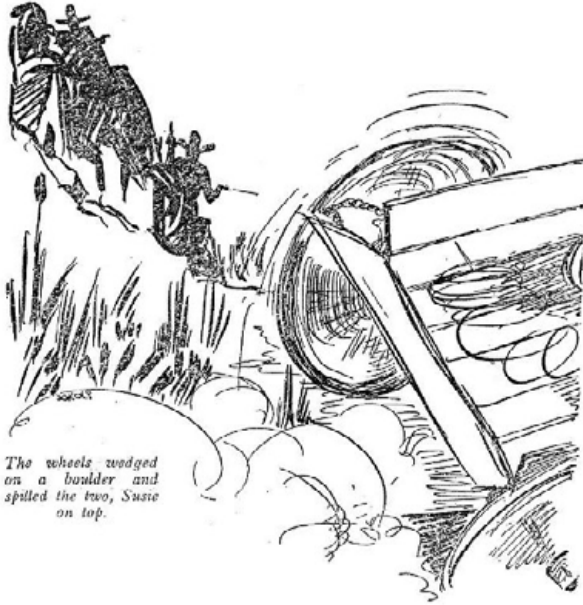


FEUD'S END

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

When Simon Bolivar Grimes killed her daddy, naturally Melinda would have nothing more to do with him. But romance proves itself as long-lived as the proverbial cat when he saves her from a stampeded herd



The wheels wedged on a boulder and spilled the two, Susie on top.



“SIMON! You, Simon! Whut the tarnation hell yo’ think this is, a gol danged hotel?” Uncle Carter, bawling like a four year old bull, shattered the early morning silence.

Simon Bolivar Grimes had heard the first raucous bellow some minutes earlier, but untangling himself from the ranch cook’s lovely daughter took time and determination. The girl had developed the art of clinging to the utmost possible degree.

Susie Wrinkled-Meat, slim, shapely, and brown, had inherited an inappropriate name and piquantly prominent cheek bones from her late father, a Comanche chief; and her Spanish

mother’s contribution was a pair of devil-haunted black eyes and an insatiable urge for just one more kiss.

She wore a gown heavily paneled with hand-made Mexican lace. It concealed this and revealed that—particularly *that*, of which Susie had plenty: such as sweetly rounded hips, and firm little breasts, coyly hinted at by the transparent yoke of her gown. She was sultry enough to need ventilated garments. . .

“Simon, darling,” she sighed. “I hate to think of you’re going with the pool herd to Abilene. I’ll miss you awfully.”

She kissed the gangling, tow-headed boy from Georgia until he tingled all the way to

his cowhide boots. He had been telling Susie good-bye since eight o'clock the night before.

"Honey, I jest got to be rep of the Box G," he panted. "But—"

"Simon, you blasted girl-crazy horn toad, wheah are you?" howled Uncle Carter from outside the cook's *dobe* shack.

GRIMES pried the armful of torrid lace from his shirt front and stumbled toward the ranch house. His coffin-shaped face was longer than usual. Maybe if he stalled long enough, he could devise some way of taking Susie with him.

"Uncle Ca'tah," he began, planting himself at the kitchen table, "I got a whale of a headache. Anyway, they ain't going to be through putting the trail brand on all them critters till tonight."

Grimes' uncle, however, was almost psychic: "Bub, they ain't no use thinking of takin' Susie along. Them cowpokes would be so danged busy murderin' each other fo' one of her kisses, they'd plumb fo'get ridin' herd."

"I warn't thinkin' of that!" flared Grimes. "I jest been tryin' to figger out why Melinda Patton ain't putting any of her H-P critters in the pool. They's suthin' funny theah."

"You might ask Melinda," was the malicious retort.

Grimes, white with wrath, leaped to his feet. He and Melinda had been very much in love until he shot her father, the crooked banker, who as front for a cattle rustling syndicate, had nearly put Uncle Carter out of business.

The impending civil war was blocked when a sweet voice purred from the threshold, "*Senor* Grimes, I 'ave jest notice there ees no flour and the bacon she ees damn' near finish."

It was Susie's mother, Catalina. Her comely face had a well-kissed look; and every quiver of her firm, generous breasts made Grimes wonder if his uncle wasn't mighty lucky in his arrangements to take care of John

Wrinkled-Meat's daughter and widow.

