

# "SMOKE 'EM DOWN!"

By Harry F. Olmsted

**Hardwick's gun-hirelings barred the trail to Wolftrack. But the Arizona pilgrim figured there never was a spread built with a wide loop that couldn't be torn down with six-guns.**

**S**TRAIGHT ahead lay Wolftrack. Brad Lonergan said the name over again to himself. Wolftrack, a town of darkness, a quiet apathetic town by the light of day, teeming with somber activity at night. Wolftrack came alive like a sinister night-prowling beast with the coming of every dusk. Brad knew that, before he was through, the six-gun in the holster at his side would be called upon to roar an answer to that dark challenge. It had been a long trail. It might prove to be the end of all long trails.

As the wild goose migrates, a thousand miles separates the Nogales Gateway, where a hundred generations of warriors have been reared, from the rolling sweep of Black Wolf range, in Montana. But as Brad Lonergan traveled, it was half again as far and the time required infinitely greater. Anything can happen on a ride like that.

From the bold bluff overlooking Wolf Creek, this gaunt, silver-templed desert man sucked at a cold cigaret and looked back over the long, long trail. There was much to compensate its rigors.

That Custer affair, for instance. In Custer, for no reason at all, Brad had thrown in his gun with that fire-eating, short-complected hairpin to cow four whiskey-crazed



gunslammers, ranicky and on the mean. Shorty! Brad grinned. Mighty easy to partner with a feller like him. Just knowin' him had made succeeding miles seem shorter.

Brad snapped away his cigaret, and looked to his cinch, before undertaking the steep trail that fell away off the tableland. At a sound along the back-trail, he stiffened, jerked the latigo, dropped the stirrup and whirled to the swift approach of seven horsemen.

Brad crouched against his horse, his hand sliding to his Colt's. He was alive to the menace of the Black Wolf. His mouth was a hard line. His eyes were slitted gimlet points.

They came fast and were still fifty yards away when Brad relaxed, smiled, and leaped forward. In full stride, the leader of those seven bit dirt, bounded forward, laughing. They came together, gripping hands,

pummeling each other.

"Hello, Arizona, yuh trigger-bendin', lead-swappin' so-and-so!"

"H'are yuh, Shorty? Howcome you doggin' my trail?"

"Doggin' hell! Thought yore gun wasn't fer hire."

"Which it ain't."

"Don't josh me, feller. No man shoves his bronc inter Black Wolf these days 'less he's peddlin' smoke. Hey, fellers!" He turned to his idle fellows. "Here's the salty gent I was tellin' yuh about. Arizona shore saved my bacon in Custer."

**T**HE boys swung down to pump Brad's hand. Upstanding youngsters, packing double, their eyes reflected their willingness to crack shells in lethal business. Their actions now proved it as a sudden hail wept up from below. A bullet screamed over them and the flat crack of a gun echoed it. Their eyes swung down. Four rifle-gripping horsemen knifed through the creek tangle, hit the trail and surged up. Shorty loosened his gun, scowled at Brad.

"Got a ticket inter this hell, Arizona?"

"Only this." Brad patted his holster.

Shorty shook his head. "Won't do! Nobody drifts inter Black Wolf now. Cut an' run, feller. We'll hold 'em off yore tail. You done me a good turn an' I won't stand fer 'em makin' you a peg tuh hang their boothill blanket on. Git!"

Brad beamed on him. "Who, me? My ears ain't cut the runnin' way uh the leather, Shorty. I'm headin' fer Wolftrack."

The two swapped glances as the rest hairpinned. Shorty saw unreasoning conviction in Brad's eyes, shrugged.

"It's you fer it, feller. But it won't be easy. Button yore lip an' pin back yore ears. Mebby I kin bluff 'er through."

The four riders roared onto the tableland, plowed to a jolty stop. Three were slouchy, sneering hybrids, with lax mouths and shifty,

shoe-button eyes. The leader, a cadaverous, bow-legged gunman, regarded them with the keen scrutiny of yellow eyes. Every fibre of the man screamed the feline threat of claw and fang.

"Draggin' yore picket-pins, gents?" he hummed flatly.

"Habitual," grinned Shorty, "an' buckin' our hobbles down yon slant if it kills."

"Which it may," said the leader softly. "Business or pleasure?"

"Who wants tuh know?"

"Tiger Skeen!" rapped the cadaverous one. "Same bein' me—the segundo fer Senator Hardwick. You got a ticket?"

