

A Texan Rides the Trouble Trail

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Chapter I

Bullet Song

It was sunset when the lanky man with the lean, bronzed face stopped his tired pony in front of the public stable in the little Border town of Vista. He sagged slightly in his saddle as if weariness as he made a rapid but ugh inspection of the town's one narrow street. It was not more than a couple of hundred yards long, was fringed with tumbledown buildings, and carpeted with a foot of velvety dust. A few ramshackle habitations dotted the rocky hillside.

Several men were wandering around the street as if they had no particular object in life, and some ponies were tied to the hitch-rail in front of the saloon. Vista looked like a place of peace, rather than a spot where injustice prevailed.

From the semi-dark depths of his stable, Lew Dawes, the stableman, watched the stranger as he sat his saddle against a background of orange sunset.

The new arrival in Vista bestrode a bay pony which bore a brand unknown to the local range. His attire was the customary garb of the cow country. He wore a gun with the holster tied down, and the walnut-butt of the weapon had that worn, smoky appearance which comes as a result of frequent handling. Lew Dawes half expected to see an official star on the man's vest, but no badge of authority glittered there.

The stableman put aside the pitchfork with which he had been scattering straw in the stalls for bedding, and shuffled to the doorway, where he leaned against the casement and yawned. The stranger noticed him.

"You the boss man here?" he asked.

"That's right. Name of Lew Dawes."

"I'm Ned Houston, from over Texas way."

"Yuh look some tuckered out, Mr. Houston, and so does yore pony," Dawes suggested. "A little rest might do yuh both some good. I reckon it'll be safe enough. I don't see any dust cloud comin' from the direction of Texas."

Houston grinned. “Oh, I’m too far ahead of ‘em for yuh to see their dust yet,” he replied. He got down out of his saddle, led his pony to the stable door, and Dawes took the reins. “I want yuh to take good care of this pony,” Houston ordered. “And yuh can fix up a bed of hay outside his stall, so’s I can spread my blankets on it. I’ll sleep here, if at all.”

“Shucks! Yuh don’t have to do that, Mr. Houston. Vista is a regular town, with all the comforts. In the back of the saloon buildin’ are a couple of rooms as are rented for human beddin’ purposes sometimes, and right now there ain’t any customers.”

“That’s handy—but I’ll sleep outside the stall where my pony is stabled,” Houston decided, firmly.

“Yes, sir. Whatever yuh like. I can fix yuh up a good feed of oats, too, if yuh say the word.”

Houston eyed him coldly, “I ain’t in the proper mood for jokin’ right now,” he warned. “I didn’t come here to joke. I’m here to look into a certain matter and mebbe raise a few ructions.”

“It’s like that, huh?”

“Yeah,” Houston said. “Generally, I’m a mild man. I ooze peace and friendship from every pore. I pat dogs on their heads and chuck little children under their chins. I’m mild till somethin’ happens to rile me. Then I get mad, and I’m a regular caution. I want everybody to understand that, so’s it can’t ever be said afterward that I jumped on ‘em unwarned.”

“That’s right kind of yuh, Mr. Houston.”

“I think so. Where can I eat?”

“Well, sir, the saloon man’s got a fat wife who can sling some pretty fair grub, if yuh can stand it a mite greasy. She’s a Mex.”

“Never scorn a Mex woman’s cookin’ if yuh’re real hungry,” Houston advised. “She can take a handful of frijoles, a slab of fat mutton and a few peppers and dish up somethin’ tasty. I need some smokin’ tobacco—”

“The saloon man can accommodate yuh.”

“Seems to me, Mr. Dawes, that yuh’re right busy workin’ up trade for the saloon man. His place ain’t the only one in town. From where I’m standin’, I can see a sign which says, ‘Brandell Tradin’ Post’.”

“No doubt,” the stableman said. “But you bein’ a stranger hereabouts, mebbe I’d better caution yuh some.”

“Regardin’ what?”

“It ain’t healthy for an hombre to trade at Torn Brandell’s place. There’s a feud ragin’ between him and Sid Jarles, who owns the Three S cattle outfit. Jarles and his punchers are fendin’ folks away from the tradin’ post.”

“When I get headed in a certain direction, I don’t fend easy,” Houston declared. “You take care of my pony. I’ll be back later.”

“Wait a minute, Mr. Houston. Yuh don’t want to underestimate what I’ve told yuh. The trouble between Sid Jarles and Tom Brandell is right bitter.”

“What could cause a bad ruckus between a ranch owner and a tradin’ post man?” Houston asked.

“It’s simple enough. Brandell has a pretty daughter, name of Clara. Sid Jarles wanted to marry her. The girl said ‘no’, and her father backed her up. Then a gent named Sam Finch, who worked for Brandell, was caught stealin’ and got fired. So he’s agin Brandell, too. Sid Jarles has ordered everybody to keep away from the tradin’ post, and he’s fixin’ to start Sam Finch up in business and run Brandell out.”

“How come this Jarles is so powerful that folks do as he says?”

“His Three S outfit is the big one hereabouts,” Dawes explained. “Jarles has a top-hand, name of Jake Walters, who’s a cold-blooded killer, and some hard hombres roost in the Three S bunkhouse.”

