



Heller with a Gun

Louis L'Amour

HELLER
WITH
A GUN

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BANTAM BOOKS

Contents

[*Title page*](#)

[*Renegade Rage*](#)

[*Map of Wyoming*](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*Bantam Books by Louis L'Amour*](#)

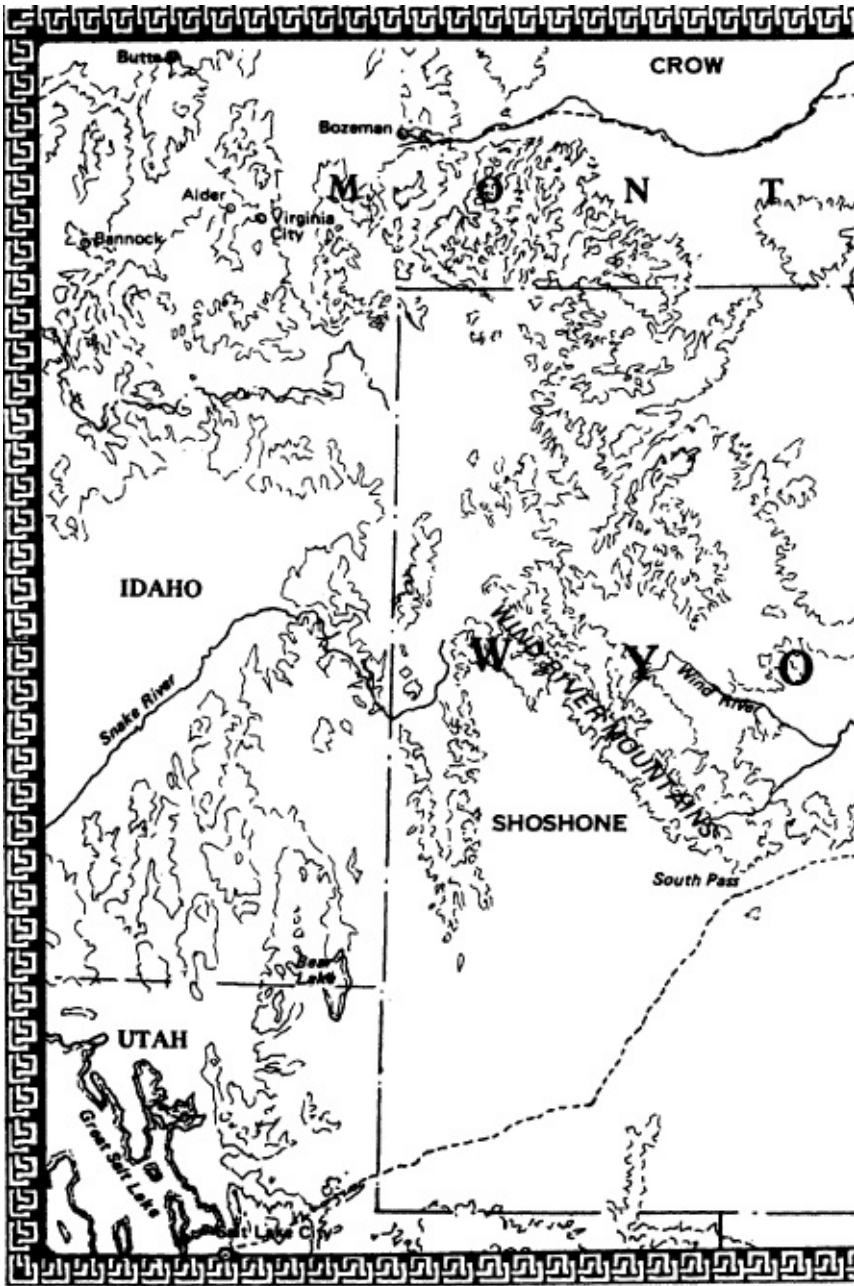
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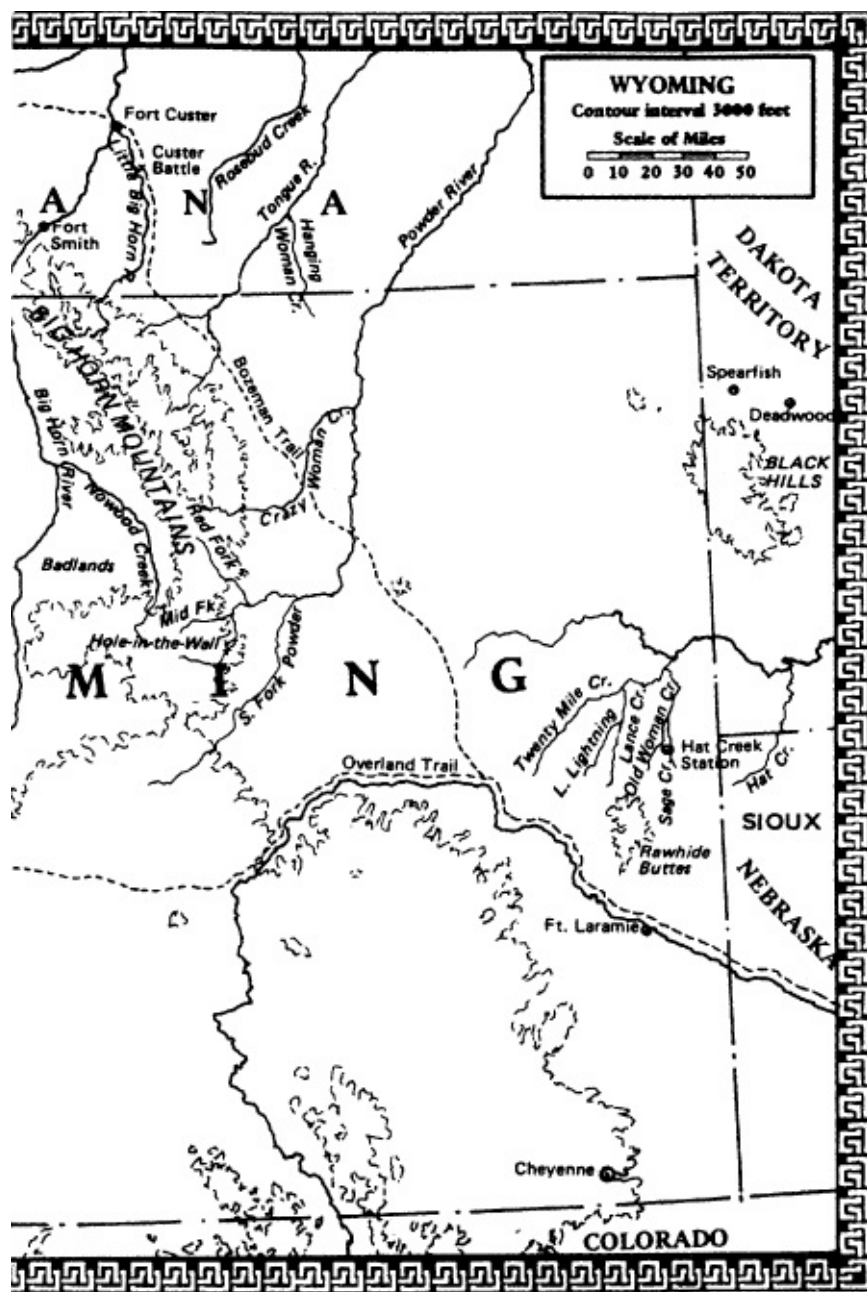
RENEGADE RAGE

