



As Colton raised his gun to finish Kane, Belle's rifle cracked sharply

Sixguns to Bowie

By Robert J. Hogan

On the Dodge, Young Wes Kane Plays Destiny's Cards!

ABOUT the time he rode out of the jack pine clump and found the stranger waiting across his trail, young Wes Kane had begun to figure maybe by now he was far enough away so he could stop dodging every human.

At first sight you wouldn't think he was anything but a towheaded kid. Not until you looked closer at the well formed shoulders and the face lines of pain and worry that age a man. Not until you looked at the six-guns hanging well down. Then,

maybe you'd glance up at the face again and see the hunted look in the deep set eyes and the pinched way the cheeks had sunk in from hunger. And if you looked at the sorrel mare he rode, drooping and head hanging and chest heaving like she'd never manage to get a good deep breath of air again, you'd figure, maybe that the pair, rider and horse, had traveled a long way fast without taking much time for eating or resting.

You'd be right, stranger.

But now the two were coming into Grasslands Valley that led to the little green town of Bowie at the lower end of the valley and the kid was figuring to stop there and begin working and eating regular—or give himself up.

Wes Kane and his sorrel had seen the green of the valley and the billowing clumps of cottonwoods ahead as soon as they'd topped Mustang Ridge and started down the east slope. And the kid had smiled a little for the first time in a month—since he'd managed to break out of jail.

Now, even the travel worn sorrel picked up a little speed in her single foot along the upper valley trail. It was as if the horse could read her rider's mind and know that there, among the cool, green cottonwoods they'd stop for a long spell.

They were rounding a clump of jack pine when the sorrel jerked up her head in the early morning air and gave a snort. And that was when the tall, lone rider and his big bay gelding stepped out in the trail.

The kid's hands flew to his guns and they came flashing out and up and leveled. "What you want?" he said.

THE stranger was a big middle-aged man. He had soft gray eyes, looking through slits and his large mouth was curled up at the corners. He sat his big bay, relaxed and seemingly not afraid. He nodded to the kid's guns.

"You ain't bad on the draw, son, but you could be better. Likely to get yourself in a heap of trouble drawing like that unless you strike a real slow buzzard who wouldn't fight, nohow."

"I'll do all right," the kid said savagely. But his guns weren't holding steady and he looked more like he'd rather run than stay and fight.

"I got plenty of dinero," the man said. "I don't need blood money from turning

you in."

"What you mean by that?"

The man jerked his head the way the kid had come, "I saw your picture along down below, couple of weeks back. But I don't take with every picture I see. Just because they caught you on a rustling job on the Border and you broke out the calaboose before they could try you, don't mean you was a real hard cattle rustler. I've lived long enough to know that a man can get into trouble in this man's world without going to look for it." He nodded at the guns. "Put away them irons before you hurt somebody. I aim to be friendly." He grinned broadly over his long, sun-bronzed face. "I'm friendly to a mountain lion today, son, 'cause I'm coming back to Bowie. It's been a long time."

The kid held his guns a moment more, watching the stranger. Wes Kane said, "You sure nuff don't act like you're tricking me."

"I ain't," the man said. "Call me Hank. Name's Hank Shard. I've done a little gold digging and cattle raising and business and one thing another until I struck me a mess of silver up Leadville way and I began riding easy since." He nodded. "And if you think you're protecting yourself with them two guns of yours, watch that jackrabbit loping out from behind that bush.

Hank Shard turned slightly in his saddle. Then, too fast for the kid to see, his guns came out and spat flame. And the jackrabbit made a wild leap sidewise and plopped on the dry baked earth, a little puff of torn fur and blood.

Wes Kane sat with his mouth open. He closed it slowly and holstered his guns. "What you going to Bowie for, Shard?"

