

# The Untamed



Max Brand

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# **The Untamed**

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# 1. PAN OF THE DESERT

Even to a high-flying bird this was a country to be passed over quickly. It was burned and brown, littered with fragments of rock, whether vast or small, as if the refuse were tossed here after the making of the world. A passing shower drenched the bald knobs of a range of granite hills and the slant morning sun set the wet rocks aflame with light. In a short time the hills lost their halo and resumed their brown. The moisture evaporated. The sun rose higher and looked sternly across the desert as if he searched for any remaining life which still struggled for existence under his burning course.

And he found life. Hardy cattle moved singly or in small groups and browsed on the withered bunch grass. Summer scorched them, winter humped their backs with cold and arched up their bellies with famine, but they were a breed schooled through generations for this fight against nature. In this junk-shop of the world, rattlesnakes were rulers of the soil. Overhead the buzzards, ominous black specks pendant against the white-hot sky, ruled the air.

It seemed impossible that human beings could live in this rock- wilderness. If so, they must be to other men what the lean, hardy cattle of the hills are to the corn-fed stabled beeves of the States.

Over the shoulder of a hill came a whistling which might have been attributed to the wind, had not this day been deathly calm. It was fit music for such a scene, for it seemed neither of heaven nor earth, but the soul of the great god Pan come back to earth to charm those nameless rocks with his wild, sweet piping. It changed to harmonious phrases loosely connected. Such might be the exultant improvisations of a master violinist.

A great wolf, or a dog as tall and rough coated as a wolf,

trotted around the hillside. He paused with one foot lifted and lolling, crimson tongue, as he scanned the distance and then turned to look back in the direction from which he had come. The weird music changed to whistled notes as liquid as a flute. The sound drew closer. A horseman rode out on the shoulder and checked his mount. One could not choose him at first glance as a type of those who fight nature in a region where the thermometer moves through a scale of a hundred and sixty degrees in the year to an accompaniment of cold-stabbing winds and sweltering suns. A thin, handsome face with large brown eyes and black hair, a body tall but rather slenderly made—he might have been a descendant of some ancient family of Norman nobility; but could such proud gentry be found riding the desert in a tall-crowned sombrero with chaps on his legs and a red bandana handkerchief knotted around his throat? That first glance made the rider seem strangely out of place in such surroundings. One might even smile at the contrast, but at the second glance the smile would fade, and at the third, it would be replaced with a stare of interest. It was impossible to tell why one respected this man, but after a time there grew a suspicion of unknown strength in this lone rider, strength like that of a machine which is stopped but only needs a spark of fire to plunge it into irresistible action. Strangely enough, the youthful figure seemed in tune with that region of mighty distances, with that white, cruel sun, with that bird of prey hovering high, high in the air.

It required some study to guess at these qualities of the rider, for they were such things as a child feels more readily than a grown man; but it needed no expert to admire the horse he bestrode. It was a statue in black marble, a steed fit for a Shah of Persia! The stallion stood barely fifteen hands, but to see him was to forget his size. His flanks shimmered like satin in the sun. What promise of power in the smooth, broad hips! Only an Arab poet could

run his hand over that shoulder and then speak properly of the matchless curve. Only an Arab could appreciate legs like thin and carefully drawn steel below the knees; or that flow of tail and windy mane; that generous breast with promise of the mighty heart within; that arched neck; that proud head with the pricking ears, wide forehead, and muzzle, as the Sheik said, which might drink from a pint-pot.

A rustling like dried leaves came from among the rocks and the hair rose bristling around the neck of the wolflike dog. With outstretched head he approached the rocks, sniffing, then stopped and turned shining eyes upon his master, who nodded and swung from the saddle. It was a little uncanny, this silent interchange of glances between the beast and the man. The cause of the dog's anxiety was a long rattler which now slid out from beneath a boulder, and giving its harsh warning, coiled, ready to strike. The dog backed away, but instead of growling he looked to the man.

