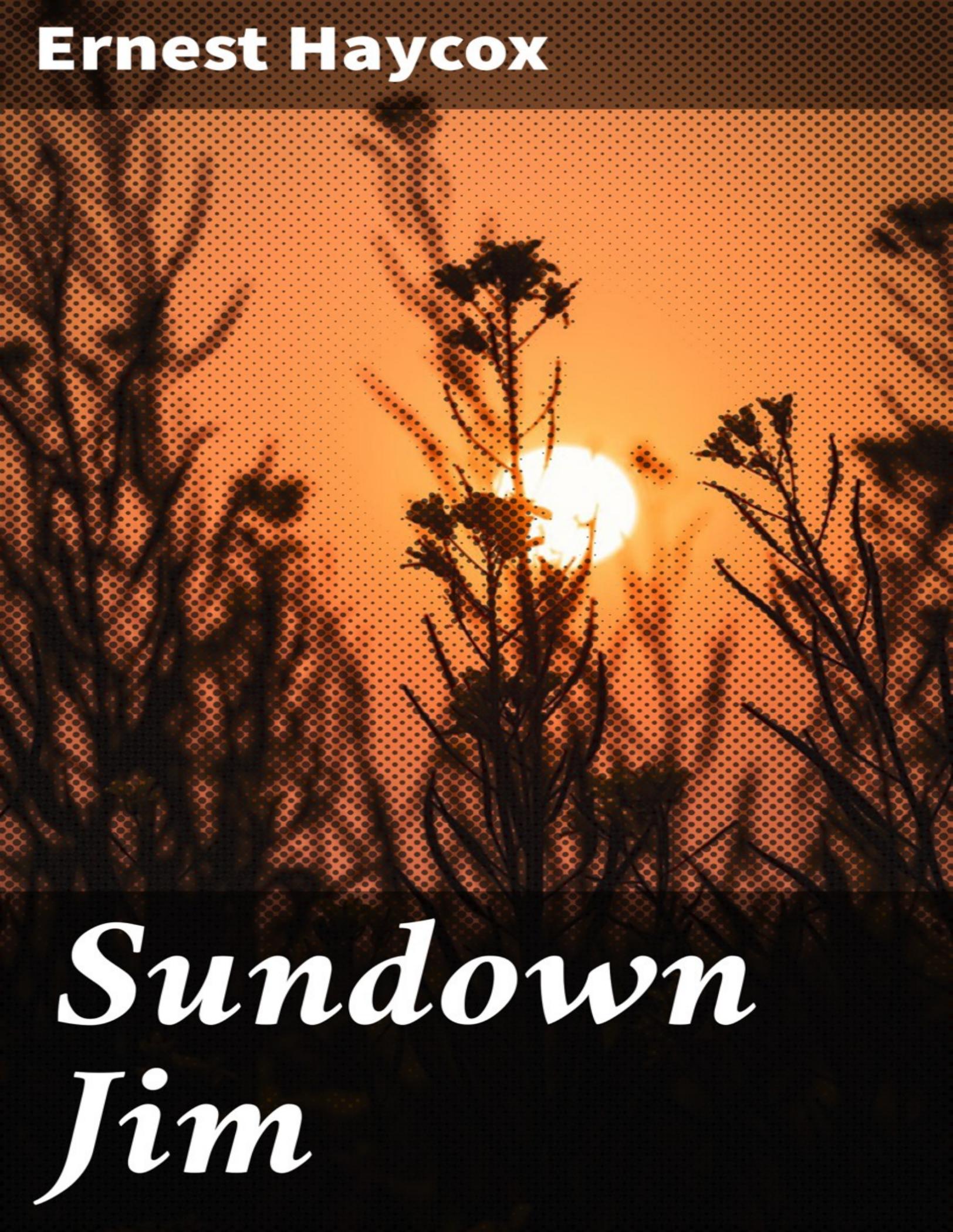


Ernest Haycox



Sundown
Jim

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I. — "I'M STILL ALIVE"

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WIND and rain and summer's sun had turned the log stage station a silver gray. Coming up to the summit of Ute Pass, Jim Majors saw how small the station was against the massive background of rock and pine which, rising tier on tier, faded into the faraway snow-fields of the peak country. This was noon, with an overhead sun warming part of the small meadow, yet even then shadows from the surrounding cliffs crept toward the station, grayly staining the earth. Majors watered his sorrel gelding and went into the station for a meal, loitering over it because he had been a-saddle since five o'clock that morning.

When he came out a man crouched on his boot-heels against the house's sunny side.

