

SHERIFF  
BLOOD

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## CHAPTER I

THE bay horse had his neck straight out and his ears forward, as if he, too, knew he was ending a long journey. His gait was neither a walk nor a single-foot, but a combination which carried him over the ground with speed and little effort. To the clip of his shod hoofs on the hard road there was the musical accompaniment of softly jingling bit and spur chains.

There was the creak, too, of good old saddle-leather as the rider swayed unconsciously to the motion of the horse. He was a young man of a little more than medium height. His shoulders were broad and square, his waist, about which no gun-belt now hung, was lean. His horse, his rig would have stamped him as an ordinary cowboy.

His face was sun-bronzed, rather blocky, a good-looking face despite the irregularity of features. His forehead was moderately high, his grey eyes wide apart. His nose was long and straight, his mouth generous and strong.

He was smiling whimsically now, for his thoughts were filled with speculative anticipation. He was coming back, after twelve years. They

did not seem such long years when he looked backward on them as a whole, but when he thought of some of the individual experiences they had held, they seemed a moderate lifetime. He was wondering what the Animas country would be like now. Would he know anybody? Would anybody know him?

Half-way up the long, easy slope he reined in. Lolling sideways in the saddle, he took tobacco and papers from a shirt pocket, sifted some of the flakes into a brown paper, gripped the strings of the Durham pouch between his teeth, and deftly rolled the cigarette with one hand.

His movements seemed deliberate, even slow, yet they were, like the gait of his horse, deceptive. He broke a match from a block, raked its reddish head across a leg of his faded overalls, cupped the sizzling blue flame in the hollow of his brown hands until the sulphur had burned off. As he lit the cigarette he dropped the tobacco sack into a palm, pocketed it. He put the remaining matches into the opposite shirt pocket.

And all the while he was speculating on what Animas would be like now. Any country might change in twelve years. Animas had been a tough region the last time he had seen it. From what he could see of it now it looked peaceful enough, though he had been too long on the ranges to take things for what they seemed.

Puffing slowly, he recalled some of the range wars and killings of the old days, which he remembered vividly, because back there he had had recourse to more than the average boy's



information. He had been too young to take part in any of the range trouble, even had he been so inclined. Then he had regarded all rustlers, bandits, gun-men as vermin who ought to be killed. Now he wondered.

He touched the bay with a spur, stopped again when they came to the crest of a low rise beyond which the road dipped into a hollow swale. His smile broadened, became a little more tender. There were many familiar landmarks now, though all blurred by time.

The Harrison Mountains, lined out in serrated array at the right, did not seem as high, as rough, as they had when, as a boy, he had explored them. At the left was the Miguel Range, paralleling the other. The Miguels looked natural, but less formidable. The region directly ahead was a valley, broken by isolated hills and desultory ridges on which cat-claw, pin-oak and chaparral grew.

Where the ground was level or gently sloping as it lifted toward the bases of the mountains, there was much grass, dotted with mesquite. Here and there a sycamore grew, and occasionally there was the brighter green of cottonwoods about a spring or along a creek.

He gazed in the direction he knew Las Animas, the county seat, lay. The high, dry air was so crystalline he might have seen the old cattle town, had it not been shut off by hillocks and low ridges.

Gradually, as if drawn by a magnet, his gaze swung to the Miguel Range, tried to see beyond

it into Big Grass Valley, particularly the old Garrett Ranch, that was bringing him back.

He remembered a trip he had made with his father across the Miguels to the Rafter G. He had been left at the ranch, while his father had ridden on after some rustlers.

There had been a girl at the ranch, a slight, slim girl. She had told him she was nine. He had been eleven then. How a fellow did remember some things !

"Funny," he drawled, "how a fellow'll ride eight hundred miles to see what a pretty little girl'll look like when she's grown up. I wonder if Big Grass Valley's as tough as it used to be in the old days." He chuckled softly. "It was sure tough then, and that little girl was cute. Reckon she's married yet ?"

Then, as if he was letting his speculations about Big Grass Valley slip away, he turned slowly in his saddle, and started to untie the strings that held the bundle back of the high cantle. He had a Colt and filled belt in the roll. Suddenly he retied the rawhide strings.

"Shucks !" he muttered. "I don't want that hog-leg. It's too clumsy and heavy, and I don't like to make a show by totin' a gun when it's not needed."

He was about to ride on when his range-trained eyes caught the movement of something in a thicket of pin-oak and prickly-pear a hundred and fifty yards away. At first he thought it a cow critter. Then the sombrero of a rider showed above the pear.



Presently a buckskin horse appeared. Its rider had not seen the man in the road or had not wanted to. It was apparent from the direction he was taking that he would cross the road or turn into it in the bottom of the little swale. As he neared the foot of the gentle descent, he looked up. He lifted an arm, and growled :

“ Howdy ! ”

“ Howdy ! ” returned the young rider, raising an arm, in the friendly salutation of the range-land.

They reined up, perhaps ten yards apart, regarded each other. The man on the bay began rolling another cigarette.

The other rider was short, gnarled. His blunt, bony face was stubbled with greyish beard. The ends of his moustache hung solemnly down beside a jutting chin. His nose was thin and twisted, his eyes deep-set and cold blue.

“ Ridin’ ? ” he asked.