Shorty nodded and whipped a paper from his pocket. Skeen snatched it, raced through its contents. His malevolent eyes tallied them.

"This here says seven," he snarled. "I count eight."

"It says I'm tuh fetch seven," corrected Shorty, bridling. "An' I brung 'em. Hell, can't I read? Don't come no hooraw on me. Tiger-man, or I'll jerk yore carcass off'n that jughead an' whup yuh down tuh house-cat size."

Skeen's fingers curled for the gun snatch and his glare scorched Shorty. Then he cooled, pocketed the sheet.

"One uh us is wrong," he said sullenly. "If it's you, yo're due fer a soon an' deep plantin'. C'mon!"

He led the way down the trail, the dust boiling under hoof as they all followed. At the bottom, they hit a wagon road and broke into a long lope. For a mile they rode silently, then Shorty reined beside Brad, spoke from the corner of his mouth.

"I can't savvy what'd bring a man here if not tuh sling iron. But whatever, Arizona, I figger tuh make this stick. We're hirin' out tuh Senator Hardwick, who owns Wolftrack an' hopes tuh own Montana."

"A senator?"

"Hell, no. But aimin' thataway. Seems he's froze hissself inter Wolftrack, which he

aims tuh have changed to Hardwick. Likewise all uh Fergus County south uh Flatwillow an’ the Snowys tuh Hardwick County. Senator Hardwick uh Hardwick County. Savvy ?”

Brad nodded. “When a man tries tuh spread his shadder over too much range, Shorty, he sometimes piles up an’ ain’t got no shadder. Who pays his gunnies in that case?”

Shorty shrugged. “I’m a gambler—me. An’ I got it figgered Hardwick’s broad enough acrost the britches tuh cast a right smart shadder. He won’t pile.”

A cold grin froze on Brad’s face. “Never was a spread built up with a wide loop that can’t be tore down with a six-gun!”

Shorty flung him a sidelong look. “Cripes, feller! You ain’t. . .”

What he thought went unsaid as Tiger Skeen dropped back.

“Through them willers is Wolftrack, boys,” he announced. “Yonder a man’s only as good as his gunhand. Remember though, that the Senator don’t c’ral no drunks or trouble makers. They’re shore boothill snaggers.”

“When do we eat?” broke in Shorty. The Tiger glared at him. Already he disliked the runt, almost to the point of murder.

“You’ll eat after yuh see the Senator,” he rasped, “if yuh still got appetite. Here we are.”

THEY splashed across the creek and rose to flat, high ground beyond. Before them was a drab scatteration of sod-roofed log structures, pine board shacks and bleached canvas. The place seemed dead. Sleepy dogs lifted their heads to bark half-heartedly at the intruders. A hip-shot Injun pony nickered from a hitchrack. In front of the general store a bearded prospector outfitted his jennies, and on the porch of a whiskey saloon a group of sleepy Tongue River Injun bucks reclined. Dead was right. Yet as Brad swung down before the imposing Buffalo Bull Saloon, he felt the weight of suspicious, prying eyes.

They all followed Tiger Skeen into the

Buffalo Bull—an extraordinarily large log affair sprawling beneath the gnarled limbs of giant cottonwoods. One full side of the puncheon-floored barroom was taken up by a long planked bar, faced with matched logs and backed with a fine mirror.

Along the other side were stained, scar-topped tables. And on all the walls save the rear where rooms fronted a balcony, hung magnificently mounted buffalo heads. The Buffalo Bull was “Senator” Hardwick’s pride.

It was quite ornate.

Tiger Skeen wheeled them up to the bar, bought drinks.

“Senator up yet?” he asked the barkeeper.

“Up?” sniffed the man. “Is he ever down? I never see such a feller, Tiger. If he sleeps, nobody knows when. Shore he’s up, a-workin’ in his office.”

Skeen grunted, leveled a finger at Shorty.

“You, smart alick!” he sneered. “Come with me. Step light an’ take off yore hat when yuh face the Senator. The rest uh you gunnies wait here till yo’re called.”

He and Shorty ascended the stairs, rattled across the balcony, disappeared through a door. Ten minutes later Shorty came down, his face stiff, his eyes writhing. He favored Brad with a sly wink as Tiger Skeen called the second gunman. One by one, at five-minute intervals, the seven Custer gunmen went up to face the Wolf Creek boss. Brad was last to be called.

