



Riddle Gawne

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CHAPTER XXIV.

"ONE GOOD TURN—"

GAWNE backed away and stepped down into the street. An instant later, he stuck his head in the doorway, to see Reb Haskell sitting in a chair, his legs asprawl, his hands plunged deep into his trouser-pockets, staring straight ahead of him, his lips in a horrible pout. Gawne's voice, snapping viciously, made the sheriff jump:

"Give me the keys to the jail, Haskell!"

Haskell passed the keys over. Gawne took them, dropped them into a pocket, and made his way down the street to the jail. The entire town was watching him, now, aware that something out of the ordinary was happening.

Gawne's demand for the keys of the jail was not the result of any particular interest in that institution; yet he had decided there might be a prisoner or two in it, and he wanted Haskell to have no further control over their destinies.

The building was heavy and substantial. Two grated windows were in its walls, and one door opened on the street.

The building sat back slightly from the street line, leaving an open space, in which, in times of any organized civic effort, Boz-

zam City's citizens were prone to meet for a discussion of the things that interested them.

Those times were not many. Yet here Bozzam City held its elections. Reb Haskell had been elected in the jail—his electors having used the jail as a voting booth. A court sat here—sometimes; Bozzam City was the county seat; though cases were so few that a judge had to be brought from Las Vegas.

Gawne unlocked the door of the jail and swung it open. Standing in the opening, he saw the figure of a man sitting on a bench in the rear of the building. Twice Gawne blinked at the man before he recognized him; then he laughed.

"I never expected to see a Bozzam man in here." He closed the door behind him, for, in the street, a citizen of Bozzam had halted, and was watching Gawne.

"Well, you're lookin' at one," said the other.

"Have trouble with Bozzam, Cass?"

"Plenty," growled the discomfited right-hand-man. He looked truculently at Gawne. "What you doin', goin' around, openin' an' shuttin' the jail door for? You the sheriff now?"

"Haskell has resigned. I'm taking his resignation right on to the governor.

This story began in *The Argosy* for September.

Thought I'd look in and see if any prisoner would find it lonesome in here until the new sheriff is appointed. Glad I stopped."

"What made Haskell resign. He was a heap enthusiastic, last night."

"That's a long story, Cass. Haskell isn't the first man that has changed his mind overnight."

"Hell!" exploded Cass; "I reckon I'll never git out of here, now!"

"What you in for, Cass?"

"For buttin' into a love game, I reckon," he said.

"Oh, don't!" mocked Gawne. But he scowled, for a suspicion had suddenly seized him. Cass had said Bozzam was responsible for his incarceration.

"Don't tell me you were butting into Bozzam's love game!" he said.

"It sure wasn't my game!" said Cass ruefully.

"Bozzam broke with Blanche Le Claire, then. And you were mixed in."

"Hell!" Cass sneered at his visitor. "Where you been—sleepin'? Bozzam broke off with Blanche Le Claire the day you herd-rode the outfit! She went home with you—didn't she? She didn't go back to Bozzam. Bozzam's took up with that there Harkless female!"

Gawne turned and examined the lock on the jail door that Cass might not see his face. He spoke with an air of unconcern.

"That's news to me."

"An' to me, too," said Cass sourly. "At least it *was* news when I got wind of it. That was when Bozzam sailed into me. I was on the porch, an' my gun got snagged."

"Bozzam sailed into you, eh? And you didn't know he was friendly with Miss Harkless?"

"I don't know nothin'," asserted Cass. "I was wantin' to know. Speakin' straight, I'd took a shine to the girl from the first—when you warned me off an' took her to the colonel's ranch—an' plugged me in the wrist. I want to tell you—while I'm talkin'—that I'll square *that* deal with you, some day."

"I was thinkin' to square it when I frames up on the Harkless girl—with Haskell. You warns me not to tell her about the colonel bein' one of Bozzam's men, an'

I figgers that because you don't want her to know that, it 'll hurt you a heap to have me tell her. I does so—makin' it strong—not thinkin' she was promised to Hame."

"I tells her if she don't hook up with me, I'll sick Haskell on her dad an' make him hang him. That don't make no hit with her. She gits a rifle an' tries to bore me—which she ain't a good shot or she'd have done it. Then I gits a note from Bozzam to come over to his shack."

"She's there—an' the colonel—an' Bozzam. Bozzam makes me crawl—which I'm so flustered, I do. Out on the porch—afterward, I tries to fan my gun, an' Bozzam steps on my gullet an' sends me off to—here—by Reb Haskell—which Haskell had been standin' there watchin' the whole performance—an' never batted an eye-winker! That's how I'm here. You got no love for Hame Bozzam, I reckon?"

"Not any."

"So I figgers when I seen you open the door. Seein' as you've took charge, I'd take it as mighty fine of you if you'd call this here solitary confinement off."

"You're free as the air, Cass."

"Damn if you don't mean it!" declared Cass, after a long look at the other.

"Sure," smiled Gawne. He watched while the other stepped to the door. When Cass reached the step, Gawne called to him. "Keep away from Haskell, Cass. He's my meat. He's leaving town by sundown."

"Meanin'?"

"That it's a clean-up. This town goes straight from now on."

"Bozzam, too?" breathed Cass, from the doorway, his tone venomously vindictive.

Gawne nodded.

