive but unconquered warrior had its effect on me. Remembering him, I began to control my temper and my tongue, to cultivate reserve as I grew older, to stare with boldness but not scorn at people who annoyed or offended me. I never met him, but I took silent pride in him—Eagle Head, my Indian cousin.

Bessie kept his picture on her dresser when she was not holding it in her hands. And she went like a docile, silent child to the photograph studio, in a carriage with Aunt Margaret early one morning, when there would be few people on the street to stare.

Bessie's photograph is not proud but pitiful. She looks out with no expression. There is no emotion there, no challenge, only the face of an aging woman with short hair, only endurance and patience. The aunts put a copy in the family album.

But they were nearing the end of their tether. The Indian aunt was a solid ghost in the house. She did nothing because there was nothing for her to do. Her gnarled hands must have been skilled at squaws' work, at butchering meat and scraping and tanning hides, at making tepees and beading ceremonial clothes. But her skills were useless and unwanted in a civilized home. She did not even sew when my mother gave her cloth and needles and thread. She kept the sewing things beside her son's picture.

She ate (in her room) and slept (on the floor) and stood looking out the window. That was all, and it could not go on. But it had to go on, at least until my sick aunt Mary was well enough to travel—Aunt Mary, who was her older sister, the only one who had known her when they were children.

The sisters' duty visits to Aunt Bessie became less and less visits and more and more duty. They settled into a bearable routine. Margaret had taken upon herself the responsibility of trying to make Bessie talk. Make, I said, not teach. She firmly believed that her stubborn and un-

fortunate sister needed only encouragement from a strong-willed person. So Margaret talked, as to a child, when she bustled in:

"Now there you stand, just looking, dear. What in the world is there to see out there? The birds—are you watching the birds? Why don't you try sewing? Or you could go for a little walk in the yard. Don't you want to go out for a nice little walk?"

Bessie listened and blinked.

Margaret could have understood an Indian woman's not being able to converse in a civilized tongue, but her own sister was not an Indian. Bessie was white, therefore she should talk the language her sisters did—the language she had not heard since early childhood.

Hannah, the put-upon aunt, talked to Bessie too, but she was delighted not to get any answers and not to be interrupted. She bent over her embroidery when it was her turn to sit with Bessie and told her troubles in an unending flow. Bessie stood looking out the window the whole time.

Sabina, who had just as many troubles, most of them emanating from Margaret and Hannah, went in like a martyr, firmly clutching her Bible, and read aloud from it until her time was up. She took a small clock along so that she would not, because of annoyance, be tempted to cheat.

After several weeks Aunt Mary came, white and trembling and exhausted from her illness and the long, hard journey. The sisters tried to get the interpreter in but were not successful. (Aunt Margaret took that failure pretty hard.) They briefed Aunt Mary, after she had rested, so the shock of seeing Bessie would not be too terrible. I saw them meet, those two.

Margaret went to the Indian woman's door and explained volubly who had come, a useless but brave attempt. Then she stood aside, and Aunt Mary was there, her lined white face aglow, her arms outstretched. "Bessie! Sister Bessie!" she cried.

And after one brief moment's hesitation, Bessie went into her arms and Mary kissed her sun-dark, weathered cheek. Bessie spoke. "Ma-ry,"

she said. "Ma-ry." She stood with tears running down her face and her mouth working. So much to tell, so much suffering and fear—and joy and triumph, too—and the sister there at last who might legitimately hear it all and understand.

But the only English word that Bessie remembered was "Mary," and she had not cared to learn any others. She turned to the dresser, took her son's picture in her work-hardened hands, reverently, and held it so her sister could see. Her eyes pleaded.

Mary looked on the calm, noble, savage face of her half-blood nephew and said the right thing: "My, isn't he handsome!" She put her head on one side and then the other. "A fine boy, sister," she approved. "You must"—she stopped, but she finished—"be awfully proud of him, dear!"

Bessie understood the tone if not the words. The tone was admiration. Her son was accepted by the sister who mattered. Bessie looked at the picture and nodded, murmuring. Then she put it back on the dresser.

Aunt Mary did not try to make Bessie talk. She sat with her every day for hours, and Bessie did talk—but not in English. They sat holding hands for mutual comfort while the captive child, grown old and a grandmother, told what had happened in forty years. Aunt Mary said that was what Bessie was talking about. But she didn't understand a word of it and didn't need to.

"There is time enough for her to learn English again," Aunt Mary said. "I think she understands more than she lets on. I asked her if she'd like to come and live with me, and she nodded. We'll have the rest of our lives for her to learn English. But what she has been telling me—she can't wait to tell that. About her life, and her son."

"Are you sure, Mary dear, that you should take the responsibility of having her?" Margaret said dutifully, no doubt shaking in her shoes for fear Mary would change her mind now that deliverance was in sight. "I do believe she'd be happier with you, though we've done all we could."

Margaret and the older sisters would certainly be happier with Bessie somewhere else. And so, it developed, would the United States Government.

Major Harris came with the interpreter to discuss details, and they told Bessie she could go, if she wished, to live with Mary a thousand miles away. Bessie was patient and willing, stolidly agreeable. She talked a great deal more to the interpreter than she had ever done before. He answered at length and then explained to the others that she had wanted to know how she and Mary would travel to this far country. It was hard, he said, for her to understand just how far they were going.

Later we knew that the interpreter and Bessie had talked about much more than that.

Next morning, when Sabina took breakfast to Bessie's room, we heard a cry of dismay. Sabina stood holding the tray, repeating, "She's gone out the window! She's gone out the window!"

And so she had. The window that had always stuck so that it would not raise more than a foot was open wider now. And the photograph of Bessie's son was gone from the dresser. Nothing else was missing except Bessie and the decent dark dress she had worn the day before.

My uncle Charlie got no breakfast that morning. With Margaret shrieking orders, he leaped on a horse and rode to the telegraph station.

Before Major Harris got there with half a dozen cavalrymen, civilian scouts were out searching for the missing woman. They were expert trackers. Their lives had depended, at various times, on their ability to read the meaning of a turned stone, a broken twig, a bruised leaf. They found that Bessie had gone south. They tracked her for ten miles. And then they lost the trail, for Bessie was as skilled as they were. Her life had sometimes depended on leaving no stone or twig or leaf marked by her passage. She traveled fast at first. Then, with time to be careful, she evaded the followers she knew would come.

The aunts were stricken with grief—at least Aunt Mary was—and

bowed with humiliation about what Bessie had done. The blinds were drawn, and voices were low in the house. We had been pitied because of Bessie's tragic folly in having let the Indians make a savage of her. But now we were traitors because we had let her get away.

Aunt Mary kept saying pitifully, "Oh, why did she go? I thought she would be contented with me!"

The others said that it was, perhaps, all for the best. Aunt Margaret proclaimed, "She has gone back to her own." That was what they honestly believed, and so did Major Harris.

My mother told me why she had gone. "You know that picture she had of the Indian chief, her son? He's escaped from the jail he was in. The fort got word of it, and they think Bessie may be going to where he's hiding. That's why they're trying so hard to find her. They think," my mother explained, "that she knew of his escape before they did. They think the interpreter told her when he was here. There was no other way she could have found out."

They scoured the mountains to the south for Eagle Head and Bessie. They never found her, and they did not get him until a year later, far to the north. They could not capture him that time. He died fighting.

After I grew up, I operated the family store, disliking storekeeping a little more every day. When I was free to sell it, I did, and went to raising cattle. And one day, riding in a canyon after strayed steers, I found—I think—Aunt Bessie. A cowboy who worked for me was along, or I would never have let anybody know.

We found weathered bones near a little spring. They had a mystery on them, those nameless human bones suddenly come upon. I could feel old death brushing my back.

"Some prospector," suggested my riding partner.

I thought so too until I found, protected by a log, sodden scraps of fabric that might have been a dark, respectable dress. And wrapped in them was a sodden something that might have once been a picture.

The man with me was young, but he had heard the story of the

captive child. He had been telling me about it, in fact. In the passing years it had acquired some details that surprised me. Aunt Bessie had become once more a fair-haired beauty, in this legend that he had heard, but utterly sad and silent. Well, sad and silent she really was.

I tried to push the sodden scrap of fabric back under the log, but he was too quick for me. "That ain't no shirt, that's a dress!" he announced. "This here was no prospector—it was a woman!" He paused and then announced with awe, "I bet you it was your Indian aunt!"

I scowled and said, "Nonsense. It could be anybody."

He got all worked up about it. "If it was *my* aunt," he declared, "I'd bury her in the family plot."

"No," I said, and shook my head.

We left the bones there in the canyon, where they had been for forty-odd years if they were Aunt Bessie's. And I think they were. But I would not make her a captive again. She's in the family album. She doesn't need to be in the family plot.

If my guess about why she left us is wrong, nobody can prove it. She never intended to join her son in hiding. She went in the opposite direction to lure pursuit away.

What happened to her in the canyon doesn't concern me, or anyone. My aunt Bessie accomplished what she set out to do. It was not her life that mattered, but his. She bought him another year.

GRANDFATHER OUT OF THE PAST

THE 1960 SPUR AWARD WINNER

Noel M. Loomis

Noel M. Loomis was a charter member of Western Writers of America, the organization's second president, and is now its secretary-treasurer. Texas-born, descendant of pioneers, Noel has been printer, editor, and all-round newspaperman in a dozen states. He has published four hundred short stories, forty books, including the novel Short Cut to Red River, a Spur winner in 1959. Long recognized as a historical novelist, Noel has also won top status as historian with his The Texan-Santa Fe Pioneers. He believes in presenting Indians in fiction neither as animals nor as Hiawathas, but as human beings, products of their own cultures. "Grandfather Out of the Past" is a warmly human story, and a treasure house of authentic Comanche lore. Currently on the faculty of San Diego State College, Noel lives with his wife, Dorothy, in a nearby back-country hideout, where he does his writing on the world's only gold-plated linotype.

Tuchubarua was an old, old man. The hot sun of countless summers on the Llano and the driving sleet storms of the West Texas

Copyright © 1959 by Western Writers of America.

breaks had etched into his ancient, copper-colored Comanche face a pattern of wrinkles that spoke of experience, of wisdom, of love and hate and violent passions now long subsided but not quite forgotten; of exploits on the hunt, on raids, on the warpath; of bloody scalps, of captive women, of long and weighty councils. But all those days of glory were gone, and in the wake of their hundred and twenty-six summers were only memories—some of them a little dim—and an old man making arrows for the young warriors, for his great-grandsons and his great-great-grandsons and his great-great-great-grandsons; an old man from whom ineffable age had stripped all glory and all egotism and all vanity, leaving in their place only a desire to live—to survive in a hard land and with a savage people where usefulness was the only excuse for existence, where a man too old to hunt was also too old to eat.

And since Tuchubarua's strength was not equal to the making of a saddle or a bow, and since he had, forty years before, given away most of his power, his only remaining usefulness was in the arrows he made; but his eyes now saw but dimly things that were near him, and so he had only his ancient knowledge and the skill of long experience to stand between him and banishment to the open prairie.

He felt a heavy step on the hard-packed ground, and knew, without looking up, who had made it, and prepared himself as he slowly drew a slender dogwood shaft through the arrow straightener.

The squat figure of Quahuahacante, Dead Hide, stopped before him, and Tuchubarua looked up slowly.

"Old Man," said Quahuahacante in his harsh voice, "I told you to have four arrows for me today."

Tuchubarua's voice in answer was soft and liquid and flowing, like those of most Comanches, and the only evidence of his great age was in the occasional failure of his voice at the end of a word. "An arrow takes much time," he said. "It must wing straight and true, and it is not easy to make them so when the wood is not properly seasoned."

Quahuahacante snorted. "Excuses are no good, Tsukup."

Quahuahacante, who was in his forties and aspired to be a war leader, always called him Old Man. Others, too, called him Old Man, but they used the word *narabuh*, which was a term of familiarity. Most members of the tribe, however, called him Tuchubarua, Bear Bird, for that was the name by which he had signed the great treaty with the Kiowas in 1790. Quahuahacante alone called him Tsukup.

It made no important difference, for Tuchubarua was a very old man, and his only remaining desire was to live out his days, however many they might be, among those of his own blood.

He sighted along the shaft, taking his time, hoping that Quahuahacante, in his impatience, would go away, for Tuchubarua, relying entirely on his wrinkled fingers and their still fine sense of touch, had to conceal his failing eyesight.

"Note well, Tsukup," said Quahuahacante. "We won't need arrows much longer anyway, for the white men are coming with rifles that shoot many times—faster even than a bow."

Tuchubarua looked up from the arrow, and saw the hard malevolence in the younger man's eyes. Why was it, he wondered, that some men never were satisfied to leave things as they were? Long, long ago, before he had reached his hundredth birthday, the band had accepted Tuchubarua as a fixture, and nobody had questioned his right to a small portion of meat when there was some extra. He did not require very much, and he never took the good parts. The hump, the tongue, the brains, the liver, the kidneys, the fleeces—all those he left to others, while he was grateful for a piece of brisket or even a small length of tail, and when food was very scarce and the babies cried, he could go without food many days.

Meanwhile, other Comanches had died off, generation by generation, and presently all of his sons and grandsons were gone. In Comanchería, without any form of written record, it was hard for any person to be conscious of anyone else more than two generations before him, so Tuchubarua found himself, without warning, a forgotten legend that had to be fed. Most of them did not seem to mind, but

Quahuahacante had a reason for wanting Tuchubarua out of the way, for his power would never be complete with the old man around. Tuchubarua had seen him in a moment of weakness, and such was the Comanche psychology that even though Tuchubarua never had told, Quahuahacante *knew* he had been seen, and the knowledge would be a gnawing thing as long as Tuchubarua lived.

All these things were in Tuchubarua's mind as he looked into the flinty black eyes of the younger man, and tried hard to recall whether he himself had ever been as heartless and as determined. It was hard to know, because one who had erred as Quahuahacante had erred must have strange and powerful desires.

Tuchubarua watched the black eyes that always showed a gleam when they looked at a girl or a woman, and he wondered at the strangeness of the young man's desires. In sexual matters there were a few restraints for the Comanches, and, as a result, inhibitions were not common—certainly not on the males. It meant, however, that those taboos that did exist must be scrupulously observed, or the combined weight of the tribal disapproval would fall on the violator. A man's sexual activities were largely not subject to censorship. He might start very early trying to make babies with girls his own age, or he might be taught by older women; the only taboo was against incestuous relationships. When he became a little older, he could visit the girls in their parents' tepees, or he could receive them in his tepee, and the only rule was that the boy must not make the advance; if he did, he was in tribal disgrace. If he forgot himself so far as to stay with a girl all night, he was considered married.

As he grew older he watched the warriors use captive women, and experimented with them himself; still later, his sex activities would involve older women of the Comanches. He was expected to use his brothers' wives, and he would find himself with the wives of other warriors also—the only restraint in the latter case being that if he should be caught with a married woman, he would have to pay damages for the use of another man's property.

But with all this freedom, Quahuahacante had strange and hidden desires, and Tuchubarua was well aware of them—so well aware that it was a wonder that Quahuahacante did not recognize his feelings; but the younger man was too intent on himself to pay attention to another's thoughts.

"You are an old man," Quahuahacante said, "who has lived long past his time."

Tuchubarua did not answer.

The younger man turned on his heel and strode away—a ridiculous gesture in a Comanche, for they always looked awkward on foot.

After a moment, Tuchubarua slowly drew the arrow through his fingers, thankful that he could still sense the deviations. Then with slow movements and great care he fitted the wood again into the hole in the sandstone slab, turning the arrow to scrape it at the right place.

A soft voice from behind him said, "Tawk, you are working early. The sun is not yet at its height."

He turned. Only one person called him Grandfather any more: his great-great-great-granddaughter, the image of his first wife—a slender, smiling Shoshoni woman who had been carried off one night by the Utes. To the best of his hundred-year-old memories, this girl, Ekarraw-ro, She Blushes, was descended from the Shoshoni. It was hard to be sure over such a long time and so many wives, but it made no difference to Tuchubarua. Ekarraw-ro was a good girl; she worked hard when she had work to do; she laughed easily; and she played hard. She did not, however, visit boys' tents at night, nor did she go walking on the prairie with them in the dark. Not that chastity was precious to the Comanches—but there was an extra pride about a girl who did not give herself away. He looked at Ekarraw-ro approvingly. She was a ripe fifteen, and the laughter in her eyes meant that she had much to give.

"There are arrows to be made," he said.

She leaned over to pick up a dogwood shaft from the bundle.

He watched her slim, well-shaped figure appreciatively. If she had not been his own kin, he would have reached for her.

"Tawk," she said, gently scolding, "these shafts are too crooked for any good use. Where did you get them?"

"Quahuahacante brought them," he said, and realized for the first time that the young warrior had done it deliberately. He looked up at her, and she was sober, avoiding his eyes. Then she knew also.

But she did not embarrass him, for that was the great damage one might do to a Comanche: catch him in an embarrassing position, either taking advantage or being taken advantage of. She said instead, "I'll gather you some straight pieces, Tawk, so it will not be such hard work."

He considered. Quahuahacante, then, knew about his eyes: at a distance he could see well, but within the length of his arms he was half blind. Quahuahacante knew that and must have been giving him crooked shafts for a long time. They were only slightly crooked, of course, but it would have been noticeable to a man with good eyesight. Tuchubarua began to feel a little discouraged then, for the first time in his long life, because it was plain that Quahuahacante was trying to force him into banishment, and for a moment Tuchubarua wished that he had had many daughters. Out of twenty-two or twenty-four children by his many wives—it was hard to remember which unless he should count them in his mind—all but two had been sons. Those two had died of the disease that pitted a man's face, and he had had no daughters to marry into other families of influence and thus perpetuate his position with the tribe. Most of his sons and grandsons had been good warriors but not war leaders or chiefs; many had died young—not uncommon among the Comanches; and without quite knowing how it had happened, he one day had found himself isolated, a lone chief at the head of an ordinary family.

Later, he had picked out a fine young warrior and had given away all of his power except that which protected him from harm to his good name. He had intended to deliver that also, but the young

man was killed on a raid into Mexico, and Tuchubarua was left unexpectedly with only a small power and without an important friend in the tribe.

That had been sixty years before, and even then Tuchubarua was too old to fast to gain more power, and too poor to get it from a medicine man; nor was he entirely willing to accept blindly all the restrictions that might go with it. Great power was a fine thing, but it was for the young, because great power carried great responsibilities and many restrictions, and it took a young man of alert mind to live with all those restrictions and not violate them. For, while few powers protected a man from death, all power was dangerous; when a Comanche offended his medicine, his power would punish him, and the usual punishment was death.

His medicine in this case was the body of a dried baby horned toad, which he wore in a buckskin locket on his neck. It had only a small restriction attending it: he must not eat certain foods: bear, coyote, fish, snakes. It was a very minor restriction, because those foods were taboo to Comanches anyway, and so he had not been in a hurry to give away the power. There was also, now that he recalled, a minor secondary restriction: he could not stand on his feet and talk in public before a group that included any woman whom he knew to have violated any serious taboo.

His mind was still sharp, and those things went through it almost instantaneously, and he watched Ekarraw-ro standing as straight as the arrows he made, and he noted her full breasts, no longer pointed like a girl's but round like a woman's, and he observed her round, solid hips under the buckskin skirt. Then he looked away quickly before she should see how closely he was observing her—and caught the black eyes of Quahuahacante, also watching her.

In spite of his age, Tuchubarua felt repelled when he looked into the evil eyes of Quahuahacante, but the younger man made no gesture or grimace to reveal his thoughts. He turned away, once again in that ridiculous stride.

Tuchubarua looked up at Ekarraw-ro and surreptitiously fingered the dried horned toad within his shirt.

"Kaku, you must not go for reeds without an older woman."

She looked at him curiously. "Grandfather, do not worry. No boy would dare risk his standing in the tribe by approaching a girl—and I am not going to invite them."

He smiled to himself. She was the image of her grandmother in looks, in voice, in thought, in the proud way she carried her head.

He looked at the arrow straightener. "These are evil times," he said. "I urge you not to go out of sight of camp alone."

She nodded agreeably. "And I have a request of you, Grandfather."

He looked up. "Yes?"

"I have seen a young man watching me. He may, I think, want to marry me."

He went a little cold at those words, but showed nothing on his face. "Yes?"

"I wish you to handle the arrangements for me, Grandfather Out of the Past."

"Your father——"

"My father was killed by the Pawnees last fall."

He remembered.

"All my mothers are dead." She meant her mother and her mother's sisters, and he noted with approval that she refrained from mentioning the name of any dead person—for that was taboo. "Therefore," she said, "I ask you to make the arrangements." She looked at him and said softly, "I am not able to give you a present, Grandfather, but you may keep all the ponies you get for me."

"What need have I for ponies?"

"None, perhaps—but the price must be high."

He smiled. She had a great deal of pride. "What is the young man's name?" he asked.

"Black Antelo——" She blushed.

He smiled again. "He is an honest man and has been a good warrior. He will make a good husband and father."

"He may not ask," she said nervously.

"I think he will."

He knew whereof he spoke. Among the Comanches some matches—especially those between an older man and a girl—were matters of convenience, but where both were young—Black Antelope was only twenty-four—it could be assumed that love played a far bigger part than either one let on. But those were thoughts that an old man kept to himself.

She looked up at him and saw the assurance in his ancient face, and then her thoughts turned to something else. "Black Antelope's mother and father are giving a Buffalo Tongue Feast tonight, and I am to serve the tongue."

He looked at her shining eyes, and smiled. It was an honor for her and for Black Antelope's parents, too, for there was a small chastity test connected with the serving. It made him feel warm all over, for it showed they respected her and wanted to show her off a little before the tribe. It would not be a vain sort of showing off, but a quiet exhibition of pride, and as such was not taboo.

"And you are to come, Grandfather Out of the Past, and eat tongue until you can hold no more."

His ancient face wrinkled with pleasure. The Buffalo Tongue Feast was a gay affair, as were a good many Comanche celebrations, but of late years they had tended to forget Tuchubarua. Then his face sobered as he realized that only Ekarraw-ro had invited him—but it was not her party. He nodded, however, and watched her gracefully walk away. It would be nice to see her serve the tongue, for while it was no disgrace for a girl to have had relations with a man, it was nice *not* to have had relations. The possibility that any man would dispute her chastity was remote, for no girl who was not a virgin would so expose herself to ridicule. It would be far less reprehensible to have lain with many men than to have claimed virginity when one did not have it.

She went away, and he resumed his work. Ten ponies would keep him the rest of his life. He wondered if Ekarraw-ro had his security in mind. Drawing the arrow slowly through the hole, he realized that he would not be able to keep the ponies. It would be too obviously a greedy thing, and even an old man like him was not oblivious to the weight of the tribal censure. Perhaps he could give them to some family that would in turn agree to provide meat for him. In such a case he would not longer be a tribal responsibility, and Quahuahacante would have no excuse for suggesting his disposal. But he knew, even as he thought it, that such a course could never be. A Comanche could not beg—and giving away to get something in return was begging.

He sat there with the warm sun on his back, drawing the shafts through the straightener, taking his time. It was a long time till evening, and he had no pot of meat to appease his hunger in the meantime unless somebody invited him. In the evening everybody in the camp was fed; that had always been the rule. But in between times, a man was on his own.

He said "Hmpl!" aloud as he considered Quahuahacante's implied threat that arrows would lose their value. He had first heard that back in the 1730s. He had been young then, and it had impressed him; now he was old, and not many things impressed him. . . . Arrows had changed since those days, for in olden times they had made arrows with only two feathers, where now they used three. Those were the days of raids on the Spanish, whose women made the best wives of all. Those were the days of great raids against the Jicarillas and the Navajos and the Tejanos, the days of the *contrabandistas* from Arkansas with many goods, of long smokes around the campfire, with plenty of *pah'mo* traded (or sometimes raided) from the Spanish, of buffalo hunting on a good horse, of captive women and many scalps. . . .

He was almost asleep when again he heard the soft pad of feet on the clay, and looked up to see a comely squaw, Wading in Still Water,

coming toward him, and watched her appreciatively, for Comanche women, unlike the men, were very graceful on foot. He looked up, shading his eyes with his hands, tossed his two braids back over his sunwarmed shoulders, and waited for her to speak.

"Bear Bird," she said, "I am a woman and I have not passed the menopause, and so I cannot smoke with you, but I would visit."