When he stepped across the threshold of Hardwick’s office, Brad felt the hypnotic power of the man’s eyes. For minutes that seemed hours, he met the stare of a large, splendidly proportioned man who would have been handsome save for chill amber eyes and a forbidding severity of the mouth. Something in Brad’s level gaze moved the man. He motioned Tiger out.

“That’s all, Skeen. They’ve all qualified. See that they’re fed. Be where I can lay a hand on you.”

Tiger grunted, and stepped out. Hardwick

motioned Brad into a chair and when he spoke, it was with the practiced ease of an orator.

“Your name?”

“Lonergan. Arizona Lonergan!”

“From Arizona?”

“Right.”

“And looking for gun employment. What is an Arizona man doing with this Custer crowd? You don’t belong with them, Lonergan. You aren’t of their stripe.”

“They’re my friends.”

“Ha! A matter of friendship. A meaningless relationship, my friend. One should be choosy. The lobo don’t make friends with the coyote. What brought you north?”

“I’m on the drift.”

A drifter, eh? It don’t fit you, my man. But let it pass. I can hire plenty like your friends, few like yourself. I need a man. One without fear, asking no odds in the game of guns. Someone unknown in the Black Wolf. Someone who will disappear when his work is done.”

His amber eyes bored Brad and a chill tide of warning surged in the man from Arizona. But the deep strength of him kept his face like a mask.

“Trimmin’ the cut, eh, Hardwick? Talk on, you interest me.”

A rising echo of hoofbeats drew their eyes out the window. A score of granite-faced gunhawks swept away from the stable and up the valley. A thin smile played about the corners of Hardwick’s lips.

“Mine, Lonergan,” he said proudly. “Body and soul, they’re mine. They hate me, but work and die for me. Why? Leadership. To a man they are outlaws. I protect them, feed them and furnish their whiskey. Slaves! Serfs! But not one to be trusted with a special job. Now you. . . .”

**H**E broke off speaking to light a cigar. “Why me?” puzzled Brad. “I might

be dangerous to you.”

“You are!” The boss blew smoke into the ceiling. “As far as any one man can be dangerous to Horner Hardwick. To lead, Lonergan, a man must possess something. In my case it is strength and judgment. I read you like a book. Smart. Ambitious. Dangerous. Without that last, I’d have no use for you. How does five thousand dollars sound?”

Brad blinked. “I’d look it over fer nits before crawlin’ into it,” he equivocated.

The Senator chuckled. “Humor becomes you, Lonergan. To earn that money will entail danger, excitement. You’ll win easily—or die. If you fail, I’ll bury you decently. If you win, I’ll hand you five thousand dollars, and you’ll leave Montana forever!”

“Astraddle of a hawss or a bullet?” Brad asked, coolly.

Hardwick’s jaws twitched. “You will leave an outlaw. Once out of the Black Wolf, my responsibility ceases. After that . . . you gather the idea? Is it clear?”

“Clear as mud,” gritted Brad. “Spread out the beddin’!”

Hardwick studied the glowing coal of his cigar.

“Up the valley,” he began, “lies the Clawhammer Ranch. Once owned by Jeff Bradley, a stubborn old coot of vile temper. One of a group that have always bucked me. I wanted Jeff to pitch up and quit, Lonergan. And what I want, I get. In his will, Bradley named. . . .”

“Will?” broke in Brad, and his eyes were suddenly chill. “Yuh mean this Jeff Bradley swallered a boothill bullet?”

The Senator nodded solemnly. “Yes, Lonergan. It was very sudden, very sad. Jeff had plenty enemies. One of them plastered him from the brush. His will named another enemy of mine as executor. Keno Savage. The last of a long list.”

“Good at dodgin’ lead, eh?”

Hardwick laughed softly, mirthlessly. “Keno’s tough, and smart. But that hasn’t

saved him. He has a daughter.”

“Oh!” breathed Brad, “a woman in it?”

“A girl,” corrected the boss, “and I want her, Lonergan. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. What Horner Hardwick wants. . . .”

“He gets,” finished Brad. “I get yuh, Senator. An’ ‘cause this gal don’t like yore face, you want me tuh make love to her?”

An open anger burned sullenly in Hardwick.

“Forget that, Lonergan. I’ll do my own lovemaking. Your job is to take her out of the Clawhammer Ranch house, where Keno and his men have holed up.”

“I see,” said Brad, frostily. “Walk right in on a bunch uh ringtailed catamounts, smoke ‘em down an’ snake out the gal. Ain’t that nice? Ha; No can do, Senator.”

