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COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES

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1945
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STORY MAGAZINE

BARBWIRE BULLETS

A RANGELAND NOVELET

By **R. S. LERCH**



A LONG COWBOY NOVEL BY FRANK BONHAM

The CANYON of MAVERICK BRANDS

LARIAT
MAGAZINE

STORY
CANYON OF MAVERICK BRANDS
A LONG COWBOY NOVEL BY FRANK BONHAM

JAN.
1945

*This time you'll listen to **ME**, Sonny Boy!*

1 **MOMMA WAS LOSING PATIENCE WITH ME AGAIN.** She says: "I'm getting plenty sick of you looking like Flaky Joe, Hair's Horrible Example! And I'm tired of you spending money for a lot of junk that doesn't help. You'd never listen to me who has been a nurse most of her life, but you'll listen this time, Sonny Boy!"



2 "THIS PROVES WHAT I'VE TOLD YOU for months," she went on. "You've got a case of infectious dandruff that ought to have repeated Listerine Antiseptic treatment and persistent massage. I've seen the records on the Lambert research, and I know what Listerine Antiseptic can do in killing the 'bottle bacillus.' And so, Baby, we're starting right now!"



3 **EVERY MORNING AND NIGHT SHE HERDED ME** into the bathroom and doused on Listerine Antiseptic. Then she followed it with a swell, vigorous massage. Boy! Did my scalp feel like a million. And the way those ugly flakes and scales began to disappear is nobody's business. What a treatment!

4 "YOU'RE ALMOST HUMAN AGAIN,"

she said a few weeks after, "and your hair looks like it used to. After this, maybe you'll listen to Momma when she tells you that you ought to use Listerine Antiseptic, every time you wash your hair, as a precaution against the infection coming back." Will I listen? You said it!



Flakes? Scales? Itching? Germs? LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC—NOW!

THESE common little symptoms may mean that you're in for infectious dandruff.

Better start at once with Listerine Antiseptic and massage, the treatment that has helped so many . . . that may help you. Listerine Antiseptic goes after the infection itself—kills millions of germs, including the "bottle bacillus", regarded by many authorities as a causative agent of this type of dandruff.

At the same time it helps to get rid of those ugly flakes and scales and alleviates itching. Your scalp glows and tingles and your hair feels wonderfully fresh. In tests, this twice-a-day treatment brought complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms of dandruff within a month to 76% of dandruff sufferers. Listerine Antiseptic is the same solution that has been famous for over sixty years in oral hygiene.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., St. Louis, Mo.

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE



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THIS IS A FICTION



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THE CANYON OF

By FRANK BONHAM

They brought their spoils beneath the rim of the Skyline and settled to feast under an Owlhoot moon. But Ross Kirby, riding hand on holster, tallied a double-cross kill and ripped the wolf-pack war wide open.



A COMPLETE RANGELAND NOVEL

MAVERICK BRANDS

THE breath-taking vistas of the trail to Skyline Ranch had always held Ross Kirby, but tonight there was something so poignant about all the old, unforgotten sounds and odors that his throat felt tight and he had to stop at a bend and get his breath.

Two years! he thought. Two years in heaven and hell, but never a spot like this!

They had a saying down in Three Rivers that the man who held Skyline Ranch held

the Big Bend. From up here, a quarter-mile above the big ranch-house, you could see why. Not a horse, not a cow, could go down the canyon or across the hills into the badlands without being observed. No one could approach the grim, fortress-like ranch-house without coming under the sights of the man who held the Skyline. There was an empire of water and grass for his cattle; and there was Smoky River Canyon. You could call this an asset or a menace. So long as you left alone the



Only the merciless gunfire of Ross and his segundo remained to stop the wolf-pack.

men who called its wild vastness their own, it was an asset, for they paid well for the privilege of privacy.

Ross Kirby listened to the roar of the falls, like wind in the tops of tall pines, rising a sheer half-mile from the juncture of the Blue and the Poverty. Here Smoky River blended their waters and roared down the gorge, as brash and reckless as the men who inhabited it.

Ross Kirby rode on, filled with memories, regrets and a few satisfactions. He came out of the buckrush and juniper growths into the clearing before the ranch-house. It was dark; the windows were shuttered. Skyline Ranch-house was a forbidden block of masonry rooted in the granite ribs of the mountain. There was only one high point to the square structure, and this was the water-tower rising thirty feet from the enclosed patio.

Ross raised his hand toward the tower. "Hello!" he called. "You there, Guss?"

Rudy Guss' voice came from the door of the house, which Ross now saw was slowly opening. He said in that thick, Teutonic speech of his: "Ross Kirby! I never t'ought you'd come back. Come in, my boy."

The shade was raised from a hurricane lantern. Ross went up the heavy plank steps and crossed the solid puncheon porch. The rancher barred the door, went around the living-room lighting wall lamps. Ross Kirby stood with his hat in his hand, letting the smell and the look of the room go into him, stirring something deep and strong. It was as though he had walked out of here a week ago and only now come back, for not a thing was different.

The same Indian rugs hung on the walls. The same bear- and lynx-hides covered the floor and the furniture on it was the hand-made, juniper and goat-skin furniture of his boyhood. The mounted lynx over the great fireplace, with its eyes shot out by Ross' father.

"Live alone up here?" Ross asked.

"Who else would I be trusting, but myself?" Guss laughed. He was a big man, as full of years as he was, his belly big with eating and drinking and his long, pointed mustaches white. His eyes were sharp little blue chips, but the lines radiating from them were of worry. "My men live below, in the Falls House, near the

work. I see my foreman once a week. You remember Rocky Taylor, *ja?* You scrapped with him as a boy." Rudy Guss laughed as he put a log on the fire.

"Maybe we'll scrap some more," Ross said, smiling. "Is he still courtin' my girl?" Ross let himself into one of the deep chairs before the fire. He was a big, solid-looking man with full lips and a jaw to break a man's fist. He had brown eyes guarded by heavy, dark brows. His face was sunburned and pleasant, except for a certain deep restlessness that showed through.

Rudy said: "*Ja*, that Rocky courts every girl in T'ree Rivers." He poured two big glasses of elderberry wine, and as he handed one to the other man he said: "Why did you leave, Ross?"

"Why not? I had a two-bit stake in Hooligan Canyon and a lot of travel in my feet. I've seen a lot of country in the last two years and hugged the *señoritas* from here to there. So now I'm back."

HE did not add that the thorn that had made life unbearable here was still just as sharp—his love for a girl who was so far above a Hooligan Canyon ruffian that she could not see him for contempt. Nor that he had some plans that would raise him farther than any man from Poverty Creek, in wild Hooligan Canyon, had ever climbed.

"Where did you go?" the German asked.

"Mexico. I reckon I'll go back some time."

Guss leaned forward, his old eyes shining. "Tell me about it," he said. "You know, Ross, I was always one to travel. But now I'm old and fat, and all I can do is talk about it."

"I was in Tehuantepec most of the time," Ross Kirby said. "I got mixed up in railroads and politics. Everybody had a knife in everybody else's back and the other hand in his money-bag."

He talked on, telling of high adventure and danger, of steaming jungles and blizzard-swept plateaus, and the cattleman listened with greedy ears, his eyes full of the remembrance of escapades of his own youth.

The stories, the wine, and the fire made him sentimental. He reached over and

patted Kirby's knee. "Always I have liked you, Ross," he said. "You was different from them other Hooligan Canyon cutthroats."

The dark-skinned man from below the border blew smoke at the ceiling. He said, musing: "Hooligan Canyon. Her men are looked down on more than anybody in the Bend. And so they're the proudest men in Texas. They drink and steal cattle and kill a man if they don't like him. But they do it openly, so they'd never make out on Blue River. And they aren't far enough across the line to ride down the Smoky."

Guss lit his big calabash pipe. "Ja," he said. "Most of them ain't worth hanging, Ross. But you—you're different. Maybe it's the blood. You were born in this house, weren't you?"

"Lived ten years in it. You're the third man to hold it since the old man died." He stood up, abruptly.

"Do you want to sell Skyline Ranch, Rudy?"

The cowman started. Then smiled. "My boy," he said, "on forty dollars a month, would you be buying ranches?"

"On thirty thousand dollars I might."

Rudy Guss regarded him narrowly. "Then it was true, about Tehuantepec! Whose money bag was you into, Ross?"

"I gambled," Ross said. "With my money and my life. And I came out with a stake. I can pay you cash. You can't hold it forever, you know. And when you go, it will be like Dad did—a shot in the night."

Guss nodded, thinking about the gun-trap Ross had walked through an hour before. This last year he had felt that his candle was burning out. The Smoky Canyon rustlers, the unseen men by whose work only you knew of them, were cutting deep into his herds. One night they would come up here and test the legend that he had a fortune locked in the strong-room under the house. He would be ready for them. Under the steps of the porch were two sawed-off eight-gauge shotguns which would blow the belly out of any man who came creeping up them. They would have killed Ross Kirby, tonight, had he loaded them. But that was the last thing he did before going to bed, like winding the clock. His strong-room was similarly protected.

But when that happened, they would

stay to fight it out, and what was one man against—well, how many? Enough to have driven out four strong men in turn who had tried to hold the place. Rudy Guss thought of the fatherland he had left forty years ago. He had a chest full of good American dollars, worth millions of marks. He would be a big man in his homeland. Ja—a big man.

He said: "Let me see the money."

Ross went out and turned his horse into the corral, carrying the heavy saddle-bags inside. He dumped the contents onto the floor before the hearth. Rudy screamed: "*Lieber Gott!* T'irty t'ousand, in real gold!"

It was too much for him. The scales were forced down. He went to the back of the house and returned with a crude sort of deed. It had been given to him by Sheriff Cave Jackson when he bought the ranch at auction after the murder of the last owner. The German signed it and made out a receipt, and quickly, greedily, like a child, gathered the money into a strong-box.

"Now," he said, "you own Skyline Ranch. What you going to do with it?" He smiled, the smile of old age watching youth make a foolish error.

Ross smiled. "I'm going to be King of Hooligan Canyon," he said. "And I'm going to open up the Smoky."

Guss laughed softly. "Ja," he said. "Once I t'ought I open up Smoky River Canyon. I rode down to the Narrows, and somebody shot me in the leg, and I decide—what man needs so much water and grass? I leave the boys alone, and every month there is t'ree hundred dollars in silver left in the grain shed." He filled the glasses again, raised his against the light. "I wish you luck, my boy."

Ross stayed at Skyline Ranch that night. As he left him in the little room in the southeast corner of the house, Rudy shook a big key at him. "I lock you in, see? You are a good boy, but—so I know where you are."

"All right," Ross said. "I guess it's time you got out, Rudy."

Ross opened the window and looked down into the whispering gorge of the Smoky. He had dim recollections that lay, like dusty silver coins, back in his mind. Memories of a day he had ventured down

that forbidden canyon and had seen a pack-train of burros disappear into a vast cave. Even then he instinctively knew that the original owners of the train had been Mexican traders or smugglers, and that they now lay somewhere along the moss-covered trail.

That day he saw parks and canyons filled with stolen cattle. He saw only a few men, and they did not see him. It set him on fire with a desire to be lord of the Skyline some day and take possession of every acre of it.

But most of Ross Kirby's memories were of Hooligan Canyon, of the tough, uncurried men who rustled and killed and stole along Poverty Creek, and yet barely made a living in the rugged valley which God seemed to have forgotten. If they had been good ranchers, they would have worked for a stake on Blue River, across the ridge, where the grass was green and high and the cattlemen were proud.

Ross and his brother hired out for board to one of the ranchers on Poverty Creek. There they learned to fight and to stalk, to rope and butcher in a hurry, to swear and drink and live for the moment at hand.

A young tough like Ross Kirby should have known better than to go a-courting on Blue River, but he began to find occasion to speak to Webb Clay's dark-eyed daughter, Nora, when they met in Three Rivers, and one day he rode up to call on them. Clay owned the big Block B ranch just above the falls. He was a big man in the Bend, but prideful, and he sent Ross away with his face burning. He started a fire in his heart, too, that grew hotter with the months.

Nora had been gentler. "I like you, Ross," she said. "But don't you see that I couldn't live in Hooligan Canyon? Come back some day, when you own Skyline Ranch." And she smiled.

Shortly after that the Smoky River crowd began to hit Clay's herds pretty hard, and, of course, Hooligan Canyon got credit for it. Clay was a good rancher, but not a fighter, and finally he sold out to John Caddo, all except a little strip up on Dutchman's Flat.

And now Ross Kirby owned Skyline Ranch, and he was going back to call on the Clays again.

II

SOMETIME after midnight Ross came awake as though a door had been slammed in his room. He sat up, unconscious that he had brought his Colt from under the pillow. It came to him suddenly what the sound had been, and he reached for his boots in a sort of panic. Death was abroad in the ranch-house, and he was locked in his room.

He heard someone run by the room, and he yelled: "Guss! What's the matter?"

The man did not stop. He passed to the front of the house. The building was a hollow square built around a patio, a hall separating the rooms from the patio. Ross' room was at the rear, at the end of the hall from the German's. He began to kick at the lock, but the oaken planks were as solid as stone.

There was another shot. It had the force and hollow thunder of a cannon blast, and immediately afterward a man screamed. Ross turned to the window and pushed it open. He heard horses crossing the front yard. With his gun cocked, he slipped along the wall to the front.

Three horses were running past the corral toward the trail, but the saddle of the lead horse was empty, and there was a sodden-looking form thrown across the swell of the first rider's saddle. The horse, frightened by the burden and the odor of death, was throwing its head and trying to buck-jump, but the horseman kept a tight rein and spurred savagely.

Kirby shouted: "Hold it!"

The rear rider twisted in the saddle and a gun stabbed flame and lead across the yard. The bullet snarled off the adobe wall close to Ross. He fired, hearing a solid *thunk* as the slug struck the man's saddle. The brush took the men, and they were riding desperately down the canyon trail.

Standing at the corner of the ranch-house, Kirby sorted the sounds that came to him, after the clatter of the horses faded. He found only the faint noises of the night, horses moving in the corral and coyotes along the ridge, and over them all the muted roar from the black canyons.

The front steps were a welter of blood. Ross slipped in it as he went up the stairs.

He smelled powder-smoke heavy and warm. He went through the open front door and lighted one lamp. Walking cautiously, he trod down the hall to Rudy Guss' room. This door also was ajar, the lock shot away. In a big juniper chair like a throne, a blanket wrapped about him and a shotgun across his knees, sat the erstwhile owner of Skyline Ranch. From the appearance of the bed, devoid of blankets or pillows, he had apparently been accustomed to sleep in this manner during his last years.

But not all his shotgun traps nor locks could shut out Death, for the dark angel's heavy hand had struck him as he sat there, asleep. The bullet had entered under his left eye and torn out the back of his head as it went into the wall. Rudy Guss had stayed in the Bend one day too long.

In the morning Ross found how it had all happened. The killer had tossed a rope over a *viga* and climbed across the roof, dropping into the patio and prying a window open. He had shot away the lock of the rancher's door and sprung through, while the old man was still dull with sleep and wine, and put a bullet through his head. Then he ran through the house and unlocked the front door to let his companions in. One of them had walked into Rudy's gun-trap and had his belly blown open. Hearing Ross' shouts, they had decided to leave.

Ross wondered about the gold he had given the old cowman. The saddle-bags were not in his room. He remembered the wine-cellar, and descended the stone stairs off the front room. But there was a door, now, at the bottom, a slab of concrete banded with strap-iron and locked with three gigantic padlocks. It would be a day's work to break the locks, and he had not yet found the keys.

He saddled and took the trail, following the blood sign. There was blood on the brush beside the trail and dried puddles of it on the ground. He was not surprised when suddenly the blood-sign petered out: No man could have bled like that for long.

Skyline range was worked from the headquarters near the falls, a cluster of adobe cabins and pole corrals among the poplars and *alamos* along the river, just below the falls. The roar of falling water was close and constant. Ross raised a shout,

and a Mexican came from the main building.

The man wore a flour-sack apron and no shirt; he was short and bald-headed, and he had long gray mustaches. "*Mande?*" he called back.

Ross remembered him. It was like finding a little part of the old days untouched. He dismounted, calling: *Cómo te ha ido, Casoose?*"

Jesus Corrales raised both arms as if to embrace him, and the fervor of his smile lighted every part of his face. "Señor Ross!" he said. "Thou art indeed back. *Grac' a Dios!*" He held him by the shoulders and kissed each cheek, and stood back, tears in his sentimental old eyes.

Jesús was as much part of this country as the canyons. He had been born here, and he had herded goats and roped wild cattle and even acted as range foreman in the days when Ross' father owned the ranch. He was Casoose to all the Americans, that being close enough to the pronunciation of his name and a lot easier on the tongue. He had taught Ross and his brother a lot of the lore of the country that only his people knew. And now he was back on the Skyline Ranch again, a humble cooker of food for ungrateful cowboys.

Over a cup of coffee Ross told him about the beauty and dangers of the big land south of the border, of how it got into a man's soul. Casoose listened, enthralled, and finally he said:

"So now you come back to Hooligan Canyon." He sounded a little sad.

Ross said: "No. I've come back to the Skyline."

Casoose shook a finger at him. "Is not good. Rocky Taylor is foreman. He does not forget the whipping you gave him."

"Taylor's quitting," Ross said. "I bought out Guss last night. I'm firing the whole crew, Casoose, except you."

He told the Mexican about the deal with Guss, and about the murder. "I promised myself seventeen years ago that a Kirby would come back. It's happened, now, and a lot of changes are going to be made. I'm going to hire men I can trust. You'll have your old job of range boss. I suppose the boys are out now on the calf-roundup?"

Casoose shrugged. "*Quién sabe?* They ride much, they talk little. Rocky went to

town yesterday. Maybeso he go to see a girl."

"I have a notion I'll run into him," Ross said. "When the boys come back, you can tell them they're done. Pick out any you think are worth keeping. And meet me at the ranchhouse tomorrow."

He crossed the Poverty a half-mile above the falls and cut over the hogback to Blue River Valley. Here the canyon was narrow. A little way up, the crimson sandstone walls fell back and the canyon was a wide valley full of sunlight and green grama, criss-crossed by sparkling feeder streams. He could see John Caddo's Ladder cattle ranging wide from the Calamity Mountains on the west, separating the valley from Hooligan Canyon, to the clay mesas on the east. All this range had once been Webb Clay's, and now he had been crowded back to Dutchman's Flat, the gateway to the badlands.

That was the trouble with being honest, Ross thought. Clay had been one of the first white men in the section, and he could have held half of Blue River Valley by now, but he had trusted in men's honesty rather than his own six-gun. So now he was beating a living out of the salt grass with his fists, and a twisted cripple had usurped his place: John Caddo, who had a body that was a curse, a mind like a knife-blade, and a daughter as beautiful as a black panther.

Ross reached the Block B in the afternoon. He looked at the unwhitewashed adobe buildings and ocotillo corrals, at the dozen-odd ponies in the corral, and he knew that Webb Clay was finished. This was the last stop this side of bankruptcy.

NORA heard his horse and came out of the house. There was no porch, and she stood in a blue gingham dress against the light wall, the sun in her blond hair and her hand raised to shade her eyes. When she recognized the dark-skinned, heavy-shouldered man holding the horse she caught her breath.

"Why, Ross Kirby!" she said. She put out her hand when Ross approached, and he took it, and all the things she had meant to him before were in him again, filling him with the same hunger for things that were above a Hooligan Canyon long-looper. She was gentleness and fire, steady-

ness and unpredictability. The man who won her would never win her completely; even when she was in his arms he would know that part of her was not his, a part that was strong and proud, and he would love her the more for it.

All this Kirby knew, but he was going, nevertheless, to remind her of an old bargain today. . . .

"You're just in time," she said. "Rocky stopped on the way to town. We're about to eat. Dad will be glad to see you."

"Rocky, too, I reckon."

They went into the cabin. The main room was small, with mud-plastered walls and a small corner fireplace. Some of the fine pieces of furniture from the big house on Blue River were being used. Webb Clay and Rocky Taylor got up from the dining table as the couple entered.

Clay offered Ross his hand. "Glad to see you back, Ross. We've often wondered about you." He was a small man who always reminded Ross of a bantam rooster. He wore a goatee and had eyes of a very pale and innocent blue, and his frail frame was stiffly erect.

Rocky Taylor merely said: "Howdy, Ross." He still wore the marks of Kirk's fists. His nose was flat and had a white scar across the bridge. He was a stolid, stockily-built puncher somewhat shorter than Ross.

Nora set a place for Ross and he ate the big plate of stew. The conversation was conventional and stiff. Clay told him about the changes in the three valleys and asked Ross some questions about Mexico. Taylor smoked cigarettes and watched the other man narrowly.

Webb Clay asked: "What will you do now, Ross? Go back to Poverty Creek?" He was the tactful Eastener, referring to Poverty Creek rather than to Hooligan Canyon.

"I reckon not for a while," Ross said. "I've got two aims: One is to open up Smoky River Canyon. The other is to take Nora home with me."

Clay's face turned red, and Nora turned sharply to Ross. Then she began to blush, and her eyes seemed to take a darker, angry blue. She said: "Whatever else you've done, you haven't learned anything about manners. The idea is ridiculous."

"Not so ridiculous as you might think.

You told me to come back after I owned Skyline Ranch. Well, I bought it last night. And here I am."

"Is this straight?" Taylor asked.

"You'll never hear anything truer," Ross told him. "Or that you're looking for a job as of now."

Clay carefully laid down his knife and fork and, moving his chair back, stood up. "I don't think we need to discuss it any further, Kirby."

Ross said: "If I had a million dollars, I'd still be a blue-jawed tough to you, wouldn't I? Because I was born on the wrong side of the Calamity Mountains. You've got to be born on Blue River to marry a white girl, don't you?"

He hadn't intended to say it. He hadn't even planned to bring the subject up before Clay and Taylor, but their silent contempt had aroused him.

Nora looked at him strangely, not entirely in anger. But Rocky said, standing: "This looks like your cue to leave."

Ross said: "Would you like to make me?"

Rocky Taylor laid his guns on the table and walked outside. Nora seized Ross' arm as he arose to follow.

"Stop it, Ross!" she said. "You're acting like a barbarian."

Ross unbuckled his cartridge belt, laid the Peacemaker on the table beside the other man's, and started out. Taylor had been waiting beside the door; as Ross came into the cramped opening he stepped in and swung a haymaker at his face. Ross could only partially duck it; knuckles bruised his cheek-bone and he lurched outside.

Taylor was after him with his left fist stabbing and his right cocked. He had the black-haired puncher off balance and he crowded him savagely, cutting his face with short crosses. Something sharp ripped Ross' cheek, and when he fell back and instinctively touched it, blood was pouring down his face, warm and wet. He saw the silver horseshoe ring Taylor wore.

Taylor's right fist came in and Ross ducked, but he was sluggish as a result of that first punch, and the blow caught him on the side of the neck. He went down, paralyzed. The ground was warm under the palms of his hands, and he felt its roughness against his cheek. He heard faintly a sort of sobbing sound, realizing

finally that it was his own labored breathing, as he dragged air painfully through his paralyzed throat. Ross crawled to his hands and knees and saw Taylor standing there, his hands on his hips, his mouth turned viciously.

Ross stood up. Rocky came after him again, aggressively but not without caution, for he had dreamed of this moment for three years, and would not have it spoiled by over-confidence. Ross saw that, and he knew what it meant: A long slaughter before the kill.

The puncher stabbed him with a short left to the heart. Ross gasped, and Taylor began to jab at his face, driving him back. Again the horseshoe ring slashed, and Ross' chin was cut diagonally. Taylor kept after him, rocking him occasionally with a hard one to the head, ripping continually at his body.

Ross Kirby weathered it somehow. It never occurred to him to let the other man drive in the finisher and take the easy way out. He began to notice something: That Rocky was breathing hard, unhurt as he was. Taylor had always liked his whiskey; and he had never been one to work if there was a cowhand he could order to do a job. He was snorting and sweating like a green hand tying a steer.

Ross took the next blow on his shoulder, fell back as though staggered. Taylor waltzed in, right shoulder rolling as his fist went out.

But Kirby side-stepped, letting the blow go by and slamming the puncher's jaw with all he had. Rocky's eyes crossed. He stumbled and tried to rig up some kind of defense against the blows that now, suddenly, hammered and slashed at his face. When he raised both hands to shield his face, Ross began sledging at his stomach. Ross found the soft spot under his ribs, and Rocky Taylor was done. He groaned, staggering away, and Ross put a thunderous blow into the side of his jaw.

Taylor lay on the ground with his bloody face in the dirt.

When Ross went back for his hat and gun, Webb Clay said stiffly: "I don't need to tell you not to come back. I have tried to shield my daughter against this sort of thing. I do not care to have it brought into my own home."

"Did it ever occur to you," Ross asked,

"that this is the sort of thing that makes one man a king and another a pauper in this country? You've lived by the book all your life, but at the rate you're going you'll be farming the badlands in another couple of years. Me, I live by the same code as a timber wolf: I fight for what I want. And I get it."

Nora said: "There are some things you can't win that way, Ross. But you'll never learn what they are until it's too late."

IT was near sundown when Ross Kirby rode into Three Rivers. The town lay in a little canyon of one of the creeks that fed Blue River. Incense cedar and juniper grew down the canyon-sides to the sandy wash, and up on the slope out of reach of spring floods the town occupied a clearing. As a town, it was strictly utilitarian: Three Rivers claimed a *cantina* where Mexicans could get drunk on tequila, a saloon where Americans could take on a load of whiskey, a post-office, a doctor, and a few stores to supply the necessities.

There was also a lawyer who profited by frequent range squabbles when there was no call for sheriff or coroner. This squabble did, and Ross Kirby visited Sheriff Cave Jackson after the doctor had taken some stitches in his cheek and chin. Ross was not perturbed by the fact that there would be permanent scars. There was more ruggedness than beauty in his countenance to begin with, and a few nicks would not weigh much against one of his breed.

Cave Jackson heard his story. He said: "My God, again? This makes the fourth time I've had to go up there and look at a corpse." He pulled a bottle out of his desk, took a pull at it, and handed it to Ross. "I can preach and I can hang," he told him, "but I'll be damned if I can make murder unpopular in the Big Bend. I wonder who I'll bury up there next."

"I can tell you who's taking over," Ross said. He showed him the deed Rudy Guss had given him.

Cave Jackson regarded him closely. He had a florid face with many broken veins in the cheeks, and a mouth that held a smile or the rim of a glass with equal grace. He had been sheriff of Three Rivers for twenty years, partly because he personally counted the ballots in all local elections.

"Guess you see where that puts you," said Jackson.

"I told you Rudy's guntrap got one of them," said Ross. "After you see the blood spilled around you'll know it wasn't me. I'm going down now and see Jim Lonnergan. I'll meet you here in the morning and we'll ride up."

Jim Lonnergan was a paradox in this country of hard work and low wages, a man who made more than most cattlemen without ever leaving his office.

"Well, what's your trouble?" he asked as Ross entered.

Ross looked at him, wondering how far it was safe to trust a lawyer with something as big as this. Lonnergan was in his forties, a dark-skinned man with a black military mustache and a strong mouth. He dressed carefully in city clothes and always gave the impression of saying a lot less than he knew.

"No trouble, Jim," Ross told him. "I bought the Skyline iron last night. I want you to take care of recording the deed and fixing it up right."

Lonnergan's face was blank; then his brows pinched together. "You bought it! With what?"

"With thirty thousand dollars in gold. It was forced on me in a card game in Mexico. Here's the deed the German gave me. He was killed a few hours later."

Jim Lonnergan examined it. He had a crooked smile when he looked up. "Well, I'm damned," he said. "Every man in the Bend out for it and a Hooligan Canyon roughneck wins it."

"The Kirby clan started it," he said. "It's just a home-coming. And I'm going to run cattle on every acre I own. You can pass that around if anybody asks you."

Jim Lonnergan knelt before his safe in the corner and started to put the deed away. Ross walked over and studied a big wall-map, tracing the extent of his holdings. He was in such a position that when John Caddo entered he saw only Lonnergan, before the safe.

"Jim!" Caddo said. "Hell's on the loose! They're sayin' Rudy Guss has been killed."

Lonnergan looked at him. "Yes, I know," he said. He closed the big wooden safe and snapped the padlock.

Caddo walked to the desk and threw

down his hat. The only thing beautiful about him was his daughter: Caddo's back was a twisted thing that put lines of pain in his face, and his mind was equally distorted. His head was overlarge, his face long and lantern-jawed and his nose like a thin ridge of bone. But he had schemed his way into one of the richest ranches in the Big Bend.

"Look here," Caddo said. "In about a week somebody's going to move in up there and dare us to throw him out. You remember I was dickering with Guss last fall to take it over?"

The lawyer shook his head. "It's too late," he said.

"Why is it too late?" Caddo sounded driven, desperate. "You can fix up some kind of a trust deed, can't you? Hell, if he's got any heirs I'll pay 'em a couple of thousand and they'll think they're rich."

Ross Kirby began to laugh. "You get around, Caddo," he said. "But this time I got there first. What's more, nothin's got to be rigged up: I own it."

John Caddo stood up, leaning on the back of his chair. He had a faculty of covering his feelings with a cold-blooded exterior like armor-plate, and he showed only a surly, contemptuous face to Ross now. "You won't last a month," he told him. "They'll get you like they did Guss."

"It's not them I'm afraid of," Ross said. "It's the ones who slap your back by day and steal your cattle by night that I'm worrying about. When I clean out Smoky River Canyon, I'm going to drag out a man for Cave Jackson to hang that we've all drunk with and heard pray out loud in church. It might even be somebody with Blue River water on his feet."

"That's a big mouthful for a man who rode a Mexican pony two years ago," Caddo remarked. He occupied his quick, nervous fingers with a cigarette. Ross had the feeling that that rapier of a brain of his was moving recklessly. When the cigarette was finished, Caddo wadded it up and threw it on the floor.

"Guss had no more legal right up there than I had," he said. "That paper he gave you is a hand-receipt—no more. Skyline comes under some Spanish grant—every acre in this part of the country does. I'm going to find out which. And I'll make my deal with the legal owner."



He said to Lonnergan: "I'm going to sue to make Kirby prove ownership. Do you want the case?"

Lonnergan said: "You're crazy. Suppose you come back when you've cooled off a little?"

Caddo hobbled toward the door. "Then I'll take it to Job Hatfield."

As he left Ross ran into Libby.

"I knew you couldn't stay away," Libby told him. "I told Dad you'd be back someday and turn Three Rivers upside down."

Ross grinned. "Whose door you been listening at?" he asked her.

Libby said quickly: "Ross! You've got Skyline Ranch!"

Ross Kirby pulled her to him and pressed a hard, quick kiss on her lips. She was warm and vital against him, and for a moment she did not try to free herself. Then she pushed him away, but she was laughing.

"Now we can talk," Ross told her. "I never could talk anyway to you but tongue-tied, for wanting to do that."

"You're a devil, Ross," Libby said, laughing. "Now, what about Skyline Ranch?"

Ross looked at her.

Her hair was black, and she knew how to wear it, with an artful carelessness that caused it to fall in natural waves to her shoulders. Her eyes were the deepest blue, and her mouth was red, provocative, scornful. She was slender, with a figure to take a man's breath. She appealed to Ross, and he liked her because there was no pretension with Libby Caddo.

"Your Dad will tell you about it," Ross said. "I've bought the iron. That's all."

Libby said: "That's only the start. I knew you'd be back up there some day. And now don't let them scare you off. What are you going to do?"

"Run cattle. What else?"

"I've always thought running cattle was a sideline with Guss."

"I don't know how it was with Guss, but it will be cattle with me—all the way down to the Rio Grande."

Libby's eyes were on him, shining and full of wonder. "You'll be in the middle of the biggest feud that ever hit Texas," she said. "You didn't buy the ranch just to make a living. You bought it— Well, why did you? Because you like a game where the stakes are big? Or to show somebody?"

"A little bit of both."

For a moment Libby studied him, and the expression in her eyes was not that of the capricious hoyden, but something deeper and more purposeful. Ross thought she was about to say something, but when he glanced up the street, following her gaze, he saw John Caddo approaching.

"I've got to talk to you, Ross," she said quickly. "When can I meet you?"

"I'll be with Cave Jackson most of tomorrow," Ross told her. "Wednesday night?"

Libby squeezed his hand. "At Hanging Rock!"

III

AFTER one of the Russian's steaks, Ross shot a few games of pool at the saloon. He looked up to see Job Hatfield sitting alone at a table, his glance on him. The lawyer beckoned Ross with one finger, calling:

"Come over and have a drink."

Ross went over, finding pleasure in the encounter with the lawyer. Hatfield or-

dered whiskey. He was a large and fleshy man with a pouchy moon-face and big, pulpy hands. His color pointed at a sluggish liver, and his eyeballs were yellow-white.

"I hear you're a big rancher," Hatfield said, with the manner of one humoring a slightly backward child.

"Well, I guess there's bigger," Ross told him. "But not around here."

Hatfield laid his hand on Ross' forearm, shaking his head. "My boy," he said, "let me give you some advice: Don't try to set the world on fire. I've seen them come, and I've seen them go. You've had some luck. Never crowd it. You're bound to roll snake-eyes sometime."

"In the Bend," said Ross, "you've got to crowd it or quit. But you've got to use some savvy. Caddo's crowding his—and look where he's heading!"

"Where is he heading?"

"He's climbed higher than anybody ever did around here, except me, but all he's got under him is a rotten framework of called loans and blotched brands. He's got his eye on the Skyline, now, and right there is where his little tower is going to come crashing down. It's too weak to hold as big a man as he thinks he is."

"No, no!" Hatfield shook his head, leaning his bulk on the table by both elbows and linking his fat fingers. He smiled, but no longer in that condescending way. There was unsureness in it now. "John knows you're in solid, up there. I admit he had some crazy notion this afternoon of trying to oust you. But I talked him out of it."

"What are you working into?" Ross demanded. "I suppose he wants to ride for me?"

The lawyer's finger tapped on the table. "You're a man that likes adventure. You take your battles and your women where you find them. All right. All John Caddo wants is more water and grass. . . ."

"Only he wants them like some men want whiskey," Ross interrupted. "He starts having the screaming horrors if he doesn't get his daily shot."

Hatfield's mouth twitched. "What you think about him is beside the point. I'm trying to tell you that Caddo will pay you five thousand dollars for all of the Skyline above the Smoky."

Ross threw back his head and his laughter filled the room. "He wants to give me five thousand for what I just put out thirty for; is that it?"

"No. You get the thirty back. I suppose it's still up there in Guss' safe, isn't it?"

His eyes had an edged intentness that Ross caught. "I wouldn't know," he said. "I think he spent it all on candy last night. But you can tell Caddo for me that he isn't going to scare or buy me out. I may even decide to take his daughter away from him."

Hatfield finished his drink at a gulp. "Then the chances are he'll go back to his original plan," he told the cowboy. "Law-suits can cost money. You've got to fight them or lose by default. I can slap you with enough suits to make your head swim. And I guess I'll have to."

Ross stood up, putting his fist under Job Hatfield's bulbous nose. "The first time I see a subpoena I'll hang this right here," he said. "I'll whip you till you don't know your Blackstone from a second-hand copy of Diamond Dick. Think about it."

He walked up the boardwalk, the crispness of the night air bracing him. The battle ahead of him was beginning to shape up. He would have Caddo to fight openly; the Lord only knew how many who would come in the night, anonymously. Rather than discourage him, Ross found the thought of it a spice.

He started back to the cafe. There was a light in Jim Lonnergan's office, up the street. It went out with such suddenness that Ross started. A moment later the sound of the shot reached him.

He saw doors open along the street and a couple of men step out. From the direction of the livery stable a Mexican hostler's voice called: "*Señor Lonnergan? Qué hay?*"

Ross was striding across the street, his heels hitting hard and his Chihuahua spurs jangling. When he reached the lawyer's office, he stopped and listened. Someone was moving about; a door closed. Ross said quickly: "Jim!"

A match flared and Ross saw Jim Lonnergan lighting the lamp. He went in, watching Lonnergan sit down behind his

desk and mop his face. He had a rueful grin as he looked at an old cap-and-ball .44 lying on the desk.

"I've been meaning to get a new gun for a long time," he said. "This cinches it. I was changing the loads and one of the damned things went off. Luckily I had already removed the balls. The concussion blew the lamp out."

"Well, thank God," Ross said. "I thought maybe somebody was settling a case with you out of court."

Lonnergan was in his trousers and boots, as though he had been preparing for bed. He had his living quarters in a small room in the rear. "Don't worry about me," he told Ross. "I haven't had anything but enemies for fifteen years. But I'm the sort that nothing ever happens to."

"Not more than once, anyway," Ross said. He went outside, explaining to the men who were gathering what the commotion had been. After they dispersed he crossed the road, walked a hundred feet, and again crossed and approached the lawyer's office from the rear. There were some things Lonnergan had not explained: Why the powder hadn't burned him, and why the door to his safe was open.

He could see into Lonnergan's bedroom through a flimsy green shade. John Caddo sat in an armchair and the lawyer stood over him, talking in a hard, intense fashion, his hands on his hips.

"This is the last time I ever stand between you and the law," he told the cripple. "I've closed my eyes to too many of your shenanigans, for your daughter's sake more than yours. When it comes to the point where you start cracking my safe to steal a paper, I'm all through. And the next time I won't shoot to knock a gun out of your hand. There's an easier way. I just wonder whether you'd have tried to use that thing on me."

Caddo's fingers tried to make a cigarette, spilling the makings on his shirt. He looked up at Lonnergan, shaking his head. "I don't know what got into me, Jim," he said. "I want that Skyline iron like it ain't decent to want anything. But I meant to get it legally."

"Do you want my opinion?" Lonnergan said. "You were happier when you owned thirty sections up the valley than you've ever been since. You'll never be big enough

to satisfy yourself. You've started something you can't stop. But if you bother that boy I'll drag a few things to light for a judge to look at."

Caddo said something that made Ross almost sorry for him; something that caused him to see for the first time the vast difference between him and other men.

"When you've got a body like mine, you don't worry about happiness," he said. "All you want is to show stronger men you're as big as they are. I guess the only cure for me is to grow six feet tall and lick a few men with my fists."

Before he moved away, Ross heard the lawyer say: "There's another cure, Caddo. And if you don't pull in your horns someone is going to show it to you. It's done with a sixgun."

OLD CASOOSE had a big dinner of *chilis relleños*, *enchiladas*, and fried beans ready when Ross and Sheriff Jackson unsaddled at the Skyline at noon the next day. Jackson preferred to eat before inspecting the body of Rudy Guss, now reposing in state on a shelf in the spring house. Ross was used to the gamy Mexican dishes, but Jackson drank a bucket of water with his meal and swore the devil had stuck his finger in Casoose's kettle.

Casoose grinned. "Eat much *chilis*," he said. "Have much hairs on chest."

Jackson grunted. "Have much ulcers on stomach," he said. "Where's this-here now body?"

They looked at the blood-stained chair in which Guss had died. Then Ross took him to the spring-house, and he and the sheriff carried the German into the small picket-fenced graveyard up on the hillside, where Fred Kirby and the two other past owners of the ranch slept. They buried Guss. Jackson finished tramping on the mound to firm it, and stood looking at the reddish, loose earth.

He said, feeling that the ceremony lacked authenticity: "Well, *adios amigo*. Dust thou art, to dust returneth."

They went back to the house.

After inspecting the gun-trap under the gallery, the sheriff went to the corral to saddle his pony. "You want to watch out for more of them traps," he warned Ross. "He's likely got them stuck all over. There must be some place he kept his money."

"I'll be careful," Ross told him. "But it will take dynamite to get into his strong-room, unless I find the keys." As an afterthought, he said: "I'll ride down to the falls with you. I'm going up and see Uncle Ad today."

"What do you want with that old varmint?"

Ross threw his saddle onto his sorrel and took up on the latigo. "I'm hiring cow-hands. Nobody in Hooligan Canyon would ride for me if he turned thumbs down on the idea. They don't believe in God, but they sure believe in Uncle Ad."

They forded the Poverty an hour later and Jackson rode up Blue River toward town. Ross followed Poverty Creek's twisting gorge. A mile upstream the canyon widened into a sandy valley with little islands of hackberry and black oak dotting the sun-struck wash. There was grass on the mountains to the east, across which lay Blue River, but westward a frowning barricade of red rimrock offered scant vegetation. Hooligan Canyon ranchers ran their cows in the valley in spring, when the grass was green and tender the rest of the year the cattle foraged in the Calamities, cropping the tough burro grass down to the roots in the straggling canyons.

Up one of these canyons Uncle Ad Cooney ran a scrubby herd of cattle with his two sons, Cain and Abel. Uncle Ad was a patriarch with a full, rusty beard and the strength of a Percheron. He liked to preach, salting his conversation with quotations from the Book, and he liked corn whiskey, which he made himself.

Ross found him hammering a mule-shoe in the smithy. He saw Abel Cooney piling a load of block salt onto a wagon behind the barn. Above the barn, on the hillside, was a little cemetery plot outlined with colored rocks, two forlorn headboards standing crookedly. Cooney came out of the dark shack, the sledge across his shoulder. He looked steadily at Ross Kirby, grubbing through his memory. Then he said in that gruff voice of his, that was like rocks going down a chute:

"Well, howdy, Ross. Didn't reckon you'd come up thisaway no more. Now that you're a big man."

"Where'd you get that notion?" Ross asked him.

"News travels. Own the Skyline, don't

you?" Uncle Ad wore no shirt, and his white skin was sweaty; it was an old man's skin, loose and flabby, but the muscles underneath were tough. He had sharp eyes of the palest of blues and he had brown-stained, large teeth.

Ross dismounted. "That's why I came up here," he told the cowman. "I've fired the whole crew, from Rocky on down. Maybe they're all right. But maybe their loyalty has already been bought. So I'm looking for men. Reckon you could spare one of your boys?"

Uncle Ad sat down on a chopping block. He bit off a chew of Mexican Twist and masticated it thoughtfully. He said: "Well, I might. What're your plans?"

"To run cattle where I damn please. I need some boys that don't scare easy. That's why I thought first of Hooligan Canyon."

Cooney turned his head. He called, "You, Abel!"

Abel came over, an indolent, black-haired man built on a narrower, less rugged last than his father. It was Uncle Ad's often-voiced opinion that Abel was no good for anything but getting drunk and fighting; but when their Fiddleback herd-stuff began to run under-strength, Abel always managed to scare up a few head somewhere to fill out. He was sleepy-eyed and slouching and always smelled of sweat and whiskey.

"You want to work for Ross for a spell?" Cooney asked him.

Abel stood with his thumbs thrust under his cartridge belt. He looked at Ross without expression. "What's the pay?" he asked.

"Sixty a month."

"Gun-hands' pay," Abel Cooney said.

Ross said: "That's right. You may have to earn it."

Uncle Ad Cooney hooked the fingers of his right hand through his dirty beard. "Whoso sheddeth man's blood," he quoted, "by man shall his blood be shed."

"And whoso stealeth my cattle—" Ross remarked.

Abel looked Ross over critically. Then he said. "All right. I'll be at the Falls House day after tomorrow."

Uncle Ad tossed the sledge-hammer over by the shed. He filled his pipe, frowning. "This I don't like," he said. "Your father

tried to open up Smoky River and he died for it. It's the scum of two nations you'll be fighting if you go in there, Ross. The book says, 'Out of violence cometh bloodshed and grief.'"

It seemed to Ross that all of Uncle Ad's quotations had to do with blood. Maybe he had it on his conscience; rumors connected him with a lot of unwholesome transactions in Hooligan Canyon.

"I'm not going looking for trouble," Ross told him. "But I'm not stepping aside if I see it coming. When we get through, a Hooligan Canyon man can look anybody in Texas in the eye."

ROSS was able to enlist eight more men from Poverty Creek. Some were not the kind he would care to ride the river with, but they could all use a rope and a gun. He thought with a smile that he would have to take away their running irons or they'd be running their own brands on his roundups.

He cooked his own supper at the Falls house. He ate on the doorstep, watching the late afternoon sunlight slant through the trees, setting fire to the mist above the river thickets. He smoked a cigarette and drank his coffee, letting the peacefulness of it go through and through him.

A rider jogged from the cottonwoods into Ross' view. The man was slender, erect, clad in a gray suit and wearing a dove-gray Stetson, flat-crowned. Until he pulled up, Ross did not recognize him. Then he grinned and called out:

"What's the matter, Jim? Did your office burn down?"

It was the first time he could remember seeing Jim Lonnergan out of Three Rivers. The lawyer's face was ruddy with wind and sunburn from the unaccustomed ride. He left his horse under the trees that shaded the bunk-house.

"Not quite," he said. "How're you fixed for coffee?"

They went into the kitchen and Ross poured a steaming cup of Arbuckle. They talked about beef prices, and how many cows could be ranged to the section in that untouched grama and buffalo grass down the Smoky but Ross knew there was something deep and troubling on his mind.

Lonnergan said finally: "I've just been by Webb Clay's. He's finished, I guess."

"Finished!"

"Caddo's running him out. He's been living by a code written in a language that we don't savvy down here, especially men like Caddo. Caddo's boy, Hatfield, thought up a good one. It seems somebody that owned the Block B twenty years ago let his taxes lapse. It was finally bought by another man who never heard about the taxes; the slip-shod way they run things here, no effort's ever been made to collect. Hatfield found it on the books, Caddo paid them up, and now he's got a paper from the county demanding re-payment of five hundred in taxes and twelve per cent interest, compounded semi-annually! I rode over to warn Clay today."

"What's he going to do?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Lonnergan's shoulders moved. "He's forgotten how to fight. Why don't you lend him a hand, Ross?"

Ross was surprised at the suggestion. "All I could do is offer him gun-help. He wouldn't want that."

"I'm not so sure. He's pretty disgusted with the position his soft-handed methods have put him in. And there's another thing." Lonnergan's eyes smiled, though his lips barely turned. "You'll catch a lot more flies with sugar than with vinegar."

Ross began to blush, but he countered: "Meaning what?"

"You'd kind of like to see Nora Clay in your pasture, wouldn't you? I should think the quickest way to melt her down would be for you to help her father out of this. You could do it. If he can hang on for a few weeks I can save his neck."

Lonnergan finished his coffee and put on his hat. He said: "Let me tell you something, Ross: A girl like Nora isn't to be won by showing her your muscles. Maybe Libby Caddo, but not Nora. You'll get a lot farther with a nicely-turned phrase about her hair than you will by knocking the tar out of her beaux."

"Jim," Ross said wearily, "I could turn a cow inside out easier than I could turn a nice phrase. As Uncle Ad says, 'To some is the gift of a golden tongue, and to some the gift of silence.' I'm great for keeping my mouth shut when I go makin' love."

All the next day Ross thought about what the lawyer had said. He tried to convince himself that what Nora thought

about him did not matter, but the need for her was with him always, touching everything he did, and when he dreamed it was not of Libby's dark beauty, that was his for the taking, but the inaccessible, gentle loveliness that was Nora's. Lonnergan was right: When she was won, it would be by some man who could say in words what it would take Ross years to tell her. And so, he told himself, there was no use heaping any more fuel on that dead blaze.

And just at dark Ross Kirby left Skyline Ranch to keep his tryst with John Caddo's daughter. . . .

Darkness filled the roaring gorge of the Smoky, and the air was cool and moist. Shortly after he passed Lookout Point, he heard a night-bird's cry, clear and sweet through the murmur of tumbling water. It hit him suddenly, seconds later, that there was something wrong with the sound. It was the call of a mountain quail— Ross Kirby laid the rein across the pony's neck and spurred into the brush. The whistle came again, with no attempt at deception: One sharp blast that ended in a rifle-crash and brought several more guns pounding through the echoes.

Ross heard the brush around him crackle as slugs broke through the matted manzanita and buckthorn. He pulled the pony in beneath a rimrock ledge and tried to get a mental map of the situation. The man who had whistled, the nearest gunman, sent another shot upward at him, across fifty feet of blackness; and Ross jumped as the lead blasted into the rock behind him. He got a tight hold on the reins and levelled his saddle gun at the base of a scrub oak down the slope.

He fired once, and as he levered another shot into the chamber of the Burgess he heard a man grunt and scramble away. He allowed for the movement and put a second shot into the ambush. The man cried out, a single gasp of shock.