"Simon," grunted Uncle Carter, "mebbe you an' Susie bettah take the buckboard and load it up with vittles. She kin drive it back."

It was so arranged; and presently they were on their way.

WHILE not quite half way to Skeleton Creek, Grimes noted a large herd near the bank of the creek that gave the town its name. The critters were branded BB. He had never heard of such an outfit. Frowning, he handed Susie the reins.

"You wait heah. I'm goin' ovah to the camp," he said, mounting the saddled *palomino* tethered to the tail gate of the wagon.

Grimes was moved by more than mere curiosity; it was part of his business to keep posted on who was who.

He skirted Skeleton Creek; but he had ridden scarcely fifty yards when he pulled up. The woman at the edge of a dawn-kissed pool, just visible through a thicket, was built to make Venus at the fountain look like a Piute squaw. Her hair, gilded by the early light and streaming to her hips, was a passable substitute for the last flimsy garment that was settling about her ankles.

He got just a flash of a bosom that quivered like delicate pink tinted jelly. Then, before he could get a look at her face, she turned to the creek, tentatively tested its temperature with an outthrust foot. Though that move cheated Grimes of a fuller view, it gave him a chance to remember that no gentleman would spy on a lady's morning bath. He headed for the camp.

Two men squatted at the fire. Half a dozen others, likewise black dots against the horizontal rays that made Grimes blink and squint, were hustling about with their work.

As he approached, the two at the fire started to their feet, hands darting to their belts. The move, however, was checked when Grimes hailed the camp; but while that gesture

had been natural enough, they did seem just a shade jumpy. One, short and squat, ducked out of sight; the other, tall and rangy, rose and approached Grimes.

As the gap closed, Grimes for the first time was able to see that the boss of that outfit had a black beard, a hatchet face and bushy brows; a salty, hard bitten hombre if there ever was one.

"Light and set, stranger," he invited. Then, gesturing at the pot on the fire, "they's still time fer some cawfee."

"Thank you, suh. I done et. I'm Simon Bolivar Grimes, suh, an' seein' yo' critters, I thought at fust you was some local outfit headin' fo' the pool herd."

"Yo're jest half right, bub," grinned the bearded man. "I'm Bart Bailey from Del Rio, which ain't exactly local. But last night I heard about a pool startin' from here and with so many cattle thieves on the prowl, I reckoned it'd be sensible tuh join up."

They chatted for a moment, then Grimes wheeled his horse and rode back to the buckboard. Susie was at the creek ford, waiting. The blonde woman was no longer in sight. But Grimes was not thinking of the beauties of nature.

"Mistah Bart Bailey," he pondered, "sho' drove his herd slow-like, fo' a gent what's afeerd of owl-hooters. Them critters is too fat fo' a fast run from Del Rio."

HALF an hour later, as they approached the mouth of an *arroyo*, he heard the whinny of a horse. It came from the right; and the greeting to his beasts was cut off before it was fairly out. Someone had blundered. The abrupt choking of the sound was a dead giveaway. There was an ambush ahead.

Grimes, pig stubborn, refused to retreat. In the *arroyo*, the light was still tricky for long range fire. As they were for a moment sheltered by a thicket, he said to Susie, "Grab my hoss and git out while I attend to that gent."

"I'm not scared," she countered; but she wisely dropped to the bed of the buckboard.

Grimes' drawn pistol, a single action .45 the length of a siege gun, lay on his knee. He was ready—

"Whack!" But the rifle blast came from the side of the *arroyo* opposite from the one where the concealed horse had whinnied.

A slug gouged a ragged welt along Grimes' ribs, thudding into the seat beside him. He yelled, pitched to the floor boards. The fuzztails bolted. The clattering drowned everything but the triumphant hoot from the left, and the answering shout from the right.

A man popped up from cover, high above the bottom of the *arroyo*. He was certain that he had plugged his victim; but a correction was on the way. The galloping mustangs had closed the gap; and then the long barreled .45 bellowed like artillery firing in battery. The lurker pitched headlong down the slope.

The mustangs wheeled sharply, wedging the wagon wheels on a boulder. The impact spilled Grimes from the seat, and piled Susie on top of him. The resulting a pinwheel of bare legs, cowhide boots, and red calico settled to the rocky bottom just in time to miss the hail of pistol slugs that poured from the opposite bank. The choked whinny from the right had been guile, not stupidity; but for poor marksmanship, Grimes would have been plugged from the left before he caught the trick.

