



## ***THE OUTLAW PILOT***

*By Stephen Payne*

**Herdin' a thousand head of steers through the badlands ain't ever an easy job. And when the job is complicated with sneakin', mutinous cowhands and a gang of outlaws, it's well-nigh impossible—unless, of course, a man like that gun-fannin' Mason is along.**

**T**HE 90 Bar outfit's fall roundup ain't more'n half over when High Man Jack Owens hits camp one evenin', drivin' a light wagon with a new chuck box built into the rear end. Settin' aside him is a wizened old jigger with less hair on his noodle'n thorns on a quakin' aspen, but more mustache than a Texas steer has horns—Raw Beef Oliver, a round-up cook. Forkin' a big iron-gray hoss and leadin' Owens' mount is a tall stranger.

"Bill Swift," Owens sez to me, brisk and sorta gruff-like, "I've sold a thousand two-year-old steers to Cap Dillingham of the 3 R Ranch, west of Cayuse Brakes, provided I can deliver 'em by the twenty-eighth of September. Today's the twenty-first and—"

"And it ain't nowise possible to trail cattle plum' around them Brakes like we'll have to, an' get 'em thar on time," I interrupt.

"By goin' through Cayuse Brakes you'll make it," Owens snaps. "Got over a thousand young steers gathered, ain't you?"

"Yes," I assents. "But—"

"But nothin'!" he cuts me off.

"Here's the man that came from Cap Dillingham with the order for the cattle and a check for a down payment on 'em," pointin' at the tall stranger on the gray. "Mason, meet Bill Swift, my foreman. . . . Mason will pilot you through Cayuse Brakes and Oliver'll cook for you. I'll run the round-up while you're gone."

I size up Mason. A cowpuncher all right, from purty nigh wore-out boots to high-peaked, old, black Stetson. Way he sets his horse; his outfit, plain, serviceable, worn; an' his little mannerisms all show he knows his stuff. A tall, big-shouldered, long-armed jigger; lean-jawed, smooth shaven, with a queer little scar on his left cheek. Hair

almost white; kinda awful, cold gray eyes that look right through yuh.

When he swings off his hoss he moves powerful lame in his left leg, so I inquires if a hoss ever fell on him. He don't act like he heard me.

"Mason!" I sings out. Still no answer, so I step up close and touch his shoulder. Gosh! He jumps high, pivotin' like he'd felt a hot iron. His hands drops toward his black-handled gun with its holster tied down.

"Ain't deaf, are yuh?" inquires I.

"No."

"At's funny. I spoke your name twice."

"I heard yuh," he sez, and his thin lips part in a grin what shows white, even teeth. I've been bossin' cow outfits long enough to know Mason ain't been travelin' long under that name.

We all get busy shapin' up our day herd of young steers—stock we'd just been gatherin' on this round-up—to cut that herd to an even thousand afore we bed the critters.

Owens tells me I'm to take for helpers three of our newest hands, Cal Bassett, Roper Dixon and Cash Martin. A kid name of Jinglin' Jimmy's to be hoss wrangler. These, with Mason and me and Raw Beef Oliver, is my trail herd outfit. Oliver's a good cook, 'ceptin' he always seems to figger a cowboy orter eat his beef raw, and I can depend on him. Some others I ain't so sure of, but the High Man is cranky as an ol' range bull, so I don't beller about the hands he's picked.

"Mighty important that this herd gets to Dillingham on the twenty-eighth," says the big boss to me. "The old crank mightn't take the critters if they're a day late. We'd be in a heck of a fix with the cattle a hundred and thirty miles from home, all wore out and sore-footed. Get 'em through the Cayuse Brakes, Bill. This Mason strikes me as some cowhand."

"Speakin' of that bird," I begins, "did he bring a written order from Dillingham?"

"Uh-huh. Written order. It's O. K. . . . What you s'picious of?"

"Mason hisself," I blurts.

"He's O. K. Dillingham said so. This ain't the first time Cap has bought cattle without seein' 'em. He knows our 90 Bar dogies; knows I give him a square deal. He'll give you his check for thirty thousand dollars to bring home, Bill."

"I'm glad it's a check and not cash," I grunts.

Afore daybreak the round-up outfit is up, my boys ropin' their strings of ponies outa the cavy. We get a string for Mason by takin' one pony from this rider, one from another, and so on. He gets some mighty bum nags, but I don't hear a squawk outa him. Course, he's got his own long-legged, speedy iron-gray, whose brand is so plum' blotched nobody can read it.

Cal Bassett, who thinks he's some bronc-fighter, ropes a roan pony he hates like pizen, and, all unexpected, said roan plants a hind hoof in Bassett's bread basket, knockin' him end over end. Bassett gets up, right on the prod. Tyin' the bronc's head down to its front legs he starts workin' on it with his quirt.

Makin' good time for a lame man, Mason drags that stiff left leg of his cross the ground and sez calm: "You've fought that hoss plenty, runt. Fight me awhile."

"All right, yuh big thus-and-such," rasps Bassett.