"Damn if I ain't runnin' with you from now on!" he declared—and slipped out of sight.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ELEMENT OF CHANCE!

GAWNE locked the jail door and stepped out into the street. A search of the saloons brought him into contact with several men whom he knew to be on the side of law and order.

He talked at length with these and they offered him their enthusiastic cooperation. Yet these conferences took a long time. He ate dinner in the Palace, and was walking down the street, planning his campaign against Bozzam, when, passing a small frame dwelling, he heard his name whispered.

He turned, to see Blanche Le Claire standing in a doorway waving a hand to him. He was only a few feet from the doorway, and he greeted her unsmilingly, and continued on his way. He had not taken more than two or three steps when he felt her hand on his shoulder, and her voice in his ear:

"Come in a minute, Jeff; I want to talk with you."

"It's no use."

"You think I want—you?" she laughed shortly. "I have given you up. It's something else, Jeff—something you ought to know." She was eagerly insistent. He turned, faced her, saw the appeal in her eyes, and frowned.

"There is nothing I want to know," he said coldly.

"Not even about Hame Bozzam—or Kathleen Harkless?"

She smiled bitterly when she saw his eyes flash; and when she seized his arm and began to walk toward the doorway, he went with her without protesting.

She shoved him in through the doorway ahead of her, closed the door behind her and stood against it, breathing fast, her face flushed.

"What has she done, Jeff?"

"Is that what you brought me in here for?" he said gruffly, starting for the door.

"No—no," she laughed excitedly, aware of her error; "I understand. I haven't any hope—of you. You made me understand that when we had that talk with no kinks in it."

Her eyes gleamed maliciously, yet she sheathed the malice with a smile that went no deeper than her lips.

"She has gone to Hame Bozzam—hasn't she? I could have told you she would; she had him in view all the time—while she was stringing you. I could have told you—she's that kind. You didn't see it, of

course; you were so deeply in love with her. Women of her type are—"

"They are all alike," he sneered. "It isn't a matter of type."

"Then you know she has gone with Hame Bozzam?"

"I know she went to Bozzam's house," he said.

"Ah!" she breathed; and noted from his corded jaw muscles that he knew more. "Do you know that she shot at Jess Cass in defense of Bozzam?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"From Cass, himself—through one of the jail windows. Why, the whole town knows it, Jeff. Bozzam has boasted of it!"

His face whitened, and he stepped toward the door. But she seized his shoulders.

"Listen, Jeff." She spoke rapidly and earnestly. "After we had that kinkless talk I rode over to the colonel's ranch. Kathleen was there. After I saw you didn't want me, I thought I would have a talk with her—to warn her against Bozzam. I—I pumped her, Jeff. I corkscrewed it out of her. She told me that she had been playing with you—amusing herself, she put it. She said she was after Hame Bozzam. Her father had told her that he was a member of Bozzam's gang, that Bozzam had threatened him, and that she was going to sacrifice herself to save her father!"

He swung her around, seized her by the shoulders and thrust his face close to hers, his eyes blazing.

"Are you lying to me?" he demanded.

She could feel his muscles quivering; the terrible pressure of his fingers on her shoulders sent lightning darts of agonizing pain to her brain; but she met the flame of his eyes steadily, with desperate calmness.

"I am telling you God's truth," she said.

She saw the fire go out of his eyes—saw it turn to smoldering contempt; and knew her acting had not been in vain.

"Yes," he said, with a bitter, vibrant laugh; "I guess you are telling the truth. I saw her in Bozzam's arms."

"I thought Hame was lying about that," she said, her eyes quickening.

"You knew it?"

"Hame told me—the next—the same

day. So you saw it!" She wriggled out of his grasp, threw one arm around his neck, slipping close to him, patting his hair, whispering consolingly.

He laughed, pushed her from him, and opened the door. Standing in it, she leaning against one of the jambs, he turned to her.

"I've this to say for you," he said. "You play the game straight. If there is any honor in that, it's yours. A man knows what to expect from you. It's the virtuous sneaks that—"

He broke off abruptly and straightened. Miss Le Claire saw his face redden, then pale quickly; and his eyes chill. Following his gaze, the woman saw on the street, not more than twenty-five or thirty feet from the house, Hame Bozzam and Miss Harkless.

Their horses were loping slowly, and at the instant Miss Le Claire saw them, both Bozzam and Miss Harkless, as though by prearrangement, looked directly at the couple in the doorway.

Miss Le Claire, quick to seize this opportunity to confound her rival, smiled brazenly, and deliberately winked at Miss Harkless. The girl on the horse blushed furiously, for that telegraphic look bore a guilty significance.

Then Miss Harkless's lips went into straight, scornful lines. The contempt in her glance; the crooked, derisive smile on Hame Bozzam's face, maddened Gawne. Miss Le Claire heard him laugh recklessly, with discordant mirthlessness.

And then Gawne seized her, crushed her arms to her sides, and pressing her to him, kissed her deliberately—she, exultant, passionately abetting him.

Miss Harkless's horse leaped, clattering, down the street; Bozzam, grinning widely, urging his animal after the other.

Miss Le Claire's triumph endured only an instant. She was released so suddenly that she staggered, almost falling.

She heard Gawne curse, profanely; and then she saw him striding down the street toward the Palace; saw him enter the saloon.

