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ACTION STORIES

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"YORE NAME'S ON A HUNDRED BULLETS!" . Thomas Thompson 4
Full-length Novel of the great Southwest

A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow-death—for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

THE DUDE HANGS HIGH Joe Chadwick 32

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!

THE COLONEL'S COLTS M. Howard Lane 50

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

LAST STAND OF A LAW DOG Walter A. Tompkins 62

Old Giff Cragg didn't mind age crippling his magic gun, but he sure aimed to turn in a clean badge—bright enough for any killer to see himself by gunflame.

THIRSTY TRIGGERS Lee Floren 77

Barr Stackpool had the cattle. Jim Smith had the water. Big Dan Reynolds had only memories. But they all had guns.

THE HOUSE OF MAPUHI Jack London 84

America's master story-teller creates a screaming super-hurricane and then plunges into its black maw a helpless, naked human with only one resource—a grim, fanatical will to live. Can either side win such a titanic struggle?

BADMAN'S BRITCHES Allan K. Echols 97

Any ornery, owl-hootin' son could shoot up a bank and gun-whip helpless folks, the way El Toro did. But only one hombre was fit to wear his pants.

GUN-WITCH OF HOODOO RANGE Emmett McDowell 102

A Senorita Scorpion Novel

Burly Jess Morgan stared numbly at his grass swept clean of cattle, the smoking ruins of his ranch, the stiffening bodies of his crew. Was this the work of the famous Senorita Scorpion—the girl Robin Hood of the West?



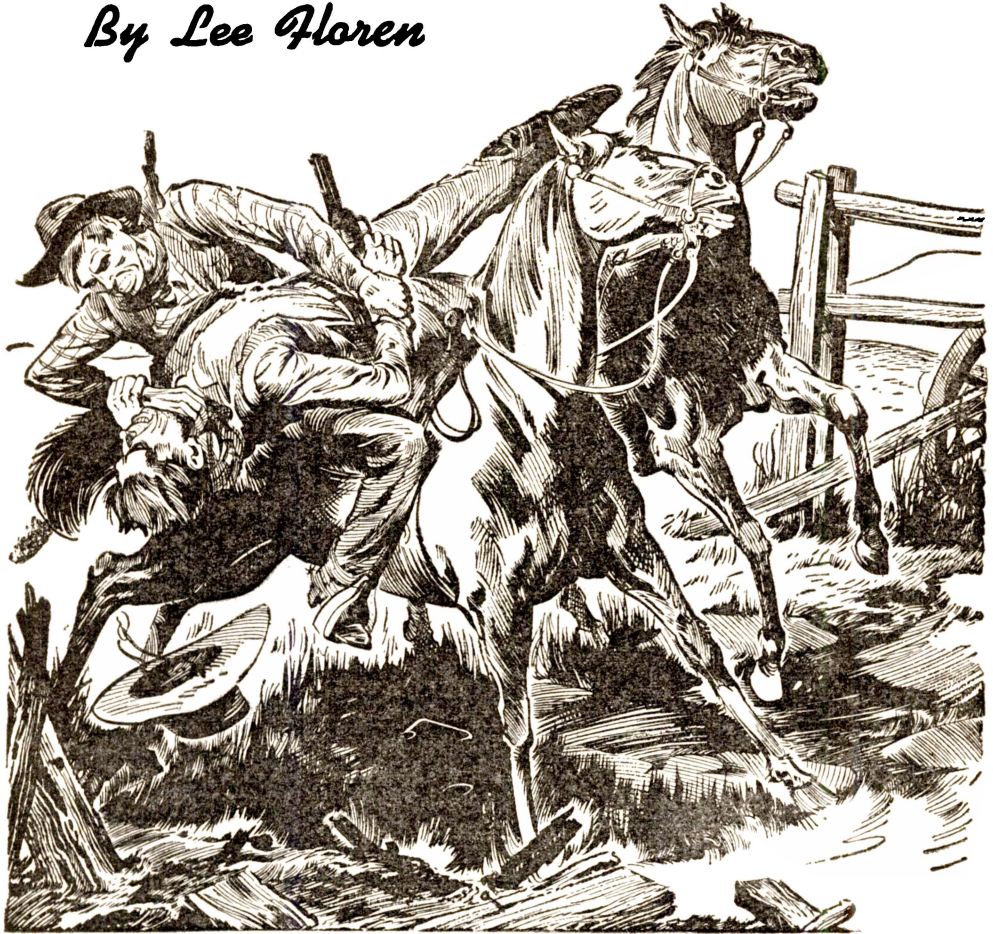
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THIRSTY TRIGGERS

