

Bowdrie Rides a Coyote Trail

Bowdrie, #1

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Only a moment before, Chick Bowdrie had been dozing in the saddle, weary from the long miles behind; then a sudden tensing of muscles of the hammerheaded roan brought him out of it.

Pulling the black flat-crowned hat lower over his eyes, he studied the terrain with the eyes of a man who looked that he might live. His legs, sensitive to every reaction of the horse he rode, had warned him. If he needed more, he had only to look at the roan's ears, tipped forward now, and the flaring nostrils. Whatever it was, the roan did not like it.

Soft-footing it along the dusty trail, he approached the grove of trees with wary attention. He let his right hand drop back to loosen the thong that held his six-gun in place on the long rides. There was no change in expression on the dark, Apache-like face except that the scar under his right cheekbone seemed to deepen and his eyes grew more intent.

The trail he followed led along the base of a rocky ridge scattered with trees and boulders broken off from the crest of the ridge and toppled down the slope. The strawberry roan, stepping daintily, walked into the trees.

"Hold it, boy." He spoke gently as he brought the horse to a stand. A few yards away lay the sprawled figure of a man.

He sat his horse, his eyes sweeping the area with the attention of one who knows he may have to testify in court and would certainly have to file an account of his discovery.

The man beside the trail was dead. No examination was required to demonstrate that. No man could take a bullet where he had taken this one without dying. Also, he was lying on his back with the sun in his eyes.

No tracks showed near the body except those of the dead man's horse, which stood nearby. From the size of the hole in the dead man's chest, the bullet had gone in from behind. Bowdrie turned in the saddle, measuring the distance, and his eyes found a large brush-covered boulder some fifty yards away.

The killer had not taken any chances. Chick still sat his horse. The killer had been smart to take no risks, as the man on the ground was no pilgrim. His was a good-looking face but one showing grim strength and the seasoning of many suns and the winds from long trails. He also wore two guns, and there were not many who did.

Bowdrie walked his horse closer, careful to disturb no tracks. He noted the chain loops hanging from the strap button of the dead man's spurs, looking from them to the horse, taking in the ornate Santa Barbara bit and the elaborate hand-tooled tapaderos that hooded his stirrups.

"California," Bowdrie said aloud. "He came a long way to get killed."

Dismounting, he walked over to the horse. It shied a bit, but when he spoke it hesitated, then reached for him with its nose, cautious but friendly.

"Your rider," Chick told himself, "must have been all right. You certainly haven't been abused."

He scratched the horse on the neck, his eyes taking in all the details. The rawhide riata suspended from a loop near the pommel attracted his attention.

"Eighty or eighty-five feet, I'll bet! I've heard of ropes like that. California, you were a hand!"

Texas riders stuck to hair ropes thirty-five to forty feet long and they worked close to a steer before making a toss. It needed an artist to handle such a rope, but he had heard talk of the California vaqueros who used ropes this long.

Walking over to the dead man, he went through his pockets. Dust was heavy on the man's clothing. He showed evidence, as did his horse, of riding far and fast. The horse was a tall black, heavier than most Texas cow horses, and was obviously well-bred and carefully trained. He was a horse who could stand long miles of hard riding, and by the looks of him he had done just that.

“Riding to see somebody,” Chick guessed, “because from the look of you, you never ran from anything.”

Making a neat pack of the man’s pocket belongings, Chick tucked them into a hip pocket. Then he took the dead man’s guns and hung them from his saddle horn.

The nearest town was too far away to carry a body, and there would be coyotes.

“I mean the four-legged kind.” Bowdrie, like many a long riding man, often talked to himself. “You’ve already run into the two-legged kind.”

He found a shallow place where the ground was not too hard, dug it out a little with a stick, and laid the body neatly in the trough he hollowed. Covering the rider’s face with his vest, Chick scraped dirt over him, caved more from the bank above, then piled on juniper boughs and rocks.

When he swung to the saddle again he was leading the black horse. Starting away, he took a route that led past the brush-covered boulder.

A minute and painstaking examination told him little. He was about to leave when he saw the place where the killer’s horse had been tethered. Something caught his eye and he studied the rough side of the rock, scowling thoughtfully.

