

MAX
BRAND

MORE TALES OF
THE WILD WEST:

CRAZY RHYTHM

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SAFETY McTEE
TWO SIXES

**MAX
BRAND**

CRAZY RHYTHM

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Crazy Rhythm

I

Back from Prison

When Jimmy Geary came in sight of Yellow Creek again, he sat down on a pine log beside the road and stared at his hometown, from the old mill at one end to the house of the Bentons on the hill, with its thin wooden spires pointing up above the trees. Best of all, he could mark the roof of Graham's Tavern beyond the rest of the houses. It was still painted red, but the wave of climbing vines had thrown a spray of green across the shingles since he had last sat in the cool of the bar room and smelled the pungencies of whiskey and the pleasant sour of beer.

Behind him, following taller than the mountains, around him thicker than the trees, before him more obscuring than the morning mist, he felt his eight years of prison. Eight years out of twenty-six is a long time. Prison monotony had made everything about those years dim except their length; the distinct moments of his life, so clear that he felt he could mark them in every day of his past, continued to that moment when he had seen the card come out of Tony Spargo's sleeve. Of course, he knew that there were card cheats, but it had seemed impossible that big, beautiful Tony Spargo, so rich in eye and color and song, could actually be doing dirt for the sake of a fifteen-dollar pot. Gus Warren, at the same table, too magnificent of brow and manner, or the Mexican with the wide face of a Chinese idol, might have been suspected, but never Tony.

He had shouted in a voice that tore his throat and cast a redness over his eyes, then he had grabbed the Colt that Tony had flashed and pulled his own gun. The weight of two bullets jarred Tony Spargo in his chair like two blows of a fist. But they were all in cahoots, the three of them. Oñate came in with a knife; Gus Warren's gun had stuck and came out only with a sound of tearing cloth. He turned his shoulder to the knife thrust and got Warren right in the middle of the face. Afterward, he had to shift the gun to his left hand to settle with Oñate. But Oñate and Spargo didn't count very much; he got fifteen years for Gus Warren, and murder in the third degree. But the warden was a fine fellow, and for good behavior there is time off.

Thinking of the past cleared the mist from his mind so that he began to see what was around him and found that his hand was stroking the smooth of the log on which he sat. There were a lot of those barkless logs waiting to be dragged away, and they were still yellow-white with the blaze of axe strokes glittering like metal here and there. He looked about at the standing trees—the

lower trunks mossed over on the north side and spiked with the stubs of broken branches, then came ragged, down-hanging boughs, and finally the fresh green of the top. On the opposite slope all he could see was the ranged and compacted mass of the treetops.

Men were like that, for the daily crowds of them seemed strong and happy, and it was only when one got underneath the first impression that the mold of time and the scars and the breakings of the years could be seen.

Something disturbed Jimmy Geary. He found that it was the noise of wind in the trees and water in the creek, both exactly the same and both trying to hurry him away, as it seemed, into some unknown expectancy of action. He looked along the scattering line of logs that so many hand strokes of labor had laid there, and down the hills he stared again into the valley. There was plenty of open country with little rusty spots of color scattered over the green. Those were the cattle.

“You’ve got a good, clean pair of eyes in your head,” the warden had told him, “but the only way for a man to keep clean is to work. In the old days you worked with a gun. You’d better find different tools now.” Well, he knew the feel of the tools he wanted to manage—the rough of a forty-foot rope and the braided handle of a quirt and the oily sleekness of bridle reins. He knew cows pretty well, and now he would work with them. Finally, he would have a herd of his own, and on the fat of this land the cattle would multiply.

“I’m going to punch cows,” he had told the warden, who had answered: “That’s good. Anything’s good, but don’t try it at home. You’d better not go back there. Hometowns are bad for bad boys, Jimmy. You know what I mean by that. It’s bad to get a wheel into an old rut.”

The warden was a wise man, and he meant that it was best for a man with a past to try a new deal at a new table. Now the eyes of Jimmy Geary were taking hold on the picture of Yellow Creek so confidently that he felt a sort of kind recognition shining back to him from the whole valley.

