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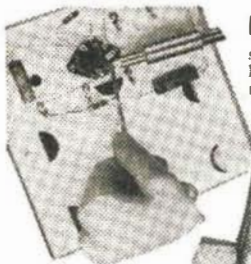
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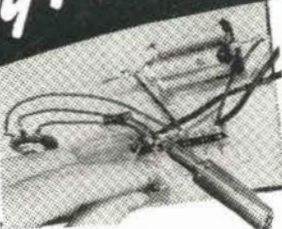
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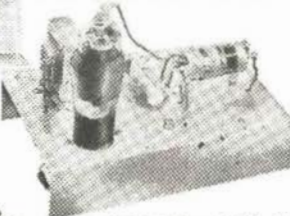
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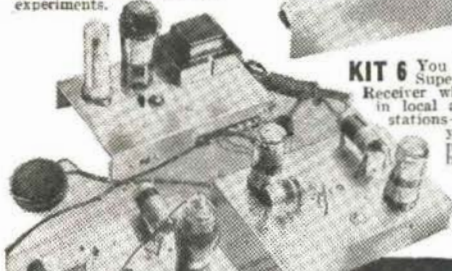
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Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen'l Mgr. & Editor

TEXICANS DIE HARD Frank Bonham 4

A complete Western novel

How could a forty-a-month cowpoke rod this huge old Mexican rancho? Charlie Drake listened grimly to the hate-filled whippers in the patio shadows, the gun-hammers clicking back, the thumbs rasping across fresh-honed blades—and felt the answer dragging at his belt.

KANAKA DYNAMITE Basil Burwell 40

"Me no likee whale-ship . . . me no likee hardtack, salt horses, dandyfunk . . . me no likee all time beat with rope . . . cap'n him big fat pig—me killum!"

DREAD SAFARI Dan Cushman 54

A novelette of jungle vengeance

They slogged on, through swamp-gloom and fever-haze—a one-armed man with a hook, a blond giant, and a score of muttering blacks—tracking the spoor of a two-thousand-year-old corpse!

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Old Doc Standish knew it was the only cure for a loco long-rider with a bad twitch in his trigger finger.

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Dead waddies and burnt-out spreads would buy him this valley, Big Bob Talbot figured. But there are six little reasons why all range hogs are wrong.

LASH OF THE SIX-GUN QUEEN Les Savage, Jr. 94

Rip-roaring Texas novel

It was a back-shoot trail Marshal Powder Welles rode, packing a warrant for a gold-topped brush-queen . . . for the range was choked with trigger-happy owlhoots craving to die for her—and Senorita Scorpion herself had yet to sling a wasted bullet.



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When the gun roared, smoke and wadding rolled against his body.



TEXICANS DIE HARD!

By Frank Bonham

How could a forty-a-month cowpoke rod this huge old Mexican rancho? Charlie Drake listened grimly to the hate-filled whispers in the patio shadows, the gun-hammers clicking back, the thumbs rasping across fresh-honed blades—and felt the answer dragging at his belt.

IN JOEL HARKRIDER'S OFFICE it was cold and dusty. Some of the dust seemed to have rubbed off on Harkrider. He had the air of having missed sleep for years, of having consorted too long with law-books and crusted ink-wells. He was one of about a dozen Americans Char-

lie Drake and Cort Carraday had seen in Chihuahua City. He had an East-Texas accent and a dispirited manner which made everything he said sound like an apology.

What he had to say to Charlie Drake, however, required no apology. Charlie



looked at Cort Carraday, but Cort's gaze, as he stood at the window, was for a girl crossing the plaza.

Charlie said to the lawyer, "Well, I guess that's fine, but how about relatives? I never heard of a Mexican dying without leaving forty cousins."

Joel Harkrider smoothed the tender rip-rapping of gray hairs over his pallid scalp. "There's a brother," he said, "but he's well-fixed, so there won't be any trouble from that quarter. But — " he shrugged "this is Mexico."

And anything, his faded-blue eyes said, could happen in Mexico. A rich *hacendado* could die and leave everything he owned to a gringo who had saved his life. And the gringo, who happened to be Charlie Drake, could ride three hundred miles and find out it wasn't a joke, after all.

He remembered the portly, pleasant little Mexican who had made the mistake of flashing his bankroll in an El Paso Saloon. It had been no business of Charlie Drake's that the man was followed when he left the saloon, but Charlie had made it his business. . . and had been in time to pull the attacker off Miguel Castillo's back in an alley. He had imagined Castillo had forgotten it long ago. But now he learned that Castillo had died of typhoid fever six months before, leaving a holographic will in Charlie's favor.

In the frigid little office they were waiting for him to say something. Charlie didn't know what it was going to be.

They'd had great times, he and Cort. They'd punched cows, bucked the tiger, mined gold in New Mexico. Cort was tinder for the spark where a woman was concerned, and this had occasionally livened things. Already Charlie was looking at those days through a golden haze, as if they had happened a hundred years ago. He had the wisdom to perceive that it wasn't being broke that separated men, but having money. And, while he sometimes got a little breathless trying to keep up with Cort, he wasn't going to see their fine times end.

He asked Cort, "What do you think?"

Cort turned from the window. He had dark, curly hair, and strong features with a strain of wildness. His eyes were as blue as a desert horizon.

"You asking me?" Cort grinned. He

might have smiled that way if Charlie had asked whether he should let it ride again on red. He wasn't helping any.

Charlie scratched his head, while Harkrider arranged papers on his desk. From the campanile of the cathedral, four strokes vibrated mellowly on the crisp tall air. "I reckon I could sell it," Charlie said.

"No doubt about it," said Joel Harkrider. "The brother I mentioned, Jose Castillo, is waiting outside right now. Speculate that's what's on his mind." He lined up three pencils, rolled his palm back and forth on them, and said mildly, "I didn't know ol' Miguel very well, personally. His own lawyer was a Mexican, but the man turned this business over to me because I speak English. But I do know Miguel was mighty fond of that *hacienda* of his. He babied it like an old husband babies a young wife. Reckon he had the only irrigation between here and the border. Best beef cattle, too."

FOR THE first time, he had said something significant. He had said, in effect, *Castillo would whirl in his grave if his land went to his brother.*

Charlie asked pointedly, "Why didn't he leave it to his brother, then?"

"I guess he hated to see the land wrecked. You see, these people figure a range ain't overstocked until the cattle are standing in each other's hip pockets. But ol' Miguel spent some time in the States learning how they farmed and raised stock. It was a hobby and a crusade, with him."

His eyes came up to Charlie Drake's face. Back of the bleached eyes was discernment. Harkrider knew a little bit about men, and he was taking a long look and a good look at this red-headed Texan who had come into a fortune and seemed worried about it. Charlie's was a pleasant face, lightly freckled, with brown eyes and a good jaw. But there was one thing wrong with it: It had no lines.

The lawyer frowned and looked away. Charlie saw that frown, and, because he could read men himself, he knew what it meant. This little transplanted Texas Blackstone had put him down as scatter-brained and irresponsible.

Harkrider muttered, "I reckon selling would be the easiest way out. Don't

know but what it would be best. Down here a *Norteamericano* ain't exactly pampered."

Charlie said, "Let's talk to Castillo."

Castillo was an enormously stout, vastly untidy Mexican whose collar failed by a full inch to button and whose trousers looked tight enough to split. He was unshaven, and the large ears were choked in fat. Under his gray coat he wore a silver-mounted revolver. He carried a cane of inlaid woods, which he transferred to his left hand as Harkrider introduced them.

"What thing?" he exclaimed. "My brother — *que Dios le bendiga* — is telling me of you. I have the summit of pleasure in welcoming you to Chihuahua."

Charlie did not smile at the butchered English, but replied in Spanish. "Thanks. To tell the truth, I thought it might be a joke when I got Mr. Harkrider's letter."

Castillo's large head made a slow negative shake. "Hacienda Rio Chula is no joke, *senor*. Three hundred thousand *hectarlas* are never a joke . . . a half-million acres! My brother must have had an excellent concept of you."

"I hope so."

There was some talk without much point, and then Don Jose struck his palm with the head of the cane. "I merely desired to congratulate you, and to be the first to buy you a drink in Mexico. Eh?"

"That," said Cort Carraday, "is the first smart thing anybody's said. *Vamonos!*"

With his melancholy smile, Joel Harkrider opened the door. "Come back in the morning, Drake, when you decide what you want to do. Good luck."

On the street, in the clear amber sunlight of late afternoon, it was warm. Along the rutted length of Calle Libertad, carts lumbered through the dust and a few cowpunchers on lean-ribbed horses ambled past. All in all, it was a hungry-looking country: The burros were underfed, the peasants were bone and brown skin wrapped up in *zarapes*; even the range, for the most part, was sorry-appearing. Before the cathedral, beggars and children thrust out dirty palms.

Cort dug down and found a handful of Mexican and American coins. He put some money in each hand and said, "Watch this!" He tossed the jingling sil-

ver on the walk. It was like a dog-fight. Charlie looked away with a feeling of having witnessed something obscene.

CASTILLO escorted them to their own hotel, the Colonial. In the lobby, a mustached old Mexican sat with a young, full-breasted girl in a dark skirt and one of those embroidered, low-necked native blouses which tease without quite promising. Cort made a low whistle which Charlie stifled with a glance. He anticipated enough trouble down here without hunting any. The girl was pretty, not yet twenty, he thought, with shining brown hair she wore inches below her shoulders. She met his glance coolly and then looked at the old man.

They sat at a sticky table in the big, drafty restaurant. Don Jose washed his hands at a basin in the corner. He drank tequila, sucking on half a lime and then drinking the liquor with short smacks. Then he threw the squeezed lime on the floor. He leaned back in his chair.

"First," he said, "I offer you the hospitality of my *hacienda* — El Molinillo. There is only one ranch in the state larger than mine. . . the ranch of Terrazas; and Terrazas is God."

"Where does mine figure?" Charlie asked.

Castillo smiled. "I would use it for a horse pasture. At one time, even Terrazas took off his hat to a Castillo. In the time of my father, before four brothers received their shares of the land, our cattle roamed a thousand hills."

Charlie saw clearly what was in his mind. He said: "*Vamos claros*. How much will you pay?"

Castillo shrugged. "I could use the land. I could not pay much. Already I am land-poor. The taxes I carry would break the back of an ox. The *peones* I feed would form an army. When they chop one stick of wood or grind one liter of corn, they consider they have been ill-used. I could pay ten thousand pesos."

A little fire lighted in Cort's eyes. Charlie shook his head. "Without seeing the land, I say no."

Don Jose spread his hands. "We will talk about it when you have seen the land, then. With me, it is a matter of sentiment. If my brother had loved a worthless horse,

I should buy it, for that reason. I offer no more than fifteen thousand, amigo."

Cort's expression, almost wild, said: *With fifteen thousand pesos we could bust the bank! The gals we could hug and the likker we could drink!*

Charlie was thinking of those things, too, but he knew Jose Castillo would jack a lot higher than this. "I might," he said, "take a hundred thousand."

Castillo laughed until he wheezed. He struggled out of his chair and offered his hand. "*Eso!* It is a pleasure to know you, *senores*, though you are totally insane. When you are near El Molinillo, do not forget me."

They shook hands again and Don Jose departed, a vast, waddling figure in a wrinkled gray suit. Cort swore softly but savagely. "You had him in your hand, Charlie! He'd have paid twenty, if you'd worked it right." He could change quickly from blitheness to anger, and he was in a black mood now.

"He'll pay seventy-five thousand, too, and that's a bet. How do I know what I've got till I see it? Maybe I'll sell it to some syndicate for two hundred thousand."

"And maybe we shouldn't have come down here in the first place. They watch the women too close and the likker tastes like medicine." He looked like a big, worried kid who liked the fifth grade so well he distrusted the sixth.

"Tell you this much: I'm not figuring to stay. But when I go back, I'll be heeled."

When they went to the desk for their room-key, the Mexican with the young girl arose from his chair. He was a man of less than middle height, his face brown, his eyes like jet and the great black mustaches ragged. He wore tight *pantalones*, a leather vest, unpolished *tajas* to his knees. When he smiled, his face shattered into a thousand squint-lines.

"I am Juan Bravo," he said. He looked surprised when this didn't register. "Don Miguel's foreman. He didn't mention Don Juan?"

Charlie shook his head. He lied agreeably. "I'd forgotten. . . Sure, he did. I thought we'd go out to the ranch in the morning. Would that suit you?"

"*A su servicio*," Don Juan said. He beckoned the girl. Charlie thought she

seemed truculent. "My daughter, *senores* — Tonia, this is Don Carlos Drake, of whom Don Miguel spoke."

The girl didn't offer her hand, but Charlie took it. The cocoa tone of her skin deepened. Her features were as fine as filigree. The dark eyes were shy, but the lift of her chin was proud. Charlie observed that nothing quite like her figure had ever come his way.

IT WAS nearly dark outside. The odors of food came from the kitchen. Charlie herded them all into the restaurant. After dinner, the old Mexican began to talk of the *hacienda*. Presently he hesitated, and something pinched a frown into his brow.

"There are many Americans who own ranches in Chihuahua. Most of them live in the States and operate through a manager. Is that how you wish to run Rio Chula?"

"I don't know. I may sell it. A man named Castillo wants to buy it."

Bravo did not cease to smile, but ghosts stirred in his eyes. He was hearing old, loved walls tumbling; his eyes were smarting from the smoke of dying hearth-fires. "A fine man, Don Jose," he said.

Antonio made her first remark. She spoke clearly, looking at Charlie. "A great driver of slaves," she said.

The foreman brought his daughter under a compelling scowl. "My daughter means," he said softly, "that Don Jose has many workmen."

"I mean that he is a great sucker of blood, a slave-driver. That where our people receive five litres of corn for each day they work, Don Jose's receive two. That where we raise hay for our animals, he cuts his on the prairies until there is no more to cut."

"Is that right?" Charlie said.

Under the slender, dark brows her eyes were hot. "Si, that is right, and it is also right that the Americans my father speaks of ranch in the same way. You, *senor*, will also beat the land with a club until it is a desert. . . Tomorrow we will make smaller corn measures."

The cafe was cold, but Don Juan had achieved a glistening perspiration. He sought to interpret. "My daughter, she — "

Charlie laughed. "Your daughter, she don't like gringos."

Tonia shook her head. "I like gringos, Don Carlos. I do *not* like Americanos."

Charlie extended his hand. "Shake hands with a gringo." In the border lingo, gringos were Americans who spoke the language and understood the ways of the Mexican. Americanos were the ones who kept a handkerchief over their mouths when they talked with one.

Tonia failed to see his hand. She drank her coffee, thought a frowning thought, looked out the door into the darkening street.

A stricken man, Don Juan arose. "We will be at the door with horses at whatever hour you say."

"Make it ten. We've got our own horses. Good-night, Don Juan. Good-night, *senorita*."

A volcanic mood descended on Cort Carraday. The ride from El Paso had required three weeks. During that time there has been no fufforaw and extremely little fluff. In their room, he commenced a caged pacing of the floor. Charlie lay down and regarded, on the ceiling, an interlacing of scrollwork in lavender, green and gold. He was a quarter-horse, built for work or play. Cort was a thoroughbred, geared for speed.

"How much money we got?" Cort asked.

Charlie counted. "Fifty-eight dollars."

"That ought to buy us an evening. You can get some more from the lawyer in the morning. Let's find a game."

Charlie realized the pressure would go off gradually or in an explosion. He could have used some rest, but you had to take Cort the way he was. He got up.

THEY walked through the dark streets, finding nothing more exciting than a few *cantinas*. A dry, biting cold had invaded the desert city. Smoke of charcoal fires and the warm scent of spiced foods hung in the streets. About the city lay a ring of hills where fires winked in the night; beyond the hills burned the red glare of slag dumps. There was silver in the mountains of Chihuahua, and there were fortunes in cattle, but Charlie Drake and Cort were wondering where rich Chihuahuenses spent their wealth.

On Avenida Ogampo they heard a

sound that arrested them both. Music. . . a tinkling echo of a *jarabe* to tickle their spines! Up the street they discovered the lights of a saloon. The old, familiar sight of batwing doors drew them like moths. They could hear the click of castanets and a dancing girl's cries.

Cort barged in first. He stood there in the smoke and light and clamor, arms hanging, the varnish of excitement on his eyes. "Ye Gods!" he said. "Ye Gods!"

It was in the tradition of an elaborate American saloon, a long bar measuring the left wall, gaming tables in the back, tables for patrons covering the rest of the floor, with a clearing for the dancers. The man was a slender Mexican as resplendent as a peacock. The girl was like a candle in the dusk of the room, her gown white, the skirt ringed with red, a silver comb like a crown in her hair. On the floor between the dancers lay a silver-trimmed sombrero.

Cort started through the crowd. Charlie caught him by the arm. "Anybody but her! Remember that night in Socorro?"

Cort brushed off his hand. For a moment he stood at the edge of the light, watching the girl in white bend like a willow as she went through the figures, hands on her hips. Charlie saw him reach up to unfasten his neckerchief. Then he was in the clearing and catching the girl's waist in the loop of the blue bandana. She turned in surprise, and then smiled and called something to the musicians. The *Jarabe* died. The music revived as a tango.

The crowd, resentful at first, began to shout, "Ai-ee!" Everyone seemed to think it was a great idea except the forgotten partner. He stood there for a moment, his mouth tight. Then he picked up the sombrero, turned his back on the dancers and went to a table.

Charlie sighed. If Cort only had sense, just a little sense, being a saddle-partner of his would have been less hectic.

He went back to the roulette table. For a while he watched the play. The table was crowded with well-to-do Mexicans and a few Americans. . . traders, ranchers, mining men. The game looked straight. He took the first chair he saw and backed the red for five. He won that and let it ride twice. Then he put five dollars on each of four numbers and on the second spin

collected. Charlie Drake decided it was his night. He won enough that the other players began to watch him, and he ceased to watch Cort. . .

With a drink at his elbow, a stack of chips before him, and the good, stifling smells of a saloon in his head, he wondered how he could have thought of settling down to ranching. He'd go into dry rot trying to keep books.

He was thinking these things when the sound of scuffling reached him. His head turned. There was no sign of Cort. No sign of the girl, either. An hour must have passed. Now he heard a crash of furniture and glanced at a door at the end of the bar. A large man was standing there signalling the musicians. The music broke out in a riotous gust. The big smiling Mexican at the door crossed his arms and kept his back to the uproar from the room.

Charlie swept his chips into his hat and went around to cash them. His mind went like a clock. Against two or three white men, Cort could hold his own, but a Mexican loved a knife fight. The ball was dancing once more. No one noticed him when he walked toward the guard. He made a roll of silver coins, which fitted his hand like the stock of a whip. The guard's face was brown and flabby, with a pocked nose and a cleft chin.

"The *excusado*" Charlie said. "Quick, hombre!"

"In the alley, out back."

"Which door?"

The guard uncrossed his arms to gesture. Charlie fired a punch at his chin. With the heavy roll of silver behind the blow, Charlie's fist drove the cleft chin into the man's neck. Across the saloon, someone yelled. Charlie slammed him on the side of the head and as he went down stepped across him to open the door. Without slowing, he got the whole picture of what was happening inside the room.

IT WAS a cramped room containing a chair, a table and a cot. The cot was overturned; the chair was smashed. The girl looking frightened, stood against the wall at Charlie's right. Two men were holding Cort in a chair, while the *charro* dancer, thin and dandified, an exalted expression in his eyes, slashed at his face with a quirt.

Charlie closed the door and slipped the bolt. The girl screamed.

The dancer whirled like a cat. With all the strength of his shoulder, Charlie hurled the coins in his face. A dozen cuts opened up. The Mexican went to his knees with his hands over his face, groaning. Charlie's gun flipped up. The men who held Cort straightened but did not molest their guns.

There were welts all over Cort's face. He stumbled from the chair. Charlie backed to a window and reached back to raise the sash. "*Vamonos!*"

Fists drummed on the door, but Cort Carraday paused to say, "Meet you outside. Cover me."

Charlie backed out. He saw Cort recover his gun from a corner and come back to stand before one of the men who had held him. He slashed this man across the face with the barrel of the Colt. He struck him again as he fell. The other man tried to run. Cort opened a four-inch cut on the back of his head. Then he took the *charro's* quirt and slashed him in the face until he sobbed.

It was when Cort turned to confront the girl, the gun levelling, that Charlie yelled. He could see Cort's face; it was insanely twisted. "For God's sake, Cort!" he shouted. "Let her be!"

Cort fired. The silver comb on the girl's head was wrenched from the black hair. Her face was white as paper. Cort blew the smoke from his gun. "Thanks, *senorita*. Thanks for your good intentions."

As they ran down the alley, they heard the door crash inward. They made the corner just as the first shot pinked the night.

II

THAT NIGHT, Cort Carraday slept like a child. Charlie was disturbed. Cort had left his hat at the saloon; he thought there had been a letter in the lining. But no one molested them that night. In the morning they shaved and went out.

In Joel Harkrider's office, it was cold enough to grow a crop of icicles. The little Texan wore two sweaters under his box coat; his lips were blue and he kept his hand in his pockets. "Mexicans!" he complained. "Keep an office warm enough

to support human life, and they start edging for the door. . . Castillo was in, by the way. He left a note for your partner." Surprised, Cort read the note and let Charlie see it.

If Senor Carraday will call at my office on Calle Libertad, I shall be pleased to return his sombrero, which a member of the police discovered last night.

Cort grunted. "Why didn't he leave it here? Well, I'll meet you at the stable."

Charlie told the lawyer he had made up his mind to look over the land before he made any decision.

"The first thing, whatever you do, is to get squared away on your debts," Harkrider said. "I'd say ten thousand pesos would clear you. Load some of those Black Anguses into cars at El Sauz, dump them on a feeder in El Paso, and you're clear."

He offered Charlie his hand as he left, wistfully, as though they might not meet again. . .

They forded the Chuvisear River a little after ten, Juan Bravo and his daughter leading up through the pass onto a sere, brown plain reaching north and east. Hills broke it at intervals. Across several of them marched low stone walls. Tonia turned to point at one of these.

"The great walls of Chihuahua," she said. "When Don Jose's workmen have nothing else to do, they pile stone upon stone." Her bitterness was irrepensible.

"What do they do on Rio Chula?" Charlie asked her.

"They play with their children or tend their own gardens. That is — they used to." She gave him her back again, but it was a nice back and Charlie didn't mind.

Cort had said nothing since they left the city. Charlie asked how he had made out with Castillo.

Cort's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Oh, tried to throw a scare into me about playing around with Mexican women. Said he got the hat from the police; they were going to lock me up. He advised me to head north, in case they changed their minds."

The old devil-may-care lights were not visible in his eyes. He looked bothered. Charlie laughed. "Don't let him throw you. He knows that if you go, I go. And if I go, I'll sell out quick and cheap."

Cort gave him a long, frowning stare. "Don't talk like a damned fool," he said.

"We're pardners—but any fight I get into is on my own. We're not a corporation, Charlie."

"Funny—I always thought we were."

Cort's eyes watched Tonia's dark hair dance on her shoulders as she rode. "If I pull out, it will be on twelve hours' notice. I've got talkin' spurs. Don't you forget it. Just give me time to saddle and it'll be, 'Adios, Chihuahua!'"

They came to a well-rutted road winding through a meager forest of pinons. "El Camino!" murmured Don Juan, and Charlie's gaze traced the tawny roadway with respect. Traders and travellers had been following that road since the days of Coronado; Indians had preyed upon it and self-appointed generals had led their peasant armies to death and glory.

Up ahead, Juan Bravo reined in his pony. He sniffed the air like a fox, Charlie pulled in beside him. "Smoke, senior," the foreman said. "Indians are good people—when one sees them first."

They proceeded cautiously. In single file, they came upon the still-smoking line of wagons . . .

THEY numbered four great-wheeled wagons whose oxen lay dead under the yokes. Fire had ravaged the train, leaving a black memory of charred oak and canvas. A barrel of flour was split open beside the road. Boots, hardware and food-stuffs mingled catastrophically between ruined wagon-sides.

Death had taken some of the teamsters on the box, allowing others to sprint halfway to the pines or crawl beneath a wagon for protection. The body of a woman sprawled beside one of the wheels.

A cold perspiration broke out on Charlie. Tonia's hands were over her face; her father slowly wagged his head. It was at this moment that Juan Bravo's pony, plunged forward.

Charlie saw it go to its knees and roll on its side, the foreman jumping clear, but even then he did not comprehend. The crack of the rifle struck through a moment later.

Cort Carraday sprawled ungracefully upon the ground. His pony began to rear. Tonia sat with her face turned toward the cairn of rocks across the road, from which the shot had come. Charlie caught her

about the waist as he dismounted, dragging her with him. Afterward, he did not know how he managed to pull his carbine out of the boot first.

There they lay in the dirt, the girl clinging to his arm while Charlie hunched around to get a shot at the rocks. He didn't know what the others were doing. He was too rattled to care.

He saw the smoke of the second shot before he heard it. It stirred heavily through a slot near the top of the boulders. Charlie snapped off a quick shot that missed by six feet. He shook Tonia.

"Behind the wagon!" Terrified, she was slow to understand until her father seized her arm to draw her into the shelter of the mound of ashes.

In Charlie Drake's mind, road and trees and rocks were sketched like a battle-plan. There were the road and an open space of fifty feet to cross; then the trees would give a furtive kind of security while he approached the rocks. He was convinced that there were only one or two men, left behind only the devil knew why. Otherwise, the attack would have been like a fist closed on them.

Someone was at his heels as he crossed the road . . . Cort. Charlie reached the trees and sprawled behind one. It was about the size of a Christmas tree, like the rest, hardly a hindrance to a good marksman. Cort spilled behind another. He fired as he landed. The bullet flattened itself on the blackened stone and soared over the trees with an expiring wail.

Charlie glanced at him. He was almost ashamed of his own nervousness. There was a fierce exultation in Cort's face, a savoring of the wine of danger. Cort loved a fight; he was totally without fear. He jacked a fresh cartridge into the chamber and spoke hurriedly.

"I'm goin' to coyot' in behind them. Keep 'em busy."

Cort made a short run to the base of the rocks. He began to work around the pile. Charlie watched the sniper's nest a moment and then he, too, sprinted forward. After he got a boulder between himself and the gunman, he felt better.

Now the moments crawled. There was no firing from the rocks. The breeze blew softly through the trees and the sun was warm on his back, making death seem a

great improbability. At once a gun barked and a man yelled. Charlie reared up.

High above him, a sniper lurched into view in a cleft in the rocks. The cool walnut of his gun was smooth under Charlie's cheek. It jolted, the butt of the gun setting him rudely back. The gunman jerked, fired his rifle into the sky and took a step forward. He toppled face-forward down among the rocks.

Lying on his back in the sun, the sniper did not look capable of frightening anyone. He wore the not-gray, not-white, pajama-like costume of the peasant. On his upper lip and chin were wispy black hairs. He appeared underfed and his skin was badly pocked. A stain widened perceptibly on his right shoulder, where Charlie's bullet had entered. A larger stain darkened his breast.

Don Juan tapped his nose. "This is not *bandido*," he said. "These hands have worked. A teamster, perhaps—"

Then he looked up, and his eyes and Charlie's met. Charlie had a feeling like nothing he had experienced before. A sickness and a shame, a remorse that came up in his breast like a sob. He did not require Cort's puzzled exclamation. "Funny! He's been shot before. This blood on his chest is almost dry."

Don Juan had a depth of understanding. "*Si, si, si!* We talk of that later, eh? Now, we bury this *pobrecito* and forget what has happened. We must hurry to beat the sun to Rio Chula."

But Charlie could not hurry fast enough to lose the knowledge that he had shot a dying man; a wounded man out of his head with fever, who had fired at them in the belief that they had come back to finish him. For this man was the survivor of the massacre.

He did not lose that dread, but he gained a hatred of the men who tricked him into murder.

AT THE railroad station of El Sauz, they broke westward into the hills. They passed a gate in one of Castillo's walls, and almost immediately a transformation in the range became evident.

There began to be a little graze on the ground. The cattle, an improved breed of longhorn, acquired a sleekness. Castillo's cows numbered thousands and were the

poorest of Mexican culls. They entered a vast golden valley rimming out into blue uplands. He saw hundreds of hornless Angus cattle, fat as crib-fed steers.

Along a creek were acres of frost-bitten chili plants, festooned with red pods. He saw fields of alfalfa and corn. Peons moved slowly along the rows.

It was now sundown. From the heart of this valley of sun-ripened *grama* and *tobosa* grass, he saw the scarlet flash of reflected sunlight at the rim of a long mesa. Indistinctly, he made out the block-like shape of Hacienda Rio Chula. A breeze rustled the dry grasses. It brought a prickling to Charlie's spine.

It was like the whispering of a dead man, asking him to guard well these things he had loved, the land and the cattle he had cared for.

Charlie Drake wanted to. But he had an allegiance to the things he loved himself, which were freedom and good-fellowship. And then he understood Cort's mood, for Cort was fearing the same thing he was . . . the end of the old, carefree days.

Before they had ascended the broken mesa to the *hacienda*, darkness filled the valley. Charlie's impression, as they approached, was of a small walled city with *torreones* at the corners. Behind barred windows burned a few lamps. A great nail-studded gate opened to admit them. In a cobbled courtyard, hostlers took their horses. Tonia went off to the house she and her father occupied within the walls. Juan Bravo escorted Charlie and Cort to the main section of the *hacienda*.

There was a kind of primitive grandeur to it all. The rooms were lofty, the outside windows tall and barred. Hides and native rugs covered the dirt floors, and the furniture was hand-made, of mountain juniper. There seemed to be six or eight bedrooms. It all added up to a crude, frontier magnificence.

They ate in a spacious dining room. When they turned in, Charlie found himself in possession of a bed large enough for a horse. He went to sleep thinking of a little Mexican with ideas big enough for a king.

Very early, Don Juan awoke him by banging on the door. "*Patron! Patron!*"

Charlie climbed out of bed and let him in. The foreman stood in the doorway, jab-

bering in Spanish and striking his breast with both fists.

"The fault is mine! I have not kept guards on them. I did not think the bulls could be moved without my hearing them—"

Charlie began pulling on his trousers. "What bulls? What are you talking about?"

"The fine-herd! Forty-five of our best bulls, too fine to be left on the range. The foundation of the herd. *Ay, sahtos!*"

Charlie got the rest as they hurried into the courtyard. The bulls had been quietly led from their stalls sometime during the night. The gate in the rear wall, through which they had passed, hung wide.

Charlie said, "Round up some riders, and wake up Senor Carraday. They can't be far."

WHILE the punchers collected, he looked over the ground. The earth of the big central court was a heavy clay, mixed with straw and manure. Near the stalls it was wet, holding the impressions of many horse- and cow-tracks and of peasants' sandalled feet. Charlie kept looking until he found one pair of footprints common to each of the stalls. They had been made by small, high-heeled boots. A cowboy's . . . or a woman's.

He glanced around, his eyes moving down the line of workers' cottages against the *hacienda* wall. Children played there, and dogs lay in patches of sunlight; women knelt before *moledores*, grinding corn. And in the doorway of her father's house, Tonia Bravo, a slender figure with a flash of red in her hair, leaned against the jamb to watch him.

Charlie walked across the yard, his spurs jingling. Tonia wore a short skirt which showed her slim tan legs. Her blouse was a pale green which enriched the warm tones of her skin; in the sunlight, her dark hair gleamed. Charlie stopped before her. She straightened with that casual grace of hers. "*Pase usted,*" she said softly.

Charlie went into the *jacal*. The floor was of packed earth covered with native rugs, bright squares of red and black and gray. The rawhide furniture was low and sturdy. In the air was a whisper of spices and the friendly incense of mesquite root coals, gray-red on the hearth.

"Such a pity about the bulls, *patron!*" she remarked.

Charlie snapped: "Don't call me '*patron.*' Call me Charlie, or Mr. Drake, or anything but that. I've worked for a living too long to be called 'boss.'"

She gave him a glance that was demure but mocking, humble yet taunting. She repeated, "Charlie," giving the *r* the faint Mexican trill that brushed the hayseeds out of its hair. "Yes; for an Americano that is better."

He started to retort sharply, remembering their conversation about gringos, but he turned, instead, to glance through a low doorway into a sleeping room. "Your room?"

She nodded. "But I don't think your bulls are in there."

His gaze slipped down her body to her feet; she wore sandals with flat heels. He went into the bedroom. One corner was curtained off as a closet. Charlie drew the curtain aside and looked down at several pairs of sandals and a single pair of low riding boots, of good kangaroo. He picked them up. He began to nod.

"It could have been you, at that," he said. "It wasn't a thing a man would have done."

Her chin went up. "So I am a thief, because I do not like Americanos."

Charlie dropped the boots and let the curtain swing back. "No, you're a fool, because you don't know when you're well off." In him was a sense of frustration and anger, because there was no way he could prove that her boots were the ones which had made the prints, and because, knowing it, she chose to banter.

When he went toward the door, she moved aside. "You will be ashamed," she said, "if the men who stole the bulls are caught with them."

"Surprised, too."

As he passed her, she said, "If you like, I'll apologize for having a pair of boots, Don Charlie."

It was the last tug at a frayed temper. He turned, the smile still on her lips, and caught her waist in the hard angle of his arm. She could out-banter him any day in the week, but he had his masculine superiority to fall back on, and the superiority of caste. He pulled her roughly against him. It was a saloon kiss. Her body was

unresisting, but her lips, that he had thought the most beautiful he had ever seen, full and rich, the color of Burgundy wine in the sunlight, took the kiss impassively.

Charlie's arms dropped away. Her face colored; she looked at the floor, her whole manner saying, *You have violated me, but it is the right of a proprietor to violate the women of his hacienda.*

It hit Charlie so he could only swallow. "I'm sorry, Tonia—" he fumbled. "I—I only meant to . . ."

She still would not look at him, and he turned at once and left the cottage. He was saddling his horse when he realized what she had done. Why, the damned little fox! She had played him to do what she expected him to.

He went back to his saddling. He thought, *I'll pay you back for that, Chata, and it won't be in liters of corn!* A moment later, he caught himself touching his mouth with his fingertips, trying to recapture the texture of her lips. What would they be like if they cared to respond? Charlie Drake decided to find out.

III

WITH A DOZEN RIDERS, JUAN BRAVO waited for Charlie outside the *hacienda*. The nearest stream was Rio Chula. They rode to the rim of the mesa to survey the valley, a tawny sea of whispering grasses. Below them were the irrigated acres along the river where it paralleled the mesa.

On the golden floor of the valley, the black shapes of Angus cattle were as plain as flies on a sun-shot wall. Don Juan led the men down the cliff trail. They dispersed across the valley to inspect the cattle.

Working with the foreman, Charlie rode for an hour down the valley before Bravo gave up. All of the animals were range animals. "It is what I feared," Bravo declared. "They have reached the hills."

They started back. West of the *hacienda*, the range crumpled into the first low barricades of the Las Tunas Mountains. Here, the timber was scrub oak and cedar, and the ridges were not high; but beyond the mountains ascended roughly to blue, timbered heights. Charlie was not worried about rustlers. The real danger

was that the pampered herd bulls, fat and short-legged, would be injured on narrow mountain trails.

As they rode back, Charlie asked, "How long since the men have been paid?"

"Six months." Bravo rode with his wrinkled brown face turned straight ahead.

"When do you hold the beef roundup?"

"This season. It is past time."

"Then we'll start it now and pick up the bulls as we go. Send a man to El Sauz to arrange for cattle cars. And let the men know they'll be paid as soon as I get the cows across the river. This may have been a grudge trick."

Don Juan looked shocked. "It would not be possible!" But the small bright eyes began to ponder.

Down here, Charlie learned, they didn't pamper a cowpuncher the way they did in the States. A man was expected to exist on tortillas and beans, to wrap himself in his *zarape* if he found the frosted ground too hard. He rode a wooden tree with a horn the size of a pie-plate. He made his own rope, of rawhide, and if he knew how to use it he didn't have to splice it every night while the other men were sleeping.

Charlie's gang worked west. Cort went with him, grouching about the bad food and the hard work. He had always been more of a saloon cowboy than a ranch hand.

Within three days, half of the lost bulls had been found. But then they were in the mountains, with a thousand dead-end canyons in which cattle could hide. On the fourth day, Charlie found a bull lying on a steep mountainside with a broken leg. He shot it and left a vaquero to skin it for the hide.

Later that afternoon he discovered the torn body of another which had been killed by lobos. Before they were finished, Charlie figured his loss at four bulls. He sent the last of the uninjured animals back. That night he sat before the big camp-fire, feeling the good, scorching heat of it against his face. He was almost certain that Tonia Bravo had let the bulls out the gate. Yet it was harder for him to muster an outraged anger against her than it should have been. He tried to think of her as treacherous and crafty. He kept thinking, instead, of why she might have done it.

She had loved old Miguel Castillo for

what he had done for her people. She hated Charlie for what some of his people had done to hers. He supposed that made them enemies. But when he turned in, what he was thinking of was the way her lashes veiled her dark eyes, of the warm, sweet pressure of her lips when he had kissed her . . .

In the morning, Jose Castillo and his foreman rode up.

Castillo's fat body was borne by a percheron of a horse. His saddle was of extra width, with skirts of *tigre* skin. Charlie remembered his appearance in Harkrider's office, and it came to him that the *hacendado* looked less cumbersome, less the dreamer after a dead dream than he had seemed in Chihuahua City. There was a sureness about him that was not quite arrogance; in his ability to look at a cowpuncher without seeing him, there was a cavalier disdain. But with Charlie and Cort, he was affable.

"*Que cosa?*" He dismounted by the branding pen, a vast ambling figure with a gray-and-red poncho over his shoulders.

Charlie shook hands with him. Castillo introduced his companion. "Vasquez, my foreman."

VASQUEZ was a large, dark Mexican with sombre features and melancholy Indian eyes. His costume was a leather jacket, straw sombrero, and bullhide chaps. He had a heavy, loose chin, heavy shoulders, and lean hips. Vasquez said, "*Su servidor*," but the flat Yaqui eyes denied that he would ever be the servant of anyone.

"The daughter of Don Juan," said Castillo, "told me you had started the roundup. I found you by your branding fire. A little late for the *rodeo*, eh? The price is not now so good."

He could say the gloomiest things with the pleasantest manner, Charlie thought. "Better late than never," he shrugged.

Castillo lit a brown cigarette and watched a calf take the brand with a prolonged bawl and a puff of smoke from cooked hide. "Good calves," he said. "Fine calves."

Vasquez regarded them with a smile at the corners of his lips, the way a raiser of bulldogs might regard a poodle.

"On the way up," Castillo went on, "I

saw some calves which did not look so good as these."

Cort Carraday had a stiff, unsmiling stare for the Mexican. "What do you expect from longhorn cows?" he countered. "Black Angus heifers?"

Castillo shook his head. "I mean—sick calves."

Charlie looked at him sharply. "The herd's been vaccinated," he said. "There shouldn't be any sickness."

Vasquez shrugged.

"Perhaps they were mavericks. But these calves did not look good."

"Where are they?"

"Not far from here. Six kilometers."

"Let's have a look at them," Charlie said.

Castillo tugged at a large ear. "A pity to take you from your work," he said. "But it seemed that you should know. Vamonos."

Charlie turned the tallying over to a puncher. He glanced at Don Jose's face as they started. Castillo retained that complacent smile. Charlie began to be angry. If there was herd-sickness, he wanted to know about it. But he got the impression that Castillo was moving pieces on a checker-board.

ONCE, as they rode, Castillo maneuvered in beside Cort and spoke to him. Cort rapped out a reply which silenced him; but it did not quiet a barbed tendril of curiosity which began to turn in Charlie's mind. He remembered the day Cort had called alone at Castillo's town office. And now he recalled Cort's preoccupation when they left town after his visit with Castillo . . .

They passed through a gap onto the apron of the plain. They were in the longhorn country, where the grass was closer-cropped and the water less plentiful. Vasquez jogged toward a motte of leafless trees around a water-hole. A handful of yearling bulls began to shy from them. The Mexican put his pony to a lope and threw one of the animals. Cort was there to make the tie.

In the weak autumn sunlight they gathered about the bull while Castillo's thick fingers explored one of the forelegs. A muffled crackling came from a heavy swelling under the red hide as he pressed it.

Castillo looked up. Slowly, he withdrew his hand . . .

For one instant none of the men spoke. Charlie's thoughts were less of the bull than of himself. He tried to recapture the spirit, for a moment, of the old, untroubled days of having nothing more serious to perplex him than how to make two pairs beat a full house; the days when he had let somebody else worry about whether or not a calf was sick. What was in every man's mind was black-leg—the killer of herds.

Vasquez groaned. "The devil! That it should be so close to your own land, Don Jose!"

Castillo arose and rubbed his hands together. He wagged his head. "Naturally, these animals will be destroyed and buried on the spot. I would recommend a fire of brush on the ground over which they have been grazing. It is possible that the sickness may be arrested."

Charlie was too sandbagged to think clearly. When you said "blackleg," you said catastrophe. The treatment for an infected herd was to destroy it.

"In Mexico," Castillo said thoughtfully, "it is customary to destroy the entire herd in which the disease breaks out. The authorities insist on it. It has been found least expensive to the vicinity as a whole. Of course, that is ruthless and unnecessary."

Charlie continued to stare at him. Castillo sadly shook his head. "It is time, Don Carlos, to decide for yourself whether or not an American is able to run cattle in Chihuahua. Our authorities distrust you. They will make it hard. And of course I cannot let you cross my land to the railroad with such animals."

There was a rustle of movement. Cort's gun was suddenly in his hand. Before they knew what he was doing, he had put a bullet into the head of the downed animal. On the broad plain, the shot rang flatly. Vasquez stepped back, alarmed. Castillo's fat-choked eyes stared.

Cort flipped out a pocket knife. The animal was still moving, but he squatted to make a long cut the length of the cannon. There was little blood, but an oily liquid bubbled from the wound. The foreman, Vasquez, laid a hand on his shoulder, the fingers biting.

"Hombre! To release such matter into the air is murder!"

Cort wiped a finger in the stuff oozing from the cut. He sniffed it, showing the finger to Charlie. But Charlie already understood. He faced Vasquez angrily.

"Sweet oil! A vet's needle and a pint of sweet oil, and you've got Mexican blackleg . . . You work best at night, don't you, compadre?"

Vasquez' face began to redden. He turned on Castillo as much resentment as a workman dared show *el patron*. "Did I not say, 'Of a pig, expect only ordure?'"

Charlie bent to wipe his hand in the blood, oil and dirt on the ground. He wiped it across Vasquez' mouth. Vasquez struck at him and Charlie slammed him on the side of the jaw. Vasquez stumbled back into Castillo.

He shook his head. The black eyes, fuming in his dark face, hardened. It was when he reached for his gun that Charlie lost his temper.

Vasquez was just a stride away. Charlie started the punch as he moved toward him. His knuckles smashed into Vasquez' mouth and the blood came. Vasquez' gun was out but the man was too sandbagged to bring it up. With his fist, Charlie knocked it to the ground. He threw a high one that opened a cut in the Mexican's brow. Fumblingly, Vasquez reached for Charlie's throat with his hands. Charlie grinned and let him close. Vasquez' eyes lighted up with a savagery, but just then Charlie brought his fist up under the man's chin with a force that lifted him to his toes.

Vasquez made a windy noise. He went down. He lay between Charlie and Castillo, as accusative as a pointed finger.

A good general, Castillo refused to be panicked. He made a convincing show of bewilderment. "Don Carlos, I say to you that it was not I, nor any of my men, who did this! Vasquez is a stupid man with a bad temper. We rode by the calves; you can see for yourself that one must notice . . . Apparently you have enemies."

Cort laughed. "Now tell him about the day I ransomed my hat."

Sturdily, Castillo returned his gaze. "What I said to you was for Don Carlos' good. I said, 'Persuade him that he cannot succeed.'"

"You also said there would be five thousand pesos waiting for me at El Paso if I did."

Castillo colored, but said unashamedly, "*Pues*, this is Mexico. I am a business man. Here we transact business by the shortest line."

Charlie was confused and angry and hurt. It was in his mind that if Cort had not hoped to collect the money, he would have told him immediately about Castillo's offer. Not that he would have been a party to treachery. But if Charlie had gone broke, perhaps Cort would have been willing to accept the money as a windfall.

He walked to his pony, found the stirrup, and mounted. "Don Jose," he said, "you may be right. Maybe an American can't run cattle in Mexico. But this is the wrong way to convince him. All you've done is to show me that my line riders should go armed. Starting today, they will. Anybody we find riding through the herd without an engraved invitation from me had better be armed, too."

IV

WITH THE IDEA OF GETTING a line on the calf-count in the long-horn pasture, Charlie headed west into the foothills, taking a roundabout way back to the branding camp. Cort said, once, "That greaser would kill his grandmother for the gold in her teeth. Blackleg! They don't stand around cropping grass that way when they've got blackleg."

Then he appeared to forget the whole incident. As they rode, he whistled, and after a while taunted, "Didn't I see you coming out of Tonia's *jaca*? Not looking for a Mexican wife to go with your ranch, are you?"

Charlie had not shaken the distemper his suspicion of Cort had put him in. He told the truth about Tonia. "I'd bet double-eagles to pesos she turned those brutes out the gate. But I can't prove it by high heels, when I wear them myself."

Cort chuckled. He started to roll a smoke, and Charlie had a small pang of jealousy, watching him. He was the same easy-going cowpoke who had crossed the border a few weeks ago, irresponsible, carefree, with no more ballast than a canoe. Charlie was already dragging the leg-iron

of responsibility. He knew he would have to get this thing off his chest, sooner or later.

"Why didn't you tell me Castillo tried to bribe you?"

Cort popped a match with his thumb nail. He didn't answer until he had the cigarette going and had snapped the match in two. "Why worry you? Everybody had been trying to throw the fear into you. I told him to go to hell, and that was the end of it."

"Castillo didn't seem to think it was. He was still counting on you helping him."

Cort gave him a pained look. "Charlie, for Pete's sake! If you'd inherited a horse, I suppose I'd be riding off on it the first time you turned your back."

Charlie stared at him a moment. Then he grinned and the tenseness went out of him. "Cort," he said, "you should have shot me for asking that. I forgot you're going to make your fortune backing the double-zero."

"Don't forget it again," Cort said. The wind took the smoke he exhaled; the same wind took the last of Charlie's suspicions with it.

The plain broke into hogbacks and eroded barrancas. A strong east wind combed the grass and buffeted the pinons and cedars. The range tilted up, rising steeply to a chain of mountains faced with pipe-organ formations of stone. The canyons deepened, the timber grew heavier. Along a thread of silver water they discovered cow-tracks. The stream led them up a twisting canyon which opened into a little park sentried with pines. On the still air hung an odor which set Charlie's mouth to watering. It was a moment before the illogicality of a civilized odor like that of beef-stew in a remote spot such as this struck him.

He looked at Cort. Cort was staring at him. Before either of them could speak, the sand between their ponies' hoofs was disturbed by something which struck a long, shallow furrow and went whining past them. The rifle shot slammed down from a ledge a split-second later.

A high yell followed it. "Get out of here, you buzzards! Get out fast!"

It was a girl's voice with a vixen edge that raised the hair on the back of Charlie's neck. Right now there was nothing to

do but keep both hands in sight and turn his horse back. He said, "Yes, ma'am."

The bank went up steeply from the trail. The ledge was formed where a cleavage occurred in the sloping pile of rotted stone. Brush grew in the crevices, and among the thorned wands of an *ocotillo* burned a blue spark of metal. The girl lay at the base of the plant, almost hidden.

Cort rode ahead of Charlie, back down the stream. "Ma'am," he called, "you talk good English for a native."

There was no answer from the ledge. Charlie's rein-hand touched his rope, lying coiled over the saddle-horn. He wondered what kind of gun the girl had used, that it required no re-cocking. There had been no clink of metal since the shot. Somebody, he figured, was rattled.

As he passed beneath her, nearly hidden from her view, he lifted the rope and tossed the loop onto the ledge. There was a gasp and then a scrambling as he spurred down-canyon, taking a dally about the horn. He looked back and saw a girl with braided yellow hair, clad in overall pants and a pony-skin jacket, come sliding down the rough face of the stone. The gun clattered along ahead of her.

SHE lay still for a moment after she landed, so that they were at her side before she came up, swearing and fighting. Her face was scratched, her hands bled, her shirt was torn so that the white skin of her breast was exposed, in sharp contrast to her deeply-tanned face. Cort caught her arms. She tried to bite him. He laughed and held her tighter. But Charlie saw desperation in her face and a genuine terror.

"All right, we'll get out!" she said. "Drive a sick man and a girl out, and laugh about it!"

"Who's 'we'?" Charlie asked. "We didn't know anybody was here."

She scanned him closely. He observed her body relax. Cort released her, then. "And I didn't know you were Americans," she said. "I thought you were some of those dirty greasers sent down here to run us out. I mean, me and Pop. We're traders, but Pop's too sick to move. Yes, and I killed one of their steers!" she said defiantly. "It was that or starve."

"One of *my* steers," Charlie corrected. "This is my range, lady. If your dad's

sick, why didn't you come out for help?"

The blond hair tossed. It was long and braided, with a sheen of pure gold. The eyes were gray, giving a kind of animal sharpness and beauty to her face. Even in shirt and levis, she couldn't have fooled anybody. The curves under the shirt were soft and full; the levis were snug across the hips.

"I wouldn't ask a Mexican for help if I was starving," she said, bitterly. "They raided us this side of Chihuahua. We had five wagons of trade goods. They killed all of our men and put a slug in Pop. He came down with a fever before I could get him out of their damned country." The cleft chin went up. "Why don't you turn us over to the *Rurales*? I killed one of your steers, didn't I?"

