

WINTER RANGE

CHAPTER VI—Continued

By ALAN LE MAY

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Kentucky Jones grinned, but the grin was very faint. He was pitying the girl as he had never pitied anyone in his life. There was a forlorn desperation about her scheme which told him, better than anything else could have done, how heavily events had pressed down upon this girl. In effect, Jean Ragland was offering him all the tangible assets which she controlled to serve as a gunfighter, and a leader of gunfighters. Yet to the best of his belief she was justified. There was nothing imaginary about the encroachment of Elliot; and if Campo persisted in his unaccountable state of paralysis the Bar Hook brand was done.

"What's Campo going to say to this?" he asked her.

"I'll take care of Campo." Kentucky Jones found himself deeply stirred. Yet he would have thought himself a fool if he had accepted such a proposition only to please Jean. One consideration alone urged him to agree. He was anxious to talk to Bob Elliot; and he felt that the basis she suggested would give him every advantage in this.

"I'm not going to turn you down," he said at last. "But I can accept only on certain conditions. First, that too strenuous an objection is not made by your father. Another is that if Campo Ragland later decides to make his own fight; or if for any other reason I'm no longer needed, then I can withdraw, and the deal is off."

"I accept that," she said. "Another condition is that the price of one dollar be changed to read: 'One dollar and such other consideration as the buyer shall consider proper, according to the state of the market upon delivery.'"

She objected vigorously to that; but since at worst it conceded him what profit he might consider justified, she at length gave in. She offered him her hand, closing a bargain which placed him in the most curious position he ever had occupied in his life.

"Jean," he said. "I'm going to ask you one question, and I want you to answer it. Do you know who killed John Mason?"

"No," she said instantly. "Kentucky, I swear that I don't know that! I thought I knew, until Zack Sanders was found; but now I'm just as sure that I was wrong."

"I won't try to get you to tell me," he said, "what you evidently don't want to know. But, Jean, I tell you this: the time may come when I'll need your help and need it bad. When that time comes, I want you to remember that perhaps I wouldn't be in this if you hadn't asked me in."

"I won't forget." He got up and jerked on his coat. "I'm going to see Bob Elliot," he told her.

The back of her hand flew to her mouth. "Now?" she said faintly. "It's as good a time as any, isn't it?" Jean Ragland turned white. "Then go on. You—I guess you know I wish you luck."

"I might need it," he admitted. As he reached the door she suddenly called his name, and he turned back. She was staring after him, white-faced. "Are—will you be armed?"

"I don't know. We'll see." He was wondering, as he saddled a fresh pony, if she had commissioned him to kill Bob Elliot.

The buildings of the SS were made variously of adobe, clapboards, and square-hewn logs.

Bill McCord stood in the doorway of the barn as Kentucky Jones came up. Kentucky had a feeling that he had been seen and watched from a long way off.

"You want to see me?" McCord asked.

"I'll talk to your boss, if he's here." Bill McCord rolled a crooked cigarette from one corner of his mouth to the other. "All right. He's up at the house." He did not offer any accommodations for Kentucky's horse.

Kentucky rode to what appeared to be the main door of a squat adobe which a glance of McCord's eye had indicated. The door opened as he pulled up, and Bob Elliot stood there, looking at him without expression.

"Hello, Bob," Kentucky said. "Bob Elliot leaned against the side of the doorway, lean-shouldered, straight-backed, looking competent and tall. "It seems very peculiar," he said with casual frostiness, "to see you here."

"I suppose so," said Kentucky, swinging down without invitation. "Are you going to ask me in or not?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Elliot; "is there any special call for it?"

"There is." "Let's hear what your business is, then."

"It's a little matter of range rights," Kentucky told him. "In that case," said Elliot, "go back and tell your boss you fell down. I understand my rights on the Bake Pan, and Wolf Bench, too, just as well as he does. And when he wants to talk to me he can come himself!"

"Ragland," said Kentucky, "can speak on his own behalf, what and where he wants to, without advice from me—or from you either. It happens that this time I'm speaking for myself. I came over to tell you that I've bought a fifth interest in the Bar Hook."

Bob Elliot's face went blank with perfectly real astonishment. "You bought a—what?"

"You heard me, I think." Bob Elliot stared at him for a mo-

ment more. "Come in here," he said at last. He turned his back and walked into the house; and Kentucky followed him. "I thought I understood you to say you'd bought into the Bar Hook," said Elliot as soon as the door was shut. "Now what in all h—l can be your idea in that?"

"I was able to buy some hundreds of head of Bar Hook cattle at a very favorable price," Kentucky told him. "I'll make something on those cattle in the spring."

"In the spring," Elliot repeated. "And where did you expect to hold them through the winter?" "Right where they are." Bob Elliot stared at him again while this soaked in. Then abruptly, unexpectedly, he turned away from Kentucky Jones and began to laugh, as Kentucky had seen him laugh before in Sheriff Hopper's office at Waterman. He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth and seemed to fight the paroxysm, which shook him as if he had been trying to strangle a fit of coughing. "This is rich," he said at last. "Nothing trivial about this transaction, I hope?"

"Hardly."

"So now naturally you want to talk to me." "Naturally. Both technically and practically, for the time being I am a part owner of the Bar Hook. More particularly as regards the Bar Hook grazing rights."

"In short," said Elliot, "what you came here to tell me is that your share in the Bar Hook is a fighting share."

"You can call it that." Bob Elliot lit a tailor-made cigarette. The ironically humorous glance of his frosty blue eyes had a snap like the flick of a whip. "That girl certainly got you in for something," he said.

