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ACTION STORIES

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THE COLONEL'S COLTS

By M. Howard Lane

Gleaming like polished jewels in their case, one's fingers ached to curl lovingly about their triggers. Yet the dead Colonel's bookish, weaking son swore they would never be fired.

THE DARK-SKINNED RIDER reached Goliad on a lathered horse and started making his inquiries of the first man he met on the late-night street.

"Senor," he said, "I look for Kyle Adams. He ees here, no?"

"Kyle?" the man nodded. "Yeah, you'll find him in the Longhorn settin' in a back-room game with a pair of cattle buyers loaded with Dodge City gold. But I wouldn't disturb him, were I you. Kyle don't like it when folks interrupt his poker—specially when he's winnin'."

"*Gracias, senor,*" the Mexican nodded, "but thees may be the matter of life and death, so I weel take my chances—"

Kyle Adams, and the rest of the silent men at the table listened to the disturbance in the hall, and Kyle recognized a voice he hadn't heard in five years.

"I will see Senor Adams, or slit your gullet!" the Mexican promised.

And George, the barkeep, answered resignedly: "And Kyle will slit yores if you bother him—"

Kyle Adams' hand was already in the discard, and he looked with mute apology in his dark eyes at the other players as he slipped out of his chair. A tall man, flat-bellied, lean-shanked, and broad of shoulder, he turned toward the door, the top of his sleek black head almost on a level with the hanging, green-shaded lamp above the table, and memories came flooding back to him.

Old Angelo's voice, out there in the hall, brought them. Angelo, who had been majordomo for Grandfather Adams' Diamond A horse ranch up in the San Saba country. The one to teach a pair of orphaned brothers how to set a saddle. Only Jeff, three years older than himself, had never seemed to get the hang of riding. To this day, Kyle guessed grimly, his brother probably still looked awkward in

a saddle. And yet, by time honored custom, Jeff had been the man to inherit the Diamond A—and the family guns.

Kyle cracked the door and stepped into the hall, faint amusement in his eyes as he listened to the volley of words, bandying back and forth between the vaquero and barkeep.

"Gents," he drawled, "I'll cut both your throats if you don't quit bellerin'!" His long brown hand moved out gracefully to grasp Angelo's bent fingers. "*Amigo,*" he couldn't repress the pleasure in his voice, "it's been a long time. But then I imagine Jeff would look down his long blue nose if you'd ever suggested coming to Goliad or Refugio to see me."

Angelo Dominguez y Noriega's face mapped the passage of three score years and more in its leathery brownness. A hundred wrinkles marred his cheeks as he grinned at Kyle's welcome. Black eyes that still carried the snap of youth, regarded the tall, lean man before him with approval.

"*Por dios!*" he exclaimed, "and the thing I fear has not happened. All thees gambling I hear so much about has not put the fat on your bones. Your body, she ees as hard as when we ride the hills of the San Saba."

"I still do my share of riding, in the day-times," Kyle smiled. "And when I do, I'm aboard *Rey de los Reyes*, but don't ever let Jeff know that."

"The King of Kings!" Angelo breathed. "The finest stallion ever sired on our rancho. But she was sold to a horse trader from San Antonio—"

"Commissioned by me," Kyle said gently, "to buy the best bronc on the Diamond A, at any price. But I still can't see how Jeff ever let loose of that palomino stud. He's no horseman, but even he could see the worth of that beauty."

Angelo's dark face mirrored sudden



Lead blasted where his shoulders had been.

contempt. "Senor," he said, "I breeng you something that may answer your question. Eef it does not, then I weel tell you what I can."

His hand reached inside his dusty blue shirt and brought out a square envelope. Kyle took it and moved into the patch of light that came through the open door at the end of the hall, and at the sight of the rounded hand-writing on the envelope he felt even his gambler's heart, that he had schooled to keep a steady pulse in any emergency, quicken its beat.

The letter was from Mary—Mrs. Jeffrey Adams now. Once there had been a time when her name was Mary Breen, and she'd clerked behind the counter in the Ladies Section of her father's General Store in San Saba. That had been eight years ago, Kyle recalled with a sudden sense of inexplicable shock at the quick passage of time. Seventeen then, she'd be twenty-five now, his own age. But a girl of seventeen was a sight older in womanly ways than a boy of the same years.

Kyle had never found the courage to tell Mary Breen how he felt about her, so twenty year old Jeff had been the one to take her to the neighborhood dances, and don a white dickey and string tie on Sundays to squire her to church. Everybody in San Saba, including her father, had figured they'd make a fine match for each other, with Jeffrey due to inherit the fabulous Diamond A. A mighty steady-going young fellow, Jeff Adams. Didn't drink, smoke, or chew—while that young Kyle now—all he wanted to do was gallop over the hills by day, and belly up to San Saba bars by night.

No one, including Mary, had ever guessed Kyle's feelings for her, because he had learned even then to mask his emotions behind an imperturbable smile.

