PRAIRIE GUNS

By E.E. HALLERAN

CHAPTER XIV

"Then he had th shrass bound gaff to anahay back and hold up several heads' citizens," I heard hear' so fairly o'what he rusted on this secand visit but he seems to have left a couple bullet holes in mighty a couple of wounds and plenty of painful photos, sheriff's arms, ribs and the deputy sheriff's arms. He musta been a dandy fighter, eastn't."

"Where were you all the time?" Terry asked.

"Wall, Yo' ain't heard all of it. Then this one man crime wave assaults a former partner of his, assaults a name of Willie Harris, and steals a hoss and saddle. Brother, I gotta be plumb broke up about it and he spends the rest of the night stealin' the Iron Front hoss and bothers everybody who he thinks of his former pal. . . . That he spared all of us except a few minutes when he scares over to the Dorsett cabin where I'm waitin' and tells me that I might as well start back to town. I'll be over and you're on your way to your ranch pronto."

"Well, I was worried about Willie."

"Never worry about Willie. He can talk himself out of anything. I'll bet on him. He may find himself in more of a mess than he bargains for, but he's a real fighter. Is the town spot now or are they still out on the streets under the guns?"

"Why quiet. They're just waiting "til daylight to send a posse after you. I think they've pretty well flattened himself on the ground where bullets were less likely to come back to the Iron Trail unless he made a purpose in his movement. Judging by the attitude of Harper Grinnel there had been some measure of success for the Flying V. It did not understand curious but it also helped to bolster up the confidence which had already formed in his mind.

He watched his opportunity and slipped away from the hotel long enough to send Hank Jones to pass the word of what had happened. Then he hurried back to the Iron Trail and spent the rest of the night with the restless men in the bunkroom. He snatched a few winks of sleep in the lull which came just before daylight, then he was awakened by a bustle of preparations. Slopes and the squirrel-toothed man were tossing orders to whispered groups in the room, gradually getting drowsy and drunken men to their feet.

It was only when Barlow came into the room that Willie understood a bit of conversation he had overheard. He was a cattle broker who'd loudly enough to be heard by all. "We've a sad duty to perform, boys. Meet behind the stable in five minutes. After that we'll go after the mad dog who killed him."

Suddenly Willie understood. This Barlow-man's answer was issuing the orders—was a smart hombre. He was planning to hold a drum-head trial and old man Leonard just before sending the remains of Bonnen's son to Trail. It was a clever scheme if somebody wanted to make sure that Terry would not be taken alive. Somebody who was not a stranger to Terry but who was a friend of his—for a kill after watching the burying.

He stayed around just long enough to watch Barlow's efficient handling of the affair and see the calculated effect on the crowd that followed. Then he slipped back to Texas street and quickly swung over to the stable at the outskirts. No one was around and he nodded his way unchallenged, passing anyone, pausing long enough for breakfast in the cookee to carry out a plan which had formed in his mind.

He swung wide to the south, conscious of the murmur of voices near the Iron Trail. Then as he circled to the corner of the building he could see several men standing around in the gray light of dawn. None of them paid any attention to him, however, and he rode on across toward Mud Creek, keeping a sharp eye on the ground.

The sign was as confused as he had expected it to be but he took little fairly certain that at no point had he crossed a double trail. He was puzzled about the way in which the Iron Front and left town so early. He was confident that when he found that trail he would also have the answer to a large part of Donovan's mystery.

He crossed Mud Creek after examining the trail Terry had made as he rode upstream. Almost at once he came upon a point where the earliest tracks, a wagon had crossed the nearly dry bed of Mud Creek and had headed west along the rail-road tracks. Willie studied the ground for a moment, then he cut back across the stream to where Terry's mount's attention stood.

A stout woman crawled out from under the wagon as Willie rode up, her yawn making an accordion of her chins.

"Mornin'," she observed politely. "Ain't Sam Coleston camped along the usual convenience place?"

The woman closed her jaws after a moment's effort. "Never heard of nobody by that name. Ain't no families along here neither. Only change in the last three days was that wagon."

"Don't know 'em," Willie said. "Well, much obliged, ma'am."

"Both. Come in a couple days ago. Last night the old man went off to get a deer and his missus fair dragged him outa town when she found out on him. I heard 'em a barnessin' up in the dark, him still drunk and her a-scared the Bird Act to him."

Willie looked completely uninterested. "But no Colestock, hey?"

"Nope. Was you lookin' for him for the posse?"

"Sure. I reckon we'll have to ride along the south bank." He turned his horse without offering any further information and rode upstream past the railroad trestle. Then he crossed the stream once more and angled across to pick up the trail of the Flying V outfit. It seemed like the best bet for his purpose. This seemed to be the only vehicle which had left town recently and he felt certain that the girl must have made her departure by some such conveyance. Certainly she had not somewhere pretty close when Donovan had made his second raid and it was likewise certain that she had not been with the redhead when he rode the roan out of town.

After he had remained north of the railroad track until he was out of sight of town, then he increased his pace to an easy trot and cut across to where the wagon trail showed in the dust. It would not do to make any great speed yet. If searchers cut his sign he did not want them to think that there was any reason for them to be interested.

He passed the fork of the trail, noting that the wagon had swung to the north along the northeast bank of the Solomon. Willie still selected to play Slings safe; he did not want other riders to come along and read sign of him following a wagon.

He had closed the distance distance something under a half mile when he realized that the man was a soldier, an armed guard paced the railroad line. Then another man appeared from nowhere and Terry realized that there was a campfire burning along the track in the distance ahead.

The sight bothered him even as he realized that here was his chance for some real information on the fate of the land. Soldiers guarding the railroad meant Indian trouble, and the lieutenant might be willing to cut out into the more remote settlements.

The heat of the day was finding out into the reasonably cool dark when Willie reached the spot where

The soldiers had great confidence in their undergrowth.

the railroad trestle spanned the stream. Here some enormous cottonwoods grew in a dense, tangled thicket. Even from the saddle, Willie could see figures on the trestle, two blue clad men who were apparently forward and rearward guards. Terry's uniform and rifles he picked out in the brush. He headed toward them, hopeful of finding a camp where he could get some information on the trail. A day in the saddle with a hungry, ill-tempered cartoon water to drink had left him with something of an appetite.

As he approached he saw that the troopers were officers. Buffalo Soldiers as the Indians called them. One wore the chevrons of a corporal. One wore the chevrons of a corporal and was genially affable at Willie as the stooped rider swung in to a halt.

"Lucky you'll get out o' the line of fire, pardner. The greenie in front was gettin' all primed to try yo' with a rifle until when we seen he wasn't one o' them red rascals."

Willie grinned. "I ain't much on hookin' cattle, either."

"Couldn't tell for sure, boss. Powerful lot o' bad Injuns. You're just now. Orders is to keep 'em away from the tracks. Got any future tend to orders."

"Had any orders about grub?" Willie hinted. "My stummick must think I'm dead as it's."

The corporal laughed and pointed back to where a thin trickle of smoke showed in the undergrowth. "Help yo'self, pardner. Got a pot o' coffee and some beans. Ain't much on variety, am I?"

"Couldn't tell for sure, boss. Powerful lot of