

## CHAPTER I

### ON THE GREAT DIVIDE

**F**ORTY years ago I rode the first forbidden trail which was to carry me into the broad highway of outlawry.

Across the span of the years I can still hear the echo of my horse's drumming feet as I careened out of a hectic New Mexico mining camp with a posse at my heels and the protesting yelp of guns in my ears.

I was then in my nineteenth year.

This first lawless act had not been deliberated. It grew out of a chance encounter in a remote desert community to which I had come without any definite purpose. Discovery of a crooked gambling deal, a flaming sense of outrage, the hot desire to strike back, a shot or two—and the thing was done.

After that I was fair game for any man hunter.

Swiftly the escapade carried me toward that dark celebrity which I shared for years with certain of my brothers and other stirrup companions known as the Dalton gang.

From here presently I shall cast back to gather all the threads of my own life and that of my ill-fated comrades of the desperate fraternity in an authentic

recital of events which marked the farewell of an epoch in frontier brigandage.

It is the first complete and valid record of the career of the Dalton boys. Our clan was the most spectacular and widely roving band of border outlaws. Our forays were upon express trains and banks. And of these raids at least five were ranked as of first magnitude, the final one ending in the most deadly street battle of the West.

I begin the narrative with the New Mexican adventure because my share in the turbulent and tragic history of the Dalton maraudings runs sharply to and from that peak of my young manhood. As sharply as the hot, savage land lifts to the Continental Divide in whose shadow I went renegade. From that red-letter day I can best survey the evolution of an outlaw of the old school.



We were swinging across from Silver City toward Santa Rosa, five riders in the evening sun—my elder brother Bob Dalton, George Newcomb, Charley Bryant, William McElhanie, and myself, the youngest of the party. We were on our way back to the Indian Territory, whence we had come on an uneasy and aimless migration. Drifting.

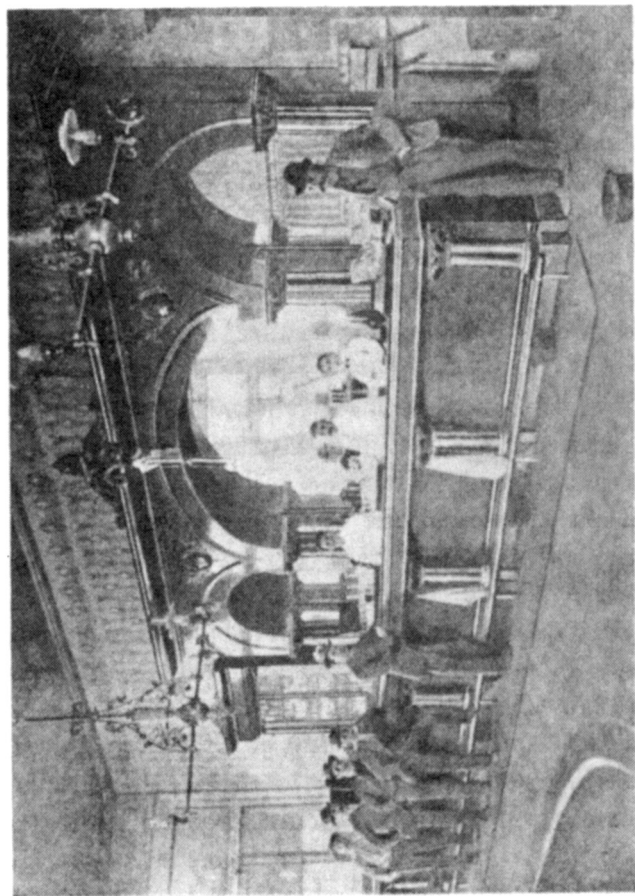
What was to happen within the hour was an impulsive thing. But for days the ferment of explosive emotions had been churning within us. Bob Dalton,



### THE OLD-TIME GAME OF FARO

IT WAS SUCH A GAME as this that sent the Dalton Boys over the great divide into outlawry.

NOTE: An actual photograph of the Orient Saloon, Bisbee, Arizona. The first man on the left is Tony Downs, the saloon-keeper. Seated at the far left corner of the table beyond the case-keeper, is a music hall singer named Doyle. Behind Doyle is Dutch Kid, a town character, and Sleepy Dick, the Porter, is just to the right. Charlie Bassett stands behind the look-out. The dealer is Johnny Murphy and next to him in the silk hat is Smiley Lewis, Beau Brummel of Bisbee. From the N. H. Rose Collection of Old-time Photographs.



