

RON OLSON

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

**Bannack
Publishing
Co.**

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

This Title Is
Number 1 In Bannack's All-Family Western
Series

All Rights Reserved
Copyright © 1984 by Bannack Publishing Company

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part,
without the written permission of Bannack Publishing
Company

Cover art by Ted Walters
2526 Lewis Avenue
Billings, Montana 59102

ISBN 0-916027-00-7

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 84-70024

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN FOR MARIAN

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The late afternoon sunlight stabbed at the eyes of the two men whenever they looked up from the rutted wagon road they were following. They rode with heads bent and hat brims pulled over sweat dampened foreheads. They sat slumped in the saddles as if they had been melted into them by the punishing summer heat. The horses seemed to understand that they were to follow the iron hard ruts of the wagon trail and did so without any apparent attention by their riders.

One of the men rode a full horse-length ahead of the other and every few minutes took the pain of the sun in his eyes as he squinted a quick glance at the trail ahead. Less noticeable was the fact that his gray eyes were scanning the grassland and clumps of sagebrush as if watching for, even expecting, something to suddenly break the monotony of the sweltering ride. The second rider, too, seemed to be tense and expectant. His dark eyes darted from the back of the tall rider in front of him to the low line of hills ahead, then to his right and then to his left, searching the little hollows that rose and fell in the long stretch of prairie.

Neither of the two spoke and each man could have been alone, plodding against the rays of the sun - except for the rope. The brown frayed horsehair rope, dallied around the horn of the saddle on the lead horse, swayed loosely back to where it was tied high on the neck of the following horse then looped Indian- fashion over its nose and lip.

As the horses and riders moved ever closer to the parched line of a long bluff directly ahead of them, they could see a slight sag in the horizon, which, as they approached, sharpened into a v-shaped notch like the rear sight of a Winchester.

Those who had traveled this way before them, the trappers, the hunters, and then the settlers who bounced on wagon seats and trudged along side the dusty wagons, must have often begun to imagine they had Oregon in their sights as they watched the green cottonwood trees appear in the brown slot.

When they were just close enough to see that the wagon road dropped down into the Platte River valley, the leader pulled up and sat looking at the narrow pass.

The second rider spoke first. "Maybe your hand ain't so all fired pat after all. Might be a good time to fold."

As he spoke, his small eyes blinked round then narrow betraying an apprehension not shown by his unmoving slouch and bowed

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

shoulders. His rough uneven face was stained where sweat and dust had come together and been smeared by his efforts to wipe them off. His wrists had been tied to the saddle horn and he had to content himself with rubbing his cheeks with his hunched shoulders. His collarless shirt had, in better times, been a pasty yellow, but now it was a sodden and limp, dirt-colored rag that served only to shield him from the burning sun.

A long hot minute passed and, hearing no answer to his taunt, he tried again. The words came as a parched whine that was distorted by his thin cracked lips, "Think you're a one man wolf pack do yuh? Well, that shore looks like a wolf trap to me."

His tied hands wouldn't let him point and the other had never turned around to look at him anyhow, but both knew full well what was meant. The heat bore down and seemed to make the silence heavier until it was too much to bear and the drooping man with the tied hands spoke again, this time as much to himself as to his captor who continued to ignore him.

"Damn heat's enough to kill a man. No wind, no breeze, not even any shade. Place ain't fit fer lizards." Then, more to the tall figure ahead of him, "Just gonna to sit here all day and melt, wolf man? What say we mosey on up to them trees, can't be much more than a couple of miles."

Without a word the other abruptly swung himself off his mount with a smooth catlike grace, unfastened the flap of his saddlebag and produced a knife. It was a shortened bowie of the type popular with small animal trappers. Its steel blade flashed in the slanting sun like a signal mirror and winked reflected light across his face as he turned and walked toward the other.

The thin stubble covered face twitched, the eyes again alternately squinted into thin lines then popped into round ovals and before he could speak or utter a sound, the knife flashed and the ropes binding his hands fell free. Then, even before he realized that he was no longer bound, a hand with the strength of iron seized almost the entire front of his dirty shirt. With a heave he was off his horse and carried, with the toes of his scuffed, patched boots barely touching the ground, to the lead horse. As quickly as he had been snatched from one horse, he was planted in the saddle of the other. A leather thong came out of the saddle bag as the knife went back in and, with a few deft, firm jerks and whirls of two big brown hands, he was tied again, now on the big chestnut of his captor instead of his own mottled gray.

Then one big hand swept the crumpled flat brown hat from the startled head of the remounted and retied man and almost before the sun

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

could land on the matted dark hair, it was covered with the high crowned hat of the tall man who seemed to move with a fluid motion that defied the heat and the hours of riding that would have exhausted most men.

In a sudden burst of protest, the captive jerked at the tight thongs and twisted to sputter at his unspeaking captor. "Yuh can't ... Yuh won't get away with this... Nobody's goin' to be fooled," he stammered. Then, threatening loudly, trying to hide his growing fear, he blurted out, "I hope they gut shoot yuh, let yuh beg. I wanna see yuh when the magpies pick out yuhr damn eyes."

By now the other had donned the flat crowned hat of his prisoner, mounted the gray and walked him up close to the big chestnut. With an unseen nudge the little procession again began plodding toward the notch in the hills and the green trees beyond. The horses, either rested by the stop or somehow sensing the water of the Platte, now walked a bit faster and the hills which guarded the road came up on the right and on the left. Anyone in the hills would be looking down on the riders, on their chests as they approached and on their backs as they moved up to what seemed to be the very end of the road.

The foremost rider now looked anxiously from one side to the other and twisted his body in the saddle as far as his tied arms would permit. The tension of the unseen weighed on him and suddenly he yelled, "Boys, this is me, Eli, Eli Lupe."

The outburst was cut off by the sudden hard pressure in his side of what he knew was the other's revolver. There was no mistaking the meaning of the jab. Its message was strong enough to overcome any other fear he had and he did not yell again.

Abruptly, they found themselves perched high on a steep bluff that formed a nearly perfect semicircle around a large, flat, grass-covered stretch of bottom land that sloped gently down to the edge of the mud brown river. From the bluff they could trace the path of the wagon road which switched first to the right, then to the left, then back to the right, and crossed a narrow patch of river grass before disappearing in a cluster of decrepit, worn, gray buildings.

The little town always came as a surprise even to those who knew it was there. Perhaps it was because of the contrast to the endless prairie or perhaps it was because the town appeared so suddenly and seemed to swallow the road and sit like an ill-tempered watchdog waiting to set upon any who dared try to enter. The momentary surprise may have been caused by the realization that coming to a town was

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

going to be ahead of coming to the river since it was apparent that everyone who used the river crossing went through Frailey first.

The horses needed little to start them moving and once they began the descent down the twisted trail, they picked their own way, stepping to avoid the deep ruts and rolled chunks of dried gumbo that on some wet day had oozed from under heavy freight wagon wheels and then dried into bread loaf size rails to threaten horses, men and wagons who followed them down the steep traverse. At the bottom of the switchbacks, the deep ruts made a long gentle turn and tracked directly toward the town.

The first building to be seen on the edge of town was an untended, square church. It was so designated by the cross which leaned crazily to the left as if pointing the way down Main Street. The weeds were flourishing all around the edges of the little building and springing through the cracks in the planks of the little step porch. The only preacher it had ever known was generally remembered as being a failure by those who took an interest in such things. Some said he had been too bookish, some thought his religion was marginal, but most, if asked about the matter, merely shrugged and observed that Frailey was not ready for a church. While that may have been true, it was probably just as true that the town was past the point where a church would make a difference.

In any event, on an unspecified day in Frailey's history, the preacher had simply tied a battered leather bag to the saddle of his pinched little horse and ridden away, presumably trying to forget about the town as quickly as he left it. As Frailey had passed from the mind of the preacher, it now grew in the minds of the two silent riders who followed the long rays of the sun into the center of town.

The rutted road turned into a fine powder that puffed up around the hooves of the horses as they walked between the weather-beaten buildings which crowded one upon the other and sat staring at the street through dust-covered windows. The sun had driven the inhabitants of the town to shelter, and the riders seemed to be the only live creatures there.

The two horses turned as if they were a team when they reached the adobe building which was proclaimed by a worn sign to be the "City jail." Their approach finally brought forth a beefy man who leaned his elbows on the jail's hitching rail and watched them pull to a halt. The dull silver of a star pinned to a suspender which stretched down to his baggy black pants identified him as the lawman of Frailey.

"Afternoon gents," he intoned looking first at one then the other.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Sheriff?" It was a question, not a recognition of what seemed obvious, and the tall rider looking down from the gray horse clearly did not intend it as a greeting.

"See the badge don't yuh?" he asked jerking a thumb toward the decorated suspender.

"I've seen badges before. Are you the sheriff?" The words were even but hard, and they left no room for misunderstanding. The speaker sat easily in the saddle not moving, but there was a note of command in the way his body was poised.

Now ruffled by the way he was being spoken to, the "Sheriff" lifted his arms from the rail and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his baggy trousers. "Damn right I'm the sheriff. Now just who the hell is askin'?"

Ignoring the question, the horseman asked, "This town got a judge?"

The force of the level stare and the penetrating gray eyes seemed to compel an answer. Without pursuing the matter of the identity of the man, the sheriff answered, "Nope. But there's a Circuit Judge. Comes through here about every two or three months. Whenever he falls sober and needs a drink, he shows up at the Bobcat." He inclined his head indicting a large building directly across the street from the jail.

"Sheriff, this jasper's got me tied like a ..."

The protest from the man on the chestnut stopped as abruptly as it had begun as the tall man, without turning his head or moving a hand, said, "Quiet there!" The words were ice in the hot still air and even the sheriff stepped back a pace and dropped his hands to his sides.

Continuing as if the interruption had never taken place, the man with deep set gray eyes probed further, "This judge, when do you expect to see him again?"

"Can't say as I know," shrugged the sheriff.

By now the sheriff, standing behind the jail's smoothly worn hitching rail, had been joined by three of Frailey's curious citizens who surveyed the mounted strangers. Nearest the sheriff stood a man who was very noticeably short and very noticeably round. He bulged at every seam of his striped pants and sweat soaked shirt. A black string tie was almost lost in folds of a fat, shining, moonlike face. At first glance most were amused by the round man, but a closer look at the eye slits in the puffy face made most men recoil and stiffen at what they saw there.

In a nasal, sing-song voice the round figure spoke but to no one in particular, "Well, well, what have we here?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Man says he's lookin' for a judge, Fred," answered the sheriff, his voice soft with deference.

"Which man?" Mead countered, sing-songing a guffaw. The sheriff and his fellow Fraileyites joined in the laugh, but it was as much an attempt to toady up to Fred Mead as a response to the slight humor in his remark.

"Got yuhrself caught up did yuh, Eli," taunted a beanpole member of the little town group attempting to join in what he apparently thought was a general joke. His toothy grin quickly dissolved as Mead shot him a quick glance and, in an undertone, spat out, "Mind your mouth, Rife."

The quick little by-play did not escape the notice of the tall stranger who fastened his gaze upon Mead, but spoke to the group at large, "Sounds to me like some of you know this one." He nodded quickly at Lupe who remained silent, his eyes popping round and snapping narrow more rapidly now than before.

"Why, I never laid eyes on him before this minute," announced Mead with a mocking sing-song that told everyone that he was lying but with half humor and half a hidden taunt. Continuing with the stage actions, he asked, "What's he done, mister, stole some of yer chickens?" As before, this brought a laugh from the group.

The sweltering street fell silent for a long moment. Enough had been said to leave the next step up to Lupe's captor. His left hand swept easily up and shoved the hat back a bit from his forehead. The heel of the same hand slowly and deliberately brushed across a broad deeply tanned forehead, the gesture of a very tired man long on the trail. His broad, open face was accentuated by high cheekbones and, had it not been for the long sweep of unruly, straw-colored hair, he might have been mistaken for an Indian.

Still, without speaking, he turned and surveyed the street that was deserted except for himself, his captive, Mead's group and a long yellow dog that lay panting in the shade of the jail. He then turned and cast a long look at the Bobcat which stood behind him with its ill-fitting, red, batwing doors framed by the gloomy darkness of the interior.

He turned back to the little Frailey group, looked from one to the other, finally focusing his eyes directly on Mead who stared back and crossed his fat arms across his stomach resting them there almost the way other men rest their arms on a bar. Then the broad shoulders came forward ever so slightly, and the tall man's words came out, almost too quiet to be heard, but they fell like hammer blows on an anvil. "He and

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

three others killed a woman and two children." Abruptly, he turned the gray away from the town men, grasped the hackamore of the chestnut and led it across the street to the Bobcat.

The saloon was the town's true center of gravity. It was prospering, the only business in Frailey that was, and sported a fresh coat of whitewash on its high false front. It also proudly displayed a sign with black Victorian letters on a white background reading, "Frailey's Bobcat." In the middle of the sign a clumsy artist of dubious ability had outlined the head of a bobcat with cruel narrow eyes and jagged teeth.

The Wyoming winds had perhaps made an impression on the Bobcat's owner at some time in the past, or maybe it was some other purpose that had moved him, but he had put the proud sign up to stay. It was braced from the sides with four by four lumber and the outward tip of the sign was tied to the top of the building front with double strands of heavy wire twisted together.

The hooves of the chestnut clapped loudly on the wooden planks of the Bobcat's boardwalk as the horse was led up to the very doors of the saloon and halted directly under the sign. With a quick skilled toss, the horsehair rope that had linked the two horses during their journey across the hot plain was looped under the twisted, slanting wire and over the top of the sign. With lightening quickness, the end was knotted and slipped over Lupe's startled head. The loose end of the rope was flipped hard on the hitching rail and, as it swung around a few times, the tall man caught it, tucked it under one of the coils on the post, then spun it around and half hitched it into a secure hold.

All this had been done so surely and swiftly, that Mead, the Sheriff and, especially Lupe, were taken totally by surprise. Lupe was snared and leaning upward on his toes in his stirrups to keep the tension off the rope.

Angrily, Mead sputtered, "What the hell, what the hell. Now hold on here. You can't do that."

At the same time Lupe was crying out, "Mead, for God's sake stop him. Mead, you owe me."

Lupe's terrified yelps were interrupted by Mead, who commanded him, "Stop yer caterwallin'. Just shut yuhr damn mouth or I'll let him hang yuh."

The loud protest of Lupe and the chestnut thumping on the dry boards had brought the Bobcat's late afternoon customers to the door and the grimy windows on either side. The men with Mead and the Sheriff had stopped in the middle of the street, probably not knowing what to do,

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

and cold scared of getting closer. The hangman, sitting on the gray horse, silenced the Sheriff and Mead with an upheld arm.

"That's enough," he commanded sharply. "He killed three people and there isn't any doubt about his guilt." Then to Lupe, "This is your last chance to clear your mind. Do you want to name the ones who were with you? Do you want to say anything to your friends? Along the trail you kept saying they were going to save you before we got to town." These last words were aimed more at Mead and the Sheriff than at Lupe.

The terrified Lupe, almost beyond speech, could only manage to beg and cry out randomly, "Mead.... boys, yuh got to stop him."

"Now lookee here, Mister. Everyone's entitled to a trial. That's the law. Unstring that man so's we can talk this thing out. Yuh can't just ride in here and hang a man." Feeling he was making some headway, Mead grew more insistent, "For your own good, back away from there and step down from that horse, pronto." Believing that silence meant agreement, he called out to no one in particular, "Someone, lend a hand there. Sheriff, help ole Lupe..."

Before the little group could collect itself and move to "help ole Lupe," it was too late.

The steel blade of the knife flashed in the last rays of the sun, the rawhide thongs dropped from Lupe's hands and in the same instant, the chestnut felt the hard sharp toe of his owner's boot in his flank, and he bolted forward leaving Lupe dangling behind. Lupe's arms rose and his hands clawed at his neck, but only for an instant. He sagged and then, limply, the lifeless body began to turn slowly, as if indifferent to the living world.

While Mead and the others gaped in disbelief, the stranger stepped off Lupe's gray with the easy natural grace that made the difficult look easy. He swung himself into the empty saddle of the chestnut who seemed to be standing waiting for him. He turned the big horse sharply, rode back to Lupe, took off the dirty, stained hat and reached up and crammed it on Lupe's head. He then leaned far out of his saddle and retrieved the tall crowned Stetson that had fallen from Lupe's head and settled it back on his own bare head.

"There were three others with him. One has already swung. Before I leave, I'll look around for the other two." With that he nudged the big horse away from the dead man, away from the awe-struck observers and down the street toward the river.

Behind him a babble of voices suddenly broke out. Some men were cursing, others yelling for those they knew to "Come out here," or

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Over here at the Bobcat. " Loudest was the shrill cry of the beanpole that Mead had called "Rife." He was yelping over and over, "He hung Lupe. He hung Lupe."

The tall figure of the avenging rider was outlined against the still bright sky as he walked his mount away from the uproar, apparently unhearing, certainly uncaring. If the town was to rouse itself and take action, now was the time, but the terrible swiftness of the act had left the growing crowd milling in confusion.

Then a sharp rifle crack sliced through the heat of the twilight, and the departing figure slumped forward over the neck of the chestnut. The horse broke instantly into a gallop and soon distance and the cottonwood trees along the broad river swallowed both horse and rider.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Jane Carpenter dozed fitfully in the old high-backed rocker. Her blonde hair was rumpled against a red, hand-sewn cushion that was tied to the top rail of the chair's back and her hands lay crossed in her lap.

The room around her was the tidy collection of necessities that would be found in most homes. There, on the far wall near the heavy planks of the door, was a board with wooden pegs for coats, hats and other odds and ends that were carried or worn outside but hung up inside. Hanging there now was a brown leather cartridge belt and holster filled with a wooden handled navy colt. Next to that was a high-crowned Stetson.

On the other side of the door, also mounted on the wall, was a rack which contained a muzzleloader, a dry old Henry rifle, a well-oiled Winchester and a long-barreled twelve gauge greener. On the shelf of the rack was a small stack of ammunition boxes. Opposite the door was a wide, brown stone fireplace with a raised hearth. A blackened, hooked poker and neat stack of small dry sticks occupied the hearth. On either side of the fireplace were open shelves stocked with food tins and battered but clean dishes.

The end of the cabin on the sleeping girl's left was given over to a bunk and small table. On the table was a kerosene lamp. It was burning, but its flame was low on the turned down wick and darkness was stealing through the small curtain-covered window above the bunk.

At the opposite end of the room was yet another bunk. On it lay a tall figure covered with a multicolored quilt. On the down pillow rested a long silent face whose broad features were fixed and expressionless, almost like a death mask.

The lamp sputtered and issued a thin thread of black, acrid smoke as it threatened to go out. The man on the bunk made an incoherent sound, a low, short cough, then was quiet again, perhaps lifeless.

It would have been impossible to tell if the light in the lamp had burned too low and gone out. Its thin trail of smoke curled upward through the soot-stained glass chimney and drifted toward the sleeping girl.

Her hands stirred and twisted in the lap of her faded denim trousers. Then her shoulders stiffened under the heavy fabric of her checkered work shirt, and her eyelids flew open. A wave of alarm passed

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

over her face, and she looked first at the unmoving form on the bunk, then at the dying glow of the lamp.

Immediately, she was on her feet and with three quick steps was at the bunk-side table. Her hand darted forward and seized the little brass wick wheel. She quickly rolled it clockwise until the white wick was a full finger width out of its slot. The almost invisible blue line of flame across the top edge of the white band hesitated, then spread downward glowing red and orange.

The spreading light seemed to bring life to the room. The light reflected off her face which was now calm and composed. The lamplight made her bright cheeks glow and gave her brown eyes a cast of deep amber.

Satisfied that the lamp was burning well enough, she carefully pulled the chimney up from its thin holding clamps and up over the strong flame. From a nearby clutter box, she took an already blackened scrap of cloth, ran it through the chimney and twisted it out the other end. Once it was replaced on the lamp, the chimney enhanced the flame even more, and the strong light reached out and bathed the face of the unconscious figure across the room.

As the light found his face, his eyes fluttered open and he stirred a bit. He lay unmoving, staring at the girl. Then he coughed again, a dry low cough.

Instantly she turned toward him, picked up the lamp, walked quickly to the bunk and placed the lamp on a nearby wooden box. She met his level stare for a moment then spoke.

"Well, I see you're still alive, but barely."

"Who" he started.

She interrupted firmly, "Don't talk, leastwise about something that doesn't matter."

Then she asked, "Feel like some water maybe?"

"Please," was his only response.

She went to a wooden stand near the fireplace and swished a long-handled dipper into a wooden bucket. Returning to the bunk she knelt down, slipped her arm under the disheveled hair and lifted the man's head and shoulder up and forward. With her other hand she held the tin dipper to his lips and tipped its long handle toward him. He sipped a bit, then some more.

Suddenly he coughed again splashing the water in his face and down on the quilt. She dropped the dipper and with both hands lowered him back to the down pillow.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

The exertion seemed to drain his energy, and with a sigh, his eyes closed and he slept. The slow rhythm of his breathing was evidence that he was still alive, but how long he would remain so was obviously a question.

Jane sat on the wooden box next to the lamp and looked thoughtfully down on the still face. He was strong. There was no doubt about that. "But is he strong enough?" she wondered. She had done everything she knew.

"I'm no sawbones," she muttered half aloud, "but I don't believe anything can help you now, stranger. It's like Pa says, a hurt man will live if he has will enough. You've got as bad a hurt as I've ever seen. It'll take a whole lot of will to raise you off that bunk."

She thought back a few hours and remembered how her big trail dog, Wink, had begun to raise a ruckus, barking and growling like he did whenever a skunk or porcupine came within range of his big drooping nose. Armed with the twelve gauge, she had gone out expecting to get a shot at the object of Wink's excited attention. Instead, she found a tall chestnut horse standing near the big corral as if waiting to be let in with the other horses who stood banging their heads over the top rail staring at the newcomer.

Strange horses had appeared in the yard before, and she didn't consider that unusual since there were a number of wild ponies roaming the river bottoms. But even in the deepening twilight she could see that this one was not wild. He was an unusually large, well-proportioned animal that looked like he would have lots of bottom and a fair amount of speed. He stood head down and tired, but rock still.

It was the dragging reins and empty saddle that puzzled her most. A riderless horse was a sure sign of trouble. It could mean a rider brushed off by a cottonwood limb or a rider thrown by a snake-shied horse. It could mean lots of things, almost all bad. The big horse turned to watch her as she walked up to him, but still he did not move.

Then she saw why. On the side opposite her, a man lay on the ground, sprawled at an awkward angle with one foot pointed skyward. She realized immediately that the rider's foot was hooked in the stirrup.

She called out, "You there, can you hear me?"

There was no reply. Only Wink's barking broke the silence.

"It's all right, Wink. Quiet down," she called.

Following her, rather Wink's, discovery, she had freed the hung up boot, dragged the incredibly heavy body into the cabin, and struggled

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

to get it onto the bunk. The matted blood on the front of his shirt told her that he had been wounded.

As she tore off the bloody shirt, she discovered the small hole in his back near the shoulder blade. Her first aid began there. She washed the wound with water, then with dark brown whiskey, pouring it liberally into the raw flesh. A clean bandage there was followed by the almost impossible task of turning him over again.

The chest wound where the bullet had come out was still bleeding, and she thought at first she would have to cauterize it to stem the flow of blood. Repeated washings with cold water and intermittent doses of the liquor finally reduced it to a trickle, and she decided to try a tight bandage to see if it that would enable it to clot.

It was only then that she went back outside and tended to the still waiting horse. The fact that the rider showed no signs of having been dragged increased her admiration of the big chestnut. It was apparent that it had been thoroughly trained, and that amount of training came only from those who had genuine affection for their animals.

As she grained the animal and rubbed him down, her mind raced with speculation over who the wounded man could be and what could have brought him here. "If he had been bushwhacked, wouldn't his assailants be looking for him? How far had he ridden?" she wondered. "Which side of the law was he on?" If he was on the wrong side, perhaps she was putting herself in danger by taking him in. On that score she was not really concerned, because she knew his wound would hold him helpless for some time.

All these questions and others came to her mind again as she sat in the lamplight looking down at the long figure. "Of course," she thought to herself, "come tomorrow I may be burying him instead of washing his wounds."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The Frailey man-hunters were not at all competent in their work. As the first shock of the hanging began to wear off, there were loud calls for men and horses. Oddly, no one called the group that began to form a posse. In fact, it was an aimless mob. Fred Mead yelled orders that were, in his presence, carried out, but were, in his absence, largely ignored. Much of his outrage was directed at the one who still wore the star on his suspender.

"Ritter, yuh damn fool. Yuh just stood there. By God, I can't believe it. Yuh just stood there while he hung 'im."

"There wasn't time, Fred," he answered defensively and more boldly than he had in the presence of the stranger.

"Time, hell!" spat out Mead. "Yuh were just plain fish-cold scared."

"I don't have to take that from you or any man," raged Ritter.

"Yuh'll take it from me, Ritter. Won't yuh?" Mead's yelling anger had become a flat, menacing rage. It had brought him to the hair trigger of explosive action. It was all around him, in the way he spoke, in the way he stood, but most of all in the way his eye slits fastened on Ritter who realized that the wrong word or a wrong movement would send him instantly to Hell.

Ritter eyed the rifle dangling in Mead's hand. "Well, I admit that ... that I was a bit.." He couldn't bring himself to say scared," so, after hesitating, he blurted out, "edgy."

"Edgy," taunted Mead, "if yuh were any more edgy, we'd have to wire yer guts in."

"I'm sure yuh hit 'im Fred," said Ritter, hoping to ease Mead's anger.

"I'm not so sure about that, Jake," chimed in the beanpole, Rife, who had finally stopped yelling, "He hung Lupe. He hung Lupe."

Rife was instantly sorry he had spoken. Mead spun and faced him, raising the rifle and shaking it in Rife's face.

"Yuh're a fool, Rife. First, I hit what I aim at. No question. I hit him. Next, it was yuhr big yap that tipped the whole thing away. If yuh don't think I can hit anything with this," here Mead was still brandishing the rifle, "take off down the street, Rife. I'll use yuhr pin slim head for practice."

"I didn't mean yuh couldn't shoot, I only meant... "

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Mead ignored him and turned back to Ritter. "Get out there and find that man. Dead or near dead, I want him dragged back to town. If you had put some men at the top of the hill like I told yuh, this wouldn't have happened. If yuh remember, we heard that someone had nabbed Lupe fer somethin'."

The town beanpole and Ritter were only too glad to get away from Mead and leave him ordering and threatening any and all who came near him. But despite Mead's commanding presence and overwhelming fury, the search effort was, at best, random. Some rode down to the river and splashed about. Others crossed the river and made a great thrashing through the cattail patches in the backwaters. A few even rode on up to the bench on the other side of the river and had a long ride up and down the bank.

However, no one thought to look in town or in the Carpenter freight yards which were located back toward the bluff, away from the river, and about two miles from the center of Frailey. Still, a more thorough search was bound to come, given time to organize and daylight to make tracking possible.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The late summer darkness soon gave way to the broad sweep of predawn light which promised yet another day of cloudless skies and compressing heat. These early hours, from first light to the time the bronze round sun rolled up over the horizon, were a time of cool relief when the heat from the previous day had dissolved and the thin chill of early morning reminded early risers that summer was not forever. Jane Carpenter savored the cool air as she pulled open the cabin door and called out, "Here Wink, here."

Instantly, the dog was by her side, in front of her, behind her, all around her, pouncing and spinning. She laughed at his capering, joyous greeting. "I guess you would enjoy a little less heat as much as folks," she said stooping to wool his neck and face. "I don't wonder with that coat you've got. Seems to me you didn't do much shedding. Maybe you expect an early freeze."

With Wink racing ahead, then stopping to look back, then running off again, Jane made her way to the corral. She bent and stepped easily through the rails and found herself surrounded by old friends. The heavy, solid bodies of the team horses would have looked the same to a stranger, but to her each was an individual and she spoke to them as if taking roll. "Steady there, Ned. Feed's coming. Say, Ike, how's the foot? I'll take a look later."

She spoke to each, stroked a neck here, patted a velvet nose there, and stood on her tiptoes to rub the forelock of a black mare. The riding horses used by the cowhands on the spreads along the river were dwarfed by these gentle giants who pulled her father's freight wagons on their long treks back to the railhead in Nebraska and westward toward the faraway mountains.

The horses followed her to the low log grain hut where she worked loose the rope latch and pushed the narrow door inward just far enough for her to step through. It was warm inside the dark little building. The tight chinks of adobe helped keep out rain and snow, but they also kept in the heat.

She worked in the dark, but was not hindered by it because she knew exactly where she had left the wooden grain scoop and the thick canvas grain bag. She counted the scoops as she dumped the light, dry, rolled oats into the bag. Thinking of the chestnut, she added an extra and then yet another. "One to grow on," she would say to her father who would only shake his head and smile.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

She closed the door and retied the latch while protecting the grain bucket from the insistent rooting of a blaze faced bay. "One of these days, Ezra, I'll put you in the grain hut and tie the door shut." She laughed at her mental picture of the great, large horse squeezed into the squat little building that came only up to his broad chest.

Staying ahead of the determined Ezra, she walked quickly to the broad feed bunk on the far side of the corral and carefully shook out equal portions of the oat flakes on the wide planks. Habit dictated the place each stood, but this morning the pattern was broken by the presence of the big chestnut.

He knew he was in the territory of others and he approached the bunk cautiously at first, then more boldly. After dodging an attempted nip by Ned, and a head butt by Ezra, he finally managed to establish a place for himself and to enjoy a few quick munches before the general supply ran low and most, but not Ezra, lost interest and began to wander over to the hay manger.

There on the side of a high, sloping mound of loose grass hay, Jane was wielding a three-prong pitchfork. Hooking it deeply into the stack, she was able to gather a large clump on the fork. This she carried to a great wide hay manger just inside the corral. With a practiced heave, the clump rose up and over the corral poles and softly settled down under the waiting noses.

A dozen trips between the hay stack and the corral satisfied her, and she drove the pitchfork into the side of the stack where it would stand until next feeding time. Pitching the hay was heavy work, but of all her chores, she enjoyed it most. The sweet smell of the prairie grass, the contented chomping of the horses who stood and watched her with their big soft eyes all combined to make her feel content and at ease with her world.

Pumping water was a different matter. The hot weather made the big horses especially thirsty, and the trough seemed to always be lower than she expected. In the winter, when the pump leathers were stiff and frozen and the pump had to be primed with water heated in the cabin, she disliked pumping even more.

As she stood and worked the long handle, pulling the water up from the cistern below, she wished that her father had chosen to locate the freight yards down on the river instead of up here on the side of bluff. Whenever she mentioned the thought to him, he would simply say, "Drainage here is good and no river floods to bother with." Her answer

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

would be to remind him of leaks in the trough, or to offer to drive one of the big freight wagons and let him stay home and pump water.

But Wink loved the pumping. The rattle of the pump action always reminded him that horse chores were almost over and that dog chores were close at hand. He always came from wherever he had been to join her and to sit impatiently, seeming to count the long strokes that brought forth the gushing water.

Although her arms always grew heavy on the handle of the oversized pump, she never paused for, had she stopped, she would have had to make the extra strokes to draw the water up through the pipe to get started again. As the water level crept up the mossy sides of the trough, the sky grew ever brighter, promising that the sun was just below the horizon.

Upon returning to the cabin, she went to the curtains covering the window and swept them back. She tied each with a strip of red gingham, twisting the strip into a neat bow.

Turning from the window she found herself looking directly into the level gray eyes of her patient. Startled a bit, she quickly recovered and called over to him. "I see you're awake. If you can hold on a bit, I'll fix us both something to eat."

"Not for me." His voice was low and dry.

"Well, let me check your bandages, then maybe you would something hot to drink."

She slid the wooden box to the side of the bunk, sat down on it and pulled back the quilt. The bandage lay bright red against his chest. Blood had seeped under the edge of the compress and had matted and clotted in the blond hair over his breast.

"Damn," she muttered.

As she stood to get fresh material for bandages, she saw a faint smile flicker across his lips. She started to speak, then shrugged and fetched the bandages. She put them on the edge of the bunk, and returned to the fireplace where she constructed a small cone of dry wood and ignited it with a sputtering sulfur match. Soon there was a hungry blaze licking the sides of a cast iron pot which hung from the iron spindle running the length of the fireplace.

Before long the water was warm enough for her purposes, and she ladled some into a white enamel bowl. She brought it and a white cloth to the bunk. Again sitting down, she began to soak the clotted blood and the bandage with the warm water. After a few minutes she was able to pull the cloth pad away from the wound, but even then she had to

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

jerk it sharply to free it from a few chest hairs which were meshed in the dried blood. That raised the eyebrows up a notch on the broad face, but it brought forth no comment.

"Oh, I'm sorry,' she said and her brow wrinkled in self reproach. The open wound was red and swollen and was filled with bright fresh blood. It was not, however, flowing, and she was encouraged that the tight compress was performing as she had hoped it would. She carefully washed the area around the wound and washed away the clotted blood on his chest.

Without a word of warning, she pulled the whiskey bottle up from beside the bunk, popped out the cork with her thumbs and liberally doused the wound with the brown liquor. His sharp, quick gasp of air was followed by an audible "ahaa" as he clamped his eyes shut for a few long seconds.

"Sorry, again." This time it was a business-like, matter-of-fact apology.

She then applied a clean compress and used the long bandage that went around his body to hold it securely and tightly against the wound. She slipped her hand under his back and gently felt the bandage on the back wound. It was dry, and she decided not to attempt to change it.

Later, without asking him again if he was hungry, she sat beside him with a steaming bowl of oatmeal. His eyes traveled from her face to the bowl and back again. She returned his look and, with the firmness of an expert nurse, said, "I eat this stuff myself every morning. Wink, my dog, eats it sometimes when he gets lazy and can't catch a rabbit and we both survive so, I don't think it'll hurt you much."

With that she offered a half spoonful of the warm oatmeal to his lips and, without protest, they accepted. Then another and another until the bowl was finished. That was followed by half a cup of hot tea that she promised not to spill on him, if he would promise not to cough. With that he smiled, drank the tea and, almost immediately, fell asleep.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Fred Mead's crowd of searchers was late in getting together and even later getting started. The events of the previous evening somehow seemed unreal to even those who had been witness to the hanging of Lupe. Yet the horsehair rope was there, cut and left dangling over the Bobcat's sign when the body had been taken down.

Mead himself was inside the Bobcat sitting at a grease-spotted table arguing with Ritter when yet another rider stepped in from the bright sunlight, blinked in the gloom and approached the table.

"Just no sign, Fred. We've been up the river and down, but haven't seen hide nor hair of 'im or his hoss." The speaker stood by the table looking longingly down at the fresh bottle of rye that Mead had just opened. He foolishly hoped that he would be offered a drink, but Mead only grunted and then asked, "If yuh ain't found 'im, whatcha doin' in here?"

"Yuh said to keep yuh posted. Now do yuh wanna be or not?" With that he stood looking from Mead to Ritter and waiting for some signal from one or the other, but mostly from Mead.

"Ease off a little, Ferris," suggested Ritter, nodding at an empty chair, "Take some weight off yer feet."

Ferris accepted the invitation, sat down, and helped himself to the rye by taking a long pull directly from the bottle.

"Get yuhrself a glass," grumbled Mead. "I don't need yer slobber in my whiskey."