And then her gaze went down the street to where Hame Bozzam was helping Miss

Harkless off her horse. Miss Le Claire's smile was full of amused malice.

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNMASKED.

GAWNE emerged from the front door of the Palace shortly before sundown. Word of the ultimatum he had delivered to Rob Haskell had reached the ears of Bozzam City's inhabitants hours before, and because it was known that Haskell did not purpose to obey Gawne's mandate, there were many eyes on Gawne when he stepped into the street.

He stepped out cautiously, not knowing from which direction Haskell's bullet might come—if the man had not heeded the warning.

He stood for some minutes in front of the Palace, keeping a keen lookout for Haskell. The street was deserted. He smiled grimly. The citizens of Bozzam were taking no chances.

He meant to kill Haskell. He owed Haskell much. Haskell had meditated killing him, that day in front of the Diamond Bar bunk-house, and for no other reason than having been told to do so by Hame Bozzam.

Haskell might make another attempt any time, for he was a tool of his enemy; though an important member of the organization that had preyed long on the country. Yet in seeking Haskell's death he felt no particular venom.

Haskell was the weapon through which Hame Bozzam struck when he wanted to strike in a legal way; he also was a barrier behind which Hame Bozzam might hide when the press of suspicion was directed too heavily against him. Therefore, if Gawne, in his determination to rid the vicinity of the Bozzam outfit, was to succeed, he must strike first at the sheriff.

Haskell did not have to stay in Bozzam City and be killed. If he hesitated to take his chance he could obey Gawne's instructions, and get out. Gawne was convinced that Haskell would go. And yet there was a chance that he would not. So when the sun began to swim low over the

peaks of the mountains in the northwest, Gawne left the front of the Palace and made his way slowly down the street.

He had an idea that if Haskell had decided not to leave town he would be found somewhere in the vicinity of the sheriff's office. Gawne walked in that direction, but when he got within a hundred feet of the building he saw two horses standing in an open space beside it.

He halted, glowering at the horses.

They belonged to Hame Bozzam and Kathleen Harkless!

Retreating, Gawne slipped around the corner of a building near him, making his way through a litter of back-yard refuse.

He came, after a time, to the rear door of the sheriff's office. It was closed and he approached it cautiously, and leaned for an instant against it, listening. There was no window in the rear of the building, and Gawne suspected, if Haskell were still in town, he would be hidden somewhere in the office, waiting. Most likely, he would watch the front door the more carefully, since from there he could see the street.

A shadow fell at Gawne's feet, and he saw that the sun had set. Coldly, alertly, watching the corners of the buildings near him, he gently pushed on the door, discovering that it was not locked.

He drew his six-shooter, stepped to the door sill, lunged against the door, sending it crashing back, and he loomed in the opening, crouching, a vision of sinister aspect.

A figure in Haskell's chair gave a startled jump at sight of him, and a half-suppressed scream issued from its lips. Then the figure sat down again, very stiff and straight and scornful—chin held high; eyes cold and hostile and contemptuous.

But the voice had the very slightest tremor in it—as though her fright were not yet over. And her face was white, except in the cheeks, where two bright red spots were growing as she asked coldly:

"Were you trying to scare somebody?"

"Not you," declared Gawne shortly. "This is the last place I should expect to find Miss Harkless—unattended." It cheered him to see her writhe under the cold blame in his voice.

"I go where I please," she stated stiffly; "and with whom I please."

She turned her back to him and appeared to gaze stonily out of the window, but in reality she was shivering inwardly, and her eyes were filled with a haunting terror, for she thought he was seeking Hame Bozzam, to kill him. He was entirely capable of doing that, she knew.

"Have you seen Reb Haskell?" came Gawne's voice, behind her.

She had decided she would not speak again, but so great was her relief at discovering that he was not looking for Hame Bozzam that her voice seemed to leap in answer:

"There is a note for you on the desk here."

When she heard him step toward the desk, when she felt him reach out to take the note—in an envelope—she clenched her hands and gritted her teeth in an attempt to keep back the thrill that ran over her. For his sleeve had brushed her arm.

And had there been no Blanche Le Claire—if she had not heard what she had heard, and seen what she had seen an hour or so before—she could not have resisted the wild, overpowering impulse that whitened her cheeks, blotting out the red spots. For she knew now that if Gawne was not for her, no other man could take the place she had reserved for him.

Hame Bozzam had attracted her; it was a superficial fascination that could not endure through closer acquaintance. She had suspected that; she knew it now. She hated the man at this instant; hated him because, in harboring Blanche Le Claire—even if there had been nothing between them—he had made it possible for the woman to follow Gawne to the Diamond Bar.

She hated him for his pretensions; his self-sufficient attitude; his air of proprietorship over her; because he was Hame Bozzam; because she had heard that Gawne hated him.

She was in a fury of desperate rage over her hatred—and over her inability to forgive Gawne for his relations with the Le Claire woman—when she saw Hame Boz-

zam step into the office. He had gone into a store to make some purchases, telling her he would join her in the sheriff's office.

He was well inside before he caught sight of Gawne. Then, watching him closely, Kathleen saw his face blanch, noted the quick glint of terror that came into his eyes as he saw Gawne's heavy pistol in hand.

The significance of his emotion smote the girl with a cold, clear understanding that left her feeling clammy.

Hame Bozzam was afraid of Gawne.