And the two of 'em cuts loose. For all he's small, Bassett's one dirty fighter—the kind as pulls a knife when he can't gouge an eye or kick a man in the groin. In 'bout three minutes he sees he's met more'n his match in this cool, steady, hard-hittin' scrapper, and out comes his knife. He lunges in to rip Mason in the belly. Down go both. A wild yell, and up outer the dust rises Mason holdin' Bassett solid. Turnin' the cuss over his knee he gives him the daggondest paddlin' ever.

"Now I'll trade you one of my nags for the roan," says the tall blond jigger with the scar on his left cheek.

Bassett is 'greeable to most anything right then. But I ain't the fool to think he'll forget this spankin'. One of them "get-even" jiggers, he'll nurse a grouch and brood, and if the chance comes will do plenty dirty work to the hombre he hates.

Soon our herd is strung out, headin' for Cayuse Brakes. Me and Mason up on point, the cattle stringin' long behind us, Roper Dixon and Cash Martin in the swing, Bassett bringin' up the drags. Ahead of us is Raw Beef Oliver's wagon and the hoss cavvy driv' by Jinglin' Jimmy. Sure pretty to see the outfit on the move, with the sun jus' comin' up.

**N**OTHIN' much happens till the second night out, when we're camped just outside Cayuse Brakes. The cavvy is grazin' near the wagon. Oliver, me and the wrangler's in camp. The other boys is with the herd, on a hill outa our sight. I'm gobblin' an early supper so I can relieve the rannies, when Mason comes from the herd, ridin' like Billy-be-damned.

Not stoppin' at the wagon, he busts right on to the hoss cavvy, ropes his own big iron-gray and leads him close to the fire. Swingin' from the 90 Bar hoss he's forkin', he begins right quick to change saddles.

"Got to leave you, Bill," he sez over his shoulder. "I know you'll savvy when I tell you I spotted a hombre comin' yonder," pointin' northeast, "who, I ain't carin' to meet."

"Was it a John Law?" pipes up Jimmy.

Mason turns and gives the younger a look outa his cold gray eyes what makes Jinglin' color up scand'lous an' act like he wished he was elsewhere.

"Yes, a John Law. Sheriff Dutton of Far Peak, to be prezact."

"Gol swiggle it, Mason," I yammers,

"you can't up an' quit me in a pinch. Here we are, all set to go into Cayuse Brakes come daylight tomorrer. I ain't got 'nother man as knows that awful country. You can't—"

"For me it's quit and run, or shoot, or get free board in a rock house," Mason snaps, swinging onto his hoss.

"Wait!" I hollers, thinkin' fast 'bout how I got to get them young steers through to the 3 R. A trail herd boss has got one code—*deliver your dogies*. "Mason, it don't make no never-mind to me what you done that a John Law should ride your trail. I won't turn you over."

A dry little smile lights the puncher's lean face. "An' I don't want to quit you, Bill, but—"

"You hop up in that chuck wagon," sez I. "Keep down, so your hat won't show above the side-boards. The beds has been unloaded and the box is 'most empty. . . . Jinglin' Jimmy'll fork your hoss and fog out ahead of the Law."

For a jiffy Mason looks me in the eyes. Then he steps off his iron-gray, jerks off the kid wrangler's hat and slaps his own on Jimmy's head. "Ride like hell, south! The Law can't keep in sight of your dust on this Poncho hoss. What you do later depends on you, kid." Mason climbs into the wagon.

Jimmy gets the idea instanter. Bein' the kind of kid you can bet your last nickel on, he's up on that gray and gone like a bat outa hell. None too soon, for foggin' down the slope from where the herd is, comes an officious lookin' hombre on a big black horse, Sheriff Dutton of Far Peak.

"Hi, stop!" he yells at Jinglin' Jimmy.

Course Jimmy don't stop. Sheriff Dutton passes our camp travelin' like a bullet. A hundred yards beyond our hoss cavvy he reins up sudden, turns his black a little sideways and jerkin' a rifle to his shoulder, empties the magazine after the kid and the iron-gray hoss. Some of them lead slugs

musta come powerful close to Jimmy, but he keeps foggin'.

The John Law abandons the chase. "You the boss?" he snorts at me, returnin' to our camp.

"I admit it," sez I. "What the hell's eatin' on you?"

"Reckon you didn't know you had a wanted man with your outfit," he returns. "But all the same you should ha' stopped Lame Larson afore he lit out."

"Lame Larson? Who's he? What's he done?"

"Damned outlaw! Belongs with Black Yardley's bandit gang."

"Who's Black Yardley?" I asks.

"Hell's bells! Don't ask me fool questions," raps the ringy sheriff. "You know who Yardley is as well as I do."

But I don't know, never havin' heard of Black Yardley. "How come you're here, Sheriff?" sez I.

"Feller driftin' through Far Peak let fall as a blond crippled jasper, white hair, scar on cheek, ridin' a gray bronc, blotched brand, had been seen with a trail herd of 90 Bar cattle."

"That so?" I drawls skeptical. "Wal, you're barkin' up the wrong tree."