The Bobcat, despite its relative prosperity in a dying or dead town, was surprisingly small compared to what one would expect from its high clapboard false front. It smelled, like most saloons, of smoke, of whiskey, and of the decay of the filth that accumulated under and between the wide cracks in the rough-hewn planks that were its floor. There were two small tables in addition to the one being used by Mead, Ritter, and Ferris. Each had a few chairs which had been thoroughly scarred by boots hooked in the legs, spurred boots propped on the seats, and by boots and spurs abusing them in every way possible.

The barkeep, who responded to a wave by Ferris, came from behind a bar that was about the length of three tall cowboys lying end to end. It, like the chairs, had been gouged and scraped by rifles leaned against it and laid on it, by revolvers banging into it, and by a devil's assortment of knives of every description being used to cut up the chunks of beef and pork that the Bobcat sometimes had available.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

On the wall behind the bar, there was a mirror that had long since ceased reflecting anything. The big bottle flies had for years been trying to cover it with specks, the smoke from thousands of pipes, hand-rolled cigarettes, and cigars had dimmed it, and a little off center was the hole and spider web cracks around it that were reminders of the wild drunk of a long forgotten cowboy who had taken a pot shot at his own image.

The shot glass the rheumy-eyed barkeep handed to Ferris was like all Bobcat glasses, chipped around the thick bottom edge from being intemperately banged on the bar and on tables. Glass banging in the Frailey saloon had become a local ritual, but it almost certainly brought about more broken glass and cut hands than service.

Fred Mead, however, was less interested in whiskey drinking and glass banging than in pursuing and apprehending the man who had trampled all over his image and authority by hanging one of his own men before his very eyes. Already, men who had timorously called him "Mister Mead" were boldly calling him "Fred" and men who only the day before would have jumped to do his bidding, were complaining at his orders and balking at every turn.

Frustration was building in Mead and he needed to force some type of action. Ritter, perhaps his closest confederate, and Ferris, the most recent, became the object of his seething.

"Look, I don't think either of yuh understand somethin'. We've had things goin' our way pretty good. Since Sheriff Baker had his little accident a year ago last Spring, no one has been cryin' around for any new Johnny Law and Ritter wearin' that badge has kept questions from bein' asked."

Both men nodded in agreement, but shifted in their chairs knowing that all this was leading somewhere and most likely to where they would have to do something to keep Mead off their backs.

"Fred, I don't think we ought to make too much of this," countered Ritter, hoping to head him off.

"Think," shot back Mead, "anytime yuh even try to think, yuh break out in a cold sweat. If yuh ever had a real thought, yuh'd probably try to hang it on yer suspender like that damn star."

The challenge to his dominion of these men stirred Mead to new levels of anger and he lashed back at them.

"I've a good mind to chuck this whole operation. I'll take my cut and pull out. Ritter, you can do the thinkin'. By damn, the more I think about it, the better I like the idea. I might as well take yuhr shares with

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

me, yuh won't need 'em in Hell because that's where yuhr goin' to be before my chair's cold."

"Come on Fred," soothed Ritter, "ain't no call fer that kind of talk. Only thing I say is that we don't see why this thing has got yuh so riled."

"I'll tell yuh, Mister Suspender Sheriff, I smell vigilante in this."

Ferris banged his glass on the table, but this time not for service. The red rye whiskey spilled out over his hand and his eyes went from one man to the other watchfully. Ritter's fingers slipped out from under his suspenders and they slapped against his yellow shirt. The legs of his chair squeaked in protest as he grabbed the broken and wire wrapped arms and pulled it sharply forward.

Men who lived by harsh deeds and by a quick draw and willingness to shoot, men whose survival depended upon their ability to take advantage of others, and men who lived on the fear they instilled in others were themselves universally afraid of one thing. That was the prospect of swift and sure justice at the end of a rope - the rope of a vigilance committee.

The terror that the thought of vigilante justice brought to them was a result of the fact that it came so swiftly and was inevitable. Perhaps even more frightening to the hardcases was the realization that they had abused too much, had killed too many, and had carried their plundering, murderous ways too far and that the result of it was, not a few injured and angry people, but a citizenry up in arms and determined to have done with them.

Law, in the hands of a few careless judges and lawmen, was, for the clever outlaw, manageable. Law, in the hands of the people who knew full well who the human predators were, was a nightmare to the likes of Fred Mead and the ones living in Frailey who took his orders. Saying it out loud as Mead had done somehow made the idea more real and brought it closer than any of them had dared believe possible. Yet their minds struggled against the possibility.

Ferris took a gulp of the whiskey left in his glass and breathed an oath. "I've seen 'em in operation in Kansas. I don't want to ever see it again. But there they ran in packs, yuh don't think jest one would ride in and do it hisself." He looked to Mead for reassurance.

"That's the part I can't figure, but the public hanging part, that's vigilante sure enough," said Ritter leanin' forward and speaking in a low conspiratorial whisper.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Well, we won't know anything until we nab our hangin' friend." Mead's insistence on that point was unwavering.

"But for all we know, he's floatin' belly up in the river. Could be he's rottin' away somewhere up on the prairie, who knows." Ferris clearly did not want much more riding aimlessly under the burning sun. "Besides," he added, "I didn't even see the hangin'."

"Makes no difference," Mead flared. "We got to find him and find out who he is and where he came from. If he's someone just didn't like Lupe, that's one thing. If he's in here from outside, then someone brought him in and that's a horse of a different color."

"How'd he get ole Lupe, I wonder," mused Ferris, "and what was that talk of Lupe killin' three people?"

"Wasn't Lupe supposed to be back watchin' the freight come in at rails' end?" asked Ritter.

"Supposed to be, yes," fumed Mead "but probably got drunk somewhere between here and there. May have took his drink money from some pilgrims that argued too much and that's where he was seen by that stranger."

"Lupe always did like a drink too much," said Ferris shaking his head. Then he added, "Here's to yuh pard, wherever yuh are." With that he drained the rye from his chipped glass with one swallow.

"Enough," barked Mead. "You two hit the trail again. Cover some of the spreads up on the flats."

"Some of them damn ranchers took down our welcome sign, Fred. It could be unpleasant tryin' to talk to 'em." Jake Ritter had been asked off more than one ranch since Mead had proclaimed him to be the successor to Sheriff Baker.

The late Sheriff had been rock honest and bear tough. He had run afoul of Fred Mead the first day Mead set foot in Frailey, some two years earlier. Within a few months of Mead's arrival, Baker had publicly promised to find out if Mead was behind the savage robbery of a drummer found dead in the alley behind the Bobcat. Before the lawman could make good on that promise, he had been found dead of a rifle shot in the back.

The few honest citizens left in Frailey probably knew that Mead was the leader of a growing gang of cutthroats that more and more came to be a dominant factor in the life of the town. Most of the ranchers suspected Mead and made no secret of the fact that they preferred that he confine his activities to the town of Frailey and stay off their land.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Mead considered the unorganized ranchers to be a nuisance, but nothing more. He stated his belief to the reluctant Ritter in terms even the bogus Sheriff could understand.

"Get on yer cayuse, Ritter, and find that man. If any of them damn cow chasers object, you disobject 'em. If yuh need help, take Ferris and some of the others. Now git!" With that he grabbed Ferris' shot glass and hurled it against the bar.

That was glass banging that both Ferris and Ritter understood, and it had the desired effect on their reluctant spirits. They were on their feet and out the door before the slow-witted barkeep could even look up to see who was banging for service.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Jane Carpenter was in the corral bending over the plate-sized hoof of a very patient Ike, perhaps the largest of the large horses owned by the Carpenter Freight Co. The huge front foot was bent at the knee, and the ankle was resting on the padded end of a sturdy board which had obviously been designed for use with the big wagon horses. The horse's head was hanging low, and he might even have been asleep. The only movement he made was a frequent sweep of his tail trying to fight off the persistent buzzing flies that were taking advantage of his immobility and separation from the other horses.

The August sun was coming almost straight down, and the girl's face was flushed a bright red from bending over and from her vigorous rasping of the outer shell of the hoof. The first sign of the approach of the riders was the ominous growl from Wink who had planted himself in the shade of the water trough while his mistress toiled in the bright heat. The dog's growl was followed by a half dozen quick barks as he rushed to the gate of the corral and peered between the thick rails.

Jane heaved a great sigh and wiped the perspiration from her brow with the back of her hand. She turned and looked down the town road in the direction of Wink's barking. She raised her hand and shielded out the sun, trying to make out how many riders there were at the bottom of the dust cloud that rose and simply hung in the air then fell, as if exhausted, to the roadway.

As the head of the dust train came closer, she saw that there was but one rider and he was coming at a slow trot. She turned back to her work for a few moments, apparently unconcerned about her oncoming visitor. "That'll have to do for now, Ike," she said as she straightened up, pulling the prop from under the horse's ankle. The muscles of the thick leg were slow to respond, and the foot hung unsupported until she stepped full away from him. Laughing, she slapped him on the shoulder, "Wake up, Ike, and go find some shade."

As if understanding her words, he lowered the hoof and turned and plodded toward the long shed where the other horses were making a cooperative stand against the corral flies. He limped a bit for the first few steps, but then recovered and was soon with his teammates.

Jane started toward the horses, then she stopped and surveyed them as they stood closely grouped together and standing head to rump as horses do in fly time. Apparently satisfied, she turned back to Wink

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

who was alternately growling and barking at the horse and rider, now close enough to be recognized.

It was the man, Ritter, who called himself sheriff of Frailey. "Afternoon, Miss Jane," he called when he was within hailing distance.

As he rode on up to the corral, she climbed through the rails and walked the few steps over to a short board wall that was nailed to the corral fence. The wall bristled with nails that served as hooks for the miscellaneous pieces of harness and the pincers, knives, rasps, files, and horseshoes that were in constant use on the horses and wagons. Most tools, harness, and repair materials were kept in the wagon barn, but ones always needed in hand were hung from the board.

"Mind if I water my horse, Miss Jane?" The question was pointless because he knew she would consent, and his horse was already gurgling water up over the cruel snaffle bit. Even the slow trot had lathered the animal across his chest and around his neck.

"Help yourself," she nodded.

"Sure is hot, ain't it," he grunted as he swung heavily out of the saddle. He went to the trough, removed his hat, leaned over the water and noisily splashed it over his head and neck.

Jane, remaining by the implement board which was a long twenty paces from Ritter, thought of asking him to take a turn at the pump, then, remembering some of what she had heard of the man, decided that he probably didn't have a sense of humor and dismissed the notion. She had seen him before in town, but had never talked to him. On the occasions when he had come to the freight yard, her father had been present.

"Yer pap here?" asked Ritter eyeing the empty freight yard.

"No."

"Expect him?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

"Pretty soon."

Ritter digested this for a minute, still looking around the corral and down the deserted road.

"You all alone, Miss Jane?" He was stating the obvious, not intending to get an answer, and he didn't. Then, looking at her closely, "Had any visitors lately?"

"Visitors?"

"Yeah, strangers. I mean anyone driftin' by askin' directions er askin' fer ... anything.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Directions?"

Ritter was annoyed by the girl's short answers and rather curt manner. He was preparing to pull himself back up into the saddle when he saw her throw a quick glance at the corral.

The horses in the shade of the three-sided shed were milling around rearranging themselves, and there, in full view, was the chestnut, looking very much like a pony alongside the giant Ike.

Ritter peered at the horses and was turning back to Jane when he realized what he had seen. The evening before had been filled with a fast moving series of events, and he had been surprised and frightened by the public hanging, but he remembered the big chestnut and the way the stranger had reclaimed him and ridden off as though nothing had happened. Even more vivid was the imprint in his mind of Lupe sitting under the Bobcat's sign with the rope around his neck, and he had been sitting on the horse which now looked at him from across the wide corral.

Jane had no reason to protect the wounded man, but an instinct, a feeling she could not define, told her that she did not want to turn him over to Ritter. But shielding him now would be impossible. Ritter knew and he was not to be denied. Quickly he approached her, but even more quickly Wink was between them, crouched low, snarling, fangs bared. Ritter stopped and fell back a few steps his face pale and his eyes large from fear and from surprise at the suddenness of the dog's appearance.

"Call that mutt off," he cried.

"He won't move, if you don't."

"Call him or I'll gun him," threatened Ritter.

"He doesn't like guns much." It was almost apologetic, but Ritter understood and his hand edged away from his holster.

After a minute the impossibility of the situation became apparent even to Ritter. He was frozen by the snarling dog whose bared fangs and laid back ears convinced him that any move he made would launch the beast at his throat. "He may be too set for me to control," Jane said, hardly giving Ritter any comfort, "but maybe, if you would ease back toward your horse, I could hold him here."

For the lack of an alternative, Ritter complied, and, ever so slowly, he felt his way backward along the corral fence. The dog held its position in front of Jane, rumbling a constant warning deep in its throat.

"Easy, Wink," she said softly. Then, "Watch him boy. Just watch him."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

A few cautious steps more and Ritter reached his horse. just as slowly as he had retreated, he eased his bulk up into the saddle. Once seated, enough of his confidence returned to call out a warning to her.

"I'm leavin' now, but mind yuh, I'll be back within the hour and if I see the damn mutt, I'll plug him shore enough. Yer Pap won't cotton to yer hidin' a wanted man so the best thing yuh can do is let us have him, easy like, when I come back."

With that he eased the horse across the road and, once out of dog range, he spurred straight for Frailey, a short two miles away. "I guess we're in for it now, Wink," sighed Jane. "It's only going to get hotter around here."

Owen Bannack's gray eyes fastened on Jane as she stepped, blinking, through the cabin door. She hesitated there, her slim' form framed by the doorway and outlined against the background of the sun bleached bluff that rose up in the distance.

"From town?" he asked.

Not answering directly, she stepped inside and walked over to the bunk. "That make-believe Sheriff sure wants you for something."

"Yes, I can believe that. Him and that round man, Mead. He's going to come back, and soon."

Neither spoke for a moment. Bannack stirred and looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. Jane watched him, a look of curiosity on her face.

"Just what did you do to them to get their backs up so high?"

"I hanged one of their gang, a man named Lupe."

The girl's eyes flew open and she stared at him, at first in amazement and disbelief. Then, as if suddenly making a decision, her face took on its determined, pumping water look. She instantly had the air of all business, of no nonsense chore work.

"We haven't much time," she said over her shoulder as she moved quickly to the catch-all area of stores near the fireplace. She pulled a burlap bag from a shelf and began filling it with camping provisions. They were plentiful and handy because the freight business required her to have on hand measured amounts of a variety of foodstuffs that could be put together for the wagon drivers.

She included coffee, some utensils, air tights, biscuits, and a healthy-sized pouch of rolled oats. She then crossed to another shelf and selected some thick, woolen blankets that she rolled and tied with a thick black harness strap.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Miss," he began, "there's no need for you to get involved in this. There's nothing in it for you but trouble.

Without the slightest pause in her hurried preparations, she retorted quickly, "I'm involved, and it's my choice. Anyhow there isn't time for all that now, we've only got fifteen maybe twenty minutes before they'll be back up here."

"Where's here?"

"Later," was all she would say as she pulled the door open and disappeared outside.

Bannack closed his eyes trying to recall the events of the previous evening after he felt the hot bullet rip through his back. He had spurred the tired horse almost as a reflex and had tried to lean forward to avoid the follow shot which, strangely, never came. He remembered reaching the bank of the river, riding through the irregular trunks of the cottonwood trees, then splashing in and then out of the water.

He had a vague recollection of wanting to return the way he had come, of feeling that his best chance was to put as much distance as possible between him and the town and that, somehow, he had to reach the high flats above town. After that, things ran together faster and faster until there was nothing.

His next awareness was of the dim light and a shadow hovering over it. Next, he heard the clear, even tone of the girl speaking to him. He remembered the spilled water, and especially he remembered the hot oatmeal and the bandage changing. From that point on, he was fully aware of himself except for the frequent periods of sleep that came upon him suddenly and unexpectedly.

"That girl was a strange one," he mused. "And where the devil had she run off to?" He wished he knew where he was, but more than that, he wanted to know what was happening outside. He felt a surge of frustration over not knowing what to expect and not being able to fend for himself.

He was able to see most of the room, and, as he looked toward the open door, his glance fell on his gun belt hanging from its wooden peg. His instinct was to raise himself from the bunk. He shifted his legs and started to lift his shoulders in an effort to sit, but the searing pain instantly drove him back.

He waited a few moments. This time his mind was ready for the knife-like pain, and, with a determined effort, he was able to bring himself up higher on the pillow and get his legs over the edge of the bunk. The blackness loomed up at him, and he fought it while a band of

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

sweat beaded up on his forehead. He concentrated all his attention on the revolver hanging next to his familiar old hat. He told himself that his chances of survival were nil, but that any chance at all depended upon getting that gun. "At least I'll take some of them with me," he told himself. "If I'm lucky, maybe that fat one, Mead."

Then he heard the plodding of horses but, oddly, they were slow steps and they sounded muffled. Before he could formulate even a guess as to their origin, the girl was back in the cabin.

"You know you really shouldn't rush off without a fare thee well or even a thank you," she said with a half smile as she noted his legs dangling over the side of the cot.

"It's that or be drowned," he answered through clenched teeth.

She blushed, grinned at him and called out, "Don't move, I'll be back in a stitch," as she snatched up her provisions and the blanket roll and whirled out the door.

"Strong headed girl," he thought. "But at least she's doing the smart thing by pulling out of here."

Just as abruptly as she had left, Jane was back, standing over the bunk. "Now, I know this will hurt like fire, but it's our only chance. Before we go, maybe you'd like some of this." With that, she reached down, picked up her medicine whiskey and offered it to him.

"No, thanks, but what's this 'we go'? Just hand me that gun and you go."

"If we take the time to argue this, we'll both lose. Now, this is the hard part. We've got to get you on your feet and out that door."

He realized that she was not to be reasoned with and that further talk would, indeed, work against them. The unwavering determination that she displayed roused a faint hope in him that somehow, in some unknown way, there might be a chance.

He nodded his agreement. She knelt, and, with a strength that surprised him, lifted his arm gently and guided it around her shoulders. With a direct, encouraging smile from her and at a short nod from him, they slowly stood. After waiting a few seconds for his head to clear, she led and he followed a tortured, halting path toward the door. It would have been no more than four long strides for a healthy man, but for them it was a shuffle, a dozen lurches, but they persisted and were at the door, then through it, and on the planks of the stoop.

There, backed up to the edge of the planks, were two wagon horses. They were wearing collars and light wagon rigging with two singletrees slung between them. One of the singletrees was strapped to

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

the collars with the straps running through the trace line hooks while the other was hanging from straps run through the heavy rump harness. Thrown on top of the trees was a wide plank making a crude wooden stretcher between the animals.

"It's crude, but it might work," she said simply.

It was a jury rig, but a simple and ingenious one. Of more importance, it had been quick. The harness was only the work of a few minutes, and the singletree hookup would not have taken much longer.

Turning, sitting, then reclining on the plank was even more painful than the short walk had been. Once he was stretched out, he almost lost consciousness and was only dimly aware of the girl lashing him to his wooden bed. He tried to motion with his arm, but it was bound to his side, and it was an effort that he called out, "The gun."

She nodded her understanding and bounded back into the cabin. Then she was back with his gunbelt and hat. The gunbelt she hung over one of the big silver horse collar knobs, the hat she stuffed under his head.

"But we can't go fast enough to..."

She cut him off with a quick wave of her hand, "There are ways up that bluff that only I know. All we have to do now is get out of here."

With the sureness of one who had done it a thousand times, she grabbed the mane of the big black horse, swung up onto his broad back and said, "Come on, Ned, we've got some climbing to do." Looking down at the man below her, she said, "I know you'll bleed, but you won't break, so hold on. We've got to be out of sight before that dust cloud gets here."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Fred Mead was sitting alone at his table in the Bobcat when Ritter burst through the batwing doors, almost unhinging them.

"Beer," he yelled at the barkeep as he hurried over to Mead's table and sank into a chair. "Got 'im," he grinned triumphantly.

"Well, where is he?" Mead half rose from his chair looking at the doors, expecting them to fill with the hangman all neatly bound for delivery.

"Not here," said Ritter waving Mead back into his seat.

"Then where?"

"He's up in the Carpenter freight yard or thereabouts."

Mead's expectant look began twisting into suspicion. "Thereabouts? Yuh mean that's where he's hidin'?"

The overheated Ritter slapped the table and yelled, "Hey over there, where's my beer?"

"Damn yer beer! Is he up there or not? How do yuh know?"

"His horse, Fred. I saw that big nag of his in the corral."

Mead was insistent and pressing. He wanted to feel the man was at least within his reach, but he knew from experience that anything Ritter said had to be taken with a hefty grain of salt. "But did yuh see him? Maybe the horse just wandered up there and Carpenter put it in with his."

"Carpenter ain't there, jest that sassy kid of his. She knows fer sure where he is. She may be even hidin' him herself." The sting of having been backed out of the freight yard was still biting at Ritter's insides. He took some of it out on the pokey old barkeep who finally sloshed a mug of flat, warm beer down on the table. Ritter grabbed the mug and took a long drink, then leaned forward and spewed it out on the old man's dirty apron.

"That swill's worse'n spring river water," he sputtered. "By damn, I've a mind to drag yuh over to the jail and lock yuh up fer serving that stuff."

Ritter splashed the remainder of the beer on the floor and banged the mug on the table. The bartender had frequently been on the receiving end of Ritter's bad temper, and he knew there was more to come. His cloudy brain could not tell him what to do to counter the abuse and it was, perhaps, just as well because his frail old body could have done little to carry out any plan of resistance. In this case, however, Mead proved to be his guardian.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Leave him be," he snapped. "Are yuh tellin' me that all yuh did was see his horse and then yuh come chicken cacklin' down here about how we got him?"

"I would've looked around but that girl and her dog ... If I hadn't been careful, that cur ..."

"A dog? Yuh mean she put a dog on yuh?" The idea seemed to give support to Ritter's notion that the man was somewhere in the area of the freight yards and that the girl knew something.

"Sure enough did. That big wolf lookin' mutt they got up there." Ritter nodded. Then, remembering his terror, he added, "Most vicious damn animal I've ever seen. jest pure blood mean."

Mead had never seen the dog, but he cast a sidelong glance at Ritter. "Sure," he said cynically, "sure, Jake."

Then Mead, satisfied that there was nothing more to be learned from his man, the "appointed" Sheriff of Frailey, was anxious to be moving. "Get Ferris," he ordered. "He's probably still asleep in back. And Snyder, he's at the stable."

Soon the little band was mounted and ready to ride. A special occasion atmosphere surrounded the men since Mead was in the saddle and out in front. Mounting had been an event for both Mead and the long-necked, suffering roan that had been roped at the livery corral and enlisted in a cause he would perhaps never be able to forget.

Fred Mead did not even lay claim to a horse of his own. When he ventured forth, it was always in a buggy and even those occasions were rare. He confined his efforts to the subtle practice of using other men, of using their eyes, their physical strength and, most of all, their guns.

Mead's strength was in his cunning and quick mind. Like few others, he understood the motives of greed for quick riches, the thirst for drink, the desire for women, and the impulse to dominate others by physical force that controlled the men around him. Because he understood those things, he could use them and he did so ruthlessly.

Mead's bulk overflowed the saddle, and his short legs were two black pegs extending halfway down the sides of the sagging roan. His white shirt added to the impression he was a man who belonged inside the shelter of a building, not out exposed to the blazing sun.

His jowls were already dripping sweat as the group swept out of town and up the sloping road toward the foot of the high plateau and the freight yards which, from a distance, seemed pasted to the very foot of

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

the rising ground. The others rode behind Mead and a bit apart from him, as if they were one group and he was on a journey of his own.

They trotted their horses for a short distance. The three who were accustomed to long journeys on horses took the quick sharp trot without even thinking about it. To them it was natural, second nature. To Mead it was worse than a wagon without springs. His entire body was jolted and he could not hold himself with his legs and move with the horse. He moved in direct opposition to the motion. Unlike the rhythmic flow of his companions, his ride was bouncing, jarring torture.

Soon he reined up and set the pace at a brisk walk. The others looked at one another, but said nothing. The distance to the freight yards and Mead's hurry to get there would have made a gallop reasonable despite the heat, but, even if the horse had been willing to attempt it, Mead was not.

By the time they pulled up in the freight yard, Mead's normally pink face was bright red. The discomfort of the ride had increased his irritation and frayed his black temper until it was sore as a hot boil. None of his companions was foolhardy enough to speak until Ritter spotted the chestnut standing in almost the same place he had been less than an hour earlier.

"There he is, Fred. jest like I said."

"I can see the horse, dammit," snapped Mead mopping his face. "What I want to see is the big lobo that was ridin' him. Now move around and find out where that jasper is holed up."

At first, they rode cautiously around the buildings and sheds of the freight yard while Mead sat tensely looking about for a clue, any hint as to the whereabouts of his prey. The search widened until it reached the brown grass that ringed the bare ground of the yard.

They rode into the freight shed and looked in and under the broken wagon they found; they pulled open the grain locker and probed the grain with a pole; they kicked at the hay stack and jabbed it with the pitchfork. They found the saddle that the girl had taken from the chestnut and slung over a saddle pole in the barn. They were encouraged because the dark stain on the polished leather pommel was blood.

Yet, their efforts were unavailing. Finally, it was Mead who yelled to them, "Try the cabin." Ferris was closer to the cabin than any of the others. He rode over to the crude little porch and swung down from his horse. He clumped cautiously through the doorway, trying to see if perhaps there might be someone inside, but in a few brief minutes was back on the step yelling for Mead.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"He was here all right," Ferris bellowed as Mead rode up. "There was a patch of blood on a cot in there and I found these," he said, waving a handful of blood stained bandages like a trophy.

"Anything else?" asked Mead who was not inclined to dismount and look for himself.

"Naw, the place is clean as far's I can see."

"Suppose he crawled off somewhere?" wondered Snyder who had joined them.

"If he did, he's close by," promised Ferris. "Looks to me like he's lost a lot of blood. Can't have much left. He's bound to be on his last legs. I don't see how he's lasted this long."

"Ritter, yuh told me that the Carpenter girl was here. Where is she? And where's that big dog she put on yuh?" asked Mead.

"I dunno," shrugged Ritter. "She probably lit out when she saw us comin. I promised to plug that mongrel when I saw him again. Wouldn't surprise me if she isn't off watchin' us from somewhere."

As Ritter scanned the surrounding area seeking confirmation of his theory, Mead stared at him with contempt. Then, looking at Ferris and Snyder, he said, "Boys, yuh know what bothers me the most about this operation of ours?" He paused but did not expect an answer. Then, nailing Ritter with an acid stare, and emphasizing each word, he said, "It's the fact that Ritter here is in it with us."

He raged at Ritter, "Did yuh ever think with them livery floor sweepin's yuh call brains that while yuh were out here jawin' with that girl, he was right here only a good spit away?"

Ritter's hands fumbled nervously with the bridle reins that twitched in his hands. "If yuh'd seen that dog, Fred. I swear..."

Mead cut him off, "I swear, too, Ritter, that if we don't find him pretty damn soon, I'll slice yuh up and feed yuh to the lowest mangy hound in the territory."

To all three of them, Mead said, "It's pretty clear that, fer some reason or other, the girl's helpin' him. She's got 'im on a horse and they're makin' a run fer it. But like Ferris says, he's got to be too all fired drained of blood to be very much alive."

Ferris, looking up at the high ground behind the cabin, said, "Since we didn't see 'em on the road, they got to be goin' along the bottom of the rim 'cause it's too blamed steep to go up."

"Yeah, but which way," mused Snyder, "up river or down?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Can't say," answered Ferris. "It'd take a long time to pick up a trail out of this damn tracked up yard. If I had to guess, I'd say down river. The trees and the bottom are closer that way."

They followed his gaze and noted how the large flat was pinched between the rim and the river as the two converged into a shimmering indistinct unity less than a dozen miles away. The line of the high rim appeared even and unbroken from where they sat until it was met by the river. The land of the river bottom sloped up to the foot of the rim slowly at first, then, as it suddenly swept upwards, the thick river grass gave way to dry prairie grass and finally there was nothing but bare, eroding, crumbling, adobe colored dirt.

"Yeah, I see what yuh mean," agreed Snyder, his deep, sharp eyes traveling along the rim. "Gotta be along the bottom, ain't no way up."

Mead was content to listen to the discussion. He realized that he had to rely on the sense of these men. This was a matter in which they would know best and his views would be mere guesswork. Besides, by taking their advice on such matters and deferring to their judgment, he created more of a sense of sharing. That made it easier for him to control them in other situations.

Still, Mead hesitated. He, too, eyed the rim. "I s'pose yuh're right, but if they knew a way..." His voice trailed away as he sat trying to get into the minds of the girl and her patient. "They might expect us to think that way."

"Naw, Fred. It's like Ferris says. They went fer the river." Ritter's comment was calculated to put him in agreement with the other two and with Mead, because he sensed Mead's inclination to follow their suggestion.

Mead glowered at him but finally agreed, at least in part. "All right, Ferris, you and Snyder hightail it that way. Ritter, jest in case yuh're wrong, tail around and head up river. I'll scout around here fer a while and meet yuh all later in town."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



As Jane guided her team away from the freight yard with the unconscious Owen Bannack harnessed between the horses, she looked anxiously over her shoulder toward Frailey. She could see the dust cloud rise from the edge of town and point its way toward her.

She wanted to urge Ned to a faster pace, but she knew anything beyond their measured wagon step would shake the rigging apart and end even the slim chance they had of slipping away. It seemed to her that they were hardly moving at all, and, with each stride of the team, she felt her hopes flag.

She had set them on a course along the foot of the rim and in the direction of the river, apparently aiming for the point where the trees ran into the sharp edge of the plateau. Their path kept them in the hard, dry grass, down a bit from the bare uplifting ground. Their trail would be obvious and easy to follow even for unskilled trackers. But they would have to look for it. She prayed they wouldn't.

As the team entered a long, shallow depression, Jane looked back and with some relief saw that she could not see the corral and cabin. She reckoned that by now the riders had reached the freight yard, but she had no way of knowing how long they would stay there. Even now they could be on her trail.

The shallow gully she was riding through bottomed out as it ran through the flat toward the river. Anyone riding toward the river from her cabin would not even be aware of the slight dip in the land. On her left, the gully had been eroded into a narrow gash in the face of the bluff. It could be seen only by looking directly up at the rim. From either side it had nothing to set it off or distinguish it from the monotonous brown surrounding it.

The sandy bottom of the little ravine suggested that it was a dry creek bed for runoff from the prairie land above. Over the years the water had eaten at the dirt cliff until the narrow wash cut back into it, and the slope was not as steep in the ravine as it was along the long wall of the rim.

When they reached the bottom of the wash, Jane turned the team directly toward the plateau. The way was easy at first, but that was before the sides of the ravine began to steepen and close in on them.

The deliberate pace of the horses soon became a struggle for secure footing. As the big hooves slid backward in the loose sandy sod, the big horses would lurch forward, but each time they would somehow

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

remain upright. The makeshift stretcher, inclined sharply upward, rocked between the horses and gouged their sides.

Jane spoke to the team, steadying them and urging them on. Her attention was concentrated on getting them all to the top of the ravine. Near the top, she pulled the straining horses to a halt allowing them to get their breath. Their wide flanks were heaving, and they were glistening with sweat, but they seemed to realize their purpose and, when she spoke, they were ready to move on.

The last few feet at the very top was a dirt wall. With a great coordinated lunge they went up, pawed for footing, and suddenly were standing in the open on the flat grassland of the plateau.

After a long moment, she looked down and saw that the foot end of the stretcher plank had, somewhere along the passage, become unrigged and was dragging the ground. She dismounted and busied herself with setting it back up on the singletree and lashing it down.

Finished, she stood up and looked down at the pale, ashen face of the wounded man. Suddenly, the thought swept through her mind that her passenger might be dead. She shuddered at the grim possibility. "Have I been going to all this trouble just to cart off a corpse?" she wondered. All at once, she felt empty and very tired. Going further seemed pointless. Her shoulders drooped as she thought of the trouble she had brought to herself and to her father, and all for nothing.

Yet, she had to know for certain. She forced herself between the hot flank of Ned and the cold looking man tied to the board. She put her hand on the side of his neck feeling for a pulse. His skin was damp and cool to the touch. She noticed the bandage on his bare chest was saturated with blood, as were the straps binding him to the plank. She thought she felt a pulse, but she was not sure. Maybe she had imagined it. No, there it was. Faint, almost imperceptible, but it was there.

"By damn!" she exclaimed.

Again the trek had a purpose. She felt her determination rise again. "If they don't find that gulch, at least right away, we may still be a step in front of that bunch. But," she sighed, "water's not pumped until the trough's full. We've got a ways to go yet, at least we might have."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The lumbering freight wagon pulled to a halt while it was still on the last stretch of level ground before the roadway fell off into the switchback trail on the face of the high bluff above Frailey. The driver sat studying the road for a few minutes, puffing on a massive black pipe whose curved stem held the bowl even below his chin. His big square hand reached up, and a callused finger tamped the gray burned-out ashes down. A few quick puffs renewed the little fire in the chamber and assured him there was probably enough smoking to last to the bottom of the hill.

Amos Carpenter looked back over his load, his practiced eye taking in the length of the big freight wagon. The canvas cover was securely tied down against the irregular corners of the covered boxes giving the wagon box the appearance of a huge badly wrapped package. The wheels were all straight without the tilt or lean which would have suggested a loose nut or worn hub. The thick iron rims were still tight despite the long absence of moisture, and even the spokes had been firm in their sockets when he checked them that morning.

Anxious to get on home, he leaned over and tightened the loop of the thick worn brake rope over the top of the foot brake handle. The wooden brake blocks that were levered to rub on the back wheels were engaged by the rope which was strung forward to the driver's box. On the easy flat runs the brake was seldom, if ever, used. The great weight of the wagon stopped it whenever the pulling force of the team was halted. When the brake was needed, the looped rope over the foot lever allowed the driver to work the brake with his leg, leaving his hands free for the reins. "Come on, Spud," he called to lead horse. "Let's head for the barn."

If the team had been asked to express its preference, there is no doubt it would have been for a downhill run. There was little for them to do except provide the guidance necessary to keep the wagon on the road. The hard job was the driver's. His task was to balance the pressure on the brake so that the wagon could move forward but not fast enough to run against the team and its harness.

Amos Carpenter had been down these switchbacks more times than he could count, and he really did not mind the difficult trail. Unlike the endless prairie which required very little of him, the downhill run and the sharp turns were a challenge, and they gave him the opportunity to do something more than sit on the hard wagon seat, watching the land roll slowly under the wheels.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

His great strength made him an excellent wagon driver. The loading and the unloading of freight, the never ending repairs to the wagon, the harnessing and handling of the team all required endurance and patience, and he had both. Being suited to the business, he enjoyed freighting well enough, but since his wife had died a few years back, a great amount of hard work had fallen on his daughter, Jane. Although she was certainly capable of doing all but the heaviest chores and she did them willingly and without complaint, he worried about her being alone while he and the driver who worked for him were away for days and even weeks at a time.

In addition to that, the freight business in and out of Frailey had fallen off recently. In large part that was due to the fact that many of the good people had left as more of the hardcases like Fred Mead had moved in. Rumors of a rail line going through Terwell, the town some twenty miles north of Frailey, had also contributed to the exodus. Those same rumors had been gnawing on him and causing him to envy those who collected their belongings and headed southwest toward Colorado or who joined passing wagon trains for Oregon.

