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The OWLHOOT ANGEL

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L. P. HOLMES

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FALL—1947

Aug.—Oct.

20c per copy

\$0.80 per year

Vol. XVIII  **No. 9**

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

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A complete Western novel

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ACTION STORIES: Published quarterly by FICTION HOUSE, INC., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Registered as second class matter January 26, 1937, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. This is a magazine of fiction. The characters named and incidents described do not refer to any actual person. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1947, by Fiction House, Inc. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U.S.A.



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by DANNY KAYE

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THE OWLHOOT ANGEL

By L. P. Holmes

Bitter and deadly, Dave Wall rode the dark trails. He was Luke Lilavelt's man, burning the dread Window Sash brand across all Arizona—gun-carving an empire for the hombre he'd sworn to kill!



*They broke from the dust near the point.
The herd bent west under the pressure.*

THE YELLOW GLOW of light from the hanging lamp emphasized the beaked predatoriness of Luke Lilavelt's nose and chin while leaving his narrow gash of a mouth and his small, cold eyes in shadow. Restless under the solid impact of Dave Wall's settled hatred, Lilavelt stirred and jabbed a finger at the crudely drawn map spread on the table between them.

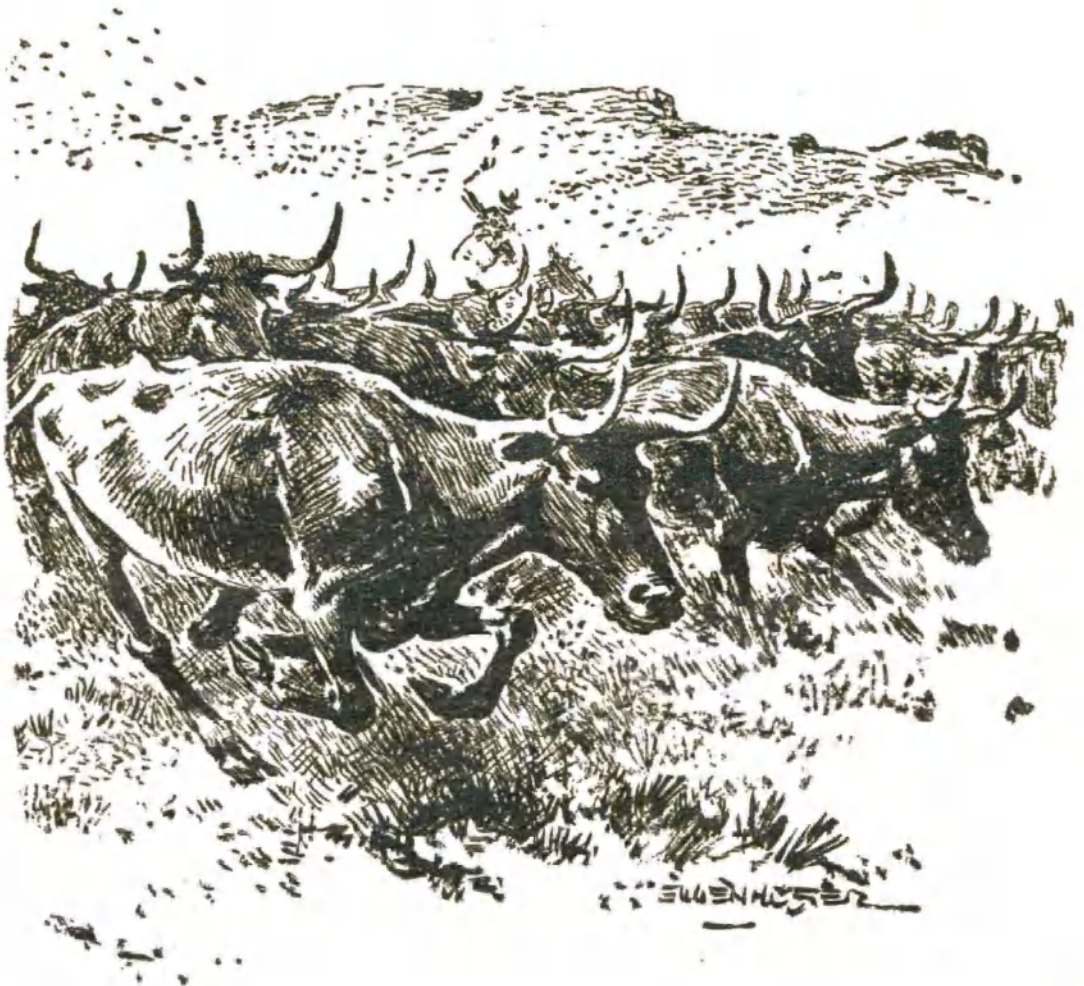
"Sure you got all this clear?" Luke Lilavelt's words slid flat and droning and devoid of all tonal resonance between lips repressed with a miserly economy of movement.

"I want that stretch between the Monuments and Stinking Water opened up once and for all. I'm tired of having to drive forty miles out of my way every time I want to move a herd in or out of my Sand Hills holdings. I can't seem to get any action out of Burke, so you are to go in and take over. Here is written au-

thority for that move." He tossed a folded paper across the desk.

Dave Wall took the paper and pocketed it without even glancing at the contents. Then he said, with slow, sarcastic emphasis, "Maybe you're not paying Tom Burke enough money, Lilavelt. Or then again, maybe he's fed up with doing your dirty work. Chances are, you're not fooling Burke any more than you're fooling me. It isn't just the Monuments — Stinking Water barrier you're after. You're after Bart Sutton and his whole Square S layout. Someday, Lilavelt, you're going to start slipping on your own slickeriness and before you quit sliding you'll end up neck deep in hell."

Lilavelt got to his feet, tall, lank and stoop shouldered. "Any time you want to quit me, you can, Wall." Then he added, acid in his voice, "I understand there's been a new addition to the Connell family. This time a little girl. That makes twin



boys and a girl. A nice family—a right nice family.”

Dave Wall was sprawled deep in his chair, all the long, rugged length of him slouched and relaxed. Only in his sun blackened face was there a suggestion of tension and it was a settled thing which pinched the corners of his eyes slightly and compressed his wide lips with a vague bitterness. Now he said, his voice perfectly even, “Keep your mealy mouth off that family. Some day, for the sake of Judith and Jerry and the kids I’ll probably kill you.”

Lilavelt shrugged. “You’ve said that before. I’m not worrying. Not while I got the story of Jerry Connell’s past locked up in Judge Masterson’s safe. The day I die a violent death, Judge Masterson has instructions to open that sealed envelope and read the contents.”

Dave Wall got to his feet. “You damned, dirty, greedy crooked rat!”

It was said of Luke Lilavelt that his hide was as thick as his conscience was thin. Yet no man could have taken the whipping scorn and contempt in Dave Wall’s words without some reaction. So now Lilavelt’s drone lifted to a tight, high note.

“Cut it fine, Wall—cut it fine! There is nothing to stop me from sending word to Judge Masterson to open that envelope right now.”

Dave Wall laughed mirthlessly. “Yes there is.” He tapped the butt of the gun at his hip. “Because if you did that it would remove all reasons for me letting you go on living. As things stand right now you’ve got me by the short hair. But by the same token, I’ve got you by the throat. So, if I want to call you a rat you’ll just have to take it and like it.”

Which was true enough, as Lilavelt well knew. He changed the subject abruptly. “I’ve sent word out to Spayd at Gravelly to start three hundred and fifty head of two-year-olds for the Sand Hills within ten days. I’ll expect you to have the trail open by that time.”

The stars were high and bright as Dave Wall rode out of the desert town of Basin. At lead behind him followed a packhorse carrying Dave’s blankets, food and frugal camp outfit and a supply of oats. Luke Lilavelt’s Sand Hills head-

quarters was better than a hundred miles distant to the north and the trail led across desert country where provender for trail-weary riders and horses was sparse and hard to find.

Dave settled himself to the long and lonely ride with the stoicism of one used to such trails. He had made many of them in the interests of Luke Lilavelt’s wide-spread cattle empire. White faced cattle carrying Lilavelt’s Window Sash brand fed on the grass of two States. There were old timers who claimed that Luke Lilavelt had registered the Window Sash as his iron because it was so easy to run a Window Sash out of Harvey Horne’s Double H and Bert Pryor’s Cross In A Box. Be that as it might, the fact remained that Harvey Horne and Bert Pryor were both dead, their once big and flourishing outfits just memories. While the tide of power and control that was Luke Lilavelt and his Window Sash iron rolled on and on. Little outfits that got in the way were gobbled up. Their choice was simple and tragic. Sell out to Window Sash at Lilavelt’s own price or be smothered and rubbed out by the power of a range piracy they did not have the strength to combat.

For a lot longer than he cared to think about, Dave Wall had been a part of that piratical machine, despising Luke Lilavelt and all that Lilavelt represented, despising himself and the part he had to play, yet knowing that his helplessness in the matter was that of an autumn leaf in the grip of stormy winds.

DAVE had made a routine trip from Basin to the Sand Hills once before, some two years past, so he knew the waterholes along the route. He reached the first one just as grey dawn began fading out the stars. He made frugal camp, watering and graining the horses. In the lee of a clump of sage he slept until the prying heat of a climbing sun reached and awakened him. Then he was up and traveling again.

This day would be the toughest leg of the trip. He rode the miles and hours away, locked in the grip of his own somber thoughts. Two things he remembered well of that former trip to the Sand Hills. The crude, frugal, almost comfortless efficiency,

of Luke Lilavelt's Sand Hill headquarters. And the girl.

On his way out from the Sand Hills he had ridden wide to the west, then south across a precipitous black lava rim below Crater Mountain to the wilderness town of Crater City. The girl was leaving town as Dave entered it. She had passed so close to him as to leave a faint and haunting fragrance. And the memory of a loveliness which was as bright and clear and warm as morning sunlight. It was a memory which Dave had clung to, for no sane reason at all, as it was doubtful that he would ever lay eyes on her again. And, even if he should there could be no meaning to it. For the distance between the poles of the earth was no greater than the gulf between such a girl and he, Dave Wall, trouble shooter for Luke Lilavelt's range piracies.

Yet, strangely enough, remembering her had somehow helped Dave through some of his darker moods.

At dusk, Dave was still holding his jaded horses to it, aiming for a dry wash and a certain high cut-bank under which a little pool of brackish water lay. He smelled the dry pungency of wood smoke before he saw the fire.

Dave had come up quietly through the thickening dusk, but at the first ring of his horse's hoofs on the bleached cobbles of the wash, two figures that had been hunkered by the fire drifted swiftly beyond the reach of its thin glow.

Dave sent in his hail. "Hello—the fire!"

There was a long moment of silence before the surly reply came. "Keep on drifting. This camp is taken."

Dave stepped from his saddle. "This is the only water in miles, and it's free. I'm coming in!"

Dave's horses smelled the water and were eager for it. They needed no urging to move up and Dave used the shelter of their bulk as he closed in. He stopped just short of the fire. "Well?"

He had those two slinking figures placed and now he had put the pressure on them. It was his way, the combination of recklessness, stubborn courage and a knowledge of men which he had gathered down through the rough and perilous years.

"Who are you?" came the question.

"That doesn't matter. I need this water

and I'm throwing off here. Your move."

There it was again. That pressure—direct, grim, unrelenting.

"There's more water, five miles west along this wash."

"Not interested. You can head for it if you don't like my company. Here is where I stop."

There was a stir of movement and a slim figure in blue jeans and jumper came out of the shadows and up to the fire. Her voice rang clear.

"If anyone has first call on this camp, I have. I was here first. And I say you are welcome, stranger."

Dave Wall went very still. There could be no mistake. It was the same girl, the one held in his memories. Then she had been in divided skirt and blouse. Now she wore the more severely practical garb for saddle work. But all the shining loveliness was there, as before. Her sleek, bright head was high and erect with pride and spirit, but despite the ruddy glow of the fire it struck Dave that there was strain and pallor in her face.

He could not have been more astounded had a star fallen at his feet, for this was the last place on earth he could have imagined meeting up with such as she. He cleared his throat and said.

"Much obliged, ma'am. I guess that settles the argument."

He swung his head and his voice was a hard lash. "Come in to the fire, you two—where I can see you better. Move!"

Dave drew a gun as he spoke. There was something about this setup that wasn't right. The feeling was rubbing across his nerve ends, alerting them.

The skulking pair could not withstand this renewed pressure. They moved into the firelight, full of a sullen furtiveness. At his first clear glance, Dave knew the type. Riff-raff of the cattle country. Always on the drift. Working a few days here, a few there. Nothing solid, nothing steady about them. Not above crime of any sort if they thought they could get away with it.

Dave said bluntly, "Your trail manners are rotten. Just why should you object to my sharing this camp ground?"

The girl said a startling thing. "Ask them also why they rummaged my saddle bags and took my gun?"

ONE OF THE drifters turned toward her, soundlessly snarling. He jumped a foot as Dave Wall's gun spat hard thunder and a slug lashed the ground beside him. Before the echoes could come back, Dave rapped, "Careful! Watch yourselves. Turn around!"

They obeyed jerkily. Dave took their guns and asked, "Which one took your weapon, ma'am?"

"The heavy one. He put it inside his shirt."

With his free hand Dave swung the fellow to face him. The man was gross, soft and bloated with whiskey. His mouth was loose, vaguely leering. Dave saw the bulge of the gun, tucked in the waist band of his jeans under his shirt. With a sweep of his hand Dave ripped the shirt from grimy collar to waist. He lifted away the gun, a light, slim-barreled weapon.

Dave was thinking. This lovely girl, in a wide and lonely land. Two slimy ones, like these. And they had taken away her only means of protecting herself.

Frostiness pinched Dave's eyes. "There's a special hell reserved for such as you two," he gritted. "I've a notion to send you there, now!" He lifted his voice. "Have they got saddle guns, ma'am?"

"I don't know. I'll see." She started off into the dark and Dave heard the weary stirring and trampling of horses.

The girl came back. "No saddle guns." "Good enough!" Dave waved his .45. "You two are riding. You can hunt that other water you spoke of."

The beefy one leered. "Want her for yourself, eh?"

Dave hit him savagely across the face with the flat of his gun, knocking him sprawling, where he lay, sniffing blood through a broken nose, dazed and half stunned. There was a raging, deadly note in Dave's voice as he said,

"The pair of you have exactly five minutes to get yourselves out of here. You'd better believe I mean that."

The second drifter, lank and gangling, evidently believed, for he dragged his bleeding, stupefied companion to his feet and hurried him, stumbling and lurching, out into the darkness. Dave followed closely.

There were three horses and one of them limped badly as it moved a trifle

apart. "Mine," said the girl at Dave's elbow. "Coming into the wash the bank caved under me and my pony came out of it dead lame. That's the reason those two found me here when they rode in. If my horse had not gone lame I'd have been home by this time."

The lanky drifter boosted his groggy partner into his saddle, swung up on his own horse. Dave Wall gave final terse warning. "Ride far!"

The horses clattered away into the early night. Dave waited until all sound of their going had faded out. Then he turned to the girl. "Day or night, even with a sound horse under you, this is no country for a girl like you to be riding alone."

She tossed her head. "I've ridden it all my life. I'd been visiting friends over at Cottonwood off the east edge of the desert and I was taking a short cut home. My pony going lame was one of those things which might never happen again."

"But it happened this time, and you could have been—in trouble. Any idea who that worthless pair are?"

"No. Probably a couple of Window Sash hands. They are the type Luke Lilavelt likes to have on his payroll, so I've heard. No decent person would ever ride for Lilavelt."

THE DARKNESS hid the ironic bitterness that pulled at Dave Wall's lips. They went back to the fire where Dave swiftly unpacked and unsaddled, watering and graining his horses. As he laid out his frugal outfit, Dave asked, "You had any supper?"

She hesitated, shook her head and said quickly, "It doesn't matter, really. As I said, I had expected to be home by this time."

"Only you're not," said Dave brusky. "You're here and you've had no supper and you're hungry. I've enough for two."

Dave stirred up the fire and got to work. Beyond the flames the girl sat cross-legged, watching him. The savoriness of frying bacon and steaming coffee flavored the air. She accepted the plate of food Dave tendered her and ate hungrily.

"How long have you been here?" asked Dave abruptly.

"Since sunup this morning. I much prefer to ride the desert at night. I left Cot-

tonwood early last evening and covered the longest leg of the ride last night. I intended laying over here for a couple of hours this morning to rest my pony and then head on home. The pony going lame changed that plan. I knew that Dad expected me home by this evening at the latest, and that when I didn't show up he'd send the boys out to look for me. They would be sure to look over the water holes, first. So I'd have been all right. Only—those two came along. I had my gun in my saddle bags and they probably guessed what I was after. So that—that big beast got there first and took it. Right after that, you rode in."

She wasn't, Dave realized, entirely at ease even now. Yet there was soft color under the even tan of her cheeks and much of the strain had left her features. She had courage, this girl, besides loveliness.

"It would seem your troubles are pretty much over," said Dave quietly. "Soon as we finish eating we'll bring your pony up to the fire and I'll have a look at its lame leg. If there is no chance of using the animal, we'll put your saddle on my pack bronc, split up the pack and hit the trail again in a couple of hours. Where is your home?"

"At Sweet Winds. I am Leslie Sutton."

Dave lowered his head slightly to shadow his startled eyes. This girl—Leslie Sutton. That meant she was Bart Sutton's daughter. He'd heard Sutton had one. But Dave had never dreamed that this . . .

"I'd like," the girl was saying, "to know the name of my benefactor. Or is that wish out of order?"

Dave drew a deep breath, masked his face to inscrutability and looked at her. "Wall is the name. Dave Wall."

It meant something all right. He saw her start, saw her eyes widen, saw her even recoil slightly.

"Not—not Luke Lilavelt's man?" she stammered. "Not that—Dave Wall?"

"I'm sorry," said Dave wearily. "But it is—that one."

II

WHEN DAVE had taken Leslie Sutton's gun from the beefy drifter and returned it to her, she had tucked it

from sight under her jumper. Now her hand stole toward it.

"No need of that," said Dave harshly. "You're as safe as if you were in your own home. You should know that by now. I'm no ogre."

"From—from all I have heard of you, I could believe that you are. I've heard—terrible things."

Dave laughed mirthlessly, "No doubt. A man in my place has things told about him. Most of them lies. And even the truthful things are seldom improved in the telling. Now you've the evidence of your own eyes. Maybe if you trust them you'll hit closer to the truth than you know."

Her eyes were accusing, her thoughts along another line. "You are heading for Lilavelt's Sand Hills headquarters." Her lips scarcely moved and the words were very low. It was as though she were thinking aloud.

"Yes, you are heading for the Sand Hills. That means—trouble—for Dad. I've heard him say it. That the day Dave Wall rode into the Sand Hills meant the start of a showdown between himself and Luke Lilavelt. It never seemed real to me. I never thought it would happen. But it has. You are here. You—Dave Wall!"

Dave writhed inwardly at the way she looked at him. He had known that along the back trail, in his service of Luke Lilavelt, he had left hatreds that would never die. In some part he had managed to shake off regrets. It was all a part of the price he had to pay for doing the thing he had set himself to do. To that realization he had hardened himself. But he never had or never could harden himself to the aversion he now saw growing in this girl's clear eyes. It was like being whipped with a lash of fire. He broke silence on things he had sworn never to explain to anyone.

"There may be things you don't understand," he blurted hoarsely. "There are such things. Sometimes a man cannot help himself. Sometimes he must do things under the whip of his own conscience and sense of honor. Sometimes he does things because the happiness and welfare of someone near and dear to him means more to him than does his own."

It made no impression on Leslie Sutton. She was as distant as the stars. "Where

can there be any conscience or sense of honor in doing Luke Lilavelt's dirty work? Or does he pay you so much money that nothing else matters?"

Her hand had been stealing under her jumper again. Now it flicked out, gripping that slim-nosed gun. The muzzle dropped in line with Dave Wall's heart. "I could kill you," she said steadily. "And no one would ever blame me."

"That's right, you could," agreed Dave, his voice quieter, but deeply bitter. "You could tell them I rode in on your camp, that I grew offensive, that you had no other choice but to shoot. It would dispose of Dave Wall very satisfactorily, but it wouldn't stop Luke Lilavelt from having his try at the Square S holdings. Somewhere, somehow, he'd pick another Dave Wall under another name. Probably he'd have to buy this one with that big money you mentioned. Which he would do. And you might not be lucky enough to have a chance to shoot that one."

Dave stood up, walked away. Soon he was back by the fire, leading the girl's crippled mount. He had only to look, to feel the flinching quiver of that bad leg under his gently kneading finger tips to know that here was a pony which would not be carrying a rider again for some time. By itself the horse could shuffle along after a fashion. But the weight of a saddle and rider would have the animal completely broken down inside of a mile or two.

While he worked with the horse, Dave could feel the girl's steady glance. But she had put her gun away. Dave had had no fear of her using it. Showing it had been purely an impetuous move with no real purpose behind it.

"This horse can't be ridden," said Dave. "We'll ride my two broncs and let this one follow along at its own speed. We might as well start now as later."

HE BROUGHT in his own horses, still weary, but stronger for water and grain. He cinched the girl's saddle on the pack horse, split up his gear as compactly as he could. He slung the saw-buck pack saddle to his own saddle horn.

The girl hung in the shadows, for the fire was guttering out. "I can stay here," she said. "Dad and the boys will be along

after a while."

"Maybe. Maybe not until tomorrow," said Dave curtly. "In the meantime a certain pair of two-legged coyotes might still be prowling. Don't be an idiot. Get in your saddle and come along."

He built a cigarette, lighted it and inhaled deeply. He heard a saddle girth creak as the girl put her weight into the stirrup. He rode away into the north without looking back.

In time she moved up even with him. "That way lies home," she said, pointing more to the west.

"Fair enough," said Dave. "Lead on."

The miles and hours ran out. The girl never spoke nor did she look backward. Against the stars Dave could catch the straight, uncompromising set of her shoulders, the erect poise of her head. Bitterness ran through him like acid.

It was nearing midnight when Leslie Sutton reined in abruptly and seemed to be listening. Dave heard it, too—the muffled echo of massed hoofs, somewhere out ahead.

The girl lifted a ringing, clear-voiced call. There came a gruff answering shout which carried a note of relief and gladness.

The girl turned to Dave. "It's Dad and the boys. They will take me off your hands."

The massed bulk of several mounted men loomed in the star glow. "Over here, Dad," directed the girl. She moved over to meet them.

"Les!" growled a deep voice. "You had me worried. What happened?"

The girl explained swiftly. "I'm afraid," she ended, "those two drifters might have grown very unpleasant. Then Mister Dave Wall rode in and drove them off. He..."

"Mister who?" The gruff voice became a growl. "Girl, did you say—Dave Wall?"

"That's right, Dad. *The* Dave Wall. He's been very decent and thoughtful. As I say, he drove those two drifters off. Then he shared his supper with me, loaned me his pack horse to ride and was bringing me home. I hardly expected such treatment after the things I've heard."

That dark blot of riders spread out, half encircling Dave. A man who made a burly figure against the stars pulled in facing him. Bart Sutton.

"That's correct, what Les just told me? You're Lilavelt's trouble shooter, Dave Wall?" growled Sutton.

"Some call me that," acknowledged Dave bleakly.

Bart Sutton seemed to tower even more massively in his saddle. "You have done my daughter a kindness," he rumbled harshly. "For that I thank you. But for the purpose you came into this country, I shall probably kill you."

"That," said Dave, in the same bleak tone, "may be."

Bart Sutton turned to his men, issuing curt orders. "Sandy, let Les have your horse. You drift back and pick up that lame pony. Forty, that bronc of yours is a stout one and will carry double. You go along with Sandy and the two of you bring the lame bronc in at its own gait. Les, you take Sandy's layout."

Bart Sutton swung down and in grim swiftness stripped the girl's riding gear off Dave's pack horse then swung it up in front of him as he went into the saddle again. Then at a word, the mounted group spurred off into the night, the girl with them. The rider, Sandy, swung behind the other puncher who had dropped out and the pair of them headed back into the desert after the lame pony. Dave Wall found himself alone.

It was, he thought, indicative. A man in his circumstance was fated to always be alone.

THE DESERT was gone, miles back. Here was a vast, slow, climbing sweep of country, bulwarked finally by tumbled hills. The Window Sash headquarters lay in an oblong basin in these Sand Hills. Dave Wall rode up to the layout through the forming heat of mid-morning.

The place seemed deserted until in the doorway of the cook shack a grossly fat man appeared, stripped to the waist, a dirty apron tied about his bulging middle. His shapeless torso and moon face glistened with sweat. He watched Dave's approach with little, pale eyes, deep sunk in rolls of fat.

Dave jerked a nod. "Tom Burke—where is he?"

The fat man looked up and down carefully before answering. "Out. He'll be back directly." There was a moist meat-

ness in the fat man's tone. "You're Wall?" he asked.

This startled Dave slightly. "That's right. How'd you know?"

The fat man shrugged. "You'll be hungry. Come on in."

The fat man fried steak and potatoes and poured coffee. It was good food. This cook knew his business and for all his bulk, moved about with a disconcerting lightness and sureness.

Dave had just finished eating when hoofs rattled outside. "There's Burke and the crew," said the cook.

Tom Burke was solidly built, ruddy and square-jawed. Dave had met him once before but Burke made no move now to shake hands. "I can guess what this means, Wall," he said curtly.

Dave said, "Here's the authority, Tom. I'm sorry."

Burke read Lilavelt's note, tore it to bits and let the bits fritter through loose fingers. "You needn't be. I'm not. I've been wanting a chance to break with Lilavelt. This is it. A man can stomach just so much and I'm way past my limit. Come on over to the cabin and I'll turn the tally books and other records over to you."

The cabin was small and stood a little apart from the rest of the ranch buildings. Burke had kept it neat and clean. The tally books, time book and other ranch records were in a box which Burke pulled from under the bunk and put on the table. Then he began packing his war bag. Without looking up, he said.

"I don't understand you, Wall. I swear I don't. There is a streak of decency in you a mile wide. Yet, every chunk of dirty business which Luke Lilavelt digs up and can get no one else to hatch out for him, you take hold of and put across. Maybe big money has wider limits for you than for me. But I don't think that it is that, either, for there is no look of money greed about you. Just what is the answer?"

Dave shook his head. "My own, Tom. One of those things. How does the crew shape up?"

"Tres Debley is the lone one of them who could ride for me if I owned this spread. The rest aren't worth hell room, but they are the sort to come in handy in putting the skids under Bart Sutton. I like Bart Sutton. He's a white man, one

of the best. I hope he turns out to be the mouthful that Luke Lilavelt chokes to death on."

Burke shouldered his war bag. "There is one part of you, Wall, that makes me want to shake hands," he said gruffly. "There is another part that won't let me. But I'll say this last thing. Lilavelt has a spy placed in this outfit. Don't let that cook, Hippo Dell, fool you. He looks dumb. He's not. He looks like a big, soft toad, but he is the strongest man I ever saw, and the wickedest in a fight. When you tangle with Hippo, as you probably will, that is one time when I wish you luck. You'll need it. *Adios!*"

Dave stood in the cabin doorway, watching Tom Burke ride away. He murmured, "I envy you, Tom Burke. You can ride away, make a clean break. Yeah, I envy you."

Dave went over to the bunkhouse, where the crew had gathered, waiting for him to show. They looked him over guardedly. Dave said curtly. "There's been a change in bosses. I'm the new one. The name is Dave Wall. Any questions?"

"Yeah," said one of the riders waspishly. "How much longer do we have to go ridin' six or seven miles out of our way to get to Crater City, instead of short cuttin' across Sutton's range? Me, I'm plenty sick of that business." The speaker was thin and spidery with a strangely small, round head, thickly matted with tightly curled black hair.

"That's right," nodded another. "As it stands, we've had to swing wide to the north around Square S headquarters then back south across that black lava rim that stretches from Crater Mountain to the Monuments. There's no sense to it."

"Sutton objects to us crossing his range, then?" said Dave.

"That's right. And Burke didn't have the nerve to tell him where to go."

"Tom Burke never lacked for nerve, or common sense, either," said Dave curtly. "When we go to town, we'll still take the long way round."

There was a rider sitting on one of the bunks, his hat beside him, who had stared at Dave unwinkingly. He was burly, his blue eyes so pale they seemed almost milky. His hair, straw colored and coarse, was close-cropped and stood up like a roach.

Now he spat and cursed, "When in hell," he wanted to know, "is Lilavelt going to send a fighting man to boss this spread?"

"That," said the spidery, round headed one, "is what I want to know, Whitey?"

HERE IT WAS again, part of an ancient pattern. One which Dave had met up with before, in other hard-boiled outfits he'd been sent to take over. There was always somebody who had to be shown and experience had taught him there was but one way to convince the doubters. He moved swiftly, ruthlessly.

In two steps he stood before Whitey, who, startled, was lunging erect. Dave hit him on the jaw with a short, hooking punch and knocked him back across the bunk. Whitey was tough. He smacked into the wall, bounced back, rolled off the end of the bunk and came up snarling. He dove at Dave, getting partially under a punch that bounced off the top of his bristling head. He got both arms around Dave's body and rushed him backward.

Dave's hips hit the bunkhouse table, sending it skittering. Whitey swung half around and pinned him against the wall between the ends of two of the bunks. Then he set about giving Dave his dirtiest best. He brought a high, sharp heel stamping down on Dave's instep. He brought a bunched knee up wickedly, again and again. He had his bullet head jammed hard against Dave's chest and he kept butting with it, jerking it up in short, lifting drives under Dave's chin, snapping Dave's head back again and again. Dave could feel the warm slime of blood begin to dribble down his lips.

Whitey whipped his right arm free and shot his hand up, feeling for Dave's face, fingers spread and stabbing, gouging at Dave's eyes. Every movement was furious, savage and fast, calculated to disable as quickly as possible.

Dave twisted his hips, catching that gouging knee against one thigh. He threw his left hand across his face to ward off Whitey's feral, clawing fingers. And with his right fist Dave hit short, jabbing punches, clubbing Whitey on the temple. Whitey twisted his head sideways to shield his temple from those jarring, stunning blows. Dave smashed him at the base of the skull and behind the ear.

Whitey couldn't stand this and Dave sensed his next move. Whitey jumped back, aimed a savage swing at Dave's face. Dave ducked, went in under the punch, rolling his shoulder behind a straight smash to Whitey's mid-riff. It was the hardest blow yet thrown and it hurt Whitey badly. His jaw dropped and he gasped. Dave never lost the advantage.

He clipped Whitey's sagging jaw with his left and pulped his lips with a driving right. Whitey reeled across the bunkhouse and now it was his turn to be pinned against a wall. Dave kept him there with whistling punches.

Whitey's forte was rough and tumble, butting, gouging, kneeling, kicking. A clean exchange of punches he did not understand. He pawed and swung clumsily, a little more weakly and blindly each time. Dave ended the fight with a jolting left and a thundering right to the angle of Whitey's jaw. Whitey went down, sick, retching and beaten.

Dave stepped back, spat out a mouthful of blood. A voice rapped curtly, "Don't try it, Nick—don't try it!"

Dave whirled. The spidery, round-headed rider had a gun half drawn, his face pulled with savagery. But there was another, lean and brown, with sun puckered eyes who held a drop on the spidery one, and he said, "Whitey asked for it. Let go of your gun!"

Nick obeyed. Dave Wall scrubbed the back of his hand across his bloody lips. "Now that I'm looking at you," he growled, "you can go for that gun any time. Or don't you like an even break?"

Nick, it seemed, didn't. He snarled soundlessly, but made no move.

Dave looked at the one who had held Nick off. "You're Debley, I hope?"

"That's right. Tres Debley."

"Thanks. When I'm not around, you're in charge." Dave swung his glance over Nick and Whitey. "You two are through. Come over to the cabin and get your time."

Dave stalked out of the bunkhouse and nearly bumped into the fat cook, Hippo Dell, who had evidently been drawn from the cook shack by sounds of battle. Dave's temper still had a red hot edge.

"Don't skulk," rapped Dave harshly. "If you wanted a grandstand seat why didn't you come in?"

Hippo's moon face was expressionless. He said moistly, "Nick Karnes and Whitey Brewer are good men, too good to fire. You'll find it hard to replace . . ."

"They're fired! When I want your advice, Dell, I'll ask for it."

Hippo's face was a bland mask, but his little eyes burned. He turned away, moving with that queer gait that was at once ponderous, yet deceptively light.

III

DAVE SLEPT all afternoon, awoke just at sunset. He felt rested, but stiff and sore from that brawl with Whitey Brewer. A dousing of his bruised face in cold water felt good and he was easy and relaxed when the supper gong rattled and he went into the cookshack.

There was uncertainty in the air, but the grudging respect of hard men to one who had proven his toughness and ability to take care of himself. Hippo Dell moved swiftly around, setting out a good supper. Dave looked around the table and said, "I know Debley. The rest of you name yourselves."

From left to right it ran Olds, Challis, Muir and Caraway. Olds blurted, "Any objection to us riding in to Crater City tonight, Wall?"

"Not in the least," shrugged Dave. "Just so you're back ready to do a day's work tomorrow. And so you don't cross Square S range."

Supper over, Dave went back to his cabin, lit the lamp and settled down to another evening of loneliness. Which was another part of his life, it seemed, which had become a settled thing. Only, tonight, for some reason, that loneliness was irksome. Perhaps that was because he was remembering so clearly where he was and who he was with this time last night.

Just about now he was cooking supper, for himself and for Leslie Sutton. She was sitting across the fire from him, watching him with a grave, accusing stillness; hating him, no doubt, because he was who he was. Dave Wall, trouble shooter for Luke Lilavelt. Dave Wall, moving always in the shadow of a dark reputation. Yet, even though she hated him, she was there, across the fire from him, and secure because of his presence. Which was one com-

forting thought to hang on to.

Dave sat in the warm stillness, listening to the riders spurring out for Crater City. The lamp guttered and flickered. At the cabin door a spur tinkled softly and Tres Debley said, "Mind if I come in?"

Dave said, liking this man, "Come on. Glad you dropped around. Anything on your mind?"

"Yes and no." Debley sat on the edge of the bunk, built a smoke. He stared at the floor and said slowly, "I lay no claim to being an angel. A man knocks around, scrambles for three squares a day, a roof to throw his bed roll under and a few dollars in his pockets. You accept your hire, do your job. Some jobs you come out of feeling clean. Others you feel—well, not so clean. In time, you forget. But for the job ahead—I don't know for sure whether I'll be able to carry my weight."

Dave was watching Tres Debley closely. "And what job do you figure is ahead?"

"Why, rubbing out Bart Sutton. That's correct, isn't it?" Tres Debley's head came up and he looked steadily at Dave.

Dave stirred restlessly. You couldn't lie to a man like this. Particularly because you liked him and because lying served no purpose.

"That," said Dave slowly, "is putting it pretty blunt. But that is just about what it amounts to."

Tres Debley nodded. "Thought so. And I don't like it. Bart Sutton is a hell of a good man, Wall. Oh, I've carried Luke Lilavelt's axe against other men, but most of them in their early days weren't a lot better than Lilavelt is now. They hogged range, pushed the weaker man aside, just like Lilavelt has done. They grew respectable when they figured they had enough range and enough cows to do them. But Bart Sutton isn't and never was that sort. He started a long time back on clear range. He never walked over anybody else. He took a bare chunk of benchland and made it into the finest damn headquarters you ever saw. Ever been up to the Square S headquarters?"

Dave shook his head. "No, I never have."

"I have. I took a chance one day and dropped by. Nobody was home. I had a chance to look around. Sweet Winds, they call it. And rightly so. Up on that bench

there is always a breeze. A sweet one. You've smelled a wind, coming off some distant cedar slope? Kind of dry and fragrant? Well, that's the way it is up there. There are big sycamores, shading the ranchhouse. I've heard it said that Bart Sutton planted those trees with his own hands. Everything is neat, well kept, well put together. Everything is clean-painted. It smacks of home and right living and good folks.

"A girl lives there—Bart Sutton's girl. I saw her once in Crater City. She's clean strain, that girl—none finer. Pretty as a sunset. And—damn it all, maybe you don't understand, Wall—but this is one job I want no part in. So, while it may sound queer for me to say I'd like to work under you, you're going to have to count me out. I'll take my time."

Dave stared bleakly at the murky lamp. "You're wrong, Tres. I do understand. That's the hell of it. I do understand. I'm not blaming you—yet I don't want you to quit. You're the one man in this outfit I want to stay. If you will, I won't ask you to make one move toward hurting Bart Sutton."

"That don't make sense. If I ride for the outfit, I have to ride with the outfit. No, that don't make sense."

"I know it doesn't," said Dave a trifle desperately. "But a break—there must be a break coming for me, sometime. I got to hang on to that hope or go completely crazy. If it doesn't come and if the cards fall wrong, I'll let you know in time. Then you can quit. Fair enough?"

Tres Debley stared at Dave for a long time without answering. Then he nodded. "Fair enough."

"Good!" Dave jumped to his feet. "Let's follow the other men and ride to town."

THEY TOOK the long way around and from the upper slopes looked down on the lights of the Sutton headquarters as they passed. They saw the black mass of Crater Mountain jutting against the stars to the west and when they cut south to the lava rim that ran clear from Crater Mountain to the Monuments, they saw the lights of Crater City gleaming beneath them.

They dropped down the narrow trail which jack-knifed across the face of the

lava rim and the hoofs of their horses beat a hard ringing on the solid rock. A quarter of a mile from the base of the rim and they were in Crater City, riding its single, wide street, picking a hitch rail for their broncs.

"I came for no special purpose," said Dave quietly. "It was something to do."

"I know," nodded Tres Debley. "We'll look around."

They prowled the street. It wasn't much of a town. Little more than three blocks long with a scattering of outlying buildings as a fringe. They paused before a general store, still open for trade.

"I could stand some smoking," said Tres.

"And I," Dave said. "We'll split a cad-dy of Durham."

They went in and made their purchases from a lanky, bald-headed man. Hoofs came thumping down the street outside, spurs clanked and Bart Sutton came in, accompanied by two riders. Under the lamplight the cattleman's hair showed a grizzling at the temples and his face looked like ruddy leather.

Tres Debley said softly. "Bart Sutton, if you didn't know it, Wall."

One of his riders said something to Sutton, who turned and looked over Dave and Tres Debley sternly. To the storekeeper he said, "Be with you in a minute, Tompkins." Then he came over to face Dave and Tres.

"Last night I had no good look at your face, but I caught the set of your shoulders against the stars," he growled. "You're Wall?"

Dave nodded. For a long moment their glances locked. Then Sutton said, "I'll be riding some of your Sand Hills range tomorrow. You've probably figured out already how easily it would be to run my Square S iron into a Window Sash. My men report some evidence of that probability. I'm going to have a look around."

"Good!" answered Dave coolly. "I'm interested, myself. So, I'll ride with you. What time will you drop by headquarters?"

"If you thought I was bluffing, you're wrong. I'll be there at sunup."

Dave nodded. "I'll be looking for you."

Bart Sutton turned away and Dave and Tres Debley went out. They stowed their

tobacco purchase away in their saddle bags and turned to see Sutton and his two men come out of the store. The three stood talking for a moment, then the two riders went directly to their horses, mounted and rode out of town. Bart Sutton went on along the street and turned in through swinging doors under a faintly lighted sign which proclaimed, *The Rialto*.

"I've been hoping for a chance to talk to Sutton," murmured Dave. "Now's as good a time as any."

"Meet you here in an hour," said Tres Debley. "I see there's still a light in the kitchen of Charlie Ring's hashhouse. Charlie and I rode together at one time. That was before his horse fell with him and broke him up so he couldn't ride anymore. He likes me to drop in for a pow-wow whenever I hit town."

Dave went along to the Rialto alone. This wish for a talk with Bart Sutton was no spur-of-the-moment idea. It had been at the back of his mind ever since leaving Luke Lilavelt's office down in Basin. Perhaps a product of wishful thinking, or a gnawing weariness of violence—a desire to arbitrate instead of fight. Maybe just to put off the inevitable, while waiting for a break . . .

THE WINNOWING DOORS of the Rialto gave under the pressure of Dave's hand. Half through them he stopped dead still, a leaping alertness lifting him on his toes, throwing his head forward until the lights of the saloon carved his face into bitter bronze.

Fifteen feet from him Bart Sutton stood, his back to the door, his left elbow leaning on the bar, a glass with a short two fingers of whiskey in his right hand, half lifted to his lips. Sutton's whole attention was centered on Nick Karnes, who stood free of the bar, some two yards to Sutton's right side. Nick's feet were spread, he was in a weaving half crouch and he had a gun drawn and pointing at the center of Bart Sutton's body.

Nick Karnes was drunk. It showed in the slight, slow weave of his shoulders, in the glazed hardness of his eyes, in the way he showed his teeth while licking his lips. And he oozed the same deadly threat a rattlesnake might have—poised and ready to strike.

Further along the bar, his back against it, his thumbs hooked in his gun belts, was Whitey Brewer. Whitey's face was puffed all out of shape from the effect of Dave Wall's fists, but he was as full of liquor as was Nick, and fully as dangerous. Whitey was watching the rest of the room, his actions plainly showing that he was guarding Nick's back.

Nick Karnes said slowly and thickly, "Well, here we are. You dropped in just at the right time, Sutton. Saves Whitey and me a heap of trouble, this does. Because we're ridin' south, to see our good friend, Luke Lilavelt. And we wanted to take him real news, news he'd be glad to hear. That you're dead, Sutton—that..."

Dave Wall said, his tone hardly above a conversational level, "Look this way, Nick!"

It was a gamble, but Dave had to take it. He could read the drunken resolve in Nick, could see the certainty of it. Nick was going to kill Bart Sutton. Whether the idea had come before the whiskey was in him, or whether it was the result of the whiskey, there was no way of telling. But the idea was there, stark and cold and set with purpose.

To have yelled at Nick might have startled him into pulling the trigger. To have shot him where he stood might not have prevented the same dire thing. For a dying man's reflex had fired a gun before. And even a man dead on his feet, could not have missed Bart Sutton, at the distance he stood from Nick. The only chance was to get Nick to swing that poised gun a little wide, and then . . .

Dave's quiet words cut through Nick Karnes' whiskey fog. His round head turned and he saw Dave. It took a long few seconds for Nick to get the full significance through his kill-drugged mind. In Nick's eyes showed a flicker of indecision. His gun wavered slightly.

Bart Sutton's right hand jerked and the contents of his half lifted glass splashed in Nick's face. With the same move Sutton was whirling away from the bar, going for his gun.

Nick's gun thundered and Bart Sutton staggered. Nick was chopping down for a second shot when Dave let him have it, knowing he had to kill Nick and shooting with that purpose. For Bart Sutton would

never have got his gun free and going in time to stop Nick's second try.

The impact of Dave Wall's slug lifted Karnes, spun him slowly on one heel and dropped him in a loose, shrunken sprawl.

Farther along the bar, Whitey Brewer got into belated action. Whitey had heard those first quiet words of Dave's, just as well as Nick Karnes had, but when Whitey jerked his head around the rawboned bulk of Bart Sutton was between him and the saloon door and he was unable to clearly locate Dave. Immediately after that came the crashing whirl of hard, deadly action, and now there was Nick, sprawled and still on the floor.

But the way to the door was open and Whitey saw Dave at last. Whitey drew and fired all in one explosive move. The slug splintered through the wing door inches away from where Dave's left hand still rested. It was Whitey's last conscious move for now Bart Sutton had a gun clear and at its heavy roar Whitey fell back against the bar, slid down until he seemed to be sitting on the brass foot rail. Then he fell over on one side.

THE SALOON, tied tight with motionless tension a moment before, exploded into excited action and comment. Poker players left their chairs and came crowding around. The sounds of shooting had carried along the street and from out there more men came running, to crowd into the Rialto. Among these was Tres Debley.

Dave Wall had been watching all the saloon crowd warily, not at all sure that this thing couldn't move farther. Then Tres Debley was at his side, saying:

"I expected to find either you or Bart Sutton down. I thought your talk had ended up in gun smoke."

"It was Nick Karnes and Whitey Brewer, Tres," explained Dave wearily. "They had Sutton cornered and were going to get him. Now they're down. But Nick got one slug into Sutton. Come on."

Dave pushed through to face Bart Sutton. The cattleman's jaw was set and pale lines bracketed his mouth. His left hand was pressed against his side.

Dave said, "Where and how bad did Karnes get you?"

"Not too bad, I guess, or I wouldn't

still be on my feet," gritted Sutton. "Felt like a horse had kicked me—here!" He pressed his left hand tighter against his side.

"This way," said Dave, taking him by the arm. "Tres, watch our backs. I don't know what might be in this crowd."

There was a door opening off the far end of the bar. Dave steered Bart Sutton to it, pushed it open. It was as he hoped. A back room with a bunk, a table and a low turned lamp. Dave turned up the lamp and said, "Let's have a look."

He helped Sutton out of his calfskin vest and tan woolen shirt. The wound ran all across Sutton's left side and was bleeding freely.

The slug must have skidded right around a rib," was Dave's guess. "Take it easy on that bunk."

Dave went to the door of the room and yelled at the bartender, who white faced and sweating, came hurrying. "Some clean water and a bundle of fresh bar towels," Dave ordered. "Then send for a doctor."

"Nary doctor in these parts," gulped the over-wrought bartender. "Sutton—is he hurt bad?"

"Not too bad. No doctor in this town, eh? Well, we'll have to do our best. Got some balsam oil?"

"N-no. But there's probably some at the livery barn."

"Send for it. Now for the towels and water."

Bart Sutton sat stoically while Dave washed away the blood. When a man hurried in with a bottle of balsam oil, Dave poured the wound full of the cooling, healing, aromatic oil, folded clean bar towels into covering compresses and bound these firmly into place with strips of toweling which Tres Debley tore up for him.

"That should do until we get you home," said Dave. "Think you can stand up to the ride?"

"I'll make it," said Bart Sutton gruffly.

Dave and Tres helped Sutton on with his shirt and vest. Tres took a look into the barroom. The place was clearing. Where Whitey Brewer and Nick Karnes had lain, a man was busy with mop and water bucket. The bartender came with a whiskey bottle.

"Bart might need a shot of this," he said.

Sutton took a deep drag and growled, "I'm all right, now. I don't know what to say except that I don't understand you, Wall. Karnes and Brewer had me dead to rights, out there. It would have made things simple for you and Lilavelt if you'd let them smoke me down. But you stepped in, downed Karnes yourself, gave me a break with Brewer. That leaves you minus two saddle hands."

"I got rid of those two early today," Dave said. "Fired them. They were Lilavelt's men, not mine."

"But you're Lilavelt's man, yourself." "Up to a certain line. I balk on murder. Let's get out of there."

When they got Sutton out to his horse the cattleman growled, "I don't know how I'm going to fight you, Wall. You take my weapons away from me. Last night you did my daughter Leslie a good turn. Tonight you definitely saved my life and you had to kill one of Lilavelt's men to do it. That leaves me dangling where you're concerned."

Dave did not answer. Instead he said to Tres Debley, "Get our broncs, Tres. We're seeing Sutton safely home."

"No need," snapped Sutton. "I can make it alone. I'm all right."

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Dave briefly. "Right now that jolt of whiskey is holding you up. It will die out before you get home. Tres and I are riding with you."

They climbed the switch-back trail up the lava rim, swung away to the east. Half way to Sweet Winds Dave saw that Bart Sutton's shoulders were beginning to sag. Dave and Tres Debley moved up on either side of the cattleman, just in case. Bart Sutton was humped over and holding on to his saddle horn with both hands, definitely a sick man, when they finally pulled up before the Square S ranchhouse.

The place was quiet and dark. They helped Sutton from his saddle, guided his stumbling steps to the door. Dave knocked and knocked again. Finally there was a stir within the house and a gleam of light. Then came Leslie Sutton's voice, sleepy, but holding a growing note of alarm.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"This is Dave Wall, ma'am. Your

father's here. He's been hurt some."

Came a little wailing cry and the door was flung open. Leslie Sutton was wrapped to the chin in a woolen robe. In one hand she carried a lamp. Her eyes were deep, shadowed pools of terror as she glimpsed her father.

"Dad—Dad! What—oh, you're . . ."

"I'm doing all right, child," mumbled Bart Sutton thickly. "A little tuckered, that's all. Show these fellows where I sleep."

IV

THE BLACK, chill, early morning hours lay over the world when Dave Wall and Tres Debley turned their horses into the home corral. Debley said, as he headed for the bunkhouse. "I won't be quitting for a while, Dave. I'll be riding with you. I got a strange feeling about things. Good night."

There were other saddles along the saddle pole and saddle blankets spread on top of them still smelled of warm horseflesh. So Dave knew that the other four Window Sash riders had beaten him and Tres home from town.

Dave lay for some time in his bed in the cabin, staring at the black ceiling with wide, sleepless eyes. He was hearing again that little wailing cry of terror that Leslie Sutton had given at the first knowledge of her father's injury. He was seeing the stark fear in her eyes.

He was remembering her as she had hurried out to dress while he and Tres got Bart Sutton into bed and how she had looked when she came back to help bare her father's wound and re-bandaged it. By then she was all courage and swift efficiency again. He remembered the strange expression in her expressive face as Bart Sutton told briefly of the happenings in town.

Then, when he and Tres had left, she had come with them to the door and said simply to Dave, "You'll never know the measure of my gratitude. For this night at least, I am thankful that there is such a man as Dave Wall, and that he chose to enter the Rialto saloon just when he did. I know now that it is possible to respect one's enemies."

All these things Dave thought about and

with the thinking came the realization that here, in these Sand Hills, he had come to a dead end as far as his future usefulness to Luke Lilavelt was concerned. You couldn't save a man's life and then go out to ruin him. You couldn't bring calamity and sorrow down on the head of a girl like Leslie Sutton. Tres Debley had put it right. There were some jobs a man could not tackle and still go on believing himself even a thin shadow of a man. This was one of them. Right here, right now, Dave Wall saw that he was all through with Luke Lilavelt and the Window Sash.

What about the Connells? What about Judith and Jerry and the kids? Their future welfare and happiness was so completely dependent on his relationship with Luke Lilavelt. The day he cut loose from Lilavelt, that day he turned Lilavelt's malignancy loose up on the Connells. Yet this had to be and it was up to him to find some other way to protect Judith and Jerry and the kids. So be it.

Strangely enough, now that this decision was made, Dave felt more relaxed and at ease than he had for a long time. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes. Later, something roused him to the borderline between sleep and wakefulness, and he thought, dreamlike, that he heard the soft clop of a horse's hoofs, moving away into the night. The sound died out before he could come fully awake, so he drifted off again and slept soundly until the jangle of the breakfast gong awakened him.

