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19th YEAR

132
PAGES

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SIDING WANTED TO SEE THE
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SMASH BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
WALT SHELDON



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ANSWER**

EVERY MAN IN THE VALLEY
HAD A QUICK-DRAW QUESTION!
TENSE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY

**JENNETH L.
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THE NINETEENTH NOTCH
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WESTERN

NOVELS and Short Stories

Feb. 1953
Vol. 13 No. 5

ALL
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STORIES—NO
REPRINTS!

19th year of
Publication

Robert O. Erlisman
Editor

Arthur Lane
Associate

★ ★ 3 BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVELS ★ ★

WHIPSAWED 12

by Walt Sheldon

They had a pretty special situation here in Black Rock, the rangehog told Robert Lyle. It did occasionally call for taking over some two-bit spread, or even shooting the man if he got tough. But they didn't have any need for law in Black Rock

THE NINETEENTH NOTCH 46

by James Clyde Harper

One of the guns had eighteen notches. And the funny thing about it, Jim Quince noted, was that this beautiful weapon was just like his own, fit snugly in his own quickdraw holster. Billy the Kid, they said, had put the eighteen notches on it

GUNFIGHTER'S ANSWER 72

by Kenneth L. Sinclair

Five hundred longhorns, Frank Elman had, and a tough crew to take them through the Portal. Were they rustled beef? Could a range-wise cowgirl make him turn back before there was trouble? Must showdown come inevitably with the bullet-baron of the basin if he stuck? Frank had one answer for all questions — the fast gun in his fist.

★ ★ 2 EXCITING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

A LADY FOR THE OUTLAW T. J. Roemer 6

It wasn't the raw wind blowing in off the badlands that sent the shiver up Connie's spine — it was sight of the three motionless riders waiting for her

BULLWHIP William Vance 107

This then, at last, was the man who'd killed Jackson's father

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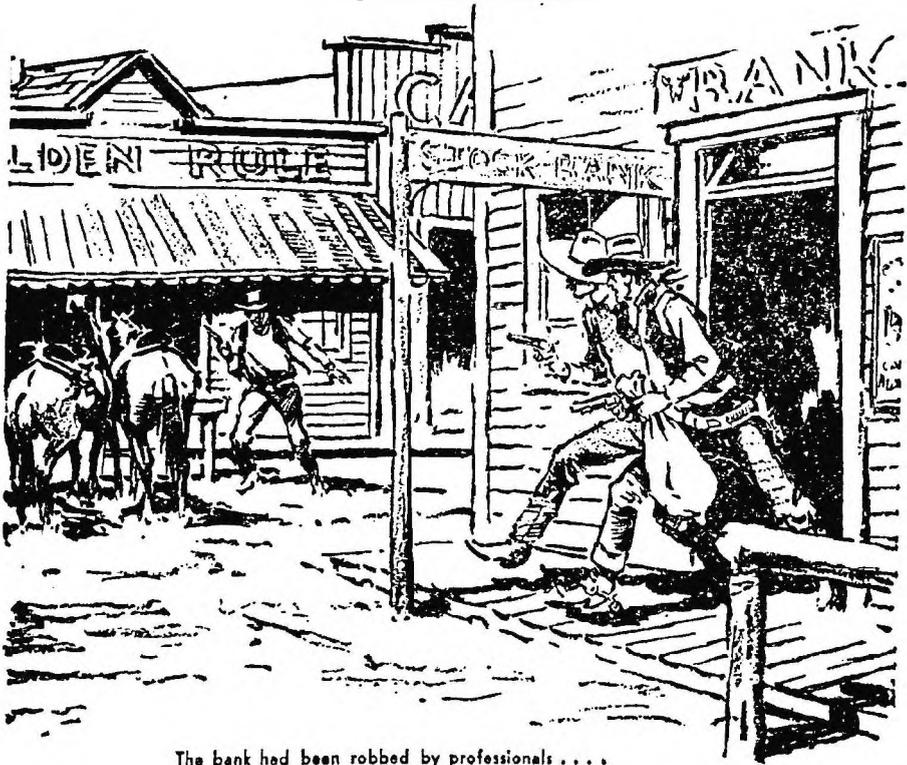
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A LADY FOR THE OUTLAW

by T. J. ROEMER



The bank had been robbed by professionals

It wasn't the raw wind blowing in off the badlands that sent the shiver up Connie's spine — it was sight of the three motionless riders waiting for her

CONNIE MORGAN sighed in her sleep, and her lovely young body turned on the corn-husk mattress. She was dreaming and her subconscious mind didn't like the thoughts of that dream. Her small throat worked, and the fine lines of her brows contracted giving her girl-ish-woman face a pixy look, much younger than Connie's eighteen years.

She was dreaming of Joey Adams and that Joey was in trouble. She knew he had quit his job as stage driver which he had held for over a year—ever since he had met her and

had learned she lived at Morgan's Hostelry. He had quit in a huff because she wouldn't marry him. Her father wasn't exactly against twenty-year-old Joey, but Broad Morgan, her dad, had gently hinted a man should have at least a few hundred dollars saved up before he took onto himself a woman, no matter how young and eager and willing. And Connie was all that. But she knew her father's good judgement, and she'd told Joey.

And he'd exploded. "How in heaven's name can a man save five hun-
(please turn to pg. 8)



"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931."

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dred dollars on this two-bit job? Connie, I want you. Run away with me! We can live in Stockton, at the other end of the line. You hear me, Connie?" He'd shaken her, then held her tight, his lean, brown face looking down hungrily into her wet eyes.

In her sleep, Connie moaned and turned back on the rough mattress. Her nightie caught and she straightened her slim legs. *Joey was in trouble. Joey was in trouble: What trouble? Joey, where are you?*

She half awakened. April rain beat on the slanted shakes close above her head. She heard a pine branch gently sweep the shingles, then the spring wind cried along the eave. Her long lashes fluttered, opened. She lay still, listening.

The hostelry was silent all around her. This was stop-over night for the stage but all were asleep at the mountain tavern in the pass. She frowned. But she thought she'd heard something. And that haunting dream. She shuddered and drew her knees up under her chin and hugged them. And she wished the wind would go away and the rain would stop its drip-drip-drip and that pine branch would lift off the roof. Before, she had never minded—she had liked all these sounds—but tonight—

She sat bolt upright in her bed. What was that?

Shivers ran up her young, curved spine. She waited, holding her breath. Then it came again—a rattle of fine sand against her window.

Connie was no scary, young thing, at least not in her own environment, and she swiftly flung back the patchwork quilt that had been her mother's and ran to the window to look down at the tavern yard below.

Three shadowy riders stood there in the dimness of the pines, a fourth horse stood riderless, and a man was directly below her second-story window! He was reaching down for another handful of sand, and in the lithe movement Connie, her heart tighten-

ing with unknown dread, recognized Joey.

She flung up the window sash. "Joey!" she cried in a whisper. "What is it?"

"Come down, Connie. Don't awaken anyone."

A sudden breeze—cold, damp, springy—came in the window and she shivered, but it wasn't because of the rough rawness of that wind. It was the sight of those three motionless riders in the shadows. There was menace in them.

SHE WRIGGLED into her jeans and wool shirt, and, without socks, swiftly drew on her riding boots, then she stole down the back stairs and outside. Joey met her at the door.

She grasped his arms. "Joey, what is it? Who are those men?"

"Shh. Not so loud. One of our horses went lame and we've got to have another."

"But who are they? And why didn't you awaken dad?"

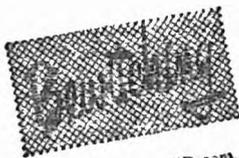
"I'll tell you later. It's a secret—our secret. Trust me, Connie. It is for us—you and me!" Now his hands were on her shoulders and she could feel them trembling from some inner excitement. And they were hot. "They didn't want to stop, even here," Joey went on in a whispered rush, "but I told them there was somebody here we could trust, and we could never get anywhere with one of our mounts lamed. Come down to the barn with us. We'll saddle up your black. If your dad or Old Ben asks you about it tomorrow just say you lent him out to me."

"But—but they'll know the horse you'll leave isn't your horse."

A grunt came from the closest of the three men in the shadows. "Uh! Hurry it up, Adams."

Joey pulled her toward the barns. "Tell Old Ben I traded, or I won it in poker, but come on." Out of the deeper shadows his tall, lithe frame loomed over her; his blond, sandy face and hair made him look years

(please turn to pg. 10)



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younger than his twenty, but Connie saw there was something different about his lips, his jaw. Even the slant of his new, grey sombrero—his latest pride and joy—was different.

Trembling, and now really afraid down deep inside, she moved obediently toward the barn, silencing the barn dog as she opened the door. She helped Joey get out the black. Joey pulled it into the off-side of the barn. One of the men led up his limping horse. Connie peered at him, but he had his hat pulled well down. They switched the saddle, then Connie saw there were saddle bags. They transferred them, and Connie saw they obviously were heavy. No wonder the horse had gone lame. No wonder Joey wanted the black, a powerful, short-coupled quarter horse.

Connie stood in the lee of the barn out of the wind and watched Joey and the chunky man. She tried to see what the other two men looked like, but they also had their hats pulled down and in addition remained in the pine shadows nearby. One, however, spoke several times in giving orders. He preceeded each with a grunt, as if it were a habit.

"Uh! See that they're strapped on tight! . . . Uh! Hustle it up! It's gettin' white in the east already."

Joey said, "You an' Pock git along. We'll catch up."

"How'n hell am I to find the way to Bruce Canyon. Uh, them woods is like a pocket."

Joey said nothing. He led the limping horse into the barn, and when he'd returned, the stocky, riderless fellow had swung onto Connie's black and was holding Joey's mount. There were no saddle bags on Joey's horse, and Connie felt a small, queer relief. These men were no good, she knew, and somehow Joey had fallen in with them. What they had done this black night, was anyone's guess. She stood cold and forlorn in the barn shadow as Joey started to swing up, without saying a word of thanks or goodby. Her throat tightened.

AND THEN he remembered! And the rush of feeling, as his arms went about her, unleashed the will that had held back her tears. She buried her head gainst his warm, sweaty chest and shook with the sobs that came from her scared and pounding heart.

"Oh, Joey, what have you done?" she whispered, trying to stifle her crying. "Tell me, Joey. I want to know. I'm afraid of those men. I am afraid for you." She clung to him and squeezed him.

He laughed shortly, excited and yet a little chokingly. "You're a sweet kid, Connie. I want you so much that I—" His arms tightened; his lips came down; the breath was gone from her body, and she didn't care for Joey's lips were on hers and flooding warmth crept from his seeking lips through her lips, her face, her neck and down through her entire body. She wanted to close her eyes and forget everything. . . everything. . .

Joey's voice: "—and I will get you, in spite of the barrier that your stubborn father has put between us. And it won't be a mere hundreds. It'll be thousands!"

"Uh, shut up that damn'd noise an' c'mon!"

"He's a-kissin' her, Grunt."

"Uh, damn you, Adams. Do yore sparkin' when we git outta the country. Come on." There was ugly savagery in the voice.

She felt Joey tear himself away. He swung buoyantly into the saddle on his grey, and laughing blew her a kiss. "G'bye, sweet kid. Remember, nothing about this tonight." He touched spurs.

"Joey, when will I see you again?"

"I'll be back—" But the wind, as it did to her words, whipped them away, indistinguishable, and Connie saw his straight figure swallowed up into the wet pine wood as the four left the stage road and struck for the thousands of trails in the mountain-

(cont'd on next pg.)

ous country to the north.

She sat down at the pump well and cried.

Before dawn broke over the pine country in which lay Morgan's Hostelry, Connie crept a second time down the back stairway. She led the limping horse from the barn, and in the greying light, dug the stone laboriously and by herself from the frog of the horse's hoof then walked to the north pasture and put him in with the far band of young and half-broken stock. She returned to the inn with a vast feeling of relief. Now she wouldn't have to lie or answer any questions to her dad or Old Ben. They'd never notice the strange horse there, and in a day its limp would be gone.

The day awakened with the usual clatter about Morgan's Inn. Sarah and Old Ben got up and rustled the fires. The handful of stagecoach passengers came down to warm breakfasts. Broad Morgan walked around his yard, whistling and taking big breaths of cool air, laughing boisterously as the col-lie barked and chased chickens from his path, then he helped the new driver hitch up the stage coach, all the while keeping a watchful eye out for any thirsty traveler who might want a nip at the tavern before beginning the day's journey. Broad Morgan, ex-miner, ex-lumberjack, ex-rancher, had a great zest for life, and he enjoyed just what he was doing—keeping a mountain inn and raising his only daughter.

FROM THE kitchen window where she was eating a wheatcake and bacon strip for her breakfast, Connie watched her father and felt great pride. He was the truest, fairest man in all the world. She had seen him settle disputes scores of times among quarrelling men. All men in the Pass accepted his word. In the mountains to the north they called him "Judge" Morgan, but he didn't like that; he liked Broad Morgan. And she liked it too. It told of the man fully.

But now Connie's dove-grey eyes were troubled. Last night Joey Adams had called her father stubborn, and she knew her father had not that fault. Joey, she recalled, had at other times said slighting things in his impatience and fretfulness. Now the insidious thought crept into her mind: did her father know Joey better than she did; than Joey knew himself? *Did her father know Joey Adams wasn't the man for her?*

The memory of last night plucked at the thought. Joey had gone wrong. She knew it. She tried to throw out the leaden thought, but her father's ingrained sense of good judgement, told her the truth. She must face it. Joey had done something, broken the law, and the terrifying fact came up hard against her teeth.

Her father knew Joey some day would go wrong. Her father knew such things, could read them in men. *Was this all true*, she dismally asked herself. *Could she go and ask her father?*

She tried to finish the wheatcake, but couldn't. She knew she couldn't ask her father because such questions would betray Joey, and she'd never do that. She loved Joey. Yes, she did. She said it over and over to herself, but as she looked down the wet, sandy road where the morning stage coach was disappearing accompanied by the barking of Major, she wondered if she really loved Joey Adams. She wished some test would come....

Two hours later a rider came up hard on the east trail and Connie learned what Joey had done. The Stockton bank had been robbed, the safe blown. It was a quiet job, done by professionals, and no one knew about it until the bank opened.

"Tom Lanner on the trail to Granite City heard riders go hard by his ranch about three this morning. Sheriff Stover took his posse that way. Told me to ride up through here warning you folk to be on the look-out, just in case." The man gulped his second free whiskey, pleased at the
(cont'd on pg. 118)



WHIPSAWED

WALT
by SHELDON

CHAPTER I

ALMOST DEAD

THUNDER shook the piled gray cloud, the endless cloud now, and its echoes scattered along the hard spines of the Carnadas. Lightning hung over the peaks, wrapping

an instantly dead moment in a blazing shroud. Cold rain swept to the attack and charged down into the valley.

Robert Lyle fought to don his oil-skin. He switched about in the saddle, fumbling at the straps of his blanket roll. Water iced into his collar; he swore and yanked the brim of his gray felt lower. The crossed sabers



They had a pretty special situation here in Black Rock, the rangehog told Robert Lyle. It did occasionally call for taking over some two-bit spread, or even shooting the man if he got tough. But they didn't have any need for law in Black Rock . . .

and the number of his Carolina regiment had been taken from that butter-nut gray felt a long time ago. . . a whole lifetime ago, if you wanted to look at it that way.

He swore, got his arms into the sleeves of the oilskin and set the collar high about his checks. He looked up, thinking he might judge the position of the sun and the probable time. No

EVEN THE SODDUSTER HE WAS SIDING WANTED TO SEE THE STRANGER IN BOOTHILL! . . . BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL!

sun. Not at the moment. Well, it was late afternoon; he knew that much.

The horse shied, and he reined it around, ducked his head forward and rode on. He glanced just once at his saddlebags to see if they were tight. His lawbooks in there. Not much, and not many, these lawbooks, but all he had. Wouldn't do for *them*, above all things, to be soaked.

Now, in places, the water was racing in sheets across the sparse-grassed prairie. He had entered this high valley some hours ago. The town of Black Rock, his destination, lay somewhere ahead. He had been riding for three days, and he had seen scarcely more than a dozen dwellings between here and Santa Fe.

He peered into the opaque, driving rain. He couldn't see the mountains in the east any more. He looked down. His animal's hoofs were sloshing water. He couldn't see the road.

He gave the mount its head. "Horse," he said, "you find it. I'll be most eternally hanged if *I* can."

He tried to slouch down, relaxed, in the saddle but it was entirely too wet and cold. And he was tired from riding. . . . tired, yes, of a lot of things. Somehow this cold, vandal rain seemed to say it for him; seemed to sum it all up. When everything could get washed away, like this, so violently and quickly—well, what was the use?

Lyle wished now that he could have a cigarette, but to roll and light one in this driving wetness would be, of course, impossible. He tightened his lips against the insistent water. He thought that he must appear grim with his lips tightened like that, and he thought so because lately it had been seeming to him that a kind of grimness, indeed, had been settling around his features.

He was thirty, and until just lately he hadn't supposed the years were marking him. He had that slender kind of face drawn visibly around the bone structure that often stays much the same between twenty and forty. But

now there were beginning to be wrinkles, deepening lines, and a few gray hairs.

And so he was letting the years take hold, and not liking it. But what else could a man do when the world had collapsed?

He started to think again about that hot, unreal day in a courthouse square when the regiment disbanded itself, when he unbuckled his sword and accidentally dropped it and then stood staring at it where it lay in the dust. . . . and in this moment came the first full understanding (though his mind had known it all along) that this was defeat, and the whole thing didn't matter any more, simply didn't matter, and in fact no longer even existed. He began to think of this, and then suddenly his head up, stared, and returned to the present.

The horse had rounded a jutting rock formation. A stream just ahead, its banks brown and overflowing, crossed the road. There was a large cottonwood by this stream. Hanging from a lower branch of this cottonwood was the dark figure of a man.

Lyle kned the horse. The horse whinnied, shied and reared, and he coaxed it down again then in a half circle toward the tree. He dismounted quickly and ran to the slumped figure. The man's toes were still upon the ground; he glanced upward and saw that the branch holding the rope had bent downward—possibly with the rain.

With one hand he hoisted the man by the armpits, with the other he pulled at the rope, loosening it. It was tied in a simple slip, and not a hangman's knot. A moment later, and by a kind of instinct as much anything, the realization came to him that the man he was holding was still alive.

"Hellfire!" said Lyle softly. He lowered the man to the ground.

THE RAIN was letting up already. Its roaring patter was dying away

and you could hear the gurglings of the short-lived streams curling across the prairie land, and now somewhere across the mountains the last protest of distant thunder.

He felt the man's pulse to be sure. Faint, slow—but still there. He stepped back to his horse—it was a cattle horse and stood fast with the reins thrown overhead—and unfastened the rolled blanket from its rump. He wrapped this blanket around the unconscious man, rolling him over and back with some difficulty. He went again to the horse and this time found a pint bottle in one of the saddlebags. Not good southern corn—it was the brandy made in El Paso they called in these parts "pass whiskey". It would do.

He looked more closely at the man's face as he dribbled the liquid into his partly opened mouth. Dark, raw-bearded man. Broad, strong nose and wide cheekbones. Almost certainly a Mexican, with very possibly a strain of Indian. He was dressed, however, not in the usual Mexican *calzoncillas*, but in wool trousers, riding boots and a striped, store-bought shirt with the collar missing. The man began to breathe more visibly now. He moved his head and half-coughed, half-choked. The rope mark around his throat was vividly red, just beginning to discolor at the edges.

"Mister," said Lyle, "you almost got to know the angels. If there are such things."

The man moved again. He moaned.

"Just take it real easy now," said Lyle. "Real easy." He drawled out the words. He put another drop of brandy between the man's lips.

The man opened his eyes. He did not start, and no expression came into his eyes. They were dark, rather large. He stared at Lyle flatly, and Lyle waited.

Seconds, many seconds later the man said, "*Muchas gracias, Senor.*" His voice was harsh, husky.

"*Por nada,*" said Lyle. He'd been

in New Mexico long enough to pick up this much Spanish anyway. He supposed if he'd studied a little he might have learned even more. If he'd been interested; if he'd thought it worthwhile to be interested in anything.

The man felt his throat. He grunted, giving the sound all the expression of his disgust and horror. He tried to raise himself to one elbow and then had to fall back again. He turned his head to one side and retched dryly.

"More brandy?" asked Lyle.

The man nodded weakly. "*Si.*" He took a long pull at the bottle this time. He sighed and seemed to feel better. Lyle rolled two cigarettes and gave him one. The man nodded in thanks.

Lyle hunkered back on his heels. He watched the man take the first few draws at the tobacco and then said, "What happened, amigo?"

The rain had stopped now. The sun was already beginning to be once more hot on the check. There was an open quiet settling again on the land.

"They almost hang Santiago Ortiz that time, no?"

"Your name's Ortiz?"

"*Si.*"

"And who are 'they'?"

"The people try for hanging me?"

"Yes."

The man cocked his head. His eyes narrowed momentarily, drawing an odd straight line from one wide cheekbone to another. "Where you come from, Senor, you don't know who wants for hanging Santiago Ortiz?"

"I just drifted up from Santa Fe. Don't hail from there, though. Looking for Black Rock. Haven't exactly found it yet."

"Ah, *si.*" Ortiz nodded. "This explains for why. They don't hear of Santiago Ortiz in Santa Fe, no?"

"Can't say as I've heard the name before."

"Ah." Another nod. His eye drifted to the pint bottle on the ground beside Lyle. He raised one eyebrow. Lyle smiled a little and passed the bottle. Ortiz took a long drink. He

was able to rise to a sitting position now. "Well, Senor, I am much obliged for your kindness, but I better tell you maybe you get in trouble helping Ortiz."

"Why?"

Ortiz shrugged. "Some call him the famous bandit. Very dangerous, no?"

Lyle broadened his smile. "You can't be very famous, amigo, if I never heard of you. And right now—if you don't mind my speaking frankly—you don't look very dangerous."

"I am here like this because I was stupid. Very stupid, Senor. I made a trust for this Senor Richardson. That was mistake, no?"

"Can't say as I really know what you're talking about," said Lyle. Nor was he listening closely to the man. You couldn't really get much interested in things when nothing mattered any more. He supposed now he'd pile this fellow over the back of his horse, take him somewhere nearby where others could help him, dump him and leave him. And then forget the whole thing.

Ortiz hadn't noticed Lyle's disinterest. He was warming up to his explanation now. He was gesturing more widely, more vigorously. "He asks me, this Richardson, to come talk with him! Maybe we make business—maybe my land comes back to me! But no! They point the pistola—like this—and they say we going to hang you!"

"Better take it easy, amigo," said Lyle. "Better not get all riled up in your condition. Whoever tried to hang you did an almost job of it. They must have figured you were already dead when they left you."

The man's eyes narrowed again and his voice became quieter. "One day Santiago Ortiz kill this Richardson," he said.

"Well, it's your business," said Lyle, "but you've got a mighty strong case against anybody who tried to hang you without proper trial or anything. Now I'm going to Black Rock to take over a law practice. You might want

to come in and see me one of these days."

Ortiz laughed. "I—Ortiz—come to the *abogado*? Senor, I can't even go into the town except by night."

"Suit yourself," said Lyle. "Right now I expect I better get you to your house, or in the care of some friends. You're going to need some rest after coming that close to hanging dead."

ORTIZ had his head bent to one side. He appeared to listen to something for a moment. Then he straightened his head. "You don't have to take me to my friends, Senor. They are coming for me."

Lyle, then, heard the sound of riders. He wondered momentarily how Ortiz could be so sure that these were his friends, but didn't ask. He'd noted before that people who spent their time in the saddle out here had a sort of instinct about these things. He rose, and turned, and looked toward the line of mountains and saw the horsemen appearing over a rise. There were perhaps a dozen.

Well, that would relieve him of further responsibility. Good thing, too; he'd better move along pretty soon if he wanted to reach Black Rock before dark. This Richardson that Ortiz had mentioned: Lyle remembered now that Richardson was one of the people he was supposed to see. Richardson, as he understood it, had been one of Cousin Lee's big clients, and was supposed to be anxious to get a lawyer in Black Rock again now that Cousin Lee had died.

Funny how the news had come just when Lyle had decided that nothing would suit him better than to go off to some remote place—like this Black Rock—and there just quietly fade out of the whole meaningless picture. At least that way he'd have a kind of peace, a kind of numbness that was better than living with the memory and all the reminders of the world that had fallen.

He stood there, waiting for the riders. Ortiz staggered to his feet, shucked the blanket and stood beside him.

It startled him a moment later to see that all the riders wore handkerchiefs over their faces. He turned to Ortiz to ask why, but by that time the riders were upon them. There was a great clatter of horses pulled to a halt. Two of the men in the lead leaped from their mounts, bounded toward Ortiz, embraced him and began to chatter loudly and violently in Spanish.

Two others pounced upon Lyle and jerked his arms roughly into the small of his back.

"Hey!" said Lyle. "Hey—wait a minute!"

A fifth rider, very small and slim, stood in front of him and pointed a pistol at him.

Ortiz jumped to his rescue. "No, no, no!" he said, and added something in Spanish. It appeared to be an argument after that. Lyle, catching a word here and there, could guess that the riders were all for shooting him on the spot, whether he saved Ortiz from hanging or not. He was somewhat bewildered by all this—and not a little frightened, he had to admit to himself. It was beginning to look as though Ortiz was losing the argument.

He stared at the maw of the gun. The bandit who held it was not taking part in the argument and was standing quietly about fifteen feet from Lyle. And Lyle was thinking that if the bandit should pull the trigger now it would be a ridiculous way to die—especially after all the Yankee bullets that had managed to miss him in his time. It would be a meaningless way to die. And maybe that would be only fitting because his whole life, as far as he was concerned, was meaningless now. He'd fought hard for the Confederacy because he'd believed in it, and even in the dark days toward the end he'd never thought that defeat

would come so dismally and with such a quiet crash.

And then, returning home, he'd found no home at all, but only a charred field and some new burial mounds. He was dazed, and in this daze he had wandered west, not really knowing where he might stop, not really caring. A lot of self pity for one man alone, he supposed—because the same thing had happened, in much the same way, to so many others. But somehow the knowledge of that didn't make it any better. And when finally he'd drifted into Santa Fe, met friends of the family there, and had been admitted, on the basis of his North Carolina qualifications, to the bar in the Territory of New Mexico—well, even this didn't do much to settle him.

And then a distant kin, one Lee Harris—those were the Harrises on his mother's side who had originally lived in Carteret County—had learned that he was in Santa Fe and there had been for a few months a desultory and fairly disinterested correspondence. Lee Harris was a lawyer in a place called Black Rock, a county seat to the west that Lyle had scarcely heard of before. It was very much to his surprise to learn, upon Lee Harris' death, that the man's law practice had been willed to Lyle. Or, in the technical sense, the library and the office furniture in Black Rock had been willed.

And so Lyle, with the sense of stepping aside from the meaningless stream of things around him, had been on his way to take over this bequest when he had found the man hanging from a cottonwood in the thunderstorm.

And now it began to look as though he'd never make even that comfortable oblivion.

He stared at the maw of the pistol.

There was something odd about the hands of the bandit who held the gun. They were small, slender. Soft looking. It was almost as though they were a woman's hands. Lyle noted a tur-

quoise ring, with the stone set in the shape of the double-barred Cross of Lorraine, on the middle finger of the hand that held the weapon.

He was still regarding this curiously when the loud voices all about Lyle stopped suddenly and Santiago Ortiz walked up and put a hand on his shoulder. "My friend," said Ortiz, "I have told my comrades that you saved my life. They will not kill you. So you go now, no? But maybe next time I see you we cannot be friends. You understand this, Senor?"

Lyle looked at the bandit quietly and steadily for a moment, then said, "Amigo, it just doesn't make much difference to me one way or the other."

He turned and walked easily to the blanket, rolled it, placed it across the horse, then mounted. He rode off without looking back. And in his mind these words kept pounding, though he didn't welcome them: *Was it all going to be as quiet and easy as he had thought?*

He felt a strong uneasiness about that.

The thunderstorm, far across the mountains now, muttered once more and a spot of lightning flashed on the horizon.

CHAPTER II

A PRETTY SPECIAL SITUATION

BLACK ROCK, Lyle decided, was not exactly a pretty town—but then few of these towns in the Territory were. It was built, in the Mexican fashion, around a central plaza or open square, and here was the courthouse and most of the business establishments. There were not many trees; the adobe houses were the color of mud and the wooden houses were largely unpainted. It was almost as though the town gave up as completely hopeless any attempt to compete in beauty with the moun-

tains and the great stretches of cattle plain around it.

He spent the first night at an Inn, washed and changed in the morning, ate breakfast, and then went out to find the office of Ward Richardson, cattle broker. This was the man, the understood, who held Cousin Lee's will and the keys to the law office.

He felt a little conspicuous in his black coat and string tie. He still wore his gray cavalry hat—it had been a question of traveling light from Santa Fe and he had chosen this hat for what he supposed you would call sentimental reasons—now he was sure it was too noticeable. He walked, a tall, slow man with a kind of cautious stride, across the square. The morning sun was already warming the dust and picking out flecks of quartz or mica in the adobe, turning them gold.

There were people in the plaza, cattle riders in from the plains, sheep drivers in from the hills. The shop fronts were opening, raising wooden awnings to shade them from the sun. A white haired caballero in embroidered clothes and riding a high Spanish rig stepped a fine black charger into the square; the Mexicans shuffling about looked up and tipped their hats to him. They looked very poor, these peons; they seemed thin and poor. Their eyes were dark with a kind of hopelessness. Lyle looked up and saw the Federal flag flying above the courthouse and it seemed to him joltingly out of place. Yet this remote, barren territory, taken from Mexico in '46, had been a U.S. possession nearly thirty years now.

Ward Richardson's office was on the far side of the plaza. It was one of the few places with glass windows in front. Black lettering on the window said: W. R. RICHARDSON CO. WE BUY SHEEP & CATTLE.

He went inside and a man he supposed immediately must be Richardson was at a desk in the far end of the room. A Mexican was standing before him, nervously handling the som-

brero in his hands. Richardson, a large, clean-shaven, somewhat handsome man who was only beginning to be heavy in the neck and jowls, was speaking. "Miguel," he was saying to the Mexican, "I know it's difficult for you to leave your family and work on the ranch. I know how these things are. But you signed an agreement to pay, Miguel, and you're responsible for that. You're not a child, you're a grown man. Maybe next time you'll be more careful."

"But, Senor, when I sign this—when he tell me about it—it all look very easy—" There was both bewilderment and distress in Miguel's voice.

"I'm sorry, Miguel. An agreement's an agreement." Richardson's tone was impatient now. His voice had a kind of twang and snap to it; it was the voice of a man used to authority.

"Senor—"

"I'm a busy man, Miguel. You'll have to run along now."

"My apple trees, Senor! Who picks them? And my wife—she have another baby soon. I cannot go to this place for working! I cannot go!"

"Then we'll have to take your house and orchard to pay the debt."

"No, no!"

"Take your choice, Miguel."

The Mexican stared at Richardson for a moment, and then slowly backed away. After a few steps he turned, brushed past Lyle and went out the door. His eyes were dull, dazed.

Richardson looked up and saw Lyle. "These people never will learn to keep out of debt," said Richardson, half-shrugging, half-sighing. "Then when the time comes to pay up they holler like stuck pigs. What can I do for you, friend?"

"I'm Robert Lyle."

Richardson broke into a smile and rose. "Well, well—our new attorney! Glad to see you!" He came from behind the desk and offered his hand. His grip was warm and strong. Now that he had risen Lyle saw that he was even taller than he had seemed behind

the desk. And yet he was well-proportioned so that he did not appear ungainly. He struck Lyle as a man of immense physical strength, and a man who would keep that strength into the years even when the extra weight now shadowing his jowls and his middle began to develop. "Been waiting for you several weeks now, Mr. Lyle. Of course, we've been doing business all right, but sometimes for appearance's sake things just have to be legal, don't they?"

WHILE LYLE was standing there wondering what he meant by that, there was a sudden crash of glass. Lyle whirled, and so did Richardson. A rock had come through the window. The figure of Miguel was darting across the plaza, running away, and a moment later it disappeared in a side alley.

"Why, the sneaky little polcat!" said Richardson. He went over to the broken window. "This glass doesn't grow on trees in these parts, damn him! Had this shipped all the way from Kansas City! I tell you, Lyle, we've got quite a problem here. These people get harder to handle all the time. They don't know when they're well off."

"Are they well off?" Lyle asked mildly.

Richardson went back to his desk, sat, and motioned to a chair. Lyle sat. Richardson found two cigars in a desk drawer and handed one to Lyle. "When I first came here with the First Colorado they were plenty more respectful than now."

"First Colorado, eh?" said Lyle. "As I remember they defeated Sibley's Texans in Glorietta Pass."

"Whipped 'em good." Richardson grinned. Then he stopped grinning. "But you're a Southerner, aren't you? You talk like one. No offense, Lyle. We did whip 'em, but they gave us some bad moments first."

"No offense," said Lyle.

"Anyway we're all U.S. now," said

Richardson, "and the sooner these Mexicans realize it the better. Why, I tell you, Lyle, there's more money and prosperity in this valley now than there's ever been—and they're still fighting us. We've even got one fellow, Santiago Ortiz, who's organized them into a pack of bandits. They live up in the hills somewhere and they come riding down and steal cattle and sheep and everything else."

Lyle decided not to say anything about his meeting with Ortiz. "Where is this bandit now?" he asked instead.

"A posse of citizens—it wasn't exactly legal, mind you—caught him a few days ago and tried to hang him yesterday. They left him hanging for dead, but I got a few reports last night and this morning that he wasn't dead and that his men came along and cut him down. That's what's got me in this bad mood this morning—" he was grinning again—"which you'll have to excuse."

"But if everything's so fine and prosperous here why would anybody run away and become a bandit?"

"Well, now," said Richardson, waving his cigar lightly, "the situation is a little more complicated than that. First off, we've got a big market for wool and hides in California—towns growing up like weeds in that country out there now. But to absorb our shipping cost we've got to grow our wool and hide pretty cheap.

"Now it so happens I've got an interest in the bank and most of the stores and trading posts in Black Rock. And these people are just like children when they want something—they'll buy whether they can afford it or not. When they can't pay—and they hardly ever can—we let 'em work it off on one of the ranches in the valley. Cuts down quite a bit on growing costs."

"But that's actually illegal," said Lyle. "The Act of Congress, March 2, 1867, I think it was, specifically forbids peonage. Thousand to five thousand dollars fine, a year to five years

in prison, if I remember correctly."

Richardson laughed. "You lawyers! Got all the rules down neat as paint, haven't you? Well, we've got a pretty special situation here in Black Rock and we can't always go a hundred percent according to the rules. I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Lyle, these *pelados* are better off now than they ever were, even if a few of 'em are working off debts."

Lyle said in a thoughtful way, "It doesn't hit me right."

"I wouldn't think a Southerner would be much bothered," said Richardson, still smiling, but with his eyes narrowed somewhat. "Seems to me you fellows kept slaves quite a long time. That's what we fought the war about, wasn't it?"

"Mr. Richardson," said Lyle quietly, "I—and a lot of other Southerners—didn't approve of slavery any more than anybody else. We considered the problem one that we, and not the Federal government ought to handle, and maybe we were wrong about that. But it was that principle we fought about, as I understood it."

Richardson got up. "Lyle, we're being mighty foolish fighting that war all over again. We've got work to do together—work we can both profit from. Now what do you say we just don't mention it again?"

"That's all right with me."

"Fine. Now the first thing I want to do is give you the keys to Lee Harris' office—your office now. It's right up the street. And then I'd like you to get working on something for me soon as possible. It's a little land deal. I have these things from time to time, and I'll retain you on a regular monthly fee the way I did Mr. Harris. Will that be okay with you?"

"What's the little land deal?"

RICHARDSON took a folder of papers from the desk and gave them to Lyle. "When you look these over," he said, "you'll find that they're mainly a contract of sale from one Her-

nando Garcia to myself of a certain spread of lands. There's an abstract of title in there describing the lands and tracing them down to the original Spanish grant. Now these things are pretty complicated sometimes and if this ever dragged through the courts a case could be made that this same Santiago Ortiz—the bandit I told you about—is the descendant of the grantee. Fact is, he originally had his ranch on these lands." Richardson chuckled. "He had to get off when I pulled him into a mortgage, and then foreclosed on him. All through Garcia, of course. He never knew what hit him."

"Just what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to fix these papers up in the right way—so's they'd look good if the thing ever came to court. I want the title traced clear and quiet—down to Hernando Garcia instead of Santiago Ortiz."

"You mean you want me to alter them? Commit forgery, as it were?"

"Oh, I think you'll find you can do it without going that far. You study 'em."

Lyle's impulse was to say flatly no. He checked it. He wanted to know more about Richardson—more about the whole situation, first. He kept his face expressionless as Richardson talked on, telling him a little more about the town and about the money to be made in the valley. He accepted the keys to Harris' office and the copies of Harris' will. He hadn't really made up his mind about anything yet. He was trying to think... actually he wanted to be alone for a little while and get some perspective on this whole business.

He had already risen and he was about to leave and go to his new office when the girl came in. He heard the front door open and he turned, at first without much interest, and then he saw her.

"Why, hello, Concha," said Rich-

ardson genially. "How're you this morning?"

"Very well, Senior."

The girl he had called Concha curtsied gravely. She was small and slender and wore the colorful ruffled skirt of a New Mexican *senorita*. A *rebosa*, or shawl, hung lightly around her compact shoulders.

"What's on your pretty mind, Concha?" Richardson's attitude was patronizing, like that of a particularly insensitive adult toward a child.

"My uncle says the chest for Senora Richardson is ready today," said Concha.

"Well, fine. Just fine," said Richardson. He turned to Lyle. "Her uncle makes some dandy furniture. Old Spanish style. The Missus had him do us a carved chest. She's always changing our house around—you know how women are."

Lyle nodded absent-mindedly. He was still looking at Concha. He noticed that twice she glanced at him and then glanced hastily away again.

"Then someone will call for the chest, Senior?"

"We'll call for it, Concha," said Richardson, and smiled dismissal for her.

She curtsied again and turned to go out. Lyle saw the ring on her right hand. It was turquoise in a Cross of Lorraine. It was—he would swear—the same ring he had seen on the hand holding a pistol fifteen feet from his midriff the day before. His eyebrows rose and he took an involuntary step forward, unable to conceal his surprise. By that time Concha had gone out of the door.

"Cute little baggage," said Richardson. "If I wasn't already married—and busy—" he sighed—"oh, well. More important things in the world, I reckon."

"She lives with her uncle?" asked Lyle.

"Yes. He's got a shop just a little ways off the plaza."

"What's his name?"

"Salazar. Old Jose Salazar. Quite a character around here." Then Richardson turned and grinned at Lyle slyly. "Kind of take a fancy to the little *senorita*, do you?"

Lyle shrugged and said, "I better go take a look at my new office now."

Richardson was still laughing at him when he walked out.

CHAPTER III

COUNT TO THREE

THERE WERE things to do, all right. He had to go to the courthouse, for one thing, and consult the records and the surveys on this land of Richardson's, or Garcia's—or Santiago Ortiz'. He hadn't yet made up his mind what he was going to do when he decided who really owned it, but he was at least sure that he wasn't going to be a party to any of Richardson's shady business. Maybe trouble stacked up there—well, he'd take care of it when the time came. And then sometime today he wanted to call on Miss Concha Salazar. He told himself that this was because he was curious about the ring, and about any possible connection she might have with the bandit, Santiago Ortiz. Just curious. That was what he told himself. Now in addition to these things he had to find a place to stay and familiarize himself a little more with the town.

But at the moment he wanted only to sit and think. Let things catch up with him in his own mind. He sat in the old swivel chair that had belonged to Lee Harris, his predecessor, and he rested his feet on a half open drawer in Harris' old rolltop desk. He re-lit Richardson's cigar, which had gone out, and he puffed and thought.

None of it was really his business, after all. He didn't want any part of it; he didn't want any part of anything. Wasn't there a place in the world where a man could just sit

back, do a few daily chores to keep himself going, and then sink comfortably into oblivion? Couldn't you even do that way out here at the tail end of everything?

He tried to imagine how he would have reacted to Black Rock ten years ago. He'd been something of a firebrand then—"Judge Lyle's youngster; always up to somethin', that boy." Once he'd fought a duel with a man for beating a carriage horse. Both bullets wild, and so nothing had ever come of it—but at least then he'd had get-up-and-go-about such things. And now? Well, recently somebody had said if he ever fell in love he might acquire some get-up-and-go. But he'd met a number of women—respectable and otherwise—and so far he just hadn't had enough get-up-and-go to fall in love in the first place.

Well, for the time being he could at least occupy his mind with a project. He could wander over to the courthouse and see just who did actually own this land in question. He left his office, locked the door and crossed the plaza.

There were the usual hangers-on at the courthouse; some stared at him, some ignored him completely. The big main hall inside was cool and dark. There were no signs to tell him where the land records might be kept and so he walked to a door marked: SHERIFF. He opened it. There were two men in the room. One was stretched out flat on a long counter, his hands folded over his middle and a large felt hat over his face. He was snoring.

The second man was braiding three strips of rawhide together. He looked up. He had waxen skin stretched tight over his skull, he had uncombed, raggedly cut blond hair spilling out under a shoved-back hat, and he was dirty. His hands were dirty, his face was dirty and his clothes were dirty.

There was a strong smell of whiskey in the room.

The man braiding the rawhide

looked up and said belligerently, "You want somepin'?"

"Looking for the sheriff." Lyle kept his voice nondescript.

The man laughed. His teeth were mottled. "That's him." He nodded at the sleeping man. "Sheriff Vance Murdell—the great peace officer." He spat tobacco and added, "Once was."