The smell of burning wood from the brakes grew stronger as the wagon turned onto the last leg of the switchback, and Amos eased off a bit allowing the wagon to roll just a bit faster. Finally, the six horses and wagon made the turn toward town. However, it was only a few minutes until Amos hauled the team off the main road and headed them toward his freight yards below the rim.

Sitting there alongside the intersection was a man on horseback. He recognized the man as Mead's sheriff, Jake Ritter. Amos removed the pipe from his mouth and spat sharply over the side of the wagon remembering how Ritter had once made a claim that the Carpenter Freight Company owed the county a dray tax. He knew the claim was Mead's idea and he had told Ritter that if the tax were imposed, freight rates for shipments to Frailey, especially to the Bobcat and to Mead's mercantile business, would be doubled. He had heard nothing of the tax since then, but he expected the subject to come up again.

As he hauled on the reins and turned off the main road, Amos nodded at Ritter but kept the wagon moving. Soon Ritter was trotting alongside scowling.

"Hey, you ... Carpenter. Pull up there," he ordered.

Amos ignored him and continued chucking the reins gently as he puffed easily on the pipe.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"What's the matter with yuh? Are yuh blind and deaf?" yelled Ritter angrily. "Pull up in the name of the law."

Amos looked at him again for a long moment before he finally hauled in the team. Then, turning and looking down on Ritter from the high driver's seat, he asked, "What law?"

"This law," fumed Ritter, jerking his thumb up at the star still hanging from his suspender.

"All I see is a tin star. I don't see any law around here unless there's been an election while I've been gone."

"Well, I'm law enough," snarled Ritter, "and yuh best get used to the idea."

"Ritter," said Amos slowly, "just what is it that yuh want. I'm sure yuh didn't come all the way out here from town to discuss politics."

"I didn't jest happen to be out here, Carpenter. I'm on business."

"Then perhaps yuh'll be kind enough to tell me what that business is all about. Just be quick about it. It's getting near dark and I've got chores to do."

"Like I said, I didn't jest happen to be out here. I've been on the trail of a wanted man. Been comin' up here every mornin' for the past three days scourin' these rims. We been lookin' fer an outlaw. He managed to hightail it out of town jest ahead of me." As usual, Ritter arranged the facts to suit himself. "I'm ridin' the whole area to make sure nothin' is missed. I jest happened to see yuhr wagon comin' down the hill so I waited to talk to yuh."

"What did this man do? Skip out on his tab at the Bobcat? Or maybe he refused to pay some tax yuh cooked up."

"Don't try to rile me with that tax business, Carpenter. Yuh're in enough trouble as it is. At least that fresh kid of yuh's is."

"Jane," shot back Amos. "What about her?"

"Well, a few days ago she skipped off with that hangin' jasper and..."

Amos cut him off sharply. "Ritter, yuh're not makin' sense. Now what man are you talkin' about?"

"Dunno his name. Some big scamp jest rode into town four evenings ago and hung Lupe."

"Well, then, he is a wanted man. I want to find him and thank the man fer performin' a community service." Then, with an iron bound voice, he hammered at Ritter, "Now cut all this clatter. What are yuh sayin' about Jane?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"As near as we can tell, she patched up the hole that Mead put in the big skunk at the hangin' and then she helped him make a break fer it."

"Ritter, if you have done anything, anything at all, to bring that girl to harm, order up a box for boot hill. You'll need it. Now I'm going to look for my daughter, and you had better pray I find her alive and well."

With that and without looking back, Amos urged the team forward, leaving Ritter sitting in the deepening gloom of the evening.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The days following the unsuccessful search for Lupe's hangman were filled with further forays in and around the countryside by Ferris, Snyder, sometimes by Ritter and occasionally by one or two of the others who frequented the Bobcat. At the end of each day, the hunters, singly or in pairs, appeared in the saloon and were seen huddling with Fred Mead. Inevitably, the successive days of unremitting heat and the lack of success took their toll, and the intensity of the search waned, while Mead and his henchmen puzzled over the way their quarry had simply vanished.

Their speculation took every conceivable turn. Ritter was of the opinion the wounded man and the girl had slipped away by going down the river, somehow eluding Ferris and Snyder. Those two were of just the opposite opinion. They thought their original guess had been wrong and the fugitives had gone up river toward Terwell and Ritter simply had missed them. Mead just simmered in the summer heat and in the heat of his frustration and rage.

Mead divided his time between the backroom of his mercantile business and the Bobcat. The mercantile had been acquired by Mead when the former owner had sustained a beating one night after closing and had, the next day, sullenly accepted a few hundred dollars for the building and inventory from Mead. That same day the merchant packed his wife and children into a spring wagon and departed for Nebraska.

The prices for goods at the store were outrageously high and Mead put everything on a take it or leave it, cash on the barrelhead basis. The actual operation of the store was conducted by the balding beanpole named Rife who had been so taken with the hanging of Lupe. Rife kept the store stocked, collected from the customers, and accounted to Mead for the profits. Those reckonings were never pleasant. Mead knew that Rife always kept some back and, for his part, Rife always felt that Mead's expectations were out of line with their ill-defined business arrangement.

"Sticky hands, Rife. That's yuhr problem and by damn I won't have it," Mead threatened as the two glared at each other across the cluttered counter.

"But it's a fair split, Mr. Mead. Like always I got jest enough to keep runnin'. Yuh never allow enough to buy back all we sell."

"So yuh say, but yuh never buy back as much as we sell either." Waving his stubby arms at the disorganized bolts of cloth on the counter,

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

at the wooden cracker barrels, at the cracked pickle crock, at the stacks of flour and bean sacks, at the sugar bin which was fly headquarters in downtown Frailey, and at the hundred other items stacked, piled, and leaned around the little store, Mead continued, "But this place always looks like a twister passed through. There ain't no way to tell what we need, er what we've sold."

"I know where most everything's at, Mr. Mead, and I'm most always here so..."

"Yeah, but when yuh ain't here I can't find anything. We was lookin' fer cartridges last night. Now where are yuh hidin' em or ain't yuh even got any?"

The reference to "we" did not escape Rife, but he knew better than to ask who that included and he certainly knew Mead too well to ask why they had been looking for ammunition the evening before.

"Sure, we got plenty of almost everythin' except .44s. And we're gettin' some of those in the next shipment."

"When's that?"

"Should be in now. Sheriff told me yesterday that he seen Carpenter pull in five, maybe six days ago. It's a funny thing though, he ain't hauled it down yet." Rife knew very well the stories about how the freightman's daughter had helped Lupe's hangman escape. Rife also knew he was entering dangerous water by mentioning the subject to Mead. He quickly tried to be helpful and fortunately hit the mark.

"Yuh want me to ride up and check on our shipment, Mr. Mead? Might be that I could pick up some .44s right away if yuh need 'em."

"Don't bother about the shells, Rife. But it might not be a bad idea fer yuh to ride up there and kind of check on our goods." Mead liked the idea. Carpenter may have found some clue as to his daughter's whereabouts. The only thing Mead knew for sure was that the girl had not been found injured or dead. That would have brought the big freight hauler to town sure enough.

Mead almost smiled and he seemed to have forgotten about the argument over the division of proceeds. "Sure, that's a good idea. Why don't yuh do that now? I'll mind the store. Besides, I'm expectin' some of the boys."

Rife knew the powwow with the boys spelled trouble for someone, but he also knew that the less he learned directly, the better off he was. Going up to the freight yards was a good chance for him to get away from the toughs who always bullied him and helped themselves to

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

merchandise when they met with Mead in the storeroom of the mercantile.

He knew, too, Mead wanted him to keep his eyes open for anything relating to the escaped man and the Carpenter girl. And Rife, the town's most active gossip and rumor peddler, saw it as a golden opportunity to replenish the store of tidbits which he willingly gave away to wide-eyed confidants. Thus it was with some anticipation that Rife took his leave of Mead, leaving the fat man to meet with his cronies.

On the heels of Rife's departure, the backroom of the mercantile became the boardroom for a gathering of Mead and company. The principals included Ferris, Ritter, Snyder, and two of the nondescript toughs who frequented the Bobcat. The unkempt, ragged crew was representative of the type who drifted in and out of Frailey. They almost always had enough to buy drinks, but, when the money ran out, they disappeared for a few days only to return for a meeting with Mead and then had money to spend. Sitting variously on the sacks and piled goods in the cramped storeroom, they munched on pilfered crackers, cheese, and chunks of pink, smoke cured ham.

"When I pay fer a job, I expect it to be done right," Mead scolded. "Yuh told Ferris yuh were shot at. Well, what I want to know is, did yuh shoot back?"

"Not when they's three or four shootin'. Yuh told us this was an easy pick off of a few cows. 'Jest run 'em up to the basin,' yuh said. That's a heap different than runnin' some on up to Terwell and mixin' 'em with Bagge's stuff. Well, they was waitin' fer us, I tell yuh. I don't cotton to bein' set up, Mead." A skinny puncher with a matted, thin, scraggly beard, surrounding a nearly lipless mouth spoke in a piercing voice. He remembered the sing of rifle slugs through the night, and he was angry.

"Well yuh weren't expected. Couldn't be. No one knew what yuh were doin' except us in this room," rapped out Ferris. His long taut face turned from one to the other. "Unless..." The unspoken words were all the stronger for not having been uttered.

The thought that one among them was, in fact, against them cut through the bonds that united the ever-suspicious men. Each wanted to place himself outside the pale of suspicion. Yet all were afraid to speak, fearing that to do so would only bring him attention. They shifted uncomfortably trying not to look or appear anything but part of the group, trying to be natural and easy, but the tension that the idea had introduced was obvious to all.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Mead was the only one who was beyond such suspicion because all plans were his, directions were given by him, and he sat at the focal point of their activities. It was Mead who realized how destructive such an idea was. He spoke to reassure them and to blanket their fears.

"I say it ain't possible. We have never had this kind of trouble before and yuh all been in on these sashays before. It's connected to that damn hangman somehow. None of those cow chasers ever done more than grumble before. Any shootin' was always jest one puncher tryin' to put on a show so's he could tell how he fought off a big gang of rustlers."

Being agreeable, Ritter chimed in, "Sure ain't had no bunch layin' fer us before, Fred. Must be that big hooter all right, stirrin' 'em up somehow."

He would have been well advised to remain silent. Mead turned on him. "Are yuh sure yuh ain't been shootin' off yuhr yap to the wrong people, Ritter? It'd be easy enough for you to spill somethin', that's fer sure."

Ritter started to protest the charge, thought better of it and fell into a brooding silence. Mead's appointment of him to the position of Sheriff had, over the months, given him a false notion of his own value. Mead saw him only as a liquor-washed prop and a man who would lie to his own friends when it served his purpose, steal from them if it pleased him, and kill them if necessary. Ritter's exalted notions of himself as one with some power and authority seemed to constantly place him in conflict with Mead. Ritter brooded about Mead's "uppity" attitude and promised himself that someday there would be a reckoning. Today, however, was not that day.

"The way I see it," Mead said to the group, "we have to make a choice. Either we kowtow to those that're makin' trouble, in which case they'll only get even bigger ideas, or we put an end to their fussin'. Ritter says that Carpenter was even goin' on about elections the other day." Pausing while that sank in, he watched them through his eye slits, evaluating their reactions. Amid nods of agreement, he went on, "Seems to me our only choice is to come down hard on 'em." Intensely, he slammed his fist onto a shelf of glass jars causing them to dance and rattle against one another.

"What do yuh have in mind," drawled the bearded one who had been on the rustling detail and had described what he felt was an ambush.

"I say we hit 'em with somethin' they won't ferget. Yuh all know the Evans place. Old Kross Evans has one of the biggest spreads around here. He's also got that big new barn they raised last mouth." Leaning

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

back and speaking suggestively, he drawled, "I hear tell it's the biggest barn in these parts, maybe in the territory. Sure would be a shame if somethin' happened to it."

They looked at one another, and a knowing smile began to spread around the room like an ill-wind. Agreement was reached, but not a word was spoken.

Mead had brought them into the rotten compact, and now he directed how it was to be carried out. "Jest so's there won't be any chance of messin' this up, yuh all go. Hit 'em after midnight and make sure that damn barn bums to the ground. There's kerosene aplenty right here," he nodded at the oily drum resting on thick blocks near the rear door. "While they're wonderin' what hit 'em, I think we ought to cut out some of them fat steers ole Kross keeps in his south pasture. Once yuh're clear, don't stop at the basin, head 'em up to Terwell. Tell Bagge to peddle 'em quick 'cause they'll be easy to spot."

Fred, may be that I shouldn't be gone from town. Folks might notice," suggested Ritter.

Mead dismissed the idea with a sharp wave of his hand. "Yuh go. And take off that damn badge after yuh leave town. All of yuh, drift out of here and leave town one at a time, no need to have folks see yuh all together."

They rose and began filing out. Ritter and the hardcases departed through the front where they pawed through the merchandise and helped themselves to more crackers, cheese and ham. Ferris and Snyder left through the rear, and as they went out the door, Mead stared at Ferris' departing back. Mead remembered that Ferris had been the one who introduced the destructive idea of a traitor in their midst, and Ferris was the most recent addition to his group.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Rife bounced along on a horse that was as lanky and thin as his rider. The afternoon sun against the wall of the prairie mesa reflected down into the freight yard and sent heat waves dancing around the corral rails, the logs of the wagon shed and the cabin as the storekeeper's horse stirred the thick carpet of dust with his choppy walk.

The layout was familiar to Rife who often brought his freight orders up himself rather than simply placing them when goods were delivered. In fact, Rife welcomed any opportunity to visit the Carpenters, especially Jane. She had done nothing to encourage the store clerk, but he had persuaded himself that she had taken a fancy to him. She was always polite because that was her way, but Rife had read far too much into her smile and pleasant way of taking his orders for goods.

In her innocence of town politics, she did not associate Rife with Fred Mead. To her, the clerk was only that, a tall thin man who ordered goods and sold them over the counter of the mercantile. If she took note of the fact that she received much more attentive service when she visited the store than other customers, she made no mention of it. On one occasion Rife had pointedly mentioned a Sunday picnic, but she had deflected the remark. He did not pursue the matter and contented himself with watching her.

Jane was, in every aspect, most desirable. Yet, she always dressed in heavy work clothes like a man and seemed always to be busy at the freight yard. She came to town for brief visits and came infrequently. Rife secretly felt he had found an undiscovered treasure and it only remained to determine how to claim it.

The blunt father was certainly a major stumbling block in Rife's quest. The freighter had never said anything directly on the subject, but there was little doubt he sensed Rife's intentions.

As he daydreamed his way into the dusty yard, Rife's thoughts on the matter were interrupted by a voice from the freight shed. It was Amos Carpenter who called out to him.

"Lookin' for somethin'?"

"Oh, hello there, Mr. Carpenter," answered the clerk who was a bit startled to be spoken to so abruptly when the yard had seemed empty.

Rife reined the bony horse over to the high door that had been propped open with a wooden box. From his seat in the burning sun, the interior looked like a dark oasis. Without being invited, he dismounted and stepped into the relative cool of the building.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Amos had been unloading assorted crates from the wagon which had been backed into the long shed. He had almost finished his work and little rivers of sweat coursed down his face and neck, joining others that streamed down his bare chest and muscular arms.

"I heard that yuh were back. Sheriff Ritter mentioned it the other day. Since I hadn't seen yuh and since I had a few slack minutes, I thought I'd ride up to see if there was any trouble with our shipment."

"Does all that mean that Mead sent yuh up here to look around?"

Amos had intended it more as a reflection of his suspicion of Mead than a charge against Rife, but he had accidentally hit dead center on the purpose of the store man's visit. It unsettled Rife to be confronted so squarely with his motives and he stammered a bit when he tried to answer.

"There's no call... I ... I, the truth to tell, I was worried about Miss Jane. The rumors and all. I was afraid that she may have come to some harm from that hangman."

Amos had stopped work and was leaning against a stack of crates looking thoughtfully at Rife. He had found his pipe and tobacco and was filling and packing the big bowl with slow and deliberate care. Firing a huge match and applying it to the pipe, he looked at Rife over the flame.

"Yes, I believe that part, but I think yuh had best leave the worryin' about Jane's well-bein' to her father. I don't need Fred Mead's ribbon clerk doin' that fer me."

Rife turned as red as his high priced calico. For an instant he could not call up the words for a reply, but finally he blurted out, "I don't see any wrong in my worryin'. We all respect Miss Jane and wouldn't want any harm to come to her."

"Respect is fine, Rife. But yuhr kind of respect makes me a mite uncomfortable. Yuh'd do well to keep that in mind."

Rife was taken aback by the directness of the other's words. He realized that he would gain nothing if he pursued the subject any further and made a desperate attempt to change course.

"Has she come home. I mean, have you heard from ... " Rife was stumbling badly. Everything he said seemed to take him into dangerous areas.

Amos looked him up and down through the smoke of his pipe. Without saying a word, he turned away, and began working the remaining crates out of the wagon box. Over his shoulder he said, "I'll bring your goods down tomorrow or the next day."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

He had been dismissed. He stared at the broad bare back for a moment, then turned on his heel and stalked back to his horse. As he smoldered his way back toward town, he sorted over the exchange with Carpenter and concluded that he had learned nothing. Certainly there wasn't anything he could report back to Mead.

As he thought back on his brief encounter, Rife kept hitting on a sour note. Something did not fit. Then it suddenly came to him. He ran it through his mind again and again. "Carpenter was too calm. He wasn't concerned enough about his own daughter. Why wasn't he out tearing up the countryside looking for her. He would be unless he knew where she was. That's it," thought Rife. "That has to be it." Rife pulled his horse up short. He sat thinking for a while, then suddenly headed off the road and away from town toward the high prairie of the benchland above the Platte.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The sliver of moon that had been hanging in the late evening sky fell below the horizon and left the broad overhead expanse of night to the stars. But the air of night was as clear as the air of the day, and the stars beamed enough light for careful riders to make their way across the broad rangeland, down into the shallow valley of Little Blue creek which had dried to a quiet trickle from the parching drought, and up the valley to a muddy watering pond.

The night riders paused while their horses dropped their muzzles indifferently as if unable to decide if their thirst was great enough to compel them to drink. Either they decided against the water or they were alerted by some night sound, for their heads suddenly came up, and their ears stood pointed into the night.

"Hear that?" one rider called quietly to the others.

"Naw, I didn't hear nothin'. Yuh're gettin' jumpy, Ritter," said a figure.

"Much further?" asked another.

The lead rider stood up high in his saddle, stretching his legs. "Jest around the point and up off the bottom," he answered.

The hooves of the horses splashed in the water and squished in the soft mud as the group made its way up to firm ground toward the black point of earth that loomed up against the sky. Two of the riders carried bulky cans that occasionally clanked against a spur or a pistol butt despite efforts to hold the bulky cargo out away from the sides of the horses.

"Muffle them damn cans!" snarled the lead rider.

"Easy enough to say," complained one.

"And keep yuhr damn mouth shut," shot back the leader in quick response.

Only moments later, the offending cans were emptied against the yet unpainted sides of Kross Evans' new barn. The shuffle of feet as the kerosene was doused on the tinder dry wood was the only sound that evidenced the work that was being done. Amid some muttered and hurried whispering, the job was finished.

Creaking saddle leather told of riders mounting and the soft fall of hooves said the horses and riders were withdrawing. One mounted figure remained. A match flared bright in the darkness; it was a bright orange for an instant before it burned lower and almost went out. It was

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

only a moment before it found the kerosene, and quickly the match light was lost in the larger flame.

The rider's face was illuminated by the flame, then, as the fire spread, his entire figure was bathed in the light. Convinced that the fire had taken, he wheeled his horse back toward the darkness. As he turned, a rifle shot rang out, and he dropped from the saddle as if a giant dark hand had swept him from the horse.

A volley of shots broke the quiet of the night. The nightriders returned the fire; sparks dancing from the ends of their revolvers. There were more rifle shots and a reply from the raiders. The entire side of the barn was a sheet of fire as the flames ate hungrily at the dry wood. The whole ranch yard and corral were now lighted by the fire. The figures of men running became targets of the nightriders who continued firing from the enveloping darkness. There was a shrill, piercing scream from a woman and, as if it were some kind of overpowering signal, the firing stopped and the muffled beat of running horses was heard, but only for the space of a brief moment.

There seemed to be an interlude of silence in which there was no sound. Then the crackling of the flames came to introduce the louder sounds of men yelling. Even louder came the squeals of frightened horses trapped in the burning barn.

A slight figure darted into the light of the fire, dashed across the yard, plunged into the water trough, emerged dripping, and rushed into the very fire itself. The side of the barn first fired began to sag as the charred beams threatened to give way.

Then, like fiery demons with great, rolling, terrified eyes of the horses that had been trapped in their stalls came bursting from the barn door. They scattered into the night in every direction. Just as the weight of the still burning roof brought it down onto and through the interior walls, there came, as if out of the jaws of hell, two gigantic horses thundering like a mighty storm. They raced as a team for the safety of the night air.

Clinging to the mane of one and lying low over the powerful neck was the figure of the one who had brought them from the furnace. Unlike the other horses, the team halted once they were full away from the heat of the burning ruins.

The mounted figure rose upright, then, like a long sigh, slipped off the horse and sank full length onto the ground. Almost instantly, the courageous head was lifted by anxious hands, and fire-singed blonde hair was brushed back from a burned face. Strong hands lifted her and

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

she was carried gently toward the big ranch house. Far from the edge of the light, in the fringe of a line of high brush, a man watched. He had been resting there and was almost asleep when he first heard the muffled sounds of the nightriders. He was puzzled and curious, thinking it might be some night animal, but he had a distinct impression of horses and men.

Before he could move forward to get a better view, the speck of orange flared in the darkness. The rising flame, the shots all came quickly, and he saw much of the drama. He watched with fascination as the rescuer ran into the flames and was surprised when the feat was accomplished and the horses came rushing out. He sucked in his breath with amazement when the team seemed to come directly out of the flames. Yet the greatest shock of all came when he saw them raise the head of the fearless one who had rushed to save the horses. In the dancing light of the fire, he saw the face of Jane Carpenter.

After they carried the unconscious girl to the ranch house, he saw the cowhands lift another body, also a woman, and carry her away. Still another was raised from the fire-colored red dust; it was that of a man. The woman and the man were carried not as burdens, but with gentleness, and the watcher felt certain that the two were fatalities of the brief, but savage, war.

Rife, the hiding watcher, was torn with conflicting emotions. His first thought, for his own safety, quickly vanished when he realized his was a safe and secure vantage point. He admired the deadly efficiency of the attackers as they fired the barn, and then used the light to good advantage in taking a murderous toll on the defenders.

His next feeling surged up at the sight of Jane, lying on the ground and Jane being carried away into the darkness. Without thinking, he knew Mead and his cronies were responsible for the raid. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with a long suppressed resentment at Mead's constant nagging and at the never-ending accusations. Anger came welling up in his chest and he felt a furious determination that was strange to him.

"If she's dead or bad hurt, " he raged to himself, "Fred Mead will pay. The fat pig will pay with his life."

While Rife was pledging vengeance on Mead, the ranch was collecting itself and trying to assess the damage. There was no doubt whatever that the greatest price was in the lives that were lost.

The ranch foreman was standing in the front parlor of the ranch house still holding his Winchester. With him were three slim ranch hands and they, like the foreman, were armed with rifles.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Boys," said the old foreman steadily, "I'll give it to yuh straight out. None of yuh need to stay on this spread one minute longer." He set his jaw, brushed a torn and bloody sleeve across his huge gray mustache and plunged on. "Mr. Evans is dead and Mrs. Evans is dead. 'Cause they are the owners, I ain't got any authority here myself. But Kross, " he quickly corrected himself, "Mr. Evans and I go way back and I fer one am holdin' on here until Miss Dottie can get here from back East or some legal person says otherwise. I can't pay yuh off, but I'm sure Miss Dottie will do right by yuh when she gets here."

The punchers were silent, their young faces bearing signs of the furious night battle. One who had been close to the barn was bareheaded and had a halo of singed hair over a smoke blackened forehead. Another had a small crooked cut on the very tip of his chin. They shifted their rifles uneasily and waited for the foreman to continue.

"I guess there ain't anything more to say," the grizzled old timer muttered, "except that yuh been good hands. If yuh need it, I'll speak to some of the other places and tell 'em they couldn't do better than to put yuh on. And..." he paused searching for words, "thank yuh. I'm jest sorry we didn't get more of 'em."

The cowhand with the singed hair looked at his companions then at the foreman. "Nice speech, Jess. Now I guess Bob and me had best try roundin' up some of them crazy nags. They may be clear to the Red River the way they was goin'."

The old foreman knew his men and he had known they would stay on, but he had wanted to be above board and give them a way out, in case his assessment of them turned out to be wrong. No further words on their staying were necessary.

"See what yuh can do on that and, Ben, it might be a good idea to scout around and see that none of them sparks carry over to the south pasture. It's drier'n a lizard's back pocket."

As they filed out through the wide front door, Jess heard the descending knock of boots on the starboard and turned.

"What'd the boys say, Jess?"

"Oh, they'll stick. Their backs are up now. Nothin' like a little shootin' to find out if yuhr men will stick er slide."

"Someone ought to try to round up some horses."

"They're a step ahead of yuh, Ferris. That's what they're doin' now. But how's the girl?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"She's still out, but Mrs. Foster is with her. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong except the burns on her arms and face, but all that smoke..." His voice trailed off and he shrugged.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," said the foreman shaking his head. "She came flyin' by me and, before I could even peep, she jumped into the horse trough and then headed fer the barn. I wouldn't have given her the chance of a biscuit weevil in hot grease.

"Well, let's hope she comes out of it," sighed Ferris. "Two dead is enough."

"Who was the polecat we dropped?"

"Went by the name of Snyder and, from what I was able to learn, he was a bad one. He told me himself that he had killed a stage driver up in the Dakotas."

"Mead'll miss him, but I guess he's got a whole den of that kind of snake."

"And they've been pretty well stirred up. After this night's work, they'll know fer sure that we were waitin' fer 'em. "

"Problem is," scowled the old foreman, "they forced our hand and it could spell trouble. A mite longer and we would've had all the spreads in these parts together, and we would've been strong enough to move. With Kross dead, we ain't got anybody to hold 'em in line. They'll scatter like chickens through a hole in the fence."

"I'm afraid yuh're right," agreed Ferris, "and, after tonight, I'm afraid I wouldn't be welcome at the Bobcat. "

"Mead'll put a bounty on yuhr hide all right. And now that he's warned that somethin's up, our plan to corral him and his gang won't be any better'n a slow tail tryin' to switch a fast fly."

"I don't know where I can do yuh any good unless all the owners stick together. Mr. Evans hired me in the name of the Owners Association. If there ain't no Association, I can't clean out that bunch alone. They'd hang me like that stranger hung Lupe."

"Speakin' of that, do yuh know anythin' about that feller? When yuh came out the other day and warned Kross that some of the Frailey crowd was goin' to hit the Blinkey place, yuh told me how Miss Jane helped him get away from Mead. But, what was his quarrel with Lupe, and where's he gone to again? Miss Jane won't say or at least didn't say anything to me. He must be quite a man, but, from what I know, he's disappeared like an old hand on fencin' day."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"I never laid eyes on 'im. I wasn't in town the night he decorated the Bobcat with Lupe." His eyes twinkling, he added, "Can't say that I mourned long over that deed. That Lupe was as low a dog as I ever met."

"I've got lots to do here, Ferris," said the foreman with a look that told much about the pain of losing an old and beloved friend. "I'd be obliged if yuh'd ride over to Carpenter's first thing in the mornin' and tell Amos what's happened here. By mornin' Jane may come to so's yuh won't be packin' news that's as bad as it would be right now. No matter what, he'll be madder'n a rain wet cat. When yuh do that, head on back here and we can jaw about where we stand in this."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Jane Carpenter was still unconscious when Ferris saddled up and rode out of the ranch yard at first light of dawn. The report from the stern Mrs. Foster who refused to leave the girl's bedside was that Jane's breathing was even and strong and that the bumps to her arms and face were not, for the most part, serious.

Ferris, who had worked for many years as a cattleman's range detective, was experienced in tracking down the petty nuisance kind of rustlers. He had expected to find the same in and around Frailey, but the cutthroats he had found surrounding Fred Mead were of a worse stripe than he had ever seen. When Kross Evans had contacted him through an Association in Texas, Ferris had decided that to get a line on the ringleaders he would come to the area and pose as a petty rustler himself. The tactic had worked in other places and it had been working here until the night raid had been planned.

When Mead called for the barn burning, Ferris knew there could be shooting and perhaps some killing, and he knew he had to warn the rancher. Disappointed that he had not learned as much as he had hoped, the detective chose to show his hand. He never joined the nightriders when they gathered for the raid. Instead, he had come to tell Evans about the raid. He had arrived only a few minutes ahead of his former gang friends and the ranch had been unable to properly prepare a defense plan. It had pretty much been grab a rifle, spread out and wait.

The return fire from Ritter and the others had been unexpected. The fact that both Evans and his wife had been shot was one of those bad breaks that seem to cluster up and rush at you when things start to go sour.

Ferris felt he was in a difficult position because he had not met any of the other ranchers. He and Kross had agreed it would be a better tactic for him to get as much as possible on Mead and his group before a general meeting was called.

Neither had he met Amos Carpenter, but he had heard Mead's men talk about the freighter after it was learned that Amos's daughter had been the instrument of that strange hangman's escape. Ferris had, of course, not known Jane was at the Evans place and it wasn't until after the shooting that the handiwoman, Mrs. Foster, told him who she was. He had immediately expected to see Lupe's executioner, but Mrs. Foster had been insistent that the girl had arrived alone.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Somehow it didn't add up right. Based upon what he had been told, he was certain the man had been hit and that had been confirmed when he found the bloody bandages. And judging from the blood on his saddle and on the bandages, the wound was pretty serious. He wondered if the man hadn't died along the road to the Evans ranch and simply been left somewhere by a frightened girl. But, then, remembering the sight of Jane rushing into the burning barn, he mused to himself, "It's not likely that one would ever get frightened very easy."

Ferris kept a sharp eye on the trail. It wouldn't do for him to meet up with any of Mead's cohorts nor with any of the ranchers either, since the word of the killings would have spread and, in their minds, he would still be thought of as part of the town gang.

He crossed the clear sign of thirty or forty cattle that had been trailed away from the Evans place and off toward Terwell. The trail was fresh, and he knew it was the work of Mead's crew.

The cow town of Terwell and the agent, Bagge, who peddled the beeves rustled by Mead's men were a part of the operation that were still something of a mystery to Ferris. He had offered to ride up there on at least one occasion, but Mead had always sent someone else.

He didn't believe that Mead was on to him or even suspicious when he had made the offer. It was Mead's way of doing things. He never let any of his men know everything that was going on. It was an effective way of insuring his control over the ruthless men who did his bidding.

Ferris wished that he had been able to spend another month watching Mead and his operation. It would have meant participating in small thievery, but it would have given him the information he needed to rally the ranchers. Things had just happened too fast. It all seemed to get rolling faster than Mead, the ranchers, and he wanted, and it all started with the hanging of Lupe. He wondered what the reason had been, but, with the hangman dead or gone, he would probably never know.

It was past mid-morning when Ferris saw the freight yard come into view. It seemed quiet and deserted, and he began to think he had made a long ride for nothing. It seemed likely Carpenter was on a delivery run and, unless there was a note or other sign, he would either have to wait or just turn around and go back to the ranch.

Just as Ferris pulled up near the water trough and prepared to step off his horse, he was warned, "Better jest sit fer a mite, mister."

He turned slowly and looked down the throat of a long double-barreled shotgun. It was cradled across the arm of an old man wearing

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

loose-fitting overalls over threadbare long-handled _underwear. His bushy, gray beard was tobacco-stained and, even as Ferris looked at the man, the oldster let fly with a brown spurt off to one side. He could have been just a harmless old yard worker, but the way he held the scatter gun and the way he fixed Ferris with a steady gaze from under the brim of his peaked hat left no doubt he was all business.

Ferris met the look for a moment, then smiled and asked, "Yuhr name Carpenter?"

"Better I do the askin', Mister Rider. Who wants to know?"

"It ain't one that takes kindly to havin' to talk down the barrel of a blunderbuss."

"The little itch in yuhr belly won't move it and neither will yuhr naggin' about it." The old beard twitched again and a second brown stream shot out and disappeared into the dust with a tiny puff. "Let's try it one more time. Who's askin' fer Carpenter?"

"A friend."

"The friend got a handle?"

"Problem with names, old timer, is they can create wrong ideas."

"Whatcha want with Carpenter?"

"I've got a message about his daughter, Jane."

The old man's eyes narrowed and the shotgun shifted a bit. "Spell it out."

Ferris had the feeling the old man was not Carpenter, but he knew he had no choice but to go along with him. "There's been quite a to do up on the Evans ranch and the girl..." he hesitated looking at the shotgun, "Ease up on that greener, old hoss, it's not good news, but it's not bad enough fer yuh to get nervous about."

At that moment another voice cut hard through the hot morning air. "Yuh got somethin' to say about my daughter, say it now, stranger. "

The speaker was behind Ferris and had apparently come from the direction of the cabin. Ferris had no idea how long the man had been standing there, but there was no doubt about who he was.

"Mr. Carpenter," began Ferris, "the foreman at the Kross Evans place asked me to ride over."

"Yes, that would be old Jess," acknowledged Carpenter, still impatient.

"Last night there was a raid on the ranch. They came to burn the new barn and to just shoot up the place. They fired the barn and by the time the shootin' was over, it was blazin' sky high. Then the girl, yuhr daughter, came runnin' from the house and like a shot went into the barn.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Before anyone could think what to do those horses came out there like all get out. Then came two of the biggest steppers I've ever seen and yuhr girl a hangin' on to one of 'em. "

"If she rode out, then..." Carpenter looked at Ferris for the conclusion of his sentence.

"Burned a bit on the arms and on her face. But after gettin' clear, she passed out. Hadn't come to yet when I left. Must a' been a bump on her head or jest breathin' that smoke."

"What's bein' done?" growled the graybeard.

"She's bein' tended by a woman who works at the ranch, a Mrs. Foster."

"Good woman," nodded Carpenter. Then looking at Ferris he asked, "Anyone else hurt?"

"Kross and his wife were both killed." It was direct, terse, and without any qualifying words, and while no disrespect could be read into Ferris's announcement, it was clear he was a man who had dealt in such matters before.

"The murderin' coyotes," bellowed the shotgun bearer. "It's that damned Mead and his crowd. This time they've gone too far."

"Yuh're right, it was Mead's men," said Ferris. "But by killing Kross they may not've done so bad fer themselves."

"How so?" Carpenter asked.

"Old Jess seems to think that the killin' of Kross may take the fight out of the other ranch owners. Mead may have managed to shut down any plans to close his operation."

Carpenter, who had been studying Ferris closely as if looking for some hint or suggestion of something being held back, suddenly asked, "Yuh're not one of Kross' hands. How do you fit into all this?"

Ferris sighed and thumbed his hat back on his head as he looked from one to the other. "I'll tell yuh, gents, it's a story that might take some hard tellin'." He withdrew a tobacco sack and papers from his shirt pocket as he eased himself in the saddle. He expertly rolled a cigarette, put it in the corner of his mouth, and returned the makings to his pocket. "It might tell better if I could climb down off this bronc and have a drink of yuhr water."