He got up and walked on with the loose and easy action of a very strong man whose weight has not yet become a burden. He could feel his strength pull up the calf of his leg and bulge along his thighs, and he kept partially gripping his hands to set his arm muscles in action. His eyes shone with the glory of his fitness. Fifteen years of hard labor had been his sentence, but eight years of daily companionship with a sledgehammer had been enough. He had been pretty soft in the old days, and now he felt that softness of the body was like poison in the belly or fool ideas in the head—a thing to be purged away. As he swung down into Yellow Creek, he realized that from his sixteenth to his eighteenth year he had never dared to enter any town without at least the

weight of one gun under his coat. Now his hands would have to do.

He went happily down the main street's windings. The roar of the creek was off to the left, the music for which he had wakened and harkened vainly through the dark of so many nights. Slater's barn was there near the road, the brown-red of the paint peeling off it in larger patches than ever. The building was a grim outline to him because he had had that half-hour fight with Jeff Wiley behind the barn till Mexican Charlie was frightened by the great splattering of blood and ran yelling to bring grown-ups to end the battle. From that great, crimson moment, Jeff and he had felt that they were set off from the rest of the boys in Yellow Creek with a greater destiny in promise for them. It was a sign and perhaps a prophecy, when Jeff was thrown by a bucking horse and broke his neck on a Monday; for on Friday there had occurred the triple killing in Graham's Tavern that sent Jimmy up the river for eight years.

Beyond the barn, the houses were closer together. He knew them all by their own faces and the faces, the voices, the characters of the people who passed through the front doors. Another twist of the way brought him in view of the central section of Yellow Creek, the irregular "square," the flagpole in the middle of it, the boardwalk that ran around the square in front of the buildings. Everything in Yellow Creek was here, from the newspaper office to the HAY, GRAIN, AND COAL sign of Thomas Masters, the old crook. Not very many people were moving about. There never were many people in Yellow Creek, except for holidays, and it was hardly strange that no one noticed young Jimmy Geary when he returned at last, not until after the sheriff had greeted him.

It was the same sheriff, on the same roan horse. The sheriff had been quite an old man of forty, those eight years ago, but by a strange chance he seemed younger than before to Jimmy Geary. He pulled up his mustang so hard that the water jounced and squeaked in the belly of the broncho. He waved a silent greeting; Jimmy's salute was just as still.

"Staying or passing through?" asked the sheriff, and all the calm virtue of Jimmy vanished at a stroke.

"Whichever I damn' please!" he replied. The sheriff said nothing. He simply took in Jimmy with a long look, then jogged on down the street.

Right after that a shrill sound approached Jimmy Geary. It was almost like the barking of a dog, but it came from the lips of a thirteen-year-old boy who was capering and yelling: "Hey, everybody! Hey, turn out and look sharp! Jimmy Geary's back! Jimmy Geary's back!"

Other boys heard the cry. They came in swirls of dust. As they gathered in numbers they got closer to Jimmy. They began to laugh because crowds of

boys have to do something, and that laughter was acid under the skin of Jimmy. The youngest of children can make the oldest of sages wince, if it keeps on laughing long enough.

Someone burst through the crowd. He was in such a hurry to get to Jimmy that he kept on sidling and prancing after he reached him. This fellow represented the *Morning Bugle*, he said. But he could not have represented it long, because he had been in the West only long enough for its sun to redden the end of his nose. He looked incomplete and wrinkled and uncomfortable like a man on a picnic. He wanted, he said, a few good bits from Jimmy Geary.

“I’m not talking,” said Jimmy. He had learned at the penitentiary to say that.

“You’re not talking?” cried the reporter. “But you’ve *got* to talk! Outside of the waterfalls and the lumber mill, you’re the only thing in Yellow Creek that’s worth writing up. If you don’t talk for yourself, other people are going to talk for you.”

“How do you know me?” asked Jimmy.

“Hey, look at the spread we gave you five days ago,” said the reporter. He was so proud of that spread that he carried it around with him, and now unfolded the front sheet of the *Bugle*. It was not a very big paper, but the headline could be read easily right across the square.

JIMMY GEARY FREED

Underneath it ran the long article. Jimmy’s eye picked out bits of it and put the bits away in his memory. He was the hero of the famous triple killing at Graham’s Tavern. He was dangerous; he was a youthful and a smiling killer. But above all, the question was, what would his career be when he got free from the prison to his hometown? Or did he intend to return to it?

“What’re you gonna do?” asked the reporter. “What’s the career ahead of you?”