So steady-going Jeff and Mary Breen, the prettiest girl in San Saba, had been married on his twenty-first birthday, and the excitement of the reception Colonel Adams had insisted on giving them at the Diamond A afterwards had been too much for the old man's heart. He'd died that afternoon right at his own festive board, as a gentleman should, with his boots planted solidly beneath his own table.

Stringy old Lawyer Whipple had gathered them together after the funeral

in his musty office above the Mercantile Bank and read the Colonel's Will.

KYLE, and most everybody else had known what its provisions would be, but the Colonel had provided one surprise. Kyle still held Mary's letter in his hand, and he was remembering as vividly as though it had been yesterday the pair of matched Colts Lawyer Whipple had bought from his safe to lay alongside the document. Kyle, who loved good guns, good horses, and good whiskey, had never seen the equal of those shining Peacemakers. Deer-horn grips, polished to an ivory patina, with the carved miniature of a horse's head on each handle had fascinated him even more than the glowing ruby eyes inset in each animal. The weapons were as perfect as custom workmanship could make them, the barrels as smooth as a woman's skin.

"Lord," he had whispered the words without thinking, "I'd give my soul to own those guns!"

Jeff had looked down his long, thin nose. "Watch your tongue, Kyle," he'd snapped. "We'll have no blasphemy here! What's the meaning of those guns, Mr. Whipple? Why show them to us? You know my keen aversion to weapons of any kind."

Jeffrey Adams had taken to reading books he got from some mail-order house in the East, and he liked to show off his knowledge by slinging big words around.

The lawyer had answered the new young owner of the Diamond A with a dry smile. "I believe," he said, "the reading of your late Grandfather's Will and Testament will provide you with the answer."

And it had. Kyle recalled the words as plainly as though the lawyer's dry voice was repeating them to him now.

Perhaps an old man's love of fine guns will be respected by his heirs, for there have been times in my life when Colts such as these you will be seeing for the first time have saved my life. Not Colts as beautiful perhaps, but just as serviceable. These guns have never been fired, and I hope the necessity to load them will never arise. They are Family Guns,

and I charge each and every heir who will bear the name of Adams to hold these Colts in trust, each for the next male kin unto the tenth generation, if the name survives that long.

Only if your life be endangered, or in defense of your home, shall these guns be called upon to fulfill their purpose. They are honest guns, and mayhap the time will arise when they will serve the Adamses well . . .

"Put the damned things in your safe!" Jeff Adams had thundered. "Imagine wasting good money on toys such as these. Why, the Colonel must have been crazy to——"

Kyle had been on his feet by that time, a white-lipped, frozen-faced boy with a pair of clenched fists cocked and ready to swing. "Don't talk to me about blasphemy!" he had cut in on his brother. "I'll beat your damned head off if you ever say another word against the Colonel—or these guns!"

Kyle found himself trembling a little with the memory of that anger still strong in him. Bitter words. Words Jeff Adams had never forgotten, nor forgiven.

LOOKING back now, Kyle could see that his brother had from that day made life miserable for him. And the sight of Mary around the ranch-house had not added to his peace of mind. He spent as much time on the range as a man could, and he rode a good horse to town most every night, and drank all the good whisky he could hold. The blue noses in San Saba called him a wild kid, and prophesied a dire end. And he had, Kyle guessed, been quite a hell-raiser at that. Certainly the town marshal had never forgotten him, nor some of the town toughs and pay-day cowboys who had lost their wages to him.

But it had taken two years for rebellion to reach the blow-up point. Years that had seen Mary Breen grow more lovely, and Jeff Adams more intolerant. Kyle had hung on as long as he could, because he'd felt the ranch and Mary needed him. The girl laughed when they were together, but he'd never seen her laugh in Jeffrey's company.

That last night was a memory now,

tinged with acid pleasure and sharp bitterness. Jeff Adams had driven home from town just in time for supper, and he'd sat down at the head of the table with a self-satisfied smirk on his lips.

"I took those damned guns away from Whipple today," he'd said with obvious relish. "He kicked like a bay steer, said they were his to keep in trust, but I told him they were mine, and I'd have them. Showed the things to Heber Shockley at the bank, and you know that fool offered me a thousand dollars for them. I told him they weren't for sale, and locked them up in one of those new-fangled safe deposit boxes they built into the basement. If they're worth a thousand dollars to Heber now, they may be worth five some day. And when they are, Mary, we'll let him have them and take a trip around the world. We sure as the Devil will never make enough to do it raising horses!"

"You'd never make enough if every hen in the back yard laid golden eggs!" Kyle had snapped, and pushed back from the table. He'd reached for his brother then and yanked him up from his seat, and planted one hard fist squarely on the tip of Jeff's sharp nose. His brother had sprawled backward to the floor, blood gushing across his shirt. "That," Kyle told him, "is a sample of what I'll give you if you ever sell those Colts. Someday they're going to belong to me. Remember that, Jeff. Now I'll be mosey-ing——"

"Step out of this house," Jeff Adams had said through bloody lips, "and never come back. Your precious guns are safe, and I hope if you ever lay hands on them you'll use one bullet to blow your brains out!"