Hank holstered his guns and gigged his bay. "Funny thing. Recollect couple of weeks back you come sneaking into a town named Salado and you got some

stuff at the general store? Rations for your war bag and such. And you asked about the way to Bowie. Kept your hat down so a man couldn't hardly see your face well." They were riding now, side by side down the trail toward town.

The kid nodded. "I remember. I didn't see you."

"I was visiting with Ike Horner back by the stove. When I heard you mention Bowie it kind of woke me up. I'd been roaming around since I made my strike, feeling like a homeless ranny. When I heard you talking about Bowie it made me remember a girl. Belle Driscoll used to be her name, till she married. Heard she married some skunk, I forgot his name. From what I heard, they moved to Bowie and settled down and she had a kid, a boy, I think. Anyway, this no good hombre she married left her, I heard. Run out on her when she needed him bad, or something, and last I heard she was still living in Bowie. So when you named the town, I got a hankering to see Belle Driscoll. Heard she even took her maiden name again, she hated the skunk so much. Reckon he never showed up."

"You say her name was Belle?" Wes asked.

"Belle Driscoll." Hank Shard nodded. He turned, suddenly. "Why?"

"Funny thing," Wes Kane said. "That's kind of how I come to be heading for Bowie."

Hank Shard was staring hard at him through the early morning haze. "How?"

The kid jerked his head. "Back when I was working for the man on the Border—the man who got me in trouble. Once we was driving herd and we'd stopped for the night and we were sitting by the fire and he got to drinking and talking. He said there was one mistake he made. Talked about the only home he'd ever had was Bowie. He said to go up to Bowie if I ever

got into trouble and see Belle. He said she'd help me."

HANK SHARD was breathing heavily, deeply. He stared at the boy. "Well, I'll be hanged!" he said.

"What you make of it?" Wes said.

Hank Shard rubbed the bottom of his chin reflectively. He said, "One thing I make. If you want get set right by this Belle, don't say a word about the man who told you, understand?"

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't be good for you," Hank said. "It might raise up a riot that might send you to a hanging tree." He stopped talking and shook his head. "No, I reckon it wouldn't go that far, but it wouldn't do no good to mention your past. It don't do no good to mention the past mostly always out in this country."

They rode on in silence, except now and then Hank Shard would rumble his deep voice and say, "Well, I'll be hanged!" and, "What you know about that?" And when they reined over to the trail before the Empire House in Bowie, Hank said, "Might as well let me do the talking since we're both looking for Belle Driscoll. Reckon they'll be able to tell us in the hotel if she's still living in town or where we might find her."

They clumped into the little lobby where one door went into the dining room and on the other side another door opened into the bar. A flight of steps went up back and around the desk to the rooms above.

There were a couple of old sourdoughs over in the corner playing checkers and they didn't even look up from the board.

Nobody was behind the desk or in sight except through the door that opened into the bar. Hank moved his head and he and the kid walked into the bar.

"You can always find somebody in the bar when they're supposed to be at the

desk of a hotel," Hank said. Then, he quickly lowered his voice and he nodded to a woman behind the other end of the bar washing glasses. He said, "That's Belle Driscoll," in a low whisper. He jerked his head and they moved past three cowhands to the end of the bar and stood across from her.

She looked up. She had a pleasant face, middle-aged now, and there was gray in her hair. But she was still slim and she'd kept her shape well and her eyes were still beautiful eyes.

"She used to sing like a thrush back in the days when she was at the Palace in Silver City," Hank whispered.

She looked up then and froze. She looked at Hank and then quickly at Wes Kane and then back at Hank and then at the kid. She opened her mouth and closed it.

The bartender was a big man with a lick of dark hair slicked over his forehead. He looked over. The woman looked at him and began drying her hands on her apron. She turned and then, on her way to the barkeep, she looked back over her shoulder. "Joe," she said low. "Those two across the bar. The big man and the towheaded kid."

"They bothering you, Belle?" Joe said and started for the two.

"Wait," she said. "They're there, aren't they? I'm not seeing—things, Joe? That—that towheaded—" She was looking at Wes now, staring at him and through him as if he were a ghost.