“Cattle,” said Jimmy. Then he turned his eyes from the sunburned nose of the other and went off down the street. He had a vast desire to take the yipping boys, two at a time, and knock their heads together. He had been almost overcome by an intense need to punch out the red nose of the reporter.

People were hard to take, and that was perfectly certain. In a prison one’s fellow humans are not so free to be annoying.

When he came to the HAY, GRAIN, AND COAL sign of Thomas Masters, he got away from the growing crowd by stepping into the office. Old Masters sat in his usual corner with the same white whiskers bulging out of the same red

face. It looked like a picture surrounded with the smoke of an explosion. He put out a fat hand, tentatively, for Jimmy Geary to grasp.

“Well, James,” said Masters, “what can I do for you today?”

“Tell me where to find a job,” said Jimmy.

“There are only a few good jobs, and there are a lot of good men,” said Masters.

“Sure there are,” admitted Jimmy. “I don’t care what I get so long as there are horses and cows in it.”

“And guns?” asked Masters.

“I’m traveling light,” smiled Jimmy.

“You try the Yellow Creek air on yourself for a week, and then come in to see me,” answered Masters, and raised his pen over a stack of bills.

Jimmy went out without a good-bye because a good-bye was not wanted. When he reached the sidewalk, Reuben Samuels got hold of him out of the increasing mob of boys and took him into the Best Chance saloon. He said: “I’m going to do something for you, Jimmy”—and sat him down at a small table in the back room. Samuels ordered two whiskies. Jimmy changed his to beer and then looked across the foam past the red length of Samuels’s nose into the brightness of his little eyes.

“I’ve got a good break to offer you, and you’re going to have it,” said Samuels. “I’ve got a place up the line that used to make big business for me. Faro, roulette, or anything the boys want. But I had some trouble up there. Some of the roughs thought the faro layout was queer one night, and they started smashing things up. What I need is a headliner to draw the crowd, and a bouncer well enough known to throw a chill into the boys that go around packing hardware. Well, you’re the man for both places, so I could pay you double. I mean something big, Jimmy. I mean fifty or sixty a week.”

Jimmy Geary shook his head. “Not interested,” he said.

“Or seventy,” said Samuels.

“I’m not carrying any hardware myself,” said Jimmy.

“Make it eighty, then, for your health.”

“Not for me.”

“Ninety dollars a week for an easy job, a sitting job, most of the time . . . and, when the work comes, it’s the sort of thing that’s play for you. Don’t say no. I’m not pinching pennies. I’ll call it a hundred flat!”

Jimmy looked hard into the little eyes. “Aw, to hell with you!” he said, and

arose.

“Wait a minute,” said Samuels hastily. “How did I know what you are taking in your coffee? Don’t run away in a huff. I’m going to do you good, I said, and I meant it. Sit here for five minutes. My cousin Abe is right here in town. One of the smartest men you ever met, Jimmy. He wants to see you.”

Abe was like Reuben in the face, but his clothes were fitted to the sleek of his body more carefully. They seemed to be painted on him. His collar was so tight that his neck overflowed it and rubbed a dark spot of sweat or grease onto the knot of his tie. At the same time that his fat fingers took possession of Jimmy’s hand, his eyes took brotherly possession of Jimmy’s heart and soul.

“It’s something big,” he said to Jimmy. “I got the idea, when I heard that you were turned loose. I burned up the wires to New York. You see, I know Lew Gilbeck of Gilbeck and Slinger. They’ve put over some of the hottest shots that ever burned a hole in Broadway. They’re reaching around for a big musical comedy spectacle to put out this fall, and I shoot them this idea over the wires. Jimmy Geary, hero of a three-man killing eight years ago, just out of prison. Big, handsome, loaded with it. Did his shooting eight years ago, when the phonograph record was playing ‘Crazy Rhythm.’ Give him a number where he does the thing over again. ‘Crazy Rhythm’ for a title. Booze. A girl or two. A real Western gunfight in the real Western way done by one who’s done it before. I shoot this idea to Lew Gilbeck and he wires back . . . ‘Yes, yes, yes . . . get him.’ I wire back . . . ‘How much? This baby won’t be cheap.’ He hands me back . . . ‘Offer one fifty a week.’ And there you are, Jimmy, with one foot already on Broadway and the other ready to step. . . .”

Jimmy Geary went with lengthening strides out of the cool shadows of the Best Chance saloon. In the dazzling brightness of the outer sun, he fairly ran into the stalwart form of Lowell Gerry, the rancher.

