

Load Your Guns — Dig Your Graves!

Copyright 1934 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Maverick Men"

By Walt Coburn

CHAPTER ONE

The Forty-Rod War

IT WAS whiskey talk that started the cattle war in Bear Paw Valley—for if Bill Patterson hadn't been more than half drunk he would never have told the customers in the Maverick Saloon that he

aimed to run Jay Cross out of Montana.

That was fight talk, and there are always plenty of tongues to spread that sort of thing. It was up to Bill Patterson to back up his talk or be called a coward.

In downtown saloons, ranch bunkhouses and distant line-camps the word was whispered: "Bill Patterson an' Jay Cross are goin' to shoot out their grudge. An' when they do—God help Bear Paw Valley!"



As Bill raised the white flag a big, black gelding broke out of the clearing, a bloodstained burden across its back. . . .

Smashing Range-War Saga

111

Bill Patterson, like as not, regretted his bragging after he got back to his ranch and sobered up. He had a nice little outfit started there at the lower end of the valley. Prices had been good, and his beef had netted him plenty. He'd had a fair calf crop. It had been a good summer and he had put up all the hay he could use. Now if he got into gun trouble, it might cost him everything he had made. Or Jay Cross might even kill him, though Jay wasn't very fast with a gun—not anywhere near the shot that Bill was.

Anyhow the talk had been made and Bear Paw Valley began to wonder what would come of it. Bets were being made even before word of Bill Patterson's fight talk reached the J Cross ranch at the upper end of the valley. And by the time Jay got the news, ranchers in the valley were beginning to take sides.

Bill Patterson was a big man, hard muscled, with a square face and a wide mouth that grinned a lot. His eyes were gray and his hair black. He was one of the best bronc riders in the country, and while not exactly loud mouthed, Bill Patterson certainly didn't hide his light beneath any bushel. A bragger, some said—yet when he bragged, he had a habit of making good his boast.

Jay Cross, owner of the J Cross iron and a good-sized outfit, was the exact opposite of Patterson. Tall, rawboned, soft spoken, with hair the color of new rope and puckered blue eyes, his features were large and rough hewn. A natural born cowman, Jay, and to watch him rope was a treat.

Up until a year or more before, these two, Bill Patterson and Jay Cross, had been friendly enough. They'd made the big cowboy contests together—Calgary, Prescott, Chayenne, Pendleton. Each had made money at the contests. Then last year they had gone together to the Prescott Frontier Days, and returned separately. Back in town, when they met, they

kept apart. That fall they did not exchange reps. They built a drift fence, separating the two ranges. Bill Patterson gathered J Cross cattle and shoved them over on their home range; Jay Cross did likewise with all the Lazy P stuff he gathered.

Neither of them had ever given the reason for this estrangement and Bear Paw Valley did not ask questions. Something in the attitude of the two men forbade it. But there were any number of stories and rumors that you could take or leave. Some said the trouble was over something that had happened at the Prescott Frontier Days contest. Another story was that Jay's foreman had written him saying that there was some queer branding going on over at the Lazy P ranch. The women of the valley said the two cowmen had fallen out over a girl. You could take your choice.

Jay took the news of Bill's threat with a quiet nod, and said nothing. But the J Cross cook, in town for grub a week or two later, told the bartender at the Maverick that Jay had started packing a gun.

A FEW drifting cowpunchers, strangers here in the valley, began to show up around town. They were hunting work. Which outfit, they wanted to know, paid the better wages, the Lazy P or the J Cross? Which outfit was the bigger of the two? And they asked guarded questions about this cattle war that was brewing. Then, one morning at daybreak, they saddled their horses, rode out of town and did not return.

Bear Paw had new food for talk. Those men were no common hands. They had all the earmarks of imported gunmen.

A feeling of uneasiness spread throughout the valley. The ranchers eyed one another with suspicion. Which side would this or that rancher be on?

Thus matters stood when the three Lawton boys and their uncle rode into

town from their ranch on the other side of the valley. They owned the Box X outfit and ran cattle over into three counties. Once in a great while one of them would show up in Bear Paw.

Old Seth Lawton, grizzled, shabby, always in need of a shave and clean clothes, was worth more than a million, some claimed. But he never wore anything but an old flannel shirt, overalls, rusty boots and a battered hat. A leathery little old man was Seth, with bowed legs, and a pair of hard blue eyes set under shaggy white brows that met above his battered nose. His mustache was ragged, tobacco stained, its drooping ends chewed unevenly. He walked with a limp, and his left hand was knife scarred, shriveled shut.

There was a story that when he had brought his first big herd into Montana, he had left the real owner of the cattle back yonder in an unmarked grave along the Chisholm Trail.

The story was never proved. Nobody had ever claimed the cattle that were branded with Seth Lawton's Box X iron. But from that herd he had built up his outfit. He had never gone back down the trail. Probably, if that story concerning him contained much truth, Seth had ample reason for never returning to the Southwest cattle country.

Then his three nephews had showed up. They were unlike in some ways, identical in other ways. They, too, had come up the trail, three boys just at the end of their teens. Now they were grown men.

Lon was the oldest, tall, black haired, black eyed, hawk beaked, with a long white scar across his jaw. His mouth was as thin lipped as that of his uncle.

Macy Lawton was only a couple of inches over five feet tall. His hair was sand colored, thin, his features sharp, his pale eyes crafty. Quick as a cat and afraid of no man, dangerous as a sidewinder.

Duke, the youngest of the three, was

a well-built young cowboy of medium height. Unlike the others, he liked to dress up. He wore fancy boots and shirts and pants with buckskin seats. His hats were the best Stetsons made. He was better natured than the others and would ride forty miles to a dance. He lacked the cow savvy of his brothers and uncle. He preferred town lights and a poker game or the squeak of a dance-hall fiddle.

In spite of his laughing hazel eyes, his ready grin, his happy-go-lucky ways and his peacock garb, he was said to be the most dangerous of the Lawton tribe in a rough-and-tumble fight or with that white-handled gun he carried in a fancy holster.

Women liked his polite manners and his flattering speeches. Some men hated him, but for the most part Duke Lawton was popular.

IN THE Maverick, the Lawtons ordered whiskey, and Duke called up everybody in the house to drink. Macy scowled up at him. Old Seth grunted and asked for a bigger glass. He filled it and drank alone, then walked toward the hallway that led to the private card rooms. He entered one of the rooms and closed the door behind him.

Lon and Macy followed him after a minute or two, their spurs jingling, guns low on their overalled thighs.

The more congenial Duke stayed at the bar, telling stories, joshing, buying drinks, a percentage girl on either side of him.

In the back room, Seth Lawton and the other two nephews talked in low tones to a cowboy who might have been recognized as one of those strangers who had come into the valley not so many weeks ago. The man had entered the room by a window that Seth had opened.

Half an hour later Seth Lawton, Lon and Macy came back into the saloon. They had a drink, then left town. And no man or woman in Bear Paw knew the reason for their brief visit.

The proprietor of the Maverick puzzled a little over the fact that the back room window screen had been cut away and a man's bootprints showed in the dirt outside. Somebody had entered and departed through that window.

Bear Paw boasted no newspaper, but all the range news and town gossip was on tap at the Maverick. And in the telling of such news, nothing of the story was lost in its repetition.

The big, genial proprietor loved his business. He was a large, florid, paunchy man with thick hands, jowls and a pair of twinkling eyes. He wore a toupe that lacked several shades of matching his real hair. His curled mustache was dyed yet another color. His red tie sported a diamond horseshoe stickpin.

He liked the talk, the drinks, the fights—all of it. Especially the conversations across the bar. He spoke with a German accent and was known in the valley and beyond as Dutch Louie. He also owned the restaurant next door, and it was said of him that he had never refused a broke man a meal or a few drinks if he needed them. He was a man without an enemy. Yet he was to play his part in the war that was brewing.

THE LAWTONS left Bear Paw Valley without visiting either the Lazy P or the J Cross ranches. But both Bill Patterson and Jay Cross got word that old Seth and his nephews had been in the valley.

"And for no good, bet on that," Jay Cross said when he got the news. "They're snakes."

Bill Patterson grinned when one of his cowboys told him that the Lawtons had passed by without stopping.

"Just as well they didn't. They belong up there in the mountains and yonder side of the mountains." Then he added, "It ain't like that outfit to make a ride just for exercise. They got some kind

o' dirty, sidwinding game to play."

But neither Bill Patterson nor Jay Cross had time right now to bother about the Lawtons. They were preparing for the fall roundup. There was plenty to do: Mess wagon and bed wagon to get ready. Harness to mend and oil. The remuda fetched in and strings of horses allotted to the cowboys. For the time being the war talk all but died down.

Then a rancher named Jake Burns, whose place was not far from the J Cross home ranch, was arrested, accused of butchering a Lazy P steer. The man had a wife and three youngsters and a good reputation. Jay Cross rode into Bear Paw and made arrangements with Dutch Louie to go the man's bail.

"It's a frameup of some kind, Louie. Jake Burns is honest. I'm backin' him."

"Yah, Jay. I fix bail mit the county attorney. Mit der roundup on your hands you got vorries enough. I fix it, Jay." He pronounced it "Yay."

Bear Paw had no court. Only a constable and a Justice of the Peace, whose authority was limited to minor offences. So Dutch Louie's check was posted as bail, there at the county seat. Bill Patterson's attorney, representing the Lazy P, did not fail to note the presence of the rotund Dutch Louie there in the court room.

"I'm acting for my friend, Jay Cross, who iss too busy mit roundups to come personal."

Jake Burns was released, pending his trial. Before he left town, however, he found one of the Lazy P cowboys who had testified that he and another cowboy had watched the butchering through field glasses.

"I butchered a beef, mister," Burns told the cowboy, "but it wore my brand. Somebody switched hides durin' the night, hanging a green Lazy P hide on my corral along where I had the meat hung. I'm warnin' you both that if ever I sight you

on my land. I'll run yuh off like I'd run a pair of coyotes. You kin tell Bill Patterson, when you go back, that what I said goes for every Lazy P man, including himself."

SO MORE fuel was added to the smoldering fire. Word was carried back to the Lazy P ranch by the two cowboys. Bill Patterson grinned unpleasantly.

"I'll send him to the pen where he belongs, unless somethin' happens to him meanwhile."

"Dutch Louie went his bail. Said he was actin' for Jay Cross, his good friend."

That brought a flush of anger to Bill Patterson's blunt featured face.

"That big sauerkraut eater," he growled, "had better keep his damned nose out of my business or he'll wish he'd never set foot in Bear Paw Valley. He talks too much. It ain't healthy."