He made room for her to sit across the stone from him, and carefully resumed his work.

"I am honored to have you here," he said, placing an arrow in the straightener.

After this palaver had gone on for a while, Wading in Still Water came to the point. "My nephew, Black Antelope, wishes to marry your granddaughter, Ekarraw-ro."

He nodded without looking up. He was pleased that Ekarraw-ro was to get her wish so soon—though that was not unusual, for marriages among the Comanches moved fast, once there was a meeting of minds. And he had not the slightest doubt that Ekarraw-ro had correctly interpreted the questing looks of Black Antelope—for in affairs of the heart among the young, looks given and accepted might well constitute a meeting of minds.

"Black Antelope is young but he is a brave warrior," she said, "and under the teaching of Stinking Bear he has become one of the best horse thieves of the Penatekas."

He nodded. He had heard about Black Antelope's competence with horses, but he observed, "He has gambled them away."

"It is only because he had nothing else to do with them. He is a generous man and sought to keep nothing for himself."

"Perhaps that would continue to be so."

"He is a thoughtful man also. He will take fine care of his wife and children."

The palaver went on and on, he objecting, she countering. They both knew how it would turn out, but as protector of the girl, he must not seem eager; it was against Comanche custom.

Finally Wading in Still Water said, "My nephew has just come back from a raid on the soldiers at Fort Belknap; he has many horses, and will give you ten of the finest for the hand of your granddaughter."

His reply was slow. "I will have an answer for you tomorrow."

They both knew what the answer would be. The man and the girl were young; it would be a love match. Ekarraw-ro would be the *naraibo*, or first wife. What more could anyone ask?

Ten ponies were a fine price from a young man, and Black Antelope had demonstrated his generosity by offering them immediately, without haggling; likewise, Tuchubarua had tacitly accepted, since he had not rejected the offer but had preserved appearances by setting a conventional period for deliberation—one of the many conventions that were extremely important to Comanches.

"Thank you, Narabuh," she said. "And now tonight my husband and I are giving a Buffalo Tongue Feast. You are to be the guest of honor."

He looked up abruptly. "I will be glad to help you celebrate, but for forty years I have had no wife to care for my clothing, and so I cannot be a guest of honor."

She joked him. "What's the matter, Narabuh? Doesn't a woman arouse desire in a young fellow like you?"

His ancient eyes squinted, and he drew a deep breath. "Such a woman as you can still arouse me," he said. "Now go away, because I have no money to pay damages to your husband."

She smiled kindly at him. It meant nothing personal; the Comanches were not prudish, and it was quite usual for men and women to talk frankly to each other.

But his blood was racing through his ancient veins as he watched her leave, and he sighed as he went back to his arrows. An old man without money and without much power was in a bad situation.

He continued to work on the arrows, and presently Ekarraw-ro came, gay and bubbling with her knowledge, and laid down a bundle

of mulberry shafts. "These are better than your dogwood, Grandfather."

She brought him a drink from a buffalo paunch, and after a while he told her that Wading in Still Water had asked him for her hand. "How many ponies did you demand?" she said.

"Ten." He looked at her. "Do you think that is too many?"

She said with forgivable scorn, "Black Antelope can steal more horses than any ten men in the band. We should have asked a hundred."

He shook his head. "Ten horses show pride. Twenty horses would show greed."

She nodded, her eyes on him. "You are right, Grandfather Out of the Past. Here." She gave him something warm, wrapped in a piece of rawhide. "Wading in Still Water is giving away meat to all, for Fights with a Knife killed four buffaloes with the lance, and everybody will have meat."

He nodded. "It is good not to be hungry."

She looked at him soberly. "Are you sometimes hungry, Grandfather?"

He looked at her, trying to decide what hunger was. Was it a gnawing in a man's stomach, or was it a lonesomeness of the heart, or was it, sometimes, a thing that ate a man's brain from the inside, like that which showed in the eyes of Quahuahacante?

"No," he said, clutching his medicine through his shirt. "No, I am not really hungry." He unrolled the rawhide and found a chunk of steaming, half-bloody meat. His mouth watered, and he said carefully, "It looks like a tender piece of shoulder."

"It is," she said. "There is plenty more if you want it."

He shook his head. No, he would fill up on tongue that night—and he had not had tongue for many years.

Ekarraw-ro stayed for a few minutes and then went to her tepee, which had been her father's. Tuchubarua sat for a long time chewing his meat, savoring the rich, smoky flavor—for Wading in Still Water

was old-fashioned: she did little of the boiling that most Comanche women had adopted when they had begun to get brass kettles from the white traders. Tuchubarua still had a number of good teeth and he took his time, enjoying particularly the bloody center of the meat. When he had finished, he licked his fingers and rubbed his hands in the dirt to clean them, and leaned back for a while against a mound of earth. He wished he had some tobacco to smoke, but that was truly a luxury not readily available to an old man in his position, so he put it out of his mind, and rested, and let his ancient eyes rove slowly over the village: the forty cone-shaped tents, the cottonwood trees in the stream behind them, the grass-covered hills beyond.

It was midafternoon, and adults were either sleeping or doing work that required little exertion. Two buffalo hides were pegged out on the grassy slope beyond the camp, but it was too hot to work in the sun. The women were sewing clothing, if they were young and ambitious, or doing nothing, if they were older. The men would be preparing their faces, painting their chests and arms, taking care of their hair in preparation for the Buffalo Tongue Feast.

Across the creek to the left of the camp, four small boys, naked and almost black from the sun, stalked hummingbirds with arrows split at the ends to capture the birds rather than kill them, so they could experiment with them. Older boys of ten to twelve lay in the shade of mesquite bushes, or worked on long pieces of orange-yellow *bois d'arc* to make their own bows, and one was down at the stream, talking to two girls getting water, and undoubtedly trying to arrange a playing-chief party. Tuchubarua chuckled. In two more years they would go to fantastic lengths to avoid any girl. The tribal taboos were rigid in many matters, and Tuchubarua recalled with stern sadness the older brother of Ekarraw-ro who had shot and killed a girl who had approached him unwell. It was a harsh thing to do, but those were the tribal mores, and the boy's parents did not even have to pay damages when the girl's parents ascertained the true situation.

Tuchubarua heard an angry buzz over his head, and looked behind him to see two five-year-olds watching with glee. In a moment they had captured another horsefly and pushed a stem of grass into its anus and turned it loose. . . .

Tuchubarua fell asleep, and woke up on his side, aware that somebody was standing near him. He rose to a sitting position, blinking.

"Bear Bird," said a woman's voice, "you are older than you were. I can remember when you never slept in the sun."

He got his eyes open quickly. The husky, taunting voice was that of Sits by Herself, a sister of Quahuahacante.

He said, "I do not need to apologize for my age."

"You should have apologized twenty years ago."

He studied her. Sits by Herself was the most beautiful woman of the tribe. He suspected she had Mexican blood, but it made no difference. Even now, in her late thirties, her skin was smooth, her face oval, her hair glossy. And she had not developed the extreme heaviness usual to Comanche women—perhaps because she never had married and never had borne children.

When she was seventeen, Tuchubarua wanted to marry her, and had made an arrangement with her parents, but she had been unwilling. Of course, there had been a great age difference between them, but she had not seemed to object to it. She had, however, suggested that they try it first, before they started living together. That was not unusual, and he had agreed—puzzled somewhat, however, at the cold manner in which she made the proposal. They had ridden over the hill to a place he had prepared, with a buffalo robe on the warm sand, and willows for privacy, and as they approached the trysting place he began to realize that, with all her beauty, the girl aroused nothing within him. It was a puzzle, for she was lithe, strong, solid of body. She took off her clothes, and he knew by her actions that she had been with men before, but he was repelled by the awful coldness that enveloped her. After a raid and killing and scalping, it would not

have mattered to him—but this was love-making, and she did not help him. She was willing, but with about as much interest as a sandy beach in the wintertime. To his final great embarrassment, he had been unable, and they had ridden back to the village in silence, and the marriage had been canceled. He never had known for sure whose fault it was, but one thing he had known: it never had happened to him before. And later he knew that she felt the guilt rather heavily, for when they were alone, she never failed to remind him. And her talk was not the good-natured banter of other Comanches, but words with barbs. The Comanche way would have been to tease him in public. But she did not.

He looked at her again. She still had beauty outside, but she had coldness—even hostility—inside the lovely body. Tuchubarua well knew that a number of other men besides himself had tried to get her, but she had not married, and he wondered if she had treated each one the way she had him. Perhaps she was aware of her lack, and had enough decency to reveal it before she married—but afterward said sarcastic things to her victims to bolster her own pride.

All those things went through Tuchubarua's mind, and he wondered how many other men in the band were subject to her periodic sarcasm. One might have suspected that she was not properly formed, but few malformed Comanche babies lived very long; besides, he had seen the necessary evidence with his own eyes. He looked now at her face, and waited for her to go on.

She wasted little time. "My brother, Quahuahacante, asks for the hand of She Blushes—Ekarraw-ro."

He studied her. "Quahuahacante has four wives," he said.

"He is an important man in the band," she told him. "He has many and great powers, and he needs another wife to take care of his shield."

There had to be an excuse, of course; a man with four wives might be thought uxorious if he should take a fifth, but if he had a practical need, it was different.

He wanted time. "What does he offer?"

"He offers the pick of any pony except his gray war pony and the bay buffalo hunter."

She certainly was a different woman from Wading in Still Water. After Wading in Still Water had spoken half a dozen words, a man began to think of the bed, even though he had no design on her. But after half a dozen words with Sits by Herself, a man thought of ponies or arrows. Tuchubarua, for all his hundred and twenty-six years, felt a quickening of his blood when he was around Wading in Still Water, but around Sits by Herself he felt nothing, as he had before.

Tuchubarua said, choosing his words carefully, "It is a great honor to receive an offer from Quahuahacante, but Ekarraw-ro has been already promised."

For a moment she stared at him incredulously. "I have heard nothing of this," she said. "Why hasn't she married, then?"

He squinted into the sun. "The offer was made only a little while ago." He was conscious that he was telling a small lie, but he thought perhaps he might be forgiven for it.

"I don't believe it!" Sits by Herself said.

"It is true."

She stared at him for a moment with that strange coldness—sometimes he thought it was hatred—and then turned and left, walking rapidly, not with the grace of Ekarraw-ro or Wading in Still Water. He watched her until she disappeared among the tepees. Sometimes it seemed to him that his long life had been wasted, for there were still many questions about men and women that he could not answer.

Comanche life tended to be fairly simple; when it departed from that pattern, even the wisest old men found it hard to understand.

Among the tepees had appeared the next-oldest man of the band—Hichapat, the Crafty One. Hichapat was only sixty-five or so but he was considerably bent over and walked with a cane. He had been a great warrior when men like Pedro Vial and José Charvet had been interpreters for the Spanish at Santa Fe—and that was a long time

ago. Tuchubarua watched him, wondering if the old man was coming up for a chat. Perhaps he would bring a pipe and tobacco—though Tuchubarua well knew that Hichapat had no more chance at tobacco than he himself.

Hichapat had one advantage, however: he was a grandfather of one of Quahuahacante's wives and so he would never be left on the prairie to die.

"Tawkl"

He turned. Ekarraw-ro was behind him. Her black eyes turned from the place where Sits by Herself had disappeared. She looked at him, and her liquid eyes softened. "Tawk, I have another present for you." She gave him a rawhide bag.

He smelled it without raising it, and stared at her. "*Pah'mo!*" The copper-black skin around his ancient eyes crinkled with delight. "Tobacco!"

She touched the back of his hand. "They offered me a present for serving at the feast."

He took a deep breath, the better to inhale the aroma. He looked up at her. "You should have gotten something pretty," he said.

She shrugged and tossed her hair. "To please you is the greatest need I have until I get a husband."

For a moment his heart was so full that his eyes felt watery. Then he said, "You have given me a memorable day, Kaku."

Her eyes danced. "I may need your help later—making arrows for my husband."

He laid the bag on a rock at his side. There was no hurry. For a while he would savor the aroma. "Would you like to marry Quahuahacante?" he asked, watching her.

For a moment she stared at him. Then she turned ashen. "Quahuahacante!" she whispered.

He waited.

Finally she recovered and asked, "How many horses does he offer?" "One."

"It is not enough," she said.

He nodded slowly and for a long time. "I told her you were already promised."

Her eyes were inscrutable. "It is a good answer, Grandfather Out of the Past. I would run away before I would marry that one."

He wondered how much she knew. "You do not like him?"

She looked at him, her thoughts far away. He could not tell whether she knew or not, but he doubted it. "He is unclean," she said finally. "It is in his eyes."

"Unclean" meant a great many things in Comanchería: probably some violation of taboos or of restrictions on a man's power. Tuchubarua considered her words for a moment and then decided that the answer was in what she had said: she had seen it in his eyes. Tuchubarua was satisfied; he knew there were some things about a man that a woman could sense, whether or not she had any knowledge of the facts.

"I will give the answer to Wading in Still Water when she comes tomorrow," he said.

She smiled. Her clouded eyes turned into dancing lights. "I will go now, to get ready for the feast," she said, and turned with a swirl of her buckskin skirt.

Hichapat, the Crafty One, was coming slowly. Tuchubarua sat back and waited for him. Hichapat came up, nodded, and sat cross-legged on the ground. His bad leg, which had been gored by a buffalo bull in his youth, gave him some trouble, and it took time for him to arrange it comfortably.

"It is a good day," he said at last.

Tuchubarua nodded. "The grass is growing tall and green, and the ponies will be fat by the time the buffalo arrive," he said.

Hichapat considered that for a while. "If it grows too fast," he observed, "it will be full of water, and that is not good."

This was the idle chitchat of old men. It went on for a while, with Tuchubarua enjoying the aroma of the tobacco still in the pouch.

Across the camp, Wading in Still Water was directing the second and third wives in preparation of the meat. They were wrapping the big tongues in grass and leaves and clay and burying them in hot coals. He moistened his ancient lips as he anticipated the savory meat, and he drew a deep breath as he considered the prospect of getting his belly full for the first time in months.

He got up and went to his tepee. He took his time but arose rather easily for a man of his age. Hichapat, of course, did not move or even look up. Tuchubarua went to the old *awyawt* at the back of his tepee. The rawhide bag, a companion on many trails, had been made for him by a young Ute squaw whom he had captured on a raid. She had been a good wife and easy to get along with, complaining only when he neglected to call her to his bed; he remembered her fondly. She had been adept with rawhide and had made for him many containers; a tobacco pouch, a bag for his mirror and tweezers, a cover for his shield, and the *awyawt*. Of them all, there now remained only the *awyawt*, and in it he kept his few remaining possessions against the day when he might be left alone on the sun-baked prairie.

Secretly, from time to time, he had salvaged a few items that might be useful to him in such an extremity—a bone needle and some dried deer sinew; the uppers of a pair of moccasins discarded by a wife of Quahuahacante. And his pipe, almost as old as he was. The bone stem had long been broken, and he had carved a new mouthpiece at the broken end; the bowl was blackened and chipped; the paintings had worn off; the sinews on which beads had once been strung had long since broken, and the beads had been lost; and without a wife, he could not redecorate it, for that was not a warrior's work. But then—he sighed as he drew it from its resting place and slowly unwrapped the rawhide covering—he was no warrior any more and he told no more stories around the campfire, for none would listen; he boasted no longer of the horses he had stolen from the Mexicans, the women he had brought home to his tepee, or the Ute and Apache scalps that had

once decorated his scalp pole. The pipe now was for him only a source of pleasure in itself.

Bearing the pipe in both hands, he went back to the rock and sat down. Hichapat looked up once, saw the pipe, and looked back at nothing. It would have been impolite to show undue curiosity.

Tuchubarua took tobacco leaves from the pouch, rolled them in his palms, crushed them carefully, wishing he could save all of the fragrance. Hichapat looked up and began to watch, no emotion showing on his face. Tuchubarua filled the pipe, packed it down, and started to get up to go for a light.

But Ekarraw-ro appeared with a burning twig, and handed it to him. He glanced at her silently, for this was a ritual not to be interrupted by words. She smiled and went away. He puffed on it four times and then gravely handed it to Hichapat, who puffed four times and handed it back.

"Your granddaughter," said Hichapat, "will make a good wife."

Tuchubarua nodded slowly, his eyes half closed. "She is a hard worker," he observed.

"Quahuahacante has been watching her," Hichapat observed.

"I know." He handed the pipe to Hichapat.

"You would like such a match?" Hichapat asked curiously.

Tuchubarua considered his answer. "He already has many wives," he said.

Hichapat drew four times on the pipe. "He is a strange man. His mother was a Jicarilla and his grandfather was a mountain man."

Tuchubarua took the pipe but did not answer.

"If he is rejected," Hichapat went on, "he will be a mortal enemy."

"Why should he want Ekarraw-ro?" asked Tuchubarua. "He has many wives—all from prominent families. There is Whistling, who makes his tepees; there is Burning Grass, who takes care of his shield and his war equipment; there is Mane of a Horse, who is a good cook and can make food out of nothing; there is Dry Wood, who—" He stopped, for Dry Wood was Hichapat's granddaughter.

Hichapat observed him levelly through eyes of age and wisdom. "—who goes walking naked in the night with any young warrior," he finished.

Tuchubarua moistened his lips but said nothing.

"Why does she not stay in his tepee at night?" Hichapat asked rhetorically. "She was a good girl; she was not too free with the boys before she married; she wanted to be a wife. Why is she not satisfied?" he repeated.

Tuchubarua wisely kept silent.

"There is some strange and evil thing going on in that family," said Hichapat.

Tuchubarua puffed at the pipe. "It is perhaps even stranger," he said, turning the conversation, "that Quahuahacante does not bring a claim for damages against the guilty warriors."

Hichapat took the pipe. "It is his swollen vanity," he said.

Tuchubarua was silent, for vanity of that nature was un-Comanche-like.

"And perhaps," Hichapat added, staring at the pipe, "he is afraid of what might come to light."

Tuchubarua was silent again. Yes, fear. It was something a Comanche might feel, but not something that he might ever reveal. On the other hand, what kind of warrior was Quahuahacante to allow one of his wives to submit herself to other braves and do nothing about it? That was one of the greatest Comanche sins of all: failure to insist on his rights.

Presently the pipe was smoked out. He scraped the bowl with a twig. Hichapat got up painfully with the help of his cane. "There will be plenty of tongue tonight," he said.

Tuchubarua watched him hobble away. What *would* be Quahuahacante's motive for wanting Ekarraw-ro: to show his power, or perhaps to prove something to himself, to give himself confidence? Perhaps. But Tuchubarua was determined on one thing: Ekarraw-ro would never be submitted to Quahuahacante's dark designs, whatever

they were. Anyway, it was too late now. She was promised—at least in his mind.

He wrapped up the pipe and put it away, with the tobacco pouch beside it. Then he made himself comfortable on his worn old buffalo robe and got ready to take his afternoon nap. He had not made much progress on the arrows that day but he would work hard tomorrow.

From across the camp he could hear the women chattering like magpies, children running and shouting. He knew that somewhere Ekarraw-ro was rubbing her best dress with white clay to make it spotless, and perhaps looking for extra beads or porcupine quills to decorate it. Old Tuchubarua had a very warm feeling when he contemplated the fullness of her heart as she made herself ready for the feast. . . .

It was black down below the Caprock when he awoke. The heat of the day was gone, and in its place was the cool night wind from the west, blowing across the endless prairie and under the purple-black sky with its brilliant stars, to drop into the little valley of the Quintafue and carry away the heat of the scorching sun.

Before the tepee of Wading in Still Water and her husband, three fires in a row burned brightly—a prodigal waste of wood in a country where wood was scarce—but a Buffalo Tongue Feast was not held every night. And now the flickering flames from the cedar boughs played against the mystically painted tepees, where women and children and a few warriors were already gathering.

The savory odor of roast tongue came to Tuchubarua's old nostrils, and he hurried to make his meager toilet. He rebraided his gray hair, with the larger braid on the left; he scoured the bottom of a horn container for a precious smudge of vermilion for his cheeks; he took off his frayed breechclout, shook it out, and put it back on. He had no leggings and only the one pair of moccasins; those were soiled but they would have to do. Anyway, what business had an old man with vanity? He put on his buckskin jacket; once it had been white, and

gay with red and blue designs and with beads and quills and long fringes made by Amatze, a Kiowa woman who had been his wife and who had been very satisfactory until she had taken her child one day and drowned them both because he would not let her go back to her Kiowa husband. . . .

It was an hour before he was satisfied with his appearance. He left his tepee and made his way toward the fire, very proud that he could walk erect and without help.

Wading in Still Water's husband, Fights with a Knife, met him and escorted him to the seat of honor—a folded antelope skin near the center fire. He stood for a moment, and Fights with a Knife made a few remarks to tell of some of Tuchubarua's legendary exploits. They all clapped their hands, and Tuchubarua, pleasantly excited, took his seat, helped by Fights with a Knife's strong young arms.

The warriors were in all their finery, with beads and quills and long, colored fringes, and Tuchubarua was acutely conscious of the fact that his own fringes had long since been used for bullet patches in the old smoothbore guns that had come from the Spaniards. Nevertheless, he was pleased to be there; it was the most ceremonious treatment he had had in a long, long time. He took the pipe handed him by Fights with a Knife, puffed four times, and handed it to Fights with a Knife. Around the fires the warriors were grouped in the first rank, with their wives and children beyond them. The wives also were dressed in their best; Quahuahacante's head wife was in white buckskin—a luxury that not many Comanche wives could boast.

Fights with a Knife signaled to Wading in Still Water, and she called to three other Comanche women, and they got branches and began to dig into the coals. Then Wading in Still Water clapped her hands, and all were silent for a moment. "Ekarraw-ro will serve the tongue," she said.

There were murmurs of approval. Black Antelope, handsome in a smoked deerskin jacket, looked modestly at the fire, very pleased and

very proud. Then Tuchubarua turned his eyes to Quahuahacante and saw the evil in the warrior's face, and was glad that Ekarraw-ro was already promised.

With a little stir among those around the fire, Ekarraw-ro came from the tepee, wearing a beautiful white buckskin dress with many beads and colored designs. She was truly a *naibi*—a lovely young girl dressed in her best finery. Her eyes were aglow, but her face was grave as she faced Wading in Still Water and waited.

Wading in Still Water said, "If any man here has had relations with this woman, let him speak."

There was silence around the fire, and old Tuchubarua, with his eyes on Ekarraw-ro, began a quiet smile of pride.

But a voice was heard, and Tuchubarua went cold when he heard the first sound of it. "I have," said Quahuahacante. "I have had relations with her."

Wading in Still Water stared at Quahuahacante, dumfounded. Tuchubarua looked at the evil eyes and would have killed the man if it had been in his power. He would have wiped the evil smirk from the man's face with a red-hot tomahawk; he would have cut off the top of his head and spilled his brains into the fire; he would have . . . but he was an old man, a very old man.

Ekarraw-ro was staring at Quahuahacante, and Tuchubarua knew from her expression of incredulity that she was innocent, that Quahuahacante had lied. But the lie had been delivered, and the Comanches would accept it at face value unless some dramatic denial could be made. That could hardly come from Ekarraw-ro, for she was only a woman while Quahuahacante was a warrior and had many horses and very great power.

Quahuahacante continued to stare at her, and gradually Ekarraw-ro's eyes dropped to the ground—not in admission, Tuchubarua knew, but in embarrassment, in helplessness.

Black Antelope stared at Ekarraw-ro. His copper-colored face had lost its pride, and now he looked hurt and puzzled.

There was no sound around the fire. Tuchubarua looked at Quahuahacante and called on all of his ancient knowledge of Comanche ways. There could be one answer to Quahuahacante's accusation. The Comanches had no medicine man to test a girl's virginity as did some tribes. For a girl in Ekarraw-ro's position now there was only shame that she had claimed to be something she was not.

Unless someone could reveal Quahuahacante's vanity, his envy, his pettiness, in such a way as to disgrace him—unless somebody could reveal the smallnesses of character that every Comanche knew were compatible with lying, Ekarraw-ro would be forever scorned.

And Tuchubarua, to the best of his knowledge, was the only one who knew enough about Quahuahacante's weaknesses to reveal him for what he was. It would not be enough to call him a liar, for Quahuahacante's egotism would enable him to counteract it. It had to be something dramatic and something abhorrent—something that, once revealed, would invoke Comanche disapprobation so strongly that not even Quahuahacante, with his vanity and his great power, would have the courage to stand against it.