“Mister Gerry,” he said, blocking the way, “you’ve always got a place for a man out on your ranch. Let me go out there and try to earn my keep until I’m worth real pay, will you?”

The sun-lined and squinting face of Lowell Gerry did not alter a great deal; one expression had been cut into that brown steel long before and it could not change. “Step aside a minute, will you, Jimmy?” he asked quietly.

Jimmy stepped aside, and Gerry walked straight past him down the street with an unhurrying stride.

Time was needed before the fullness of that affront could be digested. Jimmy was still swallowing bitterness, when he got across Yellow Creek to Graham’s Tavern. Even the trees around the tavern threw shadows ten degrees cooler than those that fell in any other part of Yellow Creek. Ivy grew around

the watering troughs; ampelopsis bushed up around the wooden columns of the verandah, swept over the roof of it, almost obscured the windows of the second story, and so poured up in thinner streaks across the red shingles above. It was all just as pleasant as before, but there was more of it. Therefore, it was rather a shock when he found in the saloon an unfamiliar face behind the bar, instead of the fat, pale, amiable hulk of Charlie Graham. This fellow was the red-copper that a man picks up on the open range. He looked as if he had exchanged chaps for a bar-apron hardly the day before. In the old days the hearty voice of Charlie was always booming, making the echoes laugh, but the new man had reduced his conversation with three or four patrons to a mere rumble.

“Where’s Charlie?” asked Jimmy.

“He’s in hell with Tony Spargo,” said the lean bartender, and his eyes fixed as straight as a leveled gun on Geary’s face.

“They don’t have the same hell for men and rats,” answered Geary. “Give me a beer, will you?”

The bartender paused as though about to take offense. Slowly he drew the beer and carved off the rising foam as he placed the glass on the perforated brass drain. Slowly he picked up Geary’s money and made the change.

“Have one yourself,” said Jimmy.

“Yeah?” queried the other, in doubt. But he saved the change and took a small beer.

“The Grahams are out of this, are they?” asked Jimmy.

“The girl’s got it. Kate runs it,” answered the bartender. He gave a somber nod of recognition and swallowed half of his drink. Jimmy rushed his down with a certain distaste. He wished it had been whiskey, because coming into this room had brought about him all the past and all its appetites.

“Where’s Kate now?” he asked, thinking back to her. At eighteen, a lad cherishes his dignity. He had only a dim memory of red hair and spindling body, for Kate had been only about sixteen and, therefore, hardly worthy of a glance.

She was out back, said the bartender, so Jimmy went through to the rear. He stopped in the small card room. It was just the same. The little phonograph stood on the corner table where it had played “Crazy Rhythm” eight years before. The same pair of colored calendars decorated the walls. On a chair rose the pile of newspapers from which men helped themselves when they were tired of cards or growing a little world-conscious. Then he crossed to the table at which he had sat. It was even covered with the same green felt. He could

remember the V-shaped cut on one edge of the cloth. Behind the chair where Tony Spargo had sat, there was a half-inch hole bore into the wall. Until he saw it, he had forgotten that the first bullet had drilled right through Tony's powerful body. It was strange that life could be knocked out by a flash of fire and a finger's end of lead.

Then he went out behind the house and saw a red-headed girl of twenty-three or four, peeling potatoes. She had three pans for the unpeeled, the peelings, and the peeled. She wore rubber gloves through which the flesh appeared duskily. She should have been very pretty, but there was no smile about her. What a man sees first is the light behind a picture; after that he sees the picture itself. Well, you had to look closely at this girl before you saw that she was pretty.

"You're Kate Graham?" he asked.

"Hello, Jimmy," said the girl. "Welcome home. I've got your old room fixed up. Want it?" She slid the pan of peelings onto a chair and stood up. She had plenty of jaw and plenty of shoulders, but her strength remained inside the sense of her femininity as in a frame. She had a smile, too, but it was no glare for heavy traffic—there were dimmers on it. It invited you close and promised to keep shining, for a long time. A door opened in Jimmy, and something like a sound moved through him.

"Yes, I want the room," he said, looking at her. "Tell me how about Charlie, if you don't mind?"

"A whiskey bat and pneumonia did the rest," she answered.

"Whiskey's hard on the eyes, all right," said Jimmy. "I was mighty fond of Charlie."

"Were you?" asked the girl.

