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FLAMING CANYON

by
WALKER
A.
TOMPKINS



MAVERICK from PURGATORY RANGE

by NORMAN A. FOX

Two WESTERN BOOKS

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by **NORMAN A. FOX**

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by **WALKER A. TOMPKINS**

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MAVERICK FROM PURGATORY RANGE

By NORMAN FOX

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HE HAD REMEMBERED THIS land with longing through the thousand days since last he'd looked upon it. He had hungered for flatness and tawny desolation and unending emptiness and the tang of sage, sometimes recalling these things as a dream is recalled. Across these last miles he had craned his neck often from the day coach's window, seeing the prairie's lean and hungry look, seeing the burned-out dryness of it, and wondering how the reality could differ so greatly from the dream. Wayne had written of the drought, of course, and so had Cynthia. But even the high ramparts of the Rim-fires were changed; they had no snow upon their peaks; and he could remember no time when the mountains had looked so bald. Such cattle as he'd seen from the train had been spiritless beasts, scrawny and dejected; and he had shaken his head at sight of them, wondering what had come over the land and feeling cheated because his homecoming was not as he'd imagined it.

When he climbed down from the coach at Ballardton, he paused for a moment on the last step and had his look at the town, and it, too, differed from his remembrance. Sometimes when he'd been cramming for an examination and his mind had grown fuzzy, he'd tried bringing himself awake by remembering the single, rutted street and those two rows of false fronts, and he had been able to visualize each building in its proper place; and they were that way now. But the juice had been sucked from Ballardton, and it seemed a stupid sort of town, spiritless and dejected like those cattle glimpsed from the train.

He swung down and stood upon the depot platform, which was so hot that he could feel it through the soles of his

shoes. He placed his telescope valise beside him and thumbed back his hat and mopped at his face with his handkerchief. He was a tall man with a rider's looseness giving him an easy grace, and he might have looked as though he belonged to this land, in spite of the black suit he wore, if the Eastern years hadn't taken the brown from his skin and the squint from his gray eyes. He had a dreamer's face; thin and sensitive; and his hair, thick and black, swept back from his forehead, making his brow higher. He stood there until he saw the buckboard round the depot and come to a halt, and the surprising thing to him was that the buckboard was pocketed by riders and all of them wore guns.

He saw Wayne upon the buckboard's seat, and he watched his brother wrap the reins around the whipstock and come down to the ground, and he saw that all of Wayne's motions were slow and studied, and he wondered if the drought did that to people, too, sucking the juice from them and making them mechanical. He did a quick calculation and remembered that Wayne was only thirty-six—twelve years older than himself but still too young to be so jaded, so burned-out looking. There was a stoop to Wayne's shoulders, and even his thin, sandy mustache looked tired. Moving toward Wayne, he thrust out his hand and said, "Hello, feller!"

Wayne took the hand and said, "Three days running we've met the train. You could have been more definite, Dan."

"There was some work I wanted to make up, Wayne. I didn't know how long it would take."

The riders were piling out of saddles; and Barney Partridge was the first of them to reach Dan. He was a little man, Partridge, short and stocky and warped by



too much riding; he had been Hourglass's foreman as long as Dan could remember, and he came forward now with a whoop and a holler and pounded Dan's back; and the others of the Hourglass crew spilled around Dan and made their exuberant greeting. Dan looked about for Cynthia and remembered there was no way of her knowing this would be the day, yet her absence bit into the man-pride of him. He said, to cover some awkwardness that bore no name, "I've got a trunk, Wayne. I see they've unloaded it."

Barney Partridge said, "We'll take care of the trunk, Daniel. It won't walk off meanwhile. This calls for a drink! Have you forgot what the inside of the Rialto looks like?"

Dan looked again at the guns they wore and wondered about that; this was not the 1870's when cattle, lean-flanked and long-horned, came spilling up the trail from Texas to Montana's virgin graze and every man carried his law at his hip. He thought: *There was no need for all of them to come to meet me, but they did. Three*

days in a row. And they came gun-hung. What in the name of sense has happened to this range while I've been gone?

But all he said was, "How's Gramp, Wayne?"

Wayne Ballard shrugged. "No better, no worse. Three years older than when you saw him last. I asked him if he wanted the ride into town and he cussed me out."

Barney Partridge said, "Do we have that drink or don't we?" and dragged at Dan Ballard's elbow.

THEY CAME around the corner of the depot, a compact, spur-jangling knot of men, and they crossed a short openness to the board and tramped along it. The smell of dust was heavy in the air; the unpainted siding of frame structures reflected the heat and beat it back in steady waves. Flies buzzed about the Chinaman's screened doorway; the heat before the restaurant was like a blast from a furnace, and the odor of sizzling steak smote a man like a club. They passed this establishment and the mercantile and Lily Greer's millinery and Ransome Price's land and loan office which had a BACK SOON sign suspended from its doorknob; and all this became familiar to Ballard again, dissolving the thousand days between.

There were few horses at the hitchrails and few people on the street, yet Dan shook hands three times before they reached the Rialto. The saloon's hitchrail held six horses which stood with drooping heads, all of them bearing the Tomahawk brand; and when the Hourglass men set their feet to the warped steps leading to the porch beneath the wooden awning, the batwings spewed six riders.

At Dan's elbow, Wayne drew in a long, hard breath; and Dan felt the rigidity that laid hold on his brother.

Whatever else had changed, Old Man Cantrell hadn't, except that the ragged black beard which fell to his second shirt button now had a sprinkling of gray in it. He was a powerful man, thick of shoulder and thick of arm, with a barrel of a body mounted upon mighty legs. His five sons were at his back, and each had been cast from the mould of Old Man Cantrell.

They were Rufe and Jeb and Mace and Ring and Hob—hill ranchers from the heights of the Rimfires, wild as that mass of mountains, untamed as the rivers that were born there. They held silent, leaving the speaking to their father, and that, too, was as it had been before. Old Man Cantrell had had more than a sociable drink, and the whiskey blurred his tongue. He squinted hard against the blinding light and said, "Well, Daniel, so you've come back to Ballardton. Looks like they made a dude out of you back East."

Dan said, "I wonder."

"You're book-larned now, they tell it," Cantrell said. "Maybe you'll be able to pound some sense into Wayne's head." His squinted glance moved to the older brother. "You've got less than three days left," Cantrell said. "Saturday, midnight, is still the deadline."

Cantrell moved forward then, his sons trailing after him; they brushed hard against Dan in passing, and Dan knew a heady anger and fought it down. No one of this wild brood offered his hand, and that built a question in Dan's mind, for there'd never been trouble between the Hourglass and the Tomahawk. You didn't make trouble for a Ballard in Ballardton. He saw the six pile into saddles and ruthlessly spur their horses to life; he saw them whirl the mounts and go thundering up the street, shouting raucously. He'd watched that spectacle a score of times in other days, but it had a new significance for him now. Why, they were a bunch of atavists—a throwback to the cave when a man did his hunting with a club and dragged his woman around by the hair! The anger went out of him and he smiled, wondering what Barney Partridge would have thought if the book-learned thought had been voiced.

The saloon was musty-dark and smelled sour, and when the Hourglass lined up at the bar, the bartender dragged his right hand across his apron and extended this moist paw to Dan. "Glad to see you back, Mr. Ballard," he said and smiled a patronizing smile. "The drinks are on the house."

Dan tilted the bottle when it was passed to him and said, "Wayne, what's this about a Saturday night deadline?"

Wayne gave a look around. Two men played a listless game of cards at a far table; against the wall another sat with a chair tilted back, his sombrero over his eyes. "It will keep until later, Dan. This is no place for talking."

Barney Partridge said, "Here's mud in your eye," and hoisted his drink.

The whiskey tasted raw and savage to Dan; he felt out of tune with the place and the occasion. He wondered then if this was how it would be from here on, this feeling alien and removed from the things that had once been. Maybe now the dream of an endless, eternal land would be replaced by the remembrance of a campus and ancient halls and shade trees. Maybe the three years had sunk new roots down for him and there would be no transplanting, not again. Then he remembered the dreams and plans that were to come true because of those three years, and he remembered Cynthia and tomorrow, and he remembered, too, the warm sincerity of the Hourglass's greeting at the depot, and he reached for the bottle again and said, "Boys, it's damn nice to be with you."

But his toast was lost in the creak of the batwings, and there was something so compelling about the man who entered that he drew Dan's eye and held it.

He was tall, and he was whiplash lean, this newcomer. He wore range garb and a flat-topped sombrero such as they favored in Utah; and his guns were thonged down against his thighs. He was young, no more than Dan's own twenty-four, and there was a wild recklessness in him. All his features had a solidness to them, and his eyes were bleak and half-veiled. He approached the bar with the quick stride of a man whose purpose is cut out for him, and he said, "You'd be Dan Ballard, eh? The pride of the tribe they named this town after. I'm Lew Fanshawe."

Dan said, "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Fanshawe's smile was a brief skinning of his lips from teeth that were startlingly white and perfect. "I'll grow on you," he said. "If you live long enough. And you will; your kind always dies in bed. I see you don't wear a gun."

THE ANGER that Old Man Cantrell had inspired burst upward like a smouldering flame. "I could borrow one," Dan said.

One of Fanshawe's eyebrows twitched. "A Ballard with guts," he said. "I wouldn't have believed it! Or do you just *talk* big?"

Beside Dan, Wayne again drew in a long, hard breath and turned rigid, and it was Dan's thought that this was like a nightmare, horror-filled, lacking reality. A minute ago he had not known of this Fanshawe's existence, yet now they stood parrying words that could lead to only one ending. And with the realization that there'd been a studied intent to Fanshawe's talk, a deliberate baiting, he knew also that there could be no side-stepping the issue. It was more than his anger that made this so; the inevitability was compounded of many things, but a man's pride was the greatest ingredient. Three years hadn't changed *that*.

Dan said, "When a man fetches me a fight, I expect him to fetch a good reason with it. I take it you've got your reason. Barney, pass me your gun!"

"Dan——!" Wayne cried in a stricken voice.

"My gun's in my hand," Barney Partridge said coldly. "And it's lined on your brisket, Fanshawe. You were told to get off the Hourglass and stay off. Now I'm telling you to lay off us when we're in town. Git!"

Fanshawe looked beyond Dan and along the bar to where Partridge had stepped a pace away from the railing. Hourglass's foreman held his gun rigid; and Fanshawe smiled again and said, "I should have known I'd have the whole crew to buck. I'll see you later, Ballard."

He turned and walked easily toward the batwings, and they creaked with his departure. After that there was a long, heavy silence; even the pair at the table had ceased their card playing. Dan shook his head and said, "Did I dream it, or did it happen? What made him pick on me?"

Wayne said quickly, "Come on, boys. Let's get out of here."

They pushed to the swinging doors and came through them and blinked in the strong sunshine, then stepped down to

the board walk. Lew Fanshawe had disappeared. A dog was picking his way from the far board walk, cutting diagonally across the street; in its exact center the dog chose to curl up and fall asleep. There was a naturalness to that little tableau that to Dan was somehow reassuring; yet he plucked at Wayne's elbow and said, "You didn't answer my question about Fanshawe."

Irritation edged Wayne's voice. "What *can* I tell you? He's some drifting gun-hand who hires out to whoever will pay him. He came to the Hourglass and offered me his services. Barney ran him off the place. He's been sore at the outfit since. When he heard you'd come back, I suppose he saw a chance to make trouble."

"But why should he have tried to hire out to the Hourglass? We run a cattle ranch, not a shooting gallery."

Wayne said, "There's Cynthia."

He'd lifted his eyes, and Dan, following his gaze, saw the row of windows above the bank, the only two-storied building in town, and he saw the one window that bore the legend: QUINCY CHURCH, M. D. That window had been raised, and Cynthia was leaning from it. She said, "Hello Dan," softly, sweetly, and he swept his hat away and held it in his hand and stood there, his eyes lifted and the sunlight strong in his face; and Wayne and the others ceased to be for him.

Wayne said, "I'll meet you at the buck-board."

Dan crossed the street, his eyes still upturned, and he stumbled at the far board walk, then was into the covered stairway that clung to the side of the building. It was dark in here; the steps creaked with his weight, and he took them two at a time and burst into Doc Church's anteroom, and Cynthia framed herself in the doorway of her father's office. He said, "Cyn! Ah, Cyn!" and came toward her with his arms open.

Behind her, Doc Church coughed discreetly, and Ransome Price said, "I'll be getting along."

In that first moment Dan had been aware of nobody but her. She wore a long, trailing dress of some rustling stuff that made her taller; these years had given her

a filled-out roundness that stirred him deeply. Her bonnet dangled from her fingers, and her chin was high, and the golden glory of her hair was drawn back from her face to a neat bun at the nape of her neck. He had told her once, long ago, that she looked like something stamped upon an old coin, and this thought was strong in him; her features were a perfection of moulding. She was coolness in a parched land, minted gold to an impoverished lover. She said, "It's good to see you again, Dan."

She was moving toward him; his lips went hunting hers and he managed to brush a kiss against her cheek. She linked her arm in his and drew him into the office; it was as he'd remembered it, a museum place of horsehair furniture, with a roll-top desk and a creaking swivel chair and a smell of medicines and disinfectants. Doc Church had put on weight, and his mutton-chop whiskers had got grayer. He hoisted himself out of the chair and thrust a plump hand toward Dan and said, "It's good to have you back with us, boy. You remember Ransome Price."

Price stood leaning against the rolltop desk. He disengaged himself and offered his hand. "It's time you got here, Ballard," he said. "You should have wired that you were coming. Cynthia's had her best dress on every day of this week."

Dan said, "You're looking well, Price."

The man shrugged. He was as tall as Dan and as lean, but he was nearer Wayne's age. He, too, wore a black suit and it fitted him well, and there was a heavy gold watch chain stretched across his vest. His face was sensuously handsome and there was a studied affability to him. He said again, "I'll be getting along."

"You're kept busy these days?"

Price smiled. "With sixty rainless days to dry up everything but Ballard Springs? No, the bottom has dropped out of the land business. Everybody wants to sell—nobody wants to buy."

Dan said, "I'm sorry about not getting here sooner, Cyn. I should have wired, I suppose. But I wasn't sure of the day until the last minute. We can rearrange plans since I got in so late."

"Tomorrow's the tenth, Dan," she said, her hand gentle upon his arm. "That's the day we set in our letters last spring. Everything is arranged—the church, Reverend Davidson, the invitations. You'll have Wayne for best man, of course. No, we'll be getting married tomorrow, just as we planned."

Price said, "You see, Ballard, you're getting that most priceless of possessions—an efficient woman. You have my congratulations."

"Thanks," Dan said, but suddenly the glory had dropped out of this moment. With Partridge and the others he had felt alien; there was a chasm of books and learning between the Dan Ballard they'd known and the Dan Ballard he'd become. Yet now he felt boorish and awkward and he was aware of the whiskey smell that must be on his breath, and he wondered if that was why Cynthia had turned her cheek to him. And because there was nothing else he could find to say, he said, "Wayne's waiting for me at the depot."

"You're tired, of course," Cynthia said. "And probably hot and hungry. And you must be anxious to see Gramp. Run along now; we've got the rest of our lives for seeing each other."

Price had spoken twice of going, but still he stood beside the desk. What in hell was keeping him here, Dan wondered irritably. Didn't he suppose they'd want this moment to themselves? He drew the girl to him and kissed her; Price directed his attention to a corner of the room and Doc fumbled with papers upon his desk. The kiss was fiercer than Dan had intended it to be; it was reaching out, a yearning toward something he had wanted in this reunion and not found. Cynthia laughed and said, "What a bear you are, Dan. Look what you've done to my hair!"

He found himself glad to be out of the room and into the stairway. When he reached the board walk, Barney Partridge disengaged himself from a hitchrail where he'd been seated. "The others went on to the depot," Partridge said briefly.

And Partridge had stayed behind to make sure there would be at least one gun guarding him, Dan realized. Why was that?

They found Wayne seated in the buckboard, the reins in his hands. The others were up into the saddles. The trunk had been loaded in the wagon. "Took two of us to lift it," Wayne said. "What are you carrying, Dan Rocks?"

"Books," Dan said. "All the way to the bottom."

He climbed to the seat beside Wayne. His brother clucked the team into motion and brought the buckboard around. Dan said then, "I think the time has come for talking, Wayne. And I think you've got an awful lot to tell me."

II

OUT OF BALLARDTON THE land ran flat in all directions, a sea of sage and yellowed grass made undulant by the haze of heat waves; and to the north a road snaked toward the lift of the Rimfires, the mountains standing brown and drab and seeming always to recede, though on a day like this a man got the feeling that he could reach and touch the peaks with his hands. After the first mile, the Hourglass crew strung out, filing behind the buckboard and ahead of it, leaving the brothers in a pocket of dusty isolation. Wayne had kept his silence; he sat hunched upon the seat looking old and tired, and to Dan's patience he gave then this brief reply: "You want to know what the trouble's about. No rain. That's your answer."

"There's been nothing like it in our time," Dan said.

Wayne's shoulders twitched; he had never owned Dan's quickness of thought nor Dan's quickness of temper, but he had become a man drawn fine by adversity and there was a fiddle-string quality to him. He said, "About that Saturday night deadline, Old Man Cantrell wants to buy or lease Ballard Springs. He's given us until then to make up our minds."

Dan said thoughtfully, "So——? It used to be that if any ultimatums were made on this range, the Ballards made them."

"Dad was alive then. And Gramp was able to sit saddle."

"But nothing's changed, really, Wayne.

The outfit that controls the water controls the range."

"Cantrell can see that, too," Wayne said with sudden savagery. "Add up the situation for yourself, Dan. We've got a river cutting down from the Rimfires, and it's the most useless river in creation with those cliffs pocketing it so that a man can't haze his cattle to drink. We've got creeks, but all of them are dried up this season. And we've got Ballard Springs, and that's the only hope for everybody."

"Purgatory River has been on my mind many times," Dan said. "There's no sense in that water going to waste. There must be a way of raising it, of piping it to the Purgatory ranchers. I went into that matter in school. I've got plans, Wayne."

"And what good will they do us now?"

"Who cares about now? If Ballard Springs can weather the range through, we can plan for another season. There'll be other dry years."

"And here's the point," Wayne said. "Ballard Springs *can't* take care of everybody. Yet if it's shared and shared alike, all the ranchers will have cattle to ship come fall. I had Barney fence the springs off, Dan. I've been letting each of the ranchers water so many head a day. But that isn't good enough for the Cantrells. Old Man Cantrell wants all his cows on their feet come fall round-up. So he wants to own the springs. Yes, he's willing to put it on paper that the water will be shared even-steven with the Hourglass. But it will be shut off to the rest of the ranchers."

"Cantrell isn't that wide across the britches, Wayne."

"But he is, Dan! That's the thing that's changed. Gramp and dad were the first ranchers on the flats. You know that. They brought longhorns up from Texas after the war. Old Man Cantrell was the first rancher in the hills. He had a shirt-tail outfit to start with, but he built fast. Maybe a lot of Hourglass calves went into his gather in the old days. Gramp used to think so. But the point is that the Tomahawk is as big as we are. And Cantrell's got five sons. Once they were just so many hungry mouths to feed; now he's got five fighting men at his back. You saw him in town. He isn't bowing

and scraping before the Ballards these days."

Dan whistled softly. "So that's why a drifting gunhawk thought there might be work for him at the Hourglass."

"It's got the shape of a fight," Wayne admitted. "Fanshawe could have heard about that."

"And who's he hired out to now, Wayne? The Cantrells? Is that why he picked on me in the Rialto? Was I supposed to learn right off that the Ballards no longer walk high and mighty on this range?"

"I wouldn't know, Dan." Wayne looked away, avoiding Dan's eyes.

They fell silent; off to the right of the road was a prairie dog village, but a whistling sentry had done his duty at first sight of an Hourglass rider and there were only so many mounds to be seen as they passed the spot. The land ran on endlessly before them, the tilt in it so slight as to be hardly discernible; and the sky arched above, blue and cloudless. Where Dan had been these past three years a man forgot how a sky could look. The team stirred up small explosions of dust; it rose and became stifling, and Dan used his handkerchief again to mop his face.

Wayne said, "I could have put a great deal more than the drought into my letters, Dan. But you sounded like you were working hard this summer, and the trouble could keep. I'm glad you're back, kid."

Dan said, "Ransome Price? Is he up to Doc Church's a lot?"

Wayne kept his eyes ahead. "Maybe he's ailing, Dan."

"He looked healthy enough to me. And prosperous, too. Let's see, he came here about two years before I left. That makes him five years in Ballardton. He's grown, Wayne."

Wayne held silent. Then: "She's marrying you, just like the two of you planned eh, Dan?"

"Tomorrow, Wayne. I supposed you knew."

"Then there's your answer, Dan. Yes, Price squired her a few places while you were gone. There aren't many people in Ballardton with the kind of background Doc's given Cynthia. You can't blame her

for that, kid. Just remember it's you she's marrying."

"I wasn't worried."

"You plan on going ahead with the wedding, Dan?"

"Why not?"

Wayne made a flat gesture with his hand. "This trouble——?"

Dan laughed. "The drought has made all of you a little crazy. The trouble's not as big as you think. Of course we're going ahead with the wedding."

OUT OF THE SILENCE that fell, Wayne said, a mile later, "We're nearly home." Barney Partridge wheeled his horse and came back beside the buckboard, riding close to it and saying nothing. And then, suddenly the land was falling away to a long reach below them; the slope had a caprock rim and was shale-mottled, and both Wayne and Dan had learned early gun-accuracy on the badgers that burrowed here. The Hourglass buildings were at the bottom of this slope, sheltered from the blizzard winds of winter; there was the high, red barn and the long, low bunkhouse, and the muddy sheen of a reservoir that had dwindled to almost nothing. Corrals, made from poles hauled from the hills, flanked the barn on either side. To the front stood the house, frame and two storied and needing a coat of paint. A gallery ran the width of it along one side.

Looking, Dan thought: *Now I'm home.*

The slope was gentle; they wheeled down it and pulled to a stop before the ranch-house; and when they leaped to the ground, one of the Hourglass hands led the team for the unharnessing and the storing of the rig in the wagon shed. An ageless Chinaman came to the cook-house door, and Dan said, "Charley, you old sinner!" and ran to him and caught him up and lifted him above his head.

Charley beamed and said, "I think you glowed up some, Dan."

Two dogs had come running, making a barking fury as the wagon wheeled into the yard, and one Dan remembered. He said, "Down, Ring! This is the only suit I've got and there's a wedding tomorrow. Where did this other fellow come from,

Wayne? He's got a fine head on him."

"You remember Sam Digby's Girlie. She had three others just like him. Sam gave me the pick of the lot. I wrote you that Sam sold out, didn't I?"

Dan crossed to the gallery and climbed its steps and opened the door. The big room into which he walked had a cavernous fireplace at its far end, and huge, hewn rafters overhead; and there was a scattering of hooked rugs and homemade furniture, some of it older than either of the brothers. These were the familiar, remembered things that made of a house a home; even the centering table seemed to have the same stockmen's journal's scattered upon it. Wayne, at his elbow, said, "We don't do bad for a bunch of bachelors."

"Where's Gramp?" Dan asked.

"Up in his room, I reckon."

Dan took the big stairs two at a time, and then stepped back to one certain spot he'd skipped in his rapid passage. It still creaked. He smiled, and smiling came into the upstairs hallway and turned toward Gramp's room. The door was ajar, and he pushed at it with his hand and stepped inside. There were the bed and the chair and the same sort of hooked rugs, and there was the man in the chair. Dan said softly, "Hello, Gramp," and it came to him now that this was the one person above all that he'd wanted to see on coming home. And that was strange, for he had not known it until this moment.

"Daniel," said Gramp Ballard and scowled. "What in hell did they do to you back there?"

They were alike, these two Ballards, far more alike than Dan and Wayne. They both had the tallness and the looseness and the thinness of face and height of forehead, but Gramp's hair was snowy white and so thin as to be an illusion of hair. The old man wore a fringed, buckskin shirt, open at the throat, and his legs were wrapped in a blanket, and a cane leaned beside him. Dan said, "Wayne wrote that you hurt yourself taking the rough off a cayuse. Are you able to get around?"

"Fair to middlin' with the cane," Gramp said. "Come closer, boy. Shoes! Are you too tender-footed for riding boots?"

"A pair of Justins wouldn't be much good for standing up in the aisle of a day coach, Gramp," Dan said. He saw now that his grandfather was older, much older; there was a grayness to those seamed leathery features, a tiredness that was more than physical. He said, "It's mighty good to see you again, Gramp."

"And I suppose I ought to say that it's good to see you. But it isn't! Look at you! What have you been doing, frittering away all this time? Three years!"

Dan said patiently, "You know our plans, Gramp. We've wanted to make something bigger out of the Hourglass, taking up where you and dad left off. That's why one of us had to get schooling."

"How much of the damn' alphabet did they tack onto your name?"

"I wasn't after a degree, Gramp, and I didn't get one. I took special courses and crammed four years' studying into three by staying through the summers. We're going to breed up better cattle, Gramp. I've learned all about that. I had one course in ranch accounting, and another in veterinarians' work. No, I don't qualify as a vet, but I'll bet I can cut down the percentage of loss we have from ailing cattle. Wait and see."

"Bah!" said Gramp. "Quit talking to me like I was a four-year-old kid or the town half-wit. Can you cure an ailing range of the trouble that's eating at it?"

"The trouble will vanish with the first rain, Gramp. You're all too excited about that. Cantrell's bluffing. This isn't the day of the open range and the six-shooter. Old Man Cantrell can't turn back the clock."

"Ride up and tell him that!" Gramp snapped. "Tell him he's out of tune with the times. And tell those five giants he's brung up the same thing. They'll behave themselves once they learn that what they're doing ain't according to the books you've studied!"

IT HAD KILLED Gramp to be tied here to a chair, Dan decided. That was it. Gramp never could stand inactivity, so he'd sat here and thought a lot of thoughts, and all of them had been bitter. The old fellow was glad to see him—of course he

was! Gramp was just too die-hard stubborn to admit it.

Dan said, "I'm getting married tomorrow, Gramp. We'll fetch you to town to see it."

"Married?" Gramp said. "To the Church girl, I suppose. Why didn't you marry her three years ago, before you left? You were old enough, weren't you? If either of you gave a whoop for the other, you wouldn't have waited. You wouldn't have been able to."

"The schooling had been planned for me," Dan said. "It was Wayne's idea. Cynthia thought it was a good notion. We've got the rest of our lives ahead of us."

"Bah!" Gramp said. "You've never lived and you never will. The Ballards are dying out."

"You'll live to see a great-grandson," Dan said.

"One bearing the Ballard name, yes," Gramp said. "But it won't have the Ballard guts. This range saw the last of those when your father died in the blizzards of '87. But maybe it ain't your fault, or Wayne's. Maybe the guts have died out of the land, and that's what makes the difference. Well, you're book learned. You'll get married and raise spineless children, and one year will be like another to you. You'll produce a better breed of cattle and a poorer breed of men. And you'll die at the end of it, and they'll tote you out to the Ballardton cemetery and give you a helluva good funeral, and you'll never even know what you missed. But maybe in the meanwhile Old Man Cantrell will change all that for you. Wayne will sell the springs to him, because Wayne hasn't the guts to buck him. And next he'll want one slice of our acreage and another, and he'll get those, too. Did you learn anything in your books about stopping Cantrell? I don't suppose you touched a gun all the time you were gone!"

Dan smiled. "I've got one in my trunk. I practiced every chance I got. You made that habit with me. But gun-skill won't matter. Listen, Gramp——"

"No, you listen. And come closer. I want to find out something."

Two steps brought Dan before the chair,

and it happened then, so suddenly there was no preparing for it, no warning. The cane had been clutched tightly in Gramp's hand; it raised with startling quickness and came down hard across Dan's shoulder, a vicious blow. He stepped back instinctively, his hand going to his shoulder, and in him the fire of anger blazed brightly, but there was a sickness too—a sickness of heart and soul. He thought: *He's gone crazy! That's it! He's an old man and this heat cracked him!* And that took the anger out of him and left only sadness and he stood limply, his hands at his sides.

"Ah, Dan," Gramp said and his face softened. "Just for a second you were mad enough to put your hands on my throat and choke the life out of me. Maybe there's hope for the Ballards yet. I had to find out, and there was only one ding-blasted way. I never laid a hand or a stick on you or Wayne before. I'm sorry Daniel. And yet I'm glad."

Dan said, "Forget it, Gramp. I'd take it from you. Any day."

The softness faded from the old man's face. "I guess it proved nothing," he said. He held silent a moment. "Don't marry her, Dan," he said then.

"I'm in love with her, Gramp," Wayne answered.

"Are you? What in blazes do you know about love? Fifty-odd years ago I was a trader on the Santa Fe Trail. One night a bunch of Comanches run off my horses. I trailed them to their camp and watched them from a ridge. They had a girl, no more than fifteen, a prisoner from a wagon-train massacre. She was a slave to some buck, and in another year or so they'd have married her off to one of them. I took one look and knew what I had to do. I got her out of the camp that night—never mind how—and we were married by a black-robed padre the evening we hit Santa Fe. That's how a man behaves when he's in love. And the hell of it is, Dan, that sometimes when I look at you, I see her. You've got her black hair and her quick ways."

"It might have been that way with Cynthia and me, Gramp. But there was no Santa Fe Trail and no Comanches."

GRAMP shook his head. "You don't even know what I'm talking about. If a girl's worth marrying, no man makes her wait three years. You haven't lived, Dan. You haven't known what it is to want a woman the minute you lay eyes on her and to know that nothing could be more important than marrying her—pronto. You haven't loved; and you haven't hated. Did you ever hate a man so much that nothing would satisfy you but to lay your bare hands on him? Just for a second you felt that way when I used the cane on you, but it didn't last. And you don't know what it is to believe in something—a cause, for instance, a cause so great that it's more important to you than living or dying."

"The Hourglass means something to me, Gramp."

"The Hourglass? Then Barney Partridge could have given you a better lesson than any you got from your Eastern teachers. He's out in the bunkhouse these days, eating his heart out because the spread he's worked for would rather side-step than fight Cantrell. Now do you see what I've had to sit here and watch day after day—the Ballard blood turned to water, the Ballard way of doing things lost forever. And you were the last hope I had."

"You're thinking backwards, Gramp. And looking backwards, too. We've still a fight to make, and, in my own way, I've trained for that fight. There's blackleg to combat, and drought, and cattle losses."

Gramp turned his head and waved one hand. "Go away, Dan," he said. "Get out of my sight."

Downstairs, Wayne said with a wry grin, "I suppose you found him in his usual good humor. You look tired, Dan. Charley's got food on the stove, and your old room's ready for you."

Dan said, "I'll pass up the grub. I had something on the train."

"The wedding stolen your appetite, Dan? By this time tomorrow it will be over and done with."

The room was as Dan remembered it, and it was like Gramp's, but the bed somehow was not tempting. Nor was his trunk, which had been moved here. There

were shelves for the books, and he might have unpacked. Instead he moved a chair to the window and sat with his elbows propped upon the sill, his chin cupped in his hands. The night came down from the Rimfires, the shadows running long and cool and purple, but the day's heat still clung to the house. The evening passed, and the lights bobbed out in cook-shack and bunkhouse; but still Dan sat. A great moon rose to the east and made the yard day-bright; Barney Partridge came out of the bunkhouse, clad only in the long underwear he wore at all seasons. Hourglass's foreman had a drink at the pump, then sat beside it for a long time; and Dan wondered what it was that came between Partridge and his sleep until he remembered what Gramp had said about the man.

Perhaps Dan dozed then. He had no remembrance of seeing Partridge return to the bunkhouse. But if he dozed he also awoke to doze again, and he stayed at the window and was there when the sun burst upon his wedding day.

III

ALL THE OLD, FAMILIAR sounds tore the morning's silence asunder and brought Dan awake—the rattle of stove lids in the cook-shack, the crackle of the first fire, the intermittent creaking of the pump in the yard, the laughter and the banter of a crew jostling as they washed-up. "Hey, cowboy," someone called. "Don't hog the soap. It ain't *you* that's gittin' married." Horses stomped in the corrals; one nickered softly. The scuffling of the crew aroused one of the dogs to a frenzy of barking. "Sure, you can borrow my best shirt, Pete," someone said distinctly. "You can just help yourself to it—*over my dead body*." The pump began creaking again, and further talk was lost.

The great house still held to night's hush. Dan came down the stairs to find Wayne burrowed in one of the chairs in the big living room. Wayne said, "Morning, Dan. I didn't call you, figuring you needed the rest. Man, you look like you slept in your clothes!"

Dan combed his hair with his fingers.

They were long fingers, and when their mother had been alive she had talked of a piano and lessons but there had been a lean year or two, and the talk had been forgotten. Dan said, "When Charley gets the crew fed, I'd like him to heat enough water for a bath. While I'm taking it, he can run an iron over this suit."

He breakfasted alone; Wayne had already eaten, and Wayne busied himself out in the yard. Charley got the big tin bathtub from a shed and placed it on the kitchen floor, and when Dan stripped down and eased himself into the water he could hear Charley in the next room, toiling with his ironing board and singing lustily. Dan worked a lather out of the harsh, home-made soap. Charley sang: "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war . . ."

Dan had forgotten how hard Montana's water was, but at least it took the grime off him and the tiredness out of his muscles. Splashing, he reflected that here was the stuff that caused all the trouble. You drank it and you bathed in it and you fought over it. And then he had to grin at his next thought. You were supposed to hope for a sunny, cloudless day for your wedding, and he was wishing it would rain.

Wayne came in when Dan had got dressed again. Wayne said, "I had the buckboard hitched. You and me will ride in it. The crew will come by saddle horse."

"Wearing guns?"

Wayne said, "We figure it best, kid. Till this matter gets settled with Cantrell. And there's Lew Fanshawe, too, remember."

"No guns," Dan said firmly. "Cynthia wouldn't like it. Is Gramp coming along?"

"I asked him this morning," Wayne said forlornly. "He cussed me out."

"Is that all?"

"No, he said something foolish. He said there were two things he couldn't abide—fancy weddings and fancy funerals. And this affair, in his opinion, is both. You mustn't mind him, Dan. He makes very little sense these days."

"I wonder," Dan said.

Wayne shrugged. "You look all shined and proper, kid. Best-looking groom in a month of Sundays. I hope I don't fumble the ring."

"Ring! Wayne, I didn't get a ring! Do you suppose I can buy one in Ballardton?"

"Cynthia got the ring, kid. She said it would be just like you to forget. I've been toting it for a week. But you'd better switch back to those shoes you were wearing yesterday. You won't need riding boots in the buckboard."

"These feel more comfortable, Wayne. I had Charley dig them out of my room. At least my feet haven't grown since I left."

Wayne shrugged again. He, too was wearing store clothes today, but that stoop was still in his shoulders and the tiredness was still in his face. And from the sight of him there was born a quick sympathy in Dan, and for a moment they were close, very close. Dan said, "I forgot to find out the time of the wedding, too, I guess no groom ever needed a best man worse than I do."

"High noon," Wayne said. "We'd better get going. I'll tell the boys about the guns. Come along when you're ready."

The buckboard had been fetched before the house. When Dan climbed to the seat, he said, "Let me handle the reins today. I don't think I've lost the knack." He kicked off the brake, and they went clattering up the slope. Wayne said, "Remember how Gramp used to bring us here and have us bang away at the badgers? It's a wonder we didn't grow up lop-sided from carrying the weight of six-shooters before we were knee-high to the pump. Seems kind of crazy now."

But Dan wasn't so sure. They'd got to be men themselves and they figured Gramp for an old fool who didn't know that yesterday was forever gone. But maybe he'd seen all this coming, seen it away off. Maybe that was why he'd schooled his grandsons the way he had.

The road leveled off, and he let the horses gait themselves to a gallop; it was good to feel the tug of them against the reins, to sense the power a man commanded when he governed a team of horses. Strong light gave a sharpness to the range; dew bediamonded the browned grass, and they could see Ballardton across the distance, etched clearly in the first sunlight. They came again to the prairie dog village, and

again the rodents were gone from sight. Behind the wagon the crew strung out; there was an early morning zest in men and horses. But the sun climbed higher and took on heat, and Dan slackened the pace of the team. Now the dust began rising, and across the endless flatness they could see where other roads converged upon the town; dust laid its plumes along all these roads.

"Everybody's turning out for the wedding, looks like," Wayne said.

"Cynthia must have sent a lot of invitations."

"She talked to me about that," Wayne said. "She didn't invite the Cantrells. Or the new fellow who took over Sam Digby's place."

BARNEY PARTRIDGE came galloping up beside the buckboard and shouted something that was lost in the rattle of wheel and hoof; he was freshly-shaved today wearing his Sunday best, but beneath the skirt of a coat that had once been black and had turned bottle-green with age, the handle of his six-shooter peeped. Seeing this, Dan frowned, and Wayne spreads his hands in a flat gesture. "I told them," Wayne said. "Most of them went back to the bunkhouse and shucked their guns. I guess Barney didn't hear me."

"He heard you," Dan said.

All this was lost upon Partridge; he grinned a wide grin and went galloping up ahead and led the way into Ballardton. The town had taken on an election day look; every hitchrail was crowded to capacity, and buckboards and buggies lined the street, sometimes two deep, choking the narrow way. The board walks were banked with people, some merely standing and waiting, some milling aimlessly. Dan steered the buckboard between Sully Grant's blacksmith shop and the White Elephant livery stable, finding an empty space in this weedy lot.

"We can walk to the church from here," he said.

The crew had dispersed, each man seeking out a hitchrail for himself. They gathered again as the brothers reached the board walk; they pocketed the two, and

the group moved up the street. Dan found himself seeking a glimpse of Cynthia; he raised his eyes to the window of Doc Church's office, but that window was blank today. She would be at the church, he supposed; wasn't there some superstition about bride and groom seeing each other before the wedding? Yesterday's fleeting hunger was in him; he wanted the nearness of her, yet there was a faint shadow of uncertainty now; and Gramp Ballard had cast that shadow.

And, thinking of this, Dan found himself appraising for the first time his real attitude toward Cynthia and wondering what inexorable steps had brought him here today. Cynthia had long been part of his life; he'd liked her, and, a few years ago, he'd fancied himself as her pursuer, yet it had been Cynthia who'd first mentioned marriage. Thereafter the match had somehow become a settled matter, though once a townsman had intimated that a girl was no fool who married a half-interest in the Hourglass and Dan had struck him, making this violent reply to the insinuation that Cynthia was shrewd and calculating. Loyalty was ingrained in him, but now he wondered if loyalty rather than love was sending him to the altar and if his eagerness for her yesterday had merely been that time had turned backward at first sight of her. Would he feel differently now if Ransome Price weren't so obviously interested in Cynthia?

Barney Partridge said, "Time enough for a drink, from the looks of the sun. Yonder's the Rialto. Come on, Dan; we'll get you something to take the shakes out of your knees."

It was in Dan to make an easy refusal; he was still remembering yesterday and how Cynthia had turned her lips away from him because the smell of whiskey was on his breath. And then, suddenly, he sensed that all the rest of his life would be this way, choosing between the man he'd been and the man he'd become once the wedding ceremony was performed. And because there were many things to which a man had to remain true, he said, "Just one, Barney. And we'll have to down it quick."

"Yipee—ee!" Barney shouted and cut

diagonally across the dust toward the saloon, the others following him.

And that was how Dan came face to face with Lew Fanshawe who leaned indolently against one of the posts supporting the wooden awning fronting the Rialto saloon.

There was that easy grace to Fanshawe, and that wild recklessness, too. His eyes were as bleak as before, and half-veiled, but there was a mocking devil in them. He was like some great tawny cat taking its ease in the sun; he showed those teeth of his, so startlingly white, so startlingly perfect, and he said, "Happy the groom the sun shines on today, Ballard. You look as polished as a new spur. She'll be getting quite a man. Quite a man."

Dan said, "Fanshawe, I want no trouble today."

Fanshawe detached himself from the support and removed his flat-topped sombrero and made a sweeping bow. "A Ballard has spoken," he said. "That makes it the law in this town, eh? But here's a little wedding present for you."

He worked his lower lip quickly and spat then, spat upon the toe of Dan's right boot. And suddenly there was silence all around, silence and immobility, the talk dying among those who lounged within hearing distance, and every man growing roots where he stood. And the anger that burned in Dan was first quick flame, searing, all-consuming, and then it was a cold flame, leaving ice in him, and a feeling as though he were detached from himself. He said in a voice that sounded like someone else's, "Barney, give me your gun and belt."

Partridge said hoarsely, "He's stepped too far this time! He'll ride out of here on a rail, wearing a coat of tar and feathers."

"Barney! Give me your gun!"

Abe Potter came shouldering through the crowd. He was Ballardton's town marshal, a big and ponderous man made more ponderous by the badge he wore. He had held this position as long as Dan could remember, and it had been three years since they'd seen each other, but this was no time for greetings. Potter's florid face showed the weight of his anger. He said,

"I saw it. I saw it all. He'll get thirty days for disturbing the peace."

Fanshawe measured Potter with a cool scorn. "And who'll make the arrest, fat man?"

Potter shrank visibly, then found a source of courage. "I can make a deputy of every man on the street."

Fanshawe said, "You're well covered, Ballard. Yesterday it was your crew behind you. Today it will be the whole town. Yes, she'll be getting quite a man!"

Dan said, "The gun, Barney!"

He reached out with his right arm, never taking his eyes from Fanshawe, and Partridge unlatched his gun belt and passed it over, and Dan swung it around his waist and hooked it in place and patted the gun into position against his thigh. Wayne said, "Dan! You don't have to do this!"

Yes, I do, Wayne. That was his thought. He had to do this because if he didn't stand up to Fanshawe today he'd have to face him tomorrow or the day after or the shadow of Fanshawe would be over him all the days to come. He had to do it because somebody wanted it done—this man before him or some other man who was behind him, whispering in Fanshawe's ear. There wasn't any choice.

He fell back a step, making a spreading gesture with his hands, and the crowd began dissolving, leaving him a breadth of space as men hurried to the cover of doorways. He fell back another step and another, still keeping his eyes on Fanshawe, and yet there was an awareness in him that all the others had put themselves at a safe distance, and that was the way he wanted it. He kept backing until the calves of his legs struck the edge of the far board walk; and he looked across the intervening space at Fanshawe and said, "This should be about right," and let his hands dangle limply at his sides.

FANSHAWE had put on his hat and slanted it against the sun and taken a spread-legged stand on the porch of the Rialto. The grin was gone and the mockery was no longer in the man's eyes; he was all business now, and it was deadly business.

And with the two of them thus, each

ready to kill the other, Dan sensed again his own detachment from all this, and he wondered if this was what Gramp had meant about hating a man so much that you wanted to lay your bare hands on him. Yet there was not hate in Dan, not really, and when he saw the flicker of Fanshawe's eyes he knew the signal for what it meant, he merely let his hand reach toward his right hip, remembering Gramp and the badgers then and being thankful for the stolen hours of practice at school; and he got the gun out and eared the hammer back all in the same motion. He heard the roar of Fanshawe's gun, but Fanshawe was just a shade too confident and that was why the bullet merely whispered past Dan's ear. And then Dan was firing.

No, there was no hate. And that was why, at the last moment, he tilted the gun a little to the left and raised it a fraction of an inch. He felt the buck of it against his palm; he saw Fanshawe go spinning about, the gun falling from the man's fingers as shock took its hard hold on him, and he saw Fanshawe's hand go to his right shoulder and the blood come seeping between his fingers.

Abe Potter moved fast for a fat man. He had posted himself at the far end of the Rialto's porch; he came running now and he kicked at Fanshawe's gun and sent it spinning and dragged Fanshawe's left-hand gun from its holster and threw it after the fallen gun. Then he got a hold on Fanshawe's elbow and hustled the man down the steps. The crowd came converging from everywhere; there was anger in the air and it manifested itself in shouted curses and lifted fists. Potter said, "Back, everybody! He's the law's prisoner!" He beat a lane for himself dragging the stunned Fanshawe behind him; and Barney Partridge scooped up Fanshawe's fallen guns and was there helping Potter.

Wayne reached Dan's elbow. He said, "You'd better get up to the church to Cynthia. The news will have gone ahead of you."

Somebody said, "She's already heard it."

Dan moved blindly up the street, his boots raising little geysers of dust. Men spoke to him, and he shook his head, not always comprehending. Someone came

running and said, "Miss Church fainted. They've carried her to her father's office."

Dan turned and headed toward the covered stairway, and Wayne went with him. They climbed the stairs together, and when they reached the office, Cynthia lay stretched upon the horsehair sofa, her long white dress in disarray, her veil thrown back, her eyes still closed. Doc Church was fussing over her, and Ransome Price stood in attendance. He was the one who'd carried Cynthia here, Dan guessed, and he wondered then if the man would always be underfoot. A great annoyance gave a petulant cast to Price's face. He said, "Ballard, couldn't this thing have been avoided today of all days?"

Dan said, "No, it couldn't."

Doc Church was passing smelling salts beneath Cynthia's nose. Her eyelids fluttered, lifted; she saw Dan and closed her eyes again, tightly. He stepped nearer and said, "It's all right, Cyn. It's all over now, and I'm still in one piece."

Her bouquet had fallen to the floor beside the sofa. It was a big bouquet, full and rich and many-colored, and these were flowers foreign to this soil. Dan wondered where they had come from until he realized they were made of paper. Artificial . . .

Doc Church was perspiring, and his wing collar and tie were awry. He said, "I'm afraid the sight of you brings back the shock, Dan. She'll be all right shortly."

Dan said, "We can tell the crowd the wedding will be delayed an hour or so."

"You're going through with it?" Price demanded.

"If Cyn wishes it."

"She'll wish it. She's that kind of thoroughbred, Ballard. Yes, she'll marry you. Even if that kill-crazy fellow is out of jail in thirty days and makes a widow of her."

Dan said wearily, "Wayne, go tell the crowd the wedding's been postponed. Indefinitely."

"It doesn't have to be that way, kid," Wayne said gently.

"Yes, it does," Dan said. "Price is right. I can't marry her as long as there seems to be some kind of curse hanging over me. I can't do that to her, even though she'd be willing. Go tell the folks, Wayne."

Wayne turned and left, and Dan said

then, futilely, "I guess I'll be going, too. Back to the ranch probably. Tell her I'll ride in and see her later. Maybe tonight."

Price said, "You'd better get that thing out of sight. That's what scared her when she opened her eyes."

Only then did Dan realize he was still clutching Barney Partridge's six-shooter in his right hand. He slid the weapon into the holster and turned toward the stairs.

IV

THEY SAT IN RAWHIDE-BOTTOMED chairs upon the gallery, the two of them, Wayne and Dan; they had been here since supper time. They had seen the shadows come down from the hills and engulf the Hourglass; the day had lost its heat and all things had turned hazy and out of focus. A breeze still ran over the land, but lazily and without malice, having a coolness in it now, having a caress. Wayne kept Durham and papers in his pocket and Dan had again tried his hand at the fashioning of a cigarette and found an old skill still in his fingers. He'd favored a pipe at school. He was like an Indian, he reflected, educated and returned to the reservation and gone native overnight. But he smiled at the thought. Ring came padding up on the gallery and approached Dan and asked in subtle, silent ways to be nuzzled. The two cigarettes made pin-points of light against the gathering night.

Wayne said with a tired sigh, "It was quite a day. Quite a day!"

"I think I'll ride in," Dan said. "There's this thing to talk over with Cynthia. And I'd like a word with Lew Fanshawe. But it will be wasted jaw-wagging, I reckon. He'll never tell who hired his gun."

"The Cantrells," Wayne said, but not with conviction.

"I wonder, Wayne. They've got guns of their own. There'd be that kind of pride in Old Man Cantrell, the kind that would make him keep a fight in his own family."

"He'll be down soon for his answer, kid."

There was a question in that statement, a question and an appeal; and Dan knew

now that Wayne had waited for his return, wanting his backing and his judgment, and that seemed odd. It was as though an older brother had suddenly become a younger one. Yet because this was still unbelievable, Dan said, "And what is your answer going to be, Wayne?"

Wayne carefully ground out his cigarette, seeing his heel upon it and making sure the last spark was extinguished. He made a ritual of this. "The whole range is counting on Ballard Springs," he said then. "But are we always going to have to play god-father to every two-bit spread in the basin? We've shared the water, sure; but this is a season where every man's for himself. There'd be enough for us and Cantrell, and if we made a dicker with Cantrell that would be straight business. The little fellow might not like it, but they couldn't blame us."

Dan said softly, "And that's how you see it?"

"It's that or fight, Dan. Maybe we should have hired Fanshawe after all. Maybe it isn't too late. Unless you want to make some kind of charge against him, he won't draw more than thirty days for disturbing the peace. And who would we be fighting for, when it comes right down to it? Ourselves? Cantrell will share alike with us. Why should the Hourglass keep on riding gun-hung so that we can have the privilege of giving our water away to all the others?"

"And if we lease the springs to Cantrell?" Dan said. "What next? He'll be after a slice of our acreage, and he'll get that, too, and then he'll be after another." It came to him suddenly that he was saying the very thing Gramp had said, and, remembering that, he added: "Gramp has a vote in this too, Wayne."

"Which could make it two against one. You and Gramp against me. I think he's been counting on that ever since you started home. He'll vote to tell Cantrell to go to hell and to fight the Tomahawk if they don't like it. You know better than that, Dan. The day of the gun is gone."

"Is it?" Dan said and remembered the silent street and the breadth of space and the nooning sun strong in his face, that and the flicker of Fanshawe's eyes.

"Today?" Wayne scoffed. "There'll always be a few like Fanshawe until time stamps the last of them out."

"Shall we tell Cantrell that?" Dan asked, not meaning to put a harsh edge to his voice.

"Shhhh!" Wayne said suddenly, and his fingers, closing on Dan's arm, compelled silence.

Dan heard it, too, the sound of a walking horse, the jingle of a bit chain out there in the darkness, the creak of saddle leather. Wayne was leaning forward, a rigidity to his body, and it came now to Dan that fear was strong in Wayne and had been with him for a long time. Dan said, "One of our crew, likely."

"No, they'll be coming in a bunch. They had themselves primed to celebrate a wedding, you know. When it was called off, I told them to spend the day in town anyway. We'll see none of them before midnight."

OUT YONDER, saddle leather creaked again, and a man dismounted and shaped up in the yard. He was a tall man, thin and built along angular lines. He came toward the house with a sureness in his step; he wore bibless overalls with criss-crossing suspenders and a sombrero was shoved back on his head and there was a rifle in the crook of his arm. His face was clean-shaven, and the sun had done little to him; there was a strained grayness to his face, and his lips were thin and bloodless. His nose was an aristocrat's nose, and his eyes were coldly intelligent. He stood at the foot of the steps, revealed in a splash of lamplight from the open doorway behind Wayne, and he said, "Good evening, gentlemen." His voice was the most astonishing thing of all—softly modulated, cultured.

Wayne said, "Good evening. Do I place you right? You're Allison, the fellow who took over Sam Digby's outfit up by the pass?"

"Clayton Allison," the man said. "I've never had the pleasure of your acquaintance, but you're Wayne Ballard, of course. And this is your brother Dan, I presume." His tone was sardonic, making a mockery

of the courtliness of his words. He didn't step forward to offer his hand.

Wayne said, "Come on up and have a chair, Allison. What can we do for you?"

Allison lowered the rifle and leaned upon it, making no other move than that. "I'm looking for my daughter. We'll dispense with any sparring with words, gentlemen. Is she here?"

Wayne spread his hands in a gesture of bewilderment. "I didn't even know you had a daughter. Why should she be here?"

"Because there are men here. You have a large crew, Mr. Ballard. And then there are yourselves, gentlemen."

Wayne frowned. "I'm not exactly sure what you mean, but I don't think I like it. We've seen nothing of your daughter. What does she look like?"

"She's nineteen. Usually she wears a Levis and a shirt, and she might pass for a boy, but only at a distance. Her hair is black and hangs to her shoulders. Her eyes are black. She's pretty—as pretty as the devil's daughter would be if he had one."

"If she shows up, we'll let her know you're hunting for her."

"In the meantime," Allison said, "I'll have a look in your bunkhouse, if you don't mind."

"In our bunkhouse? What in hell for?"

"For her, of course. Maybe your men have hidden her out. She could twist any man around her finger." His eyes were suddenly savage. "It's an inherited trait," he rasped.

Wayne said hotly, "Look in the bunkhouse and be damned to you, if it will make you feel any better! What kind of a ranch do you think we run here?"

Allison dipped his head. "My apologies," he said. "If I make them with a reservation, it's because I realize that you don't know April."

Dan said quietly, "Most of the range folks were in-town today. A lot of them stayed. Maybe your girl's there."

Something touched Allison's lips that might have been a smile. "I've already heard about your wedding and its postponement. Be wise and postpone it indefinitely, Mr. Ballard."

Dan came to a quick stand, his hands

making fists. "Now see here——!" he declared.

Allison moved the rifle back to the crook of his arm. "I meant no personal offense," he said. "I've never met Miss Church, but I'm told that she's most reputable. My views on marriage are my own. You're young Mr. Ballard. Someday you'll remember my words and understand them."

He turned and headed back toward his horse. He took three steps and paused, swinging about on his heel. "Your north line fence has a hole in it," he said. "Some of your stock drifted through onto my land. I hazed them back and patched the fence as best I could. I'm not very adapt at that sort of thing. You'd better have it attended to properly."

Wayne said, "I'll get a man up there soon. And thanks, Allison. If it happens again, just get us word. We'll save you the bother of having to round up our stock."

"It wasn't a favor to you," Allison said. "I just didn't want your crew swarming over my land. But I've forgotten. You don't know my daughter, do you?"

He went on to his horse; they heard him climb into the saddle and wheel the mount about; man and beast became shapeless and were lost in the night, only the hoofbeats reaching back to the brothers. Dan sighed, not knowing whether to laugh or be angry. "Now where in thunder did he come from?" he demanded. "And what eats him? For a while I thought he was drunk, but his eyes were too clear and his step too steady."

Wayne said, "He took over Digby's place this spring. He's no rancher, not by a long shot, though he runs a little stock back in the hills. Minds his own business strictly. This is the first time I've ever come face to face with him though he was pointed out to me once in town. He comes down every thirty days or so for supplies, pays cash and talks to nobody. I never even knew he had a daughter, and I don't think many others know it either."

Dan said thoughtfully, "The Digby place. That wedges between us and the Tomahawk, and it overlooks Tomahawk Pass. How are you betting Clayton Allison will line up if it comes to war?"

"I don't know," Wayne said. "I just don't know."

Dan shrugged the matter aside. "Pass me over those makings again," he said. "One more smoke and I'm saddling up to ride into town." He took the sack and let a pinch of tobacco dribble into the paper. "Was a time when my biggest ambition was to be able to do this with one hand. Like Gramp could."

"He's getting worse," Wayne said. "Now he's throwing things. I went upstairs after Charley fetched him his supper. I thought he'd like to hear about today. He shied a boot at me."

"Allison's coming back," Dan said very quietly.

A GAIN A HORSE was shaping up at the gate; the stars were beginning to show now and it was lighter, and on the heels of his own words Dan knew his mistake. That short and stocky form was Barney Partridge's. Hourglass's foreman came to the gallery and squatted upon the steps. Wayne said, "Getting too old to stand the pace, Barney? Time was when you'd fetch the crew home and put 'em to bed, then head back to town to finish your own liquoring."

Partridge silently extended his hand and Dan passed him the makings. He tilted the sack, spilling never a crumb; he twisted the cigarette into shape and ran his tongue along it. He fished for a match, raised a leg and drew the match along the seat of his trousers. For a moment his face was painted brightly against the gloom; he got the tobacco burning, and he said then, "They're fixing to lynch him good and proper."

"Lynch who?" Dan demanded.

"Fanshawe."

"Fanshawe!" Dan came to his feet again. "Who's talking of lynching him?"

"The whole town. Or them that's liquored enough to be of a mind for it. I heard the talk grow all afternoon. First it was of tar and feathers and a rail. You'll mind that I mentioned something of the sort this morning myself. Then it turned to talk of a battering ram for the jail door and a rope and a cottonwood and a quick dance on the air."

Wayne said hoarsely, "A lynching in Ballardton?"

"Folks set a store in the family," Partridge said. "They're beholden to the Ballards for all the things over all the years. Right now they're especially beholden with no water on this range but Ballard Springs. They figger Dan got himself cheated out of a wedding because of Fanshawe. They figger a funeral might square that."

Dan said, "You've all gone crazy! Do you hear? You've all turned loco! A lynching! A good sprinkle to settle the dust and this craziness would be washed out of you!"

He vaulted over the railing, landing hard. Wayne came to a stand then. "Where are you going, Dan?"

"To town," Dan said. "Just as fast as I can saddle up! Do you think I want to spend the rest of my life remembering a man dead because of something that happened between him and me? I'm going to talk some sense into those misguided fools!"

"The time for that is past, I reckon," Barney Partridge said. "Hours past. Whiskey bottles past. You've never seen a lynch mob, Dan." There was tension born of certainty in his voice. He knew what terror the maddened instincts of an aroused lynch-mob could produce.

Dan said, "Then here's one I'm going to see—and stop. I want Fanshawe alive! I want to get a truth out of him that will maybe put an end to whatever it is that's hanging over my head. But it isn't Fanshawe that matters. Not tonight. Can't the two of you see what this really means? The drought has made some folks crazy enough to be thinking of a lynching. But if Fanshawe's hanged tonight, that will just be a start. Supposing Cantrell's behind the man? Do you think he'll let the lynching be the end of it? This is just the spark. It's the powder-keg I'm thinking of!"

He went running toward the corral. Behind him, Partridge's voice reached out through the night. "Hold up a minute, Dan. If you're fool enough to try stopping it, I'm fool enough to ride along and help you. Wait till I get me a fresh horse."

V

PARTRIDGE SHAPED UP OUT OF darkness, leading his spent saddler toward the corral. He peeled the saddle from the mount and let the kak lie, and he turned the horse into the corral and lifted his lariat from the tangle of heaped gear. He said, "You still got my gun, Dan? Better fetch it an one for yourself. Some in town are your friends, wanting to square the insult that was tossed at you. Some are soreheads, grabbing this as a chance to see how a man looks at the end of a rope. We can't stand up to them with our bare hands."

Dan did some rummaging in the bunkhouse and found a pair of spurs which he fastened to his heels; and he fetched back two gunbelts, the one around his middle, the other in his hand. Partridge had laid his loop on two horses and got his own saddle onto one of them and was fetching another kak from the harness shed. He slapped this saddle across the back of a bay gelding. "I hand-picked this one for you, Dan," he said. "If you're three years out of practice, you'll want an easy handful the first time."

Dan said, "Is he fast? That's all I care about."

"He'll get you there and back," Partridge said.

They stepped up into saddles, and Dan put his weight in the middle and was glad now that he still wore riding boots. He'd have to get used to this all over again. He'd be stiffer than a board tomorrow. But it was good being back in the saddle again. It was good to have a horse under you. It gave you wings and made you look down on lesser men. If you were born to it, you never got it out of your blood. Back East they were talking about those new horseless carriages, and some said that in a few more years the horse would be gone. It wouldn't be so, Dan reflected. Not as long as there were Ballards.

Hourglass's foreman leaned and closed the corral gate; they wheeled their mounts and lifted them to a gallop and crossed before the ranch-house as they headed south. Wayne still stood on the gallery;

he shouted something at them, but it was lost in the rising thunder of hoofbeats. Wayne had made no move to come along. Wayne wanted no part of violence, Dan decided. Wayne closed his eyes to it and pretended it didn't exist.

They humped over the top of the slant and the prairie ran level and unbroken before them; starshine silvered the sage and gave to the land an ethereal look. They kept to the wagon road; there were always prairie dog holes for the unwary; and the wind of swift passage grew in Dan's ears and the taste of it was on his lips and was good. It came to him that he hadn't lived these past years; he'd turned himself into a mechanical man involved with books and learning, but now he was taking up where he'd left off and it was like being born again. And it came to him also that he hadn't come home until this hour, not really. It was the difference a saddle horse made to a range-reared man.

They rode stirrup to stirrup, holding to a high gallop, and the prairie blurred past them and was endlessly the same. Yonder, across the miles, lay Ballardton; and sometimes Dan fancied he could make out the huddle of buildings, but he knew this was an illusion born of expectancy. Only the lights were real. Midway to town, as Dan calculated it, Partridge pulled to a halt, dismounted, and loosened the cinch of his saddle, letting the horse blow, and Dan did likewise. In this brief recess, Dan said, "There's been a question pestering me, Barney. You were in town and knew what was happening. But it didn't matter to you one way or the other, and you rode out. Now you're backing me in whatever play is to be made. Why, Barney?"

Partridge gave this his careful consideration; the labor of thinking showed in his leathery face. "I dunno," he said at last. "Maybe in town I figured it was none of my business, one way or the other. Then when you spoke of how a lynching might be just a beginning, I saw it different. Hell will bust out soon enough without giving it a headstart."

A good man, Dan reflected. Partridge's way had been to take orders, to let the

Ballards do the thinking, but when he got his teeth into a notion you could count on his backing you till his belly caved in. The Hourglass was lucky to have him. Damned lucky!

Partridge fumbled with the cinch. "Time's a-wastin'," he observed.

Then they were riding again, and shortly Dan knew that he could indeed make out the huddle of buildings. First he identified the church spire and the blotch of darkness against darkness beneath it, and as they drew nearer the blotch took on shape and substance and became the town. When they rode into the street, there were still more buckboards and saddle-horses here than was usual, though the town had lost its crammed look of the morning. They racked their horses at the first hitch-rail that would accommodate them, and they stood then for a moment indecisively, and Dan wondered if they were too late, if the thing had already been done, and the thought took the rigidity out of his knees.

"Just listen to 'em," Partridge said. "They're set for the kill."

THE RIALTO was the nearest saloon; from it came a splash of light that lay upon the board walk and made the dust beyond something yellowish and alive. A low and constant rumble boiled from the saloon, the blending of many voices, and there was a note in it that a man, hearing once would never forget. It was compounded of anger and hate and a nameless blood-hunger; it was made from the latent violence in men and the searing touch of sixty rainless days. Farther up this same street was the Gilded Lady, and across the way stood the Palace. The same voice came from each; men were liquoring in all three saloons. The hour was near. And yet there was an unreality to this; violence didn't blossom in Ballardton, not any more. The town had outgrown a turgid past and now it was reverting; and that was the unbelievable.

Barney Partridge shifted his gun to a more comfortable position, and the gesture was real enough.

"You figger to make them a speech?" he asked.

"From the jail steps," Dan said, and

not until now had he had a plan. "It's the only way. If I go into one of the saloons. I'm likely to be still talking when they start marching from another."

"Where do I fit into it, Dan?"

"Wander around the saloons and keep an eye on things, Barney. If anybody gets ready to explode, run to the jail and fetch me the news. There's a light in Potter's office, I see. Maybe he's got a notion or two on how to stop this thing."

Partridge spat into the dust. "Maybe," he said, but there was no conviction behind it. He climbed to the board walk, and his bootheels beat a cadence along it; he shouldered among men and was lost to Dan's sight.

Turning toward the jail-house, Dan cut diagonally across the dust and in this manner passed before the Palace. Horses stood here; he read the Circle-Bar's brand and the Hashknife's and the Wagon Wheel's; these were near neighbors who depended upon Ballard Springs and owed the Hourglass allegiance. A few men loitered beneath the saloon's wooden awning; the batwings parted and a man stood silhouetted, a big and ungainly man, and by his bulk Dan knew him to be Old Man Cantrell. You couldn't mistake Cantrell. He was like a boulder, solid and impregnable. He stood looking out upon the street; if he saw Dan he gave no sign. The batwings creaked again and a second giant shaped up behind the first. This was one of Old Man Cantrell's sons; he stood at his father's elbow and said something and the two turned back into the saloon.

Here, then, was the living proof that the Tomahawk was in town, and Dan's first thought was that if Cantrell money had hired the gun of Lew Fanshawe, then Cantrell and his sons could be counted on to help stop the thing that was shaping in poured whiskey and rumbling talk. But there was no real satisfaction in the Tomahawk's presence in town. Now there was the one faction and the other, and from this proximity could come the beginning of a war. Better that Lew Fanshawe should die than that the Cantrells should be here to defend him.

Dan reached the board walk and began pacing along it. The jail was toward the

outskirts of town, isolated and removed from other buildings by a futile belief that Ballardton would grow out toward it. Each step took him farther around and the way grew darker; but before the locked door of a feed stable a man lounged. He was taking his ease here, yet there was a strained alertness to him as though all his faculties were bent upon the three saloons. He said softly, "Good evening, Ballard."

In the first moment he was only a shapelessness in black with the white of a waistcoat glimmering softly. But he had a cigar in his face and when he pulled upon it his sensuous features stood sharply revealed. Dan said, "Good evening, Price."

"A hot time in the old town tonight," Price observed.

"It's got the making," Dan admitted. "I'm on my way to see Potter. Is there any county law in town?"

Another drag at the cigar revealed Price's half-smile. "Not any more, Ballard. The sheriff used to keep a deputy here, but the fellow only grew fat. A couple of years ago the sheriff decided that Potter could handle anything that happened. Now a deputy comes only when he's sent for."

"I was thinking," Dan said, "that Fanshawe could be moved to the county seat. At least until this blows over."

Price said, "I'm surprised at your interest. When I first spotted you just now, I supposed you'd come in to see Cynthia. She's still pretty shaken. What's Fanshawe one way or the other?"

"I wonder," Dan said.

Ransome Price tossed the cigar away; his face was lost now in shadow. He said, "Probably it will all blow over anyway. They'll drink and they'll talk, and some will drink too much and fall on their faces. People as a whole are a pack of fools."

"I wonder," Dan said again.

He brushed on by, wanting no more of this kind of talk; he knew that ever since his return to the range the sight of Ransome Price had stirred an animosity in him. There was something now in the calloused indifference that whetted that animosity. Or was that merely a cloak to cover another feeling that had grown out

of the man's constant attentiveness to Cynthia? *You're jealous, you fool!* Dan thought, and was angry with himself.