What difference there was between them, what had caused their hatred for each other, she did not know. But Bozzam's fear was unmistakable; it lay, sheer and stark, in his eyes, in the involuntary cringing of his muscles, in his loose lips that seemed ready to pout. She watched, breathless, looking from one to the other.

Gawne was smiling now; the girl saw his hate as clearly as she saw Bozzam's. Yet there was something else in it—rage, deep and bitter. She saw, too, that Gawne was aware of Bozzam's terror; she saw the contempt in Gawne's eyes; the derisive curl of his lips as they wreathed into a cold smile.

Yet he waited for Bozzam to speak; the girl could see the sardonic amusement that lurked deep in his eyes as he watched Bozzam's lips, twitching curiously.

Where, now, was that confidence—big, brave, and bold—that radiated from the man when he was in the presence of women?

She watched him with a half breathless wonder. For the man who confronted Jefferson Gawne at this moment was not the man she had known—the man with the great, vibrant voice and all-conquering air. This man was a pale, shrinking craven—a human bubble, pricked by the sharp eye of man-hate and courage—shriveling to a husk of miserable aspect.

Some women might not have seen what Kathleen saw. For Bozzam made some pretense of courage. He straightened and squared his shoulders. But the girl, who had seen Gawne in a crisis, had a standard to measure Bozzam by; she had seen other men in moments of peril; and her clear,

probing eyes took no note of his pose—she looked through his eyes and into his soul and saw the shriveled manhood of him.

When he spoke there was a trace of the old strength in his voice; but to the girl it had ceased to be strength; it was now merely bombast. He spoke to Gawne:

"I've just heard that you gave Haskell until sundown to leave town. You'd better be careful. You can carry this bluff too far. Haskell—"

"You taking Haskell's end of this?" said Gawne, his voice snapping.

Bozzam cleared his throat.

"Haskell is a friend of mine." He looked at Gawne's gun, which was still in his hand. "You're heeled," he said, and significantly patted the holster at his side, which yawned emptily.

"Conveniently left with some friend," jeered Gawne.

Bozzam's face flushed darkly.

"Ben Mosely is putting a new spring in it," he said.

A second six-shooter leaped into Gawne's hand—was extended toward Bozzam, stock first. Gawne's smile was coldly derisive.

The girl saw Bozzam change color. She got up and stood between the two men, her chin lifting as she looked at Gawne. For she could not let him know that her heart was singing in wild applause for him; she must not let him see that she cared.

"Shoot him—if you dare!" she said icily.

He smiled mockingly, his gaze hostile. "There is no danger, Miss Harkless. I am not a murderer. It isn't the first time that Hame Bozzam has backed out of a scrimmage. Our love for each other is an ancient passion," he said, laughing deeply—a sound that made the girl's pulses skip a beat. "It has grown so deep that shooting wouldn't satisfy it."

A certain gleam in his eyes brought a crimson flush to the girl's face, staining it to her temples. She knew what the gleam meant, for she had felt it many times since Blanche Le Claire had visited the Diamond Bar. She felt it even now—and wondered if he saw it.

Gawne was jealous. She knew now that

he suspected her of serious intentions toward Hame Bozzam. He must not be allowed to think that! For she had never considered Bozzam seriously, and not even to punish Gawne for his intimacy with Blanche Le Claire would she have him think that Hame Bozzam could ever be anything to her. It angered her to think of it, and she met his gaze fairly, her hands clenched, indignation flashing in her eyes.

"Jefferson Gawne—you are a fool!" she declared furiously. She walked past Bozzam, stepped down into the street, and sought her horse.

Bozzam trailed behind her, looking backward over his shoulder at Gawne, whom he could see, standing in the office, his hands resting on his hips, watching, his face wrinkled in a puzzled frown.

The girl paid no attention to Hame Bozzam as she rode out of town—toward the Harkless ranch. She might have forgotten Bozzam's existence. But when, after traveling three or four miles, Bozzam spurred alongside, he was made aware that she had not forgotten him.

She halted her horse and faced him, and her face was pale with wrath and scorn and contempt.

"Jefferson Gawne is a fool, and you are a coward!" she flung at Bozzam. "I never want to see either of you again! Don't you ever come to my house or speak to me again! If you do I'll shoot you!"

Bozzam laughed—with a ring of the old confidence and depth.

"No; you won't shoot me," he said. "You're just a little excited now—over what has happened. Look here, little girl!" He drove his horse against hers and showed her a six-shooter, suspended from the inside of his vest by a sling. "I had that all along. I could have killed Gawne at any time—"

"If you hadn't been afraid!" she jeered. "Don't touch me!" she warned, reaching for the small weapon she wore at her waist, as he tried to take one of her hands. "I know you—I saw you a while ago—just as you are! And I hate you!"

"You'll marry me, some day," he laughed.

But he was aware of her earnestness, and there was no mirth in his voice.

"Bah!" she cried in her disgust over the memory of the picture he had presented in the sheriff's office.

"Look here!"

Stung by her scorn—by the truth she had spoken concerning him—he urged his horse against hers, seizing her roughly by the hand.

She had tried to grasp the butt of the pistol, but his grip prevented. He was close to her; he had dropped the mask of bland politeness which he had worn all along in her presence, and his face was repulsive with the passion that lay exposed.

