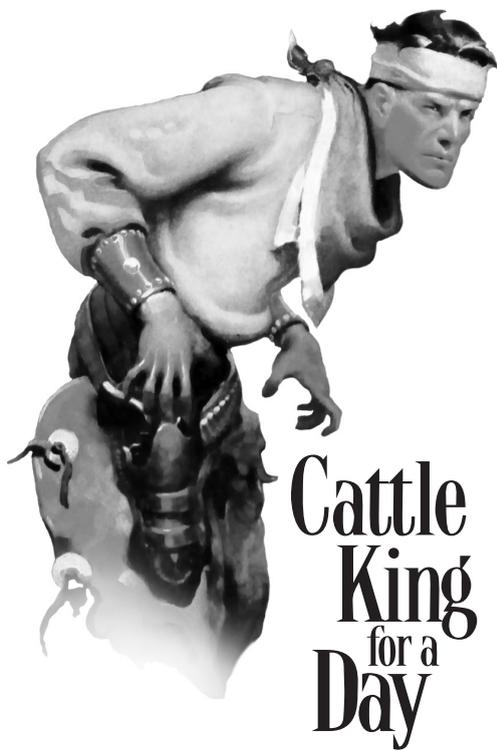


L. RON HUBBARD



Cattle King for a Day

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Chapter One

CHINOOK SHANNON was new to Montana. He did not know the simple courtesies connected with meeting road agents. In fact, he did not even know the term, being from Arizony where road agents are just plain bandits.

All Chinook Shannon knew was that the three men who had so suddenly leaped out in the trail before him meant no good to either his person or his property.

As far as the person went, Chinook was rich, being young and range-toughened and well proportioned. He had his health, a good gun eye and a fine set of teeth.

But as to property, he was somewhat beggared. His gear was battered after the two months' hard ride from Arizony to Montana. His batwings were scarred, his boots had run-over heels and his spurs were dull. His hat was floppy with rain and wind and his checkered shirt was just entering its third week unwashed.

And so it was that Chinook Shannon felt little worried about these three gentlemen.

He had come out of a creek bed and up the slope toward two huge boulders. A sudden movement had caused him to rein in. Three riders, more or less weathered and definitely tougher than bear steak, had swung into the trail.

It was impossible to get by. Chinook crooked a heel around his applehorn, extracted a sack of Bull and built himself a smoke, keeping his eye upon the three holstered guns without seeming the least bit worried.

The man in the lead had a complexion like fat meat and the afternoon sun of the mountain fall was melting him drop by drop. Only his gun showed any care and that glittered, polished with long and frequent usage.

“You’re a stranger,” decided the gentleman in the lead.

“Yep,” said Chinook, lighting up as casually as possible.

“From desert country, judging the rig.”

“Yep,” replied Chinook.

“And you come a long ways fast.”

“Hundred percent so far. Long as we’re telling fortunes, will I marry a blonde or brunette?”

“Neither,” said the man in the lead. “You ain’t going to live that long if you keep on up this trail.”

“If I’m not mistaken,” said Chinook, “this is the public thoroughfare to Bull Butte.”

“You ain’t going to Bull Butte.”

“Now, I wouldn’t say that,” replied Chinook, easily.

“You’re going to turn around and head south again or else.”

“Else what?”

“Else we’ll cave a bank in on you, that’s what.”

“Think there’s enough of you to do that?”

“Plenty,” said the leader.

“Sure you haven’t got my identity tangled with somebody else?” said Chinook.

“Nope. According to a pal in Cheyenne, you’re Chinook Shannon.”

“Pleased to meet *you*,” said Chinook.

“Yeah, I’m Jake Humphrey. Brad Kendall says you ain’t going to arrive in Bull Butte.”

“He’s wrong,” said Chinook, “but thanks for the trouble. And thanks for the name.”

“What name?” snapped Humphrey.

“Brad Kendall’s name. I was the least bit hazy who to look for.” Chinook set his toe back in the stirrup, took a long puff on the cigarette, flipped it down toward the stream and gave every appearance of a man about to ride straight ahead.

Jake Humphrey’s two men kept their ground.

“I wouldn’t want you to get hurt,” said Humphrey. “But . . .” His hand ripped inside his coat and steel flashed as his short gun came out.

Chinook dug spur. His horse, Wild Cat, reared. Chinook’s Peacemaker spewed thunder, flame and lead.

Humphrey’s short gun leaped sideways and into the brush. The three horses before Chinook tangled up.

Cursing, trying to get at their holsters, Humphrey’s two lieutenants were almost thrown by the plunging Wild Cat’s rush between them.

Chinook crouched low over Wild Cat’s mane. A .44 screamed between Wild Cat’s blurred forelegs. Chinook careened around a turn in the wooded trail, plunged off at right angles on a less distinct path and raced ahead under the low branches which whipped unmercifully at him.

He came into a dry gulch, turned down it, scrambled up the side, darted into another patch of woods and reined in.

He could hear the far-off shouts of the three reception committee members and knew that they were trying to track him over the stony paths.

At a canter, Chinook continued toward Bull Butte, choosing his own way, very puzzled as to the meeting and just why a man named Brad Kendall should desire his untimely demise.

“Very strange,” he told Wild Cat. “Maybe Mr. Borden can clear it all up for me.”

With that in mind, he entered the thriving town of Bull Butte. The metropolis consisted of two slovenly rows of weathered false-front buildings, a sign which said “Post Office, Bull Butte, Montana” and another sign which said “The Diamond Palace.”

At one end of the hoof-pulverized street was a squat, fortlike affair, quite obviously the bank.