"Lame Larson," snaps the sheriff, "jus' now split the breeze away from here. What's more, Mr. Trail Herd Boss, them punchers what's with your herd now told me plenty. Hell! a two-thousand-dollar reward slipped through my fingers."

"Two-thousand-dollar reward!" I gasps, flabbergasted.

"Yep. . . . Reckon I'll eat with yuh."

"Sure. Fill up your belly. Stay all night, too. I wouldn't think o' lettin' you ride away empty and sleepy."

But I ain't sincere. Doggone that John Law! I wish he'd vamoose an' never come back. In the chuck wagon is the only man as can pilot our herd through Cayuse Brakes,

the man as was trusted by Cap Dillingham—a wanted outlaw.

Dutton swings off. Raw Beef Oliver shows him some of his famous grub in the dutch ovens. Loadin' up his plate, the sheriff sets down on one of two bed rolls what's close together with a tarp thrown over 'em. I see him bend and kinder squint down under that tarp. Gosh! He hops up sudden an' throws that tarp aside, exposin' Jinglin' Jimmy's saddle!

"Who the hell does this kack belong to?"

I jus' gulp, but ol' Raw Beef, who I know musta hid the saddle, grunts, unconcerned, "Why, what's wrong? It's mine."

Dutton looks skeptical. "What you doin' with a saddle?"

"Got to leave the chuck wagon an' use a pack outfit to cross that dang country," replies Raw Beef, wavin' his hand at them hills on our west. "I bring my outfit 'long, of course."

The sheriff sets down and laps up his grub. I throw Raw Beef a plum' grateful look. He's right 'bout us havin' to take to a pack hoss outfit, but his old hull is in the wagon!

"If I was you, Sheriff," I remarks, "I'd trail that outlaw. If I could spare any men I'd send 'em with you, too."

"Thanks, I don't need help. I've decided I am goin' to track that cuss. I'll camp on his trail t'night."

Jumpin' up, he forks his black. "I still claim you orter held the son-of-a-gun," he snaps at me. "If he comes near your outfit again, grab him!"

"Sure 'preciate your backin' my play, Oliver," sez I to Raw Beef, awful relieved to see that John Law ride away.

"Hell! you an' me is old-timers," sez Raw Beef, partin' his 'normous mustache and squirtin' tobacco juice into the fire. "We got to deliver these yere dogies to Cap

Dillingham, we have. The Law's outa sight. Come eat, Mason."

Mason climbs outa the wagon. I swing onto my saddled hoss, rope a nag for Mason outa the cavy—he can use Jinglin's saddle—and lope out to relieve the boys with the herd.

"Sheriff Dutton get that bandit?" inquires Cal Bassett, the first waddy I run onto. "We sure wanted to see what was goin' on, but these danged steers was so ringy we couldn't leave 'em."

"Mason's still with us, Cal."

"Wh—at?"

Cash Martin and Roper Dixon lopes up to me and Bassett. I sez to all three hands: "What Mason's done, or what he is, don't make a damn bit of difference to us, savvy? With us he's no outlaw. Jus' a cowpuncher, one of this outfit. All of yuh savvy?"

Roper Dixon says he does. A rawboned six-footer, Dixon. A rough, ornery jasper; hair like a black hoss's mane; black eyes; busted nose; knuckles all broke from scrappin'. A plenty tough nut, but one of the best hands with a rope ever I seen.

"But, man, that reward—" begins Cash Martin, a sandy-complected, sawed-off, barrel-chested jigger. Cash's eyes is jus' about as shifty as Cal Bassett's.

"I savvy," interrupts Bassett, lookin' every place but at me.

Without sayin' nothin' more the three punchers head for the wagon. But I'm powerful uneasy about them jaspers. Dunno whether I can depend on 'em or not. Mason rides out to join me. The steers has quieted down and is restin' easy, so me and him has a few words, nightherdin' there under the stars.

"Wal, cowboy," I start the confab, "are you goin' to see me through with these cattle?"

"You bet your boots, I am," he replies emphatic. "Deliverin' this herd is as much my job as your'n, Bill. You see, Cap

Dillingham is dependin' on me."

"So?" sez I. "Dillingham knowed you was—what you was, when he hired you, Mason?"

"Yes."

"That reward on your cabeza straight goods?"

The lean-jawed, blond hombre nods his head. "Howsoever, Bill Swift, I'll give you my word I'm tryin' now to ride a straight trail. 'Nuff said."

"Just a minute," I persists. "Who's Yardley and where does he hang out?"

"I passed my word that I'd never say nothin' about Black Yardley." Mason gives me a look outer his steely eyes that kinda makes my flesh creep, and he leaves me abrupt.

At daybreak Jinglin' Jimmy hasn't returned, nor has Sheriff Dutton showed up again. We pack some ponies with beds and grub and head our herd into them Cayuse Brakes, Mason takin' the point. 'Tain't long afore our thousand head of steers is strung out like a snake, twistin' between little hills, climbing up some steep slopes and droppin' down others. A mile-long snake, windin' through that trackless country; avoidin' bogholes, blind canyons and sheer cliffs.

Along about noon—we ain't intendin' to stop for dinner until the drive for the day is finished—big Roper Dixon jogs up aside me where I'm workin' in the swing.