"Now we'll get to an understanding, girl! You think you know me, eh? Well, you don't half know me! I've wanted you from the day I saw a picture of you. I'm going to have you—understand? There'll be no playing with me. You don't like me, eh? Well, you like your father! You'll marry me to save him. I'll hang him, sure as hell, if you don't.

"Do you know what it was that Jess Cass said to you? He told you the truth! Your father is a cattle-thief! Haskell has the goods on him! I'll have him strung up so sure as my name is Bozzam—if you don't marry me!" He laughed harshly, enjoying the girl's horror; he felt her sway weakly in his grasp; and she looked at him with a new terror.

"I'm after Gawne, too, now," he went on vindictively. "I've run things in this country for a good many years—and I'm going to keep on running them. Do you know what Gawne was doing in the sheriff's office? He'd given Haskell until sundown to leave town, and he went to Haskell's office to kill him! You still love him—don't you?" he sneered. "Don't think I'm a fool. I saw the way you looked at him. But Blanche Le Claire has got him. That's what hurts you, eh? But Gawne's run his race in this here country. We're going to get him—right! There'll be no monkey business hereafter. It's war now—damn him!

"But first I take you! Understand that! To-night! I'm coming for you. I take you, or Haskell takes your dad!" He

crushed her against him, kissed her brutally, while she fought him ineffectively—and then suddenly released her, laughing mockingly, jerking the small pistol from her holster as he did so and throwing it far into a mesquite clump.

She rode away, swaying in the saddle, white and shaking, thrilling with terror over the intensity of the man's passion, realizing now for the first time the fierceness of the beast that she had unwittingly aroused; breathing incoherent prayers for her father and herself.

And as she rode she heard Bozzam's laugh in her ears—derisive and deep.

Back in the sheriff's office Gawne had opened Haskell's note:

I'm goin'. It's none of your damn business where. Mebbe it's far an' mebbe it ain't. But I'll git you some day.

REB HASKELL.

Standing in the doorway of the office, Gawne slowly tore the note to pieces. Lingered in his recollection was the sincerity of Kathleen's voice when she had told him that he was a fool.

He smiled with straight lips, thinking that, if she persisted in her friendship for Bozzam, she would one day discover that she might have reserved the epithet for herself.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GETAWAY.

BOZZAM'S brutal and explosive recital of her father's guilt had shocked Kathleen tremendously. Yet the ride homeward was a long one, and each mile that she placed between her and Hame Bozzam seemed to take her farther from the spell of his words and his sinister influence—seemed, indeed, to lessen the probability of the truth of his charge.

There was just a chance that he had been lying to her, hoping to frighten her into consenting to his designs; for by this time she could think of no other term that would correctly describe his desire to possess her.

She still had faith in her father; it was

incredible that he would have lied to her; that he would deliver her over to Bozzam, knowing him as she knew him. It must be that Bozzam had deceived her father as he had deceived her.

She gathered the crumbs of this consolation and feasted her hopes on them; but by the time she reached the ranch-house her fears had seized her again, and when she dismounted her knees shook with weakness.

She did not take the trappings off her horse, leaving him standing beside the porch, the reins trailing over his head. Darkness was replacing the twilight.

The house was deserted. She went from room to room, looking for her father, and, not finding him, she went out on the porch, sank into a chair and stared, white and nerveless, out over the big, dark level that stretched between the porch and the Diamond Bar ranch-house. She knew she could never pass another day in this section of the country.

It seemed to be hours afterward before she dimly saw the colonel ride up to the corral gates and dismount. She waited, a growing whiteness on her face, for him to come in; and when he walked to the edge of the porch and stood, looking at her, a quick concern in his eyes, she got up and faced him.

"What's wrong, Kathie?" He took a few steps toward her, but halted and paled at the look she gave him. Her eyes were brilliant in the ghostly light.

"Father," she said, "I rode—part of the way—home with Hame Bozzam today. He wanted me to go to Bozzam City with him, and I did so. We met Jefferson Gawne there; he had ordered Reb Haskell to leave town, threatening to kill him if he didn't go. Bozzam seemed to be furious over it.

"He acted the part of a coward in Gawne's presence, and I told him he did. Then he demanded that I marry him. I refused, and he threatened. He repeated the story Jess Cass told me here one day. Father, have you lied to me about Hame Bozzam? Did Jess Cass speak the truth when he told me about you being a—about you working for Hame Bozzam?"

She watched the colonel, holding her breath, a haunting anxiety in her eyes. She saw the colonel's face grow ashen; saw his eyes bulge and glint with some deep emotion. Then he let his chin fall to his chest and stood there, drooping, his shoulders sagging—a picture of guilt.

She caught her breath with a quick gasp; stood rigid for an instant, looking at her father with an expression of mingled regret, pity and contempt, then turned noiselessly and went into the house.

When the colonel went in, some time later, he heard her up-stairs, walking rapidly back and forth. He waited and listened for a long time, and then tiptoed to the head of the stairs and stood there watching her. She was packing her belongings into a trunk and traveling-bag. She gave no sign of seeing the colonel until he cleared his throat. Then she stood erect and looked at him, her face white in the lamplight.

"W-what are you doing, Kathie?"

"I am going away. Do you think I could stay here any longer after what has happened?"

"Don't, Kathie! You are all I've got! What would I do if you left me?" He shivered. "Hame Bozzam will kill me—sure—if you go!"