Because range gossip spreads like a prairie fire, it reached the ears of Dutch Louie. Never, in all the years he had run a saloon and restaurant there at Bear Paw, had he ever been so threatened. It was as if Bill Patterson had hit him in the face. It worried him so that he could not enjoy his supper and his beer tasted flat in his mouth. He wanted no part in any war. He had just done a favor for Jay Cross. He would have done a like favor for Bill Patterson or any man he knew. Dutch Louie lost sleep over it. Even the bits of news he heard across the bar lacked flavor. It was hard to laugh and talk when a man who was a friend to all mankind is talked about that way.

Nervously he paced the floor behind the bar and polished already spotless glasses until sunrise. Save for the snoring swamper in a far corner, the saloon had been empty since one of two in the morning. He polished his beloved stickpin, which he had bought years before back in his little saloon in Milwaukee, from a down-at-the-heels race track man who had

PAL HOLLOW GROUND

Your Best Blade Buy!

Shaves you better • Costs you less
PROVE IT YOURSELF AT OUR EXPENSE

Buy a package of PALS. Use as many as you wish. If you don't agree they're your best blade buy... more shaves, better shaves, at lowest cost... return the dispenser to us for full refund. (If your dealer can't supply you, send us his name and address. Order type blades wanted and enclose payment. We'll reimburse dealer.)



PAL
Hollow
Ground like
a barber's
razor



Usual
Blade—
ground like
a jackknife

© Pal Blade Co., Inc., Dept. P-4, 43 W. 57 St., N. Y. 19

Fit your injector razor perfectly

PAL INJECTOR BLADES
20 for 59¢
10 for 39¢ • 6 for 25¢
(Trial Size)

Double Edge

PAL DOUBLE & SINGLE EDGE
in ZIPAK® dispenser
44 for 98¢
21 for 49¢ • 10 for 25¢

Single Edge

PAL single or double edge in regular packing, 4 for 10¢

never returned to reclaim it. Somehow, the diamonds, for they were real diamonds, seemed to have lost their beautiful luster. For the first time in his memory Dutch Louie had made an enemy.

He looked ill as he turned the saloon over to the swamper in the morning and went into the restaurant to cook himself German pancakes with jelly.

He was trying to eat there, at his private table in the rear, when a cowboy strode in.

"Where's the John Law around here?" he asked Dutch Louie.

"The constable?"

"He'll do. There's a cowboy bin killed there at the drift fence between the Lazy P and the J Cross ranch. One of the Lazy P men, I reckon. His horse wore that iron. I didn't find anybody at the Lazy P but the cook and barn man and a ranch hand or two. Everybody's out on the roundup. So I came on to town."

Dutch Louie left his unfinished breakfast. Outside, he pointed out the constable's house, down the street. The cowboy swung himself into the saddle and rode down the street. Dutch Louie noticed that the sweat-marked, leg-weary horse wore Seth Lawton's Box X brand.

Back in the saloon, Dutch Louie poured himself two drinks of kummel. A Lazy P man dead! What next?

CHAPTER TWO

Gathering War Clouds

BILL PATTERSON had to leave his roundup to one of his top hands and go to town to identify the dead man.

Yes, he recognized him. He had hired him a while back when the man asked for a job. He was on the books as Ed Brown. That was all he knew about him. He had sent Brown and another man out to hunt some horses the nighthawk had spilled the night before.

The man who had ridden with Brown testified that they had split up right after they left camp just about daybreak. He had located the horses a few hours later and fetched them to camp. The last he had seen of Ed Brown was when they had split up.

The dead man, it seemed, had put up a fight. There were three empty shells in his six-shooter. He had been shot, not once, but three times. The coroner testified that any of the three wounds might have proved fatal. The sign at the scene of the killing showed that the killer had been on the J Cross side of the gateless drift fence.

"The sheriff's office will make a thorough examination," said the district attorney. "Rest assured of that, Mr. Patterson. Have you any suspicion who might have done the killing?"

Bill Patterson's lips tightened and his eyes narrowed a little. He got to his feet without saying a word leaving the D. A. sitting at his desk, a confused, half-angry look on his face.

Bill Patterson rode back to his roundup camp and told his men about it.

"Havin' Jay Cross arrested, Bill?" asked one of the cowboys who, with Brown and two other men, had come into the valley a few months ago and hired out to the Lazy P.

"No. Even if there was evidence enough to hang him, I wouldn't go to the law with it. When you and Brown and a couple more boys hired out to me you said you could earn fightin' wages. I reckon that about covers the question."

The man nodded. "It shore does, mister. Ed Brown was a good friend of mine. I'd like to meet the gent that killed him. Think it was Jay Cross?"

"No. Jay Cross was at his roundup camp when the killin' was done."

"Plumb sure of that?" asked Seth Lawton's Box X rep who had found Brown's body.

"That's what his men claim. Why?"

"When I testified at that coroner's inquest, I didn't tell all I knowed. See this spur with the busted strap? I found it there along the fence. There's a J Cross brand on the concho and on the silver mounting on the spur."

Bill Patterson examined the spur and its broken strap. He had seen that spur many times. It belonged to Jay Cross.

"You found it there along the fence? Which side?"

"The J Cross side. Where we found sign showin' that a man had been there in the brush waitin' long enough to smoke half a dozen cigarettes."

"Why did you hide out this spur?"

"It would take more than the spur to make a law case against Jay Cross. But I reckon it's enough proof for Bill Patterson, ain't that right?"

"I'll keep the spur," Bill Patterson said, and walked with it in his hand to the mess tent where he kept his bedroll.

THE THREE MEN who, with the dead Ed Brown, had hired out to him as tough hands, wanted action. They all said so. They declared that they were more than willing to start war with the J Cross outfit. But right now, Bill knew, was no time to start fighting. For the next month or two there was work to be done. Beef to gather and ship, hay to put up, sheds to repair, poor stuff to gather and drift to the winter range.

He put the spur and its broken strap in his canvas warsack, tied the sack and put it back in his tarp-covered bed, which he rolled up again and tied with its bed rope. Then he walked over to the bed tent where the cowboys were listening to the Box X rep retell his story. The dead man's partners added a word here and there, lauding the character and bravery of the dead man. The Lazy P men were impressed. Every man of them packed a gun.

"I got a few words to say, boys," said Bill Patterson, rolling a cigarette. "When the sign is right," he said, weighing his words, "I'll tell you what to do. But until I give you orders, keep out of trouble. We got work to do and plenty of it."

"What about Ed Brown?" asked one of the dead man's partners. "Ed got killed fightin' for the outfit. You ain't forgettin' that, mister?"

"I ain't forgettin' that, cowboy. But you're sort of forgettin' that I'm ramrod-din' this outfit and givin' the orders. When I need any advice from you or any other man I hire, I'll turn my outfit over to him and buy me a sheep hook. You're a stranger here in the valley. So are two three more of you gents. It's time you got wise to the fact that I own this outfit and I run it as I damn please. Whenever you or any man here can't take my orders, I'll fire him. You're paid to punch cows. You'll punch cows. Now is there any gent here that thinks he's too much of a top hand to take my orders?"

Bill Patterson's grin was wide, mirthless. He stood there in the doorway of the bed tent, his narrowed eyes watching every man. No man spoke.

"Well, how about it?" he challenged them. "Who wants his time?"

The cowboys looked at one another. Those of them who had worked several years for Bill grinned a little. This was the Bill Patterson they would fight for till hell froze over. They knew that if any man asked for his check, he would get a fight with it.

"Nobody wants it, then?" said Bill Patterson. "All right. Get this straight. I'll make a bunch quitter out of any man I ketch belly-achin' about anything. And I'm workin' you like you never worked before. Go ketch your night horses."

Bill Patterson walked back to the mess tent and poured himself a cup of coffee. He had declared himself plenty, and it might mean trouble. Those new men

were tough hands. They hadn't liked it.

As he sipped his coffee he kept thinking of that spur with its broken strap. Something queer about it being found there at the scene of the killing. Something not on the level about it. Jay Cross was the last man in the world to lay in wait for a man and kill him.

Another thing bothered Bill Patterson. Why hadn't the district attorney made mention of the fact that the dead Ed Brown was one of the witnesses against Jake Burns on that beef-butcherer charge? Brown had been killed within five miles of the Burns Ranch. That was a strong point. And the D. A. was not the man to overlook any point, weak or strong.

CHAPTER THREE

Left to Die

THE CONSTABLE of Bear Paw was little more than a figurehead, but he took his job with a seriousness that bordered on the comical. Bear Paw Valley had a habit of settling its own affairs without the aid of the law. Not that it was lawless, but until this dispute between Bill Patterson and Jay Cross, there had been but little trouble save for an occasional shooting scrape or rustling job. Therefore the valley had little need of a peace officer. It had been in a spirit of cowboy country fun that they'd put into office as constable Doc Dunning, local veterinary and owner of the feed and livery barn. In his sixties, always with a half-smoked cigar in his mouth, always smelling of the stable, horse liniment and whiskey, Doc Dunning was a short, thick little man with watery eyes and a love for pinochle—a loved shared by Dutch Louie.

Because the roundup season was in full swing, the town was all but deserted. Dutch Louie and Doc, over their beer and pinochle, discussed the trouble that was

threatening the peace of the entire valley. That shining, nickel-plated star of which he was so proud now seemed nothing less than a curse to the little horse doctor. Some cowboy with a sense of humor, perhaps it was Bill Patterson, had sent Doc a pearl-handled, intricately engraved six-shooter with a barrel seven and a half inches long. With the gun had come a letter of presentation signed simply, "Your friends in Bear Paw Valley."

It was an awkward weapon for the paunchy little Doc, but he had worn it with much pride these three or four years. He had never fired the gun. Doc disliked the recoil and would flinch when he pulled the trigger of even a .22. Now, however, he dreaded putting it on, and it was only when he took it off at night that he felt anywhere near at peace. His nights were filled with nightmares in which he was beset by gun fighters while he, paralyzed by fear, could not pull the beautiful pearl-handled six-shooter.

To Dutch Louie alone did he confide his fears. Dutch Louie had broken the ice when he whispered to Doc the warning sent him by Bill Patterson; and Doc, rheumy-eyed, his voice a husky whisper, would relate his terrible dreams and confide his fears. Their pinochle games lost flavor. They drank kummel with their beer because its potency gave them courage.

So stood matters when the cowboy called Ed Brown was found dead. Doc had driven out there in his buckboard, behind his team of fat bay horses that had only one gait besides a walk. That gait was a lazy, dust-scuffling trot. Doc suffered the agonies of death on that trip to the drift fence where the killing had occurred. He told Dutch Louie upon his return that he feared every mile of the road that he would get a bullet in his back.

Nor did it add to his peace of mind to learn the J Cross outfit would be making their first shipment next week. That

meant a town full of cowboys who took their fun in a boisterous manner. The Lazy P was shipping two days after the J Cross. If the two outfits tangled, there would be plenty of trouble.