Mary Breen had been a silent shadow waiting beside the barn door when Kyle had led his mount to the yard. Her hands had gripped his arms, and for the only time in his life he'd tasted the sudden sweetness of her lips as she'd reached up and kissed him.

"Kyle," she had whispered, "Kyle, I won't forget you."

Shaken then, and shaken even now, five years later, Kyle remembered he had told her "If you ever need me, Mary, I'll come to you——"

FOR a man with schooled nerves, and a gambler's steady hands, he found his fingers strangely clumsy as he opened the envelope and drew out the single sheet of paper it contained.

The words danced for a minute before his dark eyes; then his vision cleared.

Kyle, once you promised to come to me. I need you now.

MARY.

He looked up from the message to find Angelo's eyes studying him questioningly. "I hope," Kyle said, "that you can stand another ride, *amigo*. One drink and we're heading for the Diamond A."

"So that ees what the letter ask, eh?" Angelo said slowly. "*Por dios*, eet is a lot. There are men in San Saba weeth long memories, *Senor*. Thees Mark Rich, the Marshal, he ees not going to like to see you return. Nor ees that banker, Heber Shockley. And the good *Senor Loder*, who was forced to close his gaming tables after you paid him your last visit, he weel bust all the buttons on his vest. They are three *muy malo hombres*, *Senor*, and they run San Saba as though it were their own. They weel breeng you trouble—if they can!"

"I've been in it before," Kyle said briefly, and his eyes passed to the barkeep who was still lingering uncertainly in the hall. "George, go in and tell your dealer to cash my chips. Bring the money to the bar and, if a twenty should stick to your fingers, I'll charge it up to profit and loss. Angelo, come on."

The barkeep grinned. "That's the kind of talk I like to hear——"

Tequila and a pinch of salt satisfied Angelo. Kyle sipped Irish whisky and found the Mexican's eyes going over him.

Angelo grinned a little shame-facedly. "*Senor*," he said, "the boots, those *pantalones* from California, the cut of that coat you wear, they speak of a man with *dinero*. You have done well with the cards, no?"

"Yes," Kyle said simply, "I've got enough in my poke to buy the Diamond A—if Jeff would sell."

"He has the very little reason for wanting to keep the *Rancho!*" Angelo said explosively.

"Diamond A horses are wanted all over the Southwest," Kyle said.

"Eef they are good horses," said the Mexican significantly. "But, *Senor*, tell me how a man can raise fine broncos when the studs run free on the range, and the wild horses she come in from the badlands and steal our mares?"

Kyle forgot his drink. "What in hell is the matter with Jeff" he demanded.

Angelo answered indirectly, "Wan man," he said, "can do little alone. I am all the help that ees left now. The rest they leave either because there is no *dinero* for pay, or because Jeff speaks to them like no man should be spoken too. Myself, I would have cut the *cabrone's* throat thees many times were it not for the *Senora Maria*. And sometimes I theenk she would be maybeso the happier if I had!"

REY de los Reyes was all that a man could ask in a horse. The big stallion carried Kyle Adams back to the remembered valley of the San Saba while it took three changes for Angelo to keep pace with him.

"It's good," Kyle told his companion simply, "to be coming home," and the thought of Mary was a fire in his blood that time had never quenched.

This was the afternoon of the fourth day since Angelo had left the Diamond A with his message for Kyle, and it was apparent to them as they reached the lower end of San Saba's tree-shaded main street that someone in the community had died since the Mexican's leaving. The cemetery lay a half mile behind them on a knoll bordering the San Saba river, and the funeral procession was wending a solemn way toward them.

"*Dios*," Angelo exclaimed, "thees must be someone of importance. There will be no procession behind poor Angelo's coffin—eef I am lucky enough to even have the coffin!"

A pair of adobes loomed on the left behind the shade trees, and Kyle guided his big palomino between them. "Let this outfit pass," he counseled. "We've got business in town with Whipple before we visit Mary——"

Angelo nodded. He knew the meaning of Kyle's reference to the lawyer for

they'd had time to talk on their ride from Goliad. The majordomo had given him a graphic picture of the condition of the Diamond A—of Jerry Adams' ineptness to manage anything. His passion was books and nothing else. All the dollars that came from the sale of stock went into his library.

"He ees, I theenk, going a little *loco* in the *cabeza*," the Mexican had said significantly.

And Kyle, who had dreamed since boyhood of owning the Diamond A, had told the old majordomo grimly, "If money will buy that ranch, I'll make it mine!" And he had added to himself: "*The guns, too! The Colonel's Colts!*"

"*Carramba!*" The startled expression coming from Angelo's lips brought Kyle's attention to the funeral procession passing along the street. The black hearse was in front of them now, drawn by a team of magnificent Morgans.

"Those, those *caballos*," Angelo pointed a shaking finger at the team, "they belong to our *rancho!*"

The hearse passed on, and behind it came a black-topped buggy, with a driver and one passenger inside. A woman in dark clothes with a set, white face that looked neither right nor left.

