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Painted by Venette M. Willard

They Took a Tip From Big Business — By Robert Welles Ritchie

TO THE LAST MAN

By Zane Grey

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK SPRADLING

XV

THE children awoke hungry and noisy, having slept away their fears. The women took advantage of the quiet morning hour to get a hot breakfast.

"Maybe they've gone away," suggested Guy Isbel's wife, peering out of the window. She had done that several times since day-break. Jean saw her somber gaze search the pasture until it rested upon the dark, prone shape of her dead husband, lying face down in the grass. Her look worried Jean.

"No, Esther, they've not gone yet," replied Jean. "I've seen some of them out there at the edge of the brush."

Blaisdell was optimistic. He said Jean's night work would have its effect and that the Jorth contingent would not renew the siege very determinedly. It turned out, however, that Blaisdell was wrong. Directly after sunrise they began to pour volleys from four sides and from closer range. During the night Jorth's gang had thrown up earthbanks and constructed log breastworks from behind which they were now firing. Jean and his comrades could see the flashes of fire and streaks of smoke to such good advantage that they began to return the volleys.

In half an hour the cabin was so full of smoke that Jean could not see the women-folk in their corner. The fierce attack then abated somewhat, and the firing became more intermittent and therefore more carefully aimed. A glancing bullet cut a furrow in Blaisdell's hoary head, making a painful though not serious wound. It was Esther Isbel who stopped the flow of blood and bound Blaisdell's head, a task which she performed skillfully and without a tremor. The old Texan could not sit still during this operation. Sight of the blood on his hands, which he tried to rub off, appeared to inflame him to a great degree.

"Isbel, we got to go out thar," he kept repeating, "an' kill 'em all."

"No, we're goin' to stay heah," replied Gaston Isbel. "Shore I'm lookin' for Blue an' Fredericks an' Gordon to open up out thar. They ought to be heah, an' if they are, you shore can bet they've got the fight sized up."

Isbel's hopes did not materialize. The shooting continued without any lull until about midday. Then the Jorth faction stopped.

"Wal, now what's up?" queried Isbel. "Boys, hold your fire an' let's wait."

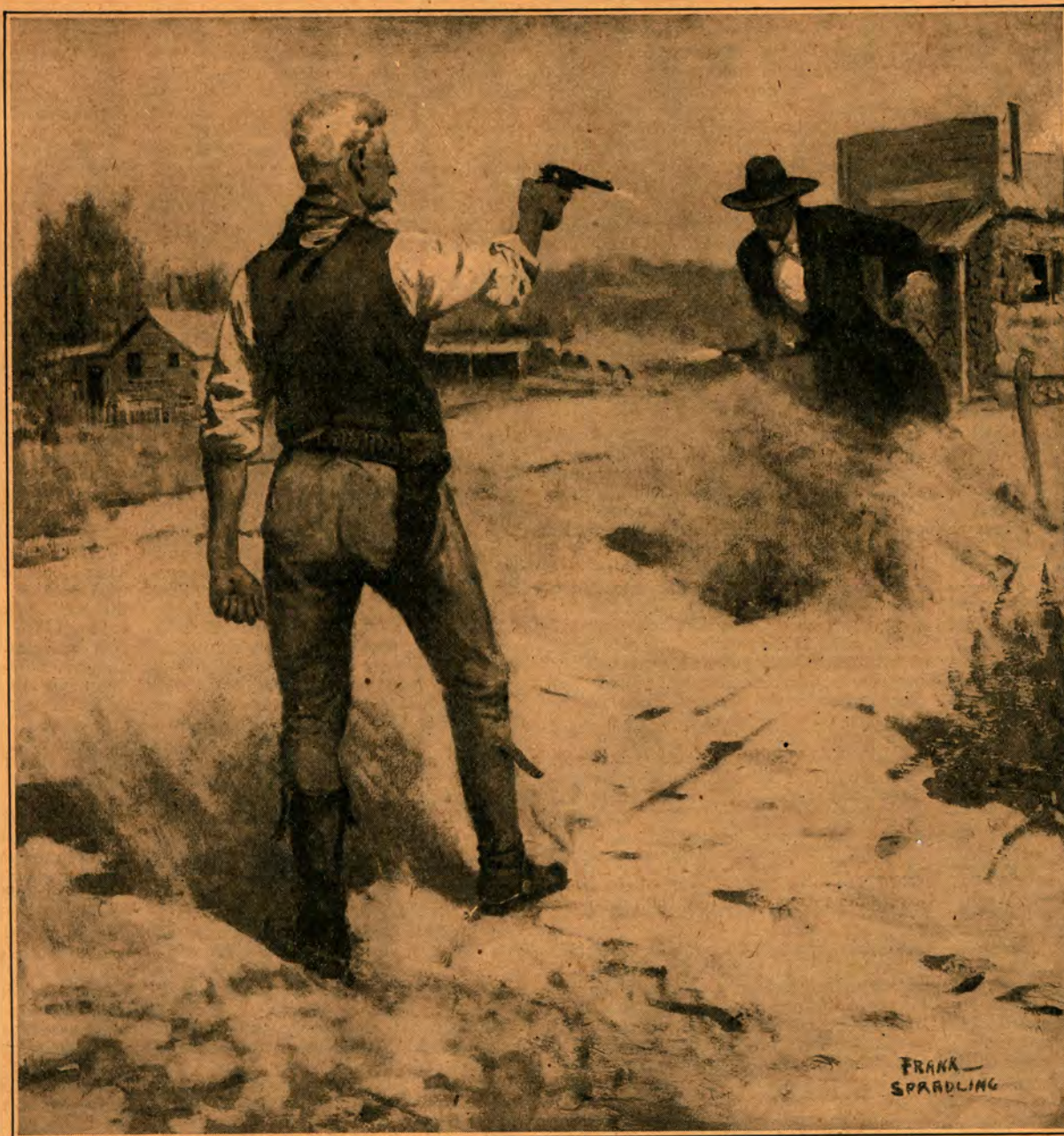
GRADUALLY the smoke wafted out of the windows and doors until the room was once more clear. At this juncture Esther Isbel came over to take another gaze out upon the meadows. Jean saw her suddenly start violently, then stiffen, with a trembling hand outstretched.

"Look!" she cried.

"Esther, git back," ordered the old rancher. "Keep away from that window."

"What the devil!" muttered Blaisdell in surprise. "She sees somethin' or she's gone dotty."

Esther seemed turned to stone. "Look! The hogs hev broken into the pasture! They'll eat Guy's body!"



"I Heerd Yo' Dad's Voice, Then Jorth's. They Cut Like Knives. I Reckon Both Went fer Their Guns at the Same Time"

Everyone was frozen with horror at Esther's statement. Jean took a swift survey of the pasture. A bunch of big black hogs had indeed appeared on the scene and were rooting round in the grass not far from where lay the bodies of Guy Isbel and Jacobs. This herd of hogs belonged to the rancher and was allowed to run wild.

"JANE, those hogs —" stammered Esther Isbel to the wife of Jacobs. "Come! Look! Do you know anythin' about hogs?"

The woman ran to the window and looked out. She stiffened as had Esther.

"Dad, will those hogs—eat human flesh?" queried Jean breathlessly.

The old man stared out of the window. Surprise seemed to hold him. A completely unexpected situation had staggered him.

"Jean—can you—can you shoot that far?" he asked huskily.

"To those hogs? No; it's out of range."

"Then, by heaven, we've got to stay trapped in heah an' watch an awful sight," ejaculated the old man, completely unnerved. "See that break in the fence! Jorth's done that, to let in the hogs!"

"Aw, Isbel, it's not so bad as all that," remonstrated Blaisdell, wagging his bloody head. "Jorth wouldn't do sech a hell-bent trick."

"It's shore done."

"Wal, mebbe the hogs won't find Guy an' Jacobs," returned Blaisdell weakly. Plain it was that he only hoped for such a contingency and certainly doubted it.

"Look!" cried Esther Isbel piercingly. "They're workin' straight up the pasture!"

Indeed to Jean it appeared to be the fatal truth. He looked blankly, feeling a little

sick. Ann Isbel came to peer out of the window, and she uttered a cry. Jacob's wife stood mute, as if dazed.

Blaisdell swore a mighty oath. "Isbel, we cain't stand heah an' watch them hogs eat our people!"

"Wal, we'll hev to. What else on earth can we do?"

Esther turned to the men. She was white and cold, except her eyes, which resembled gray flames.

"Somebody can run out thar an' bury our daid men," she said.

"Why, child, it'd be shore death. You saw what happened to Guy an' Jacobs. We've jest got to bear it. Shore nobody needn't look out—an' see."

Jean wondered if it would be possible to keep from watching. The thing had a horrible fascination. The big hogs were rooting and tearing in the grass, some of them lazy, others nimble, and all were gradually working closer and closer to the bodies. The leader, a huge, gaunt boar, that had fared ill all his life in this barren country, was scarcely fifty feet away from where Guy Isbel lay.

