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# **ACTION STORIES**

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# THE DUDE HANGS HIGH

*By Joseph Chadwick*

**He wuz a hongry-lookin' critter from the East a-ways—plumb anxious tuh ride into every kinda trouble like a real cowpoke. The great and glorious West didn't disappoint him none.**

**C**ATTLE BAWLING, COW-punchers yelping. Horses snorting, ropes slapping. Smoke curling from branding fires, running-irons glowing red. Dust sparkling in the sunlight, hazing the confused yet methodical scene. The smell of burnt hair coming sharp to a man's nostrils as the JC brand marked a thousand longhorns, one by one . . . A better picture, to Jim Channel's eyes, than any artist could paint.

A rider swung out of the dust, saying, "Twenty more to go, Mr. Channel."

Young Mr. James Arthur Channel nodded, grinned. He was watching it all from horseback, his eyes aglow. For the cattle being branded were his cattle, as of today. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and high-heeled boots, like the dozen other riders, but he had yet to exchange his handsome tweed suit for range clothes. He had only recently transplanted himself from Philadelphia to the Llano Estacado.

The deal was made with Steve Maury, the younger and trickier of that pair of Texans; Clint Maury, the real boss of the MAB being away on a horse-buying trip at the time. Jim Channel paid in cash. He also paid Steve Maury to have the MAB crew do the branding. He watched every critter get the new JC mark burned on it, so that the tally was right. He didn't know anything about cattle raising, but he was banker cautious.

His herd was turned out onto the open range, like every other outfit's cattle, to graze and increase, and Jim made ready to pull out.

"Leaving so soon?" Steve Maury asked.

Jim nodded. "I want to get my ranch headquarters under roof before winter comes," he said, in that mild way he had of talking.

"Where you holing up?" Steve said. He was a blunt talker, with no scruples against asking another man his business.



*Suddenly he whirled about  
and his sixgun blazed.*



A stocky man in his middle twenties, he had an easy grin and reckless blue eyes. His hair had a reddish tint, and now, in need of a shave, the lower part of his face had a rusty look. "I figured you'd head for Denver or maybe Dodge, and sit out the winter in style."

Jim Channel shook his head, smiled slightly, and said, "No, I'm going to be a real rancher right from the start." He was taller than Steve Maury, but less bulky. He was a couple years older, but lacked the hearty air of self-assurance that Steve affected. "I'll be at Broken Wheel Creek this winter, roughing it."

"Well, here's wishing you luck."

"Thanks. Stop by, if you get up that way."

"Sure. I'll do that," Steve said.

Jim mounted his sorrel horse, caught up the halter rope of his pack mare. Riding away, he lifted a hand to the MAB 'punchers. If he noticed the way they nudged each other and grinned, he didn't suspect that there was a joke — on himself.

**J**IM barely made it before the first snow. But he got a cabin up, and a lean-to barn for his two horses, and provisions in. He had hired a couple of Mexicans from Gomez Plaza to help him with the building, and when they left he settled down to a lonely existence. His nearest neighbor, Sam White's Circle-Bar Ranch, was eighteen miles to the east.

The wind was always howling on the high plains, and now the snow piled up. No riders came by for weeks at a time. It was odd that a city man like Jim Channel could stand such loneliness. He hadn't much to do except cut wood for his fireplace, in the stand of cottonwoods along the creek, and care for his two horses. And keep himself fed. But he had brought a box of books from home, and so passed a lot of time reading. In mild weather, he saddled up and rode out for glimpses of cattle on the snow-blanketed range. If he rode far enough and looked hard enough, he saw an occasional cow of his snow-scattered JC herd in a mixed bunch. But mostly he saw MABs, Circle-Bars and other brands. . . . Twice he rode east and visited the Circle-Bar. Sam White welcomed him each time with lukewarm

friendliness, his daughter invited him to stay for supper with her manner suggesting that she didn't care if he did or didn't, and the Circle-Bar hands joshed him because he was a tenderfoot. Jim got the idea that the White outfit wasn't very neighborly, and so after the second visit stayed away.

In mid-December, after a two-day blizzard, the Circle-Bar crew was out to see how the stock had drifted and how many had died. Two of them stopped at Jim's place. They were in a good humor because there was little damage to the herds. They wolfed the grub Jim rustled up, then rolled quirly smokes and crowded the fireplace. Spud Larkin was a quiet sort, but Curly Bates, a baldheaded old rannihan with humorous eyes, was a talker.

"Reckon your JC herd'll be about doubled by spring," Curly said, giving Spud Larkin a wink. "Providing you get a good calf crop."

Jim was lighting his pipe. He forced a grin. He was a solemn sort and found it hard to take a joshing. "You're pulling my leg, Curly," he said.

Spud Larkin chuckled dryly.

Curly said, "You sure Steve Maury didn't sell you all steers? He's a cute one, Steve is. His brother Clint has to watch him day and night, else Steve would cheat him out of the MAB."

"Oh, I don't think Steve's that bad, Curly."

"You don't know him like we do, friend."

"Maybe not," Jim admitted. "But I tallied my bunch, saw each animal branded. I'm familiar with that old maxim, 'let the buyer beware.' I'm sure Steve Maury didn't take advantage of me."

Curly Bates suddenly sobered. He tossed his quirly butt into the fire, rose, pulled on his blanket-lined canvas coat. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but just muttered, "Spud, let's get going." He moved over to the door, but, waiting for his companion who was reluctant to leave the fire, didn't open it. He gazed at Jim Channel, rubbing his whiskery chin with a rope-calloused hand.

"Next time you buy cattle, see Sam White," Curly said. "He's an honest man, if there ever was one."

"I don't doubt his honesty," Jim said. "But he wasn't very friendly toward me."

"Just his way," Curly replied. "He's as surly as a Pecos bear, a lot of the time, but he's got a heart of gold—Big Sam has." The humorous glint came back into his faded old eyes. "Maybe Sam figured you'd come courting his daughter, if he was too friendly," he added. "I heard him say more than once that there's too blamed many buckaroos riding by the Circle-Bar trying to spark Miss Jan."

"The idea never occurred to me," Jim said, grinning.

"Pretty enough, ain't she?"

"Certainly. But her manner toward me was rather aloof."

Curly rubbed his chin some more. "Me, I never figured Jan was that," he said. "Always figured she was a little too bold. Not that she's not a lady. But she was brought up without a mother, since she was a four-year-old, with a bunch of tough cowhands for nursemaids. Maybe she figured you were kind of aloof, yourself, partner. Maybe she thinks you were used to prettier girls back East."

Jim grinned again. "You urging me to court her, Curly?" he asked.

"The fact is," Curly replied, "Janet White asked Spud and me to ride by and see if you came through the blizzard all right."

With that, he and Spud Larkin went out to their horses. They were riding out across the snowy range before Jim got over his surprise that someone at the Circle-Bar should be concerned about him. And afterward, refilling his pipe, he wondered if Curly Bates had really been serious when saying that Steve Maury wasn't to be trusted.

**C**HRISTMAS DAY, loneliness got its first firm hold on Jim Channel. He was full of memories of other Christmases, at home with his parents and his brother and sister. And his friends. The decorated tree, bright with balls and tinsel and candles—and the gifts beneath it. It was always a merry time at the Channels, the best time of all the year. In the afternoon, had he been back in Philadelphia, Jim would make the rounds calling on friends as charged as he with the holiday spirit. If there was snow, he would

have his team of matched bays hitched to a sleigh . . .