Now the other guns came in, hammering out a wild death-chorus of exploding shells and ricocheting lead. Beneath him the pony trembled. Ross Kirby made out the positions of the bushwackers, forming a rough right triangle; the longest leg of the triangle was above him. He spurred the horse up the bank, stumbling and sliding, feeling the hungry rake of the thorned buckbrush. If he could break through

at this point he knew an old cow-trail far above which he could follow to the Falls House.

Directly ahead of him gunflame flared startlingly. He could hear the bullet strike his pony, a loud slap. The animal grunted, mortally hit. Ross threw himself from the saddle as it went down, landing in a dense manzanita.

Again the guns were barking, the rifleman who had downed Ross' pony firing steadily. Two of the gunmen were closer. Ross Kirby knelt there, reloading his gun and trying to ignore the slugs that snapped through the thickets around him and whined off the rocks. He was afraid, and not ashamed of it.

He dared not fire again except as a last resort. They had him, like a badger in a pit. He felt a macabre kinship with Rudy Guss and those others who had pitted themselves against the wolf-pack. They, too, had stuck out their chins and announced how tough they were. And they had found that one bullet weighs more than all the bragging in the world.

He heard the man above him begin to move down through the brush. The others were dragging themselves closer, too, but this man was within fifty feet. Ross sat back and waited, the .44-40 covering the outlaw as he crawled nearer. When they came face to face, it would all be a question of who spotted who first.

Now the gunman heard the horse threshing, and his forward movement stopped. Again he pressed ahead, with greater caution. The others on the down-slope were coming up, too, wondering whether their man was dead, or whether they would have the pleasure of finishing him.

The brush in front of Ross Kirby parted, and a shadowed face, the face of a Mexican, showed in the breach. Ross fired, saw the bullet punch a hole in the man's forehead, saw the blood begin to spill, dark and thick. He sprang up and stood over the man an instant. By the look of him, he was a border-hopper; a stranger to this valley, and that was all Ross wanted to know.

The others down the slope were calling tensely, in Spanish: "*Qué pasa?*"

Ross called back: "*Ya 'stá 'ueno! Mire!*"

He heard them coming confidently through the brush; and swiftly, quietly, he turned and went up the hill toward the cow-trail. When they found their dead partner instead of the gringo, they began to swear and fire indiscriminately. But by that time Ross Kirby was high above them, mounting the dead outlaw's pony.

IV

THERE was one thing about Libby Caddo: If she liked you, she didn't make a secret of it. When Ross reached Hanging Rock, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him, and he could feel her trembling.

"I knew you'd get through, Ross," she said. "I heard the shooting, but I knew all the wolves in the Bend couldn't stop you."

Ross sat down on the ledge that thrust out from the mountain a hundred feet above the confluence of the rivers. "I wish I'd been as sure," he said. "I got two of them. I'm on their list now for sure." He rolled a cigarette. "Did your father know you were going to meet me?"

Libby laughed. "Of course not. But somebody must have known you were coming."

"Nobody knew but Casoose."

Libby said: "You should kill that old Mexican. I don't trust any of them."

The coldness of it startled Ross. "Casoose is all right," he said shortly.

Libby shrugged. "Have it your way. Do you know why I wanted to see you?"

"I thought maybe you wanted to marry me for my money," Ross said. "You'd be the leading candidate for the earliest widow in Three Rivers."

Libby did not smile. She looked down at the pale flood below the falls, her face very serious. Her hair was shining and dark upon her shoulders and her eyes looked moody.

"Do you know," she said, "I may be running the Ladder ranch sooner than I thought. The way Dad has been forcing himself, he's going to be dead before his time. The more land he gets, the more he's got to have. He drives himself on, riding too much and sitting up all night

to figure and plan. The doctor told him he wouldn't give him over a year at the rate he's failing."

Sympathy for the crippled range king did not come easily to Ross. He had never liked nor trusted him. He said: "Maybe he'd be better off if he let men like Clay alone."

"It's his business," Libby said. "But when he goes, it will give me free hand to do a lot of things I've wanted to." She looked at him, beginning to smile a little. "Maybe I'll even marry."

Ross smiled. "Rocky ain't such a good looking man any more," he said.

Libby sniffed. "Rocky Taylor is a stupid fool," she said. "He'll never be more than a second-rate ramrod. Dad's hired him, now that he's left your outfit. I don't know why. But Rocky isn't the one I meant."

Ross asked: "Who is it?"

Libby smiled petulantly. "Who else could it be? We're out of the same mould, Ross, you and I. We live for ourselves. We don't care what anybody says or thinks, just so he doesn't get in our way. With the Skyline and the Ladder under one brand, who could ever stop us? We'd own the Big Bend."

Something in her voice, in the hard shine of her eyes, took Ross' breath. She had her father's ambition and drive, and a lot more that made her more desirable—and more dangerous. It was hard for him to catalogue his emotions when he thought about it. Nora Clay had beauty and depth; a quiet gentleness that touched something deep within him. Libby set a man on fire, turned his head with foolish thoughts that would make him trouble. Ross guessed he wasn't fool enough to marry a wildcat.

He said: "I reckon we're alike, all right—too much alike. It'd be two catamounts in one barrel."

"Is that what you think?" Libby asked him.

"What else can I think?" Ross said. "I know both of us too well."

Libby's chin was up, proud and angry. She said: "It's Nora Clay."

"Nora wouldn't have me if I were candy-coated. It's nobody. Just common sense."

Libby was silent a moment. "I suppose

I should be angry," she told him, "'I wish I could be. I'm sorry for both of us. You're in love with Nora, and she'll never have you. I could make you happier than you'll ever be with anybody else, Ross, but you've got this idea in your head."

Ross stood up. "Some day you'll thank me," he said. "You're still the prettiest girl in Three Rivers." He tried to pull her into his arms, but her open hand stung him on the mouth.

"Thanks just the same, Mr. Kirby," she said. "I've still got some pride."

Ross stood there, looking down at her shadowed, cynical face and feeling the sting of her hand on his mouth; he realized at that moment how little he knew about women, good or bad. That last remark of hers suddenly meant a lot: He hadn't wanted to hurt her, but he was sure, now, that he had. She would be fine as a casual friend; but she would be dangerous either as a lover or an enemy, and it was in his mind that she was not far, now, from being an enemy.

He took her arm. "I'll ride back with you," he said. "No woman ought to be alone at night, out here."

"I'm all right," Libby said. "You'd better run back to your big, empty house and make sure Casoose is all right."

Ross picked her up, struggling, and carried her back to her horse. He was laughing. "You'll do for a wildcat if we ever run short," he told her.

Before he set her down, he kissed her. All the stiffness went out of Libby, and when he put her down he knew she was crying. Ross helped her to her saddle. He felt a rueful sort of closeness to her at that moment, and for a moment he squeezed her hand.

"Love is no fun, Libby," he said. "Heaven must be a place where you get the one you want."

Libby's voice was choked. "It doesn't happen any place else."

ROSS had not volunteered to take Libby Caddo home for purely altruistic reasons. The girl was probably safe enough, for she was capable, and she carried a saddle gun. He had a little talk with John Caddo in mind.

At the river they said good night, and

he watched her ford the shallows. When she was out of sight, he crossed the stream behind her and rode up the grassy swale to the low ridge that surmounted the Ladder headquarters. All was dark below him, except for one lighted window in the big L-shaped ranch-house. Ross dismounted and sat on the slope until he saw Libby's light come on, and presently go out.

Leaving the pony in the shelter of a sandy wash, Ross approached the house, passing the corrals down-wind so that the animals would not give warning. Through a pin-point hole in the window shade he could see John Caddo humped over a desk. The cripple had one hand shoved into his thin, sandy hair, and he was making figures on a big yellow pad with a pencil.

With his gun, Ross jammed a hole through the glass and reached quickly through to let the shade fly up. He kept the gun on the startled rancher. "Sit still and keep your mouth shut," he said. He unfastened the catch and raised the window, and stood leaning on the sill.

"Have you gone crazy, Kirby?" Caddo demanded. He sat hunched in the swivel-chair, his tawny eyes shining with the lamplight.

"I've been havin' nightmares," Ross told him. "I had one tonight and couldn't sleep, so I rode down to talk to you. I got the idea that you were going to try to throw old Webb Clay off the Block B."

"So I am," Caddo said. "I bought the place for taxes. He leaves tomorrow, if you're interested."

"I'm just linking it up with something Job Hatfield told me. You're asking for trouble, John, when you go poking into Smoky River Canyon."

Caddo said irascibly: "I can take care of all the trouble that comes my way. I'm tired of you and your cheap threats."

Ross worked the hammer of the gun back and forth, watching him. "I'm just wondering why you want this little twenty-section strip of Clay's so much. Maybe it's so you can bring Skyline cattle in without any trouble, in case you get any of my beef mixed up with yours. Or maybe it's just for the land. Whatever it is, pardner, you aren't going to have it."

Caddo smiled. "Every day you talk

bigger. You haven't made your first brag good, yet."

"That's why I'm making this one. I'm beginning to get tired of dry-gulching and cow stealing. Clay's one of the few men left that we need around here. I don't need to tell you that you've jobbed him. Lonnergan is smelling around that tax deal of yours. I don't aim to see Clay thrown off till we break your little game up."

"I've given him warning," Caddo said. "I mean to make it stick."

"I didn't come to argue," Ross said. "If Clay goes, you go. I'll see your houses sacked and your feed burned. Those boys of mine are like a bunch of Comanches once they get started."

Caddo lost some of his lofty scorn. Possessions were everything to him, and he knew what might happen if the wild bunch from Poverty Creek were ever organized. He said: "If you touch me I'll see you hung."

"If I have to burn you out," Ross told him, "I doubt that you'll be alive to do anything about it."

Behind Caddo, the office door opened quietly. Caddo, seeing Ross' glance shift, turned to look into the dark hallway. It was impossible for Ross, from his position, to see who stood outside, but Caddo frowned and said impatiently:

"Well?"

Whoever stood in the hall did not bandy words. A gun crashed once, rolling gray smoke and pale flame into the room, and John Caddo's long fingers clutched at the chair arms. He gasped, falling back against the back-rest; he began to breathe in a ghastly, strangling fashion, and with each breath blood bubbled on his lips.

Ross Kirby, through the shock in him, knew one thing: To be caught here might mean hanging. He heard men begin to call out, questioningly, in the bunkhouse, and the bang of a door thrown open. He ran down the wall and passed around the rear of the house.

As he went past the back porch a gun bellowed from the doorway, deafening him, throwing him off balance. The bullet whipped through his jumper. Ross fired through the dark opening and kept running. Men seemed to be springing up everywhere, pouring out of the bunk-house and running to the corral, to the big com-

missary. Now Ross heard Rocky Taylor's voice, shouting orders. From the house he heard Libby's voice raised in terror.

He went under the corral bars and worked his way through the excited animals. He unlocked the feed barn and went into the musty, black interior, striking a match after he had closed the door. In the opposite wall he saw the rear door; he slid it back and stepped outside. He began to run, keeping low, heading for the water-gap across the dry arroyo where he had left his pony. When he reached it he was winded, his chest heaving as he crawled under the barbed wire.

The sounds and lights were far behind him, then, and he was mounting his pony and loping down the arroyo to where it joined the Blue. The turbulence in him did not have all its roots in sheer excitement. Shadows were marching across his mind; Rocky Taylor's, and Webb Clay's—and Libby's. Many men had reason to kill John Caddo; but these three stood to profit more than others, and he thought that Taylor and Libby might be capable of such a thing any time, and Clay, if he were crowded.

Ross Kirby was wishing for a drink as he rode the dark trail. He was seeing another side to the range war that was about to envelop all the Three Rivers country; and he did not know exactly where it would stop. . . .

ROSS went down with Casoose Corrales the next morning to the Fall's House where he checked in his new cowhands. On the way down they searched for the men he had shot the night before. Blood-stains were still prominent in the brush, but the bushwhackers had buried their own dead.

Ross said to his crew: "This is a little early for a beef roundup, but we're starting one. It's fifteen miles down the Smoky to the Big River. On the way down we'll work every gully and ridge for cattle. Any strays with no brand, my brand, or a Mexican brand is ours. Anybody that wants to back out has still got time. There'll be a bonus of a hundred dollars for every man that stays with me. But he'll earn it."

Abel Cooney licked the cigarette he had

rolled. He asked: "Where do you want the hold-up kept?"

"At The Slide," Ross told him. "After tomorrow we'll hold it wherever we find a likely spot."

That day they worked the range from the falls down-stream a mile. The country was turned all on end, rough, scrub-timbered slopes where a man needed a real mountain pony. They used breast rigs and cruppers to take up the shock of a hard-running steer when it hit the end of the rope, for it meant almost sure death to have a saddle turn in this kind of country.

At the end of the day Ross looked over the cattle penned in the little box canyon below The Slide. They were fat with eating bluestem and not being worked. If the rest of the drive turned up stuff like this, he had made a good investment.

They moved the day-herd down the canyon the following day, penning it up in a blind canyon, with Al Parsons, a freckled, gangling young puncher from the Poverty, riding herd. From that point they worked on down the gorge.

Near sundown Ross called it quits for the day. He had chosen for the campsite that morning a clearing on the bank of a sandy creek. Ike Bradley, the roundup cook, had stew ready when the crew straggled in. He had biscuits as big as horse-shoes browning in the Dutch ovens and coffee boiling in a pot like a bucket.

Tired as they were, the boys revived enough to hoorah the cook as he dished up the grub. It seemed to Ross that there was someone missing, and when he counted noses he discovered that Al Parsons had not been relieved. After eating, he said to Abel Cooney: "Casoose and I will stand bob-tail guard on the day bunch. Send a couple of boys up to relieve us at eight o'clock."

Cooney nodded. "I'll come up with Baldy," he told him.

Ross and the Mexican pushed along, trying to make it before dark. It grew dark early on the Smoky, and cold came with it. Al would be glad to head for the campfire and a belly full of chuck. They were not far from the blind canyon when a sound came to them that was alien to the primeval silence. It could have been a rock-slide; or it could have been

the echoes of gunshots pouring down the canyon. Ross and the foreman touched their horses to a lope with one fear.

When they reached the box canyon they found Al Parsons lying on the sand at the mouth of the wash. His pony was gone, and Al lay with one cheek pressed against the sand and his hands clutching at it. From far off there was the sound of horses running. Ross turned the puncher over. His body was sodden with blood. Bullets had gone into him from a dozen angles, pounding and tearing. The dazed eyes looked at Ross, seeming to know him.

He whispered, his jaw hardly moving: "Lots of 'em, Ross. Masks. They came—from the river."

The boy couldn't live, but Ross turned quickly to Casoose. "Take off your shirt," he said. "We'll need yours and mine both to plug him up."

Casoose was unbuttoning his shirt when they heard the cattle coming. It was like a distant cannonading, at first, but quite suddenly it rose to a close and terrifying thunder. Blocked by the sharp angles of the canyon, the sound now rolled past the nearest bend with an imminence that brought Ross and the Mexican up straight. Then, without a word, they bent and raised the wounded man by his arms and legs.

The cattle streamed past the bend and rolled toward them. Shaggy heads were up and long, brushhoned horns clacked like sabers. It was fifty feet to the shelter of the boulders at the side of the canyon.

Ross could see Casoose's lips moving in prayer. The Mexican had his eyes on the rocks, not even glancing at the herd that filled the whole floor of the canyon. Without the burden of the dying man they would have had some chance. This way they were bucking a game in which they held all deuces.

Ross stopped and heaved Parsons across his shoulder; he yelled at Casoose and made a gesture with his free hand. The Mexican hesitated an instant; then he was racing across the sand into the jumble of boulders.

Ross had all the weight of the dying man, now, but he was packing it in such a way that he could run without sidling crab-fashion. His knees wanted to buckle under him, but he kept pounding along

through the maddeningly soft sand. The first of the steers streaked past him, one thundering by in front of him so close that he had to stand an instant. Behind him they were plunging from the mouth of the canyon and dispersing through the trees, making for the thickets along the creek.

And suddenly it was over, and he was lying on the sand, crouching against a boulder, while the canyon floor shook to the impact of a thousand hoofs. Their ponies had loped away, and a small, chilling fear was in Ross Kirby; they were alone in the wilderness of Smoky River Canyon, with only their sidearms and no horses. It was not the kind of odds that made a man overconfident.

The day-herd was gone in sixty seconds; nothing remained in the dark canyon but the echoes of their crashing passage through the brush, the dust of their headlong run. Then they heard the horsemen. Riding at a high lope, they came arrogantly down the canyon, laughing and swinging ropes, ten men who wore floursack aprons that were dirty gray blurs in the night.

Ross rubbed his thumb across the sight of his long Colt. He laid the other gun on the sand beside him. "This is Al's party," he said to Casoose.

The Mexican nodded, laying the barrel of his revolver in the notch of the rock.

When the riders were abreast of them, they opened up. In an instant the canyon was filled with rearing horses and yelling men. Two of the outlaws pitched from their saddles. Ross and Casoose emptied their guns into the mob and reached for their extra six-shooters. Lead was beginning to come their way, whining off the rocks and chunking into the dirt bank behind them.

A man yelled something and the night-riders spurred into the brush. Two ponies ran with them, riderless. Ross and the Mexican reloaded, dug in behind new rocks to meet attack from another angle, and waited. They let ten minutes go by. The Smoky River gang had melted back into the night; apparently they made no fetish of burying their dead. The men they had left behind were dead when Ross and Casoose Corrales ventured out. They pulled off the masks, inspecting the dead faces in the deepening gloom.

One of the men was a Mexican with a

stringy black mustache and sharp yellow teeth like a gopher's. The other man, an American, brought a grunt from Casoose.

"Ay, hombre! I am cooking food for these man's belly two years. Pinto Roberts. He ponch cows for Guss."

Ross said: "When they're all tallied in, we'll find more than one of his boys was drawing pay from two sides."

While they were inspecting the outlaws, Al Parsons drew his last breath. They scooped out a shallow grave in the wash and piled rocks on his body to discourage timber wolves until he could be decently buried. Then they started the long hike back to camp.

It was nearly eight o'clock when they limped in on spiked boots that had never been designed for walking. Their ponies had drifted in a few minutes before, and Abel Cooney was organizing a searching party when they came into the firelight.

Ross drank a cup of black coffee before he offered any explanation. All the men who were not out on herd duty were sitting on their blankets, watching him; and at length he said:

"We're starting to earn our bacon and beans, boys. Al was killed tonight. We dropped two of them. I don't look for things to get any quieter from now on. Anybody that doesn't want to leave a widow can move out in the morning."

V

THE crew was still intact when they started work at dawn. Ross had a fierce pride in these men who had little to gain by sticking it out, and a lot to lose. In Three Rivers they had to drink alone; but put them in a spot like this, where a man's values were suddenly revealed under a strong white light, and they were kings, and a little better.

Hooligan Canyon. Some day men would write that after their names the way a man would say, "I was at Gettysburg."

They worked deeper into the canyon, going slowly, proceeding in pairs. From boyhood memories, Ross was picking fragments that fitted in with the things he was seeing now . . . a stretch of white water with black rocks jutting through the foam like a forest of stumps . . . a cliff almost

covered with Indian pictographs . . . a gorge pocked with wind-caves.

He was remembering something else that set his spine to tingling, and in the afternoon he said to Casoose: "I'm going to take a pasear down to the river. Keep the boys busy. Better double up the guard in case I'm not back in time."

"No, compadre," he said. "Four eyes see twice as much as two. Two guns shoot twice as fast as one. I go along, si?"

Ross smiled. "Where I'm going two men would crowd the trail."

Casoose raised his hands in despair. "*Ojalá, que hombre!* You know what is said—where the angel fears to go, there rushes the fool."

"I'm no angel, so I'll rush in."

Ross rode along the cliff, searching for landmarks. The river was about fifty feet wide at this point, filling the floor of the deep and murky gorge. There was no semblance of a trail. All the broken ledges in the cliffs seemed to slant down to meet the water. The canyon turned and twisted, and the wind that came up was cold and moist.

Across the river Ross saw a peak shaped like the horn of a saddle. Memory stirred strongly. He left his horse tied to a juniper and scouted cautiously along the brink. Near the bottom he suddenly saw it: A cave that was like an eyesocket. A narrow trail only ten feet above the water level crawled along the cliff under overhanging ledges, in and out of breaks in the moss-stained wall.

He tried to recall how he had reached the trail from the cliff. The drop from ledge to ledge was too great. The hand-and-foot-holds, were all slimy with moisture. Then he remembered the fissure in the cliff, like a great knife-slice. He made his way through the brush, watchful.

In about twenty minutes he came out of a creosote thicket onto a narrow gap in the earth. He was able to lower himself by getting his back against one rough wall and using roots and rocks in the opposite wall for support for his feet. It required fifteen minutes of this punishing labor to reach the bottom, some forty feet below. He was breathless, sodden with sweat, and his back was raw and sore.

Now he stood on the rubble bottom of the fissure, hearing the wind sough past the

mouth of it, some distance ahead and much lower. When he reached the mouth, he stood looking down at the brown river, seeing the narrow man-made trail just above it, and feeling a shakiness in his legs. There was a loneliness like that of an empty cathedral. There was only the mutter of the river, a low-voiced warning, and there was the cold dampness of the air to chill a man's skin.

Ross dropped to the trail. He had his gun in hand, and he looked southward, toward the Rio, and then north. There was much burro sign on the trail, old and new. There were marks on the cliff as though pack animals had been scraping along this passage for a century. He started toward the cave.

When he reached it, he hesitated, listening. He heard nothing, and after a moment he went up the smoothly-worn slope to the interior.

Standing there, it was like having a scene from the past projected onto his mind. There was the floor, that sloped up to meet the ceiling fifty feet back. There was the legend on the ceiling, written in candle-smoke in old Spanish characters: *Pasó por aquí*, which was followed by a list of names of men dead two centuries. There were the blackened stones of an old camp-fire.

As a boy, Ross had crawled through the low passage that gave into the greater cave beyond. There he had seen men working among piles of booty, the scene illuminated by a score of lanterns. He went back to the passage, now, and crawled into the big room. He sat back on his heels for a moment sniffing the mustiness of stale air. He had his gun firmly against his hip.

Fear went suddenly over him like ice water, as metal rasped against metal a few feet away. Light bored through the blackness from a bull's-eye lantern splashing over him blindingly. A man said in Spanish: "They come looking for gold, and we give them lead."

Ross Kirby flung himself forward on his face, firing as he fell. The outlaw's gun roared, spitting flame and lead. The bullet sliced off Ross' hip, hurting no more than the blow of a fist. The sound of the guns was a physical impact against his ears, deafening him. Ross heard no cry from the guard, but the lantern crashed on the

floor and sent its white beam upward at the ceiling.

Another cartridge exploded, but Ross Kirby had moved away and the slug screamed off the stone wall. He fired twice more at the gun-flash. The second time left no doubt that he had got his man. The gunman moaned and a body crumpled on the floor with a soft, boneless sound.

For a long time, Ross sat there, shaken by the concussion and the beginnings of trouble in his wounded hip. He had a curious feeling of floating in space; there was nothing of this world for him to grasp except the ray of the lantern. Everything else was silence and blackness, lapping at the shores of the light. He crawled to the lantern. He turned it on the gunman and saw a Mexican in a straw sombrero and a vaquero's work clothes. Ross took his guns, as a precaution, although the man was breathing in a gasping fashion that could not have been simulated.

The lamp-light revealed piles of boxes and rawhide *aparejos* on the floor of the cavern. Here was where luckless Chihuahua freight-trains had been detoured for generations. Ross limped about, digging into some of the boxes. He found what he had expected to find—a hodge-podge of merchandise of all descriptions: Lamp chimneys, liquors, cheap clothing, cooking utensils, all the miscellany of household goods the villages of Chihuahua had to import from Mexico City or the States. Such articles would have a high ransom or resale value.

Yet Ross knew that Smoky River Canyon had been guarded for more precious booty than this. He was thinking of the silver mines of the Padrones, fifty miles to the southwest. He kept moving about the cave, inspecting heaps of merchandise. The shock of his wound was wearing off and the pain grew more insistent. He could not place all his weight on his leg without driving a surge of cold blackness through his head.

Far in the back he found it. Piled like cordwood against the wall was a rick of bar silver. He lifted one of the ingots and read the mint stamp: 1859. Others bore more recent dates. It came to him that for all the lives the treasure had cost, for all the men who had bled and fought to gain it, probably no one had ever profited from

the treasure. All these years it had lain here, piling ever higher, but whoever called himself king of Smoky River at any particular time was too busy keeping intruders out to enjoy his wealth.

The lantern seemed to flicker, to gutter out. *Out of oil*, Ross thought vaguely. He was not conscious of dropping the lantern, nor of falling, for the blackness was all in his brain. . . .

Much later he came to, weak and sick. The lantern had gone out. There were some pallid highlights on the walls where a few feeble rays seeped in through the mouth of the cave. Panic laid its cold fingers on Ross Kirby's throat. To die here like a rat! he thought. To die with a mountain of stone between me and the sun. He got on his hands and knees and groped back toward the entrance.

He was half-way through the passage-way when he realized someone else was crawling through from the other side.

ROSS saw the crawling shape stop. A man inquired: "Pete?"

Ross tried to make his voice strong, as confident as the gun-barrel he shoved against the newcomer's shoulder. He said: "Huh-uh, Rocky. It's your old friend and bosom companion."

Rocky Taylor flinched; his voice was a gasp. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"You sure will," Ross told him, "if you try to go for your hardware. I'm prospecting. What are you doing?"

Taylor could still grin, his blocky face just visible, still scarred from their recent battle. "You got trumps," he said. "And you come to a good place to prospect. Gettin' back may be the tough part."

"I don't look for much trouble. It's a funny thing, Rocky, but I never credited you with enough savvy to ramrod an outfit like this."

"I don't. Well, not exactly." Taylor sighed. "I suppose now you want to know all about the canyon and who killed Rudy Guss."

"You're a good guesser. I'd also like to know who led the bunch that killed Al Parsons." Ross wished the pounding and burning in his hip would stop. It was hard to dam the waves of pain.

"Johnny Caddo had Rudy killed," Rocky stated. "Didn't know Al was even dead.

A couple of Mexes killed Guss for him. He thought he'd move right in here, but you coppered him. Guss was running the shebang before, putting up a big howl about how he never got to stick his nose in here because of all the bad men. But he was the boy."

"I'll believe that," Ross told him, "when I see it written in the family Bible. I want to know who decided to kill Al."

Rocky said sullenly: "Dammit, Kirby, I'm only working for a living myself. I don't know half what goes on. Since Caddo was knocked off, I'm taking orders from Libby. She's following pretty well the lines her old man set out. He had the idea that he'd like to slap his brand on all the Smoky River cattle before somebody else did, while the place is still without a boss. Me and some of the Ladder boys came down here to do some art work with a running iron. We were supposed to move the cows down to the Big River. Then we'd try to get them up around the Dead Hoss Mountains to the Ladder range. I don't know how we were supposed to get them across Webb Clay's spread, but Libby thinks he'll drag his pin pretty soon anyway." He added, as though feeling a weak point in his story: "I knew about this cave from one of the Mex jinglers we had when I worked for Rudy. I just thought I'd see whether there was anything here beside corn-cobs two hundred years old and a few clay pots."

Suddenly the sickness in Ross Kirby's brain was something he could no longer fight. There was a viciousness in his voice that came from desperation.

"You wouldn't know the truth if you was introduced to it," he said. "Rudy Guss was too old and fumblin' to run this outfit. And you're too narrow between the ears. Somebody's sitting up there with a big gun and a lot of ideas, running the show just like always. Maybe it's Caddo, but if it is, it's not the way you tell it. I'm letting you go, Rocky, but get out of my sight fast. I mean now!"

Taylor may have sensed that Ross was on edge for rash action. It did not take a very smart man to know that a shaking hand and a rising voice meant trouble. He said, "Okay, Kirby. It's your party."

After he had gone, Ross lay still a long time. At last he ventured onto the slip-

pery river trail, walking painfully back toward the slot. He did not know how he would make the climb back up the wall. When he reached it he rested for fifteen minutes and started back up the steep, narrow incline. At the spot where he had descended, he was surprised to find a rope ladder hanging from the top. Taylor had probably used it. No doubt it was part of the regular equipment. He did not try to puzzle out whether Rocky had left it hanging down here for a purpose. Very slowly he climbed it.

By the time he reached his pony the sun indicated that it was past three o'clock. Ross dragged himself into the saddle and rode back to the hold-up spot. For a long minute he sat looking at the deserted clearing, trying to understand what had happened.

Cooking gear littered the ground. The stake-and-rope remuda corral was uprooted and tangled in the undergrowth. The cook's pack animals, picketed a little way off, were both dead. Ike Bradley lay face down across his cook-fire, his clothes burned. He had been shot while he tended his Dutch ovens.

Ross stumbled over to the canvas water-bags hanging on a tree and drank greedily, trying to drown the fever out of his head. He heard a sound in the brush. He drew his gun, fumbling it, and then he saw Casoose Corrales coming toward him.

Casoose looked at him, sadly wagging his head. "They jump us up yonder, in a little park," he said. "They are fourteen-fifteen; we are eight. This park is where the whole gang stays. I want to fight, but somebody say, 'They got us, boys. Let's git!' I guess they kill Ike after that."

"Get any of the boys?"

"Abel Cooney, sí. He goes down like a sack of grain. I think, 'Is dead. No use es-stopping.'"

It was not going to be easy to tell Uncle Ad about it, Ross thought. Uncle Ad had told him. "Out of violence cometh bloodshed and grief."

They started back, Casoose riding close to Ross to catch him if he fell. They had gone about four miles when they heard a horse snort somewhere ahead. Casoose drew his saddle-gun and rode ahead. When Ross came up with him, he was talking to Abel Cooney.

Cooney looked a little shaken, pale in the lips, but he was not hurt. "They grooved me like a colt on a ridge," he said. "My head feels like a stick o' Atlas gettin' ready to go off. They figgered I was dead, I reckon, and left me!" He looked at Ross' bloody pants-leg, at his white face. "Cripes, boss—what'd you tie into?"

Ross rode past him, letting the Mexican explain.

Afterward, he couldn't have told how he made it to the Falls House. Casoose wanted to take him into the ranch-house, but Ross said grimly: "I'm going up."

"Ay, Dios!" the foreman swore. "You lose blood like the es-stuck pig. You will die on the trail. I, Jesús Corrales, tell you!"

Ross rode past the corrals and hit the Skyline trail. He had it in his head, through all the madness of fever and sickness, that he was finished if he did not make it to Skyline Ranch. Up there nobody could whip him; in the big brown fortress he was a giant. Down here he was just another Hooligan Canyon long-looper whom the wolves had cornered and would tear to pieces at their leisure.

Casoose had to drag him from the saddle when they reached the house. Ross remembered reaching the porch, and after that it was all a confused, tumbling stream of nightmarish sights and sounds that carried him on to darkness.

VI

WHEN Ross woke up it was like being born again: He had no idea where he was, how long he had been out, what day or hour it was. He lay on a cot, staring up at a ceiling of cottonwood branches arranged in a herringbone pattern while these questions drifted lazily and unimportantly through his mind.

The ceiling finally gave him the answer to the first question: Such *vigas* could exist only in his own ranch-house. He had the answers to the other matters from Nora Clay.

Nora came in while he was trying to decide whether or not to get up. She stood above him, blonde and unreal, the light from the window making her hair shine. Ross looked at her, feeling the same old

yearnings, and thinking, This is the only gold in the world that's worth dying for.

Nora pulled a goatskin chair up to his bedside. She said to him: "Maybe this will teach you not to play with the neighborhood bad boys." She was smiling.

"You're a good nurse," Ross told her. "Never frighten the patient. Will I die? Or am I already dead?"

"You won't be so rugged for a while. But the doctor got the bullet out of you. There's no infection."

"How did you get here?" Ross asked her.

"Casoose came after me. He wanted to borrow one of our Mexican women to nurse you. I thought we might as well have the job done right." She put a pill in his hand and held a glass of water for him. "Now you've got to sleep."

The next time they talked he was able to sit up and eat a bowl of beef broth. Nora sat there watching him; she had something on her mind that traced a frown between her eyes.

Finally she said: "What is Libby Caddo to you?"

Ross glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Just a friend," he said. He saw the expression on her face and added: "A pretty good friend."

"You talked about her," Nora told him. "All kinds of wild talk. I didn't know she meant so much to you."

Ross finished his soup and lit a cigarette. "We sorta have to go after what we can get" he said. "How's Rocky?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him." Nora spoke crisply. Suddenly she said, as though it were something she had wanted to speak for a long time: "Oh, Ross! Do we have to stand off at arms' length and make faces at each other? I want to talk to you—seriously."

"All right, Nora. I'm flat on my back and can't help myself."

Nora's eyes were sober. "I'd hate to admit after all this time that Dad and I've been wrong," she said. "But it looks like the platform we've lived by is falling to pieces. We've been proud, but not smart."

"What's happened?" Ross asked her.

"Libby gave Dad till tomorrow to pay up. Then we've got to get out."

"I can tell you what I'd do," Ross said. "But it wouldn't help your dad any, feel-

ing like he does about fighting. I'd set down and dare anybody to throw me off. And I'd kill any skunk that tried to."

Nora nodded. "That's what Dad says he's going to do. He says he should have done it a long time ago." Nora smiled. "You know, Ross, when you aren't trying to show the world how tough you are, you're rather nice."

Ross grinned, reaching for her hand. He said: "Sure I am. Do you think I might come courtin' up Blue River again sometime?"

Nora smiled, moving toward the door. "Sometime," she told him.

Uncle Ad Cooney came up to visit Ross the next night, bringing a quarter of beef, probably stolen, on a pack-horse. It had been six days since Ross came back from Smoky River. As he stood in the doorway Cooney looked like a slightly seedy St. Peter with his long, dirty brown beard and whiskey-shot eyes, a chest like a graze bull's and the crusader's light in his eyes.

He said to Ross: "Nothin' wrong with you that a slab o' good red beef won't fix up. I've got the Mex warmin' 'er up a bit. Thought a line or two from the Book might comfort ye."

Uncle Ad opened the Bible and read for a spell. Rather than cheer the sick man they gave him gooseflesh. When he finally closed the book he asked:

"What you going to do now, Ross?"

Ross said, "I don't know. Go back sometime. Casoose found their headquarters, a little park with cabins where about fifteen of them stay. Next time I'm going to run them out, to the last yellow dog."

"Time," said Uncle Ad, "that something got done. Next thing we know they'll be sending a tax collector up Poverty Creek."

After Uncle Ad left, Ross got up and walked up and down the room. His hip gave him a stab every time he took a step. When he walked too fast his head swam. But after a while he began to find a little steadiness, especially after swallowing some Mexican *aguardiente*. He was back in bed when Nora came to give him medicine at nine o'clock.

Nora didn't have much to say. She was grave as she tidied the room up for the night. After she left, Ross arose and dressed. He buckled on his Colt and, as a concession to his condition, donned a heavy

sheepskin jacket. He went out through the window and caught his horse out of the corral. Throwing the heavy stock saddle across it taxed his strength, but he got the Tipton laced down and rode carefully around behind the barn and down the trail.

He awoke Abel and the rest of the men at the Falls House. "How'd you boys like to make a little bounty money?" Ross asked them.

Abel frowned. "If you go along, we'll have to carry you back. You look like you'd climbed out of your grave before they could cover you up."

"Exercise is all I need," Ross told him. "I gave Caddo warning about running Clay out; the same advice goes for Libby. She's got her boys raiding him tonight. So we'll have a little quilting bee while they work."

"What've you got in mind?" Abel wanted to know.

"I've got a pocketful of matches," Ross said. "I'm going to build a little fire to warm my hands by."

THEY were in the hills above the Lader ranch when a group of punchers loped out of the headquarters on Blue River an hour later. Ross did not waste time after he was sure they were on the way. He did not aim to see old Webb Clay try to stand off fifteen raiders single-handed.

Ross left the men in the barranca and rode boldly into the yard. He scanned the dark ranch-house carefully before he called: "Libby!"

There was no answer, but he rode slowly through the sprawl of buildings before he summoned the others. They spread out, some taking the outbuildings, three men entering the barn to ignite the hay, he and Abel entering the house to scatter pitch-pine chips from the wood-basket everywhere a blaze could catch. When they left the house, flames were bursting from the great flat-roofed barn. The harness shed was the base of a roaring column of red.

Out in the yard the heat crowded upon them stifflingly. Dust devils eddied and scurried along the ground. Ross ran to let the screaming animals out of the corral. He fired a shot to signal the retreat.

They were gone from the ranch ten minutes after they had struck it. Riding hard, they crossed the Blue and took the trail

into the timber, and from a point high in the Calamities they watched, a few minutes later, a ragged string of riders streaming into the blaze-washed ranch-yard far below. They had not done much raiding this night: Hooligan Canyon had made a boast, and the square-jawed men from Poverty Creek had kept it.

Ross was almost exhausted when they reached the Falls House. His hip was a steady, pulsing pain. Days of inactivity had left him soft, and they had ridden hard tonight. Before starting up to Sky-line Ranch, he had two cups of coffee with the men in the bunkhouse. Around midnight he left.

He had not gone far when he heard the strike of shod hoofs on the trail below him. Ross jerked his carbine free and reined into the shadow of a hackberry. He had his gun at his shoulder when the rider jogged past him. He started; then he called softly: "Taking the warpath, Libby?"

Libby Caddo reined in sharply, searching the brush. Ross went out to meet her, but he kept his gun at the ready. It appalled him to think of firing at a woman, even if only to frighten her; and yet if this girl had enough of her father's twisted mind, he might have to do it.

Libby's features were drawn and bloodless; her hat was off and hung down her back by the string, letting her black hair fall loose on her shoulders. There were smoke smudges on her cheeks. Suddenly she reached out to him, crying his name, no longer the hoyden, but a woman desperate and hurt.

"Ross!" she said. "Why did it have to happen? Why did you do it?"

He lifted her from the saddle, feeling her slim body trembling as he held her against him; and yet part of him was still vigilant. "I tried to convince your dad I meant it," he said. "I'm sorry it had to be like this, Libby. But Webb Clay deserves a better deal than you were going to give him."

Libby looked up at him, a wonder in her eyes. "You said we were a lot alike. And yet I can see why a man like Clay, a weak and fumbling man who will never amount to anything in this country, should make way for an iron like mine; and you can't. Sometimes you reason like a Sunday school teacher."

"And sometimes," Ross told her, "you reason like your father. You sent Rocky down to run all the Smoky River cattle out before I could tally them. And I don't know but what he was leading the crew that killed Al Parsons and Ike Bradley."

Libby said soberly: "No, Ross. I sent Rocky down to cut out any of my cattle. That's all. If he's tied up with the others, I didn't know it."

Ross shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter. The deal's finished and we've got to stand pat on our cards. We'll have to play 'em out the way we see best. You'd better stay at the Skyline tonight. Nora's there."

Libby let him turn the stirrup for her, raising her foot. When he started to help her into the saddle, he saw that she was crying. She clung to him for a moment, her face pressed against his shoulder.

"Oh, Ross!" she said. "We could have had everything, but now we'll have nothing; not even each other. They're devils, the Smoky River bunch. Too tough and too smart for us. Can't you see what's happened? They've got us, the biggest ranchers in the Bend, fighting each other! And they'll be the ones to take what's left. I'm—I'm afraid, Ross."

Ross said: "In the morning you'll be as sassy as ever, Libby. All you need is sleep."

But she had given words to the same fear that lurked in his own heart. From now on they would be fighting each other as well as the canyon men.

He took Libby to a spare bedroom and then returned to the parlor. There was a chill in him that only a roaring fire and a long drink could drive out. He poked up the coals in the big stone fireplace and laid an ironwood log in place. He poured himself a half-tumbler of whiskey and pulled the big armchair up before the fire. There was magic in the combination of warmth within and without. Ross was asleep before he had finished the drink.

He might have slept an hour. When he awoke, it was to find himself on his feet before the fire, trembling. The house still echoed to the explosion which had blasted him from sleep. His first thought was of the porch, for the sound had been exactly like the one which had preceded the death of one of Rudy Guss' murderers. But when he looked out the window, the yard and the porch were deserted.

Ross could hear the others moving. A door opened and Nora cried: "Ross! Ross! Are you all right?"

Casoose came running down the hall with his forty-five in his hand. "*Qué pasa?*" he yelled.

When he realized the significance of the blast, Ross felt physically sick. He walked to the hall entrance and called: "I'm all right, Nora. I shot at something in the brush. Casoose—come here."

The Mexican's small black eyes were anxious. He was sweating, but the sight of Ross standing there unharmed seemed to reassure him. "Boss," he said reprovingly, "the doctor say, 'That he does not get up, Casoose, for two weeks.' What is he saying to me if you get sick again?"

"I'm all right, Casoose. I want you to go down to the old wine-cellar for me."

"Is locked," Casoose protested.

"It's just been unlocked. Take a lamp. I'd rather not go down myself."

There was no eagerness in the foreman's manner, but he took a lamp and went cautiously down the stone steps. When he came back, five minutes later, he was pale and shocked. He put the lamp back in the bracket and drank a great gulp from the whiskey bottle on the table. Then he sat down at the table and said: "*Pobrecita!* Through the heart."

Ross said: "Libby?"

Casoose nodded. "How did she get in here, Boss?"

Ross helped himself to the whiskey. "I brought her up," he said. "This is Rudy Guss' party. He left a cocked gun fixed so that when the door of the strong-room was opened, if anybody ever got his keys, he'd be killed. Guss would know how to discharge the thing into the concrete door before opening it. Libby was too ambitious for her own good. She was after the thirty thousand dollars I paid for the ranch, I suppose. All I'm wondering is where she got the keys."

HE went outside and stood for a long while on the porch, staring down into the dark, whispering gorge that had cost five lives since he took over the Skyline Ranch. He thought of the dark-haired, lovely girl lying in the cellar, and suddenly he was sick to death of the sight and smell of blood, of the greed that made this val-

ley a charnel house; he had had his fill of treachery and of men who came out at night, like prairie wolves.

He said to the Mexican when he went in: "I'm going down the Smoky again tomorrow. I'm going to take every man I can round up and pry those gun-wolves loose with their own weapons. This time I'm not coming back until the job is done. And I'm going to drag out the king-pin at the end of a rope."

Casoose replied gravely, "Si," not questioning him, as though he understood that this was a holy duty they had before them. He took a blanket from the couch and went downstairs to cover the girl's body.

They left the next morning, before Nora Clay was awake. Ross left the ramrod at the Falls House and rode up the Poverty. He told Uncle Ad what he had in mind.

"I'm hiring all the guns I can," he said to the patriarch of Poverty Creek. "And I'm offering more than gun-wages for this job. I'll have more range than any man needs when I get the Canyon cleaned out. I aim to lease Smoky River land to every man in Hooligan Canyon that wants it."

"I been here since the canyon was a gulley," Cooney said. "I'm satisfied with my lot. Most of the boys jest ain't ranchers. Why stir 'em up?"

"They've never had a chance," Ross told him. "Now they're going to get it, but they'll have to fight for it. I don't reckon you'd let Cain go for a few days?"

Uncle Ad's eyes were stern. "No. Abel's all I can spare. I don't rightly approve of this, Ross. It's agin' the Word."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Ad. I don't like it either. But I've got to do it."

Ross enlisted five more ranchers. He watched their eyes when they heard his offer of land, and the way they shone was all the proof he wanted of their willingness to work this range if they ever got it.

He was surprised to find Webb Clay at the Falls House when they rode in. The peppery little Yankee sat on the corral bar smoking his corn-cob pipe. He said to Ross, fingering his wispy goatee:

"Listen. When I get on the butt, I don't need anybody to show me how to fight. And I don't need a nursemaid, either."

"That's fine," Ross said. "Why tell me about it?"

Clay snorted. "I went over this morning to tell Libby Caddo I'd put a bullet through any Ladder puncher that crossed my land. Damn me if she hadn't been burned out. Thanks for your interest in me, Kirby but I'll do my own fighting from here on out."

Ross grinned. "Thought you didn't believe in it."

"I don't know what I believe in," Clay flared, "but I don't believe in getting pushed around any more."

Ross' men were beginning to assemble in the corral, saddling their ponies and getting ready for the ride. Each man carried a saddle-gun which he checked before shoving into the boot. Abel Cooney wore two forty-fives. There would be fourteen guns to throw lead back at the Smoky River gang when they clashed.

Clay watched all this preparation with a frown. "What's going on?" he asked Ross.

"Looks like there might be one of those fights you were talking about," Ross told him. "We're going back down the canyon. It's getting so an honest man has to go around apologizing in Three Rivers."

As he started off, Webb Clay said: "Wait a minute. That sort of makes it my fight, too, don't it?"

"You can make it yours if you want to," Ross told him.

"All I hope," said Clay, "is that I run into Job Hatfield."

"Maybe you will," Ross said.

It was noon when they started, and they pushed the ponies briskly to reach the canyon hideout before dark. Ross put a scout on the ridge to forestall an ambush. He kept the men from bunching, so that in event of a surprise they could not be shattered by one crashing salvo. They rode silently down the gorge.

Long before dusk they reached the spot where the cook had been murdered. By now every man rode with his rifle across the swell of his saddle. Casoose took the lead, for Ross had not been with the crew when they blundered into the outlaw hideout before.

A few hundred yards below the meadow, they dismounted and filtered through the thick stand of scrubby pinions. Webb Clay was beside Ross when they had their first glimpse of the park. The cabins stood near the trees, a string of peeled pole corrals

behind them. Clay said: "Pshaw! Corral's empty. Likely nobody home."

Ross aimed a shot at the door of the main cabin. The slug struck white splinters from the plank. There was a long, trembling silence. Ross gave the command for a fusillade. Bullets tore through the unglazed windows and chopped at the doors. They heard the racket of breaking china and clattering pots and pans. One of the doors swung inward under the pound of the lead.

Finally the shooting ended and Ross went gingerly from the trees, approaching the cabins from the west. But the camp was deserted.

They held a pow-wow back in the trees. Abel Cooney drew nervously on a crooked cigarette. "Maybeso they're acrost the border raidin'," he said.

"If they are," Ross said, "they'll find a rousin' welcome when they try to get back into the canyon. There's another possibility, though. Maybe our raid the other day threw a scare into 'em. Down in the gorge there's a cave full of all kinds o' truck, including bar silver. If they're afraid of being run out, they'd probably try to freight out all they can carry first. We'll have a look."

He knew that something was doing in the canyon by the fact that the Ladder was down again. One by one the men descended, following Ross to the outlet above the river. He posted a guard to prevent anyone approaching from the south. They started toward the cave.

He heard suddenly a sound that rang in his brain like a gun-shot. The stamp of a shod hoof! Around the bend he glimpsed a line of pack-animals stringing from the cave, already loaded but waiting patiently for the 'skinners to start them. To the men behind him, Cooney and Webb Clay and Casoose, Ross said low: "They're in the cave. Pass the word down. We've got 'em bottled up."

He went ahead, faster, on the inside of the line of pack-animals. When the blow came, some sharpened sense gave Ross warning, and he twisted in time partially to evade the down-swing of Abel Cooney's gun barrel. He felt the weight of it grind against his collar bone, and he sagged to his knees. Cooney ran past him, yelling.

"Rocky! It's the payoff!"

Ross heard his own men swearing, demanding to know what was up. He stumbled to his knees and ran ahead, and when Abel Cooney turned and slammed a shot at him he fired without slackening his pace and saw Cooney stumble forward with hands over his face.

The burros stampeded, some of them plunging into the river and the others racing past the Hooligan Canyon men. The punchers took a pummelling as the loaded *aparejos* buffeted them, but they had their backs to the cliff and were able to stay on the trail. From the cave came sounds of spurred boots pounding across the rocky floor, of men shouting and preparing for action.

VII

ROSS threw himself flat as he gained the cavern, firing upward at the three men who had come from the passage to the larger room. Behind him, Casoose and old Webb Clay took up prone positions to pour their fire into the cave. Two of the men had been carrying bar silver; they dropped the ingots and fumbled off their shots. Ross saw them falter, rocked by the force of whining forty-five lead. He jacked another shell into the breach of the .44-40, waiting for the next man, and the man who fired from the gloom of the passageway was Rocky Taylor.

Casoose Corrales' old buffalo gun roared before Ross could get off a shot. The slug, as big as a man's finger, struck the ex-ramrod in the head. Taylor lay moving spasmodically, blocking the passage.