Tuchubarua's ancient eyes searched the face of every warrior there, and he knew that none of those had the knowledge to face down Quahuahacante—none but himself. He looked around the circle, at the women there, and considered the price he would have to pay if he should undertake the task. He glanced at Quahuahacante and visualized the price the warrior would have to pay—for no man with power could make false accusation with impunity. Power itself was based on honor and integrity, and surely Quahuahacante must have offended many of his medicines with those few words. Power, however, was something like public opinion—if indeed it was *not* public opinion: power might be defied as long as one could keep the knowledge to oneself. Not all men, by any means, could so defy it, but an egotistic one like Quahuahacante probably could.

Tuchubarua kept his old eyes on the warrior. What a chain of circumstances had put him in this position! It was almost as if he

had lived a hundred and twenty-six years for this moment. If he had not been guest of honor at the feast, he could not have spoken out before them, because he had long ago forfeited his position and his rights. But now, at this moment, all things came together, and he knew what power he had over Quahuahacante if he should be willing to pay the price. He tried to warn Quahuahacante with his mind, and said calmly, "Be sure you have the right to speak of this maiden, Quahuahacante."

But Quahuahacante did not hear the warning, or did not heed it. With a sneer on his lips, he said, "No right is needed, Tsukup. She has walked with me on the prairie at night—many times."

The man's manner was such that even Tuchubarua, for a moment, almost believed him. But he looked at Ekarraw-ro and saw the red blush that covered her face and neck, and knew it was not from guilt. He considered. He could not ask her for the truth, because a woman's word was nothing. Suddenly he felt indeed old and tired, for the thing he must do was roaring at him like a stampeded herd. The end would be tragedy for both of them, and it could so easily have been avoided—but now it had gone too far, and must run its tragic course. His thin lips moved. "I say you lie," he said, "and I will prove it."

Quahuahacante's face suddenly blanched; for the first time, apparently, he realized what Tuchubarua could do to him. "Be silent, Old Man!" he shouted, and leaped to his feet. "Keep your tongue in your mouth, Tsukup!"

Tuchubarua held his eyes while he got slowly to his own feet. "Quahuahacante, you cannot testify against this girl, for your word is no good. You are filled with bad thoughts and vile motives. You have violated Comanche laws. You are unclean!"

For a moment there was dead silence around the fire. Then Quahuahacante said coldly, "Old Man, I will kill you if you say a word against me."

He was fighting desperately against what Tuchubarua had to say, but Tuchubarua was not moved. "I am going to tell the men what you

have done," he said clearly, only sorry that his voice broke a little on the last word, for he had decided, and there was no going back, and the decision was as strong in him as if he had been twenty, "and they will see that you are not fit to speak against any human being."

Quahuahacante's eyes blazed in fury, and he started to move.

But Tuchubarua stood his ground and shook his head. He had made his decision to violate his own medicine, and so he did not fear to reach out for a moment of heroics and, perhaps, vainglory. "Will the great warrior Quahuahacante attack a defenseless and helpless old man?" he asked.

It was a perfect answer to Quahuahacante's threat, for now Quahuahacante would not dare.

Tuchubarua clutched the dried horned toad within his worn buckskin shirt. "I have power. It is not a great power, but it is enough to protect me." He did not explain that it would protect only his good name, for no man ever told any of the secrets of his power. Tuchubarua drew a deep breath and looked around the circle. "This man who would speak against an innocent girl—you all know him. You know there is something strange in his eyes. You know there is an evil spirit gnawing at his brain. And I will tell you what that demon is." He looked at Hichapat, sitting with his cane across his withered legs, and he knew Hichapat was wondering what was to come next. He looked at Black Antelope, who was staring at Ekarraw-ro, hurt as only a young man can be hurt in his vanity over the girl he loves.

Tuchubarua breathed deeply as he looked back at Quahuahacante. This was the time to reveal what he knew, to expose the evil man before him. Tuchubarua would offend his power and his power would break him, but not even Quahuahacante with all his self-conceit could stand before Tuchubarua's knowledge without himself being broken. Tuchubarua spoke. "Many years ago," he said, "I was on my last raid—a war party against the Pawnees along the Padoucah Fork. This man, this Quahuahacante, was on that raid, too. It was his first, for he was only fifteen summers old."

He looked at Quahuahacante then, and saw the man sit back down, sullen, resentful, but held to his place by the force of the tribal beliefs, against which no man had the strength to stand. He knew what was coming and was trying to fight against it, but he was without strength against the certain knowledge that Tuchubarua *knew*.

Tuchubarua looked at Quahuahacante and then above him at Sits by Herself, standing back of her brother. Tuchubarua looked back at Quahuahacante. Tuchubarua could have sat down then, but he did not. He remembered the restriction on his power, but he stayed on his feet; he would spare no effort to destroy the accusation.

He had always been small of frame, and now he was somewhat shrunken, and he would need the advantage to talking on his feet. For violating the restriction, his power would destroy him—and he did not want to die, but his great love for Ekarraw-ro, the image of his Shoshoni wife, and his respect for honor and his contempt for Quahuahacante—all those combined in him to give him the strength to violate deliberately the restriction of his own power.

“On that raid,” said Tuchubarua, “this man took his sister to care for his shield. But he was not satisfied with that. His evil desires ruled him as such desires should rule no Comanche. He violated the most sacred taboo in Comanche customs. He slept with his sister. He walked with her naked on the prairie! He committed incest! *He has maggots on his penis!*”

Every shocked eye turned to Quahuahacante. For a moment he stared furiously at Tuchubarua, but Tuchubarua called on all the strength and knowledge of his many years, and held his eyes, and felt no wavering in his mind.

Then Quahuahacante began to shrink before the awful weight of the accusation. He became unable to face Tuchubarua. His flaming eyes lost their indignation and dropped slowly, and he stared at the ground, now stripped of all pretense, helpless in spite of all his power, in this final hour bearing the horrendous burden of his long-concealed guilt.

Tuchubarua glanced then at Sits by Herself and saw her looking down at her brother, a strange, bitter, almost triumphant smile on her face.

He looked around the fire. There was a stunned silence among the Comanches. Then as they saw that Quahuahacante admitted his guilt indignation began to grow among them like a great black cloud. The terrible force of the tribal condemnation arose and took ominous shape, and finally, like a crushing wave, rolled out across the fire and engulfed the man who had defied it. . . .

Tuchubarua was an old, old man, and he was dying. On the day after the Buffalo Tongue Feast, Ekarraw-ro came with a large piece of hot tongue wrapped in rawhide. He inhaled the savory odor as he raised himself in the dim light of the tepee and smiled at her. "What now of Quahuahacante?" he asked.

"That evil one! This morning he planted his lance in the ground and ran against it and impaled himself on the point. But you, Grandfather, are you sick?"

"I offered insult to my medicine," he said, and shook his head slowly. "Power is a dangerous thing—even a small power." His ancient eyes turned to her, and he smiled. "Send Wading in Still Water, so I can give her my answer." He watched her blush, and continued to smile. Then he paused to breathe painfully, for he knew his power was closing in. "There is *pah'mo* in my *awyawt*," he said. "Fill my pipe, gentle Kaku, and leave me here in peace, for I have many, many memories."

She filled his pipe in silence, and it seemed to him she took a long time, but finally she gave it to him, with a light from the nearest fire, and then she stood in the opening of his tepee. It would have been un-Comanche-like for her to make a display of her gratitude, but she said, "The Comanches will always remember the man who faced down the powerful Quahuahacante." She hesitated. Tears dropped

onto the hard clay, and she whispered softly, "Good-by, Grandfather Out of the Past."

He died, but not alone, for he had had his wish: he had lived out his days with his own people, and for him there would always be plenty of buffalo and a good horse, successful raiding parties, captive women, long and weighty councils around the campfire. For him there would be always *pah'mo*.

BIG MAN FROM TEXAS

by Ed Montgomery

Ed Montgomery has a sure touch with the kind of dry, casual humor that was the earmark of the Old West cowboy—or, for that matter, of almost any non-dyspeptic frontiersman. His yarns have appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, Argosy, Field and Stream, Zane Grey's Western, Texas Rangers, and other magazines. A comparative newcomer to WWA, he has already proved himself to be one of the outfit's stalwarts. Besides writing fiction, he is make-up editor of the Oklahoma City Times. Ed and Connie, with a seven-year-old son, Johnny, and a four-year-old daughter, Sue, reside in the university town of Norman, Oklahoma.

Old Clem Rogers' boy, Will, that went away and got to be a trick roper and one thing and another, used to say he never met a man he didn't like. It would be interesting to know whether he ever ran across Big'un Logan, back when they were both punching cows

Copyright © 1958 by The Curtis Publishing Company.

in the Cherokee Nation. Back before Big'un met Catherine Bright.

He was just about the biggest target ever came out of Texas, Big'un was, but nobody had got him killed though lots had wanted to and some had tried. And no woman had ever made him look at her twice, they said. Up till then.

He'd come out of the Cherokee country and across the Osage. He rode into town the first morning of the April term of criminal court. Must have been riding the biggest bay gelding between the Arkansas and the Red. He picked Bud McKay out of the crowd in front of the courthouse by his deputy's badge.

Bud had been told off to try and keep order, which wasn't easy, because everybody outside the courtroom was mad about not being in it. Big'un kneed his horse through the crowd till he got to where he could look down on Bud the way a cow looks down at a terrapin.

"Hi, Big'un," Bud said. He'd never seen Big'un in his life, but he knew who he was, all right. Everybody in sight knew who he was except some of the kids, and they were busy finding out.

"Who they tryin'?" Big'un asked, nodding toward the courthouse. "And where could a man find him a worthwhile poker game?"

"They're tryin' Al Morgan, that murdered Fred Jenkins. . . . Poker's again' the law, and even if it wasn't you couldn't get up as much as a two-handed game in King's back room till people find out how the trial comes out."

"Then I'll watch the trial."

"Courtroom's done packed. Fred Jenkins had a lot of friends."

Big'un nodded. "I heard about it clean over the other side of Inola."

"Jenkins a friend of yours, was he?"

"I haven't got any friends," Big'un said. "Don't need 'em. But I know Morgan and I never liked 'im. And I knew Jenkins and liked him all right. And besides, I didn't like Morgan killin' Jenkins while Jenkins owed me money."

He turned away and walked his horse right up to the courthouse

steps. John Addington was standing there. Big'un got down and handed him the bridle lines without looking at him.

"Hold my horse," he said.

Well, you know, Mr. Addington owned about fourteen sections of land and hired enough hands to populate a town. He didn't get that way from letting people run over him. But what he did was stand there meek as a sick sheep and hold Big'un's horse.

Big'un went on up the steps and quite a few people followed along, just to watch. Big as he was, he moved neat and smooth. Like a welterweight fighter. Kind of like a panther, too.

The crowd in the courtroom stuck out about three feet into the hall. Big'un reached one hand out over people's heads so he could lean against the doorway and watch the trial in comfort.

Now Al Morgan had been going pretty good, up till right then. This was Carl Bright's first big case since he'd been prosecuting attorney, and he had quite a bit to learn. Besides that, Al Morgan had taken the trouble to hire a high-powered criminal lawyer out of Oklahoma City and have his friends shoot one of the witnesses and scare the rest up pretty good.

Right then, Al's lawyer was having some fun cross-examining one of the state's witnesses. He tore that poor man's testimony apart and ground it under his heel. Then he laughed at him and grinned at the jury and sent the dazed witness stumbling away from the stand.

"Say, Judge—" Big'un shoved away and made a path through the packed crowd the way another man would have gone through a patch of horseweeds.

Judge Devlin looked around for his gavel. Big'un got through the standing crowd and stopped at the end of the aisle.

Al Morgan had been leaning back in his chair, chewing on an unlighted cigar and enjoying the show. He looked around to see what was causing the commotion and his chair came down, wham! He got to his feet and stood there tense and scared, like a cornered rabbit. Big'un didn't even look at him.

"Now looky here, Judge," he said easily. "This way of doin' ain't goin' to convict anybody. Just go ahead and turn 'im loose now and let me take care of 'im."

By then the judge had found his gavel, in under some chewing tobacco and fishhooks and shotgun shells and legal papers in his drawer. He pounded the desk with it till it sounded like a jack kicking the side of a new barn.

Si Thomas, the sheriff, got his gun out and moved over to where he could bat Al Morgan over the head with it if Al started running, which seemed likely. But Al didn't. He took the cigar out of his mouth and whirled around to the judge.

"I plead guilty," he said.

His lawyer got him by the shoulders and tried to drag him back to his chair. "You're crazy!" he said. "We've pretty near got this thing beat."

Al shook loose. "Plead me guilty!" he snapped over his shoulder.

The lawyer ignored that. "Your honor," he said, "I request a brief recess to talk with my client about a new problem which has arisen."

"Plead me guilty," Al told him, "or you don't get one cotton-pickin' red cent."

"Your honor," the lawyer said, "my client wishes to withdraw his plea, enter a new plea of guilty as charged, and throw himself on the mercy of the learned court."

"Don't say it unless you mean it," the judge warned him.

"We mean it, all right," Al said fervently.

"Well, then." The judge turned to the jury. "You all go get some-thin' to eat and we'll try this other, the cow thief, at one o'clock. . . . Feller charged with bein' a cow thief, I mean. This'n here's throwed hisself on the mercy of the court, and that means you all are shut off 'im. I'll tend to the sentencin'."

Al Morgan breathed a long sigh, looked fearfully over his shoulder at Big'un Logan, and sat down. Big'un still hadn't so much as glanced at him. That was because he'd noticed Catherine Bright.

'Most everybody always did notice Catherine Bright, though it hardly ever got any farther than that. Partly because her brother was the prosecuting attorney and partly because she was six feet and one inch tall. Right then she was real busy trying to act like she didn't know Big'un was looking at her.

The judge was leaning forward, studying the defendant. "Murder," he said, "is a right serious business."

The Oklahoma City lawyer got to his feet. "The circumstances——"

Al Morgan shoved him back to his seat. "You're right, Judge," he said encouragingly. "It's serious, all right."

"Well, now," the judge said, "the most I ever gave a man that admitted he was guilty was twenty-five years."

Big'un tore his eyes away from Catherine Bright and shook his head. "That wouldn't be enough," he said.

The judge pointed his gavel at Big'un and spoke in his quiet, careful voice, the way he did when he was real mad. "You don't figure in this," he said.

"He's right, though, Judge," Al said quickly.

The judge leaned back thoughtfully. "Well, you ought to know," he said to Al. "How's a life term sound to you?"

Al looked hopefully toward Big'un. "It'd sure as the world be aplenty," he said. "You can't go any farther than that, hardly."

Big'un nodded. The judge hit the bench with his gavel.

"She's did, then. . . . Sheriff, get the defendant out of here and the first chance you get take 'im to the pen and give 'im to the warden for the rest of his dad-gummed natural life."

Al Morgan made sure he kept the sheriff between him and Big'un while he was getting out of the courtroom. Big'un went on up to the bench and shook hands with the judge, who was the one acquitted him the time he beat up that gang so bad over at Alva.

The judge made him acquainted with Carl Bright and Carl introduced him to his sister. Carl was tall like his sister, but skinny and frail, which she sure as the world wasn't.

Big'un smiled kind of in his direction and forgot he was there. "Usually," he said to Catherine, "when people come to town for court they get up a dance."

Catherine didn't say anything. She looked down at the handkerchief she had in her hands in a way that was likely to make people forget how big she was. One of those who forgot one time was Bud McKay, which is why his nose got broken.

"Wonder if they'll have a dance here tonight," Big'un asked her.

"Yes," Catherine said.

"Then I'll take you," Big'un said, matter-of-fact as the right answer to an arithmetic problem.

"No," Catherine said, "you won't."

That surprised Big'un, and he showed it. "Why?"

"I don't want to have anything to do with you."

"Aw!" Big'un was incredulous.

Catherine was already mad. That made her madder. "You, Mr. Big'un Logan, are too big for your britches."

"No," Big'un said seriously. "No, I don't think so."

"Why, you even think you're bigger than the law of the land! You just now proved you do."

"Well," Big'un said, "if I am there's no sense in actin' like I'm not."

Sometime in there, Carl Bright had started taking an interest in the conversation. Now he got into it.

"My sister won't go to the dance with you," he said. "She's told you, and that should be enough. Now I'm telling you, and that's the end of it."

Big'un didn't even look at him. "If she's not," he said, "I want to hear a better reason. From her."

"It's not necessary for her to give you a reason," Carl said. "But aside from everything else, we don't believe in dancing."

"You don't, maybe," Big'un said. "I haven't heard her say it."

"We don't believe in dancing," Catherine said, and she took her brother's arm and they walked out of the courtroom.

Carl left her at the door and came back.

"I know your reputation, Mr. Logan," he said tightly, "and I've got one more thing to tell you."

"There's not hardly anybody don't know my reputation," Big'un said, and waited.

"Gamblin's against the law in this county," Carl said. "It's against the law every place, but it gets enforced in this county whenever I find out about it."

"All right," Big'un said, and walked past the prosecuting attorney and out of the courthouse and down the street and through King's place and into the back room.

Five of the best poker players in the Cherokee Strip were waiting for him with blood in their eyes and an unopened deck in the middle of the table. Big'un hung his gun belt over a spare chair, squeezed his legs under the table, and went to work.

Inside of an hour they lost Bud McKay, who had his own theory about betting into a one-card draw and was willing to sacrifice his daddy's grocery store, if necessary, to prove it would work. A half hour later they had to start playing four-handed for a spell, while old man Mr. Coyle Perkins went out to talk to his banker. Things got real lively when Mr. Perkins sat in again.

At seven o'clock, Big'un stood up. It took him five minutes to put all his money in his pockets. "I'll be back," he said over his shoulder.

Most of the spectators went up front to get a drink and the poker players sat back in their chairs. Mr. Perkins counted the money he had left with the look of a man who's thinking about a second mortgage.

"They always said that about him," he said. "A big man with a big weakness for a big poker game."

Bud McKay sighed. "If that's a weakness, what we just got through seein', why, then who wants to be strong?"

Big'un went around to Mrs. Johnson's rooming house and Mrs. Johnson let him in with a disapproving look on her face. Catherine

was in the parlor with a party dress on. She got up and came across the room.

"Were you pretty sure I'd be waiting?" she asked.

"I figured there was a good enough chance I'd better find out."

"We didn't used to believe in dancing," Catherine said. "My brother still doesn't, but now I do."

People said it was the nicest dance there'd ever been around here. Catherine and her beau towered over the room, just whirling and skipping around as graceful as an antelope foot race and acting like there wasn't anything else in the whole Oklahoma Territory except them and the music.

Along late in the evening some of the boys from the Bar Crazy Q came by to break up the dance but it didn't amount to much. Big'un excused himself from his partner, gathered up an armful of the handiest punchers, and heaved them at the door. They didn't come back and not a fiddler's elbow faltered.

Back at the poker game, there was another new deck in the center of the table and the players were waiting. Everybody in the front room followed Big'un back there, including Carl Bright.

Big'un got all his money back on the table, because the game was table stakes and Big'un was a man who believed in being able to protect a good hand when he got it.

Mr. Perkins started dealing a round of stud and the prosecuting attorney started writing on a piece of paper.

"What you doin' there, Carl?" Mr. Perkins asked him.

"Writing down names," Carl said. "I'm going back and charge the five of you with violating the gambling statutes."

"Oh," Mr. Perkins said. "Well, I guess we are, all right. . . . Big'un, I never heard of you raisin' on the second card thataway. What you up to, anyway?"

There wasn't much left in the game but Big'un's winnings and a

warranty deed to a half section of Mr. Perkins' land when the sheriff came in.

"Big'un," the sheriff said, "I got warrants here to arrest all you gamblers. Will you come with me?"

Big'un glanced at his hole card, folded his hand, and looked up. "I'd have to think about that, Sheriff," he said. "But offhand I'd say probably not."

"That's just what I figured," the sheriff said dejectedly.

"I'd hate to have you think I'm just bein' stubborn about this thing," Big'un said. "But you see, if I was to break this game I know a bigger one I could get into in Enid. And if I could break that one, there's some real awful big ones in Oklahoma City and Kansas City. And if I could break enough of those, why, I'd have enough money to buy out the XIT outfit."

All around the room people looked at each other and nodded. Now they knew something about Big'un Logan they'd never quite been able to figure out before.

It had never seemed quite right that big poker games would be the weakness of a man like that; a man who didn't have any other weaknesses to go with it, like women and liquor and killing.

Didn't seem like enough. Either he ought to be too big for weaknesses, or he ought to have bigger and better ones.

But now they understood. And, after what they'd seen that day, his thinking seemed reasonable to them. The XIT was the biggest ranch and Big'un Logan was the biggest man, so why not?

The sheriff sighed. "I doubt if the XIT's for sale, Big'un."

"Then I might have to find me some bigger games and start me a spread bigger than the XIT."

"You couldn't settle for less? You've got enough in front of you right now to make a pretty fair start."

"No," Big'un said thoughtfully. "No, I guess I ought to have the biggest there is."

"I see your point, I guess. And the most cows and the biggest house and the greenest grass?"

Big'un nodded. "And the tallest windmills."

"Then you can't see your way to lettin' me arrest you?"

"I guess not, Sheriff. You see, I've been pretty close before and then had my luck give out or run into better poker players or somethin'. But I've got a feelin' this might be the time."

"Can't hardly blame you, I guess. . . . Well, I'm an old man and my daughter keeps pesterin' me to come back to Missouri. Boys, if anybody sees any of the county commissioners, tell 'em about me resignin'."

"Sure will," Mr. Perkins said. "Come back and see us. . . . Arthur, your nine's high. Bet it."

The sheriff stopped at the door and turned around. "Me gettin' out like this," he said, "don't leave nobody but Bud McKay to watch the jail. And you all know Al Morgan has got some pretty mean friends. Saw a couple of 'em at the trial, too."

"Somebody ought to go give Bud a hand," one of the watchers said absently. But everybody kept staying for one more round, and nobody had left yet when the shooting started.

It turned out they'd got Bud McKay without firing a shot. Knocked him in the head when he came to the door and locked him in the cell they took Al Morgan out of.

But when they got back to the door, Carl Bright opened up on them. He'd been on his way to King's with a borrowed Winchester to try to arrest Big'un Logan.

He opened up from behind an elm tree on the courthouse lawn. First he shot a couple at the jailhouse door, to encourage Morgan and his three friends to stay inside.

While he was doing that, he was in plain sight of the man the jail-breakers had left to watch the horses. But the light was bad, and that one couldn't shoot much, anyway. And that was a good thing, because

Carl wasn't much of a shot, either. He missed the man five times before he put him out of business.

He left his tree then and started to the street to run the horses off. The people in the jail crowded out the door and started shooting. Carl turned around, threw one shot at them, and killed Al Morgan as dead as a hammer. He took two more steps, then went down with a bullet in his right thigh and got up again and made it to the hitching rack, dragging his leg.

The horses were going wild and a couple of them broke their bridles and ran away. Carl got the others turned loose and turned around and two slugs hit him in the chest at the same time.

He rolled over in the street and turned till he was on his left side and shot once more, from the hip. But he couldn't get another shell levered into the chamber after that, though he kept trying as long as he was conscious and maybe a little longer.

King's place had emptied by then, but it was almost two blocks from the shooting. The three outlaws who were left got to the street, found out they were afoot, turned to see the angry mob bearing down on them, and threw their hands up.

Some of the people started disarming them and putting them into a cell for safekeeping until they could decide whether to lynch them or not. Others bent over Carl Bright until Big'un Logan shoved a dozen of them away, picked the prosecuting attorney up like you would a baby, and ran three blocks with him to the doctor's house.

The doctor had gone into action with the first shot. He was ready and waiting, with his sleeves rolled up. He waved Big'un out of there and went to work.

Big'un was standing on the front porch when Catherine Bright got there. She rushed past him like she didn't see him and hurried on into the doctor's house. Big'un was still standing there when she came out again. So were a lot of other people.

"How's your brother?" Big'un asked her.

"He's still alive, no thanks to you."

"How bad's he hurt?"

"I hope you're proud of yourself, running the sheriff off and leaving Carl at the mercy of those bloodthirsty outlaws."

"What's the doc say about him?"

