



Decker made an underhand cast and the noose shot out straight and true

SURRENDER

By CHUCK MARTIN

A loyal girl sides Charley Decker when trouble stalks!

CHARLEY DECKER smiled as he rode the drift fences on his Circle D range, but his smile was as bleak as the winter morning which followed the Montana blizzard just abating. A pale sun was trying to break through the leaden skies, but there was no warmth in the filtering rays.

Decker tried not to see the gaunt ribs of his cattle which had yarded up like deer to get what warmth they could from each other. Decker's eyes narrowed with anger as he stared at two black spots which had been his winter hay until a mysterious fire had burned them to the ground.

Coosa Chansy was the only hand left on the Circle D, and he watched his young boss with sympathetic eyes. Coosa was short for Cocinero which meant cook, and the rheumatic old cowhand was long past his riding days. But he had saddled a horse to ride out with Decker, saying that he might as well get some fresh camp-meat as leave it for the coyotes and wolves.

A young cow had been killed by the wolf pack, and Coosa shook out a loop from his stiff rope. He made a neat catch, took his dallies around the saddle-horn, and turned his horse.

"I'll drag this critter back to the cook

shack on the end of my twine,” he said quietly. “Those two hands of ours will be hungry when they get back from town.”

Charley Decker pulled his hat down over his smouldering blue eyes. He hadn’t told Coosa that Joe Fargo and Jim Blaze had rolled their beds and had drawn their time just before the storm. Old Coosa would only worry the more, and a man was never beaten until he gave up and quit.

After Coosa had dragged the cow away, Charlie Decker squared his wide shoulders.

The Box Anchor adjoined Circle D range, and cowmen were neighborly in Montana for the most part. Clyde Ferris had plenty of feed and plenty of money.

Ferris was giving orders to his six-man crew when Decker rode up to the sleds loaded with prairie hay. The cowboys were shoveling blue-stem to the fat cattle, and Decker’s eyes narrowed with momentary anger when he saw Joe Fargo on the farthest sled.

Ferris glanced at Decker and smiled at his young neighbor. Charley Decker was twenty-five, five years younger than his prosperous neighbor. Ferris had also inherited money—enough to build up a good spread, and lure scarce help away from hard-pressed cattlemen.

“I’d like to borrow twenty tons of hay, Ferris,” Decker said hopefully, and he watched the handsome face of his neighbor.

“I don’t borrow, and I don’t lend,” Ferris said shortly. “I play for keeps, Decker. I mean in everything!”

He was watching a rider coming toward the sleds, and Charley Decker followed the smiling eyes and tightened his lips. Evelyn Blanton owned the only Appaloosa horse in the region, and she was sitting the spotted horse like a working cowboy.

Charley Decker whirled his Circle D horse and rode away with his square shoulders sagging. It was four miles to Llano and the Drovers Bank, and perhaps Tom Blanton would make him another small loan.

THE tall lean banker glanced up from some papers on his desk when Decker entered his private office. Then he quickly lowered his head and continued the study of his papers.

“Morning, Mister Blanton,” Decker said hesitantly. “I need a thousand dollars to carry me through until the thaws set in. My hay stacks were set on fire just before the blizzard hit!”

“Which makes you a mighty poor risk, Decker,” Blanton said coldly. “I’m not in business for my health!”

Decker swallowed his pride and began again. “I’ve got upward of six hundred head of stock,” he said in a low voice.

“You had six hundred head before that Norther roared down from the Border,” Blanton corrected. “You already owe this bank two thousand dollars. Sorry, but you’ve borrowed up to the handle with me!”

“My shippers will be worth thirty dollars a round, come fall,” Decker pleaded desperately. “I’ve worked cattle all my life as yuh know, and I can bring ‘em through with a little help!”

“I hope so,” the banker said dryly. “And until you have proved it, I’d just as soon you didn’t bother Eve!”

“You and my Dad were friends when you both were punching cattle for thirty a month and cakes,” Decker pleaded. “Dad did all right, and so did you, and there were some mighty tough winters when you were my age.”

“Eve is all I have, and I want her to do well,” Blanton said honestly. “In case you didn’t know, Clyde Ferris asked Eve to

marry him!"

