

The Town No Guns Could Tame

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 4

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Chapter 1

The miner called Perry stepped from the bucket and leaned his pick and shovel against a boulder. He was a big man with broad shoulders and narrow hips. Despite the wet, clinging diggin' clothes, he moved with the ease and freedom of a big cat. His greenish eyes turned toward Doc Greenley, banker, postmaster, and saloon man of Basin City, who was talking with the other townsmen.

Perry's head and arms were bare, and the woolen undershirt failed to cover the mighty muscles that rippled along his back and shoulders. One of the men, noting the powerful arms and the strong neck, turned and said something to the others. They nodded, together.

„Hey, Perry,“ Doc Greenley called, „drift over here, will you? Me and these two gents want to make a proposition to you.“

Casually, Perry picked up the spare pick handle leaning against the boulder and walked over, his wet clothes sloshing as he moved. He stopped when he reached the trio, and his eyes studied them, coldly penetrating. The three men shifted uneasily.

„Go ahead with it, then,“ Perry said shortly.

„It's like this,“ Doc explained. „Buff McCarty—“he nodded toward the larger of his two companions—„and Wade Manning, here, and myself have been worried about the rough element from the mines. They seem to be taking over the town. No respectable citizen or their womenfolk are safe. And as for the hold-ups that have been raising hell with us businessmen...“ Doc Greenley mopped his brow with a fresh bandanna handkerchief, letting the sentence go unfinished.

„We want you to help us, Perry,“ the heavy-set, honest-faced McCarty put in. „Manning, here, runs the freight line and I have the general supply outfit. We're all substantial citizens and need a man of your type for town marshal.“

„As soon as I heard you were here, I told the boys you were just the man for us,“ Greenley put in eagerly.

Perry's green eyes narrowed thoughtfully. „I see.“ His gaze shifted from Doc Greenley, the most prominent and wealthiest man there, to the stolid McCarty, and then to the young townsman, Wade Manning. He smiled a little. „The town fathers, out in force, eh?“ He glanced at Wade, looking at him thoughtfully. „But where's Rafe Landon, owner of the Sluice Box Bar?“

„Rafe Landon?“ Doc Greenley's eyes glinted. „Why, his bar is the hangout for this tough crowd! In fact, we have reason to suspect—“

„Better let Perry form his own suspicions, Doc,“ Wade Manning interrupted. „I'm not at all sure about Rafe.“

„You may not be,“ Greenley snapped, „but I am! Perry, I'm convinced that Landon is the ringleader of the whole kit an' caboodle of the killers and renegades we're trying to clean out!“

„Why,“ Perry said suddenly, „do you choose this particular time to pick a marshal? There must be a reason.“

„There is,“ Wade Manning agreed. „You probably know about the volume of gold production here. Anyway, Doc has better than two hundred thousand in his big

vault now. I have about half that much. There's a rumor around of a plot to loot the stage of the whole load."

"It's Landon," Greenley said, "that's who it is! An' do you know what I think?" He looked from one to the other, pulling excitedly at his ear lobe. "I think Rafe Landon is none other than Clip Haynes, the toughest, coldest gunman who ever pulled a trigger!"

Perry's eyes narrowed. "I heard he was down in Arizona."

"But I happen to know," Greenley said sharply, "that Clip Haynes headed this way—with the ten thousand he got from that stage job near Goldroad!"

Perry looked at Doc thoughtfully. "Maybe so. It could be that way, all right." He glanced at Buff McCarty, who was watching him from his small blue eyes. "Sure, I'll take the job! I'll ride in tonight, by the canyon trail."

The three men walked to their horses, and Perry turned abruptly back to the mine office to draw his time.

The moon was rising when the man called Perry swung onto his horse and took the canyon trail for Basin City. The big black stepped out swiftly, and the man lounged in the saddle, his eyes narrowed with thought. He rode with the ease of one long accustomed to the saddle, and almost without thinking kept to the shadows along the road, guiding his horse neatly so as to render it almost invisible in the dim light.

From the black, flat-crowned hat tied under his chin with a rawhide thong to the hand-tooled cowman's boots, his costume offered nothing that would catch the glint of light or prevent him from merging indistinguishably with his background. Even the two big guns with their polished wooden butts, tied down and ready for use, harmonized perfectly with his somber dress.

The trail dipped through canyons and wound around lofty mesas, and once he forded a small stream. Shortly after, riding through a maze of gigantic boulders, he reined in sharply. His keen ear had detected a sudden sound.

Even as he came to a halt he heard the hard rattle of hooves from a running horse somewhere on the trail ahead, and almost at the same instant, the sharp spang of a high-powered rifle.