Cowboys frequently practise with their revolvers at snakes, but one of the peculiarities of this rider was that he carried no gun, neither six-shooter nor rifle. He drew out a short knife which might be used to skin a beef or carve meat, though certainly no human being had ever used such a weapon against a five-foot rattler. He stooped and rested both hands on his thighs. His feet were not two paces from the poised head of the snake. As if marvelling at this temerity, the big rattler tucked back his head and sounded the alarm again. In response the cowboy flashed his knife in the sun. Instantly the snake struck but the deadly fangs fell a few inches short of the riding boots. At the same second the man moved. No eye could follow the leap of his hand as it darted down and fastened around the snake just behind the head. The long brown body writhed about his wrist, with rattles clashing. He severed the head deftly and tossed the twisting mass back on the rocks.

Then, as if he had performed the most ordinary act, he

rubbed his gloves in the sand, cleansed his knife in a similar manner, and stepped back to his horse. Contrary to the rules of horse-nature, the stallion had not flinched at sight of the snake, but actually advanced a high-headed pace or two with his short ears laid flat on his neck, and a sudden red fury in his eyes. He seemed to watch for an opportunity to help his master. As the man approached after killing the snake the stallion let his ears go forward again and touched his nose against his master's shoulder. When the latter swung into the saddle, the wolf-dog came to his side, reared, and resting his forefeet on the stirrup stared up into the rider's face. The man nodded to him, whereat, as if he understood a spoken word, the dog dropped back and trotted ahead. The rider touched the reins and galloped down the easy slope. The little episode had given the effect of a three-cornered conversation. Yet the man had been as silent as the animals.

In a moment he was lost among the hills, but still his whistling came back, fainter and fainter, until it was merely a thrilling whisper that dwelt in the air but came from no certain direction.

His course lay towards a road which looped whitely across the hills. The road twisted over a low ridge where a house stood among a grove of cottonwoods dense enough and tall enough to break the main force of any wind. On the same road, a thousand yards closer to the rider of the black stallion, was Morgan's place.



## 2. THE PANTHER

In the ranch house old Joseph Cumberland frowned on the floor as he heard his daughter say: "It isn't right, Dad. I never noticed it before I went away to school, but since I've come back I begin to feel that it's shameful to treat Dan in this way."

Her eyes brightened and she shook her golden head for emphasis. Her father watched her with a faintly quizzical smile and made no reply. The dignity of ownership of many thousand cattle kept the old rancher's shoulders square, and there was an antique gentility about his thin face with its white goatee. He was more like a quaint figure of the seventeenth century than a successful cattleman of the twentieth.

"It is shameful, Dad," she went on, encouraged by his silence, "or you could tell me some reason."

"Some reason for not letting him have a gun?" asked the rancher, still with the quizzical smile.

"Yes, yes!" she said eagerly, "and some reason for treating him in a thousand ways as if he were an irresponsible boy."

"Why, Kate, gal, you have tears in your eyes!"

He drew her onto a stool beside him, holding both her hands, and searched her face with eyes as blue and almost as bright as her own. "How does it come that you're so interested in Dan?"

"Why, Dad, dear," and she avoided his gaze, "I've always been interested in him. Haven't we grown up together?"

"Part ways you have."

"And haven't we been always just like brother and sister?"

"You're talkin' a little more'n sisterly, Kate."

"What do you mean?"

"Ay, ay! What do I mean! And now you're all red. Kate, I got an idea it's nigh onto time to let Dan start on his way."

He could not have found a surer way to drive the crimson from her face and turn it white to the lips.

"Dad!"

"Well, Kate?"

"You wouldn't send Dan away!"

Before he could answer she dropped her head against his shoulder and broke into great sobs. He stroked her head with his calloused, sunburned hand and his eyes filmed with a distant gaze.

"I might have knowed it!" he said over and over again; "I might have knowed it! Hush, my silly gal."

Her sobbing ceased with magic suddenness.

"Then you won't send him away?"

"Listen to me while I talk to you straight," said Joe Cumberland, "and accordin' to the way you take it will depend whether Dan goes or stays. Will you listen?"

"Dear Dad, with all my heart!"