"I got a mind to turn in my badge and gun, Louie," he groaned heavily.

"Turn 'em in to who, Doc? When a man takes office mit an oath to bind it solid, he iss stuck. *Jah*. Shuffle the cards while I bring more beer mit kummel. We need it."

Duke Lawton's arrival broke up the game. The youngest of the Lawton tribe was alone. He was dressed as usual in his fancy clothes and walked with his usual swagger. He grinned at the gloomy-looking pinochle players.

"Where's the corpse?" he laughed.

Doc winced. He was a little hard of hearing and the word *corpse* frightened him.

"Another killing?" he blurted huskily.

Duke laughed and shook his head. "Not that I know of, Doc. But I just got down from the mountains and ain't had time to look around much. Trot out the bottle, Louie, and we'll lift a few. I want a bottle to take along. What's new?"

He stayed only half an hour. Before he left he purchased some rolls of bandage and adhesive tape and iodine at the store. Dutch Louie, after all the years spent behind the bar, had learned how to study men. And he read an uneasiness beneath Lawton's rough banter.

He wondered why Duke had bought medical supplies. Also he noticed that Duke's eyes were bloodshot and that he looked drawn and gaunt. He spoke of this to Doc.

Doc nodded dismally and reached for his kummel. He had always feared and distrusted the Lawtons. He hated Duke for his barbed banter and rough humor.

"There was spots on his fancy pants, Louie. Might have been blood."

It was blood. The blood of a Box X

cowboy who lay wounded in a cave up on the Lawton range, in the roughest part. Not more than a mile from the cave was a carefully hidden grave that held the body of a nameless man. The Lawtons never carried their troubles to the law. There in their badlands country they took care of their own fights.

In the cave under a rimrock ledge Duke cared for the wounded cowboy who had been shot through the thigh. He fed the man whiskey, squeezed blood and dirt from the ugly wound, then washed the raw wound with straight iodine. The man lay there, wet with cold sweat, gritting his teeth. Duke's methods were crude but not lacking in skill.

DUKE washed the blood from his hands and bare arms, then rolled two cigarettes. He lighted them both and shoved one between the wounded man's lips.

"We'll hit for the ranch about dusk," he told the man.

"Gawd, Duke, let me go on out of the country! They'll git me, sure as hell!"

"I reckon not, feller, if you keep your mouth shut. That jasper asked for it and you gave him what he wanted."

"But he didn't ask for trouble, no more than Ed Brown wanted it. Them two dead 'uns has friends, kinfolks that'll take 'er up where they left off. Let me lay here till this laig gits better, then stake me to a fast horse. I tell you, Duke, I got a belly full of this game."

Duke's grin stiffened into a twisted line. His eyes were cruel now, yellowish in the light of the setting sun.

"Have it your own way, feller. Nobody will locate you here at the cave. You don't need to go to the ranch." Duke handed the man the bottle of whiskey, then went out of the cave. A few minutes later he was riding along a dim trail that twisted through the badlands.

Back there in the cave under the rimrock the wounded man took a pull at his

bottle. He heard Duke ride away, and suddenly he sat up, fear stamped in his bloodshot eyes. It had struck him, like a blow in the face, what Duke Lawton was doing. Duke was leaving him there in the cave, afoot, with only a bottle of whiskey and no food. His wounded leg would not bear his weight. It would tax the strength of a strong man to make it on foot to Bear Paw. Duke Lawton had left him here to die. Die like a wounded animal alone.

Sobbing, cursing, he dragged himself to the mouth of the cave, his six-shooter in his hand. But he was too late. Duke was lost to sight in the rough hills. The wounded man buried his bearded face in his arms, dry sobs shaking him. Then he crawled back to his bottle. Alone, death waiting to claim him, he sat with his back to the wall. He dreaded the thick blackness of the coming night when the wolves and coyotes would howl.

* * *

Jay Cross pawed through the contents of the jockey box on the mess wagon.

"What become of the spur I put in there?" he asked the cook.

"What spur, Jay?"

"I busted the strap on my spur about a week ago. I put it in the jockey box."

"Ain't seen it, as I recollect," grunted the old cook, busy with his batch of sour-dough bread. "A man's likely to find anything in that ketch-all. Cowboys has got the idee that a mess wagon jockey box is a place to pack everything but what belongs there."

"And you just naturally cleaned out everything that wasn't yours. That it?"

"I clean 'er out now and then," the crotchety old cook defended his rights. "Dang right I do. But I don't recollect no spurs."

Jay made another futile search, then gave it up. It would be like the old cook to throw away the spur along with all

manner of other stuff that was in his way. Roundup cooks are like kings in their palaces. They brook no interference, even from the man who pays them.

None of the cowboys remembered seeing the spur.

Loss of the spur annoyed Jay a lot. He'd had those spurs a long time. He would rather have lost a hundred dollars. He was almost tempted to fire the cook, but thought better of it. A first-class roundup cook is a mighty scarce specimen. Besides, he doubted if the cranky old rascal ever had cleaned out the jockey box on the wagon. That was just an excuse for the old son to belly-ache about something. Nope, no use firing him. There was too much work to do, and cowboys work better on good grub. The spur was gone. Where or how it had gotten out of the jockey box was a puzzle, for it didn't look as if any man would steal a spur that was etched with the J Cross brand.

Jay was not in any too good a humor as he saddled up the next morning before daybreak. For one thing, he was still irritated over the loss of the spur. And his temper wasn't helped any by the fact that he had to go on an unpleasant journey. The Box X rep had gotten into a tangle with a J Cross cowboy over something and there had been a fight. The Box X rep, temporarily laid up with a couple of broken ribs and a broken nose, had threaten to cut his string and go back to his ranch.

So Jay decided he would ride over to the Box X ranch and have it out, once and for all, with the Lawtons. There were far too many Box X cattle on the J Cross range. And Seth Lawton should, according to the unwritten law of the cattle country, get those cattle back on their own range. Seth should have at least two reps with the J Cross wagon to handle their cattle. That was what was taking Jay Cross over on the Box X range now. He left orders with his wagon boss to handle the

outfit till he returned, then he rode into the gray dawn.

THE BOX X range was familiar to Jay. He had ridden it many a time when he had repped for the outfit. That was how it happened that he knew the short cut across the badlands. That short cut would save him ten or fifteen miles, where miles were mostly up and down.

He was following a twisting trail up close to the rimrock when his horse shied suddenly. Instinctively, Jay reached for his gun. It might be a bear or a mountain lion. He urged his horse forward, cautiously. A turn in the trail and he pulled up short.

There, face twisted with pain, his hand gripping a six-shooter, a man was dragging himself across the rocks and brush, leaving a bloody trail behind him. He was hatless and his eyes were staring, blood-shot, glittering. He muttered something

thickly and cocked the gun in his hand.

Jay quit his horse with a leap that landed him on top of the man, whose gun roared. The bullet missed Jay's head by a matter of a few inches. Jay knocked the gun from his hand and pinned him down.

"Damn you, Duke!" snarled the man, his voice almost incoherent. "Leave a man die like a wolf in a trap! I'll kill you, by God, I will, Lawton. You can't get away—"

His voice choked in his throat and the feverish eyes closed. Jay relaxed his grip on the wounded man. . . .

* * *

It was dawn of a new day when Jay Cross rode into Bear Paw, holding a delirious, wounded man in his saddle. He pulled up at the constable's house next to the livery barn.

"Got a man that needs attention, Doc,"



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."



*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

WE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff . . . keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical, too!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
on CBS Wednesday nights:

VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

he told the little constable who appeared in nightshirt and hat, in the doorway. "Got an extra bed or a cot?"

"Straight back. I'll light a lamp, Jay. Is he dead?"

"No, but he will be unless we take care of him. I want some hot water and bandages and whatever you have along that line. And get this fixed hard in your mind, Doc. Nobody is to know he's here. See about getting a doctor from the county seat—and the sheriff. This man is under arrest for murder, but nobody is to know about it. Tell Dutch Louie to come over. But don't spill one word to anyone else. This is plumb important."

Still in his flannel nightshirt, still wearing his battered old hat that smelled of liniment and stable, the constable made a fire and put on the tea kettle. Muttering under his breath, his hands unsteady, he started for the front door.

"Better pull on your pants and boots, Doc," called Jay, smiling faintly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lawton Clan

IN THE old log house at the Box X ranch, Seth Lawton faced his three nephews. His puckered blue eyes blazed with anger and he shook his maimed fist at them as they sat around in the big old front room. It was a cold night and the big stove was cherry red. There was a littered desk, battered chairs of stuffed horsehair, log walls whitewashed, decorated by calendars. There was a big, well-filled gun rack over in one corner. It was raining and the boots of the Lawtons had left muddy tracks on the floor and Navajo rugs. Wet slickers, chaps and hats were lying on the floor near the door.

"You claim you left him there at the cave?" Seth Lawton snapped at Duke.

"With a bottle of whiskey and a bullet hole in his leg. He'll be dead in another

twenty-four hours. I tell you, he's as yellow as a coyote's belly."

"Why didn't you finish him?" Seth's voice was brittle.

"I figured," said Duke, smiling thinly, "that I'd let nature take its course."

"Supposin' somebody finds him?" growled Lon.

"Nobody will find him there."

"Looks to me," put in the undersized Macy, his voice harsh, "that you was too anxious to get over to that Injun camp and give them squaws an eyeful of your beauty. Leavin' that gent at the cave was plumb loco. No tellin' what'll come of it. He's got to be killed if he's turnin' quitter. If you ain't man enough to finish the job, why did you tackle it? You git paid enough for what you do."

"Swap them fancy duds for a pair of overalls," said Lon, pouring himself a drink, "and make a hand, just for once. He's got to be killed before he talks. Looks like Macy's job."

Macy Lawton twisted quickly in his chair. "My job, you big ox? What the hell's to keep you from finishin' what Duke didn't have the guts to do? It's time you took a stack of chips."

"Quit janglin', the three of yuh," snapped old Seth Lawton. "I'm tired listenin' to your chin music. Duke, go back and finish your job."

"Can't make 'er tonight in this storm. No horse could foller the trail. I'll tackle it, come daylight."

"See that you do. Macy, you take a string of horses and light out for the J Cross roundup. Rep with 'em till you hear from me. Lon, you take your horses and hightail it for the Lazy P wagon. Both of you keep your eyes open and your mouths shut. Duke will tend to his job, then drift into Bear Paw and play it from that end. I'll handle this part of it. You all know what to do when the time comes. I'm after Bear Paw Valley, and I'll git it or die a-tryin'. And damn your worth-

less hides, if you don't do your parts, I'll cut you all off without a dollar. Hear that?"