Lyle looked at the sleeping man with some surprise. The stink of alcohol made it pretty clear why he was sleeping. Vance Murdell. Lyle knew the name. Anyone connected with the law out west would know the name—and a lot of people unconnected, too. Vance Murdell in his time had been an outstanding Indian fighter and after that the man who almost single-handedly cleaned up at least three lawless towns. Lyle hadn't known he was here in Black Rock.

"You got business," the bony, dirty man was saying, "you better do it with me. Sandy Poore's the name. Under-sheriff. Get drunk sometimes—but never that drunk." He spat in Murdell's direction and continued to braid the rawhide.

"I think I better talk to Murdell personally," said Lyle easily.

Poore stopped braiding and brought his head around slowly. He stared at Lyle. His eyes were watery and pale—a little loco, Lyle swore. Finally he said, "Maybe you didn't hear me right, mister."

"I heard you. I want to talk to Murdell. My name's Robert Lyle. I'll be obliged if you'll wake the gentleman."

"Oh, you're that new lawyer-feller. That Johnny Reb. Heard tell of you."

Lyle ignored his stare and walked across the room. He shook the sleeping Murdell's shoulder.

"I said," Poore called softly, "if you got business you better do it with me. If you ain't got business, Mister Lawyer-feller, you better clear out."

Lyle turned and walked back toward Poore. There was something al-

most weary in the way he moved. He gave no fore-sign of what he was about to do. Swiftly, and quite matter-of-factly, he suddenly grabbed Poore by the filthy shirt front, yanked him up and forward and backhanded him three times across the face, hard. Then he slammed him down to the bench again.

Poore evidently got over his surprise at the time he struck the bench. His hand moved to his side, tugged at his pistol. He had trouble drawing it. He swore, yanked it out of the holster viciously and then pointed it at Lyle.

Lyle said, "I wouldn't. I'm guessing you've got a good thing here in Black Rock, Mr. Poore. I wouldn't spoil that good thing."

Poore blinked, kept staring.

"I said I wouldn't spoil it," Lyle repeated.

Poore tucked his gun away again. "Maybe you and me, Mr. Lyle," he said, "will have some *real* trouble sometime."

Lyle shrugged and turned to the sleeping sheriff once more.

Behind him he heard Poore go out. He'd make a strong guess that Poore would go to Richardson now and ask just where this smart-aleck Johnny Reb stood in the scheme of things and how far could he, Poore, go with him.

Which gave Lyle a little time, at least.

He took the hat from the sheriff's face. He had never seen Vance Murdell in the days of his glory, but he could see now that it had once been a strong, hard face. It was bloated now with flesh reddened by distended capillaries. The large brown mustache, shot a little with gray, was untrimmed and petered off to join without demarcation an unshaven stubble of several days.

IT TOOK some time to wake Murdell up. The final accomplishment was made only by discovering a pint

bottle with some whiskey in it in a drawer of the desk and waving it in front of the man's face. Murdell finally swung upright, lowered himself from the counter and pulled deeply at the bottle. He made a long, hard sound of gratification. He re-corked the bottle. Then he looked at Lyle and said in a tremendous bass voice: "You must be the new lawyer. Don't ask me how I know. I guess things. What the devil you comin' to see me for? Sandy Poore can do anything I can do. Besides—he's allowed to."

With that Murdell broke into roaring, uncontrollable laughter, slapped his thighs, swayed back and forth several times, and then stopped laughing as abruptly as he had begun.

"Oh, hell," he said, and uncorked the bottle and took another drink.

"I came to find out about some land titles," Lyle said. "I guess Poore could have helped me. I just didn't feel I wanted to do business with him."

"I know," said Murdell. "He's loco. Know what he likes to do? He likes to shoot cats. You like cats?"

"Never thought about 'em one way or another," said Lyle.

"Well, I do," boomed Murdell. He struck his chest. "And I'm loco, too. Everybody in this whole damn town's loco. You know what my advice to you, Mr. Lawyer, is? Clear out o' this town fast as you can."

Lyle nodded. "I might take that advice."

"Oh, a quitter, huh?"

"Maybe." Lyle shrugged.

"Well," said Murdell, waving unsteadily with one arm, "can't say as I blame you. I'm a quitter myself. Had any gumption I'd swear off drinkin' and go someplace else. Know how I got elected sheriff here? Richardson fixed it. He can fix anything in Black Rock. Know why he fixed it? Because he knows all I do is drink, and so I don't interfere none." He picked up the bottle again. "Damn, it's all gone." He looked at Lyle. "Why

don't you go away, Mr. Lawyer, and let me sleep again?"

"I just thought I might like to know a little more about what I'm running away from. In case I decide to run."

"You ain't decided yet?"

"No."

"You're a crazy fool, but sometimes I like crazy fools. Look—lemme show you somethin'. Hold this here bottle."

Lyle took it.

"Hold it out—arm's length."

Lyle did that.

Murdell went back to the counter and slouched there on his elbows, facing the room. "Count to three," he said.

"One, two, three," said Lyle.

There was a gun explosion and the bottle shattered. Murdell had drawn and aimed so fast that Lyle had never been able to follow the movement.

"Pretty good, huh?" said Murdell.

"Pretty good," said Lyle.

The door flew open and two people looked in.

"It's all right," said Murdell. "Everything's okay. Now how about one o' you runnin' down to the Palace and gettin' me a bottle o' whiskey?"

"Sure, Sheriff," said one of the men and closed the door again.

Lyle rolled a cigarette thoughtfully. "Murdell, I take it you don't really like it much around here. I take it you're not too fond of Richardson. How come you don't do something about it?"

"Mister Lawyer," said Murdell, "if you're fixin' to make a proposition to get me to help you take over from Richardson, forget it. I figure one like him is as bad as another—and Richardson, he's already here."

"I wasn't thinking about that." Lyle thumbed a match and lit his cigarette. "I was wondering if maybe sometimes you didn't feel you'd just like to do your real duty as sheriff. In this territory a sheriff is chief executive of the county, and responsible for the enforcement of its laws. He's the direct representative of the people.

Ever felt you'd really like to be that?" He shook out the match and studied it elaborately. "Again? The way you once were?"

"What are you gettin' at?"

"Seems to me," said Lyle, "Richardson's built everything he's got on a pile of broken laws. Seems to me if the law were really enforced he might be stopped."

Murdell laughed that sudden, loud laugh, then cut it off again. "So that's the pasture you're workin', is it? Well, I got to say I admire it, Mr. Lawyer—but you don't know what you're bitin' off. Come on with me a minute. Want to show you something."

HE LED Lyle through another door and into a room that contained two cells with iron-barred doors. There was a man in one of the cells. He was olive-skinned and stout. He looked at the two of them with fearful eyes.

"How you feelin', Bernabe?" said Murdell.

"I don't know," said the man in a dull, surly voice.

Murdell turned to Lyle. "This here's Bernabe Baca. Richardson made him go to work herdin' sheep up on Rayado Creek to pay off twelve dollars and fifty cents he owed, at three dollars a month. Bernabe didn't like that and let all the damn sheep run away. Can't say as I blame him. Know what Richardson's gonna do?"

"What?"

"He's going to have Bernabe get twenty lashes in the plaza tomorrow morning in front of everybody."

"But that's against the law!"

"Ain't it, though?" said Murdell, nodding, grinning. "And you're standin' there wonderin' why I let it happen, ain't you?"

"I am."

"Well, now, suppose I did raise a ruckus. I figure I'm just about of a size to do it. I could get Bernabe off scott-free and Richardson nor Sandy

Poore nor you nor nobody could stop me if I was of a mind to."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"Because the very next time I got myself blind drunk Poore or somebody would either slip a knife in my ribs or blow my head off with a six gun. And I can't guarantee nobody I am gonna keep from gettin' blind drunk."

Murdell led Lyle back to the sheriff's office and Lyle frowned and was thoughtful. He asked where the land title records were kept and Murdell told him. He went to the door. He put his hand on the knob and turned. "Suppose I didn't like this whipping tomorrow enough to want to do something about it myself, Sheriff. Would you be wanting to interfere with me?"

"Mr. Lawyer," said Murdell, "I ain't even gonna be there. While it's happenin' I'm goin' to be gettin' myself blind drunk. Only decent thing I can do."

"All right." Lyle nodded and opened the door.

"Wait a minute," said Murdell.

"Yes?"

The Sheriff's voice became suddenly soft. Lyle would not have suspected that booming basso could be so soft. Murdell said, "Don't reckon I'll be seeing you after tomorrow. Just wanted to say if you try to help Bernabe—well, you're a damn fool, but I used to be a damn fool like that myself." To Lyle's surprise Murdell's eyes were filling with moisture. Then he boomed again. "Go on, get outa here, Mr. Lawyer—and stop upsettin' everybody and everything!"

"I'll see you again," said Lyle. "Give you odds." He smiled and went out.

He spent about two hours then examining the land records in another room. When he had finished he was ravenously hungry. He went to the restaurant next to the Palace Saloon and ate a steak. It was tough. He checked out of the Inn then and carried his things over to the back room of the law office, where there was a

cot and a washstand. He had fully expected to hear from Richardson again by this time, but Richardson did not appear. He strolled past his office and it was empty, apparently locked. He stopped a man on the street and asked where the Salazar house was. The man took him to the edge of the plaza and pointed it out.

IT WAS evening now. The sun was still warm, but the shadows on the dust were long and soft-edged. Dark rock on the mountain ridge to the east glinted with reddish gold reflections. The breeze had died down and the leaves of the cottonwoods were quiet.

Lyle still wasn't sure what he was doing, nor why he was doing it. He felt only—in the fact that he was doing *something*—a kind of ease and contentment he didn't ordinarily feel. Maybe this in itself was a kind of runaway cowardice; maybe in some ways not much different than Vance Murdell's drinking.

He didn't know. This kind of thing was pretty complicated...when all you wanted to was drift...float....

He found himself knocking at the broad planked door of the tiny Salazar house.

A moment later she opened it.

"Hello, Concha," he said.

She studied him for a moment, dark eyes expressionless, then said, "You better come inside, *Senor*."

There was a big main room and this was evidently her uncle's workshop. Lengths of wood and tools lay about. There was the smell of freshly cut wood. Wordlessly she pointed out a stool for him to sit upon, and then from a wall cabinet fetched a bottle of wine and a glass.

When he had finally tasted the wine she sat down on a bench across from him and said—still without any expression— "You recognized me today, didn't you, *Senor*."

He was surprised, but he forced

himself not to show it. "Yes," he said. "Your ring."

He was thinking that he hadn't been wrong earlier in deciding she was beautiful. She was extraordinarily beautiful. She had a simplicity about the lines of her face, the drawing back of her dark hair that he had never quite seen before. Or was that one small taste of wine making him think this way?

"Who are you, *Senor*? Why do you come to this valley?"

He laughed a little at that, and then he tried to explain. He told how he had fought in a war, lost, drifted and come here.

"And now you will stay here?" she asked.

He frowned and said, "I don't know."

Concha said, "But you will work for this man Richardson."

"Not necessarily."

"Everybody works for him. Sooner or later."

"Your friend Santiago Ortiz doesn't seem to. And that brings me to why I came here this evening. I have some information for Ortiz. Can you get it to him?"

She smiled dryly. "It should be clear to you that I can. You saw me with Ortiz' men. But—how do I know this isn't some kind of trick? How do I know you're not doing something for Richardson?"

"If I were Richardson's man I wouldn't have cut Ortiz down from that cottonwood."

"That was yesterday. A man can change his mind. Or something can change it for him. Money, usually."

He sighed. He had finished his wine, and she took the glass to pour more and he shook his head. He lit a cigarette instead, murmuring in the best Mexican form, "*Con su licencia, Senorita*." She nodded, courteously, automatically. Lyle said, "I don't suppose you'd trust me enough to tell me just how you do fit in with Ortiz

—why you were with his men yesterday.”

“You already know some dangerous things, Senor.” It seemed to Lyle that she glanced then toward the back door, but he couldn’t be sure.

“I suppose so. But maybe the information I have for Ortiz will convince you I’m not particularly on Richardson’s side. I want you to tell him the transfers of his land are highly irregular. That if he wants to fight in court to get his lands back, in my opinion he has a good case. Almost surefire.”

“In the right court, perhaps. But here in Black Rock—”

“Tell him this anyway, will you?”

“I will tell him.”

“And if he wants any further ideas on where I stand he might have somebody watch what happens in the plaza tomorrow morning.”

“What will happen?”

“I’m not sure how it’s going to end up,” he said, smiling, “but I’m going

to start it by making a formal objection to the public whipping.”

“Bernabe?” she said. “Bernabe Baca?”

“That’s the one.”

She looked at him curiously. “Why should you bother yourself with Bernabe Baca?”

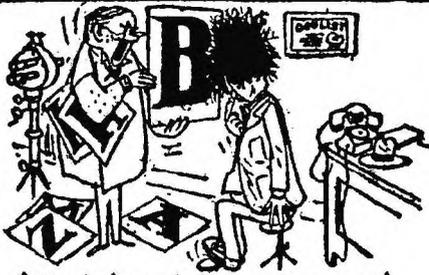
IT SEEMED to Lyle that as he had been talking to Concha tonight a subtle change had come over her. She had been, in Richardson’s office, no more than a courteous and unimportant young girl. Now it was as though she had donned importance, and was aware of it. He said, “I don’t know why I bother about Baca. Sheriff Murdell said everybody in town was crazy. Maybe some of it’s rubbing off on me.”

“Senor, I have advice for you. Do you mind?”

“What is it?”

“Don’t try to do anything about Bernabe Baca tomorrow.”

“Why not?”



“You don’t need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!”



“Says he’s got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it’s his hair’s best friend!”



“If he’s ashamed of having dandruff why doesn’t he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!”

**YOUR HAIR'S
BEST FRIEND**

America's
Favorite
Hair Tonic!



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"I can't tell you more than that. Just—please—don't do anything."

He got up, drew deeply on his cigarette. "I thought, coming here tonight, I'd learn something. Clear up a few things. All I've got is a couple of new mysteries."

She smiled as she walked toward the door with him. "You should be thankful, *Senor*, you didn't learn too much."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean for now I'm trusting you. Maybe this is foolish—I don't know. You see, when I knew you recognized me today, it was very dangerous, I thought. And when I saw you coming here—well—I made arrangements." She turned and called toward the far door. "*Tio Jose! 'sta bueno, no? Pasa—*"

The door opened and an old man stepped out. His brown, angular face seemed itself carved out of weathered wood. He held a shotgun, and it was pointed at Lyle.

Lyle said, "Everybody here points guns at me!" He muttered it, half to himself.

"My uncle, Jose Salazar," said Concha. "He doesn't speak much English. He was watching all the time from the door to see if you would make trouble. He would have pulled the trigger if I had told him to."

Lyle ran his hand around his collar.

"Good night, *Senor*. I'll take your message to Ortiz."

"Wait a minute," said Lyle. "Will somebody be here, in this house, all evening?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Suppose I should bring this Bernabe Baca here. Could you keep him out of sight for a while?"

"Yes—but what for?"

"They're holding him illegally. You know that, of course. I mean to get him out with a writ of habeas corpus. If Richardson, and the rest, don't know where he is they can't put him back in jail. And then I can fight this thing out in court, if necessary."

She looked flatly at him for a moment, her eyes large and dark, and then she laughed softly, but it was a laugh of bitterness. "*Senor*, you can't fight this thing in courts and with lawbooks. There's only one way to fight it—the way Santiago Ortiz fights."

"Did you ever try any other way?"

"I never tried picking up a rattlesnake, but I know what would happen if I did."

"But, listen, Concha—" inadvertently, in his excitement, he had taken her by the upper arms—"a test case can be made out of Bernabe. We can actually try Richardson's power, and see just how much he *does* control things. Even if we lose, we've gained something. We used to do that in the Virginia campaign: deliberately lose a skirmish sometimes to get an idea of the enemy's strength."

Her eyes went back and forth, searching his face. "What I can't understand most, *Senor*, is why now you want to fight for us at all?"

Now he realized that he was touching her. Now he was aware of the warmth and substance in his hands. And abruptly he thought he understood why, in spite of himself, he did want to fight. He looked at her steadily and said in a quiet voice, "Maybe you can guess." Then he dropped his hands from her arms.

She lowered her eyes almost immediately. It seemed that her cheeks colored, but in the dim light he couldn't be sure. "All right," she said. "Suppose we try your way with Bernabe. Suppose we try it once."

"Good. I'll bring him here somehow. And then you mustn't let anyone know he's here until I give the word. Meanwhile—don't forget to get my message to Ortiz. Maybe my way will work for him, too."

"I'll tell him. Because, you see, *Senor*, I want to do anything that can help Santiago Ortiz. Try anything." She was trying to put some kind of significance into her words that for

the moment escaped Lyle. And she would not look directly in Lyle's eyes now.

Lyle said, "I still don't know just what your connection with Ortiz is."

Now she did look at him. "I was engaged to marry Santiago before he went to hide. Someday, maybe, when he can come back..."

"Oh," said Lyle. He tried to keep his voice expressionless, but he was sure a note of hollowness came into it. He put his hat on, opened the door rather awkwardly and said, "*Hasta mas tarde*—until later, *Senorita*."

She said formally, "Senor."

And he walked off wondering if the wide, quiet look in her eyes had been pity, bewilderment, uneasiness, or what.

CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE TROUBLE

SENOR ELIDIO PERFECTO was still half asleep, and kept blinking, and kept saying to Lyle, "What, what, Senor? I don't understand. What you want, Senor?"

Elidio Perfecto was a justice of the Superior Court of Black Rock County. He looked, thought Lyle, not unlike the popular idea of Santa Claus, in his stocking cap and nightshirt. It was already past midnight, and Lyle's insistent knocking had brought the judge out of bed. It had taken Lyle all this time to return to his office and prepare the papers.

"A writ of habeas corpus, Your Honor," Lyle said again, slowly and patiently. They were in the judge's study and he spread the papers across a tidy oak desk. "You'll find the application in order, I think. Party being restrained one Bernabe Baca, party imposing such restraint, sheriff of this county, etcetera, etcetera. I've outlined the circumstances that make this an illegal restraint—though I'm sure you're familiar with them—and

prepared my own signature for oath in this matter. My name is Robert Lyle and I represent Baca as his attorney. Now if you'll issue the writ—"

"Senor, are you crazy? Nobody ever does this before!"

"Maybe not in Black Rock. But I can assure you it's done all the time in other places. And probably I don't have to remind you, Your Honor, of the penalties set up for refusing to issue a writ upon proper application."

Perfecto ran his hands across his beard in a worried gesture. "Senor, to be truthful I know quite well that Bernabe Baca is not arrested under the law. I do not like this when it happens—but what can one do? One cannot afford to make an enemy of Senor Richardson. He wants to make—what is it you call it?—an example of this man, Baca, no?"

"Now, look," said Lyle, tapping the desk. "Everybody you've dealt with around here is no doubt afraid of Richardson. They've got something to lose. I haven't. I'll take this thing all the way back to Santa Fe if I have to, and you know as well as I do you won't keep your judgeship if it gets out. For your own good you'd better issue this writ."

"Well, in the morning maybe—" said Perfecto, looking harried.

"Now. My client's already been restrained over twenty-four hours."

The judge sighed then and sat down to his desk. When he handed Lyle the writ he said, "I don't know, Senor, what kind of craziness this is. I hope you don't find yourself—well—getting hurt, Senor."

"So do I," said Lyle. "Never did like it. Good night, Judge."

IT TOOK him another ten minutes to walk back to the plaza. Except for the light showing in one window of the courthouse the square was dark. He ticked aside his coat and checked the revolver and holster he had taken from his saddle bag. He went into the courthouse.

There was a light in the sheriff's

office and he stepped in there. Murdell was sitting at a table, a large book open in front of him. There was a bottle and a glass at his elbow.

"Hello, Sheriff."

Murdell looked up slowly. His eyes were red, unsteady. He blinked several times. "Go 'way," he said. "Go 'way, Lyle. All you do is upset a feller." The sheriff's speech was even thicker than it had been earlier.

Lyle walked over to the table and looked at the open book. There were clippings and photographs in it. One tintype showed Murdell—a slimmer, harder-faced Murdell—posing with a man in a stovepipe hat. A newspaper clipping beside it bore the headline:

HOW VANCE MURDELL WAS HONORED

An Account of the Scroll Presentation Ceremonies by the Territorial Governor to Our Own Peace Officer, Murdell.

There were several other smaller headlines, and then the printed story.

Murdell looked up, saw Lyle examining the book, and then shut the book with a slam. "It's none o' your business, Mr. Lawyer. None o' your business. Jus' my own business. My own book." He grabbed the bottle and drank abruptly, dribbling some of the whiskey over his mustaches. He wiped them with the back of his hand. "Go 'way. Leave me alone," he said.

"It's an official visit, Sheriff," said Lyle.

"Wha' you mean?"

"You have illegally in your custody one Bernabe Baca, whom I represent. I have a writ of habeas corpus for his immediate release."

"Go 'way, go 'way, don't be silly," said Murdell and reached for the bottle again.

Lyle drew his pistol. "I'm not joking, Vance. I mean to take Baca with me, one way or the other."

Murdell turned his head slowly and stared at the weapon. Then he said, "I'll be dumb-hanged," and broke

into roaring, deep-throated laughter. He rocked back and forth with it.

"Vance, you probably think I won't use it. Don't make that mistake. I like you, Vance, and respect what you once were. I wouldn't enjoy shooting you. But I'd do it."

Murdell, still chuckling, looked up. "Sure. I reckon you would, Bob. I do reckon you would. Anyways, you'd give it a try. Only trouble is, Bob, I could put lead into you before you could think about pullin' the trigger. If I'd a mind to, I could do that."

"Don't try it, Vance."

Murdell leaned back. "No," he said, "I reckon I won't." He hiccupped. "Can't say why, exactly. It's just you're so blame-loco, Bob, you upset a feller somepin' awful. Now put away that shootin' iron—which you don't know how to use proper, nohow—and serve them fool papers of yours, and you can have Bernabe Baca. And tomorrow God help us all."

Lyle dropped the papers on the desk, but still held the pistol.

"I said put it away, damn it," growled Murdell. "I told you I'd get Baca for you and anything I don't like is to have my word doubted."

Lyle put the pistol back into its holster.

"Tha's better." Murdell got up, swayed, and held on to the back of the chair for a moment. He took a ring of keys from the desk-drawer and then said, "Come on." He led the way unsteadily to the cell block.

They woke Bernabe Baca up and he was more than a little confused. His eyes were wide and fearful as he dressed, and as he came out of the open cell door. Several times with his fat cheeks trembling slightly he said, "I don' want make trouble for nobody, Senor. No trouble—"

In halting Spanish, mixed with English and gestures, Lyle explained the writ to Bernabe. Bernabe was still doubtful.

Murdell said, "Where you goin'?"

when you leave here, Mr. Lawyer?"

"To a safe place," said Lyle.

"I hope it's safe. I hope it's good and safe." Murdell shook his head, sighed, and sat down. And reached for the bottle. "You're always wakin' me up, and makin' me drink so's I can get to sleep again."

"Better stay awake tomorrow, Vance. Some interesting things are liable to happen around here."

"I daresay," said Murdell, and drank deeply.

OUTSIDE, on the plaza, Bernabe started to protest again and Lyle put a finger to his lips. "Just follow me—*ven aca*," he said.

He took him across the plaza to avoid the Palace Hotel where the bar was still open, and from which came the sound of a piano and voices. They moved silently under the portales that faced the square, shading the planked walks from the daytime sun, and they passed Lyle's office—the shingle in front still bore Lee Harris' name—and then Richardson's place. Richardson's broken window had not yet been repaired. They turned off the plaza and walked to Jose Salazar's small, one-story *jacal*. Lyle knocked softly on the door.

Inside Concha's voice said, "*Quien es?*"

He told her and she opened the door, slipped them all inside. Lyle stood by quietly for a moment and listened to Concha and Bernabe chatter in Spanish. Uncle Jose was there, and put in an occasional word. And then as his eyes became adjusted to the dim light he saw that Concha was again dressed in men's clothing—the same garb she had worn with Ortiz' men.

He waited for a pause, then said, "You're going to see Ortiz tonight?"

"Yes."

"You'd better take me along with you."

"No."

"You're still not sure where I stand, are you?"

"There is much still to be explained, Senor."

"All right. Have it your own way. Meanwhile, you know what to do about Bernabe, don't you? Keep him here—don't let anyone know he's here—until you hear from me."

"Don't worry, Senor." She came closer. He found himself breathing a little more quickly to have her near, like this. She said, "And for yourself, Senor—where will you be tonight?"

"In Harris' law office. There's a cot in the back."

She frowned. "It might not be good for you to go there."

"You mean Richardson's men might try to get me? I don't think there's any danger of that yet. I don't think he'll learn about Bernabe until tomorrow."

"Even so, be very careful, Senor. Very careful."

"Would it make much difference to you if—if something did happen to me?" After the words had come out he was a little startled at his own boldness.

She stared at him for a long moment before she answered. And then she said, "Maybe I can tell you about that better some other time."

"I'll look forward to that time," he said. "Good night, Concha. *Buena' noches*."

In the back room of the law office he lay in the dark and looked up at the ceiling. Murdell was right; there was something crazy about this whole valley. The thin air, maybe, from its great height above sea level. Certainly in the last twenty-four hours or so he, Lyle, had done things he would not have done before. To begin, he had somehow taken the side of the people of Black Rock against Richardson and his crew. Of course he had instinctively disliked Richardson almost immediately, but that shouldn't have been an excuse. He had discovered once that a man exposes himself

to terrible loss and heartbreak by taking up a cause, and then losing that cause; he ought to have learned his lesson.

And then this Mexican girl, Concha. Not at all like the "ladies of refinement" he would have expected to associate with at one time. Half wild, some might call her. And whenever he saw her—and especially when she brought herself near to him—his blood raced and his heart pounded and the whole world around him seemed suddenly unreal, quite unreal.

Was he maybe in love with Concha? Was that it?

Well, he knew all about law, and he knew all about war, and he knew all about men and their needs and their nobilities—but he didn't know anything about love. Yes, when it came to his relationship with Concha Salazar he was probably operating under the biggest handicap of the lot—

He slept after a while and he dreamed that he and Concha Salazar rode together on fine steeds across an open endless plain. They rode close enough to hold hands and every once in a while they looked at each other and smiled. It was an odd dream, first, because there was not much more to it, and, second, because it was the first dream he had had in a good many years....

HE AWOKE early, washed, dressed and went out on to the plaza. Some of the shops were not yet open but people were beginning to drift into the square. On the dusty highway some dozens of yards north of the square a herd of cattle was being driven along, riders flanking it. Several dogs yipped at the cattle and were cursed heartily and struck at with riatas by the riders. The dust rose and the morning sun made dancing lights in the dust.

A peaceful scene, thought Lyle, as he crossed toward the Palace Hotel for breakfast. It would be hard to imagine a patch of country more

peaceful on the surface than this high valley with its bright everyday sun and soil enriched by the alluvial replenishment of the mountains. It was remote, but it wouldn't always be remote. It might be a fine place for a man to settle down someday...if a man happened to be inclined to settle down at all. He sighed. The blamest thoughts, the blamest ideas in his head this last day or two.

And now he wondered if Concha had returned from her visit with Ortiz yet, and decided that after breakfast he would find out.

The dining room was on the opposite side from the bar in the Palace Hotel; it was a small and somewhat dark room with no more than half a dozen tables in it. A fat senor with a mustache and sleepy eyes took his order and went back into the kitchen with it. After his last experience with Palace steak he decided upon eggs. Not much you could do to spoil them—though he wouldn't put it past his hosts to make a good try at it.

There was no one else in the dining room. He sat back and began to roll a cigarette and hummed tunelessly and absent-mindedly to himself. The menu was on the table and, glancing at it, he saw the price of the eggs he had just ordered. Seventy-five cents. Pretty high, that: half again as high as Santa Fe. Most everything was expensive here in Black Rock, and that reminded him that if he was to stay here he'd have to think of some ways and means to raise money in the next week or two. It seemed likely Ward Richardson wouldn't be wanting his services—especially when he found out about that writ of habeas corpus. On the other hand if he could do something to help Bernabe Baca he might very well be getting some other clients pretty soon—

His thoughts were interrupted by someone entering the front door. He looked up. Ward Richardson was standing there, his forehead dark and angry. Standing there, hands on hips,

and glowering across the room at Lyle. And behind Richardson, legs spread, shoulders slouched, was Sandy Poore. Poore held his right hand close to his gun, the fingers hooked slightly.

"Hello, Mr. Richardson," said Lyle mildly. "Care to join me in some breakfast?"

Richardson said, "Where's Bernabe Baca?"

"Mr. Baca? My client? Well, now, Mr. Richardson, would you mind telling me, his attorney, what business you have with him?"

"Cut out the fancy talk, Lyle!" Richardson's voice was loud, harsh. His heavy jowls seemed to be filling, like windskins, with his anger. "You came into the jail last night and got Baca—and that damn drunken fool Murdell let you have him. Where is he?"

"Suppose you go find him," said Lyle. "I presume you just want to talk to him about something or other. I hope that's all you're studying on. Because if you figure you're going to have Baca arrested again—without a good, solid charge—you're going to get yourself into a little trouble, Mr. Richardson."

"Trouble?" Richardson's voice rose, and so did his dark brows. "Trouble? You're threatening me with trouble, Lyle?"

"I'd like to remind of you of something, Mr. Richardson. This is a U. S. territory and it has laws. They may take a little time getting out here—just like that glass you have to ship from Kansas City—but that doesn't give you the right to forget them. Is that clear to you, Mr. Richardson?"

Richardson stared back in silence for a moment. Then he said, "I just almost can't believe it, Johnny Reb. I just almost can't believe anybody would be such a damn fool as you."

"And how do you figure I'm being a damn fool?"

"Lyle," said Richardson, his voice quieter now, "I run things around here. I run 'em to suit myself—and

we've all been getting along pretty well that way."

"Maybe you don't run them so much any more."

AT THAT point the senora glided in with a tray of eggs and coffee. She set them down in front of Lyle, glanced sharply at Richardson and Poore at the door, then hustled out of the room again. Lyle began to eat. He knew that he had an advantage in puzzling Richardson with his behavior, and he was hoping to keep that advantage. Richardson, he knew, could be mighty high-handed, but he didn't really think he'd precipitate an open attack on Lyle. At least he was taking a chance on that.

"Lyle, I'm going to give you one more chance," Richardson said. "I don't know what crazy notions you got in your head deciding to have this pelado, Bernabe Baca, for a client—but I know you ain't going to pay for your bacon and beans with clients like him. Now come to your senses and tell me where he is. I got to make an example out of him or the whole pack of 'em'll be pulling the same kind of stuff he did. We can't have that. Tell me where he is, Lyle, and you and I'll just start all over again like nothing ever happened."

"The damn eggs taste like sawdust," said Lyle, and went on eating.

Richardson stepped aside. "Sandy," he said, "I reckon you better arrest this man."

A sharp feeling went through Lyle's chest—though he didn't like to admit it, it was something close to fear. He'd tried to bluff Richardson, and now it looked as though Richardson was calling that bluff. He should have been smarter. Of course, if his bluff had succeeded he would have been called smart, but the sad fact was that not only would his hands be tied if Sandy Poore should throw him in jail, his prestige with Baca, Ortiz, Concha, all the others, would be gone. Like Murdell, they would perhaps admire

his craziness, but that wouldn't mean that they'd have to support it or take part in it.

The important thing for the moment then, was to keep out of that jail. At any cost. Lyle looked up. "What charge, Sheriff? Under-sheriff. What charge?"

Poore looked stupidly at Richardson.

"To hell with the charge! Put him in the jugsado!" Richardson said.

Lyle's hands were under the table now. "Sandy," he said, "I wouldn't take that gun of yours out. I've got one in my hand right now. It's pointed at your belly."

Richardson said, "You're bluffing."

Lyle said, "Tell the Under-sheriff to draw and find out."

Richardson and Poore looked at each other; both men scowled, then looked at Lyle again. Richardson said softly, "Johnny Reb, you're not going to get out of this town alive."

"I'll worry about that," said Lyle, "when I finish my breakfast. Now suppose you two just run along and let me do that."

"Lyle, you damn fool—"

"Run along. I'm tired of looking at your faces anyway. I might let this gun go off just for the hell of it."

Richardson grunted, "Come on, Sandy. We'll take care of him later."

"Yeah," said Poore, rubbing his nose with his dirty knuckles. "Later, Johnny Reb."

The two of them went out.

The moment they had gone Lyle rose quickly from the table. He called toward the back, "Senora!"

The fat woman appeared, wide-eyed and worried.

Lyle tucked his pistol back into the holster. "Is there a back way out of here?"

She nodded. "Si, Senor." She beckoned and he followed her. He went through the kitchen and then into a small corral where there were a number of goats and several hogs in a pen at the far end. The fat senora

was still at the door, staring at Lyle. He said, "You know Jose Salazar's house?"

"Si."

"How can I get to it from here without going on the plaza?"

She pointed to the south fence of the corral. "That way, Senor."

"Thanks, Mamacita. And listen—next time get fresh eggs for me, will you?"

The senora sighed, clasped her hands together in front of her apron and said, "I don't think you will be here a next time, Senor. *Adios.*"

Lyle said, "*Adios,*" and went over the fence.

CHAPTER V

WITH LAWBOOKS—OR BULLETS

WARD RICHARDSON backed out of the Palace Hotel restaurant. He stood for a moment in the street and stared at the door. There was still a look of disbelief in his eyes.

Poore said, "You ain't gonna let him get away with it, are you, Mr. Richardson?"

"Of course not." Richardson spoke angrily, impatiently.

Poore waited a decent interval, during which he spat tobacco into the dust. "What you gonna do?"

"Where's Murdell?" Richardson asked.

"Drunk. Sleepin'. As usual."

"All right, Sandy. You round up some boys. Four or five'll do—the usual ones. Then get Lyle and throw him in jail. We'll figure out a charge later. And, Sandy, we're still going to have that public whipping, only it's going to be Mr. Lyle instead of his client Mr. Baca."

"Suppose Lyle starts shootin' when we start to take him?"

"In that case," Richardson said sarcastically, contemptuously, "why don't you just apologize for disturbing him

and ask him politely please not to."

"Huh?" said Poore.

"Look, if he starts shooting, shoot back. Don't ask fool questions. Get going now."

"Okay. You don't have to get sore, Mr. Richardson. You gonna stay here and watch for him to come out?"

"Certainly not." Richardson almost added that he wasn't a cheap gunman like Sandy and the rest, but caught himself in time. He said, "I don't pack a weapon—you know I don't."

Poore grinned, showing his dirty, spread teeth. "My advice, Mr. Richardson, is for you to pack one while this locos lawyer's floatin' around town."

"You let me worry about myself," said Richardson. "In fact, you let me do all the worrying, and just follow orders. As soon as you have Lyle send word to my office."

Poor shrugged said, "Don't matter a damn to me," and moved off toward the courthouse.

Richardson crossed the plaza to his office, looking back over his shoulder several times. Poore might be right, at that: anybody crazy as this Lyle could be dangerous. He'd thought there was something not quite right about the man when he'd first walked into the office. Seemed like he had a chip on his shoulder, or something, from the start. Well, maybe it was to be expected—these Johnny Rebs were all a little unpredictable, a little wild. Couldn't keep their mind on business, and that's why hardly any of them ever got anywhere. Probably just as well he was going to be rid of Lyle—there were plenty of other law wranglers who'd jump at the chance to take over Harris' practice. And be more agreeable about it.

He went into his office and saw Mrs. Richardson sitting at his desk.

"Why, hello Marna," he said with a large, forced smile. He didn't feel like gabbing with his wife of all people right now—especially since her talk was the closest thing to jay chatter



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he'd heard yet. He said, "What are you doing here?"

Marna Richardson was almost as large as her husband; she was a plain, rawboned woman with eyes that bulged somewhat and always moved about nervously. She wore a silk gros-grain dress that was obviously from the East, obviously expensive, but she managed somehow to give it the feeling of a flour sack. She looked at Richardson in a wounded way and said, "You don't remember, do you?"

"Don't remember what?"

"What today is. What we were going to do today."

"Marna, what are you talking about? You know I'm awfully busy here—now, if you're going to come around with riddles—"

"I wasn't going to come around. I was hoping you'd remember and come back to the house, but then—" she sniffed and dabbed at her nose with a small handkerchief—"I just couldn't stand it any longer. So I came here."

"Wait a minute!" Richardson snapped his fingers. "This is the day that's your birthday, ain't it?"

"Yes." She was on the edge of weeping.

"But, honey, didn't you get your present? Didn't they bring that chest Jose Salazar was carving for you—special?"

"I got the chest. But you forgot what we were going to do."

His head went up suddenly. "Why, sure—I remember now! We were going to take the carriage out near the canyon and have a picnic. Why, gosh, honey, I'm sorry as can be I forgot that!" He was trying to sound sincerely sorry. Actually he was annoyed and wished Marna would get the devil out of here so he could think. He wondered why she couldn't have sense enough to see that all the fine clothes he bought her, and their fine big house, and the way they stood in town, all those important things—why, they wouldn't have a one of them if Richardson didn't work hard and tend to business. Well, women just couldn't

see that, somehow. "Look, honey," he said, "we'll do it some other time. Pretty soon. I got an awful lot on my mind right now."

She said, "You always do, Ward. You've always got business or something on your mind."

"Now, honey, you just ~~see that~~ I'll see you this evening."

She got up and went to the door. She turned. She had her near-weeping under control now. "Ward," she said, "sometimes I wish we just had the hardware store back in Denver again. I'm tired of Black Rock, and everything that's in it."

He laughed and said, "Don't talk crazy, honey. We own half of Black Rock now. We're going to own all of it before we're through."

SHE WENT out, leaving the door open behind her, and sailed down the street head high. Richardson smiled, sighed, walked over and close the door. He went back to his desk. He sat down and lit a cigar. Marna, he was thinking, was a fine wife and all that, but there were just a few things about her got a little bothersome sometimes. For instance, he'd thought she was right pretty when he'd married her back in Denver some years ago, but lately—spite of all the clothes he let her buy—she seemed to be getting just plainer and plainer. And then there was the business of children. Richardson had wanted a son, maybe even two or three, for a long time now, but Marna just didn't seem to be able to oblige him. That was probably her biggest fault: if she'd just have herself some youngsters she could keep busy taking care of them and not be pecking at him for attention all the time.

Well, a man could go loco worrying his head too much about such things. Only answer was to tend to business—and tend to it hard.

He saw Sandy Poore stalking across the plaza from the direction of the Palace. He went to the door and waited.

Poore said, "What do we do now, Mr. Richardson?"

"What do you mean, what do you do now? Did you get some men rounded up?"

"Sure did. Went into the restaurant. The lawyer-feller wasn't there. Went out the back way."

"Well, find him, damn it! Find him if you have to turn the town upside down!"

"Okay." Poore rubbed his nose. "You don't have to get sore about it."

"Wait a minute," Richardson said. He looked off, thoughtfully, toward the East and toward the Cornada Mountains. "By Harry," he said, "it's just coming to me—"

"What's that, Mr. Richardson?" Poore looked blank.

"I might be—it just might be—that our Mr. Lyle has skipped town. It might be he's in with this Santiago Ortiz. Don't know why anybody'd be damn fool enough to do that, but it fits. This little baggage, Concha Salazar, she was Ortiz' sweetheart before, wasn't she?"

"Damned if I know, Mr. Richardson."

"Could've sworn he knew her. Least he seemed mighty curious about her. And then the way he went over the courthouse lookin' up all the records on Ortiz' land." He slapped his palm softly. "By Harry, it fits. You know what I think, Sandy? I think that Johnny Reb came here to Black Rock just to try and take away everything I got. That's what was on his mind all the time—and that explains all the loco things he was trying to do!"

"Yeah. I reckon so," said Poore disinterestedly.

Richardson puffed on his cigar. He put his hands deep into his pockets. "Sandy," he said, "you go on over and wake the Sheriff up. Get him up if you have to throw a bucket of water on him. Tell him I'm puttin' up a reward for Lyle—say, five hundred dollars—just like the one for Ortiz. Have him go over the print shop and

get some posters made. No, wait a minute—you better just tell him to come here and let me talk to him personally."

Poore frowned. His under-lip came out in an expression close to pouting. "I can go over the print shop just as easy as Murdell. I'll just do it myself."

"No, I want Murdell to do it."

"Why don't you never let me do nothin'? And when's Murdell gonna get out so I can be sheriff, like you promised?"

Richardson looked down at the dirty gunman. "Is that all you want, Sandy—to be sheriff?"

"I told you enough times it's what I want."

"All right, my boy," said Richardson. "Maybe we can do something for you. I'm getting a little fed up with Murdell, anyway. I'll tell you what, you bring either Lyle or Ortiz in—dead or alive—and I'll see you get elected sheriff in the fall."

"You give me your word on that there, Mr. Richardson?"

"It's a promise."

Poore grinned, showing his picket teeth. "You got yourself a new star-packer, boss. Jest set back a d watch." He turned, adjusted the band of his holstered gun, brought his hat brim down over one eye and stalked off toward the courthouse. Richardson sighed and went back into the office, frowning just once at the broken window before he went through the door.

ROBERT LYLE rode beside Jose Salazar, and both men rode silently. The old woodcarver seemed to straighten his spine and square his shoulders almost magically when he climbed into a saddle. He gazed straight ahead, at the mountains, with eyes that had somehow become clearer.

When Lyle had arrived at the Salazar house, after leaving the restaurant by the back door, he had found only old Jose at home. He had man-

aged, in his broken Spanish, and by considerable sign language, to explain what had happened. And he had asked where Concha was. Old Jose had appeared to think it over a long time before he finally led Lyle behind the house to a small corral, saddled and bridled two horses, and then took him out of town across the low meadows to the southeast, avoiding the plaza.