Charley Decker stepped back with a stunned expression sweeping across his ruddy face. Ferris, beside owning the prosperous Box Anchor, had money in the bank to meet any emergency. Decker remembered Eve riding toward the Box Anchor sleds, and there was a trace of anger in his voice when he spoke to Tom Blanton.

"I'll get that money somewhere!" he said defiantly. "Good mornin', Mister Blanton!"

Tom Blanton stared at the wide shoulders as Decker stomped from his office. He thought back to the days when he had been Decker's age. He thought of pretty Mary Ellis who had married George Decker, his friendly rival. George had just been getting a shoestring start on the Circle D which he had left to Charley, his only child.

Tom Blanton stared at the papers on his desk with unseeing eyes. He had done well in the bank, and young Charley was now an orphan.

Blanton's wife had passed on several years ago, and the banker lived for his daughter Eve.

"Mebbe I was hard on him," Blanton muttered. "He's just five years older than Eve, but Clyde Ferris is worth a hundred thousand. Business is business." he said with a shrug, and returned to his papers. . .

Charley Decker jerked up his head when a loud shout came from the Box Anchor boundary. He had tried vainly to borrow money enough for hay, and he was in no mood to tolerate the patronizing attitude of his prosperous rival.

"I've been thinkin', Charley," Clyde Ferris began slowly. "We're all together up here, and I was short-tempered this mornin' when yuh rode up. I can lend yuh the money yuh need for hay!"

Charley Decker stared his unbelief,

and he was on the point of refusing when he thought of his starving cattle. "That's decent of you, Ferris," he murmured. "I can give yuh a note for security."

"Two thousand ought to be enough," Ferris said cordially and pulled out a fat wallet. "Never mind about the paper. You can pay me with interest after shipping season."

He counted out some crisp paper bills and handed them to Decker with a wide smile of friendship. "Now you get along and buy some hay, and stop worryin'. We've got to hang together up here in Montana!"

Charley Decker took the money and expressed his thanks gruffly. His voice was choked up, and he was glad when Ferris loped away to his big Box Anchor ranchhouse in the white distance.

Decker headed for the ranch of Cale Jennings who needed money, and had hay to sell. The drift fences were high with piled snow, and Decker frowned when a rider came through a break in the fence and rode toward him. There was no mistaking Eve Blanton on her big Appaloosa, and the dark-eyed girl called a cheery greeting as she joined the grim-faced cowboy.

"Why are you so worried, Charley," she asked with a little pout. "And why have you been avoiding me lately?"

"Well, you see, I've been busy," Decker floundered.

"I know," Eve Blanton said with quiet understanding. "You've been busy trying to borrow enough money to feed your cattle until the Chinooks set in. Why didn't you ask me, Charley?"

"Me ask a girl?" Decker blurted.

Eve Blanton rode closer and took his right hand. "Must money stand between us, Charley?" she asked slowly, and he flushed when he saw the expression of pain in her pretty face. "You could give

me a note, and the Circle D is good for what you need. It could be strictly business, and I want you to take this thousand dollars!"

"Strictly business," Decker repeated softly. "I wish I had seen you a few minutes sooner."

"Take my money and give that other money back," Eve urged. "You'll feel more comfortable, Charley. Have you forgotten what you told me just a month ago, or were you making a fool of me?"

Charley Decker reached for Eve and his arm slid over her shoulder. "I was telling the truth, I swear it, Eve," he said earnestly. "I love you more than anything I could put a name to. Then I got in money trouble," he finished in a whisper.

Eve Blanton tucked the money down in the pocket of his heavy Mackinaw, and now she was smiling happily. "In a way, that makes us pardners," she told him. "Now you will work and fight that much harder, for the Circle D and for me!"

DAN CUMMINGS, sheriff, rode up to the snug Circle D ranchhouse and tied his horse at the rail. He walked in when Coosa Chansy opened the door. Coosa led the way to the kitchen and poured a cup of hot coffee from a blackened pot.

"Thaw the icicles out of that cold heart of yours, Sheriff," the old cook said jokingly. "What brings you out here on a day like this?"

"Where's Charley?" the grizzled officer asked, as he sipped the scalding liquid.

"Ridin' on mighty important business," Coosa answered soberly. "Charley rode in to get some money we need almighty bad!"