Alone there in his isolated cabin, Jim Channel wondered why he had ever left home. He knew, of course. He hadn't wanted to go into the family bank, like his brother George, and spend a lifetime at the monotonous business of checking people's credit, granting loans, collecting interest, foreclosing on mortgages. He'd wanted adventure. He'd wanted to make his own way, in a harder manner. Brother George had said, "You're being a fool, Jim." His father had said resignedly, "Well, get it out of your system. I'll give you a fifteen-thousand-dollar loan. When you've squandered it, come back to the bank—and go to work."

*Maybe, Jim told himself, I am being a fool.*

Loneliness had his spirits at low ebb.

He glanced through the cabin's frost-coated window and saw a rider. He grabbed up hat and coat, hurried outside to hail the man—to extend seasonal greetings, if nothing more. But the rider was making straight for his cabin without being called in. He was coming from the east, from the direction of the Circle-Bar. He was riding a pinto horse and packing something bulky on his saddle. It wasn't a man however, Jim now saw, but a girl. It was Sam White's daughter.

"Hello," she called. "Merry Christmas!"

Jim returned the greeting, but not so heartily as he wished. He was a little jolted, unwilling to believe, yet knowing it was true, that Janet White had ridden eighteen miles across the snow drifted range just to make his Christmas pleasant. The girls he had known back East . . . Jim caught up the thought. He'd never known a girl like Janet White. She was smiling when she reined in, and her cheeks were red from the cold.

"We thought you'd drop by the ranch, this being Christmas," she said. "Most folks do, from miles around. When you didn't come, I—or rather, dad—thought it'd be nice to bring you some cookies and candy and things." She untied the bulging flour sack on her saddle horn, handed it to him. She smiled again. "Maybe we should have given you a special invitation."

"Next Christmas I'll know the Whites hold open house."

"Oh, you expect to be around these parts next year?"

"Of course," Jim said, thinking that was a queer question. "Won't you get down and come in a little while?" He didn't know whether it was proper to invite her into his cabin. "To warm up," he added quickly.

Janet gave him an amused look, and said, "Well, if you're sure it's all right," and swung down.

Jim had the thought that she was laughing at him, because of his uncertainty. He told her to go inside, that he would put her horse up in the lean-to. He led the pinto around back, feeling a warm glow of pleasure. The day was turning out right for him, after all. The only thing that spoiled it was the girl's surprised question about his expecting to be here at Broken Wheel Creek next year. She seemed convinced that he was a quitter. *But why?* Jim wondered. He hadn't yet come up against anything that even made him think of quitting.

## II

SHE HAD REMOVED HER MAN-nish hat and coat, and was standing with her back to the fire when Jim came in. She wore faded levis, boots, a flannel shirt. But her mass of tawny blonde hair was enough of a feminine touch to relieve the unattractive clothes. Her eyes were wide, a cool clear gray, and her mouth, full and red, expressive and seemingly pliant, caught and held a man's attention. Her smile revealed small, perfect teeth. Her features were, Jim had to admit, finely molded. The daughter of burly, gruff natured Sam White didn't resemble him except superficially. Janet's warm loveliness came from her long dead mother.

Jim rummaged around in the case of books over at the end of his bunk. He took out a thin volume, the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and handed it to Janet. "A gift calls for a gift," he said, smiling. "Many happy returns of the day, Janet."

"Thank you, Jim. I'll treasure this, for books are a rare thing in my life." The half-veiled amusement faded from her

eyes. She studied the book's title, leafed through its pages. "But what is it about?"

Jim explained that it was a collection of poems, epigrams and reflections written by a Persian who had lived more than five hundred years ago. He did not tell her that it had become a tradition for men to give the *Rubaiyat* to ladies they admired. But he found himself wanting to tell her just that. Instead, he busied himself with putting a log on the fire and filling the coffee pot. A little later they sat before the fireplace, drank coffee, ate some of the cookies Janet had brought.

They didn't talk much, but their silence wasn't a hostile one. Jim smoked his pipe, and Janet lost herself in the Persian's ancient writings. The cabin was no longer a lonely place. Jim's Christmas no longer lacked contentment. . . . The afternoon slipped away. Both were surprised to find shadows creeping into the cabin. Janet closed her book, jumped up.

"I've got to start for home."

"I'll saddle up and ride with you."

Jim put on his hat and coat, but halted at the door when Janet spoke his name. She was frowning now. It took her a little while to speak.

"I came here for more reason than to wish you a Merry Christmas," she said finally. "There's something been bothering me for a long time. It's been on my father's mind too. If we seemed inhospitable when you visited the Circle-Bar, it was because—well, because we were uncomfortable about you."

"I don't understand," Jim said.

"Steve Maury cheated you," Janet told him. "He put one over on you in that cattle deal. The whole countryside knows about it—and is laughing. But I can't see it as a joke, and I can't keep quiet any longer."

"How was I cheated?"

"Your cattle were cold-branded," Janet said. Then, seeing that he did not understand, she explained, "Steve had his crew burn just the hair, not the hide. When spring comes, those cattle will shed their hair—and the JC brand along with it!"

Jim's face turned stiff with anger. He remembered now the sly grins of Steve Maury's branding crew. And Curly Bates's remarks about Steve being a man who couldn't be trusted. He had bought a



thousand head of cattle, but when his cold-branded JC mark wore off those cattle would be back in their original MAB brand. He wouldn't be able to claim them. And Steve Maury had his twelve thousand dollars. A voice in Jim's mind seemed to ask, *Well, what are you going to do about it?* The same question was in Janet White's eyes. He now understood why she doubted that he would be in the cattle country next year this time.

"So Steve's boasting that he put one over on me?"

"Steve didn't tell it," the girl said. "He paid each of the MAB hands who helped with the branding fifty dollars—so they'd keep quiet. He didn't want it known until you found it out for yourself, in the spring when you started looking for calves to brand. But it was too good for the MAB cowpunchers to keep. Some of them talked, and now the story's spread all around."

"And the joke's on me," Jim said.

"Sam White didn't laugh. Nor did I."

"You might have told me sooner."

"It's best not to meddle in a neighbor's affairs," Janet said. "The Maurys are our neighbors, the same as you. Besides, Clint Maury and my father have always been friends. But I . . . Well, a woman isn't bound not to talk by any silly man-made conventions."

Jim didn't know whether she was declaring herself his ally, but her aloofness was gone. Janet no longer looked at him with half mocking amusement. She regarded him pityingly, now, and somehow that was worse. It made Jim Channel feel inadequate, but half a man, and here in the cattle country a tenderfoot was just that.

"What can I do about it?" he asked.

"I don't know, Jim," the girl said.

"You'd better ask my father."

"You said that he wouldn't meddle in a neighbor's affairs."

"If you ask Sam White for advice, he'll not turn you down."

"All right," Jim said flatly. "I'll ask him."

He went out for the horses.

THE wintry moon was bright, the wind had a bite to it, and the snow-crust crunched noisily under the horses'

hoofs. They rode stirrup to stirrup, but Janet was silent and Jim lost in a dark mood. His anger was a growing thing. There was hatred in him for Steve Maury, and never before had he hated a man. His sense of inadequacy added to his anger. Back home, he would have known what to do. A swindler could be taken into court, sued, and, if his guilt could be proven, criminal charges could be brought. But here in the plains country the only law was what a man made for himself, and court trials were unheard of. A man who was injured in any way settled matters with a gun. . . . And Jim Channel had never fired a gun in anger in all his life!