"ANN, get me some of your clothes an' a sunbonnet—quick," said Jean, forced out of his lethargy. "I'll run out there disguised. Maybe I can go through with it."

"No!" ordered his father positively and with dark face flaming. "Guy an' Jacobs are daid. We cain't help 'em now."

"But, dad —" pleaded Jean. He had been wrought to a pitch by Esther's blaze of passion, by the agony in the face of the other woman.

"I tell you no!" thundered Gaston Isbel, flinging his arms wide.

"I will go!" cried Esther, her voice ringing.

"Yu won't go alone!" instantly answered the wife of Jacobs, repeating unconsciously almost the words her husband had spoken.

"You stay right heah," shouted Gaston Isbel hoarsely.

"I'm goin'," replied Esther. "Yu've no hold over me. My husband is daid. No one can stop me. I'm goin' out thar to drive those hogs away an' bury him."

"Esther, for heaven's sake, listen," replied Isbel. "If you show yourself outside Jorth an' his gang will kill you."

"They may be mean, but no white men could be so low as thet."

THEN they pleaded with her to give up her purpose. But in vain! She pushed them back and ran out through the kitchen with Jacob's wife following her. Jean turned to the window in time to see both women run out into the lane. Jean looked fearfully and listened for shots. But only a loud "Haw! Haw!" came from the watchers outside. That coarse laugh relieved the tension in Jean's breast. Possibly the Jorths were not as black as his father painted them. The two women entered an open shed and came forth with a shovel and a spade.

"Shore they've got to hurry," burst out Gaston Isbel.

Shifting his gaze, Jean understood the

import of his father's speech. The leader of the hogs had no doubt scented the bodies. Suddenly he espied them and broke into a trot.

"Run, Esther, run!" yelled Jean.

That urged the women to flight. Jean began to shoot. The hog reached the body of Guy. Jean's shots did not reach or frighten the beast. All the hogs now had caught a scent and went ambling toward their leader. Esther and her companion passed swiftly out of sight behind a corral. Loud and piercingly, with some awful note, rang out their screams. The hogs appeared frightened. The leader lifted his long snout, looked and turned away. The others had halted. Then they, too, wheeled and ran off.

ALL was silent then in the cabin and also outside, wherever the Jorth faction lay concealed. All eyes manifestly were fixed upon the brave wives. They spaded up the sod and dug a grave for Guy Isbel. For a shroud Esther wrapped him in her shawl. Then they buried him. Next they hurried to the side of Jacobs, who lay some yards away. They dug a grave for him. Mrs. Jacobs took off her outer skirt to wrap round him. Then the two women labored hard to lift him and lower him. Jacobs was a heavy man. When he had been covered his widow knelt beside his grave. Esther went back to the other. But she remained standing and did not look as if she prayed. Her aspect was tragic—that of a woman who had lost father, mother, sisters, brother and now her husband in this bloody Arizona land.

The deed and the demeanor of these wives of the murdered men surely must

have shamed Jorth and his followers. They did not fire a shot during the ordeal or give any sign of their presence.

Inside the cabin the silence also continued unbroken. Jean's eyes blurred so that he continually had to wipe them. Old Isbel made no effort to hide his tears. Blaisdell nodded his shaggy head and swallowed hard. The women sat staring into space. The children, in round-eyed dismay, gazed from one to the other of their elders.

"Wal, they're comin' back," declared Isbel in immense relief. "An' so help me—Jorth let 'em bury their daid!"

The fact seemed to have been monstrously strange to Gaston Isbel. When the women entered the old man said brokenly: "I'm shore glad. An' I reckon I was wrong to oppose you, an' wrong to say what I'did about Jorth."

NO ONE had any chance to reply to Isbel, for the Jorth gang, as if to make up for lost time and surcharged feelings of shame, renewed the attack with such a persistent and furious volleying that the defenders did not risk a return shot. They all had to lie flat next to the lowest log in order to keep from being hit. Bullets rained in through the window, and all the clay between the logs low down was shot away. This fusillade lasted for more than an hour, then gradually the fire diminished on one side and then on another until it became desultory and finally ceased.

"A-huh. Shore they've shot their bolt," declared Gaston Isbel.

"Wal, I don't know about that," returned Blaisdell, "but they've shot a hell of a lot of shells."

"Listen," suddenly called Jean. "Somebody's yellin'."

"Hey, Isbel!" came in a loud, hoarse voice, "let yo' wimmen fight fer yu."

Gaston Isbel sat up with a start, and his face turned livid. Jean needed no more to prove that the derisive voice from outside had belonged to Jorth. The old rancher lunged up to his full height, and with reckless disregard of life he rushed to the window.

"Jorth," he roared, "I dare you to meet me—man to man!"

This elicited no answer. Jean dragged his father away from the window. After that a waiting silence ensued, gradually less fraught with suspense. Blaisdell started conversation by saying he believed the fight was over for that particular time. No one disputed him. Evidently Gaston Isbel was loath to believe it. Jean, however, watching at the back of the kitchen, eventually discovered that the Jorth gang had lifted the siege. Jean saw them congregate at the edge of the brush, somewhat lower down than they had been the day before. A team of mules, drawing a wagon, appeared on the road and turned toward the

slope. Saddled horses were led down out of the junipers. Jean saw bodies, evidently of dead men, lifted into the wagon, to be hauled away toward the village. Seven mounted men, leading four riderless horses, rode out into the valley and followed the wagon.

"Dad, they've gone," declared Jean. "We had the best of this fight. If only Guy an' Jacobs had listened!"

The old man nodded moodily. He had aged considerably during these two trying days. His hair was grayer. Now that the blaze and glow of the fight had passed, he showed a subtle change, a fixed and morbid sadness, a resignation to a fate he had accepted.

The ordinary routine of ranch life did not return for the Isbels. Blaisdell returned home to settle matters there, so that he could devote all his time to this feud. Gaston Isbel sat down to wait for the members of his clan.

The male members of the family kept guard in turn over the ranch that night. Another day dawned. It brought word from Blaisdell that Blue, Fredericks, Gordon and Colmor were all at his house, on the way to join the Isbels. This news appeared greatly to rejuvenate Gaston Isbel. But his enthusiasm did not last long. Impatient and moody by turns, he paced or moped round the cabin, always looking out, sometimes toward Blaisdell's ranch, but mostly toward Grass Valley.

It struck Jean as singular that neither Esther Isbel nor Mrs. Jacobs suggested a reburial of their husbands. The two bereaved women did not ask for assistance, but repaired to the pasture and there spent several hours working over the graves. They raised mounds which they sodded and then placed stones at the heads and feet. Lastly they fenced in the graves.

"I RECKON I'll hitch up an' drive back home," said Mrs. Jacobs when she returned to the cabin. "I've much to do an' plan. Probably I'll go to my mother's home. She's old an' will be glad to hev me."

"If I had any place to go to I'd shore go," declared Esther Isbel bitterly.

Gaston Isbel heard this remark. He raised his face from his hands, evidently both nettled and hurt.

"Esther, shore that's not kind," he said.

The red-haired woman, for she did not appear to be a girl any more, halted before his chair and gazed down at him, with a terrible flare of scorn in her gray eyes.

"Gaston Isbel, all I've got to say to yu is this," she retorted with the voice of a man. "Seein' thet yu an' Lee Jorth hate each other, why couldn't yu act like men? Yu damned Texans, with yo' bloody feuds, draggin' in every relation, every friend to murder each other! Thet's not the way of Arizona men. We've all got to suffer, an'

we wimmen be ruined fer life, because yu had differences with Jorth. If yu were half a man yu'd go out an' kill him yo'self an' not leave a lot of widows an' orphaned children!"

Jean himself writhed under the lash of her scorn. Gaston Isbel turned a dead white. He could not answer her. He seemed stricken with merciless truth. Slowly dropping his head, he remained motionless, a pathetic and tragic figure; and he did not stir until the rapid beat of hoofs denoted the approach of horsemen. Blaisdell appeared on his white charger, leading a pack animal, and behind rode a group of men, all heavily armed and likewise with packs.

"Get down an' come in," was Isbel's greeting. "Bill, you look after their packs. Better leave the hosses saddled."

THE booted and spurred riders trooped in, and their demeanor fitted their errand. Jean was acquainted with all of them. Fredericks was a lanky Texan, the color of dust, and he had yellow, clear eyes, like those of a hawk. His mother had been an Isbel. Gordon, too, was related to Jean's family, though distantly. He resembled an industrious miner more than a prosperous cattleman. Blue was the most striking of the visitors, as he was the most noted. A little, shrunken, gray-eyed man, with years of cowboy written all over him, he looked the quiet, easy, cool and deadly Texan he was reputed to be. Blue's Texas record was shady and was seldom alluded to, as unfavorable comment had turned out to be hazardous. He was the only one of the group who did not carry a rifle. But he packed two guns, a habit not often noted in Texans and almost never in Arizonians.