"Bill," he sez, "tain't up to me to say nothin' 'bout what's your business, but did it occur to you as how Mason is probably leadin' this herd straight to some rustler pals?"

"Dixon, that hombre brought the High Man a letter from Cap Dillingham. Dillingham trusts him."

The puncher fixes his black eyes on me and curls his lips derisive. "Who sez Dillingham trusts him? That letter might ha' been forged!"

"I trust Mason, too," I come back

proddy. "Better drop back 'longside the herd, Roper."

Dixon turns his hoss. "Thought I'd put yuh wise to what me an' Martin an' Bassett all think," he remarks. "Mebbe soon your eyes'll be opened plenty."

Maybe they will at that. Food for mighty uneasy thought, them words of Roper's.

'Long 'bout four in the afternoon we reach a sizable open basin, and Mason ridin' back to meet me, says, "Camp here. Wood, water and grass. Yonder's an old corral, too—if you got any need for it."

"I hasn't," sez I. "But it looks like somebody branded cattle here one time."

"One time?" Mason sez, grinnin'. "I rode to that corral afore you hove in sight. It's been used right recent."

Thinkin' 'bout what Roper Dixon had said, I grunts, "Recent, huh? You know who used it, Mason?"

The outlaw looks plum' through me. "Bill Swift, it's a wonder to me you ever growed up or got old on the range—the damn fool questions you ask." Pourin' up into the open area come the cattle, Martin, Dixon, Bassett appear one by one. Lastly our cavvy, Raw Beef Oliver, and with him Jinglin' Jimmy. I spur to the kid. "Sure tickled to see you, Jimmy. Did you throw the sheriff off your trail?"

"Say, I had heaps of fun with that John Law. I just imagined I was—was Lame Larson, outlaw, bein' chased by a sheriff." Jinglin's eyes is shinin'. "Yeah, I throwed him off all jake. This yere gray hoss is one humdinger. Whar'd you get him, Mason?"

"That's a hell of a question to ask an outlaw," pipes up Cal Bassett in that high, squeaky voice of his'n.

Mason throws a look at Bassett what I wouldn't want throwed my way, and the confab breaks up abrupt. That night everything 'pears jake. Mason and me stands first guard over the steers. Bassett, Martin and Dixon is to stand second. Two shifts,

half the night each, us bein' short-handed and havin' a sizable bunch of cattle to ride round. .

I'm in bed and sound asleep when hell busts loose. A shot and a yell wakes me and I pop from under my tarp with a gun in my fist. It's light enough for me to see two men battlin' a third, an' another one lyin' on the ground groanin'. I rush toward the battlers. Roper Dixon and Cal Bassett is wrestlin' somethin' fierce and terrible with Mason. As I run, they down him and hold him. Raw Beef Oliver jumps 'longside me and we both stumble over the hombre on the ground—Cash Martin, shot through the chest and dyin'.

"Hey, you rannies!" I beller. "What—"

"Stand back!" hollers Bassett. "We've nabbed this danged bandit!"

"The son-of-a-buzzard shot Martin afore I could grab his gun arm," Roper sings out, husky, like he's outa wind, powerful jasper though he is.

"Say, you coyotes, who's with the herd?" I yelp, thinkin' of the cattle immejit. "Nobody? Doggone your hides, what d'you think—"

"We've done our thinkin', Bill Swift," Bassett squeals. "Me and Roper and Martin figgered this out. I admit I had it in for Lame Larson—alias Mason—anyhow."

"But I'm tellin' you to let Mason alone an' forget this foolishness!" I order, emphatic.

"Foolishness?" Bassett comes back plenty insolent. "I know what you'll say, Bill Swift. You'll say we got to stay with your herd. We say 'T' hell with 'em!' Neither me nor Roper Dixon gives two whoops 'bout them dogies. We're c'lectin' two thousand bucks reward. Put that in your pipe an' smoke it."

"Furthermore," rumbles Dixon, still settin' on Mason's head, "this cussed gun-slinger has salivated Cash Martin. D'yuh think yuh can argue with us after that?"

"Argument's open right now with hot lead," I beller, and old Raw Beef leaves abrupt, to race back to his bed. The old-timer had forgot to bring his gun when he jumped outa his blankets. I'm scairt our cattle, unguarded, will stampede any second. That one shot might ha' roused 'em. But in the followin' second I hear the cavvy bells on our ponies tinklin' up in the basin and hear Jinglin' Jimmy callin' to the cattle, "Sho' now, dogies, don't you spook. Quiet down, dogies."

Some kid, that Jimmy. He's left his hosses and is tryin' to hold the cattle, 'stead of rushin' to camp to see what the hell, like ninety-nine out of a hundred kids would ha' done.

"Hot lead, huh?" Roper Dixon rumbles. "Take 'er in the guts then, Bill."

His lead-chucker vomits fire and a bullet cuts whiskers offen my left cheek. I'm needin' a shave bad, but not that kind. My smoker makes talk, too. Its forty-five slug catches Roper in the shoulder, knockin' him backwards and down, and like a panther, Mason, freed of Roper's weight, bounds to his feet.