Kyle stared at her and his lips framed a name that he didn't utter. The woman in the carriage was Mary Breen Adams!

HE heard Angelo's noisy breathing beside him, saw the old majordomo make the Sign of the Cross, and then his anguished eyes turned mutely to Kyle.

"Wait," Kyle whispered the word. The years he'd spent as a professional gambler had taught him one thing if nothing else. "Wait out your man. Don't try to break him in one hand—" Now, perhaps, that training might come in handy. Mary had sent out a call for him, but Jeff hadn't been dead then. Jeff, though, was in the coffin aboard that hearse. How had he died? Only four days were gone since Angelo had slipped away from the Diamond A, and Jeff had been a well man then.

Kyle watched the buggies and buckboards that followed Mary's carriage. There were townspeople in them. Old families of the neighborhood, all mem-

bers of the same congregation Jeff and Mary had attended.

But there were three men riding in a buckboard at the rear of the procession that brought Kyle Adams to attention in his saddle. One was the President of the Mercantile Bank, Heber Shockley. Five years had added fat to his bland, middle-aged face, and a comfortable paunch bulged his black vest. Driving the rig was Mark Rich, the Town Marshal, tall and gaunt as a starved cougar, and with the same disposition. Cameron Loder, owner of San Saba's Emporium Saloon covered most of the rear seat. It was said he knew more than any six other men about what went on along the river — both inside and outside the law. Now they held San Saba in the palms of their hands. But why were they bothering to attend Jeffrey Adams' funeral? They'd never been friends of the Adamses before now—

Dust lifted lazy veils into the golden sunlight after the procession passed on its way to the cemetery, and Kyle glanced at Angelo. "There used to be a trail down along the river," he said speculatively, "that could put us into the trees near the Adams family plot. Might make it there without anybody being the wiser, if we moved slow and careful."

"*Si, si*," the Mexican nodded, "but why do we not ride openly to the funeral *Senor?*"

It was a question that Kyle found hard to answer. He didn't quite find words to express the feelings that were in him. "I can't rightly say, Angelo," he admitted. "But it strikes me there's something wrong with this whole show. Jeff's on his feet when you leave with Mary's note. Now he's dead, four days later. Did Mary have a premonition—or what? And you just saw Rich, and Loder, and Shockley. They make strange mourners!"

The Services were drawing to a close when Kyle and Angelo eased close enough through the trees to come within hearing distance. The Community Minister, Ben Brown, was speaking. His sonorous voice came clearly to them.

". . . cut off in the full flush of a good and Godly life," he was saying unctuously, "But the Lord's ways are mysterious, his miracles to perform. How are we to know

why a man of peace should don Godless weapons, and sally into the hills . . ."

Marshal Mark Rich's voice carried the rough grate of a file crossing rusty metal as he interrupted the ceremony. "Let's have no talk of them guns, parson."

Kyle felt his finger-nails bite against the palms of his hands, and he heard breath whistle audibly from Angelo's lips. Jeff Adams had been wearing the Family Guns when he'd met his death! Why? And why again should Mark Rich object to their mention at Jeff's funeral?

Kyle saw Mary, standing between her father and mother, lift her bowed head momentarily, and he caught a glimpse of her that shocked him. The girl's face was stiff with fright—not grief!

His hand drew the Mexican backward, and silent as they had come, Kyle led the way down to the river and their horses.

"Where now, Senor?" Angelo asked when they were mounted.

Kyle turned a face that had grown hard as flint to the Mexican. "The Diamond A," he said briefly. "We've got to find out how Jeff died—and why—"

"Si," Angelo agreed slowly. "The Senora weel be expecting us—maybeso more than ever now." Then his brow clouded. "But what was thees talk of gons, Senor?"

Kyle had no ready answer. A quick and unexpected death had overtaken his brother. The Parson's talk had told him that much, but neither Brown's words nor the Marshal's intervention could explain the staring fear he had seen on the girl's face.

AFTERNOON was waning when their ride brought them to the Diamond A. Tall hills, studded with granite scarps, flanked the valley. This was horse country. From these hills and valleys the Comanches, those lords of the plains, had recruited most of their mounts. Here was sweet water, green grass, and enough rock to toughen the hooves of Morgan, Arabian, and palomino wearing the Diamond A brand. If a man watched his breeding and rearing, he could raise the finest horses in the world here in the San Saba. Horses in demand over the whole Southwest—that would bring all the wealth a man might ever need. Jeff had had his chance and failed. Now the Diamond A would become Mary's.

"But the guns," Kyle thought with a fierceness that shook him, "will belong to me!"

The Diamond A was a sad travesty of what he remembered. The Colonel had left Jeff a rambling adobe headquarters, walls gleaming with always-fresh white-wash. Barns and corrals and the bunk-house too. White, clean, neat. Now white-wash peeled from walls. Corrals and barns sagged from disuse. Steps leading up to the porch were splintered and worn as Kyle mounted them. The neglect here was something he could almost smell.