There were sounds of shouting from inside the cavern, the high-pitched voices of men in panic. Presently they quieted; but no more men attempted to escape. In the interval of quiet, Ross called:

"All right, boys. This is it. Come out with your hands high or we'll send back for dynamite and do it right."

There was no choice. The outlaws crawled out of the cave like cowed dogs. They were a motley group of border riff-raff, Mexicans and breeds, and the only familiar faces in the group were the dead faces of Rocky Taylor and those of three other former Skyline punchers. Webb Clay appeared disappointed.

"So Rocky was king," he said.

"Rocky was only the lieutenant," Ross said. "The big man wouldn't risk his life in a brawl like this. He was smart enough that he didn't have to." He turned away. "Help me load Abel on a pack-animal. I've got to take him back to Uncle Ad."

They reached the Falls House around midnight. Ross slept until dawn. He had breakfast with the crew and afterwards rode up Poverty Creek. Uncle Ad was reading the Bible on the kitchen table when Ross rode up. The old man looked at Ross as he stood in the doorway; he said shortly: "Somethin's wrong."

"They got Abel," Ross said. "We cleaned 'em out. I'm sorry, Uncle Ad. If there's anything—"

The rusty-bearded cowman pressed his fist against his forehead, his head bowed. "Nothin', Ross," he said, his voice muffled. "Jest leave him." But as he turned away, Uncle Ad said: "Did you find out who's the kingpin this time?"

Ross looked into the old man's eyes. "No. Rocky Taylor was bossing them, but I don't think he was the king. He killed Caddo, I'm pretty sure, hoping to win Libby and the ranch. He wouldn't have bothered if he was already the big boy."

Ross stood there awkwardly while Cooney got a pick-axe and shovel. Cooney led the burro bearing Abel's body up to the grave-plot among the trees. Ross went carefully up the slope behind him.

He stood where he could read the two headboards which leaned dejectedly in the mottled shade. For days, ever since his first visit up here, Ross Kirby had been troubled by something he had seen, without quite knowing what the disturbing factor was. Now he knew. There were too many graves. . . .

One of the headboards said: "Sacred to the memory of Mary Cooney. Rest in Peace." The other said: "Sacred to the memory of Cain Cooney, son of Mary and Adam Cooney. June 15, 1887."

June 15 was the day Rudy Guss had been murdered.

Suddenly Uncle Ad saw him. He straightened slowly, leaning on the shovel. He said: "Well, Ross?"

"I didn't know Cain was dead."

Cooney's stern features did not alter.

"He was killed two weeks ago. Fell off a horse."

Ross shook his head. "No, Uncle Ad. Rudy Guss' gun-trap killed him. You and he and Abel broke in, figuring to get all the treasure he'd been storing for years, money you'd paid the old miser to leave you alone, and money he'd made off his cattle. When you failed, you had Rocky give Libby Caddo the keys you'd stolen, figuring to let her take the risk, if there was any. She hated me enough, and was ambitious enough to do it. But you didn't have to kill Guss to get Smoky River, because it was already yours. It's been yours for fifteen years, hasn't it? It took a tough, smart man like you to hold it."

Uncle Ad did not move. Ross Kirby said: "Don't make me do it, Uncle Ad. Take your gun out slow and drop it."

Cooney's shovel abruptly moved, throwing dirt in Ross' face. Ross ducked, going to his knees, his hat knocked off. Cooney had his big forty-five out and his face, behind the cocked hammer, was like something out of Purgatory—the eyes blazing and the bearded mouth open, twisted as if in profanity.

Ross shot him in the breast before his hammer dropped; shot him again when he stood swaying there, still trying to get off his shot.

Uncle Ad slowly went down, no longer king of Smoky River.

Ross Kirby rode away. He put out of his mind the thoughts that tried to crowd it—of bloodshed and treachery. For what it meant, he was king of Smoky River. King—he didn't like the title. It implied more power and pomp than he liked.

All Ross Kirby wanted was to be a cowman among cattlemen; he didn't want to have to apologize to anybody for being from Hooligan Canyon, but on the other hand he didn't want small men doffing their hats when he came down the walk.

Now that he had established his right to Skyline Ranch, he found he didn't ever want to set foot in the grim, massive fortress again. He would build another place down in the valley, where the sound of the falls was a lullaby at night and the grass was green under friendly trees. The kind of place a man could bring a girl like Nora to with pride.

DESERT FOX

By JAMES P. WEBB

His track-down pace was deliberately slow; his hand never reached toward holster. For the wily sheriff knew the dread desert was a hangman's noose for owlhooters on the run.

VAN ENGLE, desert-wise sheriff, rode into Sundown without having heard anything about the holdup at the Wells Fargo office. He found the little town in an uproar. A group of men milled in front of the stage office. Sundown stood at the eastern edge of the dread Muerto Desert and served a mining region in the hills to the east. Wells Fargo had an office in Sundown, and stages operated toward the east; but not across the Muerto to the west.

Andy Franklin, the young Wells Fargo agent, saw the sheriff approaching and ran out into the dusty street.

"They held me up," he shouted. "Four men. They got away with a lot of currency that had just come in for the mines."

Van Engle halted his bay horse. "Which way did they go?"

Franklin pointed. "West."

Van Engle was a tall, lean man of forty. His face looked like brown leather, his eyes like bits of agate. His voice was soft and slow.

"How long ago?"

"Not more than half an hour, I guess."

Other men came up, surrounding the sheriff's horse. One miner said: "They're strikin' straight across the desert. They looked like men from the mountains over thar, and I reckon they took the shortest way home."

"Men from the mountains," Van Engle drawled. "And they took the short way home. Reckon they'll feel safe when they get into the hills."

"Are you gettin' up a posse?" one of the men asked. "Hadn't you better hurry, sheriff?"

Van Engle shook his head. His thin lips smiled a little. "There's never any hurry till you see a man reachin' for a gun," he said softly. "I'll go after 'em alone."

"But there's four of 'em," Andy Franklin reminded him.

Van Engle turned in the saddle and stared toward the Muerto Desert west of the little town. "I'll get 'em alone," he repeated. "But first I'll want a pack hoss, some supplies, and some canteens full of water." He looked around at the excited townsmen and added: "I happen to know the first two waterholes are as dry as the tongue of a rich man in hell."

ONCE in the desert, the bandits slowed their horses to a walk. They were not desert men, but they knew enough about that barren "water scrape" to realize that they must move slowly. Tobe Audery, the loose-jointed, pale-eyed leader, carried a sack on the cantle of his saddle. The words "Wells Fargo" were stamped in black letters on the moneyladen sack.

Audery's three companions were inclined to be jubilant over the easy success of the holdup. They had timed it just right. By the time word could reach the sheriff, the outlaws would be riding the desolate expanse of the desert where pursuit would be difficult. But Audery was not elated. The holdup had been satisfactory to him, of course; but now his greedy mind was concerned with another problem. He did not wish to go on holding up Wells Fargo offices and banks. He wanted to have enough money to live in ease, without work, and without theft. He did not wish to divide this loot with the other three. And he did not intend to.

Covertly, Audery studied his pards. Black Manthey, a dark, sharp-eyed man, was decidedly handy with a six-gun. He'd have to be handled carefully. Sam Burchett, the biggest man of the four, was slow and stupid. Joe Rutherford, wide-

shouldered and bandy-legged, had a lot of strength in his arms, and a reckless sort of courage, but Audery felt confident of his ability to get the better of Rutherford.

Audery decided that it would be best to start with Rutherford, but he would have to take pains to make everything work smoothly.

The Muerto Desert spread out around them, flat and desolate, barren as an ocean. Far off, outcroppings of sandstone lifted gauntly. The air was still and hot, and the white dust lifted by the horses' hoofs settled on the clothing of the men. Deep, powder-fine dust. The sun was a red glare in the brassy sky. Heat waves rose from the earth.

Thirst began to gnaw at Audery's throat. His tongue felt swollen. At noon the four men stopped, but they did not make camp.

They gave each of the horses a little water, and moistened their own mouths. Each of the four men had two large canteens; and with care this water would last until they reached the first waterhole. The thought came to Audery that the water would last longer if there were fewer men in the party. Fewer men and fewer horses.

The afternoon wore on. At last the sun went down, and the outlaws made camp. They drank sparingly again of the water. They were tired, wearied by heat and thirst. They ate little, preferring to sleep while the night hours spared them the punishment of sunlight.

Audery knew that his pards would go to sleep quickly. He himself set his will to the task of keeping him awake. Black Manthey, Sam Burchett, and Joe Rutherford spread their blankets. Audery did



likewise, and lay down, and stared wide-eyed at the sky. He dared not close his eyes. He might fall asleep.

An hour passed. Audery cautiously lifted himself on an elbow and stared at his companions. He listened for the sound of their deep, regular breathing. Convinced that all were sound asleep, Audery stealthily rose to his hands and knees and drew a bowie knife from the inside of his left boot.

He knew where Rutherford was lying. Softly, slowly, Audery crept along, pausing frequently to listen to the sounds of breathing. A surging elation gripped him. With one gone, there would be only two more. Manthey and Burchett could not know who had killed Rutherford. Each would be suspicious of his two remaining pards, but neither could know certainly that Audery had done the deed.

Audery stood on his knees, directly over the sleeping Rutherford, aimed the knife carefully, drove the blade downward in a swift, fierce motion.

SHERIFF VAN ENGLE, well past mid-afternoon, left Sundown alone. He took with him a pack horse laden with grub and water. Much water. He rode slowly across the desolate reaches of the Muerto Desert, and he felt the heat of the sun drawing the moisture from his body; but the desert had no terrors for Van Engle. He had been in the Muerto before, and he was prepared for it.

Having gotten a late start, Van Engle kept on until well after dark, traveling slowly, stopping occasionally to give the two horses a little water and to moisten his own tongue.

Before sunrise the next morning, he was in the saddle again. He pointed his horse toward the nearest waterhole, confident that the outlaws had gone that way. The sun came up, and mirages began to form on the sand in front of him. Van Engle paid no attention to them. He rode on, very slowly.

Near noon, he came to a cairn of rock which had not been there the last time Van Engle had passed this way. The sheriff dismounted and looked closely at the ground. He saw signs that a camp had been made here—signs which were not yet obliterated by the puffs of hot wind which

lifted and stirred and shifted the desert sand.

Van Engle walked to the cairn of rock and began tearing it down. He worked slowly, feeling the beat of the terrific sun on his back, feeling the perspiration seep through his shirt.

The body of Joe Rutherford had not been interred; it had merely been covered with the rocks. Van Engle saw the knife wound, and the blood-soaked shirt. Slowly, he rebuilt the cairn of rock, mounted his horse, and, leading the pack animal, went on into the limitless silence.

"I DON'T know why either one of you hombres would have done it," Audery said in a peevish voice. "I didn't know Joe'd ever crossed anybody."

The three outlaws were riding slowly. Black Manthey was leading a riderless horse. They had conversed little, except for Audery's occasional outbursts on the subject of Rutherford's murder. Manthey had insisted on bringing Rutherford's horse with him.

"We'll strike the waterhole this afternoon," Manthey had said. "We'll have enough water."

Audery had not argued the point. He would have preferred to leave the horse to die in the desert, but after all they *would* reach the waterhole in plenty of time, and he did not care much about the horses, one way or the other.

Audery knew that his companions were watching him and each other suspiciously, just as he was watching them with every evidence of distrust. Each of Audery's two pards knew that one of his companions had killed Joe Rutherford in his sleep; but only Audery knew which one had done it.

The day dragged away, and again the sun went down, and the night brought relief from the heat; but it did not cool the suspicion and distrust which stood like a wall between the three pards.

They ate sparingly of bacon, because they did not have much appetite. They drank sparingly from the canteens because they did not have much water. They had not covered as many miles that day as they had expected, and the waterhole was still ahead of them. They should reach it, certainly, early in the morning.

Sam Burchett sat cross-legged on the

sand, eating stolidly beside the skillet. Audery stood up, and when Manthey glanced at him with a quick, sharp lift of black eyes, Audery made a sign which Burchett did not see. Audery walked away from the camp and stood looking out over the dark desert.

After a minute, Black Manthey joined him. Audery said, low-voiced: "I reckon I ought to tell you what I saw. I didn't aim to, because I figured it was a personal matter between 'em, but lately it's come to me that he aims to do us in, too. Maybe he wants all the loot for himself. You and me have been pard's a long time, Black, and I reckon I ought to warn you."

Manthey looked sharply at Audery's hawklike face. "You mean Sam?"

Audery nodded, glancing quickly at Burchett, who was watching them intently now. "I didn't get sound asleep very quick last night. I come out of a sort of doze and saw Burchett kneelin' by Joe. I seen his arm go up and down. Sam's got the knife somewhere. I reckon if we want to get any more sleep, we'd better ask Sam where his knife is. That'll make him give himself away, and we'll take his knife away from him."

Manthey wheeled and started toward Burchett. Burchett got quickly to his feet. Audery, slightly behind Manthey, moved a little to one side, watching Burchett.

"Sam," Manthey said sharply, "where's the knife you stabbed Joe with?"

Burchett stiffened. "I didn't stab Joe. One of you fellows did it. I wish to God I knowed which one. I—"

"Quit stallin'," Manthey snapped. "Let me see your knife."

"I ain't got a knife." Burchett's voice rose. "Damn you, you can't lay that killin' on me. Maybe you done it yourself."

The day had been long. Nerves had been frayed by heat, and raveled by distrust. Burchett's control seemed to snap, and abruptly he drew his gun.

Manthey was faster, as Audrey had known he would be. Manthey's gun roared, and the sound faded quickly into the deep silence, and Sam Burchett swayed and clutched at his chest. He dropped to his knees, his face agonized in the dim light, and then dropped forward on his face.

Manthey and Audrey moved toward Burchett. Burchett's voice lifted feebly

from the sand: "You . . . you done it . . . you'll kill Tobe, too. . . . Maybe the devil . . ." His voice died into a rattle.

IT was nearly noon again when Van Engle, moving slowly over the desert, saw where another camp had been made. And this camp site, too, was marked by a cairn of stones which the sheriff tore down and rebuilt.

The body under this protecting cairn was that of Sam Burchett. The death-wound, this time, had been made by a bullet in the chest.

The sheriff made a mental calculation. The first of the waterholes, dry now, was only a few miles away. The outlaws would have reached it by this time, found it dry, and started on for the second one. There had been four of the outlaws engaged in the holdup at Sundown. Now there were two cairns of rock in the desert. That meant that only two of the holdup men were still alive.

Van Engle paused briefly at the cairn, to water his horses, and to drink a swallow of the tepid liquid himself. Then he mounted and went on.

"GODDLEMIGHTY!" Audery cried, caught by a weakening surge of panic. "It's dry!"

Black Manthey dismounted and walked to the edge of the waterhole. Audery did not need to dismount and approach; he could see from where he sat that there was no water there—only whitened earth.

Black seemed stunned by this discovery. He stood at the edge of the waterhole and stared into the basin.

For a moment, Audery was stunned, too. But he remembered that the second waterhole was only a few miles farther on, and that second waterhole did not go dry so quickly. There would be water there, surely.

His momentary panic subsided, and Audery became calm again. And then he realized, suddenly, that he was staring straight at his pard's back. Black was standing motionless beside the dry waterhole, his back to the murderer. All the preceding night, and all the daylight hours since, had been marked by the suspicion which stood between the two men. The apparent guilt of Sam Burchett had not

dissipated Manthey's watchfulness. But now, shocked by the fact that the waterhole was dry, Manthey was standing with his back toward Audery. And Audery must get rid of Manthey if he would have all the loot for his own use.

Slowly, Audery dismounted. It was all right, after all, if Manthey wouldn't turn for another moment. There was only one filled canteen now, hanging on Manthey's saddle, but that would be enough water—for one. They had been forced to cut down the horses' rations, and Manthey had agreed that morning to shoot the two extra horses. There would be enough water for one man and one horse to reach the second waterhole. And there was more than enough loot for one man.

On the ground, Audery set himself, realizing that he was a trifle weak from heat and thirst. Carefully, he pulled his six-gun from the holster and lined the barrel on Manthey's back.

At that instant, Manthey started to turn. His sharp black eyes caught the movement of Audery's arm, saw the lifting weapon. Manthey's quick hand reached for his gun, and he jumped to one side.

Audery fired, and fired again. Manthey fell forward, clutching the gun he had not had time to use. He braced himself against one elbow, and then his gun banged flatly into the silence. Manthey's horse screamed and fell to its knees. Manthey's lips twisted into a horrible grimace and his face sank against the sand.

When Audery, holding his gun ready, approached warily, he saw that Manthey was dead. Audery looked down at the last of his pards and his dry lips grinned. Everything was working out fine. He had the loot now; all of it. There was enough water in the one remaining canteen to enable him to get to the next water hole.

Behind Audery, Manthey's wounded horse whinnied pitifully, but Audery did not heed the sound for a moment. He was thinking, half deliriously, of the high living which would come to him because he would not have to divide the Wells Fargo loot. Audery chuckled, and the sound rattled in his dry throat. Manthey had relaxed his vigilance for a moment, and it had been too bad for him. Audery's lip curled as he stared with red-rimmed

eyes at the body of the man he had killed. Manthey the gun-fighter! But after Audery's bullets had hit him, Manthey had not been so capable with a gun. He had tried; yes, he had tried, with his last strength, to kill Audery, but he had succeeded only in hitting his own horse, yards away from Audery.

Audery pulled himself together. No time to waste. He must get on to that other waterhole; he must find water there.

Behind him, Manthey's horse whinnied faintly. Audery turned. The animal lay on its side, and it was trying to lift its head. Audery pointed his six-gun and pulled the trigger. The horse lay still.

Audery's eyes traveled over the horse. He stiffened then, and his gaze settled on the canteen. It had been hanging by a strap from the pommel of Manthey's saddle, and it was still there, on top of the dead horse. But there was a wetness there. . . .

Audery plunged forward. He went to his knees and grabbed the canteen, tore it from the saddlehorn. His red-rimmed eyes protruded, and he whimpered softly in his throat.

The canteen was empty. There were two holes in it. Manthey's horse had been shot just behind the shoulder, and the bullet had first passed through the canteen. While Audery had gloated, the water had run out. There was no water. *No* water. Manthey . . . Manthey the gun-fighter. With his last strength—

Tobe Audery uttered a great cry. He lurched to his feet, and, with a hoarse oath, flung the punctured canteen as far as the swing of his long arm would send it.

Audery ran to his horse and pulled himself into the saddle. He struck in the spurs, and the jaded animal responded with a trot which quickly dropped to a slow walk. Audery drooped in the saddle, his red-rimmed eyes staring out from under his hatbrim. The bag containing the loot was on the back of his saddle, but Audery had almost forgotten about it. Water! He must get to the waterhole, and find water.

SHERIFF VAN ENGLE was not disappointed when he saw that the waterhole was empty. He had known that it would be dry. He dismounted and studied

the body of the dead horse and the body of the dead man. He picked up Manthey's six-gun and looked at it. It had been fired once. A gun-fight. He looked at the two bullet wounds in the carcass of the horse. The animal had first been wounded accidentally; then killed with a mercy shot in the head. Van Engle turned and looked at the dead man again. It must have been Manthey who had shot the horse accidentally. Probably after he had been shot himself.

In the fading light of late afternoon, Van Engle spied the canteen lying on the sand yards away from the waterhole. He walked out and picked it up. Two bullet holes, but both made by the same bullet. Probably had been on the saddle when the horse was hit. Bad luck for somebody.

Van Engle camped beside the dry waterhole that night. There was no hurry about getting on. Plenty of time. Men should not hurry in the desert.

Van Engle reached the second waterhole well before noon of the next day. It was dry, as he had known it would be. There was no sign of the fourth robber. Van Engle sat down on a rock and rolled a cigarette. He took two draws, and then threw the cigarette into the sand. He looked out across the barren land.

The nearest waterhole was miles away. It would take two days of steady traveling to reach it. Did the outlaw know where it was? Probably. And if he knew where it was, he must be trying to get to it. Travelers in the Muerto Desert usually followed a more or less straight line between the waterholes.

After a drink of tepid water for himself and his horse, Van Engle mounted and went on, heading for the third waterhole. There would be water there.

He saw nothing of the fugitive during that afternoon and night. He camped at

dusk, and rode on again before dawn.

Late in the afternoon, Van Engle came upon a dead horse. The animal still wore saddle and bridle, and its head was stretched out, tongue protruding. There was an empty canteen on the saddle, but there was no loot. Van Engle rode on for an hour longer, and then made camp. There was no hurry. Necessity for hurry was diminishing hour by hour.

Before dawn, Van Engle went on. By noon today, he should come to the third waterhole, where there would be water. Van Engle thought it advisable to refill his canteens there, even though he probably had enough for the return trip. But there was no use taking unnecessary chances with the Muerto Desert.

After mid-morning, Van Engle knew that the waterhole was near by. Less than a mile farther on. His lifting glance caught a movement far above, and he halted his horse. Against the brassy sky, a lone vulture wheeled in ever-narrowing circles.

"Above the last man," Van Engle said, speaking aloud into the vast silence, "a vulture." He turned in the saddle and stared around at the barren desert.

Van Engle knew that a man dying of thirst in the desert almost invariably walked in circles at the last. Delirium and hallucination, and a lost sense of direction. Van Engle's brown face was grim, his agate eyes, narrowed against the gleam of the sunlight on the sand, intent and searching.

Something dark and shapeless lay beside a small outcrop three hundred yards to Van Engle's left. He reined his horse around and rode toward the object.

Tobe Audery lay flat on the sand. Van Engle saw, even before he dismounted, that the man was dead. Beside the body was a heavy canvas bag, with Wells Fargo lettered blackly on one side.



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FOUR FINE VOICES

By *FREDERIC W. BALES*

Into the lair of Pal Madonna rode the city-groomed kid to lay his poke in a game that called for a Boothill jackpot.

YOUTHFUL, city-groomed Peter Doom, leaning at the hitchrack, saw the girl approaching the stage. Something about the way she stopped, deeply breathing, to feed her eyes on the

morning desert with a half-smiling fondness, told Peter she was a western-bred girl returning home.

She was dark, slender and wore an air of competence. Two dusty, sleepy men from the shabby rooming house which centered the town brushed past her and heaved their warbags up on the coach. Their unmannered roughness, Peter noticed, did not ruffle her.

The girl walked forward now and Peter saw her luggage on the ground. Effortlessly he lifted her small traveling trunk to the boot of the stagecoach. A round box, heavily paper-wrapped, he handled cautiously, lifting it gingerly up to the driver. He grinned to himself. This would contain a fashionable eastern bonnet, he'd guess; likely purchased on a whim and never to be worn.

The young woman smiled her thanks and turned hesitantly before she stepped aboard the stage, spreading a glance of awakened interest over him.

She would have spoken, Peter felt, but for an interruption. The coach's shotgun messenger, preparing to mount beside the driver, had turned, one foot still on the wheel hub. He spoke over his shoulder.

"We're going through a stretch of range that's become nasty lately, gents. Are you packin' guns?"

"Now ain't you silly, Johnnie?" drawled one of the punchers. "What would Ike and me be carryin'—our bows and arrers? If any gunplay starts you take care of the plunder up on top. Ike and me'll protect the lady passenger." He clambered into the coach.

His companion, a stocky man who seemed ready to burst the seams of his sweaty shirt like some overstuffed locust emerging from its shell, bellowed gleefully.

"You mean the *two* lady passengers,



don't you, Bib?" and his crafty, insolent eyes brashly scanned Peter's eastern-draped suit.

Peter heard the girl gasp faintly. The shotgun messenger turned, giving Peter a reflective stare in which there was a touch of pity and scorn.

The squat man's insult burnt a flush on Peter's face and he thought: They make you cut your teeth early in this country.

He turned and put out a deliberate finger, tapping the cowboy on the shoulder.

"Gun talk is probably the only language your kind understand, mister. So watch me and that bit of tin down the street near the tie post." He gestured toward a crumpled bean can glittering in the sunlight thirty yards distant on the road.

He stepped easily away from the coach several paces and suddenly whirled his hand making a deft, vague flutter. There was the challenging roar of a heavy gun and the stage horses went into a frightened dance.

Down the street the tin can bounced into the air and then shot along the ground, rolling crazily to a stop.

Peter said coldly, "Even a *lady* can shoot, friend. Let's see you match me!"

The swearing driver had quieted his team and he whistled an awed sigh at what he had seen.

The sweating prairie larrikin struggled to pull his gaping lips together. He gulped humbly and climbed hastily into the stage.

The shotgun guard grinned briefly and Peter felt a warm tide of satisfaction. It was dispelled by the sudden fear that the girl in the coach would suspect him to be a show-off and he did not meet her glance as he climbed aboard.

The taller cowboy, called Bib, had seated himself beside the girl. Peter growled, "Move over with your comedian pal!" and Bib hastily obeyed. The lanky fellow turned to his companion and froze him with a look of bitter distaste and disgust.

The unhappy and chastened Ike sat looking forlornly at his fingernails and it was now that Peter heard a merry giggle at his side, and he dared to turn and to look at the pretty traveler beside him.

There was admiration in her eyes.

Peter grinned with relief. He said, "I hope your new hat don't bounce off the top of the stage,"



"Thank you, sir," she said. "I am Isabel Fleet."

He lifted his sombrero, which went oddly with his well-cut eastern garb. "And I am Peter Doom. At your service, ma'am."

The two cowmen put themselves glumly together on one seat, facing Peter as he sat beside the girl in the stage, which immediately started its lumbering travel away from the pursuing sun. The four horses went into a run and the land behind fell away in a plume of dust from the wheels, and the smell of sage and baked earth and sweated harness mounted with the morning's travel.

Peter watched this land unfold as the stagecoach with its horses in a mincing trot, bounced along a precarious bluff road. The girl touched his arm, smilingly pointing, and he nodded as he saw in the distance the sullen yellow of the Missouri River. Beyond was the still mysterious land where the Sioux tribes had made their doomed, embittered last stand. There

would be a ferry somewhere ahead and after that the wearisome haul into the edges of the Powder River Range in southeast Montana.

He felt the unaccustomed weight of the matched guns, pulling at his waist as the stagecoach bounced him on the seat; grinning ruefully at the boyish obedience to the edict that he wear them on this journey.

Peter thought of the identical mates of these twin forty-fives packed in his duffle.

His dad, Butler Doom, had called them "The Four Fine Voices." . . .

NEARLY two months had passed since the death of old Butler Doom, prairie baron who had become a metropolitan financier. He died embittered at himself for ever having deserted his beloved west to ride his thunderous way over banks, grain markets and stock exchanges; more-over he died virtually pauperized.

The girl at his side had again touched Peter's arm, pointing toward a distant shelf. A wild horse poised there at the rim and reared and galloped away, mane and tail flaunting; and Peter thought of his own rebellious disinterest in banking education and his Dad's angry, roaring, "Pete, you're like an outlaw horse who can't be roped!"

Butler Doom's estate had settled his obligations and left Peter with nothing but the right to satisfy his own restlessness—to "try out his own trails" as the old man had said on his deathbed. The father had made one last request of his son.

"Somewhere, if he ain't been hung, is a man I knew as Brandy Morris, as tough a fighting man as I ever met. He was an outlaw, highwayman and bad medicine generally. He always swore he'd take my guns off my carcass, and I gave him th' same compliment.

"We had it out one night over a poker table in a cowtown saloon. It was a gaudy brawl, son. You'll never hear music like Brandy's guns and my guns made—four fine smoke-talking voices in that little room. When it was over Morris was dead on the floor. I fetched away a bullet in my side. I also took Brandy's guns. Five years later, after I came east, I got a letter from Morris. Maybe it was him. I'd swore I killed him. But maybe it *was* Brandy. He was alive after all, and was fixin'

to get married and settle down. But before he went straight, Brandy says, he had a chore to do. He was coming after his guns and my hide with 'em."

"But he never showed up. That was twenty years ago. I figure he's dead. So maybe he left a wife, or a kid like you. I want you to find 'em. I want you to take back Brandy's guns and give 'em to his proper kin."

Peter shared his father's love for the heavy Colts strung at his hips, and he grinned musingly as he thought of the hours he had spent with the tough old financier in the target range built in the vast cellars of the Doom mansion. There the ex-cattleman had taught his boy how to handle and draw the big six-guns and how to fire them with a deadly precision.

The downward trail toward the river moved now past an occasional house; meeting at intervals indifferent, ever-brooding Indians astride small paint horses; past lonely sod huts, and then into a mockery of a street. The stage grumbled and sighed to a halt, and Peter reached for his valise, seeing the waiting ferry and, on the opposite side of the stream, another dusty team-drawn coach.

The weary driver tossed down Isabel Fleet's luggage from the boot, Peter catching it and lifting it with his own as they marched to the river's edge. The girl seemed warmly dependent on him and Peter breathed deeply, enjoying the friendliness of this strange land.

The stage on the other bank began its lumbering cruise with the same weary quartet of passengers.

Two riders swept up alongside and one, riding an ornately saddled roan bronc, bent low and flourished his Stetson down with a grandiloquent gesture.

"A good journey, Miss Isabel?" his questioned shout floated over the rumble of their travel and Peter noticed her nod coldly and then flush as she curtly drew her eyes back from the rider.

The tall man on the grulla again bent down and looked keenly at Peter, impudently measuring him. Peter saw him toss a question over his shoulder to the cowpoke who rode with him and this individual also galloped closer to look into the rocking stage. He shook his head and the ranchman on the grulla again waved his

hat in salute to Isabel as the two cut from the trail toward the mouth of a canyon. They're suspicious of strangers in these parts, was Peter's thought.

One of the passengers on the opposite seat said, "The big guy on the roan—I've seen him somewhere."

His companion answered dryly, "Likely. He's Pal Madonna. His layout's at the other end of that draw, beyond the Crippled Squaw range."

Peter stole a look at the girl beside him, and at once felt a barrier of reserve. She had withdrawn into her own thoughts and he saw the tightened expression at the corners of her mouth and judged that these thoughts were troubling her.

Purple hogbacks far westward marked a mountain's sentryship in this empty ghost nation of the Crow tribes, and the sun was low in the west when the stage moved into a narrow street which was the mouth of a town. The driver called, "Warrior City. Ten minutes stretchin' for a change of teams."

Peter came to himself with a start; turned with a sudden sharp feeling of regret toward Isabel. "Trail's end," he said and surprised a look of quick warmth in her eyes.

"For me, also," she replied, and the drab hamlet at once seemed bright and attractive to the young easterner.

A team and buckboard stood at the hotel entrance, and a small, grayish man in worn Levis, came silently forward, giving Peter one bland, measuring look as he said, "Rig's waiting, Miss Isabel."

"It's good to be home, Sam, you old maverick," Isabel said, putting an affectionate touch on the little cowpoke's shoulder. She turned and gave her smile to Peter. "Sam, meet Mr. Peter Doom. He was kind to me on the trip. This is Sam Reynard," she finished. "He's ramrod at Rafter-M."

The small man's eyes flicked over Peter's garb. There was friendly respect in his response. "Welcome, stranger, to this breath-takin' capital. We'd be proud to show you the sights, including the saloons—if I can wangle Miss Isabel's permission. She's my boss, you know. She owns the Rafter-M."

"I fancy Mr. Doom is capable of discovering the sights, Sam," Isabel said.

Peter and Reynard exchanged understanding grins, and Isabel asked:

"Will you be in Warrior City long, Mr. Doom?"

He said, "I do not know. My job's a funny one. I don't know when it starts until I find a man—an Indian. I was told he could tell me where to locate the beginning of my trail. They call this Indian—Pigeon John."

Isabel gave him a queerly frightened look. Something aloof and harsh then shadowed her face. She turned, murmuring, "Good-bye," and started toward the wagon.

Sam Reynard's eyes had gone bleak. He said flatly, "No doubt I'll be seein' you." He wheeled and followed the girl.

The friendliness of this range country had vanished in a flash; he had displeased these people from the Rafter-M and he wondered why. A sudden wariness came to him. Night had come down suddenly. Ahead, along the huddle of stores was a two-story building—a hotel from which the lights of a saloon reached welcome fingers and he went toward this one warm sign which beckoned in the gloomy hostility. The chill, uncertain mood of Warrior City followed him to the dingy upstairs room which he rented for the night.

II

THE Hotel Lost Herd was a tawdry wench of a building whose early paint and glamor had fled but whose pride in her builder's dreams clung gallantly to that vague thing called "quality." This creaking building with its blood and liquor stains and bullet holes boasted a lobby, a bar and a dining room of sorts. Peter headed for the latter's door.

The room echoed the clatter of dishware and hearty talk. Nearly every table was occupied. This was the usual cattle town crowd. Two ruddy-faced ranchers argued and ate lustily at one table! at another a white-haired, hawk-faced man forked his food with leisurely dignity. Peter guessed he was the town judge or perhaps a banker. A white-faced, black-clad diner at another table, elegantly dressed, he earmarked as a gambler—probably a faro dealer from one of the town's houses of chance.

In one corner he saw Isabel and the faithful Reynard. He studied this creature of slim loveliness; an alien figure on a stage set for rough and turbulent men. Her hair fell in full dark curls over her shoulders and she had an expression which could be reckless and friendly or quickly cold by turns.

Something stubbornly pulled at his attention. It was Sam Reynard's flat stare and Peter turned to a table, troubled at the mysterious temper of these people.

Of one thing he was certain. Reynard, with his mussed ruff of gray hair, who bent so courteously toward Isabel; a man whose face was contentedly mellowed by success in small ambitious and tight loyalties, was intensely faithful to the girl in his charge and would be dangerous to anyone who showed her disrespect.

They left the dining room shortly afterward. Isabel passed his table indifferently. Peter made no attempt to speak and felt a secret sense of satisfaction upon seeing a faint flush dye her slim neck.

Reynard, following her, half-paused and slapped a quick look at Peter. He shook his head then, as if in puzzlement, and followed Isabel into the lobby.

Later Peter walked into the smoky bar-room and over an array of bottles on the back-bar saw his reflection move in the chipped and fume-stained mirror.

The face which looked back at him, its owner decided, would never improve. His long nose had acquired a fresh, fiery windburn. His unruly hair, which was the color of new rope, bannered out above his ears, waving bawdily at the splotched freckles on his cheeks below.

He needed a shave and desert dust had put a sickly wash on his beard stubble.

Here, thought Peter, is the perfect image of the tenderfoot. A rotund, powerfully built man was behind the bar. He had white, puffy features but his face somehow gave an impression of an ageless strength. There was a faint twist of amusement about his mouth and Peter wondered if he had been observing the communion between himself and his reflection in the glass.

The man's eyes, like tiny black beads, flicked over Peter now and seemed to disappear again in the folds of flesh around them.

He pushed a quart bottle and a shot glass across the bar's polished top.

"In my place a stranger's first drink is on the house," said this bulbous-cheeked man. He poured Peter a generous drink of bourbon.

Peter tossed the whisky down, conquering its hot lash before he turned to survey the room. A dozen pairs of eyes dropped as his inspection made its circle and the subdued murmur of the place resumed at the poker tables.

The folds of flesh which hid the bar-keep's eyes opened slightly and a suggestion of laughter glinted there.

"My private stuff," the man said, nodding toward the bottle. "I had it waitin' for you. You see, my friend, like old Santy Claus, your coming was expected."

Peter's brows tilted. "Why?"

"Ike Coppage and Bib Turner, a couple of wranglers from the 4-Bar-4 spread, just rushed in, pale and thirsty, strengthened themselves with four or five tall ones, and burnt leather for home. Said a wild man-killer just got off the stage with 'em."

Peter grinned. "I met the gents."

"But you ain't breathin' raw flames and wearing hoofs instead o' boots like Bib swore you was." The barkeeper chuckled and walked away to wait on another customer.

A lone cowprod, drinking at the rail, turned carefully to face Peter. He was narrow-hipped; swart and black-haired and unreadable of thought under his dirty, low-crowned sombrero.

"You are looking for me. I am Pigeon John," this man said.

Peter leaned back against the bar. The butt of his Dad's heavy gun bit at his hip, and he relaxed his leg to ease it. Caution washed over him, and Peter knew now that his past was gone; that he was alone on his own feet with his own guns, against odds which he did not understand. He realized, suddenly, that this was as it should be.

"Who told you I was looking for Pigeon John?" His voice seemed loud against the silence in the room.

"I told him." This voice came from a lean cowpoke, whom Peter had noticed sitting in moody loneliness at a corner table. "I was there when the stage came in. Heard you telling Sam Reynard." The

rider rose now, resting one foot on his chair while he built a smoke. He wore one gun, slung low on his flank. He sipped thoughtfully from the glass in his hand. It contained ginger beer. Nothing of potency was in his drink, despite his manner. "I'm Tap Marcher, from Arrow Ranch; Pal Madonna's spread." The fingers, working at the cigarette, stopped as this man dropped his explanation and awaited Peter's answer.

Peter looked at the swart man at the bar. Pigeon John had poured himself another drink; had lifted it to his lips, then put it carefully down again, untouched.

IT all came to Peter now. He was on a stage. These men had been waiting for him; they were playing instructed roles, and he was the actor who did not know the plot. He wondered how much Isabel Fleet knew of it? And Sam Reynard? The shrewd old bartender, with his calculating appraisal? Pigeon John? Brandy Morris? The "four fine voices" and Butler Doom?

He ripped the close quiet of the room apart with his stony voice:

"Don't crowd me, friends. When I want to talk to Pigeon John I will find him—without help."

A sigh went through the crowd. The bartender placed his two moist hands flat on the bar and looked at Doom, his eyes alive and respectful. Pigeon John turned uncertainly toward Tap Marcher and Peter caught the latter's curt, negative nod at the swarthy man.

"Any way you want it, brother," Marcher said softly. "Just thought I might help you."

It was Pigeon John who could not stand the pressure of the situation. He tossed his drink and came toward Peter, angry and evilly confident. He grabbed with a long reach, hauling Peter around against the bar. A voice, angrily protesting, said: "No—No, not now, you fool." It was Marcher's.

"You want to see me. Here I am! Now talk, stranger!" Pigeon John said.

Peter's elbow shot up, hitting the man's throat, and then he struck with a clubbing arm and Pigeon John, stunned but still on his feet, crashed back against a table.

Behind him, the barkeep ducked for

cover. Pigeon John's hand was hauling at his holster. The dark-skinned gunman grinned, making his quick and nonchalant aim, and the grin was still stupidly fixed on his face as he pitched forward almost before the echo of Peter's gun had died.

The men in the bar-room sat, whitely hypnotized by the magic they had seen, and Peter understood as he looked at his smoking gun, that they had been bewildered by his lightning draw.

He turned and looked fully at Tap Marcher and the Arrow man rubbed a hand over his chin reflectively. There was awe, and grudging admiration in Marcher's eyes.

The Arrow rider turned toward the door and four men at the tables rose to follow. Marcher said wearily to the bartender, "See that Smoke's taken care of. I'll tell Pal."

The room emptied and Peter was alone and he heard the bartender's toneless voice saying:

"I never saw but one man who handled a gun like you do. And that was twenty years ago. But it's not my party, friend. I'm eight hundred years old and want to reach nine hundred. Don't want to see more than I've already seen and don't give advice."

The barkeep scratched reflectively at a fringe of white eyebrow, and a beady eye was shining at Peter. "Don't ever advise, but I might give a signal, son. You've tangled with Pal Madonna's outfit—which is bad. You'll need some backing. There ain't none. Except Isabel Fleet's Rafter-M. I'd get goin'!"

The older man made a half-pause, as if a reluctant thought had touched him; then he turned away, and Peter asked, "Why should you tell me this, friend?"

"Once or twice I've seen those guns you wear, son. I was around these parts years ago."

Peter looked steadily at him and said, "Then you can tell me—who is Pigeon John?"

The bird-like eyes rifled a humorous look at Peter. "You savvied boy, that Pigeon John would be an older man than that hired hand who made a brush at you. Or didn't you know—?"

Peter answered, "I've never seen the Indian. I wouldn't know." The barkeep

was untying his apron. His heavy face had relaxed, showing its lines, and he looked old. His sharp eyes had softened as if he might be looking back through the years at more youthful times. Peter had seen that look on his own father's face.

"You would be Butler Doom's boy—for only Butler and myself ever knew who Pigeon John was and only his own kid would ever be wearing Butler Doom's guns. I recognized 'em when you came in."

"And who is Pigeon John?" It sounded to Peter like he was hearing someone else speak, but he realized that he had whispered the question himself.

"The real Pigeon John is dead. Or rather, he never lived."

Peter surveyed this room where he had lifted a gun for the first time to save his life. Through the settling smoke of deserted cigars and cigarettes he fancied he saw the wraiths of watching men whose hands hovered at their gun butts. He wondered how many times Butler Doom had unlimbered his big Colts in this very room.

Peter looked up over the back-bar wall into the smirking face of a pulpy blonde, a painted image clad in a layer of dust and a brush-made veil, who gazed down from her framed enthronement. Somewhere outside a dog yapped mournfully.

Peter said, "As you guessed I'm Peter Doom. Your name I didn't get—"

"Folks call me Toby Honor," the saloonman said simply. The dead cigar in his mouth waggled. There was a decisiveness about this movement as if Toby had put his teeth into the night's affairs.

He struck a match, bringing the flame up to light the sodden cheroot and did not move when a draft, shooting from an opening door behind him, erased the dancing blaze.

The man who had come in quietly from the saloon's back storeroom was past middle age, heavy boned and lean. He wore a clean black suit. There was a star on his shirt.

Town Marshal Jigger Faust was one who hated trouble and who used his office badge as a barrier against it. In half a lifetime of petty officialdom, with successful gambling as a sideline, Marshal Faust had cultivated a bland, unblinking

stare that was calculated either to disconcert or anger a man.

He carried a deck of cards in his hands, constantly shuffling them as his eyes darted around the room.

This untiring riffing of the cards, Jigger had learned, kept men's eyes on his fingers and bemused them. Sometimes it slowed their own hands when a quick reach for a gun was necessary.

Jigger spread his cards across the bar with a flourish, saying, "Choose and pour, Toby," and the barkeeper obedient to an apparently customary ritual flipped a card. It was a diamond Jack.

Jigger turned over a black King and hummed as Toby poured him the winner's drink.

PETER'S stolid appraisal caught the marshal's eye as he lifted his tumbler. The lawman carefully put his untasted drink back on the bar. He turned to speak to Toby and faced a cannily presented broad back.

"This here is bad," Jigger said resignedly. He tilted his head toward the blanketed figure on the floor. "Smoke was an Arrow man and Arrow's not going to like this."

Jigger scratched at his neck and his look jumped with almost supplicating awkwardness from Toby to Peter. He said, "Young fellow, being a stranger here and known t'be Smoke's killer, I'll have to ask you to hand over your guns. You're in my custody!"

Toby bore around and put his hands flat on the bar and said, quite definitely, "The older you grow, Jigger, the daffier you get! No man worth his salt and powder would hand over his guns after a play like tonight's."

An uncertain, troubled spasm of thought shadowed the marshal's face. He studied Toby stubbornly.

"Forgetting Arrow's part in it," Toby continued softly, "no man *could* take this lad's hawlegs. He's Butler Doom's boy."

Contemplation of the present and the past held the marshal rigid for a brief moment. Hopelessness and bafflement was in his sigh.

Toby said: "You need a rest, Jigger. They say there's good huntin' up in the Elkhorn hogbacks. Why don't you ride up

that way for a week or so. It'd do you good."

"I had that in mind," said Jigger, shrugging, and he pulled his cards back off the bar, palming them into ordered neatness. He quaffed his drink and went out the back door.

Toby moved now, with astonishing nimbleness, locking the street doors and pulling down the chain chandeliers, one by one, to blow out the hanging lanterns.

"I'm closing this pigsty for tonight," he explained over a muscled shoulder. "We'll have a dram, lad, in my room behind while we're waiting on the coroner."

Toby's alley room, a cramped afterthought of space between the saloon and a rear storeroom, was heady with the smell of pipe smoke and leather and gun oil. Sweaty blankets and trophies of past hunts gave their enrichment to the hardy hideaway of this lonely man and Peter dropped contentedly across a thick bearskin draped across a cot.

Toby poured a tot of whiskey each and they clinked glasses, Peter warming to a growing liking for the egmimatic saloonman, who had lighted his pipe and was watching the pursing, fiery heart in the polished bowl with eyes which held their steady hint of enjoyable memories.

"You said I've tangled with a bad outfit—Madonna's—and that Rafter-M would be a good friend for me to make," said Peter, observing Honor under half-lowered lids. "But I met the Rafter boss, Isabel Fleet, and Sam Reynard this afternoon. And they don't like me. Not any better than Madonna and Company likes me."

Toby sat up stiffly in his chair and then relaxed again after he had pondered this.

"I can guess, boy," he sighed, nodding sagely and drawing deeply at his briar. "You mentioned that you was on the hunt for Pigeon John. Am I right?"

Peter grunted a glum assent, adding, "They left so fast you'd think I had admitted being a typhoid carrier! I told them who I was but the name of Peter Doom didn't impress them like it seems to impress you."

The barkeeper answered, half to himself, "The name meant nothing to the child—she was too young to remember. And Sam wasn't around these parts in the early days." He shook himself out

of stupor, as if again aware of Peter.

Wheels rolled outside and a wagon clattered to a stop. A hard fist rapped on the saloon's front door and Peter remembered the body of the Arrow gunman, under its blanket in the shadows up front.

"The undertaker. He's also coroner." Toby groaned as he pushed himself up from his comfortable chair. He thrust out a farewell hand.

"I'd get going, lad. Lay low for a day or two—don't mix with the Arrow bunch. Don't worry about gettin' off on the wrong foot with Rafter. That'll iron itself out."

Peter felt an angry, troubled resistance seizing him. He was on an honest errand and he was being kicked up and down hill. Even the kindly Toby was hiding his purposes behind a wall of secrecy.

His sense of rebellion made his voice harsh. "But about this Pigeon John—?"

Toby opened the door to the black alley. "Don't waste time. Like I told you, he's dead—like one who never lived at all."

The closing door left Peter banished into the night and with his truculence still fresh upon him he began a restless prowling about Warrior City.

The fair weather of the day had broken, settling into a cold drizzle. What was already pooling in fresh ruts and around him the murmuring din of gutters emptying onto wood awnings grew into a dull roar. Water cascaded from the awnings into the streets and Peter hugged the wall as he walked.

The alley had guided him to the livelier side of the town's main street. Gay lights from saloons and a honkytonk and the hotel stabbed out to repel the pressure of the rain and misty darkness. The other side of the street, lined largely with houses of trade, offered shadowed protection and Peter crossed over with several running strides.

At the bank's built-in doorway he cupped his hands over a match blaze to light a cigar; he drifted silently then along the boardwalk toward the far end of town.

The walls at his side gave way suddenly to another alley and a raspy whisper hit him:

"Here, brother—here! Into the alley! They've spotted you!"

Something cutting and burning plucked

at his hairline just above an ear and somewhere above the drumbeat of the rain on the roofs he heard a sharp noise which he recognized as a rifle's voice. The town and the world whirled once and he was falling into blackness.

He felt two hands reaching and holding and breaking his fall.

Peter sorted his thoughts with slow thoroughness when he awakened. These strange walls, the spare furnishings arranged with such sharp neatness, the smell of medicine and the stronger smell of whiskey; and the makeshift mantelpiece on one wall. It supported a decoration—a gallon liquor jug on which a scholar's cap had been cocked jauntily by some whimsically mocking hand.

III

BEYOND the wall, outdoors somewhere, he heard argumentative voices.

One man said questioningly, "This friend of ours—who was shot—you didn't see him or patch him up or anything then, Doc?" It sounded like Tap Marcher's voice.

Another answered, coldly sarcastic:

"No friend of yours would come to me for treatment, Tap. Unless it might be Jigger here, who would expect to be treated free."

There was an explosive snort. Town Marshal Faust was one of the men outside. He snarled:

"Come on, Tap! We're wastin' time with this barfly who calls himself a doctor!"

Boots shuffled and retreated and a door opened near the head of Peter's cot. He pulled his eyes upward to see the man who must be owner of this room. There was a dry, bitter chuckle.

"A barfly who calls himself a doctor, or a crook who calls himself a town marshal. That should be 'Even Stephen!'"

"Ah, you're awake, my friend. How does your head feel where that bullet creased it?"