“ Anywhere, ” returned the young rider. “ I’ll unsaddle to-night in Animas. ”

“ Know Animas ? Been there before, stranger ? ”

“ Never saw this country before, pardner, ” returned the young man. “ I’m just driftin’ through. If I don’t find me a job around here I’ll drift on west. This seems a good cow country. ”

They regarded each other, the one with his cold blue eyes, the other with his speculative grey ones. It was as if they had immediately

taken each other's measure. The man on the bay had the impression that somewhere, a long time ago, he had seen this blunt, grisly face, these cold blue eyes.

"It ain't cows as makes a country, young feller," growled the man. "It's the men as runs 'em. Savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy. Then this country's bad?"

"Not so bad if a feller leaves it alone, I reckon. What's your name?"

Such inquisition as this was in direct violation of range etiquette, and though the younger man knew this well, he managed to suppress any sign of resentment.

"Jim Johnson," he drawled. "Jim Johnson, cowpuncher."

He did not ask the other man's name. The other did not offer it.

"What's off yonder," asked Jim Johnson, "across those mountains?"

"Big Grass Valley," returned the cold-eyed man. "You thinkin' of ridin' that away?"

"I might if I don't find me a job on this side of the range."

When the older man spoke again, some of the coldness had gone from his eyes and there was a slight softening of his thin, tobacco-stained lips.

"If you're a mind to take the advice of an old-timer, you'll save yourself time and trouble by not ridin' into Big Grass Valley. 'Course I ain't tellin' you what to do."

"Oh, sure, of course not," agreed Jim Johnson.



"Thanks for the tip. What's wrong over there?"

The cold-eyed man munched off a chew of plug, and wallowed it into his hollow cheek.

"As I was sayin'," he returned, "it ain't cows as makes a good country. It's the men as runs 'em. Big Grass Valley's a mean range, Johnson, and it ain't because of its cows."

Jim Johnson grinned understandingly.

"Got you, stranger. Then I reckon I'll take your advice and ride west."

"It's good advice."

"You live over that away?" asked Jim Johnson casually.

The question brought a scowl, and for a moment the man on the buckskin seemed to resent it. Then he said with a wave of a crooked arm toward the south-east:

"I got me a little spread over toward the head of Marfa Crick. Know where Marfa Crick is?"

"Hell, no! How should I? This is the first time I was ever in this country. Any big outfits in Big Grass Valley, and if there are, who are they at war with?"

Again the cold-eyed man scowled.

"There ain't zactly a war in Big Grass!" He snapped off the word. "There's trouble, and there's likely to be more trouble. You know how a range is when it's at b'ilin'-p'int? It don't zactly like strangers, preferrin' to fight its own wars. If you ain't old enough to know that, Johnson, you'll learn here if you live long enough,

though you ain't likely to live if you go ridin' into range trouble."

"I intend to live to a hundred," said Jim Johnson with a disarming smile. "Me? I'd ride a hundred miles just to miss one dog fight. I'm sure obliged to you, stranger, for your advice. What'd you say your name is?"

"Didn't say." The tone implied emphatically that he did not mean to say.

Again Jim Johnson had the thought he had seen this cold-eyed, hard face before. He knew he was being warned, and not over subtly, to keep out of Big Grass Valley. Why, he did not know, except that this man intimated it was not a place where curious strangers survived for long. His resolution to go to Big Grass was hardened.

If Jim Johnson had allowed his feelings to prevail, he would have throttled the truth out of the man on the buckskin. Instead, he grinned, offered his tobacco sack.

"Don't roll 'em," growled the man who refused to give his name. "I eat mine!"

"Every man to his tastes. Chewin' always made too much spit and slobber for me."

The other man's eyes became even colder at this. His stained lips twisted derisively.

"You look like a finicky, high-toned cuss," he observed. "I've knowed men as et their terbaccer!"

"Oh, so have I," Jim Johnson agreed with another grin. "My old dad could eat a star of it a day and still be hungry. No offence meant."



"None took," the other growled. "It shows you ain't the man your father was, else you'd eat yer terbaccer instead of inhalin' it. In another generation there won't be no real he-men. Who was your father, Johnson?"

"Him?" ejaculated the cowboy lifting his eyebrows in surprise. "He was the man that married my mother, I reckon. At least he always told me he did. He was sure one fine old tobacco-eatin' man, stranger. Wish you could have known him. He's dead now."

"Too bad," grumbled the man on the buckskin. "He didn't live in this part of the country?"

Jim Johnson was a little puzzled. Was this some old-timer whom he had forgotten?

"Hell, no!" he said. "I told you this was my first trip into this part of the country! It ain't likely my father could have lived here, is it?"

"'Course not! 'Course not! Don't get the notion I'm a curious man, Johnson!"

"You a curious man?" Jim Johnson inquired with an innocent stare. "I know how it is with a feller that's out on the range for weeks, yeah, months maybe. He gets plumb hungry for news, ready to talk with anybody. It's natural he asks questions. Been that away myself many a time. By the way, are there any big outfits over in Big Grass Valley?"

The thin veneer of civility that had shone on the grisled face vanished. The blue eyes became icy, then softened a little.

"There's only one in the lower part of the valley," he offered grudgingly. "It's the Rafter G, owned by old Bill Garrett. Garrett's about on his last legs from what I hear. I dunno. All I got's a little spread up toward the head of Marfa Crick, and I don't mingle much with the big uns."