Soundlessly, he slid from the saddle, and even before his feet touched the sand of the trail, his guns were gripped in his big hands. Tensely, he ran forward, staying in the soft sand where his feet made no noise. Suddenly, dead ahead of him and just around a huge boulder, a pistol roared. He jerked to a halt, and eased around the rock.

A black figure of a man was on its knees in the road. Just as the man looked around, the rifle up on the mountainside crashed again, and the kneeling figure spilled over on its face.

Perry's gun roared at the flash of the rifle, and roared again as a bullet whipped by his ear. The rifle fired once more, and Perry felt his hat jerk on his head as he emptied his gun at the concealed marksman.

There was no reply. Cautiously Perry lifted his head, then began to inch toward the dark figure sprawled in the road before him. A match flared suddenly up on the hillside, and Perry started to fire, then held it. The man might think him dead,

and his present position was too open to take a chance. As he reached the body, the rattle of a horse's hooves faded rapidly into the distance.

Perry's lips set grimly. Then he got to his knees and lifted the body.

It was a boy—an attractive, fair-haired youngster. He had been shot twice, once through the body, and once through the head. Perry started to rise.

„Hold it!“ The voice was that of a woman, but it was cold and even. „One move and I'll shoot!“

She was standing at one side of the road with a pistol aimed at Perry's belt line. Even in the moonlight she was lovely. Perry held perfectly still, riveted to the position as much by her beauty as by the gun she held so steadily.

„You murderer!“ she said, her voice low with contempt. „Stand up, and keep your hands high!“

He put the boy gently back on the ground and got to his feet. „I'm afraid you're mistaken, miss,“ he said. „I didn't kill this boy.“

„Don't make yourself a liar as well as a killer!“ she exclaimed. „Didn't I hear you shooting? Haven't I eyes?“

„While you're holding me here,“ he said gently, „the real killer is making his getaway. If you'll put down that gun, I'll explain.“

„Explain?“ There was just a hint of hysteria in her voice. „After you've killed my brother?“

„Your brother?“ he was startled now. „Why, I didn't—“

Her voice trembled, but the gun was unrelenting. „You didn't know, I suppose, that you killed Wade Manning?“ Her disbelief was evident in her tone.

„Wade Manning?“ he stepped forward. „Why, this isn't Wade Manning!“

„Not—not Wade?“ her voice was incredulous. „But who is it then?“

He stepped back. „Take a look, Miss Manning. I don't know many people around here. I met your brother today at the Indian Creek Diggin's. He's a sight older than this poor youngster.“

She dropped to her knees beside the boy. Then she looked up. „Why, this is young Tommy McCarty! What in the world can he be doing out here tonight?“

„Any relation to Buff McCarty?“ he asked quickly.

„His son.“ Her eyes misted with tears. „Oh, this is awful! We—we came over the trail from Salt Lake together, his folks and mine!“

He took her by the shoulders. „Listen, Miss Manning. I don't like to butt in, you knowin' the lad an' all, but your brother came out here to see me today. He wanted me to be marshal here in Basin City. I took the job, so I guess this is the first part right here.“

She drew back, aghast. „Then you—you're Clip Haynes!“

It was his turn to be startled now. „Who told you that?“ he demanded. Things were moving a little too fast. „Who knew I was Clip Haynes?“

„Wade. He recognized you today. The others don't know. He wanted to see you tonight about something. He said it would take a man like you to handle the law job here.“

Frowning thoughtfully, he caught up the boy's horse, grazing nearby, and lashed the body to the saddle. Then he mounted the big black, and the girl swung up on her pinto. Silently they took the trail for Basin City.

Despite the fact that she seemed to have accepted him, he could sense the suspicion that held her aloof. The fact remained that she had found him kneeling over the body, six-gun in hand. He could scarcely blame her. After all, he was not a simple miner named Perry. He was Clip Haynes—a notorious gunman with a blood price on his head.

„Who'd profit by this boy's death?“ he asked suddenly. „Does he have any enemies?“

„Tommy McCarty?“ her voice was incredulous. „Goodness no! He was just sixteen, and there wasn't a finer boy in Peace Valley. Everyone liked him.“

Carefully, he explained all that had happened, conscious of her skepticism and of the fact that she rode warily, with one hand on her pistol. „But who'd want to kill Tommy?“ she exclaimed. „And why go to all that trouble? He rides alone to the claim every morning.“

Except for the glaring lights of Rafe Landon's Sluice Box Bar and Doc Greenley's High-Stake Palace, the main street of the town was in darkness. But even before they reined in at the hitching rail of the High-Stake, the body had been seen, and a crowd gathered.

They were a sullen, hard-bitten crew of miners, gamblers, freighters, and drifters that follow gold camps. They crowded around shouting questions. Then suddenly Wade Manning pushed through, followed by Buff McCarty.