"Sure they're real," Joe said: "Sure, Belle. You're all right."

"Hello, Belle," Hank said and laughed as if it was funny.

"The man's talking to you," Joe said. "Friend of yours, Belle? He knows you, see? You ain't seeing things."

She came back slow, behind the bar until she was standing across from them

but she kept staring at the boy, not Hank.

"Hank—Hank Shard," she said. And kept looking at Wes Kane. "Who's the lad with you, Hank?" She said the last almost in a whisper.

"Just a friend," Hank said. He wasn't laughing now. It was hell to see the agony of hope and fear on her face as she stared at the face of Wes Kane.

Wes turned. He said, low-toned, "I'm getting out of here."

Hank caught his wrist. "You're okay," he said.

All at once Belle shook her head and tears came to her eyes. She said, "No, it couldn't be."

Joe, the bartender was beside her. The cowhands were watching from up the bar. The barkeep said, "You all right, Belle?"

SHE shook her head as if to clear it of cobwebs. "I'm all right," she said. "I get a little crazy, sometimes." She looked at Wes. "I had a boy who would look about like you. Towheaded boy. But he died when we had the fever epidemic." She came out from behind the bar. "Come on up to my room. We can talk there."

She had a sitting room and a bedroom behind it. She went through the curtains into the bedroom and told them to sit down. Hank whispered, "Not a word about the man on the Border." The kid shook his head and Belle called, "What you whispering about?"

"Just telling Wes you haven't changed a bit in twenty years," Hank called. "Ever sing any more for the boys, Belle?"

"No," she said. "I kind of came out of the fever epidemic minus several things."

She emerged then in a fresh blue flowered dress and her hair had been neatened. She sat down across from Wes Kane. She said, "This is certainly fine, you two dropping in. I can understand you coming, Hank Shard. You always were

chasing the girls.”

“Just you I’m after. Belle,” Hank said.

“Go on with you,” Belle said waving a hand. “But what about you, towhead? What brings you?”

Wes coughed. He got red in the face, like he was going to burst. He opened his mouth and closed it and looked at Hank.

“We just happened to be riding up together,” Hank said. He lowered his voice and glanced at the open door. He went over and closed it. “The boy got in a little trouble down on the Border. He says it wasn’t anything that was his fault. He figured he’d come up this way and maybe find a riding job.”

Belle was looking hard at Wes, tipping her head, and Hank said, “You ain’t seen any posters around here that he’s wanted, have you Belle?”

She shook her head instantly. “I’d know the face,” she said. “I think you’re safe this far north of the Border unless somebody comes riding through and remembers.” She hesitated then, “What kind of trouble, Wesley? That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“He was working on cattle drives down that way,” Hank said quickly. “The man he was working for was a rustler and he didn’t know it. He sent the lad to drive a herd of rustled cattle across the Border and Wes got caught. That it, Wes?”

Wes swallowed and nodded. “And I broke out of jail and headed north.”

“You’re lucky,” Belle said. “I believe you. But you better not show your face around town for a day or two, till I can make sure there’s no notice of you being wanted.”

“I’ll hide out up in the hills,” Kane said.

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” Belle said. “You’ll stay here. You can sleep on

the couch. I’ll bring your meals up to you until we’re sure.”

Hank Shard got up slow. He said, “I’ll take your horse to the livery stable, Wes, and she’ll get a good rest.” He winked at Belle. “Wes could stand some eating food right now, Belle.”

“I’ll tend to it,” she said. “You don’t have to tell me when to feed a person.” She was up and nodding her head toward the door. She said, “Come on. I’ll show you where you can have a room, Hank Shard.” She caught hold of his arm as they went out and she hugged it. “It’s as good as Christmas seeing you come back, Hank. No fooling. Why did you come back?”

They were out in the hall, walking down between the doors that led to the various hotel rooms. Hank said, “You didn’t believe me, Belle, but I told the truth. I came to see you.”