"And he got it," the sheriff said dryly. "Was he wearin' that checkered Mackinaw, his gray Stetson, and a hickory

shirt?"

"He was, but what's the idea of such fool questions?" Coosa asked. "Everyone around Llano knows what kind of riggin' Charley wears."

"I'll wait for him," the sheriff said grimly. "And you stay right here, old-timer," he warned sternly. "I got an unpleasant job to do, and I mean to do it!"

A horse cantered into the yard and slowed down at the barn. A moment later Charley Decker came through the kitchen door, smiling happily. Then he saw Sheriff Cummings, and he studied the lawman's stern face.

"Something wrong, Dan?" he asked slowly.

"Where have you been the past three hours?" Cummings asked gruffly.

"Ridin' around," Decker answered lightly. "I just came from Cale Jennings' place where I bought twenty tons of hay."

"Cale needs money as bad as the rest of us," Cummings said quietly, and he studied the cowboy's clothing carefully. "Old Cale wouldn't give you credit!"

"I paid him cash," Decker said with a grin. "I met a good friend who insisted on lending me what money I needed."

"Yeah, what was the feller's name?" Cummings asked suspiciously.

"I can't tell you that, Sheriff," Decker said slowly. "I promised not to tell."

"So anythin' yuh say will be used against you," the sheriff said sternly. "The bank was robbed about a half an hour after you were there this morning. Two men identified you as the robber, and now yuh turn up with cash money!"

Charley Decker stiffened and stepped back. The sheriff drew his six-shooter swiftly, reached for a pair of handcuffs at his belt, and spoke crisply.

"I've never lost a prisoner up to now, Charley," he warned. "I'm putting the cuffs on you to save trouble!"

The sheriff advanced slowly, reached into Decker's coat pocket, and withdrew his big hand holding the two thousand dollars Decker had received from Clyde Ferris.

"Where did yuh get this money?" he demanded.

"From this friend of mine," Decker answered sullenly. "But I don't need it now, and I was going to return it to him!"

"You say yuh don't need it now?" the puzzled sheriff repeated.

"Another friend loaned me some," Decker said haltingly. "But I can't tell the name!"

"You met a lot of friends with money," the sheriff said mockingly. "You rode to town to borrow from Tom Blanton, and yuh told him yuh'd get the money he refused to lend you. Looks like yuh made good on yore promise, Charley. To the tune of sixty thousand dollars!"

Charley Decker stared at the sheriff as though he could not believe what he had heard. His own gun might as well have been hanging on the antlers over the fireplace, for all the good it could do him now.

"You think I held up the bank?" he asked, and his voice was muffled.

"You were recognized behind that black mask!" the sheriff said curtly. "You were straddling a Circle D horse, wearing that same hat and mackinaw. Everybody knows and you were sore at Tom Blanton too!"

ALL the defiance seemed to ooze from Charley Decker as he raised both hands and turned slowly. Then he moved like a bob-cat as he ducked low and whirled at the same time. His left hand slapped the sheriff's gun aside just before his right fist crashed against the officer's jaw. Cummings grunted as the gun spilled from his hand, and then he fell face

forward.

Decker was breathing hard as he faced Coosa Chansy. The old cook tugged at his cowhorn mustache and said he'd saddle a fresh horse. Decker dumped a box of cartridges into the pocket of his coat, drank a cup of coffee, and hurried outside when Coosa called hoarsely.

"I didn't rob the bank, Coosa," he told the old cook earnestly. "But I've got to stay on the outside of jail to find out who did. When the hay gets here, you shovel it to the cattle. Tell the sheriff I'll either find the robber or surrender to him within forty-eight hours!"

"He'll trail yuh, boss," Coosa warned. "That old lawdog won't leave yore sign until yuh kill him, or he kills you!"

"Tell Dan I won't be taken under forty-eight hours," Decker answered grimly, as he mounted the fresh horse. Then he roared out of the yard as the snow began to fall again.

Coosa Chansy watched the cowboy disappear in the swirling storm. Then he threw a fresh log on the fire, knowing that the falling snow would soon blot out the sign of the fugitive. . . .

Charley Decker rode for an hour in the blinding storm. He wanted time to think, and a place from which to make a start. The Circle D horse turned into a dim trail, worked through a brush screen, and stopped in front of a big cave. Decker ducked his head and rode into the cave which was warm with the heat of many bodies.

