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Gunman's Tally

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Chapter One

THE two horsemen streaked out of a patch of sage, one a length ahead of the other, dashed down the edge of a dry gulch and came streaming up the far side, leaving long curls of hot desert dust to unwind against the brittle heat of the day.

The man in the lead rode with teeth bared to the withering blast of his speed. His chin thong had bitten deep against his cheeks with the pressure of the wind against his stiff, straight-brimmed hat.

He loved his gray, that man, and yet his whip arm was never still as quirt rose and fell against the foaming flanks of his stretching mount.

The four-point rowels had left their many bright dots of red in the racing gray's flanks and jabbed now across the open to leave many more.

The alkali dust was in the rider's throat but he did not taste it. It was in his eyes but did not dim the fierce heat of his merciless glance.

He saw nothing of the red buttes before them, felt nothing of the sun's scorching, dehydrating ferocity. He was Easy Bill, on his way to Red Butte and to death.

He heard nothing of his companion's shouts. He had not yet realized that his companion was there.

Easy Bill Gates had forgotten his friend—he who would need so many friends in the short future.

But Jimmy Langman had not forgotten Easy Bill and he spurred his tortured sorrel through the melting-hot day, trying to keep in sight of the gray. Smiling Jimmy Langman was not smiling at this hour. He knew he would be needed, he would gladly have substituted himself. He had to keep up with Easy Bill.

“For God’s sake, pull in!”

Smiling Jimmy’s voice was thin and the racing wind whipped it back in his face with the dry sting of the alkali.

“You’re killing your bronc!”

But Smiling Jimmy might as well have pleaded with the Joshua trees on the far horizon as with Easy Bill Gates that day.

The gray’s heart was great, his stride was long. His speed had fattened Easy Bill’s purse half a hundred times. But Easy Bill thought Buster, the gray, crawled that afternoon.

The ride was eternity. The way was infinity.

But Easy Bill would have ridden hellbent for China to meet Fanner Marsten. And Fanner Marsten was in Red Butte, a gun on each hip, a smile on his twisted face, waiting and watching for Easy Bill.

Jimmy Langman withheld his quirt to the last. Easy Bill flashed down a curving road strewn with black, smoking-hot lava stones, far in advance now.

Jimmy Langman let his quirt fall.

“Sorry, Mike,” he told his sorrel and struck again.

“Sorry, Mike.”

He dug his spurs.

"You understand, Mike. We got to be there with him."

The sorrel rushed down the stone-strewn road, breasting Easy Bill's dust, laying a smoke screen of his own.

Hoofs rolling, faster and faster. Hoofs thundering, louder and louder.

Fanner Marsten was waiting with a gun on each hip. Waiting for Easy Bill Gates.

Far off across the bleak waste, broiling between the coals of red canyon walls, Red Butte came into sight, twisted and shivering and squirming with the barrage of heat waves which shot skyward like a billion glass snakes toward the smoking bullion of the sun.

The gray was belly deep in the dust, reaching, reaching, reaching. The sorrel stretched out, shiny and white with lather, keeping up to the snare-drum rattle of Buster's racing hoofs.

"Take him, boy," pleaded Smiling Jimmy.

"Take him, boy."

"We got to be there when they draw."

Since the first instant he had glimpsed Red Butte writhing on its rack of heat in the canyon walls, Easy Bill had not once taken his eyes away from the miserable collection of weary, weathered buildings.

Fanner Marsten was waiting there with a gun on each hip and a smile on his twisted face.

Easy Bill's features were frozen by a glue of dust and sweat and hate. In all this withering, frying heat, his brain was frozen, a cake of ice, congealed around one thought—Fanner Marsten must pay!

Thundering hoofs, louder and louder. Heat waves above the town, taller and taller. The naked shame of the granite butte growing larger and larger.

Easy Bill was over his horn, his quirt arm was a steel piston he did not have to command.