Charlie stared at her. So this was the last remnant of the massacred wagon-train! He felt an immense pity for the old man and the girl. But even at this moment, Cort could find something to joke about. He held her by the chin and with his handkerchief dabbed at a deep scratch on her cheek. "For a kiss," he said, "I'd square that with my pardner. Is my credit good, Charlie?"

"It's good with me," Charlie grinned.

The girl gave Charlie a close look, and then stared at Cort. And right then, Charlie knew there was going to be a meeting of the wild strains in each of them. Soberly, she peered into his eyes. Then she smiled. "I've never kissed a man without I knew his name," she said.

"Cort. Cort Carraday."

Her slim brown arms went around his neck. She kissed him on the lips, long and clingingly. When she stood back, Cort looked more like a man who has been hit on the chin than kissed. For the first time in his life, a kiss had reached him.

"Do I need a receipt, Cort?" the girl asked.

Cort's face burned. He took a long breath. "What name would I put on it if you did?"

"Amy Sheridan." She turned and walked up the stream, limping a little after her fall.

The camp was hidden behind a shoulder of rock, consisting merely of a high-sided freight wagon with a canvas top and some crates piled around a fire on which a Dutch

oven bubbled. On a clothesline was an odd assortment of man's clothing, a girl's, and long strips of sun-dried beef. She went to the back of the wagon.

"Pop! There's a couple of men here."

It was not a man's voice that replied. It was a hoarse, windy whisper, that death sometimes uses.

"Lord, girl, why didn't you—"

"They're all right, Pop," Amy interrupted. "Americans, and one of them owns the land we're on. They're going to help us."

She beckoned them. Charlie looked in at a skeleton under a blanket. There was the ugly, sweetish smell that dying men have when they have suffered long in unwashed blankets. Charlie did not see the mouth move, but he heard the man whisper.

"Got any whiskey, mister?"

"Plenty, where we're going. Can you stand a ride?"

"If it kills me, it'll be a blessing."

Charlie and Cort rode up to where the mules were staked. They harnessed them to the wagon. Cort offered to help Amy drive. They tied his pony on behind and started down the canyon.

THEY wore out that night on the prairie, five miles from Hacienda Rio Chula. At noon they hauled through the gate into the courtyard. Amy stood in the middle of the yard, staring at the slotted towers and the great block of masonry forming the front buildings.

Tonia appeared from her cottage. Charlie smiled at her meeting with Amy Sheridan. Tonio stared at the golden, braided pigtailed; she frowned at the roughness of the girl's clothing. Then she smiled and murmured, "*Uenos dios*," but Amy, with her suspicion of anything Mexican, did not acknowledge the welcome. She looked at Tonia critically and turned to Cort.

"She's pretty." It was an accusation.

Cort began, "Oh, she's just—" He glanced at Charlie. "She's the *mayordomo's* daughter."

Charlie had an instant's resentment . . . *She's just one of the natives*, Cort had been about to say. Just a greaser. But greasers had pride and intelligence, and sometimes they had beauty. Sometimes they had all three. In Tonia's face he saw that she had interpreted Amy Sheridan's manner, if she

could not understand the words. He tried to make his orders sound more like a suggestion than a command.

"Find them some dry, clean rooms, will you? And see that there's a fire, and some broth and whiskey for the old man. He's pretty sick."

Tonia nodded. It appeared that she comprehended a little English. She instructed Charlie, in Spanish, "Thank the *senorita* for me. She is pretty, too. Blondes are always prettier than brunettes, no?"

"All depends on how they act," Charlie told her.

In some unused rooms off the chapel, Tonia had furniture installed, fires laid, and clean blankets spread. While the rooms were warming, Charlie had Padre Alonso, the *hacienda* priest and physician, examine the old man. Dick Sheridan, the trader, saw his brown skin and cursed him. The *curo* said nothing, taking his pulse silently, examining his eyes, and finally leaving the wagon.

"He will die in a week," he said softly. "It would not be a kindness to bring a doctor from Chihuahua; it would simply be an unkindness to the doctor."

For a while Charlie thought about it; as they were carrying Dick Sheridan into the bedroom, he decided to tell Amy. She took it the way wild things always take catastrophe, wordlessly, with calm fatalism.

She looked across the walls toward the timbered mountains. She said, "I'll pay them back, Charlie. I'll pay them back!"

They went back to the cow-camp that afternoon.

IT WAS nearly three weeks before the branding was finished. With the hold-up drifting toward the pass, Charlie took the bulk of the crew back to Rio Chula to get the Anguses started. He was selling only a hundred *corrientes*, good beef-cattle but not the stuff to build a herd with.

As the tired, unshaven gang of cow-punchers trailed into the *hacienda*, Don Juan spoke to Charlie. "What shall I say to the men about the fiesta, Don Carlos?"

"What fiesta?"

"The fiesta of the roundup!" The old man looked surprised. "It was the custom of Don Miguel before the cattle-drive to do so . . ."

Charlie smiled. "Start the fires," he said.

"And tell the cook I don't like too much garlic."

He went over to the rooms behind the chapel, where Dick Sheridan and his girl were staying. He had heard nothing of them in two weeks. He had a small fear that Dick Sheridan would be dead, and perhaps a fear that he would not. It seemed useless for a man to suffer hopelessly. But Sheridan, clinging like a dying puma to a rotten shred of life, lay in a half-coma in his bed. The stench in his room was sickening. Charlie got out.

In his room, Charlie found a letter from Joel Harkrider, with a postmark two weeks old. In their easy-going way, the servants had figured it could wait on the roundup. As it happened, it couldn't.

Charlie read it, while his mind began desperately to figure ways and means . . .

Friend Drake: Hope you are doing well. Have to tell you, however, that a suit has been brought against you for collection of some notes I didn't know existed. Castillo acquired them from a bank. The principal was only four thousand a year ago, but the way they figure interest down here, it amounts to six thousand now.

You've got until the seventeenth to pay up. After that, the ranch may go on the block. Better sell those cattle and get the money down here.

It killed the fiesta atmosphere like a bullet. The seventeenth! That gave him one week to make the trip to El Paso and get back! He could do it, but only if his cattle cars were on time and he found an immediate buyer.

He spent that day checking and re-checking dates and figures.

All that afternoon, smoke from the barbecue pits hung over the ranch. In the kitchen, the slapping of women's hands shaping *torillas* was incessant. The tang of cooking chilis invaded every room.

Off Charlie's bedroom was a large *patio*, the heart of the *hacienda*. The entrance to it was through an arched passageway. At dusk, lanterns were hung from the rafters and food began to be carried in and arranged on up-ended barrels. The workers commenced streaming in. Cowboys wore their finest *tazas* and *sombreros*. The girls who did the meanest chores about the ranch were mysterious, dark-eyed creatures in full skirts and embroidered blouses.

Someone strummed a guitar. Suddenly there was focus to the excitement. They were pairing off for the dance. Charlie had been anxious to stay out of it, but Juan Bravo dragged him over to Tonia. "She is one to speak too quickly," he said. "But there is not a better dancer on Rio Chula."

The music was in full swing, but no one danced yet; they were waiting for the *patron* to start it. Charlie was desperate. All he knew about dancing was the Varsoviana. He looked into Tonia's face and saw there a laughing enjoyment of his plight. With a sort of desperation, he recalled the quick, rhythmic stamping of the dancers in the Chihuahua saloon. He took Tonia's hand and gave her a spin. His spurs set up a musical rattling as he went out to meet her, hands on his hips.

He kept up the bluff, somehow, until the rest were dancing. Tonia looked surprised. She still smiled, but it was a smile without a sting. Charlie almost wished she had kept the other smile. He was afraid of her when she looked that way; afraid of forgetting his resolve to keep his distance from her and let her know her place. Under his hand her waist was like a reed. He could have enjoyed it, except that he was beginning to step on her toes. He was lost.

Over on a bench, Cort Carraday sat with Amy. She wore a long gown Tonia had lent her. Her blond hair was braided and arranged in a kind of corona over her head. Charlie hated to break them up, but he had to get out of this. He got Cort's eye and signalled him.

Cort said something to Amy and came to relieve him. Charlie said to Tonia, "Excuse me. I've got to see about the wine."

He sat beside Amy. It was not over thirty seconds before he knew he had made a desperate error. Amy's eyes, as she watched Cort and the Mexican girl go through the figures, had a strange, wicked shine. Suddenly she turned to Charlie.

"Don't you want to dance?"

"I wish I could."

Amy laughed. "Sure, so you could dance with your little *amiga*!"

The odd part was, Charlie felt a species of jealousy, too. Cort, who had the light heart for it, danced like a Mexican. Once Charlie saw him kiss Tonia's cheek. She turned her head away, and through the moving pattern of dancers their eyes met;

she was laughing. Charlie felt Amy tense, her fingers clenching the edge of the bench. *Cort, you damned fool!* he thought. She's not the kind to use jealousy on. She'll cut your heart out.

Charlie began to hum a little louder than his mood called for. He decided maybe he was hungry. "How about some chuck?" he asked Amy.

She took his arm, giving it a squeeze. As they passed through the arch, she tossed a backward glance at the others.

At the smoking barbecue pits, Charlie filled their plates and got pottery cups of coffee. They went back. As he started to eat, Charlie glanced about for Tonia and Cort. Amy was looking for them, too.

They were gone.

V

CHARLIE STARTED TO RISE and nearly tipped his plate over. His heart was hitting his chest with little jolts. Was Cort crazy? Not only to try to make Amy jealous, but to fool around with a decent Mexican girl as though she were a saloon entertainer.

Amy was suddenly on her feet. She tried to pass him. He caught her wrist. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing! I'm going to my room." In the lamplight, tears sparkled in her eyes.

Charlie tried to pull her back down on the bench. "They're probably gone out for food."

Amy tore loose from him. "They've gone, all right, but not for food."

She ran down the walk and through the arch.

Something had happened to Charlie's food. It was sawdust. Something was wrong with the wine. He realized that something would remain wrong with them until Tonia came back. He thought, "What happens is up to her. A woman can end a party any time she likes. It's none of my business what she is."

But that sick breathlessness stayed with him like the jolt of a saddle-horn. Charlie Drake was not one to deceive himself. He came to a decision. He would send her and Don Juan out to the last line-camp on the ranch. He would bury them where he'd never see her again.

It was one thing to dislike a woman, and

another to be in love with her at the same time. It was going to happen to him. He was not going to be made a fool of by a girl who despised him both for what he was and for what he was not.

Someone stopped beside him, and he looked up to see Cort. Cort sat down. His left cheek was red, but he was grinning.

"She's a keep-your-distance girl, Charlie. Don't you forget it."

"What happened?"

Cort chuckled. "The usual. Just as I thought I was making time, she slapped me."

"I didn't see her come back."

"She said she was going over to her shack for a while," Cort glanced about. "Where's Amy?"

Charlie drank his coffee. "Where do you think? Cort, if you don't end up by hanging, you'll finish with a woman's fingernails cutting your jugular vein."

Cort looked pleased, his dark, good-looking face flushed. "She wasn't jealous?"

"If you don't think so, just hike over there and try to explain."

Cort scratched his head. "It might be a good idea, at that."

Gradually it came to Charlie that Tonia's few minutes were extending beyond a half-hour. In his mind a red flag of suspicion fluttered. He had almost forgotten about the lost Angus bulls, but now he was recalling that only a couple of punchers were on guard around the big corrals outside the hacienda where the hold-up herd was penned . . .

He walked to the courtyard. It was in full darkness, but he could hear the sounds made by the animals in their stalls. He turned to search the *jacales*. There was a light in Juan Bravo's quarters. Charlie knocked.

"Tonia!"

Getting no answer, he opened the door. The place was empty. Charlie strode across the ground to the gate. The heavy bolts had been slipped and it stood open a foot. He silenced his spur-rowels with match-sticks and passed through.

In the night the sounds of the herd were restless. Far out on the mesa, at the most distant edge of the great cedar-pole corrals, a vaquero sang to the cattle. Charlie approached the main corral.

Suddenly he saw them . . . a single file

of steers, ambling unhurriedly from the corral. At the same time, he saw the figure at the left of the gate.

SHE did not see him at once. She must have changed her clothes, for the white gown would have blazed like a torch in the darkness. Only her face showed, a pale oval against the darkly-massed herd. Charlie began to walk towards her.

The cattle sensed him first. A big Angus steer just poking its head through the gate swerved. Charlie moved in fast. He slammed the gate and swung to catch the girl, darting toward the *hacienda*. On high heels, she was not difficult to overtake.

He held her from the back, feeling the softness of her hair against his face. Over the white dress she wore an old poncho of her father's, a plain dark *sarape* with a hole in the center for the wearer's head.

Charlie said, "You Mexicans have a saying for this. '*Huele, y no perfume!*'"

After a long time, Tonia spoke, tightly. "I am not sorry I tried it—only that I was caught."

"I believe it," Charlie said. "And I believe you could give lessons to a sidewinder, for treachery. I knew it was you who let the bulls out. And I knew you'd try to let the cattle out tonight. Why?"

Tonia wouldn't answer. She was still breathing hard; a thin rind of moon brushed shadows into her face, emphasizing the thin cheeks, the pulsating hollow of her throat.

"So now," Charlie said, "I've got to fire your father, to get rid of you. And I need him."

"Then don't fire him. Punish me, but let him stay."

Charlie's lips smiled. "I wonder how you would go about punishing a thief in skirts, with a red comb in her hair?"

She shrugged. "Castillo would know. He has had men whipped to death. I don't think it would matter to him what kind of clothes a thief wore."

For an instant she was silent, her eyes going over his face. "I like Senor Cort," she said. "I like him because he doesn't pretend to be what he isn't."

"So you still think I've got a blacksnake in my suitcase."

"If a rich American left his ranch to a Mexican, wouldn't you wonder why? Don

Miguel met you only once. Yet he left his ranch to you when he died. And the lawyer who held the will was an American, too. I've kept hoping someone would find the real will before you take all the cattle north."

Charlie laughed. "So you didn't know the will was held by a Mexican, who turned it over to Harkrider because he spoke English!"

The impact of it was in her eyes. She had fabricated a legend around him, a dramatic lie in which he was a conniving American cattle-thief. And now that he had dissolved it, she was groping. It gave him a little better understanding into her mind, too, into the love she had for the ranch *El Patron Viejo* had built.

"You're lying." She said it positively; yet she was still searching his eyes.

"You can ask Harkrider. Not that it matters. I suppose I should fire your father and you both, just to be safe. But Don Juan is a good man, and he doesn't hate gringos. So I'm sending you where you can't do any damage . . . They need a cook at Noche Buena camp. That's twenty miles across the hills."

Though her chin went up, Charlie knew he had touched her. "If you do, my father will quit," she declared.

"I've got a notion that if I tell him who killed his favorite bulls, he'll run you out there himself."

He was suddenly enjoying it. For the first time, he had her on the defensive. She knew she had been wrong, and wanted to apologize, but she was going to be very sure before she humbled herself. "Don Charlie," she said thoughtfully, "you could tell him; then he will watch me, himself."

Charlie shook his head. "You're too dangerous. You're *muy peligrosa*."

She was quick to sense that he was half bantering. A light from the *hacienda* was reflected softly in her eyes. "Then watch me yourself," she suggested.

"I don't want to watch you."

"Are you afraid of me? I don't carry a knife."

The breathlessness which had overcome him while she was with Cort came over him again. He had a desire to possess her the way he had that first morning, but he remembered how that had gone. He said gruffly, "All right. You can stay. But, if it

happens again, it will be one for the police."

As he started away, she caught his hand. "Charlie! I'm sorry. I was wrong to suspect you, and I was wrong to let the bulls out. But I didn't know—"

At the gate, Charlie turned roughly. "I was wrong, too. I had a nice, easy life and now I've lost it. I hate being a *patron*, and I hate being in love. But I'm both."

He held her arms tightly, but she did not pull away. In the darkness, it was hard to tell whether she smiled. She said meekly, "They say being in love is nice."

"No. Only this part," Charlie said, "is nice." He held her closely by the arms, bending to kiss her. He knew how it would be, and he was crazy enough not to care. The amazing part was that it didn't go the way it had before. Her arms, slim and strong, moved up and around him, holding him. Her lips were firm and warm, half-parted—

The gate stirred rustily on its forged iron hinges. They both started. The voice of Don Juan, blurted, "Excuse me . . . I did not know."—Then: "Tonia! Why are you not—" At once his glance recognized Charlie. He looked startled and unhappy. "*Patron*, I am sorry. But I had a message, and when I did not find you inside I thought to look out here."

In Charlie's face and neck, the blood surged violently. "What was it?"

"That ten men are riding up the cliff trail. The guard in the west tower saw them. It would be well to bar the gates. A precaution. It is possible they are *Rurales*, what you would call Rangers."

VI

THEY STOOD IN ONE OF THE *torreones*, a squat adobe tower with tall rifle slots which guarded the approach to the *hacienda*. A penetrating chill filled the small angular room. Cort had come up with Charlie and Juan Bravo. Only a few men had been sent to the roof to take up guard. Down below, the rest still drank wine and ate barbecued beef and danced.

Hoof-sounds rattled on the dark night air and a moment later a file of horsemen came over the rim of the mesa. Bravo studied them. "*Rurales*! But why?"

Charlie and Cort linked glances. Charlie

was thinking of the saloon fight in Chihuahua. The horses hauled up before the gate, restless under harsh Mexican bits. A lean rider in a tall sombrero struck the gate with the barrel of his rifle.

"*Abra!*"

"For whom?" Charlie shouted down.

"Captain Villalobos. Of the Rural Police."

Don Juan breathed, "Si! It is Villalobos. I know him."

"What's the trouble?" Charlie demanded.

"*Fuegos!* Must we shout here in the cold, when there is the smell of a fiesta inside?" the *Rurales* laughed; Captain Villalobos called up, "We look for two Americans, an old man and a girl. Have you seen them?"

A panic look struck into Cort Carraday's face. Charlie knew what had to be done.

"We haven't seen them," he said. "But come in and warm yourselves."

He faced Juan Bravo, not knowing how to ask it. There was no reason why the *segundo* should perjure himself for a couple of Americans. Nor was there any reason why Charlie Drake should, except that he thought the Sheridans had suffered enough down here, and that the trader would die if he were moved.

With a short brown forefinger, Bravo tapped his nose rapidly. "In the grain shed ... No—they may feed their horses. Ay! In the bell-tower, above the chapel! Meet your guests, Don Carlos. I will see that it is done."

Charlie gripped his shoulder for a moment. "For this kind of work, there's a bonus."

As they went down, Cort said, "Thanks, kid. You're taking a big risk for an old man and somebody else's girl."

Charlie shrugged. "I don't know what the charge is, but I know they'd lock them up till they rotted."

Villalobos led his men into the *hacienda*, shadowed, tall-hatted men with *zarapes* muffling the lower halves of their faces. The captain dismounted and studied closely as he shook his hand. The eyes of Villalobos were bloodshot from the wind; his face was spare and hard and his hand had the texture of dried rawhide.

"Where is Juan Bravo?" he inquired.

"He's with a herd, out back. I've sent for him."

Through cold, silent lanes between the buildings, they moved toward the warmth of the barbecue fires. "Border jumpers?" Charlie asked.

"Murderers. They ambushed a party of traders on the Chihuahua road. Vasquez, Castillo's foreman, informs me he saw a wagon proceeding this way a few days after the murders."

He glanced at Charlie, and Charlie did not permit himself to look at Cort. Cort was the one it must have hit hardest. He was the one who, if Villalobos told it correctly, was in love with a pretty murderess.

The *Rurales* ate like hungry dogs. Some of them had drifted into the patio by the time Don Juan hurried up, rubbing his hands together. He and Villalobos embraced in the Mexican fashion, pounding each other on the back and lying about how they had missed one another. Bravo affected shock when he heard of the crime.

"But of course they are not here! Still," he said, "it would be well to search. It is possible they were smuggled in on a load of hay."

Captain Villalobos grunted as he tore a strip of beef from the chunk he held in his fingers. "We will search."

They moved into the patio, where Villalobos drifted among the workers. He recognized Tonia and paid exaggerated compliments, over which she laughed. Her father hastily told her what had happened. "Naturally," he said pointedly, "they cannot be in the *hacienda*."

Her eyes widened a little. She looked at Charlie, and then at Villalobos. "Impossible," she said. "The walls are much too high."

"But the gates are wide," said the captain, smiling.

He showed no haste to begin the search. It was a cold night and his attention was first for food and drink. Thus, Juan Bravo was able to get Charlie aside.

"The old one is out of his head. When I tried to move him, he threatened to kill me!"

OUT of the corner of his eye, Charlie was conscious of Villalobos' attention. He said casually, "I hadn't noticed, Don Juan. We'll bring another keg up right now." He disengaged his key-ring



Sheridan raised the gun. "Outa here, greaser!"

from his belt and called to the *Rural*. "Will you excuse us, Captain? The wine's running low."

"A catastrophe," smiled Villalobos.

Charlie and Don Juan went into the main building. Immediately Charlie strode through the rooms toward the *saguan*, the arched passageway off which opened the chapel. The Mexican scurried at his heels, a dark shadow with clanking spurs.

"But if we go in, patron, he will kill us!"

"I'll go in first. He doesn't trust a Mexican."

He stood a moment in the dark passage, his eyes and ears alive. Quickly, then, he crossed to the chapel. He rapped lightly and Amy's voice came from the darkened room. "Charlie?"

"Open up! Villalobos will be here any minute!"

The door was unbarred and, in the ruddy surge of the hearth, Charlie saw Amy standing with an enormous cap-and-ball pistol in her hand and behind her, a lean right-angle on the cot, her father crouched with a rifle in his hands.

"He's crazy as a loon!" Amy whispered tensely. "I can't get that thing away from him."

Charlie stepped inside. At once Dick Sheridan raised the gun. "Outa here, greaser!"

Charlie went toward him. "It's me, old timer. Charlie Drake. The lawdogs are howling outside. We've got to move you."

"Git back. I don't keer if you're Daniel Boone. I'm watching out for my ownself!" The long gun trembled.

"Pop! It's Charlie. They'll kill us if they find us here, stand us up against a wall and shoot us without a trial. You know those Mexicans!"

"Shore do. And I'm about to kill one. Pass that chair, hombre, and—"

Reaching the chair, Charlie hesitated. If there were more time! The rifle was heavy; he saw it begin to sag in Dick Sheridan's hands. Now he rested his hands on the back of the chair. "Amy's right. Dick. You don't stand a chance with them."

While he talked, the chair lifted and soared gently toward Sheridan. At the last instant, the trader perceived what had happened. He tried to squirm aside, but the chair was descending on him. The long barrel was struck down. Charlie ran toward him.

There was a magnificent roar, an end-of-the-world explosion that filled every corner

of the room with redness for one shattered second, and then expired. A lead ball caromed savagely about the plastered walls for an endless interval.

Bravo sprang into the doorway. "*Patrón!*" Down the corridor, the *Rurales* were running.

"I'm all right," Charlie snapped. "Head them off. Amy and I will move him."

He stepped in close and brought his fist solidly to the point of the trader's chin. Dick Sheridan went limp. Amy had closed the door and replaced the bar. Charlie could just discern her, a slender taper against the dark panel.

Several men ran up. Questions were fired like birdshot, and in this moment Charlie knew that unless Don Juan were superhuman, it was all up with the Sheridans, and probably with him.

Don Juan was saying coolly, "It could have been an owl, *compadres*. *Quien sabe?* I heard a noise and come out to see. I saw it on the wall and fired. It disappeared. Owl or man, it should be on the ground beyond the wall."

Footfalls rushed away.

Charlie lit a candle and placed it in Amy's hand. "The stairs behind the altar. Bring your blankets."

Silently, they traversed the dark chapel. Amy held the door open and Charlie groped inside. The steps were perilous even if a man did not have a hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight to carry. They mounted in tight spirals to the belfry, an inch wide next to the column, six inches at the circumference. Charlie was breathless and dizzy when they came out into the clear black night of the belfry. They spread the blankets and made Dick Sheridan as comfortable as possible.

Charlie told Amy to tie him and put a gag in his mouth. "If he starts yelling, you're cooked. And if they look at Don Juan's gun and find it hasn't been fired, you're cooked anyway!"

When he went down, he dumped water on the hearth-coals. He obliterated all signs of occupancy and left the door unlocked when he departed.

He looped back through the house, secured a keg of wine from the cellar, and returned to the patio. It was deserted of all the men. He joined them outside the walls. There was no trace of an owl or a

man. Villalobos' manner was that of a whip coiled to crack. He led his men back into the *hacienda*.

With patient thoroughness, he brought his attention to every square foot of the ranch-house and outbuildings. He did not miss the tanning shed nor the harness room.

He spent a moment or two in the chapel. He glanced in the room the Sheridans had occupied. Here he hesitated a moment, while Charlie's heart stopped. Had he noticed that the air was too warm for a deserted store-room?

But he strode on out.

WHEN the search was finished, Captain Villalobos made a decision. "It was a false alarm. The old ones are too quick to fire. Nevertheless, it is too late to ride farther tonight, Don Carlos. With your permission, we will pass the night in the courtyard."

Charlie had hay spread on the ground for the men, and then turned in. But he lay sleepless, thinking of an old man dying in the freezing night air of the belfry, with a girl and a mute corroded bell for comfort.

Then with tingling warmth he recalled the last moment with Tonia. *Being in love is nice*, she had said.

Did she know it could be inconvenient, as well? In his mind still lay, like a half-completed chart, a plan: The things he and Cort were going to do when they left here; the places they would see. Roulette in Buenos Aires and Rio; a girl for each arm in Tehuantepec. But even Charlie Drake knew that you could enjoy none of these good things if you kept looking back over your shoulder.

In the morning, with the night's frost still on the red, tiled roofs, the *Rurales* rode out. Charlie dressed and hurried to the chapel. Juan Bravo had already brought the Sheridans down. Amy was shivering, pinched with cold. Her father was delirious. He rambled through mad conversations punctuated with shouts. Amy regarded him wearily.

"I had to keep him gagged all night. He was yelling like a fool." Then the sage-green eyes flicked to Charlie. "What did they say about us?"

Charlie lit a cigarette. "It was a little

different from the way you told it. Villalobos has it that you murdered a party of Mexicans."

Cort was putting mesquite roots on the growing fire; he did not look up.

"Villalobos," Amy snapped, "is a damned liar. Well—maybe I didn't tell the whole story. I didn't talk about the mercury, did I?"

Charlie drew on the cigarette and watched her, and wondered how much you could believe of what Amy Sheridan said.

"You can't make a living hauling shoes and chilis back and forth across the line. So once in a while Pop bought a few flasks of mercury at the Puerco mines and smuggled them into the States. I guess we got the reputation of carrying bar-gold around with us, though. Before we left Chihuahua, this time, we found where somebody'd been poking around in the wagon. First night out, they raided us. We got away with only one wagon and our skins."

She came up to Charlie and took the cigarette from his lips. She drew on it and gave him a defiant smile. "You see, I'm really a pretty tough character, Charlie. Sometimes I smoke. And I kill Mexicans. And I don't give a damn whether you believe me or not."

"You'd better. If I don't, I'll lock you up and send for Villalobos."

From the corner fireplace, Cort interrupted. "Don't be clowning. You know what happened. The old man must have punctured a couple of them. They went back and told how they were attacked, and down came the *Rurales*."

Beyond the door, heatless sunlight burned on a patch of ground. Charlie squinted at it. "That's good enough for me," he said. "You'd better stay until things are quiet, Amy, after your father—after he's all right."

He walked to the corral. Juan Bravo had fifteen riders ready for the beef-drive to El Sauz, where the cattle would be loaded into cars.

"Best that we both go with the cattle train," he informed Charlie. "I am acquainted with the tax collector; sometimes the pinch can be made less painful."

A week ago, Charlie would have been afraid to suggest to Cort that he stay behind. Today he took it calmly. "How

long will you be gone anyways?" he asked Charlie.

"Four or five days." Charlie grinned. "Got it bad, haven't you?"

Unsmiling, Cort seemed to look beyond him. "I don't know. Maybe next week I can't see her for trail dust."

"I hope so. We've got some riding to do after I come back. I may sell out. I've got Castillo in a corner, now. He knows he's going to have to pay."

Cort shook his head. "Don't ever think you've got a Mex in a corner. That may be when he's just fixing to pull something out of his hat. Don't forget it."

All the ranch women and the numberless children were standing outside the wall as the herd moved out. Juan Bravo wore his pride like a silver-trimmed jacket. He had raised these cattle; they were, his manner said, just a little better than any cattle in Mexico. His men, too, were over-casual about it all. The women smiled and nodded, while the children ran along beside the cattle.

At the wall's corner, against the white-washed roughness of the bricks, stood Tonia. Her slim legs, the waist that was like a reed, were sketched against the light wall. She waved, and over the muted shuffling of the hoofs he heard her cry: "*Que te vaya bien!*"

Te . . . the pronoun as intimate as the brush of a girl's lashes on your cheek. Charlie smiled and waved back and felt like a damned fool; at the same time he warmed with the pride women have always kindled in men by persuading them they are doing something spectacular or brave.

She waved again, and when he turned it was to be confronted by Don Juan's thoughtful, frowning gaze. Don Juan shifted his glance to the herd. Sometime later, he said, "If you have daughters, senior, have ugly ones. That one is an anxiety."

"Last summer it was Felipe. Last spring, for two months, she was in love with Ysidoro, the tanner. And now again she acts like one in a fever, singing and laughing when she is not dreaming at the window. . . . In a day's time, she can fall in love or decide she hates the man."

There began in Charlie an oblique jealousy for a series of lovers he had never

met... "I guess," he said, "They're all thataway."

"No. Not this way. Tonia is the worst who ever lived." Don Juan shook his head and spurred ahead to whoop a steer back in line.

Charlie felt less exhilarated as they rode on.

VII

A MIRACLE HAD OCCURRED AT El Sauz. On the rusty siding between the mountains and the dunes stood a dozen cattle cars. Charlie had waited for cars as long as two weeks. Two days delay, this time, would have finished him. In a windy red dusk, they loaded the cattle.

The station keeper brought a yellow flimsy to Charlie at the camp beside the tracks. "A train will pick your cars up at midnight, *senor*."

When the train arrived, Don Juan picked two men to ride the cattle cars, watching for downed animals. He and Charlie shared the caboose with a couple of taciturn trainmen.

They rattled northward along the base of the mountains. Every now and then someone would throw a chunk of coal in the stove. Against the windows flushed the first gray touch of dawn. Worn with the trail, Charlie nodded, moving through a purgatory of half-finished thoughts which he picked up, examined, and lost before reaching any conclusion.

He thought he had not slept, but suddenly a crash of couplings jarred him awake. The lantern bobbed in the half-light. Under them, the wheels ground to a halt.

Charlie looked at the brakeman. "Is there a stop here?"

The brakeman, fat unshaven, and grease-stained, lumbered to the ladder. "Not here. We are in the *medanos*."

He poked his head out of the cupola and immediately pulled it back in. Up the tracks they could hear a man shouting, and then the rattle of a door. The brakeman descended. He sat down and held his hands to the fire.

"What is it?" Charlie demanded.

"A holdup, *senor*. It is no business of mine. They will not disturb us if we leave them alone."

Don Juan secured his carbine from a corner and on the way to the ladder stopped before the trainman. "No business of yours! Make this your business, he-goat!" With the butt of his gun, he shoved the man over backward in his chair.

Charlie seized his gun and strode to the ladder behind him. The brakeman sat up. He appeared more disturbed than angry. "You will be murdered," he declared. "And for what? For twelve cars of cattle."

Bravo stepped onto the catwalk. When Charlie reached the roof of the caboose, he found him crouched there, appraising the scene ahead of them. All around were the sand dunes, with a rickety fence of slate on the west side of the tracks to hold back the drifting sand. A pearly shore of daylight lay on the horizon, but night had not fully yielded the desert.

Eastward, about a hundred yards, Charlie picked out the forms of eight or ten horses tended by a horse-holder. An *ocotillo*, half buried in sand, failed to hide this group. Charlie nudged Juan Bravo. Bravo acknowledged it by a lift of the chin. He pointed ahead along the flat crescent of cars halfway through a curve. "*Mire!*"

The engineer and fireman stood beside the pompous little Mexican locomotive with its fuming diamond-stack, in charge of a man with a carbine. Nearer, three men were standing beside a cattle-car while others, inside the car, endeavored to chouse the animals out. There was no ramp, and the steers were resisting.

Another man was running down the tracks toward the caboose, a chunky figure in baggy trousers and loose coat, a shell-belt sagging on his hips.

The battle-formation, to Charlie, appeared full of loop-holes. He spoke rapidly to Juan Bravo.

"Down the ladder and under the cars! I'll scatter their horses. You scatter the men up the line."

Bravo scuttled down the irons. Charlie descended until just his head and shoulders were above the roof-line. Out there in the sand, the horse-holder was having difficulty. Charlie laid the barrel of his gun across the cat-walk. At this instant a force lifted one of the wooden strips so that his gun was jolted out of line. There was the unresonant impact of the bullet and

almost simultaneously the report of a rifle.

He twisted and saw the gunman. It was the man who had been approaching the caboose. He had gone to one knee to squeeze off the shot. In a sprawl, he went against a car and out of Charlie's view.

But not out of Juan Bravo's. Charlie heard the compressed thud of his shot. He watched the rustler falter back into view and crash to his knees, losing his gun, and then slump heavily forward.

In Charlie's ears was the pounding of his pulse. His hands were not quite steady; he was glad to have a rest for the gun. He levelled into the brown mass of the horses and let the hammer fall.

A pony reared above the rest. The tender tried to yank it back into line, but it had pulled free. It took a couple of tortured lunges and went down. Another horse reared and the horse-holder lost this one. He shouted at the men by the cattle-car. One of them ran to help him.

CHARLIE fired again. With a target the size of a feed barn, he couldn't miss. A horse dropped, rolled and began to kick. Charlie winced. He thought, *It can't hurt worse than chewing a Spanish bit every day.*

Now the horse-herd was all over the landscape. They were running, buck-jumping, kicking at saddle-girths. The outlaw running from the tracks grabbed the reins of one and was yanked off his feet and dragged.

Charlie scrambled down the ladder. Juan Bravo was already two cars ahead. When Charlie reached him, he was spraddled behind a truck, his gun thrust from between the wheels. Charlie took a spot near him. Above them, cattle were moving restlessly in the car.

Bravo's old smooth-bore crashed. One of the men at the gate of the cattle car went back, his arms doubled over his belly. He sagged to the sand, while his partner snapped his carbine to his shoulder and fired at the flash of Bravo's weapon. It ricocheted off an iron wheel. From the interior of the car sprang two men who sprinted toward the horses. The sand, heavy and deep, dragged at their ankles. Charlie pulled a bead and then hesitated. It was like popping tin cans off a mud

fence. He had an idea they were out of this fight.

A prolonged wail of the locomotive's whistle caused him to stare up the tracks. The outlaw who had held the engineer and fireman was dodging through the brush. Down the line of cars reverberated a series of crashes, as the couplings jolted. Black smoke went up from the stack; the drivers skidded and took hold.

Charlie crawled out. Bravo followed a second later.

They let the cars rattle past until the caboose approached. Charlie caught the grab-irons and went up. As he reached the top, he heard the popping of rifle-fire from far off. A few bullets tore the panels of the old Mexican Central cars, and then the wheels were hammering exultantly and the powdery dust of their passing drifted in behind.

They entered the warm caboose. The brakeman had pulled from his shirt a medallion on a silver chain which he held in his fingers. Don Juan paused before him, an aged, bandy-legged rooster of a man.

"'No business of yours,'" he said scornfully. "No, it was business for men." He spat at his feet and sat on a bench near the fire, scowling at the chinks in the stove.

Charlie began replacing spent shells. Juan Bravo shook his head. "It was not like Castillo. He was not formerly so crude. Of course, he did not want the cattle. He merely wanted to frighten you. But it is shameful."

No, Charlie thought; it was not like Castillo. It was like somebody else, who was more direct.

AT JUAREZ, the dusty pueblo across the shallow Rio Grande from El Paso, Charlie sold the longhorns. He received enough money to make his peace with the tax collectors and drive his Aberdeen-Angus cattle across the river. Don Juan and the other men, having no immigration papers, remained at the stockyards until Charlie returned from the bank that afternoon, just before train time.

Bravo was puzzled by the new bag of cheap leather which Charlie carried. "The take," Charlie grinned. "Nine thousand

dollars gold, American. How'll you have yours?"

The engine whistled and they waded through the horde of peddlers selling reeking leather goods and poisonous-appearing food. Bravo frowned. "This is Mexico, *patron*. A draft would have been better. From Chihuahua, our men would have brought silver pesos, which are heavy. One man cannot carry enough to make robbery profitable."

Charlie shrugged. They took seats in the chilly, littered coach. "What makes this heavy," he said, "is these." He indicated their guns.

"*Eso!*" Don Juan agreed. But he was a man in whom worry flourished, and he carried his misgivings in his eyes.

It was midnight when they reached Rio Chula. Charlie slept with the bag beside his bed. He had not seen Tonia in four days, and he found himself anxious for her. Phrases of Don Juan's hovered around him like mosquitoes, keeping him awake.

Last summer it was Felipe, and before that it was Ysidoro, the tanner. She is the worst who ever lived!

A father's duplicity to keep an only daughter? or a warning dropped to keep a man from making a fool of himself? The warning was a little late, if it were that.

Charlie did not show up for breakfast until ten o'clock. The dining room doors were open onto the patio, so that the high-ceilinged room glowed with the light of the sun blazing on whitewashed walls. The stone walks had been scrubbed and shone wetly among the dead winter plants. As Charlie sat there drinking the odd stuff Mexicans called coffee, Cort and Amy came in through the patio.

With the light behind her, Amy's hair shimmered with fine golden lights. She was wearing a short skirt and drawstring blouse which Charlie suspected were Tonia's, but the way she wore them made them hers. She had the slender legs for a short skirt, the tanned arms for a sleeveless blouse. He found a change in her. The worry had gone out of her face. Her eyes had a brightness and her whole manner an intensity that made her noticed.

Seeing Charlie, they looked startled, and then Cort reddened and some inkling of what had happened came to Charlie. He

decided to let them bring it up. They sat across the table from him.

"How's your father?" he asked Amy.

Amy paused in the act of mixing hot milk and coffee elixir. Charlie saw her bite her lip. Cort glanced up.

"The night you left," he said. "He's in the graveyard up on the hill."

"But he won't stay there," Amy said softly. "Some day I'll have him moved back to Texas."

There was a pause, while a girl entered on bare feet to bring *pan dulce*. Cort's mood changed. He caught Charlie's glance. "You can congratulate me any time you want."

Somehow, Charlie felt sunk. He couldn't believe that it would wear, for either of them. But he mustered the heartiest air that was in him, reaching over to shake Cort's hand. "I thought so! When did it happen?"

Amy reached for Cort's hand. She gave Charlie an almost defiant look. "Yesterday. We knew it was going to happen, so it might as well be quick! We thought we'd stay until things cool off a little."

"As long as you like," Charlie told them. "I'll be going into Chihuahua tomorrow to see Harkrider. I've got just twenty-four hours to square those notes of Castillo's. Otherwise, I'm on my way home, broker than I was."

He had brought the money-sack with him. Cort frowned at it as Charlie rose and started out. "What's that?"

"Double eagles. And I'm living with them till I leave."

It was an odd thing, Charlie thought, that the caressing look Amy gave the bag as he walked out was almost the look she had given Cort when she took his hand.

VIII

CHARLIE LEFT THE BAG IN the office. He went out and smoked a cigarette on the wall of the horse corral.

He had baited a trap and now he was in a kind of terror of hearing the snap of its ruthless jaws. Too many small, furtive tracks had come to his attention recently. Hacienda Rio Chula was like a coin purse left on a saloon table. A lot of hands itched for it, leaving it alone only because the owner might be observing. With the lights

out, the same hands might become bolder. Charlie pondered it until his mind seemed to go out of focus. As he sat there, it was suddenly as if he were in a strange place.

He looked around at the tall white-washed walls, with their guard towers, at the rough mountains to the west. The smells were of charcoal fires and the hot animal stench of the tannery; the sounds were quick rattles of Spanish and the rolling of corn-grinders outside the kitchen. Foreign sounds and smells, things he had nothing to do with.

What was there to hold him if he wanted to leave? An obligation to a dead man was no obligation at all. He thought of the rude camaraderie of roundups in the Red River country; his heart expanded until it seemed to choke him.

He dropped from the wall. *Texas, here I come! Dealer, let's have three aces! And set 'em up for the house, bartender;* Cort was tied up; but he himself could still break away.

Charlie Drake was going home.

Juan Bravo was at lunch. He left his place at the table, making sweeping motions with his arms to welcome him. "*Pase! Pase usted!*" Then he stood rifle-straight and smiling, awaiting his orders. Tonia appeared in the kitchen door.

Charlie wished these people wouldn't be so damned polite. They made you feel obligated. He accepted coffee. He was aware of Tonia's presence in the room, and once he caught her eyes and the look he received was gentle and yet reproving. He could have asked her to sit down, but Don Juan, he knew, would be horrified. In Mexico, women knew their place.

Now that it was time to say it, he could not. What about Tonia? What about these people who had been spoiled by good treatment? Castillo would know how to take care of them.

He fashioned a cigarette, got the warm smoke in his lungs, and said, "I'm going to Chihuahua tomorrow, Don Juan. I'm going to sell the ranch."

Something in the bottom of the Mexican's coffee cup kept his eyes. "As you wish," he said.

"I guess an American is better off in America. Look how it's gone! I lose four of my best bulls. I tell lies to the *Rurales*,

and Lord knows how that'll come out! They hold up my cattle cars. The Indian sign's on me, that's all."

"Perhaps Mexico is not to blame for all those things."

Charlie gave him a close look and wondered how much he, too, had noticed.

"Whoever's to blame, they didn't use to happen to me."

Bravo sighed. He smiled wistfully. "*Esta bien. Esta bien.*" He sipped his coffee.

Charlie's glance narrowed on him. He was beginning to understand that this little wrinkled cowpuncher's craft was a deep and subtle thing.

In a moment, Juan Bravo arose. "At the time Don Miguel died," he said, "he left in my care a box for you. It was to be yours whenever you decided to leave." He went into the bedroom.

Tonia came quickly to Charlie's side. "So you are not afraid of Jose Castillo, but you are afraid of a woman!"

"What woman? Amy?"

Tonia tossed her dark braided hair. "Of me! You thought what happened the night of the fiesta was like a—a troth. And you didn't know how to break it except by leaving! Did you think it meant so much to me?" She said that with tears standing in her eyes and her underlip trembling.

SHE had Charlie off balance with the aggressiveness of her attack. "I knew how much it meant to you," he said. "Your father told me about Felipe and Ysidoro—and the rest."

"Felipe?" Tonia's head turned quizzically. "He is my cousin! And Ysidoro is seventy years old." She put a cool forefinger under his chin and tipped his face up to hers. There was the beginning of understanding in her eyes, something indignant mellowed with something tremulous. "What did my father say about Felipe and Ysidoro?"

Charlie stood up. "Weren't you going to marry Felipe last summer?"

A woman had never laughed like this before, he thought. Clear water laughed this way when it tumbled over marbled rocks, with a thousand glints. "I have never been about to marry anyone," she said. "The morning after the fiesta, my father said, 'Little birds who fly too high fall far.' He was hoping to discourage

me...Did I fly too high, Don Charlie?"

Charlie had her hands in his. "You could fly a lot higher than Charlie Drake," he told her. "Would you like Texas, Tonia?"

She could keep the frown from her face, but not out of her voice. "I could try to like it."

At that moment, Juan Bravo returned with a wooden box in his hands. He saw at once what was occurring. With his oblique diplomacy, he preferred not to notice. He placed the box on the table. "We will want hot milk for the coffee," he told Tonia.

The box was stout, with the imprint of an ammunition firm on the lid. Bravo pried the lid up with a knife. He pushed it over to Charlie.

Inside, there was an envelope sealed with red wax. There were dried red chilis, pottery cups containing corn, oats, and frijole beans. And there was a dull silver coin. Charlie saw that the envelope was inscribed with his name. He opened it.

My excellent American friend, he read. What I now make to you is a request for the burial of my land, which you are about to kill.

In this box you will find the first corn harvested on Hacienda Rio Chula, the first chilis, the first oats and frijoles. The peso was the first money received from the sale of a purebred steer from the State of Chihuahua. These mementoes you will burn.

I hope that Juan Bravo and his people did their best to please you. I am sorry that the ranch did not. You understand that in selling Rio Chula, the land will be permitted to die as the rest of Chihuahua is dying.

For this reason, my last wish is that you spend one hundred pesos for a wreath which will be hung above the main gate. Adios!

Miguel Castillo N.

Charlie closed the letter thoughtfully, creased the parchment fold with his thumb-nail several times, slipped it into his pocket. Juan Bravo had gone to stand by the window, watching an ox-cart lumber in with a load of hay. With his finger, Charlie stirred the fat yellow corn in the brown cup. He sniffed the chilis. His thumb rubbed the tarnished peso.

Damn a man who wills you a set of hobbles!

He looked again at the coin. His eyes lightened. *Heads I stay; tails I go.* The coin flashed, came down in his palm; he slapped it onto the back of his other hand. Tails.

Charlie hesitated. Two out of three, he thought.

The second was heads. On the third toss, tails again showed. Charlie thought a moment, grunted and threw the coin back in the box. Hell! What could you tell by a coin? You had to go by your conscience, even if you had only discovered it recently.

He took the box under his arm. "In the morning," he said, "I'll go to Chihuahua. The debts ought to be paid off. I won't sell just yet."

He placed the box in the office, beside the money bag on his desk.

HE WORE the day out in drinking wine in the patio, smoking, and feeling like a cattle baron. By dark, he was sure he wouldn't like playing the cattle baron often. He could feel the wine, and his mouth, from the tobacco, tasted like a saddle-horn. Cort and Amy showed up for dinner. Cort was flushed. He had been drinking, too, and not wine. The smell of brandy was on him, though Amy was quiet and sober.

They ate and departed. Charlie got the impression that marriage was beginning to work up saddle-sores on Cort Carraday's hide.

He went to his room and remained there until all the lights were out. Then he walked on unspurred boots to the office. He took a rawhide chair in a corner, where the moonlight did not reach.

Around midnight, shadows drifted silently through the patio. He heard a side door creak. Presently footfalls approached the office. Someone stumbled and a soft curse reached Charlie's ears. The knob turned.

A whisper scraped dryly through the silence. From the door, a tall shadow and a short one advanced to the desk. Charlie heard the chink of metal as the leather bag was lifted.

He struck a match.

There was Cort Carraday's startled grunt and a whirl of Amy's skirts as she turned, but Charlie did not look at them until he

had the lamp burning on the table beside him. Cort's long body faltered back against the desk. He gave Charlie a loose grin and with mock delicacy replaced the bag on the desk.

"We were just making sure those double eagles were being taken care of right," he said.

Amy's small white teeth flashed. "Shut up!" She turned on Charlie a vixenish stare. "Sitting back in a corner like a spider waiting to catch a fly! So you thought we were after your dirty cattle money!"

"Well, it isn't exactly money," said Charlie. "It's just iron washers. I sent the money to Chihuahua by draft."

Cort was drunk; foolishly, thickly drunk. He put an arm around Amy's shoulders. "Sweetheart, you get the best ideas!"

She thrust him away so that he fell into a chair. A decanter of wine stood on a cabinet near him. He reached it, pulled the stopper and drank from the bottle.

Charlie rolled a cigarette. "I'm glad of one thing, Cort. You had to be drunk before she could talk you into it."

"Talk him into it!" Amy spat. "He has some ideas of his own."

Charlie shook his head. "It's my fault as much as anybody's. I've bungled this whole thing. We've been partners in everything else, but I've hung onto this cow-spread like it was my last dollar. I'm going into town tomorrow, Cort. I'm going to have Harkrider cut you in for your half, legal."

"The hell with that," Cort said. He drank again from the decanter; a spill of red wine trickled down his chin and onto his shirt.

Amy lifted her chin defiantly. "We don't want any part of your spik-ranch! The sooner we get out of here, the better. That's the only reason we came in to-night. You've got to have money to buy your way out of this country."

"You'll have enough. But you can't take the train. Not with what they're waiting to hang on you at the border. There's got to be another way. Got any ideas, Cort?"

Cort was nodding over the bottle. Amy stepped to his side and knocked it on to

the floor. Wine and shards of pottery went all over the tiles.

Charlie sighed, as much for the death of things past as for what had occurred.

"Better get him to bed. I'll take him to town with me tomorrow. The lawyer ought to have some contacts."

IX

DURING THAT SHORT BUT dusty train-ride into Chihuahua, Cort was silent. They had left their horses with the station-keeper at El Sauz. Cort was a little uncertain as to the details of last night, but enough lingered with him to sour his mood. He masked his shame with a waspish temper.

In Joel Harkrider's law office, it was as cold as ever. A thin-cheeked girl labored over a copy-book in the outer office, a shawl over her shoulders. When they entered, the first thing Charlie was aware of was Jose Castillo's brown bulk in a chair beside the desk. Vasquez, his segundo, stood at the window. He turned to regard them without expression, heavy-boned and somnolent, with insolent Latin eyes.

Castillo, the gentlemen schemer, offered his hand and had it refused. He exhibited no resentment.

"An unfortunate thing, that of the money," he said. "My brother was always one to borrow of the wrong people."

"Were you always one to buy the notes up behind his back?"

Harkrider, the withered little Texan behind the big desk, cleared his throat. "To get down to business, Mr. Drake—"

Charlie said, "I deposited the money to his account in the bank this morning."

Harkrider glanced at Castillo, and then stared gloomily at his desk. He began marking the blotter with a rusty pen. "That brings us to the next matter," he said.

