

STAR WEEKLY

MAY 4, 1957

COMPLETE NOVEL

LEGEND *in the* DUST

FIRST
PUBLICATION
ANYWHERE

by FRANK O'ROURKE



Without law, the town was ripe for open warfare!

Illustration by Leone

AT the toe of the hills where the evergreens rose in a mass of geometrically precise triangles toward the distant Cristos, the trail was a dusty path winding southward into nowhere. Men had roiled that dust and cattle ranged the swells of those high plains, but only the trail gave lasting evidence of their passage.

The rider came from time's smoky nothingness at dusk, gray-smudged atop the big horse, only hat and horse's ears sharp-etched against the fading amber sky. The rider saw the hollow below the trees, the horse smelled water and sawed gently on the reins.

"All right," Glendon said. "Go on down."

He reined off the trail beside the tank and while the horse drank he knelt and splashed his face and runneled water down his neck. He led the horse into the trees, drove the picket stake deep into the rocky shale, uncinched and slipped the bridle over the rope hackamore. The brown horse shivered with pleasure and went to browsing on the grass that tufted green beneath the trees. While darkness fell, Glendon gathered twigs and sticks, lit his fire, and broke open the grub sack. He boiled coffee, cooked bacon and beans, sliced a thick chunk of bread from the staling loaf. He rolled a smoke at meal's end and stood in the full darkness.

He was a thin and slightly stoop-shouldered man whose arms ended in bony wrists and long-fingered hands that forever dangled too far below the finest fitted coat sleeves. His long legs hung spare down the sweat-caked levi tubes, rider's legs of flat muscle lying close around big thigh bones with the knotty calves bulging above his worn boottops. His skin was bleached but would never entirely lose brownness, large-pored leathery skin stretched taut over jut jaw, around the wide mouth and long nose, tugging shadowed wrinkle sacks beneath his deep-ridged gray eyes.

"Fort Ellis," he said aloud. "One more day, horse."

He slept fitfully and rode the trail in a pearl gray morning that came slowly alive as wind scuffed the clouds away and laid bare the deep blue sky and brassy summer sun. He saw cattle bearing the Cross C brand and, 20 miles to the south, skirted the lake formed by a huge artesian spring that welled upward from the earth's bowels. Below the lake in the bend of the overflow creek he saw the big house, the sheds and shops and corrals. John Colter's Cross C outfit on Big Spring lake was known far and wide for an open house policy, for the coffee pot that bubbled on the cookhouse stove. Glendon had not spoken to another man in three days; he entered the yard with his tongue working rustily behind dry lips, tied his horse at the rail, smelled strong coffee and heard voices within the cookhouse. The Cross C slept beneath the cottonwoods in the lazy midday June heat; no one struck up a hand to bid him welcome. Everyone was working, only the cripples and the cook would be on tap.

Glendon took the bootworn stone step through the timbered cookhouse door, raked back his hat and peered into the gloom that was thickened for any man coming from outer sun glare. The cook turned his shaggy head and spoke in greeting, "Como sta, senior," and brought a clean cup and the gallon coffee pot to the long table; and the only other man in the room glanced upward over his white china cup that smoked thin coffee heat into the shadows. That young man was hunched at ease, big legs thrust far beneath the table. He waved one large hand and smiled at Glendon.

"Set a spell—too hot for ridin'!"

Glendon sat across the table, stirred in sugar, drank deeply and offered his sigh of thanks. The cook fussed over the stove and Glendon, overly sensitive to the presence of strangers, felt uneasiness in the room. But the young man only grinned sleepily and sipped his coffee.

"Buck," the cook said. "Getting late, no?"

"No," Buck said, and smiled at Glendon. "Ridin' through?"

"Fort Ellis," Glendon said.

"Not far," Buck said. "An' nothing to see when you get there."

Buck was a squatty young man on first glance. Broad and deep-chested, his rib case was sprung so wide his upper body seemed to descend without curvature into thick legs and large feet. Buck had a cowlick above his round, moon face, his beard was fluffy, his mild blue eyes and straw-colored hair gave him a mused, innocent appearance.

"Buck," the cook said plaintively. "You go now?"

"Pretty soon," Buck said. "Come down from the north?"

"Yes."

The cook walked soundlessly to the door, glanced up the tree-shaded lane toward the big house, and swung around with a flutter of fat hands. "Buck, the patron is coming!"

"Colter?" Glendon asked.

"Nobody else," Buck smiled. "Ever met him?"

"No."

"Take a good look then," Buck said. "Likely he's wearing a two-bit straw hat, 65-cent hickory shirt, pair of dollar overalls, no socks, brogans that cost all of one buck-fifty. Grand total of \$3.40, give or take a nickel, and him worth a million today. Yes sir, take a good look."

"Aih, Buck!" the cook whispered fearfully.

Buck leaned against the wall just inside the door and Glendon saw past him into the bright sunlight and more distant shade of the cottonwood lane; and that was his first view of John Colter coming from the big house, slapping one overall leg with a peeled willow stick, wearing no socks, placing his brogans on the earth with the intent stupid purpose of a plow horse plodding off work toward hay and water.

Shorter than Buck, John Colter was equally solid and strong. Glendon had heard too much about the man to accept the doubtful value of so many stories, but even so his first look made those stories pale. Colter had the face of a cherub and the white hair of Kris Kringle, but the hair faded to dirty yellow as he neared the door, and the rosy face was harsh-wrinkled beneath a wiry three-day beard that failed to hide the sly roughness. Colter, so the saying went, had never been beaten in a deal, a fight, a game of wits. Glendon saw the legend grow and become lifesize in the door's sunlit frame, the face squinting into the gloom as the voice rasped huskily at the young man.

"Buck. Ain't you gone yet?"

"Too hot," Buck said affably.

"Hot, my foot," John Colter said. "What we got, company?"

He walked past Buck to the table, and Glendon noticed the absence of belt and gun around the thick waist. Masterson had told him how Colter never wore a gun while bossing 50 men who did, thus taking shrewd advantage of the unwritten law that you did not shoot an unarmed man. Colter carried the peeled willow stick and nothing more; and Buck swung around to watch him with a helpless, admiring look. Colter had increased the tension in the cookhouse; but he simply ignored Buck as he gave Glendon a long, rude look.

"Passing through?"

"Yes."

"Then make yourself to home," Colter said.

"What's your name?"

"Pat Glendon."

"Glendon?" Colter tried the sound on his tongue. "Heard that somewhere. You going to Fort Ellis—Jose, where's your manners, fill the cup!"

Glendon said quietly, "I'm going that way."

"Want a job here?"

"No," he said.

The cook brought a cup for Colter, filled the others, and retreated quickly to the pantry annex. Buck strolled over and sat beside John Colter; and Glendon felt the gap between them. He spoke his thanks to the cook, to Colter, and stepped outside. Behind him, dulled by the thick adobe walls, their voices rose and fell in argument. Glendon had no business intruding on that private affair. He mounted the brown horse and faced southward where the trail faded hazily into the heat waves. Buck came suddenly from the cookhouse, walked to the black horse, and mounted. John Colter appeared in the doorway and watched Buck who sat with one hand on the Winchester stock canted upward beneath his right leg. Buck's face was no longer round and innocent; his head inclined toward Colter like a boar surprised at mast.

"You mind company?" Buck asked.

"Be happy for it," Glendon said.

"Buck," John Colter said gruffly. "Mind now. I don't give you no second chance."

"Thanks for the first," Buck said cheerfully. "Adios."

Glendon nodded good-by to John Colter and followed Buck from the ranch yard into the trail that arrowed toward Fort Ellis. They travelled a mile in silence before Buck laughed and beat his hat against his thigh, fanning a puff of dust behind.

"Feisty old cuss, eh?"

"Boss trouble?" Glendon asked.

"Oh, I ain't mad at him," Buck said. "But he's sure mad at me. I quit last night."

"Leave him short-handed?"

"Him?" Buck said. "He's got 50 men on the spread. I just got tired working for wages. Easier ways to make a living."

"Does Colter pay small?"

"Average," Buck said, "but he works you double hard. There's easier ways."

"In this country?" Glendon said.

"Why sure," Buck smiled. "Selling cows to the army for one. You heard of McMann?"

"No."

"He's contractor at Ellis," Buck said. "Supplies the army. Buys every cow you can bring him. Work a week, you make more'n Colter pays in a month."

There was a thoroughly likeable quality about Buck who spoke so openly on touchy subjects to a total stranger. Selling cattle to the army was legitimate business, providing the seller was financially able to purchase cattle and then make his resale through regular channels. But a young man whose sole assets were the clothes on his back, his gun, and his horse, did not possess the cash or the credit. To speak freely of such matters was either stupidity or the nature of a man who went his own free way and cared absolutely nothing for other people. Glendon risked a question that, other times and places, could bring fast trouble.

"Whose cows, Buck?"

"Whose cows?" Buck said. "Why, John Colter's cows. Nobody else owns any around here."

"You telling me this for fact?" Glendon asked.

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

Glendon had to laugh, and Buck laughed with him. Long ago he'd been this way, filled with an overpowering eagerness for life, the wish for things just beyond his pocketbook; but, remembering, it was not so much the material gains as the need for freedom of the mind. It had brought him close to trouble and death before he whipped that wildness. He could not give advice to Buck, for the young never listened, their ears were tuned to the distant music. But he liked this boy, and he could try. He spoke cautiously.

"You know what that monkey business is called?" Glendon asked.

"Oh, sure," Buck said.

"No offence?"

"Not a bit," Buck smiled. "You mean well, but things are different around here. For instance, you see any fences?"

"No."

"Or law?"

"No, unless it's at Fort Ellis."

"You look real good there," Buck said. "I been lookin' six months. You find any law, let me know."

"Many of the boys pulling this cow trick?"

"Not more'n 30," Buck grinned.

"What does Colter say?" he said. "What's he doing about it?"

"I'll sort of draw you a picture," Buck said patiently. "Fort Ellis ain't much of a post any more, just a station to buy beef for the Mescaleros and the other forts to the south. The fort's six miles down from town, both named the same, except the town is all McMann."

"All McMann?"

"Stock and barrel except for Charley Leslie's store," Buck said happily, "an' Charley don't count for much. McMann's retired army, was a major. He got out a while back and started the town. Having army friends, he sewed up the beef contracts. Him and that colonel at the fort soldiered together, and the colonel don't buy beef from nobody but McMann. That keeps John mad all week and twice as mean on Sundays. But McMann can't buy beef from John 'cause John won't sell him a bull beilow, so McMann has to buy all over and trail his herds in. An' John's got so many cows he can't count 'em, let alone brand 'em all. They just run wild to the west across the river. That sort of clear things up for you, Pat?"

"And no law?" Glendon said wonderingly.

"Bueno," Buck laughed. "Oh, there's a marshal or two hanging around but they don't count."

Now I told you enough to hang me, what you figure on doing in Ellis?"

"Buck," he said, "I can't tell you because I don't know myself."

"Just riding loose," Buck said understandingly. "Sure, I savvy how you feel. Passing along, looking around."

"That's it," he said.

"What can you do, Pat?" Buck asked.

"Little of this," he said. "Little of that."

"Foolish question got me a foolish answer," Buck grinned. "But you punched cows, that I know. not lately but sometime."

"Not lately," he admitted, "or ever again."

"Well," Buck said. "You just come along. I'll show you the town. Take a good look—smell too—and make up your mind. When you get tired eating McMann's grub, drinking his whiskey, using his beds, you can always head for El Paso. Now if you were a lawyer, McMann'd give you his own bed. He can't seem to get enough of lawyers."

"But no law?" Glendon said softly.

"It ain't from trying," Buck said. "I guess he can't find a good lawman. Was it you wore a star someplace, an' showed you could get along with him, then McMann'd give you his right arm!"

"No chance there," he lied.

"No?" Buck said. "Well, too bad."

They rode the trail that followed the dropping roll of land toward the southwest where a line of trees marked the river as it came from the north and swung in a huge bend toward the panhandle and the hill country and the distant gulf. He wondered how much he had fooled Buck. What was it that left the mark on a man? The faded cloth behind the star, the way a man rode and walked and talked, the way he carried a gun and watched the world around him? Glendon had ridden 500 miles to leave the star behind, and the first man he spent an hour with—and half a boy at that—seemed to sense, or smell, or feel that past. Then again perhaps he was lucky, for Buck had spoken respectfully in mentioning the law. That meant trust for the moment. If all the past would only shrivel, turn to dust in Kansas, then he would be truly lucky. All he wanted was freedom, a fresh beginning, and it came to him then, riding off the trail into a wagon road formed by many converging paths that he had silently chided Buck for a young man's dream of freedom when, all the while, his own dreams were far thinner by comparison. Thirty-six years old, hoping wilder hopes than even a boy dared dream.

"Well," Buck said. "There she is."

They came into a single street that fronted the business block and ended at the river bank. Houses were scattered in no order behind the stores, houses built mostly of adobe, bleached by the merciless sun, boasting scraggy shrubs and trees, washlines damp with underwear and trousers and dresses; dozing horses outside the saloon. Glendon looked twice and counted one saloon. That proved Buck's statement: This town was all McMann.

"Get down," Buck said. "Whiskey ain't no good, but it cuts the dust."

"You go on," Glendon said. "I'll get a room."

"Just come along," Buck grinned. "Everything is courtesy of McMann."

Looking up, Glendon noted that the largest building was divided into saloon, hotel, cafe and store, with glass windows on the second floor above the cafe marking the offices of C. B. Adams, attorney at law, and Sam McMann. Glendon untied his gear and followed Buck across the porch into the saloon; an archway gave off to the hotel lobby and, as Buck shouted greetings to a filled poker table, Glendon passed through to the desk. He signed for a room, dropped his gear, and rejoined Buck at the bar.

Buck was sitting beside a red-haired man and he began telling how he'd left the Cross C with old John roaring like a motherless calf. Buck extracted a tableful of mirthless smiles that vanished abruptly as Buck spoke to the red-haired man.

"Ed, when do we start? I'm broke, foot-loose and eager."

Ed said curtly, "Don't savvy you," and prepared to rise. Buck laughed, the same cheerful sound Glendon had heard in the Cross C cookhouse. His voice boomed above the sound of scraping chairs as he said, "Set down!" and froze them in place. In that moment Glendon read the truth in their faces. The young man who cared nothing for anything or anyone was the strongest here. He laughed and they wanted no part of whatever lay hidden

behind his smiling face. Glendon spoke in the silence.

"Private business for you, Buck. See you later."

"Pat, you don't need to go," Buck said. "You won't tell no tales out of school."

"Your friends don't know me," Glendon said. "I'd feel the same way."

"Bueno," Buck said carelessly. "But remember, I ain't showed you around town yet."

Glendon stepped behind Buck's chair and, on impulse, dropped a hand on the thick shoulder. Buck grinned up at him and Glendon understood that quick smile. He had made a friend, whether he wanted the trust or not. Then Glendon had his gear and took the stairs to the second floor and the last room at the end of the hall. The management had thoughtfully provided a tin wash basin and one galvanized bucket of water. Glendon took a hand bath, shaved, and put on clean clothes; going back downstairs he found himself hurrying and that was foolish. He was going nowhere; he had all the time in the world. He stopped at the desk to borrow a handful of matches, and moved on to the porch and looked at the town. Steps clattered down the stairs between hotel and cafe; a plump little pouter pigeon of a man dressed in blue trousers and a soiled white shirt emerged from the stairwell and stopped beside Glendon, mopping his red face with an equally soiled bandanna.

"A scorcher," he said.

"Get much hotter here?" Glendon asked.

"This is only June," the little man said with in-

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tense feeling. "In July the hinges melt, in August the devil arrives for his vacation in our fair land. Excuse me for noticing the apparent, but you are new in our town."

"Today," he said.

"My name is Adams," the little man said. "I'm pleased to meet you. In fact, I'm pleased to meet anyone new in Fort Ellis."

"Glendon," he said.

Adams had a sharp handclasp and sharper eyes that examined Glendon while he lit a cigar and teetered on his heels. "Just passing through, Mr. Glendon?"

"Looking around," he said. "Is there a livery barn handy?"

"Right down the street," Adams said. "This side. I recommend it highly."

Glendon stepped off the porch and led the brown horse 50 steps to a cavernous barn that promised both shade and coolness. The hostler led the brown horse into the shadowy alleyway depths and Glendon stood in the door shade, swallowing all of Fort Ellis in one glance. Across from McMann's buildings was another store—Leslie's by the sign—and the post-office and a barbershop with its rickety candy-striped pole. Abutting the livery barn was a harness and saddle shop; and those buildings represented the total business in Fort Ellis. Glendon walked away from the shabbiness and the heat. He came to the riverbank and descended the cutbank grade scraped out by Fresno and team, and turned north along the river under the cottonwoods that formed their umbrellas over the lower willows. Water snored and grunted beneath the bank, a thin stream no more than 30 yards wide.

He rolled a cigaret and flipped his match upstream into the dark current; and saw the red bobber below an overhanging willow branch that touched water and formed a silent fan of ripples. The line rose from bobber to a willow pole, and the pole was held by a fisherman sitting on a rock, head now turned from the water, watching him in silent amusement. Glendon removed his hat. He was an intruder, frightening the fish. He began a retreat but the fisherman said, "No luck anyway. Guess it's too hot today."

There was no resentment in her voice. Glendon paused gratefully and found old memories of his youth along the Elkhorn.

"How deep is it?" he asked.

"About five feet," she said. "Deeper under the cutbanks. I'm using worms."

"I grew up that way," Glendon said. "Willow pole and a can of worms."

"In Kansas?"

"Nebraska," Glendon said. "The Elkhorn, the Platte, the Niobraria."

"I fished the Republican," she said. "But that was a long time ago."

She had a narrow, oval face crowned with a thick head of chestnut hair that shimmered when leaf-let sunlight trembled downward through the cottonwoods. Her forehead was high, her eyes brown, her nose quite long with a cartilage bump on the vaguely arrogant bridge. Her mouth was full and wide, her chin well set and stubborn above the browned v of her man's blue shirt and slender, rounded body. She wore levis and boots, and the chestnut hair was pinned behind her ears in two fat braids. Her face was sober and plain until she smiled at her own words; then it came alive with interest as she said, "You're new in town?"