Now he was back on Circle D range, and the cave was used by the cattle back in the foothills. They were gaunted and hungry, but old Coosa would drive a sled load of hay up before dark. Decker stiffened suddenly as he saw the figure of another person back in the gloom, and his hand whipped down to his six-shooter.

"Don't shoot, Charley!" a voice called

quickly. "It's Eve, and I knew you'd come back here!"

Charley Decker lowered his pistol and dismounted. He heard the rush of small boots, and then Eve Blanton was in his arms.

"They will kill you, Charley," she said jerkily. "The sheriff is leading a posse of Box Anchor men, so I rode out alone to warn you!"

"I didn't rob the bank, Eve!" Decker said fiercely. "I was talking to you at the time, and then I rode right over to see old man Cale Jennings. He needed money for his wife in the hospital, and he rode right over to Barlow to see her!"

"The sheriff rode to Cale's place and found him gone," Eve explained. "Some one spread the rumor that you might have killed old Cale and hidden his body in a snowdrift!"

"Yore Dad refused me a loan this mornin', Eve," Decker said slowly. "It looks bad for me, but I didn't rob the bank!"

"You've got to think hard, Charley," Eve pleaded. "The man who robbed the bank was just your size, wide-shouldered, and he was wearing a mackinaw and gray Stetson. He was riding a Circle D horse!"

Charley Decker listened in silence as Eve Blanton described the bank robber. He stiffened and gripped the girl by the arms in his excitement.

"Say!" he blurted. "A man would have to be pretty lowdown and mean to do a job like that. Say a feller who would quit his boss when help was scarce, to take a job for higher wages with a neighbor!"

"You mean Joe Fargo and Jim Blaze?" Eve asked. "They went to work for Clyde for ten dollars more a month!"

"Ferris likes you," Decker muttered jealously. "He wants to marry you!"

"How did you know that?" Eve whispered. "I didn't tell you!"

"Old Tom, yore father, told me," Decker said through clenched teeth. "But Ferris did the neighborly thing!"

"I know," Eve whispered. "I happened to be behind the drift-fence this morning when he called to you. Did you return the two thousand dollars he loaned you?"

"I didn't have time," Decker growled. "The sheriff found that money on me, and accused me of robbin' the bank. I had promised both you and Ferris not to tell about those loans, and I always keep my promises!"

"I release you from the promise you made me," Eve said slowly.

Charley Decker jerked around and then relaxed. "I only made you one promise!" he murmured.

I "Charley," the girl whispered. "What ever do you mean?"

"Nothin'," Decker muttered. "Clyde Ferris can give you all the things you want."

"Not all of them," Eve corrected gently. "And I didn't say I loved him!"

"I can't talk any more now," Decker said jerkily. "I'm in a tight, and I'm a criminal in the eyes of the law. If things were different—?"

"Things will be different, Charley," Eve said quietly. "You are not a criminal, and you won't always be in debt!"

"Dan Cummings won't ever forgive me, and I won't surrender," Decker said stubbornly. He turned his head to listen, and then he jumped his saddle and went roaring out of the cave and into the blinding snowstorm.

Eve heard a bellow of pistol shots, but she knew that the men in the posse had lost time in shaking their heavy mittens from numbed hands. Sheriff Dan Cummings rode into the cave and glared at Eve Blanton.

"Charley Decker was here!" the officer accused bitterly. "You rode back here and

warned him that we were riding gun-sign on him, and that's a serious offense, young woman!"

"Do you want to handcuff me, sheriff?" Eve asked, and extended her gloved hands.

"I'll know where to find you," the sheriff barked, and shouted at the men in his posse. "After that robber, men! Shoot to kill if he don't surrender!"

SWIRLING flakes of snow almost hid the corrals in the big Box Anchor yard as Charley Decker came in through a fringe of evergreens. Decker watched the bunkhouse intently, and he took down his stiff catch-rope when a figure moved out from the barn toward a saddled horse.

Decker was wet through from the moist snowflakes which promised that a Chinook would be blowing up from the south. This meant the warm wind would melt the snows and bring out the green grass, and the long winter would be over.

