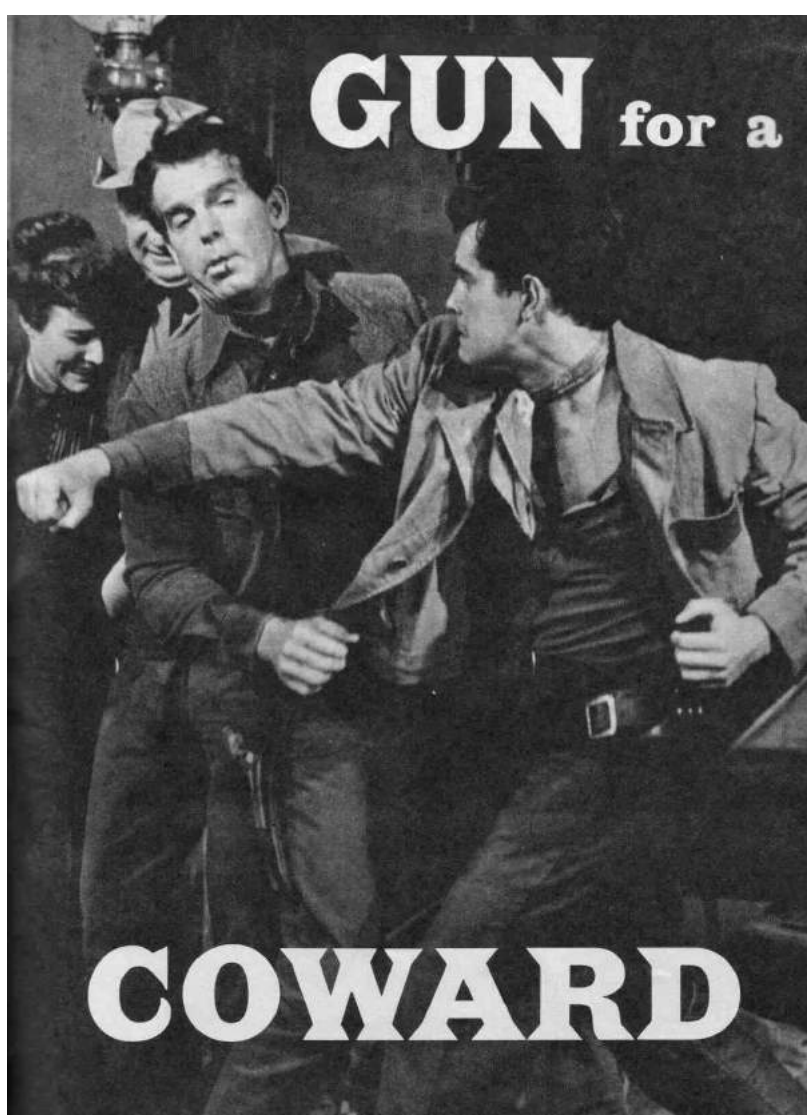


Fred MacMurray
Jeff Hunter
Janice Rule in



It was more'n Bless could stand—first Will callin' him a Cain, a brother-killer; then sayin' he was a woman-stealer. Bless lashed out.

**Jest 'cause a man's shy of fightin'
don't mean he's less a man.
Least that's what Bless proved**

• Roam the old West from the Rio Grande to Cheyenne country, you won't find blood brothers less alike than the three sons Minor Keough left behind him when he died too young, of a rattlesnake's bite.

The oldest boy, Will, had to hitch his belt and step into his Pa's big boots. Fight to build our Moonbrand herd. Fight to scrub a ranch out of wild Texas acres. All hard grind for Will, and no time for pleasin'.

Harry, the youngest, us hands called Hade. He was full of Hades, all right enough. Riskin' his neck like hell a dozen times a day for crazy reasons: breakin' some pony he hadn't the know-how to ride, fightin', shootin'.

Bless, he was the middle boy. The one just growed past his teens, this time I'm tellin' about. Apple of his mother's eye, Bless was.

