



Cassidy's Last Ride

by DESMOND STONE

"SHOOT-UPS," his wife called them. Garry Cassidy himself preferred to call them Westerns, sagas of the open air. He read them as casually and as regularly as the drinkers in the Kelvin knocked back their handles, except that he did not feel he lost anything through froth. But he liked good value for his money; just as his cobbler insisted on a bigger glass with a Plimsoll mark, so he preferred his novels to run to 200 pages at least.

All the lending libraries in Invercargill could not keep Garry going. With others of his kind, he swarmed on the shelves as soon as the new Westerns were put out. And he had so many images in his mind of sheriffs and rustlers and cow-girls quick on the trigger that he did not know which book he had read and which he had not. Sometimes it was not until the very last chapter that he realised he had shot out the gun battle before.

Garry rode once every year with the Birchwood Hunt. He had grown up with horses and he was glad he lived far enough from town to have his own grazing paddock. Garry's wife swore that he loved Silver more than he loved her. But this, Garry declared, was nonsense. He loved one as much as the other. Valma, too, could have lumps of sugar if she wanted them; all he asked was a little moist nuzzling. The members of the Hunt agreed that Garry sat wonderfully well on his horse, though they did not approve all that he did. They found his "yippees" unnerving, and they could see no reason why he should call a perfectly good horse a mustang.

But this, for a man who read so much, was a small carry over into life. For the rest of the year, Garry lived quietly and irreproachably, getting the messages from the store, biking into a head wind to work, tucking the safety-pin in his mouth while he changed the baby's nappkin. It was only when the twilight faded and the libraries opened that he stepped

outside his small corner of the world. Then he was a man who lived dangerously and violently, hurrying the covered wagons into a circle before the redskins arrived, stopping his buckskin gelding to scan the purple sage for renegades, on the run, emptying his holster so quickly that the gun jumped into his hand.

GARRY'S wife disapproved strongly, for what good was a man who neglected the odd jobs about the house? But she could not wean him from his reading. Fresh from carrying the mail on the Pony Express, he would go to the door and pity the postman as he trudged from house to house, with not even a boy with a shanghai to challenge him. Or else he would stand in the porch and sigh as he watched the children in the yard. "Poor unfortunate kids," he would say. "If only we lived in the West! Just think of it. All those prairies to play in. All those buffalo to kill. All those Indians to chase."

When the weekend arrived for Valma to take herself off to her mother's, Garry made the most of his chance. He gave Silver enough feed to last him the day and sat down to a pile of Westerns, reading his way through half them on the Saturday morning. It was not until 4 in the afternoon that he emerged out of doors, a little wan but strangely purposeful. Stepping stealthily, he moved to the middle of the back lawn, knelt on both knees on the grass, and laid an ear to the ground. There it was—a drumming of hooves, faint at first but now loud, so that the ground began to shake beneath him.

"Buffalo," he cried wildly. "Buffalo coming this way!"

Hearing him, Garry's neighbour became almost indignant. "Rubbish," he said. "That's the start of the last race at Riverton. I've got a quid on Haughty. But Red Rustler," he added, "may be dangerous."

Rustlers, that was it! Garry's mission was clear. It was time for a clean-up in

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this southern state. The cattle population had been declining for years. Oh, he knew about the nesters, pushing in with their flocks of sheep and fouling the land. But there was more to it than that. Only rustlers could take such heavy toll of the herds.

Garry went back inside, put on a wide-brimmed hat, threw his wife's red scarf around his throat, strapped two old Army colts to his thighs and walked, as one unaccustomed to walking, across the road to the grazing paddock. Bridling and saddling Silver, he rode like a southerly to town.

It was a minute past six when Garry reined up at the Esk Street police station. Hitching his cayuse to the nearest bicycle rack, he walked, soft as a cat, into the watchhouse.

"Sheriff about?" he drawled in the doorway.

A man in shirt sleeves was one-fingering a typewriter.

"Sorry chum," he said, without looking up, "we've got no one of that name here."