THE SIOUX STRUCK viciously with his knife but the blade caught in Mabry's buffalo coat. Mabry caught the Indian's greasy hair and jerked his face down to meet the upward smash of Mabry's skull. The brave fell back, his face streaming blood from a broken nose and smashed lips.

Heedless of the knife, Mabry swung. The Sioux went down, rolled over, and came up, his face a smear of blood. He threw himself at Mabry, his knife held low, cutting edge up. Mabry slapped the knife wrist aside to deflect the point, then caught the arm and threw the Indian over his hip, breaking his arm.

The brave hit hard but came up again, his knife arm askew, and grabbed for his rifle....





Map by Alan McKnight

Chapter 1

HE WAS RIDING southwest in a gathering storm and behind him a lone man clung to his trail.

It was bitter cold....

He came down off the ridge into the shelter of the draw with the wind kicking up snow behind him. The sky was a flat slate gray, unbroken and low. The air grew colder by the minute and there was a savage bite to the wind.

He was a big, wide-shouldered man with a lean, strong-boned face. His black, flat-crowned hat was pulled low, the collar of his sheep-lined coat turned up. Wind-whipped particles of snow rattled off his coat like thrown gravel.

He was two days out of Deadwood and riding for Cheyenne, and the nearest shelter was at Horse Creek Station, probably fifty miles along.

Wind knifed at his exposed cheek. He drew deeply on his cigarette. Whoever followed him had the same problem. Find shelter or die. The wind was a moving wall of snow and the evening was filled with vast sound.

There is something fiercely insensate about a Wyoming or Dakota blizzard, something malevolent and shocking in its brutality. It ripped at him now, smashing him with jarring fists of wind, and raking his face with claws of blown ice.

King Mabry lowered his head to shield his face, breathing with his mouth open. Whenever he lifted his head the wind whipped at him, sucking air from his lungs.

When they came to the creek bottom it was suddenly. The horse plunged belly-deep in the snow and began fighting for a foothold. Forcing the black through a crackle of frozen brush, he let it slide and stumble to the creek bottom.

Here was respite from the wind. The creek was narrow, sheathed in ice, yet the high banks and the trees offered protection. He headed downstream.

It was bitter cold....

When he found what he wanted it was more than he expected. The creek turned a rocky shoulder and had heaved some logs and brush over a triangle of huge boulders. On the downstream side there was an opening. When he had pulled the brush away he had a cave fifteen feet deep and almost seven

feet high.