Bassett is draggin' out his Colt, but Mason catches hold of that little cur, and whippin' him round his head like he'd whirl a rope, he lets him fly. Bassett's hurled 'bout twenty feet, fetch in' up against a rock. Then Mason pivots and jumps on Roper Dixon, who yells.

"'Nuff! I'm shot."

I run over to Bassett and grab him. He ain't knocked out, just woozy. But he's lost his smoker and his appetite for fight. Here comes old Raw Beef to help me and Mason. The scrap's over and the dogies ain't stampeded. I know Jinglin' Jimmy is all as has kept 'em from quittin' the earth.

"If you can handle this pair of lizards, I'll go out on herd," Mason hollers at me.

"Go, and you too, Raw Beef. Hustle!" I sings out.

The cook and the outlaw fork the hosses what Bassett and Roper had been ridin' and lope away. I drag Bassett up close to Roper and consider what to do. Heck of a mess! Cash Martin dead. Dixon wounded bad. I can't depend on Bassett no more. All this 'cause I got in my outfit an outlaw with a reward on his head. Can me and Raw Beef and Jimmy and Mason get that herd through? We got to.

"Bassett," I sez, "you're a damned snake in the grass. Raised plenty hell, didn't you?"

"I ain't forgettin' 'twas you who shot Roper," Bassett snarls. "Him and Martin was both my pards. Damned if I don't hate yuh, Bill Swift, as much as I do Lame Larson. I'll—"

"I'll tell you what you'll do, Bassett," I snap. "You'll either take Roper Dixon to Far Peak to a doctor, or else you'll stay with him and nurse him."

With that I tie Bassett, build up the fire, and bandage Roper Dixon's shoulder. The bullet busted his collar bone and tore plum' through. Pretty bad. Some outfit I've got on this trip through Cayuse Brakes! However, I figger Bassett'll sure take care of Roper. So I'll leave them two behind; leave 'em a couple of ponies, grub and a bed—but no gun.

The only thing Mason says to me is: "Sorry I had to shoot Martin. Heard 'em comin', you see. Jumped outa bed, saw two of 'em with their smokers out, shot one, and Roper grabbed me from behind."

At daybreak the cattle string out, Mason takin' the point, Raw Beef Oliver the swing, with Jinglin' Jimmy followin'. I'll bring up the drags and the horses. The dogies is stringin' out, the leaders outa sight, and I'm still at camp packin' the last pack nag when Sheriff Dutton rides up.

Hailstones in hell! Ain't I troubles enough without that rooster poppin' up at such a time! Course he sees Bassett, who ain't hurt none, and Roper Dixon, who's in

bad shape. Also Martin's body what I have ordered Bassett to bury later.

"I heard shots las' night," sez the hefty sheriff, scratchin' his meaty nose. "Seems to ha' been trouble here. Also it may int'rest yuh to know, Bill Swift, that I picked up the tracks of Lame Larson's hoss. He joined your outfit again."

"Sheriff," squeals Bassett, "Larson never left this outfit. He was with it all the time. He still is."

"So-ho!" Dutton's bushy eyebrows go up. "And what's happened here now, Bassett?"

"Lame Larson, or Mason as we call him, killed that man yonder, Cash Martin, and Swift shot Roper Dixon."

"Bill, yuh're under arrest," rumbles Sheriff Dutton, whippin' out his smoker. But I'm expectin' somethin' of the kind, and my ol' hogleg's in my fist, pointin' at Dutton's nose, as his lead-chucker clears leather.

"Drop it!" I yelps.

"D'yuh mean yuh're resistin' an—" the astounded jigger begins.

"Drop it! Keep back, Bassett, you snake, or I'll put out one of them slinky eyes of your'n!" Dutton's smoker slides to the ground. "Now then, Sheriff," I proceeds, "I'm tellin' you that Bill Swift don't let nobody keep him from deliverin' the cattle he has got to deliver. Either you'll give me your word to keep your nose outa my business until Cap Dillingham gets this herd, or—"

"I'll promise yuh nothin'," blusters the sheriff. "If you make me a prisoner you'll sure suffer for it. Why, by grab, man, what you've done—"

"Doggone you, you'll ride with me," sez I, and I relieve the John Law of his carbine and tie him to his horse, tyin' up the bridle reins on, said horse so I can drive it along with the cavvy.

Cal Bassett watches the sheriff and me ride away. I'd give a heap to know what that

cuss intends doin'. If there's any manhood 'bout him a-tall he won't desert Roper Dixon. How I wish Roper hadn't forced me to shoot him, wish he'd turned out to be a hand I could tie to like ol' Raw Beef and Jinglin' Jimmy.

An hour later I'm pokin' along behind the drag end o' the herd when Jinglin' Jimmy drops back to speak to me. The kid's big blue eyes sure open wide as he sees the fumin' sheriff tied to his hoss, but he says nothin' 'bout that.

"Dogies goin' all jake, Jimmy?" I inquires.