"Sure," Carpenter waved his arm toward the trough and pump. "Help yuhrself." He looked at the shotgun carrying old man and said, "I don't think we'll need yuhr cannon, Able."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

After refreshing himself with a drink at the pump, Ferris sat on the edge of the trough, puffed a bit on his cigarette, and finally began with a question. "I guess yuh been outa town fer a spell?"

"That's right," said Carpenter. "I been back to rails' end. And before that down south along the river. Able's been down to Cheyenne pickin' up some new wheels. He got back the day Jane hauled outa here."

"And before yuhr run, I'll bet yuh didn't get to town much in the last few months?"

"True enough. Only go there on business, deliveries, orders and such. But what's all my travelin' got to do with you?"

"It's a good thing fer me yuh haven't been to town more because if yuh had, we might've met before." Smiling at old Able who stood off to one side near the corral, Ferris continued, "If we had, yuhr man here would probably have dusted me on sight." As easily as possible he added, "Yuh see, I've been workin' fer Fred Mead."

Able grabbed for his shotgun that he had propped against the corral and might have drawn down on Ferris again if Amos Carpenter had not stopped him with an upheld hand. "Hold on, Able. There's more comin' otherwise he wouldn't have ever ridden up here."

"Thanks," grinned Ferris, "and yuh're right, there's more. The more is that I also worked for Kross Evans."

"Then yuh're the Association's man Kross hired to look into all the rustlin' and thievin' that's been goin' on around here." For the first time, a smile creased the broad face of the freighter.

A look of surprise and relief flooded the face of the Association detective. "Yuh're right and since yuh know, it'll save me some explaining but how did yuh know about my deal with Evans? Kross and me agreed that we wouldn't tell the Association until I had the information we needed to hang Mead."

"Name's Ferris, right?" asked Carpenter.

"Right."

"Kross and me been friends a long, time. While he didn't spread it around to the other ranchers who yuh were, he told me yuh were comin'. He had to. I carried his first message to yuh on a run back to the railhead and put it on the telegraph."

"I'll be ...," laughed Ferris. "Havin' someone know about me eases my mind considerable. Especially since Kross is gone."

"Speakin' of that, I want to get up to the ranch to see Jane and ask if there's anything I can do to help," said Carpenter.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Jess asked me to come back after talkin' to yuh, so I'd be pleased to amble along with yuh," offered Ferris.

"I'd like that. We've got some jawin' to do and talkin' to each other will give us somethin' to take our minds off bein' slow boiled in this heat," agreed Carpenter. "Before we go, come with me up to the cabin. Able, would yuh mind saddlin' up for me?"

The old man and the shotgun went off toward the tack shed and Ferris and Carpenter headed for the cabin. Ferris didn't assign any reason to being asked to accompany the freighter. If any question did come to his mind, it was only vague and undefined and he dismissed it only as a desire to talk.

Carpenter preceded him through the open door, then turned as Ferris entered and said, "Ferris, meet Owen Bannack."

A dozen thoughts rushed into Ferris' mind as he saw a long figure looking up at him from a cot. The man was dressed in denim trousers and a loose hanging blue cotton shirt. His sock-footed feet were crossed and resting on a folded bright quilt. His left arm was pulled up with the hand propped under his head.

Ferris was totally surprised, and for a brief moment he stood looking down into the penetrating gray eyes which seemed to have fastened him to the planks of the cabin floor. He started to speak, "By damn ... " he paused, then continued, "When the good Lord was makin' polecats, and givin' 'em all nine lives, he must have given this one a couple of extras."

Now it was Amos Carpenter who was surprised. He hadn't expected this kind of reaction. He frowned as the two men faced each other across the room, but before he could speak, the solemn faces broke into wide smiles and Ferris was across the space with three long steps.

"Owen, by jingo. If I had known you were still alive, I'd have known who it was that gave old Lupe his necktie party. I wondered jest who would have the sand to ride into the middle of town and string up one of Mead's own men."

"Believe me, pard, it was more accident than anything else. When I rode in there I hoped to find an honest lawman or judge who would hold him for a while. I wanted to take him back to the Committee."

"You two know each other," said Amos, more in amazement than as a question.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"If knowin' means ridin' together fer two weeks, slingin' lead at a mangy, murderin' hoss thief, and havin' yore life saved in the bargain, then I shore do know this ring tail."

"As the man says, Amos, we had ourselves quite a go a couple of years ago over in the Dakota Badlands."

"But I heard months ago you had been bushwhacked," Ferris said, a question in his voice.

"I guess I can only say a man who was paid for my scalp did a lot of crowing about a job he never got around to doing. As a matter of fact, I even heard talk about my own dying. The one spreading the story was wanted for some other killings and met the Committee before he met me."

Ferris looked down at Owen's right arm which lay unmoving by his side. Ferris guessed Mead's rifle bullet had found only the muscle in Owen's shoulder. "Looks like old Fred almost finished the job for that feller."

"Close," said Owen. "If it hadn't been for Jane, it would have been the end of my trail all right. She toted me out of here and hauled me down the road til we met up with Amos. Together they concocted the idea of Amos hauling me back here and Jane going to the Evans place. Since Mead and his bunch had already searched here, it was the best place to put me up until I either died or healed."

"Jane's the reason Ferris is here, Owen," explained Amos. "He says Mead's owlhoots fired a barn, and killed a rancher and his wife."

"She's not..." asked Owen sharply rising up from the cot.

"Jest burned some and took in too much smoke savin' some horses from the barn."

"Not just horses, Ferris," put in Amos. "Those horses are her closest and best friends. She'd go through hell to protect 'em."

"And she did," Ferris added.

"Ferris and me are ridin' up to the ranch now," and, as Owen reached for his boots, Amos quickly continued, "none of that, yuh're on the mend, but yuh're as weak as a newborn calf. Stay here, rest and try to get along with Able." The last direction brought a smile to Owen's face.

"You two get the easy part. A long ride in the hot sun, dust in your eyes, maybe someone along the way to take a pot shot at you. And you leave me here with that old skallawag."

"After seein' him tote that scatter gun around and waggin' it under my nose. I'll take the long ride," laughed Ferris.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

After more than an hour's talk with Owen, the freighter and the range detective had taken their leave and were on the road to the Evans ranch. Owen Bannack was left lying on the cot, staring out the open door. A frown of concern tugged at the corners of his eyes as he thought back to the scene on the street and remembered the fat man, Fred Mead. He owed his life to Amos Carpenter's daughter and the news that Mead had been the cause of injury to her brought a cold hard glint of steel to the gray eyes.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Rife was alone in the back storeroom amid the stacks of dry goods, the bolts of cloth, the kegs of nails, paint, and the sacks of beans and flour. He was only half-heartedly taking an inventory on a smudged tablet. As he thought of preparing a freight order based on the stock taking, his mind flashed back to the image of Jane Carpenter in the firelight of the burning barn.

Rife's oath of vengeance on Fred Mead was still seared into the uppermost level of his mind. He sank down on a stack of bean sacks and sorted through his options trying to determine which course of action available to him would bring the most appropriate punishment to Mead.

He had considered simply firing the store. It had the appeal of being an easy thing to do and something that had little risk to himself, except for the loss of a job. He had also thought of calling Mead to the storeroom and blasting him into oblivion with a shotgun. He wondered, though, if he would have time to make good his escape from Mead's little army which was nearby in the Bobcat.

In the final analysis, he knew he would do something, but until he knew more about how badly the girl had been injured and, until a good opportunity and scheme came to him, he would bide his time. Meanwhile, he hoped Mead would stay far away, because he was afraid he would not be able to conceal his newly fired hatred of the man.

Then, as if some perverse and cynical power had read his mind, the door opened and Mead's round bulk squeezed itself into the crowded room. His shirt was plastered to his pasty skin and the sweat poured from his puffy face.

"Well, there yuh are, yuh damn smutty corn stalk." Mead's irritation was partly natural Fred Mead and partly a result of the constant unremitting heat which, according to one of his men, "was renderin' ole Fred like a fat hog over a pitch pine fire."

Rife's face flushed. His tormentor's sudden appearance coupled with his thoughts of Mead's destruction flustered him and set him on edge.

Mead's slit eyes missed very little, and they immediately noticed the dog-eared notepad and associated it with Rife's unease. "Whatcha stealin' from me, Rife?" Mead's recollection of his recent dispute with the storekeeper led him to suspect only some attempt by Rife to engage in another form of store goods larceny.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Jest takin' stock is all." Rife stopped there. The day before he would have said "Mister Mead," but now he couldn't say the words.

"Oh, I know yuh're takin' stock all right. Only question is, how much?" Mead, as always, amused himself with his dark humor, invariably at the expense of others. "Is that where yuh been yuh useless pack rat? Out peddlin' my goods on the side?"

Mead came closer, and Rife leaned back away from the foul odor of Mead's perspiration and back away from the wide, threatening body. Rife's reaction seemed to infuriate Mead who snarled, "Where have yuh been, yuh slitherin' snake? Where?"

"I've been here ... and ... " stammered Rife, badly shaken.

Mead's eyes narrowed into such fine lines it seemed impossible that he could see. "That's a blamed lie. Yuh never came back from Carpenter's... If yuh ever went there at all. Maybe yuh cooked up a deal with that fool wheel-roller."

"I went up there, jest like I promised, only..."

"Only what? Did yuh learn anything about that little tramp of a girl?"

The picture of Jane's unconscious face flashed in Rife's mind and his vows against Mead hammered in his brain. Both were still alive, but now the mental picture and the unperfected promises were submerged in his stark fear of Mead, and they became indistinct memories against the sharp outline of what was now immediate and real.

Rife struggled with himself and finally managed to answer, "Wasn't no one there but _Carpenter and he didn't say anything.

Mead was unrelenting. "If that's so, where yuh been since yesterday?"

"Nowhere ... jest around that's all..," stammered Rife. Mead waited a moment. Then he moved even closer to Rife whose terror only grew as he looked vainly for an escape for both his body and his thoughts. Mead's head came forward with the heavy jowls and the folds of his neck hanging almost directly over Rife's face. Mead knew the effect he was having and he waited for it to work on Rife, then he hissed out one word, "Where?"

Rife's scrawny hands twitched and clawed at the bags behind him. Finally, like one going under water, he gasped, "I rode out to the ranch, to the Evans ranch."

Now that the admission had been made, Mead knew the rest would come easier. He straightened and his tone was scornful. "Yuh went out spyin' did yuh?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Mead pried the story out of Rife. He forced the despairing clerk to recite every detail of what he had seen the night before. Bit by bit he heard from Rife what he already knew from his riders. However, he had not learned for certain whether the rancher and his wife had been killed. Rumors had been spreading through Frailey all afternoon, but Rife's account of the event was the best evidence of the killings he had received.

Even in his misery and fear, Rife had held back the fact of Jane Carpenter's presence at the ranch. It hadn't been necessary to reveal it, and as Mead stood sneering down at him, Rife hoped that the interrogation was over. He knew if Mead asked the right questions, it would come out even if he tried to keep it in.

At the very instant Rife thought the ordeal was ended and Mead was turning away, Rife was frightened almost into a faint when Mead spun on him and with his face only inches away spat out the words, "Why did you go there, Rife?"

Rife's last reserve dropped away. His composure was utterly gone. His only thought was to get away from Mead and the only avenue was revelation.

"On the way back ... back here from Carpenter's I remembered Miss Jane was always friendly with the Evans girl. I thought she might have gone there with that man, ...with the hangman."

Mead somehow sensed the most important news from Rife was yet to come and he quietly asked with a deadly low voice, "And was she there?"

"Yes," Rife nodded, closing his eyes to shut out the sight of Mead who, looking with contempt at the wilted clerk, realized the storekeeper was too frightened to be of further use. Mead spun on his heel with a quickness that belied his large body and, without a word or glance at Rife, left the storeroom. He knew he had washed the man clean of everything worth knowing. Now Fred Mead had the vital information he had been seeking. The outlaw needed to act and to act quickly.

Jake Ritter was sleeping in an old chair in the jail. His old boots, worn and scuffed, were propped on the open drawer of what had once been a proud roll top desk. The splintered edges of the drawer and the thick layer of dust in its bottom told of feet put there by long and established custom.

Other than the rickety old desk whose top no longer rolled and the chair occupied by the snoring Ritter, there was only one other piece of furniture in the office. That was a wooden bench, once painted red,

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

which sat along one wall. It, like the inside of the desk drawer, was covered with dust. The bench's dust was the accumulation from the adobe wall that was brushed and rubbed by each successive customer of the red boards.

The carpenter who constructed the bench had been inattentive to the fact that benches frequently are occupied by more than one person at a time. The consequence of the builder's oversight was a long overhang on both ends. This gave the bench an instability that caused it to tilt, suddenly and treacherously, whenever one seated in the middle rose and left another sitting on either end.

The nasty trick of the red bench was pretty generally known and frequenters of the jail's outer office were always careful to occupy the very center of the board. Whenever a regular forgot himself or whenever a stranger, not knowing about the bench, got unceremoniously dumped onto the crude wooden floor, it was a moment of great hilarity for the Sheriff and chagrin for the sprawling visitor.

Everyone remembered the day Fred Mead was dumped. His great weight had slid off the dipping end and the momentum of the rising end was so great that it almost came completely over to drop the bench on Mead's head.

Mead had cursed the Sheriff, the bench, the rough laughter, and the idea anything funny had happened. It may have been the threat of the bench that kept him away or it may have been an aversion to jails in general, but, whatever the reason, Mead seldom went into the little adobe structure. That was a fact that gave Ritter some comfort and a little domain of his own.

When the heavy door squeaked open on its dry rusting hinges, Ritter did not stir. It was only when Mead yelled at him, "Ritter, damn yuh, wake up," that the sleeper blinked open his eyes.

The surprise of Mead himself coming to the jail served to speed Ritter's waking process. It also irritated him a bit since Mead's entrance amounted to something of an invasion of the pretend Sheriff's territory.

As if to add to the insult, Mead demanded, "Come on, climb outa that chair and let me sit a spell."

Ritter was tempted, but he knew better than to offer the bench. Sullenly he complied, rising, stretching, yawning, and scratching under his suspenders in the process. He didn't sit immediately on his red bucking bench but went instead to a wooden pail sitting near the door and stirred its contents with a bent dipper.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Having managed to avoid a few flies floating on the surface of the stale water, he pulled forth the dipper and took a quick swig. He swished the water in his mouth for a moment, then pulled the door open a crack and spewed his mouthwash into the dusty street. He carelessly tossed the dipper back into the bucket, scratched some more and asked, "What brings yuh to the jail, Fred, looking fer a room?"

Ritter's attempt at humor fell flat as Mead sat staring at him from the armchair. If Ritter sensed that his familiarity with Mead by the constant use of his first name irritated Mead, he was correct. But he may have also understood Mead would never correct him because to do so would invite the damaging criticism he was putting on "airs" and "gettin' uppity."

Finally Mead spoke, "I've found our hangin' friend."

"How?"

"How is my business, Ritter. Jest know I've done what needed to be done. If yuh'd get outa this chair once in while yuh might have found 'im yuhrself."

Ritter eased down dead center on the red bench . "Well, then, where is he?"

"Carpenter's blamed girl took 'im out to the Evans spread. They were there the other night when yuh paid yuhr call."

"I'll be..." whistled Ritter. "Right there under our noses. Are yuh dead sure of this?"

"Sure enough. The girl was seen while the barn was burin'. jest as plain as yuh please, right out in the open."

"Want me to round up a crew and pull him outa there?" asked Ritter.

Mead tilted back in the creaking, protesting chair and Ritter expected to see another dumping any second. Somehow the chair was balanced there on an invisible edge of disaster and it held while Mead leaned his head back, wiped the sweat from his neck and pulled at his collar with a pudgy finger. Ritter almost felt sorry for the heavy, heat-tortured man, but Ritter's capacity for compassion was shallow and he easily resisted the fleeting temptation to suggest Mead take off the string tie he always wore which was almost as much a part of him as his great weight.

"No," said Mead after a long moment. "It would be too risky with all the people goin' in and outa there now. We've got to put a man out there to watch the place until the buryin' is over. When that's done

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

and the place cools off a bit, we'll go in after 'im. Who've yuh got yuh can trust?"

"How about Mizer? He's got sharp eyes and is good enough with that gun of his."

"Can we trust him?"

"Why, shore, Fred. He was with us on the Evans thing and he's ridden lots of times."

"All right, but you tell him so's he'll understand he's to keep his yap shut about this. I don't want them ranchers knowin' we're on to where that big sliver's at."

Both men knew why there was a concern for secrecy. They remembered how Ferris had failed to show for the raid on the Evans ranch. Ritter had gone ahead with the raid without him and at the ranch realized where Ferris had gone. He appreciated very well the need for keeping their doings close to the chest.

For his part, Mead was deeply alarmed by the fact their operation had been exposed to one who was obviously working for the other side. Even more troubling was the knowledge the ranchers were up in arms, angry, and trying to put together an organized resistance.

Mead's cunning told him the key to control over events in this area was division of the ranchers. Armed and organized, they could smash him easily because his loosely knit group of night riders would scatter like dry seeds in a high wind the instant the cost of stealing and terrorizing became too high.

As he sat looking at the yawning Jake Ritter, Mead began to wonder just how long he should try to hold the Frailey gang together. "It might be time to think about a last grab," he thought, "but before I pull out of here, I've got to find out who Lupe's hangman is. I shore don't want him on my back trail when I scat fer the high country."

Mead knew that sending Mizer out to watch the ranch house could only be for a day or two. Because the next step would be more difficult and more dangerous, Mead was already deciding how to place Ritter and his cohorts in the direct line of any shooting that might result.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The room into which Jane had been carried was dominated by the brass four poster bed whose upright bars each gleamed with a shiny sliver of the afternoon sunlight that slipped in between the lace curtains. Despite the sultry heat that surrounded the Evans ranch house, the room seemed to be a cool refuge. Perhaps it was the pale green reflecting from the walls up onto the otherwise white ceiling that was framed by the high wooden molding.

The bedchamber was sparsely but tastefully furnished. The spindly curved legs of the bedside table supported a round wooden top, and upon it were a lamp and a porcelain basin. Both took a slight green cast from the walls.

There were two round tintypes on the wall, one on either side of the bed. The frames were a dark mahogany wood and more remarkable than the figures they surrounded. In contrast to the dark frames and deep gray and black figures in the tintypes, there was a light pastel drawing on the opposite wall next to the door. The artist had drawn a broad river flowing through a grove of tan trees and had placed dainty bright flowers in the grass that stretched up over a far away hill. Asleep on the floor under the picture was the dog, Wink.

Sitting in a high-backed rocker was a stout woman whose tightly bound gray hair rested against a padded headboard. Her kind brown eyes were fastened attentively on the figure lying on the bed. Mrs. Foster had the distinct impression the girl had stirred in the deathlike sleep that had held her since the night before when she had been carried in and placed on the bed.

The housekeeper rose and walked to the bedside. As she did so, Wink's eyes snapped open, and he watched her, but he did not move, and he made no sound. With the gentleness of an experienced nurse, she lifted the damp cloth from the girl's forehead, rinsed the cloth in the fresh basin water and placed it back on the fire burned brow. Mrs. Foster's impassive face twisted into a disapproving scowl as she noted again the burn across the girl's cheekbone. She knew it would heal into a small scar that would be a permanent reminder of the barn fire. "But it'll be a mark of courage, sure enough," Mrs. Foster grunted to herself.

The girl's blonde hair was spread against the white pillow and the hair's outer fringes were a deep burned brown. Her cheeks were a bright red as though still hot from the fire and, like a sunburn, they would eventually peel. The white compress across her forehead coupled with

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

the white coverlet seemed to complete a white ring around the red cheeks and nose.

The thumping of heavy boots on the stairway told Mrs. Foster a visitor was on the way. The footsteps were muffled by the braided long mat that ran the length of the hallway and finally, they halted altogether. There was a brief pause and then a soft knock on the closed door. Rather than call out an invitation to enter, Mrs. Foster padded to the door, opened it and looked squarely into the expectant face of Amos Carpenter.

A tight smile of recognition crossed her face and she reached out a hand toward him. "Oh, Amos. Thank God you're here."

Amos enveloped her hand with both of his and as he looked first at her and then over her shoulder toward the bed asked, "How's she doing, Emma?"

With a heavy sigh, Mrs. Foster turned and looked at the silent figure on the bed, "No change. No change at all. She's so still and so quiet." Then quickly, "Come in Amos."

The muscular freighter looked out of place among the pictures, the delicate furniture and lace curtains. In this little feminine sanctuary, certainly a girl's bedroom, his very walk seemed unnatural and tentative. Yet his obvious concern for the unconscious girl overrode the awkwardness and, once seated on a lace fringed hassock by the bed, he was entirely and only a concerned father.

The girl's face peeked out above the cover and under the damp compress, and her slight figure seemed to merge into the bed. She appeared to sleep, yet it was a strange sleep without the turning and moving that would be expected of one who was merely tired. The image created by the girl was an odd combination of helplessness and expectancy.

Mrs. Foster placed her hand on Amos's shoulder and spoke quietly, "Amos, I've got a chore or two that needs attention. Would you like me to bring you something? Maybe some spring water?"

"That would be fine, Emma. Thank yuh."

With an understanding pat on his shoulder, she turned and left him. As the door closed behind the housekeeper, Amos turned and looked at his daughter. As he studied her face, he, too, noted the deep burn on her cheek. That angered him. The bright cheeks which would soon peel angered him further. His rage built and grew and after a few moments, the silence and her inability to speak further fueled his anger. He made no idle vows or threats, it was a simple reality with him. Those who were responsible for this would be brought to account.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"When this is settled," he told himself, "the freight business in and out of Frailey is going to be shut down. Enough of this bein' gone all the time and havin' to ask her to do a man's work." As he made the promise, and, as if confirming it, he reached down and patted the head of the big dog that had joined him at the bedside.

The thought of the girl working unceasingly and without complaint brought back his discontent with their situation. He had done everything he knew to reduce the burden and had even once raised the subject of sending her back to St. Louis to live with a cousin. In her characteristic way, she had laughed at the idea and refused to even discuss it seriously.

After some time had passed, Mrs. Foster knocked and entered the room without waiting for him to move to open the door.

"Amos, that man, Ferris, told me that you hadn't eaten dinner yet and here it is almost supper time. I've laid out a bite on the kitchen table. Now scoot. There's nothing to do here right now except sit, and I'm better'n you at doin' that." As he stood, she added, as if re-enforcing her directions, and Jess is waiting to talk to you."

Before leaving, he took a long look at Jane, then turned to Mrs. Foster, "Emma, I don't know how to thank yuh for what yuh're doin'."

"Tosh, Amos. Jane's like one of my own. She and Miss Dottie were two of a kind. They almost grew up together, what with school and Jane stayin' here when her mama took sick. Well, Amos, you know you don't need to thank me. I wouldn't have it any other way. Now off with you. If there's any change, I'll call you."

Amos found old Jess sitting at the oil-cloth covered kitchen table thoughtfully stirring a big white mug of coffee. Across from the foreman was a stack of home baked white bread, a plate of cold roast beef, neatly sliced into convenient sandwich-sized slabs. There was an open jar of dill pickles and another of dried apple slices. There was also a cup of steaming coffee, a small covered sugar bowl and a small pitcher of thick cream, all arrayed around a large white plate whose edges wore a fanciful blue flowerlike decoration.

He suddenly realized he hadn't eaten since early that morning and was indeed hungry. He stepped to the water-stained and soap-spattered washstand that stood near the back door and splashed in some water from the nearby bucket. He vigorously doused his face and hands and then began drying them on a large cotton cloth that hung from a nail above the stand. Finished, he dumped the water into the large pail under the stand and, as he stepped to the table, he patted at his ruffled hair.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Jess watched the freighter wash up and waited until he was seated before he spoke, "How's the girl?"

"No change, Jess. She shore is quiet." He shook his head back and forth as a worried look settled on his face.

"I didn't send for a sawbones, Amos. Only one in callin' distance is Doc Warner up in Terwell. He's as old as the river and his thinkin' is about as muddy."

"Yes, that's true enough. Mrs. Foster's doin' all that can be expected, at least fer now."

He ate in silence while Jess sipped coffee and watched him over the rim of the large mug. As Amos finished a second sandwich and reached for his coffee, Jess nodded at the ornate kitchen range. "She made me promise to remember the pie," said the foreman. "It's in the warmer."

Above the black polished range top that was, indeed, noticeably warm, were two small cast iron doors trimmed with gleaming polished steel. Across the surface of the doors and all around the small handles there were scrolls and flowing lines crossing and curving in a whimsical pattern that had pleased some heavy handed decorator at the foundry. Amos lifted one of the little doors off the notched latch and found the promised pie.

"Join me?" asked Amos cutting himself a healthy portion and sliding it onto his plate.

Reluctantly the foreman drawled, "Naw. Truth to tell, I been there ahead of yuh."

"I see," grunted Amos eyeing the half-empty pan.

Having finished eating, Amos drew out his pipe and pouch and, as he filled the bowl and tamped down the crumbling brown threads of tobacco, he looked at the old man across the red checkered tabletop. The two had known each other for years and the bond of understanding between them was strong. They respected one another and each trusted the other completely.

The contact between them had been frequent during the years that Jane and Kross Evans' daughter, Dottie, had gone to school together. When Dottie had gone to a girl's school some two years earlier, the communication between Carpenter and the Evans ranch had gone on as Kross had talked often with the freighter about the increase in outlawry and the rise of Fred Mead in Frailey.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Kross had utmost faith in old Jess and had included him in all those frequent meetings. Both Amos and Jess were deeply hurt by the death of Kross, but, as was their way, they would say little.

"Buryin' tomorrow?" asked Amos through the first puff of blue smoke.

"In the evenin'. Too hot durin' the day. Mornin' would be too early for the other ranchers to gather."

Amos nodded his agreement. Then in measured tones he asked, "Where do we go from here Jess? Do yuh think the Association will hold together with Kross gone?"

Jess seemed to look for an answer in the bottom of his nearly empty cup. Then he set it down carefully aligning its round bottom over the corners of the squares in the oil cloth design.

"They're all good men, Amos. They work hard, they're God fearin' and honest to a turn. Backed into a corner, they'll fight like starvin' wolves over a fresh dead lamb. Trouble is, I don't think they feel cornered. Straight out, I don't think they'll hold together. "

"Even with these killin's?"

"If it had been someone else, maybe. But Kross was a leader, he was strong, and he could have made somethin' out of a murder. The others? They'll jaw a lot, but fer now, talkin' to 'em about stayin' with the Association would be like drivin' bawlin' calves north in January."

"Goin' to try?"

"That's another problem. I ain't no talker, leastwise to talk someone into somethin'. Even if I was, Amos, I'm jest a hand here. Owners won't listen to an old foreman whose boss is deep well cold and in the ground." After a moment he went on, "Amos, maybe you could talk some sense to 'em."

"I could try I suppose. Trouble with that is I ain't in any better position than you. Me bein' only a drayman."

"Could be that Jane bein' hurt gives yuh a stake."

Amos raised a big hand as if to halt the conversation at that point. "I doubt that gives me any standin' and I wouldn't trade on it if I could."

Both were silent and each man was alone with his own thoughts for a time. The sense of futility nagged at them. Each had a strong reason for wanting to take action against Mead and his cutthroats. Old Jess has lost a friend and employer to whom he had given undivided loyalty for over thirty years. Amos Carpenter had also lost a friend and had a daughter injured, how badly he still did not know.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

In both men there was a deep hostility toward lawlessness and violence. They were willing to work and to sacrifice to bring law to their own lives and to the lives of their neighbors. At the same time they were practical men who knew their own limitations. Right now they were limited by the fact that Mead had a vastly superior strength to any one or two individuals, and the outlaw leader had now dealt a seemingly crippling blow to the only good chance anyone had of organizing opposition.

"If the Association goes by the board, that means the country will belong to Mead up and down the river from Terwell to Big Bend and two day's ride in either direction," mused Amos.

"Yep, he'll have it tied tighter'n wet rawhide." Changing the subject, the foreman asked, "Yuh stayin' over til tomorrow?"

"I'd like to if yuh can put me up. I'd best be here if Jane starts to come around."

"Make yuhrself at home, Amos."

"Thanks. I think I'll look in on her now and give Mrs. Foster a rest. But before I go, I think I'll step out to the bunkhouse and have a word with Ferris."

With that, the two men rose from the table and left the kitchen, each with a sense of frustration and gloom. Neither looked forward to the grim business of the following day.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Fred Mead was a late sleeper. His organizing and planning in the Bobcat frequently kept him up until all hours. That, coupled with his affection for the rye whiskey that was stashed in a separate area under the bar for his exclusive use, usually kept Mead in bed each morning until well after the sun was up.

Mead's living quarters were in a walled off section of the Mercantile with a separate entrance onto a side street. The single window was covered with a pull down blind that had not been raised since Mead moved in. In fact, its round wooden pull hook was tied to a tack imbedded in the lower window sill. The only light that could get in during the day squeezed in around the edges of the thick blinds.

On the morning of the funeral of Kross Evans and his wife, the dull light that edged into the room showed a ruffled bed sagging under the great weight of Fred Mead. As usual, the heat had been too oppressive for sleep and it was not until the early morning hours brought a welcome cool that Mead could rest. He had pulled a dingy sheet over his heavy frame and up under his thick jowls and one might have said he looked like a gross, bloated white mummy.

It was still over an hour before he would normally rise when the still of his disorderly room was penetrated by a loud knocking at the side door. Mead's eye slits widened a bit. The knocking stopped for a moment and he instantly seemed to doze off again. The knocking began again, more insistent than before. This time it was accompanied by a voice, "Fred, Fred, open up. Quick, it's me, Jake. "

The response was a yell from Mead, "What the blazes do yuh want, yuh damn blister."

"Fred, yuh got to get up quick," came back the insistent cry.

"Jest a damn minute. And stop that hammerin' or I'll blast yuh through the door."

Fumbling for his trousers in the semi-darkness, Mead grumbled curses at Ritter. Finally, he managed to shove his stubby legs into the tent-like trousers and into a splayed pair of short boots.

Ritter knocked at the door again and cried out, "Fred, can yuh hear me? Are yuh gettin' up? Don't go back to sleep on me."

Mead cursed and stepped quickly toward the door, but he moved too fast for prudence. His foot caught in a sleeve of the shirt he had thrown on the floor the night before. His other foot was on the end of the

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

sleeve and Mead went down with a crash, knocking down a small trifles table and a wide, padded side chair.

The fall was momentous. It probably startled people far away at their breakfast tables. It may have caused horses in the livery to jerk their heads up from oat bins. It most certainly vibrated the foundations of the Mercantile and put all fragile goods on shelves in grave danger.

More immediately, it put to risk the life of Jake Ritter. Mead rocked a moment on his bulging stomach, then, like a mealy bug, began kicking all his limbs at one time trying to rid himself of the treacherous shirt, the legs of the table, and the rungs of the chair. All the time he screamed at Ritter, "Yuh're dead. When I find my gun, yuh're as dead as a head shot skunk. This time I'll plug yuh for sure."

Mead managed to free himself and, with a great effort, pull his great bulb upright. He flexed his legs and arms and satisfied himself that nothing was broken. As he did so, there was a tentative knock and a questioning call, "Fred, yuh all right in there?"

Mead reached the door and flung it open. There were curses on his lips, and it is certain he would have choked, shot, or otherwise disposed of Jake Ritter on the spot had it not been for Ritter himself who stood as if frozen. His back was to Mead, and he was staring across the street, terror pasted on his unshaven face.

Mead's words died in his throat as he followed Ritter's stare. He could see up the little side alley and onto the center street of Frailey. There, hanging from the sign of the Bobcat and swinging and twisting slowly in front of the batwing doors, was a body. Its broken neck was held by a rope, and its head lolled loosely off to one side. The corpse's hands were not tied, and its thin arms hung stiffly at its sides.

The fat man's eye slits widened as his jaw fell slack into the gross folds of his neck. He stood filling the doorway in his boots, trousers, and underwear top, his black wispy hair standing and pointing in a hundred different directions. All anger at Ritter was totally forgotten, the turmoil of the early morning awakening would never be remembered and Mead, as he never had before, stood openly in broad daylight on the town's streets without a shirt or his string tie.

The early morning sun was full on the hanging body, bringing its every detail into sharp focus. From the dusty boots whose toes angled downward toward the Bobcat's entry planks to the brown weather-worn face to the hat line, where the forehead became a ghastly white and disappeared under the clot of black hair, the silent body was explored by the rising sun. But, as if resisting the light, the body held it back and

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

where it did there was a long narrow shadow in the dust of Frailey's street.

The shadow and the body were all that remained of the outlaw Snyder. Lost in the raid on the Evans ranch, he had not been seen since. Ritter had speculated that the man had slipped off in the dark and left the country. Another said he thought Snyder had been shot and cursed at Ritter for not looking for him.

When Snyder had failed to return from the raid, Mead began to have second thoughts about who the traitor really was. The fact Ferris had not shown up for the raid convinced him it was indeed Ferris. Then the fact Snyder had not returned coupled with the conflicting stories about him caused Mead to wonder again. Even Rife had not been clear about whether or not any of the raiders had been shot.

Now Mead knew. Snyder had been captured and then brought to town and hanged in the middle of the night. He also knew that there was some connection between the ranchers and the hangman who had started this recent bout of trouble. He had suspected it ever since Rife told him about seeing the girl, but now he had dead certain proof

Mead's mind whirled with conflicting thoughts. He again considered the idea of chucking the whole thing and pulling out of the area. Packing and riding out had occurred to him before, but each time he had rejected the notion as being premature. His greed always prevailed. The operation was too easy and too profitable to abandon without a struggle.

Of course, it was Mead's way that the struggle would be waged at his command, but out away from him personally and his headquarters. The hanging body was a clear challenge, thrown directly in his face, and the whole thing was close, much too close.

This was the second direct assault on the very heart of his rustling and thieving setup. It was as near his home as possible and was intended to be an unmistakable warning and message. If Mead ignored it or tried to, he was finished in Frailey and he knew it. It was fight or turn tail.

The second part of the message was a call for an open campaign. It was shoot on sight with no holds barred. Everyone would be caught up in it and forced to take sides. Mead welcomed that aspect of the warning, because he no longer had to keep up the pretense of being a respectable merchant living in a town which was properly organized and legally constituted.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Still, Mead was uncomfortable. He needed more information about how the ranchers were organized and who was leading them. He was puzzled a bit because he had thought their organization would fall apart at the death of Kross Evans. Snyder's hanging form told him that it had not.

Just as the ranchers had struck as close to home as possible, Mead wanted to do the same. He was convinced that the hangman was at the very bottom of their strength and resistance. Mead knew that his best hope was in finding the man and disposing of him as quickly as possible.

As he stood staring at the hanging body, Mead's mind began to form a plan. All thought of flight vanished, Mead had decided to stand and to make one last bold attempt to crush the resistance of the ranchers.

"Cut 'im down and git rid of 'im," said Mead as he started to return to his room.

"But, it's Snyder," blurted Ritter.

"What difference does it make who it is?" growled Mead. "Jest get 'im down and do it pronto."

"Cripes," began Ritter, "they hang one of our men and all yuh say is, 'Cut 'im down.'"

Turning on the wide-eyed and confused man, Mead spat out, "Jest what in blazes would yuh suggest we do? Let it hang there and rot in the sun?" Knowing that he would have to do more convincing of this man and the others who worked for him, Mead began his campaign to belittle the event. "Ain't nuthin' but a body. So they strung him up, what of it? No need to get frog-eyed about it. Snyder was a fool anyway. Lettin' hisself get caught. He got what was comin' to 'im."