By Lee Floren



Big Dan choked short the gunman's words.

Barr Stackpool had the cattle. Jim Smith had the water. Big Dan Reynolds had only memories. But they all had guns.

THE TRAP WAS READY TO spring. They were going to kill young Jim Smith. So Big Dan Reynolds came from around his bar and said, "No gun play in here, savvy?"

Barr Stackpool growled, "This kid accused me of dealin' off the bottom of the deck, Big Dan. Nobody's accusin' me of bein' crooked!"

All night the poker game had run. And young Jim Smith had cleaned Barr Stackpool, owner of the big Circle K; he had cleaned Stackpool's gunhand, thin Pete Redfern. Stackpool and Redfern had figured it the other way around, but young

Jim's luck, and his skill with cards, had cleaned them.

Now young Jim was standing, hand on his holstered gun. His thin, boyish face was a little pale, and Big Dan got the impression that the young homesteader, for the first time, felt the raw edge of the danger these two cowmen personified. For the first time he realized they wanted to kill him.

Big Dan asked, "Did you accuse him, Jim?"

"No."

"Then they're just tryin' to pick trouble with you?"

Jim's words came slowly. "Yes."

From outside came the sweet smell of Spring's growing grass. The aroma pushed back the stale stink of beer and cigaret smoke.

Dan said, "Go back to your plowin', Jim."

Young Jim turned to go. But Barr Stackpool reached out. He grabbed the young farmer by the shoulder. "We got somethin' to settle here, Big Dan. And by hell you ain't goin' interfere—"

Big Dan hit him. The surprise blow smashed against Barr Stackpool's unprotected jaw. The cowman flung up his arm, releasing Jim Smith. He went backwards and the wall stopped him.

Redfern had reached. Big Dan hit at him, but the gunman went down low, the blow riding over him. But, for a moment, he was off-balance. And that moment gave Jim Smith the time he needed. The homesteader's .45 was out, covering Redfern.

Big Dan had his cutter out, too. Redfern stopped, gun almost over holster-clip; he looked at Jim Smith's Colt, he looked at Big Dan's .44. Then he let his weapon slide back down into leather.

Redfern said, "They got us, Stackpool."

Barr Stackpool wiped blood from his mouth with his sleeve. He looked hard at Big Dan Reynolds. "Me an' my Circle K riders have brought a lot of business to you Big Dan. We're the only big outfit in Tumbleweed Basin; from now on we buy our drinks in the Curcingle across the street. You can go to hell."

"That's all right."

Redfern was silent. His eyes were small, taking in this scene, and Big Dan studied him, for this man was the more dangerous of the two. Nothing moved across the gunman's eyes. There was nothing there—no hate, no fear, no anger. But Big Dan knew that the man was boiling inside.

Stackpool demanded, "Then you're takin' up this nester's troubles?"

Big Dan did not answer that. He said, "There'll be no murder in my saloon, Stackpool."

Stackpool's lips hardened, but still Redfern was silent. Finally Redfern said, "I guess it's our move, boss. An' I'd say that

move was to go out of this joint." He shrugged and walked for the door.

Big Dan swiveled his .44, covering the gunman. Barr Stackpool said, "To hell with you, Big Dan," and followed his gunhand. The batwing doors moved twice, and Big Dan, still holding his gun, stood and listened to their boots run down the plank sidewalk.