"She ees not what you left, Senor Kyle," Angelo murmured at his elbow. "But I could do little, and the Senora could do less. It takes many hands to keep a *rancho* like thees as we remember eet—"

"Yes," Kyle nodded absently, and his eyes were on a door to one side of the main entrance into the vast living room. The door was swinging aimlessly in the breeze that came every afternoon to cool this valley. Once that door had opened into the Colonel's spartan office.

"Senor Jeff made that *officina* into hees library," Angelo explained.

"Why should the door be open?" Kyle asked, and he tramped down the porch to the jarring panel.

One glance inside was enough to answer his question. Jeffrey Adams' library was a shambles. Book-cases were over-turned. His wide desk had been chopped to kindling wood.

"*Madre di Dios!*" Kyle heard Angelo breathe at his elbow. "Thees I do not understand—"

"Neither do I," Kyle answered, and he stepped across scattered books toward another open door that led to the big main room, then stopped so quickly that the Mexican buried his nose in the broadcloth of Kyle's coat.

Wanton destruction faced them in the Diamond A living room. The great oak table where he had eaten so many times was slashed and scarred with axe-blows. Drapes at the windows were torn from their rods, cut and defiled now. A Spanish oak high-boy, where the Colonel had kept his 'company liquor' was a pile of matchwood.

Shaking his head at the sight, Kyle moved swiftly from room to room, and

the same destruction faced him wherever he looked. "Whoever did this," he told the Mexican, and his dark eyes were smouldering, "sure made a good job of it. I've seen Kansas cyclones that didn't do as much damage!"

"But why, Senor, why?" Angelo's brown face had turned the color of ashes.

Kyle shrugged. "Whoever tore this place up was looking for something," he said slowly. "Mebbe we'll find out what it was when Mary gets here—"

Out in the yard buggy wheels whirred, and Angelo said, "I theenk she comes now, Senor."

Kyle headed down a hall that led to the front of the house, but Angelo made no move to follow the tall gambler for he had seen the sudden wild hunger in Kyle Adams' face, and was not surprised.

The ruin through which he picked his way dulled the edge of Kyle's anticipation as he stepped to the porch, and then on rushing feet Mary was in his arms. She pressed her face against the whiteness of his shirt, and her voice came to him, muffled by the cloth.

"Kyle, Oh Kyle, I knew you'd come to me—"

He was conscious of the warmth and softness of her body, of the faint perfume in her hair, and he steeled himself against the impulse to lift her voice and kiss the lips he had tasted once. But too much lay between them for that. Death, and mystery, and unexplained violence.

Mary Breen Adams seemed to sense his feelings, for he felt her stiffen and draw away from him. Faint pink stained the girl's pale cheeks, and then he saw terror grow again in her gray-blue eyes as she saw the ruin that had once been the living room. With a little cry she sped past him, and Kyle followed her.

"Somebody came through here, hunting something, Mary. What was it?"

"The guns—" Kyle heard her whisper. "The Colonel's Colts. You—your guns now—"

SHE turned, tall and slender, and lovely still, even with the mark of terror on her face, to put her back against the great scarred table, and Kyle saw her fingers grip its edge until the knuckles looked as though they would break through flesh.

Her breasts moved beneath black silk, then her breathing calmed a little. "Kyle, the reason I sent Angelo to find you was because of the guns. Jeff hasn't been himself for a long, long time now, except occasionally when Heber Shockley might come out to pay him a visit, or Mark Rich and that horrible Cameron Loder."

"Strange friends, he's made," Kyle commented half under his breath.

The girl went on. "Five days ago, Jeff came from town just about supper time, and brought a bundle into the house. He unwrapped it on the table and his eyes looked almost like a wild man's. Kyle, he'd brought home the Colonel's Colts! He picked them up and fondled them, and then started to curse them. And then he said, almost in a whisper, 'Gold. You're worth your weight in gold. I'll break the spell you've put on us, and have gold to burn—'"

Kyle shook his head, but he said nothing, listening intently as the girl continued speaking. "Jeff took the Colts and locked them in a drawer of his library desk, and I—I called Angelo in and gave him the note to you. I was afraid he was planning to destroy the guns or sell them, and they weren't really his to sell. The next day I was glad I'd finally called you home."

"Why?" Kyle asked.

"Jeff left the house, dressed for riding, and you know how he hated a saddle. He brought a horse from the barn. He was wearing the Family Guns, Kyle! When he rode away, I followed him. Kyle, I didn't know where he was going, or what he was planning to do. He'd never put on a pair of guns before. He rode toward Mustang Mesa. It was growing dark and that trail isn't good. But he made it to the top. I stayed as close as I could, but he reached that bunch of oaks at Lost Spring ahead of me. I lost sight of him in the trees—and—and then only his horse came out. I spurred toward the grove, and when I got almost to it I heard a shot—"

"A shot?" Kyle interjected.