"Humph!" he grunted, "that's just what I don't want. This what I'm goin' to tell you is a queer thing—a mighty lot like a fairy tale, maybe. I've kept it back from you years an' years thinkin' you'd find out the truth about Dan for yourself. But bein' so close to him has made you sort of blind, maybe! No man will criticize his own hoss."

"Go on, tell me what you mean. I won't interrupt."

He was silent for a moment, frowning to gather his thoughts.

"Have you ever seen a mule, Kate?"

"Of course!"

"Maybe you've noticed that a mule is just as strong as a horse—"

"Yes."

"—but their muscles ain't a third as big?"

"Yes, but what on earth—"

"Well, Kate, Dan is built light an' yet he's stronger than the biggest men around here."

"Are you going to send him away simply because he's

strong?"

"It doesn't show nothin'," said the old man gently, "savin' that he's different from the regular run of men—an' I've seen a considerable pile of men, honey. There's other funny things about Dan maybe you ain't noticed. Take the way he has with hosses an' other animals. The wildest man-killin', spur-hatin' bronchos don't put up no fight when them long legs of Dan settle round 'em."

"Because they know fighting won't help them!"

"Maybe so, maybe so," he said quietly, "but it's kind of queer, Kate, that after most a hundred men on the best hosses in these parts had ridden in relays after Satan an' couldn't lay a rope on him, Dan could jest go out on foot with a halter an' come back in ten days leadin' the wildest devil of a mustang that ever hated men."

"It was a glorious thing to do!" she said.

Old Cumberland sighed and then shook his head.

"It shows more'n that, honey. There ain't any man but Dan that can sit the saddle on Satan. If Dan should die, Satan wouldn't be no more use to other men than a piece of haltered lightnin'. An' then tell me how Dan got hold of that wolf, Black Bart, as he calls him."

"It isn't a wolf, Dad," said Kate, "it's a dog. Dan says so himself."

"Sure he says so," answered her father, "but there was a lone wolf prowlin' round these parts for a considerable time an' raisin' Cain with the calves an' the colts. An' Black Bart comes pretty close to a description of the lone wolf. Maybe you remember Dan found his 'dog' lyin' in a gully with a bullet through his shoulder. If he was a dog how'd he come to be shot —"

"Some brute of a sheep herder may have done it. What could it prove?"

"It only proves that Dan is queer—powerful queer! Satan an' Black Bart are still as wild as they ever was, except that they got one master. An' they ain't got a thing to do with

other people. Black Bart'd tear the heart out of a man that so much as patted his head."

"Why," she cried, "he'll let me do anything with him!"

"Humph!" said Cumberland, a little baffled; "maybe that's because Dan is kind of fond of you, gal, an' he has sort of introduced you to his pets, damn 'em! That's just the pint! How is he able to make his man-killers act sweet with you an' play the devil with everybody else."

"It wasn't Dan at all!" she said stoutly, "and he isn't queer. Satan and Black Bart let me do what I want with them because they know I love them for their beauty and their strength."

"Let it go at that," growled her father. "Kate, you're jest like your mother when it comes to arguin'. If you wasn't my little gal I'd say you was plain pig-headed. But look here, ain't you ever felt that Dan is what I call him—different? Ain't you ever seen him get mad—jest for a minute—an' watched them big brown eyes of his get all packed full of yellow light that chases a chill up and down your back like a wrigglin' snake?"

She considered this statement in a little silence.

"I saw him kill a rattler once," she said in a low voice. "Dan caught him behind the head after he had struck. He did it with his bare hand! I almost fainted. When I looked again he had cut off the head of the snake. It was—it was terrible!"

She turned to her father and caught him firmly by the shoulders.

"Look me straight in the eye, Dad, and tell me just what you mean."

"Why, Kate," said the wise old man, "you're beginnin' to see for yourself what I'm drivin' at! Haven't you got somethin' else right on the tip of your tongue?"