He was silent. Young Jim Smith was silent, too.

FROM out on the street came the rapid pounds of running hoofs. They took up power and cadence, and Redfern and Stackpool loped by. They loped past the door, the hoofs lost their power, and the sound ran out and died. Only then did Big Dan Reynolds holster his gun.

"Thanks, Big Dan," murmured Jim Smith.

Big Dan said, "Pick up your winnings."

Jim stacked up the quarters and half-dollars and dollars on top of the paper money. Big Dan was wiping the bar with a damp towel. Jim put a ten dollar bill on the bar. "Your rake-off, Dan."

Dan took the bill.

Jim Smith hesitated. "I'm damn sorry this happened. You took in a nice sum each month from the Circle K riders."

"They'll come back," Dan said. "Barr Stackpool can't tell his hands where they'll drink their whiskey. You can't push a cowpoke aroun' like he's a steer in a loadin' chute."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Dan stopped wiping the bar. His eyes were level. "What are you goin' to do, Jim?"

Jim said, "I develop my homestead, Dan. It's my home, an' Millie's home, an' it'll be the baby's home when he comes."

"You know what that means, now?"

Jim Smith spoke slowly. "Yes, I guess I do, Dan. It means guns, and nothing more."

"You an' Matt Jensen, the Bear Crick nester, will be buckin' Bar Stackpool's Circle K riders. Do you think you can do that?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

Big Dan Reynolds saw the youth's bottom lip quiver. It reminded him of Jim's mother; she had that same gesture when facing a big problem. It reminded him of

thoughts and memories he'd once thought dead. . . .

"You're a fool, Jim."

"Maybe I'm a fightin' fool," Jim Smith said.

The youth left, and Big Dan Reynolds was alone in his saloon. The morning trade would be coming in soon; he was sleepy for he'd been up all night watching the poker game. Young Jim Smith, he figured, was about twenty-one. Big Dan and Jim's father, Ray Smith, had come into Flat Rock thirty years before, coming up the Powder River trail chousing a Mill Iron trailherd.

Both had been cowpunchers through circumstances and not by choice. Big Dan had started his saloon and the Northern Pacific had built through shortly afterwards; Ray Smith had become Flat Rock's depot agent. Down at the Silver Spoon Cafe young Hattie Mueller had waited table. She had dark hair and dark eyes and Big Dan and Ray Smith had tried to win the favor of those dark eyes.

Ray Smith had married her. Jim had come—their only child—and when Jim was fifteen, six years ago, his dad had been killed while uncoupling stock cars, shooting them into siding on the Flat Rock tracks. His mother had died two years later from tuberculosis.

Big Dan Reynolds had lost the only woman he had ever wanted to marry. Young Jim had gone into the Spanish-American war and come home all in one piece. Tumbleweed Basin was thrown open to homesteading with the provision only war veterans could file on the land.

Jim had filed on Tumbleweed Springs. Barr Stackpool, who had gained ownership of the Mill Iron and changed the brand to the Circle K, had to stand by and watch; he'd seen his best water-hole go under fence. Another veteran, Matt Jensen, had filed on Bear Creek, and another Circle K water supply was under fence. These were the only two spots on Tumbleweed Basin that could be turned into farms. The rest of the valley was just cattle-land, and nothing more until—if ever—irrigation water was turned on it.

Jim had met an army nurse, married her, and built a home on Tumbleweed Springs. They had wintered there and now Jim's plow was turning over the dark

loam. And it was also turning over trouble.

"Not my business," Big Dan told himself.

He arranged the bottles on his backshelf. They were almost a hundred miles from the county seat—over in Malta—; otherwise, he'd called the sheriff in on this. But by the time a man got over there and back— He stopped working, heavy face sober. He remembered Hattie's words.

"Ray's gone now, Big Dan. My boy is only fifteen. He needs a dad now more than ever. Dan, would you keep an eye on him?"

He had looked at her and her dark beauty had stirred him again. She was in her late forties and middle-age had added weight to her but still she held to her girlish beauty.