Jim Johnson felt a sudden gnawing at the pit of his stomach. Bill Garrett was the father of the little girl he had known so long ago. She had had a brother, Dick. He and Dick were about of an age. Bill Garrett had been the richest rancher in Big Grass Valley. What had happened in twelve years?

"If you're going my way we can chin as we ride on," suggested Jim Johnson.

"Nope. I'm cuttin' across here toward the head of Marfa. Been over into the Harrisons yonder lookin' for a couple of stray horses. See you again, mebbe?"

"No, not unless you're travellin' west," denied Johnson. "I'm stayin' to-night in Animas, but to-morrow I'm ridin' on. Stranger, when I told you I'd ride a hundred miles to get around a dog fight, it wasn't any lie. Adios and hasta luego. If you're ever out in California look me up. After what you told me about trouble in this country I'm goin' to keep goin' till I wet my horse's fetlocks in the Pacific Ocean. You sure done me a favour by offering me that advice. I might have been fool enough to ride over into Big Grass Valley lookin' for a job, and got myself killed off."



The man on the buckskin, after a gruff adios, took a trail leading toward the foothills of the Miguel Range. He was soon lost amid the pear and chaparral. Jim Johnson looked after him for a few moments, then resumed his way along the road.

"Worn old '45," he mused, "carbine under his stirrup, and a runnin' iron and rope on his saddle. Pretty complete outfit for a man lookin' for stray horses. Unless I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad that hombre'd dry-gulch a man as quick as he'd rustle a calf. Guess I'll find out who he is as soon as I get to Animas. Funny how he don't want me to ride into Big Grass Valley. It'll be funnier maybe when I get there."

Though Jim Johnson let the bay have his head, he was not to reach Animas without another interruption.

## CHAPTER II

CREAKING saddle-leather, jingling bit and spur chains, little plops of dust spurting from under the shod hoofs of the bay horse, Jim Johnson was smiling faintly now. It was not altogether a humorous smile. He had had time to digest the "advice" of the cold-eyed man on the buckskin horse, and had definitely decided it was nothing more or less than a deliberate threat. There was some good reason why strangers were not welcomed in Big Grass Valley. Having already decided to ride into Big Grass, Jim Johnson was more than ever determined to do just what he had set out to do.

As he rode on he carried in his mind the picture of the stranger, and was more than ever convinced that somewhere, somehow, he had seen that face before. Rack his brain as he would, however, he could not remember.

From Las Animas the road led eastward between the ranges for five miles. Here it branched, one fork extending to the east into the Rio Jacinto country, the other turning southward, and crossing through a depression in the Miguel Mountains into the lower end of Big Grass Valley.



As Jim Johnson neared the fork of the road he could see stretches of it winding across the foothills and up into the pass. Had it not been that he had already decided to ride on to Animas to spend the night he might have taken the shorter route into Big Grass Valley.

He was a hundred yards from the junction of the roads when he saw a dust-cloud rise from behind the wooded point of a small hill about which the road bent. Then a buckboard drawn by two bow-necked mustangs swept around the bend, which was about as far west of the junction as Jim Johnson was east of it.

"Darned if it ain't a girl!" he muttered. "And ain't she makin' those fuzz-tails hit the grit!"

Surprised that anyone, especially a girl, should be driving so furiously, Jim Johnson decided to put on a little more speed himself. She might be taking the Big Grass Valley fork, and if so he wanted to see what she looked like. She might even be sociable enough to stop and talk, might tell him something about the cold-eyed hombre. He put the bay to a gallop.

The girl in the buckboard apparently noted his increase in pace, for she brought the whip down on the rumps of the mustangs. They broke into a run, making the buckboard rock and jump, but she held them in the road with a steady, practised hand.

"Well," muttered Jim, "she don't seem to like the prospects of meetin' a stranger. Let her go!"

As he reined down to a walk, she brought the mustangs to a trot, but with no marked diminution in speed, for their flinty hoofs pounded a tattoo on the road. She was close enough to the forks for him to see that she intended to take the right branch when suddenly the buckboard lurched, swerved and went down on the right-hind side. The twist of the vehicle all but threw the driver from her seat, and in regaining it she dropped the lines to clutch at the iron railing on the seat.

Sensing instantly that they were free of restraint, the mustangs broke into a mad run, jouncing the buckboard along on three wheels. Instantly, too, Jim Johnson slapped in the spurs and reined to the left across the grassy land that lay between the forks of the road. He leaned low. The bay horse reached out in a long, purposeful stride as if he knew there was no time to spare. On came the maddened mustangs. The girl was clinging frantically to the seat. Jim Johnson thought she was about to jump.

"Hold on!" he yelled. "I'll get 'em."

Instead of heading straight across the path of the runaway horses, he guided the racing bay alongside the careening buckboard, and lined a course parallel to it. As he raced on, he caught a glimpse of an ashen face, two wide and very blue eyes.

Leaning out, he grasped the near mustang's bridle, jerked violently. This frantic animal was pulled back on its haunches. It was enough of a setback to allow Jim to swerve in and get



hold of the bridle of the other mustang. Still holding the reins he slipped his boots from the stirrups and vaulted to the ground. The trembling mustangs snorted and tried to back away, coming perilously near to upsetting the buckboard. Jim held them with a firm hand.

"Oh!" cried the girl. "Thank you!"