"There was one day that I've never told you about," she said in a low voice, looking away, "because I was afraid that if I told you, you'd shoot Black Bart. He was gnawing a big

beef bone and just for fun I tried to take it away from him. He'd been out on a long trail with Dan and he was very hungry. When I put my hand on the bone he snapped. Luckily I had a thick glove on and he merely pinched my wrist. Also I think he realized what he was doing for otherwise he'd have cut through the glove as if it had been paper. He snarled fearfully and I sprang back with a cry. Dan hadn't seen what happened, but he heard the snarl and saw Black Bart's bared teeth. Then—oh, it was terrible!" She covered her face.

"Take your time, Kate," said Cumberland softly.

"'Bart,' called Dan," she went on, "and there was such anger in his face that I think I was more afraid of him than of the big dog.

"Bart turned to him with a snarl and bared his teeth. When Dan saw that his face turned—I don't know how to say it!" She stopped a moment and her hands tightened.

"Back in his throat there came a sound that was almost like the snarl of Black Bart. The wolf-dog watched him with a terror that was uncanny to see, the hair around his neck fairly on end, his teeth still bared, and his growl horrible.

"'Dan!' I called, 'don't go near him!'

"I might as well have called out to a whirlwind. He leaped. Black Bart sprang to meet him with eyes green with fear. I heard the loud click of his teeth as he snapped—and missed. Dan swerved to one side and caught Black Bart by the throat and drove him into the dust, falling with him.

"I couldn't move. I was weak with horror. It wasn't a struggle between a man and a beast. It was like a fight between a panther and a wolf. Black Bart was fighting hard but fighting hopelessly. Those hands were settling tighter on his throat. His big red tongue lolled out; his struggles almost ceased. Then Dan happened to glance at me. What he saw in my face sobered him. He got up, lifting the dog with him, and flung away the lifeless weight of Bart. He began to brush the dust from his clothes, looking down as if

he were ashamed. He asked me if the dog had hurt me when he snapped. I could not speak for a moment. Then came the most horrible part. Black Bart, who must have been nearly killed, dragged himself to Dan on his belly, choking and whining, and licked the boots of his master!" "Then you do know what I mean when I say Dan is—different?"

She hesitated and blinked, as if she were shutting her eyes on a fact. "I don't know. I know that he's gentle and kind and loves you more than you love him." Her voice broke a little. "Oh, Dad, you forget the time he sat up with you for five days and nights when you got sick out in the hills, and how he barely managed to get you back to the house alive!" The old man frowned to conceal how greatly he was moved. "I haven't forgot nothin', Kate," he said, "an' everything is for his own good. Do you know what I've been tryin' to do all these years?"

"What?"

"I've been tryin' to hide him from himself! Kate, do you remember how I found him?"

"I was too little to know. I've heard you tell a little about it. He was lost on the range. You found him twenty miles south of the house."

"Lost on the range?" repeated her father softly. "I don't think he could ever have been lost. To a hoss the corral is a home. To us our ranch is a home. To Dan Barry the whole mountain-desert is a home! This is how I found him. It was in the spring of the year when the wild geese was honkin' as they flew north. I was ridin' down a gulley about sunset and wishin' that I was closer to the ranch when I heard a funny, wild sort of whistlin' that didn't have any tune to it that I recognized. It gave me a queer feelin'. It made me think of fairy stories—an' things like that! Pretty soon I seen a figure on the crest of the hill. There was a triangle of geese away up overhead an' the boy was walkin' along lookin' up as if he was followin' the trail of the wild geese.

"He was up there walkin' between the sunset an' the stars with his head bent back, and his hands stuffed into his pockets, whistlin' as if he was goin' home from school. An' such whistlin'."

"Nobody could ever whistle like Dan," she said, and smiled.

"I rode up to him, wonderin'," went on Cumberland.

"'What're you doin' round here?' I says.

"Says he, lookin' at me casual like over his shoulder: 'I'm jest takin' a stroll an' whistlin'. Does it bother you, mister?'

"'It doesn't bother me none,' says I. 'Where do you belong, sonny?'

"'Me?' says he, lookin' sort of surprised, 'why, I belong around over there!' An' he waved his hand careless over to the settin' sun.