Sheltered by the half upset wagon, he hosed the slope with lead. His second gun, however, had dropped far beyond his reach; and as he frantically jacked the empties from his smoking weapon, a howl and a clatter of departing hoofs mocked him.

No chance to pursue. The saddle mount had broken from the tail gate and bolted. Susie was screeching to the high heavens, "Simon, they killed me!"

For a mortally wounded person, she was tolerably noisy. Helping her to her feet, he saw that a slug had creased her hip. So while

Susie nonchalantly tore a strip from her skirt, Grimes pacified the mustangs, who were industriously kicking the dashboard to pieces, maneuvered them to extricate the wedged wagon wheel, and then caught his saddle mount. That done, he approached the pie-faced man who lay gaping stupidly at the sunrise.

HE WAS a stranger, and the contents of his pockets were not enlightening. His accomplice, escaping with both horses, had removed the most serviceable clue; but Grimes, after bundling the stiff into the buckboard, circled around the scene of the ambush.

One of the hidden mounts had a broken shoe, he learned from the hoofprints; and he found a lead-riddled hat near the spot where the lurker had watched the horses. It was a Stetson with a silver ornamental band. On the brim was an old bloodstain, almost obliterated. Though the law would not accept such a flimsy identification, it was good enough for Grimes.

That hat belonged to Lem Potts, the shyster lawyer who had been the sole survivor of the gun fight in which Grimes had blotted out Melinda Patton's father. There was no mistaking that blood stain.

The implications, however, reached much further. The signs indicated that it had been an impromptu ambush. There were no cigarette butts, no blur of footprints to indicate a long vigil. Potts and the rifle man must have hastened from Bart Bailey's camp to intercept him.

Then he caught the play: Bailey and his companion had not realized that Grimes, dazzled by the horizontal rays, had not been able to recognize the man ducking from the camp fire. Thus the ambush was to keep Grimes from drawing any conclusions as to why Potts, survivor of the rustler syndicate, had had important business with Bailey.

Grimes, though unable to prove his

suspicious, drove on toward town with his convictions.

THE law against carrying belt weapons in Skeleton Creek had just been repealed, mainly because everyone homicidally inclined concealed guns in bootlegs, hip pockets, and shoulder holsters instead of wearing them openly. This repeal, mainly due to Grimes' blasting the gizzards out of a pair of ruffians who had underestimated him, got him a sour glare from old Hob Terrill, the town marshal, who sat near the jail.

"Mawnin', Hob," beamed Grimes, jerking his thumb toward the corpse in the wagon. "I got some new business fo' you, an' the sheriff."

"I guess yuh got another alibi?" He helped Grimes unload the dead.

"Suttinly I has. Ef I'd fired fust, this gent wouldn't never lived to pour a .45-70 along my ribs an' through the wagon seat. An' I got a witness."

The gritting sound Grimes heard as he clucked to the nags was the marshal's teeth. He turned back and added, "An' fo' six bits extry, you kin look an' see wheah that wild shot scraped Susie."

"Six bits, nothing!" mocked Susie, patting her hip. "It'll cost you both your eyes, *Senor Terrill!*"

The marshal, regarding the shapely bare legs Susie had cocked up on the dashboard, looked as though that would be cheap enough. Then he said, "I'll git yuh yet, yuh gol blamed trantler."

Grimes pulled up at Link Simpson's general store. Then, leaving Susie to stock up the wagon, Grimes headed toward the Corkscrew Inn, which was headquarters for the cattlemen who were pooling their herds for the long drive to Kansas.

HALF way to his destination, he halted, confused and embarrassed. A girl wearing stitched boots and a trim riding skirt

that flattered the most fascinating hips on that side of the Pecos was approaching him. Her sweet, serious face was framed by pale golden hair. The upper fullness of a vee-necked silk blouse rippled deliciously with each stride. She had everything!

This was Melinda Patton. Dreading this first meeting since he'd shot her father, he turned to duck into the Last Chance Saloon; but the swinging door slammed outward, blocking him.

Grimes, lips dry and heart hammering, caught the glance of her blue eyes. She recoiled; a gleam of tears contrasted strangely with the sudden hardening of her face.

"Melinda—honey—" he blurted.