"Yep, we're makin' it fine, considerin' how short-handed we are. That Mason is some cowhand. Never seen a rannie what knows how to point a herd quite so good as he does."

"A cowhand, yeah, but I'll tell the world he's caused me plenty grief. . . . What's on your mind, Jimmy?"

He knees his hoss 'longside mine.

"Bill, las' night, when I was guardin' the cavvy an' you an' Mason was on nightherd with the steers, we had a visitor."

"Huh?"

"A geezer on hossback. I dunno where he came from. He gave a low, funny whistle as he rid toward the dogies, an' Mason answered that whistle. Then I seen Mason an' this stranger talkin' together."

"Kid, yuh didn't hear what they said?"

"Nope. I was too far away, an' I dassent try to get closer."

"'Nother outlaw, most likely," I grunts. "Feller 'vaporated hisself into the night, I s'pose?"

"Yes. D'yuh think, boss, as Mason is goin' to turn this herd over to rustlers, like Cal Bassett said he'd do?"

"I dunno what to think, Jimmy. But what thoughts I'm thinkin' is damned uneasy ones, if yuh savvy?"

"I savvy," says the kid. "But what we goin' to do?"



“Nothin’ till the showdown comes. Kid, if we didn’t have Mason pilotin’ the herd through this twisted country we’d be plum’ lost in an hour. Yeah, we’d jamb our cattle up into a blind canyon first rattle outa the box, a canyon we’d have to back-track out of. Mason avoids all them traps. I’m jus’ hopin’ he’s shootin’ square. If he ain’t. . . .” I throws out my hands expressive, to show how helpless we’d be.

“I’ll back your hand the limit,” sez Jimmy, and again rides forward to the swing of the snakelike windin’ herd. Somethin’ comes up in my throat as I gaze after the kid. He’ll sure do to take along.

THEN, as though we ain’t troubles enough, up comes a terrific hail storm. The dogies won’t face the chunks of peltin’ ice. They bunches up on a hilltop ‘bout the size of a dime and in a gully ‘bout the width of a toothpick, while me an’ Mason, Raw Beef an’ Jimmy tries to keep the idjut critters from stampedin’. Poundin’ hail. Lightnin’, glarin’ and vivid. Rumblin’ thunder. In spite of our slickers we’re all soaked to the hide. So is our beds and everything on our pack horses.

The storm passes as sudden as it had come, leavin’ the ground all white with hail stones. Mason whips a little bunch o’ dogies outa the main herd, forces ‘em to travel an’ lead the rest. We go on and on and on. ‘Bout three in the afternoon, on top of a high ridge half a mile to our right, I catch sight of six horsemen.

Gosh! I has an all-gone, sinkin’ feelin’ in the pit of my empty belly. I has more’n a hunch them six hombres ain’t watchin’ us for their health. Dang this cussed Brakes country anyhow! Jack Owens orter ha’ knowed better than to try and put cattle through it. So had Cap Dillingham.

But did Dillingham really hire Mason? Was it really Dillingham’s letter Owens got, and Dillingham’s check for a down payment

on the steers? If so, Dillingham was a fool to trust Mason, an outlaw with two thousand bucks on his noodle. In the night Mason met some jasper he knowed and never told me ‘bout it. Hell! If he was aimin’ to shoot square with me, he should ha’ explained the thing. I’ll just have it out with that lame blond jasper right now!

But I can’t leave my job of bringin’ up the drags and ridin’ close herd on my ringy prisoner, Sheriff Dutton. So I do nothin’, Mason don’t stop our drive till twilight, and when the drag end of the herd finally drifts into the halted bunch, I see our pilot has picked out a flat place on top of a high hill. There’s grass on the hill, but about nine rocks to every square foot. Mason, ridin’ back to meet me, sez this is the only place within ten miles big enough for a bedground where we can circle round the herd, and maybeso the dogies can adjust their bones to them boulders.

“Humph,” I grunts sour. “How much further through this snake country, Mason?”

“Two days’ drive yet, and another day after that to hit Dillingham’s ranch.”

“Mason, yuh know anything about them six riders I seen on a ridge?”

“I seen ‘em, too.”

“Yeah? You know ‘em?”

“Bill Swift, I’ve mentioned afore that you’re too damned curious for your own good.”

“Look here, Mason,” I beller. Then I stop and don’t go on. What the heck’s the use of bawlin’ him out?

“I’ll unpack the other hosses,” sez he, “but you’d better take the pack off that ‘un,” pointin’ to the sheriff’s nag.

So I unload Dutton and tie him to a tree, but tellin’ him if he’ll agree to behave hisself an’ let my cowpunchers alone, I’ll untie him. Dutton won’t agree to nothin’. “I’ll have two prisoners when I leave this outfit,” he spits. “You as well as Lame Larson, unless I put a bullet between your damned eyes.”

Mason gets supper, and it's some meal 'spite of what the hail storm did to our grub. Beds are soaked plum' through, and since the sun's down there ain't much chance to dry 'em, though I do spread some blankets out close to the fire. Jimmy and Raw Beef hold the hungry, tired cattle while me and Mason eat and I feed the sheriff. Then we relieve the other boys and stand guard till midnight.