THE JAIL BUILDING shaped ahead. Logs, hauled from the hills, made its foundation; the superstructure was frame. It was a long, low building with an office to the front, and a lamp burned in the office. The barred cell windows were so many blank eyes; this building often stood empty; its commodiousness was the planning of an earlier day. Four steps led up to the office door; before the door was a small platform, and here a man could make his stand when the mob came spilling up the street. He'd be above his listeners, Dan observed, and there was an advantage in this, remembered from a public speaking class he'd attended. He had to smile now; the instructor had said nothing about stopping lynch mobs.

He mounted the steps and turned about facing back toward the street and listening to that muted roar. His thought then was stark and disconcerting. Suppose they were only using the insult to a Ballard as an excuse for all the madness that was in them? Suppose that when he tried to stop them he was only a man in their way. He remembered Gramp Ballard saying that a man hadn't lived who hadn't loved and hated and found a cause that was more important than his life. Here, then, was the cause, but there was nothing in it to inspire martyrdom. He didn't want to die that Lew Fanshawe might live. Ransome Price had been right about one thing—Fanshawe wasn't much one way or the other.

Yet there was no turning back now; a man might think his thoughts, yet he couldn't go drifting off into the shadows, putting his back to this thing. Not now. Today he'd had no choice but to fight Fanshawe; tonight, by that same queer inevitability, he had no choice but to defend the man. There was no explaining it; the books had had nothing to say on this subject.

So thinking, he set his hand to the door and pushed it inward and entered Abe Potter's office.

He remembered the office; it had been

the same under a half dozen town marshals, and he had known it from his childhood. His father had fetched him here once and there'd been that same spur-scarred, cigarette-burned desk centering the room, the same swivel chair and battered filing case, and possibly the same fly-specked, time-yellowed reward dodgers mottling the wall. But there was this difference; Abe Potter hadn't been stretched upon the floor, a big and ungainly shape with the consciousness gone out of him.

The door to the back of the room, the door giving into the cell corridor, was slightly ajar. Dan crossed the office in a bound; whoever had done this damage to Potter was back there in the corridor, and when he entered its gloomy length, lighted only by a single overhanging kerosene lamp, he saw the figure at the door of the one occupied cell, the figure who fumbled with Potter's key ring. And seeing her was like a heavy blow, for he had never seen her before but he knew her.

"She's nineteen," Clayton Allison had said. "Usually she wears Levis and a shirt, and she might pass for a boy, but only at a distance. Her hair is black and hangs to her shoulders. Her eyes are black. She's pretty—as pretty as the devil's daughter would be if he had one."

But the words had been too meager; they didn't account for the perfection of April Allison's features, or for something less tangible that struck a man upon seeing her. Hers was a primitive wildness, the wildness the fawn caught unawares, the wildness of the high hills, of singing pine unfettered stream. She looked at him with her lips slightly parted, her breasts heaving; she looked at him as a trapped beast might have looked.

She would turn and run; he was sure of that. But she didn't run. She fumbled the harder with the keys as he came bearing down upon her. She was here to free Fanshawe, to save him from the mob, but he didn't want Fanshawe saved in this manner, to ride away free as the wind. Dan reached the door and grasped at her, trying to pull her away from the lock, but she'd freed the door and it swung open. Fanshawe had stood close to the bars, encouraging her, probably; he came charg-

ing out. His fist swung wildly at Dan and caught him on the point of his chin.

This, then, was Dan's meeting with April Allison, his first meeting and his first parting. He had the picture of her, her eyes startlingly wide, to carry with him as his knees gave away and he went down to the blackness of oblivion.

VI

HE STRUGGLED UP TOWARD consciousness like a man climbing from the blackness of a well. He became aware of light—sharp, yellow light, which beat against his eyeballs and hurt them—but that was much later, after an infinity of shadows. Then he heard voices and movement; these were intangible things that swirled around him and yet remained remote from him; the only reality was pain, a steady soreness of jaw and ribs, and his head throbbed ceaselessly. There was something wrong about his ribs hurting; he knew that, but it took forever to grasp why that was wrong. He guessed then that Fanshawe had kicked him—kicked him after Dan had been knocked down. He used that thought as a man might use a rope, pulling himself upward, and he opened his eyes and saw faces.

He raised a hand to shade his eyes, and Doc Church said, "Take it easy, Dan. Just take it easy."

He was stretched upon the horsehair sofa where Cynthia had lain this afternoon, but it was the medicinal smell of Doc Church's office that first identified the place. From where he lay he could see Church's framed diploma; time had yellowed the certificate, and the glass was fly-specked, and the frame hung slightly awry. He had an urge to get to his feet and cross the room and straighten that frame; it seemed a most important and necessary thing to do. He got himself upon one elbow, but the pain beat through him with the effort and he gave it up.

Barney Partridge moved into his vision and said, "How you feeling, boy?"

"Done in," Dan said. "What a wallop!"

Cynthia was here; she stood looking down at him, her face strained, her eyes somber. Ransome Price was here, too; he

leaned against Church's desk and kept a proper look of sympathy upon his face, but Dan wondered irritably if the man went with the furniture, or what. Abe Potter sat in the swivel chair, his fat face gray, his chin cupped in his hands. Dan knew how Potter felt. Potter had got it, too, and his head was probably beating like a tom-tom.

Doc Church said, "Don't talk unless you feel like it, Dan. But we're all hoping you know more than Abe knows. Somebody sneaked up and got him from behind; he never even had a glimpse of who hit him. The sign says someone fetched two horses into the weeds beside the jail. Fanshawe and the other party took off on those two horses. One of the cayuses was stolen; it was a Tomahawk mount that Mace Cantrell had left in front of the Palace. The old man is frothing."

Remembrance came back to Dan now with a rush—the marshal's office, the heaped body upon the floor, the girl in the corridor, the swung fist of Lew Fanshawe. He tried rising again and this time got himself to a sitting position. He said, "How much start has Fanshawe got?"

Partridge shook his head. "Hard telling. Enough to clear town, anyway. It was me found you, Dan. I came up to the jail to tell you that it looked like the boys were ready to start marching. How long you'd been knocked out then I wouldn't know. Might have been twenty minutes. Abe was just coming alive."

Potter said, "The last I remember is that I was just going back into the corridor to have a look at Fanshawe. I was nervous as a cat with that mob talking itself into trouble down the street. I had my back to the front door when I got it. Whoever clouted me must walk as quiet as a shadow."

Dan brought his fingers to his chin; there was a welt. He said, "I can't tell you much. I walked into the office and found Abe on the floor. That stampeded me a little, I guess. I dragged open the door leading to the corridor and ran smack into Fanshawe. He used his fist on me. It was a lucky punch; he only had to hit me once."

"Someone must have been with him,"

Potter said. His broad face knotted with the working of his thoughts. "The party who clouted me got the keys. They were on my desk when the lights went out for me, and they were in the cell door afterwards. Did you only see Fanshawe in the corridor?"

"If there was someone else, he must have been behind Fanshawe. Everything happened so quickly. All I really remember is that fist coming at me."

Ransome Price said, "That's strange. Potter, didn't you say you found the gun lying near Fanshawe's cell door?"

"Here it is," Potter said and dragged a Colt's forty-five from his belt. "Yours, Dan?"

"Mine," Dan admitted. "Fanshawe must have dragged it from my holster and thrown it back along the corridor so that if I came out of it in a minute I wouldn't be able to lay my hands on a gun." Damn the gun! Probably it had fallen from his holster as he went down. And damn Price's quick way of putting the pieces together! Afraid of what his face might be showing, Dan said, "What about the mob?"

"Some piled onto horses and lit out," Price said. "They'll ride around in circles for a while, trying to cut sign on Fanshawe and his partner, and then they'll give it up. Most of them are still here in town, talking it over. They lost the victim for their little blood-letting party, so they've lost their enthusiasm. I told you, Ballard, that they were a pack of fools."

Potter wagged his great head. "It's beyond town law now. It's work for a deputy from the county seat."

PRICE'S EYES lingered on Dan's face; the gaze held and became steady and compelling and built an anger in Dan which he knew he mustn't show. He closed his eyes again; he had to do that or lower his gaze; and he asked himself why he'd lied. He remembered the girl vividly, that trapped wildling in the corridor, but he also remembered Clayton Allison and his visit to the Hourglass; he recalled the cynicism of the man, his open contempt for his own daughter. He thought: *I've got to play this out in my own way*, and tried

to find an excuse for himself in the thought. But he knew the truth went deeper than that; he knew that some instinct had held him from delivering her name to the law, and because he couldn't name the instinct, his conscience smote him.

He opened his eyes again and returned Price's unblinking stare; he swung his legs around and planted his feet upon the floor and came to a stand. For a moment the room revolved; the faces were a swirling blend, and then he took a tottering step and another and got command of himself. He lifted the gun from Potter's lax fingers and dumped it into the holster. He said, "I may need this. Unless the law has claim on it for evidence."

Potter said, "Fanshawe helped himself to his own guns from my desk before he lit out. A man like him wouldn't want any gun but his own. Likely he lifted your gun to play safe, just as you said."

That gave Dan a bad moment. Potter believed him because he was a Ballard, and a Ballard wouldn't lie. Not to the law. His anger rose against April Allison, a strange, formless anger that was in reality an anger with himself. The little tart! She was in love with Fanshawe, of course.

Cynthia said with genuine concern, "Dan, are you sure you're all right?"

"A night's sleep is what I need." He looked at her; she was steadiness and dependability; she was an arm upon which a man could lean. He said, "I meant to ride to town tonight to talk to you. This lynch business threw me off the track. If you're going home, 'I'll see you to the cottage.'"

"I'm going home, Dan," she said.

Dan looked at Price but spoke to Potter. "Anything else tonight, Abe?"

"Reckon not," Potter said. "We both drew blanks, I guess."

Barney Partridge said, "I'll hang around till you're ready to ride out, Dan."

Cynthia took Dan's arm; he crossed from office to anteroom with her and paused in the doorway and bade the others a good night. He opened the door leading to the covered stairway and proceeded her down the steps. Sometimes a drunk picked

this pocket of darkness in which to do his sleeping. Upon the board walk, they strolled in silence; the night air was kind to him, it caressed his face and dulled the throbbing in his head. The hitchrails seemed less crowded; the mumble still rose from the saloons, but it had a different note to it. Before the Palace he ran his eyes over the standing horses; there were several brands but the Tomahawk was no longer one of them. He found himself smiling. The little vixen! She'd had to steal a horse in order to get Fanshawe away once she'd freed him. But a Tomahawk horse! The nerve of her!

Cynthia sighed. "I'm tired, Dan," she said. "It's been too much for one day."

He groped for her hand and squeezed it; he was still thinking of April Allison.

Beyond the busier part of town the buildings thinned out; here were the better residences, and the cottage of Doc Church was one of them. It was small and white, and a picket fence surrounded it, and near the gate stood a giant cottonwood, older than the memory of the oldest man. The cottage was Eastern respectability transplanted; it was Doc Church and his daughter personified in frame and paint. Dan and Cynthia came silently to the gate and paused here; starshine trickled through the cottonwood's shivering leaves and laid a lacy pattern upon her face. An awkwardness came between them in this moment; each stood waiting for the other to speak; and Dan said then, "How about it, Cyn?"

"About what, Dan?"

"You and I."

She lowered her eyes, saying nothing, and he watched and waited and felt an odd detachment as though it concerned someone else who was a stranger to him. She said at least, "About the wedding you mean, I suppose. Don't you think it best that we keep on postponing it? At least till this trouble is over?"

"If that's the way you want it, Cyn."

She drew in a deep breath. "Dan, you've changed! Oh, I expected you'd be different after three years at school, but the way you've changed is what startles me. That gun-fight today, and then the fight in the jail-house tonight. Oh, I know both those things were forced upon you; I've lived too

long in this land not to know that a man can't very well sidestep a fight. But it seems that you've become some sort of magnet that attracts violence. That's a little hard to get used to, Dan. Can't you understand?"

"I was your fiance when I went away," he said. "I'm a stranger now. Is that it?"

She said, "Maybe I've just got to get used to you again. But it can't be done in a day. Or perhaps I'm the one who's changed. I don't know. Things don't look the same to me anymore. I used to love this land; I used to watch for the first wild flowers and see the changing seasons and wonder why all the artists in the world didn't hurry here to paint our prairie. Now even the land looks savage; it almost reaches out to claw at me. If only it would rain!"

He said aghast, "Cynthia! The drought hasn't turned you crazy, too?"

"Call it that, if you wish," she said.

HE PUT a long moment's reflection on all this, but it seemed hard to keep his mind at the task. He was tired, he decided, very tired. He said, "Once we were a couple of people who met and liked each other so much that the liking grew into something stronger. Couldn't we start all over, Cyn? I'll try reaching out for you again. I hope you'll try, too. How about that?"

But even as he spoke, he sensed that this was merely a forlorn hope wrapped in adequate words. Old Man Cantrell was another who hoped to turn back the clock, and Old Man Cantrell would fail because time moved only forward. Yet he wanted this last hold on what there had been between himself and Cynthia, and the tension held in him until she said, "It's a good bargain, Dan. And . . . and I'll try."

She put her hand to the gate, and he wondered if he was to be permitted to kiss her good-night. That wouldn't be going back to the farthest yesterday as he'd just proposed, but he made the try, his arms enfolding her. She lifted her lips, and they were as cool as he'd remembered them, but the surrender had no sweetness in it. It was the kiss a dozen close friends

would have gotten afterwards if there'd been a wedding to day.

"Good night, Cyn," he said.

When he went back up the street to where he'd left his horse, Partridge moved out of the shadow of a building and stepped up into saddle at the same time. They wordlessly wheeled their mounts and picked their way along the street. When they were upon the prairie and the night had pocketed them, they lifted their mounts to a trot, but this jogging motion seemed to drive Dan's spine upward through his aching head. He reined down to a walk, and Partridge did likewise, and the communion of silence stayed between them until they were abreast of the prairie dog village and the stars were beginning to fade.

Partridge said then, "Ransome Price saw through it quick, didn't he? About you claiming to have fell at one spot while the gun was found at another."

Dan gave him a sharp glance. "And you know better, eh?"

"It was me found you in the jail, remember. By the cell door, Dan. I dragged you out as far as the office, then decided I'd better go get Doc Church.

Dan stiffened with sudden understanding. He'd been stupid, he decided angrily. He'd even forgotten how to think. Naturally Barney had known the truth! Known it all the time!

He said, "Thanks for keeping shut."

Partridge shrugged. "Nobody asked me any questions. They were all too excited. Except Price. He helped tote you to Doc's office. When you spilled your piece, all I had to do to back it was keep my mouth shut."

Here is a man loyal to his salt, and Dan said, "You've got the truth coming to you, Barney."

"I got nothing coming that you don't feel like shelling out."

"You know the Allison girl—the daughter of the fellow who took over Sam Digby's place?"

"I've seen her a time or two when I was riding fence," Partridge said. "Wild as a hawk."

Partridge had seen her, which was more than Wayne had, Dan reflected. Wayne

hadn't even known Allison had a daughter. But at least one man on the Hourglass hadn't been completely blind!

"She's the one who sprung Fanshawe out of jail," Dan said.

Partridge gave this silent consideration. Then: "You figger Abe Potter wouldn't be interested to know that?" he asked pointedly.

Dan said, "I know where I'll find Fanshawe. Somewhere around the Allison place. I'm taking that trail tomorrow. I want Fanshawe before the law lays hands him again. I want to wring the truth out of him. Maybe then I'll quit being the kind of magnet that attracts violence. If I'd talked up tonight, half the town would be riding toward Allison's right now."

Partridge said, "I savvy what you mean."

Did he? Dan wondered if he savvied himself. He'd told a pat story and Partridge had believed it because Partridge was like all the rest—he'd never doubt a Ballard. But Dan could have told the truth to Potter and Doc and Price and asked them to keep it from the rest of the town, and they would have.

He looked out across the night, looked to the north where the hills hemmed the horizon, looked and tried to penetrate the darkness and the distance, knowing that somewhere yonder Lew Fanshawe and April Allison rode stirrup to stirrup. He had lied for the girl, and he couldn't deny it. A man might be dishonest with Abe Potter, but he couldn't be dishonest with himself.

Tomorrow he'd take the trail

VII

IN MID-MORNING HE STOOD IN the ranch-yard, his horse saddled and ready to ride, and while he shaped up a cigarette and took his time at smoking it, he let his mind check the preparations he'd made, testing them for adequacy. He might have slept longer, he reasoned; the bed had been hard to leave, but habit had clamored louder than any alarm clock. He had donned range garb, helping himself indiscriminately to whatever was his or Wayne's; he had strapped the gun belt

around his middle, placed a pair of binoculars in the saddlebag, debated about toting a rifle and decided against it. The question of a pack horse had required the greatest consideration. He might be in the hills many days; he might finish out his search before the sun went down. He had decided to travel light. Charley had prepared food for the saddlebag and that would do him, that and the saddle blanket.

The horse stood in the shade of the cook-shack; already the day's heat had an accumulated intensity, and saddle leather would quickly grow too hot to touch. The crew, come home sometime during the night and up at the crack of dawn, was gone about its business; Barney Partridge was gone with the others. The ranch seemed to slumber; the clatter of dishes in the cook-shack was the only living thing; the horses stood listlessly in the corral, the dogs were sleeping somewhere. Dan carefully put out the cigarette, setting his heel upon it and grinding.

Wayne came across the yard, taking his time. He said, "Riding, kid"

"Just to look over the country."

"Back for supper?"

"Likely."

"You'll make it before midnight?"

Wayne insisted and looked to the north.

"Cantrell's deadline, eh?" Dan said. He'd completely forgotten it.

"If you're riding that direction, you could drop in at the Tomahawk."

"And speak for both of us?"

Wayne shrugged; it was a gesture of tired futility. "I'm sick of thinking about it. Whatever you want to tell the old man will be okay with me."

I'll make the decision, eh? Dan thought. And if it's against Cantrell and means war, then Barney Partridge will lead the Hourglass in the fighting. You're too sick for that, too, Wayne? Gramp was right. We talked of a better breed of cattle, but what this range needs is a better breed of men. Wayne, what's done this to you? The drought?

"I'm riding north," Dan admitted. "But I'll not be going to the Tomahawk, Wayne. Not for that, anyway. The day hasn't yet come when the Ballards ride to the Cantrells. Let the Tomahawk come to us for

the answer. I'll try to be back by midnight."

Wayne said, "I don't like your riding alone, Dan."

Dan said, "I guess I've been doing it for a long time, Wayne."

He stepped up into the saddle and lifted his hand in salute and sent the horse across the yard in a walk. He looked back once; Wayne was slowly heading toward the house. Someone called: "Dan!" but it wasn't Wayne. Dan raised his eyes; Gramp's head sprouted from the upstairs window of his room; the old man beckoned and Dan wheeled his horse and brought it to the shady side of the gallery and dropped the reins.

He came into the house; at first it seemed so cool here that it was reinvigorating just to be inside; before he'd ascended the stairs he knew this was only an illusion. When he stood framed in the open doorway of Gramp's room, the old man was in his chair, the blanket about his knees, the cane beside him. Dan wondered how Gramp could stand the blanket in this weather. He grinned and said, "Another caning, Gramp?"

"Not that you haven't got it coming," Gramp said testily. "What's this about your gun-fighting in the streets like some common rowdy?"

Now how had Gramp known that? He wasn't talking to Wayne these days. Then Dan remembered Barney Partridge.

"I was pushed, Gramp," he said. "I pushed back. I'm not proud of it."

The old man's face was uncompromising; he had bluffed his way through a thousand poker games in his time, had Gramp. He said, "Fanshawe was on the porch of the Rialto. You backed across the street to the far board walk. When it was over, they toted Fanshawe to jail, and Doc Church came there and put a patch on his shoulder. You didn't do much more than break his skin and shock him. At that distance you should have drilled him plumb center. You're a hell of a tribute to my teaching, Dan!"

"I tilted my gun at the last moment. I didn't want him dead."

A storm gathered in Gramp's eyes. "Have you no brains at all? You humbled

a man like him but you left him alive. Don't you savvy that he'll have no rest till he sees you in his gunsight? You had your chance to finish him and you played the fool!"

Dan's lips drew tight and he said, "When I leave a dead man behind me I want to feel in my bones that he deserved to die."

The gathering fury faded from Gramp's eyes; his glance softened and his voice softened. "I could only teach you how to handle a gun," he said. "The rest you had to learn for yourself. But some have to notch their guns and have a parade of dead men between them and their sleep before they learn that there's a place for mercy, even in a gun-fighter's code."

His eyes turned bleak again. "You were riding north when I called you back. On your way to knuckle under to the Cantrells?"

"To hell with you, Gramp," Dan said softly.

The old man grinned, but only briefly. "Your wedding's postponed. Decided not to marry her after all?"

"I'll marry her when this trouble is over."

"Bah!" Gramp said and scowled. "If you loved her you'd have picked her up in your arms and toted her back to the church, if there wasn't any other way of getting her there. I built too much hope on what happened between you and Fanshawe. You still ain't alive, Dan. It's like you said, you got pushed and you pushed back. A coyote would show that kind of guts. Nothing's changed."

"I wonder," Dan said.

"Git on your way," Gramp said brusquely. "Leave an old man to his miseries. What good's thinking if you can only think for a fellow like Lew Fanshawe"

"I found one of those three things you mentioned, Gramp," Dan said. "I found a cause."

"Bah!" Gramp said again. "Would you know one if it bit you? Git on your way."

The one step still creaked when Dan came downstairs; it had creaked last night when he'd come in so late; Gramp had stirred in his room. Wayne was some-

where in the house when Dan reached the lower floor; he could hear Wayne prowling about. He went wordlessly to the gallery, climbed the railing and dropped into the saddle, and he didn't look behind him this time as he headed out of the yard.

TO THE NORTH the prairie was the same unbroken expanse of sage such as lay between Ballardton and the Hourglass except that the land had a more noticeable tilt to it; coulees and ridges dipped and rose to form a barrier for him as the miles fell behind. The heat was a steady hammer; Dan's shirt grew sticky between the shoulder blades and his sweat became a stench in his nostrils. He was surprised to find that he was not as stiff as he'd expected to be. He let the horse choose its own gait; he rode loose in the saddle, sparing himself, and even-balanced, sparing the mount. He kept his sombrero brim low enough to shade his eyes; the reflection of sunlight upon the metal trimmings of the bridle was blinding when it struck him. He rode slowly, sometimes not even thinking; he liked this aloneness.

Sometimes he dozed.

In the early afternoon he came to Ballard Springs; he had seen the sunlight reflecting from the barbed wire across the last long miles; drawing closer, he'd made out the movement of cattle around that wire, and the figure of a man. It was an Hourglass rider; Dan recognized him as he rode up. He was called Pete and if he had a last name to go with it he had kept it to himself. He was one of the older hands and he greeted Dan with no show of surprise and only the shadow of a grin to indicate any appreciation for company on a long and lonely vigil.

"I handle the gate," he said, indicating the fence with a jerk of his thumb. "We water so many a day—share and share alike. But I reckon you know that."

The cattle gathered around the fence wore the Hourglass brand. They bawled piteously, steadily, smelling the water and thirsting for it, and a man had to raise his voice above their discordance. Pete said, "Let 'em in and they'd bloat them-

selves; haze 'em away and they only drift back. It's plain hell, ain't it?"

Dan said, "It's plain hell."

He looked at the water bubbling up out of the ground; the spring seemed smaller than he'd remembered it; around the edges was caked earth, mud dried hard in the sun and dented by many hoofprints. He dismounted and crawled through the wire and stretched himself prone and sucked in the water; it had a good, clean taste; there'd been no water like this in the East. He let his horse through the gate, loosened the cinch, let the animal drink a little, pulled it back from the water with an effort, then let it drink a little more. He came through the fence again and mounted; he sat his saddle looking upon the water, looking upon the miracle of it. Five of these with the proper piping, and this range would be a garden!

He said, "Got to be riding. So long, Pete."

Beyond the springs the country lifted out of its flatness; now the foothills of the Rimfires spread before him and an occasional tree stood stark and lonely. The sun grew pitiless; heat ran its shimmering waves over the land; and a jack rabbit, bounding from a sage clump and jumping away, seemed to be disembodied, floating in the haze, losing itself to Dan's sight. He got his gun out when he saw the rabbit; he had the gun tilted when he thought better of the act and restored the weapon to its holster. He thought: *You and Fanshawe . . . you and Fanshawe, Jack . . .* but still there was no real regret in him.

He became aware of hunger and ate, never leaving the saddle. The way lifted ever upward; he found himself upon a promontory and rested his horse here; below him the range spread to the eye's limit; he could see Ballardton, a fairy town, seemingly suspended in the distance; nearer was the Hourglass—he could pick out each building and put a name to it—and nearer yet the sunlight caught the glint of Ballard Springs and made it a bit of diamond in the drab, burned setting. He sought and identified the Circle-Bar, the Hash-knife and the Wagon Wheel; all three spreads lay to the west of the Hourglass.

Behind him the hills reared; they had promised coolness from the distance, but there was no coolness.

He remembered Gramp Ballard; Gramp had first found his way to the range here at its north end; he had sought a pass through the Rimfires and spilled a few thousand longhorns down into the lush graze. He tried seeing this land as Gramp had seen it that long-gone day; he erased the town and the ranches from the picture and gave a greenness to the prairie in his mind's eye, and he was Gramp, sitting a saddle and looking upon trail's end.

Gramp had been alone, and here was what he'd been seeking. At first there'd been only Gramp, and then the Cantrells had come and holed up in the hills. Was that what made a Ballard a Ballard—being first? But he knew there was more to it than that, and more to it than owning the springs and having all the neighbors beholden. He knew that leadership had been made of something that bore no name, something that a man was born to or never achieved, something that could be dying; and he knew now why Gramp sat in his chair from day to day brooding and bedded each night with bitterness.

He wheeled the horse and rode on; it was not until he was climbing again that he sensed that he was running from the thoughts he'd had on the promontory. Presently he came out upon the rim of a gorge and looked down upon the Purgatory, that most useless of rivers. The high hills yonder gave birth to the Purgatory, sired among the peaks and lunging downward, wild and tumultuous. Across the span of the ages it had cut itself a deep canyon which narrowed to a long, impassable gorge at this point, and here the rapids thundered eternally. As a boy Dan had heard that tumult; it had held a sinister note; it was a giant running rampant down a mountainside. Now it spoke of other things, of wasted water, of what might have been a solution to all problems, a solution that was ever-present but just out of reach. Though the canyon widened below, it remained always a scar across the length of the range; there were very few places where its walls were not too precipitous to allow the watering of

cattle. Far to the south, on another range, the Purgatory gave life to a thirsty land. Here it was nothing—nothing but a clamor and a defeat.

RIDING ALONG the rim, Dan dismounted and walked out upon an overhanging rock which thrust outward like a thumb over the edge of the near wall. A hundred feet down lay a deep pool, just below the brawling, white-capped stretch of rapids through the upper canyon. Dan stretched himself out upon the rock; the heat of it bit through his shirt and made him wince. He looked downward; the Purgatory was shallower than he'd ever remembered it; he could see ledges of rock below that had been submerged in other seasons. And he saw the man who worked his way along the ledges.

At first Dan knew stark terror. Was the fool trying to kill himself? He could think of no reason in the name of sanity why a man should have descended to the bottom of the gorge. Yonder, flat against the face of the near wall, he saw the means by which the descent had been made—a knotted rope anchored to a stunted tree that grew on the lip of the gorge. He peered again at the man; there was no identifying him. He remembered the binoculars; he went back to the horse and got the glasses from the saddlebag and stretched himself out again and had a look. Now the man leaped at his vision; he was tall and thin and angular, but oddly it was the criss-crossing suspenders that identified him to Dan, for the man was stooped, feeling his way along the ledge with his back to Dan. He was Clayton Allison. Now what was Allison doing on Hourglass land, Dan wondered. And why had he worked his way down there?

He tried adjusting the glasses for better vision. He worked at them and at last got Allison into clear focus. The man had straightened up; he stood peering about, and he was holding a torpedo-shaped instrument that was attached on the end of a line, an instrument that appeared to be about two feet long. He edged around a bend in the ledge and was momentarily lost to sight. When he showed himself again he had managed to clamber

down to the water's edge. From above it looked as though the water lapped hard against the canyon's walls; it was obvious now that this was not so, at least in this dry year with the river down. The man vanished around another turn.

Pulling himself to a stand and backing from the rim, Dan restored the binoculars to the saddlebag and mounted. There was something about that torpedo-shaped instrument that tugged at his memory, but he had ridden a half mile before the recollection blossomed into fullness. He remembered college and a man he'd roomed with his second year, and a friend of his roommate, a red-headed fellow. That red head had been an engineering student. And he'd had one of those instruments. Dan had examined the thing once and asked what it was. A current meter, used in making hydrographic surveys.

The horse balked; it had grown increasingly skittish ever since they'd started paralleling the gorge's rim. Dan fought its fractiousness absently, his hand at the task, his mind elsewhere.

VIII

NOW THE NORTH LINE OF THE Hourglass was behind him and he was toiling up Tomahawk Pass. Once this had been a game trail, no more than that; usage and crude engineering had widened it to a wagon road, but it was a poor sort of road, for the passage of many cattle had crumbled the ruts. The Cantrells spilled their beef down this ancient highway every fall to trail them south to the shipping pens at Ballardton; and even at this season there were the signs of recent movement. Cattle fetched down to Ballard Springs to share the water with the others, Dan decided. The pass was a giant stairway with levels and steep pitches and not as many switchbacks as a man might expect. It was an avenue open to all; this stretch of it was on Sam Digby's holdings; above lay the Tomahawk ranch. Now Clayton Allison owned the land upon which Dan rode.

Allison, who was at the bottom of Purgatory Gorge with a current meter in his hands.

Timber stood thick to the left of the trail; lodgepole pine built a solid barrier that would permit only of erratic passage. Dan had looked to the trees with longing the last miles; they kept the sun from him now, but the heat seemed more intensified; the woods had a tinder-dry smell to them and a tinder-dry look to them. It was a wonder there hadn't been forest fires this season. He began being very careful about his smoking and to space his cigarettes further apart. The tobacco was dry and tasteless today; it gave him little comfort. Needles paved the trail, but this did not make the slippery, spongy underfooting he remembered. Once, dismounting, he scooped up a handful of them and felt their brittleness and shook his head. Within an hour he crossed two creek beds, one bone dry, the other with a mere thread of water.

He left the trail a few miles above the gorge, where a road had been cleared through the timber; he knew this road; it had cost Sam Digby many weeks of labor. Back in here was the old Digby Place, and the timber gave way to small meadows and grassy coulees where beef could thrive. Digby had never been a large operator; he had made a poor man's living and seemingly been satisfied with it, and it had been something of a surprise when he'd sold out to Allison. Ransome Price would likely know the ins and outs of that; Price had handled the sale—or so Wayne had once written.

The buildings that lay ahead were still screened from the eye, but Dan knew that any moment now he would burst upon them. He had become a man-hunter since leaving the pass trail, yet he rode with no attempt at silence; he rode as a man would ride who is making a call upon a neighbor. That was why he'd decided against the rifle. He had based this trip upon a theory that April Allison would have brought Lew Fanshawe to the hills, but he had not forgotten the contemptuous references Clayton Allison had made concerning his daughter the night before. They were enemies, those two, father and daughter, and April wouldn't dare bring Fanshawe to the place. But she would hide him out somewhere near here; she would

need food for him and perhaps medicine—there was that bullet wound—and thus the old Digby place would be the hub from which any real search should be made.

And Clayton Allison was away from the ranch. Here was the perfect time for April to be stealing food for the man she was hiding.

So thinking, Dan rode into a stump-mottled clearing and reined up before a sagging, peeled-pole fence that enclosed a log house sprawled aimlessly in the center of the yard. Scattered about were various outhouses, all of them made of logs, all of them looking in need of repairs. Sam Digby had had a greater pride in appearance than the new owner. A few chickens scratched disconsolately in the clearing; flies droned about; the lowering sun beat down.

Dan dismounted and let the reins drop. He came through an opening in the fence and crossed the sagging porch of the house and rapped smartly upon the door. The droning silence held. He had expected no answer; he had expected instead a soft scurrying, a furtive betrayal if April were alone inside. Frowning, he moved along the porch until he stood before a window. When he first tried peering he could see nothing; he ventured nearer and finally leaned toward the glass, placing his hands to the sides of his face and shielding his eyes. The living room into which he looked still held Sam Digby's homemade furniture; it had gone with the place. He came down off the porch and led his horse into the yard to the pump; he worked the creaky mechanism until the trough was a few inches full. He let the mount drink, then put his mouth under the pump and slaked his own thirst.

Pulling the horse away from the trough, he looped the reins around the top bar of the fence. He walked toward the barn; its door was open, and he strode into the dark interior and paused here; he had the feeling of being watched; it grew upon him until his shoulder blades tingled. A ladder led to a loft. Would she have dared to bring Fanshawe here? He climbed the ladder as silently as he could, but it creaked beneath his weight. He poked his head carefully through the opening; the loft

was empty, it would be another week or two before haying began. He came back down the ladder and stepped out of the barn.

AROUND THIS PLACE the timber pressed; across the brassy vault of sky overhead a hawk wheeled. A man out there with a rifle, or even a six-shooter, could pick him off like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery, he realized. He grew suddenly sick of this furtive gum-shoeing; he crossed back to the house boldly and put his hand to the door. It gave to his touch and he shouldered inside and closed the door behind him.

The room held a musty, stifling hotness. There was a centering table, a few crude chairs, some strips of faded carpet upon the bare boards of the floor. A map lay spread upon the table, its corners held down by rocks. Upon one wall a fly-specked calendar three years old was tacked. A few books stood upon a shelf on another wall. For a long moment Dan stood listening; he said, "Hello——?" cautiously, and got no answer. He crossed the room; a faded curtain hung in a doorway, and he swept this aside. Beyond was a bedroom that had been Sam Digby's. Now it was April's, Dan judged; the wall was covered with pictures clipped from magazines and pinned there. He looked at these; three were of stage actors of international fame; the rest were city scenes—carriages on Broadway, Delmonico's restaurant, women promenading in fashionable clothes.

Backing from the bedroom, he looked into the kitchen. He saw a rusty range that had been Digby's, a table, cupboards. Beyond the kitchen was a lean-to, also screened by a curtain. In the lean-to was a cot with a tangle of blankets upon it; whoever slept here had not made his bed. Beside the cot was a small stand, and upon it a book lay open. Dan had a look at the book. It dealt with hydraulic engineering. This, then, was where Clayton Allison slept.

Dan came back into the living room and looked closer at the books upon the shelf; these, too, were engineering books. He bent over the map upon the table. It was

a topographical map of the upper range, showing Purgatory River and the gorge. Along the margin were notes made in a cramped precise fist, all of them coached in technical language that was so much gibberish to Dan.

He had his back to the door as he bent over the map. He didn't hear the door open. He only heard Clayton Allison say in that soft, modulated voice of his, "Raise your hands!"

He raised his hands before he turned around; he remembered that sensation of being watched, and he thought: *He knew I was in here. That's why he came cat-footing.* Allison stood loosely in the open doorway; he had a six-shooter in his hand, and his thin, bloodless lips were drawn in a straight line, and his eyes were bleak and cold. Over his left arm he had a lariat coiled. He said, "Turn around again and put your hands behind your back, your wrists together."

Dan said hotly, "Now see here——!"

"*Turn around!*" Allison snapped. Do you think anybody would hold me to account for shooting down a man I caught breaking into my own house?"

Dan obeyed; he felt a loop fitted over his wrists and drawn tight; he felt that rope wrapped again and again. Allison tripped him then, throwing his shoulder against Dan at the same time. Dan went down to the floor and Allison came down upon him, his knee in the small of Dan's back. Dan flailed his legs, not caring now about Allison's gun, but the rope went around his ankles and stopped his wild threshing, and in a moment he was hog-tied. Allison lifted the gun from Dan's holster and laid it carefully upon the table. Dan rolled over on his side and glared at the man. Allison looked at him remotely, neither interested nor disinterested; the man seated himself upon the nearest chair and laid his gun on the table beside Dan's. He said, "Well, Ballard——?"

The man must have been just about finished with his business in the gorge, Dan concluded. Even so, how had he got back here so quickly? But a man familiar with the lie of the land would have his own short-cuts. Obviously Allison had approached this place from a different di-

rection and seen him from the timber and bided his time, waiting to see what Dan was doing.

Dan said, "You're new to this country, I know. You don't jump a man for walking into your place. That's why doors are left unlocked on the range."

Allison said, "Suppose you tell me what brought you here."

"April," Dan said.

Allison gave this full consideration, his aristocratic face hardening with the run of his thoughts. "Maybe I've got two reasons for shooting you," he said.

"You were looking for her last night. I might have come to find out if you'd found her. A lost girl could be any man's worry."

Allison's lip curled. "That's a poor bluff, Ballard."

Anger needled Dan. "And you're a poor sort of father, Allison."

"So?" Allison said. "And what would you know about it, Ballard?" He pulled himself from the chair and crossed to the bookshelf and took down one of the engineering books. From its pages he shook a photograph; he fetched this across the room and knelt and held it a few inches before Dan's nose. It was the picture of a woman's face; it might have been April Allison's except that this woman's hair was piled high and there was a petulance about her mouth; it was the mouth of a woman spoiled by a knowledge of her own beauty.

Allison said, "That's her mother. The face of an angel and the heart of a devil. Have you ever considered woman and her place in the world, Ballard? Behind any successful man you'll find a woman—remember Abraham Lincoln's statement about his mother? But what all the mealy-mouthed philosophers have overlooked is that women are back of all evil, too. Have you ever heard any orator point out that for every man who's failed there's been a woman who contributed to his failure?"

Dan said, "She was your wife?"

"I told you last night," Allison said, "that my daughter's way with men was an inherited trait. How would you like it, Ballard, if a woman ruined your life and

you counted her dead and then saw her born all over again?"

THERE WAS A streak of madness in him. That was it! He was insane on this one subject; his wife had put this kink in him, so he hated the daughter. Dan had found the core of Allison's queer-ness, and there was no comfort in it, no reality to the moment. This was like something from a bad dream, lying here upon the floor, drenched with his own sweat and trussed up like a hog while a man made mad talk. Allison restored the picture to the book and said then, as though he'd aroused himself from a reverie, "You were away for schooling, Ballard. Just what did you study?"

"What does it matter?" Dan countered.

"It matters a very great deal."

"A lot of things," Dan said.

"Engineering?"

"None of that."

"I was once an engineer," Allison said. "But you've probably guessed as much since you were looking at the map when I opened the door. It's only a hobby now. I'm a gentleman rancher by choice. You've seen my place. There's no use in my telling you that I'm a very inept rancher."

Dan understood then. Here was a man with a secret, a deadly, dangerous secret. Allison didn't know that Dan had seen him at the bottom of the gorge, but he did know that Dan had seen the map. That was why he was worried whether Dan knew anything about engineering. And that was why Dan was tied up now. If Allison thought he knew too much, then Dan wasn't to ride away from here. Dan had known humiliation and anger in this brief encounter with Allison; now, for the first time, he tasted fear.

He said, "Look, Allison, I'm not some saddle-bum who broke into your place to steal. I knocked and no one replied. Maybe I had no business coming inside. But you had no business jumping me with a gun. Loosen these ropes and we'll call it quits."

Allison lifted his own gun from the table. For a long moment he stood looking down upon Dan; he said nothing and there was no guessing the run of his thoughts.

He turned toward the door, and he looked back then, a genuine regret in those intelligent eyes. He said, "What the devil did you have to come snooping for, Ballard? Now I've got a devil of a choice to make!"

Dan said, "Think twice, man! Don't you suppose I'll be missed?" Strong in him was the feeling that he was arguing for his life. "Do you want all the Hour-glass riders swarming up here?"

"I'll be back," Allison said and left the house, closing the door after him.

Dan heard the man's boots beat across the yard; he thought he heard the jingle of a bit chain, but he couldn't be sure. Had Allison left a horse in the timber? The man had gone riding—but where? And why? When it came down to it, Allison had two choices—to free Dan or to kill him. Why hadn't he done one or the other?"

Dan lay waiting an interminable time, not moving, just listening. He became conscious of a clock ticking; it was in April's bedroom, he guessed, though he couldn't remember seeing it when he'd looked in. He struggled with the ropes; it was a waste of effort that brought the sweat down into his eyes. He tried rolling; to do so he had to press his face against the faded carpeting; it smelled of ancient dust, and he almost choked. He could maneuver himself across the room if he wanted to put forth the effort, but what was to be gained by it? He lay still, his heart pounding, and had a look around, trying to find somewhere in the room an article that might be used to free him. There was nothing.

He thought of the kitchen. Surely there'd be a butcher knife out there, and perhaps he could get his hands on it. But it would take a lot of struggling to reach the kitchen. With his heels drawn up almost to his wrists, there was no way of coming to a stand and hobbling along. The westering sun laid a patch of light through the window and upon the floor; he watched this patch crawl and listened to the clock tick and tried to gauge the passage of time. He tired of this and decided to make a try for the kitchen; at least it would give him something to do.

There was enough slack in the rope be-

tween his heels and his wrists to allow him to draw his knees up a little farther. He got on his knees and started inching along on them, but it was slow work, and when he tried too hard, he threw himself off balance and fell sideways to the floor. He was angry for a while, and he voiced his anger until he realized the childishness of this. He looked again at the patch of light and decided that Allison had been gone an hour. It had seemed like three. He heard the tread of footsteps upon the porch then, and panic clutched at his throat. He heard the hand at the door, and he knew that in a moment the door would open.

He thought: *He's made up his mind now. One way or the other!* And he thought, too, that this would be a mighty poor way to die, trussed and helpless and not able to lift a hand in his own defense.

IX

RANSOME PRICE HAD breakfasted earlier than usual that morning, and that was significant, for he was a man of meticulous habits. Of the three restaurants in Ballardton he favored the Chinaman's; he had at one time and another surreptitiously inspected the kitchens of all three and the Chinaman's was the cleanest. Also, the Chinaman never badgered him with small and useless talk while he ate; in this establishment he could occupy a solitary table unmolested while the talk of the other patrons went on around him. He'd long ago learned that the man who listens grows wiser than the man who talks.

This morning he took his time with his food; men greeted him as they came through the doorway; two or three crossed to his table and passed the time of day. Price commanded a respect in Ballardton; he had nursed that respect and carefully reared it across the years. It was a stock in trade, worth more to him than admiration or the camaraderie that some men commanded. Price had never consciously cared whether people truly liked him or not.

Breakfast finished, he came to the board-

walk. In this golden hour the town lay mellow, some of its harshness softened by the first light; yonder, on the prairie, a meadow lark sang until its music was lost in the creaking of a pump. Price sighed, thinking that the day promised to be hot again, for there was a ride he had to make. He smiled, remembering that he wanted it to be hot at the end of that ride. He had been an opportunist all of his days, and this drought was the greatest opportunity he had known. One cloud in the west might spoil everything.

He began pacing the street, as was his custom. He always took a turn up one side and down the other each morning. "Walking off my breakfast," he'd say to anybody who was curious. But this was in reality his way of keeping his fingers on the town's pulse. He made a fine figure as he strode along, a tall man in black, his suit conservatively cut, the heavy gold watch chain the only sign of opulence about him. He was entirely conscious of how he looked against the setting of Ballardton; he had chosen his garb with care, and the watch chain had been a studied afterthought. These things, too, were part of his stock in trade.

Abe Potter lounged before the open doorway of the blacksmith shop. To him Price said, "Good morning, Potter. A bad night last night."

Potter instinctively raised a plump hand to his head. "A helluva night," he agreed. "Any news of the fugitives?"

"Those that rode out from town rode back," Potter said. "They cut no sign. But most of 'em were so drunk they couldn't have seen a horse track if they'd been drinking out of it. I sent a wire to the county seat about the matter, but a whale of a lot of good it will do. After all, Fanshawe was only in for disturbing the peace. County law will think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Fanshawe's probably heading over the Rimfires," Price said. "This range has seen the last of him."

"I hope so," Potter sighed.

The street, so crowded yesterday, was almost deserted this morning. A few horses stood languidly at hitchrails, a few men moved aimlessly along the board

walks, their boots beating an echoing cadence in the early hush. Price moved on, but he did not cross over when he came abreast of the last of the business establishments; instead he walked onward to where the buildings thinned out, coming in due course to the cottage of Doc Church. Price looked upon this small, white building with an approving eye, and he put his hand to the gate and passed beneath the giant cottonwood and climbed to the porch and rapped upon the door. Getting no answer, he skirted the house and came to the yard behind it and said, "Good morning, Cynthia," taking off his hat and bowing ever so slightly.

The Churches had a garden back here, made possible by diligent hauling of water from the pump, but it was a sorry sort of garden this season. There were some blighted-looking potato plants, a row or two of corn, withered and scrawny, some peas and beans. Cynthia was picking peas; she wore a gingham dress and a sun-bonnet to match it; she straightened herself, holding the peas in her apron, and her smile was both warm and wan as she recognized the man.

She said, "Good morning, Ransome," then sighed. "It's going to be another hot one."

He said, "I knocked at the front door."

"Dad's still sleeping. I'm afraid yesterday was a little trying for him."

"And for you," he said, putting the proper amount of sympathy into his voice.

She sighed again. "I'm probably not the first bride who was left waiting at the church; even in Ballardton."

"Ballard rode out last night?" The question went deeper than the words in which it was couched; he was sure she would sense the depth of it.

"We had a talk," she said. "There'll be no wedding, at least not for a long while. Did he seem different to you, Ransome? Changed, in a hard sort of way?"

He made no answer to these questions; he stood looking at her for a long moment, weighing the possibilities of the moment; he stood there with his hat in his hand. He had a high crown of black hair that curled at the temples, and there was just a hint of gray in it. The sun had never given him

the leathery hue it gave others, nor had it squinted his eyes. He knew how he must look to her, something civilized in a savage land, a man of means and promise. He said then, "I would never have spoken of this, Cynthia, while you were pledged to him, but I think you've known how I feel about you."

She dropped her eyes, sudden confusion bringing a rush of color to her cheeks. "Yes, Ransome, I've known," she said.

HE LOOKED about him; a hedge separated this yard from the next, cutting off the view. They were alone, and he could have stepped forward and put his arms around her. He debated for a moment, wondering if he should, and he decided against it. There was a day for making that ride he had to make, and this was the day. There would be a day for taking her in his arms, but that day hadn't yet come. He said, "I don't expect an answer now, Cynthia. You haven't even been free to think about such a thing. I'll wait. In the meantime, please keep remembering me as your friend, at least. Whenever you need me, call on me. It's only you that's made this town worth staying in."

He left her then, but he paused at the corner of the house and looked back and smiled, making of the smile a warm and intimate thing. She smiled back, and in her smile was half-a-promise. His stride was longer and springier as he headed back toward the busier part of Ballardton.

Before his land and loan office, he fished a key from his pocket and let himself into the little frame building. To the front of this building was his office, a cubicle furnished with a desk and chair and files and a small iron safe; giving from this room was a door leading to his living quarters. He used this office only for the transacting of paper business; most of the work of buying and selling land was done out on the range. He took his mail from the inner pocket of his coat and placed the mail on his desk; he had picked it up at the post office on his way to breakfast and scanned it while eating. He had a daily calendar on his desk; he picked this up and tore off a sheet and

looked at the new date, staring at it for a long time. *This is it!* he thought, and his eyes showed his satisfaction.

He stripped off his coat, and from a desk drawer he lifted a shoulder holster and belt with a late model Colt's forty-five. He strapped the weapon under his left armpit and donned the coat again and picked the *BACK SOON* sign from the top of the desk. When he'd let himself out of the office and locked the door, he hung this sign upon the handle. He lifted his hat to Lily Greer, the spinsterish proprietor of the millinery, who was sweeping the board walk before her establishment, and he headed up the street to the livery stable which lay between here and the jail.

He had a saddler of his own but no place to stable the mount so he kept it at the livery. It was a buckskin gelding, a big, dependable horse that had carried him countless miles. He had the hostler do the saddling; a man marked himself by whether he did his own menial tasks or left them for the hands of others. He climbed into the saddle and took the alley behind the Chinaman's and stopped and picked three empty tin cans from the top of the Chinaman's trash barrel and stowed these in the saddlebag.

He followed the wagon road out of Ballardton to the north; the sun was making itself felt before the first sage-dotted miles were behind him; he let the horse choose its own pace and thus kept to a steady, mile-eating gait. He stripped off his coat before noon and tied it behind the saddle; he left the road near the prairie-dog village and cut diagonally across country to where a coulee grooved the terrain. Choke-cherry bushes grew here; in other years there'd been a creek which was only a dry scar of gravel today.

He took the three empty cans from the saddlebag and lined them up upon the ground at the coulee's bottom after dismounting and leading his horse down here. He paced away from the cans, counting his steps. At a distance which satisfied him, he let his arms hang slackly, then raised his right hand, snatched at the gun, spun on his heel with the same motion, and fired. He sent three shots in such

quick succession that they might have been one; the sound blended and was a steady roll, and the cans leaped into the air. He walked back to them and had a look, using his thumb to measure the distance from the top of each can to the bullet hole. He nodded, smiling a grim smile. He lined up the cans again, turning them so that an unblemished surface was exposed, and repeated his performance.

He spent over an hour at this, not always shooting but sometimes sitting upon a large rock that had once perched upon the bank of the creek, sitting there and staring at the cans or just drawing the gun and sighting it without firing. He had practiced in this manner on every solitary ride he had ever taken; he had gained a skill that would have amazed Ballardton's citizenry. This was his secret; and this was his insurance in a land that had presumed its violent days were behind it. To the livery stable man who had once glimpsed the gun beneath Price's armpit and remarked on it, Price had said, "I carry it in case I run across a rattlesnake." He had smiled then and added, "Do you suppose I could hit one if I were standing over it?"

When he mounted and rode out of the coulee, the cans were shapeless and beyond any further use for his purpose, and the supply of bullets he carried in the saddlebag was half depleted.

THE SUN stood almost at zenith; the land had taken to undulating and there was no breath of air, and he would have given five dollars for a drink of water. He thought about the heat; it was insidious, it was something a man talked about in the morning, just as he might talk about the meal he would eat when he grew hungry, but not really caring about it, not having more than a remote interest. But, like the hunger, the heat grew on a man with the passing hours, it built itself slowly into something almost tangible, something ever present, something clamoring and pitiless.

In early afternoon he reached the caprock rim and paused here, putting on his coat, and then he topped the rim and came down the shale-mottled slant to the Hour-

glass buildings. The dogs came charging to greet him, their sharp barking bringing Wayne to the gallery. An edginess gripped Wayne; Price saw this instantly. Wayne said, "Oh, it's you," both relieved and disappointed. Then: "Light and rest your saddle. Had dinner?"

"How's a man to work up an appetite in this heat?" Price said as he stepped down. He led the horse to the watering trough and was careful that the mount didn't drink too long. Price himself had a drink from the pump and walked back to the gallery. "Come inside," Wayne said. "It's a little cooler."

They stepped into the big room with the cavernous fireplace; Wayne waved his visitor to one of the chairs and seated himself facing Price. There was an open curiosity in Wayne; he had played the host but all the while he'd been wondering what fetched Price. Seeing this, Price wasted no time with prelude. He said, "I'm out here to ask if you folks would consider selling the Hourglass?"

Wayne said, "Who the devil would buy it?"

"I thought you'd be surprised," Price said. "Everybody wants to sell this season, but nobody wants to buy. Here's a stroke of luck for you. I've had correspondence with a group of Eastern investors. They were looking for a big place with certain qualifications, and the Hourglass fits to a T. They plan on developing a sort of summer resort place for Eastern visitors who'll be paying guests. They want prairie where the guests can go horseback riding. They want hills nearby where they can hunt and fish. And here's the funniest thing of all: They were enraptured over my description of Purgatory River. It's the most useless river in creation by anybody's standards—but to them it's scenic. Can you imagine that?"

"How much will they offer?"

"I suggested one hundred thousand dollars. They didn't seem to think it unreasonable."

"A hundred thousand! Good heavens, man, the Hourglass is worth three times that much!"

"In a good year, yes," Price admitted. "But what's the drought doing to this

range? And you're counting the cattle; my buyers would be interested only in the land. Besides, there's more to think about than price, if you consider selling."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Wayne said.

Price spread his hands in a patient gesture. "Look, Ballard, there's no use of you and I beating around the bush. It's common knowledge that Old Man Cantrell wants a lease on Ballard Springs. It's likewise known that you've got to give him an answer by midnight tonight. The whole range is hanging on your answer. Most of the small outfits are confident that you'll tell him to go chase his tail and that the water will still be available to everyone. But if you buck him, Cantrell isn't going to take it lying down. You're in for trouble. Here's one way out of it. You could sell to my people."

In Wayne now was the birth of a hope; it showed in his eyes, and Ransome Price read the sign, and the moment ran on into a lengthy silence that built a singing tension. Then Wayne's shoulders sagged, and the old weariness rode him again, and he said, "I'll have to talk to Dan. He's gone riding today. He's got something to say about this."

"And I've got something to say, too!" Gramp Ballard spoke from the doorway.

He stood there, a lean, stooped figure, his weight upon his cane. How he'd negotiated the stairs would be forever a mystery; how long he'd stood listening was something that could only be guessed at. A high anger was in him, and he said, "A hundred thousand dollars, eh! A hundred thousand for the sweat and blood and dreams of three generations of my family! A hundred thousand dollars and the selling out of our neighbors. That's what you're offering, Price!"

Price came to his feet, donning respect, donning patience. "I'm acting only as an agent for people with a legitimate proposition, sir. Most ranchers in the section are anxious to sell. Their places don't meet the requirements. I thought I was doing this family a favor."

"A favor!" Gramp snorted. "When did your money-grabbing breed ever do anybody a favor? You let good men settle

the land and leave their scalps to dry in Indian lodges and their bones to bleach on the prairies, and your kind came along when the land was settled and the towns built and fastened onto them like leeches and tried sucking them dry. A parasite is the kindest word I can think of to tag onto you! Now get off Hourglass land and take your stinking proposition with you!"

"Gramp!" Wayne cried aghast.

PRICE still stood, the red creeping up from his collar line, but he looked at Wayne and managed a smile. And thus Price at the moment was a man insulted but a man with too much dignity to him to answer the insult in kind; he played this role to perfection. He said, "It seems I'm not wanted here. Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Gramp had turned and limped out of sight. That one step creaked beneath his weight as he negotiated the stairs again. Price came out upon the gallery, Wayne at his elbow. Wayne said awkwardly, "I don't know what to say. He's an old man, and he's been ailing. We have to put up with his abuse every day. But I didn't think——"

Price smiled and laid a hand upon Wayne's shoulder. "Never mind, Ballard. I understand." He crossed the yard to his horse, Wayne still trailing him. "The proposition's still open," Price said. "And it's still a way out for you. Talk it over with your brother when he comes home."

"Couldn't you stay for supper?" Wayne said helplessly.

"Thanks, no. But I do appreciate the invitation. I don't hold this against you, Ballard. Nor against him, really. As you say, he's an old man and ailing."

Price offered his hand; Wayne took it, and Price stepped up to saddle. From the top of the caprock rim he looked back and lifted his hand to Wayne, who still stood in the yard, the sun strong upon him. But once over the rim, the smile died on Price's lips and a cold fury shook him and the horse felt his spurs. He let that anger ride with him for a mile; through his mind ran a steady stream of silent profanity, and then he recovered himself and hauled

the horse down to a walk. He had learned patience long ago.

Yet he was still grim of lip when he rode into Ballardton at sundown; he gave no more than a grunt to the hostler's observation that the day had been a scorcher. He went to the Chinaman's and ate morosely and came up the street to his office in the gray of twilight. When he let himself into the building, he wished he'd remembered to pull the shades before departing; the little cubicle held all the piled-up heat of the day.

He was sitting at his desk, the lamp unlighted, doing nothing, when he heard the knock at the rear door. It was not a furtive knock, it was loud and insistent and compounded of many things, and a frenzy of impatience was one of them. Price crossed through his living quarters and opened the rear door and looked at the man who stood framed there; and surprise put a rigidity in Price and left him wordless for a moment.

Then: "Allison!" he said. "You fool, don't you realize it's not quite dark yet?"

Clayton Allison had the dust of hard riding upon him; it coated his clothes and made him look ghastly. But it was his face that would have held any man's eye. Upon it was the look of a man who had wrestled with the devil across a span of time and space and found no peace. He came into the room quickly and closed the door and put his back to it and fought for breath for a long moment.

Then he said, "I had to risk getting in here without waiting. Things have gone completely wrong, and there's hell to pay. Dan Ballard's up at my place, hogtied upon the floor. I caught him in my house looking at that damn' map. I can't be sure, but I'm guessing that he knows everything."

"Hell!" Price ejaculated and fell back a step, and his thought was that this day, the one that had been the most promising of days had turned sour in every respect.

X

TO DAN BALLARD IT SEEMED to take forever for the door of the Digby place to open; he had rolled himself

over at the first fall of footsteps upon the porch, and he lay now looking at the door. It swung inward and she stood framed there; she made a small and frightened sound in her throat. She hadn't been expecting this, and he supposed she'd scream or faint. She came inside and swung the door shut and stood staring down at him; her eyes were wide and her breasts lifted and thrust hard at the plaid shirt she wore; these were the signs of her astonishment and excitement, these only.

He said, "Don't just stand there! Untie me, can't you."

She didn't seem to hear him. She said, "Dad did this!"

Incongruously he was thinking that she stood the test of daylight. Her skin was clear and flawless; her eyes darker than her father's. Her lips were slightly parted, her teeth small and white. She was that woman in the photograph, but there was this difference; she was unspoiled. He wondered if this was all she'd ever known, mountains and prairies and other ramshackle places like this. Why had Allison hidden her from the sight and knowledge of men, a child like her? But she was no child; he remembered Fanshawe.

She edged around the room, circling him, then, poised near the kitchen door, she suddenly darted from sight. He heard her rummaging out there; drawers clattered. He said in a quiet, patient voice, "Listen to me. Do you remember me from last night? Maybe you think I'm some sort of an official because I came into the jail. I'm Dan Ballard of the Hourglass. Yes, your father tied me up and left me. But it's a mistake. You'll be doing him a favor if you free me. Can't you understand that?"

Again he felt as though he were arguing for his life; the thought, persisting, crept into his voice, putting a strained quality into his pleadings. He thought of threats when his coaxing drew neither word nor action out of her; he decided against that. A girl with the nerve to spring Lew Fanshawe from the Ballardton jail wouldn't be intimidated by a man bound and helpless.

He said at last, angrily, "All right! Leave

me here! And if anything happens to me, the Hourglass will pull this place to the ground and hang your father to the highest tree in the Rimfires!"

She appeared in the kitchen doorway. She had a flour sack in her hand; it looked to be loaded with food; he could see the bulking outline of canned goods. She crossed the room quickly, placed the flour sack on the floor near the door and knelt and began fumbling at the knots holding his wrists. Relief turned him weak, but only for a moment. "Get a knife from the kitchen," he said.

She paid him no heed, her fingers still working at the knots. He felt them loosen, and then, suddenly, she ceased her efforts, snatched up the flour sack opened the door and fled through it. He heard her boots beat against the porch but lost the sound in his wild threshing as he failed across the floor, struggling to finish the job she'd deserted. He shook his wrists free and tugged quickly at the knots binding his ankles, and all the while he thought: *She's smart—smarter than a whip!* She was on her way to take food to Fanshawe, and she'd guessed that Dan was after the man. This way she was giving Dan his chance and still making sure of her own getaway.

And he had to smile.

All this while he was working frantically; he freed himself and came to a teetering stand; restored circulation sent needles through him, but he was oblivious to the pain. Scooping his gun from the table, he wrenched open the door and thought he caught a glimpse of her plaid shirt in the timber across the clearing. She had come afoot, and she was leaving the same way. He looked for his horse; he had left it tied to the sagging, peeled pole, but the mount was gone. *Of course!* April's surprise at finding him in the house had been proof that his horse was no longer in the yard. He remembered thinking he'd heard the creak of a bit chain after Allison had left; he went running to the barn and found his horse there, standing in a stall, still saddled. He got into the kak and came out of the barn at a high lope, heading for the place in the timber where April had vanished.

of the upper slopes was bathed in gold,

The sun hung low, the pine-clad sweep and the day's heat had lost its hard impact. He went crashing into the timber, making no effort at stealth, and he found a game trail. He put the horse along it at that same hard run; he kept low in the saddle and held his right arm crooked before his face to ward off the lower branches. He glimpsed her again, around a turn of the trail; she was taking a backward look, her eyes frightened, and she was running. He overtook her, swung down from the saddle and made a grab for her and tripped. Falling, he clutched at one of her ankles and brought her down. Instantly she rolled over, trying to twist free, but he was swarming upon her, pinning her down with his weight. He got his arms around her, trying to pinion hers, and she ceased struggling then, as though the futility of pitting her strength against his had become apparent to her.

Thus there was this moment when she lay in his arms, her black hair fanned out upon the ground, her heart thundering against his, and then, because he wanted to, he kissed her.

There was no intent in this, no forethought; she had just become a woman and desirable, and a wantonness had swept over him and he had surrendered to it. Her lips were warm; he had known only Cynthia and he hadn't known that a woman's lips could be warm. They were warm and hungry, but that was only for an instant, and then she was fighting him, stark terror in her eyes. She got an arm free and he felt the rake of fingernails along his face. He drew back his head, then got to a stand, pulling her up with him. He locked her wrists behind her and said hoarsely, "You little devil! I'm not going to harm you!"

She was panting hard, her breasts rising and falling. "Let me go!"

"Only if you'll promise not to run," he said, but he released her.

SHE PICKED the flour sack from the ground where it had fallen; a can of beans had escaped and she picked this up, too, and restored it to the sack. Dan said, "That's for Fanshawe?"

She made no answer, and he said, "Look, you rode away with him last night. Nobody knows that for sure but me and a friend of mine who'll never tell. I could have put the law on your trail then if I'd wanted to. But I had nothing against you, or against Fanshawe either."

"Then why are you up here today?" she asked.

"To try to find him," he admitted. "But not for the reason you think. All I want is to talk to him—ask him a couple of questions. You could take me to him. Will you?"

She said, "He'll kill you!"

He grinned. "He tried that once. That's why he's got a sore shoulder. That bullet could have split his heart if I'd wanted it to. Can't you understand that I mean him no harm? Look at it this way—a great deal of trouble is shaping up on this range. Maybe if I could talk to Fanshawe, there wouldn't be any trouble. Take me to him, April!"

If she was surprised that he knew her name, she didn't show it. She stood a long, long moment in silence; she bit her lower lip and looked at him as though she were trying to inventory the things that didn't show. She owned her father's intelligence, he decided; and he wished now that he hadn't kissed her. He was remembering Cynthia and he was ashamed, but he knew, too, that the kiss was counting against him now. It had been no way to build trust.

She said at last, "Give me your gun, and you can come blindfolded. I promise I'll bring you back safe."

He almost laughed. What childish game of blindman's buff was this supposed to be? But he said very solemnly, "That sounds fair enough." He lifted his gun and handed it to her; she thrust it into the waistband of her Levis. He unknotted his neckerchief, and she took the bandanna and placed it over his eyes and knotted it at the back of his neck. She said, "Can you see?" At first that struck him as naive, and then, because he understood that she truly trusted him and that her question proved it, he turned humble. He said truthfully, "Only the light when I'm faced toward the sun."

She said, "Just a minute," he said he felt her move away. A moment later he could tell she was leading his horse along the trail toward him. She was busy for a moment—tying the flour sack to the saddle, he supposed—and then she took his hand and placed it upon the saddle horn, and he groped for the stirrup and swung up into the saddle. She said, "Will he carry double?" He said, "I don't know." She swung up behind him and reached around him for the reins. The horse flinched, and he wondered grimly if he'd have to fight the kinks out of him blindfolded with branches everywhere. He reached to snatch away the bandanna; April drummed her heels against the horse's sides, and the mount started off at a walk.

He was to remember that ride always; it was like moving through a dream. He could hear the squealing of the saddle as the horse toiled up a slant; he could feel a sickening sensation in his stomach when the trail suddenly dipped downward; he could smell the dry tang of the timber, and from these things he tried to visualize the country through which they passed. When they faced west, the sunlight was strong through the bandanna; by this token he was able to tell when they turned north or south. He tried to make a game out of mentally gauging their route, but it was a losing game, he knew. There was a regular network of trails back here, used by the hill people.

Often April warned him about low-hanging branches, saying softly, "Get your head down." Sometimes he sensed that she reached out and held a branch aside as they passed beneath it. He tried keeping track of time and found that a futile game, too; they might have been riding a half hour or an hour. Sometimes gravel rattled on the trail, and after a while this sound became persistent and he wondered if they were out of the timber altogether.

Then April was hauling at the reins, bringing the horse to a stand. She slipped from behind him and said, at his elbow: "Quiet! Riders are nearby!" She moved away, and he guessed that she was at the horse's head, her hand clamped over the mount's nostrils to keep him from neigh-

ing a greeting. Dan said quietly, "Who is it?"

"The Cantrells!"

He could hear the passage of horses along a trail; he tried to gauge the distance and the direction and failed at both. He heard the murmur of voices; there was no coherency to this sound, no words he could fasten onto. He smiled, wondering what the Cantrells would think if they should stumble upon the two of them, him sitting a saddle with his hands free but his gun gone and his eyes blindfolded, her standing rigidly, silencing the horse. A sight like that might even sober the old man up! Sound dwindled and was lost. April pulled herself up behind Dan again, and he said, because it was suddenly very important to know; "Were they heading uphill or down?"

"Toward their ranch."

They weren't going to the Hourglass, then. They were waiting out the deadline, waiting to see if the Ballards came to them. It wasn't the showdown—not yet.

THE LIGHT was fading; he could tell that. Soon only grayness glimmered through the bandanna, and that was brief, the quick twilight of the hill country. Since sundown the gravel had rolled beneath the horse's hoofs, and it seemed to be slower going as though it were harder to pick the trail. It came to Dan that it had been a long time since April had warned him about a branch; the last time had been before the Cantrells had passed them. He was turning this over in his mind when she brought the horse to a halt again and said, "Get down."

He said, "Now—?" and raised his hands to the bandanna.

"Not yet."