She swept past him. He suddenly was glad he was riding with the trail herd. That meeting had undone every effort to forget the way she had once smiled at him in the moonlight stealing through her window. She had to hate him now, just as it had been his duty to avenge the unexpectedly revealed duplicity of her father.

Worst of all, the blow off had come just as they'd decided, after an evening's conference, that they'd be married the following day.

He stumbled back and into the Corkscrew Inn, where he gargled two shots of whiskey. Then he glanced about and saw the reps of the other outfits who were to pool their cattle. Sitting in their midst was Bart Bailey. White-haired Gil Stewart of the Lazy M was saying, "Shore, I'm trail boss. But we kain't let in any outsiders onless the reps from each ranch agrees, unanimously."

"Hell," said Bailey, "you gents has jest as good as admitted they ain't no objections tuh me."

"Makes no difference," contended Stewart. "We ain't heard from the Box G outfit yet, and until—" Then, seeing Grimes, he hailed him: "Hi, thar, Simon! Come here an' meet Bart Bailey—"

"I done had that pleasure, Gil," the boy cut in. He grinned guilelessly at Bailey.

The bearded man, if he really were surprised to see Grimes, betrayed no amazement. He nodded, then said, "I'll jest leave whilst yuh do this votin', Stewart. An' as soon as yo're done, I'll get started trail-brandin' my critters."

Stewart led the local cattlemen to the proprietor's private room.

"That was jest a formality, fellers," he said. "Ain't no objections, is they, lettin' Bart Bailey team up with us."

"I'm objectin', suh," Grimes interposed. "Fo' the Box G, what's got mo' critters in this herd 'an any other outfit."

For a moment there was a clamor of amazement at his vote. Bailey, apparently, had won the good graces of the four reps during the time he had gained by riding instead of deliberately driving to Skeleton Creek.

"What fur, Simon—? What's wrong with him—? What yuh got agin him—?"

"That's none of yo' dang business!" he retorted to the babbling trio. "Yo' asked, is I got objections an' I done said I has."

"Listen, young whelp!" Jeb Terry, broad as a chuck wagon and belligerent as an old bull, advanced a pace. "I asked—"

Pop! Grimes' fist snapped him back on his heels; but the blow just enraged Terry. With a wrathful bellow; he recovered, tugging leather.

THAT was a mistake. Before his gun half cleared the holster, a blast shook the room. Jeb yelled. Blood spurted from the hammer thumb that had been cut by fragments of the bullet that knocked the gun from his hand.

"I'll knock the two of yuh loose from yore eye teeth," growled salty old Gil Stewart, interposing. "Simon, what yuh got agin' Bailey?"

Grimes scratched his tow head and frowned. "Gil, I jest don't exactly know. Yo' might call it a permonition. Kain't prove it, so I ain't sayin'."

To explain would only warn Lem Potts, if he actually were in cahoots with Bailey in some devious piece of skull-duggery. Grimes had a deep-seated grudge against that slick customer; but for Potts' twisted legal advice, Melinda's pappy might have stayed straight, and young love would not have gone up in gunsmoke.

"Yo're right, not sayin' what yuh kain't prove," Stewart grudgingly conceded. "But yo're a damn ornery brat an' ef I was yore uncle, I'd lambaste yuh till yore hind end looked like a Scotch plaid."

"My uncle has been doin' that fo' months, an' ain't another man living what'd have guts to try it," Grimes frigidly retorted, stalking from the room, and the others followed.

Before Stewart could break the news, Bailey chuckled sourly, shrugged, and said, "I done heard most of it. Grimes, I dunno whut yuh got agin' me, but supposin' you come up tuh my room at the White Hoss Hotel? It's only fair tuh tell me in private."

Grimes had to concede the justice of his contentions.

"I'll sho' admire to give yo'all satisfaction, Mistah Bailey," said Grimes. "In two hours, ef it's agreeable to you. I got to see how many of my critters is branded."

"It's Room Four," added Bailey, as Grimes turned toward the street.

The drover's affability in the face of that direct affront convinced Grimes that Bailey was too diplomatic for an honest man; but that was all the more reason to accept his proposition. Bailey could hardly have guessed that Grimes had connected him with Lem Potts; and, in his efforts to placate the stubborn boy, he might unconsciously drop a revealing hint.