"Uh-uh," Charlie said.

"This," sighed Harkrider, "is one of those matters which is generally costly to the defendant whether he wins it or not. And I may as well advise you that Senor Castillo has a good chance of winning his case."

"He's trying to break the will," Charlie remarked. "Is that what you're working up to?"

Harkrider made a deep mark on the blotter. "That," he said, "is right. While I am sure the will is perfectly proper, there is the point that the lawful heirs have certain rights... And it may strain a court's credulity to believe that Miguel Castillo would have left his ranch to a man he had met only once."

"Castillo," Charlie interrupted, with a glance at the *hacendado*, "you're a very stout man."

Don Jose smiled, trying to think ahead of the American. "*Si*, I am *muy gordo*. I enjoy my food."

"In fact, I don't know how you ever got up the stairs to this office. But I know how you're going down them!"

He seized the back of Castillo's chair and hauled forward on it, so that the rancher was levered onto his feet. Then he slapped a palm against the seat of his pants and caught the back of his collar with the other hand. Cort had the door open by the time they struggled up to it. Vasquez, the foreman, lunged in to grapple Charlie. Cort laughed his old, exultant laugh and slammed his jaw with a larruping right.

Charlie marched the vast, shouting form to the top of the stairs. A shove, and Don Jose was taking gigantic leaps in a fight to recover his balance. Halfway down, he missed a step. He went to his knees like a bull. He rolled the rest of the way. He lay there a moment and then, coming onto all fours, shook his head.

Charlie went back.

Cort was dragging Vasquez from the office by one leg. He hauled him to the top of the stairs and rolled him down. They went back in and Charlie closed the door.

"I wonder if that was legal?" he asked the lawyer.

Harkrider had not moved from his chair. He looked pained "Legal or not, it was a mistake. He's a Mexican citizen. You're—"

"—a gringo, and sick of knives tickling my back. Mister," Charlie said, "we want some advice, and we want it quick. My pardner's in a scrape. He's got himself married to a girl the *Rurales* are looking for. A nice girl, but—"

"Amy Sheridan? Bet they're looking for her!" Harkrider gave Cort a close look.

"You don't look like a man to get tied up with a bunch like—" He caught himself. "Well, it's just hearsay. But the story is, Amy and Dick Sheridan are only two of a gang of about twenty bad 'uns that have been making a good thing out of the freight trails."

Cort's face darkened. "You've been listening to too many *Rurales*... Why didn't the rest of the gang jump us when we found them?"

Harkrider made a careless gesture. "They had to split up for a while. Like as not, wherever you found the old man was the rendezvous."

Charlie hurried in. "It doesn't matter what they say. Amy's Cort's wife. They've got to get out, and the train's not going to be any help. I was thinking maybe they could make it across the hills to Sonora."

Harkrider rolled a pencil between his palms. Then he proceeded to the door and glanced into the reception room. His secretary had vanished. He closed the door carefully and returned to his seat. As he spoke, he began to write.

"There's a man named Armendariz, in Guerrero. I've done him some favors. If you can get that far, he'll see that you get horses and grub for the trip to Cananea. Have you got any money?"

"Enough," Charlie said.

Harkrider handed Cort the note. "Sew that into the lining of your boot. And, for the Lord's sake, don't let the *Rurales* get hold of it!"

THEY had a drink at the *cantina*. There was now nothing to hold them in town, but there was no train until morning. They had taken a room again at the Colonial. Yet neither of them seemed anxious to go back to it. A cold wind flapped through the streets, blowing trash before it. They emerged into a ruddy dusk and began to walk.

Suddenly Cort gripped Charlie's arm.

Charlie followed his gaze. At the corner, a pair of policemen conferred while staring up a side-street. They turned to look the other way; and in the next moment they were gazing at the Americans.

"Those guys," Cort said, "look too busy to be killing time... I'm getting the hell out of here."

Charlie pulled Durham and papers from

his shirt pocket. He said, "You're jumpy. If they're looking for us, it's about Castillo. We'll pay the fines and walk out of the station."

Cort's thumb nervously rubbed at the cartridges in his belt. "It's not about Castillo. It's about Amy. That damned priest—! He must have reported the marriage... Charlie, I'm getting out."

He turned and started away.

Charlie caught up with him. "Not this way! You're asking them to follow us!"

Cort's face was all hard planes and angles. "I can't take a chance. If they jug me, Amy will give herself up. That's the kind she is."

"Is she?" Charlie said.

Behind them, the policemen were running. Charlie seized Cort's arm and hauled him through an open door. They entered a saddle shop, full of shadows and the stench of poorly-cured leather, cluttered with sawhorses supporting saddles, and containing just two men. A simple-looking vaquero was seated astride a roping saddle, testing it. The proprietor, bespectacled and stooped, stood beside him.

Charlie flung three saddies into the doorway, piled a sawhorse on top of them, and walked straight through to the rear of the shop.

The saddlemaker found his voice. "*Santísima!* Are you insane?"

Charlie opened the rear door and pushed Cort through. "Absolutely!" he said. He slammed the door and they began to run. It was three blocks to the hotel.

Charlie snapped at the clerk, "*Doscincuenta!*" He snatched the key and they strode up the stairway to the second floor. The Colonial was a spacious, drafty old building of two stories, built around a disheveled plaza where a fountain played drearily and withered vines climbed to the gallery of the second floor. As he unlocked the door, they could hear excited voices in the lobby.

Charlie locked the door and slid the enormous carved chest in front of it. In the darkening room, objects were just visible. He confronted Cort. "Now, what?"

Through the tall window, Cort stared down upon a dusty side-street veiled in shadows. It was an avenue of small grocery stores, shops, and leafless trees. Before the inevitable corner pulque shop stood a horse

under a wooden roping saddle. Cort opened the window.

"Somebody down there is about to donate me a horse. Can't talk you into coming with me, can I?"

"I wish you could. But it wouldn't be any good, this time. And it won't be any good for you. I'm telling you the odds are ten to one that this is over the ruckus with Castillo."

"I can't gamble it."

They were running up the gallery, now. A fist struck the door three times. "*Abran!*"

Cort walked to the window. For a last moment he faced Charlie. "I've learned something, son: Never slow down. If you do, they'll hang a mortgage on you. Keep moving, and you're your own man."

"They've already hung one on me."

"Then pay it off! Sell that outfit for ten pesos or ten thousand—but sell it! Charlie, this country is poison. It's poisoned me, and it's going to poison you. I've married into a gang of night riders, and you're being pulled into a family of *paisanos*. And I don't know but what I've got the best of it, at that!"

He turned and let his long legs through the window. "What about Amy?" Charlie asked.

"Tell her... Tell her I'll meet her at the spot where we found her and her old man. So long, Charlie. Name your first kid after me."

In the street, there was the heavy thump of his falling. A moment after, Charlie heard him running.

X

THEY KEPT CHARLIE AT THE police station most of the night. At four o'clock, the last of the searchers after Cort Carraday reported back. The night and the desert had devoured him. Shortly after, they let Charlie send for Harkrider.

The Texan passed a half-hour in a back room with the *jefe*. Both were looking pleased when they emerged. Harkrider brought Charlie his hat and gun and merely said, "This will go on your account."

Outside, he told him, "It's none of my business, Drake, but if you want to hold onto your cow-ranch, you'd better be more careful of your friends. You ain't Car-

raday's type. He'll bring you nothing but grief."

"I'll argue about that," Charlie said. "He won't bring me any more grief, because he's gone. And we're pretty much peas out of a pod, come down to it."

The lawyer shook his head. "You've no more polish than a mesquite root, but you're steady and tough. In a month you've sobered up, got a few lines in your face, and taken hold like a man." He shrugged. "None of my business anyway. But . . . be careful about Amy. Good luck."

The morning train put Charlie on the ground at El Sauz at noon. From there it was a ride of several hours to the *hacienda*. In late afternoon, he turned his horse into the corral. Amy had been waiting for him. She hurried from the back of the chapel as he walked across the courtyard.

She looked white and sick. "Where's Cort?"

Charlie took her arm. "Take it easy, kid. He had to run for it."

They entered through the patio, Charlie telling her. He closed the door of the office and from his wallet extracted a thick fold of fifty-peso notes. "Take this," he said, "and start packing. You'll be travelling light. Cort will meet you at the spot where he found you. I brought his horse back from the station."

Amy tucked the money inside her dress. She no longer looked frightened. In her face was a keen attention. "I'll need a horse for Cort," she said. "He'll have ridden the heart out of that plug he got away on."

"I'll bring them out right after sundown. Don't leave until it's completely dark. Can you manage it?"

Amy smiled, with masculine frankness. "Charlie, I was managing it when you were wrangling horses. Living with Pop was pretty brisk sometimes."

At sundown, Charlie saddled the horses and left them near the gate. He tolled Don Juan over to the office on the pretext of making arrangements for distribution of wages the next day. He kept him there until eight-thirty.

The big, easy living room, with its natural wood furniture and woolen and hide rugs, seemed to echo its emptiness. Charlie went to his bedroom and tried,

lying on the bed, to read a Mexican newspaper three months old.

But in his breast a very large ache would not be eased. The past was being buried, tonight. It was the unjoyous end of joy.

DON JUAN awoke him by tapping on the door. His mission in life seemed to be to upset Charlie's sleep. Charlie lit a candle and prowled to the door. Juan Bravo, small and stiff-necked, acted strangely. It was three A.M., but he was still fully dressed. His face looked frozen. He kept his gaze somewhere over Charlie's head.

"Don Carlos," he said, "I have tried to close my eyes. But this is too much."

"I don't doubt it. What's too much?"

Bravo said pompously, "If you will inform my daughter that her father has been aware for three hours that she was not in her bed, I shall be grateful. This comes of trying to raise a motherless daughter by oneself. It is a man's own business what he does, but in Antonia I am hurt."

"How much brandy," Charlie asked, "do you have to drink to tie on one like this?"

Juan Bravo's eyes at last met Charlie's. A curious expression came to them. "Are you saying that—Tonia is not with you?"

Charlie jumped. "With *me*? Why should she be?... Don Juan!"

Bravo looked frightened. "If I have been wrong, *patron*, cut my heart out! But I knew the girl loved you, and that night I saw you kiss her, outside the wall. And I thought—when I could not find her in her bed nor anywhere else... Don Carlos!" he whispered. "Where can she be?"

It hit Charlie Drake so that he had to sit down. He massaged the back of his neck with stiff fingers. The sluggish treadmill of his mind would not move.

Juan Bravo toured up and down. "She has never done it before! She is a good girl, never one to worry me. I lied about Felipe and Ysidoro. She has loved no one before. But I feared for her to love one so far above her."

"Above her!" Charlie walked to the dresser for his tobacco. "The sooner you understand I'm a forty-a-month cowpoke, the sooner you'll understand me. Maybe she went for a ride."

"She seldom rides." Don Juan snapped his fingers. "There were two horses, saddled, near the gate when I came to your office! Perhaps she—"

It sank coldly down through Charlie from the back of his neck to his heels. "I'll need a horse for Cort," Amy had said. For Cort? For Tonia! For her hostage! Amy Sheridan had not got away with his gold, but she had taken something she knew to be more precious. . .

In the empty room Amy had occupied they found a letter for Charlie.

Don't worry about your little Mex, partner. You can have her, or the ranch, but you can't have both. You've got the deed to this place in your office. I've seen it. Endorse it over to Jose Castillo and bring along the payroll money. He's paying for the deed. You're paying for the girl. Is she worth it? Come to the canyon where you and Cort found us. Come alone. You'll be guided from there.

After he had translated it for Juan Bravo, the foreman regarded him with an expression of confused emotions. Charlie stood frowning at the paper. At last, Don Juan asked bluntly, "*Lo vale ella?*"

Charlie passed a hand over his eyes. "It's not a question of whether she's worth it. It's a question of whether or not they'll stick to the bargain. Because Amy hates her."

THE silver was too heavy for Charlie's horse to pack any distance. Charlie led an extra horse loaded with Tonia's saddle and the bulging rawhide saddlebags. Sunup caught him searching for the entrance to the canyon.

He had drawn Don Juan a map. Bravo knew the spot and sketched in some ridges and side-canyons surrounding it. He put his finger on one point. "They would be here. There is a cave."

The shortest way was, of course, straight down the valley and due west. That was out of the question because anyone following Charlie would be observed. Other than this, there were precipitous trails which would take many hours to follow. And he might have picked the wrong spot. He was still undecided about what strategy to follow when Charlie left.

Amy had said nothing about coming unarmed, and Charlie Drake was packing all

the hardware he could carry. His Frontier Colt was at his hip. An old double-barrelled pistol of Miguel Castillo's was strapped beneath his armpit. A nasty-looking knife was tucked into his boot. Of course, they would take the Colt; they might not find the others.

Crossing the first rank of hills, Charlie rode up the main canyon into which the other emptied. As yet, the sun had not thawed the frost-patches under the trees. When he saw the familiar sandy wash, something awoke in him. His heart commenced to slug.

All these hours he had tried to think of it only as a dangerous job he had to perform; as something physical, not emotional. Now he could tie his attention neither to Amy, nor Cort, nor Castillo. It was all Tonia, a refusal to believe that they would touch her, a horror that they might. Memories drifted before him like smoke: Tonia teasing and Tonia angry; Tonia's tongue making his name sound almost romantic; and the way she had looked that last morning when he told her he was going away.

He came to the spot where Amy had fired at him and Cort; an instinct caused him to rein in. From the ledge, a man called in bad Spanish: "Alone, gringo?"

"Unless you count my horses."

The outlaw stood up, a small and solid-looking man in white linen pants and shirt, his red *zarape* wound about his upper body. He carried an old-style rifle as long as he was. "*Momentito*," he said.

He came into sight presently on a scarred jug-head of a horse. He gestured that Charlie was to follow him. They crossed the canyon floor and began to ascend a shelving ridge. There was no question of his being in danger of a shot from the back. He had a hostage.

Charlie sniffed. By the smells, he judged they were approaching the camp. Five minutes later the Yaqui shouted something and they passed a kink in the canyon to enter the camp.

At first Charlie saw only the scattered pinon trees, the boulders, and an icy trickle of water winding down the middle of the slot. Then, among the trees, he discovered the camp. It was as filthy as only a bunch of Mexican renegades could make one. Entrails of slaughtered beeves lay stinking

on the ground fifty feet from the cook-fires. The horses were tethered too close to the beef hung on a rawhide line. Flies abounded.

Men were coming into view, but Charlie's eyes were entirely for Tonia. He counted a half-dozen Mexicans and Yaquis; he saw Amy standing beside the bare flicker of a tiny campfire, with Cort seated near her. He found the lanky form of Castillo's man, Vasquez, standing with crossed arms, sullenly, near a rope horse-corral.

And no sign of Tonia.

AMY approached. Cort continued looking down at the smokeless fire with brooding eyes. Amy was wearing her own clothes again, levis and shirt and a brush-popper jacket. They suited her, making a frame for the vixen grace of her.

"You're a trusting one, Charlie," she smiled. "We've got you, the deed, and the money, and you haven't even seen the girl."

"Have you?" Charlie countered. Someone took his saddle gun and plucked the .45 from its holster, but it did not alter his cocksure grin.

Amy's glance narrowed. "We'd better have. But relax, cowboy. She's in the cave, yonder, being a good girl. Coffee?"

"Don't mind," Charlie said.

Amy sat Charlie across the fire from her and Cort Carraday. Vasquez drifted over. A cup sat beside Cort. By the color of its contents, Charlie deduced that he was drinking either tea or whiskey; and the cup was not steaming. "I see you made it out of town," he said. Cort grunted.

Vasquez tossed his cigarette into the fire. "This place," he said, "does not smell well, and I have business elsewhere. If he has the paper, I will give you the money and say *adios*."

Amy's sage-green eyes stirred. "Your move, Charlie."

Charlie patted his shirt. The hard feel of his hide-out gun was pleasant. "Right next to my heart. Let's all bring our hole-cards out first, though. The way I figure this, you must have cut Vasquez in on it when Cort and I went to Chihuahua. When I had the money to retire the notes, Castillo was ready for the next move. You're acting as a real-estate agent in this deal,

in other words, except that we're both paying you commission."

Amy stirred her coffee. "You're both winning, aren't you? He gets a ranch, you get a girl. No accounting for the taste of either of you, but..."

Charlie sipped the strong coffee. "He gets my ranch, and I get my own girl back. But—I'll dicker with you. You show me the girl, I show Vasquez the deed, and Vasquez shows you the money."

Amy had a macabre sense of humor. "You aren't going to pay for a dead horse, are you? Cort," she said, "bring her down."

Cort did not move. "Bring her down yourself. I'm out of this since you dragged her into it."

Amy's lips tightened. She snapped at one of the Mexicans. "Bring the girl."

Vasquez pulled a fat chamois sack from his jacket. He struck his palm with it; coins clinked softly. "I am not concerned with whether or not this *yanqui* gets his woman. Is there any reason I must spend my life in this place of offscourings?"

"Sure," said Charlie. "I haven't got my woman, yet. So Amy hasn't got her deed."

Cort looked at him with a frown. That was the danger—that Cort would get wise. Cort knew it was not in him to stall over a business deal. And he was stalling desperately. Somewhere, Don Juan and a gang of cowpunchers were groping over the hills, hunting for a certain side-canyon.

The outlaw brought Tonia to the fire. She was tousled; there was dirt on her face, and she rubbed at the marks of ropes on her wrists. She saw Charlie, then, and what happened to her eyes brought a lump to his throat.

"This is a funny time to propose," Charlie said seriously, "but I want to get something straight. If I buy you from these people, I'll be a poor man. With that understood, do you still want to marry me?"

Tonia glanced archly at Amy. It came to Charlie that she had achieved some kind of obscure feminine victory over Amy, which he wouldn't understand. "Carlito," she said, "you must teach me English, so that I shall not be ashamed before your people."

Cort's head came up. The strange thing was, he was looking off across the canyon beyond the horses, not at Charlie. His eyes

widened, and something happened to his coloring. Something happened to Charlie's heart, too; Juan Bravo was back there, and Cort had just spotted him. It was the only thing Charlie could think of which would hit him that hard.

Cort turned casually to Amy. "Sweet-heart," he said, "you're a nice kid, but you've picked up some wrong ideas somewhere. This kidnapping business—it seems like I won't be able to swallow it, after all. I'll tell you what: Let's take Vasquez' money away from him, let Charlie have his girl and his ranch, and get the hell back to the States!"

Amy's eyes were as cold as cave-ice. "Drunk again," she said.

"Cold sober," said Cort. He stood up, and Amy stood up, and Vasquez' manner sharpened. With his eyes still on Amy, Cort snapped, "Take her, Charlie, and get out. What happens between me and Amy and this Mexican pig, here, is no worry of yours."

Charlie took one step toward Tonia, and Amy snapped up the light carbine she had been handling as carelessly as a quirt. "Stay back! Cort, you'd better give me your gun until you're sober."

Vasquez, perceiving that trouble was building fast, stepped forward. "The paper, gringo," Vasquez extended his hand.

CHARLIE unbuttoned his shirt. He reached inside and got the warm, rounded butt of the gun in his hand. Vasquez edged forward to seize the paper. When the gun roared, smoke and wadding rolled against his body. He gave a convulsive lurch and one hand clutched his shirt.

Charlie closed with him, dropped the empty derringer, and groped for his Colt. Amy snapped the carbine to her shoulder. As a shield, Charlie realized Vasquez' body would be as effective as a blanket. He waited for the impact of the shot, while trying to support the Mexican and at the same time to find his gun.

Suddenly the canyon was filled with the tumbling echoes of gun-fire. Don Juan's men, wherever they were, were pouring their fire full upon the trapped outlaws. Tonia, partially hidden from Amy's view, ran at her, clutching for the

gun. Amy shifted like a cat. In an instant, it was not Charlie Drake under her sights, but Tonia. That would have been all right with Amy Carraday.

What she had not counted on was Cort. Cort had drawn his gun. "Drop it!" he yelled. "Drop it, or I'll...!"

Amy did not drop it. She turned, the carbine jolting in her hands. Cort fell back. He had been hit, high in the left shoulder, but still he faced her, and again he said, in a voice drained of all its force, "Drop it!"

Amy's hand worked the lever. A sickness was in Charlie. He had Vasquez' gun, now, and he let the man fall. Yet he did not fire at Amy. He would not need to. Cort was chivalrous, but he was not crazy.

Charlie heard the heavy blast of the forty-four. He did not look at Amy. He heard her gun thump on the ground. He heard a wondering whisper. "Cort! You've...shot me—"

THERE in the canyon, Charlie Drake buried what was left of his past. Cort Carraday lived an hour, long enough to clear his conscience.

"It was that damned Castillo, Charlie. I never thought money meant anything to me until the day in Chihuahua when I went after my hat. He put a stack of gold-pieces on his desk and told me a guy like me needed something like that for security, or I'd wind up cadging drinks. He told me to sink it in a ranch someplace, let somebody else operate it for me and take the profits.

"He knew me better than you did, Charlie. Better than I did myself. He told me to think about it. And the hell of it was, I did... But until...Amy, I decided to drop it all. Then—"

Charlie knew the rest. He felt no ill-will to his old saddle partner, just a vast pity. He was a poor lonesome cowboy, and he knew he'd done wrong.

As they left the somber shadows of the gorge it grew lighter, until by the time they reached the plain the warm sunlight made the whole thing seem a dream. Charlie Drake was willing to leave it that way. It was a dream somebody else had had. And now he and Tonia were going to make some dreams of their own.

KANAKA DYNAMITE

By BASIL BURWELL

**"Me no likee whale-ship . . . me no likee hard-tack, salt horses, dandyfunk
... me no likee all time beat with rope . . . cap'n him big fat pig—me killum!"**

THE LATE MORNING SUN WAS hot enough to try the oil out of a sperm whale. The wind had died, and the whaler Tropic Bird rolled uneasily in the low heave of a southern swell. The Kanaka, Tonga Tom, stuck his tattooed head in at the bullroom door and announced the bad news.

"Towhead, him die."

"More trouble," I groaned.

Juca, my Brazilian boatsteerer, raised his head and laughed. It wasn't easy. He was flat on his back with three ribs broken and I don't know what else. A whale had played mumblety-peg with him and he was lucky to be alive at all. "Wot I tal you, Dan Pepperking," he said, shaking his head to keep the sweat from running into his mouth, "a woman on board sheep is bad lock."

"Look here, Tonga Tom," I said, ignoring Juca, "how you know Doughhead die?"

The islander shrugged his big shoulders. "Him no die now. Die soon."

"Well, you should know," I said, and pushing back my hair and pulling my cap down to shade my eyes, I followed him out on deck.

The sun hit me in the face like an oak mallet, and for a minute or two I couldn't see at all, so I stood there thinking. I wasn't really astonished to hear about Doughhead. He had been going from bad to worse. He and Tonga Tom, real name Tahukea, had been taken on board at one of the Marquesas Islands, plied with rum by Captain Frink and carried off while insensible to replace two men who had deserted. Both were young, tall and muscular, and carried themselves like two Admirals, but only Tonga Tom had the will to work. He could pull an oar with the best of them. Doughhead was slow, if not stupid. He had no ginger. Every day he

grew more sullen and every day the old man kicked him a little harder, but not hard enough to kill him. Most likely he was dying of sunstroke.

My eyes were used to the sun now. There was a halo of mirage along the leeches of the sails; otherwise everything was as it should be—as it should be in the middle of a bonfire. The sea was like shimmering brass and empty as far as the squinting eye could see. I dug in my pocket for a twist of pigtail and bit off a cheekful. It helped keep the mouth moist. Tonga Tom's intelligent eyes gleamed whitely in the dark blue sky of his face. "You got 'baccy for Tom?" he asked, and I held out the twist for him to bite. Kanakas are mad for tobacco.

"You good man," he said by way of thanks, as we started down the deck, but no smile went with it. Tonga Tom hadn't smiled since he came on board. Living with white men didn't agree with him. Probably that was what was wrong with his friend, Doughhead. After all, why would a Kanaka have sunstroke? Still and all, there were no palm fronds here to break the force of the sun's rays. They glared almost straight down, melting the tar from the ropes and blistering the paint. Tonga Tom, clad only in a loincloth, walked on tiptoe, picking his way so as to keep his bare feet out of the boiling pitch of the deck seams.

It was Sunday and the crew had clustered in whatever shade could be found. But the most desirable spot in the lee of the try-works was occupied by Doughhead. He lay flat on his face and the zebra-like bands of tattooing that indigo-striped his naked body looked more bottle-green than blue. I shook him and spoke to him but he lay as inert as a bag of sand.

"He's sick, sure enough," I said, rolling him over. His face wasn't cold. It felt



I had never seen the Captain move so fast.

normal, but it didn't quite look normal.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"Him no like whaleship."

"Who does?" I said.

"Him no like hard-tackee, salt-horses, dandyfunk."

"Misses his poi-poi, does he?"

"Him no like Cap'n Frinkee."

NOW we had it. Here was another time I could have answered, "Who does?" Yet a first mate has to pretend a certain respect for the ship's master.

"What's ailin' the Doughhead?" said a nasal voice behind me. It was Seth Beetle, the Second Mate, looking down at us from under his tall, sweat-darkened beaver hat.

"Dunno," I said. "Thought it might be the heat, but now I don't."

"Oh, you call this hot, do you?" said Seth, pulling at the end of his long nose. It was a mannerism of his, and some said he was trying to draw it out into a point like the snout of a billfish. "What's wrong with him then?"

"Frink."

"Kick him off the cabin roof, did he?"

"Not this time."

"Bust a telescope over his noggin'?"

"No, he's just had enough, and he's made up his mind he's goin' to die."

"Well, Dan'l, I've heard o' them savages doin' it, but I ain't never seen one afore." Seth raised his tall hat and dug with a dirty fingernail in the lank hair that was combed across his scalp.

I knelt and slapped Doughhead, first on one tattooed cheek and then on the other. The Kanaka opened his eyes, but they had less expression than the glass eyes of a rocking-horse.

"You take um back Vait-hua, maybe him live," said Tonga Tom in a flat voice.

I pushed back my cap and wiped the sweat off my forehead. The reflected glare of the sea was scorching, even in the shade and I couldn't help remembering how cool the water had been at Vait-hua where the stream from high up in the mountains emptied into the sea and how the girls had swum naked with blossoms in their hair. "I'd like to be at Vait-hua myself," I said.

It had been a temptation to jump ship and hide up in the hills till the Tropic Bird sailed away. It was two years since

we had seen New Bedford, two years and the greasy luck poor. So far the Tropic Bird had stowed away less than seven hundred barrels of oil when she should have stowed fourteen. It was discouraging. But a first mate can't run away from his job and expect to get another. And, more important to me, there was Sabina.

Sabina is Captain Frink's daughter and I've been in love with her since we were both fifteen. She was aft in the cabin right now, embroidering, or painting pictures on sea-shells, or whatever else she did to pass the time.

I stood up and spat a brown stream over the side. "Well," I said to Seth, "calculate I'd better break out the medicine chest."

"A little sirup of Squills maybe? What do ye give a critter that's made up his mind to take the last swim?"

"Freedom, maybe," I said, looking him square in the eye.

"Or revenge," Seth said peering down into the depths of his hat. There were lots of jokes about that hat. Some said it was a kind of a slop chest in which he kept oilskins, overalls and tobacco, but others declared it was fitted up like a fishing dory with a spare sail and a pair of oars in case Seth got lost overboard.

"Well, what's the use of talkin'," I said. "Doughhead can't have freedom and he can't have revenge. We'll have to try medicine. We can't let him die without tryin'."

"You good man," said Tonga Tom. "Cap'n Frinkee no good."

"Mind yore tongue, Kanaka," said Seth Beetle sternly, and then winked at me before he turned back to Tonga Tom. "Look here," he said, "Doughhead not like bein' here so he wants to die. But you not like it neither, an' you not want to die. Why?"

Tonga Tom smiled for the first time since the Tropic Bird sailed away from his beloved island. It wasn't a pretty smile. He didn't answer for awhile and as we waited we could hear the parlor organ in the cabin wheeze and then begin playing a hymn.

"Guess Sabina knows it's Sunday," Seth said. "Lead Kindly Light."

"She don't mean this sun," I said. "Well, Tom, why you not want to die?"

The Kanaka showed his teeth again and I was reminded that those sharp fangs of his had undoubtedly chewed on human

flesh with the same relish that they now chewed tobacco, "Before time," said Tonga Tom, "devil fishee catch hold my leg, big devil fishee. One arm. Two arm. Plenty arm. Maybe so many arm," he said, holding up all his fingers. "Devil fishee die, Tonga Tom live. Devil fishee more bad as whaleship, more bad as Cap'n Frinke." And he closed his two hands as if he were squeezing the life out of a fat neck.

SETH looked at me and I jerked a thumb toward the stern. "Stay here, Tom," I said, and Seth and I went aft.

"Whew!" said Seth, fanning himself with the hat. "That there Kanaka is beginnin' to feel his oats. I hope he's not fool enough to start any trouble."

"Can't blame him if he does, but I wouldn't like it, not with his daughter Sabina aboard."

Seth stuck a short black pipe between his teeth. "It do beat all how a man like Frink kin have a daughter like her. What's she playin' now?"

"Abide With Me'. Plays well, don't she?"

"Fast falls the eventide," sang Seth. "Wish to glory it would. I'm sweatin' fit to drown myself."

"It's that hat, Seth. Attracts the sun like a lightnin' rod."

The deck was like a griddle and we kept moving, but I noticed that mighty few of the men were singing with the organ. They had flopped down in a few narrowing patches of shadow and the most of them looked as glum as a parson with a sore throat.

"Look at 'em," I said. "'You'd think it was our fault there ain't no wind."

Seth wagged his head. "No ship never had the bad luck we've had, not never."

"But it ain't bad luck," I said, as we approached the door to the companionway, "it's bad seamanship. Was you ever on a ship afore where the Captain made a habit of countermandin' the orders of his officers? Did you ever know a worse navigator than Captain Frink?"

"Well, there was Captain Beasley on the Minerva, he—"

"Listen, Seth. I took a lunar last night an' we're twenty degrees off our course."

"It's a livin' wonder we're that close. He should ought to let you navigate."

"In any other ship I would, but he's too infernal proud."

"That's what comes o' marryin' money."

The organ music had come to an end and the silence that followed was full of the protesting groans of the ship as she rocked and rolled on the long and evenly spaced swells. The rigging creaked, the topsails slapped and the quarter blocks clanged rhythmically against the underside of the yards. Down the passageway below, a stateroom door creaked and banged, creaked and banged.

I shifted my quid, walked a few paces and spat over the side. "Seth," I said, "some men is born seamen as if they first seen the light o' day in a Cape Horn snorter, but Captain Frink was born on a frog pond durin' a deader calm than this."

Seth pulled at his nose. "That is, if he was near the water a-tall."

We grinned at one another and I said, "Let's see what kind of a sawbones he is."

"He'll more likely kill Doughhead than save him. He has certain sure killed the Tropic Bird. She sits here like a decoy duck."

The door creaked and banged again.

"More like a toad in a bucket of tar," I said, and the door banged.

"Sabina!" bellowed a voice like that of an angry bull.

"Yes, Father," replied a woman's voice from the companionway stairs beside us. It was Sabina, and I could tell by the expression on Seth's face that he was just as sure as I was that she had been listening to every word we said.

"Sabina! What's the matter, you gone deaf?"

"No, Father, I heard you. What do you want?"

"I want you to lash your plaguey door, that's what I want."

"All right, Father." Sabina stepped up into the frame of the door and stood there glaring at Seth and me. "I heard what you said about Father." Her voice was like ice and it made me feel cool for the first time all day. The door banged again and Sabina jumped like a plucked fiddle string, but she didn't look back. She was tall and slim and plumb as a falling arrow, and her eyes were the purple-blue of gentians, and she had a lovely mouth, only at

the moment it was hard and sharp as the edge of a boat spade.

"I don't care if you did hear, Sabina," I said, shifting my quid, "because it's the truth."

Sabina's eyes snapped fire. "Gentlemen don't talk about another man behind his back."

The door slammed and this time she didn't jump.

"Sabina!" came that bull voice from below.

"I'm coming," she called over her shoulder, and her chestnut hair swung in its net like a pendulum. She was wearing blue silk Chinese pajamas which showed off her architecture better than the heavy gowns she wore when ashore. I had never seen her look more beautiful, or more explosive.

"And another thing," she said, turning on me a look that would have rusted a harpoon, "gentlemen don't chew tobacco."

I could feel myself getting red, but I wasn't going to take any of her gaff. I held out my twist of pigtail. "Chaw?" I asked.

THERE was no answer because a hand as big as a garden squash took Sabina by the shoulder and pulled her back down the stairs, and Captain Ebenezer Frink filled up the doorway.

"What's goin' on?" he asked in a voice that could have been heard back in New Bedford.

He was what you'd call huge, not tall, but big around as an oil cask. He was naked to the waist and his great belly hung out over the top of his dirty duck trousers. He was bald as a guinea pig and his red face would have scared a shark.

"Nothin' goin' on, Captain Frink."

"Has she caught any wind?"

"No wind, sir. It's calm as death."

"Then what in blazes do you want?"

"One of the seamen is sick. I thought I'd better break out the medicine chest."

"An' have you pizen him? Not on yore tintage. I'll have a look at him myself," he said, and scratched a chest as hairy as a buffalo's. "What's ailin' him? Any fever?"

"No fever, but he's begun to turn green."

"Green!"

"That's right, Cap'n," said Seth.

"Green, eh? Must be one o' them tropic-

al diseases. Sabina! Fetch my hat an' the medicine chest."

I could hear her running down the stairs and I shifted my quid back and started chewing again.

"You ain't moonshinin', be you?" asked the Captain, popping his red-veined eyes, "Cause if you be—" He glowered and pulled up his galluses so that part of his paunch disappeared from view.

Sabina came back and handed him the medicine chest and a broad-brimmed panama hat that had seen better days. She seemer embarrassed, as if she didn't like being around such a huge lump of nakedness.

Captain Frink shoved the chest at me. "You lug it," he said abruptly and jammed a big cheroot between his teeth. "An' you stay here, Sabina," he ordered. "It might be ketchin'." And with that he sailed out onto the deck with the cheroot tilted before him like a bowsprit and with Seth and me bobbing along in his wake like two small boats being towed by a merchantman.

"Wake up, blast you!" he shouted to the dozing helmsman. "Mind your helm!"

Doughhead lay flat on his beam end where we had left him and didn't look to have moved at all, though the shadow in which he lay had narrowed and half of him was in the sun.

"Why in thunderation didn't you tell me it was this lunk of a Kanaka? Damned sulkin' savage. All he needs is what Paddy gave the drum."

"A drubbin' won't help," I said. "He's dyin'."

"Dyin'? I'll die him with a rope's end. Green, you said? He was blue before and he's still blue and I don't like your blamed schoolboy jokes. Here you, Doughhead!" he shouted down at the outstretched Kanaka.

There was no answer, and Captain Frink swung his thick leg and kicked the Islander in the soft place between the ribs and the hipbone. It made me wince. The Kanaka didn't even blink, but I saw Tonga Tom watching from beside the windlass-bitts and I could tell that it was lucky for Captain Frink that Tonga Tom didn't have him alone on the beach at Vait-hua.

The Captain got down ponderously on one knee and laid his palm against Doughhead's brow. "Cool as a cucumber. Can't

be fever. Must have sumppin' wrong with his innards."

"I don't wonder," Seth muttered around the corner of his pipe.

Captain Frink may have heard but he gave no indication. He got up, shaded his bulging eyes and looked about. "Hey you, Tonga Tom! Draw me up a bucket o' sea water," he yelled in a voice that startled an albatross that was flying overhead. "Now if it was a white man that was tuck sick I'd give him a dose of Epsom salts or Tartar emetic, but medicine's too dang costly to throw away on a Kanaka." And he reached over and took the big funnel from the tryworks and fanned himself with it. "Red pepper might make him lively, but I calculate a pint o' salt water will make Doughhead here as peart as a flying fish."

"What do you plan to do, drown him?"

"You can't drown a Kanaka, Mr. Pepperking. Can't be did."

Tonga Tom set down a brimming bucket and stood by watching. Captain Frink paid no attention to him but knelt down again with a loud grunt, and, seizing Doughhead by the nose and chin, pried open his mouth. "Yes, Mr. Pepperking," he said, "salt water is safe, easy an' ready to hand. What's more it don't cost nothin'." He fitted the funnel to the unmoving Kanaka's mouth and began to empty into it the bucket of brine.

THAT was too much for Tonga Tom. With a hoarse cry, he leaped on the Captain, gripped him by the throat and proceeded to pound his head on the deck. The panama hat rolled off and the bald skull beat the bleached boards like a tom tom.

Usually, I'm quick to action, but this time I was slow on purpose. I wanted to see what the Captain would do to defend himself. He grabbed Tonga Tom's wrists but it didn't help him much. So, reluctantly, I did my duty. I hit the Kanaka neatly on the top of his shaven, tattooed head with the funnel. The crew had rallied to a focus at the first sign of trouble and a couple of them pulled Tonga Tom off Captain Frink and tied him up while Seth Beetle dumped a fresh bucket of water over Ebenezer Frink's slightly purple face. His eyes, when they opened, were redder than ever, but his face went pale

and he rolled over and was sick. We got him to his unsteady feet, and strangled grunts and gasps came out of his throat, but no words.

It was at that moment that the lookout sang out from the masthead. "Blows!" Thar she blows! Thar she blows an' breach-es."

There was considerable excitement among the crew at this news, and without waiting for any orders they went to their stations. The Captain just stood there with his legs spread like the legs of a sawhorse and his vacant eyes rolling.

"Captain Frink! Throw another bucket of water on him, Seth."

He did so and a faint light of intelligence shone through the fog. "Captain Frink" I said, shaking him by the arm, "lookout says 'thar she blows.' Whales, Captain."

He struggled with the idea and the lookout cried out again, "Thar she blows! Thar's white water!"

Captain Frink heard him this time and understood. He tried to speak and succeeded in making a squawk like that of a parrot that hasn't yet learned to talk.

"Do you see fit for to lower?" I asked, hoping that he would nod his head, but he began to look about wildly. "Telescope," he croaked, and Seth Beetle went off in fetch the old twine-wrapped telescope from the cleat in the companionway.

The men had begun to mutter among themselves and were drifting back by twos and threes and making a circle around us.

"Blows!" called the lookout, "two o' them."

"Whar away?" I shouted back.

"Two points off the larboard bow. Thar's another. Looks like it might be a school."

"Do we lower or don't we?" asked Sage, the Third Mate, a quiet fellow who generally kept out of things. I could tell that tempers were getting short, that the heat, the boredom and the bad voyage were working in the men like rotten whiskey.

"What's the orders, Captain?" I asked.

He scowled. "Orders?" he said with some of his old power. "I'm the man who gives the orders."

"I know. That's why I'm askin' you."

"Lower an' be damned to him," said a voice I couldn't make out.

"What's wrong?" It was Sabina, wearing a flat Chinese hat and pushing through

the men, who had stepped aside for her.

"Your Pa got the daylights knocked out of him by Tonga Tom," I said, indicating the Kanaka who was all trussed up like a roast ready for the oven.

"And you let him do it?" Sabina asked scornfully. "Are you all right, Father?"

The Captain paid no attention. He was looking at Tonga Tom as if he were beginning to remember what had happened to him.

"No, he's not all right," I said. "His brain's gone as soft as a baked Injun puddin'. There's whales sighted an' he stands there an' won't give the word to lower."

Sabina raised an eyebrow so high I almost lost sight of it under the hat. "After all," she said, "it is Sunday. You don't propose to have the men work on the Lord's Day?"

"Miss Frink," I said as calmly as I could, which wasn't very calm, "the Lord has seen fittin' to send us a passel of whales, an' it would be sinful to ignore His gifts."

Seth Beetle came along just then with the glass, and I took it from him and we went up into the bow. Behind us, Sabina said, "Where's Father's hat? Do you want him to die of sunstroke?"

Somebody snorted and that set the rest of them to laughing. Sabina stood up to them. "You wouldn't laugh," she said, "if he was able to defend himself."

"Spunky female, ain't she?" said Seth, shading his eyes while I trained the glass.

A GAINST the blue sky and sea a spout showed white as milk and then another and another. It wasn't much of a school—two pods or clusters of five to ten each and too many of them calves—but it was more than we had seen for a month of Sundays.

"We'll lower," I told Seth.

Sabina saw us coming. "Mr. Pepperking," she called, "will you help me escort the Captain to his cabin?"

I stepped through the circle and handed the telescope to Captain Frink. "It's a school, sir," I said.

He didn't say anything. He was looking at Tonga Tom.

"Mr. Pepperking," said Sabina, "the Captain must go to his cabin.

"Just as you say, Miss Frink, but he'll have to set his own course. We're a-goin' to lower."

"You have no orders."

"We can't wait for them. We all have a share in this voyage, Miss Frink, and so far we ain't paid for our 'baccy. Prepare to lower Mr. Sage, Mr. Beetle."

"Don't you dare."

"I'm sorry, Miss Frink," I said. But I was looking at the Captain. His face was contorted as if with the effort of keeping the lid on his temper. "Get Tonga Tom out of here quick!" I called, but I was too late. The lid blew and the Captain bounded over to the tied up Kanaka and struck him with the telescope again and again as if he were beating a rug.

He was hard to overpower and it was not until Seth clapped the deck bucket over his head that we got him under control. It took six of us to get him into his cabin and lash him down to his bunk. Sabina watched us from the door and her face was as white as the inside of an apple.

"Dan," she said when we filed out, "please wait. I've got to speak to you," Her blue eyes were full of trouble.

I lingered inside the door while the others went off down the passage, and asked her what she wanted.

"It's about Father. He's lost his mind, hasn't he? Do you think he'll always be like this?"

"Can't say. For your sake, I hope not. But it looks to me as if he's gettin' better. When he starts losin' his temper, you can bet your bottom dollar he's on the mend."

She flushed and started to speak but thought better of it.

"I've got to leave you in charge," I told her. "I've got to take everybody includin' the cook. He'll pull Tonga Tom's oar an' maybe work off some of his blubber. This calm should hold, but if it don't, you'll have to take the helm. You've done it before an' can do it again. An' another thing, don't go and get soft hearted and untie either the Captain or Tonga Tom, or you'll have a murder on your hands as well as a ship."

"But you can't go now!"

"We've got to unless you want a mutiny."

"I'll take that chance. I'll appeal to them."

"It won't do no good, Sabina. Them boys hate your father, an' they think you're a Jonah. You try to stop them an' they'll laugh at you. They want ile, an' nobody's goin' to stop them."

She followed me up on deck and watched us shove off. She waved, and Seth Beetle in the boat next to mine raised his tall hat.

A dead calm is a bad time to go after whales, sperm or otherwise. The sails cannot be used and the clatter of the oars in the rowlocks is likely to gally the whales and set them off at top speed in the opposite direction. I suggested to Sage that he swing his boat wide of the school and come in behind it so as to head off at least one of them, while Seth Beetle and I came at them from this side at two widely separated points. Sage's crew grumbled a bit, for they had a long pull ahead and that big burning glass in the sky was focussed on every one of them.

The school was only about two miles away and we could see the spray glisten as the whales spouted in unison. So far the whales were undisturbed.

We were about a mile from the ship when a thought struck me that almost made me turn around and head back. Something had slipped my mind. Sabina, Captain Frink and Tonga Tom were not the only ones left on board. There was Juca, my wounded boatsteerer — and Doughhead. I didn't worry about Juca. He wasn't likely to leave his bunk. But Doughhead was a horse of another color, of two other colors. Suppose he were playing possum after all? Suppose he gathered himself together sufficiently to set Tonga Tom free? Laughing at myself, I dismissed the thought. Doughhead was probably dead by now.

SIGNALLING to Seth Beetle, we began to close in on the whales. They were wallowing along towards us at the slow rate of speed possible to the young calves, with the mothers keeping close and the bulls keeping a manly distance in advance. They had a carefree air as they plowed the blue water like a big happy family on a Sunday outing. The sun gleamed on their backs and glittered on the spray, and a few sea-birds flapped about overhead waiting for something to pick up.

The birds spotted us first, but it didn't bother them. One or two came over for a

look, decided we weren't edible and went back to soaring and swooping. We were about a ship's length from the three bulls in the lead when they took alarm. The bottom of a boat is a good sounding board, and the thump of an oar travels quite a distance. The off whale heard us first. He raised his head higher than usual, then cut out the corner of his flukes, which is a sure sign he meant to break a speed record in getting away from there. The panic spread faster than you could wink. A kind of shudder ran through the entire school, and the bull which had first taken fright was already on his way like a tea clipper running before the wind, and cutting back through the school, increasing the panic. The cows and calves scattered to all points and then got all snarled up trying to find one another. The second bull managed to follow in the wake of the first, but the third pondered just a moment too long and we were on him, the iron was in him and he had sounded. He was down some time and took most of our line before he breached. He almost swamped us when he fell, but I pitch-poled the lance into him the moment after he rose to spout. That was enough. Before I could draw it back by the warp, the clotted blood gushed from his spiracle as thick as tar, reddening the foaming sea. The stricken beast made a last effort, jogging along in the direction of the Tropic Bird for better than a mile, before he went into his flurry. The spasm ended and he lay still. It was then that I noticed that little cat's paws of wind were cuffing at the sea and wrinkling it like pie crust.

I shaded my eyes and looked at the Tropic Bird. I had told Sabina that the calm would hold, but now I was proved wrong. The sails were catching the wind and the Tropic Bird was slowly running off to the leeward. Sabina could mind a helm in light weather with the best of them, but whoever was at the wheel now was a bungler, for the ship yawed first to larboard then to starboard and made small headway.

"Something's gone wrong," I said. "The Bird's in trouble. Put a flag in that whale and we'll bring her in tomorrow." This was done and we laid round for the ship. One look at the Tropic Bird told the men it was no time to argue. They bent to their oars with a will.

Seth Beetle's boat was fast to a cow and he was having his troubles, for a number of excited whales were charging towards him in a mad effort to rescue the wounded cow. Seth was in no position to heed signals. Sage was nowhere in sight. My boat would have to go it alone.

We stepped our small sail and were able to make good use of the wind which was breezing up stronger, and I let the men rest their oars. They were almost prostrate with heat and exertion and they would need to have some starch left in case we ran into trouble.

The Tropic Bird was under two miles away now and still yawing clumsily first one way and then the other, which was fortunate since we were able to gain on her steadily.

Something flashed on the ship like a mirror catching the sun, and I saw Captain Frink dash across the deck, swing himself into the mainmast shrouds and go aloft, pursued at a little distance by a Kanaka brandishing a cutting spade. I had never seen the Captain move so fast. He went up the ratlines like a man half his age and poundage. The Kanaka, who I took to be Tonga Tom, was slowed up because of having only one free hand.

"Blame your cats," I shouted, "it's the Captain, an' Tonga Tom after him. Sing out, boys, an' maybe we can gally that blamed Kanaka before he thinks to heave that cuttin' spade."

We shouted, and the Captain and the Kanaka both stopped climbing and looked around at us. Tonga Tom froze in indecision, but Captain Frink went on climbing. We shouted again and shook our fists and Tonga Tom slid quickly down to the deck.

"How the devil did they get loose?" asked one of the men, but I hadn't any answer. I could only guess.

The sun was on the wane now and darkness was only an hour or two away. That was something else to worry about.

"Take your paddles, boys," I ordered, "and scratch hard!"

THE combination of sail and paddles was effective and the distance shortened. As we neared the ship Tonga Tom and a strangely revived Doughhead showed themselves at the bow and made menacing

gestures with the cutting spade and a lance.

"Looks as if they don't mean to have us for shipmates," I said. "We'll have to change their minds for them."

I sounded calm enough even to myself, but I didn't feel it. So far there had been no evidence of Sabina. Tonga Tom and Doughhead had no reason to love the daughter of the man who had ill-treated them, and I didn't like to face the thought of what they might have done to her. It gnawed away in my mind like a rat in a pumpkin.

We ran in as close as we dared and the Captain, who was perched in the main-topgallant cross trees screamed something down at us. His voice was only a croaking shadow of his old bellow, but we could make out the words. "Help me, you infernal lunkheads! Help me!"

"Captain Frink," I shouted up at him, "Spanish Reef them sails. Cut them hal-yards"

He didn't reply but we could see him moving about and in a minute or two down came the main-topgallant-yard by the run. Then the Captain slowly descended the rigging, swung himself off into the main-top with an agility I had never suspected, and in no time at all down came the main-topsail with a jerk that threatened to snap the yard. We saw the Captain grip the main-topmast stay as if he were trying to get up the courage to slide down it into the foretop to cut the jib and topsail. But as he hesitated, the wind died to a whisper and the Tropic Bird lost headway.

The sun was almost down, and it seemed to me we had better board the ship before the breeze freshened again, and before it was too dark to see the Kanakas. At that moment Doughhead appeared at the rail and held up a severed head which I recognized as Juca, the boatsteerer's, and with a wild shout he heaved it in our general direction. It fell into the sea with a splash and sank out of sight. The grisly object sobered every blamed one of us, and I lost my appetite for trying to take the Bird by direct assault. It might cost too many lives.

"Captain Frink," I called.

"Yes, Mr. Pepperking?"

"What about Sabina?"

"She run below when the Kanakas attacked us."

"Is she safe now?"

"I can't tell. Doughhead cut t'other one loose an' he run me up here."

That was what I calculated had happened. "'Pears as if Doughhead warn't as sick as he made out," I commented to the crew. "Hope cured him quicker'n Captain Frink's medicine. Them Kanakas mean to git home to Vait-hua or die tryin'!"

Tonga Tom joined Doughhead at the rail and the two of them brandished knife-edged blubber spades, screwed up their tattooed faces like devil masks and howled hideously. They knew for certain we had no firearms in the boat and that from their position above they could make things pretty hot for us if we tried to board.