Leading the horse inside, Mabry began to work swiftly. He cut evergreens and made a windbreak that could be shifted if the wind changed, and which would also serve to reflect the heat from his fire back into the cave.

With shredded bark from the underside of a log, some dry leaves from the same place, and some twigs broken from the trunks of trees, he built a fire. He added fuel and the blaze mounted higher.

There was no shortage of fuel, yet he dragged several dead branches closer, and one half-rotted log. Stumbling through deepening snow, he cut evergreen boughs for a bed. Heat from the fire and the warmth of the horse's body would make the shelter warm enough for survival, if no more.

Working slowly, he rubbed the horse down, then hung half his supply of corn over the horse's nose in its feed bag.

The great stones warmed slowly, gathering heat from the fire. Outside the wind howled. His thoughts turned to the man who followed him.

Somehow he must have learned of the money Mabry was carrying. Several hundred dollars of his own money, and a thousand dollars to be returned to the rancher in Cheyenne.

The trouble was that when a man had a reputation as a gun fighter, somebody always believed his gun was for hire.

The trouble was that in a time and area when all men carried guns, and used them on occasion, he used them too well.

He had given it no thought until that bright morning when he was sixteen, and he rode into the Circle on the old XIT with Bent Forrest.

Two rustlers had a steer down and a hot iron. The rustlers saw them first and the nearest man had his gun lifting when Mabry drew. He was sixteen then, and nobody in the outfit knew anything about him except that he worked hard and talked little. A moment later they started to learn.

Bent Forrest was a gun-handly man, but on that morning both men were down and kicking before his gun cleared leather. He looked from them to the kid and his throat worked.

“You ever kill a man before?”

“No.”

They sat their horses in the morning sunlight while the branding fire smoldered and the steers struggled helplessly. The two rustlers lay sprawled, their guns flung free in that last moment when death came sharply.

“You'll have to take it easy, kid. You're good. Maybe the best I've seen.”

King Mabry looked at the dead men on the ground. Wind stirred the handkerchief tied to the nearest man's neck. Mabry felt sick and empty and lost.

“It was them or us, kid. We’ll say nothing about this.”

Then one night when drinking, Forrest bragged. He knew what a reputation as a gun fighter could do to a man, but he was drinking and he bragged. A tough puncher from down on the Pecos started hunting the kid to prove Forrest wrong.

They buried the tough puncher on a windy hilltop near old Tascosa, where he could lie beside Frank Valley and the boys who died in the Big Fight. And King Mabry drifted.

Fort Stockton, Lampasas, Mobeetie, Uvalde. The Big Bend, El Paso, Lincoln, Cimarron. North and west with trail herds to Kansas, to Nebraska and Wyoming.

From time to time he had to use his gun....

He awakened in the first cold light of dawn. He lunged from his blankets and stirred the remains of his fire. He tossed on some dry leaves, some bark, and a piece of evergreen bough. Then he scrambled back into his bed, shaking with cold.

It was far below zero. He knew by the wind, by the pistol crack of frozen branches, by the crystalline sharpness of the air.

After an interminable time a faint tendril of smoke lifted, a tiny flame appeared, and the pine needles flared hotly. He thrust an arm from under the blankets and tossed more fuel into the fire.

When he could feel the warmth in the shelter, he got up and dressed quickly, then shouldered into his sheepskin. He drew one gun from its holster, checked it, and thrust it behind his belt.

With a friendly slap on the black's rump he stepped past the horse and stood beside the windbreak, looking out into the morning.

He faced downstream. Occasionally the white veil of falling or blown snow would break and he could see as far as the point, some thirty yards away. Flakes touched his cheek with damp fingers. He narrowed his eyes, studying what lay outside.

Mabry was not a trusting man. The facts of his life had left no room for trust. In the hard year following that morning on the XIT he learned his lesson well, and learned the hard way. His eyes went to that point of trees around which the stream bent in a slow arc. He studied them, started to step outside, and then he stopped.

Mabry did not know why he hesitated.

A gust whipped snow into the air, lashing at his face, sucking at his lungs. And a man's subconscious can be his best friend.

Mabry stood very still.

He was invisible from the outside. Another step and he would be framed black against the snow.

A hunter can walk in the forest when the wind blows with its many sounds, yet if a rabbit moves in the brush his ears recognize the sound. Upon the vast plain or the desert the flight of a buzzard may pass unnoticed, for the buzzard belongs to the landscape. The cacti form weird shapes, the ocotillo carries a miniature forest of lances, yet if a rider moves upon that desert he will be seen.

The hunter and the hunted...these two are kin. Their senses are alert to the same stimuli, awakened by the same far-off sounds. A shadow in the wrong place, a flicker of sun reflection, a creak of leather. Each may be a warning.

And for these things and a thousand others the senses of hunter and hunted are alert. Often the exact warning is not recognized; it is a subconscious perception.