One glance, and the big man's face went white. „Tommy!“ his voice was agonized, and he sprang forward to lift the body from the saddle.

He stared down into the boy's white, blood-stained face. When he looked up his placid features were set in hard, desperate lines. „Who did this?“ he demanded.

With the crowd staring, Clip quietly told his story, helped by a word here and there from the girl, Ruth Manning. When the story was ended, Clip found himself ringed by a circle of hard, hostile eyes.

„Then,“ Buff McCarty said ominously, „you didn't see this feller up on the hill, eh? And Ruth didn't either. How do I know you didn't kill Tommy?“

„Yeah,“ a big man with a broken nose said loudly. „This stranger's yarn sounds fishy to me. The gal finds you all a standin' over the McCarty kid with a gun, an'—“

„Shut up, Porter!“ Manning interrupted. „Let's hear him out.“

„Why should I shoot the boy?“ Clip protested. „I never saw the kid before. I don't shoot strangers.“

„You say you heard shots, then rode up to him.“ Buff rested his big hands on his hips, his eyes hard. „Did anybody but you an' Ruth come nigh him?“

„Not a soul!“ Clip said positively.

„Then,“ Buff's voice was harshly triumphant, „how d'you account for this?“ He lifted an empty leather poke, shaking it in Haynes's face. „That there poke held three thousand dollars when my boy left town!“

The broken-nosed Porter crowded closer to Clip. „You dirty, murderin' coyote!“ he shouted, his face red with anger. „Y' oughta be lynched, dry-gulchin' a kid that way!“

„That's right!“ another voice yelled. „Lynch him!“

„Hold it!“ Clip Haynes's voice was hard. His greenish eyes seemed to glow as he backed away. Suddenly, they saw he was holding two guns, although no man had

seen him draw. „Manning, you an' McCarty ought to know better than this! Look at those wounds! That boy was shot with a rifle, not a six-gun! He was shot from higher up the mountain. You'll find both those wounds range downward! You come out to Indian Creek to offer me the job of lawman around here. Well, I took it, an' solvin' this murder is goin' t' be my first job. But just to clear the air, I'm a-tellin' all of you now, my name ain't Perry—it's Clip Haynes!“

He backed to his horse, stepped quickly around and threw himself into the saddle. Then he faced the crowd, now staring at him, white-faced. Beyond them, he saw Doc Greenley. The banker-saloon man was smiling oddly.

„I'll be around,“ Haynes said then „an' I aim to complete the job I started. You all know who I am. But if anybody here thinks I'm the killer of that boy, he can talk it out with me tomorrow noon in this street—with six-guns!“

Clip Haynes wheeled the big black and rode rapidly away, and the crowd stood silent until he was out of sight. Then quietly they walked inside.

„What d'you think, Wade?“ McCarty asked, turning to the tall, silent man beside him.

Manning was staring up the road after Haynes, a curious light in his eyes. „I think we'd better let him handle it,“ Wade said, „at least for the time. There's more in this than meets the eye!“

Doc Greenley walked up, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. „Just the man!“ he said eagerly. „Did you see how he handled that? Just the man we need! We can make our shipment now when we want to, and that man will take care of it!“

Chapter 2

Dawn found Clip Haynes sitting among the boulders beside the trail from Indian Creek. Below him was the spot where Tommy McCarty had fallen the previous night. Opposite him, somewhere on the hillside, was the place where the murderer had waited. The very place of concealment was obvious enough. It was not a hundred yards away, in a cluster of boulders and rock cedar, not unlike his own resting place. That the murderer had waited there was undoubted, but why?

Clip Haynes pushed his hat back on his head and rolled a smoke.

First, what were the facts? McCarty, Greenley, and Manning, three of Basin City's most reputable business men, had hired him as marshal. But Rafe Landon, owner of the biggest mine, and the most popular saloon and dance hall, had not come along. Why?

Secondly, someone had killed and robbed Tommy McCarty. Obviously, the killer had not robbed him, for both Clip and Ruth Manning had been too close. Then, the obvious conclusion was that Tommy had been robbed before he was killed!

Clip sat up suddenly, his eyes narrowed. He was remembering the chafed spot on Tommy's wrist, dimly seen in the light from the High-Stake Palace. Chafed from what? The answer hit him like a blow. Tommy McCarty had not only been robbed, but had been bound hand and foot! He had escaped, and then had been shot.

But why shoot him afterward? That didn't make sense. He already had lost the money, and if the thief had any doubts, he would have killed him the first time. The only answer was that Tommy McCarty had been mistaken for somebody else!