"Yes," he said. "Sorry I bothered you."

"No bother," she said. "You've stirred up a dull day."

"Way is that?" Glendon asked.

"Not a man in town fishes here," she said, "let alone comes down. I doubt they know a fish from a sausage. You'll be a marked man from the word go. Very suspicious."

He saw the glint of laughter and smiled in return. He replaced his hat, touched it respectfully, and went away to the road. A strange town housing people of Buck's kind, lawyers like C. B. Adams, and the unseen McMann. Not to mention this woman in man's clothing fishing on a hot afternoon, undisturbed by his invasion of her privacy. Her action was made stranger when he remembered the gold wedding band on her left hand; it took a different sort of woman to go fishing with a house and family depending on her guidance. Glendon came once more to the livery barn and paused in the welcome shade to look again at the town and pull his ragged thoughts together.

He had left Kansas two weeks ago with a headful of plans. A man always had plans; from those ideas came all of life. But a man would not worship those ideas blindly; he used them as they came, like shirts, and put the best of each into his life. The point in question, it seemed, was whether he would ever have a worth-while idea, find a spot on earth that seemed to fill his needs. He had to stop somewhere, if only for a little while, and face the truth: he had nothing before him. But if all a man faced was nothingness, if all he had done in the past came down to that dismal present, then a man had to fight against nothingness itself. Glendon wiped the fresh sweat from his face; this was as good as any place on earth to rest and plan.

CHAPTER II

SWIFT STAMM was 27 years old, her first name a legacy from the grandfather on her mother's side who insisted his daughter's first-born bear his name. The name, like a good shoe, seemed to fit more comfortably with the passing years. She was a tomboy, her mother's despair, for even in young womanhood she preferred pants and shirts instead of long-flowing dresses that choked not only a woman's body but her very thoughts.

Swift Stamm married a young lawyer at the age of 19. Her reason was loneliness that followed the flu epidemic and the death of her parents; and Bill Stamm had grown up, across the backyard fence, gone off to college, and come home to renew his easy friendship with the coltish girl become a woman. For her it was not the love young women expect; it was necessity. For Bill Stamm it was the nature of the times and a lack of more eligible girls. Bill Stamm was a pleasant young fellow then; but age changes all men.

Two years ago Bill Stamm had one drink too many and laid his thick, harsh tongue on the wrong man. They brought the sad news to Swift; now she lived on in Fort Ellis, doing bookwork for Adams and McMann, living alone and evidently enjoying the view. She had few friends among the stiffer necks, but she was well-liked by children and older people. She spent a good many hours fishing, riding out along the river, reading books and tending her garden.

She wound her line around the willow pole and stuck the hook into the bobber. She walked the

hot road to her small house a 100 yards behind the business block, and passed through the arbor gate into her private world.

She set the fishing pole against the porch rail and entered the house that offered coolness, if nothing more. She changed into sandals and a cotton dress, gave her braids a tug, and went unhurriedly across the back lot to the hotel. She had an hour's work on Adams' books; and McMann had undoubtedly discovered something new since dinnertime.

McMann was in his late 50's, very much the retired major of cavalry, complete with short wiry hair, ruffish moustache, round stomach held erect like a shield, stubby legs plunged into fine black boots; and those straight military shoulders held firmly in line. McCann wore black and gray suits with white broadcloth shirts and black string bow ties, his vest crossed with a gold chain holding the repeater watch and lodge pin. His army ring glinted on his left fourth finger, too deeply embedded in the fat creases to ever be removed in life; and while he carried no visible arm, Swift Stamm was familiar with the hip-pocket holster and the bulldog .38 hidden beneath his coattails.

McCann faced the world smugly from stern features that matched the set of his shoulders, his face highlighted by the cropped sandy hair and moustache, with tiny crabapple spots of red fattening the curves of his cheeks. His eyes were sharp blue, his teeth lay yellowish behind thin red lips, his jaw was a block of granite above his thick neck. McCann gave absolute pause to the legend that old soldiers just faded away; he gave, instead, the feeling that he might never die, that age was only a minor irritant in his path through immortal life. McCann walked in military fashion, short arms swinging precisely at his sides. He rode in the same way and he spoke in only one tone—the brusque, clipped words of a man accustomed to giving orders and expecting no argument. Yet, by the very nature of his business in Fort Ellis, he received and absorbed a plethora of such talk from men who had no appreciation, let alone awe, for the military. With those men McCann swallowed his fury and argued fluently in Spanish or English, plus a third language composed of free-swinging Elizabethan profanity that did more to control his rough colleagues than all the studied arguments in the world. McCann never failed to capitalize on this talent when other methods failed.

McMann had built his empire on simple cornerstones: his army career which gave him invaluable connections; and his unquestioned power in Fort Ellis which, combined with cash and the legal might of C. B. Adams, enabled him to back up his desires. Few men had needed more in history. McMann was strong enough to succeed with either one of the two; and having both he was, at the moment, unbeatable. Even John Colter could not dent McMann's position, and John Colter was cut from the same monolithic granite. Swift Stamm knew all this, and more, as she gave her employers a wave and turned up the stairway between cafe and hotel. She passed from view and McMann, having doffed his hat, resumed his conversation with C. B. Adams. McMann had been upstairs a few minutes earlier, watching Glendon enter the hotel; now he mused on the name.

"Glendon—the name is vaguely familiar."

"I'll have his luggage inspected," Adams said.

"Use Felipe," McMann said, "but we'll find nothing. If he is official, his breed is too smart for that."

"We can try," Adams said. "Have you seen Ed and young Buck?"

"Not yet."

"Buck quit Cross C last night," Adams said.

"I wonder how old John took that alum pill," McMann smiled.

"If I were Colter," Adams said, "I would never have allowed Buck to leave Cross C alive."

"Hogwash," McMann said. "He's just another reckless young fool. I know, he's killed three men. That makes him stupid plus reckless, ideal for our purpose. But not that bad. Ed's the best of the bunch."

"You think so?" Adams asked.

"Compare their records," McMann said. "As you might phrase it, counsellor, Ed has precedent going in his favor."

"Sam," Adams said quietly. "That boy in there is a cyclone, a tornado. He doesn't know it yet, you don't, no one seems to smell the danger in that boy. But I do. And why? Because it is my business to read people."

McMann threw his cigar into the street. He said, "Could be," and went through the hotel lobby and down the back hall to a large, bare room facing upon the rubbish-choked yard. A narrow door opened into the saloon's storage room; it made possible a highly desired privacy for certain meetings. Waiting for Buck and Ed Bailey, McMann fingered a fresh cigar. The door opened, Ed Bailey led Buck inside, both sank gingerly into the chairs across the battered table. McMann studied Buck while lighting, drawing, and expelling cigar smoke.

"You," he said. "Quit the Cross C, eh?"

"Last night," Buck said lazily. "Figure on taking some of that easy money from you."

McMann said curtly, "You are too brash and outspoken. Let us understand that now and hereafter."

"Oh, I savvy," Buck smiled. "You want some more Cross C cows?"

"I will be in the market for 500 head two weeks from today."

"What price, major?" Ed Bailey asked.

"The same," McMann said. "Delivery at my pens across the river."

"Bueno," Ed Bailey said. "Come on, Buck. Let's have one last drink and get to work."

McMann did not allow himself a move until the connecting door closed; then he brought one flat hand down viciously. Dangerous? He wondered if Colter had deliberately foisted Buck off on him; if so, old John was probably laughing fit to kill.

CHAPTER III

GLENDON lay on his lumpy mattress in the early dusk and examined his puzzled thoughts once more. He had come from the river and dozed until now, at dusk, his stomach proved more sensible than his thoughts. Glendon washed his face and took the stairs. He had decided to stay awhile.

He passed through the lobby into the cafe and ate his meal at the rear table. C. B. Adams found him there and plumped down wearily. "Rootbeer," Adams told the waitress, "and be generous with the ice, Rosie." Then Adams rubbed his chin and smiled. "The heat gets me. Well, what have you decided about our fair city?"

"I'd stay awhile," Glendon said, "if I could rent a place."

Adams erected a finger steeple of momentary thought. The waitress brought his drink and Adams stared at the straw chaff floating on the dark brown liquid. He said, "Four houses available, one decent. North of here toward the river. Dirty, unfurnished, no window glass, the well needs cleaning. A shed for your horse, a backyard."

"And the owner?"

"Maj. McMann," Adams smiled. "I represent him, and I'll not argue rent. You name a figure, I'm apt to snap you up."

Half-joking, Glendon said, "How about \$5."

"Taken," Adams said. "A ridiculous price, of course, but the house itself is ridiculous. If you have the courage to clean and furnish it, \$5 a month is sufficient . . . are you thinking of staying on permanently?"

"I can't say," Glendon said. "What time will you be up tomorrow?"

"Eight," Adams said. "Meet me at breakfast."

"What about supplies?"

"You have two stores," Adams said. "The major's, and Mr. Leslie's across the street."

Glendon paid his tab and went outside to the south end of the porch and smoked a cigar in the deepening night. The hitch rails were deserted, the saloon was quiet for such an early hour. Buck and his friends had departed while Glendon took siesta. That was the way of it for a man in a strange town; the night hours dragged when he had nothing to occupy mind and body. Glendon dropped his cigar and turned through the lobby to the stairs. He hoped one of the stores had fish line and bobbers and hooks.

CHAPTER IV

CHARLEY Leslie entered his general store and prowled the aisles, pussy-footing around his janitor's damp mop strokes. He concluded his inspection at the front window, through which he saw the stranger just opening McMann's store door. Charley Leslie had his own grapevine that, last night, brought him news of Glendon's

arrival. If Glendon was another McMann import he would not bother to cross the street; if he was a loner truly interested in low prices he'd come visiting shortly. Charley Leslie massaged his clean-shaven jaw and waited patiently.

He was a handsome man with stiff, austere features. He had slipped into town six months ago, bought the vacant building from McMann's bankrupt competitor, laid in an excellent stock, and squared off for battle in the commercial ring. McMann had learned absolutely nothing about his past, beginning with the opening gambit that backfired. Swift Stamm came over to purchase needles, and told him frankly that she worked for McMann.

"What does the major wish to know?" Leslie had asked.

"How long can you last," Swift said, "once he starts cutting prices?"

"As long as he can," Charley Leslie smiled. "Tell him I relish competition."

She had laughed with him, and they got along famously. He was on a dangerous job and dared not make mistakes, yet he did. Knowing that John Colter hated everyone connected with McMann, Leslie had fallen in love. At least he was quite certain of his feeling; it was the warmest sensation he had ever experienced. In his own chilly fashion he tried to express tender sentiments but, save pleasant friendship, Swift gave him no encouragement. So life had rolled along for six months, McMann had cut prices, learned that Leslie could not be broken, and raised prices to the old level. Thereafter Charley Leslie made a firm practice of underbidding McMann's store on every item. He became friendly with C. B. Adams and enjoyed many a good argument in the cafe; and he gained McMann's grudging respect by pandering cleverly to the major's vanity. He addressed McMann by the military title, he asked questions about battles and tactics and famous generals, he built up their interest in him while doing his own job in perfect style. As for Swift, his own cynicism made him recognize his worth to her: he was the only man in town worthy of her time.

He thought of her now as Glendon crossed the street and entered his store. Charley Leslie introduced himself, shook hands, and followed Glendon around the aisles, jotting down each item mentioned, learning that Glendon's house would be cleaned by noon and he wanted to move in at once. Charley Leslie stepped behind his front counter, finished checking prices, and quoted each article a bit under McMann's rates.

"You're cheaper," Glendon said.

"I make a fair profit," Leslie said mildly. "I am not in business to fleece my customers."

"I'll take the lot," Glendon said. "Can you haul it over early this afternoon?"

"Yes," Leslie said. "Now, is there anything else?"

"Have you got fishing tackle?"

"A small stock."

"I want line, bobbers, sinkers, hooks."

Charley Leslie smiled. "I don't believe it."

"What?"

"Another fisherman," Leslie said. "I never thought it would happen in Fort Ellis."

"Are you the other one?"

"No," Leslie said. "Swift Stamm is our fisherman. She never gives up but she catches fewer fish than anyone I know."

"Catching is the least of it," Glendon said. "What's the total damage?"

Leslie added the total, accepted cash, and made the small change. Glendon departed as quickly as he came, and Leslie went straight to the warehouse loading dock and handed the list to Manuel who waited for the important words.

"Deliver this," Leslie said. "Then go on out. Tell Colter that Glendon is not McMann's boy. Ed Bailey took Buck and that crew upriver yesterday which means trouble in the hills. Nothing else at present except we needn't worry about Glendon."

"No?"

"He's not looking for trouble," Leslie said. "He's a fisherman."

"He would not dodge it," Manuel said. "He has that look."

"What look?" Leslie said impatiently. "You are always judging a man by his look. The face tells nothing."

"He has it," Manuel said doggedly. "Adios, senior."

Leslie stood alone after Manuel had gone. How much longer would Colter play this silly game. Bringing him down here from the north, backing

him in the store, asking nothing more vital than belated information on McMann's actions. Not even caring that cattle were stolen regularly as the sun rose, just receiving Manuel's skimpy facts and doing nothing. Six months of it had shortened Leslie's temper and sharpened his appetite for big money. If Colter made no definite move within two months, he would try a deal with McMann or leave the country.

* * *

The house was clean, the furniture was installed, the shelves were stocked with food. Glendon started a fire in the cookstove, boiled coffee, and drank in reflective silence, standing in the back door that faced the river. He rinsed the cup, took up the shining new shovel, and went hunting in the earth beneath the osage hedge. He spaded a few scrawny worms, gathered his tackle, and walked to the river. Remembering Swift Stamm, he moved 100 yards upstream from her favorite spot in respect to her privacy.

He had worked forever, it seemed, just for this. He had \$1,100. in cash, life-savings of 36 years, enough to bring him through the summer and take him further down the road come fall. Something would turn up then; it always did for a man who taught himself the lesson Glendon was learning with such agonizing slowness: to stop pressing luck, let life lead the way. Glendon lay back and closed his eyes; the river gurgled at his feet and the sky darkened as a tiny wind came up. And this time she spoke first, having walked soundlessly upstream from her customary spot.

"Thought I'd find you here. Any luck?"

"No," Glendon said. "I was too busy swimming."

"Take a look."

He pulled his line and saw the bare hook, the sinker spinning lazily above the hook. She grinned and Glendon smiled with her and at himself.

"They do that," she said. "Steel you blind, Mr. Glendon."

"Miss Stamm," he said. "Is that correct?"

"Mrs. Stamm," she said. "Charley told me you stopped by."

"Mrs. Stamm?"

"In name only. I'm a widow, Mr. Glendon."

She explained casually and he considered her words while buttoning his shirt and slapping his hat against his leg. She wore the wedding ring but the widow part explained a good deal.

"You picked a good house," she said. "Did Maria clean it?"

"You can eat off the floor," Glendon said.

"I'm your neighbor," she said. "The house just south of you, the one with the big cottonwoods."

He said, "That's fine," and wondered why he spoke the banal words. He rose and wrapped his line and gave his hat a tug. "Getting late," he said, and when he turned from the river she walked easily beside him. He touched his hat, preparatory to wishing her goodnight, but she pointed her pole toward the cottonwoods and said, "Come in for coffee, Mr. Glendon. You can't have a housewarming so let's do the next best thing."

"Thank you," Glendon said. "I hope—"

"Neighbors?" she asked. "You're my neighbor now. Are you turning down my offer?"

"No," Glendon said. "If you don't care about the neighbors, why, I'll tell you the truth—I never did care what they thought."

"That's why I invited you," she smiled. "I never did either. Come in."

He followed her though a back gate, around the garden plot, into the small kitchen that gleamed from white-washed walls when she lit the lamp and trimmed the wick. She put coffee on and brought cups, sliced a yellow pound cake, set out a dish of dried apricots, poured the coffee and sat across the table, talking all the while about the heat and the town and the fact she hoped he was hungry because cake dried out so fast in this country. Then, over her cup, she said soberly, "I work for McMann and Adams, Mr. Glendon. I thought you should know that."

"Why?" he said. "Is it a sin?"

"Because you are a stranger in town," she said, "and I always receive orders from the major to cross-examine every stranger."

"That's why you invited me in?" he asked.

"No," she smiled. "I never obey the major's orders. He knows it, but he keeps trying. You like to fish and that's enough reason to know you. Fort Ellis is a dull town, Mr. Glendon, and Charley Leslie is the only other person I can talk with.

I am sounding you out for the major, and I'm not. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Glendon said. "It wasn't necessary to explain."

"It was," she said. "You'll soon get acquainted; you'll hear from others that I'm the major's spy. I'd rather tell you myself. Then, too, you can't sit a rail here. You're either for the major or against him. If you're against him, then you will be moving on as soon as he gets around to you."

"Even if I have no axe to grind?" Glendon said.

"The major will give you an axe," she said. "Then he'll grind it. . . . When were you last in Kansas?"

Suddenly he realized that she was lonely, she needed someone who saw, with her, the country where her memories were buried. Good or bad, it was always a blessing to have someone who shared those memories, even a stranger. Well, he was not exactly a stranger to her now, because he did know Kansas. And he could tell her a few things about being lonely in a crowd. He ate half his slice of cake and said quietly: "When was I last in Kansas? About three weeks ago."

"How is it this year along the Republican?" she asked.

"Back there?" Glendon asked. "Mighty good . . . thank you. I believe I will have another slice."

CHAPTER V

TWENTY miles west of the river and 30 miles north of Fort Ellis, Buck lay beside the cookfire and listened to Ed Bailey pair the boys off for tomorrow. It would be a rough, killing time but nothing a man couldn't take cheerfully, running down 500 head of Colter's cattle. Then a leisurely drive south to McMann's pens, the payoff in cash, and a month of fun. Buck grinned sleepily at the fire. They'd patronize McMann a couple of days, just for looks and ride north to Sherman where nobody asked questions and a dance was held every Saturday night.