"There was somethin' about him that made my heart swell up inside of me. I looked down into them big brown eyes and wondered—well, I don't know what I wondered; but I remembered all at once that I didn't have no son.

"'Who's your folks?' says I, gettin' more an' more curious.

"He jest looked at me sort of bored.

"'Where does your folks live at?' says I.

"'Oh, they live around here,' says he, an' he waved his hand again, an' this time over towards the east.

"Says I: 'When do you figure on reachin' home?'

"'Oh, most any day,' says he.

"An' I looked around at them brown, naked hills with the night comin' down over them. Then I stared back at the boy an' there was something that come up in me like hunger. You see, he was lost; he was alone; the queer ring of his whistlin' was still in my ears; an' I couldn't help rememberin' that I didn't have no son.

"'Then supposin' you come along with me,' says I, 'an' I'll send you home in a buckboard tomorrow?'

"So the end of it was me ridin' home with the little kid sittin' up before me, whistlin' his heart out! When I got him home I tried to talk to him again. He couldn't tell me, or he

wouldn't tell me where his folks lived, but jest kept wavin' his hand liberal to half the points of the compass. An' that's all I know of where he come from. I done all I could to find his parents. I inquired and sent letters to every rancher within a hundred miles. I advertised it through the railroads, but they said nobody'd yet been reported lost. He was still mine, at least for a while, an' I was terrible glad. "I give the kid a spare room. I sat up late that first night listenin' to the wild geese honkin' away up in the sky an' wonderin' why I was so happy. Kate, that night there was tears in my eyes when I thought of how that kid had been out there on the hills walkin' along so happy an' independent.

"But the next mornin' he was gone. I sent my cowpunchers out to look for him.

"Which way shall we ride?' they asked.

"I don't know why, but I thought of the wild geese that Dan had seemed to be followin'.

"Ride north,' I said.

"An' sure enough, they rode north an' found him. After that I didn't have no trouble with him about runnin' away—at least not durin' the summer. An' all those months I kept plannin' how I would take care of this boy who had come wanderin' to me. It seemed like he was sort of a gift of God to make up for me havin' no son. And everythin' went well until the next fall, when the geese began to fly south.

"Sure enough, that was when Dan ran away again, and when I sent my cowpunchers south after him, they found him and brought him back. It seemed as if they'd brought back half the world to me, when I seen him. But I saw that I'd have to put a stop to this runnin' away. I tried to talk to him, but all he'd say was that he'd better be movin' on. I took the law in my hands an' told him he had to be disciplined. So I started thrashin' him with a quirt, very light. He took it as if he didn't feel the whip on his shoulders, an' he smiled. But there came up a yellow light



in his eyes that made me feel as if a man was standin' right behind me with a bare knife in his hand an' smilin' jest like the kid was doin'. Finally I simply backed out of the room, an' since that day there ain't been man or beast ever has put a hand on Whistlin' Dan. To this day I reckon he ain't quite forgiven me."

"Why!" she cried, "I have never heard him mention it!"

"That's why I know he's not forgotten it. Anyway, Kate, I locked him in his room, but he wouldn't promise not to run away. Then I got an inspiration. You was jest a little toddlin' thing then. That day you was cryin' an awful lot an' I suddenly thought of puttin' you in Dan's room. I did it. I jest unlocked the door quick and then shoved you in an' locked it again. First of all you screamed terrible hard. I was afraid maybe you'd hurt yourself yellin' that way. I was about to take you out again when all at once I heard Dan start whistlin' and pretty quick your cryin' stopped. I listened an' wondered. After that I never had to lock Dan in his room. I was sure he'd stay on account of you. But now, honey, I'm gettin' to the end of the story, an' I'm goin' to give you the straight idea the way I see it.

"I've watched Dan like—like a father, almost. I think he loves me, sort of—but I've never got over being afraid of him. You see I can't forget how he smiled when I licked him! But listen to me, Kate, that fear has been with me all the time—an' it's the only time I've ever been afraid of any man. It isn't like being scared of a man, but of a panther.