“That’s the kind of thing that gets me riled!”

“Well, I’ve explained the situation to yuh, Mr. Houston. From now on, yuh’re on

yore own.”

“Thanks for yore good intentions, Mr. Dawes. Whatever they’re worth, yuh can add the amount to my bill. I’ll be goin’ up the street now.”

“What’ll I do with yore pony, Mr. Houston, if yuh never come back?”

“Oh, I’ll come back,” Houston promised.

The last colored streak of sunset had disappeared, and the swift dusk had come. Houston hitched up his overalls and chaps, adjusted his gun-belt and holster, and settled his bat on his head firmly. He strode off down the street like a man with a purpose, his boot heels thumping the walk in a steady rhythm.

As he passed the end of a narrow space between two of the buildings, a jet of amber flame suddenly split the gloom of the gathering night, a gun cracked, smoke swirled, and a bullet zipped past within scant inches of Houston’s head.

Houston reacted to the unexpected attack like a man not unaccustomed to such an event. He darted aside to get past the danger spot before a second shot could come, whipped his own gun out as he moved, and held it ready as he crouched and tensed.

No foe appeared to shoot it out with him. Houston heard boots thumping the ground, with the sounds dwindling rapidly, and realized that the man who had fired and missed was running away. Houston sped after him angrily through the narrow dark space between the buildings. He emerged behind them and halted in the darkness close to a wall. He saw nobody, heard nothing. His unknown assailant had escaped into the gathering night. He could have dodged into one of the buildings, or got around one of them and reached the street.

The attempt at cowardly assassination enraged Houston. It puzzled him, too. This was foreign country to him, and as far as he knew no citizen of Vista ever had seen him before or knew the reason for his visit to the town now. There was a chance he had been mistaken for somebody else but Houston could not make himself believe that.

The shot had been heard by a few. But since it had not been followed by other shots, or by howls of rage and pain, indicating a brawl, it attracted little attention. A few men called questions to one another concerning it, then there

was silence. A gunshot was nothing to startle Vista.

Crouching against the wall in the darkness with weapon held ready, Houston watched and listened for a time. Then he went back between the buildings to the street and peered out cautiously.

He saw two men lounging in front of the saloon on the opposite side of the street and one leaning against a post of the wooden awning in front of the store on this side. Nobody else could be seen. Lights burned in the store and saloon, throwing streaks of faint illumination upon the walks.

Houston holstered his gun and started along the walk toward the store. He was alert and ready for a quick move. His unknown enemy might try to strike from ambush again.

He noticed the man leaning against awning post leave it to saunter across the walk and take up a new position beside the store door. The streak of light revealed him as a fairly young man worn range clothing, and with a gun swinging against his hip.

Houston paced on and swung across the walk toward the store entrance. The man standing on the porch there put up a hand to stop him.

“Yuh don’t want to go in there, hombre,” he said.

“But I do,” Houston replied. “I’m fresh out of smokin’.”

“Let’s try it another way, amigo. Yuh’d better not go in. Yuh can get tobacco in the saloon. Yuh’re a stranger, so mebbe yuh don’t understand. Sid Jarles, who owns the Three S outfit, don’t want anybody tradin’ with Tom Brandell.”

“I don’t know Sid Jarles, and don’t care a hoot what he wants,” Houston said. “I’m goin’ into this tradin’ post—”

“If yuh try it, I’ll have to stop yuh.”

“If yuh try to stop me, there’ll be fireworks. Once my mind’s made up, I ain’t easy to stop, and it’s made up now. And I’m extra mad about somethin’ now, too, so yuh’d better stand out of my path, pronto. I’m warnin’ yuh.”

The man on the porch dropped his right hand swiftly to his holster as if answering a challenge. But the muzzle of Houston's gun was jabbing him in the stomach before he could draw.

"Paws in the air!" Houston ordered, "I'll just take yore hardware, lest yuh let it lead yuh into trouble."

Houston's left hand darted forward and took the gun from the other man's holster. He stepped back and, still watching the man before him, lifted the gun and sniffed at the muzzle.

"It's a good thing for you, hombre, that this gun ain't been fired durin' the last few minutes," he said.

He dumped the shells and hurled the empty gun far out into the dusty street. Then Houston holstered his own weapon.

"Yuh've cooked up a mess of trouble for yourself," the enraged man on the porch said.

"I love trouble, hombre," Houston told him. "Get away from that door now, or I'll drag yuh away."

The man started to move aside. But suddenly he whirled, and his fists came up as he launched himself forward. At the same instant, he shouted to somebody in front of the saloon. Neither of them saw the horrified face of the girl who appeared in the doorway.

Houston didn't bother to go for his gun again. His fists smashed into his would-be assailant's face, one after the other, like twin pile-drivers. The man on the porch tottered, and Houston spun him around and sent him flying through the porch rails, smashing them, to sprawl in the dust in the street. Then he entered the store, closing the door which the fleeing girl had left open.