Colmor, Ann Isbel's fiancé, was the youngest of the clan and the one closest to Jean. His meeting with Ann affected Jean powerfully and brought to a climax an idea that had been developing in Jean's mind. His sister devotedly loved this lean-faced, keen-eyed Arizonian, and it took no great insight to discover that Colmor reciprocated her affection. They were young. They had long life before them. It seemed to Jean a pity that Colmor should be drawn into this war. Jean watched them as they conversed apart, and he saw Ann's hands creep up to Colmor's breast and her dark eyes, eloquent, hungry, fearful, lifted with queries her lips did not speak. Jean stepped beside them and laid an arm over both their shoulders.

"Colmor, for Ann's sake you'd better back out of his Jorth-Isbel fight," he whispered.

Colmor looked insulted. "But, Jean, it's Ann's father," he said. "I'm almost one of the family."

"You're Ann's sweetheart, an' by heaven I say you oughtn't to go with us," whispered Jean.

"Go—with—you," faltered Ann.

"Yes. Dad is goin' straight after Jorth. Can't you tell that? An' there'll be one terrible fight."

Ann looked up into Colmor's face with all her soul in her eyes, but she did not speak. Her look was noble. She yearned to guide him right, yet her lips were sealed. And Colmor betrayed the trouble of his soul. The code of men held him bound, and he could not break from it, though he divined in that moment how truly it was wrong.

"Jean, yo' dad started me in the cattle business," said Colmor earnestly. "An' I'm doin' well now. An' when I asked him fer Ann he said he'd be glad to hev me in the family. Well, when this talk of fight come up, I asked yo' dad to let me go in on his side. He wouldn't hear of it. But after a while, as the time passed an' he made more enemies, he finally consented. I reckon he needs me now. An' I can't back out, not even for Ann."

"I would if I were you," replied Jean, and knew that he lied.

"Jean, I'm gamblin' to come out of the fight," said Colmor with a smile. He had no morbid fears or presentiments such as troubled Jean.

"Why, sure, you stand as good a chance as anyone," rejoined Jean. "It wasn't that I was worryin' about so much."

"What was it, then?" asked Ann steadily.

"If Andrew does come through alive he'll have blood on his hands," returned Jean with passion. "He can't come through without it. I've begun to feel what it means to have killed my fellow men. An' I'd rather your husband an' the father of your children never felt that."

Colmor did not take Jean as subtly as Ann did. She shrank a little. Her dark eyes dilated. But Colmor showed nothing of her spiritual reaction. He was young. He had wild blood. He was loyal to the Isbels.

"JEAN, never worry about my conscience," he said with a keen look. "Nothin' would tickle me any more than to git a shot at every one of the Jorths."

That established Colmor's status in regard to the Jorth-Isbel feud. Jean had no more to say. He respected Ann's friend and felt poignant sorrow for Ann.

Gaston Isbel called for meat and drink to be set on the table for his guests. When his wishes had been complied with, the women took the children into the adjoining cabin and shut the door.

"Hah! Wal, we can eat an' talk now."

First the newcomers wanted to hear particulars of what had happened. Blaisdell had told all he knew and had seen, but that was not sufficient. They plied Gaston Isbel with questions. Laboriously and ponderously he rehearsed the experiences of the



It Was an Orderly Trotting March That Manifested Neither Hurry Nor Excitement. But Any Western Eye

fight at the ranch, according to his impressions. Bill Isbel was exhorted to talk, but he had of late manifested a sullen and taciturn disposition. In spite of Jean's vigilance, Bill had continued to imbibe red liquor.

Then Jean was called upon to relate all he had seen and done. It had been Jean's intention to keep his mouth shut, first for his own sake and second because he did not like to talk of his deeds. But when thus appealed to by these somber-faced, intent-eyed men, he divined that the more carefully he described the cruelty and baseness of their enemies and the more vividly he presented his participation in the first fight of the feud the more strongly he would bind these friends to the Isbel cause. So he talked for an hour, beginning with his meeting with Colter up on the Rim and ending with an account of his killing Greaves. His listeners sat through this long narrative with unabated interest, and at the close they were leaning forward, breathless and tense.

"Ah! So Greaves got his deserts at last," exclaimed Gordon.

All the men round the table made comments, and the last, from Blue, was the one that struck Jean forcibly.

"Shore that was a strange way to kill Greaves. Why'd yu do thet, Jean?"

"I told you. I wanted to avoid noise, an' I hoped to get more of them."

Blue nodded his lean, eaglelike head and sat thoughtfully, as if not convinced of anything save Jean's prowess. After a moment Blue spoke again.

"Then, goin' back to Jean's tellin' about trackin' rustled cattle, I've got this to say: I've long suspected thet somebody livin' right heah in the valley has been drivin' off cattle an' dealin' with rustlers. An' now I'm shore of it."

This blunt speech did not elicit the amazement from Gaston Isbel that Jean expected it would.

"You mean Greaves or some of his friends?"

"No. They wasn't none of 'em in the cattle business, like we are. Shore we all knowed Greaves was crooked. But what I'm figgerin' is thet some so-called honest man in our settlement has been makin' crooked deals."

BLUE was a man of deeds rather than words, and so much strong speech from him, whom everybody knew to be remarkably reliable and keen, made a profound impression upon most of the Isbel faction. But to Jean's surprise his father did not rave. It was Blaisdell who supplied the rage and invective. Bill Isbel, also, was strangely indifferent to this new element in the condition of cattle dealing. Suddenly Jean caught a vague flash of thought, as if he had intercepted the thought of another's mind, and he wondered—could his brother, Bill, know anything about this crooked work

alluded to by Blue? Dismissing the conjecture, Jean listened earnestly.

"An' if it's true it shore makes this difference—we can't blame all the rustlin' onto Jorth," concluded Blue.

"Wal, it's not true," declared Gaston Isbel roughly. "Jorth an' his Hash Knife Gang are at the bottom of all the rustlin' in the valley, for years back. An' they've got to be wiped out!"

"Isbel, I reckon we'd all feel better if we talk straight," replied Blue coolly. "I'm heah to stand by the Isbels. An' yu know what thet means. But I'm not heah to fight Jorth because he may be a rustler. The others may hev their own reasons, but mine is this: Yu once stood by me in Texas when I was needin' friends. Wal, I'm standin' by yu now. Jorth is yo' enemy, an' so he is mine."

GASTON ISBEL bowed to this ultimatum, scarcely less agitated than when Esther Isbel had denounced him. His rabid and morbid hate of Jorth had eaten into his heart, to take possession there, like the parasite that battens upon the life of its victim. Blue's steely voice, his cold gray eyes, showed the unbiased truth of the man as well as his fidelity to his creed. Here again, but in a different manner, Gaston Isbel had the fact flung at him that other men must suffer, perhaps die, for his hate. And the very soul of the old rancher apparently rose in passionate revolt against the blind, headlong elemental strength of his nature. So it seemed to Jean, who, in love and pity that hourly grew, saw through his father. Was it too late? Alas! Gaston Isbel could never be turned back! Yet something was altering his brooding, fixed mind.

"Wal," said Blaisdell gruffly, "let's git down to bisness. I'm fer havin' Blue be foreman of this heah outfit an' all of us to do as he says."

Gaston Isbel opposed this selection and indeed resented it. He intended to lead the Isbel faction.

"All right, then. Give us a hunch what we're goin' to do," replied Blaisdell.

"We're goin' to ride off on Jorth's trail an', one way or another, kill him—kill him! I reckon that'll end the fight."

What did old Isbel have in his mind? His listeners shook their heads.

"No," asserted Blaisdell. "Killin' Jorth might be the end of yo' desires, Isbel, but it'd never end our fight. We'll hev gone too far. It we take Jorth's trail from heah, it means we've got to wipe out that rustler gang or stay to the last man."

"Let's drink to thet!" said Blue.

Strangely, they all turned to this Texas gunman, instinctively recognizing in him the brain and heart and the past deeds that fitted him for the leadership of such a clan. Blue had all in life to lose and nothing to

gain. Yet his spirit was such that he could not lean to all the possible gain of the future and leave a debt unpaid. Then his voice, his look, his influence were those of a fighter. They all drank with him, even Jean, who hated liquor. And this act of drinking seemed the climax of the council. Preparations were at once begun for their departure on Jorth's trail.

Jean took but little time for his own needs. A horse, a blanket, a knapsack of meat and bread, a canteen and his weapons, with all the ammunition he could pack, made up his outfit. He wore his buckskin suit, leggings and moccasins. Very soon the cavalcade was ready to depart. Jean tried not to watch Bill Isbel say good-by to his children, but it was impossible not to.