Jimmy Langman's voice behind him went unheard.

"Wait, Bill. Wait! You're crazy! He's FANNER MARSTEN!"

Fanner Marsten must pay.

Fanner Marsten was waiting, watching, seeing this twin cumulus coming in a land where it never rained. Fanner was waiting with a score-notched gun on each slim hip and a smile on his bitter, twisted face.

Fanner Marsten on the high boardwalk was saying, "Here he comes, boys. That's Easy Bill. His funeral's on me!"

Easy Bill pushed back the canyon walls and thundered down the narrow pass. Jimmy Langman swerved around the turn behind him, quirt falling, young face drawn, blond hair white as lime from lather and alkali.

Something had to stop Easy Bill.

Something, anything . . .

"Wait!" cried Smiling Jimmy, his voice as hoarse and raw as a stamping mill. He swallowed the dust of his words as he cried, "Bill! You're crazy! He's FANNER MARSTEN!"

Something had to stop him this side of death. Something, anything . . .

Ahead, Easy Bill streaked down toward a brace of guardian redcoat stones. He did not see the burro and rider until he had almost run them down. And then it was the gray who did the thinking.

Buster reared and slashed air as he skidded to a smoking stop. Easy Bill's eyes never left the street which had been bared to his ice-chip glare.

Without looking down he yelled in a voice as foreign to him as the wrath.

"Get out of my way!"

Buster reared again, half-mad from the lashing quirt. The burro stayed across the path, chewing spiny cactus with a zinc-lined mouth.

A man came up on the other side of the dun and dusty pack animal. It was Rocky Leonard, bearded and fat and forlorn.

"Easy Bill!" cried Rocky. "I knowed you'd come, you damn fool. He's waiting for you!"

Easy Bill looked down when he heard the voice and stayed his quirt hand. But none of the madness went out of his glance.

"Is he in town?" snapped Easy Bill.

"You didn't think he'd run from the likes of you, didya? He's FANNER MARSTEN, Easy. He's the best in the state. Maybe the best in the West. He's killed forty-one men, counting Mexicans. I ain't goin' to let you be the forty-second."

"Get out of my way!"

"You ain't no gunman, Easy," pleaded Rocky. The fat wrinkles around his eyes were drawn up tight with worry, his beard stuck straight out with determination. "You ain't goin' to get by!"

Easy Bill saw it was Rocky, then.

But his voice didn't let down and his glance did not relent. "You saw him kill Bob?"

"I was on the walk above Bob when it happened."

"Where's Bob?"

"We laid him out in the Oasis Saloon on a billiard table."

"Was it an even break?"

"Didn't Jimmy tell you when he took you the news?"

There was neither tone nor flexibility to Easy Bill's sharp voice.

"Was it an even break?"

"Now, Easy. Don't get yourself killed. He's waiting for you. He's bragging, making bets on where he'll hit you. He never misses. He's so fast you can't see his hand move when he draws. You ain't no gunman, Easy. I'll go get your brother and you can take him home."

"WAS IT AN EVEN BREAK?"

Rocky shifted his glance. He felt like crying.

Rocky looked back and the ice-chip eyes pried the truth out of him.

"Bob said any gunman was a skunk at heart and Marsten heard him. . . ."

"Quick!"

"Bob was drunk. He didn't know what he was sayin'. Fanner drawed without sayin' a thing and shot Bob three times before we even knowed it was goin' to happen."

"That's all I want to know. GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

The quirt arm came down again with a sharp crack. Smiling Jimmy came to a panting, glad stop on Easy Bill's right.

"Hold him, Rocky!"

"I'm doin' my best," called Rocky on the burro's far side.

Smiling Jimmy made a grab for Easy's arm and got it,

almost pulling Easy off the gray. Easy did not know what he was doing. His quirt came over in a swishing curve and cracked against Smiling Jimmy's jaw.

Jimmy let go. But he did not feel the growing sting of the long, red welt. He tried for another hold.