“You’re talking like a kid Wesley’s age,” she said.

“I’m talking like a man that’s sick of living alone.”

BELLE had opened a door and stepped into the room. She fluffed up the thin pillow and turned back the blankets. “You can bunk here, Hank. What did you say?”

“You heard me,” Hank said.

She stepped to the door, “I was afraid I did. I’m going down to the kitchen and rustle some food for Wesley.” She stepped into the hall. “A mighty nice boy, seems to be. Can’t imagine him getting into trouble on his own.”

“He might, drawing too slow,” Hank said. “That’s about all the trouble I can think of he’d rightly get into by himself.”

“You’ve seen him draw?”

Hank grinned. “When he ran into me on the trail. I told him about it.”

“I wouldn’t want him a gun-fighting kid,” Belle said. She went out. Hank could

hear her feet treading the stairs to the lower floor.

He opened the window to his room and then went down to the horses. He rode his bay and led the sorrel to the livery stable and paid the boy there and told him to treat them good. He slung his saddle roll over his shoulder and started back.

A lean man with massive shoulders and a thick beard on his face reined close to Hank as he crossed the street. The man had a deep, rumbling voice. He said, "Excuse me, stranger. Didn't a towheaded, long legged kid ride into town a while ago on that sorrel you just led in?"

Hank Shard stopped dead in his tracks. He turned with the saddle roll hindering his right arm if he wanted to draw.

"Maybe he did," Hank said. "Maybe he didn't. What business you figure it is of yours?"

"Just curious," the man said. He reined his horse around.

Hank Shard said, "See that you keep it just curious." He stepped back on the board walk and watched the stranger with the beard ride up the street.

"Friends of yours?" a voice said behind Hank.

He turned. A sandy haired man with a full flowing mustache and a big star on his vest was looking at him. The star said, "Sheriff," real plain and the eyes of the sandy-haired man were narrowed.

"Never saw him before in my life," Hank said. "Did you, Sheriff?"

"No," the sheriff said, "and if I find you're lying it won't be so easy to pull what you three got on your minds."

"Pull?" Hank said. He laid back his head suddenly and laughed.

"You rode in about an hour ago with a towheaded kid," the sheriff said. "Now you just took your horses here to the livery stable. They've had some hard riding. That can mean a lot of things."

"It sure can," Hank said. "It might mean you're making wrong guesses."

"Then again," the sheriff said. "It might mean something that would need looking into. Like what was this bearded man doing just now, giving you a signal of some kind?"

"You don't trust nobody you never saw before in this town, is that it, Sheriff?"

"About it," the sheriff said. "You'll be watched, every move. So you better get out of town, all three of you."

A window at the back of the Empire House slammed up and a woman's voice called down to the two in front of the livery stable.

"If you're just visiting with that man, Sheriff, you'll find him good company. If you're figuring he's an owlhoot and a road agent you're picking the wrong man. That's Hank Shard and he's honester than you, Sheriff. Don't be bothering him."

It was Belle Driscoll. She slammed down the window and was gone. The sheriff frowned at Hank. He said, "You know Belle Driscoll?"

"Known her for over twenty years," Hank said.

The sheriff looked disgusted. He said, "You might be all right, then," and looked disappointed. He turned and walked up the street.

Hank crossed the street and went around to the front hotel entrance and Belle was waiting for him there. She said, "Nosy lawman. Just because I saved a youngster from hanging once, and proved he didn't do the horse stealing he was supposed to have, Sheriff Rance watches everybody he hears new that I speak to."

HANK SHARD opened his mouth to mention the bearded man. He closed it again. Instead, he said, "You got Wesley fed?"

A soft light came into her eyes. "I

never saw anybody so hungry in my life. I had to stop him eating for fear he'd get sick."

She walked up the stairs with him and to his room. She took his saddle roll off his shoulder and unrolled it on the bed and put away what things he had.