This was old Seth Lawton of the Box X talking now, in his rasping voice that cut like a jagged blade. No matter how tough Lon and Macy and Duke might be, old Seth was still the boss, and they'd take his orders as long as he lived.

"I got 'er made out, hear me, all three of you? Let one of you double-cross me and you'll hang for it. If I'm killed by any of you, the one that does the job will hang—because you'll be proved guilty, hear that? You all hate me. Each one of you hates the others. You're whelps of the Lawton breed, all of you.

"Your father was my brother. His name wasn't Lawton. Neither is mine. Neither is yours. I shot and killed your father because of a woman down in Mexico. I promised him when he died that I'd look after his brats. My money kept you from starvin'. You're all beholdin' to me for everything you got today. And you'll take my orders or I'll live to see you all hang. Git out. I'm a-goin' to bed."

Seth Lawton's three nephews looked at each other in silence. The old man drank from the bottle, his puckered eyes watching them. Duke was the first to quit his chair by the stove. He managed a grin, but his eyes, when they looked at old Seth, were yellow as the eyes of a cougar.

"Sweet dreams, Uncle Seth," he said. Then he hitched his gunbelt and walked to the door.

MACY stood up. He twisted a cigarette into shape and lit it. Then he helped himself to a drink from the bottle.

"I'll head for the J Cross wagon in the mornin'," he said simply, but there was a sinister something behind his few words. He followed Duke outside, leaving the door open behind him. The wind whipped the sleet and rain into the room.

Lon swung his lanky frame out of his chair. His thin-lipped mouth twitched at one corner.

"You want Bear Paw Valley almighty bad," he said, ignoring the gusts of rain and sleet that stung his back as he stood in the open doorway. "Well, I'll help you git it. You've talked a lot tonight. You put things almighty plain, anyhow. You was right when you said us boys hated one another. And you know that we don't waste any love on you. You've raised us to be tough. We can't none of us change our ways.

"We're out now to grab Bear Paw Valley from Jay Cross and Bill Patterson. You want that valley for summer range. You had Duke rib that split up between Jay Cross and Bill Patterson, there at the Prescott Frontier Days contest. Duke, the dude, with his fancy duds and his way with women. You didn't think I knowed, but I do. And I hate Duke all the more for what he done. Just like I hate you."

He waved his hand warningly at the old man by the glowing stove.

"Sit still and listen. I'm talkin' now and nothin' but a bullet kin stop me. You and Duke wasn't satisfied to pick on men. You had to jump on a woman. A girl that never done you any harm in her life. She never harmed anybody. She's too decent for that. She cared a lot for Jay Cross and likewise for Bill Patterson. She and her old gent had a string of relay ponies and they made the same rodeos with Jay and Bill. She did trick ropin' and ridin' and the three of 'em, along with her dad, sort of went around together to the evenin' carnivals and shows and so on. Jay Cross and Bill Patterson was neighbors in Bear Paw Valley. They had the whole valley, you might say. Best summer range a man could find in Montana. You wanted that range. You figured that if you could get Jay and Bill fightin' serious, they'd kill off one another and you could buy out both outfits. So you sends

purty Duke off to foller the rodeos. Duke ain't much of a rodeo contestant but he makes a flashy showin'. And he savvies how to fool women. He fooled that girl, all right, because she was too decent to see through him."

Macy paused, his thin lips wrinkling in a snarl.

"I don't know how Duke pulled the trick," he said a little thickly. "You hired him to do it and he did. And he's never told anybody how. But there at the Prescott show he somehow ribbed it so that it looked to Bill Patterson like her and Jay Cross had made a monkey out of him. Bill like to killed Jay that night in a hotel room. Duke had played his slick game on all of 'em. Jay Cross and Bill Patterson is enemies. The girl and her father, before they quit the rodeo game, told both Jay and Bill that they wouldn't be ketched on the same range with either of 'em. Her old man, a fine old feller, was goin' to kill Jay and Bill both, but his daughter kep' him from it. The old man died a few months ago. The girl runs their little spread in Arizona. She still thinks that Jay Cross and Bill Patterson are snakes. She don't know that Duke Lawton is the snake.

"That's what started the trouble there in the valley. And you're hirin' us to keep that trouble boilin'. You've made damn crooks of all three of us. You'd dance a jig on our graves. But each of us wants the Box X outfit when you've gone to hell where you belong. Each of us, me and Lon and Duke, will fight one another like so many wolves after you die, to see who gets the layout. And when you're burnin' in Hell I reckon you'll manage to laugh at us."

Macy caught his breath and his clenched hands relaxed a little. "I'll do my share of the dirty work," he growled, "but you can't make me like the job. I'm headin' for the Lazy P wagon in the mornin' and I know what to do."

He stepped out into the night, closing the door behind him.

Old Seth Lawton sat there in his battered rocking chair, sucking an evil-smelling old pipe that had gone out. His cold blue eyes stared at the closed door, at the melting sleet on the muddy rug. Then a twisted grin wrinkled his leathery face and he took a stiff drink from the bottle. He picked up the lamp and went into his bedroom.

The bedroom was littered with dirty clothes and old boots and hats and riding gear. Chaps, an old saddle, tapaderos, whang leather, all sorts of junk. His tarp-covered blankets were on the floor near a littered table. There was a small stove and a filled wood box. An ancient marble-topped washstand.

From the washstand drawer old Seth Lawton took the stained, faded picture of a girl in the dress of a Mexican dancer. For a long time he looked at it, then put it away. He smiled thinly to himself as he pulled off his boots and overalls. Still clad, save for those articles of clothing, he blew out the lamp and crawled between his blankets.

CHAPTER FIVE

Work for a Doctor

DUKE LAWTON was worried. He had found the cave empty. Some distance from the opening he had found the empty whiskey bottle, but not a trace of the wounded man he had left to die. And the storm had wiped out all sign. Duke spent all day hunting for the man, then returned to the Box X ranch.

"You finished the job?" snapped old Seth.

"I finished it," lied Duke, kicking off his chaps.

"Took you all day," the old cowman grunted. "I reckon you was over to that Injun camp a-girlin'. Well, you come by

your habits natural. Your dad was a dude like you, always after some hunk of purty calico. Sure you planted that son where nobody'll find his carcass?"

"Nobody'll locate his grave."

"Tomorrow I want you to pull out for town. Stay around Bear Paw till we git ready to take the valley. Do what ribbin' you can. The sooner Jay Cross and Bill Patterson lock horns, the sooner they'll kill one another off. Then we step in. Hang around the Maverick and see what you kin learn. Go light on the booze and keep out of trouble because you might be needed almost any time, and I want you to be ready to take on what trouble starts. Let me know if anything important comes up."

Glad to get away from the ranch, Duke welcomed the trip to town. The disappearance of that wounded gunman bothered him. The man knew too much to live. He knew enough to send the Lawtons, all of them, to the pen. And he knew of old Seth's plan to get Bear Paw Valley for a summer range. Duke cursed himself now for not having killed the man. Because the man had turned yellow, Duke had left him to die a slow, ugly death instead of killing him outright, as he now wished he had done.

Duke knew that the man could not have gotten away alone. Someone had found him. Who? He was still asking himself that question when he stabled his horse

that night at Bear Paw. Duke felt uneasy. His swagger was a little forced as he walked into the Maverick. Dutch Louie welcomed him uneasily.

The genial saloon man had ample cause to be uneasy. That wounded man Jay Cross had brought to Doc's house had talked a lot as he tossed in his delirium. His talk had been of killings and the Box X outfit. About being left to die like a trapped wolf. He had cursed the Lawtons, especially Duke. And now here was Duke in town. Did he know about that wounded man over at Doc's house?

"Been sick, Louie?" grinned Duke. "You look kinda peaked."

"My stomach vent against me, Duke."

"You got that scalp lock of yours on kinda jack-deuce," Duke chided him.

Dutch Louie adjusted his toupe and shoved the bar bottle towards Duke.

"That calls for vun on the house, Duke." Dutch Louie's laugh sounded hollow. He took an extra kummel.

DOC had seen Duke Lawton ride in to town and stable his horse. That wounded man in the back room with his wild talk of killings and double-crossings had sent cold chills down the little constable's spine. Now he was alone in the house with the prisoner who was tied down in bed. What if Duke Lawton took the notion to pay him a visit? What if he found that Doc had this wounded man a



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N. Y. C.

prisoner? The doctor and sheriff had not showed up. Jay Cross had gone out to his roundup camp. Doc was alone with his prisoner, who was no longer delirious but lay there, tight-jawed, an ugly look in his bloodshot eyes. He lay on his back, tied to the bed securely. He had not spoken after his senses returned, save to ask for whiskey. He was weak from loss of blood. Doc gave him one chance in ten to live.

Doc bolted the doors and windows and pulled the shades. If only Jay Cross would come, bringing with him enough men to take care of Duke Lawton! The paunchy little constable wished for a hundred, more than a hundred, able deputies. Fear had him in its clammy grip. He dared not leave his prisoner, for Duke Lawton would be there in the Maverick.

Again the prisoner asked for a drink of whiskey. "You're the John Law in the valley?"

"I'm the constable," admitted Doc with some reluctance.

"What's the charges against me?"

"Murder," blurted Doc.

The wounded man's eyes were red slits. "Who says so?" he snarled.

There in the lamplight Doc recognized the look of fright in the eyes of the man tied to the bed. The prisoner's fear gave the constable courage. After all, the man was powerless, weak. Something akin to courage pulsed now through the veins of Doc. Unconsciously he rubbed his badge, polishing it. He had helped himself to a stiff drink.

"You are to be tried for murder. I say so. I represent the law in the valley."

The wounded man scowled. Then he grinned crookedly. "I'm willin' to hang for killin' the snake. I wasn't sure I got him. Last I remember is when he rode along the trail. He'd left me to die in that cave. It ain't all clear. I started crawlin' down the trail. He must have been comin' back to see if I was dead. I heard him

comin' along the trail and I let him have it. I made wolf bait out of Duke Lawton and I ain't afraid to hang for it. Gimme another drink, mister."

"You say you killed Duke Lawton?" asked Doc, pouring whiskey for the prisoner into the tin cup. Perhaps that stiff drink Doc had taken on an empty, nervous stomach had made him a little light-headed. He chuckled now as he held the cup of raw liquor to the man's mouth.

The wounded man gulped it down like water. There was suspicion in his eyes.

"You mean I didn't kill Duke?"

"He just rode into town," chuckled Doc. "He looked plenty alive to me."

"Then what's the murder charge against me? Talk, you pot-bellied little toadstool. Damn you, what's the game?"

As the man, straining at the ropes that bound him to the bed, snarled like an animal, Doc stepped backward, his round face white, his eyes mirroring terror. His voice stuck in his throat.

The wounded man struggled weakly, cursing. But Jay Cross had done a thorough job of tying up the prisoner. The rope did not bind the man's arms or body. He could move a few inches. But he was helpless as he lay there, struggling vainly.

