



A RANGER RIDES TO RIMROCK

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

Daunt, renegade-Ranger, six-gunned his past. But the Ranger code—and Ranger courage—takes plenty killing.

CAPTAIN DAUNT raised his crippled right hand and swore an oath by its missing third finger. His eyes were burning, flame-filled pools of jet.

But his voice was cold—dangerously cold.

“Nearly there,” he monotoned. “Nearly where your gold will do you no good, Kramer. Nearly where I can make you squirm, you dog.”

Daunt lowered his hand. He turned and, with even rhythmical strides, approached

his horse, rein-tethered nearby. His three-fingered hand brushed caressingly against a holstered gun at his hip as he walked. Eyes still afire from the setting sun which topped the Sierra Negras, straight-backed and easy in his saddle, Captain Perry Daunt, formerly of the Texas Rangers, clinked his silver spurs against the sides of his buckskin bronc. He jogged toward the cluster of 'dobe shacks which was Rimrock.

Rimrock that squalidly, brazenly, climbed the mountains far south of The River. Rimrock where Kramer, the evil one, squat, sleepy-eyed, as indolently indifferent as the town to which he gave name, sat, smirked and gurgled delightedly as the gold from lost souls rolled in an unceasing stream into his bloody hands.

And toward Rimrock, hate in his heart, rode Captain Perry Daunt. Daunt the three-fingered, the gun-slick of the law. Daunt who used to be known as Daunt the courageous. But who was now called a traitor. Daunt, who used to rate the snappy salutes of lean, tanned, slim-fingered right hands, but who now rated a muttered curse, a blush of shame, or averted eyes.

Into the street end of the sun-blasted village, head up, back straight, rode Daunt, whom men called traitor. Eyes straight ahead, cold resolution in the set lines of his face, he rode past pock-marked, grinning *mestizos*, past double-gunned, hard-eyed killers, past tired-faced, alabaster skinned, shoulder-slumped women. Women with too-red lips and with circles under their eyes. On, past squatty, squalid 'dobes, the target of eyes that hated, eyes that wondered, and eyes that were masked with indifference, rode Daunt. He never once glanced aside.

He eased from his saddle seat. Careless confidence in his carriage, he strode into the yawning doorway of the cantina of Jose Aguilar—a doorway yawning seductively. From the clean sunshine he stepped into the

dusky dampness of the place. And men of many nations watched him as he came in.

THE three lean fingers of his right hand brushed his bolstered gun as Daunt strode forward. Glowing yellow in the dim light, a gold piece clinked on the bar. His back was turned to a score of unfriendly guns. There were those there who might have known that Captain Perry Daunt had killed many, many men of their kind. There were those who might have been waiting, hate in their hearts, for such a chance as this. Any man there might suddenly take it into his head to slap lead into the steel-muscled body of the Ranger outcast.

But Daunt's back was turned, indifferently, to them all. His thin lips grimly ironic, he looked at the fat, puffed face of Jose Aguilar.

"Whiskey," he ordered. "Whiskey—and Kramer!"

Like the indrawing breath of a sucking bellows they gasped, those men behind Daunt. Whiskey—and Kramer! That was something!

It caused a slit-eyed, two-gunned gent to step easily away from the group behind Captain Daunt. It caused the few who still were at the bar to edge carefully away. His spurs clinking softly in the tortured silence of the room, the man who had separated himself from the group strode toward Daunt. He stopped on wide-spread feet. Gently, with his left hand, he tapped the wide, dust-grimed shoulder of Captain Daunt. His eyes and his voice were cold-mocking.

"And who," he asked, as Daunt turned about, "are you—stranger?"

Daunt's answer came crisply from straight, unsmiling lips.

"You call me right," he said. "I'm just—a stranger."

"Stranger!" It was filled with venom, that voice from the group at the rear. "Stranger, hell! That's Daunt. Captain Daunt.

That's th' John Law hairpin—a gun-slick on wheels—th' coyote gent what sold his Ranger gang for some o' Kramer's coin."

The fellow laughed raucously. Daunt's jaw muscles tightened. His face whitened beneath its heavy coating of tan. The speaker stepped from the group, grinned mockingly at Daunt.

"Yeah!" he growled. "Daunt, he sold out. And he did more than that. He let Kramer take ..."

"Ah—" A sigh from Daunt.

A curse from the other.

Then there was lightning in Daunt's hand. And the hell in his eyes flamed with the flash of his own long-barreled gun. Death drilled into the chests of two—the two who had talked about something else besides a sell-out.

Daunt swayed forward, iron steady on the group before him.

"Whiskey and Kramer," he whispered. "That's all. Just whiskey and Kramer."

Slowly, cautiously, he squatted forward. Quickly, with a move of his wrist, he slid his gun out on the floor, then empty-handed, he stood before them, this jasper who had just killed two of their kind.

He was cold meat for the gun slicks of Rimrock. And they stood there, staring. They licked their lips hungrily. But they didn't shoot!

Daunt turned. Again his back was toward them, his face to the bar. "Whiskey," he said to Jose. "Whiskey, *spik!* And send for Kramer!"

Hand steady, Daunt raised a glass to his lips. But, in spite of his pose of indifference, cold fear tugged at his vitals. A fear that he would never live to see Kramer...!

II

RANGER Lieutenant Harry Tracy gazed truculently at the Brazos Kid.

"Listen, Kid," he said tightly, "this is so old it's got whiskers on it. But if you laugh at me, I'll—I'll—"

"I won't," said the Kid, "—not out loud."

Tracy waved toward a chair and cocked his feet on the desk top. The Brazos Kid sat down, rolling himself a quirley. Lieutenant Tracy blew smoke at the ceiling.