He slid to the ground and found rocky underfooting. She said, "Just a minute till I tie your horse to this bush." After that she took his hand and led him along. They climbed upward, and she said, "Careful now. Very careful." He put out his free hand and felt the smoothness of a cliff wall to his right. He pictured himself as climbing a tilting ledge, and something about the picture he conceived tugged at his memory. She said, "Duck your

head," and he did so, and for a moment this was like being completely blind; there was only blackness, and then he saw light through the bandanna, a flickering light, and smelled wood smoke. April said, "Now!"

He jerked down the bandanna and found himself in a cave, high and dome-shaped, its ceiling blackened by the smoke of many fires. A fire burned here now, fitful and puny, beneath an opening in the ceiling that made a natural chimney. Before this fire a saddle blanket was spread, and a saddle and other gear lay nearby. Other than that the cave was empty, and April, sensing this only now, let the flour sack drop from her hand and cried out in a voice of fear: "Lew! Lew!"

"Here," Lew Fanshawe said behind them, and Dan felt the prod of a six-shooter against his spine.

He raised his hands before turning; he knew now that he stood as close to death as he ever wanted to come; he saw Lew Fanshawe standing in the shoulder-high opening that led into this cave. Fanshawe said, "I heard you coming a mile off. I just moved out and on up the ledge and around a turn, April. I see you've got his gun. Good! What happened? Catch him snooping?"

"I brought him here from the place, Lew," she said. "He only wanted to talk to you."

"You brought him here!"

"Blindfolded," she said. "He'll go back the same way."

The anger faded out of Fanshawe's solid features, and a question stood stark in his half-veiled eyes. With his free hand he thumbed back his flat-brimmed sombrero, and then he smiled in feline satisfaction, revealing his teeth. "Back there, Ballard," he said. "Get back and sit down. April, keep away from him."

Dan backed to the blanket and squatted upon it, and Fanshawe followed after him and eased down to the floor a good ten feet away, sitting cross-legged and laying the gun in his lap. Fanshawe said darkly, "Well, you're here. What's eating at you?"

"Two questions," Dan said. "I promised her that's all I'd ask. First, I want to know why you hate me?"

Fanshawe said, "That's easy. Because you're you."

Dan said, "To me that doesn't make sense."

"It wouldn't, Fanshawe said. "It wouldn't because you're not me. You haven't drifted, hiring out your guns and eating well one day and not at all the next. I've sat hungry beside a campfire and thought of men like you—well fed and well kept because somebody else, your father or his father before him, built a pile and all you had to do was be born in order to have it. This isn't the first range where I've seen men bow and scrape before gents like you, just because you were born to a name and a pile of *dinero*. What did you ever do to earn it, Ballard?"

"I see what you mean," Dan said slowly. "And that tells me more than you meant to tell me. Now I know another reason why you hate me. Because I showed myself better than you at your own trade yesterday before the Rialto. I could have killed you, Fanshawe."

Fanshawe's lip curled. "You were lucky," he said. "Plain lucky, Ballard. We'll prove that one of these fine days."

April moved, her shadow dancing a gargantuan dance upon the cave wall. Fanshawe started, his hand dropping to his lap where the gun lay. *He doesn't trust her!* Dan thought. *Not completely.* She picked wood from a pile and dropped it upon the fire which sprang higher. She moved back to a stand against the wall, saying nothing.

Fanshawe said, "You had a second question, Ballard."

"Yes," Dan said. "Who hired you to keep picking a fight with me?"

Fanshawe smiled. "Sometimes I work for money—sometimes just for fun. In your case it could have been just for fun."

Dan said, "Is that all you'll say?"

"That's it."

Dan started to come to a stand, but Fanshawe's gun was instantly in his hand and leveled. Dan said, "I've asked my questions and got my answers. I could have put the law on your trail last night, but I didn't. That was for her sake, not yours. Take my advice and shake the dust of this range."

Fanshawe said, "Stay squatted. You're not going. Not yet."

April said, "He'll be blindfolded when he goes back, Lew. He'll never find this place again—not in a million years."

Fanshawe said, "Look, honey, are you on my side or his?"

It took her a long second to answer. "Yours, Lew," she said softly. "You know that."

She loved the man, Dan reflected. Every time she turned around she proved it.

Fanshawe said, "This is Saturday, isn't it?"

April nodded, and Fanshawe said, "What's your hurry, Ballard? We've food here and a fire—all the comforts of home. No, it's not what you're used to at the Hourglass, but it will do your immortal soul good to come down to the level of us common folks for a while. He's our guest, isn't he, April? For the evening."

Dan saw it then. Fanshawe knew that midnight tonight was the deadline, and he knew that the answer the Cantrells would get from the Hourglass might be one answer if he, Dan, was there and quite another if Wayne was alone. This was part of the game Fanshawe was playing, for himself or somebody else, the game that had started when they'd first met in the Rialto. Dan had played into Fanshawe's hands by coming here, and Fanshawe meant to keep him until after midnight.

And because the Cantrells might be riding at midnight, and because many miles lay between here and the Hourglass and time could work against a man, Dan knew that any play he would make might just as well be made now. He measured the distance between himself and Fanshawe and prepared to leap, yet strong in his consciousness was one thought that couldn't be denied. No man could move faster than a bullet.

XI

SOME MINUTES are beyond measuring. This was one of them—this minute when Dan crouched, his legs drawn up under him, his eyes locked with Fanshawe's, and because Fanshawe's intent

was suddenly stark in his face, Dan knew that Fanshawe wanted it this way. He wanted Dan to try jumping him, because that would give Fanshawe his excuse to gun Dan down. Fanshawe had a code of sorts to keep, but Dan would free him from it if he made a play! Thinking this, Dan hesitated, his desperate desire tempered by the knowledge that to move was to commit suicide. But anger began wrestling with the wisdom in him, and the mockery in Fanshawe's eyes was a spur to anger.

Then April said, hysteria in her voice, "Drop your gun, Lew!"

Without looking at her, Dan knew how she'd be—her back to the cave's wall, her face contorted by the wrench of emotions, his own gun in her hand, the gun she'd taken from him before she'd brought him here. He still kept his eyes on Fanshawe; he saw surprise take the killer-lust out of Fanshawe, and then fury leaped up in the man, smouldering in his glance, but Fanshawe only said, softly, "And you told me you were on *my* side!"

It was like a whip laid across her. Dan gave her a quick look and saw the way of it, but he saw, too, that the gun she held never wavered. She said, "He made a bargain and he kept it, Lew. He could have pulled the blindfold away any time. When we got here and I told him it was the end of the trail, he could have jumped me and come after you, but he didn't. Now I'm going to keep my end of it and take him back."

Fanshawe said, "There's more mixed up in this than you know about, honey. I can't let him leave. Not right away."

The firelight danced upon her face; and she was close to crying. "*Drop that gun, Lew!*" she said with deadly, desperate emphasis.

This was the moment when fury rose the highest in Fanshawe. He might have used his gun, or he might have used words, and either could have disarmed her. This was killing April, Dan knew. She loved Fanshawe, but she loved her pledged word, too. She was hoping she could keep both; she was hoping Fanshawe would understand. The anger that swayed Fanshawe almost engulfed him; his body grew rigid

and trembled a little, and then he let the gun slip from his fingers.

Dan launched himself forward and fell upon the weapon. He plucked Fanshawe's left-hand gun from its holster and with the two in his hands he broke them open and jacked the cartridges out of them. These he flung to the darkest corner of the cave, and he sent the guns skittering across the floor, and he said, "I ought to take you back with me, but that isn't what she bargained for when she made this play. So my hands are tied. I told you once to shake the dust of this range. Don't let me lay eyes on you again."

Fanshawe looked at April and said very distinctly, very emphatically: "*You slut!*"

She began crying silently, and the tears shook her voice. "He doesn't know the way to this cave. And I'll take him back blind-folded. Lew, tomorrow you'll be glad I didn't let you do what you intended doing. Honest you will. You just need time to think it over. I'll be back before morning."

He said darkly, "I won't promise I'll be here."

"You can't move till your shoulder's healed better," she said. "And you'll need food and care. Lew, can't you understand that I *have* to do this? Can't you understand that it doesn't need to make a difference between us?"

Dan thought: *No, and he never will!* April believed that goodness lay in Fanshawe because it lay in her. She couldn't understand that there was a difference between them that was wider than Purgatory Gorge. The poor, tortured, magnificent fool!

Dan said, "I'd like to get riding," and started toward the cave's opening.

She followed after him, watching Fanshawe, still holding the gun but letting it hang limply in her hand. Fanshawe had come to a stand; his back was to the fire and he was blackly outlined and faceless. He said nothing; he made no move. Dan got through the opening; the moon hadn't risen and he was in deep darkness. April crowded close to him and got his hand and said, a sob still in her voice, "This way."

He knew again that he was being led

along a tilting ledge, only this time the smoothness of the cliff was to his left. They were descending, and again memory tugged at him, and the picture stood complete, and he smiled. When they came to where the ground was level, the underfooting was still rocky, and he looked upward to the place they had just quit; he saw the blackness of the cliff against the blackness of the night; turning, he made out his horse tied to a bush nearby. He untied his bandana and retied it over his eyes and reached for her hand. "I'm ready now," he said.

He moved toward the horse and groped for the horn and lifted himself aboard; she climbed behind him and put her arms around him and got the reins. For him there was only blackness, deeper than the night's, and that blackness was suddenly peopled by Lew Fanshawe. Fanshawe had had time to find his guns and reload, Dan knew. He had a notion to jerk away the blindfold; it had become a farce anyway, but she didn't know that, and he didn't want her to know it. So he didn't jerk the mask away.

THEY MOVED for a long time in silence; after an hour she began warning him about trees. He sensed that the moon was rising, and he sensed, too, that they were not traveling the same trail that had brought them to the cave. He began to get that earlier sensation of lifting and falling as the trail climbed and dipped. This persisted for an hour and another; he listened intently, always, for hoofbeats on the back trail. Fanshawe must have had a horse hidden out near the cave; two of them perhaps. April had come to the hill ranch afoot when she'd come for food that afternoon. He wondered about that, and asked.

"We had two horses," she said. "My own and a Tomahawk horse I took last night. I turned the Tomahawk horse loose in the hills and left the other for Lew when I went for food. He might have needed a horse worse than I did."

That made them even, him and Fanshawe, Dan reflected. With both of them she'd thought of herself last.

Shortly thereafter she said, "Now. You

can take away the blindfold." And as she said it she slipped from the horse.

He jerked away the bandanna and had his look. Overhead the blackness of the sky arched, the stars wheeling, and there was moonlight though most of it was lost in a tangle of pine tops. They were in deep shadow, but just beyond was the openness of a road, bathed a sickly yellow with the ruts grooved in darkness. This was the Tomahawk Pass road; he knew this instantly. April handed him his gun. "We're below our place," she said. "Just follow the road downward and you'll come to the flats."

He smiled. "I grew up in this country."

She looked back along the darkened trail that had led them to the fringe of the forest. "Good-bye," she said.

He stepped down from the saddle and leaned against the mount, his shoulder to the saddle's cantle. He said, "How long have you known him?"

"Lew——?" He thought she was going to cry again. "A month, I guess. Maybe longer. He rode through the hills when he first came into this country. He spent a night near our place, and I stumbled upon him one morning when I was riding. After that, after he went on down to Ballardton, he used to ride up this way once in a while. We found that cave and got to meeting there."

"And so you fell in love with him," he said, "and when you heard he was to be lynched, you found a way to get him out of jail."

"I never thought about the being in love," she said. "Not till last night. I'd heard about your wedding and how everybody was going to be there. I wasn't invited, but I took my horse and rode to town to see the excitement. After he got in trouble and got jailed, I heard the talk. I guess it was too much for me, thinking about him being hanged."

"So you stole a Tomahawk horse for him to ride away on, and you knocked out Abe Potter without Potter's even seeing you. It was Lew Fanshawe's lucky day when he met you."

She lifted her face and looked intently at him and said, "You hate each other, don't you? I wish it weren't that way."

He shrugged. "He'll be clearing out of this range as soon as he's able. Will you be riding away with him?"

"I don't know," she said forlornly. "I don't know whether he'll want me now. Last night he talked about taking me along. But tonight he's angry with me."

He said softly, urgently, "Don't go with him, April. Don't go."

She shook her head, not understanding. "You're afraid I'll marry him?"

"No," he said, "I'm afraid he *won't* marry you."

She said nothing; he looked toward the road, conscious that time was slipping away, conscious that the midnight deadline was drawing near. He held out his hand to her; her fingers closed with his, and he drew her close then, very gently, and put his arms around her and tilted her chin and kissed her. She responded willingly; her kiss was a child's kiss in the first moment of it, and then it ceased to be a child's kiss. She pushed away from him, panting, and she said, "I guess he's right. I'm just naturally bad!"

At first he thought she meant Fanshawe, and then she said, "Why does he hate me so? Is it just because of her, because of my mother? I've tried not to be like her."

"He's told you about her?"

"Many times. He can lash himself into a fury by talking about her."

He reached and laid his hand on her shoulder; it was trembling. He said, "You kissed me because you were lonely and mixed-up and afraid that Lew Fanshawe will be gone when you get back to the cave. It will be better for you if he is gone. Will you keep remembering that?"

He stepped up into the saddle again; he prodded the horse out into the road and looked back, seeing April standing at the fringe of the forest, seeing the white blob of her face. He lifted his hand in salute, and a turn of the road put her beyond his view.

AFTER THAT he tried dismissing her from his mind; tried keeping his faculties pinned to his riding. He needed more light if he were to make speed, but the light was a deceptive thing; the road was day-bright in places and shadow-

woven in others where branches swept outward making an almost tight canopy. He heard the rumble of Purgatory River where the rapids muttered far below; he came to the overhanging rock where he'd looked downward that afternoon and seen Clayton Allison. Remembering the man, he wondered if Allison had returned to the Digby place to find his prisoner gone, and thinking of this, he thought again of April.

Poor kid! She had two places to go, two men to turn to, and neither really gave a damn about her.

He rode down through the foothills and out upon the flats; now the moon was much higher and the sage clumps stood silvered and the land reached ethereally and endlessly. Hungry, he probed the saddlebag for the remainder of the food and ate while holding the horse to a walk. Afterward he lifted the mount to a gallop; the stars told him midnight was past; he pushed the animal hard, an impatience growing in him. At last he saw the moonlight glinting on the barbed wire that surrounded Ballard Springs. He saw the cattle which crowded close to the wire, and, drawing nearer, he made out the shape of a horse tied to the fence. Not until Dan was close enough to smell the water did he see the man squatting upon the ground, cross-legged. Dan said, "Pete——?" tentatively, but it was the voice of Barney Partridge that came back to him.

Partridge said, "I recognized you by the way you sat your saddle." And Partridge took a gun from his lap and eased it back into his holster.

Dan reined short and stepped down from the saddle. "You're spelling Pete? Is this a day and night job?"

"I sent Pete back to the Hourglass," Partridge said.

All the pent-up tension of these many hours put an edge to Dan's voice. "Damn it, man, is something up?"

"Not yet," Partridge said. "When I came in from riding fence today, the ranch was as peaceful as a Ladies Aid meeting. But Wayne had been working with pen and paper. I took a look at that paper. It was lying on the table."

Dan thought: *I can guess!*

He said, "An agreement to turn Ballard Springs over to the Cantrells?"

Partridge nodded. "Maybe he was just drawing it up in case. Maybe he didn't intend to use it unless he had to. Maybe he was waiting for you to show back."

"I got delayed," Dan said dryly. "The Cantrells haven't come?"

"Not yet," Partridge said. "Midnight's past. They'll be coming anytime now. But they'll have to come this way."

Understanding smote Dan then, hitting him hard.

"And that's why you're waiting here?" he ejaculated.

Partridge said, "I'm only the foreman. It ain't for me to say whether papers are to be signed or not. But nobody gave me any real orders. If a ruckus was to start between *me* and the Cantrells *before* they reached the Hourglass, it might blow the lid off without any palaver about papers. Maybe I overstepped myself. Do I draw my time, Dan?"

What was it Gramp had said about this man? "Then Barney Partridge could have given you a better lesson than any you got from your Eastern teachers. He's out in the bunkhouse these days, eating his heart out because the spread he's worked for would rather sidestep than fight Cantrell . . ."

Dan looked at Partridge, seeing a little man, short and stocky and warped by too much riding, seeing a man loyal to his brand and loyal to something else, to a principle that allowed for no running when a challenge was laid down. And knowing what Partridge had intended doing here, Dan squatted down by the man and lifted a hand to Partridge's shoulder.

"Draw your time?" Dan said. "Not if I've got any say, you won't. Pile on your horse, Barney. We're heading for the Hourglass. We'll do our talking to the Cantrells there—when they show up. If there's a fight, you'll get your share of it. But a Ballard is going to have the privilege of starting it."

Partridge grinned. "You saddle it; I'll ride it," he said.

Dan stiffened. "Hoofbeats!" he said. "Hear them?"

Partridge listened. "From the south,"

he decided. "It's not the Cantrells. Just one rider."

"I see him now," Dan said.

The hoofbeats grew louder; the horse and rider shaped up like a charging fury, the man, tall and angular, sitting unsteadily in the saddle, weaving to and fro in such a way that Dan's first thought was that Clayton Allison was wounded. Then, as the man blurred past them, so intent upon his riding that he didn't even glance in their direction, some instinct told Dan the real truth. Allison was drunk, so drunk he could scarcely sit his saddle.

Partridge said, "He'll break his fool neck once he gets into the hills."

Dan said softly, "So he needed whiskey to nerve himself for the job. Is that what took him away from Digby's?" Then, to Partridge: "Let's be riding, Barney. We've got worries of our own."

XII

THE MOON was gone and the stars nearly faded when they came to the Hourglass; the ranch lay cradled in the darkness before the dawn; the buildings were vague and shapeless, but the dogs were awake, and there was a light in the bunkhouse and another in the frame ranchhouse. Sleep hadn't come here; Dan could feel the wakefulness that pervaded the place; it sang in the night, it was a wire drawn tight and thrumming. A man shaped up in the bunkhouse door as they dismounted, the bulk of him almost blotting out the light. He held a rifle in the crook of his arm, and he had his look and sighed explosively, and said, "Oh, it's you, Barney!"

Dan said, "Will you take care of my horse, Barney? It looks like Wayne is still up."

Wayne was in the big room, burrowed deep in a chair before the empty fireplace. He had hauled off his boots, but otherwise he was clothed; he looked haggard; he looked like a man who could use a drink but would find one drink not enough. Standing in the doorway and studying his brother, Dan reflected that Wayne had never been more than a sociable drinker, a fellow who hoisted one with the crew and

walked away afterwards and forgot about it. He was glad now that it was this way with Wayne. He said, "Good morning."

Wayne started visibly and said with an edge of irritation to his voice, "Where the hell have you been? I've been thinking of sending the crew looking for you!"

Dan thought: *But you were afraid to do that. You were afraid to have the ranch unmanned.* He said, "My yarn will keep. Anything happened here?"

"Ransome Price rode out. He offered to buy the place for some investors who are interested. They want to make it a vacation spot for Easterners. His offer was a good one, considering the drought."

Dan crossed to the table. A pen lay there, and an ink bottle, and a piece of paper. He read what Wayne had written upon this paper, and he said, "Price's offer wasn't so good that you'd prefer to take it and run out. All this needs to give Cantrell what he wants is three signatures."

Wayne said, "How did I know whether you'd get back before the Cantrells came? I expected them at midnight. I had to have that ready in case it was needed."

Dan said, "You couldn't have gotten a majority. You'd never have got Gramp to sign it."

Wayne's jaw grew tight. "I'd have signed it myself, if I'd had to. I can't see where Gramp's vote counts for much any more. And you weren't here."

Dan grinned. "You tell Gramp that."

Wayne made an angry gesture with his hands. "We've got two choices. We can sell to Price, or we can stay here and buck Cantrell. That's all there is to it."

"We've got a third choice," Dan said. "We can fight. That will be Gramp's vote, and it will be mine." He tore the sheet of paper across, folded it and tore it again, and let the pieces flutter to the table. He turned and started for the stairs, and Wayne said desperately, "Where are you going?"

"To bed," Dan said. "The Cantrells hoped we'd come riding to them. They wanted that feather for their hat, too. Midnight is past, and they haven't come. They won't come until tomorrow. I need sleep."

That one step creaked under him as he climbed the stairs. The upper hallway was

dark; Gramp's door was closed and no light showed under it. In his own room, Dan stripped off his boots and belt and stretched himself upon the bed. All the weariness of the crowded days since his homecoming rose and engulfed him; he saw through the window that the sky was paling in the east; he thought of April and wondered if she were back at the cave and how she was faring with Fanshawe. The poor, tortured, magnificent fool! The thought was bitter and the thought was sweet, and he took it with him into sleep, into oblivion . . .

He awoke many hours later to the touch of Wayne's hand; Wayne was shaking him and the heat lay heavy in the room and the sun beat at the window. He looked up at Wayne and wished that Wayne would go away, and then, as clarity penetrated into his sleep-fogged mind, he said, "The Cantrells—?" They seemed to be living constantly with the Cantrells, with the threat of them, and he was growing mighty tired of it.

Wayne said, "Cynthia's coming. I spotted her to the south through field glasses. No; the Cantrells haven't showed up yet. I let you sleep. You were sleeping like a dead man."

Dan said, "Thanks. I'll be down pronto."

She had just reached the gate when he got to the gallery, his face raw from hasty shaving, his hair slicked down and still wet. She rode a livery stable horse with a stock saddle, but she sat it side-saddle fashion, her skirts billowing. He came running and reached and got her under the armpits and eased her to the ground; she was once again coolness in a parched land, minted gold to an impoverished lover; but the memory of their talk at her father's gate, the bargain they'd struck, put a restraint into him. He laughed to cover the awkwardness that had crept into this moment, and he said, "I slept in. Will you have a second breakfast with me?"

She was graver than he'd ever remembered her. She said, "I had to come out to learn how things are. The whole town is wondering this morning. You see, everyone knew last night was the deadline."

"The Cantrells haven't come for their answer," he said. "They'll be along before

the day's over, I'm guessing. Come to the gallery where there's a little shade. Will you have that second breakfast?"

"Perhaps a cup of tea," she said. "No one on Purgatory Range can make tea like Charley Wong."

Wayne greeted her as Dan led her up the steps. Wayne gave her his hand and said, "You'll find the house a little cooler than the yard, but not much. Lord, will this heat ever let up?"

DAN WENT seeking the Chinaman; afterwards Dan and Cynthia and Wayne sat in the big room, and this made it a state occasion. For Wayne it was the midday meal, but Wayne had no relish for the food; his lack of appetite was all too noticeable. Only Charley, who served, was himself; Cynthia had always charmed him and her magic had lost none of its potency. She drank the tea and said then, "You can understand why all the folks are waiting to find out what decision is reached about the springs. It means so much to everyone."

Including Ransome Price, it seems, Dan thought.

He said, "How would you vote, Cyn, if it were up to you?" He hadn't meant to ask that; it was a reaching out to older days, an attempt to recapture a closeness that had once existed among the three of them. Often they'd sat in this very room and talked about Dan's proposed schooling and spun plans and dreams, and Cynthia had been as much a part of the Hourglass as those hewn rafters overhead. Dan thought: *I wonder if it will ever be that way again*, and, wondering, he awaited her answer.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully and took a long time at replying, and she said then, "I just don't know. But bloodshed seems so useless."

He had known somehow that her answer would be like this, yet he'd hoped it would be different. He could hear a clock ticking; he made a guess at the time and wondered when the Cantrells would be coming and found himself wishing that she'd leave before they arrived. But she lingered; the three of them made small

talk, and time drifted on, and the heat built with the passing hours. It grew to envelop the house, to press it with hot hands; a stickiness dwelt in the air, and Wayne, who'd worn his coat to the table as a concession to Cynthia's presence, stripped the garment away. A thermometer was fastened out on the gallery; Wayne went to have a look at it and returned shaking his head, making no pronouncement. And then Barney Partridge clumped up the gallery's steps and stood in the doorway looking at the three of them, a little man freighted with news.

To Cynthia he inclined his head. To Dan he said, "Riders to the north. Six of 'em. They've come."

Dan said, "Cyn, you'd better stay inside!"

But she followed him to the gallery, and Wayne came along, too. Wayne took a stand at Dan's left shoulder, Partridge ranged himself to the right; the three of them were this way, standing, waiting out the last tag-end of waiting, when the Cantrells roared into the yard. The six lined up before the gallery, sitting their saddles, the old man and his sons, and Wayne said nothing and Dan said nothing; there was no invitation for the Cantrells to light down.

But Dan thought: *So this is it.*

Old Man Cantrell sat with his sons on either side of him; he had more than enough whiskey in him today, and more than enough petulance. He sat there big and burly, with his ragged beard falling to his second shirt button; he sat there arrogant and dangerous; and he said, "Midnight is a helluva long ways past, Ballard. Did you think we were bluffing?"

He was speaking to Wayne, and Wayne made the answer. "We've thought it over, Cantrell. It's to be share and share alike. The Tomahawk is welcome to water cows at the springs, the same as anybody else. But we're not signing over the springs to you."

Cantrell's lips writhed in what might have been a grin. "You've thought that over damn' well?"

"We've thought it over," Wayne said stiffly. "You've got our answer."

Cantrell said, "I tried to make it easy

for you, Ballard. Hourglass and Tomahawk could have got through this dry spell together. But you wouldn't listen to sense. We're heading back to the hills. To get our crew and round up our cattle to fetch 'em down to the flats. We're taking over Ballard Springs."

The anger that ran away with Dan was compounded of both ice and fire; he had known another moment like this, that moment when Lew Fanshawe had spat upon his boot in Ballardton the day of the postponed wedding. Yet still the hate wasn't in him; this was as impersonal as Fanshawe's insult had been. He said in a voice that sounded strange in his ears, "That's enough, Cantrell!"

Cantrell said, "Another county heard from!"

"You got decent treatment from the Hourglass, Cantrell," Dan said. "That wasn't enough for you. You've wanted to hog the water. You had the guts to set a deadline for the Ballards, to expect us to ride up to the Tomahawk and grovel because you happened to growl. You've got the guts now to sit there and tell us you're taking over our water. I'm here to tell you you're not that wide across the britches. You can still water your quota of cattle—no more, no less. I wouldn't want to see a cow suffer because the man who owns him is stupider than the cow. Now get off Hourglass land and stay off!"

CANTRELL'S five sons had held silent; this was their way, to let their father do the talking. Now Mace spoke. He was the one who sat at his father's right hand; he was neither the oldest nor the youngest of the sons; he was thirty, perhaps, but he was the biggest of the five. He was Old Man Cantrell with a quarter of a century sloughed away. His was his father's arrogance and his father's ruthlessness. He said, "He talks big for an Eastern dude, Paw. He's the one who talked Wayne into bucking us. He's grown a set of guts because he was lucky with a gun in town the other day. Shall I haul him over to his own horse trough and cool him off, Paw?"

Cantrell grunted.

Dan said, "Will you climb down off that

horse, Mace? Will you climb down and shuck your gun?"

From farther along the gallery where Cynthia had taken a stand, her voice rose. She said, "*Don't—!*" but it was a puny straw to stem the tide of Dan's anger. He cleared the gallery steps without touching them; he crossed to where Mace Cantrell sat his saddle, and he got his hand inside Mace's gunbelt and hauled the man from the saddle, and he slapped Mace hard, his fingers leaving red streaks across the man's face.

Mace fell back a pace, looking at Dan with eyes that didn't believe, looking at him with anger that grew and boiled over and exploded. He fumbled woodenly at his gun belt and unlatched it and let it fall. He came at Dan with a roar, his huge fists flailing, a beserk animal filled with one consuming lust. Dan caught him full in the mouth with his left fist; he buried his right in Mace's body just above the belt line. He heard the gusty wheeze that came out of Mace; he saw the man's head snap back.

He bored at Mace again, but this was Dan's mistake. There was too much resiliency in that mass of bone and muscle; anger might have made Mace clumsy, but it hadn't lessened his power. His fist caught Dan above the ear, filling his head with a wild buzzing; Dan went down to his knees and, falling, clung grimly to consciousness. He saw Mace bearing down upon him, a wild triumph in the man's face. Dan lowered his head as a bull does; he caught Mace in the midriff and broke that charge, and this gave Dan time to get to his feet again.

Now it became a wild trading of blows; some instinct whispered to Dan that he must keep Mace at a distance; he mustn't let Mace wrap those great arms around him or get him to the ground where weight could make all the difference. He was content then to merely fend off Mace; he did this by raining blows upon Mace, but he took blows in return, and there was a rock-like quality to Mace's fists. For Dan the world had narrowed to this man; he was only remotely aware that the other Cantrells had pulled back their horses, giving them ground before the gallery in which

to fight. He knew the Cantrells were cheering on their kinsman; he could hear the voices but make no coherence out of the words. His own supporters were on the gallery; he had a blurred impression of Wayne's face and Partridge's, and he saw Cynthia's, a white mask of a face. Why hadn't she stayed inside like he'd told her to do?

That stolen look almost cost him the fight; he had this one unguarded moment and Mace's fist caught him high and hard again, and his legs tangled, and he went down. He saw Mace come at him; he saw Mace's boot raise to kick him in the ribs; he clutched desperately at that boot and twisted, hoping to bring Mace to the ground. Mace fell and Dan rolled over on top of him and they were a writhing mass, rolling over and over, and Dan felt the man's fingers at his throat and the man's thumb trying for his eyes and the pressure tightening against his wind-pipe.

Out of the dust and the chaos he heard a strident, lifting cry. "*Get to your feet, you damn' fool! You've got no chance on the ground!*"

He thought: "*That's Gramp!*" and wondered how Gramp had got to the gallery. He'd fought this fight to keep himself out of Mace's grip, but desperation and tiredness and pain had robbed him of wisdom. Now he knew again what he had to do, because Gramp had just told him. He got Mace beneath him and broke free of Mace and struggled to a stand. He was reeling unsteadily on his feet, his fists cocked, when Mace clumsily arose. He let Mace get up, but he gave Mace no more time than that; he came at Mace with the last shreds of his power concentrated on the task and the need. He flung his fist at Mace's jaw; he felt his knuckles smash against that jaw; he saw Mace go down and lie in the dust of the yard with his arms outflung and his legs twisted, making no move.

He lay there motionless, eyes glassy bright and cold-looking.

Dan stepped back, sobbing for breath; his shirt was a ruin and one eye was swollen and his lips hurt. He stepped back, calling hoarsely to Mace to arise and not understanding why Mace didn't. He turned

and looked toward the gallery; Barney Partridge had a gun out and level in his hand; Hourglass's foreman was as he'd been that day in the Rialto when he'd broken up Lew Fanshawe's play. Partridge said, "All right, Cantrell. Pick up your man and hang him across his saddle. Dan's already told you everything you need telling. Now git!"

OLD MAN CANTRELL looked toward where Mace lay; he looked and was a man who saw but could not comprehend what he saw. He climbed heavily from the saddle and crossed to Mace and dragged at one of Mace's arms. "Git up, you pore damn' fool," he said with a great disgust.

Then, to his other sons: "Hob—Ring—give me a hand."

Dan didn't watch them load Mace upon the horse. He was only vaguely conscious of their spurring their mounts and galloping out of the yard. He was looking toward the gallery; he saw Barney Partridge, a man grown in stature in these last few minutes; he saw Wayne, and in Wayne's eyes was sympathy for a brother hurt, sympathy and a new respect. He saw Cynthia, but he didn't want to look at Cynthia; he didn't like the sick horror that was in her face; he didn't like remembering that he had put in there.

He saw Gramp leaning heavily upon his cane.

Partridge said, "That's that. But they'll be back, just like they said, with all their cows trailing along. Just a minute, Dan; I'll help you up the steps. What came over you? If ever I saw a man licked it was you when Mace got you down. Yet you broke away from him and laid him out. I'd like to know about that."

"Ask Gramp," Dan said, and his lip curled into a smile.

He looked at Gramp and saw Gramp's grin, and he grinned in return, a broken, battered grin. He took a step forward and the ground seemed to tilt and the horizon to revolve. It was too damn' hot today, he decided. He would have fallen except that both Partridge and Wayne were suddenly there beside him, giving him something to lean against.

XIII

THEY GOT DAN up to the gallery and inside the house; they eased him into one of the chairs in the big room. It was good to sit down; it was good to let the chair hold him; it soothed the pain that spread through him. He looked at his knuckles; they were skinned and bloody, and he wondered if they were broken. Wayne said, "Where the devil is Charley? We'll need hot water." Barney Partridge said, "And a piece of beefsteak for that eye."

Gramp came limping in; he stood to one side of the doorway, leaning heavily on his cane. Out of his chair and with the blanket gone from around his legs, he looked a great deal thinner to Dan, but his face wasn't as gray as Dan had remembered it. There was a fire in Gramp. There was a new vigor to him. He frowned at Dan and said, "Didn't you know better than to try tangling with a bigger man on the ground? You were lucky today—just plain lucky."

Dan said, "I licked him, Gramp; you know dog-gone well I did."

"Bah!" said Gramp. "You don't know any more about handling your fists than a steer knows about square dancing!"

"To hell with you, Gramp," Dan said softly and grinned, but it hurt his lips to grin.

Cynthia came in and stood near the doorway. In this past moment Dan had forgotten about Cynthia. She came as a ghost comes, soundless and pale. She said in a small voice, "I'll have to be going back to town."

Dan said, "Give me a few minutes to take the kinks out of myself and I'll ride with you."

She looked at him in stark horror; she had looked at him in this manner once before—that moment when she'd lain in her father's office in her wedding gown and had opened her eyes to see him standing over her with Barney Partridge's gun hot in his hand. She was afraid of him! She was as much afraid of him as though he were Lew Fanshawe or Mace Cantrell, or someone like that! Thinking this, he was sure he had lost her forever, and the regret drove deep into him and was more

painful than the havoc Mace's fists had wrought.

He said, "I'm sorry you had to see the fight, Cyn."

The revulsion was still in her eyes, but anger came there, too. She said, "It was so brutal, and so unnecessary. You'd made your say, and the Cantrells understood you. Just because that big hulk made a childish challenge, you didn't have to be like a schoolboy who'd had a chip knocked from his shoulder."

He said forlornly, "You don't understand, Cyn. You just don't understand at all."

"And I'm afraid I never will. Not long ago I said that you seemed to attract violence. Now I know that you go out looking for it."

Wayne had gone elsewhere in the house; Dan had heard his voice calling out for Charley; he had heard this without hearing it. Wayne shaped up in the doorway; he looked at Cynthia and said, an edge of annoyance to his voice, "He's just had the stiffings pounded out of him. I think that any talk about it can keep till later."

Charley came in, his face ludicrous with concern. He bore a piece of beefsteak, and his yellowed hands forced Dan back in the chair, and he laid the beefsteak upon Dan's left eye. He had a cloth with him, wrung out in cold water, and he placed this upon Dan's face, moulding it carefully around his nose.

Wayne said, "We'll want to get those hands of yours into water and stop the knuckles from swelling." Dan felt Wayne's fingers on his knuckles and winced. "Nothing broken, I guess," Wayne said.

Dan could sense that all of them were hovering about him. He heard a flurry of hoofbeats out in the yard and half-raised himself from the chair. Wayne said, "That's Cynthia. She's gone toward town. Take it easy, kid. You can square yourself with her later."

Dan said, "I did it up brown all around." The cloth was lifted from his face, iodine stung at the open cuts, and the cloth was replaced. His knuckles were being wrapped. Dan said, "Well, we gave Cantrell his answer, and we blew the lid right off. You did the speaking, Wayne, but

I'm the gent who made up your mind for you."

Wayne said, "It doesn't matter."

"You're not sorry?"

"It's like a load was lifted from my shoulders, Dan. I guess the tough part of it was not knowing what to do—that and waiting for the deadline to draw nearer. Now that the choice has been made, I feel like a free man. It's a good feeling. We know what we're up against."

Dan said, "You're a good man, Wayne."

Wayne said, gruffly, "We'll get you over to the couch where you can stretch out. No, leave that cloth on your face. We'll help you."

The move was made and Dan eased himself upon the couch and someone tugged at his boots and removed them. He heard that one step creak, and he said, "Gramp—...?"

"Gone back upstairs, Dan. I guess he can't stand being on his feet too long at a stretch."

Dan said, "You can't fool around here, messing with me. We've got to get ready for a fight. Cantrell will bring his cattle down from the hills, just as he said he would."

Partridge's voice came from somewhere nearby. Hourglass's foreman said, "We can beat the Tomahawk to the gun. We can carry the war into the hills."

"No," Dan said. "He'll have to start it, if he wants his fight. Barney, you'd better move the whole crew to Ballard Springs. Have Charley fetch the chuck-wagon out there. We'll guard the water and wait it out. If Cantrell brings his cattle, he'll find us ready to fight."

Partridge said, "I'm on my way. How many rifles we got around this place?"

Wayne said, "Charley can take care of you, Dan. I'll go see what I can do to help Barney."

"Sure," Dan said. "I'll get along."

HE HEARD Wayne's boots beat toward the doorway; the room turned silent, and a fly buzzed somewhere. This was the hottest part of the day; the heat smothered Dan, surrounding him and gluing his clothes to him. He grew drowsy; he fought against sleeping; there

was so much that needed to be done. He could hear an anarchy of sound out in the yard; horses squealing and men calling to one another. His spread was riding to war, while he was lying here like a newborn baby! He resolved to be on his feet and ready to go with them before they stepped up into saddles. He was conscious of Charley's coming with fresh cloths for his face and knuckles. And then, in spite of himself, he slept.

He awoke and there was darkness, and he spent a moment wondering what time it was. The darkness came from the cloth over his eyes; he reached and took it away and remembered April and those two blind-folded rides through the hills. He sat up and found the gray of twilight in the room; the house still held some of the day's heat, and he arose and walked to the gallery, and the coolness there was like a benediction. His body was not as sore as he'd supposed it would be. He wondered how Mace Cantrell felt, and knew a certain sympathy, not having any hate in him. He came back into the big room and discovered bread and cold meat upon the centering table. Good old Charley! He tugged on his boots and ate the food and felt better.

The ranch lay swathed in silence; he went out into the yard and found bunk-house and cook-shack empty, and the chuck-wagon gone from the shed. He got a rope and went to the corral and laid a noose over the neck of a horse and got gear onto the mount. It was labor to get this done, and pain climbed with him into the saddle. He headed north, holding the horse to an easy gait. He looked back and saw no light showing in the ranch-house, not even in Gramp's room.

He had much to think about on that ride toward the springs, but his thoughts centered on April and from them grew a need for a decision. This he tried putting from his mind. He remembered her as last he'd seen her, standing beside the pass road there on the fringe of the forest; he remembered Lew Fanshawe and Clayton Allison. But what kind of damn' fool notions were these? He'd started a war for his outfit today, and they were ahead, at the springs, waiting for the Tomahawk

to strike. There was nothing he could do for April; she'd doomed herself the day she'd set eyes on Lew Fanshawe. She'd ride away with Fanshawe because that's the way it was with her. He, Dan, couldn't live her life for her.

He put his horse to a gallop, trying to outrun his thoughts. He came across the flatness with the dusk closing in on him and the hills losing their shape and the first stars showing. Soon he saw the firelight ahead; he'd expected that the crew might have a fire going, but there were three fires, spaced a few dozen yards apart. As he drew nearer he made out the high outline of the chuck-wagon, and then saw there were two other wagons as well, and a good many more men lined against the fires than drew Hourglass pay. He didn't understand this at first; but when he rode into the group he recognized faces and responded to greetings. Four outfits were represented here—the Hourglass, the Circle-Bar, the Hashknife, and the Wagon Wheel.

Dan stepped down from his saddle in a knot of men and said, "Where's Wayne?"

Wayne said, "Here, kid," and came shouldering toward him.

Dan grinned bleakly and said, "The news got around, didn't it."

Wayne said, "Cynthia must have made a fast ride to town and the word went winging from there. That kind of news was bound to travel fast. Jim Satterwaite met her on the road south. Him and his Wagon Wheel outfit were here before we showed up. The rest came later."

Dan said, "Send them back to their spreads, Wayne."

Wayne shook his head. "I don't grab onto that, Dan. They're here to help us."

"Send them back," Dan insisted. "It's our fight."

"But they've got a stake here, too, k d. It means no water for them if Cantrell grabs the springs. Dan, I just don't understand you! A couple of nights back you were burning leather into town to save Fanshawe from being lynched. You talked about a spark and a powder-keg then; you said that the lynching might blow the lid off. Then you held out to fight Cantrell, and that really lifted the lid. Now

you want to turn fighting men away."

Dan said, "It's our water, and it's our fight. Yes, I know we'll be fighting so that the rest of them can use the water. But the thing I've been afraid of ever since I got home is a full-sized range war. Today it shaped up as a fight between two spreads—the Hourglass and the Tomahawk. Let these men stay, and Cantrell will have more than he can chew. The next thing, he'll be importing gunmen by the trainload. He'll be doing that because we'll be giving him no choice when we stack the odds against him. Then we'll have red hell loose on this range. Send these men back, Wayne."

BARNEY PARTRIDGE made an unobtrusive appearance at Dan's elbow. Partridge said, "He's right, Wayne."

Gramp Ballard said, "Of course he's right! I tried to tell you the same thing, Wayne, when we first rode up and found the Wagon Wheel here. But you didn't even savvy what I was driving at."

Dan said, "*Gramp*—!" in vast astonishment. "What the devil are *you* doing here?"

Wayne spread his hands in a weary gesture. "It was his own idea. I tried to talk him out of it. He ordered Barney to saddle up a horse for him, and Barney did. I thought Gramp would fall off it before we got here."

Dan said sternly, "You can pile on that horse again, Gramp, and go home."

Gramp said, "This is Ballard Springs, and I'm a Ballard. What you said about the others doesn't hold for me."

Dan said, "There's one thing you might as well get straight right now, Gramp. I give the orders here. Or Wayne gives them. And you've got your orders. Get back to the ranch where you belong."

They looked at each other across the space that lay between them, and they were never more alike than in this moment. It was not only a likeness of tallness and looseness and height of forehead; they were alike in their stubborn determination, and they were pitted now, one against the other, and it had never happened before, not like this. Dan expected anger; he saw it building in Gramp's eyes. He expected

abuse; he saw it trembling on Gramp's lips. There was this one long-drawn out moment when yesterday glared across the distance at today; when age stood ready to dispute the way with youth.

Then Gramp said, "I got to rest a while before I can make that ride back. Confound it, Dan, you know I ain't as young as I used to be. You ought to show some respect for my years."

Dan said, "You're laughing inside you, damn you." He crossed and laid a gentle hand on Gramp's shoulder. "You know you can't handle a rifle and a cane at the same time. And somebody had better be at the ranch, Gramp. You know that."

Gramp said angrily, "Tell me right out that I'm too old for fighting. Boss me around just because I ain't got the strength to turn you over my knee. I'm a helluva long ways from dead yet!"

Dan said, "You can hit me with the cane again, Gramp, if it'll make you feel better."

A grin grew on Gramp's face. "I don't need to. It already turned the trick. I wish your dad was here to see you tonight, Dan."

Wayne said, "Somebody riding up. From the south."

Gramp looked and said, "It's a mite early for the vultures to be gathering."

Ransome Price rode into the rim of firelight; he sat his horse well, and his back was straight, but the dust of hard traveling was upon him. He gave no greeting; he said, "I got the news from Cynthia, so I came out. It's to be war, is that it?"

Dan walked toward Price; anger stirred in Dan, and he said, "Cynthia rode fast, and you rode fast. I'm wondering just how long it's been since you started patterning yourselves after each other."

Price frowned; the firelight washed across his face and made a mask of it. "The news became common property. I'm here on business, Ballard, not to discuss personalities. I made Wayne an offer yesterday. He had to talk it over with you. There's still a way out of this fight. Sell the Hourglass to the people I represent and it won't matter about Ballard Springs. You can stop the blood-shed."

Dan said softly, "Now I know who's

been doing Cynthia's thinking for her!"

Gramp said, "I gave him his answer, Dan. Yesterday."

A revulsion grew in Dan, and he wanted Price out of his sight. Dan said, "What Gramp told you should have been enough, Price. You're wasting your time. And ours."

For a moment the mask was stripped away and the studied affability was gone out of Price, and he said harshly, "I've waited a long time to see the high-handedness taken out of you Ballards. I won't have to wait much longer. When the Cantrells have beaten you to your knees, come crawling to me and I'll trade you railroad tickets for what's left of the Hourglass."

"You'd better go," Dan said coldly.

SILENCE HUNG over the crowded men of four ranches, and from this silence an animosity arose that was almost a clamor. It beat against Price, not moving him, not for a long moment. Then Price wheeled his horse about; he used his spurs savagely and the silence broke to the beat of hoofs, and the night claimed him.

A man cursed and said, "Well, he shore showed which side of the fence he's camped on."

Dan thought: *And now the cards are faced—all of them.* A weight was lifted from him, and he knew how Wayne had felt today when the Cantrells had come and the piece had been spoken and the die had been cast.

He walked to his own horse and hauled himself into the saddle and looked down at Wayne, who had followed him. "I've got a ride to make," Dan said. "There's something that needs doing. The way I figure it, the Cantrells won't come before late tomorrow; they'll need that much time to comb their cattle out of the hills. I'll be back before then."

Wayne said, "You're not heading north again!"

Dan nodded. "I suppose I should tell you why I'm going, especially at a time like this. There aren't any words which would make it sound like sense—not even to me. When I come back, I'll try telling you about it. Meanwhile, see that Gramp gets home, will you, Wayne? He'll try

to outfox you. He wants to be in on the fight."

Wayne said, "I can't let you ride away like this, kid. If there's a reason why you mustn't take me along, take Barney."

Dan said, "It's my affair, and I've got to ride alone. Do you remember Sam Digby's place very well, Wayne? Remember that cave back in the hills, a few miles west of his house? I found it when I was first old enough to go riding alone, and I used to call it the Pirate's Cave and go there to play. Mind the time it rained so hard and I had to stay there all night, and you and Barney came looking for me the next morning?"

"I remember," Wayne said.

"I'm going to that cave, Wayne. If something happens and I'm not back by noon tomorrow, you can send Barney there after me."

Fear built in Wayne's eyes, but it was not for himself. That was the difference today had made in Wayne. He said, "You'll be riding almost to the Tomahawk fence. You'll be shot out of the saddle if the Cantrells sight you. Dan, do you have to make this ride?"

"That's the hell of it," Dan said. "I do have to make it. And I couldn't tell you why, because I don't know myself."

XIV

CLAYTON ALLISON, riding northward past Ballard Springs the night before, had not seen Barney Partridge and Dan Ballard by the barbed wire, for Allison, as Dan had surmised, was a man too drunk to be in command of his faculties. He had had a tiring, nerve-wracking day, had Allison. He had descended to the bottom of Purgatory Gorge, a feat to take the stomach out of a man, and engaged in certain observations down there; and he had made the ascent to return to the Digby place to find Dan Ballard prowling about. He had got Dan under a gun and tied Dan, and that was when the worry had really begun—the worry and the need for a decision.

His life had been a life of making decisions. But they had been impersonal decisions; they involved mountains and

rivers, and there was a good education in engineering to help him make these decisions. With people it was different. He had never known people, not really. He had been shy and scholarly as a boy; he was the autumn child of parents who had had no other children. He had married a woman who was his opposite in every respect; he had loved her with the ardor of the love-starved and had the heart burned out of him when she'd run away with another man. No person had owned any part of Allison's affection after that; he had grown bitter and cynical and more brooding with each year. He had grown away from people and more uncertain of himself, and today he'd looked at Dan Ballard, trussed and helpless upon the floor, and seen in Ballard the shape of calamity and known what had to be done. He had known, and turned his face from the hideous truth, the hideous need. He had wanted another to make the decision.

And so he had ridden hard to Ballardton and come to the office of Ransome Price.

They had talked for a long time, he and Price, though mostly Price had talked and he had listened. Price had spoken of many things, a prize at stake, the need for a man to be strong when the stake was so high, the inevitability in what had to be done. Price had argued and Price had threatened, and Price had pointed out that when a man got a certain length along a certain trail there was no turning back. Price had been logical, and an engineer could understand logic and make no defense against it. In the end Price had said what he'd said at the beginning. "Ballard's got to die. There isn't any choice about it. I'm as sorry as you are, Allison, but we can't risk his knowing. And all the sign says that he knows."

Whereupon Clayton Allison had set himself to the task of getting very drunk before riding back to the hills.

He had never been a drinking man. He had lived in rough camps on the far fringes of the frontier; his work had taken him to such places, and he had known all the cravings of men who live too much alone. But he had been master of himself. He could take the passed bottle, or he could leave it alone. He had been toasted by

soft-handed, well-dressed men who put up the money for the engineering projects that were given birth by his skill; he had drunk the toast and tossed his glass over his shoulder and thought no more about it. But tonight had been different.

He had stood at one bar and another, drinking morosely, talking to no one. He had drunk, and his tiredness and his bitterness had been his allies at the task. He had ridden out of Ballardton scarcely able to sit his saddle, and he toted a quart of Valley Tan in his saddlebag, knowing he would need this reserve to sustain himself across the miles to the work that had to be done.

The riding had sobered him a little, and he'd almost got sick. When he felt sobriety coming upon him, he uncorked the bottle he carried. He made a game out of doling it out; he'd ridden to Ballardton too many times not to know all the landmarks, and he had a drink at the prairie dog village and promised himself another when he was beyond the Hourglass. He took his third drink as he began climbing into the hills; they were deep, hearty pulls, those drinks; they burned down into him, and the fumes rose and numbed his brain again, and that was good. He thought: *Why, this is how a man really gets away from the world! He climbs inside his own skull and peers out through his eyes!*

He almost met with disaster upon the trail up Tomahawk Pass. He was pushing the horse hard, and he took a sharp turn in this fashion and might have sent the mount headlong into the timber; but the animal balked, and Allison's chin snapped hard against his chest. He shook his head and was cold sober for a moment; he took another pull at the bottle and let the horse choose its own gait. He thought: "Got to be careful," and was surprised to find that he'd muttered it aloud.

After that he dozed in the saddle, and he might have missed the turnoff to Digby's, but the horse, out of long habit, took to the road Digby had cleared, and Allison awoke to find himself in the stump-mottled space before the log house that was now his home. The house lay dark; and that was as he'd expected. He had not seen his daughter for two days, and he was

suddenly cold with a certainty that he would never see her again. Yet he was glad she had not come home; he was glad and sorry and all mixed-up, and he turned to the bottle again. He drank steadily, holding the bottle up to the moonlight and gauging the fall of its contents. He climbed down from the horse, letting the mount stand, and went groping into the barn, almost stumbling.

He thought: *I'm too drunk to hit the floor with my hat!* He had heard a man say that somewhere once, and it had sounded very inane; now it seemed hilariously funny, and he wanted to laugh, but he couldn't. He giggled, and his hands went probing in a certain corner, and he found a shovel and a lantern.

SOME INSTINCT told him to light the lantern outside. He'd have to be careful or he'd burn down the barn. He came to the doorway and got the lantern burning, and thus he never noticed that Dan Ballard's horse was gone. This would have made all the difference to him; this would have told him that Ballard no longer lay tied in the house. He went walking, with the lantern swinging in one hand, the whiskey bottle in the other, and the shovel tucked under his arm. His shadow scissored along beside him; it was a silly-looking shadow and he giggled again.

He took a trail into the timber, the same trail where April had run that afternoon and Ballard had overtaken her. He held the lantern high as he lurched along, and he found a clearing to one side of the trail and set the lantern down upon a stump and scraped away the fall of dry needles and attacked the ground with the shovel. The dirt was soft and easily worked; the hole grey. Before it got too deep he stepped out of it and surveyed it blearily by the lantern's light. A grave was supposed to be six feet deep, but he couldn't remember how wide or how long it should be. He recalled that Ballard was a tall man, and suddenly he was very sick. but it was not a sickness of his body. He took the quart and drained the last of the whiskey in a series of breath-taking gulps. He climbed into the hole and put himself to the task of digging, determined

to work too hard to think. He made the dirt fly, and at last he climbed out of the grave, his task done.

Then he turned back toward the house.

And suddenly he was a defeated man. His work with the shovel had brought the sweat, boiling the whiskey out of him and leaving him sober. He had planned carefully—the studied drinking in town, the quart to sustain him afterwards, the rationing on the ride, but he had not counted on what the work would do to him. He was sober again, sober and sick to the stomach and sick in the mind. Anger grew in him; he should have brought a second quart. Remorse rose and began choking him; he marshaled logic, the careful logic of Ransome Price. He remembered Price's argument about a man going a certain length along a certain trail and not being able to turn back.

He forced himself upon the porch and set the shovel against the wall and moved the lantern to the left hand and opened the door. He held the lantern high; he saw the table and the crude chairs. He stared down at the strips of faded carpet, and Dan Ballard was not there. Only the tangled rope lay there.

He carefully set the lantern upon the table and slumped down into a chair, and surprise gave way to fear, and fear gave way to a strange elation. He was a man who had walked with a shadow a long, long way, and now the shadow was gone. He was sober, but it was a queer sort of sobriety; it left him tired and with tangled thoughts. He wanted to giggle again. He thought of Ransome Price, picturing Price's face as it would look when word reached him that Dan Ballard had escaped. And then Allison laughed.

Later, much later, he lurched through the house to the lean-to. He managed to get one of his boots off, and he fell upon the cot and kicked the tangle of blankets to the floor and lay there; he lay there and it was like being in a hammock; the room swirled slightly, and his stomach tried to betray him, and at long last he slept . . .

He awoke with his mouth dry and bitter, and the sunlight was strong in the lean-to, and the heat had already taken a hard

hold. He sensed dizzily that it was mid-day; he came out into the kitchen and dipped water from a bucket. It was stale water, tepid and tasteless, but he drank a great deal of it. He went out to the pump for more water and washed his face and thought of food, but the thought was distasteful. He walked into the front room and looked at the rope upon the floor. He sat in a chair and remembered the grave he'd dug, and he put his hands to his face and sobbed dryly, saying, "Lord, Oh, Lord!"

He was this way when April opened the door.

He looked up at her and saw the change in her; she still wore the Levis and plaid shirt, and her hair still hung to her shoulders, and she was a wildling, but she was unafraid. Scorn was in her, and she was an adult now and his equal. This drove fear into him; he wanted to run from those eyes, he wanted to hide from them; he could do neither, so he sought refuge in an habitual anger. He said, "Where the hell have you been these last few days? I ought to use a whip on you!"

She said, "You always cut much deeper with words. That's why you never used a whip."

She crossed the room and entered her bedroom; he made no attempt to stop her. He could hear her moving about; bureau drawers opened and closed. She was not gone long. She came back into the front room with a suitcase in her hand; it was an old suitcase, battered and much traveled.

He said, "Where are you going?"

"As far away from you as I can get," she said.

He said, "I'm still your father. I'll stop you," but it sounded rather helpless and futile, even to his own ears.

She said, "You're not my father—not any more. I was here last night. I had two places I could go; I came here because of something a man said to me that made me think."

He gestured toward the rope on the floor. "Him?" he demanded with sudden understanding. "So that's how he got away."

"Yes," she said, "I freed him." Defiance flared in her. "I happen to love him."

NOW HE HAD something he could fasten onto; his lip curled and the scorn in his eyes matched hers, and he laughed, and it was not pleasant. He said, "You fell in love with Dan Ballard! You picked a man who's engaged to another woman. But that won't matter, and you'll twist him around your finger. You'll know how to do that, because you're your mother's daughter."

She stepped to the shelf of books and took down a certain engineering book and shook the photograph of her mother from its pages. She looked at the picture for a long moment, and then she tucked it into her pocket. He half-rose from the chair; her eyes drove him back.

She said, "Did my mother ever leave a man tied upon a floor? Or did she go out in the woods in the middle of the night and dig a grave? You see, when I came back last night, I went to the hayloft to sleep. I was afraid to come to the house, afraid you might be waiting, afraid of the things you'd lay on me with your foul tongue. I heard you stumbling around in the barn. I followed you when you went with the lantern. I saw what you dug and knew who you were digging it for. And I laughed, knowing he'd got away from you."

His mouth was very dry. "You saw me . . ." he said.

"That's why I just packed up," she said. "But I waited till you were awake. Before I left I wanted to tell you why I was going."

He said desperately, "Believe this, April: I was glad—glad, do you understand!—when I found he'd got away! I didn't want to do it. I just hadn't any choice."

She said, "I don't know what devilry you're mixed into. You've been up to something sneaking ever since we came to this country. It looks like murder would have been part of it. You've lashed at me about my mother. You've told me I'd come to no good end. You got me to believing I was bad. Maybe you were right. Maybe I *am* bad. Maybe you thought it long enough to make it so. But if I'm bad, now I know why. It's because I'm *your* daughter, not because I'm hers. I see now why she must have

left you. Maybe you dug another grave, and she knew about it."

He said, "It's not so! It's not so!"

Lifting the suitcase, she crossed to the door and opened it. He knew he should get out of the chair and stop her; he knew, too, that he couldn't stop her, that she was gone from him forever. He knew he had brought this about. He said, "Where are you going?"

"To a man," she said. "No, not to Dan Ballard. He belongs to somebody else. You see, I was in town the day he was supposed to get married. The man I'm going to is the kind I'm used to—the kind I had for a father—a killer. Maybe I can change him. Maybe I can do some good for him, and, doing it, do some good for myself. It doesn't matter about me. Not after last night."

He said, "You're getting married." And suddenly he understood and his eyes widened. "To Lew Fanshawe. You're the one who got him out of jail. Never mind how I know."

She said, "I could do worse. Remember the taint in my blood you've talked of so many times."

SHE OPENED the door and stepped beyond it and closed the door. He still wanted to go after her, but he knew no words to call her back. He heard her footsteps recede, and this was his moment of greatest agony. He thought: *She's mine; she was born of my passion.* He remembered her laughter; there'd been so little of it. He remembered those clippings she'd cut from magazines and pinned upon her bedroom wall. He knew her hunger now and her loneliness; he knew she had lived with a hope and a fear when she'd lived with him, and the hope had been for one kind word, one caress. She'd been within reach always, and he'd shoved her away from him.

And so he sat through the long afternoon, sat and looked back at the parade of the years and let his remorse fester. Sometimes he remembered April and sometimes he remembered his wife, the one becoming the other, and he knew that it all might have been different. He went to the dipper for water whenever his thirst grew

too great, but always he came back to the chair and sat staring. And so he grew to loathe himself; he looked at himself now as April had looked at him today. He'd been bitter and cynical, a man with no heart in him, but he'd never been crooked, not until he'd come to this Purgatory country. He turned this over in his mind until a new hate came into him. But he couldn't put all the blame onto Price. He hadn't had to listen to Price's proposition when they'd first met, and he hadn't had to listen last night when Price had sent him back here to do murder.

The long, hot day ended; the dusk came creeping, but still he didn't stir. The darkness flowed into the room and turned each object hazy; the heat still held here, more oppressive with the darkness. The hours passed, and he heard hoofbeats in the clearing. His thought was that here was Dan Ballard, returned with the Hourglass crew behind him to demand an accounting; but he refused to care.

Someone knocked at the door. He let this knocking grow more demanding, and then he said, "Come in." A man stood silhouetted in the open doorway; he was a nondescript man, a hanger-on at one of the Ballardton saloons. He said, "Allison—?"

Allison nodded.

"I was paid to ride hard and bring this note to you," the man said. He groped forward and laid a sealed envelope on the table. He backed from the room, closing the door after him, and the hoofbeats rose again and then receded.

For a long time Allison let the note lie. Then he stirred himself and got a lamp to burning, and he ran his thumb under the flap and shook out the note and read it. It had no salutation, no signature, and even the handwriting was slightly disguised, but it was Ransome Price's.

It said, "I know Ballard got away on you. He was out at the Hourglass today. Don't be worried. Ballard won't count much any longer. The Hourglass turned down the Tomahawk, and Cantrell has gone back to the hills to bring down his cattle and take over the springs. The Hourglass will fight, but it will be a losing fight. The water is just as good as ours."

He read the note and read it again, but never with any real interest. And then a thought took hold of him and grew; he had lived too long with hate to lose his taste for it in a day, but now the hate had turned inward, blighting him, and the hate grew to encompass another; and that other was Ransome Price.

He came to a stand and moved out upon the porch. He remembered April; he remembered her declaring her love for Dan Ballard. He looked in the direction in which the Tomahawk lay. He'd stop them! He'd stop the whole Cantrell outfit all by himself; And then he began walking, his scheme shaping itself. There was this thing he could do for April, but April would never know about it. Therein lay the bitterness, the bitterness and a magnificence beyond measuring.

XV

DAN BALLARD CAME THROUGH the night; he came at a hard tilt while the flatness was before him, staying with the main trail until it began climbing upward. After the first timber he rode more cautiously, sparing his mount, sparing himself. He could feel the havoc that Mace Cantrell's fists had wrought upon him; his body ached as the riding became harder; and he dismounted then and gave his horse a blow. Afterwards he walked, leading the horse behind him. He had to keep himself from stiffening up, he reflected. At least for a day or two. It was here now, the showdown; it was Hourglass and Tomahawk in a finish fight.

On that high promontory where he'd paused the day before and had his look at the country and remembered Gramp Ballard riding in on a roundabout trail from Texas, he halted again. Night made a difference to the vista; night softened it and made of it a fairy land of silver and purple. He looked back toward the springs; he could see a fire winking, but there was only one fire. Wayne, then, had sent their neighbors home. Remembering the loyalty of the Hashknife and the Circle-Bar and the Wagon Wheel, Dan's throat tightened. If Cantrell took over the springs, they'd take up the club against

him, and he wondered then if he'd made a mistake in not letting the three spreads buy into a fight that might become theirs anyway. But he remembered Gramp saying, "I wish your dad was here to see you tonight, Dan," and he knew now what Gramp had meant. It wasn't the range that counted, or the water; it was whether a Ballard remained a Ballard.

And, thinking of this, he remembered Fanshawe, in the cave, speaking of the kind of man who was born to a name and a heritage; he remembered Fanshaw asking, "What did you ever do to earn it, Ballard?" and Dan knew now the real reason why he had spurned his neighbors' help.

He began climbing again, still leading the horse. He could hear the lost voice of the Purgatory; soon he was to where he had looked down upon Clayton Allison. The jutting rock was naked in the moonlight; Dan veered away at this point and found a game trail leading into the timber that flanked the pass road. Mounting, he followed this trail toward the west, glad to be done with openness, glad to be beyond the reach of moonlight. The Cantrells might be expecting the war to be fetched to them. The Cantrells might be posted along the pass road. But they couldn't watch all these back country trails.

Once Dan thought he heard a faraway shout or its thin echo. He listened intently, hoping for a repetition, but here was none. He was getting jumpy, he decided.

The timber pressed around him and the darkness was so thick he felt he might rub it between thumb and finger, he felt he might gather a handful of it and stuff it in his pocket. Sometimes, when the canopy of boughs overhead was not so tightly laced, a little moonlight trickled through; it freckled the trail and told him he was keeping to it; but quite often he had to light matches. He was very careful with these. The way was comparatively level now, so he always climbed back upon the horse, keeping low in the saddle, keeping his right arm crooked before his face.

He kept veering steadily westward; somewhere in this direction lay the cave. It had been a good many years since he'd followed a trail to that cave, discounting

the blindfolded trip he'd taken yesterday. He tried to remember all the landmarks, and his thoughts grew twisted with the trying. He recalled how he and April had come toiling up that tilting ledge to the cave's mouth and how he had sensed then a picture that tugged at his memory. He had known the cave, of course, when he'd stepped inside it and the blindfold had been whisked away. He had played there as a boy; he'd come with a bandanna wrapped around his head and a sash wrapped around his waist, and he had carried a butcher knife in the sash. He'd stolen that butcher knife from Charley Wong, and Charley had been vociferously angry about it, showing no tolerance for a pirate's need for a cutlass. But Dan had talked of repelling boarders; he had pointed out the need to defend treasure from any who might try to wrest it away from him, and Charley had let him keep the knife.

He smiled now at the remembrance, smiled across the years at the small boy with the bandanna and sash and butcher knife, and then he smiled no more. It had been a grim game then, and it was a grimmer game now. It had the Cantrells mixed into it, and the Allison, and Lew Fanshawe; and a lot of men could die because of it.

The country was roughening, and he found himself riding the crest of a ridge; he led the horse down into a ravine, crossed over and climbed to the next ridge. He didn't remember this terrain from his childhood days, and he frowned, wondering if he'd veered in the wrong direction. Then he struck another game trail; it led westward, and, a mile along it, he came upon the ruin of a log and shake cabin. Nothing was here now but the shell of what had once been a home to some prospector who had known this country before the Ballards had known it, who had lived here and vanished from the sight and knowledge of men, leaving no name behind him, leaving nothing but this cabin. But Dan remembered the cabin, and, remembering it, knew he was on the right trail. He wondered if he had passed the cabin blindfolded last night.

Now the underfooting became rockier

and the timber thinned out and there was much more moonlight. He grew thirsty; night had banished the plague of heat, and a man might need blankets in this high country before dawn, and this coolness was good, but still he was thirsty. He put his mind from the need. Shortly he crossed what had once been a roaring creek; the gravel was bone dry, and there was not a trickle of water. He damned the drought.

HE CROSSED the creek bed and came into a strip of timber; the darkness closed and enfolded him again, but he was through the strip quickly and beyond it lay one of those mountain meadows, grassy and forgotten, where Sam Digby had grazed his cattle. This meadow was a pool of moonlight; across it a man came riding, not pressing his horse but letting it choose its own gait. Dan had never seen this man in a saddle before, but he knew him to be Lew Fanshawe.

Dan drew his own horse back into the deeper shadows at the fringe of the timber; he took his gun from its holster and held it loosely in his hand. He sat thus until Fanshawe was near enough that he could see the solidness of his features, and he rode out then, the gun held ready, and said, "Raise 'em."

Fanshawe's astonishment gave way to recognition and then to anger. He raised his hands and sat with his eyes bleak and half-veiled, and his lips skinned back from his teeth. "You play it safe," he said.

Dan reached and plucked Fanshawe's guns one after the other and tossed them aside. He said, "Where is she, Fanshawe?"

One of Fanshawe's eyebrows twitched. "April?"

"Who else?"

Fanshawe shrugged. "How should I know? She rode away with *you* last night."

Dan said, "You're running out on her, eh? I don't know that horse you're riding, but I know its brand. It belonged to Sam Digby. Allison must have bought the stock with the place. That must be the horse April rode when she came to Ballardton and got you out of jail. She turned Cantrell's horse loose."