Chapter II

Dangerous Partnership

A man and the girl who had been at the door stood behind the counter. Tom Brandell, the owner of the trading post, was emaciated, grayish-looking, weakened from a long illness. Clara, his daughter, was tall and slender, and rather good-looking. What Houston liked about her immediately was her air of defiance.

“You’re a stranger,” she said. “We saw that little fuss at the door. If it was a Sid Jarles trick to get a man in here, and —”

“Whoa, and back up!” Houston interrupted.

“Who are you to tell me to whoa and back up?” she demanded.

Houston grinned at her. “First off, I’m an hombre who wants a sack of tobacco, so I can make myself a cigarette.” He tossed a coin on the counter.

The girl turned to a shelf and got the tobacco, and put the coin into the till. But her face was as severe as she could make it, and she watched him closely.

“Never saw a person as suspicious as you seem to be,” Houston told her. “Can’t blame yuh, though, the way I understand things are.” He faced the man. “Are you Tom Brandell?”

“I am.”

“Got a letter for yuh, then.”

Houston took a letter from his shirt pocket and slipped it across the counter, then calmly began making a cigarette. Brandell ripped the letter open and read it.

“Why, this is from my old friend, Jim Penroy!” he said.

“Yeah,” Houston agreed. “Mr. Penroy raised me from a pup, and I’d die for him, if that means anything to yuh. He got yore letter tellin’ about the trouble here, and about you not bein’ well enough to put up a fight. He couldn’t come hisself,

him recoverin' from a broken leg. Anyhow, he ain't tough enough in a ruckus — too tender-hearted. I'm tough. So he sent me to do the fightin'."

"So he says in the letter. Yuh're Ned Houston?"

"Yeah. Got in a short time ago and stabled my pony. Somebody took a shot at me as I was comin' along the street. I can't make that out. Nobody here knows me, or why I came."

"I'll explain the situation," Brandell said.

"Waste of time," Houston said. "I know the gist of it, and that's enough."

"The man you handled outside is a Three S man, named Ed Foster," Clara Brandell put in. "Two more are across the street. Some of them watch the post all the time. This trouble — it's serious. If you try to help us, you'll be in danger."

"Fine!" Houston said. He fumbled beneath his shirt, opened a money-belt, and from it took a document and a bank draft. "Jim Penroy figgered everything out, Mr. Brandell. Here's a partnership paper yuh can finish fillin' out and sign, and here's a draft for two thousand dollars. The idea is that I buy a share in this tradin' post, under my own name and usin' Jim Penroy's money."

"Why should Dad sell you a share?" Clara asked.

"It's simple, when yuh think it out," Houston told her. "A man has a right to protect his own property."

Brandell's eyes glowed. "That's it!" he said. "It would make everything legal. I'll fill in this agreement right away, Mr. Houston."

"The name's Ned — to both of yuh. Open a small can of paint and get me a brush. I'll change the sign to read "Brandell and Houston" soon as I get around to it. And over in the saloon I'll announce that I've bought in as yore pardner. Then there can't be any mistake."

"You'll walk into danger if you go to the saloon," Clara said. "When Jarles learns you're a partner here —"

"I reckon yuh don't read much," Houston broke in. "Yuh don't seem to know

any word except ‘danger’.”

“Is that so!” she flared. “Let me tell you —”

“Spunky, huh?” Houston said. “That’s fine. Clara, we’re goin’ to get along. Of course, Mr. Brandell, yuh understand yuh can call the pardnership off if yuh want as soon as this trouble is over — simply hand back the draft and tear up the agreement.”

Houston turned toward the door.

“Where are you going now?” Clara asked.

“To the saloon. The stableman said I could get a meal there.”

“Clara will cook yuh somethin’,” Brandell said.

“But I want to go to the saloon. I aim to learn who shot at me, and why, and get acquainted with my enemies. I’ll sleep in the stable tonight, and be here bright and early in the mornin’, early, anyhow. Then we can make plan’s. Oh, yeah! I’ll be back later to paint that sign. You have the paint and brush ready, and a ladder.”

As Houston strode across the street, two men who had been standing in front of the saloon dodged into it. One was Ed Foster, the man Houston had handled at the store door.

Puffing on the cigarette he had made, Houston entered the saloon and stopped at the head of the bar. A man was behind the bar, Ed Foster was with a couple of others in the rear, a gambler played with a deck of cards at one table in a corner, and three men of the town were sitting at another table with drinks in front of them.

The man behind the bar looked at Houston questioningly.

“Mr. Dawes, at the stable, said I might get a good meal here,” the Texan said. “I’m hungry enough to tackle one.”

“I’ll have the women get yuh somethin’,” the man behind the bar said. “Want some red-eye?”

“Not now, thanks,” Houston told him. “I’ll wait for the grub.”

He strolled the length of the room. Ed Foster and the two other Three S men eyed him venomously. The townsmen glanced at him once, then continued their conversation. The professional gambler had an expression of hope in his face.

“Yuh don’t seem to be busy,” Houston said.

“Not so busy,” the gambler replied. “Have a chair and try your luck. My name’s Gadley, commonly known as ‘Silky’ because once I owned a silk shirt. That wasn’t in Vista. That was in a town where men risked a dollar now and then.”