There was pathos in his voice. "It was hell, Kid. You know it, even if it was before your time." Tracy shook his head slowly, and sighed. "Captain Perry Daunt," he said, "was the finest, the bravest, and the best Texas Ranger who ever slapped his seat in saddle leather."

The Kid's cool, blue eyes peered covertly at Tracy. But he said nothing.

The lieutenant breathed hard.

"Crooked?" he asked softly. "Daunt crooked? Took money to let Kramer get away? No, Kid, he didn't do it!"

Tracy still stared at the wall. The Brazos Kid licked the loose edge of his quirley. "I ain't laughin'," he reminded.

The lieutenant nodded. "All right," he said softly, and settled himself in his chair. "Eighteen years ago a gent named Kramer was running dope—running everything he could run, for that matter. Trafficked in girls. Killed, murdered, rustled. Every thing that was damnable, Kramer did. And we caught him—caught him cold—Daunt and me. In the scrap Kramer shot a finger off Daunt's right hand. But we had Kramer in irons. We were going to move him next day. But next morning—he was gone."

Tracy stopped suddenly. He looked sharply at the lean face of the Brazos Kid. But the Kid's eyes and face were expressionless.

Again Tracy sighed. "That's why you'll do," he muttered, as if to himself. "Poker face—poker eyes— Just a blank." He puffed at his dead cigarette and threw it from him.

“Daunt admitted it,” continued Tracy slowly. “Said he took money to let Kramer make a getaway. Wrote it in a note he left behind him. There was merry hell about it. A stink you could smell clear to Austin. Rumors about this and that. Wild tales that no sensible man would believe. And to top it all off, there were stories about Daunt selling his wife and daughter to Kramer.

“But this much I do know. Daunt’s wife and little girl left here when Kramer did. And Daunt’s wife was *seen with Kramer in Mexico*, I can’t explain that, but it’s true.

“But, Kid, I know Daunt. I fought beside him in the days when saddle leather was the only way we had of going places. And a gent that earns his eighty bucks a month the way Daunt and I did in those days don’t turn coyote for a few lousy dollars. When a man’s a Texas Ranger, Kid, he’ll be a Ranger till he dies.”

The Brazos Kid puffed a little faster on his cigarette. But his eyes were the same. “Yeah,” he said, “I reckon that’s right.”

TRACY nodded. “Dam’ right,” he said. “Daunt lied. I don’t know why, but he did. He didn’t take money from Kramer. He hated Kramer’s guts. He hated everything that Kramer stood for. Of course, eventually it quieted down. Kramer must have made a lot of money and quit. He dropped out of the picture for about eighteen years. And so did Daunt.

“But now it’s started again. From over yonder—” Tracy jerked his thumb in the direction of Mexico, “—we’re getting the old rumors again. Kramer’s back. The dope is getting through. Chinks, everything, coming across. And Daunt, say the rumors, he’s back too—over there some place. Maybe there’s nothing to it. But I’ve been wondering, Kid, if a gent with a good poker face and a slick gun hand might not be able to do some good—over there. Somebody who’s not a Ranger.

Somebody who’s just interested in Texas, in clean things.”

Tracy stopped. He didn’t look around.

The Brazos Kid studied the lieutenant’s profile. Faint, almost imperceptible, there was a whimsical smile on the Kid’s thin lips.

“Yeah,” he said absently, “I reckon mebby they could.”

The Kid stood up. He hitched his gun belts about his lithe hips. He reached under his vest and unpinned a badge. He extended it to Tracy. “Better keep this for me,” he said. “Mebby, when I’m on furlough, I might get drunk, and somebody’d steal it.”

Tracy grinned and accepted the badge. He opened a drawer of his desk and put the badge inside. His face sobered again as he did it. He studied the Kid and sighed.

“Well,” said the Kid tonelessly, “I’ll be seein’ yuh.”

He moved toward the door. Tracy’s eyes followed him.

FOR many minutes Daunt stood alone at the deserted bar in the cantina of Jose Aguilar. The raspy, nervous shuffle of a booted foot, the high-pitched note of a woman’s hysterical laugh, the deep mutter of a masculine undertone—only these sounds broke the silence. Daunt stood laxly between the prostrate forms of the two men he had killed, toyed absently with his glass, and waited. Waited for Kramer....

And Daunt knew when he came. He knew it before he heard the soft “ah-h-h” of many indrawn breaths, the tinkle of approaching spurs, and the ponderous, confident tread behind him. With studied-slowness he turned, his eyes masked. He stared at Kramer.

Kramer twisted his ugly face into a sardonic grin, squinted at the ex-lawman over a cocked gun.

“You’re late, Daunt. I been expectin’

you for eighteen years. 'S'matter—couldn't you find me?"

Daunt shrugged, and waved his left hand toward the gun lying in the center of the floor. "Cut th' heroics," he answered coldly. "There's my gun. I killed two of your men with it." He spread his arms expressively. "I don't give a damn, Kramer—now. Shoot—go to hell—or give me a good job. I don't care which—not a bit." His voice was flat, void of expression.

Kramer peered shrewdly into Daunt's eyes. He chuckled throatily. It was a nasty, a triumphant chuckle. "I begin to *sabe*," he grinned. "You heard that she was gone, eh? You heard that th' kid was gone, too." He grunted contemptuously. "You fool. You sentimental dam' fool...."

Kramer stopped talking, seemingly perplexed, as Daunt turned abruptly to the bar.

"Whiskey," Daunt said hoarsely to the Mexican barkeep.

Kramer grinned at Daunt's back. He raised his cocked gun a little higher, stepped close. Like the *hombre* who now lay dead on the floor, he tapped Daunt on the shoulder.

