

Muzzle flame lashed out
from Deming's gun



*Bounty hunter Kirby Jance
played 'em four ways from
the ace — but, one day, he
sure got his cards mixed!*

KILLER, WATCH YOUR BACK!

By GUNNISON STEELE

ABURLY, powerful man with dark hawkish features and hooded black eyes, Marshal Kirby Jance leaned suddenly forward in his chair and stared through the window of his office in Caribou Bend. A rider, mounted on a blaze-faced roan, was coming slowly along the street.

Kirby Jance missed little that went on in Caribou Bend. When a stranger appeared, within an hour the marshal knew his name, occupation and destination. He

knew whether the stranger was honest man or outlaw. His sole reason for discovering these things was to find out whether there was a bounty on the man's head, and if so how much.

This rider coming along the street was a stranger. He wore a long sheepskin coat and a fur cap that was pulled low over his ears, for the wind that trumpeted down from the blue-shrouded highlands was bitterly cold. But it was obvious that he was tall, slab-bodied, with flaming red hair

and angular, bony features. He rode slouched in the saddle, apparently taking little interest in his surroundings.

Kirby Jance's hooded eyes narrowed down coldly on the tall rider. He had a memory that was sharp and enduring. He knew he had never seen this man before, and yet there was something unmistakably familiar about him.

He watched as the red-haired rider dismounted before the livery barn—as he led the big roan into the shadowy structure.

THEN Marshal Jance grinned, slyly and wickedly. He opened a desk drawer and took therefrom a letter he had received a week ago, and which said in part:

“This is to let you know that a prisoner I was holding for murder, one ‘Waco’ Deming, has escaped from my jail. When last spotted Deming was headed your way, and since I hear he has friends in that locality, he’s pretty apt to turn up there sooner or later. This hombre is poison mean, and there’s a thousand dollar bounty on his scalp, so watch him careful. I enclose a flyer with his picture, description, etc., on it. . . .”

The letter was signed by Sheriff Jim Redfern, of Smoketree County, which was a hundred miles to the south of Caribou Bend.

Still grinning coldly, Kirby Jance looked at the dog-eared reward flyer that had accompanied the letter. The picture on it showed a gaunt, cold-eyed man with a beaklike nose, a man with a sneering, arrogant grin twisting his thin lips.

The man who had just ridden along the street was, without a doubt, Waco Deming.

Jance looked out the window again. The red-haired man had come from the livery barn. He stood a moment on the plank walk, ostensibly lighting a quiry, but in reality giving the street a careful

study in both directions. He was, Jance thought sardonically, like a wolf keening the wind for danger.

Deming turned then and tramped along the walk, shoulders bunched against the mauling drive of the wind, and a moment later turned in at Nick Lasher’s saloon and rooming house. That suited Jance. Lasher was Jance’s friend, almost the only one he had in Caribou Bend. Lasher didn’t suspect all that went on in Kirby Jance’s dark and devious mind, but he knew that all Jance cared for the law was what he got out of it.

Jance sat there in his office awhile longer, alone and glad of it. He had only contempt for the citizens of Caribou Bend, and they for him. They paid his salary, because he kept the town relatively free of outlaws and killers, but they would cross the street any time to avoid speaking to him.

The stupid fools, Jance thought cynically, what do I care for their two-bit salary? For by collecting dead-or-alive bounties on those foolish enough to drift into his bailiwick, and other means, he had amassed a comfortable fortune. He owned a couple of ranches and controlling interest in the bank. Less than a month ago he had collected the State Banker’s Association two thousand dollar reward for dead bank robbers.

His victim had been a reckless-eyed, yellow-haired youngster who called himself the Reno Kid. Jance grinned slyly at the remembrance. It didn’t bother him that some folks had called it cold-blooded murder.

Marshal Jance sat there, watching the door of Nick Lasher’s Denver House saloon. The sky was low and sullen, threatening snow, and the wind shouldered among the frame buildings with arrogant violence. The blue-black twilight of coming night was deepening.

Jance got up, put on his expensive, flat-crowned hat and went out into the windy street, angling across to Lasher's place. Lasher, a bald, enormously fat man with greasy features and round porcine eyes, had lit his swinging kerosene lamps. Except for two punchers playing blackjack at a table, Lasher was alone in the place.

AS JANCE looked sharply about the room, Lasher grinned. "He's upstairs," Lasher said. "He took a room."