"You never saw Duke ride into town. Duke's dead. I killed him, I tell you, you fat little fool. I got 'im."

"You got other men, maybe, like that Ed Brown, but you never killed Duke Lawton. He's here in town."

The prisoner begged for a gun. "I got to kill Duke Lawton. I might be dyin', but I'll live long enough to wipe out that snake if you'll give me my gun and send him to me. Or cut me loose and I'll crawl on my belly till I find him and cut him down. Damn you, I say I got to kill Duke Lawton before I hang. I'll take a knife and—"

There was a rapping at the door. Doc shoved a crude gag in the prisoner's

mouth. The fear that showed on Doc's round face was reflected in the bloodshot eyes of the helpless prisoner.

The rapping at the front door became more insistent. Doc picked up the lamp, then locked the prisoner in the room. His thick knees threatening to give way under him, his hands trembling, Doc went to the front door.

"Who's there?" he asked in a thin voice.

"Bill Patterson," came the impatient answer. "Let me in quick!"

INSIDE the house, Bill Patterson looked hard at the little constable.

"What's wrong, Bill?" asked Doc.

"That's what I'm tryin' to find out. There's somethin' queer goin' on in this valley. Somethin' I can't figure out. Looks like somebody is tryin' to throw a scare into me. Twice I found notes tied to my saddle in the mornin' warnin' me to quit the country. Twice in the past week my beef herd has been stampeded. Part of my remuda was run off and scattered last night. I've found signs nailed to my side of the drift fence tellin' me to quit the country and not come back. I was shot at last night durin' that storm, as I rode from camp out to the herd."

"Got any suspicions, Bill?"

"No. Only that I know that Jay Cross isn't behind it in any way. Jay ain't that breed of man. I fetched in a signed paper clearin' Jay in case I'm murdered. I'm not expectin' the law to take my part. I'll do my own fightin'. But I want you to keep this paper I made out. I don't want Jay Cross hung for another man's crimes. That's all, Doc. Here's the paper. Witness it. Get Dutch Louie's signature on it. Then put it in Louie's safe."

He opened the door and let himself out into the night.

Doc read the signed statement. Here was another complication. The little constable felt as if he was holding a stick

of dynamite in his hand with a lighted fuse attached.

His hand was a little unsteady as he witnessed the signature of Bill Patterson. He looked around for a place to hide it until he could pass it into Dutch Louie's safe keeping. At last he decided to carry it with him. The sheriff and the doctor from the county seat should be showing up soon. Then he would be free of his prisoner and he would go up the street to Louie's. He would slip the dangerous paper to the saloon man, somehow. Another fear they would have to share over their pinochle.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jay Cross was not idle. The delirious talk of the wounded man might be the workings of a twisted mind, but Jay thought otherwise. That man had been left to die there in the cave. The cave was in the center of the Lawton range. The man had talked about killing Ed Brown and another man. He had implied that they were all three partners and that there were more in the valley who belonged to the same bunch of hired killers. Jay had hired a couple of these drifting cowboys, not as gunmen, but to handle his cattle. He had learned that Bill Patterson had several of them on his payroll.

Jay had, right after the killing of Ed Brown, made a discovery which he had kept secret. Not far from the scene of the killing he had located a blind gate in the barbwire fence that was the borderline between the Jay Cross and Lazy P ranges. Neither he nor Bill Patterson had made any blind gates in their fence. They had agreed to use only the two main gates which were padlocked. By agreement, each carried a key to the padlocks. Through those two gates in a thirty mile strip of fence, the J Cross and Lazy P cattle were shoved back onto their own-

ers' ranges. Neither outfit had use for a blind gate.

There, where the wires of the blind gate had been lowered, he'd found the sign of a man and horse that had passed through.

Leaving town, Jay Cross rode toward his roundup camp. He reached camp about third guard time to find Macy Lawton in the mess tent drinking black coffee and eating cold bread and meat. Jay welcomed him with a nod.

"I'm reppin' with your wagon for a spell," said Macy, washing down a mouthful of food with hot black coffee.

"Thought you'd be with your own wagon," said Jay.

"Seth is roddin' the Box X roundup hisself. He took down bad with one of his ornery spells. Gave me and Lon and Duke hell. He sent Lon to the Lazy P wagon and kicked Duke off the ranch. Cussed us all out and accused us of everything from stealin' his cattle to plottin' to kill him. The old cuss, when he busts out in one of his ornery fits thataway, tells it scary. I'm glad to be away from him. He laid us all three out like a steer hide. Have a drink, Jay?"

"Not at camp. I do my drinkin' in town. I don't allow booze in camp. I took a couple of quarts away from that rep of yours. If you got more than what's left in that bottle, I'll take care of it by bustin' it on the wagon wheel."

MACY LAWTON'S pale eyes narrowed a little. Few were the men who had ever crossed him without paying for their audacity. Macy liked a whiskey bottle better than most men. He never went anywhere without one. He would fight quicker over a bottle than he would over a woman. One of his hands held a tin cup filled with coffee. The other hand held his thick slice of cold beefsteak and bread. Even as slow a gunman as Jay could beat him to the draw.

"I ain't used to takin' any man's orders," he said, his voice metallic and shaking with anger.

"You'll take mine as long as you work with my outfit, mister. Or you'll take your booze and hit the trail. This is my spread and I ramrod it. I'm workin' the herd tomorrow and it will be a shore enough pleasure to cut back every Box X critter. About three hundred head, all told. Make your choice now."

"Men don't talk to me like that and win in the end, Cross. I'm just tellin' you so you'll know what to expect some day. There's a quart of whiskey in my warsack. Take it and give me the two dollars I paid for it. I want them Box X steers shipped."

"I'll collect the quart. Here's the two dollars. That three hundred head of Box X stuff ain't all four-year-old steers. There's some cows and calves and some other stuff from yearlin's up. You got about ninety head of steers old enough to ship."

"What's the idea in gatherin' she stuff and stuff that I don't want shipped?"

"I want all the Box X stuff off my range. I got a bellyful of summerin' your cattle. I'm cleanin' the J Cross range of all stray stuff. Is that plain enough? If it ain't, talk to that rep of yours that gets off my range with the Box X cattle."

That was a lot of talk to be coming from the quiet-mannered Jay Cross. Macy Lawton savvied that Jay's temper was white hot.

"If I was you," Macy Lawton said, "I'd take a dull butcher knife and cut my throat. It'd be easier in the long run. My rep has worked with your wagon since it started last fall. That 'tles the Box X to ship what I don't cut back when I work my stuff out tomorrow. I'll send that rep of mine back with the stuff I don't want shipped. God knows how much Box X beef has been takin' the wrinkles

out of the bellies of J Cross cowboys. I'll help you clean up your lousy range, and glad to. I'm here for that purpose. But runnin' off at the head like you done ain't bought you a thing but trouble. More than one man that made enemies of the Lawtons learned that to their sorrow."

"No argument about that," said Jay, smiling faintly. "Got a night horse?"

"Yeah. I got a horse tied to the bed-wagon."

"You'll go on last guard in place of that rep of yours. Now you better get out of the tent before this angerin' wakes the cook. See you in the mornin'."

Jay watched him go into the bed tent. Then he poured himself a cup of coffee. The faint snoring of the grizzled old roundup cook ceased. From under the tarp there poked a partly bald head, a pair of sharp blue eyes. The old cook sat up in bed slowly, a grin on his leathery face. He had an old six-shooter in his hand.

"Yuh shore told that Macy Lawton more'n his ears could hold; Jay. It was better'n a circus. But damn it, man, you was spittin' square in the face of a side-winder rattler when you made your war talk. I laid there, pretendin' to snore, hearin' it all, watchin' it through a hole in the tarp. You standin' there, tantalizin' that gun thrower, with your hand a mile from your gun. But he never had a Chinaman's chance. I had the little snake covered all the time. This old hawglaig of

mine ain't gone off many times, but when she does roar, she talks turkey. Jay, I'll dance at your weddin' if you'll fetch me over a cup o' that java. I need somethin' to put me to sleep."

CHAPTER SIX

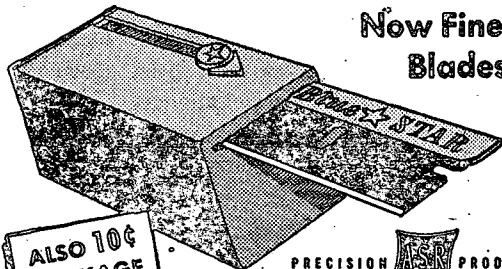
Gun Trail

JAY CROSS was worried, undecided just what to do. If half or almost any part of what that wounded man had said in his delirium held truth, then the Lawton outfit was planning to take an active part in the Bear Paw Valley war. The Lawtons had framed Jake Burns on that cattle-butcherin' charge. Then there had been some double-crossing. The man known as Ed Brown had been murdered and the job had been made to look as if the J Cross outfit was behind the killing. Another gunman had been shot down, a third wounded. All three of those men had come to the valley together, they all belonged to the same bunch of hired killers. Killers that were now drawing pay from the Box X as well as from the outfits they had hired out to.

Jay's first impulse had been to fire the strangers and the Box X rep who was working in with them. Then his better judgment told him to wait. The best idea was to confide in the men in his outfit whom he could trust.

MONEY-SAVING SHAVES For Men with Tough Whiskers

Now Finest Single or Double Edge BLUE STEEL
Blades in handy DISPENSER 10 for 25¢



Blue STAR



PRECISION PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BKLYN 1, N. Y.

He woke Jake Burns, who was working with the J Cross outfit, and had him ride a ways out of camp with him. To him Jay told his suspicions and what he thought to be cold facts. Jake Burns was one man he could trust.

"I likewise got several notices to quit the country," he told Jake Burns. "One notice was nailed to the drift fence. Another was painted on the barn door at the ranch a few nights ago. Bill Patterson made his drunken war talk, but Bill never had anything to do with those signs. Old Seth Lawton has always wanted this valley. And when that old rannihan goes after anything, he'll bar no holts. He's got these killers planted in the valley. He's got Macy and Lon to handle the deal. Duke will be in town, like as not, waitin' for the big showdown."

Jay's eyes were smoldering as he paused a moment, went on. "Jake, things are gettin' tight. Mighty tight. Hell's likely to pop open any time. Pass the news to every man you know we kin trust. I've got to be back in town as quick as possible. I'm headed for there now, and I don't know when I'll be back. I'm leavin' you in charge here. Run the spread like you owned it. I busted a bottle of Macy Lawton's whiskey before I left camp. He'll be ornery without it, but I didn't aim to back down on the whiskey rule in camp. Try to keep things runnin' smooth till the cattle are shipped. Most of my cowhands kin be depended on in a tight, if it comes to that. But I don't want a showdown yet."