"Here," he said, extending the gun as Daunt turned, "here's a gun. You've got a job."

Carelessly Kramer turned away from the broken lawman. Gun in hand, Daunt studied Kramer's back. His eyes flashed then filmed.-

"What—what kind of a job?"

"Particular, eh?" sneered Kramer. "Any kind of a job—anything I say! That's what kind of a job, Captain Daunt!"

Daunt was cold, while Kramer's breath came fast with passion. Slowly he shook his head.

"No go, Kramer," he said flatly. "That's what I'm tired of. Taking orders—running away—jumping when somebody yells."

Butt first, Daunt extended the gun

toward Kramer. "Hell, no," he said feelingly. "I said a good job. I mean it. Next to you, I'm the *jefe grande*, or it's no bet. Either I'm th' big bull of th' woods, or I take a bullet in th' guts. That's flat, Kramer."

Puzzled, eyes uncertain, Kramer took the gun. He looked down at it. Then facing toward Daunt again, his eyes glowed.

"I'll be damned," he muttered. "I believe you mean it." But his voice was kindled with disbelief.

Daunt didn't speak. He stared straight at the big man, coldly, icily.

Kramer dropped his eyes again. Slowly, he opened the loading gate of the gun Daunt had returned to him. One click at a time, while he sardonically watched for a tell-tale expression on Daunt's face, Kramer punched the ejection rod through empty chambers. He stepped closer to the ex-Ranger.

"It wasn't loaded," he said. "But I expected you to try." He shook his massive head. "I don't *sabe* it, Daunt. I swear I don't." There was puzzlement in his voice.

Daunt shrugged, turned to the bar again. He poured himself still another drink. "I won't explain it to you," he said, glass in hand. "Take it or leave it. I don't care about that, either."

Kramer backed away. Suddenly his face flamed. His loaded gun swept on. "I've got it," he shouted. "I've got it now. You've got a conscience. You wouldn't shoot me till I made a play. You've got a hide-out gun and you want me to force th' issue. So your damn' puritanical soul could rest in peace if you killed me." Kramer's big face was livid. "All right, Daunt," he cried, "make your play. I'm going to kill you!"

Steadily, slowly, full glass still in his hand, Daunt turned. His face was white, but his voice was even. "Just a minute, Kramer," he said. "There's always time for one more drink."

Unshakingly, his hand carried the glass

to his lips. He jerked his head back. “Ah-h-h,” he sighed, as he finished drinking. “All right, Kramer,” he breathed softly. “I’m ready. You’re all wrong—tangled up in your own loop. But go ahead. Play your marbles!”

He set the whiskey glass on the bar. With a gesture of finality, he dropped his arms and awaited the searing smash of the bullet from Kramer’s poised gun.

III

A HUNDRED times, the Brazos Kid had almost despaired of getting into Kramer’s border hide-out. His month’s leave of absence had passed. Two months had slipped by. And he had found neither Kramer nor Daunt.

Lean, gaunt, unshaven, wearied with the hopelessness of his task, he lounged despondently against the crumbling ’dobe wall of a narrow gauge railroad terminal building.

Deserted it was, as it always had been, except for those few times when the Brazos Kid had seen the car whisk the loads away. Twice he had seen that. Twice in thirty days, that long, low, powerful car had purred silently to this deserted, eerie place. Twice, piloted by the same, clear-eyed, bronzed-faced, set-featured girl, it had taken aboard its load of boxes marked with strange, foreign characters. Once the load had been human. Chinese—slant-eyed, puzzled, bewildered creatures who had been bundled unceremoniously into the long tonneau by the hard-faced jasper who accompanied the girl driver. While behind the ’dobe wall, the Brazos Kid had watched and racked his tired brain for a plan whereby he could come to know this girl and her cold-eyed guard.

And then they came again, just after the train had gone. Gone wheezingly down the weaving narrow track, its short, squatty, wood-burning engine puffing snortingly through its flaring smoke-stack. This time the train had left two boxes with those strange

characters painted on their sides—and two humans. A Chinaman—fat, sleek, resigned, who seated himself on one of the boxes. And a Russian—big, tall, massive-framed, whose eyes flamed boldly, as he paced ponderously back and forth, looking this way and that across the yucca-studded desert.

They spotted it simultaneously—the Russian and the Brazos Kid. The car, dust rising cyclone-like behind it, was speeding toward the station. Deep in his throat, the Russian grunted gutturally. The Chinaman stood up. High pitched was his voice as he jabbered excitedly. The Kid, behind his shielding ’dobe wall, chuckled to himself.

Then he sobered. The car, top down, came on, rumbled toward the hidden Kid and the waiting aliens. It stopped with a scream of tortured brakes. The granite-faced guard stepped out, two guns on his hips. The Kid wondered, racked his brain again. What could he do? Were these really Kramer’s agents?

The guard stepped quickly to the two aliens. They jabbered at him in their respective tongues. He grabbed them both by their arms and pushed them toward the waiting car.

“Shut yore traps,” he rasped at them. “Shut up an’ git in there.”

The girl remained behind the wheel of the car. She grinned a little at the aliens as they climbed into the back seat. The guard started back for the boxes. The girl made a sibilant noise with her mouth. Then she called softly to the guard. The soft purr of the motor didn’t drown her voice.

“We have company,” she called. There was veiled sarcasm in her voice.

The hard-faced guard whirled, hands streaking toward his holsters. The Brazos Kid jerked involuntarily, then relaxed. His glance followed the gaze of the girl.