“I’m telling you what you do, Lonergan,” said Hardwick stiffly.

“An’ I’m doin’ as I damn please, savvy?”

“You’ll do as I say, Arizona-man, or. . . .” The monarch shrugged. “Listen! From now on, you are, well, say Jeff Bradley’s nephew—Lon Bradley, from Arizona. You appear at the Clawhammer Ranch and order Keno to vacate. He’ll vilify me and talk about fighting if it wasn’t for the girl. You offer to take the lady to safety, to Lewiston. Insist, understand? Bring her to me, pocket your five thousand and ride out with the charge of murder on your head.”

“Kill Savage, bring you his gal an’ rabbit,” translated Brad cynically.

He raised one eyebrow.

“I didn’t say that,” reproved Hardwick, almost gently. “Your job is to get me the lady. Take it or leave it. And long life in the Black Wolf is not to the careful-minded.”

Features frozen, Brad made a cigaret, laughing mirthlessly. An inner urge bade him rise, destroy this monster and fight to the last cartridge against his hirelings. But caution shoved out a new deck.

“It may work, Senator,” he said at length, “but I doubt it. Why not tell this Keno that

I’ve fetched a crew from Arizona. Then call in six-eight uh yore gunnies that he don’t know. We’d have ‘im in a split stick thataway.”

Brad watched him closely.

Hardwick pondered that, puffing thoughtfully. Slow lights burned in his amber eyes.

“In some ways,” he conceded, “the plan beats mine. It’s worth trying. You can use these boys from Custer. Here’s the way we’ll work it. . . .”

FOR long minutes he talked, stressing his plan with a forefinger that beat a tattoo on his table. When he had finished, Brad rose, nodded, left the office. Just outside the Buffalo Bull, he found Tiger Skeen grinning like a cat.

“Make the raffle, feller?” he inquired.

“Cert. Headin’ fer the Clawhammer now tuh make me a play. Hardwick wants tuh see you, now. Say!” Brad glanced along the racks. “Where’s my bronc? I don’t want ever’ stray hairpin thumbin’ that hawss.”

“Nobody thumbed yore hawss, Arizona. I put him in a stall on the oats. See Pete Prentice, the stable boy, an’ he’ll rig yuh a fresh critter. We’ll go eat right after I see the Senator.”

Brad started for the stable and Tiger went direct to Hardwick’s office. The monarch was staring fixedly at him.

“Well?”

“His hawss is branded Circle Dart under the mane,” he explained. “He forks a rimfire Silver City saddle with a blanket roll. Nothin’ in the roll but a slicker, a wore-out Bisley .44 an’ two boxes uh shells.”

Hardwick stroked his freshly shaven jowl. “Don’t mean a thing, Tiger. How do you rate this one?”

Tiger Skeen swelled. “An old hand in the gun game, Senator. Prouder’n a yearlin’ bull, an’ dangerous as a rattler. Over my sights, he shapes as a top gun hand.”

“If you always keep him in your sights,

Tiger,” said Hardwick, dryly. “He’s no drifter. But he’s safe as long as he don’t fool us. Watch him all the time. Keep him in our pincers. Send out that Custer crowd with him. They’ll make a play to enter Clawhammer after dark. Tell the boys on guard to smoke up the play, plenty. And be set for trouble. That’s all.”

Tiger strolled out, made his way to the street. The Custer gunmen were just leaving the stable. They stopped as Brad met them. Shorty was feeling the effect of the whiskey he had drunk, and had sold his boys an idea.

“Arizona,” he said, and his voice trembled with rage. “You like this layout?”

“Right smart,” grinned Brad.

“Damned if I do,” swore the half-pint. “Too much skunk oil here fer an honest gunhawk.” His companions rumbled concurrence.

“What yuh figgerin’ on doin’?” asked Brad, wondering about his plan.

“We’re quittin’!”

“Hey, hairpins!” came a hail, and Tiger Skeen bowlegged toward them. “How about some chow at the Chink’s?”

“Tuh hell with it!” snarled Shorty. “Like you said, I’ve lost my appetite. We’re ridin’ out, tuh where we kin eat honest food that don’t smell uh skunk.”

Tiger pulled up short, his eyes glittering. “Leavin’ us flat, eh?”

“We don’t owe you nothin’,” Shorty rattled on. “We’re hittin’ the trail.”