Grimes headed for the branding pen at the further side of town; but he at once looped back, and down a side street to find Potts before Bailey met him.

LEM POTTS, he presently learned, was not in his hotel or office. Neither was he at the bank, the jail, nor in any of the other saloons. It took Grimes only a few minutes to make the rounds. Then he played his last hunch.

Melinda Patton's sorrel mare was no longer at the hitching rack. She must have left town during the conference at the Corkscrew Inn. Grimes reasoned that Potts, who could not be proved guilty of the attempted dry-gulching, would scarcely shake his hocks; instead, he'd merely hide out until the trail herd left Skeleton Creek. And Melinda's ranch house was the one place where he'd expect to stay clear of Grimes, a gun slinger no one in Skeleton Creek cared to face.

Half an hour later, he was approaching the ranch house of the late Hank Patton. Though neat, it already showed signs of dwindling fortunes. The cracking of the rustlers' syndicate had cut heavily into the fortune Melinda's father took in and spent each year. Then he noted hoof prints: rider and a led horse had not long ago galloped toward the house.

One of the beasts had been bleeding. *And the led horse had one cracked shoe*; the sign Grimes had noted at the ambush. Melinda had sent Potts to bushwhack him.

A feud was a feud, and he couldn't blame the gal. But if Potts were carrying on her vengeance—

"Gawd a-mighty!" he groaned, catching all the implications. "She wouldn't *hire* anyone to plug me. She ain't that low. But ef someone was making love to her, she'd have a right to *ask* him to settle me."

He dismounted, stealthily approached the house. He knew all too well in what wing the living room was. As he came nearer, he heard a murmur of voices. The garden afforded him adequate cover from observation by any employees who might be about the bunk house or stables.

He was tall enough to get a peep between the curtains that screened the barred windows; and what Grimes saw was more than enough.

The woman must be Melinda. A man was bending over her, drawing her toward him. Her face was thus not visible, but there was no mistaking that riding skirt, well over her knees, nor the dazzling curve of her white legs.

"Oh . . . Lem . . . you mustn't . . . not now. . . . I do appreciate what you've done—what you're doing for me—but I can't—please—"

Grimes drew his .45; but those slim arms, and her incoherent gasps unnerved him. His entire body trembled, and a red haze blurred his eyes. He turned from the window.

Killing Potts in Melinda's house would damn Grimes, who had no right there. If he were jailed, he'd be foiling Uncle Carter, whose old wounds kept him from going with the herd.

". . . Lem, darling—please don't—but tomorrow night—come back at eight—"

Grimes stumbled back to his horse, spurred his beast to a gallop. He'd made a fool of himself, suspecting Bailey. The only thing to do was to apologize for a piece of Georgia orneriness and square himself with Gil Stewart and Uncle Carter's other neighbors.

HIS two hours were almost up when he came larruping into Skeleton Creek. As he dismounted in front of the Corkscrew Inn, he saw Gil Stewart, and said, "Jest fergit what I said about Bailey. I done made a hell of a mistake."

"All right, bub," answered the trail boss. "I'll tell him—"

"I'd ruther tell him myself, Gil. But ef yo' want to tell Jeb Terry and the others, I'd sho' thank you. I feel so't of foolish about this mess."

He stalked toward the White Horse Hotel. Bailey was not at the bar; Grimes therefore ascended the rickety stairs to the second floor. He tapped at the door of Number Four. A

woman bade him enter.

He halted a pace across the threshold, and devoted the next moment to gaping and stuttering. Her blue robe trailed half open, and what little she wore beneath it, accentuated the high spots between waist and collarbone. There were the sleek legs he'd viewed by sunrise; and now he caught more fully the dazzling beauty which distance had that morning withheld. Her smite was a crimson challenge.



"Uh—ur—beg yo' pahdon, m'am—I'm lookin' fa' Mistah Bailey's room—I'm Simon Bolivar Grimes, m'am—"

"Oh . . . Mr. Grimes? If you don't mind—" She paused, basking in his hungry glance, yet seeming to grope for a tactful way of reminding him that she could dress just as well without an audience.

The comb slipped from her fingers. Grimes sank to his knees to retrieve it, and did his best to keep his eyes on the floor and his fingers steady. When he straightened, she was

so close that he felt her warmth and roundness against him.