TALL, lithe, white teeth showing between slightly parted lips, a swarthy Mexican rode

toward the car. He had just come from a clump of mesquite across the narrow-gauge track. The girl's eyes were hard as she watched him ride up.

"Our friend Parada," she said ironically.

The guard relaxed, walked to one of the queerly marked boxes and picked it up. "'T' hell with Parada," he grunted as he carried the box toward the car.

The mounted Mexican reached the car first. He swept off his gaudily decorated sombrero with an exaggerated flourish. "*Querida mia,*" he smirked. "A nice day, eh? Ees eet not?" His black eyes shone with sardonic humor.

The girl took papers and tobacco from a shirt pocket. She deftly rolled a cigarette and licked it with her tongue. Then she looked up. Her eyes were cold.

"Go to hell," she said flatly.

The guard chuckled and grinned mockingly at the Mexican, Parada. He set the box in the bottom of the car and started back for the other one. He grunted in a pleased fashion as he strode.

"That," he said to Parada, "from Kitty Kramer, oughta hold yuh for a while, I guess."

The Mexican sat stiffly in his saddle. His black eyes shot hate at the guard's back.

The Brazos Kid, in his place of concealment, stiffened too. Kitty Kramer. Kramer! He was right.

Tensely he watched the Mexican's eyes dart furtively toward the clump of mesquite from which he had just ridden. The Kid, catching that glance, eased his guns in their holsters...

The guard reached the second box. Parada looked at him. There was a light of triumph in the Mexican's gleaming eyes. He raised his right hand high—straight up. The girl, Kitty Kramer, glanced up at him from lighting her cigarette. Her eyes flashed wide open as she saw his pose.

A crackle of rifle fire came from the mesquite clump. The guard crumpled forward on his face beside the queerly marked box. The girl screamed as the Mexican leaned forward, hand outstretched to grab her. The deep voice of the Russian and the high-pitched squeal of the Chinaman in the back seat of the car blended inharmoniously with the sharp bark of Kitty's pistol as she shot upward at the Mexican above her.

The Brazos Kid leaped forward. Parada cursed. His hand clutched his right shoulder. The motor roared under the long hood of the car. Horsemen, yelling, shooting aimlessly, spurred from the mesquite. The Brazos Kid reached the car as it started forward. Both guns out, he leaped on the running board.

"Git goin'! he shouted to the girl.

Bullets from the Mexican horsemen sang about the car. The Kid climbed into the back seat. The Chinaman huddled down in a corner. But the Russian, eyes shining, turned, knees on the seat, and watched. The Brazos Kid, beside him, thumbed leaden fury at the *banditos* behind them.

Like thunder, stuttering, rumbling, reverberating, sounded the Kid's twin guns as they shook jerkily under the recoils of his shots. The car gained momentum, roared, rocked dizzily as it swept along, speeding easily away from the pursuing horsemen.

The Russian sighed deeply and sat back in his seat. His eyes glowed approvingly as he looked at the Brazos Kid. The Chinaman got up from his corner. His round, yellow face was placid again.

MILES down the trail, the girl stopped the car and slid out of the seat. She stepped to the ground and faced the Kid in the car. In her hand was a gun. Her clear blue eyes were hard-filled with suspicion.

"Just who are you?" There was no friendliness in her tone.

The Kid stepped out of the car. He rubbed his right hand meditatively across the beard stubble on his lean chin. His eyes dropped to survey his torn boots, his faded, tattered jeans. He snorted slightly through his nose as he looked up at her. He tipped back his worn, lopsided Stetson. Then he dropped his hands to his hips.

“Th’ governor uh Texas,” he said disgustedly. “Who are you?” His tone was as hard as hers had been. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and started tramping back the way the car had just come. The girl watched him a moment. There was a slight sneer on her lips.

“*Tonto*,” she muttered to herself. Then she called out to the Kid, irony in her voice. “Where you going, mister?”

The Brazos Kid stopped and turned. There was contempt in his eyes and voice. “I left a dam’ good saddle back there,” he said. “They cost money. I’m gonna get it.”

He turned and started walking again. Speculatively, Kitty Kramer watched him go—watched him until he was nearly out of sight. Her eyes changed from suspicion to uncertainty as the Kid tramped on and on. She looked at the placid-faced Chinaman and the huge Russian in the back seat of the car. The Russian growled something at her. His eyes were flaming, and he nodded his head up and down violently as he gestured back toward the disappearing Kid. His voice rumbled like drum beats.

The girl chuckled and her eyes twinkled. She nodded her head at the Russian. “I don’t sabe that lingo, mister,” she said solemnly, “but I bet, by dam’, that you’re right.”

She slid under the steering wheel again. The motor purred more loudly. The girl whirled the car about and sped back in pursuit of the Brazos Kid. She wheeled the long car up beside him. The Kid stopped and stared without expression at her. Her own face was

serious now.

“A saddle?” she asked.

The Kid nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “A good kak.”

The girl studied him thoughtfully. “Working?” she asked.

The Kid shook his head sidewise.

“Want a job?”

“Doin’ what?”

“Riding.” The girl patted the leather seat beside her. “Here.”

“How much?”

“Plenty.”

The Kid shot his jaw at her. “You’re th’ *jefe*?” he asked. “You hire an’ fire, mebby?” There was disbelief in his tone.

The girl grinned slightly. “They don’t know it,” she said. “But I do—on this job.”

The Brazos Kid paced around the front of the car. He opened the door and sat himself on the seat beside her. He looked out of the windshield in front of him. He crossed his legs.

“Cut ’er loose,” he said. “I’ll ride in yore rodeo.”