"Don't mention it," drawled Jim. "You'd better hop out!"

She climbed quickly down, but had to grasp a wheel to steady herself. Her lips were showing a little colour now. Jim thought they were pretty lips. She had a pretty, if slightly stubborn little chin. Her nose was small and straight. Her eyes were the bluest he had ever seen, so blue in fact that they were like violets. Her brows were as black as the wing of a crow. With one shaking hand she straightened her straw hat, and Jim saw that her hair was as black as her eyebrows.

The pallor began to leave her face, showing it tanned almost to a biscuit-brown. Little patches of colour came to her smooth cheeks. That she was no city-bred girl he knew.

"Lost a wheel, eh?" he said when he had the mustangs quieted. "I'm mighty glad I happened along."

"Yes, so am I," she returned, colour suffusing her cheeks. Then it vanished and her eyes flashed. "But if it hadn't been for you, it wouldn't have happened! Don't you see I might have been killed?"

"Why, yes, you might have been," he agreed, puzzled, but sympathetic. He thought her fright

had left her a little irresponsible. "But I don't just see what I had to do with it, except to catch your broncs."

"You don't?" Her black and finely marked brows arched, and her eyes were cold. "I was trying to get to the forks ahead of you. That's why."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" He took off his sombrero and scratched his head. "If I did I sure don't know it, and I'm mighty sorry, Miss——"

She gave him a look that seemed to say she wished he were anywhere but here.

"I'm Miss Hall, Miss Amy Hall," she informed him icily.

"Mighty glad to meet you, Miss Hall," he said with a broad smile. "You live over Big Grass Valley way?"

"No, I don't!" she flared. Then as if ashamed, crimson flooded to her temples. There was unmistakable fear in her eyes. "What do you know about Big Grass Valley, Mr.——"

"I'm Jim Johnson, ramblin' cowpuncher," he told her seriously. "I don't know anything about Big Grass Valley except that a jigger I met back a few miles told me such a range was across those mountains yonder. I sure beg your pardon if I've said or done anything to offend you, Miss Hall."

Again the colour suffused her face, and she bit her lip. "I'm still a little scared—and excited, Mr. Johnson. What kind of looking jigger did you meet back there a few miles?"



Jim described the man who had ridden the buckskin. She shook her shapely head. He thought she looked as slim and strong as a sapling, and her worn khaki dress could not hide the perfect curves of her form. There seemed to be pride and breeding about her. Johnson was sure she was suspicious of him.

"I don't believe I know him," she said. "Not from your description at least."

"He said he lived near the head of Marfa Creek, wherever that is."

She laughed now, and her eyes softened for a moment.

"He was likely stringing you along, Mr. Johnson. There are a lot of men in this country who wouldn't tell a stranger where they lived."

"I guess you're right," he admitted. "Now you remind me of it, he did look like a rustler or bushwhacker. I'd say he was a horse-thief at least. Now if you'll get hold of these mustangs——"

She took hold of the bits of the trembling horses. He stepped into his saddle and galloped back along the route she had so speedily and precipitously negotiated, until he came to the lost wheel. From its momentum it had rolled away from the road and lodged half upright against a sage.

Now he rode slowly. He had not travelled a hundred yards when he saw what he wanted, the nut that had held the wheel in place. Hooking a spur rowel against the cantle as he leaned over, he swung down, and with a graceful swoop

of his long arm picked up the nut. As if completing the same movement, he regained his seat in the saddle.

Galloping back to the wheel, he leaned over and picked it up. Carrying it so that it would not touch the side of his horse, he rode back to where the girl held the restive mustangs. He dropped the wheel and dismounted. She gave him a smile with a little warmth in it.

"I found it," he announced. "Now let's get you fixed up and on the road again, Miss Hall."

"Thank you."

Lest the mustangs should take fright, he unhitched them and tied them to a mesquite near the road, noticing as he did that their harness was old and cracked. He had already seen that the buckboard was rickety. He thought he understood part of the look he had seen in the girl's violet eyes. She was ashamed of being seen driving such an outfit. The mustangs, though durable and fiery, looked to Jim Johnson as if they were inbred range "fuzz-tails." And he knew something about horses.

The spindle from which the wheel had dropped was now clotted with dirt and grease. He managed to lift this side of the buckboard, and while he held it up, she rolled a rock under the axle to hold it off the ground. Pulling a handful of grass, he wiped the dirt and grease from the spindle. He grinned as he rested his big brown hands on his hips.

"Good so far," he announced. "Got any axle-grease, Miss Hall?"



"No, I haven't a bit. What am I to do? I can't run that wheel dry all the way to——"

"To Big Grass Valley," he supplied seriously.

Again the ready colour mounted to her temples, but her eyes flashed.

"No, to our ranch just across the divide there. We live in the lower end of Big Grass Valley, ten miles below Prairie City."

"Prairie City?" he chuckled. "You must have some town across the hills, Miss Hall."

"Just a cluster of houses," she corrected with a little laugh. "The men who started Prairie City had great ambitions for it, but they must have faded out. There aren't more than twenty houses all told. You know what those little cattle towns are."

"Yeah, I savvy. I savvy, too, we're in a jam. We have to have some grease for that wheel."

"I'd hate to have to drive clear back to Las Animas," she offered.

"Before I'd let you do that, I'd ride for it," he countered. "I can make this no-account bronc of mine fan the wind if I have to. Let's see."