So King Mabry now waited for the snow veil to break once more. He had learned to trust his instincts. Attention might lag, reason might fail, but the instincts were first born and would be the last to die.

The snow was unbroken. No tracks were anywhere visible. On the point the trees grew close, their boughs interlaced and thickly mingled with a darker bulk of pines. All were heavy with snow.

Mabry rolled a smoke and lighted it. Something was wrong out there and he did not intend to move until he knew what it was. In his lifetime he had known a few reckless men, a few who tried to be daring, who took unnecessary risks to show what they believed to be courage. He had helped to bury them.

He was playing a game where life was the blue chip. A step into the open meant to chuck that blue chip on the table. And he had but one.

His eyes returned to the trees.

He thrust his right hand into the front of his coat to warm his fingers against his body. Stiff fingers might fumble or drop a gun.

Then his eyes saw what his brain knew was there: a spot of darkness in the tops of the trees.

A small thing, a simple thing, yet the price of a man's life. A place in the branches where there was no snow.

Somebody had to be under that spot with a going fire. Rising heat waves had melted the snow about it.

It was all of thirty yards away, but knowing now where he must look, King Mabry found it.

Drifted snow over a pile of debris. Not so large or imposing as his own shelter, but enough

conceal a man who lay in warmth while he waited with a rifle for Mabry to emerge and die.

Mabry possessed one advantage. His pursuer could not be aware that his presence was known. From behind the windbreak Mabry studied the situation with infinite care.

The unknown watcher lay close to the ground, which decreased his field of vision. Without rising from his hiding place that man could see nothing lower than three feet above the ground, and the snow was that deep in the creek bottom.

Dropping to his knees, Mabry dug out snow, working with care to disturb no snow where it might be seen by the watcher. He worked slowly. In that temperature perspiration could easily be fatal, for when one stopped working the moisture would freeze into a thin film of ice inside one's clothing, and death would follow quickly.

There was a huge log, a great snow-covered tree that lay on an angle, its far end almost flanking the hiding place of the watcher. Mabry dug his way to that deadfall, then crawled along the ground behind it. When he reached the upthrust roots at its base, he stood up.

Concealed by the wall of tangled roots and frozen earth embedded around them, he could see behind the shelter, yet at first he saw nothing.

A snowflake touched his cheek with a damp, cold finger. Mabry brushed his coat. Wind picked up a flurry of snow, swept it along, then allowed it to settle down. The wind was not blowing so hard now. A branch cracked in the cold. There was no other sound but the wind.

Smoke rose from his own fire, and a thin tendril of smoke that died quickly from the watcher's shelter.

Mabry kept his right hand under his coat and close to his gun. He was forty yards away. Slow anger was building in him. He did not like to be hunted. Whoever the watcher was, he planned murder.

Mabry's face, darkened by many suns and winds, seemed now to be drawn in hard planes. It was a still face, remote, lonely. It was the face of a hunter.

He did not want to kill, yet he did not want to die. And this man had chosen the field, selected his victim. Yet he did not know the manner of man he hunted. He looked for a fat cat, he found a tiger.

Wind flurried. Behind the shelter there was an indefinite movement.

He felt the cold, knew he could not long remain away from his fire. Yet this was the time for decision.

He was born to the gun. He had lived by the gun. Perhaps someday he would die by the gun. He had not chosen the way, but it was his way and he lived among men who often understood no other.

Mabry could be patient now. He knew what lay ahead, knew what he could do. He had been hunted before, by Kiowas, Comanches, Sioux, and Apaches. He had also been hunted by his own kind.

He took his hand from his coat and rolled a smoke. He put it in his lips and lit up. He squinted his eyes against the first exhalation and looked past the blown smoke at the shelter. He warmed away the momentary chill that had come to his hand.

There was no target, nothing. The man there was warm. He was cold. There was no sense in waiting longer.

A heavy branch of evergreen hung over the other man's shelter, thick with a weight of snow, a bit away from the circle of warmth from the fire...but near enough.

Mabry drew his gun, tested the balance in his palm, judged the distance, and fired.

Cut by the bullet, the branch broke and the snow fell, partly outside the shelter, partly inside. And probably on the man's fire.

The sound of the shot racketed down the ravine, and silence followed.

Mabry's feet were icy. The chill was beginning to penetrate. He thrust his gun back inside his coat and watched a little smoke rise, thick smoke.

The hidden man had lost his fire.

The slide of snow from the branch had done what Mabry hoped it would, and now the watcher must lie there in the cold to await death by freezing, or he must come out.

Yet Mabry himself was cold, and the hidden man had shelter from the wind.

A slight movement within the shelter alerted him, but nobody appeared. The watcher's shelter was only a place where a man could keep from the wind. There was no room for fuel, scarcely space for a man and a fire.

Wind whined among the trees. Branches creaked in the cold. Snow flurried, whipped across the point, then died out. The wind was going down, the storm was over. Yet Mabry did not intend to be followed when he moved on again.

