

LAW OF THE DESERT BORN

Shad Marone crawled out of the water swearing and slid into the mesquite. Suddenly, for the first time since the chase began, he was mad. He was mad clear through.

“The hell with it!” He got to his feet, his eyes blazing. “I’ve run far enough! If they cross Black River, they’re askin’ for it!” For three days he had been on the dodge, using every stratagem known to men of the desert, but they clung to him like leeches. That was what came of killing a sheriff’s brother, and the fact that he killed in self defense wasn’t going to help a bit. Especially when the killer was Shad Marone. That was what you could expect when you were the last man of the losing side in a cattle war. All his friends were gone now but Madge. The best people of Puerto de Luna hadn’t been the toughest in this scrap, and they had lost.

And Shad Marone, who had been one of the toughest, had lost with them. His guns hadn’t been enough to outweigh those of the other faction. Of course, he admitted to himself, those on his side hadn’t been angels. He’d branded a few head of calves himself from time to time, and when cash was short, he had often run a few steers over the border. But hadn’t they all? Truman and Dykes had been good men, but Dykes had been killed at the start, and Truman had fought like a gentleman, and that wasn’t any way to win in the Black River country.

Since then, there had been few peaceful days for Shad Marone. After they’d elected Clyde Bowman sheriff, he knew they were out to get him. Bowman hated him, and Bowman had been one of the worst of them in the cattle war. The trouble was, Shad was a gunfighter, and they all knew it. Bowman was fast with a gun and in a fight could hold his own.

Also, he was smart enough to leave Shad Marone strictly alone. So they just waited, watched, and planned. Shad had taken their dislike as a matter of course. It took tough men to settle a tough country, and if they started shooting, somebody got hurt. Well, he wasn’t getting hurt. There had been too much shooting to suit him. He wanted to leave

Puerto de Luna, but Madge was still living on the old place, and he didn't want to leave her there alone. So he stayed on, knowing it couldn't last.

Then Jud Bowman rode into town. Shad was thoughtful when he heard that. Jud was notoriously quarrelsome and was said to have twelve notches on his gun. Shad had a feeling that Jud hadn't come to Puerto de Luna by accident. Jud hadn't been in town two days before the grapevine had the story that if Clyde and Lopez were afraid to run Marone out of town, he wasn't.

Jud Bowman might have done it, too, if it hadn't been for Tips. Tips Hogan had been tending bar in Puerto de Luna for a long time. He'd come over the trail as wagon boss for Shad's old man, something everyone had forgotten but Shad and Tips himself. Tips saw the gun in Bowman's lap, and he gave Marone a warning. It was just a word, through unmoving lips, while he mopped the bar.

After a moment, Shad turned, his glass in his left hand, and he saw the way Bowman was sitting and how the tabletop would conceal a gun in his lap. Even then, when he knew they had set things up to kill him, he hadn't wanted trouble. He decided to get out while the getting was good. Then he saw Slade near the door and Henderson across the room. He was boxed. They weren't gambling this time. Tips Hogan knew what was likely to happen, and he was working his way down the bar.

Marone took it easy. He knew it was coming, and it wasn't a new thing. That was his biggest advantage, he thought. He had been in more fights than any of them. He didn't want any more trouble, but if he got out of this, it would be right behind a six-gun. The back door was barred and the window closed.

Jud Bowman looked up suddenly. He had a great shock of blond, coarse hair, and under bushy brows his eyes glinted. "What's this about you threatenin' to kill me, Marone?" So that was their excuse. He had not threatened Bowman, scarcely knew him, in fact, but this was the way to put him in the wrong, to give them the plea of self-defense. He let his eyes turn to Bowman, saw the tensivity in the man's face. A denial, and there would be shooting. Jud's right-hand fingertips rested on the table's edge. He had only to drop a hand and fire.

“Huh?” Shad said stupidly, as though startled from a daydream. He took a step toward the table, his face puzzled. “Wha’d you say? I didn’t get it.”

They had planned it all very carefully. Marone would deny, Bowman would claim he’d been called a liar; there would be a killing. They were tense, all three of them set to draw.