"Ed," Buck said. "Let's go up to Sherman, eh?"

"Fandango?"

"I was there once," Buck said. "Met a nice little girl."

"Mex?"

"Sure," Buck said. "Married, but she gave me the eye. I ought to return the favor. How many head can we gather tomorrow?"

"Enough," Ed Bailey said. "You and me are taking the big canyon, the others'll circle out and drive into us. We'll sweat, brother, but the payoff's worth the time. Let's hit the sack. Long day comin'."

Buck lay back and watched the stars. He thought ahead to the payoff, the dance, and that girl. But no further. He hoped Glendon had stayed in Fort Ellis; maybe he could persuade Pat to come along to Sherman.

* * *

The summer wore and the heat increased. Glendon lived a quiet life that circumscribed no more than grocery shopping and fishing along the river, his only companions Swift Stamm, and occasionally, cafe talk with C. B. Adams. As the heat rose Glendon spent more time on the river. Swift was there, too, and they talked together under the cottonwoods and walked homeward to have coffee and talk some more. Glendon spoke only when she offered him the chance, and they got along fine.

Glendon slept late and ate small, fished the river, watched the mercury climb as June shrivelled its string. Two weeks after Buck left town, Glendon looked up from his bobber and saw a dust smoke coming down from the hills across the river; an hour later he counted the trail herd as it wound into McMann's pens. He wrapped his line and walked home, curious about those cattle in the river pens.

He wondered if they were branded, or clean, or if the long iron had worked them over; he wondered how many days they would stay in full view of all the world. It seemed incredible that Colter allowed such open theft; farther north such bald-faced rustling would start a war bigger than any banana republic revolution. Glendon ate a cold supper, shaved his sun-browned face, and walked uptown. He barely cleared the saloon doors when Buck came shouting from the bar to squeeze him in a sweaty bearhug and yell happily, "Heard you stayed. Come on now, Pat. I'll buy you a drink!"

"One drink," Glendon said. "It's good to see you, Buck."

"Good to see you," Buck grinned. "Pat, what you been doin'?"

"Loafing," he said. "Just plain loafing."

"An' us working like dogs," Buck said. "But we sure got paid for our trouble. Listen, we're going upriver in a couple days. Want to come along?"

"Where to?" he asked.

"Sherman," Buck said. "There's a saloon, an' girls, an' a dance on Saturday night."

"I'll let you know tomorrow," Glendon said. "Go back to that poker game."

He gave Buck a slap and pushed him toward the table where Ed Bailey sat, shuffling cards, watching them moodily. They hadn't shaved or washed yet, they were drinking and reaching out for their fun in sweat-grimed clothes, in dusty beards and leather-cracked boots. It went that way for men who worked so hard that time was quicksilver between their fingers, slipping from them faster than they reached. Glendon went through the hotel to the cafe, ordered coffee, and tried a sweet roll. He was hunched over his cup, anticipating night's first coolness, when he heard the shot.

Glendon rose without volition, an old war horse responding to conditioned reflexes. He checked his advance midway through the hotel lobby, walked slowly behind the rush to the saloon where men were crowded in a thick circle facing the bar. Boots drummed on the porch boards and burst inside with a sharp command from the owner, "Stand back!" All those crowding men opened ranks, some spilling backward against Glendon. One was Joe Jones, the night man at the livery barn.

"What happened?" Glendon asked.

"Buck," Jones said. "Some fool got drunk and Buck shot him!"

"Dead?"

"You heard one shot, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"That's all Buck ever takes. Sure he's dead and here's the major roaring mad!"

Glendon had lived two weeks in Fort Ellis and failed to meet McMann. He had seen the major on the street and riding past, but never in action. Curiosity made him edge into the saloon and along the wall until he had a clear view of the scene. He saw the dead man on the floor, sprawled beside a bar spittoon and a broken glass. Buck stood at the end of the bar, elbows on the knurled rail, and McMann had marched forward midway between the body and Buck. C. B. Adams came bustling inside at that moment, skipped around the body, and stood alertly beside McMann.

"Well," McMann said curtly. "What happened?"

"He up and started trouble," Buck said. "I had to take him."

"Prince?"

"Yessir, major?" the prim bartender said.

"Is that true?"

"Yessir," Prince said. "Nothing else Buck could do. This fellow was drunk and mean, he just started cussing Buck and went for his gun."

"Self-defence?" McMann said.

"Yessir," Prince said. "Can't be nothing else."

"This man was a civilian employee from the fort," McMann said furiously. "Here to inspect beef tomorrow. Evidently you killed in self-defence, Buck, but you might use better judgment. Do you know what this means?"

"Well," Buck said easily. "I reckon you'll have to find another beef inspector. I'll volunteer. I know them cows pretty well."

A ripple of laughter travelled the edge of the room and choked off abruptly as McMann glared at the crowd. He began a speech, thought better of his words, and nodded to Adams. "Take care of it," he said, and marched straight-shouldered from the saloon. In the following silence Adams said, "Prince, take this body to the icehouse, bring all the effects to my office. Gentlemen, return to your pleasures."

"That's all?" Buck asked.

"The verdict is self-defence," Adams said. "But let me remind you that friends of the deceased are upstairs. I suggest you get out of town, Buck."

"How many friends?" Buck asked.

"Three."

"Tell them to get out of town," Buck said.

"Buck," Adams said sharply. "Take a ride!"

Adams walked briskly from the saloon as the bartender tolled off half a dozen unwilling pallbearers and began the clean-up work. Before the back door slammed the games were under way, the bottles were tilted, the pool table was echoing to the

cue ball's click. Glendon turned into the lobby beside Joe Jones and put his thoughts into words: "That's how they do it here?"

"Legal and above board," Jones said. "Clear case of self-defence."

"No sheriff," Glendon said. "No marshal or coroner?"

"Adams is both."

"Both what?"

"Coroner and J. P.," Jones said. "No charges, no trouble. You heard him."

Glendon said, "Yes, I heard him," and walked from the lobby and stood deeply troubled in the porch shadows. He did not doubt that Buck had shot in self-defence, but the law in Fort Ellis was plainly a mockery. Glendon wanted to go home and forget tonight but, more strongly, he stood rooted on the porch and waited for Buck.

* * *

McMann roamed the upstairs office, venting his spleen on the walls and the desk. They had finished a stormy session with the colonel's representative from the fort, packed that man and the two remaining drovers off to bed, and sat now in mutual anger.

"The fool!" McMann said for the tenth time. "The brainless young fool!"

"I agree," Adams said tonelessly, "but he was provoked."

"Who cares?" McMann said bitterly. "With 50 blockheads he could shoot, why does he pick a man from the fort?"

"I told you," Adams said.

"You told me what?"

"He's a killer," Adams said. "He's dangerous, he'll be worse in a few weeks."

"And I'll have the colonel on my neck at noon," McMann grumbled.

"Can't you handle him?"

"Of course I can handle him!" McMann said. "But he'll insist that we show some semblance of law in town. I can talk him out of that, I think, but tell Bailey I don't want to see Buck in this town until I give permission."

"Gladly," Adams said, "but I doubt it will matter."

"Why not?"

"If Buck decides to visit us," Adams said, "he will come a-calling. As for law, you have an experienced marshal honoring us with his presence."

"Shotgun Glendon!" McMann smiled mirthlessly. "I told you I had a feeling about him."

"Then see him," Adams said. "Sound him out. Perhaps he needs money. Maybe he'll take orders."

"You read the letter," McMann snapped. "He's one of those honest fools. Exactly the kind I don't want within 50 miles of here. And lost his nerve, to boot. Oh, I'll talk to him, don't worry. I'll give him a week to clear out."

CHAPTER VI

MANUEL MARTINEZ crouched behind the warehouse dock and spoke to the thick-set man beside him. Other men guarded the dock corners and, deeper to the east behind the corral, more men waited with the horses. John Colter listened silently while Manuel talked, showing remarkable calm in the face of bad news. He did not speak until Manuel finished, then he said, "Leslie see it?"

"No, senor. He was home."

"An' Buck was ordered out of town?"

"Yes, senor. They will go to Sherman. I heard them say so earlier."

"Let 'em go," Colter said.

"And here?" Manuel said. "What of your cattle, senor? Five hundred head. That is too much to swallow!"

"Just stretch your big mouth a little wider," Colter said. "It ain't time yet. I'll tell you when."

"Very well, senor."

"Now watch Leslie close," Colter said. "I think he's getting greedy and nervous both."

"He is that, senor."

"An' watch close if he makes a pass at McMann or Adams," Colter said. "He ain't jumped that way yet, but he might."

"Not yet," Manuel said. "He stays to himself."

"Unnatural," Colter said. "There's more to that hombre than he shows. Adios."

"Adios, senor."

* * *

Charley Leslie was half dressed when the shooting occurred. He slipped on his trousers and soft leather slippers, and circled through the back lots

to the saloon where he crouched at the rear window above the cellar door and watched the activity inside. He was forced to decamp when the bartender's crew headed for the icehouse with the body. Leslie moved off to the north, crossed the road, and came back along an adobe wall toward the rear of his store. Stopping at the wall corner he heard the soft voices and crouched before Colter's guard saw him. He could not distinguish individual words but he recognized Colter's rumble and Manuel's softer bass. Leslie waited until Colter and his crew were gone, and Manuel had strolled off toward the street; then he stood and shook himself like a wet dog.

"Manuel!" Leslie whispered. "That double-crossing—"

They were cooking up something behind his back, and the only possible scheme was directed against McMann. But why do so without explaining such a plan to him? He could only infer that he was about to become the clay pigeon between two factions. He was only guessing, of course, but from tonight forward he dared not stand still and wait for the explosion. A smart man jumped first, and always feathered his nest in midair. Charley Leslie circled wide to the south and came around into the livery barn through the back door, up the alleyway to the office where the night man slept on a cot beside the desk. The night man, Joe Jones, had drifted into town a month after Leslie's arrival and got the barn job without trouble. Jones woke quietly when Leslie whispered, "Joe," through the screen door.

"Charley?"

"Don't get up," Leslie said. "Listen."

"Fire away, Charley."

Leslie spoke rapidly for 10 minutes. When he paused for breath, Jones sat up on the cot and rubbed his beard stubble. "Let me go over this," Jones said. "We're in the middle and we've got to get ready for a fast jump. We'll need a wagon and good team, have to load our stock at night and me clear town with it before daylight. Take it down the road, sell in any town between here and El Paso. Right?"

"Right," Leslie said. "Go on."

"Then come back and stay out of sight until you give the word."

"I don't know when this will break," Leslie said. "Meanwhile watch everything and everybody. I'll have more to go on in a few days. Good-night, Joe."

"Good-night, Charley."

Leslie left the barn as quietly as he came, padded back to his house, and undressed in darkness. He had promptly obeyed one cardinal rule of the game: protect your flanks by enriching your pockets as you took the fastest route out of trouble. But that move could take place only after Colter made a previous move, and Leslie himself countered by testing McMann. And even then he counted a chance if something was set to explode between the two. No matter, he thought, if they want a game he'd give them all a run for their money.

* * *

Glendon was turning off the porch for home when Buck and Ed Bailey appeared suddenly beside him. He wondered how Buck felt and could not see the face clearly in the darkness; and then Buck touched his arm.

"We're leaving tonight, Pat. Come on along!"

"Come down to the house," Glendon said. "Take a bath before you go."

"Get up behind me," Buck said happily. "Ed, let's slice these whiskers and get us a town bath."

Glendon mounted behind Buck and guided them through the back lots to his house. While they tied their horses Glendon lit his lamp, put the wash boiler on the fire, and carried water. Then Buck entered, carrying his blanket roll.

"First come, first served," Glendon said. "I'll have coffee in a jiffy."

Ed Bailey trailed inside reluctantly and stepped against the wall and watched Buck pour a basin of warm water and start shaving in Glendon's mirror. When the boiler bubbled and Buck carried a bucketful outside to wash, Bailey came forward to shave. Shirt off, facing the mirror, Bailey kept his flickering glance on Glendon in the glass. Bailey was a suspicious man, years deeper in their game, a man who had learned his lessons the dangerous, dirty way and gave no lead rope to any man he did not totally understand.

"You coming along?" Bailey asked.

"No," he said.

"Glendon," he said, "are you level with Buck?"

"All the way," Glendon said. "I've got no bone to pick. What's on your mind, Ed?"

"Buck," Bailey said softly. "He likes you."

"I like him," Glendon said simply. "Is that a crime?"

"Enough to throw in with us?"

"No," he said. "I'm not the style for your game, Ed."

"He wants to be your friend," Bailey said. "It can cause him trouble. How can you be amigos and stay outside?"

"I don't know?" Glendon said, "but I won't preach to him. He can visit me any time. I'll cause him no harm. Folks have worked it out before, maybe we can do the same."

Ed Bailey said, "Maybe—" and shut his mouth as Buck came into the kitchen and began rubbing dry on his dirty shirt.

"Feels good," Buck grinned. "Go soak yourself, Ed."

Bailey dried his razor carefully, cased it, and carried a fresh bucket of hot water outside.

"Well," Buck said. "You coming?"

"No," he said. "Can you savvy why?"

"I savvy," Buck said. "You don't want to choose cows or ride with us, an' that's all right. I never forced a man, for no man forces me. If you came along, we'd have some fun but no more. But it wouldn't be like just fun for you, eh?"

"No," Glendon said. "But any time you want to come here, you come. And I could do with riding out and seeing this country, Buck."

"I'll find time for that," Buck smiled.

Bailey appeared in the door, buttoning his shirt, slapping back his wet hair. Bailey said, "Thanks, Glendon. Sure appreciate it. Buck, time to go."

Glendon heard them walk the horses away toward the road where other men waited. Their hoof echo-died in the night, one last defiant shout floated back, wild and free, and they were gone.

Glendon lifted the boiler off the stove and replaced the lids. He was pouring coffee when Swift Stamm knocked and entered. Glendon said, "Excuse the muss," and motioned to the coffee pot.

"I'll have a cup," Swift said. "I started over a while ago but you had company."

"Buck and Ed Bailey," he said. "Shaved, took a bath, just left for Sherman, wherever that is."

"Upriver," Swift said. "Pat, I heard a shot. What happened?"

He told her, pouring coffee and filling a plate with cookies she had baked two days ago. She sat at his table and spoke her blunt thoughts: "How do you know them?"

"Accident," he said. "I met Buck at Cross C."

He told her of the meeting, and some of his liking for Buck colored his voice, for her head lifted and he saw the puzzlement.

"I know, Buck," she said, "and the rest of that crew. Do you know what Adams thinks of Buck?"

"I can guess," Glendon said. "Adams would call him a killer, probably wants to get rid of him."

"You are too close for comfort," Swift said. "Adams has told me how he feels. How do you feel about Buck?"

"Buck's a funny boy," Glendon said. "I don't know where he came from, what's behind him, but he's riding the rail these days. One side of him is all laughs and fun, having a good time. He's generous, if he likes a man he makes a friend, and I think he values friendship because he hasn't had much of it. That's the good side. The other is bad. Buck's riding a rail and he can tip either way in the time it takes to say the word. I've seen it happen before. I know how it comes to a boy like Buck. You kill a man—and I hear tonight was number four—and that works inside a boy the wrong way. Especially when it is so easy, when there's no law, and what law there is is on his side. Then one day something tips the scales and he's gone, over the wrong side of the rail."

"And yet you like him?" she said.

"I like him now," Glendon said, "for the good part in him. Just as I would like any man who treated me honestly, who offered me friendship with no strings."

"But if he changes," Swift said. "Goes off the wrong side of the rail as you call it. What then?"

"That would end it," Glendon said bluntly. "I can never abide a killer."

"How can you say that?" she asked.

"You're drawing me out," Glendon said. "Yes, you are, and I think you know why. I've known too many killers, Swift. There is no apology for a killer, he can give no valid excuse for his action. And once he starts, he never stops. Believe me, I know."

"You should," Swift Stamm said softly.

"Why do you say that?"

"I had to see you tonight," Swift said. "McMann received a letter from Kansas City this morning. I open his mail and arrange it for him. I don't need to tell you what that letter said, do I?"

"I kept hoping it wouldn't follow along," Glendon said. "Yes, I can guess what it told him, but tell me anyway."

"You have been a town marshal," Swift said. "A United States marshal, a county sheriff, a stage-coach guard. For the past 10 years, in Nebraska and Wyoming and Kansas. Last in Kansas, and you resigned a month ago because the letter stated you lost your nerve. Is that true?"

"I was a pretty good marshal, Swift. I believed in the law, in keeping the peace and giving every man a fair share of justice. I was paid for that and I like to think I gave full value. All I want now is to be left alone."

"Did you bring your shotgun?" Swift asked.

"I brought one Colt and one Winchester," Glendon said.

"Then I believe you," she said. "But I still say you lie."

"In what way?"

"You haven't lost your nerve," she said. "I don't have to be a man to understand that. I lost my nerve two years ago, or thought I did. I was like a chicken with my head cut off for over a year. Then I woke up one day and knew it wasn't true, it didn't matter that I was alone. I'd been alone before Bill was shot anyway. I just didn't want to admit that. So I did, finally, and now I'm all right. That's the way it is with you, isn't it? You're looking for something and some day you'll find it and then you'll be all right again."

"Swift," he said quietly. "Don't get all worked up over me. There's no reason."

"I like you," she said. "We can talk and you don't care how I dress or what I do. You let me be what I want to be. We can sit here and talk, and I can't do that with anybody else."

"There's Leslie," he said. "He likes you a lot."

"And you've seen Leslie," Swift said curtly. "Why do I talk to him? Because there was nobody else and at least he doesn't —" she blushed and carried her cup to the dishpan and stayed a minute before she turned. "Charley's cold inside. He has no real feelings. Pat, don't you want to talk with me?"

"Better than anything else," he said honestly. "But don't start worrying about me. There's no future in it."

"All right," she said. "And I know you well enough to see that you're getting worried about me. I should be home like all respectable ladies. Good-night, Pat."

Glendon returned to his dirty dishes and his coffee grounds and the shreds of his own hope he had ridden so far to achieve. He looked around the house and packed his gear in his mind; 10 minutes and he could be on the trail. Maybe he'd have to do it in less; but thanks to Swift he was forewarned.