Peter stammered his thank and climbed to his feet, looking at a pale-eyed wraith of a man with a drink-ruined face.

The doctor, not waiting for an answer, took a bottle from a shelf and poured a generous drink into a tin cup. He gulped

it and a spasm of nausea wrenched at his pale face.

"I am Doc Caldwell," he said. "I have just doctored my favorite patient—myself—as you no doubt noticed." There was a wry humor in his disinterested eyes.

Caldwell lighted a cigar, puffing it with relish. Peter recognized it as one of his own and guessed that the seedy physician had cheerfully and unconventionally rifled his pockets while he slept.

There was something about the man's disdainful shoddiness which appealed to Peter; something which had also drawn him to Toby Honor.

"Tell me, what happened to me?" Peter demanded.

"Since arriving in Warrior City, friend, you have made several people suspicious. You've made some angry. Someone tried to drygulch you from the roof of Maloney's feed store. Maybe some of Madonna's men. Anyway, I was on the watch and got you away before they finished the job."

Peter asked slowly, "Why?" and watched while the physician poured another drink. Caldwell offered it to Peter, who shook his head, and his host gratefully downed it himself before answering.

"I hear things and see things. I saw you leave Toby's cubby. No one goes there except Toby's friends and I am one of them. When I saw the play being made against you I stepped in. That will cost Toby two quarts of the best. My fees are simple but high."

Peter said, "If you and Toby are friends then you can tell me—"

"Nothing!" the physician interrupted. "Except that it's night again and that during the whole day, while you slept on my bed, Arrow men have been trying to raise your trail. And Toby sent word for you to ride to Rafter-M. Also, while you slept. Rafter's boss, Miss Isabel, called here. She'd heard about your fracas with Arrow. She was anxious about you."

Peter replied slowly, "Anxious about me? She doesn't even speak to me."

Caldwell's voice was hoarsely patient: "Toby told me your name was Peter Doom, which means nothing to me. I don't know what the score is, except that Toby likes you. He likes strange people. He even likes me. Maybe sinners are

drawn to sinners like saints to saints."

Peter remembered something his father had once said and found himself repeating it:

"Maybe sinners understand virtues better than saints do. Because having wasted them they know their value."

A brief warmth touched the doctor's face.

"Maybe," he said. He shrugged as if casting weak reflections aside and said sharply, "Anyway, Isabel Fleet asked that you forget any errand here that you came on and go back east before you get hurt."

"That, I'm afraid I can't do," Peter said. He shook hands with the doctor and opened the door, looking cautiously outside. He turned for a farewell word but his spare, erect host was engrossed in pouring himself a prescription from a medical jug's fast disappearing contents.

Peter loosened both guns in their holsters and walked boldly down the lighted street, reaching the hotel unaccosted.

He climbed to his room upstairs and hastily rolled his belongings in his blanket, heaving his discarded eastern-made valise into a corner. He looked thoughtfully at the oilcloth packet, containing Brandy Morris's guns.

The hallway below was empty when he reached the upper stair landing but Peter drew back into the shadows when he heard the scudding approach of horses on the road outside.

Stomping, shapeless men moved into the dim light below, advancing toward the bar-room and one tall figure paused cautiously at the swinging doors.

It was the man who had ridden beside the stage on the river bank. Pal Madonna.

Another man moved up beside him.

"The easterner! Where is he?" Madonna's harsh demand floated up to Peter.

Tap Marcher's voice answered:

"He's still here—in town. Don't be a fool, Pal! He can kill you before you touch your gun. He's poison. I don't know why he's here—I've tried to find out— Anyway, leave him alone!"

"He was on the stage with Isabel," Madonna said thoughtfully. "He's dealing himself a hand—that's plain enough. He don't know it, but maybe his hand is *just what we need!*"

Tap slowly reached for his tobacco sack as he studied this.

"People blame Arrow for crowding the Fleet girl. But people remember that Pigeon John was one of the Brandy Morris boys. Maybe the old gang is still operating, eh? Maybe they burned the Rafter hay and line cabins?"

Marcher's questions were slanted with an upyard look at Madonna. "Is that it, boss?"

Pal came back softly, "Maybe Rafter even hired a gunslinger in dude clothes—one of the old Morris gang—to murder poor Smokey."

"Yeh. Peaceable, harmless Smoke," drawled the laconic Marcher.

These two men exchanged one long, understanding look and moved against the barroom's burst of sound where Arrow men were expansively toasting the late departed Smoke Pillar and swearing vengeance against his killer.

Peter grinned as he eased down the stairway and went unseen into the night.

He found the town stable and was startled by a lantern lifted up suddenly before him. An aged, gnome-like stableman looked into his eyes. There was a gust of breath and the light vanished, and Peter whispered in a soothing voice, "I'm the ghost of your past sins, mister, needing a horse—I'll buy or hire one."

In the darkness the oldster chuckled, "Never heard of hirin' a horse. Never heard of sellin' one—this hour of night.

"We loan a horse to a friend in this country, boy." The hostler's voice had sunk to a whisper.

"Toby Honor told me to have one saddled for you, young Peter Doom. Toby prowled out ahead of you—"

HE moved his horse cautiously down-grade through gravel and rock chunks to the river's edge. Moonglow was on the water and through the heavy night mists he saw the mouth of a trail ahead leading into the basin. This would be Rafter country, or maybe Arrow's.

He sighted a loose-boarded, abandoned line shack and led his horse toward it; thinking meanwhile of the strange, unexplained allegiance toward him shown by Toby Honor and the gray, shaggy hostler at the livery barn. He put hobbles on his

horse and rolled into a blanket in the shadow of the cabin.

Daylight had paled the stars when Peter roused, rolling stiffly to his feet. He stretched and hunger hit him in the stomach; and he groaned, realizing he did not even carry a biscuit in his saddle roll. He decided to hit the trail for Rafter and reached to roll his gear. It was then that he noticed—

The rolled packet, containing the twin Colts which had belonged to dead Brandy Morris, had disappeared! Someone had prowled to his side during the night and stolen the treasured guns and he had a chill, foolish feeling which he quickly shrugged away.

There had been the fantastic notion, for this brief moment, that his visitor had come out of the past as well as the night.

He guided his horse downtrail and once clear of the pines saw to the west the Crippled Squaw peaks, hiding Pal Madonna's meadowed range, and he veered left down the valley. In the distance were the squat, neat buildings which would be Rafter.

In the morning mists far behind and above him the sudden rattle of gunfire broke. He wheeled his bronc, watching, and saw a rider sliding down a distant shelf, hitting for the timberlands below. A file of trotting horsemen finally followed.

Newly acquired reactions to this wild country told him these were Madonna's men—that the fugitive was probably a Rafter rider. He spurred his own horse toward a friendly flicker of light where a windmill wigwagged its welcome against the first rays of the sun.

He passed the corrals and groundhitched his horse near the bunkhouse; he was barely in the yard before the ranchhouse when the voice behind him said softly, "Reach, friend, and keep walkin'." These tones were those of Sam Reynard.

He heard men moving behind him, toward his horse; saw Isabel Fleet on the veranda, nod her summons toward the man who held the gun at his back.

She was cool-eyed, giving no sign of recognition, when he walked into the shadowed parlor. Sam Reynard said, dryly, "He was spookin' in the hills overnight. Lookin', maybe, for Pigeon John."

Isabel raised bitter eyes and said, "I will

never forgive myself, Mr. Peter Doom, for being childish enough to trust a stranger again. But I would not have dreamed that you would have been foolish enough to come here. Or that Pal Madonna would have dared to send you."

Peter drew a deep breath. A chuckle bubbled at his lips—he could not restrain it—at the idea that he thus found himself a sinister figure of suspicion in the eyes of the two biggest ranch outfits in the shadow of the Crippled Squaw. He stepped forward lightly, grinning down at Isabel.

"Would you please, ma'am, unbuckle my gunbelt and put my—I believe they're called hawlegs—beyond my reach. Then I can rest my weary arms, and perhaps, I can tell you a most interesting story."

The girl stepped forward, and he stood motionless as she took away his guns. There was a soft sound of relief from the Rafter ramrod behind him.

"Those guns, Miss Isabel, were Butler Doom's—my dad. They were matched with twins, which belonged to a man called Brandy Morris, and I carried them here from eastward—at my Dad's request—to give to Brandy or his kin. He told me to look for a man named Pigeon John. A man, claiming that name, forced me to kill him last night in Warrior City. He was a Madonna man. That's why I left there and headed for here."

Sam Reynard's clipped voice demanded, "Do you know Pigeon John?"

Peter pursued his narrative, as if he had not heard. "Last night I bedded down at an old line cabin in the hills. During the night someone stole Brandy Morris' guns."

He saw the startled interchange of glances between Isabel and Sam.

Rafter's girl boss turned now, and he felt sudden warmth at the flushed friendliness on her face. He bowed humbly.

"I'd like my guns back now, ma'am. I'd like to unslung them for Dad and Brandy Morris when I meet Pal Madonna and a guy named Marcher."

There was a white composure on her face as she complied.

Peter slowly buckled the belt, hitching his weapons around into their easy pulling balance.

"Dad and Brandy fought all their lives. Now they're both gone. But I think they'd understand how I feel—wanting to prove

to you that I'm carrying no water from Madonna's well."

"I believe you," the girl said quietly. "Now please leave. Go back east where you came from. Please understand me—you're in danger here."

Peter said roughly, "I'm not the only one in danger." He turned and stabbed a meaning look at the morose, watchful Reynard. "You'd better rally your boys around, friend. Arrow's prowling the hills."

He stepped into his saddle, knowing as he rode away that the two stood watching him; he pulled his horse upland and started a wide circuit on a rising trail toward the spot where he had watched Madonna's wranglers hazing the lone rider before them.

He crossed a small mountain meadow, musing over the events of the night and the morning, and was startled by the sudden whirl of wings as his mustang flushed a flock of horned lark from the grass. He had barely swung back into the shadowy spruce tangle when he heard gunfire to the north and then a high, shrill yell of "Hep, Arrow, hep!"

Back in the timber there was the sudden wild charge of a horse and the hoofbeats echoed in a dull retreat which told him the horseman had descended from the timber into a canyon below.

Everything became still again; except for the murmur of a river somewhere down under, but this quiet broke quickly into a crashing drive of riders through the thickets on the other side of the cut. The beat of gunfire began an ominous drum roll.

Peter dismounted and tiptoed through the trees, rounding a high rock shoulder. Directly ahead and below was the face of the canyon and at its base a creek ran into a slow-moving pool.

Peter saw now the up-and-down back wall of this coulee, realizing that it was merely a pocket which turned the creek around, heading it back on a new course.

A riderless horse broke suddenly from this pocket, splashing through the pool and galloping away.

Shots exploded from the rocks across the draw and they were answered by the man hidden in a cave-like burrow beyond the pool.

The Rafter rider had been driven from cover and Madonna's men on the cliff were pressing in for the kill. The besieged man fired coolly and Peter heard a gunman scream.

There was a cursing command and a rifle started reaching for the doomed quarry below. Peter felt a black anger against the Madonna crew and instinctively lifted one of his guns, regretfully holstering it again. It was four hundred yards across the deep ravine, too far for his revolvers to be of use.

The Rafter puncher yelled defiantly in an eerie echo from the depths and then Peter saw him rise to his knees, clasping his chest and slump behind the boulder where he had made his stand.

From the lip of a jagged cut in the sheer wall above the Arrow crew a new clamor of sound broke suddenly.

At least two guns were chanting a thunderous melody and panic hit the Madonna pack.

One of them, screeching, whirled over the brink of the shelf, and another made a hobbling run on a shattered leg after his retreating mates as they chased away from this new danger.

They reached the safety of the timber in the distance and quickly gathered their horses and mounted. One big man astride a roan bronc shook his fist as they circled about in milling uncertainty.

They slowly came out in single file toward the steep trail which would lead them into the lower canyon and out toward the grasslands. They were barely a hundred yards away on the divide's opposite shoulder and Peter could see Madonna, his face flushed, savagely roweling his weary horse.

Tap Marcher's terse voice, its volume increased from the sounding board of the canyon, floated across:

"That's not two guys shooting. Those were two matched guns. I think it was our eastern friend. The sissy, you called him, Pal."

This brittle sarcasm goaded Madonna into a bellow. "We'll take care of him in good time! This gives us a good excuse to ride in on Rafter. Come on!"

Peter unsnapped the hobbles on his horse and led it from the underbrush into a clearing. He wondered if Isabel and Sam

had heeded his warning, had mobilized Rafter's hands, but he was unhurried for he knew it would take Arrow's crew an hour to clear the canyon and cross the flats to Isabel's ranch.

He felt a pull of pity for the lone rider who had been harried into an inescapable stand in the narrows as he pulled his horse to the lip of the precipice.

The sprawling figure by the boulder was gone. The lone, unseen man who had joined the fight must have slipped to the canyon's floor and carried the Rafter man's body away.

Peter headed his horse for Rafter, thinking of the mysterious gunman who had flanked the Madonna crew and beaten them into flight through their own gunsmoke.

He thought of the prowler who had stolen a pair of ancestral guns.

There had been something familiar about the voices of the twin guns which barked from the fissure in the canyon wall . . .

As he started across the meadow where distant haystacks marked Rafter's corrals and barns he saw a line of horsemen, far to his right, trickle out of the timber two miles away.

He was a dusty, panting figure when he pounded across Isabel's porch. He sensed the presence of several waiting men around the cook shack and bunkhouse and saw Reynard motion them back.

Isabel appeared at the door and Peter waited until Sam reached his side.

"It's Arrow, coming for a showdown. They killed one of your men up in the canyon—I saw them dust him down off the cliffs. They won't tell you that! They'll tell you they're after me—that Rafter hired me as a pistol man. Take cover, Miss Isabel!"

He ran into the open yard, grinning for no reason at all, and he heard Sam chirping curses behind him.

"Gun 'em down!" Reynard bawled as he headed for the bunkhouse and Peter saw two or three Rafter punchers, sitting in expectant watch on a corral rail, grin unbelievably at each other and bounce down on an eager run after their guns.

A wave of Arrow men came out of the grass field's timbered edge, halting as Madonna raised a gloved hand. He jerked his head and the cold-eyed Tap Marcher rode up beside him.

THE two rode slowly forward toward the ranchhouse yard. Marcher was watching Sam Reynard and Madonna's eyes flicked over the circling punchers near the cook shack and at its nearby great stone well wall. Tap's voice came huskily:

"We're looking for a gent in fancy dress who killed Smoke Pillar last night—"

"Who—you're getting ready to say—was hired by us to do our shooting, eh, Tap?" Sam, standing in the bunkhouse door, wafted his soft voice toward Marcher.

Tap's face went bleak and he put his resigned look toward Madonna, for he knew that the Arrow play had failed.

Peter, half-hidden behind the great hemlock stump on which the ranchhouse porch was hooked, slid out and called, "Maybe it would be me you're after, Madonna!"

He saw the sudden shift and run of the horsemen and heard their baffled yell, "It's a shoot out!" and then he ducked back, slapping at his gun butts and the heavy pound of firing broke. Deadly thunder swept the ranchyard and Peter, over the pulsing weapons in his hands saw Isabel Fleet, kneeling at the doorway, firing steadily with a short-barreled rifle.

Peter saw Tap dart from behind an upturned wagon bed and toss two quick and certain shots at Sam Reynard who wheeled slowly and clutched his shoulder as he fell.

There was a sudden break in the ranks of the Arrow men and they were retreating toward their horses and Pal's raspy voice shrilled into a sort of hysterical panic as he turned to fire at a figure which came forward relentlessly behind two singing guns. Peter recognized their tune. They were the pilfered guns—and the squat little figure which advanced behind them was Toby Honor.

A horse screamed in the rolling dust and there was a man's bitter, sobbing curse. A bullet nudged at Peter's sleeve and he whirled to dodge this peril, finding Tap mincing forward with steady purpose, two men behind him.

His own weapons joyously answered the shooting bartender's singing six-guns and the hills beat back an exultant echo of the four fine voices.

At the window of a small attic bedroom in Isabel's house a man looked out, firing

orderly shots. Between bursts from his 30.30 rifle Doc Caldwell took lusty drinks from a bottle on the window sill.

He saw a Madonna man run for his horse. This deserter wore a star on his shirt and Doc threw quick bead and fired.

Marshal Jigger Faust's hat sailed high as its wearer vanished over a ridge, and Doc sighed contentedly, drinking deeply from his bottle.

The gunfire was subsiding. A voice in the distance yelled, "We're done, boys! Get riding!"

Peter wiped sweat from his eyes, peering vainly for Isabel. He saw her now, motionless in the yard, her stricken glance on the smithy's shop.

For the first time he realized the other members of the four voices were mute. Toby leaned against the shanty wall, bleeding from a wicked head wound.

His glazed eyes looked with wicked enjoyment at Pal Madonna, cut off from his horse by the shifting pattern of the fight. Pal's face wore a final, desperate ghastliness.

"Damn you, Brandy Morris!" he screamed as he fired, and then he died, puzzled disbelief wrenching his features. There had been one final burst from the saloonman's guns. The old outlaw was still chuckling as he fell into Peter's arms.

Behind him Peter heard Isabel's anguished cry of "Dad! Dad!—"

Two weeks later a fresh mound in a spruce grove on a bravely green knoll near the ranchhouse, marked where Brandy Morris slept.

A soft moon silvered the yard and on the edge of the shadowed veranda Peter sat, Isabel at his side. In a blanketed rocker Sam Reynard smoked silently, the throb of his nearly healed wounds eased by his content. Only tonight had Sam learned the final chapter of the story of the man known both as Brandy Morris and Toby Honor—as Peter and Isabel had heard it from his dying lips.

"So that's the how of it?" Sam mused.

Peter nodded, "My Dad and Brandy were the only two men who ever knew who Pigeon John was. Dad's discovery of the secret led to the showdown between him and Brandy—the time Dad thought

he had left Brandy dead in that saloon fight.

"When he told me to look for Pigeon John he naturally thought that if Brandy was dead, his kin would know the secret, too. But Brandy had not even told Isabel or you—that at times he rode boldly into Warrior City, disguised as a Crow breed known to everyone hereabouts as Pigeon John. He even helped Dad and other outlaw-hunting ranchers and lawmen try to track Brandy Morris—himself—to his hiding place, and of course always led them on the wrong trail—laughing inside of himself fit to kill. He was quite a man, this adventurous Dad of yours, Isabel."

"I expect your own Dad would do to ride the river with," she answered softly.

Peter said, "And now my errand is done. I've brought back Brandy's guns, and now they're yours as Dad wished. Tomorrow, I'd best be riding along, I've got a living to make."

Sam swore suddenly. "Dern it. This here night air is makin' them bullet wounds hurt. I'm hittin' my blankets." He arose hastily, hobbling toward the bunkhouse with considerable agility for an invalid.

"Nice moon," he called back.

Isabel had suddenly leaned against a veranda post, her face hidden in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking.

"You're crying," Peter said. "Why, Isabel? It wouldn't be because you hate to see me go, would it?" Then he snorted in self-disgust. "Damnation! As if I could be lucky enough to mean anything to you—." He started to turn away, and her hand caught his elbow.

"It was just a foolish thought of mine," she whispered, almost inaudibly. "It seems such a shame to think of those four old guns, those Four Fine Voices, being separated again. Together they could help Rafter become the finest ranch in the valley."

He said, wonderingly, "Sam was right. That is an awful nice moon!"

His arms reached for Isabel and when he looked down into her face he saw she had not been sobbing at all. There was not a single tear in her eyes.

There was simply a mischievous and wisely satisfied look.

THE GHOST OF MIGUEL

By *BARRY CORD*

It was dead man's pickin's, this V-Bar spread, and a dead-shot ghost rode its bounds staking claims with wideloop lead.

LONG JIM EVERS reined in his bronc, a scowl creasing his long face as he glanced at his pint-sized companion. "Forty miles from nowhere," he grumbled reproachfully. "An' me with my stummick ridin' my backbone! Dang it, Windy—what was the idear cuttin' cross-country from Las Cruces?"

Windy Harris shrugged. "Cows," he informed, calmly. He leaned forward, worked his huge quid into a leathery cheek, and spat over his roan's left ear. "From what I heard back in Las Cruces, this section was full of mavericks an' sleepers, jist waitin' for an iron. No law in forty miles—"

"An' not a cow in fifty! Long Jim snapped. He twisted to survey the gently rolling stretch of sageland that ran into the dirty brown Border hills. The sun had set a half-hour ago, and the shadows were already thickening in that desolate land.

Evers shifted in his saddle, his tone growing serious. "I'm ready to eat a jack, if I kin spot one, Windy. In fact, right now, I'm willin' to—"

Out on the small flat, under a pinon-topped butte, a light suddenly winked on. Evers' drawn scrutiny revealed a low rambling dwelling, the outbuildings of a spread. A hopeful grin creased his humorous features. "Windy—we're saved. The horn of Gabriel's acallin'—and I see a light in yonder distance. I kin smell food, already. Good, solid, home-cooked—"

Harris grunted. "Let's go see, Jim."

The main building was of yellow 'dobe, built around a patio. There was a crumbly 'dobe fence fronting the big yard, tall pecans casting shade over pole corrals, a big 'dobe barn, and several lesser outbuildings.

A man came out of the barn as they rode into the yard. A fast-stepping, suspicious gent. Thin starlight seeped through

the trees, touched the rifle barrel in his hands.

He faced them, ten feet away, balanced on his toes. He said: "Howdy, gents! What's on yer minds?"

Windy Harris leaned on the horn, stared innocently at him. The man was broad across the shoulders, thick about his Levi-clad waist. He had red hair, snapping blue eyes, and two-score years had not dimmed the temper that went with these unfailing attributes.

The bantam spat, apologetically. "Jest now it's thet Winchester. A rifle muzzle sets uneasy on my stummick—thanks," he chuckled easily as the red-haired man lowered the rifle slightly, but his scowl deepened. "Me an' this human beanpole are lookin' for the foreman of this sheebang."

The blocky man did not move. His gaze narrowed on Long Jim's six-foot three of saddled indolence, shifted to Windy's bare five-feet of wiry length. An incongruous pair, these, seamed and slouchy. Saddle bums, evidently. Then his gaze was drawn to thonged-down Frontiers that rode easily on lean thighs, and the cold suspicion spread further across his face. "Yer lookin' right at him!" he snapped. "Spill yer business!"

Windy looked hurt. Evers edged his bronc up close, and shook his head, sadly. "Don't mind him, mister. We're harmless. We ain't et since last night. We was ridin' up yonder, plumb lost an' helpless like, when we seen yer lights. We figgered—"

Over to the right, yellow lamplight suddenly made a long oblong among the dappled shadows. A woman loomed up in the ranchhouse doorway. A tall, angular figure in faded gray, black hair tied up in a bun on her neck. "Rolly!" she called with quivering eagerness. "Who is it?"

The redheaded foreman shrugged, eased

the rifle into the crook of his arm. "It ain't him, ma'am," he answered sullenly. "Jest a coupla chuckliners askin' a hand-out."

The woman came out to the broad, vine-covered porch. The eagerness faded from her. There was a tired, hollow ring to her tone. "Supper's ready, Rolly. Have them come in."

Rolly scowled. Windy and Long Jim were already out of saddle, heading for the stairs. He followed with soft, springy steps. Twice he stopped, looked out beyond the yard, to the darkening flatland. Little lines etched his mouth corners. His gaze swung back to the two old reprobates, and his scowl deepened as he followed them in.

The meal was solid, the best they had ever stowed away. And plenty of it. The lamp on the table threw light in a small

circle that barely outlined the big room.

The angular woman ate little. There was a weary hopelessness in her eyes, in the droop of her mouth. Forty, perhaps, yet she looked fifteen years older.

Rolly sat at one end of the long table, still scowling, eyeing the old wanderers with an intentness that caused Harris to squirm.

At the other end of the table sat a man in a wheel-chair. A short, grizzled man with a stubborn, harsh mouth, and furrows in his flat cheeks. He was Lincoln Fervans, owner of the V-Bar ranch. The woman was his wife, Lucy. They had no help, save Rolly, who looked after things—and they weren't thinking of hiring.

This information had been given shortly, almost curtly, by the crippled rancher. They were bidden "draw up chairs an' dig in!" Two extra plates were added to the



The man with the Winchester didn't move. His gaze settled on the incongruous pair.

three already on the table. They ate in silence, with none of the usual eager questions asked by people living in out-of-the-way places.

Harris, stuffed long before his more voracious companion, felt the strange tension in the room. And he noticed things now, little things that had escaped his first casual glance.

Rolly had deposited his rifle in a corner by the door, as if he figured he might need it. The wooden table had strange grooves, some old, several fresh, as if slugs had scoured its surface. He kept his face non-committal as his eyes took in the signs. But they narrowed slightly as he noticed ragged tears in the old cupboard across from the near window.

The uneasiness in Windy peaked up. He could see Rolly eyeing the old wall clock, leaning forward intently, his fingers clenched on the table surface. Half-past seven. Even as he looked, it struck the half-hour with a solemn, jangling stroke.

The lamp went then, its glass globe disintegrating. The sound of breaking glass mingled with the short, angry crack of a rifle from out in the dark. Harris surged back, hearing Long Jim's surprised curse. He lunged up in the sudden gloom, headed for the door. A dark, squat figure cut across his path. They collided, and he heard Rolly's harsh voice swear in his ear. A hand shoved him roughly aside.

When he reached the porch more glass fell, as if something heavy had been thrown through the window. Harris edged away from the squat foreman, the Frontier in his fist jutting readily. His searching eyes caught a glimpse of a vague figure low-hung in the saddle of a black horse just clearing the low 'dobe fence.

Harris' Colt slapped heavily, its report mingling with the sharper crack of Rolly's rifle. 'Dobe puffed angrily a foot behind the fleeing rider. But the potshooter continued on, crossed a patch of starlight that revealed a small, indistinct figure topped by a huge anthill sombrero—and disappeared. The low drum of hoofs faded.

Harris stood by the door, staring into the shadows. A long figure loomed up behind him. Evers' voice rasped in his ear. "Get the potshootin' galoot, Windy?"

Rolly eased toward them, swearing in a flat monotone. He said: "Reckon that's

all, gents—for tonight!" He said it as if this had been expected.

They reentered the house in silence and watched the woman as she lit a candle. She looked up at them with a dull hardness. "You'll have to get some lamps, Rolly, the next time you go to town. That was the last one we had."

Rolly shrugged, his eyes searching the dimly lighted floor. He paced forward, suddenly bent by the near table leg. Harris' puzzled gaze followed him, lifted to the old rancher, still sitting at the table. There was baffled rage in the cowman's gray eyes. His big-knuckled hands were tight about the chair arms, as if he had tried to lift himself, force his paralyzed limbs to movement.

Behind Windy, Long Jim muttered: "Mebbe I'm loco, but—"

The foreman straightened with something in his hand. It was a piece of sandstone, with a ragged square of brown paper wrapped around it. He unwrapped the paper, looked at it briefly, walked to the old rancher, passed it to him. "Jest like the others!" he growled. "'Cept this time he's givin' yuh a deadline. Yuh got till Saturday to pull yer stakes!"

The Old Rancher slowly crumpled the message. His wife walked to his side, placed a hand on his broad shoulder. "We'll go, Lincoln. We've had nothing but misfortune since we bought this place. We can't hold out—" She glanced up at Rolly, as if for confirmation.

The foreman said: "He's got us by the throat, Lincoln. An' he knows this country better'n we do. We've tried everythin'—"

Windy and Long Jim shifted uncomfortably, feeling out of things and not knowing quite what to do. The others seemed to have forgotten their presence. The rancher answered, his voice ragged: "Did yuh see Strauss? Mebbe, if he gave us a hand—"

The other sneered. "I seen Box-Ear Strauss all right. He said he had enough trouble of his own, watchin' out for the Diamond L, without chasin' after ghosts. He said somethin' about missin' cattle, too—an' I didn't like the way he said it!" At this Rolly scowled. "The Diamond L may not be behind this crazy ghost greaser, but they shore as hell ain't losin' any

sleep over our trouble and never will."

Windy shuffled, cleared his throat. "Sorry if we busted in at the wrong time, folks. Me an' Jim didn't know. Who is this ghost?"

The old rancher, chewing on his lip, eyed them, and held out the crinkled paper.

Evers looked down over Windy's shoulder. The message was terse: "This is the last warning. "You have till Saturday. Miguel."

Long Jim looked down at the crippled rancher: "One man—a greaser—drivin' you out? Off yer own spread?"

Fervans' lips twisted. He wheeled himself away from the table as his wife started to clean up the mess.

"It ain't as easy as you think, stranger," he snapped. "A man can't lick a thing he can't git close enough to fight!" He leaned forward, his thick hands gripping the chair arms. "I bought this spread over a year ago. There was a story went with it—that made me git it cheap. But I didn't hear the story till later."

"THIS place was once the old de Santoro's hacienda—had been in de Santoro's hands for generations. But the only right they had to the place was the right of possession. The land was granted the first de Santoro by royal Spain. Six years ago, the last of the de Santoros were driven off by a man named Elbow Johnson. Johnson showed a deed from the U. S. Government, an' backed it with six-guns. He had a craggy bunch of riders with him, an' when the de Santoros showed fight, he wiped 'em out. It was a massacre. A young son of Jose de Santoro, a seventeen year old kid named Miguel, got free. He went a little crazy, I reckon. He headed into the hills, an' for a coupla years nothin' was heard from him. Then he came back."

The old rancher shrugged. "It was hell—just plain hell. Johnson was no chicken-livered scoundrel—an' he had *gunmen* ridin' for him. But this crazy Mex, with a Sharps rifle he got somewhere, just broke 'em. He got Johnson, long range, the second day—killed him while he was standin' right outside there on the porch. He wore Johnson's men ragged huntin' him. He ambushed 'em till they were scared to go out alone. At night he

drove 'em near crazy *slammin'* lead into the place. They stuck for about four months. Then, what was left of that craggy outfit quit cold. The hacienda went for a year without a buyer. Then a Swede, named Omsen, took over. He lasted six months . . ."

"Finally the sheriff took a hand. There ain't a better man cuttin' sign than Sheriff Breller, an' he was born in this section. It took him four months to dig up Miguel. But he ran him down." Fervans' lips tightened. "They shot it out, on Standout Bluff. The sheriff swears he got two slugs into the kid before he fell into the river. But—"

Rolly interrupted, his tone harsh. "The stories have it that Miguel's ghost is still ridin' over the range of his ancestors." He sneered. "Mebbe! But if the gent that's been raisin' hell around here is a ghost he's a g—— solid one! An' he sure knows how to use a rifle!"

The old rancher eased back in his chair. "We been tryin' to hold on. We bought this spread legal—an' it's a good layout, given half a chance. The day I took over, I drove five hundred head onto its grass. Now Rolly tells me we're lucky if I kin round up a hundred. There was me, *my son*," his lips twisted bitterly, "an' Rolly takin' care of things. My son's gone—an' I'm a cripple. Got the slug in my back while ridin' the west line four months ago!" He ended harshly, "The doc says I'll be in a wheelchair the rest of my life—"

Windy shifted uneasily. Rolly straightened. "There's clean hay in the barn, strangers, if you want to hang around till mornin'," he suggested.

Windy and Long Jim grunted their thanks and followed Rolly out. They left the old rancher staring toward the shattered window, sitting unmoving in his chair.

As they crossed the gloomy yard, Long Jim enquired carelessly: "What happened to the old man's kid, Rolly? This rifle-totin' ghost get him, too?"

Rolly did not slow his stride. His shoulders hunched. "It was the old man's fault, I reckon. The kid was one of 'em high strung colts—the kind you gotta handle easy. But the old man is hard, an' plumb set in his ways. He tried to break the kid to his way of thinkin'. The kid couldn't

see it that way at all. The last argumint they had the old man beat hell out of Walt. The kid was nineteen, then. He took his beatin' without a word. But I remember the way he faced his father after—his face all bloody, his lips tight, his eyes gray pools of hell. He quit the spread that night—headed for the Border . . .”

Windy frowned. Long Jim muttered something about the folly of the young being surpassed only by that of the old.

Rolly left them in the barn, went back to the ranch house. He had been bunking in Walter's place since the kid had left.

Something troubled the lanky Evers. He walked to the open door, squinted toward the dark rangeland. His gaze swung around to the dim light against the ranch-house windows. He said: "Hell!" and looked down at Windy, unconcernedly making a hole in clean hay. "I hope to hell this Mex ghost comes back tonight. Seems like we oughta do *somethin'* for that grub we stowed away."

Windy grunted. "If he comes back we'll take him apart an' see what makes a ghost tick. But it ain't our affair, Jim. Come mornin', we'll ride west an' see what kind of mavericks the Diamond L have got." He settled himself, made a clucking sound in his leathery throat. "Strauss, huh? Didn't we run across a mean hombre with a handle like that up in that Montanny country?"

Long Jim snorted, walked toward the hay. "Shore, yuh idjit! He was a ghost, too. Don't yuh remember?"

Windy disdained reply. He squirmed a little, settled back, but a train of thought came through his head, and he worked on it, his eyes puckering. "Ghosts, too huh? I wonder . . ."

THE morning sun was hot over the brown land, raising little shimmers of heat. Miles west of the V-Bar, where a jumble of ravines and sandstone cliffs broke the expanse of rolling plain, a thin curl of gray smoke lifted against a tawny ravine wall, and faded before it got above the sheer sides. A score of feet beyond the fire, two broncs stood stiffly, forty feet of rope stretching taut from creased saddle knobs. The sound of profanity faded slowly into the heated air.

"Lie still, drat yuh!" Windy Harris grunted, dug a bony knee into the steer's flank. Shifting, he attempted to dally a couple of turns around the animal's hind legs. The frightened steer lunged in a frantic effort to regain its feet, the ensuing struggle spilling the pint-sized rustler. For a brief moment there was a flurry of legs, dust and chaps. Then it quieted, and Windy untangled himself slowly. He stood up, glaring at the hogtied animal, making queer gulping sounds in his throat. Finally, his adam's apple quit bobbing, and an audible sigh of relief came from him.

The sound of unsuppressed laughter spun him around, a wrathful glare in his eyes. "What in hell *you* laughin' at, you overgrown, pinheaded mule?" he roared. "Can't a man swaller his chaw without you takin' a fit?"

Long Jim rocked weakly by the side of his hogtied animal. "Hell!" he gasped finally, tears in his eyes. "Damned if I ever saw anythin' like it! Like a sage hen yuh was—" He went off again.

Windy's glare changed. "Near two bits worth of Ol' Harmony gone tuh hell!" he snapped. A faintly uneasy expression came to his eyes.

Behind them the small fire crackled. The heat was boxed in between tawny slopes here; it was like a deep miasmatic sea in which no wind stirred. Below them a creek slid through thickets with a soft, cooling murmur.

Long Jim straightened, getting control of himself. He looked down at his animal, his expression changing. "We oughta be in Diamond L country here—an' these beeves cinch it. The brand on 'em is big enough to be seen from the ranchhouse." His eyes narrowed slightly and he peered closer. "Free iron branded, an' the hombre who done it was no artist. Huh," he grunted softly, "I'll be eatin' loco weed if the first iron on this critter wasn't a V-Bar!"

Harris swung his attention to his animal. "Looks like we ain't the only runnin' iron experts in this section. Whoever worked on this one did a better job—but he was a mite careless in closin' the diamond." He straightened, his leathery face scowling. "Mebbe this Box-Ear Strauss is makin' hay while Miguel's ghost rides, huh?"

Long Jim shrugged, straightened, started

to coil his rope. Reaching the range-wise roan, he hung the reata from the horn, swung into the saddle. His gaze dropped to Windy. "I got a hunch—an' it ain't good," he muttered. "I'm gonna take a look up the ravine . . ."

Windy scowled. What had seemed like the easy prospect of rebranding six or seven head, and herding them through the broken country toward the Border, was developing angles. Ghosts and brand-blotting and Box-Ear Strauss . . .

He grunted, swung away from his trussed steer for the iron in the branding fire. Something sure smelled on this range!

The thud of sand-deadened hoofs jerked him away from the fire, his right hand flicking gunward.

He waited, his body alert, till view of the rider cutting around the sharp ravine bend eased him.

"Three Diamond L riders!" Long Jim snapped, pivoting his roan. "Headin' this way." He cut across Windy's remonstrances concerning the trussed steers. "We ain't got time, yuh fool! Leave 'em! Let 'em guess!"

Windy whipped to saddle, crowded close to Long Jim. They swung back down the ravine the way they had entered it, crossed under a gnarled oak, and suddenly pulled up. Ahead of them a shod hoof clanged sharply against stone!

Long Jim threw a glance back to the fire. His thin face tightened. "Trapped! Looks like here's where two old fools come to the end of a rope!"

His shoulders hunched as his eyes swung over the tawny ravine walls. The stream here slid close to the abrupt barrier, and Ever's questing gaze stopped at a slit in the wall beyond, like a wedge cut in the cliff. "Mebbe we kin make it," he suggested.

He glanced at Windy, and was startled by his companion's pale face, a funny flicker in his eyes. He had never seen Windy like this before. "First time I ever saw *you* get white around the gills, Windy. Scared?"

Windy straightened, snapped weakly. "You'd get pale, yuh beanpole—if you had jist swallowed yore chaw! Damn—it's shore raisin' hell—"

They splashed up the stream, crowded

through screening bushes, and made the split. It was a fault in the rock wall, about seventy feet deep, narrowing at every foot. They led their cayuses in till they could go no further, wrapped reins around rock, and left them, sliding back to the opening with ready rifles.

They didn't have to wait long. A rider appeared, jogging a big-chested white horse. A slim, wiry youngster, with a carbine under his right leg, a black hat tipped over his eyes. He looked hard, bitter and dangerous.

His gaze froze on the tell-tale fire, the hog-tied steers. The rifle slid into his hands with a smooth, easy motion. He scanned the canyon scene intently, then advanced toward the camp.

As the youngster passed by, Harris muttered: "Here's where we pull our stakes, Jim. This country's gettin' too cussed crowded for two pore rustlers like—"

Evers' fingers closed on his shoulders: "Wait! Thet kid—he looks a lot like that crippled rancher we et with last night. Mebbe—"

The kid was dismounting. He looked warily around, walked toward the steers. He paused by the almost dead fire, picked up Windy's running iron. He walked to one of the cows, squatted by it, scanned the carelessly made Diamond L brand.

Three riders appeared around the bend. The youngster dropped the iron, started to run for his ground-reined cayuse. A rifle glinted in the hands of a gnome-like Diamond L rider. A spurt of flame showed, a sharp crack. The kid twisted in mid-stride, went down heavily. He clawed at the dust, pushed up to one knee. He got unsteadily to his feet, his left arm limp, and faced the oncoming riders.

THE two oldsters who were the cause of it, watched with hard eyes. All thought of flight was gone from them. They were old hands at this game; they knew what would follow.

The Diamond L riders bunched up before the youngster, rifles glinting. They were as craggy looking hombres as Harris and Long Jim had ever lined up in their sights. The gent who had pluggèd the kid was squat, seemingly as wide as he was tall, long-armed. He sat saddle of a horse that dwarfed him. The other two

were lean, raw-boned stubby-profiled: they looked like brothers.

One of them took down his coiled rope, with a wide, loose-lipped smile. The gnome-like rider slipped out of saddle, paced to the trussed steers. He picked up the running iron, examined it, then let it drop. He cut the cows loose, watched them lumber away. Turning, he snapped orders. The man with the reata shoved the kid forward, jerking a thumb toward the gnarled oak.

Harris caressed his rifle. He said, softly: "They ain't losin' any time, Jim. The've got it all figgered out. An' the kid's the goat. What you aimin' . . ."

Evers scowled. "We got the kid into it. 'Sides, I don't like that midget, nor his friends." He grinned down at the mustached bantam as he eased the rifle into the crook of his long arm. "He's yore size, Windy—you take him . . ."

They had the youngster astride his big white, arms bound behind him, under the big oak. And they were working fast. The gnome whipped one end of the rope over an overhanging branch, started to widen the slip-noose. He leered at something the kid said.

"We ain't got time for the law, Fervans—an' it's too far away anyhow. We snapped yuh redhanded—usin' a runnin' iron on Diamond L beef. We ben losin' plenty, ever since yore pop started that cock-an'-bull story 'bout Miguel's ghost. That cinches it. Yore pop's ben runnin' a bluff—hidin' his rustlin' under cover of that ghost yarn. Even thet story 'bout you an' him breakin' up was a fake. You wanted the Diamond L to think you was out of the section so you could work yore game . . ."

"That's a lie, Card!" the youngster shouted. Pain beaded his forehead, lined his mouth. "An' you know it! Why don't you tell the truth? There's no one to hear yuh. You read the signs around thet fire. There was two hombres doin' the brand blottin'. Reckon they heard yuh comin', an' hightailed. Or mebbe the whole thing was a Diamond L setup, an' like a blunderin' fool I came into it. But I seen enough. Those Diamond L cows were V-Bar. . . ."

Card grinned, toyed with the noose. "Mebbe yuh *have* at that! But yuh'll do the rest of yore snoopin' in hell—"

At the sight of the incongruous pair shuffling toward them, he swiftly closed a hand over his holstered gun. The tall scarecrow had a rifle in the crook of his right arm, a gun holstered on his right hip. The bantam beside him walked as if he creaked. His rifle was loose in his right hand, muzzle pointed toward the sand.

Evers repeated: "Reckon you gents are plumb hasty with thet rope. Me an' Windy here was the ones thinkin' of doin' a li'll runnin' iron work when yuh butted in." A cold grin cracked his long face. "Thet shore was a sloppy job you boys did on them V-Bar critters. Reckon the brand blotters around here need lessons in their trade. This younger generation . . . tch, tch . . ."

Card sneered, his first grip of surprise passing. This was better than he had hoped for. Like the kid had pointed out, he had read the signs—had known it was not the youngster who had built that fire, roped those steers. Whoever it was must have noticed the careless branding. And he had not liked the thought of someone riding around with that information.

But now . . .

His small red eyes jerked to his two companions, narrowed meaningly. These two old fools would never talk! They had rifles in their hands, and really thought that was enough to hold Card, Cheeky and Sturgeon! Hell!

He minced, his cayuse to one side, thick lips twisting. "So you two jaspers want to show the Diamond L how to blot brands?" His sneer faded into a vicious grin. "How you fools lived this long is beyond—"

His long arm whipped up, spinning a Colt. He was still grinning, and he died like that. Harris' 30-30 slug had passed clean through his heart.

Sturgeon, leveling his gun with desperate speed, stiffened as Long Jim's rifle flared. He slid forward, hit the ground a moment after Card.

Cheeky had time to shoot twice, both wild. He was cursing the two oldsters who used rifles like he had never seen them used before, when Harris' slug got him in the left eye—Long Jim's over the heart as he started to sag.

The sharp reports faded slowly down the ravine. Walter Fervans held his frightened

cayuse with his knees, and stared with pained, wondering eyes at the three sprawled Diamond L gunmen.

Harris was complaining: "There yuh go, wastin' lead agin! Two slugs fer one polecat—"

Long Jim grunted, looked down to the clean sheared rip where Cheeky's first shot had passed. "My best pair of Boots!" he grouched, disregarding the fact that they were his only pair. "Dang it, Windy—they cost me forty dollars in Cheyenne. An' you let thet—"

The youngster swayed, his eyes clouding. Long Jim cut him free, eased him down. Walter winced as the shirt was ripped from his shoulder, exposing the ugly hole. Windy knelt beside them, his old eyes pitying.

"Bad!" he acknowledged. "We better get him back to the V-Bar . . ."

The kid jerked his head, his lips white. "No! I can't go back . . ."

Long Jim shrugged. "Yo're Walter Fervans?" He nodded slowly at the youngster's reluctant "Yes." "Don't be a fool, kid. Yore paw an' maw are eatin' their hearts out for yuh. Shore—me an' Windy heard the story—last night—"

Walter's voice was unsteady. "I heard 'bout my pop gettin' hurt, way down in Prietas. I came back. But I didn't know how—how to—"

"Jest tell him yo're sorry," Long Jim said gruffly. "He needs yuh, kid—needs yuh bad. An' yore maw—she's been cryin' inside, ever since yuh went away."

Walter Fervans whispered chokingly: "I reckon I been a fool, strangers . . ."

"Yuh both have," Windy amended. "But they'll be glad to see yuh."

THE shadows were long over the hacienda when they jogged into the yard. The youngster was slumped in Long Jim's arms, his hair shrouding his white face. Windy followed, leading the kid's big white.

Rolly met them on the porch, surprise in his eyes. The ever-present rifle eased in hands, he stepped down to meet them. "Wait! What the hell . . .?" He swung on Long Jim. "What happened?"

Long Jim told him, leaving out details, of course, of what he and Windy were doing in the ravine. Lucy Fervans' cry

smote them as they entered, bearing Walter's limp form. She stood agonized till Lorg Jim's reassurance calmed the anguish in her. She opened a door, motioned to a bed.

The old rancher wheeled himself close to the unconscious youngster, his furrowed cheeks tight, a lump in his throat. He looked up at the two saddle bums, standing stiff in the uncertain candlelight. "How'd it happen?" he asked hoarsely. "Where . . .?"

Long Jim repeated the story. Windy said nothing. He kept watching Rolly, watching the glitter in the puncher's eyes.

Lucy Fervans applying first-aid to the ugly wound stated anxiously: "We must get that bullet out of him. We've got to have the doctor!"

"I'll go for him, ma'am," Rolly offered. He was fidgety. "I'll take Brownie, the big stud—an' make it to Las Cruces before dawn." He turned to the pair, his lips grim. "You figgerin' on standin' by, to-night?"

Long Jim hesitated. A heel ground warningly on his toe, brought a pained frown to his eyes. Windy said: "Naw! Reckon me an' Jim'll be driftin'. We don't want to git mixed up in somethin' thet ain't our mess—"

They went out. Long Jim scowled at his partner. Mounting, he followed Windy up the trail; they kept on till they were out of sight of the ranchhouse, then circled.

Under the concealing shadow of trees, Long Jim nudged him, his scowl deep between his eyes. "What in hell you doin'? Playin' a game? We could'a' stayed for supper. Dang yuh, my stummick's—"

Windy cut it: "Yeah—I know. Yore stummick's allus empty. But I was kinda thinkin' 'bout thet crippled rancher an' his wife. An' thet kid. It was our fault he got hurt, Jim." The bantam tugged at his ragged mustache. "Seems like we oughta pay up for what happened."

Long Jim shrugged. "Yeah," he said. "Mebbe we oughta bring 'em Miguel's ghost—"

"Shore," Windy agreed. "I got ideas 'bout this Miguel—an' they ties in with this Box-Ear Strauss we ben hearin' about. Box-Ear—" he grinned slowly, his homely face lighting up. "Danged if it don't come

back to me! It was a li'll homesteader's shack—up in Montanny. Remember?"

"You gone loco?" Long Jim asked, peering suspiciously down at his partner. "When 'ud we ever—"

Windy's quick arm checked his words. He followed Windy's nod.

Pale moonlight washed the flat. A dark figure was riding out of the V-Bar yard—heading west. It cut across the flat, began to fade in the distance.

Long Jim said: "What the hell, Windy! It's Rolly—goin' after a sawbones. What you—"

Windy chuckled. "Shore. Which way to Las Cruces?"

The beanpole rustler glared at him. "North, yuh locoed—" His mouth closed, and he swiveled, his eyes picking up the faint blur of the disappearing rider. "Hell!" he said, understanding.

Windy nodded. "The Diamond L is west—an' thet's where Rolly's headin'. Not for the doc." He shrugged, looked down to the squat, vague ranchhouse where a crippled rancher and a wounded youngster were watched over by a woman with anxious eyes.

Long Jim muttered. "It's a lousy play, Windy. Not fit even fer shepherders." His gaze turned to the western horizon. "You figgerin' like I am?"

Windy let a gnarled, capable hand drop to his holster gun. "I'm way ahead of yuh!" he grinned. "Let's get goin'!"

The Diamond L had never been more than an excuse. A two-room flat-roofed 'dobe house, with adjoining 'dobe stalls, a couple of sheds that badly needed repair, a crazy corral, a bunch of willows around a small, gurgling spring. As a ranch it wasn't worth the labor put into it. As a base for rustling, it was invaluable.