"Rye," Jance said. "Who's upstairs?"

"Gent you're curious about. He gave the handle of Jim Beeler. You reckon that's his tight name, Jance?"

"No," said Kirby Jance, after downing the whisky, "it's not. His name's Waco Deming, and he's wanted for murder."

"How do you know that?"

"That's my business. What room is he in?"

"Third one on the left from the stairhead. Blast it, Jance, killin's are bad for a man's place of business. Why can't you toll him somewhere else to salt him?"

"Who said I aimed to salt him?" Jance looked with shiny black eyes at the fat saloonman. "I'm an instrument of the law, Nick. I just aim to do my duty. I'll give this jigger a fair shake."

"Like you give that Reno Kid button last month?" Lasher grinned. "Others might swallow that hogwash, marshal, but not me."

"Nick, you talk too much," Kirby Jance said flatly. "Here's what you do. In a little while this Waco Deming—or Jim Beeler—will likely come down. He'll be hungry and he'll ask you where's a good place to eat. You tell him the Elite restaurant. *Sabe?*"

Lasher nodded, shaking with silent laughter.

"I savvy. You'll be waitin' in the alley between the bank and the feed store.

Sometime, Kirby, I wonder why I don't charge you a commission."

"Just do what I said."

Kirby Jance turned and went out.

By now it was almost full dark. Jance tucked his head and bored into the wind that was sweeping with a high, shrill whine along the street. Most of Caribou's business places were already closed for the night. But a block down the street he could see the warm-glowing lights of the Elite restaurant, the only eating place open. The street was deserted.

Jance cut suddenly into a shadowy alley between two buildings. He paused just inside the alley, leaned against a wall, and waited. It was cold there, and Jance swore with bitter impatience, even though he meant to be well paid for any inconvenience he suffered. Like, he thought greedily, he had been paid for coddling up to that wild young fool, the Reno Kid.

He never had found out the Reno Kid's real name. The Kid had drifted into town one day, a fancy-dressing, reckless-eyed young gent of twenty looking for excitement. He drank some and played some poker and raised some good-natured cain—all of which Marshal Jance looked upon with a tolerant eye, because he'd quickly ascertained that the Reno Kid wasn't on his "wanted" list, and a scheme was building in his fertile mind.

He'd got friendly with the Reno Kid. He'd drunk whisky and played poker with him. The Kid had got to think he was a pretty swell fellow, and he'd felt flattered that a big man like the marshal, who was also a rancher and banker, would choose him for a friend.

One day when the Kid was pretty drunk, it hadn't been hard for Jance to convince the fun-loving youngster that it would be a great joke for the two of them to stage a fake hold-up of Jance's own

bank. With bandanna masks on, Jance had said, they would enter the bank at the same time—one from the front and one from the back—with drawn guns. They'd give the cashier and teller a good scare, then they'd take off their masks and everybody would have a good laugh.

It hadn't worked out like that. The Reno Kid had come through the back doorway, masked, gun in hand, and Jance had come in by the front door. Only Jance hadn't had a mask on and his gun was in its holster.

He'd yelled, "It's a holdup!" and he'd grabbed out his gun and pumped four bullets into the Reno Kid, killing him instantly.

They'd buried the Reno Kid, not knowing his real name nor whence he had come—and Kirby Jance had collected his two thousand dollar bounty for a dead bank robber.

JANCE grunted suddenly, hand sliding up under his sheepskin. The door to Nick Lasher's place had opened, and a man came out, closing the door behind him. It was, Jance saw, the tall man who had called himself Jim Beeler.

Now Beeler—or Waco Deming, as Jance knew him to be—came along the walk, obviously headed for the Elite restaurant. He had his head lowered, his muscular shoulders thrust forward against the wind.

Jance let him pass. Then he stepped out, jammed his gun-muzzle against Deming's back, and said flatly, "Freeze, mister, or I'll blow your backbone loose!"

Deming jerked to a halt. Reading that voice correctly, he stood motionless, looking straight ahead.

"Your hard luck, friend," he drawled. "I was just on my way to spend my last four-bits for a meal."

"You won't have to worry about eatin'

any more. The State'll feed you till it stretches your neck. Lift your hands!"

Deming obeyed, and Jance slid a hand up under his heavy coat and slid a heavy six-shooter from its holster.