There had been talk going on in the cookshack and the manner in which it stopped abruptly when Dave went in, told plainly what it had been about. All of the crew except Hippo Dell had been in Crater City the night before and, while only Dave and Tres Debley had been in the Rialto, the others had heard all about the happenings there. But there was one man missing.

"Where's Muir?" asked Dave, his glance running along the table.

There was no answer for a moment, then Tres Debley said dryly, "I was wondering about that, myself. He was in his bunk when I turned in, last night."

Dave looked at the others—Challis, Olds and Caraway. "Well?"

"Muir came home with us and was in his blankets when Debley came in," blurted Olds. "This morning when we woke up he

was gone. His saddle is gone, too. That's all we know."

"Did he make any mention last night of any plans he had?" Dave asked.

"Not a squeak. Didn't seem to have a thing on his mind any more than the rest of us did."

DAVE nodded and sat down. He was thoughtful for a moment, recalling now that faint sound of departing hoofs that had seemed almost dream-like at the time. His glance lifted and rested on Hippo Dell's broad back, where Hippo stood busy over his stove.

"How about you, Dell?" asked Dave. "You got any idea of what could have sent Muir riding off somewhere so mysteriously?"

Hippo turned, ponderous yet light. His moon face told not a thing, his eyes less. "I turned in early last night. Never even heard you fellers come home."

Hippo might or might not have been lying. There was no way you could tell. Dave bent all attention to his breakfast. When he finished he said:

"I'll be away for a few days. Tres Debley is in charge."

Tres followed Dave over to the corral and watched him catch up a pair of fast-looking horses. "Anything for my ears alone, Dave?" asked Tres.

Dave nodded. "I'm all through with Luke Lilavelt, Tres."

Tres hit his hands together, definitely pleased. "Ah! That makes two of us, Dave. Better let me come along."

"No. Somebody has to stay here to keep this outfit in line until I get back. That means they're to leave Square S entirely alone. I'll be seeing you, Tres."

"I'm wondering about Muir," Tres murmured. "I can't guess the answer."

"I've a hunch Hippo Dell could give it to us if he would. But no matter. All kinds of things are due to break."

"Meaning?"

"That I'm through with Lilavelt in one way," said Dave bleakly. "While in another I'm just starting with him."

Tres smiled slightly. "I look to the future with interest. Good luck, Dave."

Dave Wall rode south and east from the Sand Hills and he rode fast. This time his outfit was most meagre, only what he

could stuff into his saddle bags. The horse that followed at lead was a relay bronc, carrying nothing until, after several speedy miles, Dave pulled in and switched his saddle to this fresh animal. So he went, down across the desert, using both horses alternately.

The sun rode out the long, hot day and in the first blue dusk Dave saw, off to his left, the cluster of winking lights which marked the town of Cottonwood. These drifted behind and were lost in the night. And sixteen hours after leaving the Sand Hills, Dave clattered his weary horses up to a little ranchhouse standing in a meadow in a bend of Battle Creek.

The place was dark, for it lacked but an hour of midnight. Dave watered his horses at the creek, then unsaddled and turned them into a corral where feed racks loomed spectrally in the light of a late rising, lopsided moon. He hung his gear on the corral fence and went over to the house. His knocking brought movement, the murmur of voices and then a light. A wiry, brown, thin-faced young fellow with electric blue eyes, clad in jeans and undershirt, opened the door, lamp held high.

"Dave!" he exclaimed. "Man, I'm glad to see you. Come on in—come on in! Judith, it's your brother Dave!"

There was an excited feminine murmur, a rush and Dave was in the arms of his only sister, Mrs. Jerry Connell. After a mighty hug, Dave held her off at arm's length and looked at her fondly.

"A little more the matron," he told her, "but still the prettiest girl this side o' the desert."

"Oh—oh!" exclaimed Judith Connell. "It used to be in all the state. Dave! Don't tell me that you, the confirmed lone wolf, have finally met... Who is she, boy? Tell me her name. She'd better be worthy, or I'll scratch her eyes out."

DAVE colored slightly and laughed. "Suppose that just now you be satisfied with knocking a little grub together for me. I ate breakfast at six this morning."

Judith scurried for the kitchen. Jerry Connell said, "How are things, Dave?"

Dave looked at his brother-in-law soberly, kept his voice low. "I guess the time for the big showdown is here, Jerry."

"I'm glad," said Jerry simply. "It will be a relief. My mind has been made up for some time on that score. I'd intended telling you that, Dave, the next time I saw you. I'm in good shape now. Had a fine year. I don't owe a cent and I got a tidy bank balance, enough to take care of Judith and the kids for quite a time if the worst comes. You've been great, Dave, sacrificing so much to give me this chance. Now it is time to put all the cards on the table, and I tell you, I'm glad—glad!"

"It will be tough on Judith," said Dave soberly.

"Maybe. Several times of late I've felt she's more than half suspected things. She's been after me a great deal about why you've stayed with Lilavelt and I've been hard put to try and explain. But we don't have to be afraid for her. She's the pure quill, if anyone ever was."

"The kids?" asked Dave.

"Great. The twins are a pair of young hellions. And little Judy—she's her mother all over again. I tell you, if I can only shake out from under that one fool mistake, I'll be the happiest man alive."

"We'll give 'em a royal fight, Jerry," said Dave. "Well, I smell coffee."

They sat across the kitchen table from him while he ate, Judith with her chin cupped in her hands, her fair hair loose and shining over her robe-clad shoulders.

"You've grown older, brother mine," she said. "You've lost weight. You're lean as a whip. It has been a long time between visits. What have you been doing? Tell us about yourself."

Jerry cleared his throat. "First, we're going to tell you about me, Judith. I hope when we're done that you still love me."

She swung her head, looked at her husband. Her grey eyes grew big and steady. "As long as it isn't another woman, Jerry—nothing else matters. I'm glad you're going to tell me. I've known for a long time that something was on your mind. I've waited, knowing that in your own good time, you'd tell me. Go ahead."

Jerry told it simply, bluntly. It was a story of wild, reckless, heedless youth; of too much trust in a man not worthy of it, and of an extra glass or two of liquor which tipped recklessness over to foolhardiness.

"It was in New Mexico," said Jerry

quietly. "I was a kid of eighteen, riding for Sam Larkin's Broken Arrow. We'd been three months without sight of a town. We were pretty woolly when we finally hit Round Mountain. There was one in the crew named Big George Yearly. To a rattle-weeded kid he was quite a man. I thought he was the greatest guy in the world. Well, in Round Mountain I drank more than was good for me and along with the rest of the crew ended up in a gambling layout, bucking the tiger. We were ripe for a shearing and we got it. Three months wages went in jig time. We went outside and got to talking it over. Big George claimed the table was crooked. Maybe it was. Anyhow, that was when the damn foolishness really started."

Jerry paused, poured himself a cup of coffee, nursed it between both hands.

"Big George Yearly suggested that we get our money back. He made it sound all right. We were to wait until the crowd had thinned out and the joint about to close for the night. Then we'd barge back in and get our money back. They had, so Big George put it, really stolen our money by using a crooked table, so it wouldn't be breaking the law for us to go in and take it back at gun's point. At the time it seemed like a fine idea."

Judith Connell stirred slightly. Looking at her, Dave saw that her face was paling.

JERRY went on doggedly. "We drew straws to see who would stay with the horses. I got that job. Big George and the rest went after that money. They didn't get it. It wasn't that easy. There was shooting. Three men besides Big George went into the joint. Only Big George came out alive. He came in a hurry, running for his horse. I ran, too. The shooting had stirred up the town and the town marshal showed. He yelled at us to stop, then threw a shot—and missed. Big George threw two back. The marshal went down. Big George didn't wait for me, he didn't pay me any attention at all. He just hit leather and rode. I never saw him again. I kept going, clear out of New Mexico. For the next couple of years all I did was ride and ride. I'd stop in some place only long enough to earn a little stake. Then I'd cut loose and hit the trail again. Finally I ended up here—and met you, Judith!"

The next moment Dave Wall was very proud of this sister of his. Color had come back into her cheeks, a faint smile touched her lips and her eyes were soft and fond as she leaned over and took her husband's hand.

"I've only one little bit of censure for you, my dear. That you didn't tell Dave this before."

"I did tell him," said Jerry. "I told him all about it before getting his permission to ask you to marry me."

"Why then," said Judith Connell softly, "you're still the very perfect husband. And you were afraid, all this time to tell me? Foolish man! It doesn't amount to a thing. You did nothing, actually. You did no shooting. You hurt no one. We'll just forget it all."

"It isn't going to be that easy," Jerry told her. "The reward poster names me as the marshal's killer, too. You've wondered why Dave has worked for Luke Lilavelt? Well, somehow, someway, Lilavelt heard of that New Mexico trouble and my part in it. And he has used that knowledge as a club over Dave's head. Luke Lilavelt is shrewd that way. He knows that money can only buy so much allegiance—that other means can make a man much more valuable, even if unwilling servant."

Judith looked at Dave and began to cry. "Dave! For me—for us—you've given years..."

"There, there," comforted Dave quickly. "We talked it over, Jerry and I, after Lilavelt showed his cards. The twins were little guys then, just six months old and Jerry was just getting his ranch here to going pretty good. We were looking at the future and we figured that the more evidence we could pile up of good faith and sound citizenship on Jerry's part, the more chance that a court of law might believe us when we finally opened the books. And the more chance for a good future for you and the kids. Don't you weep over me, old girl. I'm doing all right. And now we are set to have a little showdown with Mister Luke Lilavelt. Tomorrow, Jerry and I are heading for Basin, to have a talk with Judge Masterson."

Judith made no effort to stop the tears. She went from one to the other of them, hugging them and murmuring something

about the two finest men in the world.

It was far after midnight when they ceased talking and making plans. There was a spare bunk for Dave and he fell asleep instantly, relaxed by the knowledge that the trail had taken a right angled turn and that a new, if unknown, future was beckoning.

He was awakened by Judith shaking his shoulder. Cool dawn lay outside, Judith's voice was shaky. "Deputy Sheriff Sam Ashabaugh is at the door, Dave—asking for Jerry. I—I want you there when Jerry faces him."

Dave was there when Jerry opened the door. The deputy was grizzled and lank, with steady blue eyes. Dave said, "Hello, Sam. What's on your mind?"

"This," answered Sam Ashabaugh. He showed a legal document. "It's a warrant, drawn up in Judge Masterson's office in Basin, calling for the arrest of Jerry Connell, charged with the murder of Town Marshal Charles Ogden, in the town of Round Mountain, New Mexico."

Seeing Judith standing just behind Dave and Jerry, pale of face and wide-eyed, Sam Ashabaugh added awkwardly, "I ain't enjoying this a bit, folks."

V

THERE WAS sternness, but also a white-haired benevolence about Judge Masterson. With steepled finger tips and pursed lips he had listened to Jerry Connell's story, his eyes never leaving Jerry's face while the latter talked. When Jerry finished, Judge Masterson said gravely, "It would have helped your case a great deal if you had come to me a long time ago with these facts, Connell. Why didn't you?"

Dave Wall broke in, explaining as best he could. "It is pretty hard to turn your back on the future when you've met and married the only girl, Judge. I'm as much responsible as Jerry. Yet, just last night Jerry and I decided to come to you and put all our cards on the table. In another twelve hours Sam Ashabaugh wouldn't have had to come after Jerry. Of course, I don't expect you to believe that."

"And why not?" murmured the Judge. "During a lifetime in my chosen profession I have listened to a great many lies, and

to some truths. I have learned to do a fair job of telling one from the other. I believe you."

"What's ahead for me, Judge?" asked Jerry.

"That depends on many things. First, I must get in touch with the authorities in New Mexico. Until we hear from them I'm afraid I'll have to leave you in Deputy Ashabaugh's hands. I have no choice, there. But I will do the best I can for you. It is too bad that this Big George Yearly seems to have dropped from the face of the earth. If we could just find him and bring him to custody... Yet, we will do our best."

Dave asked, "Would it be irregular to ask, Judge, where and how you got your information concerning Jerry?"

"Not at all. You have the right to know who swore out the arrest warrant. Luke Lilavelt did. Several years ago, Lilavelt brought a sealed envelope to me, asking that I keep it in my safe. My instructions were that the contents of that envelope remain unknown unless Lilavelt himself came and opened it in my presence, or in event of his—er—sudden and violent demise. In which case I was to open the envelope and act upon what the contents disclosed. Last evening Lilavelt came, asked for the envelope and opened it. In it was this old reward poster. On the basis of the information it contained, Lilavelt swore out the warrant. A shrewd customer, Luke Lilavelt—oh, very shrewd."

Dave flashed a swift glance at Judge Masterson. There was a glint in the Judge's eye.

Half an hour later, Sam Ashabaugh locked the door of the jail behind Jerry Connell. He turned to Dave Wall.

"I'm saying once more, Dave, that I'm sorry about this. I've allus been fond of Jerry and your sister, Judith. Them twin boys of theirs are little jim-dandies. I ain't seen the little girl, yet, but if she takes after her Maw she sure will decorate this old world. Times like this, I get half-way mad at the law."

"Not your fault, Sam," Dave said quietly. "Just between you and me, it's all right for Jerry to be safe in jail for the next few weeks. Yet, Judith can't stay out at the ranch alone with the kids. What's your brother Holt doing just now?"

"Nothing. He finished off topping out a bunch of young saddle brones for Henry Naramore last week. You want Holt should drift out to the Connell ranch and keep the chores caught up?"

"I'd like that, Sam. Holt's a good, dependable man. And if anybody comes bothering around, I want Holt to discourage them, quick."

"Holt will be headin' for the ranch inside a couple of hours," declared Sam. "Uh—what you aimin' to do, Dave?"

"Skin a skunk, once I locate him," growled Dave curtly.

Sam Ashabaugh hitched his jeans up his lank hips and spat. "Professionally, I got to warn you to go slow. Privately, I wish you all kinds of luck. Whilst you're at it, don't worry about the Connells. Me and Holt will take care of things."

From the jail, Dave went straight to Luke Lilavelt's office and found the place locked, with no sign of anyone about. Which did not surprise Dave any. Right after that he headed out for the Connell ranch. Judith was pale but steady, and the way she spoke a single word, twisted Dave inside.

"Jerry...?"

"All right," comforted Dave, an arm about his sister's shoulders. "He'll have to stay in custody a while. But Judge Masterson is very fair. I got the feeling that he don't like Lilavelt and when the showdown comes, he'll be on our side. Holt Ashabaugh is coming out to take care of the chores and keep an eye on things. I'll fix up that old bunk for him, out in the saddle shed."

"What are you going to do, Dave?" Judith asked.

"Why, try and locate Mister Luke Lilavelt, first. After that, cover some trails I been thinking about. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

IT WAS just sundown when Dave rode in at Lilavelt's Window Sash spread at Gravelly. The first man he saw was the foreman in charge, Cube Spayd, who was short and powerful and broad, full of a lowering brutishness and who would, Dave knew, ride as far for Lilavelt's interests as would any man hired for money. Dave did not like him.

Cube Spayd had just emerged from the

bunkhouse, was crossing to the cookshack. Somehow Dave got the impression that his sudden appearance had startled Spayd and he saw the man's eyes flicker toward the bunkhouse door, before coming back to meet Dave's level glance.

Dave asked, "Lilavelt here, Spayd?"

"Was, but he's gone now," grunted Spayd, watching Dave with unwinking, flat eyes.

"Where'd he head to?"

Spayd shrugged. "How would I know? He's always heading somewhere. What d'you want him for?"

"A little matter of business," Dave murmured. "Something I promised to deliver. Where's your crew?"

"Out gathering that herd we're to take up to the Sand Hills. We leave with it in the morning. You got that trail open between Stinking Water and the Monuments? You were supposed to take care of that little chore."

Spayd had lifted his left hand, was scrubbing his black bristled chin with thumb and forefinger. His eyes flicked another glance toward the bunkhouse door.

Dave shifted a trifle in his saddle, a movement which brought his right hand resting close to the butt of the gun which lay along his right thigh. Suddenly, for no good reason at all, there was a chill prickling at the back of Dave's neck. It sent a tight-strung alertness all through him, sharpening every sense. Dave gathered his reins slightly.

Then Cube Spayd brought his left hand away from his face and down and back in a short, hard gesture that could be nothing else than a signal. Dave acted on it.

He spurred his mount sharply and at the same time reined hard to the left. The horse, lunging under the bite of the spurs and whirling under the drag of the reins, crashed into Cube Spayd, knocking him sprawling. The half-drawn gun dropped from his hand.

Over at the bunkhouse door a rifle crashed sharply and Dave Wall clearly felt the heavy jar of the speeding slug. He kept that same pressure on the reins which brought his horse fully around and rearing. In the door of the bunkhouse a man stood, swinging the lever of a rifle as he pumped a fresh shell home. That

man was Muir, the rider who had so mysteriously disappeared from the Sand Hills headquarters after the shootout in Crater City.

Muir snapped the lever closed, had the gun partially to his shoulder when Dave shot him through the center of the body. Muir jackknifed suddenly, falling forward on his face. Then Dave was looking for Cube Spayd who, roaring with a sort of animal fury, was scrabbling around like a wounded bear, trying to recover the gun he had dropped.

Dave shot his frantic horse past Spayd, leaned over and smashed Spayd solidly on the head with the heavy barrel of his .45. Then he was up and low-crouched in his saddle, spurring past the end of the cookshack and putting the bulk of that building between himself and any possible further danger from the bunkhouse.

Dave kept the horse at it, running full out for a good five or six hundred yards before slackening off. Twisted in his saddle he looked back, but saw no pursuit or added threat. His face was grim as he plugged a fresh load into the fired chamber of his gun.

"You're a half-witted fool, Wall," he told himself fiercely. "You rode into that like a starry-eyed greenhorn and had more luck than you deserved coming out with a whole skin."

HE REMEMBERED the shock of that rifle slug. Where had it hit? It hadn't touched him and his horse showed no sign of being wounded. He ran an exploring hand around his saddle and grunted as his fingers encountered the ragged edges of torn leather across the back of the cantle.

That close had Muir come to getting him. Only that first forward whirling lunge of his horse had saved him.

Well, it all showed one thing. Lilavelt was sending the word out, or rather, delivering it himself. Get Dave Wall!

It was, Dave realized, time to start thinking heavily and clearly. He had to realize that the right angled turn things had taken in his life, had wiped out all the old purposes and substituted a brand new set. The bonds that had held him to the service of Luke Lilavelt were cast aside. The threat, the club Lilavelt had

held over his head, was gone. But new ones had come to take their place. From here on in it was war to the finish between himself and Lilavelt, between himself and all the far-flung power that was Window Sash.

Boring steadily northward into the thickening dusk, Dave did a little reconstructing. Tom Burke had told him that Lilavelt had a spy at the Sand Hills headquarters and inferred that Hippo Dell was that spy. But it was Muir who had stolen away in the night and ridden far and fast to reach the ear of Luke Lilavelt.

What Muir had brought to Lilavelt was undoubtedly the story of those wild few moments in the Rialto saloon at Crater City. He'd told how Dave Wall, instead of standing aside and letting Nick Karnes and Whitey Brewer smoke down Bart Sutton, had moved in and saved Bart Sutton's life. Not only that, but Dave Wall had cared for Sutton, seen him safely home.

There was only one answer which Lilavelt could gather from this. He'd lost his hold on Dave Wall. So Lilavelt had done what he had threatened to do, disclose that one dark shadow along the back trail of Jerry Connell. In doing this, Lilavelt also knew that he'd have to meet up with Dave Wall, man to man, with no holds barred. The status of boss and employee was done with. So Lilavelt was taking steps to eliminate Dave Wall.

This Luke Lilavelt was clever, damned clever. He had realized that Dave would come looking for him. He had ridden to Gravelly, figuring that Dave would probably call there, trying to locate him. And he had left instructions at Gravelly for removing Dave permanently from the picture. That his instructions had not borne fruit had been due to luck on Dave's part and a certain ingrained alertness which the hard, tough years had instilled in him. But from now on it all meant that Dave rode a perilous trail.

That trail this night lay north. It meant a cold, comfortless camp to rest his horse and graze it. And it meant, late the next day, a cautious entrance into the town of Crater City, both horse and rider gaunt and weary.

Dave left his bronc at the rickety livery barn, with instructions for a good rub down and plenty of hay and grain. In a

fly infested hashhouse he wolfed a meal himself and after that went to the Rialto.

There were only a few present in the Rialto, and Dave's entrance occasioned a quieting of voices and guarded looks. The same bartender was on duty who had been present during the shootout.

He gave Dave a gravely careful nod, set out bottle and glass. "On the house," he said.

Dave shook his head. "Just ate. I'll take a cigar. Don't look at me like that. I'm no wolf."

The bartender smiled faintly. "Maybe not. But them who think they are, run out of luck when you come along."

Dave kept his voice low. "Ever hear of a gent named Big George—Big George Yearly?"

The bartender considered thoughtfully, then shook his head. "I been polishing bars in a lot of places in my time. There's a lot I've served I've remembered. But no Big George Yearly. Friend of yours?"

"No. But I'm interested in him. Well, thanks."

DAVE WENT OUT, bought a shave and a haircut and in the first shadows of evening rode up over the lava rim and cut east to Sweet Winds. It was dark when he arrived and he was challenged fifty yards from the ranchhouse.

"Far enough until I know, you better!"

"Dave Wall. "I've word that Bart Sutton should know."

"And I've Bart's orders to shoot any Window Sash man who might come along," came the hard and wary answer. "But you gave Bart a helping hand, so you get one more chance. Head out!"

Dave eyed the dark restlessly. "Suppose you take the word to Sutton, friend. I won't move a foot from where I am, and if he doesn't want to see me, then I'll drift."

The guard seemed to consider a moment. "All right, Stay put."

He was back within a minute. "You win. Go on in."

Leslie Sutton met Dave at the door. Dave stood, looking at her so steadily a slight flush grew in her cheeks. "It was Dad you wanted to see, wasn't it?" she asked pointedly.

"That's right. I'm sorry. But a man

can't blind himself to beauty."

Her color deepened as she led the way to Bart Sutton's room. Sutton was sitting up in bed, reading. He eyed Dave grimly. "Evening, Wall. Nice of Lilavelt to send one of his men around to enquire about my health."

"Lilavelt didn't send me," Dave said gravely. "I thought you'd be interested in knowing that a good herd of Window Sash cattle is on its way up from Gravelly right now, aiming to cut between Stinking Water and the Monuments, and cross your range to the Sand Hills."

Sutton's eyes narrowed. "You're sure of that?"

"Quite."

"I'll act on it." A slight glint of contempt shone in Sutton's eyes. "I thought better of you, Wall. I dislike a traitor, even when he is in the ranks of the enemy. How much does the information cost me?"

Dave's lips tightened. "Not a cent. Maybe I should have explained that I'm no longer with the Window Sash. I'm a free agent."

Sutton was startled. "And looking for a job with me? Well, I never hired an out and out gunfighter yet, Wall—and I'm not going to. Sorry."

Dave shrugged. "You jump at conclusions. I'm through working for anyone. I was hoping that you'd let me side you in blocking this herd. I'd like to kick a spoke or two from Lilavelt's wheel."

"Why?"

"Personal reasons," said Dave gruffly. "You wouldn't be interested. I might add that this herd will be led by a gent named Spayd—Cube Spayd. He's a tough hombre. He won't stop easy. Don't send a boy to do a man's job. Glad to see you coming along. Good night!"

Dave was gone before Sutton could utter another word. But Leslie Sutton stopped him at the door. She said softly, "He'll get around to thanking you, after he's thought it over. It's just that he's so bitter against Luke Lilavelt and all that Lilavelt represents."

"I don't want thanks for anything," Dave told her grimly. "I just want understanding. And I can't expect that until folks know a lot of things — a lot of angles."

"What are some of these — angles?"

She was very fair, standing there with her eyes steadily questing and wondering. The lamp light seemed to build a sort of nimbus about her shining head. Dave drew a deep breath.

"Some day I hope I have a chance to tell you. I think I want that chance more than anything else in the world, Leslie Sutton."

She was still in the open door, a slim figure in half light, half dark, when the hoofbeats of Dave's horse faded out in the night.

VI

DAVE WALL was not one to make the same mistake twice. At the Gravelly headquarters of Window Sash he'd come close to getting shot in half. Luke Lilavelt had given them his orders there. Whether he had done the same at Sand Hills headquarters, Dave was not sure. But he took no chances. He rode up quietly, left his horse well back and went the final two hundred yards on foot.

There was one man here that Dave felt sure he could trust. Tres Debley. He wondered if he could locate Tres. The cabin was dark, but there was a faint light at the rear of the cookshack where Hippo Dell bunked, and the usual illumination shone from the windows of the bunkhouse. All seemed serene and quiet enough, but Dave scouted the surrounding darkness carefully before slipping quietly up to one of the bunkhouse windows and making a careful survey of the place.

A four-handed stud game was in progress. Olds, Challis, Caraway and Tres Debley. It was a quiet game, but apparently a friendly one. Even as Dave watched, Tres pulled in a small pot and Olds, the loser, grinned as he made some remark which caused the grave-faced Tres to smile briefly in return. Apparently Lilavelt had not yet contacted this headquarters since the break had come.

Dave went back for his horse, brought it in to the corrals, unsaddled, then went over to the bunkhouse. But he was still wary as he pushed open the bunkhouse door and went in. Tres showed open pleasure, the rest respectful recognition. Dave let the tautness run out of him and

he slouched loosely on a bunk.

"How are the cards falling?" he asked casually.

Olds grinned wryly. "If Tres wasn't such a clumsy dealer I'd swear he was crooked. That guy is shot plumb full of luck. With his luck, he ought to be sitting in a no limit game somewhere with big money around. He'd be fixed for life by the time the evening was over."

"You whipsaw 'em," said Tres dryly. "Bluff 'em when you ain't got 'em—sucker 'em to call you when you have."

"That," drawled Dave, "is the entire psychology of good poker. How have things been going about the range?"

"Quiet and natural."

"Lilavelt been around?" Dave made the question entirely a casual one.

Olds said, "Ain't seen hide'r hair of him. Kinda thought that might be where you'd gone—to have a pow-wow with him."

Dave built a careful smoke. "He wasn't there. Well, I guess I'll turn in and get a night's sleep for a change."

As Dave headed for the door, Challis asked, "See anything of Muir?"

Dave turned slightly. "Yeah. He's through."

Challis considered, then shrugged. "That was a loco stunt he pulled, sliding away in the night. Can't imagine what got into him."

Just before he left, Dave caught Tres Debley's eye alone and jerked his head slightly. Then he went over to the cabin and got a light going. It was a good hour later and Dave was almost asleep on the bunk before Tres came in.

"Had to wait for the game to break up naturally," Tres murmured. "You've been places, seen things, done things. I can tell by the look of you."

Dave spoke quietly. "I promised you the other day, Tres, that when a break came, I'd let you know. Well, it has. I'm done with Lilavelt. It's quite a story. Care to hear it?"

Tres sprawled in a chair. "I got all night."

So Dave told him—the whole story. About Jerry Connell, about everything. "So now I'm a free man again," he ended. "And I got debts to pay. I'm looking for Luke Lilavelt. And when I find him..."

Tres Debley's puckered eyes narrowed to a faint smiling. "Don't blame you—don't blame you a bit. Well, that's Lilavelt for you. I knew it when I took on with him. But a job is a job and I could always quit—as I'm doing, now. Lilavelt is the sort who uses a man, gets all he can out of him, then throws him away. You said that you saw Muir. Find out why he pulled that fadeout the way he did?"

"I think I can guess. He took word to Lilavelt about me siding with Bart Sutton against Nick Karnes and Whitey Brewer. Which let Lilavelt know I was done with him and which started him shooting the law at Jerry Connell. But that wasn't all Muir set out to do." And then Dave told of the attempt to get him at the Gravelly spread.

The faint smiling left Tres Debley's eyes. "We leave in the morning, eh Dave?"

"In the morning."

"I'm riding your trail for a while. I want to see the end of this."

Dave met Tres' puckered eyes. "I don't know anyone I'd rather have along, Tres."

AT BREAKFAST the next morning Dave and Tres lingered at the table until Olds and Caraway and Challis left and rode off on some ranch chore. Then Dave said to Hippo Dell:

"I'm done with Lilavelt and all his interests. I'm riding. Tres Debley is riding with me. If you want to try and hold this outfit together, Dell, fly to it."

Hippo Dell was genuinely startled. His little eyes stared hard at Dave, but told nothing. Slowly he shrugged.

"You know your own business, I reckon, Wall. But that's kinda cuttin' Lilavelt short, ain't it?"

"A game Lilavelt is a top hand at," said Dave dryly. "He shouldn't mind."

"This headquarters is going to hell in a grain bucket," complained Hippo. "Now there was Hutch Muir who up and disappeared, queer like. I been wondering what happened to him."

"If it'll make you feel any better, Hutch Muir carried tales to Lilavelt," said Dave. "Then he tried to sift a rifle slug through me at the Gravelly spread. He missed the first shot and was too slow with the second."

Hippo stared and said nothing more.

Half an hour later Dave and Tres Debley rode away from the place. Standing back from the door of the cookshack so they couldn't see him, Hippo Dell watched them go. In that moist, meaty voice of his he cursed low and savagely. He had a rifle in his hands and twice he half lifted it to his shoulder, but each time lowered it again. There were things Hippo didn't know, that he couldn't be sure of, so he didn't try the shot at Dave Wall's disappearing back. An ancient wariness was in Hippo Dell. Once before in his life he had moved into a setup without knowing all the factors. It had come close to being fatal. It had been a desperate lesson he had learned—but he had learned it. So he didn't shoot. He just cursed Dave and Tres Debley completely out of sight.

Dave set the course southwest, rode out of the Sand Hills, across Soda Creek and on to Square S range. In time, way off to the left and ahead, half hidden in desert haze, a ragged smear of rusty green showed. Stinking Water, the bitter, alkali swamp where Soda Creek ran out and lost itself in desert sinkholes. Off to the right and ahead, slightly closer, lifted the gaunt rock pillars that were the Monuments. Some ten miles separated these two land marks and a little on the desert side of center, a low, slow rolling dust cloud lifted.

"The Gravelly herd!" exclaimed Dave. "Well, this is what I wanted to see. I hope whoever Sutton sends out to block it, handles it smart."

"Looks like Square S is on the way to tackle the chore," said Tres, pointing.

Over near the base of the Monuments another dust haze showed, so thin and light that only eyes trained to rangeland distances and sign significance could have picked it up and read its meaning. In five minutes of watching this second dust blur showed definite direction and movement.

Dave frowned. "They're late. They should have picked position and been there, set and ready. No wonder men like Lilaveltrample men like Bart Sutton. Lilaveltr hits all out, while Sutton's kind figure that being in the right will fight half the battle for them. But it won't. Come on, Tres!"

Dave lifted his horse to a faster pace, slanting down toward Stinking Water. As he rode he watched the dust signs draw closer and closer together. He picked up

the low, dark smear that was the herd and then the tiny, shifting figures that were men on horseback. Dave lifted his horse to a run.

The battle was joined long before Dave and Tres got close. With the steadily lessening distance Dave and Tres could see the swirl of it going on in the gap between the herd and the Monuments. Faint and far away came the crackle of gunfire.

Mounted figures, larger and more discernible now, milled in wild melee, but that melee was not holding steady, nor yet moving toward the herd. Instead, it was drifting back toward the Monuments.

"Square S is losing," yelled Dave bitterly. "I told Sutton to send a man instead of a boy to handle this job. Tres, I'm moving in on this. You don't have to come along."

"I said I was riding your trail for a while," answered Tres. "I'm still with you."

DAVE settled low in his saddle, used the spurs. His pony flattened out into racing stride. Tres pounded along beside him. Dave still held that line, slanting toward Stinking Water. He had a plan, but its chance for success depended on that fight with Square S forces holding the full attention of the Window Sash guardians of the herd.

The herd came steadily on, the dust of its passage lifting slightly, then streaming off to the southeast in a long, saffron banner. Dave and Tres passed the point of the herd a good half mile to the east, but when they entered the first haze of that drifting dust cloud, Dave turned his sweating mount and went racing directly through the dust towards the herd.

The closer they came to the herd the thicker grew the dust until a few yards was the limit of vision. The smell of the herd and the sound of its steady protest bellowing against the miles rode with the dust. Dave, low in his saddle, drew a gun, slackened the speed of his horse a little. Abruptly he was up against the right flank of the herd.

A steer loomed, huge through the dust, a straggler working a few yards apart from its massed fellows. With a yell Dave charged straight at the beast, pumping a shot into the ground just in front of its startled nose. The steer whirled, plunged

back against the bulk of the herd, crowding and pushing and that whole section of the herd gave and moved to the left.

Dave headed his horse toward the point, but pressing, always pressing against the herd flank. He shifted his gun to his left hand and with a handful of loose coiled riata in his right, flailed and whipped at the animals he could reach. Behind him, quick to catch Dave's strategy, Tres Debley was doing the same.

It wouldn't have worked with a real big herd, for the stolid mass of it would have been too great. Nor would it have worked with this herd, had the full Window Sash group of riders been there to hold it in place. But Cube Spayd had shifted the bulk of his men out to fight off the Square S challenge. He had left just four with the herd, one at drag, one at either flank and one at point.

Now Dave Wall met the east flank rider, met him suddenly, a cursing, high riding figure and Dave shifted the swing of riata coils from cattle to man, catching him full across the face and shoulders with the heavy, hard-braided rawhide. It did two things. It spoiled the direction of the shot the fellow got off and it knocked him so far off balance that the sudden side swing of his horse, dodging to miss collision with Dave's mount, spilled him out of the saddle. Dave raced on, the smell of powder smoke in his nostrils, the blaze of gun fire still searing his eyes.

He broke abruptly from the dust, close up to the point. The point rider was there, swinging toward him, wondering at that confusion on the flank. He was cocked and ready and there was only one thing Dave could do. He beat the fellow to the shot, saw him catch at his saddle horn, miss it and go limply down.

The point of the herd was thin. It bent to the west under the pressure Dave and Tres threw against it. And it began to run, sucking the rest of the herd along behind it.

The west flank rider was too far back to block the growing stampede. He had heard the shots, felt the first growing sway and shift of unruliness in the herd, but because of the dust was unable to guess the answer until too late. He made his try, dashing to stop that curving point, to drive it back and straighten the herd

again. He might have done some good if the cattle had not already started to run. And he was one man trying to break that ominous curve to the west while two others were fashioning it and holding it together. It was mathematics, two against one, so the answer was written.

THE DRAG RIDER was too far back to help, besides being unable to figure what was taking place until the plodding cattle ahead of him picked up their walk to a quickening shuffle and then to a blind, massed run. After that he had no choice. Dave Wall and Tres Debley worked even more furiously. They kept the pressure on that curving point of the herd until, in a wild crescent, it was curving not only to the west, but to the south, heading back the way it had come. They helped its wild, blind pace with shouts and flailing riatas. Then they pulled aside and let it run.

It hadn't taken too long. Surprise had been on their side and the bulk of the Window Sash riders, engrossed in driving back the Square S battlers, had moved too far apart from the herd to block Dave's and Tres' desperate maneuver. Nor had the Window Sash fighters even guessed what was taking place with the herd until the thing was done and the cattle were running.

It was one thing to meet an attack and drive it back. It was something else to break off that fight and ride to stop a stampeding herd that was in wild flight along the back trail. Cube Spayd found this out, now. When one of his men yelled hoarsely to him, Spayd turned and saw the racing herd. When he tried to call off some of his men and send them after the herd, it thinned his ranks so that the tide of battle began to turn and the Square S began driving him and his remaining men back. Cube Spayd was faced with the decision of doing one thing or the other. To hold the line against the Square S while losing the herd would be no victory, gain no point. The herd, still holding to that long curve, could end up in the desert, in the poison bogs and sinkholes of Stinking Water. Cursing like a madman, Cube Spayd made his choice. He began drifting after the herd, fighting a rear guard action as he went.

Dave Wall and Tres Debley rode straight west, aiming at a point just south of the Monuments. It got them out of the way of the retreating Window Sash crew, though a few long-range rifle slugs kicked up dust and ricocheted away in wailing futility. They saw Window Sash lose men, for a rear action fight is always costly. They saw the spirit and purpose of Lilavelt's hired hands begin to weaken and break and they saw the survivors start riding wildly, intent now only on escape.

Tres Debley voiced Dave Wall's thought. "Reckon we sort of helped kick a spoke out of Lilavelt's wheel, Dave."

Dave was smiling grimly. For the first time in years the on-rolling tide of Luke Lilavelt's cattle empire had struck an obstacle it could not flow over. It was good to know he'd had a hand in blocking that tide. But the tide would come back, so there were things to do.

Square S riders had given up the chase, and now they came trailing back, horses blown and laggard, men drained dry by the fury of battle. Dave and Tres rode out to intercept them. They rode out to be covered by ready guns and met with scowling suspicion. A hard-jawed, raw-boned rider with a bloodstain on one shirt sleeve, swung his horse to bar their way. A second rider growled, "That's Debley. He's Window Sash!"

Another said, "And Wall, Dave Wall. I let him through my guard post last night to see the boss. What the hell are they doing here?"

"A good question," nodded the rawboned man. "What are you doing here?"

"That herd," answered Dave, "didn't swap ends and start running on its own accord."

The rawboned one relaxed slightly. "True. But you're Window Sash men. It don't add up."

"We were Window Sash. But no longer. We got scores of our own to pay off against Lilavelt. We saw you needed some help, so..." Dave shrugged.

The rawboned one scrubbed the back of a hand across a face grimed with sweat and dust and powder smoke. He felt of his wounded arm and winced.

"All right. You helped us in this mess and you warned Bart Sutton that herd

was headin' this way. Maybe you know more of Lilavelt's plans?"

"I know the man," said Dave. "He'll be back. I don't know when, but he'll be back. And he'll come stronger, next time. To lick him, you'll have to fight all out, no holds barred. Make Sutton understand that. Tell him not to be proud, not too proud to hire on a few gun fighters—if he can locate some good ones. For this is a case of kill or be killed. Tell Sutton that."

"I won't have to tell him. He'll be able to see that with his own eyes. For we're taking three good men back across their saddles on their last ride."

The raw boned one started to rein away, hesitated and said gruffly, "Thanks."

VII

DURING the next thirty days Dave Wall rode more miles than ever before in his life for an equal period of time. All were trails he had covered before in the service of Luke Lilavelt, but never at such a driving, unrelenting pace as now. He left gaunted, weary horses behind him and rode on on fresh ones. He rode himself down to rawhide and sinew, while the sun and wind burned him black. His eyes were deep and cold with unrelenting purpose, narrowed with wary alertness. For each one of Luke Lilavelt's far flung cattle headquarters could be a death trap for him under Lilavelt's orders.

But in those distant ranches there was no word of Lilavelt. Men did not even know that Dave was no longer a Lilavelt man and Dave did not bother to enlighten them. It made his own task a trifle simpler.

At the end of that long ride, Dave was as empty handed as when he started. And so the search came back to where it had started—to the Sand Hills.

On his way there, Dave stopped briefly in Crater City to make routine inquiries. Finding nothing there he rode, one mid-morning into Bart Sutton's Square S spread at Sweet Winds.

Those winds were blowing when Dave rode up to the Square S ranchhouse. And on their cooling breath was carried that fragrance of space, of far off cedar thickets, of juniper and sage. There was no guard to bar his way, but a rider did step

from the bunkhouse door, a rifle over his arm.

"Bart Sutton?" queried Dave curtly.

The rider nodded toward the ranch-house. "He'll be coming out to sit on the porch soon."

"You mean that wound still has him down? I thought he'd be a well man again by this time."

The rider shrugged. "Bart can be a bull-headed old coot. He went against Miss Leslie's protests and tried to get around too soon. That rumpus we had with that Window Sash herd got him all excited, I reckon. Anyhow he tried to hit a saddle too soon and it put him on his back again. He's coming along all right again, but slow. Bart ain't as young as he used to be. There he is now."

There also, was Leslie Sutton. She was setting an arm chair where the sun would strike and helping her father into it. Sutton was gaunt and thin. Dave went up to them, hat in hand.

Leslie Sutton caught her breath, paled first, then colored eagerly, her eyes fathomless as she looked at Dave.

"Howdy, Wall," growled Bart Sutton. "You got the marks of long riding on you."

Dave nodded. "Been around." He met the girl's eyes and said simply, "It is good to see you again, Miss Sutton. I understand this old tarantula has been difficult to manage."

"I—I think he has learned his lesson," said Leslie breathlessly.

"I'm a damned nuisance and plumb fed up with myself," snarled Sutton. "Here I pick up a little bullet scratch across the ribs weeks and weeks ago, and I'm still puling around like a sick cat. Enough to make any man chaw the halter rope."

"Enough to make you realize you're not as young as you used to be," smiled Dave faintly.

"What's on your mind?"

"Both of you, and things in general. Any more trouble with Lilavelt?"

"Nope. I've took on extra hands. I keep a patrol steady down by the Monuments. If Lilavelt shows again we'll kick his teeth in. Er—thanks for lending a hand in that last ruckus. Seems I've had you figured wrong in some ways, Wall. Glad to find out I was wrong. Pull up a chair and rest your feet. You've been around.

What's the range talk? Never felt so out of things before in my life."

If Dave had not had the haunting shadow of Jerry Connell's future always at the back of his mind, he would have asked nothing more of life than to sit and visit with Bart Sutton, to be accepted almost with eager welcome. For there was a definite, tone of gruff friendliness in Sutton's voice. And to know that Leslie Sutton was near, to hear her voice, to look at her...

Abrupt decision took hold of Dave. "I have talk to make, for both of you. I hope you'll listen."

They did, father and daughter, while Dave again told the story of Jerry Connell, of the influence it had had on his life, of the things it had made him do.

"Maybe," he ended, "Jerry and I both played our cards wrong. But at the time it seemed the right thing to do. Now it all simmers down to where it started. Luke Lilavelt. I've got to find him. That is what I've been riding far and fast for, trying to pick up his trail. I'll keep riding until I do."

"I'm glad," said Bart Sutton slowly, "that you told this, Wall. Glad to hear it from your own lips. It straightens out a lot of things. Er—when you leave, I'm shaking hands with you."

Bart Sutton was a shrewd man. He knew his daughter more clearly than she dreamed and, during the past weeks he had watched her moods and guessed much. He smiled grimly to himself when, as Dave left, Leslie walked out with him to his horse.

"Yeah," murmured Sutton to himself, "I'm mighty glad to know there's nothing behind Dave Wall that can't be forgiven."

As for Leslie, she looked up at this lean, sun-blackened man beside her. "I wish you luck in your quest for Luke Lilavelt, Dave Wall. It means so much to so many people. And you will be—careful?"

"Yes."

"And in riding other trails you will not long forget the one that leads to Sweet Winds?"

"I will know that one better than any other. Goodbye, Leslie."

THERE WERE just three men at the Sand Hills headquarters. Olds, Challis and Caraway. They were sullen and un-

certain. And far from having any animosity toward Dave, they seemed relieved to see him.

"We're danglin' in midair," growled Olds. "We don't know which is what. We ain't heard anything from Lilavelt in weeks, we ain't seen him. Hippo Dell's left, where or why we dunno. No pay has come through. We're about ready to shuck out and to hell with everything. Just what's it all about, Wall—or don't you know?"

Dave shrugged, "Lilavelt is as big a mystery to me as he is to you boys. I'm looking for him. I've been looking for him. I'm going to keep on looking for him. Any objections?"

"Hell—no! He owes us wages. We'd like to find him ourselves and collect. Then we're driftin'. That guy is too shifty for us."

"Afraid I can't help you a bit. Well, I'll be moving on. I'm swapping one tired horse for two fresh ones."

"Help yourself, grunted Olds sourly. "Take the whole damn cavy if you want. If Lilavelt don't give a 'damn about this ranch, why should we?"

With a fresh relay of broncs under him, Dave made time heading south across the desert for Basin. He had been long away and was suddenly anxious for news. How Jerry was coming along, and Judith and the kids—how the ranch was coming along. And also, maybe by this time Lilavelt had shown up again and had been picked up by Sam Ashabaugh. For weeks Dave had been so intent on the trail he had kept these things at the back of his mind. Now they all came flooding, drawing him on at a pace that kept his two broncs eating up the miles.

Daylight ran out and dark came in. The horses were gaunt for water so Dave headed for the waterhole where he had found Leslie Sutton that night long weeks ago, when the start of his breakup with Luke Lilavelt had definitely taken shape.

The horses smelled water and drove ahead eagerly. But Dave smelled something else and reined in. Wood smoke! Again, it seemed, this camp ground was occupied.

Dave moved warily in, holding the horses to a walk. He glimpsed the glow of the fire, saw a figure hunkered beside it. Dave swung a little to one side and as the horses slithered down into the dry wash, that

figure at the fire stood up. Recognition hit Dave like a club. Luke Lilavelt!

Shaggy and unshaven, ragged as a scarecrow. But—Luke Lilavelt!

Lilavelt's voice came out at Dave, tight and droning, but almost querulous, petulant. "Time you were getting back, George. Damn it, man, what held you up? It's bad enough to be stuck in this blasted desert with a horse, and pure hell to be left afoot without one."

Dave rode straight in now, to the very edge of the firelight. He swung down, spurs jangling.

"You pick up any news, George?" asked Lilavelt. "How are things in Basin? How about Connell? George, why don't you speak?" Suddenly Lilavelt was wary, wavering in panic. Then Dave Wall's voice hit him.

"Not George, Luke. But Wall—Dave Wall. Don't move one little finger, Luke! I got a gun looking right at you."

Even in that doubtful firelight, Dave could see the wild, ragged fear that convulsed Luke Lilavelt's beaked face. He thought for a moment that Lilavelt intended to take the desperate gamble, for Lilavelt's hand started sliding toward the gun that hung at his lank hip. Then he jerked the hand back as though he had been about to touch redhot iron.

"Wise," said Dave coldly. "You'd never have made it, Luke. Turn around."

LILAVELT obeyed and Dave moved quickly in to take his gun. Lilavelt was shivering slightly. Dave's lips curled with contempt. With the chips down and no shield to hide behind, Luke Lilavelt was an arrant coward.

Dave said, "Now you can look at me." Lilavelt turned slowly. "You—you're going to kill me?"

"That's what I promised, didn't I—if you ever turned the law loose on Jerry Connell? Well, you did. And here I am and here you are."

"Go slow." There was thick pleading in Lilavelt's voice now. "Go slow! I can make it worth your while. I can..."

"You can talk!" cut in Dave icily. "You were expecting George. George—who?"

"I been a damned fool," quavered Lilavelt. "When Muir brought word that you'd sided Bart Sutton and saved his life, I

blew my top. I didn't think straight. So I went to Judge Masterson and gave him the word on Connell. I shouldn't have done that. I see it now. I was a fool. I got to thinking—about you. I realized I'd started something. I wondered where I could hide out. I thought of this damned desert. I been here ever since, dodgin' around like a hunted coyote."

"But before you took to the desert you set up a little gun trap for me at Gravelly, didn't you?" Dave cut in again. "Well, Cube Spayd and Muir bungled it. In case you didn't know it, Muir is dead. And when Spayd tried to push that Gravelly herd through Square S range to the Sand Hills, I had the pleasure of helping Square S lick him. Oh, you're through in lots of ways, Luke—all through. I'm still waiting to know who you thought I was. George who?"

Dave jammed the muzzle of his gun hard against Lilavelt's gaunt belly. Lilavelt cringed, licked his lips.

Dave's voice took on a raw, raging note. "You damned, sneaking whelp! I'm not waiting all night for an answer. George who?" Dave jammed his gun deeper.

Sweat made a greasy shine across Lilavelt's face in the thin, flickering fire glow. "George—Big George Yearly."

"Ah!" The exclamation slid between Dave's lips with a soft hiss. "Now we're getting down to cases. Big George Yearly, eh? We'll talk about this."

Dave stepped back a pace, holstered his gun, reached for paper and tobacco. "I want to watch your face, so I can tell if you're lying, Luke. Face the fire. That's it. And remember, I can have this gun out and a slug through you before you could move a step. So talk up and talk straight. Now about this Big George Yearly—how long has he been in these parts and where has he been holing up?"

There was a strange look on Lilavelt's face that the firelight picked out, a look almost vacuous. It was as if he were numbed, mentally and physically by the crash of calamity that had descended upon him. Or like he was listening for the first rumblings of the crack of doom. His shoulders were hunched, he was rocking back and forth on heels and toes.

"Big George," he mumbled. "Yeah, Big George Yearly. He's been..."

That sway had pulled him back on his heels again, and this time he did not recover. Instead, he threw himself as far from the fire as possible, twisting in the air, landing clawing and scrambling on the hard, dry wash cobbles. And his voice cut through the night in a yell that was almost a scream.

"Get him, George—get him! It's Wall. Get him!"

Dave was drawing before Lilavelt was half through his desperate dive. But the import of Lilavelt's shrieking words set off compressed springs of action within him. Dave lunged back also—driving for the thick dark beyond the reach of the firelight. And the move carried him only narrowly from the path of the slug that whistled in out of the dark. While out there to the west gun flame spurted and balled and disappeared, and the report ran hollowly across the empty desert miles.

With his second lunge, Dave dove for the cut bank of the wash, struck it and lay along it, gun chopped high and ready. Off to his right there was scuffling and snarling as Luke Lilavelt clawed a frantic way up the cut-bank. Dave smashed a slug at the sound, caught the lift of Luke Lilavelt's bony head and gaunt shoulders against a star, fired again.

The snarling broke off abruptly and there was no purpose to the scuffling; rather was it a loose sliding and fumbling and then silence.

But only for a split second. Then that gun out there in the night was blaring and blaring again and lead whipped and gouged about Dave, stinging him with flying sand and pebbles.

One thought rang and rang again in Dave's mind. "I can't kill him—I can't kill Big George Yearly! I've got to have him alive!"

DAVE ROLLED and rolled along the slope of the cut bank, gaining distance and time. And all the while lead searched for him, hungry and intent. He seemed to roll into space and went down on hands and knees. He had rolled into a sag in the cut bank, past a jutting shoulder of earth. Here that searching lead could not touch him.

Dave worked fast. He laid down his gun and with one hand muffling rowels and

chains, unbuckled first one spur and then the other. He unbuckled his heavy bull hide chaps, slid out of them. He caught up his gun and began feeling his way up and over the swing of the cut bank behind him. Then, a soft shadow, melting into the blackness of the surrounding earth, he stole back, paralleling the wash.