Gentle-raised, Hannah Keough hated the hard life of Texas with a savage kind of hatin'. It fixed itself first on her man. She'd blamed Minor bitter for bringin' her out from the civilized East. When Minor died, she switched her resentment onto poor Will's wide shoulders. Young Hade she had no love for either. She hadn't wanted another baby, and her man had forced him on her.

But Bless was different. Bless she'd wanted. Bless she cherished.

Bless didn't fit into frontier livin' like his older or younger brothers. His ma was always naggin' at him to go back to

St. Louis with her and study to be a doctor or a lawyer. And Bless just naturally ran his life by reason instead of fast action, just naturally stood aside from violence.

Us hands looked on while Bless backed away from many a thing young Hade would've ate up whole. Breakin' a mean stallion—Bless would *make* himself try that. It was a ranchman's job, and Bless did his job. But a gunfight, a hell-for-leather race, a barroom brawl—those things were different.

If he hadn't sidestepped them natural, Miz Keough would've made him do it. "This terrible land!" she'd blaze out. "You're not a cowhand, Bless, you're my son. I want more for you than working a ranch."

• Down Texas way, those days, women-folk were few and far between. But one of our prettiest was Aud Nevin, daughter of old Andy Nevin, Moonbrand's good friend and neighbor. She and Bless grew up from bein' kids together.

But it was Will that had spoke for Aud's hand. Us folks all knew he aimed to marry her, soon's he got the ranch out of debt and could stop drivin' himself for long enough to pay some heed to her happiness.

Take that day of the nester trouble. Andy and his daughter Aud had ridden over to us to report new squatters on the Stringer range—and Stringer off drunk, as usual. Ought the neighbors to take steps? Like his pa'd been, Will was leader of the cattlemen and had to do the decidin'.

While they talked it out, Bless took Aud to the barns to see our black mare comin' to foal—with the colt promised to Bless. He was shy and quiet with Aud Nevin, was Bless; but you could see somethin' akin to jealousy in his face when Aud teased his brother Will for missin' his trip to the Nevinses two Saturdays runnin'.

"Your place is a half a day's ride," Will said, like he expected a girl to understand. "There was a lot of fence that needed repairin'."

Her head tossed. "You plan on marryin' without *any* courtin'? ..."

Andy and Will talked about the nesters. And down at the barn, Aud and Bless studied the mare until Will came after Aud.

"Your pa's ready to start back home," he told her. "Wish *you* weren't." He looked down at her, controlled but hungry-like. "*Soon*, Aud."

"I'm past child age, Will," she said, her voice unsteady. "I—I have to finish becomin' a woman. I can't do it alone. I need you."

Off she and her pa Andy rode, and the storm that had been gatherin' all day

brooded darker after they'd left. All durin' that early evenin', Hannah raked at her poor eldest Will, with her usual talk of takin' Bless east to live.

"I've heard this nester talk before! Bless and me won't be around to see more range war! We're goin' back to St. Louis. He's only a boy—"

"You're makin' him so," Will said, "wrappin' him up in your skirts. *I'm* your blood, too. Hade's your last-born, and you treat him like he was whelped by a coyote. You're nursin' Bless so's he'll get lost for sure."

"He *won't* get lost. I'll hold his hand. I know what's best for him."

Outside, storm brewed too. By night, when I called Will to the stable to see to the mare, rain hit the roof like war-drums. We'd been at work just a spell, by yellow lantern light, when Bless came pantin' in to help. The foal was born before Mrs. Keough flew into the stall, frantic for her Bless.

"You're soaked!" she protested, lookin' at him anxious-like.

"The mare foaled, Ma," Bless said, excited. "Colt's mine!"

"You'll be needing a horse in St. Louis?" She sounded smug.

Bless shook his dark head. "I—I just don't want to go right now, Ma."

"Is that how it is, Bless?" She'd got somethin' behind the mere words from her middle son's voice. "If you want to make your life here, I guess here I should end mine. I bore three sons, two on this ranch. I'll not leave alone."

There was no time for answerin' that. We all heard the fast hoofbeats then. It was Aud spurrin' in out of the rain, white and desperate. She and her pa Andy had come on Stringer's nesters slaughterin' a stolen steer, and bullets was swapped. Andy lay pinned under a dead horse, out yonder.