"Yes!" Kentucky Jones smiled on one side of his mouth. Until now neither had mentioned the incident in the sheriff's office which had terminated when Kentucky Jones had knocked Bob Elliot out. He held his peace, and began the making of a cigarette; but he

same circumstances. And that wasn't so long ago. Not so long ago!" "This gets no place," said Kentucky. "I told you what I came to tell you—that lets me out. From now on look to yourself. And don't drive cattle into Bar Hook range—my range—without expecting them to come right home to roost in a cloud of yells."

"Suits me," Elliot agreed. "Don't think I've forgotten the sore jaw you gave me in that run-in at Waterman. God knows I never hoped for such a chance to smash the two of you at once!"

Kentucky Jones grinned and turned to the door. "That's what I like to hear!" He stepped out to his horse and threw the reins over the animal's head. "Go tell that girl," said Elliot from the door, "that her father can't hide behind you this trip—you ain't big enough in size. And—try to make her tell you what she knows!"

Kentucky was ready to admit—to himself—that that parting shot went home. What he could not escape from was the sure knowledge that Jean Ragland did know something, perhaps several things, which he should have known. But he returned Bob Elliot's sardonic grin.

"Come and see me some time," he said; and he went away from there.

CHAPTER VII

That was a good long-stepping horse Kentucky rode that day; so that it was still a little before the long winter dusk as he reached the half way point on his return ride. His pony pricked its ears forward sharply, and Kentucky brought the horse to a stop while he listened.

Far ahead—whether it came from the Bake Pan or the Bench he could not tell—sounded a curious drum tattoo, a thin popping whispur of gunfire.

For perhaps half a minute the far-off gun talk continued, oddly like the popping of grease in a skillet. Then it stopped abruptly, as if all of the guns had fallen silent together, and in the utter quiet of those vast snowy spaces there was no longer any indication that anything had happened. Kentucky Jones struck the spurs to his horse and

men out here by sun-up tomorrow. I want Bud Jeffreys and Crazy Harris—" he named three others he wanted, and four or five alternates in case some were not to be found. All were men he knew, now laid off for the winter at or near Waterman. "Can you remember those?"

"Sure." "When you've put Harry Wilson on his way, bring a couple of horses and come back. If your father's there—" "He isn't."

"If you see a couple of poles that would make a stretcher, bring 'em along—one of the horses can trail 'em like a travois. We'll take the boys to the Bake Pan camp."

"On the way!" Jean whirled her horse. "Wait! Point out to me where Jim and Billy are."

Kentucky Jones made out a far-off bottle-shaped dot upon the snow among



"Go Back to the Bar Hook," He Told Her.

the other dark dots that were sage and grease-wood; he recognized this as Billy Petersen's fallen horse. He could not see where Jim Humphreys lay. But far off to the southwest he could see the faintly moving specks that were SS riders.

"There they go," he whispered bitterly.

"One of them tried to turn back and over-ride Jim Humphreys," she said, "but Billy Petersen drove him off. I can't see Lee Bishop down there—guess he hasn't got down the trail yet. I'll be back as quick as I can." She turned her horse and was gone in a flurry of hoof-lifted snow.

Kentucky Jones took the Bake Pan trail. Lee Bishop was twenty minutes ahead of him in reaching Billy Petersen and Jim Humphreys; but he had sighted Kentucky on the down trail, and he waited now for him to come up.

"They got Jim Humphreys," said Lee Bishop morosely. "I bet he never lived to hit the ground. If that boy was shot once he was shot half a dozen times."

"What about Billy?" Billy Petersen was leaning against his dead horse, his legs stretched upon his folded saddle blanket. In the falling light his face looked a pale gray-green. "I'm all right," he said without conviction.

"He busted his ankle, some way, when his horse flopped. We better take him over to the lower camp, Kentucky—he thinks he can ride all right if we lead along easy. We'll tie the Jim Humphreys on your horse, I guess. He's lying over here about a hundred yards."

They traveled the half mile to the Bar Hook Bake Pan camp slowly, Lee Bishop and Kentucky walking and leading the horses.

"How did this thing start?" "Me and Jim was coming home," Billy Petersen said, "past our southwest well. The SS had stuck up a kind of a tripod there, like as if to represent a well of their own, and it made us mad. We threw it down. Coming on about a mile farther we run into these four fellers, riding toward us. Three of 'em was together, and one laying back, when we met up. They come up in front of us and stopped. One of 'em said, 'Which one of you is boss here?'"

Jim Humphreys said, "Who the h—l wants to know? One of 'em says, 'I see you threw down our well tripod.' Jim says, 'And what if I did? Well, one word led to another, and finally one of 'em says, 'D—n you, Bishop.'"

"Is Billy hit?" "I don't know. Billy's horse bolted and went into a bucking fit; they were all peppering at him, but he got control of his horse and rode back to cove my Jim. Then his horse somersaulted, and the SS cowboys drew off as he fired from cover."

"Where's Lee Bishop?" "He's riding down the rim trail to Billy and Jim, fit to break his neck. He wanted me to ride like the devil and get help. I didn't think the others would be back home yet, so I came down this trail hoping to pick you up."

"Come on," said Kentucky, jumping his horse up the trail. Jean put her horse into the trail behind him and they pushed on a steady run to where the fork of the trail led up the Bench to the Bar Hook. Here Kentucky stopped his horse and Jean pulled in alongside.

"Go back to the Bar Hook," he told her. "Harry Wilson ought to be back there by now. Tell him to take the best of the two cars and drive like h—l to Waterman. I want five more

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Effort to change the name of the common house fly to typhoid fly is the motive behind a movement started by Dr. L. O. Howard, government entomologist.

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