"Why don't you have a medicine talk with Bill Patterson, Jay?" asked the rancher.

"It's up to Bill to come to me, Jake. I got my reasons for not goin' to him."

"But, hell, he don't know what we're up against here in the valley."

"He will before tomorrow night," came Jay Cross' crisp reply. "Then it will be up to him to prove himself a man or a

damned snake. He made the claim he was goin' to run me out of the country. If he's thrown in with the Lawtons to do it, then we're up against a hard proposition. It looks like that's what he's done. But it ain't like Bill to holler for help. He likes to brag, then make good what he's bragged about. It would kind of lower his sights a lot to call in outsiders like the Lawtons to take up his fight for him. I'll see that he hears about what's goin' on, if he don't already know. If he's any part of a white man, he'll act accordin'."

It wasn't like Jay Cross to talk like that. This was the first time any man in Bear Paw Valley had ever heard Jay talk about Bill Patterson. Bill had handled all the talking. Jake Burns knew that Jay was badly worked up to say the things he was saying now. And he took notice of the fact that Jay Cross' gun, which he had been packing lately, was now in a holster tied down to his leg, instead of shoved into the waistband of his Levi overalls. It looked as if the owner of the J Cross iron was actually getting ready for war. And when a man of his quiet, easy-going temperament got on the prod, he was apt to be plenty dangerous.

JAY sent Jake Burns back to camp, then rode on toward town. He grinned faintly, as he remembered telling Macy to go on last guard. That was breaking one of the cow country's unwritten laws. Macy had not gotten to camp until nearly midnight. By rights he should not be made to stand guard that night. But Jay had purposely broken that cowhand law and told Macy to stand last guard. It was the sort of insult a man is supposed to resent—a sort of flung challenge. Macy Lawton had not taken up the challenge. Then there was the matter of the whiskey bottle. Another fighting matter. Macy Lawton, killer, fearless after the manner of his breed, had not taken up the fight. That was not like Macy Lawton.

No, that little, pale-eyed killer had other reasons for not reaching for his gun. Orders from old Seth, like as not. He was going after the valley now in his own way. He had given his orders to Macy and Lon and Duke. And when the proper time came, they would light the fuse that would blow the peaceful valley into red, hellish warfare.

Neighbor against neighbor—gunning for one another—even as had happened in such range wars as the Lincoln County War in New Mexico and the bloody Johnson County War in Wyoming.

Jay Cross reached the town of Bear Paw about daybreak. He stabled his horse and walked over to Doc's house. There was a light burning behind the drawn blinds. In response to his rapping, Doc, clad in a nightshirt tucked into his trousers, opened the door. One suspender hung down and he had on carpet slippers. He let Jay, in, then bolted the door. He motioned toward the back room.

"The doctor from the county seat is back there with him," whispered Doc. "He says the feller is goin' to die."

"Then we have to get a sworn statement from him, Doc."

Back there in the bedroom Jay found the wounded man sullen.

"All doctors," he snarled, "are liars. I ain't goin' to die. Get to hell out of here and let a man alone. Every one but Jay Cross. I'll make a dicker with him. Pour me a drink, Cross. Have one yourself, after you kick this sawbones and that vet out. Die, hell!"

The sheriff had not come. He was out with a posse on the trail of some train robbers. Doc whispered that to Jay as the latter showed him and the doctor out of the room. The little constable was badly frightened.

"Duke Lawton's in town on a bender," he whispered in Jay's ear.

"Good," grinned Jay, and shut the door.

"Well, feller," he said, pouring two drinks, "what's on your mind?"

"How did I git here?"

In a few sentences Jay explained. The man's face, with its stubble of beard, twitched with pain.

"Then that fat little constable didn't lie when he said Duke Lawton wasn't dead?"

"Doc didn't lie. Duke is in town. He don't know you're here, mebbby. Again, on the other hand, he might have trailed us here. We might have been sighted and trailed."

"The little pot-bellied John Law tells me I'm under arrest. Charged with the murder of a gent named Ed Brown and another feller. Is that why I was fetched here?"

"You talked some on the way in. Enough to spill the beans. But the doctor was right when he said you were dying. You won't hang, mister."

"You wouldn't lie to a man, would you, Cross?"

"I'm not lyin'. And I'd have fetched you to town no matter who you were or what you'd done or hadn't done."

"You got the name of bein' a white man, Cross. Duke Lawton is a snake. I might have knowed he'd quit me in a tight. I knowed too much. I didn't kill the man named Ed Brown. Ed Brown ain't his real name. The man that done that killin' murdered him, then made it look like it had been a fight. I shot it out with the snake that was hired by Seth Lawton to kill Ed. Ed, you savvy, was my brother, though none of 'em knowed it. I give his murderer a fightin' chance and killed him. Duke heard the shootin' and rode up while I was finishin' the job. Duke planted him near the cave. You can spot the grave by a tree that had bin lightnin' struck."

"Why was Ed Brown murdered?"

"The same reason they framed that butcherin' charge on Jake Burns. Seth

wanted a war here in the valley. He ribbed it between you and Bill Patterson. He started ribbin' it at the Prescott Frontier Days contest. I did Duke's dirty work there. Duke framed you and Bill Patterson and the girl that rode in the relay races and did the fancy ropin'. Gail Cavanaugh was her name. . . ."

Jay's face hardened. "What in hell do you mean, mister? Talk and talk fast, damn you!"

"Hand me the bottle, Cross. Then fetch pen and ink and paper. Take down what I tell you, and I'll sign it."

Half an hour later Jay Cross called in Doc and the physician from the county seat.

"Witness this man's signature," he said, his voice strained with pent-up emotion.

The wounded man signed the document. "That's my right name, Cross. See that I'm planted next to Ed. You savvy. And if I was you, I'd hunt up that little lady and explain it all. I've killed men and never lost an hour's sleep about it. But hurtin' that girl was a lot different. It's the only low-down thing I ever did. I've squared my debts. One last drink and then I'll hit the last trail. Just one more drink."

JAY CROSS lacked the cold-blooded brain that goes to make a killer. Slow to anger, always ready to give any man the benefit of the doubt, he had gone his way through life. But now he knew that he could kill a man and never regret it. He pulled the blanket over the face of the dead gunfighter, then he folded the written confession and put it in his pocket. He hitched up his gunbelt and faced Doc.

"You say Duke Lawton is in town?" he asked in a strange voice.

Doc nodded. He had never seen Jay Cross look like that. It sent a cold chill over the little constable.

"Duke Lawton is at the honkytonk or at the Maverick, Jay."

Jay left the house with its dead man, its weary-eyed doctor, who was sipping a tumbler filled with whiskey and water, and the little rotund constable who still had his nightshirt tucked into his trousers.

Jay found the Maverick deserted save for Dutch Louie, who woke from a doze with a start.

Mechanically Louie reached for the kummel bottle as he blinked bewilderedly. "Ach . . . Yäy . . . I been dreaming here. Here, have a nip. You ain't lookin' so goot. Und me. All night I am on my feet. Und all night long that Duke Lawton buys drinks for the house like so much drunken sailors."

"Where's Duke Lawton, Louie?" Jay Cross cut in abruptly.

"He went by the honkytonk, maybe."

But Jay found the dance hall closed. A sleepy bartender was washing glasses. A swamper was cleaning up a litter of broken glass, cigar and cigarette butts, sodden sawdust. In the cold light of dawn the decorations around the boxes and the small stage looked shabby, soiled, tawdry. There was a red slipper with a broken heel lying in the middle of the dance floor. Empty glasses and bottles were on the liquor-stained tables.

"I'm lookin' for Duke Lawton," Jay told the tipsy bartender.

"He ain't here. He rode his horse in here about an hour ago, bought drinks for everybody, then rode out the front door. He ain't come back."

At the barn he found Duke's horse gone. And in the cold white sunrise he regained his calmness, his sense of reasoning. His fight with Duke Lawton must wait. This was not the time to pick a quarrel. There was too much at stake. There was the safety of the Bear Paw Valley, with its ranchers, its women and children, to consider.

He walked back to Doc's house. He needed sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Battle Orders

IF SOME walls have ears, this must have been true of Doc's house, because the man planted outside the house by the ever-suspicious Duke Lawton had carried Duke news that caused the latter to saddle his horse and quit town. Duke was no coward, but it made him feel more than a little uneasy to know that a dying man had signed a paper that would hang every Lawton.

The trouble was that Duke dared not tell Seth or Lon or Macy the truth about the man who had died at Doc's house. He had lied to old Seth about that man he had left to die in the cave.

Duke's first thought was to kill Doc, Jay Cross and the doctor from the county seat. But that would be putting his head in a noose. A triple killing of that sort was out of the question. There was but one thing left to do. That was to open up the valley war—open it with gunfire. The Box X had men planted with the J Cross and Lazy P outfits. Lon and Macy had their orders from old Seth. They knew how to start the ball rolling.

Duke spurred his horse to a long trot and headed for the J Cross roundup camp. There was no time to lose. That war must start today. And Jay Cross, Doc, every man who knew about that incriminating

document, must be killed off. The doctor from the county seat must get his before he got far along the homeward trail. That document must be found and burned. Otherwise . . . Duke shivered a little. He wasn't ready to die, and the thought of hanging was not pleasant. He rode with his weight in the stirrups, his big, grain-fed horse carrying him along the trail into the sunrise.

The J Cross cowboys were all at the herd when Duke rode up. Macy was cutting out what stuff he didn't want shipped. When he saw Duke, he rode out to the edge of the herd, motioning for the Box X rep to keep working.

"It's time to open the jackpot," Duke said. "I'm takin' word to Lon. You know what to do. Scatter this herd to hell tonight. The same will happen to the Lazy P herd. See to it that Jay Cross gits his where his suspenders cross."

"Don't worry about that," Macy said. "Got a bottle on yuh?"

Macy looked mad when he handed back the bottle. Duke corked it and rode away, headed for the Lazy P roundup camp. He grinned a little. Macy would kill Jay Cross, even as Lon would take care of Bill Patterson. Cattle would be stampeded and the remudas scattered, setting both outfits afoot save for the played-out horses they would be forking at daybreak. That is, those who were still alive to sit a horse.

REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



NOON found Duke at the Lazy P camp. Bill Patterson and his men were eating dinner. Lon eyed Duke meaningly. Duke made no sign.

Bill Patterson's nod was not cordial. Duke filled his plate and tin cup and squatted on the ground. He had not expected much of a welcome.

"I need a fresh horse," Duke told Lon. "Got a ride to make. How's chances to plant my saddle on that crop-eared roan?"

"You'll ride what I stake you to," said Lon, and went on eating in silence.