She realized now that in her rage and disappointment she had given no thought to her father's future, and swift remorse seized her. He seemed to be utterly broken—a gray, bent figure, old and absurdly futile. She ran to him with a cry of torturing self-accusation, throwing her arms around him and telling him that he should go with her—that both should escape Hame Bozzam's vicious influence.

His eyes brightened at this; and he blurted out the story of his weaknesses to her—she patting his head and smoothing his cheeks and telling him not to "mind."

But later, after they had packed the things they had decided to take with them, his moral courage failed again.

"Father," she said, holding him close and whispering to him, "was it all true—what you said about Jeff Gawne and the Le Claire woman?"

"Yes, Kathie." He could not bear to have her blame him further. She drew her

breath sharply, for she had cherished a hope, in spite of what she had seen in Bozzam City, in the doorway, when she and Hame Bozzam had been riding toward Haskell's office.

She did not speak again of Gawne or Bozzam. Some low, toneless words she addressed to the colonel, regarding the effects they had packed. The colonel told her he would find some one in Bozzam City to send for her trunk, and it would follow them by stage; and they stood for some time on the porch.

Then, as an early moon thrust a pallid rim above the peaks of some distant mountains, they mounted their horses and rode toward Bozzam City.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"DIFFERENT ARRANGEMENTS."

GAWNE'S determination to purge the country of Hame Bozzam and his outfit was not founded entirely on the high principle of service to the common moral conscience. Retributive impulses spring from personal animosities.

Gawne did not delude himself. When he stepped down from the door of the sheriff's office into the deepening twilight of Bozzam City's street he knew that consideration for the town's welfare was overwhelmed by the strength of his personal hatred for Hame Bozzam.

He would have liked to believe that Hame Bozzam's success with Kathleen Harkless had nothing to do with his bitterness against the man, but the vindictive joy he felt over the probable effect on Kathleen of the big man's banishment was not to be overlooked.

But there was a limit to his ability. He could not, single-handed, hope to accomplish Hame Bozzam's overthrow. To the best of his knowledge there were still seventeen men in the Bozzam outfit, hardened characters recruited from various sections of the country, upon whom Bozzam could depend.

There were men in Bozzam City who, like Gawne, had long yearned for Hame Bozzam's downfall. Gawne knew them,

and it had been to them that he had gone after he had forced Haskell's resignation. Haskell legally gone, Bozzam City had no representation in law.

The law was in Las Vegas, and could not be summoned that night. So long as Haskell reigned as a regularly recognized official of the county, Bozzam City was powerless to initiate any reform that did not meet the sheriff's approval.

But with Haskell's resignation, and in the absence of his successor, there arose the necessity for protective organization. Therefore, during Gawne's absence in the sheriff's office a vigilance committee was formed, composed of eager men who respected the law and had the courage to fight for it.

By the time Gawne emerged from the sheriff's office there were twenty men, armed with rifles, grouped in front of the Palace, waiting for him. Among them were some of the town's merchants; ranch owners who had suffered through the depredations of Bozzam's outfit; and cow-punchers whose love for a "square deal" they were willing to prove. But Gawne had not depended upon the chance of organizing a vigilance committee. There had existed the possibility of him not finding men in town who would sympathize with his design; and when leaving the Diamond Bar that morning he had left a brief note for Billings. When he walked toward the group of men in front of the Palace he saw the Diamond Bar outfit, headed by its foreman, skimming toward Bozzam City in a dust cloud, their horses in a dead run.

For once, there were no sounds of revelry by night in Bozzam City. The imminence of organized violence had cast a spell of awe over the town. With the coming of darkness a sepulchral silence filled the street, broken only by the voices of the members of the committee.

Gawne had tried to keep the real purpose of his visit to town a secret, and he had told only those men whom he felt he could trust. But two of Bozzam's men had been in town all day. They had used their eyes and their ears, and their lurid imaginations had supplied reasons for the significant silences that greeted their presence near any group of men that formed.

They waited impatiently for the night to come, and under cover of the shadows they mounted their horses and slipped out of town, riding helter-skelter toward the Bozzam ranch-house.

The cavalcade that wound a serpentine way over the plains toward the Bozzam ranch was ominously noiseless. A less determined company would have chattered its enthusiasm, one man to reassure another—every man to convince himself of his courage.

Whatever communication was held between the members of this band was carried on in whispers. Yet had they known that the two Bozzam men had already apprised their fellows of the coming of the vigilance committee they need not have been so careful.

For in the Bozzam bunk-house the Bozzam outfit, getting ready for a night raid on a distant ranch, was grimly preparing to receive the Bozzam City deputation.

There was little talk in the bunk-house, though the men were leaderless. Hame Bozzam had ridden away an hour or so before, taking Nigger Paisley with him; Jess Cass, the foreman, upon whom fell the mantle of leadership during Hame Bozzam's absence, had not come in, though the two Bozzam men had reported that he had been released from the jail; and among the men was a feeling of panicky indecision.

The men of the outfit, though, were self-reliant and cool. There was much hurry and turmoil in the bunk-house. Rifles were loaded, pistols examined, belts were laden with bristling cartridges; outside in the corral men and horses were in a swirl of action. Amid the confusion there was definite aim and sure accomplishment and in a brief time the turmoil ceased, lights were put out, and a silence, quite as ominous as that which surrounded the Bozzam City men, reigned in the vicinity of the Bozzam bunk-house.