“Not out—you ain’t,” said Tiger, and his fingers writhed nervously.

Brad moved back a step to watch the tableau. When Shorty spoke again, his voice rasped with strain. His thick shoulders hunched and he moved toward Tiger Skeen.

“You figgerin’ tuh stop us, yuh skin-dried stink lizard? One side, before I slap yuh windin’!”

Eyes slitted. Tiger took a step toward him, just as Slim, one of the Custer men, jerked Shorty back and stepped before him, his fists

balled.

“Git back, Shorty. That wolf’ll make beef uh yore carcass. Come dancin’ in, Tiger-man. Take on somebody near yore size.”

A dry laugh rattled across the Tiger’s lips and Brad felt the breath of death. With a flashing draw, Tiger hit holster. Caught foul, Slim made a try to match the killer, as did Brad and the rest. But Tiger was a slip-cock artist and his gun gushed before a man of them had the feel of his iron. Slim fell flat in the dusty road, his gun skidding some feet away. Gasping with the fearful effort, he crawled forward, with clawing, clutching fingers. Deliberately then, Tiger raised his spurred heel and brought it grinding down on the dying man’s wrist. And there he held it until Slim was dead. Almost before Slim chinned the dust, doors slammed to disgorge men whose weapons menaced the Custer crowd. It was suicide to go through. One by one, they elevated. All but Brad. Nauseated, he turned blindly and entered the stable.

Behind him, Tiger Skeen was sneering something about, “Now, boys, where was it you said you was goin’?”

They stared at him stonily.

“Pouch the smoke,” said Shorty, sullenly. “We ain’t licked, but we shore savvy when we’ve lost our stacks. You win the augerment.”

**T**IGER nodded with savage satisfaction, but made no move to reholster. “Fork yore cayuses an’ toiler Arizona,” he crisped. “An’ if yuh have other funny notions, start ‘em by crackin’ shells. Git goin’!”

When they had turned and entered the stable, Tiger stared down at the huddled body of Slim. “I wonder,” he mused. “Somebody’s done talked with them hairpins. I wonder who?”

He motioned for a pair of onlookers to carry the body away, turned on his heel and headed for the restaurant. In the barn, Brad looked to the comfort of his *grulla*, and

grinned wryly at the plain evidence that his roll had been tampered with. Pete Prentice, the stable boy, led Brad out a rangy bay horse. The kid's dark eyes were wide and his lips white at the corners.

“Gosh!” he murmured. “Wasn't that awful. I was talkin' to that feller jest a minute before.”

Brad glanced at the Custer gunmen, who were saddled and ready.

“Hey, Shorty,” he called. “Ride on out west, “travelin' slow. I'll ketch yuh.” When they had clattered out, he turned to the kid. “So you was talkin' with Slim? Mebby you talked him into a dyin'.”

The boy nodded sorrowfully. “Reckon I did, Mister. But I had tuh talk.”

“Talk's dangerous in Wolftrack.”

“Tuh hell with it!” Pete's voice lifted. “I'm fed up. A feller's better off dead than in this murder hole. Yo're ridin' to the Clawhammer, ain't yuh? Gawd, why do yuh crowd a man that-away? It ain't human. An' the buryin' grounds is crowdin' outa fence...”

“Easy, son,” Brad laid a cautioning hand on the kid's shoulder. He shook it off.

“My gal, she—” he choked. “Vona's out yonder, an' not a thing I kin do.”

A stream of emotion raced through Brad. His eyes lit with compassion and understanding. One time, a long, long time ago. . . . Brad clamped down on his lip, jammed on his hat and rose to the saddle.

“Dog whines an' chin slobber never won a gal, kid,” he said kindly. “Neither has a dead man. Bridle yore tongue. If yuh love this gal an' jest gotta get sucked into this, be at the Clawhammer come dark. Find Shorty an' his waddies. Tell 'em anything. But come heeled an' rearin' tuh sling a gun—fer Vona. Yuh got it?”

Pete had it. He straightened and youth leaped back into his eyes, and hope. He was laughing his thanks as Brad's pony surged from the stable.

WHERE the Black Wolf road dips out of the creek tangle, Brad, Shorty and five riders drew rein. Not voluntarily. But by invitation. The Clawhammer ranch house was just ahead. From its log wall a smoke plume had blossomed and a warning ball had sped over the heads of these invaders.