IV

THE Brazos Kid made his brag. But before he finished that ride with the Stetson-hatted, overall-clad, booted girl beside him, he wished many times for the comforting feel of a frenzied, pitching buckner beneath him. Shrieking, whistling, plucking at him, the wind rushed past the car as they whizzed across northern Mexico.

Rocking, rolling like a barrel in a sea wash, the huge car rocketed on with terrific speed. Up—around curves sickeningly—careening wildly—down stomach-lifting dips—they rushed on. Whimpering complainingly, the high pitched voice of the Oriental mingled with the deep toned rumbling ejaculations of the Russian.

The sun capped the day, sank. Twilight

came. And amid a squeal of brakes the Brazos Kid took breath again in Rimrock.

The car stopped. The girl got out. She pointed to a sign over the door of a 'dobe. "Cantina—Jose Aguilar," it said.

"Wait there for me," she told him.

She took the aliens by the arm and piloted them away. The Brazos Kid stalked stiffly toward the cantina. He stopped at the doorway and looked inside.

A fat man, squat and massive, was aiming a pistol at another gent against the bar. The fat man's face was livid with fury.

"All right, Daunt," he cried, "make your play. I'm going to kill you—now!"

The Kid froze, watched. The other man turned. He was tall, bronzed. His face was tired. And, as he tilted his head back and drank from a glass in his hand, the Brazos Kid saw that a finger was missing from his right hand. Daunt! Daunt, here with the *contrabandistas*.

Daunt set down his glass and smiled at the fat man. "All right, Kramer," he breathed softly. "I'm ready. You're all wrong—tangled up in your own loop. But go ahead. Play your marbles!"

Kramer! That was he! Kramer and Daunt! The Brazos Kid was cold—icy cold. Indecision, puzzlement, even fear came to him, paralyzed him with the suddenness of this appearance of the two for whom he searched. Unseen, unnoticed, he stood at the doorway.

Kramer's finger whitened where the edges of the trigger pressed. Curses, half inarticulate, came from his throat. Mottled places, white under the swart of his skin, appeared on his face.

But Daunt smiled—a cold, icy smile of complete indifference.

Doubt appeared in Kramer's pig-like eyes. Indecision swayed him. His gun hand wavered, lowered. Daunt smiled coldly, triumph tingling the mockery in his eyes.

"Well, Kramer," he breathed, "what do I get—job or bullet?"

Kramer sheathed his gun. Eyes steady on Daunt's, he cat-footed forward. Close to Daunt, he peered into the captain's eyes. There was amazement in his stare.

"Dam'," he wheezed, "I wonder if you do mean it."

Daunt spread his hands and smiled. Kramer snapped to sudden decision. With a straight finger, he tapped nervously on the broad chest of Captain Perry Daunt.

"I'll bet with you," snapped Kramer. "Outside of me, you're th' big bull of th' woods. I run th' shipments. I handle th' cash. You keep peace around here. Handle th' men." Kramer straightened and peered searchingly into Daunt's eyes. "That a bet?" he asked nervously. "Is that a bet?"

Daunt inclined his head. There was a peculiar smile on his firm lips. He strode to the center of the room, stooped, picked his discarded gun from the floor. Holstering it, he straightened. There was power, personality, leadership in his poise as he looked at Kramer. And there was satisfaction in his voice.

"That's a bet," he agreed.

The Brazos Kid sighed. What a man—that Daunt!

RUSTLING softly, growing in volume, rumbling, bursting into a full throated roar, a half hundred husky throats bellowed at once. One wild, high-pitched cry of approval was drowned by the mighty blast of dissent. Turmoil. Confusion. The heavy scuffle of booted feet. The shrill screams of women. Deep throated curses of men.

"T' hell with Daunt!"

"Hurrah for th' new *jefe*."

The smack of flesh on flesh. The glitter of slithering knife blades. The swift, sweeping flash of guns. Fighting, cursing, the throng surged forward.

Back to the bar, crouching, gun in

hand, Daunt waited. Kramer, teeth bared, lanced three swift shots into the seething mass. The Brazos Kid leaped forward, while above the inferno of sound, Kramer's voice boomed out:

"This way! Smoky! Gunner! Pinto! Beside us!"

A powerful black hand clutched the Kid's throat. He smashed—once, twice—with his gun barrel. The hand relaxed. A shining black face grinned horribly as its owner slumped toward the floor. Then on—shooting, slashing, striking fiercely. Behind him, the Kid heard the spiteful crack of a .38—heard the cold, hard voice of the girl who had driven him to Rimrock. She was shooting coldly with a man's venom. Gun hot, she came on in the wake of the Brazos Kid.

Fired by the love of battle, the Kid fought toward Daunt and Kramer, beside whom were lined up three slit-eyed gunmen.

"Yippee . . . Chihuahua!" Age old, the battle cry of the Rangers, shrilled from the lips of the Kid.

Then he reached those at the bar. Lined himself beside Daunt, Kramer and the three gun hands. And the girl ranged herself there too. More loyal gunmen gained the bar. The charging crowd hesitated, stopped, cowered back. Guns clattered to the floor. Arms raised submissively.

Quiet came broken only by the muttered cursing of Kramer. Ponderously, he stepped forward. A sneer on his face, he looked at the whipped legion of the damned. Scorn was in his voice.

"Fools! *Pendajos!*" He leered at them and swept his huge arm in a swift circle—a circle that took in the whole of the room. "Th' boss," he spat, contempt in his voice. "Th' boss, who 'is th' boss!" His body swayed forward. Massive head thrust toward them, he surveyed the pack and sneered again. "Daunt!" he spat. "That's who. I said so! Now clean up th' place and get th' hell outa here!"