Whatever Bill was as a man, he was father of those children, and he loved them. How strange that the little ones seemed to realize the meaning of this good-by! They were grave, somber-eyed, pale up to the last moment; then they broke down and wept. Did they sense that their father would never come back? Jean caught that dark, fatalistic presentiment. Bill Isbel's convulsed face showed that he also caught it. Jean did not see Bill say good-by to his wife. But he heard her. Old Gaston Isbel forgot to speak to the children or else could not. He never looked at them, and his good-by to Ann was as if he were only riding to the village for a day. Jean saw woman's love, woman's intuition, woman's grief in her eyes. He could not escape her.

"Oh, Jean! Oh, brother!" she whispered as she enfolded him. "It's awful! It's wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Good-by! If killin' must be, see that you kill the Jorths! Good-by!"

Even in Ann, gentle and mild, the Isbel blood spoke at the last. Jean gave Ann over to the pale-faced Colmor, who took her in his arms. Then Jean fled out to his horse. This cold-blooded devastation of a home was almost more than he could bear. There was love here. What would be left?

Colmor was the last one to come out to the horses. He did not walk erect, nor as one whose sight was clear. Then as the silent, tense, grim men mounted their horses Bill Isbel's eldest child, the boy, appeared in the door. His little form seemed instinct with a force vastly different from grief. His face was the face of an Isbel.

"Daddy, kill 'em all!" he shouted, with a passion all the fiercer for its incongruity to the treble voice.

So the poison had spread from father to son.

XVI

HALF a mile from the Isbel ranch the cavalcade passed the log cabin of Evarts, father of the boy who had tended sheep with Bernardino.

It suited Gaston Isbel to halt here. No need to call. Evarts and his son appeared

so quickly as to convince observers that they had been watching.

"Howdy, Jake," said Isbel. "I'm wantin' a word with you alone."

"Shore, boss. Git down an' come in," replied Evarts.

Isbel led him aside and said something forcible that Jean divined from the very gesture which accompanied it. His father was telling Evarts that he was not to join in the Isbel-Jorth war. Evarts had worked for the Isbels a long time, and his faithfulness, along with something stronger and darker, showed in his rugged face as he stubbornly opposed Isbel. The old man raised his voice, "No, I tell you. An' thet settles it."

THEY returned to the horses, and before mounting, Isbel, as if he remembered something, directed his somber gaze on young Evarts.

"Son, did you bury Bernardino?"

"Dad an' me went over yestiddy," replied the lad. "I shore was glad the coyotes hadn't been round."

"How about the sheep?"

"I left 'em there. I was goin' to stay, but, bein' all alone, I got skeered. The sheep was doin' fine. Good water an' some grass. An' this ain't time fer varmints to hang round."

"Jake, keep your eye on that flock," returned Isbel. "An' if I shouldn't happen to come back you can call them sheep yours. I'd like your boy to ride up to the village. Not with us, so anybody would see him, but afterwards. We'll be at Abel Meeker's."

Again Jean was confronted with an uneasy premonition as to some idea or plan his father had not shared with his followers. When the cavalcade started on again Jean rode to his father's side and asked him why he had wanted the Evarts boy to come to Grass Valley. The old man replied that as the boy could run to and fro in the village without danger he might be useful in reporting what was going on at Greaves' store, where undoubtedly the Jorth gang would hold forth. This appeared reasonable enough, therefore Jean smothered the objection he had meant to make.

The valley road was deserted. When a mile farther on the riders passed a group of cabins, just on the outskirts of the village, Jean's quick eye caught sight of curious and evidently frightened people trying to see while they avoided being seen. No doubt the whole settlement was in a state of suspense and terror. Not unlikely this dark, closely grouped band of horsemen appeared to them as Jorth's gang had looked to Jean. It was an orderly trotting march that manifested neither hurry nor excitement. But any Western eye could have caught the singular aspect of such a group,

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Could Have Caught the Singular Aspect of Such a Group, as if the Intent of the Riders Was a Visible Thing

TO THE LAST MAN

(Continued from Page 13)

as if the intent of the riders was a visible thing.

Soon they reached another group of buildings. Here their approach had been watched for or had been already reported. Jean saw men, women and children peeping from behind cabins and from half-opened doors. Farther on Jean espied the dark figures of men, slipping out the back way through orchards and gardens and running north toward the center of the village. Could these be friends of the Jorth crowd on the way with warnings of the approach of the Isbels? Jean felt convinced of it. He was learning that his father had not been absolutely correct in his estimation of the way Jorth and his followers were regarded by their neighbors. Not improbably there were really many villagers who, being more interested in sheep raising than in cattle, had an honest leaning toward the Jorths. Some, too, no doubt, had leanings that were dishonest in deed if not in sincerity.

Gaston Isbel led his clan straight down the middle of the wide road of Grass Valley until he reached a point opposite Abel Meeker's cabin. Jean espied the same curiosity from behind Meeker's door and windows as had been shown all along the road. But presently, at Isbel's call, the door opened, and a short, swarthy man appeared. He carried a rifle.

"Howdy, Gass," he said. "What's the good word?"

"Wal, Abel, it's not good, but bad. An' it's shore started," replied Isbel. "I'm askin' you to let me hev your cabin."

"YU'RE welcome. I'll send the folks round to Jim's," returned Meeker. "An' if yu want me, I'm with yu, Isbel."

"Thanks, Abel, but I'm not leadin' any more kin an' friends into this heah deal."

"Wal, jest as yu say. But I'd like damn bad to jine with yu. My brother, Ted, was shot last night."

"Ted! Is he daid?" ejaculated Isbel blankly.

"We can't find out," replied Meeker.

"Jim says thet Jeff Campbell said thet Ted went into Greaves' place last night. Greaves allus was friendly to Ted, but Greaves wasn't thar —"

"No, he shore wasn't," interrupted Isbel with a dark smile, "an' he never will be thar again."

Meeker nodded with slow comprehension, and a shadow crossed his face.

"Wal, Campbell claimed he'd heard from someone who was thar. Anyway, the Jorths were drinkin' hard, an' they raised a row with Ted—same old sheep talk—an' somebody shot him. Campbell said Ted was thrown out back, an' he was shore he wasn't killed."

"A-huh! Wal, I'm sorry, Abel, your family had to lose in this. Maybe Ted's not bad hurt. I shore hope so. An' yu an' Jim keep out of the fight anyway."

"All right, Isbel. But I reckon I'll give yu a hunch. If this heah fight lasts long the whole damn basin will be in it, on one side or t'other."

"Abel, yu're talkin' sense," broke in Blaisdell. "An' thet's why we're up heah fer quick action."

"I heerd yu got Daggs," whispered Meeker as he peered all round.

"Wal, yu heerd correct," drawled Blaisdell.

MEEKER muttered strong words into his beard. "Say, was Daggs in thet Jorth outfit?"

"He was. But he walked right into Jean's bullet, which was a .44. An' I reckon his carcass would show some more."

"An' whar's Guy Isbel?" demanded Meeker.

"Daid an' buried, Abel," replied Gaston Isbel. "An' now I'd be obliged if yu'll hurry your folks away an' let us hev your cabin an' corral. Have you got any hay for the hosses?"

"Shore. The barn's half full," replied Meeker as he turned away. "Come on in."

"No. We'll wait till yu've gone."

When Meeker had gone, Isbel and his men sat their horses and looked about them and spoke low. Their advent had been expected, and the little town awoke to the

imminence of the impending battle. Inside Meeker's house there was the sound of indistinct voices of women and the bustle incident to a hurried vacating.

XVII

ACROSS the wide road people were peering out on all sides, some hiding, others walking to and fro, from fence to fence, whispering in little groups. Down the wide road, at the point where it turned, stood Greaves' fortlike stone house. Low, flat, isolated, with its dark, eyelike windows, it presented a forbidding and sinister aspect. Jean distinctly saw the forms of men, some dark, others in shirt sleeves, come to the wide door and look down the road.

"Wal, I reckon only about five hundred good hoss steps are separatin' us from thet outfit," drawled Blaisdell.

No one replied to his jocularly. Gaston Isbel's eyes narrowed to a slit in his furrowed face, and he kept them fastened upon Greaves' store. Blue likewise had a somber cast of countenance, not perhaps any darker or grimmer than those of his comrades, but

"Somebody look after the hosses," ordered Isbel as he dismounted and took his rifle and pack. "Better leave the saddles on, leastways till we see what's comin' off."

Jean and Bill Isbel led the horses back to the corral. While watering and feeding them Jean somehow received the impression that Bill was trying to speak, to confide in him, to unburden himself of some load. This peculiarity of Bill had become marked when he was perfectly sober. Yet he had never spoken or even begun anything unusual. Upon the present occasion, however, Jean believed that his brother might have gotten rid of his emotion, or whatever it was, had they not been interrupted by Colmor.

"Boys, the old man's orders are for us to sneak round on three sides of Greaves' store, keepin' out of gunshot till we find good cover, an' then crawl closer an' to pick off any of Jorth's gang who shows himself."