Fanshawe said, "Maybe she *gave* me

the jughead. She'd do a thing like that for me. Is that what's eating you?"

Dan said, "Where is she, Fanshawe?"

Fanshawe said, "So you've fallen for her. Fallen hard."

"She needed a friend," Dan said. "I could see that. She saved my life yesterday—twice probably. I came back to make sure no harm came to her. But you wouldn't savvy that."

Fanshawe said, "Then it's her you're looking for, not me. Get out of the way. You're blocking the trail."

Dan thought: *He's making a cat-and-mouse game out of this, that's what he's doing! He hates me and he wants to bedevil me, so he means to tell me nothing.* Anger choked the last patience out of him and he stepped down from his saddle and walked out into the moonlight and reached and got a hard hold on Fanshawe's belt and dragged him from the horse. Dan's jaw tightened, and he said, "Talk, damn you! I've asked you twice where she is!"

Fanshawe's teeth shone white in the moonlight. "Don't work yourself into a lather," he said. "She's at the cave. She didn't show back last night, but she came late today and she fetched her suitcase with her. Her and her old man had some kind of a fight. She came to ride away with me."

"But two on one horse made slow traveling, eh?" Dan said. "You didn't want to bother with her. You gave her some kind of a story about coming back for her, and then you rode out."

Fanshawe said, "It's getting you, isn't it? About her and me. You don't know what there's been between us and it's worrying you because you're in love with her. You've been wondering about night before last when we hid out in the cave together. You've been picturing us in the darkness, and it's eating the heart out of you. And I'm laughing because I've got a knife in you and I'm turning it around."

Dan hit him; he struck out wildly with his left fist and Fanshawe saw the blow coming and pulled his head to one side and Dan's knuckles glanced against Fanshawe's ear. It dumped Fanshawe to the ground, that blow; he sat there staring up at Dan, and hate was naked in Fanshawe's eyes.

He said, "You've got a lot of guts when you've got a gun in your hand."

Dan dropped the gun into his holster and reached and hauled Fanshawe to a stand and kept his hand wrapped in Fanshawe's shirt front. Dan said, "Talk now, or start swinging your fists. I haven't got time to fool around."

They were this way for a moment, toe to toe and eye to eye, and the hate was still in Fanshawe, but the fear crept into him, too, and showed in his face. He said, "I might have taken her with me, but she held out for a wedding ring. That's when I walked out. She'd have been good company for a week or a month, but why the hell should I have saddled myself with her? Besides, she wasn't going to ride away with me for her own sake, she was going to do it for mine. I never could abide a reforming woman."

Dan said, "Is that all of it?"

THE HATE FLARED upward and consumed Fanshawe. "No, damn you! I could have treated her like a squaw if it hadn't been for you. She was crazy enough about me to bust me out of jail, but she saw you while she was doing it. That changed everything for her. I knew it night before last in the cave, but I couldn't show her who was boss; I needed her to steal grub from her old man. Maybe I should have taken her along, even if it meant a wedding ring. Maybe I should have done that just for the sake of beating you."

Dan hit him again. Fanshawe went down and Dan reached for him once more and hauled him to his feet. Dan said, "I owed you one for that clout you gave me in the jail building. That one just now was for her."

Fanshawe's voice turned deadly. "I never was handy with my fists. And you're still the man with the gun."

Dan crossed to where the moonlight danced on one of the guns he'd taken from Fanshawe and tossed away. He picked up this gun and walked back and thrust it hard into Fanshawe's holster. He stepped backward a dozen paces from Fanshawe and said, "Now, damn you!"

They stood this way, looking at each

other across the moon-silvered distance; they stood there and Dan was remembering the sun-drenched street of Ballardton and Fanshawe under the wooden awning of the Rialto and the silence and the first betraying flicker of Fanshawe's eyes. He thought: *Here we go again!* and there was no fear in him; he had bested this man once and he knew he could best him again. He looked at Fanshawe and waited—and he saw Fanshawe die. Not with a bullet in him; there was no play at guns. He saw the heart die in Fanshawe and the courage of Fanshawe shrivel, and Fanshawe said then, hoarsely, "To hell with you!" but there was no iron in it, it was only a quavering cry.

Dan strode toward him; Fanshawe stood waiting, watching Dan with eyes that were afraid. Fanshawe said, "What are you going to do?"

Dan said, "Last night I would have settled to let you ride out of the country. But you're a Cantrell man; you proved that when you planned to keep me in the cave until after the Cantrell deadline. The war's on, Fanshawe. Now I'm going to make sure of one less gun against the Hourglass. There's a cabin back a piece. I'm taking you there and tying you while I go on to the cave. When I come back, I'm collecting you to turn you over to Abe Potter."

The blood drained out of Fanshawe's face and he was something craven, sickening to look upon. He said, "You'll leave me tied up for hours? With a fire eating through the hills?"

"Fire——!" Dan ejaculated.

Fanshawe swept his arm to the northeast. "It's back there. Can't you hear it? Or smell it? Some fool with a cigarette, I suppose. There's no wind and it isn't heading this way, but it might. You can't leave me tied up in this timber country! You can't do it!"

Dan said, "*Shhhh——!*" and paused, listening, his ears strained. He heard it then, the distant crackle; it was miles away and it wasn't much of a fire, not yet. There was no wind; a wind could spread the fire fast. He listened and horror rose in him and choked him and he crossed quickly to his horse and heaved himself

into the saddle. He glared down at Fanshawe, and he said, "And you rode out and left her afoot in the hills with a forest fire burning——! I ought to kill you. But I can't force a fight on you, and I can't shoot you down. Once a man made the remark that you were nothing one way or the other. He was right!"

He wheeled the horse and headed it at a hard gallop across the meadow. In this manner he put his back to Fanshawe, and Fanshawe had a loaded gun, but there was no concern in Dan. Not about this. Fanshawe might like to shoot him in the back, but the man would be afraid to try. He'd be afraid Dan would be expecting such a play——hoping for it. And then he forgot Fanshawe, remembering only the cave and the girl alone and the flaming beast that had been unleashed in the hills.

XVI

AT FIRST TO DAN THE thought with terror in it——the thought of April back yonder in the cave with the fire sweeping through the hills to entrap her——was like a lash laid upon him; but, once he was across the meadow and onto a timber-fringed trail, he put down this fear, knowing it could numb a man, knowing it could make his judgment uncertain. He musn't let himself be stampeded. He musn't let this panic him. He marshaled logic, but all the while he was still forcing the horse with the recklessness of desperation.

It couldn't be much of a fire. He told himself that over and over again. If the fire had had a real start, he'd have seen the glow of it while he was still down on the flats. That fire had got started only recently, and maybe it was in some isolated gulch and would burn itself out. He looked aloft to the pine tops prayerfully; there was no wind to speak of. He could hear the distant sound of the fire, the insidious crackling that spoke of a slow eating of trees and underbrush; he fancied he could smell the smoke. He tried to determine the exact location of the fire; he gave this up as fruitless. He mastered himself, besting the fear; he mastered the horse, pulling it down to a walk. But the fire was still

there, in the hills, in his consciousness.

"Some fool with a cigarette," Fanshawe had guessed. Dan wondered about that; hill people knew the dryness of the woods; hill people would have been mighty careful. And there'd been no storm, no lightning, to have set the forest aflame. A man-made fire, set with deliberation? He thought of the Cantrells; had they expected the war would be carried to them and thus started the fire to rear the barrier of it between the Tomahawk and any invaders? He discounted this at once; the Cantrells couldn't run such a risk, not when their cattle grazed back here and a rising wind could make of the fire a Frankenstein's monster. He thought of Fanshawe who had known of the fire and said nothing until his own skin was in jeopardy. Fanshawe had that kind of poison in him; Fanshawe would not have been above setting a fire. But for what purpose? Let the wind rise and Fanshawe might die in these hills even yet.

Clayton Allison crept into his consideration; Allison drew a poor man's living from the wooded acres that had been Sam Digby's, and Allison's holdings might be wiped out before the night was through. He thought of Allison and feared for the man, but it never seriously crossed his mind that Allison might have set the fire. There was a madness in Allison, but it wasn't that kind of madness; the man was no witless vandal; the man had intelligence and would have been thoughtful of his own skin.

Below, on the flats where the Hourglass kept vigil at Ballard Springs, they'd be seeing the glow against the sky. They'd know that for what it portended; they would be remembering that Dan Ballard was up here somewhere, and they would be afraid. Perhaps some of them would come riding in search of him——Wayne, or Barney Partridge. A thought struck Dan. Had the Cantrells set the fire hoping to draw the Hourglass into the hills, away from the springs? But there were too many ragged edges to that kind of reasoning; the Tomahawk had not yet had time to gather its cattle; the Cantrells would want their herd bunched and beyond the fireline before planning such a coup. And

where would the Cantrells have found any assurance that a fire would draw the Hourglass into the hills? They hadn't known that Dan Ballard would be riding the high country tonight.

So thinking, he came upon the fire.

He had been aware that the sound of the fire was much nearer; he had been aware of smoke. Now the trail topped a ridge to parallel its crest, and, humping over the rise, he found a wooded gorge below him, running east and west, and in this gorge was smoky chaos with the white ash slowly rising and hanging listlessly in the air. The fire was a ground-hugging monster, a creeping thing, showing its red teeth intermittently. Sometimes it reared upward with startling force, wrapping itself around the base of a tree, setting a bush blazing vividly. The heat rose and smote Dan; the low, ominous roar was steady in his ears; the smoke made him weep. His horse became fractious, snorting and side-stepping, and it took all his power to hold the mount to the trail. He glanced back, trying to gauge the extent of the fire; it seemed to follow the gulch's contours. This would fix the Cantrells, he reflected; they couldn't get through now until the fire burned itself out. But there was no consolation in that.

He began to sweat; the sweat drenched him and plastered his shirt to him, and cinders landed on his clothes, and once he had to beat out a spark. The smell of smouldering flannel stayed with him, but the smoke was the worst thing; it got at his throat; it blinded his eyes. He looked to the left, down into another gorge, and wondered if he could lead the horse there. He decided to stay with the ridge, and soon he came to its end and dropped down to level country, and now he was skirting the fire and could look into the heart of it. If only it didn't crown! He had seen a crown fire once; he remembered the flames writhing upward to the tree tops, leaping from tree to tree, spreading with devastating rapidity. Now he was a man pacing a tractable lion which kept its distance and offered him no real harm but which could suddenly turn upon him and become many lions, surrounding him.

5—Two Western Books—Summer

A DEER BROKE out of the brush not half-a-horse ahead of him. It stood for a moment, frozen in its panic, the fire reflected in its eyes, and then it was gone, running into the far brush. The horse tried again to bolt; he supposed he'd have to blindfold the beast. The air grew stifling; the heat pressed down and was relentless and ponderous and almost tangible. The mount's panic became a contagion; for a moment terror swept over Dan and his impulse was to turn and find another trail and put himself as far from the fire as possible. He remembered the deer. Those animals knew!

He wondered how far he was from the cave; nothing was familiar any more, there were no landmarks; there was only heat and smoke and the lurid flames to his right, and the drifting ash in the air. He fought a new panic, fearful that he was going in the wrong direction. The smoke brought on a fit of coughing, and he reeled in the saddle, clutching at the horn, and almost lost control of the horse. The ground became rocky underfoot; he saw a high, dark outline ahead. Relief swept through Dan. The cave was inside that hill, and on the far side of the hill he would find the trail that climbed the ledge to the cave's mouth.

He went forward blindly through swirling smoke. He kept a steady hand on the reins, but he let the horse pick its own way. Skirting the hill, he put the rise of earth between himself and the fire, and thereafter he was in darkness again. When he was able to peer upward and dimly discern the cave, he dismounted, glancing about in search of a bush stout enough to anchor the frightened horse. He found one and wrapped the reins around the stalk and stumbled to the ledge and began climbing it. It had been easier going when he'd made the ascent blindfolded. The smoke was seeping around the hill; the smoke was here. He looked down upon brush and stunted trees. If the fire crept around and set all that ablaze, what then?

He got to the cave's mouth and stumbled inside. No fire burned in here as there'd been when April had fetched him to the place; blackness enveloped him. He cried out hoarsely: "*April—?*", and only then

did he allow himself to think that perhaps she wasn't here, perhaps she had dared the woods and been trapped between the cave and Digby's place. Horror made him light-headed and took the strength out of him, and he thought for a moment that his knees would not sustain him. Then there was rustling movement to the rear of the cave and she came groping toward him, her hand reaching out and touching his arm.

"Dan!" she said.

He leaned against her, his arms fumbling for her. "Oh, Lord!" he said.

"I tried to go home," she said. "The fire had me cut off. I came back here. I've been lying with my face to the floor."

He could smell the smoke; it had crept into the cave to writhe in the darkness. He said, "I've got a horse." He took her by the wrist and groped toward the entrance and got out upon the ledge. He was careful on the descent; the smoke had become a pall, blotting out the stars. He set one foot ahead of the other and tested each step before he took it. He got to the bottom of the ledge and moved to where he'd left the horse, and the horse was gone. Falling to his knees, his eyes smarting, he groped with his hands and found where the bush had been pulled up by the roots. He said dismally, "He got panicked and bolted." This was the worst moment for him.

She said, "Shall we go back to the cave?"

His first impulse was to say yes. He looked about him; the fire had crept around the north side of the hill and flowed into the levels; a juniper suddenly became a torch; it stood out starkly for a moment and then was a blackened nothing. He thought how it would be in the cave hugging the floor, feeling the heat and fighting the smoke, gasping for air and making that vain fight until they had no strength to fight any longer, and suffocation came. He said, "No!" and it was a shout. Odd how curiously hard it was to make yourself heard in this lowering atmosphere.

He got her by the wrist again and they went running and stumbling to the south. The fire came creeping that way, too, around the base of the hill. A burning brand arced through the air; another fol-

lowed it. Flame roared up a pitch-covered tree trunk and a lofty hemlock became a pillar of flame. The fire spanned itself from this tree to another, and Dan sensed then that there was a wind. *Lord!* he thought, *it's crowning!* He went running hard, draggin' April along beside him. They got beyond this section of timber and began clawing their way up a ridge. From its crest they paused, lookin upon the spreading inferno behind them; snapping branches were like a barrage of rifle fire. Then they dropped over the ridge and went stumbling and groping downward, into timber, into weird darkness.

THEY FOUND a trail; it led eastward and they followed it. That was all the planning there was left in Dan, to head east or south. Either way led out of the timber. They ran until they could run no more. They paused, sobbing for breath; they felt the heat and saw the fireglow bloodying the sky; and this ravine was like a horizontal chimney, sucking the hot wind.

"It's here," April said. "It jumped the ridge."

Dan said hoarsely, "Damn it! Damn the fire!"

It was going to get him; he knew that now. It was wily, that fire; it was a monster playing a stalking game with him, making him run till his lungs burst, making him hope for safety when there was no safety. It was made of dryness and madness; it was the drought taking a tangible form. It was all the rainless days concentrated into a blazing club that would beat him down. It had long ago gotten Old Man Cantrell; it had dried up Cantrell's mountain creeks and turned the man's selfishness into a lust for Hourglass's water. It had worked on Wayne, too, shriveling the courage in Wayne and turning him old before his time. It had even changed Cynthia, making her a stranger to the man she was to have married. But Dan had stood impervious to the drought; he had laughed at it and told the others that a little rain would wash away their madness. But that drought had bided its time; it had contemplated this puny mortal who derided it, and it had laughed its dry, silent laughter—and

waited. And now it had him trapped.

April said, "What did you say?"

Only then did he realize he'd been talking aloud. He dragged his sleeve across his face; he dashed away the perspiration and swept some of the madness from him with it. He said, "We'll have to run for it again."

In the eerie, flickering light he looked at her, seeing the black soot upon her face; he looked at her and smiled, then reached for her hand and led her along the trail until the trail petered out and they found themselves in the maze of an old windfall. Now they had to climb over ancient logs that sometimes were piled high and criss-crossed like jackstraws; he gave her his hand when he could. He'd better go easy here, he reflected, or he'd break a leg. The heat was upon them and the roar of the fire was in their ears and the smoke had them both weeping and choking, and he wondered just when the enemy would burst into the windfall and surround them. His desperation whetted, he grew careless of risk. At least the fire put a light in here, and that helped. Progress was painfully slow; it was a matter of climbing and crawling and clawing along; it was like moving in a nightmare, expending effort and sweating, yet seeming to get nowhere.

Brands had been sailing overhead; now they began dropping in here. The tangle of logs was thinning out; Dan looked back and found April toiling behind him. He said, "Here," and gave her his hand, and then they were stumbling into a gravelly creek bottom. There was a trickle of water, and Dan came down to his knees and sucked at it and loosened his bandanna and soaked it and mopped his face. April had a drink; she lay prone and exhausted and might have stayed here except that he dragged at her and got her beyond the creek and went stumbling into the brush. It took forever to find a trail, but the trail led eastward. He could still cling to that one need—move east or south! But the fire seemed to be on two sides of them now, and behind them, and it was moving faster than a galloping horse. The smoke strangled Dan and was like thumbs gouging at his eyes; the smoke made a swirling

haze through which they groped blindly. Dan was afraid he might go unconscious; he wondered how that would be, just dropping down and giving up the effort and letting the drought win.

He said, "Do you know where we are?" He shouted it.

April shook her head.

He pressed onward; the woods grew light as day, and the trail wound ever eastward. A steer came lumbering out of a thicket; it charged wild-eyed and almost bowled them over in passing; it crashed into the brush opposite the trail and was gone. It had worn the Tomahawk brand; Dan had seen it in the lurid, unearthly light. He thought of his bolted horse; he hoped the horse had won through to safety.

Then he and April were stumbling out upon a road, and there was no sense to that until Dan suddenly realized it was the Tomahawk Pass road. Just beyond was the gorge; he hadn't heard the rumble of the Purgatory because the roar of the fire was in his ears. Across there was safety, and his eyes spanned the gorge in futile hope. But at least he knew now where he was; he went lurching down the road, April beside him; he reached and took her hand again. If they just kept going this way, they were bound to reach the flats, he reasoned. But now, through the wall of timber flanking the road, he could see the fire; brands sailed out here and fell upon the road or spanned the river to drop upon the far side of the gorge. Dan's desperation grew. They'd almost won through, and now they were to be trapped!

The fire rode high and the fire crept low. The massing pines beside the road had ceased to stand starkly silhouetted against the fire behind them; the fire had reached the road and turned the timber into torches. The brands fell more thickly and April pressed close to him, saying nothing, but he felt the fear in her. They moved to the far side of the road and the danger was that a misstep might send them plunging into the chasm.

THEN Dan saw the jutting rock ahead, the rock that thrust outward like a thumb over the edge of this near wall. He

reached the rock and moved out upon it; he wondered if they could make a stand here, but he knew the burning brands would get them, or the heat and the smoke. He could see the road below; the fire was already down there; a tree exploded and fell blazing across the road. He looked at April and said, "Can you swim?"

She nodded.

He drew her close to him; he didn't want to have to shout; his throat was raw. He looked at her and all the questions he'd wanted to ask came crowding, but he never voiced them. She'd come to some sort of decision tonight, he knew; she'd tried to make a bargain with Lew Fanshawe, but it had had to be a certain kind of bargain. He remembered now that she hadn't been surprised when he, Dan, had appeared at the cave; she hadn't asked him why he'd come. He shook these things from his head; this was not the time for talk.

He said, "We've got one chance. The river is below, but it's a mighty long drop. We're below the rapids, and there's a pool straight down. It always looked like a deep pool. If we jump from here, maybe we can swim on south to safety. It's a long chance, but a better one than we'll have if we stay here and let the fire close in on us, or if we try to break through it. What do you say?"

Her face was oily with perspiration and streaked with soot; her face was calm. "I'd rather drown than burn."

He looked toward that wall of fire, and, looking, shuddered; brands fell around them and one touched his shoulder and he patted frantically at the smouldering flannel. The light washed the far wall of the gorge, it painted the rock lividly, but it didn't show down into the black depths. He stripped off his gun-belt and let it drop. He seated himself and tugged at his boots, and April did likewise and succeeded in removing her own. His refused to budge, even when she lent him a hand; his feet were too swollen from walking, and he gave up the effort. He came to a stand and stepped toward the edge of the rock and smiled at her and said, "Are you afraid?"

She took his hand. "Not with you."

There was no need for waiting, no sense

in it. Waiting might drain the courage out of them. He said, "Here goes," and his fingers tightened on hers, and they stepped out into space together. Only then did he hear the voice of the river.

XVII

TERROR RISES IN A MAN ON A long, plummeting drop through space; it takes the stomach out of him and fills him with a sick dread; and it was thus with Dan. He knew the pool was directly below, the silent, dark pool, but he remembered how shallow the Purgatory had looked yesterday. Supposing the pool was only a few feet deep now! He knew that striking the water would be like striking a wall if he hit awkwardly. He struggled in mid-air, keeping himself straight, and he struck feet first, April striking after him. The impact was savage; it drove the wind from Dan and he went far beneath the surface, and he was conscious then of the coldness of the water and the smothering pressure of it, conscious of that and the fact that he'd lost his grip on April.

Panic had its way with him, and he fought it down, clawing blindly and fighting toward the surface. It took forever before he felt air against his face and sucked it in. He called: "April—!", frantically, desperately; the roar of the rapids was in his ears; the fire-lighted sky high above wheeled wildly; the canyon walls became a rushing darkness. The current had him and was sweeping him down-stream. He stroked along; it was instinct to keep his arms and legs moving. Something smashed out of the darkness, grating against his ribs. His hands flailed out, his arms wrapped around the trunk of an uprooted tree that had been plucked from the higher hills and sent hurtling downstream. He clung hard and rode with the tree.

His worry was for April; he strained his eyes against the spray-filled darkness and called her name, knowing how futile it was to try to shout the rapids. An undertow seized him and sucked him beneath the surface, tree and all; he lost his grip on the tree and struggled to

break water, and when he did he was close to the wet wall of the canyon. Ahead and to his right loomed a rock; he set his eyes on this rock and paddled wearily toward it, sobbing with exertion. The rock seemed to recede from him until a wild, patternless eddy swept him at it. He was going to hit hard, he realized, but there was no strength in him to prepare for the impact. He caromed against the rock and reached out and clutched for it; water-polished sandstone slid under his clawing fingers, but he got his hold. It was then he found April. She was here, too, holding fast to the rock; her face a white, strained glimmer in the darkness.

He shouted at her; he wasn't sure he made himself heard. He cried: "Let's try for the west wall!" He knew they couldn't remain here; he knew the river's tearing hands would pull them away when their strength was spent and send them hurtling with the current. He could see the wall; it loomed tantalizingly close; it was a million miles away. He let go and struck out diagonally toward the wall; April did the same. He got to her and tried to lend her a hand; he found that this wasn't necessary. It came to him as something of a surprise that she was a better swimmer than he.

He lost her again in the darkness; under the overhang of the wall there was no reflected light from the lurid sky above. He felt his knees grate against sandstone; he reached out and found a rough grip on a stub of rock and hauled himself upward. A hand reached to help him, and he half lifted and was half pulled to one of those ledges that broke the smoothness of the canyon's wall. Spray dampened the ledge; the surface was hard and rough, and he sprawled spent and shaking, sucking in air in great, gasping sobs. He found April beside him, and they lay like this, and he wondered then what wisdom there'd been in choosing the river to the blazing forest. This was just the reverse of the old saying. This was out of the fire and into the frying pan.

He lay for a long time, not trying to talk. He felt the strength come back into his limbs, but his body ached. He'd been taking too many beatings of one kind and

another lately, he decided. He sat up, and April did likewise, crowding closer to him. He felt her shiver and he put his arm around her and his lips close to her ear and said, "It was quite a ride, wasn't it?"

She nodded, and he said, "Possibly we could work our way along these ledges, but it will be pretty risky without daylight." He left her and edged cautiously along on hands and knees, patting carefully ahead of him before he put his weight down. He crept back and said, "This one seems to peter out. We're going to have to have help to get off here. Do you want to try the river again?"

She shuddered. "I'm a good swimmer while I last, but I can't keep it up long."

He said, "If we wait, the Hourglass will come looking for me once the fire burns out. They might be able to make it along the rim by daylight; they might not be able to get anywhere near here for a week. It will depend on the fire. And they'll look in the woods for me, not in the river. There's only one thing to do. I'm going on downstream and try to get our crew. Then I can lead them to you."

She crept close to him; she crept into his arms. She said, "Don't go!" and she was a little child, terrified at being alone. She was quiet for a long time; he held her close, trying to comfort her, wondering how to comfort her. She said then: "You'll have to go, of course. I'll wait until noon tomorrow. If you're not back by then, I'll try the river before I get too weak from hunger."

He said, "Good girl!" He tried tugging at his boots; they still resisted him. He took her in his arms and kissed her, and he said, "So long," trying to make it sound cheerful. He said, "Here goes nothing," and let himself off the ledge and into the water. The current caught him, swirling him away; he had one last glimpse of the white blob that was her face, and then it was lost to his sight.

THIS TIME he tried no fighting; he let the current sweep him along and he worked only at keeping above water. To conserve his strength, he played a game with the river; he was going to outwit the

river. Sometimes floating trees swished past him; twice he was dashed against rocks and clung to them, getting his breath, getting his strength. Each time he let go reluctantly, wanting to stay fast but knowing that disaster lurked in the notion. The walls still rose above him, but the night sky was no longer fire-lighted, and he knew he must be below the timber. The walls grew farther apart and the current lost its racing buoyancy, and after an interminable time he paddled awkwardly toward the west wall and found a shore here, wide and sloping upward. He pulled himself to the shore and lay for a long time just resting.

He was far below the gorge. He knew this when he began feeling his way along the wall; it was not so precipitous here; it was broken in many places, and he clambered into one of these fissures and found stunted bushes growing from its sides, and he began clambering with the help of these. Sometimes he slipped; once he rolled a dozen yards, but there was no sheer drop, no real danger. The last lap was the hardest; the rim was a sandy cutbank, and he had to dig handholds into it and struggle to make the ascent. He might have explored and found an easier way, but this near to the top he grew impatient. At long last he pulled himself over the rim and lay upon the prairie with the stars wheeling above and the hills off to the north of him, so many miles away that he was astonished at the distance he had covered.

When he had rested, he began walking. Ballard Springs should lie about due west, the way he calculated it, and only a couple of miles away; but the darkness before dawn had closed down upon the land, and he could only go by guesswork. The fire still raged in the hills; a heavy pall of smoke hung yonder and the sky was red as from weeping, and he could orient himself by that ghastly sight. His feet pained him; riding boots were not made for walking and his were soggy from the river. He was limping badly at the end of the first mile; he was going on sheer will after that. He wanted more than anything in the world to lie down. He remembered April and kept moving.

He was a little feverish and talking to himself when he made out the blotched darkness against darkness ahead of him and identified it as the chuck-wagon. He heard the voices, and the movement of horses, and realized dazedly that they'd let the fire go out. He'd counted on there being a fire; he'd intended to follow it as a beacon and bring himself to the Hour-glass camp at the springs, and then he'd forgotten about it. He lurched forward, stumbling, trying to run. Someone said coldly, "Just stand your hand and sing out!" He saw a man shape up ahead of him, and he babbled, "It's me! Dan!" and pitched forward on his face.

He heard the rising voices around him; he could sense the excitement in the voices without getting any coherence out of the words. He felt himself lifted; many hands were at that task. Wayne's voice reached him. Wayne cried, "Dan—! Dan—!" over and over again in a shaky manner. Wayne sounded as though he were close to blubbering!

Gramp said, "Stretch him out on a blanket, you confounded idiots! Can't you see he's done in?" Gramp's voice reached into Dan, clearing the fog from his mind. Dan said, "Wayne! Didn't you send him home?"

Wayne said, "He wouldn't go. He just wouldn't go."

Dan felt himself being lowered, and a blanket was beneath him. He said, "If somebody wants to do me the biggest favor in the world, get those damn' boots off!"

They obliged him; he tried wriggling his toes, and they wriggled, and that seemed an important accomplishment. Wayne said, "What in hell happened to you? Long after you'd left, we saw the fire. Then your horse came bolting toward the Hourglass. Barney rode up toward the hills then, to try to find you. He ran into the Cantrells, They must have seen the fire, too, and got through while they could. They're somewhere on the lower pass road. They turned Barney back with bullets."

Dan said, "Here it is—all of it," and he talked then, lying still upon the blanket and letting the words run. He told of his first trip to the hills, and of Clayton

Allison and April and Lew Fanshawe. He told of the urge that had taken him back tonight; he told of the fire and those hideous hours of outrunning it, then of the leap into the river and the decision to risk the current a second time. He struggled to a sitting position when he was through, and he said, "We've got to get back to her! Don't you understand? She's there alone, on the ledge!"

WAYNE'S HANDS pressed him down. Wayne said gently, "We can't ride up there without running into the Cantrells. Barney ran into only part of the outfit—the old man and three of the boys. They must have been waiting for the others to get through. When they're all together, they're going to strike at us, sure as shooting. We've got a war to fight before we can reach the gorge."

"Then we'll carry the fight to them!" Dan babbled.

Wayne said, "You couldn't possibly find her until full daylight; you know that. Take it easy, Dan. You've got to rest. Can't you get that through your head? You've got to rest!"

Wayne was right, Dan decided. He was holding onto the feathery edge of nothing. He let himself go back upon the blanket; he let himself relax, and the need for rest flowed over him and engulfed him, and for a long while he was conscious of the muted murmur of voices around him, and then he slept. He slept until daylight beat upon his eyes, but even then he might not have awakened except for the pressure of Wayne's hand upon his shoulder. Opening his eyes and looking up, he saw the sky overcast by a gray pall with the sun floating behind this hazy curtain, red and fuzzy. He saw Wayne's thin, drawn face, but he saw a peace in Wayne now, a placidity.

Wayne said, "Time to get up, Dan. The Cantrells are coming."

Wayne said it so quietly that it took a full moment for the import of it to reach into Dan. He sat up on the blanket; he felt reinvigorated, he felt ready to cope with the world. He looked again at Wayne who crouched beside him; Wayne had a gunbelt latched about his middle. Dan said,

"Rustle me a spare gun, will you, Wayne. I left mine up at the pass." Wayne nodded and walked toward the chuck-wagon, and Dan glanced about for his boots, but he couldn't find them.

Someone said, "Look at 'em come!"

Dan lifted his eyes to the north, and there, across the flat expanse, a knot of riders came sweeping through the sage, rising and falling, bobbing ever nearer. They came with no thunder to them but the thunder of hoofs, and then, the distance shortened to six-shooter range, they began a wild shouting and a ragged firing; guns were in their hands and smoke came from those guns; a bullet pinged into the canvas tilts of the chuck-wagon, a horse squealed in pain. An Hourglass rider, standing not far from Dan's blanket, half turned, his hand clasping against his ribs. He brought his hand away, and there was blood on his fingers; he stared at this in shocked surprise.

This was it, Dan thought. This was really it!

Pandemonium took hold of the Hourglass, but there was little panic in it. Men were running to horses which had been saddled in anticipation of this moment. Men knelt behind the wheels of the chuck-wagon and rested rifles on the spokes and made those rifles talk. Charley Wong took a frying pan and began beating upon it with a ladle, hopping about in a frenzy of excitement as he did so. What was the matter with Charley, Dan wondered? Was that the way they made war in China?

Wayne came running back and pressed a gun and belt into Dan's hands. Dan flung the belt about his middle and caught the end and latched it, feeling detached from all this, feeling very much a part of it. Gramp cried, "Somebody help me up into a saddle, damn it!" Someone boosted him, and he was a horse. So was Wayne. Dan saw a mount rearing with trailing reins, gun-shy and was ready to bolt. He got into the saddle and got the gun into his hand and wheeled the horse, facing north; and the Cantrells were almost upon them.

They were attacking just like Indians, Dan reflected, waiting for daylight and coming with a whoop and a holler. They

were showing no more sense than a bunch of Sioux! Then he realized there was no choice for the Cantrells; if they brought a war they had to bring it in this fashion. Sage offered little shelter; the open sweep of land lent itself to no strategy, no cunning. It was roar up a-shooting; it was make this bold play and chance the odds and win or lose on the one throw.

There were nine of them. That would be the old man—you could tell him by the beard—and his five sons, and three riders who drew Tomahawk pay and gave the Tomahawk allegiance. Dan remembered Lew Fanshawe, and his certainty that Fanshawe was a Cantrell man, and he looked for the gun-hawk, but Fanshawe was not here. Nine . . . There were ten in the Hourglass bunch, but that was counting Gramp.

Dan looked for Gramp; Gramp was kneeing his horse out front; Gramp had a rifle to his cheek, and his snowy hair flew in the wind, and the rifle made its sullen sound, and a Tomahawk rider threw up his hands and fell backward from his horse. Gramp had been right! There'd been this one last fight left in him, and he'd known it! A bullet plucked at Dan's sleeve; he beat against the horse with his stockinged heels and charged forward with Hourglass riders flanking him. Hourglass and Tomahawk came together and there was the shock of horses striking against horses; there were shouts and curses, and powder-smoke in the air, and pain and death, and the sullen sky overhead, and the contested water behind them. Dan saw Wayne. Wayne had crashed against one of Cantrell's boys; Wayne was driving at this one with a gun-barrel, knocking him from his horse. Wayne's face was a fighting man's face; it was their father's face. Dan thought: *I hope Gramp sees him! I hope Gramp sees him!*

Dan was into the thick of it himself. Out of the boiling dust he saw a rider loom close by; he saw the man's contorted face and recognized him as Mace Cantrell. He felt a kindness toward Mace; he had fought Mace one way and bested him, but that had earned him Mace's hate. Mace struck at him with a gun-barrel; Dan swerved sideways in the saddle, feeling

the blow along his shoulder. He brought up his own gun and clouted at Mace and missed him. Mace triggered; the flame exploded in Dan's face, the powder scorched his cheek, and he heard the whisper of the bullet. He fired then, blindly and without aim, and knew that he'd missed. An Hourglass rider nearby lifted his gun, and the thunder of it was a roar in Dan's ear, and Mace seemed to dissolve before him and was gone down into the dust.

AFTER THAT the fight was a whirlwind maelstrom without sense or pattern where a man went shooting and clouting and looked twice to tell friend from foe. It wasn't a fight; it was a roar in the ears. It was brief, and it was endless, and it was suddenly over when the Tomahawk broke and the remnants went tailing it to the north. Dan drew hard upon his reins then, fighting his horse to a stand, and he looked around him in the settling dust and there were men upon the prairie, some stirring and some not. He looked for Wayne; Wayne was in a saddle, his face powder-scorched, his face triumphant. He looked for Gramp and found him kneeling beside a fallen giant whose rigid beard was pointed to the sky.

Dan got out of the saddle and lurched over to where Gramp was, and Old Man Cantrell looked up from where he lay and said very plainly, "Damn you! Damn all of you!" and, saying it, died. Gramp said softly, "I got him. I got him, Daniel. I guess I knew from the first day he came to the hills, so long, long ago, that someday it would end like this."

He looked old and tired; he glanced toward the south. "I want to go home," he said.

Dan looked down upon Old Man Cantrell, seeing the blood upon him, seeing the sightless, staring eyes, and he was suddenly sick. A bullet had done this—a bullet you could hide in your watch pocket or hold in the palm of your hand. A little bit of lead, and this was the end to Cantrell's scheming and his selfishness. And, thinking of this, Dan remembered Gramp's ancient belief that Hourglass calves had gone into the Tomahawk's gath-

ers; he remembered Cantrell's arrogant deadline and Cantrell's ruthless challenge about taking over the springs by force, and he knew that Gramp had been right, always, and that there could have been no other ending.

Wayne came limping up, blood on his trouser leg. To Dan's quick show of concern, Wayne shook his head. "Only a scratch," he said.

Dan smiled and said, "You did yourself proud today, Wayne."

Wayne said very solemnly, "Because of you, kid. Because of your kind of guts. Or maybe it was because of Gramp—him and his insisting that he be in on the fight."

Gramp looked up at him and grinned. "I should have used my cane on you as well as on Dan."

Dan looked across the prairie; far to the north the Tomahawk riders were still fleeing. He said, "What's the tally, Wayne?"

Wayne said, "The old man and Mace and Hob and Rufe got it. The other two boys and the hired hands didn't have enough stomach to keep going after that. They've lost face on this range forever, and I'd guess that the fire wiped out their ranch."

"And the Hourglass?"

Wayne's face stiffened. "Pete's dead," he said. "Three other fellows besides myself got nicked. We'll give Doc Church a busy afternoon."

Barney Partridge came bow-legging up; it occurred to Dan that he hadn't glimpsed Barney in the fighting, yet the mark of battle were upon Barney—a smudge of gunpowder on one cheek, a cut over one eye—and he wore them proudly. Dan grinned, raising a hand to Barney's shoulder, and he said, "Wayne will have to be getting to Doc Church and taking the other boys along. The rest can see that Gramp gets to the ranch, once the burying is done. Me, I'm riding north again. You can do me a favor, Barney, if you'll rustle up every lariat around the camp."

"I'll do that," Partridge said. "And I'll ride with you. You've been doing too much riding alone lately." He grinned and spat. "You can put your boots on now,

Daniel. The fight's over and there's no chance of your dying. The Hourglass rules this range from here on out."

XVIII

THEY TOILED TOWARD THE pass, the two of them, riding single-file beneath the bleak sky with the sun beating pitilessly through the haze and the heat intensified by that low, gray curtain. They rode warily, remembering that the fleeing remnants of the Tomahawk had bolted in this northerly direction, though Barney Partridge had shown no real concern about the enemy.

"There's a last fight for every man," he'd told Dan when they'd been stirrup to stirrup on the flats. "Your gramp had his today. But he won his fight, so he'll sun himself on the gallery the rest of his days and remember. The Cantrells lost theirs. They'll want no more of this range, and it will be a long time before they'll lift a gun in anger again. They got a bellyful, Daniel."

Dan had nodded. What did he care about the Cantrells? He was remembering April on the ledge. He was remembering that she meant to dare the current if he wasn't back to her by noon.

Where Tomahawk Pass tilted upward they came into the first of the forest; the fire had swept on to the west, leaving a dead and blackened stand of skeleton timber in its wake, leaving desolation. The ash was knee-deep; the ash stirred to the breeze and raised a ghostly mist; no bird sang, no cricket chirped, no life showed itself. Dan looked and shuddered, seeing a nightmare land. Partridge said mournfully, "All that timber shot to hell 'n' gone."

Higher in the hills the black pall blotted out the peaks; yonder, miles away, the fire still raged.

The road was passable; sometimes, though, when they began skirting the gorge they came to where a tree had fallen in blazing ruin across the road and burned itself out. Most of these they were able to ride around; some they snaked aside with lariats. An echo-less silence held the blighted land; the roar of the river was

loud in their ears. Partridge said, "Recollect where she might be?"

"I can only guess," Dan said, frowning. "Remember the rock that sticks out over the gorge like a thumb a couple of miles up? We made our jump from there. No telling how far downstream we went. But I'd guess she's somewhere along about here."

He dismounted and crawled to the lip of the gorge and looked down; he could see the racing river and the wall; he could see the ledges above the water line, but these ledges were bare, and his view was limited. He drew his gun and fired into the air three times, spacing out the shots. He listened then, hoping she might have heard and called out, but he supposed her voice wouldn't have lifted above the Purgatory's clamor. Still, he repeated his signal from time to time in the next hour as they moved slowly along the rim, peering over its edge intermittently.

Once Partridge held up his hand for silence. "Listen!" he said. "A shot! Somebody heard our signal and answered. To the west, I'd say, and higher up. At Digby's place."

"Clayton Allison," Dan guessed and was not interested.

They continued their searching; they fired again but there was no answering shot from the north. Dan watched the sun and saw it pass zenith and tasted despair; and then, upon his knees at the rim again, he looked down and saw her almost directly below him. He shouted, "April——! April——!" incoherently; she didn't hear him. He picked up a fist-sized rock and tossed it outward and saw it drop into the water near the ledge, dashing spray. She stood and raised her eyes then, searching for whoever had thrown the rock. He leaned far out and waved his arm frantically. She waved in return. He crawled back and hurried to his horse. "Barney," he cried, "give me a hand with the ropes! I've found her! Do you hear? I've found her!"

They'd brought every lariat they could find; they began knotting these lariats together, making one long rope out of them, and in the end of this Dan fastened a loop. He found a place along the rim where

the rock was smooth and there was no danger of the rope's sawing in two, and he flung the rope over and watched it snake far out and fall back against the near wall. The rope reached down to the ledge. Partridge fastened the end to his saddle-horn and Dan said, "I'm coming down."

"No need for it," Partridge said. "If she can reach the rope, we can haul her up."

"I'm going down," Dan said again.

Wrapping his hands around the rope, he swung himself out over the rim. He braced his feet against the wall and let himself down slowly; there was little resiliency in him; he'd kept himself going too long and too hard. He put a brake upon his patience, making the descent carefully; he tried not to look below. At last he was upon the ledge. April was to him instantly; she looked beaten; she looked done in. He took her in his arms and held her for a moment, stroking her hair. He said, "I was afraid I wouldn't find you in time."

She said, "I thought about trying to swim it, but I knew you'd come."

"We'll get out of here fast," he said evenly.

HE DROPPED the loop over her head and shoulders and drew it up snugly under her arms. He looked up; Partridge was leaning over the rim; Dan lifted his arm and signaled to Hourglass's foreman, and Partridge vanished, and shortly the slack went out of the rope and April began rising. Dan watched as best he could; he saw April reach the rim and Barney's hands help her. Shortly the rope came snaking down again, and he caught it and fastened the loop under his own arms and felt the tug of the cow pony at the other end of it and went spinning upward. Both Barney and April were waiting to help him; Partridge had snubbed the rope around a tree and the cowpony stood off at a distance, up the road, its feet braced.

Dan got to a stand and removed the rope and said, "Barney, this is April Allison."

Partridge fumbled off his hat and extended his hand, admiration in his grin. "I've seen you before, but never close up.

You're a looker, even with your hair all stringy. Pleased to meet you."

Dan put his arm around her, steadying her. "We've food in the saddlebags. You must be famished."

She said, "More scared than starved. Time dragged down there." She shuddered. "I kept worrying about you—and him." "Fanshawe—?"

She shook her head. "My father. I remembered the fire and wondered about him."

Dan said, "We'll go looking for him. Somebody signaled us a while ago."

She ate, and while she ate she talked; it was personal talk and Partridge wandered off, displaying an intent interest in the rim and the skeleton woods beyond. She told Dan of her parting with her father and her hurrying to Fanshawe and the bargain she'd intended striking with Fanshawe. She told all this tonelessly; Dan squatted near her and told her of his last meeting with Fanshawe. She said, "He doesn't matter—he never did really. He was someone who was kind to me because I was useful to him. I guess I was hungry for kindness. It's my dad I'm concerned about. Whatever he did, he must have had a reason for it. I've had a lot of time to think about that."

"We'll find him," Dan promised.

He helped her up into his own saddle when she was finished eating; he mounted behind her, and Partridge, who'd coiled up the long rope and hung it from his saddlehorn, mounted too, and they rode onward up the road. Again they had to work around obstructions; they came to the jutting rock where April and Dan had made their jump; they looked, and April shuddered and said, "I don't think I could do it twice. Not even with you."

Dan dismounted and walked out upon the rock. "Here's your boots and my gun," he said and picked up these articles and put them in his saddlebag.

Beyond the north line of Hourglass's holdings, they came upon a miracle; here the barrier of lodgepole pine still stood thick to the left of the thrail; some vagary of the fire had spared this section of the hills, burning out the timber below it and to the west of it. They found the road

Sam Digby had built in from the pass to his ranch; they threaded along this road; there was heat and utter silence and a sense of oppression in the air, but the fire hadn't been here. They came into the stump-mottled clearing where the sagging, peeled-pole fence enclosed the sprawling log house, and here they found Allison. He lay in his yard; he lay flat upon his back, his arms flung wide; and April saw him thus and moaned and came down from the horse and ran to him, falling on her knees beside him and cradling his head in her lap.

Dan and Partridge, dismounting, came forward, and Dan saw the blood upon Allison's shirt front. He said gently, "We'll get him into the house." He saw that Allison's overalls were worn through at the knees, and he wondered how far the man had crawled.

Allison's six-shooter lay near his right hand. Partridge picked it up and jacked the used shells out of it and said, "Empty. That's why he didn't signal more than once."

They took hold of Allison and carried him to the house, April hurrying ahead and opening the door. She said, "Put him in my bedroom. Over here." Silence was in this house, silence and heat and faded carpeting and home-made furniture. She swept the curtain aside, and they brought Allison into the room with the clipping-covered walls and laid him upon the bed.

He opened his eyes then; he looked about him and said wearily, "I wondered if anybody would ever come."

Dan ripped apart the man's shirt and had a look at the wound, and Partridge, peering, said, "Reckon I should ride for Doc Church?" But there was no hope in Partridge's voice.

Allison said, "April . . ." and reached out his hand and she took it. Allison looked at the two men and said, "Don't go. I want to talk while there's time."

Dan said gently, "I want to know who did this to you, but don't force yourself. Take it easy, Allison."

But he was thinking that Allison was as good as dead and that the man knew it. Allison had something he wanted off his

chest. Maybe the greatest kindness would be to listen; Allison would be gone long before anybody could reach Ballardton. It was courtesy to a dead man.

Allison said, "I owe you the truth, Ballard. I owe it to you because I might have murdered you, if it hadn't been for her. You're a rich man, Ballard, if you only know it. I've got to tell you about that—while I can."

Dan said, "The Purgatory?"

ALLISON tried to nod. "I'm an engineer. I've been making a hydrographic survey. Maybe you guessed as much when you saw the map out on the table the other day. I was afraid you had. I was afraid the whole scheme had gone smash. A dam on the Purgatory, down there in the gorge, would furnish electrical power and act as a reservoir to irrigate the entire range. My notes are here in the house, and any engineer can translate them for you. I prowled the country and found my site; I took soundings and drew a cross section of the river at the point of the dam site. I found the flow with a current meter. It's a natural, Ballard."

"What did you expect to gain?" Dan asked. "The Hourglass holds title to all of Purgatory Gorge."

"You were to be ruined and then bought out without your knowing what you were giving up," Allison said. "That was *his* scheme. With this drought it wasn't hard to stir up Old Man Cantrell to make trouble; that only took a word or two. *He* thought you'd sell out cheap, either before the fight or after. He's the one who guessed the river had possibilities for a dam site: He looked for an engineer who was down on his luck, one he could twist around his finger. He found me."

Bitterness brought the old cynicism into Allison's voice. "He found the right man for his crooked scheming. He arranged for me to take over the Digby place as a blind. All I was supposed to do was make the survey; he'd handle the rest." Allison sighed and began to cough.

Dan's voice turned cold. "Now I see it. Ransome Price. He offered to buy the Hourglass for some Eastern investors. No wonder you jumped me and hog-tied me

when you found me looking at that map. And then you rode to tell him I was wise to his scheme."

"He said you had to die, Ballard. He sent me back here to kill you. I might have done it, but you'd got away. Then he sent me a note, saying it didn't matter. The Hourglass had defied the Tomahawk and it meant war. He was sure you Ballards would be driven out. And he was sure you'd be willing to sell at any price, once the Cantrells had beaten you. That was Price's way, to work one ranch against the other and pick up the leavings."

Dan said, "The war's over, Allison. The Cantrells have lost. And so has Price."

Allison said, "I was willing to have a hand in a swindle, if that's what getting the Purgatory meant. I didn't know I'd be expected to turn murderer before I was through. But here's the important thing, and I want you to know it. At the showdown I lined up with the Hourglass. I'm the man who set the woods afire."

"You started the fire!"

"My idea was to set a strip ablaze between the Tomahawk and the lower country. That way I hoped to keep the Cantrells from getting at the springs. But they saw the fire and knew they had to get through before it spread. They came riding, and I heard them coming. I made a stand against them, but I'm no man with a gun. They shot me down and rode on, leaving me. I managed to crawl back here. That's all of it."

Dan said aghast, "You stood up against the Cantrells *alone!*" He remembered Old Man Cantrell, his stiffening beard pointing at the sky; he remembered Cantrell with no regret.

Allison said, "You can thank her for anything I tried to do at the last." He looked up at April. "She walked out on me. Before she did, he made me see myself as I really was."

HE KEPT his eyes on her, and he said, "I want you to know this, my dear: I didn't want to do murder. That's why I had to get drunk first. I argued with Price; I told him there must be another way. He insisted that Ballard had to die. I refused to do the killing. Then he told

me that he'd been standing near the jail the night Lew Fanshawe was snatched away. He told me he'd seen *you* ride away with Fanshawe. He claimed that Fanshawe was wanted for murder down in Utah and that it would go hard against you if the law knew you'd sprung Fanshawe from jail. He said he'd take the truth to the law if I didn't ride back here and take care of Ballard."

April came down to her knees beside the bed; she leaned close to her father and said, "Then it was partly for me? You were going to do it to protect me?"

He said, "I've been a poor father, but you counted for something with me, always. And when you told me how you felt about Ballard, I changed sides because of it. I wanted to do that for you; I wasn't sure you'd ever know about it. I thought you were gone forever."

He looked at Ballard and he said, "Take very good care of her, my friend. Very good care."

He looked at April, and his eyes were glazed. He called a name; it wasn't her name; it was another name, and Dan remembered that photograph in the engineering book; he remembered that woman spoiled by a knowledge of her own beauty. Allison called that name and tried drawing April closer to him, he stiffened convulsively, and the candle of his life guttered out.

It took them all a full moment to realize he was gone, and then Dan thought: *He was going on sheer will at the last.* Allison had had to tell the truth, and he had held on till the truth was out. Thinking this, Dan clawed off a sombrero he'd borrowed in the Hourglass camp and worn on this ride.

April came to a stand. She was dry-eyed, and he wondered if she understood, and he said gently, "We'll see that he's properly buried."

Still she didn't cry; the tears would come later. She said, an edge of hysteria to her voice, "The grave's already dug. The one he dug for you. Remember, I told you about that down by the gorge."

Dan said, "We'll leave you alone with him for a while."

He came through the outer room to the

porch; Partridge came with him and they stood silently together, Dan's jaw rigid with the run of his thoughts. Dan said then, "Will you stay here and attend to the burial, Barney? Me, I've got one more ride to make."

Partridge said, "Price——?"

"Price!" Dan said.

"Don't tally him as too easy," Partridge said. "No man's ever seen a gun on him, but he carries one sometimes, and he's practiced a lot. Once I watched him from the rim of the coulee, months ago. He was puncturing some tin cans."

Dan said, "I wouldn't want him to be too easy."

He crossed the yard and climbed to his horse; he wheeled the horse about and sent it along the road leading back to Tomahawk Pass. He rode with his thoughts on the people he'd left behind him; he rode with his thoughts miles ahead on the man he would face before sundown. He remembered Gramp and the three things Gramp had told him he'd have to taste before he'd really have lived. He'd found a cause worth dying for—he'd wanted peace along the Purgatory, or, failing that, the downfall of the Cantrells. He'd found love. He'd thought sometimes that he'd hated Fanshawe, but Fanshawe wasn't worthy of hate. He'd pitted himself against the Cantrells, but even that had been impersonal. But now there was Price. And now there was hate. Thus had he found the last of the three.

XIX

HE HIT HOURGLASS IN LATE afternoon, riding hard. He tarried here only long enough to change horses. Wayne and the wounded had not yet come back from town; the chuck-wagon stood in the yard, and some of the men were in the bunkhouse. They had done a burying job at Ballard Springs — Dan had seen the mounds as he'd come past—but they'd brought Pete back to the home ranch; they had Pete laid out in the bunkhouse with a blanket over him, and they would do a proper job for him later. Dan asked about Gramp. Gramp was in his room and had been sleeping the last time,

anybody had looked in on him. Gramp could rest; his work was done.

A fresh horse under him, Dan humped up over the caprock rim and lined out for the town; he could see the buildings far south across the flats; he could see the high lift of the church spire, and he remembered the wedding that had been postponed. He thought of Cynthia and recalled her saying, "Not long ago I said that you seemed to attract violence. Now I know that you go out looking for it." He reflected grimly that she ought to see him now!

This side of the prairie dog village, he met Wayne and the three wounded Hourglass men who had gone into Ballardton with Wayne; Dan had watched the group draw closer to him; he had recognized them and thus rode with no fear. They all drew rein, and Dan saw that Wayne was keeping one foot out of the stirrup, holding it stiff, and Dan said, "What did Doc Church think?"

"He claims we'll all live," Wayne said and smiled. His eyes searched Dan's. You found her, kid?"

"She's up at Digby's place. Barney's with her. Clayton Allison is dead, Wayne. Before he died, he talked. I'm on my way to hunt down Ransome Price. He's the one who was behind all the trouble on this range. Barney will tell you the whole of it."

Wayne eyed him thoughtfully. "I'll send the boys on to the ranch, Dan. You're out to make a fight. I'll be at your back when you do."

Dan thought: *He's found himself today, and he'll never run from trouble again,* and a surging pride was in him. He reined closer and lifted a hand to Wayne's shoulder, gripping it hard. He said, "This is a one-man job, Wayne, and I'm the Ballard with a whole skin today. Better go on to the ranch. There won't be much to this."

But he was remembering what Barney Partridge had told him about Ransome Price's secret skill with a gun.

Wayne said, "I guess I wouldn't be much real help at that. I'm going to have to be using Gramp's cane for a week. But at least the odds won't be stacked against you in town. Abe Potter told me that

the Cantrell boys and their help rode through around noon. After the fight at the springs, they must have made a wide circle through the foothills and lined out for the town. They stopped only long enough to buy grub for their saddlebags, then headed on south."

Dan said, "I'll be getting along."

Wayne said, "Good luck, kid," and it was the way he said it that made-them brothers again.

Dan jogged his mount and skirted the group, giving a wave to the men who'd been wounded today for Hourglass. Not looking back, he rode onward; he saw the shadows of the sage clumps grow long and cool and purple; he saw the day die, and he came to Ballardton in the last light and rode along the grayed street and tied up his horse before the Rialto and went jingling his spurs along the board walk on the far side of the street, until he came to Ransome Price's office.

The little building was locked, but there was no BACK SOON sign upon the door. Frowning, Dan turned away; he saw the portly figure of Abe Potter coming along. He greeted Potter, and the town marshal sighed and said, "A little excitement out your way today, I hear tell."

Dan said, "Work for you, Abe?"

"I'll send a report to the sheriff. I talked to Wayne this afternoon. It's just routine. The Tomahawk got what it asked for. I see that smoke's still standing over the hills. I reckon the fire wiped out Cantrell's spread. What do you suppose started it?"

Dan shrugged. "We'll never know," he said and reflected that this was the second time he'd lied to the law for the sake of an Allison.

"I wish it would rain," Potter said.

"Seen Ransome Price?"

Potter thumbed back his sombrero and thought carefully. "Not lately," he said. "Now wait a minute. He was in the Chinaman's. Having a mighty early supper, I thought."

Dan said, "Thanks," and went on down the street; he passed Lily Greer's millinery shop; he came to the restaurant and opened its screen door. The smell of food smote him; only then did he remember that he was very hungry. He looked at the row

of stools along the counter; he looked at the tables. Quite a few men were here at this hour; Price was not one of them. He said, "Anybody seen Ransome Price?"

THEY HAD STARED at him as he stood framed in the doorway; he'd forgotten about his battered face, his singed and shapeless clothes. But their stares held not surprise but respect, a new evaluating of him, and he guessed that the story of Hourglass's fight had gone the rounds. A man who smelled strong of horses said, "You'll find him down at my livery stable. He keeps a horse there, and he came in just as I was going out to eat. Better hurry. He's taking himself a trip; he wanted me to saddle up for him, but I didn't have time."

Dan said, "I'm obliged."

He about-faced and headed up the board walk; he came past the Palace and there were no Tomahawk horses at the hitchrail, and it seemed odd to think there would never again be Tomahawk horses there. He went on; he remembered that the last time he'd walked this way had been when he'd gone toward the jail-building in the hope of saving Lew Fanshawe from a lynch mob. That had been just a few nights ago; that had been an eternity ago. Soon he was beyond the hub of the town's activity, and here was the feed and livery stable. Before this very door he'd found Price lounging that night, lounging and smoking a cigar and making talk of what fools men were.

Now the door was wide open, and he paused before it and lifted his gun from leather and let it drop back into the holster. He took a scraping step and framed himself in the doorway; he stepped into a well of quietness lighted by a single lantern set upon an upturned box. Back yonder were stalls and darkness and the slow munching of horses, the restless stomping of horses, these things and a movement made by a man.

Dan said softly, "Price——?" Ransome "Price——?"

He saw the suitcase then; it was set upon the floor near one of the rear stalls; it hadn't yet been tied to a saddle. This wasn't to have been a short trip to talk

over a land deal with some drought-ridden rancher. Price intended shaking the dust of the Purgatory from his boots. Price moved into the cone of light cast by the lantern; he stood there with his sensuous face drawn tight by some inward strain, his eyes expressionless. He said, "Well, Ballard——?"

Dan said, "Leaving us?"

"Some business in Helena," Price said. "There's no train for two days and stage connections are poor."

Dan said, "You might do business here. It's lucky I caught you in time. You came to Wayne with a proposition, Price. I'd like to talk about that. I'd like to know if you still want to buy the Hourglass."

Price sucked in a hard breath. "You don't mean it!"

Dan said, "You've heard. You know we beat the Cantrells today. You know we don't need a way out."

"That's it," Price said.

Suddenly Dan was through with this kind of talking; he had thought to play cat-and-mouse with this man, he had relished the thought, but now there was in him no desire but to have this over and done with. A harshness crept into his voice, and he said, "No, the Hourglass isn't for sale. We'll hold onto it and find some Eastern investors who'll be willing to put a dam on the Purgatory on a shares basis. The same kind of deal you had fixed up when you set out to lay your hands on the Hourglass. It's a natural, that river. Clayton Allison said so."

In a flat voice Price said, "So you know!"

"Everything," Dan said. "You were afraid I did. That's why you're running out. You showed your cards when you rode to Ballard Springs last night; you thought the Tomahawk would put us under and it wouldn't matter. But the Ballards have won; the Ballards are kingpins on this range now and forever, and you lined yourself against us. That means you're through here. You couldn't do much business on this range now——not even honest business. So you're tucking your tail between your legs and running."

Price said, "Is that all?"

The hate grew in Dan and consumed

him, and he remembered Gramp saying, "Did you ever hate a man so much that nothing could satisfy you but to lay your bare hands on him?"

He said, "Only this, Price. The Cantrells wanted something that wasn't theirs, but they were willing to run a risk to get it. I can respect them for that. But you were the kind who played safe. You prodded a range war into starting; you were willing to set neighbor against neighbor and see the whole range running red just because it would give you your opportunity. You were willing to climb over a pile of dead men and not give a damn about them. I couldn't hate the Cantrells. But I want you to know that I hate you. And I want you to know why!"

Price said savagely, "To hell with you, Ballard!" and raised his hand toward the shoulder holster he wore. Dan saw that gesture; he'd been waiting for it, and his hand jerked toward his own gun, a quick, stabbing movement, and he was remembering Gramp and the badgers again. The bullet came; it breathed hotly past Dan's face, but it didn't come from Price's gun. A shadowy stall to Dan's left had blossomed flame; a man was in there and triggering, and even before Price shouted: "*Fanshawe!*" Dan knew and understood.

THERE WERE the two of them, and they had him in a crossfire, and with the knowledge of this he went down to the spongy dirt of the runway and rolled, fring as he rolled. The lantern blinked with the concussion, wavering and almost going out. Price's gun was speaking; the bullets lifted the dirt and flung it into Dan's face, but in Dan was a thought which he held to with cool calculation. *One at a time!* He blazed in the direction of that stall to the left; he fired at the flame of Fanshawe's gun; and Fanshawe came lurching out into the light, the gun still in his hand, the gun a dead weight in his hand.

Fanshawe fell heavily, dropping across Dan's legs, and Fanshawe was dead when he fell.

Now Dan turned his gun, seeking out Price and knowing a frantic desperation because the weight of Fanshawe pinned

him to the floor and kept him from rolling. Horses were pitching in the stalls; the one Price had saddled kicked out, the hoofs grazing Price who took a staggering sideward step; and that gave Dan his moment. Price fired again; the bullet tugged at Dan's shirt; but Dan put a cool precision to his shooting now; he got Price in the sight and triggered and saw Price's heavy gold watch chain leap, and Price stepped backward as though he were impaled. Price looked at him; Price's eyes were cold and fathomless, and then the intelligence was gone out of them. Price's knees gave beneath him and he went down and lay in a tumbled heap like a pile of discarded clothes.

Dan got to his feet and stood unsteadily for a moment; the smell of burnt powder was heavy in here; he thought he heard the thud of boots along the board walk. That would be men drawn by the sounds of gunfire. He crossed over and looked down at Price, and Price was quite dead. He remembered himself saying to Gramp. "When I leave a dead man behind me, I want to feel in my bones that he deserved to die." He looked at Price, and there was no regret in him.

He went to where Fanshawe lay. Fanshawe's lips were skinned back in a grimace, showing those teeth so startlingly white and perfect. This grimace Fanshawe would carry with him through eternity. Dan thought: "I should have known," and found that he'd said it aloud. Fanshawe had heard that a war was shaping along the Purgatory, and he'd come to hire himself out to the Hourglass, but Barney had sent him packing. So he'd found someone else to buy his guns. And with this knowledge, Dan understood many things.

He knew now why Ransome Price had stood in this livery stable's doorway, listening to the sounds of building fury the night Fanshawe's life had been in jeopardy, listening and pretending an indifference to Fanshawe's fate. He knew why Price had held his tongue about the truth of Fanshawe's escape. And he knew why Fanshawe had tried from the first to pick a fight with him; Fanshawe had had a personal hate, but Fanshawe had also wanted Dan dead because Price had wanted him

dead. Wayne, standing alone, was to have been easier to handle.

Fanshawe's horse was here in the livery stable, impounded by Abe Potter after Fanshawe's arrest the day of the wedding. Fanshawe was to have ridden out with Price, and Fanshawe had faded into the shadows at the sound of Dan beyond the doorway when Dan had first come here tonight, for Fanshawe was a wanted man. There was another horse saddled, too. Dan looked at it, seeing the gentleness of the beast, seeing the side-saddle.

He walked to the doorway and through it. He felt the night air against him and it was good; the day's heat was gone, the day's violence was done. A group of men was coming on the run, and one of them was Abe Potter. Potter saw Dan and came to a heavy stop and said, "What is it?"

"Two dead men inside," Dan said. "You'll find guns in their hands. That makes it fair fight. If you look in the alleys, I think you'll find a saddler with Sam Digby's old brand; one of the fellows inside wanted to ride out on his own horse. You can tack this onto that report you're sending the sheriff. It's all of the same cloth."

Potter dragged his sleeve across his forehead. He said wearily, "Is there no end to it?"

Dan said, "Don't worry. It's all finished now. All that the law will have anything to do with anyway."

XX

WHEN HE GOT UP THE STREET as far as the Rialto, he climbed upon his waiting horse and jerked at the tie-rope, then sat his saddle indecisively for a long moment, knowing the one thing that had yet to be done and hating the thought of it. He got the horse into motion, letting it take a slow walk, and kneed it along the street until he was beyond the busier part of town and the buildings thinned out and the better residences stood neatly spaced apart.

He came to the cottage of Doc Church and dismounted in the shadow of the giant cottonwood, looping the reins over

the picket fence. He walked slowly to the porch and rapped upon the door; the waiting wasn't long; the door opened and Doc Church stood there. He looked and saw Dan, and surprise made Church a little foolish for a moment. He said, "Come in." but there wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm to it.

Dan said, "Cynthia—?" and then, peering past Church, he saw her.

She sat here in the parlor, and she was part of its studied elegance; she fitted well against this background of plush furniture and Battenberg lace curtains and red drapes held by white, tasseled cords. She wore that long, trailing dress of rustling stuff she'd worn the day he'd come home, but over it was a linen duster, and her hat and veil were in place, and on the floor near her feet a suitcase rested. She had looked up eagerly as the door had opened; her eyes were alive for a moment, and then the expectancy that made them alive was gone out of her.

Dan said, "You thought I was Price."

It wasn't a question and it called for no answer. Doc Church stood, a man awkward and embarrassed, and Dan said, "It's all right, Doc. We talked it out under the cottonwood a few nights ago, and there were no strings on her. But Price won't be coming. He's dead."

He hadn't meant to give it to her quite that way; he saw her reel, but she didn't faint. Dan said, "I meant to come here tonight anyway, to ask you to release me from whatever was left of a promise between us. I guess that was already taken care of."

Cynthia stared at him and her voice was empty. "He came to me this afternoon and asked me to marry him. We were to be married in Helena; he had to leave quickly. Some business, he said." Her voice broke and grief had its way with her. "Dan! Dan!" she cried. "Why did you do it?"

"Not because of you," he said gently. He remembered Fanshawe; he wondered if Price had meant that Fanshawe was to ride away with them, too; he wondered if Fanshawe was to have fitted into some other scheme on some other range. "Perhaps I did you a favor," he said. "There

may be a day when you'll believe that."

He turned toward the door; there was no more to be said. Cynthia looked at him; she had herself in hand again, and she said, "This is good-by between you and me, Dan?" In the glow of a centering lamp, her face stood etched in all its perfection; there was hope in her eyes and a shrewd calculation. Odd, Dan thought, that he should remember at this moment the flowers she'd carried the day of the postponed wedding—the artificial flowers—and that he should remember, too, the townsman he'd once struck because the fellow had intimated that a girl was no fool who married a half-interest in the Hourglass. But he only said, "Whenever you looked at me alive, you'd remember him dead. Yes, it's good-by, Cynthia."

He stepped out through the door and Doc Church followed after him. He got to the horse and stood with one hand upon the horn, and Church's face was lost in the shadow of the cottonwood. Church said, "I'm not asking you how it happened, Daniel. I'll hear soon enough, I suppose. I never felt sure of him. I want you to know that."

Dan said gently, "On the outside he looked like her kind of man. I can understand that. And his prospects were good. I hold no grudge. She's ready for traveling. Send her away for a while, Doc. That's what she needs."

"Perhaps," Church said. "She has an aunt in Indiana."