Once more he waved his arm in that sweeping circle. Then he turned, and his eyes found the Kid. Eyes ringy, he swaggered toward him. Daunt, too, looked at the Kid—looked curiously, with calculation in his eyes. The girl stepped forward. Daunt paled as he saw her.

Kramer stopped in front of the Kid. His eyes were filled with suspicion. "Who are you?" he snapped.

The Kid's eyes said nothing. But he shook his head, as though in sorrow. "Dam'," he sighed. "This is sure an inquisitive bunch."

Kramer started a curse. The girl touched Kramer on the arm. He didn't turn—but he listened.

"PADDY'S dead," she said calmly. A "Parada killed him. Tried to stick us up. This gent gummed his play. I hired him to take Paddy's place." She took her hand from Kramer's arm. "That's all," she said.

Kramer nodded, ever so slightly. "All right," he said. "But watch him."

The Kid's mouth turned down at the corners, and a light flamed in his eyes. But the girl was already striding toward the door.

"Come on," she said to the Kid. "I'll show you where to bunk."

The Kid followed her. He didn't look at Daunt. But he felt Daunt's eyes burning into his back. And he wondered just why Captain Daunt had tied up with Kramer. He wondered why Daunt had paled when he saw the girl. Had Daunt heard, above the turmoil of the saloon fight, that shrill battle cry of the Rangers? And, if he had heard, what would he do?

Back in the *cantina*, Daunt stepped before Kramer. Eyes burning, he leaned forward.

"Th' girl, Kramer," he asked hollowly, "who is she?"

Kramer chuckled evilly, then shrugged. His face paled, and flushed. "Not

who you think she is," he said.

Daunt tensed. For an instant it seemed as though he would spring upon the heavy man. Then he slumped and turned abruptly to the bar. "You're a dirty beast, Kramer," he said. "I don't know whether to believe you or not."

Then, to the Mexican behind the bar: "Whiskey!"

Kramer sneered behind Daunt's back. "Whiskey," he mocked. "Well, I guess you're entitled to some."

V

MANY and conflicting are the tales of the end of Rimrock. Some piously relate that Kramer and his wicked crew were lured to oblivion by El Diablo himself. Others say that the spirit of the Holy Virgin, outraged, her infinite patience exhausted at last, drove Kramer and his killer crew before her, straight into the guns of destruction.

But the Brazos Kid, at this time would have said that it was Lieutenant Harry Tracy—Tracy of the Rangers—who loyally believed, and backed his faith that once a Texas Ranger, always a Texas Ranger.

The Kid knew it when he saw the old Chinaman plodding patiently behind a decrepit burro, shambling wearily down the street of Rimrock. And his heart sang within him, burst into a song of gladness. The Rangers!

The Kid was glad because, in these few days he had spent at Rimrock, he had come to know this tall, bronzed hombre who used to be a captain of the Rangers. In these few days he had looked beneath the set, stern features, and the jet-black, film-masked eyes of Perry Daunt. And there he had seen something more than mere reckless courage. He had seen honesty, purpose, and manhood. Ranger manhood—the kind of manhood that stays with a man until he dies.

Bland, placid, resignation in his yellow face, Ah Lee, the old cook at the Ranger station at Los Ventres, plodded down the street. Dust in little clouds trailed up from behind his flat-soled sandals.

Nonchalantly, striving to keep from his face the surging emotions in his breast, the Brazos Kid left the doorway of the *cantina*. He stalked across the street. Passing Ah Lee in the center of the narrow, dusty roadway, he looked the Chinaman squarely in the eye. No sign of recognition came into the slant eyes of the Oriental. But then, no wonder at that. The Kid, still unshaven, ragged, unkempt, was a very different Kid than the one Ah Lee knew at the Ranger camp.

The Kid stopped, turned at the other side of the street. Leaving his burro outside, Ah Lee shuffled into the *cantina*. The Kid strode impatiently into his own shack. He paced back and forth, frowning.

Disquieting thoughts raced through his mind. What if he was wrong? Perhaps Ah Lee had not been sent by Tracy, after all. What if Ah Lee had been sent to the Ranger camp—by Kramer? Kramer seemed always to know the Rangers' movements. He had evaded every net they'd ever spread for him. Suppose Ah Lee...

The Kid whirled, started for the door of his shack. He'd see! There was ice in his eyes, and his lips were straight as he entered the *cantina*.

KRAMER was there. Daunt was there. And—Ah, Lee! The Kid strode past the three. Kramer's eyes shone as he listened to the Chinaman. Daunt listened with expectancy, calculation in his face.

"Velly much money," sing-songed the Chinaman. "I sabe lot...."

The Kid lost the finish as he strode past. But he'd heard enough. So Ah Lee sabied where there was "velly much money," did he? There was a new, crackly note in the

Kid's voice as he asked for his drink. And as he looked at the Mexican behind the bar, there was a strange mixture of fire and ice in his eyes.

"Whiskey," he snapped.

Daunt and Kramer turned to look at him as he said it. The Kid jerked back his head to down his drink.

Kramer grunted. "What's th' matter with you?"

The Brazos Kid turned and met Kramer's stare, saw Daunt's squinted eyes. "Nothin'." The Kid's voice was surly. "I'm jes tired—tired of ridin' padded cushions. I want a bronc an' somethin' t' do."

Kramer grinned. Daunt looked at the fat man and jerked his head toward the Kid. "Good youngster," he said. "Mebby he'd be handy."

Kramer nodded. "All right," he agreed. "He rides."

Daunt's lips turned down a bit. "All right, fella," he said to the Kid. "Don't ride any more cushions. Get yourself a bronc. It won't be long before you'll get plenty of action. Plenty."

The Kid nodded curtly.