"The law, eh?" the tall man murmured. "All right, but the law ain't got a cussed thing on Jim Beeler—"

"Don't try to feed me that swill!" Jance snapped. "Your name's Waco Deming, you broke out of the Smoketree jail, and you're wanted for murder."

"So? You seem to know a lot about me, sheriff."

"Marshal. Marshal Kirby Jance. Move out ahead of me, across the street, toward that buildin' with a light in the window!"

Deming obeyed. Three minutes later he was in a cold jail cell. It had, Jance congratulated himself, been much easier than he'd expected.

"Your mistake," he said gloatingly, "was in coming to my town instead of makin' a big circle."

Waco Deming stared at him with the cold, wicked glare of a cornered cougar in his yellowish eyes.

"It's plain I made a mistake, anyhow," he said. "Look, Marshal, I know where there's ten thousand dollars in bank loot cached—"

"And I know where there's a river of rye whisky flowin' uphill!" Jance jeered. "That one's got gray whiskers on it, Deming. So forget it. You're worth a thousand iron men to me."

"Would you hang a man for a thousand dollars?"

"One—or a dozen! Speakin' of hangin', it'd be powerful cold to stand out in this wind with a rope about your neck, wouldn't it?"

"Not so cold as it was that time up in Montana when the vigilantes got me," the redhead drawled. "It was forty below and gettin' colder, with me hemmed in by

twenty men. I thought they never would get the knot made. It sure was cold.”

“How’d you get away?”

“I didn’t.”

“I reckon they went ahead and hanged you?” Jance sneered.

“Nope. I stood there and froze to death!”

Kirby Jance was a man without humor. He sneered, “You think that’s funny? We’ll see how you feel about it tomorrow!”

He wheeled and stalked along the corridor to his office in the front part of the building.

Deming was sullen-eyed and black-tempered when Jance appeared the next morning. Numb with cold, because he’d had only one blanket, he cursed the marshal wickedly.

“Hang me and be danged if you’ve got to,” he snarled, “but don’t starve me. Where’s my breakfast?”

Jance grinned. “You know it snowed last night?”

“I reckon I did—the cussed stuff blew through the window and down my neck all night!”

It still was snowing, harder than ever now. It filled the air like a swaying white curtain, and already covered the earth to a depth of several inches.

“Deming, who did you kill?” Jance asked suddenly.

Deming stared flatly at him. “A poor widowed mother and her five kids,” he sneered. “Come ag’in, tin-badge!”

Jance shrugged. “It don’t matter. Point is, you’re goin’ to hang unless you get loose. And the only way you can get out of my jail is for me to turn you out.”

DEMING waited, watching him with narrow interest.

“How bad do you want to live, Deming?”

“As bad as you do. Maybe more.”

“We’ll see. I’m goin’ to give you a chance to go free. You know I wouldn’t be foolin’ you, Deming. You’d know I wouldn’t boot away the thousand dollars you’re worth, dead or alive, just because I like you. There’s a string tied to it.”

“I reckon you want me to rob a bank?” Deming said sardonically.

Jance shook his head. “I want you to kill a man!”

“So? I usually get paid for that.”

“All right. I’ll give you a thousand dollars to kill this man—after you do it.”

“Mister, I still want to live. Who is this jigger, and why do you want him killed?”

“His name’s Dave Runnels, and it’s my business why I want him dead! He owns the Three W outfit north of town. He’s an old, gray-whiskered badger, and he lives alone. No folks.”

“So he oughtn’t to mind dyin’, huh?”

“Owlhooter,” Jance said harshly, “I’m givin’ you a chance to make a thousand dollars—and go free! I’d just about as soon hang you and collect a thousand for your dirty hide. If you’re interested, speak out!”

“I’m interested,” Waco Deming drawled. “Why do you want this Dave Runnels dead?”

Jance cursed wickedly.

“If you’ve got to know, because I hold a mortgage against his outfit. He can’t pay it. The note falls due three days from now. I promised him an extension, which I didn’t mean to give, and he said he’d be in today to fix up the papers. If he found out I didn’t aim to give the extension he’d have time to raise the money somewhere else. I don’t want the note paid off—I want his ranch.”

“Marshal,” Deming said admiringly, “you play ‘er four ways from the ace, don’t you? Then, by the time the old muskrat is found dead, it’ll be too late to

do anything about that mortgage. You'll own another ranch. Slick!"

Jance sneered. "Satisfied? Or do you want my life's history?"

"How do you know I wouldn't take your thousand and just keep on ridin', without saltin' this Dave Runnels?"