Bill Patterson grinned faintly. One of the cowboys had said something about Duke beating Lon's time with some girl. Lon had knocked the cowboy down and kicked a few teeth out of his jaw. The Lawtons were all quick to anger, slow to forget that anger. They could carry an enmity forever.

"They tell me, Bill," grinned Duke, "that Jay is wearin' his gun tied low."

Bill Patterson looked up from his plate. "I reckon that's his privilege," he said briefly. Duke's grin faded slowly.

At the corral Lon caught his horse and pointed out another to Duke.

"I ain't ridin' any pack horse," said Duke. He roped the crop-eared roan. There in the center of the rope corral, filled with horses, Duke and Lon eyed one another. No brotherly love was lost in that exchange of glances. Then Lon led his horse out of the corral, Duke following with the big roan.

"I told you," said Duke, when the two were saddling, "I got a ride to make."

"To the breed camp to make a dance," sneered Lon.

"Can't you get anything through that skull you pack around on your dirty neck? Hell pops tonight when the guard goes on at twelve. Scatter these cattle to hell. Kill the nighthawk and run off the remuda. Tend to Bill Patterson personal."

"This ain't no time to start this busi-

ness," said Lon. "We wasn't to start the game till after we'd shipped."

"We start it tonight," said Duke.

"All right. Let 'er buck. I'll handle my end. See that you handle yourn."

Duke rode away after he had taken the buck out of the big wicked-tempered, crop-eared roan. He reached the Box X ranch before dark.

"What fetches you back here?" snapped old Seth, glaring at his nephew.

"If you want that valley," said Duke, "you'd better git down there tonight and handle the deal. She pops at midnight. Buckle on your hawblaig."

"Who the hell gives the orders here? Are you drunk or just plain loco. I'll say when that fight down yonder starts."

"If you wait till after tonight, the game is up with us. I was sent to town to pick up news. I done picked 'er up. Plenty. By daybreak the J Cross and Lazy P outfits will be all the same one happy family. Jay Cross is wise to us now. Bill Patterson and him will be pardners again just as quick as Cross kin git to talk with Bill Patterson. Better round up the boys and take 'em down into the valley. I'll tend to my end in town. I took word to Macy and Lon. The balloon goes up at midnight."

Seth Lawton buckled on his gunbelt. He was at last riding down to take Bear Paw Valley.

DUTCH LOUIE was glad that Duke Lawton had left his place. But he felt uneasy about Jay Cross. Jay had acted queer when he came in, asking for Duke. When Doc came into the empty saloon, there in the dawn, Dutch Louie gave a sigh of relief. He set out the kummel bottle and two glasses. Then he asked about the wounded man.

"He iss better?"

"He's dead, Louie. The doctor couldn't save him. Here, put this in the safe. It's a statement the man made and signed."

The doctor and I witnessed it. It's dynamite. There's enough explosive in that statement to send the Lawtons to hell. Jay said for you to lock it up and forget how to open the safe."

Dutch Louie groaned. His pudgy hands opened the safe. He put the document inside, shut the door and spun the knob. Then he faced Doc across the bar.

"A safe full of dynamite, Doc, und I sit by it."

Absently Dutch Louie adjusted his toupe. Brothers in misery, the two drank in silence. Weary as they were, sleep was beyond question. There was nothing to do but wait for the worst to happen. And had they known the plan that had formed in Duke Lawton's mind they would both have had material cause for real worry.

Duke had thought it out carefully, soberly, as he left the Box X and, quitting Seth at the forks of the trail, took the main road to town. Rightly Duke figured that Jay Cross would not be carrying that signed document with him. Dutch Louie owned the only safe in town. Therefore that damaging document would be in Dutch Louie's safe. While the others were stampeding herds and shooting one another, Duke planned to get that document. Once it was destroyed, he would do his share of fighting.

As Duke rode into town by a side street and left his horse at the rear of the saloon,

he slipped his black silk neckerscarf up so that it covered the lower part of his face. His gun in his hand, he slipped into the saloon by the rear door. The hands of the big clock above the back bar pointed to midnight.

Save for Doc and Dutch Louie playing pinochle at one of the tables, the place was deserted. Duke Lawton grinned behind his black silk mask.

"Take it easy, you two." His harsh voice brought the pinochle players erect, wide-eyed with fear. "Do what I tell you and there won't be a shot fired. Constable, throw that purty gun of yourn in the corner. You, Louie, open that safe of yourn and make it fast. Make any mistakes, and I'll gut-shoot you!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The War Breaks

DUKE LAWTON had not counted on Jay Cross riding over to the Lazy P camp as soon as he could get there. Bill Patterson and his cowboys had just come in from working the afternoon drive and were unsaddling. Bill scowled at Jay without speaking.

"I want to see you alone, Bill. It's important, or I wouldn't be here."

"I ain't got all day," said Bill, as the two rode off some distance from camp. "Is it fight-talk?"

fast HELP for
HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH - JUMPY NERVES

Today more people than ever before use Bromo-Seltzer. Because this time-proved product gives fast help. Not only for headache pain, but also for the upset stomach and jumpy nerves that often go with it.

Quick! Pleasant! Bromo-Seltzer effervesces with split-second ac-

tion, ready to go to work at once. And it is so refreshing! You must be satisfied or your money back! Caution: Use only as directed.

Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drug store fountain or counter today. It's a product of the Emerson Drug Co. since 1887.

WHERE OTHERS FAIL
BROMO-SELTZER WORKS



"It's fight talk, all right, but nothing like you have it figured. The Lawtons aim to stomp us both out. Our best bet is to beat 'em to it. I got proof in black and white that will hang 'em all."

For half an hour Jay talked. Then the two ex-friends rode back to camp. Most of the cowboys were eating. Lon Lawton and another man were saddling up fresh horses; and there was suspicion written in his eyes. Several other fresh horses were saddled. Lon must have passed along word of his suspicions, because the men who had saddled fresh mounts were cowboys Bill Patterson and Jay Cross knew to be friends of the Lawtons, hired to make trouble in the valley.

"Had supper, Lon?" Bill asked carelessly, as he and Jay rode.

"I took on a bit of what that grub spoiler calls a meal," Lon sneered.

"Then you might as well take these men here and relieve the men out at the hold-up. I'll be out directly."

Bill stepped down off his horse and looped his stirrup over the saddle horn. Lon and his men had the advantage of Bill and Jay, just now. The Lazy P cowboys Bill could count on were eating, not suspecting trouble. Lon and his men were on fresh horses. The others had not caught their new mounts yet. They were afoot. The edge was all Lon Lawton's. But would he take advantage of it?

Lon's men, all mounted now, waited for the signal to open up the fight.

For a long moment, a moment during which Jay and Bill waited with taut nerves, Lon hesitated. Then he turned and rode away, the others following him. Old Seth Lawton would never have done that. Old Seth would have shot it out while the odds were in his favor.

Bill and Jay caught fresh horses. Then Bill spoke to his men.

"Never mind the grub, boys. Saddle up and pack your guns. We're takin' Lon Lawton and them men he rode off with.

They'll put up a fight, and a hard one."

"Lead us to 'em," grinned a lanky cowboy. "That pack of gun-toters was gettin' into my hair and whiskers. My meat is that one-eyed crook that won two months pay off me with his trained dice. I'm goin' to empty that jasper's pockets."

"Which direction is the hold-up?" asked Jay.

Bill started to point as he swung into the saddle. Then an oath escaped him. Lon and his four men were headed in the other direction, spurring hard for an outcropping of big boulders half a mile away. The full import, the real significance of this visit of Jay's to camp had finally penetrated Lon Lawton's thick black skull. Why wait till midnight? He cursed himself for not starting the fight there at camp. Turning in his saddle, he jerked his carbine and emptied it at the oncoming riders. He grinned as he saw a rider reel in his saddle and pull up.

Lon and his men gained the rocks, there on the creek bank among the brush and cottonwoods. Dismounting, they sought shelter, prepared to make a bloody stand.

"We'll circle 'em, Bill," called Jay, jerking his Winchester lever. "Play Injun on 'em. Lon Lawton is the one that counts. I want that big son alive."

As the afternoon passed into sundown, Lon and his men, from their barricade of boulders, put up a cool-headed, deadly fight against odds. Several Lazy P men bore wounds that proved the marksmanship of those imported gunmen. Every time Jay Cross or Bill Patterson showed any part of themselves they were showered with lead. Lon and his killers were concentrating on the two cowmen. Occasionally Jay or Bill would raise one of their hats on a stick to see whether Lon's men were still alert, but always bullets greeted them.

There came a lull in the firing. Bill

and Jay held a whispered conference. Both had been nicked by that hail of bullets. Night was not far off.

Bill hoisted a white rag on a stick. Instantly it drew a volley of shots. Bill grinned a little, examining the bullet-torn flag of truce.

"Looks like we'll have to close in on 'em, Jay."

"Looks that way. I'll give 'em one more chance to surrender." Jay raised his voice to a shout. "Turn over Lon Lawton to us and the rest of you can quit the country. If Lawton don't want you all killed, he'll be man enough to give himself up."

"Go to hell!" roared Lon Lawton.

There was the crack of a gun. Lon's profane bellow choked off. Silence.

Then a white flag was waved from the boulders. Bill raised his tattered white rag on its stick. A moment's hesitation, then a big, black gelding wearing the Box X brand broke from the boulders and brush. The horse wore no bridle. Across the saddle was a ghastly, bloodstained burden, held by a lariat. Thus his hired killers had delivered Lon Lawton to his enemies. Jay's rope snared the big black gelding. Lon was dead, shot in the back. He had paid his price.

Into the sunset vanished the hired killers, quitting Bear Paw Valley forever.

Jay and Bill pushed on for the J Cross wagon. A messenger had already gone ahead with a message to Jake Burns to grab Macy Lawton and any other man who might be in the Lawton employ.

* * *

A lantern burned in the mess tent and another in the bed tent, there at the J Cross camp. Three men in the bed tent were bound hand and foot. There was another whose body was covered with a blood-stained tarp. He needed no ropes to hold him there. Two cowboys, both slightly wounded, guarded the prisoners.

In the mess tent lay Jake Burns, badly wounded. He forced a grin.

"Macy was too fast for me, Jay. He got away. I think I hit him once, but I'm not certain. He headed for town like a bat out of hell."

"I'll send a doctor from town, Jake. Let's go, Bill. They musn't get that paper in Louie's safe."

With Jay and Bill now rode half a dozen picked men. They rode into town just about the time Duke Lawton was forcing Dutch Louie behind the bar.

Now, from the other end of the moonlit street there came other riders, Seth Lawton and Macy in the lead, spurring hard.

Inside the saloon, under the ugly menace of Duke's gun, Dutch Louie's thick hands fumbled clumsily with the safe's combination. Sweat rolled down his florid face. His precious toupe had slipped partly off. Duke cursed him in a rasping voice.