THE FAMOUS CRYSTAL BAR IN TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA. The saloon of the old West was more than a place to drink. It was a social institution, the rendezvous for friends and enemies, and the forerunner of city and country clubs. *From the N. H. Rose Collection of Old-time Photographs.*

the dominant man of the little cavalcade, had recently resigned as United States deputy marshal in the Indian Territory in protest of what he considered unfair treatment by his superiors. He had wanted to get as far away as possible from the scenes of his former official duties. A considerable amount of unpaid wages was involved. The affair was galling him. And the rest of us, bound together in loose fraternity, had become infected by his morose mood. I believe all of us had a presentiment of impending trouble. Perhaps some readiness to violence was already crouching in our hearts.

The sun swooped down a yellow sky behind the ramparts of the great divide. Mountain shadows enveloped us. Ahead across the saffron desert lights pricked out, dancing in the heat waves that still rose from the earth. We spurred our horses. Man and beast were hungry. We jogged into a large mining camp and had chuck at a Chinese restaurant. The Chinaman steered us to a faro game in an adjacent saloon.

Like most saloons of the day, it offered the three prime diversions of the frontier oasis: drink, dancing, and gambling. A Mexican orchestra was setting a tempo for the hectic life of the place—a rootin'-tootin' bedlam of miners, cowboys, professional gamblers, and professional women, all bent upon satisfying primitive passions. Stacks of gold and silver glistened in the gaming racks. Revolver butts shone from hol-

sters. The light flashed from the teeth of smiling señoritas and their paler sisters.

Our crowd bucked the faro. I appointed myself lookout, having previously paid the price for what I knew about faro. It didn't take me long to discover that the game was crooked. But Bob and the others had already lost considerable money. Quietly I tipped off the boys. This crude attempt to trim us served suddenly to fan a heated temper into flame. The crooked gambler in all times and places has aroused a violent sense of outrage in his victim. To be played for a sucker is probably the ultimate insult to a man's pride.

Casually we gathered at the bar. We looked at one another and made our resolve.

"Hands up!"

I snarled it in unison with the other four. Our guns had leaped out with one accord. The almost spontaneous action showed how neatly our minds were already attuned to any challenge. We held the guns on the startled dealer, on the proprietor and the forty-odd patrons and hirelings of the place.

Hands up! The old barking dare of the frontier. The assertion of final and unequivocal resort to force. The readiness to make the issue deadly, if need be. . . . Myself saying them for the first time in lawless exclamation—those fateful words.

Every hand lifted. We raked the crooked gambler's spoils off the table, from his rack. We were taking back our own, plus punitive damages.

"This may teach you how to treat strangers," said Bob Dalton.

With furtive courage some of the bolder señoritas were slipping money and jewelry into "ladies' purses." Here and there came the swift flash of a bright garter. We had to keep an eye peeled to see everything in those moments of shifting movement behind the up-raised hands.

"No need o' that," drawled Newcomb with a polite smile at the apprehensive women hiding their gems. "None o' us fellers sports any rocks." We had no desire, and there was no need, to molest any but the faro dealer.

We backed to the door. In a moment we had mounted our horses. A fusillade to discourage pursuit, and we were storming out of camp.

The charter members of the Dalton band had set out upon their extensive career of outlawry.

The following morning we were riding eastward toward the Neutral Strip, the lonely gateway to the Indian Territory. Leisurely we paced, not afflicted by any fretting sense of guilt. Meantime, during the night, a mixed posse—mostly Mexicans—had set out in pursuit. The camp had felt its touchy frontier pride challenged.

Looking back from the lip of a deep arroyo, we saw the approaching whirlwind of the posse's dust. Presently they were drumming at our heels. We were considerably amazed. We hadn't counted on this spirited

resentment. It was to be a fight, after all. Fair enough. That suited our touchy mood exactly. It's a soul-stirring thing to go into action, if you like to fight. And none of us had ever been averse to it.

Seven of them; five of us. Unsheathing rifles, we defiled across to the far side of a brushy canyon. Following the course we had anticipated, the pursuers hove into view about one hundred and fifty yards away. They had evidently expected a running battle. Perhaps a volley or two would have satisfied their sense of duty. Seeing us come to bay, they became reluctant.

*"Vengan hombres—allá están!"* shouted the leader, spurring forward. "Kill them!"

Bob opened fire. The rest of us followed suit. The leader's horse reared and whirled. By this time we had dismounted. As I had leaped from the saddle our pack horse ambled dutifully up beside me. In the first return volley a rifle ball struck a frying pan in the animal's pack, ricocheted, and dealt me a flesh wound in the right arm. The posse wavered. We mounted and charged across the canyon.

*"Retireense!"* bellowed the Mexican.

His fellows needed no urging. Before they gained the sheltering brush Bob's Winchester had taken toll of another horse. The rider hit the ground running. They were gone like rabbits in the chaparral. The honor of the mining camp had been vindicated plenty so far as this posse was concerned.