There was a snappy click to the Kid's boot heels as he strode out. What had Daunt meant by "Plenty?" Did Daunt know that the Kid was a Ranger? Was he trying to tell the Kid something? Or was it irony behind the accentuation of that last word? Was Daunt just baiting the Brazos Kid?

ACROSS' the street again, the Kid found the girl sitting on his doorstep.

"Howdy," she said. There was a new hint of friendliness in her voice.

"Howdy." The Kid grinned back. But his voice was hard and smacked of mockery. "Git yoreself a new pardner for th' joy rides," he said. "I'm takin' a new job."

The girl's eyes widened. There seemed to be a bit of disappointment in them. Then

they hardened again. "Yeah?" she drawled ironically. "Just what job are you taking, mister?" But her voice had lost the chill edge that it used to have.

"A regular job," said the Kid.

The faintest hint of wistfulness in her eyes, the girl watched the Kid enter the shack after she had moved aside.

The Brazos Kid placed his hands on his hips and looked about the room. He strode to the table and, from a stock of odds and ends, took a pair of spurs. They were made of silver.

The girl stood in the doorway and watched. The Kid looked up at her from his bent-over position, fastening his spurs on his boots.

"Now," he said, "I need a saddle."

The girl placed both hands out, one on each side of the door. "Listen," she said, "for that rig you lost, I'm going to give you the best saddle you ever threw a leg over."

As she leaned forward, there was a new something in her blue eyes. They had lost their former hardness. "Will that square us?" she asked.

She looked a lot different without that assumed hardness about her lips. The Kid noticed it. He didn't answer her. He just nodded.

"I'm glad," the girl said with studied emphasis, "that you've got a regular job. There's not many of 'em here."

Involuntarily, inwardly cursing himself for it, the Brazos Kid blushed. As she watched him, the girl smiled. "I believe I've got you spotted," she said softly. She waved an arm toward the horse corrals. "The rig you can have," she said quickly, "is hanging on this end in the shed. And the pinto bronc. Both yours. And I hope you like your new job."

It seemed to the Brazos Kid that the girl hurried as she turned and strode away. He watched her cross the street and enter the *cantina*. Then he strode up the slope toward

the bronc pens.

VI

THE girl, Kitty Kramer, strode purposefully into the *cantina*. She had a little piece of pigging string in her hand. As she walked, she struck it angrily against her overall-clad leg.

"Men!" she muttered scoffingly to herself as she strode. "Men!"

Kramer, Daunt and the aged Ah Lee were still there. The girl stepped smartly past them and stopped at the end of the bar. Daunt and the Chinaman had their backs to her. They didn't see her. But Kramer glanced at her frowningly.

She listened while the three talked. Finished, Daunt strode toward the door. "After chow," he said.

Kramer nodded. The Chinaman, Ah Lee, sing-songed as he followed Daunt. "Plenty glad," he said, "you likee this. Velly much money flo me." He wagged his yellow head as he shuffled out.

Kramer's eyes glittered as he watched Ah Lee leave. "Yeah?" he muttered. "Plenty much money flo you—like hell!"

He turned and padded to the girl's side. Hard-eyed again, she watched him come.

"Well," he snapped at her, "what you hangin' around here for?"

She gave a quirk to her lips and didn't answer the question. "Getting ready to double-cross somebody else?"

Kramer's eyes glittered. He smiled coldly, straight lipped. Closer he stepped to her. Coolly, measuring his blow, he struck her sharply across the face. The girl's head rocked back under the blow. But otherwise she didn't move.

"Fine," she applauded coldly. She thrust her jaw forward. There was a tigerishness in her smile. "Kramer," she said icily, "that's the last time you'll ever lay a hand on me. I'm leaving—leaving right now. Try to stop me, and I'll kill you."

For a fierce instant she stared at him. Kramer didn't speak. The girl looked as if she meant what she said.

She strode out through the door. Kramer padded quickly to a door at the rear. "Wall-eye!" he called. "Come here."

Quickly, as the flat-faced *hombre* appeared, Kramer piloted him to the front door of the saloon. He pointed a shaking hand toward the girl.

"Her," he said to Wall-eye. "Don't let her leave." He looked up, long and meaningly into the other's eyes. "If she gets wild," he breathed, "too wild, fix her clock, Wall-eye. But fix it quiet. She knows an awful lot, Wall-eye. And she hates me plenty."

UP at the bronc pens, the Brazos Kid raised his head and listened to the roar of an automobile motor. He grinned to himself. This was one trip on which the Kid wouldn't ride the padded cushions. His smile was whimsical.

The motor accelerated, died, sped up again. The Kid pictured the gear shifting operation. Then he stiffened, tense. A hoarse cry rose above the motor's roar. A shrill voice—a girl's. The Kid ran around the saddle shed. He heard a shot—heavy, reverberating.

Then came another, a sharper, more staccato sound. And the roar of the motor anew. Rounding the corner of the shed, the Brazos Kid saw the car speeding out of Rimrock. And a short, squat-bodied figure lay in its wake, dead in the rocky street.

Kramer waved the gathering crowd aside. "Forget it," he snapped. "It's my business. Bury him."

He took a piece of paper in his hand and called out some names in a loud voice. Then his eyes found the Kid. "And you too," he said. "All be there. Right after chow. Rifles and plenty ammunition. We're takin' a ride."

EXPECTANCY, a fierce, ominous

expectancy, pervaded the outlaw camp. Somber-eyed, watchful, the Brazos Kid paced in and out of the *cantina* of Jose Aguilar. Watching for Daunt, for Ah Lee. Hoping for a clue as to whether these two were or were not Kramer's allies.