“Deal a little two-handed stud,” Houston said “I’m bringing forth some money. My name’s Houston, just got in from Texas. Got a little business to ‘tend to here.”

They began playing stud in a listless manner. Houston glanced at the Three S men frequently as they stood at the bar in whispered conversation, and “Silky” Gadley watched Houston. The gambler was a tall, thin, middle-aged man fastidiously dressed, and had the icy manner peculiar to his kind.

“Somebody shot at me before I’d been in town fifteen minutes,” Houston said, so the others in the room could hear. “I can’t guess at the meanin’ of it. I’m a stranger here, and never had a ruckus with any of the citizens, far as I know.”

“Mebbe it was a mistake,” Gadley said.

“If it was, it’d better not be repeated,” Houston replied. “It makes me mad to be shot at.” The three cowboys at the bar left it and started walking slowly toward the table, Ed Foster in the middle. Houston reached down and shifted his holster, then went on playing stud. The Three S men stopped a few feet from the table and looked at him. Ed Foster did the talking.

“Stranger, yuh got a little rough with me across the street, and I was for fillin’ yuh full of lead. But these cowhand friends of mine talked me out of it.”

“Yuh’re right, they’re yore friends,” Houston said. “They probably saved yore life for yuh.”

“Bein’ a stranger, and not knowin’ the situation here, no doubt it did make yuh

mad for me to try to keep yuh from goin' into the tradin' post. So the boys told me to overlook it and explain everything."

"Yu're wise to overlook it," Houston told him. "But mebbe I'd better do the explainin'. I'm a stranger, all right, but I know the situation. I heard all about it."

"Then we'll give yuh fair warnin'. Sid Jarles don't want anybody to trade with Brandell."

"He'll have to tell me that hisself, and even then it won't do any good."

"Yuh think yu're bigger than Jarles, and the whole Three S outfit?" Ed Foster asked angrily. "Think yuh can ride into this town and do as yuh please?"

"I can go into the tradin' post any time I want, at least," Houston said. "Nobody's got a better right."

"A better right? What yuh mean by that?"

"I own an interest in the tradin' post. I just closed the deal — bought an interest from Brandell."

"Brandell's made a fool out of yuh then, and yuh've bought only a mess of trouble."

"Nobody's made a fool out of me. I bought the interest after I knew all about the trouble. And yuh can take word from me to Sid Jarles that I won't stand for any of his interference. If he don't want to trade at the post, that's his business. But he won't scare other folks away."

"Oh, he won't?"

"That's right, he won't! You take that word to him. If he wants to argue with me about it any, he'll find me here in town in the mornin'. I've got money tied up in that tradin' post now, and no ranch owner with a grouch 'cause a girl wouldn't look at him is goin' to wreck my investment. Yuh can tell Sid Jarles for me that I think he's actin' like a half-baked button."

"If we tell him yuh said that, yuh're as good as planted right now."

“Tell him, ‘less yuh’re afraid to.”

“Oh, we’ll tell him!” Ed Foster said. “And we’ll ride back into town in the mornin’ to see the fun.” He nodded to the other two Three S men. “Come on, boys. We’ll hit for the ranch and take this news to Sid. Mebbe Jake Walters will have a chance to catch up on his shootin’ practice.”

“If yore friend Jake is the Three S lead-slinger,” Houston told him, “tell him for me that he’d better not start actin’ up in my direction. I can be tough, too.”

The Three S men almost choked. They stared at Houston an instant, then turned away to go out into the street. A moment later, hoof beats told that they had left for the ranch.

“Very pretty, Mr. Houston — and very dangerous,” Silky Gadley said, in a low voice, as he shuffled the cards again. “Maybe you know what you’re doin’. You impress me as a man who does. However, make no mistake about Jake Walters. He’s good with a gun.”

“So’m I,” Houston admitted. “I’d like to know who shot at me tonight, and why.”

“Well, there are not many men in town,” Gadley replied. “I heard the shot, but thought it was only somebody tryin’ to make noise. I can tell you one thing — none of the Three S men shot at you. Two of them were in here at the time, and Ed Foster was on watch over at the tradin’ post.”

As they continued their game of stud, somebody entered from the street and went to the head of the bar. The man behind it served him. Houston looked at the man who had entered with interest. “One of the local boys?” he asked Gadley.

“Yes. His name is Sam Finch. Brandell fired him for stealin’. Sid Jarles plans to set him up in a new store and put Brandell out of business.”

‘So I’ve heard. Nervous cuss, ain’t he? He couldn’t have shot at me, for instance, ‘cause of me buyin’ an interest in the tradin’ post? He couldn’t have known of it.”

“Sam Finch is always nervous,” Silky Gadley said. “He’s been around Vista about a year, and he’s been nervous all that time. When a man watches his back

trail and shows a lot of interest in every stranger —”

“Yeah,” Houston broke in, nodding. “When he does that, he’s afraid that his past might catch up with him.”

A waddling fat woman came from the rear of the room with a big tray of food, put it upon one of the tables, looked toward Houston and grunted. Houston settled with Gadley and strolled over to the other table to eat.