From his shirt pocket, Brad drew a tan neckerchief. Waving it before him, he broke into the open, the six Custer men following. But if the first warning shot had been sudden, the volley that now broke from the valley borders was breath-taking. Guns roared from the high ground. Lead whispered and sang. Brad chuckled. Hardwick's men were playing their part well.

Shorty clutched at his breast and sagged across the horn. A companion caught his horse and turned it. The Custer men wheeled back and sought the shelter of the creek timber. Brad roweled through the leaden sleet and popped into the open door of a barn. The whole thing was part of the play to deceive those defenders of the cabin who watched the thing with puzzled eyes.

Roll of gunfire rattled into nothingness along the hill borders. An uncanny silence succeeded. In the barn, Brad lit down, slipped his cinches and patted the trembling neck of his horse. A short laugh tumbled across his bared teeth.

“Whee-ew. Mebbyso that was play actin', but if so, Brad Lonergan, you was never cut out fer an actor.”

He was peering out. The cabin was hardly a hundred feet away. Brad fastened his neckerchief on a pitchfork and thrust it outside. For a moment silence, then. . .

“Spill it!” came the cutting challenge. “An' if it don't sound right we take to the smoke. What yuh want?”

“I want inside,” called back the Arizonian. “Tuh make some medicine.”

The reply came hard on the tail of his words. Keno Savage, opined Brad, must be a man of lightning decision.

“Come ahead! Lift yore hands an’ no tricks.”

But Brad was already on his way, darting from his cover and racing for the cabin door. He was halfway across when the first bullet hummed past him. Roaring guns again echoed along the high ground, on either side of the valley. Lead was searing Brad’s heels as he lurched through the suddenly opened door. Strong arms seized him, jerked away his .45 and patted him for hideouts.

Brad’s eyes were shining as he faced Keno Savage, a seamed veteran of the prairies. Nor was he in any doubt that this was Keno — this diminutive, steel-eyed rawhide, whose lips were flattened with the rigors of hardship, persecution and the stubborn will to resist aggression.

“Say yore piece, feller,” he said icily, “an’ if yuh lie, I’ll know it. Who are yuh?”

“I’m Brad Lonergan!”

“Brad Lonergan?” Keno started, and a mutter of surprised whispering ran around the grouped men. “Mebby so. Mebby not. Yore eyes are right. But Brad Lonergan would have some way uh provin’ hisself.”

Brad nodded and turned back his vest. On it glittered the gold and enamel badge of the Arizona Rangers. Keno laughed softly, stepped forward and gripped the Arizonian’s hand.

“Can’t say I’m glad tuh see yuh in this mess. Brad,” he said simply. “‘Cause I reckon we’re all doomed. Still, in wormin’ through Hardwick’s blockade trail, you fetch us our first real hope. Here’s the Clawhammer, such as it is. Wisht ol’ Jeff Bradley was here tuh welcome yuh. I regret—”

“Never waste time regrettin’ what yuh can’t in no ways help,” said Brad philosophically.

He ran his eyes over the five men who stood at different angles of the big room. What he saw was resignation to death and grim determination to fight to the bitter end. An instant later he knew the reason. She came

through the door, slender, smiling, her brave brown eyes fixed upon Brad with quizzical intentness.

Brad bowed and smiled, as Keno introduced the girl. But almost at once his face was cast in the grim mold of the Nogales manhunter.

**T**HROUGHOUT that slow, dragging day, the Clawhammer cabin echoed to the buzz of talk as warriors planned.

In the first flat blackness succeeding the afterglow, a low whistle came from outside. The lamp was taken into another room, the door jerked open. Seven men filed in. The door closed, leaving them in blackness. A man fetched in the light. Shorty and the Custer men found themselves under the muzzles of as many rifles. With a soft laugh, Pete leaped to Vona’s side. Brad stood grinning at Shorty.

“Hello, yuh sawed-off, hammered-down hunk uh hawss meat. How yuh like workin’ fer the Senator?”

Shorty’s doubtful eyes searched the Arizonian’s face.

“What is this, Arizona? You orta know the only way I’d sling a gun fer that killin’ skunk would be with a six-gun in my back. You needn’t lay them irons on this outfit. Like we told yuh, whatever looks good tuh you in this, suits us.”

“We’re in a jam, feller,” snorted one of the Custer men, “an’ lookin’ fer a out. We ain’t forgot Slim.”