But he didn't see them, didn't find a clue that told him anything. And, as the sun sank behind the Negras range, somber shadows played upon the set faces of fifteen mounted men. Behind them rode the Brazos Kid, down the narrow canyon, at the end of which he knew lay the Big River. The river which, legally, Texas Rangers might not cross. The river that made a haven of Rimrock.

At the head of the cavalcade rode Daunt. Straight-backed, jet-eyed, three-fingered Daunt. Then Kramer—huge, hunched spider-like in his swaying kak, long arms flopping loosely.

And as he watched these two and the hard-eyed killers behind them, the Brazos Kid cursed savagely to himself.

Shod hoofs clicking sharply on rock-strewn sand. They came to the Rio Grande and crossed. Shallow water cascaded, foam-topped, about the limbs of daintily stepping broncs.

They splashed out on the other side, entering the land of the Ranger patrols. The Brazos Kid longed for his badge. He wanted to face this gang, badge on his shirt, guns out.

Slowly Daunt reined in his bronc, dropped back beside Kramer. In a low voice he spoke to the fat man. Kramer nodded, but turned in his saddle and, while he rode, watched Daunt, reined in motionless beside the trail, giving low-voiced instructions to the riders as they filed past him. Satisfied, Kramer looked front again.

"About a mile more," Daunt was saying. "Rifles out."

There was the swish of steel against leather as they filed past the straight-backed Daunt. Then they had passed, and Daunt fell

in beside the Kid.

"About a mile more," he said to the Kid. "Rifles out." Then, in a lower voice: "Ah Lee and Tracy. We planned it. We know about you."

Then he rode to the head of the cavalcade. Fierce exultation flamed in the Kid's breast. Lieutenant Tracy had been right. Once a Ranger, always a Ranger. And Daunt had hidden up front again, back beside Kramer. In the front rank where the Kid knew a snapped command of "Halt! Hands up!" would cause gun hands to flash into flaming, violent action. And that action would bring the retaliation of bursting, crackling rifle fire from Ranger guns—guns which would endanger the lives of Daunt and the Kid as well as those of the others:

Then it came!

"Halt!"

A curse from Kramer. Daunt whirled, gun flashing, and called the battle cry of the rimrock Rangers. An answer burst from the lips of the Brazos Kid, from the bushes beside the trail, from a dozen loyal Ranger throats.

THEN confusion. Rifles and pistols flamed and roared. Screams and curses. And, mingled with that mad mixture of sound, came to the ears of the Kid the sharp crack of a small-calibered .38. And high-pitched, courageous and oft-repeated, there came to the Kid's ears the throaty cry of a girl in battle.

And so it was that Kramer and his killer crew met and fought with the forces of Texas law. Fought with the ferocious courage of cornered beasts. And the poker face of the Brazos Kid wreathed into a mirthless smile as his guns flamed death. He was fighting on the side of the Texas law—for the honor of Captain Daunt. Blood stained the yellow sands. Bullets pocked the rocks. Acrid smoke filled the air. Men who had lived giving no quarter, died asking none—died with hate in their eyes, a snarl of fury on their lips, and

smoking guns in their hands.

Then, out of the bloody action, the swirling smoke and dust, emerged the Brazos Kid and Captain Perry Daunt. Triumphant, heads up, they marched to the waiting Ranger line. And out of puzzled eyes, the Kid saw Captain Daunt fold tenderly into his arms the girl who had been at Rimrock.

Hardly understanding, he heard her tearfully tell of her knowledge. She told them of her mother's discovery, years before, that she was a bigamist. She had married Daunt thinking that her first husband, Kramer, was dead. She told them of Kramer's devilish threat to tell the tale to the world, to disgrace Daunt, and of a woman's weakness to save the name of the one she loved. It had been a futile sacrifice.

Swiftly, beseechingly, the girl turned to Tracy. "Mother released Kramer that night when you and Captain Daunt captured him. She was still legally Kramer's wife and, to save Captain Daunt from disgrace, she went with Kramer that night. She took me with her. Captain Daunt is my own daddy.

"Captain Daunt—Daddy—didn't do it. Mother did. Kramer made her do it. She thought she was doing right. She was good—much too good for the beast she thought was dead. Daddy discovered what she had done, and to save her he took the blame on his own shoulders."

In sudden mental exhaustion, Kitty swayed against her father's breast. Gently he stroked her head with a tender hand.

Lieutenant Tracy stepped forward.

There was a smile of satisfaction on his lips. Comfortingly he placed a hand on Kitty's shaking shoulder. Then his lithe figure straightened. Level-eyed, soldierlike, he looked at the assembled Rangers. At Captain Daunt. His hand flashed to salute.

"Captain Daunt," he said, "—Texas Ranger."

Blood on his arm, dripping from the wound in his shoulder, the Brazos Kid straightened, joined in the salute. Then he slumped, groaned, slid to the ground.

Kitty ran swiftly toward him, bent over him. There was nothing hard about her face now. It was shining with sympathy and tenderness.

The Kid looked up at her and grinned weakly. "You can shoot," he said, "and fight, and ride." His eyes were a study. "I wonder," he went on softly, "how you'd like t' learn t' cook—for a Ranger?"

Kitty studied him, her eyes as expressionless as his. "You," she said softly, repeating his own words when she had hired him, "You are the boss? You hire and fire, I suppose? A cook, for a Ranger?"

The Kid nodded. Kitty seated herself beside him, mimicked his own previous words. "All right," she said. "I'll ride in your rodeo."

Then, snuggled to his breast, blood from his forgotten wound stained to brown the blue of her shirt. A dozen Ranger hands lifted to smart salute—a salute to a Texas Ranger who had risked all to clear the name of another.