"Then can you swear me in as a deputy?"

The watchhouse cop lifted his head, jamming the keys of his typewriter in his annoyance.

"No, but I'll run you in as a nuisance if you don't buzz off. Go back to your party and behave."

Garry's eyes were like chips of ice.

"Tell me," he said, menace in his voice, "where do the rustlers hide out?"

"Rustlers! What rustlers? I know no rustlers."

Garry knew the man at once for a liar. The set-up was clear. The sheriff was in cahoots with the rustlers. He would get no help from the law. Rage burned within him as he stepped back into the passage. If the sheriff would not help him, he would raise a posse himself. He knew where to find one—men who were not afraid of risks, men who held the law in contempt.

Urging Silver to a gallop, he swept through the town, leaving the streets awash with excited citizens. Not since the days of the hansom cabs and the carrying company draughts, had Invercargill echoed to such a clatter of hooves.

Garry pushed on into the gathering night, stopping and dismounting at the first highly-lit tavern. He slipped through the cars in the yard and tried the front entrance. But the swinging doors wouldn't swing. Stepping back a pace, he hurled himself forward. The door splintered and he burst inside.

There was a cry and a scatter, and 30 drinkers were diving for cover—jumping out windows, scrambling under chairs, hurdling tables and rushing out doors in a pantomime of panic. A minute later and the bar was clear. But all around

the room were projecting boots, and disembodied legs, and heads that floated free. It was Salvador Dali at his best.

Garry preened himself a little. His reputation as a gunslinger had preceded him. In the first silence since prohibition, he weaved across the floor and planted a foot upon the rail. He sent a coin spinning along the counter and called for a drink.

"Stranger to these parts?"

Garry fixed two steely blue eyes on the barman. "Yeah," he drawled. The West had taught him to keep his lips tight.

"You come from far?"

Garry looked hard at the barman and gave him the benefit of the doubt.

"I bin around," he replied, waving an arm. "Nevada, Utah, Arizona, done a bit of punching in them all."

"Then stranger," said the barman, "let me give you some advice. Never come in a door like that again after 6. It's bad for the nerves and bad for business."

Garry said nothing but looked contemptuously around as the room came to life and the drinkers crawled from concealment. He wanted no yellow-livered curs for his posse.

Out of the corner of a narrowed eye, he saw the barman bend down behind the counter. Stepping back, Garry jerked savagely at his holsters. He had a little trouble with his draw, but finally ended up with a Colt in either hand. "Reach," he said to the astounded man. "Lay that shot-gun down."

Reappearing with nothing more dangerous than a foaming glass, the barman did as he was told. But when the beer began to trickle down his arm, he felt it was time to protest.

"Don't you want your drink?" he asked plaintively.

Apologising coolly ("Plumb careless of me," he put it), Garry lowered his gun and moved back to the bar.

"You want to be careful, son," he was told. "One of those things might go off."

The sneer rubbed Garry on the raw. Swiftly he raised his right arm again and gestured at the nearest light bulb. "Judge for yourself," he said, and took careless aim. A shot rang out and a bottle of New Zealand wine collapsed into splinters on the shelf. The crowd laughed and the tension slackened. Disconcerted, Garry aimed again at the light, more deliberately this time. Another shot sounded and a roar of rage went up from the bar. The bullet had punctured a cask on the floor and glorious beer was running to waste. There was a wild surge from the crowd and Garry backed toward the door, 44s sweeping in a menacing half-circle. Then with a step and a jump, he moved out the door and swung his legs over the saddle.

If, he resolved, he could find no one to ride with him, he would ride the trail alone. It was a quiet night and even the coyotes slept. Twisting in the saddle, Garry peered through the darkness. There, low on the Takitimus, was the flickering light of a fire. He stopped puzzled. For one hideous moment he thought it was a band of Sioux down off the reservation. But no Sioux ever left a trail like that. Then he knew it for what it was—the campfire of rustlers ready to swoop.

Lashing his horse to a gallop, Garry raced through the night to give warning