Bill Isbel strode off without a reply to Colmor.

"Wal, I don't think so much of that," said Jean ponderingly. "Jorth has lots of friends here. Somebody might pick us off."

"I kicked, but the old man shet me up. He's not to be bucked agin now. Struck me as powerful queer. But no wonder."

"Maybe he knows best. Did he say anythin' about what he an' the rest of 'em are goin' to do?" persisted Jean.



"Don't Anybody Move!" Like a Steel Whip This Voice Cut the Silence. It Belonged to Blue. "Who're Yu?" Demanded Jorth in Husky Pants

more representative of intense preoccupation of mind. The look of him thrilled Jean, who could sense its deadliness yet could not grasp any more. Altogether the manner of the villagers and the watchful pacing to and fro of the Jorth followers and the silent, boding front of Isbel and his men summed up for Jean the menace of the moment, that must very soon change to a terrible reality.

At a call from Meeker, who stood at the back of the cabin, Gaston Isbel rode into the yard, followed by the others of his party.

as advisable behind Greaves' store. You take the right side. An' keep hid."

With that Jean strode off, going round the barn, straight out the orchard lane to the open flat, and then climbing a fence to the north of the village. Presently he reached a line of sheds and corrals, to which he held until he arrived at the road. This point was about a quarter of a mile from Greaves' store and round the bend. Jean sighted no one. The road, the fields, the yards, the backs of the cabins all looked deserted. A blight had settled down upon

the peaceful activities of Grass Valley. Crossing the road, Jean began to circle until he came close to several cabins, round which he made a wide detour. This took him to the edge of the slope, where brush and thickets afforded him a safe passage to a line directly back of Greaves' store. Then he turned toward it. Soon he was again approaching a cabin, and some of its inmates descried him. Their actions attested to their alarm. Jean half expected a shot from this quarter, such were his growing doubts, but he was mistaken.

A MAN, unknown to Jean, closely watched his guarded movements, and then waved a hand as if to signify to Jean that he had nothing to fear. After this act he disappeared. Jean believed that he had been recognized by someone not antagonistic to the Isbels. Therefore he passed the cabin and, coming to a thick scrub oak tree that offered shelter, he hid there to watch. From the spot he could see the back of Greaves' store, at a distance probably too far for a rifle bullet to reach. Before him, as far as the store, and on each side, extended the village common. In front of the store ran the road. Jean's position was such that he could not command sight of this road down toward Meeker's house, a fact that disturbed him.

Not satisfied with this stand, he studied his surroundings in the hope of espying a better. He discovered what he thought would be a more favorable position, though he could not see much farther down the road. Jean went back round the cabin and, coming out into the open to the right, he got the corner of Greaves' barn between him and the window of the store. Then he boldly hurried into the open and soon reached an old wagon, from behind which he purposed to watch. He could not see either window or door of the store, but if any of the Jorth contingent came out the back way, he would be within reach of his rifle. Jean took the risk of being shot at from either side.

So sharp and roving was his sight that he soon espied Colmor slipping along behind trees, some hundred yards to the left. All his efforts to catch a glimpse of Bill, however, were fruitless. This appeared strange to Jean, for there were several good places on the right from which Bill could have commanded the front of Greaves' store and the whole west side.

COLMOR disappeared among some shrubbery, and Jean seemed left alone to watch a deserted, silent village. Watching and listening, he felt that the time dragged, yet the shadows cast by the sun showed him that, no matter how tense he felt and how the moments seemed hours, they were really flying.

Suddenly Jean's ears rang with the vibrant shock of a rifle report. He jerked up, strung and thrilling. It came from in front of the store. It was followed by revolver shots—heavy, booming. Three he counted, and the rest were too close together to enumerate. A single hoarse yell pealed out, somehow trenchant and triumphant. Other yells, not so wild and strange, muffled the first. Then silence clapped down on the store and the open square.

Jean was deadly certain that some of the Jorth clan would show themselves. He strained to still the trembling those sudden shots and that significant yell had caused him. No man appeared. No more sounds caught Jean's ears. The suspense then grew unbearable. It was not that he could not wait for an enemy to appear, but that he could not wait to learn what had happened. Every moment that he stayed there, with hands like steel on his rifle, with eyes of a falcon, but added to a dreadful, dark certainty of disaster. A rifle shot swiftly followed by revolver shots! What could they mean? Revolver shots of different caliber, surely fired by different men! What could they mean? It was not these shots that accounted for Jean's dread, but the yell which had followed. All his intelligence and all his nerve were not sufficient to fight down the feeling of calamity. And at last, yielding to it, he left his post and ran like a deer across the open through the cabin yard and round the edge of the slope to the road. Here his caution brought him to a halt. Not a living thing crossed his

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vision. Breaking into a run, he soon reached the back of Meeker's place, and entered, to hurry forward to the cabin.

Colmor was there in the yard, breathing hard, his face working, and in front of him crouched several of the men with rifles ready. The road, to Jean's flashing glance, was apparently deserted. Blue sat on the doorstep, lighting a cigarette. Then on the moment Blaisdell strode to the door of the cabin. Jean had never seen him look like that.

"Jean—look—down the road," he said brokenly, and with big hand shaking he pointed down toward Greaves' store.

LIKE lightning Jean's glance shot down, down, down, until it stopped to fix upon the prostrate form of a man lying in the middle of the road. A man of lengthy build, shirt-sleeved arms flung wide, white head in the dust—dead! Jean's recognition was as swift as his sight. His father! They had killed him. The Jorths! It was done. His father's premonition of death had not been false. Then after these flashing thoughts came a sense of blankness, momentarily almost oblivion, that gave place to a rending of the heart. That pain Jean had known only at the death of his mother. It passed, this agonizing pang, and its icy pressure yielded to a running gust of blood, fiery as hell.

"Who—did it?" whispered Jean.

"Jorth!" replied Blaisdell huskily. "Son, we couldn't hold him back. We couldn't. He was like a lion. An' he throwed his life away! Oh, if it hadn't been for thet it'd not be so awful! Shore we come heah to shoot an' be shot. But not like thet. It was murder—murder!"

Jean's mute lips framed a query easily read.

"Tell him, Blue. I cain't," continued Blaisdell, and he tramped into the cabin. "Set down, Jean, an' take things easy," said Blue calmly. "You know we all reckoned we'd git plugged one way or another in this deal. An' shore it doesn't matter much how a fellow gets it. All thet ought to bother us is to make shore the other outfit bites the dust, same as yo' old dad had to."

Under this man's tranquil presence, all the more quieting because it seemed to be so deadly sure and cool, Jean felt the uplift of his dark spirit, the acceptance of fatality, the mounting control of faculties that must wait. The little gunman seemed to have about his inert presence something that suggested a rattlesnake's inherent knowledge of its destructiveness. Jean sat down and wiped his clammy face.

"Jean, yo' dad reckoned to square accounts with Jorth an' save us all," began Blue, puffing out a cloud of smoke. "But he reckoned too late. Mebbe years ago, or even not long ago, if he'd called Jorth out man to man thar'd never been any Jorth-Isbel war. Gaston Isbel's conscience woke too late. Thet's how I figger it."

"Hurry. Tell me—how it—happened," panted Jean.

"WAL, a little while after yu-all left I seen your dad writin' on a leaf he tore out of a book—Meeker's Bible, as yu can see. I thought thet was funny. An' Blaisdell gave me a hunch. Pretty soon along comes young Evarts. The old man calls him out of our hearin' an' talks to him. Then I seen him give the boy somethin', which I afterwards figgered was what he wrote on the leaf out of the Bible. Me an' Blaisdell both tried to git out of him what thet meant. But not a word. I kep' watchin' an' after a while I seen young Evarts slip out of the back way. Mebbe half an hour I seen a barelegged kid cross the road an' go into Greaves' store. Then shore I tumbled to yo' dad. He'd sent a note to Jorth to come out an' meet him face to face, man to man. Shore it was like readin' what yo' dad had wrote. But I didn't say nothin' to Blaisdell. I jest watched."

Blue drawled these last words as if he enjoyed remembrance of his keen reasoning. A smile wreathed his thin lips. He drew twice on the cigarette and emitted another cloud of smoke. Quite suddenly he changed. He made a rapid gesture—the whip of a hand, significant and passionate. And swift words followed:

"Colonel Lee Jorth stalked out of the store, out into the road, mebbe a hundred steps. Then he halted. He wore his long black coat an' his wide black hat, an' he stood like a stone."

"The rest of us jest looked. I'd fergot yo' dad for the minnit. So had all of us."

But we remembered soon enough when we seen him stalk out. Everybody had a hunch then. I called him. Blaisdell begged him to come back. All the fellars had a say. No use. Then I shore cussed him an' told him it was plain as day thet Jorth didn't hit me like an honest man. I can sense such things. I knew Jorth had a trick up his sleeve. I've not been a gun fighter fer nothin'.