In an uncharacteristic, friendly tone Mead continued, "Now go on Jake, get that corpse down. We don't want it to stir the boys up, now do we?" Ritter finally pulled his eyes off the body and looked sidelong at Mead who, sensing progress, continued. "We'll have to stand together on this and I'm countin' on yuh to back me up if the others start gettin' skittery."

"Sure, Fred. I'll back yuh like always but..."

Mead interrupted, "I knew I could count on yuh. But we can't stand here gabbin' all day, we got work to do. Soon as yuh get 'im down and outa town, meet me in the store."

Mead's mind was racing and the removal of the body was a mere detail. Ritter, bolstered by the almost kind words and the attitude of sharing, took heart. "Sounds to me like yuh got a plan, Fred. "

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Could be. That jest could be, " said Mead as he turned back into his dark room.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The ranchers came to the funeral of Kross Evans and his wife in buckboards and spring wagons. Cowpokes rode alongside the wagons on their best horses. The ranchers, their wives, and the riders all wore dark clothes that would have been more appropriate to winter than to a hot and dry, late evening in summer.

The wagons were halted in the wide ranch yard, and the anchor weights were secured to the harnesses and dropped in the dust under the noses of the heat weary horses. The cow ponies were tied to the corral poles in a long row where they stood with their loosened cinch straps, nuzzling the reins of their hackamores and bridles and casting interested glances at their neighbors.

As they arrived, the men stood in small clusters talking quietly, and the women disappeared into the house while the subdued children sat on the porch and looked ill-at-ease in their Sunday clothes. They arrived during the space of an hour, and as they did, the evening sun began to drop out of the cloudless western sky.

Old Jess, carrying a high crowned black hat in his hand and wearing a long black coat, stepped out of the house. Mrs. Foster, in a black, straight, plain dress, was on his arm. Her face was covered by a veil which spread downward from a large black hat that lay like a flat fan over her head and shaded her eyes.

The two moved through the little group on the porch, then stood off to the side while the two pine board caskets were carried from the house, each by the strong arms of six men. Following the coffins, Jess and Mrs. Foster walked across the yard and began to climb the hillside that rose up behind the ranch house. The very top of the hill was still bathed in sunlight as the procession began its climb, but the sharp sun line climbed the hill ahead of them and disappeared before the marchers reached the two graves freshly dug near the crest of the hill. The little troop was not long, but as the pallbearers, Jess and Mrs. Foster reached the graves, the end of the line was still halfway down the slope. As they filed up the hillside, the line shortened and merged into the growing assembly.

The group stood quietly for a few minutes, then old Jess stepped forward to the foot of graves. Twisting the big hat in his large work-scarred hands he spoke.

"Yer Honor, we ain't got a regular preachin' man and most here think that I ought to say somethin' to yuh about these folks. I knowed 'em

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

both. They was honest and they worked hard all their lives. Fer the good things and the good times they had, they thanked yuh. The bad times only made 'em work harder. They was brought down sudden-like by the work of old Lucifer hisself. We don't know why these good people had to die and us that's left feel like we're caught in a stampede at midnight. Any help yuh can give in headin' and circlin' this mess would be thanked. Now that Kross and his missus have gone over to yore side, all us folks here would ask yuh to take 'em in and do right by 'em. That's all I'm goin' to say because Jim Rankin here has agreed to read a bit outa the Book."

An old rancher with a thick beard stepped forward, opened a gilt-edged, tattered and worn Bible and, in a deep baritone voice, read the Twenty-third Psalm from the Book of David. The pallbearers slid heavy ropes under the coffins and lowered them into the fresh graves. Each rancher in turn picked up handfuls of the mounded dirt and cast them onto the coffins, then they turned and filed back down the hill while shovels wielded by two of the young cowhands began refilling the graves.

Some of the women had brought cookies, pies, and cakes. They spread the food out on a makeshift table set up, on the front porch. They also arranged a long line of coffee mugs near the smoke blackened old enamel coffee pot that had been taken from the chuck wagon and which now issued steam from its chipped spout. The men filed along the table quietly commenting about the food and making small talk about the drought.

Nibbling on the food, they reformed little groups around the porch and watched the now less somber children dart in and out of the house. Jess and Amos Carpenter moved from one knot of men to another nodding, talking, shaking hands and making polite remarks about how well the burying had gone. Some, ever so gently, prodded the old foreman with elbows and told him that for all his claiming not to be a speaker he was a regular Mr. Lincoln.

Finally, and inevitably, the men drifted off away from the house and over toward the charred remains of the barn which most of them had helped raise only a few weeks earlier. A few kicked aimlessly at the rubble, others spat with disgust as if making sure the last embers were extinguished. The young cowhands sulked on the outer fringe of the group and, with arms folded, muttered to one another about how the murdering outlaws should be strung up at first light of day. The eager firebrands competed with one another in devising appropriate ways of bringing ruin down upon the head of Mead and his group.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

The older men, the owners, were less outspoken. They compared intelligence on losses they had suffered at the hands of the rustlers. Every ranch had lost some cattle. There was no apparent pattern to the stealing. It had been a few here, a few there until the major theft of Kross Evans' prime herd of steers.

Attempts to track the losses always met with failure. The trail either disappeared in the muddy river bottom or merged into the dust of other long established cattle trails that crisscrossed the dry prairie. There was a general suspicion the beeves were driven north toward Terwell, but attempts to confirm that had failed. There was cleverness in the system. A half dozen steers could be easily picked off any of the herds that were widely scattered because of the poor range. It was impossible to bunch the cattle or to watch them effectively.

There was no one who doubted the brain causing the theft was that of Mead, but there was no direct proof of his guilt. The ranchers uniformly avoided the town except for times of actual and compelling need. Some arranged for supplies directly through Amos Carpenter's freight yard and others went as far as Terwell just to avoid any contact with Frailey.

The ranchers' wives lamented the absence of a church and a place where they could gather. They also spoke to their husbands often about how nice it would be to have a store that they would feel comfortable about entering.

All these things, the rustling, the killings, the fact that their town had been effectively taken from them, weighed on the minds of the ranchers who milled around the ruins of the Evans barn. They all turned expectantly when old Jess and Amos Carpenter walked across the yard to join them.

Old Jess was blunt and came immediately to the point. "Well, gents, Kross and his missus are in the ground. I can't speak fer him any longer. I've sent word to Miss Dottie and I expect she'll be here by and by to take over the spread. So I'm only an actin' top hand. But, by God, I'm also a man whose friend has been gunned down by that scum, Mead. What I want to know is how yuh stand or do yuh stand."

There were grunts of approval and nods from the younger men, but they waited for the owners to speak. The first to do so was the Bible reader, Jim Rankin. He was probably the eldest and was generally thought to be one of the first ranchers to settle in the area.

"There ain't a man jack here that don't agree with yuh, Jess. The killin' of Kross and his wife can't be passed by. Kross had talked of hirin'

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

a range detective to track down these rustlers, and I still think that's the way to go."

Amos spoke saying, "Kross made good on that, Jim. He sent off for a man from Texas. The man came and fer a month has been in town workin' fer Mead."

There was a rush of surprised exclamations. The loudest came from Leif Beson who owned the ranch upriver from the Evans place.

"Better explain that, Amos. If he was sent for by Kross, why's he workin' for Mead?"

"The man's name is Ferris," began Amos.

"Ferris," sang out a young puncher, "Hell, I've seen him in the Bobcat."

"That's likely," explained Amos. "He was posin' as a hardcase to get in with Mead and his crowd. He and Kross felt it was the best way to find out how the rustlers was operatin' and jest who was who."

"Why in the devil, didn't Kross tell us?" It was Beson who still wore a puzzled, almost worried, frown.

"Kross felt, and I agreed with him, the fewer who knew the better. That way there wasn't as much chance someone would let somethin' slip. A word here or a word there could have cost the man his life quick like."

"The man ain't no more use to us though," put in Jess. "He came to warn us of the raid and we were waitin' fer 'em. It was just one of those cussed things when the shootin' started that Kross and his missus was shot. Anyway it forced Ferris' hand and now Mead knows fer sure that Ferris is our man."

"But if he's the range detective Kross thought he was, can't he still do the job?" asked Rankin in his best biblical baritone voice.

"He's only one man," answered Amos, "and he can't watch all yuhr herds any better'n yuh can yuhrselfes."

"I fer one think we should send a man to bring in a U.S. Marshall," said the man standing next to Beson. "It's a matter fer the law to handle. I never did put in with detectives and such."

"By the time yuh do all that, Mead'll have stripped this area clean." Jess looked from face to face and tried to force them to see the necessity of facing up to their predicament. "Once yuh don't have any livestock or not enough to operate yuhr ranches, Mead will buy yuh out with the money he's got from sellin' yuhr own cattle. While he's doin' it, he'll drive yuh crazy. Like a horn fly after a scab, he'll bite at yuh until yuh're on a dead run to nowhere."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"What are yuh proposin' then?" asked Rankin.

I'm sayin' yuh ought to keep the Association together. Yuh ought to vote and pick a president. Then yuh should have a meetin' to figure out how to fight back. There's ways of skinnin' a cat that yuh ain't talked about yet."

The meeting fragmented into men talking to one another, agreeing, disagreeing. The absence of one overpowering voice of authority was having the inevitable effect Amos and Jess had feared. This went on with the notion beginning to take hold that the best course of action might be each man for himself. Some talked loudly that with the recent deaths the outlaws would lie low for a while and there might be a breathing spell for everyone. Suddenly all eyes looked down the darkening roadway at the sound of a horse coming fast. With a whirl of dust, a rider appeared, and he pulled up at the porch of the house. One of the women spoke to him and pointed in the direction of the burned barn. The rider spurred his horse and came to the group, and through it to the center. There the young man, who was caked with dust and sweat, pulled the heaving, blowing horse to a dead stop.

"Looking down at the elder statesman, he said, "Mr. Rankin, they done got 'em all. They hit the west pasture about an hour after yuh left. They got the cows, the steers, and even the new breedin' bulls outa the lot. Burt and I came in jest as they were leavin' and Burt took a slug in the chest. He's hurt bad."

Tears of fatigue, and anger, and a few perhaps of nervous fright rolled down the youngster's cheeks. He would have wrestled a grizzly at that moment to prove his courage, but it wasn't necessary. There wasn't a man present who questioned it. His anguish only added to the emotion that swept the group.

A voice from the edge of the assembled men cried out, "That's it then. It's war."

No one spoke to disagree. Jess and Amos exchanged looks. They knew the speaker was right and they knew that the Association would stand and stand tall until the fight with Mead was ended one way or another. What they did not know was whether determination alone would be enough in the rough and tumble of a range war.

Rankin and the others were anxious to be moving. The ranchers wanted to get back to their spreads to protect themselves as best they could, yet each one was concerned about his ability to do so.

It was Rankin who spoke for the group. "Men, we best all get home as quick as possible. I don't suppose there's any chance of trackin'

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

my herd tonight, but I aim to try at first light. Jess, you and Amos are right about the Association, it's the only way. I say we meet again at my place tomorrow night."

"The sooner the better," was the phrase heard most in response to the invitation.

"One more thing," Amos spoke out over the sounds of the other voices. "This next meetin' has got to be kept among ourselves. Time and place both have got to be secret. Otherwise, Mead'll hit us again if he knows when we're grouped together."

No one disagreed. With a few further determined promises to stand together and fight, the meeting broke up. Still, the ranchers were anxious and frightened. They collected their children and wives, put them into wagons and buggies, and disappeared down the ranch road.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Able, the old wagon driver and all around assistant to Amos Carpenter, was up as the light of predawn illuminated the eastern sky and gave it a pink tinge from the horizon to the high middle sky where it faded into a dark blue. He banged around the wagon yard tending to the horses and cursing them fondly as he slapped rumps and necks.

He thought of Jane as he pumped the trough full of water and he wondered when Amos might show up with some further word. The only information he had received in the last two days was from the man, Ferris, who had returned briefly the evening of the day before. Ferris had said the girl was still unconscious and had assured him they were doing all they could for her. Able wanted to ride off to the ranch himself and he had threatened to do so, but Ferris reminded him Amos wanted him to stay at the yards and keep an eye on things.

Ferris had not stayed long and, after talking with Bannack, had ridden off even though it was full dark. "Most likely some fool trip thought up by that Bannack feller."

"He's a deep one, he is," Able thought to himself as he finished his pumping. Able instinctively liked the man and saw in him a strength known to few men. Still it was not Able's way to admit to such things openly, and he maintained his gruff way with his patient.

"Man's an ox, that's what he is," Able muttered as he walked toward the cabin. "That shot would've killed most men and even a strong man would take longer to recover. Seems to me he gets stronger by the minute. He's not one to stay down long. "

As he stepped up on the little porch, Able's attention was captured by a piece of white paper hanging on the door. He pulled it off the nail that was there for customers who came to the yard and found no one at home. The nail took orders and informed buyers where to locate their goods in the freight shed.

"That's funny. Didn't see it on my way out," he mused.

Able carried the paper with him into the cabin and to the table where he turned up the lantern. As he stood squinting at it and trying to focus on the scrawled handwriting, Owen Bannack called to him from the cot where he sat pulling on his tall boots.

"Need someone to read that for you?"

Still thinking it was the usual freight order, the wagoneer shot back, "Who asked yuh? And why ain't yuh got some grub on the table?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Yuh been up and pacin' around here fer days now. It's about time yuh earned yuhr keep."

Owen smiled to himself. He and Able had been at each other from the day the old driver returned from his run to Cheyenne. Owen had come to enjoy the acid-tongued old wagon driver, and had thrived on the oldster's strongly flavored soups and plain food that appeared like clockwork and were plopped down unceremoniously on the table.

"Me, cook? Why I think you are forgetting that I'm a patient in this godforsaken hospital. If you think I'm going to cook while you lollygag around outside rattling that pump to make me think you're working..."

Before he could finish, Able said to him sharply, "Come over here and read this."

The change in tone from gruff banter to genuine concern was immediately apparent to Owen who was instantly at the table. He took the note and in the wavering light of the lantern read the hurried scrawl.

Carpenter, I know your daughter is at the Evans ranch. Last night during the burying the Rankin place was hit and all stock was taken. I do not know who is next, but F. M. knows where Miss J. is. Get her away from there.

A friend of J.

Owen read the note aloud, and as he did, a deep frown came to his face. "Able, tell me about this. Where did it come from?"

"It was hung on the door. There's a nail where folks hang orders and such. I didn't see it until I came back from chores."

"J must mean Jane. You agree?"

"Must be. Ain't no other daughter J at the Evans place."

"Who is F. M.?"

"I ain't so sure," scowled Able.

"The note says F. M. knows. Who do you suppose would want to know? And what difference would it make if F. M. knew where Jane was?" As Owen spoke, as much to himself as to Able, he saw sudden understanding wash over the old man's face.

"F.M. is Fred Mead," Able said flatly.

"Ah, yes, our fat owlhoot in town. He knows Jane saved my bacon and, if he knew she was at the Evans ranch, he would expect to find me there as well. That explains why our note writer thinks Jane is in

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

danger. Any idea who would know these things and who would have enough of a stake in all this to warn us without giving us his name?"

"No idea at all. Yuhr guess is as good as mine."

"It would help if we knew. As it is we don't know how much stock we can put in this. Might be a ruse, but still it's only a warning about Jane. I'm inclined to believe it and that means we've got to act, but first I'm going to turn you from being a poor cook into a passable map maker." Owen grinned at the puzzled teamster. "While I rustle us some food that's fit to eat, you sit there and draw me an outline. Show me the river, the towns up and down the river, and the ranches on both sides."

Able had freighted in the area for years and the assignment was not difficult for him. He wetted the end of a stubby pencil and set to work. He abandoned two attempts as the problem of getting a suitable scale caused him to run out of space on the lined tablet. By the time Owen set eggs, coffee, steak and potatoes on the table, the third attempt had yielded a passable outline sketch of the Platte showing the river towns of Terwell, Frailey, Big Bend and a dozen ranches spreading out on both sides.

As they ate, Able explained the diagram, and Owen asked questions about the terrain, about how cattle were rounded up and shipped and about the ranchers themselves and their operations. Again Able's constant travel throughout the area proved to be useful and there were few questions he could not answer.

Finished, Owen rose and began buckling on the big navy colt. Able watched him and did not raise a protest. He had come to know Owen Bannack well enough to realize the tall, square-faced man did pretty much what he set his mind to. The wagoner knew Owen's shoulder wound would be painful, but he also was satisfied it was past any danger of reopening. Riding would slow the healing and would slow the use of the arm for some time, but it wasn't anything that a strong and determined man couldn't handle.

"I'm going to head for the Evans place, but maybe by the back door. If your map is as good as you think it is, I should be there by tomorrow night. If Amos shows up here, it'll mean I missed him. Show him the note and tell him to meet me at the ranch." Owen took the comfortable old high crowned hat from the wall peg and settled it over his unruly hair. It made him look much too tall for the room.

"Better go easy on that shoulder or they'll be carryin' yuh back in here. Miss Jane can't be expected to save yuhr onery hide ever time yuh

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

get plugged pullin' some fool stunt and I'm through nursin' yuh, so better keep yuhr eyes open."

"The thought of being helpless and having to put up with your cooking will make me the most cautious man in the territory, Able."

"It was good enough while yuh were lyin' there near croaked."

Owen smiled down and chuckled as the old timer merely harumped back at him. "Ferris may be ridin' in later, tell him what's up. If it's late, he might want to wait here for either Amos or me to get back."

"Yuh mind tellin' me what yuhr plan is?" asked Able.

"I'm going to figure that out between here and there. I suppose some of it depends on what the situation is at the ranch."

"Well, let me tell yuh one thing, Mister Owen Bannack. That girl's more to me than I expect yuhr thick head could know about. I ought to be ridin' instead of sittin' here bein' yore message man."

Owen spoke gently to the old man, "I know how you feel, Able. And, remember, I owe her my life. I'm not one to forget that kind of thing. And don't worry, before this thing shakes out, you may be in the middle of it all and in just as deep as you want." Then he added with a broad grin, "And we may just decide to have you cook Mister Mead some dinner. That'd solve all our problems."

Able snorted at him and the two went outside together. Able scoffed at Owen, and took pleasure in catching and saddling the big chestnut, finally telling him, "If yuh can't rig yuhr own hoss, yuh shouldn't be ridin'."

Owen looked the big, sleek animal over while Able was drawing up the cinch and commented, "You've got him so fat, he'll split me apart the first mile."

"It's not likely yuh can even ride him that far," grunted Able as he stepped back and tossed the reins to Owen.

With a long step and a powerful thrust of his leg, Owen swung up into the saddle. The effort had pained him, but he only shook his head and said, "Come on, Cocoa. I don't think we're appreciated around here." With a nod of the big hat he was headed down the road just as the sun nosed up over the edge of the mesa.

Owen followed the dusty wagon trail to the main road. He reined up for a moment looking down the road to his left as it dissolved into the main street of Frailey some two miles away. His gaze then went up the road on his right and it followed the sharply rising incline to where it began switch-backing up to the top of the plateau.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Apparently satisfied, he reined the big horse toward the zigzagging road and let him settle into a ground-eating steady walk. The days of grain and corral life had brought the animal into prime condition. Much longer and he would have begun to lose his strength and wind, but now he felt comfortable in the still cool air and seemed to welcome the open road and the opportunity to stretch his long legs.

Soon, they broke out of the shadow of the switchbacks and bluff into the full sunlight that was flooding the dry prairie. Owen immediately turned off the roadway and set Cocoa on a course that took them along the edge of the rim. This gave Owen a view of the entire river bottom on his left and the grassland on his right.

The prairie was deceptive and while it appeared to be tabletop flat, in reality it was made up of long gentle swells rising and falling evenly with miles between the rounded crests and the long shallow valleys. Here and there small bare rock outcroppings jutted from the upper folds of the land.

For long months the prairie had been without rain. Left to itself, the land, which was a semi-desert, endured without any apparent effect other than the browning and drying of the grass. There was also a tendency in the grass to draw itself tightly into clumps leaving patches of dry bare ground between. As the drought intensified, the clumps grew tighter and seemed to rise higher as the weaker grass around the edges withered away under the hot sun.

However, the prairie had not been left to survive the rainless summer as it had in ages gone by. Ranchers had covered the area with cattle and the grass was eaten far shorter than it ever had been by the herds of buffalo and other wild animals. As a result, the prairie grass had been weakened and was suffering more from the drought than nature had intended.

Yet, even now, in these, the driest of times, there was still a pale green color in the grass deep in the heart of the clumps, down under the dry brown leaves. Owen had seen all this before and he knew the prairie would survive, at least this dry spell. It would not survive deep plowing and intense grazing that were the sure signs of the arrival of settlers who thought only of what the land could give them and not of what the land was.

In contrast to the brown hue of the grassland, the river that had cut its way through the land, snaked off toward the southeast. The eastern bench where Owen was riding was the high side of the river. The western side was low and the land near the river was choppy. Some of it was

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

wide bottomland that flooded every spring and became almost swampy when the river areas received unusually heavy rain.

The river itself wandered among the tall cottonwood trees leaving islands of them randomly spaced along the sides of the main channel. The little bogs that were usually filled with stale water were dry now, but they were marked by the clusters of cattails whose dark brown seed pods leaned heavily from their green stalks.

The Platte, which was always brown with silt, was now deep in its banks. From a distance, it seemed to move not at all and, even on a hot day, was inviting only as a concept. In this season it could be crossed at a number of points without serious risk to horses or cattle.

Access to the valley floor became easier the further upriver one traveled. After a while, the rim lost its sharp edge entirely and one could ride easily from the bench to the river.

Before the sun had climbed more than a quarter of its arc into the bright blue sky, Owen reached the sharp edge of what he recognized from Able's description to be Little Blue Creek, a tributary to the Platte. He also knew from his sketch map and from Able's explanation that the Evans ranch began here and followed the creek for a half dozen miles. The little waterway began somewhere up in the higher reaches of the prairie that it drained. About half way along its course was the Evans ranch house.

Owen studied the terrain then rode down to the trickling creek and allowed Cocoa to drink. When the horse began gurgling his nose in the water, Owen pulled him up and crossed the muddy bottom. Instead of going up the stream, he continued across the ravine and up the other side, following the Platte as before.

A full two hours later, Owen angled down to the river and pulled the horse to a halt. With a grunt he dismounted, knelt down and soaked his kerchief in the water and used it to mop his face. He then cupped his hand full of water and leaned forward and sipped just enough to wet his mouth and lips.

"If I drank much of that stuff, the dirt would settle in my stomach, and I'd soon look like that pumpkin, Mead," he said to Cocoa who bounced his head up and down as if agreeing. Owen walked to the shade of a young cottonwood whose bare roots were exposed directly to the water. Before sitting, he loosened the saddle cinch and dropped Cocoa's reins in the middle of a patch of tender river grass growing along the side of a giant fallen tree.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

He sat back against the tree trunk and tipped the big hat over his eyes and, in the way some men have, seemed to instantly relax as if taking the very most out of a few moments of rest. Continuing the earlier conversation, he said from under the hat, "Yep, Cocoa. I'll wager old Mead's belly is plumb full of river dirt, but not his head. I'm not so sure about what he's got going upstairs, but we do know that, like any snake, he'll jump if you just nudge him in the right place."

Cocoa ripped loose an especially large mouthful of grass and munched it while he eyed the big hat and considered the afternoon ride he knew was coming.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The sun had slipped below the horizon and the shadows of the land had blended into the oncoming and deepening twilight when the four riders who had been warily riding through the dry washes of Little Blue creek paused to talk. It was not yet dark enough for a match to be noticeable to anyone far away, but the night was close enough upon them that the little flare illuminated one rider's face as he lighted a cigarette.

The dark eyes of Jake Ritter squinted against the little light as he drew on the twisted paper until it glowed bright red. His fingers snapped the match and the flame instantly died. He shifted in his saddle, smoking in silence. Finally he spoke to his companions, 'Now once more so's yuh don't forget. We're after that jasper that hung Lupe and Snyder. Nuthin' else counts. We've got to get up close to the house and scout it out. Once we know the lay of the place, we got to move fast. No shootin' til we got our man. If they get on to us, skedaddle. The river's yuhr best chance to lose 'em. Remember, I'm givin' the orders and if any of yuh spill this kettle of soup, yuh'll have to answer to me and to Fred.'

"How do we know they ain't waitin' fer us like last time?" asked one figure uneasily.

"Cause the Judas who was fillin' 'em in has showed hisself. And he knows he's dead meat if he lets hisself get close to town."

"So yuh say," said another. "But this had better go easy. I don't mind sayin' this country is gettin' pretty spooky fer my blood. Night drivin' a few steers is one thing, but killin' and night hangin' is another."

"By damn, I'll join yuh on that tune, Creech," chimed in another.

"Hold off that jabber," ordered Ritter, "I don't want any of yuh gettin' slippery on me. I'm lookin' to pick up that little extra that Fred offered if we pull this off."

"Fine fer him to sit back there in the Bobcat and send us out to test the aim of them ranchers," muttered Creech.

"He'd be here, but there ain't a horse in the county can carry him," cracked another.

"That's a fact," laughed Creech. "I never see'd a man as wide across the belly. Why he's as big around as a two-hole outhouse."

The guffaws relieved the nervous tension and they felt ready to go on with their mission. Nevertheless, their words reflected a growing apprehension among Mead's followers. The second hanging had been

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

unsettling and had given rise to brooding and talk of looking for other and greener pastures.

Mead had cunningly hit upon the idea of the clean sweep raid on Rankin, knowing the ranchers would be at the funeral of Kross Evans. It had the desired effect, spirits picked up at the Bobcat and there had been no defections.

Darkness had settled around the ranch house by the time the riders reached the line of brush along the creek that had, on the night of the barn burning, been Rife's observation point. The riders dismounted, loosely tied their horses to the branches of the scrub bushes and stretched out to study the house. Their heads turned quickly as the whisp of branches told them there was another presence nearby. Quietly and nervously hands reached for revolver butts and legs curled up under tense bodies in anticipation of leaping up. The thrashing through the brush grew louder, then stopped altogether.

"Ritter? Creech?" It was a hoarse whisper, but instantly recognized by Ritter.

"Mizer, we're over here," Ritter called back keeping his voice low.

As Mead's lookout and watchman of the ranch crept over to Ritter's position, he swore bitterly. "I been out here steamin' and sweatin' not to mention starvin' fer over two days. Where in blazes yuh been?"

"Busy, but don't muddle yuhr head about it," said Ritter. "I'll fill yuh in later. What've yuh seen?"

"Saw a funeral and saw a meetin'."

"A meetin'? What was it all about?" asked Ritter.

"I couldn't really tell. Only heard a lot of arguin' and arm wavin'." Mizer seemed disgusted with his lookout assignment and wasn't inclined to be entirely cooperative.

"Yuh musta heard somethin' dammit. That's why we sent yuh out here."

"Wasn't nuthin' said about attending any rancher meetin's. Yuh said to watch fer anything about the big feller. Anyhow, the thing didn't last long and it busted up when some kid came spurrin' in yappin' somethin' about the Rankin place."

"He must have been tellin' old Rankin he was suddenly short a herd of cows." Ritter's voice carried a note of pride.

"I thought Mead was goin' to go easy fer a while and let things cool down some," said Mizer with surprise.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"That was the idea until that big sorehead that yuh're supposed to be watchin' hung Snyder in front of the Bobcat."

"Well, I ain't seen 'im go out and I ain't seen 'im go in. Nobody lookiin' like our man has been anywhere around," declared Mizer defensively.

"Don't sound right to me," put in Creech. "Someone sure strung Snyder up. I don't like the idea of another hanger prowlin' around this territory."

"I did see that skunk, Ferris," growled Mizer. "I almost put a slug in the two-faced striper."

"Good thing yuh didn't. It would've messed us up good," replied Ritter. "Who's in there now?"

"Well, now that's kind of a funny thing. The foreman, a couple of hands and a big guy, Carpenter I think, all rode out a couple of hours ago. That leaves only the Carpenter girl and the housekeeper besides yuhr man."

Ritter whistled softly through his teeth. "Then we're in luck. Miz, there ain't no use in yuh hangin' around here. Come on and help us take that big whelp outa there and back to town."

The big ranch house was dark except for an upstairs window that was outlined with the light of a kerosene lantern. It shone like a beacon and guided the five figures who stalked softly through the grass and then through the dust of the barnyard. They moved slowly leading their horses until they reached the corral. They halted there, whispered a bit. After the conference, three of the figures came on while two held the horses and looked anxiously at the dark bunkhouse and nearby sheds.

As quietly as rough boots would allow, the three men entered the house, tiptoed through the entryway and lower room, and climbed the stairway of the darkened house. Once in the upstairs hall, they turned toward the room at the far end where a thin glow of yellow light lined the bottom edge of the closed door. Hardly breathing, they eased their way down the length of the long mat and stopped to listen for sounds in the room. Apparently hearing none, Ritter turned the knob until the latch was free. With a gentle push he swung the door open. There in the dim light of the bedside lamp they could see the girl, apparently in a deep sleep. In the nearby rocker the housekeeper was dozing, her head tilted to one side. The only other occupant was a large dog who lay alongside the bed, his ears pointed forward, his eyes gleaming darkly in the lamplight. Underlying the silence, there was a deep rumble coming from the dog's throat and his lips were curled up over white teeth.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Ritter held his revolver in his hand, but it hung down at his side. The memory of the dog flashed through his mind, and he remembered the girl's words warning him the dog didn't like guns. In a low hiss, he warned his companions, "Don't move or that wolf will be at our throats."

Slowly he slid back into the hallway and pulled the door closed. He backed his two companions down the hall and whispered, "Look in the other rooms. He ain't in there."

Each bedroom door was opened, but a look into the starlight-flooded chambers showed them to be empty. Further tiptoeing down the stairs and a second look in the parlor and the kitchen and the small library with its cold fireplace and lined bookshelves all combined to tell them the house did not contain their prey.

"Must be in the bunkhouse," Ritter guessed as they stood whispering near the front door.

Ritter sent one of his party to tell the men with the horses the point of attention was to be the bunkhouse. Ritter and his lone companion scurried across the open yard to the squat bunkhouse. They made their way along the wall of the long squat building until they reached the door. Again Ritter and his compatriot eased open a door and slipped into the deeper darkness of the inside of a building. The small square windows did not admit enough light for them to see anything and Ritter decided to risk a match. The burst of light caused him to squint at the line of empty bunks and cowhand clothing hanging from the walls. Convinced the place was unoccupied, the two men went back outside and again engaged in a conference.

This time their voices were raised a bit since they were certain the only people around were the two in the ranch house bedroom. They were puzzled and confused. After a few minutes, they were joined by the man called "Creech" who had been with the horses. "He ain't here, I say we pull out," was Mizer's argument.

Creech agreed. "This place gives me the creeps. It's too quiet. I'm with Mizer."

Ritter was strongly inclined to agree with both men, but his fear of returning empty-handed and trying to explain to Mead was great enough to overcome his desire to leave. He realized they had only one option, to return to the room and question the girl. His fear of the dog caused him to hesitate, but, finally, he hit upon a plan. Since it would put another at the point of first risk, it was, for Jake Ritter, the very best plan. "The Carpenter girl is the key. She'll know where he's hid. We got to go back up there and get it outa her."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"What about that big hound," asked Creech.

"We'll go back up there and I'll shove the door open. Mizer'll plug 'im before he can move."

"Me?" exclaimed Mizer. "No, siree. Do yuhr own dog shootin', Ritter."

"I don't see none too good in the dark. Besides, yuh're a better shot than me."

"Jest peachy of yuh to own up to it now, yuh weak-eyed weasel," sneered Mizer.

They returned to the house and, as carefully and slowly as before, they made their way back to the hallway outside the bedroom. Ritter stood off to one side with Creech while Mizer lifted his revolver and squared his body directly in front of the door.

Ritter reached down, turned the knob and, with a sudden push, flung the door open. It slammed against the wall and, as the sound died away, Mizer's gun belched flame and a roar. The crashing of the door and the thunder of Mizer's gun was followed by an instant of silence.

The three men stormed into the room and confronted the wide, staring eyes of Mrs. Foster who started out of her chair, one hand thrown up over her mouth. Mizer bent over the silent bundle of fur then straightened up.

"Yuh're damn right I'm a better shot than you. This mutt won't give us any trouble."

"Who are you men and what do you want here?" demanded Mrs. Foster as she moved over to the bed as if to protect the girl.

"I'll do all the askin' and yuh'll do all the answerin'," snarled Ritter now bold again with the knowledge the feared dog had been dispatched.

"You're the man ... the sheriff .. who lives in Frailey and works for Fred Mead," said Mrs. Foster accusingly.

"Creech, poke yuhr head outa the window and see if the shot roused anyone," ordered Ritter.

Turning to Mrs. Foster, Ritter leaned close toward her face until she recoiled from his foul breath. The lamplight flickered off his thick features and exaggerated his menacing dark eyes. He suddenly reached out and seized her arm and, as she tried to pull back, he viciously jerked her close to him.

He squeezed her arm harder and ever harder and, without warning, shook her, snapping her head back and forth. The violence of

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

the shaking loosened her knot of hair and it cascaded down onto her shoulders in tangles.

"Now, listen to me, missus whoever yuh are. We're here fer the big wart that the girl brought here. Jest tell us where he's hidin' and yuh won't get hurt."

"I don't know what you're talking about. There was no one with her. She came here alone."

"That's a stinkin' lie, nanny. We ain't got all night. Now out with it." Ritter gave her another shake.

Mrs. Foster said nothing. She realized these men were desperate and she would have no success arguing with them. Her only response to Ritter was a cold stare.

Mizer interrupted, "Jake, she ain't a gonna tell yuh anythin', leastwise without some persuadin' and time's too short fer that." Looking at the bed he added, "Look at that girl. She's still asleep."

Ritter followed Mizer's lok and turned to the bed. Jane had apparently not moved since they entered the room. The shot and the loud threats would have awakened anyone. Realizing how strange it was for the girl to sleep through all the noise, Ritter called out over his shoulder at Mrs. Foster, "What's the matter with her?"

"She is unconscious and has been since the night you and your cutthroats burned our barn," answered Mrs. Foster sharply.

"Could be," mocked Ritter. "Could also be she's fakin'. She was lively enough the day she put her dog on me and helped her hangman friend get away."

"Come on, Jake," coaxed Mizer, "we ain't goin' to get anything here. This ruckus is bound to bring someone and those men could be back anytime."

"All right, Mizer, go have the boys bring the horses over to the house."

Mizer, anxious to be out of the ranch house and away from the place altogether, hurried from the room.

Ritter turned his attention back to Mrs. Foster for a moment. "If yuh're lyin' to me, I'll make yuh pay in ways yuh'll never ferget. Yuh say she's out, but I don't mind sayin' I don't think I believe yuh."

Ritter walked to the side of the bed and peered down at the quiet figure. He reached over, raised the wick of the lamp, and continued to stare at her.

In a teasing and taunting voice he intoned, "Wake up there little nurse. Where's that stinkin' patient that yuh took fer a ride?" Then he

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

bent lower and said, "Maybe a good slap or two might bring yuh around, yuh fakin' little baggage."

There was a moment of silence and, as Ritter raised his hand, the quiet of the room was filled with the sharp click of a hammer being cocked. Ritter froze, sensing something was wrong.