CHAPTER VII

HOT, burning sunlight pursued Buck and Ed into the old town slumbering near the river beneath the ancient cottonwoods. The streets meandered aimlessly, the roads curled into the blankness of the compass points; and no one rushed toward life in Sherman where tomorrow would be no better than yesterday.

Buck sang all the way across the plaza into the saloon that stored delightful odors of beer and whiskey and homemade wine; and the owner, Coyote Smith, stroking his long moustaches, came forward in smiling greeting and set up the first round on the house.

"What happened?" Coyote Smith said. "Last time there was 10 of you."

"Oh, we left out with 10," Buck said. "Took our time and had us a poker game last night."

"An' five of you won?"

"Si," Buck laughed. "Other five had to sell some cows over in Texas. They'll be along directly . . . dance tonight?"

"Big fandango," Coyote Smith said. "Same as always."

"Get somebody to take the horses," Buck said.

He walked from the saloon and around the corner on the street leading to the river, and stopped under the trees he remembered so well. He had a clear view of the house from here, 50 yards back

toward the plaza. He had walked that girl home and saw how the cottonwood towered over all others and cast a huge shadow against the night sky. She talked enough to explain that her husband was overdue from working across the river. She didn't encourage him, but she hadn't told him to stay away. Buck rolled a cigaret and watched the house; once the chimney smoke slackened off from breakfast fire, he saw the man leave for the plaza.

He was a young fellow, tall and thin, wearing cotton pants and a blue gingham shirt and runover boots. His teeth flashed white when he turned to smile a last good-by, he wore his black hair slick and boasted one of those big saddled noses. Buck watched him out of sight with a smile of good-will; if the young fellow gave no trouble he'd be meek as a lamb himself. Buck walked slowly toward the house, ducked under the clothesline, and stepped into the kitchen. She whirled from the stove with a tiny shriek, recognized him, and smiled.

"Juanita," Buck said. "You remember?"

"Buck," Juanita Lopez said. "You are back."

"Just got in," Buck said. "You coming to the dance?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "And you will be there?"

"With bells on," Buck laughed. "Do I get a dance?"

"Of course," she said. "You and your friends are always welcome here, Buck."

Buck laughed and walked whistling up the street to the plaza.

Ed was snoring when he ducked into the adjoining room and undressed. Buck slept dreamlessly through the day and woke to shave, soap off, and dress in his clean outfit. He found Ed and the other boys in the saloon, talking with people they knew, buying drinks and laughing at jokes, waiting for dance time. Buck shook hands all around, bought a round, and played cooncan until Coyote Smith called, "Barracks are open," and untied his white apron.

They trooped around the plaza to the barracks that now served as town meeting place and dance hall. Buck danced with Coyote Smith's wife and kept looking at the benches as they spun; and finally he saw her, in a group of girls, her eyes laughing, her lips red, her feet tapping to the music.

"You know Juanita Lopez?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Lola Smith said. "Her husband works for us, with the sheep across the river. A good man."

"Where is he tonight?"

"He had to cross the river," Lola said. "There was some trouble."

"Too bad," Buck said. "Somebody ought to dance with her."

"Well, go," Lola smiled. "I cannot compete with the tender ones her size."

"You're my girl," Buck said.

"Oh, go on!"

Buck crossed the floor and stood beside her, and the girls gave him those long-lashed glances of welcome. Buck smiled at them and faced her.

"Come on," he said. "You promised."

She danced away with him, not too close but moving not too far away. Buck was cautious while recalling all the steps he had learned in Chihuahua, until they were whirling with the music and she was smiling dreamily. When the set ended he took her to the corner, bowed to the other girls, and went away.

Buck danced a few sets with older women, and waited patiently until the orchestra bowed good-night. He caught Juanita in the darkness, took her arm, and guided her around the barracks. He walked beside her down the dusty street to the house, through the front door, where she turned and smiled.

"You are very kind," she said. "Thank you."

"How long does he nurse those sheep?" Buck asked.

"Oh, not long," she said. "He will be home soon."

"Nice house," Buck said.

"Buck," she said fearfully. "You must go now."

Buck closed the door and dropped the latch bar. He grinned as he crossed the room, watching her retreat from the table. He circled quickly and caught her, still grinning, laying his big hands on her shoulders.

* * *

One of the five missing poker players reached Sherman and pulled Ed Bailey upright in bed and told him the bad news: the five losers had cut a

bunch of cows from Colter's main herd and driven on for the Texas line. They topped a ridge and met two Colter riders head-on; one got away but the other man was killed. Four of the losers went on with the cows; the fifth had ridden a good horse half to death getting back to Sherman. Not because the death of one meant more than a grumble to Colter; but the dead man was Colter's foreman. That quick flurry of shots had spelled the end of armed neutrality for them all.

"Roust 'em out," Bailey said.

He found Buck's room empty and ran for Juanita Lopez's house; and arrived just in time to see her husband enter, hear the shot, and run cursing toward the doorway. Buck appeared immediately, backing outside with his Colt held carelessly on the darkness within. Bailey heard Juanita sobbing and caught, beneath that high-pitched sound, the groans of her husband.

Then Buck turned and nudged Bailey toward the plaza. He laughed. "Idiot! Imagine him pulling such a fool trick. What you doin' up so early, Ed?"

"Getting you up," Bailey said. "We're leaving for Fort Ellis."

"But I'm not broke yet," Buck said reasonably.

"Nor likely to be," Bailey said. "McMann'll be looking for us."

"What happened?"

"Steve just got in," Bailey said. "Had trouble over east, shot a Colter man."

"John's got 50 men! He won't get riled up over losing one jughead."

"He will on this one," Bailey said. "The boys shot his foreman."

* * *

A tall man with an undershot jaw and heavy, sagging jowls walked laboriously into the Cross C yard, legs quivering from a 20-mile hike. He entered the big house and brushed the protesting maid aside to roust John Colter from bed and tell his story of the five men who stole cattle and shot Cross C's segundo and gave his own horse a lung-shot that drained its life 20 miles from home. His name was Pasqual, next man in rank to the dead foreman; and he shook with anger as he spoke.

"Patron," he said. "Last week they took 500. Now more. And they shot Jack. Patron, this is too much."

"Easy, boy."

Colter woke from a fine, dreamless sleep to lose his foreman, a man known and trusted for 12 years. A lesser man would climb the ridgepole and bay like a wolf; Colter's face betrayed no emotion.

"Five of them?"

"Yes."

"Then the other five went to Sherman," Colter said. "An' ain't spent all their money yet. That's good. Pasqual, you recognize any of the five?"

"Too much dust," Pasqual said bitterly. "Then we were shooting and I had to run."

"Don't matter," Colter said. "But you're right. I guess it's time."

"Say the word, patron!"

"Get those boys from the east camp," Colter said. "Now just you and me and Manuel know where they came from, what I planned. Keep it that way. Take 'em to Fort Ellis tonight and round up Manuel. Start it tomorrow morning right after breakfast. You remember how I want it?"

"I remember," Pasqual said.

"And Leslie," Colter said. "He won't know about this. Wait till he shows up, stick a gun in his hands, make sure he does his share."

"He will," Pasqual said grimly.

"Boot 'em out," Colter said. "Burn the whole shebang."

"And McMann?"

"Kill him!"

Pasqual ran from the big house to saddle a horse and start his ride. John Colter climbed rheumatically into his faded overalls and patched shirt. He had planned this from the day he put Leslie into the store. Tomorrow morning 17 men would start shooting across the street in Fort Ellis; they would keep shooting until McMann was dead or decamped. Either way, it was Colter's answer to three years of open theft, given in the only language McMann understood; and the beauty of it was, Leslie would take all the blame. For the 15 men Pasqual was bringing in were all strangers, hired in Texas and kept at the east camp over a month. John Colter had paid them double wages to eat and sleep and wax fat; now they would earn their keep.

CHAPTER VIII

GLENDON did not go uptown until the following Monday; at that time, heading for the store, Swift Stamm met him outside the livery barn.

"Turn around," she said.

She led him back to the barn corner, her fingers biting urgently into his arm. Even so, he saw nothing unusual in her appearance at this hour. She often did bookwork between 6 and 7, to escape the rising day heat. Glendon tried a smile to calm her down.

"What's the matter, you hook a trout already?"

"Trouble at Sherman," she said. "McMann and Adams were talking in their office. Buck shot another man up there Saturday night."

"Dead?"

"Buck was in a house with a girl," Swift said. "The husband came home. Buck shot him in the leg; they all came straight down here. They're in the cafe now."

"Why would they do that?" Glendon asked. "Shooting a man in the leg is no cause for such commotion."

"Let me get my breath," Swift said. "Pat, the reason they came back is a lot worse. I heard Bailey telling how they had a poker game on the way to Sherman. The five losers rode off to steal more Colter cattle and sell them in Texas. One of that bunch got back to Sherman yesterday morning. They met two Colter riders and killed one. He was Colter's foreman, a man named Jack Wilson. That's why Bailey brought them down so fast. You didn't know Wilson, Pat. He was the only man Colter really called his friend."

"Now the roof comes off?" Glendon said.

"There's more," Swift said. "Just a few minutes ago, after Bailey talked, the major told Adams to offer you the marshal's job."

"Generous of him!" Glendon said.

"Pat, it makes no difference. You've got to leave right now."

"Wait," he said.

He held her arm and looked up the deserted street at the store fronts, the hitch rails, the tiny dust devils swirling beneath the boardwalk. He watched the silent town come alive.

"Pat," she said. "Adams will come any minute."

His mouth shaped the words, "Very well," but his lips spoke other words that came from instinct. In that moment he saw Leslie's store windows smashed outward by rifle barrels, saw the entire store front erupt in flame, heard the roar of the shots, saw the man on the porch tumble dead into the dust below the hitch rail. Glendon said, "Get back," and threw her around the livery barn corner. He followed and pulled her along the barn wall and across the vacant lot to her house where she sank on the nearest chair and stared at him numbly.

"Into the kitchen," Glendon said. "Stay away from the windows. Be back in two minutes."

He ran from her back door, hurdled the osage hedge, and raced for his own house. He scooped up his Colt and cartridge belt, the Winchester, six boxes of ammunition from the pantry shelf; and ran, hunched over, back to Swift's. She was in the kitchen, crouched against the wall below window line. Glendon ran through, latched the front door, swung the window shutters into place; then walked, catching his breath, to lean the Winchester against the wall and stand beside the small north kitchen window.

"What is it?" she said. "Why—?"

"We're lucky," Glendon said gently. "If you had started five minutes later—but forget it. That's Colter's answer, Swift, and we stay here until it's finished."

"But Charley's in his store," she said.

"We can't do a thing," Glendon said. "Listen!"

The rifle fire was steady, ricochets came off wood and iron to scream overhead, sailing across the river. The opening volley had been violent; now the sound was redoubled.

"All we can do is wait," Glendon said.

★ ★ ★

"Keep walking, señor!" Pasqual said.

Charley Leslie felt the gun and walked steadily down the centre aisle into the warehouse; and saw many men waiting in the shadows. Manuel rose up and gave a signal; those men filed around Leslie and began crawling up the aisles toward the front window.

"Do you fight with us?" Manuel asked bluntly.

Charley Leslie understood everything, and sil-

ently cursed himself for misjudging his time. He had never faltered in making quick decisions. He made one now, already exploring the future possibilities.

"Colter's order?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"No time," Manuel said. "Do you fight?"

"Of course," Leslie said briskly. "Let's give McMann a crawlful."

He swung back into the store and went directly to the gun cases. He selected a rifle, began loading the magazine, and nodded toward the windows. "Going to kick them out?"

"Yes," Manuel said, from the floor.

"Then get these guns and the ammunition below window line," Leslie said. "Plenty of water in the warehouse?"

"Yes," Manuel said. "Before you came."

Leslie heard the reluctant note of approval in Manuel's voice. They understood authority, they respected a man who could keep his head. The tall one spoke to Manuel in staccato Spanish. Manuel smiled and crawled around beside Leslie.

"What does he want?" Leslie asked.

"He told me to help you," Manuel said. "So, you see, my janitor work is not finished. Let us get the guns down."

While they worked, Leslie watched the store front. The tall man was setting his line below the windows; and across the street one of Bailey's crew stepped outside and stood in the porch shade. The tall man cocked his Winchester and raised the barrel. Passing down the last case of ammunition, Charley Leslie watched the street, completely fascinated by the scene. The tall man whispered and 15 rifles canted upward; he whispered again and 15 men came off their knees.

"NOW!" the tall man cried.

The rifle barrels slashed forward, both windows burst into shreds, the first volley was one deafening shot, Leslie saw the man on the porch roll lifelessly into the dust; then he was crawling across the store toward the beds and mattresses and bolt goods. He could only guess how this insane business might end; in the meantime he had no intention of stopping a bullet.

★ ★ ★

One moment Ed Bailey was sitting wearily at the cafe counter, coffee cup in his left hand; next a slug blew the cup into flying pieces and spun the handle around his forefinger. Another slug sliced the brim of Buck's hat and killed a man in his tracks. Bailey dove for the lobby arch and rolled through; the others hit the deck and crawled forward, fumbling for cartridges, skinning their elbows on the splintery floor. Bailey shouted up the hotel stairway; and McMann answered his call.

★ ★ ★

McMann dropped his razor and ran to the stairhead. Ed Bailey shouted a hurried explanation and pointed across the street in emphasis.

"Cover the front, put a few men in rear!" McMann shouted.

McMann turned and ran the length of the hall, slamming his hand heels against the doors. By actual count he had 12 men upstairs, 13 with himself; downstairs a total of 14, and Adams was shaving in his rooms behind their offices. McMann gave a curt order to the first man dressed and returned to his own rooms. He dressed quickly, already estimating the situation, planning his fight. For this was a battle to McMann; all the years of his life had trained him best for such moments. McMann strapped on a Colt, dropped the bulldog .38 into his hip pocket holster, and walked to the stairhead.

"Bailey! How many casualties?"

"Two," Bailey yelled, "but we're all set now, major."

"You need more men down there?"

"Sure could use 'em, major."

McMann faced the hall. "Five of you report downstairs to Bailey! You—the first five this way!"

They clattered past him, leaving a gap upstairs, and McMann realigned the remaining seven men in rooms facing the street; and hurried around the stairhead to the side hall door leading into Adams' rooms above the cafe. Adams was already shaved and armed, cheerful enough to offer a smile.

"Not entirely unexpected, eh?"

"Take over the warehouse," McMann said. "Move all weapons, ammunition, and blasting powder to a safe place. Issue all supplies. I'll be upstairs for the time being."

"Very well," Adams said, and then shook his head. "What's Colter's idea?"

"Simple enough," McMann said. "Pin us down, flank action tonight. Burn us out. I would employ the same tactics."

"And if he does?"

"He cannot," McMann said. "I intend to turn the tables on those ignorant fools. I will burn that store and kill every man in it. Don't expose yourself."

"Why, Sam!" Adams said. "Your solicitude is touching."

"Solicitude?" McMann said, from the doorway. "It's too much trouble finding another lawyer."

★ ★ ★

McMann weathered the surprise attack and launched an efficient rebuttal. Fire slacked off after the first hour's fighting, and the sniping began. McMann sent two men to the hotel roof; Pasqual countered with a man on Leslie's roof behind the false front. Toward noon McMann dispatched three men in a wide circle to kill or capture the horses in Leslie's corral. Pasqual himself greeted those men; two died and the third staggered back to the hotel with a torn arm. McMann sent a crew to rip the heavy timbers from his ice-house and build solid barricades behind his windows. In Leslie's, Manuel used every box, crate, mattress and cloth bolt for a similar purpose.

Buck had lain on his stomach in the cafe and exchanged shots with the roof sniper until his nose itched from gunpowder and his face turned beet red. His only consolation was knowing that the sniper was clinging to a slanting roof, shingles hot under his boots, sun above making him dizzy, wanting water and unable to take the time as he moved up and down the roof behind the false front. But the boards were either too thick for a Colt, or the sniper was lucky.

Buck went back to the store warehouse, selected a Sharps buffalo gun, and walked out and around the corner of the store. When Pasqual's sniper rose and snapped a shot into the cafe, Buck steadied the buffalo gun against the corner and sent a .50-calibre slug through the false front, one foot below the cornice. The rifle came sliding off the roof; the man followed, cartwheeling to the ground. Buck blew smoke from the Sharps' barrel and returned to the hotel. As he walked up the back hall the man guarding the left front window raised his head to fire and took a shot in the face. Across the street Manuel levered another cartridge into his Winchester and grinned wickedly. Buck could not see Manuel but he stared at the dead man on the lobby floor and cursed softly. It was tit-for-tat; they were getting nowhere. Buck caught Ed Bailey's eye and motioned him back to the safety of the stairs.

"How many that make?" Buck asked.

"Five," Bailey said. "An' a couple shot up."

"No good," Buck said. "They mean business over there."

"Maybe they're gettin' better pay," Bailey said dourly. "The major ain't said a word about that. I'd get out now if I could."

"Tonight," Buck said. "You an' me."

"Should I hit the major up again?" Bailey asked. "Might be worthwhile."

"Oh, sure," Buck smiled. "If he's alive tonight to pay off."

★ ★ ★

Glendon managed an hour's sleep toward supertime, and woke to souse his face in the wash basin and find a smile for Swift.

"What will they do?" she asked.

"Fight," he said. "Till somebody wins."

"How long is that, Pat?"

"I think it will end tonight," Glendon said.

"And who—?"

"Who wins?" he asked. "McMann has more men, but that other bunch is here to stay. I'm inclined to bet on them."

"But McMann will get help," Swift said. "From the colonel."

"No help there," Glendon said. "This is off limits for the army. McMann set up his town and made his own law. Now he's tasting the same medicine. Only way the army can step in is on orders from your territorial governor . . . and who will let him know in time? Nobody."

"It's a terrible thing," she said. "I can't believe this is happening, Pat."

"No one does," Glendon said. "But it happens. Now, when it gets dark, we want no lights. I'll be outside."