But that was nothing to the next shock! Hungry lips pressed a moist, clinging kiss on his mouth, choking his gasp of amazement. Her arms twined about him, and she arched herself closer, breathing an inarticulate sigh of contentment.

“Lawd, m’am!” He was thrilled and horrified. “You kain’t do that—not heah—with that door—”

His mouth went dry and ice raced through his veins when heavy footsteps came clumping down the hall. Then the robe slipped from her shoulders. Sheer horror paralyzed him.

In desperation, he reached for her wrists. She cried out, and while one hand broke away, her feet laced treacherously with his boots, tripping him. He was hopelessly tangled with a writhing armful when the door burst open.

Bailey was at the threshold. At his heel was the marshal, Hob Terrill.

“I’ll kill the skunk!” roared Bailey, gun drawn before Grimes could kick clear and protest that it was a frame-up.

“Drop it!” snarled Terrill, knocking the weapon aside just as Grimes got to his own gun. “Yuh fool, yuh’ll jest embarrass yore wife ef yuh kill him and have tuh explain why. She ain’t been hurt none, not exactly—”

He cocked a critical eye at the hysterical Mrs. Bailey, who was laughing, sobbing, and pouring out an incoherent account of how Grimes had gone wild seeing her state of array when she turned from the dresser. Terrill didn’t blame Grimes for having notions; he was getting a few himself; but he sternly went on, “Yo’re under arrest fur assault and battery, improper and unfittin’ conduct, an’ attempted—”

He choked, groping for just the word to use before a lady. But Bailey cut in, “Hell, marshal, ef yuh arrests him, *yuh’ll* be advertising my wife’s humiliation. Supposin’ him and me go outside the city limits and

settle this.”

“Kain’t do it.” Terrill was adamant. “I kain’t countenance dueling. If a couple gents gets riled an’ on the spur of the moment shoots each other, that’s jest a act of God. But planning it, with malice aforethought, it’s down right iniquitous an’ it don’t go. Not in Skeleton Crick.”

Bailey’s wrath subsided. “Maria, I done tol’ yuh that that dang open front nightgown—”

“Bart, it’s a negligee—” “That open front nightgown was downright indecent,” he persisted. “So mebbe I shouldn’t git too hostile, specially as he ain’t done no—no—uh—damage.”

GRIMES was sweating, embarrassed, and wrathful. Bailey was a skunk; but having told Gil Stewart that he’d withdrawn his objections, Grimes couldn’t back down. And then Bailey said, “Since this here ain’t got beyond the four of us, I’ll fergit it, ef yun let me in on the Skeleton Crick pool.”

“You damn’ ornery polecat!” fumed Grimes.

“Yuh agrees,” Terrill cut in, “er by God, I take yuh to the hoosegow.”

“I ain’t agreein’ because Terrill’s caught me with my galluses hangin’ halfway to my ankles,” raged Grimes. “I jest done told Stewart I was mistaken about you, and that I wouldn’t vote agin you. So I kain’t back down.

“But once this trail herd gits to Kansas, I’m scatterin’ yo’ guts all ovah a quarter section! Now ef yo’ wants to join, yo’ ah plumb welcome, suh.”

Bailey chuckled. Grimes stamped into the hall. And to forget the morning’s humiliation, he spent the remainder of the day at the branding pen.

The following morning, the trail herd surged northward, chuck wagon and remuda at the rear.

Grimes, watching Bailey’s critters joining the pool, saw something he had not noticed

the previous morning. It became plain enough, once a trick of the early light made him for a second time scrutinize the "BB" on the flank of one of the beasts that supposedly had come all the way from Del Rio.

It was slick and skillful branding; but his resentment and his initial suspicions had sharpened his eyes. The "BB" had not long ago been "HP"—Melinda Patton's brand! Instead of having come from Del Rio, Bailey had by a circuitous route taken Melinda's disguised cattle from her spread and then back again to Skeleton Creek.

Neither could it be wholesale theft; particularly not when Potts, Melinda's lover, had been conferring with Bailey the morning previous. It was becoming intricate beyond reckoning; each possible answer was contradicted by some other fact.

Gil Stewart, though he had heard nothing of the clash between Bailey and Grimes, kept them far apart, just on the chance that the boy's initial opposition might, in the tension of the long march, cause an outbreak of hostilities. The most even tempers would crack after the first week of long marches, nights broken by guard duty, by alarms real and false, by rumors of rustlers, by threats of stampedes.