Jammed back among the tawny canyons of the Malpais Rim, it was a hop, a skip and a short jump to the Border. It lay far from the beaten path, in a section overlooked as inconsequential by the hard-worked sheriff in Las Cruces. All in all, the Diamond L was in an admirable position for its nefarious purpose.

Moonglow lightened the darkness about the spread as Windy and Long Jim dismounted by the willows. Old hands at this game, they talked little. Windy nodded

shortly toward the rear of the squat 'dobe, indicating his course of action. Long Jim eased away. His long figure was like a shadow crossing the gloom-blotched yard toward the front of the 'dobe where Rolly's big brown stud stood trailing its reins.

Windy waited till Long Jim had reached a vantage point. Then he cut out in a short arc, a gnarled hand brushing against his gun butt. He reached the back of the house without incident, flattened against the wall, gave wordless thanks to the warmth of the summer night that kept windows open.

A moment later, he was inside the bedroom, skirting a chair. A streak of light cut into the darkness, showing a door ajar. Voices rasped against his ears. He edged to the door, and peered through.

Box-Ear Strauss was swearing vividly as he paced the big living-room. Lamplight cast his rangy, hard-muscled frame in long distortion over bare walls. Heavy guns lay thonged against his legs, their pearl handles winking with his long-paced stride. His ears marked him. They were huge, membraneous things, squared off as if by shears. They stuck out like billboards on either side of his big square head.

A GAINST the far wall, two men stood nervously watching their boss pacing. One of them, a thin, wiry man with a sharp face, kept fingering his Colt. His mouth kept twitching.

Box-Ear stopped, glared at Rolly. The bogus V-Bar puncher was by the table, his thick body tense. "Damn it to hell!" the Diamond L owner snapped. "Card, Cheeky an' Sturgeon! You know what yo're sayin', Rolly? Yo're tellin' me that—"

"I'm tellin' you, I don't know who they were," Rolly interrupted savagely. "Looked like a coupla saddle bums, that' all. One was long, thin, like a scarecrow. A good wind could'a blowed him away. The other was a under-sized runt who walked like he creaked. They were there last night—when Card pulled the Miguel play. Card was on the dot. Hell, we had ol' Fervans on the run. Come Saturday, we woulda had the V-Bar for the takin'."

Rolly threw up his hands. "Then, tonight, these meddlin' bums come in, totin' Lincoln's kid, with a slug in his shoulder.

Thet was the first shock. I thought I had fixed things 'tween him an' his ol' man—fixed it so's he'd never come back. But he heard 'bout his pop bein' laid up . . ." He shrugged, his lips twisting. "Anyway, the way they spilled it, Card, Cheeky an' Sturgeon are doin' their ridin' in hell!"

Beefy, a thick-waisted, flabby-faced man, siding the nervous-fingered gent, snarled: "Hell—you know what that means, Box-Ear! Outside of yoreself, there warn't a better man with a gun than Card! An' Cheeky an' Sturgeon was 'bout as good!" Beefy swore, his eyes dilating. "I'm sayin' we oughta git to hell out, while the gittin's good! We got most of the V-Bar beef up in thet canyon under the Tombstone—an' while it ain't what we started out to git, it'll give us a stake across the Line." His gaze slid from Box-Ear's scowling features to Rolly, to the man beside him. "'Specially now thet there's only four of us in on the divvy!"

Windy waited to get the full picture of the setup. Harsh lines took the humor from his mouth as he started to push open the door. Box-Ear was facing the bedroom, his voice rasping, ". . . gonna give up this play less'n we have to, Beefy. We're gonna hit back—hit hard. We'll pour enough slugs into thet ranchhouse to—"

His voice snapped off, his rangy body shocking stiff. His gaze narrowed on the small, homely-faced gunster who was framed in the bedroom doorway.

He found his voice then, snapped it metallicly: "What the —" His right arm tensed with his intention. But he didn't draw. Didn't move.

A sad voice was saying casually, "Howdy, gents. We're lookin' for Miguel's ghost!"

Indecision held the four of them rigid, eyes shunting from Windy's grinning face to the mock mournfulness of Long Jim's. The beanpole rustler was in the front doorway, long sinewy fingers hooked casually in his gun belt. His voice was almost sepulchral in that taut stillness. "Windy—where *is* Miguel's ghost?"

Windy chuckled. "In hell! In mortal guise he was known as Card . . ." His eyes slanted to Box-Ear, and his chuckle took on a harsh note. "Jist like Box-Ear here was known as Rickey Means, up in

Montanny. The hard-case jasper who was given a meal an' a bed by an old homesteader, an' who paid 'em for their kindness by killin' 'em for the hundred dollars they had hid in a old coffee pot. Looks like Rickey is still playin' his old game—"

Box-Ear's face was pale, his eyes dark, uncertain. He said: "Windy Harris—an' Long Jim Evers!" Recognition brought sweat out over his face. His voice choked in his throat. "Damn yuh, Rolly—why didn't yuh—"

The nervous-fingered jasper at the side of Beefy sneered: "What the hell, Box-Ear! They're jist two bums, with their cutters pouched! I'll take the runt—"

His nervous fingers tightened, pulled on his gunbutt. Then he was sliding forward on his face, his eyes bulging. He never heard the slamming reports that followed his move; didn't see the crossing jets of flame, the smoke that billowed upward. He didn't see anything. He was dead.

Box-Ear staggered with lead in his chest. His eyes tried to focus on the crouched beanpole from whose hip spurted jagged flame. His guns spat aimlessly as he fell, and dimly, through the exploding roar in his head, he heard the crash of glass . . .

Rolly, jumping clear, worked his gun in spurts, his eyes blazing. He caught a blurred glimpse of a harsh-faced runt backed against the inner wall, a long-barreled gun bucking heavily in a gnarled fist. Then a .45 slug caught him in the right eye, sent him spinning backward. He hit the table with his back, and went down with it.

Beefy, cursing with wild fear, made a running dive for the window. Two slugs hit him at the same instant. His heavy frame crashed through glass—hung limp across the sill—tipped. Clothes made a ripping sound on jagged edges, and then the window was blank. Smoke drifted out of it in slow, wraithlike fashion, the heavy, smashing shots fading out into the night.

Long Jim straightened, wiped a long hand across the gash on his cheek. Windy, unhurt, came to him, eyes grave. "Bad, Jim?"

Long Jim swore. "Naw! But my stum-mick's near wrapped around my backbone. When do we eat?"

DEATH WAITS AT PARADISE PASS

by WAYNE C. LEE

The young marshal staked his claim in Boothill when he cracked Paradise Pass in killer-guise to play a maverick's game with holsters sealed.

SHERIFF BEN CRESSET looked up at his early morning visitor, a twinkle in his eye. "No luck?"

U. S. Marshal Jim Harper shook his head. "No luck. Pillard seems to have vanished into thin air." He dropped into a chair. "I've been ridin' half the night. Never found a trace of him."

The sheriff's weather-lined face showed no disappointment. His next words seemed to change the subject. "Remember that drunk you brought in yesterday just before you rode out after Pillard?"

Jim nodded. "Sure. He was raisin' such a rumpus he was liable to stampede the town if he wasn't locked up."

"You said when you brought him in," Sheriff Cresset went on, "that it wasn't exactly a marshal's job to arrest drunks but I figure you made a mistake. Know who that drunk was? He was One-shot Jim Pillard."

"Pillard?" Jim left his chair with a start. "Right here in jail?"

Cresset nodded, a grin creasing his leathery face. "You ought to know where he is; you put him there. Didn't you know him?"

Jim shook his head. "I've never seen him before. But I know one or two of his pals—too well. How did you happen to find out who he was?"

"Well, after you left I searched him to see what I could find out. Thought he might be up to some devilment."

Jim was leaning on the sheriff's desk now. "Find out what he was doin' here?"

Cresset nodded. "I found out plenty. But just what he was doin' here in Pine Springs is still a mystery to me." The sheriff looked sharply at the young marshal. "Say, Jim, didn't you say you wanted to get into Tom Dolan's hideout pretty bad?"

Jim's eyes lighted. "I'll say! There's no place in this state that I would rather look over than Dolan's layout. From your description he must have it named right: Paradise—Paradise for the outlaw. But you said yourself that he kept that valley guarded so close a snake couldn't wiggle through."

"That's right, I did, and I still say it. But I think I know how I can get you in."

"How?" The word exploded like the report of a rifle.

"Just keep your shirt on." The sheriff pulled open the top drawer of his desk and picked up an open sheet of paper lying on top of the disheveled pile of posters and notices. "Take a look at this. I found this on Pillard."

Jim took the paper. It was a letter written in a man's heavy handwriting and dated at Sweetwater, a town twenty miles to the south at the edge of the foothills.

"Dear Tom,

The bearer of this letter is One-shot Jim Pillard, the man I told you I would send to you. They don't come any squarer nor any faster with a gun. You can trust Pillard all the way. He'll be a big help to you. I haven't told him about our plans for that job next week but he'd make a good right hand man for you.

Sam."

Jim looked up at the sheriff, eyes sparkling. "Looks like we've hit the jackpot, sheriff. But who's Sam? And what's the job he's talkin' about?"

"That's what I'd like to know and what I expect you to find out. Of course, I know you want to get into Paradise for some reason of your own but I figured as long as I've got a way planned for you to get in there you might find out that much for me."

"I guess that's no more than fair," Jim agreed. "Pillard was one of the men I wanted but I'm willin' to bet long odds

that one or maybe two more are in Dolan's hangout. I take it you expect me to give this letter to Dolan and pass myself off as Pillard?"

Sheriff Cresset nodded. "That's right. From now on you won't be Marshal Jim Harper but Jim Pillard—One-shot Jim Pillard, one of the fastest gunmen alive and don't forget that last."

Jim grinned. "I'm not exactly the slowest myself."

"I know that but just the same I'd hate to see you meet up with Pillard if he was gunnin' for you."

Jim wandered toward the window. "Well, I wouldn't go out of my way just to meet him; I'm not that much of a gambler. But neither would I put all my chips



Jim made off with his strange caravan. His work in Paradise was finished.

on Pillard if we did happen to tangle. I think I can bluff my way through on that score."

The sheriff closed the desk drawer. "You'll be skatin' on pretty thin ice, Jim. Paradise is no place for the law. The only law they know there is what Tom Dolan hands out and that sometimes has to be backed with lead. If you're found out, you're done for and there ain't nobody on earth can do a thing about it. Still think you want to try it?"

"Haven't changed my mind a bit, sheriff." Jim came back to his chair. "I'll never be satisfied until I look over Dolan's layout and this is probably the only chance I'll ever have to do it unless I hold up a bank, then high tail it in there just two jumps ahead of a posse."

THE sheriff folded the letter and slipped it back into its envelope. Then he carefully resealed the envelope with a few light dabs of glue. "Well, there you are." He handed the letter to Jim. "That's your ticket to Paradise. Be mighty careful or it might be a ticket to Boothill with no questions asked."

Jim stuffed the letter into an inside vest pocket. "How come you know this outfit so well?"

"I've been sheriff of this county for ten years. I'd ought to know something about the outlaw hangout that's been runnin' me ragged all this time. I've had three deputies who were big enough fools to trail their men clear back into the pocket. None of them ever came back."

"The last one was a fellow named Mason, wasn't it?"

Cresset looked up quickly. "That's right, Dirk Mason. About three weeks ago he lit out on the tail of a horse thief. The last anybody saw of him he was ridin' straight toward Dolan's hangout."

"What kind of a fellow was Mason?"

The sheriff's eyes burned into Jim. "What difference does that make?" he asked sharply.

Jim shrugged, ignoring the sudden change in the sheriff's attitude. "None, I guess." He stood up and stretched leisurely. "I think I'll be gettin' on to Paradise. Dolan may need a good right hand man."

The sheriff stood up, too, again master

of his composure. "Be careful, Jim. You're playin' with dynamite. When you get there, take that letter straight to Tom Dolan. If there's a square shooter in that place, it's Dolan."

"Know him?" Jim eyed the sheriff closely.

"I used to," Cresset admitted. "He wasn't a bad fellow then. He's just a case of a good man gone wrong. But I'm warnin' you: if he ever finds out you're a lawman he'll kill you just like he'd kill a snake and he'd never turn a hair."

"Sounds like a pleasant character. Know anything more about him or his outfit? I'd like to know something about the neighbors I'm goin' to have."

"I don't know much. Tom Dolan was always pretty wild. He moved away from here just a while after he was married. He got into a bank hold-up and killed a couple of men. The law was hot on his trail. He hit it back into the hills; took his wife with him. Other outlaws followed him in until he had quite a gang built up. It was a perfect hide out where two guards could keep out an army. They called the place Paradise."

Cresset paused long enough to fill his pipe from the sack he took from the pocket of his leather vest. "It wasn't long," he went on, "till the place was known all over the state. Outlaws flocked in from everywhere. Tom Dolan kept the place open to all law dodgers so long as they joined his gang and followed the rules he laid down."

Jim nodded his head with a grin. "And One-shot Jim Pillard is goin' to be the next one to join the band."

"You'll have to be careful, Jim," Cresset reiterated. "You'll have to act like a law dodger or they'll spot you sure. If you're goin' to live in a den of skunks you've got to smell like one."

"Say, what are you goin' to do with Pillard?" Jim asked, suddenly remembering him.

"Keep him in jail out of sight. Nobody will know he's here but me and my new deputy. He's just a kid that I hired after Mason was killed. Good steady fellow; I can depend on him to keep it under his hat."

Jim started toward the door.

"Wait a minute." The sheriff came around his desk. "You'd better leave that star here. They use stars for target practice in Paradise."

Jim unpinned the star, then hesitated, tossing it in his hand. "I think I'd better take this along. I might need it if I make an arrest."

"You don't make arrests in Paradise," Cresset said solemnly. "While you're there, you'd better remember you're One-shot Jim Pillard and be satisfied with what you can find out. And find out if you can what kind of a deal that is between Tom Dolan and this fellow Sam."

"I'll do my best," Jim promised.

II

FOR the last five miles the trail had been getting rougher. Jim shifted his weight forward in the saddle to make the climbing easier for his horse over a particularly steep stretch of trail.

On all sides rocky peaks reached up into the clouds above timber line. In contrast to the sharp pinnacles near by, Old Baldy off to the right shoved its round top above the fringe of trees like the shining dome of a bald man. Around to the left, almost directly ahead of Jim, a deep niche gaped in the solid wall of massive peaks that seemed set to block any attempt to probe into the secrets they held behind them. This niche would be Paradise Pass. Beyond it was the valley where Tom Dolan made his headquarters.

Jim checked himself again. His ornamental boots had been laid aside in preference to old worn boots, run over at the heel. His pants were a little the worse for wear. A soiled shirt had been substituted for the spotless one he would have preferred wearing. A red bandanna served as a neckerchief. As nearly as possible this outfit paralleled the one Pillard had been wearing in jail this morning.

Behind Jim's saddle, neatly tucked into the middle of his bedroll, was a United States Marshal's badge. But the last outward vestige of Marshal Jim Harper was gone. The man astride the roan gelding was One-shot Jim Pillard. And just to prove it was a letter of introduction in Jim's vest pocket addressed to Tom Dolan.

5-Lariat—January



Limpy

"That will be far enough, Stranger!"

Jim reining in sharply, his eyes racing among the boulders along the trail trying to locate the source of that voice.

"Better grab a fistful of sky. That gun is too handy."

That wasn't a man's voice! He couldn't be fooled that bad. No man's voice could have that throbbing, almost wistful tone.

And then he spied her, not thirty yards up the trail, a little to the right, the rifle laid carelessly across the top of a boulder, almost too carelessly, as if she were perfectly familiar with it and the commanding power it gave her. Her small head was cocked to one side and the dark curls fell out from under her old dusty hat. Her eyes, like two pools of midnight, held a challenge that pushed Jim's hands higher away from his gun. Her lips, strikingly red against the deep tan of her cheeks, pursed a trifle as she jerked up the tip of the rifle barrel.

"Get off your horse real careful like and come over here."

Jim stepped down from the saddle, keeping his hands in the clear. Slowly he advanced toward the girl with the rifle.

"You're a little out of your territory, aren't you?" Jim stopped a few yards from the girl. "I thought this was Dolan's stampin' grounds."

"Maybe that's where I belong." Her eyes never wavered from his face. "Who are you and what are you doin' here?"

"I was about to ask the same thing of you."

The girl frowned. "It ain't healthy to argue when you're on the wrong end of a rifle."

Jim grinned. "Maybe you're right. I guess you're callin' the cards now. My name is Jim Pillard and I was headin' for Paradise to see Dolan. I'm not supposed to be very good company for little girls like you."

The girl tossed her dark head. "I can take care of myself." She came around the rock carrying the rifle in the crook of her arm. "So your name is Pillard—One-shot Jim Pillard? Dad is expectin' you."

"Dad?" Jim caught the word with a shock.

She nodded. "Sure—Tom Dolan. I'm Star Dolan." The muzzle of the rifle dropped until it was almost in the dust.

Jim shook his head in unbelief, still staring at the small supple figure of the girl. "I didn't know Tom Dolan had a daughter."

She smiled, a wide smile that revealed a row of white even teeth. "You're not supposed to know anything except how to throw a gun, Mr. Pillard," she said flipantly. "Now quit standin' there like a wall-eyed pack mule and get back on your horse. I'll get you past the guards up in the pass."

She turned into the trees down the slope. Jim mounted his horse and waited, his mind still slightly addled at finding a girl here where he expected to find only seasoned outlaws and gunmen. A pretty girl, too, he admitted; a very pretty girl.

She came back up the slope mounted on a black and white pinto. She reined into the trail and he drew up beside her. They rode in silence until they reached the mouth

of the pass. There a voice from part way up the rocky wall boomed out a challenge.

"Who you got with you, Star?"

Star drew rein; Jim followed suit.

"Jim Pillard," Star called back.

Jim searched the wall but found no sign of the man whose voice rolled down into the pass.

"Are you sure it's Pillard?"

"Of course." Star glanced across at Jim before she continued. "If he isn't Pillard you won't have to worry about him comin' back."

They rode on through the pass and out into the trail overlooking Paradise Valley. Then Jim ventured a question.

"What did you mean, he wouldn't be bothered with me comin' back?"

Star looked at him in surprise. "Why, just what I said. If you're not Pillard you're probably some badge toter and badge toters don't ever leave Paradise once they get in."

Jim caught his breath at the ease with which she dismissed the subject as if it were too common to merit discussion. He stopped again.

"How do you know I'm Pillard? All you have is my word for it."

She reined in the pinto, her eyes searching his face intently. "I don't know it but I like your looks," she said frankly. "I think I can trust you. All my life I've watched outlaws come and go. I can usually tell the good ones from the bad ones." There was no hint of bragging in her voice. "You're a good one."

He dropped the subject and swung his gaze out over the valley. He whistled softly. Never had he seen quite such a valley as this. Paradise—it was well named, indeed.

III

THE valley was about three miles long. A small stream cut through the center of it coming from the melting snows up on the peaks and disappearing as if by magic where it ran into a subterranean rock fissure at the lower end of the canyon. A heavy growth of timber choked the upper end of the valley. Farther down, the trees drew back from the banks of the little stream leaving open grassy slopes on which two or three bands of horses grazed.

Less than a quarter of a mile from the lower end of the canyon the open glade between the rims of trees spread out until it was nearly a half mile wide. Here, in two neat rows on the far side of the stream, stood a dozen small cabins. One cabin, quite a little larger than the others, stood a few yards upstream from its neighbors. Farther back from the river was a huge log barn. In front of the barn was a coral built of heavy poles where six or seven horses were now standing, heads hanging sleepily.

"Nice place, isn't it?" Star said, breaking the silence.

"It's the prettiest place I ever saw." Jim looked at his companion. "How long have you lived here?"

"Almost all my life."

"And how long is that?"

"Nearly eighteen years. I'll be eighteen next month."

For a moment he let his gaze rest on her, making a mental picture of the smoothness of her tanned skin and the perfect balance of her features. "Are all the girls in Paradise as pretty as you?" he asked finally.

A flush crept into her cheeks. "There aren't any other girls in Paradise," she said.

Jim caught his breath. "You mean—you mean there aren't any other women in this place?"

"Just my mother and me." She hesitated a moment, then prodded her pony with her heels. "Watch the trail. It's steep in some places," she warned.

He didn't follow immediately. He watched the back of the girl swaying in rhythm with her horse's movements. What kind of a girl was Star Dolan, the only girl in a town of outlaws? Very likely she was quite capable of taking care of herself, judging from her fiery black eyes. Possibly she had inherited some of the power that must surely be a part of Tom Dolan's make-up—the make-up that had enabled him to maintain his role as boss of Paradise all these years.

He glanced again at the rows of cabins. What was Paradise holding in store for him? Was the man he wanted down there? He drew a long breath. He'd never find out up here. The answers were all down there in those two rows of cabins. He urged his horse down the trail after Star.

He caught up with her where the trail widened out on the grassy slope. They rode down the slope in silence and crossed the shallow ford below the cabins.

"I suppose that big cabin at the other end of the line is where you live," Jim said, motioning to the cabin farthest away.

Star nodded. "The men stay in the other cabins. Dad assigns them to their places."

Most of the grass had been worn away in the lane between the rows of cabins. As they rode past the first building, a man stepped out of the doorway and shuffled forward, proportionating his stride to favor a short left leg. He stopped directly in the path of the horses, thumbs hooked in his belt.

"I though I told you not to ride around with any other fellow!" he said sharply, eyes boring into Star.

An involuntary wave of antipathy swept over Jim as he looked at the man blocking the trail. He was fairly young but already his tobacco stained teeth were beginning to rot away showing ragged yellow snags where his upper lip curled back in a perpetual half snarl. His slate gray eyes were hard and cold and, if Jim could read character, they were the eyes of a killer.

"I'm only bringin' him in to see Dad," Star defended herself.

"Couldn't he bring himself? I don't want any other fellow ridin' herd on my girl."

"Your girl?" Jim looked sharply at Star. The color had drained from her face; a look closely akin to fear was in her eyes. Jim faced back. "How do you figure that?"

The man swung his cold stare on Jim. "Just keep your chips out of this, fellow! If I want you to sit in this game, I'll tell you about it."

Jim started to make a hot retort, his hand edging involuntarily toward his gun.

Star interrupted. "Limp, behave! This is Jim Pillard. He's here to see Dad."

Limp took a quick backward step, his eyes widening percipiently. "Pillard?" His voice had lost half its volume. His hands inched up away from his gun belt. "One-shot Jim Pillard?"

Surprise and a warm glow of satisfaction swept over Jim. "I see you've heard of me."

"Everybody here has heard of you,"

Star said, her voice confessing her relief that the tension of the moment was past. "Now Limpy, get out of the way and we'll go up and see Dad."

Limpy stood his ground. "Just because he happens to be Jim Pillard doesn't give him the right to ride around with my girl," he said, cold defiance again lighting his eyes.

Jim leaned forward in the saddle. "You heard her. Get out of our way!" His cold blue eyes locked with Limpy's slate gray ones. "Maybe I'll sit in on that little game quicker than you think. Then we'll see whose girl she is."

"You'll never live to see!" Limpy promised venomously. "You can't bluff me." Nevertheless, he stepped out of the lane and let the horses past.

They rode the length of the lane before Star broke the silence.

"You didn't really mean what you said back there, did you?"

Jim grinned. "Why not? Don't I have a chance against a fellow like Limpy?"

"It's not that." There was no levity in Star's voice. "You'll have to watch Limpy mighty close. He can't be trusted behind your back."

"I had that figured," Jim said. He shook his head thoughtfully. "Just why did you pick a fellow like that for a beau, if it's any of my business?"

"It's not."

Star swung down in front of the short hitching rack and flipped the rein over the bar. Jim shrugged and followed suit. He trailed her up the steps and into the cabin.

A BIG MAN was sitting behind a crudely made desk. He looked up as Star led Jim through the door. His once black hair was now an iron gray and the crow feet at the corners of his black eyes reached back almost to his temples.

He rose with surprising agility. "What does this mean, Star? Who is this fellow?"

Star laughed. "He's not a sheriff, Dad. This is Jim Pillard. You said you were expectin' him."

"Pillard? Oh, sure. Hutton said he was sendin' him up." He reached out a hand. "Glad to know you, Pillard. I can use a man like you."

Jim met the vise-like grip of the older

man. "I don't mind sayin' I've been pretty anxious to meet you." He noted the shadow of suspicion still lingering in Dolan's eyes. From his vest pocket he took the letter Cresset had found on Pillard. "Here's a letter Sam sent to you."

Tom Dolan took it and tore off the end of the envelope. A faint smile added some new wrinkles to his leathery face. "It's a good thing you didn't lose this, Pillard, or you might have had a hard time explainin' yourself. Sam Hutton is a particular man. He said he'd send a letter with you and if you hadn't showed it, well—"

He let the sentence trail off as he glanced quickly over the letter. "I see here," he said, looking up again, "that Sam didn't tell you about the job we've got planned. You'd better come up tonight for supper and we'll talk this thing over."

Jim accepted the invitation. "By the way," he added, "have you got anybody around here by the name of Mason?"

"Dirk Mason?" Dolan asked quickly. "He rode in the other day. What about him?"

"Nothing in particular," Jim said easily. "I just happened to know him and thought maybe he might have come up here."

"Old friend of yours?"

Jim hesitated. "Not exactly. Just an acquaintance."

Star spoke from the window where she had been looking out toward the cabins. "Here comes Dirk now." She moved across the room. "I guess I'd better get supper started."

"Don't forget we're havin' company," Tom Dolan reminded her. "And be sure to tell Maggie." He turned back to Jim, a grin on his face. "Maggie gets hoppin' mad when I invite somebody to eat with us and forget to tell her."

A knock rattled the door casing. Dolan turned his attention that way.

"Come in, Mason," he invited.

Mason stepped quickly across the threshold, his pale greenish-blue eyes blazing with excitement. "Say, boss, Limpy just told me that—"

He broke off, his eyes riveted on Jim. Jim sat easily in his chair but under the serene exterior every muscle was tense, keyed for instant action.

Tom Dolan laughed, misinterpreting

Dirk's surprise. "Sort of brings you up short seemin' somebody you know, don't it, Mason? Pillard was just askin' for you."

"Pillard?" Dirk asked carefully.

"Sure." The smile dropped away from Dolan's face. "Don't tell me you've forgotten him?"

"No," Dirk said cautiously. "No, I remember him."

Dolan looked from one man to the other, his eyes probing like points of steel. "Pillard said you were just acquaintances. Maybe it wasn't a very friendly acquaintance."

Jim rose easily from his chair. "We've never had any trouble," he said. "Right, Dirk?"

"Right," Dirk agreed slowly.

"Now see here!" Tom Dolan was on his feet facing the two men. "It's a rule in this camp that there's no fightin' between the men. If anybody wants a fight, come to me. I can see you two are aimin' to tangle but I'm warnin' you if you do you'll have me to settle with. Get that and get it straight."

"Sure," Jim said lightly, still looking straight at Dirk. "We understand." He turned to Dolan. "I give my word as one outlaw to another that I won't start any trouble."

"And you, Mason?" Dolan pressed his advantage.

"Sure. I give you my word, but—but this—" He spun suddenly on his heel and started toward the door. "I'll see you later, boss." He disappeared through the door.

Jim's muscles began slowly to relax. "Not very friendly today, is he?" He picked up his hat. "I think I'll unpack my stuff and wash up before feedin' time."

Tom Dolan followed him as he moved toward the door. "Your cabin will be the third from the other end on the right side," he said. As Jim stepped out onto the little veranda, he stopped. "Pillard, what kind of trouble is there between you and Mason?"

Jim looked up innocently. "I told you before there never has been any trouble between us," he said.

"Well, I can't make you tell," Dolan said resignedly. "But remember what I told you. Any trouble in this camp includes me."

"I won't forget to invite you," Jim promised and swung off the porch.

HE swept the lane between the cabins with a quick glance just in time to catch Dirk Mason turning into the second cabin from the far end on the left side. He made a mental note of that and turned to his horse. As soon as he had taken care of his horse and made the cabin assigned to him livable, he would pay a visit to his neighbor across the lane.

Thirty minutes later he knocked grimly on Dirk's door. A gruff voice inside invited him in. Jim opened the door, stepped inside, then quickly shut the door again.

Dirk was seated on his cot in the corner. At sight of Jim he leaped to his feet and away from the wall in one lightning move.

"What are you doin' here, Harper?" he asked tensely, his hand not far from his gun butt.

"Just came over for a visit with my neighbor," Jim said easily yet watching Dirk's every move with an eagle eye. "Better keep your hands in the clear!" He moved farther into the room. "Aren't you goin' to ask me to sit down?"

"I ain't askin' you to. You can do as you please."

"Maybe I'd better remember my manners and keep standin' till you sit down," Jim said significantly.

"What are you after?" Dirk waited tensely for the answer.

"You know what I'm after," Jim said grimly. "I want to ask you some questions."

"Questions?" Dirk relaxed a trifle.

"Who helped you frame my brother?"

"He wasn't framed," Dirk said hotly. "He robbed that train, then when the posse was bringing him in—"

"Hold it!" Jim's voice exploded like a bombshell. "You tell another lie and I'll drop in your tracks! Bill was talkin' to me a couple of days before the robbery. He told me how you and Pillard tried to bribe him into helpin' you rob the mail car he was workin' on. He said you talked about another fellow you called the boss. The boss must have been the one who helped you frame Bill. Neither you nor Pillard is smart enough for that. Anyway, you framed him. How isn't important. Then you and Pillard murdered him while

you were bringin' him in."

"We killed him only because we was tryin' to escape. We were deputies."

Jim's blazing eyes silenced him. "It's mighty queer how you and Pillard happened to get deputized for that job. And it's even queerer how you got Bill by himself and murdered him without the sheriff gettin' wise."

Nervously Dirk started to reach for his tobacco sack then thought better of it and returned his hand to the vicinity of his gun belt. "You can't prove a thing," he said tightly.

"You're wrong there, Mason. I have a warrant for your arrest and when I leave Paradise I'm takin' you with me."

Dirk tensed. "And when do you figure on leavin'?"

"Not just yet." Jim saw the muscles in Dirk's gun hand relax for a second time. "I intend to find out first who helped you frame Bill."

"You'll never find out from me." A light of triumph lighted his greenish-blue eyes. "And you won't be stayin' in Paradise long, Harper; at least, not on top of the sod. Do you know what happens to range dicks when Tom Dolan finds out they're in camp?"

"He won't be findin' out," Jim said softly, "for you're the only one who knows and you're not goin' to tell."

Again Dirk tightened up, anticipating gunplay. "And why not?"

A grim smile played across Jim's lips. "Dolan might hear that you were a deputy sheriff just before you came here."

Dirk caught his breath. "How did you find that out? Anyway, a U. S. Marshal is worse than a deputy sheriff. Dolan would check on you first. By that time I'd be out of here."

Jim prepared to play his ace. If he had guessed wrong— But it was more than a guess; it was sound reasoning.

He looked straight at Dirk, his head wagging slowly. "You won't be leavin'— not that quick. You're not here for the scenery. You've got some scheme in mind to make a haul here. That's your stripe. You couldn't play fair with your own grandmother. You'll be stickin' around here till you make that haul. So you won't tell Dolan who I am and I won't tell him what you were before you came here."

"Pretty sure of yourself, ain't you?" But the weak bluster was only proof of the accuracy of Jim's shot.

"I think so." Jim started backing toward the door. He might have bluffed Dirk Mason out of telling Dolan there was a U. S. Marshal in camp but he hadn't bluffed him out of taking a shot at his back if the opportunity presented itself.

He reached back and flipped open the door, then stepped quickly out into the lane.

The sun was just touching the peak that boxed in the western end of Paradise Valley when Jim left his cabin and headed for Dolan's four room cabin up the river. What Tom Dolan might tell him before supper was over would likely be extremely interesting but what he might ask him was an entirely different matter.

Jim was perplexed.

What was Dolan likely to expect Jim Pillard to know? Probably something that the pseudo-Pillard never heard of. Jim didn't attempt to fool himself. One mistake might be fatal.

He left the trail leading between the cabins and took a branch trail down to the bank of the stream. He was a little early for supper. Perhaps a little time to think over the situation he had catapulted himself into would clear his head.

He found a trail worn along the bank of the stream and he turned into it. He had gone but a short distance when he halted, his attention focused on two people seated on a log that apparently had been left there by receding flood waters. Although they had their backs to him, he easily recognized them as Star Dolan and Dirk Mason.

Jim moved forward, intent on learning what these two could have to talk about. But luck was against him. His boot struck a small rock and it in turn hit another with a sharp ping. Dirk leaped to his feet and whirled, his hand slapping the gun at his hip. But Jim was even faster. His gun gleamed in the twilight.

"I wouldn't do that, Dirk. It might not be healthy."

Star, who had come to her feet with a speed equal to Dirk's, gasped in relief. "Oh, it's—it's not Limpy."

"Were you expectin' Limpy?" Jim asked, watching the tenseness melt away

from Dirk and his hand move to a safe distance from his gun.

"What business is it of yours?" Dirk growled. "What are you doin' here?"

"Just walkin'," Jim said. "I was aimin' to wind up at Dolan's. Now I think you'd better run along. I'll entertain Miss Dolan." He motioned down the trail with his gun. With a murderous look at Jim, Dirk followed the direction of the waving gun muzzle.

"Supper's almost ready, Mr. Pillard," Star suggested rather timidly.

"Jim," he corrected with a grin, falling in step with Star as she started up the slope toward the big cabin.

A faint smile touched her lips. "All right—Jim. I just came out here for a little fresh air while supper finished cookin'," she added almost apologetically.

"You'd have been better off in the house than out here with Dirk Mason," Jim said darkly. "Say, why was he so scared of Limpy catchin' him? Does Limpy shoot everybody he catches talkin' to you?"

She nodded slightly. "Just about."

"Nice open competition here," Jim muttered in disgust. "Still, I couldn't blame Limpy for lettin' daylight through that polecat."

Star's chin came up defiantly. "Dirk is a nice fellow."

Jim stopped and faced the girl. "You think Dirk is nice? You wouldn't know a nice fellow if you saw one!"

"I won't see one," she said, a little catch in her voice. "I never will see one around here."

Jim had no answer, realizing suddenly the extent of Star Dolan's misfortune in being cooped up in Paradise.

"Anyway," Star went on, "why are you so interested in who I'm with?" She looked at him closely. "You're not much like the other fellows around here. You're—you're different."

With a shock, Jim realized his danger. He had stepped out of the character of One-shot Jim Pillard and, to make matters worse, he had made that slip right before the sharp eyes of Star Dolan. Jim felt the inevitable creeping up on him. Sooner or later Star would know for certain the truth that must now be a faint suspicion in the back of her mind.

"Of course I'm different." He laughed carelessly. "You didn't expect One-shot Jim Pillard to be like the rest of these two-bit gunmen, did you?"

"I hadn't thought much about it before," Star said slowly.

Jim increased the pace up the slope. Even the companionship of Tom Dolan, in spite of the questions he might ask, would be a sanctuary now.

IV

AFTER the last shred of the wild raspberry pie had disappeared, Tom Dolan shoved back from the table. "Like I always claim," he said, grinning, "I've got two of the best cooks in the state."

"I completely agree with you," Jim said, following Dolan's example and pushing back.

"Mother did most of the cookin'," Star defended shyly.

"Don't you think it!" Maggie Dolan denied emphatically. "Star did most of it. She told me herself she wanted to cook this meal especially for Mr. Pillard. All I did was make sure it didn't burn while it finished cookin'."

"Mother!" A warm flush swept over Star's cheeks.

Jim found it hard to remember where he was. Could this be Paradise; in fact, the home of the boss of Paradise? It seemed more like the home of some friendly valley rancher where he had dropped in for the evening.

"It makes no difference who did the cookin'," Tom Dolan was saying. "If Star did it, it was just what Maggie taught her. Would you believe it, Jim, Maggie taught her more book learnin' than most kids get at a regular school. Maggie was a teacher when I married her. When we came up here she brought a whole load of books. Took an extra pack mule to bring 'em."

"It's a good thing I brought them," Maggie defended vigorously, "or Star wouldn't know anything now. She never had any other chance to learn. Now you men get in the other room while Star and I clean up the dishes."

Tom Dolan led the way into the large room where Jim had met him that afternoon. Jim looked back through the par-

tion door at Star helping her mother clear up the table. He turned to Dolan.

"Dolan, you're not bein' fair to Star," he said bluntly, "keepin' her shut up here away from school and the kind of people she should be with and the kind of things she ought to have."

If Jim expected an outburst of righteous fury from Tom Dolan, he was surprised. Only a sigh came from him; his iron gray head drooped a little.

"I know," he said finally. "Star has had a rotten deal all her life. I'd do anything in the world for her that I could do."

Jim made the most of his advantage. "You could send Star and her mother out of here and let them get the things they've wanted all this time. You've surely got the money."

Dolan still looked at the floor. "Sure, I've got the money. But how long do you think it would be before somebody found out who they were and used them to get in here and get me?" His head suddenly snapped erect, eyes sparkling with quick anger. "But what dratted business is it of yours? I didn't get you up here to tell me how to run my family! You're here to get the low-down on this plan of Sam Hutton's. Now quit actin' like a mushy school girl and tell me how much you know!"

Jim caught his breath. Once again he had slipped out of character. One-shot Jim Pillard would certainly never have been guilty of trying to persuade Tom Dolan to risk his neck to give his wife and daughter the things they deserved. He forced his mind to the problem at hand.

"Sam wouldn't tell me much," he said. "He didn't seem to trust me."

Dolan nodded. "I can believe that. He told me your weakness—liquor. He probably was afraid you'd talk too much. But Hutton says you're a good man and I'm willin' to take his word for it. I want you to ride along on this job he mentioned; might need that gun of yours."

"What kind of a job is it?" Jim asked carefully.

"Just the kind of a job you'd expect considerin' that Hutton is doing the plannin'. Bein' a clerk in the bank at Sweetwater gives him a good chance to find out about the money shipments in and out of there. The last time he was up here he

said he thought he'd be appointed as special guard on this shipment. If he is, it will make it that much easier."

"What kind of money, gold?"

Again Dolan nodded. "Raw gold—dust and nuggets brought in by the prospectors and traded at the bank for cash. They're sendin' it up to Denver. I've been expectin' Hutton to come out some of these evenings with the final details. The shipment is to go through sometime this week."

As if in direct answer to Tom Dolan's statement, Star came into the room with a message.

"Limpy just told me Sam Hutton is here," she said.

Jim jerked around in his chair, muscles suddenly taut like over-taxed wires.

"Where is he?" Dolan asked.

"Limpy said he stopped down at one of the cabins for a dust cutter. He'll be right up."

Jim rose to his feet. "I reckon I'd better be goin'."

"No hurry," Dolan said. He turned to his daughter. "Send Hutton in here as soon as he comes up to the house."

As Star left, Dolan turned back to Jim. "You might as well be in on this. Maybe Hutton wouldn't tell you about this raid while you were down on the plains where you could spill the whole thing to the world in general but you won't do any harm by telling it here."

But Jim continued toward the door. If he wasn't out of the house before Sam Hutton came in, his game would be finished. Hutton wouldn't know that he was Marshal Jim Harper but he would know that he wasn't One-shot Jim Pillard which would lead to the same drastic consequences.

"You can do your plannin' better alone," he said, "then give me the low-down tomorrow."

He stepped quickly through the door onto the porch and down the steps. He made his way in long strides toward his cabin. Halfway there a heavy set man stepped hurriedly out of one of the cabins and almost bumped into Jim. He swung up the lane toward Dolan's cabin without a backward glance. Sam Hutton was in a hurry and Jim had no desire to impede his haste.

JIM came to his cabin but he didn't go in. He leaned against the corner completely hidden in shadow and waited, his eyes never leaving the door of Tom Dolan's cabin where Sam Hutton had disappeared. If his hunch was right, Hutton would be coming out soon and making a visit to another cabin not far away.

There was a marked similarity between this train robbery Hutton was planning with Dolan and the one in which Pillard and Mason had tried to force his brother Bill to become a partner. It was too much of a coincidence to be ignored. There must be some connection and Jim thought he saw the link that coupled them together. If only he could be sure!

For half an hour he waited and watched. Then he suddenly came erect as light streamed from Dolan's doorway and a man stepped through onto the porch. A moment later the light was snuffed out and the dim figure of a man came swinging down the lane between the cabins.

Jim shrank back until he was almost like a part of the cabin wall itself. The man walked past and rapped on the door of the cabin that stood second from the end on the left side. That was Dirk Mason's cabin and the man, Jim had made sure, was the same one who had gone into Dolan's a half hour before, Sam Hutton.

Like a shadow, Jim crossed the lane between the cabins and dodged along the back of the row until he came to Mason's shack. There he halted, ears cocked to pick up every sound made on the other side of the wall. The conversation of the two men inside the cabin came clearly to him as he crouched against the wall.

"So you've made your arrangements with Dolan? Now where do we come in, Sam?"

Hutton laughed. "We come in with the gold. You stay with Dolan till after the train is stopped. I'm goin' to be a special guard with the gold, you know. I'll give in to Dolan's men and they'll take the two boxes I'm guardin'."

"Then how do we get it away from them?" Dirk asked dubiously.

Hutton laughed again in felicitous anticipation. "We don't. Those boxes won't have the gold. The real boxes of gold will be hidden back in the corner of the car.

That's where you come in. You help me sneak those boxes out and we'll hit the trail. Easiest hold-up we'll ever pull. Dolan stops the train for us which is something we couldn't do alone and besides that, Dolan will get the blame for it all."

"What about a pack horse? We can't carry that stuff away on our backs."

"I'll have that all arranged. After I leave here tonight I'm goin' to get a pack horse and a saddle horse and cache them down the river about a mile from the spot where the hold-up will be. Sometime tomorrow night while the rest are gettin' the logs on the tracks you get those horses in close so we can get away fast."

Dirk's guttural laugh rolled across the cabin. "Sounds almost too easy. We never had pickin's like this before."

Jim shifted positions against the cabin wall. A sudden movement behind him made him whirl. He caught only a glimpse of someone dodging out of sight behind an adjacent cabin. Another eavesdropper, Jim decided, apparently frightened away by his movement. Who could it be and why had he picked this particular time and place to listen in on things not meant for his ears? Jim wondered. The sound of a familiar name jerked his attention back to the pair inside.

"Yeah, if Bill Harper had played along with us we could have made several hauls nearly as easy as this."

"Speakin' of Harper," Dirk said, instinctively lowering his voice to the point where Jim had to strain his ears to understand, "remember I told you Bill Harper had a brother who was a marshal? Well, that marshal is here in Paradise now."

"Here?" Hutton's voice lost its braggadocio. "How is he gettin' by?"

"He's posin' as One-shot Jim Pillard."

"Pillard? Why, Dolan said Pillard was up at his place just before I came. I was goin' over to see him as soon as I left here. You must be off your nut. I sent Pillard up here myself."

"Maybe you sent him but he didn't get here—and Harper did. That's the important thing. He's got a warrant for my arrest and Pillard's, too. Probably got Pillard now. He was in here this afternoon tryin' to make me tell who framed his brother. He's sure it wasn't Pillard or me."

There was a nervous note in Hutton's voice. "You didn't tell him?"

"Of course not. As long as he can't find out who planned that frame-up he won't do a thing. Of course, he wouldn't have much chance here in Paradise, anyway. If I'd thought he would have, I'd have called him this afternoon right in front of Dolan."

"We've got to get him out of the way—quick," Hutton said thoughtfully.

"How? Are you goin to frame him like you did his brother?"

"No need of all that bother. There are quicker and surer ways here in Paradise."

Jim rose to his feet. He had heard all he needed to hear. Inside were the two men who, along with Pillard, were responsible for his brother's death. He eased his gun out of its holster and stepped around to the door. If he could arrest these two he would take his chances on getting them out of Paradise in the dark.

He kicked open the door and stepped inside, gun gleaming in his hand. The two men froze to their seats.

"Get your hands on top of the table."

Slowly the two complied. Hutton's small eyes took on a cunning light. "You're Harper, I take it—Marshal Jim Harper?"

"That's right," Jim said. "Bill Harper was my brother. I'm takin' you both in to stand trial for his murder."

"Wait a minute, Harper," Hutton said, his fingers tapping the table top around the base of the kerosene lamp. "You've got to have a reason for makin' arrests. I wasn't even in the posse that killed your brother."

"It won't be hard to prove that you framed him with the robbery and even planned the way to have him killed."

Still Hutton seemed unruffled. "You have to have a motive before you can prove that a man has committed a murder."

"We've got it," Jim said grimly. "Bill wouldn't play along with your men, Pillard and Mason, so you had to get him out of the way and get somebody in his place who would help out. We have evidence and reliable witnesses to bear that out. Now both of you stand up and back toward me where I can relieve you of those guns."

Slowly the two men started to obey. Hutton leaned far forward as he rose until his head almost touched the lamp.

With a sudden puff he extinguished the flame in the lamp and plunged the cabin into inky blackness.

Jim dropped back against the wall and crouched. Orange flame ripped across the blackness toward him as Dirk and Sam Hutton brought their guns into play. Jim answered the shots and dodged away from the returning bullets.

Suddenly the door burst open and the two outlaws darted out. Jim sent two more shots after them then the hammer of his gun fell on an empty cylinder. He leaped to the door, fingered shells from his gun belt. But he caught only a parting glimpse of the two men as they disappeared into an alley.

Up and down the rows of cabins men were rushing wildly into the open.

Jim ducked across the lane to his own cabin and before any resemblance to order came over the excited men Jim was in their midst feigning ignorance and asking questions with an intensity equal to the most curious.

V

PARADISE buzzed all the next day with preparations for the train hold-up. The sun was less than an hour high when Jim finally started up the lane toward Dolan's cabin to receive his instructions.

All day long he had kept an eye open for Dirk. Hutton was gone, he knew. And apparently Dirk had deemed it wise to keep himself out of the public eye for the present.

He was over half way up the lane when a voice, raised a trifle in anger, brought him to an abrupt halt.

"Let me go, Limpy!"

Jim needed no interpreter to tell him it was Star Dolan's voice nor did he have any doubt as to who and what was causing her anger. Quickly he turned into the alley between two cabins. Down on the trail that paralleled the little stream Star was trying to pull her wrist out of Limpy Mundane's grasp.

"Listen, honey," Limpy said a little thickly, "we're ridin' out in less than an hour and, who knows, maybe I won't be ridin' back. You've been my girl for a month now and you've never even let me put my arm around you."

Star's face was flushed. "The only reason I've been your girl is because you've killed everybody who said I wasn't."

"Sure." Limpy grinned. "It's been the rule here for a long time that you belong to the fellow who is fighter enough to keep you. I'm that fellow. Now come on; give me a kiss." He jerked her toward him.

Jim waited for no more. He covered the distance down to the river bank in long strides.

"That will be enough of that, Limpy!"

Limpy whirled, cold hatred suddenly blazing in his eyes. "What business is it of yours?"

"I'm makin' it my business. Does Tom Dolan know what's goin' on?"

A harsh guttural chuckle preceded Limpy's answer. "No. And I don't reckon he'll ever find out. Star's afraid to tell him—afraid he'll pick a fight and I'll gun him down. Then I'd be boss of Paradise."

"Yeah?" Jim said mockingly. "I think I'll sit in on your little game now, Limpy."

Limpy's bravado vanished. "You're goin' to try to take Star away from me?"

"The way I understand it," Jim said slowly, "the fellow who can whip all contenders gets to claim her as his girl. Right?"

"Yeah," Limpy said thickly, "that's how it is."

"I'm claimin' her as my girl as of now," Jim said. "Call me?"

Limpy cast a furtive glance up the slope then looked back at Jim. "Sure, I'm callin' you."

But still his hand stayed clear of his gun.

"How do you want to fight?" Jim asked and watched the surprise in Limpy's face as it dawned on him there could be other ways of settling this dispute than in gunsmoke. "Guns or fists?"

Courage flowed back into Limpy's face. "Name it," he said recklessly.

"Fists," Jim said and began unbuckling his gun belt.

Almost eagerly, Limpy followed suit. Jim had a feeling he was making a mistake. This would be the way to settle such an argument in Sweetwater or Pine Springs but this was Paradise and here barking guns was the common language. He glanced at Star standing to one side fascinated like a bird watching a snake.

Limpy was a wily fighter. Cautiously he danced around looking for an opening. His short leg seemed to be no handicap. Jim waited for an opportunity, then lashed out suddenly as Limpy's guard dropped an inch too low. The blow caught Limpy flush on the nose.