"Blast you," shouted the Captain, "don't lie there. These savages mean to kill me an' take the ship. Do somethin'!"

"He don't say nothin' about what might happen to his daughter," said one of the men.

"We'll have to board her if we can't do anythin' else," I said, "but there should be an easier way so long as that wind stays down."

"An' two hours ago we was whistlin' for it," said another man.

Just then, the Captain sang out. "Thar's a boat comin'. Mr. Beetle's, I kin make out his hat."

The sun slid into the mouth of the sea, leaving a smear of red across the sky. Then, before you could sigh it was dark and the moon was coming up.

Seth Beetle hailed me across a narrow shimmer of water. "Trouble?" he asked.

"The Kanakas have taken the ship," I told him. "Sabina's hidin' below and the Captain's a treed coon."

"How?" he said, meaning what.

"Tonga Tom chased him up into the maintop. How are we goin' to retake her?"

"Simple," said Seth. "Noticed the jib halyards was hangin' down from the boom end. We can board from the bowsprit."

"Mebbe," said I. "Them Kanakas is handy with a spade. They hacked off Juca's head neat as you'd chop the head off a rooster."

"We better try. That wind is agoin' to freshen up again an' when it does, it'll hold. Have ye tried pitchin' an iron into them Kanakas?"

"Too big a chance. We might lose it. We'll need all the weapons we've got if we're agoin' to board her. Listen, Seth, pull in closer, I've got an idee."

A FEW minutes later, while Seth's boat was raising a rumpus at the bow to draw the attention of the Kanakas, my boat dropped astern, and I slipped over the side as quietly as I could and swam toward the Tropic Bird. I had remembered that due to the heat earlier in the day the stern windows had been left open into the cabin. Luckily, no light had been lit as yet and if I could get inside unnoticed I could secure the guns and ammunition and engage the Kanakas while the boat crews boarded from either end of the ship.

Taking hold of the rudder, I rested for a moment, then whispered as loudly as I dared. "Sabina!"

"Yes," answered a whisper from the shadows above.

"It's Dan. Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Lower me down a rope."

"I have none."

"Make one then and hurry."

I heard a ripping inside and an unholy screeching and yowling from Seth's boat at the bow. The Kanakas would not be fooled for long. There was no time to waste.

"Hurry!" I whispered.

"Here!" whispered Sabina, and there was a light splash beside me. I reached out and felt a strip of blanket trailing from above.

"Is it secure?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Here I come then."

For a man who is used to going aloft in all kinds of weather it was not too much of a task to clamber up on the rudder and go hand over hand up the strip of blanket which Sabina had lowered. But it wasn't easy to get through the window, and Sabina made it harder by tugging at me.

"Damn it, leggo!" I whispered. She let go and I launched myself through the opening. Something clattered with enough noise to have waked a mummy dead ten thousand years. I crouched, listening, easing the sheath-knife from my belt, ready for whatever came at us in the dark, waiting for the patter of bare feet coming

aft. But there was no sound, only the creaking of the ship.

"Why don't you look what you're doing?" hissed Sabina almost in my ear.

"I'm no cat to see in the dark," I said.

"Why the devil did you leave things around for me to fall over?"

"It was a cutlass. I thought you might need it. Where's my father?"

"Tonga Tom chased him up the mainmast. He's there still. Give me a match."

"There's one at the lantern behind you."

I groped, found it, and flashed it for a moment at the window and there was an answering light from my boat at the stern.

Immediately there was the sound of footfalls overhead and I could hear the Kanakas jabbering with pleasure at having found the location of the other boat. That was all to the good. Their attention was focussed now and there was small danger of their coming below, particularly since Seth was smart enough to keep up a pretense of preparing an attack by shouts to the Captain and occasional feints toward the ship. I went to the door and unlocked it.

"What are you going to do?" Sabina asked.

"Never mind," I said. "Just stay here until I get back."

I slipped out and glanced up the companionway. The doors were shut fast, but the slide above was open a few inches, showing a flap of moonlit sky and one star. I tiptoed over to the Captain's stateroom and groped around until I found the brand new fowling-piece he kept there with bullets and powder. Loading it, I carried it out and set it at the foot of the companionway and then went back to load up the old trade flintlocks which stood in a rack against the bulkhead. They were not much good but they could make the devil of a loud noise. I loaded them up, set them at the foot of the stairs and took the fowling-piece with me as I went back to talk to Sabina.

SHE was standing against the dead light, trying to see my boat through the gloom. "The wind is freshening up again and the ship is making headway," she said. "Your boat is falling behind."

"That's bad," I said. "Them Kanakas ain't likely to waste no more time dilly dallyin'. Either they go up the mast after your Pa or they come down here after you.

I'm goin' up on deck. After I'm gone, lock up the door and don't open it no matter what happens."

"Don't be a fool, Dan Pepperking. Let them come here and you can shoot them as they come down the companionway."

"An' what about your Pa?"

"I don't care about him. He—" She broke off as if realizing she'd already said too much.

"What about him, Sabina?"

"If he's up the mast, won't he be safe?"

"Not for long. That's why I've got to go."

"Please Dan, don't leave me."

"What's the matter," I taunted her, "you scared?"

That got her back up. "I'm no coward," she said. "Not like—"

"Not like Captain Ebenezer Frink," I finished for her and I could sense her stiffening, even in the dark. "How dare you!" she said.

"It's high time you knew. What happened?"

"Nothing. Go on deck if you must."

"I'd better before it's too late."

"There's nothing to prevent," she said.

"I'm not going until I find out what happened."

"Then you'll have a long wait."

"Sabina," I said, "you're enough to make a man bust his biler."

"Burst his boiler, Mr. Pepperking," she said, planting a shot below my waterline. I was so mad the blood almost spun out of my ears. I gripped the fowling-piece and stalked out so savagely that the butt of the gun slammed against the door. The silence that followed was filled suddenly by hurried footfalls overhead. "Lock that door," I whispered almost in a shout, and ran to the foot of the companionway, cocking the fowling-piece as I ran. The doors above were flung open with a crash and Doughhead stood silhouetted against the moonlight. His arm jerked back and I ducked and fired as a blubber spade came ringing down the stairs. Doughhead let out a screech and disappeared from view. I had winged him but how seriously there was no telling. I felt around for one of the old flintlocks and the movement told me that my shoulder had been cut by the spade as it passed. But there was no time to worry about it. They would surely come back.

I could tell by the feel that the wind was breezing up and that the Tropic Bird was forging ahead. I could hear Captain Frink shouting hoarsely from the masthead. "Mr. Beetle! Help, Mr. Beetle. Mr. Pepperking, help!" and I heard Seth urging on his men with a "give way. Give way there!" as they tried desperately to keep the ship from drawing away from them. Now was the time I'd have to act if I was ever going to, and I started up the stairs. The next instant Tonga Tom leaped down at me like a leopard from a bough. The old musket missed fire and we went down together with the Kanaka on top. The fall knocked most of the breath out of me, but I had sense enough to hang on while I got some of it back. I had to hang on or I'd have had a well-sharpened carving knife sticking out of my windpipe. Tonga Tom had his back against the moonlight and I couldn't see his face but he could see mine.

"Tom," I said, when I had the breath. "Why for you want kill me? Before time you say me good man."

The downward pressure eased a little. "You killum Towhead. Me killum you." And the knife started downward again. With a sudden lurch I rolled over and butted him in the face, but only hard enough to make him let go. We both got to our feet and he was back at me in an instant. As he dove towards me I pitched forward onto my face expecting the knife, but it didn't come. Instead, there was a sound like somebody hitting a pumpkin with an axe handle and Tonga Tom fell across me and curled up against the bulkhead like a piece of bacon on a hot skillet. I managed to scramble to my feet and look around at Sabina standing over Tonga Tom with the fowling-piece clubbed in her hands. I took a look at Tonga Tom. He was dead.

"You'll catch hell from your Pa if you've broke that fowling-piece," I said to Sabina.

She didn't answer, but stood there swaying and her face in the moonlight was white as cocoanut meat. "Dan," she said, "you're hurt. You're bleeding."

"Just a nick. Don't amount to shucks."

She looked at Tonga Tom again and the fowling-piece dropped from her loose fingers. "Dan, oh Dan, I—" Her voice trailed off and she turned around and went into her stateroom and closed the door. I let her go. I had something else to worry about

Somebody was moving around on deck. Maybe Doughhead wasn't dead after all.

Picking up the blubber spade which had creased my shoulder, I climbed the stairs. I was taking no more chances with fire-arms.

THE deck in the moonlight was almost as light as day, and I could see Seth Beetle and the crew of the two boats, scurrying around looking for bloodthirsty Kanakas.

"Mr. Beetle," I called in my best speaking-trumpet voice. "Prepare to take in sail and heave to."

Seth let out a whoop and ran over to me, so did most of the men. I pointed down the companionway and two of the men went down and brought up Tonga Tom's body. In the bullroom they found Juca's headless body.

A hoarse, frightened shout from above turned all eyes aloft. Crouched like a great bear on the mainmast was the Captain, and inching his way toward him a few feet below was Doughhead, obviously wounded, but just as obviously bent on putting an end to Ebenezer Frink.

"I've got more than half a mind to let the Kanaka kill the yellow-bellied old tyrant," I said to Seth. He nudged me and jerked his head so that I looked behind me. Sabina was standing close enough to have overheard but there was no hint of anger in her pale face.

"Send two men up to head off that Kanaka, Seth," I said, "and another two to help the Captain. I don't think he can manage by himself."

"Thank you, Mr. Pepperking," Sabina said as Seth Beetle hurried off.

"Don't git any false notion that I'm doing it for your sake, 'cause I'm not. How'd the Captain git loose anyhow?"

"I untied him."

"I thought I told you to keep him tied."

"What does it matter now?" she sighed, and then asked, "Do you think the men will stand for Fäther being in command after what's happened?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I don't think he should be. Oh, Dan, you're right to call him what you did. He—"

"What did he do, Sabina?"

"We came on deck after I untied him.

All of a sudden Father noticed that the Kanaka, the one he tried to fill with sea water—

"Doughhead."

"Doughhead was gone. Father couldn't believe it. At first he was angry and swore and said things about lazy, lying Kanakas and so on, but after a minute or two he thought of something and his face went gray. The other Kanaka, the one that was tied up, was gone too. I guess Doughhead must have untied him."

"He must have," I agreed, taking out my pigtail and biting off a cheekful. I waited for some comment but she made none. "Go on," I said. But she shook her head and put her chin in the air in such a way that I knew she was trying to keep from crying.

"Mebbe I better tell you what happened. I don't know but I can make a middlin' good guess. Them Kanakas showed up an' your Pa took one look an' run, leavin' you to fend for yourself. Ain't that about right?"

She nodded and turned her head away.

There was a shout from the rigging of the maintop and a dark shape went hurtling down through the moonlight into the sea.

"Father!" Sabina gasped, and clutched my arm.

"No, it was Doughhead. They're bringin' your Pa down now."

A few of the men were at the rail peering down at the sea, and a rope was thrown. "He's on!" one of the men cried and they began to haul in the rope.

"Doughhead ain't anxious to drink no more salt water," I said. But Sabina didn't answer. She hurried over to the spot where Captain Frink, chaired in a double bowline, was being lowered to the deck.

WHEN he was freed of the ropes the Captain put his arms around Sabina and hugged her. In the mixture of moon and lantern light his face was no longer a solid tomato color. It was a blotched and unripe green. He had been close to death and he didn't like the look of it. But when he saw Doughhead hauled up over the side, the blood shot up into his face so that I feared he was going to have a stroke.

"Tie up that Kanaka!" he ordered, and a couple of the men sprang to obey. Doughhead offered no resistance. Either he was

all played out or he had made up his mind again to die. They trussed him up so that he could scarcely move an eyelash, and the Captain, leaning a little on Sabina's arm, walked over to him.

"Well now," said Ebenezer Frink in a voice that was all cream and no skim, "if it ain't Doughhead. They tell me you're a bit out o' sorts, Doughhead, my boy. They tell me you've kind of made up your mind you're goin' to die. Now we can't have that, can we?"

The eyes that looked up at the Captain were more like those of a sick dog than a man, but there was no trust in them, only a kind of patient waiting for the end.

Captain Frink smiled like a shark and purred, "No, we can't have that." Then he straightened up and let go a great rasping laugh that would have taken the edge off a porcupine. "We're goin' to cure you, Doughhead, my boy." And then he pointed at one of the men standing by. "You," he said, "fetch me that funnel from the tryworks. An' you, draw me up a bucket o' brine."

No one moved.

"You heard me, blast you," roared the Captain. "Git a move on."

"Father, you can't do it," said Sabina facing up to him.

He ignored her, and doubling his big fists up on his hips, he glared at the two men. "When I say jump, you jump or I'll have it out of your hides. Fetch me that funnel!"

The men shifted uneasily, but didn't move.

The Captain looked at the grim faces all around him, getting black in the face one minute and white the next, like a chameleon on a checkerboard. He tried blustering. "So it is mutiny, is it? Well, you'll wish it warn't. It'll be jail for every man jack of you the minute we drop anchor!"

One of the men yawned deliberately, and Seth Beetle pulled his nose and drawled, "Seems to me the Captain's lookin' a little peakid. We better break out the medicine chest."

I saw what he was driving at. "Mebbe your right," I said. "How about a little ipecac or syrup of squills?"

"What!" said Seth indignantly, "Waste good medicine on a Frink? No, sir. You," he said to one of the men, "fetch me that funnel from the tryworks. An' you, draw me up a bucket o' brine."

The men, grinning, ran to do as they were told.

Captain Frink's eyes almost popped out of his head. "You can't—" he said hoarsely. "I—" And, flailing his arms, he charged aft toward the cabin. He didn't get far. The men were after him in a pack, pulled him down, and sat on him. He struggled, but it was no use.

"Dan, stop them," Sabina cried. "You can't let them."

"Sauce for the goose," I said.

"I know, but you've got to stop them."

"Why?"

She opened her mouth. Shut it again.

A circle had formed around Ebenezer Frink, and by the light of a lantern Seth was making a great play of fitting the funnel to the Captain's mouth.

"Funnel ain't big enough," he said. "Git me a bigger one."

"It's the biggest we got."

"Then it'll have to do. Now you men understand that medicine is too blamed costly to waste on anybody higher than a mate. As a physician I can't recommend nothin' better than salt water. It's cheap, safe, always to hand an' don't cost nothin'. What's more, it's the best medicine in the world for hives, rickets, broken leg, or unusual enlargement of the lip such as is suffered by this poor critter lyin' so peaceful at my feet. Give me a little elbow room, an' tilt that funnel."

Captain Frink thrashed his bald head wildly, his lips compressed, his eyes wide with terror.

"Guess one of you will have to hold his nose," said Seth. "He don't like the smell."

Sabina screamed. "Dan! Dan, if you love me, stop them!"

The men all looked up at me and I winked. Seth winked back. "Tilt that funnel," he said and raised the bucket.

"You cowards!" yelled Sabina. "You low-down, dirty cowards." And then she started bawling, heaving great sobs like a spanked child crying it out in a lonely room.

"Mr. Beetle," I said, "belay that bucket. We can't pour brine into the mouth of this unsightly lump of blubber when it is already running out of the scuppers of his fair daughter's eyes. Leave him stand up." And I spat over the side.

The men grinned and got off of the Captain, and he lay there for a minute.

"Help me. Help me up," he said in a voice the size of a mouse. But no one stirred, and he rolled over and got up by himself, not looking at anybody. He was as harmless as an old blunderbuss without a flint. His flash was gone. Hanging his head, he shambled aft.

I WENT OVER to Sabina and held a lantern up to her face. Her eyes were all red and there were long tear streaks down her cheeks, but she tucked up one corner of her mouth the way she'd hold her skirt if she were stepping over a puddle.

"Don't twitch your mouth at me, woman," I said. "He had it coming to him and so did you. It don't pay to think you are better than other folks. We're all God's children, an' the U.S.A. ain't nobody's kingdom. Kanakas is folks like you an' me even if their skin is brown an' maybe a bit blue here and there. I'm a-goin' to make it my business to see that Doughhead gits back to Vait-hua, Frink or no Frink. Now I been a-hankerin' after you, Sabina, for a good many years—five, anyway—but accordin' to your lights I warn't fitten to so much as pick up your crumbs—not high-toned enough, no ruffled shirt-bosom, no diamond pin, but rough boots an' a calico shirt. Every look from you was a stab with an icicle. I put up with it, but not no more."

The tenseness was gone from Sabina's mouth and her blue eyes were clouding up again, but she tried to get some of the old brimstone into her voice.

"Yes, you're a real sailor, you are, need a bilge-pump in each pocket to pump the salt out. I used to think you had a heart as big as a scuttle-butt, but now I know it's no bigger than a split pea." And the tears started down her cheeks again.

"Sabina," I said, "will you marry me? Mind ye, I ain' agoin' to shine my boots or perfume my hair with cajapugy ile. This is a declaration of independence as well as a proposal." And I took out my twist of pigtail to bite off a fresh cheekful.

Suddenly she smiled and held out her hand and said, "You gottum 'baccy for Sabina?"

I threw the twist over the side and blew out the lantern.

DREAD SAFARI

By Dan Cushman

They slogged on, through swamp-gloom and fever-haze—a one-armed man with a hook, a blond giant, and a score of muttering blacks—tracking the spoor of a two-thousand-year-old corpse!





*O'Neil dropped him with a
slug from his Luger.*

IT BEGAN LIKE ALL NIGHTS IN the jungle town of Nouvelle Chambery. The sun sank at exactly six o'clock. A purplish haze crept up from the solid wall of the jungle. On the verandah of the officer's club, white-clad French colonials forgot the heat and commenced cursing the mosquitoes. Lights went on in the town's half-dozen wine houses, and the evening tom-toms started throbbing over in the native village.

There was only one occurrence slightly out of the ordinary, but it occasioned little interest. A slim dugout canoe with the painted figurehead of some upriver tribe

circled the small steamboat owned by the Bohn Expedition Scientifique, and came to rest on the dock of plank floating on empty petrol barrels. The native paddlers held their craft still and a white man stepped ashore.

Actually, "white" was a poor word with which to describe him. "Caucasian," or the "bondele," would be more exact, for tropic sun had long since turned his skin the hue of fumed *okume* wood.

He paused on the float and went through the pockets of his wrinkled whites, finding money to pay off the paddlers. It took him more time than it would most men, for

he had only one arm, his right. A steel hook extended from the left sleeve of his shirt.

"Ah, *bondele!*" gasped the leader of the paddlers, jingling the dozen ten-franc pieces which had been bestowed on him. "You are a great man among your people!"

The white man, known from Cairo to Johannesburg as "Armless" O'Neil, waved aside the native's protestations of gratitude, spent some time scrutinizing the small, one-stack boat of the Bohn Expedition, then turned to let his eyes rove the dismal jungle town of Nouvelle Chambéry.

There was a street lined haphazardly by trade houses and grog-shops. Up the river was a native village, most of the huts standing on stilts to raise them above a swampy lagoon. On higher ground, occupying a man-made clearing, were the wood and sheet-metal buildings of a French military cantonment. The post had been built only a few years before when De Gaulle was busy with his program of enlisting native recruits to the banner of Free France, and hence it was reasonably bright with whitewash.

Armless O'Neil's face had its usual malevolent twist when he finished his sweeping scrutiny. He spat. A huge black who had followed him to shore gave the Moslem salute, and asked, "Is not this city even fit for your vengeance, O armless one?"

O'Neil smiled with a twist of his broad mouth. "It's plenty damned good enough for what I have in mind, Bobolongonga."

"Ai! ai!" chanted Bobolongonga, rolling his eyes. "Tell me, O armless one—will thou kill him with thy pistol, or will thou split his unbelieving skull with thy mighty hook?"

O'NEIL didn't bother to answer the question. He jerked his head in the direction of some dunnage that the natives had set ashore, and started up a cobble path to the street. Bobolongonga, his gargantuan black man, lifted the dunnage and strode behind, a flowing white *kufan* exaggerating his stature, giving him an air of primitive magnificence.

O'Neil did not pause when he reached the street the way most visitors would do. Instinct seemed to guide him. He circled a cluster of palms, and walked across the sun-baked, coppery earth to a ramshackle

building with a sign, hard to read by the failing light, that said:

LE MAISON ALGERIAN.

VIN, CHAMPAGNE ET LIQUEURS
DE ANGLETERRE.

He climbed the three steps to its verandah, opened a battered insect door, and paused to scrutinize its interior.

The Maison Algeria was like a hundred other Congo dumps specializing in cheap liquor and the jungle substitutes for continental entertainment.

There was a small mahogany bar at one side, surmounted by a mirror and a Bavaria-glass mosaic long since etched to semi-opaqueness by the tropics' inevitable fungus. A D.C. light plant had been installed one time or another, as evidenced by the four-bladed electric fans which collected cobwebs from the ceiling, but it had gone out of repair and the place was lighted by petrol lamps suspended on drawstrings. Eighteen or twenty tables and a considerable number of rattan and native grass chairs were scattered without order across the room. There was a tin platform with a degenerate upright piano, a balafron with calibash resounders, one of those square-shelled fiddles with silk strings.

A Dakarese Armenian stood behind the bar, thoughtfully swatting flies with a damp towel as he listened to a battery wireless set reproducing the nasal tones of a Brazzaville newscaster. Four non-coms in the white kepis of the Foreign Legion sat around a table, intermittently drowning out the wireless with bursts of bawdy laughter. Partly hidden by the piano, a sharp-faced woman of probable Eyyptian blood was applying henna to the palms of her hands.

The Armenian glanced up with a blank expression, and went on slapping at flies of which there was an inexhaustible supply.

Bobolongonga leaned forward to speak into O'Neil's ear. "Is that the man, Master? Is he the pig who murdered your friend, Tommy Huston?"

O'Neil gestured the black man to silence, and strode on to one of the wall tables. The Armenian did not seem to notice. He was intent on the newscaster who was repeating passenger arrivals at the port of Boma.

"Cognac!" bellowed O'Neil, hammering the table with his hook arm. "Would you let your customers suffer thirst, you unbaptized swine?"

The Armenian snapped off the wireless and came over with a bow-legged shuffle, his loose tennis shoes going slap-slap on the floor matings. He stared at the deep scars left by O'Neil's hook on the table, and truculently rubbed them with the wet towel.

"*Monsieur?*"

"Cognac! And make sure it's *French*."

"Yes, *Monsieur*." He was staring at the hook arm. He seemed on the point of saying something; instead he swallowed, rolling his pointed Adam's apple up and down.

O'Neil spoke, "Behold, my baggage! Send a boy up with it. Your best room. No lizards, understand?"

"Yes, *Monsieur*." He hesitated. "French cognac is six hundred francs the litre."

"French cognac!"

O'Neil waited, his eyes roving the place. One of the non-coms, a fellow with a huge, beaked nose, commenced bellowing successive stanzas of a Marseille music-house tune to which some inventive expatriate had substituted ribald words of the Bantu and Senegalese dialects. His companions hee-hawed and beat on the table with the flats of their hands. O'Neil's face was an inscrutable, Buddha mask.

THE Armenian flourished a bottle of Angouleme, and made a ceremony of breaking the seal. He polished a glass, poured. O'Neil sniffed for bouquet, tasted. He drew a crumpled thousand-franc note from his shirt pocket and tossed it on the table.

"Ah!" breathed the Armenian, slipping it in the band of his trousers.

"Give me my change!" barked O'Neil.

"Yes, *Monsieur*."

O'Neil watched him count back four hundred-franc notes. He selected one of them, rolled it in a tight ball, and tossed it across the table.

"*Monsieur!*" breathed the Armenian. "A thousand gratitudes, *Monsieur!*"

"Do you know a man named Peron?"

"Ah! Paul Peron? Indeed, only last night I saw the same Paul Peron in this very room. See, *Monsieur*, at that very table—"

"And Max Bohn?"

"The scientist, *Monsieur* Bohn? Indeed, also last night Bohn was here. Bohn, and the English gentleman, the good *Monsieur* Wisler."

"The scientist? Bohn?"

"Is it not so? You have heard of *Le Bohn Expedition Scientifique*? They have come these three, four days ago and pause to repair the drive-shaft. To the far interior, they go. Even to the White Nile, perhaps, and beyond, to dig for the ancient relics of the—"

O'Neil laughed from the side of his mouth. "Bohn will bury more than he digs up, I'll lay American dollars to French francs on that."

"Indeed!" The Armenian lifted his skinny shoulders showing at once surprise and agreement. "Perhaps it is so."

"Does Bohn and that cockney friend of his come here every night?" demanded O'Neil.

"Perhaps I could send the message. Perhaps—"

"You can send a message to Paul Peron."

"As *Monsieur* wishes."

"Wait." O'Neil crumpled another hundred-franc note and rolled it across. "When was the last time you saw Tommy Huston alive?"

The clawlike hand closed on the bank-note. The Armenian's eyes were like twin pieces of black jade. He exhaled slowly, thoughtfully.

"Huston—the American. I have heard of him. But it has been years." He pretended to be searching his memory. "Perhaps four years are gone since I saw *Monsieur* Huston."

"You're lying," said O'Neil flatly.

"*Monsieur!* I? May my soul be given to the hell of the Mohammedans if I lie. I have heard he was dead. Murdered. But I have not seen him . . ."

O'Neil watched him hack away, rubbing bony hands. He laughed with a single jolt of his shoulders, and gulped down the brandy. He poured another and sat with arms planted wide, looking at its shimmering surface, his face bronzed and malevolent.

"Do you think this Christian swine murdered him?" asked Bobolongonga.

"The Armenian? With that money—"

hungry Max Bohn in port, you ask if the *Armenian* murdered him?"

"But you said he lied. With your lips you—"

"I bought a rug one time," growled O'Neil.

"Ah!" The huge black man arched his eyebrows. "You have known this wicked Bohn elsewhere?"

"Sure. I knew him in Tanganyika during the copper excitement. I worked for him. He was cheating natives out of their treaty claims and peddling them to Royal Dutch. When I quit him he got scared I'd go to the administration and sent a hatchet-man named Portuguese Dave around to kill me."

"He did not kill thee, Master? You slew him with your mighty hook?"

"He lived. Bohn, too. The good die young, as we Christians say."

"And that is why Tommy died, O Master?"

"I think Tommy knew too much about *scientist* Bohn. They were both on that Nicolini expedition. And Nicolini died—mysteriously."

"It was the gri-gri curse of the tombs. I have so heard it!"

O'Neil spat at the wall and laughed. "Or a shot of mercuric chloride in his coffee."

With deft, one-handed movements, O'Neil rolled a cigarette, then leaned forward while Bobolongonga drew a chemical-dry matchbox from beneath his *kuftan* and lighted it.

Bobolongonga said, "It is not well even for the *bondele* to disturb the tomb covered by the dirt of twenty times one hundred years. There is a black fetish—"

"I thought you were Mohammedan."

"*Allah illa Allahi!*" chanted Bobolongonga lifting hands toward Mecca. "It is true, but neither do I spit at the gods of darkness."

O'Neil smoked slowly, keeping watch on the door. It was now quite dark outside. Soldiers, jungle tramps and clerks drifted in to drink third-rate Moroccan brandy or Brazzaville beer. A hunchbacked fellow with Fulani features commenced beating out a sort of minor melody on the balafron.

The houseboy returned and spoke to the proprietor. He was the one sent for Peron.

II

O'NEIL ground out the coal of his cigarette. A small, round-shouldered man was standing in shadow beyond the doorway, scrutinizing the room.

"Peron!" called O'Neil.

The little man jumped at sound of his name. He shuffled in a trifle apologetically. He was about forty with a round, weak-jawed face, and a pair of apprehensive eyes. He had considerable flesh, with a flabbiness that looked as if it would hold an impression like putty.

He put out a sweaty hand which O'Neil took.

"You were looking for me?" he asked in a husky voice.

O'Neil nodded, motioning him to a chair. "Cognac?"

"Ah—yes. Yes." Peron cleared his throat and looked at the Angouleme label. "A little one, perhaps."

O'Neil filled his glass brim-full; Peron balanced it for a second on the ends of his blunt fingers, then dumped it down his throat without losing a drop. The liquor seemed to help him. He shuddered a couple of times and came up smiling. He held out the glass for more.

"I suppose you wanted to know about our poor friend, Monsieur Huston," Peron said.

"Yes. I want to know who killed him," snapped O'Neil.

"I—have no idea." Peron glanced around, and repeated defensively. "I don't know who did it."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not!"

O'Neil shrugged. "All right, Peron."

Peron relaxed a trifle.

"Where was he killed?"

"It was up at Efunta village. He had brought down a few tusks. There was a buyer for a billiard ball concern here at Nouvelle Chambéry, but Tommy didn't dare show up. The Colonial administration wanted him on a smuggling charge. I don't know just what he'd done to make them—"

"He was up at Efunta," said O'Neil, leading him back to the subject.

"Yes. He was there, so he sent down here to make a deal with the buyer. When I got back, Tommy was gone. I tried to

find him and couldn't. Finally a fetish doctor took me to a hut upriver. And there he was. Stabbed. That's all I know about it. Honest to God, O'Neil—"

"Then what did you do?"

"Well, you know how it is in the tropics. You have a dead body, and you can't wait long—"

"You buried him and came back to Nouvelle Chambery."

"Yes."

"You reported it to the Colonial administration, and they did nothing."

"That's right."

Peron breathed deeply. A line of perspiration had appeared along the edge of his hair. He wiped it off with the back of his hand.

"When was this?" asked O'Neil.

"About—"

"Don't you know the exact date?"

"It was thirteen days ago."

"And where was Max Bohn?"

"Bohn couldn't have killed him!" Peron spoke with such sudden conviction that even Bobolongonga stared at him.

"Why couldn't he?" asked O'Neil.

"Because he was down on the Congo."

"That was damned convenient, wasn't it?"

"Besides, Bohn was Tommy's friend. I heard Tommy say he liked Bohn—"

"You're lying."

Peron poured another drink, getting as much liquor on the table as in the glass. He drank and stood up.

"Where are you going now? Back to report to Bohn?"

"No, *Monsieur*! I have nothing to do with Bohn. Nothing!"

O'Neil watched him back away. He rammed into a Legionaire, turned hurriedly, and walked with little, quick steps to the door. O'Neil spat moodily at the floor matings.

Bobolongonga asked, "Do you think that he murdered—"

"No. He hasn't got the guts."

O'Neil pulled a crumpled radiogram from his pants pocket and smoothed it. Bobolongonga leaned forward, looking at the blue paper with its violet printing.

"Does the paper tell you that Peron spoke with a double tongue, Master?"

"Just checking. This says that Tommy was shot, not stabbed. It was eleven days

ago, not thirteen. The first thing a liar should have is a good memory."

"Aye! You have a mighty wisdom, O armless one!"

O'Neil stood abruptly, motioned to Bobolongonga, and strode to the door.

IT WAS COOL outside with breezes moving in from the river. Native drums beat in ancient rhythm. Overhead the stars seemed close and yellow in the velvet sky.

O'Neil took a single, deep breath, and started along the street, moving from one place to the other, looking through smoky windows for Max Bohn.

Several blacks and mulattos from a steamboat crew were seated in one place, drinking Brazzaville beer in defiance of colonial regulations. Forty or fifty paces farther on was the dock with Bohn's steamboat lying at rest, boilers cold, moonlight shining milk-white on her freshly painted superstructure. There were lights in a couple of deck cabins. The plank was down, and a scar-faced native, naked except for a loin cloth and *topi*, sat with a bolt-action rifle across his knees.

O'Neil placed one foot on the plank as though to walk aboard, and the native lunged to his feet, his thumb clicking off the safety.

"No, bwana!" he rumbled. "Master *bondele*-man, he say no visitor."

"Bohn?"

The native shook his head and repeated, "No visitor."

O'Neil turned, and walked back up the cobble path. He circled a rusty, sheet-metal warehouse strong with the odor of rancid palm nuts, passed to the shadow of a bokongu tree, and went back to the docks.

He stood with his back against an abandoned thatch-roofed wharf house, watching. A door opened and closed on deck. From the depths of the engine room came a sound of someone hammering metal.

A woman was singing in a husky, melodious contralto, accompanying herself by intermittent cords from a guitar.

He moved closer to the boat, keeping in the shadow of the overhanging thatch roof. He caught a few of her words. Italian. One of those nostalgic, Neapolitan heart songs.

The singing continued for twenty minutes or so with some rather long stretches of silence. After that, the boat was silent.

He returned to the Maison Algeria, left Bobolongonga to keep watch, and climbed to his room on the second floor.

The door was closed. He unlatched it and went inside. There was an electric twitch, but the lights didn't work. He struck a match, locating a candle in an old-fashioned iron holder. A door and two windows looked out on the second-story verandah. He opened them, adjusted the bamboo jalousies to admit a little air, and lifted the mosquito curtain from around the bed. He stripped off his holster. Its shape was left, marked with perspiration against the side of his shirt. He lay back, inhaling a cigarette.

Those rough legionnaires were raising plenty of hell downstairs.

A slight tremble of the flimsy verandah warned of someone's approach. He recognized Bobolongonga's step, and lay back again.

The big black man paused in the door. "Ah *bwana*! I have seen him. The thick-eyed one."

"Bohn?"

"Yes. He is in the salon downstairs. An Englishman and a black servant is with him."

"Who's the Englishman—this Joe Wisler?"

"I do not know. He is small, with red spots, and the face of a jackal."

"It's Wisler, all right." O'Neil spat as though to take the vile taste of his name off his tongue. He stood, and slipped the holster back on. He motioned for the black man to follow him.

O'Neil entered the salon by a side door, shouldering French non-coms from his way. Max Bohn, with two companions, were sitting at a corner table.

Bohn was perhaps forty. He might have been six feet tall were it not for his habit of hunching forward. He was heavily muscled. His face was broad, and flat, with an oily cast. One got only a vague impression of his pale eyes through the thick-lensed glasses he wore.

There was no sign of recognition on Bohn's vast face as O'Neil crossed the room. At his right sat a little cockney with red-spotted skin, and on the left was a massive black of the northern Sahara type, a wrestler if one were to guess by his ears which were battered until they

looked like shapeless tumors hanging on the sides of his head.

The cockney, Wisler, said something from the side of his mouth. Bohn twitched, and leaned forward.

"Ah, O'Neil." He rose, rubbing palms on trouser legs to dry them before shaking hands. The bottom part of his face smiled, and his short-roached head nodded in apparent pleasure. "It has been many years, so? Three, four—"

"It has been six years," said O'Neil in a flat tone, ignoring the hand that Bohn had thrust at him. "You sent Portuguese Dave around to run a knife through me, remember?"

Bohn dropped his hand. He blew his breath, puffing his heavy cheeks.

"Ach! So. I always knew you suspected me, but it was not true. Of you I cared little. You could not harm me. Whether you lived or died—what difference? But you must believe the worst. Thus, gentlemen, mankind. So be it!" He sat down again, sagging the rattan chair. "Why is it you come to see me—the man you name 'killer'?"

"Tell me about Tom Huston."

The muscles of Bohn's shoulders tightened his shirt.

"You ask me, *Mynheer*?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you murdered him." O'Neil laughed from the side of his mouth. "No, *you* didn't do it. Your kind never does. I should have said you *had* him murdered."

BOHN gripped both side of the table, half rising. A rush of blood had darkened his face. He trembled as though ready to fling the table from his way and charge, then he relaxed a trifle. His little, near-sighted eyes roved the room. Men at nearby tables were watching—listening. He exhaled, and sank back to the chair.

"Ach!" He forced a smile and lifted his beefy shoulders to shrug. "He was your friend. Men say such things on losing their friends. Their minds do not balance suspicion—fact. They hate a man, and him they suspect. Thus you suspect me." Bohn opened a tin and lighted a tiny, Dutch cigar. He lit it slowly, showing how calm his hand was. "I do not kill for advantage, O'Neil. No. But say I do kill for advant-

age—what could I gain from our poor friend, Tommy Huston? Nothing. He was what you Americans call ne'er-do-well, jungle vagabond. You should not believe every man who whispers in your ear."

"Peron, you mean?"

"He talked to you tonight."

"Peron never hinted that you murdered Tommy Huston."

"No matter. I can prove I am not murderer. Was not Huston killed long before I arrive at Nouvelle Chambéry—before I even leave Bangui as the authorities will testify?"

Joe Wisler had been silent, shifting his pointed eyeballs from one man to the other. He now nodded vigorously.

"That's true as I sit 'ere, O'Neil. We ain't 'avin' no 'and in murder."

Bohn spoke, "I had trouble with Huston? Ach—so! A small thing. A woman—nothing. But what advantage could I gain in killing him?"

"What advantage was there in killing Doctor Nicolini?" O'Neil spat the words from the side of his mouth.

Bohn moved suddenly, sweeping the table up so its legs rammed the smoke-blackened ceiling. He took a single step forward, and drove the table down at O'Neil's head.

O'Neil did not retreat. He seemed ready to take the blow over head and shoulders. At the final second he moved aside, deflecting the table with his outstretched hand.

Wisler was on his feet, backed against a screened window, his right hand at the butt of the Enfield revolver at his waist. His sharp eyes shifted from O'Neil to Bohn. He didn't draw. The puffy-eared black man had risen slowly and had pressed his naked shoulders against the wall.

The table crashed, and Bohn rolled on. His stubby feet did not serve well his bulk. His hands shot out, reaching for O'Neil's throat.

O'Neil sidestepped and snapped his fist to Bohn's jaw.

Bohn took it, absorbing its force with no change of expression. It stopped him momentarily, then he came on, still trying to get O'Neil in his apelike grasp.

The wrestler had now drawn a bludgeon of goat's intestine filled with fragments of steel. He croached forward a little. He saw his chance as O'Neil weaved out of Bohn's

way and sprang forward, bludgeon lifted.

Bobolongonga shouted, but he was momentarily tangled in the rush of legionnaires trying to get out of the way.

O'Neil turned, swing his hook arm in a backward arc. It struck, leaving a furrow across the wrestler's shiny skull that was first grayish, then scarlet. The wrestler staggered, his eyeballs vast and white. He shook himself and came on a step, the bludgeon still uplifted.

Bobolongonga flung men from his way, set his feet, and swung a terrific, back-hand blow to the wrestler's neck.

The man's head snapped, shaking droplets of perspiration from his bulging forehead. Bobolongonga made it a one-two, driving him down with a shoulder smashing through the bamboo-lath wall. He leaped on, lighting with both feet in the wrestler's abdomen.

Bohn was shouting at Joe Wisler who had by now drawn his Enfield revolver, "Don't shoot. No shooting, you fool!"

Wisler put the gun out of sight beneath his shirt while his fingers were still closed on the butt. O'Neil stood with right hand on hip, with his hook hanging free.

A gendarme's whistle shrilled outside.

"All right, Bobo," said O'Neil.

Bobolongonga kicked the wrestler once more for good measure, then he stepped back, breathing deeply.

He said, "Next time it will be my sword, you unhallowed pig! You son of a Christian goat!"

"All right, let's get out of here before they toss you in that typhus hole they call a jail."

The wrestler sat up, retching violently and spitting blood. Max Bohn stood powerful and spread-legged, his thick glasses reflecting the light of the petrol lamps.

He said, "I warn you—" then he stopped.

"Go ahead and say it!" barked O'Neil.

Bohn did not open his mouth. A huge Senegalese in military cap, white shorts, with a whistle on a tasseled loop, elbowed through the crowd. He waved a Star pistol around with an imperious gesture.

"In the name of *le Governor-General* . . ." he cried in French "*Le Governor General de Brazzaville!*"

"To hell with *Le Governor-General de Brazzaville!*" whooped a Moorish sergeant,

The gendarme waved his pistol the more, cursing these drunken men of the *Regiments etrangeres* for starting another of their nightly riots.

O'Neil strode away with Bobolongonga, and climbed the stairway to his room.

III

HE WALKED IN, FUMBLING FOR a match to light the candle. The doors had been open, and the night breeze had carried away the heat of the afternoon. Fresh thatch from the roof gave a spicy fragrance. Only a slight glow found its way through the vine-covered verandah. He felt his way, swinging his hook arm in front of him.

He paused, the match in his fingers, not striking it.

There was an odor in the air. Something in addition to fresh thatch and the fragrance of jungle night. It was the odor of a certain Palmyra tobacco smoke mixed with hemp leaf—the hashish of Asia Minor.

O'Neil stood still, listening to the sound of Bobolongonga breathing closely behind him.

"Do you notice it?"

"What, Master?"

"That tobacco smoke."

"I smell nothing."

Bobolongonga plucked his sleeve. "It is some *special* tobacco?"

"Yes. It smells like those cigarettes Tommy Huston used to have sent to him from Khartoum and Dar es Salaam."

The black man sucked his breath. "It is so, *bwana*, that the *avodoun* of Dahomey makes a man's nostrils tell him of the walking dead even without his seeing. For one does not see or feel the dead return. But once, O Master—"

"The hell with it!" barked O'Neil. "If Tom Huston's ghost came back he wouldn't be subtle about it."

He struck the match. Its acrid smoke drowned out all other odors. There was no one in the room. O'Neil lighted the candle, carrying it to the verandah. No one there, either.

"The hell with it," O'Neil repeated.

He pulled off his clothes and went to bed inside the mosquito curtains. Bobolongonga blew out the light and curled up

on the floor mattings. He snored. The drums were beating their regular *thum-thum-ta-ta-thum* in the native village.

O'Neil broke the silence by saying, "The smell was here all the time. That exercise sharpened my senses, that was all. Voodoo be damned!"

"Aye, Master," said Bobolongonga sleepily.

Bobolongonga awakened him in the morning by setting a tray loaded with breakfast beside his bed. The big native then squatted with knees higher than chin and stirred syrupy coffee extract with honey in a glass tinkling with cracked ice.

O'Neil pulled on his trousers and took time to strap on his hook arm.

He said, "The Mohamet himself had no such servant as thou. Where the devil did you raise this ice?"

"From a man of my tribe who is cook at the officer's table."

"Which tribe is that, of the hundred you claim?"

"Ho!"

O'Neil ate breakfast—sliced papaya, tiny hen's eggs, brittle cassava bread, the coffee. It was late when he went downstairs. Two white-clad officers from the cantonment were having sundowners in a small, reserved section of the lower verandah.

"O'Neil!"

A spare, deeply-browed man with a tight-clipped moustache lifted a long forefinger.

"Lieutenant Gretry!" O'Neil grinned. "I haven't seen you since we had target practice on those Azande up beyond Sebut."

"Ah, that." Lieutenant Gretry shook his hand. He turned to his companion. "Meet Devoux. Devoux, the lucky devil, is being transferred to Brazzaville. O'Neil, here, saved my life one time up by Sebut."

O'Neil shook Devoux's hand, too. He was young, round-faced and smiling. They had a drink. Devoux excused himself and walked off toward the officer's house.

AFTER he was gone, Gretry smoothed his close moustache and spoke,

"I hear it said you came here to kill Max Bohn, Monsieur."

"Who told you that?"

Gretry shrugged angular shoulders, and poured more brandy. "It is the truth?"

"I came here to find out who knocked off

Tommy Huston. And if it happens to have been Bohn . . ."

"So." Gretry let his fingertips strike the table.

"Did Bohn murder him?"

"How could he, Monsieur? Huston was murdered in Efunta village. Bohn was far downriver. Or, at least, so I have been told."

"The Colonial Administration did not see fit to investigate."

"No. We are few, and the jungle is very large. It is filled with fever, and there is little ice for the drinks. And you must understand our friend Huston was in poor repute since the Longo affair, while on the other hand Monsieur Bohn had the thoughtfulness to present the Commandant with two cases of vintage Cleson."

"Longo? That's a palm-oil concession. I thought the administration wanted Tommy for smuggling."

"This-that, what difference why? Does not death balance all ledgers? 'Smuggling' you must know is the term of convenience. If someone elopes with the Governor-Generals wife he is wanted for 'smuggling.' In Tommy's case the administration did not encourage his encroachment on the concession of a large company for the purpose of gathering fallen ivory."

"Especially without a couple cases of Cleson."

"Why yes, *Monsieur*. I have heard that every man has his price."

"Are you suggesting that I pay a little something to the local commandant?"

"Not at all. I just wanted to let you know how everything stood. And there was something else. You know about the Nicolini expedition which was looking for the tombs, Sembel the First to Ninth, paroaahs of the lower Nile after Egypt fell to the hords of Asia. You know much of ancient history, O'Neil?"

"The only date I know is 1492."

"But you must know that the ancients of Egypt placed more than mummified remains in their tombs."

"What you're getting around to say in your subtle French way is this: Doctor Nicolini found the tombs, and Max Bohn, his chief guide, wanted to hog the gold and gems they contained. Doc stopped him, and Bohn knocked him off. Tommy probably knew too much, so he was murdered for

the same reason. Now Bohn has a 'scientific' expedition of his own and is going back. It fits like brandy in a bottle."

Lieutenant Gretry lighted a cigarette and gazed across the sunweary clearing.

"You have, I suppose, half the story. I'm certain there are some holes in it. For instance, I do not believe Bohn murdered Tommy Huston. I am not certain that the Nicolini expedition ever opened the tombs. And there is something else."

"Yes?"

"Julie Nicolini."

"Who is she?"

"The Doctor's daughter. She returned, you know. I had the pleasure of meeting her in Brazzaville during my rainy-season furlough. A most beautiful creature, O'Neil."

"She would be!"

"Indeed?"

"I never knew Tommy Huston to get wound up in anything without there being a woman around."

"Eh-so! He is to be congratulated. But more of Julie Nicolini. She was in Brazzaville. She made efforts to promote an expedition of her own. She failed, but Bohn succeeded. Tommy Huston had trouble with the authorities. He was killed. Next Julie disappeared." Gretry sat back, smiling, brushing his moustache. "Strange, don't you think?"

"Damned strange. Do you think Tommy ran away with her?"

"The natives. They buried him at Efunta village."

"Do you think Bohn did away with her—the Nicolini girl?"

He shrugged. "I know she disappeared."

"There's a girl on the boat, you know."

"Eh?"

"Sure. I heard her singing last night, in *Italian*."

"It might be well to look into it."

"I'll do that!"

IV

O'NEIL TOOK SIESTA IN A hammock swung from the upper verandah. Bobolongonga brought him late-tiffin of spicy-sweet mango, sweet boiled kid, fixed in sort of a *koos-koos* with heavy applications of curry and saffron.

"*Bish'mullah!*" intoned Bobolongonga,

blessing the food in the Moslem manner, passing it with his right hand as the Arab camel drivers had taught him.

O'Neil ate. It was nearly dark when he finished. He sat in the gloom of the verandah, occasionally sending Bobolongonga below for cognac mixed *sa-tenga* after the eastern fashion, half water. One after another lights came on in the cabins of the steamboat.

Drums started in the native village. As though this were a signal, O'Neil put down his glass and started away, motioning for Bobolongonga to follow.

He took the identical round-about path to the river as the night before.

There was deep shadow beneath the overhanging thatch eaves of the wharf house, only a short stone's throw to the boat. Porters had been loading supplies on her during the evening hours, but the freight stages were pulled up now, with only the passenger plank down. The watchman's shadow could be seen, and occasionally the blued shine of his rifle.

O'Neil stripped, save for his shorts, handed Bobolongonga his Luger, and stepped toward the water. He returned to pluck a heavy-bladed Egyptian dagger from its sheath under Bobolongonga's *kufan*, and fastened the weapon in a drawstring at his hip. The big man watched with no change in expression.

"I should wait here, *bwana?*"

"Yes. Take my watch. If I don't show up in a half-hour, go up for Lieutenant Gretry."

With lifted hand, "*Allah hummal?*"

That's right," grinned O'Neil. "And while you're about it, ask for some help from St. Peter, too."

He slid belly down in the muddy water near shore, pulling himself along with a one-handed stroke, making scarcely a gurgle of sound.

He came up in moon-shadow of the stern and hung to the paddlewheel. All quiet aboard. He carefully pulled himself to the catwalk beside the wheel.

He rested, water running from his body, dribbling below with a slight, musical sound. His eyes roved the deck. The open door to the engine room was at his left. There was a regular, grating sound of someone working with a pipe threader.

He pulled himself over the edge making

no special effort at concealment. A narrow stairway led to the passenger deck. He climbed it.

The boat was one of those little mission jobs, flat-bottomed with a wide beam, giving the needed buoyancy to ascend mudbar-choked rivers to the utmost heart of the continent.

The passenger deck had a rather wide promenade covered by striped awnings which had been long before bleached gray from tropic sun. Tonight there was heavy shadow beneath them, broken here and there by of flare of yellow light from the screened door or window of a stateroom.

Someone opened a door. O'Neil sat down in a deck chair.

Naked save for his white shorts, his body was scarcely discernible against the chair's canvas. Down the line a man had paused and was bent over, trying to scratch a match on his fingernail. The matchhead broke. He cursed. Joe Wisler's voice. He walked away, feeling through his pockets. His feet went slap-slap down some stairs on the opposite side, his voice but not his words were audible as he spoke to the guard.

O'Neil stayed where he was. No sound of the girl. He made an habitual movement for papers and tobacco, but his fingers only touched his soggy shorts. He stood up and made a slow circuit of the boat, pausing to look in each of the lighted doorways. They had patent steel jalousies that prevented him seeing much inside.

A guitar string made a vibrant sound across the night air. O'Neil turned as though it was a pistol shot. The sound came again from an unlighted stateroom.

He walked over. The screen was propped open.

He paused there a moment, then without speaking he stepped inside. The room was black. Someone moved, inhaled sharply. The air of the room was scented by a Paris perfume mixed with a woman's hair. A woman's hair always smells bad or good, and this girl's hair smelled damned good.

She spoke, "Who are you?"