Nothing had changed in the scene except the appearance of that man, yet this was change enough. Jim Majors' life had run through hard and dangerous channels and in him was a whetted sensitivity to the call of the wind, the breath of smoke in still air, the dim prints on dusty trails—and to the obscure shifts of men. And this was like a shouted warning.

He passed the man, and climbed into the saddle and rested that way while he rolled and lighted a cigarette, his glance turned eastward. But he wasn't sure, and he wanted to know; and he had a trick that he had used before in situations like this. One moment he was wholly idle, with his back to the station; the next moment he swiftly wheeled his

horse and caught the man off guard. The fellow was a small, nondescript shape against the wall, but his eyes were wide and cool in the way they absorbed the details of Majors' appearance—from the black edges of Majors' hair to the stars stitched into the sides of his boots. Majors showed the man a smile that was tough and long-lipped and narrow, and watched the other one's lids drop and shut out interest; whereupon Majors rode away.

The Pass meadow hung narrowly between the long rise from the west and the swift fall of the canyon to eastward. Back of him—and he chose to look around to see this—was a last view of the far desert out of which he had traveled; before him the road descended into a sunless gorge and curled about a huge rock wall. When he arrived at that turn, he looked back again, to observe that the little fellow was on his horse and riding toward a steep side trail into the timber. The news of his approach to Reservation, Majors realized, would precede him.

The stage road was a ledge hewn from the vertical face of this dark, damp cliff which reared higher toward the sky as he descended. Now and then it widened to permit the passage of wagons; and quickly narrowed again. A mile from the stage station, Ute Fork River came out of the northern heights and fell with a crystal glitter into the deepening canyon bed. Mist hung here like rain, wetting his clothes; afterwards he wound with the sharp loops of the road, the cliff to one side and the white-laced river rapids on the other. Down this narrow gateway he traveled, seeing the print of wheel and shod hoof in the soft dirt beneath; and at last, around the middle of the afternoon, the road fell out of

the canyon, left the river's course and struck through a rugged, rolling country solidly covered with pines.

He had shown no particular interest through the canyon, but now his gray eyes searched the pines carefully and his ears caught all the stray sounds that ran through the drowsy, warm quiet of late Indian summer. There was this vigilance about him, even though he sat on the sorrel gelding with a loose-muscled slackness and even though his long lips held a remote smile. He was an inch over six feet and didn't show the bulkiness of his two hundred pounds. It was a distributed weight, lying in the muscles of his chest and upper arms, on the broad flats of his shoulders, in the girth of his legs. He had big bones. His fingers were long and blunt at the ends and a tuft of black hair grew behind each knuckle joint. His face was broad, his features boldly spaced and faintly irregular; the bridge of his nose showed a small break and on his right temple lay the pale track of some old cut. These were the scars that Jim Majors, at twenty-five, had to show for his life. These scars, and the quickness of his eyes, and that remote and angular smiling. Behind such surface signs was a toughness the years had beaten into him. Behind these signs also were his weaknesses.

The dust-yellow road ran straight between the close-ranged trees and an overhead sun baked up a rank, resinous smell. Cowbirds whirled in a swift dark cloud out of the trees to the left of the road. Majors' shape held its indifference in the saddle, but his glance ran over there, gray and sharp, and it was no surprise to him when a man trotted from the trees and fell into the road, a hundred yards ahead.

It was something out of a book whose pages he had well learned, by disaster and by sweat. The man looked around casually—too casually—and reined down until Majors came abreast; and rode beside him. He was red-haired and ruddy and freckled of skin, and young enough to show the glint of laughter in his eyes. His glance touched Majors, its sharpness only half-concealed.

"Tobacco?"

Jim Majors fetched out his tobacco sack and passed it over. The other rider let his reins sag on the saddle horn and rolled up a smoke, his teeth making a white flash when he licked the cigarette together. He cupped a match between his palms and bent a little, a net of crow-track wrinkles springing around his eye corners. The edges of his hair were raw-red in the sunlight. He had the huge fists of a good rope hand. In those few moments, Majors knew, the redhead had gathered all the information that was to be seen.

"Fine weather."

"Yeah."

"Stage is late today, ain't it?"

Majors said: "Didn't pass any."

The other one said, "Thanks for the tobacco," and gave him the first direct glance. "My name is Brand. Brick Brand."

Majors drawled: "I didn't ask."

Brick Brand's eyes showed a more ironic amusement. "All right," he said, and cut quickly out of the road, calling back, "Thanks for the tobacco."

Majors watched him fade through the pines toward a country which rose and seemed to break into a yonder tangle of gulch and draw. He murmured, "Number Two."