"Why?"

"Safest way," he said. "Anybody comes barging around, I can stop them before they get too close. I could do with supper if you're up to it."

"I'm up to it," she said, "but don't ask me how I'll feel in the morning."

* * *

McMann watched darkness cross the sky and smother the street below; rifle fire sputtered into silence as men went in relays to the cafe kitchen. McMann paced the upper hall, gnawing his thumb, planning for the night. He had 21 able-bodied fighting men, while enemy casualties had cut their strength to a rough dozen. McMann planned a diversion for midnight, a direct fire fight across the street, during which time he would send two flanking parties out to move upon Leslie's store. Then a calculated period of silence—say two hours—to lull all suspicions; and then an assault. That should come at approximately 3 a.m. when a man's spirit dipped to lowest ebb.

Those flanking parties would need coal oil, rags, and blasting powder bombs. They would carry shotguns and Colts for the infighting. It was now 9 o'clock, giving him three hours to issue orders, prepare special equipment, re-evaluate his plans for possible error. Well satisfied, McMann stepped away from the nearest door and lit a cigar. At that moment the entire set of buildings quivered to the smashing thud of a heavy object; someone had rammed a wagon into the north saloon wall. Flame flicker danced redly in the hall window. Rifle fire boomed from across the street.

McMann heard the surprised shouts as he ran to the stairhead; even as he roared orders men rushed toward the danger. McMann charged downstairs into the saloon and took personal command of the situation. He organized a bucket brigade, sent the bartender with two men to hang blankets across the saloon front to mask their movements. Bailey led six men outside and around the corner; other men passed sloshing buckets from the water barrels in the back room. Within five minutes Bailey returned with his report.

"Cart," Bailey said. "We put it out."

"Now we shall give them a taste of stronger medicine!" McMann shouted.

The bar seemed to swell suddenly and slap him in the chest. He was blown forward against the knurled edge, he staggered backward and reached out blindly for support. He fell over a card table as the concussion first deadened, then seeped from his swollen eardrums; and he heard timbers crashing, floors grinding apart, smelled acrid smoke on the blast wind. In that moment McMann refused to admit his mistake, recognize his own weakness; that he, as a military man, should have known the hay wagon was a feint, that in his own stubbornness he refused to credit ignorant fools with such wit. They had tricked him with the hay wagon; and now he faced a truth he could not believe, much less combat. His world was coming apart before his eyes; his mind clouded over and he walked unsteadily toward the hotel lobby, thinking only of escape.

* * *

Buck was sleeping in the last hotel room on the back hall when the fire started. He sat up, rubbed his face, and listened. A few minutes later the blast spun him off the bed against the bureau. He rose unharmed as the cafe and store collapsed, then burst into flame. Leaping to the south window, Buck saw men run from the livery barn and take up a firing line facing the back lot. Buck tossed his Winchester aside, kicked off his boots, and dug his socked toes into the rag rug. A man had to travel light, the way they were headed. He stepped into the hall and waited beside the back door; and Bailey came running from the lobby with a dozen survivors. Fire was licking into the lobby, illuminating the hall, painting a greasy red patina on their faces. McMann shouted orders that made no sense; no one listened as they crowded around Buck. Bailey rapped his knuckles on the door and shook his head.

McMann shouldered between them and spoke gibberish that ended as Buck clouted him on the ear and spun him against the wall.

"Shut up," Buck said genially. "All right, boys. Run fast and head for the river."

Bailey broke from the doorway, the others close behind, and the rifles exploded from north and south. Bailey shot back and leaped high, bent down, slowed, speeded up, twisted toward the icehouse and yawed away. The second man dropped but Bailey was still going, very near the outer darkness.

"Well," Buck said. "Are you going or staying, McMann?"

McMann clung to the door frame, heat from the hall blistering his shirt. He yelled something and burst outward on his heavy legs, head thrown back, running without sight or thought. Buck watched him pass the halfway mark; then three-quarters as he reached the icehouse. As he stretched desperately for darkness a dozen shots kicked dust around him, smashed him down, rolled him over dead. Buck stood alone in the hall, pursing his lips in disgust. There went a meal ticket; but the way things had gone, they might as well strike out on their own.

Buck closed the door and turned into the bedroom, dumped the water pitcher over a blanket and draped it on his raised forearms; it provided a steaming shield as he ran up the hall into the lobby and fought his way through rising flames to the saloon. Buck ran to the back storeroom, picked his way between whiskey barrels and beer kegs, and found the small side window boarded up long ago to prevent petty theft. He wrenched the boards away and boosted himself through the opening, fell head first to the ground, and rolled to his knees, Colt ready, still in darkness here as he had expected. Buck began crawling north, away from the fire and the town, into the night.

CHAPTER IX

GLENDON lifted Swift and led the way to the house. She faltered and he held her firmly while she cried at last, a necessary relief she had bottled up too long. Manuel hailed them a minute later from the front yard, asking for help to put out the fire at Leslie's shop.

"Right with you," Glendon answered.

"Charley," Swift said. "Is he all right?"

"Manuel?" Glendon called.

"Si?"

"Leslie?"

"Unharmed, senor. Please come quickly and bring a bucket if you can. We will need much help."

Manuel charged off to the south, shouting into other houses as he ran, and Glendon found the water bucket in the darkness and made swift strides to the front door and step outside beside him.

"Now you go and see Mrs. Morales," he said. "We'll need coffee before the night's over."

"Pat," she said. "How did it end. What will happen now?"

"Tomorrow," Glendon said. "Don't give it a thought tonight. We'll know tomorrow."

* * *

Glendon slouched exhausted on a nail keg outside the livery barn, thinking dully how all of life seemed to be a process of getting hurt, licking wounds, and getting hurt again. He saw the people of the town crowded into the street before Leslie's store, staring apathetically at the smoking ruins of McMann's tiny empire. Only the half-melted adobe walls, jagged and black, marked what had been the greatest influence in their restricted lives.

"Here comes Adams," Jones said. "If he ain't a sight!"

Glendon swung around on the nail keg and saw Adams limping up from the river, a ragged scarecrow resurrected from the dead. Adams joined the crowd and established his old authority with a few eloquent gestures, a few sad words, proving the shrewdness of those men who turned weaknesses into virtues. Adams was alive and returned to the town, therefore he was a better, more virtuous man than McMann who was dead. Now was the time to throw Adams out of town, give him no second chance to smother them with trouble. Instead, two men tenderly helped him up the steps into Leslie's store.

"They ought to cut him into tripe. He's laughing at 'em, you know that?" Jones said.

"I know it," Glendon said tonelessly. "I know it too well, Joe."

Adams spent 10 minutes in Leslie's store before he limped down the street toward Glendon. He had a gleam in his red-rimmed eyes, the look of a sinner turned righteous; and no man became so righteous as a reformed sinner, and a false one at that.

Adams plumped down on the ground beside Glendon and rubbed his dirty hands across his eyes. "Pat, I want to see you later on today. I just sent a message to the fort. I begged the colonel to telegraph the governor. Last night was

murder. We must have law and order in this county."

"You've changed," Glendon said curtly.

"Wouldn't you?"

"So now you want a sheriff?"

"I do," Adams said.

"Appointed by the governor?" Glendon asked. "Taking orders from the governor. You want that?"

"I do," Adams repeated. "His orders would be identical with my own wishes."

"I don't blame you," Glendon said. He rose from the nail keg and moved off, then paused to voice Adams' unspoken fears. "You better find some law fast. Ed Bailey and Buck won't be polite and wait on you."

"Pat—!"

He walked away before his anger got out of hand. Adams had played both ends against the middle so long that, like McMann, he had deemed his position impregnable. Now Adams knew all too well that Buck and Ed Bailey would run wild, feed off all factions impartially, laugh at all law. Adams was afraid for his life; and Adams wanted him to shoulder the burden.

Glendon entered his house, heated water, and scrubbed his filthy body until the skin was red. He dressed in clean clothing, buried the dirty outfit in the garden, and walked on to the river. He would not forget last night.

"I knew you were here," Swift said. "Come up and eat."

She had washed and changed into the well-worn clean trousers and blue shirt Glendon forever associated with the clean face and, most of all, the clean mind. She carried sandwiches, coffee, and two cups hooked over one finger. Glendon turned from the water and joined her on the flat rock and ate with sudden hunger. The coffee pot drained, he rolled a cigaret.

"I saw Adams," Swift said. "He told me you had a talk."

"He talked," Glendon said. "I walked away."

"The news is already around town," Swift said. "Everybody hopes you'll take the job."

"Don't push it at me," he said roughly.

"I'm sorry, Pat."

"No," he said. "I'm sorry. Listen, there's not much left here. What will you do?"

"Adams wants me to stay," she said. "He's going to rebuild."

"With what?"

"Money," she said simply. "A lot of money. I copied the joint will they drew up last year; each gave the other everything in case of death. Adams has it all now."

"The meek shall inherit the earth," Glendon said thinly. "In a—don't you want to get out of here, Swift?"

"I don't know," she said. "Every time I think so, I wonder where I'd go, what I'd do. Pat, will you take the job?"

"You mean, you want me to?"

"Yes," she said, and then, "No—I don't know what I mean."

"I know what you're going to do," Glendon said. "Go home and go to bed."

He watched her go away, tall and slim, and wondered how much he ought to read in her words, how far he should look behind the new-spun fabric of their friendship. She had sensed his outrage today, his compulsion to do something for these people. She was sickened by last night but he saw it with different eyes, with wiser eyes, as a repetition of similar nights in distant towns.

Only three men rode north from McMann's pens across the river. The others elected to cut and run for El Paso. Ed Bailey and Tom McMillan waited half an hour, holding Buck's horse, before they started up the trail; in that minute Buck came from the river, sopping wet, and mounted the black horse.

Buck led them from the trees to the river, and did not bother looking back. They followed, Ed Bailey riding rear guard. All through that day no words were spoken but they understood: Buck was the leader. Ed Bailey was second-in-command. They came at darkness to Colter's south camp, a fine cabin and horse corral beside the windmill; and Tom McMillan's horse went lame.

Colter's camp man stood beside the tank and watched them water the horses. Buck shook out his rope and cut a fresh horse from the corral, pulled it protestingly through the gate. The camp man was only a thin-faced, gangly boy but he ran out to grab Buck's rope and give it a hard yank. Tom McMillan

called, "Hey, boy. We're trading you my horse." But the boy started down the rope toward the Colter horse, and Buck said calmly, "We're wasting time." Buck shot once and the boy lifted his arms and fell away from the rope. Buck pulled the horse over beside the tank, tossed the rope to McMillan, and punched the spent cartridge from his Colt.

"Shift your gear," Buck said. "We've got cows to gather."

Buck had shot the kid in the back, and the kid wore no gun. Bailey had ridden through his own life and reached that moment when a man either turned back or crossed an invisible line and went on; and once he crossed there was no return. Then a man lived on until his string ended. He had watched Buck the past three weeks, wondered how near Buck was, when it might happen. The fight at McMann's was enough to change any man; but even then Bailey was not sure. Now he looked at the body beside the corral gate and followed Buck eastward into the twilight. The moment had come and passed, so quickly Buck himself would be unable to name it later on, to say that was the time. But Ed Bailey knew, and rode on. There was no turning back for them now. They rode one road and it would squeeze narrower every passing day.

* * *

News gathered slowly in a country so vast. John Colter had his pipeline to the state capitol, but it took a week to bring him information that spread a wintry grin on his round face. So Adams was going back to business at the old stand, was he? So Adams had used his influence to request law and order in the county; and recommended Pat Glendon for the sheriff's job. Colter blinked calmly when his man from the capitol reviewed Glendon's past; but he grinned at the latest news, something Adams had evidently not heard. A change of governors was taking place, the new governor was arriving tomorrow from the east and it would take time before the new man—a general of the army—was ready to operate. Colter gave his man orders and sent him back to the capitol. Adams had influence, but John Colter was infinitely more powerful.

His man carried instructions to Colter's lawyers; that he, Colter, wanted law and order more than anybody else, that Glendon was a sound choice for the job—if the former Kansas marshal would accept. However, Glendon needed deputies and Colter recommended a man from Fort Ellis who also wanted peace and was such a good citizen he would accept a deputy's badge to the detriment of his own business. John Colter would be happy to meet the new governor and offer the benefits of his hard-earned knowledge if it would help, in any way, to mitigate the present situation.

Then John Colter gave succinct orders to Pasqual: ride to Fort Ellis and tell Charley Leslie to expect someone from the governor's office and answer yes to that man's question. There would be another deputy, of course, and that man should be of Spanish blood. Leslie was to recommend Manuel.

"At once," Pasqual said. "But what about Buck?"

The boy from the south camp had been found, the story read accurately in the tracks around the tank and corral; and 200 head of prime stock was missing from the south herd. Pasqual and all the crew were on the bitter edge these days. They had liked the boy who worked so hard, listened eagerly to their advice, a boy found shot in the back, a boy unarmed but for the rifle left in the line cabin.

"Hold tight," Colter said. "Now I don't mean if you run into Buck. Just bring me his ears then. But we won't go lallygagging after him just yet."

"Yes, patron," Pasqual said grudgingly.

John Colter grinned. "We're about to acquire law and order, Pasqual. Better to be on the side of the law, eh?"

CHAPTER X

THEY sold the cattle in Texas and spent two days carousing in a dirty trail town. Buck disappeared while the others got drunk and played cards; but where the others were inclined to linger, Buck routed them out and led the way west. Hoping for Sherman, Buck took them south around Colter's range, into the dry canyon a mile east of Fort Ellis. In early evening Buck went off toward town, returned an hour later, and led them down to the corral behind Leslie's store. Buck had spent a busy hour, as witnessed by the mattresses and five-gallon cans of coal oil.

"Burn the store," Buck said. "I'll meet you at the pens."

The others hesitated and Bailey said, "Come on." He had spoken very little during the day, showing neither approval nor disregard for Buck's ideas. He knelt beside a mattress and slit one side with his knife; this was more to his liking, this made sense. They owed Charley Leslie a left-handed debt if nothing else. Bailey poured coal oil on the ripped mattress, hauled it aside, and began on the next.

"Ed," Buck said.

"Yes?"

"No shootin' tonight."

Buck caught the nod of agreement and led his horse off south. He made a wide circle to the river and tied the black in the willows above the ford. Then he walked to Glendon's back door and cupped his hands; his soft whistle brought Glendon outside, lamp in hand.

"You make a fine target," Buck laughed softly.

"Buck, it's good to see you," Glendon said.

"Surprised?"

"Yes," he said. "I figured you'd be south."

"How far, Pat?"

"With the river between us," Glendon said.

"Things are rough around here, Buck."

"It wasn't our fault," Buck said. "You know Colter sent that bunch in."

"I didn't mean that," Glendon said.

"What else is there, Pat?"

"That boy," Glendon said. "At Colter's south camp."

He waited for a denial, knowing it would be the truth, but Buck only reached for the bubbling pot and poured his coffee and grinned.

"Oh, him?" Buck said. "I plumb forgot that, Pat. I had no choice, he gave me trouble."

Glendon wanted to ask what trouble an unarmed boy of 17 could offer five men; and the words were useless. Buck simply would not understand. Buck was gone, gone forever over that line Glendon knew so well.

"A new governor was sworn in," Glendon said. "I hear he's going to take off the roof on the territory."

"Don't you worry about me," Buck said. "If that governor don't bother me, I'll leave him alone."

"Buck," Glendon said patiently. "That's the point. He can't leave you alone. He's got to do something."

"An' where do you stand, Pat?"

"Where I always did," Glendon said. "I want to see things settled down."

"With old John snorting?" Buck laughed. "And Adams sticking around here? Between them, Pat, they won't let things settle down. That Pasqual is goin' to trail me."

"Maybe the governor can handle Colter," Glendon said.

"Can't be done!" Buck said. "But what I stopped in to say was, you want to take a little ride? We're heading for Sherman."

"No, Buck," he said steadily. "It wouldn't do any good now."

"Are you figuring on staying here?" Buck asked.

"A while longer," he said. "I—"

He heard the wild yell uptown, "FIRE!" and ran to the front door and saw the first flames rising from Leslie's store. When he turned to grab his bucket Buck put a hand on his arm and grinned.

"If you stay," Buck said, "you'll sure have plenty of building room."

"Buck," he said.

"Pat, I just got to go."

"Buck," he said sharply. "What for?"

"Oh, you mean that?" Buck said. "Calling card for Leslie. Teach him to stay out of other folks' business. Adios, Pat."

* * *

In the two weeks following the burning of Leslie's store, business ground almost to a standstill in Fort Ellis. Leslie refused to rebuild, swore he was done with business, yet made no move to leave town. Leslie had received his orders from John Colter and was biding his time, waiting for Adams' next move; and Adams, hauling in supplies and opening a makeshift store in the livery barn, made no move.

As the days passed news trickled in from the territory. Buck and his crew were stealing cattle from Colter, taking horses from everybody, slipping into Sherman for supplies and fandangoes, carrying on an unending war against Cross C. Buck killed four men during that period, Ed Bailey shot another, and rumor numbered Buck's crew at 10, then 15,

then 20. On Monday of the third week Joe Jones came to Glendon's house with a message: the governor's personal representative would like to speak with him in Adams' office.

"In a few minutes," Glendon said.

He finished shaving and slipped on his last outfit of worn, patched clothes and crossed the back lot, knowing what to expect, not knowing what to answer. He met the governor's man, a gentleman of 50-odd with sharp blue eyes and tiny white teeth gleaming behind a brown beard. His name was Avery and he wasted no time talking business.

"The governor is ready to act," Avery said. "He is mailing letters to various men throughout the territory. He has proposed an amnesty to all men who have broken the law. If those men will come to the capitol, put off their guns, and sign the amnesty, they will not be held liable for any crimes or killings previous to that date. The governor feels it the only way we can wipe the slate clean and start fresh. What do you think of the idea, Glendon?"

"The governor means well," Glendon said.

"You don't think it will work?"

"It hinges on one thing," Glendon said. "Will every man concerned take off his guns?"