Hank watched her and a warm feeling possessed him. He said, "I meant what I told you, Belle, about why I came here."

She spread out a special little doily on the top of the old varnish-cracked dresser.

"I been a wandering ranny most of my life, Belle. But I've made my pile—in silver. Got it banked safe and sound and I aim to buy me a ranch some nice place and have you and me settle down."

"Hank," she said, turning. Her eyes glistened with moisture.

"You can pick out the place and ranch."

She turned and stared out of the window.

"I've thought about you a heap since I saw you years ago. I always thought about you as my girl."

She turned. "Hank," she said. "You forget. I'm still married."

"After that—after your husband left you like that, in the middle of the fever epidemic? Took everything you had in the house and went out and left you and the boy sick."

He said it savagely, for it seemed to be coming out of him, forced into speech against his will.

"I'm married, just the same," she said. "Even if I hate the ground he walks on. Even if I might kill him if I could, I'm married to him. I said, 'Till death do us part,' Hank. Folks from Utah are like that. Strict. I'm funny, I guess. Maybe it's the way I was brought up. I was brought up awfully strict, Hank, about marriage. I guess that's partly why I went off the trail when it all happened. Sometimes I see

things in my sleep, like I thought I was seeing down at the bar, when you stood there—with the towhead."

"Think about it," Hank said. "You're going to be pestered with me until you tell me yes, Belle."

She shook her head. "I'm proud to have you ask me, Hank," she said. "But you best forget it." She went out and he heard her go down the hall and descend to the first floor.

Hank walked down the hall and tapped at Belle's door to see the kid. There wasn't any answer. He tried the door and it opened and he peered around the edge of the door.

Wes was sleeping like a baby, sprawled out on the couch. Hank closed the door softly. He said, "Any snake that'd use a kid like that to get him caught with rustled cattle ought to be hung twice."

He went down to the back porch of the Empire House and washed up and Belle had dinner for him when he came in the dining room. But she didn't stay. She went out to the kitchen and he didn't hear any more from her.

"Shouldn't of sprung it on her so sudden," Hank muttered. "It was enough shock me coming up with a towheaded kid that reminded of her own dead one without me asking her first chance to marry me."

She came in to bring him his dried apricot pie and she turned to go, then she bent over and looked out of the front window.

"What's Sheriff Rance doing on that porch pole over at the general store?" she said.

Hank took a squint. He said, "Tacking up a poster bill of some kind. Somebody's wanted. He must have just got them in." He went back to his apricot pie.

"He's looking over this way," she said. She stood, suddenly motionless, looking at Hank Shard. "You don't suppose—the

boy, Wesley. They wouldn't have followed him—here?"

Hank Shard wiped off his mouth and got up. He hitched his six-guns, slammed his hat on without a word, and headed for the front door.

He was thinking of what Belle had said about the sheriff and how he'd like to get something on her. It was queer, him tacking up a wanted poster right across the street from the Empire House.

AS HANK crossed the street, he saw a woman and a half grown girl come out of the general store and pause to look at the poster.

"He looks so young," Hank heard the woman say.

His blood boiled a little in the wave of heat that rushed over him. Maybe the kid was guilty. He didn't think so. But maybe the kid had known all the time he was rustling cattle. What was burning him was the way the arrogant sheriff went about it.

He glanced up the street. Sheriff Rance had paused up by his office and was looking down the street, watching him. The man with the beard was on the edge of the office doorway. He ducked back as Hank looked up. Maybe he was going to step back anyway, and maybe it was on purpose—a strange move.

Hank walked past the poster without looking at it. He went into the store and bought a sack of smoking tobacco. He turned and waited inside the door. He could see the poster well enough through the dirty store window. It was a poster like the ones he'd seen down south near the Border. It was the same, a picture of Wesley Kane with his name under the picture of the kid and the amount, "ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD. DEAD OR ALIVE."