"Yeah, I sure was."

He kept hesitating until it suddenly occurred to him that he had no words for what he wanted to say. He hardly knew what he wanted, either, except he wished to see that faint brightening about the eyes and mouth. He said he could find the way to the old room, so he left her and went off up the stairs that creaked in all the familiar places. It was wonderful that he should remember everything so well. From sixteen to eighteen he had written himself "man" and kept a room here and lived—well, without too much labor.

When he got up to the room, he heard snoring inside it. He backed off and looked at the number to make sure. It was Number Seventeen, all right, so he opened the door softly and looked in. A long man with a jag of beard on the chin and a sweep of mustaches across his mouth was lying on the bed with his

mouth open. It was Doc Alton.

That sight brought up the past on galloping hoofs. He crossed the room. Doc opened his eyes and shut his mouth.

“Hello, Jimmy,” he said quietly. Doc was always quiet. Perhaps that was why he had been able to open so many safes without bringing on the vengeance of the law. He had been one of those aging men of forty, eighty years ago. Now he looked to the altered eye of Jimmy Geary even younger than in the other days, as the sheriff had. Doc sat up and shook hands.

“How’s everything?” he asked.

“All right,” said Jimmy. “Thanks for the letters and the cash.”

“They wouldn’t let me send much,” answered Doc. “Feeling like work?”

“Listen to me!” said Jimmy fiercely. “Wake up and listen! When I brace people around here for an honest job, they give me the eye and walk straight past. But the thugs come and hunt me up . . . Samuels, and that sort, and a safe-cracker comes and waits in my room. I say . . . what the hell?”

Doc Alton yawned. “You feel that way about it? All right. I’ll take a snooze here. I’m kind of tired. If you ain’t changed your mind before you’re ready to go to bed, I won’t argue with you any, but I’ve got a sweet layout fixed up. It’s a two-man job, and it’s fat. There ought to be fifteen, twenty thousand in it.”

“No, and be damned to you!” said Jimmy. “I’m going out to get an honest man’s job.”

“Take a gun along with you, then,” said Doc Alton. “Let me tell you something. A lot of people around here remember Tony Spargo.”

“A dirty louse of a cardsharper!” answered Jimmy Geary. “To hell with him, too, and the crooks that remember him.” He strode from the room and had sight, from the door, of Doc Alton yawning again, his eyes already closing for more sleep. At the stable he hired a saddle horse and hit out over the rough trails to the ranches. He put in the rest of that day getting to eight ranch houses, and he collected eight refusals.

Two of them stood out. Old Will Chalmers said to him: “What sort of a plant are you aiming to fix on me out here? No, I don’t want you or any three like you, either.” At the Morgan place, the girl he had known as Ruth Willet opened the kitchen door for him. He had gone to school with Ruth, and he put out his hand in a pleased surprise. She simply slammed the door in his face, and screeched from behind it: “I’ve got men in this house, Jimmy Geary. You get out of here, or I’m gonna call ’em! I got men and guns here. You get off this place!”

That was his last try. He got off the place and went slowly back to Graham's Tavern, letting the cowpony dog-trot or walk, letting the evening gather off the hills and slide unheeded about him. Darkness, also, was rising out of his heart across his eyes.

He put up the horse in the barn and went into the saloon. There was no one in it except the bartender, although voices were stirring in the back room.

"Whiskey!" he said, looking down at his watery reflection in the bar varnish.

"How's things?" asked the bartender cheerfully.

Jimmy Geary lifted his eyes with deliberation across the shining white of the bar-apron and over the lean face of the other. There he rested his glance for a moment, drank the whiskey, and lowered the glass to the bar again without changing his gaze. "You take a run and a jump and a guess at how things are," said Jimmy Geary.

"Yeah?" said the bartender. But he worked a smile back onto his face. "Look here," he murmured, "there's somebody to see you. Right out there on the back verandah. Been waiting for you."

"With a gun, eh?" sneered Jimmy Geary.

II The Ambush

But the whiskey had hit through his blood, and the sour fume of it was in his nose and his brain. He had eaten nothing since morning. So the danger of guns meant little to the vastness of his gloom, with this red fire blowing up in it. He knocked the rear door of the bar open. Three men were playing poker at the table that was placed most clearly in his memory. A pair of them had dark faces.

"Take a hand, brother?" said this man cheerfully.