"Touch that girl and you'll die in your tracks."

The words were flat, metallic, and penetrating. A shout might have moved Ritter to action. An excited threat might have invited him to make a sudden move. The clipped, deadly warning seemed to petrify him.

"Now straighten up and lift your hands away from your gun. You, by the window, I'm hoping you'll make a play so that I'll have an excuse to even the odds here a bit."

Creech knew instinctively he was only a twitch away from death. "Easy mister, the only move I'm makin' is goin' to be slow and away from my belt."

Owen spoke easily, "Now I know you two have some sidewinder friends outside. If you want to call out, go ahead. The only thing is, neither of you will live to see them go down as they come in this door."

Looking at Mrs. Foster he said, "Ma'm you don't know me. My name is Owen Bannack. I hope you'll believe I'm on your side in all this. Now do you feel up to collecting some guns?"

"That, sir, will be a pleasure." Mrs. Foster was careful not to step between Owen and Ritter as she went around behind him and pulled his revolver from its holster. She did the same for Creech and then moved to the side of the bed and stood, her hair strewn around her shoulders, a gun hanging from each hand. Owen had the feeling she knew how to use them and would if any threat were made to Jane.

Ritter's eyes bulged in his head and his mouth had dropped open. He began to nervously lick his lips and he held his arms high and straight over his head.

"If I remember correctly, your fat friend in town called you Ritter. That right?"

"Ritter, that's right. Jake Ritter. But yuh got the wrong idea here mister. I was only goin' to smack her easy like... that is... I meant no harm. I wouldn't hurt a little girl like her fer nuthin'. No sir, I wouldn't."

Owen let the frightened man babble on for a minute before interrupting. Having heard enough, he merely raised the muzzle of his colt a bit and said, "Hold your tongue. I believe we've all heard our fill."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

With quick strides he crossed the room and placed the business end of his revolver deep in Ritter's stomach causing him to grunt in pain. "If I had to guess, I'd say you were bossin' this little woman beatin' party. That about the size of it?"

Ritter bobbed his head up and down and opened his mouth as if to speak, but a jab from the colt brought him up short.

"All right, boss, listen. I want you to go over to the window and tell your outfit to pull out. Tell 'em that you'll catch up. Don't take any arguments or questions. Sound like you mean it."

Owen spun him around and with his gun squarely in Ritter's back marched him to the window. Owen turned to Mrs. Foster, "Do you think you could keep an eye on this one for a minute?" he asked, indicating Creech who stood outlined against the wall.

"I'll do better'n that. I'll try out his own gun on him, if you say so."

Owen grinned at the fierce woman. "It might be better if you waited a few minutes, but if he gets the least bit itchy, why go right ahead."

He then turned back to Ritter, "Now, if you enjoy livin', get your bunch on the road."

Ritter parted the curtains and leaned out the half open window. "Mizer," he called.

Before Mizer could answer, a loud cry came from the bed. Jane was up on one elbow staring wildly and uncomprehending at the scene before her. The disheveled Mrs. Foster, the gunman, Creech, flattened against the wall and two men standing near the window had obviously bewildered her and she cried, "Pa? Able?"

All heads in the room turned toward the bed. Her large terrified eyes held them for a few seconds. Ritter, who may have seen the girl's eyes flutter a few moments earlier as he stared down at her, was perhaps not as surprised as the others. While obeying Owen's order to call out, he had also noticed the window was only a few feet over the porch roof. Sensing that the cry had diverted his captor for an instant, Ritter plunged through the window breaking the frame and carrying the curtain with him. He rolled across the porch roof and dropped off toward the ground as slugs from Owen's revolver screamed over his head.

Even as he hit the ground Ritter was yelling, "Mizer, here, bring that hoss."

Inside the room Creech had lunged for Mrs. Foster and had managed to twist a gun from her hand. Before he could find the trigger,

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Owen's bullet found his forehead. The impact of the slug straightened him as if he were on a string and slammed him through the hallway door. He was dead before his body skidded to a halt, rumpling up the foot mat like an accordion on top of his head.

Owen knew he had hit his mark and he also knew that pursuit of Ritter would be foolhardy and useless. He listened for a moment to confirm his belief that Ritter and his gang would hightail it out of the area rather than try to rush him. The hurried thud of horses told him he was correct. It was only then he turned his attention to Mrs. Foster and the girl.

The woman was seated on the bed with her arm around Jane holding her close and talking softly. The gunfire had apparently shocked the girl into full consciousness for she realized where she was.

"Oh, Mrs. Foster, I don't understand. What's happening?"

"It's all right, Jane. just you rest easy now. It's all over."

Owen made no move toward them. There was nothing he could do, yet he wanted to assure them that the danger was indeed over before he left to drag Creech out of the house.

After a long moment, Jane began to collect herself and she fastened her eyes on Owen. She obviously recognized him and was retracing events in her mind. Finally, she said, "I sure hope you haven't managed to get yourself shot up again. You wouldn't survive much more of my bandaging."

"Oh, the bandaging isn't so bad. I would only worry about the drowning." He burst into a deep laugh when Jane attempted to make a mocking reply, but instead dissolved into giggles.

Mrs. Foster looked from one to the other in disbelief. "If you two don't beat all." She looked at Jane, "You've been completely out for more than two days and I was beginning to think you were never going to come out of it, and you," she said, looking at Owen, "a complete stranger, come waltzing in here shooting up the house, and then you both take up laughing like this was a spring picnic. I swear." But as she spoke, she too felt the release from the tension of the past moments and relief at seeing Jane conscious and even joking. She chuckled a bit and observed, "It sure must have been an interesting sick room is all I can say."

"I'd say it was the very best. And even better was the elegant ride afterwards. I can't say that I remember much of it, but the alternative might have been kind of final," said Owen.

"Jane told me a bit about it, but what was all this about?" asked Mrs. Foster looking around the room to indicate the night's events.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"I don't know all the story," answered Owen, "but somehow Ritter and his friend Mead found out Jane was here at the ranch. I figure that led them to think I was here too and they came aiming to pick me up and bundle me off to town."

"They must have seen me the night they burned the barn," said Jane. "It must be the same bunch."

"There's no doubt about it. It's Mead's crowd all right," agreed Owen. "But it's a bit strange how we knew they were coming here. Able found a note on the door that said F. M. knew you were here. Able and I agreed F. M. was Fred Mead. The note said you were in danger and told Amos to get you out of here. That tells you why I'm here, but we can't figure who in town would have written the note. Any ideas?"

Mrs. Foster shook her head indicating she did not have any answer to offer. Jane looked down for a moment and then said quietly, "I have an idea."

Owen and Mrs. Foster looked at her and waited. "For quite a while now, Fred Mead's storekeeper, Rife, has been trying to ... " she hesitated, "I guess you would say, get my attention. I think he might write a note like the one you described." She added hurriedly, "I might be all wrong. Maybe I have been imagining things."

"Knowing that storekeeper, Jane, I don't think you imagined anything," Mrs. Foster assured her.

"Sounds likely to me," Owen agreed. "Considering what just happened here, it fits together." Then he asked Mrs. Foster, "Where's Amos? I expected to find him here. If I had known what the odds were going to be, I might have enlisted Able to come with me."

"He and the foreman and the hands rode off to a meeting of the owners' association. The raiders hit Jim Rankin's ranch last night and took every blessed cow he owned. Mr. Bannack, this whole thing has turned into a war and I don't know where it's going to end."

"I'm afraid you're right about the war and it will probably get worse pretty fast." He noted the alarm spreading across the faces of both Jane and Mrs. Foster and hastened to give them some assurance. "But at least for now the fire has been put out here. I think you should get some rest." He smiled at Jane and added, "I guess it's my turn to be giving the nursing advice." He stepped to the door, but before leaving, he turned and told them, "I've got some cleaning up to do in the hall then I'll be close by until Amos and the others come back, so you both rest easy."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

As Mrs. Foster settled Jane back down into the bed, she remarked, "So that's your patient. No wonder you tied him to a board and hauled him off rather than give him to Fred Mead."

"Oh, tosh! When I heard he had hanged the outlaw, Lupe, I decided to help him, that's all there is to it," Jane said, trying to sound as offhand as possible.

"I see," Mrs. Foster smiled.

The excitement had drained the girl and she soon began drifting toward a sound sleep, but before her eyes closed she smiled at Mrs. Foster and said softly, "I think we should be glad he's here though, don't you?"

Before Mrs. Foster could answer, Jane was fast asleep. The housekeeper waited until she was certain the girl was sleeping deeply, then she went around the bed and dragged the limp bundle of brown fur out of the room.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



It was much later in the evening when Amos Carpenter and Jess reined up in front of the ranch house. Jess conferred briefly with his three cowhands before sending them off to the corral to unsaddle and tend the horses.

The foreman was making a despairing comment on the drought and Amos was agreeing with him when they became aware of the man sitting in the dark of the porch. They were startled by his greeting that came up out of the wicker chair.

"Evenin' gents. I was beginning to think you were going to make a night of it."

Recognition came swiftly to Amos who called out, "Owen, by golly yuh had me ready to jump outa my tracks fer a second." Then to his companion, "Jess, yuh can't see this big critter, but this is the man I was tellin' yuh about. Jess, meet Owen Bannack."

The men shook hands and exchanged greetings. Jess and Amos settled onto a nearby wooden porch bench. Jess tugged a corner off a mangled tobacco plug and offered it to Amos and Owen both of whom declined. Amos busied himself with his pipe that he finally fired with a wooden match.

"First off, Amos, you should know Jane has rejoined the living. She was wide awake a few hours ago jabberin' like a blue jay, but I think she's probably gone back to sleep by now."

The freightman's relief was apparent in his voice. "By damn, that is good news. She really had me worried. If she hadn't come around, I'm not sure what I would've done." After a pause he said, "But yuh're none too well yuhrself. What brings yuh to the ranch?"

Owen recounted the finding of the note by Able, their conclusion that it spelled trouble for Jane, and his determination to ride to the ranch to alert Amos. He went on to give them the details of Ritter's visit. As he concluded, he said to Jess, "I guess that leaves us with a very dead patron of the Bobcat who's in need of a grave, if you have room for him."

Jess snorted, "It's a mighty big ranch and while I don't cotton to makin' it a cemetery for night crawlers, I'll be glad to plant every coyote yuh drop here. Matter of fact, I might have the boys put 'im under the ashes of the barn. Maybe some day we'll build a hog sty over the varmit."

"Yuh say there were five of 'em, Owen?" asked Amos thoughtfully.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"As near as I could tell. There were two in the yard and three in the bedroom when I got here. As I came in the kitchen door, one of them came downstairs and went outside. I believe he's the one Ritter called Mizer."

"Sounds like they came lookin' fer yuh all right," the freighter admitted. "The only mystery is how they knew Jane was here in the first place."

"Jane guessed they might've seen her at the barn burning," said Owen. "It's a reasonable explanation and makes good enough sense."

"But how'd they know we would be gone to an association meetin'... " Jess wondered. "Seems like they know too much. Almost like buzzards a wingin' around lookin' down on everything."

"Could be someone let it slip or it could be they jest came hopin' to take yuh while everyone was sleepin'," mused Amos.

"It's hard to believe one of the ranchers tipped the meetin'," insisted Jess. "They're all losin' stock and none of 'em has anything to gain by toadyin' up to Mead's crowd."

"If they are, in fact, all losin' stock, I guess I'd agree with yuh," said Amos, "and they are. Leastwise, so they say."

"The housekeeper told me about the association meetin' tonight. She said it was a result of a raid at the Rankin ranch."

"That's the straight of it, Owen," Amos assured him. "The thing we can't figure is what caused Mead to move so soon after the raid here. We all thought he would hunker down fer a while."

"I may have been partly the cause," Owen said. "Amos, you remember right after you got to the ranch to see Jane, you sent Ferris back to the freight yard to fill Able and me in on how things stood at the ranch?"

"Yes, I knew Able would be fussiri' and worryin' about Jane, and you seemed keen on knowin' the story of what was goin' on around here. And, the problem with the association seemed to be an important part of it, so I asked him to ride back and give yuh the story," agreed Amos.

"Ferris told me Jess was afraid the association was falling apart and, without Kross to hold them together, it would probably be every man for himself."

"I would've sworn it was cut and run time," put in Jess.

"If that had happened, Mead could have picked the ranches off one at a time and it would have been next to impossible to get them together again. At least that's the way Ferris and I saw it," explained Owen. "I figured if we could provoke Mead a bit he might do something

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

to bring the ranchers together despite the loss of Kross. I suggested to Ferris that since no one had any real use for Snyder's body, it might be a good decoration for the Bobcat. Besides, it would save Jess here the trouble of buryin' him."

"I'll be cussed," laughed the foreman. "What with the barn burnin', the killin' of Kross and the missus, and the stock bein' run off, not to mention Miss Jane bein' burned and smoked like she was, I forgot the skunk. He's the one who fired the barn."

"Then it's two fer the Bobcat," chuckled Amos. "After the hangin' of Lupe, another body hangin' in front of the saloon would sure spur Mead into doin' somethin'."

"The rustling of Rankin's herd the night of the funeral and then the attempt to pick me off here seems to prove Mead can be goaded pretty easily," agreed Owen. "Of course, my prod almost pushed him too far. It could have been a bad business for Jane and her nurse lady."

"I think it's had the result you thought it would," said Amos. "The ranchers are together now and determined to fight Mead. They've got one problem. Ain't a leader among 'em. Jim Rankin has been elected president, but he's too old fer the job and he knows it."

The men were silent for a while, each with his own thoughts. The faint red glow of Amos' pipe had been noticeable each time he puffed on the long stem, but, as the pipe fire sank lower into the bowl and was covered with the burned ashes, the glow faded and, by the time the talk of the situation slowed, the light from the embers disappeared altogether.

The restful sounds of the night filled the silence and the chirp of a cricket, the soft burble of a horse blowing through his lips, and the talk of the cowhands as they finished tending their ponies all seemed much closer than they were. The reality of the war with Mead and his outlaw gang seemed somewhat out of place and even unbelievable. Yet, the memories of wounded friends, dead friends, and the knowledge that more night attacks were probable made the war, like the night sounds, seem real and very close.

It was Amos who finally spoke, "Owen, it may not be any of our business, but we can't help wonderin' what brought yuh to this area and what yuhr quarrel was with Lupe."

"My public hanging of him seems to have brought a lot of the trouble between the ranchers and Mead to a head, and I guess I owe you an explanation," Owen began. "It's really not much of a story. Lupe, along with three others, tried to kill a rancher up in Montana. They did

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

kill his two children and, after violating the man's wife, traded her to a band of drunken renegade Indians for some elk hides. She was found later, tied to a big cottonwood along the Yellowstone. There was only enough life left in her to describe the bunch before she died. Lupe and his friends bragged about their deed in front of crowds in half a dozen saloons all up and down the Musselshell."

Owen paused and the gloom of the night was close upon them all. It seemed he was reluctant to go on, but, after a time, he picked up the thread of his tale again.

"There were a couple more murders by those same men. The law, what there was of it, was both afraid of the gang and simply unable to stand up to it. Finally, a committee was formed. One of the killers was rounded up almost immediately and he confessed the whole thing in front of the Leader and the full committee. He was given a few minutes to make peace with his maker and was then hanged in the main street of Branville, the town they had been hurraing. The rest of the outfit made a run for it. I've been on Lupe's trail for almost six months. I heard he was down this way and managed to corner him about two days out of Frailey."

"The story is yuh seemed to plan on turnin' him over to the Sheriff," said Amos.

"That part of the story is true enough. I was taking him back to the Committee and needed a chance to rest. I was dead tired and he was waiting for a chance to make a break. I had hoped to put him to roost in the jail for a few days. As I sat there in the street, I realized the Sheriff was no Sheriff at all and, instead, was a dupe who took his orders from the fat man. In fact, there was no law of any kind, not even a judge. On top of all that, a blind man could see Lupe was in tight with them. If I tried to ride out, I was damned, if I didn't, I was damned. So I did what had to be done. Now there are two of that family's murderers yet to run down."

Amos broke the silence that followed the story, "Yuh said that Lupe and his bunch tried to kill the rancher."

Owen did not answer, at least no words came from his lips. There was no sound. There was only the darkness and it was the depth of the night.

It was Jess who asked, "When yuh say committee, do yuh mean a vigilante committee?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Yes, Jess, a vigilance committee. I've worked with them a number of times. Matter of fact, I was tracking a horse thief for the Committee when I met Ferris."

"Owen, I know yuh will be wantin' to move on now yuh're able to travel. At least I expect yuh will since there ain't nuthin' to keep yuh here," began Amos, "but we were wonderin', me and Jess, if yuh would consider ramrodin' the owner's association."

"Amos," began Owen.

"Now, before yuh say anything fer certain," interrupted Amos, "hear me out."

"I have a thing I must do, Amos, and until it's done..."

Again Amos interrupted, "But hear me, Owen. From what yuh jest told us, I think yuh might find this interestin'. When Lupe first came to town there was another man with him. He was a small man, always wore leather chaps wherever he went and had the longest knife I've ever seen. Carried it in a scabard that was decorated with little tin flowers. Are yuh interested?"

"I'm very interested."

"It seems the little knife man and Mead were old friends. In fact, the man with the chaps was the one brought Lupe here. After a few months, he left and hasn't been seen since, but I'll bet yuh a chicken dinner that Mead knows exactly where them leather chaps are today."

Owen was not long in answering. "When I rode into Frailey, this wasn't my fight. But everything that has been said and that has happened since keeps telling me otherwise. I might still have ridden out. I think you understand I have no choice but to finish the job I've started. But now what you tell me changes my plans. Your fight is mine. If the Association will have me, I'll do what I can. If they won't, I'll stay anyway."

"Whoopee," called out Jess. "Yuh were right, Amos, we got ourselves a man."

"From the sound of it, I'd say the two of you must have been doing a little plottin'," said Owen easily.

"We thought we had yuh headed fer the chute, we jest needed to close the gate," chuckled Jess. "From what yuh've already done in town and out here tonight, I'd say that things around here might jest be in fer some changes."

"I have to admit that what Amos has been telling me while he and Able had me at their mercy, and then him sending Ferris to tell me the association was on the edge of falling apart an had me headed in the

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

right direction," Owen admitted. "I even did a little scouting around on my way here this afternoon."

"That so?" Jess was hoping for an explanation, but, even as he spoke, he realized Owen would speak only when the time was right.

"Yuh know, I think there's a little breeze coming up," observed Amos. "We may be in fer a change in the weather."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



When morning cleared away the darkness, it showed a sky covered over with high thin clouds, the kind that might later drift away or be dissolved by the sun. However, it was late enough in the season for them to pile up and grow heavy with moisture.

Even now the air seemed to be a bit cooler than usual for this time of day. The horses in the corral at the Evans ranch were less leaden and they even bit at one another and danced around while they waited for morning hay from the ranch hands.

Owen was smoothing the saddle blanket over the back and shoulders of Cocoa as he talked to Amos who stood with his foot propped on the feed bunk. "I don't think you should be in a rush about taking her home, Amos. She's chipper enough, but then you're in no hurry. Besides it is probably better to be here than your place. The yard is too close to town and, if Mead begins to feel threatened, he might strike out in any direction."

"Are yuh sure yuh don't want me to ride along, Owen?"

"I want you to, Amos. But more than that, I want you to stay here. Remember, there's no guarantee Ritter and company won't be back. I think you should even set a lookout up on the hill there and, by all means, keep someone on guard at night."

"If yuh think things are gettin' to that point, I guess I could ferget the freight business fer a few days and even bring Able over here. He's a considerable man with that greener of his."

"That might not be a bad idea, Amos. There's no point in trying to defend two places. When Able comes, I'm certain Ferris will, too. Ferris is a good man and he'll stick this thing out. With those two here you'll have enough to keep Mead thinking for a few days before he tries this place again."

"I'm sure Jess won't mind the company fer a few days," said Amos, "if I can keep him and Able out of each other's hair."

"I'll be back in plenty of time for the meeting day after tomorrow," promised Owen as he swung up into the saddle and headed Cocoa up the hill behind the ranch house.

His shoulder seemed to be a bit less painful and he felt comfortable in the saddle. He had provisions enough for two days ride and had borrowed extra ammunition for his colt and his rifle from the ranch storehouse.

He angled back toward the river on a route that took him away from the ranch and away from Frailey. When he reached the little row of

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

hills along the Platte, he turned the big chestnut north and tracked along the river valley. He stayed far enough away from the river to avoid the difficult riding of the little washouts and ravines that rains and washes had clawed into the land along the bank.

The high, thin cloud overcast didn't seem to be able to decide whether to retreat and break up or to hold out through the day. Even with the thin veil over the sun, the heat was intense. The moisture in the air had increased and it seemed to add to the heat. It certainly made Cocoa sweat more heavily. It plastered Owen's shirt to his back and darkened the felt around the sweatband of his big hat.

Before midday, he stopped on a rise overlooking a set of ranch buildings planted haphazardly along a dry feeder stream. Able's sketch told him it was what the residents of the area called "Half Horn Creek." The ranch belonged to association member Leif Beson.

Owen sat resting for a time studying the lay of the ranch and the land around it. On beyond the buildings, the land was a series of bare hills that were cut in random directions by deep ravines. Rising behind them was a dark rim that disappeared from view far off in the east and tailed away toward the river valley to the west.

Finally, he nudged Cocoa forward and headed him on a course that would take them well around the ranch and toward the hills beyond. He was careful to keep himself out of any line of sight as he skirted the Beson place and wove his way into the ravines. The riding was hard, but he maintained a steady pace until mid-afternoon found him at the foot of the rim which took its dark coloration from the scrub juniper that covered it all the way to its upper crest.

After resting, he began climbing through the dark, almost black brush. Upon reaching the uppermost edge of the long rim, he began following it in the direction of the river. He had ridden only a few miles when the rim abruptly opened into a deep ravine cutting through it and tracking back into a deep hidden basin no more than a mile across. At its far end, it opened into the prairie beyond.

Owen dismounted and made his way along the ravine until he came to a vantage point which gave him a good view of the basin floor. He was not surprised by the sight of nearly two hundred cattle milling in the scrub trees.

"Rankin brand on most of 'em, I'll bet," he mused to himself as he squatted down. The narrow trail coming in through the rim was blocked by a crude pole gate and the sharp sides of the basin made a natural fence. Near the center of the basin he could see where collected

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

runoff had formed a pond that was now bare and muddy around the edge. There were a half dozen steers standing in a shallow area, enjoying the water that came half way up on their sides.

He scanned the area back and forth until his eyes finally came to rest on the lean-to. It was slung between two large, gnarled bushes and was fashioned from a dirty canvas. It was less than a hundred yards below him near the floor of the basin. He watched it until he was satisfied there was only one occupant who was asleep in the shade of the shelter. Although he couldn't see it, Owen knew a horse would be picketed nearby.

Having seen enough, he carefully made his way back to Cocoa, led him back off the rim crest, mounted and rode away. He stayed over the lip of the basin as he followed it around to where its split side permitted passage through to the prairie that stretched away toward the river town of Terwell.

It was long after dark when Owen entered the town and rode along the street until he found the livery. He dismounted, led the big chestnut inside and began unsaddling him beside an empty stall. He was joined by a balding, potbellied man who watched in silence while the saddle was pulled off, dropped onto a worn, thick wooden rail, and was followed by the damp hot blanket.

"Grain?" asked Owen.

"In the bin," answered the other nodding toward a large covered wooden box. "A nickel a scoop and one buck for the night," he called out as Owen scooped up a generous portion and spread it in the feed box at the end of the stall.

"Do I wipe him down or do you for that price?" asked Owen.

"Oh, I'll do that," the man assured him.

"For a dollar you should, but maybe I'll help." In a friendly tone he added, "I guess I am coming in pretty late at that."

The liveryman, glad for the offer, responded to the easy apology, "Oh, that's all right. I get 'em in here at all hours." After a few minutes he asked, "Come far?"

"Yes, seems like I was plumb stuck in my saddle. I've been going since sunup." Then Owen asked, "Say, do you mind if I just stretch out on your straw for the night? I'm afraid I'm not much on hotels and all that."

"Help yuhrself. I don't blame yuh. Our hotel ain't much."

"Any work in these parts?" Owen asked casually.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Not much, but I expect it would depend on what kind of work yuh're lookin' fer."

"The only thing I'm good for is stock work. I'm fresh out of a job. The place I was on up Dakota way just couldn't make a go of it any longer. Too dry, no grass, and then some Texas fever finally wiped the operation out."

"Things ain't much better around here, except we ain't got any cow fever. Didn't know it was goin' around."

"As far as I know it hasn't spread and has stayed up along the Missouri breaks."

"It may be a little early for roundup, but, what with the dry weather, are any of the ranchers shipping cattle out?" asked Owen.

"Some have," said the man who hung his soft brush on a nail. He went to a closed shelf near the door and withdrew a half-empty bottle of cheap whiskey. He uncorked it, helped himself to a long pull, and offered the bottle to Owen who waved it away, but thanked him for the offer. The liveryman wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "Yuh might look up a fella named Fin Bagge. He's made a pretty good business out of bunchin' up herds outside of town and runnin' 'em back to rails' end."

"I might just do that. Thanks for the idea."

The other waved and disappeared with his bottle into a room at the far end of the livery. Owen pulled some dried beef strips from his saddlebags along with a few hard biscuits and a small air tight of beans. He eased himself down in the clean straw piled high against the wall opposite the stalls and, as he began eating his lonely supper, he muttered under his breath, "Well, Mr. Fin Bagge, I'll look forward to meeting you."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Jake Ritter was brooding over a morning drink in the Bobcat when Fred Mead entered. Mead looked around the room, spotted Ritter and, as he walked toward him, called to the barkeep, "Rye. My bottle."

Mead eased himself into a chair whose squeaking legs protested the weight. It was well that the cross-braces had been wired into place to keep them from popping out of their holes, otherwise Mead would have brought disaster to himself and to the battered chair.

Mead had been munching on cheese before leaving the mercantile and crumbs of it still stuck to his unshaven chin. When the bartender put the bottle and one of the glasses with its chipped bottom edge on the table, Mead, without looking up, said, "Let's have some of that beef I saw in here last night." As an afterthought, he called after the slowly retreating barkeep, "And bring some bread and be sure it's that fresh baked stuff. I don't want none of yuhr slabs of green mold."

"Yuh say he called himself Bannack?" asked Mead recalling the report he had received from Ritter on the previous night's unsuccessful trip to the Evans ranch.

"That's what he said," grumped Ritter, "Owen Bannack."

"Never heard of 'im," snorted Mead. There was no conviction in his voice and even Ritter sensed the denial was a lie. "He didn't let on as to why he was here or say anything about Lupe?"

"Like I told yuh last night, Fred. He came out of nowhere and drew down on me and Creech. We didn't have a chance. It happened faster'n anything I ever saw and he didn't say a word about Lupe."

"Yuh're sure he dropped Creech? I don't want to see him hangin' outside in the mornin'."

"I didn't see it. Like I said, I was goin' out the window, but I can tell yuh fer sure that horn dog will hit what he shoots at. I'd bet a new six-gun Creech is already in the ground."

Mead had been furious the night before, and he and Ritter had been dangerously close to a shootout. It was only Mead's need of the man that had saved the situation from becoming a deadly parting of the ways. Mead, as usual, had now recovered his composure and had already begun to think of ways of handling the problem.

Ritter, on the other hand, was still brooding over his close encounter and was still glum over the way Mead had tried to browbeat him the night before. He had been promising himself Mead was no longer going to call all the shots and direct all the operations from the

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

comfort of the saloon while the others did the riding and took the risk of being shot down.

"Maybe we oughta send Mizer out there again to watch the place," Mead suggested.

Ritter flared at the suggestion. "He won't go, Fred, and I ain't goin' to ask 'im."

"None of us is safe as long as Bannack's roamin' around out there," warned Mead. "I say we gotta get on his trail and stay on it until we track 'im down."

"Fred, yuh got Bannack on yuhr mind. Yuh have ever since he set foot in town. The more I think about it, the more it seems to me it's hooked up with Lupe. That little snake pal of yuhrs, Serill, said somethin' about a big hombre who had been on their trail up in North country. Was it somethin' Serill and Lupe did that brought that tall jasper down on us?"

Mead's eyes smoldered in their slits. "That's none of yuhr business. Bannack's here now and he's goin' be a sliver in our hides until we pull 'im out."

"The boys don't take kindly to pullin' yuhr slivers, Fred, and neither do I."

"Whatcha suggest?" sneered Mead, "hang tail and run?"

"It's near certain he'll help the ranchers with their association. I don't see anythin' good comin' from takin' on the whole outfit. If they get the bit in their teeth, it'll be a vigilante runaway. Yuh said so yuhrself. The boys and I agree that the thing to do is make one last big run, then cut up what we got and let everyone go his own way."

Mead was long in answering. "Yuh know, Ritter, fer once I agree with yuh. I guess all we need to decide is whose place we hit. Any ideas?"

Ritter was taken aback by the sudden turnaround in Mead's attitude and even more surprised by the agreement with his suggestion. He eyed Mead suspiciously. Ritter knew Mead well enough to realize dividing up the accumulated spoils was going to be a risky business. It would call for every bit of caution he could muster. Yet, the prospect of getting his cut and leaving the country appealed to him and he brightened at the invitation for suggestions.

"Some of the ranchers have been gatherin' their herds tryin' to make it easier to protect 'em. We could work out a sweep of a couple of 'em. Then we could push the whole bunch up through the basin, pick up the Rankin stuff and make our own drive to the railhead. Mizer and I like the idea. It leaves out Bagge and makes more fer all of us."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Sounds good to me. How long will it take to get ready?" Mead was all agreeable.

"Not long. Lemme get Mizer to scout out the ranches and report back to us tomorrow."

Mead agreed and Ritter, filled with a mission, eagerly took his leave to find Mizer and work out the details. Mead, left alone at the table, stared at the batwing doors as they flopped after the disappearing Ritter. "So yuh got the boys to agree to pull out did yuh, " he said to the absent Ritter, "and yuh think that it's time to slice up the kitty?"

Mead filled his glass with more rye and stared at the bullet hole in the mirror behind the bar. Still thinking of Ritter he growled, "What yuh see, yuh scum bucket, may not be as real as yuh think it is. It may be that before this is over yuhr ideas about who gets what may be as cracked as that glass." Then he yelled at the barkeep and, in the best Bobcat tradition, banged his glass on the tabletop. "Where's my food? Yuh tryin' to starve me down to nothin'?"

Later, in the mercantile, Mead faced Rife across a counter piled high with stacks of heavy work clothes. As usual, Rife was apprehensive and suspicious of Mead and his motives. Rife now fidgeted with the string that came up through a hole in the counter from the large spool sitting on the floor.

"I'm not sure I understand what it is yuh're offerin' me," Rife said hesitantly.

"I'll lay it out fer yuh again," said Mead, making an effort to appear restrained and relaxed despite Rife's grating demeanor.

"When yuh say turn the store over to me, do yuh mean sell it?" asked Rife.

"That's exactly what I mean," said Mead firmly. "But there are two things yuh have to agree on. First, I'll want the money quick. That's why the price is so low. Next, yuh have to promise not to breathe a word of this to anyone."

Mead's greed had prompted him to undertake a liquidation and to squeeze as much as possible out of Frailey before leaving. He knew his effort to make a quick sale to Rife was a gamble. The man might not have a dime, but Mead couldn't shake the feeling the storekeeper had managed to hold back a sizeable amount from the till. Selling him the store, which Mead would otherwise simply abandon, was a way of recovering what Mead thought of as his lost profits.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"I ain't got that kind of money. Fact is I don't have much of anything," shrugged Rife. "I don't have any notion of where I could get it either."

"Look, there's the bank up in Terwell. If I remember, you even said something about knowin' someone up there. You could ride up there this afternoon, see the banker first thing in the morning and be back here late tomorrow night. This time tomorrow night yuh could be the owner of this place lock, stock and barrel."

Mead didn't realize just how compelling the idea was to Rife. The storekeeper's mind was racing at the possibilities. It would mean the end of his relationship with Mead. That alone was an attraction. But the greater attraction was being proprietor of the store. It was something he had dreamed of often and it would give him some status. It might just be the kind of status that would make Amos Carpenter look upon his intentions more favorably.

At bottom, Mead was also partly correct in his suspicions. Rife had not been entirely faithful to his accounts. He had managed to accumulate a modest sum in the Terwell bank. With it as a deposit, and with the giveaway price Mead had quoted, Rife felt that he might just manage the deal.

"If yuh're sure about this and if that's a firm price, I might as well ride up there." Rife tried to avoid sounding anxious, "It can't hurt to ask."

"It's firm all right. Jest remember this. The deal's off if yuh mention one sound of this to anybody here in town."

"I won't be able to if I'm on the road to Terwell," Rife assured him. "If I'm going to get there so's I can be in the bank bright and early, I'd best be goin'."

Quickly, Rife pulled off the dirty apron, draped it over a rack of brooms, snatched up his small black hat and headed out the door before Mead could changer his mind. It was still a couple of hours before midday, but Rife knew by pushing it a bit, he could make Terwell by late evening.

Rife considered taking a buggy and going across the river and using the wagon road. It was longer because it arched around the broken hills that folded along the lower side of the valley and the buggy would have been more to his liking, but a straight ride up through the ranches on the high side of the river would be quite a bit faster. Having decided to sacrifice comfort for speed, he set off on horseback.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Once out of town and settled into the hot ride under the light gray cloud mantle, Rife began to mull over the sudden offer by Mead to sell the mercantile. One thing stood out above all others. Mead was planning to pull out of Frailey. That much was clear. What he couldn't figure was why.

Things had been going pretty well for Mead from what Rife could make out. Judging from the numerous meetings with the toughs who wandered in and out of the store and lounged around the Bobcat, Mead's night activities had been yielding him a handsome profit. Despite his arguments to the contrary even the store had made Mead a little money.

On the other hand, the hanging of Lupe had brought a change in Mead's gang. They had become more surly and short-tempered. Rife had even heard a good bit of grumbling about "things goin' sour." Then the second "hanging" had thrown Mead into a rage. He had cursed at everyone he met in the store and in the street. He and Ritter had been seen quarreling and Rife was reasonably certain at least one of the Bobcat regulars might have left town and a number of them had openly talked about it.

Rife also knew the gang had tried to capture the man Ritter called Bannack. The attempt had been a total failure and had provoked a long and heated argument between Ritter and Mead that had started in the storeroom and had been carried over to the Bobcat. From what Rife could make out, Jane had escaped uninjured, and he hoped that her safety was, in some measure, to his credit.

His midnight note had been a hurried deed. It had been done secretly out of a fear of having to confront Amos Carpenter. It had been done out of hatred of Mead and a desire to somehow punish the man. Also, it had been done out of concern for Jane's safety because of his secretly held affection for her.

The thought of purchasing the store and being rid of Mead elevated his mood and gave him high hopes for the future. He straightened his long thin frame in the saddle and urged the unwilling horse forward.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Terwell was a substantially larger town than Frailey. In addition to its bank, there were three saloons, a couple of boarding houses, the hotel, a cafe and competing general stores. Terwell was destined to be on the coming railroad line, and it was already experiencing growth in anticipation of the arrival of the tracks expected sometime next year.