Dan stepped up into saddle. Cynthia would never come back, he knew. This land had been too much for her, and she'd find her kind of people and her way of living somewhere else, and she'd never come back. He thought of Price and he wondered then if Cynthia was another reason why Lew Fanshawe's gun had been hired against him; Dan's wedding might have come off if it hadn't been for Fanshawe. Had Price really loved her? Was that why he'd been going to take her with him on the ride out, or was it a shred of triumph he'd hoped to take, the woman who was supposed to belong to a Ballard? Dan turned this over in his mind and found that it didn't matter.

He lifted his hands in salute to Doc

Church and went riding back up the street.

THE AFTERMATH of released tension left him almost sick; he saw the Rialto again and wondered if he should buy himself a drink, but he knew he didn't want a drink. He took the road north, building a cigarette as he rode along, and he got some comfort from the tobacco. He looked ahead to the lifting hills; their high crests were blotted out by smoke. He rode numbly, almost too tired to think, and it came to him then, the full realization. He was free! Free of everything. Free of violence and bloodshed and worry, free of his promise to Cynthia, free to take up the dreams that were left off when he'd come home and found this mess. It was a good thought, and he carried it with him across the miles to the Hourglass.

Light showed in the ranch-house when he came down off the caprock rim, and there was activity in the yard, even at this late hour; the crew had a sleeplessness in them and he could understand that, remembering how he'd wanted a drink and yet not wanted it. He gave his horse to the first man who shaped up, and he climbed the gallery then and stepped into the big room. Wayne was here, seated in a chair with his hurt leg propped stiffly before him, and Barney Partridge was here, too, seated in a chair with his hurt leg propped stiffly before him, and Barney Partridge was here, too, seated across from Wayne. Dan looked at Hourglass's foreman and said, "April—?"

"Up at Digby's place," Partridge said. "We got her dad buried and she began taking it hard when the dirt fell. She wanted to be alone, so I left her. There's nothing in those hills that could do her harm now."

Wayne said, "Barney's told me all about Price and Allison and the hydrographic survey. That explained a lot of things. Now I know why you had to make your ride tonight."

"Price is dead," Dan said. "So is Fanshawe. He was Price's man. Either Allison didn't know that, or he didn't have time to tell me."

Wayne said, "You look worked-over. You'll be anxious to bed down."

Dan said, "We can do the rest of the talking in the morning."

He climbed the stairs; that one step creaked beneath him. He came along the hall and saw that Gramp's door was partially open, and a faint glow of light fell out into the hall. He stepped into the doorway; Gramp was in bed, propped up against pillows but not sleeping; a lamp burned dimly on a stand beside the bed. Dan crossed to the bed and sat upon the edge of it and said, "How are you feeling, Gramp?"

"How would I be feeling after a day like today?" Gramp said testily. "I had no business leaving this room. You know that."

Dan said, "You'll be out and around soon. We'll need you. We've got a ranch to run."

Gramp frowned. "Are you and Wayne going to lean on me till the day I die? What's the matter with the pair of you running the ranch and letting me have a little rest for a change? Wayne's supposed to know the range, and you're supposed to be educated. What the hell good was all that book-learning if this place can't produce a better breed of cattle? Damn it, Daniel, the pair of you make me tired!"

Dan came to a stand; unconsciously he raised his hand to his shoulder where Gramp's cane had struck him, and the pain was gone. He smiled down at Gramp and said, "Good-night, you old son of a gun!"

He went to his room and stripped off his singed clothing and lay naked upon the bed without getting under the covers. The air was stifling; the heat pressed down upon him like a hard hand. He lay sleepless; he saw the outline of that trunkful of books in the corner. He'd have to get them unpacked. That was one of the first things he'd have to do. He dozed and awoke and dozed again; a great deal of the tension ran out of him; he soaked up rest.

While it was still dark he surrendered to an urge that had persisted in gnawing at the edge of his consciousness, keeping him from full sleep. He came off the bed and rustled up fresh clothing and donned it; and he crept carefully down the stairs, not wishing to disturb Wayne or Gramp.

The bunkhouse was dark when he crossed the yard. He saddled a horse and stepped up into the saddle and lined out to the north, riding easily.

He passed Ballard Springs just at dawn; he saw the graves the Hourglass men had dug; he looked at the wire-enclosed water and at the cattle which stood sluggishly before the wire. The whole range had worried about this spring, he reflected; Cantrell had wanted it so much that he'd died wanting it. And all the while the real worth of the Hourglass had been up there in that useless river, and none of them had seen it!

Not so very long thereafter he was toiling upward and at last he was into that desolate land of dead ash and blackened timber and he reined short upon the jutting rock and listened to the rumble of the Purgatory below. He tried to picture the dam that would be built; it would mean power, and stored-up water; they'd never have to worry about another drought.

HE RODE ON; the light was upon the land, but it was a dismal light, gray and uncertain, and the air held that same oppression he had felt in his bedroom. He turned off onto the road Sam Digby had built; he came at last into the stump-mottled clearing before the log house. He left the horse standing in the yard and stepped to the porch and pushed at the door; there was only silence, silence and an air of desertion; and he was panicked with the thought that she might be gone from here, gone from his life. He called her name and an answer came to him, low and incoherent and sounding like a sob. He crossed to the curtain at her bedroom door and thrust it aside. She lay face down upon the bed, fully clothed and crying. He sat down beside her, saying nothing for a while, and then he laid his hand upon her shoulder.

He said, "He was just a man who took the wrong turn of the trail somewhere. When he found where he was headed, he turned back. Always remember that a lot of men wouldn't have done that."

Her crying ceased; he lifted her, taking her into his arms; he looked down into her face and saw what grief had done to it.

He said, "I've come to take you home."
"Home——?"

He said, "I love you. I didn't dare say that before, not even to myself, because I was half-promised to someone else. That's not so now." He remembered Gramp saying, "You haven't lived, Dan. You haven't known what it is to want a woman the minute you lay eyes on her and to know that nothing could be more important than marrying her——pronto." But he *had* known; he'd known that night in the jail corridor when he'd found her freeing Fanshawe, but he'd turned his face from the truth. Now he could understand why he'd lied to Abe Potter and all those others in Doc Church's office when they'd asked him about that jail delivery.

She stirred in his arms, her own kind of pride showing in her eyes, and he saw that she was trying to break free of him. She said, "I don't want your pity! I heard my father ask a promise of you in this very room. You don't have to spend the rest of your life keeping it."

He got her by the shoulders and shook her angrily. "You little fool!" he said. "Do you suppose I want you for anybody's sake but your own? I've told you I love you. There's only one thing I want to hear out of you. Say it, April! Say it!"

But still her pride was in her, tinged now by awe and unbelief and a timorous grasping at a miracle. "I saw *her* once she said. "The day of the wedding. She's a grand lady, the kind you'd want for mistress of the Hourglass. I couldn't fill her shoes, Dan."

He laughed then, glorying in her self-pride, glorying in her humbleness, and, remembering the shallow soul of Cynthia and the courage of this girl beside him, he groped for words to tell her how it was with him, and, failing to find the words, he drew her close again. "Once before, we made a jump together," he said. "Believe me, we won't be taking a chance this time. Say it, April!"

"I love you," she said and buried her face against his shoulder. "I did from the first. Dad knew that. I told him so last night. Oh, Dan, are you very sure you want me?"

He made his reply in his own way, and after that she said nothing; she sighed. He held her for a long time, stroking her hair and kissing her gently. Suddenly she tore free from him again and sat bolt upright and said, "Listen! Do you hear it? On the roof! *Rain!*"

He thought: *Why couldn't this have come a week ago?* And he thought how different everything might have been for himself and Wayne and Cynthia and the Cantrells and Ransome Price and Fanshawe. He thought of the hate that might have been washed away by this, but he knew then that all the things that had happened were bound to have happened, the drought had only hurried them.

He said, "We'd better be starting. From the looks of this, it's going to keep up all day."

"It will put out the forest fire," she said.

They went back into the house and he found a slicker that had belonged to Sam Digby. He wrapped it around her and laughed at the sight of her in it. She picked a roll of paper from the table. She said, "The topographical map and Dad's notes," and tucked it away.

OUTSIDE, he mounted and reached down for her and got her into his arms. Her face was very close to his, and he kissed her.

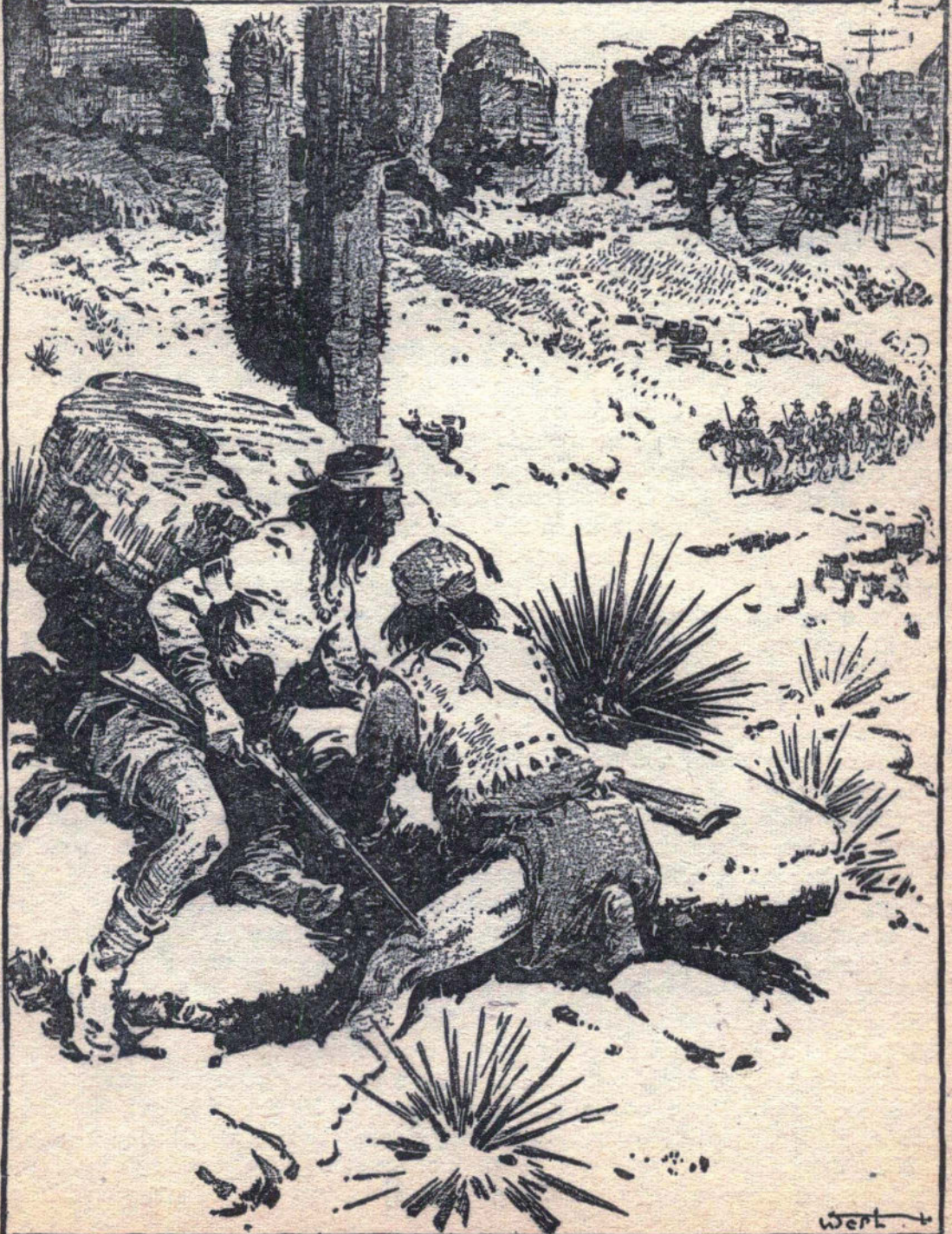
She said, "Dan, I'm scared! Your folks——!"

He said, "You saw the look on Barney Partridge's face when he met you yesterday. That's how it will be with my brother Wayne when he shakes hands. But there's another that I'm most anxious to take you to. He's an old man who met you once before, long, long ago in a Comanche camp on the Santa Fe trail."

She didn't understand what he was talking about; he knew that. But the fear was gone from her face; she had placed herself in his hands, she had placed her future in his hands. He would see that she was never sorry. He drew her closer to him and jogged the horse into motion and put his back to Digby's place and went riding through the dripping woods, through the slanting rain

FLAMING CANYON

By Walker A. Tompkins



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THE TANDEM-HITCHED CON-estogas caravanned in majestic silhouette against the darkening sky, sway-backed canvas hoods catching the red glare of sunset before they dipped into blue shadow beneath the flat rim of the scab-rock plateau.

At the foot of the cliffs where the lights of the Port Columbia stage depot bloomed in the twilight, the Brewster ferry was tied up at its slip. Three passengers waiting for the Yakima stage to pull out stood by the ferry tender watching the wagons crawl down the switchbacks toward the river.

Ed Guerrant, the ferryman, spoke softly from the deck.

"That's Del Troy coming now, Mr. Herrod. Hauling minin' machinery from Spokane to the Okanogan diggin's upriver. He always crosses the Columbia here."

The passenger addressed as Herrod spoke around the unlighted cigar in his teeth. "Who'll be driving the second string?"

"Most likely that albino partner who followed Troy out from Texas," Guerrant said. "Feller name of Whitey Crade."

Herrod gestured at Guerrant without turning to face him.

"Take the ferry across and tie up. I'll handle Troy."

A girl standing a short distance away watched the ferry move out into the river, straining at its parallel cables. Doc Godette stood beside Herrod, a scrawny figure in his Confederate gray coat, an ancient brass telescope screwed to his eye, its lenses focussed on the oncoming wagons.

Midway out on the ferry slip pilings, Fred Bolte checked the wick of his unlighted lantern and watched the fishline he had in the water. There was a certain tenseness in Bolte which seemed to be shared by the girl.

"I hope you know what you're doing,

Bix," the girl spoke through the dusk. "This man Troy will be desperate when he learns what you have done. You know he's racing against time to get those wagons to Conconully."

Bix Herrod regarded the girl with an obscure amusement.

"If Troy stands in our way, he must step aside—or be forced aside. That's up to him, Shasta."

The girl moved away from the ferry landing, as if dreading the showdown she knew would soon transpire there, and walked up the slope to where a hostler was hitching a fresh span of Morgans to the waiting Concord.

Troy's wagons were at the foot of the talus slope now, rumbling down the Port Columbia road toward the ferry landing. Bix Herrod loosened the cross-draw revolvers in their holsters at his flanks, and flexed his finger muscles like a pugilist readying himself for battle.

"Troy wears no guns," Doc Godette reported, telescoping his spyglass and tucking it under an arm. "You'll bait him into no shooting tonight, Bix."

A certain disappointment touched Herrod as he pondered Godette's report. Finally he shrugged and started upslope to the stage stand, the oldster following him.

Guerrant's ferryboat was lost in the dark reflections of the foothills looming above the west bank of the river. Fred Bolte, knowing his role in the drama to come, reeled in his fishline and made another cast. The stage was set for trouble tonight. There was no way of knowing how Del Troy would meet it.

As the wagons drew closer to the stage depot, details drew into sharper definition. Each of the jerklined mule teams was driven by a man who rode a saddled nigh-wheeler, and the stamp of a gruelling desert crossing lay on wagons and mules and drivers



alike. Columbia Basin alkali had neutralized the canvas-hooded wagons and the flesh and clothing of Del Troy and his partner with an overall drab hue.

Punishing late-June heat and dried-up waterholes and recurrent breakdowns of overloaded wagons had plagued the freighters on this trek. But the urgency of meeting a contract deadline and the disaster which its expiration would bring to their personal fortunes had driven the men, kept them in saddle beyond the normal limits of their endurance.

Now the hellish nightmare was behind them. Red sunset—the fifth to overtake them out of Spokane—smouldered beyond the looming granite teeth of the Cascades in a burnt-out cauldron glow as the gaunted mules followed the down-grade toward the welcome coolness of greening bottom-land.

The sweet promise of water, the first since their torturous by-passage of Grand Coulee's whelming barrier, reached the ears and nostrils of men and animals, quickening their progress toward the ferry landing. Beyond the Columbia's whispering breadth lay the Okanogan country and trail's end.

Unaware of the appraising eyes upon him, Troy rode at a hipshot slouch in the saddle, a sun-blackened Texan of thirty-odd whose hands coiled slack on jerkline, taut on brake rope; his body juices drained dry by the desert crossing, his nerves at

the raw fringe of breaking for want of food and rest.

But tomorrow's dawn marked the due-date for delivering this emergency freight in Ruby and Conconully. Only the river remained as a barrier to be breached.

Under the dust-veneered sag of his Stetson brim, Troy's smoky, raw-red eyes swept the welcome vista of purple foot-slopes lifting beyond the Columbia River in receding corrugated waves to meet the cerise ribbon of the lofty skyline.

Lights twinkled in a crosshatched pattern on the far bank, civilization outposted by the deadfalls and honkies of Brewster. Closer at hand, the lamps of the Port Columbia stagecoach stand threw their fan-wise yellow glow on a waiting Concord, silhouetting the man and the girl who watched the wagons rumble by.

Chain tugs clanked and stretchers and lead bars made metallic discord in the dusk's hush as Troy halted his mules at the foot of the ferry ramp. The ferry, he noted, was tied up on the west bank tonight, which meant a vexing delay at a time when every hour was precious to him.

He stepped down from stirrups with the stilted awkwardness of a man made bone-weary by eighteen hours under the debilitating sun of the Washington plateau. Behind the lead wagon with its trailer and canvas-tarped caboose, Whitey Crade halted his mules and dismounted, eyeing the Port Columbia saloon with a sullen thirst nagging his vitals. Crade knew the futility of suggesting an overnight stop here. Whiskey and sleep must wait until this freight was discharged and the waybills signed by Steen Slankard.

CRADE felt a peevish impatience needle him as he watched Troy flank his lathered team, pausing solicitously to ease a swingspanner's galled collar, move on to rub a leader's gaskin with a handful of green weeds.

Finally Troy crossed over to the hoof-splintered ramp of the ferry landing and yanked the clapper rope of the iron bell on its standard, to signal the ferryman on the opposite bank that a payload was waiting for service.

When the anvil tones of the ferry ten-

der's answering bell volleyed back from the Brewster side, Troy removed his Stetson and swatted the dust from his hickory shirt and shotgun chaps.

The sudden glare of a lantern startled him, drawing his eye to a lone cowpuncher who was fishing for sockeye salmon out on the splintered pilings of the ferry slip. Across a gap of time and distance Troy believed he had seen this cowhand with the fishhooks adorning the band of his black sombrero. He had a mental picture of this man fishing for cats in the Pecos, and he tarried to confirm the hunch.

"You're Fred Bolte, ain't you? Used to ride bodyguard for Bix Herrod on the Chisholm Trail?"

The fisherman lifted his lantern to put its yellow shine on the speaker. Beaver teeth glinted under his ram's horn mustache.

"Well, Troy. Small world. Didn't know you'd come West."

Troy watched Bolte haul in his line to land a forty-pounder.

"Some difference between that Chinook and a Nueces bullhead, eh, Bolte? Everything is bigger out here."

Bolte said, "You knew Bix Herrod, eh? He's up at the stage yonder with Doc Godette. You know Doc? Always travel together."

Troy considered this information for a moment, not liking it.

"I saw a girl as I passed. She with them?"

Bolte took out a knife and slit his fish from end to end.

"Shasta Ives. Owns the Dollar outfit down Yakima way."

"Colonel Sam's daughter. I've heard of her."

Bolte sensed that the lean Texan was not making idle conversation, so he amplified his remark. "Old Sam died last winter. Bix and Shasta aimed to get married this fall."

"I heard about that, too," Troy said, and moved back to his wagons. Whitey Crade was seated astraddle the bull-bar plank which jutted behind his lead wagon, and the glow of the stage lanterns revealed he sullen cast of the albino's milk-white features. Troy hunkered down beside his

partner, building a smoke and letting the tension ease from his overtaxed muscles.

"Shouldn't have let you auger me into leavin' the Brazos," Crade grumbled, airing a chronic grouse. "Mulewhackin' ain't my game. Are we supposed to be ranchers or slaves to a jerkline string? I tell you, Del, I'm getting a bellyful of this."

Bix Herrod and another man left the girl at the stage door and angled down the slope toward the freight caravan. The ennuï in Troy's throbbing eyes gave way to a sharpening interest as he watched them approach, wondering what had brought the Yakima cattleman this far north; and apprehension touched him briefly as he pulled his thoughts back to Whitey Crade's complaint.

"Like I've told you for two years now," Troy said wearily, having been over this many times before, "we've got a range and no stock. If hauling freight for Slankard & Company will make the money we need to build up a herd, these hauls are worth the grief they cost us."

Bix Herrod halted before them, appraising the crated machinery under the Conestoga hoods. He was a big man, this Herrod, bigger than Troy remembered him being, back in Texas; perhaps because he carried himself with the unconscious swagger that went with the ownership of Washington's biggest cattle outfit.

He wore his Keevil hat and tailor-made fustian and Hussar boots as a king might wear crown and purple robe, and a touch of that arrogance flavored the man's greeting as he turned back to Troy.

"Didn't expect our trails would cross out here, Del."

Troy nodded, his attention shifting to Herrod's companion. Doc Godette was a rawboned oldster, doubled up at the moment in a paroxysm of spongy coughs which betokened the last stages of consumption. The old medico's face was whiskey bloated and along his caved-in cheek lay the scar of a Yankee saber, scribbling its puckered whiteness from temple to jaw. Doc Godette had aged in the years since Troy had seen him in Abilene.

"Howdy, Godette. Bolte tells me you're getting married, Bix. Congratulations."

The coal on the end of Herrod's cheroot

ebbed and glowed, illuminating the rigid planes of a darkly handsome face and the close-clipped black mustache which was italicized by the line of a wide and predatory mouth.

"Thanks. Shasta and I have been checking on summer range up in the Okanogans this past week."

Troy lit his cigarette, a premonition of trouble building up in him. Instinct told him that Herrod had engineered this seemingly chance meeting at Port Columbia tonight.

"I heard the drought hit Yakima and Ellensburg range pretty hard this summer," he agreed banally. "Graze is good between here and the Canadian border."

Herrod's eyes focussed on Troy with a calculating intensity.

"Shasta and I aim to summer our beef in Flaming Canyon," he said through a burst of fragrant cigar smoke. "I used the Canyon three years ago when the winter die-up whittled down my Lazy H feeders. It's comforting to know there's government graze available to tide us over."

Del Troy's sloping hat brim hid the sudden harsh fixture of his mouth as he pondered this disclosure of Herrod's plans. Doc Godette walked over to the landing slip where Bolte was, as if he sensed heavy weather in the offing.

"Reckon I got bad news for you, Bix," Troy commented. "Whitey Crade and I have proved up on adjoining homesteads at the mouth of Flaming Canyon. Aim to stock our range this fall and build up a herd of our own."

FOR A MOMENT the silence was broken only by Whitey Crade's accelerated breathing, betraying his concern over what lay just ahead.

"Yeah?" Herrod echoed. "I heard a couple of small-tally squatters had fenced off the Canyon entrance this spring. I'm glad to hear it's a fellow Texan I got to deal with. Don't reckon you'll object to Dollar and Lazy H shoving a trail herd across your land to reach the upper Canyon?"

Troy dropped his cigarette stub and ground it out underheel, thinking, *This is what Bix has been leading up to tonight.*

"Sorry, Herrod. But I took a year's lease on the whole length of Flaming Canyon this spring. From Okanogan Jones, the squaw man who owns most of the range in the Twenty-Mile Strip between our homesteads and the Canadian line. I've got haying crews harvesting the graze starting this week. Aim to use it for winter feed."

Herrod's cigar glowed brighter under the hard pull of his lips.

"Implying that I can hunt elsewhere for summer range?"

Troy nodded, his eyes bleak in the darkness.

"Stacks up that way, Bix. Canyon grass belongs to me and the nesters who are cutting and stacking it on shares."

Herrod hunkered down to Troy's level, and his voice came now in a sharp, imperative undertone. "I'll lay my cards on the table, Troy. Our herd is already on the trail from Yakima. I expect to shove my beef into Flaming Canyon early next week. I don't propose to let any drift fence stop me."

Troy absorbed the impact of Herrod's flat ultimatum in silence. He had a clear picture of how things stood between them now. Herrod's beef was moving north, headed for the lush graze which made Flaming Canyon the choicest range in northern Washington. Herrod was warning him to move out or face a showdown.

"Listen," Troy said carefully, measuring his words. "Flaming Canyon is closed this summer. When your steers show up next week, keep them clear of our fence. There's plenty of grass in Jones' Strip, outside of my lease"

Herrod's cigar made a fiery parabola through the night as he flung it savagely against the hood of the near wagon, its shower of sparks revealing the cattleman's congested features for a pinched-off instant.

"Back on the Rio Grande, I remember you used to pack a gun, Troy. I'm giving you fair warning to resume the practice if you expect to back up this talk."

Herrod paused waiting for Troy's reaction. The lean mulehacker came to his feet, saying to Whitey Crade in a brusque aside, "I'm going to ring that bell again,

Damned ferry must have foundered on the way over."

Herrod's rumbling laugh followed Troy over to the landing, but its import failed to penetrate just then. Fred Bolte had picked up his lantern and was teetering his way down the piling stringers as Troy gave the bell rope a yank. Doc Godette stood by, Bolte's fish slung over a warped shoulder.

Herrod called through the dusk, "Tell him, Fred!" and crunched off through the gravel to rejoin the girl who waited alongside the Yakima stage.

"Tell me what, Bolte?" Troy asked sharply, as the bell's reverberations thinned in their ears.

"The boss means you can ring that bell till hell freezes over, I reckon," Bolte grunted, fingering the hooks and flies which decorated his hatband. "The ferry don't cater to freight wagons any more."

The hazy apprehension which had been shaping up in Troy ever since Bix Herrod had mentioned summer graze came into sharp focus in the Texan's brain now.

"Who says it don't?"

Doc Godette's chuckle was a thin scraping noise beside him.

"Herrod leased the Brewster ferry this afternoon, my friend. It will handle stages and hossbackers. But no wagons."

Troy's hand fisted on the bell rope.

"I see. Bolte lit his lantern to signal the ferrytender not to answer my bell, is that it?"

"Not bad guesswork, Troy," Doc Godette commented.

Whitey Crade joined Troy after Bolte and the oldster had returned to the stage depot.

"Trouble, Del?"

Troy's answering nod was delayed. He stared angrily across the blue-black ripples of the river, to where the tied-up ferry was a blot against the dancing reflection of Brewster's lights.

"Plenty. Herrod's closed the ferry to us. It's his opening move in a game to freeze us out of Flaming Canyon, partner."

Crade's shoulders lifted and fell. He spat into the darkness, accepting this crushing news without rancor.

"Then we're licked. We can't get Slankard's freight across no other way."

Troy brushed past his partner, heading for the wagons.

"If Herrod aims to force a range war, we got to make a stand here and now," he called back. "We'll cross the river tonight."

II

FROM THE JOCKEY-BOX OF HIS lead wagon Del Troy fished out a coiled shellbelt and a holstered six-gun. Whitey Crade watched apprehensively as his partner buckled on the gun harness, jacked open the Colt and shoved a .45 cartridge into the empty chamber under the firing pin.

"Don't let Bix shove you into the wrong stall, now," Crade warned nervously. "He don't strike me as an hombre who's let his draw go rusty since he became a range boss. Killin' Herrod won't solve this thing."

Troy crossed around behind the caboose and hauled a double-rigged Brazos saddle from the tailgate. He cinched the rig on his close-coupled steeldust mustang, and slipped the hackamore which trailed his mount.

"Getting this jag of freight to Slankard comes first," Troy grunted, swinging into stirrups. "That ferry is a public carrier. Herrod can't discriminate against my trade. I'm going after that ferry."

Crade stared, running splayed fingers through his close-cropped, flax-white hair.

"You're loco. If Bolte said the ferry belongs to Herrod, you can bet they ain't bluffing about picking who they'll carry."

Troy curvetted the steelduster away from the caboose. His spine was ramrod straight now, his weariness shed like an unwanted garment before the urgency of his purpose. He stared down at his partner in the thickening gloom of the summer night.

"Unhitch and water the mules. If Herrod pulls out for Yakima before I get back, treat yourself to one drink. Otherwise, guard the freight."

Troy touched the mustang with steel and moved off in the night, heading up the river. His departure was masked from

the stagecoach depot by intervening cottonwoods and willow brake. Before he drew out of earshot he caught the jangle of whippletrees as Whitey Crade unhooked the tugs.

A half mile upstream, Troy reined down to the water's edge and, loosening his gun belt, hoisted it armpit high and tightened the buckle, in anticipation of the swimming depths ahead.

Directly opposite, to the north, was the sandy promontory which marked the site of the old Astor fur trading post. Beyond it the Okanogan River poured its silty flood into the broader blue bend of the Columbia. Both rivers were narrow at the point of confluence, offering no ford, but suitable for the crossing Troy had in mind.

The steelduster dipped its muzzle into the cold water, protesting as Troy spurred it out into the sluggish back eddies. A moment later the mustang lost footing in the near channel and the gelid river rose over Troy's boots and chap-clad thighs and touched his midriff with a welcome coolness.

The main current caught them then, and the flats where old Fort Okanogan had stood became an impossible objective for the swimming horse. Troy lifted his elbows above the ripples, enjoying the feel of the river against his parched flesh, and wondered if he would have to quit the saddle and cling to the steelduster's tail when they hit the turbulent influx of the Okanogan.

They faced a six mile current in mid-stream, and it had already swept them abreast of the Port Columbia landing where Crade would be watering the teams. The thick hawsers of the ferry cable made their twin strike overhead, black threads awheel under the star-powdered sky; and then the Texas mustang was quartering toward the west bank, flung downstream like drifting froth by the inexorable current.

Disaster threatened in the rough waters marking the union of the Okanogan and the Columbia as the swimming horse was overwhelmed by the backwash of a side-wheel steamer, churning upstream toward Tonasket. The steelduster was floundering in a desperate, losing fight for survival be-

fore an eddy swung them into slack water abreast of the tied-up ferry.

A sprawl of outjutting gravel south of the Brewster settlement loomed ahead and the steelduster's hoofs finally made purchase on solid bottom. An eternity later horse and rider were ashore, breasting stomach-deep salt cedar scrub and tule growth.

Troy climbed out of saddle, letting the mustang take a breather after its hard battle with the river's cross currents. Mentally he was comparing this mighty seaward-rushing Columbia with the Rio Grande and the Pecos and the Nueces and the other rivers he had fought in his past. Washington's waters, just as Washington's arid desert stretches, outclassed anything Texas had to pit against a man.

He emptied his cowboots, stripped and wrung out his waist Levis and sopping shirt, grateful for the impromptu bath which had revived his dehydrated tissues. Exhaustion had bogged his spirits on their way out of the scab-rock country today; but the anger which charged his veins and the invigorating swim had put the man back in fighting fettle, like some intoxicating drug.

BACK IN SADDLE, the .45 snugged down against his hip, Del Troy spurred up to the historic Cariboo Trail which led to the Canadian wilderness and hit the outskirts of Brewster at a high lope.

Avoiding the main street, he followed the waterfront shacks to the ferry landing. Against the filigreed pattern of the stars on the mirror-smooth river, he made out the black rectangle of the ferry, tied up at its mooring for the night. The fat twin cables stretched off and away in dwindling perspective toward the far lights marking the Port Columbia stage depot.

Despite Crade's apprehensions, Del Troy was not underestimating the caliber of the enemy he faced. He had known Bix Herrod of old; knew that the fortune which Herrod had brought to Washington Territory a decade ago was the profits of wet cattle shoved across the Rio Grande by the dark of the moon.

He knew of the gun rep which Herrod had left behind on the Texas Trail; knew

of the graves which the Lazy H boss had filled in the Panhandle and through the brasada country. He wondered what manner of woman Shasta Ives might be, wishing he had seen Herrod's intended wife in the revealing light of day.

Herrod had planned this showdown tonight. His knowledge of Troy's coup in Flaming Canyon had been telegraphed by his act of closing the Brewster Ferry.

It was a shrewd stroke to cripple Troy at the outset. Without the proceeds of his freighting contracts with Steen Slankard, the Conconully trader, Troy would be unable to develop his homestead. And Herrod, by cutting this essential link across the Columbia which Troy was forced to patronize on his way to and from the outfitting posts at Spokane and Sprague, had struck Troy at the most vulnerable chink in his armor.

These thoughts rode in black progression through Troy's head as he gipped the dripping steelduster down to the shack where Ed Guerrant, the ferryman, had his office and living quarters. His call brought the old man out of his shack with a lantern.

"Just a hoss and rider?" Guerrant greeted him disappointedly. "Minimum toll is five bucks, young feller. Wait till mornin' and cross with the Wilbur mail wagon for only six bits. I——"

Guerrant broke off, recognizing the horseman before him in the glare of the uplifted lantern.

"Troy! I—uh—"

The oily click of a gunhammer coming to half-cock focussed Guerrant's rheumy gaze on the Colt barrel which rested on the Texan's swelfork pommel.

"I know. Herrod's ordered you not to handle my business from here on out." Troy's words held a sinister timbre which belied the laugh that accompanied them. "Get that scow moving, Ed. I got twenty tons of freight waiting on the east bank. Freight that's due in Ruby and Conconully by daylight. You've cost me an hour's delay already."

Guerrant's hand trembled, nearly causing him to drop the lantern. A second premonitory click of the Colt started him down the ramp onto the waiting ferry.

"You can't get away with this high-handed stuff of forcin' a man at gun's point, Troy. There'll be hell to pay when I tell the marshal about this."

Troy rode his mount down to the ferry. It was more raft than boat, being formed of three parallel fir logs with a railed decking of cedar puncheons.

Guerrant cast off his lines and a moment later the ferry groped out of its slip, the current slewing it quarterwise against the tug of the stream, big pulleys humming on overhead cables as the rushing water under the keel logs furnished the motive power to angle the craft across the Columbia.

"Douse your lantern," Troy gruffed from the winchhouse door. "Herrod's over yonder. I wouldn't want you to stop any lead if he took a notion to keep you from landing."

Guerrant hastily complied to the order, extinguishing his lantern as the ferry reached mid-river. He had not lit his running lights and the river was empty of traffic.

The lights of Port Columbia drew closer, vivid against the ebon backdrop of the high plateau behind it. Troy hitched his steelduster to the ferry rail and went forward, eyes drilling the night ahead, gun palmed. His nerves had gone tight again as suspense claimed him, wondering if the guns of Bix Herrod and Doc Godette and Fred Bolte might be waiting out there ahead.

But Whitey Crade was alone on the ferry ramp when the craft nosed between the jutting V of pilings and Guerrant made his bow lines fast. Against the lighted windows of the stage stand, the Conestogas made lurching black shapes as Crade drove the first team aboard. The ferry heeled over under the weight of the over-burdened freighters as the mules halted alongside the downstream rail.

"Now the second string, Whitey," Troy ordered softly from the bank where he had stationed himself. "Ed, be ready to shove off the instant our last wagon is aboard."

Whitey Crade's big wagons rumbled down onto the ferryboat's deck planks a minute later. Troy heard Shasta Ives' warning shout from the porch of the re-

lay station where the Yakima stage was still waiting.

Ed Guerrant made cursing noises as he lashed his ferry mule into motion, circling the big capstan which, geared to a cable winch, would propel the ferry on its return crossing.

SHOUTS and the abrasive drumming of feet came out of the night as Troy waited on the landing ramp, open water widening between him and the ferry's square stern. He saw Fred Bolte loom beside him and attempt to leap aboard the craft, only to meet the down lash of Troy's gun barrel which dropped the Lazy H gunhawk neatly into kneedeep water inside the slip.

Troy was racing along the piling tops as he heard Bix Herrod and Doc Godette helping Bolte ashore. The Texan leaped for the moving ferry and grabbed the railing for support, bracing his shoulders against the endgate of Crade's trailer.

Then, from the receding blackness of the riverbank, the clotted shadows were breached by the spurt of a muzzle flash and a gunshot flatted through the night, a bullet whining overhead and ripping a slot through a Conestoga hood.

The urge to kill was ground into Troy's mouth as he triggered an answering shot toward the east bank, heard the clamor of shouts which followed.

"Troy's hijacked the boat, by Gad!" Herrod's shout spanned the widening gap of water. "Doc! Fred! We'll cut the cables and set them adrift!"

Ed Guerrant wailed an oath from the capstan as the overhead cables vibrated to the hewing blows of an ax. One cable sagged and splashed into the river astern, writhing like a boa constrictor against the phosphorescent wake.

"We're done for," the ferryman rasped out as the second cable collapsed, coiling loosely over the upstream rail. "This tub won't stop driftin' short o' the Pacific Ocean—"

Troy knew a moment of stark despair as the clumsy barge yawed violently in the turbulent waters, the stern swinging downstream, the lights of Brewster veering crazily around.

Herrod had won. The ferry was at the mercy of the rushing river now, and Troy knew they stood to lose their teams and wagons, perhaps their lives, in the first rapids they would strike.

But a sharp night wind made itself felt on the taut, ribby hoods of the wagons, and the pull and play of cross currents and the sucking vortex of a giant eddy veered them toward the willow-hung banks below Brewster, spinning the forty-foot craft in dizzy carousel until the square prow grated with a grinding shock on the same outjut of gravel where Troy and his horse had landed.

Timbers splintered against submerged rocks and the harness mules brayed their panic into the night as the river drove the ferry hard aground, its deck teetered at a slope which threatened to capsize the overloaded wagons.

Then a final thrust of the whirlpool's rim restored the ferry to an even keel, lodged it with rockbound solidity to the promontory, its beams paralleling the riverbank.

Whitey Crade's voice reached Troy above the clamor of the mules. "We're fools for luck tonight, pardner. We can drive the wagons off onto solid ground up front here."

Guerrant got his lantern lighted and found Del Troy pushing a twenty dollar gold piece into his hands, double the customary toll for the crossing. In accepting the fare, Guerrant forfeited the most valid complaint he could make to the Brewster marshal; but the ferryman turned on Whitney Crade and gloated, "You think you licked Bix Herrod tonight? Hell, your troubles are just beginnin'."

Guerrant saw the albino's enthusiasm fade, and knew a moment's contempt for Crade's puerile ways, his utter ignorance of reality; and he wondered again, as he had wondered in the past, what had brought these oddly-contrasted partners together.

"Ed's right about this being the beginning," Troy agreed. "But at least we won the first round."

"Yeh," said Whitey Crade, his eyes goggling foolishly. "We won the first round all right, and maybe we'll win the whole shebang!"

III

THE WAGONS REACHED THE fork of the mountain road just as the gray light of false dawn was touching the morning mists. Because their freight was consigned to different camps, Crade took the Ruby road to the left while Troy pushed on toward Conconully, the county seat.

Dawn was flaming behind the conifer-stippled hill crests when Troy toiled his wagons into the valley pocket between Mineral Hill and the Tarheel and saw the hard angles of the boom camp shaping up through the fog lifting from Salmon Creek.

This was trail's end, and he should have felt exalted by the knowledge that he had delivered this freight in time to meet Slankard's deadline. He had a bonus coming and he had stalled off competing freighters eager to handle Slankard & Company's trade. But the Texan felt only a sense of anticlimax, the drag of his own spent forces, the menace which overhung his personal fortunes.

Troy felt a kinship for this brawling backwoods mining town, though he was a cowpuncher and a Texan and, therefore, had two alien counts against him. Most of its buildings had been constructed from lumber which Troy and Crade had hauled over the Cascades from Slankard & Company sawmills on Puget Sound.

The trader had amassed a fortune catering to the building needs of this young and lusty camp. His lumber had gone into the Silver King reduction mill, the Cariboo House hotel, the courthouse; Slankard shingles roofed the saloons and honkies and assay offices. A percentage of those profits had reverted to Troy, giving him the means of developing his homestead at Flaming Canyon, ten miles north.

The sister camp, Ruby, was a primitive settlement with log cabins, dugouts, soddies and canvas tents. Conconully had an oddly civilized aspect by contrast; its false fronts, its brick bank, gave the county seat an air of solidity, permanence.

As Troy toiled his creaking tandem string down the deserted river of dust which formed the main street, he was struck by a change in Conconully today—an altered expression on the face of the town which he was unable to define.

He saw Sheriff Gaddy winding up his night tour of duty by taking a breakfast tray to the inmates of the county jail. Ambie Pride lay drunk in the alley between Beagle's Saloon and the post office. Otherwise the town seemed deserted, which was an unusual thing even at this hour.

"What's happened to this burg?" Troy wondered, unhitching his spent mules inside Slankard's stockaded compound. And then he knew. The syndicate's reduction mill was silent. The roar of its stamps, the rumble of its ore hoppers at the far end of town were usually a trembling thunder in the background, day and night, like a waterfall's boom. Today it was strangely mute, leaving a vacuum over the town.

Troy stabled his mules in Slankard's stone barn, groomed and grained his steel-duster, and then headed for the trader's office.

He found Slankard at breakfast, a dour, spadebearded man in late middle life who was well on his way toward being a millionaire.

Slankard invited his mulewacker to join him at the table and he accepted Troy's waybills without enthusiasm.

"You made your deadline and I'll pay off with a bonus as agreed," the trader grunted. "But that minin' machinery will rust in my warehouse before I find a buyer."

Pouring himself a cup of coffee, Troy stared at the trader, sensing that some catastrophe must have hit the diggings during his fortnight's absence.

"Two weeks ago the mines were begging for this machinery. Crade and I almost killed ourselves getting it here."

Slankard emptied a can of milk over his oatmeal mush.

"That was two weeks ago," he said funereally. "Ten days ago a ship landed in Seattle with a ton of gold dust from Alaska. Two-thirds of the miners hereabouts have abandoned their claims and pulled out for the Sound, aiming to book passage for Skagway. This Klondike strike will make the Californy rush of '49 look like chicken feed."

Troy went on eating in silence. Slankard, his appetite gone, went into his front office and returned with a sheaf of greenbacks due his freighters for the Spokane haul. The grim set of Slankard's square-

bearded jaw told Troy that this call of gold from the distant Arctic would somehow touch his own destiny.

"Where does all this leave the Okanogan boom, Steen?"

Slankard counted out the currency before answering.

"It means Conconully and Ruby will be ghost towns by fall, son. Maybe you and Crade were right, plantin' your flag on the cattle spread instead of staking out a mining claim like I advised when you first hit this country."

TROY pondered the trader's grim prediction, knowing that Steen Slankard was not given to rash judgments where they concerned his own business future. Slankard was a big operator, owner of half the enterprises in Ruby and the county seat, a man who controlled vast holdings of Puget Sound timberland and whose power in the State were rivalled only by the squaw-man up on the Twenty-Mile Strip, Okanogan Jones.

"I'm sending you over to Coulee City tomorrow to pick up a load of trade goods from a store I bought out," Slankard said. "That will probably be the last business I'll be able to send your way, Troy. Slankard & Company will probably pull out of the diggings before the summer is over."

Troy built a cigarette, his mind reeling under the implications of this news. If Slankard went out of business, it meant that Troy's sole source of revenue was cut off, with his savings far short of the minimum he and Whitey Crade had deemed sufficient to stock their prospective ranch in Flaming Canyon.

He thought of Bix Herrod, and his impending show-down with the powerful Lazy H outfit—and the realization of what this body blow meant to his own prospects put a brassy taste on his tongue.

"If this Coulee City haul will add to your losses, Steen, forget it. Consider my contract with you cancelled."

Slankard tilted back his chair and thrust thumbs to armpits. A brooding speculation touched the trader's face as he regarded the hard-bitten young Texan.

"Bix Herrod has been scouting your range over in Flaming Canyon this week, Del," Slankard drawled. "Might be you could sell out to the Lazy H and recover

what you've sunk in that homestead during the past two years."

Troy touched a match to his cigarette and pulled in a deep drag of smoke. He put on his Stetson and stood up to leave.

"I ran across Herrod at Brewster Ferry last night," he said laconically. "Herrod already knows Flaming Canyon graze won't be open for his beef."

Leaving Slankard's, Troy crossed the Salmon Creek bridge and made his way to the Cariboo House, where he maintained a room for such times as he was not living on his homestead.

Sleep blotted out his senses the moment he sprawled out on his bunk; and when he awakened, the westering sunrays of late afternoon were shafting through the window, and he realized he had slept out the entire day.

He dressed and shaved and left the hotel, making his way to the Loop-Loop Casino on the main street. Shouldering through the batwings, he found the big gambling hall almost deserted.

Ordinarily the Loop-Loop's roulette layout and poker tables would be doing a heavy business this time of evening. Now, he found only one game going—Roxanna Laranjo's blackjack concession.

He watched the raven-haired girl, her vivid scarlet gown standing out against the smoky shadows of the deadfall, her dusky hands shuffling and dealing cards with a supple grace. The chance of talking privately with Roxanna Laranjo brought Troy his first relief and anticipation since his return to the diggings.

The girl's lustrous black eyes lighted in recognition as the Texan moved toward her table, and she turned to the quartet of miners and said, "This game is closed, gentlemen."

She cashed her customer's chips and came over to a corner table where Troy had seated himself.

"It's good to see you back, Del. A lot has happened since you left for Spokane."

Troy helped her into a barrel chair and toyed with the gold bangles which adorned her slim, olive-skinned wrists.

"Seems I always cry on your shoulder when trouble breaks for me," he grinned. "Slankard's cancelled the summer business I been counting on. This Alaska gold rush has put a bad crimp in my outlook, Roxie."

He drank strength from the sympathy in the girl's eyes. In a land where women plied an older and more dubious profession, Roxanna Laranjo stood out as a nugget amid dross. "That lady gambler at the Loop-Loop," the local miners had dubbed her. She had handled the blackjack concession at the Casino for a year now, fraternizing with the rough element who patronized the place, yet keeping herself rigidly aloof.

A girl of mixed Spanish and Chihuahua blood, Troy had first known this amazing woman back on the Rio Grande. Between them, from the first, had been a rapport which transcended the usual physical bond between a man and a woman on the frontier. Always she had been remote and unattainable, oblivious to the healthy hungers which her beauty aroused in Del Troy.

She had been a dancer in a Laredo fandango house in the old days. Their paths had separated, and somewhere during the ten years which had followed, Roxanna had brushed the sharp edges of life and a disillusionment bordering on bitterness had caused her to become a professional gambler, mysterious and introspective.

Yet always, as now, Troy found his spirit buoyed by the very nearness of this exotic, dusky-skinned beauty. He found in her a personality a platonic affinity he had never known for any other woman in his life.

"Bix Herrod aims to summer his beef in Flaming Canyon, Del," the girl said suddenly, withdrawing her hand from his.

He met the full strike of Roxanna's black eyes and thought he read a mixture of fear and anxiety blended in their depths.

"I know," he mused, and told her of last night's episode at Brewster Ferry.

"If he'll buy you and Crade out, you must sell," Roxie burst out passionately when he had finished. "Herrod will stop at nothing to gain control of your Canyon, Del. The girl he plans to marry wants to graze her cattle on the range you've leased from Okanogan Jones. That much is common knowledge around Conconully."

He moved his chair around the table to be closer to her and she saw the cedar-butted gun belted at his flank, something

which had escaped her attention as he crossed the room a few moments ago.

"You know what Flaming Canyon means to me, Roxie," he told her gently. "It's not like you to ask me to quit when the going gets rough. Why should I give up the choicest cattle range in Washington State? It's mine. I'll fight to hold it."

BEADS OF SWEAT had broken out on Roxanna Laranjo's olive forehead, and her firmly rounded bosom rose and fell to the violence of her breathing.

"You haven't packed a gun since you came West," she murmured. "I take that to mean that sooner or later you will face Bix Herrod in a shoot-out. I don't want that to happen, querido mio."

The Mexican endearment fell strange on Del Troy's ears, after so long away from Texas, and brought vivid memories flooding through him, making him wonder again what vagary of destiny had brought this girl to a back-of-beyond mining camp like Conconully.

Whatever dark and brooding secret her past held, Troy did not know, nor did he seek to invade her privacy on the strength of their long-standing friendship. It would have pleased him to think she had followed him out West, but he knew that was not the case. Roxanna had never shared so much as a kiss with him, though she must have known that love for her could be an easy thing to rouse in him.

"If Herrod aims to make a range war of this thing," Troy bit out, "then he shall have it. Not one Lazy H or Dollar cow will graze on Flaming Canyon grass as long as I'm alive to prevent it, Roxie. I have told Herrod as much."

The girl's hand shook visibly as she plucked at a slender gold chain which encircled her neck, and from the cleft of her bosom she drew a small crucifix and a plain gold band which Troy had never seen before. It was a wedding ring, and it struck him in that instant as a clue to whatever loss had extinguished the vivacity Roxanna Laranjo had once shown the world.

"You must not fight such odds as Herrod will put against you, amigo," she whispered. "For you it would only mean

a bullet from ambush. That is the way Bix Herrod fights."

Troy did not appear to have heard her foreboding words.

"I visited the Indian agent over at Nespelem last week," he said. "The agency is ready to buy all the beef I can raise. The Colville Reservation is the largest in this part of the United States. Which means that making Flaming Canyon pay off is not a gamble. I'd be a fool to give it up."

Roxanna shook her lovely head, wise to the ways of this man before her, bowing to the adamant purpose which controlled his life, knowing the measure of his courage and his inflexible decision.

"You'll fight this Herrod," she predicted, "and you'll lose. Men as fine and true and staunch as you have fought him and lost, *companero*."

She signalled the bartender for a glass of chianti then, and changed the subject to more trivial things. It was a right-angle departure from her previous trend of talk, but he left her an hour later with the feeling that Roxanna had known Bix Herrod in the past more intimately than Troy himself had known him.

IV

TROY WAS IN THE SADDLE BEFORE daylight had thinned the gray mists next morning, feeling the need of paying his haying crews a visit in Flaming Canyon before starting on Slankard's weeklong junket to Coulee City.

He covered the ten miles of mining road to the rimrock overlooking his homestead in time to catch the full strike of dazzling sunrise on the obsidian cliffs of the canyon and as always the spectacle stirred him to the core of his being.

The genesis of Flaming Canyon's name was rooted deep in Indian legendry—the description given it by some prehistoric huntsman who had marveled at the fire-bright glare of dawn refracting from its fluted scarps.

The cliffs gave off that illusion of pulsing incandescence this morning, exactly as they had done on a morning three years

ago when Del Troy and his albino partner, Whitey Crade, had passed this way on their way toward a Canadian cariboo hunt.

A cowman born and bred, Troy had recognized this vast rock-hemmed range as a veritable stockman's Eden. Its velvet-green expanse was watered by Glacier Creek, a meandering stream which sluiced down the long gorge like a ribbon of platinum, feeding on the everlasting ice of the high Cascades, a permanent guarantee against the blight of summer droughts.

Troy, like Crade, had been a drover for a big Texas combine a year before their arrival here. They had hazed longhorns to Montana and Wyoming and, yielding to mutually itching feet, had crossed the Bitterroots out of Idaho to explore the unsettled reaches of Washington State.

From the moment of his first glimpse of Flaming Canyon, Del Troy was aware that he faced a crossroads in his life. His twenties had been spent with irresponsible drifting, responding to urges to see what lay over the next hill. A hundred widely-separated cow camps had known him. It had been an unfettered life, free and wild, sometimes dangerous, but never boring.

But with his thirtieth birthday behind him, Troy sensed that he had come to the point in a man's life where driving his picket pin on a spread of his own was something that could not long be delayed if he ever achieved anything beyond a tumbleweed's roaming existence.

Whitey Crade, five years younger and still at the peak of his wanderlust, had responded dubiously to Troy's enthusiasm over Flaming Canyon; but he had agreed to postpone their cariboo hunt and followed Troy back to the Conconully land office to investigate the possibilities of filing on a homestead.

Before that summer was done they had erected cabins on contiguous 160-acre claims under the provisions of the Donation Land Act. Money to develop their embryo ranch was their first need, and a freighting contract with Steen Slankard had supplied that.

Directly behind their homestead boundaries, Flaming Canyon's sheer cliffs narrowed like an hourglass, the connecting notch known as Keyhole Pass. Beyond

the Keyhole, the Canyon widened to as much as five miles from rim to rim, snaking northwesterly into the country known as the Twenty-Mile Strip which Congress had set aside from the Indian lands they had opened to white settlement.

Except for an unfiled section of public domain at Keyhole Pass, ownership of Flaming Canyon's upper range was vested in the hands of the celebrated Osoyoos Lake pioneer, Cyrus "Okanogan" Jones. Troy had had little difficulty in getting a year's lease on Flaming Canyon's entire length from Jones, with an option to renew it annually as his ranch expanded; for the squaw-man at Osoyoos Lake was interested primarily in future speculation of timber and mineral rights on the Strip.

Given time and the Indian agency's market for his beef, Troy was confident he could transform Flaming Canyon into a spread which would rival the big outfits at Yakima and Ellensburg. This coming fall would see the importation of bulls and she-stock to form the nucleus of his future herd.

Reining up on the rimrock overlooking the twin homesteads, Troy hipped over in saddle and let his eye follow the eroded walls of volcanic glass which twisted their serpentine way into the haze-filled timberland of the Twenty-Mile Strip, with the Canadian Rockies sprawled in remote, brooding grandeur on the northern horizon.

From this elevation, he could see the tents of his hay crew pitched on the edge of Glacier Creek where it entered the notch of Keyhole Pass. In the hayland beyond he could see a dozen wagons top-heavy with cut hay, crawling turtlelike down the road toward their homesteads.

The ricks were driven by jean-clad, straw-hatted nesters from the belt of farmland which covered the Okanogan River valley from Malotte to Tanesket. These farmers were at work harvesting the hay crop which would winter their own horses and milk cows, as well as the beef cattle Troy intended to bring up this fall.

DIRECTLY BELOW HIM, Troy scanned his long ranch house and the neat whitewashed corrals and outbuildings which he and Crade had built during the

past year. A mile across the sprawling mouth of the canyon, close to the north cliffs, a smaller shack marked Whitey Crade's homestead. A wisp of smoke was spiraling from the rock chimney there, proof that Crade had returned home after unloading Slankard's freight at Ruby yesterday.

Troy put his horse down the steep road into the canyon, circled his homestead grounds, and crossed the flats to Keyhole Pass.

A half mile beyond the nesters' tents he approached a bucolic hayshaker riding a mowing machine.

A notch of worry furrowed the farmer's sun-blackened visage as the Texas cowman pulled up beside his team.

"How's it going, Dreyfuss?"

The farmer climbed from his bucket seat to extricate a mangled rattlesnake from his cutter bar. His rheumy eyes avoided Troy as he answered in a Hoosier's drawl, "Figger the canyon will yield a ton an' a half, mebbe two tons of prime hay to the acre, Mr. Troy. If we can harvest it, that is."

Troy cuffed back his Stetson, sensing that trouble had visited the hay crews in advance of his own arrival here.

"Why not? I own this grass. We'll split fifty-fifty on every ton you cut. Don't the deal satisfy you and your neighbors?"

Dreyfuss waved at a passing hayrick, bound for a farm on the river bottom east of Flaming Canyon.

"We're not tryin' to hedge out on our bargain, son. Us hoe men are grateful for this hay. But a passle of gun-slingers rode in from Yakima day before yesterday. Ordered us to leave this grass stand for cattle they aim to summer here."

Troy laughed harshly. Bix Herrod had left his hint of gunsmoke reprisal behind him, then, in an effort to intimidate these rustic sodbusters into abandoning the hay harvest.

"I know. But you'll get your hay if I have to bring in troops from Fort Colville to fight off those Yakima range hogs, Dreyfuss. Keep your rakes and mowers on the job. I'll handle the policing of this canyon."

Dreyfuss climbed back on his mower,

mopped his grimy face with a faded bandanna, and scowled moodily.

"I got a wife and kids to think about, Mr. Troy. Don't count on me or any o' my neighbors totin' a rifle along with our pitchforks. Most of us lost our homes because of cattle wars back in Nebrasky and Kansas. I for one don't aim to get mixed up in no shootin' fracas."

Troy put his horse around and headed out of the Keyhole, overhauled the out-bound haywagon at a gallop and reined up finally at the gate of Whitey Crade's yard.

His partner emerged from the cabin as Troy was watering the steelduster down by the creek. Daylight revealed the strange physical appearance which had warped Whitey Crade's personality.

An albino, Crade's hair was the dead white of carded cotton fibers; his lashes and brows were so thin and colorless as to give his milky face a naked, grotesque appearance. No amount of rain or sun or wind could darken the fish-belly pallor of his skin. His eyes were the deep pink of a rabbit's, and it was this freakish lack of pigmentation which had tainted Whitey Crade's entire life, warped his philosophy, made him belligerent and neurotic in all his human relationships.

It was strange, almost macabre partnership, this bond between Whitey Crade and Del Troy. It had had its beginnings on a trail drive to Dodge, five years before. A foray by a Comanche war party had stampeded the herd after their crossing of the Red, and Crade had been trapped in the path of the longhorn juggernaut.

Troy, acting as trail boss, had swung an unerring rope to pluck his albino flank rider from certain death. And Crade's pathetic, almost childish gratitude had been the basis of their partnership. From that moment on, Crade had attached himself like a leech to the whippy-built trail boss; and Troy, seeing an opportunity to salvage something from a drifting human derelict who was a victim of his own complexes, had brought Crade west with him.

In their Flaming Canyon homesteads, Troy had seen a means of giving the albino some worth-while purpose for living, some shield for his tottering sanity.

The partnership had been a cross for Troy to bear from the first. Crade's basic moral structure was unstable. He was given to strong drink and gambling; he had a predilection for bad women and gunplay which had brought their partnership to the verge of a break on more than one occasion. Only a deep, underlying sense of pity and responsibility toward a weakling had given Troy the forbearance necessary to keep their friendship on a going basis.

"Drinking again, Whitney?" Troy greeted bluntly, noting the bleary glaze on Crade's ruby irises, the unsteadiness of his gait as the albino lurched down the slope from the front gate. "I thought I told you to lay off booze. A man who can't handle his likker and tries to pick a fight every time he—"

Crade grabbed a hitching post for support, his breath coming in gusty whistles.

"Damn it, you're packin' a gun. Why don't you use it? Afraid it'll git tangled in yore apron strings?"

Troy sucked in a slow, deep breath, curbing the anger that seethed close to the surface as he saw Whitey Crade's splayed fingers poise above the stock of a side-hammer Root .36 at his hip. Knowing Crade's mercuric temperament. Troy had long since exacted a promise from the cowboy never to tote a gun, drunk or sober.

"Pull in your horns, Whitey. I dropped by to tell you that our summer contract with Slankard & Company is washed up."

It was stunning news, spelling catastrophe for everything they had slaved to build up here in Flaming Canyon—but Crade's chalky face wrinkled in a grin, his recent passion ebbing from him as quickly as it had flared up.

"'Sta bueno by me. Never liked mule-whackin' nohow."

TROY'S EYE ranged along the barbed-wire drift fence which blocked off the mouth of Flaming Canyon, marking the common boundary of their homesteads. That fence was the tangible barrier which would face the pool herd which Shasta Ives and Bix Herrod were pushing up the trail from Yakima.

Disregarding his partner's callous indifference to their dilemma, Troy stepped into saddle.

"I'm pulling out this afternoon with one wagon," he said, "heading for Coulee City on the last run we'll make for Slankard. I want you to water my tomato vines and milk the cow while I'm gone. And I want you to stick close to the spread till I get back, do you understand?"

A humility touched Whitey Crade, his usual reaction of remorse chastening him after a flare-up at his partner's discipline.

"You can depend on me to do the chores, Del. I ain't forgettin' you saved my life back in Oklahoma. You're an hombre to ride the river with, Del."

Annoyance carved a crease between Troy's eyes as he picked up his reins for the return ride to Conconully.

"I wish you'd forget that Oklahoma business, Whitey. You don't owe me a thing. We're pardners. That's enough."

Whitey Crade's mouth slackened into a doltish grin as he watched Del Troy ride off across the canyon floor, pass his homestead grounds and vanish beyond the far cliffs.

Then, touched by the backlash of his own unpredictable emotions, Crade squared his shoulders and headed back to his cabin. Waiting at a deal table there were Bix Herrod and the ubiquitous Doc Godette, the oldster clad in a Confederate battle tunic whose brass buttons carried the tarnish of thirty-odd years since Appomattox.

"Troy's heading for Coulee City, eh?" the Lazy H boss remarked, picking up a whiskey bottle from the table as Whitey Crade pushed the door wide open behind him and stood glowering at his two visitors.

"Have another drink, Whitey."

Crade brushed a hand across his flabby mouth, dropped it to squeeze the butt of his .36.

"Get out of here!" he snarled waspishly. "I've changed my mind. Ought to be hoss-whipped for even givin' a second thought to your offer to buy out this homestead. If I'd swilled much more o' that rotgut, you'd talked me into double-crossin' the best pardner a man ever had."

Bix Herrod appraised the albino, pursed

his lips thoughtfully and then got to his feet.

"Let's drift, Doc. Senor Crade ain't in a mood to talk business this morning, I take it."

Crade stood aside as his visitors left the cabin.

"And don' be comin' back with your bottles o' snake pizen," he shrieked, a sob trembling in his voice. "I ain't sellin' out my land, come hell or high water. Troy an' me control Flamin' Canyon an' we don't aim to let go our hold to no Yakima range hog."

Herrod and Doc Godette walked over to Crade's lean-to barn and let out the saddle horses they had rented in Brewster the day before. Concealing the horses where Del Troy had missed seeing them was a precaution which Herrod had occasion to be thankful for.

On their way through the wire gate which the outbound haywagon crew had neglected to close behind them, Doc Godette eyed his companion quizzically, unable to fathom the complacent grin which Bix Herrod had carried away from their abortive interview with Troy's partner.

"Looks to me like we got some wire-cutting ahead of us, Bix," the medico commented. "Buying a 160-acre right-o'-way into Flaming Canyon ain't in the cards."

Herrod grinned expansively.

"I haven't played my ace in the hole yet, Doc. I'll send Shasta over to dicker with Crade tomorrow. She'll cool him down."

Godette scowled and kept his secret thoughts to himself.

"Every man ever born has his price," Herrod went on. "Crade's price won't come high, especially when Shasta goes to work on him. That albino pimp will open a quarter-section hole into Flaming Canyon before our trail herd sights this fence. You can bet your last blue chip on that, my friend."

Doc Godette lapsed into a coughing spell which left him spent and gasping. A medical man, he knew he carried his own death sentence in his diseased lungs, that time was running short for him.

"I hope so," he wheezed. "Troy's got the law on his side. It'll take more than

bluff or gunsmoke to pry our way into Flaming Canyon this summer. Mebbe Shasta's your answer. But I doubt it."

V

AT THREE O'CLOCK DEL TROY pulled out of Slankard's compound with a payload of kegged nails and tarpaper rolls in his single wagon, consigned to the Indian Agency at Nespelem.

A depression lay on his spirit, engendered by Steen Slankard's gloomy forecast of Conconully becoming a ghost town by fall, and Roxie Laranjo's prescience that a finish fight with Bix Herrod would end disastrously for him.

Roxie, provocative in a satin dressing robe, stood framed by the upper gallery door of the Loop-Loop as he swung the mule string out into the deserted street, and her smile was erased from her lips as she saw the stock of a Winchester booted under his saddle fender.

That rifle usually reposed under the seat of the Conestoga, a weapon carried solely for the purpose of bagging game to supplement Troy's rations on a long haul through primitive country. Its presence alongside his pommel now told the girl that Del Troy had drawn stakes in a game which necessitated his being ready for any emergency he might meet, day or night, from now no.

A block beyond the Loop-Loop, Troy was startled out of his lethargy by hearing a feminine voice hail him by name from the wooden-awned porch of the Cariboo House. Aside from Roxanna Laranjo, there were no women to be found closer than Straight-Edge Lulu's bawdy house in Ruby.

Troy halted his team and peered curiously at the hotel.

A young woman in her early twenties, wearing a flat-crowned marbled Stetson, work shirt and split riding skirt, came down the steps and crossed the foot bridge over the creek, her spurred boots spraying little puffs of dust as she halted before him.

He had never seen her around the diggings before, he was certain; her beauty was too striking to have been overlooked in this thoroughly masculine camp, and

he mentally ticketed her as the wife of some visiting engineer. A wealth of burnished wheat-gold hair cascaded to her shoulders, in vivid contrast to the deep amber brown of her eyes.

Not until he saw the dollar sign worked out in brass studs on her belt did he realize that he was facing Shasta Ives, whom he remembered only a vague outline at the Port Columbia stage depot two nights before. Her ranch derived its brand from the superimposed initials of her late father, Sam Ives, which formed the Dollar symbol \$.

"Didn't take the stage south the other night, eh, ma'am?"

His greeting was couched in a dry humor which brought a slight flush to her cheeks. He scanned the girl's supple figure in bold appraisal, mentally approving the lift of her firm young breasts under the faded shirt, the even whiteness of her teeth.

"Mr. Troy, if you can spare a moment I'd like to discuss something with you. Something vitally important to both of us."

Hat on saddlehorn, a cigarette curling smoke beneath the fingers of his left hand, Troy's eyes hardened into bleak slits.

"As Bix Herrod's intended bride, I reckon you want to discuss summer graze, ma'am. That issue is closed tighter'n a pair of mail-order boots, so far as Flaming Canyon is concerned."

Shasta Ives' dark eyes glittered, putting a vitality there which added to her natural attraction. The unblinking intensity of her gaze told Troy that, although this girl was an enemy of all that meant anything to his life, she was a woman of unquestioned charm, and therefore doubly dangerous.

"Aren't you being a—a dog in the manger. Mr. Troy?" she asked accusatively. "You know the drought has burned up Yakima range this year. Lazy H and Dollar will have to get summer graze or face a die-off before round-up. As I understand it, you aren't running a single steer in Flaming Canyon."

Troy remained untouched by her logic, the thought needling him that Herrod was behind this meeting, using the girl as a go-between to gain his objectives.

"I'm not a dog in the manger, Miss Ives. I'm not letting Flaming Canyon grass go to seed. It's being harvested to tide me over the winter. Crade and I hope to stock the canyon by fall."