We're packin' up to hit the trail again at dawn when all of a sudden appear seven riders. They pop up over the edge of the hill and are right at our camp afore I see 'em. Jinglin' Jimmy and Raw Beef are with the herd, stringin' west off the rocky hill and up a gully, grazin' as they travel. Me and Mason and the tied sheriff is at camp.

I just stand like I was petrified while I size up them newcomers. Six of 'em I has never seen afore, but the seventh is Cal Bassett. And say! There's plenty of triumph in that geezer's slinky eyes. Mason, busy packin' a pony, keeps right on workin'.

"Mornin'," rumbles a whalin' big hombre with an eagle-beak nose stickin' through a nest of black whiskers. Two of his sidekicks also has plenty whiskers. The other three is acquainted with razors. All of 'em knows what well-dressed, tough nuts what lived in the open ought to wear—heavy shirts, greasy overalls, boots, big black hats.

"Mornin', cowboys," sez I, figgerin' I'd jus' as well call 'em cowboys and act sociable. "You work for some outfit round here?"

"Ain't you the inquisitive hombre," returns black whiskers. "We work for ourselves. Since I met this friend of your'n," indicatin' Cal Bassett, "I know your name, Bill Swift. I'm Black Yardley."

"Pleased to meet yuh," I lie. For I never was less pleased to meet anybody.

"I take it you got hoss sense, Bill Swift," Yardley proceeds. "Yuh'll notice yuh ain't got no more chance than a jackrabbit in the

center of a coyote pack. So don't reach for your lead-chucker."

"No savvy your line o' talk," I sez, just stallin' along.

"I'll explain some," sez Yardley. "I'm a great talker anyhow. That tall blond jigger, packin' the hoss, used to be one of my men. And—"

"Used to be, huh?" the words pop outa my mouth.

The burly, black-whiskered hombre nods emphatic, then shouts: "Hey, don't yuh step round on the other side o' that hoss, Larson! And keep your hands away from your guns!"

"Guns?" I think, and for the first time notice that Mason is wearin' two this mornin'. He has turned to face our visitors and now without a word he rolls a cig, his hands steady as rock.

"You're real interestin', Yardley," sez I. "Tell me some more. I'm one curious jasper." Uneasy? Gosh, I'm on tenterhooks. Them six men and Cal Bassett settin' there on their hosses all abreast, stony-faced, lynx-eyed, make me squirm.

"Cayuse Brakes is our country," Yardley resumes. "Couple of weeks ago, Lame Larson up and told me he was quittin' us. 'Boss,' he sez to me, 'I'm fed up on this damned business. Maybe I can ride a straight trail if somebody'll give me the chance.'"

"And I agreed never to squeal on you, Yardley," Mason breaks in, harsh. "Also you promised to lay off me and give me a chance. So what the devil you doin' here?"

"Hell!" snorts the black-whiskered outlaw. "You know why I'm here." He turns his attention to me, continuin', "After Larson left us, the next thing we knowed of his doings we seen him pilotin' a trail herd 'cross my country. Wal, naturally I figgered he was goin' to turn a nice little trick for us, so, night afore last, I sent one of my boys, Whistlin' Smith, to talk to him."

I can't help givin' Mason a dirty look. "The hombre you met in the night an' never

told me 'bout," I growls.

Black Yardley chuckles grim and ugly. "I was some s'prised when Whistlin' Smith reported back to me that Larson—Mason as yuh call him—hadn't no intention o' turnin' this 90 Bar herd over to his old pards. S'prised—and damned annoyed."

I jus' stare at the outlaw boss. He goes on: "Yesterday mornin', Bill, I seen what you done to the fool sheriff. I also seen the two men what was left behind your herd. One shot bad, the other—wal, I rid up and talked to him," pointin' a dirty thumb at Cal Bassett. "Cal was all-fired ringy at yuh, Bill, so he fitted into my scheme plenty good."

Bassett throws a triumphant look at me. "I get the reward on Lame Larsen," he 'nounces. "That is, unless Larsen decides to talk turkey with Yardley. Course my good friend, Black Yardley, takes this 90 Bar herd."

"Yardley, you can't take the dogies," speaks up Mason, cold and grim. "Remember, you agreed to let me alone."

"But you was damn fool enough to pilot a herd worth thirty or forty thousand bucks across my territory," snaps the black-whiskered outlaw. "If yuh think I'm goin' to lay off, you're plum' loco."

"You goin' back on your word? You double-crossin' me?" Mason wants to know.

"Put it anyway yuh like," retorts Yardley, "but I aim to have these cattle. However, I'll give you the chance to join my outfit again, Larson. Join us, and Cal Bassett don't collect no reward on your scalp. Turn my offer down and Bassett collects two thousand bucks. Savvy?"

An instant's tense silence. I don't seem to count none in this drama, but I'm lookin' at the man who does, the tall, lame, thin-lipped and cold-eyed rider, Mason, or Lame Larsen.

His piercin' eyes—eyes now narrowed to pinpoints—is tryin' to tell me somethin', but I don't get the message.