"Hattie," he had said softly, "why don't you marry me?"

"I'm sick, Dan. The doctor doesn't know what is wrong with me."

"I'm sorry, Hattie. I shouldn't have asked. I guess I forgot about Ray. He was the only man for you, wasn't he?"

"He was the man, Dan."

Dan had promised to keep an eye on young Jim. Now he was thinking of the danger facing the youth. These thoughts pushed through him, giving him no rest. They pushed away his sleepiness.

His bartender came at nine. He unbuckled his apron and hung it up and went into the bright Spring sunshine. Unrest and indecision were running through him, giving his thoughts a hard coldness, bringing a scowl to his thick face. He went to the livery-barn and saddled his long-legged bay gelding.

BLUEJOINT grass was almost to the bay's knees. It waved deceptively across the basin. Soon the summer sun would scorch it and sink it down; this basin would be arid and dusty. Pot holes held water now; springs were still running; but when August came with its terrible heat, these would be dry. Then would Barr Stackpool need the water of Tumbleweed Springs and Bear Creek.

Circle K cattle would line up against the barbwire fences, bawling and tossing their long horns, their tongues swollen and slobbering. Circle K cattle would be

thirsty and gaunt. In a way, he could hardly blame Stackpool.

He knew that Jim had offered to sell Stackpool water in the dry months. And he knew that Stackpool had said he would either control Tumbleweed Springs or his cattle would die of thirst. Stackpool had bossed this basin too long to have a kid nester taunt him. . . . He had a fierce pride—a foolish, stubborn pride—the arrogance of the born cowman.

Big Dan rode the fifteen miles to Matt Jensen's farm. When he topped the ridge he saw the log house was in ashes; the barn had been burned down, too. Smoke was eddying lazily upward from the ruins. He drew rein, watching, fearing. He saw no signs of life around the burned-down homestead.

He rode through the cottonwoods. A rider came out of the brush now and he recognized Pete Redfern. Redfern sat an iron-gray stud.

"You're on Circle K property, Dan Reynolds."

Big Dan corrected, "Matt Jensen's property, Redfern."

Redfern loafed in saddle. "Matt Jensen done sold out to Barr Stackpool, Big Dan. They signed over the deed this mornin'. Matt done loaded up his material belongin's an' pulled out with his missus and two kids. Stackpool gave me orders to torch the buildin's to the ground. An' that I did."

Big Dan saw that the three strand barb-wire fence had been cut. A few head of Circle K cattle were grazing on the short spring-wheat planted by Matt Jensen. His first thought was, "There's something crooked here," and his next was, "Now Jim Smith's all alone fightin' Stackpool."

He rode over to the ashes of the house and drew rein. Redfern had ridden beside him. He saw tracks; shod horses, boots, and then wagon tracks, running away from the fire. It didnt seem logical that Matt Jensen would sell and run. He told Redfern this.

"Maybe you figure we run him off, eh?"

Big Dan shrugged.

Redfern's tone showed his anger. "You hint at too much, Big Dan. Jus' pull your beak back, fella, an' let me an' Stackpool handle this nester of a Jim Smith. 'T'ain't no scrap of your'n, it is? Jus'

'cause you happened to spark his mother years ago—"

Big Dan's hammerlock choked short the gunman's words. His arms clamped around Redfern's neck, the saloon-man braced himself in stirrups, horse tense against his weight. He dragged Redfern from saddle.

They went to the ground, with Big Dan trying to keep on his feet. Redfern pulled his cutter and Big Dan lost the hammerlock, grabbing the man's wrist. The gun rose, blasted harmlessly into the sky, and then Big Dan had the six-shooter. Redfern slammed his head into Big Dan's guts.

The pain was sharp. It cut through him, biting him; he smashed down with the Colt. He missed the gunman's head and the pistol hit Redfern on the collar-bone. He sat down, moaning and holding his shoulder, and Big Dan stepped back, breathing thickly.