They were halfway across the range to the Circle-Bar when Janet said, "Rider coming toward us." The horseman was coming from the direction of the White ranch. A touch of amusement edged the girl's voice, as she added, "I'd gamble that it's Clint Maury. He's visiting the Circle-Bar. If it is he, he'll be in an ugly humor."

"How so?" Jim asked.

"Clint's a man who takes a lot for granted. He figures I'm going to marry him. He won't like my being with you."

"And are you going to marry him?"

"Maybe. Yes, maybe I will—unless a better man comes along," Janet said, and was unaware of Jim's sudden frown. She waved an arm, called out, "Hello, Clint!"

The rider loping toward them did not reply. Clint Maury wasn't in a mood for pleasantries. He was in a black rage, one born of jealousy without a doubt, and he merely jerked his head in a curt nod when the girl introduced him to Jim Channel. He was a tall lean man of about thirty. Jim wouldn't have believed he and Steve were brothers; they were as unlike as day and night. Clint was dark of face, his features all sharp angles, and he had none of Steve's easy good humor. A solemn sort, chill of eye and thin-lipped. He had reined in before Jim and the girl, blocking their way. After that nod, he ignored Jim and stared at Janet.

"You left the Circle-Bar before noon," he said, flat accusation in his voice, "You said you'd be back long before dark."

"I forgot the time, Clint. It wasn't deliberate."

"How'd I know but that something happened to you."

"Now what could happen to me, Clint?"

Maury didn't like her bantering tone. His scowl showed it. "Hell; better riders than you have been thrown and left afoot."

Janet laughed shortly. "Is that all you were worried about?" she asked. "That's not very flattering. I thought you were afraid that Jim might have made advances to me." Her voice took on an edge. "Where I ride, how long I stay, is still nobody's business but mine. Remember that, Clint."

There was a jarring silence.

Jim Channel could almost feel the hostility between Janet White and the man she believed she might marry. It wasn't a thing he understood, but he knew that Clint Maury wasn't the sort even a woman should bait too far. That was another thing Jim could feel: the hard-core toughness of Clint Maury.

"All right," Maury muttered. "Have it your way—for now."

"For now, and for as long as I like," Janet retorted. "That's something we won't quarrel about." She gestured toward Jim without taking her gaze from the other man, and said, "I've told him about it, Clint—about how Steve cheated him."

The moonlight was full on Clint Maury. His face grew sharper, mere rock-hard. He shifted his gaze to Jim Channel. "I don't know that Steve cheated anybody," he stated. "I heard some talk when I got back from San Antone in the fall. If Steve took money off you and gave you nothing in return, that's between you and him."

"It's between me and the MAB," Jim said flatly. "I wanted to buy cattle. I met Steve, and he told me the MAB would sell me all I wanted."

"Nobody deals with the MAB except through me."

"Steve is part-owner of the ranch. That makes it responsible."

"Get this straight," Maury said, grinning now—but without humor. "I own the MAB—lock, stock and barrel—and I've got no partners. Steve Maury works for me—as a ranchhand, for wages." He turned from Jim, as though that settled

the matter as far as he was concerned. And said to Janet, "You riding back with me?"

Janet looked as surprised as Jim Channel. It was clear that she hadn't known that Steve Maury was no part-owner of the MAB. She said slowly, "We'll ride together. Jim's coming to the Circle-Bar to talk with dad—to ask his advice."

"Advice about what?"

"About what he should do about Steve."

Maury showed his humorless grin. "Suits me," he said. "I'd like to hear what kind of advice Sam gives him."

Jim Channel saw that the man was relishing this part of the encounter. *He's eager for what will come of it*, Jim thought. He knew that Clint Maury wasn't going to forget where Janet White had spent the greater part of Christmas Day.

### III

THE THREE OF THEM reached the Circle-Bar just as the group crowded into a buggy and a buckboard—were calling their goodbyes to Sam last of the day's callers — a big White. It was noisy over at the bunkhouse where the hands were still celebrating the holiday. . . . They put their horses up in the barn, then went to the house.

Big Sam White shook Jim's hand in a manner that was friendly enough. He called to the buxom Mexican housekeeper to set out supper for the three. Later, after they had eaten, they joined the Circle-Bar's owner in the comfortable parlor of the big adobe house.

A bulky man of sixty, Sam White was settled in a rocking-chair. His hair and shaggy mustache were iron-gray, his eyes a faded blue. He was mellowed this Christmas night, his gruffness laid aside. He gave his daughter a fond smile, and said, "So you had to bring this thing to a head?"

Janet stood by his chair. She had changed to a dress of soft green material and fixed her hair before supper. She looked wholly feminine, now, and Jim Channel was sure that he had never known any girl so attractive. He tried not to stare at her, yet his eyes kept seeking



her. He sat stiffly on the sofa, feeling all tense inside. Clint Maury was lounging in an arm chair. His gaze too kept going to Janet.

Sam White said with caution, "You two want me to arbitrate your dispute?"

Maury said, "So far as I'm concerned, there is no dispute. The deal was between Channel and Steve—and it didn't bind the MAB. Steve and I inherited the MAB, and under my father's will I was given a two-thirds' share. It's ten years since John Maury's death, and in that time Steve sold out to me bit by bit. Sometimes I paid him ten thousand, sometimes five. . . . He's a wild one, Steve is. Everytime he wanted to sew some wild oats, he'd demand money of me. I wasn't going to throw it at him for nothing in return. He likes trips to Denver and Dodge and San Antone—so he can gamble and play around with fancy women. Me, I like the MAB."

He paused, shrugged.

"Both of us got what we wanted," he went on. "Steve ran through his share of the ranch. He knows it and he's satisfied. I never heard him complain because I now own the whole of the spread." He gave Jim a mocking look. "When I got back from that horse-buying trip, Steve left for Denver. That was in October. He just got back a week ago. If he's got any of your money left, it's up to you to take it away from him."

Jim looked at Janet, and then at Sam White. He thought that both were eyeing Clint Maury with some doubt.

"I'll see Steve, then," he said.

"Go easy on that, son," Sam White told him. "Like Clint says, Steve is a wild one." He continued to eye Clint Maury. "Clint," he said, "a man has been wronged by your own flesh-and-blood. Steve's an irresponsible cuss. I figure you'd feel bound by his tricky deals, especially when he muddies up the MAB's reputation."

Maury shook his head. "I don't see it that way," he replied. He was thoughtful for a moment, then added, "Since we're discussing the MAB, I may as well bring out one more thing. Steve is not my brother. He wasn't John Maury's son. John Maury married a second time, and the woman was a widow with a son by her first husband. Steve took the Maury

name, and he's kept on using it—and I can't stop that. I'm not my brother's keeper, Sam, because I've got no brother, you see."

"But all these years you've let folks think he was your brother," the old man said bluntly. "Channel here took him for that, and dealt with him in good faith."

"Like I said," Maury replied, "it's been Channel and Steve."

"That's your final word?"

"You know it is, Sam."

There was a lengthy silence, then Janet said, in a tense whisper, "It's not fair, Clint." Her father silenced her with a frown. He looked at Jim. "Jan told me you wanted advice from me?"

"Yes, sir," Jim said.