I got the buckboard like Will ordered, and Bless saddled horses. It was on for dawn before we got where Andy lay. We pulled him clear, fed him whisky for the pain, and while Will rode out to hunt the nesters I set Andy's smashed leg like I'd been taught before I could sit a saddle. Bless tried to ride with Will, seein' it his duty. But Will, bein' in authority, made him stay to help Aud.

Singlehanded, Will cleared the sullen nesters off Stringer's range. Then he met Stringer himself, who was ridin' home drunk from town with Danny—his one remainin' hand—and talked cold turkey. Bless meantime drove Andy home to the Nevin place on the buckboard, with pretty Aud and me ridin' herd.

• Once she knew Bless meant to stay on the ranch, Hannah Keough gave up. It was a shock to see how she aged, that next six months. When she took to her

bed, Aud came over and nursed her. At the end, Doc sent Hade runnin' to fetch in Bless. But it was all over too quick; Will sat by the bed alone when the good Lord took his ma.

It was bad, hearin' Will break up and cry. "Ma, let me tell you," he begged, like he was lost somewhere. "I love you too, Ma—"

But the last she breathed to her first-born was, "Tell Bless I couldn't wait for him."



Bless was Ma's pet. Day Ma died, Will kept sayin', "I love ya, too, Ma!"

We buried her on the hill, alongside her husband Minor. More months went by, and Bless's foal grewed to a fine yearling, and the herd was ready to head for Abilene. Like always, we had a barbecue the night before the trail drive.

That was the night, while the rest of us was sashayin' around the big fire, that Aud went to find Bless up the hill.

Aud said, "Will's goin' to ask me formal to marry him."

"That's fine, Aud. Will's a good man."

"It's not *my* lovin' Will that keeps us apart!" Aud cried out, and she meant her and Bless. "It's *your* lovin' him! Tell me what your heart says. Say it, Bless, say it!"

"It says—it says you're my brother's promised."

"I love *you!*" And they were locked together, then; roped, throwed, branded, clingin' tight.

Afterwards, she said she'd have to tell Will.

"No," Bless said. "It's for me to do." His face worked, but his voice was strong. Strong and sad, sad, sad. "They're dancin' down in the corral."

The fiddle and jew's-harp had feet shufflin', when the two came into the corral out of the dark. Young Hade was raisin' whoop-de-doo, like always, and even old Will was relaxed. Right soon, he took Aud's arm and led her off into the shadows.

"Aud," he said, smilin' down, "after this drive maybe I can rest. Hade's plannin' to take a wife. Soon as the drive's over, payin' for Moonbrand will be done. I've been thinkin' to set a date for *you* to wed with *me*."

"Will, please don't talk about—" Her

eyes fell. "Things change."

"I know. And now we're drivin' your pa's herd up to Abilene with ours. It can be a double weddin' with Hade and Claire, in Abilene..."



Bless loved Aud—but she was promised to Will, so Bless couldn't speak up.

I was tellin' the assembled feasters my story about the time a Indian arrow cut clean through my windpipe and I pulled her out and went right on fightin', when first I noticed that Stringer and his hand Danny had joined the doin's.

Right up to Bless, Stringer strode. "Been to town lately? Checkin' mortgage on my place?" The music died. "Mentioned you'd like to buy the bank out and add my land to yours? Long as I can pull a trigger—"

Bless just stood there. "It's the bank's land. You're just sorta usin' it. Pullin' triggers isn't goin' to raise cattle. Or fix the fences."

Hade moved in then. "You tryin' to buy him out from the bank, Bless?"

"I figured to talk to Will. We could take his debts and pay him extra."

Stringer went purple. "I don't hold with land-stealers."

"We'll pay for it," Bless said. "And you can have a job with us."

"I'd as soon ride with a jackal as with you, Bless Keough!"

Around the fire, breaths sucked in. It was an ugly insult. But Bless spoke quietly. "Your pressin' me won't save your land."

"You've got high and mighty ways!" Stringer roared. "What can you do to back 'em up? Show me you're *man* enough to take away what's mine!"