But who? Obviously, whoever had waited on the hillside the previous night had been expecting someone to come along. So far, Clip knew of only three people besides McCarty who might have come along. Wade Manning, Ruth Manning, and himself. But wait! What was Wade doing on the road so late? And why was Ruth traveling alone on that lonely trail?

There was always the possibility that Wade Manning, knowing Perry actually was Clip Haynes, had planned to kill him for the reward offered in Arizona. However, Manning didn't look like a cowardly killer, and the theory didn't, somehow, fit the facts.

Clip Haynes shook his head with disgust. If it was just a matter of shooting it out with some tough gunman, he was all right, but figuring out a problem like this was something he had not bargained for. It was unlikely, however, that anyone would want to shoot Ruth, or that anyone guessed she was on the road that night. That left Wade and himself as the prospective victims of the killer, for by now he would know his mistake.

Three men had known that he was taking the canyon trail to town—Doc Greenley, Wade Manning, and Buff McCarty. Clip's eyes narrowed. Why, since he had been riding slowly, and Tommy McCarty probably at a breakneck speed, hadn't Tommy passed him? Obviously because Tommy had come out on the trail at some point between where Clip had first heard his running horse and the point where he had seen the boy killed.

Mounting, Clip turned the big black down the mountainside to the trail. As he rode along he scanned the edges carefully. Suddenly, he reined in.

The hoof-prints of the big black were plainly seen, but suddenly a new trail had appeared, and Clip could see where a horse had been jumped from the embankment into the trail. Dismounting, and leading the black, he climbed the embankment and followed the trail. As soon as he saw it was plainly discernible, he swung into the saddle again and followed it rapidly.

Two miles from the canyon trail, at the end of a bottleneck canyon, he found a half-ruined adobe house. Here the trail ended.

Dismounting cautiously, Clip walked up to the 'dobe. The place was empty. Gun in hand, he knelt, examining the hardpacked earth of the floor.

The earth was scuffed and kicked as though by a pair of heels, such marks as a man might make in a struggle to free himself. But there were no ropes in sight, nothing...

He froze. A shadow had fallen across him. He knew a man was crouching at the window behind him. His own gun was concealed from the watcher by his body. Apparently studying the earth, he waited for the first movement of the man behind him.

It could only have been an instant later that he heard the click of a cocking gun hammer, and in that same flashing split second, he hurled himself to one side. The roar of the gun boomed in the 'dobe hut, and the dirt against the wall jumped in an awkward spray even as his own pistol roared. Clip leaped to the door.

A bullet slammed against the doorjamb not an inch from his head, as he recklessly sprang into the open, both guns bucking. The man staggered, tried to fire again, and then plunged over on his face.

For a moment, Clip Haynes stood still, the light breeze brushing a lock of hair along his forehead. The sun felt warm against his cheek, and the silent figure on the sand looked sprawled and helpless.

Automatically, Clip loaded his guns. Then he walked over to the body. Before he knelt, his eyes scanned the rim of the canyon, examining every boulder, every tree. Satisfied, he bent over the fallen man. Then his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. It was the big man who had been so eager to see him lynched the night before, the man who had joined Porter in his protests.

Clip's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, then he got to his feet. He turned slowly, facing the shack. He stood there a moment carelessly, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

„All right,“ he said finally, „you can come out from behind that shack. With your hands high!“

Wade Manning stepped out, his hands up. His eyes glinted shrewdly. „Nice going,“ he said. „How did you know I was there?“

Clip shrugged, and indicated the big black horse with a motion of his head. „His ears. He doesn't miss a thing.“ He waited, his eyes cold.

„I suppose you want to know what I'm doing here?“

„Exactly. And what you were doing on the canyon trail last night. You seem to be around whenever there's any shooting going on.“

„I can explain that,“ Wade said, smiling a little. „I don't blame you for being suspicious. After we talked to you at the mine that day, I decided I'd better go back out there and tell you I knew who you were, and to be careful around the men at the mine. And I didn't want you to jump to conclusions about Landon.“

„What's Rafe Landon to you?“ Clip demanded.

Wade shrugged, rolling a smoke. „Maybe I know men, maybe I don't,“ he affirmed, running his tongue along the paper. „But Rafe sizes up to me like a square shooter.“ He glanced up. „And in spite of what Ruth says, I think you are, too.“

„Know this hombre?“ Clip indicated the man on the ground.

Wade nodded. „Only to see him. He worked for Buff McCarty for a while. Lately he's been hanging around the Sluice Box. Name's Dirk Barlow. He's got a couple of tough-hand brothers.“

Mounting, they started down the trail together. Clip Haynes glanced out of the corner of his eyes at Manning. He was clean cut, smooth, good-looking. His actions were suspicious, but he didn't seem the type for a killer.