The girl made circles in the dust with a dainty boot toe.

"Couldn't we—Mr. Herrod and I—rent the use of your grazing range until our October beef gather?"

"What's the matter with the graze outside the Canyon? Okanogan Jones owns half the Strip from the river to the Cascade divide. He'll lease you whatever your herd needs."

Shasta bit her lip, anger showing in her eyes now.

"You know how rough the Strip country is, Mr. Troy. Inside your Canyon, a dozen riders could keep our cattle bunched all summer. It—it's only fair to warn you, Mr. Troy—Bix has used Flaming Canyon in the past and he will again. Until you actually have stock to feed on that grass, Bix feels that you have no legal right to deny us grazing rights."

Troy donned his sombrero and yanked his jerkline.

"Adios, ma'am. I don't think Herrod has any doubts as to where the legal rights lie in this case."

Shasta Ives jumped back to avoid the heavy wheels of the Conestoga, and her defiant shout lashed up at him.

"You cut a wide swath now, Mr. Troy. If Bix wanted to he could sue you for your last dollar, for wrecking the ferry he leased from Ed Guerrant down in Brewster."

Troy's retort reached her through the whorling dust, "That ferry wouldn't have been wrecked if Bix and his friends hadn't cut the cables, ma'am."

He crossed the Okanogan by way of the Omak Ford at dusk, and camped that night at the Disautel Claim deep in the Colville Indian reservation.

THE NEXT DAY he unloaded Slankard's freight at the Nespelem agency and turned his mules due south, to cross the Columbia at Wild Goose Bill's ferry the following morning. This third day on the road would find him bucking the sun-

baked scab-rock badlands on the high, sage-scented desert plateau.

He derived no comfort from the knowledge that this was probably the last time he would have to endure the ordeal of crossing the Basin desert. The cancellation of a lucrative summer freight contract with Steen Slankard, due to the unforeseen exodus of miners to the Yukon gold rush, had come as a crippling blow to Troy's dreams.

Every passing hour drew Bix Herrod's trail herd closer to an open showdown at the entrance of Flaming Canyon. Facing the Lazy H gun-hung crew loomed as a tough prospect, for Troy was virtually playing a lone-wolf game.

He knew he could not depend on the loyalty of Whitey Crade if the showdown involved a gun fight with Lazy H. Sheriff Irv Gaddy, the law of Conconully, would back him to the limit, he knew; but having the government behind him would be of scant help if Herrod breached the homestead fence and shoved two or three thousand head of hungry cattle onto Flaming Canyon grass.

A second visit from Herrod's emissaries to the hay harvesters would result inevitably in the river bottom farmers pulling out of Flaming Canyon en masse. That would leave his lease wide open to the inroads of the Yakima steers, and by the time he could get a restraining junction filed against Herrod in the circuit court, the damage would be irreparable.

By mid-day. Troy was faced by the abyss of Grand Coulee, forcing him to veer southwestward across the bitter expanse of sage and greasewood and lava outcrops. His destination, the railhead of Coulee City, lay across a break in the great chasm near the Dry Falls.

Lack of forage for the mules forced Troy to abandon travel during the heat of the afternoon. He doled out water to the suffering brutes from the barrel he had filled at the Columbia River. As soon as dusk came he hitched up and pushed on.

A full moon rode the cloudless sky and its argentine glow threw the four hundred foot cliffs of Dry Falls into vivid awesome relief as Troy's wagon skirted the one-time cascade where the waters

of the Columbia, thrown out of their original bed by the action of glaciers and prehistoric earthquakes, had once formed a cataract by which the glories of Niagara would be reduced to a seeping trickle by comparison.

The old bed of the river made rough going for the wagon, but the lights of Coulee City lifted above the far horizon and Del Troy was determined to keep the mules going all night if need be, to achieve his goal short of another scorching day.

He was dozing in saddle when, from the clotted shadows of a scab-rock outcrop at the brink of Dry Falls, the cool night was cracked by the shattering roar of a gunshot.

A bullet whipped past Troy's cheek as he straightened in saddle. He moved by instinct then, snaking the Winchester from his scabbard and leaving the stirrups in a rolling dive.

Muzzle flame from a rifle bore lanced the darkness ahead of the spooked mules as Troy sprinted for the shelter of his wagon box, and an invisible force sledged his left shoulder and slammed him face forward on the rubble.

Pulling himself to his knees, Troy groped to recover his fallen .30-.30 and levered a shell into the breech. Gunsmoke tarried above the lava outcrop where the drygulcher was hidden, its smudging umbrella haloed by the moonbeams.

Troy drove an answering shot in that direction, heard his copper-jacketed bullet ricochet into the awful blackness of the Lower Coulee.

A yell somewhere behind him warned Troy that he was boxed in between cross-firing guns, that he was silhouetted against the white canvas of the Conestoga hood.

Crouched low, Troy headed in the only direction left open to him—toward the brink of the Dry Falls. Bullets quested after his darting body from two angles as he flung himself into a patch of bubble-pitted lava on the very lip of the chasm.

The mules stampeded for fifty yards and came to a halt in a shallow coulee near the outcrop where the first bushwhack shot had breached the night.

Not until he tried to rest his Winchester barrel across a lava chunk did Troy realize

that he had been hit. A numbing sensation was spreading down his arm, across his left shoulder, and his fingers came away sticky with a warm, viscid ooze when he explored under his shirt. After this first numbness of bullet shock left him, he knew that a searing agony would set in, reducing his own effectiveness at bagging a target.

At least two bushwhackers were converging on the Conestoga now. Above the tom-tomming in his ears, Troy caught a liquid sloshing sound, and a vagrant breeze brought the fumes of spilled coal oil to his nostrils.

Troy lowered himself to the sanctuary of a yard-wide ledge below the rim, knowing shoot out was soon to come. His flesh crawled at the prospect of toppling into the empty depths under his right elbow. Half a thousand feet below, he saw the twin lakes of stagnant water below the cliff talus, reflecting the high-riding moon like the eyes of a corpse.

Discarding his Stetson, Troy lifted his head above the rimrock in time to see a spurt of ruddy flame blossom in the night as his attackers set fire to the wagon.

If this was an ordinary hold-up by desert bandits out to loot a passing freighter, it seemed unlikely that they would be bent on destroying the empty wagon in this fashion. He saw the mules break into a stampede, panicked by the flames which enveloped the prairie schooner.

Horror bit into Troy as he saw the team veer to the right, headed for the yawning chasm brink.

Seconds later the team went over the edge, the Conestoga teetering against the moonlit sky, its hood blazing like a torch. Nausea crawled into the pit of Troy's stomach as he watched the long, plummeting drop of the ten-mule team and the big wagon, hurtling like a comet down the vertical wall of the Dry Falls toward the broken talus which sloped to meet the prehistoric lakes in the pit of the gorge.

The flaming Conestoga seemed to explode as it struck bottom. An eternity later, it seemed, the appalling crash of mules and wagon volleyed up from the shadow-blocked depths to assault Troy's ears as he crouched, numb and bleeding, on the ledge far above.

VI

“PLAY THIS CLOSE TO YORE chest, now!” came a guttural voice through the hushed quiet. “Troy’s hit, but he ain’t out of the fight by a damned sight. He’s trapped on the rim yonder.”

The voice struck a familiar chord in Troy’s memory, but he couldn’t identify its owner. He pushed the carbine aside in favor of his Colt six-gun, knowing his left arm would soon be paralyzed and that the .45 would serve him best in a close-in fight.

He unknotted the bandanna from his neck and snapped the dust out of it, wadding it into a makeshift compress. His hand shook as he unbuttoned his shirt and explored under it, feeling the slow well of blood where a slug had ripped the egg of the muscle high on his left arm, near the point of his shoulder. The bone had not been nicked; the wound was more painful than serious.

The abrasive sound of a hobbed boot sole on lava reached his ears but the tricky shift of the breeze made it impossible to orient the direction of the ambusher’s movement. The moon put the ground line in sharp relief and Troy waited for the shape of a skulking attacker to cross it.

The bandanna stemmed the flow of blood down his sleeve. He eared the knurled hammer of his Peacemaker to full cock, his eyes raking the rimrock along the full arc of his vision.

A long period of nerve-sapping waiting followed. Occasionally the furtive sounds of his attackers deploying into position for shoot out reached his ears. Cicadas trilled in the bunch grass thickets. Somewhere far off a coyote bayed at the moon.

Something twitched the twigs of a greasewood clump directly above the ledge where Troy was cornered. But he held his fire, not sure if a gust of wind had caused the foliage to move.

Further to his right, metal scraped on rock. A stalking gunman was bellying across the ground, thrusting a rifle ahead of him. Too late, Troy realized that the moonlight had swung around enough to

put his ledge under the full betraying glare of its beams. He was a prime target now.

The wind died off. The cloying scent of sage bit into Troy’s nostrils. Overhead, a shooting star scratched its white, dissolving spark across the heavens. Far below him, the shattered wreckage of the Conestoga had started a brush fire, the smell of smoke lifting in an acrid chimney current up the cliff.

The greasewood clump vibrated again, and moonlight glinted off the muzzle of a Springfield rifle thrust tentatively through the foliage.

Troy calculated the angle of the gun, knew that the man behind its sights had not yet spotted his hideout. He steadied his Colt barrel on the ledge rim and squeezed off a shot.

On the heels of the whipcrack report, Troy heard a brief threshing noise in the gravel behind the greasewood, the gagging exhalations of a man. Spur chains jingled as boot toes made a rataplan on the flinty rubble, and then the noises ceased. The black muzzle of the .45-70 still protruded from the fork of the greasewood bush, canted toward the moon.

Maybe he had dropped a man; maybe it was a ruse to draw him out of hiding to become a target for the second ambusher.

He heard a whisper, “You hit?” But no answer. Then came the furtive sound of a man crawling on all fours directly above him, invisible behind the rimrock. The noise ceased in the vicinity of the greasewood, and the low, dismayed oath reached Troy’s ears.

Pain was mounting steadily in Troy’s shoulder now, forcing him to grind his teeth against crying out and betraying his position. The shadows altered imperceptibly along the fluted rocks as the moon cruised down the Washington sky. He estimated that a full hour had dragged by before another noise reached him.

It was the drumroll of horse’s hoofs, headed south-west. Two horses, traveling across the scoriated channel of the dry riverbed. The ring of steel-shod hoofs on volcanic rock gradually dwindled and left a brooding silence over the empty land.

This sound of a withdrawal posed a

problem for Del Troy. The horses might have belonged to passing cavalry scouts bound for some army post, or they might have been the mounts belonging to his ambushers. A wrong guess now would be fatal.

It did not seem likely that his ambushers would withdraw, leaving him in possession of the field. He was too cagey to take for granted that his bullet had tallied a target.

The Springfield left hanging in the greasewood could be bait to lure him out of hiding. On the other hand, without so much as a pocket of shadow to take concealment in, Troy knew it would be suicidal to wait until one or the other of the gunmen crawled around the perimeter of Dry Falls and cut him down at long range.

Thrusting his throbbing left arm through his shirt front to support it, Troy came to a kneeling position, flesh braced against the expected shock of point-blank lead.

But nothing stirred on the skyline. Crickets sang their sedative lullaby from the sage clumps. The night was so still he could hear the crackle of the fire which was licking the dead grass at the bottom of the coulee.

Taking the long gamble, Troy climbed off the ledge which had been his sanctuary and inched closer to the greasewood, out of line of the .45-70 muzzle. Veering a dozen yards to the left, he topped the hump and had his first look behind the greasewood clump.

A SPRAWLED SHAPE made an angular blot in the shadow of the greasewood. The smell of blood in Troy's nostrils was most likely his own, but he saw the moon refracted in a diamond point from a crawling black puddle beside the formless shadow.

Searching the broken riverbed beyond, Troy finally made up his mind as to the shape events had taken. He had downed one of the bushwackers with a lucky shot; the remaining gunman had elected to beat a retreat rather than run the risk of a siege.

Standing up, thumb alert on gunhammer, Troy moved forward and halted be-

side the body which lay in the grotesque posture of death beside the greasewood. A cowboy, judging from the batwing chaps which encased the saddle-warped legs, and the steeple-peaked Stetson which had rolled to one side.

With a boot toe Troy rolled the slack, loose weight of the corpse over on its back. His bullet had smashed the stalker dead center of the forehead, and a curtain of blood and dirt masked the contorted face. The jutting beaver teeth under a blood-clotted ram's horn mustache were vaguely familiar to him.

Then, glancing at the dead man's hat, Troy tagged his victim. The felt band of the black Stetson was impaled with a collection of dry flies and fishhooks.

"Fred Bolte," Troy muttered aloud, and slid his gun into leather. "You've done your last fishin' this side of hell, hombre."

Identifying one of his ambushers as Bix Herrod's personal bodyguard removed the last mystery behind the destruction of his mules and wagon tonight. Herrod, learning through some source—perhaps from Shasta Ives—that the man who blocked his summer range was making a trek to Coulee City, had dispatched two of his Lazy H gunhawks to wait for him here at Dry Falls, knowing it was the only means of crossing Grand Coulee from the Indian Reservation.

For the first time since the strike of lead against his own flesh, Troy realized now the seriousness of what Herrod's men had accomplished tonight. His best wagon and the pick of his mules were now buzzard bait and kindling wood in the pit of the Lower Coulee. Herrod had made a second strike at Troy's source of livelihood, augmenting this blow with a direct try on Troy's life.

If Troy had had any doubts as to the limit Herrod would go, this business at Dry Falls removed them. The chips were down in a game which had a boothill grave waiting for one or both of them at its finish.

Troy clambered back down to the ledge and recovered his Winchester and Stetson. Back on the rise where Fred Bolte's sightless eyes stared at the westering moon, the Texan wrestled briefly with a vindic-

tive impulse to hurl the Lazy bodyguard over the rim.

Instead he picked up Bolte's fishhook-bristling sombrero and, shouldering his rifle infantry fashion, headed toward the lights of Coulee City, five miles by crow-flight across the desert. The coyotes could quarrel over Bolte's corpse tonight; Troy knew that getting medical attention for his wound was his first need.

If he remembered correctly, there would be a stage leaving Coulee City for the Okanogan country around noon tomorrow. He would board it, with a dead man's hat as his only extra baggage.

VII

CATTLE BEARING THE LAZY H and Dollar brands and earmarks plodded up the cliff-bordered bottoms of the Columbia River, ribby and gaunted from a hard winter and a burned-out spring.

Bracketted by yipping outriders, Bix Herrod's pool herd was strung out in a dusty column which measured five miles from its point to the drags.

Behind them lay the parched Ellensburg hills; the river settlements of Rock Island and Wenatchee. Directly ahead was the cluster of shacks marking Entiat.

The majority of these three thousand head of bawling cattle belonged to Bix Herrod; the remainder were Sam Ives' legacy to his daughter, and a smattering of mavericks, picked up enroute through the Colokum Pass by Herrod's hungry-looped drovers.

Herrod was waiting for his herd's arrival when they forded Entiat River. With the unerring instinct of a stockman, he saw that the pool herd was beginning to take on tallow during its leisurely advance northward, and grass improved from here on.

Paced by a chuck wagon, the herd was within a hundred miles of its summer range at Flaming Canyon now. Riding out to confer with his trail boss, Herrod left orders to favor the stragglers, nurse the she-stuff along, take it easy.

He had plenty of time. A few months on the lush grass of the Okanogan would

put Lazy H and Dollar beef in shape for the fall gather and the short drive through Snoqualmie Pass to the slaughterhouses in Seattle. And with the Yakima and Oregon ranges ruined by drought this year, Herrod stood to rake in a fat profit on a beef-short market. The feed and water of Flaming Canyon would guarantee that.

Turning back up the Cariboo Trail toward the Okanogan, Herrod rode with a vast contentment suffusing him, a welcome release after the strain of past months, when he had seen his fortunes shriveling under the tropical hot Washington sun.

A proud, ruthless and thoroughly unscrupulous cattleman, Bix Herrod's sleep was not deviled by so much as a shred of worry concerning the end of this cattle drive. He rode with the firm assurance that the temporary nuisance of Del Troy's presence at Flaming Canyon would be disposed of long in advance of the herd's arrival at the homesteaders' drift fence.

He had known Troy casually, as a happy-go-lucky saddle bum back in Texas, a decade ago. It had come as a surprise to find that the erstwhile Chisholm Trail drifter had acquired ambitions to build a spread of his own out here in Washington.

But Herrod was quick to see that Troy's scheme to introduce big-scale Texas methods of cattle raising to the unsettled Okanogan had possibilities which he, Herrod, might well adapt to his own long-range objective of dominating the cattle industry of this north-western frontier.

Whereas Herrod owned leagues of rich cattle range in the Yakima country, he had savvy enough to foresee other rainless years such as this one. If, by gaining title to permanent summer range in Flaming Canyon, he could assure the prosperity of his cattle empire, Herrod was prepared to take any steps to wipe out any opposition which might confront his greedy ambition.

Shasta Ives figured in that ambition. When Herrod had first arrived in Washington, well heeled with the proceeds of his crooked loop and running iron back in Texas, his only neighbor had been aging Sam Ives, one-time brevet colonel under Jeb Stuart.

Ives, coming to Washington Territory shortly after the humiliation at Appomattox, had founded the Dollar ranch, married, and begot a daughter, whom he had named after the snow-clad peak which overshadowed his wife's home in California.

Colonel Sam had looked with distrust upon Bix Herrod, fearful of how far his fellow Texan's shadow might fall. He had seen Herrod build up the vast Lazy H outfit, freezing out small-tally ranchers with the aid of the gun-hung crew he had brought with him from the Lone Star plains.

Ives had died last winter, thereby removing the last obstacle to Herrod's long-range scheme to monopolize the privately owned grazing range in the State of Washington. Shasta Ives was twenty years younger than Herrod, but he had courted her with an ardent devotion which had slowly overcome her father's opposition to the match.

Only on the death of old Sam, in his ninetieth year, had the girl finally consented to wear Herrod's ring; and then with a patent reluctance which had piqued Herrod's pride. To Herrod, such a marriage was based less on love than on more practical business grounds. Once Shasta became his bride, the Dollar would automatically fall into the sphere of control which the Lazy H wielded in the Yakima country.

A man of unquestionable social charm and education, Bix Herrod chose to consider his forthcoming marriage to Shasta Ives as icing on a very delectable cake. The rambling California-style ranch house which Herrod had built on a tawny bluff overlooking his cattle empire needed a hostess. And Shasta's beauty made her a prize well worth capturing, even without the added inducement of Dollar's fertile acres of Natchez Valley graze.

As Shasta's intended husband, Herrod knew he enjoyed the girl's complete faith and unswerving loyalty. His personal integrity was something she had never questioned, despite the hints which Colonel Sam had implanted in her regarding Herrod's rustling activities back in Texas.

However Herrod had managed to ex-

and his range, Shasta accepted his version of astute business dealings and fair payment for value received. Stories of night raids by Lazy H riders, small-tally ranchers left dangling under cottonwood limbs as the price of their defiance to Lazy H and its spreading power—these stories Herrod could pass off as ugly rumors started by jealous inferiors. And, knowing Shasta's deep-seated inheritance of honor and square dealing, Herrod was careful to curry the girl's respect in every way he could.

Midway to Brewster, where Herrod intended to await his oncoming pool herd, the Lazy H cattle baron was hailed from the shadow of the beetling Ribbon Cliffs by a familiar voice.

Reining his big stallion in the direction of the voice, Herrod saw the familiar sunken-chested figure of Doc Godette emerge from a willow thicket at the river's edge.

Excitement put a flush of color on Herrod's cheekbones as he spurred down to meet his henchman. Exactly where his path had first crossed Godette's, even Herrod could not remember precisely; but a close rapport had always existed between this ambitious wide-looper and the broken-down, ex-Confederate surgeon.

Crowding seventy, Doc Godette had been a practising physician in an obscure Texas trail town during the reconstruction years which followed his mustering out of the Confederate forces. But drink and opium had made Godette a pariah of his profession, a traitor to his Hippocratic oath.

His habit of administering to patients who visited him in the dead of night, owl-hooters with a bounty on their scalps and gunshot or knife wounds of doubtful genesis on their persons, had given Mike Godette a notoriety and a crooked reputation.

AT ANY RATE, the oldster's genius with scalpel and suture needle had saved Bix Herrod's life on a certain occasion when a Texas Ranger had put a bullet in Herrod's lung following an unsuccessful attempt to steal a herd bound for Abilene.

Godette, in the early stages of tuberculosis even then, had carried the wounded rustler to Medora and devoted the next six months of his life to concealing Herrod from the posses seeking to cut his sign, and had nursed Herrod through a convalescence when another medico would have given up his patient as lost.

As long as that bullet scar remained on Herrod's chest, he owed an unshakable allegiance to Doc Godette, the only loyalty that the man was capable of. And on that basis their Damon and Pythias relationship had its inception.

When Herrod had come West to shake off the law noose that was tightening around him in the brasada country of the upper Pecos, Bix Herrod's companion in flight had been Doc Godette; and with the ascending star of Lazy H fortune, Godette carried the title of Herrod's foreman and was his inseparable companion and personal advisor.

"You killed Troy?" Herrod greeted the rawboned old man.

Godette shielded a cough behind a palsied palm and when he lowered his hand, a stain of crimson lingered on the corners of his mouth. His forearm was pitted with hypodermic scars and his faded eyes were pin-pointed with narcotics now.

"Well, Bix, I'll answer that one with a yes or no."

Herrod swung out of stirrups, his flat brows jutting like awnings over his narrowing eyes.

"What in hell does that mean, yes or no? He's either dead or he damned better had be." Herrod's piercing flint-black eyes lanced through the willows behind Godette. "Where's Fred?"

Godette rubbed the worn stock of his ancient Spiller and Burr campaign pistol, avoiding Herrod's glance.

"I left Bolte back at the Dry Falls. We jumped Troy's wagon, set it afire and hazed it over the cliff. But Fred got careless. Forgot there was a full moon. Troy blew his brains out."

Herrod pulled his bridle reins back and forth through his powerful hands, his jaw sagging as he took the brunt of this shocking news. Fred Bolte had sided Herrod for years before Godette had joined the

triumvirate. He and Bolte had shot their way out of more than one tight corner together, back to back.

"What happened to Troy?"

Godette's interest appeared to be fixed on the black lava seams which laced the eroded face of the Ribbon Cliffs overhead.

"Well, Bolte plugged him. Troy forted up in the rocks and I reckon he bled to death there."

A grim prescience of disaster flowed through Herrod.

"Out with it, Doc. It ain't like you to beat around the bush with me. You ain't sure Troy cashed in his chips?"

Godette fished a bottle from his tunic and fortified himself with a stiff dram. Having long since diagnosed his own incurable disease, Godette kept himself alive with alcohol and morphine.

"I lit a shuck soon as I found Bolte was past my help, Bix. I'd say Troy bled to death, but I didn't dally around till daylight to make sure. I'm too old a goat to risk my horns with a younker."

Herrod was silent for a long interval, his knuckles whitening over the stocks of the twin Colts slung for cross draw under his fustian town coat.

"I should have handled Troy myself," he said finally. "Get your bronc and come on, Doc. We'll eat at Brewster."

Dusk found Herrod and Godette at the ferry landing opposite Fort Columbia. The Ribbon Cliffs, forcing a closure of the Cariboo Trail, meant the oncoming herd would have to cross to the east bank of the Columbia. By noon tomorrow the cattle would reach Port Columbia and make their crossing back to the west side where the river was narrowest.

Guerrant's ferry cables had been repaired and the raft, towed back upstream from the bar where it had landed with Troy's wagon, was once more in operation. At the moment it was shuttling back to Brewster, loaded with the red-and-yellow stage from Wilbur and Coulee City.

When the ferry nudged into its slip, the stage driver mounted his boot and drove the thoroughbraced Concord up the ramp and halted in front of the Brewster station, directly opposite Guerrant's shanty.

Herrod, his chair tilted back against the

wall of the ferryman's house, was dozing when Doc Godette plucked his sleeve.

"Reckon my diagnosis of Troy's wound was a trifle on the optimistic side, Bix. Look a-comin' yonder and remember you left your shootin' irons in your alforja bags."

The color drained from Herrod's swart countenance as he caught sight of the tall, bowlegged cowpuncher who alighted from the Coulee City stage and headed toward the ferry landing.

Del Troy halted in front of Herrod, his smoke-gray eyes shuttling between Doc Godette and the Lazy H boss. His left hand came out from behind his back and he tossed a black sombrero on the step at Herrod's feet.

"See you at Flaming Canyon next week, Bix. Meanwhile, there's a little keepsake for you in case you want to go fishin'."

So saying, the Texan turned on his heel and strode back to catch the departing stage for Conconully.

"Fred's skypiece," Doc Godette muttered, staring at the bullet hole in the brim of the bloodstained sombrero. "Well, Troy knows what he's up against, anyhow. He doesn't know I was with Fred that night or I wouldn't be here to brag about it now."

VIII

AMBIE PRIDE, THE BROKEN-down prospector who enjoyed the dubious distinction of being Conconully's town drunkard, was on hand at the relay station when the midnight stage pulled in from Brewster.

A lone passenger alighted from the Concord, and Ambie Pride hobbled over to make his customary plea.

"I'm dead beat for nourishment an' you can't eat free lunch at Beagle's Saloon without buyin' a drink, stranger. Besides which my wife Jennie is fixin' to have a baby and' I'm needing a bracer."

Pride's whimper broke off as he recognized the drawn lines of Del Troy's face in the glare of the stage lamps. Ordinarily the genial Texan was good for a dollar and a few joshing words, but tonight Troy brushed off the beggar's outstretched palm

and stalked grimly across the street to Slankard & Company's office.

He found the bearded trader playing checkers with Irv Gaddy, the sheriff. After a moment's hesitation, Troy decided to let the lawman in on his failure to reach Coulee City to pick up Slankard's merchandise.

"Herrod's cattle are bedded down this side of Pateros tonight," he finished up. "Which means they'll hit my Flaming Canyon fence in two or three days at the outside. I can't make the Coulee trip with my other wagon or send Whitey over there either, Steen."

The trader fingered his beard thoughtfully.

"No matter. I'd just have that more inventory I couldn't dispose of. Sorry you lost your outfit, son. Never rains but it pours, seems like."

Sheriff Gaddy, apparently concentrating on his next move, rubbed a leaf-brown ear and spoke through his drooping waterfall mustache.

"If you can prove Bix Herrod was behind that ambush, swear out a warrant for his arrest and I'll be glad to serve it, Del. If somebody don't put a rope around that guy's neck he'll be running for gov'nor."

Troy, his hand on the doorknob, shook his head in negation.

"Bolte's dead. I didn't identify his partner. Herrod was behind the deal, obviously. But proving it is something else."

Troy stepped out into the night, saw that the Loop-Loop Casino was locked up—an unheard-of thing for a gambling house which did its best business in the hours after midnight—and after a yearning glance at the window of Roxanna's upstairs bedroom, made his way to the Cariboo House.

Sheriff Gaddy was breakfasting in the hotel dining room when Troy joined him next morning, refreshed after a good sleep. He was wearing a clean shirt which concealed the lump of bandage taped to his left shoulder.

Gaddy waited until Troy was building a smoke after his meal before saying what was on his mind.

"Del, I was talking to Ambie Pride after

I seen you last night. Had to lock the old coot up to sleep off a binge. It seems Ambie has been on a huntin' trip over Flaming Canyon way."

Troy grinned at the picture that conjured up.

"Aiming to feed that new baby a venison steak when the stork shows up?"

Gaddy's face was dead serious as he teetered back his chair, furbishing the star on his gallus strap with a big horny thumb.

"You know that section of public land between your homestead and the Twenty-Mile Strip?"

"At Keyhole Pass? I ought to, Irv. Been trying hard enough to get you or some other reliable person to prove up on it, to protect my back. Don't tell me Ambie Pride wants to file on it!"

Gaddy scratched a stubby jaw with his pipe stem.

"Not hardly. But Ambie Pride says somebody's fencin' that piece and is throwin' up a homestead cabin smack in the middle of the Keyhole. It wouldn't be so good, say, if Bix Herrod got the idea of taking a donation claim right at your back door."

Troy's chair legs hit the floor as he came to his feet. The Keyhole had always been the weak link in his plan to eventually control the entire length of Flaming Canyon. If a hostile owner moved in, he could legally demand right-of-way between Troy's and Whitey Crade's homestead, through the mouth of the Canyon. That possibility had long been a nightmare to the man.

"The courthouse opens in a couple hours," the sheriff went on, a toothpick waggling under his mustache. "Dazzy Kline can tell you soon enough who filed on Keyhole."

Troy lifted his Stetson from a nearby antler rack.

"Hell, I can be out to the Canyon by then. I'll find out for myself."

Troy was saddling his steelduster over in Slankard's barn before the Conconully sheriff caught up with him.

"I'll ride out with you, son. You might find a gent with an itchy trigger finger squattin' on that section."

Troy jerked his latigo tight and mounted.

"No, thanks, sheriff. Filing on an unclaimed chunk of government land is nothing a sheriff can object to."

"Of course," Gaddy called after him, "this whole thing might be another of Pride's whiskey tales."

The steelduster was lathered and blowing when Troy reached the south wall of Flaming Canyon and directed his gaze toward the narrowing notch of the Keyhole.

AMBIE PRIDE'S REPORT had been no figment of a drunkard's imagination. A pile of notched fir logs had been snaked over to the Keyhole. Two men were already at work, even at this early hour, fashioning a foundation from rocks brought from the bed of Glacier Creek. And a row of fence posts had been set across the section line. Reels of barbed wire gleamed in the morning sunrays from the bed of a springboard wagon parked near the creek. Wire purchased from Slankard's stock.

And Troy made another grim discovery. The nesters he was depending upon to harvest his hay crop were nowhere to be seen—their tents were gone and their rakes and mowing machines were nowhere in evidence.

The sodbusters had deserted the sinking ship during his absence.

Troy spurred his winded mustang recklessly down the road which ribboned down the shoulder of the canyon, and reached his own homestead. The anguished bawling of his milk cow pulled Troy's attention from the Keyhole situation, and he tarried to pay his log-walled barn a visit.

The cow's udder was swollen with pent-up milk, indicative that Whitey Crade had been derelict in his duty to the suffering animal during Troy's absence. Cursing, the Texan wasted a quarter hour stripping the cow, pumping the water trough full and forking fresh hay to the neglected beast.

Back in saddle, he skirted his cabin and was swinging across the flats in the direction of the new homestead claim at the Keyhole when a scene of activity over on his partner's homestead brought him up

short, his original mission pushed from his mind.

A crew of men was strung out along Crade's drift fence, cutting barbed wire and yanking posts out of the ground with lass' ropes. The barrier which Troy had counted upon to indicate the deadline for Herrod's pool herd was being obliterated before his very eyes.

Loosening his saddle gun in scabbard, Troy put the steelduster at a dead run across the intervening flats, forded Glacier Creek and reined up in front of Whitey Crade's tarpaper shack.

"Whitey!" his bellow started echoes from the looming cliff. "What in hell have you b——"

He broke off, as the cabin door opened on bullhide hinges and the trim figure of Shasta Ives stepped out on the clean-swept stone flags of his partner's porch.

The girl from Dollar was hatless, the sun catching highlights in her cascading blond tresses. She looked mannish in a pair of high-cuffed bibless levis, and her shirt sleeves were rolled back to reveal arms whitened with baking powder.

Ground-tying the steelduster, Troy headed for the house, a storm of conflicting emotions keeping him speechless even when the girl gave him a cordial invitation to join her at breakfast.

"Where's my partner?" he blurted finally.

Devils danced in Shasta's brown eyes.

"Mr. Crade is staying over in Conco-nully until you return, I believe he said."

Troy gestured toward the drift fence.

"Who's that out yonder tearing down fence? What are you doing here at Crade's?"

Shasta swatted her palms together, flour clodding up to obscure her half-smile.

"Those are Dollar cowhands, Mr. Troy. They work for me. I own this homestead, as of Wednesday noon."

"You——" Troy swayed on his feet, unable to comprehend this cataclysmic turn of events. "I never called a woman a liar, ma'am, but Crade wouldn't sell me down the river. Not without consulting me first."

Shasta leaned back against the door casing, folding her arms across the swell of her breasts.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Troy, but you're mistaken. Mr. Crade sold me this homestead the day you left for Coulee City. For a thousand dollars in cash. Do you want to see my deed?"

Knots of muscle swelled at the corners of Troy's jaws as a deep, festering hurt took root in his breast. The ambush at Dry Falls, this stab in the back over at the Keyhole today, even the threat of imminent range war which Bix Herrod's approaching cattle presaged—these calamities were tangible, something a man could fight in his own way.

But to have a trusted partner play the Judas role in his absence—to be double-crossed by a man who owed Troy his life, his one chance of salvaging his manhood—this was a tragedy too deep to absorb at one blow.

"Please don't look at me that way, Mr. Troy," Shasta implored, her arrogance fading as she stepped toward him. "After all, everything's fair in love and war. And this is surely war between us. My whole future is tied up in gaining right-of-way for my stock to enter Flaming Canyon. Mr. Crade is not your slave or your chattel.

He had a perfect legal and moral right to accept cash payment for property he held in his own right."

Troy's lungs expanded to the slow, deep pull of his breath, his face ashen as the face of a pugilist who has sustained a crippling blow, his brain as yet incapable of realizing the potentialities of disaster which Crade's perfidy would bring.

"Yeah," he said numbly, "everything's fair in love and war. Even to tipping off a killer that I'd be prime ambush bait out at Grand Coulee, I suppose!"

A frown altered the girl's face, pulling the anger from her eyes. She drew back her hand in the act of touching him.

"Grand Coulee? Ambush? What are you talking about?"

He laughed then, harshly and on a rising scale. His hands fisted, every instinct in him calling out for physical reprisal, his rage checkmated by the barrier of sex.

"Don't lie to me! Don't deny you sent Fred Bolte out to ambush me! Well, I had to kill Fred Bolte. The first life I ever

took. You can laugh and forget that. I never will."

Shasta recoiled from the ferocity of his eyes, seeing a beserk quality enter his uncurbed temper.

"I know nothing of Bolte's activities," she said hollowly. "Surely you don't think I—I'd condone anything as violent as—"

He was gone then, striding back to his waiting horse.

He swung into stirrups and left Crade's gate at a run.

For a long minute the girl remained at the cabin door, a sense of shame touching her, a feeling akin to disloyalty to her better self which erased what triumph she had felt at engineering a tactical victory over this homesteader she felt to be an enemy.

The strike of hoofs approaching from the east drew her gaze away from Del Troy's departure toward Keyhole Pass. Shasta pulled her gaze around to see Bix Herrod riding through the gate from the direction of the fence-cutting crew.

"It worked, Shasta!" the Lazy H boss shouted exultantly as he stepped down from his stallion. "I thought Crade would be putty in your hands, but I hardly expected to find a 160-acre gate wide open before I got back."

She evaded his attempt to kiss her, and not until then did Bix Herrod pause to see the haunted look in his fiancee's eyes.

"Shasta, honey! What's troubling you this morning?"

Shasta stepped back, her eyes imploring him.

"Bix, tell me the truth. What happened to Fred Bolte?"

Herrod's smile faded, his eyes shuttering as if to conceal the guilty knowledge that lay behind them.

"What do you mean?"

"Troy was just here. He says Fred tried to ambush him over at Grand Coulee night before last. He says he had to shoot Fred."

Herrod's jaw snapped shut. He stalled for time to compose his thoughts by clipping the end off his cigar and lighting it.

"Matter of fact, Bolte is dead," he admitted. "I sent him back down to meet the herd, as you know. He got himself knifed by a jezebel down in Wenatchee's red light district Saturday night. Doc brought me

the news at Pateros. I helped bury Fred yesterday."

Tears brimmed the girl's lashes as she stared back at the man she intended to marry, a tiny worm of disillusion screwing into her thoughts for the first time since she had accepted Herrod's betrothal ring.

"Bix—you wouldn't lie to me—about Fred?"

Herrod was smiling again now, his arms extended toward her. A moment later she was pressed against him, sobbing uncontrollably against his lapel.

"Of course I told you the truth, Shasta. It's my word against Troy's. Which of us are you to believe?"

IX

THE TWO BURLY STONE masons who were laying the foundation for the Keyhole Pass cabin paused in their work as Troy rode up. He recalled having seen this pair around Conconully before, and had the impression that they were muckers at the Silver King diggings.

"Which one of you filed on this land?"

The workmen exchanged glances, sensing the threat in the horsebacker's voice.

"Neither of us, feller. We just took on this fencin' and cabin-raisin' job to kill time while the mine's closed down. Got the job from Nick Jordano, the shafthouse foreman."

"Since when is a mining engineer interested in a homestead? There's no mineral in Flaming Canyon. It's been prospected from end to end. Jordano knows that."

The spokesman shrugged.

"Jordano didn't file on it. Somebody braced him for day labor and he give us the job. That's all we can tell you."

There was nothing to be gained by dallying here. Troy wheeled the steelduster around and started back to town.

The county courthouse was open when Troy reached Conconully and he went directly to the land office. Dazzy Kline, the county recorder, was going through his morning mail.

"I'd like to see your plat of Flaming Canyon," Troy requested brusquely, without preliminaries. "Want to find out who

filed on that public land near the Keyhole this week."

Kline cuffed back the celluloid eyeshade which cowed his bald head and grinned competently.

"No need to open the archives for that dope, Troy. Your lady friend over at the Loop-Loop took a notion to be your neighbor."

Troy's jaw dropped. "Meaning Roxanna Laranjo?"

"That's right. Gamblin's lead around here. Maybe she wants to settle down and grow garden truck."

Troy left the courthouse in a haze of relief and bewilderment. Not until he was hitching his mustang at the rack in front of the Loop-Loop deadfall did the full import of Roxie's surprise move become clear to him.

"She heard about Crade selling me out, so she filed on the Keyhole. With Roxie homesteadin' that piece, Herrod can't shove a single critter beyond her fence."

The implications of the girl's coup buoyed Troy's spirit like a narcotic in his bloodstream. Between the Lazy H herd and the upper Canyon, Roxanna's homestead stood like a barrier as effective as if an avalanche had blocked the Keyhole. There could be no other explanation for the girl's move. In his absence, she had countered Whitey Crade's treachery with a master stroke, plucking victory from what had seemed irrevocable defeat.

Troy mounted the Casino steps and pushed through the batwings, his eyes sweeping at once to the blackjack table in the far corner. He was in luck. Roxanna, wearing a full-skirted Spanish gown which made her resemble a damosela from old Castile, was fitting a new baize cover to her gaming table.

A lone customer stood drinking at the Casino's bar, standing in Troy's path as the Texan headed toward Roxanna's corner. Not until he was abreast of the man did he recognize Whitey Crade, and sight of his traitorous partner halted Troy alongside Crade's elbow.

On the bar in front of the albino was a half-empty whiskey bottle, a shot glass and a buckskin poke from the puckered mouth

of which had spilled a heap of gold specie.

"Spending your double-cross pay on forty-rod, Whitey?" Troy's voice cut through Crade's alcoholic fog. "How do you think you'll feel when that dinero's gone and you have to live with yourself?"

Crade clutched the plump leather sack with trembling hands, swiveling slowly to meet the full impact of Troy's scorn. His obscene, corpse-white face took on two spots of color over his cheekbones as he tried to focus his pink eyes on the man he had betrayed to the enemy.

"I had a right to sell out, Del. Who in hell do you think you are—my guardeen?"

Crade's voice was thick with whiskey. His side-hammer .36 pistol was thrust under his belt and his ruby-dark eyes were bright with a malevolent defiance.

A sneer plucked at the corners of Troy's mouth.

"Sure," his reply came gently. "You had a right to sell out. The homestead belonged to you. You owed me nothing. Forget it."

Crade lurched away from the bar as Troy started toward Roxanna again. The albino jerked the drawstring of the gold poke taut and spun it on a forefinger.

"I'll split the dinero with you, Del. You damned bastard, take it all. Here—catch!"

As he spoke Whitey Crade tossed the bag of specie in a looping arc toward Troy's face, in a feint to mask his simultaneous reach for the five-shot revolver at his hip.

Reading the trick even as it came, Troy parried the leather pouch in mid-air, batting it back against the albino's chest and following up with a pounce which caught Crade's gun arm on its upward jerk from his belt.

They grappled, Crade's left knee-battering at Troy's crotch as they struggled for possession of the gun. A hard twist of both hands on Crade's wrist brought a belch of pain from the albino, and the unfired Root .36 dropped into a sand box beside the brass rail between them.

CRADE WRENCHED himself free of Troy's traplike grip and scooped the whiskey bottle off the bar. Troy ducked under the swinging bottle, felt it graze the bullet wound on his shoulder with an im-

pact that shot fire through his vitals.

The bottle left Crade's grasp and splintered on the floor behind them. The bartender's nervous yell was lost on Troy's ears. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! I'll tolerate no violence in this house. Take your argument outdoors."

Troy rocked Crade back on his heels with a blow to the nose which brought crimson spewing from the albino's nostrils. Stepping wide, Troy unbuckled his gun harness and flung it on the bar, his eyes never leaving Crade.

"We can settle our accounts without gunplay, Whitey. Come on."

All reason had left Crade's liquor-fuddled brain now. He lunged at his former partner with fists flailing, the craze to kill blazing in his red-shot eyes, curses spilling from twisted lips.

Crade's frenzied assault drove Troy back against a poker table, upsetting it with a dry clatter of spilling chips and a crumbling chair. Troy lost his footing on the puddle of spilled whiskey behind him and he went down, powerless to dodge Crade's out-lashing boot.

The kick grazed his jaw, snapping his head back. Through a red gauze of pain he saw the albino leaping for him, butchering his flesh with kicks and blows as Crade pulled the fight to the level of a saloon brawl, kicking, gouging, no holds barred.

Troy rolled free and came to his feet, snatching up a croupier's stool from the roulette layout and beating it over Crade's shoulders. But still the albino bored in, murderous, bawling deep in his throat like a wounded bull after a matador, driven by an insane passion to stomp the life from the man who faced him, a powerful maniac whose strength was doubled by the drunken fury which possessed him.

The batwings flashed open and revealed the crouched figure of Sheriff Gaddy on the threshold, as the two fighters slugged their way in a serpentine path through the rows of gaming tables.

Roxie Laranjo's passage was a breath of perfume and a rustle of silk as the girl fled across the barroom to where the sheriff stood, hand on gun butt, bitter lights in his eyes.

"Stop them, Irv—oh, in God's name,

stop them before they kill each other."

Gaddy shook his head, watched Troy chop Crade's face to a bloody ruin as they smashed each other toe to toe in the middle of the Casino, men evenly matched for weight and reach and a mutual determination to make this a finish fight, the swan song of their broken partnership.

"Crade sold Troy out," Gaddy said mercilessly. "Less'n the rabbit-eyed freak tries pulling any Injun tricks, I'll let Troy dish out the medicine Crade's got coming to him."

Roxanna averted her eyes as the fury of battle carried Troy and Crade against the bar with a resounding crash, trading uppercuts with a furious abandon which brought no pain to either man.

Crade retreated along the bar, tiring fast. He stooped once to seize up a brass cuspidor and hurled it, screaming, at the bruised visage of the Texan who followed him relentlessly, carrying the fight to him. Troy ducked the hurtling bludgeon and leaped to block Crade's possible retreat toward a side door, fists lancing through the albino's defenses to pound Crade's lips to a jelly and bruise the albino's chest and stomach with a merciless rain of blows.

Sheriff Gaddy pulled Roxanna clear of the doorway as the brawling pair veered away from the end of the bar and hit the batwings, locked in a grapple. They crashed heavily to the porch outside and Crade was the first on his feet, stomping Troy's skull and back with spike-heel boots.

Gaddy followed them through the fanning doors, gun half drawn as he saw Crade's bloody fingers lock on Troy's throat, thumbs probing for the windpipe, his sunflower rowels raking Troy's flanks and thighs, slashing Troy's bullhide chaps to ribbons.

Troy broke the strangling grip on his neck and reared to his feet, smashing a haymaker to Crade's solar plexus which carried the albino backwards to hit a porch post with splintering impact.

RECOVERING, Crade's fist stabbed to his belt and sunlight flashed on naked steel as the albino got a bowie blade from its sheath under his levis.

The sheriff's gun was in the open now,

but before the lawman could intervene Troy had launched himself under Crade's thrusting knife and his head caught the albino in the short ribs, butting him in a backward somersault over the Casino's porch rail.

The knife clattered out on the plank sidewalk as Whitey Crade collapsed moaning in the weeds alongside the porch. He was whipped, utterly spent. Troy, his shirt hanging in rags about his heaving chest, stumbled down the steps and reached down to grab his erstwhile partner by the armpits, hauling him to his feet.

"Your horse is at the rack, Whitey," Troy's voice gusted like a crow's caw from his laboring throat. "Straddle it and ride. There ain't room in the Okanogans for the two of us after today."

Mopping blood from his eyes with a ragged sleeve, Whitey Crade lurched dazedly across the sidewalk and clutched the end of the hitchrack for support, blood dripping in gobbets from his crushed nose and mouth to stipple the dirt, his head bowed on his chest.

Crade was beyond speech or movement when the Casino's trembling bartender came outside with the albino's gold poke and gun. Sheriff Gaddy seized the latter emptied the loads from the cylinder and walked over to thrust the empty gun into Crade's hip pocket.

"You heard what Troy said," the sheriff rasped out. "Hit the trail, Whitey. And keep going. I'll lock you up for life if I ketch you inside my county again."

It took the combined efforts of Gaddy and the bartender to hoist Crade aboard his claybank gelding. Sagging in saddle as if his spine was broken, Crade stared around dizzily while the bartender stowed Shasta Ives' gold into a saddlebag.

Fumbling with his reins, Crade peered through swollen lids, hunting until he located Del Troy leaning against a porch post, gasping air into his tortured lungs.

"I'm pullin' stakes," croaked the albino. "But fog your guns next time our trails cross. I ain't forgettin' this, damn your black soul. Not ever."

Clinging to saddle horn, Crade spurred away from the Casino and headed the gelding down-canyon toward the Ruby

diggings. Sheriff Gaddy crossed over to the porch of the Silver Exchange Bank and posted himself in a rocker there, keeping an eye on Crade until the banished albino was lost behind the pines at the south end of town, headed into exile.

Roxanna materialized at Troy's side when the Texan brought himself groggily out of torpor, his eyes bleak with disillusion that allowed no trace of exultation over this hard-won brawl.

"Breaking a friendship isn't easy, Del," the girl's whisper reached his throbbing ears. "Don't let Whitey's parting threat bother you, querido. He won't stop riding till he gets back to Texas where he belongs, that I know."

Troy lowered his eyes to meet the message of faith and pride he read in Roxanna's somber gaze, and for the first time he recalled the reason that had sent him into the gambling house.

"I wanted to thank you for making that Keyhole deal for me, Roxie," he said huskily, words coming hard. "Herrod would have had me hogtied for branding if you hadn't moved in to scotch his play."

She pulled his head to her and kissed him once, lightly and impersonally on his bruised cheek, and old hungers swept Troy again as he rubbed his aching jaw against her glossy raven hair, holding her thus for a long moment.

"I had my reasons, Del," she told him, and he felt her withdraw behind the mantel of aloof mystery which would forever be a barrier between them.

X

DUST MOILED UP FROM THE Cariboo trail as the Lazy H and Dollar pool herd approached the fruit orchards of the nesters around Omak Ford. It was a dust that built a curtain across the zenith and turned the sun to a copper rivet, tempering the unseasonable heat which was slowly turning the foothill forests into a tinderbox.

Farmers watched the sprawled brown tidal wave of hoofs and horns approach their unfenced apple orchards and were apprehensive of what Bix Herrod's drovers

would do when they reached the outer limits of the plowed and planted bottomlands.

At a community meeting two days before the sodbusters had voted, reluctantly but in solid majority, to abandon their haying contract with Del Troy. The level heads among them, veterans of cattle wars in other places, knew the potential battleground which Flaming Canyon had become. Hints of the Lazy H's violent methods of expanding its cattle empire had trickled up the trail from Yakima, and these nesters had no stomach for hang-rope or raiders' torches by night.

It was with relief, then, that they saw the oncoming heard quit the greening river-bottom and move into the eroded coulees which serrated the lofty tableland which formed a buffer between the pine-mottled foot spurs of the Cascades and the river valley.

For the nesters, the emergency was at least postponed, and there were few among them who believed that a lone cowman like Del Troy could long stand against the pressure of Herrod's cloven-hoofed juggernaut.

Throughout the sweltering day, Yakima riders hazed the bawling stragglers up the claybanked brakes, bunching the herd on the grassy bench of Pogue's Flat. A mile due west of this bedground, the frowning obsidian ramparts of the Cascade Range were broken by the broad, inviting maw of Flaming Canyon, its remoter extremity pointing like a crooked finger into the snow-watered Eden of the high hills where the drought had not yet penetrated.

It was too late in the day to push the herd into the Canyon, but Bix Herrod had learned of minor formalities to get out of the way before the vanguard of the beef drive started its entry onto long-awaited summer range.

Shasta Ives, who had moved out from the Conconully Hotel to live on the Crade homestead for the summer, had informed Herrod of the barbed-wire fence which had mysteriously been strung across the narrowing hourglass formation of the Canyon, at Keyhole Pass.

That fence had been completed secretly during the week, connecting up with the

back line of Del Troy's homestead on the south half of the canyon mouth. It formed an unbroken barrier from cliff to cliff, duplicating the fence which Dollar cowhands had removed from Crade's frontage in advance of the herd's arrival.

As evening's blue dusk was pooling between the rimrocks, Herrod rode toward the Keyhole with Shasta Ives and the ubiquitous segundo, Doc Godette, flanking his stirrups. Herrod scorned to make any show of force by bringing an armed crew with him. Whoever had dared file on the homestead rights to the Keyhole was obviously in ignorance of the powderkeg he had chosen for a claim.

The walls and rafters of the new homestead cabin had been raised between Glacier Creek and the Keyhole notch, fifty yards from the triple strands of barbed wire which closed Flaming Canyon to the cattle herd bedded down on the outer flats tonight.

As the three riders drew rein at the wire gate, Herrod's halloo brought two men and a girl from the doorless and windowless cabin. Herrod recognized their sharp-cut silhouettes against the red wash of sundown glow through the Keyhole, and sight of them brought him quickly erect in saddle.

"What's Roxie Laranjo doing here?" he exclaimed, as if to himself. And his eyes were on Del Troy and the Conconully sheriff, Irv Gaddy.

Shasta bent a curious stare at her fiance.

"She's the lady gambler at the Loop-Loop Casino, isn't she? You've met her before, Bix?"

Doc Godette, preoccupied with a whiskey bottle to ease off the pains of a recent coughing spell, did not fail to notice the quick alarm which clouded Herrod's eyes as Shasta spoke.

"She used to dance in a honkytonk in San Antone, Shasta. Everybody west of the Pecos knows Roxie Laranjo."

Del Troy and the sheriff dropped slightly behind the dusky-eyed Spanish girl as she reached the fence, her gaze striking Herrod with a blinkless intensity, her carmine lips parted in an inscrutable smile, alike hostile and provocative.

"Evenin', Roxie," Herrod said, lifting

his Keevil hat. "What are you doing here?"

STRANGE and obscure cross currents flowed between this pair for a moment. Then Roxanna shifted her attention to Shasta Ives, her glance carrying on to Doc Godette, who sat his horse with the silence of a graven image, shrouded in his own thoughts, knowing more than his poker face revealed.

"This is my homestead, Senor Herrod," Roxanna said in the softest of voices. "I want you to know that in case you have any idea of running your cattle through the Keyhole tomorrow."

Herrod was silent for a long moment, tasting the bitter realization that he had been out-manuevered by this frail girl from a Conconully gambling den. His eyes narrowed a little.

"I've got three thousand odd critters out on the flats," he said finally. "This fence won't stop them when they get started up Glacier Creek."

The sheriff sauntered over to the wire gate, leaning his elbows against the taut wire, his voice casual.

"Miss Laranjo owns the Keyhole, Herrod. I'll be camped on the rimrock with a shotgun and four or five deputies all this week. I'll g'arantee that not one hoof trespasses on this woman's property without her consent."

Herrod purpled, turning his gimlet stare on Del Troy, a brief wonderment touching him as he saw the livid bruises and scabbed cuts which had converted the Texan's face into a green-mottled caricature.

"This your idea, Troy? Blocking off the Canyon with a female's skirts?"

Troy appeared engrossed in shaking tobacco into a cigarette paper troughed between his fingers. Twisting the smoke and cementing it with a swipe of his tongue, the cowman directed his answer toward Shasta Ives.

"You've got gall, Herrod, talking about using a woman's skirts."

The inference in his voice stung Shasta, brought an amused smile to Roxanna's lips. Draping a Mexican shawl about her shoulders, the Spanish girl turned and headed toward her half-finished cabin. Gaddy and

Troy remained in their tracks, watching Herrod's forming reactions with languid amusement.

"You got a legal right to haze those cattle as far as this fence," the sheriff averred, "seeing as how Miss Ives here has bought Whitey Crade's land. But that's as far as you'll go."

Doc Godette stirred in saddle, returning his whiskey bottle to the military surgeon's kitbag strapped to his pommel. He eyed Herrod slantwise and drawled sagely, "Looks like you're out-foxed here, Bix. The law's closed this gate on us. You can't graze three thousand mossyhorns on Crade's homestead indefinitely."

Herrod picked up his reins, lashing his foreman with an angry glance.

"Keep your horns out of this, Doc. Shasta ride back to camp. I've got a few words for the tin star here that don't concern a woman."

Shasta Ives thrust out her chin, shaking her head adamantly.

"No, Bix. Some of those cattle belong to Dollar. Whatever you're going to tell Mr. Gaddy, I have a right to hear."

The Conconully lawman laughed softly.

"Nothing Herrod's got to say interests me, ma'am. He's caught pulling a sandy and he knows it. The devil himself couldn't force Roxie's fence as long as I've got a ca'tridge left or a crook in my trigger finger."

Herrod's face was apoplectic, but in Shasta's presence he forced himself to back down, yielding to the inevitable.

"You've closed off the front end of Flaming Canyon," he directed his venomous admission to Del Troy. "But there's still the back door, my Texan friend."

Herrod wheeled his blue roan and hammered off across Crade's prairie, Doc Godette and the Dollar mistress riding after him.

"Back door," Del Troy echoed, firing his cigarette and turning his smokey eyes on the sheriff. "I don't savvy that lingo."

Sheriff Gaddy jabbed his corncob pipe between toothless gums and fished in his vest for a match.

"Easy to figger, son. Four-fifths of Flaming Canyon lies in the Twenty-Mile Strip. Herrod knows he's buffaloeed at

this end of the Canyon. He'll chouse his steers onto Okanogan Jones' range, make a deal with Jones and before you know it you'll find Lazy H and Dollar beef spread over the back end of Flaming Canyon from hell to breakfast."

Troy thought that over at length, chewing on the possibilities that Gaddy was on the right track."

"Jones may be a greedy squaw-man squatting on range he got from allotments to his Injun wife," Troy admitted, "but he's dead honest and square as a section corner. He leased Flaming Canyon to me. He won't turn around and open it to Herrod, not for all the gold Lazy H could fork over."

Roxanna joined them in time to hear Gaddy's reply.

"Sure Okanogan Jones is honest. But he'll grant grazing rights to Herrod. You'd have to hire an army of line riders to keep Lazy H steers from drifting where the grass grows greenest, Troy. Which would be Flaming Canyon. The back door to your spread is wide open from the north."

Troy ground his fists together for a moment, then pushed by Roxanna Laranjo and disappeared behind the unfinished cabin. He reappeared a moment later astride his steeldust saddler.

"Take Roxie back to town, will you?" he asked Gaddy. "You've spiked Herrod's guns. He won't cut this fence."

"What are you going to do, Del?" Roxanna asked anxiously, her eye on the six-gun thonged to Troy's leg.

"I'm riding up to Jones' place at Osoyoos Lake tonight. I've got to beat Herrod to the punch. This time tomorrow that trail herd will be scattering over the Strip. I've got to make sure Okanogan Jones will protect my lease."

Gaddy unfastened the wire gate and let Troy ride through. Roxanna's face was furrowed with worried lines as they stood watching Troy's departure, a tall and indomitable figure in the saddle, heading through the violet haze of sundown on his way out of Flaming Canyon.

"There goes a man, Roxie," the sheriff muttered through his pipe smoke, "who don't know when he's licked."

Roxanna's hand went in habitual gesture

to the gold cross depended from her necklace.

"If you think Del is licked, you don't know him as I do. He won't stop fighting Senor Herrod until he's dead."

Gaddy made a despondent gesture with his pipstem.

"We did what we could for him, Roxie, but it wasn't enough. We just give Troy a breathin' spell that won't last out tomorrow. Once Herrod's beef hits Jones' Strip, the deal is out of my hands. My jurisdiction don't extend over the county line into the back half of Flaming Canyon. And Herrod knows that."

XI

THE TRAIL-WEARIED LAZY H crew was tossing its supper dishes into the wreck pan of the chuckwagon when Herrod and Shasta Ives and Doc Godette cantered out of the sunset from Flaming Canyon.

They were hunkered over the tongue of the hoodlum wagon, eating the meal which the Dollar cook had rustled up for them, when they saw Del Troy leave the Canyon mouth and skirt the bedground on horseback, a mile distant and headed north.

Bix Herrod suppressed a half-formed impulse to order one of his crew to track the Texan down and make certain that Troy had taken his last ride. But Shasta's nearness precluded any such open violence. Herrod was aware that his fiancee was still nursing doubts as to the true cause of Fred Bolte's killing, and he was a man of great caution when the chips were down in a highstake game.

"I wonder, now, where Troy would be riding?" Doc Godette, thinking out loud, voiced the same question which nagged the edge of Herrod's thoughts. "Let's see. There's Oro town and the Custom House at the Canadian line. Or Okanogan Jones' ranch at the head of Osoyoos Lake."

Herrod carried his tinware over to the chuckwagon and lighted a cigar. When he rejoined Shasta and the old medico, his plans had been shaped.

"Shasta, I hate to ask this favor of a woman. But I can't spare a man. Besides, you're the ideal person for the job."

"What job, Bix?"

Herrod squatted at the girl's side, his eyes fixed on the black-limned horizon line to northward.

"It's a cinch Troy is heading for Jones' Ranch to try and talk the old squaw man into refusing to open the Strip to our beef, Shasta. And he might succeed. Jones is jealous of his power. He wouldn't like to see a big-scale rancher get a toehold in the Okanogan."

Shasta's eyes searched Herrod's face with grave concern.

"What do you want me to do, Bix?"

"If you was to make a deal with Jones for your Dollar stuff, he wouldn't refuse. I know Jones, his vanities and his weaknesses. He's a sucker for a pretty face. Jones needn't know that Lazy H beef is mixed up with Dollar."

Doc Godette took his cue and ambled off toward the rope cavy corral. When he returned, five minutes later, he led a leggy bay stallion with a Dollar brand on its rump.

Herrod had evidently given Shasta her instructions. As he helped her mount, he said apologetically, "You'll be perfectly safe, darling. It's only twenty miles to Osoyoos Lake and Jones' squaw will put you up overnight." He pushed a weighted leather poke into her saddlebag. "Money talks with Jones. Remember to keep Lazy H out of this. Dicker with Jones for grazing rights for three thousand odd head."

Belatedly, Shasta bent down for his parting kiss, feeling as always an unaccountable reluctance to share his caress.

"Summer graze will be waiting for us when the herd crosses into the Strip tomorrow, Bix," she promised him.

"Your charms worked with Crade," Doc Godette put in slyly. "An old gaffer like Okanogan Jones will be a pushover."

The darkness hid Shasta's abashed grimace.

"I'm not proud of my conquest over Crade, Doc. What good does his homestead do us now? We're out a thousand dollars, that's all."

With that she was gone, spurring off toward the north, soon lost in the roundabout shadows. Herrod turned to Godette

and gruffed irritably, "Dammit, why did you have to mention Crade? A man's got to play his hand the way it's dealt him."

Godette shuffled off to get his bedroll from the hoodlum wagon.

Herrod finished his cigar, lost in his thoughts. In spite of the impasse which Roxanna Laranjo had flung in his path today, the Lazy H man was in smug spirits. Flaming Canyon was far from lost to him. Its use was vital to his summer plans, for he was short-handed and once his beef was thrown onto Flaming Canyon grass, keeping them bunched until fall round-up would be a simple thing to accomplish with a skeleton crew.

The Conconully sheriff was nullified as an opposing factor, once the Yakima pool herd was north of the county line. Gaddy had already been dismissed from Herrod's mind. Toward Roxanna, Herrod owned a steady and mounting hatred—it galled his masculine vanity to have been outwitted by a female, and he realized he'd have to take care of her sooner or later.

WITH SHASTA absent on her overnight trek to Jones' Ranch, Herrod decided to sleep at Crade's shack instead of with his crew. He went over to where his crew was playing poker on spread out blankets by lantern light and ordered his horse brought up, and then returned to the chuckwagon to finish his smoke.

He was waiting there when a rider took shape against the star-powdered skyline and, after hailing the cook over by the smouldering campfire, dismounted and engaged the pot-wrangler in an animated conversation.

Mentally dismissing the newcomer as a grubliner cadging a meal, Herrod was vaguely surprised when the rider called him by name, only arm's length away.

"Don't you know me, Herrod? I'm Whitey Crade."

Herrod straightened, staring at the disheveled wreck of a man who stood limned in the guttering pulse of the campfire's light.

"Good lord, man, what happened to you? You look like you come off second best in a tussle with a buzz saw."

Crade dropped his eyes, turned to put

his face in shadow. His clothing was in rags, his nose was a swollen monstrosity against his battered fishbelly-white face and both eyes were puffed to misshapen slits.

"Tangled with Troy over at Conconully yesterday. The sheriff give me my walkin' papers. That's why I'm here."

Herrod pursed his lips thoughtfully, remembering the marks of combat he had noted on Troy's features over at the Key-hole earlier this evening.

"Troy sore because you double-crossed him, eh?"

Crade spat through a wide gap in his teeth where Troy's fists had caved in his jaw.

"To hell with Troy. I'll kill the sonofabitch one of these days. Herrod, I want to rent my lass'-rope to Lazy H for the summer. Hear you're shorthanded. I'm a top hand."

It was on the tip of Herrod's tongue to refuse Crade. He knew the albino's mercuric temperament, his unstable ways. Loyalty and industry were not in Whitey Crade. He was a troublemaker on any crew, a bunkhouse agitator to be avoided like a plague, no matter how shorthanded an outfit might be.

But the curt refusal died without utterance. A new possibility of Crade's usefulness to Lazy H dawned in Herrod's brain.

"You say you aim to settle your score with Del Troy. You can do that and draw Lazy H pay to boot, Crade."

The albino spat again, rubbing his hands together. Before he could answer the night wrangler came up with Herrod's saddle horse. Waiting until the wrangler had withdrawn out of earshot, Herrod played his ace.

"Troy's riding up the Strip to Jones' Ranch tonight, Whitey. He'll probably be back sometime tomorrow. You any idea what trail he'd take?"

Whitey Crade's face took on a malevolent vitality.

"Sure. He'd cut over from Osoyoos Lake to Oro and the Wannacut, hit the Loomis Road at Lily Basin and follow it back to Flaming Canyon. I've made the ride with him a dozen times."

Herrod handed his reins to the albino and put a hand on Crade's shoulder.

"Here's your horse. You'll find a couple of quarts of smooth bourbon in the alforja pockets. I can't use your rope, Crade. But I'll rent your guns."

Crade stepped into saddle, fumbling with the straps of the saddlepouch to check on the two bottles of whiskey there.

"How you handle Troy is up to you," Herrod went on. "I want him out of the way. So do you."

Avarice kindled in the albino's swollen, puffy eyes.

"What's in it for me besides the fun of seeing Troy drop and kick, Herrod? A man can't wet his stomach on revenge."

The night masked Herrod's contempt. "Shasta gave you a thousand dollars of my money to sell out Troy. I'll double that if you bring me proof that Troy's dead."

Crade leaned from stirrups to shake on the deal.

"I'll fetch you Troy's topknot if you say so," he grinned, and rode off into the night, guided by the far cold gleam of Polaris.

XII

THE CLANG OF AN IRON TRI-angle roused Del Troy at daybreak. He had arrived at Okanogan Jones' place too late to dicker with the squaw man, and had spent the night in the long barked-log bunkhouse which Jones rented to Cariboo Trail travelers at five dollars per head, including breakfast.

The self-styled king of the Twenty-Mile Strip had built himself a rustic citadel here at the south end of Osoyoos Lake, and he did a thriving trade. The mess hall adjoining the bunkhouse was jammed with boisterous patterns this morning, a motley cross-section of frontier humanity which had never failed to intrigue Troy on his past visits to Jones' headquarters.

He shared the washroom with bearded Canuck trappers from Hudson's Bay, chechacos from Europe and the East who, despairing of booking passage on Alaska-bound steamers were attempting the overland route to the Klondike gold fields;

buckskin-clad woodsmen, frock-coated gamblers seeking refuge from the law, stolid-faced cavalrymen from the army post at Fort Colville, assigned to border patrol duty; lumberjacks and miners, and shifty-eyed men with the look of the owl-hoot on them—they were met here at Okanogan Jones' crossroads blockhouse.

The squaw man's chair at the head of the mess table was vacant when Troy entered the hall. But his portly Indian wife, Tenas Josie, was on hand to supervise her corps of giggling half-breed daughters who plied to and from the kitchen with endless platters heaped with venison, moose steaks, steaming mugs of black coffee, wheat cakes and jellies, and country butter in ten-pound lumps.

A hairy-faced prospector en route to the States from the Yukon was dominating the table conversation when Troy found himself a place at the crowded benches. The Alaska miner wore three chains of yellow nuggets looped ostentatiously across his unbuttoned plucked-beaver coat, and he was boasting of a carpetbag full of gold dust which he had deposited in Okanogan Jones' safe for the night.

"Ye're all damned fools not to pull stakes and head for Dawson, friends!" the miner spoke through a mouth crammed with venison. "In six days with a Long Tom an' a dish pan I grubbed twenty thousand dollars out of Bonanza Creek. Plenty more where that came from, free for the takin'. Me I'm headin' for Seattle to paint the burg red before I head back north for another fling."