He glanced toward Sam Finch, who still stood at the bar, and found Finch watching him. The man downed his drink at a gulp and left the saloon. Houston devoured the meal which had been put on the table.

Silky Gadley meandered to the front door and looked out, and as he returned he stopped beside the table where Houston was sitting.

“If you’ve really bought an interest in the tradin’ post —” Gadley said, his voice low.

“I have. I wasn’t foolin’.”

“You may be in for serious trouble, then. Sid Jarles has been running things with a high hand in this part of the country for some time. He’s got plenty of enemies, but his enemies haven’t had anybody to lead ‘em.” Gadley added, thoughtfully, “They may be on hand, however, if trouble starts.” He raised his voice. “Well, Mr. Houston, come in and try your luck at poker when you’ve got some time. Maybe we can get a game goin’...”

“Thanks,” Houston replied. “I may do that.”

Gadley went back to his table, sat down and lit a cigar. Houston finished his meal, went to the bar and paid for it. The bartender eyed him as he made change, and spoke from the corner of his mouth so nobody else could hear:

“If yuh get into a brawl with Jake Walters, remember that he always squints his eyes quick-like when he’s goin’ for his gun.”

“Thanks,” Houston replied, picking up his change.

“This town has been under Sid Jarles’ thumb so long that some folks are gettin’

tired of it. Yuh'll have friends.”

“Know who shot at me?” Houston whispered, as he got out materials to make a cigarette. “No. Got no idea. May have been a mistake.”

Chapter III

Showdown Coming

Leaving the saloon, Houston looked up and down the street. Nobody was in sight. He went across to the trading post, to find Clara Brandell behind the counter.

“I put a ladder at the corner of the buildin’, and we’ve got the paint and brush ready,” Brandell said. “But mebbe yuh’d better top and think about it.”

“I’ve already told some of the men in the saloon that I’ve bought an interest here. Now, I’ll do a little sign paintin’.”

He went outside and put the ladder into place, then took brush and can of paint and went up the ladder. An expert sign painter would have sneered at the result, but anybody could read it. When the work was done, the sign read:

BRANDELL & HOUSTON

TRADING POST

He replaced the ladder and took brush and can into the store.

“Bein’ some tired, I’ll go to the stable and get me some sleep,” he said. “See yuh in the mornin’. G’night!”

He left the trading post and strode up the street to the stable, to find Lew Dawes sitting in front of it, smoking a pipe. Dawes knocked the dottle out of his pipe as Houston appeared. “I fixed up that pile of hay outside the stall and tossed yore blanket roll on it,” Dawes reported. “Reckon I’ll turn in myself. I sleep in the little room in the back.”

Dawes barred the door, yawned, and went back through the stable. Houston talked to his pony, then unrolled his blankets and made his bed. He got off his boots and half undressed, then rolled up in the blankets and fell asleep....

His pony’s, squeal awakened him. Houston was out of his blankets and on his

feet with gun held ready almost as soon as he opened his eyes. But it was not a gun he needed with which to confront this peril.

Dense smoke was swirling through the old stable. Tongues of flame licked through the smoke in three places.

“Dawes!” he shouted. “Wake up!”

He got his boots on and ran to the rear of the building to the little room. A flash of flame showed him Dawes stretched on the bunk. Houston shook him and got him awake. Dawes was half choking because of the smoke.

“Stable’s afire!” Houston shouted at him. “Let’s get the hosses out!”

The smoke was so dense in the big long room that they scarcely could see. Dawes ran to the wide front door while Houston got his own pony out of the stall.

“Houston!” Dawes’ shout reached him. “The door’s stuck! I can’t get it open!”

Houston led his pony through the smoke to the door and tried to help.

“Stuck, yore eye!” Houston said. “It’s been fastened outside. We’re in a trap.”

“The rear door-”

They ran to that, stumbling through the smoke, gasping as it swirled around them. The rear door was fastened on the outside, too.

Dawes shouted again, and came through the smoke with a crowbar. Houston tore it from him, ran to the wide front door again, and attacked the heavy planks with the crowbar. The flames were spreading now and shooting from two of the windows. Houston thought he could hear men shouting outside.

He smashed one of the planks and began prying at the others with the crowbar. The men outside were calling to one another in alarm. Houston got off one of the planks and tore away at another. He howled at the men outside, and two came running from the blacksmith shop with tools.

“Get yore hosses!” Houston shouted to Dawes.

The door was smashed in. But had the building been frame instead of adobe, they never would have gotten out. Houston took his pony through the door and handed the halter to the nearest man, then plunged back inside to help Dawes, calling for the others to come and help. Dawes was down and unconscious because of the smoke.

They got Dawes outside, and finally got the four horses outside which had been stabled. Black smoke was rolling through the windows and door. Hay and straw were burning. The rafters and window frames were afire. There was nothing to do except let the fire burn itself out.

Houston examined his pony and found him unharmed. As the smoke thinned, he managed to get his bridle and saddle and some of Dawes' stuff outside the barn, with the men helping.

Dawn came to show a smoking, gutted stable. The rear door had not burned, and they found it had been barricaded as the front door had been.