With a wild bellow of rage Limpy threw caution to the winds and charged in. Jim retreated warily, punching vicious short jabs inside Limpy's flaying arms until the gunman backed away to reconsider his mad attack.

But Jim gave him no rest. He followed relentlessly, driving home harder and more telling blows. Limpy attempted a rally but he charged straight into a mighty right swing. With a groan he sank down.

Jim leaned over and shook him. Limpy's eyes opened slowly and he shook his head groggily.

"Had enough?" Jim asked.

Limpy nodded. "Yeah. She's your girl."



"Now then," Jim went on sternly as Limpy rose uncertainly to his feet. "Get your stuff and clear out of here."

"Nobody but Dolan tells me when to leave Paradise," Limpy said defiantly.

"I'm tellin' you right now!" Jim said threateningly. "If you don't like it, get your gun and we'll settle it in smoke."

Limpy hesitated a moment. "All right, Pillard," he said finally, "you win. I'll get out." He picked up his gun belt. "But Dolan will have something to say about this. Mark my words!"

"I'll look out for myself. As for you, if you ever come back to Paradise, make sure you come shootin'."

Limpy spun on his heel and stalked away. Jim turned to speak to Star but he encountered only empty space. Star was already disappearing between two cabins up the slope. With a shrug Jim headed toward Dolan's cabin.

DOLAN met him on the porch. "About time you showed up," he said. "I was beginnin' to think you wasn't comin'."

"I made a little detour," Jim said by way of explanation.

"We're leavin' pretty quick," Dolan said. "I'm dependin' on you as my right hand man. I want to make sure you've got everything straight. Now it's about a three hour ride to Signal Canyon where we'll hold up the train. As soon as we get there we'll start draggin' logs onto the tracks for a barricade. There'll be no more trains goin' along there tonight. After we get the track blocked we'll get what sleep we can and be ready when the train we want comes along about sun-up. Everything clear?"

"I think so. Got it planned just how to take care of the train crew and guards?"

"I'll assign every man to a certain job after we look over the layout there. I've detailed a couple of boys to watch for some dirty work I got wind of."

Jim flashed a searching glance at Dolan but the outlaw leader went on, apparently oblivious to Jim's sudden interest.

"The boys are up at the corral now gettin' the horses ready. We'd better be movin'." He stepped off the porch.

"I'm a little short on ammunition," Jim said. "I'll go around by my cabin and pick up some more and meet you at the corral."

"Wait a minute." Dolan stopped a stride away from the porch. "Who's that fellow ridin' off toward the trees. Looks like Limpy." He pointed to a rider angling up the slope from the corral.

"It is Limpy," Jim confirmed. "I ordered him out of Paradise."

"You?" Dolan asked sharply. "What business is it of yours to kick my men out?"

"I make some things my business," Jim said bluntly. "He was mistreatin' Star and I took a hand. He claimed she was his girl."

"His girl?" Dolan exploded, his indignation at Jim smothered in a rising flood of anger directed at Limpy. "Why haven't I heard of this?"

"Because Star was afraid you would pick a fight with Limpy and get yourself hurt."

"Get myself hurt?" Dolan's eyes blazed. "Let that little short legged runt hurt me? Why, I'd fill him so full of lead he'd weigh as much as a horse! And I'll do it yet if I ever lay eyes on him again!"

"I've got first bid," Jim said, a touch of humor in his voice. "I warned him not to come back unless he came shootin'."

"You'll never get a crack at him if I see him first," Dolan said with a note of finality. He whirled toward the corral. "Hurry up. It's time we was ridin'."

Jim hurried down the lane toward his cabin. He glanced up at the slope where Limpy was nearing the trees. He stopped in surprise as a rider came out of the fringe of trees and met Limpy. Both riders halted and held a conference. Jim squinted his eyes against the last rays of the sun. If his eyes weren't deceiving him, that was Dirk Mason who had ridden out to meet Limpy. What could Dirk have to talk over with Limpy? Jim wondered. Birds of a feather flock together and certainly Limpy and Dirk were of a similar plumage.

Thoughtfully Jim opened his cabin door. His hand flashed to his gun as he realized that someone was in the room. Then it came away guiltily as he faced a surprised and defiant girl.

"What's the idea?" Jim asked, indicating his personal belongings scattered over the bed and floor.

Star breathed heavily, her black eyes blazing. "You double-crosser! You've been actin' mighty funny for a fellow dodgin' the law and now I know why."

She held up the U. S. Marshal badge she had been clutching in her hand.

Jim kicked the door shut behind him. He heard the hoofs of the horses churning the dust up by the corral. Tom Dolan was leading his men out of Paradise on another raid. He would expect Jim to catch up later.

"You've been gettin' into things that wasn't much of your business, don't you think?" he asked softly, mentally cursing himself for not taking Sheriff Ben Cresset's advice and leave the star in Pine Springs.

"You're here after Dad, aren't you?" Wild fear, almost hysteria, was in her eyes.

Jim shook his head. "No. I don't have a warrant for your father. I'm here after another man and I think I'll soon have him."

"You're after Dad! I know it!"

The rumble of pounding hoofs came closer. Very soon they would be right outside the cabin. Star made a sudden rush for the door but Jim caught her.

"Sorry, but this is as far as you go. You'd make a mess of things if you got out there."

"I'm goin' to warn Dad!" she panted, fighting desperately to break his hold. "You can't get away with this!"

"I can try," he said, a twinkle coming into his eye. He tightened his arm around her shoulders. "But you'll have to behave yourself."

He anticipated her scream just in time. He clamped his hand quickly over her mouth, stifling the outcry. The horses thundered past and their echo gradually died away.

"Sorry I had to do this, Star," Jim said apologetically. "But you didn't leave me any choice. I'll not touch your father. I give you my word."

He listened for the sound of the departing horsemen but even the echo had faded into the hush of the twilight. They were out of the reach of any warning Star might sound. He took his hand away from her mouth. Still he didn't release her.

"I know what you're thinkin'," he said when she held her silence. "If I'd just let you go you might be able to wave your father back. I'm afraid you won't get to do that, either. I'm goin' to lock you in here when I leave."

Star's blazing eyes burned up into his. "Don't you dare!"

Jim grinned. "I've already dared worse things than that. You can get out before long. The lock is bolted on and the burs are on the inside. If you work real hard you can probably get the lock off the door in twenty minutes. By that time we'll all be out of the valley." He became serious. "Believe me, Star. Nothing is goin' to happen to your father."

"I don't believe a word you say!" she retorted fiercely. "Now let me go! You're no better than—than these men you call outlaws!"

"Maybe I'm worse," he said, grinning. "But you've given me an idea. How many of your outlaws ever did this?" With a swift gesture he leaned over and kissed her full on the lips. Then in a move equally as swift, he released her and stepped to the table where he scooped up a box of cartridges.

Behind him he heard Star gasp. But she made no move either to punish him for his audacity or to get to the door ahead of him. When he reached the door he looked back. Star stood where he had left her, surprise and anger mingled in her expression. He swung the door open.

"Don't worry about your father. He'll be back tomorrow. In the meantime, you be a good girl." He grinned as anger overcame her surprise and color flooded back into her face. He shut the door and snapped the lock.

He strode off toward the corral. Tom Dolan and his gang were far ahead and this was one train robbery he didn't want to miss.

THE first rays of the morning sun threw a long shadow behind the huge pile of logs heaped across the railroad tracks. The night's work had been thorough. No train would crash through that barricade.

The train was due any minute. When it arrived, Jim's job would be to assist in subduing the engine crew. Jim was thankful to Dolan for assigning him to a position where he could see almost the entire waiting gang. Tom Dolan himself was but a short distance away waiting to help on a special assignment that only he and two others knew about. Farther down,

close to the place where the mail car should come to a halt, Dirk Mason lay hidden behind a huge log. On the way out from Paradise Dirk had held his peace concerning Jim's standing with the law and Jim had been satisfied to say nothing of Dirk's proposed treachery.

The tracks began to hum. Dolan gave the signal for all his men to be ready. The humming rails increased their volume. Then Jim picked up the sound of the locomotive holding down its speed for the sharp curves ahead. As it rumbled around the last curve, the engineer took one look at the barricade and applied the brakes. He brought the train to a screeching halt.

Gunmen appeared from all sides brandishing their weapons. The train crew, taking no chances, leaped into the clear, their hands in the air.

It had worked easily.

Jim started on the run, not for the engine but for the mail car. Dirk Mason and Sam Hutton would surely try to make away with the gold and this, Jim decided, would be a good time to finish the job he had started two nights before in Dirk's cabin in Paradise.

He had gone but a few steps when he halted suddenly at the sound of a familiar voice.

"Put 'em up, Dolan! This is the end of the trail."

Jim dodged behind a tree where he couldn't be seen from Dolan's position and made a quick survey of this new development. That voice belonged to Sheriff Ben Cresset. Apparently Cresset had watched the pass out of Paradise Valley, certain that soon Dolan's gang would be coming out on the mission of plunder Hutton had mentioned in the letter found on Pillard. Then, unable to face the whole gang or prevent the hold-up, he had followed them here and now, while every man was concentrating on his part in the robbery, was striking his blow by capturing the leader of the gang.

Jim peered around the trunk of the tree. Cresset was herding Dolan, hands above his head, back out of sight of the train.

"I always knew you'd pick me up some time, Ben." Dolan's words carried faintly to Jim above the commotion around the

train. "Who tipped you off to this hold-up?"

Jim strained his ears to catch the sheriff's answer. "Oh, a fortune teller over in Sweetwater told me."

"Sweetwater?" Dolan's voice rose in surprise. Then followed a string of colorful epithets directed chiefly at one Sam Hutton.

Jim fingered his gun butt undecidedly. After all, Ben Cresset represented the same law he did. But Jim had practically promised Star Dolan that her father would return from this raid safely. If he didn't do something—

A sudden outburst of shooting from the direction of the mail car brought him around in a flash. Were Dirk and Hutton making their getaway? He broke into a run toward the commotion.

He arrived in time to see Dirk and Sam Hutton riding full speed away from the scene. Two of Dolan's men were firing at them, deliberately aiming high. Before Jim could free his gun of the holster, they were out of range frantically digging in their spurs.

"Man, are they scared!" one of the men chuckled. "Don't reckon we'll be bothered with them around Paradise any more."

The answer flashed across Jim's mind. That had been Star he had seen dodging away from Dirk Mason's cabin the other night. She had overheard the plot and had told her father. Hutton's plan had backfired. Already other men were busy dragging two heavy boxes out of the car toward the pack horses.

Jim raced back toward the spot where he had last seen Dolan and the sheriff. But they were gone. The sheriff had lost no time in getting Dolan out of reach of his men before they discovered his absence.

Jim headed for his horse. Now was the time to cut loose from this gang. There was no point in going back to Paradise. The men he was after had not been heading that way the last he had seen them. If he could just get away before any of the gang noticed. But he was too late.

"Hey, Pillard. Give us a hand here with these boxes. We ain't got all day!"

Slowly Jim turned back. Now he would have to await a more convenient time to break away which probably meant returning all the way to Paradise.

VI

THE returning caravan of outlaws had scarcely reached the hitching rack in front of Dolan's big cabin when Star accosted it. Her accusing eyes flashed over the riders then settled on Jim's face.

"Where's Dad?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "He's been killed or else the sheriff arrested him! And it's all your fault! You had it planned that way!"

Jim's defense seemed to lack weight. "He isn't hurt at all and I didn't have anything planned against him."

"Then where is he?"

Jim made no reply; one of the men answered instead. "The sheriff got him. At least, that's what Pillard says. Caught him right while we was gettin' the gold."

The men dismounted. Two of them lifted the heavy boxes off the pack saddle and started into the cabin with them. Star faced Jim, tears trembling on her eyelashes.

"You had it planned with the sheriff! You wanted Dad to get caught!" She whirled toward the other men. "He isn't even Jim Pillard! He's a—"

"Hey, Star," one of the men called from the doorway of the cabin, "who's this jasper?"

Jim looked up. The two men had stepped aside with their boxes to allow a man to come out. Jim caught his breath. Across the porch and down the steps came One-shot Jim Pillard, deliberate, confident, a murderous gleam in his eyes. He stopped in front of Jim.

"I hear you call yourself Jim Pillard," he said softly.

This was the test; Jim's bluff had been called. And the only argument that would be accepted would have to come from his gun.

"That's right," he said slowly. "Any objections?"

"You bet! I'm Jim Pillard and I can prove it."

"How?"

"With this." Pillard tapped the gun at his hip.

Jim nodded. All eyes were on him now. If he intended to dispel the doubt already instilled by Pillard in the minds of these outlaws he would have to call the turn without delay. Nor did he have the slight-

est desire to do otherwise. Here stood the man, Jim was certain, who had killed his brother. It was admitted that Pillard and Dirk Mason had been the two with his brother when he had been killed. Jim doubted if Dirk had the nerve to murder a man in cold blood but he had no such doubts about Pillard. Pillard was a killer and now he was ready to add the second Harper to his list of victims.

"You can reach for your gun when you're ready," Jim said evenly.

A heavy expectant silence fell over the group of watching men. Then through that silence echoed the drum of a running horse. The men jerked their attention away from the impending battle. A rider was racing down the trail from the pass. He splashed across the little stream and turned into the lane between the cabins.

"It's Dolan!" one of the men exclaimed.

Jim confirmed this with a glance then turned back to Pillard. No time now to wonder how Dolan had escaped from Cresset. It might be better not to let this matter wait until Dolan arrived with any scrap of information he might have picked up while in the sheriff's custody.

"We've got time to settle this now," he said, eyes locked with Pillard's.

"Suits me," Pillard said, dropping into a lower crouch.

But Star threw herself in front of Jim, fear showing plainly in her face. "Not now, Jim! Wait till Dad gets here. Maybe there is some other way to settle this."

Jim shook his head. "This is the only way. Anyhow, isn't this the way you wanted it?"

She bit her under lip. "No, Jim," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Please wait."

A warm glow swept over him as her grip tightened on his arm. "All right," he said quietly. "I'll wait."

Deliberately he turned his back on Pillard. Tom Dolan brought his horse to a halt a few feet from his men.

One of the men voiced the question in all their minds. "How did you get away from the sheriff?"

Dolan swung out of the saddle. "Then you know what happened?" He looked around at the nodding heads. "Well, we hadn't got very far till we met Cresset's deputy, a red headed kid with lots of grit

but no gumption. This kid told the sheriff one of their prisoners had escaped. He said his name was Pillard but the sheriff explained that it was just some jasper who wanted to be tough and claimed to be Pillard."

"I reckon we might know something about him," one of the men said significantly.

The import of the remark was lost on Dolan. "The sheriff seemed mighty anxious to get on this fellow's trail," he went on, "so he turned me over to the kid and he lit out after him. After Cresset left I didn't have much trouble trickin' the kid and gettin' away."

"Which way did this fellow go—the fellow who called himself Pillard?" Star asked.

"The kid said he was headin' this way. Cresset went back a ways to pick up the trail."

"I got here, all right," Pillard said sharply from the other side of the crowd where he was still waiting for Jim to turn back to the fight. "And it happens that I am Jim Pillard."

Dolan quickly appraised the stranger he had failed to notice in his excitement. "I'm afraid you're wrong, Stranger. This fellow here is Jim Pillard and I reckon he's got a gun that can prove it."

"I'm waitin' for him to use it," Pillard said sarcastically.

Dolan turned to Star. "How did this fellow get past the guards at the pass?"

"He didn't," Star said. "Mike stopped him, then when he said his name was Pillard, he brought him down to wait for you."

Dolan spoke to Jim. "Who is he, Jim? Ever see him before?"

"I had a little trouble with him down in Pine Springs just before I came up here. I never thought he'd follow me up here, claimin' to be me just to get in."

"Well," Dolan said resolutely, "there's only one way to settle this. Get back and give them room," he ordered his men. "It's a safe bet the fellow who stays on his feet will be Pillard."

Star was still clinging to Jim's arm but he gently pushed her to one side. Again his arm tensed, fingers fashioned like claws. His eyes fastened on Pillard trying to forecast that lightning move.

Each seemed to read the other's mind. Two hands darted down simultaneously; two guns flashed up together; two shots crashed almost as one. But one shot was the smallest fraction of a second ahead of the other. Pillard's bullet tore through the left sleeve of Jim's shirt, digging into the fleshy part of the arm. Jim's bullet went true.

"Well," Dolan said after the echo of the shots had bounced back from the forest wall on either side, "I guess that proves who you are—Jim Pillard."

One of the men suddenly threw up his head, sniffing the air. "I smell smoke," he said. "Wood smoke."

Just then Maggie Dolan came running out of the cabin waving frantically up the valley. "Fire!" she screamed. "Forest fire!"

ALL eyes flashed up the valley. A heavy column of smoke was rising above the trees at the extreme upper end of the valley. It was spreading rapidly. Immediately Tom Dolan took command.

"Get all the axes and shovels you can find!" he ordered. "We'll have to fell some trees and dig away the pine needles down below that, then start a backfire. Hurry, everybody!"

Jim spun away toward his own cabin. There was an ax standing in the corner behind the door, he knew. The wound in his arm was beginning to burn like fire but that would have to wait. If the wind should grow a little stronger it might sweep that fire over the entire valley.

As he came out of his cabin with the ax he saw the guards who had been stationed at the pass riding full speed down the slope. Already Star was saddling two horses for herself and her mother. In five minutes Paradise would be empty.

Jim joined the others and, with Dolan in the lead, raced up the open valley. At the fringe of trees, Dolan split them into small groups and sent them farther ahead to dig trenches through the mats of pine needles or to fell trees preparatory to setting a back fire.

It was then that it struck Jim with the force of a blow that there was something almost uncanny about the way this fire had got started. There was not a cloud in the sky; it couldn't have been started

by lightning. No man ever got up into this part of Paradise Valley unless he came from Paradise itself. That meant— That was it. Someone from Paradise had started it! Who? Jim thought he knew the answer.

By hard riding Dirk Mason and Sam Hutton could have beaten the main body of Dolan's men back to Paradise. They would have been unchallenged by the guards at the pass. If they had come up to this end of the valley they could have started the fire and right now would be riding back toward Dolan's cabin to get the gold their trickery had failed to get for them earlier that morning.

Jim dropped behind the other two men in his detail. As soon as the trees cut him off from their vision he reined around sharply and drove his horse recklessly back toward the open valley.

Breaking into the clear he headed straight for the corral a half mile away. If he hurried, he reasoned, he should be able to get his horse in the corral and himself securely hidden in Dolan's cabin before Dirk or Hutton could get there from up the valley where the fire had been started.

Before he reached the corral, however, he discovered that his reasoning was all wrong. Besides the pack horse and Pillard's horse, two other horses were standing at Dolan's hitch rack. Jim needed no more than a glance to assure him that they belonged to Dirk and Hutton. That glance also told him that the horses were not lathered or even breathing heavy. They couldn't have just finished a long hard run. That seemed to blast his theory that Dirk and Hutton had started the fire in order to draw everybody away from camp so they could get the gold boxes.

Still they were apparently taking advantage of everyone's absence to get the gold. But the coincidence of the fire, if it was a coincidence, would have to wait until later to be explained.

Jim dismounted at the corral gate and left the reins trailing. He started on a swinging run toward Dolan's cabin. Maybe he could surprise them as they came out.

He succeeded after a fashion but the surprise was shared almost equally by all concerned. Jim was still racing toward the corner of the building when Dirk came

through the door followed closely by Hutton. Each carried a heavy box.

They saw Jim a split second after he realized that once again his reasoning had been wrong. Dirk and Hutton dropped their boxes and clawed for their guns, no question in their minds as to the course of action required. Jim sank his heels in the grass, his hand streaking for his hip.

The two outlaws were a trifle slower on the draw than Jim and they had the added disadvantage of being off balance after dropping the heavy boxes. Jim's first shot caught Hutton squarely in the chest. Dirk fired a hasty shot that snapped harmlessly past Jim's ear. Jim's second shot silenced Dirk's gun for all time.

Jim advanced to the porch and paused, looking down at the two outlaws lying crumpled over the gold boxes. Then slowly he turned back toward his horse. Never in his three years as marshal had he been called on to deal out justice more quickly or more decisively.

Twenty minutes later he was astride his horse holding a long lead rope to which were fastened four more horses. His few belongings were packed tightly in his bed-roll tied behind the cantle of his saddle. The boxes of gold were back in the bags on the pack horses while Pillard's, Hutton's, and Mason's horses each carried its master tied across the saddle.

Jim led his strange caravan down the lane between the cabins. His work in Paradise was finished. A glance up the valley showed him that the fire was already diminishing and with it the danger to Paradise. Perhaps he could get out of the valley before any of the fire fighters returned.

He had scarcely passed the cabins when a rider coming down from the pass splashed across the little stream. Jim reined in as he recognized Sheriff Ben Cresset.

"Little late, Sheriff," Jim greeted him. "I was just bringing Pillard to you. How did you get in here?"

"Pass was unguarded." The sheriff looked beyond Jim to the three bodies tied across the saddles. "Pillard have some pals?"

Jim nodded. "Those other two are the fellows I came after. A fellow named Sam Hutton and your old deputy, Dirk Mason."

"Mason?" The sheriff's face blanched. He spurred past Jim toward the horses on the lead rope.

"You didn't know you had a crook for a deputy, did you, Cresset? He was one of—" Jim broke off, his eyes fastened on the sheriff's trembling hand as he reached out to touch Dirk Mason's body as if to convince himself that it was real. "What's wrong, Cresset?" Jim pulled his horse around toward the sheriff in alarm.

"Nothing," Cresset whispered hoarsely, pinching his lower lip between his teeth. "Everything's—all right." For a minute he hung his head on his chest, then he brought it up determinedly, almost proudly. His breath was coming in rapid jerks. Just a trace of moisture damped each eyelid, making the lashes cling together.

"Jim," he said huskily, "I've got something I reckon I'd ought to tell you. I knew I was hirin' a crook when Dirk was workin' for me. And I was pretty sure he wasn't dead when he disappeared up this way. But if I had known you was after him I don't reckon I would have helped you get in here. For you see, Dirk's name wasn't Mason; it was Cresset. He was my son."

JIM sat stunned for a moment. "I'm sorry, Sheriff," he said finally.

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I knew it was headin' for this. I tried every way I could to straighten him out but it was no use. I thought maybe he would be all right when he came to work for me as deputy but I guess there just wasn't any good in him. This was the only way it could end. I'm—I'm glad it's over."

Slowly the sheriff reined his horse around and started back across the ford and up the trail. Silently Jim watched his broad back as he rode up the trail, his head sagging forward on his chest. A lawman with an outlaw son! Fate had given Ben Cresset a difficult role to play.

"Jim!"

Jim turned back toward the lane leading up to Dolan's cabin, his brain suddenly soaring up out of the depths. He recognized that voice.

"Are you leavin'?" Star drew rein beside him but her eyes were on the three horses with their gruesome burdens.

"My work's done here," Jim said. "Those are the three men I came after and not your father."

"I guess I knew that you weren't after Dad yesterday when you told me," she murmured, "but—but I was scared."

"I reckon I can't blame you for that." He looked up the valley across the glade beyond the cabins for the returning fire fighters but the glade was empty. "Where's the rest? Still fightin' the fire?"

She nodded. "I thought I heard some shots down here so I came back as soon as I could get away. The fire wasn't so very big after all and it was in a little three cornered patch between the forks of the river. It couldn't get away."

"Know what started it?"

Again she nodded. "Limpy. Dad caught him just a little way from there. They had a fight. Limp's dead," she finished, her voice a dull monotone.

"I reckon Limpy was in cahoots with Hutton and Mason. He started that fire just to get everybody away from camp so these two could get the gold. Well, I'd better be hittin' the trail."

"Can't you stay?"

Something in her voice caused Jim to stop, his eyes seeking her face. "I'm afraid I can't," he said, his voice betraying the sudden emotional turmoil rising within him. "You see, I've got to deliver a few things," he waved his hand at the four horses behind him, "to the sheriff at Pine Springs. Then I'll have to go on and make a report at headquarters." He paused, his eyes searching her face. "But I'm comin' back, Star; I promise. Remember that fight I had with Limpy?"

She nodded.

"Remember what that fight was about?"

Her eyes dropped. A tinge of pink colored her cheeks. Again she nodded.

"I don't reckon you've forgotten the reward I was to get for winnin' that fight? I'm claimin' that reward, Star, and I'm comin' back to make sure nobody takes it away from me."

"You won't be comin' back after Dad?" A trace of the old fear shone in her eyes.

"No," he promised, "it won't be your father I'll be after next time. It will be you. I'm comin' back if I have to rob a bank so they'll let me in!"

LAW-STAR TROUBLE

By *CHUCK MARTIN*

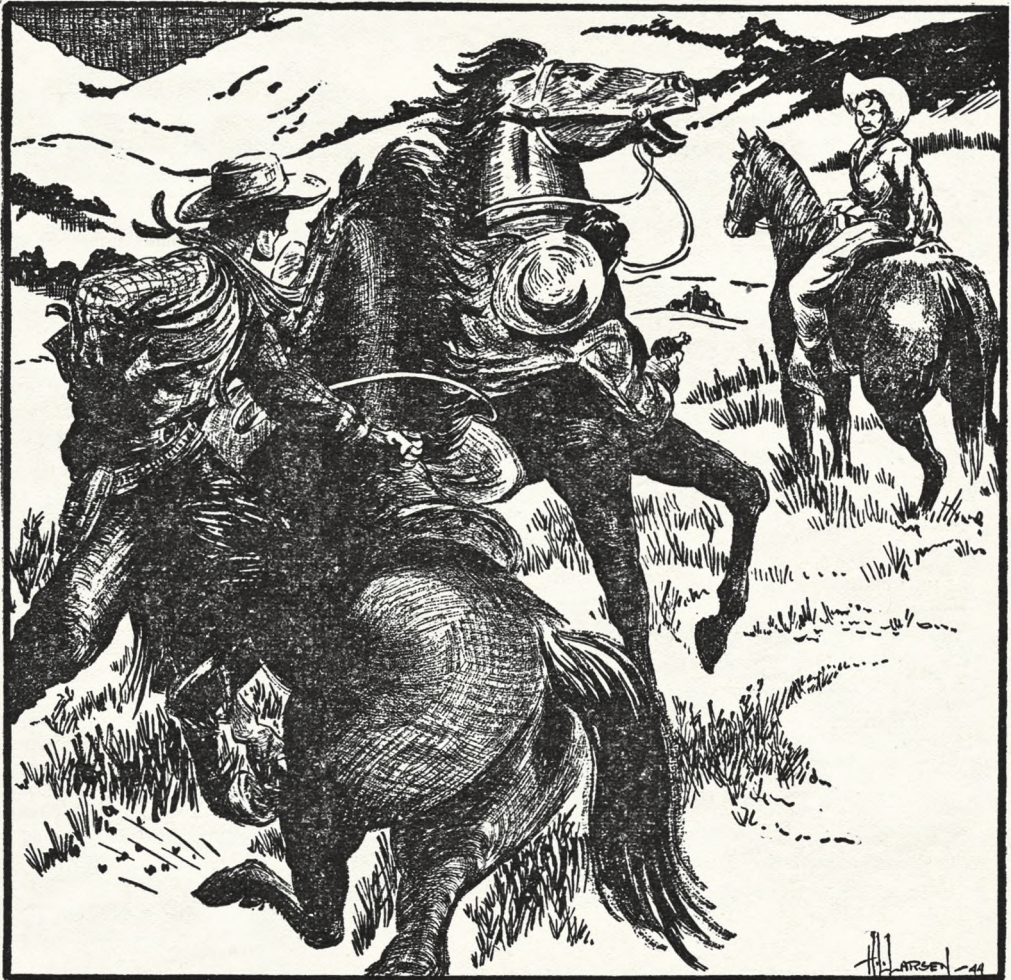
Stillman's hardcase crew reserved a special niche for badge-wearers. And that was on burly Joad Rankin's carved gun-handle.

BOW LANGTRY was talking business with Judge Crail Thompson just outside the court room door. Neither of the two men heard the argument which preceded the flight of old Willie Gowers through the swinging doors of the Lucky Star saloon.

Willie Gowers was a barfly and the town bum of Singletree, and he was also swamper in the saloon on those rare occa-

sions when he was sober. He tumbled off the high boardwalk into the dusty street just as a wide-shouldered bouncer hustled through the doors to finish what he had started inside.

Joad Rankin was a fighting man with the marks of his trade stamped on his scarred features, and in the notches on the handle of his heavy six-shooter. He was six feet tall, weighed a hundred and ninety pounds,



and he worked for Rod Stillman, the boss of Singletree.

Gowers groaned, sat up, and climbed unsteadily to his feet. His eyes were almost closed from the beating he had taken from Rankin who watched from the boardwalk. Gowers reached for a filthy blue bandanna in his right hip pocket to wipe the blood from his battered face.

Rankin struck for his holstered gun with the speed of long practice. The .45 Colt cleared leather with a deafening roar as Rankin pressed trigger on the draw, and Willie Gowers went down like a wind-blown pine. His worn boots thudded a time or two in the thick dust, stopped abruptly, with the toes sagging outward. Whatever soul Gowers had possessed had fled to his maker.

A tall man stepped from the Marshal's office next door to the court room. Tom Sherwood was fifty-five, straight as a tall pine, with a thick thatch of snowy white hair under his black Stetson. Sherwood had been city marshal of Singletree for twenty years, and he had never asked for any help in the discharging of his law duties.

Bow Langtry stiffened and then relaxed. He had offered to help stubborn old Tom Sherwood one other time, and he had not forgotten the stern rebuff with which the old lawdog had refused his offer.

"God!" Judge Thompson muttered under his breath. "Tom is going to breach that killer."

Sherwood stopped on the boardwalk, looked down at the body of Gowers, and faced Rankin. A tall well-dressed man of thirty-five stood in the doorway of the saloon, watching his bouncer and the old marshal.

"You killed old Willie in cold blood, Rankin!" Sherwood made his accusation. "Willie never packed a gun in his sinful life, and yo're under arrest!"

"He reached for his hip pocket," Rankin answered in a hoarse whisper. "I figured he had a gun, and I shot in self defense. You ain't arresting nobody!"

Sherwood's gray eyes began to blaze under his white shelving eyebrows. He recognized the threat in Rankin's crouched shoulders, but Sherwood had never admitted that the years had slowed him down.

"Shoot if you draw," he warned sternly.

"I'm coming to take your pistol!"

Rankin wasted no time in argument. The thumb of his right hand was hooked in the belt just above his open holster. He dropped that trained hand as Tom Sherwood stabbed at his lawgun, and the marshal's six-shooter failed to clear leather.

Rankin drew and shot from the hip with one smooth, swift movement. His slug hit the marshal in the left chest just under the ball-pointed badge of his office. Sherwood jerked back, gasped weakly, and then his knees buckled to send him toppling from the boardwalk to join Willie Gowers in the dusty street.

Rankin turned to face Judge Thompson and Bow with the smoking gun in his big fist.

"You gents saw the ruckus," the brutish bouncer husked in his hoarse whisper. "Rod Stillman likewise saw the play. Who you looking at, Langtry?"

Bow felt a hot surge of anger flooding through him. He was twenty-eight, owned his little B Bar L cattle spread, and minded his own business. He was a match for the killer in size and weight, and now he felt an irresistible desire to match six-shooters with the wide-shouldered bouncer.

"Holster your meat gun and take a chance!"

Bow issued the challenge without pausing to think. He felt a big hand on his right arm, and Judge Thompson pulled Langtry aside and stepped in front of him at the same time.

Joad Rankin had raised his smoke-grimed gun with the hammer under his calloused thumb to make it three of a kind. Killing a citizen was one thing, but Judge Thompson wasn't Bow Langtry. Rankin held his fire and lost his opportunity when Judge Thompson pushed Langtry back through the open doorway of his court room.

"Stop fighting your head, Bow," the judge told Langtry quietly. "Singletree is facing a showdown, and Rankin means to whittle your notch on the handle of his gun. You mean to give him fight and he knows it. Singletree needs a new city marshal, and I'm swearing you in!"

Bow was still smarting from the indignity of having another and older man save him from certain death. The hot

blood was tingling to the tips of his fingers, and his narrowed blue eyes were smouldering with frustrated anger.

"Raise your right hand and repeat after me," Judge Thompson barked suddenly.

BOW heard himself repeating the oath of office before he recovered from his surprise. Halfway through he hesitated, and then his stubborn jaw thrust out. He was into the deal too far for withdrawal, and he told himself that he never started anything he couldn't finish.

"I do!" he finished in a husky strained voice.

"You are the new city marshal of Singletree," Judge Thompson closed the brief ceremony. "You wait here until I go out and get the badge of office from old Tom's vest. I don't have to tell you that you will have trouble with Rod Stillman, the boss of Singletree."

Bow Langtry clenched his teeth, but Judge Thompson was already through the door. There was nothing for him to do except wait, but he walked closer and watched Thompson through the big front window.

Joad Rankin and Rod Stillman were standing in front of the Lucky Star, talking in low tones. Both men looked up as the tall gaunt judge left his court room. They watched with interest as Thompson leaned over the body of the old marshal, unpinned the ball-pointed law star, and climbed the high boardwalk without a glance at them.

"That Langtry hombre will bring it to me, boss," Rankin whispered hoarsely. "I might as well take it to him first!"

"Hold it!" Stillman barked. "The best you'd get would be a draw. Never give a sucker an even break. We'll sit tight and let him deal the cards."

"I'll play what I catch on the draw," Rankin growled. "That cowhand never saw the day he could beat my hand!"

He scowled as the long coat-tails of Judge Thompson disappeared through the court room door. Rod Stillman smiled with his lips, loosed the long gun in his right holster, his black eyes gleaming like polished ebony.

"You'll get a chance," he promised Rankin. "You've made your play, and now the deal is up to Judge Crail Thompson.

I think I know what that old law sharp has in the back of his mind."

Judge Thompson walked up to Bow Langtry and pinned the law badge on the new marshal's faded vest. Then he stepped back and offered his hand with a bleak smile.

"You've sworn to uphold law and order here in Singletree, Marshal Langtry," Thompson said grimly. "Good luck, and speed to your hand. You know what to do."

"I've only got one cowhand on the B Bar L, but Tex Beal can run things," Langtry said thoughtfully. "Write out a warrant charging Rankin with the murder of Gowers, and I'll sign the complaint myself."

"You learn fast," Judge Thompson praised with a smile. "We were both witnesses to the fact that the old marshal started to draw first on Rankin, but Gowers was unarmed."

Judge Thompson walked behind the bar of justice and sat on the high-legged stool behind the barrier. His pen scratched briefly, and after he had finished the warrant, Bow Langtry took the pen and signed the complaint.

"Better take old Crag Finlay, the jailer, with you," Thompson suggested. "Crag is crowding sixty, but he could watch your back if any of Stillman's hired killers try a sneak."

"That's whatever," a voice agreed dryly, and the old jailer came in from the back room. "I'll back any play you make all the way, Marshal Langtry," he promised the new peace officer.

He offered a gnarled hand, gripped Langtry hard, and pushed his battered Statton to the back of his balding head. Long gray mustaches framed the jailer's humorous mouth, but there was a fighting gleam in his pale blue eyes.

"Thanks, Crag," Langtry said slowly, with a thoughtful expression on his tanned features. "I'm going into the Lucky Star by the front door. You circle around and come in the back door just to keep Rod Stillman honest in case he tries to copper Joad Rankin's bet."

The main street of Singletree was deserted when Bow Langtry started out to make his first arrest. The new marshal's high boot heels rang hollowly on the board-

walk as he walked with purposeful stride toward the Lucky Star saloon.

A TALL cadaverous man was opening the back door of a long black wagon which stood in the street near the two bodies. Gib Latham ran the furniture store, and was the only undertaker in Singletree. He spoke in a low mournful voice to Langtry.

"Tom Sherwood carried insurance, marshal. What about poor Willie Gowers who died without relatives, and without funds?"

"Give Willie a decent burial and send the bill to Rodney Stillman," Langtry answered, without lessening his stride.

Bow had no illusions about the honor of the west or the ethics of old Judge Colt. As he breasted the swinging doors which shielded him for a moment. Langtry drew his gun and walked into the saloon with the cocked weapon in his right hand.

Joad Rankin was standing at the middle of the bar facing the front door. His gun was in his holster, but the clawing hand poised above the notched handles furnished ample evidence that the burly killer had intended to make his strike without warning.

Rankin's hand started down and stopped with a jerk as he stared into the muzzle of Langtry's six-shooter. Rod Stillman was standing at the far end of the bar, and a rough-looking cowboy with a pocked face was leaning against the side wall with a hand on his holstered gun.

Bow recognized Sile Evans who traded in cattle on money furnished by Stillman. There should be a fourth man in the Stillman combine; a slender wiry bronc-stomper who answered to the name of Drift Connors. Langtry saw Connors at a card table in the back room, and he also saw old Crag Finlay in the back doorway with his lawgun cradled in his gnarled fist. The old jailor was giving his new boss perfect cooperation.

"I have a warrant for your arrest, Rankin," Langtry stated quietly, but his voice carried that quality of sternness which comes to those who enforce the law. "The charge is murder, and anything you say will be used against you!"

Rankin wet his lips and glanced into the back-bar mirror. Stillman was elbowing his coat away from his scabbard, and Sile Evans was going into a crouch.

"So you had to pull a sneak," Rankin sneered. "And you had to do it behind a law-star."

"A double sneak," Langtry corrected quietly. "You other gents are covered from the rear, so don't figure too strong on a percentage."

Stillman did not turn, but Drift Connors jerked up his head from the game of solitaire he was playing. He saw the gun in the old jailor's hand, relayed the news to Stillman, and kept both hands on the green-topped table in plain sight.

"Old Crag Finlay is standing pat with aces, boss," Connors stated, and his tone was conversational so as not to set off taut muscles.

Only Stillman's black eyes showed the anger he felt as he realized that the new marshal hadn't fallen for a sucker game. A good gambler always played the cards that were dealt to him, knowing that the deal would get around to him in due time. Stillman was a good gambler.

"So you're the new marshal of Singletree, and you've got a warrant for Rankin's arrest." Stillman broke the stalemate. "Better go along with him, Joad. We'll see that you get a fair trial, if it ever gets that far."

To Rankin, Stillman's softly spoken words were an order. Stillman was the boss, and Rankin raised his ham-like hands in token of surrender.

"I'm coming to take your gun," Langtry announced his intention.

"I've never surrendered my gun," Rankin blustered, and his huge shoulders tightened to make the powerful muscles writhe under his wool shirt.

"There always has to be a first time," the quiet voice of Stillman guided his henchman. "I'll come right down to the jail and post bail for your release."

"Don't bother coming to the jail," Langtry told Stillman. "See Judge Crail Thompson in his court room."

Advancing slowly with his gun centered on the bulky bouncer, Langtry lifted Rankin's notched gun and stuck it down in the back of his gunbelt. Then he stepped aside and gestured toward the front door with a jerk of his head.

Crag Finlay covered the men in the saloon until Langtry and his prisoner were through the doors and the sounds of

their boots had died away. The old jailor was wise with that wisdom which comes only with the sure years. He retreated slowly through the back door, kept to the alley, and entered the jail by the back door just as Bow locked Rankin in a cell.

"Sile Evans meant to wing me as I passed in front of the Lucky Star," Finlay explained to Langtry with a grin. "So I kept to the alley. If I have to stop a slug, I want to be shot in front."

"You're shot with luck," Rankin sneered behind the bars of the cell door. "Never mind ordering dinner for me. I won't be here that long."

"We live and learn," the old jailor quoted, as he picked up a vicious-looking sawed-off shotgun. "I keep this around just in case some hardcase gets an idea about a jail break," he told Rankin. "Better slide over and see the judge, boss."

Bow knew that the old jailor was trying to give him some information. He walked out front to the marshal's office, locked Rankin's gun in a drawer of the scarred oak desk after ejecting the shells, and continued on to the court room.

Stillman was coming down the boardwalk from the saloon, and the two men met in front of Judge Thompson's office. Langtry waited, stepped aside to let Stillman pass, and followed the gambler into the room.

Judge Thompson looked over his nose glasses which were attached to a long black ribbon. He was making some entries in a ledger, but he laid aside his pen and removed his glasses.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked Stillman.

"Not particularly, but you were elected Justice of the Peace," Stillman answered dryly. "I came down to arrange bail for Joad Rankin."

"You didn't," the judge corrected in the same tone of voice the gambler had used. "You just thought you came to arrange bail."

"The sky's the limit," Stillman said confidently. "I own half of this town."

"The charge is murder," Judge Thompson said sternly. "Your man will have to stay in jail until after his trial!"

Stillman stiffened, and his face darkened with anger. He owned the Lucky

Star, the one small hotel, and the general store. He held a controlling interest in the bank, several cattle ranches, and was the recognized power in Singletree.

"A man is held to be innocent until he is proven guilty," Stillman reminded the court. "Joad Rankin has not been proved guilty and I demand his release on bail!"

"You don't demand anything but justice in my court," Judge Thompson warned coldly. "As a witness to the killing of the former marshal, I've added another charge against Rankin. He resisted arrest after he was warned, and he killed a peace officer in the discharge of his duty. Now the charge is double murder, and posting bond is not permissible."

"Just a minute, your Honor," Stillman said in a smooth quiet voice. "I would like the permission of the court to point out an irregularity."

"You have the court's permission," Judge Thompson answered politely. "I am listening."

"The city marshal is elected to office by the voters," Stillman announced triumphantly. "If the incumbent is removed from the local scene before the expiration of his term of office, his successor is appointed by the town trustees!"

"When a meeting of the trustees has been called, and a quorum is present," Judge Thompson corrected with dignity. "Until such a meeting has been called, this court is empowered by law to appoint a competent and trustworthy man to uphold law and order. This I have done, Mister Stillman."

"Postmaster Tuttle is chairman of the trustees," Stillman replied. "Banker Joe Turner is another member, and I'm the third. I'll call a meeting right after dinner."

"I have the fourth vote," the judge reminded Stillman. "The issue will remain deadlocked, and my appointment will stand until election."

"Sounds like you expect Tuttle to vote with you," Stillman retorted, tipping his hand that he controlled the vote of Banker Joe Turner. "Hmm."

"And you are counting on the support of Turner," the judge said, with irritating suavity. "Shall we set the meeting here in the court room for, say, one o'clock?"

"Make it two o'clock," Stillman sug-

gested. "Sile Evans and me are closing a deal with a cattleman at one, and I'm nominating Drift Connors as acting marshal."

"So ordered," the judge agreed, and turned to Langtry. "Marshal, will you notify the other members of the Board of Trustees that a meeting will be held in my chambers at two o'clock this afternoon?"

"I will, your Honor," Langtry agreed, and left the room with a little swagger to his broad shoulders.

"Singletree is due for some changes," Stillman said, after Langtry had left the room. "A new legal light might shine differently, if you know what I mean, your Honor."

Judge Thompson's bony face underwent a sudden change as his stern lips tightened, and his jaw thrust forward. The judge owned a small cattle ranch and kept himself fit by riding his Morgan horse to and from town. He carried his fifty-odd years lightly, rendered his judgments with meticulous impartiality, and he did not know the meaning of personal fear.

"Are you trying to intimidate me, sir?" he roared.

Rod Stillman shrugged one shoulder. "I'm the boss of Singletree," he stated quietly. "I've got the most men, and I control the most votes."

"I could charge you with attempted bribery," Thompson said grimly, and then he imitated the gambler's shrug. "But I have no witness," he added. "Until two o'clock, then. I'm busy now, if you will excuse me."

A LITTLE bird-like man with a hawkish face looked up when Langtry walked into Banker Joe Turner's private office. Turner had small eyes set close together, and he never looked directly at the person to whom he talked.

"Morning, Bow," he greeted Langtry. "What's this, what's this? You are wearing the badge of a city marshal."

"Old Tom Sherwood was shot and killed this morning," Langtry answered, knowing that Turner had heard the news. "There will be a meeting of the town trustees in the chambers of Judge Thompson this afternoon at two. Your presence is requested."

"I'll be there," Turner assured Langtry.

"I hope your luck holds out, young man."

"I'll try to help my luck," Langtry said dryly. "Did you ever take notice how closely luck is linked with merit?"

"I never was good at puzzles," the little banker snorted. "Perhaps this is a good time to remind you that your note is due here at the bank in three days."

"This is a good time to remind you right back that I have the money to pay it here in your bank," Langtry retorted sharply. "I know better than to give you and your boss an advantage!"

Turning abruptly, Langtry left the bank and continued up a side street to the post office. Postmaster Sam Tuttle was an old friend of Langtry's, and like most of the men of Singletree, had been raised a cowboy. He still wore his boots and Stetson, and he greeted Langtry with a genuinely warm smile.

"We've got one limb of the law that Rod Stillman and his gang won't run up a tree," Tuttle said confidently. "I heard about the meeting, and I'll be there at two o'clock sharp. If you get in a tight, I can still use a gun."

"Thanks, Sam," Langtry murmured, but his firm handshake told of his appreciation.

"I've got to run down to the bank on a little business," Tuttle said, and put on his ten gallon hat.

Langtry left the post office and stopped at the lunch room to order dinner for his prisoner. Then he ordered food for himself, so that he could guard the jail while old Crag Finlay was getting his dinner.

Langtry finished his soup and ate his roast beef slowly. Rod Stillman entered the lunch room and took a stool across the counter from the new marshal. Neither spoke to the other, but Bow Langtry wondered at the satisfied expression on the gambler's smooth dark face.

Joe Turner came running into the lunch room as Langtry was paying his check. The little banker was trembling, and he shouted at Langtry in a high squeaking voice.

"A fine marshal you are, Bow Langtry. You sit here eating while the bank is being robbed!"

"The hell you say!"

Rod Stillman spun around on his stool as he almost shouted at Turner, and Still-

man seldom lost his poise. "When did this happen, Joe?"

"Not more than ten minutes ago," Turner gasped. "The clerks were gone to lunch, and I was at the teller's window. Two masked bandits came in and one of them shoved a gun under my nose. They cleaned out the drawers, and most of the money from the vault!"

Bow Langtry left the lunch room and legged it down the street at a dead run. The two clerks had returned to the bank, and were checking losses from long slips of paper.

"How much was taken from the vault?" Langtry asked one of the clerks.

"The vault is locked, and no one but Turner knows the combination," the clerk answered, with a trace of resentment in his voice.

Langtry stared at the big built-in vault with a speculative gleam in his narrowed eyes. Suspicions were forming in his mind, but suspicions might lead to clues. He remembered Rod Stillman's agitation and he remembered that the gambler could bet twenty thousand dollars without any visible show of emotion.

Langtry left the bank and hurried to the post office. One of the clerks told him that Sam Tuttle had not been seen since he had left to go to the bank for a talk with Joe Turner. The meeting of the trustees was slated for two o'clock, and Judge Thompson would be outvoted unless Sam Tuttle attended the meeting.

Joad Rankin was eating his dinner when Langtry returned to the jail. Langtry told Crag Finlay to take his lunch hour, but to hurry back. Then Langtry sat down at the old desk, tilted his Stetson over his eyes, and tried to place the rapid-moving events in a sequence that would make sense.

Old Willie Gowers hadn't made an enemy in Singletree. Tom Sherwood had been a man of sterling integrity. Had Willie Gowers been used as bait to lure the old marshal to his death? Langtry reasoned that it looked that way. Rod Stillman was going to appoint Drift Connors, a gun-hung saddle-tramp, to the position of city marshal. And now the bank had been robbed.

Langtry sat up with a jerk as realization swept over him like a flood. Cattlemen and storekeepers alike would be ruined.

Notes and mortgages would be foreclosed. No extension of time would be granted, and WHO would gain by such a procedure?

The answer was: "*Rod Stillman, the boss of Singletree.*"

Langtry stretched to his feet, looked in at Rankin who made a derisive sound with his puckered lips, and then the new marshal left his office and walked into the court room next door.

Judge Thompson glanced up with an expression of relief and called for Langtry to come back to his chambers. Rod Stillman and Banker Joe Turner occupied chairs across the big table from the judge, but Sam Tuttle was conspicuous by his absence. The clock on the wall gave the time as half-past one.

"Sorry, Judge, but Turner and I have voted to appoint Drift Connors as acting marshal," Stillman announced. "That lets you out, Bow Langtry!"