"I'm called Armless O'Neil. And who are you?" He waited. No answer. "Julie Nicolini?"

"No."

"Oh, yes, you are."

"My name is Morez. Nina Morez—"

"That's Spanish. Last night you were singing in Italian. Your name's Nicolini."

"I said—"

"Why are you on this boat?"

"I don't believe it's any of your business why I'm here, Mr.—"

"Did you know Tommy Huston was murdered?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know."

"The same man who murdered your father?"

"You mean . . ."

He laughed. "I mean it was Max Bohn."
She waited.

"I know why you're here. You have some pot-boiled idea about getting next to Bohn and tripping him. It's a dangerous business, kid."

"You'd better go."

"And you're coming with me."

"No."

"You'll come easy, or I'll stuff your head in a pillowcase and carry you."

"Listen!"

SHE hissed the word, stepping forward. For the first time her form became visible. She was a short girl with a waist so slim a large pair of hands would have almost reached around it. A vague impression of her face indicated she was young and lovely. She reached up, touching his shoulders,

"It's Bohn. I know his walk—"

"I'm at the Maison. Will you come there—"

"Hurry!"

O'Neil moved outside. He paused, watching. Bohn's head and shoulders were coming into view as he climbed the stairs from the lower deck.

Bohn reached the last step, and turned with moonlight reflecting on the thick lenses of his glasses. The wrestler was at his heels.

O'Neil moved away from the door. Bohn's nearsightedness momentarily saved him. He might have moved from sight without a challenge had it not been for the wrestler.

He muttered something. Bohn turned, stopped.

"Eh! *Verdammen!*" His big frame

hunched forward as he spotted O'Neil in the shadow. He gestured at the wrestler. "Zonva."

Zonga obeyed the gesture, moving along the rail to cut off O'Neil's escape down the deck. O'Neil merely stood where he was.

Bohn's hand made a rapid pass at the front of his linen jacket. There was a clattering sound as a gun sprang to his hand from a clip holster. Moonlight glimmered on a chrome-steel barrel.

O'Neil's hand rested on a folding deck chair. It was a heavy chair, made in India of Burmese teak, with thick brass reinforcements. He twisted it up, and flung it waist high.

Its unexpected impact drove Bohn half around. He had snapped the safety off his pistol. The night was shattered by concussion, by a streak of yellow flame. Powder burned O'Neil's feet as the bullet whipped near, plowing splinters from the deck planking.

O'Neil sprang. He trod over the chair as it fell. Bohn was trying to bring the automatic up to aim. O'Neil swung his hook, chopping it from his hand.

Bohn plunged forward to hands and knees, clutching his wrist, a whine of pain in his throat. On the deck below, the native watchman was shouting a jargon of the Congo, swinging his rifle around.

O'Neil vaulted the rail, driving his feet to the black man's shoulders, flattening him with head banging the deck. The rifle skidded away, clanging against an oil drum.

The plank was near, but O'Neil did not use it reaching shore. He trotted along the deck, lowered himself from the stern, and swam away, almost submerged, using easy sweeps of his right arm.

"It is you, *bwana!*" Bobolongonga moved from the shadow of the wharf house, a heavy Walther pistol in his hand.

O'Neil waded out with river weeds stringing from his shoulders. He flung them away and dressed, cursing his luck in three languages.

Bobolongonga said, "Your rage is as the four-score saints, O Master."

"My rage is as the damned fool. I bungled and probably fixed that Nicolini girl for trouble. Bohn wouldn't hesitate knocking off anybody he thought was dealing from the middle of the deck."

"Perhaps I should kill that infidel."

"Come along!" O'Neil strode toward the street of Nouvelle Chambéry. He paused at the stairs leading to the Algeria's verandah.

"Cognac!" he growled at Bobolongonga. "And if you come around with some cheap Spanish I'll split your ivory skull."

"Aye, Master!" Bobolongonga towered very straight, giving the Moslem salute in deference to O'Neil's vile temper. "Behold these two hands. Thus will I strangle the infidel if he but breathes the word of any, but Three-Star Angouleme!"

V

O'NEIL CLIMBED THE RICKETY stairs. The lopped-over thatch of the roof and a thick growth of vines shot moon and starlight from the verandah. The double doors of his room seemed to be the same as he had left them. He walked inside, fumbling for his chemi-dry matchbox.

He stopped. Once more the room held an odor of Palmyra tobacco mixed with *bangh*, though much stronger than the night before.

He stood with legs planted, fingers resting on the butt of the Luger. Night sounds became audible—balafron, native drums, horse-face bats shrieking in the camwood trees which crowded the village clearing. There was a spark of light. At first glance it might have been mistaken for a reflection from the inner hall. The light brightened and dimmed after the manner of an ash-covered coal when a man drags on a cigarette.

"Well?" barked O'Neil.

A voice answered—an easy, familiar voice with a hint of laughter beneath it.

"Hello, O'Neil. Isn't that a hell of a way to treat a guest? Take your hand off that gat. And why in the dirty old hell haven't you got something around here to cheer your guests from the nether kingdom?"

"Tommy!" O'Neil shook himself as though clearing his brain. He drew a match, struck it, held its flame above his head. Tommy Huston was half-reclined on the bed, a billow of mosquito curtain around him.

Tommy Huston was as many years shy

of thirty as O'Neil was of forty. He was a tall, wavy blonde with burned skin, handsome in a hell-and-be-damned way which women understand better than men.

Tommy took a last drag from his blue paper Khartoum cigarette and ground it out on the floor matting.

"How does the old ectoplasm look to you, O steel-armed one?"

"You tramp!" snarled O'Neil. He walked over and lighted the candle. "You no-good, fiddle-playing fathead. Sit there with a grin on your face like Nero with his pants down. I ought to split your skull and save some expense for the Colonial Administration."

"The hell with you," said Tommy cheerfully.

"Why did you send word you were dead?" barked O'Neil. "I was about ready to knock off Max Bohn for it."

"For killing me?"

"Yes, for killing you."

"Why, O'Neil! I didn't know you cared."

"I hope you die of the screaming dysentery." O'Neil looked Tommy up and down as though he hated his guts. "Well, what are you doing here?"

"It's just a friendly visit. I was here last night, but you weren't around."

"I know. I smelled you." O'Neil sat down in a reed chair. He grinned. "Just to show how low a man can get for friends in this rotten country, I'm half way glad to see you."

"Oh, sure," grinned Tommy.

"You're broke as usual."

"Sure. Broke flat. How about a couple thousand francs?"

O'Neil made no move to give it to him. Bobolongonga creaked across the verandah and drew up at the door, eyes becoming vast and white at sight of Tommy. O'Neil dived forward in time to rescue the long-necked bottle of Three-Star Angouleme.

"*Nakka Allah, ya zeim!*" chanted the big black man, lifting his arms so high his fingertips touched the ceiling. "O Allah, thou indeed hast power to conquer the unbelievers—"

"He's alive," growled O'Neil, "and Allah had no part in it."

O'Neil seemed to soften a little with a long slug of the Angouleme grape glowing in his intestinal tract. In short sentences

he told about Max Bohn, about the girl aboard the steamboat.

"What the devil is she doing there?" he asked.

"Trying to put the finger on Bohn."

"That's what I thought. And why did you play dead?"

"You're dull, O'Neil. Dull as a rhino. Now I suppose you've bumbled around and ruined everything. You should have stayed away from that boat. It was like this—Julie and I are—" He spread his long fingers. "You know how it is. Women have always been attracted to me."

"You conceited punk." O'Neil poured more cognac.

"You see, we were certain Bohn murdered papa Nicolini, but what could we prove? Bohn was a good guide, I'll say that for him. He took the Nicolini expedition up to that forsaken Bahr el Aziab country, and never a hitch. Located the tombs, too. Did you know Bohn had a Ph.D.? Sure has. He knows plenty of history. I got pretty good at it myself. You know about the Sembel line of pharaohs who fled to the White Nile after they were conquered by the Assyrian armies in—"

"An Irishman named Columbus discovered America in 1492, now go on about Nicolini."

"Well, we got to digging. There were three or four months of it. We unearthed some outer tomb chambers with plenty of relics. Pottery, cloth, rolls of papyrus. Say, O'Neil, did you know that old slum was worth plenty of dough? Well, I'm like Bohn. I'd have sold it to the private collectors, but Nicolini was honest. The museum had sponsored him, and he hung tight for giving it to them right down to the last flask of rancid oil. Then one morning Nicolini was dead. We didn't have any proof against Bohn. About that time those Hedraz natives got to causing trouble. 'Behold—has not the curse struck down the chief of the diggers? Will not our wives sicken and the goats' milk turn black?'—you know the line. So we packed up and got out.

"Julie wanted to lay the finger on Bohn, so she pretended to be palsy and got included in his expedition. You know the trouble I had. I ran onto an Englishman named Sam Rogson up at Efunta and nursed him through the blackwater. That

is, I nursed him till he croaked off. It looked like a good chance, so I made like he was me and had the natives bury him. Gave Peron my last thousand francs to come in and put my death on the records. I planned to lie low at Efunta and take out after the steamboat with a crew of paddlers. Now you got your big foot in it."

O'NEIL thought for a while. "That was a half-cooked idea of yours, getting her to go along with Bohn. He's no fool."

"It was her idea, not mine."

"We ought to get her off that boat."

"Little Julie will get along all right."

"Then what do we do?—just sit here?"

"What do you care as long as the liquor holds out? Listen, O'Neil, this may be a jungle *maison* crawling with green lizards and puff-adders, but I've been bushed up with the Bakota so long I think it's the Ritz Carlton."

Tommy pulled off his canvas shoes, treated his toenails with Tiger Balm to soothe them from an attack of chiggers, and lay full length on the bed. In an incredibly short time he was breathing with deep regularity. Bobolongonga curled up on a pallet near the door. O'Neil stayed in his long-backed rattan chair, thinking.

He jumped awake. Outside, dawn was tinting the misty purple shadows of the jungle. A heavy dew had fallen, and the air was filled with white jasmine, a heavy, almost synthetic odor, remindful of a woman's perfume. Someone was running across the verandah—it was that which awakened him.

O'Neil put his pistol back when he saw it was only a native soldier from the cantonment.

"O'Neil?" the native asked, fastening his eyes on the hook arm.

"Yes."

"Buena-Lieutenant Gretry, he say come quick."

"What's wrong?"

"Me, I don't know. Maybe man he dead."

"What man?"

"Small *bondele*. You come now."

Tommy sat up, pawing for the fold in the mosquito curtain. He looked out, blinking his eyes and asked what the hell?

"You know as much about it as I do."

O'Neil followed down the stairs and along a cobble path. The path wound among clusters of papaya trees to a decrepit hut where a Moorish sergeant stood guard. The Sergeant spoke over his shoulder, and Lieutenant Gretry came out. By the appearance of his uniform he had dressed in a hurry.

"What's wrong?" asked O'Neil.

"Eh? How do I know? It's that little jungle tramp, Peron. He is near death, *Monsieur*. Torture. Someone has beaten him with a sun-dried whip. And after that—the ants. It is not pleasant." Gretry smiled in a wry manner. "But one does not come to the tropics to look on pleasant sights, is it not so?"

O'Neil bent through the hut's low door. He waited for things to become visible in the gloom. The hut had been abandoned for a long time, but it still smelled of smoke, of putrefaction, of unwashed bodies. A couch of dry grass was at one side, and on it a small man.

Peron. He looked insignificant and jelly-like, covered with blood that had smeared and caked. His eyes were closed; one hand lay on his naked chest; the other dragged palm up on the dirt floor; he was breathing jerkily. A native soldier stood at the head of the couch, waving an improvised *punkha* of palm leaves, chasing the early-buzzing flies from his raw skin.

"When did you find him?"

"Some natives stumbled across him about an hour ago. There had been the lion scare. They heard strange sounds. They started poking their assagaispears around the edge of the clearing and found poor Peron. It was his groaning."

"Why did you call me?"

"You are his friend. The sergeant saw you talking with him at the Maison two nights ago, and . . ."

"And I'm supposed to know the inside reasons for every dirty job."

"One cannot escape death nor his reputation. Tell me, who would torture Peron, and why?"

"Max Bohn. He knew Peron talked to me that night. He knows I'm suspicious of his 'scientific' expedition. Last night I sneaked aboard the steamboat, and Bohn tried to kill me. Afterward he tried to find out how much I knew by torturing this poor devil."

"Ah-so? And just what could Peron tell?"

O'Neil shrugged.

"Tell me, O'Neil, what things interest you in our poor little village of Nouvelle Chambéry?"

"Murder. A woman. And the riches of a king dead these two-thousand-odd years."

Gretry lighted a cigarette. Smiling, "You have the soul of a poet. You should have been born a Frenchman."

"I should have been born with brains enough to stay in Chicago where I belong!"

VI

NATIVE SOLDIERS CAME WITH a *tepoi*. They loaded Peron, and carried him to the little, white-enameled *hopital* inside the compound wall. The doctor, a bored little Corsican, glanced once and threw a five c.c. dose of something into his arm.

"Look at him," said the doctor, stepping back with his hypodermic syringe. "Not a good drop of blood in his veins, I'll wager. Corpuscles? Pah! Rather a hybrid cross of malarial infusoria floating in a current of quinine water. And this the medical master-minds of Brazzaville would have us cure with sulfanilimide! His blood will not stand it, *Monsieur le Lieutenant*."

"Then give him lime-water and aspirin."

"Will he live?" O'Neil asked.

"Perhaps," answered the doctor.

"I want to talk to him when he wakes up."

"Eh—come back at one."

The doctor was seated on a little, metal stool, watching stonily as a native orderly cut off Peron's shredded clothing, when O'Neil went out the door.

The cantonment was on a slight rise of ground overlooking the river. He drew up, eyes sweeping the scene. He made a surprised movement. The steamboat was gone. He looked up-river. No sign of its smoke.

"When did Bohn pull out?" he barked over his shoulder at Gretry.

"He is gone? *Eh, bien*. We are better off without him."

The Corsican doctor overheard and shouted from the *hopital*, "The boat? It left perhaps three hours ago."

O'Neil hurried down the cobble path, and up the termite-weakened stairway to his room in the *Maison*. Tommy had gone back to bed. Bobolongonga sat crosslegged in the middle of the floor.

"Where the Judas have you been?"

"I was at the village, O master."

"Hell of a Moslem, dancing the voodoo all night!" He strode to the bed, stripped back to the mosquito curtain. "Get up!"

Tommy moaned and covered his ears with the grass filled pillow. O'Neil booted the bed from under him.

"Get up!"

Tommy picked himself up from the floor, cursing. He walked over to pour water on his head from the brass pitcher. Bobolongonga put a towel in his groping hands.

"What's the idea, O'Neil?"

"Peron. Bohn tortured him and left him for dead. Peron told all your secrets, you can bet on that. Then Bohn pulled for the up river *with* the Nicolini girl. We've made a rotten mess of this, Tommy."

"*You've* made a mess of it," said Tommy, wiping his dripping head.

"If it hadn't been for you, Tommy-lad, she wouldn't even be on that boat. And I wouldn't be *here*." He looked at Bobolongonga. "Well, don't stand there with your eyes like oysters, you *bawane*, you essence of camel's dung! Bring breakfast."

Bobolongonga retreated, bowing, "You will have the fried eggs, Master? The pink papaya juice with honey? The *koos-koos* with—"

"I'll have aspirin. And cognac!"

They waited through the rising heat of morning. At twelve o'clock O'Neil walked to the *hopital*. A native squatted on his heels on a little platform, working the hand lever of some overhead *punkhas*. The *punkha* fans were ribbed with tufted linen, and water came from a drip-trough on the ceiling, striking the tufts, making an evaporation that gave the room a sticky coolness. Peron lay on a cot, eyes closed, breathing easily. He didn't seem to be in such bad shape.

"Where's the doc?" asked O'Neil. He repeated the question in Bantu.

The native directed him to a screened terrace where the doctor was having a pre-tiffin sundowner.

"You're early," he said, finishing his drink and standing up.

The doctor went to Peron's room, filled a hypodermic syringe through the cork of a bottle, and with a bored movement shoved it in the little man's arm.

"That should bring him around in three or four minutes. Drop over for a brandy when you're through."

O'Neil nodded and sat down, waiting for the hypo to work. In a minute Peron stirred and opened his eyes. His senses seemed glazed, and it took a considerable time for his eyes to focus.

"Peron! It's me. O'Neil. Look here, Peron. It was Bohn, wasn't it?"

"Give me a drink," Peron said huskily. The water seemed to help. He lay back, eyes on O'Neil. "Yes. Bohn. He beat me with a whip. And the round-eared devil. The big man—Zonga. You cannot know, *Monsieur*—"

"What did you tell them?"

"I do not know."

"You told him Tommy was alive? You told him why Julie Nicolini was on the boat?"

"What could I do? They beat me. They rubbed salt in my wounds . . ."

"It's all right now, Peron. You're safe now. Go back to sleep."

O'NEIL walked to the native village through the brutal heat of the mid-day sun. Huts on stilts stood on both sides of a muddy lagoon. Dugout canoes, most of them rotting and seeped half full of brackish water, were tied in solid rows like driftwood along the shores. Here and there footpaths from the jungle ran down and ended as floating bridges of criss-cross bamboo. Every living thing—humans, goats, the scrawny chickens of the tropics, were sleeping out the midday heat.

O'Neil found the fetish house and bent low to enter. It was dark inside, with only a little light coming through the smokehole which was cut through the center of the dome roof. The air was stagnant with heat, repulsive with the odors of uncured skins, and the human skulls that hung in clusters with bits of dehydrated skin stuck to them.

In a short while, a little, dried-up fetish priest came from a rear room and squatted before an ancient calabash containing a *bokonon* of palm nuts and pebbles. O'Neil strewed a handful of silver ten-franc pieces on the earth. With a suck of his breath

the fetisher bent forward, gathering them up.

"Yes, *bondede-ukoi!*"

The words meant "leopard white man" and were supreme flattery.

"I would have ten of your strongest paddlers," said O'Neil.

"They shall be yours, *bwana.*"

"I want them *now.*"

"In siesta?"

"I'll give you two hours."

"In two hours, O hook-armed one!" grinned the priest, jingling coins in his hands.

O'Neil got together a supply of hard bread and tinned provisions, purchased a half-dozen Lebel rifles and a quantity of 8 MM cartridges of "Le Bourse legionnaire" at half the European cost, and directed Bobolongonga to carry everything to the rude canoe dock of rip-rap bamboo where the lagoon entered the river.

The heat of afternoon was waning when a gurgle of paddles sounded up the lagoon, and a slim dugout canoe moved into sight, driven by the arms of ten natives.

They set out—O'Neil, Tommy and Bobolongonga, with the natives working easily, bending their bodies in rhythm, chanting a tribal song.

Nouvelle Chambery became a distant scar and finally merged with the jungle. Vegetation walled the river solidly. The heat was lifting a trifle, and the odors of the jungle made themselves known—the poignant sweetness of unseen flowers mixed with resinous, new-burst leaves, with the musty gasses of decay. There was a break in the green wall, a grassy shoulder of land, some huts with toadstool roofs and woven-palm sides.

"Efunta village," said Tommy.

With near-darkness, O'Neil gave the signal that sent the dugout to the shore where a narrow footpath came to the water's edge. The white men slept in hammocks beneath a mosquito tent. Another day of hard travel, a camping spot at a mission school abandoned for several years and overgrown by jungle.

A group of tall natives speaking a hybrid Banda dialect of the Sudan grasslands said that "a boat of the fire" had stopped there during the morning hours.

It was the season of harmattan in the north, and the river was low, cutting multi-

channel patterns through miles of mudbars. O'Neil drove his paddlers on at a killing pace. They tired, and he replaced them with a group of eight tough Mandanda head-hunters.

They reached a country far north and east of the Congo. Natives fled into steep bush, or stood truculently with *assagais* and poisoned arrows ready. They had high-boned, Sudan-type faces, and their speech was sprinkled with words of Arabian. Here the jungle was a narrow strip on each side of the river, with vast grasslands beyond.

At the close of each day, O'Neil paid off his Mandanda savages, not with currency, but with heavy, Lebel cartridges whose brass cases they would hammer into ornaments.

One evening when O'Neil had lost track of the days of his journey, Tommy asked, "Are we in English territory yet? Or is it French?"

"French, You've been here before, Tommy; how much farther can he go in that steamboat?"

"Maybe two hundred kilometers," said Tommy.

"You show the way to Bahr el Aziab?"

Tommy nodded.

"We'd better take our own route. I don't care for ambush."

Tommy didn't seem to be listening. "You didn't know her, did you? Julie. She was a sweet kid. It was a crime for the old Doc to bring her here. This jungle. She'd have gone back home after he died if it hadn't been for me, though. I talked her into staying—into putting the finger on Bohn. If she's dead, I'll feel like her murderer. Hell."

"I'm the one who threw the *sabots* into the machinery, Tommy-lad."

"What difference does it make whose fault it is?"

"Don't worry, kid. She was aboard that boat. I just couldn't make my bluff stick, that's all."

The Mandanda head-hunters awoke and squatted on their heels, chewing syrupy chunks of native *bangh*.

Distantly in the east, like angular shadows, arose the outline of mountains. The canoe continued upriver with mountains fading in heat of day. Night, another day, and another. It was slower going against

rapid current. A small river flowed in from the sudan country to the north.

O'Neil stood on shore, watch in hand, timing the exact moment of sundown. Its variation from the equatorial six o'clock indicated the position to be three degrees north latitude. This, coupled with a compass bearing on the mountains allowed him to pinpoint their position on his mind's map of Africa.

"Fifty kilometers north, twenty east—that should put us at Bahr el Aziab."

VII

THEY WORKED THEIR WAY along the smaller stream, pausing next evening within sound of a waterfall. A village of stone and wood huts was built on the terraces formed by resistant, horizontal stratas of rock. Warriors, carrying javelins and rhino-hide shields advanced cautiously downhill through brush bramble.

O'Neil stepped ashore, lifting his hook in a signal designed to arouse their curiosity if not their friendship.

"Talk to them," he said to Bobolongonga.

The huge black man splashed ashore through ankle-deep water, lifting his hands in the Moslem salute. To O'Neil's surprise they answered in the Moslem manner and suddenly lost restraint, rising from every side, chattering at the sight of two white men.

Their chief, a fellow with a high-beaked facial structure and ears drawn down by heavy decorations of brass and water-crystal, escorted O'Neil to his hut, seated him on a spongy soft bed of bark cloth and served unfermented sugar-palm juice in gourd cups.

Using Bobolongonga as interpreter, O'Neil traded the chief a rifle and twenty rounds of ammunition for ten fighting men who would serve as guides and porters on the overland trip to Bahr el Aziab.

Sunrise found the safari moving across vast, yellow Sudan country through armpit deep grass that swayed in the dry-season wind from Sahara. The ten tribesmen, Banyas, went first; next walked the tireless Mandanda head-hunters, carrying short throwing spears and heavy machete knives, together with extra rifles; and in the rear were the whites and Bobolongonga.

A footpath wound through deep savannah grass, across a crusted slough; it climbed among little hills made dark by glossy-leaved coffee trees, and dropped again to a wide plain. Here and there they found waterholes with their inevitable bones of antelope and zebra. The mountains were to south-west now, apparently as remote as ever.

They spent the night in a cluster of nut palms. By morning sun a purplish depression could be seen cutting deeply through the plateau country from north to south.

"Bahr el Aziab?" O'Neil asked, looking at Tommy.

"That's it."

The valley of Bahr el Aziab was fifteen or twenty kilometers from rim to rim, its bottom sometimes flat, covered by brush and jungle-like vegetation, sometimes broken in little, steep-sided hills with tops on an exact level with the plateau. Distantly in the north was a bluish fog of smoke.

"Village?" asked O'Neil.

Tommy nodded. "Those are Hedraz tribesmen. They're a Fulbe tribe, like these Banyas. Treacherous. They used to drive red buffalo down to camp and trade them to Nicolini for cartridges. Sometimes they brought rice and monkey-bread, too. I never went up to their village."

"How far is it from the tomb-diggings?"

"Ten or twelve kilos."

The path dropped steeply through rusty earth in a series of switchbacks. The bottoms of Bahr el Aziab was thickly overgrown with pale, greenish thorn. Heat was like a thick blanket. Insects caused the two white men to pause and fashion fly-whisks, though the natives did not seem to mind.

After an hour, Tommy stopped with the path still in thorn brush.

"There's a sweetwater spring just beyond. I've been there a couple times. Nicolini was thinking of using it for a permanent camp. Instead he chose a spot up ahead a kilo or so."

"Take over," said O'Neil. "I'll prowl ahead—alone. Bohn's outfit is likely to be up there."

Tommy was right about the spring. It was only a hundred steps away—a swift little stream of cold water flowing from green-crusted sandstone. No fresh footprints. O'Neil walked on. A quarter-hour, and the brush ended. He could see a

meadow with a cluster of buildings at one side. There were three grass huts with most of their thatch blown away, a mosquito house with net sides, the whole surrounded by a line of pointed pickets. On a little rise of land he could see a whitewashed cross. He took it to be Nicolini's grave.

He watched for a considerable time, but all lay deserted, outlines distorted by the heat waves of afternoon.

He circled the clearing and then, bending to find concealment in the tall grass, he walked to the mosquito house. Its floor was covered by a half-inch of undisturbed yellow dust carried in by the dry-season wind. No human footprint anywhere.

Tommy was asleep when he returned. O'Neil didn't waken him. He took siesta himself.

"What did you find?" Tommy asked when he woke up.

"Nothing. Bohn hasn't reached the camp yet. Maybe he by-passed us—maybe he's ambushed for us. We'd better wait."

O'Neil moodily watched the Mandanda dig white grubs for their supper. The heat lessened with late afternoon. O'Neil spoke a word of command. It took only a minute for them to gather their few belongings and form a line. A tenseness hung over the safari as it moved single-file along the winding footpath.

AN ABRUPT, flat sound broke the air. O'Neil stopped. He listened. It came again, and this time there was no mistaking its identity. It was the distant crack of a rifle.

"Do your Hedraz tribesmen have guns?" he asked Tommy.

"A few maybe."

It wasn't the time of day for hunting. Antelope and most of the other grass-eaters of the Sudan were bedded down.

They moved on as shooting continued intermittently. The clearing was deserted as before. Evening settled quietly with the Mandanda hunting more grubs.

O'Neil was restless. He followed an antelope trail through areas of thorn. Occasionally he paused to listen. The shooting had long since stopped. Something had crackled brush, and he followed the sound warily. It was not repeated. He paused, drew tobacco and papers from his pocket, creased a paper in the bend of his left arm,

and commenced dribbling tobacco. There was no wind in the bottoms, but a high twig nearby trembled. He spun aside, letting the tobacco fall, flipping out his Luger pistol. An assagai whisked past, disappearing into the brush bramble beyond.

O'Neil checked an impulse to squeeze the trigger. His ambusher was in line with the camp, and those 9 MM Luger bullets carry a long way. He took two swift strides and plunged toward the brushy spot whence the assagai had appeared.

Briars dragged off his sun helmet and snagged his shirt. He twisted, freeing the gun. He saw the man. A native.

The native had fallen in trying to escape. Brush had stopped him short of the ground, and for the moment he was helpless as a netted fish. O'Neil watched him clawing tangled twigs, trying to regain his feet.

"Stop!" barked O'Neil in English.

"Yes, *bwana*."

O'Neil had not expected him to understand. The fellow turned his head, rolling his frightened eyeballs. He was a lanky Congo tribesman.

"Who are you?" asked O'Neil.

"The *bondele* call me M'peno."

"That's a Bateke name."

"Yes, *bwana*."

"How'd you get to this country?"

"With the great safari. The safari of the tombs." M'peno was growing more confident now that so many seconds had passed without a flash of death from the Luger. He got up, carefully thrusting briars from his naked flesh. Clotted blood made reddish-black marks on his skin. It was evident that he'd been running blindly through valley thorn.

"You came here with Bohn?"

He nodded his head violently. "Yes."

"When?"

Native fashion, he pointed up the valley with his scar-enlarged underlip, "Up river we stop one, two day ago. Pretty soon dig. Some men dig, some build house. Soon many warrior come. They kill—one, two three . . ." The native counted his fingers and made a signal to indicate that many more had fallen. "I run. They try to catch me—"

"How about Bohn—big *bondele*? Was he killed?"

"I do not know."

"And the girl? White girl?"

"I do not know if she died, *bwana*."

O'Neil slid the Luger back in its holster.

"Why did you try to run me through with that assagai?" he barked.

"You would not kill me?"

"Of course not."

"Big *bondele*, he say you kill. Kill me, him, everybody."

"And eat you when I'm through?" asked O'Neil, smiling.

"I do not know," breathed the Congoese.

"Behold! Hear me—do as I say and I will neither kill you nor eat you. Instead I will give you many pieces of silver. Now get your assagai and come."

O'Neil returned to camp. Mandanda and Banya tribesmen gathered in an excited circle, staring at the strange tribal marks of the Congo native. O'Neil told his story in brief sentences.

"So that's the size of it," he concluded. "Bohn bypassed this camp and went directly to the tomb-diggings. He was there a day or so when the Hedraz attacked. Julie was with them—either she was killed or taken prisoner."

Tommy ran for his rifle, pulled out the cartridge clip to make sure it was filled, and slapped it back again. His eyes were a little bit wild as he stood with the rifle across one forearm, bending forward.

"Well?" he demanded in a high-pitched voice.

O'Neil knew he'd been worrying about Julie more than he pretended, and that, coupled with quinine and a touch of malaria, was tilting his balance a trifle.

"Take it easy, Tommy-lad."

"Take it easy!" he almost screamed. "Those Hedraz go in for religious torture. If they have that poor girl do you realize they'll—"

"I realize as much as you do."

"By the gods, I'm not going to stand here and—"

"I said to take it easy." O'Neil got out his own rifle. "How big is that Hedraz village?"

"I don't know."

"A couple-hundred huts?"

"I suppose."

"No use trying to strong-arm it, Tommy-lad. We'll move in on the quiet. If our luck holds, we'll bring her out." He made a sharp signal to the men. "Up! Double time!"

VIII

THE FOOTPATH WAS WIDE, well traveled. Darkness was settling. A homing flock of parrots followed overhead for a time, raising raucous cries. The parrots disappeared, and distantly drums could be heard beating in a peculiar, rocking rhythm.

At first only the heavy drums of elephant hide could be distinguished, then others with lighter heads became audible. At last they could hear even the light tamburs of monkey skin.

The village was close. Voices could be heard chanting a monotonous "ke-ke-ke."

The footpath left brush behind. There was a small field made hummocky by the recent digging for big-rooted yams. The outlines of many cone-shaped thatch huts were visible against the rolling reds and yellows of a huge dancing fire. O'Neil called a halt. Just beyond the yam field was the shadowy outline of a picket stockade.

He handed Tommy his rifle, found a few extra 9 MM cartridges of his Luger, slid a heavy, Arabian dagger or short-sword in his belt.

"Wait here. At the edge of the brush. Do you hear me?"

"What the hell's the matter with you, O'Neil? Of course I hear you."

"I didn't want you to get any brave ideas into that boy-scout brain of yours. Stay here and wait. If they're holding the girl, I'll get her out of the stockade on my own, but I may need some help in crossing the garden patch. So have the guns ready."

"I want to go in there, O'Neil. One man can't—"

"One man can do more than two, and a hell of a lot more than three. You'd only be in my way."

"By the gods—"

Tommy raised his voice, took a step forward. O'Neil's hand snapped out seizing his collar and twisting tight. He rammed Tommy back, tangling his legs. Tommy lashed and cursed in a snarling whisper, but O'Neil held him.

"I said not to get any boy-scout ideas. I'm running this show."

Tommy sat with arms propped behind him, naming O'Neil certain things in English, French and Congoese.

"How long will you be?" he finally asked,

O'Neil grinned with half his mouth, "Why, time is a funny thing, Tommy-lad. It looks broad as the Pacific, and then all of a sudden it runs out on you."

Bobolongonga lifted his hands toward Mecca as O'Neil walked away.

"Ay-ay-Allah. Has he not the heart of a lion, O *sidi*?"

"He'll live," said Tommy, caressing his abused throat. "He's the kind who goes over Niagara in a barrel and dies at eighty, of cognac poisoning."

"Is that bad, O *sidi*?"

"No. That's good."

O'Neil crossed to the stockade with a stride that was almost casual. No movement of sentries. The pointed pickets had rotted here and there close to the ground, and had been drawn together by long lengths of rope woven from baobab fiber. He drew the dagger and cut through the rope wrappings, pushed two pickets aside, and slid through.

A man turned around. A native. He had been patrolling the inside of the stockade. He paused and was peering into the shadow, trying to make out O'Neil's form. He came inching forward, his *assagai* ready, shoulder high.

O'Neil could have shot him down, but he did not dare disturb the village. Instead he balanced the dagger by its broad blade, waiting.

A twitch of the native's muscles was warning. O'Neil flipped the dagger, heavy handle first. It made a half revolution, driving its blade hilt-deep.

The warrior released his *assagai*, but the knife blade put him off balance. The spear went wild, its head tearing into the turf, its shaft snapping around with a vibration like a plucked viol string, slamming O'Neil in the shins.

The native reeled, clawing at the dagger. A scream mounted in his throat. O'Neil moved forward, fingers closing, choking off the scream, holding him as he lashed from side to side. His struggles weakened. O'Neil retrieved his dagger and stood erect, watching for further signs of alarm. He grunted and slid the dagger back in his belt.

It was a dozen steps to the outlying huts. O'Neil reached their shadow. No one was around them. He went on to the central dancing ground of the village. Women,

children and old men crouched in a wide circle, slapping hands and weaving from side to side, keeping time with a hundred or more dancers who executed contorted steps in drum-rhythm.

He stood still for a minute or so. Rolling flames of a fire lighted a considerable area of the village. On the far side of the circle were three large huts belonging either to chiefs or to the various fetishes.

WALKING in shadow he circled toward them. Posts, dangling with gri-gris stood near the doorway of the middle one. He saw a couple of sentries with bushy headdresses and knee-bangles. They were at the front, watching the dancers, waving shields and *assagais* in rhythm.

A third sentry who should have been patrolling the rear was at one side of the house, also a spectator.

O'Neil approached, wrapping a handkerchief around the dagger handle as he came. He sprang the last six feet of distance, locking the sentry's throat in the bend of his left arm, swinging the dagger handle. It stuck with a muffled thump. O'Neil felt the body go limp and lowered him face foremost to the ground.

He felt of the fellow's skull which was still serviceable, then quickly gagged him with a handful of dry grass wrapped in the handkerchief, and tied wrists to ankles with the man's own breechclout.

He stood up. The dancers, the other sentries were close, but darkness and the noise had saved him. He moved around the hut, examining it. Only one entrance, and that guarded. Its walls were of mud and thatch, plastered over bamboo framing.

He swung his hook, sinking it deeply, jerking loose great chunks of dried mud and rotting straw. The wall proved to be a foot thick, and it took five or six minutes to dig an opening large enough for his body.

The hole was finally there. He listened with his head half way inside. If there was a sound in there, he couldn't distinguish it. He poked head and shoulders in. Nothing visible except the V-shaped front entrance outlined by light of the dancing fire.

The air was vile with the lingering heat of afternoon, with the odor of uncured skins, of drying birds' wings, and bones, and lion's entrails and all the other things

used in the practice of native witchcraft.

He crawled inside. The floor was covered with mats of woven grass. He rose to a crouch, touching fingers to dagger and Luger making sure they were in place.

He could see the sentries with their backs to the door. Light coming through the door also revealed a man's bound feet in ventilated shoes. Bohn wore such shoes as those. He could hear little excited movements at different places in the dark, but no one spoke.

The firelight climbed brighter. A heap of thatch and bamboo from an abandoned hut had been hauled over and dumped on the fire. The hut interior came alive in a sultry glow. Still he could not see Julie Nicolini.

He spoke, his voice something less than a whisper,

"Julie. Julie Nicolini."

He waited, formed his lips to speak again, stopped. A voice answered from shadow against the wall.

"I'm here."

The prisoner by the door suddenly moved. Light reflected from thick glasses. Max Bohn.

Bohn's hands and legs were tied together so that he was forced to sit in a hunched position. He had turned his head, near-sighted eyes searching the gloom. "O'Neil?"

One of the sentries stood only a long reach distant. He turned at sound of Bohn's voice. O'Neil remained still. The Cockney, Joe Wisler, was over there, too. O'Neil had a vague impression of his skinny face, working with excitement, or fear.

The sentry peered for a while, but his eyes were still too full of firelight to see in the hut's darkness. He turned away. O'Neil moved on, trying to locate Julie Nicolini.

"Here!" Her voice was close.

She was in a standing position, arms spread, wrists bound to upright posts.

He exhaled slowly, reached, touched her shoulder. "You're all right?"

"Yes."

He could see her quite well now. She seemed very small, her skin ruddy in the fireglow, dark hair falling across her shoulders. He could hear the repressed sound of her breathing.

Her wrists had been bound tightly to

upright posts by many wrappings of tough thong. He carefully worked the dagger blade. Bohn was speaking in a rising whisper,

"O'Neil. Damn you, I will not be left here."

O'Neil did not answer to tell him it would have been disastrous to approach close enough the door to effect his release. He kept working the blade, severing the thongs which held Julie's right wrist. He felt them part, then turned his attention to the other wrist. Bohn was breathing angrily, through clenched teeth.

"Damn you!" roared Bohn.

The two sentries were peering in at him.

"Ho, white man!" one of them said in guttural English.

IX

BOHN TWISTED TO ONE KNEE and an elbow, fighting his bonds. His heavy body writhed like a contortionist's. He stopped, and stared up at the guard.

"Listen. Me—friend. Friend of Hedraz. Behold, and I will show you your real enemy." He swung his head in the direction of O'Neil and the girl. "See your real enemy! Behold the hook-armed man who would help the devil-woman escape."

Julie Nicolini was jerking frenziedly as O'Neil tried to hack through the final thongs which held her. She fell forward, seeming to be free. One strand still held. It jerked her back; she fell with a leg bent beneath her, arm tossed high.

"Stop them, my friends of the Hedraz!" Bohn was roaring. "See, am I not your friend? Did I not kill the old leader of these white men, that evil sorcerer, Nicolini? Did I not poison him so he would not bring on your tribe the curse of an opened tomb? Beyond the hook-armed one—"

During this speech the guards had rushed past him, raising an alarm.

The girl was on her feet, jerking at the single, remaining thong. O'Neil slashed it. She fell forward. He seized her blouse, jerked her upright. He could have carried her easily. A native ran in carrying an oil torch. The hut was suddenly filled with excited, shouting natives.

O'Neil spun around, the dagger in front of him. He was rammed. He staggered

forward, keeping the girl close with his hook in the belt of her jhodpurs. She was screaming. He saw a native swing an assagai, clublike. His brain-seemed to explode in white fire, dissolving in the darkness with flying constellations of stars.

He came up spitting blood. A second blow had mashed his lips. They had dragged him outside. He was on his hands and knees with pistons of pain ramming his brain. He looked around. Still the drums, the self-imposed hypnosis of the dance. Perhaps a dozen warriors were gathered in a circle.

"O'Neil, you made a hell of a mess of it," he addressed himself through a bloody mouth.

A fetish doctor shoved his grotesque head-mask through. The head-mask was three feet in diameter, blackish skins stretched over a frame with eyes, nose and mouth painted on it. Its chin came to his navel and his arm protruded from its ears. It was a nightmare thing.

Bohn was still shouting, "See, did I not say I was a friend? Friend of Hedraz. Behold! Me *baminga*. Friend."

A voice issued from the depths of the witch-doctor's mask—a command to the guards. One of them seized O'Neil's shirt, roughly jerking him to his feet. Another cut Bohn's wrists and ankles free. The big man chortled gleefully and started away from the circle of warriors only to be stopped by the iron points of several *assagais*.

The witch doctor spoke again and walked away, his mask making him look like a deformed head with tiny legs attached.

"Me friend," pleaded Bohn, trying to part the *assagais*.

One of the guards stepped behind him and swung an *assagai* shaft to his skull. It made his knees bend. He turned, shaking his massive head, his eyes blinking. His glasses had dropped off. He picked them up, shaking dust from their lenses.

"Go!" said the guard, gesturing his head at the retreating witch doctor.

The point of an *assagai* burned the flesh of O'Neil's rear. He got up, shaking dizziness from his brain, spitting curses at the blackfellow who had goaded him.

He looked for the girl. She was backed against the door of the hut. He held out

his hand, and she came to him. He could tell by her eyes how scared she was.

"It's a long way to Chicago, kid!" he grinned.

"I do not understand."

"Never mind."

She clung to his arm, her bare shoulder against the sun-coppered skin of his chest. The native nudged his *assagai* again, driving O'Neil forward.

He felt for his dagger. Either he'd dropped it, or they'd taken it away from him. The Luger was still in full sight at his hip. In the half darkness, none of them had noticed it. He jerked his shirt over it.

Zonga and Joe Wisler were brought from the hut. There was a big mulatto from the expedition, too. They were all marched away—O'Neil and the girl leading, Bohn still protesting after them, and finally Zonga, Wisler, and the mulatto. They stopped at the door of a wood-slab house, entered the door to a sort of vestibule, bent low to enter a second door.

O'Neil looked around. He was in a circular room about ten meters in diameter. Three lamps with wicks of twisted goat's hair gave a flickering yellowish light, sending up smoke that cut a man's lungs.

The hut was evidently the tribe's holy of holies. Voodoo posts and hundreds of assorted gri-gri were deep along the walls. At one side of the room was a dais with a throne, and seated on the throne was what seemed to be an idol with an almost human face.

O'Neil moved closer, studying the seated figure. It had the face of a man. Dried, human skin was stretched tightly over a skull with built-up cheeks and eyesockets. The clawlike hands rested on the arms of a fume-browned chair carved with stylized palms and the figures of men in Egyptian costume fighting with spears. Over the idol figure was a robe of brocade, falling apart from dry rot but still aglitter from links of gold set with rudely-cut diamonds and carnelians.

The figure was an Egyptian mummy.

BOHN was also staring at the figure. He moved forward on stubby feet, reaching one hand to touch the bejeweled robe.

The witch-doctor squawked something, and a warrior swung down with a heavy *assagai*, catching Bohn across the arm.

Bohn bent over, clutching his forearm, gritting from pain.

"Me friend," he said. "Friend of Hedraz. But for me would not these others be free? I ask it!"

A man entered from a rear room, and paused, listening to Bohn's words. The masked witch-doctor saw him, lifted his arms, swung them to earth like a Moham-medan at prayer.

This newcomer, this chief of the fetish-ers, was tall and well muscled, gowned in flowered red and yellow trade-cloth. He was unmasked, but his face was painted in a manner which made it resemble the enthroned mummy.

"Me—friend!" repeated Bohn.

The fetish-chief lifted his right hand. "Silence, white man!" He spoke in English, and did a rather good job of it. "I do not believe white men. When I was not yet old enough to carry spear, white men came to my village from the great sands of the north. They led in chains many slaves of Tongos who they would trade for ivory. And so the old men of the tribe traded—so many tusks that three canoes were loaded. Then at night those Tongos slaves killed our women and children, and burned our huts with weapons the whites had given them. And so it had been planned from the first."

"But I am friend. Did they not tell you how I killed the white chief, Nicolini, for disturbing the ages-dead in their tombs? How now I—"

"Through last dry season my people watched you dig for tombs among the rocks, and they did nothing. Then came the flies to curse our cattle and lay a strange disease that killed them by dozens. You have cursed us by your digging, and so you all must die."

"I have heard it from the lips of the long-dead one!" He stretched an arm, pointing at the mummy's face.

O'Neil laughed the sudden, raucous sound making every native turn and stare. He laughed the louder, slapping his thigh.

"You heard *him* talk?" he demanded,, bending a thumb at the mummy.

"Behold, white man—"

O'Neil spat at the mummy's sandals. "Is *that* as great a fetish as your tribe owns? Ha!—no wonder you live in fear of little flies which lay eggs on cattle. No won-

der you fear that coward tribe, the Ban-yas!"

A long stride placed O'Neil beside the throne. The fetish chief leaped between him and the sacred mummy. O'Neil hooked the front of the chief's robe, jerked his feet free, and flung him across the room into the arms of his guardsmen.

The fetisher shrieked for someone to stop the desecration, but no one seemed to hear him. O'Neil stripped the sacred robe from the mummy and wrapped it around his own shoulders.

At this sight even the fetish-chief was struck silent. He waited for lightning from heaven to split the room's smoke-reeking air.

O'Neil's lips twisted in a sort of smile. He hooked the mummy by its breast-wrappings of criss-crossed linen, lifted the dried body, and dumped it face foremost to the floor.

The fetish-chief screamed something. When no responding movement came from the men, he jerked a short *assagai* from a warrior's nerveless fingers, spun and plunged it at O'Neil's breast.

O'Neil slapped the shaft aside, but the tension was broken. He leaped down, the ancient robe fluttering around him, siezed Julie's wrist.

The fetish-chief sprang, enraged fingers clawing for O'Neil's throat. O'Neil slammed him away. The fetisher was on hands and knees near the door. His flying body had cleared a path. O'Neil went on, half-carrying the girl.

The way became a mass of struggling men. The bedlam of close quarters saved them from guardsmen's spears. Zonga, the wrestler, was flinging the lesser man aside, but went down with a rude dagger in his throat. Lamps were kicked over, flames trampled. Only the single lamp above the mummy's throne still burned.

O'Neil pushed Julie into the vestibule, followed her. She screamed, flung herself aside. Max Bohn was there ahead of them, waiting, a native war-club in his hand. He rose on stubby toes, swinging with all his heavy strength at O'Neil's head.

O'Neil moved. The club glanced from his skull. The dim walls of the little room spun across his gazed eyeballs.

He could hear Bohn's voice, "... thought you would leave me to die . . ."

O'Neil rebounded from a wall with his shoulder, rolled, fighting for balance. Bohn had the club lifted, trying for a finishing blow. The girl clutched his knees. He tried to boot her away, but she stuck like a spider-web.

O'Neil set himself. He swung his hook. Bohn staggered back, shaking his head, jaw open and bleeding. O'Neil's fist smashed him down.

Bohn came up, blocking the door. The club was still in his hand. O'Neil drove the flat of his foot to Bohn's throat. His head snapped, sending droplets of perspiration flying from his short-roached hair.

O'NEIL glanced around for the girl. She was crawling towards him on hands and knees. Natives were charging from the inner room. He bludgeoned the first one down with his hook, hurled his collapsing body back to glut the tiny doorway. The robe fell from his shoulders.

Bohn groped for the club, backed through the outer door. O'Neil followed, helping the girl, drawing his Luger.

Half a dozen warriors, attracted by the excitement, were running from the dancing circle, *assagais* ready to throw. Bohn drew up, shaking his head like a cornered buffalo.

"Friend of Hedraz . . ." he shouted.

The closest native drove his *assagai*. The heavy iron tip crunched through Bohn's chest. Two more spears struck him, driving him back as he fell.

His sudden appearance had saved O'Neil and Julie. They ran, following the hut's circular wall.

Warriors were coming from the dancing circle, from the fetish hut. A tall savage poised to fling a wickedly-pointed javelin.

O'Neil dropped him with a slug from his Luger. O'Neil tangled the girl's belt with his hook, held her behind him as he found shadow behind the hut. He kept firing, keeping pursuers away.

They ran, following a zig-zag path among thatch houses. The drums had finally come to a stop. Native warriors had formed two ragged groups, circling to cut off retreat.

The stockade was close. Men were moving in its shadow. They were O'Neil's own Banyas and Mandanda head-hunters.

Tommy had not kept watch from the edge of the bush like O'Neil had ordered. He'd brought the natives in to this closer position.

O'Neil shouted to reveal his identity and started across open ground. Occasionally an arrow or javelin hissed grass near his feet.

The voice of Tommy Huston issued a command. There was a volley of high velocity rifle bullets hurling back the mob of pursuing Hedraz. O'Neil lifted Julie over the wall and paused to ram fresh cartridges into his Luger.

"Tommy?"

"Here I am."

"I should split your worthless skull for not waiting in the bush."

Tommy swore back cheerfully without pausing his operation of the rifle bolt.

The Hedraz retreated. Inflamed by this success, both Mandanda and Banya charged into the open only to find the air thick with arrows.

They came back carrying a wounded Banya, and were content to retreat to safety in the bush.

By dawn, O'Neil had led the group to the edge of the Aziab river ten kilometers away.

O'Neil crouched on his heels near the southward-flowing stream, and did a deft, one-handed job of fashioning a cigarette of strong, native tobacco.

From the side of his eye he kept watch of Tommy Huston and the girl.

They stood close. She looked into Tommy's face, smiling with a girlish softness. Her hands reached, lightly touching his shoulders.

O'Neil stood up suddenly.

"Listen," he said, pointing a finger at Tommy. "You're not giving that little one the Huston touch-and-go. You're marrying her, understand?"

Tommy stared at him.

"And next time you're reported dead, don't show up alive or I'll give the Colonial Administration the corpse they're looking for."

"Say, what's eating you?"

"I'm jealous!" growled O'Neil, biting the soggy end of his cigarette. "I'm jealous, and too damned old to do anything about it."



"It'll hurt bad," Doc told him.

OUTLAW POISON

By Lee Thomas

Old Doc Standish knew it was the only cure for a loco longrider with a bad twitch in his trigger finger.

UTTER WEARINESS SHOWED in Doc Standish's heavy face. The old medico sat on his swivel-chair in his office with a whiskey-bottle on the floor between his stubby legs. He was cold sober. He had taken at least a dozen long drinks in the two hours since John Williams had died.

A great shock—like the death of an old crony—always made liquor lose its effect on him. Right when he needed the solace of whiskey most, whiskey refused to effect him.