Of our crowd I was the only one scratched. This



was the first time my flesh had ever been seared by hot lead. The scar of it lies close to the deep, arm-shattering furrow which a Coffeyville citizen gave me as a memento of my last fight some years later. It infuriated and somehow belittled me. I wanted to pursue the retreating posse and get satisfaction.

"Come on," restrained Bob, "forget it!"

But it was not to be so lightly forgotten, this almost comic opera scrimmage on the fringe of the Staked Plains, wild and desolate. I bathed my wound at a little asequia and bandaged it with a cud of tobacco. I'm afraid I said some rather harsh things to the faithful pack horse as we resumed our ride.

Report of the New Mexican episode spread like prairie fire. It gave us a certain "gang" identity and stamped us with dangerous repute. It raced ahead of us through the lonely lands into Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. It spread westward to California where other Dalton brothers lived, soon to blaze up there in disastrous flash.

I recollect a sudden disturbing thought as we jogged across the high plains with their swimming horizons. I was riding close behind Bob, three years my senior; Bob, who was always so confident, valiant, and decisive. Always since puppyhood we had trudged or ridden close together. Now I watched him in the saddle ahead of me, broad shoulders swaying easily to the horse's lurch, quiet, leading the way. The squeaking of the saddles made a sort of melancholy music.

"Where," I reflected, "are we going?"

Home, of course; back to the green hills and swales of Oklahoma; back to the main cluster of our scattered family.

"But not quite home any more," I thought.

Something had weaned me away. Maybe those shots back yonder. Maybe the long ride, which now seemed to be endless. Something had been severed. I was a man now. I had been up against the smoke. I looked at my bandaged arm. Got to go it alone now, along strange paths, me and my horse and gun.

"That suits me," I decided, answering some unseen challenge.

The mountains of New Mexico huddled back along the western horizon—bleak and goomy.



The very aspect of the land spoke of lawlessness. Impossible wholly to resist its sly insinuations as our horses marched the dim trails. Nature itself jeered at the petty adjustments of mankind, here where the fantastic buttes crouched in stony contemplation; where the desert lay eternally wide and still; where life and death seemed of small concern, and not even echoes came back from any cry of distress or beseechment.

Here whining arrow, gunshot and bloodshed, and ravishment of every sort were an old familiar tale beside azure peak and red eruption.

"Be free and bold and take what comes!" The wind

whispered it in the cholla and the greasewood, and my saddle creaked the refrain. It was a seductive invitation to a youth of nineteen who already accounted himself tough.

That was forty years ago. Now I am fifty-nine. Across the intervening span I look back upon that gangling young ghost of myself, rifled, spurred, dusty, and a bit troubled as he rode beside his fellows; look back upon him and through him to childhood, recollecting what he was, what shaped him, from what breed he sprang—he and the blood brothers of the Dalton clan.

Of that marauding band I am the sole survivor. The rest have gone these many years, with their boots on. In fact, I am one of the very few yet alive of that whole elder school of border outlaws whose kind rides no more. And now that I am dry behind the ears I have a yearning to tell truthfully the tale of the Daltons and others of the old-timers whose lives and exploits have been so often garbled, fantastically romanticized, or vaguely related.

It may have some historic interest, helping to correct the distorted perspective of the old West. It may cast some sidelight on the resurgent wave of outlawry centered now in cities, along the skyscraper frontier. At least it will give the whole and intimate story of one representative freebooter of his period, who by some miracle of fate and human understanding has

lived long enough to translate the explosive and insensate language of his guns.

The tale will recount contacts with many of the less exploited desperadoes, as well as some of the more widely celebrated figures of the last frontier.

It will have dreadful and sinister things in it, of course: swift foray, desperate encounter, and the ultimate tests of reckless manhood; hot saddles, cracking guns, and last stands in a fated hour; fantastic courage and inglorious defeat—splendid things and mean, on both sides of the law's deadline. The sowing of black oats, and the terrible harvest.

And to leaven the wild antic of hair-trigger men in hair pants, the story also will have the romantic presence of women, gentle, stoic, and tempestuous, whose lives were entwined with the destiny of outlawed Daltons.

The guns that once gleamed in our hands have long since rusted away. The antagonisms we then hotly pursued have vanished like a mirage. The cell in which I made expiation for fourteen years has been occupied by many succeeding "penitents" during the past two decades. The scars of battle are healed. There will be no whine or alibi or spleen in what I shall set down.

With that as my prospectus and my viewpoint, let us go back to a little Missouri community shortly after the Civil War, a region where many notorious marauders were cradled.



