"You'll keep your filthy mouth closed around me, Redfern!"

Redfern looked up. Anger had colored his eyes but now they were dull and without thought. They went over Big Dan Reynolds. Redfern said, "You've got the upper hand now; you can talk big. But there'll be another day."

Big Dan pulled the rifle from the boot on Redfern's kak. He swung up, carrying the rifle and six-shooter. He said, "I'll leave these down yonder along the crick by the crossin'." He rode away.

Redfern was right. He was in this because of Hattie, and because of Ray Smith; they were both dead. They had left a job unfinished because of death, and he was finishing it. There was no other way; that had to be. It was part of him, just as his blood and tissue were a part of him; there was no dodging that fact. They had left young Jim and, if Ray Smith hadn't married Hattie, then young Jim would have been his son. That was true. That was life.

He glanced back once. Redfern stood beside his horse and watched him. He remembered the hate he had seen scrawled across the gunman's loose, ugly face. Redfern was a gunhand, ignorant in his egotistical, centered way. His pride lay based on his prowess with a gun and Big Dan Reynolds had smashed that pride to one

side. Redfern would be out to kill him.

He came to the crossing, spray rising around his bronc's hoofs, and when he got to the far side he stuck Redfern's Winchester barrel down in the mud, letting the sixshooter drop in the water beside it. Redfern would find them clogged with mud and water. He smiled at that thought.

He found the wagon road and touched his pony with his spurs. It was four miles to Jim Smith's farm. When Big Dan rode into the yard Millie Smith was sweeping off the small front porch. Dan asked, "Where's Jim?" and she said, "Down along the north fence, I think."

Dan watched her. "You'll be comin' into town soon to stay close to Doc Wilson, won't you?"

"We're going in this evening, Dan."

Dan turned his bronc. "That's good." Her words stopped him. "Jim was in town all last night. This morning he had quite a bit of money he said he'd won at poker. Who did he win it from?"

"My house-man," Big Dan lied. He grinned and added, "I canned the house-man this mornin'. Another run of luck like that an' Jim will take over my outfit, Millie."

"I thought perhaps he had played with Stackpool and Redfern. They've been trying to get him into a poker game. I think they want to win this farm from him. I'm glad he didn't play with them."

"He didn't."

He rode to where Jim was punching in some postholes. He noticed that Jim packed his six-gun and also had a rifle leaning against a nearby tree. He said, "I didn't tell Millie this, but Stackpool bought out Matt Jensen today. He burned Jensen's building, tore down his fences."

Jim's lean face was thick with conflicting emotions. "That dirty dog!"

"Maybe he showed brains."

Jim grinned suddenly. "He might've, at that. But, brains or no brains, I'm not runnin'."

Big Dan felt the edge of the youth's pride. Day by day Jim got more like dead Ray Smith.

Jim told him he was taking Millie into town tonight. Big Dan said he would send out two of his housemen to watch the

farm; with Jim and Millie gone, Barr Stackpool and Pete Redfern might try to burn down the buildings.

"We'll wait until your men come out," Jim said.

BIG DAN reached Flat Rock by late afternoon. His bay was tired—he'd traveled around thirty some miles—and Big Dan was tired, too. He didn't sit a saddle much lately and the kak had peeled the bark off the inside of his huge legs. He had met one rider.

Stackpool had said, "Well, I bought out Matt Jensen. That water hole is mine, now."

Big Dan had reminded him that Jim Smith had offered to sell him water from Tumbleweed Springs. "He'll run a two inch pipe down to a trough outside his property, Stackpool. The watering-fee will be two-bits a head for the rest of the summer."

"My cattle drink free water, or none at all. That spring is mine by squatter's rights, Big Dan. I ran cattle on it for years. They drank there free. An' they'll drink free out of that spring again, an' it'll be around the edges of it, not out of a trough below this nester's fence. You can bet your last Canuck dollar on that!"

Again Big Dan Reynolds caught the brutality of this cowman. He was domineering; he was proud; his strength was naked and strong. He was thinking of this as he dismounted in Flat Rock's livery-stable.