It was Ted Lowery, a keen-visaged man of the Bozzam outfit, who first glimpsed the Bozzam City men as they reached the timber grove beyond the big level on the other side of the ranch-house.

The seventeen Bozzam men, grouped in the shadows near the bunk-house door, heard Lowery draw his breath sharply.

"There's a bunch of them," he said. "Twenty-five, mebbe. It's a clean-up!" he cursed profanely.

While the other men peered intently toward the timber grove, where in the moonlight they could discern a number of horsemen massed, as though they were conferring before making the attack they meditated, Lowery sought out the two men who had brought the news from town.

He gazed suspiciously at the taller of the two, a dark man with a set cynicism in the curve of his lips and a mocking, devil-may-care glint in his eyes.

This was Baldy Ferguson, whose recklessness and nonchalant disregard for the property rights of cattlemen typified the spirit of Bozzam's men more accurately than did Hame Bozzam himself. Hame Bozzam was a subtle worker; Baldy Ferguson was frankly a stealer and a killer.

"You say Bozzam was in town to-day?" demanded Lowery of this man. "You an' Lippy tumbles to what's goin' on, an' Bozzam fizzes it! It looks mighty suspicious! You say you couldn't tip Bozzam off? Why?"

Baldy grinned.

"Mebbe you've noticed lately that Hame's been sorta offish. In society, Hame is. I've never seen Hame more offisher than he was to-day. Couldn't git within ridin' distance of him. Twice, when he sees me bowin' an' scrapin' at him a mile an' a half down the street, he taps his gun significant an' tender, like he was yearnin' to use it, an' makes faces at me that'd scare a coyote from the warm carcass of a lost doggy.

"Hame was puttin' in a heap of his time rushin' the colonel's girl—which I don't blame him—an' I reckon he didn't want her to know I was travelin' in his class. I don't rush in promisc'us, rememberin' what Hame done to Cass."

"Well, he's got us into a hell of a scrape," growled Lowery.

"Women is the downfall of them that wants her," sagely observed Baldy unruffled. "Which I wish it was me instead

of Hame which was doin' the fallin'. You reckon we're a lot of childrun which can't take care of ourselves when our maw ain't around?" he giped at Lowery's back as the latter moved away. "Hame's gone a lovin', an' we stay to do the fightin', which shows that things ain't right in the world, seein' as the colonel's girl ought to have picked me or Lowery!"

"Shut your mouth," snapped Lowery.

"Which we'd all better be doin', and keepin' one eye on them vigilance fellers," advised Baldy, "for they're comin'!"

The vigilance committee had left the edge of the timber grove. Spreading, the horsemen rode rapidly toward the bunk-house until they were within perhaps a hundred yards of it. At that distance they halted and grouped again.

"Somebody's got mighty sharp eyes," muttered Baldy.

"Or ears," growled Lowery. "They heard you yappin'."

"Which my music they'll appreciate pronto," said Baldy lightly. A horseman had left the group and was riding forward. "Here's where I bust up a riddle," added Baldy. He settled himself and threw a rifle to his shoulder, covering the horseman deliberately, his cheek snug against the stock of the weapon. Lowery lunged against him and forced the muzzle downward.

"That's Gawne, you damned fool! Down him an' that gang will wipe us out complete!"

"You always was a far-seein' guy," giped Baldy. But he lowered the rifle.

Gawne rode within a dozen paces of the Bozzam men and pulled Meteor to a halt. He had held one hand up, the palm toward the Bozzam men, as an indication of the peacefulness of his intentions, and when he saw that the Bozzam men were to respect the sign, he dropped the hand, resting it on the pommel of the saddle.

The Bozzam men moved restlessly away from the shadows of the bunk-house, stepping out into the moonlight toward Gawne, for they were not eager to precipitate the fight which they knew was being carried to them.

It was not so with Baldy. He did not

change his position as Gawne approached, except to lean against a corner of the bunk-house, where he watched, with a smile of half-humorous contempt, the crowding of the other men around the visitor.

His gaze never left Gawne's face after the latter drew his horse to a halt, the contempt in his eyes grew more pronounced; the curve of his lips grew cruel and truculent.

"Is Hame Bozzam around, boys?"

It was Gawne who asked the question. The sound of his voice broke the tension that the men had been laboring under since the appearance of the Bozzam City men at the edge of the timber; there was a concerted shifting of bodies and a general relaxing of strained muscles. Lowery answered the question.

"Bozzam ain't home to company to-night," he said drawling. "We're the reception committee," he added. "We got word of your comin' from Baldy Ferguson an' Lippy Weiss."

"That saves me from explaining," said Gawne. "But I wanted to talk with Hame Bozzam. You say he isn't here?"

"I'm yappin' what I said previous," said Lowery.

"All right." Gawne's voice was abrupt and businesslike. "Cass isn't here, either?"

"Cass is scared to show himself since you turned him loose," laughed Lowery harshly.

"Who is next in authority?"

"I seem to be doin' the gassin'."

"Well," said Gawne, "here's the situation. I'm not going to quibble. You know what has been going on and you know that Bozzam City knows it, and knows who has been doing it. Bozzam City has been ready to end its acquaintance with the Bozzam outfit all along. The opportunity didn't come until to-day, when Reb Haskell resigned.