FOR the first night's camp, Grimes was assigned to the third watch. Instead of spreading his tarpaulin near his fellows, he made his bed somewhat apart, and near the river. All day long, whenever a BB could be picked out of the herd, he received fresh confirmation; positively no doubt that they had all been HP. He was still simmering with wrath and humiliation and jealousy; he had to get to the heart of the riddle.

Something crooked was in the wind. He now had two on his list of men to blot out, once Uncle Carter's cattle had been delivered and the money banked: Bart Bailey, and Potts, Melinda's new lover.

Yet despite his brain wracking, he finally must have dozed. Something was creeping toward him; a silent shape whose advance he had felt rather than heard.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled from the shock of realizing that an enemy had almost crept up on him. Then, silent as the stalker, Grimes drew his pistol, thumb ready to flick the hammer back when the enemy was too close to retreat.

"Simon, I thought it'd never be dark," whispered a soft voice. "Last night I sneaked to the chuck wagon—"

"What? You hid in it?"

"In that bull's hide stretched under the wagon bed. I shoved out some of the brushwood they put in fer fuel."

She was in his arms, eyes agleam in the dim light, hungry lips seeking his mouth, stopping his protest, "Yo' kain't follow us. Uncle Ca'tah was right. Though I did so't of 'low it'd be nice ef yo' could—"

"Just tonight and tomorrow night, honey," she explained, wriggling closer, a supple length of quivering loveliness. "Then I'll take a hoss and go back. Won't be nothing—I can make it in a day, riding. I hid some grub—"

But by that time, Grimes wasn't interested in details concerning the bull's a hide "hammock" in which Susie had stowed away. He drew her closer, thrilled as her breath sighed in quick gasps in his ear. . . .

The trail day is long, and the night woefully short, yet there were a number of hours before Grimes was due to stand watch. And though kisses made them drowsy, he watched the slow circling of the dipper overhead.

An owl hooted . . . then another . . . just a night sound; and but for the girl in his arms, Grimes would have ignored it as did the herd guards and the nighthawk of the remuda. But it would be a mess, having the second watch slip up on him and catch Susie.

HE RELAXED. Then, peering toward the men stretched out near the chuck wagon, he saw a dark shape emerging from a blacker patch. The moon's upper edge was just peeping from the horizon, though trees still shadowed most of the camp.

The figure moved silently, infinitely cautious. There was a gleam of steel.

Murder! Grimes, thrusting Susie aside, snapped his .45 into line. The blast shook the silence; but even as the gun jumped in his hand, he knew that he had been an instant too late. The blade sank home. The slayer leaped, whirling toward the report.

Grimes bounded forward. Tongues of flame laced the gloom. Susie cried out, stumbled; but that shot stretched into a prolonged drumming. The gunner, bolting toward the remuda, pitched headlong.

"Cut down, hip high!" yelled Grimes. "Susie—fer Gawd's sake—"

She was on her feet, but the hand that caught his wrist was wet with blood. And then the camp became a howling madness.

"I got him!" Grimes roared. "Quit yo' shooting—see who he knifed—You, Jeb!"

Matches flared. Gil Stewart plucked at the knife haft in his chest, coughed, and slumped back, dead. The assassin Grimes had shot down was Bart Bailey.

The reason for his treachery became apparent an instant later. Rifle fire crackled from the flank of the bedded herd. Horsemen charged out of the darkness. That explained the owl hoots!

Grimes made a dive for the wagon, passing out rifles. The cowpunchers aroused in time to beat the ambush, raked the raiders with a withering fire. Saddles emptied, horses pitched end for end. Instead of a camp gutted by a stealthy assassin, they charged into a hornet's nest.

They broke; and as the drovers piled into their saddles, Grimes got the answer: Melinda, Potts, and Bailey had conspired to plunder,

then peddle the stolen cattle to traders in wet beef.

But as the enemy fled, a new peril threatened the camp. The cattle were stampeding. A long, rumbling line thundered along the flank. The raiders, defeated, had precipitated a panic to block pursuit. The drovers again were on the defensive; and against a deadlier peril.

Grimes jerked Susie from her feet and into the saddle in front of him. No time to get a second horse. Not a chance to fan out the roaring herd. They had gotten too good a start. Moonrise revealed a surging sea of long, deadly horns; and the main body, blindly following, was adding to the irresistible flood of beasts.