He moved quickly to another hiding place behind a tree. He was not twenty yards from the man's hideout now and he could see the darkness of the hole into which the man had crawled.

This man had waited in ambush to kill him. He had followed him for two days or more.

"Come out."

Mabry did not speak loudly, for in the still air the smallest sound could be heard. "Come out with your hands up, or come shootin'."

Silence....

And then he came with a lunge, throwing himself from the shelter, rifle in hand. He had heard

Mabry's voice, so he knew where to look, yet the instant it took to separate his target from the trunk of the trees was fatal.

Yet at the last moment, Mabry shot high. His bullet smashed the man on the shoulder, turning him half around. The rifle dropped and the wounded man grasped at the wound, going to his knees in the snow. Then he fell, grabbing for the rifle.

King Mabry balanced his gun in his palm and walked nearer, ready to fire. He was cursing himself for a fool for not shooting to kill, yet in the instant he glimpsed the man's face, he knew this was not a gunman. And why add even a coyote to his list of killings?

Get me killed someday, he told himself cynically.

The wounded man had fallen against the front of his shelter, which was only a hollow under the roots of a blow-down. There was blood on the snow, and blood on the man's shoulder and chest.

He stared up at Mabry, hating him. He was a sallow-faced man with lean cheeks and a hawk's hard face and a scar over one eye. Now it was a frightened face, but not one Mabry had ever seen before.

"You...you goin' to stand there?"

"Why not?" Mabry asked coldly. "I wasn't huntin' you."

"I hope you die! I hope you die hard!"

"I will," Mabry said. "I've been expecting it for years. Who put you on me?"

"Why tell you?" the man sneered.

"You can tell me," Mabry said without emotion, "or you can die there in the snow."

Grudgingly the wounded man said, "It was Hunter. If you didn't take the job, you were to die."

Mabry understood the truth of that. Ever since he arrived in Deadwood and understood why he had been hired, he should have expected this. They could not afford to have him talk.

No man lost blood in such cold and lasted long without care. If he left this man, he would die. Dropping to his knee, he reached for the shoulder. The fellow grabbed at Mabry's gun and Mabry hit him with his fist. Then he bound up the wound with makeshifts and then gathered up the guns and walked back to his own shelter. He had planned to stay another night, but there was evidence that the storm was breaking, and regardless of that, he could not keep the man here or leave him to die.

He rolled his bed and saddled up, then drank the rest of the coffee.

Mounting, he rode back to where the man lay. The fellow was conscious, but he looked bad.

"Where's your horse?"

Too weak to fight, the man whispered an answer, and Mabry rode to the clay bank behind some trees, where he found a beat-up buckskin, more dead than alive.

Mabry saddled him after brushing off the snow and rubbing some semblance of life into the horse with a handful of rough brown grass.

When he got back to the man's shelter he picked the fellow up and shook him. "Get up on the horse," he said. "We'll start for Hat Creek. Make a wrong move and I'll blow you out of the saddle."

He took the blankets and threw them around the man to keep in what warmth his body could develop.

It would be cold tonight, but with luck he could make Hat Creek Station.

Wind flapped his hat brim and snow sifted across the trail. He lifted the black into a trot. The country about them was white and still. In the distance he could see a line of trees along another creek.

His mind was empty. He did not think. Only the occasional tug on the lead rope reminded him of the man who rode behind him.

It was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways.

Chapter 2

KING MABRY FOLLOWED Old Woman Creek to Hat Creek Station in the last cold hour of a bitterly cold day.

Under the leafless cottonwoods whose bare branches creaked with cold he drew rein. His breath clouded in the cold air, and as his eyes took in the situation his fingers plucked absently at the thin ice that had accumulated on his scarf.

He was a man who never rode without caution, never approached a strange place without care.

There were no tracks but those from the station to the barn. There was no evidence of activity but the slow smoke rising from the chimney.

One thing was unexpected. Drawn alongside the barn were two large vans, and beneath the coating of frost bright-colored lettering was visible. He could not, at this distance, make out the words.

Nobody emerged as he approached the station. No door opened. There was no sign of welcome.

Everything was still in the bitter evening cold; even the rising smoke seemed stiff in the unfamiliar air.

Hat Creek Station had originally been built by soldiers sent to establish a post on Hat Creek in Nebraska. Unfamiliar with the country, they had crossed into Wyoming and built on Sage Creek. When abandoned by the Army, it became a stage station on the route from Cheyenne to Black Hills and a post office. From the beginning its history had been wild and bloody.

Mabry knew the stories. They had come down the trails as all such stories did, from campfire to card table, from bunkhouse to chuck wagon.

It was at Hat Creek that Stutterin' Brown, a stage-company man, emerged second best from a pistol argument with Persimmons Bill over stolen horses. They buried Brown.

A party of freighters bound for the Black Hills was attacked by several hundred Indians near Hat Creek Station, and was saved only by the arrival of a troop of cavalry from Rawhide Buttes.