After a good breakfast of potatoes, steak and eggs, Owen finished a steaming cup of black coffee, paid the neat waitress, and stepped into the street. There were already a couple of spring wagons pulled up in front of the stores taking on ranch supplies. There were people moving up and down the boardwalks and, in general, the town was coming to life.

Owen couldn't help comparing it to the scrubby little town of Frailey. He hadn't seen much of Mead's town, but then there wasn't much to see. One saloon, a dirt jail, and a mercantile that looked like the next wind would blow it away. He wondered what the difference would have been had the railroad pointed its steel fingers at Frailey instead of Terwell. He dismissed the thought with a shrug and walked along the street until he came to the corner.

There, across the street, was a new jail made from large rocks laid up in an irregular, random pattern but giving the appearance of permanence and solidness appropriate to such buildings. He assumed the rocks had been hauled in from one of the outcroppings he had observed along the trail.

The inside of the jail was bright with fresh whitewash. A neat rolltop desk was the most prominent item of furniture, but there were also a number of comfortable armchairs. The omnipresent coffee pot occupied a small table that sat below a new pine board which sported a half dozen shiny nails each holding a clean white mug.

"Looks like you're fresh open," said Owen to the square man sitting behind the desk sorting through a stack of posters.

The man looked up over his spectacles with a pair of pale blue eyes that fixed themselves directly on Owen's face. "Yes, as a matter of fact, we are. Finished our new buildin' less than a week ago."

The worn star, though, was not new. Owen sensed that its needle fastener had worn out a considerable number of shirt pockets over the years. The man and the star seemed suited to one another.

Owen extended his big hand, "My name's Owen Bannack. If you have a few minutes I'd like to talk."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

The Sheriff shook the outstretched hand and then gestured toward a chair. "My time is yuhrs. Name's Hale, Bus Hale."

"Sheriff, would it be of interest to you to know one of the citizens of your fair city is part of a rustling gang. That over the past year at least and probably more, he's been receiving stolen cattle and reselling them."

The Sheriff looked at Owen, slowly removed his spectacles, leaned back in his swivel chair, and finally said, "In answer to your question, yes, I'd be interested in knowin' that."

"The name Fin Bagge mean anything to you?"

"Yes, I know the man. He's been around here for a couple of years and his business is buying cattle. Are yuh accusin' him?"

"I am."

"I'll need proof"

"If I can show you where a large part of Fin's cattle come from and how they get here would that do the job?"

"It might, but the real trick is to show Bagge knew they were rustled cows when he bought them. Where do you say these cows came from anyway?"

"I'm sure by now, Sheriff, you've heard about the trouble down around Frailey." The Sheriff frowned and nodded that he had. The mention of Frailey caused the lawman's eyes to narrow slightly and he looked at Owen with a hint of suspicion.

"I have to tell yuh, Mr. Bannack, Frailey's outa my area. I've heard plenty about what's goin' on down there but my people here would have my scalp if I tried policin' the whole territory. I've only got one part time deputy and we're spread too thin as it is. So I'm afraid yuh would do better to organize the people down there and get yuhrself a real lawman. I can't arrest someone on mere accusation."

"I'm not asking you to do that. I only ask you to take a short ride with me out to Bagge's place. I've already done some early morning riding, and I know what we'll find. Your part is simple. Say nothing. Do nothing. Then, if you hear enough, lock him up and I'll send plenty of ranchers up here to identify their cattle."

Owen's direct and open attitude made an impression on the Sheriff. And there was, in the big man's bearing, a purpose and honest strength that persuaded Bus Hale to trust him.

"Okay with me. I need to settle my breakfast anyway," said Hale, "but this had better be what yuh say it is."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

They found Fin Bagge standing outside the door of a one-room shack a short ride out of Terwell. The shack sat near a large corral constructed from split rails. Near one side there was a mounded stack of year old hay and a larger stack of fresher hay cut earlier in the summer before the grass had burned from the heat. There was a large red, long-handled pump sitting over an open cistern. The pump spout was positioned over a long deep watering trough inside the corral.

Bagge had apparently just started to tend to the large mixed lot of cows in the corral. He stood bareheaded, watching the riders approach him from the Terwell road.

Hale and Owen stopped a few feet away and looked down at the gap-toothed man with the bulging nose. Owen looked him over and then asked, "You Fin Bagge?"

"What the hell? Sure I am. Hale, yuh know who I am. What's up?"

"Bagge, my name is Owen Bannack and I came to ask you if you ever heard of a man named Lupe." As he spoke, Owen threw a coiled rope at Bagge's feet. One end of the rope had been tied into a hangman's knot. The movement was sudden and unexpected and startled even Hale who shot a sharp glance at Owen.

The rope thudded into the dirt and the hangman's knot glanced off Bagge's dusty boot. The startled man stared down and quickly kicked at the rope as he would at a snake. He looked up, his eyes wide under the dark bushy brows.

"What the hell ... Lupe ... Why I heard." He stammered for a bit as he appealed to the lawman. "Hale, yuh can't sit there and let this man threaten me."

Hale looked at Bagge with interest and a bit of a smile flitted across his square face. "I ain't heard no threat, Fin. The man jest asked yuh a question."

Bagge retreated a few steps until his back came against the wall of the shack. Owen touched Cocoa's side and the big chestnut advanced on the man who flattened himself against the peeling wood. Owen turned the horse at an angle so that the chestnut's shoulder finally pinned Bagge to the building.

"My hearing must be getting bad. What was it you were saying about your friend, Mead."

"Mead? Why I never said nuthin' about Fred ... I mean Mead."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Why I would have sworn you mentioned Mead and his friend Sheriff Ritter. You do know Ritter now don't you?"

The corral master was thoroughly flustered and frightened. The suddenness of Owen's appearance and his quick questions were soon going to be too much for Bagge to handle. The pressure of the big horse increased. "Now before I try out my spurs on this horse, tell me who brings yuh the rustled cattle from down river."

Bagge's eyes bulged like his nose and he gasped for air, "Mostly it's Jake, Jake Ritter. Sometimes it's others."

Owen kept up the pressure. "And you get 'em for a good price because they've been rustled?"

The words came tumbling out, "But I never rustled nuthin'. So help me, mister, it's true. Hale, yuh gotta believe me. I ain't no rustler. I ain't gonna swing fer nobody."

Owen raised the reins high up on Cocoa's neck and gave them gentle tug. The big chestnut obediently backed until Owen let the reins fall slack again. Bagge stumbled forward and fell to his knees heaving for breath.

Owen stepped out of the saddle, picked up the rope he had thrown down and walked over to Bagge who lurched to his feet. Holding the rope and slowly and deliberately rearranging the tangled loops, Owen studied Bagge for a while. Then he fixed the man with his gray eyes, "Before I get back on that horse and ride outa here, you tell me how this operation was set up."

Bagge's head swiveled from Owen to the silent Sheriff Hale and back to Owen. "It was more than a year ago. Fred Mead and a little fella name Serill rode up here and we made the deal. Mead's boys would gather the beeves and hold 'em in a little canyon down in the river country. When they had a few together, I'd start a drive with some I had collected here. We'd mix 'em together and run the whole lot back to the rail head. I usually made up some sale slips, but the buyers never looked at 'em. They knowed some of the herds was rustled so they jest took somethin' off the goin' price and looked the other way."

"What did you do with the money?" asked Owen.

"I held out my cut and took the rest to the bank. As far as they knew it was jest my regular business. I had Mr. Deese send a draft to a Denver bank, jest like Mead and I agreed."

"What bank in Denver?"

"The Miner's Federated."

"Whose name is on the account?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"It's a joint thing, Mead-Serill."

Owen turned away from Bagge and stepped back up in the saddle. He looked at Sheriff Hale and asked, "Heard enough to put him up in your new jail?"

"Plenty," said the Sheriff to Owen. Then to Bagge, "Saddle yuhr horse, we're goin' fer a short ride to town."

Bus Hale then turned to Owen. "I can't say I approve of yuhr methods, but yuh get results and I guess that's what counts. I've got plenty on Bagge here and with a little more checkin' I'm sure he's goin' on a long trip to hard labor. But there's one more thing." He caught Owen's eyes and held them. "I've heard of an incident down in Frailey. It involved a man gettin' tangled up in a rope in front of the saloon. I think I understand a little better now how that might have happened. But jest so's you understand somethin', let me spell it out. I don't go with vigilante hangin's. I'm the law around here and, if such a thing was to happen in my jurisdiction, it would go hard on the hanger. Is that clear?"

Owens eyes did not waver, "I understand, Sheriff, and I think you know where there's law such things don't happen. It's when the law goes sour or stops being the law that the citizens take back their natural authority and use it to protect themselves."

"I can't disagree with yuh Mister Bannack and I'm not fergettin' yuh came to me instead of jest draggin' Bagge out to the nearest tree and savin' the county a lot of trouble. I jest wanted to make sure we understood one another."

"If our business is finished," said Owen, "I'll be leaving you here. There's some cleaning up left to do, but I don't think there'll be any more night drives from down river into your county."

He touched his hat, wheeled Cocoa, and headed away from Terwell toward Frailey. He set his course for the faraway rim lining the horizon.

The morning sky was now a solid mass of unbroken gray clouds which were almost heavy enough to suggest rain later in the day. The overcast was thick enough to shield out the sun, and there was every sign the long drought was ending with the arrival of the unsettled weather so typical of fall.

By mid-morning Owen was near the broken country that contained the rustlers' holding corral basin. As he came to a patch of scrub bushes which lined a little rise, he reined the big horse over to the shelter of the small pocket wash the wind had eaten away from the hill.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

He dismounted, walked the few steps back up the slope and looked through the brush at his back trail.

There in the distance was a horse and rider coming on, seeming to follow his exact course. Owen positioned himself where he would not be seen, but where he would be close to the path the rider would be taking.

The soft thud of hooves on the grass announced the horse and rider. As they drew almost even with his position on the rise, Owen stepped into full view and called out, "Hold him right there, friend."

Rife jerked hard on the reins of his gaunt horse. The startled animal shied and Rife slipped as neatly from the saddle as if being thrown on the first jump of a wild bronc. He rolled, apparently making an attempt to avoid being trampled, but even before he had turned over twice, the horse had come to a halt. It stood looking at Rife, wondering why his rider had dismounted so abruptly.

Owen made no move toward the man who obviously had not been injured. Instead he stood quietly, waiting for Rife to collect his wits. While he watched Rife look around and sit up, he remembered seeing the man before.

"I've been watching you track me for over an hour. Why?"

"I can see how it might have seemed that way," said Rife as he picked up his hat and brushed dry grass from his clothes. "I was hopin' to catch up and have a talk with yuh."

"It seems you caught up so let's have your talk."

"I saw yuh in Terwell, ridin' down the street with the Sheriff. I recognized yuh from..." Rife stopped not wanting to rile the man.

"Yes, I remember seeing you one evening not too long ago in Frailey, but you didn't come trotting after me to exchange greetings."

"I've heard that yuh... that the ranchers have formed a group to fight Mead and yuh might be helpin' 'em somehow. If it's true, I might have some information that would be useful to yuhr group."

Owen studied the man for a minute before asking, "Could it be you're the one who left a note on Amos Carpenter's door the other night?"

"Could be," Rife admitted.

"Well, then, it could be the ranchers would be interested in any further information you have about Mead. I might add that whoever wrote the note did a service that was appreciated."

"Whoever wrote the note would be glad to hear it helped out," said Rife. "The fact is, I was in Terwell on business concernin'

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Mead. I'm the manager of the store he presently owns." Rife laid emphasis on the word "presently."

"I believe I've heard you mentioned," smiled Owen.

Rife took the remark to suggest some favorable comment had been made about him. Encouraged, he went on, "It seems Mead has plans to leave the country very soon and, as a matter of fact, he made a tempting offer to sell the store to me."

Earlier, when he had seen Owen on the street in Terwell with the Sheriff, he had just concluded his business with the banker, Deese. Rife had instantly connected Mead's plans for a sudden departure with Owen. The same profit motive that had led him to hold back on Mead prompted him to decide he might just be able to avoid paying anything for the store.

Thus he had hurried after Owen hoping to expedite Mead's plans. Rife wasn't sure how or in what way, but it seemed to fit nicely into the way things were developing for him. A more hurried Mead might never get around to asking for the money Rife carried in the greasy leather belt around his waist.

"You say that he's leaving town?" Owen asked.

"I'm sure of it and probably as soon as this very evenin'. I'd guess he and his friends are plannin' some night ridin' before they go."

"Any idea where?"

"No, but it'd be where there's the most cattle."

"I don't know why you're telling me this, but I expect you have your reasons." In his mind, however, Owen had already come to the realization Rife was trying to use the ranchers for his own selfish purposes. In fact, Rife's greedy motive only made the information more credible and Owen was content to let the matter ride.

The two men exchanged only a few more words before Owen stood and waited while Rife mounted and rode on toward Frailey. Owen wanted the storekeeper out in front and not behind him and, under no circumstances, did he want to ride along with the covetous schemer.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Jane looked almost comical in her man-sized denim work trousers and plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up above the elbows. She was sitting on a low wooden stool in the kitchen of the Evans ranch house twisting open garden-fresh pods and dumping the peas into a white porcelain bowl. Her forearms were neatly bandaged from elbows to wrists, and she had a small white patch on her cheek.

Wink was sitting near the back door watching her. He wore a white bandage at a rakish angle over the right side of his head and his ear jutted up through the cloth as if sewn there as part of the bandage.

Mrs. Foster was busy at the stove with steam rising from at least three different kettles. The room was filled with the fragrance of cooking onions and a pot roast.

Darkness was arriving outside, and the cloud cover brought it along earlier and spread it over the land more suddenly than usual. But the promise of rain and cooler weather made the kitchen seem close and friendly. The hands would soon be filing into the long dining room for supper, and the bustle of mealtime preparations was building to its conclusion. The foreman had requested that the meal be advanced a bit in anticipation of the stockman's meeting which was soon to follow.

"It's a good thing we don't need them peas for supper," teased Mrs. Foster. "Jess and the men would have their supper after the meetin' instead of before it."

"Shelling peas has never been my favorite chore," answered Jane.

"You like 'em well enough. I think you eat one for every three you put in the bowl."

"I hear they're good for burns," Jane laughed.

"If that's so, you're as good as healed."

"Mrs. Foster, what do you think the men will decide to do tonight? Pa said it might be all talk, but I think he's a lot more serious than that. I know Pa and he's got his mind set on something."

"Only time will tell, Jane," said the woman as she disappeared into the dining room with steaming bowls of potatoes and gravy. She repeated herself as she reappeared, "Only time will tell." She again disappeared with the huge brown roast on a great oval platter. The next trip saw the removal of a plateful of fresh sweet corn piled into a cone like firewood. It was followed by two loaves of bread hot from the oven,

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

blackberry preserves, well-house butter, a glass pitcher of fresh milk and, finally, the large coffee pot.

Mrs. Foster muttered something about how they had better be close to the house and washed up. She went to the porch and clanged the empty pipe hanging by the door. The clanging was quickly followed by the shuffle of boots and the snatches of voices as the dining room filled. Jane heard the scraping of chairs and the rattling of utensils as the table conversation settled into a steady murmur.

Mrs. Foster reappeared and asked, "Are you sure you don't want to sit out here and try to eat something?"

"Not on top of all that soup this afternoon and all these peas. Thanks anyway," she smiled.

The woman had no sooner disappeared back into the dining room than the kitchen door swung open. Wink whirled around and looked at Owen Bannack, but, sensing the tall man was acceptable company, the dog made no sound."

"It's all right, Wink, lie down," said Jane softly.

Owen stepped into the room and remarked, "I seem to find you in all sorts of unexpected places."

"I wouldn't think a kitchen would be an unexpected place for a woman."

"I'd agree, but you seem much more at home driving a team of horses."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," she sighed.

Thinking that he might have offended her, he quickly apologized, "Somehow that didn't come out quite right. I wasn't trying to be serious. It was a clumsy way of joshing you."

Next, it was Jane who felt that she had made him ill-at-ease. "Oh, I wasn't ... I mean, I didn't..." She looked at him, dropped her hands into the large bowl as her shoulders sagged, and her face tightened in frustration.

Owen started to speak, but he, too, stopped. They looked at each other across the room. Each waited for the other to speak. Finally, at the same instant they burst out laughing.

After a minute Owen said, "I could go out and come in again."

"No need," she said, "besides, Wink might not let you in a second time."

"He looks like he's been to the wars."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

“I guess we all do, she said holding up her bandaged arms. “I imagine you’re still wearing some wrapping, too. If I know Able, he probably packed yours with axle grease.”

“You’re right on both counts,” Owen laughed.

“You’re just in time for supper. You better get in there before it’s all gone.”

“Sounds good to me.” Having said that, however, Owen made no move to leave.

“Pa’s in there and so is Able and you friend Ferris,”

“That’s a hand to draw to,” smiled Owen still not moving.

Looking down at the bandaged brown dog he asked, “Does he permit a friend to say hello?”

“He will if he knows what’s good for himself. Won’t you, Wink?”

Owen extended his hand palm down toward the dog. “It’s okay, Wink,” she said to the dog. Seeming to understand her perfectly, the dog stood and stepped over to Owen accepting the offered hand that scuffed his shoulder and side. Owen knelt and spent a few minutes making a friend of the animal.

“I used to have a dog who looked a lot like him,” he said looking up at Jane. “We called him Ring.”

“Ring, what a strange name for a dog.”

“He was smaller than Wink here, but he was a good stock dog, and I remember he sometimes managed to get himself in the wrong place and in trouble with the cows. Every time it happened, he would get a comical look on his face, and you could almost hear him asking what he should do next.”

Jane laughed and said, “Sometimes Wink does the same thing, and when he does, he just blinks his eyes hoping I’ll save him.” After a pause, she asked, “You said, ‘we,’ do you mean your family when you were growing up?”

“No, the ‘we’ was my wife and boys.” Owen stood up and then added vacantly almost as if talking to himself, “But they’re all gone now.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. “ Her face turned deep red with embarrassment.

As if waking from a dream, Owen smiled suddenly and assured her, “You don’t have to apologize.” Changing his tone, he looked closely at her and said, “I never got around to thanking you, Jane.”

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

She was aware it was the first time she had heard him speak her name. It stirred her with a feeling she had never before experienced. “No need, your helping Pa and the others is more thanks than I could have hoped for.”

“That may be, but for what it’s worth, thanks.”

“You might take it back if I keep you out here talking until the food’s gone,” she smiled.

“It smells good. That tells me Able didn’t cook it,” he chuckled. “I suppose I had better go in there and rawhide him a little.”

As he crossed to the door, Mrs. Foster swept into the room. “I declare, Mister Bannack,” she glanced quickly at Jane who swept up some pods and then at Owen, “If you want some food you’ll have to move pretty fast.”

“So I’ve been told,” he said, as he walked by her into the other room.

“It doesn’t look to me like there’s any more peas in that bowl than when I left,” said Mrs. Foster with a mock frown.

“Tosh!” was all Mrs. Foster heard as she disappeared back into the dining room with a fresh bowl of potatoes.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



The ranchers and their hands began drifting into the ranch yard soon after the Evans ranch crew had finished eating. The group began gathering around the porch. They sat and stood in groups talking about the weather and watching the thick clouds drawn into relief against the black sky by the flashes of lightning that were marching closer and growing more frequent.

When all the members of the association were accounted for, Amos stepped up on the porch and held up his hand for silence. As soon as the talk died down, he spoke, "Since it looks like we may be in line fer a drought buster, I'll keep it short. Yuh all remember at the last meetin' I told yuh I knew a man who might be able help us put an end to all this night ridin' and rustlin'. He's here now and he's agreed to do what he can. Gents, meet Owen Bannack."

Owen stepped forward and looked over the group. The light from the hurricane lanterns Jess had hung from hooks along the front edge of the porch roof reflected off their faces. There were the mustaches, a few beards, some older men and some younger men. They were men who believed in hard work, a dance on summer Saturdays in a neighbor's barn, a drink or two on occasion and church on Sunday. Like such men, they were slow to anger and adverse to shooting and killing, but they could be pushed too far, and they could be aroused to vengeful action, especially when their families and their land were threatened.

Owen knew these men. He had been one just like them at another time and in a different place. He, too, had known the marauding, the night raids, and the fear of pounding hooves in the dark. Like them, he has been inclined to hesitate, hoping against hope it would all somehow stop, thinking that perhaps others would take action.

His penalty had been greater than loss of his own life. A family lost. A ranch lost. His life changed and committed to building justice wherever it might lead him.

Now he found himself being asked to lead others along a road he himself had once refused to travel. It was a harsh and unforgiving path, and they had to understand that fact before all others.

"First thing. Is the man named Beson present?"

A voice came from the back edge of the group, "Yeah, I'm here. Leif Beson."

"Mind stepping up here?" asked Owen easily.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

There were some murmurs and shrugs among the men as they opened a pathway for Beson who shuffled forward. As he stood looking up at Owen, his feet were spread apart defiantly and his hands were jammed in his trouser pockets.

“Beson, you are either a thief or a fool. Which is it?” Owen’s words came like hot lead, and they were fired at the man as if from a rifle. The light from the lantern was behind Owen and his tall wide figure loomed darkly over the rancher. The crowd was hushed and expectant.

Before the man could speak, Owen rapped out, “How much has Mead paid you to let your ranch be used as a corral for rustled cattle?”

“I don’t know...” started Beson.

“Or was it Ritter who paid you?”

“I ... “

“Is it your man or Mead’s who’s sitting up in your rim basin watching Jim Rankin’s herd?”

“What’s that about my herd?” snapped the bearded Rankin from the porch. He stepped forward and stood next to Owen and glared down at Beson.

The man knew he had been found out and realized there was no way to escape. Yet, for a moment, he tried to bluff his way through, hoping Owen’s words were just speculation and wild guessing designed to smoke him out.

“Yuh’re makin’ a big mistake, Bannack. I don’t know what all this is about, but if yuh think I’m goin’ to stand here and take yuhr insults, yuh better think again.”

Continuing his attempt at bluster, he began pushing toward the edge of the group. Swearing, he called out, “Get out of my way. If this is the kind of association yuh got, count me out.”

His attempt to brazen his way out of the trap was doomed before it began. Old Able, whether by accident or by design, was stationed near the man. He blocked Beson’s path, his shotgun resting in the crook of his arm.

“I reckon it’d be only polite to wait around and hear the man out, Mr. Beson. I find all this basin talk downright interestin’,” drawled Able.

By that time, two young cowhands had joined Able. Their intentions were written plainly on their tense faces.

Beson turned on them and snarled, “To blazes with yuh all. Yuhr damn association won’t last the week. Yuhr trouble is yuh don’t know when yuh’re beat. Mead’s goin’ to make summer sausage of yuh.”

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

The admission brought oaths from the group and one man called for a rope. Hostility and anger seized them. Beson became the visible object of their anger and frustration and their rage was intensified by their realization Beson had been one of their own and had turned traitor.

It was Owen who spoke just loud enough to be heard, "Able, If I'm not mistaken, I believe I heard the man request the privilege of visiting the root cellar. I hope you'll accommodate him and make certain he doesn't leave early."

By the time he finished, the men were quiet and his handling of the matter satisfied them. He had suddenly become their leader. It was simply an accepted fact, and they looked to him for instruction.

Owen explained to them how he had ridden up through Beson's range and found the holding basin. He also described seeing Rankin's cattle and how they had been run through the bottle neck opening.

One rancher called out, "Hell, I've known about that place fer years, used to play there as a kid. But we all trusted Beson and never thought to look there. I suppose if anyone ever suggested ridin' along that rim, he was smart enough to change the subject and head everyone off on a wild goose chase."

Owen then outlined his visit to Terwell and the confession of Bagge. He told them how their cattle had been collected and herded off to the railroad. The news that at least some money that properly belonged to them was in a Denver bank brought smiles to their faces and jokes about Mead being their marketing agent.

After they had settled down again, Owen told them the hard news. Without mentioning Rife by name, Owen told them he had learned of a raid coming that night.

"What we need to know is who's got the biggest herd around." Immediately they all looked at a rancher named Wendell whose spread lined the river for over twenty miles. He had been repeatedly hit by the rustlers who found it easy to run a few head off the mesa and then disappear in the broken hills along the river, but his herd still numbered in the many hundreds.

"Have you been bunching them together the last few days?" asked Owen.

"I have," boomed Wendell. "It seemed the only way to protect 'em after they hit Jim's place."

Owen asked the same question of others. Some had tried to bring their widely scattered animals together, others had planned to, but were waiting for fall roundup. It soon became evident that, if Mead's gang had

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

done a good job of scouting the river ranches, it was most likely the rustlers would hit the Wendell place.

Then Owen said, "It may be Mead is planning one last big raid. And, as we have guessed, it'll be on Wendell's range. Now this will be a dangerous and bloody business. No man should feel obligated to go. Those of you who have families should think twice about riding out of here with me. just so we're all square with one another you should know I'm the one who used the sign of the Bobcat for a hanging."

There were grunts of approval and a few scattered comments of "a job well done" and "none too soon."

Owen raised his hand for attention and continued, "I was commissioned by a vigilance committee in Montana to track the man down and bring him back if possible. He would have appeared before them, been given a chance to make his peace with whatever god he believed in, then he would have been hanged. There was no doubt whatever about his guilt. I hanged him because I felt I had no choice when I saw that Ritter was Mead's man."

The ranchers listened intently as Owen continued, "I tell you these things so you'll know who it is you're riding with tonight. When this business is finished, I'll leave because there are others I'm looking for. But you'll all stay here. If the knowledge you rode with a vigilante will haunt you later, now is the time to save yourself that burden. If it'll ease anybody's mind, let me make it clear this is not a vigilante ride tonight. None of you'll be involved in any hangings. We're only going to stop a raid by rustlers. If we capture any riders, I think we should jail em until you can get a marshal or sheriff to take over and decide what to do with them. That's all I've got to say. Amos?"

Amos looked at Owen for a moment then said simply, "I'm not even a rancher, but I've had my fill of Mead and his cutthroats, I fer one am ridin'."

The meeting ended with the Association voting unanimously to ride under Owen's leadership. They began checking revolvers as they walked toward the corral, and as they reached their horses, they reached up to saddle boots and pulled out rifles and began levering up cartridges. A few glanced anxiously at the sky and the gathering clouds looming over angry flashes of lightning while they tightened saddle cinches and tried to decide whether or not they needed to wear rain slickers. Jane, who had been standing inside the front door of the ranch house, ran out and caught Amos by the arm before he had gone more than a few steps. "Pa ?" It was a question, but each knew it needed no answer.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

He bent over and kissed her lightly on the cheek and, as he did so, he saw the tears brimming in her eyes and threatening to spill out despite her brave attempt to blink them back. "You're all I got, Pa, and..."

"And that's why I'm comin' back," he continued as she hesitated. Then he tried to tease away her fear, "Don't worry. Owen told me about yuhr nursin' and I sure ain't goin' to get myself shot and have to go through that." With that, Amos squeezed her shoulder gently and stepped off the porch and moved to join the others.

Owen, who had already swung up into the saddle, sat nearby and now he walked Cocoa over to her. "I'll see to it he comes back," he said simply.

She wanted to speak, to say something, but before she could, he was gone and the horses bearing the grim-faced men pounded out of the yard into the dark. While she watched, a blue fork of lightning flashed out of the clouds throwing an eerie bright light on their backs. Within seconds, it was followed by the rattling crack of thunder which loosed the first big drops of rain that thudded heavily into the invisible carpet of dust surrounding the lonely house

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



It was only by the use of extravagant promises of an immediate payoff at the end of the drive that Jake Ritter was able to rouse the men to ride. Ritter had first enlisted Mizer who had a close kinship with the rough men. Then he and Mizer had assembled their band of six of the Bobcat's regulars in a group at the rear of the gloomy saloon.

"Why the army to pick off a few beeves?" scowled a stringy man who leaned against the clapboard wall toying with a gleaming six gun.

"We're goin' fer more than jest a few, Puler," said Ritter expansively, "and like I been sayin', there's a big payoff fer this ride. "

"Big like Mead's other payoffs?" asked a burly man whose bare arms lay crossed on his chest as he tilted back in his chair and held himself in balance by hooking the heels of his boots under the top edge of the table.

"Yuh always been paid," snapped Ritter.

"Gettin' paid fer a little night herdin' is one thing," drawled Puler as he spun the cylinder of his revolver, "but gettin' paid fer duckin' lead is another."

"How much did yuh pay Creech?" put in a man whose sunken cheeks and dull black eyes gave his face a death-mask appearance.

"Creech knew the odds like all of yuh," intoned Mizer. Looking directly at Ritter he added, "But I think Bulis has got hold of a question that needs answerin', Jake. If this is goin' to be another one of them runs where they're waitin' fer us, I fer one want to know about it."

Ritter snapped his suspenders in disgust and anger. He took a long drink of rye from the chipped Bobcat whiskey glass before answering, "If yuh remember, Miz, I was the one lookin' down Bannack's gun barrel."

While Ritter was talking, Puler snapped the hammer of his revolver back and took aim on the bartender who was slowly tottering along behind the bar serving a couple of townsmen. With a cold sneer, he pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber. "Speakin' of Bannack," he said as he broke the gun open and slid a cartridge into the empty chamber, "do yuh know where he fits into all this?"

The men all looked at Ritter. "I only know he's out there somewhere, hidin', but yuh don't need to worry none about him. Like I told yuh, he ain't ten feet tall." With a swagger in his voice, he added, "If

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

he hadn't slipped up on me while I wasn't lookin' I would've plugged 'im in the gut and hung 'im out the window."

Bulis' cheeks seemed to draw deeper into his face as he smeared designs in a spilled puddle of whiskey with a broken, dirty fingernail. "I dunno, Ritter. This whole thing smells. Lupe and Snyder hung right outside the door there. Then Creech is gunned down and now, all of a sudden, yuh want us to go rippin' off and yuh ain't even said where."

"I told yuh. They's too many beeves up in the basin fer Bagge to handle. So we figure to slice off as many as we can from another bunch and run the whole outfit back to the railhead ourselves. It's too big a herd fer jest a couple of us to handle. We'll have Rankin's stuff and whatever we get tonight."

"Could be a haul all right," said Mizer. "Are yuh sure a deal can be made fer 'em at the railroad pens?"

"Should be nuthin' to it," Ritter assured him. "Bagge does it all the time. He told me hisself the buyers ain't never checked a brand or bill of sale yet."

"Jest remember, Ritter," warned Puler as he jammed his gun into a black leather holster, "we'll be with yuh when yuh collect from the buyers and expectin' that bonus yuh promised. "

"And there better not be any surprises," added Bulis as he swept his hand across the little puddle of whiskey which had been the paint for his fingernail drawing.

They filed out of the saloon, banging the shuttered batwing doors and blinking at the change in light. Unseen by them, standing in the darkness of the overhang of the mercantile was Fred Mead. He stood stock still and back against the wall where even the faint hue of reflected light could not reach him. If one could have seen his face, they would have seen the puffy lips draw back in a cruel and cynical smile.

As the riders piled into their saddles, the yellow light from the doorway of the Bobcat spilled out onto the street and formed a faint square of light directly under the sign that was illuminated by the lightning from the rolling swirling clouds. The Frailey Bobcat, like Mead, seemed to be watching and waiting...

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



After Rife reached the top of the high rim, he pulled up and studied the trail both in front and behind. It was more than two hours since his encounter with Owen Bannack and he wanted to assure himself that there was no danger of a second such meeting.

Exercising great care, he then set himself on a course that would not take him back to Frailey. He had two purposes. The first was to go to the Evans ranch and try to determine whether his tip on the raid had its desired effect. His second purpose was related. He wanted to avoid town and Fred Mead, hoping Mead would take to his heels before the night was over.

In the darkness, Rife was able to creep close enough to hear most of what was said at the ranchers' meeting. By the time they rode away, Rife's bony face was taut with excitement. Tonight might see the end of Mead's power and an aroused and victorious ranchers' association would be certain to ride into Frailey after him. The storekeeper was awash with the feeling events were all going his way. He first wanted to clinch the progress he had made. That meant Mead had to be frightened out of town and the knowledge the ranchers were up in arms might very well do the trick.

Summoning all his courage, Rife crept through the yard. The rain was still little more than random drops, not yet covering the ground, as he shuffled forward. His foot stubbed against the heavy timber, then his hand fumbled for the leather latch strap.

Slowly he pulled open the thick door and rested it against the block of wood that was its prop. Trying to feel the way with his feet, he haltingly made his way down the crude steps of the root cellar. Once he was sure that the last step had been negotiated and that he was standing on the floor and out of the sight of anyone outside, he called softly, "Beson, can yuh hear me?"

His answer was a soft thumping and scuffling sound almost under his feet. He leaned over and groped in the blackness and, almost instantly, his hands found a man's face. He gasped in fear and surprise and jerked away. Recovering himself, he again reached out until he found the face that was bound with a kerchief.

Rife worked the gag down off the face and pulled a knotted rag out of the man's mouth. He was instantly greeted with a hoarse whisper, "Who are yuh?"

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

“Never mind,” Rife answered, hissing out his words. “I’m goin’ to untie yuh. Yuh got to get to town and warn Mead the ranchers are on the prod. Tell him Bannack is a vigilante and that he’s leadin’ the pack.” Rife worked feverishly at the knots which had been expertly tied by someone who had been determined Beson would stay put.

“Make sure Mead understands there’s over a dozen of ’em, and, if he stays in Frailey, his life ain’t worth a plugged nickel.”

The man was finally free and, as he crouched next to Rife, he whispered, “But who the hell are yuh?”

“Don’t make any difference. Yuh heard ‘em yuhrself. They’re after blood and once they get started, yuhr own neck will probably get stretched.”

Recalling the angry cries of his former friends and remembering the calls for a rope, Beson shuddered, “Well, they ain’t gettin’ the chance.”

Feeling he had the man sufficiently convinced, Rife whispered, “I think yuhr horse is still tied to the corral. Now, get goin’. Mead might even give yuh somethin’ fer the information.”

With an invisible padding of boots on the root cellar steps and a few footfalls dying away in the darkness, Beson was gone. Rife waited until he heard the quick staccato of a horse being spurred away before he came up out of the earthen hole into the black rain.

He turned boldly toward the ranch house, strolled across the porch where one lantern still hung swaying gently in the breeze that was ushering in the rain and knocked loudly, rattling the frail screen door.

An apprehensive Mrs. Foster appeared in the doorway, peering into the half light. She did not recognize him immediately and frowned at the strange beanpole figure.

“Who ... ,” she began. Then in a surprised voice, “Mister Rife, I hardly recognized you.”

Without being asked, he pulled open the screen and stepped into the entryway. He looked at her then looked around as if confirming that the house was empty. “Where’s Miss Jane?” he asked.

Ignoring his question, Mrs. Foster said sharply, “What brings you here on a night like this?”

“Visitin’, jest visitin’,” said Rife, still trying to look around her at the interior of the house.

Mrs. Foster eyed the dirt on Rife’s clothing, “Have you been thrown from your horse?”

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Rife looked at the caked dirt on his knees and hands. Taken aback by his carelessness, he rubbed his hands together and began brushing at the dirt. The disapproving scowl brought him up short.

“Ah, yes, as a matter of fact, I did take a little tumble. Would yuh mind if I stepped into the kitchen and washed up a bit?”

She did mind and would have preferred to decline and to send the man packing, but civility was too much a part of her, and she had nothing upon which to base a denial except her instinctive dislike. Reluctantly, she agreed, “It’s this way.”