He looked back along the road. There had been two boxes of supplies in the buckboard at the time the runaway had started. Now the boxes and their contents were littered along the roadside for a hundred and fifty yards.

"Oh, what can we do?" she cried. "I had a can of lard in the rig! We could use lard, couldn't we?"

"We sure can, and not for fryin' flapjacks in,

either. You just wait here and I'll gather up that stuff."

She could not let him do it alone, however. As he hurried along the road she kept pace with him. When they were back at the buckboard her face was flushed and her parted lips red. He laid his armful of packages on the ground and removing the outer lid of the lard can, he pried off the under one with his knife. Then with the knife-blade he smeared some lard on the axle.

"While I lift up, you roll the wheel on," he told her. "There, that's fine."

She watched him screw on the nut. There was something wistfully sad in her voice when she said :

"I often wish I were a man. Men can do so many things a girl can't."

"Yeah," he agreed, leaning back against the replaced wheel. "And a girl can do so many things a man can't."

"I'd like to know what."

"Well, now"—he smiled whimsically, his eyes half closed in contemplation of her—"a pretty girl like you can make a fellow's head do flip-flops, and if I looked at a good-lookin' man all I'd want to do would be to poke his jaw. See what I mean?"

"No, I don't!" The flush that flooded her cheeks belied her words. "I must be on my way, Mr. Johnson. I am so much——"

"I'll have you off in a couple of minutes," he said. He knew that ranch vehicles usually



carried malleable socket wrenches. He found this one back of the cushion, and tightened the nut that had caused the trouble and tested the others. He had begun to replace the supplies in the buckboard when she told him she would do this while he rehitched the mustangs.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful, Mr. Johnson, but it's nearly mid-afternoon now. No matter how fast I drive, it will be dark before I can get home."

When he started for her horses he saw a coyote in a clump of sage some thirty yards away, looking on with canine curiosity. As he had got the wrench from back of the cushion he had seen with some surprise that there was also an old Frontier pattern Colt there. Now he reached for the weapon.

"Mind if I try your hog-leg?" he asked softly.

The girl, who was placing one of the boxes in the buckboard, turned. She was quick to follow his line of vision. The coyote, standing with its ears pricked, made a pretty, though narrow target. Only its head and neck and half its body showed above the sage.

"Bet you can't hit him," she challenged.

He did not seem to take aim; in fact, he fired as the weapon swept down. At the roar of the .44 the coyote leaped high, and landed on its side.

"Oh, you did!" she cried. "Can you shoot like that all the time, Jim Johnson?"

"Yeah, that's about my average," he drawled.

"Not a bad old gun you've got here. What makes you carry it?"

The candid admiration that had been in her eyes vanished now. They took on a doubtful expression.

"I thought I might be out after night," she explained. "I'm quite used to carrying a gun."

Presently she was in her seat holding the lines, ready to go. The mustangs pawed and champed their bits. Jim stood beside the wheel.

"I don't know how I can thank you for helping me out," she said, as she extended a small brown hand. "I would surely have had a pile-up if you hadn't come along. Now I must be going."

He held her hand for a long moment, and looked into her eyes. There came into them that look he had not yet learned to diagnose. It looked like fear and doubt and defiance.

"Would you mind tellin' me," he asked, "whether you think I can get a job ridin' if I mosey over into Big Grass Valley?"

"I don't think there would be any use," she said. "There aren't many cattle left in Big Grass, and I am sure all the outfits are full-handed. Now, adios and good luck. Thanks again."

He went to his horse, where he adjusted the saddle. Instead of mounting he gripped the horn and looked after the girl as she drove quickly away. The mustangs were slowing down a little as they began the first of the climb toward the gap. The girl turned in her seat to look back, but she did not wave a friendly hand.



"Well, I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad," muttered Jim Johnson. "Here I am, ridin' for a month to get to Big Grass Valley, and within an hour two people have told me to keep out of it! And the last one's the prettiest thing I ever saw wearin' skirts, and she's scared stiff!" He slipped a toe into the stirrup. "I wonder why."

### CHAPTER III

THE sun was flooding its evening light down the great trough between the mountain ranges as Jim Johnson rode into Las Animas. Though he felt a tightening of his throat muscles at this homecoming, the town was not wrapped in romance, as he had enshrouded it in his memory. It was plain, drab, ugly. He did not realise this failure of the place to impress him was because since he had left he had seen so many towns like it, so many mountains higher than the Miguels and the Harrisons.

As he recognised one place after another, there came over him a fear that he himself would be recognised. Here was where Stubby Smith had lived. There was old Mrs. Henshaw's house, and Pablo Martinez's adobe. He wondered whether Pablo still made and sold *tortillas* and *enchiladas*. Pablo was probably dead ; so was old Mrs. Henshaw.

There under the cottonwood, back of Sam Witherall's corral, was where he and Warty Williams had had the fight over ownership of a mangy hound pup. He wondered where Warty was. He hadn't been a bad sort of kid.



One by one he picked out places, indelibly stamped on his memory by momentous incidents of his boyhood.