It was a long, dangerous gamble, but here was the answer to many things, if he could put it over. He had to get Big George Yearly—get him alive!

Where was Yearly? Out there where that gun had blared, was only deep dark and silence now.

To go after Yearly, try and locate him in that blackness, or to wait here, on the edge of the dry wash, and wait for him to come up to the fire? The questions whipsawed Dave.

Would Yearly work up to the fire? Maybe. Maybe he would think that some of that savage lead he had thrown had found its mark, seeing that Dave had thrown none in return—had done no shooting beyond the lead that had done for Luke Lilavelt. It was as good a gamble as any. Dave pulled himself to the edge of the cut bank and crouched there, like a waiting panther ready to spring.

Dave waited minutes that seemed hours, with a strained intensity of senses that made the utter silence turn to phantom roaring in his ears. He didn't move, he didn't breathe. Back up the wash where he'd left his horses one of them stamped wearily. Then silence again.

Dave thought his nerves would tear apart. Then he heard it, the soft scuff of boot leather on cobblestones. At last he was hearing what Lilavelt had heard before—Big George moving in.

Well, Luke Lilavelt had made his gamble and had lost. Lilavelt was dead. That second shot—with Lilavelt's head and shoulders a target against the stars. While now, in that wash below...

It was a black bulk moving, the bulk of a man—a huge, gross figure, moving with deceptive softness and lightness. Dave measured the distance as best he could. It was a long leap—a good ten or twelve feet. But the chance might never come again. Dave gathered himself and made the try, knowing as he did so, that this

big brute of a man he was launching himself at—this Big George Yearly—was the man he had known as Hippo Dell!

No mistaking the gross figure, nor that strange ease and lightness of movement. This was Hippo Dell, all right, erstwhile cook at the Sand Hills headquarters. Even the dark could not hide that stunning fact from Dave.

Dave's leap was short. The stir of Dave's move brought the big man around, cursing, snake-fast. His gun stabbed up and blared. But Dave was falling and the shot tore out the crown of his hat. He landed hard, on hands and knees, threw himself forward again, desperately, frantically.

THE DRIVING WEIGHT of his shoulders caught the big man at the knees, brought him crashing down and Dave heard the clink of gun metal on cobble stones as Big George landed. Dave swarmed on his man, grabbing for the throat. He found it, big and round, but though the surface layer was soft, there were thick muscles inside. Dave drove his fingers deep with every ounce of strength he had and locked them there.

Then came savage moments of pure nightmare. It was as though Dave had a grizzly bear by the throat. Ponderous fists beat and pounded at him. Dave hunched his shoulders, drove his head hard and deep between his rigid wrists and hung on.

Big George quit pounding, wrapped his arms about Dave's middle and set down. What was that which Tom Burke had told Dave about this man they had known as Hippo Dell? The strongest man Tom Burke had ever seen, and the wickedest in a fight.

It was as though bands of steel were clamped about him, drawing tighter and tighter with a power to crush and rend anything. But there was rawhide and steel in Dave Wall, also, and he called on every ounce of it now. But despite this, Dave thought his ribs must go, and then his spine. He could feel his ribs spring. The feeling was ghastly, the pain a terrible thing. But still Dave clung to the big man's throat, knowing it was his only chance. And that grip had cut off air from the big man's throat and lungs and Dave knew that deep torture was racking him.

Abruptly those crushing arms slacked

off. Big George began to roll, over and over, arms and legs thrashing. There was wildness and desperation in him, too, now. That air—that precious air he was strangling for and couldn't get. . .

Over and over and over. Back and forth. This was the worst of all for Dave. Each time the big man's crushing bulk rolled over him, cobbles gouged and bruised Dave's back and shoulders and hips, slammed the back of his head wickedly. Dave felt his senses begin to slip. There was a vast roaring in his ears, the taste of blood in his mouth and throat. He couldn't hang on much longer.

Big George quit rolling, leaving Dave on top. The big man's gross torso seemed to arc like a taut spring, taut with a terrible, shaking intensity. Then he began going flaccid. Dave let go of Big George's throat and staggered to his feet.

How he kept to them he did not know, for all the world, this black, lonely world was whirling and weaving about him. The stars shuttled crazily.

Only some deep, driving instinct kept Dave at it, got him to his horses and back again, a coil of rope in his hands. Somehow he got Big George's thick wrists together, looped the rope bitterly tight. He tied Big George's ankles.

Then he was conscious of just two things. The fact that Big George was breathing, in long, whistling, shuddering gasps, and that only by the strongest drive of sheer will could he keep from going completely out himself.

Dave sagged over the man he had captured and tied, and fought his weakness back—fought the shadows back until, by the thinnest of margins he won. And so waited while the world slowly steadied and the stars quit whirling and the wide night grew real again.

VIII

DEPUTY SAM ASHABAUGH, squatting on his heels in the shade of his office in Basin, looked up at the sound of hoofs. Four horses, gaunt and travel-worn came down the street toward him. A lean, burning-eyed figure rode the first one. Of the other three, one carried nothing at all while the remaining two carried men, tied to their saddles. One of

these men was dead. The other was alive, a mountain of flesh, with sagging lines pulling and distorting a face that had once been round and moon-like.

Sam Ashabaugh hit his feet with a lunge. "Dave Wall! What in hell's name you got there?"

Dave Wall's voice was hoarse and croaking. "What I went after, Sam. Luke Lilavelt and Big George Yearly. Finding one led me to the other."

Dave got off the horse like an old, old man. He hung on to his saddle to steady himself.

"It was like tangling with a bear," he mumbled. "He broke some ribs on me just squeezing me with his arms. And he beat my back to a pulp rolling on those cobblestones. Don't take any chances with him, Sam—he was too hard to get."

Dave wobbled as he spoke and Sam got an arm around him. "I'm takin' care of you first," blurted the astounded Sam. "Come on in here."

He steered Dave's unsteady, halting steps into his office and into the back room to the bunk in there. He got Dave on to the bunk and straightened him out. With a long sigh Dave let go of the tight band of will power that had been holding him together. All things went dim and blurry and far away. Then they faded altogether and he drifted deep into something that was half stupor, half sleep.

Pain brought him back, pain in his punished ribs and back. People were in the room, bending over him. A man was saying professionally, ". . . get these ribs bandaged before he comes out of it. Then I'll work on his back."

It was too much to resist or even groan. Dave let them have their way with him and finally they were done. There was still pain, but it was a better kind of pain, almost comforting after the other wild torment. Soft hands brushed his face and Dave opened his eyes to look up at his sister, Judith. He managed a twisted grin.

"Hi, old girl! Have I been a nuisance?"

She sobbed softly. "Your poor body. It was as though you'd been beaten with heavy clubs. Just one great bruise. Oh—Dave . . ."

He captured one of her hands, patted it. "It was rough, for a fact, but it's done

with now. How's Jerry and the kids?"

"Aw-all right. And everyone thankful to you. Now you must be quiet — and sleep."

He did sleep, despite the pain. When he awoke it was Tres Debley and Sam Ashabaugh who were beside him. "Sam, you still got Big George Yearly safe?"

"I got him," nodded Sam, troubled. "Only he swears his name is Dell, and that he's not Big George Yearly."

"He's Big George. I heard Lilavelt call him that. Hi, Tres, old settler, how are things at the ranch?"

"They'll keep. Right now Sam and me got things to do to you. Doctor's orders. You're due in Judge Masterson's offices in a couple of hours. Hang on to yourself, cowboy. This will probably hurt like hell at first."

THEY ROLLED him on his face and went work on his back with some kind of ointment or grease, kneading and rubbing, from hips to the top of his shoulders. Gently at first, then with more emphasis. Dave gritted his teeth, squirmed and grunted, cursed them savagely. But presently the battered, stiffened muscles began to soften and flex. After that the ministrations were comforting. An hour later he was up and dressed. Aside from the marked stiffness with which he carried himself and the gaunt tautness of his face, he looked much his usual self.

Jerry Connell was in Judge Masterson's office, and also a tall, ramrod straight, white-haired man. The Judge shook hands with Dave and said, "Meet John Ogden. Mr. Ogden, this is Dave Wall, brother-in-law of Jerry Connell."

Dave felt the impact of stern, relentless gray eyes burning at him from a strong-jawed, granite-like face.

"Ogden!" exclaimed Dave softly. "The Town Marshall of Round Mountain was named Ogden."

"My younger brother," said John Ogden harshly. "Shot down like a dog in the performance of his duty."

"Mr. Ogden," Judge Masterson intervened, "has heard Jerry tell his story of that shooting. And he has heard from me what we think of Jerry Connell in these parts. He has agreed not to prosecute Jerry if we can convince him that we have at last

found Big George Yearly." The Judge cleared his throat. "Tell us what happened, Dave."

So he did, telling of the long trails he had ridden, trying to locate Luke Lilavelt and of his lack of success. How he had ended the long circle at the Sand Hills headquarters and of the setup he found there. And then, coming down across the deep desert, how he'd found Lilavelt at the dry wash waterhole.

"He'd been hiding out in the desert all the time," Dave ended, "and it was only bull luck that I came across him. Still bigger luck that he thought I was Big George Yearly, coming in. Apparently Yearly had taken Lilavelt's horse to use as a pack horse when he went out to Cottonwood for a load of supplies. At that Lilavelt nearly out-foxed me, but he was too smart for his own good. When he yelled to Yearly to get me, that gave me time to dodge, so Yearly missed his first setup shot at me. After that I managed to get Lilavelt and get my hands on Yearly so I could bring him in alive. I never want another chore like it."

"Are you sure it is Yearly, instead of Hippo Dell?" asked the Judge.

"Lilavelt called him Big George Yearly. We'll make sure. Has Jerry seen him yet?"

"Not yet. But he will now. Sam, go get your prisoner."

The rest had done the big man good, too. Sam Ashabaugh had cuffs on him, but he moved with much of that old deceptive lightness and softness. He stared around with those small, hard, unwinking eyes. His glance touched Jerry briefly, passed on.

"He's changed," said Jerry slowly. "He didn't used to be fat when I rode with him. But there is something there—something . . ."

"It will take more definite identification than that to convince me," said John Ogden harshly.

"What have you to say for yourself, Yearly?" asked Judge Masterson.

"You got the name wrong," said the big man. "It's Dell, not Yearly."

His voice was coming back after the choking Dave had given him. Again it was meaty, moist.

Jerry Connell's eyes quickened. "It's

Yearly! That voice—it hasn't changed. I recognize the voice."

"So you say," growled John Ogden. "It's merely your word against his."

"True," nodded Judge Masterson.

JERRY wasn't daunted. "I'm remembering something else. We were on round-up one time for Sam Larkin. It was deep range, way back at the fringe of things. We kicked up a really wild cow critter. It had a strain of longhorn in it and was a maverick. We had the devil's own time roping it and getting it stretched for branding. I put the iron on it and Big George did the ear-marking. The critter, fighting all the time, swung its head and the tip of one of those big horns caught George Yearly, glancing under the left shoulder, tearing his shirt and ripping a mean gash across the muscles. Big George liked to show how big and tough he was and he didn't take care of that wound like he should. It went a little bad and when it finally healed, it left a mean scar. I suggest . . ."

The big man let out a yeasty snarl, whirled and lunged at Jerry, cuffed hands bunched and lifted high for a blow that could have brained Jerry had it landed. It was quiet, alert Tres Debley who upset that plan. He drove against the big man from the side, knocking him off balance. Then Sam Ashabaugh took off with a leap that draped him on the big man's shoulders. Between he and Tres, Sam got the big man off his feet and down to the floor with a crash.

Sam said, "We'll see about that scar."

There was the rip of cloth as he peeled half the big man's shirt away. There, where Jerry said it would be, was the ragged scar.

"I guess," said Judge Masterson calmly, "I guess that settles it. Satisfied, Ogden?"

John Ogden nodded. "The man who killed my brother. He'll hang for that."

"Take Big George away, Sam," ordered the Judge.

With Tres Debley helping, Sam hustled his prisoner out. Judge Masterson crossed to another door, opened it and said with a slight bow, "Come in, my dear."

It was Judith Connell. In her arms she carried baby sister. The twins, big-eyed

and subdued, tugged at her skirt. Jerry went over to them, tried to take them all in his arms.

Judge Masterson said, looking at John Ogden, "You can go home with your family now, Jerry."

THEY SAT ON the porch of the ranchhouse at Sweet Winds and listened while Dave Wall told the story. "It was a crazy idea, but I got to wondering how Lilavelt got hold of that reward poster in the first place. Then I figured maybe Big George Yearly had given it to him, planning to get Jerry hung, and then maybe the hue and cry after him would die down. Anyway, that's the way it worked out."

"And," growled Bart Sutton, "now Luke Lilavelt is dead. Which really clears the board in lots of ways. The boys will be interested in hearing about that. I'm going out to the corrals and tell them."

He was looking better, was Bart Sutton. He was filling out again, his stride was steadier and had a trace of the old briskness.

Leslie Sutton murmured, "Sometimes Dad can be so obvious."

Dave Wall sobered as he looked at her. "I'm remembering the first time I saw you. It was a picture I carried with me, ever after. Had someone told me then that today I'd be here, looking at you, talking to you . . ." He shook his head at the wonder of it.

She smiled at him levelly. "There was a time when merely your name filled me with strange dreads. That was before I knew you."

"There are things along the back trail, like the final end of Luke Lilavelt . . ."

"All past—all forgotten," put in Leslie Sutton quickly. "You've earned a good future, Dave. Look to it."

"The good of it will depend on you," he told her gravely. "You've known that, I think, for quite a while."

She nodded, her eyes very soft. "Known and welcomed it."

The wind stirred about them. Sweet wind, fragrant with space and sunshine, with far off cedar and juniper and sage, with the heady incense of the beckoning years.



The kill-crazy mare sent a wild, eerie cry bugling into the hills.

BOOTHILL BONANZA

By Charles McDermott

When you hang the kill-sign on an old sage rat, be sure it's double-rigged and cinched tight.

“MALPAIS” KASH rode out of the badlands and headed toward the Calamity Hills at an easy trot. His unshaven face wore a cunning, triumphant grin. Sometimes, a sheriff's posse was a plain cussed nuisance. But the one that was twisting itself loco in the wilderness of rock and lava which Malpais was putting behind him, drew a chuckle from the outlaw.

Malpais knew the gnarled little runt who was leading the posse. Sheriff Clem Yokum had been dogging his trail ever since that killing in Arroyo, when Malpais

had tackled the Arroyo Cattleman's Bank.

But Sheriff Yokum was a fool, and Malpais was smart. That was why Malpais had outfoxed the law longer than he could remember—except for that little stretch in Yuma. In fact, that was how Malpais had got his name: when a posse began to yap, he knew enough to squirrel into the scarred, malpais reaches of the badlands, where even a Sioux tracker couldn't un-kink the trail.

But this time, Malpais had a hunch that Sheriff Yokum wouldn't turn back. The banker that Malpais had belly-shot was a

particular crony of the lawman. So, this once, Malpais was heading for the Calamity Hills to confuse the lawman. Malpais knew the Calamity diggings almost as well as he knew the badlands. He knew of timbered shafts and deserted shacks where a man could hide until he got a chance to fatten his saddlebags. Let the fool tin-star chaw the badlands apart.

Malpais reached the timberline, and found an ore-wagon road that had fallen into disuse. It led up to the abandoned diggings that scarred the hills.

His buckskin stopped suddenly. Taut-lipped, Malpais eased from the saddle, his long-barreled .45 Colt in his hand. Thirty feet ahead the narrow road elbowed around a rocky outcropping. He cat-footed to the shoulder.

On the side of a hill a whiskered little coot was operating a hand-winch. Malpais watched him draw a heavy ore bucket out of the shaft. An avaricious glint kindled his eyes. He started to ear the hammer of his Colt back, then a cagey smile twisted his lips.

He pouched the weapon, stepped forward. "Thought all the gold was scratched outta these diggin's," he drawled amicably.

Startled, the oldster whirled. An ancient six-shooter leaped into his fist.

"What yuh prowlin' fer, stranger?" he growled. His eyes, beneath shaggy brows, were fierce as a lobo's.

Malpais laughed disarmingly. "If you had help, you could scratch ten, mebbey twenty times as much outta that hole," he suggested.

"Yeah," the oldster admitted, scratching his whiskers reflectively. Tension had eased slightly from his gnarled body. "Yuh lookin' fer work mebbey?"

Malpais nodded.

The oldster scrutinized Malpais closely, then lowered his sixgun. "Reckon yuh're honest enough," he opined. "Did yuh mean ary harm yuh coulda back-bit me."

Malpais laughed inside. The old fool wasn't going to offer any trouble. He thrust out a hand. "I'm Malpais Kash—from over Crazy River way."

"Call me Gopher—Gopher Smith," the oldster offered. "Been hankerin' to git me a pardner, but I feared did word git round I made a strike, there'd be a stampe. Dang fools! They'd likely scratch

fer twenty years 'thout findin' another speck."

Malpais' green eyes narrowed. "Nobody knows you're up here?" he asked slyly.

Gopher grinned. "Fust face I've seen fer three months." He turned back to the shaft. "Yuh run the winch; I'll fill the bucket. But—" He whirled suddenly. "I'm only payin' yuh a fair wage, mind!" he warned.

"I didn't expect no pardner share," Malpais chuckled.

Gopher climbed down the ladder into the shaft. While he waited for him to fill the ore bucket, Malpais examined some of the ore. His eyes lighted. Wide ribbons of gold streaked the rock. Malpais grinned.

THAT NIGHT, after supper, he watched old Gopher remove a loose board from the shack's floor and add a handful of gold to his cache. Malpais' eyes gleamed as he stared at the yellow stuff. Old Gopher already had enough to take a man a long way. His hand inched toward his gun.

Then he slowly shook his head. He had it soft here. Old Gopher evidently was a little tetchd, otherwise he wouldn't be so trusting. All Malpais had to do was wait until the old fool scratched the pocket empty, then all the gold would be his for the taking. All of it!

He glanced at the shelves, at the food stacked there. His eyes darkened. Unless the pocket was cleaned in a few days, the store would have to be replenished.

"How long you figger to work that pocket?" he asked Gopher.

Gopher glanced at him sharply. "Yuh ain't petered out a'ready, are yuh?" he asked testily.

Malpais shook his head. "Rations are kinda gaunt," he hinted, glancing at the cache.

"Reckon I kin slip into Arroyo and git a load 'thout no trouble," Gopher said. He stared queerly at the startled light that spun up in Malpais' eyes. "Yuh dodgin' the law, ain't yuh, Malpais?"

Malpais' hand snaked for his gun. "Why, you—"

"Hold up, son," Gopher said quickly, soothingly. "No need tuh git spooked.

Ain't no business o' mine, but I knowed fust time I seen yuh."

"What you figgerin' to do about it?" Malpais snarled.

"Nuthin'," old Gopher said. "Just nuthin'. Yuh're a pert hand with a pick. I'm plumb satisfied."

Malpais let it rest there. But the idea of old Gopher making a trip to town for the supplies, worried him the next day at work. If the old fool happened to let his tongue wag . . .

That night, Malpais licked his lips greedily when the grizzled prospector added another handful of gold to the cache. He knew what he ought to do. He knew he ought to beef old Gopher now. There were enough supplies to last Malpais a few days on the trail. By then, he figured he could be across the border.

"How much you figger to take outta that hole?" he asked Gopher.

"Fifty-sixty thousand, thereabout," Gopher answered.

Malpais licked his lips again. He had to figure a way to get all that gold.

"Reckon I best git them supplies to-morra," Gopher mused idly. "Yuh got anything special—"

"Yeah," Malpais interrupted, his face hard. "You just make special-sure you don't mention I'm hid out up here. Savvy?"

"I don't chaw no bone fer the law," old Gopher grunted.

Next morning, Malpais watched the old prospector saddle the wicked-eyed dun and ride toward Arroyo. As soon as he was out of sight, Malpais hurried to the cache. He lifted the loose plank, and stiffened. The gold was gone!

Malpais cursed luridly. Had the old fool possessed more cunning than he had calculated? Or had he merely re-cached the gold, cautious-like?

His face twisted with rage. He'd been a fool to trust the old codger! If Gopher sent a posse swarming up to surround the shack—

Malpais swore again, plagued by misgivings. Had Gopher lugged the gold into town with him? No, that would start a stampede into the hills. Gopher didn't want that. Likely, Malpais reasoned, the old fool had cagily moved it to safer hiding.

All he had to do was hide in the hills to make sure Gopher didn't sneak a posse

up to surround him. When the old prospector returned, he would make him cough up the gold. Then, to make sartin no one discovered the murder till he was safely out of the country, he'd dump Gopher's old carcass into one of those abandoned shafts.

Malpais chuckled. To hell with the gold still in the pocket. A gent that got too greedy usually lost his head and tripped over a hangtree root.

SADDLING the buckskin, Malpais rode up into the hills where he could hide and watch the trail from Arroyo. The sun soared into the sky, then slowly settled in the west. Pretty soon, he spotted Gopher coming up the trail, a gunnysack across the saddle.

Grinning crookedly, he swung into the saddle and rode back to the cabin. "You hear any gossip in town?" he asked sharply.

Gopher nodded. "Sheriff Yokum is boilin' mad 'cause he lost yore trail in the badlands," he said. "Son, yuh didn't hev tuh beef thet fella, did yuh?"

"He was notchin' my briskit in his gunsight," Malpais lied.

Old Gopher shook his head sadly. "Stealin' ain't no way benefittin' tuh a man," he philosophized. "Yuh git a little and yuh want more. Purty soon yuh gotta let blood. Then yuh hev tuh answer tuh some 'Un higher than a tin-star. Yuh cain't nohow cover yore trail from Him, son."

"Why, you pious old fool!" Malpais snarled, his hand slapping his gun butt. "Mebby—" He stopped, puzzled. Old Gopher had a sly grin tucked in his whiskers.

"I promised yuh I'd chaw no bone fer the law, Malpais," Gopher chuckled. "But I writ a letter in town—left it at the bank. If somethin' was tuh happen I didn't turn up in town tomorra, why, I reckon Sheriff Yukum would come snortin' up here, pronto."

A cold, helpless rage began to burn in Malpais as he saw his carefully-built plan crumble. Gopher hadn't been as simple as he'd pretended. If he killed him now, Sheriff Yokum would get that letter; he'd come up to the cabin and discover the murder. Even if he hid the body, the nosy tin-star would be suspicious. He'd block

the trail through the pass, and that would be the end.

Malpais' mind worried darkly at the problem as he watched Gopher prepare supper. If he could make the old fool's death look accidental and hide in the hills until the lawman rode away . . . But how?

Malpais swore beneath his breath, and hitched a chair up to the table. Gopher watched him from under his shaggy brows. "Yuh ain't eatin' healthy, Malpais," he chided. "Yuh ain't got the miseries, hev yuh?"

Malpais stabbed a baleful glare at Gopher and shoved back from the table.

A sudden commotion in the corral startled him. It was not quite dusk and he could see the horses, their eyes rolling whitely, snorting and plunging wildly inside the enclosure.

"Whut in tarnation has got into them broncs?" exclaimed Gopher.

"Rattler in the corral," Malpais guessed, and hurried out.

The sidewinder was coiled in the thick dust, its flat, evil head poised to strike. Malpais' gun slid into his hand instinctively. Then he paused, an ugly grin breaking across his face.

"Shoot, yuh danged fool!" Old Gopher had hurried out of the cabin and was watching. "Them broncs will be tearin' the poles down 'nother minute."

Malpais concealed his elation. His gun leaped, roared. The sidewinder's head disappeared. Its rusty coils thrashed wildly for a few minutes in the thick dust. Slowly, watching, Malpais blew the smoke from his weapon.

HE CLIMBED into the corral and tossed the dead snake into the brush. Then, with a glance to mark the spot, he turned back into the cabin. His eyes gleamed. If he could trick old Gopher into revealing the location of the gold without arousing suspicion. . . .

But old Gopher saved him the trouble. He had the gold out and was weighing it, hefting it in his hand, miner fashion, when Malpais came in. The outlaw watched Gopher replace it then in the old cache beneath the floor.

Gopher hung his brush-jumper on a peg near the door, and crawled into bed.

Malpais waited till his snores filled the cabin, and then lifted the prospector's jacket from the peg and hurried outside. He found the spot where he'd tossed the sidewinder.

He grinned as he rolled the snake in Gopher's jacket. Then he returned to the cabin. He shed his own jacket and hung it on the peg where Gopher's had been. In a few minutes he crawled into bed.

He lay there listening to old Gopher snore. Pretty soon, when the first fingers of dawn lifted the darkness off the hills, he'd get the gold from the cache, and slip from the cabin.

He'd take old Gopher's jacket and hang it back on its peg. When old Gopher awakened and found him gone, he'd discover the robbed cache. He'd rush to the corral to saddle the dun. The wicked-eyed animal wouldn't smell the sidewinder sign on old Gopher's jacket till he was close because the sign would be faint, wetted by the early dew.

But it would be on the jacket, definitely! All Gopher had to do was to get close enough to the dun. He wouldn't be expecting those flashing, steel-shod hoofs rearing high . . .

Malpais licked his lips. When that pesky tin-star, Sheriff Yokum, got the letter Gopher had left for him, he'd have a hell of a time figuring what had turned old Gopher's mare into a killer.

Rising, Malpais eased into his clothes. He went out and shook the dead rattler out of Gopher's jumper. He brought the kill-scented garment back into the cabin and hung it on a peg. Then he crawled into bed again.

Suddenly, he sat bolt upright. Old Gopher was stirring in the opposite bunk. Malpais' fingers tightened about the cold butt of his gun.

He heard Gopher pull on his boots and open the door. Malpais eased from the bunk, followed. A full moon was soaring above the hills and Malpais saw Gopher had slipped into his jumper before leaving the cabin.

Malpais' finger tightened on the trigger of his long-barreled .45. In a moment he breathed easier. Old Gopher had stopped just outside the cabin.

He was kneeling, his whiskered face

lifted to the sky. Malpais' mouth curled scornfully, listening.

"... I ain't no way ag'in the law, but it ain't my problem to do a sheriffin' job, so forgive me. Amen."

Malpais ducked quietly into his bunk as old Gopher turned back to the cabin. He heard the old man feel along the wall for a peg, grunt as the jacket probably missed the peg, and fell to the floor. The next minute the prospector's snores filled the cabin again.

Cautiously, Malpais rose. It was pitch black inside the cabin now. But his groping fingers found the jacket he'd hung on the peg, and in a moment he had the heavy sack of gold from the cache. He clutched it tightly, his pulse wicked with elation. He started quickly but quietly for the door.

Abruptly, he froze.

Hell! With all his careful planning, he'd nearly slipped. He whirled toward the chair beside old Gopher's bunk. His fingers fumbled in the dark, but fumbled expertly at a familiar task. He grinned wolfishly when he finished. He'd added the perfect touch.

MINUTES later, Malpais dropped into the corral. His coaxing voice reached out to the buckskin. Then, suddenly, fear exploded along his spine. Gopher's mare had whirled, her eyes rolling wickedly in the moonlight.

She screamed, her hoofs lashing out toward Malpais' frozen figure.

In the instant he stood rooted with surprise, he realized what had happened. That jacket he'd heard fall to the floor when old Gopher returned to the cabin, hadn't been Gopher's at all. Instead, the prospector had knocked *his*, Malpais', to

the floor as he hung the kill-scented one on the peg!

The blasted fool had innocently switched the kill-sign!

"Why, the seven-jointed old ball of whiskers!" Malpais snarled. He'd ruined his whole carefully built plan. In another moment old Gopher would be awake.

Malpais cursed again luridly, stabbed for his gun as he twisted desperately to avoid the mare's slashing hoofs. A glancing blow drove him to his knees. Above him the mare squealed, rearing wickedly, her steel-shod hoofs glinting murderously in the moonlight.

Malpais attempted to lift his sixgun, and a cold shock raced through him. His arm wouldn't respond! His whole right side seemed paralyzed. That glancing hoof-blow had done something to him.

Stark fear knifed him then. He screamed wildly.

"Gopher! Help!"

His agonized glance saw the old prospector erupt from the cabin, clutching his six-shooter.

Gopher's faded eyes took in the scene at a glance. His gun lifted, sighted on the kill-crazy mare. The animal sent a wild, eerie cry bugling into the hills. She seemed to bunch, gather her muscles into a destructive bolt.

"Shoot, you blasted fool!" Malpais screamed.

In that instant before the hoofs flashed downward, Malpais heard Gopher's gun-hammer click. He saw the stunned expression that flashed across the old prospector's face. And he laughed shrilly, insanely.

Hell! He'd made it perfect all right. Too perfect! He'd emptied the old fool's gun. . . .

See Your Fall **NORTHWEST**

FOR THESE 3 BIG SPECIALS

THE WHITE SILENCE

By JACK LONDON

TRAIL OF '98

By ROBERT SERVICE

BEWARE THE SOURDOUGH SIREN By DAN CUSHMAN

Trail of the Renegade Gun

By Walker A. Tompkins

For five years, Morse wore the Confederate grey of Hood's Volunteers. Now he ramrodded a carpetbaggers' town, throwin' his lead for the Yankee greed-pack.

HE reigned up briefly on the north bank, nostalgia narrowing his smoke-gray eyes as they appraised the familiar outlines of Tanner's Ferry on the Texas side of the Red. Then he

gigged the bayonet-scarred warhorse across the puddled ford.

"Hell of a homecoming," he muttered cynically, tasting the irony of this day and hour that should have been a high

Voicing the old rebel yell, the Texicans thundered into the plaza.



point in his life.

It was hard to realize he was the same cocky young rooster who had ridden away to war one spring morning, strong and proud and reckless, a rebel song on his lips:

*I'll be back in a year with a Yankee's
left ear*

*My saddlebags full of loot for my
sweetheart to boot—*

Well, he was back. Only the year had stretched into five. The lobe of his own left ear bore the crop of a Yankee saber. His Chihuahua *alforja* bags were rotting with the carrion of his Texas stallion on some forgotten field in Tennessee. And his sweetheart . . . the next hour would answer that. He knew he had been listed

as killed in action for the past two years. Molly Provo might be married and have a casa full of kids by now . . .

Realization of how thoroughly the war years had sapped the core of him struck Webb Morse hardest when his mount splashed up on the heat-checked mud-flats and quartered wearily into Sam Houston Street.

He got no lift from the fact that under him at last was the Texas soil that had sired him. The fierce devotion to that soil had fortified him through the bitter denouement of the Lost Cause. It had kept his sanity intact during the twelve postwar months he had spent in the hospital of a Yankee prisoner of war camp.



Today's return culminated the dream he and thousands like him had cherished during four years of bivouacs and forced marches, charges and retreats, and finally ultimate defeat and surrender.

And yet the fulfillment of that dream left Morse indifferent now, dispirited by a sense of anticlimax, conscious only of his throbbing physical weariness and the black tunnel of the future stretching ahead for Texas and all things Texan . . .

Tanner's Ferry showed the impact of the war years. The stamp of carpetbagger rule lay heavy on this trail town he had left as a rowdy young cowhand of nineteen.

Heading along the street, he was made aware of those changes wherever his gaze settled. The Alamo Livery Barn, where he and his hard-bitten sire, Buffalo Ben Morse of the Rocking M, had always left their horses when they rode in from the home spread, had been given a coat of red paint and a new sign reading:

Union Pride Stables, King Dowell, Prop.

And the Star of Texas Saloon, where kindly old Pegleg Forsell had slipped him watered whiskey in spite of his youth—the Star of Texas was now the Yankee Doodle Bar, King Dowell, Owner.

Even the signposts on Sam Houston Street, he noticed, had been changed to Abe Lincoln Avenue.

"Funny it ain't King Dowell Boulevard," Webb Morse grunted as he reined up the hill toward the Trail House. "Dowell seems to be the herd boss around Ferry nowadays . . ."

Curious stares followed the rider, but no one recognized him as the stormy petrel of the Rocking M, the swaggering green kid who had been a mite too reckless with his guns in the old wild days before Secession. The few loiterers on the street brushed him off with indifferent stares, ticketing him for another broke-down warrior drifting back to a homeland that lay prostrate under the heel of a Reconstructionist government.

THE TRAIL HOUSE was much as he remembered it, an unpainted three-story eyesore dominating the crown of the bluff, its gingerbread beginning to fall into disrepair now, its lofty cupola still bounded by a rusty iron railing where Molly Provo

had stood on that fateful morning in '61, waving as long as he was in range of her vision.

Zeke Provo had founded the Trail House back in the fifties, when Buffalo Ben Morse had been building up his Rocking M iron out in the untamed *brasada* flats. Now Zeke's bones were mouldering in some nameless grave outside a Pennsylvania village named Gettysburg.

Zeke's name had been painted off the sign which overhung the porch steps. The name of King Dowell replaced it, the smug gilt letters seeming to fling a taunt at Morse as he stepped out of the saddle in the signboard's shadow and hitched his blue roan to the chewed tie rack.

Morse remembered a few of the spit-and-whittle society who loafed as of yore behind the ornate railing of the hotel porch, but they scanned his fatigue-rutted face and stubbled jaws without visible recognition.

Morse's lips twisted sardonically as he returned their blank, unwelcoming stares. His reflection in the glass doors told him he was a sorry, broken shell of the swash-buckling six footer who had paid court to Molly Provo on this same porch before war had cast its pall over the land.

His pinched face was shaded now by the battered brim of a campaign hat which had once borne the insignia of General John Hood's volunteers. There was a faded patch on the sleeves of his shirt where sergeant's stripes had been, dim now under the heavy layer of red dust from the Indian Nations.

He had picked up a pair of bullhide chaps on the way south and west, but his footgear was Confederate issue, not so high of heel as the custom-built star boots he had once worn so proudly. Only his six-gun was Yankee; a trophy he had acquired at Wichita en route home.

The familiar lobby was deserted except for the ghosts of old memories when he crossed over to the clerk's desk and tugged off his buckskin gauntlets. He was in the act of reaching for the brass bell beside the clerk's blotter when a door marked *Office* opened and a towering man in a fustian swallowtail and reddish Dundrearie whiskers emerged from the room, a thick ledger under his arm.

"I'm looking for a night's lodging and

a stable for my pony," Morse said, tossing a sheaf of greenbacks on the counter.

"The clerk will take care . . ." The man halted on his way through the hinged flap of the counter, bending a scowl at Morse's currency. "We accept only American money here, cowboy," he added curtly.

A red tide of disgust mounted in Webb's face as he drew back the Confederate paper and thrust it into his batwings. He had known his mustering-out pay wasn't worth anything, but a perverse impulse had prompted him to test its negotiability here in the town he had devoted five years of his life to defend.

"Then I'm broke," he said flatly. "But I'm not asking for a handout. I haven't had a square meal in a week and I need a night's shut-eye before I drift on through. Have you got any work I can do around here—anything at all?"

The frock-coated man shook his head dismissively.

"We operate the house on a cash basis, stranger."

Webb's throat muscles tightened, but he check-reined his temper to size up the hotel man at closer range.

He saw a pale, well-padded face, split by a rusty mustache. A carpetbagger, by the look of the jeweled cravat pin and the gold nugget chain looping in twin nodes across his alpaca vest. The perfecto in his teeth gave off the odor of expensive Havana leaf and his fingers were innocent of callouses or sunburn. The soft hands of a man who had eaten well during the war years.

All the hate and frustration that had been dammed up in Morse's being came unleashed then, but it was checked on tongue's tip when he heard a girl's voice call his name and turned to see Molly Provo crossing the lobby toward him.

"Webb Morse . . . it's really you, isn't it? And they had listed you as killed in action—"

ZEKE PROVO'S tomboy daughter was no longer a slim and saucy girl in jean breeches and a man's sombrero. The years had brought the full flower of maturity to her figure and her one-time braids had given way to a modish hairdo drawn smoothly off her temples and rolled in a sleek raven's wing bun at her neck.

"Molly girl," he croaked huskily. "Are you—have you—"

She moved closer, scanning his stubbled features hungrily, unable in the restraint of their meeting to accept the reality of him.

The swallow-tailed hotel man moved between them, beaming fatuously and rubbing his fat palms together.

"Why didn't you say you were a friend of Miss Provo's?" he purred unctuously. "I've heard a lot about you, Webb Morse."

A thrill needled the Texan. Miss Provo, he had called her. Then she hadn't married in the years she had believed him dead.

"If you meant what you said about tackling anything, Mr. Morse," the hotel man was saying, "I think I can fix you up."

Webb tore his gaze off Molly Provo and grinned sarcastically.

"Is a Johnny Reb fit to work for a bluenose Yank?" he demanded recklessly, instantly regretting the outburst, knowing it would sound like a petty reaction to Molly.

The big man smiled, revealing a row of gold-capped teeth as he removed the perfecto from his shiny lips.

"Can you use that gun?" he asked, gesturing with the cigar tip toward the Army Colt holstered at Morse's flank.

Molly Provo bit her lip, remembering this tired warrior's gunslick rep of other days, wondering if the war had hardened the man's soul as it had scarred his body.

"That depends," Webb evaded carefully, on the target you got in mind. I'm not a professional gunhawk, if that's what you mean."

He thought about the glow that lighted in Molly's eyes at his words, later on. Now he was watching the hotel man thrust a fishbelly-white hand under his lapel, and remove a bulging alligator wallet. He rifled through the papers it contained and drew out a folded sheet.

"I have an I.O.U. here," he said, "that I want collected. My debtor is what you would call a blue-nose Yankee, Morse."

Morse took the paper. It was in the amount of a hundred dollars, signed by one Jubal Culdeen, and bore a date six months old.

"You'll find Culdeen down at the Yankee Doodle bar," the hotel man went on. "He

won over a thousand dollars in a stud game last night. Collect this I.O.U. and I'll stake you to a week's board and room and a week's credit at our stable."

Morse hesitated for a barely perceptible interval before folding the paper and thrusting it under his hatband.

"The Yankee Doodle," he grunted. "I reckon you mean the old Star of Texas. Pegleg Forsell's place."

For the first time a hint of annoyance crossed the hotel man's bottle-green eyes.

"It was formerly the Star of Texas, before I bought up Forsell's mortgage," he said patiently. "Just a word of advice, my rebel friend. The war is finished. Don't try to start it all over again your first day back in Texas."

Morse hitched the weight of the Colt on his flank and donned his hat, adjusting the chin cord at his throat.

"You're King Dowell, then," he said levelly, eyeing the hotel man with fresh interest. "If you ramrod this town, why didn't you get the marshal to call this debt of Culdeen's?"

No answer was forthcoming and Morse turned on his heel and strode across the lobby, tugging on his gauntlets. As he was crossing the porch he heard the door open behind him and turned to see Molly Provo overtaking him.

"Webb—don't go after Culdeen," she panted anxiously, gripping his sleeve. "Mr. Dowell is just baiting you into a gunfight with the most dangerous man in town. Please believe me, Webb. Please."

He grinned, chucking her under the chin, then turned his mind to graver things.

"You ought to know me better than that, Molly girl," he said gently. "I'm dead ganted for sleep. Have a room fixed up for me? Tomorrow when I'm rested we'll get caught up on a lot of things, you and I."

II

RICKAREE PASCOE, bartender at the Yankee Doodle, answered his hoarse query with a vague gesture toward the greasy burlap curtain which separated the barroom from the pool hall in back, and returned to polishing his backbar mirror.

Webb Morse's cavalry boots scuffed little furrows through the sawdust as he shouldered through the split curtains and sized up the dozen-odd barflies and loafers who lounged on the benches along the wall.

He spotted Pegleg Forsell, the old Texican who had owned the Star of Texas before Dowell's regime, busy brushing off the baize of a snooker table in the rear. Everyone else in the room had the look and smell of carpetbagger on him.

Sooty-chimneyed ceiling lamps dropped yellow cones through the smoke-gauzed atmosphere, revealing a beefy individual at a center table who wore a tin star on his gallus strap. The lawman was breaking a rack for a practice round of rotation, giving Morse a casual glance as he sized up the layout of multi-colored balls.

"Which one of you is Jube Culdeen?"

Morse's voice was like his face, tired and cracked, the voice of a man who was hungry and saddle-sore and near the tattered edge of his endurance. The gauntness of the man might have accounted for the sharpness of his voice, for his eyes held no challenge, only a brooding indifference, as if he had a chore to do and wanted to accomplish it and be gone.

"You're lookin' at him, stranger."

Morse's heavy-lidded gaze swung around through the blue stuffiness of the room to locate the speaker.

Culdeen proved to be the star-toter who was leaning across the pool table, his bulbous girth bulging over the sidepocket and overlapping the green-covered rubber cushions as he lined up his cue for a combination shot. It was the belly of a man gone soft from too much lazy living and hard drinking, but Culdeen's very size made him dangerous.

Webb Morse's face was inscrutable as he pushed on through the curtains. Their swaying was the only motion in the room as he stared at Culdeen.

Behind Morse's poker face, his brain had come alive with speculation. Culdeen was the marshal of Tanner's Ferry, a town which he assumed King Dowell held in the palm of his hand.

Dowell wants his marshal put out of the way for reasons of his own, he thought grimly, and it doesn't matter if a Johnny Rebel gets killed doing the job . . .

He recalled Molly Provo's desperate warning. But Culdeen with without his guns now. They hung over a ball rack

along with the marshal's hat.

Ivory balls clicked around the table as Culdeen made a shot. Squatting to line up his next play, Culdeen's beady orbs swiveled up in their greasy hammocks of flesh and observed that the stranger in the doorway was wearing a bone-butted Colt low on his right thigh. His long arms were thumb-hooked in his belt buckle, but his eyes held the glint of a man who had come looking for trouble.

"What can I do for you, son?" Culdeen wanted to know, his cueball carroming off the baize cushions.

Morse moved down between the tables, taking the piece of paper out of his hat and flipping it in front of Culdeen.

"This I.O.U. is several weeks in arrears, marshal," he said brusquely. "I'm here to collect it for King Dowell."

Culdeen, his icy reserve showing the first faint sign of uneasiness, shot a tentative look at his racked gunbelts and observed that the stranger blocked the alley leading to them. He eased the butt of his cue on the floor and reached for a cube of chalk suspended from the ceiling by a string.

"Since when," he demanded, "did King Dowell hire a John Reb to collect his debts for him?"

Morse flexed his bronzed, calloused hands impatiently.

"You got the money," he said. "Shell over."

Culdeen's bull-sized shoulders hitched. He shook his head, grinning, and spat a gobbet of brown tobacco juice between the stranger's boots.

"Get out of here, bucko. You're in my way."

It was steely quiet now. Jube Culdeen scaled over two-twenty and the scars on his blocky face and ham-sized fists had come from uncounted saloon brawls. He regarded Morse with a certain bleak annoyance, as he would dismiss a pestering drunk.

"You mean you haven't got the money, marshal?"

Jube Culdeen leaned his cue against the table and rubbed his palms ominously up and down his pantslegs.

"Hell's fire, yes—I got the money," he acknowledged. "But I ain't payin' it to no ragged Johnny Reb son of a—!"

MORSE shrugged, fingers tugging at the buckle of his shell belt. He laid the gun harness on the snooker table behind him with deliberate care, and with it his campaign hat and King Dowell's I.O.U.

"Your wearin' a law badge don't give you the right to call me that name, Culdeen. I'd say the name fit you better."

Webb's left hand reached out suddenly to grab hold of the marshal's collar, bunching his shirt so that it drew tight across Culdeen's barrel chest, jerking him off balance.

The Texan followed through with a smoking uppercut which landed on Culdeen's stubbled jaw with the sodden impact of an ax hitting a chunk of oak.

The blow rocked Culdeen to the toes. Blood seeped from an ugly gash split open across his jaw. And it brought a roar from the big marshal's chest that was prelude to the rough-and-tumble sort of bar-room brawling for which Culdeen enjoyed an unchallenged local reputation.

The spectators drew in to watch the slaughter.

Out-weighting the stranger by sixty-odd pounds, Culdeen clawed Morse's hand off his shirt, the fabric ripping to expose his hair-weeded chest. Then, lowering his head, Culdeen lunged forward with the intention of locking Webb's arms to his sides in a bear hug that would crush the wind from his lungs.

But the stranger danced back, his bull-hide chaps brushing the mahogany rim of the pool table. Retreating before Culdeen's rush, he caught the marshal off balance again and landed a rapier-like one-two which brought big pouches swelling under each of Culdeen's eyes.

Blinded, swinging and kicking at a target which proved as elusive as thin air, Culdeen took a hard chopping right to the heart which jolted the air out of him. Onlookers stared in breath-held dismay as they saw Culdeen sag to his knees.

Then Culdeen's groping hands found his maplewood pool cue and he came to his feet, poising the tapered stick like a javelin, summoning the brute power of his arm for a thrust which could impale his opponent's belly.

But Webb parried the driving point of the cue with his hip, deflecting it into the

baize-covered slates of the pool table. In the brief instant that Culdeen struggled to extricate the stick from the ripped cloth, Webb came in from the marshal's undefended side with a smashing haymaker which sledged Culdeen under the left ear and wilted him in a sprawled heap on the debris-littered floor.

Culdeen shuddered spasmodically and made no move to rise.

Morse looked up at the white faces limned in the lamplight. No film of sweat had started from his gaunt cheeks. He was not breathing faster than usual. Only his eyes were changed, their lack-luster glaze replaced now with the savagery of combat.

"Gather around, you scum!" he rasped out. "I want witnesses to see this."

Men jammed forward as Webb went down on one knee. He explored the unconscious man's pockets and drew out a greasy leather poke crammed with greenbacks. He counted off four twenties and two tens and spread the greenbacks on the floor.

"A hundred dollars," he said in his dead, stolid monotone. "Not a *peseta* more or less. When Culdeen comes to, give him this cancelled I.O.U. of Dowell's."

NO MAN made a move or voiced a comment as Morse picked up his shell belt and holstered Colt, stepped over Culdeen's bunched form and headed for the front of the saloon, buckling on his gun harness.

Old Pegleg Forsell slipped unnoticed from the back room and overtook Morse outside the batwings.

The two men gripped hands, memories crowding them hard across the gulf of years.

"Webb Morse," Forsell whispered huskily. "I didn't even recognize you until you hammered Culdeen down to size with that last punch. Lord . . . you're not a slick-ear hellion any more, Webb. You've come back a—an older man in more ways than one."

Morse grinned bleakly, massaging a bruised knuckle against an unshaven chin.

"Lots of things," he drawled, "seem to have changed around Tanner's Ferry, old timer. Including you."

Forsell peered over the slatted half-

doors to make sure that Rickaree Pascoe was still behind the bar.

"Things are worse than you know, Webb. Dowell's crowded every bankrupt Texican out of town. He's even commandeered the arsenal of the old Home Defense Battalion, locked it up in the courthouse yonder to make sure us Texans stay helpless."

Forsell eyed the young cavalryman anxiously.

"Did Dowell really sic you onto the marshal—or are you runnin' a blazer on them damnyankee sons?"

Morse folded Culdeen's money and thrust it in a shirt pocket.

"Dowell's paying me. I'll sleep in a clean bed for the first time in five years and eat a square meal for the first time since I was let out of prison camp, Pegleg. I wasn't fussy how I earned it."

The old saloonman kicked at a splinter with his wooden leg.

"Dowell figgered Culdeen would shoot hell out of you, son. Him and the marshal are thick as fleas, so far as I know. Next time you cross trails with Culdeen, don't let him see your back. It's good to see you agin, Webb."

Forsell hobbled back to the poolroom. Culdeen still lay behind the table. No man had made a move to roll the marshal over on his back. Rickaree Pascoe had joined the group, unable to comprehend that Culdeen had been bested in fair fight.

"Fetch me that fire bucket on the shelf yonder, Pascoe," Forsell said quietly. "Jube will be madder'n a bull rattler in dog-days when he rallies around. Nobody ever cold-cocked him before that I know of, especially a Texican."

The bartender brought a red bucket half full of water, soggy with cigarette butts and cigar stubs. Forsell dumped the dirty slop over Culdeen's head and shoulders, saw the big marshal twitch convulsively.

"That Texican," someone spoke up in an awed whisper. "Anybody ever seen him around Ferry before?"

Pegleg Forsell was the only man present who knew the answer to that, and he held his tongue.

Culdeen rolled over, staring around glassily. Then he heaved his big body to a sitting position, grabbed the webbed pouch of a corner pocket and hauled himself shakily to his feet, rubbing his eyes

with clubbed knuckles.

"The stranger took a hundred bucks out of your poke and left King Dowell's I.O.U. behind," Forsell said, his voice carrying a vague undertone of satisfaction.

Culdeen accepted the I.O.U. slip, still not quite certain where he was.

"I was out?" he gruffed hoarsely. "The Reb licked me?"

Forsell nodded. "Out cold," he said cuttingly, contempt laying acid on his tongue. "You had it coming, Jube, calling a Texan what you called him."

Culdeen waddled dazedly over to the ball rack and took down his gun harness.

"Where'd he go? Back to the Trail House to see Dowell?"

Forsell nodded.

"I don't savvy it," Cudeen said heavily. "Dowell never has crowded me for a gamblin' debt yet. Why should he sic a Rebel tramp onto me this way?"

THE TRAIL HOUSE HOTEL occupied an oak-rimmed bluff overlooking a U-bend of the Red, its square-angled silhouette dominating the trail town. Webb Morse climbed the sloping street, dragging his spurs with a bone-weariness which had been building up for months before his encounter with Jube Culdeen.

He slanted up the porch steps of the hotel, noting with vague surprise that his battle-scarred pony was missing from the hitch rack. Ignoring the stares of the loafers on the porch, he pushed on in.

Molly Provo was waiting at the counter, her slim figure enticing in a shirred bodice and flounced skirt. She had shunned feminine finery in the old prewar days.

"Culdeen paid you?" she asked, eyes mirroring relief as she scanned his face for cut or bruise and saw none.

"Why not?" the Texican countered, looking around for King Dowell without locating the hotel man. "That's what your boss hired me to do, wasn't it?"

The girl thrust the money into a drawer and slid the hotel register around to face him.

"I had the hostler stable your horse, Webb," she said gently. "I laid out soap and towels in Room F, at the head of the stairs. Your bath will be ready in the annex out back."

←Action Stories—Fall

Morse's hand shook slightly as he accepted the pen Molly had inked for him, and scribbled his signature in the register. He hesitated as he ran the nib along the blue-ruled line into the home address column, and then he scrawled *Rocking M Ranch* there.

Something in Molly Provo's eyes as she slid forward his room key brought panic stirring inside Morse.

"Then you haven't heard—about the Rocking M, Webb?"

The panic congealed into despair now. Molly Provo had news for him, news he hadn't felt ready to ask anyone in town up to now. He sucked in a deep breath.