The horse had waited for some time, judging by the hoof marks, and evidently had tried to scratch himself on the rock.

Bowdrie gathered several tiny fragments of wood from the rough surface. Dry and hard on one side, they were fresh and unweathered on the other. Carefully he picked off several of the bits of wood, scarcely more than shreds, and put them in a cigarette paper.

Hours later, when the shadows reached out over the little town of Hacker, Chick Bowdrie ambled the roan down the town’s dusty main street to the livery stable. The black trotted behind.

Sitting in a chair tipped back against the outer wall of a saloon was a man who watched his arrival with some attention. As Bowdrie pulled up at the livery stable the man turned his head and apparently spoke to someone inside. A moment later the doors pushed wide and a man in a white hat stepped out and looked to where Bowdrie was stepping down from his horse.

Stabling the horses, Chick rubbed them down with care, fed and watered them himself. A stable-hand, chewing methodically, strolled over and watched without comment.

“Come far?” he asked, finally.

“Quite a piece. What’s doin’ around town?”

“Nothin’ much.” The hostler looked at Chick’s lean, hard face and the two guns. “Huntin’ a job?”

“Could be.”

“Herman an’ Howells are hirin’. If a man’s handy with a six-shooter it won’t hurt none.”

“There’s two sides to a fight. What about the other?”

“Jack Darcy. Pitchfork outfit. Young sprout, but he ain’t hirin’ gunhands. He’s got no money.”

The stable-hand’s eyes went to the black. “You usually carry two horses?”

"It's handy sometimes." Chick straightened and his black eyes looked into the stable-hand's blue eyes. "You askin' for yourself or gettin' news for somebody?"

"Just askin'." He indicated the black horse. "You look to be a Texas man but that ain't no Texas outfit."

Chick smiled. "That'll give you something to keep you from sleepin' too sound. Somethin' to think about, Rainy."

Astonished, the stable-hand stared at him. "How'd you know my name?"

"Pays a man to keep his eyes open, Rainy," Chick replied. "When I rode up, you were diggin' tobacco out of your pouch. Your name's burned on it."

The stable-hand was embarrassed. "Why, sure! I forget sometimes it's there."

Bowdrie walked up the street, estimating the town. Quiet, weather-beaten, and wind-blasted, a few horses at the hitching rails, a stray dog or two, and a half-dozen saloons, a few stores. Only the saloons, a café, and the hotel showed lights in a town deceptively dead. He had seen many such towns before. A wrong word and they could explode into action.

The killing on the trail and the fact that at least one outfit was hiring gunhands meant there was more than was easily visible.

After booking a room at the two-story frame hotel, he went to the café. Ordering, he sat at a long wooden table and ate in silence. The slatternly woman who served him manifested no interest in the silent, leather-faced young man with the twin guns. She had seen them come and go and helped prepare a few for burial after they were gone.

He ate thoughtfully, turning over in his mind the problem that brought him here. Somewhere in the town of Hacker was a cow-stealing killer known as Carl Dyson. He was wanted in Texas for murder. Chick Bowdrie had been working out the man's carefully concealed trail for nearly a month.

He was sitting over his coffee when Rainy came in, slumping into a seat across the table. He had no more expression than Bowdrie. Picking up the pot, he poured a cup of coffee, black and strong.

"Couple of gents lookin' your gear over," he said without looking up. "Figured you might like to know. One of them is Russ Peters, a gunhand for the H&H outfit. The other was Murray Roberts, who ramrods for the H&H."

"Thanks." Chick pushed back from the table. "Where do they hang out?"

"Wagon Wheel Saloon, mostly. A couple of sidewinders, mister. Better watch yourself." Rainy's range-wise eyes dropped to the guns in their worn holsters as the stranger went out the door. "Or," he added, "maybe *they'd* better watch out!"

Several poker games were in progress in the Wagon Wheel, a few punchers were casually bucking a faro layout, and four men stood at the bar. One was a tall, fine-looking man in a white hat and neat range clothes. The other was shorter, heavier, and roughly dressed, with a brutal, unshaved face and a mustache. He wore a low-crowned sombrero with a crease through the middle.

