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UNDER
THE
DIEHARD
BRAND

GALAXY
PRESENTS

CHAPTER ONE

THE night rider was nervous. It was with considerable effort that he kept his voice easy and assured as he sang.

Two thousand longhorns, bedded down on the strange range country of Montana, moved restively, still upset after the dangerous crossing of the Missouri that day.

Summer lightning flashed in bright brass sheets along the horizon, momentarily showing up the semicircle of rimrock which surrounded the bed ground. The mutter of thunder growled across the sky. Bunched-up clouds shot nervously across the face of the moon.

The weary young trail hand knew there would be trouble before morning.

Sit down little cyows
And rest yo' tails,
An' forgit all about them dusty trails.
Now if you played faro
Or had a rival to yo' gal
Yo' worries would be . . .

He stopped suddenly and looked questioningly at the ridge to the south. Sheet lightning silhouetted a rider up there.

The trail hand rode a short distance from his charges to wave the strange horseman off from the nervous herd. The

rider was coming slowly down the slope, being very careful to ride easily and quietly.

The trail hand advanced. "Howdy, stranger. Step light. These bovines is nervous wrecks after our crossin' today." He studied the other but asked no questions. He saw that the horse was travel-worn and knew from the other's rig and clothes that he had come through from Texas—which is a long jump.

"Sure. But they been mighty sparin' of signposts and I don't savvy this country none. Where's Wolf River?"

The trail hand looked more closely and saw that the stranger was young, around eighteen, and from the looks of him hadn't eaten very regularly of late. "The wagon's over to your right, stranger. Better go over and git down. We're short-handed and might be able to help you along."

"Thanks, but I been comin' for such a hell of a while that I'm gettin' anxious to see the target. You know Wolf River?"

"Some."

"Know if I can find Diehard Thompson there?"

"Sure you can. Last I hear of him, he's sheriff."

"Gettin' along all right?" said the stranger.

"Gettin' along in age," replied the trail hand. "Was a time when strong men fainted at the mention of that name, but the old boy's agin' up pretty bad. One of these days, somebody is goin' to get nerve enough to find out if he's as bulletproof as he used to be. He's slippin'. There's plenty of citizens—"

"Wait a minute," said the stranger, "you're talkin' about my dad."

"Hell, no offense, I hope. I didn't know Diehard ever

stopped practicin' the draw long enough to have a kid." He stopped uncomfortably. "Cooky'll fix you up if you drop over. You'd be plumb welcome to drift north with us, Thompson."

The youngster shifted wearily in his saddle and the trail hand noted the absence of all weapons.

"Guess I'll be swingin' on if you'll wise me up."

"Sure. Keep the Pole Star on your left a little. Wolf River's about sixty miles and if you miss it you'll fall over the GN tracks."

"Much obliged. Be seein' you."

The kid started a wide circle around the herd, picking his way by the flare of lightning. He was very thoughtful and a frown wrinkled up his tired face.

He traveled until he reached the other side of the bed ground and then looked up to pick out the Pole Star. Clouds were scudding across it, yellow in the lightning, blue white in the moonlight, and the task was difficult.

He had just singled it out when, behind him, he heard the far-off crack of a shot, almost blotted out by the summer thunder. He turned in his saddle and looked back.

He could see the whole amphitheater from where he sat. The cattle had started up, looking about, beginning to walk nervously in small circles.

He knew one rider could not hold that herd now and he reined around, intending to go back and be of what help he could.

Another shot made a thin red line on the ridge across.

The kid saw the trail hand as lightning fanned across the horizon. The man was laying on his quirt, racing away from

the evident ambush, toward the far-off chuck wagon, going for help. The puncher streaked up the slope toward the ridge not far from the kid. The roll of the mustang's hoofs came faintly above the growing rumble in the herd.

An instant later, half a dozen horsemen rose magically on the rim above the trail hand, as black and stiff as though they had been cut from cardboard.

A heavysset fellow on a chunky horse spurred down to meet the puncher. Orange flame spat. Lightning flared.

The puncher leaned backwards in his saddle, hands thrown up. He vanished and his horse plunged on.

An instant later the others on the ridge started down, firing into the air, shouting.

The herd was ready to go. With a roll which shook the earth, two thousand longhorns began to stampede.

The cracking shots were blotted out in the crash of horns against horns. The riders were swallowed up in the geysering black dust.

The kid dug spur toward the unseen chuck wagon, quiring his weary horse. But his message was not needed. The fire was kicked together and tired men were struggling up, grabbing saddles and rifles.

The kid reached the spot where the riders had appeared first. He halted, waiting for the crew to come up to him. The trail hand was somewhere below. The kid walked his horse slowly down the slope.

Cattle were pouring over the far rim, bawling in terror, a seething cloud of madness on its express journey to nowhere.

The kid stopped again. Below him one of the riders had

reined in and dismounted beside the dead trail hand. The rider turned the body over with his foot. The arms flopped outward.

Above the booming storm of the departing stampede, the kid heard a resonant, unearthly, sad voice say, "God rest your soul, my man."

It was all one vast, scrambled nightmare to the kid, as illusive as cigarette smoke. The man just below could not see the kid against the black rocks and the kid, recovering reason in time, knew that it would be madness to show himself, unarmed, to this pious murderer.

The crew came boiling over the ridge. The mysterious rider had vanished completely. Suddenly the kid realized his precarious position, himself unknown in a strange country.

Lightning spread a yellow glare across the heavens. The kid spurred into the cover of the darkness. He looked back once as the sheet lightning flared again.

The trail hand was spread out in the form of a cross, his teeth bared in a cold grin, sightless eyes staring at the chilly moon.