"We didn't get mail regular at the front," he acknowledged. "I haven't had a line from Dad since I left. I aim to ride out to the home spread in the morning but I—I had to look you up first."

There was tragedy in Molly's eyes as she met his own.

"King Dowell owns the Rocking M now, Webb. Your father . . . old Ben passed away a year before the war ended. You were listed as missing in action. Dowell bought the Rocking M just as he bought everything else in this town, including my father's hotel. With his rotten Yankee money. He owned a textile mill in New Jersey that had a contract to supply the Union troops with blankets."

He heard her out in stunned silence, his solar plexus as numb as if a boot had kicked him there. Old Buffalo Ben, dead two years gone . . . the Rocking M brand now in the grip of a blood-sucking carpet-bagger . . . bought dirt cheap for back taxes.

"Texas will never be the same again, Webb," the girl whispered, lifting her face to meet his kiss. "We lost more than the war. You—you boys are marching back to a dead land, an enemy land. Try and accept that fact as I have done, Webb darling—and don't let it break your heart."

Webb Morse picked up the key, his face hardening.

"Don't sell Texas short, Molly," he said with savage earnestness. "The whole country is hungry for beef and they say there's five million head of longhorns waiting down here. I saw a lot on my way back, and it holds a lot of promise for Texas' future. The Union Pacific is building to

Abilene and I hear John Chisholm is figuring on running herds up the trail from San Antone to meet the Kansas railhead. Those cattle will cross the Red at Fort Reno and here at Tanner's Ferry, Molly. You'll see this town boom, along with Texas. And we've got to root out the carpetbaggers before that boom comes."

The passion of his words left Morse spent. He turned on his heel and headed for the stairs. Molly Provo had a strange new pride in her eyes as she watched him toil slowly up the steps, gripping the banister for support.

III

MORSE found towel and soap on a washstand in Room F and carried them down the corridor, into the annex. A Negro roustabout was busy filling a zinc-lined wooden tub with buckets of warm water, completing the task while Morse stripped.

His lean physique bore the criss-cross welts of battle scars now. Malnutrition and the disease-ridden confines of a Yankee prisoner of war camp had sapped its toll of Morse's once magnificent body, but he knew a few months on the open range would alter that. Whether he would find a panacea for the despair which corroded his heart was something else again.

He soaked in the steaming tub, letting the warm lather take the kinks out of his saddle-ganted fibers. Finally he climbed reluctantly from the tub, hauled on his cavalry breeches and gathered his boots and shell belt, shirt and underwear and bathing chaps into a neat bundle.

The door of the washroom squeaked open and Morse saw a burly figure materialize behind the steam which obscured the room. He slung a wet towel over his shoulder and was padding barefoot toward the corridor door before he recognized the visitor.

It was Marshal Jube Culdeen, and he was more than a little drunk. His slitted, piggish eyes were abnormally bright and alcohol had flushed his swart jowls to a mahogany hue.

Culdeen's fists were coiled about the cedar stocks of twin Colts thonged low on either thigh. His whiskey-fouled breath reached the Texan through the whorling

steam clouds as he moved sidewise to block the door.

"We got a little score to settle, soldier," Culdeen said thickly. "You got a gun in that bundle. Get fixed to use it. I don't aim to take advantage of an unheeled man."

Morse froze. Culdeen wasn't too drunk to plot a frame-up to cover a cold murder. He was baiting Morse into reaching for the Army Colt before cutting him down at point-blank range.

Morse read the set-up for what it was. The crash of shots would fetch the colored porter from the pumphouse, and it would be a clean-cut picture of a rebel drifter being shot while resisting arrest for striking a lawman.

"O.K., Culdeen. Dowell's giving you a second try at me, eh?"

Muscles swelled under Morse's scar-traced torso as he stooped to deposit his bundle on the wet floor, tugging at the end of his gun belt as if to free his holster.

Then, moving fast from a crouched position, he drove his naked shoulder into the marshal's knees and lashed up both arms to claw for Culdeen's right wrist.

The marshal's legs skidded on the soapy floor and he went down, bellowing. Even as Webb's hands locked on Culdeen's gun arm he saw the marshal draw back a spike-heeled boot, then straighten his leg.

The bootheel caught Webb in the crotch, wilting the strength from him, dropping him into a black vortex of agony. He was conscious of Culdeen kicking himself free and standing erect, sliding a .44 from leather.

As if from a remote void he heard the double click of a gun hammer being eared to full cock, then the cold hiss of the Colt muzzle pressed to his temple.

A shot thundered through the room, but it was not Culdeen's gun. Through the nausea that wracked his vitals, Morse saw the marshal of Tanner's Ferry collapse in his tracks, the back of his skull torn off by a bullet that had come from the direction of the washroom door.

Then someone was lifting Morse to his feet, and Culdeen was an inert heap between them.

"King—Dowell," panted the Texan, recognizing the carpetbagger. "I don't savvy your saving my life. I thought . . . Culdeen wore your collar."

Dowell flashed a gold-toothed grin as he pouched a smoking gun in a holster under the snug lapel of his fustian.

"Don't try to figure it out, Morse," he told the Texan. "Go to your room and rest up. I'll have supper sent to you. Then, first thing tomorrow, I want to have a talk with you."

A consuming weariness engulfed Morse, dulling his sharp curiosity of the motives which had prompted the carpetbagger boss of Tanner's Ferry to gun down a henchman and save a rebel's life.

"There's nothing the two of us could discuss, Dowell," Morse said harshly, picking up his bundle. "You know I'm the heir to the Rocking M spread. I aim to redeem what was stolen from me while I was away. From where I stand, it looks like you're the hombre between me and what I aim to do."

Dowell's hooded orbs gave no hint of malice.

"That's what I want to talk over with you, Morse," he said enigmatically. "Play the cards I deal you and you'll own the Rocking M within a month's time."

Exhausted, bewildered, Webb Morse moved off down the hall and turned into Room F. He locked the door and flopped full length on top of the blanketed cot, and knew no more. . . .

In the washroom a bulbous-eyed Negro attendant was staring down at the corpse of Jubal Culdeen.

"After dark I want you to fetch Culdeen over to the coroner, Ras," ordered King Dowell. "And if I hear a breath of talk out of you concerning this I'll have you lynched, understand?"

Ras scratched a thumbnail across his kinky scalp and nodded emphatically.

"Yas *suh*, boss. I don't know nothin'!"

KING DOWELL was breakfasting alone in his suite when Webb Morse was admitted by the Negro valet.

Ten hours' sleep had revitalized the Texan's face, smoothed out some of the haggard ruts which had been there yesterday. He had shaved and changed to a patched and faded shirt of gray linsey woolsey. The Colt jutted its bone stock from the well-oiled holster at his hip, and he had cleaned off the mud and dust from his cavalry boots.

"Coffee, Mr. Morse?" Dowell greeted his guest.

Morse shook his head, eyes wary as they scanned the rich furnishings of the room which had been Zeke Provo's personal suite before the war.

"I've had breakfast," he said non-committally. "I had aimed to ride out to the Rocking M this morning, but I'm obligated to you for saving my life. That's the only reason I'm here."

Dowell stirred sugar into his coffee cup, his eyes studying the lean Texan.

"The Rocking M means a lot to you, doesn't it, Morse?"

Dowell saw the color rise in the lean Texan, sensed the tension building up in the man. The army years hadn't tamed the temper Dowell had heard so much about.

"The Rocking M," Morse said slowly, his eyes fixed at a point beyond King Dowell, "means life itself to me. I'll stop at nothing to get it back, even if it means bucking you and your whole rotten State Police."

King Dowell reached under his lapel and drew out a sealed envelope. Standing up, he crossed the room and let his visitor read the label written across the letter:

DEED TO ROCKING M RANCH,
CONVEYABLE TO WEBSTER
MORSE ONE MONTH
FROM DATE

"I had my attorney, Judge Handrick, draw this up last night, Morse," the carpetbagger said. "This instrument, duly signed by myself, relinquishes my legal claims to your late father's ranch and leased range and other assets."

Morse made no attempt to reach for the envelope. A pulse hammered on his temple as he saw King Dowell go over to the big iron safe that had been Zeke Provo's, open the laminated door and stow the document within.

"O.K., Dowell—let's have it," Morse said sharply. "You bought my father's bankrupt estate for a song, so naturally you aren't giving it away for less than a song. What's your proposition?"

Dowell paused beside the ornate marble mantelpiece, reached up to a bric-a-brac stand and removed a glittering bit of polished metal which he tossed through the air to Morse.

It was a five-pointed star with the word *Marshal* on it.

"Culdeen's badge," Morse said, scowling.

Dowell nodded. "I want you to pin that star on, Morse. I want you to help me run Tanner's Ferry as it should be run . . . on a basis of law and order and justice for all."

Morse stiffened, turning the badge over in his hand.

"Carpetbagger law!" he grated contemptuously. "No thanks, *Señor*. Besides, buying back the Rocker M on a marshal's pay—"

Dowell cut in, his voice strained in its earnestness.

"Not carpetbagger law—American law, Morse. Texas is back in the Union. I'd expect you to enforce the law against Yankee and Rebel alike, without fear or favoritism. I want all factions to put aside their wartime animosities and work together for the common good of Tanner's Ferry.

"I need your help, Morse."

The Texan pulled a deep breath through his teeth, wondering if Dowell could actually be motivated by a true interest in Texas's destiny. As if reading his thought, Dowell went on:

"All so-called 'carpetbaggers' aren't greedy vultures, intent on milking a defeated land dry. I have invested heavily in Ferry's future. I don't want to see this town torn by dissension when prosperity returns with the big trail drives of Texas cattle headed for the nation's market. We face a fine future, providing law and order replaces this continual feuding between native Texans and 'foreigners' from the North. Can you understand that, Webb Morse?"

Morse tongued his cheek thoughtfully. Old hatreds were too deeply ingrained in the Texan's fiber to be nullified by glib-tongued theorizing.

"Where," he demanded, suspiciously, "does the Rocking M fit into this deal? I've spent the last five years of my life fighting for Texas, for the common cause, all that hogwash. All I'm interested in from now on—" Morse emphasized each word by jabbing his chest with a thumb—"is the welfare of one guy, Webb Morse, and to hell with anything or anybody else, savvy?"

KING DOWELL rocked on toe and heel, studying Morse carefully. "That deed in the safe," he said, "is yours one month from today—if you accept the marshalship of Tanner's Ferry and clean up a few rattlers' nests for me."

Morse's flinty gaze veiled.

"What rattlers' nests?"

"Accept my offer first. A month as marshal to clean up this town and replace lynchings and riots with respectability—and the Rocking M reverts to you, no strings attached."

Slowly, never taking his eyes off the immaculate speculator, Morse removed his campaign hat and pinned the law badge on the faded spot that had once held the insignia of General Hood's volunteers.

"I'm your man, Dowell," he said gruffly. "What's my job?"

Dowell returned to the coffee table, hands laced behind his back, eyes focused out the bay windows on the tarpaper roofs of the town sprawled at the foot of the bluff.

"A certain lawless element here in Ferry has organized a secret society aimed at overthrowing the Texas government and restoring the pre-war status quo," King Dowell said. "They call themselves the Rebel Legion, though most of them are saloon bums and other dodgers of military service. They're an owlhoot bunch, Morse, feeding on old hates, preaching destruction instead of construction. For the sake of Tanner's Ferry's future, this Rebel Legion must be exposed and crushed before they cause any wholesale bloodshed."

Morse appeared intent on building himself a smoke.

"Who ramrods this Legion outfit, Dowell?"

"That is a closely-kept secret. As a returned rebel soldier, popular in town before the war, you will be in a position to learn the identity of the Rebel Legionnaires, their plans and their objectives," Dowell said. "A drunken Yankee marshal like Jubal Culdeen—himself a roughneck—could accomplish nothing."

Dowell gestured toward the safe.

"Bring me a roster list of the Rebel Legion's membership," the carpetbagger said, "and I'll swap you the Rocking M deed for it, Morse. That's a small price to pay for what should become one of the most lucrative cattle ranches in Texas."

Morse moved toward the door, cigarette drooping from his lip, his hand lifted in careless salute.

"I'll bring you the Legion's muster roll, Dowell," he promised. "It may take a little time, but I'll pay off."

Molly Provo was on duty at the clerk's desk downstairs when Webb Morse descended to the lobby. Her eyes lost their quick brightness as she caught sight of the nickel-plated star on the man's cavalry hat and sensed its implication.

"No, Webb—you couldn't have!" she said hoarsely, as he paused in front of the counter. "That star—you haven't sold out to King Dowell . . ."

Morse leaned toward her, his eyes softening as he scanned the face that had haunted him in the smoke of a hundred battles, a thousand sunsets.

"I'm the marshal of Tanner's Ferry, Molly," he said flatly. "But only long enough to whip the town hoodlums down to size and move along to the Rocking M. I want that spread to be ours when I take you out there for the first time, Molly girl—"

She recoiled from his outreaching hand, her face bone white.

"Oh, Webb!" she gasped out in an accusing whisper. "You've let a carpetbagger bribe you to do his dirty work the moment you got back—"

He sensed the disillusion in her, and crossed swiftly around the counter to seize her by the shoulders.

"Nothing's going to stand between me and getting Dad's ranch back, Molly," he said fiercely. "You know I'm half dead, all broke, in no position to be choosey. The minute Dowell pays off—"

She twisted out of his grasp, her palm slapping his jaw with a whipcrack sound.

"You—you traitor!" she cried shrilly, backing away. "Don't come near me, Webb Morse—don't even speak to me—"

Her voice caught and she flung herself into the office room and slammed the door in Morse's face.

He paused a moment there, listening to her sobs, his chin still holding the sting of her blow. Then his face composed itself into a stubborn mask and he stalked out of the lobby, heading for the town jail down on the courthouse plaza.

He spent the morning going through

Culdeen's office desk, lining up things, checking reward dodgers and other mail that had accumulated for weeks without being read.

It was high noon when his ears caught the flat roar of a gunshot from the direction of the Yankee Doodle Saloon. He noted the sound only subconsciously, his brain innured to gunfire as a result of past campaigns.

Two minutes later a barefoot, ragtag *mestizo* kid flung himself panting into the marshal's office, gesticulating with boyish excitement.

"They's been a shooting at the Yankee Doodle cantina, *Señor*," panted the button.

"*Señor* Rickaree Pascoe sends for you, *si*."

Morse stood up, clapping on his hat, hitching his Army Colt down on his leg.

"*Gracias, muchacho*," he told the breed younker.

IV

HE SAW men running toward the Yankee Doodle as he approached. The barroom inside was boiling with excitement, and as he reached the porch steps the batwing doors fanned open and old Pegleg Forsell lurched outside, clutching a Colt .45.

The old Texican hobbled across the plank floor and leaned against a scarred pillar, clutching it for support, his bony face dark with anger.

"What's going on in there, Pegleg?" Morse asked, halting beside the panting saloon keeper.

A sneer gathered under Forsell's tobacco-stained mustache as he stared at the law badge on Morse's sombrero.

"I winged a bluenose damnyankee who rang in a stacked deck on me, marshal," he said, with biting emphasis on the last word. "They hollered for the law, did they? Waal, I'll be here when you get through round-sidin' with them Yankees inside, marshal."

Knots of muscle grated on the corners of Morse's jaw as he took his old friend's diatribe. Then he pulled his eyes off Forsell's face and shouldered his way into the crowded barroom.

The bartender was carrying a bowl of water and some torn bandages over to a

poker table where a gaunt, lantern-jawed man was seated before a disordered pile of chips and scattered playing cards. Five other players were still seated at the table, while an upset chair revealed Pegleg Forsell's spot in the game.

"Got a job for you, marshal!" spoke up Rickaree Pascoe, the bartender, his nasal accent branding him instantly as a New Englander. "Old Forsell threw a gun on Judge Handrick here, claimin' the Judge tried to deal off the bottom."

Morse halted in front of the poker table, sizing up the man who served as county coroner and King Dowell's legal advisor. Judge Handrick's left shoulder showed the nip of a bullet and his sleeve was bloody to the elbow.

"I wasn't even armed at the time," Handrick said, wincing as Pascoe swabbed the raw furrow marking the path of Forsell's slug. "Ask any of the boys here, marshal. They all saw it."

Morse cocked his arms akimbo, staring down at the scattered cards. He didn't have to ask questions; explanations were forthcoming from all sides. Too readily, he thought grimly.

"Cold-decking in a poker game can't be proved by an outsider," Morse said quietly. "Drawing on an unarmed man is something else again. You all would be willing to swear in court that Judge Handrick wasn't heeled?"

The chorus of affirmative assurances left Morse with no other recourse.

"*Sta bueno*," he grunted. "I'll jail Forsell pending your formal complaint for assault, Judge."

Handrick grinned and shot a quick, triumphant glance around the barroom as Morse turned on his heel and stalked outside. True to his promise, Pegleg Forsell was waiting where Morse had left him, letting his temper cool down.

"Pegleg," Morse said loudly enough for his voice to carry into the barroom, "I've got to run you in for attempted murder. They got a clean-cut case against you in there for throwing down on an unarmed man."

Forsell fished his gun from holster and handed it to Morse, butt foremost.

"You always had big ideas, Webb," his old friend rasped hotly. "But sidin' King Dowell against your own breed is enough

to make Buffalo Ben retch in his grave. You didn't even ask me my side o' the story."

Morse thrust the old man's gun into the waistband of his chaps and reached out, intending to link his arm through Forsell's. But the old Texican was already hobbling down the steps, angling across the plaza toward Tanner's Ferry's jailhouse.

"What is your side of the story, Pegleg?"

Forsell flashed him a sneering glance.

"The Judge dragged a derringer out of his vest when I called him for a snaky deal. I shot in self-defense. And my bullet could have plugged that damnyankee in the heart as easy as it clipped his shoulder, you know that."

MORSE'S FACE revealed no surprise at learning Forsell's version of the shooting. He knew the futility of going back to the Yankee Doodle and searching Handrick's pockets. The derringer had no doubt been smuggled to an accomplice before they even sent the kid over to the office to fetch the law.

"Every Texan in these parts will hate your double-crossin' guts when they find out who the new marshal is," commented Pegleg bleakly, as they entered the jail office. "What's King Dowell payin' you for bein' his star gun-toter?"

Morse made no comment until he had opened the cell block door and followed Forsell to an iron-barred cage in one corner of the otherwise unoccupied jail.

"I've sworn to uphold the law in this town, Pegleg," he said, "regardless of how a man stood in the War. If the Judge framed you, you'll have your chance to speak your piece before a judge and jury."

Pegleg stretched himself out on the jail cot and muttered profanely.

"You think a Rebel stands a show of justice in a courtroom packed with blue-nose northerners?" he demanded testily. "With Judge Handrick himself bein' the slickest-tongued Yankee shyster in Texas? You didn't inherit a spoonful of old Ben's brains if you think that, Webb."

Webb Morse's fingers shook a trifle as he turned the key in Forsell's lock.

"Before my case ever comes to trial," Pegleg went on, "King Dowell's bunch will have busted this jail down and strung

me to a cottonwood down on the river-bank. I won't be the first Reb to get rail-roaded to hell that way, Morse . . . and I won't be the last. You were a Reb once, yourself."

Morse headed back to the marshal's office and stepped out on the board walk to find a sizable crowd had formed in front of the jail building. Remembering Peg-leg Forsell's grim prophecy, Morse dropped a hand to gun butt.

Then he saw that this was no ordinary throng that had been attracted here by the grapevine spreading the news that the new marshal of Tanner's Ferry had made his first arrest.

Most of the faces confronting Webb Morse were men he had once counted as friends. Gaunt-faced veterans of Hood's Volunteer Texas Brigade, returned like himself to a land that was prostrate under a vengeful enemy. Sullen-eyed cow-punchers, many of whom had once twirled a rope for old Buffalo Ben Morse on the Rocking M.

And individuals, each with his share of memories from Webb's past: Kaw Ringstad, who had owned the saddlery on Sam Houston Street before the war, the man who had fashioned the first man-sized kack that Webb Morse had ever forked. Gifford Wirum, former owner of the Alamo Livery Stable, which he had lost to King Dowell on a mortgage foreclosure. And many more like them, Texans all—

Morse's roving glance rested on each face in turn, sensing the hostility, feeling the mass impact of hatred turned upon him, finding its focal point on King Dowell's shining law badge pinned to his campaign hat.

Beyond the close-packed mob, over in the shade of the palmettos rimming the courthouse, another throng had gathered. Judge Abel Handrick and his saloon crowd. Ferry's rival factions had squared off today, and riot was brewing.

"We got ways and means of dealin' with a Texican who sells out his own birth-right for a mess o' Yankee pottage, Morse."

That was grizzled old Skypilot Sather talking, the gunman-turned-preacher whom Webb Morse had laughingly engaged to perform at his and Molly's wedding when he got back from the wars. Sather was usually the spokesman whenever a crowd

got together in a common cause.

"You been away five years, Webb," put in the old saddler, Kaw Ringstad, elbowing his way to the front of the crowd. "Take the advice of an old and disappointed friend and take another five years before you show up in Tanner's Ferry ag'in, son."

The dull mutter of assenting voices thinned off before Webb Morse's shuttling glance.

"You said all you got to say, gents?" he asked quietly, hooking thumbs in gun belts.

Giff Wirum grunted and spat into the dust.

"We have said a gad's-sight plenty, Webb," he answered for the mob. "We know where *you* stand. We're tellin' you where we stand."

MORSE leaned against the pillar which supported the wooden awning of the jail porch, scratching his shoulder blades there, a semblance of his old-time reckless grin touching his lips.

"Then I'll speak my piece," he said coolly. "You can pass this word around. I'm the marshal of this burg, as of today. I aim to play my cards as they're dealt me. I recognize no favorites and I wear nobody's collar—"

"Except King Dowell's!" roared a derisive voice from the rear of the crowd which Morse recognized as coming from Highpockets Hesseltine, one-time cavvy wrangler on the Rocking M.

An uneasy stir went through the crowd. The issue was in the open, now. Names had been said, challenges flung. And over by the palmettos, Judge Handrick and Rickaree Pascoe and the rest of the carpet-bagger bunch were moving toward the jail, hands on gun butts, spoiling for a fight.

"Need help in breakin' up this mob, marshal?" called Pascoe, approaching the end of the porch on a run, his hands reaching under his grimy saloon apron to produce a sawed-off shotgun he usually kept under the mahogany.

Morse jerked erect. The ingredients of wholesale slaughter were in the making here, with the cowtown's rival factions squared off and gun steel beginning to show.

With a swift, smooth motion, Morse

flipped his Colt out of leather and thumbed a bullet into the adobe ahead of Pascoe. The Yankee Doodle bartender skidded to a halt, grounding the butt of his scattergun, astonishment making his swarthy face go lax.

"Get back to your bar, Pascoe!" Morse shouted, holstering his fuming gun to indicate his own surety that disaster had been averted. "All of you, break this up and get back where you belong. I was appointed marshal to maintain law and order, and damned if I'm going to start out with a riot."

He turned his back on the glowering throng and stepped back into the jail office.

Going back into the cell block, he approached Pegleg Forsell's iron-barred cubicle.

"You were right, Pegleg," he commented. "Every Texan in town hates me for tryin' to enforce Yankee law, and every Yankee hates me for bein' of Rebel stock."

Forsell glowered back.

"You always were a no-good hellion, Webb!" he snarled. "I thought the war had tempered you, like fire does a piece of good metal. Instead it rotted your core."

Morse's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, as he toyed with the idea of releasing old Pegleg on his own recognizance. But that might be taken as a sign of weakness, of cowardice.

"Pegleg," he asked suddenly, "do you belong to the Rebel Legion?"

Forsell glanced up, then turned his back to the cell door.

"If I did," he growled hoarsely, "I wouldn't admit as much to a bootlickin' turncoat of King Dowell's."

The main street was ominously deserted when Morse left the jail and headed up the bluff to the Trail House. He knew with a swift prescience that he walked alone in this town, a man without friends, a pariah despised by the Texans he had lived among as a neighbor, a man with a rebel war record who could never hope to gain the trust of the Yankee politicians who were running Texas.

He dined alone at the Trail House restaurant, seeing in the half-eaten dinner at Molly Provo's place the evidence that the girl had quit the dining room when she saw him approaching up the hill.

Dinner finished, Morse went out back

to the stables and saddled up the crowbait pony he had ridden across the Red less than twenty-four hours ago.

Back in saddle, he skirted the river side of Tanner's Ferry until he reached the brasada flats. He was heading west, unable to curb the homing instinct that had started him on the familiar trail to the Rocking M.

THE SUN was half-westered down the sky when he topped the last sage-carpeted hogback and overlooked the home ranch which Buffalo Ben Morse had hewn out of this wilderness in the fifties.

Homesickness plucked at the man as he sized up the familiar buildings of his boyhood home, observing that King Dowell had not let fences or barns fall into disrepair. And cattle teemed in the grazing range beyond the ranch—prime longhorns for which a beef-hungry nation, recovering from the strife of civil war, was willing to pay a high price at the railheads in Kansas.

This was home, this Rocking M. The spreading acres of Texas homestead which he had left an eternity ago with his father's blessing ringing in his ears, the land he had staked his life to defend.

Morse was lost in the mesh of pent-up reverie when his ear caught a thud of steel-shod hoofs approaching through the chaparral behind him.

Instinct made his hand drop handy to his gun as he reined his cavalry pony around, to see Skypilot Sather breaking out of the mesquite a dozen yards away.

"What profiteth it a man if he regain his own ranch and loseth his soul, Webb?" Sather called, halting his dun mare and leaning on his high-horned pommel.

Morse took the rangeland preacher's measure before answering.

"You didn't trail me out from town," he said shortly, "to quote gospel to a wayward sinner, Skypilot."

Sather nodded, pushing the funereal black Stetson off his forehead, reining in closer as he met Morse's look.

"You're right, son, I didn't. Matter of fact, the Rebel Legion had a sort of special session, you might say, and had a lottery to see who'd handle our new marshal. I won the draw, Webb. I trailed you out here to kill you."

Skypilot's left arm whipped a short-barrelled Walker from the holster under his frock coat as he finished speaking, hand blurring in the tricky cross-draw which had lost none of its deception or speed in the years since Sather had swapped his notched guns for a Bible.

Morse's Army Colt was only half out of leather when the roar of Sather's gun thundered harshly across the gray Texas prairie. The impact of his point-blank slug lifted Webb Morse bodily out of saddle and plummeted him to the hard gumbo.

Sather thrust his smoking Walker into holster, turning his eyes piously to the heavens.

"Thy Will, not mine, be done, O Lord," he sighed, turning from his horse to the Texan sprawled at his feet.

Sather reached down, grasped Morse by the shoulder and rolled him over on his back. In so doing he exposed the marshal's right arm—an arm which ended in a fist carrying a cocked gun.

"Your draw went rusty on you, *amigo*," Morse whispered, coming to his feet. Blood dripped from his left armpit, where Sather's slug had cut an egg of muscle on the Texan's shoulder. "I won't repeat your mistake and aim high. I've had plenty of practice in the last five years, Skypilot."

Sather didn't bother to raise his arms. Facing death, he was once more the imperturbable gunman, backed by the steady-lying faith of a rugged man of God.

"Skypilot, I want the complete roster of the Rebel Legion from you," Morse went on, his gun muzzle reaming the circuit rider's flat belly. "Turn me down and I'll kill you."

A SINISTER TENSION overhung Tanner's Ferry when Webb Morse rode back into town an hour after dark. He came in alone, hitching his warhorse to the rail in front of the jailhouse. This was a live, writhing tension, a force that made itself felt the moment he had hit town.

The bulk of a new bandage, fashioned from cloth torn from Skypilot Sather's shirt tail, thickened the marshal's shoulder under his faded shirt, and new pain yanked at nerves accustomed to pain as he walked up the front steps of his office.

He found the jail door had been torn bodily out of its frame during his absence,

and he remembered what old Pegleg Forsell had predicted about a lynch mob storming the jail before his case could come to trial.

A lamp was burning on the office desk and Judge Abel Handrick was seated in the chair that had been Jube Culdeen's.

"You should have been here, marshal," Handrick greeted Morse. "It was quite a show while it lasted. This *juzgado* caved in like a wet shoebox when the mob started work."

The new marshal surveyed the hickory wagon tongue lying across the threshold of the cell block. No surprise moved him as he saw that the door of Pegleg's empty cell hung askew on broken hinges.

"They lynched the old man?" he asked.

Judge Handrick laughed shortly.

"Forsell was rescued by his own friends, my lad. Sixty-odd men, all wearing masks. They assembled just after dusk with a precision that told of careful planning. Forsell was loose inside of two minutes."

Morse drew a deep breath across his teeth.

"The Rebel Legion?" he asked.

Handrick flicked ash off the glowing end of a cigar.

"Obviously. The town figgers you must have laid your hand on the leader of the Legion, they were so anxious to free old Forsell. It only happened an hour ago."

Morse fished in his shirt pocket for tobacco and thin husks.

"Where did they take Forsell?"

Handrick shrugged.

"*Quien sabe?* The Legion works fast. They scattered into the darkness, vanishin' like a covey of quail. You'd probably find those jail-breakers in their homes right now, or strollin' on the street. Provin' who had a hand in this jail-break is something else again."

Morse finished licking and tapering his quiry, lit it over the lamp chimney and inhaled a lungful of smoke.

"King Dowell was mighty pleased when he heard how you handled Pegleg Forsell this mornin'," Handrick went on. "I don't know exactly how he feels right now. You might take a pasear up to the Trail House and explain why you were out of town, leavin' your jail undefended."

Webb Morse headed outdoors, tightened his saddle girth and swung into stirrups.

Judge Handrick moved to the door of the jail office, watching as the Texas marshal loped up the main stem and turned left toward the Trail House.

Five minutes later he was knocking at the door of King Dowell's suite on the third floor. Dowell himself opened the door.

Before the carpetbagger could speak, Morse reached in his chaps pocket and drew out a folded sheet of paper.

"Here's the names of every man who belongs to the Rebel Legion, Dowell," he said flatly. "This roster is yours as soon as I get the deed to the Rockin' M, as per your bargain."

Dowell's jaw unhinged. He tugged at his Dundrearie side whiskers, staring at the paper in Morse's fist. Then he relaxed, standing aside and beckoning the lawman inside.

"You work fast, son," the speculator conceded. "If that Legion list is the real McCoy, this offsets what happened at the jail tonight."

Morse grinned bleakly.

"It's the real McCoy," he said. "You'll find names in this roster that'll surprise you . . . including Molly Provo's. I got this paper at gun's point from the secretary of the Legion . . . old Sather."

Dowell crossed the room to his safe, spun the combination knob and opened the massive door.

The sealed envelope containing the Rocking M deed was in his hand when Dowell turned, to find himself covered by the muzzle of Webb Morse's Army Colt.

"Just making sure you didn't fish a gun out of that strongbox, Dowell," the Texan said, extending the sheet of paper with his left hand. "I've lived up to my contract. I don't know you well enough to take any chances."

The papers changed hands, Dowell unfolding the roster list and scanning it eagerly. Morse pocketed the ranch deed after breaking the seals and checking the document's authenticity.

Then the Texan reached up to his hat, unpinned Culdeen's tin star, and laid it on top of the carpetbagger's safe.

Dowell opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it as he saw the rebel soldier, gun still palmed, back toward the corridor door.

"*Hasta luego, Dowell,*" Morse said softly. "I sold out the Rebel Legion like I contracted to do. The rest is up to you."

The door closed softly on Morse's exit.

V

WEBB MORSE spurred his tired cavalry pony down the west shoulder of the bluff and picked up the trail which flanked the high cutbanks of Red River. This ash-gray ribbon of hoof-beaten path would lead him to the Rocking M.

But a mile out of Tanner's Ferry, the Texan reined off into a dry arroyo which intersected the main river bottom. The dwarf willow and salt-cedar bosques grew together in a whippy jungle that clawed at his saddle leather and closed in behind him, masking his passage.

There was barely enough starlight for him to pick out the sway-backed outlines of the old tannery building built at the edge of the river, formerly reached by a wagon road through the arroyo. The establishment dated back a generation and marked the genesis of the settlement which bore the name of Tanner's Ferry, a mile downstream.

The click of a carbine lever sliding a shell into the breech challenged Morse from the brush ahead as he approached the abandoned tannery.

"Skypilot?" he called softly, eyes probing the stygian backdrop of the weathered mud cliff which beetled above the tannery yard.

The lean figure of old Sather moved out of the shadows, distinguishable only by the glint of starlight on his rifle.

"Everyone's here," the frontier circuit rider said, as Morse stepped out of stirrups and ground-tied the warhorse. "You've seen Dowell like you planned?"

Morse nodded.

"Long enough to turn in my star."

Sather escorted him along a weathered board fence, past an adobe-walled storage shed and up a ramp to the rear platform of the tannery. Lantern-light winked through cracks in the timbered wall as Skypilot Sather led the way to a door and exchanged whispers with a sentry posted there.

They entered a barnlike room thick with

the stench of old hides and vats of lye, odors of human sweat and tobacco smoke and reeking coaloil fumes.

A single lantern burned from an overhead beam, and its yellow glare revealed the crowded ranks of masked men who crouched on the plank floor and lined the walls, fifty or sixty strong. All wore bandanna masks, with the exception of Peg-leg Forsell, whose artificial leg made any attempt at disguise useless.

Morse felt the mass impact of electric excitement which greeted his coming, and he was aware of the undercurrents of doubt and hostility which were present at this conclave of Texans.

"You were supposed to cash in Morse's chips—not lead him to our rendezvous, Skypilot!" the harsh voice of Highpockets Hesseltine, the old Rocking M cavity wrangler, challenged them as they reached a table in the center of the circle. "I knew when you won that lottery today that you'd get religion when it came to a showdown—"

Morse jerked open his shirt to expose the bloodstained bandage on his shoulder.

"Does that look like Sather caved?" he demanded. "We've got work to do tonight, men. We ain't got time for jawin' back and forth."

Morse turned to the masked figure in bibless levis and brush-popper jumper who appeared to be the chairman in charge of the Rebel Legionnaires.

"Take off your mask, Molly," he urged gently. "I'm prouder than I can tell you to know you're the Texican who organized this Legion to fight back at carpetbagger rule."

The slim figure hesitated, then drew the bandanna off her face. Molly Provo's eyes were glowing as she met the young rebel's answering grin.

"I want all of you to take off your masks," Morse went on. "We are not cowards, afraid to show our faces to each other. We are met tonight to recover what is rightfully ours. There's nothing illegal about that."

THE irrevocable logic of Morse's statement brought its answer as, slowly at first and then with increasing enthusiasm, the assembled Texans stripped off their masks and stood revealed in the glare of lantern light.

"I've already explained our little discussion over at the Rocking M this afternoon, Webb," Skypilot Sather commented. "The rest is up to you. I might call you hombres' attention to the fact that Morse ain't wearin' King Dowell's law badge tonight. That ought to speak for itself."

Webb Morse climbed up on the table, his head level with the hanging lantern, his eyes searching the faces below.

"Sather informs me that King Dowell's first move on seizing control over at Ferry was to impound the arsenal belonging to our old Home Defense Battalion," Morse began. "Dowell knows no organized resistance to the carpetbaggers can get anywhere as long as your arms and ammunition are locked up in the courthouse."

Heads nodded agreement, the weight of Morse's personality already an infectious thing in the room.

"The county courthouse holds the records of the land and the business enterprises which King Dowell and his blue-nose Yankee underlings robbed you of," Morse went on. "Examination of those records by a federal court wouldn't hold water long if Dowell got his property the same way he stole my father's spread."

Half a hundred voices gave throat to affirmation, from Texans forced by bankruptcy to fall back before the tidal wave of invading carpetbaggers at war's end.

"Very well," Morse said, hitching his gunbelt. "We ride on Tanner's Ferry tonight. By morning I expect to see King Dowell's grip broken for all time. That's all."

He leaped down off the table, to find Molly Provo moving up into the circle of his arms. In that confused moment, cheering friends and bunkhouse mates rallied about the man who had returned from the bloody fields of battle to be their leader.

Skypilot Sather laid a hand on the shoulder of the girl and the man who had claimed her heart in earlier and happier years, and his soft chuckle reached them through the clamor of armed Texans who milled through the tannery on their way out to where their picketed horses were waiting.

"When the smoke clears tomorrow some of us won't be here, children," the old circuit rider said huskily. "I pray God I will be spared to make you one, but that

is in the Lord's hands. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and His Will be done, not mine."

It was at once a benediction and a requiem, but the Right would ride with them back to Tanner's Ferry tonight . . .

KING DOWELL rode down from his aerie at the Trail House well after midnight to join Rickaree Pascoe and his carpetbagger henchmen at the Yankee Doodle saloon.

Judge Handrick was haranguing the bar-room crowd as Dowell entered the batwings. The buzz of voices tapered off as the carpetbaggers noted the unusual fact that Dowell had a pair of guns buckled outside his fustian.

"I don't like it, men," Dowell said abruptly, his voice raw with strain. "The mob that got Pegleg Forsell is still out of town. That spells trouble."

Rickaree Pascoe, his voice thick from too much whiskey, grumbled a short answer:

"I agree with the Judge here. You played into the Rebel Legion's hands when you app'inted Webb Morse marshal."

Dowell's scowl cut the bartender off.

"Morse accomplished his purpose," he bit out. "He gave me a bona-fide list of the Legion membership. We're in a position now to call in the State Police from Austin and clean up this town. That's all that matters."

Dowell crossed over to the bar and jerked a whiskey bottle from Pascoe's lips.

"Tonight is no time for addling your wits with rogut," he said harshly. "Judge, I want you to roust up twenty men and get over to the courthouse. If trouble breaks tonight, that's where it'll center. Maybe I'm letting this jail-break booger me, but we've got to play our cards close to our belly."

Judge Handrick hitched his gun belts, spat into the sawdust and strode out into the center of the barroom, calling out names. Men detached themselves from the crowd to form ranks behind the lawyer.

"The rest of you be primed for trouble if it breaks tonight," Dowell ordered. "If the Rebs want a fight, they'll get it. Judge, if any suspicious riders approach the courthouse plaza, shoot to kill."

Carpetbaggers moved out of the Yankee

Doodle and deployed down the street, following Handrick past the deserted jailhouse and angling across the plaza toward the brick courthouse.

They were fanning out with the intention of spreading a cordon around the building when the first thunder of hoofs swept down the main street.

A spate of gunfire blasted from the Yankee Doodle Saloon, as Webb Morse led a cavalcade of fighting Texas sons down the street they had named in honor of Sam Houston.

Voicing the rebel yell of old, the Texans flung themselves from saddle as they converged on the palmettos which rimmed the courthouse plaza and headed in a beeline toward the steps of the county building which housed the arsenal.

Disorganized by the sudden devastating force of the Legion attack, Handrick's men raced for tree trunks and the vantage points offered by the courthouse pillars, opening fire at wraith-like targets which advanced at a run behind flaming guns.

Like avengers from the Apocolypse, Morse and Pegleg Forsell, Skypilot Sather and old Gifford Wirum of the Alamo Stables ran shoulder to shoulder up the steps, carrying the charge straight into the thundering fire of Handrick and the saloon killers who had reached the porch ahead of them.

Then Handrick was moving out to the head of the steps, Colts thundering their defiance as he blocked the main doorway.

Giff Wirum faltered, went down on one knee as Handrick's wild slugs caught him on a kneecap. Skypilot Sather flung aside his empty dragoon and locked in a grapple with the apron-clad figure of Rickaree Pascoe.

With the same harsh, reckless laughter that he had carried into battle on more distant fields of combat, Webb Morse held his fire until he picked out Judge Handrick standing spread-legged above him, desperately reloading his hot-barreled .44s.

Handrick's thumbs were earing back his gunhammers when he recognized Morse. He swung his guns to cover the Texan, saw the orange muzzle-flashes of Morse's Colt as the crouched gunman walked in close, shooting with deadly precision until he saw that Handrick was dead on his feet, his body held upright only by his gun-

belt caught on the doorknob at his back.

Then Pegleg Forsell was hobbling through the gunsmoke to release the carpetbagger's corpse, his wooden leg making short work of the plate glass door which led to the interior of the courthouse and the impounded arsenal that would guarantee the freedom of Tanner's Ferry.

THE PITCHED BATTLE had tapered off to sporadic gunfire between stampeding carpetbaggers and their pursuing rebel adversaries as Forsell and Skypilot Sather, the latter bleeding from knife wounds but lifting his rich voice in a battle hymn, shot off the locks of the arsenal room and started passing out rifles.

Morse headed back down to the plaza, picked out a horse from the compound, and swung into saddle.

The hotel porch was deserted when Morse skidded his mount to a halt under the Trail House signboard. His ears caught the rebel yells and an occasional gunshot down in the town, as he raced into the empty lobby.

Morse reloaded his guns on the way up to the third floor. Reaching the corridor there, he saw a bar of lamplight shafting out of King Dowell's open doorway.

He palmed his guns and moved across the threshold.

The main room was empty. Then a woman's sharp cry drew Morse toward the office. A shot followed close on the scream.

He reached the doorway in time to see Molly Provo knocked headlong to the floor, her mouth bleeding from the blow that had staggered her.

King Dowell, his back to Morse, was staring down at a nickel-plated pocket pistol which he had wrenched from the girl's hand. Smoke curled from the barrel of the small-calibered weapon, and blood was dripping from a flesh wound on Dowell's left cheek.

"I offered you everything a woman could want from life, Molly," Dowell gasped, tossing the pistol aside and mopping his bloody cheek with his silk cravat. "It's still not too late to ride out of this uncurried cowtown—to enjoy the queen-dom it is in my power to offer you—"

Molly Provo propped herself up on one

elbow, her eyes sweeping past the towering carpetbagger to catch sight of Webb Morse moving across the threshold.

Her glance telegraphed its warning to King Dowell and the big carpetbagger whirled, splayed hands plummeting to Colt butts. The draw halted with twin guns half out of leather, as the Yankee speculator stared into the bore of Morse's six.

"Running out on your wild bunch when the going got rough, Dowell?" Morse grinned mirthlessly. "You got a lot to answer for before you quit Texas, *amigo*."

For a long moment, King Dowell faced the shoot-sign in the Texan's eyes. Then, with thumbs and forefingers, he eased his Colts out of holster and dropped them.

"You worked too fast for me, Morse," he said heavily. "I figured a week would see you in Boothill and Molly's Rebel Legion scattered. If you'd ridden out to the Rocking M tonight things would have been different—"

Molly Provo pulled herself to her feet, dropping a sleeve across her bruised lips. With her hair in disarray and her slim body nondescript in bibless levis and hickory shirt, she was once again the harum-scarum tomboy whose image Morse had carried in a secret corner of his heart.

"*Watch him, Webb!*" she cried.

Dowell's right hand twitched a concealed derringer from the spring clip holster under his starched cuff.

The crack of the single-shot .41 blended with the report of Morse's gun. Through founting powder-smoke he saw the carpetbagger's knees unhinge, saw the first slow seep of crimson blossom on the alpaca vest as Dowell toppled sideways, smashing his forehead against the Trail House safe.

"Thanks, Molly girl," Morse grinned, a sudden weariness coming into his voice as the tension eased off within him. "I was waiting for him to spring a hideout gun on me. It's just as well this way—"

Molly was in his arms then, her lips meeting the crushing demand of his own. The lamp on Boswell's safe guttered out as the fuel left its wick, but the room was glowing in the light of the Texas sunrise.

"We better mosey down the hill and see how Skypilot Sather's doing," Morse suggested after a while. "We'll need him before that sun's an hour higher."

"SIX-GUN FIESTA"

By Wayne D. Overholser

Gold Plume was Duke Madden's town, and he ruled by lobo law. There was no room in it for an ex-marshal like Harrigan—not alive.

IT had been a long chase and so far a futile one, but Jim Harrigan had every reason to believe that the end was in sight. He pulled up his gaunted roan saddler atop Star Mountain Pass, his gaze sweeping the new mining camp of Gold Plume that lay below him, squeezed thin by high granite cliffs hugging the

creek. Somewhere in that scattering of frame buildings, log cabins, and tents would be Rush Kane, the man Jim had trailed across the Continental Divide from Dodge City.

Answers to Jim's questions in Pueblo told him Kane had been there less than a week before. Rush Kane, gambler, was

The floorman went for his gun. Jim's Colt spoke once.



not one who could easily be mistaken for another. He had crossed Marshal Pass, paused in Gunnison, and gone on to Ouray. Gradually Jim had closed the gap, and now, if his calculations were right, Kane had ridden into Gold Plume last night.

The promise of winter was in the thin air here on the pass, and Jim did not pause long. He turned his roan down the twisting trail that lay like a looped ribbon against the mountainside, passed a slow-moving line of burros carrying coal to the mining camp, and came into the aspens, aflame now with the gold and orange of fall.

But the beauty of this wild land held no lure at that moment for Jim Harrigan was thinking of the job that lay before him, and of his own chances that were, at best, slim. Gold Plume was Duke Madden's

town, and Madden would give Kane the help he needed.

Then he was down, the trail cutting across an open park toward the camp. Log ranch buildings lay hard against the cliff, and below him a line of haystacks bulked high along the creek. Jim was surprised because the ranch had been hidden from the trail by overhanging rock, but he was more surprised by the drama that was being enacted here. A girl stood facing a half circle of mounted men, a Winchester in her hands, her voice crisp as she said, "The answer's no, Burke."

"You're smart, ma'am," a familiar voice was saying. "Smart enough to see the butter on your bread."

"We'll hold the hay," the girl said firmly.

"You'd better take Madden's offer," the man pressed. "Ten dollars a ton is better'n winding up with nothing."



"Dad said you were bad enough to steal anything," the girl cried.

"He was a little hard on us." The man laughed softly. "We wouldn't steal the hay. We'd just borrow it. No use packing it in when we've got some right under our nose."

"Still playing the old game, ain't you, Boomer?" Jim asked.

The man wheeled, hands dipping for gun butts and falling away when the girl said flatly. "I'll kill the first man who draws his iron."

A careful alertness came into Boomer Burke's face. He was a wide man with squeezed features that made him look as if the top of his head had been hammered down toward his feet, leaving his chin where it was. Licking dry lips, he turned his gaze back to the girl. "You can put your rifle down, ma'am. Jim Harrigan don't need a woman's help."

Jim leaned forward, hands resting before him, a loose lank man who belonged in the saddle. The dark leather-brown of his cheeks and his sun-bleached blue eyes were evidence that he had spent most of his waking hours where the sun and the wind could touch him. He laughed silently now, a kind of mirth that jarred Boomer Burke and made him shift uneasily in his saddle.

"I've met up with Boomer before," Jim said contemptuously. "He won't pull a gun on me. Not when I'm facing him."

Jim's tongue was a knife ripping skin from Burke's body. His men looked at him as if expecting swift and violent action, but the cool courage that it took to face Jim Harrigan wasn't in him. He said mildly. "I don't see your badge, Jim."

"I'm a private citizen, Boomer."

"Then what in hell are you doing here?"

"Looking at the scenery."

Burke's shrill laugh was a strange sound coming from such a bulky-bodied man. "You've got plenty to see around here." He rubbed a pimply nose. "Harrigan, you wouldn't cross the street to see the purtiest sunset this side of hell. Now what are you doing here?"

"I hear Gold Plume's got five thousand men who've showed up in the last six months. Wouldn't be surprising if another rode in."

"That ain't it, neither." Burke wagged

his great head. "You wouldn't know a chunk of gold ore if you saw one. Me and Duke get our fun relieving the other fellow of his dinero. You get yours playing bloodhound. Who are you after?"

"Maybe you. Maybe Duke." Jim shrugged. "Still working for Duke, are you?"

"Sure. It's Duke's town." Burke motioned to the girl. "Only some don't know it."

"But Duke's got ways of persuading folks. Even pretty girls."

"That's right." Burke's grin was a wicked tightening of lips against yellow teeth. "If you're after me or Duke, you've got a chore."

JIM built a smoke, his mind making a quick study of this development. Rush Kane had worked for Madden in the Montana gold camps when Jim thought Kane was a square shooter. Now Burke would take word to Madden that Jim Harrigan was in camp and Kane would hear. He'd guess why Jim had come, and he'd ride on or Madden would ride him out until the sign was right for Jim's removal.

"Might be quite a chore at that." Jim thumbed a match into flame and held it to his cigarette. He flipped the charred stick away, his eyes blue slits. "You tell Duke, Boomer. I'll be looking him up pretty soon."

It was a plain raw challenge, and there wasn't an ounce of bluff in Jim Harrigan. Burke, knowing that, said, "I'll tell him. Belle, you'd better think over what I said." He wheeled his horse toward town, gray dust boiling behind him, his men lining out along the trail.

"I'm Jim Harrigan." Jim raised his hat. "Didn't look like they were shoving you around any, but I couldn't keep my nose out of it."

She held out a brown firm hand that was swallowed by his big one. "I'm Belle Calvert. I'm afraid I was in for more shoving around than you figured. It's a good thing for me you stuck your nose into it."

She was small and slim and straight with black hair and black eyes and a determined chin. To Jim Harrigan, with the long ride and lonely campfires behind him, she made a lovely and distracting

picture, the fulfillment of an old and cherished dream.

"I'm glad I was some help," he said.

She tried to smile, and he saw she was close to crying. "I guess you're a rip-roarer from Bitter Creek the way Burke rode off."

"I shave with a Bowie knife and I cut my teeth on a stick of giant powder." He winked. "What was the ruckus about, ma'am?"

"Duke Madden wants my hay for any song he decides to sing," she said sourly. "Six months ago Rocking C was one of the biggest spreads in the San Juan. Then they made the strike and miners came in like locusts. They've stolen our beef, killed my father, and I can't pay enough to keep hands."

"I've got an idea the tune Duke would sing," Jim said dryly.

"Get down and rest your saddle," Belle invited. "You won't find a bed in town, and you'll be lucky to get a meal."

"Thanks, but I guess I'd better mosey on." He lifted his reins. "If you have any more trouble with Madden or Burke, let me know."

"I will," she promised. "If you can't find accommodations in town, come back."

"Thanks," he said again, and raising his hat to her, rode away.

IT WAS after noon when Jim rode into Gold Plume. Sunlight was sharp upon the town, and the air, caught between the high cliffs, was still and hot and gray with the dust that was constantly being churned into motion by burros and men. The dirty turbulent creek ran with swift abandon along the east cliff, and between it and the west wall lay the town, two long lines of buildings and tents threaded by the dusty street.