"Now we'll jest nacherally add up all the points we've made about Dan —the queer way I found him without a home an' without wantin' one —that strength he has that's like the power of a mule compared with a horse—that funny control he has over wild animals so that they almost seem to know what he means when he simply looks at them (have you noticed him with Black Bart and Satan?)—then there's the yellow light that comes in his eyes when he begins to get real mad—you an' I have both seen it only once, but we

don't want to see it again! More than this there's the way he handles either a knife or a gun. He hasn't practiced much with shootin' irons, but I never seen him miss a reasonable mark—or an unreasonable one either, for that matter. I've spoke to him about it. He said: 'I dunno how it is. I don't see how a feller can shoot crooked. It jest seems that when I get out a gun there's a line drawn from the barrel to the thing I'm shootin' at. All I have to do is to pull the trigger—almost with my eyes closed!' Now, Kate, do you begin to see what these here things point to?"

"Tell me what you see," she said, "and then I'll tell you what I think of it all."

"All right," he said. "I see in Dan a man who's different from the common run of us. I read in a book once that in the ages when men lived like animals an' had no weapons except sticks and stones, their muscles must have been two or three times as strong as they are now—more like the muscles of brutes. An' their hearin' an' their sight an' their quickness an' their endurance was about three times more than that of ordinary men. Kate, I think that Dan is one of those men the book described! He knows animals because he has all the powers that they have. An' I know from the way his eyes go yellow that he has the fightin' instinct of the ancestors of man. So far I've kept him away from other men. Which I may say is the main reason I bought Dan Morgan's place so's to keep fightin' men away from our Whistlin' Dan. So I've been hidin' him from himself. You see, he's my boy if he belongs to anybody. Maybe when time goes on he'll get tame. But I reckon not. It's like takin' a panther cub—or a wolf pup—an tryin' to raise it for a pet. Some day it gets the taste of blood, maybe its own blood, an' then it goes mad and becomes a killer. An' that's what I fear, Kate. So far I've kept Dan from ever havin' a single fight, but I reckon the day'll come when someone'll cross him, and then there'll be a tornado turned loose that'll jest about wreck these parts."

Her anger had grown during this speech. Now she rose. "I won't believe you, Dad," she said. "I'd sooner trust our Dan than any man alive. I don't think you're right in a single word!"

"I was sure loco," sighed Cumberland, "to ever dream of convincin' a woman. Let it drop, Kate. We're about to get rid of Morgan's place, an' now I reckon there won't be any temptation near Dan. We'll see what time'll do for him. Let the thing drop there. Now I'm goin' over to the Bar XO outfit an' I won't be back till late tonight. There's only one thing more. I told Morgan there wasn't to be any gun-play in his place today. If you hear any shootin' go down there an' remind Morgan to take the guns off'n the men."

Kate nodded, but her stare travelled far away, and the thing she saw was the yellow light burning in the eyes of Whistling Dan.

### 3. SILENT SHOOTS

It was a great day and also a sad one for Morgan. His general store and saloon had been bought out by old Joe Cumberland, who declared a determination to clear up the landscape, and thereby plunged the cowpunchers in gloom. They partially forgave Cumberland, but only because he was an old man. A younger reformer would have met armed resistance. Morgan's place was miles away from the next oasis in the desert and the closing meant dusty, thirsty leagues of added journey to every man in the neighbourhood. The word "neighbourhood," of course, covered a territory fifty miles square.

If the day was very sad for this important reason, it was also very glad, for rustling Morgan advertised the day of closing far and wide, and his most casual patrons dropped all business to attend the big doings. A long line of buckboards and cattle ponies surrounded the place.

Newcomers galloped in every few moments. Most of them did not stop to tether their mounts, but simply dropped the reins over the heads of the horses and then went with rattling spurs and slouching steps into the saloon. Every man was greeted by a shout, for one or two of those within usually knew him, and when they raised a cry the others joined in for the sake of good fellowship. As a rule he responded by ordering everyone up to the bar.