"The devil with the sheriff seeing me," Hank exploded. He stepped out of the

store and got a close look at the poster. The sheriff was still up there watching. Hank looked back at the poster and tried to figure what was different about it from the others he'd seen. Something was different, that was sure. Yet, the picture and the printing were the same.

When he turned again, Sheriff Rance was at his elbow.

Hank turned on him. He said, "Where'd you get these posters, Sheriff?"

"If it's any of your business," the sheriff said with a trace of a grin, "that bearded man I figured you were planning something illegal with, is a U.S. marshal. Just happened he brought the posters along. Why?"

Hank Shard froze. He turned his head slowly and looked up the dusty street toward the sheriff's office. The bearded face was gone from the door.

Sheriff Rance was throwing him a tight loop. He said, "You haven't seen the kid, have you, Shard?"

Hank tried to relax. He tried to pretend he wasn't much interested. He said, "What you got against Belle Driscoll, Sheriff? She's a mighty fine woman—always helping people."

"She helps the wrong ones," Sheriff Rance said and there was no trace of a grin on his face now. "But you ain't answered my question. I asked you did you see that kid on the poster. He's wanted for rustling down along the Border."

"It don't seem like a nice looking kid like that could rustle cattle, Sheriff," Hank said, desperately.

Sheriff Rance turned and walked back up toward his office.

Belle was waiting inside the door of the Empire House when Hank clumped back in. He wiped off the dust of the street on the rope mat and took his time.

She caught him by the arm and closed the door behind him and when she'd made

him face her, she said, "What'd the sheriff say?"

Hank shrugged. He wanted time to think, to figure out what was wrong with the poster and perhaps what might not be right with the bearded man with the broad, heavy shoulders and the wide set, piercing black eyes.

"Answer me," Belle said and she shook Hank.

Hank said, "I believe we'd better get the kid out and on his way."

"Why?" Her eyes were blazing. "That sheriff isn't going to try some trick to get that boy away from me. There's something queer."

"I feel there is," Hank said. "I sure do. But I can't figure it out and—"

"And what?" she demanded, staring up at him, desperately.

"And there ain't anything we can do, Belle, honey. You can't mess with a U.S. marshal."

"What's that?" She went pale.

Hank slowly nodded. "He asked me first in front of the livery stable," he said.

"I didn't see anybody until I saw you and the sheriff talking."

"He was there when I came out after turning over the horses."

"What did he say?"

"Asked me about Wes. If Wes rode into town with me and if the sorrel was his horse."

BELLE clasped her hands and wrung them a little. She said, "I hadn't figured on this." She walked over to the little hotel desk and back again. "How do you expect the marshal knew about Wesley?"

"Maybe trailed him all the way up," Hank said. "How do I know? Only thing, we got to get him out."

They turned toward the stairs and walked up fast. And in the parlor of

Belle's quarters Belle herself shook the kid awake. Her voice was soft and soothing, but vibrant underneath with the fear and anger that she felt.

"Wesley. Got to get up and start moving. Wesley."

He turned over and opened his eyes. He jumped and Hank laid a hand on the kid's forehead and he said, "Take it easy. Come to."

The kid sat up. "What's the matter?" Belle told him as gently as she could. She said, "We're going to try and get you out. I think we can slip you out of the back door of the hotel, and you can go across the street and get your horse saddled and light out."

Hank went out and down the hall. He looked out a rear window and hurried back. His face was long and somber. "We're going to have to figure something better than that," he said. "Sheriff's got a deputy sitting in the doorway of the livery stable with a scatter gun."

"Oh, God!" Belle breathed. She looked at the kid with as much horror as if he was her own flesh and blood. "But we've got to do something,"

"I'm trying to think," Hank said. "There's something wrong with those posters. The one I saw wasn't just like the ones I saw below."