“We’re all in a jam, boys,” said Brad, “an’ oll lookin’ fer the same out. We’ll never find it, long as Senator Hardwick’s shadder glooms the Black Wolf. Tonight we gun him loose from that shadder. I’m shore of yore help, myself. But Keno an’ his boys kinda want tuh hear yuh say uncle.”

“Uncle!” yelled Shorty, in the laugh that lifted. “I’m fer the Clawhammer from line camp tuh cattle cars. I’ll see yuh through this till hell freezes ice, jest tuh slam hammers



ag’in that murderin’ Tiger Skeen!”

“Now yo’re shoutin’!”

“Run the damned kioats to their holes!”

All doubt was stamped in the very venom of their loyalty. Guns lowered. Pete, tearing his hands from Vona’s, surged forward.

“What we waitin’ fer?” His voice was edged with hate.

“One minute, kid!” Brad rebuked him. “Back water. Keep yore hand on yore gun an’ yore eyes skinned, but shut yore mouth. Stay with Vona. When we leave, take her into the willers an’ lie low till yuh see how the wind blows. If we lose, try an’ sneak her through tuh safety.”

“But—” protested Pete.

“But—nothing! Them’s orders, Keno, step in an’ change tuh some uh Vona’s rags. Yo’re goin’ with me. Shorty, you’ll lead the hawssbackers into Wolftrack!”

Like gunshots, he snapped his orders. No one made protest. In him they recognized the leader they had lacked. In his disconnected demands they sensed the skeleton of a bold plan.

**W**OLFTRACK had come alive. From saloons and gaming hells came canned music, feminine laughter, man tones. The main stem, poorly lighted with smoky oil lamps, gave upon dark passageways, convenient places for villainy and murder, black lanes that led to little-used doors, crimson-lighted cribs, faithlessness. In one such alley Keno Savage tottered after Brad Lonergan.

“Hey,” complained the Arizona man, “walk lady-like, an’ graceful. Mince along.”

“Mince, hell!” swore Keno. “Le’s see you mince with a female skirt on an’ a scatter-gun danglin’ ‘twixt yore hind laigs. Here—here’s the door. Hardwick’s hangout. Wait! How yuh aimin’ tuh work this?”

“Jest horn in an’ talk to the polecat,” said Brad. “Pull his stinger before he kin call up

too much he’p.”

“Fer, why, Brad? Le’s shoot the kioat.”

“Nope. I want tuh find out who killed Jeff Bradley.”

“Huh. That ain’t no secret. Tiger Skeen’s bin braggin’ about that job fer six months.”

“Why didn’t yuh say so?” snarled Brad, and he shouldered into a dark hall.

“Yuh never asked me,” grumbled Keno. “On the dead thievin’. Brad. You really figger tuh make a go uh this . . . lissen!”

From the street came echoing hoofbeats. An excited messenger hit dirt, bawling something about, “They’re loose an’ on the mean. Clawhammer’s gunhungry an’ jerkin’ triggers!”

Electric silence gripped Wolftrack. A woman screamed, shrilly. A rising murmur of frenzied man talk succeeded. And the scraping of many boots. And over all, like a thin threat, came the distant war cry of Shorty and his roweling Clawhammer crew.

“C’mon!” barked Brad. “We gotta dust, or we’ll lose the Senator in the crowd.”

He raced ahead, dragging the cursing Keno. Ahead, light poured from under a door. They shoved through it—into the barroom. It was empty, even the bartenders having rushed to the street. From somewhere came footsteps, the slamming of a door. Brad whirled to the balcony—and looked up into the gray, enigmatic face of Senator Hardwick.

“Well, well, Lonergan,” he greeted them. “You made it. Come up!”

He motioned them to the stairs, turned back to his quarters. Brad, cool now as mountain water, felt Keno tremble with a great wrath, calmed him.

“Easy, ol’ son. It won’t be long now.”

They hit the stairs and started up. Keno’s clumping was anything but ladylike. Behind them the saloon doors swung in. Tiger Skeen stood blinking there, his sly gaze weighing the pair on the stairs.

“Hey—Senator!” he bawled, his hand snaking in the draw. “Skunk tracks! That ain’t

the Savage filly. We're tricked!"

Things happened then. Brad whirled, leaped to the floor. As he lit, his gun flashed out; roared—once. A slug smashed him just above the left armpit, skewing him. And as he fell he crumpled. But his instinctive hammerdraw had avenged the murder of Jeff Bradley. One ounce of lead had closed Tiger Skeen's eyes in death, had sealed his ironic lips forever.