"Yo' dad had no rifle. He packed his gun at his hip. He jest stalked down thet road like a giant, goin' faster an' faster, holdin' his head high. It shore was fine to see him. But I was sick. I heerd Blaisdell groan, an' Fredericks thar cussed somethin' fierce. When yo' dad halted, I reckon aboot fifty steps from Jorth, then we all went numb. I heerd yo' dad's voice, then Jorth's. They cut like knives. Yu could shore heah the hate they hed fer each other."

Blue had grown a little husky. His speech had grown gradually to denote his feeling. Underneath his serenity there was a different order of man.

"I reckon both yo' dad an' Jorth went fer their guns at the same time—an even break. But jest as they drew someone shot a rifle from the store. Must hev been a 45-70. A big gun. The bullet must hev hit yo' dad low down, aboot the middle. He acted thet way, sinkin' to his knees. An' he was wild in shootin', so wild thet he must hev missed. Then he wobbled, an' Jorth run in a dozen steps, shootin' fast, till yo' dad fell over. Jorth run closer, bent over him, an' then straightened up with an Apache yell, if I ever heerd one. An' then Jorth backed slow, lookin' all the time—backed to the store an' went in."

BLUE'S voice ceased. Jean seemed suddenly released from an impelling magnet that now dropped him to some numb, dizzy depth. Blue's lean face grew hazy. Then Jean bowed his head in his hands and sat there, while a slight tremor shook all his muscles at once. He grew deathly sick. This paroxysm slowly wore away, and Jean grew conscious of a dull amaze at the apparent deadness of his spirit. Blaisdell placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Brace up, son," he said, with voice now clear and resonant. "Shore it's what yo' dad expected an' what we all must look fer. If yu was goin' to kill Jorth before, think how shore yu're goin' to kill him now."

"Blaisdell's talkin'," put in Blue, and his voice had a cold ring. "Lee Jorth will never see the sun rise agin'!"

These calls to the primitive in Jean, to the Indian, were not in vain. But even so, when the dark tide rose in him, there was still a haunting consciousness of the cruelty of this singular doom imposed upon him. Strangely, Ellen Jorth's face floated back in the depths of his vision, pale, fading, like the face of a spirit floating by.

"Blue," said Blaisdell, "let's git Isbel's body soon as we dar an' bury it. Reckon we can right after dark."

"Shore," replied Blue. "But yu fellars figger thet out. I'm thinkin' hard. I've got somethin' on my mind."

JEAN grew fascinated by the looks and speech and action of the little gunman. Blue, indeed, had something on his mind, and it boded ill to the men in that dark square stone house down the road. He paced to and fro in the yard, and then he entered the cabin to stalk up and down, faster and faster, until all at once he halted as if struck, to upfling his right arm in a singular, fierce gesture.

"Jean, call the men in," he said tersely. They all filed in, sinister and silent, with eager faces turned to the little Texan.

"Gordon, yu stand in the door an' keep yo' eye peeled," went on Blue. "Now, boys, listen. I've thought it all out. This game of man huntin' is the same to me as cattle raisin' is to yu. I'm goin' to kill Lee Jorth! Him first, an' mebbe his brothers. I had to think of a good many ways before I

hit on one I reckon will be shore. It's got to be shore. Jorth has got to die! Wal, heah's my plan. Thet Jorth outfit is drinkin' some; we can gamble on it. They're not goin' to leave thet store. An' of course they'll be expectin' us to start a fight. I reckon they'll look fer some such siege as they held round Isbel's ranch. But we shore ain't goin' to do thet. I'm goin' to surprise thet outfit. There's only one man among 'em who is dangerous, an' thet's Queen. I know Queen. But he doesn't know me. An' I'm goin' to finish my job before he gits acquainted with me. After thet, all right."



"Oh, Jean!" She whispered. "It's awful! It's wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Good-by! If Killin' Must be, See That You Kill the Jorths!"

Blue paused a moment, his eyes narrowing down, his face setting in hard cast of intense pre-occupation.

"Wal, what's yo' trick?" demanded Blaisdell.

"Yu-all know Greaves' store,"

continued Blue, "how them winders hev wooden shutters thet keep a light from showin' outside. Wal, I'm gamblin' thet as soon as it's dark Jorth's gang will be celebratin'. They'll be drinkin' an' they'll hev a light, an' the winders will be shut. They're not goin' to worry none aboot us. Thet store is like a fort. It won't burn. An' shore they'd never think of us chargin' 'em in thar. Wal, as soon as it's dark we'll go round behind the lots an' come up jest acrost the road from Greaves'. I reckon we'd better leave Isbel whar he lays till this fight's over. Mebbe yu'll hev more'n him to bury. We'll crawl behind them bushes in front of Coleman's yard. An' heah's whar Jean comes in. He'll take an ax, an' his guns, of course, an' do some of his Injun sneakin' round to the back of Greaves' store. An' Jean, yu must do a slick job of this. But I reckon it'll be easy fer yu. Back thar it'll be dark as pitch fer anyone lookin' out of the store. An' I'm figgerin' yu can take yo' time an' crawl right up. Now if yu don't remember how Greaves' back yard looks, I'll tell yu."

HERE Blue dropped on one knee to the floor, and with a finger he traced a map of Greaves' barn and fence, the back door and window, and especially a break in the stone foundation which led into a kind of cellar, where Greaves stored wood and other things that could be left outdoors.

"Jean, I take partic'lar pains to show yu whar this hole is," said Blue, "because if the gang runs out yu could duck in thar an' hide. An' if they run out into the yard—wal, yu'd make it a sorry run fer 'em. Wal,

when yu've crawled up close to Greaves' back door an' waited long enough to see an' listen, then yu're to run fast an' swing yo' ax smash agin the winder. Take a quick peep in if yu want to. It might help. Then jump quick an' take a swing at the door. Yu'll be standin' to one side, so if the gang shoots through the door they won't hit yu. Bang thet door good an' hard. Wal, now's whar I come in. When yu swing thet ax I'll shore run fer the front of the store. Jorth an' his outfit will be some attentive to thet poundin' of yours on the back door. An' they'll be lookin' thet way. I'll run in, yell an' throw my guns on Jorth."

"Humph! Is thet all?" ejaculated Blaisdell.

"I reckon thet's all, an' I'm figgerin' it's a hell of a lot," responded Blue dryly. "Thet's what Jorth will think."

"Whar do we come in?"

"Wal, yu-all can back me up," replied Blue dubiously. "Yu see my plan goes as far as killin' Jorth, an' mebbe his brothers. Mebbe I'll get a crack at Queen. But I'll be shore of Jorth. After thet, all depends. Mebbe it'll be easy fer me to git out. An' if I do yu fellars will know it an' come an' fill thet store full of bullets."

"WAL, Blue, with all due respect to yu, I shore don't like yo' plan," declared Blaisdell. "Success depends upon too many little things, any one of which might go wrong."

"Blaisdell, I reckon I know this heah game better than yu," replied Blue. "A gun fighter goes by instinct. This trick will work."

"But suppose thet front door of Greaves' store is barred?" protested Blaisdell.

"It hasn't got any bar," said Blue.

"Yu're shore?"

"Yes, I reckon," replied Blue.

"Man, aren't yu takin' a terrible chance?" queried Blaisdell.

Blue's answer to that was a look that brought the blood to Blaisdell's face. Only then did the rancher really comprehend how the little gunman had taken

such desperate chances before, and meant to take them now, not with any hope or assurance of escaping with his life, but to live up to his peculiar code of honor.

"Blaisdell, did yu ever heah of me in Texas?" he queried dryly.

"Wal, no, Blue; I cain't swear I did," replied the rancher apologetically. "An' Isbel was always sort of mysterious aboot his acquaintance with yu."

"My name's not Blue."

"A-huh! Wal, what is it, then, if I'm safe to ask?" returned Blaisdell gruffly.

"It's King Fisher," replied Blue.

The shock that stiffened Blaisdell must have been communicated to the others. Jean certainly felt amaze, and some other emotion not fully realized, when he found himself face to face with one of the most notorious characters ever known in Texas, an outlaw long supposed to be dead.

"MEN, I reckon I'd kept my secret if I'd any idea of comin' out of this Isbel-Jorth war alive," said Blue. "But I'm goin' to cash. I feel it heah. Isbel was my friend. He saved me from bein' lynched in Texas. An' so I'm goin' to kill Jorth. Now I'll take it kind of yu, if any of yu come out of this alive, to tell who I was an' why I was on the Isbel side. Because this sheep an' cattle war, this talk of Jorth an' the Hash Knife Gang, it makes me sick. I know thar's been crooked work on Isbel's side too. An' I never want it on record thet I killed Jorth because he was a rustler."