Meanwhile the road maintained its steady descent until, late in the afternoon, it led him to the brow of the foothills, wherefrom he saw a narrow valley turned amber and blue by sunlight's last hazy glow. Low ridges hemmed the valley on either side and a river—the Ute Fork—made a glittering, willow-fringed lane down its middle; ten miles away a line of bluffs rose apparently to box in valley and river alike. Below him a thousand feet he could see the housetops of Reservation.

At dusk he left the last hairpin turn of the road, crossed a branch of the Ute Fork by a covered bridge that ran the footfalls of his horse hollowly forward, and entered Reservation's main street.

He was a stranger here, yet this was like a hundred towns he had entered at dusk on many another night of his life. The street was a silver streak between low buildings whose square fronts and overhanging board awnings had long ago lost the shine of fresh paint. He passed a blacksmith shop, the smell of its forge fire hanging to the still air. Lights made a fogged shining out of dusty windows and locust trees formed an irregular line along the walks. Saddle horses stood here and there before hitch-racks and the wide mouth of a stable yawned at him, with a lantern swinging in its arch. Here he turned and dismounted, seeing two men tipped against the stable wall in their chairs. The lantern light showed the pale attention of their eyes.

He said, "Putting up," and took care of the horse and later went along the walk until he met the edge of another street running out of the shadows. On the four corners of the square thus created were a saloon, a hotel, a feed store

and an empty building. The hotel was across the dust and he could hear the clatter of dishes and the scrape of feet in its dining room. Yet he stood here a little longer, searching the town with that care he could not forget; searching for the change in men's faces, for the lift and fall of voices, for the obscure shifts that now, as all along his past, he had trained himself to see. A group of riders loitered in the doorway of the saloon, illumined by its out thrown light. A half-dozen Indians crouched against the base of the hotel wall, entirely motionless. Behind him he heard one of the men in the stable say, in a quiet tone: "Good horse—strange brand." A long-shaped fellow with a cool face strolled out of the near-by dark and gave Majors a direct glance and passed on to the restaurant. His hat was cocked far back on his head, showing the edge of yellow hair. Up in a second-story window of the flimsy hotel a woman came to a window and looked into the street, her hands holding the curtains apart. Night air, crisp with the touch of coming winter, began to flow down the dark shoulder of the Silver Lode Range.

He crossed the street and entered the hotel's narrow lobby, wherein one man sat with a kind of huge gloom, half-turned from Majors. There was a raw pine desk and a stairway tacked without grace to one of the walls, and an arch through which Majors saw the dining room. He went over to the desk and picked up a pen, and wrote in the register "J.J. Majors," and waited until the man in the chair got up and came around the desk.

This one reversed the register with the steel point of a false arm, and studied the name, his lips faintly moving. He

had a moon-round face and full, faintly flat features stained by the copper of Indian blood. His glance lifted and skimmed Majors and dropped. He said, "Take Number Four," and went back to the rocker.

The stairway swayed a little when Majors put his weight on it. On the dark upper landing he turned uncertainly in a narrow hall before finding an open door. He went in and lighted the lamp and saw nothing to distinguish this room from any other. Light flushed a yellow strip beneath the door of the opposite room and he heard a woman speak in a low, rapid voice, and heard, too, the brief answer of a man. Then both voices quit suddenly. Majors closed his door, judging that this was the woman who had been silhouetted in the window. He considered this dismal room, his lips lengthening, and walked to his window and looked down into Reservation's square—and at that moment saw a man quit the group by the saloon and cross to the stable.

His smile stretched out, thin and tough. There was never any change in this game. All the moves were according to a pattern, which was a pattern he had learned long ago. In a little while another move would be made and he thought he knew what it would be. He got out of his coat and washed up in the bowl, and flattened his unruly hair and got into his coat again. For a moment he stood like this, his head tipped down so that the shadows in his eyes blackened. His features turned heavier than they had been. Afterwards he went to the bed and tucked in the trailing edges of the blankets, arranging them in a certain fashion to suit him. When he opened his door and stepped into the hall he heard the woman in the other room again break off from her

talking. There was a long-drawn whisper, like a warning, and then somebody in there moved away from the door.

He descended the stairs, cut into the dining room, and took one of the vacant tables. A blackboard hung on the opposite wall, and somebody had written: "Menu—T-bone and Mashed Potatoes—Apple Pie. Fifty Cents." Beneath it was this chalked notice: "If You Don't Like Our Grub Don't Eat Here!" Jim Majors laid both big arms on the table. His eyelids narrowed and faint wrinkles cracked the smooth surface of his forehead. There was a door behind him, leading directly to the street. In front of him a half-dozen men sat at one long table; in the corner was a smaller table, occupied by the yellow-haired fellow who had earlier passed him on the street. Majors caught that one's glance, so cool and so distantly bright. A half-breed waitress laid Majors' meal in front of him. When he was all through he put his half-dollar on the table and went directly to the street.