"The river—Simon—the river—" gasped Susie.

"Not a chanct, honey! They's cut us off, both sides—"

SHE tried to worm from his arms, but he checked her.

"Simon—you're silly—I can't last long—I'm just tiring your hoss—a wild shot—plugged me—"

Good God! Then he remembered how she'd let out scarcely a yelp. The morning before she'd yelled bloody murder, just at a scratch. She must be badly injured.

"Shut up, you little fool," he snapped, turning in the saddle. "We'll make it."

His .45 crackled. A longhorn pitched in a heap another, and a third. The mountain of beef was too high for those behind to hurdle. Horns locked, they could not swerve. Bones crushed as tons of frenzied beasts piled up, held like a timber jam by one key log.

"We're gainin', honey—hang on—"

He swung to the left, trying to outrace the further tip of the crescent. He emptied his other gun, gained a few more precious yards.

Then the overloaded mustang's stride broke. He had lamed himself in a gopher hole.

Terror drove him on, but he couldn't last long. Escape every instant became more hopeless.

"Simon—you fool—"

Susie's frenzy caught Grimes off guard. She slipped free, thudded to the earth. One bit of devotion in a solid front of treachery. He wheeled, reloaded his guns, bounded to her side. It was insane; perhaps Grimes knew he hadn't a chance, even though he did ride on.

"That buffler wallow—scrunch into it! I'll shoot the hoss!" he yelled. "And pile up some cows tother side of it—"

And then, far ahead, he saw a rider skylined in the moonlight; a rider suddenly blossoming white, and wildly waving something white. A pistol blazed. The point of the onrushing crescent swung, fanned out. Hundreds of frenzied beasts with a single, insane mass mind responded to the new terror. Those further to the rear wheeled, snorting, bawling, hoofs rumbling, horns clashing. Grimes whirled, picked up his limp burden, swung to the saddle.

He flogged his lamed mustang with his pistol barrel, booted and spurred the beast till it forgot its tortured leg.

And when the horse finally pitched in a heap, the stampede had been turned. Other riders, who had outraced the right wing of the herd, came scrambling up the bank to press the advantage. The critters were milling now. Hundreds dead, but the most were saved.

GRIMES, struggling to his knees, saw the white rider reel in the saddle. It was Melinda Patton, peeled down to her boots and a few scraps that only an expert in ladies' wear could have described. She slid to her feet, swaying as she clutched the saddle horn.

"Simon," she panted, "I came to warn you—they were going to murder—you and Stewart and as many others—as they could—then loot—"

Grimes, kneeling beside Susie, looked up and snarled, "Yo' came to save yo' own critters!"

"No! It was you. Do you suppose if they planned to stampede the herd they'd try murder by hand, when the herd would do that?"

That clinched it. Grimes felt Susie snuggle closer. She smiled and murmured something, then slumped against his arm.

"I wonder," he finally muttered, voice dry and strained, "if you really are in a class with this gal?"

Melinda knelt beside him. "Let's forget our feud. Dad was in the wrong. I finally saw your position. Then I suspected Potts—"

"Potts?"

"Yes. After dad was exposed, and all the cattlemen got damage judgments against his estate, the bank began wobbling. The only way I could save myself was to disguise my HP cattle as BB, and get Bailey to drive them north. The money I'd raise would go into the bank in a blind account and tide me over, instead of having everything cleaned out by judgments against dad's estate. Just judgments, but ruinous.

"I was wrong, but desperate. Potts had been courting me for some time, and finally I pretended to encourage him. But when he came in yesterday, with a wounded horse, and a confused story, I suspected dirt.

"Then the marshal told me how Bailey and his wife tricked you. That nasty play set me thinking more. And when Potts, early this evening, left me on a flimsy pretext—instead of trying to force himself on me, I became more suspicious, and followed him."

"Mebbe," said Grimes, very slowly, "yo'll are in a class with Susie after all. When I git back from Kansas I got a shooting party with Potts—"

"No, Simon." She leaned closer, till he felt her warmth against him. "There's been too much hate and killing. This is feud's end. I'm grieved—but dad was wrong—you couldn't help it—"

"Honey," he groped, "ef yo' mean that, I'll even kiss Potts when I git back."