He unsaddled the bay, watered him and let him roll in the corral; then he led him into a stall with native bluejoint and oats in the feed-box.

He got two of his bouncers to ride to Jim Smith's spread. They weren't anxious to take the job, he saw, and that brought a wry smile to his lips. Then he went upstairs to his bachelor quarters over the saloon and rolled across the bed, not bothering to take off anything but his boots; sleep came quickly. He was dead tired, and his youth had left him.

He was awakened by the sound of voices in the street. He hobbled to the window, stiff from his ride. Jim Smith's buggy was down there. A rear wheel was broken, the hardwood spokes snapped; he had tied a small cottonwood tree to it,

making a skid out of it. The horses were muddy.

"Where's Big Dan?" somebody asked.

Big Dan pulled on his boots, something knife-cold inside. Evidently the youth had had a run-away and with Millie in her condition— He almost ran down the stairs, forgetting his aches and pains.

He pushed through the crowd. "What happened, Jim?"

"Millie got some sudden pains. She got afraid and she wanted to start in for doc. I let her go—the team is old an' not wild. I stayed behind until your two bouncers came out."

He spoke in a low, savage tone. The two housemen had found her: the team had run-away, smashing the wheel; she was on the ground beside the road, the horses stopped because they had become entangled in the buckbrush. One man had straightened out the rig and the other had loped to the farm for Jim.

"Where's Millie now?"

Millie was in the doctor's office. Big Dan asked, face showing his fear, "How is she?"

"Doc's with her. I dunno, Big Dan."

Big Dan Reynolds stood there. Now he was adding this all up, and he was trying to find a total. "What scared the team? Did Millie tell you?"

"She said a jackrabbit scared them."

There was something missing here. Big Dan sensed that; did young Jim sense it, too? That team was well-broken. No rabbit would scare them. They had seen hundreds of jackrabbits. . . .

He went down the street to Doc's office. Mrs. Hudson was helping as a nurse. She met Big Dan in the lobby.

"Could I speak to Millie?"

She told him Millie was in the operating room. No, he couldn't see her. The doctor came out. Millie would be all right. The shock of the run-away, of course, had acted on her.

"I want to ask her one question."

Mrs. Hudson looked at the medico. He had known Big Dan for years. Finally he said, "For a minute, Dan."

Millie lay on the bed. She was undressed and he saw the tips of her bare shoulders from under the comforter. Her face was calm. He took her hand. It was warm. "Millie, I want you to answer one

question. And I want you to tell me straight. What scared that team?"

"A cottontail rabbit."

"Jim said a jackrabbit scared them."

She watched him, silently.

He said, almost softly, "Was it a rabbit? Are you telling me the truth? Or was it Pete Redfern, or Barr Stackpool?"

He had hit on the truth. Her face showed that. She watched him; he felt her eyes search him. Finally she said, murmuring, "Yes, it was them, Big Dan. They rode out of the brush, guns blasting. The team took the bits. Don't tell Jim. He'll go against them and they'll kill him."

He kissed her on the lips. "You be a brave girl, Millie."

"Doc says I'll be all right. The baby is due any time now, he says. And we hope for a boy. We have the name picked out. Dan Smith."

"Why Dan?"

"For you, rummy! If Jim's mom was alive, she'd want him named Dan. We've both agreed on that!"

Big Dan Reynolds swallowed hard. Doc said, "The time's up, Big Dan." The saloon-man went outside. The dusk was slipping down to enfold this pioneer cowtown. He didn't notice it, though. He was turmoil inside, and indecision was with him; out of this came one thought: Would he be alive within the hour? This sent fear pounding through his veins. But there was no other recourse. There was no one he could call to help him. He had to do it alone.

THEY had moved the broken buggy and team to the livery-barn. He didn't know where Jim Smith was. Two riders came down the street, confident in their saddle; he watched them step down and leave their broncs tied in front of the Curcingle Bar, across the dust. He watched them with great indifference.