"I'd thought of that. First, you wouldn't get the money till I knew the job was done. Second, I wouldn't be far away, and I'd see you was afoot at the time. Then, if you tried to weasel on me, I'd catch up with you and fill you so full of lead it'd take four mules to haul you in!"

"Marshal, you'd be a pleasant sort of skunk—if it wasn't for your smell! But you've done talked me into it. Unlock this door and gimme my gun."

"Sure—but it'll be empty."

"I can't beef nobody with an empty smokepole!"

"Play me for a sucker, Deming, and I'll kill you before you could spit," Jance said coldly. "Here's how we'll do it: I figure Dave Runnels will leave his ranch and head out for town about mid-mornin'. I know where there's an old abandoned line shack between here and the Three W, a quarter mile off the trail. You and me'll head out there. I'll wait at the shack with the horses, and you'll hoof it over to the trail where there's a bunch of cliffs and boulders.

"You wait there for Runnels. Afterwards, you come back to the old shack, I'll give you the thousand, and you ride out. That's all there is to it."

"All that with an empty cannon?"

"That's just till we get out of town," Jance said impatiently.

"What'll folks think about you turnin' me free?"

"Only one man in town knows you're in this cell—Nick Lasher, and he's a friend of mine. I'm openin' this door now. We'll go to the livery barn together, get

our broncs and ride out of town. Only just remember my six has got bullets in it!"

"It hurts me, marshal, to see you don't trust me," Deming grinned, as he left the cell and took his empty gun. "After all, you're turnin' me loose, ain't you, and givin' me a thousand dollars to boot for doin' just nearly nothin'? Why should I want to shoot you?"

"Just do as I say," Jance warned darkly.

THE abandoned shack huddled drearily in the lee of a bluff. It was a desolate and rotting thing, but it would afford some shelter from the bleak wind, and from the snow which still fell steadily. The ghostly white world pressed closely about them.

"I'll wait here with the horses," Jance said again, and carefully repeated his instructions.

Waco Deming said nothing. His contempt for Kirby Jance showed in his yellowish eyes. He accepted without comment the handful of cartridges Jance gave him and put them in his pocket.

"You got the money?" he asked.

"I've got it," Jance said. "Just one way you can get it."

"I'll be back," Deming said. He vanished into the swirling snow.

Kirby Jance went into the cabin and settled himself to wait. He carefully considered this. He didn't think he was taking too much of a risk. Waco Deming would have to play the game straight with him. If he had any thought of welching, he wouldn't get far afoot in this blizzard. He would be drawn back here by the bright lure of the promised thousand dollars.

Jance's grin was as sly and wicked as a wolf's.

Deming would kill Dave Runnels, and that would assure him, Jance, Runnels' ranch. Then he, Jance, would kill Waco Deming. He would take the body to town,

swear that he had seen Deming kill Dave Runnels—and collect the thousand dollar bounty on Deming. The scheme was foolproof.

Jance kept listening for a gunshot, even though he knew he wouldn't be able to hear it above the wild racketing of the wind.

He waited what seemed like a long time.

And then Deming came tramping through the snow, a ghost figure out of a ghost world. He stopped before Jance, a sneering grin twisting his hard lips.

"I want my pay," he said.

Jance asked tautly, "Everything go off all right?"

"Why else would I want my pay?"

"You'll get it—when I'm sure everything's like you say."

Deming's yellow eyes slitted and his lips drew back from his teeth. "Meanin' you think I might try to collect for something I didn't do?"

"Take it like you want to, owlhooter!" Jance said flatly. "I'm still runnin' this show. You'll get the money when I'm sure Dave Runnels is dead, not before!"

"Want to see the body, huh?" Deming sneered.

"That's the idea. Where is it?"

"Layin' in the middle of the trail, where he fell." The lanky redhead swore with petulant anger. "All right, you cussed buzzard! Let's get it over with, so I can get my pay and find me a warm place to bed down."

They mounted the horses and rode away from the cabin. Jance rode slightly behind the lanky killer, his gaze seldom leaving the redhead's back. If Deming noticed he gave no sign. He rode slouched in the saddle, his bony face sullen.

They came to the trail that led from Runnels' ranch to Caribou Bend. After riding along it a short distance, Deming

suddenly halted his horse and pointed.

"You wanted proof, law-dog. There it is!"