Clip frowned a little. So Ruth didn't like him? Something stirred inside him, and he found himself wishing she felt differently. Then he grinned wryly. A hunted gunman like Clip Haynes getting soft about a girl! There wouldn't ever be any girls like Ruth for him.

He looked up, his mind reverting to the former problem. „How about this gent Porter back in town—the one who was so sure I shot Tommy McCarty. Where does he fit in?“

„A bad hombre. Gun-slick, and tough. He killed a prospector his first night in town. About two weeks later he shot it out with a man named Pete Handown.“

„I’ve heard of Handown. This Porter must be fast.“

„He is. But mostly a fistfighter. He runs with the surviving Barlow brothers—Joe and Gonny. They’re gunmen, too. They’ve figured in most of the trouble around here. But they’ve got a ringleader. Somebody behind the scenes we can’t decide on.“

„Greenley thinks it’s Rafe, eh?“

„Yes. I’ll admit most of the gang hang around the Sluice Box. But I’m sure Rafe’s in the clear.“ Wade looked up. „Listen, Clip. If you ride with the stage tomorrow, watch your step. There’s three hundred thousand in gold going out.“

Doc Greenley was standing with Buff McCarty on the walk in front of the High-Stake Palace when they rode up. He glanced swiftly at the body slung over the lead horse. Then he smiled brightly. „Got ‘em on the run, boy?“ he asked. „Who is it this time?“

„Dirk Barlow,“ Buff said, his eyes narrowing. „You’ll have to ride careful now, Haynes. His brothers will come for you. They’re tough as hell.“

Haynes shrugged. „He asked for it.“ His eyes lifted to Buff’s. „I back-trailed Tommy. I knew he cut in ahead of me last night, and if you looked, there was a chafed spot on his wrist. I knew he’d been tied, so I looked for the place. I found it, and this hombre tried to kill me.“

„You think he killed Tommy?“ Buff demanded.

„I don’t know. He hasn’t the money on him.“ He turned his head to see Ruth Manning standing in front of the post office. Their eyes met, and she turned away abruptly.

Clip swung down from the saddle and walked across the street. When he stepped into the Sluice Box he saw Rafe Landon leaning against the end of the bar.

He was a tall man, handsome, and superbly built. There was an easy grace in his movements that was deceptive. He was wearing black, and when he turned, Clip saw he carried two guns, tied low.

„How are you, Haynes?“ he said, holding out his hand. „I’ve been expecting you.“

Haynes nodded. „What do you know about this McCarty killing?“ he asked coolly. He deliberately ignored the outstretched hand.

Landon smiled. „An accident, of course. Nobody cared about hurting Tommy. He was a grand youngster.“

„What d’you mean—an accident?“

„Just that. They were gunning for somebody else, but Tommy got there first.“ Rafe looked down at his cigarette, flicked off the ash, and glanced up. „In fact, it would be my guess they were gunning for you. Somebody who didn’t want Clip Haynes butting in.“

„Nobody knew I was Haynes.“

Rafe shrugged. „I did. I’d known for two weeks. Manning knew, too. Probably there were others.“ He nodded toward the street. „I see you got Dirk Barlow. Watch those brothers of his. And look out for Porter, too.“

„You’re the second man who told me that.“

„There'll be more. Joe and Gonny Barlow will be in as soon as they hear about this. Joe's bad, but Gonny's the worst. Gonny uses both hands, and he's fast.“

„Why tell me this?“ Clip asked. He looked up, and their eyes met.

Rafe Landon smiled. „You'll need it, Haynes. I'm a gambler, and it's my business to know about men. A word of friendly advice never hurt anyone—even a gent like you. Joe Barlow's never been beat in a gunfight. And like I said, Gonny's the worst.“

„Porter? What's he like?“ Clip asked.

„Maybe I can tell you,“ a harsh voice broke in.

Clip turned to see Porter standing in the doorway. He was big, probably twenty pounds bigger than Clip, and his shoulders were powerful.

„All right,“ Clip said. „You tell me.“

Chapter 3

Porter walked over to the bar.

Glancing past him Clip could see the room filling with men. Come to see the fun, to see if the new marshal could take it. Clip grinned suddenly.

„What's funny?“ Porter snarled suspiciously.

„You,“ Clip said shortly. „Last night I thought I heard you say I needed lynching. I suggested anyone who wanted to debate the matter could shoot it out with me in the street. You weren't around. What's the matter? Yellow?“

Porter stared, taken aback by the sudden attack. Somebody chuckled, and he let out a snarl of rage. „Why, you—!“

Clip's open palm slapped him across the mouth with such force that Porter's head jerked back.

With a savage roar, the big man swung. But Clip was too fast. Swaying on his feet, he slipped the punch and smashed a vicious right hand into the man's body. Porter took it without flinching, and swung both hands to Clip's head.