All this time they had been climbing the long prairie that sloped down like a trailing skirt from the high ridge. In the lower valley it was grassland, now the grass was becoming sparse and the yellowish brown soil was dotted with tufted, bluish chamiso and Indian paintbrush. Ahead, the first rolling foothills showed scattered dots of juniper, bottle green against the caramel sand.

They moved on, climbing, picking their way, and presently the wall of the mountains seemed to open by itself, ridge sliding back upon ridge, so that there was before them the mouth of a long canyon. Jose led the way into the canyon. The land became dryer and rockier; pear and candelabra cactus appeared scattered among the boulders. Lizards shuttled across the trail occasionally, and a long tailed magpie rose in alarm from a mesquite tree.

In an hour's time they were hemmed in on both sides by high, reddish cliffs.

After holding his patience until it became unbearably heavy, Lyle said, "Senor—a *donde vamos*—where are we going?"

Jose calmly gestured ahead and said, "*Mas alla.*"

"Further, eh? How much further can we go?" He looked up at the narrowing cliffs.

Jose shrugged, said, "*No sabe,*" and kept on riding.

There was suddenly a piercing whistle ahead, somewhere up the canyon. It echoed, rollicking along the canyon walls.

Lyle, startled, straightened in the

saddle and dropped his hand to his pistol.

Jose grinned. "*Nuestros compadres.*"

"Our friends, is it?" said Lyle. "Hellfire, I wish they'd show themselves."

He got his wish five minutes later. They rounded a bend of the canyon and saw six men standing across the trail, waiting. Several of them held rifles. Lyle reined in, and one of the men started to come forward and he saw then that it was Santiago Ortiz. The man seemed taller now than when Lyle had first met him; his eyes seemed darker and sharper set there in his broad cheekbone.

Lyle said, "Well, we meet again."

Ortiz ignored him and began to talk in Spanish with Jose. They held a long and apparently involved conversation. Lyle took advantage of the time to look around, note his surroundings. The canyon here widened somewhat into a kind of *rincon*, or pocket. He saw that several rough lean-tos and dugouts had been constructed here and there. A small stream tumbled through the pocket, to disappear again at its lower end. Horses were grazing in the low brush at the far end, and several saddles lay about, men sitting or lying on some of them. There was a pen of milk goats at the base of the south cliff.

Now Ortiz turned to Lyle. His eyes went back and forth examining Lyle's face closely—a little guardedly. "Much I don't understand, Senor," he said finally.

Lyle said, "That goes double, my friend."

"Si. Maybe you want to help for us, like Concha Salazar say—but maybe everything is one of Richardson's tricks, no?"

"Is Concha here, now?"

"She is here. We will talk, all of us. I think is good thing everybody talk now. You are hungry, no, Senor? We don't have much, but for now you are welcome." He cleared his throat, frowned and repeated, "For now."

Some minutes later Lyle found himself seated on the ground around a large pit of wood embers over which a butchered sheep was being roasted. There were some twenty members of Ortiz' band, and Lyle noticed that none of them would look directly at him, but that some of them stole curious glances when they thought he wasn't looking. Concha presently appeared from one of the lean-tos. She still wore men's clothing, but a rebosa was wrapped around her shoulders.

She came up to Lyle, glanced at Ortiz, then said, "Richardson drove you away, too, Senor?"

"You can put it that way." He told her what had happened.

"And now what are you going to do?"

Lyle frowned. "That depends on you people. I have some ideas, but I'll need help."

Ortiz interrupted, putting his hand on Concha's shoulder. "We eat first, no? Afterward we talk about these things."

There was a great deal of conversation in Spanish during the meal, but Lyle couldn't follow most of it. He ate with a sheath knife, like the rest, and he ate heartily. He looked at all of Ortiz' men, studying their faces that were mostly thin and hard, and tried to decide from their eyes whether they were friendly or unfriendly toward him. He could come to no conclusion. Among them he saw Bernabe Baca with a somewhat worried expression on his plump face; Bernabe refused to look at him directly.

IT WAS already getting dark in the canyon when Ortiz finally came over to Lyle, tin coffee cup in hand, and squatted on his heels beside him. He rolled a cigarette in his free hand. Lyle thumbed a match and lit it for him.

"Concha tells me, Senor," said Ortiz, "that you want me to come back to Black Rock and try with the law books to get my land again."

"I did have something like that in mind."

"The last time I came to meet somebody from Black Rock I was almost killed from hanging. Is not easy to trust somebody now."

"I can understand that."

"Well, first I want to know—why are you trying to help us, Senor?"

Lyle frowned. "I don't know if I can explain it. I don't know if I'm sure myself. Maybe I just don't like to see big people rawhide little people. Maybe it's as simple as that."

"I must tell you the truth, no? I am still not feeling easy about you, Senor."

"I guess I can't blame you for that. But look, Ortiz, let me ask you something. Do you figure on spending the rest of your life as a bandit out in these hills?"

Ortiz shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*"

"You want to get back, don't you? You want your lands back again, and you want Black Rock the kind of a town where a decent person can live, and depend on laws and protection."

"Senor, these are things not easy for thinking about—"

"Well, listen to me, Ortiz. Richardson can be fought if it's done the right way. He's not as big and mighty as he's got everybody believing. If somebody'll show some fight, a lot of other people will fight, too. They'll stop voting for Richardson's hand-picked sheriffs. The Judge'll run the court as it ought to be run. Witnesses won't be afraid to testify against Richardson. It just takes a beginning—don't you see?"

"How do you think to make this beginning, Senor?"

"Arrest Richardson," said Lyle.

"Arrest Senor Richardson?" Ortiz' eyes widened, and Lyle could see the sense of power Richardson had built: even a man who had escaped and was completely out of Richardson's reach was shocked at the idea of arresting him.

"Yes. That one thing would show everybody that Richardson's not above the law. As for the charge, we can make it peonage. I saw him com-

mit it myself with this fellow Miguel. We can gather enough evidence later to make it stick. The important thing is to get him into that jail—show everybody it can be done.”

Ortiz smiled now and shook his head. “You want to do all this with the lawbooks, *Senor*. But how can you do it when the Sheriff and all the other men will not help you?”

Lyle looked around. “You’ve got some pretty husky looking men here, Ortiz. Seems to me if they happened to be standing around—not doing anything illegal, mind you—but just standing around and looking as though they meant business, why, it might kind of encourage the sheriff or the undersheriff to do his duty?”

Ortiz got up. He walked a few steps, then came back. He puffed the cigarette nervously. “I don’t know. I don’t know, *Senor*. What you say has a good sound—but I don’t know if is another trick for making me hang.” He dropped the cigarette suddenly, stamped on it. “I will go to sleep and think of this, *Senor*; no? In the morning, I tell you.”

“That’s fair enough.”

Ortiz walked off toward a dug-out with a stocky, square stride—it made Lyle think of a quarter horse gait—and then disappeared inside the shelter. Lyle frowned, lit a cigarette for himself. It was fully dark now; several small fires were twinkling here and there in the small *rincon*.

Lyle heard the scrape of a foot-step, looked up and saw Concha Salazar.

“Santiago told me to see that you have a comfortable place for the night,” she said. She pointed at a lean-to near the stream. “You can stay there.”

“Thanks.” He watched her closely, sensing that she had come to talk about something other than his shelter for the night.

She sat down beside him. “*Senor* Lyle—”

“You better call me Bob.”

“All right, Bob. I don’t understand you. Many things about you.”

“We haven’t had much time for understanding, Concha.”

“Yes, only a little time and too many things happening in that time. maybe if we didn’t have *Senor* Richardson we’d have time.”

“Maybe we’ll have time if we get rid of Richardson.”

THERE WAS just enough moonlight for Lyle to see Concha’s eyes, dark and large, move slightly across his face, probing. “Bob, when I asked you before why you tried to help Bernabe—why you tried to help all of us—you said maybe it was just craziness. That was no answer. I still don’t understand. Is there some other reason?”

Lyle frowned, picked up a stick and started to poke at the earth in front of him. “It’s complicated, Concha,” he said. “I don’t understand some of it myself. It’s not so much the way I think as the way I feel—if that makes sense. It started with the war: I was young, then, I wasn’t even twenty. I put everything I had into the Confederate cause, it was the only thing I knew, or cared about, and I figured it was my whole life. Then, when we got licked, it was just as if somebody came along and said there’s nothing to work for, nothing to live for any more.

“So I went back to school and got my law training, and clerked in an office in Carolina for a while, and then came out West—but it was all like sleepwalking. I still couldn’t believe in anything, couldn’t see that anything was worth believing in.

“I can’t say exactly what happened to me in Black Rock. There were several things. First, Richardson just plain rubbed me the wrong way. It was men like him—on both sides—not caring who they hurt as long as they came out on top—well, men like this do the things that start wars in the first place. I just suddenly felt I had to fight Richardson, and everything he stood for, and the minute

I felt that, I swear, it was like waking up from the sleepwalking. I had a reason for being here, for walking the earth, again. Does that make any sense?"

"I think so," said Concha. "I'm not sure." She was still watching his face.

"Then I saw Sheriff Murdell," Lyle continued. "He had a reason for his life one time, and he lost it. But he'd like to have it back; he would like to be a *real* peace officer again more than anything in the world. And this in spite of the fact that right now he's got everything he wants, including all the liquor he can drink. So it must be something built into a man makes him want something to fight for. And makes him feel all empty and meaningless without it." He laughed suddenly, and with a touch of embarrassment. "I must sound mighty foolish to you. I sure do to myself."

"No, Bob," she said quietly. "I don't think it's foolishness."

He looked at her. "There's a third reason I haven't mentioned yet. Somebody once said to me if I ever fell in love I'd have more get-up-and-go."

She lowered her eyes. "Bob, if tomorrow Santiago says no—he doesn't want to go into Black Rock and fight with lawbooks, your way—what will you do then?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Drift, maybe. I—I wouldn't want to."

"I wouldn't want you to, either, Bob."

He put his hand out and lifted her chin. He looked deeply into her eyes for a moment. Then he pulled her toward him gently and kissed her.

But she broke away. "No, Bob—this is wrong. This is not right for us to do!"

"Why not?"

"I am to marry Santiago. It's been arranged—the families—a long time."

"Do you love him?"

"I don't know, Bob. Oh, I don't know. I can't seem to think. Please Bob—everything is happening so quickly. It needs more time."

She rose. He kept her hand for a moment, then let it go. She turned and walked off hastily, without looking back.

It was some minutes later that Lyle heard a step approaching again. For a moment of wild hope he thought it might be Concha returning. He looked up. Santiago Ortiz' stocky figure stood there, half-silhouetted.

"Senor," said Ortiz—

"Yes?"

"I did not know at first why you came and said you wanted to help me. I think I know now." Ortiz was breathing heavily, and now Lyle saw that his hands were stiff at his sides and all but trembling.

"What do you mean?"

"I was watching, Senor, when you took Concha into your arms. I was sitting over there and watching."

Lyle rose. "I'm sorry you had to see it," he said. He couldn't think of anything else to say that would have any meaning. He put his thumbs into his belt. "What happens now, Senor Ortiz?"

"I could have you be killed very easy now," said Ortiz.

"I suppose so." Lyle was tense, and he could feel his own heart beating hard against his chest. If it came to a fight he might be able to take care of Ortiz, standing here, but he knew he'd never get out of the canyon alive after that.

"You saved my life, Senor. I owe for that, no? All right, I pay now. I let you go. Take the horse you came on, Senor—a gift. Ride away from here. Ride very far. Because next time I see you, Senor, I will kill you." Ortiz' voice began to rise in spite of his effort to control it.

Lyle stared at the man, and in his mind tried to find the right words. There didn't seem to be any. He felt suddenly hollow and empty again. It was much the same feeling of that afternoon in Carolina when, in surrendering, he had dropped his sword accidentally into the dust.

And then, as he stood there, the

wild scheme came into his mind. He thought about it. In the space of a few seconds the whole thing jelled in his head. He knew clearly now what he was going to do—and he knew also that he'd much more likely fail than succeed. And in a wild feeling that was not unlike drunkenness, he didn't care.

"I'll leave right away, Ortiz," he said, surprised at the calmness of his own voice.

CHAPTER VI

TWO AGAINST TERROR

THAT MORNING it rained in Black Rock. It was not usual for this to happen: the only rain that Black Rock saw ordinarily came from the quick brushing of the afternoon thunderstorms in the height of summer. Today there was cloud cover, low and gray, over the entire valley and a constant downpouring that was surprisingly cold. The plaza was deserted.

Lyle, without his oilskin, was soaking wet when he rode into the square. His felt butternut gray hung shapelessly over his ears and the back of his neck. He shivered involuntarily with the cold, and his stomach was drawn with hunger. He made himself ignore these discomforts. He kept his eyes straight ahead.

He rode the horse to the front of the courthouse, dismounted and looped the reins to the hitching rail. He put both hands under his coat and adjusted the hang of his cartridge belt and holstered pistol. He went into the courthouse.

There were the usual loafers—half a dozen perhaps—in the big central hall. They lifted their heads and stared at him as he entered. They stiffened, became alert. He didn't look at any of them. He walked to the door of the sheriff's office, opened it and stepped inside.

Vance Murdell was sitting at his desk. He looked up, startled. Cards were laid across the desk in a *solitaire*

spread; a pint bottle of whiskey yet unopened stood at a corner of the desk. Murdell, Lyle noticed with some surprise, had shaved and trimmed his mustache.

Murdell looked at Lyle in complete astonishment for a moment and then said, "I'll be a son of a six prong buck."

"Morning, Vance," said Lyle.

Murdell looked him up and down. "Kind of wet, ain't you?"

"Yes. I got caught in the rain."

"Happens sometimes." Murdell swung around in his chair, crossed his legs and put his fingertips together. He was altogether too much at ease in the way he moved. Lyle knew that it was only to cover up his wariness. "Guess what," said Murdell. "I'm sober."

"That so?"

"Well, maybe not a hundred percent—still a little hangin' on from last night. But I'm playin' a game with m'self. I'm seein' how long I can go sittin' here without reachin' for that bottle. Don't expect to go much longer, to tell you the truth."

"Well, hang on just a little longer if you can, Vance. I got some business for you this morning."

"Figured you might have." Murdell looked Lyle up and down. "Didn't imagine you'd drop in just for social tea when Sandy Poore and all them other coyotes is lookin' for you. Did you know you was a bandit now?"

"No."

"You and Mr. Ortiz, Richardson's put up a reward for both o' you. I swear, I do believe that Mr. Richardson's goin' to go too far one o' these days."

"He already has," said Lyle.

"Meanin'?"

"I'd like to swear out a complaint against Ward Richardson on a charge of peonage. I want you to arrest him for it."

"You loco?"

"Maybe."

"Just what good do you figure you're goin' to do yourself—or anybody else—by doin' this?"

"Richardson's got to be put in jail. Once people see it happen they'll know it can be done. It's the only way they'll get together against Richardson."

Murdell looked at the bottle, frowned, started to reach for it, then hastily pulled his hand back again. He scratched his newly shaven cheek. He looked up at Lyle from under his thick eyebrows. "You know there's liable to be some shootin' if anybody tries to take Richardson, don't you?"

"I know that."

"Can you shoot?"

Lyle smiled dryly. "Used to do it. It ought to come back to me."

"And you know if you should happen to come out second best in this here shootin', your friend Mr. Richardson would just be stronger'n ever."

"I know that, too. I figured we'd have a chance, though. Not a big one—but enough maybe, if we play it right."

"You figure *we* have a chance." Murdell looked at Lyle with a side-glance.

"You and I, Murdell. You swear me in as deputy and we arrest Richardson. You want to get back something of what you used to be, Murdell—don't tell me different, because I know it. I knew it when I saw you looking at those pictures in that book of yours. Well, here's your chance. Here's your chance to be the real Vance Murdell again. In your heart you want to do that, and you know it. What do you say?"

"I say you're loco as hell." Murdell stared at him in a startled, almost frightened way.

AS A LAWYER Lyle had sometimes changed the minds of jurors. He'd been told he had a certain skill at it. He put every drop of ability he possessed now into his words, and into his way of talking as he spoke to Murdell. He spoke quietly and sincerely and let his thoughts form in their own way as he talked. He looked Murdell in the eye. "A man's got to do what he can for the place he lives in and

the people he lives with, Murdell. A man just doesn't feel right if he hasn't got that. I don't know why, exactly. Don't imagine you do, either. But it's so.

"And it's mighty hard to do sometimes—so hard that you just want to give up and say the devil with it. Only that doesn't work, either. I tried it, and so did you. Well, we both got ourselves in a spot now where maybe it's going to be a little dangerous for us to get our self respect back again. But we got to do it, Murdell; there's no other way. If we let this chance pass today we're never going to feel right about it. You know that, Murdell. You know it as well as I do."

Murdell said, "Lyle, I wish to the devil you'd never showed up in this town."

"You're not with me?"

"Yes I am, hang it." Murdell rose and sighed. "Come on—let's go arrest Mr. Richardson. Or try to."

Lyle grinned and they walked out of the office together.

The hall was empty.

Murdell said quietly, "They seen you come in. Richardson knows you're in town by now. He'll no doubt be lookin' for you."

"No doubt," said Lyle.

They walked out of the courthouse and into the rain. The yellow soil underfoot was like thin soup; the rain spattered it into making momentary pock marks. The light was soft and gray and there were no shadows. It was unreal, thought Lyle; it was like the setting of a dream.

They started across the plaza toward Richardson's office.

"Don't reckon he'll be alone," said Murdell.

"No."

"If we get out of this alive," said Murdell, "I'm gonna get drunker'n I ever was in my whole life. I'm gonna get drunk as a male hooty owl."

"If we *do* get out of it," said Lyle, "I might join you."

There was no other sound but the purr of rain. There was no other movement on or around the plaza; the shop

fronts stared out darkly like so many blind eyes. Lyle thought he heard thunder rumble distantly in the west, but he couldn't be sure.

They were halfway across the plaza when they saw the door to Richardson's office open. Richardson stepped out. He was looking at them. He seemed very tall and impressive as he stood there. He moved forward then and Sandy Poore slouched out of the door in his wake. Two other men—Lyle recognized two of the loafers from the courthouse—came along behind Poore.

"Four," said Murdell. "Leastways if I'm sober and countin' straight, it's four."

Lyle felt a twitching in his hands, and hoped that they wouldn't tremble. He was inwardly taut and the roof of his mouth was dry. This was a feeling of fear, he supposed; he wondered if men like Murdell ever experienced it.

"If it comes to a showdown," said Murdell in a low voice, his eyes still straight ahead, "you take the two on the right. I'll take Poore and Richardson. Shoot fast and don't worry 'bout your aim."

"Right," said Lyle. Somehow Murdell's words managed to calm him down a bit.

They were a little more than ten yards from Richardson and the others now. They stopped.

Richardson's deep voice called out, "Murdell! Get out of the way! We're going to take that man!"

Murdell smiled. "Come to take you instead, Mr. Richardson!"

"What's the matter with you," Richardson called, "are you crazy?"

"Come to take you to the jail, Mr. Richardson! You're under arrest for—" he turned to Lyle—"what's that word, anyways?"

"Peonage."

"Pee-o-nage!" Murdell called out, pronouncing each syllable carefully.

Richardson said, "For the last time, get out of the way, you drunken fool!"

"Comin' peaceful, Mr. Richardson?" shouted Murdell.

Richardson turned to Poore. "Take your men and get Lyle."

The gunman nodded, gestured to the other two men, narrowed his eyes and stepped forward, his shoulders slouched and his right hand curled near his side.

THERE WAS a moving figure down the street, on Richardson's left. Lyle saw Richardson glance in that direction, and followed his glance. A woman in a dark dress, and carrying an oiled silk parasol was coming toward Richardson. She was tall and rawboned and had slightly bulging eyes—these were fixed on Richardson.

"Marna!" Richardson called. "Get away! Go back!"

She stopped and stared about, bewildered. She looked at the men with Richardson, at Lyle and Murdell; she frowned and looked at Richardson again.

"Back, damn it!" Richardson shouted at her.

"It's his wife," Murdell muttered to Lyle. "Careful with your shootin'."

Lyle nodded, but kept his eyes on Poore and the other two gunmen. These three had stopped momentarily to glance at Marna Richardson. Marna was now standing about fifty feet to the left of Richardson, her eyes wide, and her face suddenly pale. She seemed unable to move.

The entire tableau held this way for a moment, as though frozen in time. And then, suddenly, there was movement. Sandy Poore dropped to a sudden crouch and drew his gun. Lyle didn't see Murdell draw, he heard only the sudden explosion on his left, and then from the corner of his eye saw that Murdell's gun was out. He was drawing himself at that time.

Poore jerked backwards and off balance as though he had been struck by a swung beam. He screamed loudly and harshly. He grabbed at his side and began to kick violently so that he moved in a circle on the mud, pivoting on one hip.

One of the two men behind Poore

doubled up into a crouch and began to run for the cover of the porch in front of the shop next to Richardson's. The other man, eyes wide with fear, had his pistol drawn by this time. Lyle shot at him hastily. He missed. An instant later Murdell's gun went off again. . . the man looked surprised, stood where he was for a moment, then blood welled out of his mouth and he fell forward.

The man behind the corner of the porch now shot at Lyle. Lyle felt something hit his right arm a terrible blow; it snatched his whole body half-way about. He looked at his arm stupidly, realized that his pistol had fallen, tried to move his fingers and found that they were numb. He saw the bullet furrow in his sleeve; it had ripped the cloth like a knife. He saw the first blood seeping out of the wound. And then he began to feel the pain.

There was another gun explosion.

Lyle turned his head. The man at the porch corner was slumped over it, quivering a little, his pistol fallen from his hand. Murdell was moving forward. He was moving diagonally, toward the right. Everything was getting a little blurred in Lyle's sight, and he blinked. He shook his head. That cleared it a little. He kept staring, and now he saw where Murdell was going.

Richardson had managed to run down the street to his wife. He stood behind her now, holding her arm in a fast grip, and with the other hand brandishing a pistol. Marna Richardson seemed still paralyzed with fear.

"Don't you come closer, Murdell!" called Richardson. "You just stay where you are!"

Marna Richardson began to sob hysterically.

"Take it easy, lady—I ain't goin' to shoot in your direction," said Murdell. He put his weapon back into his holster. Then he kept walking forward. "But I'm comin' to get your husband. Goin' to sure enough put him in jail!"

"Murdell, I'm shooting if you come any closer!" Richardson looked less

tall and dignified as he crouched behind his wife. He looked like a frightened boy too big for his age.

Lyle felt suddenly weak. He put his left hand on his right arm, and felt the warmth and stickiness of the wound. The scene in front of his eyes began to rock a little. He dropped to one knee.

Murdell started suddenly to laugh. It was that crazy, deep-voiced laugh Lyle had heard the first time he'd met him. And again the Sheriff cut it off abruptly. "Richardson, you damned fool!" he roared. "I've arrested bigger'n you a hundert times! Go ahead and shoot off that hogleg of yours! I'll give you ten to one hard dollars you miss!"

Richardson pulled the trigger. The gun in his hand bucked, exploded. His wife fell suddenly limp, fainting and he let her crumple to the ground. Murdell took another two steps forward and then fell as though he had stumbled. It took Lyle a moment to realize that Richardson hadn't missed.

Richardson, still holding his pistol level, stepped clumsily over his wife's fallen form and trotted to where Murdell lay. He stared at him in a wide-eyed, half crazy way.

Lyle, still on one knee, reached down with his left hand and picked up his own fallen pistol. "Richardson!"

As though jolted out of a dream, he whirled toward Lyle.

"If Murdell's dead, the charge is murder now, Richardson. You understand that—got it through your head? Drop that gun, Richardson, and don't make it worse."

Richard stared at Lyle for a long moment, his eyes still wide, and then suddenly lifted the revolver again as though to fire it. Lyle felt not only faint but sick now. Everything in his vision was blurred around the edges. He seemed to be slipping away.

Dimly now, it seemed to him that there were hoofbeats. . . that someone riding a horse had suddenly arrived. To his surprise he heard Concha's

(please turn to page 128)

THE NINETEENTH

CHAPTER I

THE KILLER

IT HURT most when he turned to look back. Pain stabbed through him like the thrust of a knife

blade. But Jim Quince turned, fighting away the dots that had danced before his eyes the last several hours.

The voices grew stronger. Two of the dots assumed human form. Jim Quince halted his leg-weary horse and licked parched lips.

"Come shooting, you Dabneys. I'll



take..."

Jim reached for his gun, swollen left hand grasping the saddle horn, right hand fumbling for the weapon. Then he folded and fell to the ground.

The girl was first to reach him. She stooped, exclaimed: "He's been shot, Little Jeff!"

"Sure has!" The young Negro boy laid aside a lumpy knapsack and

NOTCH

by JAMES CLYDE HARPER

WOULD THIS DEADLY GUN OF BILLY THE KID'S GO ON KILLING FOREVER? DRAMATIC, THRILLING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL

dragged Jim into the shade. He removed Jim's blood-stained shirt and rolled him on his stomach.

"Bad, too, Miss Cathy. Looks like the bullet's lodged."

"He's lost a lot of blood."

"Yes, ma'm, it's lodged, there against his shoulder blade." Little Jeff drew a knife from his pocket.

"Can you do it, Jeff?"

"You'll see my bullets, all right."



One of the guns had eighteen notches. And the funny thing about it, Jim Quince noted, was that this beautiful weapon was just like his own, fit snugly in his own quick-draw holster. Billy the Kid, they said, had put the eighteen notches on it

"Think so. No harder than taking the bullet out of Nubbin deer." Little Jeff sterilized the blade point with a match flame. "He won't even feel it since he's unconscious."

"But you have no antiseptic."

"He's rugged, Miss Cathy. He can take it."

From the knapsack Little Jeff withdrew a partly filled bottle of water which he used to cleanse the wound. Then as gently as a surgeon in white, Little Jeff touched the shoulder, sensitive fingers tracing the position of the lodged bullet.

"Look away if you like, Miss Cathy."

"Go ahead. I've seen blood before."

Little Jeff made two deft incisions with the razor-sharp blade and pressed to squeeze out the missile. But it did not emerge. A frown crossed his face and he enlarged the incisions. The ugly lump of lead oozed out.

"We'll have to use his shirt for bandages, Miss Cathy. Will you wash his back while I cut strips from the shirt?"

"You constantly amaze me, Jeff, the many things you know and do." She cleansed the smooth, supple shoulders.

"Oh, books are a good teacher, Miss Cathy."

Little Jeff was ready with a pressure pack and bandages. They had to lift the unconscious form while Little Jeff made adjustment. Cathy held him braced on her lap. She looked into the haggard, young face, and anger kindled in her.

"Jeff, look. He's not only been shot; he's been brutally beaten."

"Sure has. Black eye, bruised lips. And there's a cut in his scalp."

THE BANDAGING was finished. But Cathy did not remove his head from her lap. With the moistened cloth she cleansed the wound in his scalp, the bruised lips. Little Jeff sat

back, a grave expression on his young-old face.

"A man don't ride, the shape he's in, Miss Cathy, unless there's worse behind."

"No, poor thing."

"His horse is bad off too. It's just about ready to drop. Guess we'd better take them to Brother Ben?"

"Yes." Cathy let a dribble of water between the bruised lips, and laid the damp cloth over the feverish black eye.

"Miss Cathy, you notice this bullet?" Little Jeff held the lump of lead on his palm. It crudely resembled a four-pronged star, was about the circumference of a silver quarter.

"Yes...?"

"You remember the bullet I took out of Nubbin? Well, this one looks just like it." Little Jeff scowled. "Whoever shoots notched bullets is a killer, Miss Cathy."

"Whoever shoots any bullet into a man's back is a killer!"

"Yes, ma'm, I guess that's right." Little Jeff thrust the bullet into a pocket and they both looked at Jim Quince.

He stirred, reached an exploratory hand for the damp cloth over his eyes. Cathy removed it, smiled down at him. He stared at her blankly, tried to sit up. The movement sent pain ripping through his back, and he went limp.

"He's gone again, Jeff!"

But his eyes snapped open. "Who're you?"

"Cathy Waide. And this is Jeff. We removed the bullet, we fixed your back. Does it feel any better?"

He sat up with help from Cathy, glanced warily around and fumbled for his gun.

"There's only us," said Cathy.

The tensy left. "I'm Jim Quince."

"I wonder if you feel like riding? It'll take almost an hour to get there."

"Where?"

"You'll be among friends," smiled

Cathy. "Brother Ben is a friend of every man. His place is a few miles away near the foot of Big Canyon. We thought it would be good for you to rest there awhile. Brother Ben will be glad to have you as his guest."

"I can pay my way."

"Brother Ben expects every man to pay his way. Though sometimes one lets him down."

They helped Jim to his feet, and Cathy brought the horse. Both rider and horse seemed stronger after the brief respite. But Jim was still weak and in pain. It told in the way he accepted assistance, and the tightness of his mouth.

They got him astride. Cathy took the reins to lead, Little Jeff walking beside Jim's stirrup.

JIM LOST track of time. Twice he slumped and would have fallen had not little Jeff caught and steadied him. Once they stopped to rest, as much for the benefit of the horse as for Jim.

The sun was about three o'clock when they reached the house. Jim had a distorted vision of a rambling adobe structure, a patio, some sheds, a corral. He was aware they had stopped, felt Cathy and Little Jeff helping him down. Then another arm supported him. A gentle feminine voice crooned in his ear.

"You po' thing. Come on, Mammy Lou sho' take care of you."

The sheets were cool to his feverish back, the pillow soft to his throbbing head. Mammy Lou whisked off his boots, called Little Jeff to complete the disrobing.

Little Jeff brought a pan of cool water, sponged off Jim's face and body. Dimly Jim realized what the other was doing and tried to help.

"Don't move about, Mister Jim. Lifting yourself will just make your back hurt more. I can manage all right."

Little Jeff was right. His strength belied his slender frame, and his

hands had deft agility. He finished with the sponge bath, placed Jim on his right side so the wound would be accessible. Then pulled the covers over the lower part of Jim's body.

"Mammy Lou," he called from the doorway, "has Brother Ben got in from the orchard?"

"Down at the barn with the mules. Why?"

"His shoulder's bleeding again. I think Brother Ben ought to take a look."

"I'll get him," said Cathy and went out the back door.

Mammy Lou bustled around the big kitchen. "I'll fix him a bowl of hot soup. The po' thing looks plumb gant to me, like he ain't ate in days."

"Maybe ain't." Little Jeff secured the medicine kit and carried it in beside Jim's bed. Mammy Lou had hot water ready by the time Brother Ben arrived.

Vaguely Jim sensed the man's presence, felt strong fingers examining the wound. He tried to rouse from his lethargy, tried to turn and look at the man.

"Lie still, son. We're just going to renew the dressing, then leave you to rest awhile."

Jim felt the sting of a cleansing antiseptic, coolness of a healing ointment. Fresh bandages were placed and adjusted. The covers were tucked about him.

"Go to sleep now, son. You need a lot of rest." The voice was soft and gentle, the kindest man's voice Jim ever had heard. It was almost as tender as a mother's soothing her baby, Jim thought, slipping into exhausted slumber.

CHAPTER II

DARK-TRAIL DESTINY

IT WAS daylight when Jim Quince awoke. He stared at the unfamiliar surroundings, and started to arise.

A sliver of pain brought his memory up to date. He had slept around the clock.

"Good morning, Mister Jim." A strong young arm helped him sit up. It didn't hurt as badly to turn around as it had yesterday. Little Jeff grinned. "Feel better today?"

"Yes. Guess I do."

"I'll give you a shave if you'll trust me with the razor."

Jim rubbed his stubby beard. "I'll trust you."

Little Jeff brought the necessary items, chuckling.

"Mammy Lou pretty grouchy today. She kept hot soup ready for you all night. But Brother Ben said you needed rest more. I guess you did. You didn't even rouse when we put on fresh dressings right after midnight."

Little Jeff worked a thick lather in the mug, deftly honed and stropped the razor. He placed the pan of hot water near.

"If you lie back, Mister Jim, I can get to you better. Now don't be nervous. I does this all the time for Brother Ben since he don't see too good up close no more."

Little Jeff applied lather, steamed it off with a hot towel, then put on fresh lather. He opened the razor and soon had the stubble removed. He applied another hot towel, left it on to steam a few minutes.

"Your horse looking better today, Mister Jim. That's a mighty fine animal you got. Quarterhorse strain, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh."

"He'll be good as new in another day. Didn't feed him heavy last night, but gave him all he wanted this morning. The rascal ate six ears of corn and kept looking around for more." Little Jeff removed the towel, started over with the razor a last time for closeness.

"Corn? You raise it here?"

"Yes, sir. We raise lots of things. You'll have to get out and look

around." Little Jeff gently massaged tingly lotion into Jim's battered face.

"That feels awfully good, Jeff. You could hold a job in any barber shop!"

"I gets lots of practice on Brother Ben." He took some of the things from the room.

Jim found his clothes on a chair. The pants had been sponged and pressed, the boots shined. Little Jeff returned with a clean shirt.

"Sorry about the one you wore. I made bandages out of it. This is one of Brother Ben's."

The shirt was not expensive like Jim's, but of good, strong material. Jim slipped it on, with help from Little Jeff. The youngster fashioned a sling to support Jim's left arm.

"Mammy Lou says breakfast is ready for you."

"Feel like I could eat a bear."

"There's comb and brush on the dresser. Mammy Lou fixed everything last night while you was asleep. This will be your room."

Little Jeff departed with the rest of the shaving articles. Jim combed his hair and followed.

MAMMY LOU waited in the dining room. The others apparently had eaten, let Jim sleep as late as he would. He reckoned it must be past eight o'clock.

"Good morning, Mister Jim. You sit right down." She brought a platter of steak and two eggs, hot biscuits, jelly.

Jim grinned. "How about some soup?"

"Now, Mister Jim. Jeff done told you about that. Soup would have been good for you last night. You is better today, needs man-filling food." She wagged a chiding finger. "Everybody eat soup today for dinner. Mammy Lou waste nothing she makes."

She waddled away for hot coffee and Jim tore into the food. The steak had been cut bite-sized so a one-armed man could manage. The eggs were large, the biscuits puffy and brown.

Jim supposed he ate too fast, but he had never tasted better food.

Mammy Lou returned with the coffee. Her jovial black face beamed at Jim's emptied plate. "That's good you ate everything. It'll soon get you back on your feet."

"Do you treat every stranger this fine?"

"Strangers ain't strangers here long. It's Brother Ben, I guess. He has a way with folks like Jeff has with animals. After while you'll learn what I mean."

"I won't be here long. Jeff said my horse is already frisky. Another meal of two like this and I'll be ready to travel, too."

"Yes'r, Mister Jim, but don't you leave too fast. Brother Ben will say you're welcome to stay as long as you like. He'll tell you to talk it over with yourself. You know, Mister Jim, when a person talks things over with himself, he usually makes the right decision."

She picked up the dishes. "Make yourself to home, Mister Jim. Lie down if you wish, or go sit in the sun. Brother Ben and Jeff is out back, making a potato hill. Go visit with them if you like."

Jim debated about his gun. Never had he gone this long after awakening without it around his waist. But then he had never before awakened in a place like this.

He decided to leave the gun, and went out the back door.

LITTLE JEFF stopped digging the warm earth and grinned. "Feeling better now, Mister Jim?"

"Who wouldn't after a breakfast like that? Mammy Lou handles a skillet as good as you do a razor."

Brother Ben came from the shallow trench and held out his hand. "Didn't tell you last night how glad we are to have you. I thought you needed rest more than words, or even Mammy Lou's hot soup. Though I

don't think she's quite forgiven me for that."

He was taller than Jim, had the firm-muscled glow of one who enjoys outdoor work. He wore thick leused spectacles behind which warm blue eyes looked unafraid at the world.

"I appreciate what you've all done for me," said Jim.

"Glad to, son." Brother Ben watched Little Jeff loosening the soil. "Ever work with growing things, son?"

"No..."

"There's good from working with your hands in God's clean earth growing things. You plant the seeds, till the soil, and fight bugs and worms. When harvest comes, you feel mighty proud. I reckon it's the same with God. He plants a man by birth, gives him faith to fight off the bugs and worms. It doesn't always work out. Sometimes the bugs get the plant just like sometimes the devil claims a man. But when God's harvest is good and clean through faith, I reckon God is mighty pleased."

Jim Quince felt the humble sincerity of this man and attempted no reply. Brother Ben returned to shoveling the earth from the trench Little Jeff had picked loose.

"I'll be able to move on in a day or two," Jim said.

"Where, son?"

From another Jim would have resented the question. He did not ask questions of this nature of others; he did not expect questions to be asked by others. But Jim did not resent the questions from this man.

"I don't know. South I guess."

"Son, it's more important to know where than when."

Jim didn't quite understand.

Mammy Lou called from the back door. "Mister Garrett to see you, Brother Ben."

The caller, a tall, rangy man, came around the house leading a deep-barreled roan. The horse would stand six-

teen hands, was built for hard, fast riding.

Brother Ben went to his caller. They shook hands, and Jim heard their remarks.

"Found your note when I got in last night, Brother Ben."

"Yes. Were you...successful yesterday?"

"No, false lead again. We'll get him though."

"Pat...must you?"

The visitor laid his big hand on Brother Ben's shoulder. "When a man keeps on and on, somebody's got to stop him. They've asked me to do it. So...I guess I must."

"I'm sorry for Billy."

"Maybe you'd better be sorry for me. I might become another notch on his gun."

"No, Pat. You're right and Billy's wrong. It won't be you."

"I hope not. Say...what did you want to see me about?"

"It'll take a day or two. Can you spare the time?"

"Sure. Anything you want, Brother Ben. You know that."

"Well..."

They moved away and Jim Quince did not hear any more. In a few moments the tall visitor rode away. Brother Ben went into the house.

"Jeff," said Jim, "wasn't that Pat Garrett?"

"Yes, sir."

"That Billy they mentioned...Billy the Kid?"

"Yes, sir. Mister Garrett has been deputized to hunt him down. Brother Ben sure upset. We all liked young Mister Billy."

"You liked him? Was he here?"

"Yes, sir. About a week once."

Jim Quince was silent, staring at the ground.

AFTER DINNER, Mammy Lou persuaded Jim to rest awhile. He lay on his side, staring at the wall. "Know where you're going instead of

when," that's what Brother Ben meant. Well, where was he going? South? East? West? Regardless of the direction he chose, was there any real destination? Or was he to go on and on, skulking by night, hiding by day, afraid to let men see his face? Was his destiny to be patterned after that of Billy the Kid, who once had spent a week with Brother Ben? Was his destination, too, to be finality from a flaming revolver, like that awaiting Billy the Kid in the big gun Pat Garrett wore?

"Guess I should have kept my big mouth shut...!" He didn't know he had slept until Mammy Lou aroused him.

"Come on, Mister Jim. You slept almost two hours. You going to have company soon."

"Company?" Jim pulled on his boots.

"Yes'r. Miss Cathy say last night she be back this afternoon. Now who she comin' to see? Old Mammy Lou? Naw, sir, not old Mammy Lou. She come to see old Mammy Lou 'bout twice a month. Yesterday was her regular visit day, but she comin' back again this afternoon. Now who she comin' to see? He-he, not old Mammy Lou!"

She sidled out before Jim found an answer. He inspected himself in the mirror and followed. Mammy Lou placed a kitchen chair outside in the shade.

"You sit out here and watch Jeff finish the potato hill. We had a mighty fine garden this year. Sec, it's right over... Well, will you look at that? Nubbin is come moochin' again!"

Jim did not see anything.

"Beside the fence, Mister Jim. Watch now. He's getting ready to paw and shake his head. He don't like Jeff wasting his time this way."

Jim saw then, surprised. It was a young buck deer, his tawny-grey coat blended with the background until he moved. Little Jeff took a potato and

went toward the deer. It eagerly came to meet him.

"Jeff found the poor thing one morning when he went to feed the mules. Had a big hole shot in his back. Jeff's been treating him and he's almost well. Keeps coming back about once a week, though. I reckon it's mostly for petting and the sweet potato, instead of doctoring for his back. I declare, that boy's got a way with wild things..."

"Hello, where's everybody?" The voice came from the kitchen.

"Out here, Miss Cathy." Mammy Lou rolled her eyes at Jim. "I declare, Mister Jim, Miss Cathy's come to see us again today."

Jim felt his face grow warm, and pretended to be engrossed in watching Little Jeff and the deer. At the raised voices, the deer shied back, tested the scene for scent and sound. Apparently satisfied, it returned to Little Jeff. The boy tolled it toward the house with bits of potato.

Cathy came from the kitchen, smiled a greeting. "Hitched my horse out front and walked right in. Hello, how do you feel today?"

"Much better, thanks to you."

Mammy Lou placed another chair in the shade. "My, Miss Cathy, but you look scrumptious today. Ain't that your new outfit?"

"Oh... Everything else was dirty."

"Yes'm," said Mammy Lou gravely and returned to the kitchen.

Jim decided he must have been worse off yesterday than he thought, not to have been more observant. Her clothing emphasized her trim figure, which was nicely curved in the right places. She wore her hair in short pigtails. Her skin had a tanned, healthy glow.

"I'm glad you're better," said Cathy. "We were worried about you yesterday."

Jim decided it was best to remember he would ride away in a day or two.

CHAPTER III

TWO WITH GUNS

THE DEER gave a sudden start, and stared at the terrain south of the house. It took a piece of sweet potato from Little Jeff's hand, and scurried around the corral. In a few moments it vanished into the hills.

Little Jeff hurried to the house. "Someone coming Nubbin don't like. You may not either, Mister Jim. We'd better hide you in the barn."

"Not in the barn," decided Mammy Lou. "They might see you running for it. In your room, Little Jeff. Get under the bed if you have to. Where is Brother Ben?"

"Reading," said Jeff. "It's his reading time."