He stood with his back to the hotel wall, the shadows covering him while he tapered up a cigarette. A small wind, definitely cold, rolled off the mountains and the distant peaks cut their black spires out of the high sky. Supper hour's quietness had come and had gone and there were little messages running the street now that a man might miss unless he knew the voice of trouble. The tip of Majors' cigarette glowed against the solid disk of his face and grew dim and his eyes observed this street with the need to know what was happening. The Indians had gone. The blond man came from the hotel's dining room, his spurs dragging the walk. He passed Majors, cut over the dust and put a shoulder gently against the corner of the dark building. A

hostler drove four harnessed horses from the stable and halted at the square's corner. Light poured brightly from the saloon and more men were gathered by its swinging doors, hunched up and softly speaking. A half-dozen riders whirled in from the darkness and dropped down to join those others. Somebody said, "Hello, Ben." The group gave ground and a rider, with as square and solid a body as Jim Majors had ever seen, walked into the saloon, his personality towing everybody else behind him.

Little things were happening here, like straws blown before a wind. The blond man's head swung toward the saloon and came back and tipped up and Majors saw that he watched that second-story hotel room where the woman was and where the hidden man was. The hotel man came out of his door and looked at the saloon a moment and turned; he hooked the steel point of his false arm around the door frame, hauling himself back into the lobby. Majors threw his cigarette to the dust, watching the sparks spray as it struck. He shook his heavy shoulders together, walked diagonally across the square and entered the saloon.

Smoke and sound and the flash of light from a back bar mirror filled this place. Men crowded the poker tables all down the length of the room; men stood up to the bar, their bodies fitted comfortably over its edge. Somebody at one of the poker tables called "Ben!" and the rider with the square body wheeled from his drink, his glance striking out against Jim Majors. Black brilliance was in his eyes. His lips lay naturally away from big, broad teeth, which gave him an expression of grinning against the light's glare. Jim Majors' quick attention caught all this, even while he walked on to

the bar—this, and the deep and square shape of a torso so extraordinary as to make the man's legs seem spindly by comparison.

Majors found a hole at the bar and waggled a finger for his drink. Talk made a steady, humming sound in the room. More riders shouldered in from the street and another voice said, "Hello, Ben." The barkeep came down to Jim Majors with bottle and glass, and waited there for the price of the drink, his hands automatically toweling the mahogany. Majors lifted a quarter from his pocket and held it until the barkeep's disinterested eyes rose.

Majors said: "Know a man named Ed Dale?"

He hadn't lifted his voice, yet this was like the snap of a trigger on an empty shell—a sound to reach men even through greater sound. The rider adjoining Majors made a slow half-turn and stared at him, but Majors had only a view of this from the extreme corner of his vision. He was watching the barkeep's eyelids lift and betray a streak of expression—and drop again. The barkeep took the quarter. He said, "Never did," and went down the bar. Majors poised his glass against the light, looking through the amber shine with his lips caught in that long, faint smile, remembering that there were stages in this game a man had to reach, one way or another. He felt and heard the effect of that question ripple outward, as though he had dropped a stone into water.

The talk checked down. Somebody at the end of the bar said, "Ed Dale?"

He drank his liquor at one breath, knowing the eyes of the room were turning to him; the feeling was that definite.

The barkeep came back and stopped, apparently waiting for the empty glass. But he said in his spare, even tone:—

"Lookin' for a man by that name?"

Majors said: "Tell him so, when you see him," and wheeled out of the saloon, leaving half-silence behind.

He stood on the corner to roll up a fresh cigarette, his breath running in and out with a deeper reach. Match-light showed the fresh sparkle of his eyes and the tough, thinned-down edges of his lips. There was a stage running in from the valley side of town, making a racket in Reservation's quiet. Majors crossed the dust and took his stand by the hotel door, half-buried in the shadows again.

The blond man hadn't moved from the edge of the empty building.

The stage rolled up. Two passengers got out and made a run for the restaurant. The driver crawled down with a sack of mail and limped toward the hotel door. He was thin and old, with a silvered crescent of a mustache; and his bright blue eyes touched Jim Majors as he passed by, showing no expression. The waiting stableman hurried up to unhitch the four worn horses and to back in the fresh four he had been holding here.

Something here grew tighter and tighter; something here grew thin and odd. It was a feeling brushing across Jim Majors' senses, drawing his glance into all the apertures of this town. Men came out of the saloon, not talking and moving as though they had something to do. The square-bodied Ben shouldered through the doors, pointing silently here and there, which was an order that scattered those others along the street while he paced the dust and took a

stand in the darkness beyond the horses. The hostler drove the old team away and the passengers came from the restaurant and stood by the stage door, waiting. All this was within the spread of five minutes.