"Just for a poker game!" she said scornfully. "Just so you could do things bigger than anybody else. Big? You don't know what big is!"

"I guess I didn't do exactly right. Your brother goin' to get well, or isn't he? I need to know."

"Big?" she said again. "Why, my brother is skinny and peaked and scared of things sometimes, but he made a runt out of you this night. You and your little, teeny ideas about things. He's a bigger man in a minute than you are in a hundred years."

"He might be," Big'un said doggedly. "I wish you'd tell me how he's gettin' along."

"And making me go along with you. That was the worst." She stopped, sobbing, and that was the first time Big'un had realized she was crying there in the dark. "Making his own sister humiliate him like that. A girl you didn't even care anything about, either. Just the girl that happened to be the biggest girl in sight."

She went back into the house with her shoulders shaking.

People always figured that talking to did Big'un Logan a lot of good. But he still had a lot to learn about things, or he wouldn't have made the play he tried next.

He marched back to King's and into the back room. There were people there, talking in low voices about Carl Bright, but nobody had touched the poker table since the first shot was fired in the jailbreak.

Big'un gathered up about all the paper money he could hold in both hands and went out again. He busted into the doctor's office holding the money out in front of him.

"Here, Doc," he said. "Here's more money than you'll make in five years. Take it and cure that boy."

The doc looked up from his patient for about two seconds, and then got back to work. He didn't look up again.

"Why, you ignorant, big-footed, hammerheaded fool!" the doctor said. "You think there's enough money in the world to pay for the life of a man like this one?"

And he called Big'un about five names he ordinarily wouldn't have used in front of Catherine, with the Angel of Death hovering over his hands.

Big'un Logan staggered back out onto the porch, looked at the money, and then slowly carried it back to King's. He threw it on the table and never touched any of it again. Neither did he ever turn another card.

It was twenty-three days before the doc would say Carl Bright was out of danger. The day he did, Big'un went down to Mrs. Johnson's. Catherine was back in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Johnson with the dinner.

"Catherine," Big'un said, "you were right about a lot of things, but you were wrong about one thing. About how much it's got to do with it that you happen to be such a big, fine figure of a girl. I'd want to be married to you even if you were so little I'd have to carry you around in my pocket to keep from losin' you."

"All right," Catherine said. "I'm glad you told me. And Carl told me to say there's no hard feelings and for you to come and see him. And now you go off and try to learn about thinking big. A man like you ought to think bigger than other people, not littler."

"All right," Big'un said, "but I'm not goin' far."

He practiced thinking bigger for a day, then went down to the courthouse, pleaded guilty to the gambling charge, and sold his saddle to pay his fine.

He thought for another day, then went to see Carl Bright. When he left Carl's room, he went and found the county commissioners and got them to appoint him to fill out the unexpired sheriff's term of office.

Lawlessness disappeared from the county overnight. The wildest out-

law in the world was looking for better odds than going up against a combination like Big'un Logan and Carl Bright.

Two more days, and Big'un was back in Mrs. Johnson's kitchen.

"I'm tryin'," he told Catherine Bright, "but I guess it just don't come natural."

"What doesn't?"

"Thinkin' big."

"Oh."

"I've got over that XIT business, though. That's good, ain't it?"

"I think so."

"Well, they'll have to get along with the present management. I'm shut of them."

"That's encouraging."

"But—well, it seems like the more I aim to think big, why, the more all I can think of is little things."

"What little things?"

"Well, like a little house at the edge of town and a little land with it, and a little orchard, and some little kids around the house and——"

"You're doing fine," Catherine said.

"I am? I was afraid maybe——"

"You're doing fine. . . . How many children?"

"Oh, about ten or twelve."

"You can stop right there," Catherine said, taking off her apron. "You're thinking big enough now."

KILLER'S CONSCIENCE

by Stephen Payne

Steve Payne, a charter member of WWA, grew up on Colorado cow ranches wearing real cowboy spurs on his boot heels. Now he also has a bronze WWA Spur to hang on the wall, evidence that he wrote the best Western juvenile book published in 1954. His true-to-life tales of rugged ranch and range have been appearing between book covers and in magazines, including The Saturday Evening Post, for well over thirty-five years. Cowhand and ranchman himself, he has written chiefly about working cowboys and ranch people. Steve and his Lucretia with the pretty red hair live in Denver.

It's hard on a kid of fourteen to have his dad locked up in the penitentiary. Harder still on the kid's mother. Ma and my grown-up brother, Tom, were sure that Dad did not shoot and kill Floyd Em-

Copyright © 1957 by Literary Enterprises, Inc. Originally appeared in *Ranch Romances*, second August issue, 1957.

mett's son, Claude. Yet the circumstantial evidence was enough on the side of Emmett, owner of the big Slash 4 outfit, to get Dad sent up for life.

Both before and after the trial in Winblow, Emmett said he was going to run all the rest of the Haines family off our TH ranch. But the winter passed without his making good on his threats.

Tom did the riding necessary to take care of our three hundred cattle on the range—we fed hay to only a few of the weakest critters—while Ma and I held down the ranch. Often I'd wake up at night, hearing her moving around, and I knew she felt as strange and lost and lonely without Dad as I did. Even lonelier. But she kept up her courage by saying: "Someday the man who killed Claude Emmett will come back. His conscience won't give him any rest until he clears your father."

When Tom was with Ma, he'd pretend he agreed, but when I'd ask him what he really thought, he'd say, "Ma's got to go on hoping. But no dry-gulcher's going to put his neck in a noose."

The spring work kept all of us so busy that May was almost gone before I had a chance to go fishing. Breakfast over one morning, I grabbed Dad's fishing rod and scooted to the stable, where Tom was saddling up to ride range.

"Going to see her today?" I asked, putting my old saddle on Dozey.

He stepped up into the leather. "Mind your own business, Dan. And keep your lip buttoned."

"Touchy as a teased snake," I said, gazing after him as he pointed west across the green hills. Vaguely, I wondered if I'd ever be as good-looking as Tom, with a figure like his to match Dad's. He sure was a straight-up rider, and it wasn't any wonder if Nina Frazier liked him.

But Nina was Floyd Emmett's orphaned niece. He was her guardian, and if he ever caught those two together . . . For a minute I almost hated Tom, thinking how Ma was leaning over backwards to avoid further trouble, while Tom was asking for it.

Carrying fishing rod and a can of worms, I rode northeast across

choppy hills to strike Winblow River about a mile from our buildings. When I saw happy gophers, prairie dogs, and sage hens, heard meadow larks and other songsters, the thought came to me: Nina and Tom—Ma, too—could be as happy as you little folks, if—

Winblow River, flowing east, was roaring along out of its banks, carrying trash and even small trees. I should have known that two weeks of warm weather would turn the high mountain snowbanks to water. No use even trying to fish.

But, looking north toward Winblow, ten miles away, I forgot my disappointment, for a horseman on the far side of the river was plunging his mount into the current to cross to my side. Fear turned me cold, but I whipped Dozey up close to the water, yelling, "Turn back! Safe ford upstream two miles."

If the man heard me, my warning didn't stop him. His swimming horse came on strongly until past midstream and then— Oh, golly! A floating tree hit it and knocked it over, carrying it downstream. I reckoned the horse was a goner, but the rider was swimming toward me. I got my rope ready and loped along the bank, thinking: Dad'd just swim out and grab him. I can't do that, but I can force Dozey 'way out into the current.

The man went under and I lost all hope. But he came up again, and with Dozey breast-deep in water, I was close enough to throw him my rope. He caught the end of it with his left hand and hung on while Dozey dragged him out onto the damp ground.

I was trying to do something about pumping the water out of him when he coughed and turned over. Then I saw his right arm was useless. A bandanna was knotted tight around it, close to his shoulder, but fresh blood was staining his shirt sleeve and more blood was seeping from what must have been a wound on his right side.

He was a lanky hairpin, forty or maybe fifty years old, with a hawkish face, bloodshot eyes, and sandy hair—except where an odd-looking snow-white patch outlined a deep scar above his left ear. It looked as if his skull had been dented by a blow from an ax.

Between spasms of coughing and vomiting, he mumbled, "Thanks, kid. Get me—outa sight—from—other side—river."

I knew then why he'd felt he had to cross the stream. He was on the dodge! "Nobody's over there," I said. "If you can get on my horse I'll take you home. Ma'll doctor your wounds. Bullet nicks, ain't they?"

"Right." He grimaced. "Your mother'll take me in? Not if she knows I'm Rufe Morgan, she won't."

The name didn't mean anything to me. "Sure she will!" I said. "She's that kind of a woman. Even blood and the fix you're in won't faze her. We're the Haines family."

Morgan's cold light-blue eyes came wide open. "The Haines family on the TH ranch?"

I nodded and he said, "So I was heading in the right direction. . . . Sure there ain't anybody over yonder? . . . Let's go."

Getting Rufe Morgan to our house was the hardest job I ever tackled. He couldn't climb on Dozey nor was I strong enough to boost him to the saddle. But Rufe managed to hold to the saddle horn with his left hand while I propped him up on the right.

Three or four hundred yards from the ranch I hollered for Ma and she ran out to help me. Morgan stared at her, a sturdy woman in high boots and short corduroy skirt and leather jacket, her hair still black and glossy, and her wide, pleasant face one to remember. To remember for its strength of character, its patience, kindness, and spirit.

"Your boy dragged me outa the river," he explained. "Only fair to tell you I'm on the dodge, and I don't want to get you folks in bad with——"

Ma stopped his talk by picking him up and carrying him across the deep gully back of our house and into her bedroom. "Build up the kitchen fire, Danny," she said. "Get hot water so I can clean these wounds. I'll be stripping him."

I helped pull off Rufe's sopping-wet boots, and a small, flat package

wrapped in a piece torn from a yellow slicker fell out of one of them.

The wound in his side was only a nick, but his arm was broken between elbow and shoulder. Ma cleaned both wounds, put splints on his arm, and fixed up a sling for it. Finally she propped up his head and spoon-fed him beef broth.

She was hanging up Rufe's clothes to dry when my curiosity made me open the little package I'd found in his boot. It was a newspaper clipping, so I called Ma and read:

"Tragedy strikes the Haines family pictured below. Mrs. Ruby Haines, Tom Haines, twenty-one, and Daniel, thirteen. The husband and father, William Haines, has been convicted of murder and sentenced to the state penitentiary for life."

Mother looked at me. "Why was he carrying this clipping?" she asked, excitement in her usually calm voice. "Danny, perhaps his conscience——"

"He told me his name, Rufe Morgan," I said, "and apparently he wanted to find our ranch, Ma."

"He did? . . . Danny, if a posse comes, we won't say anything about Rufe Morgan. . . . Let's read the rest of the clipping."

I went on: "For several years there has been no love lost between Bill Haines, owner of the TH ranch near Winblow, and Floyd Emmett of the Slash 4, a widower with one son, Claude. One sharp clash between these two aggressive men took place when Haines baldly accused Emmett of mistreating Emmett's orphaned niece, Nina Frazier.

"Haines said, 'You've stolen Nina's cattle and everything else the girl's parents left her, and, damn your ornery hide, you now keep her close-herded on Slash 4 so nobody can help her.'"

"In the resulting fist fight Haines soundly whipped Emmett.

"This feud climaxed about a year later when tragedy overtook Claude Emmett. It had been well known that Claude was often gone from home for months at a time, and rumors of his activities, although unproven, should have interested Sheriff Lennister.

"Last October, Claude returned from one of his jaunts, with money

in his pockets; cash which he squandered in Winblow carousing and gambling.

"But Claude swore he was not in town on the night when Bill Haines, who was never averse to having an occasional fling himself, won three hundred dollars in a poker session at the Placer Bar.

"Haines claims he was on his way to the livery stable when a masked man held him up with a gun and robbed him.

"Two days later, Haines was back in town. So was Claude Emmett. After scrutinizing some of the greenbacks Claude was spending, Haines accused Claude of being the thief who had robbed him.

"Sheriff Pat Lennister, saying Haines had no valid proof, refused to intervene and in the fight that followed Claude Emmett all but massacred Bill Haines.

"Two weeks later, out on the range, three Slash 4 cowboys, two ranchmen, and Floyd Emmett heard a shot. Dashing over a hill, they came upon Haines, with a rifle which had been fired, bending over Claude Emmett's lifeless body. Claude had been shot in the back and knocked out of his saddle. The fatal bullet had gone clear through and was lost for good.

"Haines' story, to which he stuck without deviation, is: He was riding range alone and heard a shot. He cut over a ridge and saw a saddled riderless horse, saw a man's body lying in the draw.

"Haines said he had yanked his rifle out of its scabbard, for this looked like a dry-gulcher's work and he wanted to be ready if the fellow showed himself. Naturally, he rode up to the body to see if anything could be done for the victim.

"How come his rifle had been fired? He'd shot at a coyote and missed just a short time earlier. . . . No, he did not kill Claude Emmett. An unknown dry-gulcher must have done it.

"But Sheriff Lennister was unable to find any trace of an unknown assassin, and Haines was proved guilty of the murder of Claude Emmett.

"Mrs. Haines staunchly maintains her husband's innocence and

says she is sure the real killer's conscience will someday compel him to clear her husband.'"

I folded the paper and looked at Mother. She was sitting by a window, gazing across the hills as she had so many times during the past winter, as if looking for that big bear of a man, my dad; hoping, almost believing, he'd come riding home. Her face looked calm, but two big tears were running down her cheeks. Perhaps she was now living over again those terrible days from the time Dad had clashed with Claude and taken an awful beating, until after the trial had ended and he had been taken from us.

Still looking out of the window, she said, "Danny, someone's coming. It's not Tom. Tom stays out late these days, and I wonder why, when he can't have a lot to do on the range. . . . I'll go see who this rider is."

My eyes followed her as she left the house and I was thinking: Doggone, I don't want to give her another shock, but I know what keeps Tom out late, and it ain't looking after cows.

In my mind I saw again, as I had early this April, big brother Tom meeting a girl on horseback in a sheltered glen well over on Emmett's Slash 4 range. Wound up with excitement, I had sneaked through aspens for a closer look. The girl, young, slender, and very blond, took away my breath. She was prettier than a spotted fawn seen against a blue lake at sundown, and she had a smile for Tom which'd make any young man lose his heart.

Listening to them talk, I learned she was Nina Frazier, and I learned how Floyd Emmett's niece managed to meet Tom. Young cowboys who so much as dared look at Nina always got fired in a hurry. But Baldy Hicks was so old, stove-up, and ugly that Floyd Emmett believed he could trust him to ride close herd on her.

Nina had won Baldy over to her side, and when everybody else was away, she'd have Baldy saddle a horse for her to ride out on the range. One day in March she saw a rider who was not a Slash 4 man and ventured to meet that rider, Tom Haines.

A few days after I first saw them together, I let Tom know that I was on to him and Nina.

He's hot tempered and as full of spleen as Dad, and he looked savage when he told me to keep it under my cowlick and not tell Ma—or anybody. Yet I knew, with an awful chill in my stomach, that once Emmett found out what was going on, he'd— Gosh, what would he do?

I came back to the immediate present, seeing that Ma had met Mr. B. Painter, the hardware-store man of Winblow, out in the yard. He was saying, "Mrs. Haines, I'm one of a posse organized by Sheriff Lennister to trail down an outlaw. A stringy, blond fellow known as Rufe Morgan."

Mother used one of her favorite old sayings, "Do tell?" And then, "This bandit was seen in Winblow?"

"I'll say he was!" Painter snapped. "He stopped in town and got into an all-night poker game which broke up in a gun fight. Although Morgan was hit, he wounded two men, and then high-tailed it.

"We were several hours finding his trail. But it led us to the river, east and north of your ranch. We found his horse and saddle away downstream. Horse dead. Looks like the man drowned. But Lennister sent me to ask ranchers if they'd seen any wounded fugitive. You haven't have you, Mrs. Haines?"

I held my breath, waiting for Ma's reply. She said carefully, "You've said the man was wounded. I don't believe he could have gotten out of the river without help."

Mr. Painter went away to visit more ranchers, and Ma came to see how the patient was doing. Rufe had been able to get out of bed and look through the window, and he'd heard as much as I had. Ma colded him and put him back under the blankets.

I went out and chopped wood until she called me for dinner. With me helping him Morgan ate a good meal. His eyes—cold and blood-hot, eyes that showed the effects of drink, too—followed my mother

as she went out of his room after seeing that he was getting enough to eat. He said, "She's doing all she can for me. For a cuss not worth her sympathy. She's a real person!"

"I'm glad you see that," I came back. "Dad always said he couldn't have built up this outfit without her help, and he wondered how she could put up with the rough life he gave her."

"Rough life?" Rufe asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Rough for a woman," I said. "So much work and mighty little fun. Dad'd get his fun in town. He drank some and he'd gamble and he liked a good fight.

"But he was sure a square shooter. Never had trouble with good neighbors. Only with Floyd Emmett, because Dad had the guts to stand up for ranchers Emmett stomped on. Nobody else did. And Emmett's got Sheriff Lennister buffaloed so bad that once Emmett decides when to run us Haines outa the country the sheriff won't stop him."

Rufe Morgan was paying close attention. He said, "So it took real courage for your mother and older brother to stay on here after your father went to the pen."

"That's the truth. I sure know it now after six months of living in fear of Emmett and having people in town act like we were worse'n shepherders. Mother pretends not to see the way folks look at us, nor hear whispers like "That's Danny Haines, the jailbird's kid. His dad shot Claude Emmett in the back. In the back!"

I stopped, startled by what I saw in Morgan's face. He had pulled his lips together so hard they were white. His mouth was twisted, and the glints in his bloodshot eyes scared me.

"Kid," he said, "my folks taught me what was right. Gave me an education, too. I've only myself to blame for what I am today, a no-good stinker, and yellow t'boot."

"Whoa up now," I put in. "Ma says there's some good in everybody. Though old man Emmett's so barbed-wire ornery I doubt even she can find——"

As if he didn't hear me, he was going on, "All winter long, I pickled myself in whisky, trying to kill something that kept nagging me. But last week I sobered up, and I told myself, 'Rufe, you've got to do two things. You've got to.' I was far north of here, but I pointed my horse for Winblow."

Tired out, the man lay back and closed his eyes, but I prodded, "Why'd you head to Winblow and why'd you stop there?"

"Huh?" He roused himself with an effort. "I was cravin' whisky. But I also wanted five hundred bucks to square myself with an old prospector, Ike Jensen, near Spurlock, a hundred miles south of here. Figured to get it by gambling."

"Did you make it, Rufe?" I was getting a big kick out of talking to a bandit. Not that he fitted my idea of a dashing, heroic bad man. He didn't pan out at all in those respects.

"Yes," he said, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "I got in a good hot game, ran my last ten bucks up to better'n five hundred. Then, still halfway sober, I had this cash changed into greenbacks, stuck them into an envelope with a note saying, 'Ike, here's a real grubstake for you, and thanks again. Rufe,' and mailed this to Ike Jensen."

"But why'd you do that?"

"Still feel good about it," Rufe resumed, ignoring my question. "But once a fool, always a fool. I went back to the saloon for more pooking and drinking. Game broke up toward dawn, when I called the crooks I was playing with for cheating. . . . That, Dan, is how I got these bullet nicks and got the law on my trail once again."

I said, sort of awed, "Seems you did one of two things you set out to do. What's the other?"

Like it had been all through our talk, he wasn't answering my eager questions. "Law on my trail," he repeated thoughtfully, "and I want to stay free, ride out and save my hide. . . . Dan, I can't clean my gun with only one hand. Clean the cylinder and barrel and wipe all the cartridges dry for me, will you? That's a good kid."

The talk fell off while I cleaned his double-action Colt .45. Handling

it reminded me that I'd dropped Dad's fishing rod this morning and hadn't picked it up again. On foot, I went to look for it, and I had climbed the hill going toward the river when I saw Mr. Painter.

Instinctively I hid in chokecherry bushes to keep out of his sight, for he was searching the ground on this side of the river across from where Rufe's horse tracks led into it, and he'd found some sign to hold his interest!

He went on to the place where Ma had come to help me and Rufe, paid close attention to the tracks he saw, then rode back over the hill and circled around so Ma wouldn't see him as he made for the ford up the river.

I got the rod, hurried home, found Ma planting potatoes in her garden, and told her what I'd seen Painter doing. "Now the sheriff'll come and we'll be in Dutch for helping the poor hunted cuss."

She straightened up, her face troubled. "I'd help any 'poor hunted cuss,'" she said. "It's the way I'm made. But Danny, I don't want Tom to know about Rufe. He'd flare up, and explode, 'We don't want to make our shaky standing any worse by helping a bandit.'"

I nodded. That'd be Tom all right. "You'd hoped to keep Rufe here until he's able to take care of himself?" I asked.

"Yes," she said simply. "And in the hope that—Danny, when you were talking to Rufe, did he say anything—anything at all to strengthen my hope?"

"Yes, Ma," and I repeated everything Rufe had said.

The light in her eyes was good to see. "I'll go talk to him, Danny. You keep an eye out for Tom. Where is that boy anyhow?"

I didn't say anything. But I thought, It's a swell day for a young buck and a sweet gal to meet and get all goofy about one another. . . . How soon'll that darned sheriff get there? He'll hardly make it before dark.

The afternoon had run along until it was chore time, so I went to the pasture and drove the milk cows into the corral. Sunset left a glow of gold all along the rough mountain sky line, and the big range world

seemed hushed, so peaceful, so beautiful, it got right inside a fellow.

I'd finished milking when Rufe walked from the house to the stable. He was wearing his own boots, but an old hat, a clean shirt, and pair of pants which had been Dad's.

Ma called, "Dan, let him have High Jinks and my saddle."

"But," I began, "Tom won't like this." High Jinks was Tom's top horse and it'd be hard to explain why we'd let a fugitive ride out on the best nag we owned.

"Don't argue," Ma replied.

All squirmy inside, I backed High Jinks out of a stall, pointing to the saddle Rufe was to put on him. "You ain't in no shape to ride," I said, noticing he had buckled on his gun belt but had shoved his gun between pants and belt on the left side—for a left-hand draw.

"You're right," he admitted as he put the saddle on High Jinks. "I'm as weak as a starved dogie. But I want to be far away when the sheriff gets here."

He was trying to bridle High Jinks with one hand when hoofbeats pounded frantic-like into the yard.

"The law!" Rufe jumped to the door and dragged it shut, all but a small crack. I crouched to peer out and he stood above me, doing the same.

But the lone rider astride a lathering bay horse wasn't Sheriff Lenister. I was seeing for the second time a small-framed, slender yet wiry girl. Her pale gold hair was flying every which way; her eyes seemed to shine in her tightly drawn face.

"Anybody home?" she called, stopping her horse in front of the house.

"What a gall!" the wounded outlaw ejaculated in a low voice. "Who is she, Dan?"

But I was scared speechless, because I had an inkling of what Nina Frazier's coming to our ranch as if chased by Indians might mean. Mother flung open the house door, but before she could speak, Nina was saying,

"I'm Nina Frazier, Mrs. Haines. Brace yourself for a shock." Her words rushed out like wild horses leaving a corral. "Uncle Floyd, with two of his men, caught me and Tom together and he went crazy."

Ma got in, "What's this? You and Tom——?"

"Yes. To us, all the terrible things that have happened didn't seem to matter. . . . Uncle Floyd and Beefy Brown grabbed Tom before he could do anything and all three men beat him before they tied him.

"Uncle Floyd ordered me to go to the ranch. But as quick as I was out of his sight, I rode straight here to tell you he's coming to burn all your buildings."

I saw Ma standing as if she'd been turned to stone. That was the way I felt too—like an ice-cold stone. She asked, and clear across the yard from her I could feel the anxiety in her voice, "What about Tom?"

"They'll bring him here. Whether or not they'll let him go with you and Dan I don't know. I don't know!" Nina cried chokingly. "Mrs. Haines, you probably hate me as much as——"

"Nina, I don't hate you at all!" That was just like Ma. "I do wish you kids had confided in me. But I'm not angry with either of you."

"You don't hate me?" Nina's question was so low it was only a whisper. "Tom was so afraid you would. Mrs. Haines, you're——" Her voice broke. "I wish I had a mother like you."

"Nina, they're coming," Ma said. "Yonder I see the dust. You must hide. Ride around behind the house and down into the gully."