Little Jeff and Jim went into Jeff's bedroom, and Mammy Lou peeked out a front window.

"It's your daddy, Miss Cathy, and that awful foreman of yours."

Brother Ben came from the small library, finger marking his place in a book.

"What's wrong, Mammy Lou?"

"Sheriff Waide and Turk Gammon is coming. We reckoned to keep Mister Jim a secret."

Brother Ben laid aside his book. "I'll handle it, Mammy Lou."

"Please, Brother Ben, no, sir. You is too easy when folks asks questions. But Mammy Lou just a natural born talker. Let me talk to Sheriff Waide."

"Well..."

Mammy Lou said glibly: "We don't want to cause that poor boy no more trouble, now does we, Brother Ben?"

"Well, no."

"Then you let Mammy Lou handle things."

"Well... I won't have you lying to the sheriff, Mammy Lou."

"No, sir. Mammy Lou won't lie." She urged him toward the back room where Jim and Little Jeff were hidden.

"You just leave everything to old Mammy Lou."

When he was safely inside, Mammy Lou scurried about to be sure there was no indication of a visitor. Jim's gun on the chair in his room gave her a start. She shoved it beneath clothing in the bottom dresser drawer. She brought the chairs from the back yard, told Cathy to sit in one, and gave her a pan of potatoes and paring knife.

"No use hiding you, Miss Cathy. They've seen your horse out front. You act like you're on a visit, and is helping me get ready for supper. There, they're riding up front. I'll go bring them in."

"Bring them in? In here?" Cathy gulped and glanced at the closed bedroom door.

"Yes'm. Sometimes folks don't find what they wants because they're standing right over it."

Mammy Lou left to answer the knock at the front door.

"Well, howdy, Sheriff Waide, and Mister Turk. Come in, come right on in."

SHERIFF ED WAIDE was a large, hurried man. "Got a stranger around here, Mammy Lou? Turk thinks he may have come this way."

"Young. Dresses good. Armed." Turk Gammon shared nothing, including words.

"Uh, no, sir. Ain't seen no strangers a-tall."

The men sauntered into the house. Turk Gammon searched with a sweep of his eyes. Sheriff Waide mopped his face with a handkerchief that was already sodden. He saw his daughter in the kitchen.

"Well, what're you doing here?"

"Oh, just...peeling potatoes."

"Dressed up, ain't you?" Turk Gammon missed nothing.

"Finally wore her new outfit for old Mammy Lou to see. Sure mighty pretty, ain't it?"

"I suppose," said the Sheriff.

"Brother Ben here?"

"No, sir. Not here. Nor Little Jeff, either."

Turk Gammon was at the back door, staring at the corral. "Whose horse?"

"You know how Little Jeff is always messing with sick animals."

"Don't look sick."

"Ain't now, I reckon. Little Jeff mighty handy with his doctoring. Always a deer or a bird, or something."

"Whose horse is it?"

"Well, uh, maybe it's Mister Pat's."

"Pat? Pat Garrett?"

"Uh, yes, sir. He was by this morning to see about something. Maybe it was the horse."

"Oh." Turk Gammon turned and his gaze stopped at the closed bedroom door. It was the only closed door he had seen in the house.

"Who's in there?" He reached for the knob.

Cathy frantically sliced a potato into bits.

"Goodness, Mister Turk, don't open that yet!" The alarm in Mammy Lou's voice stopped him. She brandished a broom as a weapon between her and the closed door.

"Little Jeff usually very careful to lock the cages before he leave. I keep thinking that sometime he might forget. And if they's one thing Mammy Lou don't want, it's a mess of snakes loose..."

"Snakes?" Sheriff Waide bellowed. Turk's hand retreated from the knob.

"Why, I thought you knew, Sheriff. Jeff traps 'em for zoos and places back East. He has some big beauties..."

"Who the devil ever saw a beautiful snake!" In three strides Sheriff Waide was across the kitchen. "What does Brother Ben mean letting Jeff keep snakes in the house?"

"Why, Brother Ben encourages Jeff, sometimes even helps him. They get money..."

"Yes, I know. But in the house... Turk, get away from that door! Come

on, let's get going."

Turk Gammon backed away, staring at the knob. Then he turned and followed his boss. Sheriff Waide called to his daughter.

"Cathy, you'd better start for home soon. Clouds are piled over Big Canyon. Don't try South Crossing unless you're sure it's not raining up above." He went on, muttering: "Snakes in the house..."

WHEN THE SHERIFF and Gammon had ridden away, Mammy Lou opened the closed door. "They's gone now."

Brother Ben said, sternly: "Mammy Lou... Snakes in the house..."

"Mammy Lou didn't say that. Sheriff Waide said that. Mammy Lou remember Sheriff Waide don't like snakes. She ask Mister Turk not to open the door, grab a broom and act like snakes in there."

"That's right," grinned Jim Quince. "She didn't say the cages were in the room. She just sort of fed their imagination and they did the rest."

Brother Ben was not quite placated. "You said you'd seen no stranger. You said Little Jeff and I weren't here. You implied the horse in the corral belonged to Pat Garrett. Now let's see you get around that!"

"Yes'r. Mammy Lou know Mister Jim, so he ain't no stranger. You and Jeff ain't here," she pointed about the kitchen, then at the other room, "you is there. Mammy Lou don't say the horse is Mister Pat's. She say maybe, since he was by to see about something this morning."

Brother Ben shook his head. "I don't suppose you actually lied. But I've certainly never heard a better misconveyance of the truth."

"Yes'r," said Mammy Lou contritely.

Brother Ben returned to his read- and Little Jeff went to finish the potato hill. Jim Quince walked into the living room, stared out at the descending sun.

Cathy set aside the pan of potatoes.

"I'd better be getting on back to the ranch."

"Yes'm. Now don't you let Mister Turk get uppity with you. I declare, I don't see why your pappy puts up with that man."

"Because he makes money with cattle. He sold a bunch last week that went above market price."

"Yes'm. He might know all about cattle, but he sure don't know nothing about women."

"Now, Mammy Lou..."

"That's right, Miss Cathy. A man can drive a cow, but he can't a woman. He's got to lead her."

"Well, Turk Gammon isn't going to drive or lead me either one!"

"No'm, but he sure been trying." Mammy Lou cocked her head teasingly. "Now if he knew what I know..."

"You don't know anything." But Cathy colored prettily.

"No'm? You wore your new outfit over just to show Mammy Lou?"

"Certainly." Cathy's declaration was vigorous, but her glance strayed toward the front room. A worried frown puckered her brow, and Mammy Lou stopped teasing.

"Oh Mammy Lou, what if he finds out?"

"Mister Jim? He already did. Didn't you see him look at you in the back yard? It stuck out all over you both."

"No. Not him. Turk. What if Turk finds out I came over to see Jim... to see how Jim was getting along?"

"Yes'm. The last three poor boys what came to see you got the daylight whammed out of them. Guess Mister Turk would go wild sure enough about a feller you'd dressed all up to go see."

"Perhaps I'd better not come back..."

"Now don't say that, Miss Cathy. Nobody going to bother you here. Your pretty face is better for Mister Jim than all Brother Ben's medicine."

"I wouldn't cause him any trouble..."

Mammy Lou wagged her finger. "Now you don't worry. You get along home before your daddy starts fretting. Ain't going to rain today, but he might start worrying anyhow. You just get on home and leave everything to old Mammy Lou."

MAMMY LOU started with Cathy to the front door. But seeing Jim there, she remembered business back in the kitchen. Cathy went on alone.

Jim nodded. "Going to be a pretty sunset."

"They usually are. I like the view best though from Brother Ben's old home."

"Does he have two?"

"He first settled down at the edge of the flats. From there you have the desert at your feet and the mountains at your back. And you have a perfect view of each sunrise and sunset. I love it there."

Jim walked with her to her horse. She untied the reins and mounted.

"I'll take you there sometime. It's about three miles downstream. Brother Ben moved here because it was easier to irrigate the things he grows." She quieted, gazed down at him. There were no words exchanged, just a look between them that was long and deep.

Jim glanced toward the canyon that twisted from the towering mountains down onto the lazy flats. It cradled a trickling river that could become a raging torrent when rain drenched the mountains.

"Be careful when you cross," said Jim.

"I will." She rode away. Jim waved and returned to the house.

Brother Ben called him into the study where he was writing in a book. "Sit down, son. I'll be finished in a moment."

Jim took the chair, glanced about. He was not too familiar with books, but he realized this small library was well stocked. Some of the titles Jim recognized; some he did not. There were volumes on history, geography, medicine, mathematics, and a few

works of the scholars and of the better novelists. Jim knew now how Little Jeff had acquired the demeanor of an educated man three times his twelve or thirteen years.

On a special stand was a large family Bible. On Brother Ben's desk was a smaller edition, of much-used appearance.

Brother Ben finished and looked at Jim.

"Ed Waide is a fine man, a good sheriff. He'll be back after he's thought things over."

Jim Quince made no reply.

"Turk probably will be back too. Perhaps even before the sheriff. Turk isn't scared of snakes."

"I figured he wasn't," said Jim, "I'll leave tomorrow."

"You're not scared of Turk Gammon."

"No."

"Are you scared of Sheriff Walde?"

"No!"

"Then why will you leave?"

Jim frowned. "If I stay I'll get you in trouble."

"If you run, will it get you out of trouble?"

There was no answer.

Brother Ben looked out the window. The trail along the downward course of the river was visible. On it was a moving dot—Cathy riding for South Crossing and home.

"She's a fine girl, son."

Jim knew who Brother Ben meant. He said, simply: "Yes."

"Her mother died the year Mammy Lou and Little Jeff came down Big Canyon. She and Mammy Lou have grown very dear to each other, and she and Jeff have a lot of fun fishing and tramping through the mountains. That's where they were yesterday when they found you." Brother Ben brought his gaze to Jim. "We all love her very much, son. We wouldn't want to see her hurt."

Jim Quince nodded soberly. "That's another reason why I'm leaving tomorrow."

"That's another reason," said

Brother Ben quietly, "why you shouldn't leave tomorrow."

Mammy Lou called them to supper.

CHAPTER IV

FORTY-FIVE DEAD MEN

IT WAS LATE next morning when Jim Quince awoke. Mammy Lou had set his breakfast back to keep warm, and let him sleep late again.

"Good morning, Mister Jim. My, you looking better today! Even got your arm out of the sling. Don't you think it's too early for that?"

"Just wanted to try it. Still pretty sore, so I'll use the sling after breakfast."

Mammy Lou set food before him. "Little Jeff say if you want him to shave you again, he'll be glad to when he get back."

"Believe I can do it myself this morning."

"Yes'r you sure is better! I've got lots of hot water, plenty for a bath if you like."

"I'll take you up on that."

Jim finished his meal, shaved and bathed. Mammy Lou renewed the dressing on his shoulder, then gave him a clean shirt.

"I'll owe a good laundry bill the way I'm using shirts."

"Mammy Lou do the washin' here. You let her worry about that." She affixed the sling for his arm. "There, you is all set. Now, Mister Jim, just make yourself to home. Sit in the sun, take a nap if you like, or read one of Brother Ben's books."

"Where is he and Jeff?" Maybe I'll loaf with them awhile."

"Too far away today. Brother Ben up the river laying by the corn. Jeff got the other mule across the river, scratching the orchard."

"Across the river? Isn't that dangerous if a flash flood comes?"

"Little Jeff's done learned about them the hard way." Mammy Lou filled two cups from the coffee pot on

the stove. "Ever been in a flash flood, Mister Jim?"

"No... Guess they're pretty rough."

"You'll never know unless you're caught in one. I hope that never happens." Mammy Lou's face puckered with remembrance that was not pleasant. "Little Jeff was only six. It happened six years ago this month. Me and him and his daddy, and the white folks we was coming with to live in the West. The boss got confused at North Crossing, took down Big Canyon instead of the hill road. We didn't know how rain in the mountains quickly turned into a flash flood. The white folks and my husband was drowned, and one of the team of mules. Brother Ben pulled me and Little Jeff out. The other team managed to escape someway." Mammy Lou sighed and finished her coffee.

She shook away her thoughts and arose. "Well, you just entertain yourself, Mister Jim. This Mammy Lou's scrub-the-kitchen day, and she's got to get busy."

She shoed him away from the table, and Jim sauntered out the back door. His horse nickered from the corral. Jim walked over, scratched the animal's ears. The horse was fully rested, ready again to travel.

Jim glanced about the out-buildings and sheds, saw little Jeff had completed the potato hill. The trench had been filled with potatoes and turnips, the earth cover neatly rounded and packed. Jim walked around the house, sprawled lazily in the sun on the front stoop.

It was here, a short time later, that Turk Gammon stealthily found him.

JIM WAS unaware of the other's presence until Gammon spoke.

"So there was a snake in that room!"

Jim blinked, sat up. His hand moved toward his hip, and stopped. His gun was still in the dresser drawer.

Turk Gammon grinned faintly. "What's your name?"

Jim started to his feet, but was shoved roughly back. He winced from the pressure on his wounded shoulder.

"Again—what's your name?"

"You go to hell!"

Gammon leaned forward and his thick right hand exploded against the side of Jim's face. Jim was almost knocked from the stoop. He spat a trickle of blood from a cut in his mouth.

"I'll remember that, Mister!"

Another might have stepped back from the coldness of Jim's words. But Turk Gammon merely leaned forward again, right hand now knotted into a big fist.

"See that you do. For this one's going to be harder. When I ask a question, I expect an answer. Again—what is your name?"

From the door suddenly came an avalanche of fury. A wet kitchen mop whipped above Jim's head, caught Gammon full in the face. He lurched back, blinded, gasping for breath. Mammy Lou held the wet mop ready to strike again.

"We don't allow no manhandling here, Mister Turk. You oughta know better than that. Nobody mistreats our guests."

Turk Gammon was taut with rage. He made a gesture toward the gun at his hip. But Mammy Lou grimly kept her position. Turk Gammon backed away, wiped dirty water from his face. He glared at Jim.

"Get your horse and get out of... No, maybe you'd better stick around. Then I'll know where to find you... later."

He strode down the road. In a few moments they saw him bring his horse from behind some brush, mount and ride for South Crossing.

Jim Quince went into the house and buckled on his gun. Back on the stoop, he said "I won't be caught napping again."

Mammy Lou collapsed with a sudden gasp. "My goodness! It just struck me! What would old Mammy Lou have done if Mister Turk had tried to use his gun!"

"Maybe he'll try it later." Jim Quince slowly rubbed his stinging face.

LITTLE JEFF was first to return from work, in deference to the gathering dark clouds above the north mountains.

"Sure going to be a gully-washer when it does rain," he remarked to Jim at the barn, unharnessing and feeding the mule. "They been piling up three days now, a little bigger and blacker each day."

"Mammy Lou said you'd be back about three, as if it wouldn't rain before that time."

"Yes, sir. You can almost set a clock by the rain during the summer rainy season here." Jeff hung the harness on its peg. "If it's going to rain at all, it'll come about three o'clock."

Jim's horse frisked after them as they started from the lot.

"Mighty fine horse you got, Mister Jim."

"You're taking too good care of him. I'll have to ride him pretty soon before he forgets what it's like."

Little Jeff latched the gate behind them. "How'd you like to go with me tomorrow?"

"Riding?"

"In a way. We'll ride awhile, then get off and walk. That is, I will." Little Jeff grinned. "You might not care to walk where we'll be?"

"Where is that?"

"In a rattlesnake pocket across the river."

"A rattlesnake pocket!" Jim started in spite of himself.

"Yes, sir. I've spotted a good place where I can catch a few. I get five dollars apiece for the big ones, Mister Jim."

"I dunno..." Jim wasn't scared of a rattlesnake if he saw it in time and had a gun in his hand. But walking around in a den area... "By golly, Jeff, if there's one thing I don't want, it's to be bitten by a rattlesnake."

"Oh, you won't be in any danger when I get through fixing you up. They can't bite you no matter how

hard they try. Come on, I'll show you."

Little Jeff went to one of the sheds, secured by a heavy padlock. From a nail beside the door, he took the key and opened the lock. Then swung open the door.

From the darkened interior was an eerie clamor that caused Jim Quince to step backward. When he stopped, his gun was in his hand.

"Don't worry, Mister Jim. They're in locked cages."

Little Jeff reached inside, took a lantern from a wall hook. He lighted it, thrust it ahead to show the cages were locked. Jim lowered his gun, cautiously peered over the slender shoulder.

A dozen cages were in the shed, six to a side, on waist-high benches which were stoutly anchored into the ground. The cages were of heavy pine boards and two inner layers of heavy screen wire, outside of which were two layers of chicken wire. Between the layers of wire were wooden braces to prevent the wire being pushed loose. The only exit from the cages was the small square door, held securely locked by an iron bar thrust down through double hasps.

"Only got four now," said Jeff. He set the lantern on a wooden pedestal placed in the center of the room so rays fell into every cage. "Need six more to make a shipment. May need seven, though. One of these been feeling poorly." Little Jeff walked to one of the cages. Jim gingerly approached. In a coil that would almost fill a water bucket, was one of the biggest and ugliest rattlesnakes Jim Quince had ever seen.

"You mean you catch those things?"

"Ain't dangerous if you're fixed for it." Little Jeff went toward the back of the shed where there was an array of equipment and shipping boxes. Jim Quince didn't notice very closely. For the big snake had leaned toward him, rattling in jerky spasms. He wheeled for the door. It had taken six steps to enter; it took only three

to get out.

Little Jeff followed, appearing not to notice Jim's hasty exit.

"With these," Little Jeff indicated his armload of articles, "you ain't in any danger. Leg protectors, catching clamp, tin jug for the captive. Brother Ben helped me make them, and they sure work."

The leg protectors were buckle-on leggings of sturdy tin sheeting, from above the knee down over the foot. The catching clamp was a spring-powered prong at the end of a strong steel rod, so contrived that when a thumb lever was flipped, the prong closed tightly. The tin jugs were just that, the entrance through an inverted metal funnel with spring trap door at the bottom. This opening was so arranged that the catching clamp could be inserted to transfer the snakes to cages in the shed or shipping boxes.

"You won't need anything but the leg protectors, Mister Jim. I'll do all the catching.

"Yeah, you sure will!"

Mammy Lou called from the back door. "Brother Ben is coming, Jeff."

The boy returned his "tools" to the shed, blew out the lantern and locked the door. "I'll put away his mule. You go on, Mister Jim, and get ready for supper."

BROTHER BEN surrendered the mule to Jeff. They spoke briefly, then Brother Ben came toward the back door. Jim Quince noted curiously that Brother Ben carried two books, in addition to lunch bucket and water jug.

"Feeling better, I see," he returned Jim's greeting, then turned to Mammy Lou. "Well, it's all laid by. We'll have a wonderful harvest. The Lord has been good to our growing efforts this year." He went on into the house.

"Does his reading in the middle of the day when old sun shining brightest," Mammy Lou had noted Jim's curious glance at the books. "Poor eyes ain't what they used to be, so only reads an hour each day. Little

Jeff reads to him at night and they talk over what Jeff has read. They's gone through all them books once, some lots of times. I declare, Mister Jim, I reckon they knows 'bout as much as the fellers what wrote them books."

She moved away to finish supper. Jim washed and went to his room to comb his hair. His hand brushed the gun at his hip. He stared at it in the mirror. Hesitantly, he reached to remove the weapon in deference to this kindly house, this haven of Brother Ben's. Then his eyes lifted to the side of his face which still stung. The "later" Turk Gammon mentioned could be five minutes from now, an hour, or anytime tonight or tomorrow. Jim's hands dropped to his sides.

Mammy Lou came from Brother Ben's study as Jim emerged from his room. Little Jeff lighted lamps, then retreated to help Mammy Lou with the dishes. Brother Ben looked out at the softly blended hues in the sky deposited by the lazy sunset.

"Jeff's elated that you're going with him tomorrow."

"Not sure that I am, yet."

"It's quite interesting to watch Jeff. He's an expert at catching those rascals."

"Oh, I guess he knows his business. But I'm a complete washout when there's a rattlesnake near."

"So am I," smiled Brother Ben. "But there's really no danger when you wear the leggings. They're twice as high as a rattlesnake on the ground can strike, and even the biggest can't dent the metal."

The hues outside were darkening. Brother Ben brought his gaze to Jim.

"Mammy Lou said you had a visitor today."

"Yeah."

"You'll be able to ride tomorrow, son. Your horse is ready now. If you ride with Jeff we'll all know where you've gone. But if you go any other way, none of us will know, perhaps not even you."

"Oh, I donno," Jim looked

at the wall. "The trail shouldn't be hard to follow."

"That part you're thinking of now won't. Turk Gammon will be easy to find. But after that, what?"

"I never cross bridges until I come to them."

"That's just it, son. There aren't any bridges along the way you're thinking of now. Nor any end, either. It just goes in a circle, surrounded by darkness, and hiding, and fear."

"Fear? Of what? Turk Gammon? I'm not scared of a dozen Turk Gammons."

"The fear I mean is worse than a dozen Turk Gammons—a hundred times worse than a dozen Turk Gammons. Come, I want to show you something."

Brother Ben arose, had Little Jeff light a lantern. When it was ready, Brother Ben guided Jim through the back door to the shed nearest the house. But unlike the other shed, this one was not locked.

Brother Ben motioned Jim to enter, and shut the door behind them. He placed the lantern in a wire hook strung from the ceiling, and soberly looked at Jim.

"Might be crowded a bit, son. You see, forty-five men are standing in here with us."

Jim Quince stared blankly.

"The contents of this shed are different than that of Jeff's. But these are much more deadly."

Brother Ben indicated the left wall. On it were twelve wooden pegs. From eleven of these hung holstered revolvers and cartridge-studded belts. Cradled above these were three other weapons—two Winchesters and a long-barreled Sharps buffalo gun.

"There's notches on each of these guns, if you care to look. Seven on the Sharps, three on one of the rifles, two on the other. These three revolvers have three each, these three have four. Here are two with only one each. Here's one with two, and one with five. This one," Brother Ben removed one of the guns from its wooden peg,

"has eighteen. It was left here by young Bill Bonney."

"Why, its just like mine." Jim Quince leaned forward inquisitively. This gun of Billy the Kid's was a beautiful weapon, snugly fit the quick-draw holster. Jim reached to take it.

"Eighteen men are watching you, son."

JIM QUINCE started and involuntarily glanced around. He felt a ripple of breeze on his neck, and it was cold despite the warm July night. He hastily withdrew his hand.

Brother Ben put the weapon back, somberly shook his head. "I guess that's one reason Billy didn't take it when he left. But he might as well. Those eighteen men will stick with Billy as long as he lives and breathes. Three more have joined the group since Billy left here."

Brother Ben moved back and his gaze swept across the weapons. "Forty-five notches, forty-five lives of men. Some Indians, some Mexicans, a few born on foreign soil. Some better than the others, some worse perhaps.

No man lives who is wholly good; no man dies who is totally bad."

"Some men go about seeking trouble." Jim Quince said. "You see it every day. They'll get you if you don't get them first. Turn your back or remove your gun and you haven't got a chance."

"No man has the right to take another's life."

Jim Quince touched the side of his face that had stung. "I'd have killed him today if I'd had on my gun."

Brother Ben closed his eyes and placed a hand across his forehead. He sighed and dropped his hand, then slowly took another gun from its peg.

"Killing a man isn't too hard, son. It's afterward that the hard part comes. Every night when you try to sleep, every day when you're by yourself. Sometimes when you're in a crowd. He appears just like the last moments he lived. You see the shock come into his eyes as he feels the

touch of death from your bullet. Those eyes keep looking at you. At the last there's a trace of fear as the man peers into eternity. Then death takes him, and you mark another notch on your gun.

"But you can't forget his eyes. You wonder at the fear in them. Was it fear for himself or of what waits beyond for you? You worry about the meeting with him when you die. You worry about a lot of things that will be answered only when you reach eternity. You wake up in the middle of the night, the darkness about you filled with those fears. You're even scared sometimes in brightest daylight."

Brother Ben placed the gun back on its peg. "That's the fear son, that's worse than a thousand Turk Gammons. I know. Thirty years ago I wore that gun. It's got two notches on the handle."

Jim Quince licked lips gone suddenly dry. He felt an errant breeze again caress his neck. Only this one had a clammy touch. Jim Quince turned and stalked from the shed.

Brother Ben took the lantern from its hook, came out and closed the door. He watched Jim walk to the corral fence, saw Jim's horse come and thrust its head over the top rail. Brother Ben went into the house.

"Where is Mister Jim?" Little Jeff took the lantern and put it away.

"At the corral with his horse." Brother Ben kept on through the house into the study. Little Jeff followed him to the door.

"Want me to bring a lamp and read?"

"No, thank you, Jeff. Not tonight." Brother Ben sat in the dark and picked up the frayed-edged Bible. Little Jeff quietly returned to the kitchen.

"He's praying, I think," he told Mammy Lou. "I bet it's about Mister Jim."

"Goodness knows, I hope it works better for him that it did with Mister Billy."

Little Jeff peeked out the back door, then whispered to Mammy Lou. "Mister Jim is sitting on the potato hill."

"Maybe he's talking things over with God hisself."

"He ain't saying a word to nobody. He's just sitting and staring at the barn."

"Sometimes, Little Jeff, a man says most to God when he never speak a word."

They went into the front room, Mammy Lou to darn some socks and Little Jeff to read a book. They sat so the light did not shine into the study.

After a few minutes they hear Jim Quince come in and approach his room. At its door he spoke.

"I'll be ready in the morning, Jeff. But you'll have to do the catching!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Happy day!" softly exclaimed Mammy Lou.

None of them saw the tear trickle down the face of the man who sat by himself in the darkness.

CHAPTER V

COLT MAGIC

THE SUN crested the eastern mountains as they crossed the river shallows. Little Jeff, astride one of the mules and leading the other carrying the paraphernalia they would need, indicated the trickling stream.

"Doesn't look dangerous now, does it? About a foot deep, maybe twenty feet wide. You'd never believe it can jump higher than your head and stretch from bank to bank."

They rode up the west slope and Little Jeff pointed toward the south. "See that clump of trees back from the river, about a mile from here? That's Brother Ben's old home. Mammy cleans it twice a month and I water the trees. Now see that other clump farther down the river? That's South Crossing. Thirty miles west is

town, where I ship out my snakes Saturday. We go there once a month. Not much of a place, but the nearest there is out here. They're talking of building a railroad through, and that may make it grow. Sure glad if they do. The stagecoach doesn't like to carry my snakes, regardless of how well I pack them."

"Know how they feel," said Jim wryly. "Who buys those blamed things, anyway?"

"A fellow back East. He sells them to zoos and traveling shows. The big ones go pretty good, he says. I guess it's because they're meaner looking."

"They all look mean to me." Jim Quince was silent. Then, "Jeff, have you ever been into the other shed?"

"Brother Ben's? Yes, sir."

"You've seen those guns?"

"Yes, sir. I help Brother Ben clean the place."

"Where did he get them?"

"Why the men who owned them brought them."

"They gave the guns to Brother Ben when they rode away?"

"Nobody ain't rode away but young Mister Billy. He wrote a note the night he left. Said he guessed Brother Ben was right, but he'd been riding too fast to make such a sudden stop. Two of the others are gone, but they didn't ride away. They're buried in the hills. Brother Ben conducted their services. Me and Mammy Lou and some of the other fellows was there each time."

"You mean the men who own those guns are here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

Little Jeff waved in a wide circle. "These mountains are big, Mister Jim, and the flats are broad."

"Brother Ben hides them?"

"Oh, no, sir. Brother Ben won't hide anyone running from the law."

"He did me. At least he let Mammy Lou hide me."

"He didn't know yet whether or not you was running from the law."

"Oh." Jim stared blankly at the landscape. "Well, if he doesn't hide them, what are they doing here. Some

of those guns have pretty bad records."

"Yes, sir. But they've all been squared with the law. Every man, except young Mister Billy, has gone to where they were wanted and squared themselves with the law. Some were sentenced and paroled, some served time and came back. Two weren't so lucky, Mister Jim; those two buried in the hills. They were hanged. Brother Ben brought their bodies back here where he said they had escaped from fear."

Jim Quince was incredulous. "They willingly went back to face the music, knowing they'd surely be hanged."

"Yes, sir."

"They must have been loco!"

"Brother Ben says it's harder to go on living when you are afraid than it is to die when you're not."

Jim pondered this soberly. "Well, maybe I'm crazy, but I don't get it. I figure nobody wants to die."

"Perhaps," said Little Jeff solemnly, "you're not afraid."

There was no reply from Jim Quince. He rode with a puzzled frown. It was the expression of a man asking himself questions, and unable to classify the answers.

LITTLE JEFF pointed out a gap in the rolling terrain ahead. "There it is, Mister Jim. We dismount at the foot of the slope, walk up across the gap, and bango, there we is."

"Bango is probably right," Jim touched his gun for reassurance. "Say, why dismount and walk? Looks like you could spot them better from your mule."

Little Jeff grinned. "No, sir. Old mule and snake scare each other. Old mule sees snake and shies away. Or old snake sees mule and crawls away—if he sees him in time. It's easy to sneak up on them on foot. Find old snake dozing in the sun, and bango, he's caught before he knows what happened. It's simple, Mister Jim."

"Yeah, sounds too simple. Well, I'm free and twenty-one. I didn't have to come. But since I did, I did. So..."

Little Jeff dismounted and unfastened the paraphernalia rigged onto a specially constructed pack saddle. Jim remained astride, closely scanning the ground.

"No need to worry here, Mister Jim. They seldom crawl over the gap. Once in awhile, one might get a yen to rove and come over..."

"That's the one I'm looking for," said Jim tersely; and Little Jeff had to laugh. Jim mustered a feeble grin, and gingerly stepped down from the saddle.

Little Jeff tied their mounts in skimpy thorn tree shade, then sorted the equipment. There were leg protectors for both, one of the catching rods, and two tin jugs with the trap door entrances. These were covered by a canvas draping, held from the metal by wire supports. Jeff had explained this was to keep the sun's rays from the containers so they would be reasonably cool inside. Otherwise, the heat from the sun striking the metal might kill the snakes.

Little Jeff put protectors on Jim's legs, then donned his own pair. He took up the catching clamp and tin jugs, and took the lead toward the gap.

"We're here in good time, Mister Jim. They'll probably be dozing in the warm sun. In an hour, though, they'll begin to hunt the shade. By that time, maybe we'll be ready to go. I ain't going to take but six. That big fellow was pretty frisky this morning. He'll be all right to ship by day after tomorrow. Well, we're at the top, Mister Jim. What do you think of it?"

Jim looked about in jerky glances. He did not know exactly what he expected. But what he saw was no different than dozens of other places he had seen. The site was a small hill pocket, about one hundred yards across, perhaps twice that in length. In the bottom were a few scattered rocks, none larger than a bale of hay. Clumps of grass were about. The largest growing thing was a scraggly thorn tree, hardly higher than Jim's head. He didn't see a living thing, particularly not a rattlesnake.

He grinned ruefully. "You sure this is the place?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Maybe you was expecting too much."

"I guess I expected to see them piled up by the wagon load. Why, I've gone through worse looking places than this on foot."

"You probably could here, Mister Jim. Old rattlesnake will shy from a man just like he does a mule, if he sees the man first and has time to get away." Little Jeff started down the slope. "Well, come on, Mister Jim. I'll put the cans in the shade of that thorn tree, then carry old snakes over and dump them in. Be quiet as you can, Mister Jim. We want to catch old snakes, not cause them to shy away."

THEY BEGAN their cautious descent, carefully measuring each step for a minimum of noise. Halfway down the slope, Jim noted a crooked tree limb several feet from their path. Tree limb? There were no dead trees in this hill pocket.

Jim quickly took another look. There were markings on it. The end was smooth, not jagged like a broken limb.

"Je... Jeff!" Jim's whisper was a dry-mouthed croak.

The young boy inquiringly turned. Jim could only mutely point, not aware at the moment that he used his left hand.

Little Jeff shook his head, and whispered. "I saw him, Mister Jim. Too small." Jeff started on down the slope.

Too small? Jim blinked and followed. The snake was bigger than Jim's wrist, longer than his arm. And it was "too small"... good gosh!

Little Jeff was almost to the thorn tree when he stopped. He gently put down the tin cans and beckoned. Jim slipped up quietly. Several feet away, sprawled in lazy undulations, the snake was drowsing in the sun. It was thicker than Jim's forearm, almost twice the length of the other.

"We'll take this one."

Little Jeff crept toward the victim. He extended the steel catching stick until the spring clamp was directly above the thick neck. With his thumb, Jeff flipped the lever.

At the touch of metal, the snake became violently awake. It tried to jerk from the terror that grasped its neck. Thick body whipped madly, scattered a shower of gravel, broke weeds off at the roots.

But the clamp would not relinquish its hold, and the snake soon tired. Little Jeff maneuvered the steel rod to make the snake fight more, kept this up until it lay completely exhausted. All except the vibrating tail. It kept piercing the air with its staccato rattling, which made Jim's nerves tingle like fingernails scraped across glass.

"That's it, Mister Jim. When old snake is worn out, he's easy to drop into the can. Like this, Mister Jim."

Little Jeff lifted on the rod until the dangling body was clear of the ground. He pivoted, placed the tail over the tin funnel entrance. Then quickly he lowered away. The slick sides of the funnel chuted the body down through the trap door. At the proper moment, Little Jeff flipped the lever, and the spring clamp relinquished its grip. The head dropped out of sight and the trap door immediately closed. The rattling continued, though now muted by the canvas draped container.

"What happens when you put in another?" Jim was surprised that his first nervousness had gone. He supposed it was because Little Jeff made everything seem so simple. "I mean, won't that one be rested enough to try to escape, when you're dropping the other one in?"

"Can't but one at a time go through the trap door. One gets hung sometimes with his head sticking out, so I just shoves him on in with the clamp. Door closes too quick for the one already in to get out."

"Don't they fight when you drop in a new one?"

"Old rattlesnake needs room to

fight, Mister Jim. He's got to coil to strike whatever he's fighting. Ain't enough room in there for these big ones to coil and strike. But if they manage to bite each other, ain't no serious damage. They're immune to each other's poison."

Little Jeff placed the cans in the shade of the tree, then picked up the catching clamp.

"Well, come on, Mister Jim. Let's find number two."

Jim rubbed the tip of his nose. His glance strayed to a spot near the thorn tree, unencumbered by rocks, weeds or grass. Even a chinch-bug couldn't hide in a barren spot like that.

"Tell you what," Jim said gravely, "you go ahead with your hunting. I'll stick around and keep your can in the shade. The sun will get hot pretty soon, and you certainly want to keep your cans in the shade."

"Yes, sir," agreed Little Jeff, and turned to hide his grin.

BY ELEVEN o'clock, Little Jeff had caught four. At eleven-thirty, he brought in the fifth.

"Getting harder to find, Mister Jim. Done took to the shade to get out of the sun. Some's gone into holes or under rocks, which places I never bother. Stoop down at a hole or lift up a rock, and old snake's got you at his mercy. You getting hungry yet?"

"Hadn't even thought about it."

"I'll take another look about, then we'll pack up and head for home. If I don't find number six today, I'll come back for him in the morning."

"You'd done better today if you hadn't brought me."

"Oh, no, sir. I've done good today. Sometimes I've done much worse than this when everything should have been fine. There's no explaining old mister snake. Sometimes he stay hid when you think he be out. Sometimes he be out when you think he stay hid. You never. . . Good golly, Mister Jim, look! Miss Cathy shouldn't oughta do that, not on the young pinto."

Jim wheeled toward the gap. Cathy Waide waved, rode down the slope. The pinto minced along, ears twitching, tail swishing.

"She ain't got that horse broken good." Little Jeff hurried to keep pace with Jim's long stride. "He's liable to go wild if he sees a snake. But maybe they're all hid by now."

But they weren't.

Below the place where Jim saw the tree limb, the pinto blew lustily through distended nostrils. That sound was joined by another from the ground. Almost at the horse's feet, a rattlesnake spun into a coil, raised tail filling the air with its deadly staccato.

The pinto braked to a stop.

Jim Quince began to run, was tripped to his knees. He'd forgotten the leg protectors. Scrambling erect, he continued up the slope with stiff-legged, careful strides.

Cathy tried to guide the horse around the snake. But from the other side of the path, a second vicious rattling arose. Another snake gathered into a coil.

The pinto reared, pawed wildly at the sky. Cathy lost her seat, slipped down onto the horse's rump. The horse whirled and Cathy fell on her back, breath knocked from her body. The horse lunged madly away.

On either side of Cathy, coils tightened and tails buzzed harder. The snakes were going to strike.

Twenty feet away, Jim tripped and fell again.

"Good God a-mighty. . .!" The way Jim spoke wasn't a prayer, perhaps. But neither was it an oath. It was more an anguished plea.

In one quick motion he drew and fired. Flame stabbed twice from his gun. Jim stumbled to his feet and blinked to be sure it had actually happened. Both bullets had reached their marks. The snakes were dying, heads almost torn away. Slowly Jim holstered his gun.

Little Jeff expelled a breath of awe. "Golly, Mister Jim, you're fast with a gun!"

Jim stared at the dying reptiles. "It usually takes me four shots to hit the ace of spades. I'm not this good usually."

"Well, you were mighty good today."

"I...I know." Jim wiped his brow with an unsteady hand.

LITTLE JEFF packed the paraphernalia while Jim retrieved Cathy's horse. It stopped a half mile from the gap when trailing reins tangled in a shrub. The pinto had a slight limp in one forefoot.

"You'll have to take it slow." Jim handed Cathy the reins.

"I feel like riding him until he drops. Imagine doing a thing like that." Cathy swung astride. "Just wait until his foot gets well."

"Can't take it too slow, Mister Jim." Little Jeff started the mule he rode, leading the other with the packed equipment. Accustomed to the snake hunting trips, neither animal showed the slightest disquiet toward the contents of the tin cans.

"What's the hurry, Jeff? It's just past twelve o'clock. We have plenty of time to get back across the river."

"Wasn't thinking of that. Was thinking about old snakes. They can't stay penned in them cans too long."

"Why don't you hurry on with them, then," said Cathy. "Tell Mammy Lou we'll soon be along."

"Yes, mam. Maybe that would be best." Little Jeff looked at her and rolled his eyes. Cathy colored but made no defense since Jim would hear. Little Jeff rode on, grinning.

After some distance in silence, Cathy spoke.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"Probably not worth it."

"Oh, I don't know. What were they about?"

"Me."

"You?"

"Yeah, that shooting I did back there."

"Yes, Jeff told me. Thanks very much, Jim."

"That's just it." Jim rubbed his hand across his brow. "I'm not sure it's me you should thank."

"Jeff said you killed them both. He said you saved my life."

"I pulled the trigger all right. But I'm not sure I did the aiming." At Cathy's puzzled look, Jim tried to explain. "I've been handling a gun since I was twelve. But the more I practiced, the more thumbs I seemed to have. As for a quick draw," Jim ruefully shook his head, "I gave up long ago."

"That's what puzzles me about this shooting today. I'm falling all over the hillside, ordinarily couldn't even find my gun. But I did today." He was silent a moment. "It was nothing short of miraculous."

"Perhaps," said Cathy gravely, "you prayed to God for help."

"That surprises me, too. I think maybe I did."

In the silence that fell between them, there was a rumble from the distant clouds. Jim glanced at them.

"Those clouds look like business today. Well, if the river looks dangerous when we get there, we just won't try to cross."

Cathy spoke quietly. "Jeff said Brother Ben took you into his shed last night. Did you see everything in there?"

"Enough, I reckon. Still don't understand those men giving up their guns, two even going back to be hanged."

"You didn't see the tools at all. You saw only the guns."

"Tools? What tools?"

"Why the hammers and axes and saws, and the spades and rakes and hoes, that the men get in exchange for their guns. Tools with which to build and to till the soil."

"From the looks of the country I've

seen around here," Jim grinned, "it must take plenty of tools to eke out just the barest living."

"They don't have a lot of money, and they do work very hard. But it doesn't take a lot of money for happiness, Jim. That's what they have now instead of fear, and hiding and running."

"You sound like Brother Ben."

"He knows, all right. Did he tell you about it?"

"Said one of the guns was his."

Cathy nodded. "He killed one man in a game of cards, then an officer who tried to arrest him. He was caught after sixteen months of running and hiding, and sentenced to fifty years. He was paroled after serving twenty. He believes he was spared to save others from his mistakes."

Jim Quince laughed. "Those two who were hanged weren't saved very long!"

"I suppose it's the way you look at it."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't go back to be hanged, regardless of what anybody said. I'd fight just as long as I could."

CATHY MADE no reply. A drop of rain spattered her hand. Jim felt one, too. They glanced at the clouds above the mountains. Ropes of rain stretched down at the earth. A cluster of it crept from the mountains toward them.

"We're going to get wet," said Jim. "We'd better find a tree to get under."

Cathy pointed to their right. "Brother Ben's old home is just across those ridges."

Jim estimated the speed of the approaching rain. "How far?"

"Perhaps a mile and a half."

"Then get on behind me. My horse will tote double, and yours can travel twice as fast without a rider."

In a moment she was behind, and Jim spurred into a trot. The pinto

came readily enough. But they were still a hundred yards from the house when the heavy downpour swept over them.

Jim threw back his head and laughed. "Brother Ben would say there's no use to run. If it's going to get you, it's just going to get you."

Cathy didn't see anything funny. She looked a sight. Pigtails in stringy strands, clothes plastered to her body. And the rain was cold and shivery. It kept beating on her back.

Jim pulled up before the front door. "You scoot inside. I'll put the horses in the shed, be right on in."

He dried the animals and saddles as best he could with an old horse blanket and a pair of towsacks. Then he darted through the downpour around to the front door. He shook rain from his hat, tried to knock some from his clothes. They were too wet for that to do much good. Jim went into the house.