“Huh?” Shad repeated blankly. They were caught flat-footed. After all, you couldn’t shoot a man in cold blood. You couldn’t shoot a man who was half-asleep. Most of the men in the saloon were against Marone, but they would never stand for murder. They were poised for action, and nothing happened. Shad blinked at them. “Sorry,” he said, “I must’ve been dreamin’. I didn’t hear you.”

Bowman glanced around uncertainly, wetting his lips with his tongue. “I said I heard you threatened to kill me,” he repeated.

It sounded lame, and he knew it, but Shad’s response had been unexpected. What happened then was even more unexpected. Marone’s left hand shot out, and before anyone could move, the table was spun from in front of Bowman. Everyone saw the naked gun lying in his lap. Every man in the saloon knew that Jud Bowman, for all his reputation, had been afraid to shoot it out with an even break. It would have been murder.

Taken by surprise, Bowman blinked foolishly. Then his wits came back. Blood rushed to his face. He grabbed the gun. “Why, you ... I”

Then Shad Marone shot him. Shad shot him through the belly, and before the other two could act, he wheeled, not toward the door, but to the closed window. He battered it with his shoulder and went right on through. Outside, he hit the ground on his hands but came up in a lunging run. Then he was in the saddle and on his way.

There were men in the saloon who would tell the truth—two at least, although neither had much use for him. But Marone knew that with Clyde Bowman as sheriff he would never be brought to trial. He would be killed “evading arrest.”

For three days he fled, and during that time, they were never more than an hour behind him. Then, at Forked Tree, they closed in. He got away,

but they clipped his horse. The roan stayed on his feet, giving all he had, as horses always had given for Shad Marone, and then died on the riverbank, still trying with his last breath. Marone took time to cache his saddle and bridle, then started on afoot. He made the river, and they thought that would stop him, for he couldn't swim a stroke. But he found a drift log, and with his guns riding high, he shoved off. Using the current and his own kicking, he got to the other bank, considerably downstream.

The thing that bothered him was the way they clung to his trail. Bowman wasn't the man to follow as little trail as he left. Yet the man hung to him like an Apache. Apache! Why hadn't he thought of that? It would be Lopez following that trail, not Bowman. Bowman was a bulldog, but Lopez was wily as a fox and bloodthirsty as a weasel. Shad got to his feet and shook the water from him like a dog. He was a big, rawboned, sun-browned man. His shirt was half torn away, and a bandolier of cartridges was slung across his shoulder and chest. His six gun was on his hip, his rifle in his hand.

He poured the water out of his boots. Well, he was through playing now. If they wanted a trail, he'd see that they got one. Lopez was the one who worried him. He could shake the others, but Lopez was one of the men who had built this country. He was ugly, he killed freely and often, he was absolutely ruthless, but he had nerve. You had to hand it to him. The man wasn't honest, and he was too quick to kill, but it had taken men like him to tame this wild, lonely land. It was a land that didn't tame easy.

Well, what they'd get now would be death for them all. Even Lopez. This was something he'd been saving. Grimly he turned up the steep, little-used path from the river. They thought they had him at the river. And they would think they had him again at the lava beds. Waterless, treeless, and desolate, the lava beds were believed to harbor no life of any kind. Only sand and great, jagged rocks-rocks shaped like flame-grotesque, barren, awful. More than seventy miles long, never less than thirty miles wide, so rough a pair of shoes wouldn't last five miles and footing next to impossible for horses.

On the edge of the lava, Shad Marone sat down and pulled off his boots. Tying their strings, he hung them to his belt. Then he pulled out

a pair of moccasins he always carried and slipped them on. Pliable and easy on his feet, they would give to the rough rock and would last many times as long in this terrain as boots. He got up and walked into the lava beds. The bare lava caught the fierce heat and threw it back in his face. A trickle of sweat started down his cheek.

He knew the desert, knew how to live in the heat, and he did not try to hurry. That would be fatal. Far ahead of him was a massive tower of rock jutting up like a church steeple from a tiny village. He headed that way, walking steadily. He made no attempt to cover his trail, no attempt to lose his pursuers. He knew where he was going.