SAM WHITE lifted his bulk from the rocker, crossed to a gun rack at the far end of the room. He returned with a six-gun in a holster attached to a cartridge-studded belt. He handed the gun rig to Jim.

"When you learn how to use this, go after Steve Maury," he said.

The weapon was a dead-weight in Jim's hand. It was not his way of settling a dispute, but the plains country knew no other way. Here there was no recourse but to the gun. Suddenly Jim knew that if he wanted to survive in this land he must start fighting back—in the way of its people. He knew that Sam White had given him all the advice he could hope for, whether it was good or bad advice. Clint Maury was no longer relaxed; his face was rigid, his eyes narrowed down and murky. Janet looked frightened. She seemed to wish that she could undo what had gone too far. Jim stood up.

"I'll do more than that," he said, talking to Clint Maury. "The first break in the weather, I'm going to hire riders and go on round-up. I'll gather in every animal marked with the JC brand."

"That, friend, will get you real trouble."

"I'll be ready for it," Jim retorted. He nodded to Sam White, said, "Thanks for the advice." He looked at Janet, said, "Good-night."

He left the room, picked up his hat and coat in the hall. Outside he buckled on the gun-rig. The feel of the heavy weapon against his thigh gave him no sat-

isfaction. It did not free him of his sense of inadequacy. He strode to the barn, wondering if old Sam White saw more in him than he himself was aware of.

JIM opened the barn door only wide enough to permit him to bring his horse out. The sorrel gelding stood just inside. It hadn't been unsaddled. Jim paused to tighten the cinch. There was a bit of light; a lantern hanging from a post pushed back the darkness with a dim glow. Jim caught the movement of a shadow, from the corner of his eye, and he knew, even before he turned, that Clint Maury had entered and now stood behind him.

They faced one another, Jim with his back to the sorrel and Maury just inside the door opening. A brown-paper cigarette drooped from Maury's thin lips. Jim watched smoke trickle from the man's nostrils.

"There's one thing more, Channel," Maury said. "The girl."

"What's she got to do with us, Maury?"

"Plenty with me, nothing with you. Get it, mister?"

"No."

"You're thicker through the head than I figured," Maury said. "I'm telling you that you're not seeing her anymore." He reached up, removed the cigarette. His eyes glinted with that jealous rage Jim had seen before. "Maybe it'll take more than words to convince you," he added, and flipped the butt at Jim's eyes.

It hit Jim's cheek, showered red sparks. Maury followed it up, driving in on his toes. He came at a crouch, long arms reaching, but he didn't get Jim in his grip. Jim know nothing at all about guns, but a fight with bare hands was another matter. Back East he had been a member of an athletic club, and something of an amateur boxer. It was that training that saved him from Clint Maury's vicious rushes—and helped him meet them more than halfway.

He jabbed Maury about the head, reeled him back. Maury cursed with pain and frustration, lunged in again, his purpose always to get his arms about Jim and throw him. Jim side-stepped, landed a blow to the back of the head. Maury fell to his knees, but got his arms around Jim's legs. He heaved Jim over back-

wards, leapt atop him, and they rolled over and over while each strained for the advantage. A bent knee to Jim's stomach did it; he stretched out, limp and breathless. Maury jumped up, started to use his boots. Jim caught hold of his leg, clung to it, upset the man. He leapt up, drove a fist against Maury's nose as he came up. Blood spurted and Maury's head rocked back. The rage was gone from his eyes, was replaced by something akin to alarm. His chest heaved. His breathing rasped. He came in again, more slowly now, and warily.

Jim braced himself, struck out, missed. A blow to the jaw jarred him to the core. He threw up his arms in a feeble defense, and Maury broke through it to pummel him. A red-black mist formed before Jim's eyes, and he thought in sudden panic, *He's got me!* Then his training stood him in good stead. He rolled with Maury's next blow, one to the stomach, then swayed forward in a clinch. He pinioned Maury's arms to his side until his vision cleared, then shoved the man away. He rushed this time, pounding Maury hard about the body. He could see the MAB man weakening. Maury's face was slack, his mouth hanging loose.

Jim aimed what should have been a finishing blow.

Maury rolled away from it, slammed against the wall. He slumped there, his eyes blurry—but still full of hate. He was beaten. He knew he was beaten, and couldn't believe it. Jim muttered, "Come out, Clint. Come out into the open!"

Maury kept tight to the wall a moment longer, wedged against a stack of bagged grain. Then his hand closed, almost without his knowing it, upon a pitch-fork that leaned against the grain. He grabbed up the fork, lunged forward, the sharp tines aimed at Jim's chest. Jim knew that Maury meant to kill him, yet he did not think to grab for the gun at his thigh. He leapt to one side, grabbed up a water pail, and, all with one desperate movement, flung it into the man's face.

Maury lost his hold on the fork, the tines of which jabbed at Jim's coat. Maury fell to his knees, cradled his battered face with his arms. Jim had heard a cry—a woman's horrified cry—when Maury rushed him with the pitch-fork.

Now he saw Janet in the doorway and her father behind her. The girl was trembling with fright rather than shivering from the cold. Sam White's heavy face was scowling. He pushed by Janet, came and looked down at Maury.

"You asked for it, you got it," he muttered. "A hell of a way for a man to misuse a friend's hospitality."

Maury didn't answer. He didn't move from his knees.

Jim said, "Mr. White, I'm sorry for my part in this," and turned to his horse.

It was the day after Christmas, mid-morning, and Jim Channel was cutting firewood with methodical swings of his axe. A rider approached the cabin on Broken Wheel Creek. It was the swarthy, taciturn Spud Larkin who had stopped there before with Curly Bates. The cow-puncher had his bedroll and warsack tied to his cante. He reined in, nodded, pulled off his gloves, and rolled a smoke. Jim rested his axe.

"Got paid off at the Circle-Bar," Spud said, once he'd lighted up. "Heard tell that you were looking for a hand."

Puzzled, Jim asked, "Who told you that, Spud?"

Spud was eying the cuts and bruises on Jim's face. "A couple different parties," he said, drawing it out. "The way they told it, you needed somebody to show you how to use a six-shooter. I'm not bragging, you savvy, but these folks figured that since I've had some experience here and there I'd be the man you'd like to hire."

Jim knew who those folks were: Sam White and his daughter.

He said, "Step down, carry your gear inside."

The way he said it marked him as a tenderfoot no longer.

#### IV

EVERY DAY GUNFIRE racketed around the cabin and lean-to barn that made up the headquarters of the JC Ranch. Most of it was six-gun fire, a heavy blasting of .45 cartridges, but Spud Larkin, a thorough teacher, did not let his pupil neglect the Winchester. As with many Easterners who had hunted game, Jim Channel already was fairly

proficiency with a rifle. But Spud Larkin taught him the fine points. He trained Jim to shoot from the saddle, while his horse was reined in and on the move. "You learn fast," Spud said, in what was high praise.

Jim tried, his earnestness almost grim. He hadn't much time, he realized, not near time enough for him to become as expert as Spud Larkin. But then, Spud was a wizard with firearms. How he had become so expert, the puncher never said. But it was evident that at one time in his life a six-gun and a rifle had been the tools of his trade. . . . In the weeks that snow and bitter cold kept them close to the cabin, Spud never spoke of his past. He didn't talk about much of anything.