"Danun it," he muttered.

From five that afternoon he had worked with Williams, trying to get the rancher

out of his coma. William had died without regaining consciousness. He had not been able to tell Doc Standish or Sheriff Mike Louis the identity of the man who had slugged him.

Both knew why Williams had been slugged. He had been taking his monthly payroll out to his Circle W ranch. The money had been in bills and silver and both Doc Standish and Sheriff Louis had seen him leave town.

"More money for the hands," the raw-boned rancher had said, tossing the sack in his buckboard. He had climbed up the reins of the two sorrels. "Some night real pronto I'll bring in my missus an' while her an' your woman gab-fest, Doc, me an' the sheriff'll have a rummy session."

He had never talked to them again.

Four hours later, Circle W hands had driven the same buckboard back, only this time fresh blacks were hitched to it, not the sorrels. The buggy, the foreman said, had rolled into camp, the sorrels running wildly, reins dragging. They had backtracked and found John Williams in Chimney Cut. The payroll, of course, was gone.

Doc Standish drank again. He recorked the quart bottle and set it on the floor again. He and Sheriff Louis had guessed what had happened. A rider, the tracks showed, had come in close. Evidently he'd slugged Williams and lifted the payroll.

"He didn't believe in banks," Sheriff Louis said. "He always paid in currency. I wonder if some local hand has slugged him?"

Doc Standish had doubted that. For one thing, Williams had moved his payroll each month this time, and he'd never been molested before. People on Chimney Rock range liked the old-timer. Had somebody coveted the payroll he'd have hit it before this. And that person would have killed John Williams outright.

Sheriff Louis had nodded agreement. "Must've been some stranger, Doc. There's been quite a mess of trouble over in Big-horn county, I understand. Two nights ago two gents held up a stage comin' from the mine."

Doc had unloaded Williams' .45. The heavy Colt had held four unfired cartridges. That meant Williams had got in one shot, for he always let his gun-hammer sit on an empty.

"Wonder if he connected?" Louis asked.

Doc had shrugged. "He was a poor shot."

Louis had looked down at the heavy-breathing unconscious cowman. "Doc, what can you do for him? Pull him through, Doc!"

Doc Standish had shaken his head. "His skull is fractured. It looks to me like a piece of bone had been driven into his brain. I'm not God, Sheriff."

Louis had said "I'm ridin' out to Chimney Cut to look for sign. I know the Circle W men said there was no sign on that lava bed. But I gotta do something, Doc."

Doc Standish had given his friend a hypo. Outside, he heard the clatter of hoofs, and he watched Louis ride out of town. The medico pulled at his bottle and sat beside the man who lay speechless on the bed.

When Louis came back John Williams was dead.

THESE thoughts, bitter and turgid, were with the old medico now. He too wanted to do something, wanted to find out who had killed his friend. But what could he do? His heart wouldn't let him ride a horse any more. He made his calls in a buckboard, or else his patients were brought into town.

The door opened. Martha came in, shawl wrapped around her slender shoulders. "Doc, you'll have to come home! Brooding here by yourself with that bottle won't bring John back. You're hungry, aren't you?"

The medico smiled. "I am, I guess."

"You guess! Are you coming home?"

"After a while."

"You said that an hour ago. I'm bringing you some grub, then."

He heard her heels go down the porch steps. He lifted his bottle and uncorked it and then said, "Oh, what the hell good are you?" and he put the bottle down untasted. He heard boots on the steps. He hoped it wasn't a call. He looked at the clock, and noticed it was after one.

There was no knock at the door. Two men entered, one limping a little on his right leg. He was short and burly and tough-looking. The other was taller, and he had his Colt out, the barrel bluntly on Doc Standish. He had a long, skinny face with loose lips.

"You the doc?"

Doc Standish hadn't gotten from his chair. He swiveled around and looked at them. He looked at the .45. "You can put that away. Yes, I'm the doctor here."

But the man didn't put the gun away. He looked at the blinds, his glance raking and wolf-like, and he smiled a little—a hard, mean smile—when he saw they were already pulled low. His gun on the medico, he walked to the back door, gave the knob a turn. The door was locked.

He said, "All right, Ike, get over there," and gestured toward the operating-table with his gun-barrel. The lame man hobbled across the room and sat on the leather-covered table. He got up on it with some difficulty, Doc noticed. There was blood on his pants and on his wide-winged chaps.

The gun-barrel came back on Doc Standish. "My pard has a bum leg. You look at it. I'll stand by the door."

Doc said, "I don't treat longriders."

The tall man laughed shortly. "Longriders, eh? Well, now, how did you get the wild idea we was outlaws?"

"Your faces. Your clothes. Your tied-down guns. Men ride peacefully on this range. You got it stamped on you."

The man's laugh died slowly. "All right, we're longriders, like you say. But my pal still has a bum pin. Get over there and work on him."

Doc looked at the gun. He let his eyes travel up the man's arm and let his gaze lock with the man's. Then he returned his eyes to the gun. No use arguing with a gun, especially when the man behind it will kill you.

"I'm pretty drunk."

"You'll be pretty dead if you don't jump pronto."

Doc got to his feet. He had a rifle in the next room and a pistol in his bottom desk-drawer. But to go for either would be suicide, he reasoned. He got the man lying down on the table.

The effort had brought the redness to his face. He asked the man to help but the man had said it was his job. Doc's heart was throbbing by the time he got the man on his back.

"I've got a weak heart," he said. "I can't work fast."

"You'll work fast . . . this time."

The tall man crossed the office, got Doc's bottle, returned to his spot beside the door. He drank noisily. Doc found himself wondering about Martha as he unbuckled the wounded man's chaps. She'd walk right into this. He wished there was some way to warn her. But there wasn't.

"You'll have to take your trousers off," Doc told the wounded man.

"Cut them," he ordered.

Doc went to his desk for his shears. The tall man moved over to watch him. He took Doc's pistol and put it in his belt.

"Don't steal that," Doc almost pleaded. "My brother gave it to me thirty years ago."

"You'll get it back," the man said. "I'll mail it back by parcel post." He laughed a little at his joke. Doc didn't laugh. Neither did the wounded man. Doc slit the pants with the shears and the wound lay in view. He saw right away it was a bullet wound.

"I'll have to give him an anaesthetic," Doc said.

"What's that?" The tall man was suspicious.

Doc explained he'd have to put the wounded man to sleep. Both the tall man and the wounded man objected to that. The wounded man claimed no sheriff was going to walk in and find Ike Jones unconscious on a doctor's table. When Ike Jones went out, he'd do some shooting first.

"We gotta get outa here," the tall man said. "Get to work, sawbones."

"It'll hurt bad," Doc told the wounded man.

"I'll grit my teeth. I'll be a big boy." A smile touched his whiskery lips. But his eyes, Doc noticed, were dull.

Doc shrugged. "You'll be in pain, not me."

He went to work with a half-interest in his labors. He'd taken out too many bullets to be nervous about the job. He wished his heart would steady down. He wished Martha wasn't due to arrive soon.

The bullet had not gone through the man's thigh. It had missed the bone and become imbedded in the heavy muscle inside the thigh. Doc painted the wound with alcohol to wash the blood away and he was reaching for his forceps when Martha came in, carrying a tray covered with a cloth.

"Why, you've got a patient!"

She had not seen the tall man when she had entered, for he had stood behind the door when it opened. Now he said, "Put the tray down, old lady, and take a seat over there, and keep your gab shut hard, savvy?"

She turned, scared. "Who are you?"

Doc cut in with, "Sit down, honey, as he says. They came in right after you left. This outlaw has a bullet in his leg."

"A bullet. Maybe it's the one John Williams fired!"

SHE had voiced an opinion that Doc Standish had held for some minutes. Her legs seemed wooden as she sat down, the tray on her lap. The tall man crossed the room, took the tray, and went back to squat beside the door. He started eating the food. "Who's John Williams?"

"You sure you don't know?" Doc asked slowly.

The man spoke around a cheese sandwich. "Oh, sure, I know now. He's the old fellow we met today, Ike. You know we asked him for his belongings and he got real smart. He wanted to fight. About that time Ike saw the sack in his buckboard. Ike's got an eye for money, he has."

He started eating again.

Martha had recovered her composure, Doc figured. He winked at his wife. "Just take it easy, mama." He glanced at the tall man. "You killed Williams. He died this afternoon."

"You don't say," the wounded man grunted in make-believe surprise.

"You hit him too hard, Ike," the tall man said. "I warned you about being so promiscuous with the barrel of your six-shooter."

Martha hissed, "You dogs!"

The wounded man smiled a little. He lay back, eyes closed, as Doc probed. There was no sign of pain on his leathery face. The tall man took another pull at Doc's bottle. "You drink a good brand," he said.

Doc kept on working. Sheriff Louis was somewhere around town, but how could they get word to him? There was no way. Martha, watching him, saw his scowl leave suddenly. She knew then he had a plan, for she knew him as well as she knew her own mind. But she wondered what it was. "There's the bullet," Doc said.

He had the lead in his forceps. It was ugly and blunt and bloody. He held it up, the lamplight on it. His fingers were bloody, too. The wounded man sat up.

"Feels better already," he told the tall man. He started to get to his feet but Doc's forearm held him.

"We'll wash it out and bandage it," the medico said.

The wounded man looked at his partner. His partner looked at the clock. "We've been here fifteen minutes already. Make it snappy, Doc. We got a meetin' place with a stage yet tonight if my pard can hold up."

Doc remembered Sheriff Louis telling about two men holding up a Bighorn stage. But he kept his knowledge from showing in his grooved face. "You better wait a minute or two longer. You might get infection unless I sterilize that wound."

"All right," the tall man said.

Martha was silent. The tall man cleaned up the tray and shoved it into a corner. Outside the town was quiet at this late hour. Doc worked quickly. He washed the wound again and bound it. He worked very quickly. Martha had never seen him work so fast.

Doc wished he could have killed the man on the table. He wished he could have given him a deadly hypo and killed him. But if he did both he and Martha would die under the tall man's gun.

"That's all." He stepped back.

The wounded man got down, hobbling a little. "It feels good, Slim," he said. He looked at Doc. "How much do you want?"

"I won't take John Williams' money. You can do me your biggest favor by getting to hell out of my office."

The tall man smiled. "He sounds mad."

The tall man locked the front-door. He put the key in his jocket. He went to the store-room, looked in, and didn't see the rifle, dark in the dark corner. He said, "All right, Ike, we drift." With Ike hobbling ahead they went out the back. He had taken the back-door key and they heard him lock the door. They were locked in.

Somewhere, horses started on the run, back in the alley.

Doc had the rifle. Despite his bum heart he moved fast. He slammed the barrel around, smashing the window. He scrambled outside, cutting himself on the jagged

glass that hung to the frame. Martha cried, "Doc—"

But the rest was lost in the roar of his rifle. They were far away, moving against the darkness, and he missed. They shuttled around a corner, horses kicking gravel. Doc ran out on Main Street. He figured Sheriff Louis should be around the livery-barn, for he knew the lawman's nightly circuit around town. He saw Louis break out from under the livery-barn light.

"Kill them, Sheriff," he screamed. "They killed Williams."

The gunmen were a block away from the lawman, Doc figured. He couldn't see them. But he heard the roar of guns. He ran up the street, forgetting his weak heart. He saw Louis shooting.

"I got one," Lewis hollered.

The sheriff and Doc ran forward with the hoofs of the remaining outlaw drumming in safety out in the darkness. Doc gasped out to the lawman what had happened. Louis had downed the tall man. He was dead.

Doc got up from examining the man, heart beating wildly. Sheriff Louis was cursing. "They had to come to you because there ain't another doctor in a hundred miles. I'm gettin' my bronc and headin' after that guy!"

"There's no use in hurrying." Doc had taken a box from his vest pocket. He put a granule of something on his tongue and swallowed. "You know what I just swallowed?"

"What difference does it make? That gent's gettin' away!"

Doc grabbed his arm. "He won't go far, Sheriff. I just took a strychnine granule. A single granule acts as a heart stimulant. Ten of those would kill me inside of fifteen minutes."

"Why tell me that? Let go my arm!"

"Well, I put about ten grains in a gelatine capsule. I put the capsule in the wound and bound it up. And when that strychnine hits his blood . . ."

Louis stood silent. "He sure won't ride far," he said.

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WATCH FOR IT IN THE JANUARY ISSUE OF

LARIAT!

Boss Of Bushwhack Basin

By THOMAS F. WATERS



McKelvey let go a shot. The man fell . . .

Dead waddies and burnt-out spreads would buy him this valley, Big Bob Talbot figured. But there are six little reasons why all range hogs are wrong.

BEN MCKELVEY WATCHED the rider in front of him with narrowed, brown eyes. Mid-day sunlight, bright but without warmth, poured down upon the little group of riders, gathered under the bare cottonwoods beside the rushing stream called Little Squaw River. McKelvey, big, broad-shouldered, sat his horse with an apparent easy looseness; but his mind was hard, and his muscles ready to snap into action. The rider he faced was directly in front of

him, a rider that sat huge and massive, a bull of a man, in his saddle.

"Talbot," he said coldly, "you're a big man. But you're heading for a big fall."

Big Bob Talbot did not move. His black horse shifted a step or two under him, but the big man's eyes did not stray from his own. "You're the one who's going to fall, McKelvey. You and Rawlings and all the rest of you."

"Listen, Talbot," McKelvey said. "My father bought two cows and a bull to this

range long before you learned to talk. The same with Rawlings' dad. Both of them wanted only a small ranch and a small range. Not the whole Montana Territory. We're here to stay, Talbot. My ranch and Rawlings' ranch. We're not moving out for any number of your kind or all the hired gun hands you bring in. Remember that."

Big Bob Talbot's bull neck squeezed down even shorter. His cold, small black eyes glittered above the gray mustache. "You remember this—and tell Rawlings, too—I'm a big man and I'm building a big cattle empire. You aren't going to stand in my way—you nor those mangy squatters you let live off your land and cattle. I want this land and I'm going to have it. You're getting off if I have to kill every last one of you!"

McKelvey watched the four gunmen behind Talbot. They were ready, and willing to go into action at the big man's word. His own men, behind him, were cowmen. They could shoot, and shoot well, but against the hired gunnies of Talbot's they wouldn't stand much of a chance. McKelvey threw a glance at Doug Benner, moving up at his left. And McKelvey knew that his own six-gun, a few inches above his right hand, as well as Benner's, would take its toll, and the big man he faced knew it, too.

"You're wrong, Talbot."

The big man had turned to go. He said, as a last word, "You're a stubborn man, McKelvey. You'll pay for that stubbornness with your life. Remember what I said—if I have to kill every last one of you!" Big Bob Talbot turned his horse away and started up a trail leading away from the river. His four men followed, spurring their ponies.

Doug Benner, his easy-going smile gone now and his gray eyes hard, said, "We haven't seen the last of them."

McKelvey watched the retreating riders. "Neither have they seen the last of us."

McKelvey turned and rode down the trail beside the river without saying more, and Benner and the rest of his men followed.

AHEAD lay the cabin of old Wyatt Jordan, a nester who lived on McKelvey's range near Little Squaw River

with his small family. He remembered the time that Big Bob Talbot, in his campaign of intimidating the Jordan family, had ridden to old Wyatt Jordan's cabin, found him outside chopping up firewood and had thoroughly beat up the old man in front of his wife. Jordan's grown son, William, had not been there, or there would have been fireworks. When McKelvey had happened by a few minutes later, and Jordan's wife was bathing the old man's battered and bloody face, he had become infuriated at Talbot, had ridden to see the big ranch owner and engaged him in a fight. Talbot had drawn a gun, forcing McKelvey to bring his own gun up. Talbot had taken a slug in his arm, and that had ended the episode. But McKelvey knew Talbot had not forgotten it. And now Talbot would never stop until he had fulfilled his promise to bury McKelvey's hide—either that or seen the light of day darken from in front of McKelvey's guns, he thought bitterly.

McKelvey came abreast of Jordan's cabin. The old man, tall and thin, with graying hair, was doing some hammering on the old bridge across the river in front of his cabin. McKelvey pulled up at the bridge, and Jordan stopped his work and looked up. The old man's faded blue eyes squinted into the sunlight at the rider. He came across.

"Howdy, Ben," Jordan said. "Getting colder."

McKelvey agreed, "Yes. Snow's coming soon."

Jordan's son appeared from beneath the bridge and stood in back of his father. He evidently had been helping the old man on the bridge unseen by McKelvey until now. The boy was a typical homesteader, medium height and stockily built, with large, strong hands and feet enclosed in big heavy shoes. "Hello, William." McKelvey nodded to the boy.

"Howdy, Ben."

Mrs. Jordan came from the cabin in a wide calico apron. She held a towel-wrapped package. Jordan turned to watch his wife approach.

She crossed the bridge and spoke to McKelvey. "Hello, Ben. I was hoping you'd come by today. I just finished a fresh batch of those oatmeal cookies." She smiled broadly.

McKelvey allowed his thin lips to loosen into a pleased smile. "Thanks, Mrs. Jordan. It just happened I rode by today hungry for some."

She laughed, her wide, homely features showing their pleasure. The Jordans were friends of the McKelvey family, coming here when his father had still been alive. McKelvey knew that old Wyatt Jordan killed a steer now and then to eat, but McKelvey did not mind. The small family did not take much beef, and they killed no more than was necessary. McKelvey had never spoken to them about it. In unexplained return, Mrs. Jordan often brought special fancy dishes of food to McKelvey. And to McKelvey, a bachelor, they were always welcome. The little cabin with the Jordans were as much a part of his range as the hills and the river.

"Talbot," McKelvey said, "is on the warpath. Watch yourself."

Jordan's graying bowed a little and he watched the ground for a few minutes. He looked up again at McKelvey. "What's the matter? Something against me?"

"No," McKelvey answered. "Just the same old thing. He wants this range. But he's getting a little impatient."

At McKelvey's words Mrs. Jordan's face had lost its carelessness. She said to the old man, "There's trouble coming. It's been coming for a long time." Jordan was quiet.

"No need to worry now, Mrs. Jordan," McKelvey said. "He won't bother you yet. But just be careful."

McKelvey turned his horse. Doug Benner and the rest of his men had been waiting and now they edged their horses toward McKelvey.

"You've been here a lot longer than Talbot has," he said. "You'll be here when he's gone." He smiled at the woman standing beside her son, touched his hat brim. "Thanks again, Mrs. Jordan."

He touched spurs to his horse and turned off the main trail, away, from the river. Down the trail, down to where the Little Squaw River ran into the larger Yellowstone was the town of Graywater. McKelvey turned off to the smaller trail that led to his ranch, out on the yellow prairie away from the river.

That night Ben McKelvey heard a rider come into the ranch yard, riding hard.

That would probably be Benner, coming in off the range. A high, long shout echoed out from the corral, and McKelvey heard several of his men run by the house. He had been building a cigarette and was about to light it, but at the shouts and sounds of running men outside, he placed the cigarette unlit into his mouth and pulled the door open. A horse and rider pulled to a dust raising stop, and four or five men gathered around them. The group started up toward the house.

McKelvey stepped down off the porch and headed for them. Close enough now, he recognized the tall, lanky form of Benner walking toward him. The other men clustered around him. And in Benner's arms was the loose rolling shape of a dead man.

McKelvey stopped. Benner came closer, his gray eyes narrowed now and reflecting the light from the open doorway. His face, dark now, was tight and still. He stopped before McKelvey.

"This is Johnny Ames." Benner's throat was tight, and his voice showed its strain. Gone was the loose, easy recklessness that characterized McKelvey's wrangler. Doug Benner's lanky, usually happy-go-lucky form stood still and quiet in the gathering darkness. "I found him over in the north timber, not far from Jordan's cabin. He was shot in the back."

ANGER went through McKelvey in hammering, crashing waves. He looked at the dead boy's body, held in Benner's arms. Johnny Ames had come to his ranch only a year ago, looking for a job. He was young, about William Jordan's age, and had fondly been called, "Kid," by the men. McKelvey set his teeth, hard. This could only mean one thing. Big Bob Talbot had started his war!

Benner said, coldly, "You know who did it as well as the rest of us."

"Yes."

"And—?"

"I'll ride to town in the morning."

"What for?"

"To see Neilson."

One of the other men, Jed Callahan, said, "Riding in to see the sheriff will do no good."

"As far as doing something about the Kid," McKelvey said slowly, "no. It won't.

It's what going to happen from now on that I want to see Neilson about."

"Meaning?" Doug Benner.

"Meaning just what you want it to mean. The time has come for a showdown. We've had to eat mud from Talbot's boots long enough!" McKelvey turned toward the house, felt the first cold drops of half-melted snow on his neck. He turned into the house. The wind had increased to a whining shrieking roar by the time McKelvey reached town. It carried cold snow now; big heavy flakes that, with the wind behind them, formed an almost horizontal curtain in front of McKelvey. There was nearly a foot of snow already on the ground and it was being drifted in small pockets along the wide street. He was thankful now that he had put on a heavy mackinaw.

McKelvey found the sheriff's office and the sheriff, Burt Neilson in it. The sheriff, a gray haired man, getting old, stood up wearily and looked at McKelvey as he slammed the door, shutting out the wind and snow. He stamped his feet and brushed snow from his hat.

"Hello, Ben," the sheriff offered. "I guess winter's come at last."

"Yes."

"You'll want a cup of coffee. I've got some hot in a pan here." Neilson turned to a big pot bellied stove, on top of which was an iron pot. Steam rose vigorously from it.

"Never mind the coffee." McKelvey was staring at the aging sheriff's face. At his words, Neilson turned back, scenting trouble. He waited for McKelvey to speak again.

He had known Burt Neilson for a long time. He had been sheriff ever since McKelvey could remember. Trouble had come and gone in the town of Graywater. In his time Neilson had been a good sheriff. He had taken care of most of it. Not always had there been a man put into jail, but the trouble had usually stopped as soon as Neilson had taken a hand. McKelvey remembered, as a boy, that Neilson had been a man he had always looked up to. But in the last five years, Neilson had been more of a tradition around the Little Squaw country than an upholder of justice. Other, larger forces had taken a hand. McKelvey had felt for a long time that a new sheriff was in order. He couldn't take the snow

and cold of winter, nor the hard rides, nor the quick-nerved action it took to fulfill his job. Still Neilson had been re-elected, and McKelvey knew that the sheriff would stick to it and try to wear the star just as long as he could.

"My boy Johnny Ames was shot in the back last night."

Neilson was silent for a moment. Then, "Do you know who shot him?"

"I know who shot him just as you and everyone else in this country would know."

The sheriff said, after a pause, "I can't bring in Talbot just on that account."

"Neilson," McKelvey said, "you couldn't bring him in on any account. I didn't ride in to town all this way to try to get you to bring in Talbot." McKelvey stopped, but Neilson did not speak. His age-tightened mouth grew even thinner. "I came to tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to fight back. Talbot has declared open war as far as I'm concerned, and I'm going to take things into my own hands. There's been trouble coming now for a year and a half, and now it's here. I just want to tell you to keep out of it." It had been a long speech for McKelvey, and having said it, he turned to go.

Neilson came out from in back of his desk. He laid a hand on McKelvey's arm. "I'd advise you not to, Ben."

"Talbot's reign of terror has got to be stopped sometime. You can't do it. Neither can I, peaceable. Nor otherwise alone; but there's enough straight men in this part of the country who can. And we're going to do it!" McKelvey opened the door; snow came whirling in, leaving its white traces along the floor.

Neilson still had hold of McKelvey's arm. His grip tightened. "Ben—"

McKelvey brushed the hand away. "Remember what I said, Neilson. Keep out of the way!" He slammed the door behind him, in the sheriff's face. He knew the sheriff would stay in his warm office. He would not be bothered by the old man. McKelvey rose to his horse's saddle, heading the animal back out of town, toward his ranch. The wind was at his face now, and he knew it would not be an easy ride back.

THE snow was getting deeper now, and McKelvey's horse made hard work of it. The wind was going down a little, but

the snowfall did not seem to decrease. McKelvey let his muffler down from his chin, and he realized that his neck had been sweating. He stopped long enough to build a smoke and light it. He drew the smoke deep into his lungs, feeling the deep pleasure of it in the cold air. He spurred the horse on again, feeling the first pangs of hunger, for he had had no more than coffee this morning at his ranch.

It was after mid-day now, and McKelvey turned out of the timber onto the trail that led to his ranch. The tracks of his early morning's passage were completely covered now, his sharp eyes detecting only a faint depression in the snow that was slightly lower than that surrounding it. He was near home.

Then he heard the first faint sounds of gunfire. A few seconds after that a scent of wood smoke came to his cold nostrils. He stopped. There was another shot, and another. He threw the cigarette out of his mouth and touched spurs to the horse. That was at his ranch!

The horse made slow time in the snow, but he kept it at its fastest possible speed. The timber was gone now, behind him, and only the soft rolling mound of a last hill separated him from sight of the ranch. He kept on the trail skirting around the hill.

He came around the hill in a full run, and looked down on his ranch buildings. His mind jumped with shock. Through the snowfall he could see the square forms of the buildings, showing up black against the white covered ground. One of the barns was burning. The gray smoke was coming out of it, drifting with the slight wind toward him. It was hot and acrid in his nostrils. Then the ranch house burst into flames, the orange tongues of fire leaping out around one corner and up toward the roof.

He buckled his gun belt around his mackinaw, having had it underneath. He drew the gun, and spurred his mount toward the buildings. So this was the start of it! Talbot had opened it up with the first shot. Despair crept slowly into McKelvey's mind as he rode on. This would be the way Big Bob Talbot would work. Take McKelvey first, then get Rawlings. Attack in rough weather and hit hard.

Two quick shots sounded close to him, and then McKelvey saw the first forms of

mounted men through the snow. A horse and rider were coming toward him. He pulled up, his six-gun drawn. He could see the forms of other men near the buildings, running on foot, riding horses that reared and wheeled. The rider coming close to him saw him at last, and pulled up. McKelvey picked out the form of Doug Benner, his wrangler.

"Benner!"

Benner rode up to him, his own gun in his hand. The lanky wrangler was breathing hard, and steam from his horse's nostrils streamed out into the air in twin white jets. "They caught us right," Benner said breathlessly. "The dirty sons have got every building on fire. Bunk Dickson and Kennedy were killed right off. There's nothing we can do; every man's on his own, riding off."

More gunfire sounded up ahead from a small group of men near the corral, and McKelvey felt a slight tug at his sleeve. He lifted the six-gun and fired three times at the group. He heard one of them yell, and the group drifted apart. Benner edged away.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "For God's sake let's get the hell out of here!"

McKelvey cursed loud and long. Benner edged him on. "The boys are spread out all over in this snow. Talbot's men are the only ones at the ranch and they won't stay long, once they get everything afire."

McKelvey threw two more shots at the dimly outlined forms he could see through the heavily falling snow, and then he turned back toward Benner down the trail. "We've got to get together with Rawlings!" he shouted in Benner's ear.

"The boys all agreed to meet at his ranch. They'll be up there to Rawlings' by night-fall."

McKelvey threw one glance back over his shoulder at his burning ranch. He cursed again. "We'll be back," he said through his teeth, more to himself than to Benner. "We'll be back. And I'll nail that dirty son of a Talbot to a wall if it's the last damned thing I do!"

"Come on, come on!" Benner urged.

They went back into the timber and left the trail. They would not follow that. McKelvey headed north, toward the Rawlings ranch. He said to Benner, "They will probably expect us to head for there. They may,

be watching the main trail. We'll go through the timber and they may spot us even there, but it's the only chance we'll have."

THEY rode their horses hard now, but the snow, over a foot and a half deep now, made progress slow. The timber thickened, and the ground sloped down slightly toward their right. They were near the river. They kept going, following the ridge that wound along at the rim of the river's valley, away from the trail that followed the stream down below them.

They came to another trail, the one that led to their ranch from the bridge across the river at Jordan's cabin. McKelvey, his hot temper cooled now to deliberate and thoughtful action, motioned Benner to stop. He waited a long moment, listening for the sound of voices or a horse. Then he threw a meaning glance at Benner and spurred the horse forward. Benner was beside him and they crossed the trail quickly, riding again into the timber.

There was no sound behind them, and McKelvey had seen no tracks on the trail nor any sign of riders on the trail as he crossed. They kept going, higher into the hills, following the edge of the valley. They would go far north, McKelvey decided, then west to Rawlings' ranch. Talbot's men would probably be watching the trails to the ranch from the south. They kept going, silently, neither speaking, urging their horses through the snow. McKelvey stopped once to re-load his six-gun, prepared to light a cigarette, thought better of it and went on. Light began to darken as the day drew to a close, darkness coming sooner because of the leaden sky overhead that continued to shed its big, heavy flakes of soft snow.

To their right now the bank along the river raised higher. The main trail from town came up along the bank, farther from the river, and McKelvey saw that they were riding within fifty yards of it. Over the edge—a steep cliff that rose twenty feet above the stream—was the river itself. Darkness was deepening swiftly now.

Then suddenly both men stopped, dead still. McKelvey whipped his head around. Both of them had caught the faint whisper of a man's voice, uttered in the face of the wind behind them.

The listened. Again, words—indistinguishable, but human words nevertheless. Benner looked at him. "They're following us," McKelvey said simply. "Following our tracks."

McKelvey could not see the man, or men, behind them. Abruptly he turned toward his right. "Take the other side," he said softly to his wrangler. Benner nodded, and turned the other way, into the heavy timber.

McKelvey dismounted and left his horse behind a thick clump of snow covered cedars. He lifted his Winchester from the saddle scabbard. He saw Benner leave his horse and drop down to the snow, drawing his own rifle. Then Benner drifted into the heavy gray curtain made by the falling snow.

McKelvey drifted downstream, following the edge of the bank. He kept his eyes probing into the gathering darkness, into the timber, on the path along which he and Benner had come. He dropped down to one knee behind a cedar, hearing another voice, nearer this time.

He was none too soon. The shapes of five men drifted into his sight immediately, all riding single file. They were quiet now. And then they stopped.

One of them drew his gun, fired. McKelvey saw the flash in the gloom, aimed in Benner's direction. They had spotted Benner before he could fire his first shot. McKelvey cursed under his breath. He heard Benner's answering fire coincide with his own shot from the Winchester. The rider who had fired toppled from his horse and fell into the snow.

The four remaining men dispersed quickly, and McKelvey heard their guns going and saw the orange flash of the muzzle fire. He dropped the rifle, pulled his six-gun and fired into the group of men and horses. He heard one man ride around to his left, trying to encircle him. McKelvey tried to keep his attention on that man, but another rider came at him dead on, out of the swirling snow. The rider was firing rapidly and McKelvey sent out two shots in return. Immediately firing came from his left. McKelvey realized that he would have to keep moving. He edged back. He heard no more firing from the other side of the trail. They had got Benner.

Another horse and rider drifted up to him then, close in the darkness. McKelvey

let go a shot. The man fell out of his sight again, the horse drifting back into darkness, but McKelvey heard the man fall, and saw the dark form of his body, a shapeless gray mass, lying in the snow. And then other shots spat out from either side of him. McKelvey stepped back again, and his foot stepped on a fallen pine log. It was slippery under the snow, and as McKelvey felt his feet going out from under him, his six-gun flew spinning, out of his hand. One of the buzzing slugs had hit the barrel. The firing stopped for a moment. McKelvey tried to reach the gun, crawling on his hands and knees. His hand felt numb, stung by the jarring of the hit six-gun. He pawed around in the snow, in the darkness, but the gun had dropped deep. He scraped the snow savagely, viciously. He thought once of going back for his Winchester.

Then a rider came close, passed in back of a thick cedar. A shot rang out, and he heard the whistle of it next to his ear. Another. He ran then. Keeping his head low, he ran his way through the snow, toward the river. There was nothing else to do—his way to his horse was blocked; he could not go back to his rifle. He reached the edge of the bank, slugs buzzing close, reaching out for him. He did not hesitate. He let himself go, over the bank, and a second later the icy cold water of the river hit with a numbing shock.

HE WENT DOWN, clawed his way to the surface, the water cold and freezing against his face. He reached the surface, heard the slugs chugging into the water around him. He went down again, letting the swift current carry him downstream. When he came up again, there were no more shots. Seemingly far away now, he heard the excited shouts of men up in the darkness, in the falling snow. The current was swift, and soon even the shouts were gone.

He tried to swim, but the current was too swift. It wasn't long before the numbing coldness of the water soaked into him. It became torture to try to move his arms and legs to keep afloat and McKelvey felt as if he would like to just quit and let his body go down. But something within, some inner spirit, kept his arms and legs moving. He had no need to swim down-

stream—the current did that, swiftly. He tried again and again to reach the shore but always the swift water whirled him away. It was fully dark now, and McKelvey caught glimpses of the white banks, showing gray in the darkness, speeding past him.

Then an unseen deadhead, reaching out into the darkness for him, jolted him across the back. The breath went out of him, and blackness jarred before his eyes. The current bore him off the log, and McKelvey went down again. Water came into his lungs and came up, coughing violently, the severity of it bringing consciousness to him again. But now he had no sense of deliberate thought. He fought the water savagely, fighting the clutching whirlpools that seemed to bear him off without reason or direction.

There was no time to him, no feeling, no conscious thought. There was only the blind, instinctive inner force driving him to fight, to keep his head above water. He floated down in a vertical position, and once his feet and legs touched a rock. He tried to grab it, but it was slippery and he fell again into the water and went down, coming up farther downstream coughing and spitting, thrashing with his tiring arms.

Once again his feet touched bottom. But this time it was not slippery rocks—it was solid land. His feet touched first, his legs bent and then his knees hit the sand. He went down, unable to stand, and the current rolled him farther into shallow water. He struggled up violently, found that his head was above water and that he was still kneeling. He shook his head and got to his feet. Dimly he could see the gray shore of the river in front of him, and he stumbled toward it. Once he fell again, and rolled in the water and sand. The cold of the air hit his soaked body, and he was shivering as he made for the shore.

The sound of a human voice came to his ear, seemingly from far away. He looked and saw the bright, yellow light from a cabin window. He stepped into the snow covered bank, weariness weighing him down. He heard the sounds of running feet and shouting voices, and saw the light from a kerosene lantern come bobbing toward him just as he felt a lightness come over his body and he knew he was falling. Blackness closed in, and he

never felt the rushing, cold snow hit him in his face as he fell.

McKelvey awoke in the quiet warmth of the Jordan cabin. He struggled up from unconsciousness to see the wide, homely features of Mrs. Jordan above him. He tried to remember back, how he had got to the Jordan cabin. He could remember the gun fight up on the bank of the Little Squaw River, and dimly the mad whirling descent down the river. And here he was tucked very nicely into bed. Behind the woman were standing the old man and his son, William. Jordan held a lamp in his hand. Beyond these two were his clothes, wrung out now and hanging on a make-shift washline.

"How long have I been here?" he asked dumbly.

Jordan stepped forward. "About six hours, Ben," he said. "You didn't even know it when we brought you in. William was coming in with the milk when he heard you floundering around in the water, on that sand bar out there."

Six hours. It must be after midnight.

"Have you got an extra horse and saddle, and some dry clothes?"

Jordan said, "Of course . . ."

"And a six-shooter?"

"I've got an old one," Jordan answered. "Hasn't been fired in several years."

"If it fires now it will be all right."

"There's some extra heavy clothes of William's," the woman said. "I'll get them for you." She went out, to the one other room in the cabin.

Jordan came closer to the bunk where McKelvey lay. "What's the matter, Ben?"

"Talbot raided my ranch this afternoon. Fired it all."

Jordan asked no more. He was silent for a long time. He knew that the time for a showdown had come. William, the stocky, serious-faced boy behind him, turned to go out of the room.

"I'll get the horses," he said.

"Horses!" Jordan echoed.

William drew up straight and faced his father. McKelvey could see that this was the time when the boy was breaking away from the discipline of his parents. This was the time for his own decision.

"I'm going with him," William said. "I'll take the rifle."

The old man stared at him for a long

moment. Slowly his face changed from its first expression of protest to that of one facing an inevitable reality. He nodded, at last. "That's as it should be. Get the black and the sorrel from the barn." Jordan turned back to McKelvey. "It's our fight, too."

WILLIAM asked, "Where we headed?" It had stopped snowing; the sky had cleared and they could see their way plainly in the white snow that lay bright in the starlight.

"To Chip Rawlings' ranch," McKelvey answered. "The others will be there."

"And then?"

"And then to Talbot's." The homesteader boy was silent. The horse's hoofs made soft whispering noises in the snow as they rode the main trail north along the river, parallel to the path McKelvey and Benner had taken earlier. McKelvey led the way; he went farther north than he had to, north to the higher timber where he had been forced to take to the water.

There he found the spot. There he found the body of Doug Benner, his lanky, gray eyed wrangler. He lifted himself down from the saddle to kneel over the silent huddle in the snow. Blood made dark little patches on the snow near his head.

William sat his black horse silently, watching McKelvey, understanding the cowman's silence as he knelt there in the snow. McKelvey stood up, rose again to the saddle and saying nothing, headed west through the timber. William followed, no question on his lips, none in his heart.

In the darkness before dawn, they rode into the ranch yard of Chip Rawlings. Before they had ridden to within fifty feet of the corral, a challenging voice came out at them to stop them in their tracks.

"Who's there?" McKelvey stopped, brought up his arm to still William, riding beside him. "Speak up or I'll fire!"

McKelvey tried to recognize the voice. He could not. It was either one of Rawlings' men or else Talbot had taken over. McKelvey drew his gun, the one old man Jordan had given him. He had fired it twice outside Jordan's cabin to test it.

"Who's speakin'?" he yelled back.

From the shadows beside the bunkhouse came a familiar voice—Rawlings'. "That you, Ben?"

Out of the darkness behind him, a shot exploded into the cold still air. McKelvey felt something rip at the side of his borrowed coat. He lowered his head, hit spurs to the sorrel and yelled at the youth behind him, "Hit for cover!" Then to the men near the ranch buildings, "We're coming in!" He headed the sorrel toward the bunkhouse, pulled up in the shadows and hit the ground. William Jordan was behind him, then beside him on the ground. Shots from Rawlings' men near the corral were ringing out at the muzzle flash they had seen in the timber out beyond.

A man came up to McKelvey out of the shadows. McKelvey could see and recognize the slim, small shape of the Englishman, Chip Rawlings. He could visualize the man's sandy mustache bristling, his light red hair flopping over his eyes. "Ben!" Rawlings whispered. "How the hell did you get through them?"

McKelvey said, "Where are they? In the timber?"

"My God, man, you rode right through them!"

McKelvey looked back over his shoulder. The firing had stopped now. Evidently Talbot had visited the Rawlings ranch in the night, and were waiting out in the darkness for daylight. McKelvey thought of the close scrape he and William Jordan had had, traveling through that timber with Talbot's men around them. He shrugged.

"My men get here?" he asked Rawlings.

"They're all here except you and Benner. And two men the boys said were killed at your place. . . ." Rawlings seemed to ponder a moment. "Where's Benner?"

"He's dead." Quickly and emotionlessly McKelvey told him. "William Jordan here rode back with me. He's all right," he added, as Rawlings turned to look at the homesteader beside him. William had his rifle in the crook of his arm.

Rawlings looked to the east. The faintest of pale blue showed behind the pines that spired up from the top of a steep ridge. "Daylight here soon," he said.

"Yes," McKelvey answered.

DAYLIGHT, cold and bright, broke down on the little basin wherein Rawlings' ranch was located. The sky was clear of clouds, and the air was bitterly cold. A little wind stirred puffs of snow

around the ground. McKelvey could see clearly now. Men were stationed at all points of cover around the yard. He recognized some of his own men.

McKelvey looked to the eastern sky. Bright yellow now. Overhead was an unbroken sky of blue. He took one last draw on his cigarette, threw it into the snow.

A rifle shot spat out from the timber, and he saw a little puff of snow spray up a few yards away. Firing broke out in a loud, ascending noise, in all directions. The men in the yard kept their guns silent. Then a man on the other side of the bunkhouse let go with one shot. There was an answering reply of gunfire, far away.

Then all hell broke loose. Riders streamed down from all sides, whooping, yelling firing. The air was filled with the sounds of rifle and six-gun fire. McKelvey had a rifle in his hands that Chip Rawlings had brought out to him earlier. He let go with it. Gunfire streamed out from every point that his own and Rawlings' men were stationed. McKelvey drew his sights on one rider zig-zagging down from the timber. One shot went wide, to the man's right. He levered in another cartridge, squeezed off the trigger again. The man went off the horse, snow spraying as he hit the ground, rolling.

McKelvey heard William Jordan's gun going, off to his left near the corral. He watched the first rider charge into the yard. McKelvey reflected on Talbot's decision to make such a bold and costly play. This, he thought, is the final act. Big Bob Talbot's mind, twisted and warped with his desire to rule the biggest range in Montana, had driven him to making a play, where we would win all or lose all.

Then the yard was filled with yelling, shouting riders. All of Talbot's men. The big play. The cold air was filled with the sounds of shouts, gunfire. Then he saw Talbot.

The big man rode in behind two of his men, but even then the man's bulk was easily recognizable. McKelvey centered his fire in that direction. Then he saw what Talbot had planned. The big man had ridden around to the other side of the bunkhouse. He left the saddle of his horse and jumped for the bunkhouse door—he was inside. McKelvey dropped down to the ground below the bunkhouse window. He saw other riders leave their mounts and

run into the buildings. He saw their plan. If they could get inside the buildings, the bunkhouse, the barns, the house, they could send a withering fire out into the yard. The buildings were empty of his or Rawlings' men.

McKelvey crawled around the corner of the bunkhouse, keeping low, keeping down below the windows. He paused once to send a shot at a rider going past. He went around to the other side, came to the door which had been closed behind Talbot. He watched behind him, in the yard, waited till there was no one shooting specifically at him, then stood up and fired his rifle twice into the door. He dropped the rifle, pulled his six-gun and kicked the door open, following it in with one big jump.

The big brute of a man was down at the far end, his own Winchester in his hands, having pulled it in from the broken window at McKelvey's two shots in the door. Fury was written in his face, in the swing of his powerful head, in the heave of his bull-like shoulders. He brought the rifle up. McKelvey squeezed the trigger of his six gun.

Talbot's arm stopped in its upward swing, surprise came to his face. The rifle he was holding dropped to the rough wooden floor with a noise that seemed louder than it was, coming in the echo of McKelvey's shot. Talbot grabbed for his right arm, wincing.

"You've got the habit of shooting me in the arm, McKelvey," Talbot said through his teeth. "You'll pay for that—for not killing me."

McKelvey's gun lowered. Then with a savage roar, the big man charged. He ran his brute way down the length of the bunkhouse, lowered his head and ran full tilt for McKelvey. McKelvey dodged away, swung and hit him in the neck as he went past.

Big Bob Talbot went down, heavily. He started to rise to his feet immediately, his one good arm pushing the huge bulk of his body upward. McKelvey kicked him then, under the chin. Talbot rolled, dazed. It was a blow that would have broken the neck of any man, but the fight was not gone from the big ranch owner. He tried to stand, fell again. He was pulling on the butt of his six-gun as he fell, with his left hand.

McKELVEY saw it. He drew. Talbot's shot went through the roof. McKelvey's hit the big man in the chest. He fired again. Talbot's knees stiffened, as he tried to rise. The gun was still in his hand, and he was trying to raise it again. McKelvey set himself for another shot, waited. Talbot's face turned to him, his lips moving savagely but making no sound. The man's eyes were like a snake's. Then they closed, tightly. Talbot fell again, hitting the edge of the door as he went down. He stayed down. He never moved again, not under his own power.

Outside the sound of firing had stopped. McKelvey went to the doorway. Chip Rawlings was coming on the run, his gun in band. His hat was off and a little stream of blood had run down the side of his face, through the sandy red hair. He saw Talbot lying in the doorway, stopped.

"It's all right," McKelvey said. He stepped down from the doorway.

Behind Rawlings he saw the other men. Five or six of them were grouped around two of Talbot's men, holding them with their guns. He saw the bodies of two other riders on the ground, half buried in the snow. He saw William Jordan sitting in the snow next to the corral. He was hanging onto a leg that stretched queerly out in front of him. But when he saw McKelvey watching him, he grinned.

"Except for those two," Rawlings pointed toward the two men held prisoner, "the rest are either dead or running out of the country by now. Those two will hang."

BESIDE the brand new buildings of Ben McKelvey's there was a grave. The marker set into it bore the name, DOUGLAS BENNER.

Springtime spread its soft, warding sunshine over the fertile land. McKelvey looked out over the branding pens. Cattle bellowed and stomped as they came out of the pens. He heard a rider coming along the trail toward the ranch house. When he came closer McKelvey recognized William Jordan. He pulled up in front of Ben, left his saddle. The boy still limped a little as he came toward the house, but on his face was a wide smile, and under his arm was a large, towel-wrapped bundle. McKelvey grinned broadly.





I never heard a gun go off louder,

Lash Of The Six-Gun Queen

by Les Savage, Jr.

It was a back-shoot trail Marshal Powder Welles rode, packing a warrant for a gold-topped brush-queen . . . for the range was choked with trigger-happy owl-hoots craving to die for her—and Senorita Scorpion herself was yet to sling a wasted bullet.

BUTCHERKNIFE HILL WAS about thirty miles north of the Mexican border, and they had told me in Alpine I would find him there. The first thing I thought, with sight of him, was bull. That's exactly the way it bulged into my mind. Bull. And you don't know what that means, really, unless you've seen a real old time mossyhorn sulking. Pure destruction with its tail switching. Shoulders so big and flanks so small he looks out of shape, almost awkward, till he moves.

Cats don't have more grace. But he don't have to move. Just look in those little red eyes and you got it.

"Chisos Owens?" I said.

His eyes weren't red, though. They were the color of gunsmoke. He sat a big dun with a hogged mane and his Porter rig was double girted the way all Texas men like them. His levis and old cotton shirt were so faded and soiled I couldn't tell the original color.

"Marshal Powder Welles?" he said. He

had thin lips for such a heavy-boned face, and they barely moved over the words.

"News travels fast in the Big Bend," I said.

"We have a grapevine of sorts," he told me. "I heard you were in Alpine inquiring after me. I don't know where the Scorpion is, Marshal, and if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

My own Porter rig creaked as I leaned toward him. "That was a United States Senator the Scorpion murdered in Alpine, Owens. I work for the same government. Do I have to tell you the trouble you can get in for not helping me, or are we going somewhere and talk?"

The back of his hand was covered with pale blond hair, except where an old rope burn cut across it. He put his fingers around the saddle horn. There was a faint, distinct popping sound. It must have come from the cords in his wrist, standing out as big as dally ropes in that moment, with the force of his grip. Then he lifted his shoulders in a shrug, and turned up toward the line shack on the ridge. There was a cottonwood corral out back and we turned our animals in there. A plank table and a pair of pegged pine benches made up the furniture inside, with wall bunks at the rear and an old wood stove in one corner. He threw some chunks of mesquite on and filled the coffee pot from the water butt inside the door. I sat down at the table and took off my John B to scratch my head.

"It's funny how the Mexicans tack on names like that," I said. "Senorita Scorpion. I understand it fitted Elgera Douglas."

"It fitted," he said.

"I understand you were in love with Elgera Douglas."

HE WAS turned away from me when I said it, bent over the stove. But his whole great frame seemed to lift a little with the breath he took. Finally he turned around and lowered himself to the bench opposite me. He put those rope-burned hands on the table in front of him and took one fist in the other hand and cracked the knuckles, staring at them.

"What do you want to know?" he said.

"Where Senorita Scorpion is," I told him.

"I'll show that card just once more," he said. "I don't know where she is."

"I guess you know why Senator Bailes was down this way," I told him.

"I'm out of touch, down here," he answered.

"It looks like this war with Spain is the real thing," I explained. "Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders are going to need a lot of horses. Government's commissioned horse runners all over the country to gather in the wild horses for the cavalry. Some enterprising young mustanger has been going below the border for his animals, and he hasn't been too particular whether they're mustangs or broke horses he brings back. Activity seems to center around the Big Bend, and seems like none of the State officers have been very effective in checking it. The Mexican government told Washington if they didn't send someone responsible down it was going to raise a helluva ruckus. Even mention of war."

"So Senator Warren Bailes came down to see what was up with the local authorities and try to get some action out of them. He must have dug up something good. Washington got word they'd see the end of it in a few days. The morning after he sent the wire, Bailes steps him out onto the corner of First and Main in your fair county seat and in bulges this Scorpion on her buttermilk hawss and empties every blue whistler in her dewey right through Senator Warren Bailes."

His eyes had taken on a smoky color, and he was staring past me, almost talking to himself. "The worst part of it is, Elgera was so capable of it. I wouldn't believe it. I still don't want to. But she was so capable of it. Get her mad and she . . ."

He lifted his head with a jerk, as if realizing the release. His eyes moved to me, and they looked even more like a sulking bull's, now. He cracked his knuckles again. That irritated me somehow.

"I don't know how out of touch you are," I said. "You seem to have a pretty busy line between here and Alpine. Where's Johnny Hagar?"

I've questioned enough men to know the value of snubbing them up like that. The unexpectedness of it lifted his head again that way. The Arbuckle's started boiling over and he got up and moved over to

move the pot off the open blaze. They'd said he was hard to rile, but there was a stiff line to his shoulders, and I wondered how much farther along the fence I could push him.

"The Douglas faction, they called it," I said. "More machine, from what I hear, with Johnny Hagar county sheriff and you town marshal in Alpine and Elgera Douglas sitting on the county board. Striker's bunch didn't have much chance, in those days, did they? What is it, Owens? What did Senator Bailes find that threatened the set-up you and the Scorpion had? How was she tied into this mustang business?"

There was a tinny clatter. I didn't see it for a moment. Then he backed away to reveal the coffee pot overturned on the stove and all that good Arbuckle's spreading out like ink on the floor.

