

The Blazing Horizon

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CHAPTER I

In 1871 a few buffalo hunters, among them a certain Captain Stone, pitched their camp on a little knoll in Kansas just north of the Indian Territory line. South and west of the rise flowed Fall creek; on the east the waters of Big Casino creek ran their endless course and invited the roaming herds of buffalo and other wild game in which the region abounded.

The captain was a far-seeing man. He noted the abundance of spring water, the succulence of the prairie grass and the not unimportant factor of the place's nearness to the border of a land from which the government, in accordance with its treaties with the Indians, had excluded the white man from settling. When other buffalo hunters joined them, Stone thought he saw the possibility of a new "Princess of the Prairie," as Wichita then called itself; so he took the first step in colonization and established a small store, carrying such supplies as the hunters required, including, the records state, one barrel of whisky.

As the population increased, Cox and Emerson put in a coal outfitting store and a man named Dixie installed a genuine saloon, with bar, foot-rail and all accessories. The prairies, with their luxuriant growth of blue stem and buffalo grass, became dotted with small cattle and horse ranches; the big cattle herds on their way to Ogallala, Neb., then a big shipping point on the Union Pacific, stopped in the little town for supplies.

Word of the news traveled fast. Soon hundreds were drifting well, farthest southwest of the plain settlements; Stone and two other men, Dagner and Smith, laid out a site.

By 1880 Caldwell had attained a population of 2000. Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe ran its tracks down Wellington, forging an iron link between Caldwell and Wichita and making its bid for the big herds that thundered up the Chisholm Trail. The buffalo camp had flowered into a cow town—and one of the wickedest cow towns in history.

The big boom that started with the coming of the railroad found Gordon W. Lillie waiting on table in one of Caldwell's busy restaurants and longing for something that would more nearly satisfy a normal youth's desire for adventure and the opportunity to make a fortune.

As he saw it, the main requirement for the latter was a working capital, whereas Gordon Lillie and capital were not yet acquainted. As far back as he could remember, Newton Lillie, his father, had had about all he could do to make ends meet. Gordon was 19, and the oldest of the children. Then came Albert, Effie May, Lena and Gordon's foster sister, Lucy Conant.

Newton Lillie had been a flour miller in Bloomington, Ill. Two years before, calamity had descended on the family when fire had destroyed the mill, and the Lillies now lived near Wellington, Kas., about 25 miles from Caldwell, where the father still patiently tried to eke out a living from another flour mill, but counted more hopefully on the productivity of the farm land that he had pre-empted.

Gordon Lillie stood in the doorway of the restaurant, his gaze roving idly over one of the strangest medleys of humanity a man had ever looked upon. It was Saturday afternoon in Caldwell. Bronzed, chap-clad cowboys from nearby ranges, or stopping en route from their fatiguing herd riding, rubbed elbows with roughly dressed railroad laborers, for the Santa Fe extension was not yet finished and Caldwell was the haven of thirsty souls who worked along the right of way. Here were cattle thieves, horse thieves, Indians, desperadoes; women, some with children and others with hard eyes and painted cheeks and a ready smile for each passing male; men making sidewalk speeches on the coming greatness of Caldwell, urging their listeners to buy while the boom was yet young.

A clatter of hoofs and an enveloping cloud of dust moved down the street. Three men dismounted in front of the restaurant. The tallest of the three, a man with a shaggy black beard, eyed the youth with cold appraisal and waited. Lillie did not appear to notice him. He tugged at his lip and was lost in contemplation of the panorama of wild border life before him.

A harsh voice broke in on his thoughts. "We're hungry. Are you gonna stand there and go to sleep or invite us inside?"

Lillie straightened up with a start. He murmured something in apology, then led the way into the dining room and indicated a table for the trio. Glibly he recited the bill of fare.

The bearded man listened impatiently and then gave his order. "And get a move on," he added surlily.

The youth glanced at him sharply, noted the heavy, brutal features, the deep-set, slitted gray eyes, and said nothing. He went about the business of setting food before them and retired to the kitchen. Another waiter was out there, eating his own supper ahead of the evening rush. "I've got a crab out there," Gordon Lillie told him.

The waiter squinted out into the dining room. "Him? That's Tom Benton. He's ornery."