They looked at him; he met their gazes. Stackpool was hard, the chips were down; he was ready. Redfern was lithe and quick and his gaze was without thought. They looked at him and then entered the saloon.

He went to his own saloon. He went behind the bar and poured three quick drinks. He put them in a row and then drank them, one after another; he drank

fast, and he felt the raw edge of the bitter whiskey.

"Killin' a snake inside of you, Big Dan?" his bartender asked.

"Two snakes," he said.

He went out the back door. He circled and crossed the street, the dusk warping around him. He came down the alley, kicked at a tin can, and stopped outside the backdoor of the Curcingle.

He stood. He thought, "That damn' whiskey didn't help a bit," and he smiled a little. He was afraid. Then he stepped inside.

Stackpool was at the bar, Redfern beside him. They didn't see him until he said, "Millie told me you two stampeded her team. You tried to kill her. You aimed to murder the girl. This has come to a head."

They saw him then. Stackpool said, very clearly, "The crazy fool," and he set down his drink. A globule of whiskey hung to the corner of his mouth. His tongue came out and took it away.

Redfern moved out, with Big Dan watching his every movement. The gunman was crouched and dangerous. He said, "I'll get him, Stackpool." He said, "He's been runnin' against me too much."

Stackpool said, "If you miss, I'll get him."

"I won't miss," Redfern breathed.

Boots were running on the plank walk outside. They came closer and louder; a man barged through the front doors. Stackpool had turned but Redfern had kept watching Big Dan Reynolds.

"Jim Smith," Stackpool said.

Jim Smith stopped and said, "I was just talkin' to a fellow here in town. He saw these two headin' over the hills after Millie's team had run away. They stampeded it, Big Dan!"

Dan said, "Get out, kid!"

"And let you carry my fight! Hell, no!"

There was a man who was shuffling his feet, tip-toeing toward a window. The others had all left. The only sound heard was the window rising, the man climbing through; outside his boots hit the ground, and they heard him run. His boot-sounds died and the guns lifted.

Redfern got in first shot. He was low, crouched; his gun winked a red blossom.

Big Dan was on one knee and Redfern's bullet hit his thigh. Big Dan had his gun out, and his palm was flashing down; he felt the hammer catch on his hand, felt the lift and pound of the gun.

Redfern was going ahead, sinking ahead; his gun was pointing down. And Big Dan, taking a chance the gunman was dying, swung his pistol on Barr Stackpool. Stackpool had his back to the bar, his gun hanging from his limp fingers. He slid down, the Colt falling.

"I made a mistake." The cowman spoke brokenly. "I should have bought that water— I should have—"

Stackpool's big head lopped, and he slid on his side. Big Dan looked at Jim Smith who stood with his face terrible and bleak. Big Dan asked, "Did he get you, son?"

"He shot wide."

Outside, men moved. They came into the saloon. One helped Big Dan up, and he hobbled to Jim Smith. He put his arm around the youth, who was still shaken and quiet.

"You'll help me, Jim?"

"Any time, Dan."

THEY went up the street, Jim Smith's strong right arm around Big Dan, with Big Dan hobbling; thus they came to the doctor's office. Mrs. Hudson let them in and they got Big Dan in a chair. Somebody stuck his head in the door with, "They're both goners, Big Dan."

"Get outa here, Webber."

Mrs. Hudson shut the door. "The doctor went to the Curcingle to see them. Now don't disturb Millie, please. She's asleep."

"She didn't hear the guns?" asked Jim. "No."

The woman got to work on Big Dan's leg. The wound was in the flesh, she said, and soon the doctor came. Big Dan leaned back, eyes closed, fighting his pain, fighting his thoughts.

So they would name him Dan Smith, huh? Then he asked, "But if it's a girl, Jim; what name then?"

"Hattie, after mom."

Big Dan kept his eyes closed. He hoped the baby was a girl. He would like to use the name, Hattie, again. It was the sweetest name in God's good world.