"Tetchy, aren't you for a man that don't know nothing?" I said.

"Listen." He turned to me, and he held his knuckles again. I kept waiting for them to pop. Crazy how something like that can get on your nerves. "Listen, Welles, marshal or not, you'd better go now. I don't know where the Elgera Douglas is; I don't know where Johnny Hagar is. I don't know nothing. You'd better go."

I scratched my head again. "Texas Stock Association. Is that the TSA brand on them cattle you're herding?"

I didn't think he would answer for a minute. "Used to be the Scorpion's beef," he said, finally, wheezing a little like a man with a gut-shot. "The courts are holding her estate till this thing is cleared up. TSA is handling the beef for the courts."

"You got a rep as a lone wolf," I said. "Like to rod your own cut. Never favored the big combines. You don't look right in this chorus, somehow. Why did you sign on with TSA?"

He was getting more and more like a bull. It came out of him with a sort of groaning sound. "Welles—"

"Maybe you don't know Kelley Striker is the president of TSA's board of directors," I told him. "I can't figure a man like you signing onto an outfit rodded by the same hombre that kicked you and Hagar out of the wagon the minute Elgera Douglas's support was gone. Is there something under the soogan here, Owens, or

did your guts leak out when the Scorpion bought a trunk?"

"Damn you!" he yelled and through the yell I could hear his knuckles crack again, and that was the tipoff.

He came right across the table at me. If I hadn't already started to jump up and kick the bench back away from beneath my feet, I would have been pinned beneath the table and Owens, because his lunge tipped it over, and he and the furniture crashed over onto the floor. One of his hands struck my side beneath my ribs. For just an instant I felt the awesome strength of him. I couldn't help yelling with the pain of those pinching fingers. Then I had torn loose, going on back, and he had tumbled to the floor.

He got up with blinding speed for such a hulk, and his legs were bent to jump me where I stood against the wall. Then he stopped, with all his weight thrown forward on his toes, hands outstretched, staring at the old Cloverleaf house gun in my hand.

"Really hell with the hide off, ain't you?" I said. "I guess I better tell you why I really came. Spanish Jack was going to send one of his own deputies, but I wanted a talk with you anyway, so he let me serve this supeenie on you. It's for your appearance at another inquest they're holding on Senator Bailes' death next Monday. Now, shall we go fetch our hay burners, or do you want to dig up another tommyhawk?"

IT WAS about sixty miles from the border to Alpine, and Butcherknife Hill lay just about halfway between. It was hotter than the hinges of hell through them thirty miles between Butcherknife and the county seat, and my pied mare was played clear out by the time we rode in past the Southern Pacific's brick depot and cattle chutes at the end of Main. Si Samson's Livery, it said on the peeling sign above the big double doors of a barn on the corner of Second and Main. Si looked like a bronc-smashed hand. He was all bent over and had a painful limp, and his hair was hogged as short and stiff as the mane on Owens' dun. He stopped when he saw us, staring at Chisos.

"Judas," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Nothing," said Si, looking down at the ground. "Nothing. You gentlemen want to stall your animals here? Looks like they need a good rubdown. Have my boy do it for fifty cents extra."

I stepped off Pie and unlashed my saddle roll from behind the cantle. Summer dust was the color of a dirty dun hawss in the street, and I had the feeling of that old man standing in the doorway of his barn and watching us till he reached the opposite side. The Alpine lodge was a big frame building on this corner with a wooden overhang shading the sidewalk. There was the usual line of idlers. The idleness dropped off them like a kack with the cinch cut, when we passed across the porch. I was in the lobby before I heard one of the chairs scrape. The plank walk made a hollow wooden thump that receded southward.

Chisos and I cleaned up, then went downstairs to the grub house next door. Cecil's Cafe, it said, and had as strong a smell inside as most of those greasy sack outfits you find in a border town. I forgot the smell when Cecil came out of the kitchen.

You ever seen nopal after a spring rain? That's how red Cecil's lips were. Eyes that gave you the same feeling when you look into a deep pool of cool water on a blistering day. The gingham dress was stamped with blue flowers and had built-in curves. She didn't do anything as obvious as Si Samson. But I caught the momentary hesitation, about halfway down the counter towards us, as she recognized him. Then she came on.

"Chisos," she said, a little breathlessly. "Haven't seen you for ages."

"Cecil?" I asked him.

"Cecil Peters," he said. "Marshal Welles."

"How long you known Chisos?" I asked her.

"Long time, marshal," she told me. "Menu?"

"That's funny," I said. "When you first came in, you looked like you'd never seen anything quite like him before." She made a little pout with her mouth, handing Chisos a menu too, but I wouldn't let it go. I put my elbows down and leaned forward, pinning my eyes on her. "Si Samson had the same look. The clerk in the Alpine.

What is it, Cecil? Didn't they expect Chisos was coming back with me?"

Her smile began at one corner of her lips, not all humor, something almost wistful, and built slow, and her eyes slid around to Chisos. "Maybe that's it, marshal," she said softly.

"Bryce Wylie was the deputy Spanish Jack told me he meant to send with that supeenie," I said. Auburn lights rippled through her hair with the negative shake of her head, and her eyes were still on Chisos. "Spanish Jack?" I asked her.

"I don't think he could have, either," she said. "Matter of fact, I don't think there is any man in Alpine who would have wanted to try and bring Chisos Owens in, except maybe Johnnie Hagar, and he's not here anymore."

"What were the odds on the opera seat?" I said.

She looked at me, and the smile was full now. "Matter of fact, they *were* making bets. The boys in front of the Alpine were offering odds five to one against your bringing Chisos back."

IT MADE ME mad at first, to realize how I'd been used by Jack, and then, somehow, I had to laugh. I heard the crackling sound beside me. It was Owens, with his knuckles.

"All right," he growled. "How about eating?"

"I'm right sorry, Owens. I didn't know. I wouldn't have showed you up in front of your girl this way for the world."

"I'm not his girl," said Cecil.

I glanced up, suddenly, at her eyes, because she and Chisos were looking at each other again, and that thing was between them. I was close enough to see the color, now. Blue. A deep dark blue. Then the roots of her hair. She sensed it and turned toward me.

"What would you suggest," I said, tapping the menu.

"The beef stew is particularly favorable tonight, marshal." It seemed deep for her voice. Then I saw her mouth was closed, and where she was looking. Tension stiffened the deep planes of muscle across Owens' back, lifting his shoulders up till he looked like he was bent over. I turned on the stool. It was Spanish Jack, standing behind us. He was almost too hand-

some; he had a head of hair so black it looked blue, thick and curly as mesquite grass. Even the burnsidies were curly. His skin was swarthy, but so clear and fine his cheekbones gleamed through it like an Indian's, under the light, and his teeth were as white as the polished bone handle on my house gun.

I jerked my thumb at Chisos. "Here's your chestnut."

Jack made a little motion with one womanish hand. It gave me the sense of leaves fluttering. "Chestnut?" he said, frowning.

I looked at one of my own hands. "My fingers ain't burned, either. Did you lose any money, Sheriff?"

Jack turned to frown at Bryce Wylie. The deputy was a big kettle-bellied man in the sloppy serge vest and pants of what must have once been a pretty good suit. He packed a buscadero gun-belt, and it creaked a little as he hooked his thumbs on it and pressed down heavily, shrugging at Jack. The town marshal turned back, trying to make his smile at Cecil easy.

"I told you he was a salty character," he told her.

"Yeah," I said. "So full of alkali my uppers are rusty. This another one of your boys?"

The smile faded as he glanced to the other side. "Yes, Marshal. Jerry Hammer. A good boy. Meet Marshal Welles, Jerry."

"Gladtameetcha, Marshal," he said.

It was interesting to see how much humor he could keep out of his empty little eyes with such a big smile on his mouth. He had that rolling bulge to his heavy thighs you get in a short Mexican, sometimes, and it had split the seams out on his buckskin *chivarras*. His upper body was the same way, looking like they'd piled on the muscles till they couldn't get any more, and his white cotton shirt had trouble containing him. His nose had been broken badly and there was a deep scar the color of raw liver cutting through the greasy blue stubble of one cheek.

"You look like you've had a hard life, Hammer," I said. I might as well have reached out and wiped that smile from his lips with my hand, the way it disappeared. Spanish Jack formed that laugh again.

"We'll take Owens off your hands now, Welles. Did he cause you any bother?"

"If I had a bet on it, I would've worried about it more," I said. "What do you mean, take him off my hands?"

I saw Cecil stiffen a little behind the counter. "Till the inquest, of course," said Jack.

"He was never on my hands," I said. "That was a supeenie I served on him, not a warrant."

"Yes, of course, of course," said Jack. Chisos had not turned around yet. His shoulders were still hunched forward that way. Jack looked at him. "Coming, Chisos?"

"Wait a minute, Jack," I said. "Where are you taking him?"

"To the jail," said the sheriff. "We'll hold him in custody till the inquest."

"Judge Kerreway is holding the inquest you said," I told him. "All the way from Marathon to do it. He staying with friends?"

He didn't get his feet in these oxbows, either, and it had begun to prey on him. "What are you getting at, Marshal?" he said, a little furrow appearing between his pretty brows.

"The judge isn't registered at the Alpine Lodge," I told him. "You couldn't hold the inquest without him, could you?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps he was held up."

"I paid an extra dollar for a double at the Lodge, and I ain't going to throw that away for nothing. I think you better let Owens sleep there tonight. If there's an inquest, he'll be at it."

"I want to make sure he'll be at it," said Jack. "Come on, Chisos."

"Don't try to put the bronc in this chute, Jack," I told him. "It's too narrow."

"I'm taking him," he said.

"You got a warrant, Sheriff?"

"I don't need one."

"Then you're not taking him officially."

"I'm taking him. Come on, Chisos."

"Marshal—"

THE LAST was as shrill as a maverick calf bawling for milk, coming from Cecil, and she never finished it, because Jack had stepped forward to grab Chisos' shoulder and try and pull him around. Chisos came around all right, more on his own volition than Jack's. After that it all went so fast I didn't rightly take everything in.

Chisos' spinning motion whirled him off the stool into Spanish Jack with his head down and those bull shoulders in Jack's middle. It carried Jack backward. Jerry Hammer pulled a gun and lunged forward to whip Chisos across the back of the neck while he was still bent forward.

"Well, hell," I told them, and went in on it dragging at my own dewey. But there was Wylie. I was suddenly blocked off by his body. He got one hand around my right wrist before I had my Cloverleaf pulled free. The palm felt like sandpaper, and I thought my bones would crumble in the grip. His body carried me right back where I'd come from. I knocked aside the stool I'd jumped off of and crashed into the counter so hard it knocked a dirty plate off farther down.

Suddenly the whole Big Dipper was inside my head, each star flashing on and off separately. I found myself sitting on the floor with my back against the counter and those sloppy serge pants in front of me, and realized dimly he must have smashed me full in the face.

He lifted a foot to kick me. I caught it in both hands and rolled to one side. The jerk took him off-balance. Before he hit the floor, I was on my feet, pawing for a stool. I couldn't see very well yet. Things were still spinning and something thick and wet kept getting in my eyes. But I caught his movement to rise. I took the stool by its seat and jammed the legs at Wylie. He howled and tried to get away. I jumped after his rolling body, jamming them legs in when his face came around again. His screams sounded like a loco horse and I figured I'd gotten his eyes.

"Marshal, Marshal—"

With Cecil crying like that from somewhere, I dropped the stool and spun toward the others. Jerry Hammer was probably the only man in the room who could have closed with Chisos and kept up his own end. The two of them were in the middle of the room, slugging it out. Beyond them, where that first lunge of Chisos' must have knocked him, was Spanish Jack, just getting to his hands and knees in the corner. I figured what was in his mind, and was already jumping past Chisos and Hammer when Jack's fingers made that fluttering motion.

He was still on his knees as I reached

him. I kicked the Colt from his hand just as it cleared leather. It skidded across the floor. He dove by me, after the gun, with a hoarse shout. I had to spin around to catch him. He had his hand on the Colt again. I don't do no more walking than I can help, and my heels are still pretty spike. Wylie's screams had been puny compared with the bellow Jack let out when I stamped down.

There was a crash from behind me like a bunch of freight cars coming to a quick stop. Jack was through for the moment and I turned to see. Chisos had knocked Jerry Hammer across the counter and a whole shelf full of dishes had fallen down on him. Hammer didn't get out from under the wreckage.

Chisos started rubbing the back of his neck, looking at Spanish Jack where he lay huddled on the floor, holding that mangled hand and groaning, and then at Bryce Wylie, sitting against the counter farther down with his hands over his face. Finally Chisos looked at me, and stopped rubbing his neck.

"Snuffy little bronc, ain't you?" he said mildly.

II

SOME OPERA SEAT ARGUFYER said there was only two things the old time cowhand really feared—being set afoot and a decent woman—and that he'd do anything to keep from calling a spade a spade in front of the latter. That's how a bull came to be called a duke. And here was the duke again, filling the room with that switching, pawing, snorting destruction, pacing from one wall to the other, his shoulders so big and his hips so small that his hips acted as a swivel to swing his upper body from side to side every time he took a step.

"Why should Jack want to get hold of you so bad?" I said.

Chisos stopped pacing by the window that overlooked Main. "I don't know, I don't know."

We had left Spanish Jack and his deputies to do their own cleaning up down in Cecil's. I had some cleaning up of my own to do. My face felt like a bronc had stamped it, and looked that way, in the cracked mirror. I poured some water from

the cracked china pitcher into the cracked washbowl.

"I really didn't think Spanish Jack would buck a government man that way," I told Chisos. "He must really think he's in a fancy kack, pulling a high-heel time like that."

"Jack is Striker's man," said Chisos, "and Striker practically owns the Big Bend."

"They aren't bigger than the U. S. government," I said. "I suppose I could swear out a formal complaint, or call the military, but that would snub things up so tight. I'd like to give them a little more rope. I've sent a wire to Judge Kerreway in Marathon, and if he really hasn't been called in to sit on a second inquest, that will put a new rigging on this horse. What you got, Chisos, that they want so bad?"

"Nothing" he said. "I don't know"

"What did you think you'd find out, signing up with TSA?"

He turned to look at me. His eyes met mine in the glass. For a minute, that sullen, powdery color filled them. Then I saw the pattern of crow's feet around the edges; it might have all been from weathering, or he might have been studying something. He moved over toward me, still watching my face in the glass.

"What do you mean to do, when you find the Scorpion?" he said.

"My duty would be to bring her in and turn her over to the proper authorities," I said. "How much of a chance do you want me to give her?"

He took an impatient breath, turning back. "I'm mixed up, Marshal. For the first time in my life, I'm mixed up. I've always been able to ride straight down the trail before. When things got in my way, I got them out, in one manner or another. But I'm up against a fence here and it's hog-tight and horse-high and bull-strong and I can't get through. I saw her do it. I was standing right down there on the corner of Second and Main when Senator Bailes came out of the Alpine, and I saw her ride up on that palomino and empty her gun in him, and ride away."

"And yet you can't quite believe it."

He shook his head. "I'll believe she shot him. I knew Elgera. But there's something wrong."

"Wasn't Kelly Striker the campaign

manager for Bailes when he was running for the Senate?" I said. I saw him nod in the mirror. I wiped my hands on the bloody towel. "I'll give the woman the same chance I gave you, Chisos," I said.

He turned again, and there were those crow's feet, "Just why did you jump in down there? You put your foot in a deeper bog than you realize. Spanish Jack won't forget it, and Striker is a big man. He might even have the power to touch you."

"I didn't like the length of Jack's burn-sides," I said.

Owens laughed suddenly. It was the first time I'd heard him do it.

"All right, marshal," he said. "When I told you I didn't know where Elgera was, I meant it. But there are a few leads. That palomino of hers. La Rubia, she called it. The Blonde. Nobody else could ride it. Mexican friend of mine claims he saw it without a rider down by the Dead Horse Mountains. That's near the Lost Santiago Valley. Not many people could find her if she was hiding out in her old home. I've been in a couple of times, and didn't come across any sign that she was there. But if you want to have a look-see, I'll take you."

"That would make me," I told him, "as happy as a red bangtail in a Porter kack."

SIERRA DEL CABALLO MUERTO, they called them. The Mountains of the Dead Horse, because some Spicks had got lost here in the old days and they and their horses had all died through lack of water. I thought I'd seen some badlands in my time, but they was the Promised Land compared to this.

There were trees, sometimes, but they didn't pack any more spinach than you could grow on a slickhorn. There were riverbeds, but they hadn't been wet since a hundred years before the first Comanche burnt sotol stalks in rimrock. There was *toboso* grass, but it was so tough even the buffaloes had left it alone.

Buzzards floated on air so still it hurt my ears, and they must have been waiting up there a long time for us, because I couldn't see anything else alive enough to die. My pied horse was ganted up like a heifer with epizootic, and I had to get off every half hour or so and wipe the alkali out of his nose so he wouldn't choke to death.

*There ain't no hoss that cain't be rode;
There ain't no man that cain't be
thrown.*

"Will you shut up?" Chisos said. "There ain't no cause to sing. We're just about at the entrance to Crimson Canyon. It leads into the Lost Santiago Mine. The mine goes clean through this hogback of the Dead Horses into Santiago Valley. If you want to turn back, now's your chance. From here on in it's touch and go."

"Let's go then," I told him.

He stepped off his dun and unslung a pair of old *armitas* he had hitched to his saddle horn. He buckled these hide aprons on and got a pair of gloves from his saddle roll. I saw why in a few minutes. The canyon walls was as red as rot-gut bourbon, and so narrow we were riding in shadow dark as night at two in the afternoon.

Soon the way became so choked with prickly pear and horsehair cactus and mesquite we could hardly force our way through. Coming from the north, I wasn't even prepared as much as having taps on my stirrups. The thorny brush kept tearing my boots out of the oxbows and ripping holes in my levis and gouging my hands till I was ornery enough to eat horseshoes. Chisos didn't pay no attention and finally we reached the end and, sure enough, pushing our way through the last bunch of brush, we found ourselves in the mouth of a mine.

My pried animal spooked when I tried to push her in after Chisos' dun. I didn't blame the cuss much. There was something skeery about the shaft. Not the fact that the beams looked ready to crumble in on you any minute. Not even the darkness that closed in blacker than sin after we'd left the meager light near the entrance. It was something else. Something an animal recognizes when a man can't. I've learned to trust in their judgment.

"No wonder the Douglas clan was hard to find," I said, more to make sure he was there than anything else. "What happened to the rest of her family? Didn't she have a brother named Natividad?"

"He's supposed to be in Mexico, trying to get help," said Chisos. "A couple of her womenfolk have been seen down in the Chisos Mountains. That's my old pasture,

and they have friends among the Mexicans in the back country. With the grapevine they've got down here, it wouldn't do much good for you to hunt them up. Word of your movements travel about as fast as you can, and the Chisos are just about as deadly as these mountains, if you don't know them."

"This mine is supposed to be over two hundred years old?"

"Simeon Santiago discovered it in 1681," he told me. "His engineer was an Englishman named Douglas. The shaft caved in and trapped Douglas and his wife and a bunch of peons in the valley. They lived in there until 1890, cut off from the outside world—"

"I know the story," I said. "And the Scorpion is supposed to be descended from this Douglas ranny."

"You sound skeptical," he said.

"It's possible," I told him.

"But not probable?" he said.

"You're a better judge of that than I am, being tied into all this so much," I told him.

"I've seen evidence."

"All right," I told him. "All I care about is Elgera Douglas, not her family history. Help me find her and I'll even believe that Indian story about her being able to change from a woman into a real scorpion whenever she wants, if that'll please you."

He made a disgusted sound, and there was no more talk. I don't know how long it took us to stumble through that twisting, turning mine. He must have used up a pocketful of matches trying to find our way back when we'd made a wrong turn, once. Finally we reached the other end. It was night, and the moon was out. The shaft opened on a hillside, and from the lip we could look down into the Lost Santiago.

It must have been five miles across to where the Dead Horses started building that purple, jagged wall again, and twice as far the length of the valley, with the mountains lifting up at either end to enclose it completely. Water at the bottom, because there was a dark motte of trees making a strip a few hundred yards board, seeming to run the complete length of the floor. Chisos got down and began to squat around on the ground.

"No fresh tracks coming out of the mine," he said, finally.

"Let's take a look at the house anyway," I said.

HE shrugged and his Porter creaked as he climbed on again. The house was at the bottom of the slope, and as we approached, I could see how the top bar on one of the big cottonwood corrals had fallen down. There was a porch around front, formed by a line of poles supporting an overhanging roof thatched with Spanish dagger. This thatching had dried up and fallen through to litter the tiled floor of the porch. Moonlight came through the gaps this left and spilled like pools of yellow honey across the brown husks of thatching and the faded red tiles. Chisos grunted like a tired cow, getting off his dun again. He hesitated before the big oak door. It had been painted blue once. It's a Mexican superstition about the Virgin Mary, I guess. It must have been some home-made paint, from some vegetable dye, because it was peeling off. I could see Chisos' big barrel swell with the breath he took before he turned the hammered silver knob, and shoved the door open. I couldn't help stiffening up a little.

I saw his hand drop to his holstered Bisley, before he stepped in. It smelled like rotting leather, inside, and old, molding earth. Like a grave, I thought, and then almost cussed out loud at myself. I could hear him fumbling around in the dark. Light flared and I saw it was from an old camphine lamp on a big oak center table. There was something ghostly about the tarnished Spanish helmet on the mantle of the fireplace.

"That's two hundred years old," he said.

"Okay, okay," I said. "You want to flip to see who waters the horses?"

"I'd rather do it," he said. "That creek is drying up and most of it's so full of alkali it'd eat the guts out of our nags. You'd have a tough time locating the good holes." He went out and came back in a minute with our saddle rolls, setting his frying pan and coffee pot on the table. "There's some Arbuckle's and a little bacon in my roll."

Then he left again. I could hear the creak of leather as he got in the hull. I could hear one of the animals snort, and

then the pad of their feet, fading, drying, dead. I stood staring at that helmet. Two hundred years—

All right, maybe it *was* two hundred years old. I went to the table and unlashed his roll and got out the sack of coffee, and the greasy paper of bacon. Then I realized I'd have to wait till he got back with the filled canteens to make coffee. I went over to a pile of wood in the corner. It was rotten and crumbling, and must have been left here when the Scorpion high tailed it. The hearth was of adobe, running the whole length of the wall at this end of the room, with holes along it at intervals for pot fires, and iron pothooks swinging out on either side of the main fireplace. I had a blaze started in one of the pot fire holes when I heard Chisos coming back. That river must be nearer than it had looked. The pad of hooves stopped outside. "Kelly?"

It was soft, and husky, from out there. It was a woman's voice.

"Yeah," I said, after that moment it took me to recover, muffling my voice with my sleeve a little. That creak of saddle leather. That tap of high heeled boots across the tiles. That dry shuffle of them same boots through some of the Spanish dagger that had fallen off the overhang.

"No," I said, "don't buy that trunk quite yet. You ain't going anyplace but in."

SHE had started to whirl away, with the first sight of me. But the Cloverleaf house gun in my hand kept her from doing it. The door made a perfect frame for her. I thought Cecil had been pretty, but she didn't hold a logfat candle to this filly.

Tall for a girl, taller than me in the spike heels of them basket-stamped pewees she wore. The Mexican *charro* pants I'd heard so much of, fitting just as tight as they said, with red roses sewn down the seams. The white *camisa* for a shirt, fitting the same way, in the right places, tucked into a crimson sash of Durango silk tied around her waist. And the hair like taffy, or gold, or I don't know what, why try to compare it, when it's so much just by itself. I was a mite surprised by the little whip dangling from her left wrist. Unless I'd missed a detail in previous descriptions, this fancy quirt was something new for Senorita Scorpion.

"If you're really a scorpion," I said, "come on in and bite me." Her eyes flashed like a gun barrel catching the sun. I moved my Cloverleaf a little to let her know I wasn't joking as much as it sounded, and she stepped on in. "Lay that dewey on the table," I told her, and her fingers closed a little around the barrel of her Winchester, and then she stepped over to put it on the table. "Funny," I said. "I guess I've heard as much about that Army Colt you pack, and how good you are with it, as I've heard about your horse. And yet, according to the witnesses, this was the dewey you used on the Senator, too. What's the conundrum?"

She ran her hands down her hips like she wished the Colt was there, and then her lips twisted. "Who are you?" she said, in a small, strained voice, harsh as mesquite scraping a saddle skirt.

"United States Marshal Powder Welles," I told her. "I got a warrant there in my saddle roll. It's for the arrest of Elgera Douglas, alias Senorita Scorpion. Craziest alias I've ever heard. I served one on a jasper called himself Clarence the Cat once, but—"

"Oh, shut up," she hissed at me, still standing stiff as a poker with those hands clawed against her legs. It struck me her eyes weren't right on me. They were looking over my shoulder. There was a loud pop, and I couldn't help jumping and whirling around. It was just that rotten chunk of wood, spitting its last as the fire ate it up. But by the time I'd seen that, it was too late. I was already whirling back as the crash came from the other direction. She'd knocked the lamp off the table, and there wasn't enough light left from that dying fire to put in the end of a coffin nail. I threw myself aside, figuring she'd go for that Winchester and was right. The room seemed to come apart at the seams with the sound of it. I saw the flash and heard the blue whistler go by me and thud into the wall. My chivalry was worn thin, but I kept myself from firing at the flash, with an effort, and shouted at her from where I'd landed on my knees up against the wall after jumping aside that way.

"Honey, you'll be skylight going through that door and I swear I'll curl you up if you try it."

I could hear her scratchy breathing from

somewhere on the other side of the big room. The windows were shuttered tight, but moonlight made a yellow rectangle of that open door, and she must have realized how right I was, because I couldn't hear her moving. The moonlight didn't help me any more than that, though, way back where I was. It was still as dark as a dirty boot. Then she stopped breathing.

I could hear it too, the sound of approaching horses, and I took the chance and hollered at him, "Chisos, don't come in. We got your gal corralled and she's just as liable to send you to hell on a shutter as not."

ELGERA?" It came from Owens in a cracked way, out there, and then creaking leather as he swung off. "Elgera, are you in there?"

"Get him, Chisos," she said. "He's a marshal."

"No, Elgera." I could hear him coming toward the porch. "He's going to give you a chance. He knows there's something fishy about what's going on."

"What do you mean, a chance?" Her voice sounded thin.

"Give us the facts," I said, "Did you kill Bailes?"

"Think I'm a fool?"

"All right, we'll pass that up," I said. "Why did you kill him, then? What had he found that would have spilled your saddle?"

"Is that what you call giving me a chance?" she said. "Answer any one of those questions, and I'd be putting my head in the noose. I won't admit killing him, I won't admit anything. Chisos, if you love me, get me out of here."

"Don't come in Chisos," I said. "I want this straightened out before you come in."

"Elgera, I tell you, he'll do to ride the river with," called Chisos. "Won't you let us help you? You were seen by a dozen people when you killed Bailes. But you must have had a good reason. That's the only thing I can go on. What was Bailes doing? Was he mixed up with that mustang-running himself?"

"What have you found out working for TSA?" she said.

"I've got a relief man on that Butcher-knife line camp who used to work for an affiliate of TSA in Kansas," said Chisos.

"He broke horses for this affiliate till one stove him up, and TSA pulled him down here on a job he could handle. This Kansas affiliate was one of the outfits the army gave contracts to for broncs. The contract wouldn't let the affiliate put their own brand on the animals till they were broken. This buster says he saw more than one Mexican brand on them broomtails before he broke them."

"Is that the tie-in?" I asked her. "Kelly Striker's on TSA and he managed the Senator's election campaign in the old days. Was Bailes really the brains behind this border-hopping mustang outfit? If you had that good a reason for killing him, sugar, you might get out on extenuating circumstances."

"Don't be stupid—"

"I'm only trying to see you get your deal from off the top, blondie," I said, riled a little now. Nobody likes to be called stupid, not even an old knothead like me. "Give us something to work with, will you? I can't see a smart gal like you pulling a trick like that without a good reason, any more than Chisos can. Who was that you asked for when you first rode up? Kelly? Kelly Striker? Why should he be here?"

"He wasn't here," she said. "Chisos, if you don't get me out I'll do it myself. You're a fool for trusting any lawman like this."

"I'm coming in, Marshal," Chisos said.

"Don't, Chisos, please," I called to him, but his boots tapped across the tiles, and his silhouette filled the door. I couldn't cut him down cold like that. Then the room began to rock again, with gunshots.

"Damn you, marshal," I heard Chisos shout, and he threw himself into the room from the doorway, until I heard his big body smash into the table.

"I didn't do it, Chisos," I hollered, rising from against the wall, and he must have heard me, because there was a heavy grunt and a scraping sound, and then something like a herd of buffaloes smashed into me, and I went down under the table he had heaved my way. "Get out, Elgera, get on out," he shouted.

The table was turned completely over on me and I was pinned beneath it from the waist down. It had knocked my house gun from my hand so I couldn't even cut one

at the girl as her silhouette appeared for a moment in the moonlit door. When I went to get out from beneath the furniture, I began to appreciate Chisos' strength. It was like trying to move a house off me. There was a stumbling, shuffling sound, and another silhouette filled the doorway, blocking out light. Chisos must have heard me trying to get from beneath the table, there, because it looked like he turned in again. About that time my legs came free.

I tried to stand up, but it had mashed them up a lot, and they wouldn't support me. I fell on toward Chisos, and he must have thought I was coming for him. I heard the grunt he made, launching himself. I tried to get up again and meet it, but he struck me, and it felt just like that table again. I went to the floor beneath his hot, pounding weight with the noise of a run horse receding in my ears.

"So you'd give her a chance, would you?" panted Chisos, and I thought the roof had fallen in on my face. I tried to roll free of him and get a grip on his wrist so he couldn't hit again, but he spraddled his weight out over me, raising up from the hips, and that fist smashed into my face once more. I had gotten a hint of his terrible strength back there at Butcherknife when he clutched at my side with that hand. Now the whole kack was being cinched on.

I heard the small, muffled sounds of pain I made, jerking beneath him. He hit at me again, and the dark and my struggles caused him to miss my face and catch my shoulder. It sent a ringing numbness down my arm. I caught his thick neck with my good hand, clawing, grasping. He tore my hand away, twisting my arm up. I heard a cracking noise, and a scream, and then realized it was me. Again that roof smashed down on my face. A light went on somewhere. At first I thought it was the lamp. Then, in a little, small thought way down inside me, I realized there wasn't any lights on anywhere, really.

III

THERE AIN'T NO HOSS THAT cain't be throwed, there ain't no man that cain't be rode. If you're really a scorpion, come on in and bite me. What have you found out working for TSA? I've

found a gal in Alpine pretty as a spotted dog under a red wagon. That won't do you no good. Her hair ain't dyed. It's auburn clear down to the roots. And somebody in Alpine would recognize her, even if she did dye her hair. Wouldn't they? Don't ask me, I'm Kelly Striker. You're Kelly Striker . . . ?

That's what brought me out of it, I guess, because I couldn't be Kelly Striker, he didn't have a broken arm. I lay there feeling the hard packed earth of the floor against my back and staring up at the herringbone fashion of willow shoots they lay across the viga posts which form the rafters in them adobe houses. I lay there wondering which hurt worse, my broken arm, or my smashed face. I didn't want to move, knowing both of them would hurt more when I did. I could see it was daylight outside now. Morning, because it was still a little cool. I'd been unconscious that long?

Finally I managed to roll over and crawl to the door. My mare was cropping at some curly brown mesquite grass downslope.

"Pie," I said, "will you come here," and the effort almost made those lights go out again. She just kept browsing. It hurt so I kept groaning with every spasmodic effort I made crawling toward her. She lifted her head and that glass eye looked at me questioningly. Damn you, after all we been through together, you just stand there and look like that. Come here. Can't you see I need help. That Owens cuss thought he beat me to death? He'll see. Come here.

Finally I got to her. She shied a little when I reached up for a stirrup leather. I don't know how long it took me to get in the saddle. I don't want to remember. I turned her upslope. It took us half the day to get through that cave. Maybe I passed out inside, or maybe it was just that dark. It was late afternoon when we reached the Canyon on the other side. That fight through the thick brush choking the cut was the worst part, I guess. I lost count of how many times I was torn from the saddle. I was glad for a horse like Pie then. Any other animal would have spooked and run away the first time I fell, with all that mesquite cracking and popping and me yelling like crazy.

I knew the old Comanche Trail came through Persimmon Gap in the Santiagos

and lined down on this side of the Dead Horses to the Rio Grande and, if I could reach it, there was an outside chance I'd be picked up. It was night before I got free of Dead Man's Canyon. The next time I fell off my horse I stayed off. Somewhere way off I could hear a coyote yammering. It began to get cold and I started shivering. I couldn't stop. Maybe it was more reaction than chill. Then I passed out again.

"Los muertos no hablan."

"Speak English, will you? My cowpen Spanish don't fit this poke."

"He said the dead don't talk, *Senor*."

I looked up to see the two heads bending over me, one a big fat greasy pan almost lost in the shadow of a sombrero, the other a soft, tinted face with eyes as blue as the Mary color they put on their doors, and hair like taffy, or gold, or why try to compare it—and I knew I was unconscious.

Carretas, they call them, those big carts with solid wheels and cottonwood rails on the side. I could feel myself lifted into it. The smell of fresh onions gagged me. I wondered how it could smell so strong in a dream. Or maybe it wasn't a dream. No human woman had a lap as soft as that. She had gotten in the cart with me and sat down so her legs formed a pillow for my head. I could even feel the red suede of her charro pants.

"Oh, look at his face," she said in a soft, horrified way.

HER voice at the house had been thin and scratchy. It was rich and full, now, like running Durango silk through your hands. I opened my eyes. Her mouth was different, too, somehow—the lips riper and softer; her whole face seemed softer. I wondered if she still wore that whip.

"Women are crazy critters," I muttered.

Her laugh was small, cutting off short, but it held something wild that clutched at me. "You're all right," she said, "as long as you can gripe like that. What happened to you?"

"Most of it happened after you left. Chisos—"

"Chisos!"

"Yeah," I said.

"Oh, the fool, the fool," she murmured, in a soft, husky way.

"No" I told her, "I was the fool. But

now I've got you and you're coming back with me."

She laughed again. "Yes," she said, "you've got me, but before I go anywhere with you you'd better get patched up a little. We're going to Avarillo's at Boquillos."

WELL, all right, I thought, maybe we had better, because I didn't want to take my head off that soft lap just yet anyway, and I sort of snuggled back, and then the whole thing cut its picket pin and drifted off . . .

"Senor, I have seen plenty of rawhide in my time, and there are compadres of mine who swear on the Virgin's name that it wears better than iron, but I never saw a man made from it before. I have some horse-shoe nails out in the back, and I have been discussing with myself whether you would thrive more on them than you would on this baby food my great fat aunt insists will cure you."

I wasn't in the cart any more. I was in another adobe room, with slots for windows and hard-packed earth for a floor. The bed was made of hand-hewn oak slabs pegged together and the covers of dirty red wool smelled like goats had been sleeping in them. The man who wanted to feed me horseshoe nails stood beside the bed with a clay platter of some steaming hog-tripe.

I've seen steers rolling in so much tal-low they couldn't walk, but this jasper made them look like skin and bones. He had so many chins there was no telling where his jaw ended and his neck began. The sweat ran like grease from the creases. He had on a broad black belt, buckled up like he was trying to hold in some of the gut that slopped over it in great rolls that looked like white sausages in his thin silk shirt with the flowing sleeves. His eyes were like a bloodhound I seen once, big and sad and bloodshot, with that liquid look that makes you think you're going to spill out and run down his cheeks any minute. I'd worked long enough on this case, now, to know most of the people mixed up with the Scorpion, and there was no missing the gate in this corral.

"Ignacio Juan y Felipe del Amole Avarillo," I said.

"Si, mining engineer extraordinario, archeologist magnifico, consultant on af-

fairs of the heart, or whatever else you happen to require at the moment," he chuckled, "You are well informed, Marshal Welles."

"Where's the Scorpion?" I said.

He raised fat eyebrows. "They have a saying down here, Marshal. Quien sabe? Who knows?"

"She brought me here."

"A peon and his wife brought you here," said Avarillo. "They found you on the Comanche Trail in this sad condition."

"Then I *was* dreaming," I said.

"Si," he said. "Now try to get down some of this *pinole con leche*. And after that we will dress your face again. My aunt has soaked the seeds of Guadalupina vine in mezcal for three days. It will not make you handsome again, but it will heal the wounds."

"I wasn't handsome to begin with," I said. "How about that hogtripe? I'm hungry."

"Not hog-tripe, senor, please," chuckled Avarillo. "It is parched corn fluff and milk."

Whatever it was, I ate it. Then his big fat aunt came in with this stuff soaked in mezcal juice. She made Avarillo look like a ganted dogie. If his cheeks were so fat they almost hid his eyes, I couldn't even see her eyes. She kept tugging at her pale blue satin shawl, and chuckling, and a different part of her body quivered every time she chuckled. It got on my nerves, somehow. Then, once, I caught a glimpse of her eyes, behind all that doughy fat. They weren't chuckling.

"Where's my dewey?" I said.

"Please, senor, I have not finished dressing your face. Your what?"

"My cutter, my lead chucker, my hog-leg—"

"Ah, he means his gun, my big fat *tia*," grinned Avarillo.

"In a safe place, senor," she told me.

"Yeah?" I started to get up, but his big fat aunt caught me by the shoulders.

"Please, Marshal Welles," objected Avarillo. "You are in no condition to excite yourself. Perhaps I should introduce you to Moro. He is my—ah—man, you might say. He is a Quill, a pure-blooded Indian of Mexico, and he is a very good card player. Come in, Moro."

Moro came in. I've seen a few of them

Quills. There's something different about them you don't get in an Indian like a Comanche, or Apache. It's like the difference between an oily bronc with a glass eye that's so full of the hokey-pokey he's always jumping around and you're on your guard every second, and a big fool with a streak of Quarter in him, maybe, who just sulks along till you've quit watching him, and then up and flips the kack. That was Moro. His eyes might as well have not been there for all they told. His mouth looked like somebody had cut a slit in his face with the blade of the big Arkansas toothpick he carried stuck naked through the rawhide dally holding up his *chivarras*.

"Chusa?" he said, shuffling a pack of greasy horsehide cards through fingers like big fifty barrels.

"Poker's my game," I told him, "stud at that. I won't be here long enough to sit through a hand, anyway, Charlie."

"Moro," said Avarillo. "And I think you will be here, senior."

"When you took my wallet," I said, "did you happen to notice the U. S. marshal's badge pinned to the flap?"

"I respect the United States Government, senior, more than you seem to think," grinned Avarillo. "But if it ever came to pass that they questioned my respect, all I would have to do is step across the river, and that is all they could continue to do, question, is you see what I mean."

"Chusa?" said Moro.

"Hell," I told him.

IT WAS HOT down there on the border. I ate a lot and slept a lot, and I must have gained some weight, because my levis started getting tight around the waist. I felt like a hog getting fattened for the killing. Moro stayed in the room most of the time, trying to teach me that *chusa*, but my cowpen Spanish didn't help much, and the only word he knew in English wouldn't bear repeating in polite society.

After about the first week they let me up, figuring, no doubt, I couldn't cause too much trouble with that cracked wing. Avarillo ran the local saloon in town. They call it *cantina*. My room had been at the back, and it opened directly onto the saloon itself, which was no more than a couple of round tables to drink at and a

row of barrels at the back set up on a wooden rack so Avarillo could operate the bung-starters.

Avarillo walked down the row of barrels, thumping each one as he spoke. "Mezcal, Marshal? It will make a cock of a copon, a bull of a steer, a stallion of a gelding. Tequila? The kick of a mule is a love-tap. Pulque? One drink and a kitten thinks he is a *tigre*."

"I'll take the bull-maker," I told him. "I need a little vinegar in my roan."

He poured me a big shot in a clay cup, nodding his head toward the outer door. There was a brush arbor to one side and we sat at the table beneath that. Moro stood against one of the supports, playing with his horsehide cards. The town wasn't much more than this *cantina* and a bunch of mud houses hung on the outside with the same scarlet *ristras* of chile you see at old Haymarket Plaza in San Antonio. We could look across the narrow gorge of the Rio Grande into Mexico.

"Boquillos means little mouths," Avarillo told me. "Because of the narrowness of the gorge here, no doubt."

"When you going to kill the hog?" I said.

Those eyebrows raised. "Que?"

"Back in Webb County we always fattened our bacon before the slaughter," I said.

Suddenly he began to chuckle, leaning forward and looking up into my face. "Don't I fit into the roll of the benevolent host, marshal?"

"About as well as a dun trying to look like an albino," I said.

His chuckle spread over his whole body, in waves, and he peered closer. "You know, marshal, my big fat *tia*, she thinks you are so quaint, with your cynical colloquialism. I imagine it amuses many people, doesn't it, so that they overlook what lies behind it. I would not like to be Chisos Owens, right now. In his place, I would have rather killed you, than beaten you like that and left you alive. Perhaps Chisos does not realize it. Perspicacity is not one of his attributes. Perhaps not many people realize it, but I have always prided myself on my judge of character. I would hate to have you on my trail, marshal." He leaned back, taking a deep breath. "We are not fattening you for the kill, marshal. You

may leave whenever you wish, my friend."

"The Scorpion's far enough away to be out of my reach, in other words."

He began to chuckle again, throwing his fat brown hands up and shrugging. "A man's most secret thought is not safe with you around, is—" It was like somebody had noosed a California collar up tight suddenly. He almost choked on the words. Then he stood up. "We have had our appetizer. Shall we repair to the festive board now?"

BUT I had seen that glance, past me. I got up and made to go by Moro, still leaning against the post. My good right arm was toward him as I passed, and he had just started to lean his weight forward away from the post when I did it. So casual he didn't know it had happened till I had that blade out of his belt.

"I never repaired anything but a broken pack-saddle," I said. "I don't think I'll start treating my vittles that way so late in life. Instead, let's you and me just move around the corner, Moro, while Ignatz here meets whoever's coming up the trail from the canyon. Make a wrong move and I'll cut out your brisket with this Arkansaw toothpick."

"It is not a toothpick, senor," Avarillo told me, staring past us with a twisted face. "It is a *belduque*, used by the blood-drinkers of the *cordillera*."

"Whatever it is, act natural, or you'll have some more blood to drink," I told them. "Git, now, you black Injun."

I could feel Moro twitching, with that point in his gizzard. He walked around the corner like the ground was covered with bantam eggs he didn't want to break. Avarillo stood beneath the arbor, wringing his hands and cussing under his breath in Spanish. In a minute, this jasper bulged into view at the lower end of town, coming up a trail that looked like it started at the bottom of the canyon. He was over six feet tall, gaunt without being skinny, something reckless about his slouch in the saddle. He had on a pair of old bullhide chaps scarred and ripped with recent brush-riding, and his John B. had the Texas crease you can spot a mile away. The three-quarter rig was so sweaty even its creak was soggy as he swung off.

"Seen her?" he said.

"No, no," said Avarillo, wringing his hands.

I could see the man's eyes now. Red-rimmed and grim, stabbing at Avarillo like nails pinning up a reward dodger. "She was up north of Alpine last Monday," he said, in a hoarse, driven way. "Busted up a mustang drive. When it was over, the horses were scattered over all of Brewster County. Half of them had Mexican brands on. Wouldn't have been known if she hadn't scattered them that way—"

Avarillo must have been making signs with those elevator eyebrows, because the man stopped suddenly, staring at the fat Mexican. I decided it was about time to bulge. I made my own signals with the point of that knife and Moro reacted, moving around the corner.

"Leave your hands off your hardware, Sheriff Hagar," I told him. "I can cut both your ears off with one throw on this Arkansaw toothpick."

"*Belduque*, please," groaned Avarillo.

"Or should I say ex-Sheriff Halgar," I told him. "Take both your deweys out and drop them on the ground, and don't try to pull no Curly Bill spin or I'll curl your bill."

He gripped the ivory handles of his Peacemakers without putting his index fingers through the trigger guards, and eased them out. There was just a fraction's hesitation. I let my wrist twitch so the sunlight ran along the knife blade. The Peacemakers made dull thuds.

"Step away," I told him, and then went over and picked them up, stuffing them in my belt. Then, casual-like, I flipped the knife at one of the cottonwood supports holding up the arbor. It was at the other end, some ten feet away, a thin pole at that. Avarillo looked at the blade, quivering a little in the cottonwood. Then he looked at Johnny Hagar.

"Don't you look good," he chuckled, "in your ears?"

"How do you know the Scorpion was up north of Alpine last Monday?" I asked Johnny Hagar. His face was turned grey with dust, and sweat had made two glistening grooves from his nostrils to the corners of his thin, closed mouth. I let my good hand move a little closer to one of the Peacemakers. "I could shoot your ears off just as well."

He drew in a thin breath. "A dozen people saw her. A couple of big ranchers, the station agent at Sanderson, Spanish Jack."

"What was he doing there?" I said.

Hagar shrugged. "He was called in after it happened, cut her sign south of Alpine, lost her around Butcherknife."

Avarillo must have seen the expression on my face, and it must have been going around in his mind for some time, now. "Just what was the fight between you and Chisos Owens about, Marshal?"

"We had found Elgera Douglas at the Lost Santiago," I said. "He was trying to keep me from taking her back to Alpine."

JUST before a norther hits, sometimes, it gets as quiet as that. I don't think they were even breathing. Finally Hagar let out a disgusted breath.

"That's impossible. She couldn't have made it from Alpine to the Santiago in the same day. Not even on her palomino."

"She was there," I said.

"And she was north of Alpine," he said. "Beyond any doubt."

"One of us is lying," I said.

"There is a dead man who once called Sheriff Hagar a liar," smiled Avarillo.

"I hope he don't get too tetchy on that point of honor now," I said. "Seeing as I've got the hardware."

"We seem to have reached an impasse," said Avarillo.

"If you mean we're up against a fence, not necessarily," I said. "Finding the Scorpion might clear up this little discrepancy, as well as a few others. You seem to have been working hard trying to locate her too, Hagar. Why is that?"

"I don't think she murdered Bailes."

"That was witnessed," I said.

"She must have had a good reason, then," he said.

"You change hosses pretty quick," I said. "A reason that would stand up in a court of law?"

He shook his head from side to side like a bull with blowflies. "I don't know, but—"

"I think you're in the same wagon Chisos Owens was," I said. "You're in love with the gal and you want to ride her trail, no matter what she does. A man that dizzy over a filly ought to be willing to make a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"Be careful, Johnny," said Avarillo.

"I took it for granted, to begin with, that Chisos Owens knew where the Scorpion was," I said. "But I don't think he'd deliberately lead a lawman onto her, the way things happened. So now, I'm taking it for granted you don't know where she is. She seems snubbed in pretty tight to this mustang-running. I think maybe we find out their secrets, and we'd find hers. Nobody has been able to find where they cross the border. You probably know more about this section of the Rio than anybody, Avarillo, from what I hear of you. How about it?"

He shrugged fat shoulders. "The buzzard leaves no tracks in the sky."

"And a blind bronc also tears up a lot of brush on his way to the waterhole," I said, "if you go in for sayings. And that's just what I'd be, wandering around down here. I'd tear up a helluva lot of chaparral before I found the sink. You can let me go on alone, if you want, but there's no telling what I'd bump into, or turn up. Wouldn't you rather be there when it happened than not?"

Avarillo looked at Hagar. "He is right, Hagar. With a man like the marshal, it is sometimes better to help him than let him run around loose."

"If you aren't mixed up in this mustang-running yourself, and know where they're crossing, I can't see what you'd have against showing me," I told them.

"Good," said Hagar, "but get this, marshal. If we find the Scorpion, and you try to take her in, there isn't anything I won't do to stop you, even if I have to kill you."

IV

ID THOUGHT THAT RIDE INTO the Santiago had been through the worst badlands this side of the misty beyond, but they was blueroot pastures from a mortgaged cowman's dream compared with what Avarillo and Hagar dragged me into. It all seemed connected with death, somehow, and that didn't help. Below Boquillos, was Dead Man's Turn, where some grissel-heel had been shot on a high ride. Beyond that was the old Smuggler's Trail with a big stone tower overlooking it which they called Murderer's Haunt because some blue bellies had been starved to

death there during the War between the States. And then on into the Dead Horse Mountains again.

"From Alpine on down," Avarillo told me, "the Santiagos and the Dead Horses make a spine of impassable mountains with Rossillos Basin on their west side, and Maravillas on their east. The Smuggler's Trail crosses the Rio just east of Boguillo, and then either turns up or down, east or west. The Rangers know that this ancient trail is being used by the mustang-runners, but always turn either east or west on this side of the river, looking for them to take either the Rossillos Basin north, or the Maravillas. To their knowledge, there is no known way through the Dead Horses. It would be certain death. But that is only to their knowledge."

"And to your knowledge there's a trail striking due north through the Dead Horses into the Santiago Valley," I said. "Once in the valley they've got that creek to carry them through."

He was sitting an Arizona nightingale packing as much tallow as himself, rigged out with an old Mother Hubbard saddle and a spade bit with shanks as long as shovel-handles. Need that much leverage, I thought, to stop that iron-mouthed knot-head.

"Your perspicacity constantly amazes me, marshal," he said.

"Simple geography," I said. "And I suspect you aren't the only one knowing this trail. Since it goes right into the Scorpion's home pasture, I suspect she knows of it."

The Mother Hubbard creaked like a rusty gate as he leaned his weight toward me, looking sorry as grease. "You think she is running the mustangs."

"What else does it add up to?"

"Perhaps we had better not take you through," he said.

"I could do it alone, and if the Scorpion winds up on the end of this one, she'll find herself in Alpine faster'n a water bucket down a go-devil," I said.