"Plain enough!" Houston said. "Somebody wanted us to be burned to death, or killed by smoke. Wanted it for me, I mean, and didn't care if Dawes went along with me."

Dawes, still half sick and with his eyes flaming with rage, stood beside him.

"This is enough!" the stableman howled. "I'm bucklin' on a gun soon as I can find one! I ain't had any hand in the ruckus around here, but now I've been dragged into it. When my stable is set afire and ruined, and me almost killed, it's time for me to get in the fightin'! Time for men in Vista to run their own business and not be dictated to by anybody."

He mentioned no names. But everybody knew he meant Sid Jarles and the Three S bunch.

Houston ate breakfast at the trading post, and praised Clara Brandell's cooking until the girl's eyes glowed. Houston's pony was tied to the hitch-rail out in front. He had his gun-belt and gun, but had lost his blankets, coat and hat in the fire.

Dawes had calmed down some after turning his rescued horses into the town's makeshift corral. He and some of his friends were cleaning up the debris at the

stable and burning it. The stable was nothing now but fire-scorched adobe walls.

Men of the town were walking around and talking to one another in low tones. They glanced often at the mouth of the south trail, from which direction Sid Jarles and his men would come if they rode into town.

“Somebody shore tried to burn me to death,” Houston told Brandell and Clara. “I like to do my fightin’ out in the open.”

“There’ll be trouble when Sid Jarles comes to town — and he’ll come,” Clara said. “I’m hopin’ so,” Houston declared. “I want to see that hombre.”

“He’ll probably have his killer, Jake Walters, with him,” Brandell warned. “Some more of his men, too. Ned, this well, I’m a little afraid for yuh.”

“Shucks!” Houston scoffed. “You just ‘tend to the tradin’ post. And you, Clara, keep out of dangerous places. My name’s on the sign now, and I’ve got a right to defend my property and business. I’m mad, too, which helps a lot. Bein’ shot at from the dark, and then somebody tryin’ to burn me to death — that’s enough to make any man mad.”

Ned Houston finished his breakfast and walked through the storeroom and out upon the street. Making and lighting a cigarette, he went across to the saloon. Most of the men of the town were gathered there now, with the exception of those who were helping Dawes.

“If there’d been a wind, the whole place might have burned,” the saloon man was saying. “Mebbe Dawes set it afire with his pipe.”

“After barricadin’ the doors on the outside?” Houston asked, as he stepped forward. “If yuh’re afraid to speak out and say who yuh think is responsible, don’t talk at all. And if yuh’re tryin’ to defend the man who done it —”

“Me, I ain’t takin’ sides in any ruckus,” the saloon man quickly interrupted.

“There’s times when everybody should take sides,” Houston said. “That’s when some hombre ain’t playin’ fair.”

“Them’s my sentiments.” The speaker was Silky Gadley, the gambler. He wore a gun-belt beneath his long black coat, which was unusual for him. “If men want

to fight, and do it fair and square, that's their business. When they don't play fair and square, it's every decent man's business to go after 'em —"

"I want to see this Sid Jarles if he comes to town," Houston said, "I come over to ask of yuh to tell him that. I never believe in postponin' a showdown. I'll be at the tradin' post."

He left the saloon and returned to the store. With Clara to help him, he got busy cleaning and rearranging some of the stock, while Brandell sat in an easy chair at the rear end of the counter. Both Houston and Clara knew they were working merely to keep their nerves down under the tension of waiting.

It was mid-morning when riders came into town off the south trail. Sid Jarles rode ahead. Jake Walters was with him, as were five other men. They dismounted in front of the saloon and tied their horses, slapped the dust from their shoulders and tucked their riding gauntlets away as they stepped up on the plank walk.

Houston watched through the window as Clara pointed out the men to him. Sid Jarles was a tall, powerfully built man with graying hair. Jake Walters was short, heavy in body. Ed Foster was one of the other five.

The Three S men went into the saloon. Some of the townsmen emerged and hurried away, as if from a place of trouble. Houston saw Dawes coming down the street, and noticed that the stableman was wearing a gun. Houston stepped outside quickly and called to him, and Dawes crossed to the trading post.

"Don't start anything, Dawes," Houston said. "Let Jarles start it, if it's got to be started."

"If he had me burned out —"

"If he did, it was 'cause I was sleepin' in yore stable. Whoever set the fire was after me."

"Yuh can't fight Jarles and his gang alone. Jake Walters is with him."

"And five others," Houston said.

The Three S men were still in the saloon. Sam Finch came along the walk,

striding quickly, glancing across at the trading post, and then darting into the saloon to find Jarles. Houston turned to reenter the trading post, and Dawes followed him.

Thus, by disobeying Jarles' orders, Dawes put himself on Houston's side. The stableman bought something he did not need — from a shelf at the front so anybody across the street could see him plainly. Then he went outside and leaned against one of the awning posts and rolled a cigarette.

"This waiting —" Clara said to Houston.

"Yeah, waitin' is always the worst part," Houston admitted. "Keeps yuh keyed up, huh?"

"I hope — that is —" she muttered hesitantly.