Langtry half-turned, drew his six-shooter swiftly, and covered Stillman and the banker. Joe Turner began to tremble, and his sallow face became more pale.

"Clear leather and keep Rod Stillman under your gun, your Honor," Langtry told the judge in a crisp decisive voice. "I'm taking Joe Turner with me for a little walk. We will be back before the deadline, which I understand was set for two o'clock!"

Judge Thompson whipped back the tails of his long coat and cocked his pistol as it cleared his holster. Langtry advanced behind his gun and disarmed the gambler. Prodding the little banker to his feet, Langtry drove Turner from the court room at the point of his gun.

"Have you got a time lock on that vault?" Langtry asked Turner harshly.

"Yes . . . no," Turner panted. "The combination was stolen!"

Langtry said nothing about the scratching he had heard while examining the locked vault. He drove Turner into the bank, and ordered the little man to open the vault.

"I can't remember the combination," Turner whined.

Langtry slapped the sniveling man in the face with his flat hand. His gun came up and touched Turner's head. His voice was grim with promise when he spoke.

"Open that safe before I spill your brains on the floor!"

Joe Turner almost collapsed as the gun touched his head. He began to fidget the combination, and at last he stepped aside.

"I can't open the door alone," he whimpered, and called one of the clerks.

As the vault door swung open, a big man tumbled out on the floor gasping for breath. Then Sam Tuttle sat up with his big chest heaving.

"I'd have smothered in another ten minutes," he told Langtry hoarsely. "Those two hold-ups drove me inside the vault and Turner saw them do it. I was talking to Turner at the time!"

"Take this gun," Langtry said through clenched teeth, and handed Tuttle the gun he had taken from Rod Stillman. "Now let's get back to the court room and hold an honest meeting of the Trustees."

THE clock in the chambers of the judge pointed at five minutes to two when the three men re-entered the court room. Judge Thompson was holding his gun on the gambler, and he reversed it in his hand and rapped on the table to call the meeting to order.

"We will take the vote," Thompson announced, with quiet satisfaction.

"This is illegal, and under duress," Stillman protested.

"You can vote as you like," the judge corrected. "I vote for Bowman Langtry to fill the unexpired term as city marshal."

"I vote the same way," Sam Tuttle echoed promptly.

"Turner and I have already appointed Drift Connors," Stillman muttered. "Drift IS city marshal!"

"Two to two, and that's a stalemate," Judge Thompson said judicially. "As Justice of the Peace, my appointment of Langtry still stands. This meeting is adjourned!"

Sam Tuttle turned on Joe Turner with a savage growl.

"You saw me locked up in your vault, and you didn't notify the marshal," Tuttle accused. "I want to know why?"

"I did tell the marshal," Turner snarled. "I notified Drift Connors, but he said he was going to track down the bank robbers."

Bow Langtry remembered the prisoner he had left unguarded in the jail. Judge

Thompson could deal with Stillman and Turner, but with two city marshals holding down the same job, one of them would have to step down and surrender authority.

Obedying a sudden impulse, Langtry drew his six-shooter and stepped into the jail office behind the cocked weapon. He almost stumbled across the body of a man lying on the floor just inside the open door, and Finlay groaned just as Langtry recognized the old jailor.

Finlay staggered to his feet with blood trickling down his bald head from a scalp wound. He sank to the floor again behind the scarred oak desk as Langtry ran back to the cell block to make sure that Joad Rankin was still a prisoner.

"Reach for the ceiling, cowboy!" a low snarling voice gave the stick-up order from the front door.

Bow turned his head without moving his body. Drift Connors was leering triumphantly from behind a cocked .45 six-shooter. Little beady eyes in his pocked face glowed like rubies with killer light, and Langtry knew that he was marked for death.

Langtry made a dive straight for the floor without moving his boots. Connors triggered a shot, and his slug tore the Stetson from Langtry's head. Then the bellying roar of a double-barreled shotgun exploded like a charge of dynamite.

Langtry rolled and came to his knees. The hammer of a six-shooter clicked twice from inside Rankin's cell. Langtry reached inside and clubbed the wide-shouldered killer over the head with the barrel of his gun, and Rankin sank to the floor.

Crag Finlay called hoarsely from the office, and he was crawling out from behind the desk when Langtry ran to his aid. Drift Connors was lying on his back on the board sidewalk where the double charge of buckshot had thrown him.

"I had it to do, Marshal," the old jailor explained grimly. "He was bucking his meat gun down for a second shot at you, and you down on the floor. On top of that, I noticed that the drawer to the desk had been forced, and Rankin's gun was gone!"

"I should have been killed twice," Langtry said dryly. "Connors' slug parted my hair and ventilated my old J.B. Rankin tried two shots at me, but I had emptied

his six-shooter before locking it up in the drawer."

"It's a good thing you took the keys with you," Finlay commented. "Better let me have them, and I'll go back there and dehorn that Rankin killer for good. I hope you fractured his skull."

Langtry walked outside, hooked his fingers in the collar of the dead man's shirt, and dragged the body inside the office. Then he closed and locked the door as Finlay came from the cell block with Joad Rankin's empty gun in his gnarled fist.

"I had that sawed-off under my coat," the old jailor told Langtry. "I just about cut that phony marshal half in two. Looky sticking out of his vest pocket!"

Langtry reached down and took a sheath of paper money from the dead man's coat pocket. The paper band with the name of the bank was still around the money.

"Five thousand dollars," the old jailor whispered, as he read the paper band. "Hell, Bow; that means Connors was one of the bank robbers!"

"There were two bandits," Langtry said slowly. "Rod Stillman was in the lunch room with me. Who does that leave?"

"Sile Evans," Finlay whispered hoarsely. "Them two robbed the bank while their boss proved an alibi!"

"Lock the door after me, and don't let anyone in," Langtry told the old jailor.

A crowd had gathered in front of the jail, but Finlay turned the key in the lock. Pushing a way through the crowd, Langtry walked into the court room.

Judge Thompson and Sam Tuttle were holding Stillman and the banker in the back room. Stillman jumped to his feet as Langtry opened the door and entered the room.

"What was that shooting?" the gambler demanded. "As one of the trustees, I have a right to know!"

Langtry ignored the scowling gambler as he turned respectfully to face Judge Thompson.

"Your Honor," he said quietly. "An armed bandit tried to kill me in my own jail. He clubbed Crag Finlay over the head with his six-shooter, broke open a drawer in my desk, and gave my prisoner the gun I had confiscated from Rankin."

"If that was Drift Connors, I ordered him to release the prisoner," Stillman ad-

mitted in a low calm voice. "In case you have forgotten, Connors was appointed city marshal before you sneaked in here and used illegal methods to hold the job yourself!"

"Both of us being marshals, that was too much law," Langtry told the scowling gambler. "Drift Connors is dead!"

"Dead, you say?" Stillman repeated in a whisper. "As a member of the trustees, I demand your surrender until after you are tried for his murder!"

"But I didn't kill him," Langtry explained with a grim smile. "Connors parted my hair with a slug while my back was turned. Old Crag Finlay was knocked out, and lying on the floor behind the desk. He regained consciousness and cut loose with his sawed-off just as your man was lining his sights on me for a sure thing, and Drift Connors is through drifting."

Banker Joe Turner moaned softly and slid from his chair. Rod Stillman glanced down with a sneer curling his lips.

"I might have given you an extension of time on your note, Langtry," the gambler said, and his low voice was perfectly controlled. "Every cent on deposit in the bank was stolen by the bandits."

"I owed the bank three thousand dollars, and I had close to five thousand on deposit," Langtry answered thoughtfully. "You mean you won't make good the bank's losses?"

"Why should I?" Stillman asked with a shrug. "I lost more than you did, and unless you pay off that note, the bank will foreclose for the benefit of the creditors."

"We caught one of the bandits," Langtry said, and he smiled when Rod Stillman jerked up his head.

"This is a frame-up! You planted that money on Drift Connors!"

The gambler lost his customary poise as the accusation tumbled from his lips.

"Who said it was Connors?" Langtry asked slowly. "And who mentioned that we found any money on the man we caught?"

"You intimated as much," Stillman muttered, but Langtry merely shrugged.

"Keep Stillman here for a half hour, your Honor," Langtry addressed Judge Thompson. "Sam Tuttle and I have a little business that won't wait."

WHILE Sam Tuttle went to get his horse behind the post office, Langtry knocked at the back door of the jail, told Crag Finlay of his plans in a low voice, and saddled his horse. Five minutes later he was riding with Tuttle along the back streets and out of town.

"We ought to find Sile Evans on the Circle S," Tuttle remarked carelessly. "Making him talk will be a mighty tough job."

Bow nodded without speaking. The Circle S was used as a holding ground by Rod Stillman, in the cattle trades made by Sile Evans. Langtry was wondering how many men Evans would have on the ranch, and then he reined suddenly into the brush with a sharp command to Tuttle.

"Ride off the road, Sam. A hoss-backer coming on a fast cayuse, and we can get him between us!"

Langtry drew his gun and waited. The drum of hoof-beats grew louder, and then a leggy roan rounded a bend in the dirt road. Langtry nudged his horse with a spur and blocked the trail.

"Rein in and stand your hoss! The law speaking!"

Sile Evans jerked back on the reins before he recognized Bow Langtry. He made a slap for his holstered six-shooter, saw the gun in the marshal's hand, and slid his lathered horse to a stop.

"I'm through with Rod Stillman," Evans shouted hoarsely. "I'm leaving town, and it's between you and him!"

The color drained from his face when Sile Evans saw the big postmaster ride out on the other side, and Sam Tuttle had a cocked six-shooter in his right hand.

"Look him over, Marshal," Tuttle said quietly. "I'll keep him honest."

"Slide down," Langtry told Evans, and dismounted at the same time.

After taking the prisoner's gun, Langtry searched Evans thoroughly. Evans was clean as far as bank loot was concerned, but Langtry walked to the Circle S horse and opened the saddle-bags behind the cattle-trader's cantle. Then he whistled softly.

"Whew! Fifty thousand in cash, and Drift Connors only had five thousand on him!"

"You caught Drift?" Evans whispered shakily.

"That's right," Langtry admitted. "Stillman makes an alibi for himself, while you and Connors robbed the bank."

"I'll give up head," Evans said harshly. "Stillman made me and Connors rob the bank, but that runty banker was in on the deal. He didn't offer any resistance, and it was a dead cinch!"

"I ought to kill you, Sile Evans," the postmaster said huskily. "For locking me up in that vault and leaving me to die for the want of air!"

"Blame it on Stillman," Evans muttered. "Drift was to be city marshal, and I was to get your job as postmaster!"

"Anything you say will be used against you," Langtry warned his prisoner. "Do you still want to talk?"

"I don't aim to take a long stretch by myself," Evans growled. "Me and Drift robbed the bank with consent, and you've recovered all the money. Guarantee me protection, and I'll testify against the boss of Singletree!"

"Rod Stillman just thought he was the boss of Singletree," Langtry corrected coldly. "You'll get a fair trial, and all the protection I can give you. Now climb your bronc and let's get back to town."

"Hold me some other place besides in the jail," Evans pleaded. "Stillman or Connors will kill me!"

"Drift Connors is dead," Langtry explained coldly. "He tried to pull a jail-break, but it didn't work."

"Stillman figured to run the law up a tree, and then run the town," Evans muttered. "He could have sent me up for ten years, so what have I got to lose?"

THE shadows of twilight were dimming the red rays of the setting sun when Bow Langtry and Sam Tuttle reached the outskirts of Singletree with their prisoner. Langtry had calculated the opposition in his mind, and had formed a plan.

"You ride down the main street where Stillman can see you," Langtry told Sam Tuttle. "I'll keep to the alleys and come in the back way with Evans. I want everything to be legal, and after I lock up Sile Evans, I'll have a warrant for Stillman when I make the arrest."

"Have your gun in your hand when you tell Stillman he is under arrest," the postmaster cautioned.

Bow Langtry circled wide and came into town from the opposite direction. Even then he kept to the back streets, and old Crag Finlay was waiting at the back door of the jail when Langtry rode down the alley with his prisoner.

"Did you recover the loot?" the old jailor whispered hoarsely.

Bow Langtry nodded and lifted the saddle-bags from the bank robber's horse. He went directly to his office, sat down at the oak desk and wrote out a warrant, and carried the saddle-bags with him when he again left by the back door and crossed to the court room.

Judge Crail Thompson opened the back door in answer to Langtry's knock. Langtry walked in, and after closing the door, he explained to the judge what had happened since he had left town with the postmaster. Thompson listened gravely, and with a hint of worry in his gray eyes.

"You've done a good job so far, Marshal," he told Langtry. "You've cleaned up the small fry, and every one a dangerous criminal. You've secured evidence enough to convict Rod Stillman, but Stillman is big game."

Bow Langtry stared at his scarred boots for a long moment. The judge had given him a measure of praise, and was trying to convey a warning.

"I'm listening, judge," Langtry said quietly, "What are you trying to tell me?"

"You were appointed to preserve law and order," Thompson said heavily. "You've got a warrant for Stillman's arrest in your pocket, and I know you will serve it. Stillman said to tell you he was shooting on sight!"

The news did not seem to surprise Bow Langtry. He nodded, drew his six-shooter, and carefully checked the loads. Then he holstered the gun, pulled his Stetson low over his eyes, and spoke curtly.

"I'd take it kindly if you would walk down the street and into the Lucky Star by the front door, Judge. I'll be along before dark."

Judge Thompson stared for a moment before nodding his agreement. He walked through his court room and onto the board sidewalk, and he started toward the saloon just as Sam Tuttle swung down from the saddle in front of the Lucky Star.

The postmaster shouldered through the swinging doors with both big hands at his sides. The saloon was crowded, but most of the drinkers had retired to the side wall, and some had drinks in their hands.

Rod Stillman stood at the center of the bar with his black Stetson tilted to the back of his head. His right hand came up swiftly, and his long-barreled six-shooter covered Sam as the hammer clicked back.

"I thought you was somebody else," the tall gambler murmured, but there was no apology in his deep voice. He holstered his gun with the same effortless speed, picked up a glass of brandy with his left hand, and drank slowly.

Sam Tuttle grunted and walked to the end of the bar nearest the front door. He ordered a drink which he left untouched as he drew the makings from his shirt pocket and rolled a smoke.

Rod Stillman jerked around when the back door to the card room opened from the alley. His gun whipped to his hand, lowered slowly when Joe Turner came into the saloon. The little banker glared at the gun in Stillman's hand until the gambler holstered the burnished weapon. Turner stood five-feet-two inches in his flat-heeled shoes, weighed ninety-eight pounds, and carried no weapon.

"Sorry," Stillman murmured, and poured himself another drink.

The little banker climbed up on the brass rail and poured a drink from a special bottle which the bartender took from the backbar. His curving nose made him look more than ever like a hawk as he perched on the brass rail and carried the thin glass to his bloodless lips.

Footsteps sounded on the boardwalk, and a tall shadow lanced in under the high bottom of the swinging doors.

ROD STILLMAN pushed away from the bar with his right hand slapping for his holstered gun. The hammer clicked back as the six-shooter leaped from leather, and Judge Crail Thompson pushed the doors apart and stepped inside. He stopped abruptly as he saw the cocked gun in Stillman's hand.

"What's the meaning of this?" Thompson asked sternly.

"My mistake, but you know what it means," Stillman answered roughly, and it was evident that his nerves were on edge. As he poured himself another glass of brandy, an authoritative voice spoke clearly from the card room.

"You're under arrest, Rod Stillman. Don't make a pass for your gun!"

Bow Langtry was standing under the arch which separated the card room from the saloon. His law-gun was cradled in his fist as he broke the bad news to the gambler, and Stillman glanced into the back-bar mirror. He kept both hands in plain sight on the mahogany bar as he turned to stare at Langtry.

"I knew you wouldn't take a chance," Stillman said quietly, and while his voice was calm, his black eyes burned with a strange luminous fire.

"Taking chances is your business," Langtry corrected coldly. "Mine is to preserve law and order, and anything you say will be used against you. I have a warrant for your arrest in my pocket."

"What's the charge?" Stillman asked, and his lips barely moved.

"Accessory before the fact in the murder of one Willie Gowers," Langtry recited. "Accessory to the bank robbery, and I have proof of your guilt. The money has been recovered, and I'm coming to take your gun!"

Rod Stillman pushed away from the bar, and his lips skinned back over his white even teeth. He was like a trapped animal, and just as dangerous.

"Stay away!" he warned viciously. "I'll match my draw against your drop!"

Bow Langtry stopped his advance, but his cocked gun covered the gambler's left breast. His low voice was a humming warning when he spoke just above a whisper.

"Move a hand and I'll drill a tunnel through your heart, Stillman. Sile Evans talked with his mouth wide open!"

Rod Stillman crouched with his back against the bar. His right hand was taloned to fit the grips of his gun, and then that hand began to tremble slightly.

Bow Langtry waited and watched as the blustering courage drained from the boss of Singletree. He had seen strong men

break under a continuous nervous strain, but Langtry hadn't expected such a sudden change in Rod Stillman.

The gambler's shoulders began to sag, and his two hands slowly rose to a level with his shoulders. The smoldering fire had died away in his black eyes, leaving them glazed and almost lifeless.

Bow Langtry advanced slowly and lifted the gambler's six-shooter. Then he stepped back and told Stillman he could lower his arms.

"I'm glad it's over," Stillman said shakily. "I never was the boss of Singletree."

Bow Langtry frowned to show that he was puzzled. Rod Stillman turned to face Joe Turner, and he pointed an accusing finger at the little banker.

"I was only the front man," Stillman said thickly, and once more his dark eyes were blazing with uncontrollable anger. "There's the real boss, but he kept himself clean!"

Stillman's pointing finger emphasized his words as he made his dramatic exposé. The other fingers of his right hand opened suddenly to catch a tiny two-shot derringer which the gambler shook down his sleeve. The hide-out gun barked spitefully, and banker Joe Turner gasped and sank to the floor with a .32 slug through his treacherous heart.

Like the whipping flick of a snake's tongue, Rod Stillman turned the hide-out gun toward his own head.

"*Braam!*"

The bellowing roar of a .45 six-shooter thundered deafeningly in the low-ceilinged room. Flame leaped from the hand of the city marshal, and the hide-out gun was torn from the gambler's clutching fingers.

Rod Stillman went to his knees in the sawdust, cradling his shattered hand against his white shirt. He rocked back and forth for a time as he fought against the agony of his useless, pain-racked hand.

"I only worked for Turner," he told Langtry in a gasping whisper. "Why didn't you kill me?"

"I'm not a killer," Bow Langtry said quietly. "You'll get a fair trial, but that isn't answering your question. I was sworn to uphold law and order, when I was appointed as marshal of Singletree!"



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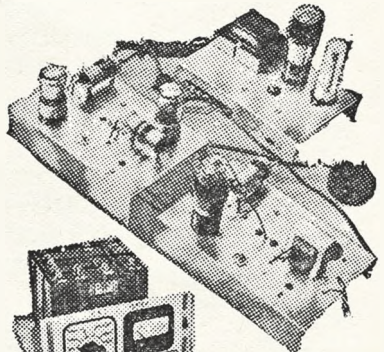
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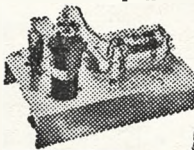
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BARBWIRE BULLETS

By R. S. LERCH

The silent gunswift swore he'd stalk Owlhoot's trails and Satan's way-stations of night-riding mavericks till he bucked his brother's venom-killers.



TWILIGHT was deepening to darkness when Drew Ackerman let his horse walk on the last, steep, upward pitch. The flanking mountains seemed to draw closer, the shadows to close in, to hover around and above him like black, reaching hands. An evening mist crept out of the pines beside the road, and the night breeze swayed it into uncertain, spectral shapes.

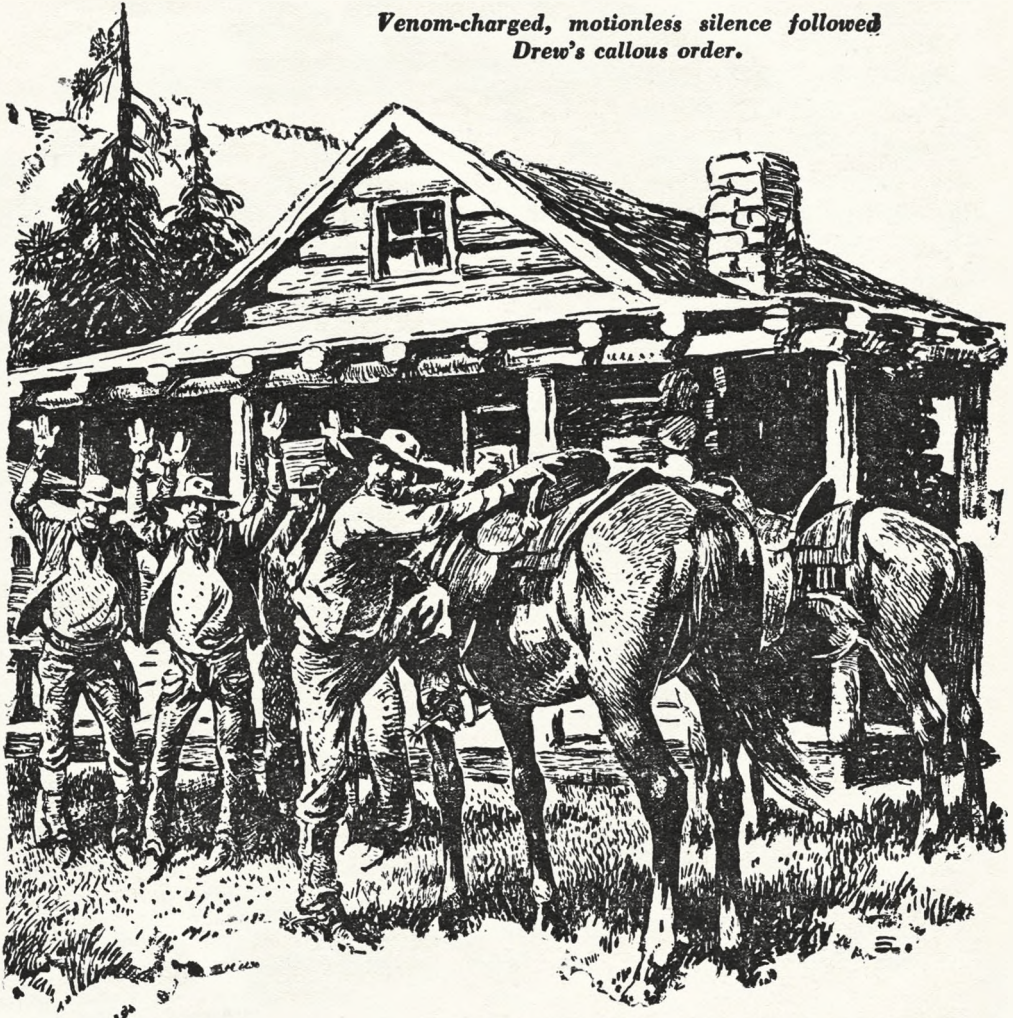
The impression which had grown on him with each additional mile during the last three weeks, that his quest was hopeless, here acquired almost the proportions of conviction. For a month he had traveled westward, eliminating one by one each ranch, each town, each way station, until there was left only Poison Pass. Here,

then, would he find the answer. Or would he? Ackerman was now in a frame of mind where he doubted that he'd ever find it.

But a strange feeling came over him as he continued toward the finish of this last stretch of the long trail. Out of those deep caverns of the subconscious that so often motivate the actions of men who live close to the raw and violent in nature there arose the warning of red savagery turned loose.

He topped the last rise and reached the crest. Ahead of him, on the right, the lights of the Poison Pass Station showed like yellow squares painted against the dark bulk of the building. His narrowed, searching gaze picked out the barn behind

*Venom-charged, motionless silence followed
Drew's callous order.*



the station and the large corral near it. Behind these, partially concealed in a grove of pines, were more lights and the dim outline of another log building.

He let his tired horse continue to walk across the flat at the top of the pass, none of the disturbing thoughts that had been flooding his mind evident in his stern, angular features, or in the easy coordination with which his big frame sat the saddle. To all outward appearances he was just another traveler wearing a well-oiled gun, a rider whose contacts along the trail were of short duration and soon forgotten.

He drew up before the open door and glanced at the sign above it. "Poison Pass Station, Jim Herrick, Agent." The squat, chunky man with a blob of a nose, straight, black hair worn long, and the black eyes and swarthy complexion indicating Indian blood mixed with white, who was leaning against the door frame, was apparently the agent.

Drew Ackerman stepped down, dropping the reins over a hitch-rack. The man in the doorway moved aside as Drew walked forward. There was a shine of increasing interest in Herrick's eyes as they took in Ackerman's tall, solid frame and settled searchingly on his face. Drew's swift glance swept the interior of the big room as he stepped inside.

On the left was a long dining table flanked by benches. In the right wall was a stone fireplace and a few big chairs. At the back, opposite the table, an open door revealed the kitchen, and farther along the wall at the right were two more doors. The closed one bore the sign, "Office." The open door disclosed stairs leading to the second story.

Ackerman turned to find the eyes of Jim Herrick still watching him with close attention. There was the faintest sign of a perplexed frown on the man's forehead.

"Have I seen you before?" Herrick asked.

"I don't know. Have you?" Drew asked quietly in return. "I've never been here before," he added, as if to take the sting out of his reply.

The squat man shook his head. "Somewheres—" he said as if to himself, but did not complete the thought. He kept looking at Ackerman.

Drew asked, "Supper?"

The man started slightly, then said, "Half an hour, when the stage from the east gets in. Meals fifty cents; room a dollar; drinks and high-life at the Double Eagle," and he jerked a thumb toward the rear of the station.

Drew recalled the building he had seen back in the pines. He said, "I'll take a room."

"Number two, second on the right upstairs," the agent returned without moving from his indolent position against the door.

Drew Ackerman went up, washed in the cracked porcelain bowl, and returned to the main room. He led his horse to the corral and unsaddled. There were five horses in the enclosure and they all looked as though they had been ridden recently. One in particular was dusty and trail worn.

An Indian youth came out of the barn and approached. As Ackerman swung the saddle down the youth said, "Rack's in the barn. I'll feed and water your horse. You can—" and suddenly he checked himself while a startled look came into his eyes. He was staring hard at Ackerman.

"What's the matter?" Drew asked sharply, returning the stare.

The youth gulped, swallowed, and said, "Nothing. I thought—a spirit—" and his whisper died away.

Ackerman's right hand shot out, gripping the lad's arm.

"I'll want to talk to you later," he said, low and hard. "Until I do, keep what you think to yourself."

The boy nodded vigorously. "Yes—if what I think is true—I want to help. But don't tell anyone. They'd kill me."

"Who?" Ackerman rapped.

The youth shook his head in vigorous protest. "Not now. They might be watching. Maybe late tonight. I'll come to you. You trust me."

There was something so earnest in the lad's low voice and appealing in his dark-eyed stare that Ackerman nodded slowly and released his grip.

"All right, lad. I'll trust you, and you can trust me. What's your name?"

"I am Bill Moose Horn. I think I must go to see Night Bird, to be sure."

There was relief and a mounting eagerness in his guardedly soft voice.

"To be sure of what? And who is Night Bird?" Ackerman asked, frowning.

"To be sure that I will have the right answers to the many questions I think you are going to ask me. Night Bird is my sister. She knows much. But we must not be seen together now, or they might suspect something," and he went quickly toward the water trough and picked up a bucket.

DREW carried his saddle and bridle into the barn. A lantern hanging from a rafter revealed a number of saddles along the left wall, one of them covered with a blanket. These had apparently come from the horses in the corral. Those in the barn were stage relays. He racked his saddle, hung the bridle on a peg behind it, and stepped outside, facing the lighted windows of the Double Eagle some fifty yards away.

He walked toward the building slowly, listening to the sound of voices and the shrill laughter of a woman. His gaze sifted through the trees, but nothing moved in the deep shadows of the grove. An open space surrounded the building. Drew crossed it, glanced through a window, then opened the door.

There was a bar at the rear of a fairly large room, and tables with a cleared space for dancing. Along the left wall was a row of booths and along the right wall stairs led to the second floor, with a piano standing under them. Behind each end of the bar were doors apparently leading to private gambling rooms.

As he backed the door shut Drew Ackerman's veiled glance swept the room, automatically cataloguing the lay-out but centering conscious attention on the three men lined up at the bar and on the three at a table to the left. On the right was a table with four percentage girls seated at it. His gaze passed over these and returned to the other table. The three men there were drinking with two of the short-skirted girls. Ackerman caught the intent gaze of a couple of the men at the bar, examining him through the mirror along the back wall. He sauntered forward.

Every man in the room, except the bartender and one of those at the table with the two girls, were of the same type. Stony-eyed, with lines in their faces advertising the hardships they had endured and the in-

nate viciousness of their characters. It did not need the evidence of their well-oiled guns and low-slung holsters to announce them riders of the long and dim trails of the owl-hoot.

The exception at the table was in direct contrast and Ackerman surrepticiously examined him more closely than the others. He was a beefy man, heavy in both shoulders and waist, and there was a smooth sleekness about him that was almost oily. The girl beside him was young and pretty and the man's bold eyes stripped her every time they looked at her. She seemed to like it. There was cruelty and ruthlessness in the too wide and too thin mouth, as well as in the pointed chin.

Drew Ackerman had almost reached the bar when the very intensity of another's gaze switched his covert gaze from the big man to the little one seated beside him. This man was small, dark, with acquiline features and eyes like black shoe buttons, and in those eyes there was a penetrating challenge which seemed actually to scorch. While the big man hid his viciousness beneath a smooth exterior this dark little wasp wore his in the open like a black banner. Ackerman's own eyes narrowed and into them crept a cold fire that accepted and threw back the challenge.

The dark man suddenly switched to his partner and his lips moved as he threw words at the big man. Drew reached the bar and signalled for three fingers of liquor. While the bartender was placing it before him Ackerman's gaze shifted to the mirror and he examined the third man at the table. This one was like those at the bar, just another night-riding gunnie. But Drew surmised that the exhausted animal he had seen in the corral had been ridden by the seated man, for, like the horse, his clothing and floppy stetson were coated with trail dust and his features showed the strain of long hours in the saddle.

As Drew watched, this man arose and the two girls at the table got up with him. The other two men were in earnest, low-voiced conversation. The two girls and the rider approached the bar. One of the girls sauntered toward Drew.

"Hello, big boy. Let's get better acquainted. How about a drink?"

Ackerman turned and looked down at her. Her red lips were smiling, but her

eyes were wise and calculating. Drew grinned a little, then motioned the bartender to serve her.

"Let's take a table, where we'll be alone. I can be awfully nice, big boy."

Ackerman's grin widened, but like the girl his eyes did not mirror the smile. He shook his head slowly.

"I won't be here that long," he said quietly.

She stepped close and put a slim hand on his shoulder.

"You look like you been riding the long trail. Why hurry away? You don't have to high-tail in such a rush. This is a good place for a ranny on the dodge. Lots of hiding places I could show you, and some of 'em are real nice."

Again Ackerman shook his head. When he spoke this time the smile was gone.

"It won't work, sister. You can go back and tell them if they want information about me to come to me themselves." Then, on a sudden hunch. "I'll tell you this much, though. I'm figuring on buying a ranch, but there's nothing around here I've seen that's worth having. I'm pressed for time, so I'll be moving out," and he downed his drink, put a coin on the bar, and walked toward the door.

The girl's, "You'd be surprised," caught up with him, but he neither turned around nor looked back to indicate he had heard.

Out in the night once more, among the pines, he walked slowly while he tried to understand the set-up at Poison Pass. There had first been Jim Herrick, the agent, then the Indian stable boy, and last the swarthy little man with the evil face. All had thought they recognized in him someone they had seen before, though he knew he had never set eyes on any of them. He had an answer for that, but there were the diverse reactions of the Indian and the man in the Double Eagle. The boy's had been one of a friend wanting to help; the other's had been one of a savage gunman measuring a prospective victim of hate.

BUT there was more to think about. There was the Double Eagle itself. Though it was not so large as most similar resorts in trail towns, still it could draw only on the infrequent travel of the stage line, which wouldn't amount to enough in a year to support the place for a month.

The answer became suddenly and startlingly clear. The remarks of the girl who had attempted to get information from him, particularly about being able to show him a hide-out, as well as the character of the men who had been in the barroom were the clues.

The Double Eagle was a way-station for the night riding fraternity, a place to recuperate between long, hard rides. Three days to the northeast was the railroad, and two days' fast riding to the north of that was that ace of hide-outs, the Hole-in-the-Wall. From the Hole-in-the-Wall trails led to every surrounding state and it was rumored that the James gang, Butch Cassidy's long-riders, and the owl-hoots of Flat Nose George and Nate Champion intermittently operated from there.

The sound of shouted commands and the cracking of a whip announced the approach of the stage. Drew Ackerman reached the front of the station just as sweating horses were drawn to a halt in front of the door. From behind the station young Bill Moose Horn went immediately to the horses and began to unhitch them. The old driver climbed down from the box and went to the coach door, opening it with a flourish.

"Poison Pass Station, ma'am," he declaimed in a high, squeaky voice.

She was a small young woman, and while she displayed no startling beauty, there was a rounded maturity about her that caught the eye, and a sweetness of expression in her finely balanced features that showed a beauty of spirit. Her wealth of black hair, darkly shining, and her deep, violet eyes added their full quota of appeal. She wore a dark suit and carried a small carpet bag, and she stepped quickly out of the coach.

"Thank you, driver." Her voice was low and controlled.

Jim Herrick had snapped out of his indolence. He came forward, reaching out to take the bag, while his swarthy face was bunched in a wide smile.

"Welcome, Miss. I'm Jim Herrick, agent at the Pass, and we'll do our best to serve you. Dinner immediately."

"I'd like a room," the girl said, still calmly, though a brief smile came and went.

"Certainly. Just follow me," and Her-

rick turned and preceded her through the door.

Her calm glance rested for a moment on the tall figure of Drew Ackerman as he leaned against the wall, smoking. He drew sharply on the cigarette and the glow of the coal faintly illumined his face. The effect on the girl was startling. She stopped short, and her eyes widened while they stared up at Ackerman's hard features. One of her hands, bunched into a little fist, came up and pressed hard against her breast. Drew slowly removed his stetson, but before the gesture was completed the girl had hurried past.

From inside Drew heard the agent say, "Room one, to the right at the head of the stairs, Miss."

Footsteps sounded at the side of the Station as men from the Double Eagle came for dinner. Ackerman went inside. The girl had disappeared and Herrick was just hurrying down the stairs. Behind him Drew heard the others coming in.

"Dinner right away, boys," Herrick announced.

Someone touched Ackerman's arm and he snapped around. It was the big man with the smooth face and bold eyes who had been seated in the road-house.

"Can I have a word with you, friend?" he asked, and his voice was as oily as his skin.

Drew said, "Go ahead," and moved a little to one side to avoid others entering the room.

The man hesitated a moment. Then, "I'm Hugh Oliver. I heard you were interested in buying a ranch? I have one I think you'll like. I want to go west to the new placer discoveries and I'll sell cheap. Some of the finest horses you ever saw, and plenty of fine grassland and water. I'd like to have you ride out with me tonight and look it over in the morning. We can make a quick deal. I'm anxious to get away."

"Where is it?" Ackerman asked.

"About five miles west of here. Trail leaves the right of the road about two miles west. Only ranch in these parts. It won't take us long to get there and I've a nice ranch house—"

"Maybe I'll ride out tomorrow," Drew interrupted, turning away.

The girl had come down and was being escorted to the table by Jim Herrick. The other men, casting surreptitious glances at her, took their places at the table. There was little talk during the meal. So far as Drew Ackerman could determine the girl did not once look at him.

The stable-boy finished hitching up the relay team and was standing beside the horses when the driver finally stood up after wolfing his food.

"Stage leaving right away. Anyone going west?" he asked.

No one answered or looked up. A little later the girl thrust her plate back and arose, quickly crossed the floor, and once more ascended to her room. One by one the others got up and went back toward the Double Eagle. The rancher, Hugh Oliver, tried to engage Ackerman in conversation, but Drew arose saying only, "I'll see you tomorrow, probably," and walked away.

Oliver stared after him and the friendliness was gone from his eyes. Drew walked to the fireplace, rolled and lit a cigarette, and listened to the dying clatter of the stage as it rolled westward. He smoked half of the cigarette, then tossed it into the fireplace and went slowly and thoughtfully up the stairs. Before he reached the top he heard quick footsteps inside the girl's room. She seemed to be pacing the floor, four steps one way and four returning, over and over again.

Drew Ackerman went to her door and knocked lightly.

II

THE footsteps within the room ceased and for a space of ten seconds there was silence.

Then, "Who is it?" There was the faintest sign of a tremor in the question.

Ackerman held his voice to a low murmur.

"My name is Drew Ackerman, if that means anything to you, Miss. If it doesn't I've made a mistake and I ask your pardon."

Hurried steps approached the door and there was the sound of a key turning in the lock. The door swung open and the girl, wide-eyed and breathless, stood looking up at him.

"Come in—Drew," and the words were soundless, merely formed on the trembling lips.

Ackerman went in and she closed the door and turned around. He saw that beneath their healthy tan her cheeks were ashen and her deep, dark eyes were wide and filled with some nameless fear. There was tension in her voice.

"You *are*—Drew Ackerman. I knew it the moment I saw you, but for a second I thought you were—Dave. Where is he? I waited—and waited—until I knew something had happened, and couldn't wait any longer."

Ackerman's stetson was in his hand and he looked down at her, speaking slowly.

"I knew you too—the moment you left the stage. Dave had written me about you on his way west. When you saw me and—stopped—I was sure, Hope Norman."

"Yes, I am Hope Norman," she said, her voice a little stronger.

She went to an old rocker and indicated a chair for Ackerman. He seated himself and placed his hat on the floor, then faced her again.

"Tell me," he said with a quiet reassurance that seemed to encourage her. Her voice regained strength.

"I received letters regularly while your brother was working his claim, glowing accounts of its promise, and finally of his success there. We became engaged when he was on his way west, you know, after we'd met in town and dad invited him to our ranch for a visit. He told you that, didn't he?"

Drew nodded. She waited a moment then continued without faltering.

"Finally he wrote that he was starting back with over fifty pounds of gold dust and nuggets, nearly fifteen thousand dollars. A month ago a letter came saying he was buying a horse ranch west of Poison Pass and asking me to answer immediately. He asked me to come and look at it with him so that if I didn't like it he would not make the final payment, for that is where we would live.

"I was visiting an aunt when the letter arrived and didn't get it until a week later. I answered immediately, explaining the delay and telling him to make the last payment, that I'd live wherever he did, and asking him to hurry back and we'd get

married immediately. I never had an answer.

"I waited as long as I could, and finally came on myself. He had mentioned a man he'd met. Charley, he called him. I thought I might get some news of Dave from him if I could find him. I had to tell father I wanted to take a trip east, and actually started that way so he wouldn't suspect, or he'd have roped and tied me before he'd have let me come here. I realized the foolishness of my move when I arrived. Then I saw you—and was glad I'd come. Dave told me so much about his older brother. Oh—Drew, do you think—" and she halted, her courage failing.

A slight change had come over Ackerman's face while she talked. It seemed to have hardened, for the angles became more prominent and the lips were pressed in a tighter line. From behind the Station came the sound of a horse. Before he answered Drew Ackerman slid out of the chair and went to the window. He saw the horse and rider just entering the pines, a little wide of the Double Eagle. They came into view again, briefly, beyond the trees as they ascended a slope and once more disappeared in timber farther up. The second view confirmed the first impression. Drew recalled that young Bill Moose Horn had said he was going to see Night Bird, his sister. The youth was on his way.

Ackerman walked back and sat down again, facing Hope Norman. He said, carefully,

"I don't know—Hope, but I wouldn't count on Dave being alive. What you've said confirms a hunch I've had. A man tried to sell me a horse ranch tonight. He said it was the only ranch around here. I'm supposed to ride out to see it tomorrow."

"Are you going?"

Ackerman wasn't listening to the question. His head had jerked around, sideways to the door. He glanced over the room, noted the door in the left-hand wall, and picking up his stetson moved quickly. He tried the door and found it unlocked, then faced the girl again. Quiet footsteps sounded on the stairs outside. Ackerman put his fingers to his lips and murmured,

"My room is the next one. Leave this door unlocked," and he went into his own room.

He quickly lit the lamp, then sat down on the lumpy bed and began to twist a cigarette into shape. The footsteps were louder now and they paused before the girl's door, then continued on to his own. They halted again and there was a sharp rap on the door.

Ackerman thumbed a match, lit the cigarette, and said, "Come on. The door's unlocked."

The door swung and the horse-rancher, Hugh Oliver, stood in the opening.

"Sorry to bother you, friend," he said smoothly, "but I'd appreciate a definite answer about you coming out in the morning. If you're not coming, I have a trip I should make. If you are, I'll postpone it.

Ackerman looked at him for a long moment before replying. Finally, "I'll be there," he said shortly.

"That's all I want to know. Your word's good with me. See you tomorrow morning," and smiling with his lips, Oliver backed out and closed the door.

Ackerman listened to the heavy man's footsteps descend the stairs. There was no attempt at treading softly this time. Drew went to the door, opened it slightly, and continued to listen. He heard Oliver cross the big room and go out the front door. Moving to the window looking toward the Double Eagle, Drew Ackerman waited and watched. A little later he saw Oliver following the trail toward the resort. Only then did he return to Hope Norman's room.

"That rancher," he explained when the girl looked questioningly at him, "said he wanted to know for sure whether I was going out there tomorrow. Maybe so. But I've a hunch he also wanted to find out whether you and I know each other."

HE resumed his chair and faced the girl again. After a second of silence he resumed.

"My story is something like yours, one of waiting. Only I waited too long. The last letter I had from Dave was five weeks ago from Tennison, the next stage stop west of here. In it he described a fine gelding he was bringing back as a present for me. I waited three weeks and when no further word came I took the trail. He said he'd write me again in a few days. I had no idea how far he'd come from

Tennison, so I had to check every town and ranch on my way.

"I didn't even know in what state your father's ranch was, for Dave didn't tell me about you until he was working his claim, and only said he'd met you in a town on his way and had visited you at the ranch for awhile. I drew a blank at each stop and knew that Poison Pass was the last chance before reaching Tennison. Now I know he got this far."

The girl was staring at him and with his last statement she caught her breath sharply.

"How—do you know?" he whispered tensely.

"Because at least three others besides yourself noted my resemblance to my brother."

"What can we do now?" and she leaned farther forward.

Drew shook his head slowly.

"You can give me your home address so I will know where to locate you, and then you can take the next stage back. You'll be in danger every minute you're here. If the men responsible for Dave's disappearance thought for one moment that you were hunting him you're life wouldn't be worth a broken spur chain."

Instead of replying the girl arose quickly and went to her carpet bag. She lifted it to the bed and opened it. At that moment there were sounds in the rear of the Station and Ackerman went to the window. He stood at the side, where he could not be seen from below.

Hugh Oliver was leading two bridled horses from the corral to the barn. The lantern had been hung in the open doorway and as Oliver dropped the reins its glow shone on the animal's dark and glossy coats. A moment later the little man whose venomous glance had challenged Ackerman in the Double Eagle reappeared with a saddle and blanket. Oliver began to saddle one of the horses while the little man disappeared into the stable. When he came out again Drew started slightly and stared hard while a curse was checked just behind his teeth.

His gaze was centered not on the man but on the saddle he was cinching to the second horse. Even by the dim light of the overhead lantern Drew's sharp eyes could make out some of the intricate de-

signs tooled on the leather, and the silver stitching and the ornaments on the taps. Once he half turned, as though to stride from the room, then checked himself and wheeled back to the window. The two mounted and cantered around the Station to the road and the sound of the hoof-beats told him they were heading westward. He turned back slowly to the girl.

"I just saw the saddle I gave Dave on his eighteenth birthday. It was headed for the ranch I'm visiting tomorrow."

Hope Norman gasped, "Then that means he is—dead."

Ackerman lifted his shoulders. "We can only be sure that it means Dave isn't using his saddle," but there was little conviction in his tone.

Then he noted what the girl had taken from the bag while he had been at the window. Half-boots, levis, soft flannel shirt and spurs, a cartridge belt with a thirty-eight Colt lay on the blankets.

"What in—" he began when she interrupted.

"I came out here to do something about finding Dave. I haven't changed my mind. And I can take care of myself, don't make any mistake about that. My father was disappointed when I wasn't a boy, so he raised me like one—almost. I've had all the training he'd give a son, probably more, for he wanted me to excel even men in what he taught me."

"WATCH!" and before the word died Drew Ackerman was looking into the muzzle of the gun.

A slow and admiring grin finally softened his hard features. He made no reply and during his silence Hope Norman continued to stare at him defiantly. After a moment she laid aside the six-gun and again faced him. The fight went out of her suddenly.

"Please, Drew! He gave me his love and loyalty and I gave him mine," she begged. Then, with a touch of her former aggressiveness, "I'm staying and if I have to work alone it'll be because you won't let me work with you. I'd rather we became partners."

The grin on Ackerman's face had straightened while she spoke. It returned now and he held out his big right hand.

"Okay, partner!"

She gave a little cry as she ran forward



Hope

to grasp it. He became sober almost immediately, however.

"First you must promise not to leave here while I am away tomorrow. Wait here, in your room as much as you can, until I return, and say nothing to anyone that would give them reason to suspect why you are here. Will you do that?"

She nodded slowly and with evident reservations.

"I'd rather go with you, but you're the senior partner here. And Drew, watch yourself. Something tells me you're going right into the same thing Dave did—and that he didn't—didn't come out—"

"I know," Drew interrupted hastily. "But Dave was younger than me, and he wasn't trained."

"Yes, Dave told me. You were once marshal of a wild trail town in Kansas."

"Get all the rest you can. I'm leaving early. I'll see you when I get back."

She walked to the door connecting their two rooms and halted, looking up anxiously at him.

"Take care of yourself, Drew. If you're not back before the stage passes I'm riding out there."

During the night Drew was awakened by carousing in the Double Eagle. He looked out the window and discovered the corral filled with horses. The riders had not even removed the saddles and bridles. Finally, becoming accustomed to the noise, he slept again.

How much later it was he did not know, but he was awakened once more. This time there was no noise from the roadhouse. Perhaps, he thought, it had been

the cessation of the noise that had awakened him. Once more he arose and looked out the window. The corral was empty. He returned to his blankets and for long minutes lay thinking.

The third time he was awakened it was by a sound at the door of his room. His hand slid out the six-gun hanging from the back of a chair at the head of his bed. The noise was repeated, a faint scratching, as though someone was afraid to rap. He slid out of bed and approached the door, moving along the wall where the creaking of floor boards would not advertise his approach. He shoved back the bolt and stepped away, gun leveled.

"Open her," he invited softly.

For a moment it was dead quiet.

The knob was turned soundlessly and the door swung. He lowered his gun and returned to the bed as Bill Moose Horn slid into the room. Drew sat watching the Indian lad in the pale glow of a high riding moon shining through the window. Moose Horn stood looking down at Ackerman, and there was no expression on his face. But in his eyes a dark restlessness played beneath the surface. When he spoke it was softly, and in the voice there was an unmistakable reflection of the excitement in the eyes.

"I have seen Night Bird, my sister. She tells me to bring you to her. I tell her also of the beautiful lady who has come to the Station. Night Bird tell me that she must come, too, that she have a message for this beautiful lady. Night Bird is very wise."

"You want to go right away?" Ackerman asked, keeping his voice as low as the lad's.

Moose Horn shook his head in an emphatic negative.

"We could not go and get back in time. It is almost morning now. No one must suspect and I have work to do at the station. We will go tonight, two hours after dark. You will meet me beyond the pines at the top of the first bench behind the Double Eagle. Bring the lady and let no one see you leave. I will have horses saddled and waiting up there."

There were a score of questions Ackerman wanted to ask, but something in the manner of the lad warned him to defer them. Moose Horn had suddenly become

alert, his head turned a little toward the door.

"Somebody comes," he whispered and glided toward the window.

He raised it soundlessly and slipped through. Drew saw the dark fingers gripping the ledge, the black hair just above the sill. Then both disappeared and an almost soundless thud indicated the lad's landing on the soft turf below. Footsteps sounded out in the corridor, moving from the rear of the building toward the head of the stairs. They were soft, yet heavy, and apparently no effort was being made to walk quietly.