There was a momentary lull in the babble of talk, and Okanogan Jones made his dramatic entry into the mess hall. He was a wizened little man in his middle sixties, dressed in fringed buckskins and parfleche leggings, with a Mormon's black hat topping his leonine mane of hair and a shock of cinamon whiskers bracketing his pippin red cheeks.

This husband of the Moses squaw, Tenas Josie, had hewn his niche in Washington politics and was now at the heyday of his power. It had been Okanogan Jones who had made a personal trek to Washington and influenced Congress to set aside the Twenty-Mile Strip from the Indian lands

which had been closed to white settlement.

Jones was the undisputed monarch of thousands of sections of Cascade timberland and its unplumbed mineral wealth. Osoyoos Lake was a Jones cistern. He had built his blockhouse here in the days of Indian warfare and when his scalp loomed as a tempting trophy for Chief Moses' tomahawk-wielding braves, he scotched that threat by marrying Tenas Josie and adding her allotments to his kingdom.

But Del Troy's eyes were not on Okanogan Jones as the leather-caparisoned autocrat of the frontier made his entrance. On Jones' arm, like a queen entering her royal palace, was Shasta Ives. She took the extra chair which Tenas Josie had placed alongside her husband's split-cedar throne at the head of the table, her eyes flashing with excitement as she saw the impact her arrival had made on this uncombed, unkempt assemblage.

Some half-forgotten sense of gallantry touched the mob as it wolfed down its food, and to a man they got to their feet, waiting as Okanogan Jones adjusted the chair behind his guest.

"Be seated, gents!" Jones invited, obviously pleased by this tribute from his rough patrons. "My guest of honor, boys—Miss Shasta Ives. Owns the Dollar ranch down Yakima way."

Del Troy's eyes met Shasta's and he knew that his trip had been in vain. Okanogan Jones was eating out of the girl's hand; he had opened the Strip to Dollar and Lazy H beef. He knew that with a despairing intuition that brooked no hope to the contrary.

"Like Crade, like Jones," he thought bitterly, and his voracious appetite deserted him. Herrod played his cards for what they were worth. And Shasta was his ace of trumps

"A' cowgirl, eh?" spoke up the loquacious Klondiker. "Ma'am, you're overlookin' a bonanza in yore own back yard. Up in Juneau an' Ketchikan this minute, beefsteaks as thin as a bootsole are fetchin' an ounce of dust, an' no fresh meat to be had."

Okanogan Jones speared himself a hunk

of roast moose and signaled one of his daughters for the coffee pot.

"So?" chuckled the oldster. "Nineteen dollars for a tough beefsteak. Miss Shasta, maybe you ought to move your herd on acrost the border to Alasky. Them mossyhorns would be worth their weight in gold up yander."

Del Troy watching Shasta in spite of himself, saw that the blowhard from the Klondike had her complete and undivided attention.

"Is that feasible, sir?" she asked the miner. "I mean, can cattle be driven overland to the gold camps?"

The Klondiker, flattered wiped his beard with a greasy palm and leaned across the table toward Shasta.

"Why not? Once out of the Cariboo country, you got the Telegraph Trail straight acrost Yukon Territory. What do you sell a cow for here in Washington?"

Shasta's glance raked down the table to fix on Del Troy.

"Well, I—that is, we expect to net twenty dollars a head at Seattle this fall."

The Bonanza Creeker scoffed, slapping his hand against his knee.

"Hell's fire, ma'am—beggin' your pardon—at Dawson that same cow would fetch five hundred bucks. You got all summer to drive your beef north. You got an army of beef-hungry miners waitin' for a market, an' thousands arrivin' up the trail every week. I tell you, you could make yourself a million."

Okanogan Jones wagged his head dis-sentingly.

"He's joshin', Miss Shasta. Don't believe half o' the hogwash you hear at my table. Why, you got better'n fifteen hundred mile o' mountain an' forest betwixt here an' the Klondike. A bighorn goat couldn't foller this Telegraph Trail our friend speaks of. You let your beef fatten up on the Strip this summer an' don't go fillin' your perty little head with crazy notions."

Troy left the dining hall while the petty argument raged between Okanogan Jones and the Klondike optimist. He smoked through a dozen cigarettes before Jones and Shasta Ives left the mess hall and headed for the horse barn.

ONE OF TENAS JOSIE'S daughters was holding a stirrup for Shasta when Troy entered the barn. Mounting, Shasta said to Troy without preliminaries, "Bix tells me that Fred Bolte was knifed to death in Wenatchee on the way north, Del."

"Did he? Then I'm a liar."

She flushed under the whiplash of his words.

"I am aware that you hate my future husband," she said candidly. "I regret that more than I can tell you. But it occurred to me you might have been mistaken in the identity of the ambusher you shot over at Grand Coulee that night."

Troy laughed softly. "You might ask Doc Godette about the Stetson with the fishhooks in the band that I gave Bix at the Brewster Ferry," he said. "No. Forget I said that. Godette knows who butters his biscuits. He wouldn't double-cross Bix."

She stared at him numbly, her eyes unaccountably moist. Then she wheeled her bay stallion and, with a choked word of thanks to Okanogan Jones and the half-Indian girl, she sent her saddler on a dead run toward the Cariboo Trail.

Troy turned to Okanogan Jones, surprising his intent stare.

"Don't say it, Troy!" the squaw man snapped testily. "I already know why you're here. You had your ride for nothin'. Miss Ives told me you aimed to bulldoze me into closin' the Strip to her beef. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Troy leaned the point of his shoulder against the barn door.

"Mind telling me about the deal you closed with Shasta?"

Jones scowled, and then, because he liked this hard-bitten Texan, relented from his first impulse.

"She'll pay me a dollar a head for summer graze, subject to my tally at the round-up this fall."

Troy tugged his lower lip. "Shasta owns around six hundred head of cattle. You don't stand to make your taxes, Jones."

Okanogan Jones bent a queer stare at the cowman.

"You're mistaken. She told me she'd be grazing around three thousand head this

summer. The herd hits the Strip today."

"Sure it does," Troy said, and drove across the clincher he had been leading up to. "The bulk of it Lazy H beef, belonging to Bix Herrod. Bix used the girl to run a sandy on both of us, Jones. Lazy H has its eye on Flaming Canyon, not your rough land. That's why I rode up here to see you last night."

Okanogan Jones was a fair and judicious man. For the first time, he sensed the fact that all was not right; that he had been duped into putting his signature to an agreement without inquiring into its possible ramifications.

"The hell you say, Troy!" he blurted. "The girl didn't specify what brands those cattle carried. I naturally assumed it was old Colonel Sam's Dollar." He grinned bleakly. "No fool like an old one. I've been took by a perty smile. My lease didn't specify Dollar or any other brand."

Troy had Jones on the defensive now and he pushed his advantage.

"Jones, you leased Flaming Canyon to me. If I furnish the wire and posts, can I count on your crews fencing off the coulees running into my lease, to keep Lazy H and Dollar cattle off my grass this summer?"

Jones fidgeted uncomfortably.

"I ain't got the men to spare for a fencin' job, son. Keepin' Flaming Canyon clear of drifters will be up to you, not me."

Troy had his answer, knew he had played his cards and lost. Technically, Flaming Canyon was out of bounds to Lazy H and Dollar beef. Actually, the contract Jones had consummated with Shasta Ives this very morning was an open invitation to let Herrod's beef roam where it willed.

"I don't like the idea of Herrod movin' in on me any better'n you do, son," Okanogan Jones went on. "The man's ambitious to ramrod Washington State, I can see that. But it looks to me as if he's got us backed into a corner. Say the word, and I'll refund the money you paid me for that lease."

Troy shook his head, walking over to a stall where his steeldust mustang was hitched.

"No. Looks like this is up to me and Herrod to fight out, Jones. I was a fool for thinking you could help me."

While Troy saddled and bridled, Jones paced in the background, tugging his red whiskers nervously.

"Beats me how a four-flusher like this Herrod roped hisself a thoroughbred like this Shasta woman," he grumbled. "You reckon that Shasta filly come up here an' made a fool out o' me, son?"

Troy ducked low under the door lintel as he spurred out of the barn.

"You figger it out," he retorted. "Hasta luego."

XIII

SHASTA IVES LET HER LEGGY bay work off its morning steam until the green peach orchards marking the limits of Okanogan Jones' domain were a mile behind her. Then she settled the stallion into a long lope and turned her thoughts inward.

The heiress to Dollar ranch had spent most of her twenty years in saddle; she rode with the supple ease of a centaur and a horseback jaunt of a crisp morning was invariably conducive to mental excursions which left her oblivious to passing scenes.

Thinking and self-communion were yokes the girl would have gladly shed in favor of enjoying the new landscape this morning, but there were things crowding her consciousness now which were not to be ignored.

The fact of Fred Bolte's violent death had left her untouched emotionally, for she had always held her fiance's body-guard in stern disfavor. The hang of Bolte's tied-down guns, on a frontier where riders ordinarily avoided the added weight of armament except on dress-up occasions, stamped Bolte in Shasta's eyes as a man whose presence on the Lazy H payroll was due to his trigger skill rather than his worth as a range hand.

But she had been careful never to question the reasons why her handsome, swash-buckling suitor had filled his Lazy H bunkhouse with casehardened men like Bolte and Doc Godette. When her ailing father had hinted that Bix Herrod hired

men as Colonel Sam had once picked soldiers for a sortie behind the Yankee lines, for their shooting skill alone, she had charitably suggested that Herrod, unlike her father, preferred to have Texans working for him.

Whereas Shasta had her private doubts concerning most of the Lazy H roster, Doc Godette was an exception. She was under no illusions about the old soldier's morals. His lecherous eye never touched her without making her feel somehow unclean. She saw in him the disease-ravaged shell of a man. But Doc Godette had ministered to her father during Colonel Sam's final illness last winter, and on that score alone she tolerated Godette's lascivious innuendos and forgave him his uncouth ways.

Even after Colonel Sam's death and her decision to wear Herrod's ring, Shasta had turned a deaf ear to whispers which came her way. This morning, she was remembering a conversation she had overheard in the Dollar blacksmith shop when the Colonel's men gathered there to roundside while horseshoes cooled in the vat. They had branded Herrod for an outright rustler and worse. But loyalty to a future husband came first with Shasta, and she had dismissed the talk as bunkhouse gossip, without foundation.

But now Fred Bolte was dead, and a lone homesteader from Flaming Canyon had openly admitted killing Bolte in self-defense. She had Herrod's assurance that the wrangler had died in a drunken brawl with a Wenatchee harlot. Which version was the true one?

She realized that Del Troy was Herrod's enemy, and therefore her enemy. A drifter without so much as a cow to slap his own iron on, Troy was harvesting the lush hay crop in Flaming Canyon to the detriment of her cattle as well as Herrod's.

The fact that Del Troy had the power to stir unguessed wellsprings in the core of her, by the briefest of glances or the inflection of his voice when he spoke to her, had come to assume the proportions of something shameful and clandestine in Shasta's secret appraisal of herself.

Listening to Herrod's arguments concerning Troy, Shasta had been convinced

of her own free will that ruthless methods were in order. She had stood by, tacitly condoning Herrod's leasing of the Brewster ferry which cut Troy off from his freight traffic east of the Columbia. Guilt had touched her only obliquely when she had connived with Whitey Crade to betray Troy.

And in arranging a summer lease with Okanogan Jones this morning, she now realized that her business proposition had been predicted on half-truths which the squaw man had accepted in good faith. Bix Herrod was probably right in believing that Jones would not allow Lazy H beef to enter the Strip.

Last night, with Herrod's magical personality throwing its spell over her, the means justified the ends so far as Jones was concerned. But now, with the first flush of her easy conquest behind her, Shasta Ives found herself wondering what the ghost of her father might be thinking of the chicanery she had employed in opening the Strip to Lazy H cattle.

She had done nothing wrong in a legal or moral sense of the word. She was reasonably clear of conscience on that point. But in thwarting Del Troy and in deceiving Okanogan Jones as to her true purpose for closing a deal for summer graze, she had strayed sadly afield from the teachings of her intrepid old sire.

Her self-condemnation made a vicious circle, beginning and ending with the mysterious death of Fred Bolte. She was unwilling to let her thoughts touch on the possibility that the man whose children she intended to bear, whose name she would shortly assume, was a man capable of sending one of his men on an ambush mission.

Yet Del Troy's candor reminded her uncomfortably of her father's mannerisms. Either Troy or Herrod had lied about the true facts of Fred Bolte's death. And Troy did not strike her as a man who would boast about a murder he had not committed.

These things were festering in Shasta's brain when disaster struck her on a stony patch of the Cariboo Trail. Her bay saddle, hitting a reckless lope along the road, without warning plunged a forehoof into

a weed-shrouded gopher hole and went down in full stride.

Inbred experience saved the girl serious injury as she instinctively kicked free of oxbow stirrups and, using the saddlehorn for a springboard, vaulted over the bay's head as it hit the dirt and slewed around on the pivot of its trapped hoof, the snap of bone sounding clear as a breaking stick in her ears.

The animal's first agonized scream was timed with her landing on all fours on the flinty earth. Even as she came to her feet, shrouded with drifting dust and shocked to the roots of her teeth, she realized the bay must be put out of its misery.

COLONEL SAM IVES had always insisted that his daughter carry a Smith and Wesson in her saddle pocket to use against a rattlesnake or range coyote, or for emergencies such as this one.

She had owned the bay since it was foaled. It had been a gift from her father. Moving in a stupor of grief, she unbuckled the saddlebag and took out the revolver. The bay's anguished eyes wrenched her as she put the .32 muzzle behind the animal's ear, looked away and pulled the trigger.

She could not bring herself to remain beside the dead bay. Instead she moved off the trail and seated herself on a rocky shelf which jutted out into the sliding green waters of the Okanogan, there to give way to a storm of girlish sobs.

Her grief was not yet spent when a rataplan of hoofbeats reached her ears. Turning, she stared through flooding tears to see the whip-lean figure of Del Troy reining his steelduster alongside the slain stallion on the road.

"Toughest thing that can happen to a rider, ma'am," he said gently, removing his Stetson. "Horses are people to me, same as to you. But you did the only merciful thing."

He had dismounted by the time she had climbed the slope and was loosening the bay's latigo. She watched, wiping her eyes with her neck scarf, as he extricated her saddle from the dead weight of the carcass. He stripped his Brazos hull from the steelduster and replaced it with her own gear.

"Alamo's gentle," he said, swapping bridles. "I can pick him up from the Lazy H cavvy later."

She sank to her knees beside the dead bay, stroking its glossy mane as a bereaved mother might caress a child.

"But I can't leave you on foot, Del. You can't cover the twenty miles back to Flaming Canyon in those star boots."

He hoisted his saddle over a shoulder, deriving a strange thrill from her use of his first name.

"I won't have to. Jones will lend me a bronc."

He offered his hand and she mounted the steeldust mustang, gathering up the reins. Tears were close to her lashes as she regarded her dead bay.

Reading her thought, Troy said, "I'll have Jones send down a man to bury your pet, Shasta. Next time you ride up this way you can fix up a headboard to suit your fancy. I won't let the coyotes molest anything."

For a long moment their eyes met and held, and again Shasta felt the stormy rebellion in her heart, the half-sensed twinge of disloyalty toward the man she was engaged to marry.

"I'm sorry we're on opposite sides, you and I," she said simply. "I wish we could be friends."

He took her hand on that, but the spell was broken and a brittle note entered his voice as he recalled her mission to Osoyoos Lake and the disaster it meant for him.

"As long as Herrod keeps his steers off Flaming Canyon graze, there'll be no trouble," he said bluntly. "Hasta la vista."

He could not know that his parting Spanish idiom, a throwback to his Texas years, had been the identical last words her dying father had uttered. He mistook the sudden sobs which choked her as a woman's grief for a favorite pony. When she had gotten a grip on herself, Del Troy was already a hundred yards away, trudging back toward Okanogan Jones' ranch with his saddle and bridle.

She turned south once more after a whispered farewell to her dead horse, and followed the Cariboo Trail through a break in the foothill timber to enter a broad mountain meadow dappled with wild lilies

in full bloom and bordered with rhododendron jungles limb-heavy with flowering masses.

This was Lily Basin, though she was new to this country and did not know it. She sent Troy's steelduster into an easy singlefoot jog.

WHITEY CRADE had spent the long night among the pines that crowned a hogback overlooking the Lily Basin road. Sleep had been denied him, for the throb of bruised muscles and splintered ribs was not to be eased by anything except the passage of time. His toxic personality had been further unbalanced by the virulence of the hatred which seethed in his warped brain, a hatred which had had its beginning in the brawl with Del Troy at the Loop-Loop deadfall and his banishment from Conconully.

The bourbon bottles which Bix Herrod had sent with him from the Lazy H cow camp last night were empty now, tossed aside in the knee-high Russian thistles which concealed Crade's presence overlooking Lily Basin.

The hogback's crest gave him a view of the entire length of the Cariboo Trail where it crossed the meadow; and he knew that it was a matter of time before Del Troy would come within range of his Winchester, homeward bound from Jones' Ranch.

Whiskey and brooding hate and the frustrations which had become a part of the albino's basic character had fused to make Whitey Crade irrational, edgy as a coiled rattler in dogdays. His rabbit-pink eyes had studied the road below ever since dawn's early light had filtered into the basin below his ambushade.

The liquor in his veins had put Whitey Crade's vision out of focus, made his head reel. But he was not too drunk or cold or hungry to miss the rider on the steeldust mustang who came in sight through the timbered gateway now.

The tension mounted in Crade as he reached for the .30-30 carbine at his side and checked the shell in its breech. He thrust the octagonal barrel over a lava chunk and lined the sights tentatively on a flat patch of road directly opposite his

hiding place, in the path of the oncoming rider.

To Whitey Crade, waiting with the impatience of a spider in its lair, the identity of that rider was beyond question. His eyes, never keen because of their abnormal pigmentation, did not have the power to focus on details. But the erect posture of the horsebacker told him it was Del Troy; so did the sweep of the Texas sombrero.

If he needed final and decisive proof that his long-awaited target was now within gun range, the steeldust mustang supplied that proof. Crade had been with Troy when the horse, then a yearling, had fallen into their mustang trap in the Guadalupe out of El Paso one winter five years back. Troy had selected Alamo for his own personal mount on that long-gone fuzztail hunt.

The rifle barrel wavered slightly as Crade notched his sights on the rider's chest, following the loping steelduster in a level arc. He pulled a deep breath into his lungs to steady his aim, cuddling the walnut stock against a bruised cheek. When the steelduster was directly opposite his ambush, Whitey Crade squeezed off his shot.

The butt plate recoiled against his shoulder and Whitey Crade reared to his knees, fanning the smudge of gunsmoke away with his hat.

As through a windowpane swimming with the beat of raindrops, Crade saw the steelduster galloping empty-saddled across the meadow, its rider a shapeless, motionless sprawl on the road below.

Bix Herrod had promised two thousand dollars cash on the barrelhead for proof of Del Troy's death. His guns, his hat—any symbol to back up Crade's report.

But shame and panic seized the albino now, shocking him cold sober. He flung his carbine aside in the weeds as if it had been a scaly reptile. Del Troy lay dead on the Cariboo Trail. But consummated revenge left a flat, acid taste in Crade's mouth.

He slogged back over the hillcrest to where he had left Bix Herrod's mount. Tardily, the realization came to Whitey Crade that his bullet had snuffed the life

from the only man who had ever befriended him in his misspent career.

That damning knowledge would haunt Whitey Crade to his grave.

XIV

THE SMUDGE OF BIX HERROD'S northering cattle herd once more lay in a ragged pillowing mass against the southern skyline when Del Troy left Okanogan Jones' ranch astride an apaloosa mare the squaw man had loaned him.

His unscheduled return to the Osoyoos Lake blockhouse had paid off with an unexpected windfall of business. Jones, making a subtle peace offering to mollify Troy after his refusal to defend the Texan's grazing rights in Flaming Canyon, had come forth with the news that he had purchased a sawmill in the upper Methow Valley. Jones had a yen to go into the logging business for himself, to tap the rich source of revenue which had hitherto been Steen Slankard's monopoly.

Thus, when Troy set out for Flaming Canyon at mid-morning, he carried with him a lucrative contract for a month's work of dismantling and freighting the mill, complete with donkey engine, across the mountains to the site which Jones' timber cruisers would select for future logging operations.

Troy knew that Jones had the wagons and the manpower to do his own freighting, but he saw no reason to decline this largess and he insisted on a written agreement. This prospect of adding substantially to his cash reserve meant the difference, for Troy, of starting his beef herd in the fall or postponing it for an indefinite period of time.

But the advent of the Lazy H and Dollar pool herd, written in the trail dust which feathered the skyline ahead of him, robbed Troy of the full savor of his improved outlook.

He knew he would be powerless to prevent Herrod's beef from encroaching on the rich grama grass which stood high in Flaming Canyon this season. Appealing to the federal courts for an injunction requiring Lazy H to police its own lease was out of the question; by the time the

ponderous legal machinery got into motion, the damage would be done. And fencing off the canyon's innumerable entering coulees would take months to accomplish.

A depression that was unusual for the man settled on Troy as he put his borrowed mare down the trail. He turned his thoughts toward Shasta Ives, wondering how a woman could look at a man with the wide-eyed sincerity of a nun, and yet be capable of baiting a trap for a shrewd man like Okanogan Jones; a woman who could break her heart over the loss of a pet animal, and yet cheapen herself into beguiling a weakling like Whitey Crade into selling a partner down the river for a few pieces of Judas gold.

Thought of Crade brought a sadness to Troy, rather than any remembered anger. He wondered where Crade was this morning—probably headed for Texas. Knowing Crade's inferior mentality, his childish dependence on guidance from others, Troy doubted if the albino would reach the Rio Grande. Born under an evil star, damned by his physical handicap, Crade was an object for pity, not hate. He would probably wind up in a cowtown alley with a knife in his ribs, or spill his blood across some line-camp poker table en route to his native Panhandle.

Troy's mind was occupied with these dour prophecies as he giggered the apaloosa through the timbered mouth of Lily Basin. The mare whinnied at sight of an empty-saddled horse grazing on the meadow floor a hundred yards off the trail. Troy's following glance identified the foraging horse as his own steelduster.

His first thought was that Alamo had thrown Shasta Ives, though he had seen enough of her riding ability to doubt that such an accident could have happened. The next instant, his swiveling gaze searched out the sprawled figure of the girl, lying in the wagon road ahead.

He roweled the apaloosa to a gallop, cold dread knotting his throat muscles as he skidded to a halt alongside the girl, saw the clotted blood which had soaked the wheat-blond tresses on the nape of her neck.

Forgetting that he was on a borrowed mount, he vaulted from saddle and ground-

hitched the mare, only to see her snort at realization of her freedom and gallop off into the meadow.

Down on one knee beside Shasta, Troy parted the blood-soaked hair from her neck, to reveal the shallow furrow cut through the flesh above the backbone, like a trace of crimson chalk.

Such a long, straight wound would not have been sustained by falling on a sharp rock.

"Bullet crease. A bullet meant for me."

The rise and fall of the girl's lungs as he lifted her was Troy's first proof that the slug had not scored the spinal column, killing her instantly. He judged from the amount of blood she had lost from a relatively shallow wound that the gunshot he had heard on his way back to Okanogan Jones' ranch must have been the one which had knocked the girl from saddle.

Carrying his unconscious burden over to a cushion of dew-moist grass, he lowered her gently and loosened her shirt collar. Healthy color was already suffusing her face; her pulse was steady and strong. The stunned nerves at the base of her skull were rallying and she would, in all probability come out of her coma suddenly and completely, unaware of any lapse of time.

A WHISTLE brought his steelduster cantering over from the rhododendron brakes. By the time the horse reached the road, Shasta's eyes had fluttered open and she was attempting feebly to prop herself up on her elbows.

Incoherent syllables formed on her lips as Troy stepped over to his horse and unlooped his canvas waterbag from the horn. Using the girl's silken neck scarf for a swab, he cleansed the bullet nick as best he could, washed the dirt and gore from her hair and bound the scarf about her neck to protect the exposed flesh from dust.

"Reckon you run into a dry gulch trap that was set for me, ma'am," he told her, holding her head while she drank from the spout of the waterbag. "Somebody who knew my steelduster and was too far off to see who was riding it."

She did not register what he had said,

he knew; but she was able to sit up by herself. Her eyes were sightless, glazed orbs as she stared at him, her brain still groping through a black tunnel.

Scanning the surrounding meadow, Troy saw where an ambusher could have had innumerable choices of hideouts. For all he knew, the bushwacker might be lurking within gunshot range at this moment; and the thought sent Troy back to his horse, snaking the Winchester out of its scabbard.

"We'll ride on together, Shasta, just in case," Troy grinned, jerking the lever of the .30-30. "You take it easy while I dab my twine on Jones' mare."

The apaloosa had not bolted far. Precluding any necessity for using his own horse, Troy unbuckled his sisal lariat from the pommel, shook out a loop, and, carrying his rifle, set off toward the grazing mare.

That was the first coherent picture of Del Troy which came to clear focus in Shasta Ives' bullet numbed brain. The throbbing pain which scalded her neck nape brought her hand up to touch the bandage which Troy had put there; she saw the freshly coagulated blood which smeared her finger tips.

Through the mysterious power of association which ruled her brain at the moment, Shasta connected the wound on her neck with the rifle which Del Troy was carrying as he headed toward the apaloosa. And to Shasta, the combination of evidence which her eyes beheld added up to one appalling conclusion—Del Troy had overtaken her on the trail and attempted to kill her.

With a choked scream, the girl pulled herself to her feet and, seizing the steelduster's saddle horn and cantle rim, dragged herself clumsily astride.

Terror whipped the girl's distraught sense as she clapped spurs to the mustang's flanks and sent it rocketing down the grassy basin, expecting any instant to hear the crack of Troy's rifle and to feel the stunning jolt of a bullet between her shoulder blades.

Her sudden getaway spooked the apaloosa mare, sending it off at a tangent before Troy could get within roping range of the fractious animal.

His own puzzlement and dismay at seeing the girl's sudden flight made him yell out, but his shout, instead of bringing reason to Shasta Ives, made the girl redouble her frantic spurring of the steelduster.

By the time Troy put his loop on the mare, Shasta was out of sight. An hour's headlong ride through the timbered foothills cleared her head in a physical sense, but her hysteria toward Del Troy remained, confusing and outraging her.

The dust of the Yakima trail herd was her guiding beacon as she hit the open flats at the south border of the Twenty-Mile Strip. Giving Troy's horse a chance to blow, Shasta heard the remote cacophony of bawling cattle as Herrod's herd topped the flat horizon ahead of her.

Troy had apparently made no attempt to overtake her. She had not glimpsed the Texan at any time during her wild flight.

She located the chuckwagon marking the crew's noon camp, and put the steelduster in that direction.

Bix Herrod and Doc Godette were eating their noon meal apart from the crew when they spotted the oncoming rider. Earlier this morning, Whitey Crade had galloped in from that identical direction, giving out a gibbering, half-intelligible version of Del Troy's ambush death up in Lily Basin.

"Looks like Shasta astraddle that mustang of Troy's," Doc Godette commented, squinting his cataract-rimmed eyes into the sun glare. "How could that be, you reckon? She wouldn't swap her favorite Skeeter hoss for that steelduster, even if she run across it after Crade bushwhacked Troy."

Herrod blew on his coffee to cool it, his own eyes narrowing with a grim premonition.

"She'll confirm Crade's story, most likely," the Lazy H boss grunted. "Keep your smart remarks to yourself, Doc."

The two men came to their feet as Shasta rode up and half-slid, half-fell out of saddle into Herrod's waiting arms.

"You're hurt!" Herrod exclaimed, seeing the dried blood on the neckerchief

which girdled her throat. "Doc, break out your kitbag. Shastas skinned up."

The girl clung to him, trembling.

"Del Troy . . . shot me," she panted hysterically. "Loaned me . . . his horse . . . after Skeeter broke his leg in a gopher hole. Then Troy . . . trailed me . . . and tried to bushwhack me, Bix."

HERROD PUSHED her out to arm's length, his eyes frogging with disbelief.

"How's that again? Pull yourself together, woman. You say Troy took a shot at you?"

She nodded vehemently.

"I saw him walking back to the horse he borrowed from Okanogan Jones when I came to," she said. "He had his rifle in his hand. It couldn't have been a minute after he grazed me."

Shasta spoke with complete surety, unaware that she was distorting the truth; for the time-lapse following the impact of the slug which had snuffed out her senses had seemed scarcely longer than the space between clock-ticks.

"He shot me, Bix. I tell you, Troy shot at me."

Doc Godette came over from the campfire where he had put his surgical tools to boil in a tin can. He had overheard Shasta's hysterical narrative, and even as his eye met Herrod's over the girl's shoulder, he knew that the Lazy H boss had surmised the real truth.

Whitey Crade's vague, repetitious recital of having shot Del Troy and set the steeldust mustang astray in Lily Basin gave logic to what had really happened. Crade's ambush bullet had dropped Shasta from saddle, providentially with only a superficial wound. Switched riders had confused the drunken albino.

During her period of insensibility, Troy must have arrived on the scene. In all likelihood he had put the makeshift bandage on her neck before she regained consciousness.

"You heard what Shasta said, Doc!" Herrod clipped, his voice vibrating with quick triumph. "While you're patching up Shasta I'll round up three or four of the boys. We've got a job to do."

Shasta Ives, yielding herself to the skilled hands of the segundo who had never lost his surgeon's genius of yesteryear, took no interest in her surroundings until, five minutes later, Bix Herrod rode up, flanked by four Lazy H cowhands. Doc Godette's line-back grulla accompanied them, saddled and bridled.

From the pommel of Herrod's saddle swung a coil of hemp rope.

"Where—where are you going?" Shasta's voice held a sudden panic at sight of the rope. "What are you going to do?"

Herrod's mouth was a grim seam as he slapped a palm on the coil of hemp he had picked up from the hoodlum wagon.

"Ride up the trail to meet Troy. There's only one brand of medicine for a polecat who'd try to shoot a woman."

Shasta ran forward, forcing him to halt his horse or run her down.

"You can't lynch him, Bix. Turn him over to the sheriff, and I'll testify at his trial. But don't put Troy's ghost between us now."

Something in the girl's voice warned Herrod to go easy.

"All right," he growled. "I'll hold Troy for the law, if that's how you want it. That's a promise."

Doc Godette climbed into saddle and the horsebackers galloped off in a surge of lifting dust.

"We got the deadwood on Troy this time, men." Herrod remarked when they were out of earshot. "I've waited too long to miff a chance like this."

XV

WHITEY CRADE WAS LOAFING at the chuckwagon with the riders gathered there for noon grub when Herrod had visited the camp to select four riders for his lynching party. His first act had been to order Crade to cut a horse from the cavy and report to the trail boss for duty.

Having ostensibly hired out as a Lazy H drover, the sullen albino made haste to comply, roping a strawberry roan from the string assigned to him by the wrangler and leaving camp at a gallop.

Always quick to offense, Crade had already

made a bad start with the Lazy H crew. He resented their joshing remarks about his battered face and swollen hands, attributing his beating to some jezebel at Straight-Edge Lulu's house in Ruby.

As always, the colorless hair and skin of the man attracted cruel stares from normal men, and the Lazy H bunch had been no exception. They regarded him as a freak, and he knew it. All of Crade's life-long complexes and frustrations rode his shoulders as he reported to the Lazy H trail boss down the line and was assigned an outrider's position between the herd and the river.

When he found himself alone, with stragglers to beat back into the herd with a knotted rope-end and a definite purpose to occupy his attention, Crade shrugged the chip from his shoulder and turned the bitter spotlight of self-condemnation upon himself.

He had killed Del Troy. That conviction had become a part of him. He had never taken a human life before, and the enormity of his sin put a festering panic in the man which he knew no lapse of time nor ocean of liquor could ever expunge.

Reaction from his all-night vigil at Lily Basin and a head-splitting hangover from his whiskey debauch put his nerves in a state of near-collapse.

Troy's ghost rode at his stirrups. He heard Troy's voice above the clacking horns and beating hoofs of the herd lumbering in bovine stolidity alongside him. He saw Troy's face etched in the fumerols of dust which swept toward him from the green river, bringing its smell of rotting mud and tules, reminding him of Texas. Old memories marshaled to haunt him, and tears began to cut their salty swaths through the grime which hid the yeasty pallor of his face.

He screamed aloud, and the echo was a mockery lost in the rumble of the herd. The cattle were moving steadily up the bench, strung out in a tenuous column for three miles behind him. The country was flat and open, requiring little vigilance on the part of the drovers. He counted himself lucky that the trail boss hadn't assigned him to the dust of the drags. It did not occur to Whitey Crade that Bix Herrod

had had an ulterior purpose in sending him out of camp ahead of the other cowboys.

He tried to roll a smoke but his hands were palsied and only after repeated tries did he manage to get a shapeless lumpy cylinder between his scabbed lips. He reined up to strike a match, and was grateful for the lift the nicotine gave him.

But gradually the heat and dust and noise put Crade under its sedative spell and he dozed, his mouth going slack. The cigarette dropped from his lips and fell unnoticed in the parched bunchgrass behind his horse's hoofs. Instantly, ruddy flames flickered in the murk behind him like snake's tongues, the smoke of kindling grass blending with the whorling dust.

Dreams took shape in macabre tableau behind Crade's lids. He dreamed as the roan drifted with the herd, knowing its duty and cutting a stray back into the main bunch without awakening its stupefied rider. Crade dreamed of another beef drive, in another year and on a remote range in the cactus flats of Oklahoma.

He dreamed that he was caught in a sudden stampede caused by raiding Comanche warriors; that he had been bucked from saddle and was helpless in the path of tidal wave of hoofs and horns.

Behind him the grass fire spread, carrying the smell of smoke to the plodding steers.

CRADE MOANED in his sleep. He saw a tall rider angle like a phantom across the prairie between him and the stampeding Texas longhorns. The rider was Del Troy, whose unerring arm and rope sent release from certain death toward Whitey Crade, dragging him to safety at rope's end. That rope had linked them figuratively through the years, severed in a saloon brawl in Conconully.

The bawling of frenzied cattle loomed louder and louder in Crade's dream, until drums was like nails being hammered into the dinning pressure of it against his ear-skull; and the roar brought him screaming out of his dream, into the compounded horrors of a real stampede.

Fifty yards to the rear, the burning grass had already been beaten out

by milling hoofs; but the damage was done and the Yakima pool herd, catching the scent of smoke and its mass panic spreading from animal to animal with the speed of a bullet's flight, had whipped the Lazy H—Dollar steers into a stampede.

Crade's horse, knowing the peril about to engulf them, swapped ends with devastating suddenness and arched its back like a ruptured clockspring, hurtling its rider into space.

Crade landed on hands and knees, and he felt the ground tremble under the strike of a thousand lethal hoofs as he staggered to his feet.

Yells thinned by distance and the sporadic pop of gunfire breached the hellish cacophony of bellowing cattle as other riders sought to head off the stampede and start the horned juggernaut to milling on the open plain.

Crade ran a dozen feet in a blind zig-zag, making in the direction he believed the river to be, before a charging bull ripped open his side with a curved horn and flung the man to his belly.

Passing hoofs disemboweled Whitey Crade. His world became a blur of horned demons, knocking Crade down as fast as he tried to crawl away, dragging his torn guts behind him. He smelled the acrid tang of his own blood as he went down for the last time under a thundering avalanche of doom.

The stampede spent its blind inertia after a five-mile run, Lazy H and Dollar riders keeping clear of the danger and compacting the herd with consummate skill. The cause of the stampede would never be known; but when it was finished, ashen-faced riders broke away from the noon camp, scouting the hoof-trampled wake of the stampede in search of possible victims.

Shasta Ives, no stranger to rangeland tragedies such as this, rode with the crew, investigating mangled carcasses of yearlings and she-stuff that had been overwhelmed by the juggernaut, making sure that no shapeless mass of broken bone and mangled muscle could be that of a luckless horse or fallen rider.

The cowboys swung north, relieved to find that the tidal wave of destruction had taken no human toll. Shasta reined back

toward the chuckwagon, and quite by accident her eye was caught by a glint of sunlight on metal, far to the east where the benchland broke away into the Okanogan River farm belt.

Nausea touched her as she looked around for the other riders, but found herself alone on the prairie. She put her horse in the direction of the flash of light, impelled by a prescience that she would find death at its source.

Not until she was within a dozen yards of the shapeless heap amid the bunchgrass clumps did she realize that she had seen sunrays glinting on a belt buckle; and that the formless hulk in the dirt before her had once been a living, breathing human.

Shasta flung herself to the ground and ran forward, steeling herself for what she might find, stifling a selfish prayer that this would not prove to be one of her father's Dollar hands.

Only by the ruby-red irises of the half-opened eyes which regarded her was Shasta able to identify the stampede's victim as the albino pariah, Whitey Crade.

She was unaware that Herrod had put Crade on the Lazy H payroll last night, and the albino's presence here in the path of the stampede was a puzzle she did not try to fathom.

It seemed impossible, but life was not yet extinct in this mass of fractured bone and mashed flesh. Crade recognized her, calling her name through the blood which filled his lungs.

"I'm cashin' out one day too late," the dying puncher whispered, one ruined hand closing over hers as she knelt compassionately beside him.

"You'll pull through, Whitey," she lied, seeking to comfort his last moment on earth. "We have a skilled doctor riding with us. Mike Godette. He'll patch you up."

Crade shook his head ever so lightly, drinking strength from her taut smile.

"I shot Del Troy . . . this mornin' . . . south of Jones' Ranch," his ratty whisper reached her. "Killed the . . . only hombre . . . I could ever call friend. There ain't room in hell . . . for a man who'd . . . who'd . . ."

His whisper trailed off, and the impact of the albino's words took precious seconds to penetrate the girl's understanding.

"Crade! What are you saying? You didn't shoot Del Troy—I was riding that steeldust mustang this morning! You can't die without knowing that."

But the reassurance that he would meet his Maker without the stain of murder on his immortal soul came too late to ease Whitey Crade across the Big Divide. His rabbit-pink eyes were fixed on Shasta's face when the torment ceased and he crossed beyond her aid.

XVI

BIX HERROD HALTED HIS CAV-alcade on a spur of glacial rocks overlooking Horse Springs Coulee, near a surveyor's benchmark which indicated a point on the boundary of the Twenty-Mile Strip.

From this point, five hundred feet above the trail, the men with Herrod had an unobstructed vista of the Strip to its northern limits. Okanogan Jones' fortress-like ranch was a discernible dot against the sheen of Osoyoos Lake.

A spiral of dust moved against the diluted gray-green haze miles to the northward, visible only to the trained eyes of these range-wise men. Doc Godette unlimbered his brass telescope and focussed it on the source of the dust.

"It's Troy," he reported, handing the telescope to Herrod.

Herrod studied the oncoming rider for some moments.

"We'll wait for him here, men," he decided. "Navet and McKnight, take a pasear down to that tamarack clump yonder and lie low. Fuller, you and Silva hole up in that rocky hump yonder. If Troy leaves the trail, signal. But I imagine he'll pass here."

The four riders moved off, grinning expectantly. Silva hipped around, balancing a Spencer across his saddlehorn.

"Troy's fair meat for any of us, boss?"

Herrod dismounted, handing the spy-glass back to Godette.

"No shooting. I want Troy to know who's counting coup on him. When he's

boxed in. I'll give the word. I've already earmarked that cottonwood down there for Troy."

The horsemen moved off to vanish in their appointed lairs, bracketing the trail Del Troy was following. The sandy wagon tracks bore the recent hoofprints of two south-bound riders. Crade and Shasta. Herrod deducted that Troy would read the import of that extra set of tracks and follow them accordingly on the supposition that one set belonged to Shasta's ambusher.

Godette and Herrod led their horses into a brush-choked coulee and picked their way on foot down to the level of the road, seating themselves behind a jumble of bubble-pitted lava rocks under the shade of a gnarled cottonwood.

Herrod carried the coil of hemp rope with him, and his spatulated fingers set to fashioning the rope into the deadly five-roll hangman's noose.

"Bix, you got enough on Troy to hang him legal, with Shasta's testimony," Doc Godette commented between coughs. "I wouldn't put Troy's ghost between you this close to your weddin' day. I'd turn Troy over to Gaddy and let the law take its course."

Herrod, completing the noose to his satisfaction, coiled the rope carefully and set it aside. He bit the end off a Cuban cigar and studied Godette thoughtfully. During the years of his association with the ex-Confederate army surgeon, Herrod had usually followed the oldster's wise counsel, using Godette as a governor to counterbalance his own tempestuous judgments. But today he made his own stand.

"I'll tell Shasta that Troy started shooting and we were forced to drop him," he growled. "The girl's sharp. She'll get to wondering who cleaned off her wound, put that scarf on her neck for a bandage. Besides, there's Whitey Crade. That pink-eyed brockle-face would spill Shasta an earful if I gave him half a chance."

Godette tugged the cork from his omnipresent bottle of rye and imbibed deeply, shuddering as the revivifying liquor warmed him.

"Crade must be disposed of pronto pronto," advised the oldster, his voice taking on new vitality under the boost of the

stimulant. "Yes, indeed. A most unusual physical specimen, that Crade. Rarely come across a true albino in the course of a lifetime's practise. I'd like to perform an autopsy on that one."

Herrod got his cigar drawing evenly and settled back for the long wait, grateful for the cottonwood's shade.

"You'll get your wish if Crade doesn't high-tail first," he said, fanning his face with his Keevil brim. "I can't afford to run the risk of Shasta talking things over with that maverick."

Godette fingered the tarnished brass buttons of his army tunic, letting his thoughts stray to other things.

"Shasta deserves a better deal than she'll get from you," he drawled. "A thoroughbred, that girl. And she trusts you to hell and back. You can't deceive her forever."

Anger glinted briefly in Herrod's eyes. He stepped forward.

"One thing you will not intrude upon, Doc," he said flatly. "My personal affairs. Always remember that. I've already taken more off you than any man living. Don't crowd me too often."

Godette turned his pale, wise eyes on his companion.

"You cut a wide splash with most folks, Bix, but I've seen your cards and your bob-tailed flush don't faze me a damn. Strong men are afraid of your strength and the weak ones kowtow to you the way weaklings will, hating your guts as they lick your boots. But I've had one foot in the grave too long to be buffaloeed by the likes of you, Bix Herrod."

Godette watched Herrod's lips whiten, and it gave the oldster a perverse satisfaction, knowing his svengalilike hold on the man, knowing the flaws as well as the strengths of the cattle king.

"I won't be around when Shasta gets wise to you," Godette went on. "You're on the top of the stack now. When you meet a better man, you'll cave, and drag Shasta down with you. Personally, I think you're waiting with that rope for the better man who might have coppered your bet."

It was a long speech for Doc Godette, when he was finished Herrod made no comment, choosing to treat the oldster as he might a petulant child. Godette, having

vented his spleen, turned over on his side and went to sleep.

The cottonwood's shadow had wheeled a considerable distance before Herrod shook the old soldier awake.

"Troy's abreast of the boys now," he whispered. "Skin out on the road yonder and tell Troy your hoss throwed you. Troy might go for his gun if we pulled a road-agent deal on him."

DOC GODETTE grunted and came to his feet. He yawned prodigiously, loosened the ancient Spiller and Burr percussion revolver in its scarred holster, and hobbled off around the boulder pile toward the road.

Crouched behind the bole of the cottonwood, Herrod waited with a cocked Frontier .45 in his fist.

Del Troy was less than fifty feet up the road, his jaded apaloosa mare limping from a thrown shoe. The Texan came erect in saddle as he saw Godette's shadow fall across the road ahead of him, his hand dropping instinctively to gun-butt.

"Make a habit of taking walks in the heat like this, Doc?" Troy sang out, raking the roundabout slopes as he reined up, his eyes wary, alert.

"Bronc threw me tail-over-tincup and ran into the coulee yonder," the medico explained. "Thought you might dab your twine on the ornery jughead and save me a walk."

Troy remained tense, a warning tocsin ringing steadily somewhere in the back of his head.

"How come you were here in the first place?"

Godette gestured toward the uphill cairn marking the Strip.

"This here's the boundary of Jones' range, son. Bix sent me ahead of the herd to scout the grass."

Troy's tension eased off slightly. He reached for his coiled lass'-rope.

"I'll get your horse for you. Where is it?"

Godette started to gesture toward the mouth of a defile across the road. As he did so, a bluejay set up a chattering racket on a dead snag nearby.

"See that jaybird yander, son?" Godette

remarked. "Five gets you ten I can drill an eye plumb center, first shot."

As he spoke, Godette pulled the rusty Spiller and Burr from leather, twirling it innocently by the trigger guard. Troy saw nothing suspicious in the move, reading it as an old gaffer's pride in his marksmanship.

"I got my doubts if you could hit a barn door with a handful of corn," he grinned. "I'll take that bet, and double it if you knock a feather loose. Hell, that rebel blunderbuss won't carry fifty yards."

Godette bristled indignantly. He lifted the ancient piece, squinting down the sights. The bluejay scolded raucously, drawing Troy's eye toward the feathered target.

He realized his error instantly. When he jerked his head around to face Godette, the blackbore of the gun was leveled at his midriff.

"Hold your fire, Doc!" Bix Herrod sang out from behind the cottonwood. "Reach, Troy. You're under a two-way drop here."

Caught, Troy groped his hands to hatbrim level as the massive figure of the Lazy H cowman stepped out from the roadside talus, sunlight glinting on a leveled Colt.

Godette, with a spongy chuckle, moved up with alacrity and jerked the gun from Troy's holster, following suit with the booted Winchester.

Navet and McKnight spurred out of the tamaracks behind Troy, joined almost immediately by Silva and Fuller from the rocky slopes above the road.

Troy hearing the riders closing in behind him and reading the trap for what it was, grunted with self-disgust.

"Always play it safe, don't you, Bix? This time you aim to make sure you finish what Fred Bolte started."

Bix Herrod waited until his four Lazy H riders had boxed Troy in from the rear. Then he flung his hang-rope over the limb of the cottonwood and tied the slack to the trunk, leaving the noose dangling at a level which told Troy that he would remain mounted when the lynch trap was sprung.

"Shasta beat your ambush up in Lily Basin this morning," Bix Herrod blustered,

for the benefit of his men. "Lynch rope's too good for a man who'd draw down on a girl."

Troy got the picture then in its full perspective. He also caught a discrepancy in Herrod's words.

"Shasta doesn't know this country. How'd she know she was bushed in Lily Basin?"

Herrod bit his lip, aware of the slip he had made. His reference to Lily Basin had been a direct quotation from Whitey Crade's erroneous version of Troy's bushwhacking.

"Rope him with his own reata, men!" Herrod ordered. "Let's get this business finished."

Silva and McKnight spurred alongside Troy's mare at the same moment, while Navet reached for the Texan's saddle rope.

Driving his spurs into the apaloosa's flanks, Troy lashed a fist at Navet's jaw as the mare lunged forward. But the desperate bid for getaway was short-lived. Fuller drove in front of the mare to block its jump, and simultaneously Silva smashed his gun barrel at Troy's skull from behind.

His scalp gashed by the clubbing steel, Troy nearly toppled from saddle, fireworks exploding behind his eyelids.

He was vaguely aware of ropes pinioning his arms behind his back, trussing his elbows to his sides. Then Doc Godette led the mare under the dangling rope and Troy felt the scratch of hempen fibers brush his cheekbones and jaw as McKnight, spurring alongside him, fitted Herrod's noose around his neck with the roll snug to his left temple.

THE STAGE was set for execution. Bix Herrod, whipping off his Keevil hat with a flourish, waved the riders back while he stationed himself alongside the apaloosa's rump. One swat of that hat would make the mare bolt out from under Troy, and the rope looped over the cottonwood limb would snape his neck like a dead twig.

But Herrod's arm froze at the top of its arc. It was a harsh command from Doc Godette, holding Troy's bitring, which caused Del Troy to open his squeezed-shut eyelids.

"Hold 'er Bix. You don't want your woman to see this."

Herrod wheeled about, his face losing some of its purple flush. Rocking around the south shoulder of the bluff came Shasta Ives, quiring a dead-beat Dollar cowpony up the road.

She bucketed to a dusty halt between Troy and Herrod, relief crowding some of the terror from her eyes. Thrusting a windblown lock of hair off her face, Shasta gasped out, "This is a tragic mistake, Bix. Whitey Crade ambushed me, not Troy. Crade told me with his dying breath."

Silva, obeying a signal from Doc Godette reached to free Troy's neck from the noose as Herrod stared up at the girl.

"Dying breath? What do you mean?" he asked.

She told them of the stampede and Crade's ghastly end. When she finished Herrod said carefully, "Crade tell you why he tried to kill Troy?"

"No. Only that he regretted dying with his best friend's life on his conscience," Her glance touched Del Troy. "I'm sorry. He was gone before I could tell him it was a mistake."

Herrod had passed through the toughest crisis of his life, and his relief was evident in the slow exhalation he let leak through his lips. He saw Shasta turn to where McKnight was cutting Troy's bonds with a hunting knife, and the moment the Texan's arms were loose she extended her right hand to him.

"Crade died because of me, Del. I shall never forget that as long as I live. No amount of penance will ever free me of the knowledge that I wronged you so."

Troy massaged his chafed neck muscles and grinned slowly.

"You just got through saving my hide, ma'am. I reckon that evens us up, don't it?"

Shasta turned to Herrod then.

"Not quite," she said grimly. "Bix, you lied when you promised me you wouldn't lynch Del. I'll overlook that. But I'm going to sign Crade's homestead over to Mr. Troy as soon as I can get to the county courthouse and draw up the necessary papers. The least I can do is put Troy back in full control of Flaming Can-

yon. I'm through being a pawn in your range-hog schemes, Bix."

For the first time since they had become engaged, Bix Herrod knew he was dangerously close to losing this girl who was so vital to his ambitions. He was realistic enough to know that eating humble pie in the presence of these men was his only recourse now, to salvage what he could of the girl's shattered faith in him.

"Of course, Shasta—I would have suggested turning the Crade place back to Troy if you hadn't. My abject apologies, Troy, for this necktie party. I let my temper get the best of me. Shasta claimed you ambushed her. I guess that made me a little crazy in the head."

Troy gave Herrod a strange, searching look.

"I don't suppose you know how Crade happened to be caught in a stampede of Lazy H cattle, do you?"

Troy's question warned Herrod that the Texan's mind was groping on the edge of a dangerous hunch, and he talked fast to divert him off the subject.

"Give Troy his guns, Doc."

When Troy had booted his Winchester and holstered his sidearm, he turned to Shasta Ives and lifted his hat.

"Your cattle hit the Strip today," he said. "Shasta, I'll not object to your jag of Dollar beef grazing inside Flaming Canyon this summer, in view of what happened here."

He turned to Herrod then, and his voice sharpened.

"But I'll butcher the first mossyhorn I find on my grass with a Lazy H iron, Bix, and I'll shoot the first Lazy H hand I catch on my land. Let's get that straight, here and now."

Shasta laughed softly, the heat of anger still in her.

"Thank you, Del. I give you my word that Bix will not violate your lease with Okanogan Jones. It will cost him a bride if he does. There are limits to what I will do to make a dollar."

XVII

THE WORST DROUGHT IN Washington's history, having scorched

ed the Yakima rangeland into a tawny waste freckled with the bleaching skeletons of starved livestock, spread its blight northward as July ran its torrid course.

Washington's skies took on a perpetual brassy color from the haze of high smokes. Timber burned unchecked in the Mount Rainier area; further to the east and south the golden wheat fields of Walla Walla and the Palouse withered before heading out.

The Okanogan country did not escape the searing hand of Nature. Streams dried up to disconnected chains of mud puddles throughout the Twenty-Mile Strip. Only Flaming Canyon remained verdant, its cliff-shaded length irrigated by the seepage of Glacier Creek, which tapped the perpetual ice fields of the high Cascades to the west.

Snows receded on the higher peaks, leaving bald patches of granite. Okanogan Jones' timber cruisers reported the fern-brake and hackberry undergrowth was tinder dry, needing only a careless camper's fire or a bolt of heat lighting to touch off a conflagration.

For Del Troy, July and the first two weeks in August were occupied with the herculean task of dismantling Okanogan Jones' sawmill in the upper Methow Valley, so that he was unaware of the drought which seemed to be dogging Bix Herrod's fortunes. He was engaged with the problem of stripping down a donkey engine's weight to a freight wagon's capacity when the driver of the Twisp stage dropped off a letter to him from Shasta Ives, post-marked Conconully.

It contained a quit-claim deed to Crade's homestead, made out in his name and accompanied by a hastily written note—

In view of the terrible drought conditions in the Strip, I have taken advantage of your kind offer and have had my men cut out all stock belonging to Dollar and put them inside Flaming Canyon. Naturally, I will reimburse you in full after the fall round-up.

Your fine steelduster, Alamo, is getting fat and frisky at Mr. Slankard's stable here in town and Miss Laranjo and I give him a workout every day to keep him in shape. Roxanna and I have become close friends since I took up residence at the Cariboo House. She thinks a lot of you, Del.

BACK IN THE CASINO, sharing a jug of cool beer across Roxie's blackjack table, Troy waited for the lady gambler to open the conversation. He felt toward this strange, exotic woman an even stronger sense of kinship now, knowing he was forever in her debt as a result of her blocking the Keyhole grange to Lazy H cattle.

"You're wondering how a lady of Shasta's breeding could become the companera of a gambling hall hussy, no es verdad?" Roxie accused him half-seriously.

"Not at all. They don't come any finer than you, Roxie. There can be no thought of Shasta condescending to accept your company. I have no doubt she feels privileged."

Roxanna's statuesque shoulders lifted and fell in the expressive gesture common to her race.

"Outside of Jennie Pride," she smiled ruefully, "there are no women in Condonally to whom Shasta could turn for companionship. It was not my wish that she should seek me out in a—a hovel such as the Casino. It reminds me how I have fallen."

Troy made wet rings with his beer glass on the green baize, suddenly ill at ease. He changed the subject.

"What kind of a cattle deal could take Shasta to Seattle this time of year? She'll have no difficulty marketing her beef this fall, what with Seattle jammed with gold hunters."

Roxanna fingered the wedding ring and the small gold cross on her neck chain. She smiled slowly.

"It goes back to that time she listened to a Klondiker talk about twenty-dollar beefsteaks in Dawson," Roxanna said. "You were there. It was at Okanogan Jones' place."

Troy laughed recalling the forgotten incident.

"Good Lord, Roxie! Is Shasta still thinking she can drive a trail herd overland to Dawson? The gold rush will be petered out before she could get halfway across British Columbia."

Roxanna Laranjo shook her head and frowned slightly.

"There are steamships operating between Puget Sound and Alaska. Shasta has the idea that she can sell her cattle to one of these shippers, at three times what the Seattle packeries will pay on the local market. I think she is on the right track. Those Alaska miners are hungry for fresh beef."

Troy rolled and licked a cigarette, his eyes thoughtful.

"I doubt if any coastal steamer is equipped to handle a cargo of livestock, frankly. Not when the Seattle wharves are jammed to overflowing with tenderfeet willing to shell out five hundred dollars apiece for passage to Alaska."

Troy's eye strayed to the ring looped over the girl's necklace, and a new train of thought hit him.

"You'll be Shasta's maid of honor at her wedding soon."

Roxanna tucked the ring back into her dress.

"Del, I would not give odds that Shasta Ives will ever become Senora Herrod. He has not been to see her once since he set up his cow camp in the Twenty-Mile Strip. Does that sound like their love affair is prospering?"

Troy became aware that his pulses had picked up their tempo and he spoke hastily to cover his wonderment at that.

"How you women bandy gossip! Herrod's got his hands full keeping his Lazy H stock alive, I reckon. And you forget he has an eye on Dollar. He'll go through with that marriage to get it. I wouldn't sell his wedding day short, querida."

They were silent for a long time, occupied with their own thoughts. A quarrel flared and died at a poker table nearby without drawing them from their bemused reverie.

Roxanna spoke suddenly, bringing Troy back to reality.

"You have known me many years, amigo. In Texas and Dodge City. You must be curious about this wedding ring I carry."

He shrugged, embarrassed without quite knowing why.

"It is no affair of mine if you are a married woman, Roxie. I have always known there was nothing in the cards for you and me."

SHE CAUGHT his calloused hands between her own, and in her eyes Troy read a wistfulness and a yearning which made him turn his head aside, as if he had seen her soul bared naked before him.

"You know that my religious faith denies me the divorce which my gringo sisters are free to use," she whispered. "Perhaps one day I will share a sordid story with you, amigo." Her black eyes clouded forebodingly. "I feel I shall never see Chihuahua again, Del. I would like to know that this ring I carry could pass into your hands when I am gone."

He laughed then, uneasy before the morbidity that had crept into her voice.

"Shucks, paloma mia—you'll dance a fandango on my grave. You're fat and healthy—well, healthy anyway. And you can't be over twenty-five. This kind of talk is not like you, Roxie."

She shrugged again, and the mood passed, leaving her face veiled behind the inscrutable mask she showed the world. A pair of muckers with the grime of the drifts on their rough clothing approached her table, grinning with the easy camaraderie of the time and place.

"How about some twenty-one, Roxie? Silver King opened today. We're aimin to celebrate."

Roxanna Laranjo reached for her deck of cards, and Del Troy excused himself and left the Casino. His conversation with the girl had dulled the zest of his homecoming; and he crossed to Beagle's Saloon to hoist a few drinks with Ambie Pride, in hopes of shaking off his melancholy.

Dusk came prematurely, an hour before the sun touched the fir-clad hills west of the town, and it was dark enough for the kerosene flares to be lighted on the awning of the Casino when Troy went back on the street. There was a smokey, resinous tang in the air that put a grim foreboding in the Texan, but he was too preoccupied with his moods to inquire into the reason for it.

Wheels rumbled out of the timber to westward, the twin eyes of oil lamps marking the east-bound stage pulling in from the coast. The Concord halted before Beagle's place and discharged a half-dozen miners returning to Conconully after an

abortive visit to Seattle, the so-called gateway to the Alaska gold-rush. Scraps of their talk reached Troy as he watched the hostler changing the stage team for the run to Brewster:

"Five hundred bucks for standin' room in the hold of a stinkin' tub! And the same boat unloaded a thousand men who claim the Klondike boom is already busted."

"We may not get more'n day wages in the Okanogan diggin's this winter, but by damn we'll eat."

"They say the ice gits five foot thick on the Yukon by Christmas. A man's a fool to try his luck above White Pass any later than June."

Old man Beagle left his post office annex, dragging a sack of outgoing mail. The stage tooler, tossing the Conconully mailbag down from the boot, remarked:

"Damned near didn't get here this run, Beagle. Biggest forest fire in forty year is sweepin' through the Methow Valley toward the summit, faster'n a man can gallop a hoss. Liked to singed the hair outen my ears before I hit the east grade."

Del Troy's nostrils savored the thick, cloying fumes which choked the atmosphere and he knew a pang of quick alarm.

"That's smoke from Methow, eh?" Beagle grunted, shouldering his mailbag and express box. "Any danger the wind'll carry that fire down the foothills and wipe us out?"

The stage driver picked up his leather ribbons and kicked at his brake pedal.

"Anything could happen, Beag. I reckon by now Twisp is blazin' like a furnace. This dry weather's made a damned tinderbox out o' the mountings hereabouts. I'll be glad to cross the river."

Troy stepped down off the porch and yelled up at the driver:

"Did you pass the Seattle stage this afternoon, Shufelt?"

The driver spat a gobbet of tobacco juice at a square lamp and the hot glass gave off a sizzling sound.

"Didn't I, now? Augered for ten minutes trying to make that knothed Guff Latchskin turn back. Told him it'd be like toolin' a stage into the devil's kitchen in hell, tryin' to cross the Methow with

that fire gainin' ground like it was. Bet you any amount you want to name Latchskin don't git through. He'll fry in his own grease an' his passengers with him."

The Brewster stage lurched forward to the crack of Shufelt's whip. Troy paused a moment, indecision in him; then he headed past Slankard & Company's corral at a run and within moments was tossing a saddle on his steeldust mustang.

Slankard was grooming a chestnut colt in the next stall. He had not seen Troy since the latter's return and he was chock-full of news.

"You hear about me buyin' a couple steamships for my lumber trade, Del? Auctioned off by the sheriff over at South Bend. Got 'em for ten thousand apiece, and worth a hundred. I aim to—"

Troy led his horse out of the stall, his face gray with strain.

"Forest fire spreading beyond the ridge, Steen. Shasta Ives was on the noon stage. I aim to see if I can help. Shufelt thinks they're trapped."

Del Troy vanished in the darkness before Slankard could reply. Later, back in his office, Sheriff Gaddy arrived for their evening game of checkers and noted the depression which filled his crony. The lawman waggled his head slowly when Slankard told him about Troy's ride.

"We'll never see Troy again," Gaddy predicted, and a deep sense of loss put its hard pressure on the sheriff's lips.

XVIII

THREE HOURS OUT OF CON-conully, Shasta Ives accepted the stage driver's invitation to share his top-side seat, glad to quit the stuffy confines and dubious comforts of the Concord's interior.

The smell of smoke had become increasingly pronounced as the stage climbed the long grade up the foothill divide which marked the rampart of Methow Valley. Sundown found them still short of the summit when Guff Latchskin swung his Morgans out on one of the turn-outs of the single-track road, to let the inbound stage from Seattle pass.

The whiskered reinsman aboard the

hurricane deck of the other Concord brought his thoroughbraced vehicle to a dusty halt alongside Latchskin. Gaunt-faced passengers peered out at Shasta from the canvas-curtained windows.

"Slash fire over Twisp way has spread acrost the lower end of the valley, Guff. She's headin' north along the crown growth like an express train. You can't get through."

Guff Latchskin pared himself a quid from the twist of long green Missouri leaf he carried in a hip pocket.

"Been expectin' a burn this summer. How far below Twisp did this thing start?"

"Neighborhood of Old Goat Mountain, this side Lake Chelan."

Latchskin scoffed, unwinding his reins from the whipstock.

"I'll make it through, then. That's all of thirty mile."

Shasta saw the other driver eye Latchskin with obvious gravity.

"What I'm tellin' ye, Guff, is to get that junk wagon o' yourn turned around and foller me back to Conconully. By the time you hit the relay station at Twisp, the hull damned world will be a lake o' fire an' brimstone. I tell you, this one's a heller."

Guff Latchskin was a stubborn man and to him the greatest pride in life was maintaining his stage schedules. His face distorted by the giant chew he had tucked under his cheek; the jehu whispered a reassuring aside to his lady passenger:

"Old Shufelt's ascairt of his own shadder, ma'am." Then, raising his voice, he addressed the other driver.

"Rattle you hocks, tillicum. I got a schedule to keep. By the time that fire covers the country between here an' Old Goat, I'll be eatin' supper west of the pass."

The Conconully-bound driver eyed Shasta worriedly.

"Better climb aboard with me, lady. This is the last chance Latchskin's got to turn his outfit between here and the valley bottom. I wouldn't like to see ye fry on account of Guff's dang fool pig-headedness."

Before Shasta could voice an opinion, the Concord under her lurched violently

on its bullhide springs and Guff Latchskin was hitting the summit grade, rocketing his vehicle around hairpin turns with reckless abandon.

"Like I said, that old yahoo tells everything scary, ma'am!" Latchskin chuckled, confident of his own judgment. "The forest fire ain't made yit that these Morgans couldn't out-run. A little smoke won't hurt us none."

They topped the divide and teetered down into the Methow in the face of a blast of super-heated air which made the team trumpet with panic and forced the girl to shield her nostrils with a handkerchief.

Before they had put a mile of the steep switchbacks behind them, the surrounding forest was obscured behind a void of sluggish smoke and the black sky was leaden with flying sparks and pine needles torn from the crown growth by the forced draft of the fire which was sweeping up the valley.

She sensed that Guff Latchskin had overplayed his hand when she saw the gaunt reinsman brace himself against the footboard and lash his Morgans into a run, which threatened to capsize the jouncing Concord at the steep, unbanked turns.

Shasta judged that they had skidded halfway down the valley grade when she caught sight of the first ruddy flash of flames eating up the declivity below the stage road.

Almost simultaneously a giant, centuries-old Douglas fir directly ahead of the stage exploded into flame, its resinous needles flaring like a two-hundred-foot torch, stripping the tree to a charred skeleton within seconds.

THE FURNACE BLAST of the air was rapidly becoming unendurable to human lungs as the oxygen was sucked out of it. Shasta screamed in the driver's ear, imploring him to stop the team, but her words were lost in the funneling bass roar of the holocaust.

Latchskin was trying to stop the Morgans, she realized next. But the team was out of control. Whipsawing lines could not slow the stampeding animals, racing blind down a ten-degree slope. Latchskin's boot

rode the brake lever, the locked wheels screaming in and out of ruts.

Then an elbow bend in the road loomed through a momentary rift in the whorling smoke clouds and Shasta knew, even as did Guff Latchskin, that their momentum would make it impossible to negotiate the turn safely.

"Jump fer yore life, lady!" Latchskin bawled against her ear. "I guessed this thing wrong—"

She flung herself out into space even as the careening stage left the ruts. Sheer luck carried her free of the pounding wheels and she hurtled head-over heels into a yielding barrier of wild rhododendron scrub under the roadbed's rim.

Scatched and bleeding, she gained her feet in time to see the Seattle stage up-end as its running gear straddled a giant rock, the team breaking clear of the wagon tongue and sprawling in a tangle of harness to vanish in the smoke coils which hugged the slope.

The stagecoach disintegrated into slivers. One six-foot wheel, its axle gouged into the dirt, spun crazily through the smoke, spokes shuttering in the red witchglow which filled the night. The screaming of mangled horses reached the girl's ears faintly above the organ-roar of the forest fire which was now advancing in an unbroken horseshoe curve below the road.

Discarding the ruins of her aigrette hat, Shasta brushed back her tousled hair and scrambled to the road's level. A blazing tamarack twig struck her, knocking her off her feet; her skirt was flaming when she got up again and she ground a handful of dirt against the charring fabric.

She staggered aimlessly in circles, her sense of direction lost in this inferno. The crackle of nearing flames blotted out the sound of her own screams as she called Guff Latchskin in the chaotic moments which followed.

Fire was leaping in recurrent waves up the mountainside, falling back and surging closer to the road with each wave. She made her way down to the smashed stage, breasting a tangible wall of heat, and knew then that she was alone in this lost, chaotic world.