An hour passed, and then another. It was slow going. The rock tower had come abreast of him and then fallen behind. Once he saw the trail of some tiny creature, perhaps a horned frog. Once, when he climbed a steep declivity, he glanced back. They were still coming. They hadn't quit. Lopez—that was like Lopez. He wouldn't quit. Shad smiled then, but his eyes were without humor. All right, they wanted to kill him bad enough to try the lava beds. They would have to learn the hard way learn when they could never profit from the lesson.

He kept working north, using the shade carefully. There was little of it, only here and there in the lee of a rock. But each time he stopped, he cooled off a little. So far he hadn't taken a drink. After the third hour, he washed his lips and rinsed his mouth. Twice, after that, he took only a spoonful of water and rinsed his mouth before swallowing.

Occasionally, he stopped and looked around to get his bearings. He smiled grimly when he thought of Bowman. The sheriff was a heavy man. Davis would be there, too. Lopez was lean and wiry. He would last. He would be hard to kill. By his last count, there were eight left. Four had turned back at the lava beds.

He gained a little. At three in the afternoon, he finally stopped. It was a nice piece of shade and would grow better as the hours went on. The ground was low, and in one corner there was a pocket. He dug with his hands until the ground became damp. Then he lay back on the sand and went to sleep. He wasn't worried. Too many years he had been awakening at the hour he wished, his senses alert to danger. He was an hour ahead of them, at least. He would need this rest he was going to

get. What lay ahead would take everything he had. He knew that. Their feet would be punishing them cruelly now. Three of them still had their horses, leading them.

He rested his full hour, then got up. He had cut it very thin. Through a space in the rocks, he could see them, not three hundred yards away. Lopez, as he had suspected, was in the lead. How easy to pick them off now! But no, he would not kill again. Let their own anxiety to kill him kill them.

Within a hundred yards, he had put two jumbled piles of boulders between himself and his pursuers. A little farther then, and he stopped. Before him was a steep slide of shale, near the edge of a great basin. Standing where he did, he could see, far away in the distance, a purple haze over the mountains. Between there was nothing but a great white expanse, shimmering with heat. He slid down the shale and brought up at the bottom. He was now, he knew, seventy feet below sea level.

He started away, and at every step, dry, powdery dust lifted in clouds. It caked in his nostrils, filmed his eye lashes, and covered his clothes with whitish, alkaline dust. Far across the Sink, and scarcely discernible from the crest behind him, was the Window in the Rock. He headed for it, walking steadily. It was ten miles if you walked straight across.

“So far that Navajo was right,” Shad told himself. “An’ he said to make it before dark ... or else!”

Shad Marone’s lips were dry and cracked. After a mile, he stopped, tilting his canteen until he could get his finger into the water, then carefully moistened his lips. Just a drop then, inside his mouth. All these men were desertwise. None of them, excepting perhaps Lopez, would know about the Sink. They would need water. They would have to know where to find it. By day they could follow his trail, but after darkness fell ... ?

And then, the Navajo had said, the wind would begin to blow Shad looked at the dry, powdery stuff under him. He could imagine what a smothering, stifling horror this would be if the wind blew. Then, no man could live. Heat waves danced a queer rigadon across the lower sky, and heat lifted, beating against his face from the hot white dust beneath his feet. Always it was over a man’s shoe tops, sometimes

almost knee-deep. Far away, the mountains were a purple line that seemed to waver vaguely in the afternoon sun.

He walked on, heading by instinct rather than sight for the Window. Dust arose in a slow, choking cloud. It came up from his feet in little puffs, like white smoke. He stumbled, then got his feet right, and kept on. Walking in this was like dragging yourself through heavy mud. The dust pulled at his feet. His pace was slow. Thirst gathered in his throat, and his mouth seemed filled with some thing thick and clotted. His tongue was swollen, his lips cracked and swollen. He could not seem to swallow. He could not make three miles an hour. Darkness would reach him before he made the other side. But he would be close. Close enough. Luckily, at this season, the light stayed long in the sky.