Inside the stable I was scrambling to my feet. "Rufe," I said, "Sheriff Lennister can't be far away and you better be driftin'. Lead High Jinks out the back door. . . . That darned Lennister'll be too late to help us. Though he wouldn't stop Emmett anyhow." I was talking grim and mad. "If I had a real gun—all I've got is a twenty-two—I'd——"

Rufe Morgan stared at me, the veins in his temples jumped, and he lifted his left hand to scratch the funny white spot above his left ear where his skull was dented.

"Kid, don't ever take up a gun to kill another man. Leave that dirty business to fools like me."

The ominous thud-thud of hoofs was growing loud on the quiet and peaceful twilight air, and all sorts of wiggly things squirmed in my tight stomach and tighter throat.

"Go out and side your mother," Rufe ordered.

Leading High Jinks, he moved toward the back door, while I slid out at the front and ran across the yard, my head screwed to the left, my eyes watching four riders sweeping toward the ranch. Tom, tied to his saddle, was one, looking as if a stampeded herd had run over him. The others were enough to give a kid wild nightmares: Big Floyd Emmett, sitting his horse like a hunk of granite, Ed Roper, trap-mouthed and frozen-faced, a killer, and Beefy Brown, an ex-prize fighter who, folks said, didn't give a damn how dirty the job. He'd do it.

I reached the house and Ma came out. She was not carrying a gun; nothing but a large sheet of tablet paper. The two of us stood together, facing the riders as they pulled up, spattering us with dirt and gravel.

Emmett pointed his fist at Mother. "Woman, pack up such small stuff as you want the most to keep."

"Why should I do that?" Mother asked.

"Ask your sneaking coyote of a son! . . . Beefy, cut Tom loose. . . . Tom, you and your kid brother get a team and wagon, *pronto*. Start packing up, Mrs. Haines."

Mother waited until Beefy had released Tom, then she held up the piece of paper. "Get off your horse, Emmett, and read this."

Emmett dismounted, took the paper, and read aloud: "Last September, Perry Orr, Claude Emmett, and I, Rufe Morgan, pulled a stage robbery near Spurlock. We were putting uninhabited, desert country behind us when my horse broke a leg. Emmett's mount gave out, leaving one sound horse for the three of us, and we believed we were pursued.

"Perry Orr was my old partner. Claude Emmett had thrown in

with us in July and had helped with a couple of jobs before the stage holdup.

"We had to make camp and Perry and I were asleep and Claude on guard when I came awake and saw Claude Emmett split Perry's head with our camp ax. I was clawing for my gun, trying to get up, when Claude hit me with the blunt side of the ax. Probably believing I was dead, too, he took the cash and lit out on the good horse.

"But Ike Jensen, an old desert rat, found me and Perry. He buried Perry and saved my life. No posse showed up, but three or four weeks passed before I could travel. I remembered Claude's mentioning his father's ranch near Winblow, saying he'd go home for the winter. I came to Emmett's Slash 4 range, looking for Claude. Eventually I caught him out on the range. But there were too many other riders close by for me to risk meeting him face to face. So I let Claude have a rifle bullet in the back.'"

Floyd Emmett stopped reading and thwacked the paper with his clenched right hand. "Mrs. Haines, this is a bald, trumped-up lie. Claude never was a bandit."

I saw Ed Roper and Beefy Brown swap glances, telling each other, and me, that they knew darned well Claude had been a rotten egg. Of course, they never had spoken of it openly—and they wouldn't now. They worked for Floyd Emmett.

Mother said quietly, "This paper will clear my husband. Read the rest of it."

Emmett was so mad he had trouble with his voice, but he did read on:

"Later, I was safely holed up in a town when I saw a newspaper account of the happenings on Slash 4 range; Bill Haines being convicted of Claude's murder. Also an article about Haines and his family.

"Something got under my skin so deep that whisky couldn't make me forget the tragedy for which I was responsible, so I've come to the Winblow locale to square things for Haines and his family. This should do it. Rufe Morgan.'"

As Emmett finished, the two gunmen sitting their horses like posts, my brother the same, Ma said, "Now all of you know the truth."

Emmett snapped, "No good, Mrs. Haines, you wrote this."

"Yes," Mother admitted. "Morgan's right arm is broken. But he told me what to write, and signed it with his left hand."

Emmett squinted his eyes and shook his head. "You're lying, woman. There isn't any Rufe Morgan."

Ma turned white. She had believed Morgan's confession would clear Dad and stop Emmett's war on us. But although things weren't coming out right at all, she said firmly, "Rufe Morgan was here. He has gone only because he's on the dodge and knows the sheriff is coming. . . . Pull in your horns, Emmett. We'll see what Sheriff Lennister says."

"No sense in showing this paper to that chump of a Lennister," Emmett retorted, fumbling a match out of one of his pockets. "Ed, Beefy," he went on, "tie Tom Haines to a corral post. I'm going to use a bull whip on him. Then all you Haineses'll get your wagon and team and get out, and I'll burn your shacks."

In the moment of silence that followed, I could see Tom, his jaw set like our dad's, estimating his chances of turning the tables. Ed Roper was on one side of him, Beefy Brown on the other, his hand firm on Tom's right arm. Tom didn't have a chance. But neither Beefy nor Roper had moved to obey their boss.

"Give me that paper," Ma said calmly.

"No!" Emmett lighted the match. "Hell, woman," he went on, "if Morgan had dry-gulched my son, as this confession says, he'd have known I had a score to even with him, and if he'd had any guts he'd have faced me."

"I've been thinking maybe you would figure it that way, Floyd Emmett," spoke a new voice.

I jerked as if half a dozen hornets had gotten under my shirt, swiveling my head to look toward the southwest corner of the house. The

voice went on, "I'm Rufe Morgan and I killed your son Claude because he had it coming!"

The paper dropped from Emmett's left hand. The match burned his fingers and he flung it aside. He as well as everybody present stared at the lanky man who had stepped around the corner of the house. His hat was pushed back so the white-haired scar above his left ear showed plainly. His face was tight, and his eyes were every bit as savage and cold as Emmett's.

Ed Roper's hand flashed to his Colt. But he jerked it away, ejaculating, "Rufe Morgan, sure 'nuff!"

Mother and I weren't directly between Emmett and Rufe, but Roper and Beefy were backing up their horses, Tom's and Emmett's moving with them. Then—it was really only a second or two but it seemed a long time—Emmett answered Rufe:

"You are Rufe Morgan? You dictated and signed this confession?"

"Yes, to both questions, Emmett. Your men know me. They're giving you and me a clear field. Fill your hand!"

I saw Emmett's hand jump to his gun butt, saw his weapon leave holster, and saw flame spit from its muzzle. But in this same instant, and before I even heard the shots, something hit Emmett. He staggered, his hands dropping and his gun falling to the dirt. His knees buckled and he lurched sideways. Then the ground caught his big body.

While my ears rang with the explosion of guns, I saw Rufe Morgan step up to Emmett, smoke curling from the barrel of his gun, gripped in his left hand. He had his look and in a tired voice said, "Trail's end," and pitched forward on his face.

The next moment, Tom and Roper and Beefy were bending over the two men. Ed Roper's voice was strained and high: "Both dead, Mrs. Haines. . . . And now Beefy and me are lighting a shuck. *Pronto!*"

The two men hit their saddles and were gone in a cloud of dust, and a girl with wide and frightened eyes came running from back of

the house. Tom wheeled and saw her—saw Nina Frazier. He opened his arms and Nina flung herself into them.

All that, two dead men, Ma and me, and Tom and Nina was what Sheriff Lennister saw as he and five other men stopped their horses.

The sheriff swallowed his Adam's apple twice before he gulped, "What's this mean, Mrs. Haines?"

So long as I live I shall never forget my mother in that moment, so calm, with her hand on my shoulder; never forget the lift in her voice: "It means that Tom and Emmett's niece will prove once again that love is stronger than feuds and hate; means there'll be peace here now, and that my husband will soon be home, his name vindicated."

"Bu-but that's impossible," spoke the befuddled sheriff.

"Oh, no," said Mother, picking up from the ground Rufe Morgan's confession. "Remember, Sheriff, how you hooted when I told you the killer's conscience would never let him rest until he did all in his power to square things for Dad Haines and for us? Read this. You'll find I was right."

MAN AFOOT

by John Prescott

John Prescott is another WWA Spur winner. His Journey by the River was rated the best Western historical novel published in 1954. Many times contributor to The Saturday Evening Post and other magazines, John has also published numerous novels, among them Ordeal and Guns of Hell Valley. He is equally at home with sympathetic human themes, dramatic action, and dry humor—or with a combination of all three that makes his fiction rewarding reading. Confirmed Arizona Westerners, John and Jane make their home in Phoenix.

After the massacre I came to live with my uncle Harlan and aunt Martha Allen. I was their nephew, Uncle Harlan being my mother's older brother when she was living. Since our families were among the early settlers in the valley, coming out from Illinois at Uncle Harlan's urging when the war ended, the places bordered on each

Copyright © 1958 by The Curtis Publishing Company. Originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post* as "Apache Raid."

other. Yet the ruins of my folks' place couldn't be seen from Uncle Harlan's and Aunt Martha's, and I didn't have to look at them.

They lay deserted a long time. Uncle Harlan now and then rode over to tend the graves and see what time had done; but I didn't. Though I often felt I should go, I hadn't seen it in four years. I knew that grass filled the rooms, and that weather had washed the smoke and ash from the walls and fallen vigas, but still I shied off.

I was twelve now, but I was still afraid; and didn't want to have so sharp in my mind all I'd seen on that day, or smelled or heard—what Uncle Harlan called the butchery.

Just the word made a picture.

Anyone who knows that grassy country along the Sonoita and Babocomari can imagine our life there. Save Tucson, seventy miles around the Santa Ritas, there were no towns. There were few ranches, and those widely spread through the valley. At times, a month or more would pass with no human being even going by, unless it was some Indian skulking through the hills, well out of rifle range.

In the spring and fall there were roundups; but unless the stock was driven to our place for cutting and branding, we rarely saw the men. It went by turns, and I remember only two times when our place was used.

Off and on, we shared with other families having young folks the keep of a traveling schoolteacher; but mostly, Aunt Martha saw to my learning.

Maybe the ones we saw most often were circuit riders. They might show up any time, coming through the valley every season at least, stopping at each ranch to pray and hymn, and maybe baptize a child. Sometimes there was dead to read over. Sometimes they'd make right what had been going on between some girl and her cowboy lover.

As you'd guess, these visits were looked for the most by Aunt Martha, while Uncle Harlan could take them or leave them, it depending on the preacher—how much he ate and carried on afterwards. He joked about them, and often scandalized Aunt Martha.

"Feller smells pulpit clear to here," he might say when one turned up toward our dooryard.

Or, "They always come in time to feed, yet they never fill out. A pure puzzle."

And once, on feeding a really heavy eater and having later been exhorted at until midnight, he called the man a "God-shouting, starving acrobat."

Most times he seemed to make these jokes in good humor; but as the time since my folks were killed went on, they seemed to grow more earnest, and I wasn't sure.

But either way, to Aunt Martha, they were blasphemy. As pious as a saint herself, she always bridled at what she called his heresies.

She might say: "How would you like preaching through the country all alone, and have folks poke fun at you?"

But that just made him snort. "Shoo, I'd never do that. I couldn't tell folks how to live, what to do and not do."

She might say: "Harlan, you don't show them proper respect. You're giving offense to God."

But he'd just say: "I often wonder if they do speak for Him as they claim. I don't see how they can know His mind."

She might say: "You're going up in a curl of smoke one of these days. He knows you're mocking Him."

Then he'd say: "I sometimes wonder if He knows; or knowing, if He cares. Anna and Harold never mocked Him."

As he spoke this way only when he thought I couldn't hear, it was hard to tell if he was still joking. By his voice, he seemed to be; but he never joked to *me* about my folks' dying. My mother had been his favorite—being so much younger than he—and as he and Aunt Martha had no children, she'd been like a daughter to him. But I could never be certain.

Still and all, the circuit riders were always welcome. We'd hymn and pray with them, put them up for a night, and send them on their

way with full stomachs. If their animals needed care, and they usually did, Uncle Harlan would see to them.

As a rule, when they came, they showed up on some stringy nag or mule; but once we had one come afoot. It was summer, and we were waiting out supper on the gallery. The sun was sliding behind the Santa Ritas, and the grama grass had that reddish-gold color of early evening. Then from off the trail by the creek, a man came walking.

Next to me, the forelegs of Uncle Harlan's chair came down.

"Clark," he said, "get my rifle."

I did; nor did I ask why. In cow country, nothing was more chancy than a man afoot. A man without a horse might do anything; they even spooked the stock. Moreover, it wasn't long since Uncle Harlan had shot a looter digging in the ruins at my folks' place.

So I didn't ask, but got it from the rack—a seven-shot Spencer that used a metal case. I hardly took it out, though, than Aunt Martha followed. Shooting near the house was her business, too.

"No doubt you see that man afoot out there," Uncle Harlan told her when she jumped him out.

"I do; but meaning trouble, he'd scout us out first."

"Ain't no rule on that. They're tricky sometimes."

While that was true, the man didn't look so sly, walking or no. He was closer by now, and we could see his long legs folding and unfolding. His claw-hammer coat drooped low down, and his stovepipe hat stuck high up. Maybe a minute passed before we saw his collar was turned backwards.

Then Aunt Martha smoothed her apron and said, "Praise the Lord, a preacher's coming. Harlan, put that weapon aside."

He did, of course, but not without comment.

"I swear," he said, "now there's a sad case. Unless he's pushing self-denial to the last inch."

"Have your jokes now, Harlan, before he gets here," she said.

But he had no more to say then, and pretty soon the man came loping up, bowed over like a folding rule, and raised his hat.

"Brother and Sister Allen," he declared. "A pleasure, indeed. The name is Obidiah Balk, Minister of the Gospel, and preacher to the heathen. Friends call me Deacon, there being virtue in brevity."

"A Deacon!" Aunt Martha smoothed her apron again. "I declare, we've never had a Deacon stop before now."

"Truly, I am but a humble worker in the Lord's vineyards," the Deacon said, smiling, and bowing again, too.

While I thought a Deacon ought to be as solemn as an owl, here was one more like an actor in a medicine show. And as he was afoot, too, Uncle Harlan eyed him, speculating all the while he told of himself. Of course, he couldn't let that first remark pass.

"Must be lots of ankle bending in between jobs," he said.

"Our blessed Savior shirked no journeys on foot," the Deacon answered.

Being Gospel, Uncle Harlan had to back off from that. But he wasn't finished, even if Aunt Martha was watching him.

"Preacher to the heathen, you say?"

"It is one of my aims to take them the Word of the Lord."

"Ought to tell you the only word them butchers savvy comes from a Spencer barrel; that or a Springfield."

That time, Aunt Martha didn't just watch him. "Harlan Allen, that's blasphemy!" she said.

"Shoo," he said. "I'm just being helpful. Anyone aiming to speak to them better season his words with plenty of powder."

Though he didn't say about that, the Deacon's smile now turned holy and full of patience for doubters.

"The Word is the same for all of God's creatures," he said, while he glanced above, as if checking with heaven. "For the heathen, as well as those of little faith."

There shone a sly light in his eye there at the last. And as she couldn't tell what Uncle Harlan might say, Aunt Martha told the Deacon that he'd come in time for chicken, which was now ready.

Right off, supper was different than with most preachers. First, we

had Grace, a long one with flowing words; yet its end left us hanging while the Deacon slid out to fork a big piece of breast meat. Then, along with the chicken and fixings, a heap of church talk was served. As a rule, a preacher was too busy eating to spare time or breath on talk; but the Deacon shoveled it in, and directed the conversation, too.

Mostly, Uncle Harlan just listened, kind of marveling; but Aunt Martha reveled in glory, her face glowing and her eyes like two stars while talk of Scripture and the Christian life swirled all around. Supper done, the Deacon puffed away on one of those cigars that Uncle Harlan got from Tucson each year at Christmas, and tamped his meal down with a big glass of Uncle Harlan's cherry cordial.

And at the same time he led us off on a round of hymns, heading out with "Rock of Ages" and ending with "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." Then to top it off we circled back for another shot at "Rock of Ages."

It's only fair to say I liked it. I was mostly firm against teachers and parsons, but our lonely life made it good to sing and let go in general with a man as jubilating as the Deacon. I couldn't help but see how pretty and full of life Aunt Martha was.

Uncle Harlan sang, too, but he was doing some thinking on the side. No preacher had so spread himself with us before, and after the Deacon's second cigar and third glass of cordial, Uncle Harlan began to look as he did when thinking of his worst jokes. Then, with the singing ended, he said, as if he pulled it out of the air, "You ain't yet said what church you speak for, Deacon."

He was right, too. Usually they told right off if they were Dutch Reformed or Free Will Baptist or Moravian or Methodist, or which. But the Deacon hadn't said.

Still, it seemed as if he'd just been getting ready. "I was only waiting to get us in a godly mood to mention that," he said.

"Well, I'm at the peak of it right now," Uncle Harlan said.

"To tell the truth," the Deacon said, filling his chest with air and letting it out, "it's my own church I'm speaking for."

I noticed Aunt Martha was watching Uncle Harlan pretty close there; but she forgot him when she heard that.

"A church!" she said. "Where?"

"Right here in this noble valley," the Deacon said in a puff of blue smoke. "I plan to build it just as quick as I get all the folks pushing. It's another of my aims."

"A church!" Aunt Martha said. "A church of our own!"

As no other circuit rider had ever had aims of that kind, I thought Uncle Harlan would cut loose with something big; but he only stared at Aunt Martha. And when I looked at her, too, I saw her face so filled with pure light that my skin went picky.

Ordinarily, when a preacher had come, and gone on again, things would settle back down. But this time they didn't. As Uncle Harlan put it, Aunt Martha didn't want them to.

"Harlan," she'd say, "a church is a mark of civilization."

"Ain't sure this place is ready for civilization," he'd say.

"But there's got to be a start, doesn't there?"

"I question whether I'd start with that, though," he'd say.

"Just the same, we've needed one a long time."

That being opinion, he might fork off on what he called the practical view, maybe hoping she wouldn't trail.

Then he'd say, "I don't know how you can have a church with folks spread fifty miles in every direction."

But she'd have an answer there, too. "Distance doesn't matter, Harlan. When the will is there, a way can be found."

"Building it, too? Where're the money wages coming from? I didn't hear the Deacon's jeans jingling."

"He said that willing hands would be enough."

Maybe, since he thought a church so unlikely, he was easy in his talk on it. But the Deacon was apt to make his edges show.

A week or so passed before Aunt Martha began to wonder about his coming our way again.

"When he finds that nobody else around has cigars like mine," Uncle Harlan said.

"Now, you know that isn't fair," Aunt Martha said. "After all, he rarely has a taste of luxury."

"Uh-huh. I could see that by the way he drank my cordial," Uncle Harlan said. "Got a big taste for it, though."

"Now, Harlan, you'd be thirsty, too, if you traveled on foot. You can't blame a man for that."

"I doubt it's plain thirst," he said. "But it's his own fault if it is. That's what comes of going about the country that way. He drinks up everybody's cordial killing his dry. I'm not surprised, though. A man afoot can't be trusted."

Up to then, she'd tried to win him over with patient reasoning. But when he started that, her dander went up.

"You men rave about old wives' tales, yet you talk that nonsense! I doubt you'd know a thief if one picked your pocket!"

Of course, that only served to get his own dander up.

"Maybe not; just let him drink all my cordial, though! Or smoke up all my cigars, or trick me away from the meat plater!"

"That's right, Harlan Allen, mind your belly!"

"Moreover," he went on, good and riled now, "I'd know one come lipperty-lopperty up the trail, spouting a flood of Bible talk, and how he aims to preach to the heathen! A man without a horse, a pot to cook in, or a bottom to his stomach! He's too good to make the rounds; he's got to have his own church—a maverick church! And all of us got to drop our work and help build it!"

At first Aunt Martha's face had got red, but now it went white, and then her voice grew small and began to shake. Tears leaked out on her cheeks.

"I don't think you love us any more," she said. "You wouldn't talk so if you did."

"Lord to God, what's that got to do with it? I'm just trying to pro-

fect you! He calls himself a Deacon! Why, the man's a fool! A fool at best, and there's no telling at worst!"

I'd seen them quarrel before, but not in this way. They waved their arms and sent their voices up. But the worst of it was feeling that something bigger lay under what they spoke of, wanting to be out.

As this began a time when I felt there was more than I knew beneath the skin of things, I was just as glad that roundup was near; though, as a rule, I was doubtful of those fall and spring weeks, with Uncle Harlan gone. But this time, at least when helping him get ready, it was better to be busy than fret about what I had only a glimpse of now and then between him and Aunt Martha.

There was plenty to do, all right: the pony string that ran as wild as deer along the bottoms in off times must be chivied out for Uncle Harlan to pick over. His bedroll must be packed for Troy Ross to take when he brought his chuck wagon by. Coffee and sugar must go in a sack, along with a change of underwear and socks. There were irons to clean; leather to soap; shot to be cast in molds against any trouble when he was gone.

Then there was the brush pile to be used for signal smoke if Indians came. This was on a hogback up behind the house where, if it was lit, the men on the plains to the east would see it. Being my job, I always stacked on plenty of green mesquite and cottonwood and all else that smoked. And just to be sure, I kept a pail of coal oil in the kitchen, handy to need.

The days being so full at this time, the Deacon had grown smaller in my mind than those new, dark, uneasy things. Not that I forgot him—he was still a part of them—but he was deeper in my thoughts, and when he came again, a few days before roundup, I was surprised.

The first thought I had on sighting him before the house with Aunt Martha and Uncle Harlan, was that he might better have come when Uncle Harlan had left. Even up at my brush pile, their manner of standing said trouble—a feeling I got.

When I reached them I was sure. Uncle Harlan's face looked grumbly and sulky, and Aunt Martha's eyes were steamy. The Deacon stared at his old boots, while his bony fingers picked at a trouser patch. It was plain there'd been words, and when I came up, all gave a jump, startled.

Pretty quick, though, the Deacon pulled up and smiled.

"Well, now, how is young Master Pierce today?" he said.

As he hadn't used my name before this, it struck me I was part of the talk. But I bobbed my head and told him I was all right.

"Kick any rabbits out of that?" he said, and he eyed the brush pile above, maybe thinking how rabbit would taste.

I told him, no, I wasn't hunting rabbits. "It's for the Indians, a warning, when roundup comes and we're alone," I said.

Of course, it was the wrong thing to say. Just the mention of them was enough; right off, he looked primed for a sermon.

"Ah, the heathen," he said. "It will all pass. It will all change when I go among them with the Word."

This being what Uncle Harlan called fool talk, I thought he'd bust out laughing; as he didn't, I knew things were past joking.

"Now you bring it up, you might go now," he said, and as he glanced at me the notion that the talk touched on me grew bigger. "But the other's out. Nobody's going to make a church of that place. It's going to stay as it is."

"It would make a very fine one," the Deacon said, and he, too, glanced my way. "It only needs a new roof."

Uncle Harlan seemed to stand more solid now, more square. He spoke more quietly, too.

"It don't need nothing," he said. "It's fine now."

"In the middle of the valley like it is, all could come," the Deacon said, moving his arms, as if people filled them.

"Ain't nobody got any business over there," Uncle Harlan said, and I now saw little white dents around his mouth—a sure danger sign.

"Least of all a preacher—after what happened there."

Had he some pride, the Deacon would get sore to hear that; but he just glanced again at me as if wondering if I knew what they spoke of. Then, maybe guessing I did by now, he went on.

"It would make a fine memorial, too. A monument to faith and peace in a place of violence. God would always be there to talk to."

Uncle Harlan, by now, would make a range bull look calm.

"Then He ought to know that the last man who stuck his nose in there uninvited got himself shot," he said.

As this was so much worse than all his other blasphemies, Aunt Martha stared as if he was the devil appeared in a spout of flame. But not until the Deacon had gone shambling off, and we lay in bed at night, did fitting words come to her. Maybe she thought I couldn't hear; but I could, and I was scared she didn't scold.

In a thin, splintery voice she said, "Now I know what troubles you, Harlan."

"I've said aplenty I can't abide that man," I heard him answer.

"It's what you haven't said. You've held it in a long time; working. Since Anna and Harold died. This just brought it out."

"My God! You make it sound like a bellyache!"

"Your taking His name so easy is another sign. You've been that way since they were killed. I've watched it coming. I know."