"That's the rub," Avery said. "We've got our doubts, too, but we have to try it. If it won't work, the governor will take immediate steps. If the amnesty fails, will you accept appointment as sheriff of this county?"

"Try your amnesty," Glendon said. "I promise you an answer if it fails."

* * *

Avery returned on the fifth day, crossed the river, and drove directly to Glendon's house. Avery got down, much the worse for wear, and shook hands gravely.

"Take it up to the barn," Avery told his driver. "I'll walk over."

Then Avery turned and walked inside without invitation, seated himself at the kitchen table, and shook his head.

"You see Buck?" Glendon asked.

"Could you make some coffee?"

"Yes," he said. "Basin's over there if you want to wash."

He made coffee while Avery washed face and hands; before the pot boiled Avery lit a cigar and began talking, choosing his words with care.

"I can speak frankly with you," Avery said. "I have been around a bit, as you have guessed by now, and seen my share of tough customers. This one has me stumped. Yes, I saw Buck. We got into Sherman the afternoon after we left here. I went into Smith's saloon and inquired for Buck, and Smith pointed to the back table. I introduced myself, he shook hands with a big grin, and invited me to sit down. One minute we were alone, next a man named Bailey was sitting with us and three more were out front watching my driver. I gave Buck the governor's letter. He read it twice and told me it wouldn't work. He and Bailey feel that Adams wants to get rid of them because they had worked for McMann. Buck refused to sign. Nor would he promise to leave the territory when I suggested it might be wise for all concerned. I offered him a week's grace to reconsider, to wire the governor if he changed his mind. I don't expect that, Glendon."

"Was he staying in Sherman?" Glendon asked.

"Evidently he was in no hurry."

"If you think it'll help," Glendon said, "I'll ride up and talk with him."

"That's a generous offer," Avery said. "I know how you happened to meet Buck. He told me all about it. I'd say he likes you better than any man he has ever known. Strange, on such short acquaintance, but it happens. You could talk yourself blue in the face and it wouldn't help. He's past redemption, Glendon, and we both know it."

"You know what I ought to do," Glendon said.

"Of course," Avery said quietly. "Get on your horse and head for California. But you won't. You're as incorrigible as I am. Look at me, Glendon! More years than I care to remember in the agency, retired last year. Along comes an old friend, a general with whom I served. He is taking a new post and he needs help. You can't dodge it, Glendon. Either you'll pack up and ride away in an hour, or you'll stay on. And if you stay, you've got to help us. A man does only a few tasks well, some of us are limited to one. What we do well, we have got to do. Glendon, I'm asking a great deal—perhaps your life—and I'm just selfish enough to demand it. Will you take this appointment?"

Glendon unfolded the paper and read the official wordage and noted the salary—an unreason-

ably high rate of pay—and felt the pencil pushed into his right hand.

"We don't need ink," Avery said.

He signed and watched Avery replace the paper in his coat and lay the star on the table: it glittered in the dull light, shone into his eyes.

"Now," Avery said. "You need two deputies. Any preferences?"

"None," he said.

"I have two recommendations," Avery said. "Charley Leslie who has good reason to volunteer. He recommended another man, Jones at the livery barn. Jones has other reasons. He wants a better job with higher pay, but I think he can handle it. Will you go along with them at the start?"

"They'll do," he said.

"I'll appoint them immediately," Avery said. "Now what do you need?"

"A shotgun," he said flatly. "Ten gauge double barrel, sawed off two inches past the forearm. Case of double ought buckshot. Colt and Winchester ammunition. Same order for both deputies."

* * *

Buck's gang had come down from the northeast at dawn, eaten breakfast, and slept through the heat of the day. The town was quiet and no one disturbed them, not even the handsome young man with the game leg who drove his wagon toward the river and the hills beyond. But during the day a man rode into town and talked with Coyote Smith, and rode on his way. Coyote Smith polished glasses and waited expectantly for suppertime. When Buck and Ed Bailey came up the back hall and lifted their pre-supper drinks, Smith said idly, "Heard some news today."

"What?" Ed Bailey said. "The governor dropped dead?"

"Not exactly," Smith said. "He appointed a new sheriff in this county. A man from Fort Ellis named Glendon."

Buck tossed off his drink and rolled a cigaret, his face round and pleasantly blank. Finally he said, "Pat Glendon?"

"That's the man," Smith said. "They're building a new courthouse in Ellis, complete with jail and handcuffs. An' he's got two deputies, man named Leslie and another one named Jones."

"If he comes through here," Buck said, "tell him to stay out of my way. Leslie and Jones! That Leslie and his store, now he's after trouble, too. Tell them I start shooting on sight. You hear me, Coyote? Tell him to stay clear."

"You sort of liked him, eh?" Coyote Smith said.

"Just pour the whiskey," Buck said tonelessly. "I've got no friends. I don't need any!"

CHAPTER XI

GLENDON established a temporary office in the harness shop across the street from the livery barn. That same day workmen poured into town, pegged down a tent camp, and began the courthouse in the vacant lot just above Leslie's burned-out store. Later in the morning the southbound stage brought Glendon a sealed pouch from the governor's office; and minutes later a fast freight wagon deposited a packing case outside the livery barn. Jones went over, read the shipping tag, and signalled.

"For you, Pat."

"Cart the ammunition over," Glendon said. "Clean the guns. Break out a box of shells each. Target practice in 10 minutes." It was then he saw Swift approaching. He had warned her about his job, but the shock was plain.

He waited until they carried the packing case across the street; he took Swift's arm and led her away from the office door and tried a smile that failed. She bumped the sawed-off barrels and flinched, and Glendon said, "It won't bite, Swift."

He laid the shotgun in her hands and felt her arms give beneath the weight.

"So heavy," she said.

"Has to be heavy," Glendon said. "To carry these loads. Swift, I wanted you to see it. I took the job, now I'm tied to it. From now on you'll be doing the fishing for both of us."

"I know," she said, "but we can have coffee at night."

"With luck," he said. "Now get out of this sun."

She smiled and walked away, leaving him alone in the barn wall shade, the smell of grease and oil rising thick in his nostrils. He thought of bygone days when he patrolled his street—and it was

always his street—with the shotgun under his arm; it had become a symbol in those towns, a mark of rough justice.

July wore on and August came with unabated heat. Black clouds rolled falsely above the peaks, lightning flashed in the night sky, rain was only a mirage. Glendon trained his deputies and rode out on the lonely trails and drew into his mind a picture of his county. He sat in the stuffy office and waited through the long, hot days for the first break, the word from Avery, the time to start. He watched the building race between Adams' local crew and the capitol work-gang. The new hotel took on shape, the courthouse rose from foundations to walls and finally rafters. Adams' crew built with adobe and vigas and rough-cut lumber; the work-gang built the courthouse from timbers and boards, every sliver hauled down from the railroad siding. The courthouse was no Grecian urn, no thing of beauty forever; it was a stopgap built for one purpose—to place a mantle of authority over the county.

Glendon moved into the office an hour after the last nail was hammered home; and across the street Adams' crew finished the hotel roof and puttied the big windows into the bar front. The same bartender tapped his first keg of beer and broached his whiskey; that night was Adams' grand opening with everything on the house. Adams had no beds in his hotel, no counter in his cafe, no desk in his new upstairs office; but he played the host that night; he rushed the growler with a smile, and the town whooped it up as men had laughed and sung and drunk in McMann's time. That same night a special messenger brought the latest news on Buck, a stack of eastern papers with a letter from Avery.

Buck's gang had grown to eight members, all men who ignored the governor's amnesty and wanted only to live their own lives at the expense of others; work not, yet reap all the harvests. The eastern papers were filled with overblown accounts of Buck's adventures. It was time for action now.

* * *

John Colter rode into Fort Ellis with 30 men behind him. They spread along the street while Colter walked up the steps into the new courthouse and ambled down the centre aisle toward the sheriff's office. Pasqual followed him closely, and two men took stations outside the double doors. John Colter entered the office, grinned at Charley Leslie and Glendon, and dropped into the nearest chair.

"Pat," John Colter said. "Here you got a new courthouse and deputies, an' you ain't done nothing for a month. When are you taking Buck off my back?"

"Waiting on you," Glendon said.

"On me?"

"Swear out your complaints," Glendon said. "Name your witnesses. We'll do the rest."

"Complaints?" Colter said. "You know what's going on. Buck killed my foreman, that boy at the south camp. Go out and get him. Bring him home in a box."

Glendon inked a pen in the bottle and looked up calmly. "Get it down, Colter. Are your witnesses ready to testify in court?"

John Colter held his angry words. He had made no headway at the capitol. He dared not sign that complaint, name his witnesses. If Glendon brought Buck alive to trial, a real honest trial with judge, jury, and honest lawyers, Buck might talk loud and long about the days he worked for Cross C.

He stomped out of the courthouse and cooled his heels on the steps. He waited patiently until Charley Leslie stood beside him, and then he said, "What's going on?"

"Jones is scouting Sherman," Charley Leslie said softly. "We were just making plans when you came in. I'm going up there tonight."

"That don't tell me nothing!"

"That's all I know," Leslie said. "Don't be so impatient."

"So?" John Colter said shrewdly. "Feeling your oats?"

"Doing my job," Leslie said meaningly. "And getting paid in cash."

"You'll be paid," Colter said. "Just keep your eyes open. Watch Adams, get word to me through Manuel."

"Paid?" Leslie said pointedly. "Just when, Mr. Colter?"

"That was my store burned," Colter growled. "I lost the money. Keep your shirt on. You'll get it!"

"Five hundred," Leslie said. "From now on."

"FIVE — !"

"I'm risking my life," Leslie said. "Ante up or the deal is off."

"You tin-horn," John Colter said. "Let me say it for you—our deal is off. And don't go peddling certain information or you'll leave this town in a box." He turned and touched Pasqual on the arm. "Take a good look at him, Pasqual."

"I see him, patron," Pasqual said.

"Save it for the peons," Charley Leslie said coldly. "You promise a lot, Colter, and you pay off in pennies. Now stop trying to bribe an officer of the law or I'll step inside and report to Glendon."

John Colter had his temper under control once more; he grinned, hitched up his overalls, and went down the street to the new hotel. C. B. Adams, superintending the placement of the cafe counter, greeted him pleasantly, glanced toward the courthouse, and offered a deliberate wink.

"Seeing our new sheriff, Mr. Colter?"

John Colter stepped through the empty door casing and motioned Adams into a corner. "You figure on doing business the same way, Adams?"

"I had no fire sale," Adams said, "but I'm back at the old stand."

"You'll get burned out again," Colter said bluntly.

"Oh, come now," Adams said. "Those days are finished. Our new sheriff is unbribable, Mr. Colter. You should know, eh? You just saw him."

"You going to keep those beef contracts?" Colter said.

"I have certain leads," Adams said primly. "And a bit of influence."

"Penny ante," Colter said scornfully. "And you'll buy no more of my cattle, Adams. I've got my craw full and I'm all done fiddling around. I'm going to Washington next week and take a closer look at your influence."

"Do that," Adams said. "Although I doubt your reason for the trip. I think perhaps you want to be a healthy distance from Fort Ellis if Glendon brings Buck in."

"If I go to Washington because of Buck," John Colter said shrewdly, "you ought to head for South America."

"Then why are we at odds?" Adams said softly. "We want the same thing, Mr. Colter. I am thinking of the future when this country opens up. If I were a palm-reader, a fortune teller, I might say, 'I see you selling cattle to me, I see myself selling those herds to the government. I see all concerned making more money and staying within the law.' Well?"

John Colter said swiftly, "Can you take care of Buck?"

"I can," Adams said. "Given time."

"Then take care of him," Colter said bluntly, "and we'll talk business."

"In my own way, no questions asked?"

"No questions asked."

* * *

Charley Leslie did not ride alone that night. A messenger came roaring down from the railroad, Glendon read Avery's terse note saying now was the time, and sent for Leslie and all posse members. They were mounted and riding within 30 minutes, Manuel leading them north in a steady driving pace. They rode through the night and camped in timber five miles south of Sherman the next morning. At that time, breakfast hastily cooked and eaten, Glendon sent Manuel forward to scout the town and locate Jones.

Manuel took the open road and came boldly into Sherman, dismounted outside the saloon, and limped inside. He saw Jones at a table, playing cards with a harmless looking old man, and decided to bluff it straight through. Manuel had a drink, questioned Coyote Smith about work, and took his leave. He trotted south over the first ridge, waited patiently, and was rewarded a few minutes later when Jones came on the trot. Manuel said, "Follow me," and led Jones back to the river camp. Jones went straight to the breakfast fire and squatted beside Glendon.

"Here's the names," Jones said, opening his notebook. "That one scratched out—he's dead up at Vegas."

"Did they come in night before last?" Glendon asked.

"Seven of 'em," Jones said. "Stayed all night and hung around till last night when a Mex came down from the north and passed them some news. They headed west right after dark."

"You know why they left?"

"Oh, sure," Jones said. "The news was all over town this morning."

"How do these people take it?"

"Listen," Jones said, "they're scared to death of him."

"Think they'd help him?"

"No," Jones said thoughtfully. "They're just standing by."

"Lay out your map."

Jones spread his rough pencil sketch on the ground. The others gathered around and Jones pointed out roads, plaza, old army buildings, and the Lopez house. He described all roads, each one as far as he had been able to ride out. His work was good and he accepted Glendon's thanks with a self-conscious grunt.

"Now what?" he said.

"We start the merry-go-round," Glendon said. "We get them quick or we keep trying. We'll try that west road first. Leslie, you take everybody a mile out that west road from the river. Find the best place for shooting and square off. Manuel, you keep covering the other roads."

"Si."

"Jones," Glendon said. "You come with us. We're going into town."

"Town?" Jones said.

"I want to get acquainted," Glendon said. "Hang around all day and leave tonight for home."

"But we don't go home, eh?"

"It's an old dodge," Glendon said. "Worth trying once. Leslie, look for us at dark."

CHAPTER XII

GLENDON rose from the saloon table at dusk and paid the bill. Coyote Smith followed him to the hitch rail where Jones stood beside the horses. "Glad to have you, sheriff," Smith said. "Come back any time."

"We'll be back," Glendon said.

"Heading for Fort Ellis?"

"Possibly," Glendon said. "You might do two favors for me, Smith."

"Name them."

"Tell Buck I was here," Glendon said. "Tell him we'll save time and bother if he turns himself in."

"I'll tell him," Coyote Smith said.

Glendon led Jones south across the plaza on to the south road, followed it two miles, stopped to listen, and made the western circle across the river back to the west road. They came up slowly and saw the thin line of trees along the road. Glendon whistled twice and waited until Leslie called, "Come on in, Pat," and loomed out of the darkness to lead the way to the pickets. Horses staked, Glendon walked the tree line with Jones, checked every man, placed Leslie at the west end with Jones and went down to take up the flankman's spot on the east. He found a spot 10 steps from the road and settled himself against a tree with the shotgun across his knees.

Glendon cupped his hands and called to the next man.

"Pass the word," he said. "If one or two come riding, let them go. Understand?"

"Got it . . . ho, Billy!"

The order was relayed up the line to Jones and Leslie. Glendon knew he should have given that order 10 minutes ago. Was he getting careless, forgetting that little things meant so much? He shivered in the cooling night and slipped the shotgun higher on his knees; and heard the horses coming from the west.

He went flat and brought the shotgun to bear on the road. He listened to the hootbeats—two or three horses, no, just two—and lay unmoving as they passed by and disappeared in the moonless night. He counted off the minutes, five, eight, 10, and heard the faint, growing sound of more horses coming leisurely from the west. When the lead rider loomed up in the darkness, 10 yards up the road, Glendon cocked his triggers and lifted his voice in a shout.

"Buck, put up your hands!"

He saw the shadowy bulk of horsemen pull close together, then spring apart as spurs drove home. He fired one barrel high against that dissolving mass, closed his eyes as the others began shooting and muzzle blast came red. He looked once more and saw two riders veering off to the north; and far down the road toward town he heard more shots. Then he ran for the road, shouting to Leslie and Jones, "Close in!" and

stumbled over a horse. He fell full length, scrambled to his feet, and almost immediately struck a fallen man. He bent down, touched that body, and went on. Ten steps away someone grabbed a bridle rein and tried to soothe a wounded, struggling horse.

"How many?" he said.

"One here," Jones said. "Hold on, here's another one—Pat, this one's alive."

"Watch him," Glendon said.

That made three down, he thought, and two away clear. Two had ridden past. Seven in all; it tallied out. He winced at the horse's high, almost human cry of pain and called, "Shoot it," and stumbled up the road until he found Jones and Leslie beside the wounded man. He said, "Look at the others, Jones," and cupped a match above the face blob. Strange eyes looked up at him, glazed with shock, seeing nothing, or looking far beyond their own vision. Jones came on the run to say, "Both dead. Don't know either."

"Get the horses," Glendon said. "Send a man back for Manuel."

"What about this one?" Leslie asked.

"Forget him," Glendon said harshly. "He's gone now."

He cursed savagely, the first time Charley Leslie had felt the axe edge of his temper. "Die on me," Glendon said to the dead man. "When I needed you!" He swung around, bumping Leslie roughly. "Come on, there's no time."

* * *

Manuel took the lead and Glendon followed, at a walk, until Manuel's voice drifted back: "Senor, they came this way."

"You're sure?" he called.

"Very sure! We are lucky, senor."

"Hit it hard," Glendon said. "Take us up there, Manuel."

They rode behind the slender man, riding fast through the night, and Glendon knew that Buck's stubbornness was betraying him. Avery's letter had said, "Do your best to take him alive. The governor wants to make an example of him. If you cannot, shoot to kill." Well, four men were dead and one captured, and it meant nothing. Only Buck counted, for as long as Buck rode free he would find more men of the same breed; and it would be to do all over again. Glendon rode in the night and smelled pines as the trail lifted and began a twisting assault on the slopes; and Manuel was suddenly beside him, halting them all, saying, "Behind the big hill, senor. In the hollow."

"How far?"

"Half a mile maybe."

"Get down," he said. "Tie the horses here. Form a line, Manuel, take us over."