As he splashed water on his hands, he looked around the kitchen. “Very cozy,” he observed in the familiar tone one uses with friends. “I don’t believe I heard yuh say if Miss Jane is in.”

Again, she avoided a direct answer, “If you have a message for her, I’d be glad to take it.”

Rife smiled at her knowingly, “It’s kind of a personal thing. I guess yuh might say I’ve come callin’. That ain’t somethin’ a man gives in a message.”

Mrs. Foster’s distantly tolerant manner went out the window. “Calling? On Jane?” She drew herself up and glared at the startled Rife. “Mister Storekeeper you aren’t calling on anyone in this house tonight. Things are in a state around here as it is, and here you come out of the night all covered with mud announcing you are calling. If there is going to any of that, you’ll do it after talking to Jane’s pa.” Advancing on Rife who faltered backwards, she continued, “Have you talked to Amos about this?”

“Why, I ... That is I’m sure when he hears I own the mercantile, he’ll agree quick enough.”

“I don’t care if you own the whole blamed town of Frailey. You aren’t going to pester that girl this night.”

Rife had backed away from the menacing woman until he felt the kitchen door close up against his spine. He stepped into the doorway where he vainly tried to soothe her. “I’m sure in time yuh’ll see things my way. There’s no need to get riled. I assure yuh I have only the best of intentions.”

“Intentions, my potato masher,” she scolded. “You get your self back to town and don’t show up here until you’ve explained your intentions to Amos Carpenter.”

Rife quickly slithered out the kitchen door. Despite the rain, he welcomed the darkness. Vowing to get even with the woman, he vanished into the night.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

As Mrs. Foster stepped back into the kitchen and closed the door with a healthy shove, Jane stepped into the room.

“Did I hear voices?” she asked looking around.

“Just the rain I expect,” said Mrs. Foster with a comforting smile, “and there was a no account puff of wind, but it’s gone now.”

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



With Ritter and Mizer leading the way, the band of rustlers rode along the river bottoms, threading their way through the little groves of trees and avoiding the cattail marshes. They were guided in part by Ritter's knowledge of the terrain and in part by the increasingly fierce lightning. It was possible to identify each segment of the pathway by a flash from the clouds and before that stretch of trail could be covered, another flash would dart out of the sky, leading them onward.

The rain was slow in coming and consisted of the incredibly large drops which so often are the first arrivals of a summer thunderstorm. The sound of the rain was lost in the rhythmic beat of the horses' hooves, and the impact of the drops was cushioned by the thirsty grass. As they would sweep by a grove of cottonwood trees, the riders could hear the rattle of the rain on the large leaves and on the many dead branches and dry tree trunks.

Despite the drying of the still warm breeze which flapped their shirts, the men began to get wet, first their hats, next the upper surfaces of their trousers, then the legs, and finally, their shirts stopped flapping and lay sodden on arms and bodies. A couple of the riders managed to untie their slickers and get them over their arms and shoulders without breaking the fast pace being set by the leaders.

At one point they came upon a wagon road whose two worn tracks were dark against the grass in the flashing lightning. They followed the road until it turned away and headed off toward the higher country. As they approached a wide bend in the river, they halted under the shelter of two large trees which leaned toward another and formed an imperfect tent.

The rain was increasing in intensity, and those that had not done so donned rain gear. They checked and rechecked to make sure the butts of the their revolvers were accessible and that their rifles were also free of obstructions.

"It's jest ahead," said Mizer in a half shout. "They must have at least two hundred bunched up in a big shallow coulee off to the right."

As the little group pulled to a halt under the shelter of a clump of dripping trees to get their bearings, they made final plans. The riders' voices were heavy and thick as they strained to make themselves heard over the cracking thunder.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

“They must have some guards with that many, otherwise they’d scatter,” warned Bulis.

“Bound to be a nighthawk with this storm comin’ up,” called Puler.

“No matter,” declared Ritter. “Like always, they’ll fire off a few shots and hightail it fer the ranch to tell how they fought off an army.” Then, all business, he asked, “What’s the best way to take ‘em, Miz?”

“I guess we ought to fan out across the bottom end of the coulee, and push ‘em up to the flats. When we get ‘em movin’ we’ll lose a lot that’ll turn back. The best we can do is keep the main body out in front of us and movin’. It gets a little steep near the high end of the coulee, but after we get there, it’s easy goin’ all the way to the rim.”

“If we keep ‘em goin’, I figure we can make the basin before first light,” said Ritter. “We’ll be half way to the rail pens while they’re still roamin’ around here lookin’ fer a sign. This rain’ll wash our trail plumb clean.”

As they prepared to move forward, Mizer reminded them, “Now remember, keep right on their tails or we’ll lose ‘em at the top of the coulee.”

The riders filed out of the trees and headed toward the long wide coulee which was soon outlined by the lightening. As they had agreed, they formed a line and began sweeping up the slope. Almost immediately they came to a few steers who stood staring at them in the winking light.

The rain was becoming a downpour, and it beat against their faces and against the horses who were soaked to their skins. The ground around and under the clumps of grass began to grow slippery and footing became more difficult. A few rivulets of water began to course down the sides of the coulee toward the river below.

The cows on the fringe of the herd stood bewildered at the flashing sight of the nightriders until the horsemen were full upon them. Then the cattle spun and trotted toward the herd. The rustlers remained silent and drove the cattle by slapping coiled ropes and flat hands against their legs.

The herd was restless and, while a few cows lay on the grass, most stood with their backs humped against the rain. At first, they refused to move but the rustlers pressed forward and began whistling and calling in low voices, "Hup. Hup. Ha. Hup."

Almost reluctantly at first, the animals began to turn and head up the coulee. The movement was contagious and soon the main body of the herd was walking, then trotting up the slope. As they drew near the lip of

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

the coulee, the ground rose sharply, and, as the herd leaders came to it, they slowed, but the pressure of the main body carried them forward.

The leading edge of the storm front was directly overhead, and the flashing lightning was reaching a peak of intensity. For a few moments it seemed as though the world had suddenly turned all the way around and full daylight was being splintered by slices of darkness.

At that instant, the rim of the coulee flashed with gunfire. It might have been lost amid the shafts of lightning and cracking thunder, but the wall of gunshots burst forth in the very faces of the closely packed herd. A few of the foremost cows bolted forward through the line of guns. The bulk of the herd, however, paused like a great brown wave about to break over the edge of the coulee. It wavered for an instant, then the gunfire increased and was punctuated with the boom of a shotgun. Riders appeared shouting and firing into the air.

The wave fell back upon itself. The herd turned. The cattle were terrified and bawling wildly. Their eyes rolled white in the blue streaks of lightning, and they began running madly down the coulee.

The hesitation at the top of the coulee, the turning and the beginning of the stampede consumed only a moment. Ritter and his crew were taken completely by surprise. Puler's horse slipped when the man tried to rein sharply around. Horse and rider disappeared under the pounding hooves. Another rider sat petrified and stared at the onrushing cattle. Outlined there by the light of the storm, he was mercifully cut down by a bullet from the gun of a rancher.

One of the rustlers on the fringe of the group disappeared in the darkness and was never seen or heard from again. Later, the ranchers would find the remains of yet another of the cow-thieves near the lower mouth of the coulee.

Bulis managed to beat the stampede to the flat land along the river, and he wheeled his horse to avoid the cattle. He lashed his mount furiously and rode free for a short distance. He looked back over his shoulder at the last thing he would see in this world. Like an apparition, it was the grim face of Ferris with his six-gun leveled, waiting for a flash of light. Bulis threw a curse into the rain, but the sound died in his throat as Ferris' slug found the back of his head. All sounds associated with the outlaw's death, the roar of the six-gun, the sloshing of the horses through mud, and the fall of the body to the muck along the river, were lost in the roll of thunder which ushered Bulis to Hell.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

The rustler next to Bulis in the mad ride down the coulee was swept into the river by the rushing cattle. His body was found two days later tangled in the rigging of his bloated horse.

Somehow in the confusion, and the dark, and the rain and the flashing lightning, both Ritter and Mizer managed to evade the avalanche of crazed animals and escape the bullets of the ranchers.

The ranchers pulled up half way down the coulee and gathered around Owen. "I make it at least two down, could be three," called out Amos.

"Must of been two or three made it to the river," yelled Jess over the confusion. "Ferris was after one so we can tally his hide."

"Any of our men hurt?" asked Owen.

They counted and called out names in the rain and between thunderclaps.

"I think everyone's here but Ferris," Amos said.

"Them cow's of yuhrs is goin' to hit the river hard," Rankin said to Wendell.

"I'll lose some all right," boomed Wendell, "but it's a sight better'n losin' 'em all."

"I'm almost sure I saw that make believe sheriff and one other head off over the side of the coulee," Owen called out to the group. "Some of you should stay here and do what you can to round up those cows and see if you can't get some out of the river. If this rain keeps up, you'll want to move them up out of the river valley or you'll lose 'em in the high water that'll be coming before morning.

The owners dispatched some of the young cowhands to the work and, at Owen's insistence, Wendell agreed to stay behind and supervise the operation. "The rest of us will visit Frailey and see if we can't arrange an appointment with the town's heavy hero," Owen told him. "It's important you save your herd. The rest of us can manage Mead."

Reining away from the battlefield, Owen led the ranchers up out of the coulee and toward Frailey. The lightning was less frequent and not as spectacular as before, but the rain settled into a drought-breaking downpour. As the footing for the horses became more and more treacherous, the pace slowed until the group was reduced to a walk.

Even then, on some of the hilltops which had been burned bare by the long dry months, the horses slipped and struggled for footing. Low places were rapidly becoming puddles as the rain fell faster than the ground could absorb it, and Owen and his men found themselves

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

splashing through tiny blowouts that had, only a few hours earlier, been bone dry.

Owen broke a long silence by calling over to Jess, "At this rate how long do you figure to town?"

Jess wiped the streaming water from his face and replied, "We'd have done better to build a raft and float the river, but it ain't too bad. I'd say we'll be there just before first light."

Amos, riding on Owen's other side, asked, "Yuh worried that Mead may have already flown the coop?"

"Partly, but I'd guess he'd hole up if the storm hit before he left town."

"That fat weasel ain't one to do any night ridin', horse or buggy," agreed Jess. "Besides, we don't know fer sure he was plannin' on leavin', do we? He must have been aimin' to make a big haul from tonight's little party."

"True enough," said Amos, "but he'll think of savin' his skin first, and when Ritter gets in ahead of us and tells him what happened back there, Mead might jest light out."

"Runnin' 'im down shouldn't be too all fired hard," said Jess, wiping more rain from his face and trying to pinch it out of his mustache. "Findin' Mead out in the flats would be easier'n findin' an ornery buffalo in a cabbage patch."

"Whether he stays or runs, he'll know we're coming in and that's a big advantage for him," Owen warned. "If he makes a stand, it'll be tough to dig him out without risking the lives of our own men."

With that grim thought in their minds, they fell silent and pulled their slickers closer about their necks. Each one knew the brief, furious battle in the coulee had only set the stage for what promised to be the much more dangerous game in Frailey.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Mead was alone in the Bobcat. Only a twin set of lanterns flickered on the bar and Mead sat at his customary round table picking at the remains of a greasy ham. The liquid portion of his midnight snack had obviously been supplied by the nearly empty bottle of rye whiskey. Its frequent use during Mead's repast was evidenced by the congealed meat grease that smudged and clouded its sides, making it appear to be filled with smoke.

The outside door had been closed earlier when the rain began pelting through the swinging shutters. The barkeep had long since taken his leave of the place as had the few sullen customers who had lingered over their drinks until they realized the storm was not going to let up. Grumbling, they had pulled their hats low, collars high and left the place to Mead.

When the outside door was pulled open and slammed back, the startled Mead instinctively reached for the rifle he had laid across the arms of a nearby chair. His eye lids widened a bit at the sight of Jake Ritter who stepped into the Bobcat. Ritter was streaming water from his hat and from his rubber poncho. His legs were spattered with mud and his boots looked like two clots of sodden earth.

Without speaking, Ritter stomped to the table, dripping a trail of water behind. He stopped in front of Mead where a pool began to form around his feet. He added to the rainwater on the scarred planks as he pulled off his hat and slapped the soaked felt against his leg.

"They was waitin' fer us," his voice was hard and cruel.

"Who ...?" began Mead.

"Who?" stormed Ritter, "Every damned cow owner and wrangler in the country, that's who."

"What happened?" asked Mead sharply.

"They stampeded the whole herd right down our throats. We didn't have any more chance than a prairie rat in a pack of coyotes."

"How many of yuh did they get?"

Before he answered, Ritter grabbed the bottle and finished its contents in one long swig. "Don't know fer sure. I'm pretty sure Puler got

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

trampled and someone else was shot out of the saddle. Me and Mizer may be the only ones left."

"Where's he?"

"He's roundin' up a couple of fresh horses from the livery. "What are yuh aimin' to do with fresh horses," asked Mead, suspiciously.

"We're lightin' out of here as soon as we settle up."

"Settle up," frowned Mead. "What in blazes are yuh talkin' about?"

"I'm talkin' about a passel of ranchers that's maybe fifteen minutes behind me, and I'm talkin about gettin' a couple of fast horses and puttin' distance between me and this town. As fer settlin', Mead, now's the time fer yuh to cough up some of that wad I know you been stashin' away."

"Ritter, yuh never get any smarter," sneered Mead resting the barrel of the rifle on the edge of the table while holding the lever and stock in his fist with one fat finger on the trigger. "If yuh think yuh can come drippin' in here like a slimy mud puppy and tell me that yuh're runnin' fer a hole, don't expect me to start throwin' money at yuhr stinkin' hide."

Mead, for all his skill in manipulating men, had no way of comprehending the effect that sitting on the downhill side of a stampede would have on a man like Jake Ritter. The bawling, maddened animals, the hellfire storm, and the sudden line of yelling, shooting ranchers were forever imprinted on his mind.

Ritter was no longer cowed by Mead or by his rifle. Ritter was not demonstrating courage, but rather the carelessness of desperation. He ignored the rifle and Mead's threatening abuse. "If I was in yuhr boots, Mead, I'd be packin' quick and not sittin' there pointin' yuhr rifle around. If yuh shot me, it'd jest be a waste of a slug yuh'll need pretty damn soon."

Mead would have been more comfortable if Ritter had sworn and blustered. He realized that Ritter's warning would require action and require it soon. His first thought was to make a run for it, but the prospect of making the necessary physical effort and of sloshing around in the savage storm made him cast the idea aside.

At the same time, Mead could not abandon the hope of enlisting Ritter and Mizer. The idea of having the two help him hold off the ranchers while he negotiated his way out of the situation caused him to change his attitude and tone. "If what yuh say about them ranchers is true, Jake, then we're all in the soup together. Yuh won't be able to get

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

far. If we let 'em know we mean business, we might scare 'em off or make some kind of deal."

Ritter knew very well Mead was angling for some advantage, so he gave him an opening. "If yuh're talkin' about us stayin' here and makin' a stand, I wanna see the color of yuhr shootin' money. I wanna see it now, Mead."

Mead thought he had a bite, "Fair enough."

Immediately Mead was on his feet and headed for the door. Without hesitating or attempting to shield himself from the rain, he plunged into the street with Ritter close upon his heels. In a matter of a minute they were inside the mercantile and in Mead's living quarters. By the light of a wavering, smoking candle, Ritter's eyes saw the two carpet bags and the round black leather bag piled together near the door.

Ritter realized Mead had been planning to leave town and had probably only been waiting for the rain to let up and for the first light of day. He was on the verge of challenging Mead, but then dismissed the impulse. Mead knelt down on one knee and began furiously digging in the leather bag.

He rose and shoved a handful of banknotes at Ritter. "Here, it's more than half of all I got."

Ritter took the money but didn't look down at it as he stuffed it inside his shirt. "I know this ain't the whole caboodle. Where's the rest? With that knife swingin' pal of yuhrs in Denver?" Suddenly, he snatched the remaining money out of Mead's hands and jammed it in with the rest. "Bonus money," he mocked.

Mead stiffened, "How'd yuh know where Serill is?"

Ritter enjoyed Mead's surprise. "Maybe yuh thought I couldn't read or that I never paid any mind to what Bagge did with the money he got fer the beeves. Each time we made a run up there Bagge gave me money from the bunch before. But it wasn't near enough so I asked around and even watched Bagge go to the bank. It wasn't hard to find out yuh were sendin' it to Serill. I jest showed my badge and asked the cashier a few questions."

"All right, so I sent a few bucks to Serill, we ain't got time to argue about it now," said Mead anxiously. "We need to find the best spot to hold out against them ranchers."

"We'll need plenty of shells and a few extra rifles," Ritter mumbled as he looked around the room.

"Plenty in the store," Mead offered.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Grab up what yuh can carry, and I'll get Mizer, and we'll start throwin' some stuff together over at the Bobcat where we can hold 'em off," suggested Ritter.

Mead nodded and hurried into the main room of the mercantile. He snatched three rifles out of the rifle rack and a dozen boxes of shells off the nearby shelf. He barreled out the front door and angled over to the saloon. He burst into the room and called out, "Ritter? Mizer?"

The saloon was empty. The answer to his call was the sudden rushing splash of horses starting off down the street in the direction of the river. He grabbed his own rifle off the table and ran to the door. Standing in the doorway he leveled the barrel in the direction of the hoof beats. Using a bright flash of lightning, Mead pumped three quick shots at the backs of the two figures. Both riders were gone by the time the street was illuminated again, and all he could see was the glistening mud of the empty street.

What Mead did not see was the crumpled figure of Mizer in the mud nor his riderless horse racing alongside Jake Ritter who was now lashing his own horse madly. Neither did he see the group of ranchers a few hundred yards away who pulled sharply at the sound of the rifle fire.

He cursed savagely and bitterly into the darkness that had swallowed the fleeing Ritter. He wanted to believe Ritter had lied to him only to get money, but he knew the man had been afraid and desperate. He wouldn't have left the others and the herd unless something had gone wrong.

"Bannack's on his way, all right," he muttered. "Could be he even heard them shots." With a snarl he spat aloud at the darkness, "Come on then with yuhr damn vigilantes. We'll see if yuh want me enough to eat some lead."

He turned, pulled the outside door closed and disappeared into the saloon. Working feverishly, he overturned tables and rolled them to cover both ends of the bar. For further cover he piled chairs in front of the tables. Next he carried his stock of rifles and shells to his crude fortress. As a final act of preparation, he located a fresh bottle of rye whiskey from his private stock and placed it near the cache of arms. Finally, he carried the two lanterns to the end of the bar nearest the front door. Standing with his rifles, ammunition, and whiskey arrayed around him, Mead, with all his might, hurled the first lantern through the window of the saloon. It shattered the glass and went spinning into the street where it fell into the mud. The wick sputtered for a few seconds then the flame died. The second lamp followed the first.

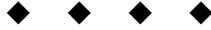
THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Mead, alone in the darkness, sat down and helped himself to a slug of his rye. He began loading his extra three rifles, slamming the cartridges in and then levering a round up into the chamber. He realized he would be able to cover only the front door, but a few well-placed and properly timed shots at the rear might serve to discourage any attempts from that direction.

Even now Mead did not feel trapped or hopeless. His outlaw life had put him in many difficult spots and his arrogance still outweighed his fear. At the worst, he thought, he could surrender and then try to figure a way to escape.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



There were no lights yet visible in Frailey, but the outlines of the buildings could be seen from where Owen and the others reined up.

"Sounds to me like someone's in there doin' our work fer us," said Amos as the sharp crack of rifle shots died away.

"Kinda funny, they sure ain't seen us yet," added Jess.

"It might be a good idea to hold everyone here for a while, suggested Owen. "While it's still dark I think I'll slip in and look around. We better know what we're ridin' into."

"Want some company," Amos asked instantly.

"No, that would just double the risk of someone getting shot. Better if you stay here, but be ready to ride. If I'm not back in an hour, use your best judgment about goin' in."

He quickly disappeared into the night. There were still some occasional flashes of lightning in the clouds that were rolling away from the river, and they guided him to the end of the main street.

Owen dismounted and led Cocoa to a shed whose eaves still dripped rain from the soaked shingles. He dropped the reins, rubbed the big animal's nose, then left him and began making his way from building to building toward the mercantile and the Bobcat.

It was slow going as he stepped around the puddles, trying to move as quietly as possible. Each corner and each black doorway could be filled with sudden death. Yet, as he progressed, the silence remained. Amos had briefly described the mercantile and the location of Mead's sleeping quarters, but the mysterious rifle shots suggested the outlaw would not be caught in bed asleep.

The front door of the store stood open as if someone had thrown it back and neglected to close it or had been in a very great hurry. Owen knelt down and crept into the store. Slowly he felt his way along, taking great care not to knock over some unseen object as he went. He found the door to the storeroom and near it another door, also open.

He felt inside the open door for something that would confirm his belief that this was Mead's living area. His hand found a carpetbag, another, and finally the leather carrying case. He explored the leather case that seemed to contain miscellaneous items of clothing and was about to put it down when his hand found a square piece of folded paper.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Touch told him it was a letter. He slipped it into his shirt pocket and replaced the case on the floor.

Having explored the store enough to convince himself it was not occupied, Owen eased out the side door and stood trying to get his bearings when he heard the clink of a glass or bottle. It came from darkened saloon across the street. He stood for a moment listening. Softly, he stepped back inside the mercantile.

After a few moments, he returned to the street carrying a pick-handle in one hand and a bolt of white cloth in the other. He moved down the street where he would be out of any line of sight from the front of the saloon. He then sloshed through the ankle deep mud to the saloon side of the street and worked his way down to the Bobcat.

He jammed the pick-handle into the end of the bolt of cloth and slowly extended his makeshift target under the ledge of the window. With his free hand he picked up a handful of mud, squeezed the water out until it was firm in his grasp, then threw it hard into the street where it plopped loudly into the street mush. He heard a faint stirring from within. After a few seconds, he passed the bolt of cloth up across the open window.

Before it was halfway across the space of the broken window, the white cloth was ripped from the handle by a rifle bullet. Owen tossed the pick-handle at the window and, as it smashed into the jagged remnants of the broken window, another shot slammed into the window casement sending splinters knifing through the air.

Owen met the ranchers as they reached the spot where he had left Cocoa. He called out and they wheeled to where he stood.

"Sounded like yuh might've found more than yuh were lookin' fer," called Amos.

"In a way, I think I found less," replied Owen.

He outlined his foray down to the saloon and concluded, "I have the strong hunch there's only one gun in there. I don't know for sure, but my hunch also tells me that it's Mead."

"That chicken coop's needed cleanin' fer a long time," said Jess. "It'll be a smelly job, but when it's done, it'll sure be a nicer place to have an egg with yuhr beer."

"The man is a deadly shot with that Winchester," warned Owen. "I hope we can avoid putting anybody in his sights. I've got an idea. Able?" he asked looking around

"Right here," answered the wagon driver edging his horse forward a bit.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Just how fast can you fire and load that blunderbuss of yours?"

"How fast do yuh want?"

"Fast enough to make a man think there are three or four just like you comin' at him all at once."

"Yuhr Pap never learned yuh to make a small request did he?" grumped Able.

"Why I thought that, for you, it wouldn't be a tall order," teased Owen.

The oldster harrumphed again and demanded, "Tell me where and how, as soon as yuh get through speechin' like some dandy general."

Owen and the others chuckled quietly at Able's sharp tongue. It was the old man's way to spare no man and, even in this situation, it would have been difficult for an outsider to know whether or not he was serious. However, those who were best acquainted with Able accepted his sarcasm and realized it was usually no more than his form of wry humor. Those who knew him also had the greatest regard for his ability to use his ever-present shotgun.

Owen stepped closer and outlined his plan to the group.

There were grunts of understanding and agreement as they listened. Finally, Jim Rankin ended the discussion by announcing, "It's not the way I'd do it, but yuh've got yuhr reasons so I say that's the way it'll be." There were no dissenting voices, so Owen's plan was adopted.

Soon the light of day began spreading over the newly washed landscape. Dawn was perhaps still a half an hour away, but already the darkness had almost completely dissolved. The violence of the storm had spent itself and most of the heavy clouds had tumbled over the horizon. A band of them remained and seemed to sit on the far away rim as if determined to hold down the sun itself.

The little cluster of buildings along the river was wet from the rain and appeared to have been given a fresh coat of paint. The shingles were steaming as the warmth of the attics and rafters heated them from below. The main street glistened from a hundred tiny puddles and, in every way, Frailey seemed to have been thoroughly scrubbed and spread out to dry along the bank of the swollen river.

Amos, Jess and two others were spaced along the street and each man had a commanding view of the front door of the saloon. At the back of the building crouched low in the weeds that covered the lot were Able and the remainder of the rancher troop.

At a signal from Jim Rankin, they rose and moved up close to the rear door, staying carefully to the sides and out of a line of fire from

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

within. A young cowhand stood at Able's side, his hands filled with shotgun shells.

Able lifted the long-barreled gun and let fly. The boom of the shotgun shattered the quiet of the town. Even while the roar hung in the air, another followed. The rear door of the saloon jerked on its hinges. Like a rapid-fire cannon the shotgun boomed again and again. The riddled doorway ripped from its mooring and went crashing into the building. Still more thunder from the gun, and it was joined by the thick popping of six guns.

The rear wall of the building seemed to have been taken with a great blight. Angry holes appeared and splinters flew in every direction. Despite the soaking from the rain, puffs of dust drifted out of the bullet holes.

Able's rapid shotgun blasts pelted the wood around the doorway, and a great gaping hole grew where the door had been. The assault on the building was so violent and destructive it seemed the entire structure would come crashing down within seconds. And the cascading of the wooden frame obviously would begin with the riddled back wall.

The fusillade directed at the building fairly rocked and shook the frail boards and timbers. The shotgun salvos, supported by thudding handguns and the crack of rifles, was like a great irresistible force which was pressing at the rear end of the Bobcat.

The furious attack was not joined by any movement or firing on the front side of the building. The entire street seemed to be empty. There were no animals, no men, and no gunfire.

The attack was designed not so much to frighten as to shock. It was a thundering, shaking shove. No man could have resisted its force.

Mead was simply forced toward the front door. Creeping and crawling like an enormous roach, he made it across the floor and to the entrance. He drew his legs up under his bulk and hurled his body into the street.

The long thin line of a lariat settled over his sloping shoulders and was drawn taut. Owen Bannack, standing on the peak of the roof, hauled in his catch.

Mead was terrified and he clutched at his neck, as he screamed, "No. Not the rope. God, no!"

Owen used the ledge of the building's false front for leverage and pulled the rope tight. Mead was drawn up to his feet then to the very tips of his toes. All the while, he was tearing at the rope around his fat neck.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

Owen secured the rope on the thick wooden arm of the sign. He then waved at the men across the street. A signal was given and the roar at the rear of the building died as suddenly as it had begun.

Amos appeared mounted on his horse and leading Cocoa. He dropped Cocoa's reins looked up at Owen and rode back down the street where he was joined by Jess, Able, and the entire group of ranchers. Without a backward glance they rode out of Frailey leaving Owen leaning over the false front of the Bobcat looking down at the choking and struggling outlaw leader.

"Mead, " he called down, "I know you can hear me so listen. I have a letter here signed by Serill. He says he has been buying the properties as the two of you agreed. Now I'm going to loosen the rope a hair. Just answer my questions and answer them straight."

Owen eased the rope a bit. "Where is Serill?"

"Colorado," came the gurgled response.

"Where in Colorado?"

"Damn yuhr hide, Bannack."

The rope tightened for a moment, then loosened again. "Where?"

Mead gasped and screamed, "Yuh filthy vigilante. Yuh ain't got no right..."

The rope jerked tight again. This time it was firmer than before, but then it was eased.

"Where?"

"In Denver. He's buyin' minin' property." After pulling in a few rasping breaths, Mead asked, "Yuh ain't goin' to let me go are yuh, Bannack?"

Owen ignored his question, "What's the connection between you and Serill?"

"Go to hell," yelled Mead as he lunged with all his great weight and all of his strength in one effort to break the strangle hold of the rope. The rope held, and as Mead stumbled and as his feet went out from under his heavy body, his neck snapped.

A few moments later, as the sun burst forth throwing its bright rays down the deserted street, Owen picked up Cocoa's reins and swung into the saddle. He looked at the swaying body and said aloud, "That's three for the Bobcat."

Turning, Owen rode out of Frailey without looking back at the town, the saloon, or the heavy bulk swaying under the image of the cruel cat.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



A week had passed since the bleary-eyed residents found Mead hanging in front of their saloon. Jess had been gone all day with the buggy. He had been in a high state of excitement since receiving word that Miss Dottie, Kross Evan's daughter, was coming into Terwell on the stage. He had suggested that Ferris make the run for him, but the younger man had declined.

Ferris had been growing restless and had been making plans to head back to Texas. At Jess' insistence he had been staying on to help bring some order back to the ranch. After some friendly arguing, he had agreed to hold off his departure one final day while Jess made the drive to Terwell.

Ferris was idling on the front porch waiting for Mrs. Foster to call supper when the buggy wheeled into view. He ambled out to the tie rail to meet it and called out, "Yuh almost missed supper. What kept yuh?"

"Stage was runnin' a little late as usual," growled Jess. "Them nags they got pullin' them boxes ain't worth their oats. If I was to be runnin' that outfit..."

Jess' rambling was entirely lost on Ferris who had fallen into the widest dark eyes he had ever seen. Above them was a smooth white brow over which lay a single dark round curl from the cascading black hair which fell over the shoulders of a tan traveling dress. The red lips curled into a smile and said, "Hello. I'm Dottie Evans."

Ferris gulped and stammered, "Pleased to meet yuh, Dottie, I mean, Miss Evans."

Jess, who had been unloading bags, continued to mutter about the stage line specifically and the state of things in general, but he did not miss the greeting and Ferris' reaction.

"Oh, Miss Dottie, this is a hand who's been hangin' around the ranch fer the last couple of weeks. Lately he's been talkin' Texas so I don't expect he'll be stay put much longer."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ferris. Jess has told me so much about you today I had started hoping you might be able to stay on here."

"I hadn't left yet ... I mean I hadn't decided exactly when to leave, Miss Dottie," he stammered.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

"Just Dottie, please," she laughed. The warm sound of her light tone threw the detective another loop.

"I can hold off fer a while and see how it goes."

"I wouldn't hold you from other business. I'm sure you've got to go catch other cow thieves and it would be wrong for me to interfere." The cultured and school trained voice kept Ferris badly off balance.

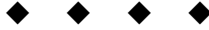
Jess, for his part, was thoroughly enjoying the scene. "Ferris, I swear I don't understand yuh. Now don't jest stand there blockin' Miss Dottie's road. Help me with these bags."

Ferris jumped quickly to one side. "I didn't mean to be blockin' yuh Miss Dottie, I mean Dottie." He was beginning to recover himself, and, as Dottie stepped onto the porch and into Mrs. Foster's arms, he muttered at Jess. "Why didn't yuh tell me?"

"Tell yuh how," shrugged Jess innocently. "I never was one to holler into an empty barrel." Then, as if it had only occurred to him, he asked, "I was jest wonderin', Ferris, if I could talk yuh into stayin' on through the roundup."

Ferris looked at him and, as the old foreman's mouth broke into a grin as wide as his mustache, Ferris laughed and said, "Yuh know, Jess, It's still pretty hot in Texas this time of year. I might take yuh up on that offer."

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT



Wink's bandage had grown dirty and had fallen off, but it didn't really matter because the crease along the side of his head had developed a healthy scar. Jane, too, had found she could manage without the bandages on her arms and the patch on her cheek. Bandageless, she was sweeping out the cabin.

The little building was now almost bare. All the furnishings had been piled onto the big freight wagon standing by the door. Another big wagon stood filled with freight equipment and a hundred miscellaneous items from around the now desolate looking yard.

Amos, puffing his pipe, was working with Able to adjust a cover for the wagon. Finally, getting it secured to his satisfaction, he strolled over to the porch and sat down.

"Well, Jane, I think that about does it. Can you think of anything we might have forgotten?"

"No," she said absently. "If anything, we might have tried to take too many things."

"Oh, we'll find a need fer 'em, no doubt about that."

"Pa?"

"Yes, Jane?"

"Do you think he did right, hanging Mead the way he did?"

Amos leaned back against the wall of the cabin and looked at his daughter for a long minute. She had been strangely silent ever since Owen had ridden off toward Terwell on the day following what some had laughingly called the "shooting of the Bobcat."

"Why do yuh ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. I heard some say it was vigilante justice and outside the law."

"Vigilante is jest a name. I think a man does what he knows to be right. Here in this country, things went bad fer a lot of reasons. Good people stopped carin', other good people looked fer excuses. As far as that goes, I'm to blame and the ranchers are to blame fer lettin' it happen. In that way, we're probably more to be blamed than the man who straightened it all out fer us. When vigilantes ride, every man's hand is on the rope. That's true even fer the men who cry, 'For shame,' because, if

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

they let things go sour, and if they wink at the outlaw and don't support the law, they force people to take the kinda action we saw here."

"It seems a little funny somehow, the way the men who took his orders and who did his work, just rode off and left Mead alone."

"Yes, I suppose so, but it's not really surprising. It's the same story we hear about other places. When the people get riled, the owlhoots have a way of suddenly gettin' scarce."

"They sure did around here and with Sheriff Hale taking over the area until there's an election, I'll bet it stays that way." After a pause, she asked, "That was Owen's doing wasn't it? Getting the governor to give Sheriff Hale some kind of special authority?"

"Yes, it was. And he was also responsible for Hale takin' over the mercantile until the ranchers can make their claims against it." Then Amos chuckled, "Sure was a disappointment to Rife. I don't know I ever saw a man so put out."

"Put out is right," she said. As they laughed at the double meaning, he stood up and took a last look around. "Yuh ready?" he asked.

She heaved a great sigh, and silently handed Amos her broom. He fitted it in under the canvas, picked Wink up in his brawny arms and deposited him on the wagon seat. He helped Jane, then climbed aboard himself and took up the reins.

"Ready, Able," he called to the old driver sitting on the high seat of Amos' second wagon.

The old wagon driver waved and snapped the reins over the backs of his team. Amos called out, "Ready there, Ned?"

By way of answer, the big team leaned into the traces, and the wagons were underway.

A few people in Frailey waved tentatively at them as they lumbered through town. The townspeople were pitiful figures who were left without any guidance, purpose or direction. They looked bewildered at the sight of what had been their lifeline, their link to the rest of the world, rolling down the street and out of sight.

"It's kind of sad," said Jane who was close to tears. "Who will bring them supplies? I feel almost like we're deserting them."

"They'll find a way. People always do. Besides, we need a new start and so does Frailey."

Later, after the wagons had crossed the river and rolled up to the high western plain, Jane and Amos began to settle into the bounce and sway of the ride. Amos contented himself with his pipe and made an

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

occasional comment, but Jane remained silent and seemed lost in her thoughts.

Suddenly, a big chestnut horse trotted up alongside the wagon. Owen looked at the two on the wagon seat and smiled. "Goin' somewhere?"

Amos, who obviously was not surprised, snapped the reins lightly and replied, "Yep. Thought we might take a sashay down Denver way."

"Mind if I ride along?"

Amos turned a poker face to his daughter, "I don't know. Jane, do yuh think it would be all right if Mister Bannack tagged along with us?"

"Oh, Pa," she laughed, as she jabbed her father with her elbow and prayed Owen wouldn't see the deep blush she knew was spreading across her face.

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT

THREE FOR THE BOBCAT