The small business portion of the town looked about the same. There were even the same signs, though most of them were faded almost to illegibility. The only marked change was a two-story red-brick building next to Miller's general store. A line of saddled horses stood at the hitching-rack in front of the store. They looked no different from the line that had been there when he left twelve years ago. A sombreroed Mexican and two cowboys lounged on the porch of the old Elkhorn Saloon. And there was Dad Sanders's livery stable ! But Dad Sanders would be dead surely. He had been an old man more than a decade ago. Jim reined down to read the faded legend across the wide, square front of the stable, whose ridge sagged like the back of an old and overladen pack-horse. It read :

“LIVERY. HAY, GRANE. JOHN  
SANDERS, PROP.”

“It sort of looks like it'd stand a good deal of proppin',” mused Jim Johnson as he turned toward the broad entrance. As he rode in he saw that the plank flooring that sheathed the front portion of the barn was stained and pitted and scarred as it had been in the old days when the place had been one of the favourite playgrounds of the town boys. Here and

there a plank had been renewed. There were several openings which should have new flooring.

As the tired bay stamped to a stop and sniffed the smell of hay, a man appeared from a little room. He was tall, lean, straight as an Indian, despite his long, snowy beard and equally white hair.

"Darned if it ain't old Dad Sanders!" Jim Johnson muttered under his breath, and had all he could do to keep from calling out a cheery hello. What he said was :

"'Evenin', sir. Is there a chance to stable my horse here for to-night?"

"There might be if you got the dinero to pay for it," returned the old man. "Where you ridin' from?" He walked around to where he could see the brand on the bay's stifle. "Circle Dot," he said. "That brand don't belong in this part of the country."

"I reckon not." Jim Johnson stepped from the saddle. "I stole this horse a long way from here."

"You stole him?" Dad shot a sharp look at the cowboy, whose face was serious. Then he looked back at the animal. "Well, you showed fair judgment in your stealin', young feller. He's what I'd call a good hoss. You don't exactly look like a hoss-thief."

"You never can judge a stranger by his looks," advised Jim with a grin, "especially a travellin' stranger. Here's a dollar. Give him hay and grain."



The old man looked at the dollar, then up into the newcomer's sun-browned face.

"Put that peso in your pocket!" he snorted. "I'll trust you!"

Jim stripped off saddle and bridle. Dad led the sweat-streaked bay back to a stall. When he returned Jim was rolling a cigarette as he sniffed the old familiar horsy smells. How he could refresh the old man's memory if he were free to do it! Until he had met the cold-eyed man back ten miles he had had no thought of hiding his real identity.

Dad Sanders shot another inquiring glance at him. He seemed about to speak when Jim said:

"I might take a job punchin' cows. Is there any chance round here?"

"Well," mused the old man, "there's the Two Spot down the valley, and the Hammond ranch on Juniper Creek. The Hammond boys do most of their own ridin', and the Two Spot ain't such a big spread. The best chance might be the Pitchfork off to west. It's owned by Chuck Gayley."

"I'll likely be ridin' west to-morrow, or in a day or two," said Jim. "It won't be much out of my way to ride by the Pitchfork." He wanted to smile, for he had played with Chuck Gayley and fought with him when they had been boys.

The old man's snowy brows were puckered into a scowl.

"Them eyes of yours, stranger," he muttered. "Durned if they don't make me think I seen you

somewhere before. You ain't never been in this part of the country?"

"It's my first trip, sir. I'm just ramblin' through. I'll linger to punch a few cows if a job shows up."

"Ramblin'?" ventured Dad with a hard chuckle and a hard look. "Ramblin' to keep ahead of the man you stole that hoss from?"

"I might be at that," returned the newcomer with a grin that twisted up an end of his mouth.

Again the old man's eyes focused on the stranger's steely-grey ones.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Jim Johnson, cowpuncher."

"Sounds like a damned Swede!" snorted Dad, disappointment clouding his eyes. "You don't look like a Scandahoovian, feller!"

"Ay bane Swade," said Jim soberly. "That bane long tam ago, though. I haf larn talk English. Wance my nam be bane Yim Yohnson."

"I guess you're a Swede all right," agreed Dad with a toothless grin. "Anyway, you sure talk like one when you want to. But them eyes of yourn. They sure don't look like the eyes of no Swede I ever seen. There used to be a man right here in this town that had eyes just like 'em."

"Then he must have been a Swede," Jim offered soberly.

"No, by gosh he wasn't!" snorted Dad. "He was Jim McLeod, the best sheriff Animas county ever had or ever expects to have. I don't know who you are, stranger, but don't you be



a-tryin' to tell me Jim McLeod was any damned Scandahoovian. He was clean American, though of course he might 'a' had a damned Scotchman for his grandfather." The old man shrugged his bony shoulders. "'Course if you're a Swede you couldn't be expected to be related to Jim McLeod. Besides, Jim he went north round twelve years ago."

"I never heard of Jim McLeod," Johnson returned with a sober face. "Who's your sheriff now, if I might ask?"

"Sandy Naughton. Sandy's been sheriff ever since McLeod give up the office and went north to go to cattle ranchin'."

"Good sheriff?"

The old man curried his long beard with slow fingers. "Fair," he answered. "Yeah, fair to middlin', but Sandy, he don't rate deuce-high to Jim McLeod. Jim was maybe the best sheriff in those days in all the south-west. Speakin' my own opinion, I'd say he was the best, and them was hard days for any sheriff down this away."

"Maybe it's good for me Jim McLeod isn't sheriff here now," said Johnson with a chuckle. "Likely, anyway, I'd better be raisin' dust to west to-morrow. By the way, I heard there was a range called Big Grass Valley yonder across the mountains to south. There might be a chance to get on over there."