After a long time, he stopped and looked back. Yes, they were coming. But there was not one dust cloud. There were several. Through red rimmed, sun-squinted eyes, he watched. They were straggling. Every straggler would die. He knew that. Well, they had asked for it. Dust covered his clothing, and only his gun he kept clean. Every half hour he stopped and wiped it as clean as he could. Twice he pulled a knotted string through the barrel. Finally, he used the last of his water. Every half hour he had been wetting his lips. He did not throw the canteen away, but slung it back upon his hip. He would need it later, when he got to the Nest.

His feet felt very heavy, his legs seemed to belong to an automaton. Head down, he slogged wearily on. In an hour he made two miles.

THERE IS A TIME when human nature seems able to stand no more. There is a time when every iota of strength seems burned away. This was the fourth day of the chase. Four days without a hot meal, four days of riding, walking, running. Now this. He had only to stop, they would come up with him, and it would be over. The thought of how easy it would be to quit came to him. He considered the thought. But he did not consider quitting. He could no more have stopped than a bee could stop making honey. Life was ahead, and he had to live. It was a matter only of survival now. The man with the greatest urge to live would be the one to survive. Those men behind him were going to die.

They were going to die for three reasons. First, he alone knew where there was water, and at the right time he would lose them. Second, he was in the lead, and after dark they would have no trail, and if they lived through the night, there would be no trail left in the morning. Third, at night, at this season, the wind always blew, and their eyes and mouths and ears would fill with soft, white filmy dust, and if they lay down, they would be buried by the sifting, swirling dust. They would die then, every man jack of them. They had it coming.

Bowman deserved it; so did Davis and Gardner. Lopez most of all. They were all there; he had seen them. Lopez was a killer. The man's father had been Spanish and Irish, his mother an Apache. Without Lopez, he would have shaken them off long before.

Shad Marone tried to laugh, but the sound was only a choking grunt. Well, they had followed Lopez to their death, all of them. Aside from Lopez, they were weak sisters. He looked back again. He was gaining on them now. The first dust cloud was farther behind, and the distance between the others was growing wider. It was a shame Lopez had to die, at that. The man was tough and had plenty of trail savvy.

Shad Marone moved on. From somewhere within him he called forth a new burst of strength. His eyes watched the sun. While there was light, they had a chance. What would they think in Puerto de Luna when eight men did not come back? Marone looked at the sun, and it was low, scarcely above the purple mountains. They seemed close now. He lengthened his stride again.

The Navajo had told him how his people once had been pursued by Apaches, and had led the whole Apache war party into the Sink. There they had been caught by darkness, and none were ever seen again according to the Indian's story.

Shad stumbled then and fell. Dust lifted thickly about him, clogging his nostrils. Slowly, like a groggy fighter, he got his knees under him, and using his rifle for a staff, pushed himself to his feet. He started on, driven by some blind, brute desire for life. When he fell again, he could feel rocks under his hands. He pulled himself up. He climbed the steep, winding path toward the Window in the Rock. Below the far corner of

the Window was the Nest. And in the Nest, there was water. Or so the Navajo had told him.

When he was halfway up the trail, he turned and looked back over the Sink. Far away, he could see the dust clouds. Four of them. One larger than the others. Probably there were two men together.

“Still coming,” he muttered grimly, “and Lopez leading them!”

Lopez, damn his soul! The little devil had guts, though; you had to give him that. Suddenly, Marone found himself almost wishing Lopez would win through. The man was like a wolf. A killer wolf. But he had guts. And it wasn't just the honest men who had built up this country to what it was today. Maybe, without the killers and rustlers and badmen, the West would never have been won so soon.

Shad Marone remembered some of them: wild, dangerous men, who went into country where nobody else dared venture. They killed and robbed to live, but they stayed there. It took iron men for that: men like Lopez, who was a mongrel of the Santa Fe Trail. Lopez had drunk water from a buffalo track many a time.