"You ain't no gunman!" shouted Jimmy. "He'll murder you without trying! Easy. For God's sake, I wouldn't have told you if I'd known. . . ."

"Bob was drunk!" chimed Rocky across the blocking burro. "He said—"

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" roared Easy Bill.

Jimmy's hold slipped loose. The quirt struck him and then whipped back to come crashing like a rifle shot on the gray's rump.

Buster, mouth raw, out of his head, tried to whirl. The curb tightened and kept him straight. The quirt exploded again.

Buster soared straight out and over, heels clearing the burro by inches. Rocky threw himself back out of danger. The gray hurtled down into the single heat-whipped street of Red Butte.

Fanner Marsten had been waiting. He stepped a pace forward, giving his black slouch hat a rakish tug over his slitted left eye. The other was wide open, watchful.

"Hold your ears, boys," said Fanner without turning to the hastily withdrawing crowd.

The gray streaked up the street, with the color of dust and the speed of light. Easy Bill saw Fanner Marsten. He jerked hard and stood Buster straight up.

The ice-chip eyes were as frozen as Easy Bill's brain. The

hat dropped back, released by the wind, and the chin thong welt was like a bullet crease across his lean jaw.

Buster's four hoofs were on the sandy earth again and Easy Bill came out of the saddle, stiff as a walking poker.

He dropped the reins and stepped toward the boardwalk, looking up at the man in black-and-white who stood there grinning at him. Sun flashed as it ricocheted from the clean gunhawk's .45s.

Easy Bill went up to the walk as though shot from a cannon. He stopped twenty feet from Fanner Marsten.

To Easy Bill everything was clear and chill. He was conscious of nothing but the gun at his side and the man in black-and-white before him.

"You killed Bob Gates this afternoon," said Easy Bill in a toneless, sharp voice.

Fanner Marsten grinned at his forty-second notch-to-be. He was having his fun in the way he liked best.

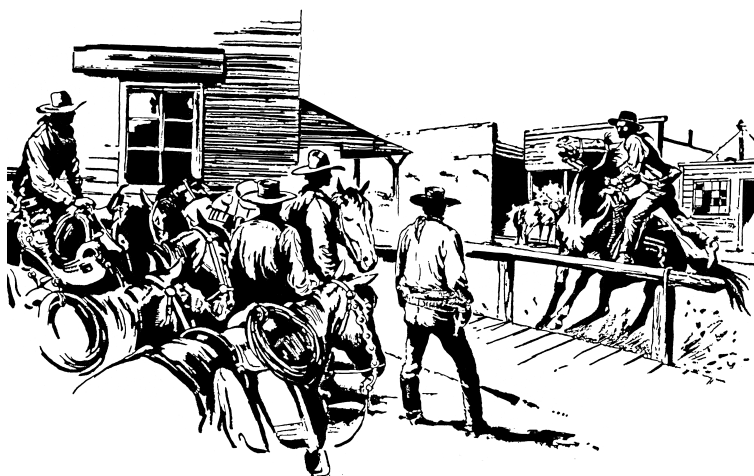
"Nobody ever told me his brother was good with a gun."

"You didn't give him an even break," said Easy Bill, monotonous and hard as a steel rail.

"You going to do something about it?" replied Fanner with a sweet, innocent smile, as inviting as a worthless woman's smirk.

"I aim to even up the board," said Easy Bill, looking straight ahead and feeling the weight of the gun on his hip without touching it.

"Any time you say, pardner," grinned Fanner Marsten. "I never in my life seen a man so anxious to die. Soon as you move, we draw and blaze away. Fun, huh?"



Buster's four hoofs were on the sandy earth again and Easy Bill came out of the saddle, stiff as a walking poker.

Easy Bill would not have felt a branding iron then. He was an arm, a pair of eyes and a gun. Beyond Fanner he could see the door of the Oasis. Bob was in there, on a billiard table, arms crossed on his riddled chest. . . .