Haynes staggered, and before he could set himself, Porter swung a powerful right that knocked him sprawling. Before Clip could get to his feet, Porter rushed in, kicking viciously at Haynes's face, but the young marshal jerked his head aside and took the kick on the shoulder. The camel boot sent pain shocks through his body.

It knocked him rolling, but he gathered his feet under him and met Porter's charge with a jarring left jab that set the bigger man back on his heels and smashed his upper lip into his teeth.

Porter ducked his head and charged, but Clip was steadying down, and he sidestepped suddenly, bringing up a jolting right uppercut that straightened Porter up for a crashing right that knocked him reeling into the bar.

He grabbed a bottle and hurled it across the room, but Clip ducked and charged in, grabbing the big man about the knees and dropping him to the floor. Deliberately, Clip fell with him, driving his head into the man's stomach with all his force, and then spinning on over to land on his feet.

Breathing easily, he waited until Porter got up. The big man was dazed, and before he could assemble his faculties, Clip walked in and slapped him viciously with both hands, and then snapped his fist into Porter's solar plexus with a jolt that doubled the bigger man up with a groan. A left hook spun him half around and ripped the skin under one eye. As he backed away, trying to cover, Clip walked in and pulled his hands away, crossing a wicked short right hook to the chin. Without a sound, Porter crumpled to the floor.

Turning on his heel, Clip walked quickly from the room, never so much as glancing back.

It was almost noon when he rode slowly down the mountain trail and tied his horse in a clump of mesquite. He glanced at the sun. In about fifteen minutes the stage should be along, and if it was to be held up, it would be somewhere in the next two miles. Carefully, he walked ahead until he found a place among the boulders, and then settled down to wait until the stage came along. From there on he could follow it.

Suddenly, he noticed a cloud of dust above the trail in the distance. The stage. He got up, and stood watching it as it drew nearer. He could see that everything was as it should be, and turning, he walked back to his horse. When he was about a dozen steps away, he halted in midstep, and drew back. There on the ground, over one of his own tracks was a fresh boot print, one heel rounded badly, and a queer scar across the toe!

His hand shot to his gun, but before he could draw, something crashed down over his head, and he tumbled forward into blackness...

It was hours later when he opened his eyes. When he tried to lift his head a spasm of pain shot over him, and he groaned desperately. Then for a long moment he lay still, and through the wave of pain from his throbbing head, he remembered the stage, the boot print, the gold.

Desperately, he got to his hands and knees. The ground where his head had lain was a pool of blood, and when he lifted one hand, he found his hair matted with it and stiffened with sand. Crawling to his feet, he had to steady himself against a boulder. Then he retched violently, and was sick.

After he staggered to his horse and took a drink from his canteen, he felt better. Summoning all his resolution, he went back and examined the ground. The man had evidently followed him, waited behind a boulder, and as he returned to his horse, knocked him over the head. Quite obviously, he had been left for dead.

Clip walked back to his horse, checking his guns. They hadn't been tampered with. When he swung into the saddle and turned the big black down the trail, his lips were set in a tight, grim line. He loosened the big guns, and despite his throbbing head, cantered down the trail.

He didn't have far to ride. Only about three hundred yards from where he had waited, he found the coach, lying on its side, one wheel smashed. A dead horse lay in a tangle of harness, and sprawled on the ground was the stage driver. He had been shot between the eyes with a rifle.

About twenty yards away, evidently killed as he was making for the shelter of a circle of boulders, was the messenger.

It was two hours before Clip Haynes rode up in front of the High-Stake Palace and tied the black to the hitching rail. His head throbbing, he stepped in.

At once the hard round muzzle of a gun jammed into his spine.

Clip stopped, his hands slowly lifting.

„Back up, an' back careful!“ he heard Buff McCarty saying, his voice deadly. „One false move an' I'll drill you, gunman or no gunman!“

„What's the matter, Buff?“ Clip asked. His head throbbed and he felt his anger mounting.

„You ask what's the matter!“ Wade Manning snapped. Stepping up he jerked Clip's guns from their holsters. „We trusted you, and then you—“

„We found the money, that's what!“ Buff snarled, his voice husky with rage. „The money you took off Tommy! We shook down your duffle bag an' found it there—the whole three thousand dollars you murdered him for!“

„Listen, men!“ he protested. „If you found any money there it was a plant. Why—“

„I'm sorry, boy,“ Doc Greenley interrupted, shaking his head gravely, his usual smile gone. „We've got you dead to rights this time!“

Clip started to protest again, and then his jaw clamped shut. If they wanted to be like that, argument, he figured, was useless. He turned to walk out, and found himself facing Porter.