The paunchy little Doc stood by the card table with its unplayed cards, its two steins of beer and small glasses of kummel. He stood petrified, unable to move.

Duke Lawton, impatient at Dutch Louie's lack of speed, vaulted the bar with a barked oath. He kicked the stooping Louie in the ribs and face. Blood spurted.

The sight of that blood, of the masked robber kicking Dutch Louie, had a startling effect on Doc. With surprising agility he retrieved his gun from the floor. His voice was steady, commanding.

"Hands up!"

Duke Lawton whirled with a snarl, his gun spewing flame. Doc felt the shock of a bullet in his thigh. As fast as he could thumb back the hammer, he shot at the masked man. A lucky bullet tore the gun from Duke's hand. He groped for the gun with his left hand but Dutch Louie, with a roar like an enraged bull, was upon

him, swinging a heavy wooden mallet known as a bung starter.

Unarmed, Duke ran for the rear door. There was a carbine on his saddle and an extra six-shooter. His black silk neckscarf had slipped from his face. Doc, still working the hammer of his empty gun as he lay in a widening pool of blood, cursed the most dangerous of the deadly Lawtons for a yellow-bellied coyote. Dutch Louie, his face bleeding from a broken nose, swore thickly in his native tongue as he rounded the bar to give chase, still armed with his bung starter.

But the real fight was now out there in the night. Guns spat fire from the deep shadows. Horses, terrified by the shooting, lunged and milled together in the moonlit street. Dutch Louie carried his wounded friend down into the cellar, bolting the heavy trap door from below. He got a lantern going and set about dressing Doc's wounds.

CHAPTER NINE

Bloody Sunrise

IN THE darkness outside it was every man for himself. Friend and enemy looked alike in the dark. Jay and Bill had told their men to stay in their places and not advance or retreat unless ordered.

Now the Lawton outfit made a rush for the saloon. A quick volley put out the saloon lights. Once barricaded in the darkened interior, Seth Lawton snapped brittle orders, as from the windows his men took snapshots at J Cross and Lazy P men.

Duke cursed his maimed hand and the closed safe. There in the darkness, he kept searching for Dutch Louie. Convinced that the saloonkeeper was not in the place, he set to work trying to force open the old safe.

Seth cursed him for wasting his time. "What the hell you tryin' to bust in there

for? There ain't enough in that old iron box to bother about. Go back to that rear end of the place and take charge of your men. We want Jay Cross and Bill Patterson, not what that sauerkraut eater keeps in his safe."

Duke obeyed, snarling curses. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand had been partially shot away. One of his men had stopped the bleeding somewhat with a tourniquet of buckskin string, searing the raw stubs with coal from the big stove. Duke had endured the pain without a whimper. His only worry was that incriminating paper in the safe. A paper that would put a noose around his neck.

Seth Lawton was like a man gone insane. His carefully laid plans had been scrambled into junk. Somebody had talked out of turn. Who? He swore to cut the tongue out of the man who had talked, then kill him. Seth never accepted an excuse from any man. No man working for him could make a mistake and get away with it.

"Somebody was careless," he told Duke and Macy. "His damned mistake has cost us the valley. Even if we git Jay, Cross and Bill Patterson, they'll have us up for gunfightin', and it'll take a hell of a pile of money to clear us. And more money to git the J Cross and Lazy P outfits. What in hell become of Lon, anyhow? Why ain't he here?"

"Maybe he's got a reason," Duke had insinuated. "Maybe he made a bad mistake. He ain't any too smart in the head."

"A thousand dollars," old Seth told them all, "to the man who kills Jay Cross. Another thousand for Patterson's hide."

Daylight would be coming soon. Jay and Bill had their men surround the saloon, using what they could find for shelter from the Lawton gunfire.

"Don't let the Lawtons get away," was the grim order. "Kill them if you have to."

Jay and Bill met, just before daybreak. "About that Prescott fight of ourn," said Bill, "I sure made a fool outa myself. I was lied to and I was jealous. Soon as this deal is over, Jay, you ketch the first train for Arizona. I'll handle your cattle. Fetch her back and I'm standin' the big weddin' party. She thinks you're the greatest feller livin'. She'll be waitin' for you, pardner. Me, I never had a chance with her. And about me runnin' you out of the country, that was whiskey talk. When I sobered up and remembered, I felt like a sheepherder."

"Forget it, Bill. As far as me goin' to fetch Gail, that's for her to decide when we go down there together. She used to like you a lot. Same as she liked me. It's up to her, pardner. As for the whiskey talk, I never aimed to let you make a plumb fool of yourself. I'd have quit the country before I'd have tangled up in a gun war."

"You always did have more guts than me, Jay. It would have took plenty of them guts to move out leavin' folks to think you was too yellow to fight. You're a white man, Jay. Mind shakin' hands?"

"The pleasure, you damn bonehead, belongs to me."

DAWN came in a crimson streak. The men outside watched it stain red the mountains that were snowcapped. The men inside the saloon, that now was a

shambles, saw no snow-capped peaks, for their vision was limited to the immediate surroundings. Through shattered windows they watched, bloodshot eyes peering furtively, guns cocked. Whiskey bottles passed from hand to hand.

Seth Layton, squatted by a hole he had gouged in the chinking between the logs, cursed in a steady monotone. Macy, a Winchester in his hand, kept moving about from the front of the place to the rear.

Duke, drinking whiskey as if it were water, driven away from the safe by old Seth, guarded the rear door. He had made a peep-hole and through this he watched. His right arm pained him some. But his brain seemed afire. He shot at anything that moved, out there in the back that was piled with whiskey barrels and beer kegs that had been made into a barricade.

Now both factions suddenly ceased firing. Coming into town at a long lope were half a hundred men.

"It's the sheriff," gritted old Seth, his face gray, twisted with a terrible hate. "He's got a whole damn army with him. Macy, git word back to Duke that the jig's up. We can't stand off the whole of Montana. If we start shootin' into that posse, we'll all be killed or hung. As she lays now, we kin pay our way out of it. Tell Duke we're layin' 'em down."

Macy took the word to Duke. Duke's

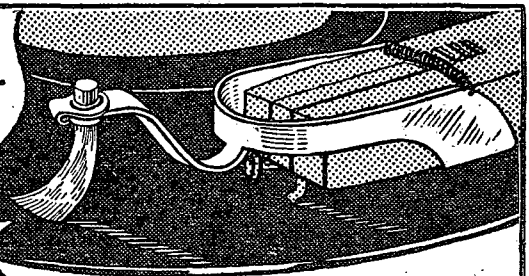
RECORD-Brush

*it
cleans
as it
plays!*

- PROLONGS RECORD LIFE
- IMPROVES TONE QUALITY
- REDUCES NEEDLE SHOCK
- INCREASES NEEDLE LIFE



SAVE YOUR RECORDS!



If Not Available At Your Dealer
Send \$1.00-Regular ... \$2.50-Deluxe Model.

ZIM PRODUCTS
6722 DEVONSHIRE AVE. ST. LOUIS 9, MO.

face went livid. His eyes, killer's eyes, glittered.

"Give up to the law?" he gritted. "Is the old fool yellow? Has he lost his guts?" His six-shooter swinging in his left hand, he stalked past Macy and into the front of the saloon. He faced old Seth.

"In that safe," he said flatly, "is a signed paper that will hang us all. You raised me to be a tough hand. I'm playin' my string out. You and Macy kin quit like yellow dogs, but I'm-fightin' my way out."

Old Seth's lipless mouth twitched a little. "Damn you, Duke, you always was my favorite of the three whelps."

The old cowman's face was the color of ashes that had lain long on the ground. His eyes burned with queer lights. His unwashed old blue flannel shirt was sticky with blood.

"I ain't got much to lose," he said, shoving cartridges into his six-shooter. "Supposin' we step out yonder and fight 'em in the open?"

* * *

It was a sight that is still remembered in Bear Paw. The three Lawtons, old Seth in the lead, dying, his legs unsteady, walking out of the saloon, into the red-streaked sunrise, their guns blazing.

The sheriff and his posse pulled up, hunting cover. Now the three Lawtons held the street, their guns smoking.

"Come out and fight!" called old Seth. "Come out and fight, you yellow-bellied polecats!"

Jay Cross started to quit his shelter behind a long pile of cordwood. A six-shooter barrel thudded down on his head and he dropped to the ground. With a quick leap Bill Patterson cleared the wood pile and was out there in the open, his gun roaring, a grin on his face.

Duke went down, lay there in the dusty street, motionless. Seth's bullet dropped

Bill to his knees, shooting as he went down. Now Macy staggered and fell. He twitched a little, then lay still.

Bill Patterson's gun was empty. His numbing fingers fumbled at his cartridge belt. Old Seth, gun cocked, watched him.

"You bragged once, Patterson," he cried hoarsely, "that you was man enough to handle the whole damn Lawton tribe. You got two of us. Load that gun an' try again."

"Be right with yuh, Seth," called Bill Patterson, his grinning lips bloody.

But even as Bill fitted a cartridge into the chamber of his gun, the old he-wolf of the Box X went down in a crumpled heap. The last of the Lawtons was dead.

Jay Cross, his head still throbbing from the blow Bill had handed him, sat there in the street wiping the blood from Bill's mouth. The sheriff's men had taken the saloon and were busy caring for the prisoners.

"So-long, Jay, old pardner," grinned Bill. "I'm sorry about hittin' you over the head thataway, but it had to be done. Gail will need you, understand? I'm kinda put out, not bein' able to give you and her that weddin' party. Tell her so-long for me, Jay."

"I'll tell her, Bill."

"Take care of her, pardner. Good luck to . . . you . . . both."

THE LITTLE cow town of Bear Paw has not changed much. Doc is no longer constable, but his ornate gun and badge are there on display at the Maverick Saloon. Doc and Dutch Louie still have their pinochle and beer.

Sometimes Jay Cross and his wife and their youngster, Bill, come to town, but not very often, because Jay is busy with the J. Cross and Lazy P outfits. The Lazy P belongs to little Bill, whose namesake died for the love of a pardner and his love for a girl.

THE END

MAN-TRAP



Copyright 1935 by American
Fiction Magazines, Inc.

The two guns flamed in unison as
Steep's second shot mingled with the
slam of Bud's .45. . . .

By Cliff Farrell

There's more than one way of skinning a cougar, young Bud Elliot figured; and as for collecting for same—Bud would do that if he had to ram his skins right down skinflint Muddy Wickwire's craw with the hot end of a .45!

M UDDY WICKWIRE, owner of the Corkscrew T, sat in the squalid, littered big room of his ranch house, squinting at the weekly edition of the *Stockmen's News*. Behind him a door opened softly and Ink Steep, his range boss, slipped into the room. The