Chinook swung off, hitched Wild Cat to the rack, brushed hopelessly at the white dust which covered both of them and then, with jingle bobs tingling and leather creaking, he entered the heavy door.

The bank was rather well built. The cashier had iron bars before him, perhaps as a reminder of what would happen if he tampered with the funds, and a Derringer beside the till. There was a swinging gate and a sign which said “Paul Borden, President.”

Without waiting for an invitation, Chinook pushed through, tilted his hat to the back of his blond head, hooked his thumbs in his cartridge belt and said, “Howdy.”

Banker Borden looked up. No sign of recognition could be detected on his ruddy, soft face. Somewhat annoyed at the intrusion, he said briskly, "You wish to see me about some business?"

"Yep," said Chinook.

"I don't seem to place you. One of Kendall's men?"

"Nope."

"Well, then," said Banker Borden, exasperated, "where are you from?"

"Arizony."

Borden paled slightly. He had half risen from his chair. He sank back now, shakily, removed his glasses, polished them and looked fixedly at Chinook. He saw a sight which did not at all encourage him. He saw six feet two of range rider encased in batwings, vest and flat-brimmed hat. He saw the white dust of travel and the weary lines on Chinook's young face. He saw the way the ivory-butted, silver-chased Peacemaker was lashed down low on Chinook's thigh and an empty loop in the cartridge belt.

"You're . . . you're Chinook Shannon."

"Yep."

"And . . . and you've come to see about the Slash S ranch."

"Yep."

"But . . . but I wired you about your grandfather's death two months ago."

"Yep."

"See here, Shannon," wailed the banker, "you can't keep a man in suspense like that for two months and then suddenly turn up. You know something had to be done about the Slash S."

“Yep. I’m going to do it.”

“Why . . . why, yes, of course, Shannon.”

“Of course,” said Chinook. “I believe you said my grandfather died?”

“Uh . . . well, that’s right.”

“Murdered, perhaps?”

“Why, no! What makes you think that?”

“Shannons ain’t like other people. They don’t die natural deaths. I believe I’m the heir.”

“Yes . . . yes, the sole heir to the Slash S.”

“I believe,” said Chinook, “that it’s the biggest spread east of the mountains.”

“Well . . . er . . . yes.”

“There were, the last time my grandad wrote, about four thousand head of good beef cattle there, which he was to ship in the fall. Did he ship?”

“Well . . . no . . . that is . . . His death was a very great shock to all of us, Mr. Shannon. I think the country sustained a great loss. . . .”

“Why didn’t he ship?”

“Well . . . er . . . perhaps I had better start at the beginning, Mr. Shannon. You, I believe, were about to come north anyway to take over your grandfather’s ranch and run it for him. He said as much.”

“He figured he was getting old,” volunteered Chinook. “Me, I’ve always been a drifter and I always wanted to be one of those things they call a cattle king. Now, you savvy?”

“Well . . . yes . . . of course. Your grandfather was very fond of you, I believe.”

“Down Texas way, when I was a little shaver. Yes. Now come on. What happened to the shipment? Train wreck, rustling, what?”

Borden squirmed and looked beadily at Chinook’s Peacemaker. Taking a long breath, he plunged.

“There’s been some trouble, Mr. Shannon. Montana is divided into three lines of endeavor: sheep, cattle and mining. Sometimes, Mr. Shannon, those three come into conflict. In this instance, it was cattle and mining.”

“Go on,” said Chinook.

“The Shoshone Mining Company discovered a rich lode up Pan Creek, a stream of water which bisects the Slash S. Properly speaking, Mr. Shannon, the ground did not exactly belong to your grandfather, but the water below that did.”

“Go on,” said Chinook.

“Now you are not a mining man, Mr. Shannon, but you must understand that minerals have the upper hand over mere cattle land. And you must understand that the wealth of this state depends upon gold mining at the moment. You have heard of cyanide mining?”

“Nope,” said Chinook.

“It is a process lately introduced into Montana. Cyanide is utilized to remove the gold content from the crushed ore. Unfortunately for your grandfather’s ranch, a great deal of this cyanide was swept away by the stream known as Pan Creek and was carried down into the watering pools. Cyanide, Mr. Shannon, is extremely poisonous. The cattle, Mr. Shannon, are dead.”

“Four thousand head?”

“I regret to say,” said Banker Borden, his eyes on the gun.

“Well, but there’s a chance to get more stock and to stop the spilling of this stuff into Pan Creek,” said Chinook.

“My bank,” said Borden, “most unfortunately holds paper on the Slash S to the amount of twenty-six thousand dollars.”

“Well, we’ll fix that somehow. I want to roam around a little. I got an idea, Borden, that this ain’t exactly fifty-two cards in the deck.”

“Young man, do you mean to implicate—”

“Yep.”

“Well, I . . . that is . . . er . . . I must inform you that I mean to foreclose at noon tomorrow. The sheriff has already issued the papers.”

“No chance that you might grant an extension?”

“Business is business,” said Borden.

“You can call it by that name,” replied Chinook. “It’s almost noon now. You mean to say that for twenty-four hours, I am the owner of the Slash S?”

“I have already probated awaiting your signature, but I hardly think that it is worth your while, unless you have twenty-six thousand dollars on your person.”

“Give me your pen.” Chinook turned the legal document around, looked it over, and saw that it looked all right. He signed.

“I think,” said Borden, “that you are being very foolish. Twenty-four hours is very little time, and I would suggest—”

“Suggest anything you want,” said Chinook, buttoning a copy into his batwing pocket. “But wait until I’ve got a little more time.”

He walked out.