Gold Plume made no pretensions of dignity or permanence. There was no brick, no stone, no paint. It was a town of pine box houses and tents and rectangles of four planks claiming a building site, a circus with a hundred side shows. Stores and offices with canvas tops. Log foundations. Houses with Leadville fronts. Plank walks or dusty paths piled with lumber. Canned gods. Kegs of beer.

Here in Gold Plume a thousand men

preyed upon another thousand who blasted gold from a stubborn earth. Tin horns. Tinsel women, flaunting themselves and their merchandise. Barkers chanting their persuasive spiel, "Come in, gentlemen, to the Domino where the games are square and the girls are beautiful." This was Gold Plume, wild and tough and bawdy. This was Gold Plume, Duke Madden's town.

Jim racked his horse, and ducking around a pile of lumber, stepped into a canvas-topped restaurant. Every stool along the pine counter was occupied, and Jim took his place at the end of the line of waiting miners, long experience in boom towns having built a patience that was not natural in him. Outside, a couple of riders were pushing a dozen small steers through the burros and horses, cursing and being cursed. Jim, looking out, saw with some surprise that the steers carried the Rocking C brand.

The line moved up and presently Jim had a stool. "Steak, fried potatoes, and coffee," he said. As he ate, he thought about Belle Calvert's steers. Two-year-olds, he judged. With the amount of hay he had seen below the Rocking C ranch-house, it struck him that it was a fool thing to be selling the steers now. Another six months would put weight on them, but the girl had impressed him as one who knew her business.

Jim had a slab of peach pie. He ate slowly, savoring the sweetness, the long trail and hot days giving him an appetite for it. When he was done, he made way for a miner, and asked, "How much?"

"Five dollars," the aproned man said.

Scowl lines marked Jim's forehead. "Ain't that a mite high?"

"Good meal, wasn't it?"

"Hell yes, but five dollars . . ."

"You making trouble?"

"I'll pay, and get my next meal somewhere else." Jim slammed the money on the counter. "You're a damned thief, mister."

A miner elbowed Jim's ribs. "Shut up, friend."

The restaurant man scooped up the money. "Go somewhere else and be damned. I don't want your business. I've got plenty."

Jim went out into the sunlight, temper

knotting his nerves. This, he guessed, would be Duke Madden's work. It surprised him because Madden had never been more than a sharp operator of gambling schemes.

"You pay five prices for everything in this camp." The miner who had elbowed Jim in the restaurant stood beside him. "If you squawk too loud, you're likely to come up in the creek with a slug in your head."

"Madden?"

"Him and Boomer Burke and their wolf pack," the miner said bitterly. "They're squeezing the camp dry. Ain't enough gold on the creek to pay the kind of prices they ask."

"Madden's a gambler. What's he got to do with the price of a meal?"

"He's organized the business men. Every new man who comes in has to satisfy Madden or he don't get started."

"And if they don't stick with the price agreement, they'll get a slug in the back?"

"That's right." The miner pinned gray eyes on Jim. "You knew Madden?"

Jim nodded. "In Montana. He won't last long here."

"Looks plumb permanent now. The only way to beat him is with a Vigilante organization, but we haven't got a man who can run one."

Jim told himself that Duke Madden was the problem of the men who had their stakes here, that it was nothing to him one way or another. He said, "You'll find your man when you get tired enough of Madden," and turned away.

"Hold on." The miner fell into step with Jim and held out his hand. "I'm Ira Raeder. Got the Blue Bonnet mine up the gulch that ought to make me rich and won't as long as Duke Madden calls the turn."

Jim shook Raeder's hand and gave him his name. He liked the man. Raeder's grip was firm and his eyes had a way of meeting Jim's squarely.

"It'll catch up with Madden," Jim said.

"Not until it's too late for the rest of us. Harrigan, you look tough enough to do this job. Say the word and I'll get a dozen miners together tonight that we can trust. We'll have to know more about you, but I think you'll do. I don't often go wrong on a man."

Jim shook his head. "I'm no miner, and this camp don't make any difference to me. When I do the job I came here to do, I'll drift."

"We'll pay you," Raeder urged.

"No, thanks."

THEY WALKED in silence for a time, Jim's eyes raking the street for Rush Kane, Raeder eyeing Jim as if cudgelling his mind for something that would win the tall man over.

As they came to the log butcher shop crowding the plank walk, Jim saw the Rocking C steers held in a pole corral along the creek. The two riders who had delivered the beef were inside, one a tiny bowlegged man with frosty green eyes and a deep-lined face, the other a club-footed cowboy who was backing away from the counter and trying to pull the little rider with him.

"Another Madden job," Raeder breathed. "The little gent is Half Pint Ord, the other one Limp Sanders. Ord came into this country with Sam Calvert ten years ago."

The butcher behind the bar was one of the biggest men Jim had ever seen, tall and heavy-boned and meaty. He was laughing now, great head thrown back, little red-flecked eyes almost lidded shut. He motioned to a pile of gold eagles. "Take it and drift, Ord. That's the price Madden says to pay, and by hell, that's what we will pay."

Ord shook free of Sander's grip. "You offered Belle a hundred dollars a head. Now you're trying to pay half of that."

"Madden cut the price," the butcher said blandly.

"Come on," Sanders begged, pulling at Ord again.

"You're as big a thief as Madden," Ord bellowed.

"Thief am I?" the butcher rumbled, and moved ponderously around the pine counter like a heavy locomotive going into a hard pull. "I don't take that off nobody, including runts and cripples."

"Stand pat," Ord called, and grabbed his gun.

The butcher moved with surprising speed for a man of his size. His right hand smashed downward across Ord's frail wrist as his left hand clubbed him

on the side of the head. The little cowboy went down into a still, twisted pile.

The temper that had been in Jim Harri- gan since he had clashed with Boomer Burke broke now. Forgetting that this was none of his business, he stepped into the butcher shop, gun palmed.

"That'll be enough, mister," Jim said flatly.

The butcher had started toward Limpy Sanders who was backed against the wall. Now he came to a flat-footed stop. He put his gaze on Jim, rage staining his face and slowly spreading to the back of his neck.

"Why are you horning in?" the butcher demanded.

"Makes you no never mind why I'm in. If you've killed that cowhand, I'll see you hang. If you made a deal for one hundred dollars a head, you'll keep it."

"You're wrong, friend." Crooked snags of teeth showed in a wicked grin. "Mebbe you don't know that Duke Madden sets the prices and we pay 'em. If you've got an argument, go over to the Domino."

"You owe twelve hundred." Jim nodded at Sanders. "That right?"

"That's it."

"Pay him." Jim motioned to the butcher.

"Go to hell," the giant bellowed.

"I'll give you ten seconds. Got a watch, Raeder?"

"You bet I have," Raeder said exultantly.

"Start timing," Jim said coldly. "If you haven't showed that dinero when the time's up, you'll have a hole in your guts."

The butcher rumbled a defiant oath, gaze leaping from Raeder to Jim and back. Then he broke, bravado seeping out of him like wheat pouring from a cut sack. He counted out another six hundred dollars and handed it to Sanders.

"Give him the other stack," Jim ordered.

Still cursing, the man obeyed. Ord was sitting up now, rubbing his head.

"Help him on his horse." Jim nodded at Sanders. When the Rocking C men had gone, he slid his gun into leather. "If you want a fair draw . . ."

"Not me," the butcher snarled, "and you'll wish to hell you'd kept your nose clean."

"He's got a bad habit of making them kind of mistakes, Si," Boomer Burke said from the street. "I just wondered how

long it would take you to kick up a fracas, Jim, and damned if you didn't fool me. You done it sooner than I figgered."

Slowly Jim made his turn. Burke stood in the doorway, a gun in his hand, malicious enjoyment showing on his wide face.

"I'm purty fast, Boomer," Jim said.

"Not fast enough to make a play good," Burke said. "Duke wants to see you. Come on."

II

DUKE MADDEN'S Domino was a long hall with a carved mahogany bar running along one side, keno tables, roulette wheels, and other gambling games in a large back room. Here was Gold Plume's one bit of glamor. Chandeliers glittered overhead. Painted women filtered through the crowd. A piano against the wall separating the gambling room from the saloon, was making a faintly musical racket under the fingers of a stooped, chalk-faced man.

Burke had holstered his gun. He said, "I've got a derringer in my pocket that makes a hell of a hole in a man's back, Jim. Don't make a wrong move."

"I like my back the way it is," Jim murmured.

"Left," Burke ordered. "Up the stairs."

Duke Madden was doing all right, Jim saw, and it puzzled him. Madden had been one of the small fry in the Montana camps where Jim had known him, but there was no doubt about him being top rooster here. Even now in what should be the slack time of day the Domino was crowded.

Jim climbed the stairs to the balcony. A row of doors ran along the wall, none of them numbered. Burke said, "First one, Jim."

Turning the knob, Jim pushed the door open and moved swiftly through it, fingers brushing gun butt. He hadn't known how he'd be received. Then his hand dropped. Duke Madden was sitting behind a roll top desk, a sly smile twisting his thin lips.

"No rough stuff, Jim." The gambler pointed toward a leather couch. "This is just a friendly visit."

"A hell of a way to invite a man in for a visit," Jim growled.

Burke heeled the door shut. "I'd better

get his iron, Duke. It was a damned fool notion letting him keep it."

"He don't want to die bad enough to make a draw." He laid his gaze on Jim's face. "Boomer tells me you've resigned."

"That's right."

Twisting his swivel chair, Madden took a cigar from the box on his desk and bit off the end. He held his silence for a moment, taking his time lighting the cigar. Jim, seated on the couch, saw that Madden hadn't changed except that his run of luck had given him an opportunity to satisfy his desire for comfort.

The office was expensively furnished for a camp like Gold Plume where everything had to be packed in. The desk was mahogany, the leather covering of the couch black and of good quality. There were a number of chairs in the room, a small safe set against yonder wall, and some pictures of nude, round-figured women hanging on both sides of the door.

Madden's suit was of costly black broadcloth, his white shirt silk. The diamond in the ring on his right hand was large and brilliant. He was a shrewd and elegant man, this Duke Madden, with a saber-sharp nose overlooking a carefully trimmed mustache. His obsidian-black eyes indexed his tough and unforgiving character, and now they showed a worry that was nagging him.

"Boomer and me know you didn't come to Gold Plume to look at scenery," he said finally. "I doubt like hell that you're after either of us. You dragged us back across the Bitter Roots and made us stand trial in Helena for a killing we didn't do. When we beat that charge, you were done with us."

"I know." Jim crossed his legs, smiling now as if he saw humor that escaped both Madden and Burke. "I don't see that it's any of your business why I'm here."

"Everything in Gold Plume is my business." Madden leaned forward. "I'm riding a grizzly, and you might be the huckleberry who's aiming to stick a burr under my saddle."

"I didn't have no notion about bothering you till you put this gun dog on my tail," Jim said sourly. "I don't like that."

"I don't give a damn whether you like it or not." Madden tongued his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "I'm going to

find out why you're here. I've got too good a thing to lose. I was in Durango when I heard about this strike. There weren't fifty men in the camp when me and Boomer showed up. We sunk every nickel we had into this place and kept putting our profits back. This winter we'll clean up."

"My reason for coming has got nothing to do with you," Jim said.

"I wouldn't lay a bet on that." Madden took his cigar out of his mouth. "First you sided the Calvert girl against Boomer. Then you butted into a deal between Si Taylor and the Rocking C boys. What does that look like?"

"I ain't one to stand still while a bunch of men push a girl around," Jim said testily, "or beat up a runt Ord's size. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Boomer says to give you a chunk of lead where it'll hurt." Madden pulled on his cigar, found that it had gone out, and relighted it. "I'm not sure. As far as I'm concerned, we're dealing from a new deck."

"Fair enough." Jim rose and paced to the window. He looked down at the shifting crowd in the street. "I'm kind of curious about your scheme for cleaning up Duke. Looks like you're milking your cow dry."

"She'll be dry by the time I'm done," Madden said with arrogant confidence. "Most of the boys in camp have money. There'll be more by spring because we've had some good strikes. With the monopoly I've got, I'll be in position to tote the dinero out myself when the pass is open in the spring. That's why I can't let you go around tripping me up."

Jim shrugged. "Seems to be your cow. Guess I'll mosey. I don't figure on being here long, so I won't bother your milking none."

"A couple of boys in the next room have got their sixes lined on your belly, Jim," Madden said coldly. "You go out of that door before I tell you to, and you won't be eating no more."

ANGER crowded Jim then. That was the reason for Madden letting him keep his Colt. His gaze swept the wall, but he could not locate the guns. They were hidden behind the red-figured wall-

paper, he guessed, with tiny eye holes too small to be seen from where he stood.

"You must like my company," Jim murmured.

"I like it well enough to keep you till I know why you're here."

"You've made money in Gold Plume, Duke. Maybe I can."

"That's no reason for a bloodhound like you. I doubt like hell that you ever resigned your marshal's job."

"Ever hear of a marshal getting rich?" Jim asked.

"Never did," Madden admitted.

"I don't want this kind of money." Jim made a sweeping gesture toward the main floor. "But I get damned tired of risking my neck for the kind of dinero Uncle Sam pays."

"So you came here on a job that'll pay more," Madden said with satisfaction. "You just put a gun to your head when you said that. Raeder hire you?"

"I didn't say so." Jim saw he'd made a mistake. Perhaps a fatal one. "I came here on a personal chore."

"You were talking to Raeder," Madden charged.

"He was in the restaurant when I ate dinner."

"He's been trying to organize some Vigilantes," Madden pressed. "You're the kind of a man he needs to boss the outfit. I won't stand for that."

"You're wasting time," Burke said impatiently. "I've had something to give this yahoo ever since he fetched us back from Idaho."

"Boomer wants your hide," Madden said softly. "Know any reason why he shouldn't have it?"

Jim could smell death now, there on the other side of the wallpaper, and it was in Duke Madden's hands whether it came snarling through with a roar and tongue of flame.

"Boomer is a pretty fair trigger boy, Duke," Jim said as if he felt he was in no real danger, "but he don't have your brains."

"Shut up, Boomer." Madden grinned as he tossed his cigar butt into a spittoon. "What are you getting at, Jim?"

"It's always a mistake to kill a man when you don't have to. You don't have to kill me."

"Hell, I would be a fool to let you walk out of here and start working for the Vigilantes."

"I didn't make this ride for that." This was it. Either Madden believed the truth, or Jim Harrigan was a dead man. "I trailed Rush Kane here from Dodge City to kill him. When that's done, I'm drifting."

"Of all the damned hogwash," Burke bellowed.

"Shut up, Boomer. You've got a brain like a canary." Madden reached for a cigar, a thoughtful expression on his face. "What do you want Rush for?"

"He married my sister. I guess you know what happened in Dodge City. That's why I resigned my job. I couldn't do this chore as long as I was toting my badge."

"You believe that yarn?" Burke demanded.

"He's talking straight." The sly smile was on Madden's thin lips again. "I guess we're in position to do each other a good turn, Jim. I'd like to have Rush out of the way, and I'd just as soon play it your way as have one of my boys beef him."

"Say, you're talking sense now," Burke said. "Let Harrigan get Kane."

"You always were a hell of a checker player, Boomer, because you never could see more than one move ahead." Madden chuckled. "All right, Jim. You can have Rush any time you want him. You'll find him at the Rocking C."

Watching the gambler, Jim couldn't tell what was going on behind those black eyes. "I don't get this," he said. "Rush used to work for you. I figured he was heading for Gold Plume to deal for you again."

"Rush Kane will never deal for me again," Madden said feelingly. "You go ahead and do your chore. Then get to hell out of camp."

Jim moved to the door and opened it. He turned then, eyes searching the gambler's bland face. He asked, "Why would Rush head for the Rocking C?"

The cat-like cruelty that was a part of Duke Madden was mirrored now in the widening of his smile. "Natural place for him to go, I guess. He's Belle Calvert's brother, and with her pushing him, he may be a little hard to handle."

PUSHING his way across the crowded street to his horse, Jim found himself thinking about what Madden had said. It was unbelievable. Jim had seen Belle but a few minutes, but those minutes had been long enough to convince him that she was everything that was fine and decent. It was impossible for her to have a brother like Rush Kane, but it must be true, or Duke Madden, suspecting what he did, would not have let him leave the Domino alive.

Jim mounted, and turned his roan into the south-bound flow of traffic, hardly conscious of his surroundings. He would kill Rush Kane, but he could not think past that moment, could not think of what Belle Calvert would do or what she would think, and suddenly it seemed important that Belle think well of him.

Duke Madden had told him more than he had intended. Reading between the lines, he guessed that Madden had pulled off too many killings. Public opinion was something to be feared even in a mining camp like Gold Plume. He was afraid of Ira Raeder, and he was afraid to make a bold move against Belle Calvert.

As far as Madden was concerned, Jim's arrival was a gift from heaven. It would result in Kane's death, and it would keep Jim from staying to side Belle if he wanted to. That was the way the gambler had figured it, and Jim cursed him for his shrewdness.

Before Jim was out of the traffic, a mounted man spurred a horse into the street ahead of him, almost running a miner down, and took the south road in a gallop. Jim gave it little attention at the moment. He rode slowly, his thoughts sour company.

Hate did not come naturally to Jim Harrigan, but it had been a corroding bitterness in him from the moment he had learned what had happened to his sister in Dodge City. Only the death of Rush Kane would purge that bitterness. Yet when he thought about it, he saw Belle Calvert, her black eyes and black hair, the sweet set of her mouth, and he knew he would hate himself from the moment Rush Kane went down before his gun.

He had almost reached the Rocking C when he met the man he had seen leaving town just ahead of him. Still he thought

little about it, for his own problem was gripping his mind and leaving room for nothing else. Ahead of him was Rush Kane, and Rush Kane had to die.

Half Pint Ord was pulling gear off his horse when Jim rode in. He called, "Howdy, mister. Say, you sure did us a favor in town. I didn't get a chance to thank you then."

Ord came across the yard in a fast rolling pace, a grin creasing his wrinkled face. He held out his hand, and Jim, stepping down, took it.

"Glad to do it, friend."

"You're a marked man now," the little cowboy said soberly. "Nobody bucks Duke Madden, and lives to sing about it."

"I ain't much of a songbird anyhow," Jim said.

"Come on in. I told Belle about it, and she was sure tickled. That six hundred dollars looked plumb big to her."

Jim fell into step with Ord, resenting the cowboy's friendly manner. For an instant he didn't know why, and then he did know, and he hated himself as he had known he would. He was entering Belle Calvert's house under the guise of friendship. She'd welcome him and she'd thank him, and then he'd kill her brother. No man, he thought with inward heat, could be lower than that.

Opening the door, Ord stepped aside. "Here's the man who took chips in our ruckus, Belle."

"I've met Mr. Harrigan. Come in and close the door. If you make a move for your gun, I'll kill you."

Jim blinked for a moment in the gloom of the house. Then his eyes focused clearly on her, and he felt himself shriveling like a fly before a blast of flame. She was standing against the far wall, her Winchester held on the ready. He had never seen so much contempt on a human's face.

"Have you gone loco, Belle?" Ord exploded.

"Loco enough to kill him," she said grimly. "Take his iron."

"Look, Belle. This is the man who pulled his cutter on Taylor. If . . ."

"He had me fooled, too. I said to take his iron."

Swearing feelingly, Ord obeyed. "It'll be a long cold day before he does you a good turn again. What's the matter?"

"He came out here to kill Rush," the girl said bitterly. "If Madden hadn't sent a man to warn us, he'd have done it."

"I'll be damned." Ord faced Jim. "That right?"

"That's right," Jim admitted.

He knew now why the man had left town ahead of him. More than that, he saw the real depth of Madden's scheming. The gambler had still been suspicious of his relationship with Ira Raeder, and he'd rigged the play this way, hoping to get rid of two men he wanted removed and still keep his hands clean.

Hate was in the room, hate and scorn that Belle and Half Pint Ord had for him, as intangible as smoke and as real. Resentment rose in him then.

"Maybe I look like a skunk, but I don't smell like one," he said hotly. "Rush Kane needs to die. If I'd caught him on the street, I'd have killed him the same as I would any sidewinder."

"Give him his gun," Belle said in sudden decision.

"Now you are loco," Ord shouted. "Rush can't . . ."

"Give it to him."

Reluctantly Ord obeyed and drew his own six. "Just one funny move, mister, and I'll forget what you done in town."

Belle motioned toward the stairs. "Rush is up there."

III

JIM went ahead of the girl, not understanding this. Nor did he understand why Rush, if he had been warned, hadn't met him in front of the house with his gun in leather ready to smoke it out.

"The room on your right," Belle said. "I want to see if you're any part of a man."

Jim stopper in the doorway, surprise holding him there. Rush Kane was in bed, a bandage around his head, his face as white as the pillow on which he lay. Pale lips pulled tight in a grin when he saw who it was. He said, "Long time no see, Jim," and held out his hand.

"He's not here to shake your hand," Belle said in quiet fury. "He's here to kill you."

Kane's arm dropped, pleasure washing out of his face. "I guess you've got something wrong."

Jim stepped in the doorway, surprise

denly weak and foolish. He had known Rush Kane as a tall vigorous man, filled high with the love of life, a strong man and an honest gambler. Finding him this way was something that had never entered his mind.

"You can put down your Winchester, ma'am," Jim said heavily. "What's between me and Rush will wait till he's on his feet."

"What's this all about?" Kane asked.

Jim came to stand at the head of the bed. "You knew what I thought of Ann," he said dully. "I respected you when you married her, but I reckon I had you pegged wrong. Ann wrote that your luck had run out. When I got there, I found you'd killed her."

Kane flinched as if he'd been struck. "If that's what you believe, then go ahead and do what you came to do."

"Isn't that what happened?" Jim demanded roughly.

"No. If I never had another decent thing in me, my love for Ann was decent and fine and beautiful. I'd have killed myself before I'd have knowingly let anything happen to her."

"Sure, you didn't hold the gun." Jim gestured impatiently. "But you got into a ruckus and killed a man. Then you hightailed to your room, thinking that with Ann there, they'd let you alone, but they came after you and Ann was shot. In my book that says you killed her."

Kane closed his eyes. "Go ahead, Jim, if it's what you believe."

Jim stared at the still white face of this man he had planned to kill, and for the first time doubt rose in him. "I'll listen to your yarn, Rush," he said at last.

"Go to hell," Kane whispered. "You wouldn't believe anything I said."

"I'll tell you what happened," Belle cried, crossing the room to face Jim. "An honest gambler didn't have a chance in Dodge City. Not with the sharpers he was playing with. He lost everything he had, and then he got my letter telling him Dad had been killed and that Duke Madden was here. I asked him to come and help. He didn't have any money to bring Ann, and he couldn't leave her there, so he tried to use the same tricks that had been used against him."

"I'm not a very good gambler, Jim,"

Kane whispered. "I wasn't smart enough to catch them, and I wasn't smooth enough to keep them from catching me. One man pulled his gun, and I got him. I thought that ended it, but they followed me to the room. When they yelled to come out, Ann tried to make me stay inside. They shot through the door, and she got hit."

"You rode off," Jim accused bitterly. "You didn't have the guts to stay and bury her."

"Ann was dead, and I couldn't help her then." Kane motioned to Belle. "She needed me. I killed the two men who shot Ann, and rode out of town. I couldn't have done anything more." He opened his eyes and looked at Jim, self condemnation on his face. "I've never been worth a damn. Dad said that when I left here. I should have been shot when I married Ann. Now go ahead and get it over with."

RUSH KANE'S eyes closed as if the effort of keeping them open was too much for him. There was silence then; the metallic beating of the clock on the bureau was the only sound in the room. Some of the long pent-up hatred drained out of Jim Harrigan then. They might have lied to him back in Dodge City, friends of the men Kane had killed. Yet, staring down at this man who seemed close to death, Jim couldn't bring himself to say he believed him.

"I wouldn't kill you when you're lying here like this," Jim said finally and with some anger. "You know that. I've got some thinking to do."

Kane looked at him then. "I was hoping you'd take the job I fizzled at. The man who needs killing is Duke Madden."

"That's why Rush is this way," Belle cried. "When I told him all that had happened, he went to see Madden. He told him he'd get proof that Madden had killed Dad. They drygulched him on his way back."

"A fool way to go at it," Jim said.

"I've been crazy ever since I lost Ann," Kane muttered.

Belle motioned toward the door. "That's enough talk."

When they were downstairs, Jim said thoughtfully, "Madden told me where I'd find Rush. Then he sent word out here I was coming, figuring that maybe we'd

both get plugged, but I can't figure out why with Rush shot up like this."

Madden doesn't know how bad Rush is. I asked the doctor not to tell."

"What are his chances?"

Belle gestured wearily. "Doc wouldn't say." She hesitated, glancing at Ord and then back to Jim. "What are you going to do while you wait for Rush to get well so you can kill him?"

Jim paced across the room to stare out of the window. Sunlight had fled from the canyon floor, and evening shadows were thickening into dusk. The knifing sharpness of her words curried his nerves raw. Without turning, he said, "I don't know."

"Madden will kill you if you go back to town," she pressed.

"It might work the other way. Mebbe I'll kill Madden."

"That's what Dad thought. He got ten thousand dollars for the townsite and some cattle. Then he was robbed. He accused Madden, and the next morning we found his body between here and Gold Plume."

Jim turned then. "I'm sorry."

"Dad should have known," she said miserably, "that one man can't touch Madden. You ought to know it, too."

"Your dad was a rancher. I've been a lawman. That makes a difference when you buck a tough like Duke Madden."

"Not enough difference."

Ord had slipped out through the kitchen. From where he stood at the window, Jim couldn't see Belle's face clearly, but he felt that she was watching him, weighing him, perhaps hoping that he was a different man than she now judged him to be.

"It's an old game with me," he said. "When you fight a man who has the grip Madden has, you don't go at it the direct way. You whittle him down first."

"Then you are going to fight Madden?"

He felt the tension that was in her, the expectancy. He sensed again, as he had the first time he had seen her, that here in Belle Calvert were the qualities he had dreamed of finding in a woman. He had never had time to look for them before, and he had always thought that a lawman, risking his life as he did, had no right to ask a woman to be his wife. That was behind him. His life was his own now,

to live as he saw it, to take what he wanted. Here she was, and she might have loved him if a perverse fate had not dealt him the hand it had. Now she could only hate him.

"I guess I don't have much choice," he said at last. "I ain't in the habit of running when a man rigs up a play like Madden did today."

"I have your word you won't harm Rush now?"

"Yes."

"I hope you'll stay for supper, Mr. Harrigan. I know how Duke Madden can be licked."

JIM sat on the front steps, smoking, while the last bit of daylight left the canyon and heat fled with the light and a chill wind swept down from the peaks above him. He tried to bring his mind to focus on Rush Kane, to form a sane judgment, but could not. His thoughts were turbulent whirlpools, always sweeping back to Duke Madden. The desire for vengeance that had been a driving force in him these last days had subsided until it was a mere spark beside a roaring flame, this need for smashing Duke Madden.

Jim had no idea how Belle meant to fight Madden, but he made his own plans, and he was still thinking about them when she called him to supper. Half Pint Ord and the crippled rider, Limpy Sanders, ate with them. Jim had liked Ord from the moment he'd seen him make his stand against the butcher, and at the same time had instinctively distrusted Sanders. He was a sullen man, keeping his face lowered over his plate while he ate.

When they had finished eating, Jim asked, "What's your plan for whipping Madden?"

"With food," she said. "It's that simple. We sold our last steers today to get money to buy another herd and drive them into the valley before the pass is blocked. Winter shuts us in unless you want to go out on snowshoes and risk the slides. Most of the miners won't do that, so by spring they'll have to pay what Madden and his organization asks for food."

"And you'll control the only supply of meat that Madden doesn't."

She nodded. "We've got plenty of hay to winter two hundred head. We can buy

cattle cheap in Utah, and by doing our own slaughtering, we can undersell Madden's butchers, and still make a profit."

"Even at Utah prices, twelve hundred dollars won't buy many steers."

"We've made other sales," she said quickly. "Not for as good a price as you wangled out of Taylor, but enough to buy two hundred head."

It would work if Belle Calvert had enough men to hold her cattle until the day when winter privations and Madden's greed forced Gold Plume to come to her. Jim knew that because he'd been in snow-bound mining camps, and he'd seen the fantastic prices that the threat of starvation forced people to pay. But he knew, too, that long before that day Madden would act in a drastic and unpredictable manner.

Jim shot a glance at Sanders, but he still couldn't see the man's eyes because his head was bowed over pipe and tobacco pouch. He said, "It's late in the year to make a drive like that."

"I know," Belle said, "but some falls the snow comes late. We'd have to gamble on that."

Jim rose. "I've got a better notion. Want to ride to town with me, Ord?"

"Sure." The little cowboy came to his feet. "Gonna make a call on Madden?"

Sanders's head had snapped up. He sat motionless, his filled pipe and tobacco pouch held in front of him, interest lines deep around his brittle, glass-sharp eyes.

"I was hoping you'd go to Utah with the boys," Belle said, disappointment honing an edge to her voice.

"If you're dealt two hands, you play the best one first. Come on, Ord."

Jim waited until they were in the saddle before he asked, "How long has Sanders been with you?"

"He rode in just after Sam was killed. All the old hands but me had drawn their time to take a crack at the mines. Limpy asked for a job, and Belle was glad to have him. He's a good hand, Harrigan."

"You trust him?"

Ord hesitated as if choosing his words carefully. "Sometimes when you don't have a sharp blade handy, you have to use a dull one. Or maybe one that ain't

tempered right and snaps off in your hand. Might even fly up in your face. Can't tell till you try it."

The old rider's implication was plain enough. As far as he was concerned, Limpy Sanders could be trusted as far as Jim Harrigan.

"You know Ira Raeder?"

"You bet. A top hand gent, Ira is, and a good friend of Belle's. He liked her dad. Prospected all through the San Juan before he made the strike here. Stayed at the Rocking C whenever he came through."

"He's the man I want to see. Know where his cabin is?"

"Right up the gulch."

GOLD PLUME was simmering when they rode through; within the hour it would be boiling. Traffic ebbed and flowed along the plank walk; men elbowed and rammed their way from one saloon to the other, finally coming to Madden's Domino. Flares threw a leaping, lurid light across the street, and barkers intoned their persuasive chants into the laughter and curses and ribald song that rose from the crowd.

"Spend their days in the bowels of the earth," Ord said sourly, "and their nights in hell making Duke Madden rich."

The business block fell behind, and they were threading their way through the miner's shacks and tents when Ord said, "Here it is."

There was no light in it. Disappointment knifed through Jim. "He ain't there."

"That's damned funny," Ord said thoughtfully. "Ira ain't one to go sashaying around at night."

"Maybe he's out visiting someone," Jim suggested.

"Maybe. Reckon it'd be all right to go in and wait a spell."

They dismounted in front of Raeder's cabin. Jim laid a hand on Ord's arm. "Wait," he said softly.

"What's up"?

"I had a notion I saw a man's face at the window. Too dark to be sure."

"Wouldn't be Raeder. He ain't the kind who sits in the dark and looks out at folks who ride up."

"Something's wrong, Ord. You get a

feeling about things like this when you pack a star for awhile."

"Hell, let's go see."

"And get some round windows in our skulls."

They held their position beside the horses, listening and hearing nothing but a medley of sounds flowing to them from the business block. It was dark, no moon shining between the high cliffs and only a narrow patch of black sky set with a few stars. Miners' cabins on up the creek held lighted windows, pinpoint points piercing the thick night.

"Black as the inside of a bull's gut," Ord said. "You couldn't see no face."

Jim didn't argue. It might be only the work of overtight nerves, but he'd learned years ago that careless men didn't live long at this game. He said loudly, "Guess Ira ain't here." Then he whispered, "Take the horses up the creek. Stay there till you hear me holler or hear some shooting."

Ord grumbled a curse and obeyed. Jim dropped flat and bellied toward the cabin. Before the sound of hoofs had died, he plucked gun, and jerked the door open with his left hand.

He called, "Hello, Raeder," and dived for the window.

The response was instant, and not the kind of greeting that would come from Ira Raeder. Jim reached the window as the gunman inside blasted his third shot through the doorway. Jim fired from where he stood, targeting the spot where the gun flash ribboned out. He put three more bullets into the room firing low and spreading them two feet apart. Moving back to the door, he waited there while he heard the man die.

"All right, Harrigan?" Ord asked, coming back with the horses.

Miners were pouring out of their cabins and running toward Raeder's place, filling the air with shouted questions. Still Jim waited until half a dozen men had gathered. Then he struck a match and went in. Lighting a lamp that he found on a pine table, he heard Ord cry out. He turned, and saw Ira Raeder lying on his back in the corner, a gaping knife wound in his abdomen. Another man lay against the far wall, a bullet hole in his chest. Both were dead.

"It's Grizzly Brashada," a miner said bitterly.

"Madden's man?" Jim asked.

Puzzled, they stared at him for a long moment before one asked, "How did you know, stranger?"

"I know Madden. You'll have killings like this as long as he rods the camp. Come on, Ord."

Duke Madden had said he had too good a thing to lose. He might have added that he'd go to any length to hold it. Riding back to the Rocking C, Jim thought bitterly he should have foreseen this and encountered Madden's move. Madden was still convinced that Raeder had sent for Jim to run the Vigilantes, and he'd decided to snuff out that danger permanently.

"Another five minutes and we'd have saved Raeder's life," Jim said with regret. "He propositioned me today to help organize some Vigilantes, and I turned him down. Then I changed my mind after I talked to Belle. That's why I wanted to see him tonight."

"There ain't nobody else in this camp who could pick out the right men," Ord grunted. "I mean nobody who could get 'em to follow him like Ira could."

"I guess we'll play our other hand. I'll go to Utah with you, Ord."

IV

THEY ATE BREAKFAST by lamp-light that morning. When they were done Belle handed a heavy money belt to Ord. "You'll carry that, Half Pint. Top Zachary Rule's herd, and make the best deal with him you can." She brought her gaze to Jim. "You'll give the orders. Travel as fast as you can, even if you take all their fat off. We'll put it back after you get here, but you may not get here at all if you don't beat the snow."

"Damned fool thing to be taking orders from this yahoo when he came here gunning for your brother," Sanders said sullenly.

"Perhaps it is," Belle said. "There's only one way to find out."

"How do you know he ever handled cattle?" Sanders pressed.

"Have you, Jim?" she asked.

It was the first time she had called him by his first name. He grinned. "A little."

"Rush has told me a good deal about Jim Harrigan, Limpy." Belle pinned her gaze on Jim's face. "You see, he worships you. Perhaps because you're Ann's brother, or perhaps because of you yourself."

He was yet to be tested. Again Jim sensed that Belle hoped he was the man she had first taken him to be. He said now, "The herd will come through."

"I still don't like it," Sanders said doggedly.

"You can draw your time."

"Let it go." Sanders turned to the door. "I was thinking about you."

Jim lingered until Sanders and Ord were gone. Then he asked, "I thought I heard a man ride in after I went to bed."

"It was Limpy. He went into town for a drink." She caught his arm. "Why, Jim?"

"Just curious." He stood at the door a moment, filling his mind with the picture of her. Then he left, certain that the threat of treachery would ride with them to Utah.

They were atop Star Mountain Pass before the sun showed a complete circle above the east wall, the canyon bottom still dark with shifting purple shadows. A chill wind knifed them when they reined up to blow their horses, and Jim pulled his collar around his neck. There had been no word spoken since they had stepped into saddles. Now Jim put his gaze directly upon Sanders's dark saturnine face.

"You ain't fooling me, Limpy. If you've got a notion about playing Madden's game, you'd better pull out now while you can still ride."

"You two would play hell trailing two hundred head from Utah," Sanders sneered. "I ain't playing Madden's game nohow."

"I like to let a man know where he stands. The first trick you pull that looks off color will get you a slug in the brisket."

"Save your lead, Harrigan."

"Let's ride." Jim turned his roan down the west slope, having one look across the great vastness of sage and pinon and cedars to the sky-reaching La Sal mountains that sprawled across the Utah-Colorado line. Then the fast dropping trail brought them into the spruce, and the distance was blotted out.

Ord took the lead because it was an old trail to him, paying no attention to Sanders's grumbling that it "sure as hell ain't no rack track." They came down into the flame-tinted aspens and scrub oak, reached the San Miguel that rushed toward a distant sea through red-flecked canyon walls, and made camp that night beside its singing waters.

They were in the saddle again by dawn, angling up the south wall, and took westward across a sagebrush plain, slashed by innumerable canyons into a series of sweeping downgrades and steep uplifts. Southward Lone Cone stood gracefully sharp against a cloudless sky.

It was a raw wild land holding a primitive challenge, and on another day Jim Harrigan would have thrilled to it, but now the need for haste was a never-ceasing prod. They reached the Rio Dolores—River of Sorrows, named by the Spaniards a century before, and went on across the south slope of the La Sal mountains into the weird red rock country of Eastern Utah.

Beyond Moab they came to Songbird creek and the Bridlebit ranch. Here Half Pint Ord dickered with Zachary Rule. "I want good steers," he said. "The top of your herd. We aim to push hell out of 'em until we get 'em across Star Mountain into Gold Plume."

Zachary Rule, who ran a good Mormon outfit by strict Mormon standards, lifted his gaze to a cerulean sky. "Maybe you'll get 'em across before snow flies. Mebbe." And the way he said it told Jim he didn't have the faintest hope they would.

It took a day to cut out the steers Ord selected, a precious day that could not be picked up on the trail. Here, beside the red waters of Songbird creek hemmed in by red walls fringed with needles and spires and strange figures resembling ancient gargoyles that grinned down from lofty perches, riders twisted and wheeled their mounts, working out the cattle Ord wanted. Dust rose over the bawling shifting mass, and hung there in the still air like a red, sun-bright blanket.

They were on the move at dawn, north and then east, letting the cattling run their fractiousness out. Back across the La Sal mountains, Ord riding point, and on to the Dolores. The cattle slowed with

that first burst of energy gone. Then they had to be pushed. No time to feed. Cover as many miles as they could between sunup and sundown. That was the only goal.

Through scrub brush. Broken country. Through the cedars. Black stands of pinon. Holding them at night in a box canyon if they could find one, logs and brush dragged across the mouth. In saddles by dawn. Pushing. Always pushing while days fled and the nights grew colder and the chances of winning this gamble grew less with each passing hour. Always Jim Harrigan slept with a sixth sense alive, for the danger of Limpy Sanders's treachery was a live and constant thing.

But Jim had no fault to find with Sanders's work. He was in the saddle as many hours as the others, and he stopped his grumbling. They reached the San Miguel and then it rained. Jim, looking eastward to the mountain pass, saw the shifting ominous clouds, and knew that it had snowed.

STILL they pushed. Hoofs sucked in the mud. The river ran high and murky. The sky cleared and it grew cold and Jim, lifting his eyes again, saw the white hood that fitted the mountains like new mantles. Then they were at the foot of Star Mountain. If their luck held, they'd drive into a Rocking C pasture by another sundown.

"We're licked," Sanders growled that night as they hunkered beside the fire, the wind a bitter cutting blast as it rushed down from the snow peaks.

Jim stared at him in surprise. "What's the matter with you, Sanders? We ain't licked by a hell of a long ways. Tomorrow we'll shove 'em over the hump."

Sanders rose, eyes turning from Jim to Ord and back, the firelight a shifting scarlet on his stubble-black face. "You think we're not licked. Hell, man." He motioned toward the herd held in a box canyon behind him. "They ain't et a mouthful since we left Utah. Ganted up till there ain't nothing but hide and bone. Look at us. Nothing but hide and bone, neither. Now you think you can push them critters through the snow." He shook his head. "I'm done."

Jim and Ord were on their feet, as tired and tight-nerved as Sanders. Clothes ragged. Stubble long on gaunt faces. Covered with the dust and grime of these days on the trail. Wanting nothing so much as sleep and more sleep. But neither had complained. Luck had been better than they had expected.

Jim, watching Sanders closely now, wondered about this sudden rebellion. Ord had guessed the snow would not be more than six or eight inches. Unless it was a good deal deeper, there would be no great trouble on the pass. It was strange that Sanders hadn't quit back along the trail instead of waiting until they were within a day's drive of Gold Plume, and Jim thought he could guess the reason. This would be as good a place as any for Madden to steal the herd, a great deal safer than after it had reached the Rocking C.

Sanders did not move. He had made a statement, and now stood motionless, sullen eyes meeting Jim's as if waiting to see what action his words would provoke.

It was Ord who broke the silence. "Them steers ain't as bad off as you're letting on, Limpy, and neither are we. Hell, we ain't been on the trail long. It just ain't sense for you to quit."

"I figgered we'd beat the snow," Sanders grunted.

"All right," Jim said in sudden decision. "Ride and keep going. Don't let me catch up with you."

"I'll wait till morning." Sanders began backing away from the fire.

"You're getting out now." Jim motioned toward Sanders's horse. "Go on. Drift."

Sanders pulled at an ear, belligerence seeping out of him. "Reckon I'll stay. We might get through. No use throwing a good job away."

"If you're staying," Jim warned, "don't ride out during the night."

Jim made his bed close to the cliff, wondering about Sanders and seeing little logic in his actions. The treachery he had expected had not materialized. Weariness and the nearness to trail's end had relaxed his vigilance. Now his nerves were fiddle-string tight again. He moved his bed farther along the cliff when he heard Sanders snore, and dropped into a light sleep.

Jim was never sure what woke him. It might have been a stirring of the cattle. A strange movement in the brush. A splash in the river. He sat up, senses alert, silently drawing gun. Overhead a round moon laid a platinum shine upon the water, and the aspens, stripped now of most of their leaves, ranged up the mountainside like countless ghosts on the march, the wind whispering through them.

Then he caught the sound of movement upstream, and called, "Who is it?"

A RIBBON of flame leaped at him and a bullet snapped past. His answering fire was quick and accurate. Limpy Sanders came up on tiptoes and reeled away from the shadowed canyon wall to sprawl full out, his head almost falling into the hot ashes of the fire.

Jim moved position quickly, keeping the cliff to his back. More guns opened up, Ord's on the other side of the fire, and at least three men in front of him. Lead chipped the rock behind him and screamed away into the night. He dropped to his knees, holding his fire, and mentally cursed Ord for giving away his position.

It was an old game to Jim Harrigan, and one that he understood well. Experience had taught him not to waste a bullet. Ord's gun, too, had gone silent. Confident that their raking fire had done its work, the three left the cover of the boulders near the river and came toward the cliff. In that instant Jim's gun became a leaping, living thing, foot-long tongues of flame lashing from its muzzle, its thunder rolling waves of sound beating against his ears.

One man jackknifed at the knees and went down. Another threw a wild hurried shot at Jim and took a slug in the chest. The third made a run for it along the edge of the river. Jim fired at him and missed. It was Ord who drove two bullets into him, caused him to break stride, stumble, and topple into the swift running river.

"You all right, Ord?" Jim called.

"Got a nick in my left arm's all. I figgered they got you after you downed Limpy."

Jim walked to where Sanders lay and rolled him over. "Dead," he said, and pulled him away from the fire. He glanced

at his watch. "Be sunup in an hour or so. We'd better get breakfast and start 'em moving."

"I reckon." Ord stared at Sanders's face, sullen in death as it had been in life. "What in hell was biting that coyote?"

"He went to town the night Raeder was killed. I'm guessing he saw Madden and told him what Belle was figgering on. Chances are they rigged this then, aiming to salivate us and take the herd."

"What was his idea for trying to quit?"

Jim shrugged. "Hard to tell. Maybe he aimed to worry us. Or maybe he wanted to ride off and meet these hombres up on the pass. Then he got boogery and changed his mind. Not much bottom. Never is in men who hire out to double cross somebody."

Dawn was breaking across a bright cold sky when they cleared the mouth of the box canyon and started the herd. It was steady pushing, the snow at first a thin sprinkle like stingy frosting on a cake. Gradually deepening, it slowed but didn't stop them. They topped the pass shortly after noon, and came out of the snow. It was dusk when they reached the valley floor and shoved the herd into a pasture behind the Rocking C buildings.

Belle had steaks sizzling when they came into the house. She stood at the stove, staring at their bearded faces as if she found it hard to recognize them, a tight worry in her face Jim had not seen before, her shoulders drooping a little as if some pride had gone from her.

"You've got your steers," Jim told her, "and I don't reckon it'll take many days to put some taller on 'em."

"Where's Limpy?"

Jim told her while she forked the steaks onto a platter. Then he asked, "How's Rush?"

She faced him now, lips trembling as she fought to control her emotions. When she did speak it was a whisper that barely reached him. "I don't know. He went to town yesterday, and hasn't come back."

V

JIM ate hungrily and went to bed. Boreweary, he gave little thought to what Belle had said. He slept like a dead man, and woke to look upon a white world.

They had beaten the snow by hours.

Ord was finishing breakfast when Jim came into the kitchen. "Some lazy devils can sleep all day," he said amiably, "but I've got cattle to feed."

Jim grinned and rubbed a hand across his whiskery face. "Sure, I slept all day. Must be almost daylight now." He pulled a chair up to the table. "You'd have to put snowshoes on them critters to get 'em over the hump now."

"Lucky all the way." Ord rose and moved to the door. "If you ain't above it, Harrigan, you can come out and give me a hand."

"I ain't above it, but I got another job that needs doing first. Bringing the beef in ain't much good if we don't fix Madden. I wish Raeder was alive."

"There's talk that you killed him," Belle said.

Her words jolted breath from him. He stared at her blankly.

Ord, still standing at the door, cursed softly. "There's no sense in that, Belle. Jim didn't even go inside the cabin till there was five or six of us there with him."

"I'm just telling you what I heard." Belle set a plate of food in front of Jim. "There was some pretty wild talk the day you left, most of it against Madden. Then the story got started that he'd sent Brashada to ask Raeder to see him, and while Brashada was there, Jim came in, shot Brashada and knifed Raeder. One of the miners said he saw you step out of the cabin and wait until the rest came."

"That sure is a bucket of hogwash," Ord exploded.

"It's the talk," Belle said soberly. "You can't go into town, Jim. Madden's men will lynch you."

Ord grinned crookedly. Before he went out, he said, "You'll find another pitchfork in the barn, Jim."

Jim ate slowly, thinking about this and knowing that no matter how illogical it was, Madden, with enough free whiskey and enough talk in the right places, could make this accusation stick. If Jim was found dangling from a rope some cold morning, no one would connect Madden with it.

Belle filled Jim's coffee cup, and poured another for herself. "What are you go-

ing to do about Rush?" she asked, coming back to the table.

"I ain't had much time to think about it," Jim answered evasively.

She stirred her coffee, misery-filled eyes on him. "Rush wasn't as badly hurt as the doctor thought. He'd been up a couple of days when we heard this talk about you killing Raeder. Rush couldn't stand it. He said this wasn't your fight in the first place, and he wasn't going to sit around and wait for you to come back to a rope."

"That's why he went to town?" Jim asked, thinking that Rush might have had another reason for leaving.

She nodded. "I don't suppose he's alive now."

It was a funny hand fate had dealt Jim Harrigan. He lowered his eyes thinking of the one compelling urge that had driven him to Colorado after he had looked at his sister's grave in Dodge City and heard the story of her death. Yet now the urge was gone. Hate had been a fever burning high in him and then breaking.

He knew what Ann would tell him if she were here; that he wasn't God, that revenge was not for human hands. Besides, she loved Rush Kane, and what woman would do less for the man she loved than she had tried to do for Rush.

"I'll find out why he ain't back," he said at last.

"And if he's alive, you'll kill him," she said tonelessly.

Jim built a cigarette, his chair canted back against the wall, his mind reaching into his memory to the day when Ann had come to him in Helena and told him she was leaving with Rush. Jim had told her she was crazy to follow him, that she should stay in Helena where she had her home.

"You've never been in love," Ann had said simply. "When you are, you'll know what it means to be with the one you love, to work for that person, and maybe die for him."

She had done exactly that, and he knew she would have no regrets. Whatever blame could be laid upon Rush Kane, killing him would not bring Ann back. He saw himself in a new light, saw the corrosive effect of the hate that had been sucking at him through these weeks.

"I guess me and Rush won't have any trouble," he said.

"Jim." Belle leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You came here to kill Rush and instead you risked your life going after my cattle. Why?"

HE couldn't tell her. She wouldn't believe it. Or if she did, her answer to his question would be no. She couldn't love a man who had come so close to killing her brother. So he said lightly, "Madden shoved me around. Now I'm going to do the shoving. See if you can find some paper and a pen and ink."

When she brought them, he pushed the paper to her. "Put this down, will you? Nobody can read what I write."

For half an hour he paced the floor, smoking steadily, having her write and scratch out and rewrite until she had what he wanted. Then he read it through again.

How long will you accept one man's rule?

How long will you pay five prices for everything you buy in Gold Plume?

How long will you allow gamblers to set the prices you pay?

Rocking C has beef to sell at a fair price, but it will not have it long unless Duke Madden is licked.

Rocking C asks the help of every honest man in Gold Plume in this fight.

"It'll do," Jim murmured.

"You aren't going into town, Jim?"

"Sure." He slid into his coat. "If you listen, you'll hear Duke cuss when he reads this."

She caught his arm. "You can still get over the pass if you start now."

"I never leave a job half done." He took hold her hand and pulled her against him. He saw how near she was to breaking, and yet he knew she would not break. There was a strength in her that Rush lacked. If she had been Rush, she would have stayed and died in Dodge City. It was that proud courage which had held her here after her father had been killed, had made her fight against odds that no gambler would take.

"But it isn't your job," she cried.

"It is now." Then he forced himself to ask a question that had been in his mind all the way to Utah and back. "Would

it make any difference to you if I got killed?"

She tore free and walked away. She stood for a moment facing the stove, her back to him. There was no sound but her breathing and the ticking of the clock on the shelf above the table. Then, without turning, she said, "I am in debt too much to you now."

He went out and strode through the shifting white curtain of snow to the barn. He should not have asked the question. He could not expect her to love him. He saddled, and mounting, took the road to Gold Plume, a bitterness in him that he had never felt before. Now he had a chance to live his own life, and he had found the woman who would give meaning to that life, but his hatred had killed whatever chance there had been of earning her love. And hope died then in Jim Harrigan.

Jim settled down into his coat collar, hearing the high scream of the wind, watching snow flakes whip around him in dizzy horizontal flight. Winter had come a month ahead of time. A spell of good weather might take the snow off in the canyon bottom, but it would stay in the pass. He wondered in grim relief what it was like up there now in that treeless open space that looked out upon the world.

He rode slowly when he reached town, remembering he had seen a log cabin that served as a newspaper office. Even by hugging the path that twisted along the creek side of the street, he found it hard to see the buildings, for snow was a white curtain drawn across his vision. Then, finding the cabin, he left his horse on the sheltered side, and waded through the snow to the door. He opened it, stamped snow from his boots, and slid in.