He stopped in surprise. The house was completely furnished, as livable as any home he'd seen. The he remembered Little Jeff and Mammy Lou took care of the place.

Cathy called from the kitchen. "Don't come in here, I'm taking off these wet things. How long do you think it'll rain?"

"How long it rains is not as important as how long the river will be dangerous to cross."

"Oh, that's right. That could be all night, especially if it keeps on raining. You can come in now."

She was wrapped in a wooly blue robe, several sizes too large, as were the floppy fur-lined sneakers. They apparently had been left by Brother Ben for just such an emergency.

"I've got a fire in the stove and coffee making." Cathy had dried her hair, tied it back with a strip of bright cloth. Jim wondered where the heck she had found that. Her face had a fresh-scrubbed brightness, and she seemed to be bouncy inside.

"There's food in the pantry, Jeff has the box full of wood, and Mammy Lou has two jars of fresh water. We could spend a week here if we have to."

Jim toyed with the suggestion, found many pleasing aspects, then one that was not. Facing an outraged father, who was also an officer of the law, had certain disadvantages.

"Your dad would have something to say about that."

"Not much when he found out I'd made up my mind."

"Made up your mind? About what?"

"Us!"

Jim Quince could only stare.

"That's right." She flashed him a teasing smile. "I made up my mind about us the day Little Jeff and I found you."

Jim sat weakly down, as she rummaged for cups and saucers. He wondered if he had stayed at Brother Ben's too long. He rubbed his nose, started and stared at his fingertip. It was his left hand. He suddenly was aware he had been using it all day.

"Well," he advised himself, "if you stay any longer you sure can't say it's because you're still sick. You're able to go right now, which you know you ought to do."

Cathy filled the cups, extended one to him. His eyes met hers. A slow grin spread across his face.

"You know," he said, "it might rain a week."

She smiled, and they drank their coffee.

CHAPTER VI

THE HARDEST SHOT

THE RAIN was typical of the desert summer rainy season. It kept falling almost as hard as when it first began.

"Brother Ben has a change of clothing in the bedroom closet," said

Cathy, "perhaps a little large, but they're dry."

Jim changed in the bedroom to woolen shirt, tan trousers, thick socks. They spread their wet garments on chairs beside the kitchen stove. Jim wiped off his boots and pulled them back on. He had worn his trouser legs down over the tops and no rain had gotten inside. Jim dried his gun and holster, hung it on the chair along with his wet clothes.

Cathy was busy at the kitchen cabinet with can opener and utensils. Rather quickly the food was ready—red beans, sardines, canned peaches, and a box of salted crackers.

Cathy laughed. "Not the kind of meal I'd planned our first one to be. I can do much better. Even Mammy Lou says I make good biscuits."

Jim grinned and helped himself to the beans. They ate, then washed and dried the dishes, and returned to another cup of coffee. While they were drinking, the rain stopped. It quit almost as suddenly as it had begun.

Jim looked at his pocket watch. "Little Jeff missed his schedule today. It started about two, I'd say, and has lasted for over an hour. It's almost four o'clock."

"Well, the danger at the river won't be over for sometime yet." Cathy turned their clothing so the other side would get some heat. "So we might as well relax."

She brought a rocking chair from the front room, and a footstool of covered tin cans. Jim propped his feet on the stool, and she curled up in the rocker like a lazy kitten.

"Um... it's so nice and cozy. That's the way it's always going to be with us."

"Were you ever dropped on your head?"

"No." She laughed. "You saved my life today, so now you've got to keep me."

"You're talking out of your mind.

You don't know me. You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough, Jim Quince, and what are you going to do about it?" She wrinkled her nose at him. "If you try to run away, I'll bring Daddy and we'll drag you back. So there you are. You're stuck and you'd better like it."

Jim fumbled with a button on his borrowed shirt. "Look, my name might not even be Jim Quince."

"I'm not in love with your name."

"You're not in love with me. You just think you are."

"That's why I stayed home yesterday, telling myself I wasn't. But today I didn't fight any longer. I just saddled and came to see you. Mammy Lou pointed the way you and Jeff had gone, so I followed your trail until I found you." Cathy smiled at the toes of her over-size sneakers. "I've always wondered what it would be like. Well, it makes me want to soar like an eagle, or perhaps crow like Mammy Lou's rooster. Sounds silly, I guess, but that's the way I feel."

Jim Quince got up for a drink of water. With his back to her, he spoke. "There's something you've got to know."

"I don't care what happened in your yesterdays. It's today and tomorrow that count now with us."

But Jim shook his head. "I killed Otis Dabney in Santa Fe the other night."

She was silent. Jim put down his glass and returned to his chair.

"I'm a gambler, Cathy." He frowned at his fingertips. "I caught Dabney stealing the aces in a poker game. When I exposed him, he left and got a partner and they laid outside for me."

"They beat you up. That's what was wrong with your face." Cathy arose and lighted a lamp. It was growing dusky. The cloudy sky would bring darkness early today.

"They worked me over so fast I never recognized Dabney's partner. I

had to use my gun. Dabney went down the first shot and his partner ducked away in the dark. I jumped on my horse to get out of town, for I wouldn't have a chance up there after killing a Dabney. His partner opened fire and a bullet caught me in the back."

Cathy knew what he meant. The Dabneys were a prominent family with considerable influence. Otis Dabney was a ne'er-do-well, always in a scrape of some kind. But he was nevertheless a Dabney, and the family would leave no stone unturned to see that his killer hanged.

"Do you know for sure he was dead?"

"He fell like a limp dishrag—didn't make a sound or move a muscle."

"Well, the Dabneys have friends, but so do the Waides. Daddy will help us. So will Brother Ben." Cathy came around and stood slightly behind Jim. She leaned over to brush his cheek with her lips.

From the window was a blast of flame and a pistol shot shook the room. The lighted lamp exploded in a shower of broken glass. Cathy screamed and fell across Jim's knees.

JIM LURCHED to his feet, reached for a gun he did not have. He wheeled toward the chair where it hung with his drying clothes. But the showering lamp oil was ahead of him. Some of it struck the stove, blazed up with a fiery roar. Tongues of flame leaped to his gun, their clothes, the floor. Portions of Cathy's robe began to smoke, changed into greedy flame.

Jim Quince ripped the garment from her. An angry wound lay exposed in her smooth shoulder. Blood dribbled down her side and arm. Jim swept her limp form into his arms and fled from the fiery holocaust.

From the bedroom he grabbed a blanket to cover her, ran on into the outside darkness. He placed her safely away from the doomed house and charged around toward the kitchen.

But the ambusher had escaped. The sound of a swiftly galloping horse quickly faded.

Jim brought their horses from the shed. He tied the pinto's reins so it would eventually make its way home. Then he lifted Cathy and climbed onto his horse.

A rider came from the darkness toward the river. Jim thought perhaps it was the ambusher. But it was big Pat Garrett, on his rangy roan.

"Heard a shot, saw flames, came to see if I could help. Oh, it's you, Quince. Well, hurry on to Brother Ben. He's got something of interest for you." Garrett bent closer, noting the blanketed figure. "What happened?"

"Somebody shot Cathy. I've got to get her to the house."

"Come on. I'll lead the way."

They crossed the river at the shallows. The water was stirrup-deep and swift, but the horses floundered through. Out on the bank, Garrett rode ahead to acquaint them with what had happened.

Brother Ben assisted Jim into the house. Mammy Lou flounced about, preparing things they'd need, and heaping condemnation on Cathy's assailant.

Jim laid Cathy on the kitchen table, covered with a clean sheet. Hot water and bandages were ready, antiseptic and healing ointments. Cathy moaned and stirred.

"We'd better hurry before she comes to," said Jim. "The bullet's lodged, I think. Jeff, you'll have to do it."

Little Jeff accepted the assignment with quiet dignity. He cleansed sharp blade and hands, and lowered the blanket to inspect the wound. The bullet had struck near the left armpit, ranged across toward the spine. It had been robbed of force when it struck the oil lamp, which probably saved her life. Remembering the positions in which they had been, Jim Quince realized the bullet was meant for him.

"Will you help me, Mister Jim?" Little Jeff's sensitive fingers had the bullet located. He looked at the knot of flesh pinched up between his fingers. "I declare, it seems spread out like the one we took from you."

Little Jeff motioned and Jim steadied the spot for the swiftly wielded blade. Mammy Lou bit her lip and looked away. The strained silence was broken by a grunt from Little Jeff. A piece of metal clanged into the pan of water.

"That's it, Mister Jim. Now we cleanses it, douse on that germ-killing stuff. Now the salve and bandage. There now, everything's done. Well, Mister Jim, you helped as good with her as she did with you."

Little Jeff rinsed hands and knife, took up the misshapen bullet. Mammy Lou brought a vial of ammonia spirits. Cathy fought the sharp odor at first, then rolled her head and blankly looked about. Mammy Lou helped her sit up.

"Jim, you're all right?" Cathy remembered with a rush.

"Yeah. So are the horses. But our clothes and the house burned."

Pat Garrett picked up his hat. "Guess I'll be on my way. Got a tip in Santa Fe that he's hiding in a sheep camp on Maxwell's ranch."

Brother Ben followed him to the door. "Thanks, Pat, for bringing the note."

"Sure. Anything, anytime. Just let me know." Garrett mounted and loped away. He had an appointment to keep with death—the death of Billy the Kid.

LITTLE JEFF came into the front room, his young face incredulously puckered.

"Brother Ben, this bullet from Miss Cathy just like the ones from Mister Jim and little old Nubbin deer!"

Brother Ben took the bullet and went into his study. From a drawer, he withdrew two similar pieces of lead and a powerful reading glass. Minutely he studied the three pieces of lead, told Little Jeff to scan them closely.

"They sure look the same all right," Little Jeff decided. "Miss Cathy's is messed up more, I guess when it hit the lamp. But they all look notched."

Brother Ben dropped the bullets and the glass in his pockets. "Don't mention this to the others. We'll wait until Sheriff Waide gets here."

They returned to the living room, found it and the kitchen empty. Mammy Lou had taken Cathy to exchange the blanket for clothing. Mammy Lou's was too large, Little Jeff's too small, so Brother Ben's was pressed into service.

"Mister Jim must be putting away his horse," said Little Jeff. He and Brother Ben sat down in the big front room to await the appearance of the others and the coming of Sheriff Ed Waide. Brother Ben had sent one of the boys from the hills for him soon after Pat brought the note.

Little Jeff was partly right. Jim Quince took his horse into the corral, removed saddle and bridle. But he did not return to the house. Instead, he went to the unlocked shed.

He did not need to strike a match. He reached unerringly to the gun and holster. Buckled on, it tested quick to his draw, much faster than his own gun had been. Slipping cartridges from the belt loops into the gun, he muttered: "All right, you guys, all eighteen of you move over. You're going to get some company."

Jim Quince had made his decision, every foot of the way he rode with Cathy in his arms.

"It all adds up." Jim turned to leave the shed. Someone could have followed Cathy, spied on them together in the house, then fired at him. Jim felt pretty sure he knew who did it. He'd overheard Mammy Lou and Cathy talking about the beatings administered to Cathy's would-be suitors.

Jim closed the shed door and stood still. Two men rode up to the house. By the light through a front window,

Jim recognized Sheriff Ed Waide, and the man who wanted Cathy.

Jim started around the house.

SHERIFF WAIDE'S eyes widened when he saw Cathy's arm in a sling.

"What happened to you?"

It didn't take long to explain, Mammy Lou doing most of the talking. Twice the sheriff glanced across the room; once at Brother Ben, and again to look at his foreman. Turk Gammon stared at the floor as he listened to the details.

Mammy Lou brought the recital to an end: "Mammy Lou better not get her hands on the scoundrel who shoot her poor Miss Cathy!"

Brother Ben spread the misshapen bullets and the enlarging glass beneath a lamp. He extended a folded note to the sheriff. "Read this, Ed, then take a look at these bullets."

The sheriff's face hardened as he read the note. He thrust it into a pocket, bent over to inspect the three bullets.

"This one came from Nubbin, the deer. This one from Jim, and this one from Cathy. Little Jeff can identify each of them because he removed all three. The one from Cathy is a bit more battered because it hit the lamp. But it still has something in common with the other two. Do you see it, Ed?"

"Yeah."

Brother Ben straightened. "We don't know who fired the ones at Nubbin and Cathy. But that note gives us a good idea who fired the one into Jim."

"That's right. Turk, where'd you been when you caught me tonight?"

Turk Gammon slowly straightened from his lazy slouch. His gaze flicked around them once, then centered on Ed Waide. The sheriff was the only one armed.

"Why in town, like I said. They told me you'd been called out here when I got to the ranch. I followed

(please turn to page 106)

GUNFIGHTER'S ANSWER

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR



He screamed once
as he went down...

CHAPTER I FAIR FIGHT

THE FEELING that came to Frank Elman when he left the Paradise saloon and crossed the worn porch was one that stopped him for a moment. He was not a man who paid much attention to feelings, but this was an odd one—a convic-

tion that he stood between two worlds.

Behind him was the bawdy hubbub of the saloon; the endless jangle of the piano, the rough laughter of men, the half-indignant squeal of a percentage girl.

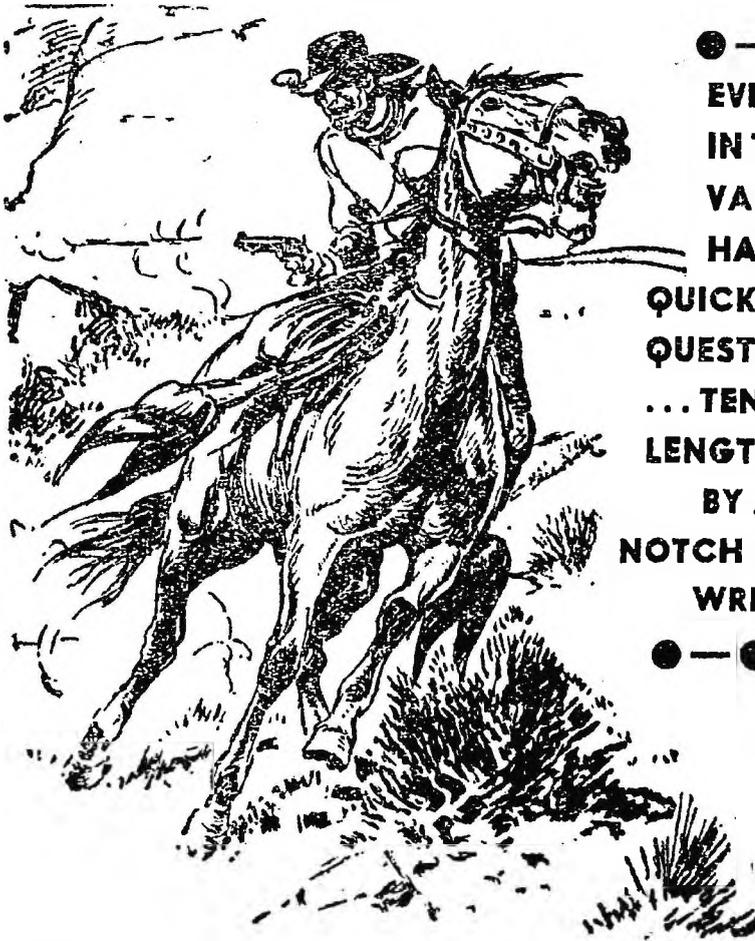
Out here was the silent street, and the smell of dried grass drifting in from the range, and the serene bulk of the surrounding mountains that loomed darkly against the stars; a

calm world, and an orderly one—Tracy Pardue's world.

And Tracy sat quietly on her horse, waiting as Frank moved toward her again. It seemed necessary that he do more than just touch his hat in a gesture of respect. He took it off, and looked up at her small tanned face, and said, "Hello, Tracy. A Mex

kid came in and said you wanted to see me."

"I do. I'm sorry I wasn't at the ranch today when you rode by. Old Juan said you had a bunch of cattle that you wanted to drive through, so I rode down where they're bunched and looked them over." Her slim body, clad in levis and shirt, stirred



● — ● — ●
**EVERY MAN
IN THE
VALLEY
HAD A
QUICK-DRAW
QUESTION!
... TENSE BOOK-
LENGTH NOVEL
BY A TOP-
NOTCH WESTERN
WRITER!**



Five hundred longhorns, Frank Elman had, and a tough crew to take them through the Portal. Were they rustled beef? Could a range-wise cowgirl make him turn back before there was trouble? Must showdown come inevitably with the bullet-baron of the basin if he stuck? Frank had one answer for all questions—the fast gun in his fist.

in the saddle with a subtle impatience.

"Frank, you've got about five hundred head there."

"Five hundred and ten," he said, smiling a little at the accuracy of her estimate. "And a crew to handle them. I brought most of the boys to town tonight to introduce them around."

"To the girls in there." Tracy's chin lifted a tiny fraction of an inch but here eyes, luminous in the lamp-light from the saloon windows, looked down at him with an odd sadness. "Those cattle are gaunted, but they're good stock. Where did you get them? You've been gone only six months, and Lin said you had only a hundred dollars when you left."

"There are ways for a man to make money in a hurry if he's willing to take some risks."

"Crooked ways, Frank?"

He shook his head. "I didn't steal the money that bought them, girl. And your dad doesn't need to worry about me bringing rustled cattle through the Portal. Tracy, where's Lin? I didn't find him out at our place."

"I'm sure I don't know where he might be. I haven't seen him for some time."

Frank stared up at her, wondering at the offhand way in which she had spoken of his brother. He had thought they would be married by now. Tracy and Lin were the same age, twenty-two, and Lin had polish and a knack with the girls, and he had wanted Tracy for his wife. In that, if one wanted to peer deeper into Frank Elman's feelings than Frank had ever consciously done, might be found one of the reasons why he had wanted to put Amity Basin behind him for a time.

There had been another reason too, a more obvious one. Rod Langerham, who had inherited the big Cross L spread in the center of the basin, was crowding. Pushing out, taking more and more range from the lesser outfits on the claim that those whose

herds had dwindled had no further need for the grass. Step by step Langerham had moved, buying up or driving out those who stood in his way. And the steady drive of his expansion was aimed straight toward the Elman brother's spread.

Frank had an answer for that now, in the new stock and in the boot-tough crew that he had brought up with him from the Border country.

Tracy must have been thinking along those lines too. "Frank," she asked in a tight voice, "are you going to make trouble?"

"I'm not going to make it, but I'm not going to sidestep it. And I'm not going to be crowded into selling to Langerham as the others have done."

TRACY'S EYES searched his face then, while the ribald noises in the saloon seemed to become louder in contrast to the silence out here. The night breeze stirred her hair, a brown lock of it falling across her cheek; she lifted a hand and brushed it back without taking her scrutiny from Frank.

It was as if she was puzzled and a little frightened by this man who could smile so easily but who wasn't smiling now. Frank Elman was twenty-seven and stood over six feet in his boots, every inch of him toughened by the hard, unremitting work that was his way of life. He had played hard too, knowing full well that a man had to blow off steam now and then, letting himself go in the brief, infrequent sessions that he permitted himself at Mike's Paradise.

He was a man upon whom responsibility had fallen at an early age, and the effects of that were deep inside him. A man who was called tough, not so much because of his appearance—his right cheek had been scarred by a bronc's hoof when he was a boy—but rather because of an inner, combative spirit that revealed itself in his every reaction to life.

Tracy Pardue's world was a dif-

ferent one. She had been sheltered, and she was much like her father in every way.

Old Ed Pardue had found this huge basin long ago, and had named it, and had placed his ranch squarely across its only entrance. He had split rails for the fence with which he first blocked the Portal. And then he had chosen those who would build this range and he had sent for them, to share it with him. The Langerhams, the Binnses, the Elmans, and a dozen-odd other families. Pardue had chosen carefully, since he was a man who had seen range wars and contention and wanted no more of it.

A fanatic, some called him, who wanted peace above all else and thought he could shut out the evils of the world by building a fence.

But there was one thing he hadn't reckoned with. He could choose his people who were to share the basin, but he couldn't choose their sons. And the second generation often was quite unlike the old stock. The old ones died and then the evils of the outside world—greed, and hate, and all the the rest of it—came into being inside the basin.

It wasn't Ed Pardue's way to fight those things. He shrank from them, averted his eyes and hoped for the best.

That could never be Frank Elman's way. He had an elemental streak in him that made him what he was—a fighter.

And now he said gently, "I reckon your dad got over that sick spell he was having when I left, Tracy."

She bit her lip, moving her head slowly from side to side. "No. It's his heart—he's at Doc Wintler's place now, where he can have proper care. But it—doesn't seem to do much good."

"Tracy, I'm sorry." For the first time Frank noticed the tiredness in the way she held her slim shoulders, and knew that she had been trying to carry the Portal outfit herself. She had no brothers. Old Ed Pardue, whose wife had died when Tracy was

born, had wanted a son—now the role was forced upon Tracy.

"I'm sorry too," she said softly. "And not only about Dad. About you, Frank."

"Why me?"

"Because you're going to fight. There will be violence—and no one in this world ever gained anything by violence."

"Those are your dad's words you're speaking, Tracy."

Her lips quivered, tugged by some intensity of feeling that was in her. "They are good words, Frank. True words. You've got a forty-cow outfit, and a house and corrals that you built with your own hands after that fire in which your folks died. But is it worth all this?"

"It is to me. It's ours, Lin's and mine. The kid's got a right to a good start—"

"The kid! He's a grown man—is there no sacrifice too great for you to make for that brother of yours?"

Frank didn't answer that directly. He said, "With the new stock, we'll make full use of our range. All I want Langerham to do is leave us alone—but you seem pretty certain he'll try to move in on us, that there'll be trouble. Have you changed your opinion of him while I've been gone?"

"Things have happened, Frank. Rod has brought in a new foreman, a man named Zack Stahl. Just last month, Stahl killed Vince Jones in a gunfight. They said it was a fair fight—as if there could be such a thing, with guns!"

Frank felt a tightening of his jaw muscles. Jones had held the range immediately north of the Elman graze. This had been a long stride for Langerham, one that brought him squarely against the Elman's north line.

The girl reined her horse away. "I've found out what I wanted to know, I guess," she said tiredly. "Our stock will be moved aside for you tomorrow, and you can go through the Portal." She paused, glancing toward him over her shoulder with solemn eyes. "This is catty of me—but if you

want to find Lin you might look around for Karen Langerham.

FRANK STARED at her slim back as she rode down the street. Oddly, he didn't think of her last words at once—he was thinking that she tried to fill a man's boots at Portal, but that she was more than any of the painted, provocatively dressed girls in the Paradise. It wasn't a matter of lush beauty at all—it was something deeper, some inner appeal that always had baffled him.

He built a smoke, and his methodical thinking came around to her mention of Karen Langerham. To find Lin, look for Karen—what in blazes had she meant by that? Karen Binns was a tall brunette who had married Rod Langerham three years ago, and their wedding had been the last occasion on which everyone in Amity Basin had met on friendly terms.

That had been before Rod Langerham began his reaching out—or perhaps it had been the beginning of it, not recognized as such by anyone at the time. Rod had taken over the Binns spread just a few weeks after the ceremony, and old Dan Binns had left the basin.

Abruptly, Frank crushed his cigarette under his heel. He moved along the sidewalk—the feeling of alarm that was building within him left no room for any desire to go back into the Paradise. He wanted to think, in the quiet of the street.

In front of the hotel he came to a halt. Lin's horse was at the hitch-rail, traces of dried sweat showing on its coat. The animal was a freak, a chestnut with white mane and tail, the only one of its kind in the country. And the silver-mounted saddle was the one that Frank had bought for the kid on his twenty-first birthday.

Frank turned, mounted the steps and went into the hotel. It was a small place, getting most of its business from cattle buyers and drummers and an occasional cowboy who

wanted to sleep off a spree. There was no night clerk; Frank spun the register around and found the number "12" set down opposite Lin's name.

He climbed the stairs and moved along the nearly dark hallway. As he approached the door of Room 12, it opened, and a bespectacled little man with a folder of papers under his arm came out.

The man was Alec Mulford, Amity's only lawyer. He gave Frank a startled look, then stepped to one side and hurried by, going down the stairs with nervous haste.

The door of the room had closed promptly behind Mulford. Frank strode to it and knocked.

"Who's there?" Lin's voice was pitched high, tight-sounding.

"Frank."

The lock clicked. The door opened a crack, then swung wide. Frank stepped into the room, closing the door behind him, and then stopped, a feeling of shock running through him when he saw his brother's face.

Lin Ekman was handsome in a boyish, plump-cheeked way that appealed to the ladies. His hair was reddish brown and laid smoothly to his well-shaped head—it was no dark and unruly tangle as Frank's was. Lin had had an easy time of it, with Frank taking the rough jobs, the bog-line riding and the bronc-breaking and the log cutting, because he had wanted his brother to have something better than the grinding toil that was his own lot. Now Lin's face was gray with fear and his eyes had a trapped wildness in them.

He darted to the window and looked down into the street. He turned back, rubbing his palms on his thighs, no sureness in him now at all.

"What the devil's the matter with you, kid?" Frank demanded.

Lin lifted a trembling hand to the mustache that he had raised since Frank saw him last. "I—I haven't got much time," he said as if he hadn't heard Frank's question. "If only Zack Stahl doesn't cross me up—"

"Rod Langerman's new foreman? I hear he killed Vince Jones."

Lin nodded, and blurted, "They—they had a fight over the way Cross L stock was being shoved over to the Jones waterhole. Tillie Jones didn't have money enough to bury Vince—she sold out to Langerham to get it, Frank, an' left the basin."

This was the old pattern—the way in which Langerham crowded the little outfits, let economic pressure force them to sell to him.

"And what's this I hear," Frank said softly, "about you and Karen Langerham?"

Lin's mouth twisted bitterly. "Word sure gets around. Tracy turned me down flat, Frank—she never would give me a reason. After that I went on a bender, an' I— Well, Karen happen to be in town—" He made a crooked, half-defiant little smile. "Dammit, you made a gentleman out of me, an' a gentleman doesn't talk about—"

Frank shoved the younger man, angrily, over to the wall. "You'll talk about it this time! What in blazes got into you? Were you out of your head?"

"I—I—" The kid spread his hands helplessly. "We met up in Bonita Canyon a few times, an' then she took to pretending she was having dress fittings in town, an' came by our place instead. I—"

"Another man's wife," Frank said savagely. "Rod Langerham's wife!" He was thinking now that he had been too easy with the kid. Lin had been only fifteen on that night when their parents died in the fire, and Frank had been twenty—too young, maybe, for the chore of raising a headstrong brother. The neighbors had helped; but somewhere along the line Frank had made a bad mistake and the results of it were cropping out now.

"Rod found out about it," Lin said miserably. "Damn him! He told Karen that he'd kill me, but I'm buying out." He wet his lips and gestured toward the tiny, battered writing desk beside the bed. "Zack Stahl fixed it up for me. I'm waiting now for—"

CHAPTER II

GLOVES OFF

FRANK WENT to the desk and picked up the legal-looking paper which lay there. It was a deed, conveying Lin's interest in the Elman ranch to Rod Langerham. Lin had already signed it—and the signature had been witnessed by Alex Mulford and by the owner of the hotel. "You damn fool," Frank said. "You poor, weak, damn fool."

Lin fell back a step, chewing at his lip. Frank, there's nothing else I can do! I'm no good to you, nor to anybody else here. You were hellbent for me to be a gentleman an' you made me one, able to hold my liquor an' stand up when a lady enters the room, an' I'm no damn good for anything else. You're better off with me out of the way—I've made nothing but trouble for you. When they get that deed I can leave the basin. Stahl's promised me that."

"What's the word of Langerham's man worth? Kid, what kind of crazy, twisted reasoning have you got in your head?" Frank slammed the deed down on the desk. "Once they get this you'll get a bullet in your back—that's the way Rod's kind operates. And what sort of fix are you leaving me in—were you too scared to think of that? Once Langerham is half owner of the Box E he'll move that big crew of his in on me. What do I do then?"

Lin had no answer for that. There was a silence; and Frank thought of the chances he had taken, the gruelling work he had done to get money to buy a herd and to hire the crew that he had brought with him. He had drifted into an impoverished range down on the Border, a land of cattle-poor ranchers who couldn't, at the prevailing low price of beef, make the long drive to railroad shipping pens. Across a range of mountains regarded as impassable there was a booming mining

camp, but the drive around those mountains was too long. . . .

He had persuaded a stricken rancher to let him contract to drive a herd across the mountains. He had made the drive, losing some stock in the defiles, staying awake nights to fight off Mexican rustlers. At the beef-hungry mining camp he had done well—and with his share of the proceeds he had gone back to buy the next herd on his own. He had made four drives altogether, to make his stake. And now his cattle were waiting outside the Portal.

"The Portal," he said, in tones that suddenly were awed. "Lin, that's it—why didn't we ever see it before? The Portal's what Langerham wants. Getting the Jones graze carried him a step nearer to it, and now we're all that stand in his way."

Lin seemed bewildered, too wrapped up in his own fears to think clearly. But it all was plain enough now, to Frank. The man who controlled the Portal could control the basin—no head of beef could be moved in or out without his consent. He could squeeze out all the other ranchers and the basin would be his. Two hundred thousand acres, well watered, protected from winter storms by the high mountains that surrounded it. . . .

Old Ed Pardue had never operated that way. But Rod Langerham would. Langerham had never made a move against the Pardues, not wanting to tip his hand. But the day he controlled the Box E he would have advanced to their line, and he wouldn't stop there. With the Cross L at Portal's fence, some sort of incident could be drummed up to make trouble between the two outfits.

A sound of running hoofs came from the street. Lin darted again to the open window and looked out. Frank stepped to his side. Looking down over the roof of the hotel's wide porch he saw that the Langerham crew was hitting town.

They were making a show of force—they all were here, and there were more of them now than Frank remembered. They rode fine horses, since the basis

of the Langerham success had always been fine stock, fine mounts for the Cross L crew. In the lead rode a big man who held himself erect in his saddle, a man who was a stranger to Frank.

"Zach Stahl," Lin blurted. "He'll be up here in a minute. Frank, I—"

Giving the younger man's arm a quick grip, Frank said, "Steady, kid. He'll not be coming up here. Sit tight till you hear from me." He moved to the door and paused there, looking back with a wry smile. "Kid, don't let things scare you so. They're only bad when you let them get you." He went out, and heard the lock click behind him.

HE TRAMPED down the stairs and met Zack Stahl in the dimly lighted lobby. Stahl moved with a big man's easy swing, at the unhurried pace of a man supremely sure of himself. He carried a gun of the latest model, in an oiled and tied-down holster. The shirt was stretched by his massive shoulders and his barrel chest was black, with pearl buttons. He wore soft-looking white deerhide gloves.

He smiled when he saw Frank—it was a disarming smile, expansive and toothy. He tilted his hat back from his broad face and said, "Why, howdy, stranger. Who might you be?"

"I'm Frank Elman. You needn't be going up, mister—the kid has changed his mind."

Stahl lifted bushy, almost white eyebrows. "Why, now, that's too bad. I've been trying to help him and I've had me a time, keeping Langerham from going right after him. Quite a hand with the ladies, that brother of yours is. But a woman can't take to spending half the night at his place without it getting noticed. Not when she'd Rod Langerham's woman."

"And now Rod's cashing in on it. That pegs him pretty low."

"You've got it wrong, friend." Stahl made his smile again, adding, "You strike me as a man I can savvy—we ought to get better acquainted. And

if the kid has changed his mind like you say— Come on to the Paradise and I'll buy you a drink."

Frank nodded. He wanted to look at this man in better light, wanted a chance to measure the gunman who now was ramrodding Rod Langerham's outfit. And getting Stahl away from the hotel this easily was a break that he had not expected.

They left the hotel and moved along the plank sidewalk, Stahl glancing over his shoulder only once as if to make sure that Frank was following him.

The Langerham crew was at the saloon, their horses filling the long hitch-rack. Mike's Paradise was something that seemed not to fit, at first glance, into the scheme of things in Amity Basin. But Ed Pardue was no fool—he knew the preponderance of men over women in any cattle country. And knew that a place like the Paradise could serve as a safety valve, a place where they could blow off the steam that might otherwise make trouble.

Inside, the Cross L men were lined solidly at the bar. Stahl picked a table in the center of the big room, said, "Another time, honey," to a percentage girl, and sat down.

Frank took a chair and sized the man opposite him. Stahl was, he judged, about forty. There was a driving vigor in everything the man did, in the way he thumped the table for a bottle to be brought, even in the determined friendliness of his smile. His face was muscular, his eyes so pale a greenish-blue that they seemed almost colorless.

Frank looked around and saw that old Ben Daggett, with the other four hands that he had brought up from the Border country, occupied the end of the bar. Daggett looked idly toward the pair at the table, then stiffened and put down his drink without looking at it, and wiped a hand over his seamed face as he stared at Zack Stahl.

Stahl downed his first drink and held up a gloved hand. "The glove is soft, friend," he said. "But what's in it isn't.

I like to use the glove when I can."

"Is that a threat?" Frank asked.

Stahl made his wide smile once again. "Just setting you straight—if we understand each other we'll get along. You've got some dandy range out there, with good springs. Langerham can put it to good use. All of it, friend, not just half of it. He'll pay you a nice price."

"And that will put him right where he wants to be, up against the Portal. It should be easy for him to handle a sick old man and a girl, shouldn't it?"

Stahl's eyes widened and took on a muddy look. "Why now, have I said anything about Portal?"

What had been only a well-grounded hunch in Frank's mind was a certainty now. Langerham wanted the Portal, and Stahl wasn't troubling himself to make much show of covering it up.

A HUSH FELL over the Paradise, and then it was broken by the swift, hard impacts of a man's boot-heels coming across the floor. Frank saw that Rod Langerham had entered the place.

Langerham was a small man with a thin face and overly large, brooding eyes. In spite of the warmth of this night he wore his long coat and kept his shoulders back, his face maintaining its mask of dignity, his stride laden with a forced aggressiveness.

When he reached the table he said, paying no attention to Frank, "Stahl, I wanted some of the crew to ride with me tonight. When I got to the bunkhouse I found they were all gone. You brought them here without orders—why?"

Stahl did not rise. Looking at him, Frank wondered if it was thinly veiled contempt that he saw in those pale eyes. Stahl said, "Why, now, Rod, I didn't want to bother you with details. The way I see it, my job is to work for your best interests, figure out what needs to be done and do it. Pull up a chair and I'll tell you the little

deal I've got for you. I reckon you know Elman, here."

"I know him," Langerham snapped, pulling a chair away from another table and seating himself. He fixed his brooding eyes upon the center of the table. "Elman, I'm going to kill that brother of yours. Tonight—stay out of my way. Stahl, what's this deal you're talking about?"

"It's all part of the same thing," Stahl said, pouring a drink for Langerham. "A good, tight little deal. Young Elman is signing over to you his interest in the Box E. I was just telling Frank that you'll pay him a nice round price for the other half of it."

For a full half minute Langerham was utterly silent. Then he drew himself up, a faint smile coming to his face, and tossed off the drink impatiently. "Stahl, hiring you was the best thing I ever did. I—" He scowled. "What happens to young Elman?"

"He leaves the basin," Stahl said. "You'll not have to worry about your wife seeing him any more. Strike a deal with Frank, here, and you're all set."

In Langerham's eyes, then, there was a clash of feelings. Only a brief one—he leaned back in his chair and nodded, openly pleased with this.

But Frank rose. "Rod, you're a pretty low grade of skunk, playing the injured husband till you see a chance to profit from it. But it doesn't swing your way. I'm bringing in a stocker herd, and Lin and I are going to hold the E—all of it. You can have your whack at him, if you're man enough to make it a fair shake. Try it any other way and you'll answer to me."

It was Stahl who rose then. "So that's the way it's to be, eh? Well, I'm a man that wants to like everybody, friend. I'm not making much of a go of it in your case."

Frank shrugged and backed from the table.

A muscle twitched in Stahl's cheek, and suddenly his eyes were hooded. He still maintained the shape of a

smile, but now it was a grimace of vicious joy that revealed the inner nature of the man. "You savvy what this means," he said. "I'll be coming after you, friend. Gloves off."

"Start any time. Here and now if you like—we're both armed."

Stahl's eyes widened as if he were seeing the real Frank Elman for the first time. And finding in him a stubborn, unbending will that was lacking in young Lin. The ramrod debated for a moment, slowly flexing the fingers of his gun hand.

CHAPTER III

NO ANSWER

BUT THE matter was decided for them by old Ben Daggett, who had sensed the tension at the table in the middle of the room. The wizened cowhand drew his long-barreled sixgun, shouting, "The lid's on, boys! First man that throws a gun on Frank gets lead in 'im!"

The others whom Frank had brought north with him spun from the bar, drawing their weapons to back old Ben's say. Mike Gaffney, the bald little saloonkeeper, lifted a sawed-off shotgun from behind the bar, pleading, "No shootin' in here, now! All this glass costs—"

"There ain't goin' to be any shootin'," Daggett said, his wrinkled face wreathed in a smile and his glance darting about the room. "All these boys are goin' to be real careful about their hides."

Frank's crew made a little cluster, each man covering another's back, and moved toward the door. Frank moved with them, backing up, his hand on the carved bone stock of his gun. The last things that he saw when he passed through the swinging doors were the taut, furious, thwarted face of Rod Langerham and the big, calm figure of Zack Stahl. The ramrod had his gloved thumbs hooked under his gun-

belt and he seemed on the verge of laughter. . . .

"Damn!" said old Ben when they reached the porch. "Did you know who you was throwin' fightin' talk at in there?"

Frank glanced at him, frowning until he recalled that old Ben was partly deaf and could read lips at distances beyond the earshot of other men. "His name is Stahl—"

"Zack Stahl, that's right. Hell, ain't your ever heard of him? He drove trail herds for awhile, blasted his way through farmers that tried to keep his drives from crossin' their land. Then he turned into a town marshal, the kind that keeps on the move an' will tame any town for the interest that'd bid the highest to have it swung their way. Why, he killed four men in—"

"Leave it be," Frank said. The silence in the saloon had been broken again, now, by a rising rumble of voices. "You and the boys mount up and head for the camp—watch things out there, Ben. There's something I've got to do here in town, but I'll be along directly."

Frank waited until his crew jogged down the silent street, and then he went to the hotel.

As he climbed the stairway he fought down an urge to send young Lin out of the basin. That would save Lin from the consequences of his affair with Karen Langerham, and from the range war that was now a certainty as well. For Lin, it would be the easy way out. And that was the flaw in it—Lin had been permitted to take the easy way too often.

Frank blamed himself for that.

When he reached the door of Room 12 he found it ajar. Frowning, he pushed on through. And then he stopped, a small stricken sound rising in his throat but never passing his lips.

Lin Elman lay on the floor of the room, his face in a pool of his own blood, the haft of a knife protruding from his back.

FRANK DARTED forward, knelt, and found that Lin was dead.

He rose, fighting down a wave of sickness. A knife—it was quiet, and somehow more sinister than a gun. It was a devil of a way for a man to die. Steeling himself he knelt again and pulled the blade from Lin's body and wiped it on a towel.

Stunned by grief, he wondered distantly how the killer had gotten in here. Lin had kept the door locked and certainly would not have opened it for anyone he did not know. Frank went to the window and looked out over the porch roof, which was only three feet below. He struck a match, and before it was extinguished by the night wind that often came down from the peaks he saw that several of the sun-curved shingles were freshly cracked.

The killer had walked on them. He had climbed the porch roof and had entered Lin's room by the window, leaving it through the doorway when his chore was finished.

Frank remembered the deed then, and looked quickly toward the little writing desk. But the deed was gone.

HE DID NOT get back to his stocker herd that night. Sudden death was a final, conclusive thing for its victim, but it placed a lot of responsibilities upon those who were left behind. Frank tramped down the stairs, not trying to think beyond the immediate tasks that must be done, and roused out Doc Wintler.

That was formality—all that the doctor could do for Lin Elman he did with a scratch of a pen on a death certificate.

"I'll have to hold this," he said, "till the sheriff gets up here." He looked again at Lin's body and shook his head, his round pink face professionally calm in the presence of death. "I don't know what's happening to this basin of ours—two killings in less than a month." He snapped his instrument bag shut. "Well, I'll keep this from Ed Pardue—I'm having a hard enough time pulling him through. If

he gets to worrying it'll finish him."

Frank went down the stairs with the doctor, and then went back to Mike's Paradise. The Langerham outfit was gone. And Mike's swamper agreed, for a ten-dollar fee, to make the fifty-mile ride to the county seat to inform the sheriff.

Then, because the hotelkeeper had been aroused by all the tramping of boots on his stairs and insisted that the dead man be removed from the place at once, Frank went out into the night again to find the town barber, who acted as undertaker. He helped the barber carry Lin's body down the street and into the back-lot shed where the coffins were piled.

It was dawn when Frank reached his camp. Shock and grief had drained him of all feeling—leading Lin's horse, he rode like a man in a stupor.

The cattle were stirring. Old Ben Daggett was poking up the campfire, dumping grounds from the coffeepot and scooping a handful of fresh grounds from a bag of Arbuckle. He looked sharply at Frank's face and demanded, "What's happened, bucko?"

Frank stepped down from his saddle and, feeling the need to talk to someone, he told Ben what had happened. The whole of it, from the very beginning when Ed Pardue had tried to choose only good people to settle his basin. Ben watched his lips the whole time—Frank could not bring himself to speak loudly of these things. From time to time Ben handed him steaming cups of coffee.

When Frank came to the end of it at last he said, "That's how it stands, Ben. You and the boys hired on to work stock, not to buck up against an outfit like Langerham's got now. I can't afford to pay gunfighters' wages, so—"

The oldster swore. "Me an' the boys have cussed you up one side an' down the other, when you couldn't hear it. You set a pace a man can barely keep up with, but you don't

back up for anybody. There ain't many of your kind left, bucko—it gives a man a good feelin' to know he can match your style, even though it strains 'im to the point of grumblin' an' swearin' to do it. I figure we'll hang an' rattle. What me an' the boys better do now is get the herd movin'."