He muttered something to his companion as Bowdrie came to the bar, but the bigger man merely shot a glance at Chick and went on talking.

"Darcy better sell while the sellin' is possible. At this rate he won't have anything left."

The man with the creased sombrero stared at Chick. "Right nice horse you led into town," he commented, "and a good many of us are wondering what became of its rider."

Chick turned slowly. His left elbow rested on the bar; his right hand held a glass of rye. He stared into the yellow eyes of the man in the creased sombrero, and somebody in the room swallowed audibly. Menace seemed to rise like a cloud in the smoke-laden air of the room.

Bowdrie's Apache face did not change. He lifted his glass and drank the rye, putting the glass back on the bar. Tension in the room was a living thing, and the studied moves of the young man at the bar awakened something in the minds of the onlookers.

"I said," the man in the creased sombrero repeated, "a lot of folks want to know what became of the rider."

Chick's eyes held steady, and then in a casual, almost bored tone he said, "The name is Russ Peters," making it clear he referred to the man he faced. "Used to call himself Rusty Padwill. Fancies himself a gunfighter but is always careful who he does his shootin' with. Ran with the Murphy-Dolan crowd in the Lincoln County War. Wanted in Colorado for stealin' horses, suspected of dry-gulchin' a prospector in Arizona. Run out of Tombstone by Virgil Earp."

Peters' mouth dropped open and he started to speak, but Chick Bowdrie continued.

"I might add that the man who rode that horse I brought in was dry-gulched, and I suspect everybody in town knows who is most liable to shoot a man in the back."

Peters had been startled into immobility by the quiet recital of his background. His face turned white, then red as a wild anger swept over him. "You pointin' that at me?" he demanded.

"When you throw a stone into a pack of dogs, the one that yelps is the one that got hit."

Overcome by fury, Peters lunged at him, but Bowdrie brushed Peters' grasping hand away and snapped a jolting right uppercut to the chin. Peters' knees buckled and he fell forward.

Bowdrie moved back a step to let him fall, then said to the astonished bartender, "I'll have one more. The riding across country was kind of dry an' dusty."

Peters pulled himself to his knees, shaking his head. Realization struck him and he lunged to his feet, grasping for his gun. He got his hand on it and stiffened. He was looking into the unwavering muzzle of Bowdrie's gun.

"I'm in no mood for a shooting," Bowdrie said, "and this ain't your night. You'd better mount up and head back for the home ranch."

Murray Roberts glanced over at Bowdrie. "That tip is appreciated, mister. We had no idea Russ was a wanted man." He glanced at the two guns. "You handle yourself pretty well. Where did you say you came from?"

"I didn't say."

"If you're huntin' a job, drop out to the H&H. We need men."

"If Peters is a sample of what you have"—he drained his glass—"I reckon you do."

Turning on his heel, he walked out, leaving Roberts staring after him, his features taut with anger.

Bowdrie had reached the hotel porch when a dark figure detached itself from the shadows.

"Hold it!" The man lifted a hand. "I'm friendly!" He was a short, blond man in worn boots, jeans stuffed into them.

"You're talking," Bowdrie said. "Shall we step inside?"

The young man wore a gun, a black-and-white-checkered shirt, and an unbuttoned vest. He had a wide, friendly face, very worried now. "You led a black horse into town? A California rig?"

"I did."

"What happened to the rider?"

"Shot in the back about ten miles south. Do you know him?"

"He was my friend, and I was expecting him. I'm Jack Darcy, of the Pitchfork. That was Dan Lingle, and he was coming in to help me."

Bowdrie was surprised, then irritated with himself. He should have known the man. "That was Dan Lingle, the lawman? The one who cleaned out the Skull Canyon crowd?"

"That's him. What beats me is why they would shoot him. Nobody knew he was coming, nobody even knew I knew him. Lingle was my brother-in-law. Then my sister was killed."

"Killed? How?"

"Some hand she hired while Dan was away. She caught him stealing. He knocked her down. In falling, she struck her head, apparently, and died. Dan knew the man by sight, and he was hunting him."

"When did your fight begin here?" Bowdrie asked. "Tell me about it."

Darcy hesitated, then shrugged. "We were getting along all right, the H&H an' me. In fact"—he flushed—"I sort of was courtin' Meg Howells."