Decker could make out the lumpy outline of a bedroll behind the cattle when the skulking figure climbed the saddle. Decker might have been staring at a reflection of himself. Wide shoulders in a warm mackinaw, a gray Stetson tied with a blue bandanna, and a pair of worn gray pants.

Decker drew in a deep breath and made an underhand cast with his dinky loop. The noose shot out straight and true, and Decker leaned against the manila tight-twist as the Box Anchor horse bolted to unseat the rider in a deep drift.

Decker came in fast as the tall rider was getting his feet under him. He hit the stunned man squarely on the jaw, and the man fell without a sound. Decker turned the prisoner over and fastened the big hands behind the man's back with a piggin' string. There was a tack room at the end of the barn, and Decker dragged

his captive inside and made a crude gag with the captive's bandanna.

"Joe Fargo," he said quietly. "You had a chance to steal my extra clothes, and you're a dead ringer for me!"

He bound the scarred soggy boots and made a quick search of Fargo's clothing, muttering as he pulled out a wallet from an inside coat pocket. After an examination, he replaced the wallet, closed and locked the door behind him, and studied the big ranchhouse carefully. .

Then Decker remembered that the Box Anchor crew was in the sheriff's posse, and he wondered if Clyde Ferris were riding with his men. He bucked through the snowdrifts and pushed open the kitchen door. He stood by the big iron stove warming his hands and sipping hot cowboy coffee, listening intently toward the big living room.

After finishing his coffee, Decker moved slowly across the splintered floor. A log fire was burning brightly in the living room, and Decker searched the house without finding anyone. He returned to the living room and stood with his back to the fire, watching the steam rise from his soggy clothing.

The door was pushed open suddenly, and without warning. Clyde Ferris stepped inside, closely followed by Sheriff Dan Cummings. Ferris was tall and slender, undeniably handsome, and he wore the best rigging that money could buy.

It was a close race when Ferris and the sheriff slapped for their six-shooters with gloved hands. Charley Decker watched intently, but he made no move toward the gun on his long right leg. A startled cry rang out as a snowcovered figure darted into the room and seized Clyde Ferris by the right arm just as the cattleman's weapon cleared leather.

"Don't shoot!" the girl screamed, but the gun roared like a cannon in the big

room.

Charley Decker made a leap as Ferris wrenched free from Eve. Ferris was thumbing the hammer of his six-shooter back for a second shot when Decker's rocky right fist thudded solidly against the Box Anchor owner's jaw.

As Ferris fell to the rug, a stern voice called to Decker.

"Stand and surrender to the law, owl-hooter! Or I'll drop yuh in yore tracks!"

Decker straightened up and raised both hands. Dan Cummings held the drop, and his gray eyes were bright with triumph. He came forward warily, flipped the six-shooter from Decker's holster, and then the room was filled with excited manhunters.

"String the thieving son up!" a hoarse voice bellowed, and Decker stared at Jim Blaze who had worked for him on the Circle D, with Joe Fargo.

Decker's eyes widened when he saw old Tom Blanton, and Carl James; the little teller at the Drovers Bank. The banker held a gun in his right hand, but the sheriff warned the posse that his prisoner would get a fair trial.

"That's all I want, a fair trial," Decker said quietly. "I can prove that I had nothin' to do with the bank robbery!"

"I saw you myself," Tom Blanton contradicted flatly. "And so did Carl James, and a dozen other people in Llano!"

Eve Blanton faced her father and the sheriff with her head held high. Decker tried to catch her eye, but the pretty girl would not be denied.

"Charley was with me when the bank was robbed!" she stated quietly. "It couldn't have been him!"

UNBELIEF showing on his stern face, Tom Blanton whirled to face his daughter. "You don't know what you are

saying," he burst out. "Some of the bank loot was found on Decker. Tell her, Sheriff!"

"He don't have to tell me," Eve said slowly. "I know all about it!"

"I borrowed a thousand dollars from some one who believed in me," Charley Decker muttered.

"That some one was me," Eve interrupted again.

"We know the serial numbers," her father said, but some of the sureness was gone from his gruff voice.

"I had just withdrawn it from the bank a little before the robbery," Eve explained.

"It won't hold water, Miss Eve," the sheriff interrupted hoarsely. "I found two thousand on Charley, and that money was stolen from the bank!"