The interior of the cabin was warm and strong with the smell of ink and paper. A man sat huddled on a stool at the composing bench, straining forward to catch all of the thin light that he could. He turned when he heard the door, and said, "Good morning," in a nasal twang that marked him as an Easterner. "I mean it's a hell of a morning, isn't it?"

"It is for a fact." Jim laid his paper on the bench. "I'd like a hundred of those run off. I'll wait."

The editor read it and lifted pale blue

eyes to Jim. "I can't do it. I'd be dead before night."

HE WAS an old man from whom age and defeat had sucked away the desire for battle, but he still nursed a small pride that made him hate himself for his cowardice. His trousers were baggy and patched; his shirt collar showed careful stitching where he had whipped down the frayed threads. He had not shaved for several days, and his white stubble made a faint fringe along his cheeks and chin. The smell of cheap whiskey and chewed tobacco made a stench about him, and Jim thought sourly that he would be a poor ally at best.

"Likely I'll be in the same fix," Jim said, "but I'm risking my neck to fight the rotten deal you've got in Gold Plume. What kind of a newspaper man are you who won't do the same?"

The editor slid off the stool, lips pulling into a determined line. "The Gold Plume Eagle stands for justice and fair play, my friend."

"How much have you got in Gold Plume?"

The skinny shoulders sagged, and the editor turned to the window. "The snow covers a lot of filth," he murmured, "but it doesn't change it. The filth's still there. I'm too old to be a hero."

"You'll be a hero or a dead coward." Jim drew his gun and thumbed back the hammer. "Start in."

The editor wheeled when he heard the gun coming to cock. He stared at Jim's grim stubble-dark face, and fear laid hold of him. "All right," he whispered, and climbing back on the stool, began to work. Presently he reached for a sheet of paper and rolled it across the type. "Have a look at your suicide invitation," he said, and lighting the sheet, handed it to Jim.

Jim scanned it. "Run 'em off," he said laconically, and pulling a stool up to the stove, sat down. "Suicide invitation." Well, maybe the editor was right, and it didn't make a hell of a lot of difference. His thoughts turned to Rush Kane, and he wondered where the gambler had gone. He'd run from Dodge City, and he'd likely run again.

"There you are," the editor said at length, stacking the papers on a table.

"How much?"

"Nothing." The old man chewed his lower lip. "Except the privilege of helping you. There was a time when I'd hold to a belief through hell and high water. Then I made the mistake of running, and I've been running since. It's kind of good to think of myself as a man again."

"No need of you getting into trouble," Jim said roughly.

"The name's Fred Webb." The old man held out a claw-like hand. "You're Jim Harrigan, aren't you?"

"How did you know?" Jim asked in surprise.

"Heard a lot about you since Ira Raeder was killed." He sliced bacon and put it on the stove. "I thought you'd be the only one with enough courage to do what you're doing."

There was more strength in this man than Jim had thought. He said, "I didn't kill Raeder."

"Didn't suppose so." Webb filled his coffeepot from a bucket and put it on the stove. "I knew Grizzly Brashada. I felt his fists the second week I was in Gold Plume after I'd printed something Madden didn't like." He grinned wryly. "What are your plans, son?"

"I aim to pass these out. After the miners read 'em, I've got a hunch Madden will get spooked and make a mistake."

Webb stood at the stove thoughtfully scratching a cheek. "The lid's off the minute you show your face on the street. If you're bound to die, lick Madden first."

"What are you getting at?"

"Don't pass those papers out yourself, or you'll die before you start. I'll get the kid who sells my Eagle. Madden won't catch on."

Jim nodded. "All right. Get him."

"Watch the coffee and bacon." Webb pulled into his coat and went out.

DISCONTENT grew in Jim Harrigan while he waited. It was time for action, and waiting was against his nature, but he knew the old man was right. He paced the length of the office, smoking constantly. When he'd carried a badge, he had all the agencies of the law on his side. Now he was alone except for a girl, an old cowhand, and a broken-down editor

who had been aroused enough to grasp again for a departed self respect.

And Rush Kane. Or was he an ally? Jim couldn't guess. A year ago he'd have said yes. Now Kane was unpredictable. Jim had known more than one man of promise to lack color when the final assay was made. It was even possible that Kane had gone over to Madden to escape Jim's guns.

Webb came in with a wizened leggy boy who read the top paper, and threw Jim a broken-toothed grin. "I took a beating from Boomer Burke. It's time somebody had the guts to fight 'em."

"Pass a few of those out in the small saloons," Jim said, "and then try the Domino. Get back in an hour, and there'll be five dollars for you."

"I don't want five dollars." The boy scooped up a stack of the papers, and moved to the door. "All I want is to see you pitch some lead at Madden and Burke."

"You may get another beating if Burke gets his hands on you."

The boy grinned again. "That'll be all right if you crack a few caps."

"Let's eat," the editor said when the boy had gone.

Jim glanced at his watch. "I'll give him an hour," he said worriedly.

New hope burned high in him now. The old editor and the boy had taken the beatings and done nothing, but the moment somebody came along who wasn't afraid to fight, they had accepted their responsibility. There must be hundreds like them scattered in the Domino and the other saloons, in the mines, in the cabins and tents.

It was an hour that held a thousand minutes for Jim Harrigan. He ate and paced the floor, came back to the table for another cup of coffee, and paced the floor. He worried his watch in and out of his pocket, and when the hour was up, he reached for his coat.

"The kid should've been back. I'm gonna kick the lid off."

"Wait a minute." Webb gnawed off a chew of plug, tongued it into his cheek, and picked up a double-barreled shotgun from a back corner. "I'll go along. I never killed a man, Harrigan, but I can."

"When I came in this morning . . ."

"I wasn't any part of a man. I was

something they should have buried the day Grizzly Brashada beat me up. Kind of funny, isn't it?" He spit into a can. "You gave me what Brashada stole."

Jim Harrigan's grin was a quick break across his dark face. The last doubt was gone. He had to win. There were hundreds in Gold Plume like Fred Webb. Like the wizened, broken-toothed kid who hadn't come back.

VI

IT had stopped snowing, but the wind screaming down from the high cliffs had a slashing cut to it. It broomed the snow from the street and threw it in ragged white columns against the fronts of tents and buildings, or carried it through the open spaces and piled it high against yonder cliff, leaving the street a gaping, frozen streak threading the camp.

Jim held his hands in his pockets, keeping them warm against the moment when a fast draw meant victory against Duke Madden, or death for Jim Harrigan.

"Keep 'em off my back," Jim said when they reached the Domino. "I'll do the rest."

They pushed open the saloon door, a rush of wind sweeping in with them. Jim shut it, his right hand close to gun butt as his eyes scanned the packed crowd. Boomer Burke was bellied against the bar halfway along it. Duke Madden was in his shirt sleeves, his back to the door as he watched the keno game in the gambling room.

Silence spread across the saloon like a high wave spills water over a flat beach. Boomer Burke whispered, "Harrigan," as if the word were a curse, and the whisper ran into the silence.

Slowly Duke Madden made his turn, saw who it was, and tongued his long cigar to the other side of his mouth, his inscrutable eyes giving no hint of the feelings that were in him.

Even the chalk-faced man stopped playing the piano and turned on his bench to watch Jim. There was no sound but the girl's voice at the roulette wheel, "Seventeen and black." It, too, died as Jim climbed to the bar top.

He had seen some of the papers on the floor that the boy had delivered, he knew

the seed had been planted, and he understood the silence that his entrance had brought to the big room.

"Where's the kid I sent here, Madden?" Jim demanded.

Madden shoved long white fingers into his waistband as he said carelessly, "How the hell would I know?"

Hard on Madden's words a floorman in the corner by the piano went for his gun. It was a mistake, a fatal one, and he died without firing a shot. Head thrown back, he took a wobbly step, and then his controls gave way and he fell like a tent with its ropes slashed in a single stroke.

Jim swung his smoking gun to Madden. "Get the kid," he said, "or I'll drill you between the eyes."

"He's around somewhere." Madden motioned to a floorman. "See if you can find him, Pete."

Madden was playing this in his usual shrewd way so that no blame would come to him. Nor could he be held for what his employees did. The floorman who'd made his try. The barkeep who sidled back along the mahogany and was carefully lifting his shotgun when Webb pulled one trigger. The blast nearly took the barkeep's head off.

"I've got another barrel," the editor croaked. "Anybody want it?"

No one did. Silence came again as the echoes of the shotgun's roar died. Then Madden nodded at the boy who was being pushed through a door in the back.

"Here's your kid, Harrigan," Madden said coolly. "Now get out and let the boys get on with their drinking."

"I've got something to say first," Jim said. "Mebbe some of 'em didn't see the papers the kid passed out."

LIGHT from the overhead lamps made a bright shine on the uplifted faces: gamblers' white ones, the paint and rouge on the percentage girls, miners' beards, the bronzed faces of packers. Here was a cross section of Gold Plume, tough and licentious, but holding a spark of decency and a flame of resentment against Duke Madden.

"If you can handle yourself on snowshoes," Jim said, "you don't have to worry. There's plenty of grub on the other side of Star Mountain. If you're staying here

all winter you'd better start worrying because you'll be busted by spring. Either in here or paying Madden's prices. With five thousand people stuck in Gold Plume for a winter that's starting early, you don't have to be smart to see how it'll be by spring."

"That sheet the kid passed out said Rocking C had some beef." It was the big butcher, Taylor, who had tried to crook Half Pint Ord that first day Jim was in camp. "That's a lie because I bought the last Rocking C steer."

"We brought a herd in from Utah. Come out and see 'em. If they're stolen, you'll know who done it and why. In the end it'll be our beef that decides whether Madden busts you with his prices."

"You're piling it on," Madden said in his mild tone. "You reckon the boys will believe the coyote who killed Ira Raeder?"

"The coyote who killed Ira Raeder was your man, Grizzly Brashada," Jim shouted angrily, "and I killed him. Who's the hombre who claims he saw me come out of the cabin?"

"He ain't here," Burke shouted.

"The hell he ain't," a man in the gambling room cried. "Here he is, Harrigan. Mink Drusy."

Drusy was a little man who was being shoved into the saloon from the gambling room against his will. Raising bloodshot eyes, he cried, "Don't shoot me, Harrigan."

"But you'd have hung me with your lying story," Jim raged. "Tell the boys how you could see me in the dark that night."

"I couldn't," Drusy shrieked. "I lied."

"Why?"

Drusy tried to duck behind Madden. Somebody hit him and drove him back into the saloon. He shot a glance at Burke and licked dry lips. "Burke made me."

Jim grinned. He'd planted more seed and he'd have a good crop. It was here in the faces of these men.

"Get back to your drinking, boys," Jim called. "Don't send anybody after me, Madden, or I'll shoot their ears off."

Jim motioned for Webb and the boy to leave. Then he jumped down from the bar and backed through the door, cocked gun held hip high. Slamming the door shut, he slapped a bullet through it that

sang over the heads of those inside.

"Go with Webb," Jim ordered the boy. "Webb, stay inside and keep your door locked. This'll boil up fast now."

Jim raced along the street to his horse, and swinging up, quit town at a fast pace, hoofs ringing on the frozen ground.

There was no pursuit. Madden's move would come later. Under cover of darkness.

STABLING HIS HORSE, Jim went into the house to find Ord and Belle waiting beside the stove for the coffee to boil.

"What kind of a dido have you been up to now?" Ord asked.

Jim told them, and added, "The minute we shoved that herd over the pass, we put a bee inside Madden's pants and took a reef on his belt. We'll hear from him tonight."

"But you don't know what he'll do," Belle said.

"Burn our stacks," Ord suggested.

"He ain't one to destroy anything he thinks he can get later on." Jim took the cup Belle handed him. "He'll try to get me and Ord, thinking he can make a deal then."

"I won't deal with him on any terms," Belle said.

"Then you'll get the same dose. Any place in town you can go?"

"I'm staying here."

The way Belle said it told Jim there was nothing he could say that would change her mind. He finished the coffee and set the cup on the table, feeling admiration for this girl.

"I didn't see anything of Rush," Jim said. "We'll find out tonight."

He expected her to flare up, to say he had been the one who had driven Rush from this house. But meeting his hungry searching gaze, she said simply, "We can't help Rush if Madden kills us."

"He won't," Jim said sharply. "We'll be ready for him. Fetch all the guns and ammunition you've got. Pile it on the table. Ord and me will nail up the windows. We can hold off an army for a month."

"Dad made shutters for the windows," Belle told him. "They're upstairs."

Ord had moved to the window. Now

he said, "Looks like Madden's coming, Jim."

Swearing, Jim wheeled to the window. A line of horsemen, dark against the snow, were coming from town. A dozen, Jim saw, and he cursed himself for letting Madden outguess him.

"It isn't Madden's bunch," Belle said with certainty. "Those are the men Raeder would have picked for his Vigilantes."

Breath came out of Jim in a long relieved sigh. "Then it's what I've been playing for. Come on, Ord."

Jim and Ord were waiting in front of the house when the riders pulled up. "We're here to do what Ira Raeder would have done if he was still alive," the leader said. "We're ashamed that a stranger had to start the job we should have done."

"I'm glad to see you," Jim said soberly. "I was beginning to think we'd bitten off too big a bite."

The spokesman looked past the corrals to where the cattle stood huddled against the cliff. "Those steers are the only food in Gold Plume Madden don't control. Our job is to protect them and you folks. How do you want us to do it?"

"Two men to stand guard," Jim said quickly. "Madden might try to burn the stacks or steal the herd. The rest of you split the breeze getting here if you hear any shooting."

"Jones. Cartwright." The leader nodded at two of his men. "Take it till midnight. We'll send two more out then." He brought his gaze to Jim. "We've got to draw or drag now after what you done today. The camp's buzzing. The boys are talking like you was Paul Revere himself. Now reckon we'd better get back. We've got fifty men to organize."

Jim watched them go, feeling the tug of doubt. A dozen men like these would be stronger than fifty uncertain ones.

"You boys stay in the barn," Jim told the two who had been left. "I'll bring your supper out. If Madden tackles the house, you light out for help."

They were hectic hours until dark, checking guns and ammunition, seeing that there was ample food and water in the house, and putting shutters into place that Sam Calvert had prepared years ago against a possible Ute attack.

It was dark when Belle called supper. Jim took food to the men in the barn, and coming back, ate with Belle and Ord.

"Madden's licked," Jim said jubilantly. "What we needed was somebody to think there was a chance of licking Madden and start organizing."

Jim's feeling was contagious. "Sure," Ord said, "we'll give 'em hell."

And for the first time since he had come back from Utah, Jim saw real hope in Belle's eyes. "I've been sorry I ever brought you into this, Jim," she said, "because I couldn't see anything but death for us. It was just that I was too stubborn to quit. Dad had so many dreams . . ."

"BELLE!"

It was a high cry, shrill and demanding, from somewhere back of the house. The wind had increased; there was the scream of it around the eaves that was as horrible as a banshee's wail, but this was different. It was human, yet it seemed to be something else, coming as it did with the screech of the wind.

"BELLE!"

It came again. Closer now. Just outside the back door. They sat at the table paralyzed, heads turned to catch the sound.

Then Belle whispered, "It's Rush."

JIM knew what was in her mind. If Rush was dead, this was not a human cry. But Rush wasn't dead if he could make a sound like that. With that thought, Jim knew what it was, but he was too late. Belle was out of her chair and raising the bar that held the back door.

"Wait, Belle," Jim shouted, but there was no stopping her.

She flung the door open. Jim palmed his gun, but he was too late. They piled in, Duke Madden in front, Belle gripped tightly before him, the muzzle of his .45 shoved hard against her ribs.

"Drop your iron, Harrigan," Madden said without feeling. "Boomer was right. We should have got you when you first hit town."

Jim let his gun go. Ord, caught flat-footed, made no try for his Colt. Burke was there. The big butcher, Si Taylor. Others Jim had never seen. And back of them, a bloody bandage around his face, stood Rush Kane.

Fury rolled through Jim. "You sniveling

yellow pup," he raged. "You knew Belle would open the door when you yelled like that."

"Petty smart, wasn't it?" Madden glowed. "Maybe a little smarter than you were when you pulled off that job you did this afternoon." He jerked a thumb at Burke. "Look around, Boomer. Some of that Vigilante bunch might be inside." He grinned at Jim. "We got the two boys in the barn."

A moment before Jim had been completely confident. Now there was no hope at all. He stood there, stooped a little, his mind on the gun at his feet.

"Even the yellow bellies in this camp won't stand for you shooting a woman," Ord said hotly.

Madden's smile was quick and wicked. "No shooting, runt, but any house can have a fire, especially on a cold night."

Jim saw that it would work as perfectly as Madden had thought. They'd be slugged, and left in a burning house with no proof that Madden had been there. There would only be the ashes, and the bones of those who had died.

Burke and the others came back into the kitchen. "Empty," he said.

"Got the coal oil, Si?" Madden asked.

"Right here," the butcher said.

"Lay your gun barrel across their heads, Boomer," Madden ordered, his voice held to a casual tone. "Put Harrigan's iron in his holster. It'll look better to find their guns beside their bodies. Better put them in bed, too. Somebody might wonder why they were burned to death in the kitchen."

Rush Kane was a forgotten man, a man who had lost his right to merit others' respect. Only his eyes seemed alive in that mass of bandages, eyes of a madman who can be pilloried no more. Taylor passed in front of him, and in one quick motion, Rush swept the butcher's gun from holster, and wheeling, fired at close range over Belle's head. The bullet caught Madden above the left eye.

The kitchen was an inferno then and Rush Kane's body broke under half a dozen bullets. Jim dropped to his knees and gripping his gun, tilted it upward and drove a slug into Boomer Burke's wide chest. Ord's thundering .45 brought

Taylor down in a sweeping fall.

Lead beat at Jim. There was the numbing pain of it along his ribs and his left thigh, the warmth of spreading blood. He propped himself on one arm, still firing until his hammer dropped on an empty. The door crashed open.

Jim heard, as if from a great distance, the pound of running feet. He came flat, trying to crawl toward a gun that lay in front of him, but he never reached it. For in that moment all sight and sound died for Jim Harrigan.

JIM was in bed when he came to. He felt the house rock as a blast of wind struck, heard the low moan. Then he was aware of the lighted lamp on the bureau, of Belle sitting beside him.

"Rush?"

"Dead," she told him. "He must have gone to town after Madden, and they got the drop on him. I suppose they held him prisoner until they needed him. His face was slashed to pieces with a knife. That must have been how they got him to call out like he did."

Maybe it was good guessing. Maybe bad. He wasn't sure what Belle really thought, for she said, "Rush was always a weak one, and he never got along with Dad. That was why he left and took another name. But Dad would have been proud of him tonight."

"He died a brave man," Jim said.

"He'd have like to hear you say that. It's given to some to be strong just like it's given some to be weak. He thought so much of you because you were strong, and I think it was why he loved Ann."

"Ord?"

"He's gone for a doctor."

He closed his eyes then. The shadow of Rush Kane was no longer between them. There were many hills along his back trail. Lonely hills. He had ridden with a badge on his shirt and a gun on his hip. He had been cursed and hated and feared. Never, in all those years, had he done anything for the love of a woman.

He opened his eyes and looked at Belle, and she must have seen what was there, for she bent and kissed him. He knew, then, that the last hill was behind him.

NEVER PROD A PILGRIM

By Lee Priestley

**Look sharp, podner, before you boot any creased pants.
They may be drapin' a bronco gent.**

THERE shoulda been somethin' to tell us life would be different in the whole Valley on account of the ordinary lookin' young fellow gettin' off the stage in Desert City that day. I was

hangin' around to dodge some of Ma's weekly cleanin'—wouldn't you think she'd learn sometime that drummers and cow-pokes don't lift the tidies to see how good we dust?—so I know there wasn't no clap



Hob kept pumping bullets and Phin kept hopping.

of thunder or nothin'.

Most passengers time they get to Desert City are two parts dust to one disgust, which made that traveler stand out like a white collar on a coal miner's neck. After two thousand miles he still had creases in his pants and a shine on his shoes you could see your teeth in. But outside that unnatural neatness, he looked like most anybody else. Average size, a kinda long face with two black eyes lookin' mournful and eager at the same time, but there wasn't nothin' to make him stand out in a crowd. Not then.

He was the only passenger, but he hadn't more'n dipped one shiny shoe in the ankle deep dust of Main Street till everybody was watchin' and listenin'. He had a telescope and a funny lookin' leather case with little side curtains like on a buggy and a handle on top. Noise? I've heard a five-way dog fight and pigs stuck under gates but they wasn't nothin' to the racket comin' outa that case. It was a screechin', goose-pimple-raisin' row that sounded like forty fiddlers outa tune.

The stranger put the case on the store platform and rolled up the little side curtains. I got me a good look, but when I'd seen them I didn't know no more than when I started. It was two little critters I'd never even seen a picture of in the school dictionary. They looked kinda like baby polar bears only not the right color.

The young fellow's eye lit on me while I was gettin' a better look. "Hey, Bub," he asked me, pleasant like, "do you know where's a good, clean rooming house?"

"Yessir," I told him. "My Ma runs one. Pur't near too good and clean to be comfortable."

The stranger laughed. "That sounds all right. How's for you carrying the telescope so I can make it easy on my cats? They're about crazy from being shut up and jolted around."

Them queer critters was cats! I felt sorry for the stranger (the tag on the telescope said *Phineas Lowell from Lowell, Mass.*) in advance. When the Desert City folks knowed he'd lugged cats from Lord knows where . . . But I didn't say nothin'; it wasn't none of my beeswax.

We climbed the steps to the platform, the cats yowlin' like a nightmare with the stummick ache. The best way home

woulda been right past the store and down the walk in front of the Emporium and the Busy Bee, but I thought I'd better take him around the back before he ruint himself complete, duded up like he was and carryin' cats.

The stranger was followin' me all right, gawkin' a little to see what kind of a town it was, when I turned the corner of the platform into the shade. After that I don't rightly know what happened. I walked past a man with his hat over his eyes tilted back in a chair against the wall and I wondered if he was stone deaf not to hear the racket the cats was makin'. I reckon the stranger didn't see him at all; maybe on account of him gawkin', or maybe the change from the bright sunshine to the shade blinded him.

Anyway, he walked square into the man. The cats jolted down into the end of their case with a noise like steppin' on a concertina; the chair slipped and Hob Nayles—it was him sleepin'—woke up with a yell that echoed back from Baldy Mountain. I found out afterwards that Hob had trailed some cattle down to Pecos and got in close to morning so that was why he was sleepin' while he waited for somethin' from the blacksmith. But he woke up fast. His chair scatted out from under him and he went over backwards like a bronc tryin' to mash his rider.

HOB had come down from the mines a year back and he still wore nails in his boots and acted tougher'n whit leather so his nickname was a natural. He was awful big and always willin' to pick a fight so outa three hundred people in Desert City the stranger had to bust *him* wide open. I shut my eyes, dreadin' to see the stranger killed outright

Well, Phineas dropped his cats to help Hob up, but Hob lit so hard it looked like he bounced right back on his feet. And mad! Soon's he got his breath he started cussin'. Phineas tried to dust him off with his big white handkerchief and that just put the cork in the jug. I figger the only thing saved Phin was Hob's gun belt had slid to the back. Time he's tugged it around, people was comin' to the corner and Hob wasn't bad enough or mad enough to shoot an unarmed stranger with half the town lookin' on.

But he was too mad to let it go with a streak of cussin'. He ripped out a couple more good ones and yelled in Phin's face: "Why the blazes can't you look where yore goin', you blasted, tangle-foot traveler!"

Phineas was shore humble. He begged Hob's pardon four or five times and said he was terrible sorry. "It was extremely awkward of me, sir," he said, "I hope you'll forgive me."

"I'll forgive, but you ain't goin' to forget soon, you tony tenderfoot! I'll teach them awkward feet some new tricks!"

He pulled his guns then and blasted away at the stranger's heels. Phin did what anybody'd do when a slug hits an inch from his instep; he yelled and jumped about three feet straight up. Hob kept pumpin' bullets and Phin kept hoppin'. The folks at the corner got to laughin' in spite of theirselves like you will when somebody falls down, even if they break a leg. It even looked kinda funny to me. I'd heard of makin' tenderfeet dance like that back in the old days, but I reckon it was the first time in twenty years anybody in the Valley had seen it done.

By the time Hob had emptied his guns he wasn't half so mad. A big crowd was watchin' by then, so he wound up with a flourish of cussin' and, grabbin' Phin, by the coat collar, he yanked him to the edge of the platform.

"Don't you tangle them awkward feet around me no more, stranger," he advised, pretty grim. "Or the next place you go you won't be walkin'!"

Then he planted his big foot smack on the seat of them tight, sharp-creased pants. Phin lit on his hands and knees out in the dust with his coat splittin' up the back and his hard hat rollin' under the hitchin' rack. Then Hob noticed the cat case sittin' where Phin had dropped it so he kicked that out into the street, too. The catch come loose and two brown and yellow streaks scotched out and flew up the cottonwoods in the draw faster'n you could spit.

Phin got up outa the road and shook down his ruined clothes. I swear I was sorry for him; his face was bleak and closed up like a empty house. He limped over to the cat case and, pickin' it up, fastened the little door. Then lookin' right

through me he said in a dead voice:

"Let's go, Bub," and started off down the road. Behind us every loafer in town was heehawin' like a barn full of mules.

Ma could see he was a gentleman in spite of his lookin' like he'd been clawed out of a rubbish barrel backwards so he got the best front room. He sat on the edge of the bed with his hands hangin' between his knees while I fussed around gettin' him some towels and fresh water. He asked me in that dead voice if I'd seen where the cats went, and when I told him he took a quarter outa his pocket and asked me to get a can of salmon. When I looked flabbergasted he said the salmon was for the cats; for me to toll them into the case with it. It worked, too, and he thanked me when I brought them.

When I got back downstairs, Ma's curiosity was comin' to a boil. She made little cluckin' noises and shook her head when I told her what had happened. Then Mary Sue, my sister, come in and I had to repeat the whole works for her. Her and Ma went "Tsk, tsk, tsk," together.

"He won't stay," Mary Sue said. "He'll probably take the east stage tomorrow. He never could live that dancin' down and if he could, Hob wouldn't let him."

Mary Sue kind of preened her bangs when she mentioned Hob. He was her regular Wednesday and Saturday night beau, pretty near her only one for a fact. Her blue eyes and yella curls had had every young squirt in the whole Valley fallin' over his feet in our front parlor until Hob froze everybody out. Hob was good lookin' and kind of dashin', but Ma and me just didn't cotton to him even if he did own his own brand.

Ma was real indignant. "What kind of a town is this goin' to be with such goin's on? The very idea of Hob actin' like that! He's got to be dealt with."

IT WAS supper time so I knocked on Phin's door. He was still sittin' in the same place on the edge of the bed but he said, "Thanks, Bub, I'll be down." Then his eyes come alive like they'd just tripped over me and he asked, "What's your name? I can't keep calling you 'Bub'."

"Lance," I told him. "Ma named me Lancelot, but she finally come to it I could

chop it short. It was awful hard on clothes havin' to fight all the time over Lancelot."

He smiled a little. "I can imagine the West would be a bit hard on a Lancelot. It's starting off kind of hard on a Phineas, too."

He went over to the window then and stood lookin' out. I wondered how it looked to him. I'd lived in Desert City all my life so I hardly ever noticed it, but Ma and Mary Sue was always complainin' about the dust and the wind. Phin was starin' out west where I thought it looked kind of pretty with the grey of the desert rollin' away to red and purple hills. When he turned away from the window he had a kind of stubborn look on his long face and I saw he had decided to stay. But I knowed he was goin' to have a tough time.

Well, sir, he had a gift for gettin' off on the wrong foot. I banged the triangle and the boarders come in to eat Ma's fried round steak with gravy and buttermilk biscuit. Phin was neat again, but his hands was kinda skinned up from landin' off the platform. Nobody acted like they noticed it though. The talk was general, about the weather and needin' more rain—if there ever was a cattleman had enough rain I never heard of him—and the market price. Everybody stayed away so careful from asking Phin what he thought of Desert City that it got plumb pointed. Anybody knows it ain't hardly polite not to ask a stranger what he thinks of your town before he's had time to get a good look at it.

I guess Phin felt like he ought to hold up his end of the conversation but his idea of polite talk was to remark that the Valley had some likely farm land and then ask Lem Larkins what crops did best. Lem dropped his knife and choked bad on the bite he was chewin'. The silence got so thick you could have spread it on a biscuit. Lem had cussed louder and longer than any other man in the Territory about homesteaders comin' in and bustin' the sod to ruin the range. Only of course Phin couldn't know that.

Mary Sue said the first thing that come into her head, tryin' to smooth it over. "Oh, Mr. Lowell," she cooed at him, "do tell us about your cats. Lance says he never saw anything like them."

Phin looked puzzled at Lem still stranglin' on the words he didn't dast say in front of Ma and Mary Sue, but he answered her real polite. "They're Siamese cats, Ma'am, and really right uncommon."

"Siamese cats!" Mary Sue batted her eyelashes at him. "I never heard of such a thing! Where ever did you get them?"

"These are the great-grand kittens of a pair the Queen of Siam gave to my Great Aunt Lucy."

Now I ask you who would believe that? Anybody knows the only animals they have in Siam is white elephants. You couldn't blame folks for thinkin' Phin was crazy when he let loose with stuff like that and acted like he was kinda proud of it too. That finished the table talk. Nobody else said a single word. They just shoveled in their dried apple pie and left, wantin' to be the first down to Grant's store to tell it. I knowed it would be all over the Valley by morning.

Phin was out and gone when I got up and nobody lays in bed at our house. About ten he come in all dusty and asked me if I wanted a job and I was hired before I even knowed what for. Phin had rented the vacant building across from the Emporium to put in a hardware and seed store. I'd been right about that mulish look I'd seen on his face the night before.

Before sundown I begun to wonder if I'd made a bad deal, for Phin was work brickle and as hot after dirt as Ma was. He was a stepper too; you had to raise yourself to a gallop to keep up with him. We scoured the whole place with hot soapsuds, washed the windows and made a bunch of shelves for the stock that was comin' right away, Phin said. He practically worked me to death before noon, and I revised my first idea of him bein' puny. He was thin, sure, but surprisin' strong, like the whalebone in Ma's corsets.

If I thought that Phin would never make out in Desert City before that stock come, I knowed it after. I put stuff on the shelves all the way from apple peelers and angel cake pans to zinnia seed and zither strings. It was kinda fascinatin'. And when we opened, the women folks took to that store like nice old tabbies to catnip. You wouldn't believe the stuff they bought. Why, Ma bought a cherry

pitter when she hadn't see a cherry since her and Pa left Indiana!

IT WAS the men I had been thinkin' about. They saw all that money tinklin' into Phin's cash box, money spent for stuff the womenfolks had got along without until he come. They said, pointed, that the Valley would be a better place with one less Yankee. And that wasn't the worst. Phin sold so many seeds that it wasn't no time till the women found they'd bit off more than they could chew. That put the husbands to makin' garden and if there's anything sheepisher than a rancher afoot, it's a rancher hoein'. The men would wait till most dark and act like the cat in the cream jug if anybody seen them. So they didn't grow to love Phin so's you could notice.

Husbands might have got wore down to green stuff on the table in time, but about then Phin got in paint. The mornin' after the freighter come, he beat me down to the store like he always done and when I turned the corner onto Main I was struck all of a heap. Phin was movin' the ladder and the store front was so white it hurt your eyes. For a fact, before the day was over two teams shied at the place and run away with their rigs.

Wouldn't hardly a man on the whole range speak civil to Phin after the wives got through buyin' paint. I begun to wonder how long we could last with just lady business, but I knowed better'n to laugh at what women could do. The cash box kept filled pretty much even if the men was wishin' that Hob had aimed a mite higher. Phin had shore dislocated the peaceful life of the Valley; husbands got so they took to the hills whenever the freighter come in.

I don't know if Mary Sue did it a purpose or not—girls is shore puzzlin', ain't they?—but one night when Hob come to make his regular Wednesday call, she had Phin in the parlor. He was kinda singin' while she played the organ.

Phin seemed a little scared and Hob looked sourer than a jug of buttermilk. "I swear, Mary Sue," he said, deliberately insultin', "I thought there was a cat fight in here!" He plumped hisself down on the sofa and stretched out his legs to hem Phin into a corner beside the organ. "I

see music and dancin' goes together in you, Mister," That was to Phin.

"Go on; paste him, Phin!" I was urg-in' to myself. "Hit him and take a lickin', but don't just stand there like a dyin' calf in a thunderstorm."

But Phin did; stood there, I mean. It was a puzzle to me how he was raised. Folks out here don't think less of you for gettin' licked, but they think you oughta try. Phin just stood there, lookin' at Hob, his black eyes as sad as a ketch dog's, sayin' nothin'. He was shore good at that.

"Well, three's a crowd," Hob said briskly. "Me and Mary Sue will excuse you now, Mr. Dancin' Master."

Phin looked at Sister, expectin' her to say somethin, I guess, but she didn't do nothin' but reset her side combs. It come to me she was tryin' to egg him on to stand up to Hob.

Phin started to go, just like he'd been told. Mary Sue had a disgusted look and I was plum sick. There wasn't no more fight in Phin than in a bunny rabbit. Just as he stepped over Hob's feet that was hemmin' him in, Hob tripped him up and the poor feller fell flat on his face on Ma's parlor carpet. He got up and never even looked around; just went. Between Hob's heehaws I could hear Phin's feet climbin' heavy up the stairs.

He wasn't no fighter, but, gosh, he was a bear for punishment. The next thing the freighter brought was *wire*, rolls and rolls of it. I was scared the men of the Valley would decorate the Hangin' Cottonwood with Phin some night. We didn't sell much wire, but we could have made money on a gross of snake oil linament to rub on the sore backs sprung from carryin' water to all them flowers and garden spots. It was gratifyin' how stuff growed and pretty soon folks from way over on the Cap Rock would drive around to look at the posies and the white paint.

Once in a while a man or so would speak to Phin real cordial and I begun to think he might be able to live down his bad start. But I shoulda knowed better. He could find more ways to look like a fool than a ram in springtime. He took to pokin' around on the range of hills back of town after supper ever night. I saw his shoes white with limestone dust and scuffed up from scramblin' so I knowed

about where he was goin' but I didn't see no sense in it. About all he'd find on the ledges was a few snakes and plenty vinegaroons.

Then he hired him a rig and was gone all one day. It was a Wednesday and when Hob come up to see Mary Sue that night he brought the news with him. Phin had gone down to the land office to file on a homestead.

I was goin' past the parlor door when I heard Mary Sue sayin', surprised, "Phin's filed on a homestead?" and Hob laughin'. It struck me odd he'd think it was funny, bein' against all homesteaders on account of his cattle spread. So I got down to look under the hatrack to be sure nothin' of mine hadn't rolled under there and listened kind of accidental.

Hob was fair whoopin'. "Wait till I tell you," he laughed. "He got the Government to give him that level strip over under the limestone ledges."

"What's so funny about that?" Mary Sue asked him, still puzzled.

"I swear, Mary Sue," Hob laughed some more, "yore might' near as dumb as he is. What's good's that land when there ain't no water in a mile and a half and not enough of it for range? That cat lovin' Yankee's so durn civilized he's forgot water don't run out a little spigot every place."

I didn't stay to hear no more, in spite of findin' a dime in the umbrella stand. I was about ready to give it that Phin just didn't have no savvy.

NEXT THING, he bought some lumber and hired some hands to build him a house on his place. People all over the Valley was cautionin' each other not to mention moisture in no form to Phin and maybe spoil the joke. Ma and Mary Sue looked at him kinda pityin', but most folks had to cross to the other side of the street to keep from laughin' in his face.

It was a pretty little house when it was done, but it looked kinda foreign out there, like a pig in prayer meetin'. It had green shutters and Phin had slapped white paint on everything, even the picket fence out front. Ma and Mary Sue had fits over it, but I wondered how convenient it was goin' to be havin' to haul all the water you'd use a mile and a half in a barrel.

The freighter brought a big load of furniture all the way from Phin's home back east, but he didn't make no move to leave his room at our place even after he got the stuff set in. Folks got to wonderin' if he'd finally remembered it was kinda hard to live without water and figgered he was too stubborn to give in and haul it.

Then one morning when I went down to the store, Phin wasn't there, but somethin' was doin' out to his place I could see four, five men workin' around somethin' that looked like a giant grasshopper on a freight wagon. Part of the contraption was bobbin' up and down some. I wondered what in the nation Phin had imported that time.

When he come in all over dust, he was shore feelin' good. He started slingin' kegs of nails in the storeroom like they didn't weigh no more than feather pillows. He whistled and kinda pranced with his feet even.

I couldn't stand it no longer so I plain out and asked him what he'd been doin'. When he said, "Plowin'," I knowed he'd gone clean crazy, and I had to turn away quick or I'd have bawled like a girl baby. I'd waited so long for him to turn sensible and act like other folks.

Phin stopped rackin' the kegs and looked at me. Then he put one hand on the pile and kinda flew over it in a queer tumblin', twistin' leap that made my eyes pop. He come over to me actin' like he didn't notice the way the bright sun had made my eyes water neither.

"That's nothing," he said, grinnin' about that fancy leap. "Sometime I'll show what else my Aunt Lucy's Siamese servant taught me. But now, Lance, let's go over to my place. Lock the door. 'Tisn't likely we'll miss much custom this mornin' and I have something to show you."

I followed him acrost the flats to his house and as we got nearer I could hear the contraption poppin' and bangin' like the Fourth of July. I couldn't make nothin' of what they was doin'.

"They're digging a well for me, Lance; a water well," Phin told me, takin' pity on my bug eyes and mouth hangin' open. "Don't you feel some better now, pardner? This is a new method, lots quicker than digging by hand and we can go deeper for water."

I hauled in my chin, but I couldn't think of nothin' to say. Phin went on explainin'.

"That's what I as looking for on the ledges: water sign. Limestone most always carries water so I looked till I found water stains on the side of the hills. Then I traced those ledges toward the river. When I found some of that same rock outcropping along the river bluffs I knew the water ran right under here. That's why I went ahead and filed on the land and built the house before I could get the well crew. I'll have plenty of water."

Sure enough, Phin got a fine well with sweet water spurting high in the air. He was as tickled as a kid with new red-topped boots and kept tellin' me I couldn't dream what a difference that well would make to the Valley. Only I thought it wasn't the well would make the changes, it was Phin hisself. He made him some ditches next and led the water to that field of dust he'd plowed up. By the time the windmill come, it was showin' green and handsome; pretty stuff that after a while bloomed with purple flowers smellin' like a lady's top bureau drawer.

Phin moved out to his house about then and the next trip the freighter made he brought a red pig in a crate and a little yella cow not much bigger'n a good size dog. Nobody would believe me when I told how much milk she gave morning and night. Most of them said I was as big a liar as Phin; the littlest kid on the range knowin' it took four cows to make a gallon.

AT HOME I could see that Ma was puttin' in her ten cent's worth on Phin's side; she was just barely polite to Hob when he showed up on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Mary Sue herself took to lookin' at Phin kinda thoughtful and flutterin' around him, helpless as a lady-bird. Whenever she batted her eyelashes at him, the poor feller's face would light up like he heard angels singin'. But even if he got up enough nerve to pop the question and supposin' Mary Sue was to say, "Yes," it wouldn't have been no use. Hob would have purely tore Phin apart.

Phin set considerable store by his place and by and by he had it lookin' fixy as a farm in the mail order catalog. He moved trees from the river bank and planted flowers under them and along the fence.

Nobody laughed much anymore at his little spread, especially after they heard the green stuff was alfalfa, making four cuttin's a year with no trouble at all. There was some thoughtful rubbin' of thumbs in chin whiskers, but mighty few snickers.

Things was goin' too smooth to last. One night somebody—I might as well say Hob; we all knowed it was him—made a sieve out of the little tin water tank beside the windmill. Then the pig was let out and drove out in the desert so he got overheated and was dead when we found him. A night or two after that the little cow got into the alfalfa and woulda foundered only for Phin not bein' able to sleep on account of the windmill creakin' and findin' her when he got up to see to it.

The payoff was the night we went to Phin's for supper. He'd got things shoved around where he wanted them so he asked us to sample some Down-East cookin'. It was mostly beans and crullers. After supper we was walkin' around lookin' at stuff with Phin helpin' Mary Sue real careful over his little water ditches and Ma nudgin' me. Everything was as peaceful and dull as nap time on Sunday until Hob and four of his hands galloped down the Cap Rock road in a cloud of dust and milled around outside the fence.

"Howdy, folks!" Hob yelled. I could tell from the red showin' under his tan that he'd stopped for several at the Oasis, the other side the ridge. Ma pressed her lips together tight, just noddin' chilly, but Mary Sue smiled and said hello and Phin spoke cordial and surprised.

"Won't you gentlemen come in?" Phin asked, grateful as a stray pup for a kind word and either not noticin' or tryin' to overlook the sneer in Hob's voice.

"No, reckon not, Mr. Dancin' Master," Hob said. "We're in kind of a hurry. Was you admirin' the purty posies? They'd be lots purtier somewheres else."

I knowed right then from the tone of Hob's voice that we was headin' for trouble.

Hob asked Phin, "Don't reckon you thought you'd built right acrost our trail to town, did you, Mister? Them posies and this fence is smack between us and urgent business." He looked over at Mary Sue. "Move back, Honey, or I'll get my loop on you sooner than you expect!"

Then I saw that the four had ropes in

their hands and they began yellin' and castin' at Phin's fence. Before you could spit, the panels began to fall over. Then they tromped up the flower beds and lassoed the gate posts, pullin' them out by the roots. The poor little gate went bumpin' and leapin' off toward town behind one of the horses as the men rode off, whoopin' like drunk Indians.

Tears was rollin' down Ma's cheeks, she was so mad. "Phin'll have the law on you, you good-for-nothin' hooligan!" she hollered at Hob who was makin' his horse dance in a row of red flowers. "He ought to kill you! Don't you never set foot in my house again!"

Hob was grinnin', sure of hisself. "If I wait for that lily-livered cat lover to kill me, Ma'am, I'll live a long time. And if you don't let me in yore house I'll take Mary Sue to mine!"

What's he do but spur his horse over to Mary Sue and pick her up and kiss her! He set her down quick before she was a mind to slap him and rode off, laughin'. While all this was goin' on, Phin stood there in the middle of the ruins, sayin' nothin' and doin' nothin'.

Hob turned in his saddle down the road apiece. "And don't you put that fence back neither, or next time we'll pull yore purty lil' house down around yore ears!"

"Git yore gun!" Ma yelled, pushin' Phin. "Cut acrost and catch him at the river! Shoot him!"

"I don't have a gun, Mrs. Russell," Phin said in a dead voice.

"Throw a rock at him then!" Ma told him. "Do somethin'!"

"Maybe he could holler 'Boo'!" Mary Sue said, plum disgusted. Phin turned red and looked at her like a hound dog kicked outdoors. "Phin Lowell, if you don't do something about this—this—outrage, just don't speak to me again as long as you live!" She was so mad the ruffles on her dress was bristlin' as she flounced off to our rig.

LOOKED TO ME like Phin was goin' to take root in that spot, he stood so still. Ma put her hands on his shoulders. "I don't hold with violence neither," she told him, earnest-like, "but there comes a time when a man has to protect his own. If you don't do somethin' about this, Phin,

you might as well pack up and git out of the Valley. Folks has made excuses for you on account of you bein' new to our ways, but they won't be able to overlook this. Come on, Lance," and she headed me for the buggy, too.

I'd about give up tryin' to make Phin out. Bright and early next morning he was out patchin' up the fence! He wouldn't fight, but he was mulish as a heifer about doin' things that was bound to make more trouble.

By Saturday morning Phin had the fence fixed and as we was expectin' freight, he got down to the store extra early. He probably had plenty on his mind which would account for him not fastenin' his cats up as good as usual before he left home. Anyway, when he come walkin' absent minded down the street, there was them two bouncin' along behind him.

The cats blew around the store like puff balls, lookin' and sniffin' at everything. Phin said he guessed they'd be all right and then we got busy with the freight and forgot about them.

Phin was awful absent-minded that morning. He'd stand holdin' something, lookin' blank as a new page in the ledger. I watched him and I figgered he was makin' up his mind, only I didn't know what about. He looked at the stock on the shelves like he'd never seen it before and when old Mis' Bascomb asked to see one of the patent potato peelers, he brought her a hatchet.

When she went out after bein' snappish about the hatchet, Phin stood in the front door rockin' on his heels with his hands under his coat tails starin' at Main Street like he'd never seen it before, neither. I knowed when Mary Sue turned onto the board walk for even Phin's back lit up welcomin' as a red hot stove in zero weather.

"Good morning, Miss Mary Sue," Phin said, kinda entreatin'. "It's going to be a fine day."

She looked at him like he was a mud puddle. Then she tilted her nose in the air and sailed past.

Phin stood there a long time; then he turned around and began to count stuff and put lists down in his pocket book.

He left the contraptions in the crates till last. Then he got a hammer and nail

pry and brought out some big long handles. The next crates had some steel whirligigs with places to fasten the handles on. When I got the bolts tight and pushed the handle on one, them twisted bars turned and clattered, goin' round and round each other like twirlin' thumbs.

"What in the nation is it for?" I asked Phin. "It's like that patent egg beater laid sideways, but what's the use of it?"

I COULDN'T hardly believe it when he told me. There's places where they use such contraptions to cut grass!

It was afternoon time I got the third one done on account of it bein' Saturday with people millin' in and out and buyin' stuff. We was so busy I quit lookin' up when the door slammed, so I don't know just when Hob come in. Then I noticed how quiet everything had got and saw the customers gettin' out.

Hob stood over by the door with his thumbs hooked in his gun belt, purely breathin' fire, and Phin faced him there in the aisle, white and shakin' like clabber cheese. It was goin' to be terrible.

Hob started walkin' slow and grim down the aisle between the counters towards Phin. Phin didn't back down none, I'll say that for him. He stood there like a man expectin' death and destruction, which was about what I figgered he'd get, too.

Grabbin' a handful of shirt front, Hob pulled Phin up on his toes till his collar was around his ears and chokin' him. "Didn't I tell you about that fence, you son of a codfish?" he yelled, so mad he was swelled up like a chuckwalla. "I dared you to build it up again, didn't I? So what do you do?" He stopped yellin' to shake Phin till his ears flapped. "You put up *wire* plum to the ledges!"

"I have a right to put up fences; that's my land. I made a gate for . . ."

Hob choked him off before he finished. "I ruint a good horse on that blasted gate and I'm goin' to take pay for him out yore hide! You'll see the pearly gates, you bean-eatin' Bostoner! You pussy-footin' pilgrim! You sweet Nancy nester!"

Every time he called Phin somethin' else he slammed him against the wall and yanked his collar tighter. He was just waitin' for Phin to make some kinda move so's he could beat him half to death or

shoot him. I gathered my feet under me ready to hop the counter. The both of us wouldn't be no match for Hob, I knowed, but I couldn't do less than get my head tore off tryin'.

Phin's eyes looked frantic as a drownden man's. But he wasn't seein' his past life like they say you do before goin' down for the last time. He was lookin' into the future. He saw the Desert City people laughin' and pityin' and treatin' him contemptuous. He saw Mary Sue gettin' married to Hob and maybe Hob mistreatin' her when he was drinkin'. I reckon he saw his little place that he was so proud of ruined and deserted.

Phin pushed at Hob feeble like—he wasn't gettin' much air through that stiff collar—and Hob squared off for a haymaker. Then things happened so fast I never was rightly shore which was first. I think my rummagin' around under the counter for somethin' to throw woke up the cat takin' a nap down there after her busy morning. Anyway she flew up like a runaway window blind, yowlin' and clawin'. She missed my shoulder, hit the counter and bounced square into Hob's face. He yelled, steppin' back, and one of them grass cutters caught him like a bear trap. I reckon the handle musta rapped his head right smart, for he fetched a fall that shook the building.

PHIN STOOD, planted, starin' down at Hob who was shakin' his head trying to think what hit him. But Phin's black eyes that usually went flat as a stepped-on toad when trouble boiled up was watchful, I saw, and kinda gleamin'. When Hob got up, swearin' and kickin' lose from the lawnmower, Phin didn't step back none. I figgered that future he saw in his mind looked so black, he realized at last he had to put a crimp in Hob or else.

Mary Sue run in then, her heels tappin' hysterics and her face scared. She grabbed Hob's arm.

"No, Hob! No! Let Phin alone!" She kinda shook his shoulder. "Don't hurt him, Hob! Don't!"

Hob snarled at her, ugly as a sheep killin' dog. "You keep outa this, Mary Sue, if you know what's good for you! I'm goin' t'trim him down till he'll fit the least buryin' box in the Valley and

ain't you nor nobody else goin' to stop me! Git out!"

Mary Sue was cryin'. She grabbed at Hob's arm startin' down to his gun belt and he fetched her a back slap that cracked like a mule skinner's whip. She staggered and fell backwards over some buckets of sheep dip onto a pile of wagon sheets in the corner.

Phin come to life then. He let out a war cry that Geronimo wouldn't have been ashamed of and he boiled over like a jug of cider in June. He fair flew at Hob and the next thing was a crash that shook the whole Valley. That was Hob sailin' over Phin's shoulder somehow to smash into the china shelves. Another crash and a tinkle of fallin' glass was Hob's gun flyin' in the other direction through the front window. Then Phin lit on Hob and they both threshed around among the busted tea cups.

The next few minutes Hob was in the air oftener than he was on the floor. He'd lash out with a fist to slam Phin and Phin would reach out like he was goin' to shake hands and Hob would fly off, twisted up and squawkin'. I never have told nobody the things I seen Phin do that day; they wouldn't believe me if I did.

When Phin, yellin' louder and lookin' wilder all the time, leaped over the counter onto Hob's chest, it come to me. I was seein' some of the things that Siamese servant of Great Aunt Lucy's had taught Phin!

Phin grabbed Hob and got him on a shoulder; then he begun to spin and swing Hob around faster and faster. When they was just a kind of blur, two hundred pounds of cowpuncher flew across the store to slam into the rolls of barb wire.

Phin kinda crouched there, his shoulder muscles ripplin' under his tore up shirt, gettin' a deep breath. His hair roached like a mad dog's and his eyes was shinin' in his marked-up face. He tucked his feet under him and his lips drew back over his teeth in a snarl that was half crazy mad and the other half pure pleased. I seen Mary Sue crouched down behind the sheep dip, watchin' him, scared to death but fascinated. It was plain as print that Phin was enjoyin' hisself. And fixin' to enjoy hisself still more.