Mary nodded. "The bullet came so close I could almost feel it. Somebody was shooting at me, but I—I kept right on riding, and then another horse raced from the trees with a man hunched over in his saddle. It was so dark I couldn't recog-

nize him, but Kyle, somebody had been waiting there for Jeff. When I found him he was dead. It—it looked like he ran into a low limb.”

“Or a club across the back of the neck,” Kyle said grimly. “It’s cheaper to kill a man, Mary, than hand over a thousand—or five thousand dollars for a pair of Colts!”

“But I got the guns!” the girl exclaimed. “I brought them home and hid them in the one place where I think they’re safe.”

“And after you took Jeff’s body into San Saba, you stayed there with your folks?” Kyle asked.

“Yes,” Mary nodded.

“So this could have happened any day since Jeff died,” Kyle murmured thoughtfully. “Let’s go see if you did a good job of hiding the guns—”

Mary led the way from the living room down a remembered hall, past the bedroom where Jeffrey Adams had brought a young bride, and Kyle watched her pause before what had been a guest room. She gave him a brief little smile.

“This is my room now, Kyle,” she explained quietly. “Jeff and I quit being man and wife a long, long time ago . . . the Colonel’s Colts,” she added, “are in a chest under some of my clothes. It was the safest place I could think of to put them.”

She pushed the door open, and Kyle heard her cry out sharply. Across her shoulder he saw feminine underthings scattered ruthlessly in front of an overturned Chinese chest.

“The guns *were* here,” he said gently.

Mary stepped back and Kyle’s arms went around her. Her shoulders were shaking, and he knew she was close to hysteria. He tried to focus her attention by asking another question.

“Mary, did you report your suspicion concerning Jeff’s death to Mark Rich?”

“Yes,” the girl steadied herself and turned toward him once more. “Yes, I told him, and he—he looked Jeff over and said his death sure looked accidental to him. He—he acted like he was just trying to humor me—”

“Maybe,” Kyle drawled, and there was iron in his voice now, “he’ll try and humor me, too!”

DUSK was shaping into darkness when Kyle and Angelo drove Mary Adams into San Saba. Silent now; there’d been time for them to do their talking on the way in from the Diamond A.

Kyle had summed up the situation succinctly. “There’s three men in this town who might want our Family Guns: Shockley, Cameron Loder, and Mark Rich. They’ve all visited Jeff from time to time, and mebbe that’s what they came to talk about, but, even if he hated the Colonel’s Colts, it’s taken all this time to try and persuade him to part with them.”

“But Senor, eef he jes’ want for to sell those gons, why not do eet above the boards right here in town?” Angelo had expostulated.

“Because,” Kyle said bleakly, “he was afraid to handle it that way. If he parted with those Colts out on the range he could claim he was held up, and the guns stolen from him. He could say he lost them. Hell, he could use a dozen excuses. And you can lay your last dollar that the hombre who got them wanted it played that way. It’s easier to kill a man than pay him!”

Kyle left the girl at the home of her parents, and she put her hands in his for one electric minute. “Luck,” she whispered. “Good luck, Kyle—”

In the buckboard, he and Angelo cut across town to the main street. Lights were glowing in stores, and behind the batwings of saloons up and down the way. A block ahead Cameron Loder’s Emporium was the most impressive structure next to the two-story brick of the Mercantile Bank building. A half block beyond was Mark Rich’s jail office.

Kyle swung the buckboard to a halt in front of the marshal’s office, and shrugged the wrinkles from his gray coat. The cloth masked a shoulder holster and short-barreled Colt. He stepped through the open door of the office, A hanging lamp cast a pool of brightness over the lawman’s desk.

Mark Rich looked up from some circulars he’d been studying, and Kyle smiled inwardly at the look of surprise that crossed the man’s narrow, coyote-like face.

“A—Adams,” he stuttered. “What in hell you doin’ in San Saba?”

“I’m here to investigate a little matter

of stolen guns," Kyle drawled. "And maybe murder—" His eyes were close on the marshal's face, and he saw the lawman's wide lips go slack.

"I'm wonderin'," he struck again, "just why you shut up Ben Brown this afternoon when he mentioned our Family Guns. Did you, maybe, know then that they'd been stolen?"

"And how the hell should I know anything like that?" Mark Rich blustered. "I jest didn't think it was fitten and proper to talk about guns at a funeral—"

Kyle chuckled without mirth. "Sure funny," he drawled, "the sentiments a funeral bring out in a man—" He rose easily from his chair. "One more thing, marshal. I took a quick ride out to Lost Spring this afternoon, and I found some evidence there that may hang a man—"

"If you got anything to prove that Jeff didn't bang his head accidental and break his neck when he fell off'n his bronc, it's yore duty to hand it over to me!" Mark Rich thundered.

"I've been doing my own fighting too long to stop now, Rich!" Kyle told him briefly, and he could hear the marshal mouthing curses behind him when he stepped outside.