In the darkness, Uncle Harlan's voice came so dry and bare I felt my neckline start pulling.

"That's all done and gone. I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have to," she said. "It still shows. It always does when a body turns his grief on God in anger."

It was out, that dark, strange thing that I had only partly seen. But it was when he didn't answer that I grew most frightened. Had she been wrong, he would have said; but his silence made me see him on a mountain with a glare of wrath about him as he shook his fist at God, and God came at him with thunder and lightning. You might laugh to know that; but I did. And though the night was warm, I dug deep in my blankets.

Roundup came, and Uncle Harlan rode off. He might be gone a week, maybe more, depending on the work on the range. For him it meant fun, being men's doings, and men's talk around campfires and branding pens.

For us it was different. At home the time stretched over the frame of days like a drumhead. Every morning, before dawn, I'd go through the trap door to the roof and stand watch behind the parapet until the sun was well up, showing everything about. Dawn was the time for Apache raiding parties.

Through the days we stayed near the house, keeping lookout through the clear fall light for motion in the hills. At night we lay behind closed shutters, listening in our beds for sounds that might be Indian-made; though they weren't much for night.

We kept water stored in buckets against siege, and the rifles loaded in their rack, ready.

Sometimes in those waiting days I wondered if the Deacon had finally gone to the mountains, as he'd talked of so much and as Uncle Harlan had told him to do. If he had, he could be dead by now. Past doubt, that much of him was foolishness. But what he'd urged for my folks' place didn't, after thought, seem so foolish. Thinking of it that way, instead of how I'd seen it in my mind all these years—how Uncle Harlan spoke of it, and aimed to keep it—was good. Someday, of course, it would be mine; but meantime, to be a church would be nice.

But we didn't talk about it; nor of the Deacon. Nor of Uncle Harlan, either, save for plain, daily-doing things. We shied clear of uncovering all that lay beneath, spooky and dark. Being alone was enough to think of.

For most of a week things went on well. But one day toward noon Aunt Martha busted in from outside, slammed the door, and drove the drawbar through the brackets. Then she started on the shutters, calling out to me at the same time.

"Get your fire going, Clark! There's Indians over the creek!"

Though we were primed for trouble, the valley'd had no raids for

so long we didn't really expect it. Just being ready for it, though, seemed to mean we had to have it.

Still, my legs worked. And my ears, too; I could hear her call to keep my eyes peeled and that she'd cover me. I was going out the back door then, the pail slamming my legs, the oil sloshing over.

I guess a part of me was numb, though, for all I could hear and take orders. I didn't feel the pail hit, or the oil spilling out. No more than I felt the pull of the climb, or the ground hitting my feet. I saw the brush pile getting nearer, but my mind was full of Indians, the memory of their coming that other time so cold and swelling-big there was no room for anything else.

It was good I didn't look at them until the fire took hold and I'd started down. Had I looked going up, I'd never have made it. Even with the grade in my favor, I scarce seemed to move. They were far off, and still tiny in the hills across the creek; but they looked just as on that past day, making it so true that I could hear the screams, smell the flesh burning, see the blackness of the root cellar where I was hidden, and see how humans look when they're ripped up and all inside comes oozing out, gray and slithery in the red.

I was in a state when I reached the house. Aunt Martha jerked me in, barred the door, then slapped me once, hard, on each cheek.

"Clark!" I heard her say. "Clark! Up on the roof now! So long as we've got range, we'll fight from there! Go now!"

There was nothing weepy about her now. She put the Spencer into my hand; she shoved me toward the ladder, too, although the slaps had helped me get moving some on my own.

Up on top we lay behind the mud parapet and pushed our rifles over the edge. Aunt Martha had the Springfield that Uncle Harlan had brought from the war. At her elbow was a sack of Minié balls and paper cartridges, their tails sticking up, waiting to be bit off.

By now, and seen from the roof, the Indians weren't so tiny as they'd been from the hogback. They were still above the creek, but letting down toward it now, running in single file. There was something

in how they ran, that and the time of day, that didn't square with their known habits on raids; but I couldn't tell until Aunt Martha raised up and pointed.

"It's the Deacon!" she said, and when she said it again and added "There!" I made him out.

He was out ahead of the Indians some ways, running alone. No doubt we'd have seen him before, but the howling pack behind him kept our eyes glued. But we saw him now, his long legs pumping, and his clothes, except a scrap or two, gone.

When I saw his boots missing, too, I knew what had happened. They did such things, though no one knew why. On finding someone, they'd strip him, then pointing at the sun, sign that he had so much time before they gave chase. Now and then, before turning him loose, they dragged him through cholla; they might partly skin his feet, too, and let him go that way, the soles flapping.

A game it was; a kind of joke before business.

The Deacon, as he'd gone hunting them to preach of kindness and love, likely gave them pause, and a belly laugh, too. But it was plain they hadn't figured on a walking man, one so leggy.

It was plain now as well that, barring a fall, he might reach us. Aunt Martha saw it, too, and stood up to estimate the range.

"We'll have to hold fire until he gets over the creek," she said. "Shoot high, then, over his head. Don't pull down now."

When I said I wouldn't, she nodded; then she smiled softly.

"You're a good boy, Clark. You always made your folks proud. Just remember, it's not how long you live that adds up, only how."

She was saying that we mightn't have much time, that soon we might die. Did they catch the Deacon, they'd likely leave us be, but given he made the house, we'd be killed, too. Something in me said I should feel cheated; had he not tried for our place, the Indians wouldn't have come; they'd have chased him elsewhere. All along we'd thought them raiding us, but they weren't at all. We were like a man due for hanging who gets let off, then gets hung anyway.

Somehow, though, I didn't feel that way. What I felt most was no longer being scared. This time I could see them, not just hear and smell, and later, see what they'd done. I could fight back, too. That made a difference.

As it turned out, though, it didn't happen that way. When the Deacon reached the creek, he didn't cross over. We waited, ready, for him to leave the brush along the bottoms on our side; but when we next saw him he was going through a clearing far downstream, still on the yon side. He was wobbling now, and the Indians were close behind him, yelling wild.

I was still trying to figure what happened when Aunt Martha turned and looked behind us across the roof. From the pile of brush the smoke was lifting into the sky, thick, black, and oily.

"He saw it," she said, and her voice seemed far away, though she was right next to me. "He knew we were alone, and he kept away."

Uncle Harlan and the other men were on a part of the range that was nearer than we knew. He reached us in an hour, his horse caked with foam, its nose running blood. It foundered and lay on its side in the dooryard.

Had Aunt Martha really thought he didn't love us any more, she'd have known different when he hugged us in his arms, and the words, when he tried to speak, wouldn't come out right. For some time, I was shy of watching his face, for fear of what mine was likely to do.

When we told what happened, he didn't hang back for the others to come, but ran for the bottoms with his pistol in his belt and one of our rifles in each hand. He didn't need them, though, as it happened; for, by then, the Indians had gone.

For a miracle, he found the Deacon still living, and that night he went to Fort Lowell, at Tucson, to get the post surgeon, riding relay between ranches along the way. He was back before noon the next day.

When the surgeon had done his work, Aunt Martha held that godli-

ness had saved the Deacon's life. But the surgeon wondered if the Indians hadn't let him live because he'd run against them so well. Sometimes they were funny that way. All they'd done was cut those tendons at his ankles—what the surgeon called the Achilles tendons—so that it wouldn't happen again. Sometimes they were funny that way, too.

Coming down to how he kept the Indians away from me and Aunt Martha, though, was something different. And no matter how he hemmed and hawed over it, Uncle Harlan gave in at last and spent the rest of that fall putting up a new roof on my folks' place. Helping him, I found I didn't scare at all over there any more; but liked it.

Nowadays he doesn't quarrel with God either. Nor does he poke fun at Deacon Obidiah Balk. As a matter of fact, each Sunday when the Deacon comes riding on his mule, Uncle Harlan is out in the doorway waiting to shoulder him down and help him up to the gallery for a smoke and a glass of cordial before dinner.

You might even call them good friends now; but, as he likes to say, it was almost bound to happen once the Deacon took to riding, like any other human being out in cattle country.

GUN JOB

THE 1954 SPUR AWARD WINNER

Thomas Thompson

At the first national convention of Western Writers of America, in Denver in 1954, the first Spur ever awarded for the best Western short story was won by Thomas Thompson with "Gun Job," from Collier's magazine. This highly dramatic Western was later presented on the Ford Theatre TV program. Long a successful novelist and short story writer, Tommy has been equally successful writing movie and TV originals for one of the major studios. Lately the Thompsons (June is the better half) have moved from their hilltop home in Santa Rosa, California, to North Hollywood.

He was married in June and he gave up his job as town marshal the following September, giving himself time to get settled on the little ranch he bought before the snows set in. That first winter was mild, and now, with summer in the air, he walked down the main street of the town and thought of his own calf crop and of his own problems, a fine feeling after fifteen years of thinking of the problems of others. He wasn't Marshal Jeff Anderson any more. He was Jeff

Copyright 1953 by Thomas Thompson.

Anderson, private citizen, beholden to no man, and that was the way he wanted it.

He gave the town his quick appraisal, a tall, well-built man who was nearing forty and beginning to think about it, and every building and every alley held a memory for him, some amusing, some tragic. The town had a Sunday-morning peacefulness on it, the peacefulness Jeff Anderson had worked for. It hadn't always been this way. He inhaled deeply, a contented man, and he caught the scent of freshly sprinkled dust that came from the dampened square of street in front of the ice-cream parlor. There was a promise of heat in the air and already the thick, warm scent of the tarweed was drifting down from the yellow slopes back of the town. He kept to the middle of the street, enjoying his freedom, not yet free of old habits, and he headed for the marshal's office, where the door was closed, the shade drawn.

This was his Sunday-morning pleasure, this brief tour of the town that had claimed him so long. It was the same tour he had made every Sunday morning for fifteen years; but now he could enjoy the luxury of knowing he was making it because he wanted to, not because it was his job. A man who had built a bridge or a building could sit back and look at his finished work, remembering the fun and the heartache that had gone into it, but he didn't need to chip away personally at its rust or take a pot of paint to its scars.

In front of the marshal's office Anderson paused, remembering it all, not missing it, just remembering; then he turned and pushed open the door, the familiarity of the action momentarily strong on him. The floor was worn and his boot heels had helped wear it; the desk was scarred and some of those spur marks were as much his own as his own initials would have been. He grinned at the new marshal and said, "Caught any criminals lately?"

The man behind the desk glanced up, his face drawn, expressionless, his eyes worried. He tried to joke. "How could I?" he said. "You ain't been in town since last Sunday." He took one foot off the desk and kicked a straight chair toward Jeff. "How's the cow business?"

"Good," Jeff said. "Mighty good." He sat down heavily and stretched his long legs, pushed his battered felt hat back on his thinning, weather-bleached hair, and made himself a cigarette. He saw the papers piled on the desk, and glancing at the clock, he knew it was nearly time to let the two or three prisoners exercise in the jail corridor. A feeling of well-being engulfed him. These things were another man's responsibility now, not Jeff Anderson's. "How's it with you, Billy?" he asked.

The answer came too quickly, the answer of a man who was nervous or angry or possibly both. "You ought to know, Jeff. The mayor and the council came to see you, didn't they?"

Annoyance clouded Jeff Anderson's gray eyes. He hadn't liked the idea of the city fathers' going behind the new marshal's back. If they didn't like the job Billy was doing they should have gone to Billy, not to Jeff. But that was typical of the city council. Jeff had known three mayors and three different councils during his long term in office and they usually ran to a pattern. A few complaints and they got panicky and started going off in seven directions at once. They seemed to think that because Jeff had recommended Billy for this job the job was still Jeff's responsibility—"They made the trip for nothing, Billy," Jeff said. "If you're worried about me wanting your job you can forget it. I told them that plain."

"They'll keep asking you, Jeff."

"They'll keep getting 'no' for an answer," Jeff said.

Billy Lang sat at his desk and stared at the drawn shade of the window, the thumb of his left hand toying nervously with the badge on his calfskin vest. He was a small man with eternally pink cheeks and pale blue eyes. He wore a full white mustache and there was a cleft in his chin. He was married and had five children, and most of his life he had clerked in a store. When Jeff Anderson recommended him for this job, Billy took it because it paid more and because the town was quiet. But now there was trouble and Billy was sorry he

had ever heard of the job. He said, "You can't blame them for wanting you back, Jeff. You did a good job."

There was no false modesty in Jeff Anderson. He had done a good job here and he knew it. He had handled his job exactly the way he felt it should be handled and he had backed down to no one. But it hadn't been all roses, either. He grinned. "Regardless of what a man does, there's some who won't like it."

"Like Hank Fetterman?"

Jeff shrugged. Hank Fetterman was a cattleman. Sometimes Hank got the idea that he ought to take this town over and run it the way he once had. Hank hadn't gotten away with it when Jeff was marshal. Thinking about it now, it didn't seem to matter much to Jeff one way or the other, and it was hard to remember that his fight with Fetterman had once been important. It had been a long time ago and things had changed—"Hank's not a bad sort," Jeff said.

"He's in town," Billy Lang said. "Did you know that?"

Jeff felt the old, familiar tightening of his stomach muscles, the signal of trouble ahead. He inhaled deeply, let the smoke trickle from his nostrils, and the feeling went away. Hank Fetterman was Jeff Anderson's neighbor now and Jeff was a rancher, not a marshal. "I'm in town, too," he said. "So are fifty other people. There's no law against it."

"You know what I mean, Jeff," Billy Lang said. "You talked with Rudy Svitac's boy."

Jeff moved uneasily in his chair. Billy Lang was accusing him of meddling, and Jeff didn't like it. Jeff had never had anything to do with the marshal's job since his retirement, and he had promised himself he never would. It was Billy's job, and Billy was free to run it his own way. But when a twelve-year-old kid who thought you were something special asked you a straight question you gave him a straight answer. It had nothing to do with the fact that you had once been a marshal—

"Sure, Billy," Jeff said. "I talked to Rudy's boy. He came to see me

about it just the way he's been coming to see me about things ever since he was big enough to walk. The kid needs somebody to talk to, I guess, so he comes to me. He's not old-country, like his folks. He was born here; he thinks American. I guess it's hard for the old folks to understand him and it's hard for the boy to understand them. I told him to have his dad see you, Billy."

"He took your advice," Billy Lang said. "Three days ago." He turned over a paper. "Rudy Svitac came in and swore out a warrant against Hank Fetterman for trespassing. He said his boy told him it was the thing to do."

Jeff had a strange feeling that he was suddenly two people. One was Jeff Anderson, ex-marshal, the man who had recommended Billy Lang for this job. As such, he should offer Billy some advice right here and now. The other person was Jeff Anderson, private citizen, a man with a small ranch and a fine wife and a right to live his own life. And that was the Jeff Anderson that was important. Jeff Anderson the rancher grinned. "Hank pawin' and bellerin' about it, is he?"

"I don't know, Jeff," Billy Lang said. "I haven't talked to Hank about it. I'm not sure I'm going to."

Jeff glanced quickly at the new marshal, surprised, only half believing what he had heard. He had recommended Billy for this job because he figured he and Billy thought along the same lines. Surely Billy knew that if you gave Hank Fetterman an inch he would take a mile—

He caught himself quickly, realizing suddenly that it was none of his business how Billy Lang thought. There were plenty of businessmen in town who had argued loudly and openly that Jeff Anderson's methods of law enforcement had been bad for their cash registers. They had liked the old days when Hank Fetterman was running things and the town was wide open. Maybe they wanted it that way again. Every man was entitled to his own opinion and Billy Lang was entitled to handle his job in his own way. This freedom of thought and action that Jeff prized so highly had to work for everyone. He stood

up and clapped a hand affectionately on Billy Lang's shoulder, anxious to change the conversation. "That's up to you, Billy," he said. "It's sure none of my affair." His grin widened. "Come on over to the saloon and I'll buy you a drink."

Billy Lang stared at the drawn shade, and he thought of Hank Fetterman, a man who was big in this country, waiting over at the saloon. Hank Fetterman knew there was a warrant out for his arrest; the whole town knew it by now. You didn't need to tell a thing like that. It just got around. And before long people would know who the law was in this town, Hank Fetterman or Billy Lang. Billy colored slightly, and there was perspiration on his forehead. "You go ahead and have your drink, Jeff," he said. "I've got some paperwork to do——" He didn't look up.

Jeff went outside and the gathering heat of the day struck the west side of the street and brought a resinous smell from the old boards of the false-fronted buildings. He glanced at the little church, seeing Rudy Svitac's spring wagon there, remembering that the church hadn't always been here; then he crossed over toward the saloon, the first business building this town had erected. He had been in a dozen such towns, and it was always the same. The saloons and the deadfalls came first, the churches and the schools later. Maybe that proved something. He didn't know. He had just stepped onto the board sidewalk when he saw the druggist coming toward him. The druggist was also the mayor, a sactimonious little man, dried up by his own smallness. "Jeff, I talked to Billy Lang," the mayor said. His voice was thin and reedy. "I wondered if you might reconsider——"

"No," Jeff Anderson said. He didn't break his stride. He walked by the mayor and went into the saloon. Two of Hank Fetterman's riders were standing by the piano, leaning on it, and one of them was fumbling out a one-finger tune, cursing when he missed a note. Hank Fetterman was at the far end of the bar, and Jeff went and joined him.

A little cow talk was good of a Sunday morning and Hank Fetterman knew cows. The two men at the piano started to sing.

Hank Fetterman's glance drifted lazily to Jeff Anderson and then away. His smile was fleeting. "How are you, Jeff?"

"Good enough," Jeff said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"You twisted my arm," Hank Fetterman said.

Hank Fetterman was a well-built man with a weathered face. His brows were heavy and they pinched together toward the top, forming a perfect diamond of clean, hairless skin between his deep-set eyes. His voice was quiet, his manner calm. Jeff thought of the times he had crossed this man, enforcing the no-gun ordinance, keeping Hank's riders in jail overnight to cool them off. . . . He had no regrets over the way he had handled Hank in the past. It had nothing to do with his feeling toward Hank now or in the future. He saw that Hank was wearing a gun and he smiled inwardly. That was like Hank. Tell him he couldn't do something and that was exactly what he wanted to do. "Didn't figure on seeing you in town," Jeff said. "Thought you and the boys were on roundup."

"I had a little personal business come up," Hank Fetterman said. "You know about it?"

Jeff shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

The pale smile left Hank Fetterman's eyes but not his lips. "Rudy Svitac is telling it around that I ran a bunch of my cows through his corn. He claims I'm trying to run him out of the country."

Jeff had no trouble concealing his feelings. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago. He leaned his elbows on the bar and turned his shot glass slowly in its own wet circle. Behind him Hank Fetterman's two cowboys broke into a boisterous, ribald song. The bartender wiped his face with his apron and glanced out the front window across toward the marshal's office. Jeff Anderson downed his drink, tossed the shot glass in the air, and caught it with a downsweep of his hand. "You're used to that kind of talk, Hank." He set the shot glass on the bar.

"You're pretty friendly with the Svitacs, aren't you, Jeff?" Hank Fetterman asked. He was leaning with his back to the bar, his elbows behind him. His position made the holstered gun he wore obvious.

Again, just for a moment, Jeff Anderson was two people. He remembered the man he wanted to be. "I don't reckon anybody's very friendly with the Svitacs," he said. "They're hard to know. I think a lot of their boy. He's a nice kid."

Slowly the smile came back into Hank Fetterman's amber eyes. He turned around and took the bottle and poured a drink for himself and one for Jeff. "That forty acres of bottom land you were asking me about for a calf pasture," he said. "I've been thinking about it. I guess I could lease it to you all right."

"That's fine, Hank," Jeff Anderson said. "I can use it." He doffed his glass to Hank and downed his drink. It didn't taste right but he downed it anyway. The two cowboys started to scuffle and one of them collided with a table. It overturned with a crash.

"Please, Hank," the bartender said. "They're gonna get me in trouble—" His voice trailed off and his eyes widened. A man had come through the door. He stood there, blinking the bright sun out of his eyes. Jeff Anderson felt his heart start to pump heavily, slowly, high in his chest. "Morning, Mr. Svitac," the bartender mumbled.

Rudy Svitac stood in the doorway, a thick, dull man with black hair and brows that met across the bridge of his nose and a forehead that sloped. Jeff saw the rusty suit the man wore on Sundays, the suit that had faint soil stains on the knees because this man could not leave the soil alone, even on Sundays. He had to kneel down and feel the soil with his fingers, feeling the warmth and the life of it; for the soil was his book and his life and it was the only thing he understood completely and perhaps the only thing that understood him. He looked at Jeff, not at Hank Fetterman. "Is no good," Rudy Svitac said. "My son says I must talk to Billy Lang. I talk to Billy Lang but he does nothing. Is no good."

A thick silence settled in the room and the two cowboys who had

been scuffling quit it now and stood there looking at the farmer. Hank Fetterman said, "Say what's on your mind, Svitac."

"You broke my fence," Rudy Svitac said. "You drive your cows in my corn and spil my crop. All winter I wait to plant my crop and now is grown fine and you drive your cows in."

"Maybe you're mistaken, Svitac," Hank Fetterman said.

"My boy says is for judge to decide," Rudy Svitac said. "My boy tell me to go to Billy Lang and he will make a paper and judge will decide. My boy says is fair. Is America." Rudy Svitac stared unblinkingly. He shook his head slowly. "Is not so. I want my money. You broke my fence."

"You're a liar, Svitac," Hank Fetterman said. He moved away from the bar, slowly. He looked steadily at Jeff Anderson, then he glanced across the street toward the marshal's office. The door was still closed, the shade still drawn. Hank Fetterman smiled. He walked forward and gripped Rudy Svitac by the shirt front. For a moment he held the man that way, pulling him close, then he shoved and Rudy Svitac stumbled backward, out through the door, and his heel caught on a loose board in the sidewalk. He fell hard and for a long time he lay there, his dull steady eyes staring at Jeff Anderson; then he turned and pushed himself up and he stood there looking at the dust on his old suit. He dropped his head and looked at the dust and he reached with his fingers and touched it. One of Hank Fetterman's cowboys started to laugh.

Across the street Jeff Anderson saw the blind on the window of the marshal's office move aside and then drop back into place, and immediately the door opened and Billy Lang was hurrying across the street. He came directly to Rudy Svitac and put his hand on Svitac's arm and jerked him around. "What's going on here?" Billy Lang demanded.

"Svitac came in looking for trouble," Hank Fetterman said. "I threw him out." Hank was standing in the doorway, directly alongside Jeff. For a brief moment Hank Fetterman's amber eyes met Jeff's gaze and

Jeff saw the challenge. *If you don't like it, do something about it, Hank Fetterman was saying. I want to know how you stand in this thing and I want to know now. . . .*

There was a dryness in Jeff Anderson's mouth. He had backed Hank Fetterman down before; he could do it again. But for what? One hundred and fifty dollars a month and a chance to get killed? Jeff had had fifteen years of that. A man had a right to live his own life. He looked up toward the church and the doors were just opening and people were coming out to stand on the porch, a small block of humanity suddenly aware of trouble. Jeff saw his wife, Elaine, and he knew her hand was at her throat, twisting the fabric of her dress the way she did. He thought of the little ranch and of the things he and Elaine had planned for the future, and then he looked at Billy Lang and he knew Billy wasn't going to buck Hank Fetterman. So Jeff could make a stand, and it would be his own stand and he would be right back into it again just the way he had been for fifteen years. There was a thick line of perspiration on Jeff's upper lip. "That's the way it was, Billy," Jeff said.

He saw the quick smile cross Hank Fetterman's face, the dull acceptance and relief in Billy Lang's eyes. "Get out of town, Svitac," Billy Lang said. "I'm tired of your troublemaking. If Hank's cows got in your corn, it was an accident."

"Is no accident," Rudy Svitac said stubbornly. "Is for judge to decide. My son says—"

"It was an accident," Billy Lang said. "Make your fences stronger." He didn't look at Jeff. He glanced at Hank Fetterman and made his final capitulation. "Sorry it happened, Hank."