Latchskin, his skull skewered by a sun-

dered bolster rod, lay wedged under the wreckage of his coach.

Terror lent its strength to the girl as she clawed her way back to the road. A rattlesnake slithered across her hand; a magnificent bull elk, flushed from its habitat by the advancing fire, bounced in forty-foot arcs up the hillside in defiance of gravity.

Instinct told her to crawl on all fours, where the air was purest close to the ground. The heat was singeing her hair now and she knew that death would probably come from suffocation before the flames actually touched her body.

Knotting a handkerchief about her nose and mouth, she fought her way up the road, following the zig-zagging ruts while the thick undergrowth on both sides of the right of way smouldered, fumed briefly, then burst into open flame.

By what miracle of endurance she managed to reach the summit, the girl never knew; but the smoke thinned there in the face of a night breeze and the main body of the fire was behind her.

Utterly spent, she flung herself headlong on the hoof-trampled dirt and tried to choke the smoke out of her lungs.

Her ears had long since lost their function, stunned by the hellish roar of the holocaust which was the Methow Valley. A drowsy ennui filled her brain. The dust felt soft to her cheek.

This is what death is like, she thought, and drew comfort from its approach, welcoming its release.

The nightmare faded and cleared, faded and cleared yet again; she had no way of knowing that hours had elapsed while she lay here.

The fire, slowed by thinning timber, had surrounded her now; its red rim was an unbroken fence about her.

Her imagination began playing her tricks. A face floated in the trembling heat waves which covered the roadbed, and she knew it should be the face of Bix Herrod, her fiance. But instead she conjured up the strained features of Del Troy, and it seemed to her that he was astride Alamo, the steeldust mustang she had come to regard as a part of her life in Conconully this summer,

"The driver—the stage—how far beyond are they, Shasta?"

It was Del Troy's voice, and it sounded real enough, not like a figment of her deranged imagination, here on the portal of eternity. Strong arms were encircling her waist, lifting her; but even then she could not comprehend that Troy was actually here beside her, flesh and bone, not a ghost out of the red hell that engulfed her world.

"He's dead. Coach off the road. There's only me."

She was in saddle when she opened her eyes again; Troy's arm, its sleeve charred and blackened by the fiery gauntlet he had run, was supporting her body. The Texan, his face masked now with a bandanna, was spurring the steelduster off the stage road, down a brush-choked gulch on the far side of the summit which the fire had not yet ravaged.

Deluging sparks jumped the divide and the walls of the defile they were following showed patches of livid flame in scores of places as Troy sent the mustang hammering down the rocky notch.

The roar of the forest fire was an ocean breaker curling over them, enveloping them, as Troy slid off the mustang's crupper and hauled Shasta out of saddle.

Vaguely through the smoke she saw the black maw of a prospect hole looming against the granite face of the gulch; and Troy was driving the steelduster ahead of them up the sprawl of weed-grown mine tailings as he carried her in his arms like a child, his spike-heeled cow-boots grinding into the fractured rock for footing.

Fifty feet back in the semi-darkness of the abandoned mine tunnel Troy laid the girl down, and she licked the moisture which slimed the mossy rocks with her tongue, greedily sucking the dank seepage through her lips.

The air was distilled ozone in this grotto. The silhouette of the horse stood guard like an ebony statue against the sullen red glare of the fire which had pursued them, like a disgruntled foe, to the very mouth of their sanctuary.

"We'll be safe here," he told her, soaking his bandanna in a stagnant pool and swabbing her singed eyebrows and cheeks.

XIX

THE SAWMILL which Troy had moved to the logging camp on the Sinlahhekin was now a cooling mass of twisted, melted scrap. Okanogan Jones' dynasty had evaporated from the face of the earth, a burnt offering on the altar of Indian gods whose minions had once roved over this hunting ground.

Del Troy returned to Conconully after spending a night with Okanogan Jones. He carried good news for Shasta Ives, the fantastic survival of her Dollar herd; and that errand alone made his return worth while from such a barren and sterile zone.

He expected to find Shasta at the Cariboo House; but as he tied up at the hotel rack he saw that the girl was conversing with her fiance on the vine-hung porch.

IT WAS the first time Troy had seen the Lazy H range baron since the hang-tree episode two months before, and in that interim Herrod had aged perceptibly. Gray streaked his temples. He had lost weight and his coat hung baggy on his frame.

The hatred which Herrod had once taken care to conceal when in the presence of his intended wife lay stark on the surface of the man now, plain to read in the hard strike of his eyes, in the lithic clasp of his mouth.

"You should be well satisfied with how things have turned out, Troy," Herrod greeted the Texan's arrival at the porch steps. "I lost twenty-five hundred head of prime beef because you kept me out of Flaming Canyon. I'll remind you of that one day."

Troy raised his hat to Shasta, ignoring Herrod. He wore no guns and he knew that fact relieved the girl.

"Bix has told you of your own good luck?"

The girl nodded, her mouth compressed, giving him the thought that he had interrupted a heated quarrel.

Troy shifted his gaze toward Herrod, wondering if the man's pride would yield enough to let him say some word of thanks for what Troy had done for Shasta Ives. But there was no gratitude printed on Herrod's face; only a consuming, festering

hate which he made no effort to conceal.

Troy said finally, "Had I known this fire was coming, that it would jump my lease, I would gladly have invited you to throw your herd there, Bix. We're on equal footing now, you and I. Neither of us owns a calf to slap an iron on. Both of us are range poor. I'm willing to shake hands on a new start."

Herrod laughed harshly, his face twitching.

"You can go to hell, Troy. I hold you directly responsible for what Lazy H has suffered. I will have an accounting for that."

Troy tongued his cheek, keeping his feelings tautly curbed.

"That's how it stands between us, then?"

"Do I have to draw a picture for you?" Herrod answered.

Troy shrugged. "'Sta bueno," he said. "I don't offer my hand to a man twice." He turned to Shasta. "If you need me, I'll be glad to help haze your beef to Seattle this fall, Shasta. I imagine you'll need every drover you can rustle up."

Shasta had remained silent during the strained meeting of the two men, and she made no answer to Troy's offer as the Texan mounted and crossed the Salmon Creek bridge on his way to the Loop-Loop Casino.

From the hotel porch she watched Roxanna Laranjo emerge from the deadfall to meet Troy; and her face hardened under the stress of secret emotions as she watched them vanish beyond the square facade of the building.

"You should have shaken hands with Troy, Bix," she murmured. "He showed himself the better man today."

Herrod flushed, hitching his chair closer to the girl. His hand reached out to where hers lay in her lap, his fingers toying with the square-cut diamond solitaire he had given her.

"As I was saying, Shasta," he said with a humility that was rare in him, "a man needs a woman most at a time like this, when his world has crashed around him. I'm going back to Yakima tomorrow. We could be married by the mission padre over at Pateros on the way home."

Shasta pulled herself back to reality,

staring at Herrod as if she had not heard him.

"I'm not going back to the home ranch, Bix. It holds too many unhappy memories for me since Dad died."

He lit a cigar to bridge the awkward silence which built up between them, and spoke around it, his voice brittle.

"I'm not asking you to go back to Dollar. I'm asking you to be my wife. My credit's good at the banks. Together, we can start out again, the two of us, and rebuild the Lazy H."

She got to her feet, picking up the straw sailor she had hung on the chair back and pinning it on her piled-up hair.

"Dollar is for sale, Bix. I'll accept a mortgage from you on your own terms. That's what you really wanted of me, wasn't it? Title to Dad's holdings in Natchez Valley?"

Fear was born in Herrod's eyes now, the fear of a man who saw the inevitable fruits of his perfidy ripening for the harvest. Doc Godette, an older and wiser man than he, had warned him against this eventual moment of rebellion from Shasta Ives.

He knew now that he had lost whatever grip he had held on her heart.

"I love you, Shasta. I want to remind you that you are betrothed to me. Dollar does not enter into that."

He had said the wrong thing. He had given her an opening. She was steeling herself to voice a decision that had been a long time in shaping up in her mind. He knew that too late to rectify what he had said.

With a slow, cool deliberation, as if weighing the consequences of what she was about to do, Shasta took the diamond from her finger and thrust it into his palm.

"We're finished, Bix. Whatever affection I knew for you has died, as completely as death can be. I don't know when it happened. I don't want to be melodramatic about it now. I've always been honest with you, Bix. I don't feel you have been the same toward me. I feel you have used me as a pawn to further your own ambitions."

She turned away.

HERROD stared at the ring, then flung it savagely away from him. It struck the street with a little geyser of dust and the facets of its blue-white stone glittered in the sunlight like a drop of distilled brilliance, attracting a cruising insect.

"Del Troy has come between us."

Herrod's flat statement stung her, brought her wheeling to face him. Her eyes were dry, her breathing controlled.

"Of course not. How dare you suggest such a thing?"

He said, "You can't deny he's made a play for you. Risking his hide to track down that stagecoach the day the fire broke."

"He saved my life. Perhaps I could love a man for that, if other things were equal. But if Del Troy has room in his heart for any woman, that woman is Roxanna Laranjo."

Herrod opened his mouth, then clamped it shut without saying whatever had come to his mind. He turned and stalked down the hotel steps and then, remembering something, wheeled back and from a pocket of his fustian coat took out a folded cardboard placard which he opened and thrust in front of her.

"Read this," he challenged. "It might make you change your mind about a few things."

She stared at the printed poster, the black and red type blurring through her tears. She recognized it as a duplicate of a sign she had seen tacked on the post office bulletin board over at Beagle's that morning.

PUBLIC LAND SALE

Having decided to dispose of my extensive holdings in the Twenty-Mile Strip as a result of the recent fire, all lands deeded in my name or that of my lawful spouse, Tenas Josephine Jones, will be placed on public sale at one dollar per acre on Friday, October first, at 9:00 a. m. All sales to be cash, subject to current taxes, existing liens and easements under the law.

First come, first served. Lands available at this sale may be located on

the plat of the Twenty-Mile Strip, available for public inspection in the archives of the Okanogan County Clerk of Records, Courthouse, Conconully, Washington.

Cyrus (Okanogan) Jones
Osoyoos Lake Ranch, Wash.

Shasta looked up, surprising a leer on Herrod's face.

"What does this have to do with my changing my mind about us, Bix? If you are inferring that my decision had anything to do with your loss of worldly goods—"

He waved her off.

"If you take it as an insult, I apologize. No. Jones' sale means that Flaming Canyon will go to the first bidder who can offer Jones thirty-five thousand in cash. I could raise twice that on my equity of the headquarters ranch from any bank in Yakima."

The printed poster fluttered from Shasta's hands.

"But Del Troy has a year's lease to run on Flaming Canyon. Jones couldn't sell that portion of the Strip."

Herrod's arching brows contradicted her.

"Couldn't he? Why not? When Troy's lease expires next year, a new owner would be under no obligation to renew his option under Washington law." His manner softened. "I'm offering you half interest in Flaming Canyon as a wedding gift, Shasta. Jones is out to salvage what he can from the wreckage of the Strip. When he was sitting tight in the saddle he feared and hated me. But he would sell Flaming Canyon to me now. Make no mistake of that."

Herrod turned on his heel and headed down the steps. A screen door banged as Shasta Ives retreated into the hotel—and it gave Herrod an opportunity to search in the dust for his diamond ring without losing face. He recovered the gem and pocketed it, smiling with secret satisfaction.

He started up the street.

He thought, "She'll come back to me on her knees," and he headed toward the Loop-Loop saloon to drink on his prediction.

IN THE PRIVACY OF A GAMBLING booth in the Loop-Loop Casino, Del Troy told Roxanna Laranjo of Okanogan Jones' decision to abdicate his Twenty-Mile Strip throne.

The news that Flaming Canyon was available for purchase had brought mingled hope and despair to Del Troy, for it had come several years too soon. He knew from a study of government surveys that thirty-five thousand dollars would be the value Jones placed on the slightly less than fifty-five sections which the canyon encompassed from the Keyhole to the headwaters of Glacier Creek. A large percentage of this acreage was prime grazing land, even tillable in case nesters ever invaded it with hoe and plow.

It was a golden opportunity; one which Troy had not expected to see open up while Jones was alive. But the fire had wiped out the squaw man's timber, and he had no interest in farming or cattle ranching.

"This October first sale may see hundreds of sodbusters bidding for Flaming Canyon," Troy said at the outset of their tête-à-tête. "Herrod's broke, so I'm not worrying about him. But you know and I know that my homestead and Crade's would never make a cattle spread. It looks as if it took an Act of God to lick me, Roxie." He shrugged resignedly and fumbled with his belt.

"No," the Spanish girl said. "You must buy what you can of the Canyon. If Senor Jones would agree to a long-term mortgage, you could own the entire Canyon, free of debt, inside of ten years. Beef will fatten there as nowhere else. And you have a market for all the beef you can raise, at the Indian agency."

He smiled bitterly behind curling cigarette smoke.

"I grant you that. But Jones is after cash. At a dollar an acre, I couldn't expect him to carry me."

"I have some dinero saved," she said earnestly. "The cards have been kind to me since I took up gambling. A tithe I have given to the Mother Church. But I have seven thousand pesos in the bank at

Del Rio. It is yours for as long as you need it without interest."

Her generosity stirred him more deeply than he cared to admit, but he had his own pride and his own convictions.

"Muchas gracias, Roxie. But I cannot do that."

They left the Loop-Loop when a bell signal from Beagle's Saloon informed Conconully that the mail was ready for distribution, and Roxie accompanied him over to the post office.

A decided change had come in the weather after the month-long dry spell. The fire which had gashed a deep wound in the backbone of the Cascades had pulled rain clouds in from the Pacific and the Olympic Peninsula, and awesome thunderheads were racking up in blue-black masses above the denuded summits west of Conconully.

Humidity weighted the air, making breathing difficult. A few warm drops of flat-swollen rain dimpled the dust, wept from the eaves of Conconully's buildings as Troy and Roxanna joined the group in front of the post office annex.

"We're in for a good soaking," Sheriff Gaddy commented, scanning the ugly cloud formations. "A pity this storm couldn't have come in time to put out the fire. But after the fire cometh the deluge, the Good Book says."

Troy, sorting through a week's accumulation of mail, turned to Roxanna and said, "I think I'll pull stakes for the homestead before this storm breaks. When the weather lets up I'll take a pasear over to Jones' Ranch and see if he'll do business for less than cash on the barrel head. I doubt if I have any luck."

Roxanna gripped his hand.

"Good luck, amigo. Remember what I told you—about my money. It is yours for the asking."

Troy left her then to get his horse and took the north road out of camp on his way to Flaming Canyon. Roxanna went back to her room for her afternoon nap. She covered her face with cloths soaked in skimmed milk, for her beauty was her chief stock in trade, her attractiveness ranking equally with her reputation for a

square game to draw gamblers to her table.

She was dozing off when a knock sounded at her door and she arose to admit Shasta Ives. The girl thrust an envelope into Roxanna's hand, and excitement made her features glow.

"I wrote to the Alaska steamship people over in Alaska," Shasta said, "and I wanted you to be the first to read their answer. I accomplished as much by writing as I would have done by a visit to Seattle."

Roxanna found a flint and wick and got a wall lamp going. Her jet eyes raced over the purple typewriting.

Dear Madam,

Your favor of the third inst. received and contents duly noted.

In reply wish to state that your proposal to ship live cattle to the Alaska market has been considered by our board of directors.

As a speculation, this firm is prepared to purchase up to 500 head of beef steers at three times the prevailing stockyard prices, or approximately sixty dollars per head delivered to our dock on Elliot Bay, Seattle, subject to customary inspection procedures of local abattoirs.

Trusting to receive an early and favorable reply, we beg to remain, Madam,

Yr Ob't Servants,

ALASKA MARITIME CORP.

YOU SEE, my dream was not so foolish after all, Roxie!" Shasta said exuberantly. "I still have enough of Dad's crew left to take my herd to Seattle. Del will serve as my trail boss. I must tell him this news. Just think, sixty dollars for a steer worth only twenty on the local market!"

Roxanna handed back the letter and pulled Shasta to her, embracing her affectionately, knowing how much this news meant to the girl.

"I'm afraid Del has already left for Flaming Canyon," she said. "And with a bad storm brewing, you will not want to ride after him. Come downstairs. Jodie, the bartender's little boy, will be glad to deliver your message to Del."

In a darkened booth at one end of the

Casino's barroom, Bix Herrod roused from a moody contemplation of the whiskey bottle which had been his companion throughout the afternoon, his alcohol-flushed face fixing in a scowl, watching with keen interest as he saw Shasta Ives and Roxanna Laranjo descend the stairs and confer with the bartender. Borrowing a tablet, Shasta scribbled a hasty note.

Herrod was not too drunk to miss overhearing Shasta's instructions to Jodie, the thirteen-year-old son of the Casino's barkeep. Shasta was sending an urgent message to Del Troy.

To Herrod's distraught brain, that paper could carry but one item of news. Shasta was letting Troy know she had broken their engagement.

A seething, irrational anger took possession of the Lazy H cattleman as he saw Shasta leave the Casino, on her way back to her quarters at the Cariboo House. He waited until Roxanna had returned upstairs to change her dress in preparation for the night's gambling, and then he emerged from the booth.

Incoming patrons buffeted Herrod as he approached the door but he elbowed them aside with a blind, miserable rage filling his veins. Rain was beginning to fall over the darkening street as Herrod lurched down the steps and headed toward the rear end of the Casino.

He arrived at the lean-to stable there just as Jodie, the bartender's son, was leading a saddled pinto into the open. With a savage gesture, Herrod snatched the folded sheet of paper from the pocket of the younker's linsey-woolsey shirt.

"Hey, Mister Herrod! I've got to ketch up with Del Troy and deliver that there paper—I'm getting two bucks for the ride."

Herrod cuffed Jodie aside, struck a match and scanned Shasta's brief message, his contorted face gradually relaxing as he absorbed its context.

Friend Del:

Please return to town at once. I have extremely important news and must see you immediately. I will wait for you at Room F in the Cariboo House.

Yours faithfully,

SHASTA.

Herrod folded the missive and thrust it back into Jodie's pocket. He fished in his pants and drew out a gold coin, flipping it to the wide-eyed youth.

"This eagle is for keeping your mouth shut about me reading this paper, sonny. Take it along to Del Troy as Miss Ives told you to, savvy?"

Jodie crow-hopped into the saddle, his freckled face beaming under the steady dash of the rain.

"Gee, Mister Herrod—thanks! You betcha. I won't talk."

Jealous demons pricked Herrod with their tridents as the Lazy H rancher returned to the main street and sought the shelter of Grainger's Gun-Shop porch, from which place he could see the lighted upper windows of the Cariboo House marking Shasta's private suite of rooms. Within the hour Del Troy would be keeping a tryst with the girl Herrod had planned to marry.

A form took shape beside Herrod and the scraggy paw of the town drunk, Ambie Pride, plucked his sleeve and extended a dirty palm.

"Got four bits to spare for a shot o' red-eye, Mister? My tongue's dryer'n a boot-sole an' I got a two mile walk home in the rain to where my woman's expectin' a baby any hour—"

Herrod flung the beggar from him with an oath. Then, his manner suddenly changing, he helped Pride out of the mud and pulled him back against the clapboard wall of the gunsmith's. From a wallet Herrod took out a twenty dollar bill. He tore it in two, handing Pride one of the halves.

"You get the other half of this frogskin if you deliver a message to Shasta Ives over at the Cariboo, Ambie."

Pride pocketed the torn bill and rubbed his bony hands together suppliantly.

"For a double sawbuck, Mister Herrod, I'd cut my old lady's throat. What's this message?"

From the window of her room on the second story front corner of the Loop-Loop Casino, Roxanna Laranjo was staring out through the rain-lashed night while she counted off fifty strokes of a brush through her shimmering black hair.

Intermittent flashes of lightning flicked

across the black heavens, throwing the battlemented store fronts of Conconully into sharp relief. The storm had driven men off the street, with the solitary exception of a man who crouched in the shelter of Grainger's shop across the street.

She was winding her hair into a glossy bun at her neck when a particularly spectacular burst of lightning showed her a second man abroad in the night. The drunkard, Ambie Pride, was sloshing through the mud to meet the man at the gunsmith's porch.

As the greenish glow of electricity tapered off, Roxanna recognized with a start that Pride was meeting Bix Herrod, and she mused on the strange reversal of fortune which should make the Lazy H tyrant stoop to consort with Conconully's prodigal.

THE GLARE of a passing wagon's oil lantern showed Roxanna something which piqued her interest. Herrod handed the town drunkard an object, which Pride thrust in his pocket. Then, after shaking Herrod's hand, the drunkard headed for Beagle's Saloon and vanished inside.

The next time a bolt of lightning ripped across the zenith, the gun-shop porch was empty. Through the tail of her eye she glimpsed Bix Herrod crossing the Salmon Creek footbridge in front of the Cariboo House.

Putting the finishing touches to her primping, Roxanna Laranjo blew out her lamp and made her way downstairs into the stifling fumes of lamp oil and tobacco and cheap whiskey which she must endure until the night's long chore was finished.

A hatred for all the tawdriness which surrounded her life came to the girl. She sized up the nude paintings over the gambling layouts, the unkempt miners lining the brass rail, the racked guns and moose heads and all the other accoutrements of the saloon, and a revulsion passed through her.

She felt the need for a stimulant and paused to order a glass of claret sent to her table. As she was leaving the bar a draft touched her cheek from the street doors and Shasta Ives stepped into the deadfall. The girl's cheeks were flushed

with excitement and she was wearing an oilskin slicker and a wide-brimmed Stetson which dripped rainwater.

"Shasta, you must not come in this—"

"I know, Roxie. But Ambie Pride just looked me up," Shasta said. "His Jennie's baby is coming at last. Doctor MacAdam is already on his way out to the Pride shanty. Ambie says the doctor wants me to help out."

A smile softened Roxanna's face. The pregnancy of Ambie Pride's wife had been followed by this town with increasing interest for weeks.

"Roxie, I won't be at the Cariboo when Del gets back to town," Shasta went on. "Would you give him this Seattle letter for me when you see him, and explain what happened? I left a note pinned to my door, telling him to see you."

Roxanna took the envelope and thrust it into the bosom of her Spanish gown.

"Por seguro, Shasta dear. And I hope Senora Pride has a comfortable time tonight. My prayers go with you."

Roxanna watched from the saloon window as Shasta went out to her waiting horse and vanished in the slanting downpour, headed for Ambie Pride's shanty two miles up the gulch.

A rare exhilaration was in Roxanna as she went back into the congested end of the barroom and took her accustomed seat at the blackjack table. Her arrival was being impatiently awaited by five or six of her steady customers, and in a moment she was exchanging chips for specie.

The voices of the gamblers touched her abstractly, her thoughts were far afield tonight. "I'll stand." "Hit me easy. A jack! That busts me."

Roxanna's mind was not on the game. Her eye ranged toward the bar, impatient because her wine had not been delivered by the white-jacketed floorman.

Then her eyes suddenly widened, drawing a droll remark from one of her players.

"You look like you're seein' a ghost, Roxie! Place your bet, Joe."

Roxanna was staring off across the smoke-shrouded room to where a group of miners were about to open a rondo-coolo game. With them was the Conconully doctor, Duncan MacAdam, stripped to his

shirt sleeves and obviously settling down for a long play.

A cold premonition touched the girl as she dropped her deck of cards and stood up.

"I'll drop out this round, Senores—"

She crossed over to Dr. MacAdam's table.

"Senor Doctor! Are you not delivering Jennie Pride's baby tonight?"

A round of laughter circled the table.

"Ambie's been bragging again, has he?" laughed the medico. "No, Roxie. Take my professional oath on it, Jennie's time is still a week off. I will be on hand when the stork makes his appearance, you can bank on that."

A cold constriction went through Roxanna Laranjo as she turned back to her table. Sinister events were shaping up behind the storm tonight.

"Gentlemen," she apologized to her players, "this game is closed. I—I feel ill. I must cash in your chips and retire to my room."

XXI

IN THE PRIVACY OF HER ROOM, Roxanna Laranjo removed her low cut scarlet gown, and donned the austere black silk which she reserved for confessionals and holy communion.

A steely insouciance had claimed her. She moved like a puppet; like a sleeper in the coils of a nightmare. Intuition told her she had a tryst with destiny tonight; and the mood sent her to her dresser where she kept her rosary, and her lips moved as she counted the beads for a prayerful moment.

From a camelback trunk under her bed, Roxanna removed a rich mantilla of black lace with the scent of cedar oil on it. She draped the heirloom over her head and shoulders, and from the trunk she took a single-shot .41 derringer.

Thrusting the tiny weapon under her sash, Roxanna stepped out into the corridor and left the building by the outdoor stairs which served as a fire escape. No one saw the black-shrouded shape move through the dank gloom of the storm and cross the Salmon Creek bridge. Bone-dry

this morning, the shallow gravelly bed of the stream was alive with the secretive whisperings of rising waters now. She put the bridge behind her and slogged through ankle-deep mire toward the looming shape of the Cariboo House.

Avoiding the lobby entrance, Roxanna climbed the outside stairs and entered the black gut of the hotel's upper hallway. She paused a moment there, the gruff roll of thunder shaking the building, rain pounding the shingles overhead like flung pebbles.

Her hand sought the crucifix at her throat and her finger tips drew strength from the sacred talisman of her faith. She knew a moment's mortal fear, and rejected it. The fatalism of her race was a shield and a sustaining force for what lay ahead. Her damp dress clung with an adhesive sheen to the curves of her body, as she moved down the carpeted hall, wet skirts swishing.

A crack of lamplight spread fanwise under the door marked F. She saw the white rectangle of the note Shasta had pinned there for Del Troy; and she concluded that the girl, in her haste to answer Ambie Pride's call for help, had left the lamp burning.

The door was unlocked and Roxanna stepped inside, her face a marble oval behind the dripping lace veil. She closed the door behind her with a muddy heel.

This was Shasta's living room, pine-walled and austere in the mode of the frontier, furnished with ornate Victorian pieces. A pink hobnail lamp glowed under its green shade atop a writing desk; chintz curtains closed off a door leading into Shasta's bedroom off to the right.

A faint odor of whiskey and wet wool clung to the room, its thin effluvium telling Roxanna what she wanted to know.

Roxanna draped her mantilla about her, its dripping lace riding her right hand as it sought out the tiny curved handle of the derringer under her sash.

Her black eyes fixed on the bedroom doorway as she spoke.

"Come out of there, Bix."

Silence greeted her, to be broken by an ear-numbing clap of thunder reverberating like a giant's tympani over the storm-pun-

ished valley. A windowpane rattled in the bedroom. The gale moaned under a vibrating shingle somewhere on the hotel's eaves.

She waited, knowing she could not be wrong. Suddenly the chintz curtains moved, parted by a hand that held a Colt revolver. Bix Herrod stepped out of the bedroom, his eyes squinted into the lamp-light, rain's recent dampness sparkling on his coat and leaking from the brim of his Keevil hat.

Drink and hate and suspense had twisted the man's face into a satanic grimace.

"By God, Roxie, you've followed me too far this time."

He seated himself on a horsehair divan facing the girl, balancing the .45 barrel across one knee. Roxanna's pale lips moved behind her veil.

"You paid Ambie Pride to get Shasta out of town on a pretext. You know Del Troy is due to come here. You're waiting to murder him."

Herrod's teeth glittered under his shadowing mustache. He growled, "Shasta tossed me over for that Texan today. Gave back my ring. If I can't have her, I'll make damned sure Troy doesn't either."

Roxanna had not known of this development, for Shasta's friendship had not reached that intimate a stage, but the news transformed the harsh planes of Roxanna's face, easing the tension there, flowing through her like cool air relieving a long fever.

Herrod spoke again, rubbing his stubbly jaw with a knuckle, his other hand hefting the Colt.

"I'm going to kill you, Roxie. I've known I'd have to, ever since you turned up in Conconully. By God, you're—"

Herrod broke off, stiffening as he saw the glitter of a derringer muzzle behind the gossamer webbing of her mantilla.

"I won't let you ruin Shasta's life as you crucified me, Bix." She closed her eyes. "Mother of Jesus, forgive me—"

SHE SHOT HIM in the chest without aiming the derringer. The .41 slug caught Herrod in the act of springing to his feet and the drilling shock of it unhooked his knees, dropped him face for-

ward, his own gun skidding across the rug in front of him.

He pulled himself up on all fours, like a sprinter crouched to start a race. Great ruby drops of blood leaked from his vest and trickled down his looping watch chain, the fat beads swelling to fall free, the carpet's pile drinking them up.

Herrod was staring at Roxanna, his lips peeled off his teeth, a vast surprise in him.

"You she-lobo. You greaser witch—"

Gunpowder had ignited Roxanna's veil, the lace glowing red as the smoulder spread. Its smoke filtered across her eyes as she turned and reached for the door-knob.

Herrod's gun was within reach on the floor. With an effort that drained the color from his face, he scooped up the .45 and fought its dead weight until he had Roxanna's shapely back under his sunsights.

The heavy .45 roared and bucked against the crotch of Herrod's thumb. Through founting gunsmoke he saw Roxanna's shoulders jerk violently against her neck as the bullet smashed her high on the spine, lifting her on her toes.

The shock drove her forward against the door. One splayed hand sought the varnished casing, clutched it. She pressed her cheek against the wall for support, and then her head slid down the wall in slow jerks, her body twisting half around as she slumped. When she came to rest her head was turned toward him. Her lovely eyes held no malice and no regrets as their brilliance slowly faded . . .

For a long moment Herrod stared at the woman he had killed, and there was no remorse in him, only a swelling sense of horror as he felt his own life spilling out.

Clutching the arm of the divan, Herrod pulled himself to his feet, listening to the roar of the storm which had covered the exchange of shots. He holstered his gun, instinct telling him it must not be left behind to betray his presence here to those who would discover this tragedy.

Doubled over with the cramp of his wound, Herrod pressed both palms over the welling blood which soaked his vest and made his way back into Shasta's bedroom.

Thunder and lightning played over the

invisible hills above and around Conconully as Bix Herrod got a window sash open and straddled the sill. He half-fell, half-jumped to the flat slope of the hotel's back porch. Invisible down there was the ladder he had used to gain access to Shasta's rooms.

He skidded on the wet shingles and went over the eaves, the shock of his ten-foot drop cushioned by a mound of stoyewood. Hitting the mud, the wounded cattleman writhed for a moment in his agony, then searched the slanting downpour for the misty blur of lamplight marking the uphill cabin where he and Doc Godette were living.

Godette had saved his life once before, in Texas. He was the only man in the world who could help Bix Herrod now.

XXII

THE STORM WAS ROARING toward its climax as Del Troy and young Jodie headed back toward Conconully. Jodie had overtaken the Texan within a mile of his goal at Flaming Canyon.

What news Shasta Ives had for him, Troy could not guess. But the urgency of her short message was enough to keep his steelduster at a steady gallop, giving the horse its head through the Stygian gloom.

They reached the canyon of Salmon Creek where the road bent down-gulch toward the county seat, to find a shallow trickle of water instead of the gushing run-off which the storm should have brought from the burned-off slopes at its headwaters.

"The storm's tapering off, Mister Troy!" Jodie piped up in his childish treble. "An hour ago when I crossed, the crick was withers deep to my paint hoss."

On the far bank, Troy reined up. The rain hammered his oilskins like pelting buckshot. Up-canyon he could hear a thunderous churning of angry waters, the wrench and grind of moving boulders, the splintering crunch of logs being snapped like toothpicks.

"No," Troy shouted to the bartender's kid. "This is bad. There's a log-jam up at the rapids most likely. If it had busted loose when we were crossing, you and I

would have been drowned like rats."

Instead of reining south toward Conconully, Troy pushed up-canyon to investigate, Jodie following him with frightened wonder. When they reached the crest of the rise, a dazzling lightning burst blinded them momentarily and the acrid taste of raw ozone hit their nostrils. The lightning discharge had struck a snag dangerously close by.

The pinched-off glare revealed a scene of pure menace to Troy. The rock-ribbed gulch was brimming with congested waters, the creek's run-off temporarily blocked by the tons of boulders and uprooted trees which had jammed the narrow aperture of the rapids. When that backed-up lake let go—

Troy jerked the steelduster around and raked his spurs, flinging a desperate shout at Jodie.

"Flash flood coming up, Jodie. We've got to warn the folks in town. When that log dam gives way Conconully is li'ble to be wiped out—"

Jodie, bent low over his pinto, sobbed his terror as he hammered after Del Troy. They passed the looming shafthouse of the Silver King and skirted its tailings, galloped under the chute scaffolding which crossed the road and reached the outskirts of the mining camp at a gallop.

In front of the community firehouse alongside Slankard & Company's trading post, Troy flung himself from stirrups and leaped to throw his weight on the pleated bullhide rope which connected with the clapper of the five-hundred-pound bronze bell in the cupola.

The deafening tintinnabulation of the bell gonged out over the drowned valley, rousing metallic echoes which the steady drumbeat of rain could not obliterate.

Jodie's face was a pale oval in the murk as Troy grabbed the boy, pulling him from his horse.

"You take the far side of the street, boy. Warn folks in Beagle's Saloon and Slankard's place and on to the courthouse. Tell 'em to get to higher ground. I'll cover the other side."

The clangor of the firebell, rung only in times of desperate emergency, had already brought a rush of men from the doors of

saloons and honkytonks along Conconully's main street.

They took up the shout of "Flood! Flood!" and miners sprinted for their private cabins to warn sleeping partners of impending disaster.

Providentially, a rift came in the scudding storm clouds and the wan rays of a sickle moon illumined the town, showed Del Troy the rush of humanity heading for the higher slopes above Salmon Creek.

The Loop-Loop Casino was already emptied by the time Troy drove his horse up the porch steps. He crossed on to Elliot's Hotel and shouted his warning to the crowd congregated under its awning, and left pandemonium in his wake as he raced over the Salmon Creek bridge toward the Cariboo House.

The lobby was already deserted when he got there. Upset tables revealed where a group of late diners had quit the hostelry, running for their lives. The lights burning in Shasta Ives' suite upstairs sent Troy racing up the steps.

The door of room F was partially open, and lamplight revealed a note pinned to the outside panels:

Del: Have been called to Ambie Pride's for midwife duty. Roxanna will tell you why I called you back to town.

SHASTA.

SHASTA, then, was safe. Pride's shanty was well above the threat of the flash flood. In the act of turning away from the door, Troy's eye was arrested by a seeping puddle of crimson which was pooled under the crack of the door.

He shoved it open, and stood transfixed by what he saw.

Roxanna Laranjo sat against the door-jamb, head on chest. The back of her rain-soaked dress was gorged with congealing blood.

Even as he lifted her, Troy knew that this woman of mystery, his friend and confidante across a span of nearly fifteen years, was beyond his help.

He carried his limp burden into the next room and laid her gently on the candle-wick spread of Shasta's four-poster bed.

His eye, following a crimson trail across the rug, was led to the open window and the fresh bloodstains which blotched the sill.

Murder had been done in Shasta Ives' room tonight. Not until Troy looked again at Roxanna's placid face, chalk-white in the lamplight shafting through the doorway, did he see the single-shot derringer which the girl clutched in stiffening fingers.

The dead must wait. Troy had a duty to the townfolk who lived further down the valley. In the act of turning away from the still form on the bed, he remembered something. He bent quickly and snapped the fragile necklace which girdled Roxanna's neck.

He slipped the gold wedding ring into his own pocket, recalling the premonitory words Roxanna had once uttered, her wish that he should have that ring when she was gone. The crucifix he placed in her dead hand, after gently removing the derringer.

"Hasta luego, dear one," he whispered, bending to kiss Roxanna's waxen brow. "I'll be back, querida. Sleep sweet—"

He pocketed the derringer as he quit the room, and went on downstairs only after making sure that no guests were asleep in the other hotel rooms.

Further down the valley, at the south edge of Conconully, lights glowed in homes which would be menaced by the flood when it broke. Troy had barely hit the saddle when a cataclysmic roar of sound burst on his ears and, reining about, he beheld the most soul-sickening spectacle of his life.

With a banshee wail, a solid wall of water rushed down the canyon above Conconully, striking the flats and spreading in a fifteen-foot wall of irresistible doom.

A cloudburst in the upper mountains and intervening log jams along the course of the creek had backed up the lethal waters until, giving way under their cumulative pressure, the flash flood had gathered its full strength.

To save his own life, Troy sent his steelduster rocketing up the pine-clad slope behind the Cariboo House. From that vantage point he saw the tidal wave of debris-littered water strike the firehouse and topple its forty foot tower. The bell gave

out one clanging knell before it was engulfed and shattered.

The log stockade of Slankard's trading post toppled like cardboard and the corals and barn and warehouse were wiped out. The Loop-Loop Casino, its windows ablaze, jolted crazily from its foundations and then collapsed askew like a house of cards.

Geysering fountains of spray dashed skyward from the stone barrier of the Silver Exchange Bank, dividing the waters enough to spare Beagle's Saloon the full brunt of their might. Grainger's gun shop floated free of its foundation and whirled past the spot where Troy had gained sanctuary above high-water mark.

Trees uprooted like weeds. Rolling boulders of incalculable mass were driven before the foaming waters like boys' marbles. The full crest of the sprawling flood hit the Cariboo House, caving its flimsy wooden walls, bringing the long roof down like a canopy which floated off like some grotesque ark.

"God bless you, Roxanna."

The flood swept on down the valley. Elliot's Hotel rode the waters briefly, then disappeared. The roof of the stone jail stood like a rock in the face of the flood, debris piling up before its barrier.

In the space of two minutes the waters lessened, their force spent on the open valley, and where Conconully had stood was now a draining, gurgling bowl of mud and rocks and debris, the evidence of human tenure expunged as if by the stroke of a giant broom.

The flash flood was over, the storm re-treating into the Cascades. The sucking waters of Salmon Creek sang the swan song of a town that in the space of a hundred seconds had been swept into limbo. Conconully was no more. Perhaps it would never come to life again.

XXIII

THE MORROWING SUN FOUND the populace of Conconully wandering dazedly over denuded mudflats and mounds of dripping wreckage, searching for vanished possessions, for some scrap of debris they could identify as having

marked the site of the vanished boom camp.

Beagle's Saloon loomed gaunt and alone in an area scoured to the bedrock by the passage of the waters. Its barroom was jammed with splintered logs and boulders and flotsam from upcreek mines. By some fantastic caprice of the flood, its costly twenty foot backbar mirror had not suffered so much as a single fracture, its polished prisms reflecting the ceiling from its place on the caved-in wall.

Del Troy, more mobile than the others because he was on horseback, cruised the length of the gutted valley again and yet again in search of some trace of Roxanna Laranjo's body. But the girl's remains were to rest forever unfound, somewhere under the deep silt of the valley floor.

The rocky hillslopes round about would protect her grave through millenniums of time.

Miraculously, Conconully had no other loss of life to mourn as an aftermath of the calamity which had rubbed the county seat and the homes of half a thousand people off the map. This flood would be the date from which future events would be measured; its uneasy future was condemned to oblivion, even as Steen Slankard had predicted in June.

With the exception of Beagle's Saloon, there was little evidence that a thriving town had stood here yesterday. The stone vaults of the Silver Exchange Bank and a lodge hall remained intact, stark under the sunlight like tombstones needing only epitaphs to become permanent reminders of the camp's existence.

Wherever Del Troy rode, stories of heroism and comedy and pathos reached him. Of how Steen Slankard had risked his life to free the animals trapped in his rock-walled barn; how aging Sheriff Gaddy had unlocked his jail and dragged two drunken inmates to safety, the waters lashing armpit high before he got his charges to the higher ground of the courthouse square.

Troy found Steen Slankard excavating his half-buried safe two hundred yards from the site of his trading post. The thousand-pound vault had been carried like a chip by the rush of waters, and its re-

covery was little short of a miracle.

But for a man who had lost everything but the clothes on his back, Slankard appeared to be taking his misfortune philosophically.

"I was covered by insurance," he explained to the Texan, as he watched seepage fill the hole where his safe was buried. "Good thing, so far as I was concerned. I aimed to sell out and go back to my lumber mills on the Sound, anyhow."

Troy managed a grin, remembering something Slankard had told him on the eve of the forest fire.

"Didn't you say you'd bought a couple of steamships, Steen? You could have launched 'em in Conconully last night."

Slankard wiped his muddy hands on his beard and fished in a pocket of his butter-nut jumper, handing Troy a clipping from a recent Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*. It carried a photograph of two deep-sea freighters, tied up at the docks of South Bend:

"Six-thousand tonners," Slankard explained. "The *Nahcotta* and the *Willapa*. Bought 'em sight unseen when a lumber outfit went into receivership down on Shoalwater Bay."

Del Troy returned the clipping with a laugh.

"You'd buy a herd of elephants if you could get 'em at a bargain, you old Shyllock," he jibed. "What'll you do with a couple of steamships?"

Slankard leaned on his shovel and spat on the ground.

"Aim to cut me a slice of the money that's coming out of Alaska," he said shrewdly. "I've got deep-water docks over on Whatcom Bay. They say lumber fetches its weight in gold dust up at Juneau and Ketchikan. From now on I'll do my own shipping, instead of paying another man half my profits in freight."

Troy moved off, spotting Sheriff Irv Gaddy poking around the puddled rockpile which had been the county jail. From the moment of his discovery of Roxanna's dead body in the Cariboo House, he had decided to confide in no one but the lawyer.

Drawing Gaddy out of earshot of a group of men who were grubbing for treasure at the site of the Loop-Loop Ca-

sino, Troy recounted his gruesome discovery.

"She'd been shot in the back, sheriff," Troy concluded. He drew Roxanna's deringer from his pocket and ejected the fired cartridge from it. "She had this in her hand. I saw blood on the carpet of Shasta's bedroom, leading toward the window sill. Whoever she shot it out with made a getaway just before the flood hit, I figger. Her body was still warm."

GADDY fingered the star on his suspender strap, shock graven deep on his craggy face. The fact that Roxanna Laranjo was missing was already common knowledge in the town, but she was believed to have been asleep in her room over the Loop-Loop when the Casino was wrecked by the flood.

"I got a message from Shasta, asking me to visit her in the room where Roxanna was killed," he told the sheriff. "I'm trying to figure this thing out. Do you suppose—"

The sheriff cut in, finishing Troy's thought, "You're wondering if Bix Herrod is mixed up in this? I ain't seen that range hog around this morning. Might be we ought to mosey up to Godette's cabin and see if Herrod's accounted for, son."

They waded the brimming width of Salmon Creek and passed the flooded basement of the Cariboo House. The tarpaper shanty which Doc Godette and Bix Harrod had rented after their return from the burned-out cow camp on the Strip was perched on a shelf directly above.

Doc Godette was pumping a bucket of water in front of the shanty when Troy and the sheriff walked up the path. The oldster had his sleeves rolled back, his arms scrubbed septicly clean.

"Mornin', gents," the old war dog greeted them. "Quite a calamity last night. I'm lucky I didn't appropriate an empty house on the flats."

The sheriff stared past Godette, into the darkened interior of the cabin. A man lay on the bunk there, the gleam of torn cloths which bandaged his naked midriff visible from where Gaddy was standing.

"Treating a patient this mornin', Doc?" Godette finished pumping and moved as

if to block their view of the cabin door.

"Yeah. Bix Herrod. He was down at the Loop-Loop when the firebell started ringin' last night. A little tipsy, he was, and Herrod can't amble very rapid when he's in his cups. The flood caught him crossin' the bridge and bashed him up considerable. I found him down the hill this mornin', half drowned."

Acting on a sudden hunch, Del Troy shoved past Godette and strode into the shack, halting beside Herrod's bunk. The Lazy H rancher was unconscious. The room was thick with chloroform odors and Godette's surgical instruments were laid out on a split-pole table by the bed, glittering in neat array on a boiled towel.

"You sure Herrod ain't suffering from a gunshot wound, Doc?"

Godette bent a quick stare at Troy as he entered the room, the Conconully sheriff at his heels.

"An unethical question to ask a medical man, amigo."

Troy laughed harshly. "You speak of ethics?"

Godette coughed. "Touche, my friend. No. I assure you I am treating Bix for lacerations and internal injuries sustained in last night's flood. It's too early to tell if he'll rally out of it. I got him under opiates now."

Troy's glance returned to the line-up of scalpels and suture needles, hemostats and forceps on Godette's table. They were the tools a surgeon might employ in probing for a bullet; even a layman could ascertain that.

"Come on, sheriff," Troy said abruptly. "At least we know Herrod didn't drown."

Godette stared after them as the two men headed off down the slope toward the scene of devastation.

"I'd bet my bottom dollar Doc fished Roxanna's bullet out of Bix's hide," Troy muttered. "But that's something we'll never be able to prove."

As they crossed the creek, Shasta Ives approached them on horseback. The girl's face was white and gaunt from a sleepless night.

"A boy or a girl at Ambie's Shasta?" Troy greeted her, purposely stalling off any reference to the tragedy which had

descended on Conconully during her absence.

Shasta's eyes clouded as she drew rein alongside them.

"That was a strange thing, Del," she said. "Mrs. Pride isn't expecting her baby for another week at least."

"How," demanded the sheriff, "did you happen to go over to Pride's last night?"

"Ambie came to the Cariboo House to get me, saying Doctor MacAdam had already left and that Jennie needed my help. But it was a false alarm, an outright lie on Ambie's part. The doctor wasn't even there."

Troy and the sheriff exchanged glances. It was obvious that Ambie Pride had maneuvered to get Shasta out of town for some obscure reason.

"We'll ask Ambie why he pulled off that hoax, Miss Ives," the sheriff said. "I got a hunch he was bribed to do it."

Shasta pressed a palm over her eyes.

"I've already seen Ambie. He came home this morning and told us about the flood. The drunken scoundrel can't even remember talking to me last night, he says."

Del Troy fingered his gun butt, his thoughts far away.

"Del, you haven't asked me why I sent for you," she said. "I wanted to tell you that Bix Herrod plans to sell out his Lazy H down in Yakima and buy Flaming Canyon from Okanogan Jones. You've heard the Strip is to go on public sale October first?"

Troy nodded, and gestured off toward Godette's cabin.

"I know, Shasta, I've got bad news for you. Your fiance was hurt last night. Caught in the flood when it washed out the Salmon Creek bridge. Godette's got him up at his cabin yonder."

Shasta's face altered, but her reply did not strike the men as that of a grief-stricken bride-to-be.

"At least he won't be leaving for Yakima to sell his ranch today then." She fixed her eyes on Troy, her thoughts running ahead to other things. "Del, I want to talk to you about selling my cattle to a Seattle shipping company for sale in Alaska. I got a letter offering me sixty dollars a head, after you left town yesterday. That's one

reason I sent for you. Roxanna Laranjo has the letter I wanted her to show you. As soon as I find her—”

THE AVERTED FACES of the two men told Shasta that something was amiss.

“Roxie drowned last night, ma’am,” the sheriff said gently. “Del and I been scouting for her body this mornin’. She was the only victim of the flood, so far as we know.”

Shasta’s cheeks turned ashen, and she swayed slightly in the saddle as she absorbed the tragic news.

“The poor, poor thing. I loved her like a sister.” She pulled herself erect and glanced off in the direction of Doc Godette’s cabin. “I’ll ride over and see how Bix is getting along. Let me know if you— if you locate Roxanna, Del.”

After she had gone, Troy turned to the sheriff.

“It all fits, sheriff. Ambie Pride tricked Shasta into leaving the hotel. Herrod was probably back of that deal. Roxie went to see Shasta for some reason or other and found Herrod waiting there to kill me. It fits. It’s got to be that way.”

Gaddy swore softly under his breath.

“Sure. And we’ll never be able to pin it on Herrod.” He spat angrily. “I hope the buzzard doesn’t pull through. Shasta will be better off if he dies.”

An hour later, returning from a third fruitless quest down the valley for some trace of Roxanna’s body, Troy was hailed from the county courthouse by Dazzy Kline, the recorder. Riding up to meet him, Troy waited.

“Is it a foregone conclusion that Miss Laranjo is lost?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Then alight and come into my office, Troy. Seeing as how Roxie is officially dead, I’ve got something she wanted me to give you—in case anything happened to her.”

Scowling puzzledly, Troy dismounted and entered the courthouse. Dazzy Kline entered his archives vault and brought out a brown envelope heavy with red seals.

“She left this in my keeping the day after you got back from the fire with

Shasta Ives,” the recorder said. “Must be her last will an’ testament, you reckon?”

Some instinct for privacy sent Troy outdoors, away from Dazzy Kline’s inquisitive presence, before he broke open the seals. A document fell out which he saw to be the deed to Keyhole Pass. It was assigned to Del Troy as her beneficiary, and was accompanied by a covering letter, and a bank passbook showing a \$7500 balance.

Tears misted Troy’s eyes as he read the message, couched in Roxanna’s spidery, feminine hand.

Del, Queride:

It will perhaps come as a shock to you when I tell you that I have been Bix Herrod’s wife for twelve years. We were married at the mission chapel in Villa Acuna in the days when I was a fandango dancer in Del Rio and Bix was running cattle across the Rio Grande.

When the Rangers forced Bix to come West he left me behind, Del. I followed him to Yakima and not until I learned of his engagement to Shasta Ives did I give up hope of winning back his love.

I came to Conconully to hide myself; I could not bring myself to warn Shasta that she would be entering a bigamous marriage.

Perhaps I shall tell Shasta my secret, one day; I do not know. I do not think Bix loves her; he is incapable of loving any woman.

I will not be alive when you read this. If there should be any element of mystery connected with my death or disappearance, use this information as you see fit.

I think Shasta Ives’ heart belongs to you, Del. A woman can tell these things. Think well of me always; I have cherished your friendship.

Vaya con Dios,

ROXIE.

P. S. This money is yours, Del. I have no kinfolks.

Del Troy folded the letter and pocketed it. His eyes lifted to the everlasting hills

which would forever be the martyred girl's monument, and his mind dwelt at poignant length on her half-revealed saga, knowing that her letter had touched only on the edges of her tragedy.

Roxanna's secret was his legacy, to be kept inviolate from the world, even from Sheriff Gaddy. His glance strayed across the devastated valley and rested briefly on the door of Godette's cabin. Perhaps, at the end, Roxanna had achieved retribution for all she had suffered in her brief span of life.

XXIV

CONCONULLY, WITH A FAITH in its continued prosperity as a silver camp, was too engrossed in reconstructing the ruined settlement before the advent of winter to pay any attention to the feverish activity which was transpiring in Flaming Canyon during the days which followed.

Bix Herrod's first intimation that Shasta Ives was making a cattle drive a month ahead of schedule came when the Lazy H rancher, recuperating from his bullet wound in Doc Godette's cabin overlooking the flats, saw the long russet column of Dollar beef moving up the main street, heading west into the mountains.

Unable to leave his bed until his damaged tissues were beyond the danger of internal hemorrhage, Herrod dispatched Doc Godette to investigate. When the oldster returned, he had disturbing news.

"Seems Dollar is headin' acrost Cascade Pass to saltwater, Bix. She's made some kind of a deal with Steen Slankard to ship her beef to Alaska. Accordin' to the drovers, she stands to collect a hundred bucks a head."

Herrod made some rapid computations in his head.

"Fifty thousand dollars," he mused. "Doc, you can see what she's aiming at. Del Troy's talked her into buying Flaming Canyon when Okanogan Jones holds his public sale the first of the month."

Godette, easing a coughing attack with whiskey, said nothing.

"Doc, we can copper Troy's bet. You're saddling up today and returning to Yakima. You'll sell out Lazy H at ten cents on the

dollar if you have to. I want you back here with at least forty thousand in specie by October first."

Godette eyed his boss narrowly.

"And leave you here to change your dressings and cook your own grub? The only thing you'd need money for would be a coffin."

Herrod swung his feet out of the blankets and stood up. His knees wobbled and he sat down again, cursing his impotence.

"Doc MacAdam can take care of me till you get back. You can close the deal and get back in two weeks."

Godette grunted. "And let the sheriff find out you've got a bullet hole in your hide? Uh-uh."

Herrod stared out the door at the dust of the trail herd smoking the valley.

"I'll tell MacAdam the flood pushed me into a spike and punctured my belly. Saddle and ride, Doc. We can't waste a day."

Godette packed his corn cob and got the pipe going. He wore a dubious scowl as he fingered the Yankee saber scar on his cheek.

"Dead sure you know what you're doing? You've spent years building up a spread down there. Don't tear it down without giving it due thought, son."

Herrod cursed until the exertion left him spent and gasping.

"Hell's fire! Flaming Canyon is good the year 'round. No droughts to worry about—this summer proved that. I would never have settled in Yakima if I'd known about the Okanogan."

They stayed there and argued for a long time, but in the end Herrod got his fierce, intemperate way, as he always did. Doc really didn't care any more. He was following a pattern of obedience set up for many years now, but still he felt a small tinge of rebellion at moments like this. Not enough to act upon, though.

Doc Godette rode out of Conconully that afternoon, Yakima bound with Herrod's power-of-attorney in his pocket. His patient owed his life to the fact that Roxanna Laranjo's .41 slug had hit a rib and been deflected away from lung tip and liver. With ordinary precautions, Godette knew that Bix Herrod would make a full

recovery, thanks to his own surgical genius the night of the flood.

Shasta Ives remained in Conconully, living as a guest at the Ambie Pride home. A week later an incoming stage brought word from Del Troy that the Dollar herd had safely traversed the burn between Twisp and the upper Methow Valley, and was pushing westward through the high gap of Cascade Pass, the first cattle herd in the history of the state to cover that route.

THAT NIGHT, September twenty-eighth, Del Troy headed into the Cascades astride his steeldust mustang, figuring that by pushing Alamo to the limit of his endurance he could reach Conconully by early morning of October first. Jones had advertised his sale to start at nine a.m.

He carried with him a bank draft for thirty-five thousand dollars, drawn to Okanogan Jones to facilitate their negotiations; together with Steen Slankard's personal check for the remaining fifteen thousand, payable to Shasta Ives.

At the very hour of his departure from Slankard's mills, an incoming stage brought a letter from Shasta Ives.

Doc Godette got back to Conconully today. I'm positive he turned over the Yakima money to Bix. Please hurry, darling! We can't lose Flaming Canyon at the eleventh hour.

Your own devoted,

SHASTA.

P. S. Great news! It's twins at the Ambie ride household; a six-pound boy named Reid and a seven-pound girl named Lucy. Ambie is so dismayed he's climbed aboard the water-wagon.

Troy made a five-hour stop his first night at a timber cruiser's camp on the Skagit. Dawn of the twenty-ninth found him in saddle and when sunset put his elongated shadow down the old Indian trace he was using as a short-cut, he was midway between Cascade and Twisp Passes, on the lofty rooftop of the mountain range.

He bolted a supper at a telegraph repair crew camp in the shadow of Reynolds Peak, with the serpentine length of Lake Chelan catching the moon-glades off to the south; and the cool hours of September's last day paced him down the Twisp wagon road into the burnt-out wilderness of the Methow.

He pushed the steelduster until midnight, and made a dry camp near the spot where the charred wreckage of Guff Latchskin's stagecoach lay rusting on the mountain side. Exhaustion claimed both horse and rider, and October's first dawn was in their eyes when they hit the home stretch toward Conconully, twenty miles away across the lowering ridges.

Alamo was maintaining a steady lope down the snag-bordered grade, into the green country untouched by the August holocaust, when the morning hush was breached by the report of a gunshot.

The bullet's close passage was an air-whip on Troy's earlobe, and instinct sent him diving from saddle into a fernbrake hedge bordering the road, his Colt .45 palmed before he hit the ground.

Every nerve of his body was keyed to a wire-taut pitch as he cuffed off his Stetson and burrowed deeper into the underbrush. A spiral of gunsmoke located his ambusher as lurking in the concealment of an eroded heap of towering glacial boulders, on the opposite side of the road and down the grade a few yards.

Troy waited, gun cocked, hoping against hope that the bushwhacker would not shoot his mustang, halted in the open road. He was primed to shoot the instant his attacker ventured out of the rock nest to investigate.

Suddenly there came to Troy's ears the muffled sounds of a raucous, spongy cough, the hard spasms of a consumptive wracking his lungs.

Troy's mouth twisted in a grin of recognition as he gained the shelter of a spruce bole to get the sun's strike out of his eyes. He thumbed a shot toward the boulders and called out in a bantering voice, "Show yourself, Doc."

The coughing finally subsided, to be followed by a weighty silence. Somewhere far off a woodpecker drilled at a dead snag,

the wind was a souging melody through the conifers overhead.

"Reckon I'll hang and rattle, Troy," a voice reached him from the boulder pile. "It's cool and safe in here."

Time was running out fast for the Texan. Okanogan Jones was due in Conconully this morning, to open his land sale. Minutes were precious, yet Troy knew it would be suicidal to come into the open and attempt running Godette's careful ambushade.

A curl of tobacco smoke from the medico's ubiquitous corncob drifted up from a cleft between two rocky pinnacles, betraying Godette's approximate location. Troy aimed at the sloping brow of rock and drove a shot in from an angle, heard the bullet ricochet with the scream of a plucked harpstring as it smeared off the granite.

There was a sound of creaking saddle leather behind the rocks and a moment later the scrawny figure of Doc Godette appeared, mounted on his line-back grulla. The oldster had his arms up, his ancient Spiller and Burr revolver dangling by the trigger guard from his right thumb.

The bloody track of a bullet had joined the puckered saber scar on Godette's hollow cheek.

"Won't swap words or lead with a man who carroms a billiard shot around corners at me," Godette chuckled, halting his horse in mid-road. "I'm your meat, son."

"Saltwater lies a hundred and fifty miles yonderward," Troy said. "Hit the trail, Doc."

Godette picked up his reins, a rare twinge of conscience laying its sharp edge against him. When Troy was fifty feet beyond him, the old medico wheeled his mount and called out.

"Troy! You should know Bix Herrod's up and around this mornin'. With forty thousand in specie to offer Okanogan Jones. You'll have to hurry. I wish you luck."

Okanogan Jones drove into Conconully at nine o'clock sharp with his blanket-draped squaw riding the box of his democrat wagon. The oldster turned his rig into the shade of Beagle's Saloon and hitched his mules to a tree which stood at

an angle to the ground, half uprooted by the flood's passage.

The erstwhile king of the Twenty-Mile Strip unrolled a sheet of canvas and tacked it to the clapboards of the saloon wall. It bore a crude legend brushed on with tar—**PUBLIC LAND SALE HERE NOW.**

From the porch of Doc Godette's shanty overlooking the tent-dotted town, Bix Herrod noted the squaw man's arrival and went into the cabin to make preparations for his first trip into town.

From a go-easter bag on a shelf he took a pair of derringers fitted with spring clip holsters which, worn high on the wrists, would be concealed by his coat cuffs. It was a rig Herrod had not worn since his Texas days, but instinct warned him not to venture out unheeled.

Emerging into the mellow autumn sunshine, Herrod picked his careful and deliberate way down the path to the temporary footbridge across Salmon Creek.

He was nearing the main street when he sighted Shasta Ives riding into town from the direction of Ambie Pride's place, a shopping bag looped over her saddle horn.

Herrod saw the girl dismount in front of Moore, Ish & Company's canvas tent mercantile store. She saw him as he approached and said impersonally, "I'm glad you're up and around again, Bix."

"Is that all you have to say to me, Shasta?"

He moved toward her, all his old jealousies and stormy pride and injured vanity showing in his tired eyes.

"I'm buying Flaming Canyon this morning, Shasta. My offer is still open. It's not too late to share in Lazy H's new deal."

"First come, first served, Jones said," she remarked. "That's Del Troy's horse. You're too late, Bix."

A panic touched Herrod then, and he lurched past her, crossing the street at a limping run, without regard for the cramps in his half-healed muscles.

Bix Herrod slogged up the saloon steps and shouldered through the slatted half-doors into the barroom. His glance came immediately to rest on Okanogan Jones, who was seated at a poker table nearest the door. In the background, Jones' squaw,

Tenas Josie, squatted on the floor, a plat of the Twenty-Mile Strip spread open on her lap.

Jones was alone, scribbling on a sheaf of papers. Herrod approached the table, relief surging through him.

"Open for business, Okanogan?"

Jones cocked a hostile eye at the cattleman.

"Anybody fool enough to pay a dollar an acre for my burned-out land, I'll do business with!" the squaw-man grunted. "Look over Josie's plat and name your wants."

Herrod thumped his sheaf of greenbacks on the baize.

"Forty thousand chips in that bundle, Jones. I want the fifty-five sections comprising Flaming-Canyon for that money."

Okanogan Jones eyed the money hungrily; then pushed it back.

"No dice. Flaming Canyon was sold two minutes ago, Herrod."

Herrod's jaw petrified. "Who bought it?"

JONES JERKED a thumb toward the bar, and his hand went to his parfleche jacket in search of his eye glasses.

Herrod wheeled slowly to face the bar. Del Troy stood there with a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass before him, one dusty boot hooked over the brass rail. The stamp of a long and gruelling trail was on his clothes, rutted deep in his haggard face, but his spiking gaze held the Lazy H boss rooted to his tracks.

"Step over here, Bix. I've got something to show you."

The Lazy H rancher stood like a graven image. This moment had to come, this meeting; it was in the cards. It galled Herrod to know that destiny had switched their fortunes at the time when this meeting had to be; but he found himself stumbling forward, pulled by Troy's voice against his will. A slow fear cramped his stomach, his feet dragged, scraping the boards with a wooden sound.

"I'm not armed, Troy." Herrod cawed. "I'm not ready."

Troy turned to Beagle.

"Another glass, please. We're going to drink to Bix Herrod stretching a hang-

rope before the year is out. For a murder he doesn't know I'm wise to."

The perspiring bartender skidded a glass down the mahogany, his face ashen. Del Troy reached for the glass, tilting his bottle to decant a dram of amber whiskey for his guest.

"I'm not armed—"

Even as Herrod parroted the words, his right hand made a flicking motion and a .41 hideout gun appeared magically there, from its spring clip under his cuff.

"You had something to show me?" Herrod mocked, insane lights kindling in his eyes as he cocked the derringer.

Del Troy carefully replaced glass and bottle, his face taut.

"Before you pull that trigger, Bix, I've got a little keepsake for you. Something you never should have lost. You'll want to know how I got it. It belonged to your wife."

Troy reached for his shirt pocket as he spoke. From the pocket he drew a plain gold ring which shimmered in the light from the backbar glass.

He dropped the wedding ring on the sawdusted floor puncheons at Herrod's feet, drawing the man's eyes with it.

"Roxanna's ring, Herrod. I took it from her dead body the night of the flood. You killed her."

Herrod stared at the golden circlet on the floor, unable to tear his eyes away from it. And in that frozen instant that his foe's attention was off his gun, Del Troy bunched his muscles and brought a chap-clad leg up to smash Herrod's arm.

The Lazy H boss staggered back, bellying with pain, and Del Troy's outswiping hand battered the derringer from Herrod's grasp and sent it bouncing across the room.

Herrod made a frantic reach for the bar to break his fall and knocked the whiskey bottle to the floor. He saw Troy's bunched fist coming, but was powerless to roll away from the blow.

The punch connected with Herrod's cheekbone in a meaty, sodden impact like a sledge hitting a steer. Herrod reeled back and recovered his balance, seeing the glint of following gun metal as Del Troy made his draw.

Herrod brought his reserve derringer from his left sleeve with all his old-time skill, before Troy's .45 came to a level. The weapons blazed as one, their concussion shaking the overhead lamps into penduluming arcs.

Through smudging gunsmoke, the frozen onlookers saw Herrod's shot pluck a puff of dust from Troy's sleeve and drill its sightless path through space to smash a window light in the back of the barroom with a splintered, chiming crash.

But Troy's aim had been precise, dead center to the bridge of Herrod's nose.

Dead on his feet, the big Lazy H rancher pitched sideways to thump his temple against the curved rim of the bar. His weight pulled him down to the brass rail, one leg out-thrust, the other doubled under him. Then his head sagged back to pillow itself in a tarnished cuspidor that caught his spilling lifeblood.

"For you, Roxie," Troy whispered to the ghost he felt at his side, and stooped to recover the Spanish girl's ring.

HERROD'S HUSSAR BOOT drummed the floor in brief tattoo, and then the reflexes left his settling hulk and he lay in broken, slack finality alongside the counter, smoke wisping from his derringer bore and eddying milkily in a pull of air currents sucking through the batwings.

Tenas Josie was crooning some ancient tribal death chant in her guttural jargon, over in the corner. The whiskey bottle still rolled around the floor in rhythm to her keening melody, a fact which seemed somehow important to Del Troy in that moment, clocking as it did the brief span of time since death had brushed him.

Troy stared for an interval at the smoking gun in his hand before replacing it in leather. The street door fanned open and Sheriff Irv Gaddy stepped inside, his eyes summing up the picture before him and finding it to his liking.

"She's across the street, Del," the lawman said, and bent to cover Bix Herrod's blood-gouting face with the Keevil hat. "No use her seeing all this."

Del Troy's hand touched the hip pocket of his levis then, confirming the reality of the bill of sale to Flaming Canyon which Okanogan Jones had signed and delivered a moment before Herrod's arrival. That paper marked the sum total of all his life's strivings, the net result of many spins of the wheel of fate.

Vagrant pictures flashed across the kaleidoscope of his brain, reminding him of the cost of blood and effort that lay behind this crowning hour of his life; and ghosts stalked out of the gunsmoke, demanding their turns in his memory.

He thought of Fred Bolte's scattered bones, bleaching on the cauterized brink of the Dry Falls; and of Whitey Crade's treachery and its grisly price. Fire and flood had joined to delay this moment; Roxanna Laranjo had sacrificed herself in the flower of her womanhood to help bring it about.

And then the reverie faded, and Troy gave Bix Herrod a last searching look, and realized then that he had come to the end of a long black tunnel, that its threats and its hazards were forever behind him.

He stepped around the dead man and through the doorway, squinting against the bright glare of the October sun that touched the mica particles in the dust of Conconully's thoroughfare and turned them to diamond points.

All the tension seemed to pass from him as he descended the saloon steps, walking out to meet Shasta Ives, as the girl he loved ran toward him across the street. He knew then that this was his ultimate prize, the true fulfillment of all that had led them to this meeting.

No words passed between these two—her hands came up to pull his head down with a gentle urgency, and he bent to taste the full rich promise of her betrothal kiss.

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