Hob could see it, too. And he saw it just when he found out his levis was hung tight in the barb wire. He saw Phin all ready to jump him again, whoopin' and wild-eyed, and he couldn't take no more. Hob yelled and threshed and finally come outa his pants like a ant lion outa his hole. It was a good thing, I reckon, he wasn't vain about the fit of his levis like most punchers, for if he'd wore 'em tight Phin woulda massacred him right there. Hob practically tore the door down gettin' outside with Phin right at his heels.

People was crowded on the board walk listenin' to the racket when them two busted out. Hob was in a pure panic by then and movin' so fast he only shocked the modesty of the front row as he took off down the street like a scalded cat. Phin grabbed up some tomato plants in pots he'd set out earlier. He slammed them at Hob as fast as he could snatch them up. The first one hit smack between Hob's shoulders, bustin' like a sack of flour bouncin' outa the chuck wagon; the second and third was near misses and the fourth took him square on the back of the head as he whizzed outa range.

I reckon you coulda heard a pinon drop all the way to Baldy Mountain. Phin stalked back inside before anybody could haul in their chins and come out with Hob's ripped levis. He had the hatchet and he nailed the pants to the side of the building like you stretch a skunk skin on the barn door. The crowd roared.

I went so weak then my bones sagged. That laughin' put the cork in the jug. Hob heard it and I knowed he wouldn't be back in Desert City. But if he should come I knowed Phin could handle him again, but good.

THE VALLEY FOLKS treat Phin friendly now, but kinda cautious, too, like the business end of a hair-trigger mule. He's considered not only a leadin' citizen, but the man that brought progress to the Pecos country. Him and Mary Sue made me an uncle last month—twin boys—so the Lowells are in the Valley to stay.

I shoulda knowed it all the time. I'm one of the few people that's had the day-lights kicked outa him by a rabbit. The meek are very deceevin'.

THE DEVIL'S FIVE

By Joe Musgrave

Four wooden-faced hunters and a cold-eyed girl. They trekked from the ends of the earth to that steamy Congo village. And even jungle-wise Bart Collins could not escape the murder web they stretched across the Tamboni bush.

BART COLLINS frowned against the glare as he strode toward the weathered house at the end of Tagoda's one street. They were strange individuals, those five who waited for him, and he guessed that only a strange purpose could bring them to this rotting Congo village.

Neither big game hunting nor legitimate business would bring their kind four-hundred miles upriver when it was unsafe for a white man to touch foot in the Wasuli lands beyond Tagoda. Death rode the

Congo fastnesses dominated by the savage, cunning Wasuli, as Bart Collins could well testify.

Twice within a week Bart had tried to enter that warrior-haunted jungle domain, only to be driven back both times by grim, painted blacks. He had escaped by the narrowest of margins. He couldn't expect that luck to hold a third time.

Bart turned these facts over in his mind as he approached the house. It was odd these newly arrived strangers would want



The jungle trail was bedlam. Bart's rifle flared with quick, deadly shots.



to meet with him, and odder still that they should address their note to him personally. He had been away at war four years and only a handful of people knew he had returned to the Congo. Yet these utter strangers called him by name.

He welcomed, rather than resented the opportunity to meet them. He was thankful these days for any excuse which would momentarily obscure his own insoluble problem. His father and sister were cut off in the center of the Wasuli area. He didn't know whether they were alive or dead, but he knew he had to reach Tamboni Lake and find out the truth for himself.

The porch creaked as he mounted the steps. He knocked, sending the sound rolling through the house.

"Come in, Mr. Collins," a man said from the shadowed interior.

Bart opened the door, took two steps inside. His eyes swept the five strangers. "You wanted to see me?" he asked.

There was no immediate answer. They just sat there, the four men and the girl, appraising him with expressionless faces. Ten years of knocking about the Congo and four years in the British Eighth Army doesn't tend to make a man overly sensitive.

Bart returned their stares with faint amusement. Six feet two inches, a solid two-hundred and twenty pounds of bone and muscle, he was a hard man with the marks of a hard, vigorous life on him. He had black hair and eyes, and a bronzed, rock-jawed face filled with calm self-assurance.

When he tired of the game, Bart asked with slow insolence, "Are you sure you can see enough?"

The girl's laugh was lazy, insinuating. "Perhaps not," she said. She had an elusive and quite pleasant accent.

Bart's glance flicked over her. She was blonde and disturbingly beautiful. She wore no make-up except the red-stain of her mouth, and her hair was done in two long braids tied with twin scarlet bows like a little girl. But there was nothing of the little girl in the languid pose of her curved, full-breasted body or in the look of her slightly-tilted hazel eyes.

The square-featured, square-bodied man who sat beside her on the battered wicker settee stirred and leaned forward. He was

smoking a large-bowled pipe and removed it from his mouth with great deliberation. He was obviously Dutch, with a high red color and sky-blue eyes. His least movement betrayed a stolid, relentless physical strength, a strength built up and passed on to him by generations of big-boned, indomitable ancestors.

"This is no time for foolishness, Greta," he rumbled in deliberate but excellent English. Then he turned his attention to Bart.

"We meant no offense," he said. "But when we prepare to place our lives in the hands of one man, we wish to be certain of that man. That is why we were staring."

LOOKING at the Dutchman, Bart was reminded of a bull elephant cautiously, yet benignly, regarding a lesser creature. Bart decided definitely he did not like these people and their odd airs. He was in no mood to play mouse to their cat.

His face showed his quick irritation. "Look!" he said. "If you want to talk to me, let's get to the point. Let's skip the pretty riddles."

The Dutchman's expression didn't alter. Only the blue slivers that were his eyes sharpened.

"But of course," the big man said. "We are too wrapped in our own thoughts and plans. We assume too much. First, Mr. Collins, let me introduce my friends and myself."

And in his sober, deliberate manner, the Dutchman introduced each of the party. His name was Aartje Van Brunt. The girl's was Greta Bregar. The girl was the only one whose nationality left Bart in doubt. The others were easily identified.

There was the Spaniard, Ramon Manuel Pedraza. He was a small man, lean and delicate, with the liquid brown eyes and soft features of a woman. The jagged knife scar on his left cheek looked strikingly out of place on so polite and inoffensive a person.

There was the Italian, Arturo Scarletto. He sat on the edge of a stool, nervously clasping and unclasping pudgy hands around his paunch, a medium-sized man with a puffy, white face and rounded shoulders. His black eyes burned with a dark, intense flame out of the strained mask of his face.

And there was the German, Karl Riegler. He was nearly as tall as Bart Collins, well set up, with broad shoulders, lean, flat loins and the savagely blank face of a Prussian. He sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair and Bart despised him at first sight.

Collins acknowledged each introduction with a faint nod of his head. What did the odd crew want with him? He was intrigued by the Dutchman's queer statement that they were preparing to place their lives in his hands.

Van Brunt seemed to be considering the explanation he would give as he rubbed one red-stained cheek with a stubby thumb.

"We wish to employ you, Mr. Collins," he said finally, and leaned back on the couch as though he were finished, as though he had explained everything.

"For what?" snapped Bart.

Van Brunt filled his great lungs with a deep breath, heaved forward again. "You're a guide, aren't you?" he asked. "For ten years you made your living taking hunting parties into the Congo. Well, we want you to take us into the Wasuli region. You may name your own price. Time, not money, bothers us. We are anxious to get started."

Bart's frown altered into an amused smile. "I hate to disappoint you people," he declared. "Any other time I'd be glad to take your money, but right now the whole jungle east of here is crawling with painted warriors. I'd think you would have heard before now that the Wasuli are raising ten kinds of hell, all of them directed at white men."

No one said anything. He had been standing just within the door since his arrival. No one had offered him a chair. Bart gave himself the satisfaction of another look at the blonde girl, and half-turned to leave. The Spaniard leaped from his chair with surprising speed, caught a chair from against the wall and slid it toward Bart. The little fellow smiled a polite half-smile, gestured elaborately toward the chair.

"Forgeeve my manners," he said liquidly, excluding the others, as if politeness could not be expected from them. "'Ave a chair, Meester Collins. I 'ave been most impolite. Now we can talk better."

Bart's mouth twisted wryly. Then they weren't finished. He slid into the chair and the Spaniard scuttled back to his place.

"Ve haff come a long vey, Collins,"

rasped the German. "Ve do not allow a few ignorant blacks to disappoint us. Come now, name your price and let us settle this!"

Collins sighed, "Look, you people," he said wearily. "If you were armed with automatic rifles and hired fifty warriors for guards, you still wouldn't have even a half-way chance to get back alive."

Karl Riegler's steely eyes held his for a moment. Bart could feel the man's brutality, his utter lack of feeling for anything or anybody.

"So?" the German spat. "Ve haff der guns you mention and vill hire so many guards as you say. As to chances, ve are not children to vorry about danger."

"There are other guides," Bart said, standing up. "You'll have to get one of them. Maybe you can get one if the price is high enough, though, frankly, I doubt it."

The blonde stood up, too. Bart hadn't seen that much woman in a long time. She didn't mind his looking. She seemed to invite it.

"We wanted to go to Tamboni Lake," she mentioned, as if it were an afterthought. "I had really hoped you could take us there."

BART'S eyes narrowed. He studied the five faces before him. Why did she mention Tamboni Lake so casually just as he was leaving? Could they possibly know that his sister, Marie, and his father had been caught at the lake by the native uprising.

It could be chance that Greta Bregar struck on the single place that he, himself wanted to go, the single place that he had to go, no matter what the cost or danger. It could be chance, but somehow he doubted it. Travelers seldom waited until they were this far inland before they employed a guide, yet these people had come directly to him.

But now their own motives and purposes were unimportant. No matter what they were after, he would take them if it bettered his chances of reaching Marie and his dad. Perhaps they knew that. Perhaps that was why they had come to him instead of the score of other old Africa hands in the region. Their expressions revealed nothing.

"Very well," Bart said, carefully controlling his voice. "I'll take you in, but you understand I can't guarantee whether any of you will ever come out. To put it bluntly, if the lady will excuse me, you are all damn fools to want to go."

Scarletto, the Italian, twisted uneasily, his pudgy hands moving over his paunch as though it hurt him.

"Let us be the judge of that, Mr. Collins," he said softly. "Perhaps you do not understand true sportsmen. We have come a long way—a very long way, and we don't wish to be disappointed."

The blonde smoothed her dress over her hips, regarded Bart intently, then turned and walked slowly from the room. The Dutchman was the only one who didn't follow her with his eyes.

"We leave everything to you," Van Brunt said. He heaved out of the wicker settee, took a wad of bills from his pocket and handed them uncounted to Collins. "We're interested in nothing but the starting date. Don't bother us with details. Get whatever you need and don't worry about cost."

"We will be ready in a week," Collins said.

And he kept his word.

Even in the jungle money talks. Through extravagant presents to the proper sub-chieftains — men who cared more about their own comfort and well-being than they did about the safety of their subjects—he secured the services of forty Bantu bearers. Through negotiations with an Arab slaver laid up for the time being with a spear wound suffered in his last foray, Collins hired thirty of the Arab's cruel-faced Somali warriors as guards. Money and gifts spent in the right places likewise produced the necessary equipment for the trek.

But the dispatch with which he organized the safari on which no sensible black man wanted to go brought no comment from the five Europeans. They accepted the job as a matter of course, as they seemed to accept everything.

The morning they left Tagoda there was none of the usual excitement displayed by whites on their first trip into virgin jungle. They merely took their places in the line of march and started walking. Busy as he was bringing order into the departure,

Bart Collins paused briefly to observe his charges and wonder both at them and at the motives which brought them to the Congo.

Other than the thin reason that they wished to hunt, the five had given him no hint of their purpose in making the dangerous trek. Collins was no fool. He knew the truth had been left unsaid, yet try as he might, he could guess not a single reasonable motive which would send such people into the Wasuli region.

But Collins was a practical man. The safari bettered his chances of reaching Marie and his father, and until he definitely had reason to believe otherwise, he meant to give his employers the benefit of the doubt. There would be time enough later to inspect motives.

At least, that was what he thought up to the afternoon of the second day. The thing that happened then brought him up short, changed within the space of a few minutes his whole attitude towards his companions. It was a brutal occurrence which shocked even as hardened a man as Bart. He began then to see them in their true light.

II

THE TRAIL EAST of Tagoda climbed steadily until it emerged on the rim of the tortuous Vrivri, a river which in its turbulent youth had cut deep into the earth, but which now had grown sluggish and old in its steep-banked gorge. Its bed was spotted with quicksand bogs—death traps for the unwary.

Bart had fought the Vrivri many times and knew its tricks. On the second afternoon, after he had successfully brought the heavily laden blacks down a narrow, difficult path into the gorge, he called a halt. The grunting Bantu bearers and the Somali guards flung themselves down to rest. Bart took Bosnagi and Lomoka, the two huge-muscled Bantu trail breakers, down the bank until he found the spot he sought.

A narrow ridge of solid rock crossed the stream bed at this point forming a safe footing. It was covered with about a foot of sticky mud but from past experience he knew how to feel his way across, avoiding the dangerous quicksand which

lay on either side of the yard-wide walkway. Using a bamboo pole to test his footing, he edged into the hip-deep water, taking Lomoka with him. Bosnagi remained on the bank, playing out on the rope which Lomoka carried along behind Collins.

Once across, Bart drove a stake in the ground and fastened the rope to the stake. Lomoka anchored the rope in the same manner on the other bank. Thus, the safari could safely span the river by merely following the guide line.

Bart waded back and started the main party moving. The whites sat motionless waiting for the porters to prove there was no danger. After the first few blacks had passed over with no difficulty, Greta eyed Bart.

"I am a little afraid," she said softly, but she did not look it. "Will you come with me?"

"I'll carry you, if you like, so you won't get wet," he offered.

"No," she said. "We are all the same on this trip. If the others get wet, so do I."

He smiled faintly and led the way into the water. Van Brunt and Riegler followed them. Scarletto and Pedraza remained where they were. The Spaniard and the Italian were in poorer physical condition than their companions and welcomed every opportunity to rest and catch their breath.

When he got Greta to the opposite bank, Bart left her and struggled up a narrow path which led out of the gorge. He was anxious to judge whether the way would be passable for the heavily-laden bearers. When he reached the top, he was surprised to find Van Brunt ponderously following him. As he waited for the Dutchman to join him, he idly studied the scene far below where the blacks were fling into the water. Scarletto and Pedraza still had not stirred from their resting place.

The Italian sat watching the river and the bank beyond. The Spaniard lay full length on the ground, resting with his hands under his head. Bart wondered how they would fare in a few days when the going began to get really tough.

"If I can make it up here, the rest of them can," Van Brunt rumbled as he reached Collins. He did not grin, though

his remark was meant in joking reference to his great bulk.

Bart nodded, noting that despite the hard climb, the Dutchman wasn't breathing the least bit hard. The man was a solid mass of muscle. He was like a figure hewn from a square block of stone.

"So now begins the bad part," Van Brunt declared, looking at the tremendous wall of trees and foliage which rose up before them.

Bart signaled Lomoka with a wave to start the natives up the path. Then he, too, gazed reflectively at the jungle. He had said nothing to Van Brunt or any of the others about the Wasuli territory beginning when they passed the gorge.

"It can be very bad," he answered. "If the Wasuli really try, none of us will ever walk out of there. It would be dangerous enough even if the Wasuli were friendly."

"However," the Dutchman commented, "within my small experience, I have come to believe that no man dies before his time. If it is his time, it is useless for him to run away. If it is not, then he need fear nothing."

"That is a comforting way to look at things," Bart said dryly, "but I am not so fortunate as you. I feel like fate needs a little common-sense help."

The Dutchman scratched his cheek with a broad thumb and his blue eyes sharpened as he regarded Collins.

"You say that," he pointed out, "yet I do not see you applying common sense. Here you stand beside me, preparing to enter on a journey the dangers of which you understand pretty clearly."

"There are reasons which occasionally override common sense," Bart said without amplification.

"Ah," Van Brunt returned not unkindly. "Fate assumes many guises to lead men along determined ways."

BART'S half-angry rejoinder to the Dutchman's patient, unyielding line of talk remained unspoken. Lips parted to speak, he suddenly stiffened, hearing above the noise of the natives plodding up the trail a shrill, far-away scream.

He whirled back to the edge of the gorge, his gaze sweeping the scene far below. He could not immediately find anything wrong. The last of the blacks

were starting up the path. The bank directly below him was deserted except for Riegler and the blonde girl, and they were standing calmly together, staring across the river at Scarletto on the far bank.

Abruptly Bart realized what was wrong with the picture. Pedraza, the Spaniard, was missing. He instinctively guessed Pedraza's fate a moment before he saw the white splash of water which betrayed the little man in mid-stream.

It was impossible, but somehow the Spaniard had gotten into the quicksand. His furious attempts to pull free of the sucking mud were rapidly forcing him deeper. The water was already to his shoulders.

"*Madre de Dios!* Help me!" Bart heard him cry frantically.

But not one of the three whites who watched him huddled. They appeared frozen by the tragedy, so stunned they could not move. And the rope—the guide rope put up by Bart to make certain none of the party strayed off the safe crossing—lay only inches from the struggling Spaniard's hand.

"The fools!" blurted Collins. "Why don't they help him."

The blacks along the path which wound up the wall of the gorge and those who already had reached the top had become aware of the white man's misfortune. Every eye was turned on the rapidly sinking Spaniard.

"Put the rope in his hands!" Bart shouted.

Apparently the whites did not hear him above the sound of the jabbering natives and the cries of Pedraza because they still did not shake off their spell. But Lomoka, who was the last native to start up the path, heard Bart despite the clamor. The barrel-chested Bantu ran down the path, leaped to the bank and sprinted toward Riegler and Greta.

His approach snapped Riegler from his stupor. The German excitedly jerked from the ground the stake holding the guide rope. He awkwardly pulled the rope from the stake and threw it out over the water toward his friend.

His aim was bad. The rope fell short by more than a yard. Pedraza made an anguished motion toward it and sank below the surface. And although he reared

his head above water again, he no longer tried to fight. He merely screamed again and again in animal fear.

With an oath, Bart spun about to try and get to the path leading down to the river. He collided with Van Brunt who was standing silently at his shoulder, watching the scene without emotion. The big Dutchman instantly anticipated his intentions.

"You can't get down in time," he said coldly. "The path is jammed with blacks and there isn't room for you to get by them."

What he said was true, but the calm way he said it angered Bart. He hesitated, searching for a course of action. Then he shouted furious orders to the natives. His voice lashed them into action, part of the file on the trail hastening upward, while the ones nearest the river turned and scrambled back down.

Yet by the time Bart reached the river, it was too late. The Spaniard was gone, swallowed up by the mud, and the sluggish surface of the water flowed by unruffled.

In the difficult descent into the gorge he was unable to watch the scene, so when he emerged on the bank, Bart was uncertain as to the spot where Pedraza went down. The rope which Riegler had vainly thrown out trailed away downstream so that it no longer marked the site.

"What happened?" Collins asked. "A child could have followed that rope across. I can't understand it."

Greta's face was a shade whiter than usual, her features strained. Riegler was stiffer, more wooden. By his code, it was unmanly to show you were shaken by the taking of life.

"He was so excitable," the girl explained. "He was nervous about crossing, and when he got to mid-stream, apparently something touched him underwater. He screamed and leaped away from it, forgetting about the quicksand. He was completely away from solid ground before he realized what he had done."

Riegler affected elaborate unconcern, saying nothing. Bart turned to Lomoka, his face severe.

"I left you and Bosnagi in charge of the rope," he snarled in Bantu. "This happened because you disobeyed me and

left the river. Do I have to use a club to make you understand my orders?"

THOUGH the black was larger by far than Bart, he shrank back, his mouth working nervously. He looked pleadingly from Bart to Riegler, but he did not speak.

Greta abruptly intervened on the native's behalf. "It was more our fault than the Bantu's" she explained. "We thought they were needed to help get our supplies up the cliff, so Riegler told them to go on about their work and that we would bring the rope."

Lomoka caught the sense of the girl's statement, and vigorously bobbed his head in agreement. Until she spoke, he had been afraid to entangle a white man in the affair. Bart's eyes clashed with Riegler's cold, blank stare and he liked the man less than ever. The German had been willing to stand by without a word and see the black blamed for the incident, when he himself was actually responsible.

"In the future," rasped Bart to Riegler, "neither you nor anyone else will interfere with my running of the safari. I want that understood, because if it isn't I'm taking the whole bunch of you back to Tadoga."

There was the faintest curl at the corners of Riegler's thin, ugly mouth. Bart had to restrain himself from smashing a fist squarely into that arrogant face.

"We may as well camp here," Collins continued. "We probably won't be able to recover Pedraza's body, but we'll make an effort anyway."

He sent Lomoka to bring Scarletto over the river. The Italian waded out of the water lamenting what a terrible thing his good friend Pedraza's death was. Van Brunt had come down the path in the meantime, and with his slow, deliberate step walked along the river bank, standing slightly apart from the others, smoking his fat-bowled pipe and looking with mild interest at the water.

Bart saw that none of the four was very deeply touched by the tragedy. Even the Italian with all his protestations evidenced no real sorrow. These were an entirely different breed of people from the kind with which Collins was familiar. They puzzled him, made him strangely uneasy.

He watched them go to Van Brunt and confer in low tones.

Then Riegler spoke to Collins. "Ve haff talked it ofer und agreed nothing would be gained by delay," he barked. "One grave is like another. Ve will leave him in peace und push on."

"As you wish," he said.

When the four started toward the path, he became aware that Lomoka stood at the water's edge, staring oddly at him.

Lomoka pointed furtively once to the ground without speaking, then turned and hurried after the whites. Bart frowned, puzzled by the black's gesture. He moved to where Lomoka had stood and looked down.

There was a small round hole in the soft earth, a hole made by a stake. Bart studied it a moment, glanced around him and then across the river. Suddenly he sucked in his breath, understanding why the black had drawn his attention to the place.

No wonder the Spaniard blundered into the quicksand. The stake holding the guide rope had been moved from its proper place to a point eight yards downstream. He had been deliberately led to his death.

Bart's mind drove back through the excitement of the past few minutes with icy clarity. Like pieces fitting into a jigsaw puzzle, he dropped remembered items into their places, and the picture he saw was not pleasant.

Riegler and the girl had gotten the natives away from the river and one of them had moved the stake. Scarletto, sitting on the opposite bank, could not have missed seeing the stake moved. But the Spaniard, lying flat on his back, had seen nothing. They all had worked together to trap Pedraza.

Bart understood now why Riegler waited until Lomoka rushed toward him before he pulled up the stake and threw the rope into mid-stream just out of Pedraza's reach. That purposely awkward throw sealed the Spaniard's fate and at the same time covered up the fact that the stake had ever been moved.

He knew all this was true, yet the murder was so cleverly executed, no one but Lomoka had even suspected the facts. The murderers could never be proved guilty. He decided he must pretend ignorance

of the deed, at least until he had more time to think the matter through.

He moved away from the river, walking rapidly toward the path. The whites, except for Van Brunt, were already climbing upwards. The Dutchman stood at the base of the cliff, studying Bart.

"I feel very bad about this," Bart said, acting to forestall Van Brunt's suspicion. "Such an accident is the guide's fault. I suppose you and your friends will feel harshly toward me for leaving the river before everyone was across."

The Dutchman pulled at his pipe a last time, deliberately knocked it out against a rock. His searching look was gone.

"It was only Pedraza's fault," he declared. "We understand that. He knew the risks when he came, and if you will remember, you refused to guarantee any of our lives."

"Yes," Bart conceded, "but such an argument is small consolation to a man's family and friends."

The Dutchman took a few steps up the path, halted and looked down at Collins.

"You need not worry about those left to mourn him," he said. "There are none"—he paused—"except, of course, those of us here. In our lives, we have learned to bear such grief."

Van Brunt resumed his climb, sure-footed and quick despite his great bulk. His words had been meant to reassure Collins, but the tone was callous, cynical. It was only the tone which impressed Bart.

III

COLLINS halted the safari well before sunset, choosing a large clearing for the camp site. While he looked to the preparation of defenses against a sudden Wasuli attack, his companions lounged about the cooking fire, chatting as though they had passed an uneventful day. No mention was made of Pedraza. It was as if he had never existed.

Bart slept fitfully that night. His nerves were unaccountably on edge, and time and again he awakened, sat up and stared over the sleeping camp. The Wasuli rarely attacked during the darkness, and knowing this, Bart could not account for his definite

feeling that something was wrong.

He got up at the first hint of dawn, anxious to get an early start. He strode to the far end of the camp where Bosnagi and Lomoka slept apart from the other natives as should men above the rank of bearers. Bart dug his toe not urgently into Bosnagi and the native snapped awake like an animal.

"Get the boys up," Collins told him as he took two strides to where Lomoka lay curled up on a pile of grass.

He started to nudge Lomoka and then stopped. The smell in his nostrils was a familiar one. It was the scent of blood. He bent over the still figure at his feet, knowing beforehand what he would find. Lomoka was dead, his throat cut from ear to ear.

Bart straightened, hardly hearing Bosnagi's thin, wavering cry of grief, a cry which roused the camp. Bart saw several logical explanations. A brave but foolhardy Wasuli could conceivably have crept into the camp and killed the native. Or a Somali guard might have resented a remark by the somewhat arrogant Bantu and taken this means of revenge.

But recalling that Lomoka had seen more of the murder at the river the previous day than anyone else, Collins chose to believe a white hand had wielded the knife which shut the black's mouth forever. Someone in camp did not believe in taking chances. In time, Lomoka might have grown bold and revealed to Collins and his fellow blacks what he had witnessed.

Bart gave the necessary orders to Bosnagi, pushed through the crowd which had gathered and walked back to the center of the camp. The three white men were waiting for him, Greta, the only one who enjoyed the luxury of a tent, had not yet appeared.

"What's the excitement?" asked Scarletto without interest as he rubbed gingerly over his stomach.

"Our first loss to the Wasuli," Bart lied. "A warrior got past our guards and cut a Bantu's throat while he slept. It will mean a couple of hours delay until they get the poor devil properly buried."

Scarletto grunted, stopped rubbing his stomach. Van Brunt occupied himself with filling his over-sized pipe and the task

seemed to require his full attention.

"Perhaps it will be all for the goot," Riegler said callously. "The oders will be more alert now. For such carelessness, the guards should be beaten."

Bart could no longer hide his distaste for the German.

"The whip doesn't work so well on non-Aryans, Riegler," he said shortly. "We'll be lucky to keep those guards from deserting as it is, without indulging in any foolishness."

The German instantly bristled, his ugly scar of a mouth jerking as wrath flooded over him. His venomous eyes burned into Collins for a moment, and then with a sudden gesture, he reached to the ground beside him and brought up his heavy hunting rifle. A bullet from that gun would stop a charging lion. The barrel rested right in line with Collins' breast bone.

"No one insults Riegler," he snarled, "especially no African beachcomber. Before I kill you, Collins, you will apologize!"

BART was surprised at the violence of the German's reaction. The man's aloof mask had splintered with mad-dog violence. But Collins did not flinch, though he knew a man as unbalanced as Riegler could murder him without a second thought.

Van Brunt intervened with the same cool disinterest with which he would comment on the weather. "No one shoots his guide in the middle of hostile territory, not even Riegler." The Dutchman puffed deeply at his pipe, surveyed the smoke with contentment.

The alarm on Scarletto's white face faded, and a twisted smile jerked his puffy lips. Riegler stiffened, blinked slowly and gradually lowered the rifle. Without another word, he got up and stalked angrily off.

Bart's eyes followed the German. "You may not have done your friend a favor then," he said grimly. "The next time I'll be watching and when he blows his top, he's going to get a foot shoved straight into that slit mouth of his."

He spoke without the least braggadocio. He was a matter-of-fact man and he made a matter-of-fact statement. Then as though he dismissed the matter from his

mind for the time being, he glanced at the blonde girl's tent.

"Miss Bregar is sleeping late," he noted. "She was about the first one up yesterday morning."

"Oh, she's been up and around for sometime," Scarletto told him. "Said she was going to take a bath and went off with a couple of Somali guards toward that little stream where we got water last night."

"What!" exploded Bart. "Is she crazy? The jungle around us is probably crawling with Wasuli just waiting for a few numbskulls to straggle off by themselves."

He hurriedly secured his rifle, and taking four Somali with him, started after the girl. The stream lay about five minutes walk down a narrow game trail. He saw plainly the small, fresh prints of her shoes on the soft earth. Except for the harsh calls of parrots, the jungle lay silent about him. It was a silence which ate away even the sound of his footsteps, and traveling down the twisting lane between the huge, age-old trees, he grew increasingly uneasy about the unnatural quiet.

The blacks with him evidenced the same uneasiness. He watched the greater care which came into their motions, the tightening of their neck and shoulder muscles, the wary sweep of their hawk-like faces. Bart held his rifle ready, while inwardly he cursed Greta Bregar's willful disregard of her own safety. He had given her credit for more sense.

The trail dipped downward and Bart knew with a mixed feeling of relief and dread that the stream lay hardly twenty-five yards further ahead. Where the path twisted around the rotting hulk of an immense fallen tree, the two Somali shuffling ahead of him abruptly stopped.

He came up beside them, saw with shock the torn and bloody remnants of two men. Though the corpses were unrecognizable because of mutilation, the broken weapons tossed over their remains identified them.

They were the Somali guards the blonde girl took with her for protection.

Bart heard the beat of his heart swell deafeningly. His mouth and throat grew dry. Undeniably, this ambush was the work of the fanatical Wasuli. But the girl—what of her?

Against his will he forced himself to

search the small open space, probe through the underbrush seeking that which he did not want to see. The Wasuli would not spare her because she was a girl. It was sickening to him to remember her soft, alluring body and then think of the grisly thing which he would find.

Bart did not like the Somali, but the very qualities he disliked now stood him in good stead. They were professional killers, hard, brutal men who fought for pay against whomever their current master decreed. Men could not work willingly for Arab slave traders and not become steeled to blood and danger.

Where Bantus would have fled back to camp like frightened women, the four guards he had brought with him stood fast, hardly exchanging a word. They betrayed small concern for their murdered fellows, putting on no scene of wailing and mourning such as the Bantus had done that morning in camp when Lomoka's body was discovered. As soon as they were certain the Wasuli were gone and that their own skins were safe, they joined Bart in his search.

One of the blacks discovered the girl's tracks further down the path. Her spoor continued toward the stream. Hope, faint and slender though it was, leaped up in him. Greta had left the natives within call and had gone on to the stream alone. She had not been with the guards when the Wasuli warriors struck.

HE RACED headlong down the path, the deposit of leaves and damp earth cushioning the sound of his footsteps. He flung down a slope, burst through a screen of reed and came out on a grassy bank. He stopped, hearing only his own breathing and the ripple and splash of water plunging over a series of small waterfalls.

Before him lay a circular pool of water, deep and clear, fringed with ferns and a profusion of yellow, sweet-scented flowers. The pool lay in shade except for a few columns of light which plunged through breaks in the interlaced roofing of branches overhead. His eyes darted over the place as he tensely held his rifle.

"Well...hello," he heard the girl say with displeasure.

It was a moment before he saw her.

She stood chin deep in the water near the far bank, her blonde head difficult to make out against the background of yellow flowers. She appeared puzzled, but quite unruffled by his appearance until the four Somali broke out of the jungle behind him.

"What is this?" she asked. "I don't usually care for company when I bathe."

Her absolute serenity when only a few steps away two men lay dead because of her thoughtlessness so angered Bart that, for a fleeting time, he could not speak. Then with a growing command, he told the blacks to wait down the trail for him.

"You little fool!" he cried when the natives were out of hearing. "Get out of there and back to camp!"

She stared at him, apparently taken aback. Then without replying, she swam with a slow, graceful stroke across the pool, stopping near the bank where he stood. Again she looked at him.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mr. Collins," she said in a low flat voice. "Are you confusing me with one of your blacks?"

"I'm not confusing you with anyone but a thoughtless, selfish fool," he blurted. "A child would know better than to leave camp like you've done. I thought you were dead. It's a wonder to me you aren't."

Her slightly tilted eyes widened. She had taken her blonde hair loose and it fell in a shimmering mist, floating out around her shoulders.

"Oh?" she said questioningly. "That is sweet. You were worried about me. I forgive you your rudeness, then."

He scowled, thinking of the hacked corpses and the likelihood that the Wasuli still prowled close by.

"Forgive, the devil!" he exclaimed. "Get out of there before I drag you out."

She hesitated, glancing down at herself in the clear water. Then a faint smile drew her lips.

"Very well," she said huskily, "if you insist. After all, I suppose you know what you are doing."

She advanced slowly, deliberately, into the shallows near the bank. The water fell away from her throat, her shoulders, her breasts, slid in a glittering wash from her curved hips and her wet, glistening legs. Then she waded through ankle-deep

water and stood on the grass before Bart.

He blinked dumbly. Then his face muscles tightened as though suddenly tugged by a rough hand. He was utterly confused.

"I'm sorry," he muttered and hastily swung about. "I didn't realize."

But Greta was already walking past him to where her clothes lay. While she dressed, he cursed her inwardly as he realized the brazen trick she had played to silence any reprimands he proposed. He cursed her, too, because it would be long days and nights before he would be able to get the sight of her out of his mind.

When she was ready, Greta came close beside him. Without looking at her, he started up the path. When they came to the blacks, two guards swung in ahead and two behind them.

"Shall we go by another way, master?" asked the Somali in the lead, believing Bart would avoid the dead men because of Greta.

"No," growled Bart. "Let her see what her folly caused."

THE NATIVES grunted in approval and surprise. It was not an action typical of the white men they had encountered. But Bart had come to the conclusion that the whites he was supposed to shepherd, the girl as much as the others, were more barbaric than Congo natives. Perhaps a savage lesson would sink in where mere words would have no effect.

As they approached the fallen tree where the bodies lay, he heard her catch her breath. She walked behind him, however, so he did not see her face. She said nothing, but her silence told that she realized the identity of the hacked warriors. They waited beyond the tree while the Somali hastily piled stones and limbs over their dead fellows. He did not comment on the price of her bath.

"It was an awful thing," she said at length. "I wouldn't have done it for anything. I know I can never make it right, but please..."

Her voice was humble and pleading. He was almost convinced until he looked at her. As with her companions, she appeared incapable of showing real remorse or sorrow. Despite her artful voice, she actually was untouched by the tragedy.

What manner of woman was she? What

was she after, she and the others? Bart could not penetrate beneath the guarded surface of those odd eyes. But he could play the game as falsely as she did.

"It is all right about the natives," he lied with apparent lack of feeling. "You expect Somali to die in such a manner, and if it hadn't happened to them here, they would have gotten it somewhere else. But as lovely a woman as you wasn't meant to end up in a forgotten jungle grave. That's why I was upset. I didn't like to think of it. I still don't."

The smile came to her slowly, but it was rewarding. Her lips parted and she took a deep breath—a satisfied breath, thought Bart.

"I am impressed you would worry about me," she said with sudden warmth. "You are very kind. We shall be friends, close friends."

Bart left all explanations of the incident to the girl when they reached camp. He noticed she told the story in detail and for the first time the whites showed concern over something.

Throughout the morning, whenever the width of the trail allowed them to walk together, Bart saw them deep in conversation and from their frowns he gathered they were returning many times to the narrowness of Greta's escape. But he had very little time to spend with them because he was occupied with showing himself up and down the line of march to quiet and reassure the natives.

Bantus grew increasingly nervous as the distance from their homelands increased. After the early morning slaying, they knew the Wasuli were lurking in the jungle around them and until they steadied down, Bart was afraid any untoward sound or occurrence might panic them.

In the afternoon, the Wasuli drums started talking. Though Bosnagi could not read the talk, he was certain the safari was the subject occupying the drummers, and the low, rolling blossoms of sound came from many points, too many points, revealing that their path lay between numerous groups of Wasuli warriors.

Outwardly, Bart was calm and assured. He did suggest, without stressing the matter, that the whites keep their guns at hand for the rest of the journey. But he need not have worried about upsetting his

charges. Either they were unusually ignorant of the dangers surrounding them or they had nerves of iron. They failed to exhibit the least concern.

He took every precaution possible to guard against a surprise attack, throwing a screen of Somali warriors both ahead and behind the main body, spacing guards evenly down the line of bearers.

But his measures were not enough. An hour before dusk, the Wasuli struck with swift and sudden violence.

IV

TAMBA, chieftain of the Wasuli, was a cunning leader. His handiwork was written all over the raid. He selected the section of trail where the path was at its widest point, a broad and beaten track where the entire safari would relax its vigilance.

Even Collins had sighed with relief as the track widened. He felt the strain of shepherding his charges throughout that tense day and had been looking forward to reaching this less vulnerable stretch. Since he had devoted practically no attention to the Europeans, he took this opportunity to drop back to the center of the safari and see how they were making out.

It happened just before he reached them.

Greta was walking several yards ahead of the men. Riegler was second, then Van Brunt, with Scarletto trailing behind as usual. Though the path was broad, at least ten strides across, no sunlight reached it for the age-old trees along its edges sent their branches arcing overhead to form a close-packed roof.

Perhaps the feeling of security which settled over the marching men kept them from inspecting the gnarled branches closely. Perhaps the cleverness with which the Wasuli warriors camouflaged themselves with paint and leaves made it impossible to see them as they lay silently on the overhanging branches. In any case, the first knowledge any member of the safari had that Tamba's men lay clustered in the trees above came when the leader of the ambush gave a shrill, high scream.

At the signal, the hidden warriors threw down long ropes of liana, and plunged down the swaying vines with the agility of

monkeys. It happened with terrifying speed. There was the crackle and rustle of twigs, then the abrupt flood of armed men pouring down from the trees into the very midst of the safari.

Bart's head jerked upward when the raid leader screamed for his men to attack. For an instant, he was paralyzed with surprise. He had expected an ambush, but Tamba had caught him off guard, caught him the very first time that day he had relaxed his caution. Then painted bodies were dropping from the trees.

He flung his rifle muzzle up instinctively. It roared in his hands. A slug blasted into a black at point blank range. The native threw his hands outward and fell.

The shot lashed Bart alert. He shouted to the startled blacks around him to defend themselves. Then his rifle flared with quick, deadly shots at target after target. In the rising bedlam around him, he was able to see little as he loaded and fired, raging at the top of his voice in an effort to get the frightened Bantus into the fight.

But one scene was indelibly inscribed on his memory. When the shrieking Wasuli started dropping from the trees, the huge Dutchman reacted more quickly than anyone else. With incredible speed for so large a man, he darted forward, drove past Riegler and grabbed the blonde girl. Then he did a strange thing.

Van Brunt caught the girl up with his left arm, and handling her like a feather, sprawled her flat on the ground beside him. He knelt almost touching her, and began to shoot at the swarming blacks. Greta angrily struck at him once, but she did not try to get up.

Riegler watched the Dutchman, his mouth dropping open in surprise. Then he, too, raced to Greta's side. Neither the Dutchman nor the German acted as though they were strangers to violence. The onslaught did not unnerve them. They fought very calmly, shooting with cool deliberation.

Scarletto was less fortunate than his friends. The jittery Italian was confused by the attack, and in the opening minute, instead of seeking the side of his companions immediately, he turned aimlessly in his tracks, his fat jowls quivering, his eyes wild.

By the time he noticed that Van Brunt

and Riegler had run up the trail to Greta, a wall of Wasuli barred his path. Then he seemed to grow so frightened that his mind cracked. Bart could hear him screaming senselessly, "No! I'm Scarletto. Don't you understand, I'm Scarletto?"

BY THAT TIME a mixed group of Sōmali and Bantu warriors had rallied around Bart. He saw Scarletto shooting and dodging, running in foolish little zigzags that brought him no closer to safety. A lean, tall Wasuli armed with a long knife sprang at the Italian. Scarletto clubbed him with his rifle, but not before the whistling blade bit deep into his side.

Men were locked in combat all along the trail now. Seeing that they could expect no mercy and with escape impossible, even the Bantu bearers were galvanized into action. And with the Bantus going to the assistance of the Somali, Bart knew the violence of the Wasuli attack could not long be maintained.

He led his band toward the blonde girl and her two defenders, clubbing and cutting a path through the Wasuli.

To his surprise, the battle eddied away from the trees, with not a single native trying to charge in close enough to throw a spear or knife. Bart breathed a silent prayer of thanks when he saw this for he knew that only two armed men, excellent shots though they were, could never hope to stand off a determined rush by those frenzied warriors.

Scarletto dropped his empty rifle and jerked out his pistol. He was swaying on his feet, three dead warriors lying around him. His face and his shirt front were crimson with his own blood. He was nearly done.

Bart shouted to his men, plunged to the Italian's rescue. Then came the same high-pitched Wasuli yell which had launched the attack. The din of battle wavered, thinned and was suddenly gone. At their leader's cry, the Wasuli disengaged themselves, dove into the jungle and disappeared. Only the cries of the wounded pierced the abrupt silence.

Collins sprinted toward the wobbling Italian, knowing the man was terribly wounded. Scarletto's face was unrecognizable, sliced open with three deep gashes. As he came closer to him, Bart saw the

pudgy European was trembling in every muscle, his mouth opening and closing spasmodically. Then his knees crumpled under him and he fell.

His eyes were closed as Bart bent beside him, but his lips moved. Over and over he whispered, "Curse her, curse her, curse her," until his last flicker of consciousness was gone.

Bart set about stemming the man's flow of blood and binding up his wounds, though his experienced eye told him there was no hope for the Italian. Before he was finished, Scarletto was dead.

"Poor fellow," Greta said, standing just behind him. "The devils cut him off and butchered him. He didn't have a chance."

Bart got up slowly, filled with a deep weariness. He looked at her. Dirt and leaf mould where Van Brunt had pressed her down against the earth still clung to her clothes. It was the first time he had seen her disarrayed, he thought, wondering why so foolish a notion should occur to him at such a moment. There were white lines of strain at each corner of her mouth.

"I was afraid none of us was going to have a chance," he said.

She didn't look at Scarletto again. "Did he say anything before...I mean, did he make any last request?" she asked tensely.

Bart wished that he wasn't so tired. He wanted to think, wanted to desperately, but his brain was so fuzzy. Had Scarletto been cursing Greta?

"No," he told her. "He was too far gone. He said nothing."

HE SQUARED his shoulders and walked away from her. Expertly he brought order out of the confusion, buried the dead in a shallow trench, treated the wounded. He was harsh, almost brutal with the blacks, but he made them obey him, made them lift their packs and forge a half-mile further down the trail before making camp.

Then, since the swift African dusk had fallen, he made them work by the light of torches clearing the thorn and grass from a clearing, had them erect a formidable *boma* before he let them eat or rest.

He sat down heavily by Greta's tent, forced himself to eat the food which Van Brunt handed him. The Dutchman and

Riegler ate as heartily as usual, but the girl had no appetite. She did not appear afraid, yet Bart sensed an uneasiness beneath her calm exterior, a tension she sought to hide.

"Well, are you ready to turn back?" Collins bluntly asked them.

Riegler's hard face snapped toward him. "Certainly not!" he declared. "Ve drove the swine off. They von't forget this lesson. Ve vill haff no more trouble."

Bart smiled thinly. He had inspected both his own and the enemy dead, and he did not like the things he had learend. He had found his gun and Scarletto's were the only ones which had done any damage. The marksmanship of Riegler and Van Brunt, even at such close quarters, left a lot to be desired. He doubted if they had accounted for one Wasuli between them.

"They accomplished what they set out to do," Collins said evenly, "and that was to knock out the bulk of our guards. We lost twelve Somali and five others are badly wounded. Only four Bantus were killed. No, we didn't drive them off. They merely set us up for the real attack."

The story had been there on the trail for Bart to read. Tamba's raiders had concentrated on the Somali guards when they could have wreaked much greater havoc by concentrating their efforts on the Bantus. The whole purpose of the surprise attack had been to knock out the safari's fighting men. True, they had killed Scarletto, but no real effort had been made to slay the other whites.

"Bah!" scoffed the German. "It was chust dat the Somali vere the only ones who fought. They vere trying for us all, but ve vere too tough for them. If Scarletto had kept his head, he'd be here, too."

Bart turned from the man in disgust, looked at Van Brunt. The Dutchman's eyes reminded him of highly polished glass slivers, so hard and bright they were in the firelight.

"None of us wish to turn back," Van Brunt said flatly. His glance flicked at Greta. "Apparently, it will be quite dangerous, but from now on, I for one will be a lot more watchful."

"Very well," Bart stated. He hadn't wanted to turn back, but simple honesty had forced him to make the offer. "By the

way, Van Brunt, you were on your toes this afternoon. That was good thinking to get to Miss Bregar the way you did and get her out of danger."

"Ah, you saw that?" The Dutchman smiled archly. "You give me undue credit. You see, little Greta is to me what a good luck charm is to other men. When I have her close at hand, I feel no harm can come to me. Yes, I am quite selfish."

He reached out and patted the girl's arm.

"You are too modest," she countered, removing her arm from under his blunt fingers. "I was most flattered by your action." Rather poor thanks, Bart thought, for a person to give her benefactor.

"In order to keep the blacks steady and make sure nothing goes wrong," Bart said, turning to business, "we three men will have to take turns on watch tonight."

Van Brunt nodded his approval. "Good idea. You've borne most of the responsibility, so you turn in, Collins, and I'll take the first watch. Then you can spell me and let Riegler have the third one."

BART was asleep as soon as he stretched out on his bedroll. He was accustomed to long, hard treks, to the physical and nervous strain of jungle life and his body swiftly replenished its strength. When Van Brunt awakened him, he felt refreshed and alert once more.

After he made the rounds of the camp, more to let the guards know he was on hand to watch and help them than to inspect the primitive defenses, he sat down just outside the flickering ring of light from the fire. He was sitting there, with his gun beside him, listening to the night noises, when he saw Greta emerge from her tent.

She came straight toward him, moving silently through the quiet camp. He thought of her as she had been when she stepped from the jungle pool. He had thought of her many times. There were many things he did not like about Greta Bregar, but her full, rich beauty was not numbered among them.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked her.

"I woke up and was lonely," she murmured. "Would it bother you, if I sat with you awhile?"

She wore a brief pair of shorts and a halter that looked like two very small handkerchiefs knotted together. He wondered whether that was her customary sleeping garb or whether she had donned it for his benefit. Nature had been most kind in allocating curves to Greta.

"I would be an unusual man if I said you wouldn't bother me," he declared frankly, "but, I'd like your company very much."

She laughed, a low, throaty laugh. "You surprise me."

"I don't think so," he said.

She sat down beside him, very close. He could feel her softness and her warmth. With the perfume she wore, he decided she could have been quite ugly and he would have liked her.

"Usually I know men," she told him, "but you baffle me. Just when I am ready to say the kind of man you are, then you are suddenly different. Somehow you elude me."

"I'm just an ordinary cutthroat," Bart laughed.

"You say that jokingly," she said quite seriously. "But you are hard. I saw that today, and even before. In a way, maybe you're harder than either Van Brunt or Riegler."

"Maybe I have more driving me forward," he said quietly.

She turned her face toward him. "Why?"

"My father and sister own a plantation on Tamboni Lake in the heart of the Wasuli territory," he explained. "I'll never rest until I learn what's become of them. The Wasuli chieftain was always our friend but a trader who escaped when the Wasuli went on the war path told me he saw our house burning.

"If they've been harmed," he went on harshly, "then I will have debts to pay to those who harmed them."

She was silent for a time. "You won't be able to get near the tribesmen," she said. "How can you hope to learn anything?"

"I have friends among them, men whose lives I've saved, men I've kept out of trouble," he pointed out. "They'll talk to me no matter what Tamba tells them. I'll find ways to learn the truth."

"Yes," she said, "I believe you will." A

note of regret was in her voice. "I believe you're the kind of man that only death would stop. But you can't avenged yourself against a whole tribe."

He drew his knees up, gripped his hands around them. He studied the darkness with restless eyes.

"Only against the ones responsible," he stated grimly.

"Then you mean against Tamba, the chieftain," she said.

"I'm not so sure," Bart said. "Somehow I don't believe Tamba started this. I feel there is someone back of Tamba, someone who is using him."

THE GIRL sensed that he had forgotten her. After a time she wriggled closer to him, the length of her thigh against his, the upper part of her body turned to press against him.

He twisted very deliberately, then in one motion his arms went around her, his mouth found her lips and he pressed her backwards. She responded with swift and violent ardor, arching under the pressure of his embrace, her fingers digging into his back muscles. He kissed her long and savagely for she asked no tenderness.

His senses were beginning to close out all else but the girl when, faintly, he heard the guttural cry of alarm. If she heard it, she gave no sign. He fought against himself for an instant, then tore her away and vaulted to his feet.

The camp was silent. There was no alarm, no movement. The guards were at their places, dark statues lit by the flames of the many small fires with which Bart had circled the thorn *boma*. But from their motionless figures, Bart knew they, too, had heard the cry.

"Why do you act so?" she asked poutingly.

"Someone was hurt or frightened," he snapped. "I heard him yell."

"Everything is all right," she coaxed him. "You can see everything is quiet. You imagined it." She held out her arms to him.

That voice had been German. Riegler was the one who had cried out.

Without answering her, he strode off, and he heard Greta mutter under her breath as she scrambled to her feet.

Riegler and Van Brunt had spread their

bed rolls within a few yards of each other near the girl's tent. They slept in the open, their mosquito netting tossed over bamboo crossbars. Bart quickly reached the tent, the firelight at his back reflecting past him on the two mounds of netting.

He went to Riegler and lighting a match, cupped it in his hands. The German lay on his side, his mouth open, drawing the slow breaths of a man in the deepest slumber. A long native knife was clutched loosely in his right hand.

Bart thought at first he was all right, but there was something strangely awkward in the way he lay, in the way his mouth gaped. It was odd also that the precise German would go to sleep under such sloppily arranged netting.

Riegler's left hand extended outside the netting. Bart stood so that one foot was almost against the German's hand. On impulse, he moved his toe over the extended fingers and stepped down. Riegler didn't move.

Then Bart understood why the man slept so peacefully. He had been slugged. He was unconscious.

He heard a movement behind him and turned. Van Brunt was sitting up watching him. The Dutchman's voice held none of the drowsiness of a man just awakened.

"What is it, Collins?" he asked a little too calmly.

Bart shook out the match and walked close to the Dutchman.

"I thought I heard somebody cry out," he explained in a low voice. "Sounded like Riegler, but he's sleeping like a baby. Did you hear anything?"

"Wasn't a sound over here," Van Brunt said. "Probably one of the blacks dreaming."