"I've got nothing but chicken feed," said Jimmy.

"Yeah? All we're spending is time."

"I'll be back, then."

He stepped onto the rear verandah, letting the screen door bang behind him. A woman got up from a chair and came slowly toward him. As she moved through the light that slanted out of a window, he recognized Juanita Allen. She was the half-breed daughter of Mac Allen.

“Hello, Jimmy,” she said. “I heard you were here. I came on over. That all right? I wanted to see you.”

“And knife me, too, eh?” said Jimmy. “You used to be Tony Spargo’s girl, didn’t you?”

“Tony Spargo? That’s so long ago, I wouldn’t remember!”

She put back her head a little and smiled at him with professional ease. True, he had been eight years out of the world, but he knew that gesture. She backed up into the light, and he saw what the years had done to her. Well, the Mexican blood fades fast.

“How do I look, Jimmy?” she said. “Like hell, eh? Come here and let me take a slant at you, too.”

She pulled him forward into the light. That would be easy for an accomplice lodged in the dark of the brush.

“My God, the time’s only made a man of you,” said Juanita. “But look how it’s socked me eight times in the face. You remember, Jimmy? I’m just your age. My birthday comes on Monday before yours. Take a look and tell me what I’m good for now, will you?”

There were some straight lines up and down on her lip. Her smile pulled her face all out of shape and let him see the blanched whiteness of some false teeth. And soap and water would never help her; there was grime in her soul.

“You don’t have to tell me . . . I’ll tell you . . . I’m done,” said Juanita. “I don’t mind about the men. To hell with them! But I can’t even get a job slinging hash. You’d think I might get a finger in the soup, or something. I’m not good enough for the people around here. Listen to me, Jimmy.”

“Yeah. All right. I’m listening,” said Jimmy. “Quit crying, will you? I like you fine, Juanita. Please don’t cry.”

“Take hold of my arm,” she said.

He could feel the two bones of the forearm.

“Look at,” said Juanita. “I’m sunk . . . I’m done. I’ve gotta get a break or something, and pull out of here. Jimmy, you were always a good kid. Give me a break, will you?”

“I’ll give you a break,” he heard himself say. “Will you quit crying, Juanita, please? I’m going to give you a break. What d’you need?”

She stopped the crying and started gasping, which was worse. She held him by the wrists with shuddering hands. “I wouldn’t need much. There’s a little bill over at the boardinghouse. It’s only forty dollars, Jimmy. They’d sock me in jail, if I didn’t pay that. And then a little bit more. Car fare, some place.

Jimmy, you were always kind. I was sorry, when they slammed you for those three crooks. I knew Tony was a crook. He was a dirty crook to me, too. You see how it is, Jimmy. I wouldn't need the money, if only . . .”

“You wait here,” said Jimmy Geary. “I'm coming back.”

She kept a grip on him all the way across the verandah. “I'm going to wait right out here for you,” she kept saying. “I'll be expecting you back. I'll wait right here . . . if it takes you all night, I'll be waiting right here.”

He got away through the outside door and up the stairs to Number Seventeen. When he got inside, he wanted a drink.

“Hey, Al!” he said to the snorer. He lighted a lamp. Electricity had not been brought out to Graham's Tavern.

“Yeah?” said Alton, turning on the bed. “What time is it?”

“Time for a drink. Where's your flask?”

“Under the pillow.”

Jimmy put his hand under and found a gun. Then he found the flask and pulled it out. He unscrewed the top, poured a long shot down his throat. The whiskey horrors choked him. He took another drink to kill them and put the flask down.

“Want some?” he panted.

“Not till I eat.”

“Got any money?”

Doc sat up, suddenly. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “Sure I've got some money. Help yourself.”

He pulled out a wallet. Alton's wallet was always full. Now the bills were packed into a tight sheaf. He pulled out some fifties. There were seven of them. “Three hundred and fifty,” he said.

“Sure, kid, sure,” said Doc. “Take some more. Take all you want.” He took two more.

“A lot of dirty bums is all I've been able to find since you stepped out of the picture,” said Alton. “A lot of dirty, yellow-faced rats. You and me will burn up the highway, kid.”

Jimmy looked down from the long mustaches of Doc and saw the face of the warden in the shadows at his feet. He saw the prison yard, and the pale eyes of Barney Vane, the lifer who was head trusty. Even the best warden in the world has to use trusties, and a trusty is, you know what. So Jimmy reached for the flask and unscrewed the top of it again.