From the staircase, lurid curses lifted as Keno struggled to emerge from the encumbering dress. When he made it, the fabric fouled the hammers of the scattergun. At last he swung up the deadly arm. On the balcony stood Senator Hardwick. Every inch a killer now, his lips were drawn flat, his eyes slitted with a hooded threat. The black snout of his pistol pitched down on the man he hated most.

"What a pleasure, Keno," he purred, "to have you come asking for it."

From the floor, Brad thumbed a slug at the voice. Brushed by bullet backwash, Hardwick flung down as a load of buck screamed over his head and smashed into the bracket lamp. Then the Senator was ducking into his quarters, with Keno stuffing shell and scrambling after him.

**B**RAD found his feet. Roar of guns, cries of men, pound of hoofs, made the night hideous as Shorty led his warriors along the main stem. Men broke into the Buffalo Bull. Brad ducked behind the stairs in a hail of lead. His three well-placed shots darkened the saloon. Now Brad was on the balcony, feeling his way into Hardwick's black apartment. He found Keno venting curses as he fumbled a rope that dropped from the sill of an opened window.

"Damn rabbit," spot the rawhide. "Playin' his cards close to his belly. How kin yuh fan a man with buck when yuh can't ketch 'im?"

"Thisaway," gritted Brad, and eased down the rope. At the bottom, he tarried only to

know that Keno followed, then leaped along a dark alley. Before him, three men ducked out of the bullet-scourged street, splashing shots at a pursuing horseman.

Brad eased ahead, and froze as a portal opened. Voices. A pang of fear stabbed the Arizona man. The voice was Vona's!

"Petel!" came the low command. "Come back in here. You don't know. . . ."

"I'm findin' him, honey," came Pete's sullen retort. "This country ain't wuth a dime with Hardwick alive!"

From behind, and across the dark lane, a low, venomous chuckle lifted. Came a low, lipless challenge in the Senator's slurring tones.

"Lonergan!" it said. "You're under my sights. My finger is on the trigger. An ounce of pressure and you die!"

"What's stoppin' yuh?" asked Brad, icily.

"Ha!" laughed the mad dreamer of the Black Wolf, "that you may know the price of crossing Senator Hardwick. When your grave is forgotten, I will dominate these ranges. I rated you right. Ambition — brains — courage. But no honor. You failed me, Lonergan, and threw away life, wealth, power. As the false nephew of Jeff Bradley, you could have returned after the smoke had died down, returned to be a power in Montana."

Brad laughed. "Yo're mistaken, Senator. I am the nephew of Jeff Bradley. As boss of the Clawhammer, I'll live to wipe the last of yore spawnings from Black Wolf, What you want, you get, eh? Well, you've wanted killing for a long time—and tonight you get it!"

Brad hurled himself forward, down. Hardwick's gun bellowed and the slug screamed off the wall where Brad had stood. As Brad fell, clawing at his iron, he was conscious of a timed gunbeat from the portal where Vona had spoken, of the two-tongued roar of Keno's buckshot gun.

And, suddenly, an uncanny silence was on Wolftrack. Firing had ceased. As has been the case since dawn of war, hireling warriors had

fled when the going got rough. From the street came gruff commands, as Hardwick men were herded into a sullen, beaten pack.

As Brad rose, boots slogged through the darkness. Keno’s yelp rang out.

“Seived ‘im, Brad! He’s deader’n a buzzard singed in the fires uh hell. His sixes was good but my jacks beat ‘em. Cards?”

“This partic’lar hand is played out, Keno,” said Brad, conscious of his throbbing wound. “Pete, yuh dang fool! Why’d yuh drag Vona here—in spite uh my orders?”

“Me . . . ?” Pete’s weak voice came from the dark. “I . . .”

“Eemagine ary beardless jigger like Pete draggin’ Vona any place,” came Keno’s laugh

Vona came to Brad with a rush. Her arms came up and she kissed him.

“Pete didn’t drag me, Mister Lonergan. I fetched him to see the greatest man in Black Wolf. I figured it might help him—later. An’ . . .” she pulled his head down, “an’ we’re namin’ our first one . . . Brad!”

“Hey!” protested Pete, edging toward them. “Whatever she tells yuh about me, Brad, is her idee—not mine.”

Brad pinched the girl’s cheek, turned toward the street where Shorty bawled for the man from Arizona.

“Not bad idees, son. Jest git yuh a nice new pair uh apron-strings an’ hogtie yourself to ‘em!”