The moments crawled on and a sense of something expected ran a cold breath along the street, colder than the wind rolling off the mountains. The square-bodied Ben made a changeless stain in the shadows; and other men had gone on to the corners of this square and had stopped. The blond man's hat peak showed vaguely over the backs of the stage wheelers. The driver's boots scratched across the hotel floor, and afterwards he stepped through the door and stopped a moment to freshen up a pipe. He had a limp mail-sack tucked under one arm, which caused him to bend a little as he ran the match across the pipe's surface.

Jim Majors lifted a hand to his cigarette and when he spoke it was with a summer softness, the motion of his lips hidden behind his hand.

"Tell him I got here, and I'm still alive."

The passengers had climbed in. The driver walked on and crawled up the wheels to his seat, tucking the mailbag under it. He unwrapped the reins from the brake handle and for a moment he was a gaunt, stooped shape against the night sky while he adjusted those reins between his old fingers. He said: "Gyp! Belle..." and kicked off the brake.

The tall wheels were moving, but there was the smashing fall of someone on the hotel's inner stairway and at once a man rushed out through the dining room door, throwing himself at the stage with his body bent over as though in agony.

Coolness whipped through Majors and he flattened his shape against the hotel wall; for he heard the square-bodied Ben calling up in a voice that was solid and without pity:—

"Not tonight, Pete. Not tonight."

The fugitive had one hand on the opening stage door. He raced with the stage, trying to lift himself inside, and he was abreast Jim Majors—with the lunging of his wind loud in Majors' ears—when a gun began to beat up echoes; the gun of the square-bodied Ben. There were two shots. Majors heard them strike into the fugitive. He saw the man stumble, still gripping the stage door, still trying to pull abreast. But his legs all at once quit lifting and for a brief moment the desperateness of his will caused the stage to drag him on a yard or more before he let go and fell into the dust.

The stage gathered speed, rocking toward the covered bridge and the hairpin turns of the foothills. A woman cried out and rushed from the hotel, passing Majors. Dust rose up and made all this vague to him for the moment. The smell of powder drifted into his nostrils. He saw her drop and try to lift the dead man's head into her lap. She was repeating his name in a wild, crying voice, her white shirtwaist rocking across this dismal semi-dark. He heard her say: "Ben Maffitt—someday—someday...!" That was all. She was crying again in a way that turned Jim Majors cold.

Ben Maffitt walked slowly across the street toward the saloon. The blond one, Majors observed, hadn't stirred from his long-held spot by the corner of the empty building. And at that moment a new bunch of riders were galloping into town from the hillside.

II. — KATHERINE BARR

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NOBODY in this town made any gesture toward the dead man or toward the girl who crouched in the smoky dust and cried out her heart; and this was a brutal indifference Jim Majors didn't understand until his glance crossed the street again and discovered Ben Maffitt bulked in the saloon's doorway. Maffitt waited there with his silence, so sure, so arrogant.

This was the story of the town completely told. A thousand nights could add nothing to what Jim Majors knew at that exact moment. If there was any pity in Reservation it cringed away from Ben Maffitt's presence; if there was any decency on this street, it remained shamefully silent. The newly-arrived riders rounded in at the saloon, but he saw them only as a massed blur on the corner of the scene. For it was Maffitt he watched, studying the man's motionless shoulders and arms with the premonition of trouble to come. Anger burned rankly in him, and the cool game he intended to play here became impossible. The crying of that forlorn girl destroyed the set of his judgment, and, even though he knew he opened up every risk he should now be avoiding, he couldn't stop the swing of that temper. It was a weakness for which he had more than once been punished, as the scars on his face showed; nevertheless he walked into the dust, as far as the kneeling girl, and spoke to her.

"I'll take you back to the room."

He stood patiently by, the details of this roundabout scene vivid on his senses. The new riders made a still group

on the street, not dismounting. He had an incomplete view of the tall blond man still posted by the edge of the empty building. Maffitt's crowd showed their scattered and indistinct shapes in the surrounding dark and Maffitt remained as solid as a stone image in the glow of the saloon's doorway. Maffitt watched him and the blond man watched him—and every eye in the town was turned his way. It was an impact he could feel.

Nobody spoke. The girl's crying was a fading, hopeless note in a silence that got heavier; when he spoke again his own voice, gentle as it was, ran solidly through the dark for the whole town to hear.

"Come up."