Ackerman remembered the fat, moccasin-clad squaw who did the cooking and waited on the table at the Station, and swung back into bed for another hour's sleep. He was asleep before the squaw reached the bottom step.

III

HOPE NORMAN did not put in an appearance before Drew Ackerman left for the Tomahawk Ranch of Hugh Oliver. The road reached westward from the Station until it dropped steeply to a lower level. Here it angled to the southwest and at the angle a well marked trail swung to the right, heading toward the northwest and what appeared to be a break in the rugged mountains hemming him in.

But the break was lost as the trail twisted through narrow valley and gorge, over hogback and wooded bench. Only the climbing sun kept him informed of the direction of his travel. The country grew wilder the farther he rode and game darted to right and left from the trail, deer, rabbits, grouse, and on the heights bighorns and mountain goats.

The verdure and wild life disappeared suddenly when the trail dropped him into a narrow, rocky canyon where scarcely a blade of grass grew on the sheet of rock that was its floor. Ackerman became more alert and the thought occurred that, like his brother, he was being lured into some blind hole from which there was no escape; that no fine ranch, but only death, lay ahead. A little later he saw what looked like the end of the canyon. He slowed his mount and his darting glances covered

every possible spot that might conceal an ambush. Then he discovered that this was not a box but that the gorge made an abrupt turn. He rounded the turn and saw the end, a bright, oblong patch of blue sky with green, rolling land beyond. He reached the exit and halted to stare out over a beautiful mountain park.

A dark line of cliffs indicated the western and northern borders of the park. In the northwest corner there appeared to be a break, and from this a heavy growth of trees formed a band that clung to the base of the cliffs, circling to the south and west until they reached a point almost directly opposite his position. On a knoll in front of the southern edge of this timber belt, and facing the open, he saw the outlines of a low, wide log building, with the suggestion of other buildings behind it. To the south there seemed to be little branches of the park sunk back into the wooded hills that marked the park's boundary on his left.

One fact immediately impressed itself upon Drew. This was supposed to be a horse ranch, yet in all the broad, rolling terrain between him and the ranch house, and as far north and south as he could see, there were scarcely a dozen horses grazing on the lush grass.

He quit the mouth of the canyon after a final, sweeping survey of the park, and headed directly toward the house. As he drew closer he noted a barn and several smaller buildings. At the right of these was a large corral in which were a score of horses.

Riding up the final slope toward the veranda of the big log house, his gaze rapidly cataloged the salient features of those horses. Every one of them appeared to have recently been ridden almost to complete exhaustion. All of them were either blacks or chestnuts. There was not a white, gray or pinto among them. A fresh horse, already saddled, was grounded in front of the veranda. As Ackerman reached the top of the knoll Hugh Oliver came out of the house and walked to the top of the steps.

"Light and come in. We'll have a drink before we get down to business," he invited heartily, his lips and eyes both smiling.

Drew Ackerman waited a moment before

replying. And while he hesitated he studied the man. There was a restless eagerness behind that smile, and in the eyes was an expression very like that of a cat watching a mouse. Finally he returned the smile with one of his own, a little strained, but at least it showed his teeth.

"Thanks, Oliver," he said, "but I'd like to get the survey over first."

He watched the rancher closely while he made that statement, but saw nothing in the man's reaction to indicate disappointment that Drew had refused to walk into a trap waiting for him inside the house. Oliver's smile even broadened a little.

"Of course," he agreed readily. "My horse is ready and we'll go at once. Most of the animals are in a couple of those pockets at the south end of the park, but the finest are held up north. We'll go to the southern pockets first."

He came down from the veranda and mounted the waiting horse, then led the way toward the south park wall. Drew glanced back once and caught an indistinct movement back in the belt of trees behind the house, but could not determine its cause. He returned his attention to Oliver, who was traveling unhurriedly at a running walk.

Throughout the ride vague doubts began to take hold of Drew Ackerman. He had thought at first that Hugh Oliver's willingness to sell the ranch had been motivated mainly by the desire to get his hands on any money Drew might be carrying, which must necessarily be large if such a deal were to be completed on the spot. Drew had figured that that trick had been played on his brother. The money had been turned over, and then Dave had been murdered and the bill of sale he had received had been destroyed. Now he wasn't so sure. If that had happened and Oliver planned to repeat it, certainly there was no evidence of the intention so far. Ackerman began to doubt the whole theory he had built up.

They reached one of the pockets, a large, circular bowl with a narrow opening. A pole fence closed the neck of the pocket. Beyond this some fifty head of fine, clean-limbed and deep-chested stock grazed, or drank from a spring at the back of the pocket. Like those in the corral, there was not a light colored horse among them.

Nor did any of them bear a brand, though Oliver had called his ranch the Tomahawk. Ackerman was thereby confirmed in one conclusion he had drawn.

And then he forgot this aspect of the problem. He felt Hugh Oliver's eyes searching his face and knew why the rancher had brought him to this spot. But he could not control the tightening of his jaws and the wolfish narrowing of his gray eyes as he looked.

SOME of the animals had shifted and there, alone in a small open patch, was a beautiful chestnut with a long silky tail and mane, and with four, clearly defined, white stockings. The animal threw up its head and looked toward them, its neck arched, its ears pricked forward with intelligent curiosity, and revealed the almost perfect white star in the center of its forehead. That star was the conclusive evidence that Ackerman was gazing at the animal Dave had described, the gelding with a high percentage of Arab blood he was bringing from the west coast for his brother.

"Those are less than half of the stock we have here," Hugh Oliver said smoothly. "There is another pocket with about as many. But the pride of our ranch is a pocket in the north wall. I want you to see them, only ten altogether, but every one a blooded stallion. I think they will convince you of the bargain you will be getting when I name the price. We'll go there next."

Hugh Oliver was clever. If Drew had only suspected it before, he now had his proof. The rancher had seen what he wanted to know in Drew's reaction at sight of the chestnut, yet there was not the slightest suggestion in speech or manner to betray him. Oliver had his proof that Drew Ackerman was related to the man who had owned the chestnut, and that he had come to Poison Pass to investigate. Drew turned without a word and let Oliver lead the way across the park toward the northern line of cliffs.

They rode swiftly and without conversation. Oliver apparently wanted to bring whatever scheme he had in mind to a quick conclusion. Drew Ackerman became absorbed in his thoughts, placing himself in the rancher's position, judging the man,

and endeavoring to foresee just what that scheme was.

He recalled the belt of trees and the movement he had detected among them. He recalled Oliver's lazy gait in riding to inspect the herd at the south and he noted the speed with which the rancher now traveled. Also, there had been no evidence of Oliver's companion of the night before, the venomous little black wasp who, Ackerman knew, had recognized him in the Double Eagle. He had a few answers, and surmised what to expect ahead.

They reached the black opening that Drew had seen in the perpendicular north wall when he had first looked out over the park from the canyon mouth. As they drew up to it Oliver slowed the pace a little. He turned in the saddle.

"Up here about a half mile," he called, then rode on.

Ackerman did not reply. He was examining the gorge they were about to enter. The floor was solid rock, the walls were perpendicular, and some two hundred feet high and in spots were less than fifty feet apart. If there was water or grass in any part of this blind canyon he'd eat and drink it all for lunch. His gaze darted ahead and upward to the rim and something bobbed down out of sight too quickly for identification. But he needed no confirmation that it was a man's head.

"Just a minute, Oliver," he called.

The rancher looked around, then turned his mount. When he saw Ackerman making no move to continue, slow surprise and bewilderment were expressed in his smooth features.

"I've changed my mind," Drew continued calmly. "It won't be necessary for me to see those stallions. I'll take your word for it. This trip is consuming more time than I expected. I suggest we return to the ranch house and conclude the deal there as quickly as possible."

Oliver hesitated a moment, but he held his features to their show of bewilderment. Finally he said, in a voice louder than seemed strictly necessary, "Very well, we'll go back to the ranch house and close the deal. It won't take long."

He motioned Ackerman to precede him, but Drew sat quietly. For a moment the two looked at each other. Finally Oliver rode up.

"You're a suspicious man," he observed as he passed.

"That's why I'm still alive," Drew returned calmly.

They returned to the ranch, Oliver reluctantly for awhile, holding his mount to little more than a walk. Finally, however, he seemed to recover from whatever resentment Ackerman's attitude had aroused. He waited for Drew to come close, then entertained with a detailed account of the advantages of the park, pointing out various spots where there was excellent grass beyond their field of vision, where hay sufficient for five times the stock he owned could be cut and stored for winter use; how the park could also be used for cattle in addition to blooded horses.

At length they arrived at the house and Oliver dismounted, led the way up the steps and through the front door to a wide, cool living room with a big stone fireplace and comfortable chairs. He motioned Drew to one of the chairs and walked to a cupboard beside the fireplace. He returned with glasses and a bottle of bonded bourbon. Handing Drew a glass he poured drinks and seated himself, placing the bottle on the floor beside his chair.

"Success," he nodded at Drew, and downed the drink.

Ackerman hesitated, then drank. Oliver began a detailed account of the stock he owned. Drew gave no indication that he wasn't listening to the rancher, but his own ears were attuned to little noises from the rear of the building. Now they seemed to be coming from all sides. He stiffened inwardly and switched his gaze to a window behind Oliver. In it was framed the sneering, swarthy face of the little man of the Double-Eagle. He knew another face had appeared at the window behind him, and the little noises behind the doors leading out of this big room told him there were others he had not yet seen. Oliver's smooth voice suddenly grew biting sarcasm.

"Well, Ackerman, the farce is over. You thought I didn't know your name, eh? Young Dave told us about his brother, swore he'd come to revenge him, and we've been waiting. You figured my moves pretty close, at that, while we were on the way to that south pocket. But I wanted you to get a look at Dave's horse. Your ex-

pression then told me I'd made no mistake, that you were Drew Ackerman.

"You figured, too, that we went down there to give my men a chance to move through the timber up to the wall of the canyon where they could pick you off. You made your mistake, though, in not realizing they would return the way they went. I see you've already recognized my foreman, Shot Prine, in the window behind me. It will take only a lift of my right hand for him to show you faster gun speed than you ever dreamed up."

NONE of Ackerman's tension showed. He now appeared almost drowsy, his lids half lowered over his eyes, his forearms relaxed along the arms of the chair, his body slumped in a recumbent position against the chair back.

"You talk too much, Oliver. Get to the point," he drawled.

Oliver's mobile features changed once more, and hard, savage lines appeared in his face as he leaned forward, his mouth thin as a knife slash, his pointed chin thrust forward like a blunt spear head.

"You know blasted well what I want. I know your reason for coming to Poison Pass. You'll get your freedom only after you deliver. Now you talk."

Ackerman shook his head slowly, his eyes veiled.

"You ain't told me anything yet. Keep talkin'."

The rancher's features twisted into a sneer.

"Your brother mailed a letter before he came to inspect the Tomahawk. Do you expect me to believe he didn't tell you in it where he had hid his gold; that that ain't what really brought you to Poison Pass? We're going to get it, mister, if we have to carve you into little pieces to make you talk."

Drew actually grinned this time.

"So Dave hid the gold you meant to take from him with your fake sale, eh? Good boy! I always knew he had brains. He always played them close to his chest. I suppose if I knew and told you you'd let me go free?"

"Of course," Oliver said too quickly.

Ackerman's reply was a deliberate insult.

"Like hell you would! A moment ago you said your Shot Prine could show me

gun-speed I'd never dreamed of. Is it faster than—this?"

Ackerman's right arm made no move, only his wrist and hand seemed to twitch, and Hugh Oliver was looking into the muzzle of a forty-five. Drew's eye-lids lifted now, exposing gray lightning that bored at the rancher. His voice was as hard and sharp as his eyes.

"Your gun-dummies can't shoot fast enough to stop me from dropping this hammer. You're a dead skunk if anyone tries, and you know it. Order them to move to the outside front of the house. We're leaving."

Hugh Oliver's eyes popped for a second. Then a sickly ashen hue spread over his smooth, florid cheeks. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Then he shut it. Drew Ackerman smiled and there was less comfort for Oliver in that smile than there would have been in the most savage scowl.

"Go ahead, give the orders."

The rancher opened his mouth again,

and this time words came forth in a high-pitched voice quivering with fright.

"For God's sake, boys, hold it. Do like he says—move around to the front of the house."

Sweat was popping out on the man's forehead and rolling down his cheeks in little colorless worms while he waited for the men to obey him. There was a long moment of silence before the shuffling movements began. Men left the building, passed the windows, and their low voices out in front could be heard indistinctly. At last someone called,

"We're out here, boss. What next?"

Ackerman said, "Get up and walk to the window."

The rancher obeyed like an automaton. Drew closed in behind him, jabbing the muzzle of the forty-five against the man's spine. His left hand went over Oliver's body quickly. He drew a small thirty-eight from a shoulder holster. At the window he looked over the rancher's shoulder at the four men staring at the front door,

What is Wrong When Prayer Fails?

Thirty years ago, in Forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange Power that Knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong, can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his twenty-one years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power, which

there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the World's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 30 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9000-word treatise. He says the time has come for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mental-physics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. K-290, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.



then said sharply.

"Where's Shot Prine? Get him around there fast."

The edge in Ackerman's voice told the fat rancher that Ackerman's tension was close to the breaking point.

Oliver called almost hysterically, "Shot! Shot! Get around to the boys, for God's sake."

A dark shadow of a little man came around the corner of the house and the fury in his twisted face made an inhuman mask.

"Now, out! And stop just outside the front door," Ackerman snapped.

Hugh Oliver followed orders, walking as though his legs were turning to rubber. He halted just beyond the door. Once more looking over Oliver's shoulder, Drew surveyed the hard-case crew in front of him.

"All right boys, shuck 'em and step away," he demanded.

Venom-charged, motionless silence followed the order. Drew waited a moment, then snapped, "Quick!"

One of the men began to unbuckle his cartridge belt. Others followed reluctantly. They stepped back and Ackerman's eyes stabbed at them. His gaze settled on Shot Prine.

"Get that hide-out gun from beneath your shirt and toss it with the others," he barked.

Shot Prine's snarl was like the hiss of an angry goose, but he obeyed.

"Back to the corner of the porch, and stick together," Ackerman then commanded.

The men shuffled into position and Drew prodded his captive forward. He gave his next order to Hugh Oliver without shifting his restless gaze from the grouped men.

"Pick 'em up and hang 'em over my saddle horn."

He waited until the job was finished. Then, "Get on your horse and head for the pass, slow."

Oliver was a little more active now, as if in this last order he saw a possible way out. Ackerman appeared not to notice it. Oliver climbed hurriedly into the saddle and looked around as he dug in his spurs. Drew Ackerman was already mounted. Oliver's horse raced forward down the knoll and up the second swell beyond. Ackerman roweled his own mount in pursuit. When

he reached the top of the rise he saw the rancher leaning far forward in the saddle, spurring frantically and heading toward the north rim of the park. Drew made no effort to pursue, but held straight for the eastern outlet, and he too plied the spurs.

He looked back. Not a man was in sight. And Hugh Oliver was circling back toward the ranch house. In another three minutes the whole Tomahawk would be on his trail, for their horses were still saddled after their return from the gorge. He was less than half way to the canyon opening when he saw them, like a small swarm of bees winging low into the open park.

He lost sight of them in the canyon, and twenty minutes later saw them charge down the trail, strung out this time, while he waited under cover of a clump of spruce at the crest of a hogback flanking the trail.

IV

DREW ACKERMAN worked his way toward the stage road, following the ridges only when there was brush or timber for cover. He dropped the collection of guns and belts in a sink hole, then continued, keeping the Tomahawk trail in sight as much as possible. It was slow work, for he was careful not to outline himself against the sky on open stretches and it was not until he almost reached the road that he saw the Tomahawk men again. This time they were returning and there were only five in the bunch. Hugh Oliver was with them, but the dark-faced Shot Prine was missing.

Drew paused a moment.

Drew did not ride to the road, but paralleled it, still keeping well back and under cover. It was not until dusk that he approached Poison Pass Station on foot. The stage had arrived and young Bill Moose Horn was standing at the heads of the fresh horses.

Ackerman's sharp glances darted around searchingly. No one else appeared to be in sight. He eased up to the lighted window of the station and took a quick look inside. He saw Hope Norman at the table, head and eyes lowered while she ate, oblivious of the glances of the others. Shot Prine was not there.

He walked warily to the front of the Station. The Indian lad saw him immedi-

ately. Ackerman approached and asked in a low voice, "Where's Prine?"

The youth gestured toward the roadhouse. "Drinking," he murmured. "And cursing."

Drew grinned a little and swiftly recounted what had happened. The youth nodded.

"The girl has been worried. She heard you and me talking in your room last night and came to me in the barn today. I told her not to worry. I also told her what we are to do tonight. She is beautiful, and loyal—like my sister, Night Bird. If you will take her to the bench beyond the pines I will have fresh horses waiting for you. I will take care of your horse as soon as the stage goes. He is in that aspen thicket, isn't he? I saw you ride in and walk out."

Ackerman nodded, and gave the lad's arm a slight squeeze.

"Good boy. Good night eyes. We'll be up on the bench in about two hours. Right?"

A gleam of white teeth accompanied the youth's quick, "Right."

Drew Ackerman walked into the station and chose a spot at the table where there was nothing at his back but a blank log wall. Hope Norman looked up quickly and as quickly returned her attention to her food. Ackerman ate fast, finished before the girl, and arose and left the table, ascending to his room. A little later he heard Hope go into her room, and heard her moving quickly around. Within a few minutes the shouts of the driver sounded as the stage rattled away.

He pinched out his cigarette then and went to the door connecting his room with Hope's. He tapped lightly and the girl's swift, "Oh! Come in," told how anxiously she had been awaiting his appearance.

She said nothing, but her tension betrayed her anxiety. She had changed to her riding clothes and the flannel shirt and levis enhanced the soft curves of her well-rounded body.

"We're a little farther along the trail," Ackerman said quietly, then outlined what had happened, and told what little he had accomplished.

"The Tomahawk is run solely for the benefit of long-riders. The horses are all dark for night riding and they're un-

branded. They're all kept where they can be gathered in a hurry. There's a corral full left by the gang who rode through here last night," he finished.

The girl had better control of herself now, and appeared resigned.

"I knew that Dave was gone. Who do you suppose did it?"

Drew shook his head. "There's no way to be sure. They're all killers, but my bet would be on Shot Prine, or Hugh Oliver. Maybe both."

He didn't tell her that Dave's death could not have been easy, that Oliver hadn't learned the hiding place of the gold.

Hope said quickly, "Prine's here now. He's out there in the resort, drinking. And he's come for you. I sensed it before, and after what you've told me I'm sure of it. He'll never forgive you for getting out of those traps he and Oliver prepared."

Ackerman's only reply was a thin smile. But it was enough. The girl caught something of his mood, and her own eyes grew hard.

"There remains this trip tonight. Did Billy Moose Horn tell you he'd told me?"

Drew nodded. "A good lad," he said.

"A gold mine. And his sister—she must be as fine as he is. They've both been educated in the east. She's willing to help us, even probably endangering herself. I wonder what it's all about. Some way I have a very strong hunch it'll be very important."

"I'm sure of it. Young Moose Horn is risking his life, and his sister's too, to help us. He wouldn't do that just to give us information. He'd give the information himself, if that was all. Or why couldn't she come down here? No—it's more than just information, but I haven't the foggiest idea what."

Ackerman had spoken quickly toward the last, a suppressed excitement evident to the watchful and understanding girl. She continued to stare at him with wide eyes that mirrored only sorrow. She shook her head in a slow, regretful negative.

"I know—what you're thinking. I began to think that, too, when Billy was talking to me, but he guessed what was in my mind. He can read me, I think. He told me, sorrowfully, that I was hoping when there was no hope. He said that Dave was

dead—a flat statement that permitted no hopeful interpretation.”

DREW ACKERMAN did not answer her. He looked down, drew tobacco and paper from a vest pocket, and slowly rolled a cigarette. When it was made he crushed it in his big hand and let it drop to the floor, then arose.

“Let’s go,” he said, and turned toward the door.

She came up behind him and laid a small hand on his arm.

“I had my hope today, until Billy killed it. After that I buried it. That’s what you’re doing now, and I know how hard it is. I wish I could help, Drew.”

Ackerman’s big hand suddenly covered hers and he spoke from his heart, and was inwardly startled at the words that came forth.

“You *have* helped, Hope, more than you’ll ever know. But now we’ve other things to think about.”

That last sentence carried steel in it. Steel, too, was in Hope Norman’s voice when she answered.

“I know. As soon as we’re sure who did it, there will be justice—no, not only justice, but full payment—to exact.”

Drew said, “I left the light on in my room. Best to leave yours on, too. Prine may be waiting for us to put them out.”

He opened the door a crack, glanced down the hall, and listened intently. Only the sounds of the squaw in the kitchen fighting with the dirty dishes, and the low voices of two men in casual conversation in the main room ascended to him. Nothing moved in the hall.

Drew played cautious.

Turning, he nodded to her, and slipped out, heading toward the stairs at the back of the corridor. The girl followed silently, closing the door softly behind her. At the bottom of the stairs Drew eased open the door. For a full three minutes he stared into the darkness, searching each shadow, each obstruction that might serve as cover for a watcher. At length he looked over his shoulder at the girl.

“Follow me when I get ten feet away, and keep low,” he murmured, then slipped out.

Keeping the barn between them and the Double Eagle, he worked his way deeper

into the grove of pines surrounding the resort, then turned northward toward the slope. The road-house appeared only as a dark, indistinct blur. Only one gleam of yellow light appeared at its side, near the front of the building. Drew Ackerman’s gaze shifted to it several times, uneasily. Finally he halted, beckoning the girl closer to him.

“I want to take a look. Wait here,” he said softly.

He slipped toward the building, moving furtively and keeping to the best available cover. Behind the last tree, with the cleared space that surrounded the resort before him, he looked around searchingly, then moved swiftly across to the building. When he was beneath the window he raised slowly until he could see the interior of the big room.

There were three or four in the room besides the bartender, but none of them was Shot Prine. That worried Drew. He quickly joined Hope Norman and they started forward once more.

The upward pitch began some fifty yards behind the Double Eagle. They climbed steadily. Above them, towering like a giant, black cloud with a white crest, loomed one of the peaks flanking the pass. They seemed to be heading directly for its summit, and the way grew constantly more difficult. Hope Norman seemed scarcely to mind for she was light-footed as an antelope. It was harder for Drew Ackerman, accustomed as he was to doing most of his traveling in the saddle. Several times they rested and once, through a brief rift in the canopy of pine fronds above, they caught a glimpse of a strange yellow glow beginning to appear in the east.

The toil through the night blackness, with no aid from the stars whose pale light failed to penetrate the forest cover, seemed endless. Their only guide was the pitch of the ground. Yet within a half hour it ended as abruptly as it had begun. They halted, panting, behind the last row of pines and looked out over a nearly level bench, bare of trees to its base, and covered only with low bushes and grass.

Almost immediately they saw Bill Moose Horn back in the shadow of the trees at the back of the bench. The movement of one of the three horses he had brought had directed Drew’s gaze to the spot. All

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the animals were looking in their direction and the Indian lad was kneeling, his hand thrust forward, his dark eyes watchful. Across one knee he held a rifle, and Drew Ackerman saw it slowly raised to a ready position.

Drew called softly across the bench, identifying himself and Hope. The lad immediately arose and Ackerman and Hope hurried forward. Again, clearer and steadier this time, they saw the mysterious light in the east. Ackerman turned to examine it and saw the arc of the moon just appearing above the horizon. He turned as the Indian lad drew close.

"We must hurry," Bill said swiftly. "I think I've been watched."

Ackerman replied tersely, "Shot Prine was not in the Double Eagle when we passed."

The Indian youth said, "I was afraid of that. He is a weasel. I am afraid of him."

There was no touch of cowardice in the lad's simple statement and Ackerman knew that Bill meant only to express realization of Prine's deadliness rather than any actual fear of the man.

THEY mounted immediately, and with young Bill leading rode toward the end of the bench until they hit a distinct trail winding eastward around the shoulder of the mountain. This, Ackerman knew, was one of the little known outlaw trails that extended from Canada to the Mexican Border, and was the one most used by the long-riders who stopped at the Double Eagle for celebration, and the Tomahawk Ranch for obtaining fresh mounts.

The trail climbed steeply for awhile and the trees flanking it became lower and scrubbier, stunted cedars, twisted by wind and cold and snow. As the trail swung northward once more, Drew Ackerman turned in the saddle to look back. Far below, visible only as dark patches beside a narrow ribbon that was the stage road, were the Poison Pass buildings. Suddenly he called to those ahead, halting them.

A rider had left the station and was racing west along the road. Drew studied the man and finally said, "That's not Shot Prine. Too big."

"No. It looks like one of the men who

work around the Double Eagle. I do not like it," the Indian youth returned. "Let us move on fast."

He turned and urged his mount ahead, and the pace quickened. For over an hour they rode steadily, sometimes climbing, sometimes descending a little, where water-worn draws furrowed the mountain-side. All trace of civilization except the thin trail they followed was lost. Great peaks towered around them, narrow valleys and twisting canyons yawned below. Down the slope the tree tops and the brush concealed details, but up where they rode the low bushes and the gnarled and twisted cedars failed to hide the bald ruggedness of the rocky slopes. The moon climbed higher, shedding a pale, ghostly light around them, shortening and blackening the shadows.

As their mounts toiled on, an uneasy feeling grew within Ackerman. He felt impelled to glance frequently behind him. He gave way to the sensation several times and neither saw nor heard anything. Then he noticed that Bill Moose Horn was doing the same, and he realized that the more highly developed and primitive instincts of the native had inspired in Bill the same uneasiness.

The youth left the trail, turning toward higher ground. How he recognized the spot to turn off, Ackerman didn't know, but there was no hesitancy. In fact he put his mount to great effort. There was no trail, but the Indian rode in and out among the brush clumps without pause. Ackerman looked upward and saw a spot where all vegetation vanished, a bald patch covered only with boulders and backed by what appeared to be a perpendicular wall of rock at least three hundred feet high.

The youth headed directly for that spot. He was not watching his back trail now, but mounting steadily upward. Could that cheerless, exposed, barren, and rock-studded desolation be the home of Night Bird, Bill's sister, Drew Ackerman wondered. A sense of eerie uncertainty gripped Drew. He felt as though they were leaving the earth behind and landing on some cold and long dead planet where there was neither life nor any way of sustaining life.

Hope Norman turned and looked back at him and her eyes were dark and wide with apprehension. The chill spell of the

place had gripped her also. Ackerman tried to smile encouragement, but he felt it was rather thin. She said nothing, but once more faced about and followed the pony bearing Billy Moose Horn.

The lad halted at the edges of the bushes and gave a low call, not unlike the moaning notes of the mourning dove. Drew saw movement far up the slope near the base of the cliff. A similar note drifted down to them and the Indian went forward again, threading his way among the boulders across flatter ground.

The barren stretch was wider than it had appeared from below. As they moved closer Drew noticed a dull, reddish glow low down among the boulders. It seemed to come from behind the cliff, as though the rock wall itself shone with some mysterious, inward fire.

A little later he discovered the source of the light was a small fire at the back of a deep, wide crack in the precipice. He saw, next, that the smoke from it spiralled upward into the crack. The outlet of this natural flue was somewhere high above, where the telltale gray column would be dissipated before it could give away the location of the hide-out.

There was movement. What Drew had first taken for an inanimate rock close to the entrance of the crack became a human figure, no taller than Hope Norman, and as perfectly proportioned. As she walked toward them with a wild grace Drew noted that she was clad in skirt and waist of Indian tanned buckskin.

Bill Moose Horn slid from the bare back of his pony and stepped close to her. He spoke rapidly in his native tongue and she appeared to answer some question. Ackerman and Hope Norman dismounted and waited. The Indian lad took his sister's hand and led her toward them. She appeared a little shy, smiling slightly, but not looking up until Moose Horn spoke.

"This is my sister, Night Bird. These," now addressing his sister, "are my friends and the friends of him whom you have brought back to life."

The girl looked up then, and her own eyes met the wide and startled eyes of the white girl. Hope took an impulsive step forward and the smile left the native girl's face.

"It is not the one you have lost," she

said a little sadly, interpreting the sudden uprush of hope in the white girl's face. "This man was his companion—called, Charley. He is much better, but—" and here the maid's dark glance switched from Hope to Ackerman and back again. "But I think it better for your friend to see him first. This man is not a—a pleasant sight. You wait." Then turning to Ackerman. "You come."

Ackerman stepped forward promptly, the girl's strange words and manner starting a slight chill coursing along his spine. His naturally stern features were drawn into harsher lines, with all expression forced back from their grim exterior as he went with the Indian maid to the mouth of the crevice.

V

THE crack was deep and at the mouth was about eight feet wide. Drew's sharp glances darted over the stack of firewood along one wall, the skins that formed a mattress on the rocky floor, and the soft fur blankets for protection from the cold of the upland nights. From one side came the sound of water dripping into water. He discovered a second crack splitting the wall of the main crevice. This was only a foot in width, but from somewhere in the darkness above water dripped continuously and fell into a large pail placed at the mouth of the crack.

Near this pail Ackerman noticed cooking utensils, cans of food, a haunch of venison, sacks containing flour and sugar and coffee, a hand-axe and a large knife. Leaning against the wall was a rifle, with a belt and six-gun on the floor nearby. Obviously, this natural cave had been inhabited for weeks.

His gaze switched to the rear, where the wall converged to make a natural flue for the fire on the rocky floor. But it was what lay in the ruddy light of the fire that brought a muttered, bitter oath to his lips.

Half reclining on a second pallet of tanned hides lay a thing that had once been a man. Had he been the victim of a pain-maddened grizzly he could scarcely have been more broken and mutilated.

The nose was a boneless flap of flesh that lay over against one cheek. The shat-

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tered jaw bone had knit at an angle, drawing the lower jaw to the left. One cheek was sunken, where the bone had been crushed; the other was a lump that all but hid the eye above it. The top of his head was a shining sheet of blood-red tissue, with tufts of snow white hair above the ears and the back of the neck. The left arm was fore-shortened and twisted, with the hand and forearm stiffened almost at right angles to the upper arm and the fingers only flesh-covered bones, crooked and stiffly interlaced, a useless, immovable claw. One shoulder was higher than the other, and at the throat of the loose shirt appeared ugly, white scars that extended downwards out of sight.

His legs were covered by a soft, woven, rabbitskin blanket, and from the outline beneath the covering Ackerman judged that they were twisted and probably atrophied. The sunken eyes that stared up at him seemed maniacal in the black intensity of their unwinking stare.

"You're Dave Ackerman's brother?"

The voice was a harsh croak, with the words badly slurred. The crooked lower jaw jerked and bobbed, and Drew noted that there were few teeth left in the mouth and that the tip of the tongue had been split.

Drew looked at the wreck and nodded. His own, narrowed eyes glowed with but little more subdued hell-fire than burned in the eyes of the broken man. He said but one word.

"Who?" and it was like the stab of a knife.

A crackling, bitter laugh was his answer.

"He's mine. The segundo of the Tomahawk, black little Shot Prine is a killer, the killer of your brother. The fiend of hell who made me what you see was that oily, sharp-chinned, smooth faced owner, Hugh Oliver. *He's mine.*" The last two words were a scream.

"He's yours, if I have to rope and drag him to you."

"But he didn't get what he was after—Dave's gold. A Tomahawk puncher saw it in Tennison, then said his boss was looking for a buyer. When that ranny headed out of town on a running horse about midnight, Dave got suspicious. He hid the gold off the trail."

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"Never mind the gold, tell me about Dave—and yourself. Why aren't you dead?"

The fires in the sunken eyes rose to new intensity. The man's slurred syllables tumbled out almost inarticulately.

"They figured me easier to get information from, I reckon. They gave Dave three chances and when he laughed at them the third time they gave him lead. When they got through with me, just Prine and Oliver in a pocket at the west edge of their ranch where their gang couldn't hear my screams, they left me for dead too.

"Night Bird was traveling through the mountains to visit her brother. She heard, and saw the last part. She had a pack horse. She threw away the pack and loaded me on, instead. She worked on me for three days. Then that Oliver fiend discovered my body was gone and began to nose around. She got her brother and they packed me up here.

"Since then he's come at night to bring supplies, and she's never left my side. Stuck through fever and delirium and God knows what, trying the best she could to set bones that was broken in a half dozen places, using herbs and native medicine to stop the bleeding and kill the fever. No white woman was ever half the angel she's turned out to be. Drew, part of that gold has to go to those two, or I'll haunt you as long as you live."

"All of it goes to them, except what's necessary to get you to a first class surgeon," Ackerman snapped.


The other shook his head.

"No use in that last. I'm done for. Anyway, there's the other girl, the girl Dave was going to marry. Night Bird said she was coming. Before Dave died he left a message for her. I reckon she couldn't stand to look at me. Will you tell her for me, Drew?"

From behind Ackerman a small, half choked voice answered for him.

"She has looked at you. Tell her yourself, my friend."

DREW looked down. Hope Norman knelt by his side, leaning toward the broken creature, her eyes wide and dark and the long lashes sparkling with tears. There was a choked sob that didn't come



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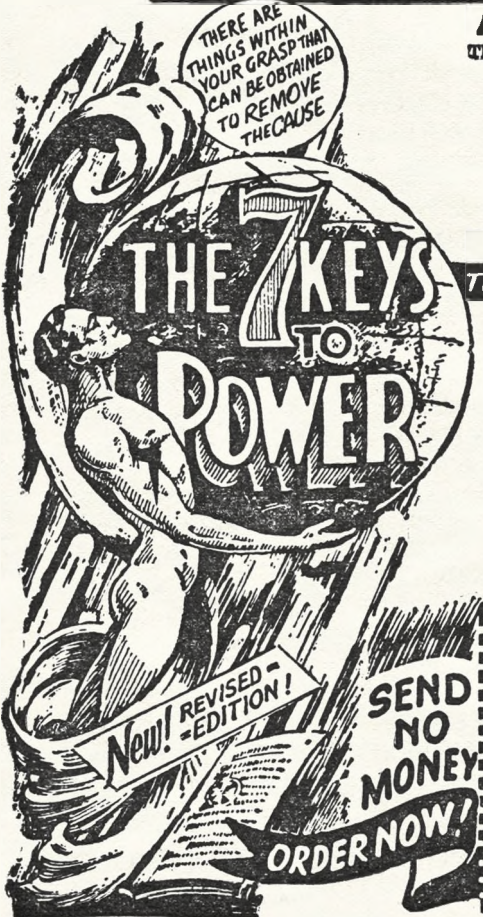
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from the girl. Ackerman switched his gaze to the twisted man.

He was leaning forward too, and all the fire had left his eyes. They were the eyes of a stricken man, sick with the view of such loveliness and loyalty as he knew could never be his. Drew Ackerman stared and slowly his jaws tightened and the little muscles at the hinges writhed and knotted and stood out in solid lumps.

At length the broken man said slowly, with care to articulate as clearly as possible, "Dave thought—of you—and little else. It was his home for you—he was planning. He would have wanted me to tell you how much he loved you—but you know that. He would not want you to cry—he would want you to find happiness wherever your heart would direct. I—I guess that's all—"

He turned on his side, his back to them, a horrible twisting motion that gave the two watchers the impression they heard the grinding of broken bones. Hope Norman arose and walked unsteadily toward the mouth of the crack, her head bent into her cupped hands, her sobs breaking free and unchecked.

Ackerman, too, turned slowly away and was in time to see the little Indian maid arise from her couch near the opening, put an arm tenderly around her white sister's shoulders and walk with her out to the boulder-studded plain. Drew himself moved slowly after them and looked around. He had to wink several times before the mist in front of his eyes cleared.

He realized at once that Bill Moose Horn had disappeared. But there were five tethered horses, the three they had used and the two kept for Night Bird and her patient. The Indian lad's disappearance while they were inside rang a little tocsin in Drew Ackerman's mind. He became more alert. He was remembering the sensation of being followed while they were on the owlhoot highway. It returned, this time redoubled.

He moved cautiously toward the edge of the rocky plain, his gaze searching the open spaces between the moon-bathed clumps of bushes below. He halted and crouched low. His gun was in his hand while he remained poised, his narrowed gaze following the course of some dark

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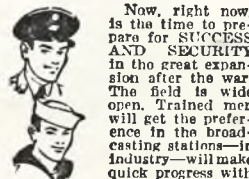
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object weaving sinuously and silently upward. It did not halt at the edge of the open, but came on, running low and swiftly.

Ackerman straightened and slid his gun back into the leather, then strode forward to intercept Bill Moose Horn. The youth halted, breathing deeply. His words came in a rush of sibilant whispers sharpened by urgency.

"The Tomahawk comes. Six of them less than a quarter of a mile away. That rider who went west from the station—Prine sent him back to the ranch to call the others. Prine returned to guide them. We are caught."

VI

DREW ACKERMAN felt a new emotion arising as he listened to the panted words of the youth, a kind of exultation, as if a prayer were about to be granted. Had it not been for the presence of the girls he would have sifted quickly down toward the main trail to feed this all-consuming hunger for vengeance that sight of the creature in the cave had born in him. Attack was what he wanted; defense was what he must prepare. He gripped the lad's arm, talking low and swiftly while his darting eyes covered the terrain between them and the cave.

"Get the women to help. Tell them why. We roll boulders across the mouth of that crack; a double row of big ones, with another row on top."

Bill ran toward the two women while Drew Ackerman tackled the largest boulder near the mouth of the crack. With grunting heaves, his steel-corded body bending under the strain, he began to roll the rock toward the opening. The Indian youth and the two girls worked on another. After the first two stones were in place the two girls worked together rolling a boulder to the crack then hurrying back for another. Young Moose Horn wrestled them into place, fitting them into as solid a wall as possible. It took four of the largest for each of the two rows to stretch across the crack. Others were placed on top of these, with but a narrow, unfilled space at each end, the girls scrambled in-

side, and the Indian hurried to move the ponies.

There was a quick expostulation beyond the barrier and Ackerman stepped close and looked over. The twisted man had dragged himself up to the barrier and was standing. Erect as he could get he was less than five feet in height, yet it was evident that at one time he had been a tall man. The rifle that had been resting against the wall was in his hands, its barrel thrust over the top row of rocks. His eyes gleamed with the same mad light that had flared in them when he was recounting his torture.

"I—have prayed—for this."

He seemed unconscious of any others around him, seemed to be speaking only to himself.

Hope Norman hurried forward with her own six-gun in her hand. She saw the cripple and turned toward him. Drew reached across the barrier and caught her arm, shaking his head.

"Let him be—he doesn't even know we're around now. He will be a deadly help when we need it most. You girls lie flat and wait. Pick your shots, don't waste lead, and shoot to kill. That's all."

He turned away, and at that moment the Indian youth hurried up, handing Drew his own rifle. Ackerman motioned it away and his words were low and sharp.

"Inside is the place for the rifles. Short guns here. Get in there with it. If Night Bird isn't a good shot let her do the reloading. Always have a loaded gun in your hand. They'll rush when they think there's a chance. But first—put out that fire."

"Drew—Drew—where are you—going?"

THE whispered words came sharply to him and a small reaching hand clutched his shirt sleeve. He looked down into the dark eyes of Hope Norman.

"Don't sacrifice yourself, Drew. You—you're all I—" and she couldn't go on.

Ackerman covered her hand, pressing it gently.

"Don't worry, Hope. I'll be as safe as you, maybe safer. My clothes are dark. They won't see me against the cliff, and if they get close to the cave I can take them from the side. Steady, girl. And

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forget there's such a thing as mercy. If you think you can't do that, take a look at—Charley."

"I've already forgotten," and this time her voice was almost hard. "Luck—and God go with you, Drew Ackerman."

She lowered herself behind the barrier; Ackerman sifted along the base of the cliff, and a faint hissing came out of the cave as water killed the fire.

On a tiny knoll close to the rock wall Ackerman had a clear view of the open slope. The moon had passed its zenith, and he was invisible in a band of black shadow. He did not have long to wait. The movements of bush tops down the slope warned him first. A little later he saw men easing forward, spread out in a wide fan. He counted six.

Ackerman gave the low whistle of a night-bird, knowing that both the Indian youth and his sister would correctly interpret it. He shifted his gaze to each moving object in an effort to identify the big form of Hugh Oliver and the diminutive shape of Shot Prine. It was useless.

They reached the edge of the plain and hesitated. Next they were in the open, but still indistinct forms as they closed in toward the mouth of the cave, each man constantly covered by one of the boulders dotting the ground. No sound came from the crevice. Its mouth was likewise within the shadow band and only a blur to the approaching Tomahawk killers.

The half circle of men began to converge on their focal point. Still no sound from the cave. They reached the spot where there was no more cover, where all the larger rocks had been removed to form the protective parapet for the cave. There the Tomahawk hesitated. Finally one near the center shifted a little, began to ease forward. The first shot was fired, a spit of flame darting out of an opening in the barrier. The crawling man flattened and remained where he was.

Orders in the sharp, hard voice of Shot Prine brought the charge. Tomahawk shot forward, guns spouting fire. Ackerman stepped away from the wall, his six-gun lashing at the flank of the attackers. He dropped one. A burst of fire, a fierce, wild, high-pitched yell from the twisted man. Another man sank to the ground,

tried to crawl back to shelter, and collapsed. A fourth man stopped, weaving on rubbery legs. A second burst of fire from the barrier and the man's legs buckled. He was dead before his body struck the rocky ground.

Two made it to safety, the two whose quick brains had immediately taken in the situation. They did not attempt to retreat to the boulders, but dashed to each side of the cave, flattening themselves against the cliff, out of the range of those behind the rock wall. Only then, while he was dumping the empties and thrusting new loads into the cylinder of his six-gun, did Drew Ackerman recognize the two he had been looking for.

Hugh Oliver was against the cliff beyond the cave, and between Drew and the cave was the deadly little wasp, Shot Prine. In the consternation at the preparedness of their intended victims, and the sudden and unexpected blast of fire decimating their crew, the two leaders had apparently failed to spot Ackerman. Both were facing the cave.

There was a long period of quiet, then the two began to cat-foot toward the crevice. Suddenly there came the crash of a tumbled rock and one of the boulders of the barrier rolled into the moonlight. With its fall the cracked, slurring voice of the broken man cried forth a wild defiance.

"Hugh Oliver—it's my turn now. The gold's here. You can get it—when you pay the price. I know where you are—and—I'm coming."

Sensing what would follow, Drew Ackerman leaped into the clear moonlight and snapped.

"This way Prine, or you get it in the back."

Shot Prine whirled like a striking rattler. He spotted Ackerman and fired while still in motion. Drew walked toward him, one deliberate pace at a time, and with each stride he fired a shot. Prine triggered frantically, but after the second shot, lancing Drew's sleeve, his lead went wild. On Ackerman's third shot Prine lay crumpled, twitching out life at the base of the cliff.

With two shots left, Drew swung toward Hugh Oliver. He had noted the wild plunge over the parapet of the crippled

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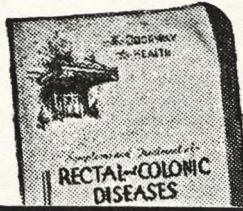
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man, and saw that he was sprawled out grotesquely with a six-gun in his good hand. There had been flashes from the gun of Oliver, without a return shot from the warped little figure on the ground.

Now, as Drew turned, the wreck fired one shot. Oliver's gun dropped to the ground and both his pudgy hands were pressed hard into his stomach as his thick legs melted beneath him. He cursed once, in a whining shriek of terror—and was still. The huddled form on the ground was likewise still.

Drew Ackerman stalked forward, his eyes stabbing at the prone Tomahawk leaders, his six-gun held at balance. Neither moved. When he reached the broken man the two girls were kneeling beside him and the Indian youth stood back, looking down. There were tears on Hope Norman's cheeks and she held the dying cripple's deformed hand in both of hers, but her eyes were wide and stricken as they stared at the spreading red blotch on the breast of the shirt.

Drew waited, standing behind them and looking at the dying man. The cripple's eyes were fastened on the face of the girl. At length he seemed to sense Drew near and he raised his glance. The eyes focussed and he made a grimace that Drew understood was a smile. He whispered, "Drew," then looked significantly at Hope Norman.

Ackerman put a hand under her arm, raising her. Night Bird looked at him sharply, then put an arm around the white girl and led her gently away. Drew knelt. The words that came from the twisted lips were faint, but they were distinct.

"Drew, I saw her look—after you—when you—stayed outside the wall—before the fight. She doesn't know it yet, but she loves you—and I am glad. And you are beginning to love her, too." There was a pause while the speaker gasped weakly with pain.

Ackerman said very quietly, "I loved her from the moment I saw her, Dave."

The dying man's eyes widened. "So you know. How?"

"When she first came into the cave—your eyes gave you away. You were saying good-bye without her knowing it."

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"Yes. Does she suspect?"
 Drew shook his head. "No, and she never will. She will remember you as she knew you when she promised to be your wife."

Dave Ackerman's eyes thanked him. Silence held for a moment, and then the dying man spoke once more, his voice so faint as to be scarcely audible.

"Charley never came to the pass. And the gold. It is—in the cave. Part of it for the two faithful natives—Night Bird and her brother want to build a school where they can teach their people—sanitation—reading, writing—white man's knowledge. It will take money. Will you back—them for me—brother?"

"That's a promise—an oath. And I'll give my life to making Hope happy—for both of us."

The light of gratitude and love that glowed in Dave's eyes for the short moment of life left to him was all the thanks Drew Ackerman wanted.

The four rode down from the barren slope in the high light of noon. When they reached the trail they found six horses tethered in the brush. One of them was a beautiful chestnut gelding with four white stockings and a white star on its forehead. On its back was a silver stitched saddle, with tooled intricate designs in the leather.

While the Indian youth loosed the horses Drew Ackerman lifted Hope from the pony she rode to the back of the gelding, and she wondered at the quiet satisfaction this action seemed to bring to the strong man on whom she had come so to depend. Her appreciation was in her eyes. Also, for Drew Ackerman alone to see, was a promise. Peace and hope rode the trail with him then.





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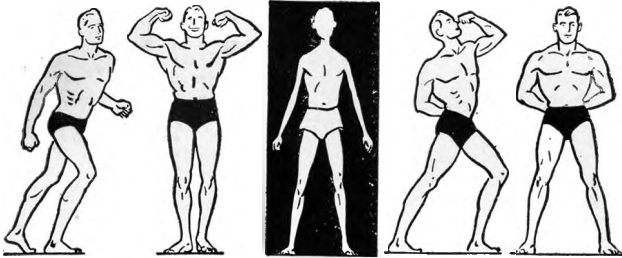
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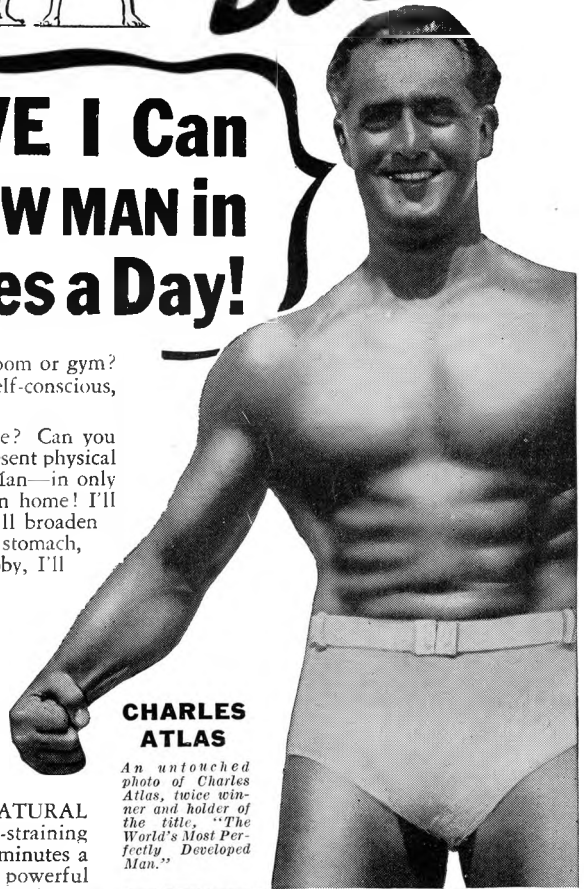
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