The challenge was there in the open. But Bless made no move to pick it up. Young Hade was the one that swung the punch to send Stringer sprawlin'. Then Will came up, big and solid, shovin' between.

"Bless made a fair offer," Will said.

"Yes or no? You've borrowed to the limit, like all of us. Only you haven't paid it off."

Then it was like Stringer was really relieved to have the saddle of debts lifted off his back. Will and Hade led him off to pow-wow about terms. I made a sign to the fiddler, and the music started screechin' again. Tensions relaxed. But some of the boys looked sideways as Bless and Aud went by.

"Everybody was sort of expectin' me to fight," Bless was sayin', slow-like. "It was Hade that hit him. And Will that shut him up."

"What difference does it make? You beat him *your* way."

"It makes a difference to folks that would have done it another."

- We got our lines of bawlin' cattle movin' out of the home valley toward Abilene by sun-up. Us hands ranged along their flanks, keepin' them on the prod. North lay days of sparse scrub, with dust kicked up like a chokin' curtain.

Hade rode with all his crazy young energy glintin' in his eyes. Bless sat thoughtful in his saddle. Will kept things orderly, day after poker-hot day, with Stringer grumblin' because he and Danny had to ride drag and eat dust. Myself, I figured he complained just 'cause he didn't like workin'.

The country turned from rollin' hills to rocky canyons. We had to keep rangin' the flanks to hold the herd compact. We'd made a night camp somewheres close off from a dead town called Arroyo Seco, when Will found out sugar was low. Hade had plumb forgot to see to loadin' the chuck wagon.

Cowboys on drives without sweetenin' for their coffee can get mighty mean. So Will sent Hade to town, with Bless to chaperone him. The way we all heard later, it was at a fleabag saloon there that trouble started.

And Hade, of course, started it. You could count on Hade, that way. After they'd made a deal with the bartender for a jug of molasses, Hade took up with a couple of tired, scrawny females hangin' around the place. Some cheap bandit cut in on him, and Hade protested the shovin', and fast as that the guns was out.

Before shootin' started, though, Stringer and his faithful hand Danny had sauntered in. They'd sneaked off, despite Will's orders, to wet their dusty whistles. Bless was tryin' his quiet best to guide his brother out of there with the molasses they'd come for. But Stringer saw somethin' was stewin'.

"Bless don't mind gettin' stepped on," Hade explained to Stringer. "But I want to hear somethin' soothin' before I leave." That was when one of the bandit's boys

took up the challenge. His six-shooter cracked like a stick breakin'.

Hade was there a split second before him. The bushwhacker took a bullet and fell, shootin' back even as he went down. The lead had been meant for Hade but Danny took it. He dropped, and Stringer drew, and the bandit drew, and a full-scale artillery was all set to develop. Then Bless tossed the molasses keg at the bandit, who had to drop his gun to catch it.

"*Hold it!*" Bless commanded the bandit. And slowly everybody slid his gun back into its holster. Stringer picked up Danny's body, Bless got back his keg, and they filed outside to their horses. We got our sweetenin' maybe a hour or so later. And we dug a grave for Danny, with a wooden cross.

At dawn, when we started the beevies movin' again, Will came on Stringer and young Hade saddled up near the grave. His eyes were icy, fixin' on them.

"Worth the whisky, Stringer?" he demanded, voice like a lash.

Stringer snarled. "Wouldn't of happened if your brother hadn'ta backed down. It was his fight and Hade took it up and so did we." A flat lie. It had been Hade's fight. But Stringer still hated Bless about the bank business—when Bless had snooped around Stringer's accounts.

Will knew it wasn't Bless's battle. "Next time you ride off without orders, don't bother ridin' back," he said. "Get your spot, Stringer. You, too, Hade. And keep that gun out of your hand, unless there's need," he added to his baby brother.

"There was," growled Hade, sullen at bein' tongue-lashed. "Drive cows, Will. I got things to do in Abilene." He peeled away, mad as a hornet.

• You meet up with all kinds, chaperonin' cows through the Panhandle. The three Indian braves that cut in from the hills to meet us, a few days out of Abilene, weren't anythin' special. I'd seen their kind before; and in days when they wore war paint and feathers, not white man's work clothes.