"Yuh can speak right out, if the cat ain't got yore tongue."

"Well — I hope nothing bad happens to you. Because you must be all right, if Mr. Jim Penroy trusts you so. He and Dad have been friends since they were boys, and always promised to help each other."

"Jim Penroy picked me up and gave me a home when my folks died," Houston explained. "If I can be half as good a man as he is, I'll be pretty good."

"I'm sorry you had to come to us when there's trouble," she told him. "Vista is only a crossroads town, but the back country is fine, with more people coming in. We do a pretty 'good business when things are all right."

Houston grinned. "Yuh mean I've made a good investment? Jim Penroy said as how, if I liked it here, and was liked, I could make the investment permanent and pay him back when I could. But I reckon, soon as the trouble's settled, yore father will be wantin' me to move on."

"Dad is sick. He needs a man here. Sam Finch — Dad caught him stealing. The post could be built up into something big. But this trouble—"

"I understand Jarles turned agin' yore father 'cause you refused to marry him."

"He's a beast," Clara said. "He's about the last man in the world I'd ever marry."

“Who’s the first?”

“There hasn’t been any, so far,” she said.

“You go back and talk to yore father,” Houston said. “Keep him company—and stay where yuh won’t be hurt. I think it’s about time for the showdown.”

He motioned toward the window with his head. Clara looked across the street and saw Sid Jarles and his Three S men coming out of the saloon.

“The showdown’s comin’,” Houston said.

Chapter IV

Battle Smoke

The Three S men remained grouped at the edge of the walk across the street.

“Dawes!” Sid Jarles called. “I want to talk to yuh.”

“I’m listenin’,” Dawes gruffly replied.

“I’ve been told what happened. None of the Three S men had anything to do with burnin’ yore stable. I know how it looks, but I’m tellin’ yuh the truth. I may fight men when it’s necessary, but I wouldn’t burn a hoss.”

“Somebody burned me out, and fastened the doors so’s I almost burned, too. If none of yore men did it, who did? I ain’t got any enemies in town, as I know of.”

“Yuh had another man sleepin’ in yore stable last night,” Sid Jarles reminded him. “Whoever set the fire was prob’ly tryin’ to get him, not you.”

“Only a skunk’d try to get a man that way,” Dawes growled. “Show me who did it. Then I’ll believe none of yore men did.”

“Yuh’re talkin’ pretty high, seems to me,” Jarles called. “I’ve told yuh none of my men did it. If I learn who did, I’ll let yuh know. And you keep out of Brandell’s place! I don’t want folks to trade there.”

Before Dawes could answer that, Houston stepped out of the store and stood with his fists planted against his hips, looking across the street at the Three S men.

“Who are you to tell folks not to trade here?” Houston shouted. “I own an interest in this place, and I don’t intend to let you or any other man try to wreck my business! Don’t let me hear any more of that kind of talk!”

Sid Jarles turned purple with wrath.

“So you’re this man Houston, are yuh?” he shouted. “As far as you ownin’ an

interest — that's only a trick of Brandell's. Yuh don't look like yuh own anything except yore pony, and mebbe yuh haven't got a bill of sale for him."

"I can show yuh a pardnership agreement for my share in this tradin' post," Houston replied. "I'm a pardner, all right. Paid for the interest, too. Mr. Brandell can show yuh the draft. Only it's none of yore business."

"Mebbe I'll make it some of my business!" Jarles raged. "Mebbe you'll bear lookin' into, too."

"Oh, I can tell yuh about myself. I come from Texas to 'tend to a certain matter —"

Out of the saloon rushed Sam Finch. His eyes were ablaze, and he looked as if he had been drinking heavily. He thrust some of the Three S men aside and rushed to the middle of the street.

"I know why yuh come!" he yelled. "Lawman, are yuh! After me, are yuh? Yuh won't take me! I've been watchin' ever since I come here. I saw yuh ride in last evenin', and heard yuh tell Dawes yuh come from Texas. I knew yuh was after me! But yuh'll never take me back!"

"I reckon yuh're loco," Houston said.

"Yuh ain't foolin' me any! I shot at yuh last night, and missed. I set fire to the barn, too, but yuh got away. But yuh won't dodge this!"

Sam Finch jerked a gun from beneath his coat and opened fire.

The first bullet sang past Houston's head and smashed against the corner of the trading post wall. The second went wild as Sam Finch lurched forward. Houston fired the third shot, and it knocked Finch off his feet. He sprawled in the dust.

"He must have been loco," Houston said. "I never saw or heard of him till I came to Vista. Case of guilty conscience, I reckon. Some of yuh look to him."

Ed Foster and another man hurried out into the street and lifted Sam Finch out of the dust. They carried him to the walk in front of the saloon and stretched him there. Sid Jarles knelt beside him a moment, then stood up.

“He’s finished,” Jarles said. “He muttered somethin’ about helpin’ rob a bank and shootin’ a cashier over in Texas two years ago. So now we know who shot at Houston and who burned the stable, and why. Are yuh satisfied, Dawes?”

“I’m satisfied that you didn’t have my stable burned,” Dawes said.