Presently a loud command in Benton's surly tones called Lillie forth. The man was pounding on the table with his fist. "What kind of beef do you call this? This steak's so damned tough you could sole boots with it."

The color deepened in Gordon Lillie's ruddy cheeks and resentment flamed within him. He made no answer but started to remove the offending meat. Benton's heavy stare never left the youth's face. "I said the steak was tough," he repeated. "I'm waitin' to hear you admit it."

A calm voice drifted in from the doorway. "I didn't know anything or anybody came too tough for you, Benton." Benton swung around and met the smiling blue eyes of a broad-shouldered, fair-haired cow puncher who had entered at that moment with half a dozen companions.

The bearded one glared. "I don't remember issuing any invitation for you to horn in on the conversation, Joe Craig."

Joe Craig grinned. "I declare to goodness I clean forgot my manners, Tom. I always was disappointing to my folks that way. They never could count on me to uphold the family reputation for politeness and so I came to Kansas and got a job riding for Titus Moore, not wanting to embarrass the family for the rest of their lives."

"That was being right considerate of the family's feelings," Benton snapped.

"Ain't it the truth? Although my interruption in this particular case might be excused on the grounds that I had a personal interest in the discussion. Didn't I just hear you say that the steak was too tough to suit you?"

"If there ain't anything the matter with your ears you did." "Well, now, that's downright strange. You see, all the beef that's setved in this place happens to be Bar K beef. Besides, I don't hear your two friends complain."

"Maybe I'm a little more finicky than my friends," Benton said sarcastically. "I always was hard to please. As for it being Bar K beef, maybe that's the reason it didn't suit me. There's a lot of things about the Bar K I can't get wild about."

"Including me," Craig supplied cheerfully. "Still, you're the last man in the world I'd expect to find prejudiced against Bar K steers. Matter of fact, I sort of thought you entertained a pretty high regard for them." The smile had left Craig's face and the humorous twinkle in his eyes had been replaced by a cold stare.

Benton glared back for an instant, then, with fists swinging, he ran at Craig. The latter deftly sidestepped the bigger man's rush and rocked him with a solid smash to the head. As Benton reeled back, cursing, his right hand made a quick, stealthy move toward his left breast, but Craig's own gun was whipped out in a flash and leveled from the hip. Benton's arms fell to his sides.

"Some day," Craig said coolly, "you're going to make me

street a gun barked. It was followed by the sound of running feet and a few of the diners rushed to the door to look.

Someone came in presently to announce that the town marshal had been shot. Craig looked up with an expression of mild interest. "That so? Who is the town marshal now? I can't keep track of them."

"Not is—was," corrected his informant. "Name was Sam Fortune."

"Now ain't that too bad?" sympathized Craig. "With a name like that you'd sort of expect better things was in store for him. Who shot him?"

"Brad Becker. Brad and him got in an argument over the name of an author. They were both lit. Becker claimed the book was wrote by Shakespeare and Fortune said it was wrote by a man named Bunyan. They were too literary for me."

"Ain't it the truth?" Joe Craig wagged his head sorrowfully. "Did they say what book it was they were arguing about?" "Yes, they did. It was Paradise Lost or something like that. . . . What in hell are you laughing at?"

For a moment Craig was speechless with mirth. A few of his companions smiled but others exchanged bewildered looks. "That," said Craig finally, "is what comes of pursuing the higher learning too far. Where's Becker now?"

"He headed for the border. But he'll be back. Fortune wasn't killed in the line of duty and Becker wasn't resistin' arrest or anything. They got in an argument, called each other a liar and got mad. Fortune drawed and Brad was quicker. You can't convict a man for that."



At the sound of the boy's "Daddy!" Harrison's eyes wavered. In that instant Benton fired.

real mad and I'm likely to forget myself. You can leave now. Me and the boys are aiming to eat and we don't want our appetites spoiled none by the presence of complaining dyspeptics. And don't forget to pay your reckoning," he added.

Benton's cheeks glowed an angry red beneath their fringe of beard. "Anybody," he muttered, "can act like a real bad man when he has six more behind him to back him up."

"You know enough about my daily routine to know when to catch me alone. I'd be real glad to accommodate you any time. Matter of fact, there's nothing to prevent you and me from going up the street right now and pursuing the debate to a satisfactory conclusion."