Silent on their ponies, these three watched the herd come on. Their elk and buffalo had been driven away. They had to get meat other ways, now.

I was right beside Will as they reined in facing him. We both knew what was coming. It was part of the expenses of a drive, like beads or a hunting knife might once have been. But Hade spurred up, narrow-eyed.

"Them Injuns lookin' for a free handout again? Give 'em nothin'!"

Bless rode up behind him. "We'll give what's fair, like always."

"How'd half the herd be, Bless?" Hade snorted, contempt all over him. "Fair

enough? Maybe they'll run off and leave us alone then?"

Will told him to hush, and turned to the mangy chief with a gesture of welcome. The red men nodded. Then the chief began. "Four hundred braves in hills." So you could figure fifty or a hundred. "Many guns." That spelled two or three rifles. "Many squaws and children. Long winter." And that was the story, except for the tribute demand: "Twenty head."

But you could figure the Indians wouldn't fight. There were other herds on the trail. They'd collect other loot. Will offered six steers, with Bless concurrin' and Hade mad as spit. The youngest Keough leaned in his saddle.

"And when you take your six beefs," he barked, "go into the hills and stay there! If you come nosin' around, bring your medicine man with you. You'll be needin' him to speak the chant of the dead over you."

The Indians stiffened up, but Bless was right there with the easy word. "He speaks with the words of the young. Accept our gift with honor."

The red men relaxed, accepting the apology too, and rode off down the line. But Hade didn't relax. He was boilin'. "No need to make me small in front of Indians!" he railed at Bless. "Sometimes it sticks my throat to call you brother. A saddle tramp backed you off from that gal in Arroyo Seco. I've had it from you!"

Will swung around on him. "No way for brothers to act."

"Bein' his brother don't change my opinion of him. He's a coward. The men in the bunkhouse laugh behind his back. Won't race his horse, won't mix it up. Won't do nothin' where he might get hurt."

The bad feelin' of the day carried over after dark fell and camp was made. Past midnight, sudden shots brought us up fast out of our bedrolls. Turned out Hade and Stringer had rigged a coiled bullwhip on Bless's chest while he slept and then had made a noise like a rattler whirring. Bless had come up out of sleep into unreasonin' terror, clawed his gun loose and fired at the harmless contraption, while Hade and Stringer guffawed at his panic.

At the gunshots, the scared bawlin' of the cattle had us in our saddles and swingin' rope. It could have been a bad stampede. Beef spooks real easy at gunfire. But we were lucky, that time. Just as I rode back to tell Will trouble was past, I saw him flatten Hade to the dirt with a terrific punch to the jaw. Reckon anyone who'd been a Moonbrand rider fifteen years would know what went on in his mind. Hade ought to've known better, considerin' how it was that, when

their pa moved to keep a seven-year-old Bless from runnin' from a rattler, their pa got killed. Snakes had a special horror for Bless, always after. He thought he'd killed his father. He thought if only he'd held still there wouldn't have been that quick move that made the snake strike. . .

Will led Bless off, arm over his shoulder, talkin' low. "You been tearin' yourself over it for these years. Bless, give it up. I'll stand with you against anything. But I can't fight you for yourself."

"I'm not even sure of the man I am," Bless grieved. "I don't fit, Will. Ma always wanted to leave the ranch. I've made up my mind to leave it, too."

Will gaped at him. "*Why?*"

"I'll tell you true, Will. It's a girl. I figure I'll take my share of the herd and buy me a homestead or maybe some business."

But Will was grinnin' big as daybreak. "A girl? You been courtin' and I didn't even know it? Ranch is big enough for all of us. We'll build you a house. The women'd be company for each other." Bless turned his head away, and Will's elation began to run down. "*Who's the girl?*"

"Aud," Bless answered, sick-like, sayin' what Will already guessed.

Will just stood there. Slow, slow, his big shoulders squared. "You want everythin', don't you?" he said, in a dead man's voice. "Why wasn't I told? Or didn't anybody much care?"