"Murray Roberts come in and hires out to Howells. Before long he's got Herman and Howells down on me. He showed 'em some doctored brands, and I never rustled a cow in my life! Then he started courting Meg, an' they wouldn't let me on the place."

"I'm no gunfighter. He drew on me, Roberts did, and I reckon he'd of killed me if Meg hadn't grabbed his arm. She claimed it was my fault and said I wasn't to come back."

Bowdrie sat down on the cowhide settee and motioned Darcy to join him. They were sitting so Bowdrie could watch both the window and the door without being seen. "How long has Roberts been here?" he asked.

"Six months, I'd say. His partner, Russ Peters, he showed up about a month ago, but he'd known Roberts before, I believe."

"Six months?" Disappointment was obvious in his tone. Rising, he started toward the stairway. "I'll be riding your way tomorrow, Darcy. Might put up with you for the night. Maybe I'm not the man Dan Lingle was, but—"

"Gosh a'mighty, man! Come ahead! I can use all the help I can get, but you're welcome, anytime! Fact is," he added, "it gets kind of lonely out there, with nobody coming by and me not seeing Meg anymore."

He turned to go, then stopped and looked back. "You didn't say what your name was?"

"I'm Chick Bowdrie."

"Chick Bowdrie, the Texas Ranger? I've heard of you."

Bowdrie went up the stairs, and the desk clerk, rising from his chair, watched until Darcy mounted his horse and rode out of town. The clerk came from behind his desk, glanced quickly around, then ran down the street.

Bowdrie came down the stairs and followed, keeping to the shadows.

A few minutes later, standing in the darkness outside an open window at the other end of town, he listened as the desk man told his story to Murray Roberts, Russ Peters, and a heavy-set man with a bald head.

"Chick Bowdrie, is it?" Roberts was saying. "That means we've got to kill him or we're through here."

"Then we'll kill him"—the fat man took the cigar from his lips—"and we can't waste any time. If he finds any evidence, he'll let McNelly know."

The fat man looked over at Roberts. "Who killed Lingle, Murray?"

Murray Roberts shrugged. "Not me!" he protested.

"Well, it wasn't me, either!" Peters said. "I'm damned if I know!"

"Murray, you ride back to the ranch. I'll keep Russ here. Ride herd on the old man. We can't let him start guessing or he might come up with some answers." The fat man paused and pointed a thick middle finger at Roberts. "You watch him, not that girl! Women will be the death of you yet!"

Chick Bowdrie returned to the hotel, slipped up the back stairs to his room, and went to bed. There were never any simple cases anymore. Maybe there never had been.

He had started hunting a killer with no accurate description except that he was carrying two diamond rings, a watch, and four beautiful Morgan horses—a stallion and three mares.

It had been a cold trail from the start, but one thing he knew. The killer had sold no Morgan horses. Wherever he was, he still had them.

"Better check those ranches tomorrow," he told himself.

He clasped his hands behind his head. Just to think! He, Chick Bowdrie, a Texas Ranger! No idea had been further from his mind a year ago. He'd grown up, at least part of the way, on a ranch not far from D'Hanis, a town near San Antonio. At sixteen he had killed his first man, a cow thief who was trying to run off some of his employer's cattle, but even that had not been his first fight. At six years old he had helped load rifles for his father and uncle as they fought Comanches, and by the time his sixteenth birthday came around, he had been in a half-dozen Indian fights.

His experience was not unusual for the time and the area. Indian fights and over-the-border raids were all too common, but skill with guns had come naturally. Like many another boy or girl of his time, he had been hunting meat for the table from the time he could hold up a rifle.

Yet the way things had gone, he might have wound up on the wrong end of the law. It was only chance and Captain McNelly of the Rangers that turned him around.

The H&H ranch lay six miles west of Hacker, and Chick Bowdrie made it by a few minutes after daylight. He reined in among some cedar at the end of a long hill and looked down upon the ranch.

It was enough to make a cattleman dream. Miles upon miles of green, rolling range spreading out like a great sea behind the cluster of ranch buildings. And there were cattle. As far as a man could see, there were cattle, scattered over the range or gathered along the stream that watered it.