They moved up the hill, off the trail, then on the sloping level of the side hill, then downward as the earth receded. Glendon smelled old fire smoke as they came to the edge of timber and felt grass under their boots. Manuel whispered, "Senor, they are in the cabin. Their horses are behind. Wait here."

They spread out in the trees facing the bottom of the hollow. Minutes later a man groaned and Buck's voice came clear and angry, "Get up, Ed. Get up and try!" Then came the sound of horses moving in the trees behind the cabin. Buck shouted and Glendon fired one barrel, then the other, shooting blind into the darkness below. He heard the cabin door slam shut, heard the cross-bar drop in place, and only then did Glendon smile. Moments later he saw the tiny flame flicker, saw Manuel throwing wood on the cookfire, saw the cabin take shape in that light.

"Settle down," he said. "Watch that door. We'll wait it out."

He hitched himself around on the stony ground and raised the shotgun on the door and wished, as usual, for a cigaret. Charley Leslie came crawling along and lay beside him, puffing from exertion.

"That man of yours is good," Glendon said.

"Plenty good," Leslie said. "Pat—"

"Yes?"

"You'd better understand something," Leslie said. "He works for Colter."

Glendon rolled on his side and wiped sweat from his eyes. A good deal that had puzzled him came clear: If Manuel was in Colter's pay and Leslie knew it, then that store—he could understand why Leslie had finally told him tonight. Colter wanted Buck dead, not on trial, and Manuel would be looking for the chance. But Leslie, in warning him, gave himself away. He would be watching two of them from now on.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll watch Manuel. I expect you to do the same. I want Buck alive."

"So do I," Charley Leslie said wickedly. "I want to see him hang."

* * *

Gray dawn came like a cripple running, lifting darkness from the hollow, showing the cabin beside the tank. They had waited out the night, Manuel had fed both fires, and no one had escaped the cabin. Glendon cleared his throat and called, "Buck?"

"That you, Pat?" Buck answered cheerfully.

"Give it up," Glendon said. "We know Bailey's hurt."

"We'll stick it a while, Pat. If you get nervous, come on down and get us."

"Buck," Glendon said coldly. "You're going to get hungry and thirsty. Bailey's hurt bad for all I know. I'm not waiting around all day. Take five minutes to make up your mind. Come out my way or we'll burn you out!"

* * *

Buck lay in the hole he had dug in the dirt floor. Ed Bailey was against the back wall with a dirty shirt sleeve tied around his shoulder. Ed grunted with pain and Buck said, "Shut up, you're not dead yet."

"You heard him," Ed Bailey said. "He'll burn us out. We've got no chance. Let's give up!"

"Sure," Buck said softly. "No jail holds me."

"Then tell him," Ed Bailey said. "Buck, tell him!"

* * *

"Pat!"

"Yes," Glendon answered. "Five minutes are up."

"I'm hungry," Buck said. "Ed thinks he's dying. So I guess we'll give you this round. We're coming out."

Glendon called, "Watch the door," and trained his shotgun to the right where Manuel and Leslie were already standing in the tree shadows. Manuel glanced toward him, saw the shotgun, and lowered his rifle. Charley Leslie saw those twin muzzles, stepped back behind Manuel, and lifted one hand in agreement. Then the door was open, rifles and Colts flashed in the sunlight, arcing through the doorway to the ground. When Buck stepped outside, supporting Ed Bailey, Glendon walked from the trees. Charley Leslie holstered his Colt, walked forward, and jerked Buck away from Ed Bailey.

"Burn my store," Leslie said. "I'll watch you dance for that, Buck."

"Let go," Glendon said curtly. "Manuel, take care of Bailey."

He took the handcuffs from his pocket, pinned Buck's hands behind his back, and snapped them on. He said quietly, "You all right, Buck?"

Buck was watching Manuel work over Ed Bailey. Buck looked around and smiled, and Glendon knew that Buck was grinning at the way Manuel lost his chance.

"Sure," Buck said. "Thanks, Pat."

"Don't thank me," Glendon said. "No prisoner of mine is manhandled. Jones, get the horses!"

CHAPTER XIII

"I'VE been sitting here like a little girl in the dark," Swift said. "How did it really happen, Pat?"

They sat on the bench facing her garden in the cool August night that foretold fall weather, their first time together in three weeks. Glendon had spent those days at the capitol where the law's slow-grinding machinery moved toward the politically expedient conclusion. Wanted in five counties, the governor finally arranged to hold his prisoners' trial in the new Ellis County courthouse. Glendon had brought them home for tomorrow's trial, and now he sat relaxed for the first time in weeks.

"How?" he said. "Luck, the kind that kisses you once in a lifetime. That night we jumped them, Buck wouldn't listen to reason. Ed Bailey told me how he tried to warn Buck but they swung back on the cabin trail. Manuel smelled their dust and we followed them to the cabin. I used that trick once in the middle of summer in Western Nebraska, so dry the dust was powder, hung in the air for hours. I trailed a man 50 miles, never saw him, caught him when his horse gave out. Dust and luck."

"What will happen to them?"

"Bailey and Buck will hang," Glendon said.

Buck's talking with his lawyer tonight, Swift. Did you know that?"

"No."

"The smartest man in the territory," Glendon said. "Adams hired him, brought him down to defend Buck and Ed Bailey."

"Adams!"

"Don't ask me why," Glendon said wearily. "I could name a dozen reasons and each contradicts the others. But Adams put up the money and it'll be a fight . . . he thinks!"

"But won't it, Pat?"

"No," he said bluntly. "Not with Tom McMillan giving evidence. Nobody knows that but the governor, Avery, and me. I am telling you in confidence. Are you coming tomorrow?"

"I can't watch it," she said.

"Nobody wants to judge another," Glendon said. "It will always be that way. It should."

He stretched his arms stiffly against the darkness. He had lived on five hours sleep a night for three weeks, and tomorrow would be a brutally long day. Swift rose beside him and looked toward the river; it was a windless night and the town behind them murmured with the expectant sound of people talking late. The hotel was jam-packed with newspaper men come hundreds of miles to watch the trial and report the results. A Roman carnival, in truth, for Buck was no longer a plain man. He was a legend one step from history, no matter that his last steps would take the gallows route.

"Late," he said. "Let's hope it begins and ends tomorrow."

"I've been thinking about us," she said timidly.

"Yes?" he said.

"If it ends tomorrow," she said, "what will you do?"

"Swift, I wish I knew," Glendon said. "Let's wait and see. Maybe we'll stay and maybe we won't, you and I. Let's hope for a vision."

"I need one," she said. "Stay or go, that's the question, eh?"

"Sleep on it," Glendon said gently. "Good-night, Swift."

* * *

When he entered the office next morning Leslie was back in the cell block, pursuing his favorite pastime of the last three weeks: giving Buck an unmerciful riding. Leslie spent a good share of his waking hours telling Buck exactly how much he'd enjoy watching Buck's heels dance in the air. Now, sitting at his desk, checking over the day's tight schedule, Glendon heard that cold, cruel voice telling Buck to shave, shine, and shampoo himself for the judge.

"Leslie!" he called.

Charley Leslie came from the cell block and offered Glendon a smile and mock salute. He had waited weeks for today, and the triumph lay over his face in the smile and the curl of his lips.

"Charley," Glendon said. "Stop riding him. He'll be tried, convicted, and hung in a little while. What more do you want?"

"Anything I can get," Leslie said bitterly. "I'd like to spring the trap!"

"Because he won't whine?" Glendon said. "Because you can't break him, make him crawl, beg for mercy? Charley, you could ride him a year and he'd be tougher at the finish. Just don't give him a chance to do anything. Not one chance."

"I'd love that," Leslie said. "But he'll get no chance. As for the other, is that an order?"

"No order," he said. "I won't tell you how to talk and walk and live, Charley. Where's Jones?"

"Breakfast," Leslie said.

"I'm going out for a minute," Glendon said. "Now remember, when we bring them in, they come one at a time, 10 feet apart, three of you on each man. During the trial you watch your own man every second."

"Don't worry," Leslie smiled. "They won't get foxy."

"Charley," he said. "You never know."

He left the office and went through the courtroom to the front steps. He entered the cell block and stopped facing the first cell where McMillan sat in white-faced silence.

"Enough to eat?" he asked.

"Plenty," McMillan said tonelessly. "When do we start?"

"Few minutes," he said.

* * *

Toward the end, heat and pressure were nearly unbearable. The lawyer for the defence was a clever man who had no chance to show his metal. Glendon never forgot the look on Buck's face when McMillan

was called as a witness for the territory. McMillan took the stand and the prosecutor led him through a detailed description of the night Buck's gang rode down on the railroad telegraph stop, how Buck had shot the operator in cold blood; how Ed Bailey had backed Buck to the limit in that particular case and, in another, had fired the shot that killed a man on Cross C's southern range. Ed Bailey looked up in mild surprise at mention of that almost forgotten shooting; it was too late to do anything and the clever lawyer saw the truth. He did his best, but his best was useless. The evidence was presented to the jury, they withdrew for eight minutes by the clock, and returned with their verdict: "Guilty."

Buck never opened his mouth, just sat smiling faintly at the jury, then at McMillan, as the next words came.

"The prisoners will rise and face the bench!"

Buck and Ed Bailey rose together; and now time was running out on the last day of its kind in this land.

"Edwin Bailey, I sentence you to be incarcerated in the Ellis jail until September 1, and on that date between sunrise and sunset you will be hanged by the neck on a gallows until you are dead!"

Ed Bailey met the judge's eyes squarely; and it was true, Glendon knew, that no one really cared what happened to Ed Bailey. He was the frosting on the cake; he was the forgotten man. They watched Buck and they waited for the words that came now in measured tones:

"Buck Atherton, I sentence you to be incarcerated in the Ellis jail until September 1, and on that date between sunrise and sunset you will be hanged by the neck on a gallows until you are dead!"

* * *

"One week from today," Charley Leslie said. "Just seven days, Buck. I hope you try something before then. I'm disappointed."

Leslie stood facing the cell where lamplight shone weakly on Buck's face. Leslie had eaten an hour ago, relieved Jones, and waited now for Manuel Martinez to take over the night guard. He had thrown bitter words at Buck for an hour, and received nothing in return. When Manuel arrived Charley Leslie said sourly, "So you've given up, eh?" and crossed from the courthouse to the cafe, drank a cup of coffee, and found his man waiting on the dark veranda.

"What a day," Adams said. "I'll never forget it, Charley."

Charley Leslie had gained little satisfaction from Buck; and now he had crossed the street to claim a promise made long weeks ago.

"I am resigning shortly," he said. "Eight days from now, to be exact."

"That is a shame," Adams said. "You've done a fine job, Charley."

"I am not a deputy sheriff," Leslie said curtly. "I've developed richer tastes, C. B., and I'm too old to change. When do we start?"

"Start what, Charley?"

"You and I talked," Leslie said. "Some time ago. You dangled a proposition before my eyes, you suggested we discuss it at our leisure. I'll be at leisure in eight days and I expect a deal that fits my tastes."

"Of course," Adams said. "And I haven't forgotten. Will you take over the hotel?"

Charley Leslie threw his half-smoked cigar into the street. He began cursing softly and he continued to curse until his anger ran itself aground on his dry lips. He said then, "Don't joke with me. I want no hotel clerk job, no saloon job, no cafe job, none of your penny ante junk, Adams. You're in business again, and I want cut in."

"But I meant business," Adams said calmly. "Honest business. I'll do anything within reason—"

"How true," Leslie said. "Anything within reason. I can't name the page and verse but it'll be coming. Now for the last time—do you cut me in?"

"I'm sorry," Adams said. "I cannot offer you anything of that sort, Charley."

"You can't?"

"Nothing, Charley."

"Then I'm sorry too," Leslie said. "I just had a long talk with Buck. He still feels badly about the major's untimely death. He feels the major cheated him by dying and cutting off all that easy money. So he asked me what might happen if he wrote out a statement for the attorney-general, or managed a meeting with that gentleman, and told him about you and the major, how he helped sell you so many hundred head of cattle. He remembers several hundred head they sold to you with blotted brands, so to speak, and rebranded with the major's brand

which, if I remember correctly, was not only registered in the major's name but in yours as well. Buck told me he can put his finger on 50 or 60 of those old hides. I told him to think it over three or four days and let me know."

Charley Leslie lit a cigar and smiled above the match flare. He saw the round, red face whiten in sudden fear. "Well," Leslie said. "What should I do, C. B.?"

"All right," Adams said. "You've copped my bet. What do you want?"

"I want to leave here," Leslie said, "with full pockets. What is it worth to make certain Buck never sees the attorney-general, never writes a statement?"

"One thousand," Adams said without hesitation.

"I'm deaf, C. B."

"Two."

"Five thousand," Leslie said. "Cash in advance."

"Half now," Adams said. "Half when the job's done."

"Stop it," Leslie said. "I'll take a turn up the street. Be upstairs when I come back, have the \$5,000 on your desk when I open the door. You've got 10 minutes."

He strolled along the veranda, stepped down to the street, and walked past the courthouse. He smoked his cigar and laughed happily, thinking how the best of them finally came around when you touched the proper nerve. He had no intention of attempting anything as stupid as shooting Buck in a cell and making it resemble a jail break. He returned to the hotel, went upstairs to the office that smelled of varnish and fresh paint, took the package of bills from the desk, and tipped his hat to the red-faced man in the swivel chair.

"When?" Adams said.

"Fifth or sixth day," Leslie said.

"No," Adams said. "No later than the fifth day."

"Agreed," Leslie said.

* * *

Adams felt the doubt growing in him through the passing days, the feeling that at last he'd been taken lightly and politely. When nothing happened on the fifth day he knew he had to act. He did not doubt that Leslie had bilked him, but he doubted less that Buck might well sing a song tomorrow to the attorney-general. Adams slept not at all that night, and reached his decision at breakfast.

He went upstairs, locked his door, and opened the safe. He removed the derringer, loaded in two fresh cartridges, and went over the tiny gun with an oiled rag. He slipped into his wide-sleeved black coat and attached the spring holder to his right forearm, just above the wrist. The derringer clamped in neatly, the shirt and coat sleeve hid the slight bulge. C. B. Adams took a fortifying drink from his private stock and walked steadily across the street to the courthouse. He asked to speak to Buck and went down the aisle to the end cell. He winked twice and saw Buck's eyes narrow; and then he spoke on as only a lawyer could, until sufficient time has passed. Luck smiled just before he made his move.

The county clerk called to Jones, and C. B. Adams felt, rather than saw, the turning of Jones' head toward the office. C. B. Adams had the derringer in his hand by then. He wheeled, his right side to the cell, his body blocking a segment of bars and cell from door view for the moment it took to start his turn. He tossed the derringer between the bars from that shortened distance of six inches, saw Buck's big hand engulf the gun; and then he was marching out of the cell block, through the courthouse, into the street. He was trembling when he reached the hotel lobby, and he mastered fear with great effort. He saw Charley Leslie at the cafe counter, drinking coffee, and that was more than enough to bring the thin smile to his face. C. B. Adams went upstairs and locked himself in his office. He placed the spring holder in the safe, removed his black coat, and rolled up his sleeves. He spread an inch-thick stack of legal papers on the desk, dipped his pen, and smudged his fingers with ink. Then he moved the big chair close to the windows, seated himself, and looked down upon the street. He could see the courthouse and most of the street. He tried to light a cigar but his fingers trembled the match into smoky blackness. He took another drink, corked the bottle, and settled back to wait. On the second try he lit the cigar and puffed in triumph.

"Now, Charley," he said aloud. "Get ready for the last act!"

CHAPTER XIV

BUCK palmed the derringer and stood motionless behind his cell door. McMillan was asleep but Ed Bailey was already up and waiting, watching him in eager silence. Buck wasted no time pondering C. B. Adams' reason or motive; all he could see was freedom in the near distance . . . and squaring his debts before he left this place. Buck pawed at his shirt pocket for tobacco and papers, pocketed the derringer, rolled a cigaret, slipped the derringer out and into his right hand, and held the cigaret ready in his left.

"Joe," he called.

"Now what?" Jones asked.

"Need a light," Buck said.

Jones said, "You must eat them matches," and came down the line, scratched a match on his pant seat, and extended it toward the bars. Waiting for the cigaret tip, Jones stared into the twin derringer muzzles leveled on his belt buckle.

"You got the keys?" Buck said.

Jones hesitated a split-second too long before he answered, "No"!

"I've got no time to fool," Buck said. "Lift that right arm above your head and yank those keys with your left."

Jones took the key ring from his left hip pocket and inserted the proper key in Buck's cell lock. Then Buck was outside, spinning Jones around, jerking the Colt from his holster, tossing the derringer between the bars to Ed Bailey and following that with the key ring. Buck was five steps up the aisle when McMillan sat up and said, "What—?" and screamed, the thin, throat-choked agony of a dying man.

"Shut up," Buck said genially. "Ed, you out?"

"Coming," Ed Bailey said.

"Come on, Joe," Buck said. "Let's go make ourselves at home."

Ed Bailey prodded Jones toward the office; and McMillan leaped on his bunk, grasped his window bars, and began shouting. McMillan had nothing to lose and he knew it too well. Back to his cell door, face pushed against his window bars, McMillan cried for help and waited for the shot. The county clerk came rushing from the courtroom, ran squarely into Buck's Colt, and fainted dead away on the floor. Ed Bailey pushed Jones into the corner and backed off toward the gun rack, fumbled through the keys until his left hand, working blind, turned the padlock.

"Watch him," Ed Bailey said.

Buck sat on one corner of the desk and grinned at Jones while Ed Bailey rummaged through the stack found his own Colt and holster, found Buck's and tossed it on to the desk, then took two Winchester's and ammunition, closed the rack, snapped the lock, and pocketed the keys. McMillan was screaming now, a keening sound that carried down the street. Buck walked over to the inner door and smiled at McMillan.

"Turn around, Mac," Buck said.

McMillan wheeled from the window and took the shot in the chest.

"Watch Joe for me," Buck said happily.

Buck," Ed Bailey said. "Let's move."

"I'm expecting a visitor," Buck smiled. "You just watch him."