He waited for an answer to his invitation. None was forthcoming.

"Another thing," he flung at Benton as the latter, with his two followers, strode toward the door, "when I told you the Bak K was getting tired of seeing you around I was kind of careless in my wording. Plying party calls at night when no one's looking was barred, too." He turned his back deliberately and sat down.

"Me, now," he was saying fifteen minutes later as he busily plied knife and fork. "I'd say this was real good beef. Still, I'm not so hard to please as Tom Benton. Bill," he addressed Lillie, "you take by advice and keep a supply of poison handy to season Benton's food with."

Lillie smiled. "I'll take it under advisement. It was real nice of you to get him off my back."

"You don't know what a pleasure it was. I fired Benton from the Bar K for two reasons. He was a bully, and I was satisfied he was withholding valuable information as to the whereabouts of some Bar K cows that was lost, strayed or stole. Some more of our stock was run off the range about a month ago and I guess I kind of hinted to him that he was more or less suspected."

One of Craig's companions snorted. "Hinted! I'd like to hear you when you're real plain spoken."

Craig turned once more to his supper. A frown had gathered between his sandy eyebrows. Somewhere down the

"Not in Caldwell, anyway." Craig turned to address the other Bar K men. "You boys going up to Mag's place?"

"We'd sort of counted on it," one of them said.

"Go ahead, then. I'm staying here to talk a bit to my friend Bill Lillie. Don't go getting in any literary arguments and don't shoot up the musicians' gallery. I like enthusiasm but it has its limits."

He lingered at his table, smoking a cigar, until the last of the supper crowd had left. Then, followed by Lillie, he walked to the door, where he stood looking out on Caldwell. It was nearly dark now. To the west the sunset traced an orange glow against the horizon. A bird called. Off to the south there sounded the mournful cry of a coyote.

"Tom Evans," Craig said to Lillie, "was telling me you was hoping for the day when Oklahoma would be opened for settlement. Bill, you've been listening to bad advice. If people want to settle somewhere, why don't they fill up western Kansas first? That's Indian country down below the line. Also it's cow country, and if the noble red men are willing to permit the use of their lands for grazing, why let 'em graze. Me, now, I'm a cowman. Why don't you come to work for Titus Moore? The Bar K will be glad to have you."

"I'm obliged," said Lillie, "for the offer. Right now I've got other ideas. I'm trying to land a teacher's job in the Indian school at Pawnee. I taught country school for a while back in Illinois."

Craig was watching two figures moving toward them through the twilight. The taller figure was that of a man about 35, slender and tall. There was about him, in the cut of his clothing, in his calm, deliberate movement, an air of elegance. He wore a frock coat, a round-crowned soft hat, lower and smaller of brim than Craig's. He was smooth-shaven, except for thin black sideburns that descended nearly to his jaw.

The boy with him must have been 12 or thereabouts. He was dark like the other and had the same black eyes. His hat, which he carried in his hand, permitting the cool breeze to ruffle his wavy hair, was a small replica of the man's and his slight figure was set off with a dark blue velvet jacket, fastened in front by means of braid loops.

A pitying smile played about Gordon Lillie's lips. "Poor kid," he said softly. The sight of Anthony Harrison never failed to evoke his sympathy, possibly because of the impression of loneliness the boy always gave him.

The Harrisons were talking, the man smiling and shaking his head at something, the boy serious-faced. When they drew within earshot the man stopped his laughter and fell silent. Gordon Lillie spoke to him. "Evening," he said courteously, and Harrison, staring straight ahead, made no reply but nodded shortly and went on.

Lillie plucked at his lip. He was not surprised or hurt at the rebuff. He had learned enough about Jeff Harrison in the short time they both had been in Caldwell to know something of the man's strange ways. A taciturn man, curt, grave, unbending only when he was with his boy. Father and son had come to Caldwell a while back and were living alone in a little cabin on the town's edge. Jeff Harrison spent every evening of the week, save two, gambling. It was rumored that he gave those evenings to his boy, and sometimes the two were to be seen strolling along the broad main street but more often a light burned in their cabin and their silhouettes could be seen bending over a rude table against the lamplight.