Over against the foothills he could see what must be the Pitchfork holdings. Inquiries made before riding in here had told him what to expect. The Pitchfork cattle, or what he assumed to be them, ranged up the draws that led into the hills and along the flanks of the hills themselves.

Only within the past year had trouble arisen. H&H cattle had been missed, brands had been blotted, and Rack Herman had been led to believe that Darcy was rustling. Then Roberts had come in, was taken on as foreman, and complaints against Darcy multiplied. Then a Darcy hand was reported to have killed an H&H rider.

Chick studied the situation thoughtfully. He had grown up on the range, punching cows and riding the open range. He knew how range wars developed and on how little evidence accusations were often made.

Nobody had seen that H&H rider killed. He had been found near Pitchfork range, shot through the back. The H&H then killed a Pitchfork rider, and the H&H began hiring gunmen.

"It looks like somebody wanted trouble," Bowdrie surmised, but he was too experienced to draw any firm conclusions.

The trouble had started before Murray Roberts appeared, so he, apparently, was not the cause.

H&H hands were riding out on the range now. He sat his horse, watching them go. The fewer around, the better. Finally he started the roan and cantered down to the ranch yard.

A girl came running down the steps to drive some chickens from a flowerbed, her blond hair blowing in the wind. When she saw him she stopped, shading her eyes against the sun.

He drew up. "Howdy, ma'am. How's for a cup of coffee?"

"Of course. I am sure there's some left. We try to have coffee throughout the day for any of the hands who might ride in. Will you come in?"

He swung down and tied the roan to the hitching rail, and followed her into the house. The Chinese cook was just cleaning up after the cowhands. Seeing Bowdrie, he asked no questions but brought coffee, then some eggs and sliced beef.

"You will be Meg Howells," he said abruptly.

"Yes." She studied him. "How did you know?"

"Why," he said blandly, "I run into a feller who said you were the prettiest girl in these parts. He surely was no liar."

"Oh? You met Murray?"

He swallowed some coffee and used the fork on the eggs. "No, ma'am. His name was Jack Darcy."

"Oh?" Her voice was cool. "How is he?"

She tried to keep her tone disinterested, but underneath it he could detect not only curiosity, but interest.

"Looks mighty peaked, like maybe things were goin' bad at the ranch or maybe he lost his best girl or something." Before she could respond to that, he continued, "Of course, he did lose his best friend."

"Jack did? Who could that be?"

"Mighty fine man named Dan Lingle, a law officer from out California way. He was ridin' in here to visit Jack, and somebody dry-gulched him. Shot him from ambush and in the back."

"How awful! That's just terrible! And that's just how Jack's...!"

She hesitated, frowning.

"Jack's what?" Bowdrie asked.

He was no judge of women-folks. It was not like reading trail sign. Women made queer tracks, yet even he could sense that Meg Howells had something on her mind.

"Why, it just struck me that Jack's father was killed that way. He was following some rustlers. It was about eight months ago. He was found lying beside the trail and he had been shot in the back."

He sipped his coffee, and suddenly she turned on him. "Who are you? Are you looking for a job?"

"No, ma'am. I'm a Texas Ranger. I'm following a man who married a woman, murdered her, and then drove off her cattle. He told folks he was migratin' west, that his wife was sick in the wagon. After he was gone, they found her body. He'd taken the rings her father gave her, and four Morgan horses.

"There was another killing of a woman after that, but we're not sure the same man did it."

"Four horses?"

"Yes, ma'am. A stallion and three brood mares. Fine stock. Have you seen any such horses?"

"No. No, I haven't."

She seemed suddenly eager to be rid of him, so he pushed back his chair and got up. "Mind if I look around a little? You've a fine place here."

"Please do! Go right ahead!"

She was already hurrying from the room. He drained his cup of coffee and walked outside. Taking his time, he strolled toward the stable. When he saw the row of saddles on a railing, his lips tightened a little.

"Somewhere," he told himself, "you're going to find a saddle with wooden, California-style stirrups. Real old-time stuff, and some of the wood will have been rubbed off, just recently, on a rock."

No such saddle was in this lot, however. He was just turning away from them when a harsh voice cut into the silence, a voice that sent little prickles along the back of his neck.