"Hombre," Yardley goes on to Mason, "yuh only got one choice. Seven to two, we are," throwin' me a contemptuous glance and sneerin' to show how slight is my chance and Mason's. "We can bullet-riddle both of yuh afore you can say Jack Robinson."

"Yardley, you're a double-crosser. You've gone back on your word to me, yuh polecat," Mason hisses. "Here's my answer!"

I'm lookin' straight at him, yet I fail to see his two Colts leave their holsters. I see 'em in his hands, held low at his hips, both muzzles spurtin' flame. Deafenin' roar and crash of shots. Pandemonium among the seven horsemen. I crouch, snake out my own barker and begin' throwin' lead. Horses leapin' every which way, kickin', squealin'. Dust! Din! I can't see more'n half of what's goin' on. I'm busy pumpin' bullets at Cal Bassett, who's tryin' to get me. All the rest of that gang seem hell-bent on downin' Mason. But Yardley's saddle is empty, his horse sky-hootin' away yonderly. 'Nother hombre has keeled offen his bronc, but his foot has hung in a stirrup and his crazy hoss is kickin' the man's head to a pulp while it stampedes over the rim of the hill and outa sight.

Mason's first two shots has settled Yardley and one other, but four more men throw lead at him. Outa the tail of my eye, as I knock Bassett offen his nag, I see Mason hurled back by a forty-five slug. But he lands sitting and his two guns flame on. A hoss leaps towards him, a wild-eyed killer on the hoss. I shoot that hombre through the head. Another of my shots brings down a bronc that squeals horrible and kicks, the rider pinned under the critter.

Then all in the space of time it takes to empty a six-shooter that battle's over. Silence, save for a thuddin' of hoofs in the distance, squeals of wounded horses and groans of men. I take stock of the situation.

Yardley dead. One bandit gone yonderly somewhere, draggin' from his stirrup. Cal Bassett gone west. I've somehow escaped 'cept for a few minor nicks. Two more Yardley outlaws has cashed in and the other two is shot up terrible. Three horses so bad hurt I put 'em outa their misery.

Mason is lyin' stretched out on the ground. Quick as I've seen there ain't no more danger from the toughs I run to him.

"Mason, Mason, tell me you ain't dead."

He sets up slow, blood on his face, blood all over his shirt. "Not dead," he mutters. "Nope. I'll pilot them cattle through the rest of the way."

I catch a pack pony and soon get some rags to bandage that gun-fightin' outlaw. Three times he's been hit in the body and has got a scalp wound besides. Not a whimper outa him. But thunder! I know he can't live long.

Here, speedin' to camp, come Raw Beef and Jimmy. They stare at the awful scene and Jimmy turns alkali white, but Raw Beef growls, "Damn, I missed out on—"

"The rip-snortin'est scrap ever," sez I. Then I walk over to Sheriff Dutton, who's been a spectator to the whole business. "You willin' to take charge of them two wounded bandits and go back and see how Roper Dixon is makin' out since Cal Bassett left him?" I inquire.

"I'll be glad to," says the awed sheriff. "What's more, Bill Swift, I'm forgettin' what you done to me. I'm also forgettin' all about wantin' to nab Lame Larson. By grab, he's all man, he is!"

"Then let's both get busy," sez I, cuttin' ropes on the John Law and lettin' him up.

The sheriff takes a good look at Mason. "Lordy," he says, "you cowpunchers take the cake. That is you real, steel-true cowpunchers—you and Mason and Jimmy and ol' Raw Beef. All you could think of,

Bill, when I wanted to arrest Mason, was you had to get the herd through. Same when I arrested you. You bucked the law, regardless o' consequences. And now Mason, shot all to hell, dyin' as he rides, will still pilot this herd."

In that last sentence I figger the sheriff pays Mason the highest compliment he or any man could. For Lame Larson, or Mason, outlaw, gunfighter and cowboy, all shot up though he is, does pilot our 90 Bar herd on across Cayuse Brakes. The second day and the third he has to be tied to his saddle. Sometimes he's outa his head, but he swears he'll kill me if I make him get off to die. But on we goes, plumb through the badlands.

**S**UNDOWN of the third day after the battle—the twenty-eighth of September—we reach Cap Dillingham's ranch. I'm ridin' with Mason up on point when Dillingham hisself lopes out to meet us.

"Got 'em here on time, I see," says the rancher. Then lookin' sharp at the tall, blond cowpuncher aside me, whose face is white as a cigarette paper, body swayin' in the saddle, "Great Scott, Mason, what's happened?"

Mason musters a grin. "Played the game square with you, Cap," he whispers faint, and then loses consciousness.

An hour later we has got him to bed and Dillingham, who is somethin' of a medical jigger hisself, has cleaned his wounds and bandaged 'em proper. Me and Raw Beef Oliver and Jimmy is waitin' with misery on our faces for Cap's verdict.

"Will—will Mason go west, Cap?" I asks husky.

"No," he answers emphatic. "You did a good job of first aid, Bill, and that rip-tootin' outlaw has an amazing constitution. Also plenty of fighting grit. He'll live to be foreman of my outfit."