V

THE GIRL was waiting for him at her tent. "You were right," he said. "Van Brunt was wide awake and hadn't heard a thing." He smiled and reached for her. "I guess I've been in the bush so long that kissing a girl makes me hear queer noises. Let's start over and I promise nothing will interfere this time."

She avoided his arms. "You talked to Riegler?" she asked with a queer intentness.

"Oh, no," he said offhandedly. "He's the soundest sleeper I've ever seen. He was really dead to the world."

He caught her, pulled her against him. With her face so close, he could see she had a worried frown. He kissed her cheek and throat. She hardly seemed conscious of him. Her body was cold and unyielding.

With an abrupt, business-like agility which denoted considerable practice, she broke away from him. "I'm quite sleepy, Mr. Collins," she said. "Good night."

She stopped and stared at him when he laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" she demanded.

"Just a happy nature," he said.

She gave the tent flap a savage tug as she closed it behind her.

The first blocks in an involved puzzle had fallen into place. As he walked away from the tent, he had no need to wait for Riegler to awaken to learn what had happened.

Greta and the German had tried to murder Van Brunt. She had kept Bart occupied, while Riegler, thinking the Dutchman would be deep in sleep after his long day, had crept up to cut Van Brunt's throat with the native knife. But the Dutchman was too sharp for them. He had been waiting for Riegler and with either a kick or one blow of his ham-like hand had put the German in dreamland.

For reasons of his own, it had suited the Dutchman to fling the unconscious Riegler back into bed and play innocent when Bart appeared.

Bart had fallen in with murderous groups before, but never with a crew as politely vicious, as calmly ruthless as this. Apparently all of them together had murdered the Spaniard by leading him into the quicksand. The German then had killed Lomoka to seal his lips about the Spaniard.

The Wasuli had wielded the weapons which cut down Scarletto, but actually Riegler, Van Brunt and Greta had helped in his slaying because they had not turned their own guns against the blacks attacking him. Tonight the Dutchman had been on the list for death.

Bart couldn't visualize any stakes in the Wasuli territory rich enough to warrant this brutal game of devil take the hindmost. It was among the poorest of the Congo districts, poor in ivory and almost

completely lacking in diamonds and gold. Yet Bart knew from experience that only material gain made white men act as these people did.

And one other thing puzzled him. Why had Van Brunt rushed to protect the girl when the Wasuli struck? Since they were all so evidently playing dog eat dog, why hadn't he let her take her own chances and hope that the Wasuli would cut her down? Certainly her beauty held no attraction for the Dutchman, because he was the only one of the group who had shown no yen for her.

The three whites couldn't delay the answers much longer, though. Tomorrow night they would reach Tamboni Lake, the place where they had wanted to go "hunting."

In the morning, Riegler was more surly and arrogant than ever. He blustered and swaggered, shoving the heavily-laden blacks from his path, criticizing the progress of the safari at the top of his voice. Like the Prussian bully-boy he was, however, he was careful not to cross the watchful Dutchman.

WITHIN a half-hour Bart had enough of this foolishness, but he was too busy with the blacks to take on more trouble. The drums were talking again and with every step forward the Bantus grew more fearful. Bart drove them hard, keeping them so occupied that they had small opportunity to talk among themselves. But when they began to blow and stumble he was forced to call a rest.

He sensed what was coming. The whites of their eyes showing, the blacks jabbered excitedly as they squatted by their packs. Finally, they fell silent and Bosnagi hesitantly approached him, accompanied by a group of Bantus.

"*Baas* Collins," the powerful native said uneasily in his own tongue, "the men say you are a brave and wise leader." He went on with a long speech on Bart's wonderful qualities. "They know, therefore," he concluded, "that one so wise as *Baas* Collins does not wish to lead his men into death. They are afraid, master, and they wish to turn back. They will go no further."

Bart expected the Bantus to react in this manner. He was surprised they had waited

so long. But it did not upset him; he knew how to handle them.

But before he could speak, Riegler swaggered up beside him. "Und vot iss dis black ape talking about?" he demanded loudly.

"If you will leave the handling of the safari to me, Riegler," Bart said tightly, "we'll get to Tamboni Lake in good shape. The blacks are frightened, that's all. They say they don't want to go any further, but I think I can bring them around without any trouble."

Riegler's ugly slit of a mouth jerked down in a sneer. "Bah! Are you afraid that you coddle them? Don't waste vords on animals, I show you how to get them moving!"

Before Bart realized what the stupid Prussian was about, Riegler whipped his rifle up, crashed the butt against the side of Bosnagi's head. The black man fell like a poled ox under the brutal, unexpected blow. The natives around Bosnagi were stunned, staring at the bloody smear on their leader's head as though at first they could not understand.

"You're too soft, Collins!" Riegler snarled. "Now tell them to . . ."

Bart hit him, driving his fist like a pile-driver straight into that cruel mouth.

The German reeled back, crashed into the ring of watching blacks, and struck the ground as they leaped away from him. Riegler cursed, and heaved his shoulders up, fighting to level his rifle before the guide could reach him.

But Bart, his face white with anger, was an old hand at rough and tumble fighting. His boot thudded against the rifle stock, tore it from Riegler's grasp. Then he went twisting in, yanking Riegler upright with his left hand, straightening him with a terrific right. The German tried to knee him and got three sickening blows in the belly for his trouble.

Riegler staggered back, clawing for his pistol, but Bart drove after him, clouted him over the heart and started working on his face. The bully-boy forgot the pistol in the desperate need to protect himself. He tried to hit back, tried to fend off the shattering blows. He was trembling in every muscle, sudden and terrible fear written all over him.

Bart was merciless, beating the man to a pulp with a cold, methodical thorough-

ness. He had had enough of Riegler and he meant to hammer the German until he was a sodden, pain-wracked wreck. He was going to give him a taste of his own brutal medicine.

He beat Riegler into a stupor, slugged him until he moaned with pain. He wouldn't let the German stay down and he stopped just short of knocking him senseless. Finally, when he grew sick of the business himself and stepped back, Riegler was still conscious. The bloody, unrecognizable German slid to his knees, fell forward on his face, retching and jerking.

Bart watched him for a time, his features like granite. Then his eyes went around the thick circle of blacks that had gathered. They had watched the whole battle in utter silence, watched with bitter satisfaction a kind of justice they understood. Bosnagi had roused, enough to watch the fight with pain-clouded eyes. His glance met Bart's.

"We follow you, *Baas*," he said hoarsely.

THE NATIVES dispersed, going back to their packs, hoisting the loads without a word. There was no need for the arguments. They were with Collins now to the last.

The blonde girl and Van Brunt still stood there. He looked at them challengingly. "Have you anything to say?" he asked angrily.

The faint outline of a smile tugged the Dutchman's lips. "Good show," he said. "Very good show."

Greta's eyes were expressionless as they moved from Riegler to Bart. She shrugged and walked off. The German lay in the dirt, unable to move. Neither of his companions went to him.

Bart treated Bosnagi's head, then had a stretcher made for Riegler. The Bantus vied for the privilege of carrying the German the rest of that day, deeming it a great pleasure to hear him moan every time the stretcher jolted.

Two hours before sundown they came out of the dense jungle onto a sparsely wooded bluff overlooking Tamboni Lake. Its broad waters rippled silver in the late sun. Waterfowl settled around its edges in restless clouds. In the shallows, hippos sluggishly took their pleasure. Whereas through all the miles of jungle they had

traveled, they had seen few animals, here game showed itself on every side.

Bart had settled on this place as a permanent camp long before they reached it. It was easy to defend because the Wasuli could attack only from the jungle side. A small path went down the bluff to the lake, insuring a plentiful supply of water, fish and fowl if the need arose.

The only objection to the place was that the Wasuli could cut the safari off from any retreat. Under the circumstances, Bart did not regard that as a valid objection, because no matter where they camped, if the Wasuli decided to attack in force, any retreat they attempted would turn into a slaughter. And from the steady drum talk, he guessed that warriors were being called up from every *kraal* in the area.

So long as they held a strong position on the bluff, they could beat off the Wasuli. Bart had known from the first that their sole hope of leaving the Wasuli would be eventually to lure Chief Tamba into treating with them. He had once called Bart friend and perhaps he could be made to see reason.

Bart put his men to building a low wooden stockade. Then in front of the stockade, he erected a second wall of thorn. By dark, the work was finished and a supply of firewood stacked within the camp. But not once did Tamba's men show themselves. The night passed without incident, and the quietness of the Wasuli troubled Bart. It was not like aroused natives to delay an attack, allow an enemy time to prepare defenses.

He got his answer when the sun blazed up over the lake. As though the coming of the sun were a signal, the jungle before the camp came alive with movement. From the churning underbrush moved a vast and silent host of warriors, edging out in a solid mass until they stood packed across the mouth of the bluff.

When he saw the Wasuli did not mean to attack immediately, Bart warned his men to hold their fire. He sent every man to the stockade, gave careful instructions for repelling an attack. If they turned back the first rush, the Wasuli would never after be able to penetrate the stockade. Then he waited. Tamba would have to make the first move.

For long minutes the Wasuli stood si-

lently, exhibiting their strength. At last, a great shout went up from them and they clashed their spears against their shields. They opened a lane in their center and down it strode a tall, thin black wearing a horned headdress, and a lion skin tossed over his shoulders. It was Tamba, head chief of the Wasuli. Clustered about him were six sub-chieftains, proud and arrogant.

"I, Tamba, would talk with your leader," he cried in Wasuli. "Come out that we may speak as warriors. No harm shall come to you."

It was what Bart wanted, a chance to talk with the chief. He translated Tamba's words to his companions.

"It may be a trick," the girl said. "Van Brunt and I will go with you. I can use a gun and if they try anything, then we'll have a chance to hold our own."

Bart shook his head. "Tamba's word is good," he declared. "I'll be in no danger."

Riegler, his face swollen and disfigured, limped painfully to the barricade. He was armed with both pistol and rifle. He did not look at Bart.

"Perhaps Greta is right," the Dutchman said thoughtfully, studying her. "In any case it can do no harm for us to go along. He has his advisors, and you can have yours."

BART trusted the Wasuli leader, so he did not make an issue of the matter. Mainly, he wanted to talk with Tamba, and his mind was occupied with that desire.

He pressed through a small opening in the stockade, cleared a path in the thorn. Behind him came the three whites, Riegler lagging behind despite an effort to preserve his dignity.

Bart and Tamba confronted each other at a point almost equidistant between their two forces. The chief was grim and unbending. He gave no indication he recognized the white man. He fastened a wooden stare above Collins' head and kept it there.

"This is a strange meeting for old friends," Collins said, "for men who have eaten and hunted together."

"There are things beyond friendship, beyond the small wishes of men," snapped Tamba with a bitter twist of his mouth. "The gods speak and men obey. Blood runs

in the jungle and it is the blades of my warriors that loose it. We have said to all other peoples, 'Beware of our lands,' and if they disobey us, then the fault is not ours that they die."

The lean, hard chieftain was changed. It was in his face, his manner, and his voice. There was no pleasure in Tamba, no joy in his strength of arms.

"Why did you ask me to come out?" asked Collins.

For the first time Tamba's eyes met his.

"I did not wish to spill your blood," the chieftain began. "Twice did my warriors turn you back from our borders so that I would not have to harm you. That was what I wished to say. That was what I wanted you to know. This third time I cannot protect you."

Bart blinked in puzzlement. This was a queer message for a chieftain to bring. True, the Wasuli had turned him away from their borders twice, and what he had taken for luck was, he learned, merely their reluctance to kill him. But why was it so important for Tamba to tell him this? It was almost like an apology.

"I am not easy to kill, O Tamba," Bart said quietly. "When the best of your warriors lie dead on this cliff, perhaps you will wonder again at the wisdom of fighting a friend."

"None of my warriors will die here," Tamba said, and his voice was only a whisper. "None at all. The battle is won." He looked at the ground and there was shame on his face.

Bart frowned, seeking the meaning in Tamba's words. Then he felt the pistol prod him in the back and Greta was standing directly behind him, with Van Brunt and Riegler close on either side.

"Don't move or cry out, Collins," she warned, "unless you've lost all interest in your sister and father! As Tamba says, the battle is won."

It was too much for him to understand immediately. He had fought to bring these people into the Wasuli lands, taken every precaution to protect them, and suddenly they were betraying him.

"What . . . ?" he started.

"It's simple, Collins," Greta interrupted. "Tamba works for me!"

"For us," Van Brunt amended.

"Now just walk straight ahead through

the Wasuli lines," the girl continued, "and we'll stay close to you so your Somali and Bantus won't suspect a thing. I'll go back in a minute and tell them everything is all right and that you've gone to Tamba's *kraal* to make peace."

VI

THERE WAS no mistaking the threat of the pistol or the cool deadliness of the girl's voice. He walked ahead, too stunned for a time to speak. As soon as he was in the jungle, they disarmed him and bound his hands. Greta immediately disappeared.

"What's this all about?" Bart demanded of Van Brunt.

The Dutchman's blue eyes glittered. "Money, of course," he growled. "More money than most men ever dream exists."

"You're crazy if you think you'll find money, or anything you can turn into money, around here," scoffed Bart.

The Dutchman rummaged for his pipe, began to fill it with a maddening deliberation. "Oh, it's here all right," he said. "You see, we scnt it here, loot from most of the countries of Europe. Rather clever of us, wasn't it, picking as unlikely a spot as this to hide it in. It took infinite pains, many months and, of course, many lives to smuggle it in and plant it on your father's land. There were a few more than twenty of us who started out together four years ago, but what with one thing and another, only five were left when we ended the game."

Sudden comprehension registered on Bart. "I should have guessed," he said in disgust. "You're Nazis—rats running for cover."

Riegler, who had been glaring at Collins, snarled threateningly. Van Brunt remained unperturbed. He lit his pipe, drew rasping, contented puffs on it.

"The National Socialist Party listed Scarletto, Greta and me as art experts," the Dutchman went on, an edge of irony in his tone. "It was our job, to bustle around after our conquering armies, gain possession of a great variety of valuable objects, without regard to who owned them, and send them back to the Greater Reich. You can see that our jobs offered us vast opportunities. Naturally, we did rather well for ourselves."

Bart spat as though to clear his mouth of a suddenly unclean taste. "The rest of you betrayed your own countries first, then betrayed the Nazis, and are now trying to betray each other. Where does our Aryan superman fit in?"

Riegler limped toward the bound and helpless guide, summoned his strength and hit Bart high on the cheek. Bart stumbled backwards, but he didn't fall. Van Brunt stepped in and blocked the German. Riegler knew better than to dispute the issue.

"You must excuse Karl," the Dutchman said apologetically. "It isn't only that he can't resist striking a helpless man. And it is more difficult for him than for Greta and me to swallow the fact he is a person wholly without honor. You see he comes of a noble Prussian military family which had honorably murdered and stolen for Germany for many generations. He is the first to murder and steal purely for himself, so he gets touchy at times, feels kind of naked without a cloak of patriotism to cover him."

The Wasuli were leaving in long columns, disappearing down the path which led back to Tamba's *kraal*. Only a holding force was being left to coop up the Bantus and Somali. The chieftain and his personal guard held their places, however, waiting for Greta to return. So far as Tamba's actions were concerned, the blonde girl appeared to be the most important one of the whites.

"Riegler was a great help, though," mused Van Brunt. "We knew how to steal the stuff and he had the proper connections to smuggle it into Spain, where the efficient and corrupt *Senor Pedraza* took over and moved it to Africa. That may sound difficult, but when you've spent a lifetime in gun-running, white slavery and smuggling drugs like our late friend *Pedraza*, it's surprising what you can do even in wartime."

"You talk too much," growled the German as Van Brunt settled himself on a fallen log.

Bart also wondered somewhat at the Dutchman's talk. Van Brunt seldom talked without a purpose. He wasn't one of those men who merely liked the sound of his own voice. But what reason could he have for his present rambling?

"Little Greta was our prize," the big

man continued, ignoring Riegler. "In our business you can't beat a woman with a beautiful body, animal cunning and no scruples."

"No doubt," Bart said bitterly, "but I'm more interested in knowing what my family's got to do with this and why I'm mixed up in it."

VAN BRUNT puffed contentedly at his pipe for a few seconds. He appeared perfectly relaxed. Only his eyes revealed his hair-trigger alertness.

"Your family had the misfortune to live in the place we selected for our hide-out," he said softly. "And you—you had the misfortune of being the kind of man who wouldn't have rested until you learned what had happened to your father and sister. What else could we do but eliminate all of you? It will be a long time before we can safely convert our loot into cash. Until then we can't afford the luxury of mercy."

Tremors of helpless rage shook Bart as he heard Van Brunt calmly reveal the liquidation of his father and sister. The Dutchman looked away until Collins got himself under a semblance of control, but Riegler watched him avidly, savoring his misery.

"Which one of you murdered them, and how?" Bart's voice wasn't pleasant to hear.

"Greta handled it through the natives," the Dutchman explained. He glanced at Riegler. "She always gets someone else to do her dirty work. Pedraza got her into the Congo about the time of the landings in Normandy. We saw the handwriting on the wall and wanted to get our preparations made.

"You remember the kindly old trader, Emil Schacht, who wandered around this part of the country and everybody thought was half-crazy?" Van Brunt asked. "He was a German agent. He had to be. Riegler had both his sons in a concentration camp.

"Well, he helped Greta, introduced her to your father as a student of primitive art. By the time your father woke up to the fact that she was dancing at Wasuli voodoo ceremonies, using poison and dime-store magic to build up a reputation as a witch, and promising the natives she would make them the greatest tribe in the Congo, it was too late for him to stop her."

The Dutchman paused and listened. No sound came from the camp. It was appar-

ent the blonde girl was being successful in convincing Bart's men that all was well with their leader.

"It was child's play for her to convince the blacks that your father and sister were bad *juju* and that they must be removed. Her cleverest trick was to build a huge clay idol—very holy—to protect the Wasuli from evil spirits. She filled its insides with the boxes of stolen trinkets which Pedraza smuggled into the coast and old Trader Schacht transported to Tamba's *kraal*."

His pipe had gone out. He looked at it regretfully, knocked it against the log and restored it to his pocket.

"Funny thing," Van Brunt added, with no evidence of humor, "old Schacht was the very first sacrifice to the god. Greta wanted to make sure she could trust him to keep quiet. In our business, dead men are about the only ones you can trust."

The cold-blooded recital had the quality of a nightmare about it. Bart knew these people existed, yet it was hard for his mind to accept them as they actually were. They were too completely lacking in human qualities, too deadly and merciless, too cunning and murderous.

It was a clever plan, losing themselves in this isolated, seldom traversed region, turning the hiding place of their loot into the Wasuli holy of holies, and using the savage tribesmen to keep away all outsiders.

There was the soft, quick sound of footsteps. Greta appeared, a slight, pleased smile on her face.

"Goot!" exclaimed Riegler. "I grow tired of Van Brunt's talking. He tells our life history. Vat do ve now—get rid of this one?" He was eager to settle scores with Bart.

"So?" Her glance went questioningly toward the Dutchman. Their eyes clung. Then she smiled.

"Now that we are at the end, you grow nervous, Karl," she said lightly. "We three are rich and safe at last." She gave the word "three" a peculiar emphasis. "Van Brunt talks because he is relieved, as am I."

SHE TURNED and called Tamba. The tall chieftain hurried forward, his manner tinged with fear. She told him they were ready to proceed to the *kraal*, ordered

him to have his guards watch Bart closely on the trip.

"Wait!" Bart growled at the chieftain. "Did this woman order you to kill my father and sister?"

Both Tamba and the girl were startled by his unexpected question. Greta frowned, her eyes flicking at Van Brunt again as she realized how much he had talked, but she rapidly regained her composure. Tamba was trembling, his face gray and miserable.

"It's all right, Tamba," she said. "Tell him, if he must know."

"Draw knife across their throats, she say, and hide them where no white men can ever find. If we do this, they can do us no more harm by changing to evil spirits in the dark night."

As he spoke, the black leader kept his his face averted, and the moment he finished he backed away. Tamba obviously did not like to talk of the matter.

"It was a foolish question," the girl said. "Why torture yourself? But then your father and sister were the same way, snooping for knowledge which could do them no good. That's why I knew we would never be safe so long as any of you lived."

Bart was very calm now. The shock and rage had passed. He felt only a deadly, methodical hate for these three.

The guards were waiting. He took his place between them and began the long walk. The jungle was shadowy and unreal about him. He walked heavily, hearing nothing but Tamba's words repeated over and over in his brain.

One less experienced in the ways of Africa would have had a hard time convincing himself that the Wasuli would so suddenly turn against old friends. But Bart understood the festering sore of superstition which existed in these simple black minds. In their precarious lives fear was the driving element, fear of the unknown, fear of the countless lurking deaths and tragedies against which they were helpless.

Their primitive lives were a constant battle for survival, and since they were at the mercy of so many forces stronger than they were, they clutched at every hope of aid from the unseen powers which they believed peopled the world about them. They

were ready-made subjects for a skilled and heartless charlatan like Greta Bregar.

Tamba led the way, going slowly because the stiff, sore Riegler could manage no faster pace than a walk. Greta followed Riegler, and Van Brunt brought up behind her. Bart and his guards came last. The Dutchman was careful to keep behind his two companions, and had Bart been as watchful as usual, he would have noticed that several times Greta tried to no avail to drop behind the Dutchman.

When Tamba warned them to walk carefully, Bart roused from his thoughts. The chieftain was pointing to a deep, rectangular pit freshly dug in the trail. They had to skirt its edges to pass.

It was a nearly completed trap of the type used by the Wasuli to catch the larger animals. Half of the long, needle-pointed wooden stakes already were in place in the bottom, neatly arranged in long rows. When the other half of the floor was covered with stakes, the pit would be cleverly topped with a thin covering of thatch, dirt and leaves. An unwary animal stepping on the apparently sound topping would plunge through onto the stakes.

Part way around the edge of the pit, Greta stopped to inspect the primitive but effective trap. When she stopped, the Dutchman likewise halted, remaining two paces behind her. At that moment, an ugly snarl sounded. Tamba cried an alarm, jabbing his arm toward a leopard crouching in a tree-fork directly across the path from Van Brunt.

Instantly every eye focused on the leopard. Van Brunt swung to face the beast, bringing up his rifle, but Tamba's guards were swifter. Two brawny warriors blasted their spears at the leopard with desperate speed.

One spear missed by a fraction, bit deep into the tree, but the other one caught the cat full in the chest. Then Van Brunt snapped two shots into it. The animal reared, fell backward into the underbrush, clawing as it died.

The whole attention of the party was focused on the threshing figure. But some intuitive sense forced Bart to shift his glance to Van Brunt. The intent Dutchman had lowered his rifle, stood poised on the very edge of the pit. As Bart's eyes

swung to Van Brunt, he saw the blonde girl take two hard, driving steps and plunge against the Dutchman's back.

Van Brunt pitched forward under the unexpected impact. It was characteristic of the strange, quick-thinking man that he did not cry out. Instead, he twisted in mid-air, trying to throw himself far enough out in the pit to land in the section still lacking stakes.

But it was too much to ask of his body. He could do no more than get part of his body beyond the waiting stakes. He fell face down, and Bart noted as he struck, he continued to grip his rifle, holding it under him by its stock with both hands.

Van Brunt gave a hoarse, agonized scream as the stakes tore into his flesh. He heaved up awkwardly a few inches, then grew rigidly quiet, though his breath continued to come in slow, intolerably painful gasps. Rivulets of blood wound down the fresh white wood of the stakes. In the underbrush the death paroxysm of the leopard was over. The jungle all at once was eerily quiet.

GRETA stood at the edge of the pit, staring down at Van Brunt. Her lips were slightly parted and she was panting. She held her arms stiffly at her side, her fingers extended.

Horror held the Wasuli. They had moved smoothly and surely when the leopard had threatened, but this was different. At last, several of them gathered their wits and leaped forward. Greta raised her gaze from Van Brunt, saw what the warriors intended to do.

"Let him be!" she commanded in Wasuli. "By black magic he summoned the leopard to slay me, but my *juju* was stronger. Both he and the leopard were as nothing against me. Let this be a lesson for all to see."

The blacks backed away, awed by this demonstration of the white witch's power. Even Riegler was surprised, but he knew well enough that Van Brunt hadn't fallen.

"At last we are rid of him," he said in his guttural English. "Ha! He was so sure of himself and to think you were the vum to get him."

"Yes," she said, as though her thoughts were far away. "They are all gone now—

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all but us—only two out of more than twenty who thought to share in the treasure. And this big one was the only one I feared.”

Riegler nodded in understanding. They appeared to forget that Bart stood within two yards of them.

“I hated him from the first,” she continued. “He watched us weed out the others, and always he laughed, because he thought he was too clever for us ever to get him. It amused him to see us bloody our hands because he planned to take everything for himself in the end.”

Bart held no brief for the Dutchman, though he had always thought the man in many ways superior to his companions. Van Brunt, as well as the other four, had been responsible for the death of his sister and father. He would be glad to see them all dead, but he could not stomach their way of killing.

“Even wolves do a good job when they turn on one of the pack,” he said in disgust. “Don’t leave him there to bleed to death. If you must kill him, at least do it with a bullet.”

Riegler’s eyes were red and mean in his swollen face. He stared at Collins and when he spoke there was a gloating tone in his coarse voice.

“I do not shoot him, Collins,” he said. “I want him to die chust like dat. The oder night he hit me, Collins—only once.” He paused to let his meaning sink in. “Now perhaps you can be thinking of vat I plan vor you.”

Bart realized Riegler meant exactly what he said. Vicious and brutalized as he was, the German’s conception of revenge was to degrade and torture.

“Maybe so,” said Bart, “if your sweet little girl friend doesn’t decide to murder you first. I’d give some thought to that, Riegler. You’re not much of a prize yourself, and with you out of the way, she would have the whole treasure instead of only half.”

His words caught them both by surprise. An odd look passed over Greta’s face, as though Bart indeed had read a secret thought. Apparently the idea that the girl would ever turn against him had never entered the swaggering, self-centered German’s head. He shot a suspicious glance at her, but already she had formed her ex-

pression into an amused, slightly scoffing look.

“Come now,” she said lightly to Bart, but her words were intended for Riegler. “You’ll have to do better than that if you wish to make trouble between Karl and me. Karl is my kind of man. He gets not only his share of the treasure, but also me.” She patted the German’s arm. “You’re right about Van Brunt, darling,” she said. “We’ll leave him just as he is for hitting you.”

VII

BART did not speak again on the trip to the *kraal*. As they took him past the central compound, the milling warriors stared at him, their faces blank and unfeeling. He could expect no help from them. He was shoved into a hut and left there. The guards at the door would not speak to him.

He lay on the floor, too tired to mind the dirt and smell. He dozed fitfully until the pain from his bound arms prodded him out of his stupor. He could sense the rising excitement of the natives as the day wore on. The hand drums began their nervous thrumming at nightfall, and he heard the voices of many speakers and one voice he knew was Greta Bregar’s.

Soon after that they came for him. Riegler came into the hut with four guards and kicked Bart because he had difficulty getting on his feet.

“Ve go now to see Greta’s god, you und I,” he said. “Only you von’t come back!”

Outside Bart could see a long line of natives, each bearing a torch, weaving into the jungle and heading toward the lake. Riegler prodded him with the rifle into the line behind Tamba and Greta. Every time he stumbled, Riegler jabbed him viciously with the gun.

When they reached the lake and the procession began to wind down the cliffside, the blacks began to chant over and over the single sentence: “Death fills the night, but Taa is the God of Death and protects his people.”

A cave mouth appeared in the glare of the torches. It was a small opening, but once inside, Bart saw a great cavern spread before him. The yellow light of the torches climbed straight up in the still air and

the shadows of the moving natives were eerie giants parading along the walls. In this unreal atmosphere, Bart had the feeling once more that he was dreaming, that such things could not be, that soon he would awaken and laugh at the confused fantasies which haunted his sleep.

But the huge and grotesque figure which emerged from the gloom at the far end of the cavern was not unreal. It was the giant clay idol made by Greta. It was the living symbol of the fierce god Taa to whom the natives chanted. And crude though it was, there was a stark and terrible power about the idol.

Taa was a representation of brute, unreasoning power, a gigantic male figure, more beast than man, and about it was something obscene and incredibly evil. The idol crouched on a raised ledge of rock which extended from the far wall, crouched on a heap of figures meant to be struggling, dying men. The work was crude, but there was an undeniable skill in it, as though this monstrous figure had been forced out of Greta's mind.

The Wasuli chanted and groveled before the idol, and Greta, standing at the base of the figure, led them in the barbaric ceremony. He hated the girl with a malevolent hate, hated her even more than he did the grinning, excited Riegler.

Warriors painted from head to foot with stripes of blue and yellow paint dragged long tree branches from which all leaves and bark had been stripped to a place before the god. These branches were laid out as the spokes of a great wheel. The hub of the wheel was laid over a thick mattress of faggots.

Behind Bart other painted blacks carried in a crude wooden cross, anchored it in a deep hole prepared beforehand. Then he was roughly pulled back to the cross, his ankles lashed at its base, his hands tied to the crossbars.

"This is it!" he thought. "Now they'll give Taa his blood sacrifice."

BUT HE WAS WRONG. The victims of Taa did not die so quickly or so easily. While the worshippers of Taa returned to the *kraal* for a wild orgy lasting until dawn, the victim was left alone in the cavern to face the god. Only at dawn



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when the sacrificial fire had burned down into a searing mass of coals did the blacks return. Drunk with the madness of their night-long rites, the blacks swept back to the cavern, lifted the cross from its place and cast the victim into the bed of coals. If a black man was the sacrifice, he was usually out of his mind with superstitious terror by the time the maddened Wasuli came to burn him to death.

Bart was sick with his helplessness, but he fought to show no emotion. He did not resist or beg for mercy. In his harsh face, only the agony of his eyes betrayed his berserk desire to tear the girl and Riegler apart with his bare hands.

He heard her give the victim over into the keeping of Taa, watched Tamba light the sacrificial fire, and he held firm while on hands and knees the blacks crawled backward out of the cavern. Greta and Riegler followed them, and neither one looked at him as they went past.

Tamba knelt alone before the idol, and Bart heard the low sing-song of his voice. The Wasuli leader was praying for his people, asking Taa to protect them. He prayed in utmost sincerity and to Bart's bewilderment he finished by pleading with Taa to be merciful with Collins.

Because he was the chief, Tamba did not back away from the god on hands and knees. He walked backwards, slowly and with dignity, until he reached Bart. Tamba turned and looked into the white man's eyes. His face held none of the contagion of cruel excitement which had infected his warriors.

"I did not want this, *Baas*," he said unexpectedly, "but it is the law of the god. I did not want you to die, *Baas*, but I could do nothing. The White Witch rules. She speaks with the voice of Taa.

"You are a white man, *Baas*, so you do not believe in Taa," Tamba resumed, "even though he reached out across the jungle a distance of many suns to bring you here to die. The White Witch is his servant and no man dares oppose her. Wherever she goes, men die."

He paused and reached out his hand to Bart's shoulder. Though Tamba's hand was on his sweat-stained shirt, the white man still gave no slightest hint that he knew of his presence.

"Only Taa himself can save you now,"

Tamba said without hope, "and it is too much to wish, for in saving you he would be forced to reject the White Witch. But I do not wish you to die thinking I killed the old *Baas* Collins and your sister. They live!"

What foolishness was Tamba saying to soften his hate? Anger flowed into Bart's face. His glance struck the black with physical force.

"I have no need of lies, Tamba," he gritted. "In the forest you told me you killed them, cut their throats with a knife as you would slay a goat."

Tamba shook his head jerkily. "No, no!" he objected. "If the White Witch had said the word 'kill', then I would have had to obey." He wet his lips, looked furtively about. "But she said to draw a knife across their throats and hide them where no white men could ever find them."

Bart stiffened and his full attention was on Tamba.

"A dull knife lightly held does not kill," the chieftain whispered. "Your father and sister are hidden in the forest where no white man could ever find them. The old *Baas* Collins curses me because he does not understand why my warriors must keep them there. I watch over them and they are never hungry."

The words turned over in Bart's mind and then he laughed, a slightly hysterical laugh. He understood. Many times the child-like blacks when confronted by duties they did not like had followed the letter of his words in such a way as to totally avoid carrying out the meaning.

Bart caught hold of himself, choked off his laughter. "Thank you, Tamba," he said simply. "Take care of them. The White Witch will leave after a time and then they can go free."

Tamba's fingers bit into Bart's shoulder, and then suddenly, the tall chieftain was gone.

WITHIN the cavern, Bart's only measure of time was the slow dying of the sacrificial fire. He watched the flame creep out along the limbs as the faggots burned themselves out.

It was sadism of the highest order to leave a man alone in that vast, shadowy underground place, knowing that his life dripped away with the minutes, knowing

how horribly he would die on those glowing embers.

And always before him crouched the hideous figure of Taa on its heap of crumpled bodies, crouching in the silence and the flickering light like some obscene monster risen from the bowels of the earth.

As the night drained away, tension grew in Bart. The fire had died to a great red bed of coals, when he heard someone approaching.

The noise was close at hand before it registered. It was an odd dragging sound, painful and slow. He twisted his head as far as he could, peering into the shadows. A great bulk loomed out of the blackness.

"Van Brunt!" he gasped.

Had this night of terror shredded his mind? Was this some grim hallucination? He had seen the Dutchman dying on the stakes.

Wide-eyed he watched the bloody apparition hobble towards him, awkwardly using crooked sticks for crutches.

"Yes, it's me," the big man said hoarsely.

"I do not die yet."

Bart stared at him wonderingly. The Dutchman's torn clothes were stiff with blood and not all of it was dry. His broad, fat face was ghastly white, and the flesh sagged from his cheeks in mushy chunks. His eyes were dull, deep-buried stones, fixed and unblinking.

"You're insane," Collins said. "You're dying on your feet and yet because of that damnable treasure you've crawled this far."

"Insane?" croaked the Dutchman. "Yes, perhaps. I've waited too long for tonight to let so insubstantial a thing as flesh and blood keep me from victory."

Van Brunt was against him then, clumsily fumbling for the knife in his belt.


"What are you doing?" Bart said tightly.

"I'm going to cut you free," the Dutchman said. "You'll have to help me. I didn't want to share the ending with anyone, but I'm hurt so bad, I have to accept it."

As the last rope fell away, Bart sneered, "You fool! Do you think I'd help any of you murderers!" He leaped forward, reaching for the rifle.

Amazement came into the white mask of Van Brunt's face. Then his heavy jaw set and he lunged forward, reaching his huge hands for Bart's throat.

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BART was taken off-guard by Van Brunt's action. The Dutchman's hands found their mark, and as his injured legs would not support him, he pulled Bart down with him as he fell.

Collins found he had made a mistake in attacking so soon. His arms were almost useless after the long hours in which he had been tied to the post. His fingers refused to grip and there was no strength in his muscles.

His lungs became an agony and his throat was bursting under the merciless pressure of those great, blunt fingers. In sudden fright he knew Van Brunt was killing him.

Then as everything began to fade from his mind he felt the pressure lift. By the time he could see again, Van Brunt was sitting a few yards across the cavern floor from him, holding the rifle.

"I'm sorry," the Dutchman said, and there was a tremendous weariness in his voice. "I do not think so clearly. I should have known you would react this way, but with so much blood gone, my mind is fuzzy. I tell you now why you must help."

Bart painfully heaved himself to a sitting position. It was hard to believe that the Dutchman could dredge enough strength up out of that battered body to choke a man senseless. There was fresh blood on Van Brunt's clothes, so he knew the effort had opened some of the wounds. A little bleeding, Bart told himself, and even this iron man would crumple.

"I'm not what you think, Collins," Van Brunt declared. "I'm not what Greta and Karl think. My country is a small one and when the Nazis came, there was little we could do as a nation.

"But many of us knew there were things we could do as individuals," the Dutchman continued. "I was a sculptor, a good one. This she-wolf Greta was one of my pupils. Even then she worked for the Nazis. When Holland fell, she asked me to work with them."

His voice grew stronger, clearer as he talked. The memories seemed to stir him and bring a grim, new strength.

"I agreed—and this you must believe—I agreed because from within I could do the Nazis harm, where otherwise I could do little. My government knew of my decision and approved it.

"I took the job of official jewel and art thief. I was a valuable spy for the allies. But there was one job I assumed for myself—the stamping out of the band of miserable lesser thieves who had clustered under the Nazi cloak.

"I joined them, and since it would be done anyway, I stole with them," he admitted. "But I did it with a double purpose. First, I turned their own greed in upon themselves, set them to killing each other so their own share would be greater. And second, I forced them to keep the majority of the loot together. The loot is all there in the idol, and if you help me dispose of Riegler and Greta, it will all one day find its way back to the rightful owners."

The Dutchman took a long breath, spread his blunt fingers wide and regarded them.

"Strangely enough," he said, "I have not killed one of them with my own hands. These last ones, though, make me break my record."

Bart found himself wanting to believe Van Brunt. Despite all he had seen and suspected, he found it hard to think the man was lying.

"Why were you so willing to drag me into the jungle," Collins asked, "when you knew they planned my murder?"

"They insisted, and it would have been suspicious for me to argue," Van Brunt explained. "Besides, I thought I could protect you."

"You almost convince me," Bart said, "but you were mighty eager to protect Greta that time when the Wasuli got their signals mixed and jumped us."

Van Brunt managed a grotesque grin, and lowered his rifle.

"I was protecting myself, not Greta," he said. "That little party was meant to get rid of Scarletto and me both. The one safe place was by Greta's side."

"All right," Bart said. "I'm convinced. But what can two of us do?"

"There are five of us, counting Bosnagi and two Somali," Van Brunt declared. "He's on watch up the path away. You didn't think I got here by myself, did you? He's the boy to thank for saving your life."

"Bosnagi was trailing you—scared stiff, mind you—but still going to make sure you were all right," the Dutchman declared. "That's how he found me in the pit. You

see, I managed to take the shock on my rifle. That way I kept the stakes out of my chest, although my legs got it bad.

"I managed to get back to the lake with Bosnagi's help. It was dark by then. We saw the line of torches move down the other shore and disappear into the cliff. We tied a few logs together and the blacks rowed me across."

The slap of bare feet, running hard, sounded in the cavern. Bosnagi and the two Somali warriors raced toward them.

"The Wasuli come, *Baas*," Bosnagi jabbered excitedly.

"*Aaaiiee*," exclaimed one of the Somali, "they come very fast, waving torches and shouting to Taa."

VIII

BART leaped to his feet. A glance told him that there would be no quick moving for the Dutchman. Muscles ridged out on the big man's jaw as he set his teeth. He pulled his head up, looked around him.

"No time to talk," he said. "Get me up there behind the idol. They won't think about us hiding here."

Bart had no choice. He snapped orders to the blacks, and the four of them picked up Van Brunt and his crutches, hurried around the sacrificial fire.

As they ducked down behind the idol, the shouting, screaming mob of Wasuli poured into the cavern. After their night-long rites, they were like a pack of animals. They were naked except for the paint which duabed their bodies, their bellies swollen with food and native beer, their brains inflamed with religious madness.

And running in their fore were Riegler and Greta, naked as the blacks and infected with the same hysterical excitement.

Greta was steadier on her feet than the German, but she, too, had thrown off all restraints. This was her night of victory. She had won everything she wanted, and tonight she could laugh at the world.

Van Brunt, leaning with his back against the idol, looked above him. Greta had shaped only the front of the idol. To save time and labor, she had made the rear of the figure a flat wall of clay. In order to offset the greater weight of the huge arms, she had inclined the idol backwards, leaned it against four wooden braces.

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But she had not taken into her calculations the fact that the weight of the idol would be vastly increased because of the boxes of loot stacked within it. As a result, the god after a very short time began to sag forward, pulling away from the back supports.

Bart gave no attention to such details. He lay flat on the ledge, peering out between two rocks at the scene below. The mob reached the cross where Taa's victim should have been, surged around it.

The raging babble of voices cut off, and silence struck like a thunderclap. The crowd in its frenzy had failed to note that the two guards were gone from the cavern mouth. They were totally unprepared to find their victim had disappeared into thin air. They milled confusedly.

Greta collected herself first. "He's escaped! He's gotten away!" she cried.

Then as the significance of the jungle-wise guide's escape dawned on her, she turned on the blacks like a crazy woman.

"Don't you understand, you fools, he's gotten away," she screamed. "Don't stand there. Get out in the jungle and if you don't have him back here by nightfall, Tamba himself will die in the fire!"

THE BLACKS moved restively, murmuring among themselves, but none of them started out of the cavern. Never before had they failed to obey the girl. Her angry glance darted over the mass.

"Tamba!" she demanded. "What's the matter with them?"

The chieftain pushed his way from the rear of the crowd. He had hung back, not wishing to see Bart killed. Alone of that group, he was neither drunk with frenzy nor drink.

"They are afraid, O Witch Woman," he said nervously. "Taa will be angry. The sacred fire has been burnt, the prayers said, and the rites completed."

Tamba appeared to grow more confident. The ritual had been laid down by the White Witch herself. He stabbed his finger at the huge idol.

"Taa has come for the white man we promised," pointed out the Wasuli leader.

"Now Taa will be angry with my people, and they are afraid. If they go into the forest, they will find only death. My people fear Taa's anger because we do not

give the sacrifice we promised."

"What's he saying?" Van Brunt hissed. After Bart translated, the wounded man considered a moment, then said with sudden vigor, "Quick then! Fate plays into our hands."

The urgency in the Dutchman's tone immediately brought Bart to his side. Van Brunt pointed out the dangerous forward lean of the idol.

"If we act swiftly, we can stampede them for good and Greta won't ever be able to control them again."

Bart called Bosnagi and the two Somali warriors to him softly, explained the Dutchman's plan. Together they worked the four long wooden supports free of the ground. Two of the poles were anchored midway up the idol's back and the other two high up behind the shoulders. Bart and the three blacks each took one support, and at the white man's soft command, threw their full strength against the poles.

On the cavern floor Greta faced the rebellious and suddenly dangerous Wasuli.

"Taa shall have his sacrifice," she cried shrilly to the blacks. "He shall have a white man as promised."

A relieved, excited shout went up from the Wasuli. Riegler looked about him foolishly, and then grinned.

"Tie this one to the cross," she commanded, jabbing a finger at the German.

The Wasuli wavered doubtfully.

"Act now," screamed the girl, "before Taa strikes all of us!"

THE BLACKS waited no longer. Like a pack of wild dogs they leaped upon the startled Riegler, threw him against the cross, tied him hand and foot. He was too befuddled to understand what was happening at first. Then terror sobered him and he went mad with fear.

"Greta! Greta! Save me!" he pleaded.

She rushed the blacks faster toward the glowing coals, darting naked among them, beating them with her fists and cursing them for their slowness.

"You're the last one, Riegler," she screamed. "I've won. I've beaten you all!"

The huge warriors carrying the cross rushed forward to the edge of the smouldering fire, heaved the heavy timber and the man bound to it into the white hot heat. He landed face down in the coals, with

the weight of the cross on his back. The terrible sounds that ripped from his throat were those of a tortured, frenzied beast.

As Greta ordered the Wasuli to seize Riegler and tie him to the cross, Bart and his three blacks were straining to overthrow the idol. Under their combined efforts, a tremor ran through the god and it swayed. But though the giant mass moved, they could not maintain pressure enough to push it past the point where it would crumple forward of its own accord.

Three times they tried, and each time they failed a fraction short of success. The Dutchman sat in the darkness, hearing the quick, aching suck of their breathing as the third time they met defeat and were forced to relax the pressure.

"Lift me up, Collins!" he growled fiercely. "Lift me up so I can get my hands on a pole."

"You're in no shape to help."

"Lift me up, I said," snarled the Dutchman. "I can't walk, but I can brace my legs. There's more strength in me yet than in you weaklings."

Bart hesitated, but there was an edge in Van Brunt's voice which warned him to obey. He helped the impatient Dutchman to his feet, got him out to the edge of the pole.

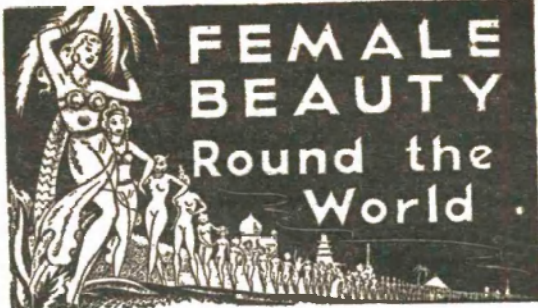
Van Brunt braced his torn legs, stiffening them, so the bone if not the shattered muscle, would hold them straight against the pressure he meant to exert.

"Pick the pole up, Collins, and put it in my hands," he said gruffly.

Bart set the pole against the idol's back, put the end in the Dutchman's broad, square hands. The man's skin was icy cold. His chest heaved with the effort of breathing. His fingers fumbled numbly for the pole, but when they closed around the wood, Bart noted they set like a vise.

Collins gripped the timber a few feet above the Dutchman's hands and planted himself. He marveled at the will which kept the big man going. Bart's own legs were trembling with exhaustion. He felt dizzy and sick.

"Push!" ordered Van Brunt, and without waiting for the others, he threw himself against the pole. Then Bart joined his strength, and the blacks heaved forward with him.



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THE IDOL moved, moved further forward than it ever had before. It swayed out, inching further and further away from its center of balance. And then, just as hope leaped up in Bart, the great mass slowed, came to a rigid stop.

Bart's muscles were like water. He could do no more. He was finished and he knew it. As he started to give way, he heard a savage, deep-throated growl behind him and the pole drove forward through his lax fingers. He heard the timber creak as it arched under the strain of the Dutchman's superhuman effort.

It teetered outward an inch, three inches, a foot and then with a swift wrench it ripped away from its foundations. There was a splintering of wooden inner supports as the huge mass toppled. Then the tremendous weight hurtled straight down toward the cavern floor.

Greta and the warriors who had carried Riegler to the fire were clustered close to the base of the idol. They saw the god rip free of its foundations and leap outward. They tried to run, but for them there was no escape.

The blonde girl turned and ran four steps. Then the mass rammed down over her, hit with a thundering roar. She and the terror-stricken warriors around her were blotted out like bugs stamped under a mountainous foot.

The frenzied Wasuli dancing and leaping further out in the cavern fared better. Clawing and screaming, they fanned out over the cavern floor, racing to get out from under the idol's fall. Except for those who fell or were too frightened to move, the great majority of the blacks escaped.

The thundering impact rocked the cavern. The air shivered with the echoing sound. Then abruptly all was silence, the brief quivering silence which follows a catastrophe. In that interval, even the injured were too stunned to cry out.

In this moment, one of those swift inspirations came to Bart.

"Know you the wrath of a god, O Wasuli," he shouted, and his voice rolled out over the cavern with a strange and eerie quality. "Know you henceforth that no man kills in the name of Taa, I am the

God of Death and no man does my work. You built a false statue to me and followed an evil woman saying she was my servant. I have smashed them both."

Low stricken sounds rose from all parts of the cave. Not a black man dared move. They were paralyzed with terror.

"I place you in the keeping of a man you tried to kill," Bart declared. "From this day on, you will follow the commands of Baas Collins. Go to your *kraal* and await him, and when he arrives, let his father and sister be waiting with you. Obey me or I crush the Wasuli!"

Like a startled herd of zebra, the Wasuli broke for the cavern mouth when Bart ceased speaking. They would cause no more trouble. So long as those black men lived they would remember Taa's voice speaking to them in the cave. Bart's quest was ended, as was the grimmer quest of the Dutchman.

Bart turned, his thoughts focusing on the wounded man. Van Brunt needed attention badly. He lit a match and ordered Bosnagi to retrieve one of the torches dropped by the Wasuli. In the yellow match flame, he saw Van Brunt sprawled on the ground, his hands still clutching the pole. He had fallen as soon as the idol gave way. That effort had spent the last of his strength.

Bart bent down beside him, started to cut away his clothes to see what could be done about his wounds. The big man's eyes were closed and he was hardly breathing, but when Bart touched him his eyelids fluttered open.

"They are both gone?" he asked faintly.

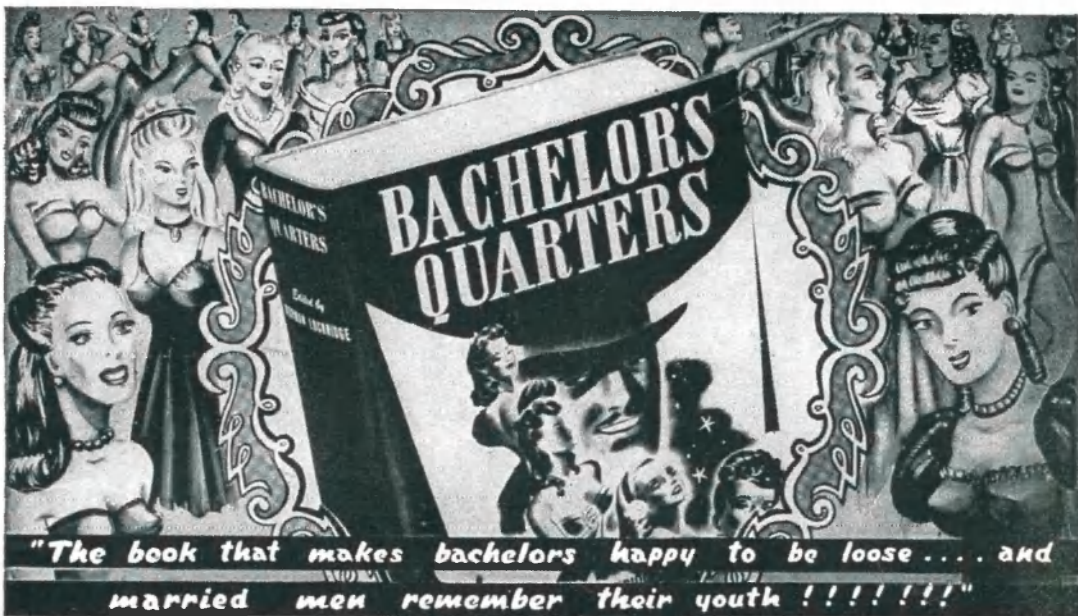
Bart nodded.

"And you will guard the treasure," he whispered painfully, "until your government can remove it?"

"Of course!" Collins told him.

The Dutchman's hands relaxed on the pole. "It is finished, then," he said. "It is done—at last."

The match burned Bart's fingers. He dropped it and the light sputtered out on the damp ground. He did not hurry to light another for he knew the Dutchman lay dead in the darkness. When Bosnagi brought the torch, Bart still knelt beside Van Brunt, his worn face thoughtful.



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