“Then stand aside, ‘cause we’ve got another matter to settle.”

Sid Jarles stepped down off the walk. Jake Walters and the five Three S men lined up a few feet behind him. They started marching across the street, Jarles stopped as he reached the other side, and his men scattered a little and bunched with hands on holsters.

“Houston, if Brandell unloaded a pardnership on yuh —” Jarles began.

“Let me make it short for yuh,” Houston broke in. “He didn’t unload it on me. I knew all about this little fuss before I bought.”

“All right! In that case, here’s what I’ve got to say—I’m goin’ to put the Brandell Tradin’ Post out of business. I was aimin’ to set up Sam Finch, but now I’ll find some other man. I’m goin’ to keep everybody from tradin’ a dime’s worth with yuh.”

“All this ‘cause a girl couldn’t see yuh, huh?” Houston asked.

“My reasons are my own, and I don’t want any of yore lip!”

“Jarles, I don’t think much of a man who uses his might to fight another in a sneakin’ way,” Houston said. “Brandell is a sick man. A sick man and a girl — that’s who yuh’ve been fightin’. But I’m with ‘em now.”

“As if that made any difference,” Jarles sneered.

“It makes the devil of a lot of difference. Now, Jarles, you listen to me. Don’t yuh ever let me hear of yuh orderin’ folks to stay away from this tradin’ post! You ‘tend to yore ranch. Yuh ain’t runnin’ this town any more.”

“Oh, I ain’t?”

Jake Walters lurched forward.

“Stranger, yuh make too much big talk,” he said. “Yuh can’t talk like that to my boss when I’m around.”

“Takin’ the fight up, are yuh?” Houston asked. “Who’re you?”

“Jake Walters is the name.”

“Oh, yeah! I’ve been told about yuh. Think yuh’re a bold, bad lead-slinger, huh? Mr. Walters, I don’t like yuh. I think this part of the country’d be better off without yuh. Mebbe yuh’d better ride.”

“Why, yuh —”

Jake Walters crouched suddenly, and he did what Houston had been warned he would do — he squinted. Houston sprang down off the walk and into the street as his hand streaked to his holster, and his gun cleared leather again.

Jake Walters’ first shot missed as Houston jumped off the walk. Houston’s first burned across Walters’ arm, and his second struck in the chest and sent Jake Walters reeling backward, to drop and die.

But not before Walters had sent a second shot winging its way along the street. As Houston turned, that bullet struck him in the left hip and spun him halfway around. Numbness claimed his left leg, and he started to collapse.

That was what saved him. The other Three S men were opening fire, Sid Jarles with them. Houston sprawled flat and went into action. Then he realized, dimly, that he had help. From the walk in front of the saloon Silky Gadley, the gambler, was blazing away at the Three S men. The saloon man also came rushing with a gun and opened fire, and Lew Dawes rushed into the street to stand beside Houston and use his gun.

Blasts of gunfire roared and echoed along the street. The town women rushed into the nearest building and excitedly called to one another. Smoke swirled, and bullets struck and ricocheted with nasty whines.

The firing died out. People came from the buildings. Ned Houston started to lift himself on his elbows, and Dawes hurried to help him up. Then he found that Clara Brandell was beside him.

“Slug in the hip — don’t amount to much.” Houston said. “You, Clara! I told yuh to stay out of harm’s way. What yuh doin’ here?”

“I’m taking care of you,” she said. “Anyhow, the danger is gone now. The fight’s over. Help him to the walk, Dawes.”

Houston limped to the walk and sat down on its edge. Somebody handed him a flask, and he drank. Clara Brandell was calling to her father in the store that everything was all right.

“Get a doctor to cut this slug outa me, and I’ll be all well in a couple of days,” Houston said to Dawes. “I’ll help yuh rebuild yore stable, me bein’ the cause of it gettin’ burned.”

Silky Gadley came over to Houston.

“They’re all dead except Ed Foster and Sid Jarles,” he reported. “Foster won’t last long, but Jarles will live. These men he brought to town were his fighters. The rest of his outfit won’t give us any trouble.”

“How about our boys?” Houston asked.

“We got off pretty well. They wasn’t expectin’ us to take a hand. I’ve got a burn on one arm, and the saloon man’s wife will have to ‘tend bar for a few days. Bullet got her husband in the leg.”

They carried Sid Jarles to the walk and propped him up against an awning post. Houston looked at him.

“Mr. Jarles, yore bossin’ hereabouts is at an end.” Houston said. “If yuh’re a wise man, yuh’ll understand that. The whole town’s agin yuh, and the whole range will be, soon as the truth of all this is known. Yuh can stay on and behave yourself, far as I’m concerned, personally, or yuh can sell out and ride. I’ll be around here to see that yuh behave.”

“Then you’re going to stay here?” somebody asked.

Houston glanced up to find Clara Brandell standing near him, smiling, and with glowing eyes.

“Yeah, I think I’ll stay, now that this is a right peaceful place,” Houston said.
“Me, I like peace and calm. And I’ve got an investment here that’s got to be protected.”

“And even that ain’t all. I want to get better acquainted with you.”