Jance peered through the falling snow, drawing in his breath sharply. For there, sprawled in the middle of the trail, was what obviously was the body of a man. The body, half-covered by drifted snow, lay on its back.

"That proof enough?" Deming sneered. "That's Runnels, ain't it?"

Jance was still staring at the figure. It was an old man, his scraggly whiskers clogged with snow. And red streaked the thin old face, and stained the snow about the body.

"That's Runnels, all right," Jance said.

"Then I want my pay."

"You'll get it."

"When? You offered me a thousand dollars to kill this man, didn't you?"

"Yes." Jance's voice suddenly grew sharp, and he pointed. "Look—he's moving!"

Deming turned toward the figure in the trail. But almost instantly he wheeled back, throwing himself backward and sideways in the saddle.

HIS eyes murderously aglare, the lust to kill stamped plainly on his dark cruel features, Jance was grabbing up under his sheepskin for his gun!

Jance saw the redhead's hand dart like the head of a striking rattler up under his coat—saw it come out gripping a long-barreled six-shooter. His own gun blasted, but Deming's sudden move had startled him, and he missed.

He saw muzzle-flame lash out from Deming's gun, and felt the brutal, numbing shock of lead in his shoulder. He swayed in the saddle, fighting desperately to raise his gun again, realizing with a dismal gray certainty that Deming had been expecting him to do just what he'd

done.

Dazedly, he realized that he'd dropped his gun, that he was falling. He tumbled from the saddle head first, and felt the cold of the snow against his face. He rolled over, knowing he was helpless, that he was at the mercy of the cold-eyed Deming.

The snowy world reeled before Kirby Jance's eyes. But he could see the gaunt, gargoyle-like figure of Waco Deming, standing over him, gun in hand. He saw the grim, merciless flame in Deming's eyes.

Then he was aware of something else that sent amazement rocketing through him. The supposed dead man, Dave Runnels, had risen up out of the snow! He stood beside Deming, swiping wrathfully at the snow and blood in his whiskers, glaring angrily at Kirby Jance.

As if from a vast distance, he heard Deming's voice.

"I could have killed you just as well, Jance, but I'd rather see you hang or go to the pen," Deming said. "You see, I knew just what kind of snake tracks you were makin' from the start. I'm not Waco Deming, wanted killer—there's no such man. My name's Jim Deming Redfern, though my friends call me Waco. I'm a deputy U. S. Marshal, as well as sheriff of Smoketree County."

Some of the shock was leaving Kirby Jance now. He could see the rangy man he had known as Deming, and the angry-eyed old rancher, more clearly—just as clearly as he realized that his wickedly cunning murder scheme had suddenly backfired.

"I danged near froze layin' there in that snow waitin' for you two to show up," Dave Runnels growled. "And this cussed rabbit blood we smeared in my whiskers—Sheriff, when you stopped me here on the trail a little while ago and told me what

was afoot, I figgered yuh'd been eatin' loco weed. I didn't know any human could be half snake and half skunk like Kirby Jance is!"

Jance sat up in the snow. "Deming—or whatever your name is," he whimpered, "you're makin' a mistake—"

"You made the mistake, when you murdered the Reno Kid," the tall man said flatly. "When a friend of mine, livin' in Caribou Bend, sent me word that the Reno Kid had been killed up here while robbin' a bank, I smelled somethin' fishy. I'd heard about you, Jance, and I traced that smell right to you. I had that reward flyer printed, with 'Waco' Deming's name and description on it, and my picture—and sent it to you along with a letter sayin' that Deming had escaped from my jail. Then I headed out for Caribou Bend.

"I let you capture me, hopin' you'd pull some crooked stunt like when you got the Reno Kid drunk and talked him into pullin' a fake bank robbery so you could murder him for the bounty he'd bring. And you did. Jance, do you think I was fool enough not to know you aimed to murder me and collect on my hide after I'd killed Dave Runnels for you? Then you'd have sworn I killed Runnels. You'd collect a thousand dollars, and you'd have a ranch. Jance, you're slick—and a murderin', blackhearted wolf!"

Terror lifted dark and ugly inside Kirby Jance. He felt the cold feet of the snow as it walked over his face, he heard the bitter, mocking howl of the wind as it swept across the dreary white land.

"This Reno Kid," he mumbled, "what was he to you?"

"He just liked to call himself the Reno Kid," the tall man said slowly. "His name was Johnny Redfern, and he was my kid brother!"