Fanner was grinning more widely, watching Easy Bill's eyes.

"Why did you kill him?" said Easy Bill without moving.

"There was a good reason," said Fanner.

"You wanted me to come in here to finish it off so you could get us both," said Easy Bill.

Everything was clear to him. The boards were a pattern of cracks he had never seen before. The nails in the sidewalk were standing out, each one separate.

The buttons on Fanner's fancy vest were sharp, down to the last carefully threaded hole.

"Are you going to move?" said Fanner, getting a little bored. "It ain't everybody I give an even break."

"Barton hired you. He wants our spread," said Easy Bill without any change in his voice whatever.

Fanner was growing impatient. It was hot in the sun and the flies were buzzing around a black spot near his boots—from which they had picked up Bob Gates. The flies tickled Fanner's face as they rose up and batted against him.

He raised his hand suddenly, angrily, to brush them away.

Easy Bill had not been watching Fanner's eyes. His mind was centered on Bob Gates inside the Oasis.

Fanner's hand moved suddenly, coming up past his right gun butt. Easy Bill saw it and acted, knowing he was about to die. But he did not care about that. He had had to come.

Easy Bill's fingers went down, flawless and swift. No gunman, but he could draw. Fanner's .45s would be out and smoking before his own ever left leather.

Fanner saw the move the instant Easy Bill touched his gun.

Fanner was off balance. He brought his right hand down, conscious only of the fact that it had betrayed him. He was not cool in that instant.

Fanner's hand smacked against the walnut butt. Steel flashed in the blinding sunlight as the .45 came up.

Easy Bill had the start.

Easy Bill's hand was still going down. He tipped the butt back, finger in the guard, on the trigger. He raised the weapon, holster and all, twisting sideways to do it.

Fanner fired in haste.

Easy Bill fired through the bottom of his leather. The kick jabbed the .45 free into Easy Bill's hand.

Fanner was starting to turn around. He whipped back, left hand down for its gun. Left gun out before the right-hand .45 had reached the boards.

Easy Bill fired again.

Twice. Three times. Four times.

The .45 in Easy Bill's hand had jumped up level with his jaw.

Fanner was farther away. He seemed to have stumbled over something.

Five times. Six times.

The hammer clicked on the first. The cylinder had turned all the way around.

So had Fanner Marsten. His boots were working back and

forth, soles toward Easy Bill. Marsten was on his face. His right gun was all alone and his left boot was pointing at it. His left gun was frozen solid in his clutching grasp. They would bury him with it still in his hand.

Easy Bill just stood there.

The world was beginning to whirl and grow dim. He was starting to shake.

Then Smiling Jimmy Langman was beside him, gently pulling him back and away. Rocky was on the other side, looking fixedly at Fanner Marsten's boots now that they were still.

The whole town was held in a silence as thick as the ooze which ran out from under Fanner's chest.

The flies had left the dried, black spot and settled down in a buzzing cloud over the fresh, bright scarlet pool which grew bigger and bigger for them.

Smiling Jimmy got Easy Bill turned around and headed down the walk.

Rocky jerked his thumb at a sagging hotel sign over their heads. Jimmy guided Easy in through the broken-paned door.

A crowd spread back like an unfolding hand of cards.

Jimmy and Rocky kept looking straight ahead. They guided Easy Bill up a flight of creaking, rickety stairs, into a dim and murky hall, through a door.

The broken-backed bed registered on Easy Bill's brain. He turned a little and sat down upon it, staring at the floor.

He felt sick at his stomach. His hands were shaking as he tried to steady his face. The room was spinning faster

♦ G U N M A N ' S T A L L Y ♦

and faster and Rocky and Jimmy were all mixed up with the crazy windows and splintery chairs and a cracked white washbowl.

Easy Bill tried to focus on the washbowl.

God, but he felt sick!