The big man sneered, and, for just an instant as Clip watched him, he saw the man's eyes flash a message to one of his captors. Then Porter was past, and Clip was being rushed to jail.

When the cell door clanged shut he walked across the narrow room, dropped on his bunk and was almost immediately asleep.

It seemed a long time later when he was awakened. It was completely dark, and listening, he knew the jail was deserted.

Clip walked across to the window, and took hold of the bars.

Then he heard a whisper. „Haynes!“

„Who is it?“ he asked softly.

„It's me—Rafe. Stick your hand through the bars. I've got a key!“

Clip Haynes thrust his hand out, and felt the cold metal of a jail key in his hand. Then he heard Rafe speaking again. „Better make it quick. Porter's got a mob about worked up to lynching you.“

In two strides he was across the cell. The key grated in the lock, and the door swung wide. Then he turned and stepped back, throwing the blankets into a rough hump to resemble a sleeping figure. Going out, he locked the door after him. His gun belts were on the desk in the outer office, and he swept them up, hurriedly checking the guns as he stepped outside.

Rafe Landon was waiting there. Surprisingly, Rafe had the black horse with him. Without a word, Clip gripped the gambler's hand, and then swung up.

„Listen,“ Rafe said, gripping his wrist. „Whoever robbed that stage today kidnaped Ruth!“

„What!“ Clip jerked around, his jaws set.

„She rode out along the trail just before the stage left town. She told me she wanted to watch you. She hasn't returned yet, and Wade's just found out. There's only one place she can be—with the Barlows!“

„You know where they hang out?“ Clip snapped.

„Somewhere back of the Organ. There’s a box canyon up there, that might be it. Take the west route around the Organ and you’ll find the trail, but watch your step!“

Clip looked down at Rafe in the darkness, his eyes keen. „Just what is Ruth Manning to you?“ he demanded.

Clip thought he detected the ghost of a smile. „Does it matter? The girl’s in danger!“

„Right!“ Clip swung his horse. As he did so he heard someone shout, and glancing back, he saw a crowd of men spew from the doors of the High-Stake.

The big black stretched his legs and sprang away into the night, swinging around the town to the trail in tireless, space-eating strides.

Chapter 4

The huge pinnacles of rock known as the Organ loomed ahead. For years during his wanderings, Clip Haynes had heard of them. Some queer volcanic effect had shot these hollow spires up into the sky, leaving them thin to varying degrees, and under the blows of a stick or rock they gave forth a deep, resonant sound. Around them lay rugged, broken country.

For a half hour he cut back and forth through the rocks before he located the box canyon. And then it was the horse that found the narrow thread of trail winding among the boulders. A few minutes of riding, and he sighted the dim light that came from a cabin window.

He dismounted and slipped a gun into his hand. Then he walked boldly forward, and threw the door open.

A startled Mexican jerked up from his seat on a box and dropped a hand for his gun, but at the sight of Clip, he reached for air. „Don’t shoot, señor!“ he gasped. „Por dios, don’t shoot!“

Clip stepped in and swung his back to the wall. „Where’s the girl?“ he snapped.

„The señorita, she here. The Barlows, they go.“

Clip stepped quickly across the room and spun the Mexican around. Picking up a handful of loose rope, he bound the man hand and foot. Then stooping, he untied Ruth.

„Thanks,“ she said, rubbing her wrists. „I was beginning to think—“

„No!“ he exclaimed dryly.

Her face stiffened abruptly. Clip grinned at her. „You had that coming, lady. Let’s get out of here!“

Suddenly, he stopped. In the corner was a heap of sacks taken from the stage earlier that day. Pausing, he jerked the tie string. The sack toppled slowly over. And from its mouth spilled nothing more than a thin stream of sand!

„Why—!“ Ruth gasped. „Why, where’s the gold?“

„I’ll show you later!“ Clip said grimly. „I suspected this!“

There was no talk on the ride homeward. Clip rode at Ruth's side, seemingly intent only on reaching town. It was almost daylight when they rode swiftly up the dusty street.

„Should you do this?“ she protested. „Aren't they looking for you?“

„If they are, they better not find me!“ he snapped. „I'm doing some looking myself. You ride to your brother, quick, and tell him about that sand. Tell him to bring Buff McCarty to the High-Stake just as quick as he can make it!“

His eyes narrowed. „And you,“ he went grimly, „will have a chance to drop by the Sluice Box and see your precious lover, who didn't have guts enough to come after you himself!“

Her eyes widened with amazement, but before she could speak, he wheeled his horse and rode rapidly back up the street and dismounted. Then he walked into the Sluice Box, his face dark with rage.