"Ferris loaned me that two thousand," Decker said slowly.

Clyde Ferris stirred and sat up suddenly. Then he staggered to his feet and slapped for his empty holster.

"Hold it, Clyde!" the sheriff said sternly. "Did you lend the prisoner two thousand dollars today?"

"I wouldn't lend him snow water and let him melt it himself!" Ferris shouted angrily.

"You loaned me the money, Ferris," Decker said slowly. "Now I know why!"

"Yuh're a liar!" Ferris shouted. "Beggin' yore pardon, Eve," he apologized to the girl. "I never loaned him a dollar!"

The sheriff glanced at Eve and back to Ferris. He realized that Clyde Ferris had not heard Eve tell about her loan to Decker, and Dan Cummings spoke gruffly to Tom Blanton when Decker nodded for a word alone with the officers.

"It's yore loss, so watch Ferris," he told the banker. "You said something, Decker?"

Decker drew the sheriff aside and

spoke briefly in low tones. Cummings grunted a time or two, told everyone to stay where they were, and left the room with Decker.

“Yuh won’t try a getaway, Charley,” the sheriff grunted. “You could have been across the Canadian line long before this, and yuh’ve got too much to lose now!”

“He’s in the tack room,” Decker said quietly. “I locked the door, but the key is hangin’ on a nail near the casing!”

Most of the anger was gone now, as Charley Decker worked with the law, although he was a prisoner. The sheriff reminded him that he had resisted arrest, had assaulted the law, and would be called to account.

Muffled sounds came from inside the locked room, and Cummings took the key and fitted it to the lock. He threw back the heavy door and stared at a man lying on the floor. He told Decker to throw off the ties that bound Joe Fargo’s boots together.

Decker pulled the hoggin’ string, but he shook his head when the sheriff told him to remove the bandanna gag. “Let’s take him to the house where all those witnesses can hear him give up head and talk with his mouth wide open,” Decker suggested. “He don’t know that his pard has already put the blame on him!”

The sheriff stared and then smiled grimly. He prodded Fargo with the muzzle of his gun and told the prisoner to start for the house. Charley Decker led the way and opened the big front door.

Clyde Ferris was on his feet, rubbing his swollen jaw. Decker reached up and pulled the slip-knot to remove the bandanna gag.

“You framed this whole deal, Ferris!” Joe Fargo burst out savagely. “You got most of the loot, and yuh made me high-tail in case Decker proved an alibi!”

“He’s crazy, sheriff,” Ferris said quietly. “Like as not, he and Decker

planned this whole thing between them!”

“Just a minute!” the sheriff interrupted, and he turned to Carl James, the bank teller. “Take a good look at Decker,” he told the little man. “Does he look like the robber?”

Sheriff Cummings took Fargo by the arm and ordered Decker to follow them into the kitchen. A moment later he opened the door and pushed a man through in front of him. Even the Box Anchor man gasped as they stared at the tall masked man with Stetson pulled over his eyes.

“That’s the robber!” Carl James shouted.

NOW, the door opened again and another man came into the room. Tall and wide-shouldered, with a mask on his face, and a gray Stetson pulled low over his eyes. Carl James began to stutter.

“They look like twins,” he gasped. “If I could only hear them say the stick-up words!”

“I want all that paper money, or I’ll blow yore brains out!” the second masked man said grimly.

“Now you, hombre!” the sheriff ordered the first masked man.

“I won’t talk!” the prisoner growled. “I want to see a lawyer!”

“That’s him!” the little teller shouted. “The last man who spoke was the one who held me up!”

The sheriff jerked the hat from the man’s head and removed the black mask.

“It’s Joe Fargo,” Tom Blanton murmured.

“He stole those clothes from me the day he hired out to Ferris,” Decker said quietly. “Look in his inside coat pocket!”

Cummings removed a fat wallet, stared at some paper money, and passed the wallet to banker Tom Blanton. “Take a look at those serial numbers, Tom,” he said quietly.

Blanton studied the numbers and nodded his head. "These are part of the loot, but there's only five thousand here," he said.

"Decker planted that money on Fargo," Clyde Ferris spoke up. "After he tied Joe up. Then he pulled that fake yarn about me lending him two thousand!"