"It'll be dark in almost an hour," Belle said. "Maybe then if—"

Feet clumped below in the entrance to the hotel. Belle Driscoll sat motionless, listening. The heavy feet were coming up the stairs. They were coming down the hall and they stopped at her door. "Open up," Sheriff Rance's voice barked. "This is the law."

Hank Shard groaned. The kid was white. He stood up. He said, "Let him come in," gently, like he was ready to give up.

Then, without invitation, the door

opened and Rance and two deputies came in. "Come on, Wesley Kane," Rance said. "There's a U.S. marshal waiting to take you back."

Wes Kane nodded. He walked forward, past the sheriff and his deputies. He paused outside, "I thank you for what you did. I sure wish I could stay longer." He half turned, then, "Whatever anybody says, I didn't do anything that I knew was wrong."

Belle was too filled up to say anything. Hank just stood there and watched the sheriff close the door. Their feet clumped down the stairs and they could be heard walking up the boardwalk along Main Street. Then there was no sound except Belle's soft sobbing and her words, "He—he was like my son—would have been." She stared up at Hank. "We got to think of something, Hank."

"I'm thinking," he said. "What the devil was wrong with that poster I saw?" He said it savagely. Then, suddenly, he grabbed his hat and stamped out and down to the street. He went across and looked at the poster in the dim light of evening and he studied it until it grew dark, until he heard the soft clop of hoofs on the back street leaving the livery stable in the dark.

He walked up the stairs and Belle was waiting for him in her doorway. He came in, shook his head. "Once, about ten years ago I had a streak where I figured I was a business man. I went into the print shop business, with another fellow who knew about it. And there's something on that poster that didn't come out of a—" he stopped and was staring at Belle with his mouth open. "I got it!" he said. "The edges, they been cut crooked, like with a hunting knife. And now I remember the posters below were bigger, more white around the edges."

"What difference does that make?" Belle said, trying hard to understand him.

"A heap of difference!" Hank barked. "These is posters that were hanging up down near the Border and this bearded hombre took 'em down and, so nobody would notice they'd been tacked up before, he trimmed the edges, and he didn't get them even and square like they do where the posters are printed."

Belle Driscoll stared at Hank blankly, her eyes anxiously searching his face.

"But I don't see," Belle said.

"It means this man with the beard ain't a U.S. marshal at all. Otherwise, he'd come bringing posters square and even and right off the press. This buzzard is"—Hank gaped at Belle, his eyes wide open. "You don't figure the skunk who hired the boy to drive the cattle where he might get caught crossing the Border—you don't figure that pole-cat would follow the kid up this way, after he'd broke out of jail, and take him back to get the reward?"

Belle Driscoll's face was hard. She said, "If he was a man like the man I married, he might."

Hank Shard had turned away, thinking hard. He whirled back. "What did you say? About the man that left you? Your husband? What he could do? And this man, the kid said—I didn't tell you but that's how come the kid headed for here."

Belle stood motionless glaring at him. "What did he say?"

"He said one night the man he worked for was drinking heavy by the fire and he got talking about Bowie being a nice town and if the kid ever got into trouble, to come look up a woman named Belle in Bowie."

Belle's mouth was wide. She said, "Did you see this man? Tall with broad, heavy shoulders. Wide set black eyes?"

"That's him," Hank said. "That's the man with the beard."

Belle was out of the door and heading down the stairs. She said, "He's no U.S.

marshal! That crazy sheriff is taking his word for it in order to get something on me.”

Sheriff Rance stepped through the door from the bar.

He said, “Were you mentioning my name, Belle Driscoll?”

She told him she was and why. She said, “And you let him bluff you that he was a U.S. marshal. Why you locoed idiot!”

“Wait a minute!” Sheriff Rance roared. “I saw his papers and his badge!”

“Then,” Belle said savagely, “I’ll lay you a ten to one there’s a dead U.S. marshal somewhere down south of here.”

She turned then and ran out of the hotel and Hank Shard rushed after her. She ran down the side of the hotel and across the back street to the livery stable. She called the stable boy for horses saddled and she said, “I want a Winchester. A loaded one!”