Rafe Landon stood just inside the door. He walked up to Clip, smiling gravely. „I heard what you said to Ruth,“ he said. „I want to tell you just two things, Haynes. The first has to do with my want of—guts—as you put it. Once I offered you my hand, and you refused it. Will you take it now?“

Something in his manner seemed strange. Clip glanced down at the gloved hand. Then he took it. Amazement came into his eyes.

„Yes,“ Rafe said, „you're right. It's iron. The blacksmith in Goldfield made it, several years ago. I lost both my hands after a fire.“

Clip looked up, his face tight. „Rafe, I—“

„Forget it. As for Ruth—“

The doors burst open, and Clip wheeled. Wade Manning stood in the door, Buff McCarty beside him. „The Barlows are coming!“ he exclaimed, his face tense. „Both of them, Clip, and they've been bragging all morning that they'll kill you on sight!“

He stepped into the street, his steps echoing hollowly as he stepped across the boardwalk. He stopped in the edge of the dusty street and looked north.

The Barlows, Joe and Gonny, were standing on the porch in front of the old hotel building. Then they saw him, and started toward the steps.

Somewhere a horse whinnied, and in the saloon, a man's nervous laughter sounded strangely loud. Clip Haynes walked slowly, taking measured steps.

Joe Barlow's hand was poised over his gun. Gonny waited carelessly, slouching, a shock of hair hanging down over his eyes.

When they were fifty feet apart, the Barlows stiffened as though at a signal, and drew. Joe's hand moved; Clip Haynes shot.

The street broke in a thundering roar through which he found himself walking straight toward them, his guns hammering. He knew the first shot he had taken at Joe had been too quick. Suddenly it seemed as if a white hot branding iron had hit his left shoulder. He dropped that gun, feeling the warm blood run down his sleeve. His arm was useless—but his right gun kept firing.

Suddenly, Joe was falling from the steps, and almost as in a dream Clip saw the man straighten out, arms widespread, blood staining the dust beneath him.

Clip started to step forward, and realized suddenly that he was on his knees. He got up, feeling another slug hit him in the side. Gonny was facing him, legs spread wide, a fire-blossoming gun in either hand. A streak of red crossed his jaw.

Clip started toward him, holding his last bullet. Something slanted a rapier of pain along his ribs, and one of his legs tried to buckle, but still Clip held his fire. Then, suddenly, about a dozen feet away from Gonny, Clip Haynes turned loose his gun.

Almost before his eyes Gonny's gray flannel shirt turned into a crimson, sodden mass. The gunman started to fall, caught himself, and lifted a gun. They were almost body to body when the shot flamed in Clip's face. Something struck him a terrific blow on the side of the head, and he fell...

Actually it was only a minute, but it seemed hours. Men were running from every direction, and as Clip Haynes caught at somebody's leg and pulled his bloody body erect, he heard Wade gabbling in his ear. But he didn't stop. It was only a dozen feet, but it seemed a mile. Step by step, he made it, fumbling shells into his gun.

Weaving on his feet, he stopped, facing Doc Greenley. His eyes wavered, then they focused.

Doc's face went sickly with fear. He opened and closed his mouth, trying to speak. Then suddenly he broke, and went for his gun.

It was just swinging level when Clip shot him. Then Clip pitched over on his face, and lay still.

He must have been a long time coming out of it because they were all there—Ruth, Rafe Landon, Wade Manning, and Buff McCarty—when he opened his eyes. He looked from one to the other.

„Doc?“ he questioned weakly.

„You got him, Clip. We found the gold in his safe. He never moved an ounce of it, just sand. We made Porter confess. He robbed Tommy of the three thousand dollars, and later Doc Greenley made him plant it on you. One of the Barlows slugged you.

„We found the note you left in the jail. You were right. It was Doc who killed Tommy, trying to kill you. He didn't know you were Clip Haynes at first.

„I told him,“ Wade continued, „never suspecting he was the guilty one behind all this. He knew he couldn't fool you. Felt he'd given himself away somehow. He confessed before he died.“

Clip nodded. „At first—at the mine. He said Clip Haynes got ten thousand. Only the law and the bandits knew it was that much.“ Clip paused, a wan smile twisting his features. „He was the one planned that job—not Haynes. I was the law. The express company hired me. When he said that, I was suspicious.“

Clip closed his eyes, and lay very still. When he opened them again everyone was gone but Ruth. She was smiling, and she leaned over and kissed him gently on the lips.

„And Rafe?“ he questioned.

„I tried to explain, but you ran away. He's my uncle—my mother's brother. He started Wade in business here, but no one knew. He thought it might hurt Wade if people knew a gambler backed him.“

„Oh,“ he said. For a moment he was silent. Then he looked up, and they both smiled.

„That's nice,“ he said.