For a long moment Rudy Svitac stared at Billy Lang, at the star on Billy's vest, remembering that this star somehow had a connection with the stars in the flag. His son Anton had explained it, saying that Jeff Anderson said it was so, so it must be so. But it wasn't so. Hank Fetterman wasn't in jail. They weren't going to do anything about the ruined corn. The skin wrinkled between Rudy Svitac's eyes and there

was perspiration on his face and his lips moved thickly but no sound came out. He could not understand. Thirteen years he had lived in this America, but still he could not understand. His son had tried to tell him the things they taught in the schools and the things Jeff Anderson said were so; but Rudy had his soil to work and his crops to plant, and when a man's back was tired his head did not work so good. Rudy Svitac knew only that if the Jimson weed grew in the potato patch, you cut it out. And if the wild morning-glory climbed the corn, then the wild morning-glory must be pulled out by the roots. No one came to do these things for a man. A man did these chores himself. He turned and walked solidly up the street toward where he had left his spring wagon by the church.

His wife, Mary, was there, a thick, tired woman who never smiled nor ever complained, and watching them, Jeff saw Anton, their son, a boy of twelve with an old man's face, a boy who had always believed every word Jeff Anderson said. Jeff saw young Anton looking down the street toward him and he remembered the boy's serious brown eyes and the thick black hair that always stood out above his ears and lay rebelliously far down his neck. He remembered the hundred times he had talked to young Anton, patiently explaining things so Anton would understand, learning his own beliefs from the process of explaining them in simple words. And Anton would listen and then repeat to his parents in Bohemian, telling them this was so because Jeff Anderson said it was so. A bright boy with an unlimited belief in the future, in a household where there was no future. At times it seemed to Jeff almost as if God had looked upon Rudy and Mary Svitac and wanted to compensate in some way, so he had given them Anton.

Jeff saw Rudy reaching into the bed of the wagon. He saw Mary protest once; then Mary stood there, resigned, and now the boy had his father's arm and there was a brief struggle. The father shook the boy off, and now Rudy had a rifle and he was coming back down

the street, walking slowly, down the middle of the street, the rifle in the crook of his arm.

Billy Lang moved. He met Rudy halfway, and he held out his hand. Jeff saw Rudy hesitate, take two more steps; and now Billy was saying something and Rudy dropped his head and let his chin lay on his chest. The boy came running up, and he took the rifle out of his father's hand and the crowd in front of the saloon expelled its breath. Jeff felt the triumph come into Hank Fetterman. He didn't need to look at the man. He could feel it.

The slow, wicked anger was inside Hank Fetterman, goaded by his ambition, his sense of power, and the catlike eagerness was in his eyes. "No bohunk tells lies about me and gets away with it," he murmured. "No bohunk comes after me with a gun and gets a second chance." His hand dropped and rested on the butt of his holstered six-shooter, and then the thumb of his left hand touched Jeff Anderson's arm. "Have a drink with me, Jeff?"

Jeff saw Elaine standing in front of the church and he could feel her anxiety reaching through the hot, troubled air. And he saw the boy there in the street, the gun in his hand, his eyes, bewildered, searching Jeff Anderson's face. "I reckon I won't have time, Hank," Jeff said. He walked up the street and now the feeling of being two people was strong in him, and there was a responsibility to Billy Lang that he couldn't deny. He had talked Billy into taking this job. It was a lonely job, and there was never a lonelier time than when a man was by himself in the middle of the street. He came close to Billy and he said, "Look, Billy, if you can take a gun away from one man you can take a gun away from another."

Billy looked at him. Billy's hands were shaking, and there was sweat on his face. "A two-year-old kid could have taken that gun away from Rudy, and you know it," he said. He reached up swiftly and unpinned the badge from his vest. He handed it across. "You want it?"

Jeff looked at that familiar piece of metal and he could feel the boy's eyes on him; and then he looked up and he saw Elaine there on the

church porch, and he thought of his own dreams and of the plans he and Elaine had made for the future. "No, Billy," he said, "I don't want it."

"Then let it lay there," Billy Lang said. He dropped the badge into the dust of the street and hurried off, a man who had met defeat and accepted it, a man who could now go back to the clothing store and sell shirts and suits and overalls because that was the job he could do best. There was no indignity in Billy Lang's defeat. He had taken a role that he wasn't equipped to handle, and he was admitting it.

The boy said, "Mr. Jeff, I don't understand. You told me once——"

"We'll talk about it later, Anton," Jeff said. "Tell your dad to go home." He walked swiftly toward Elaine, swallowing against the sourness in his throat.

They drove out of town, Jeff and Elaine Anderson, toward their own home and their own life; and now the full heat of the day lay on the yellow slopes and the dry air crackled with the smell of dust and the cured grass, and the leather seat of the buggy was hot to the touch. A mile out of town Jeff stopped in the shade of a sycamore and put up the top. He moved with dull efficiency, pausing momentarily to glance up as Hank Fetterman and his two riders passed on their way back to the ranch. He got back into the buggy and unwrapped the lines from the whip stock and Elaine said, "If there's anything you want to say, Jeff——"

How could he say it? He couldn't, for the thing that was most in his mind had nothing to do with the matter at hand, and yet it had everything to do with it and it couldn't be explained. For he was thinking not of Hank Fetterman nor of Rudy Svitac, but of a colored lithograph, a town promotion picture that had once hung on every wall in this town. It showed wide, tree-lined streets, a tremendous townhouse with a flag half as large as the building flying from a mast, and lesser pennants, all mammoth, rippling from every building. Tiny men in cutaway coats and top hats leisurely strolled the avenues, and

high-wheeled bicycles rolled elegantly past gleaming black Victorias on the street of exclusive shops, while three sleek trains chuffed impatiently at the station. The railroad had put on a large land promotion around here when the road was first built. They had offered excursion trips free so that people could see the charms of New Canaan. They had handed out these lithos of the proposed town by the bushel. For a while New Canaan bustled with activity, and men bought town lots staked out in buffalo grass. And then the bubble burst and New Canaan settled back to what it was before—a place called Alkali at the edge of open cattle range. And young Anton Svitac had come to see Marshal Jeff Anderson for the first time and he had come about that picture—

Jeff remembered how the boy had looked that day, no more than six years old, his eyes too large for his old man's face, his voice a mirror of the seriousness of thought that was so much a part of him. He had come to Jeff Anderson because Jeff Anderson was authority, and already young Anton had learned that in America authority was for everyone. "My father and mother do not understand," he said. "They do not speak English. . . ." He unrolled the lithograph and put his finger on it, and then indicated the town of Alkali with a spread hand. "Is not the same," he said. "Is not so."

There were dreams in that boy's eyes, and they were about to be snuffed out; and Jeff Anderson didn't want it to happen. "Sure it's so, Anton," he heard himself saying. "It's not what it is today; it's what's going to be tomorrow, see?" He remembered the trouble he had had with the words, and then it was all there and he was telling it to Anton, telling it so this boy could go home and tell it to a work-bent man and a tired woman. "It's like America, see? Some of the things aren't right where you can touch them. Maybe some of the things you see are ugly. But the picture is always there to look at, and you keep thinking about the picture, and you keep working and making things better all the time, see? America isn't something you cut off like a piece of cake and say, 'There it is.' You keep on looking

ahead to what it's going to be, and you keep working hard for it all the time, and you keep right on knowing it's going to be good because you've got the picture there to look at. You never stop working and say, 'Now the job is done,' because it never is. You see that, Anton?"

The boy hadn't smiled. This was a big thing and a boy didn't smile about big things. He rolled the lithograph carefully. "I see," he said. "Is good. I will tell my father. We will keep the picture. . . ."

Those were Jeff Anderson's thoughts, and how could he tell them, even to Elaine? For they had so little to do with the matter at hand and yet they had everything to do with it.

And Elaine, looking at her husband now, respected his silence. She remembered the three long years she was engaged to this man before they were married, years in which she had come to know him so well because she loved him so well. She knew him even better now. He was a man who was born to handle trouble, and a piece of tin on his vest or a wife at his side couldn't change the man he was born to be. She knew that and she didn't want to change him, but a woman couldn't help being what she was, either, and a woman could be afraid, especially at a time like this, when there was so much ahead. She wanted to help him. "Maybe the Svitacs would be better off someplace else," she said. "They never have made the place pay."

And that was exactly the same argument he had used on himself, but now, hearing it put into words, he didn't like the sound of it and he wanted to argue back. His voice was rough. "I reckon they look on it as home," he said. "The boy was born there. I reckon it sort of ties you to a place if your first one is born there."

She closed her eyes tightly, knowing that she was no longer one person but three, knowing the past was gone and the future would always be ahead, and it was her job to help secure that future as much as it was Jeff's job. She opened her eyes and looked at her husband, still afraid, for that was her way; but somehow prouder and older now. She folded her hands in her lap and the nervousness was

gone. "I suppose we'll feel that way, too, Jeff," she said. "It will always be our town after our baby is born here. I talked to the doctor yesterday——"

He felt the hard knot in the pit of his stomach. Then the coldness ran up his spine, and it was surprise and fear and a great swelling pride; and the feeling crawled up his neck, and every hair on his head was an individual hair, and the hard lump was in his throat—— He moved on the seat, suddenly concerned for her comfort. "You feel all right, honey? Is there anything I can do?"

She didn't laugh at him any more than Anton had laughed at him that day in the office. She reached over and put her hand on his hand, and she smiled. As they drove down the lane the great pride was inside him, swelling against him until he felt that the seat of the buggy was no longer large enough to contain him. He helped her out of the buggy, his motions exaggerated in their kindness; and he took her arm and helped her up the front steps.

The coolness of the night still lingered in the little ranch house, for she had left the shades drawn; and now she went to the west windows and lifted the shades slightly, and she could see down the lane and across the small calf pasture where a thin drift of dust from their buggy wheels still lingered. There was a loneliness to Sunday after church, a stillness on the ranch. She glanced toward the barn and Jeff was unharnessing the mare and turning her into the corral, his back broad, his movements deliberate; and she saw him stand for a moment and look down the creek toward where Rudy Svitic's place cornered on Hank Fetterman's huge, unfenced range.

He came into the house later, into the cool living room, and he sat down in his big chair with a gusty sigh and pulled off his boots and stretched his legs. "Good to be home," he said. "Good to have nothing to do." He raised his eyes to meet hers and they both knew he was lying. There was always something to do.

The moment he was sure she knew, it was easier for him, but he

still had to be positive that she understood that now it was different. Once he made this move there would be no turning back. She had to see that. An hour ago the town had been a town, nothing more; and if certain merchants felt business would be better with Hank Fetterman running things, that was their business; and if Billy Lang wanted to go along with that thinking or go back to the clothing store, that was his business. Jeff Anderson hadn't needed the town. It was a place to shop and nothing more, and a man could shop as well with Hank Fetterman running things as he could with Jeff Anderson running things. But now, suddenly, that had changed, and there was tomorrow to think about, and it was exactly as he had explained it to Anton. Now, one day soon, Jeff Anderson might be explaining the same things to his own son; and a man had to show his son that he believed what he said, for if he didn't there was nothing left—"I was wrong about Billy Lang," Jeff Anderson said. "He's not going to stand up to Hank Fetterman."

She looked into his eyes and saw the deep seriousness and knew his every thought, and in this moment they were closer than they had ever been before; and she remembered thinking so many times of men and women who had been married for fifty years or more and of how they always looked alike. She said, "I have some curtains I promised Mary Svitac. Will you take them to her when you go?"

She didn't trust herself to say more and she didn't give him a lingering embrace as a woman might who was watching her man go off to danger; but she pretended to be busy and turned her head so that his lips just brushed her temple, and it was as casual as if he were only going to his regular day's work. "And thank her for the pickles," she said.

He stalked out of the house as if he didn't like having his Sunday disturbed by such woman nonsense, but when he was halfway to the barn his stride lengthened and she saw the stiffness of his back and the set of his shoulders. She sat down then and cried.

Anton, the boy, was pouring sour milk into a trough for the pigs when Jeff rode into the Svitac yard. The world could collapse but pigs had to be fed, and the boy was busy with his thoughts and did not see Jeff ride up. The door of the little house that was half soddy, half dugout, opened, and Mary Svitac called something in Bohemian. The boy looked up, startled, and Jeff smiled. "Will you ride my horse over and tie him in the shade, Anton?"

The flood of hope that filled the boy's eyes was embarrassing to a man, and Jeff dismounted quickly, keeping his head turned. He took the bundle of curtains from behind the saddle and handed the reins to the boy; then walked on to the sod house, where Mary Svitac stood, the shawl tied under her chin framing her round, expressionless face. He handed her the curtains. "Those pickles you gave us were fine, Mrs. Svitac. Elaine wanted me to bring these curtains over."

Mary Svitac let her rough fingers caress the curtain material. "I will give you all the pickles," she said. "We don't need the curtains. We don't stay here no more."

Rudy's thick voice came from the dark interior of the sod house; and now Jeff could see him there, sitting in a chair, a man dulled with work and disappointments, a man with a limited knowledge of English who had come to a new country with a dream, and found grasshoppers and drought and blizzards and neighbors who tried to drive him out. He looked up. "We don't stay," he said.

"Can I come in for a minute, Mrs. Svitac?" Jeff asked.

"I make coffee," she said.

He stooped to pass through the low door, and he took off his hat and sat down. Now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness of the room he saw the big lithograph there on the wall, the only decoration. Rudy Svitac stared unblinkingly at the floor, and a tear ran unashamed down the side of his nose. "We don't stay," he said.

"Sure, Rudy," Jeff Anderson said softly. "You stay."

Mary Svitac started to cry. There were no tears, for the land had taken even that away from her. There were just sobs—dry, choking

sounds as she made the coffee—but they were woman sounds, made for her man; and she was willing to give up fifteen years of work if her man would be safe. “They will fight with us,” she said. “They put cows in my Rudolph’s corn. They tear down our fence. Soon they come to break my house. Is too much. Rudolph does not know fight. Rudolph is for plant the ground and play violin——”

“You stay, Rudy,” Jeff Anderson said. “The law will take care of you. I promise you that.”

Rudy Svitac shook his ponderous head. “Law is for Hank Fetterman,” he said. “Is not for me.”

“It’s not so, Rudy,” Jeff said. “You ask Anton. He knows.”

“I ask Anton,” Rudy Svitac said. “He says I am right. Law is for Hank Fetterman.”

The boy came to the door and stood there, peering inside the room. His face was white, drawn with worry; but the hope was still in his eyes and a confidence was there. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. Jeff could hear the sound of horses approaching. . . . Jeff stood up and the feeling that was in him was an old and familiar feeling—a tightening of all his muscles. He went to the corner of the room and took Rudy Svitac’s rifle from its place, and he levered in a shell, leaving the rifle at full cock. He stepped through the door then, and he put his hand on the boy’s head. “You explain again to your father about the law,” he said. “You know, Anton, like we talked before.”

“I know,” Anton Svitac said.

Jeff stepped swiftly through the door into the sunlight, and he saw Hank Fetterman and the same two riders who had been with him at the saloon coming toward the soddy. Only Hank was armed, and this could be handy later, when Hank talked to the judge. *If we had expected trouble all three of us would have been armed, Judge, Hank Fetterman could say.* . . . They rode stiffly, holding their horses in. Jeff Anderson stood the cocked rifle by the fence post, placing it carefully. He pushed his hat back on his head and felt the sun on his

back as he leaned there, one foot on a fence rail, watching the pigs drink the sour milk.

He knew when the riders were directly beside him, and he turned, his elbows leaning on the top rail of the fence behind him. His hat was pushed back but his face was in shade, for he had moved to where he was between the sun and the riders. Hank Fetterman said, "We're seeing a lot of each other, neighbor."

"Looks that way," Jeff said.

Hank Fetterman quieted his horse with a steady hand. His eyes never left Jeff Anderson's face. "I asked you once today if you was a friend of the bohunks," he said. "Maybe I better ask it again."

"Maybe it depends on what you've got on your mind, Hank."

"The bohunk's been eating my beef," Fetterman said. "I'm sick of it."

"You sure that's it, Hank?" Jeff asked quietly. "Or is it just that there's something that eats on you and makes you want to tear down things other folks have taken years to build up?"

There were small white patches on either side of Hank Fetterman's mouth. "I said the bohunk was eating my beef," Hank Fetterman said. His lips didn't move. "You doubting my word?"

"No," Jeff said. "I'm calling you a liar."

He saw the smoldering anger in Hank Fetterman, the sore, whisky-nursed anger, and then the cattleman felt the full shock as the flat insult in Jeff's voice reached through to him. He cursed and half twisted in the saddle, blinking directly into the sun. "You forgetting you ain't a lawman any more?" he demanded.

"You decide, Hank," Jeff said.

They looked at each other, two men who had killed before and knew the meaning of it, two men who respected a gun and understood a gun. They said nothing and yet they spoke a silent language, and the man who had been a lawman said, *I'm telling you to back down, Fetterman*, and the man who wanted to be king said, *You'll have to be big enough to make me*. No actual words, and yet they knew; and they

faced each other with muscles tense and faces drawn, and appeared at ease. Jeff Anderson had dealt himself into the game, and he had checked the bet.

Hank Fetterman saw the rifle by the post. He knew it was cocked and loaded. He wondered if Jeff Anderson was actually as quick and as accurate as men said he was; and because he was Hank Fetterman he had to know, because if he backed down now it was over for him and he knew it. He jerked his horse around, trying to avoid that direct glare of the sun, and he made his decision. His hand went for his gun.

Jeff Anderson saw the move coming. It seemed to him that he had plenty of time. He had placed the rifle carefully and now he held it, hip-high, gripping it with one hand, tilting it up and pulling the trigger all at the same time. He didn't hear the sound of the rifle's explosion. You never did, he remembered; but he saw the thin film of gun smoke and he saw Hank Fetterman's mouth drop open, saw the man clawing at his chest. He didn't feel the sickness. Not yet—

Time passed as if through a film of haze, and nothing was real. Then they were gone and a canvas was stretched over the still form of Hank Fetterman and Rudy Svitac was whipping his team toward town to get the coroner. Now the sickness came to Jeff Anderson. He stood by the barn, trembling, and he heard the boy come up behind him. The boy said, "This was in the street in town, Mr. Anderson." The boy held out the tin star. "I told my father how the law was for everybody in America. Now he knows."

Jeff Anderson took the tin star and dropped it into his pocket.

Elaine saw him through the front window. She had been watching a long time and she had been praying, silently; and now she said, "Thank God," and she went and sat down, and she was like that when he came into the room. She wanted to ask him about it, but her throat kept choking; and then he was kneeling there, his head in her lap,

and he was crying deep inside, not making a sound. "It's all right, Jeff," she said. "It's all right."

For that was the thing he had to know—that it was all right with her. He had to know that she loved him for the man he was and not for the man he had tried to become. He couldn't change, any more than Billy Lang could change. She had never told him to take off his gun—not in words—but she had wanted him to, and he had understood, and he had tried. No woman could ask for greater love than that a man try to change himself. And no woman need be afraid when she had such love. She thought of young Anton Svitac and of her own who was to be, and she was calm and sure.

A long time later she picked up Jeff's coat and laid it across her arm. The tin star fell to the floor. For a long time she looked at it, then she bent her knees and reached down and picked it up and put it back into the coat pocket. She went into the bedroom then and hung the coat carefully. From the bureau drawer she took a clean, white pleated-front shirt and laid it out where he could see it. Marshal Jeff Anderson had worn a clean, white pleated-front shirt to the office on Monday morning for as long back as she could remember. She didn't expect him to change his habits now.

BLOOD ON THE SUN

THE 1955 SPUR AWARD WINNER

Thomas Thompson

In June 1955, Tommy Thompson hit the jackpot by winning his second WWA Spur—and doing it in his own home town, Santa Rosa, California, where he was chairman of the WWA convention committee. The winning story was "Blood on the Sun," from American Magazine. "With two Spurs," said Tommy, "all I need now is a horse." WWA didn't get him a horse, but a couple of years later his fellow writers did put him in the saddle as WWA president. This Spur-winning Tommy is a genial guy who is prouder of being a granddaddy than he is of his Spurs, his presidency, or his authorship of such successes as Bitter Water, Brand of a Man, Rawhide Rider, and Saddle the Wind.

We hadn't expected him. He stood there in the doorway of Doc Isham's store, his lips thin and tight. He looked more like the trouble man I had first figured him to be than like The Preacher we had come to know. He was built like a cowboy, tall and lean-hipped. He was about thirty-five years old, I'd judge. It was hard to tell, and he wasn't a man to say. With all his gentleness, he had never quite lost the cold steadiness that had been in his eyes the night he first came to

Copyright 1953 by Thomas Thompson.

our valley with a bullet in his chest and more blood on his saddle than there was in his body. He had been a dead man that night, but Grace Beaumont had refused to let him die.

That coldness was in his eyes now as he looked at us, and it bothered me. It was those eyes and his hands, long and tapered and almost soft, that had made me pick him as a gun fighter. "Howdy, neighbors," he said. "I hear you've decided to fight Corby Lane." His voice was soft, but everybody heard it and they all stopped talking.

We were all there. Jim Peterson, tall and blond and nervous, thinking of the bride he had left at home. Fedor Marios, with his great mat of kinky white hair; Mel Martin, the oldest man in the valley. Ted Beaumont was down at the end of the counter with the two farmers from Rincón Valley. They were the ones who had come across the ridge to tell us there was no use trying to deal with Corby Lane. They had tried it, and Corby Lane had moved his sheep through their valley and wiped out their crops completely.

Frank Medlin, the young cowboy who worked for the Walking R over at Seventeen Mile, was also there. It was Frank Medlin who had gotten Ted Beaumont into his latest trouble. The two of them had served six months in jail on a cattle-rustling charge just a few months back.

Ted moved away from the counter, walking a little unsteady. "So help me," he said, "it's The Preacher come to pray!"

I keep calling him The Preacher. He wasn't one, really. His name was Johnny Calaveras, but us folks here in the valley had nearly forgotten that. To us he was The Preacher. It wasn't that he actually held church. It was just in the way he looked at things, calm and peaceful, always expecting the best. That's all right when you're fighting something like weather or grasshoppers, but it wouldn't work against Corby Lane and his hired gunmen, and nobody knew it any better than I did. I had been a sheriff in a boom town before I married and settled down. I knew about men like Corby Lane.

The Preacher looked at Ted, remembering that this boy was Grace

Beaumont's brother, and then he looked around the room, measuring every man, and there wasn't a man there who didn't grow restless under that gaze.

"Here's The Preacher," Mel Martin said needlessly. "I reckon that makes all of us." His lie was there in his voice. We hadn't asked The Preacher to join us. We didn't figure he'd want to.

The two farmers from Rincón Valley were standing between Mel Martin and Ted Beaumont. Ted pushed one of them away roughly and stood there peering at The Preacher. "Let's get things out in the open, Preacher," Ted said. "You're always mighty full of high-flown advice, especially for me. I just want you to know that I'm running this show."

The Preacher didn't show any signs of how he had taken that. "Which end of the show you running, Ted?" he said. "The fighting end?"

There was a lot of nervousness and tension in that room. The Preacher's remark struck everybody funny, just as a remark will sometimes when men are keyed to the breaking point. We all laughed, and the color came into Ted Beaumont's cheeks. But Ted wasn't a boy who backed down easy. He took a step closer to The Preacher and he let his eyes run over the man. "Where's your gun, Preacher?" Ted said.

The Preacher stood there, and I saw the half smile on his lips; it was the kind of smile I never like to see on a man. There was bad blood between The Preacher and Ted Beaumont. I caught myself wondering if that was the reason Grace Beaumont and The Preacher had never married, and I figured it must be. They had been in love ever since Grace had nursed him back to health from that gunshot wound he had when he came into the valley.

"I don't wear a gun when I'm talking to my friends, Ted," The Preacher said easily.

It made Ted mad. He was a handsome kid, stocky-built. He had wavy blond hair. He was just twenty, but he had done a man's work

from the day his dad had been gored to death by a bull four years back, and all of us accepted him as a man. Ted had set himself up as a sort of leader here, and that was all right with most of us. We were going to need his kind of fire before this day was over.

There wasn't a man in the valley wouldn't have been glad to forget the scrapes the kid had been in, even if only for his sister Grace's sake. But Ted wouldn't let you. He always looked like he was mad at the world. Now he got that nasty twist to his lips and said, "What you gonna do, Preacher? Sing church songs to them sheep?"

When you're standing there thinking that within a few hours you'll maybe be killing a fellow human being or getting killed yourself, that kind of talk sounds childish. We all felt it. The Preacher said, "Why not? I've heard you and Frank Medlin singin' to cows on night herd. How do you know sheep don't like music?"