But he knew she couldn't rise, and so he reached down and lifted her and turned her against his chest. She murmured, "Don't let him stay there," and nothing held her upright except the pressure of his arm. Meanwhile in his ears was the sound of somebody crossing from the group of riders just arrived in town. He changed the position of his arm around the girl and turned his head.

It was another girl, dressed in a man's riding clothes, her shape turned slim and tall by the half-shadows lying in the center of this square. She walked with a swinging step and all he could distinctly see at the moment was a surface of black hair and features sharpened by the sight before her. She stopped, her glance touching the dead man and rising afterwards to the girl half-collapsed in Jim Majors' arms.

She said: "Tony, why are you here?" Her voice was strong, evenly rounding off the words. It carried an authority that scraped against Majors; it churned up his temper.

He said: "This is a hell of a time to ask questions."

Her chin lifted, moving her cheeks into clearer light. She had been looking at Tony, never seeing him. Now she saw him, and anger visibly colored her judgment and her lips made a long part across white teeth.

One of the mounted figures by the saloon called to Majors in a grating voice: "Keep your voice down, pilgrim," and spurred on. Majors saw the shape of the man weave in the saddle as he came, old and stiffly tall, with a narrow face further brought to point by a white goatee. He had a rawhide quirt half-lifted in his hand, and when he halted he shook it at Majors. "Keep your voice down."

The slim girl said: "Dad, never mind."

All the town watched through the cold shadows. Majors said to the girl Tony, "I'll take you to the room." But the heaviness of her body remained constant and he thought he had to carry her. Time ran slow and thin, the threat of the old man above him and the tall girl's eyes emptying anger on him, and all the yonder men carefully listening. His mouth was a long streak across the weather-bronze of his skin, narrowed to that edged, tough half-smile.

Tony pulled away from him and murmured, "It's all right." He turned her and walked back to the hotel with her.

The hotel man stepped aside from the doorway, the steel hook of his arm flashing in the light. Majors followed the girl up the loose stairs, going into her room. Dust yellowed her white shirtwaist and tears caked dust against her face, and her eyes were half-open, showing him a glance dim and wild. She sat loose-shouldered on the edge of her bed. He removed his hat and stood uncertainly at the door, making

his guesses about her. She wasn't very old and she had a shapeliness and a prettiness that a good many men had probably observed.

"Don't let him stay out there."

He said: "I'll take care of that. Your husband?"

Her head rolled on the pillow. "No." But the question had seemed to break through her despair. "I guess you must be new here."

"Sure. Why?"

"Nobody else would ask me that question. Don't let him stay there. He was—" She rose from the bed and turned her back to him in the far corner of the room, wiping her cheeks. She said dully: "Guess I must look pretty bad. Well, that's the way things happen to me. I liked him. He was a boy and he got mixed up the wrong way. That's all. I liked him. He was trying to get out of the country." She came about, fear slowly thawing from her face. "I hope I live long enough to see Ben Maffitt die like that!"

Someone came up the stairs with a light, quick step. Majors said: "This Ben Maffitt—" A voice called through the doorway: "Maybe you're too curious."

Spinning on his heels, Majors saw the dark-haired girl there, her eyes considering him without friendliness. He had a clear picture of her then. She wasn't as tall as the street's darkness had made her seem. The riding trousers had helped to create that illusion, shaping her in a slim, boy-figured fashion. She wore a man's shirt open at the neck; it fell carelessly away from her throat and showed the smooth, ivory shading of her skin. He had gathered the impression that her features were sharp, but this too was an illusion

dispelled by the room's light. Her lips were long and her eyes wide-spaced and colored by a gray that had no bottom; and the strongest impression she left with him was of a temper that could swing to the extremes of laughter, and softness, and anger. There was, he thought, this capacity for emotion in her.

She broke his thoughts with her curt question. "Are you through looking at me?"

He could be soft or he could be blunt. He matched her temper now. "Don't be so proud. I see nothing to justify it."

Her eyes showed him a fresh outrage. But Tony, in the corner, was crying again in an exhausted tone. It turned the dark-headed girl across the room. Majors watched the way she went over to Tony and put her arms around the girl.

She said, so gently: "Tony—Tony. I'm sorry you've been hurt. I'm so sorry."

The roughness went out of Jim Majors. This girl held Tony against her breasts and her lips were broad and maternal and she was saying: "Cry, if it will help, Tony."

Majors swung from the room, but he turned again to have a final look, not quite knowing why. There was a difference between these two that any man could see and it added something to the dark-haired girl's character that she should be here comforting this Tony whose life, he guessed, was pretty much of common record in the town. The dark girl's eyes lifted and met his smileless glance, and held it, with a faint expression of curiosity. He made a burly, heavy-boned shape in the doorway, the scars on his face definitely toughening its expression. He said, "Maybe I was wrong," and went to his own room. He had left the door open and

the light on—and he saw the edge of the bed quilts hanging straight down, though he had tucked them in before leaving. A small smile struck across his lips again, harder than before; and he blew out the light and shut the door, descending to the lobby.