"Who are you, and what are you doin', prowlin' around here?"

Chick's face was blank. "Just lookin' around," he said. "I asked Miss Meg if it would be all right."

"Well, it isn't all right." He was a short, enormously fat man with a thick neck rising from massive shoulders. Chick was suddenly wary. This man was not just

fat. There was an ease and dexterity in his movements and the way he used his hands that belied his bulk. At least two inches shorter than he, the man must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. "Anybody who wants to look this ranch over comes to me!"

"I heard," Chick said mildly, "that the place belonged to Howells and Herman."

"That's right. I'm Rack Herman!"

"Yeah?" Something about the man stirred all the antagonism within him. "From the way you talked, I figured you were both of them."

Herman's features seemed to tighten. The easy-appearing fat man vanished and the face Bowdrie looked at was brutal.

"Think I'm just a fat slob, do you?" His tongue touched his lips, and into his eyes came a queer eagerness that made Bowdrie cringe as though he had touched something unclean. "I like to beat clever fellers like you!"

"Take it easy, boss." Murray Roberts appeared in the doorway behind Herman. "That's Chick Bowdrie."

Rack stopped in mid-stride, and the transformation was amazing. In an instant his face was all smiles.

"Bowdrie? Why didn't you say so? I thought you were some driftin' cowhand lookin' for something he could steal! Shucks, if I'd knowed you was the law..."

"Come up to the house, will you?"

"Thanks, but I've some ridin' to do. However, if it is all right with you, I might stop by on the way back."

"Of course! Stop by anytime! Glad to have you at any time!"

Bowdrie walked to his horse and swung into the saddle. Turning his horse toward the Darcy range, he wiped the sudden sweat from his brow. "That, Mr. Bowdrie," he said aloud, "was a close one!"

Rack Herman was a new element in the situation, but the rancher was no tinhorn crook, but something more. He was a monster, a being of concentrated evil such as one rarely found on western range... or elsewhere, for that matter.

He was crossing the slope of a hill out of sight of the H&H when a movement caught his eye. It was Meg Howells on a small gray horse, approaching by a roundabout way and heading for the hills. Circling through the trees, keeping out of sight, he rode until he cut her trail; then he fell in behind. The girl was riding fast and she was going somewhere, obviously with a destination in mind.

Glancing down his back trail, he glimpsed another rider whose route had not crossed his. Hurriedly Chick Bowdrie pulled back into the trees until the horseman rode past. It was Murray Roberts.

The trail itself was dusty, so Bowdrie held to the grassy side of the road to raise no dust. It was simple enough to avoid being seen by keeping to low ground until suddenly Meg rode up a low hill and through a cleft in the rock wall.

Until now she had been riding a known trail, but she hesitated before going into the notch, obviously uncertain of what she might find. Hesitating from time to time, she rode on.

Pulling the roan to a stop, Chick watched Murray Roberts allow the girl some time before he entered the cleft. He had the impression this was no new trail to Roberts.

Waiting approximately as long as Roberts had, Chick rode into the cleft.

It grew narrower and narrower, until at one point the sides of his boots rubbed the rock on either wall; then it widened again, and far ahead he could see the girl riding into a green and lovely box canyon. Beyond, there was a clump of cottonwoods and a small cabin. There was a corral, and in the corral, several horses.

Instinct told him what horses these were, and with that realization came a heightened sense of danger. Roberts was just ahead, spurring now to catch the girl.

Bowdrie turned sharply away from the notch and skirted the canyon, keeping to the brush but riding fast. He dismounted behind a ramshackle barn and eased himself to the corner. Peering around, he saw four horses in the corral.

The Morgan horses! Then Roberts... He heard voices, Murray Roberts' voice. "How'd you know about this place?" he was demanding.

"I saw you riding here. Later, I saw him coming here. I had no idea what was here, but I had to find out."

"Now you've found out, you'd better get, an' quick! If he finds you here, he'll kill you." He was silent for a moment, then added, "Meg, let's you an' me cut out. Nobody's got a chance with him around! He killed—"

"Who did I kill?"

The voice was so close that Bowdrie started as if stung. Then he realized the voice came from the barn behind which he was hiding.