“You sure you want that?” asked Doc.

“Aw, shut up,” said Jimmy, and drank.

“Sure,” said Doc Alton. “I’ll get on my boots. I’ll be waiting for you, while you spend that stuff. I suppose that’s what you want to do?”

Jimmy said nothing. He got out of the room and down to the back verandah. He heard the girl rise—the whisper of her clothing and the sound of her drawn breath, but she kept back against the wall. He went to her and stood over her, looking down at her.

“Aw, Jimmy,” she moaned suddenly. “Don’t say you couldn’t get anything. Don’t turn me down flat. I swear to God, I haven’t eaten. I’m hungry. Give me the price of a square meal, will you, Jimmy?”

“Here, here,” said Jimmy Geary. “I’ve got enough for you. Where’s that bag? Here, open it. There’s three hundred and fifty in that bag, now. You pay the damned board bill and get out to a better part of the world. This is the rottenest part of creation. Nobody can go straight here.”

Juanita caught her breath, started to laugh, choked, sobbed, and then uttered a queer screaming sound that was sob and laughter in one. She wobbled like a hopeless drunk, staggering with hysterics. Well, a man can’t very well handle a thing like that. He took her down to the kitchen door and threw it open. Kate was inside drying dishes that a big Negress was washing and putting out on the drain.

“Here, Kate,” said Jimmy Geary. “Juanita’s hysterical. Get her a drink or something. Quiet her down, will you?”

The face of Kate Graham smiled, as stone might smile. The Negress turned slowly and put her chin up into the air. “That thing!” she said.

Jimmy wanted to kill Kate Graham. Instead, he took Juanita across the room to her and caught her by the wrist and shook her arm.

“You . . . take this girl . . . and be good to her! Haven’t you got any more heart than a toad? Take her . . . now . . . and let me see you!”

Kate, with a look of fear and wonder, took that weeping burden in her arms. Jimmy got out of the room onto the verandah. He leaned against a pillar there for a moment, and the stars wavered a little in the sky. Afterward, he went up to Seventeen and found Doc Alton pulling on his second boot.

“Ready, old son?” asked Doc, smiling till his mustaches spread out thin.

Jimmy lifted the pillow, took the gun, and passed it out of view under his coat. “Wait here a while,” he said, and went down again. He would play a round or two of that poker, as he had promised to do, for that would show

whether or not luck intended to favor him in the old ways.

The three were not impatient. Instead, they greeted him with three different sorts of smiling, so that he had a very odd and vivid feeling that he had known them before. They opened with a round of jackpots, the man with the lofty brow dealing. The Mexican had openers. Jimmy held up a pair of nines and drew another. He won that pot and six dollars, but it wasn't the money that made him feel better and better. He had a genuine kindness for these strangers.

"I haven't met you people before, have I?" he asked.

They had not had that luck, they said.

"I've taken on a little liquor," apologized Jimmy. "You know how it is."

They knew how it was, and it was all right. Two more hands went by before the dark-faced, handsome fellow opposite Jimmy got up, revealing the bullet hole in the wall. He said they ought to have a bit of music, so he wound up the squeaking phonograph and put on a disk. The very first bars of the tune poured the consciousness of Jimmy far into the past.

"You know," he said, when the fellow with the big black eyes sat down, "it seems as though I've been right here before, with all of you. It's a queer feeling."

The three exchanged glances quietly, and Jimmy made sure that he was quite drunk. If that were the case, he ought not to be sitting in at a poker game, but the music from the scratched and cracked old record on the phonograph held him fascinated, not because it was pleasant but because it hurt like the ache of old wounds.

It was like air-hunger, the sickness of Jimmy. It was like waking from a nightmare with the vision gone but the fear remaining. He could feel the eyes of the three on him. The game ought to go on, of course, but they seemed to understand a mystery that was closed to him, and they remained half smiling, watchful.

Jimmy looked up, not out of the past but deeper into it. Time closed like water over his head. He leaned a bit forward, and the three leaned the same trifle toward him. They were not smiling, now—not with their eyes, at least.

The music went on. It thrust a knife pain into his right shoulder, into his heart, although he was not following the words just then.

He pointed with his forefinger. "You're Oñate's brother!" he said to the Mexican.

The man nodded and smiled like a Chinese idol.