One man, however, received no more greeting than the slamming of the door behind him. He was a tall, handsome fellow with tawny hair and a little smile of habit rather than mirth upon his lips. He had ridden up on a strong bay horse, a full two hands taller than the average cattle pony, and with legs and shoulders and straight back that unmistakably told of a blooded pedigree. When he entered the saloon he seemed nowise abashed by the silence, but

greeted the turned heads with a wave of the hand and a good-natured "Howdy, boys!" A volley of greetings replied to him, for in the mountain-desert men cannot be strangers after the first word.

"Line up and hit the red-eye," he went on, and leaning against the bar as he spoke, his habitual smile broadened into one of actual invitation. Except for a few groups who watched the gambling in the corners of the big room, there was a general movement towards the bar.

"And make it a tall one, boys," went on the genial stranger. "This is the first time I ever irrigated Morgan's place, and from what I have heard today about the closing I suppose it will be the last time. So here's to you, Morgan!"

And he waved his glass towards the bartender. His voice was well modulated and his enunciation bespoke education. This, in connection with his careful clothes and rather modish riding-boots, might have given him the reputation of a dude, had it not been for several other essential details of his appearance. His six-gun hung so low that he would scarcely have to raise his hand to grasp the butt. He held his whisky glass in his left hand, and the right, which rested carelessly on his hip, was deeply sunburned, as if he rarely wore a glove. Moreover, his eyes were marvellously direct, and they lingered a negligible space as they touched on each man in the room. All of this the cattlemen noted instantly. What they did not see on account of his veiling fingers was that he poured only a few drops of the liquor into his glass.

In the meantime another man who had never before "irrigated" at Morgan's place, rode up. His mount, like that of the tawny-haired rider, was considerably larger and more finely built than the common range horse. In three days of hard work a cattle pony might wear down these blooded animals, but would find it impossible to either overtake or escape them in a straight run. The second stranger, short-legged, barrel-chested, and with a scrub of

black beard, entered the barroom while the crowd was still drinking the health of Morgan. He took a corner chair, pushed back his hat until a mop of hair fell down his forehead, and began to roll a cigarette. The man of the tawny hair took the next seat.

"Seems to be quite a party, stranger," said the tall fellow nonchalantly.

"Sure," growled he of the black beard, and after a moment he added: "Been out on the trail long, pardner?"

"Hardly started."

"So'm I."

"As a matter of fact, I've got a lot of hard riding before me."

"So've I."

"And some long riding, too."

Perhaps it was because he turned his head suddenly towards the light, but a glint seemed to come in the eyes of the bearded man.

"Long rides," he said more amiably, "are sure hell on hosses."

"And on men, too," nodded the other, and tilted back in his chair.

The bearded man spoke again, but though a dozen cowpunchers were close by no one heard his voice except the man at his side. One side of his face remained perfectly immobile and his eyes stared straight before him drearily while he whispered from a corner of his mouth: "How long do you stay, Lee?"

"Noon," said Lee.

Once more the shorter man spoke in the manner which is learned in a penitentiary: "Me too. We must be slated for the same ride, Lee. Do you know what it is? It's nearly noon, and the chief ought to be here."

There was a loud greeting for a newcomer, and Lee took advantage of the noise to say quite openly: "If Silent said he'll come, he'll be here. But I say he's crazy to come to a place full of range riders, Bill."

"Take it easy," responded Bill. "This hangout is away off our regular beat. Nobody'll know him."

"His hide is his own and he can do what he wants with it," said Lee. "I warned him before."

"Shut up," murmured Bill, "Here's Jim now, and Hal Purvis with him!"

Through the door strode a great figure before whom the throng at the bar gave way as water rolls back from the tall prow of a ship. In his wake went a little man with a face dried and withered by the sun and small bright eyes which moved continually from side to side. Lee and Bill discovered their thirst at the same time and made towards the newcomers.

They had no difficulty in reaching them. The large man stood with his back to the bar, his elbows spread out on it, so that there was a little space left on either side of him. No one cared to press too close to this sombre-faced giant. Purvis stood before him and Bill and Lee were instantly at his side. The two leaned on the bar, facing him, yet the four did not seem to make a group set apart from the rest.