The way he said it made Ted look a little foolish. The muscles of his face tightened. Until The Preacher had come in nobody had questioned any of Ted's decisions, and Ted didn't want his decisions questioned now. He said, "Look, Preacher. We've decided on a line. They go one step beyond it and maybe we'll club a few sheep. Maybe we'll hang a few shepherders." He slapped the gun he had strapped around his middle. "We don't need no sermon from you. This gun will do the talkin'."

The Preacher gave him a long look and then deliberately turned away. He spoke to those two farmers from the other valley. "What happened in Rincón?" he asked.

The two Rincón men started to talk at once, stopped, and then one went ahead. "There's six Mexican herders with the band," the farmer said, "but they won't cause no trouble. It's this Corby Lane and the three men with him. They're gun fighters, neighbor, and they come on ahead of the sheep."

"We know the setup, Preacher," Ted Beaumont said. His voice was ugly.

The kid was getting under my skin. "The Preacher ain't heard it," I said. "Let him hear it."

"Why?" Ted Beaumont said, turning to me. "So he'll know what verse in the Bible to read? Let's get out of here. I warned you last month a couple of us had to put on guns and fix a boundary if we wanted to keep this valley clear of sheep."

"You mean you and Frank Medlin decided you needed an excuse to wear guns?" The Preacher said.

"If Frank and me are the only two not afraid to wear guns, yes," Ted said bluntly.

The Preacher shook his head. "You're not tough, Ted," he said. "I've told you that before. You're just mixed up."

I saw the wicked anger in Ted's eyes and it wasn't a man's anger. It was the flaring temper of a kid. "I told you I'd handle this without your sermons, Preacher," Ted said.

"You're not going to handle it, Ted," The Preacher said. "Not you or anyone here, the way you got it laid out."

I kept my mouth shut. I liked The Preacher. I wanted to give him his chance. It was old Mel Martin who bristled. "Hold on a minute," Mel said. "There's gettin' to be too much palaver."

"Looks to me like you need some palaver," The Preacher said. "You're gonna expose yourself, let Corby Lane know just how many men you got and what you plan—"

"You got a better idea, Preacher?" Mel said.

"I have," The Preacher said. "Let me go up there and talk to Corby Lane."

It surprised all of us and there was a loud hoot of derision from Ted Beaumont. "You and who else, Preacher?" Ted scoffed. "You and God, maybe?"

I saw the brittle hardness come into The Preacher's eyes, and I could see him fighting to control his temper. "A man could do worse than picking God for a saddle partner, Ted," The Preacher said. "But I figured on taking one man with me."

"Who you want to take with you, Preacher?" Ted said, his voice sarcastic. "Old Fedor, maybe?"

The deep red of Fedor Marios' complexion, turned to a saddle tan and I thought he would hit Ted. He didn't have a chance. The Preacher's voice was so soft we barely heard it, but it filled the room like a solid block: "Why don't you come along with me, Ted?"

The color ran out of Ted Beaumont's cheeks. I looked at The Preacher, and I was looking at a man who had fought a losing battle with his temper. He hadn't planned on taking Ted Beaumont up there with him. He had planned on taking me, maybe. I was his best friend. But a man could stand just so much. Even a man like The Preacher. Ever since he had known Grace Beaumont, The Preacher had tried to be friendly with her brother. He had taken things from Ted no other man would have taken.

I saw the conflict in Ted Beaumont's face. It was one thing to go up to that sheep camp with ten men back of him. It was another to go it alone with a man like The Preacher. I saw the conflict and I saw Ted make his decision. It was the wrong one. He figured The Preacher was bluffing and he was going to call that bluff.

"Sure, Preacher," Ted said. "I'd like to see you run. What are we waiting for?"

"I got a little business to attend to," The Preacher said. "I'll be back in five minutes and we'll go."

"You sure you'll get back, Preacher?" Ted said.

The Preacher had started toward the door. He stopped and turned. In his eyes was an anger so great that I knew it wasn't aimed at Ted Beaumont alone. It was a bigger thing. An anger toward the thing that made Ted Beaumont the way he was. I couldn't think of the man as The Preacher any more. He was Johnny Calaveras again, a man who had ridden in out of the night with a bullet in his chest. I wouldn't have wanted to cross him right then. He looked at me and said, "You better come with me, Luke, to see I get back all right." He went outside and mounted and I followed him.

He wanted to see Grace and tell her what had happened. That's the way Johnny and Grace were with each other. He headed for the schoolhouse up at the end of the street and I followed.

Grace must have expected him. She had let the kids out for an early recess and I saw her standing by the oak tree out by the pump.

She was one of those women who became really beautiful after you knew them. The trouble Ted had caused her showed in her eyes and in the way she smiled, but the grief she had known was a part of her beauty. Johnny swung down easy and walked over to her, and she put out both her hands and he took them. I loosened my reins and let my horse crop at the grass. I didn't want to listen to what they had to say. It was none of my business.

I glanced at them a couple of times, and they were standing there close together, still holding hands, The Preacher tall and straight and serious.

The kids had spotted them now and they were all standing there, staring like a bunch of calves at a corral fence.

Maybe the wind changed. Maybe Johnny spoke louder. Anyway, I heard him, though I wasn't trying to listen. "Maybe I could have handled it without a gun, the way we planned," he said. "Maybe I couldn't have. I won't risk it with Ted along."

Suddenly it was as if the two of them had reached the end of a dream and they were all alone in the world, and it wasn't the world as they had wanted it, but the world as it was. I saw Johnny bend his head swiftly and kiss her, and I heard those blasted kids giggle, and it wasn't anything to giggle about.

I saw Grace break away from Johnny's embrace, reluctantly and yet quickly, and then she left the schoolyard and went across the street to the Perkins house, where the schoolteachers always lived. She walked rapidly. When she came back out of the house she had a folded belt and a holstered gun in her hand. She came across the street and handed it to Johnny Calaveras, and I knew it was the same gun he had worn into the valley. No one had seen it since that first night.

"I'll take care of him, Grace," I heard him say. "Maybe it's best this way." He buckled on the gun belt. The dark-brown stains of Johnny's own blood were still on the leather. I felt old and tired and somehow useless, and then I saw Grace Beaumont's eyes and I saw the worry and the end of a dream in them. I didn't have to make any decision. I thought of my own wife and of the love I had seen between Johnny and Grace, a love that was maybe ending here today.

I rode over close to them. "I'm going, too, Johnny," I said.

"I didn't ask you," he said flatly.

"You couldn't stop me."

We rode back to the store, and everyone was out in front. Ted Beaumont was in the street, mounted, a little uncertain. He said, "I see Luke didn't let you get away from him."

Suddenly I felt sorry for Ted Beaumont. He was nothing but a darn-fool kid itching to get his fingers on a gun. I had seen the signs before. A gun could be a dangerous thing with a kid like Ted. I wondered if Johnny had known what it was like to want a gun more than anything else.

"Get this, kid," Johnny said, and now his eyes were holding Ted. "From here on out I give the orders. Make up your mind to it or drop out now."

I saw Ted bluster, wanting to give a scoffing answer, but that gun, the new look about The Preacher, held him from it. And he couldn't back down now. He said, "What's holding us up?"

"Nothing," Johnny Calaveras said. "Not a thing."

The sheep were an undistinguishable blot against the brown grass, and as Johnny and Ted and I climbed the hill the animals took form and shape and became separate bunches. We could see the herders, men on foot, and their dogs stretched in shady patches, tongues lolling, ears alert. The herders, half asleep under the trees, hadn't noticed us yet. We couldn't be seen from Corby Lane's camp because there was a shoulder of the hill between us and the camp. Ted looked at me.

There was an amused, indulgent swagger in his glance, but there were white patches at the corners of his mouth, and I knew he had been watching Johnny Calaveras.

The only thing Johnny had done was to strap on that gun and take off his gloves, but that made the difference. He wasn't The Preacher any more. I could see his right hand just hanging limp at his side almost as if his elbow were broken. Johnny Calaveras was a gun fighter. It was marked on him as clearly as if it had been printed in red letters.

I watched his right hand opening and closing, loosening fingers that had been long unused in their deadly business. I saw Ted Beaumont's lip move, and I knew the fear he was beginning to feel. I had felt it myself.

We had dropped down into a draw, out of sight of the sheep, and Johnny Calaveras reined up sharply. He didn't waste words. "I know Corby Lane," he said. "I can ride into his camp and talk to him without getting shot at. What good it will do, I don't know, but that's the way it has to be." A little of the harshness went out of his voice. "If it should come to a fight," he said, "I want the odds on our side."

He was talking straight to Ted now. There was something cold and deathlike about Johnny's voice. I felt as if I were watching the opening of a grave.

"A gun fighter that stays alive," Johnny said, "never gives a sucker a break. Luke, you ride up this draw and come in behind the camp. Keep your ears open, and don't make a move unless I give the sign, but don't be afraid to shoot if I do."

I think he was trying to make Ted see that there was nothing glamorous about gun fighting. It was brutal stuff with nothing of trust or decency about it. I looked at Ted, wondering if he had seen through this, and I knew he hadn't. He still had that cocky swagger in his eyes, but those white patches at the corners of his mouth were more noticeable. "You want me to ride along with Luke to cover for you?" he said.

"No," Johnny said. "I want you to come along with me. Maybe Luke couldn't hold you if you started to run."

That was like slapping the kid in the face, but it was a smart move. Ted Beaumont would be twice as determined now. He was a little scared, and a little anger right now wouldn't hurt him. I headed on down the draw, riding slow enough not to attract attention, and I saw Johnny and Ted ride up on the ridge to within full sight of the sheep camp.

Luck was with me and my timing was perfect. I came up behind the sheep camp just as Johnny and Ted rode in. The three men standing there by the oak didn't even suspect I was around. They were too busy watching Johnny and Ted, and I was able to dismount and move up into the brush not fifty feet behind them.

One of the men looked more like a shepherd than he did a gunman, but he kept his hand near his gun as he slouched there against the tree. Another was thick through, a brutal-looking man with shaggy hair and crossed gun belts and blue lips.

The other gunman was slender to the point of being emaciated, and at first I picked this one to be Corby Lane. His clothes seemed to hang on his frame. His shirt moved in the imperceptible breeze, and he gave the impression that if his clothes were removed he would be revealed as a skeleton strung together with spring wire. "You boys just ridin'?" he said. "Or did you want something?"

"I want to talk to Corby Lane," Johnny Calaveras said slowly.

The thin man shifted his position slightly and I felt my finger tightening on the trigger of my rifle. "Corby's taking a siesta," the thin man said. "You can say it to me."

"I'll wait for Corby," Johnny said, smiling. It was a cold, thin smile.

I had watched this kind of thing before. The thin man was measuring Johnny, seeing the things I had seen. He had recognized Johnny for what he was, or for what he had been in the past, and the thin man

was smart enough to take it easy. There wouldn't be any fast gunplay. Both men had respect for the damage a .45 slug could do.

"You might have quite a wait," the thin man said. He had glanced across the fire they had burning and beyond to the tent that stood under the oaks.

"I got time," Johnny said.

The other two gunmen were standing back, letting the thin man do all the talking. Johnny and the thin man sparred, making small talk, each one looking for a weak spot in the other. It would have gone on like that until Johnny found the opening he wanted, except for Ted Beaumont.

I had been so busy watching the play between Johnny and the thin man and keeping my rifle ready on the other two gunmen that I had nearly forgotten Ted. He had behaved himself up to this point and any fool could see what Johnny was doing, stalling, waiting for Corby Lane to show. But I had misjudged Ted just the way I had misjudged The Preacher. Ted said, "We're wasting time, Preacher." Every eye except Johnny's turned toward him.

I saw Johnny tense. "I'll handle this," he snapped.

"You talk too much, Preacher," Ted said. "We come here to run these sheepers out. I do my talking with this!"

Ted's hand slapped down awkwardly and his fingers closed around the butt of his gun. Telling it now, I can see every move. I couldn't then. I threw myself out of the brush, my rifle hip level, and I yelled out for them to throw up their hands. I saw the thin man drop into a half crouch and I saw his gun half clear leather, and then Johnny was sailing out of his saddle and he landed on Ted Beaumont's shoulders. The kid went down hard, the gun spinning out of its holster.

I rammed my rifle barrel against the thin man's back and I heard his grunt of pain. The thin man let his half-drawn gun slip from his fingers, and Johnny had snapped to his feet, his cocked gun in his hand, and he was covering that tent beyond the fire, his eyes sweeping the other two gunmen, warning them.

Johnny didn't even look at Ted. "You're so anxious to get the feel of that gun," Johnny said across his shoulder, "pick it up and see if you can keep them covered." The kid did as he was told.

I knew what had happened to Ted and I felt like taking a club to him. It was as Johnny said. Ted was too blasted anxious to get the feel of his gun, and if he had gotten away with his crazy plan he would have figured himself quite a gunman. I was glad he had failed. I saw him standing there, the wind half knocked out of him, and for a minute I was afraid he was going to be sick. The gunmen had raised their hands and I moved around behind them and took their guns.

The thin man laughed, a high, wild sound. "Where I come from, punk," he said to Ted, "you wouldn't live to be as tall as you think you are."

Ted swallowed hard but he kept his gun trained on the thin man.

Johnny moved over toward the tent. He kept his gun in his hand and he walked toward the door of the tent, walking slowly on the balls of his feet, making no sound. When he was near the tent he moved to one side and he stood there, his hand gripping the butt of the gun. "Come out, Corby," he said softly. "It's Johnny Calaveras."

The flap of the tent moved aside and a man came out. He was round and fat. His eyes were a striking pale blue and his skin looked as if it had never seen the sun. He reminded me of a well-fed snake that had lived too long in the dark. He stood there on his thick legs and stared, his tongue darting in and out. "Is it you, Johnny?" he asked.

"You want to touch me, Corby?" Johnny said. "You want to feel the flesh and bone?"

"Johnny, I figured——"

"You figured I was dead," Johnny said. "Otherwise I would have come after you before this."

Corby Lane looked at his gunmen lined up there under Ted's and my guns. I saw that Corby Lane was a man who was weak without

guns to back him up. "Johnny," he said, "it was all a mistake. It was a mix-up."

"It was that," Johnny Calaveras said. "And you did the mixing. You set a gun trap, and me and Steve walked into it."

This talk didn't make sense, except to tell me that Corby Lane was part of the past that was always in Johnny's eyes. Corby Lane's voice was steadier now. "All right," he said. "So it was planned. But I didn't plan it. It was Steve's idea. He was tired of the way you kept riding him. He was tired of your preaching."

There was a wicked ruthlessness on Johnny's face now, and I thought I was going to see a man killed. For that second Johnny Calaveras was a man without a heart or a soul. His lips were thin, tight against his teeth, and I saw his trigger finger tightening. I saw the sweat on his forehead. I watched him trying to keep from squeezing the trigger. His voice came out on his expelled breath.

"You're a liar," he said. "Steve didn't know anything about it. You told him to raid my camp. He did it because that was what you were paying him for and because he liked to fight. You counted on that. You told him me and my boys were part of the XB outfit. He couldn't tell in the dark that it was my camp he was raiding any more than I could tell it was Steve who was raiding me. You double-crossed us both, Corby, because you wanted to get rid of me and Steve and you knew there was no other way."

Sometimes a certain dignity comes to a man standing on the edge of eternity. It came to Corby Lane now. His shoulders squared and he faced Johnny Calaveras. "All right," he said flatly. "That's the way it was, and it worked. Steve's dead. He caught a bullet right between the eyes that night." There was perspiration on Corby Lane's moon face, but there was a growing confidence in his voice. "Maybe you fired the bullet that killed him, Johnny," Corby Lane said quietly. "Did you ever think of that?"

Whatever it was, I knew that Corby Lane had hit Johnny Calaveras

with everything he had. I saw the old tiredness come into Johnny's eyes, and an old hurt was there in the sag of his shoulders. "Yes," Johnny said. "I've thought of that. And I figured if I hunted you down and killed you it would give me something else to think about."

"I would have been easy to find," Corby Lane said. In some way he had gained the upper hand, and as I watched I realized these two men had known each other not only well but completely. Corby Lane knew of some twist in Johnny's nature that would be a weakness in a gun fighter. I figured I knew what it was. Corby Lane knew that Johnny was a man who would ask himself questions, and that, for a gun fighter, was a dangerous thing. Someday he might ask himself if it was worthwhile killing again. Corby Lane was gambling that Johnny had already asked himself that question. And Johnny had, I knew. Otherwise he wouldn't have become the man we called The Preacher.

"Why didn't you come after me, Johnny?" Corby Lane said.

"Because I decided there was only one way to really hurt you, Corby," Johnny said, "and that's the way I'm going to hurt you now. I want that money belt you always carry. Without money to hire guns you're nothing. You're not even worth hunting down."

"If this is a plain holdup why didn't you say so?" Corby Lane said. "They'll excuse a gun fight quicker than they will a robbery."

"Go to the law, Corby," Johnny said. "When you do I'll start talking. The law is still trying to find out what happened to those six soldiers that got killed. The law still wants to know what happened to that payroll the soldiers were packing."

I saw the surprise in Corby Lane's face and then the terror, and I knew Johnny had pulled something out of Corby Lane's past, something that had been long dead. "You can't tie that to me," Corby Lane shouted. "It happened before I even knew you. You don't know anything about it."

"Don't I?" Johnny said. "It didn't happen before you knew Steve.

Maybe Steve told me all about it. Maybe it was on Steve's mind so strong he had to talk about it."

I watched Corby Lane. I knew he was trying to decide if Johnny was bluffing or not, and I saw he was afraid to take the chance. He made one last gesture. "If you know so much," he said, "you know Steve was in it. You're admitting that."

"I am," Johnny said. "But Steve is dead. They can't hang a dead man, Corby, but they can sure hang you."

"What money you've got," Johnny said. "We'll call it wages you owed me and Steve. After that, turn those sheep out through the canyon and keep 'em on open graze. I reckon you can't make a living running sheep legitimate, Corby. I reckon you'll go broke. That's good enough for me, and it would be for Steve. Someday you're going to slip and say the wrong thing, and the government will know what happened to that payroll pack train. I'll count on it happening. If I ever hear of you making a slip, I'll see that it happens sooner. Give me the money belt, Corby."

The gunmen watched their boss back down. I watched Corby Lane, too, and I watched Johnny Calaveras. I wondered if Johnny really did know enough to hang this man, and Corby Lane was wondering the same thing. I decided I would never know for sure; I knew Corby Lane would never take the chance of finding out. Johnny had him whipped. Lane took off the heavy money belt and handed it to Johnny Calaveras.

The tall, thin gunman spit between his wide-spaced teeth. "So you're Johnny Calaveras," he said. "I've heard of you."

"Move those sheep down into the valley and you'll hear a lot more," Johnny said.

"I reckon I would," the tall gunman said. "But I won't be around." He glanced toward the fire where I had thrown the guns. "If you're finished with me and my boys here," the tall gunman said, "I reckon we'll mosey along." He looked at the money belt Johnny was strapping around his middle. "I don't work for a man that ain't got no money," the gunman said.

As we rode back to town I looked at Ted and his face was serious and ashamed, and I knew he was thinking of the fool he had made of himself. Ted Beaumont had lived a long time in those few minutes back there.

Maybe The Preacher figured he owed us an explanation, but I never thought that was it. Rather, I think he wanted Ted to see everything in the right light. The Preacher stared straight ahead. "I worked for Corby Lane down in New Mexico," he said. "There was a cattle war on and any man who took a job took a gun job." It didn't sound like the rest was really meant for us. "Steve was already working for Corby," he said. "I figured it would be best if I was with Steve."

He was trying to say a lot more, but suddenly it was hard for him to talk. "This Steve," I said. "He was your buddy?"

The tiredness in The Preacher's eyes was something you could feel. "Steve was my brother," he said. "He was a kid who couldn't leave guns alone."

It hit me like a sledge hammer, and I looked at Ted and saw the impact of it numbing him. I thought of Johnny Calaveras, this quiet man we called The Preacher, living with the thought that he might have killed his own brother in a gun trap set by Corby Lane. And suddenly I knew what the fight inside Johnny was as he stood there with a gun held on Corby Lane, and I knew why he had let Corby Lane live. It was his way of proving to himself that he had whipped the past, his way of paying a debt he felt he owed. And I knew now why Johnny Calaveras and Grace Beaumont had never married.

"I used to be pretty proud of my gun speed," The Preacher said quietly. "But spending the rest of your life wondering whether you killed your own brother is quite a price to pay for pride." I glanced at Ted Beaumont; he looked sick.

Everybody was out on the street when we got back to Doc Isham's store. They were standing there looking up toward the south end of the valley. There wasn't any worry in their eyes any more, and I knew

that band of sheep had turned east, toward the mouth of the canyon.

Grace was there, and when she looked at Johnny and Ted she knew, without being told, that the two men she loved had reached an understanding. She knew that Johnny had won his right to live his new life. I knew now what it was that had made Grace and Johnny's love for each other so compelling. It was the understanding between them. There wasn't anything about Johnny's past that Grace didn't know, and that knowledge had drawn them together, and at the same time it had held them apart. Johnny would never ask a girl like Grace to marry him until he was sure his past was gone, until he was sure he could settle a fight without killing.

Johnny dismounted, and for a second his shoulder touched Ted Beaumont's shoulder. I saw Ted glance toward the money belt, his eyes questioning. I saw Johnny's quick understanding and I saw his grin, amused, pleased. He unbuckled the belt and tossed it to one of the farmers from Rincón Valley. "Here," he said, "Corby Lane sent this down. Said he hoped it would pay for the damage his sheep did to your crops." He turned then to Ted. I saw Ted stiffen, waiting for the lacing he knew he had coming.

The Preacher said, "If you've a mind to grub out that oak on your place, Ted, I could give you a hand with it tomorrow."

"Thanks, Johnny," Ted said, and he tried to grin.

Johnny took Grace's arm and the two of them walked off together.

I left the valley about ten years back. Johnny and Grace are married now, still in love, still amazed at the goodness of the world. Ted Beaumont married my oldest girl, Lucy. Ted's a good, steady boy now. Outside of that, things haven't changed much. Folks around here still call Johnny Calaveras The Preacher. It's surprising how much respect men can cram into a nickname like that.

look for

GREAT WESTERN INDIAN FIGHTS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE
POTOMAC CORRAL
OF THE WESTERNERS

As Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Before the West could be settled, it had to be won." From 1832 to 1891 the Western states, from the Great Lakes to Oregon and south to Mexico, saw the last great scenes of massacre, bloody rout, ambush, fire, and pillage. It was then when the great Indian tribes, the Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapaho, Modoc, and Apache, staged their final fights against the encroaching tide of white settlement. It was there that the crimes of the redskin were answered in kind by the white man.

In reliving these historic battles the authors follow the great generals of the U. S. Army, the Texas Rangers, and hired gun fighters as they drove proud and resentful tribes to death and submission on reservations. Written by an organization of men with a common and consuming interest in the Old West, these accounts make thrilling, vivid reading in America's most colorful era.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

**Read these eighteen top-notch stories about
the rugged past of the Old West:**

BAD COMPANY	<i>S. Omar Barker</i>
THE WARHORSE OF SPOTTED TAIL	<i>Amelia Bean</i>
WINE WITHOUT PRICE	<i>Bill Burchardt</i>
THE BRUSHOFF	<i>Peggy Simson Curry</i>
ONE NIGHT IN THE RED DOG SALOON	<i>Hal G. Evarts</i>
ARMY WIFE	<i>Kenneth Fowler</i>
HOMESTEADER'S WIFE	<i>Norman A. Fox</i>
MY SISTER AND THE GUNMAN	<i>Ray Gaulden</i>
HOSTAGE TRAIL	<i>Fred Grove</i>
THIEF IN CAMP	<i>Bill Gulick</i>
THE LAST GUNMAN	<i>Donald Hamilton</i>
LOST SISTER	<i>Dorothy M. Johnson</i>
GRANDFATHER OUT OF THE PAST	<i>Noel M. Loomis</i>
BIG MAN FROM TEXAS	<i>Ed Montgomery</i>
KILLER'S CONSCIENCE	<i>Stephen Payne</i>
MAN AFOOT	<i>John Prescott</i>
GUN JOB	<i>Thomas Thompson</i>
BLOOD ON THE SUN	<i>Thomas Thompson</i>

SPURS WEST