"You're the brother of Tony Spargo!" said Jimmy Geary to the man across

the table.

“I’m his kid brother,” sneered Spargo.

“And you’re the brother of Gus Warren?”

“Sorry. I’m only his cousin. But maybe I’ll do to fill out the hand?”

“Aye,” said Jimmy Geary, “you make the three of a kind.”

The needle was scratching with every whirl of the disk, and, yet, Jimmy wanted the record to continue endlessly, for he knew that he was to die before the song ended. Spargo had out a gun and laid it on the edge of the table, leaning so far forward that Jimmy could see, over his shoulder, the hole in the wall. He had an insane feeling that his own soul would be drawn through that same gap in the wall and whistled away into nothingness. There would be nothing in the way of an inquiry, even, for the gun of Doc Alton would be found on him. Perhaps that was Alton’s part in the plot—to see that the victim went heeled to the fight. But there would be no fight. The music poured icy sleep over his hands.

They were going to get him on the down strain of that weary sing-song. He could see the murder tightening in the hand and the eyes of Spargo. Then Kate Graham spoke out of the doorway, deliberately, as though she did not realize that the song was running swiftly to its end: “The thing’s off. He hasn’t got a gun. It’s murder, if you turn loose on him . . . and I’ll give the testimony to hang you.”

The Mexican uttered a little soft, musical cry of pain. Spargo’s lips kept stretching thinner over his teeth. He said the words through Jimmy to the girl: “Are you gonna be the blonde rat? Are you gonna run out?”

“You fixed this job and got us here!” cried the cousin of Gus Warren. “Now what’s the idea?”

“Look!” moaned Oñate. “I have the same knife for him. Look, *señorita!* It is the same!”

“What did I care about your brother, Oñate?” asked the girl calmly. “Or about four-flushing Gus Warren? And I’ve just been getting some news about Tony Spargo. It made me send for the sheriff. Are you three going to be here to shake hands with him?”

They were not going to be there. They stood up, with young Spargo running the tips of his fingers absently over the bullet hole in the wall. They all looked at Kate as they went out, but they said nothing to her.

That silence continued in the room until after the first pounding and then the departing ripple of the hoofbeats. Jimmy stood up.

“The sheriff’s not coming, if that’s what you mean,” said the girl.

“Sit down here,” said Jimmy. The whiskey was gone. Inside him there was only emptiness, with a throb in it.

“There’s no good talking,” said the girl, but she came to the table and slipped into the chair where Tony Spargo had once sat. She was only calm from a distance. At close hand he could see the tremor as he leaned across the table.

“You were only a kid,” said Jimmy. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

The song had ended; the needle was scratching steadily in the last groove. A nick in the disk struck the needle point at greater and still greater intervals.

“It was Tony Spargo, was it?” said Jimmy.

“I was nearly sixteen,” she said. “He used to talk to me and look at me with his greasy eyes. I never saw the grease in them until this evening. I didn’t know till after she’d talked to me.” She folded her hands. The fingers were smooth and slender. She wore rubber gloves around the kitchen and that was why. But in spite of her double grip, the hands would not stop quivering.

“What are you afraid of?” asked Jimmy.

“You know what I’m afraid of. You’re going to say something. Go on and say it and get it over with. I can take that, too.”

“Hello,” said the voice of Doc Alton from the doorway.

“Go on away, Doc,” said Jimmy. “Wait a minute, though. Come and take this.”

He kept holding the girl with his eyes as he held out the gun to the side. Doc Alton took it.

“I owe you some money,” said Jimmy Geary, “and I’m going to keep on owing it for a while.”

“That’s all right,” said Doc Alton. “Are you . . . are you staying around here, Jimmy?”

The mournful wistfulness of his voice left Jimmy untouched.

“I’m staying around here,” he answered. “So long, Doc.”

Doc Alton went out.

“I mean,” said Jimmy, “I’m staying around unless you say no.”

She drew in a breath and closed her eyes. “Wait a minute,” she whispered. “In a minute . . . I’ll be able to talk.”

He knew that, if he put his hand over hers, he would stop their trembling, but he sat up straight and waited. The needle bumped for the last time on the

disk and the scratching ended. Another sound rose and moved forward in Jimmy, a rushing and singing like wind or like mountain waters that go on forever.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Crazy Rhythm* by Frederick Schiller Faust (as Max Brand)]