"We cared too much, maybe. We figured maybe it'd grow itself out. It wasn't like that." Bless was close to tears. "It wasn't to hurt you."

Will stared at him bitterly. "And I knocked Hade down!" he said suddenly.

- Next day, the herd hit trail with a difference—almost like they knew Abilene was only one more stanza ahead. On toward noon, Will cut out and started a fast ride for the town we was all itchin' to see. Hade wanted to ride with him, knowin' his pretty girl Claire would be waitin' for him. But Will laughed and said he could wait one more day. It was up to the boss of the Moonbrand to see that pens for the stock were ready and waitin'.

Before he took off, Will asked Bless if there was anythin' he could do for him; any messages to deliver. But Bless just shook his head. After Will left us, we made good time on till dark. Then we pitched our last trail camp. By the time the fires started dyin', every man was rolled up in his blanket and asleep. All but Bless and the lookouts. Bless couldn't sleep. The restless stir of the cattle in our narrow valley was like the restlessness in himself. The herd was spooky tonight. Maybe a cat in the hills—

The raiders came down out of the dark faster than any cat. They were firin' as they came. As I jumped awake it seemed like gunfire, and the start of the terrible stampede was halves of the same sound.

Bless was shoutin': "Hade! Loving! Everybody mount up! We'll stop them at the mouth of the canyon!" He hit his own saddle and was off like wind in the dark. We pulled on our boots and made for our saddles. The stampede was full-scale, now. But up on the hill, poundin' along, we could see the rustlers racin'. It was too much for young Hade, and he started yellin' orders:

"Stand fast! Pick your cover! Shoot 'em as they ride by!"

"Bless said to follow him down to the narrows," I tried to tell Hade. But the kid was beyond listening. Best I could do was jockey him out of the fire-glow. It was too late to follow Bless. I heaved out my good old Peacemaker.

Hade was a good shot, give him that. One rustler spun out of his saddle, and then another. I guess it was the echoin' reports that told Bless he rode alone. Back he swung, poundin' up the canyon.

Hade yelled like a madman: "*I got me another one!*" The words was no sooner out of his gullet than a rustler bullet found him. He went down on his knees like a young tree crashin'. "Where's Bless?" he screamed.

"He run out on us," Stringer croaked.

Now Bless was out of his saddle, kneeling down. "Hade— Kid—"

"You run away, Bless," Hade gasped. "You run away again."

"I didn't. We didn't have a chance for a fight out here. We mighta stopped 'em at the entrance. Hush, Hade. Easy." But he didn't have to explain to Hade anymore. Hade shuddered and slumped and was dead.

"Ran out on his own brother!" Stringer snorted, draggin' in one of the fallen outlaws by his bootheels and dumpin' him down close to where Hade lay. He pointed to the dead gunman. "Remember him? He's one of them you wouldn't fight, back in Arroyo Seco. If you had, your brother wouldn't be dead now. Anyways, you won't be able to run out on him again."

- Somebody that saw us ridin' into Abilene must have recognized us and run ahead for Will. He was there on the steps of the hotel, with Aud and her pa Andy just behind him, as we came through the crowd, herdin' before us the thirty-odd survivors of the stampede. Across Bless's saddlehorn hung Hade's limp body. The eyes that followed us turned grim with sympathy.

Bless, his face like rock, rode up till he was opposite the oldest Keough brother. Will, stunned, disbelievin', moved to help

with the body.

"Rustlers." Bless said, swingin' down. "Hade tried to fight it out at the camp. I told him to follow me on up to the hills, but—I guess he didn't hear me. I thought he did." The hard, even voice choked up, then.

But Stringer spoke out real clear. "Bless ran out on us."

"He's a liar," I yelled, before I even knew I planned to talk. "Bless did the right thing. Hade wouldn't listen—" I saw Will's face. I stormed.

"You shoulda been standin' with Hade," Will said, starin' at Bless. "You shoulda been with your brother, no matter what. You shouldn'ta moved."

The boys all filed after Will as he carried Hade across the muddy street of Abilene, to the mortician's. Only Aud stayed with Bless.

"Bless," she murmured, "come with me, Bless. You're worn and tired."