Saturday afternoons, Spud would saddle up his dun horse and ride out. He'd returned Sunday morning, bringing with him a fresh supply of ammunition—for which Jim would reimburse him. Jim figured that Spud rode no farther than the Circle Bar for the cartridges—and for a poker game with the Circle-Bar hands—but he didn't question the man. Even though he wanted to ask about Janet, Jim expected no information that wasn't volunteered. He was becoming less and less a tenderfoot, and, without realizing it, much like Spud Larkin.

It was the last Saturday in January, a cold afternoon with a bleak sky overhead. Spud was saddling up. Jim opened his trunk, took out his money belt, counted out five ten-dollar gold pieces. He went out to the lean-to, said, "Pay-day, Spud," and handed over the money.

"The Circle-Bar only paid me forty a month."

"You're working for the JC now. It pays fifty a month."

"Well, thanks, boss," Spud said, with a rare smile. He was thoughtful for a minute, then added, "With all that money in my jeans, I'll be riding to Madera Plaza for some fun. You ever been there, Jim?"

Jim said that he hadn't.

"Maybe you'd like to ride along."

"If I ride anywhere, it'll be to the Circle-Bar."

Spud said, "This girl, eh?" then thought some more. "It's up to you, boss," he went on, "but there's plenty to drink and

Mex girls to dance with at Madera Plaza. Riders from all over show up there, Saturday nights."

A short month ago, Jim wouldn't have guessed that he was being told something in a round-about way. But now he knew that Spud was letting him know that MAB riders would be at the Plaza, and that one of them might be Steve Maury. He had been considering a visit to the Circle-Bar, to see Janet, but now he changed his mind.

"Sounds like fun. I'll ride along."

Madera Plaza was a cluster of adobes that had sprung up with the coming of the ranches to the Staked Plains. It was owned by Jose Ramirez, a New Mexican who had been a Comanchero until the trade with the Comanches was broken up. There was a big 'dobe that sheltered Ramirez's trading post and *cantina*, another that was his livery stable. The trader's house was opposite, and on either side was a row of smaller 'dobes where lived the Ramirez relatives and hangers-on. It was beginning to snow, in huge flakes, when Jim Channel and Spud Larkin rode into the village.

They put up their mounts at the livery barn, turning them over to a cheerful Mexican youth. Spud spoke to the boy in Spanish, listened gravely to the reply, then nodded to Jim.

"Half a dozen MAB riders are here," Spud said. "Both Maury's are in the bunch. That's a surprise to me, Clint's being here." He turned back to the boy, and they talked some more. Then Spud said, in English, "Manuel here says that Senor Maury—meaning Clint—shows up every Saturday lately. Drinks a lot. Looks like he's expecting a visitor."

Jim nodded. He knew that Spud meant the visitor Clint Maury was expecting was himself. He gave Spud a questioning look.

"I'll side you," Spud said, reading that unspoken query. "I'll keep the other MAB hands off your back while you talk with Steve."

"Just how tough will Steve be, Spud?"

"Tough enough," Spud replied. "But he's only crooked where money's concerned. He's been in a lot of fights, but I never heard of him trying to shoot a man in the back. Stand up to him, the whole way."

They headed for the *cantina*, and the snow was now a murky white curtain. Spud opened the door, and Jim followed him inside. The place was crowded; Jim guessed that there were at least fifty people gathered there, half a dozen of them young Mexican women. Curly Bates and a couple other Circle-Bar riders sat at a table sharing a bottle. Other men were at other tables, some of them playing cards. The bar was lined, and the painted, gaily dressed girls were dancing with clumsy-footed men at the rear. Music was furnished by two guitars and a fiddle; the musicians sat on a little platform in a corner. It was a noisy, rowdy crowd. A huge pot-bellied stove heated the big room. The air was stale with the mingled smells of tobacco smoke, liquor, humans, and perfume. There was a flurry of excitement. Men nudged each other, called to one another in hoarse whispers, laughed. The crowd had become aware of Jim Channel's presence.

Spud Larkin caught Jim's eye, nodded toward the corner at the rear, opposite that occupied by the musicians. Clint Maury was there alone, at a table, hunched over, staring at the whiskey bottle before him. Jim looked farther about the *cantina*, but saw no signs of Steve Maury. He didn't know whether or not to feel relieved. Spud had heard from the livery stable boy that Steve Maury was in the village.

SPUD led the way to the bar, ordered whiskey of the fat Jose Ramirez. They downed their drinks, and Jim bought the second round. It was less noisy, now. The crowd seemed waiting for something. Voices were lowered, and there was less laughter. The music kept up, though more softly, but one by one the couples stopped dancing. Jim and his companion carried their second drinks to a side table, sat down. Spud rolled a quirly cigarette, and Jim filled his pipe. Four MAB riders, men Jim remembered as part of the crew that had branded his JC mark on the MAB cattle, were at the bar with their heads together.

"Spud, what do you think?" Jim asked.

"Relax. Steve'll show up."

Jim couldn't relax. His nerves knotted up as he waited.



Finally, after perhaps an hour, Clint Maury left his table and came forward. He gave Jim a black look, but went on out without speaking. Jim saw that Spud seemed puzzled by Maury's departure. Jim himself was surprised that the MAB owner, who had appeared somewhat drunk, hadn't picked up their quarrel where it had left off in the Circle-Bar barn. . . . Spud nudged Jim.

A man was descending the stairs at the far end of the bar. He was with a girl, and the two of them were laughing. It was Steve Maury.

THE music broke off in the middle of a chord. Talk ceased. The only sound was the laughter of the pair on the stairs, then Steve had some warning and he too fell silent. His companion laughed alone, and she let her amusement bubble on until Steve muttered, "Shut up, baby."

He'd seen Jim.

The two of them might have been alone, the way their glances met and locked. Jim felt his pulse hammering. He told himself that he was unafraid, yet wasn't sure that was so. He could see Steve's ruddy face darken with a scowl. He thought he detected uneasiness in the man's china blue eyes. Steve came on down, started across the floor, moving with a swagger that was patently bravado. He halted ten feet from Jim's table, his coat pushed back and his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt.

"If it ain't the dude!" he said, lifting his voice, making it hearty. "How's the cattle business, friend?"

"It'd be all right, Steve, but for the thieves in it."

"Meaning just who?"

"You, Steve—providing what I hear is true," Jim said. He shoved back his chair and stood up. "You took my twelve thousand dollars after selling me cattle you didn't own. You had them cold-branded so that my JC mark wouldn't show up after they shed their hair in the spring. You figured I wouldn't know what'd happened to my cattle."

"Maybe you heard wrong, Channel."

"No use denying it. The whole country knows what you pulled."

"You got witnesses that you paid me any money?"

"No. But I've got your signature on a bill of sale."

Steve had been forcing a grin, and it faded. "So you have," he said, without heartiness. "That's something I'd forgot. All right, Channel. I admit taking your money and having the cattle cold-branded. But I don't admit that I didn't have any right to sell MAB stock."

"Clint claims you didn't," Jim retorted.

"Clint lied to you, then," Steve said. "You gather those cattle and rebrand them—and I'll pay the freight of it."

Jim was surprised, and the muttering that arose about the *cantina* proved that others were equally astonished that Steve Maury should back down in such a manner. Jim said, "I aim to do just that, soon as the weather opens up. It'll make trouble between Clint and me. Which is no doubt what you want. You're trying to wiggle out, Steve—and saddle Clint with your swindling job that backfired on you. Hell, Steve, I didn't think you were that yellow!"