Near a place known locally as Robbers' Roost, a few miles from the station, there had been a series of holdups, and it was near there that Boone May, a shotgun guard, killed an outlaw.

Hat Creek Station was a convenient wayside stop for travelers from Cheyenne to Black Hills, and

one time or another most of the noted characters and gun fighters of the West had passed through.

It was here that Calamity Jane was fired from her job as a government packer, for drunkenness. And here, at various times, had stopped such men as Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp, Sam Bass, Joel Collin, Scott Davis, Seth Bullock, Big-Nose George, and Lame Bradley.

In short, the patrons of Hat Creek Station were men with the bark on.

Swinging around the barn to the door, Mabry stepped from the saddle, pulled the pin from the latch and, swinging wide the door, herded the two horses in ahead of him. Then he pulled the door shut and fastened it securely.

Standing behind his horse, he remained there until his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness within the vast barn. When he could see again, he located an unoccupied stall and stripped the saddle and bridle from the black.

Then he untied the wounded man from the saddle of the buckskin and helped him to the ground.

The man wilted then, scarcely able to keep his legs under him.

“Can you walk?”

The man looked at him sullenly. “I can walk.”

“Then you’re on your own. You cross my trail again and I’ll finish the job.”

The man turned and staggered to the door, almost fell there, but caught at the door to hold his balance. Then he pushed it open and walked out into the snow.

Mabry turned back to his horse and carefully rubbed him down, working over him patiently and with care.

Somewhere a door closed and Mabry heard a man coming down the wide aisle between the two rows of stalls.

The hostler was a tall man with an unusually small face, very round and clean shaved.

He halted, staring into the darkness of the stall where Mabry worked.

“Come far?”

“No.”

The hostler puffed on his pipe. He had never seen this man before and it was indiscreet to ask questions, but the hostler was a curious man—and he knew that beat-up buckskin.

He gestured. “Ain’t in good shape.”

“Better shape than the man who rode him.”

Griffin, the hostler remembered, was considered a very salty customer in some circles. He must have cut himself into the wrong circle.

“He has friends.”

“You?”

“Shuckins, man. I’m just hostler here. Knowed Pete, like most folks.”

Mabry had removed the scarf from around his hat and the sheepskin coat hung open. The hostler had seen the guns.

“Admire to know what happened.”

Mabry picked up his rifle and saddlebags with his left hand. He did not exactly gesture, but the hostler decided not to leave any room for doubt. He preceded Mabry to the door.

When they reached it, Mabry said, “He laid for me.”

The hostler had suspected for a long time that Griffin was one of that crowd. Knew it, in fact, without having a particle of information. So he laid for the wrong man.

Mabry stepped out into the cold. The thermometer beside the door read forty degrees below zero.

“Man around called Benton. Him an’ Joe Noss. They’re partial to Pete Griffin.”

“Thanks.”

Snow crunched under his boots as he crossed to the station and lifted the latch. He pushed open the door and stepped into the hot, smoke-filled air of the room.

There was a smell of rank tobacco and drying wool, a shuffling of feet and a riffling of cards. The potbellied stove glowed with heat and five men sat around a table playing poker with several onlookers. All the seated men had removed their coats. They wore wool shirts and suspenders.

From an adjoining room there was a rattle of dishes, and Mabry saw another door that led off to the left of the bar. He remained where he was, taking time to study the occupants of the room. His open coat revealed the guns, and he wore no glove on his right hand.

Somebody coughed and somebody else said, “I’ll take three cards.” Chips clicked, feet shuffled.

Alone at the bar was a man who wore a cloth coat, narrow at the waist with a wide fur collar. He had a round fur cap on his head, the earlaps turned up and tied on top. He glanced at Mabry, frankly curious.

There was nobody in the room that Mabry knew until the bartender turned around.

Mabry crossed to the bar and put his saddlebags on top, leaning the Winchester against the bar.

The bartender's face was flushed. He glanced quickly, guiltily around, then touched his lips with his tongue. He was obviously worried and nervous.

"Lo, King. I—"

Something that might have been amusement flickered briefly in the big man's eyes. He stared gravely at the bartender. "Know your face, but...What was that name again?"

"Williams." The man spoke hastily, his relief obvious. "Bill Williams."

"Sure. Sorry I forgot."

The bartender ducked below bar level and came up with a square, dusty bottle. "Little o' the Irish. On the house."

Mabry accepted the bottle without comment and filled a glass. He lifted it, sighting through the amber whisky to catch the light.

"Has the smell o' the peat, that Irish does."

Mabry glanced briefly at the man in the fur-collared coat, then pushed the bottle toward him.

"The name's Healy. Tom Healy, of the Healy Traveling Shows." He lifted the whisky, treasuring it in his hand. "The best they'd offer me was barrel whisky."

They drank, replacing their glasses on the bar. Mabry let his eyes canvass the room, probing for possible trouble. A man remained alive by knowing what to expect and what direction to expect it from. And there was a man near the card table with a long, narrow face filled with latent viciousness. He stood near a slack-jawed man with shifty eyes.