The hotel-keeper swung himself in a rocker, the steel-hooked arm hanging idly down. He rolled his head toward Majors, using no extra effort. Breathing made an unusual sound in his heavy chest. There was a layer of fat under his chin and his round, copper-stained face showed a gray, surly composure; as though he believed in nothing.

Majors remained by the street door, tapering up a cigarette while he considered the crowd rolling around the yonder saloon. Apparently Maffitt had entered the saloon, but the old man with the white goatee stood on the walk and other riders made a half-circle around him. The night was colder and blacker than it had been. They had taken the dead man from the square. Shadows shifted along the base of the empty building opposite; a cigarette glowed and died there, to tell him that all his hope of playing a quiet game was gone. They were watching him, they were weighing him, and they would never get him out of their minds. For this was a country that hated strangers and a country filled with men who looked over their shoulders at a past they had run from and couldn't forget.

The hotel-keeper's voice rustled like dry sheets of paper rubbed together. "How was the Sundown country when you left it?"

The question held all the shock of a bullet fired at his ear. Majors had his back to the hotel-keeper and he remained

that way, but his lids crept nearer together and his lips ran thin; and the last thought of ease went out of him. He said, over his shoulder, "I don't know you."

"I wondered about that. I lived in the Yellow Hills five years ago—and I heard of a J.J. Majors." Afterwards a heavier tone weighted down the hotel man's talk. "Sundown Jim. Sure."

"Who's the man with the white chin-whiskers?"

"Pedee Barr. It's his daughter Katherine upstairs. You'd better be right. If you ain't right..."

"You'll never find anything under my bed, friend."

"It wasn't me that looked," said the hotel man. "But I guess you knew the kind of country you was ridin' into. Better never be anything under your bed—and nothin' pinned on your vest."

"We'll wait and see who's curious enough to have a look at my vest."

"It won't be a long wait."

Jim Majors saw the high, stiff frame of Pedee Barr wheel through the saloon door. He had wanted to play it quiet for a while, but that would never be possible now; and at once a weight in his mind tipped the other way, throwing him back to habits and impulses he liked better. It was time to make a break, to roll up a little lightning and find out where it struck. He had a trick that always betrayed this kind of decision; he pulled his shoulders forward and threw down his cigarette, expelling the smoke through his nostrils in a long sweep of breath. Light struck the solid irregularity of his features and the scar on his temple showed white, and he was smiling again, the powder color of his eyes brighter

than before. When he crossed the square he noted that the blond man had disappeared. He shouldered through the doors, a strong draft of smoke and sound running against him. Certain things he wanted to see—and instantly saw. Pedee Barr stood in a corner of the saloon, his goateed face narrow and small-boned and strictly unsmiling. The men around him, Majors judged, were his own men; and when Pedee Barr's glance lifted and came over to him, full of a proud man's intolerance, Majors noted how all those others swung about to copy the gesture. Ben Maffitt sat before a poker table at the room's other end, the chair turned to permit his wide chest more freedom. His hat clung to the extreme back of his head and a clump of coal-colored hair fell down across his brow. He had a cigar clenched between his big teeth and his interest was only half-captured by the game.

Majors caught his slanting, sly glance; it was a manner of indifference not quite hiding the catlike alertness of his interest. Majors went on to the bar, using his shoulders to make himself a place. The men on each side gave way to this pressure, their glances bracketing him cheerlessly. He recognized one of them as the rider who had been up at the summit stage station.

Majors laid his arms on the bar, waiting his turn. He felt a growing pressure in the place; it was like a steady force on his shoulder blades. He made a circle on the bar with one forefinger, watching the pale imprint show on the scarred hardwood surface, and he was carefully laying away in his head the thing he had learned, which was that Ben Maffitt and this Pedee Barr were friendly enough to share the

shelter of this saloon. It was one piece of a puzzle to be shaped against other pieces when the time came.

He got his bottle and glass and poured a drink.

Behind him a man said: "Heard you asked about Ed Dale."

Jim Majors put his fingers around the bottle when the barkeep came back to get it. He said: "Leave it here," and turned and saw Brick Brand. The edges of Brand's hair burned a pure red in the light. He had a self-assurance gleaming like humor in pale blue eyes.

"You know Ed Dale?" said Majors.

The redhead considered Majors blandly. "Where was he from?"

Majors said, "Maybe same place I'm from."

"Why you think he's in this country?"

"He came in one side and he didn't come out the other. So he's here."