Daggett caught up his saddle and tramped toward the cavvy. But he paused a moment, adding over his shoulder, "One thing, though. This Langerham's sort of got his tail caught in the gate hinge, ain't he? If he springs that deed on you it'll tie 'im to the killin', tight an' proper."

Frank thought about that, while his crew shouted and spurred their mounts in jabbing little runs to get the herd under way. He doubted that Langerham had done the killing. For one thing, the man's manner and actions in the saloon had indicated that he had not yet settled his score with Lin.

That might have been put on, of course. Rod Langerham's nature always had been a devious one, even in the days when his parents had been living and he attended the little Amity school. Older than the other boys yet smaller than they, he had found some wry pleasure in fooling them, making them think he was fixing to pull some vicious prank like burning the schoolhouse, then laughing at them when they brought the teacher and it turned out that he was primly dusting erasers. He had been making up for his lack of size by proving himself more clever than others.

Maybe that had carried over into his manhood. Maybe it provided some of the drive that had made the Cross L the biggest outfit in the basin and would make it bigger still if Langerham had his way.

Frank doubted, though, that the man possessed the courage to kill. Rod had a high regard for his personal safety—and in killing, even by means of a knife in the back, there was always an element of risk. He would put

someone else to the chore. Stahl, perhaps.

And yet, in the saloon, Rod had not seemed to have known about the way his ramrod had crowded young Lin into a corner in the guise of helping him. And he would not have known about the deed, then....

That pointed to another fact. The relationship between Rod and Stahl was an odd one, hardly that of boss and employee at all. The ramrod went ahead on his own—it could be that Rod Langerham, for all his cleverness, had hired a man he couldn't handle.

Of one thing Frank was certain. Sooner or later he would find the owner of the knife that now was thrust down into his holster beside the barrel of his gun. Probably he would kill the man—but before that man died, he would talk....

FRANK PUT the knife into his bedroll, tied the dusty blankets behind the cantle of his saddle, and rode out to help his crew.

They were most of the morning getting the herd through the Portal. Ed Pardue's valley was narrow but richly grassed; a gash in the wall of mountains that, everywhere else, blocked all access from the low desert country outside to Amity Basin above. The rail fences that Pardue had thrown across the upper and lower ends of his valley had been replaced with barbed wire years ago. Between them lay the Portal outfit's four miles of range, with stout log buildings and corrals set solidly in the lee of the mountain at one side.

There were gates in both fences. A horsebacker or a man with a wagon could pass through at any time he chose. But when a herd was to be driven through the Portal cows had to be bunched and held aside to keep the stock from mixing.

That was extra work for Portal. It was one price that Ed Pardue paid for his measure of control over the basin. He had always paid it willingly.

Frank and his crew funneled the stocker herd through the first gate and made their drive up the valley, shoving the grass-hungry cattle along to keep them from stopping to graze.

It was hot and dusty work. Passing the Portal herd, Frank lifted a hand in greeting to the riders who held it. They were old men, most of them—men who had come here with Ed Pardue in the very beginning, men whom Frank had known since boyhood. The exception to that was their foreman, red-headed young Barry Verson, who had come here only two years ago and who worshipped Tracy Pardue with every glance he gave her.

Frank wondered whether Verson was the reason for Tracy's refusal to marry young Lin. A strange wry stir of feeling got into him then, but he told himself that it didn't matter now. Lin was dead. There could only be gaping emptiness in Frank's life, where once there had been driving purpose.

He wondered why he was going back into the basin at all. There was other range, beyond the mountains; range that a man could take and hold without the certainty of facing a cattle war. The Box E's modest house and forty cows were hardly worth the price of facing Langerham and Stahl.

And yet he was going in. He didn't try to analyze the feeling of purpose that was building within him now. Maybe, he told himself, he was just too stubborn to quit. Or perhaps a man did things because of inner, driving demands that were deeper than he knew.

The herd reached the Portal's upper fence and was driven through. And now it was on Box E graze—high graze, the land tilted gently down toward the basin and slashed by cottonwood-lined Bonita Canyon.

Beyond the Box E was the expanse of the basin, range that had never been fenced because there had been no need for fences between the families that Pardue had chosen. In the

center of it was the big white Langerham house, placed on a high knoll and visible from everywhere here, lighted by a dozen lamps at night.

On this side of the Langerham range was the slovenly Binns layout. Nearer than that was the Chester place, the Afton place, and finally the Jones place. On all of them, houses were being torn down, their roof beams bared to the sky—all of their range was Langerham's now.

Beyond the white house lay other ranches, all holding rich graze on which some had prospered, some had not. That was in the inevitable pattern of things—some ranchers spent their beef money wisely, building for the future. Others spent theirs for things they thought they needed but really only wanted. And when their herds dwindled while those of their neighbors grew, they wondered why.

The Langerham outfit had grown more than any other. And Binns had had a thousand head, Jones and Chester and Afton several hundred apiece, all under the Cross L brand now. That was a way of growing fast, of gathering momentum.

And Frank Elman was placing himself squarely in the way of that momentum. For what reason, with Lin dead? He shrugged the nagging question aside, having no answer for it.

CHAPTER IV

HOT LEAD HUNCH

HE WAS two days in getting his stock settled on its new range. He made a trip to Amity with the wagon, for salt cakes, and found that the Sheriff had not yet arrived in the basin.

He was distributing the salt near the Bonita Canyon springs when Tracy Pardue rode down the slope. Her hair was tangled by fast riding and her face seemed pale, her eyes shadowed by the sadness that was in them now.

She dismounted hastily and came toward him, saying, "Frank! Oh, Frank, I—"

She was in his arms then, and she was crying, pressing her cheek against his chest as if she found solace there. "Poor Lin," she said at last. "I— Do you think Rod did it?"

"I don't know," Frank said woodenly.

She drew back, wiping her eyes and scanning his face. "It was my fault," she said in a tiny voice. "He wanted me to marry him, but I—I—"

"It was nobody's fault, girl," Frank said roughly, "unless it was mine. I reckon I didn't have savvy enough to be a father to the kid."

A silence came between them; into it there crept a strange quality of tension, a thing that puzzled Frank and made him clench his fists until the nails dug into the flesh of his palms.

It was broken by the arrival of a rider who came along the canyon bottom, a man with greasy clothing and a week-old stubble of beard.

The man was John Sayre, who had a little horse-ranch up in the foothills to the east. An irresolute, watery-eyed man of fifty, a whining man full of the despair of his own failures.

"Howdy, Frank—Miss Tracy," Sayre said, reining up and looking at them knowingly. "I hear tell you've brought in a big herd, Frank."

"Not a big one. Five hundred and some."

"So?" Sayre's smile revealed teeth stained by the tobacco that bulged his cheek. "I see you brought a crew, too, but I got to wonderin' if you could use another man. Things been tough for me this year—most of my mares had foaled before that last spring blizzard hit, an' I lost—"

"Sorry," Frank said shortly. "I've got all the crew I can afford."

"Gun-hung hombres, I noticed! Me, I'm right handy with a six—"

"You've had your answer," said Frank, who never had liked Sayre. "It

was no. Better ride on out, mister."

When the man was gone Tracy gave Frank a reproachful glance. "You wouldn't help him. A neighbor—"

"I don't trust him. He kowtows to Langerham, always has."

She seemed not to hear his words. "Frank, you're harsh. And bitter. You don't trust anyone—how can any person live like that, walling himself off from—"

"A man's got to be harsh, sometimes," he said unsteadily. "Haven't I got reason to be, with Lin lying dead there in town?"

"No!" Her chin came up, and she defied him. "Vengeance can hurt only you. Oh, Frank, can't you see where you're headed?"

"What would you have me do? Let Langerham tramp over me?"

"Langerham, Langerham!" she cried. "Can't you think of anything else? You think he killed Lin, because of Karen. Had you known that Lin was gambling? Maybe he was killed because of that!"

"Girl, you're not thinking straight. You've got your dad's ideas all mixed up in your head, and you— Anyway, Lin sure didn't have any money for gambling."

"Unless Karen gave it to him! There, I've said it. But Frank, even if you're right about Rod you can't stand against him with a five-man crew. It's senseless! He'll crush you!"

"So you'd have me crawl?" he asked bitterly.

"No. Take those five hundred cows out of the basin and sell them. Frank, a man can be happy with a forty-cow outfit. You wouldn't have to hire a crew of gunmen, and Rod would leave you alone."

"Like he left Vince Jones alone? Girl, you're blind. Rod Langerham's not like your dad would have him be. He's reaching out, and pious words aren't going to stop him."

She seemed unable to say more. She faced him angrily, her breathing quickened, her eyes flashing. He

seized her shoulders, intending only to shake her and to make her see, somehow, how wrong she was. But there came to him then a sudden awareness of her nearness, of her slim loveliness, of the way her breathing stirred womanly roundness under the thin cloth of her shirt.

Her parted lips held an appeal that she probably was not even aware of. A torrent of feeling rose within Frank then, and would not be denied. He kissed her roughly, harshly.

The way of his life had been harsh. He was a man who had worked toward a goal—building a life for Lin—and he had denied himself the time for the careful and proper courting of a girl who might be his own wife.

But in this moment he knew that that had not been the only reason why he had contented himself with infrequent sprees at Mike Gaffney's Paradise, with the casual favors of the percentage girls. He knew now that he had wanted Tracy Pardue. But Lin had wanted her too, so Frank had stepped aside. . . .

Lin was gone now. The barrier was down. Frank's pulse hammered as Tracy's lips answered his kiss with a frank eagerness that seemed beyond her control.

The wild sweetness of it lasted only for a moment. Gasping, she wrenched herself free, color staining her cheeks, her widening brown eyes looking up at him with a stricken comprehension.

"No," she said faintly, lifting a hand to push her tangled hair back from her face. "I'm not Karen Langerham, Frank."

HE SAID, "Girl, this isn't like that. I'm in love with you."

"No." It seemed that she was trying to convince herself that this could not be. "I'm—particular, I guess. How can I love a man who has no trust in anyone, who is turning himself toward a killer's trail?"

He stared at her, wanting her, feeling once again that their worlds were different and wondering if the gap

between could ever be bridged.

Then a voice demanded, with deep anger in its tones, "Am I needed here, Miss Tracy?"

It was young Barry Verson, who had ridden into the canyon unnoticed but must have seen that embrace. His stocky body was tense in the saddle—he too, Frank knew in that moment, loved Tracy.

The color of her cheeks deepened. "I—" she began uncertainly. "Wait, Barry—I'll ride home with you." She gave Frank one final wordless glance and then she mounted up and rode from the canyon with her foreman.

When Frank rode alone toward his own ranch he knew that it was because of Tracy, though she refused to see the pattern of Rod Langerham's expansion and didn't realize its menace to the Portal, that he was going to make a stand here in the basin.

When he neared the Box E house and swung wearily to the corral to unsaddle he found his crew cooking supper over an open fire. The house was small—there never had been a crew on the spread before—but Daggett and the others had found room for their blankets inside, and had taken turns at cooking on the tiny stove.

Now they were cooking beside the corral. When Frank asked why, they looked at him with odd, knowing expressions. "You got company up there," old Ben said. "Purty company. We figured we'd best stay out from under foot."

Frank saw the horse that was cropping grass beside the house, then. It was a Cross L horse.

When he went into the house he found Karen Langerham awaiting him. She was a tall girl, a restless girl of Frank's age, with black hair and a figure that other women envied. Her fringed doeskin skirt accented the slim length of her legs, and her silk blouse seemed molded to her bosom by some dressmaker's art.

She said, "Hello, Frank," in a

throaty voice. "I heard about what happened."

"You shouldn't have come here, Karen. Your husband—"

"Rod?" She lifted one shoulder. "He doesn't care what I do."

"Not enough to kill Lin because of you? He shook his head. "Did you come here to try to make me believe a thing like that?"

"No, I didn't." She laughed a little. "Funny, isn't it, how people react to things? Rod never did care about me, really. But when he found out about Lin he was furious—his pride was hurt, I guess. His concern was with what other people would say—you know, Rod Langerham's woman with another man. But he didn't kill Lin. He hasn't got backbone enough. He's little and petty and grasping, but he's afraid—he's afraid of everything."

"He's got men who'll do what he tells them. Vince Jones was killed—"

"That was Stahl's doing. Frank, don't try to go after Rod. That's exactly what Stahl is waiting for you to do. I heard them talking—Frank, he aims to kill you."

Frank leaned against the fireplace mantel, building a cigarette with careful fingers. "Then you did come here to keep me from going after Rod."

"All right, I did. You're Lin's brother and I don't want you to be killed by that stinking Stahl—you won't believe that either, but it's true. I'm human, Frank. I was flattered when Rod asked me to marry him—I didn't know the mess I was getting into. We'd been married only a little while when he went to my folks and told them that I'd tricked him into marrying me, that he knew I'd been 'that Binns girl' the cowboys all talked about. He gave them their choice. They could sell to him and leave the basin, or he would divorce me and see to it that everybody knew about me.

"Frank, he hasn't changed a bit since we all went to school together—"

but his schemes are bigger now. He kept his word about not divorcing me, but sometimes I wish he hadn't. He's a devil, and if you killed him I wouldn't care much. But Stahl's in the way and you can't get past him."

Frank looked at her and wondered what were the real motives that lay behind those dark eyes of hers. She had high cheekbones and an almost Indian cast of features that set her apart from the other women in the basin and subtly added to her appeal. She was a beautiful woman, an experienced woman—young Lin hadn't had much chance of avoiding infatuation with her.

Frank asked suddenly, "Did you give Lin any money?"

"A little," she admitted. "He was always broke, and I hated to see him feel—"

"Karen, I'm going to let the law have first crack at finding Lin's killer," Frank said abruptly. "So you've had your ride over here for nothing."

She had moved about restlessly, lithely, all the time they talked. Now she stopped, looked at him with unreadable eyes, but said nothing at all.

Remembering the cigarette that he had stuck into his mouth, he lighted it. Through the smoke he said suddenly, "The Portal is what Rod's really after, isn't it?"

Her quick intake of breath told him what he wanted to know. Maybe Rod didn't confide in Karen, but she had overheard many things at the Cross L. She said lamely, trying to cover up, "I—I really don't know. Rod doesn't tell me anything about—about business."

"You'd better be starting home now," Frank said gently. "It'll be dark before long."

When she was gone he wondered again, briefly, about her real purpose in coming here. Maybe she had been trying to justify herself in his eyes. Maybe she really had wanted to warn him off, to keep him from running up

against Stahl. Or, more likely, she had sought to keep Rod Langerham from being killed. The man was her husband, after all—he was rich, and he would be a lot richer. But only if he lived.

THE SHERIFF arrived in the basin on the following morning. He didn't go to the Box E—he went to the town, and he sent the swamper out to fetch Frank.

There was a hearing, a perfunctory affair held in the musty office of lawyer Alec Mulford.

Sheriff Sam Rengo was a paunchy little man with a bowler hat and a carefully maintained affability. "I've viewed the body," he said at the beginning of the hearing. "I aim to make this as easy on everybody as I can—our job here is to establish how an' exactly when the feller died, not to churn around tryin' to figure who killed him."

There followed a dry questioning of the hotelkeeper, of Doc Wintler, and finally of Frank himself. Frank was given no chance to bring in what the sheriff called "side issues." "Just stick to the questions, Elman," Rengo said when Frank tried to mention the deed. "That knife that you say was in his back—where's it at now?"

Frank took the knife from his holster and tossed it on Alec Mulford's desk.

By the time the hearing was over Frank was fed up. He sensed that the sheriff was treading carefully, making sure of his ground so that he could do some fancy sidestepping later.

But when Frank reached the street and paused to light a smoke he found the sheriff at his side. "Hell of a thing," Rengo grumbled, looking up at the surrounding mountains. "This basin's been peaceful for twenty years—no trouble of any kind. Then hell busts loose."

There was no expression of sympathy for Lin. There was only an irritated concern over the "trouble" that

meant work for the sheriff. Frank said nothing, merely waited.

"All right," the lawman said heavily. "Generally, in a case like this'n, the ideas of the folks directly concerned ain't worth a damn. They jump to some fool conclusion an' then try to twist the facts around to fit it. But go ahead—who do you want me to go after?"

"I'm not saying—yet," Frank retorted with deep anger. "I'm giving you time to do the job you're paid for. I can give you some evidence—"

"About that deed, I expect," the sheriff said, giving him a sidelong glance. "Mulford told me about it, but it wasn't in the hotel room when I made a search. You got it, maybe?"

"No. The killer took it with him. I was trying to tell you that, at the hearing. If you'd—"

"You're a stubborn hombre. Elman. Bullheaded, too. A man gets in a tight and buys his way out by signin' over his interest in a ranch. How does that prove anything?"

"The deed was signed. It's worth money to whoever's got it. He'll be hanging onto it."

Rengo shrugged. "So I turn the basin upside down to find it?"

"It's only good to one man—the man it was made out to."

"Now you're pulling around to Langerham. All right—that brother of yours gave Langerham reason to kill him. Right in the open, in a shoot-out, with no worry about the law ever tappin' him for it. Justifiable, savvy? Would he sneak into a hotel room with a sticker in his hand, and leave there with a deed that he never could use afterwards? Pry your eyes open, Elman. Your brother wasn't spending all his time woman-chasin'—he got into some high-stake games at the Paradise, an' when he lost he couldn't pay up. Some of the boys don't like a welsher."

Frank's fists knotted—a sick misery was in him now. Why did a man's death have to bring to light all the un-

savory aspects of his life? Lin had taken money from a woman; somewhere along the line Frank had failed miserably with the kid. Perhaps if he had struck out from the basin long ago, for a larger herd and more money. . . .

But he said angrily, "The gambling's one of those side issues you mentioned, Rengo. If you don't get the killer inside of a week I'm going after him myself. I've got a hunch—"

"Hunches," the sheriff said, "ain't worth a hang in this business."

"But votes are," Frank said bitterly. "And Langerham controls a lot of them, doesn't he?"

Rengo's face darkened, but his eyes were thoughtful. Frank tramped away from him and went to the hitchrack where his horse was tied.

CHAPTER V

THAT BINNS GIRL

AFTER SUPPER that evening Frank took a turn around his range, concerned about his new cattle—long accustomed to the steady pushing of the trail-drive, they might be restless on their new graze and might drift.

It was the lower limit of his range that worried him the most. The unmarked line that separated the Box E from the Jones graze which now belonged to Langerham. He aimed to give Langerham no shred of an excuse to start trouble between the two outfits.

But he found his stock sett'ed and content. Relieved, he made a big circle and swung back toward home by way of the Portal fence on the high side of Bonita Canyon. He had no concern about that fence. This was a matter of wanting to make a ride of it, of jogging slowly along in the dusk with the feeling of detachment from the world that let a man think things out.

He wondered about Tracy Pardue. She had responded to his kiss, the gulf between them forgotten for one breathless moment. But then she had remembered, and had drawn back.

He wondered if he loved her in the sense that most people used the word. Certainly he wanted her—but love, to a busy man, was a simple and direct thing. A woman like Tracy would demand and deserve something deeper, a steady building toward a future that would hold children, a home, and roots that reached deep.

His throat tightened, and he knew that he loved Tracy in that way. Every fiber of his being reached toward her, had done so for longer than he had allowed himself to know. Feelings could be stronger things than a man suspected—denied, they cropped out in other directions. Maybe that explained the harshness that Tracy had recognized in him, the harshness that had frightened her.

Abruptly he reined up. Some of his cattle were grazing on the other side of the Portal fence. And at a point a few yards farther on, the wires were down.

With a feeling of alarm tightening his nerves he stepped from the saddle and tramped forward. And found that the wires had been cut.

He turned, and an awareness of watching eyes brought icy, restless prickles into being on the back of his neck. He looked toward the cottonwoods that lined Bonita Canyon but saw no movement there. He tramped back toward his horse, intending to mount up and gather the strays and push them back through the gap.

But a rider came in at a fast pace, from Portal range, and dismounted and came forward with stiff-legged strides. It was young Barry Verson. He picked up the wires and looked at them, and then looked squarely toward Frank.

"You didn't wait long to start usin' pliers, Elman. I figured you'd be tryin' something like this, the minute

I seen you bring in more critters than your range'll support. Portal's got good grass, an' a sick old man an' a girl ought to be easy for you to handle, eh?" Verson dropped a hand to his gun, his stocky figure tense and distinct against the dark bulk of the cottonwoods that were partly behind him now. "Well, I'm stoppin' you, mister. You Elmans may be hell on wheels with the women, blindin' 'em to the kind of snakes you are—"

"Don't be a damn fool," Frank said, lifting his hands so that Verson could not possibly misunderstand his intentions. "I didn't cut that fence. I just got here."

Verson wasn't listening. The wild light in his eyes said that he wasn't thinking of the fence at all, but of the time he had seen Tracy in Frank's arms.

Tracy wasn't here, but her image stood between the two men now. Frank felt almost sorry for Verson—he sought for words that would calm the man.

But he had no chance to speak them. Verson staggered suddenly forward, breath gushing from his mouth. The report of a gunshot came at almost the same instant. Verson went down into the grass at Frank's feet, his legs twisting and then slowly straightening.

Frank crouched, his hand darting now to the carved bone stock of his gun as his eyes lifted to the dark row of the cottonwoods. He saw the puff of smoke that lingered there; but then it was laced through by the orange flame of a second shot.

It struck Frank a blow, savage in its intensity, on the side of his head. He staggered, all balance gone, and went down. Though he made a violent inner effort to regain control of himself, he failed. The pain that flooded through him demanded the relief of blackness, and the blackness wiped out all else.

KAREN LANGERHAM was an unhappy woman, moving restlessly,

through the moonlit patio at the rear of the Cross L house. It was past midnight now; she had been unable to sleep in the brooding silence of the great house that dominated the center of the basin. She had thrown a thin robe over her nightgown, pushing it back from her shoulders because the air was sultry—on this night the breeze had failed to come down from the mountains.

She didn't know where Rod was. He had been in a savage mood lately, drawing more and more into the shell of his bitter silences, spending but little time at the ranch.

Only one other person lived here—the aged Chinese cook, whom Rod had hired after he swept from the table the first meal that Karen had cooked for him. She had wanted other servants. A lot of them—she had yearned to prove to all the basin that "that Binns girl" could have all the trimmings of respectability.

Though they could well afford them, Rod had refused to hire them. Smirking, he had reminded her of the squalor of her background, and had told her that being a lady was a little beyond her reach.

She lifted her hands to her hair now—she had let it down to its full shoulder length, and had brushed it to glossy sleekness for lack of anything else to occupy her. But, detecting a smell of cigarette smoke in the air, she stiffened.

A deep voice said, "Mrs. Langerham, you're a beautiful woman."

It was a man's voice, and one that she recognized at once. Drawing the robe hastily over her shoulders she turned to face the sound of it and saw that Zack Stahl was sitting on a bench in the deep shadow under the pepper tree. The tip of his cigarette made a steady glow as he drew upon it.

"What are you doing here, Stahl?" she demanded.

He took the cigarette from his mouth. "Waiting," he said. "It's a muggy night, isn't it?"

"You belong down at the bunk-houses, not here. Rod is gone and I don't know when he'll be back."

Stahl nodded. "He's down at Mike's Paradise, sitting alone in a corner with a bottle at his elbow. But it's not him I was waiting for."

Karen drew the robe more tightly about her and lifted her head. "Get out of here," she said coldly.

Stahl made his expansive smile and rose, grinding his cigarette under his heel. "Get back with the rest of the hired help, is that it? You've told me that before, Karen."

"I'm telling you again. And to you I'm Mrs. Langerham—keep it that way."

"The high-an'-mighty lady, eh? You weren't like that with young Elman. Nor with some cowboys hereabouts, I hear tell, before Rod put that sparkler on your finger."

"Get out!"

He pushed back his hat, letting her see the angry lines of muscle along his broad jaw. But he moved to the gate in the patio wall. "I've got plenty of time," he said, giving her a lingering look.

It was a look that chilled her. A look that he had given her once before, when she left a room in which he and Rod were talking business. Rod had seemed not to notice it, or not cared—but it was a measuring look, a scrutiny of pale and hooded eyes that seemed to her to be reptilian. A look that thoroughly frightened her.

She did not completely understand that fear—she had thought that she knew men pretty well. But there was something about Stahl that was different. A cold possessiveness, a patient and confident waiting. . . .

Instinctively her will rebelled against the man. He made her want to run, to escape from something without fully knowing what it was.

But the patio gate had closed behind him. Stahl was gone. She forced herself to breathe normally again. . . .

THE SUN warmed Frank Elman's face. He stirred, gritting his teeth against the throbbing pain that the movement aroused in him, and felt of his head.

The whole left side of it was covered with dried blood that had caked in his hair and on the side of his face. The wound was above his ear—a long gash that had laid his scalp wide open. He sat up dizzily, thinking that he must have looked like a dead man last night, when the 'busher was here.

He looked toward Barry Verson and saw that the Portal foreman lay exactly as he had fallen. Flies clustered about the round blue hole in the back of Verson's shirt.

Frank got to his feet and swayed there, gripped by wave after wave of weakness. He looked around for his horse, and then decided that the animal must have gone home. Verson's mount was gone too.

He found that his holster was empty; and he was looking in the grass for the weapon when Tracy and the remainder of her crew rode through the gap. The girl's face whitened in spite of its tan. She made a little cry and dismounted and knelt beside the body of her foreman.

Frank made no sound. There were no words he could force past his lips, with Tracy's eyes lifting to him first in stricken disbelief and then in icy contempt. "Oh," she cried, "I knew you were going to kill—but why did it have to be poor Barry?"

He tried to tell her, then, what had happened here. He was hardly aware of the sudden grip of the hands that seized him from behind, or of the fact that one of the Portal men picked up his gun from the grass.

"This here's Elman's gun, Miss Tracy," the Portal man said. "It's been fired—there's one empty in the wheel, right under the hammer."

Frank stared around. There were six men in Tracy's crew—old men who had been toughened and made wise by years of hard work. Men who had

gone along with Ed Pardue's ideas because he was the boss. But Pardue was not here with them now.

"Barry lived long enough to crease this back-shooter, I reckon, before he died," said the man who held Frank's weapon. "There's been fence-cuttin' done here, Miss Tracy, an' Barry caught 'im at it. These Elmans, they run to a pattern an' there ain't anything good about it." He bent a glance toward the cottonwoods. "Boys, a stout rope'll—"

"No!" Tracy cried, jumping to her feet, her eyes avoiding Frank's now. "Cline, we'll have none of that talk. We'll take him to the sheriff."

"You ain't takin' him any place," said a new voice that came from the direction of the cottonwoods.

Looking quickly that way, Frank saw Ben Daggett and the other Border hands come riding forward, one of them leading Frank's horse, all of them holding guns tilted to a ready angle.

There was an angry rumble in the throats of the Portal men. They were crusty old-timers, their will to fight long subdued by the placidity that Ed Pardue enforced. But the will was there. . . .

And in that moment Frank knew the reason for the fence cutting, for the shooting of Verson and himself. It had been shrewdly aimed to make trouble. A shoot-out between the Portal and the Box E would remove part or all of the opposition to Langerham's expansion that remained here.

The men who had held Frank released him now, to free their gun hands. Tracy bit her lip, a helpless look coming to her brown eyes.

But Frank called, "Ben, hold it! Stop right there a minute."

Daggett obeyed, scowling in disapproval.

Frank turned to Tracy, saying, "I'm going to give myself up to the sheriff. But first I'll tell you exactly what happened here. Maybe it'll open your eyes to what Langerham aims to do."

He told her how it had been, and why he thought it had been done. Her eyes softened a trifle as he talked, but her chin remained stubbornly up-tilted and she never did look directly toward him. When he finished there was a flat silence; then the old cowman, Cline, tramped over to Verson's body and picked up the foreman's gun from the ground.

"One shot fired from it, too," Cline said heavily. "Makes Elman out a liar, I reckon. He brought in too many cows for his own range, Miss Tracy, an' figured to help himself to some of yours."

Frank's hands closed and made fists. The killer had fired both Frank's gun and Verson's, thinking that Frank was dead, to account for everything here without having his own presence brought into it. On a rising feeling of trapped anger Frank said, "The sheriff will decide whether I'm lying or not, Tracy. I'm pulling out of here now—tell those cowboys of yours to keep their guns in leather. A shoot-out will do nobody any good."

She gave Cline a wordless look of appeal. Grumbling under his breath, the old cowman stepped back.

Frank turned to him. "I'll take that gun of mine now."

Cline's jaw hardened. "Damn'f I'll—"

"You'll do like he says!" called Ben Daggett, tilting his gun down.

Cline spilled shells from the weapon's cylinder, snapped the loading gate shut with an angry click, and flung the gun at Frank's feet. Frank picked it up and backed to his horse.

He was aware only of Tracy's face now. She was talking to her men in a low voice, pleading with them, warning them that Frank's boot-tough crew had the drop, telling them that it was the law's job to deal with killers.

Her lovely face was cold-looking and her eyes were filled with a held-in pain. And Frank knew that he had lost her. All her upbringing had schooled

her against the kind of man she now thought he was.

As Frank rode away with his men, Ben Daggett said, "We thought you was just out lady-chasin', when you didn't show up last night. But then when your horse showed up alone this mornin'— I watched your lips while you told that gal what happened, Frank. Who do you think it was that shot you? Give me his name an' I'll—"

"I don't know who it was," Frank said dully. "I didn't get even a look at the hombre. But he was there, in the cottonwoods."

CHAPTER VI

STRANGE TALK

THE SHERIFF, when Frank rode into town and found him lounging on the shady porch of the hotel, showed only an annoyed interest in the killing of Barry Verson.

"Well," Rengo said, clapping his hands to the arms of his chair and pushing himself up to his feet, "I'll have to ride out there, I reckon, an' fetch him in. If it was like you say, you're in the clear. If not—" He gave Frank a guarded look. "It's an odd thing—every time some of this hell busts loose in the basin lately you're right handy, to point your finger at somebody else. This time it's an hombre you didn't even see."

"Are you saying that I'm lying?" Frank demanded. "Do you think I killed my own brother? With a knife?"

"I don't think anything. But you better walk careful, bucko. An' don't make any try at leavin' the basin, mind—the law's got a long arm." The sheriff tramped away; Frank went to Doc Wintler's place.

The doctor poured liquid fire into Frank's wound and stitched it up, clucking about the violence that had come to their basin. In response to Frank's question about Ed Pardue he

said that the man was in bad shape.

"He had another attack last night—just barely pulled through. The least little shock, now, could finish him. I aim to see that he doesn't hear about these things that have happened."

They buried Lin Elman that afternoon. Rod Langerham attended the funeral, his manner laden with a stiff retention of dignity that made it clear that he was here as a matter of duty—the important man of the range was making an appearance at the burial of a lesser man.

That, Frank thought, was the surface impression Langerham wanted to make. Everyone here knew about Lin and Karen Langerham—Rod must have known that his appearance at the funeral would set tongues to wagging. It was a price Rod was willing to pay. In a subtle way it would cement his position as an important man.

Looking at the man, though, Frank wondered if there was not another, simpler reason. He wondered if Langerham was not getting a vicious satisfaction out of seeing dirt dribble through the preacher's fingers and fall upon Lin's coffin.

Bitterly, Frank decided on one thing. The bumbling sheriff would never take in Lin's killer, particularly if that killer were a man of Langerham's power. And Frank was surer than before, now, that Langerham had at least ordered Lin's death. It lined up so well with everything that had happened—Langerham's advance toward the Portal, and now the cutting of the Portal fence to make trouble between the Portal and the Box E.

Frank was going after Langerham. And soon. The driving urgency that was building within him would not long be denied.

BUT WHEN he returned to town, riding behind the spring wagon that had served as a hearse, he found Sheriff Sam Rengo waiting for him in the dusty street. The sheriff drew

his gun, saying, "Get down from that horse, Elman. I'm sorry, but you're under arrest—now don't go tryin' to make trouble for me—I ain't alone in this."

Frank got down from his saddle. "Under arrest for what?"

The lawman stepped warily forward and pulled Frank's gun from its holster before answering. "For the killin' of young Verson. I looked around out there an' found nary sign left by that bushwhacker you dreamed up."

Frank stared at the sheriff in a dark, almost uncontrollable fury. As from a great distance he heard a sound of hammering going on somewhere back in the hardware store. And now he saw that there were far too many horses at the hitchracks for this time of day—and men crowded the hardware store porch, men whose hands were relaxing and dropping from the stocks of their guns now that he had let himself be disarmed.

They were the Cross L crew. Langerham's crew, although Langerham himself was not in sight.

Stahl was there, however. The big hombre had his gloved thumbs hooked under his gunbelt and was smiling broadly.

"Damn you, Rengo," Frank said. "I might have known you'd kowtow to Langerham, the same as everybody else does."

"Move along, now," Rengo said. "It's too late in the day to be startin' out for the county seat, so the boys are fixin' up kind of a jail in the back of the hardware. Step careful—the hombres you see over there ain't deputized, but they're backin' me."

When Frank mounted the steps of the hardware store he heard Stahl ask loudly, "Are you sure that back room'll hold him, sheriff? Where I come from the boys make pronto medicine for back-shooters, and somebody here might take the notion to save the law the trouble and expense of—"

"Don't go makin' that kind of talk

now," the sheriff snapped. "He's in custody."

Stahl's only reply was his broadly confident smile.

The back room was one where spools of barbed wire were stored. Its door had been hastily reinforced and heavy planks had been spiked across the window, from which the glass had been removed, leaving only narrow slits for air.

"This'll do, I reckon," the sheriff said, mopping his face with a bandanna and nodding dismissal to a pock-marked little hombre who was clinching the last of the spikes that had come through the wall around the window. "You can leave off that now, mister. If you'll give me your name I'll see that a county warrant gets sent to you for your labor."

"Rupe Isham," the little hombre said, giving Frank a wickedly triumphant glance and wiping his palms downward over his cartridge laden gumbelt. "Send it in care of the Cross L, sheriff. I reckon this shebang'll hold your prisoner—for long enough, anyway."

Frank stared at Isham's back as the little hombre went out. Isham was new here; Stahl had brought the man with him, or had hired him later.

The sheriff remained only long enough to give the cell a quick once-over to make sure that there were no tools that Frank might use to escape. Then he tramped out, slamming and locking the heavy door behind him.

THE AFTERNOON dragged. All its heat seemed to be imprisoned in this tiny cell along with Frank, who sat on an upended wire spool.

He berated himself for the meek way in which he had let himself be taken in by Rengo. Perhaps that had been the result of some inner compulsion that was born of his love for Tracy Pardue. Some yearning to measure up to the pattern of life that she would demand of the man she would marry—peaceful, respectful of the

rights of others and of the authority of the law.

But the law was crooked, or at least weak and easily influenced by Rod Langerham's might. And now Frank was effectively put out of Langerham's way. The cutting of the Portal fence had not worked quite as expected, but Langerham had turned it to good purpose after all.

Savagely, Frank told himself that a man only tangled his rope when he tried to be something he wasn't. If it was in him to be harsh, to be a fighter who stood on his own feet and hit an opponent with anything he could lay his hands on, so be it. Respectability was only a thin veneer that some men used to screen their real purposes.

But it was too late now for Frank to make his fight against Langerham. He would go to trial, and Tracy would testify against him. After that she would learn that he had been right about Langerham's intentions. But it would be too late—everything was too late.

The light had faded beyond the slits of the window planking and the coolness of night was beginning to seep into the cell when Frank heard a guarded tapping on the outside wall.

"Elman," a voice said. "Hey, Elman."

"Yeah," Frank breathed, rising and going to the window.

The man outside was Kelty Volk, the swamper from the Paradise. "Got a message for you," he said. "One of your cowhands was in—feller by name of Daggett—an' said to tell you he's got his boys outside town an' that they'll bust you out of here come full dark. I had me a time gettin' here without bein' seen—Stahl's got hombres posted all over town. Ought to be worth somethin'..."

Frank slipped a bill between the planks. "Kelty, you tell that old fool to stay out of it. Something like this is just what Langerham wants. He'll wipe them out."

"I dunno about Langerham—ain't seen 'im around. But that Stahl, he's buyin' drinks for everybody an' makin' hang talk. My guess is they'll be takin' you out of here pretty soon. You better—"

"Tell Daggett anyway. He and his boys wouldn't have a chance against that bunch. Where's the sheriff?"

"Asleep at the hotel, I reckon. Last I seen 'im he was pattin' his paunch an' pickin' his teeth as he come out of the cafe."

"Get him, Kelty."

"Ought to be worth another bill, seems like," Volk grumbled.

Frank gave him the bill and listened to the sound of Volk's cautiously retreating footsteps in the alley.

It was only a moment after that sound died that Frank heard another one. A subtle scratching at first, on the other side of the door. Then a creak, as of wood being pried apart, and finally a rending, splintering sound as the wood broke completely and the door swung inward.

He saw the shadowy forms of two men in the doorway. Clenching his fists he breathed, "Who're you?"

"Cross L," a voice said gruffly. "But not workin' for that coyote Rod in this, happen so. We got a horse for you outside, an' Mrs. Langerham is waitin' for you."

Frank let breath slide through his nostrils, a feeling of relief that was mixed with puzzlement flooding through him. He recognized this pair—they were old-time Langerham hands, men who had helped build the Cross L but had been pushed into the background when Rod took over. He didn't know why Karen Langerham would want to help him—maybe this was some feminine means of spiting her husband—but he did know that Ben Daggett would probably disregard his orders and that this would save his crew from disaster.

He went along with the Cross L men, passing through the dark and silent chasm of the store where the

smells of harness leather and fresh rope lingered in the air. When they reached the porch he saw that Karen was waiting at the hitchrail, mounted side-saddle on the Arabian horse that Rod had bought for her when they were married.

Rod had wanted his wife to ride in style. Certainly she did that, a tall and imposing figure in the shadow that the hardware store cast across the moonlit street. "Quick!" she breathed as Frank stepped into the saddle of the horse that awaited him. "If Stahl gets word of this before we're gone he'll kill us all!"

Frank spoke just one word as, with the two Cross L men mounted and following them, they put their horses to a run. He said, "Thanks."

But as they rode out of the town he saw the small, lonely looking figure of Tracy Pardue come out of Doc Wintler's house and stop there, turning her head to follow them with her eyes.

Frank groaned inwardly. He could not stop now, but Tracy had seen him with Karen Langerham. She had seen him accepting Karen's help, and she would draw her own conclusions from that.

He was certain that he had lost her now, finally and forever.

KAREN DID not slacken the pace when they got clear of the town. She kept her mount at a headlong run and she looked back from time to time in obvious fear of pursuit.

Frank asked no questions about where they were going. He owed his escape to Karen—and there was the fact that he was unarmed while Karen's men were not.

They swept across the floor of the basin and climbed the hill where the Langerham house stood. The house was brightly lighted as it always was at night—Rod Langerham had bragged about the cost of the oil that kept all those lamps going. They circled to the back of the house, where

Karen dismissed her men and stepped lithely down from her side-saddle. Drawing her long gloves from her hands, she led Frank into the patio and then turned to face him.

"You're wondering why I helped you," she said.

"I reckon I am."

She slapped her gloves against her doeskin skirt. "I told you once that I was human. I meant it. I've had men watching Stahl, telling me what he was doing. Frank, he was going to hang you to get you out of his way. I couldn't stand to think of that." She lifted her head to look at him squarely, and the movement made the moonlight strike glints in the dark gloss of her hair. "Believe me, Frank," she said earnestly. "I was born here in the basin, just as you were. I've got a loyalty to this range and to the people on it, the same as you have. We can't escape it, either of us—we've got to stand together now."

"That's a strange sort of talk, Karen, for Rod Langerham's wife."

"Oh, forget Rod Langerham! He's grasping and selfish, but he's weak—he would never get anywhere with his schemes if it weren't for the help he's got. Lately he's been wild—happy as a boy one minute, snarling the next, always pacing around—"

"He's done pretty well. He got Vince Jones put out of his way and he got Lin killed, and now he's made trouble between my outfit and the Portal. He's making the kind of headway he wants."

"But he's scared. Frank, he's terrified. He never knows about those moves until after they're made, and then he can't back down. He yells at Stahl and tries to be the boss, but Stahl only smiles and goes ahead in his own way, saying that it's for Rod's good. But it isn't. I know it isn't—call that a woman's intuition if you want. Rod knows it too. That's why he's scared."

"Of what? Stahl's working for him—"

"Oh, can't you see it? Stahl is strong and Rod is weak. Stahl can build what Rod wants and then take it away from him with one bullet. That's what he aims to do—I've seen it in those eyes of his, and I think Rod has seen it too."

"What would it buy him to kill Rod? The Cross L would go to you, not to Stahl."

"And if he married me? That's the way he's got it planned—he's hinted at it. Frank, you've got to kill him."

CHAPTER VII

BLOOD AND STEEL

HE SMILED at her crookedly. "I'm beginning to get it. You told me once that I couldn't get past Stahl to get at Rod. Now you've changed your mind about it all—you've put me in your debt so I'd have to do what you want done. You're scared of Stahl too, even more scared of him than Rod is. You're afraid you can't handle him either."

"All right," she said, "that's the way it is. I'm out of my depth and I'm scared. I'm just that Binns girl—I don't want the whole damn world, all I ever wanted was a little happiness. Frank, please help me."

He shook his head. "You haven't thought it through—or else you don't want me to. If I kill Stahl I'll just be doing Rod a favor. He'll hire somebody else, a man he can handle, and go right ahead. And you'll still be his wife, rich and—"

"I'll leave him, Frank. I've got to leave him—I'm just a prisoner in this house and I can't stand it after what he did to my folks. With Stahl out of the way you can stop him—there can be peace in the basin again. We're just little people, you and I—we can save something out of the wreck we've made of our lives. Frank, we can—"

She didn't finish that. She lifted her hands and put them against his

cheeks, her fingertips digging into the flesh, and she pressed her scarlet mouth against his.