The muttering of the crowd was hushed.

Steve Maury winced. He took his gaze off Jim, looked about. His boyish face reddened. Somehow he seemed to lose stature. He looked back at Jim, said thickly, "I'll swallow that, Channel. I won't draw a gun on a damn' tenderfoot—and have your killing on my conscience."

He swung about, walked to the bar, hunched over it.

"Jose," he said, "give me a bottle. I aim to get drunk."

A woman laughed, off-key. It was the girl Steve had been with upstairs. Then the musicians began playing, and Ramirez called out, "*Senores!* A round on the house, please!" The *senores* made slow movement toward the bar. They looked as though it really wasn't possible that Steve Maury was letting this tenderfoot get away with that insult.

Jim turned to Spud Larkin, uncertainty in his eyes.

"Only way to settle it now is to shoot him in cold-blood," Spud said dryly. "And that's no good. Next best thing is to gather your cattle and rebrand—with the help of a tough crew paid fighting wages—and then wait for the Maurys to make the next move."

Jim nodded, said flatly, "Right now, I'm heading back to the ranch." He saw that Spud wanted to stay longer, but was willing to leave. "No need for you to come with me," he added.

He went out, buttoned up his coat and pulled down his hat against the whip of the wind. The snowfall was a heavy one now, and it seemed that a blizzard was in the making. He strode to the livery barn, had the Mex boy saddle his sorrel. He gave the youth a half dollar, then rode out and lifted his horse into a lope. He was close to the *cantina* when the gun barked and window glass shattered.

Jim reigned in, thinking the shot had been fire within the place and that Spud might be in trouble. He saw no one else outside; he seemed alone in the storm. Then the *cantina* door was flung open and Spud Larkin leapt out. Spud saw him there, for Jim was directly in line with the door and its out-thrust of lamplight.

"Get moving, Jim!" Spud yelled. "Ride out—and keep riding!"

"What happened in there, Spud?"

"Didn't you shoot Steve Maury through the window?"

Jim caught the bewilderment in the man's voice. He said, "No, Spud. I—"

He got nothing more out. Other men were rushing from the *cantina*, the four MAB cowpunchers. They had their guns in their hands.

## V

**J**IM KICKED SPURS TO THE sorrel, Spud Larkin whacked it on the rump. The horse swung away, hitting a gallop right off, and only that swift get-away saved Jim Channel from the vengeful MAB riders. That and the blinding snow. When the guns opened up, Jim was an obscure target. Fright left him almost at once, and he slowed his spooked mount. The timbered gully—a creek break thick with cedar that gave the Mexican village its name—loomed through the murky whiteness. Jim swung off the road and took shelter among the brush and trees.

He dismounted and swept away his tracks with a loose branch, then took cover again. A few minutes later, a group of riders swept past. Jim counted ten of them. The four MAB men had been joined

by some of the others who had been in the *cantina*.

They kept to the road, evidently hoping to overtake their quarry upon it—or follow him all the way to Broken Wheel Creek. A minute or two later, another horseman came by at the slower pace. Jim wasn't sure, but he risked it and called, "Spud, that you?"

The rider pulled up. "Jim . . .?"

He put his dune down the slope, came into the thicket, and there was an uneasy look on his lean face. "All hell broke loose," he said sourly. "Did you see anybody when you rode up to the *cantina*?"

"No, Spud. You sure the shot came from outside?"

"Everybody is. It came through a side window."

"I swear I didn't fire it," Jim said. "You can examine my six-gun and rifle, Spud. They haven't been fired." He remembered, then. "What about Clint Maury?" he added. "He left the place before I did, and there's bad blood between him and Steve. He could have been hiding somewhere and seen me come out and go for my horse. If he hates Steve like I think, he could have shot him and figured I'd be blamed."

"It could be," Spud said. "But nobody'll ever believe it."

"Is Steve dead?"

"He was still living when I left."

"Maybe we could go back and find Clint," Jim suggested. But he knew that was no good, even before Spud shook his head. There were still plenty of men at Madera Plaza who'd be anxious to put a rope around a man suspected of back-shooting. "What'll I do?" Jim asked.

"Hide out," Spud told him. "Hole up somewhere. You sure can't go back to the ranch. If Steve dies, the MAB crew will never rest until you're found. If you can keep from being caught, and he doesn't die, they'll give up the search. With Steve alive, it'll be his game—to settle in his own way." He was silent for a lengthy moment, thinking. Then: "There's a Circle-Bar horse camp about twenty miles north of your place. It's not used in mid-winter. We'll head for there."

Luck favored Jim somewhat. The snow lasted only long enough to wipe out his and Spud's tracks, then came only in light

flurries. Had it lasted, grown into a blizzard, the two men would have had difficulty finding their way to the horse camp. They might easily have lost their way entirely—and never reached any shelter. Too often did men lose their lives by being caught on the open plains during a snow-storm. . . . But they reached the camp—a soddy and a feed corral—without trouble. It was a lonely place, and Spud said, "You'll be safe here—as safe as anywhere." He gave Jim a searching look. "You'd be safer still, if you made a run for it—and got out of these parts."

Jim shook his head. "I'm not running farther," he said.

Afterward, when Spud rode away, heading for Broken Wheel Creek to keep an eye on how things turned out, Jim wondered why he didn't want to run—to clear out of this alien county, for once and for all. He knew the answer included many considerations. He was stubborn enough not to admit defeat. He wouldn't return East and confess failure to his family; nor did he want to renege on that fifteen thousand dollar loan made him by his father. Pride made him want to pay off that debt.

Too, he refused to leave the cattle country with people believing that he would shoot a man down in cold-blood. He was sure that Clint Maury was guilty of that shooting, and he clung to a baseless hope that some day he could prove it. . . . Then there was also Janet White. She was the most important reason of all why Jim was determined not to leave the plains country. Ever since Christmas Day, Janet had been in his thoughts. He kept thinking of her being at his cabin. The truth was, Jim Channel had lost his heart to the girl. He sat close to the fire in the soddy and tried not think of what she had said about Clint Maury—that she might marry Clint unless a better man came along.

It began to snow again after midnight.

This time it kept up, and Jim, unable to sleep, knew that it was a good thing for him. There would be no riders man-hunting him in a snowstorm. . . .

**S**PUDE Larkin had said that he would ride back that way within a couple of days. When one day ran into another

and a week dragged by, Jim Channel grew uneasy. He began to fear that something had happened to his *compadre*; he worried that the MAB outfit might have jumped Spud merely because he was employed by the man they hated. Jim believed that this was a case when no news was sure to be bad news.

As for himself, Jim was not too uneasy. He kept close watch and saw no signs of riders. The soddy was well-stocked with provisions by the Circle-Bar; at least enough to keep him fed for a month. . . . But his mind was made up to wait only a day or two longer and then ride out to see if anything had happened to Spud.

The next day—it was his eighth at the camp—a rider showed up. It was Janet, and Spud had sent her. She explained, once inside the soddy and warming herself by the fire, that Spud had kept away the first few days out of fear of being trailed by some of the MAB outfit, then, when the search was called off, he had occupied himself with getting together a round-up crew.

"They're not hunting me any longer?" Jim asked.

"Clint Maury led the search for three days," Janet told him. "Then Steve began to recover. Steve wasn't as badly hurt as everybody believed. He was taken to the Ramirez house and doctored up. He's still there, and he's sure to live."