Joe Craig threw away his cigar and gazed at the backs of the departing Harrisons. "Bill," he said after a minute, "that's a mighty handsome little boy."

"Takes after his father. I can't help feeling sorry, somehow, for Tony Harrison. No mother, and a gambler for a father. Leastwise, I don't know anything else Jeff Harrison does for a living."

"Any little boy without a mother," remarked Craig, "sort of takes hold of my sympathies."

"The boy," Gordon Lillie continued, "has to sit around all alone at night and wait for his daddy to come home. Some evenings he goes with him and waits outside."

"Don't he ever go inside?"

"His daddy won't permit it. Jeff Harrison's a gambler, but he ain't a common one. Another thing, I've never seen him speak to a woman since he's been in Caldwell. The boy don't, either. There's a rumor going around that Jeff Harrison has brought him up to have nothing to do with them."

"Now that's kind of queer," pronounced Joe Craig.

He departed a few minutes later. "Think I'll be traveling up to Mag Wood's place. Have to keep an eye on the boys. They can stand just so much liquor and then they feel an irresistible desire to shoot things up. It's just plain animal spirits with them, but I don't approve of it myself—not when I'm responsible for them to the colonel."

Mag Wood's place was one of the most pretentious buildings in Caldwell and Mag herself was a remarkable woman. She had reputedly made a fortune with her big dance hall, just across the Arkansas river from Wichita, and when the boom hit Caldwell she moved down to the new town to lure the freely squandered dollars of the free and easy souls who came there for their periodical flings.

For Caldwell was raw and wide open. Its trigger finger perpetually trembled. There was little law enforcement in the town; men quarreled and killed in Caldwell and walked on about their business, or rode south four miles and crossed the border of No Man's Land. Over night, almost, it had become a haven for the worst element along the frontier, and Mag Wood's dance hall, nicknamed the Red Light, because of the bright red lamp that hung over the door, became the hangout of some of the toughest.

Mag herself was not without a sense of humor. Evidence of it was found in the sheet iron and boiler plate fortification she had reared around her musicians. The mortality among dance hall music makers, especially in the Red Light, was high, and only the hardiest spirits dared risk the flying bullets that were a nightly accompaniment to the festivities.

Jeff Harrison was standing at the bar, drinking quietly, when Joe Craig entered. The handsome gambler's gaze swept over him as he came in, then turned back to the bar. Craig managed to range alongside. Every time the door opened, he noticed, Harrison turned to scrutinize the newcomer.

"Apparently lookin' for someone," Craig said to himself. Acting on a sudden impulse, he spoke quietly in the gambler's ear. "I'd consider it an honor if you'd have a little drink with me."

Jeff Harrison turned his searching brown eyes on the blond cowboy and hesitated half a minute before answering. Then, with a slight smile that seemed to heighten rather than lessen his gravity, he accepted. "I'd be glad to," he said quietly.

To his great annoyance, Craig was called away by two of the Bar K men before he could follow up the opening. When he started back, he saw Harrison do a surprising thing; one of the dance hall girls who had been casting ardent glances at the slender, elegant figure, sidled up to the gambler and seized his arm.

"Probably asking him to buy a drink," Craig was thinking.

But Harrison, after a casual glance at her, deliberately turned his back and went out, his face an expressionless mask. The girl stared after him in astonishment and anger, then shrugged and walked away. When Craig noticed her next she was making love to a little bow-legged bantam rooster of a cowboy.

Gordon Lillie came in. "I just passed Jeff Harrison," he told Craig. "He was headed for the Big Buffalo saloon. I expect he will be playing poker the rest of the evening."

Craig pushed back his big hat and scratched his head. "Now that man Harrison sort of captures my interest. He's a gentleman, whatever he is. I'll be darned if I don't like him."

The bantam rooster of a cowboy was balancing his new-found lady friend on one knee while on the other he rested the hand holding his six-shooter and pumped bullets in the floor. Mag Wood herself bore down on him, but before she could round up the celebrant he had flung his arm up with a loud "Whoopee!" and fired in the air. The bullet rang against the iron plate protecting the musicians. The music stopped suddenly and the fiddler stuck his head out and looked wrathfully down.

"If you-all don't quit that damn foolishness down there," he threatened, "you ain't gonna have no orchestry. I'm havin' (Continued on page 6.)