"We have a witness who saw and heard you give the two thousand to Decker," the sheriff said gruffly. .

"If you have, it's just one more willin' to lie for part of the loot," Ferris sneered.

Eve Blanton stepped forward and faced Ferris. "I loaned Charley a thousand of my own money," she said quietly.

"He's trying to fool yuh, Eve," Ferris said with a smile. "He's a liar and a thief, and he figgered he had nothing to lose!"

"Some one is both, but I'm sure it is not Charley," Eve said positively. "I saw and heard you lend that two thousand dollars to him. I was behind that drift fence where you fed your cattle!"

Tom Blanton swung his six-shooter around to cover Clyde Ferris. He glanced at his daughter and spoke shortly.

"Keep on talkin', gal!"

"Being a woman, I've a certain amount of curiosity," Eve said with a shamed smile. "While you were talking, I snooped around. There are two suitcases in Clyde Ferris' bedroom, and one of them wasn't locked!"

"That won't work!" Ferris said viciously. "If there is money in those suitcases, either Fargo or Decker planted it there!"

"You sneakin' coyote!" Joe Fargo shouted. "You needed money, and yuh saw that Decker and me were the same size. You had me steal his clothes, and rob the Drovers Bank!"

"Will you take the word of a criminal against mine?" Ferris asked the sheriff. "Fargo is wanted in Utah for robbery, and

he was fixin' to leave the country!"

"That's right, but it was all yore idea," Fargo retorted. "You threatened to turn me in to the sheriff unless I played along with you!"

Sheriff Cummings came from the bedroom carrying two leather suitcases. He opened one, removed a layer of clothes, and stepped back.

"Count that money, banker," he told Blanton.

"Fifty-three thousand," Tom Blanton announced after finishing his count. "But there's a lot of bonds here in the bottom of the bag!"

EXAMINING the bonds carefully, the sheriff then turned to Ferris. "That's most of the loot from the robbery of the First National Bank in El Paso five years ago," he said sternly. "Two men were killed, but the third robber escaped with the loot!"

"Ferris was the one who got away!" Joe Fargo shouted. "My brother was one of the men killed in that stick-up!"

Charley Decker had been watching Clyde Ferris closely. The Box Anchor boss reached under his left arm to palm a snub-nosed pistol from a Wes Hardin holster. Decker bulldogged Ferris just as the gun flashed into view, and the hideout gun went spinning against the wall. Decker put all his weight and muscle behind a driving right fist that thudded solidly against the Box Anchor man's jaw.

Ferris sank to the floor, and sheriff Cummings clicked the cuffs around the unconscious man's wrists. He straightened up and nodded at Tom Blanton.

"There's a fifteen hundred dollar reward for the capture and conviction of the man who robbed the Drovers Bank," Blanton said with a smile. "You've earned it, Charley, and I'll see that yuh get it!"

"There's three thousand for the capture

of the El Paso robber,” Sheriff Cummings added. “Plus twenty percent for recovery of the bonds. I’ll see that you get that too Charley!”

“Give it to the Peace Officers fund,” Charley Decker said quietly.

“I’ll do that,” Cummings promised. “After I take enough out to pay these little debts you owe.”

“I told you that you would not always be in debt, Charley,” Eve Blanton reminded the Circle D cowboy. “Did you say something?”

“Not in front of all these people,” Charley Decker growled, as a flush stained his tanned face.

“So you won’t surrender, eh?” Dan Cummings said, and he faced Charley Decker with a grim smile. “I ain’t never lost a prisoner up to now,” he reminded the embarrassed cowboy. “You are under arrest for resisting, and assault. You are

guilty on both counts, and you can either give yoreself up to me or to the person who kept yuh out of prison. The judge will like as not fine you fifty dollars on each of those counts I named, but with this other party, yuh’ll get a life sentence. Well, make up yore mind, cowboy!”

CHARLEY DECKER stared and then a slow smile started at his mouth and spread across his rugged face. He walked up to Eve Blanton, held out both his hands, and Eve slipped the piggin’ string around his wrists—the same one that had bound Joe Fargo.

“The parson will pass sentence two weeks from today, folks,” Decker said happily, and then he slipped his bound hands over Eve’s head, held her close, and whispered with his lips close to her ear.

“I love you, honey,” he murmured. “I surrender!”