"Blue, it's late in the day fer sech talk," burst out Blaisdell in rage and amaze. "But I reckon yu know what yu're talkin' aboot. Wal, I shore don't want to heah any more."

At this juncture Bill Isbel quietly entered the cabin, too late to hear any of Blue's statement. Jean was positive of that, for as Blue was speaking those last revealing words Bill's heavy boots had resounded on the gravel path outside. Yet something in Bill's look or in the way Blue averted his lean face or in the entrance of Bill at that

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particular moment, or all these together, seemed to Jean to add further mystery to the long-secret causes leading up to the Jorth-Isbel war. Did Bill know what Blue knew? Jean had an inkling that he did. And on the moment, so perplexing and bitter, Jean gazed out the door, down the deserted road to where his dead father lay, white haired and ghastly in the sunlight.

"Blue, you could have kept that to yourself, as well as your real name," interposed Jean with bitterness. "It's too late now for either to do any good. But I appreciate your friendship for dad, an' I'm ready to help carry out your plan."

THAT decision of Jean's appeared to put an end to protest or argument from Blaisdell or any of the others. Blue's fleeting, dark smile was one of satisfaction. Then upon most of this group of men seemed to settle a grim restraint. They went out and walked and watched; they came in again, restless and somber. Jean thought that he must have bent his gaze a thousand times down the road to the tragic figure of his father. The pity of it! Gaston Isbel lying face down in the dust of the village street! Patches of blood showed on the back of his vest and on one white-sleeved shoulder. He had been shot through. Every time Jean saw this blood he had to stifle a gathering of wild, savage impulses.

Meanwhile the afternoon hours dragged by, and the village remained as if its inhabitants had abandoned it. Jorth and some of his men came out in front of the store and sat on the steps in close, convening groups. Every move they made seemed significant of their confidence and importance. About sunset they went back into the store, closing door and window shutters. Then Blaisdell called the Isbel faction to have food and drink. Jean felt no hunger. And Blue, who had kept apart from the others, showed no desire to eat. Neither did he smoke, though early in the day he had never been without a cigarette between his lips.

Twilight fell. Darkness came. Not a light showed anywhere in the blackness.

"Wal, I reckon it's about time," said Blue, and he led the way out of the cabin to the back of the lot. Jean strode behind him, carrying his rifle and an ax. Silently the other men followed. Blue turned to the left and led through the fields until he came within sight of a dark line of trees.

"Thet's whar the road turns off," he said to Jean. "An' heah's the back of Coleman's place. Wal, Jean, good luck!"

Jean felt the grip of a steel-like hand, and in the darkness he caught the gleam of Blue's eyes. Jean had no response in words for the laconic Blue, but he wrung the hard, thin hand and hurried away.

Once alone, his part of the business at hand rushed him into eager, thrilling action. This was the sort of work he was fitted to do. In this instance it was important, but it seemed to him that Blue had coolly taken the perilous part. And this cowboy with gray in his thin hair was in reality the great King Fisher! Jean marveled at the fact. He shivered all over for Jorth. In ten minutes, fifteen, more or less, Jorth would lie gasping bloody froth and sinking down. Something in the dark,

lonely, silent, oppressive summer night told Jean this. He strode on swiftly. Crossing the road at a run, he kept on over the ground he had traversed during the afternoon, and in a few moments he stood breathing hard at the edge of the common behind Greaves' store.

A pin point of light penetrated the blackness. It made Jean's heart leap. The Jorth contingent were burning the big lamp that hung in the center of Greaves' store. Jean listened. Loud voices and coarse laughter sounded discord on the melancholy silence of the night. The death of Gaston Isbel was being celebrated by revel.

In a few moments Jean had regained his breath. Then all his faculties set intensely to the action at hand. He seemed to magnify his hearing and his sight. His movements made no sound. He gained the wagon, where he crouched a moment.

The ground seemed a pale, obscure medium, hardly more real than the gloom above it. Through this gloom of night, which looked thick like a cloud but was really clear, shone the thin point of light, accentuating the black square that was Greaves' store. Above this stood a gray line of tree foliage, and then the intensely dark-blue sky studded with white, cold stars.

Jean gathered all his forces, until sense of sight and hearing were in exquisite accord with the suppleness and lightness of his movements. He glided on about ten short, swift steps before he halted. That was as far as his piercing eyes could penetrate. If there had been a guard stationed outside the store, Jean would have seen him before being seen. He saw the fence, reached it, entered the yard, glided in the dense shadow of the barn until the black square began to loom gray—the color of stone at night. Jean peered through the obscurity. No dark figure of a man showed against that gray wall, only a black patch, which must be the hole in the foundation mentioned. A ray of light now streaked out from the little black window. To the right showed the wide, black door.

Farther on Jean glided silently. Then he halted. There was no guard outside. Jean heard the clink of a cup, the lazy drawl of a Texan, and then a strong, harsh voice—Jorth's. It strung Jean's whole being tight and vibrating. It took tremendous effort of will to hold himself back another instant to listen, to look, to feel, to make sure. And that instant charged him with a mighty current of hot blood—straining, throbbing, damming.

WHEN Jean leaped this current burst. In a few swift bounds he gained his point halfway between door and window. He leaned his rifle against the stone wall. Then he swung the ax. Crash! The window shutter split and rattled to the floor inside. The silence then broke with a hoarse "What's thet?"

With all his might Jean swung the heavy ax on the door. Smash! The lower half caved in and banged to the floor. Bright light flared out of the hole.

"Look out!" yelled a man in loud alarm. "They're batterin' the back door!"

Jean swung again, high on the splintered door. Crash! Pieces flew inside.

"They've got axes," shouted another voice. "Shove the counter agin the door."

"No!" thundered a voice of authority that denoted terror as well. "Let 'em come in. Pull yo' guns an' take to cover!"

"They ain't comin' in," was the hoarse reply. "They'll shoot in on us from the dark."

"Put out the lamp!" yelled another.

Jean's third heavy swing caved in part of the upper half of the door. Shouts and curses intermingled with the sliding of benches across the floor and the hard shuffle of boots. This confusion seemed to be split and silenced by a piercing yell, of different caliber, of terrible meaning. It stayed Jean's swing—caused him to drop the ax and snatch up his rifle.

"Don't anybody move!"

Like a steel whip this voice cut the silence. It belonged to Blue. Jean swiftly bent to put his eye to a crack in the door. Most of those visible seemed to have been frozen into unnatural positions. Jorth stood rather in front of his men, one arm outstretched, and his dark profile set toward a little man just inside the door. This man was Blue. Jean needed only one flashing look at Blue's face, at his leveled, quivering guns to understand why he had chosen this trick.

"Who're—yu?" demanded Jorth in husky pants.

"Reckon I'm Isbel's right-hand man," came the biting reply. "Once tol'able well known in Texas. King Fisher!"

THE name must have been a guaranty of death. Jorth recognized this outlaw and realized his own fate. In the lamplight his face turned a pale greenish white.

Blue's left gun seemed to leap up and flash red and explode. Several heavy reports merged almost as one. Jorth's arm jerked limply, flinging his gun, and his body sagged in the middle. His hands fluttered like crippled wings and found their way to his abdomen. His death-pale face never changed its set look or position toward Blue. But his gasping utterance was one of horrible mortal fury and terror. Then he began to sway, still with that rigid set of his face toward his slayer, until he fell.

His fall broke the spell. Even Blue, like the gunman he was, had paused to watch Jorth in his last mortal action. Jorth's followers began to draw and shoot. Jean saw Blue's return fire bring down a huge man, who fell across Jorth's body. Then Jean, quick as the thought that actuated him, raised his rifle and shot at the big lamp. It burst in a flare. It crashed to the floor. Darkness followed—a blank, thick, enveloping mantle. Then red flashes of guns emphasized the blackness. Inside the store there broke loose a pandemonium of shots, yells, curses and thudding boots. Jean shoved his rifle barrel inside the door and, holding it low down, he moved it to and fro while he worked lever and trigger until the magazine was empty. Then, drawing his six-shooter, he emptied that. A roar of rifles from the front of the store told Jean that his comrades had entered the fray. Bullets zipped through the door he had broken. Jean ran swiftly round the corner, taking care to sheer off a little to the left, and when he got clear of the building he saw a line of flashes in the middle of the road. Blaisdell and the others were firing into the door of the store. With nimble fingers Jean

reloaded his rifle. Then swiftly he ran across the road and down to get behind his comrades. Their shooting had slackened. Jean saw dark forms coming his way.

"Hello, Blaisdell!" he called warningly.

"Thet yu, Jean?" returned the rancher, looming up. "Wal, we wasn't worried about yu."

"Blue?" queried Jean sharply.

A little dark figure shuffled past Jean. "Howdy, Jean," said Blue dryly. "Yu shore did yo' part. Reckon I'll need to be tied up, but I ain't hurt much."

"Colmor's hit," called the voice of Gordon. "Help me, somebody."