"It's a big country. Might be any one of a dozen places."

Majors looked at the redhead's poker expression. He said: "If you don't know him what the hell you bothering me for?"

The redhead's eyes grew rounder. But there were other things here to trap Majors' attention. The talk had fallen away so that all the room could hear this. Men watched him. Pedee Barr's head was craned forward and he had cupped a hand behind his left ear to catch the cool run of those words. Ben Maffitt swung his body in the chair and his glance slanted over the room, very keen.

The redhead's grin came back, like a warning; he was, Majors judged carefully, a tougher man than he appeared. The silence tightened and the redhead drawled: "Your time

ain't so valuable, mister. Maybe you're a friend of Ed Dale's. Maybe you just want to find him and pay back the five dollars you owe, or maybe you got a letter for him from his grandmother. Then again, maybe you don't know Ed Dale at all, except what you learned from a reward notice."

Majors said: "He had a fresh bullet-mark on his right hip and a picture of a girl in his coat pocket."

His attention was half on the redhead and half on Ben Maffitt. His answer was like added weight to a silence already heavily strained. Maffitt's head rose another inch and his stare was direct now, all indifference gone. Majors had the full effect of the man's black eyes. And then there was a little byplay that gave the scene away. The redhead looked back at Maffitt and when he returned his attention to Majors he wasn't smiling.

He murmured, "That's different," and put one hand forward and in a quick motion threw back the lapels of Majors' coat.

Majors made no gesture to stop that. But he knew he had reached the end of an alley. All the men in the saloon waited and watched, and the tension in here was something that couldn't last. What he did now would make him or it would break him, for that was the kind of crowd he faced and this was the kind of country he was in. He was a big, idle shape backed against the bar, his heavy elbows hooked over its edge, and his solid shoulders negligently drooped. His lips ran a rolling half-smile across the heavy irregularity of his cheeks. It wasn't that he meant to smile, but he was remembering how changeless were the rules of this game.

The incidents of his life kept repeating themselves, move for move, fight for fight, scar for scar.

He said: "Pull the coat together, like you found it, Brick."

The redhead was smart enough to know trouble when he saw it, and he saw it now. His answer was to take one backward step and stop there, stiffly placed.

"No," he drawled, "I guess not."

Majors pushed himself away from the bar, gently speaking. "All right, Red. This is a treat on me."

The redhead raised both arms, but he never got them fully lifted. Majors was away from the bar before he had finished speaking. He caught the redhead's jaw with a straight jab that made a pulpy echo in the room, like the flat of a cleaver against meat. Brand's face tilted toward the ceiling and he hit out with his fists and struck nothing. Majors shot a blow into the man's stomach, doubling him up. The redhead fell against Majors and tried to hang on. There was another man coming up from the corner of the room, yelling: "Boot him, Red, boot him!" Majors threw Brand backward and measured him and hit him twice on the face and sent him to the floor. Brand lay there, supporting himself on his arms, his breath caught in his throat.

The second man rushed on, whirling his arms in windmill style. He struck Majors and got his arms around the latter's neck and jammed his knee into Majors' crotch. It was barroom fighting, wicked and punishing. He jabbed his thumb into Majors' ears and stamped on his feet and tried to swing his weight to catch Majors in a strangle grip.

Majors wheeled and carried this man in a complete circle, meanwhile watching Brand try to come up from the floor. All

the faces in this room were pulled into lines of strict, savage attention; these men were ringed around him, a wolf glitter in their eyes.

Brand was half-upright. Majors waited for the other man's head to duck in again, and reached up and slugged him in the temple. He felt the fellow's grip loosen, which was his opportunity. He jumped aside and caught the man from behind, shoulders and crotch, and lifted him off the floor; he swung him face downward, forward and backward for momentum, and threw him through the saloon doorway.

Everybody heard that crash on the yonder walk—that and the wild howl that followed. Red was on his feet, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. There was a gap between his teeth, and his eyes didn't quite see Majors, who stood there and waited. The redhead said, between breathing: "That's all!" Majors stepped back into the center of the room. He wasn't looking at Brand. He had turned away from the man and it was this indifference the men in the saloon saw; this indifference and the hardness of that smile which remained so constant on his lips. The scar on his temple showed white in the lamplight and his hair fell across his forehead; and the depth of his breathing lifted and lowered his chest. He had his eyes on Ben Maffitt then, and in them was bright eagerness.

He waited like that, measuring Maffitt—as though inviting him to speak. Then he said: "Brick, come around here and pull my coat together."

The silence got close and dangerous. Ben Maffitt, motionless in his chair, showed the room no expression, though Majors knew the room waited for Maffitt to speak.