"Rack!" Roberts was startled. "I thought—!"

"You thought I was back at the ranch!" Rack Herman moved out of the barn, walking toward them. "You didn't think I'd have a hideout without two ways in an' out, did you?"

He moved closer to them. "Murray, you're a weak sister! I've seen this comin' and knew I'd have you to kill. You're no good to me, anyway, and I've got the old man right where I want him, and it's time to clean house. I've already taken care of Peters, and now you."

Murray Roberts went for his gun and was too slow by half. Rack Herman put three bullets over his belt buckle before Roberts' gun had cleared its holster.

Rack Herman thumbed shells from his belt, but before he could load, Bowdrie stepped from behind the barn. "Drop it, Rack! Drop it right where you are and then move back!"

Rack let the gun slip from his fingers and moved back away from it. "If you didn't have that gun, I'd...!"

What made him do it, Bowdrie never knew, but he unbuckled his gunbelt and handed it to Meg. "Don't shoot unless it is to save yourself. Maybe I'm a damned fool, but I've got this to do."

She took the guns, and Rack moved toward him, sure of himself now. As they came together, Bowdrie stabbed a left to Herman's face, but the man took the blow and kept coming, very sure of himself.

A smashing blow caught Bowdrie in the ribs and a clubbing right caught his jaw and started bells ringing in his skull. He felt himself falling, heard Rack's grunt of satisfaction.

His knees hit the dust and then Bowdrie came up as Rack closed in. Bowdrie hooked hard to the side of the face, twisted away, and stabbed a left to the heavier man's mouth, drawing blood.

Herman could punch unbelievably fast. He caught Bowdrie with a left and right, but Bowdrie's right caught Herman on the chin. Yet how he got through the next few minutes, he never knew. Blows rained on his head, jaw, and shoulders, yet he stayed on his feet, taking them and fighting back. Through his befogged brain an idea penetrated. Battered though he was, Bowdrie realized that Rack was gasping for breath.

Powerful as he was, and amazingly fast for such a heavy man, Herman was carrying a huge weight and the sun was hot. Bowdrie, dried by desert suns and winds, was lean as an ironwood tree and just as resilient. No doubt Herman had won most of his fights with a blow or two, but Bowdrie had soaked up what punishment he could give and was still on his feet.

Through the fog in his brain and the taste of blood in his mouth, Chick knew he could win. Hurt though he was, he drew on some well of desperation within him and began to punch.

Left, right, left, right, blow after battering blow pounded the huge body and the brutal face. His arms were weary from just punching, but Herman's mouth was hanging open as he gasped for every breath.

Stepping away, he fainted, and as the heavier man's hands came up, he threw a low hard right to the midsection. Then, weaving to avoid the pawing blows, he threw blow after blow to the heavy body. Then there was nobody in front of him and hands were grabbing him.

"Stop it, man! You'll kill him! Stop it!"

They pulled him back, and Rack Herman lay on the ground against the barn wall, his face bloody and battered.

Jack Darcy and Rainy were there, holding him back from the man he had come so far to find, Rack Herman, the man who had once called himself Carl Dyson. Bowdrie knew he would have to look no further for the saddle he had hoped to find.

He shook his head to clear it of the last of the dwindling fog. He stared at Rainy. "What are you doing here?"

"I'd been wanting to marry Jack's sister," Rainy explained, "but Dan Lingle beat me out. He was a good man and I held no grudge, but I came on to find Darcy. I knew her murderer was somewhere around."

"That was only one murder. There was another in Texas." He took his gunbelt from Meg and slung it about his shoulders. "I'd no business doing this"—he gestured at Herman, who was being helped to his feet by Darcy—"but the man's arrogance kind of got under my skin."

"He had it coming," Rainy agreed, "but he'll live long enough to hang."

Holding their prisoner, they walked toward the corral. The Morgans were waiting, heads up, alert.

"After you get those horses back where they belong," Darcy suggested, "why don't you come back? There's a lot of good cattle country around here."

Bowdrie slapped the dust from his hat. "I'm a Ranger," he said, "and there's always work for a Ranger. Come to one trail's end, and there's always another. I kind of like it that way."