Jean ran to help Gordon uphold the swaying Colmor. "Are you hurt—bad?" asked Jean anxiously. The young man's head rolled and hung. He was breathing hard and did not reply. They had almost to carry him.

"Come on, men," called Blaisdell, turning back toward the others, who were still firing. "We'll let well enough alone. Fredericks, yu an' Bill help me find the body of the old man. It's heah somewhere."

Farther on down the road the searchers stumbled over Gaston Isbel. They picked him up and followed Jean and Gordon, who were supporting the wounded Colmor. Jean looked back to see Blue dragging himself along in the rear. It was too dark to see distinctly, nevertheless Jean got the impression that Blue was more severely wounded than he had claimed to be. The distance to Meeker's cabin was not far, but it took what Jean felt to be a long and anxious time to get there. Colmor apparently rallied somewhat. When this procession entered Meeker's yard Blue was lagging behind.

"Blue, how air yu?" called Blaisdell with concern.

"Wal, I got—my boots—on—anyhow," replied Blue huskily.

He lurched into the yard and slid down on the grass and stretched out.

"Man! Yu're hurt bad!" exclaimed Blaisdell. The others halted in their slow march and, as if by tacit, unspoken word, lowered the body of Isbel to the ground. Then Blaisdell knelt beside Blue. Jean left Colmor to Gordon and hurried to peer down into Blue's dim face.

"NO, I AIN'T—hurt," said Blue in a much weaker voice. "I'm—jest killed! It was Queen! Yu-all heerd me—Queen was—only bad man in thet lot. I knowed it. I could—hev killed him. But I was—after Lee Jorth—an' his brothers —" Blue's voice failed there.

"Wal!" ejaculated Blaisdell.

"Shore was funny—Jorth's face—when I said—King Fisher," whispered Blue. "Funnier—when I bored—him through. But it—was—Queen —"

His whisper died away.

"Blue!" called Blaisdell sharply. Receiving no answer, he bent lower in the starlight and placed a hand upon the man's breast.

"Wal, he's gone. I wonder if he was the old Texas King Fisher. No one would ever believe it. But if he killed the Jorths I'll shore believe him."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

MISSING A GOOD BET

(Continued from Page 15)

It all depends on how adjustments are made and on how permanent those adjustments may be.

Only a short while ago the whole world trembled at the prospect of an impending strike in England, which, had it not been averted, would have brought disaster.

To-day urban labor is armed to the teeth with power. Capital is the same. Both are stronger than the arms of the Government. Approximately 4,000,000 farmers are lined up for the contest, and only an understanding and proper adjustments can avert an impending crisis far greater than the disaster of the Great War.

To avert the calamity the city man must understand the man in the country, and when he knows the facts he will use his power to set things right.

But how is he to get the facts?

It cannot be done by the farm press, because the city man does not read the farm

press. It cannot be done by college extension workers, because city folks do not attend farm lectures.

It cannot be done by news items in the city press, because city readers will not read farm-news items.

It cannot be done by business interests, because it does not seem to be to their advantage to do so.

There are, however, several avenues open. THE COUNTRY GENTLEMAN showed us at least one way. Its paid page ads in the city press, such as the one What Happens in the Dark, are in very truth carrying the light to the city. Many other means may be employed, all of which will cost cash and effort.

It will take a real man with real all-round ability to successfully direct such a campaign; but such can be found, and it seems to us that the American Farm Bureau Federation is the logical leader at this time.

It has accomplished wonders so far, but its great service has only begun.

Right now we see the work and partial results of those arrayed against us. Powerful interests are at work trying to create the feeling among city folks that the farmer is trying to get everything within his power, and that when he gets it he will make the world pay the price or let it starve and go naked. They see the wheat marketing plan as "an opening wedge" to "infringe on legitimate business."

They see any livestock marketing plan as only a scheme to make the consumer pay more for his meat, and they are succeeding to a degree in making the city believe it. In other words, old man Public Opinion in the city is about to think the farmer wrong, and let us remember that the farmer alone is not the "balance of power" in this country, and he cannot win if public opinion in the city is against him.

Carrying the light to the city is a stupendous undertaking, but we must do it to win. Failing, we lose.

We do not see how the city worker in shop, factory or clerkship can work for smaller wages and yet live halfway decently. Everything he eats and wears and the house in which he lives cost enormously under our system, yet the farmer is feeding the world and clothing it below the cost of production and has been doing so for years. He has fed and clothed the world better than he has fed and clothed himself.

He has built the world a mansion while he himself lived in a cottage. He has bought the world a limousine while he rode in a flivver. He has clothed the world in broadcloth, in silks and satins, but dressed himself and his in duck, in calico and gingham, yet the city misunderstands. "Carrying the light to the city" is the "rainbow of promise."

CHAFF

The Farmer's Tasks

THE farmer's tasks are never done. He works two eight-hour days in one, till daylight saving knocks him flat by adding one more hour to that. In certain years his crops won't grow. When crops are good the price is low. So raising little, naught or much, he's very apt to get in Dutch. And when I see him on the jump, I sometimes think that he's a chump for raising food that loafers eat whose pants wear only at the seat, and taking all the market's chance producing wool to patch those pants. And yet, besides those lazy folk, who sidestep every labor yoke, he feeds some worthy people, too, hard-working scouts like me and you. If he should quit, all things would slump; I hope he still keeps on the jump, and I am filled with gratitude for fifty-seven kinds of food. Should need arise, so help me Pete, I'd go and help him thresh his wheat.

Couldn't Do It

A MODEST son of the Golden State makes affidavit to this story: An Easterner who had bought a home in California heard of his neighbor's talent for raising large tomatoes. So the newcomer sent over to get a hundred pounds of the toothsome vegetable. "Please say to your boss," answered the talented farmer to the messenger, "that, to my regret, I am unable to cut a tomato for anybody!"

A Rara Avis

A PHOTOGRAPHER had been taking movie pictures of farm life. On his way to the station he met the old farmer. "I got some excellent pictures of your men at work." "Did ye? If I come to your place can I see pictures of my men at work?" "Certainly." "Well, well, well! Modern wonders'll never cease."

His Comfortable Condition

"WHERE," thundered the orator who loved the dear pee-pul and the offices they bestow, "is the man among us who is not downtrodden and oppressed in some manner, who can truly say that he is free to realize his cherished ambitions, and is not bound, handicapped and ——" "Right here, sir!" answered a cheery voice from the audience. "I have been a widower for nearly two years now."



"What's the Matter, Mr. Dicky Bird?"
"Oh, I Was Such a High Flyer When I Was Young
That Now I Have Rheumatism in My Wing"

Some Relief

"THE welkin must ring quite stentorianly when all your younger children start crying at the same time," said the inquisitively inclined tourist. "Well, I'll tell you," replied Gap Johnson, of Rumpus Ridge, who is blessed with fourteen olive branches. "When they all start to cry at the same time it 'pears to me like they sorter drown each other out, and the fuss hain't noways as painful as you mought—p'tu!—reckon 't would be."

Time's Victim

FATHER takes the train to town;
Bobby goes to school;
Brother John's a farmer's lad;
Tom plies plumber's tool.

Mary dressmakes all day long;
Cora sings in church.
Mother dear is like a hen
Frantic on its perch.

There's a reason, too, of course,
Hard to show in rime.
Daylight saving part must keep,
Others, standard time.

Mother dear must feed us all;
So before the dawn
She must cook for father first,
Even though she yawn.

Then come Bobby, John and Tom;
Mary is the next,
By installments—not at once,
That's why mother's vex.

So it is three times a day,
All this to bewitch.
So no wonder she can't tell
Who's next, when or which!
—Blanche Elizabeth Wade.

The Art of Swimming

TOMPKINS: What are you reading? WILKINS: A book on swimming. The idea is splendid. You tie the book round your neck when you go in the water. If you find yourself drowning turn to page fifty-seven and it tells you just what to do.

A Reasonable Supposition

"THE Hon. Thomas Rott—" "Why, I thought he was dead!" surprisedly interrupted old Festus Pester. "I heard somebody praising him yesterday."

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You have the same opportunity that was open to Dr. J. W. Kidd of West Virginia. He is a busy physician who for thirty-six years has been working heart and soul in the interests of the little town in which he lives. "I have never worked more than two hours a day with your weekly," he wrote; yet from the very beginning of his work he easily earned fifty to seventy-five extra dollars each month. And all the while he is building a permanent business that will bring ever-growing profits.

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You will be interested in the story of Mr. E. A. Herrick. In the Massachusetts city in which he lives is another of the most successful of Curtis workers—a man who earns \$5000.00 to \$8000.00 every year with his Curtis subscription business. Yet Mr. Herrick, in the very first month of his work, earned \$135.00 extra by our plan! He, too, can look forward to building up a permanent subscription business that will grow from year to year and yield ever-increasing returns.

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