Karen Langerham was very much a woman in this moment. Frank's blood raced, as any man's would, as she pressed herself against him. Young Lin, he thought bitterly, hadn't had much chance...

He put her away from him, roughly. "It won't do, Karen. I'm sorry for you but I'm not blind like Lin was. You're thinking of yourself and nobody else. You've got an easy life here, and position. Things you never had before. I think you're trying to protect them, trying to shield Rod by shoving me at Stahl. But Rod's the boss of the Cross L and he's the man who's got to answer for—"

The sound of the shot came to their ears then. It came from somewhere within the Cross L house. There was only the one shot, and then there was silence.

FRANK WENT into the brightly lighted house and tramped along a hallway, hearing the tapping of Karen's high heels behind him. The smell of gunsmoke guided him somewhat; he passed through the open doorway of the room that Rod Langerham used as an office, and then he halted.

Rod was in the big steerhide-covered chair behind the desk, his inadequate-looking little body slumped sideways, his eyes staring up fixedly toward the ceiling that he never would see again. The hole that the bullet had made was in the exact center of his forehead.

Karen made a throaty sound. Frank looked quickly toward her and was startled by the aloof calmness that was in her manner now. She wasn't looking at Rod's body. She was pointing toward something that lay on the carpet in front of the desk.

It was a gun. A .45, with bone stocks into which had been carved the initials, F. E. It was Frank Elman's gun.

"Now," Karen said, "you'll have to believe me. He's killed Rod like I said he would, and he's put it onto you. Now you've got to kill Stahl!"

Frank picked up the gun. He looked again at Rod Langerham's body and he thought that he had been stubbornly wrong about all this, that he had concentrated on Langerham and had ignored the greater danger that Stahl represented.

Oddly, he thought too about Tracy's father. All the evil in the world was in Ed Pardue's basin now...

He holstered the gun and moved to the door, giving Karen a bleak look as he passed her.

In the hallway he encountered the aged Chinese cook, who was peering into Langerham's office. The Chinaman had his queue tied up with strips of white cloth and he was wildly excited, jibbering at Frank with the words of English that he knew, interspersing them with his own singsong language.

Frank got the cook's meaning, though. The Chinaman had been awakened by the shot and had seen a man run from the house. A big man—the gestures were more expressive than the words—who wore gloves.

"Stahl?" Frank demanded.

The queued head bobbed vigorously. "You bet! Plenty bad man. You catchee, Mist' Elman? You catchee plenty quick, you kill!"

Then Frank heard the hoofbeats of a horse out in the yard. A sound that retreated quickly into distance and was gone. He ran from the house, circled to the back of it to get the mount that he had ridden from town. He stepped into the saddle and spurred the animal to a run.

From the vantage point of the hilltop he could see the fleeing rider plainly, though the man was far out on the moonlit floor of the basin now, his figure oddly tiny in the saddle—maybe that was an illusion fostered by distance. The planes of Frank's face tightened; this chase should be an

easy one for a man who knew the basin as well as he did, and at the end of it he was going to kill. He thumbed open the loading gate of his gun, rammed out the shell that had killed Rod Langerham, and replaced it with a cartridge from his belt.

IN THE BIG white house, Karen Langerham was turning down the lamp in Rod's office. She was not as composed as she had seemed to Frank Elman now—she had sent the excited Chinaman down to the distant bunk-houses to tell someone to go for the sheriff, and now she was alone in the silent presence of death.

She ran her hands up and down her arms. She was afraid—the invisible fingers of her fear pulled at her face and made of it an unlovely mask.

But she was not afraid of Rod Langerham. It was only that the nearness of his dead body was a chilling thing, a thing that triggered the release of other fears within her.

Zack Stahl—his image sprang into her mind, smiling that broad, knowing, confident smile, his colorless eyes saying that he could bide his time.

Karen had no fear of men, nor of their desires. But she knew instinctively that Stahl didn't want her for herself alone. To him she was a stepping stone, a way of getting the Cross L. Once he got that he would cast her aside—she knew that, from some premonition deep within her.

She hoped fervently that Frank Elman would kill the man. But then she shuddered—she had seen Stahl drop a bandanna from his hand and draw his gun and put six bullet holes in it before it touched the ground. Frank was, to her, only a forlorn hope.

She turned to leave this room, wanting to escape from the dark current of her own thoughts. But she caught her breath, all blood draining from her face.

Stahl was leaning against the door jamb, smiling at her. He was not wear-

ing gloves now—they were tucked neatly under his belt.

"You," she said in a voice that was barely audible. "You didn't ride out—"

"No, I didn't. I've got other men to do chores for me—like I did chores for Rod."

Woodenly she moved forward. "Let—let me out of here!"

"No." His eyes flicked a glance to the carpet. "Elman took his gun, eh? No matter. I got it from a nail in the hardware store, where that fool sheriff hung it. Elman must have taken it with him when he escaped, eh? And we both saw him leave here after he killed Rod with it, didn't we? I'm through being somebody else's hired man, my dear. When we get the Portal we can have a cattle empire here, you and I. That's the way it's to be."

She put her hand to her throat, not realising it until she felt the icy touch of her fingers. "You killed Rod. You planned to do it, all along."

Stahl's teeth gleamed again in his smile. "We'll keep our plans strictly between ourselves, won't we? To the sheriff we'll tell a neat, tight story. You did me a favor by bringing Elman out here—I'm a man that can jump quick, take advantage of the breaks. Elman killed Rod to square up for his brother. As soon as Rod is buried you'll marry me—everyone knows you're not the kind of woman to wait around observing a proper period of mourning. And I don't think you're fool enough to try to cross me, my dear." He dropped a hand to the stock of his gun in an unburied, idle-seeming gesture.

She looked at the weapon with stricken eyes. "You killed Rod," she said again in a whisper. "And Lin Elman too, and that Portal foreman."

Stahl shook his head. "Not young Elman, and not the foreman. There are always men you can hire for things like that. Good, reliable men. I had young Elman all set up—I was going to go to his room and get him talk-

ing, and then Rupe Isham was to come in through the window from the porch roof. It didn't turn that way, but Isham went ahead and handled the job on his own. He likes a knife—I see that makes you shudder, Karen.

"He's leading Elman out to the Blade Rock line cabin right now. It's a quiet, lonely place, and Isham seems like a harmless little cuss. He'll pull the wool over Elman's eyes, fool him so that he'll never know what's up till he gets the blade between his ribs. The sheriff will thank us for it—Elman's an escaped prisoner and he's got everyone on this range against him since that Portal affair."

"You're crazy," Karen Langerham breathed. "You're trying to make a big grab, and you'll never—"

He made a negligent little movement that pushed his body away from the door jamb. He came toward her, watching her with hooded eyes. "Not crazy," he said. "Just smart enough to see my chance when it's put in front of me. I've got every angle covered. If we understand each other now—"

There was the sound of a fast-ridden horse arriving in the yard. They both turned, listening to it. The hoofbeats slowed and stopped, and then there was a heavy footfall on the porch....

FRANK ELMAN reached the Blade Rock line cabin just at dawn. It was high in the foothills on the east side of the basin; Cross L had always kept a man or two out here to prevent the drifting of its blooded stock into the brushy canyon country beyond. The cabin was a small one, set against the base of the great up-rearing blade of sandstone that gave the place its name.

Frank had long since lost sight of the man he followed. The killer's horse was a fast one, and Frank's mount had gone lame in the first hour. But the trail had been easy to follow—the fleeing man had been strangely care-

less about leaving sign, had ridden across soft ground when he could have gone around it, had broken branches from brush in the haste of his passage.

There was an unsaddled horse at the side of the line cabin, wearily cropping grass. Drying lather made a pattern on the animal's sides.

Frank stepped down, drawing his gun, and moved quickly to the cover afforded by a boulder. "Stahl!" he called.

After a time the door of the cabin opened. A man came into view—a little hombre with a pock-marked face, a man who stretched and yawned and blinked in the dawn light. Rupe Isham.

"Where's Stahl?" Frank called. "If he's in there tell him to come out. I want him."

Isham located Frank by the sound of his voice and peered stupidly toward the boulder. "Stahl? He ain't here, mister. He come by awhile ago an' woke me up. Took my horse an' left me his, an' lit out for someplace in a peltin' hurry. Say, ain't you that Elman hombre? How'd you get out of that jail I fixed?"

Frank rose and stepped around the boulder and tramped toward the shack. Reaching it, he thrust Isham roughly aside and peered into the tiny room, seeing only an iron stove, some chairs, two bunks placed against a wall, a table covered with oilcloth, and a box nailed to the wall to serve as a cupboard.

Isham's gunbelt lay atop the pile of his clothing, on the foot of the lower bunk. The man grinned at Frank and said, "You goin' to look under the bunk? Or maybe he's hidin' in the woodbox—"

Frank struck him, an open-handed blow that whipped Isham's head around. "How long ago was he here? Which way did he go?"

"I ain't got any watch—it was still dark. An' I didn't get up to see which way he headed—sounded like he was

goin' back in the hills. Hell, you don't need to get rough with me, mister big. I only done what I was told when I fixed that jail. How about some breakfast? From the looks of that horse of yours you've made a long, fast ride. I got coffee an' a side of bacon—"

Frank went on into the shack and picked up Isham's gumbelt and flung it aside. "All right," he said. "Get to it."

He was thinking that the trail ahead of him, if Stahl took refuge in the broken country beyond Blade Rock, would be hard to follow. That was rocky going, on which a horse would leave but little sign. This chase might be a long one.

Isham had gone to the stove, cringing along sidewise to keep from turning his back to Frank, and now he was building a fire. Oddly, the man seemed less fearful than he acted—his eyes held triumphant glints in the light of the fire he kindled, before he replaced the stovelid. He dumped grounds from the coffeepot into the woodbox, put fresh grounds and water into the pot, and said, "Set down—no need for you to stand around like that."

Frank looked at the slight, underwear-clad figure and smiled a little at the inner awareness of danger that kept prodding him. There was no logical basis for it that he could see. No reason for him to fear this cringing man who now had no gun within reach. Frank charged his feeling up to his own weariness and hunger—he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. The sheriff had seen to the filling of his own belly, no doubt, but hadn't bothered to send a meal to his prisoner in the improvised jail. Frank pulled up a chair and sat down at the table, placing his gun on the oilcloth at his elbow.

BACON SIZZLED in the pan. Isham filled a plate and placed it before Frank. "Eat hearty, mister,"

he said. "If you're aimin' to go into them hills you'll need grub in your belly. Say, what's proddin' you to go after Stahl? You mad at him because he was fixin' to get you hung? Got away, didn't you? An' bad medicine with a six."

"Never mind my reasons," Frank said shortly, frowning a little at Isham's sudden talkativeness.

Isham shrugged. "None of my never mind, I reckon. Coffee'll be ready directly. I'll get you a clean cup, if I can find one." He crossed behind Frank, moving toward the cupboard.

He didn't reach it. An electric warning of danger flashed along Frank's nerves, a culmination of the feeling of alarm that had nagged him ever since he stepped into this shack. A warning that was spurred to full life now, by the sharp intake of the breath of the man behind him.

He turned his head quickly and saw that Rupe Isham was crouching, whipping out the knife that he'd had thrust down under his underwear between his shoulder blades. Isham's face was contorted with triumph as he brought the weapon up and then down, in a swift and deadly arc.

Frank rolled aside, kicking the chair away from him, upsetting the table with a crash. He had no time to grab for his gun. He could think only of that flashing knife, could try only to avoid its stroke, while a fear that is as old as mankind clawed at his heart.

The knife slashed through his shirt just under his armpit. But then he was free, rolling away and scrambling to his feet, putting the overturned table between himself and Isham.

The little hombre regained his balance and crouched there, his face drawn by the intentness that was in him now.

They faced each other in deadly silence. Isham and his knife were between Frank and the doorway. Frank looked for his gun and saw that it had slid under the lower bunk and gleamed there faintly now, a foot or

so from Isham's boots, unseen by the little hombre but totally beyond Frank's reach.

Frank's nerves steadied somewhat. He said, "You're a pretty good little liar, Isham. Stahl never was out here at all, was he? Never traded horses with you. I got a look at you when you left the Cross L—you weren't Stahl's size, but I didn't stop to think about it then. So you led me out here to rig a trap for me. What's Stahl paying you for the job? As much as he did for knifing Lin?"

Isham's grin was a fixed and wicked thing now. "He paid off for that," he said. "An' he'll pay me again for this." He lunged around the table with the blade upraised.

CHAPTER VIII

NO KILLER

FRANK CAUGHT up a chair and lifted it, jabbing with it.

Isham's rush carried him against the out-thrust legs of the chair. He grunted with pain and twisted away and tried again, but again was fended off.

Frank laughed. "An old-timer told me once that the way to handle a knifer was never to let him get within reaching distance. It works, hombre—what are you going to do about it?"

He was taunting Isham now. He wanted to rattle the man, to goad him into making a mistake. He had to get that knife out of Isham's hand somehow. And he wanted to use hard and merciless fists on the man—he was thinking of the way young Lin had looked, lifeless on the floor of the hotel room...

But the fury that was in him was restrained, coldly held down by his awareness of the menace of that knife.

Isham lunged again, trying to get past the chair. And he nearly succeeded—Frank swung the chair barely in

time, flinging the little man aside so that the stroke of the knife only grazed his right shoulder. He felt no pain, but there was a sudden wetness that flooded down his side and told him that the blade had not missed entirely.

Isham slammed against the stove, knocking down the rusty chimney pipe and floundering for balance in a shower of soot. Frank struck then, with the chair—one leg of it caught Isham's upraised arm and there was a crunching sound, and the knife clattered to the floor.

Frank flung the chair aside and used his fists. Their impacts slammed Isham against the wall and the little hombre huddled there, making no resistance at all, his broken right arm dangling and his left arm crooked over his face.

Frank battered the man. He had thought that it would be simple justice to beat him down until there was no pulse left in him. But it seemed different now—Isham was only a tool. A vicious tool, cringing and groaning with agony now, but someone else's servant, nothing more.

Isham seemed almost devoid of manhood now. And this seemed unworthy, suddenly, to Frank. He stepped back, panting, while Isham slumped to the floor.

Frank had gone farther than he knew. Isham was insensible; breathing, but so thoroughly beaten that he might not wake up for hours.

Frank laughed then, suddenly and with a bitter gladness.

"Stahl," he said softly, "I've got you right where I want you."

He lugged Isham outside. He found the saddle and bridle that had been removed from Isham's horse and he placed them on the animal. He slung Isham across the saddle, belly-down, and tied him there with his own catch rope. Then he went back into the cabin, found a piece of paper and

printed on it with charcoal from the stove. He printed the words:

STAHL, HE TALKED.

Going outside again, he punched a hole in the paper and put it on the saddlehorn and then tied the reins around the horn to keep it there. He said to the unconscious Isham, "You made a mistake, friend, in depending too much on that knife. When you missed the first time you should have run for your gun." Then he slapped the horse sharply on the rump.

The laden animal snorted and started out. Like all the Cross L mounts he was a homer—he would go back to the ranch where the comfortable stalls and the oats were.

Frank went back into the cabin, which now was filling with smoke, and put the stovepipe back together. He took off his shirt and tore it into strips and bandaged the shallow knife gash as best he could.

Then he settled down to wait. Stahl, he knew, could not afford to let him live with the knowledge that he now had. Stahl would be coming out here, perhaps alone and perhaps with some of his men if there were any others he could trust as he had trusted Isham. But certainly not with the sheriff, nor with any of the basin ranchers who might hear what Frank had to say.

Frank would be ready for him when he came.

IT WAS LATE in the evening of that day when Frank saw a rider come across the expanse of the basin and start quartering up the slope. He rose from the bench on which he had been sitting by the line cabin's door, and peered through the uncertain light.

The rider was not Stahl. The figure was slight, almost boyish. Frank had a feeling of let-down and disappointment at first, and then, as Tracy Pardue rode in and dismounted and

ran toward him, an amazed gladness.

She came into his arms and she clung to him, crying a little when she saw the blood-soaked bandage on his shoulder. "Frank, you've been hurt!"

"Just scratched some." He held her hungrily to him, asking no question; and the miracle of it was that when he sought her lips she yielded them to him with an eagerness that matched his own.

When the kiss ended she pressed her cheek against his chest, still clinging to him with her arms. "I saw that horse, carrying the poc-marked man," she said. "At first I thought he was d-dead. But then I saw the note, and knew that it must have been you who put it there. So I back-tracked the horse, carrying the pock-marked man," lowed you out to the Cross L after you escaped. Karen and that foreman of hers told him that you'd killed Rod Langerham, that they'd seen you run from the house and ride away. Frank, that's not true, is it?"

"It's not true, girl. And I didn't kill Barry Verson either."

"I know you didn't, now. Doc Wintler gave me a bawling out about that—he said it was impossible for Barry to have fired a shot after he was hit. And if he'd shot you first he certainly wouldn't have had his back turned toward you. It had to be someone else who was there. But Frank, Rengo had deputized almost everyone in the basin, and he's put guards across the Portal so that you can't get out!"

"I don't want to get out," Frank said stubbornly.

She drew back a little and looked up at him, scanning his face with an expression that was strangely tender and fully womanly. "I know, Frank, I—I know many things that I wouldn't admit before. I've had a battle with myself. I knew, deep down, that you weren't a killer like—like some other men become. It nagged me and wouldn't let me be till I sat down and

thought things out. Dad's ideas were all right, I guess, when the basin was young and everybody did what he told them was proper. But things are different now. And you're a man—you've got to be harsh sometimes, to stand for what you know is right."

"Girl, when Karen Langerham helped me she was trying to rope me into helping her against Stahl. I didn't believe what she said about him then, but I believe it now. You've got to know, though, that there was nothing else—"

She made a tiny moan. "I saw you leave town with her. Oh, Frank, I thought I'd lost you! That hurt—but it helped make me see things straight. I know now that being hurt is part of loving, that I've got to be a person in my own right, deciding my life for myself—a woman, Frank. I'd hidden myself behind Dad's ideas for so long that I guess you never could see the real me. But you were always the one—that's why I couldn't marry Lin. Frank, I've come out of my shell and I'm shameless—if you still want me—"

The bullet came then. It snapped past them with the spanging sound that a rifle makes, and it plowed a bright, fresh gash in the wood of the door jamb.

FRANK CAUGHT Tracy up in his arms and darted into the shack. Another bullet struck the building. The single window was shattered by it—a silvery shower of glass fragments tinkled to the floor.

"Down!" Frank said grimly. "Get down, Tracy. He's up on the rock somewhere—keep on this side of the stove." He turned back toward the doorway, drawing his gun and cursing the fact that there were no rifles in this cabin.

A third bullet struck, placed shrewdly and low so that it slashed through the thin wall and clanged against the stove.

"Frank!" Tracy cried. "You can't go out there—he's got a rifle!"

"There're things a man has got to do, Tracy." He looked back at her, the hunger that was between them pulling at him like a physical force. "He can place his shots till he gets us both. Tracy, you've got to know that I've loved you longer than I ever knew..."

He turned and darted out of the shack. The man with the rifle must have been expecting this—a shot crashed, and something wrenched Frank around so that he lost his balance and fell on the hard-packed earth.

He scrambled up and ran toward the base of the huge blade of rock, his left arm a useless weight now. He saw movement at the top of the rock. A big man, wearing a black shirt and gloves that seemed very white in the twilight, reared up and threw his rifle to his shoulder to fire again.

The man was Zack Stahl. He must, Frank thought, have circled widely and worked his way along the foothills while Frank's attention was on Tracy's approach. Now he threw shot after shot at the running man below him, trying to stop Frank before he reached the base of the rock.

The shots missed. Frank's body was wolf-lean and he kept dodging as he ran, making a poor target. He reached the rock and, protected for the moment by the bulge of it, leaned weakly against it, panting and glancing wryly down at his left arm. Blood made a glistening rivulet above the elbow but the bullet had passed through without striking the bone.

He rested only a moment. The echo of the shots had drained away among the hills and there was silence now—Stahl must have emptied his rifle and was reloading it before moving into a position from which he could fire again. Crouching, Frank ran along the base of the blade to the low end of it and started up the rock itself.

The blade was narrow, and rounded at the top so that he had no room to dodge here. He saw Stahl up ahead, and knew that he was right in his

guess about what the man was doing. Stahl was on his knees, peering over the edge of the rock from time to time to look for the man he thought was still below, wounded and unable to climb. He was thrusting shells into the chamber of his rifle.

Frank gave the man no warning. He thumbed back the hammer of his gun and let the long barrel drop, aiming carefully as he squeezed the trigger.

The bullet's impact seemed, oddly, to jerk Stahl to his feet—that was an illusion brought about by the man's startled reaction. Stahl staggered back, clapping a hand to his side, the rifle slipping from his hands and going over the edge of the rock.

Stahl recovered and drew his six-gun, but fired no shot now. He darted back and flung himself down into a depression in the rock so that only the tip of his hat crown remained in Frank's view.

Frank fired at the hat, and missed. But it was lowered quickly from sight.

"We're even now, mister," Frank called. "I'm coming after you."

"Come ahead!" Stahl shouted. "You only barked my ribs, friend. I didn't trust anybody but myself for this job, and I can wait you out. When you get close enough I'll put lead between your damn eyes."

"Like you did to Langerham?"

Stahl's chuckle had a raw and humorless sound. "I was finished with him. I had what I wanted here—a hold on things. That fool brother of yours gave me a chance to sink the hooks into Langerham and put him into a position where he had to let me go ahead and do as I please. Now you're the last man in my way, friend. Which is your tough luck."

FRANK CALLED, "What did you do with the deed that your man took from Lin?"

"It's right here in my pocket. It's a valuable piece of paper—some evidence is going to turn up, proving that Langerham knifed the kid. His

widow can record the deed, I reckon, by back dating it some and saying Langerham got it before the killing."

"You're on thin ice, Stahl."

"I'll make it thicker by shutting you up. You're wanted for gunning that Portal foreman, friend—the sheriff will give me a pat on the back for this."

Frank clenched his teeth and kept moving slowly upward. His bullet wound was throbbing and he felt dizzy by the exertion of climbing up the rock. Stahl's big steal, he knew now, might work—the big hombre was the man who would bluff it through if anyone could. But Frank said, "You know damn well I didn't kill that Portal man."

Stahl chuckled once more—the sound was very close now. "That two-bit horse rancher, Sayre, was useful there. I wanted you to hire him—it would have been handy to have a man in your outfit—but you didn't fall for that. So I made use of him anyhow. You..."

Stahl's voice trailed off. Frank, who was hardly a dozen steps from the depression in the rock now, saw sudden movement there and knew that this was the finish of it, one way or another.

He saw the glint of steel as a gun came into view, laid close to the rock and gripped by a daintily gloved hand. Stahl was protected, Frank was not—he felt naked and alone and he cursed the stubbornness that had brought him up here.

But Stahl had to lift his head to take aim; Frank waited for that, knowing that the hand was too small a target. The big hombre had removed his hat, but now his straw-colored hair came quickly into view, and then his broad, rocky, confident face.

Frank fired. And knew with a sudden despair that he had aimed too low—the bullet made a white gash in the rock and glanced off with a fading whine.

What seemed at first to be a disas-

ter, though, was the thing that saved Frank Elman. Stahl made a convulsive movement and reared up to his feet, firing a shot that went into the air, digging his fingers frantically into his eyes. Frank stared at the man, and then knew that Stahl had been blinded by the rock fragments Frank's bullet had thrown into his eyes.

Stahl was a gunman, sure of his ability to put a bullet where he wanted it to go. In a shoot-out with him, Frank most likely would have lost. But Stahl was helpless now. . . .

"Drop that iron," Frank heard himself say sharply. "You don't deserve this, but you're all finished here and if you'll get your hands up I'll give you a break. I'll take you in—"

Stahl made a sound that was an ugly compounding of thwarted fury and the frenzy of a strong man who finds himself suddenly helpless. He said, "Damn'f I'll—" He lunged toward Frank, as if to grope for him with his hands. But he was too near to the edge of the rock; he lost his balance, floundered, and toppled over the edge.

He screamed once as he went down. It was sixty feet to the rocky ground below—Stahl's body struck with a heavy impact, and he stirred once and then was still.

Looking down, Frank wondered why he had not pumped bullet after bullet into the man when he had the chance. And in that same moment he knew the answer.

Tracy was right about him. He was a man who did what he had to do—but deep inside where the real man dwelt, he was not a killer at all.

THE MAN and the girl were riding together across the basin when they met old Ben Daggett. Tracy had bandaged Frank's bullet wound; Daggett looked at the blood-soaked cloth

and swore softly, and said, "You all right, Frank? Hell—beggin' your pardon, Miss—I been lookin' for you everywhere. Things've happened. I crowded that fool sheriff into a corner an' talked some sense into his head. Both him an' me are lookin' for Stahl now."

"How did you get him to do that?" Frank asked.

Daggett drew a hand across his weathered face. "How did I get 'im to do that? Growed up down on the Border, didn' I? Learned to track Mexkin cow-thieves before I was ten. You said a 'busher shot you an' Verson, so I went to trackin'. Trailed that horse-rancher right to where he lived, an' when me an' the boys got a little rough with 'im, he mentioned that Stahl paid 'im to do the shootin'.

"Then I went to the Cross L, an' just happened to be hid out by the corrals when a horse come in with an hombre tied across the saddle. Stahl, he cut the hombre loose an' stood 'im on his feet an' give 'im a lacin', in which some things about knifin' was mentioned. They talked quiet, so nobody could hear, but it happened I was readin' lips from where I was at. Like a fool, I went lookin' for the sheriff again, an' Stahl took right out, but now I'm followin' his trail. . . ."

The old puncher scowled; no one was listening to him. The edge of the sun's disk was rising above the mountains, bringing a new day to Amity Basin, and Frank Elman had reined his horse close to Tracy's. They had eyes only for each other now—this was a new day for them as well.

Old Ben cuffed back his hat. "Hell," he said, not begging anyone's pardon this time. "Just a deaf ol' fool, talkin' to m'self again. . . ."

THE END

THE NINETEENTH NOTCH

(continued from page 71)

to see if I could be of help."

"Yeah, I know you said that. But you could have seen me coming, circled in the dark and come up from behind."

A shadow stirred in the doorway.

"You were in Santa Fe when Dabney was shot, Turk; you brought me the word about it. You didn't say you were with him when it happened. You didn't say you shot the man who did it. But this note from Santa Fe does. It says the man should have killed you both, the way you beat him up. It's signed by a man who ought to know—Otis Dabney. He wasn't killed, just creased across his scalp. You'd have found that out if you hadn't tried to follow up and finish what your bullet in the back started."

The shadow at the doorway thickened.

Turk Gammon did not speak, and the sheriff was fooled by his silence. He extended his hand.

"Let me have your gun. I want to see the kind of bullets you use."

Turk Gammon moved, but not to surrender his gun. He drew, covered the sheriff. "You'll see my bullets all right..."

The doorway shadow took shape. Jim Quince spoke softly. "I want to see them, too."

In the big wall mirror Turk Gammon saw Jim enter. In the same swift glance he saw that Jim had not drawn his gun. It was still in the holster.

Turk Gammon wheeled and fired.

No one saw Jim Quince draw. One instant he quietly stood still. The next the gun in his hand was a stab of flame at Turk Gammon. The big foreman yelled, sank to the floor. But

he was not dying, as Jim Quince had intended. He sat there moaning and wringing his bullet-torn hand.

"I can't understand it," Jim incredulously muttered. "I aimed for his heart, but shot the gun from his hand."

"That's the hardest shot there is, especially when the man's trying to get you," the sheriff said. He retrieved Gammon's gun and removed one of the cartridges. He glanced around and nodded.

Jim extended his borrowed gun to Brother Ben. "My gun was destroyed in the fire. But I'd like to trade this one for the loan of some tools in your shed. I want to rebuild your house, and then I reckon another." Jim kept his eyes from Cathy.

"Build where the one was burned," said Brother Ben, "and it will be for you. The boys in the hills will help. We can start first thing tomorrow."

But Cathy shook her head. "Nopel! Something else is first tomorrow. Daddy can bring back the license when he takes Turk into town to jail. Brother Ben can perform the ceremony. I told you, Jim Quince, there's nothing you can do about it."

Jim Quince did not argue.

Brother Ben unloaded the weapon. "For a moment, son," he said, "I thought this gun was going to get its nineteenth notch."

"Wouldn't wonder that you did," Jim Quince gravely nodded. "I reckon He changed my aim so I didn't kill a man—like he helped me kill two snakes today."

Brother Ben made the only answer. Soberly, quietly, he said, "The ways of the Lord are many!"

THE END



This then, at last, was the man who'd killed Jackson's father

BULLWHIP

by WILLIAM VANCE

RICHVILLE people had just about forgotten Arch Jackson. When anyone did remember, it was only to declare how tough it had been that old Arch got acquitted of murder only to be shot down trying to break jail before he knew the verdict. But Tramp Jackson, old Arch's son, hadn't forgotten. There was ten years of waiting in his dark brooding eyes that afternoon he returned to Richville.

It was sundown when Tramp Jackson hung his bullwhip on his saddle horn while he picketed his packhorse

in a willow thicket along the river. He pulled the canvas-covered pack from the sweaty animal and let the pack lay where it fell. He took one long look around to make sure he could find the place in the dark and then he mounted his big black horse and jogged back up to the wagon road.

Tramp was jolted out of his usual calm a moment later when the black stopped suddenly and stood there spread-legged and snorting. A six-foot length of snake had crawled out of the brush for the warmth of the open



His straight hard punch stopped Snark for the moment!

road. With a quick motion, Jackson uncurled his bullwhip. A movement of his wrist and the whip whistled through the air and cracked like a gun going off. The headless snake writhed on the ground and Tramp Jackson rode on, whistling now; not because he was especially happy but because he was doing something instead of thinking.

He judged things just about right, because it was dark when he got to the edge of town. He left the black a distance from the road and went ahead on foot, a big man who didn't look so big because he was well-proportioned, with springy legs, a man who wasted no motion and moved quick.

This was a town he'd known, but not for ten years. He passed the smithy, farther out in the business section. He could smell the still-smoldering forge. He wondered if Tate Carlisle was still there, shoeing horses, making branding irons, fixing wagons and maybe sharpening plows. He remembered he liked to watch Tate hammer out a horseshoe, the piece of iron glowing a cherry red and sparks flying when Tate hit it with his big hammer. He remembered standing there waiting for the red-hot horseshoe to go plunking into the big wooden barrel of water, where it sizzled once, violently, and then sank with bubbles cascading upward.

Tramp was past the smithy, putting thoughts out of his mind about his kid days. There on his right was Joe Luke's leather shop and the smell of that was something to be remembered, too. Funny how he'd always liked the smell of leather.

He came in under the shelter built out over the livery stable entrance and he leaned against the wall for a moment. He could hear quietly argumentative voices and he listened idly, his interest not even quickening when one of the voices turned passionate.

"I'd never do t' Sutton, Deal, and you know it," one of the voices said.

The other voice was that of Dan Deal, quick, impatient, anger-ridden

and arrogant. "Dammit, you've got to do it. You've no choice and you know it."

There was a long and pregnant silence. "I can always take my medicine like a man." A long sigh followed this statement.

Deal laughed and Tramp remembered the man better from his mean and nasty laugh. Deal, he remembered, was what Arch had called a shyster. "Yes, you could, Olden," Deal said. "But you won't. You give me the paper and we're done. You'll be paid in full."

"All right, Deal." There was bitterness and hatred mingled in the man's submission. "You win."

Tramp Jackson moved on into the night. He wasn't interested in these two. It was something else he was after.

There were two saloons, he remembered. One the Community House was the one the cow people patronized. The other, on the opposite side of the street, was Newman's Place, run by the farmers and sheepmen and two-bit ranchers, hung out there when they were in town. Tramp turned toward the Community House.

THERE WERE a half dozen horses in front of the place. He moved among them, silent as a ghost. Two of them bore a Tumbling R brand. Two were slick and there was a Spur animal and the last he didn't get to see because a man walked out of the Community House just then and stopped deadstill when he saw Jackson there by the horses.

The man came over and jerked the reins of one of the Tumbling R horses loose from the rail. He said, "Howdy," as he got into saddle.

Jackson nodded. "Noticed you're from the Tumbling R. They taking on any new hands?"

The cowboy pushed up his hat, "Dunno. You'd have to see Tuok Cleary. He left for the ranch about sundown. In a rig."

That was it. That was what Jack-

son wanted to hear, but he was late. He said, "Thanks, cowboy."

"Don't ask him tonight, pardner," the puncher advised in a friendly voice. "The boss sent him home early."

"Thanks," Jackson repeated. Excitement burned in him. So the old man was in town. He was torn between his desire to get at Tuck Cleary and to see Mose Rich. He told himself the latter would have to wait. That was something he wanted to build up by degrees, by slow inches. Something that came last, like pie or cake at the end of a good meal.

Walking fast, he got back to his horse. He rode the black hard, circling the town now. He got down below the road where he could skylight anyone using it. He picked up the rig a half hour later. He rode hard and fast to get ahead and when he found the place he was looking for, he reined in the black. He got a sack out of his saddlebags and he took off his hat and pulled the sack down over his head and made it secure under his chin. The sack already had eyeholes cut in it. He stuffed his hat in the saddlebags and the black whinnied softly.

"Shut up, you fool," Jackson murmured. He left the black there and went across the road and climbed up on the rock overhang and squatted there waiting, the bullwhip in hand.

He didn't have long to wait. The team trotted easily along, trace chains jingling, leather squeaking in its own way and the creak of the buckboard answering. When it was below, Jackson jumped. In that brief moment he saw two people in the buckboard.

It was too late to do anything about it then. He landed behind the seat and the buckshot loaded handle of the bullwhip whistled through the air.

The man on the seat let out a startled yell as the bullwhip landed on his head. The big hat kept the full force of the blow off and he yelled again as he clawed for his gun. The whip raised and dropped again and the man on the seat slumped against the girl.

It came to Tramp Jackson then that this was the man who'd killed his father and all the plans he'd made faded away as he raised the whip again and again, an overpowering rage gripping him.

"Stop it, you're killing him!" Fear and horror was in the girl's voice.

That brought him out of it. He grabbed the little satchel on the seat and jumped to the ground and raced for the black. Sweat was pouring off him and his knees felt quivery. The wind brushed his face and cooled him off but he wasn't as happy about it as he thought he'd be. He kept remembering the girl's face as she cried out for him to stop. He tried to recall the faint fragrance he'd got a whiff of in that moment before violence took over, but he couldn't, because it had been too fleeting.

The satchel banging against his leg got his attention. He opened it, and took out the sheaf of bills and put them inside his shirt. He threw the satchel away and removed the sack from his head.

He didn't get much sleep that night, old Ben Newman, and the new folks, either. He moved his camp before daybreak and killed half the morning rubbing down his bullwhip. Then he rode into town.

THE TOWN was dead and there wouldn't be any life in it until Saturday night. Maybe later than that, now that he had the Tumbling R payroll and they'd have to come back to the bank for more. He considered taking that too, but it didn't fit in with his plans.

Three men were in Newman's Place besides old Ben. Tramp wasn't afraid of being recognized. He was only thirteen when he'd come in town with Arch, and Ben had been getting a little blind even then. Tramp sipped his beer in the sudden silence a stranger brings. He kept quiet though and soon they went back to talking. About the robbery.

"Seems to me," one of them said,

"he'd got a sight more if he'd tackled the bank."

Jackson wanted to tell them he wasn't after money. It was revenge. But he couldn't reveal that. One of them guessed it, at least in part. "Some o' the homesteaders, tryin' to get even for all o' Mose's meanness."

Newman shook his head sadly. "Shame, shame. Everything so peaceable, too."

"Sure to spoil things," the first man spoke again. "First peace we had in years and it's liable to explode account o' some hot head."

"What's it all about?" Tramp Jackson asked.

They looked at him in silence, measuring him with their eyes. One of them said, "Just a little local trouble, stranger."

That was all he got. He didn't want to press the matter. He finished his beer and went out. He rode back to his camp, packed and moved again. He meant to stay put this time, until he finished the job he set out to do.

In a clump of cedar he was well-concealed from the road below. For ten minutes he'd watched a kid scrambling around in the rocks down there, thinking about the time he'd been that size and playing in the same place. Jackson raised his head quickly in a characteristic listening attitude when he heard the rattle of wheels on the stony road. The boy heard it too, for he scuttled to the brush, ran up a small ridge and flattened out on a rock that was well above the road.

Tramp Jackson showed a trace of his Indian ancestry in the way he sat there without moving. He scrubbed a hand over his high cheek bones and there was Indian in the hook of his nose and the slant of his black eyes. Where it came out most of all didn't show. It was inside of him.

He got off his horse in a quick, catlike movement as a team pulling a buckboard came around the bend of the trail. The horses pulling the rig were matched sorrels, tall as a barn

door, doing a high-spirited dance on the rocky wagon road, their noses pulled in, their shiny necks glinting in the sun. It was all the girl could do to keep them in hand on that narrow, twisting trail.

Tramp's black eyes sparked with anger as he looked at the boy. He saw a flash of white and he heard the whistle of the rock as it left the slingshot. The off horse reared and squealed and there was a tangle below for a moment. The team and buckboard bouncing wildly, disappeared around a hairpin turn.

Tramp ground-reined the packhorse and put the black down the embankment. He hit the road in an avalanche of flying rocks and dust and spurred the black right across the road and down the other side. He caught the sorrels on the trail below but the buckboard was empty.

THE TUMBLING R on their hips caused his mouth to thin. He got the matched pair quiet with his crooning song and his quick knowing hands and when they were stamping restively, he tied them to a tree. He mounted his jealous black and went along the trail, trying to remember whether old Mose had a daughter.

He met her limping down the road and she stopped when she saw him. There was a purple bruise on her smooth cheek and her brown skirt was covered with dust. Golden skin gleamed through a torn sleeve of her mannish and red-checked shirt. Jackson touched his teeth with his tongue and mentally reminded himself that he was here on business. The girl was the same one who'd been in the rig with Tuck Cleary the night before.

"Hurt?" he asked her as he stepped down. She was tall, coming up to his shoulder, her black hair with its glints of reddishness just even with his chin.

She gave him a quick smile from gray eyes that would always look like they held tears, and shook her head. "Just my pride," she said in a friend-

ly voice. "I've been told they're too much horse—for a woman to handle."

He gave her one of his rare smiles, trying not to like her too much. "I hitched your team down the road a piece," he told her.

She thanked him with her eyes and smile and said, "I'm Lucy Rich. And I'm in your debt."

She was one of that breed. He felt a sort of regret but there was no trace of it on his rugged face. He nodded and ignored her questioning look and turned down the trail. She limped beside him and he ignored that too. He held the horses while she climbed into the buckboard. When she had the leathers firmly in her hands, he said, "I can drive, if you want me to do it for you."

She gave him the same smile and a shake of her head. "But I would like to know whom to thank."

He considered that for a moment. Not telling her would be worse than giving her information that might mean nothing. "Jackson, ma'am," he said. "They call me 'Tramp.'" He watched her eyes and face and there was no change, no glint of a hidden remembrance coming alive.

Her smile was as natural as the white sheep back clouds that floated overhead and the sunshine that come down between them. "Thanks, Tramp Jackson," she said.

He stepped away from the sorrels and they lunged ahead and then minced down the road as she held them in. The girl kept her attention on her team and didn't look back. The black, still feeling pangs of jealousy, nudged Jackson with an impatient head. Tramp climbed into his saddle and went back toward where he'd left the road when he first saw the girl. He found the place where she'd been thrown from the buckboard. A tiny square of white lay in the brush. He leaned from the saddle and picked it up without dismounting. It was a slimy thing with lace around the edges

and so feminine that he felt a sensuous surge inside him as he looked at it and held it close to his nose and sniffed it. He shoved it in his shirt pocket and looked up at the rock where he'd seen the boy with the slingshot. He got down and began climbing the steep bank toward the rock.

When he neared the top there was a hurried scuffling sound. Jackson ran around to the other side of the rock and the boy slid down it into his arms.

The kid fought like a mountain lion, kicking, hitting and trying to bite. Jackson pinned his arms and shook him lightly. "Hold still," he said. "You won't get hurt."

The boy stopped struggling. Jackson released him and sat back on his heels and they regarded each other like two strange dogs.

THE BOY was about twelve or thirteen, Jackson thought. Just about the age he was, he remembered, when he'd sneaked away, scared and hungry, not knowing which way to turn. There is some of the hungry stringiness about the kid that must have been in me, he mused.

"What'd you do that for?" he asked the boy. He reached around before the kid could dodge and grabbed the slingshot out of the hip pocket of the boy's ragged pantaloons.

The boy reached for the slingshot but Jackson pulled away. "That's mine," the kid mumbled.

"Answer my question," Jackson snarled. "Why'd you do it?"

The kid looked at him in puzzled wonder. "You don't kerry a gun," he said. "You don't look like a cowpuncher. An' that was a Rich," he said it as though that explained everything.

"What if it was a Rich? You might o' got the lady killed, spookin' her horse like that."

"Wouldn't care," the boy said through sullen lips. "All them folks'r just alike."

"An' how's that?" Jackson picked up a small stone and put it in the leather pocket of the sling and snapped a shot at a running lizard. The reptile thrashed around for a moment and lay still. The boy's eyes widened.

"Some shot! Betcha can't do it again, though."

Jackson picked up another stone. "Let's say that lizard's an alligator," he said. "I just plunked him once and made 'im mad. Now he's comin' right at us with his jowls wide open and droolin' and teeth shinin'—" He let the leather pocket go and the lizard bounced under the impact of the stone.

The boy's eyes shone with respect. "That's some shootin', mister."