Angelo fell in beside him. "I leesten through the window," he said as Kyle tramped toward Cameron Loder's Emporium on the corner. "Why for you lie to Senor Reech? We do not go to the mesa yet—"

"But Mark doesn't know that," Kyle murmured. "Now, while I'm in the Emporium you mosey on down to the livery and get the two best broncs in the place. Wait there until I show up—"

"*Por dios!* So you feex eet so Angelo mees the fun, no?"

Kyle gave the Mexican a bleak glance. "You may run into plenty of fun before morning," he said grimly. "I want the horses so we can slip out of town while our buckboard's still here in plain sight. It'll make anybody who might be interested figure we're somewhere around town."

"And where do we go, Senor?"

"Mustang Mesa," said Kyle, and he turned in through the door of the garishly bright Emporium.

Loder was at his customary place at the inner end of the long bar. There were

men about the room who recognized the tall gambler, and some of them had a smile for him and a wave of their hand—others turned away, scowling. Kyle edged along the bar toward Loder, and he saw the saloonman's golden teeth show in a bland smile.

"Adams," he boomed, when Kyle neared him, "by the Lord, it's good to see you again. Goin' to break my games this time?"

"If I need the money to rebuild the Diamond A, yes," Kyle told him bluntly.

"Too bad about your brother bustin' himself up," Loder commented. "Hear tell he was wearing them famous guns of the Cunnel's when it happened—"

KYLE studied the saloonman as he would an experienced adversary across a poker table.

"The guns," he told Loder deliberately, "have been stolen."

"Why, now, you don't say!" Loder's surprise seemed genuine, but his hooded eyes never changed expression. "You folks are sure runnin' into a streak of bad luck."

"Not as bad," Kyle answered, "as some other gent is going to head into. The hombre who stole those Colts is going to end up with a hangnoose around his neck."

"Now, Adams," the saloonman's teeth glittered, "you cain't hang a man for stealin' a pair of guns. You know that—"

"No," Kyle agreed, and he let the silence grow between them for a significant moment, then added gently, "But they hang men for murder in Texas. And my brother was murdered! I took a little ride out to Lost Spring this afternoon, and the killer hadn't done a very good job of coverin' his tracks."

He had planted another seed of doubt and, before Loder could reply, Kyle moved out to the street, and swung left to the corner. A pair of blocks away to the right lay the high, white mansion that belonged to Heber Shockley.

Kyle moved toward it, and stepped to the porch. An elderly man-servant answered his knock. Mr. Shockley, he informed Kyle, was not at home. He had left on horseback earlier in the evening. No, the servant did not know when Mr. Shockley would return.

Nodding his thanks, Kyle turned back to the dark walk and headed beneath the trees toward the lights of Main Street that he could see in the distance. Where had Shockley gone? The banker was not the kind to make night rides—

And then that sixth sense possessed by all men who pit their wits against their fellow men, brought a warning that he was not alone here in the darkness. He heard a rustle of sound at the bole of a tree behind him, and side-stepped, crouching and turning all in one movement. Lead blasted where his shoulders had been and Kyle saw the blossom of gun-flame that played about the trunk of the tree. His own Colt was out of its shoulder clip and in his hand, but he held his fire as boots raced off through the darkness.

He listened until the sound disappeared and then turned again to move toward the lights of Main Street, a faint, icy smile on his lips. Time was running short.

Angelo was at the Livery, worry marking his dark face. "*Por dios,*" he complained, "thees waiting ees the hardest theeng I do yet—"

"The waiting is all over," Kyle told him as they eased out of the rear of the Livery and rode back alleys out of San Saba. "We'll have Jeff's killer, and likely the Colonel's Colts before morning—either that or a one way ticket to hell!"

As they rode through the night, he told the Mexican briefly of the results of his interviews and of Shockley's disappearance, and the attempt made on his life.

"One of those three hombres," he summed up, "is guilty, and I'm damned if I can figure which it is. But I'm guessing we'll know before we spend much time on Mustang Mesa. Whoever turned this trick is going to hightail it out there pronto to try and erase the evidence I claim to have found."

"And we weel be there to greet heem—"

"Yes," Kyle drew a deep breath. "We'll be there. . ."

TEXAS STARS wheeled across the velvet-black sky as they angled across a Diamond A range. Hills grew about them, and the square bulk of Mustang Mesa loomed blacker than the night as they reached its base.

Angelo took the lead, seeking out the

precipitous trail Jeff Adams had travelled to the mesa-top. It was slow going, the hooves of their mounts striking sparks from hidden rocks. As they reached the gently sloping plateau, Angelo swung in his saddle to glance at Kyle. "Those trees to the left, Senor," he said softly. "Lost Spring comes from boulders there. Eet ees where that killer waited for Senor Jeff—"

Kyle halted the Mexican's words with a sharp gesture. "Somebody," he said softly, "has gotten the edge on us. I just caught the shine of starlight on bridle steel! Swing in here," and he moved to one side behind boulders to ground-rein his mount.