The man in the fur-collared coat spun a gold coin on the bar and refilled their glasses.

In the momentary stillness of the room the sound of the coin was distinct and clear. Heads turned and eyes held on the coin, then lifted to the face of the man in the fur collar. An Eastern face, a tenderfoot. And then their eyes went naturally to Mabry, and seemed to pause.

"Easy with that gold, mister." Mabry lifted his glass. "Maybe half the men in this room would slit your throat for it."

Healy's smile was friendly, yet faintly taunting. "I'm green, friend, but not that green. Even if I'm Irish."

Mabry tossed off the whisky. "You fork your own broncs in this country," he said, and turned abruptly away.

He took up his rifle and saddlebags and stepped out toward the adjoining room, and then he missed

a stride and almost stopped, for a girl had just come into the room.

She walked with quick, purposeful steps, but as their eyes met her step faltered, too. Then she caught herself and went on by, leaving him with a flashing memory of red-gold hair and a gray traveling dress whose like he had not seen since Richmond. He opened the inner door and entered the hallway beyond. Away from the fire, it was cold.

Along the hall on one side were four doors. These he surmised led to separate rooms. On the left side was one door, which he opened. This led to a long room lined with tiers of bunks, three high. The room would sleep thirty. Choosing an empty bunk near the door, he dumped his gear.

He shucked his sheepskin coat, then his belt and gun. The second gun stayed in his waistband.

City girl...must be with the Healy show. Her eyes had looked into his, straight and clean. Not boldly, but with assurance and self-possession. She was all woman, that one. And a lady.

None of his affair.

His thoughts reverted to the men in the room. Dispassionately, yet with knowledge born of long experience, he could see what would happen. Within thirty minutes or less Griffin's friends would know he had come in and under what circumstances. What happened then would depend on how fast they would go for a friend.

Not far...unless it would serve their own ends, or one of them was building a reputation.

Or unless the man with the narrow face was one of them. That one had a devil riding him. He would kill.

If the weather broke by daybreak he would push on. He took the gun from his waistband and spun the cylinder. It was a solid, well-made gun. He returned it to his belt and walked back to the outer room.

"How about grub?"

Williams jerked his head toward an open door through which came the rattle of dishes. "Beef and beans, maybe more. Best cook this side of the IXL in Deadwood."

Mabry walked around the bar into a long room with two tables placed end to end. Benches lined either side. At the far end of the table near the fireplace Healy sat with the girl, and with a big man whom Mabry had not seen before.

He was a man with a wide face and a geniality that immediately rubbed Mabry the wrong way. Better dressed than most of the men in the outer room, he held a fat black cigar between his fingers.

"Take some doing, all right. But we can do it."

The big man was speaking. He glanced down the table at Mabry, who was helping himself to dishes.

that an aproned man had put before him. The big man lowered his voice, but it was still loud enough for Mabry to hear.

“West out of here into the Wind River country. Then north. There’ll be fuel along the Big Horn.”

“What about Indians?”

The big man waved his cigar. “No trouble. Mostly Shoshones up thataway, and they’re friendly.”

Healy made no comment, but he glanced at Mabry, who was eating in silence. Healy seemed about to speak, but changed his mind. Twice the girl looked at Mabry, and he was aware of her glance.

The fellow was either a fool or a liar. Going up that valley was tough at any time, but in the dead of winter, with a woman along, it was asking for trouble. And with two loaded vans. As for Indians, the Shoshones were friendly, but there were roving bands of renegade Sioux who had taken to the rough country after the Custer fight and had never returned to the reservation. Only last week a couple of trappers out of Spearfish had been murdered up in the Big Horns. Their companions found their bodies and plenty of Indian sign. They lit out for Deadwood and the story had been familiar around town before Mabry took the outtrail. It was not the only case. Mabry had talked to them, had bought the black horse from them, in fact.

“I’ll have my two men,” the big man said. “That will make four of us and the three women.”

Three women....

And those renegade Sioux did not have their squaws with them.

He filled his cup and put the coffeepot down. The girl glanced around and for an instant their eyes were held, then she looked away.

“Join us, friend?” Healy suggested.

“Thanks,” Mabry said. “I don’t want to interrupt.”

It was obvious that the big man was not pleased at the invitation. He was irritated, and shifted angrily on the bench.

“We’re planning a trip,” Healy said. “You can help.”

Only the irritation of the big man prompted him. Otherwise he would have stayed where he was. He shifted his food up the table and sat facing the big man and the girl.

“King,” Healy said, “meet Janice Ryan. She’s with my troupe. And this is Andy Barker, who’s agreed to guide us to Alder Gulch.”

“In this weather?”

Barker’s face tightened. “I told them it wouldn’t be easy, but I know that trail.” He hesitated, the

took a chance. "Do you?"

"No."

Barker showed his relief. "Then I'm afraid you won't be much use to us," he said abruptly, "but thanks, anyway."

"I haven't been over that trail, but I've been over a lot of others in bad weather."