He lifted his eyes to look at her. But that brought him so he could see the cluster of townsfolk still gapin' at him like he was some kind of unhealthy freak. Bless strode into the hotel.

I heard how the whispers ran around. They carried Stringer's story, not Bless's. I went to find Will.

"Gossip's spreadin' like a wind-whipped fire that Bless run out on the kid," I said, when I cornered him. I read somethin' I didn't like to see in Will's eyes, then. "*You* know better'n that. Bless maybe avoids trouble. But he never run from his job!" I could have been talkin' to a stone statue. . . .

But it wasn't the job of a statue to go out to the small, neat house where Claire Anderson lived with her ma and her small brother and sister. It wasn't a statue's chore to tell the girl who'd been waitin' for her man that Hade was dead. Will did that straight off, and like he did everything. Like a man.

Up on Boot Hill, the preacher read his buryin' sermon. The crowd gathered, and listened, and broke up again as it turned toward town. But by the hole in the ground where Bless stood, head bowed, face gaunt, there seemed to lie a special shadow. Claire, sobbin', broke from her ma to face him.

"You let him die!" she screamed, with half of Abilene to listen. "You killed him! You wouldn't stand with him and fight, so he died!"

She still was screamin' when Mrs. Anderson led her away. But Aud, at Bless's other side, spoke quiet as a rustle. "Pay her no mind."

"She loved Hade," Bless said, like the world had ended.

"So did you, Bless," Aud said, and took his hand to hold.

But her pa came up to face them, grim

as granite. "A bad time to take Will's woman from him, isn't it, Bless?" Andy said. "Aud, listen to the townsfolk, the trail hands. Bless is afraid of snakes and afraid of hurt. He backed down from a hundred men since he was a kid. Finally he run off and his young brother got killed for it."

"They're just words, Pa," Aud said, aghast. "Not facts." And she might have stood there forever, if Bless hadn't sent her on with Andy while he himself remained by the hole that shovels were fillin' in. . .

Grief or no grief, we had that scattered herd to find. Our hand Durkee was out trackin' them already, and I went after Will's okay to ride out with the rest of our boys and hire on any Abilene guns that was willin' to help us. We was goin' to take care of that rustler party that had trailed us from Arroyo Seco. But I couldn't strike much spark out of Will then. I knew what chewed on him.

Aud and Bless, that was what he was thinkin' of. Through all the years, this man Will had loved her. Sometimes it hurt like a wound not to grab her close and forget his pa's dreams, his ma's needs, his young brothers. He'd never spoken out to her much, but he hadn't figured she ought to be burdened gray with the things he had to get done. He'd spent the days buildin' fence and raisin' feed—and the nights prayin' for it all to get good enough so he dared lay his work down a bit and give Aud a husband free for love. And all that while, he hadn't seen how she'd needed a man to *need* her, not shut her out.

Now he couldn't understand what words Bless had had that he—Will—had been lackin'. He couldn't see how, between her and Bless, there had grown up somethin' more than land and a ranch and cattle. He'd tried a long time to make allowances that Bless was different. But what creature crawled up behind its own blood kin and took from him? Even a rattler gave warning. Bitter. bitter, bitter, Will Keough was. He had good right to be.

• But whatever he thought about Bless, what Abilene thought was uglier. By the time Bless got back from the new grave at Boot Hill, the crowd in the hotel bar was seein' red from Stringer's talk. Bless had to pass through them like he was runnin' a gauntlet. The men kept a dead, insultin' silence.

"Here comes the rabbit!" blurted Stringer, and a rattle of scarecrow laughter applauded him. Fun was about to start, and they knew it. "Give him drink," Stringer went on. "He gets drunk enough, he'll forget he run out on his brother."

I shoved forward then. "Leave him

alone. He's got grief enough." .

"Grievin's for women," Stringer gloated. "Fightin's for men." He turned to the crowd. "How many of you ever seen Bless fight?" No answers to that. "How many ever seen him back down from a fight?" They roared, that time.