Silently, bent almost double, they started toward the circle of oaks about the spring, and then Kyle flung himself flat in the short grass. Angelo dropped beside him, for his ears, too, had picked up the drum-beat of hooves on the sounding board of the trail behind them.

"*Dios,*" he whispered, "thees mesa she ees popular tonight!"

A rider, unrecognizable in the gloom, swept past so close that gravel kicked up by his mount pelted against them. Kyle wiped dust from his eyes, and watched the man disappear beneath the trees.

Then a sound came from the yonder darkness that froze him with surprise and shock. A woman's scream, sharp in the night!

Angelo cursed. Kyle hit his feet in a sprinting run that left the Mexican behind. Mary was there ahead in the grove. That cry could have come from no one else. What was she doing out here? Kyle didn't know, and then he heard a voice that was hard for him to recognize as the once-suave tones of Heber Shockley.

"You dirty double-crosser," his voice was coming from the boughs of one of the giant oaks as Kyle slowed his pace, "I don't see the guns you were supposed to bring out here with you tonight. Damn you, I had a hunch you wouldn't bring them—"

"You're a sniveling coward!" the marshal's voice was contemptuous. "When a gent hires me to pull his chestnuts out of the fire he pays for it. And what in the name of damnation hell are you doing holding that woman up there with you?"

"I'll keep her until you produce the guns!" Heber Shockley's voice was a madman's snarl. "And, if you don't, I'll put a bullet through her head!"

Kyle was inching slowly closer, and he could feel Angelo at his heels. Ice caked his spine. Shockley's vindictiveness could make him kill Mary in a second's vengeful rage if the slightest alien sound disturbed the uneasy balance of conflicting forces there beneath the oaks.

Mark Rich's voice lost some of its arrogance. "Heber," he said, "damn it, I told you I got to the Diamond A too late. Somebody beat me to it, and got those guns. And now that cussed brother of Jeff Adams claims he's got evidence that Jeff was murdered. We've got to figure out a way to take care of him and quit worrying about the damned guns. I tackled him once tonight, but missed my play."

"To hell with Kyle Adams!" the banker screamed. "I tell you I want those guns! I've wanted them ever since I first laid eyes on them, and you made the deal to get them for me. You said you could save me money, and make a nice piece for yourself. Damn you. I know—"

"I'm afraid you're both wrong," a cold voice drawled from the edge of the boulders that masked the spring. "I have the Colonel's Colts, and as collector's items I know men in New York who will pay said fortune for them. But you can have them cheap, Shockley, and my silence as well, for say ten thousand dollars!"

Kyle was close enough now to make out the bulky shape of the saloon-man, then his attention was caught by a flurry of movement on the limb of one of the big oaks that arched above the clearing. Shockley cursed with sudden pain as Mary Breen's fingernails clawed suddenly down across his face, and he saw the dim shape of the girl drop down from the tree.

Shockley cried, "Stop her!"

Mark Rich was swinging in his saddle and his hand was rising with a Colt in it. "Loder, you're the man I want. That ten thousand will look good in my poke—"

A stub-barreled Sunday-gun flamed in the saloonman's hand as the marshal's Colt echoed his words. Kyle saw the lawman reel in his saddle, and his Colt started to sag as Loder fired a second time.

A wild burst of shots spewed from the tree, and Kyle saw Mary stumble and fall. Heber Shockley was shooting at the girl! Kyle fired from the ground. He reached his feet, and drove another and a third shot toward the banker, and he heard the man's wild scream of terror as the force of lead smashed him from his precarious seat on the tree-limb. Like some giant black-winged bird of prey he came sprawling down to land almost beside Mary Breen.

KYLE leaped toward the girl, and he heard Angelo's shout of pure pleasure. "Senor," the Mexican called from near the spring, "thees broom she has sweep clean! Loder he ees dead with the bullet in the belly. Mark Reech maybe weel live long enough to hang—"

Kyle paid no attention to the Mexican. He was bending over Mary, feeling her body for sign of wounds, and then she stirred beneath his hands.

"Oh, Kyle," she whispered, "Kyle, I'm all right. There's no fool like a woman, I guess, and none bigger than me. A boy brought a note after you left me tonight, and it told me to come out here alone. Said if I would find your guns—our guns—here at the Spring. But instead I found Heber Shockley."

"The undertaker will be the next one to find him!" Kyle told the girl. "It looks like the Colonel's guns have helped clean up the San Saba without ever firing a shot!"

Angelo came running over to them from the direction of the spring, and he carried a black gunbelt in his hands. Starlight glowed softly on the ivory patina of polished gun-stocks.

He pressed the Peacemakers into Kyle's hands. "The Colonel's Colts," he said proudly. "I find heem in the bags behind Senor Loder's saddle."

Kyle took the weapons and held them for a moment silently. With fingers that trembled slightly, he swung the gun-belt about his waist and notched it in place.

"From now on," he said, "I'll be wearing these."

"For as long as we live—" Mary Breen whispered. "For as long as there are Adamses to call the Diamond A their own."