"Oddly enough," he said, "I think you could. No one else has. But I think you could. That is why we shall go on, if you wish."

I wished. Maybe I was sorry for it afterward. No trees. No brush. Not even them rings of stones you found out in the

Rosillos blackened on the inside where some Comanches had roasted sotol stalks maybe a hundred years before. Just sand and rocks and creosote and sun. Pie had taken on some tallow with Avarillo's grain, but I could see it lather up and drip off her, pound by pound.

*Ain't no hoss that cain't be rode,
Ain't no man that cain't be throwed.*

"Senor, must you add to our misery?"

"Oh, go ahead and let him sing, Avarillo, I kind of like it," Hagar grinned. I'd heard about that grin, too, and how nothing short of the devil could wipe it off, and maybe not even him. I began to appreciate it farther on, when I couldn't even sing. Then we found the first dead mustang.

We had turned north away from the Rio Grande into those Dead Horses. I don't know how many miles it was up off the river. I'd lost count. I know we'd started at daybreak and it was now late afternoon. Hagar was leading us on his apron-faced horse and it shied suddenly, in a weary, reluctant way. I saw it, then, lying beyond some creosote bushes, and had to haul up the ribbons on my own piebald to keep her from spooking. The buzzards had been at the carcass, but the brand was still evident on the flea-bit hide.

"*El Reja*," said Avarillo. "That is quite a big outfit in Mexico."

"Looks like it's been dead a long time," I said. "We ain't on a fresh trail."

"No?" murmured Avarillo. The way he said it made me look at him. But he'd already turned that mule away and started on up the cut. We lined deeper into the Dead Horses, stark peaks all around us. Then the sun went down and it was darker than the inside of a ramrod's yannigan bag. Finally the moon came up as fat and yellow as a Webb County punkin, and its light turned the country into the kind of a picture a ranny sees after paintin' his nose all night. Sometimes the hogbacks turned red as the tops of a kid's Hyers, next they might be green as wheatgrass in spring, with big purple rocks poking out like post-oak bumps on a brush-hand's legs.

"All right," said Johnny Hagar, abruptly, and swung down off his dun. We'd been traveling across shaly ground, but

now we had struck a strip of sand, and it was all churned up like a band of stuff had been run through. There were droppings, too. Hagar toed some. "Fresh enough," he said. "Push a little and we might tie into them."

Pie was so played out I had to keep giving her the boot. We crossed a saddle between two peaks and on the opposite slope saw the haze swimming atop the next row of hills. We flagged our kites at a hard gallop down the slope and up the next. Just before the ridge, Hagar stepped off his horse and moved to the top on foot, squatting down when he reached it, to keep from being skylighted.

"Sure enough," he said. "Big bunch of them fogging through that next valley. Looks like a full hand of riders—"

MAYBE it was in the way he stopped. He could have ended it there, all right. But his voice sounded like a tight dally snipped off suddenly. His whole lean body stiffened, and he started to turn toward us, still squatted down like that, then wheeled back, and finally, rising at the same time, turned back towards us.

"Don't do it, Hagar," I said. "Is she down there?"

No telling what makes a man hesitate, in a moment like that. Whatever it was, it gave me the chance to thwart his original intention. He had the look of going for his guns, though his hands did not actually move. I can't figure him backing down on a draw-out, even though in his moment of hesitation, his glance was pinned on my own hand, close enough to that Cloverleaf in my belt. At any rate, I had already booted my horse up, and by the time he went into his final move, faced toward me, I was close enough to ram my horse in against him, knocking him off balance.

"Marshal, I told you—" he gasped, grabbing for my bridle.

But I was on the crest, then, and could see down into the next valley. A bunch of mustangs was being run northward beneath a dirty brown mist of their own dust. There were two riders dragging, one on swing and one on point; I couldn't make out what color their horses were, exactly. But there's one color you can't miss, even under those conditions. It's that pale gold tint of a true palomino, set off by the pure

white mane and tail. And there it was, out-riding, on the opposite slope, and the rider had hair as blonde as the horse's.

Hagar had the shank of my bit in one hand now, and his tug caused Pie to whinny and rear up. I necked hard to the right, swinging the animal around into him by its rump, and freeing one foot from the stirrup at the same time. My boot caught him under the chin. He made a sound like a roped dogie when it hits the ground, and the sudden release of his hold on my bit caused Pie to plunge forward. Hagar was falling on backward, and I had swung out my stirrups to kick the horse on over the hill, when Avarillo's voice came from behind me, soft and bland as hogfat dripping down a candle.

"Not quite now, marshal, if you please."

Any other man, I might have gone on and kicked Pie over the hill. But there was something in his voice that made me turn around, still holding my feet out that way. I don't know where he got the stingy gun. It was a little four-barrelled Krider pepperbox almost hidden in his fat hand, but at this range, it would be deadly.

"I'm going on over, Avarillo," I told him. "She's down there and I'm going to nail her this time and nobody is stopping me. If you want to open my back door, go ahead."

I turned my back on him. I didn't make the mistake of hustling over the crest. I dropped my feet in easy, heeling Pie into a deliberate walk. Hagar lay on the ground, watching in an unbelievable daze. Then I was over the top and going down the other side.

Once beneath the crest I pushed Pie into a gallop down the steep talus, praying for the sure feet she'd shown so many times before, giving her free bit and letting her slide when she wanted. I was right on the flank of the band, and quartered in, meaning to drop behind the drag riders and pick up the girl on the other side. But I didn't use enough cover, I guess. They must have caught sight of me coming down. Somebody started gun-racket.

I couldn't hear any of them blue whistlers whining my way, or see them kicking up dirt around me, but it came from down there somewhere. It was a case of hive right on in or duck, and I wanted that girl too much to turn my tail.



He lurched toward me, trying to get hold.

"Git on there, you piebald cousin to a rat-tailed ridge-runner," I howled at Pie, and she really lined out under that, because she knows I never yell at her unless I really want to shovel on the coal. The gunshots mingled with the sound of running horses to deafen me and the dust billowed up to gag me and I raced around the drag end of that band of pepper-gut broncs. A horsebacker bulged out of the blinding dust ahead. He was turned the other way in the saddle, with his Winchester, and it surprised me. He jerked around my way when he saw me coming, looking as surprised as I was, and pulled his gun over the saddle bows.

I cut loose with my Cloverleaf, shooting at his horse. I saw his hat twitch off, and that's how accurate you can be on a running animal with a six-iron. His Worcestershire made its bid then. I saw it buck across his saddle bows and saw it reach out that red finger. I could feel Pie jerk against my legs. Damn you if you've dusted my hawss, I thought, and squeezed my trigger again, kicking my feet free of the stirrups at the same time. Pie went head over heels and I threw myself clear, trying to roll it off.

8—Action Stories—Winter

But the ground was rocky, and my broken arm caught it. I heard myself bawl like a roped heifer, and then went flopping off across rocks as sharp as a razorback hog, howling and grunting and bringing to a stop against a boulder.

I LAY there a minute, spinning like a trick roper's Blocker loop. I could hear somebody groaning. It was me. When I realized that, I knew I was beginning to come out of it. My busted wing hurt even worse than the first time it had been snapped. The thunder of running horses had faded into the distance, and the gunshots were farther off too, not coming so hot and heavy now. Then I began to hear that other sound. It was like something scraping over rocks. It *was* something scraping over rocks.

"Jerry?" called someone. "Was that you going down?"

I had cover on one side, from this boulder. I could see my Cloverleaf lying out in the open, where I'd dropped it. I had to make a quick decision, and decided I'd rather check out making some kind of bid than just sit here and wait for them to rake the pot in. I rolled over on my belly and began snaking towards my iron. I was within

a couple of feet of it, when that scraping sound stopped, and it was the soft, gritty noise of boots stepping into sand. My fingers were an inch away from that cloverleaf-shaped cylinder on my Colt house gun, when he spoke from behind.

"Don't do that quite yet, Marshal. I want to enjoy this a while before I send you to hell on that shutter you unhinged for yourself back at Cecil's."

I stayed in that position a minute, or a year, I don't know. Then I twisted my head around, with my hand still pawed out that way, so I could see him. I had already recognized his voice, of course.

"Well, Bryce," I said. "Light down and give your hawss a rest."

There was a small, puckered scar in the flesh of his cheek, like someone had punctured the flesh with something, and a black patch over one eye. He passed the palm of his free hand over that side of his face, without actually touching it, and his lips pulled away off his teeth in a flat grin.

"I've been waiting for this, Marshal," he said. "You don't know how long I've been waiting for this, You don't know how I've thought and dreamed and planned of this moment. I never hoped to have a drop on you, of course. I thought it would have to be flipcock and shoot, and all the pleasure would have to be after you was dead. This is so much better.

"Start squirming, marshal. Im not going to kill you right off. I'm going to shoot you in the legs, so you can't move away, and then in the belly. That will take a long time. Hours, maybe, even a day or so. With your tripe leaking out the hole, marshal, and the sun coming up and burning you like a match roasting a fly. Ain't you going to beg, marshal. If you beg a little maybe I'll let you off easy . . ."

I began to sweat. I couldn't help that. I didn't figure he'd be so nice as to put out my bull's-eye quick even if I did squall. The only thing I could hope would end it fast was if I took a quick grab for my gun and made him take a snap shot. He couldn't be as certain that way and there was an outside chance it might snuff my candle then. Two pair against a straight, but there wasn't no more draws left in this game for me. My whole body stiffened. He must have seen it. He cocked his forty-four.

I decided I might as well step in the

kack now as any time, and reached out for my Cloverleaf. I never heard a gun go off louder. My whole body jerked so tight I cried out with the shock it sent through me. But somehow I could still get my fingers around the walnut grips of my own lead-chucker, and I turned over on my back with it in my hand.

BRYCE WYLIE was standing on his toes. He was looking down at his toes. Even his gun was pointed at his toes. There was a sick look on his face. Then, slowly, still hanging there like he was in a California collar, his left hand reached across and spread out over his belly. His gun dropped out of his right hand, and he pitched over on his face.

As I lay there, staring at him, it came to me that I felt no pain, that it was not Wylie who had shot at all. I rolled over on my belly and helped myself onto my knees with my good hand.

"Well," I said, "if you ain't the shootin'est gal I ever seen."

"You've got a lot of sand in your own craw, marshal," the Scorpion said, coldly blowing the smoke from the end of the big Army Colt she held and stuffing it back in the holster.

Moonlight made that hair shine like wet gold. Her bottom lip was ripe as possum berries in the spring, and the shadow beneath it made her look like she was pouting. And now was the time to wear a whip, but she didn't have it on.

"Saving my life that way sort of complicates matters," I told her. "I really meant it when I said I was going to take you in, Elgera."

It's funny the shine blue eyes get in shadow, that way.

"Before you even heard my side of the story?"

"I'm listening."

"What would that behind you indicate?" she said.

"That I was cussed lucky you came along just then."

"Not lucky. I saw what happened from the other slope. But I don't mean that. Doesn't Wylie and Jerry Hammer's connection in this mean anything to you?"

"They're Spanish Jack's men," I said.

"And Jack is Kelly Striker's man," she told me.

"You mean the TSA?" I asked her.

"You're a government man," she said.

"Couldn't you have a government auditor go over their books?"

"They're shaky?"

"It would be my bet that TSA is in as much red ink as they are blood," she told me. "Why should a big corporation like that contract to handle my cattle for the courts till this thing is cleared up? What they make off that won't be chicken feed compared with what they get handling beef they can drive to market."

"Maybe you're working for Striker, too," I said. "So when Bailes finds out TSA is pulling a fast one, he has to be eliminated, and Striker picks you for the job."

"That's not very logical," she said, and I could see the flush beginning to tint her face. "Kelly Striker has been bucking me in Brewster County for years."

"It's not very logical that you should shoot Chisos Owens back in Santiago and then save my life here, either," I said.

"Chisos!" That color seeped out of her face. She bent toward me, letting it out on a heavy breath. "Where! Where is he, Welles?"

"You ought to know better than me," I told her. "When I came around back in your house, he was gone, too. I figured he'd taken out after you."

"After me? What are you talking about?"

"At the Santiago," I said. "That Monday. What had you done, just run another band of these pepper-guts through?"

That buttermilk horse of hers stood a few feet behind, and she began to back toward it. Her eyes were shining slits in her face. "You're trying to forefoot me. I wasn't at the Santiago on any Monday since Bailes was killed. Chisos isn't shot."

"You ought to know," I said. "But all that blood on the floor at Santiago wasn't mine. I think you gut-shot him good and he's either holed up somewhere or dead—somewhere."

"It's the same thing that happened in Alpine," she muttered.

"What happened in Alpine?" I said.

"I wasn't there," she said.

"You wasn't there when?"

"Marshal—" she was bent toward me,



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hands closing into fists—"tell me the truth. Chisos isn't shot."

"I think he was," I said. "A blind greener couldn't have missed, the way he was skylighted in that door."

"Where is he?" she said.

"I don't know, Elgera," I said. She started backing toward her horse again. I got the idea it wasn't what she had meant to do at first. "Don't spook, now," I told her. "You ain't got Chisos here to throw your clothesline this time. I'm not losing you this time, Elgera. I try to remember what my ma taught me about being a gentleman, but I swear I'll forget every word she said—*Elgera!*"

SHE had whirled to that horse. I never seen such a mount. The Mexicans teach their animals to whirl outward, but this buttermilk nag spun toward the girl as she jumped into the air. Her left toe caught the stirrup and the inward pinwheel of that animal slapped her into the saddle faster than I could follow. She drove the palomino right at me. But I was all horns and rattles now, I was so mad, and, instead of jumping out of the way, I let that pale, writhing chest hit me. It knocked me aside, but I was still in close enough to grab her leg as it went by me, and that kept me from falling.

The palomino wasn't in its full gallop yet, and my weight tugging on the animal pulled it down. Shouting something, the Scorpion tried to kick free, but I slid my grip on up her leg till I got my hand hooked in that Durango sash around her waist.

With the horse still going forward, it pulled her back off the saddle. She lost balance and came off the animal on top of me. The fall stunned me. She kicked free and rolled off, trying to gain her feet at the same time. I rolled after her, and there was only one way I could stop her, with my left wing still out of commission. For just an instant, we were face to face, still on the ground. My right arm was on the upper side, and I snaked it out and grabbed her left wrist, twisting her left arm around behind her in a hammerlock.

I was right up against her, with her breath hot in my face, so close I could see the little devils dancing in her eyes. She made another violent attempt to break free.

I shoved that twisted arm farther up her back. She gasped with the pain and shoved herself hard up against me to ease the pressure.

"All right," she panted in a final, despairing defeat, "all right."

"It better be," I said, without relaxing my hold. "Now are you going to be a good girl or am I going to have to take you back to Alpine in a clothesline?"

"I'll be a good girl, marshal," she breathed into my face. "I'll be a very good girl."

Maybe it was the husky emphasis she put in the last words, maybe it was that heated breath in my face, I don't know, but it struck me for the first time how tight she was up against me. I'd thought about it a lot, of course. A man can't help thinking about it, on a case like this . . . from the beginning, from the very first story . . . a woman they called *Senorita Scorpion*, and then through all the other stories . . . and coming up against men like Chisos Owens and Johnny Hagar ready to die just for another look at her . . . and then seeing her that first time at the Santiago, and thinking about it after that . . .

But I didn't think about it now, and that was funny, after it being in my mind so long, about her. Nothing was in my mind now. I didn't actually have any consciousness of what I was doing until I felt the ripe, soft richness of her lips against my own.

I never will know how long it lasted. Finally it was me who pulled away. She lay there taking slow, deep breaths, staring at me. Her eyes weren't half-closed in that sleepy way anymore. They were staring at me in a strange, wide surprise.

"Somehow," she said, in a husky whisper, "I hadn't thought of you, like that."

"I'd thought of you," I said. I could hardly get it out, my throat was so drawn up. "I got no right, you're my prisoner and I got to take you in and they'll probably hang you. But I can't help it."

The focus of her eyes changed for a second, not seeming to be on my face now. Then the expression on her face changed, too.

"Powder?" she said, in that husky way, and brought her lips in again. I took it. Then I felt the stiffening of her whole body, against me. Her free arm slid beneath my

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side and hooked around behind me, pulling me in. I tried to jerk my head back and get free of that grip, but I'd got the gate open too late. The whole State of Texas hit me on the back of my skull, and my head exploded and scattered pieces all over Mexico, and the Dead Horses opened up and swallowed me.

V

I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS A long time, marshal. Chisos shot? I tell you I wasn't at the Santiago. I'm going to shoot you in the legs, and then in the belly. Ain't you going to beg, marshal? So long since I held a woman. Somehow, I hadn't thought of you . . . like that . . .

"If you don't stop talking so deliriously, Marshal," said Ignacio Juan y Felipe del Amole Avarillo, "you will not only reveal the details of your love-life, but all secrets of the United States Government as well."

I opened my eyes to see him sitting cross-legged beside me, puffing calmly on a cheroot, his Arizona nightingale cropping at creosote behind him. It was daylight. I really doze a long time when they snuff my bull's-eye. Then I saw the animal working over the creosote beyond Avarillo's mule.

"Pie," I said, starting to raise up, and that was about as far as I got before the back of my head seemed to split open.

He pushed me back down with a fat hand. "I thought the man with the Winchester had shot your horse, too, when I saw you go down, from where I was on the hill. But evidently the animal only stumbled in that rough ground."

I rubbed the back of my head. "Hagar?"

"It was Hagar who hit you from behind," said Avarillo. "Then he and the girl headed northward. My mule cannot keep up with that palomino of hers when she pushes it. Or perhaps even my dubious scruples would not allow me to leave you here to die."

I got up finally, trying not to cuss out loud. Once was bad enough. But twice, like this, struck at a man's pride. Then my eye fell on Bryce Wylie's body, over by the boulder. It didn't seem to bother Avarillo.

"I got an idea from the gal, if nothing else," I said. "I can't figure Wylie and Hammer running these mustangs on their

own. If Spanish Jack is behind this border-hopping, that leaves two possibilities. Either he's working for himself, and double-crossing Striker, or he's working for Striker."

"And if he's working for Striker, that would bring in TSA," said Avarillo.

"Chisos said something about an affiliate of TSA in Kansas handling a lot of these Mexican bronses," I muttered. Then I lifted my head a little. "I wonder what Striker's reaction would be if we showed up in Alpine with Bryce Wylie's body?"

We found out. I hadn't expected Avarillo to come with me, really, when I said it, but he came anyway. We corralled Wylie's horse where it had run a couple of miles from the scene of the ruckus, and tied his body across the saddle. The trail took us through the Santiago, and we reached there about sundown, finding the house deserted, and no fresh sign. We went out through the cave that night, and up to Butcherknife, where we spent the night in the empty line shack there. TSA evidently hadn't gotten around to putting another man on those cattle. We reached Alpine late afternoon of the next day.

We rode down the middle of main, leading Wylie slung across his horse head down. I went near enough the curb, passing Cecil's Cafe, to see in through the dusty panes of the front window. It wasn't very busy this time of day. There was only one other customer besides Spanish Jack. Jack was holding Cecil's hand and leaning across the counter, and I could see them chalky teeth of his shining in that smile from here.

He didn't see us pass, but there was a crowd gathering around our horses as soon as I stopped them in front of Si Samson's livery. The coroner came over in a few minutes, a fat, pompous little busy-body with a carnation in the buttonhole of his funeral-colored fustian. He took charge of the body, and I went over and sent a couple of wires at the telegraph office.

FROM the telegraph office, I saw Spanish Jack come out of the cafe and cut across Main toward the coroner's. Avarillo wanted to clean up first, but I dragged him, tired and dusty and pouting like a child, to the cafe. Cecil was behind the counter when we came in, and gave me that smile

but somehow it wasn't the same, after the Scorpion,

"You look tired, Marshal," she said.

"Big job of work about done," I said, sitting down and shoving back my hat to rub my eyes.

"About done?"

"Judge Kerreway never did come in for that second inquest, did he?" I said. She shook her head, watching me. I hooked a menu and studied it. "He'll come in now. I just sent him a wire. This thing's ready to bust apart at the seams, and a lot of interesting yaks are going to pop out when it does, including most of them connected with TSA."

"TSA?"

"Yeah. Give me some of that beef stew, will you. What're you having, Avarillo?"

"If you have it," he told Cecil, but looking at me, "I'll take a big stiff jolt of tequila."

She wasn't as talkative as she was that first time. After she brought the stew, she went back into the kitchen, and Avarillo poked me in the ribs with his elbow.

"If it is true that a closed mouth catches no flies, marshal," he said, "you must be choking to death on them by now."

"I just thought it was about time we stirred up a little activity," I told him. "I'm getting tired chasing around all over Texas after the jaspers mixed up in this murder. It's about time a few of them came to me."

They did. They came about midnight. Avarillo and I had a double at the front end of Alpine's second story, and waiting by the window, I saw the three horses pull up to the hitchrack below. Spanish Jack forked a shiny black with four white socks that looked like it had more flash than bottom. He swung out of his silver mounted saddle with a flourish. Jerry Hammer climbed off his Copperbottom Quarter animal with as little effort as possible. I had never seen the third man before.

"I think Kelly Striker's come to pay us a visit," I said. "You got that stingy gun of yours?"

"But of course," he said, chuckling. "One does not travel without one's friends."

There was a knock on the door after a time. I opened it and let them in. The one I had never seen before was standing in front of Hammer and Spanish Jack. He

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was a big man, pompous as a grain-fed steer, shoving his gut out and planting his Custom Hyers wide apart so you couldn't miss how important he was. The flesh of his face looked like inch thick beefsteak, rare, and his bloodshot eyes had gazed down the neck of a lot of good bottles. And yet, somehow, they held a little glow in them, and I got the idea the results of rich living only hid what was beneath.

"Kelly Striker," he said officiously, introducing himself. The two words sounded like somebody shoving a pair of forty-four flat noses home in the cylinder of a Colt. "I would have made your acquaintance sooner, marshal, but you left in such a hurry last time."

"Business," I said. "Maybe you'd like to hear about your man?"

"Spanish Jack's man," Striker corrected me, stepping in as I moved back.

"Oh," I said. "You just come along for the ride."

"I hold a natural interest in what goes on in Alpine," he said. "What *did* happen to Bryce Wylie?"

"I come across him blotting some brands on TSA beef down by Butcherknife," I told Striker. "He wanted to make it a corpse-and-cartridge occasion. He did."

A little muscle twitched beneath that beefsteak flesh of his cheek, and he couldn't control the momentary, instinctive shift of his eyes around to Jack. The Sheriff couldn't hide his surprise, either. Striker's glance rode back to me. He pulled back his coat to shove his thumbs behind the cartridge belt crossing his pin-striped pants, and shoved his gut out farther, walking to the window and staring down into the street.

"I can't feature that, somehow," he said. "Wylie was making a hundred and fifty a month as a deputy. Why should he risk his job for a few rustled beeves?"

I didn't answer. Avarillo was sitting on the bed, staring at me in a puzzled away. Jerry Hammer leaned against the door-frame, building himself a smoke. I felt like a hide pinned to the wall with those empty, unblinking little eyes on me.

"Are you sure," said Kelly Striker, putting pressure on his gunbelt with those thumbs so that it creaked. He turned back to me. "Are you sure this didn't just happen on the road, somewhere? Wylie wasn't

the kind to forget what you did to him at Cecil's."

"Wasn't he?" I said.

Striker took a heavy, labored breath, like a horse that's lost its wind. "A public officer shot a man down in Duval County, about six years ago, over a personal affair like that, and it caused him quite a lot of trouble. A mob wanted to hang him. He was put on trial. He was acquitted, but they removed him from office, and he had to leave Texas."

"Folks don't mind a man doing his duty," said Jack, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, like a fiddling stud. "But when he uses his office to settle personal difference, like that . . ."

He was a high-strung man to begin with, of course. I wondered if he was this nervous all the time, though. I found the tail of my eye on those womanish hands of his, waiting for that fluttering movement.

"Yes," said Striker. "Wylie was well-liked around here, Welles. If it got to drifting around that things had happened, that way, I'm afraid it wouldn't go so well with you."

"You seem to be working some kind of beef," I said.

"I'm only interested in the welfare of the community," he said. "Mob violence is a terrible thing. Even if that didn't happen, Washington might question the affair rather closely, if the wrong kind of rumors reached them. Now I have no doubt it happened just the way you said. But for your own protection, marshal, I think it would be wise to retire. I have connections in Washington. It could be done with no taint on your record. Just move you onto another job, and get a fresh marshal out here."

"No," I said, "I can't see it that way. I'm too close to cracking this thing. I've got too much evidence another marshal couldn't use the way I can. It's going to bust higher than a broomtail hauling hell out of its shuck, Striker. It's going to shake a lot of men loose of their kacks."

Striker took that hoarse breath. "Won't you reconsider?"

Hammer took a last puff on his coffin-nail, dropped it to the floor, ground it beneath a heel. Then he straightened from where he had leaned against the frame. The bedsprings creaked as Avarillo bent

forward slightly. Jack's hands were moveless, at his side.

"No," I said, and became conscious of the hard, cold feel of my own dewey against my belly. "I'll finish the ride."

"Oh?" said Striker. That little glow flared in his eyes. I couldn't help keeping tabs on Jack's hands. I took in a breath and held it. "Oh," said Striker again, and turned and walked out the door, and Jack and Hammer wheeled and followed him.

VI

LIGHTS BEGAN TO POKE YELLOW holes in the evening along Main Street. Si Samson's livery doors groaned as he swung one shut against the rising chill. I stood at the window, hearing the creak of saddle leather as Striker and his boys mounted in front of the hitchrack below. Striker swung off north toward his home in the hills out there. Jack and Hammer trotted their animals around onto Second and out of sight. The jail was over there.

"I thought for a moment they were going to make a play," said Avarillo, still sitting on the bed. His eyes dropped to the walnut handle of my Cloverleaf. "They say Jack is a dangerous man. Even Hagar had a healthy respect for him."

"I got his number," I said.

Avarillo chuckled. "I was beginning to lose my faith in you when you talked like that in Cecil's. I think now, however, I perceive a pattern. You thought she would pass it on?"

"Didn't you see Jack sparking her when we passed?" I said.

"And you think Striker found out what was in that wire you sent?"

"I hope he did," I said. "TSA has their headquarters in Waco. That's where I sent the wire. I asked the marshal's office to have a government auditor check over TSA's books. The Scorpion gave me that idea. If Striker did have the influence to find out what was in the wire, and TSA's books were shaky, I figured it would put a bee in his bonnet."

"His sombrero was buzzing pretty loud when he came here," said Avarillo. "But why didn't you tell him where you really found Wylie?"



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"He would know where I stand," I told the Mexican. "This way, he might figure I'm lying about Wylie, and that I really found Wylie with those mustangs, and suspect Wylie's connection. But he ain't sure. He's confused. Have you ever seen a steer when it's confused? They get boogered and stop figuring their moves. Then you can haze them just about anywhere you want. I figger we've hazed Striker right into our Blocker loop."

We had. I went downstairs and sat in the lobby of the Lodge where I could look out on Second Street. There was a Mexican *cantina* next door to the jail. In about fifteen minutes, Jerry Hammer came out and unhitched his own Copperbottom and Jack's stockinged black, leading them across to Si Samson's stable. He came out of the stable and went back to the jail. The lights in the front room of the jail went off in a minute. I went out and crossed Main, going between two houses on the opposite side of the street to an alley behind. There, under a cottonwood, I waited. In another ten minutes, Hammer came up the alley farther down and went in the back door of the livery barn. He came out riding his own horse and leading Jack's.

"A childishly elaborate plan to deceive us," said Avarillo by my side. It caused me to jump like a snake-spooked filly. That chuckle shook his kettle-gut. "I thought you were up to something, marshal. When do we get our horses?"

"Right now," I said.

Si Samson came out of the little room he had up front, when we hit the barn, scratching his roached mane and grumbling. "More damn horses coming and going than I ever seed in Alpine before."

"Just got word Chisos Owens is gut-shot and dying down in the Santiago," I told him.

He looked at me with a strange, tight expression, then snorted, and turned back up the aisle to get our horses. Avarillo sighed heavily.

"What new, diabolical plan has the mad marshal in mind?"

"What do you figger the Scorpion would do if she found out Chisos Owens was dying somewhere?" I said.

"Go there," he muttered.

"That's what I figger," I said. "The way the grapevine works around here, she

ought to hear about this before we get out of town."

Even his smile was fat. "It is surprising, how fast word can travel in such a desolate country. But then most of the people are her friends. But why the Santiago?"

"When the Scorpion first came on me down there in the house, she asked for Kelly, before she saw me," I told him. "They made it a meeting place."

Si brought back our horses. We filled our canteens at the water trough outside, then headed north out of town, past the cattle chutes at the railroad yards. I didn't bother trying to track Spanish Jack, figuring they would meet somewhere near Striker's house. We topped the first rise and saw them in the light of a rising moon about half mile ahead. Striker's home hunkered in a big grove of trees off the road at the crest of the next hill. A horse was coming down the road from there. It met Jack and Hammer at the wooden bridge crossing Calamity creek in the cut. They headed south, around town and on down toward Butcherknife.

THE road followed Calamity down to where it turned west just above Butcherknife Hills, the road bending east toward the Santiagos then, away from the Creek. It was the only main route south, and we didn't bother keeping Striker in sight, just trailed behind him most of the time, checking up on his tracks once in a while, but traveling the brush beside the road in case he sent one of his boys back to see if they were followed.

We followed Chalk Draw down into where Crimson Canyon opened out, and then into that red cut, with its brush so thick every foot was a battle, and its buzzards sailing around on top like a bunch of argufyers on the opera seat. We could see fresh sign where Striker had forced his way through ahead of us—mesquite berries newly torn off their brush and recent horse droppings in the decay underfoot.

Late afternoon we reached the end of the canyon. The brush thinned here, and the canyon opens up into sort of a bowl. The mouth of the mine was on one side of the bowl, so covered by tangled chaparral and devil's head that no one would suspect it was there if they didn't know about it.

One of the ears on Avarillo's mule flopped toward the cave. "What is it, *querida*?" he asked the critter.

"You cover me," I told him, getting off with as little noise as possible. "Striker might have left one of them behind."

I snuggled around the outside edge of the bowl, keeping in as much brush as possible, till I reached the mouth of the mine. There I could hear what the mule must have. It was a heavy, labored sound, like someone breathing. It stopped, after a minute. I got out my Cloverleaf and crawled into that chaparral over the entrance of the mine. It took me a long time to get through without making any noise. With the last bit of brush still screening me from the inside of the mine, I could see him. Dim light filtered through to reveal his body stretched out face down on the floor.

"I got my dewey on you, Hammer," I told him. "If you're dealing one from the bottom you'll get your lights put out."

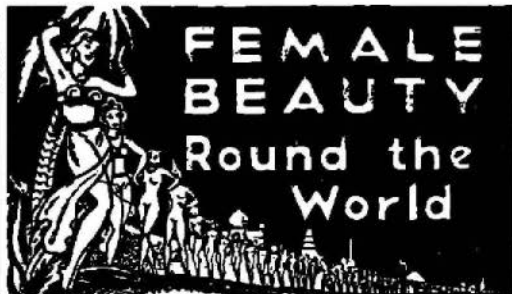
He made an effort to lift his head, failed, groaned heavily. I crawled out with my lead-chucker pointed at him. Crouching beside him, I turned him over. It looked like a whole herd of Texas longhorns had walked across his face. I never seen such a bloody mess. His shirt was ripped down off his chest, and I got a good look at those muscles. They were like thick slabs of beefsteak across his chest, and deep layers of quilting covering his body, and one shoulder was bared like half a Webb County cantaloupe.

"It must have been about ten men," I said.

"Chisos." It was hard to understand through his mashed lips. "Chisos Owens. Striker left me to guard this end of the cave. Chisos came through like you did. I tried to stop him . . ."

"Like trying to stop a stampede," I said. He didn't answer, and then I saw he had passed out. I went back and got Avarillo. We loaded Hammer on the rump of his mule, head down, and started picking our way through that shaft.

THERE is no measuring time in a place like that. It was still night when we reached the other end, but the first dawn light was beginning to silhouette the jagged outline of Dead Horses across the valley.



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The windows of the house made yellow rectangles against the dark shape of the walls. We left our animals hitched to the corral a hundred yards behind the house, stretching Hammer out on the ground and trying his hands for good measure.

"Perhaps one of the shutters in back can be forced," said Avarillo. Two wings of the house stretched out on either side of a flagstoned patio, with poplars growing around a dried up well in the middle. We tried three windows along the south wing before a shutter gave. It was a bedroom, with a big four poster at one side. I got my face full of cobwebs, climbing through. The door led to the hall. Cat-footing down this, we could begin to hear the voices from the living room.

"Now wait a minute, Chisos," said Kelly Striker. "You're taking too much for granted."

"On the contrary," said Chisos. "Judge Kerrey wasn't going to sit on any second inquest, because there wasn't going to be any inquest. Powder Welles wondered why Jack issued that phony subpoena on me. I think I know why, Striker. You'd found out I was working at your Butcher-knife line camp and you were skeery I'd uncovered something, and you wanted to stop my mouth. Well, you were right, on all counts. Too bad TSA is such a big organization. You can't keep your thumb on every department. Like Waco, for instance, where I signed on as Timothy Evans. They sent me to Butcherknife. And I *had* uncovered something. A lot of things. There's another name on your Waco payroll sheet. Sam Skee. He used to work for a Kansas affiliate of TSA. They were handling those rustled Mexican bronses."

"I can't believe it," said Striker. "If what you say is true, TSA will take the necessary measures—"

"Measures, hell," said Chisos. "TSA knew exactly what was going on. Sam was busted up by one of them bronses, and drinks when it gets to hurting him, and talks when he drinks. He says there was a TSA brand inspector on the Kansas company's corrals seven days a week. The inspector was working hand-in-glove with a colonel in the Quartermaster corps who got a cut for not looking when they blotted the Mexican brands out with the Kansas Company's mark."

Avarillo and I had now reached the end of the hall. The door here was partly open, and we could see the picture. Chisos Owens was standing in the front door, faced toward Striker and Spanish Jack, who stood by the table. The glass cover of that camphine lamp had been broken when Elgera had swept it off the table that last time we were here, but it still worked. The light it shed, however, did not reach the other end of the room, and in the shadows over there, with only the pale shine of her blonde hair and that strange glow in her blue eyes clearly visible, stood the Scorpion, whip and all.

"You seem to have all the data," said Kelly Striker.

"One word from me will start an investigation that will ruin TSA and you along with it," said Chisos.

"And that one word from you would pull Elgera Douglas right down with me," said Striker.

"That's as good as admitting it," said Chisos.

Striker shrugged. "Why not? It will never get beyond this house. TSA wiped out most of its resources in the battle to break the Scorpion down here. It would have folded up if that order for mustangs hadn't come from the army. But most of the other stock companies had gotten the jump on us and filled all the good sections with their own horse-runners. We tried to wangle a deal with the Mexican government, but they wouldn't bite. The only thing left was to run the stuff across the border.

"It was Jack here who got the idea of picking up the branded stuff. They were already broken, and that would save us the ten dollars a head it cost to have the wild ones busted."

Chisos face was pale and set. There was a little ragged hole in the leg of his levis, high on the right thigh, and the faded cloth bore a dirty bloodstain there. That must have been where the gal's blue whistler caught him when he was skylighted in the door. Not too bad a wound, if he could stand on it like this so soon.

"What makes you think it won't get beyond this house?" he asked Striker.

Striker laughed confidently. "Elgera," he said.

Chisos turned to the girl with a sick look

on his face, "Tell me, Elgera, tell me just once. That's all I ask. I'll believe you. Anything you say"

"Tell you what?" said Striker. "Are you still trying to convince yourself that she didn't murder Senator Bailes? Anything you say outside will just make it worse for her."

"He won't have to say anything, Kelly," I said, stepping in. "I heard it all."

Striker whirled toward me, surprised as a dogie the first time it's thrown, and all the angles must have passed through his mind in that minute. "Jack," he shouted.

JACK had wheeled around too, and had recovered from his surprise enough in that minute. His hands made that fluttering movement. I hauled on my own dewey. The tips of his guns were just clearing the holsters when my first shot caught him. He grunted, and took a step forward, elbows twitching with the effort to lift the guns on up. I let another one go at the middle of him, and was twisting for Striker.

He wasn't no gunnie, and he had just fought his iron out. I emptied my dewey into him. When his gun exploded, it was pointed the other way, because my shots had spun him around. He fell across Spanish Jack's body on the floor.

Then I saw someone coming at me from the other side of the room, and wheeled that way to see Chisos Owens. His lips were drawn back against his teeth and his eyes held that gunmetal shine.

"That four-shot house gun don't quite go around, does it?" he said. "I'm sorry it's empty now. You aren't taking Elgera, marshal, I told you that last time, no matter what she did, you're not taking her!"

I guess he didn't know about my broken arm. Or maybe he would have done it anyway, feeling as he did about the girl.

"Chisos," I said, "don't. It won't be clean. I'm through fighting you clean. I'm taking that girl and I don't care how I have to do it."

"No, you aren't," he said, going for his gun.

"Well, hell," I told him, and jumped in.

I had that empty Cloverleaf still in my good hand when I reached him, and I brought it down on his gun wrist with all

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my force. He howled in pain, and the Bisle went spinning out of his hand. He made a swipe at me with his other paw. It caught me on the side of the head as I jumped back out. Ears ringing, I tore free, and with that hand still held out toward me, hit him across that wrist too, with my dewey. He grunted hoarsely, pulling the hand back instinctively. It gave me an opening, and I wheeled in on that side, lashing him across the side of the face with the gun. It laid his cheek open. Blood spurting, he lurched toward me, trying to get hold.

I dodged his arms again, and came in on the other flank. He whirled at me, but I caught him again and jumped away. That one put a stripe across his forehead. Shaking his head dazedly, he came on in at me.

I took another shift that put me on the outside with him up against the wall. I slashed him on one side and then the other. I tried to get away, but each time he turned one way or the other. I drove him back with a blow. Finally I got too close and he caught my broken arm. The pain blotted out sight for a minute. We were in against each other and the smell of his blood almost gagged me. I slashed blindly at his head, felt him sag downward. He tried to catch my next blow with his free hand, but I changed directions and got by the block. He sagged again, beneath the blow.

He wouldn't let go of that broken arm, and I guess I was crying like a baby with the agony of it now. I hit him again and he slid farther down the wall. His face was up against my belly. He still wouldn't let go the arm. Bawling like a stampeded heifer, I tried to tear loose, and lifted that Cloverleaf for another blow.

"If you hit him again, marshal," said the Scorpion, from behind me somewhere, "I swear I'll kill you."

I stood there a minute, without turning around. Chisos drew in a breath full of broken, hoarse pain. Then his grip on my arm relaxed and he slid the rest of the way down the wall to sprawl at my feet. It came to me, then, that the Scorpion was still standing at the far end of the room, by the fireplace, and there was no gun in her hand. I thought for a moment I'd been tricked. But the voice had come from behind me. Something made me turn that way.

The Scorpion standing in the doorway held that big Army Colt in her hand. But there was no whip a-dangle from that left wrist.

"Well," I said, "I sort of figgered this heifer had twins."

VII

BRANDING A COW WAS THE smartest thing a man ever did with the critters. I wished, somehow, that somebody had branded these two gals so we could cut them out and chouse them to their right outfits. But then the brands would probably have been the same, anyway. Every thing else was. They both had that hair, pale as a palomino's mane, and them blue eyes with the peculiar glow, and the suede *chivarras* with red roses down the seams. The curves on the one by the fireplace were more obvious, and would probably have drawn a man's eye on the street quicker. But a little extra side-bacon don't always make a prize hog.

Avarillo had pulled his stingy gun when we first burst into the room, and that was apparently what had held the one over by the fireplace from any movement. But now he tucked it way, with a strange secretive chuckle, which gave the one in the doorway a drop on us.

"I shall relinquish my services now, marshal," he grinned. "The problem which has presented itself is entirely yours."

"Pick Chisos up," said the one in the doorway, waving her gun.

I helped him onto the chair where he sat with his head on his arms, making soft, retching sounds. I never knew a man to take such a beating and remain conscious. Spanish Jack was dead, but my two last shots had only caught Striker in the side, spinning him around that way. Avarillo helped me drag him over against the wall and sit him up, and the Mexican started to build a fire and heat some water for his wounds. Hagar was behind the woman with the Colt, and he moved around her, staring at the other one in a vague, puzzled way.

"Which one is the Scorpion, Hagar?" I said.

He jerked his narrow head at the one with the Colt. "This one, of course."

"Are you sure?" said the one by the fire-

place, in that husky voice. "Are you sure, Hagar?"

He started to speak, angrily, then checked himself. The one by the fireplace laughed throatily.

"The way I got it figured," I said, "Striker didn't take everyone on the board of directors of TSA into his confidence when he started running these Mexican mustangs across. Bailes was one of those on the board who wouldn't have accepted it. But he was also in a position to uncover it, if anything aroused his suspicions. And that's just what he had done when he sent that wire from Alpine to Washington, assuring them that he had evidence which would stop the mustang running. Striker had to stop him or be ruined. Striker had been trying to break the Scorpion down here a long time, and this gave him a chance to kill two birds. He imported a gal from somewhere who was the Scorpion's double. He had her ride into town and kill Bailes, which naturally put the genuine Scorpion out among the willows."

"That's very clever," said Avarillo, "but, if Hagar, who has known her for years, and who has been in love with her, cannot tell, in the final analysis, which one is the real Scorpion, how are you going to decide?"

"Let's go outside," I said.

The one with the Colt finally agreed. Chisos' dun with the hogged mane and Hagar's apron-faced horse was out there, along with Spanish Jack's black and Striker's animal. And two palomino mares. One was hitched to a support of the porch roof. I unhitched her and led her away from the house in case of a ruckus. Then I put my foot in the ox-yoke and swung aboard. She was a spirited beast, and started sidestepping and cavorting, but I didn't have too much trouble handling her. I dismounted and ground-hitched her. Then I went over toward the mare hooked to a cottonwood some yards from the house. This one started snorting and hauling at its bridle before I was within ten feet. The nostrils fluttered and the eyes rolled at me like shiny glass. The muscles began to ripple and twitch beneath its fine pale skin.

"All right," I told the girl who had stood by the fireplace. "You step in this tree."

Her lips pinched in for a minute. Then

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she shrugged and walked toward the horse. The animal jumped around the same as it had before, fuming and whinnying. It allowed the gal to unhook it, though, and throw the reins over its head. But when she lifted her foot to the stirrup, it spun away.

With a curse like a man, she hauled on the reins. The spade bit in the critter's mouth caused it to wheel back fast with that vicious jerk on the reins. The girl jumped on its back without using stirrups. She hadn't found them when the butter-milk horse started chinning the moon. It cat-backed and double-shuffled and then went into a high-hinder that looked fit to split a cloud. Coming out of that, it sun-fished with such a violent wrench the girl lost her seat and spilled out of the yannigan bag. The horse galloped off a few hundred feet, wheeling around down there in nervous circles, snorting and squealing.

"How about you?" I told the one with the Colt.

She looked at me, then started walking toward the horse. We watched without saying anything. The girl on the ground sat up, shaking her head dazedly. The other one reached the horse and looked like she was talking to it. The she stepped on and brought it back to us in the prettiest little Spanish walk I ever saw. I moved over to the gal on the ground.

"You're under arrest," I said, "for the murder of Senator Warren Bailes."

RAY STEWART was her name. When she saw the bronc was boogered for good, she told us the whole story. She had been a rodeo queen—I figured it would take some kind of tough one like that to go through with Striker's plan—she had been in love with Striker in Waco, and he had enough influence over her to rope her in on this roundup. She and Striker had been using this house as a rendezvous after Elgera Douglas had been forced into the *rules* of the law. Ray was the one who had shot Chisos here at the Santiago, that time. It was the real Scorpion who picked me up out on the Comanche Trail and took me to Avarillo's, and who had saved me from getting my lights put out by Bryce Wylie. She had been trailing the herd of mustangs Wylie was driving that time, instead of

driving them, waiting till they got up around Alpine so she could stampede them again the way she had that other herd, in the hopes of breaking up the rustling and exposing Striker's connection.

We all had some much-needed shuteye at the Santiago, and a good breakfast the next morning. Striker's wounds wasn't so bad that he couldn't stand the ride north. I took the horses down to the creek for water just before we left, and Elgera said she'd show me the good holes.

"That was clever about *La Rubia*," she said.

"That means The Blonde, don't it?" I said. "I'd heard you were the only one who could fork that buttermilk horse of yours."

"Si Samson sent one of his stable boys down to the Rosillos with news that Chisos was dying in here," she said. "You did that on purpose?"

"That grapevine you got should make Morse blush for shame," I told her. "I figured you'd fog in if you heard the man you loved was sacking his saddle."

"He's just a very good friend," she said.

"Hagar, too, I suppose," I said. She nodded, pouting a little. "How about that time down in the Dead Horses, with Wylie? I asked.

"Don't thank me," she said.

"I'm not talking about how you saved my life," I said. "You know what I'm talking about."

"All right," she answered. "How about it?"

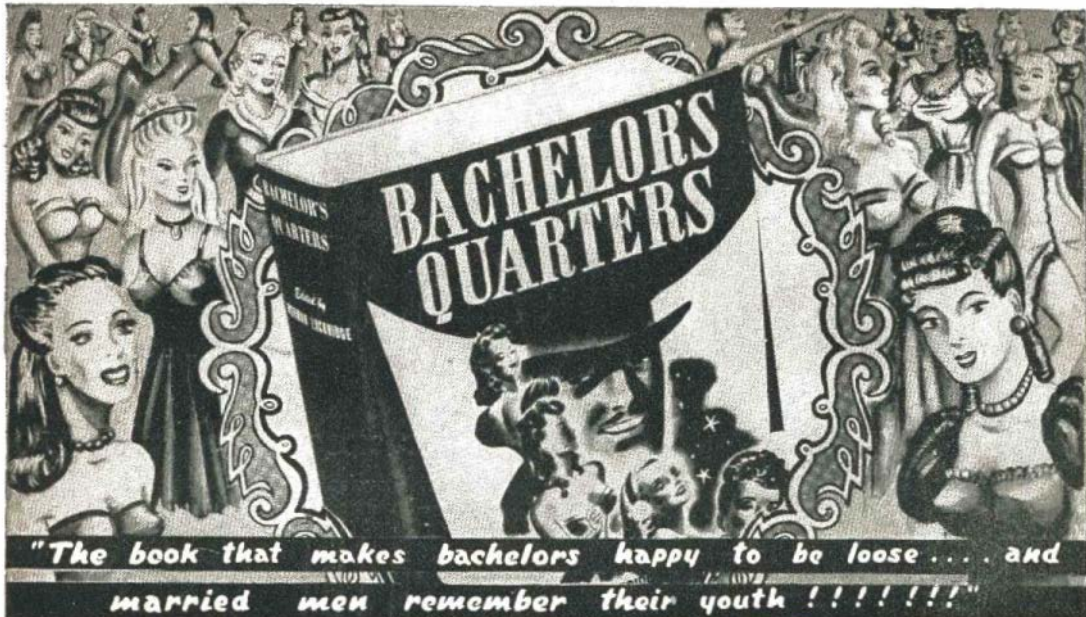
"Was it ever like that, with Chisos, or Hagar?" I said. She started to answer, then closed her mouth. The pout grew. It made her underlip look ripe as possum berries running in the spring. "I guess not," I said, and did what I'd been talking about, again. When I stopped kissing her, the lids of her eyes were dropped heavily, like a sleepy kid's, and she was staring at me with that same expression on her face I'd seen down in the Dead Horses, that time.

"I've got a little duty to do," I told her. "But I'll be back."

"I'm not making any promises, Powder," she said.

"I am," I told her, "I'll be back."

"Snuffy little bronc," she said, "aren't you?"



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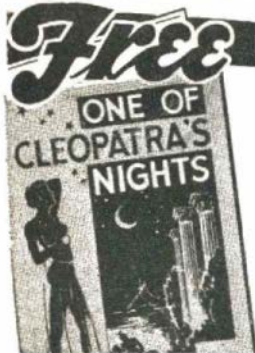
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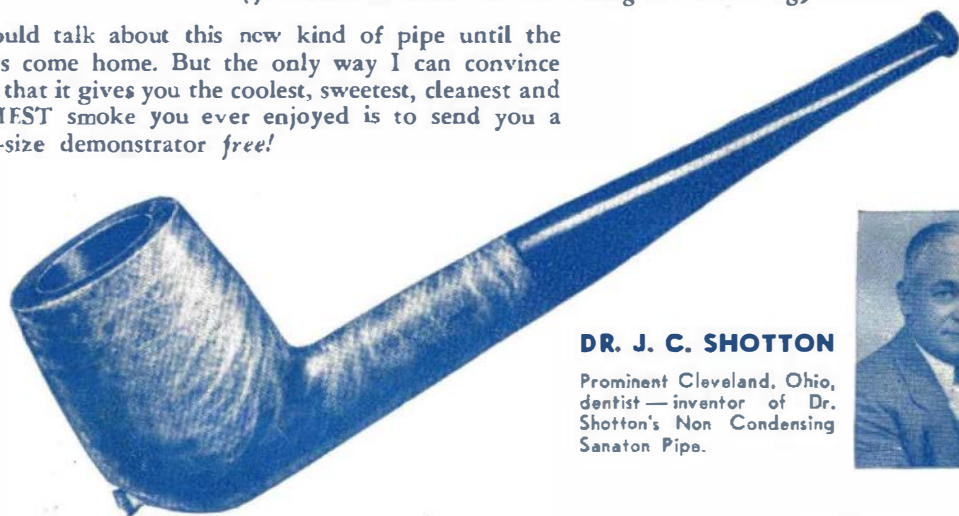
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