"Well, there might be," the old man answered guardedly, "but I wouldn't advise you to ride across the Miguels to see. It'd be a ten-to-one chance, 'less you're a fighting man, Johnson."

From rumours as reaches us there's trouble brewin' in Big Grass, if it ain't already there."

"Range war?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call it that," said Dad, still guardedly. "It's just that things ain't what they used to be in Big Grass, back in the days when Bill Garrett and his Rafter G outfit was a place where 'most any driftin' cowpuncher could get on at least long enough to make himself a road stake."

Again Jim felt a quick resentment. Here was another subtle warning for him to keep out of Big Grass Valley.

"So long," he told Dad Sanders. "I'll ramble round and see what your town looks like."

"S'long," said the old man, and when the newcomer had swaggered away: "Him a damned Swede? He sure acts like he did steal that hoss! I got to look in my registry book, and see where that Circle Dot iron belongs."

Turning along the ragged board walk that bordered the dusty main street, Jim forgot Dad Sanders. He was gripped by the fear that he would be recognised. He told himself that it would be best if he were not known, if he intended to solve the mystery that veiled the rangeland across the Miguel Mountains. That there was mystery there had made him all the more determined to ride on to Big Grass Valley.

As he reached Hank Rawlins's saddle-shop he started to turn in, drawn by old memories. He glanced through the clean window, recalling



that Hank had always kept his windows shiny. Inside, astride his bench, Hank was working at a saddle. It might have been yesterday, but for the greyness of Hank's moustache and disordered hair.

Looking across the street to Miller's big store, Jim caught the glint of black patent-leather shoes. His gaze roved upward past creased grey trousers, pink shirt, blue necktie, to a pudgy, sallow face crowned by slick yellowish hair parted in the middle.

"Stubby Smith, or I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad!" muttered Jim. "He always did have an ambition to be a counter-jumper, even when he was a kid. Now ain't he one hell of a lookin' thing to call himself a man?"

Jim went on. In front of the Elkhorn Saloon he stopped and eyed the two cowboys and the lean-featured Mexican. One of the cowboys gave him a keen scrutiny.

"Could you hombres direct me to the sheriff's office?"

"Seems to me you ought to know," answered one of the cowboys with a doubtfully friendly grin. "Ain't you——"

"I reckon you read the wrong brand," interrupted the newcomer. "This is my first trip on to your range, pardner. I'd like to make a little talk with your sheriff." Jim Johnson knew he had to stand the test, and was as impassively nonchalant as if he had been looking at a total stranger.

"Damn me!" muttered Pete Hammond,

starting to get up, "you look like somebody I knew somewhere. You ain't——"

"If it'll rub any tallow on your bump of curiosity, stranger," said the newcomer with a smile, "I'm Jim Johnson, ramblin' cowpuncher. I just rode in from the east, and likely to-morrow I'll be headin' toward where the sun goes down. I'd be mighty much obliged if you'd tell me where I can find your sheriff."

"Beg pardon all to hell, Johnson," stammered Pete Hammond, turning red. "Thought I might know you. Mistaken, I reckon. You'll likely find Sandy Naughton in his office. It's the 'dobe just the other side of the co'thouse."

The office of the sheriff was in the front portion of the gaol building.

The middle of the plaza was taken up by the old red-brick courthouse. All about were catalpa and magnolia trees, taller than when Jim had last seen them. Among their dusty foliage filtered the rays of the sinking sun, thrusting out irregular bars of mellowed and yellowed light, across which spider-webs hung like shimmering threads. It lay in irregular pools on the yellowed earth.

On the edge of the water-trough in front of the old courthouse a score of sparrows and linnets were chattering and squabbling. Others bathed in a muddy pool under the trough. With a tightening of his throat cords Jim Johnson wondered how many birds he had shot off the edge of that trough with his slingshot.

He glanced up at the front of the courthouse.



There, between its upper windows and its pilared entrance, were the same old letters—"JUSTICE." Jim Johnson remembered that those embossed letters had always been dingy and black.

Sandy Naughton, the sheriff, had been out to Eagle Creek, ten miles west, to serve some papers on a rancher, and had just got back to town. After stopping to get his mail, which consisted of one lone letter, he had gone on to his office.

Now, as he sat behind his scarred desk, he perused that letter so intently that one sandy eyebrow was cocked up, the other down. His mouth was twisted so that his moustache sat askew.

Sandy could read the letter, but he could not make out just what it meant. He was a square-bodied man, running considerably to weight around the middle. He had a round, honest face, creased by many sun-wrinkles. In his perplexity he ran his stubby fingers through his shock of russet hair, which like his moustache, was but slightly streaked with grey.

"Well, I'm dog-goned!" he muttered. "It's a hell of a sort of man that writes a letter as important as this un, and then don't sign it!"

"Ah-hem!" came from the doorway.

Sandy jerked his head up, to see a lithe stranger standing there. The stranger's stetson was drawn down over his eyes, and though his jaw was out-thrust with determination, he looked a little doubtful. "Howdy, mister," said Sandy.

"Howdy. Are you the sheriff?"

"I sure am, and right now I'm one befuddled one. Name's Naughton. Yourn?"

"I'm Jim Johnson. If you're busy I can come in later, Mr. Naughton."