"But he and all the rest think I shot him."

"Spud says you didn't."

"Did Spud tell you that I think Clint Maury did it?"

Janet nodded, and said gravely, "I think Clint is capable of such a thing. From the first time I met him, something about him frightened me. He . . ." She broke off flushing. "I know," she said. "I said something about maybe I'd marry him unless a better man came along. Well, sometimes a girl will say queer things to a man who shows no interest in her. Especially to a man who must have known more attractive girls back where he came from. I—I would never have married Clint Maury."

Jim sighed with relief.

"Those girls back East," he said. "I forgot them after I got to know you, Jan. Since Christmas Day . . ." He broke

off, sobering. "But there's no good in such talk between us. Until things are settled between Steve and me, I can't plan for the future. And unless I can take possession of my cattle, I'll have no future here in the plains country."

"Maybe if we told Steve the truth," Janet suggested.

"He'd never believe it, even though he and Clint are on the outs," Jim said. "But Steve can't cause any trouble until he's recovered. It's Clint Maury I'm worried about. He won't give up those JC branded cattle without a fight."

"He hates you," Janet said bleakly. "Because of me."

## VI

**T**HAT WINTER ROUND-UP was a killing job. It was hard on men and horses. They made the gather in snow and sleet, in howling wind and bitter cold, and they had to cover hundreds of miles to find cattle bearing the cold-branded JC mark. The great herds were scattered and drifted, driven south toward the wild Pecos country by the storms . . . It took good men, and Spud Larkin had hired that sort. It required many horses in the *remuda*, and Sam White had supplied them. The chuck-wagon and gear wagon also came from the Circle-Bar, on loan. Jeff Long, a burly colored man, was the cook. He kept the crew well fed, and always had a big pot of coffee on the fire.

It was Jim Channel's first round-up, but he rode with the tophands in the crew. Like the others, he stayed in the saddle from dawn until dusk and fought off the cold by drinking quantities of Jeff's steaming coffee. Every day that a few head of JC's were gathered, they were rebranded—and this time the brand was burned into the hide.

It wasn't that every day they made a gather. The cattle were too scattered, too mixed in with the more numerous MAB's, Circle-Bars, and other range stock. And often the weather was so severe the crew couldn't ride far from the round-up camp. The days ran into weeks, and the outfit was moving farther and farther south toward the Pecos badlands. The gather ran now to nearly five hundred head, and

a couple of riders held them in a bunch so that they didn't mix in with the other cattle.

Another day's work added more than thirty head to the herd, and Spud Larkin said, "No use drifting the bunch south with us, Jim. I figure some of us should start trailing these critters toward Broken Wheel Creek."

Jim nodded. He too had been thinking that.

He said, "How many riders will it take?"

"Four will be plenty," Spud told him. "But one of us—you or I—better be along. In case the MAB outfit tries to pull something."

"It's my risk, Spud," Jim said.

The herd was pointed north in the morning. The weather was good. There had been a thaw for several days, and the melting snow was uncovering wide patches of brown grass. Jim and three of the best hands—picked out by Spud Larkin—kept the cattle moving along at an easy pace. Each man was armed with sixgun and rifle. They had two spare horses packed with grub and gear. Jim rode point—and kept a sharp lookout for strange riders.

They kept to the trail until dark, then made camp and paired off to stand night guard on the herd. In the morning, they were in the saddle and on the move before the sun came up. That day too was clear. And warm. It began to look like an early spring . . . But the third day was bleak, with no sun at all. The fourth day there was a drizzle of rain that turned to sleet at nightfall. The herd had traveled about forty miles. It was still that far to Broken Wheel Creek.

The rain and sleet kept up, and Jim and his men lived in clothes that never dried out and slept in damp blankets on the sodden ground. The cattle bawled mournfully, but were easily handled. They finally bedded the cattle down twelve miles from the Broken Wheel, and made their last night camp. Jim told the others, "Tomorrow night we'll bunk in my cabin."

They got the campfire going, protecting it from the rain with a pack tarp rigged above it. They cooked a meal, downed it in a hurry. Shorty Pincher and Pete Larue had the first spell of rid-



ing night. They rode out on tired mounts. Jim and Mike Shane hugged the fire for a smoke before spreading out their bedrolls. Jim puffed at his pipe and wondered vaguely why the MAB outfit had made no move against his round-up outfit, and just then Mike said, "Rider coming."

Jim peered into the darkness, saw the horseman.

"Watch out for more," he said. "Warn Shorty and Pete."

He went to his saddle gear, which lay near his picketed horse, and pulled his Winchester from its scabbard. A voice hailed, "Hello, the camp!" Jim recognized it. And muttered, "Steve Maury!"

He moved well away from the glow of the campfire, and called out, "If you're alone, come in, Steve. If you've brought the MAB crew, keep away!"

"I'm alone, Channel," Steve answered.

He came riding in, the rain dripping from his hat brim. He pulled up by the fire, and his face, in its flickering light, was thinned down and colorless. Steve Maury wasn't his old hearty self. He still wasn't wholly recovered from his wound. He folded his gloved hands on the saddle horn, sagged wearily.

"Been waiting for you," he said. "Been holed up in your cabin for more than a week. Looks like you've got your JC cattle."

"About half of them, Steve."

"Your crew still out after the others?"

"That's right. Spud Larkin and the rest are close to the Pecos country," Jim said. He was puzzled by Steve's lack of hostility. "I've got my cattle—or soon will have all of them—and I mean to hold them."

**S**TEVE gave him a wispy grin. "Clint'll have something to say about that, friend," he stated. "He hates your guts, just like he does mine." He paused, but Jim kept silent. Steve went on, "Clint caught on quick that Sam White's daughter fell for you. I reckon he knew before you did. Her visiting your cabin on Christmas Day, while he was at the Circle-Bar, drove him loco with jealousy. He'd like to see you dead, Channel."

"I'll worry about that when he shows up."

"And right now you're worrying about me, eh?"

"I'm not worried," Jim said flatly. "I was ready for you that night at Madera Plaza. That's why I hired on Spud Larkin, to make me ready with a gun. But I didn't back-shoot you through the window."

"I know."

"You know who did it?"

Steve showed another faint smile. "I had an idea it was Clint, soon as I regained consciousness," he said. "Then the White girl showed up at the Plaza, after I'd been laid up for about a week, and convinced me you didn't fire the shot."

Jim thought, *So Janet went to talk with him.* He didn't say anything. He held his rifle at his hip, and watched Steve.

"Clint knows what he wants and he's determined to get it," Steve went on. "The girl is only one of the things he wants. He's out to own the MAB—all to himself. I was only John Maury's adopted son, but the old man willed me an equal share in the MAB. He said it on his death bed, when he was too weak to put it in writing. Clint heard him say it. But after we buried him, Clint said only the old written will stood. It gave me only a third part of the spread, and Clint got that away from me. Everytime I'd cut loose my wolf, he'd cheat me when I was drunk. He'd give me a couple hundred dollars to sign my name to papers that eased me out as a part-owner. When I'd sobered up, he claimed he gave me so many thousand dollars instead of hundreds. I warned him before he left for San Antonio in the fall that he'd have to give me a new deal—or shoot it out with me. Then I pulled that loco swindle on you . . ."

"And Clint saw a way to even things with us both."

"Sure. If he'd killed me, he'd have hanged you."