"Well?" asked Lee.

"I'll tell you what it is when we're on the road," said Jim Silent. "Plenty of time, Haines."

"Who'll start first?" asked Bill.

"You can, Kilduff," said the other. "Go straight north, and go slow. Then Haines will follow you. Purvis next. I come last because I got here last. There ain't any hurry—What's this here?"

"I tell you I seen it!" called an angry voice from a corner.

"You must of been drunk an' seein' double, partner," drawled the answer.

"Look here!" said the first man, "I'm willin' to take that any way you mean it!"

"An' I'm willin'," said the other, "that you should take it any way you damn please."

Everyone in the room was grave except Jim Silent and his

three companions, who were smiling grimly.

"By God, Jack," said the first man with ominous softness, "I'll take a lot from you but when it comes to doubtin' my word—"

Morgan, with popping eyes and a very red face, slapped his hand on the bar and vaulted over it with more agility than his plumpness warranted. He shouldered his way hurriedly through the crowd to the rapidly widening circle around the two disputants. They stood with their right hands resting with rigid fingers low down on their hips, and their eyes, fixed on each other, forgot the rest of the world.

Morgan burst in between them.

"Look here," he thundered, "it's only by way of a favour that I'm lettin' you boys wear shootin' irons today because I promised old Cumberland there wouldn't be no fuss. If you got troubles there's enough room for you to settle them out in the hills, but there ain't none at all in here!"

The gleam went out of their eyes like four candles snuffed by the wind. Obviously they were both glad to have the tension broken. Mike wiped his forehead with a rather unsteady hand.

"I ain't huntin' for no special brand of trouble," he said, "but Jack has been ridin' the red-eye pretty hard and it's gotten into that dried up bean he calls his brain."

"Say, partner," drawled Jack, "I ain't drunk enough of the hot stuff to make me fall for the line you've been handing out."

He turned to Morgan.

"Mike, here, has been tryin' to make me believe that he knew a feller who could drill a dollar at twenty yards every time it was tossed up."

The crowd laughed, Morgan loudest of all.

"Did you anyways have Whistlin' Dan in mind?" he asked.

"No, I didn't," said Mike, "an' I didn't say this here man I was talkin' about could drill them every time. But he could do it two times out of four."



"Mike," said Morgan, and he softened his disbelief with his smile and the good-natured clap on the shoulder, "you sure must of been drinkin' when you seen him do it. I allow Whistlin' Dan could do that an' more, but he ain't human with a gun."

"How d'you know?" asked Jack, "I ain't ever seen him packin' a six- gun."

"Sure you ain't," answered Morgan, "but I have, an' I seen him use it, too. It was jest sort of by chance I saw it."

"Well," argued Mike anxiously, "then you allow it's possible if Whistlin' Dan can do it. An' I say I seen a man who could turn the trick."

"An' who in hell is this Whistlin' Dan?" asked Jim Silent.

"He's the man that caught Satan, an' rode him," answered a bystander.

"Some man if he can ride the devil," laughed Lee Haines.

"I mean the black mustang that ran wild around here for a couple of years. Some people tell tales about him being a wonder with a gun. But Morgan's the only one who claims to have seen him work."

"Maybe you did see it, and maybe you didn't," Morgan was saying to Mike noncommittally, "but there's some pretty fair shots in this room, which I'd lay fifty bucks no man here could hit a dollar with a six-gun at twenty paces."

"While they're arguin'," said Bill Kilduff, "I reckon I'll hit the trail."

"Wait a minute," grinned Jim Silent, "an' watch me have some fun with these short-horns."

He spoke more loudly: "Are you makin' that bet for the sake of arguin', partner, or do you calculate to back it up with cold cash?"

Morgan whirled upon him with a scowl, "I ain't pulled a bluff in my life that I can't back up!" he said sharply.

"Well," said Silent, "I ain't so flush that I'd turn down fifty bucks when a kind Christian soul, as the preachers say, slides it into my glove. Not me. Lead out the dollar, pal, an'