Buck stood in the doorway, shotgun balanced against his hip, looking across the empty bench rows toward the hall doors. He heard boots thud up the steps, through the hall, and the door slammed back as Charley Leslie came charging down the centre aisle. Buck let him come half a dozen steps, time enough to see the double barrel lift, to see Buck grinning at him along the rib. Buck had not been happy for weeks but this moment brought him nearer real joy than any he had ever felt; happy, smiling, he pulled trigger and watched the heavy buckshot load slam Charley Leslie against the benches. But not too soon; not before Leslie had seen him and had time—that second called eternity—to remember. Buck shuffled around the bailiff's table before the judge's bench and fired the other barrel into the body, raising dust puffs, bouncing the body on the floor.

"Buck!" Ed Bailey called. "Come on!"

Buck shuffled back into the office and grinned at Jones. "You stay where you are," he said. "Maybe you'll live longer. Ed unlock these irons."

Ed Bailey knelt down and unlocked Buck's leg irons, dropped the key ring, snatched it up, and worked with frenzied speed on the handcuffs. Buck drew his Colt and tossed the shotgun into a corner. Watching Jones, he took the Winchester and turned

out of the office without a word, moving up the centre aisle, over Leslie's body, through the hall into the bright sunlight on the courthouse steps. Behind him, Ed Bailey unlocked himself, scooped up the other Winchester, and prodded Jones into the cell block. He locked Jones in the first cell and ran stiff-legged to join Buck on the courthouse steps.

"Upstairs windows," Ed Bailey said. "Don't stand here."

Buck laughed. "We'll ride out. Nobody'll lift a finger."

Ed Bailey had no choice. He followed Buck down the street, jumped the first horse at the hotel hitch rail, kneed it sideways, tried to cover a dozen windows and doors. He cursed softly as Buck deliberately picked a good horse, and more deliberately rode it in a circle before the hotel. Ed Bailey would not understand the meaning or growth of a legend if someone painted such a picture under his eyes; but truth came to him then, as they touched spurs and ran the length of the street toward the river, that no one in town dared aim a gun at Buck.

They crossed the river and passed the major's empty pens and raced for the hills; an hour later, pulling in for a blow, Ed Bailey wiped his sweat-slick face and studied the back trail.

"Adams," he said hoarsely. "We owe him something, Buck."

"We owe him nothin'," Buck laughed. "Wanted us out of the country."

"And let's go," Ed Bailey said. "Let's get over the line and stay there!"

"Compadre," Buck said, "you forgettin' we've rode together?"

"No," Ed Bailey said. "I won't forget. You know that. But we're finished, Buck, an' I'm riding south."

"You go on," Buck said. "I'll hang around a while."

"Buck," Ed Bailey said. "That's the way Glendon'll figure you. Don't give him no advantage."

"Nobody pushes me," Buck said softly.

Ed Bailey swung his horse to the south and looked at Buck one last time—for there would be no future time.

* * *

All Glendon could do when he returned was sit in the office with Avery and Jones. Buck and Ed Bailey had a nine-hour start, and riding off half-cocked was simply a waste of time.

"They crossed the river," Glendon said. "Rode west. That's all we know." He held the derringer in his hand, jiggled it twice, and dropped it into a drawer. "We can cross Ed Bailey off. He won't stop until he's over the border. And he won't come back."

"But you think Buck will stay?" Avery asked.

"He'll stay."

"Which makes him a fool," Avery said.

"A fool," Glendon agreed, "and he can't tell you why himself. Call it pride, call it anything. Maybe it has no name. But he'll stay! Avery, how many men can you get in 24 hours?"

"Two hundred," Avery said. "Possibly more."

"Will you try my way?" Glendon said. "Push him hard and hope for a break?"

"I'm with you," Avery said. "You name it, Pat."

"Wire the governor," Glendon said. "Have every town watched. Start men pushing in toward Sherman from over in the Bravo valley, down from the railroad. Root into every sheep camp, cabin, ranch. Stop at the Cross C and ask Colter to throw his crew north and south along the Texas line and work this way. Can you get the governor to put up a reward for Buck? As big as he can make it."

"Five thousand?"

"Dead or alive," Glendon said. "But pass the word to shoot on sight. No use talking with him. He'll never come in alive."

"Where will you be?" Avery asked.

"Sherman," Glendon said. "I'll wait for him there."

"Pat," Jones said. "You got to take me with you. I can't stay in this country after today."

"Nobody blames you," Glendon said.

"Can I go?" Jones said thickly.

"Why, man," Glendon said. "You're the next sheriff of this county. I want you and Manuel. Go tell him."

He knew how Jones felt. To be on guard and allow Buck freedom was the worst possible punishment a good deputy could suffer; and Jones was becoming just that—a good man. He watched Jones run from the office, and heard Avery say, "You have a good effect on deputies, Pat."

"He came slow," Glendon said. "Just finding himself. He'll do."

"Now," Avery said briskly. "I'll be at the railroad in six hours. Give me until tomorrow night to put my men in motion. Do you want me to come down on Sherman?"

"Yes," he said, "but after dark. Then lay out to the north, east, and south, and don't cross the river to the west. I want Buck to come in that way without trouble, without suspicion. Jones and Manuel will be in the saloon. I'll be in that woman's house."

"I'll see you at Sherman," Avery said. "Good luck."

* * *

Leaving the courthouse, Glendon met Jones and Manuel Martinez coming up the front steps. Manuel had taken charge of the bodies, made a list of effects, and now placed a grimy finger on one specific item: \$5,000 safety-pinned inside Charley Leslie's shirt pocket.

"Where is it?" Glendon asked.

"Clerk's office," Manuel said. "In the safe."

"All right," he said. "Meet me at the barn in 10 minutes."

He walked down to the hotel and saw Adams behind the desk, bent studiously over the register. He crossed the lobby and stood silently against the desk until Adams looked up, smiled, and shook his head.

"A terrible business," Adams said. "I see you are going out. Good luck."

"I'll try to get to the bottom of it," Glendon said. "If I have time."

"Charley, you mean?"

"No," he said bluntly. "How Buck got that derringer."

"Derringer?" Adams said blankly. "Oh, was that the gun?"

"Buck left it on my desk," Glendon said. "And you were the last man to visit him."

"You don't believe — ?"

"Charley had \$5,000 in cash on him," Glendon said. "He didn't own \$500 last week, he hadn't been out of town. Nobody here has that much money . . . nobody but one man. Charley got hold of \$5,000, Buck got hold of a derringer, but Charley didn't give it to him. I'll be doing some guessing while I'm gone. If I get back, I'll hang around until I figure it out. Maybe Buck'll have time to tell me."

"You are accusing me," Adams said. "Accusing me of giving Buck that gun?"

"Not officially," Glendon said. "Just guessing."

Glendon went away from the hotel and through the sunny day to his house. He saddled the big horse, strapped on his blanket roll, and headed for the gate; and Swift came running to catch his hand, then she was in his arms, head buried in his shoulder. He said awkwardly, "I'm sorry about Charley, Swift."

"You're going now?" she said.

"Got to," Glendon said. "Buck's way ahead."

"How long will you — ?"

"I can't tell you that," he said. "Until it's over."

"Pat," she said. "I've got to ask you something."

"Yes?" he said, impatient now.

"I'm asking you, Pat. I don't care what you do, where you go. Will you take me?"

He swung the shotgun barrels away from her arm and touched her cheek with his rein hand. He said wonderingly, "You sure freckle up in the summertime," and then he pulled her close and they stood silently until the big horse jerked at the reins. Glendon said, "You wait right here, Swift. I'll do the asking."

CHAPTER XV

BUCK rode alone in a land he had ruled with the gun. Times without number he had ridden from night into the lonely sheep camps, off the timbered slopes into cabin yards, across flats to the aspen pole corrals where two-bit ranchers mustered up a half-fearful smile and dropped another steak in the pan. But now, one day and one night free, he sensed the change and felt the cold wind warning of Ed Bailey's good-by. Now he was all alone.

That night he slept in the timber and woke in early dawn hungry. He watered the horse and drank deeply, and sat beneath an old bull pine, staring eastward across the plains. He thought of Ed Bailey, by this time nearing the border, but he turned toward Sherman, less than 30 miles to the northeast.

He'd get a fresh horse, some food, and say good-by to Juanita.

He rode slowly north and kept to the cottonwoods and the willows, followed the river bends, and dismounted in thick cottonwoods a mile below Sherman at 11 o'clock at night by his pocket watch. He tied the horse and waded the river, dried his feet and shoved on his boots; and walking into town heard the music and knew the day: Saturday, fandango night in Sherman. He grinned and rubbed his dirty jaw; he wasn't slicked up, he needed a shave, but he'd look in on that dance.

Slipping along in the deep shadows, Buck reached the plaza. He could hear the music clearly, the laughter and singing and movement of people inside and out. He approached the barracks and looked through the south window, into the glare of the wall lamps shining yellow and smoking black. The music was loud and gay, the floor was covered with dancers, old folks crowded the benches, giggling girls filled the corners; but he did not see Juanita. He murmured, "Stayed home," and drew back from the window.

He circled far out into the empty plaza until he came abreast the saloon and saw the light in the windows. Coyote Smith always closed for the fandango; and remembering, he had seen Smith's wife but not the saloonkeeper. He went toward the saloon until he stood just outside the slanting window light. He saw Coyote Smith polishing glasses behind the bar . . . polishing over and over again, not talking, not pouring drinks, just moving a towel over the glasses. Then Smith came forward and moved between the lamplight and the window, giving Buck his first clear look deep inside. He saw a figure in the back corner, caught lamp glint on the shotgun, and recognized Jones. Buck grinned savagely and half-drew his Colt.

They already had the town staked out; and he'd bet there were men on the ridges and along the roads: He liked that; it made the game better. He circled far to the north and came down behind the saloon and closed in on Juanita's house. Moving through the weeds, guiding on the big cottonwood, he saw the faint lamplight in her east window. She had stayed home from the fandango while Lopez was out in the hills. Fine, he'd take her down to the river and send her back later on for some grub and a fresh horse; and have her pass the word to Coyote Smith that he'd been a-calling.

Buck drew the Colt and stepped softly through the front gate and came on to the front door. He stood against the wall beside the door and held the Colt on the ready.

"Nita," he whispered.

The house was silent to his call. He gave the door a push and it fell back, and lamplight flooded yellow over the gravelled walk.

"Nita," he said. "Come out here!"

CHAPTER XVI

THEY rode all night and reached Sherman at 8 o'clock next morning. While Manuel led the horses to the livery barn, Glendon entered the saloon and faced Coyote Smith. Jones was inspecting the other stores, covering his front, and Manuel would slip from the livery and come along the store backs. Coyote Smith said, "You back again?" and pushed a bottle down the bar.

"Can we get breakfast?" Glendon asked.

"I'll tell the woman," Smith said gloomily.

Smith headed for the kitchen and Glendon said, "Call her!" Smith turned to protest, changed his mind, and called his wife; in that moment, as Glendon intended, Smith knew.

"We'll be here a while," Glendon said.

"How long?" Smith asked.

Glendon said, "Who cares, Smith?" and waited for Manuel and Jones. When they reported all clear he said, "We'll change off shifts. I'll take the house. Manuel, you move around. Jones, you'll head-quarter in here. Now let's eat."

They took the back table and ate their breakfasts while Coyote Smith watched them warily. Glendon stepped out back and crossed the vacant lots to the Lopez house and met Lopez himself at the front gate, just about to leave with team and wagon. He saw the woman in the doorway, a shadowy figure, and placed one hand against Lopez's chest.

"You know me?" he asked.

"Yes, senor," Lopez said. "You are the sheriff."

"Go on about your business now," Glendon said.

"But come back after dark and get your wife."

"My wife?"

"Get her out of here," Glendon said. "Don't let her out of your sight. Stay until you're broke, then come back."

He dropped five gold pieces into Lopez's hand and saw the dark face tighten in understanding. Lopez said softly, "He has escaped?"

"You can guess," Glendon said. "I can't tell you any more."

"Now I see," Lopez said. "Senor, I will take her away tonight. And I will pray for you."

"Pray for yourself," he said. "Don't worry about your house. I'll watch it."

Glendon went through the gate, into the house, and faced the woman across the room. He saw in one glance why Buck came here, and came again. She had everything, and she had nothing; she had delicacy but she was hollow underneath. Glendon removed his hat and laid the shotgun on the table.

"Don't go out without my permission," he said. "I'll be here from now on."

"You cannot —!"

"Shut up!" he said wearily. "I want no trouble. Listen to me and we'll get along."

He settled himself in a chair that afforded him views through front and back doors and kept Juanita inside until Lopez returned. Lopez ordered her to pack for a trip. She ran behind the table and sobbed her protest, and the sobbing became a scream; then Lopez struck her across the face, a blow that knocked her flat. He jerked her up, slapped her soundly, and spoke in Spanish that ripped and tore. She packed a sack docilely and walked in silence to the front door where Lopez grasped her arm and tipped his hat to Glendon.

"I am sorry," he said. "It was the only way."

"You've got horses?" Glendon asked.

"Good ones," Lopez said.

"Try Las Vegas," he said. "Above the railroad."

"I had Les Vegas in mind," Lopez said. "I have relatives there. Good luck, senor."

"And to you," he said.

Lopez led her from the house where Manuel waited to make sure she did not break and run; the horses walked away into the night and Manuel came to the front door.

"They are gone."

"I'll stick inside until midnight," Glendon said. "Then I'll be in the yard, on the north side."

"We are ready," Manuel said. "Good shooting!"

Manuel went away and Glendon sat alone in the house. At midnight he slipped outside with a blanket and squatted cross-legged beside the north yard fence. He felt ants moving in the sand under his legs, heard the chatter of night insects, the sound of horses and cows and goats in surrounding pens. Night lay high and thick, the stars were bright, then gray pennants lanced the sky and false dawn bloomed with a touch of dew-wet fall chill; and morning rose in the east.

He slept in a room behind the saloon while Manuel and Jones stood guard. He rose at noon and took over while they slept; toward supertime a lone rider cantered into town and ordered a drink, glanced around at him, and winked. He motioned the rider over and said, "Nothing so far," and watched Coyote Smith absorb this byplay.

"Mr. Avery's all set," the rider said. "Any orders?"

"No," he said. "Just wait."

"Good luck," the rider said. "If you need us, we're primed and cocked. Passes are blocked, Colter's coming in from the east."

The rider rode away and Coyote Smith polished his glasses and ignored Glendon. Toward dark Manuel came up the back hall with Smith's wife and pushed her gently into the kitchen.

"She was saddling a horse," Manuel said. "I did not think she should ride on such a dark night, eh?"

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'KILL or CURE'

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"Bad for the bones," Glendon said. "Smith, don't try it again."

"Keep your hands off my woman," Smith said harshly.

"Keep your hands on the bar," Glendon said.

He slept an hour and woke to the boisterous talk of saloon customers awaiting the Saturday night fandango. When he joined Jones at the back table, Smith requested permission to lock up during the dance. He said, "You stay here," and motioned Smith back to the bar. The crowd moved along to the barracks, the music began, and Glendon took the now familiar path to the Lopez house. He waited until midnight and prepared to move outside; and it came so swiftly he was caught on his knees, the shotgun pointing at the floor.

"Nita," Buck called.

Glendon had not lain his hammers down, the sheepest good luck, for he was cautious with the double barrel, uncocking it before he moved outside. He brought the shotgun up slowly until the butt pressed snugly into his shoulder and his heavy muscles corded inward and steadied the trembling barrels. He was on his knees in the half-darkness and the lamp shone boldly on the closed door; and then the door came open and released lamplight streamed thinly on to the hard-packed earth outside.

"Nita," Buck said. "Come out here!"

Glendon's finger lay against the front trigger and the stock was sweaty hot on his cheek. He looked down the ramp between the barrels and watched the empty doorway. His breath was puffy on the stock, hot into his skin beneath the shirt. He heard the boot scuff again as Buck came away from the wall and faced the door, still hidden, the Colt hammer dropping and coming back to full cock with a sharp click. Buck was testing the Colt, listening to the silence.

"Pat," Buck said. "You fooled me good. I know you're in there."

Glendon held his breath, watching the door, waiting for sound of advance or retreat; for Buck had to make a play or run for the river. If he spoke it would do no good, it would change nothing. He opened his left hand under the forearm and brought the fingers back hard and tight around the checkered wood, and waited in silence.

"Pat," Buck said again. "I know you're in there!"

Glendon waited and the silence became a brass band, cymballing all the past though his ears; Buck at the Cross C cookhouse table, lazying over coffee; Buck in town, buying the drinks, laughing. He waited in the silent darkness; and he knew, as Buck knew, that it could not last much longer.

Buck called. "You better come out if you want a last chance, Pat. I ain't goin' to stay all night."

No, he thought, but you've got to do something, Buck. Break for the river, go uptown, go somewhere. Manuel's prowling the night and you'll never know when he might bust it wide open with that handmade torch of his. Buck stood fast at the corner; and from the south, out on the street, Manuel Martinez called.

"Sheriff!"

Glendon did not answer and felt the seconds running icy through his mind, and then Manuel shouted, "I understand, sheriff."

He waited, watching the doorway and the invisible corner beyond; and the torch was a streak in the sky, lit and thrown toward the house from the street, orange-red and flaming, throwing sparks, arcing high and falling behind the house to light up all that side. Manuel shouted, "ALTO!" and the Winchester tore the silence apart.

He saw Buck appear, silhouetted against the torch light, moving north, a black shadow against the wall as he leaped from the orange-red light. Buck poised there for one endless moment, then came on north through the doorway light; and he saw the shirt front take shape in his front sight and called out, against all his will.

"Buck, give up!"

There was no gap between his last word and the first shot. Buck whirled and came running, the Colt aflame, the slugs tearing into the dirt all around him; and then Glendon pressed the front trigger and felt the brutal recoil of the 10-gauge, and pressed the back trigger without volition, and lay in the night on the hard earth and knew he was crying. Not for Buck, he had no tears for Buck, but for what a man must do to live. Head down on the stock, he cried silently and heard the running feet and found himself erect, walking forward, meeting Manuel Martinez across the dead legend in the dust.

THE END

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