"Well, we're both still alive."

"Yeah—but for how long?" Steve said. "He'll be after you because you won the girl away from him, and because you've got a thousand head of MAB cattle. He'll be gunning for me because he knows as long as I'm living he won't be able to sleep sound at night."

"What are we going to do about it?"

Jim asked. It was a strange thing; he had expected this meeting to end with blazing guns, but now he looked upon Steve Maury as an ally. "Can't we get the jump on him?"

Steve shook his head. "Not with a big, tough crew siding him," he said flatly. "I just wanted to warn you that Clint'll be after these cattle. I don't know what you can do about it. Me, I'm going into hiding—until the time is ripe for me to go after that no-good son with a gun in his hand!"

He nodded perkily, swung his horse about, and rode off through the rainy darkness.

Jim was peering after him when the first gunshot racketed, loud through the light drumming of rain. Other shots rang out, men yelled. The MAB crew loomed, Clint Maury in the lead. Jim swung his rifle up, began firing at the shadowy figures. He saw a MAB man topple from the saddle, saw another go down with his hit horse. Beside him, Mike Shane was hit in the thigh and fell sprawling.

The MAB riders separated into two bunches, one jumping the herd and the other shooting at its guards. The cattle stampeded, just as the attackers wished, racing wildly from the bed ground with half a dozen riders urging them on with shouts and gunshots. Jim saw Shorty Pincher and Pete Larue hightailing it for safety, but firing back as they fled. Jim kept firing until his Winchester was empty, then he flung it aside and drew his sixgun.

He swung it up, at Clint Maury.

He never fired that shot.

Something struck him from behind, a gun butt crashing down upon his head. His head felt split open and his brain reeled. He dropped to his knees, and only dimly heard Clint Maury say, "Good work, Nate!"

**T**HEY half lifted, half shoved Jim Channel onto his horse. They'd mounted him bareback, but put the bridle on the sorrel. They tied Jim's hands at his back with piggin' strings. He was still dazed by the blow to the head. His hat had been knocked off, and he felt the chill rain on his face and running down his

neck. Most of the MAB crew were gone with the stampeded cattle. Only four men remained with Clint Maury.

"So far as I'm concerned," Clint muttered, "rustling is still a hanging offense. You were caught red-handed, Channel, and I've got the whole MAB crew for witnesses."

"What about this one we shot, boss?" somebody asked.

"Let him go," came the flat reply. "I've got no quarrel with him."

Mike Shane was safe, then, thought Jim with relief. Shorty and Pete had gotten away.

Jim knew that he himself had no chance. He was in Clint Maury's way, and the man had found an excuse for killing him. Hanging a rustler couldn't be called murder. That was in Clint's mind. He didn't want to be blamed for murder. He said, "The nearest trees are at his place on the Broken Wheel. We'll take him there."

It was a long ride, the longest Jim Channel had ever made. Yet he did not want to come to the end of it. His horse was led by one of the MAB riders. Two others flanked him, one to a side, and the fourth brought up the rear. Clint Maury, a hunched figure in the saddle, rode in the lead. No word was spoken during those twelve miles. The rain beat down at them the whole way. Finally they halted close to Jim's cabin, and Clint pointed to a big cottonwood.

"That'll do," he said.

The other four were slow to move, now. There was reluctance in them. Clint shouted at them in sudden rage. "Fools! Don't you know how to string up a damn' rustler?"

He took the rope from his saddle, quickly fashioned a hangman's noose. He giggered his horse close to the big cottonwood and tossed the noose over a stout limb. He tied the rope's other end to the trunk.

"Bring him over here!"

The four kneed their mounts, swung Jim's sorrel into position. Clint made ready to fit the noose about his victim's neck. It was then that Steve Maury's voice reached out from the cabin window.

"You can't do it, Clint! By damn, that's one thing not even you can do!"

Steve was yelling like a crazy man. "You drop that rope over Channel's head, and I'll gut-shoot you. You back-shooting son! You think I don't know it was you who gunned me down at Madera Plaza!"

Clint cursed, dropped the rope, grabbed for his sixgun.

Steve's rifle blazed.

Clint's horse took the slug, reared high and shrieked wildly. Clint dropped from the saddle before the animal collapsed, firing twice at the cabin window, then darting for the trees. Steve fired again, but missed. Clint kept on running, crashing through the trees and brush. The four MAB hands seemed undecided about taking part in this fight between the Maurys. Steve called two of them by name, "Nate, Charley—turn Channel loose. You know blamed well he's no rustler!"

None of the four moved.

"Turn him loose," Steve bellowed, "or I start shooting again!"

Jim's bonds and the noose were cut away. He caught up the sorrel's reins, then grabbed a rifle from the saddle boot of one of the MAB riders. He swung his horse into the thicket. He saw a figure, moving at a stumbling run, break from the trees and splash across the creek. Clint Maury was fleeing like a man in panic. He reached the far side, scrambled up the bank, plunged on.

Jim put his horse across, but it hit ice on the bank and shod hoofs found no footing. It fell back into the water, throwing Jim against the bank. He was jarred, had the breath knocked out of him, but he forced himself up. Even though dazed he knew that Clint mustn't make good his escape. Jim realized that if they didn't fight it out now, Clint Maury would never call it quits.

He topped the bank, swung his rifle up, fired at Clint. He missed that shot, and another. He began to run, levering another cartridge into the firing chamber. He splashed through muddy pools, stumbled over lingering mounds of snow. His breath rasped. He began to falter. But Clint was losing headway. The man was less accustomed than an Easterner, a tenderfoot, to being afoot. Suddenly he whirled about, and his sixgun blazed.

Jim swung the rifle up, fired without

sighting. He saw Clint stagger, heard the man's grunt.

Clint cursed him, obscenely, and fired again. He fired twice more in wild rage. Jim's rifle cracked again. Clint reeled back, but refused to go down. He rallied, lunged toward Jim, his face convulsed. He came on until within ten feet of the man he hated. Jim held his fire. Jim didn't shoot even when Clint got his sixgun to bear and cocked . . . That was one of the things Spud Larkin had taught him: *Count the other man's shots.* He knew that Clint's gun was empty.

The hammer fell on a fired cartridge.

Clint muttered an oath, tried again. And again. Realization came then. He swung the gun high, flung it at Jim. "Damn you," he mumbled, collapsing.

Clint Maury sprawled flat on his face.

JIM walked back, fording the creek, picking his way through the trees, and the four MAB hands still sat their mounts. Steve Maury came from the cabin, his gun in his hand. He came to meet Jim, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"You're owner of the MAB now, Steve," Jim told him.

"Too bad, in some ways. Clint was a real cattleman," Steve said, sincere regret in his voice. "Too bad there was a rotten streak in him." He was silent a moment. Then: "Those cattle will be returned to you, Channel, and the MAB will pay you damages—for all its cost you to gather them up and rebrand them. You figure we're even?"

"We'll call it that," Jim said.

He saw a saddled mount in the lean-to barn. It was Steve's horse, but he led it out and swung to the saddle.

"One of my men was wounded," he explained. "I'm going out for him." He rode out across the dark range, telling himself that he would bring Mike Shane in and then ride for the Circle-Bar. Janet would want to know that it was over. She would want to know that now he could plan for the future. He would have much to say to her, but Janet would not need to be told that he was in the cattle country to stay. The moment he appeared, she would see that Jim Channel was no longer a tenderfoot.