Bless finished his whisky fast and turned to leave. But Stringer stood in his way. I saw Will and the girl Aud at the doorway, just as one cowhand bawled, "Hit him, Stringer!" and another urged, "Make him fight!" Bless made to push past his tormenter, but Stringer grabbed him and spun him.

Agile as a cat, Bless ducked the roundhouse punch and landed one of his own that smashed Stringer against the bar. Calmly, he turned his back and began to walk away. But Stringer snarled after him, white with hate.

"Turn around! I'm askin' for guns. *Turn around!*"

- Bless had only just started his turn when Stringer's gun jumped out. Over by the door, Will fired with swift purpose. Stringer wallowed on the floor, clutchin' a smashed shoulder, and Bless finished up his pivot so as to face Will. As he holstered his gun, Will spoke cold and harsh and final.

"That's the last time I'll bother to save you. Get away from me with your woman and your ways. Someone has to fight *for* you."

"No. Fight *with* me." Bless's eyes were a hurt blaze. He launched at Will in a furious drive, and the scrap was on. Brother against brother, they slammed home punches that had the crowd gaspin'. Will's weight and experience told for him as he set out mashin' Bless to pulp. But Bless stood up to it.

Aud burst from the crowd, screamin'. "Leave him alone! You'll kill him!"

But Bless, face swollen bad already, made it to his feet again.

"Stay out of it," I told the girl. "He's fightin' for the right to be his own man." The fight we was watchin' was twice as terrible because there was a vacuum at the middle of it where hate ought to be. Their brother feelin' canceled out the trouble between 'em, so this was cold, grim, ruthless.

Through the doors they slugged and out into the dusty street of Abilene. Down the steps, with the crowd followin'. A silent crowd, with none of the yells and cheers you'll hear over most saloon brawls. A crowd almost scared to watch. And now the youth and wiriness and speed in Bless were beginnin' to make up for Will's weight and power and know-how. They fought a corridor through the onlookers, riddin' themselves of hate and envy with every blow.

I was the first one saw our hand

Durkee gallopin' up the street, driftin' in his saddle like only a bad-wounded man will do. But he called out as he came:

"Will! Finally found 'em—out there in rock shelves—but—they found me, too. By the time I came round, they was gone." He sagged down out of his perch, and I caught him. "I—I tried everythin' I knew—" he gasped.

The herd gone! Bless turned, stunned. "Everythin' you worked for, Will!"

Just for a minute, Will's head hung like a beaten man's. Then he lifted it up. "We'll find those cattle. Any men—" But then he stopped dead. He looked at Bless. "You won't be needin' me. It's yours to do."

Bless knew what was meant. His younger shoulders set. He yelled out like a general. "Every man who rides with the Keough brothers gets himself a double eagle in gold!" And he was in his saddle and off up the street, with half of Abilene scramblin' for their horses to follow him.

Dust settled by the hitchin' post as Will and Aud stood there, lookin' after the posse. Will spoke at last, like someone closin' a book.

"I'm not goin' with him, Aud. I'm standin' out of his way—like you said I should have a long time ago. Goodbye, Aud."

She saw him mount and swing in another direction. "Will! Where—"

That was when I saw the far-off look in his eyes. Like they was fixed on some dream a long time denied him. "Wichita, Dodge City, Waco. I expect to do quite a bit of travelin'. Don't be sorry, Aud. It's right to live life as it comes. That's what you and Bless are doin'. You're lost to wait till everythin's perfect." He smiled as he turned away. "I'm not waitin' any more."

THE END

Adapted from the UNIVERSAL-INTERNATIONAL CINEMASCOPE Production — Directed by ABNER BIBERMAN — Produced by WILLIAM ALLAND — Screenplay by R. WRIGHT CAMPBELL — In EASTMAN Color — Adapted for SCREEN STORIES by JEAN FRANCIS WEBB

THE CAST

Will Keough.....**Fred MacMurray**
Bless Keough.....**Jeff Hunter**
Aud Niven.....**Janice Rule**
Loving.....**Chill Wills**
Hade Keough.....**Dean Stockwell**
Mrs. Keough.....**Josephine Hutchinson**
Stringer.....**John Larch**
Andy Niven.....**Paul Birch**