Hank got his horse saddled and led out another horse for Belle. He said, “Hadn’t you ought to let me handle this, Belle?” but she wouldn’t listen and made him help her up and she sat like a statue of vengeance with the rifle across her lap.

“They’ll be likely taking the same trail we came up,” Hank said.

There was a moon rising. Belle reined her horse and made a sharp turn, “If Dan Colton hears us coming, he may shoot the boy,” she said. “That reward is for dead or alive. If he does, the boy won’t be able to name him as the boss that made him ride with the cattle. That’s what he’d figure on doing eventually, kill the boy.”

“I’ll follow you,” Hank said.

She giggled her roan into a wild run around a butte and down a gulch and up a steep bank and they came out onto a plain with clumps of jack pine here and there. And they reined their panting broncs over behind a pine bush and waited. The two

horsemen should be along any time now. They’d be moving slow.

Hank lifted his guns in their holsters and let them settle back again. He swung his arms a couple of times to limber them. They waited and listened and then, far off, there came the sounds of wild galloping and the thunder of hoofs was coming nearer the valley.

The moon rose higher and it was full and bright, like the light of a dull day. The thudding hoofs came nearer and Hank Shard braced himself for the stop.

A man was yelling now, yelling, “Kick that sorrel or I’ll shoot you where you sit in the saddle. Kick her, I say.”

“That devil,” Belle said. “That’s him. I’d know Dan Colton’s voice anywhere.” She reined her horse out into the trail.

THEY could see the horses coming. The kid on his sorrel and the bearded man on his horse. And down the valley three other riders came, running their animals hard.

“Must be the sheriff figured he’d better look into it,” Hank said.

“He’s going to be late for this party,” Belle said through clenched teeth.

“Whoa!” The bearded man yelled and tried to rein both horses and swing them. The sorrel wouldn’t swing. They came on toward the waiting pair by the jack pines.

Belle Driscoll raised her rifle and her voice was shrill and commanding. “Put up your hands, Dan Colton!”

“Belle!”

“Put up your hands, I said!”

Colton swerved his horse and went for his right hand gun. It came out and swung to finish the kid.

Belle’s rifle barked and Dan Colton’s right arm dropped and the gun fell out of his hand. He put spurs to his horse and the horse ran like a wild stallion for the brush.

Flame spat from the sheriff’s guns.

There was a moment while Dan Colton swayed like a drunk in the saddle. Then all the life went out of him and he pitched headlong out of the saddle and crashed into the mesquite, and the sheriff and his men raced in.

When they left, Hank got the kid on one side of Belle and he rode close, on the other side. He held Belle's arm to steady her. She rode with bowed head and now and then she shook a little, as if she might be weeping.

Sheriff Rance came riding up as they were getting down at the livery stable. He said, "You were right, Belle. Colton wasn't a U.S. marshal. I was mighty careless looking over his papers first time. I just looked again and they describe a smaller man than Colton. I reckon the cavalry'll be up directly to investigate."

Belle didn't say anything and Sheriff Rance lowered his voice. "I've been wrong about some things with you more

than I thought, Belle," he said. "I hope we'll be more friendly from now on."

He rode off and Belle watched him go. Then, turning to walk with Hank and Wes to the hotel, she said, "He's just laying it on because election'll be coming up, soon."

A moment later at the entrance to the hotel, she turned to Hank. "That was hateful of me saying that about the sheriff. I don't ever want to ever be hateful again." She took a deep breath. "I guess I do need somebody like you to look after me, Hank. A person gets ornery alone." She looked at the kid, pressed his hand a moment. "Good night, Wesley."

She went in quickly.

Hank looked at Wes and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You know, Wes," he said. "I got a hunch Belle's going to want a ranch big enough so's there's work for two men around it."

Wes Kane grinned. "I sure hope so," he said.