Well, so have I, Shad told himself. Shad Marone took out his six-shooter and wiped it free of dust. Only then did he start up the trail. He found the Nest, a hollow among the rocks, sheltered from the wind. The Window loomed above him now, immense, gigantic. Shad stumbled, running, into the Nest. He dropped his rifle and lunged for the water hole, throwing himself on the ground to drink.

Then he stared, unbelieving. Empty! The earth was dry and parched where the water had been, but only cracked earth remained. He couldn't believe it. It couldn't be! It couldn't ...

Marone came to his feet, glaring wildly about. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face heat-flushed above the black whiskers, now filmed with gray dust. He tried to laugh. Lopez dying down below there, he dying up here! The hard men of the West, the tough men! He sneered at himself. Both of them now would die, he at the water hole, Lopez down there in the cloying, clogging dust!

He shook his head. Through the flame-sheathed torment of his brain, there came a cool ray of sanity. There had been water here. The Indian

had been right. The cracked earth showed that. But where? Perhaps a dry season. . . .

But no; it had not been a dry season. Certainly no dryer than any other year at this time. He stared across the place where the pool had been. Rocks and a few rock cedar and some heaped-up rocks from a small slide. He stumbled across and began clawing at the rocks, pulling, tearing. Suddenly, a trickle of water burst through! He got hold of one big rock and in a mad frenzy, tore it from its place. The water shot through then, so suddenly he was knocked to his knees.

He scrambled out of the depression, splashing in the water. Then, lying on his face, he drank, long and greedily. Finally, he rolled away and lay still, panting. Dimly, he was conscious of the wind blowing. He crawled to the water again and bathed his face, washing away the dirt and grime. Then, careful as always, he filled his canteen from the fresh water bubbling up from the spring. If he only had some coffee....

But he'd left his food in his saddlebags. Well, Madge would be all right now. He could go back to her. After this, they wouldn't bother him. He would take her away. They would go to the Blue Mountains in Oregon. He had always liked that country.

The wind was blowing more heavily now, and he could smell the dust. That Navajo hadn't lied. It would be hell down in the Sink. He was above it now and almost a mile away. He stared down into the darkness, wondering how far Lopez had been able to get. The others didn't matter; they were weak sisters who lived on the strength of better men. If they didn't die there, they would die elsewhere, and the West could spare them. He got to his feet. Lopez would hate to die.

The ranch he had built so carefully in a piece of the wildest, roughest country was going good. It took a man with guts to settle where he had and make it pay. Shad Marone rubbed the stubble on his jaw

"That last thirty head of his cows I rustled for him brought the best price I ever got!" he remembered thoughtfully. "Too bad there ain't more like him!"

Well, after this night, there would be one less. There wouldn't be any thing to guide Lopez down there now. A man caught in a thick whirlpool of dust would have no landmarks; there would be nothing to

get him out except blind instinct. The Navajos had been clever, leading the Apaches into a trap like that. Odd, that Lopez's mother had been an Apache, too.

Just the same, Marone thought, he had nerve. He'd shot his way up from the bottom until he had one of the best ranches. Shad Marone began to pick up some dead cedar. He gathered some needles for kindling and in a few minutes had a fire going. Marone took another drink. Somehow, he felt restless. He got up and walked to the edge of the Nest. How far had Lopez come? Suppose ... Marone gripped his pistol. Suddenly, he started down the mountain.

"The hell with it!" he muttered. A stone rattled. Shad Marone froze, gun in hand. Lopez, a gray shadow, weaving in the vague light from the cliff, had a gun in his hand. For a full minute, they stared at each other.

Marone spoke first. "Looks like a dead heat," he said.

Lopez said, "How'd you know about that water hole?"

"Navajo told me," Shad replied, watching Lopez like a cat. "You don't look so bad," he added. "Have a full canteen?"

"No. I'd have been a goner. But my mother was an Apache. A bunch of them got caught in the Sink once. That never happened twice to no Apache. They found this water hole then, and one down below. I made the one below, an' then I was finished. She was a dry hole. But then water began to run in from a crack in the rock."

"Yeah?" Marone looked at him again. "You got any coffee?"

"Sure."

"Well," Shad said as he holstered his gun, "I've got a fire."