"Aw, that wasn't nothin'," Tramp Jackson said. "You should o' seen me when I was in practice." He tossed the slingshot to the boy. "What's your name?"

"Billy Sutton," the boy said eagerly. "What's yours?"

"Why, I'm just an old trail bum," Jackson said. "That's why folks call me 'Tramp'. Where you live, Billy?"

"On Jackknife Creek." The boy wound up his sling carefully. "You come up sometime, hey, Tramp?"

"Sure, Billy," Jackson said. "Sure. But Jackknife—ain't that the old Jackson place?"

"Dunno. Me'n my ma and pa took it when I was no more'n ten. Long time ago."

"How old are you now, Billy?"

"Near twelve," Billy Sutton said. He rolled up his sleeve and flexed a puny bicep. "Lookit that aig, Tramp."

"Yeah," Tramp said. "Yeah, it's a whopper, Billy. Now why'd you take a crack at that team down there?"

Suspicion flared in Billy's eyes. He said fiercely, "Didn't I done told you it was a Rich rig?"

"Like I told him, I'm plumb ignorant," Tramp said patiently.

"High and mighty bunch," the boy blazed. "Tryin' t' run my pa off them rocky acres. But they ain't gonna, no they ain't. Richer'n dirt in the cor-

ral, but they can't buy us out. An' they can't run us off."

"You scoot for home, Billy," Tramp Jackson said, standing to his full six foot one height. "Your ma might be needin' you."

Billy shoved his sling into his pocket. "You come up and see us, Tramp," he said. "I'll let you shoot my flipper."

"That's a deal, Billy," Jackson said gravely. "One thing, pardner—we don't shoot at horses which women drive. That ain't decent, son."

Billy scuffed the dirt with a cracked and rundown boot. "Yo're, right, Tramp," he said. "Soon's I done it I was sorry. Even if it was a Rich."

Jackson nodded. "I know," he said.

The boy looked up at him. "You don't look like a bum," he said.

Jackson laughed. "Looks are deceivin'," he said. He watched the boy hop nimbly from rock to rock until he reached the wagon road. Billy turned and waved and then disappeared around a turn. Jackson went to the black and mounted. "Still tryin'," he muttered. "An' he'll keep on. Rich ain't changed any, Blackie."

Jackson picked up his packhorse where he'd left it and put the animal down the canyon before him. He found the off-canyon he was looking for and made camp in a little natural parkway, beyond a tangle of brush and vine that hid him from a chance rider who might get off the wagon road.

DARKNESS came early to the canyon. When a dusky mantle had dropped down over the secluded canyon, Jackson saddled his riding horse and rode down into the valley.

He knew his way around here, though it'd been ten years ago that he knew it. Out near the Tumbling R, he ground-reined his mount and squatted nearby, watching the yellow lights of the ranch and bunkhouse. His patience was something like the mountains that stood in the distance around him, as he waited for the lights to go out.

The big house went dark first. A time later the lights in the bunkhouse winked out and Jackson got on his horse and moved in closer.

He found the holding pen he was looking for without much trouble. He opened the big gate and its easy swing told him this was a well-kept ranch. It'd been that way when he was a kid.

The black worked easily, moving the small herd toward the gate. There was impatient bawling from the aroused animals, but he'd expected it and for that reason had picked the pen farthest from the house. He got them out of the corral and streaming toward the flat country, the fleet, cow-wise black keeping them well-bunched.

He was well away from where he'd picked up the cattle when he heard the thud of pounding hoofs and a shout. He touched the black with his heel and went close to the herd, leaning over in his saddle so he wouldn't show against the horizon. He slipped the bullwhip off his saddle horn as a rider thundered up past him. He gave the black the spur then and went out, the loaded whip handle whistling through the air. The rider plunged from his saddle under the solid impact.

Jackson wheeled the black to meet the other rider, coming up fast. It was a girl. He got the whip stopped and was out of the saddle and up behind the other, the horse plunging away, snorting and crow-hopping at the sudden added weight. Jackson got a whiff of a familiar scent then and he knew it was the Rich girl. She was always in the way.

"Take it easy," he growled, "an' y' won't get hurt." He was busy with a pigging string and in a moment he stepped down. She was tied securely to her saddle. He headed her horse toward the ranch and slapped it with his hat. The horse galloped away into the night.

Jackson mounted the black and got the purebreds bunched again and moving, "Might o' known," he told the horse, "a gal as pretty as that one would have someone hanging around."

He got the herd into a mile-eating trot and kept them that way until long after midnight. He stopped them down by the river, riding back and forth to keep them away from the water until they cooled. After that he let them drink and then kept them bunched until nearly dawn.

At daybreak, Snark and Twist, the Oregon cattle traders, came from across the river and there was a low-voiced consultation on the river bank. It ended when Tramp Jackson got his pay. The two Oregon men took over the herd and moved them out across the river.

Tramp didn't watch them go. He felt satisfaction as he rode back to his camp. The second step in his plan had worked without a hitch. Except for the girl. He hoped she wouldn't have to wait too long at the ranch before someone found her.

IT WAS well toward noon when he reached his camp. He cared for the black and had a bit to eat before he took off his boots and lay down and smoked a cigarette. It was while he was lying there that his satisfaction died and it wouldn't come back.

He tried to coax it up. First lick for you, Pa, he thought. First of a heap o' them. Arch Jackson's patient face was there with him and it seemed he could hear his father's drawling voice: "Gettin' even is like looking fer that pot o' gold at the end o' the rainbow, son. Looks awful purty and easy to reach. But when you get there, ain't nothing there, not a thing. Revenge is like that, boy."

Tramp threw his cigarette to the ground, used one of his boots to hammer out the fire. In this country it was an eye for an eye and a man who didn't take his revenge when he had it coming was a sucker in spades.

Some inner voice told him Arch Jackson had never been a sucker, but Tramp didn't listen. *What about Mose Rich, he argued? Why is he walking around, big and strong and healthy and you ain't, Pa? You'd be no*

older than him, was you alive. You'd be here today if it wasn't for Tuck Cleary, Rich's gunhand.

Tramp Jackson couldn't sleep after that. Always before now, he'd been able to bed down anywhere and any time and sleep like a log. But not now.

In disgust he put his boots on and pattered around the camp. He worked imaginary kinks out of his bullwhip and rubbed it down with tallow. With all this pattering activity, time dragged like it had a broken leg and his thoughts kept trying to break out of the corral he'd rigged in his mind. He saddled the black then and rode off toward Jackknife Creek.

The trail was better now than it'd been then, he thought. The Suttons had got it up away from the bawling creek and spring fresher danger. He could see the old road down below. It held a lot of memories. He could see the place he used to fish on hot summer days. A big rock and willow tree shading a deep hole where the fish like to congregate when the summer heat was baking the country.

The clay-chinked cabin was the same, except a frame lean-to had been added. There was a big sturdy barn and a round corral. Beyond, Jackknife Meadow had been irrigated and planted to alfalfa. Sutton was doing well, much better than the Jacksons had, even with Arch Jackson's tremendous capacity for hard work. Tramp rode on toward the house.

Too late he saw the matched sorrels tied in back. He started to spur the black into the brush but the Rich girl came out, followed by a comfortably-built woman of thirty or so. They both stopped, waiting for him.

There was nothing to do but ride up there. He lifted his hat and got a nice smile from the Rich girl. He saw the purple marks on her wrist where he'd tied her hands to her saddle horn the night before.

She was easy and friendly. "Stella, this is Tramp Jackson. He did me a favor yesterday. When Ginger and Pepper got out of hand."

"You was tellin' n.e," Mrs. Sutton said.

"Tramp, this is Mrs. Sutton," Lucy Rich went on.

The Sutton woman offered her hand and Jackson got off his horse and went over to take it.

"Billy told us about you," she said.

"I rode up to see him," Jackson said awkwardly.

"Billy and Jed are out irrigatin'. They'll be along directly. Won't you come in and have a cup of coffee?"

Jackson shook his head. "No, ma'am, thanks."

Lucy Rich said, "I'm going now, Stella. Don't forget to tell Jed about the meeting."

"I won't. And we're real grateful, Lucy. Jed couldn't manage by himself."

Jackson and Stella Sutton walked with the girl to her rig. Tramp untied her horses and held their heads while Lucy Rich climbed to the buckboard. She settled herself on the seat and asked, "Are you looking for a job, Tramp?"

He waved his head negatively. "No, ma'am. I'm just a trail bum. Bums don't work, ma'am."

She smiled at that. "Maybe you call yourself one, but you don't look it. There's a job at the Tumbling R if you change your mind."

He thanked her and was silent as she drove the matched pair away from the Sutton place.

Mrs. Sutton sighed and said, "She's a fine lady. She organized the meeting for the reservoir we're all going to build. It's a valley project."

THINGS just didn't make sense to Tramp Jackson. "Thought the Rich outfit didn't have much use for— for homesteaders."

She nodded, smiling. "Once it was that way. All that's changed since Mose died. Mose was the old man—"

"Mose dead? Mose Rich?" It couldn't be this way, he thought wildly. Like having a horse shot out from under you. Like jumping on a steer

to bulldog it and discovering it was an old muley.

Stella Sutton was looking at him in a surprised sort of way. He got hold of himself quick. "You knew Mose?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Just know of him, is all."

"He's been gone two years now. We did have it bad up until then. Mose was hard. He felt he owned ever' single foot of this valley and he meant to keep it that way. Why, the man who owned this place before us—name same as yours—Arch Jackson, it was. Mose tried to frame the man. Some still say it wasn't a frame at all. But Arch was acquitted. But before Arch could be turned loose he tried to break jail and Tuck Cleary shot him."

Jackson's throat was dry. He tried moistening his lips with his tongue but there was nothing there but dryness, either. He turned his head away because she was looking at him in a curious way. "Didn't—didn't Jackson leave any folks?"

"There was a boy 'bout Billy's age. He disappeared. Never heard from again. Anyway, this place went back to the Tumbling R. Then when Mose died, my Jed, who'd been havin' a streak of bad luck, decided to take over this place. Miss Lucy helped us a lot."

"She helped you?"

Stella Sutton nodded. "'Course, things are not as good as they could be but we're not complaining."

Tramp could see she was of a breed that wouldn't complain, no matter what happened.

She went on: "When Mose started getting old, he took on a partner. A man named Deal. Dan Deal, a sort of lawyer. Dan Deal was just about like the old man at his worst—except Deal wasn't honest and straight-talking like old Mose."

"What a hand," Jackson said.

She nodded. "After Mose died, Deal put a lot of pressure on people who'd taken up places around here. Started off, just like Mose when Mose was

younger. Sicked Tuck Cleary on 'em. Lucy just wouldn't stand for that. So Deal started doing things behind her back. Little sneaking things that made it harder for a man to get along."

Dan Deal to replace old Mose. He didn't know Deal too well. Of course he wouldn't, being only twelve or thirteen at the time. But he remembered old Arch's comment. "Black'eg. Shyster. Couldn't sleep in a corkscrew, 'cause it ain't crooked enough."

"Don't seem to me Deal could do much if Lucy was against it," Jackson said.

"You'd be surprised, Mr. Jackson. Got so a person had to think twice about borrowing money—even from the bank. Deal pays a premium to buy up a homesteader's note. And when he gets his hands on it, he's hard to dicker with. I say hard, when what I mean is it's not being done. Deal'll come right in and take food out of the kids' mouths. I'm just glad my man got his loan from Sid Olden."

"Sid Olden?" A lot of things fell into place then as Jackson remembered the conversation between Olden and Deal the night he arrived in Richville. Remembering, he had to turn his head away from the way the woman's pride shone like a bright light in her eyes and smile. He mumbled, "Yes'm, sure is fine."

"Here I'm talking a blue streak and haven't even asked you to take a chair," she said. "Billy and Jed, they'll be along soon."

"I won't wait," Tramp said abruptly. He went to the black and got his reins and stepped to the saddle. There, he raised his hat and said, "Tell Billy I'll see him one o' these days." He knew he wouldn't and there was regret in him.

"He'll be sorry he missed you," she told him. "That's all he's talked about since he met you."

JACKSON looked back at the turn of the road. She was standing there and she waved to him. Friendly people, he mused. Little things make a big dent in their lives. And everything

so different from what he'd expected. He was all confused, he realized, but one thing stood out so plain he couldn't go around it, anyway he tried. He had to get the herd back to the Tumbling R. No question about that, he mused, in spite of Dan Deal. A Jackson would never steal from a woman, no matter what the cause. And he had to return the payroll.

Jackson didn't stop by his camp. There was plenty of graze for the packhorse there in the canyon and he didn't want to lose that time.

The big river had the herd stopped. The river was up and the two Oregon men were holding the herd there, waiting for the water to go down. They were unshaven, tired and surly and they greeted Jackson with suspicion.

"I'll pay you a hundred dollars extra for your trouble," Jackson explained. "That's besides the money I'll return that you gave me."

The two men looked at each other, interest coming alive. Twist showed his yellow teeth in an ugly grin. "Listen to that, Snark."

"Yep. An' he ain't got a gun neither."

"An' he's gonna give us a hundred extra. What's wrong with us takin' that, everything else and the cattle too? Eh, Snark?"

"I offered you a fair deal," Jackson said. "I take it back now. The only deal is your money back and I take the cattle."

Snark reached for his gun and the bullwhip whistled and curled and Snark yelled and his yell turned to a scream as the skin peeled on his hand and he dropped his gun. The bullwhip flashed back and curled out again like something alive and Twist's arms were wrapped to his body in rawhide. Jackson jumped in then and grabbed Twist's gun. He threw the iron from him and went to his knees as Snark jumped in, fists flying. Jackson shook his head to clear it, trying to fend off Snark. Twist was working frantically to free himself from the entangling bullwhip.

Jackson got to his feet somehow. He backed away from Snark and when the cursing man rushed in, Jackson picked an open spot and punched hard. His straight hard punch stopped Snark momentarily as the man teetered on high heels. Before Jackson could punch again, Snark regained his balance and charged in, head down and arms working like pistons. Jackson hit Snark behind the ear and the man plunged into the ground.

Jackson whirled like a cat as Twist leaped into the air and came down on his shoulders. The two of them went to the ground in a tangled, fighting heap. They rolled over and over and into Snark who grabbed a rock and scrambled to his feet, looking for a chance to strike with the boulder. Frantically, Jackson tried to keep Twist between Snark and himself. Snark swung and Jackson rolled and brought Twist under the impact of the swinging stone. Jackson felt the man stiffen in his arms and go limp. Jackson kicked out then and the toe of his boot caught Snark under the chin and lifted the cattle trader bodily into the air. Snark fell and lay still.

Jackson got to his feet, winded and aching all over. He looked around the rocks for the guns. He found them and threw them into the river. He counted out the money the two men had given him and put it in Snark's hat and weighed it down with a stone. He got on the black then and turned the herd back toward the Tumbling R.

DAY WAS just getting up over the mountains when Jackson hazed the cattle back into the Tumbling R's holding pen. He worked hurriedly, trying to beat the early risers. He'd lost two cows somewhere along the way but he wasn't worried about that. When roundup crews made a systematic search for strays, they'd be found. He put the last cow in and pushed the gate shut when he got the command to put up his hands.

The one was Dan Deal, a medium-

sized man with powerful shoulders, a square, dark-brown face and a small black mustache. He looked dangerous. The other was the horse-faced killer, Tuck Cleary.

"This might be the man," Tuck Cleary said.

Deal said, "Get down off your horse."

Jackson stepped down, still keeping his hands in the air. He kept remembering that Tuck Cleary was the man who'd killed Arch Jackson.

Deal came up to him and patted his sides, after a glance at his hip. "Where's your gun?"

"Don't carry one," Jackson said.

Deal searched Jackson's pockets. He found the handkerchief Jackson had picked up on the trail where Lucy Rich had been thrown from the buckboard. He sniffed it and said, "This belongs to Lucy, Tuck." A speculative look came into his cruel face. "Look at those scratches on his face, Tuck. Looks like a woman clawed him. Maybe he's the man who carried Lucy off."

Tuck said, "Lucy? Boss, she's at the house right now."

"Dammit, we want her out o' the way for awhile," Deal said. "This is made to order, Tuck. You take Lucy up to Tripp's old place. Keep her there until you hear from me. I'm takin' this man into town for the sheriff. And when people hear about what he done to Lucy, I'll bet that crackerbox jail can't keep 'em out."

"I get it now, boss," Tuck said eagerly. "You handle him all right by yourself?"

"I think so, Tuck," Deal's voice held a savage note. "He makes a break it'll be easier. A dead man's easier t' pack in."

Jackson, the rage building in him, made his break right then. He kicked out at Deal and twisted the rifle out of his hands. Cleary's gun cracked and Jackson felt the burn of the bullet as he went around the mincing black. He threw a shot that blasted the dirt up around Cleary's legs and then he

levered up another shell. He had the rifle barrel over his saddle and Tuck Cleary was backed against the corral fence.

"Your gun's cocked," Jackson taunted. "Go ahead and shoot, Cleary. Bet I can blow your head off before I die!"

"Wait, wait," Cleary whined. "I ain't goin' t' shoot."

"Why not, Cleary? You found it easy to shoot a defenseless old man—an old man who was locked in a jail."

Cleary's face was twisted with fear. "Arch Jackson!... You're his kid! I know you now. Wait a minute, Jackson, don't shoot. I'll tell. He wasn't tryin' to get away. But Deal made me do it. He's got somethin' on me and I had to do it. Deal went with me and waited across the street while I told the deputy to take five. I killed Arch and then opened the door and claimed he was tryin' t' escape. But Deal made me. An' I'll tell you something else, Jackson. He crooked old Mose out of half the Tumbling R. I can prove it, too."

Deal got to his feet slowly. "You can't prove nothing, Cleary, you yellow-bellied rattler. And this range bum—who'll believe him? You're—"

"I will, Dan," a clear voice said and Lucky Rich stood there, looking at Deal with revulsion on her face. "I heard it all, Dan," she went on, struggling for calm. "I think it's all over, Dan. I overheard Tuck and I think the sheriff will believe me."

Jackson got on his horse. He uncoiled the bullwhip from his saddle horn. "All right, men," he said. "Get ahead o' me. We're going to town."

"You'll come back, Tramp?" the girl called. "I need—a man like you."

"Ma'am, you want a trail bum around here?"

"Well, not a trail bum," she smiled. "Just Tramp Jackson. You'll come back?"

"Sure will, ma'am," Tramp grinned, and his bullwhip sounded like a six-shooter. ●END

A LADY FOR THE OUTLAW

(continued from page 11)

startlement he'd caused come to their faces, then said, "Well, gotta git down along to Preston an' tell the sheriff over there."

Connie at the kitchen door asked, "How—how much did they take?"

"Close to thirty thousand, Mr. Linter reckoned."

"Another whiskey, Jeb?" Connie heard her father ask, then Connie was running to her bedroom. Joey had helped steal thirty thousand dollars!

The day wore on, hours of agony and dread for Connie. Old Ben didn't notice the strange, limping horse in the north pasture, and her father was busy in the tavern with folk coming along the trail, excited at the news of the Stockton bank robbery.

Connie wanted to run away, to close her ears, to scream! But she went misty-eyed about the Inn helping Sarah with the usual sweeping and cooking and bed-making.

BUT TOWARD mid-afternoon a lone rider drifted up the trail from the direction of Stockton, and Connie, sweeping off the Inn stoop, watched him casually loop his mount's reins over the tavern rack, and roll a cigarette, his quiet brown eyes taking in the place under shadow of his hat brim. He was a lank, cool number, Connie saw—wash-softened shirt, limp denims tucked into scuffed boots—and there was a plain, double-action .45 strapped to his side, which in itself was not unusual because Connie knew a lot of men who wore guns. But there was something about this man—

She saw he was looking at her and there was something in his eyes, a plain, man-look as he saw her young, rounded body, that shot the red into her cheeks. With a swish of her broom she turned her back as if tossing her skirt—if she'd have had on a skirt instead of jeans—and she retreated into the kitchen. But her cheeks burned.

Curiosity took her to the door leading to the tavern, and keeping out of sight she watched him come in. He sauntered to the bar after a casual look around, and her dad asked him what would he have. He'd have whiskey, he said, and downed it neat, with no chaser. Her father poured another "on the house" and asked if he'd heard about the bank robbery. The man nodded offhand, and Connie then listened to her father trying to draw him out, friendly-like, in conversation, but Broad Morgan couldn't get much. He was just drifting through, might stay for the night. His handle was Ed Priest. No, he wasn't interested in a job; might stay for the night though "if the grub an' beds are good."

"Humph!" Connie said. "Did you hear that, Sarah? Criticising our food and beds already." And she went back to her sweeping, still warm-cheeked at the memory of his naked, hungry look.

Later her father rented him a room upstairs and the man took up his bed-roll then went out and took care of his horse. Connie couldn't contain her curiosity—and something else. She tucked in her red-plaid shirt, opened the second button from the top and patted her wavy brown hair two pats, then went down to the barn. This man took her breath away, oddly. He intrigued her with a snake-like fascination. Maybe she could find out something about him.

He was just finishing currying his horse, a leggy, beautiful roan.

"Nice animal you got there, Mister." She perched on top of a low stall.

He straightened slowly. He looked at her. "Miss, it's dangerous for you to run around like this."

An arch came into her back. "And why not? I always do. This is my father's place."

"That second button—that was not unbuttoned when I saw you before."

She could have died in that moment. He saw everything. He *knew* she'd unbuttoned it on purpose.

"And your hair," he murmured, still holding himself very rigid, "has lost its wind-blown effect, but it is just as pretty—it is prettier."

"Mister, I came out to be friendly, because you're one of our customers. Dad says—"

She never got any farther. He was in front of her; the curry comb was gone from his hand. His right arm was around her, and his left was under her lifting her off the low stall partition, and then he was closing her to him and bending his suddenly taut, brown face to hers.

FOR ONE wild instant Connie felt a fright, then the flashing thought came that here might be the test she'd been wishing for—did she really love gangly, young Joey Adams?—and searching for the answer she lifted her lips and pressed gently against him.

"My God!" the man said, and then his lips were on hers, his arms were coils of steel, his lean brown fingers pressed into her body. Connie fought for breath. She tried to cry out. But the hard lips of the man, pressing against hers, closed out all sound. A small, quick fear grew within her, but his lips kept seeking; she could see his brown curly hair tumbled, his long-lashed eyes closed, the hot, bright spot of red high on his brown cheeks. Then with the press of his lean, sinewy body, a warm glow began within Connie. She closed her own eyes; her arms crept upward to be around him—

"Connie! Connie!" It was Old Ben, approaching the barn. "Your pop wants you."

She leaned back and pushed against the stranger's chest. She knew her cheeks were aflame and her hair a wild mess.

"Don't. Don't!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Old Ben is coming."

He released her. He was shaken. His breath came in hard, quick pants.

"I—why did you ever come out here? Tempt me?"

"Why?" She arched her brows and coolly rearranged her hair. She had recovered quickly; she was master of the situation. "Why, I wanted to find out something."

His triangular eyes shot up. "And did you?"

She laughed, now very coolly. "I'm not telling." And like a little, rounded elf she fled through the length of the barn and out the back door toward the Inn.

She found her father in the tavern cellar, tapping a new beer keg. At her question, he looked up in surprise. "Why, no, Connie. I didn't tell Ben I wanted to see you."

She hid her quick warmth at the knowledge Old Ben had spied them through the barn window and had used that ruse. What must Old Ben think? But she went on with a thought that had been bothering her ever since she'd learned what Joey had done.

"Dad, if a friend of yours sorta falls off the beaten path, do you always stick by him?"

For an instant Broad Morgan's thick brows quirked upward, then he said quietly, "That depends. Generally I would, Connie."

"Even if the friend knew it was wrong in the first place?"

"Connie, dear, circumstances can change the most heinous crime, and friends are not real friends if they aren't loyal in times of need. Remember that always. But don't you fret your pretty little head with such things. You don't have such problems." He patted her on the hair with his big, wet hand, then heard the beer sizzling upstairs through the opened tap and made a run for it.

Connie went up to her room slowly, trying to sort out the saneness from the emotions this wild day. Why should everything happen in twenty-four hours? She thought back over the haunting scene from last night, and she shivered. She recalled Joey, his youth, his love, his caresses—shy, growing, urging a bit more every time, and the recollections quickened her

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breathing involuntarily. Then she remembered that one, quick, flaming meteor of passion—yes, she had been as guilty as he—in the barn. She had been toying, tempting him. She thought she had a reason. But did she prove anything?

HHEAT CREPT through her body at the memory. Love? What was it? This handsome Ed Priest—Joey, young, gangly, like a puppy—She looked at herself in the full-length mirror, then, as if ashamed, turned quickly away. Yes, she certainly had enough to tempt any man. But which one?

Her wide, troubled eyes wandered out the window, then grew motionless. This Ed Priest was talking to Old Ben, pointing casually across to the north pasture at the horses, and Old Ben was shrugging. Old Ben was moving toward the tavern. And suddenly Connie was flying down the stairs.

She took up her old place back of the kitchen-tavern door and she listened. As she suspected Old Ben had come at once to tell her father.

"...strange horse over there, Broad. A dun, limping in right front foot. I wouldn't'a noticed but this strange hombre spotted it right-off being kicked away by the other horses as if a stranger, an' also about the limping. What do you make of it?"

"Hmmm." Through the crack of the door, Connie could see her dad's thick brows gather thoughtfully. "So he noticed it right off, eh? And you don't recognize the animal. Anything else?"

Old Ben hesitated. "Why—uh—yeah. Connie's black is gone."

Connie could have sworn her dad's face didn't move a muscle.

"That so?" He turned and began sloshing glasses in water. "Oh, Ben," he called as the old wrangler was going out of the empty tavern. "I don't believe I'd mention that to this young Priest."

Old Ben touched his hat and shuffled off.

Connie stood rigid in her hiding

place. She pressed her knuckles tight against her lips. Who was this Ed Priest? Why should he notice a strange limping horse in the north pasture? Didn't his sharp eyes miss anything?

And then there was her dad—so quiet, and cool, so far ahead of everybody always in thought and figuring out things. Did he suspect or, worse, know Joey was in on it?

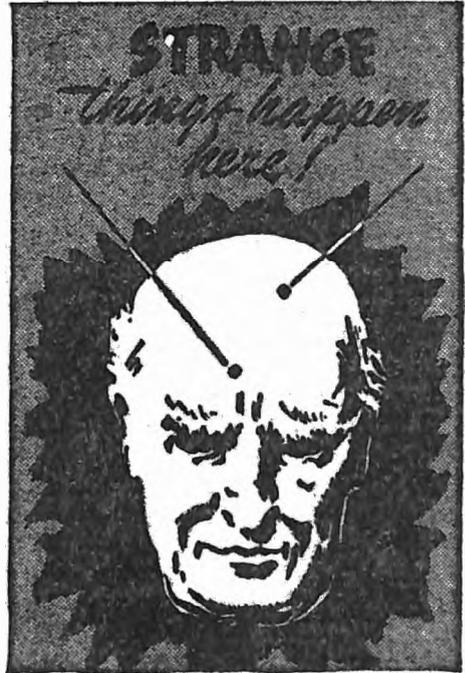
She ran her whitened knuckles uncertainly over her even, pearly teeth, and again dread of last night for Joey crept through her. What could she do? A noose, she knew with womanly certainty, was drawing around Joey's happy-go-lucky, young neck.

A thought came to her, and she whirled and ran up the back stairs. She knew this Ed Priest was out in the yard. She got the pass key from Sarah's room and swiftly ran down the hall and opened Room No. 10.

It was bare, immaculate, well-made—as Sarah did all the rooms—and there across the foot of the iron bed lay the stranger's bedroll. Swiftly she opened it. Dusty blankets, shaving kit, an extra pair of boots, pants, two shirts, one a wool one—she was disappointed. Nothing to disclose his identity or occupation. Wait a second! Her eye caught something. That wool shirt—She held the brown cloth to the light, and her heart crawled into her throat. She was right! Two small pin-prick holes under the right pocket told her what she wanted. Ed Priest was a deputy sheriff!

She found herself trembling. How did he know? What made him come here? Did he know Joey was in on it? He must have some clue—coming to Morgan's Inn. She recalled that first piercing look he'd given her. Then it wasn't just her womanly charms that had caused that look. He knew she and Joey were going steady. This Ed Priest had come to Morgan's Inn to watch her!

SHE FORGOT where she was. And time slid past. Only the creak of



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the stairs warned her at the last instant. Spurs jingled softly.

She flung down the shirt, whirled to the door, running. She made it across to Sarah's room just in time before he turned corridor corner.

She leaned weakly against the closed door wiping the back of her hand over her forehead. Joey. She had to help him. The law was here, closing in on Joey. This quiet, ruthless Ed Priest, she knew, would be a bloodhound on Joey's trail. She had to warn Joey to run, to get out of these mountains, to flee this state, and with held breath she listened against the door until the other door closed and all grew quiet once more in the Inn upstairs.

Then silently she opened her door and slipped into the hallway, making not a sound.

The door across the way opened. "Hello."

She froze in her tracks. The man had ears like a lynx.

"H—Hello."

His eyes weren't smiling, although his lips pretended to. "I was wondering who it was." He nodded gravely and closed his door, and Connie, the breath choked up into her, continued down the hallway.

But she didn't go down the stairs. As she came to the top step a wild, daring plan came to her. She turned to the old wing of the log inn where her room under the eave was. She slipped into a buckskin jacket with quilted lining, squeezed her hair under a mannish, grey, felt hat, and took a pair of leather riding gloves from her top desk drawer. She had on tough, serviceable half riding boots and tucking her levi pants legs securely into them started down the back stairs. But at the second step, she turned and went back.

From the bottom dresser drawer she took out a pearl-handled .38 and a partial box of shells which she dumped into the left jacket pocket. She twirled the cylinder of the .38 once, expertly, loaded all chambers but the

one under the hammer, then thrusting the gun into the right jacket pocket and out of sight she went down the stairs, in a round-a-bout way under the pines to the barn where she saddled a small, grey mare. She led the mare out the side door, keeping out of sight of the Inn buildings and under the pines she mounted and, kicking her small heels into the mare's flanks, she headed north into the wild mountain country toward Bruce Canyon.

Twice in pine-secluded, high places she paused and searchingly looked over her back-trail, once in a thick glade even circling around to come up on her own trail, and finally she was sure no one was following her. She had given that clever deputy the slip. And abandoning her efforts to keep to high ground and rock, she cut across valleys and hogbacks, straight to where she knew Bruce Canyon lay.

An hour later she came out on the western rim of the rugged, pine-dotted valley and sharp disappointment dragged at her stomach. There wasn't a sign of life in Bruce Canyon.

THE WINDOW-LESS, abandoned ranch cabin lay sleeping under a clump of pines. No smoke curled from the field stone chimney. No horses stamped in the sagging corral. The wooden pump was over-grown with weeds. The place looked as deserted as when the Gable family had deserted it eight years ago.

She dismounted and led her mare to the valley floor, started to re-mount then thought better of it. She had some of her father's inbred caution. Abandoned as the place looked, there was no use taking any chances. She wasn't sure, yet, about her plans, but she had to warn Joey, and she wanted no trouble with his new-found friends. In fact she wanted not a thing to do with Grunt and Pock and that hulking one whose horse had gone lame.

She came out of a tongue of pine near the sagging front door and walked soundlessly toward it on sand and pine needles. Her right hand was

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closed tightly on the .38 in her right jacket pocket.

Six feet from the door she received a shock. There *was* somebody in there! She heard the low murmur of voices.

Her heart pounded violently. She felt weak and wanted to run. But her legs wouldn't move. She was there in the sunlight, in the open—

She did the only thing her terrified mind told her to—dropped down and crawled on all fours against the protecting logs of the building. There she crouched, suddenly scared and shaking. She hadn't thought it would be like this, but all at once she was awfully afraid. She had thought of Joey, and that he would be there, and he would protect her, but now she knew Joey wasn't in that cabin. His voice wasn't amongst those talking; she would recognize his in a million. Now what to do? She looked fearfully about, and then almost fainted. A wide-open crack was six inches from her head!

She became like stone. Shock held her rigid. Joey was in there all right, but he was stretched on a broken bunk along the opposite wall. A two-inch gash lay along his right temple just underneath the short, yellow curls; his eyes were closed; he didn't seem to breathe underneath the ropes that tied him on the pole bunk. A gag, the remains of a dirty gunnysack, was strapped around his mouth.

Connie's eyes darted wildly about the room, and in the far corner in the shadows she saw two men leaning over a rickety wood table counting money. It was heaps and heaps of green paper and silver and gold coin. One man was pock-marked; the other was the hulking rider whose horse had gone lame.

"Yep, ten thousand for each o' us, Pock. Not bad for a night's haul."

The wide man said tonelessly, "He sure didn't have any brains, thinkin' we were goin' to split this four ways. He fell in with us too easy. If they

pin anything onto anybody, he'll be the fall hombre; they know him. He sure didn't have any savvy no ways."

"That's how it is with young waddies with petticoats on their mind. Said he was doin' it fer some female he was going to get hitched with. He sure blabbed a lot. Grunt said he blabbed too much. We couldn't trust him— Say, where the hell is Grunt? Time to be ridin' soon."

"Grunt's still watchin' the back trail. He's a suspicious codger. He'll be in soon."

CONNIE had worked out her .38 now. Her dimpled little chin was set, and two spots of color were high on her cheeks. She was going to creep to that sagging door and throw down on those two men; then she was going to cut Joey loose and—

A sound behind her. She whirled. She got off one shot then a great dirty hand clamped over her mouth and another caught her by the neck, and the man, Grunt, adeptly kicked the .38 out of her hand. She fought; she tried to scream; then she fainted....

When she came to, they were tying her wrists and legs.

"Think she was followed?"

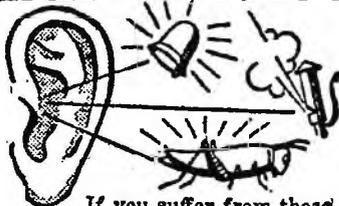
"Wouldn't be surprised."

Dusk settled fast in the valley; the sun was below the western rock rim. The outlaws talked in low tones, and Connie knew they were discussing what to do with them. The money still lay on the table, now evenly divided.

Finally they decided to fix her bonds so she could loosen them herself eventually. They were going to ride off and leave her and Joey. They went for the horses.

"Joey, are you all right?" She whispered it. He wriggled in answer. She moved her arms and legs and made the surprising discovery that they had greatly underestimated the yielding of a woman's body. The rope lariat scraped her skin but she wriggled and squirmed her arms and worked it over her head.

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"Joey, is there a gun here? Have you yours?" She was working at his bonds. The gag fell away, then the other ropes. In the growing darkness he hugged her.

"Connie! Connie! You're wonderful."

"Sh-h-h! They're coming back. What will we do?"

TRUE TO her words, the soft roll of horses' hooves on sand and pine needle came from out of the woods.

"God, Connie, there isn't a gun, not even a club, in this shack. We'll have to run for it."

"No, they'll ride us down."

A wavering thread of whistle came through the night air.

"It's Dad! It's the whistle he uses to call his horses. He saw my gray!"

"Your dad?"

Outside curses grew loud with the rolling drum of hooves. "Damn it. She was followed. Get in there an' scoop up that money! Hurry. We'll split and outride 'em in the darkness."

But Connie, quick as a mink, ran to the heavy slab door.

She pulled on the door. It wouldn't come. Then Joey saw her strategy and lent his strength, and creakingly the ill-fitting slab came into place, and Connie banged down the oak bar, wedging it tight.

A howl of fury exploded outside.

"Get back!" Grunt roared to the wide man, and .45 slugs bit and howled into all parts of the cabin. Joey grabbed Connie and flung her to the floor. He protected her with his own body.

"I've made a mess of this. I hope I get hit."

Connie felt Joey's body jerk twice. He coughed.

"Joey," she screamed. "Are you hurt?" She shook him.

"Connie—darling—"

Hoofbeats through the night! Grunt shouted hoarsely to his men. Pock, with a last scream of oaths, emptied his gun a second time through the blackness of the cabin, then Connie

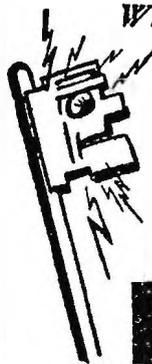
heard their horses thunder for the pines. She lay still, sobbing. Joey's weight was a dead thing upon her.

Minutes later at her father's voice she lifted the oak bar and a dozen men came into the cabin. They lit a fire. Joey Adams was hit and hit hard, but Broad Morgan, after examining the wound in the chest and thigh, declared, "He'll live."

Connie lifted her wet eyes. And she met thin, brown ones, looking down at Joey Adams, calculatingly. Her arms instinctively went around Joey.

"No. You can't. He isn't guilty. He did it for me—so we could get married. Joey isn't bad."

Broad Morgan looked around with wise eyes, eyes that had seen through
(continued on page 129)



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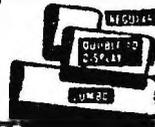
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OF

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(Signature of business manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of September, 1952. Tess Hatwood (My commission expires March 20, 1954). (SEAL)

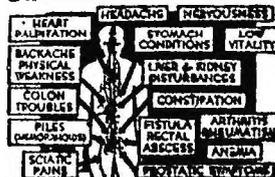
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WHIPSAWED (cont'd from page 45)

voice. "Don't move, Senor Richardson! And you will drop that gun!" He tried to find her... out there somewhere between himself and Richardson... he could see kind of a silhouette... somebody on a horse pointing a rifle at Richardson... it was hard to tell exactly—

CONSCIOUSNESS came slowly and it was some time before Lyle realized that he was indoors, lying on his back. He shook his head slowly back and forth several times and saw then that he was on the bench in the law office. Somebody was doing something to his arm. He looked at his arm. Bandage. He looked up. A small man with halfmoon glasses and a narrow, pinched face was smiling at him. "Couldn't do anything for the sheriff, but you'll be all right, Senor. The bullet didn't touch the bone."

So he wouldn't be getting drunk with Murdell...

He heard Concha's voice say, "Gracias, Senor el Doctor."

The doctor said, "Por nada," and moved away.

Now he could see Concha clearly. Now everything became clearer. She was kneeling at the bench beside him, smiling. There were a dozen questions he wanted to ask; he didn't know quite where to begin. Concha put her hands on his cheeks and they felt cool. She looked into his eyes. "The people put Richardson in jail, Bob."

"You mean Murdell did."

"Yes, he too was very brave."

He tried to get up but was still weak. He fell back again. "Concha—"

"Si mi querido?"

"Now we'll have time. Lots of time. And I expect this valley is as good a place as any other to spend it. Together, Conchita. What do you think?"

She smiled again, leaned forward and kissed him. That was the answer to his question—and to the other questions as well. In fact, for Robert Lyle, it was at this moment the answer to just about everything. ●END

his daughter all day, had seen through the coming of Ed Priest, and Broad Morgan who had organized this posse and followed his daughter's trail like a bloodhound, looked the young deputy in the eye and drawled, "I reckon you'd call that turning state witness, wouldn't you, Priest?"

Ed Priest said, "I reckon, Broad." He looked to the unconscious Joey. "He sure is the lucky one." Then walked out and into the night, readying to take up the outlaws' chase tomorrow. And Connie sat down by the table near the heavy bags of money and she whispered to her dad with Joey's head on her lap,

"It's love, Pop. It's real love—for both of us."

And Broad Morgan bowed his head. "I reckon it is, honey. A man who'd do that for his girl."

Connie smiled happily.

THE END

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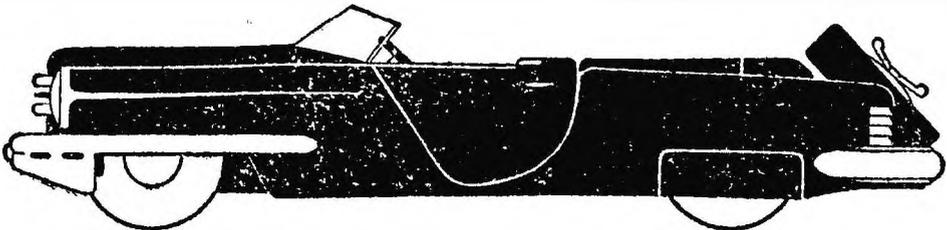
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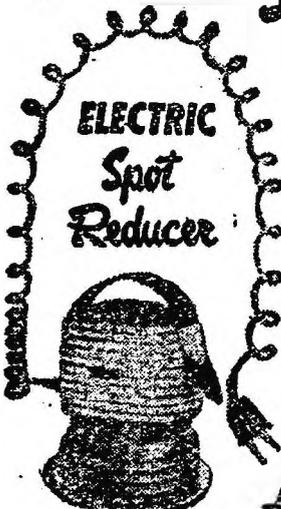
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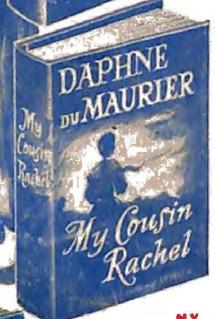
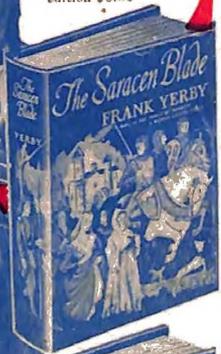
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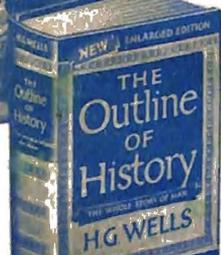
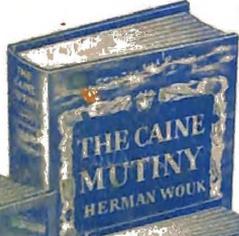
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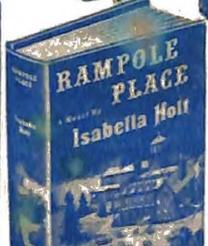


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