Barker brushed the ash from his cigar, ignoring Mabry. "That's about it. We can leave as soon as the weather breaks."

"You missed your count," Healy said. "There'll be another man."

Barker looked quickly at Mabry. "You?" Obviously the idea was distasteful to him.

"No," Healy said, "although we'd like to have him. I referred to the other man in our company, Doc Guilford."

"Oh....All right."

Mabry tried his coffee and found it hot and strong. The room was very still. On the hearth the fire crackled briefly, then subsided. Barker drew on his cigar, seeming to want to leave, but hesitating, as if he disliked leaving them alone to talk to Mabry.

Or was that, Mabry asked himself, his imagination? He might be letting an irrational dislike of the man influence his judgment. Mabry liked the coffee, and it warmed away the last of his chill. He liked sitting across the table from Janice Ryan and could feel the sharp edge of her curiosity.

"Take quite a while, a trip like that," he ventured. "Better have plenty of grub and some spare horses."

"When we want your advice," Barker said, "we'll ask for it."

King Mabry lifted his eyes. He looked at Barker for a long time, then said quietly, "I've been asked," he reminded him, "by him." He indicated Healy. "Or do you have some reason for not wanting them to get advice from anyone else?"

Barker stared at him, his lips tightening. He was about to speak when Williams came into the room.

"Mabry," he said quickly in a low tone, "watch yourself. Trouble making up."

"Thanks."

He saw startled comprehension in Barker's eyes and saw the man grow faintly white around the eyes as he heard Mabry's name.

Trouble might mean that Griffin's friends were going to take action. That could mean nothing more

Barker, but the name obviously had. It had proved a severe jolt, by the look of him.

“King...King Mabry.”

“That’s the name.”

Barker smiled stiffly. “Healy,” he said, “when you introduce a man, use his whole name. It might make a difference.”

“The bartender called him King. It was the only name I knew.”

“Does it matter so much?” Janice asked.

“In this case, yes.” Barker chose his words with care, yet they carried the information he intended and a warning. “King Mabry is a known man. They say he has killed fifteen men.”

Mabry’s eyes were bleak. He gave Barker all his attention. “Not fifteen. Only eleven—not counting Indians.”

Barker got up, smiling faintly, obviously feeling he had scored a point against Mabry. Yet as he turned to go, King Mabry spoke. The remark came from nowhere, unconsidered, unplanned. “One thing, Barker. They were all armed, and they were all facing me.”

The big man stiffened, and the glance he threw over his shoulder at Mabry was malignant. Yet he held a probing, half-frightened curiosity, too.

As he watched the man leave, Mabry’s mind caught at that final reaction. Somewhere, Mabry told himself, he’s shot a man in the back, or been accused of it.

It was something to remember. Something not to forget. Nor was Barker an enemy to be underrated. The big man was too confident not to have victory behind him. He was no fool. He was a shrewd, tough, dangerous man.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room after Andy Barker had gone. Mabry drank his coffee and refilled the cup.

“None of my business,” he said, “but I’d think about that trip. You’ll have trouble.”

Healy shifted his cup on his saucer and said nothing. Janice Ryan started to speak, then stopped. Silence stretched taut between the walls, and then a board creaked, and when they looked around, a man was standing in the door.

He was a tall man, somewhat stooped, with a lean hatchet face, and he wore his gun tied down. Andy Barker King Mabry knew the kind of man he was, and what to expect.

Low-voiced, he said, “Better get out. This is real trouble. Gun trouble.”

Chapter 3

NOBODY MOVED. THE man in the doorway looked down the table at Mabry, then advanced a step into the room. When he stopped his right side was toward them.

His features were lean and vulpine. Mabry could see that the fellow was primed for a killing, and he was the man he had seen watching the game in the outer room.

“You brought in Pete Griffin?”

Mabry’s right side was toward the door as he sat on the bench. His coffee cup, freshly filled, was before him. He waited while a slow count of five might have been made, and then he replied, “I brought him in.”

“Where’s Pete now?”

The speaker came on another step, his eyes holding on Mabry.

“I said, where’s Pete?”

“Heard you.” Mabry looked around at him. “You want him, go find him.”

A second man came into the room and moved wide of the first. This man was not hunting trouble. “Bent?”

Benton ignored him. He had come into the room set for a killing, for a quick flare of anger, the kind that leads to shooting. Yet the attitude of Mabry gave him nothing upon which to hang it.

Mabry took the cup and cradled it in his hands. Benton tensed; Mabry might throw the hot coffee. He drew back half a step.

Healy looked from Mabry to Benton, seemingly aware for the first time that the situation was tense with danger. Sweat began to bead his brow, and his lips tightened. There was only one door and Benton stood with his back to it. Janice Ryan sat very still, her attention centered on Mabry.

“Bent?”

Distracted, Benton turned a little. “Shut up!”

Aware of his mistake, he jerked back, but Mabry seemed oblivious even of his presence. Mabry

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