"A town like Bozzam City can't be without regularly recognized legal representation and so, when Haskell left us, some of the boys formed a vigilance committee. The committee has decided that Bozzam City can get along without the Bozzam outfit. Not being in a hurry, though, the committee"—and here Gawne grinned

slightly, coldly and sarcastically—"has decided to give you boys plenty of time to get out of the country."

"How long?" asked Lowery slowly.

"An hour," said Gawne steadily.

The bodies of the men in the group stiffened again. Looking from one to the other, Gawne saw the faces of the men harden and grow bitter with hatred. He did not attempt to add anything to what he had just said, desiring to give them time to fight down the retaliatory impulse he knew they must feel, which might take the shape of violence.

A shot now, a single hostile movement, and there would follow a maelstrom of murder that would set the country a tingle with the story of it.

A word or a look on his part might precipitate it, and he was careful to keep his gaze, as it roved from one man to another, impersonal and expressionless.

He saw tense, grim malevolence on the faces that were turned to his; he saw personal blame and hatred in some glances; cold appraisal in others; he knew some of the men were wondering what success would attend a quick pull and a snap shot.

They took a long time for consideration of his ultimatum; and not a word was spoken. Yet by that mental telepathy which is sometimes more eloquent than words, the men had communicated to their spokesman the result of their deliberations.

Lowery scanned every face in the group. All were grimly grave with the exception of Baldy's. That saturnine individual, silent and apart, was still leaning against the corner of the bunk-house, his face still wore its expression of humorous contempt. Over Lowery's face a shadow flitted as he looked at Baldy.

Catching Lowery's glance, Gawne looked furtively at Baldy, and his lips straightened. Baldy intended to dissent from the popular decision. And when Lowery finally spoke, Gawne turned to him, but out of the corners of his eyes he watched Baldy.

"An hour ain't such a long time," finally said Lowery.

"You're ready to move now," smiled Gawne. "But we'll stretch it half an hour. We've no wish to be hard on you."

"Well," said Lowery, "we ain't tied to Hame Bozzam, I reckon. An' Bozzam City ain't the only town in the country!"

It was plain that he was trying to strengthen the impulse of passivity that he saw reflected on the faces of the men by deprecating Bozzam City he was preparing them for complete surrender to the edict of the vigilance committee.

But there came a discordant interruption.

"Bozzam City's good enough for me," drawled Baldy from the bunk-house.

"Yes, good enough for you, but Bozzam City's getting mighty particular."

Gawne spoke just in time. In the odd silence that had followed Baldy's words, Gawne had noted a return of the tension that had gripped the men previously. At his words a man, quicker of perception than his fellows, snickered. A ripple of other snickers followed. Baldy's attempt to sway the sentiment of the men had failed.

"Not overparticular, I reckon," he sneered. "Bozzam City stands for you!"

Gawne grinned coldly. He had not wanted to force a fight. He would have preferred to have the men leave peaceably.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

They would have accepted the inevitable, but Baldy was determined to force a fight.

Gawne's eyes began to smolder with the cold fire that had shriveled the courage of more than one man of the Bozzam outfit—the luminous reflection of wanton passions, which, coupled with the lazy carelessness of his attitude, had earned him the sobriquet, "Riddle." His gaze was sweeping the entire crowd; but to many it seemed his eyes never left Baldy.

"You don't like to travel, is that it, Baldy?" said Gawne.

"I ain't lettin' you tell me when!"

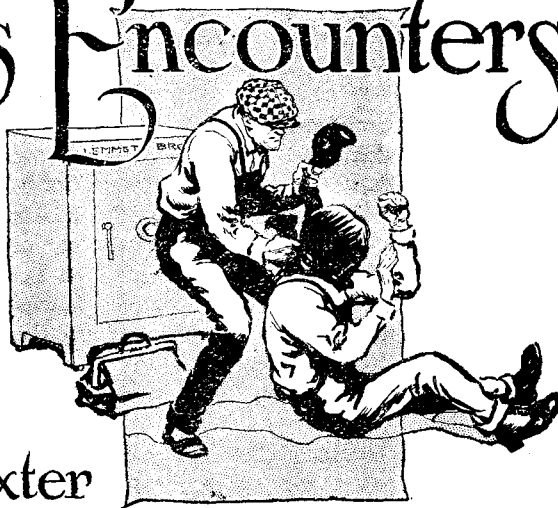
"Well," said Gawne gently, "the others have agreed to go within an hour and a half; but since you object, we'll make a different arrangement for you."

"I reckoned you would," said Baldy, a note of satirical triumph in his voice. "There ain't no damned vigilance committee makin' me pull my freight!"

"Yes, different arrangements," said Gawne, still more gently, his voice cutting off mutterings that arose here and there among the men. "We've given the others an hour and a half. You'll go now!"

Mr. Bilks Encounters the Colors

by Hugh Pendexter



WILLIAM BILKS, who answered more quickly if addressed as "Slinky Bill," halted at the corner and deposited his box of tools on the curb. He was attired as a workman and

felt secure from any prying gaze. A policeman swung jauntily by, and took it for granted he was waiting for a car. But although Mr. Bilks frequently leaned from the curb to scrutinize the string of cars