"I ain't so busy but I can listen to what you got to say. Jim Johnson? Um-mm, I don't reckon I ever knowed you before. Take a chair there, and pour out your troubles. Or maybe you want to sell me somethin'."

"No," drawled Jim. "I haven't got anything to sell except my horse and saddle, and I may need them to pay a lawyer. Thank you, I won't sit down." He glanced toward the door. "I may decide to run before I get through makin' my confession. It's taken me a long time to squirm up courage enough to come and do it."

"Confession?" asked Sandy. "What you got to confess to? You don't belong here. Maybe it was some crime you committed in some other place, and you want me to send you back? Conscience been hurtin', eh?"

"Yeah, that's it," returned Jim with a feeble grin as he fidgeted one boot on the worn, bare floor. "My conscience wouldn't let me run loose any longer, Mr. Sheriff. If you have never been on the dodge for years, I'm tellin' you you don't know what hell is!"

"It sure must be plain hell," sympathised Sandy. "Set down, Johnson, and tell me about it. Maybe it ain't as bad as you think. Sometimes a feller lets his 'magination sort o' get the best of him."



"If you don't mind, I'll stand up," returned Mr. Johnson, fidgeting and glancing again toward the door. "I may decide to run. Right now my sand ain't very high."

"Yeah?" Sandy said, a brittle edge to his usually placid voice. His eyes were suddenly narrowed and hard under their bushy brows. He reached into a drawer and pulled out a '45, which he laid near his right hand. "I think you won't run, Mr. Johnson. If you committed a crime and was about to confess, you ain't goin' to get out of this here office till you've done 'er. What sort of crime did you commit, and where did you do it?"

"Murder," Jim Johnson answered, "and right here in this town; I'll own up, Mr. Sheriff, though I know it may mean I'll be strung up."

Again in perplexity Sandy's brows and moustache tilted askew.

"Murder?" he mused aloud. "Murder in this here town, you say? Jim Johnson, eh? I don't recollect any man by that name a-killin' anybody. How long ago was it?"

"Why, it was thirteen years ago," returned Jim with a sober face. His head was down and he had to look up from under the brim of his sombrero.

"Thirteen years ago?" snorted Sandy. "Why, damn it, man, you couldn't been more'n a kid then! How old are you now?"

"Twenty-four. I turned it a couple of months ago."

Sandy shook his head. He ran his fingers

through his hair. He scrutinised his visitor more closely, shook his head again. He picked up the holster-worn Colt and laid it down.

"So you killed a man in this here town when you wasn't but 'leven years old?" he mused.

"Did you belong to some emigrant party headed west? That might account for me not rememberin'. I been right here in this office as sheriff and under-sheriff and deputy for near thirty year, Johnson."

"No, I didn't belong to no emigrant party bound west. We lived right here in Animas, but as my folks were sort of poor white trash you might not have taken any notice of them. This may account for the way I got away."

"Then your folks knowed about this here murder?" demanded the sheriff. "Johnsons are sort of common 'most anywhere, but I sure don't recollect any. What makes you think I wouldn't have noticed your folks if they was white trash, Johnson?"

"Well"—Jim fidgeted again—"I always had a notion sheriffs were kind of high-toned. I know I used to be scared of 'em. I knew one, though, who was sure a white man."

"You did, eh?" snorted Sandy. "Well, get this here straight! Sheriffs are all what you might call white. And I never knowed one who was high-toned. Now take Jim McLeod, for instance. There never was a finer man ever walked or set on this here what's called God's footstool! You didn't know Jim McLeod? No, 'course you didn't. If you got to make this



here confession to ease your soul you might just as well go ahead, but I want to tell you before you start you're a goin' to have hard work makin' me swaller a story like you're tellin'. It's totally unplaussible that a 'leven-year-old kid could kill a man right here in this town and me or Jim McLeod not know about it. Jim McLeod was sheriff here thirteen year ago, and I was under-sheriff. Who was this feller you killed ? ”

“ I killed Christopher Columbus,” blurted Jim, as if a great weight had been lifted from his soul. “ I killed Christopher Columbus right here in this town ! ”

Sandy, after a long-drawn inhalation which he expelled in a snort, jerked forward. His hands gripped the edge of the desk.

“ Christopher Colum-buss ? ” he ejaculated. “ You damned fool, Chris Columbus's been dead more'n fifty year ! Yeah, more'n a hundred, I reckon. The trouble with you is you're crazy ! What kind of liquor you been drinkin' and how much ? ”

“ I swear I haven't had a drop for a week,” declared Jim. “ You can smell my breath, Sandy, if you want to.”

The sheriff was so puzzled that he failed to catch the familiarity. He snorted. He gasped. He shook his head.

“ What you talkin' about ? ” he demanded.

“ I killed Christopher Columbus,” reiterated Jim. “ If you don't remember it, I do. This shows what sort of a sheriff you've been, lettin' a murder be committed right here under your

nose, and not bringin' the killer to justice. You just sit tight and wait till he walks in and gives himself up. Sandy, you are sure one hell of a fine sheriff ! ”

There was now no doubt in the sheriff's expression. His red face seemed about to burst with a rush of angry blood. He was being made the butt of a joke by this fool cowpuncher he had never seen before. Some of the boys about town had put him up to it. He glanced ferociously at the window. It was empty of peering, grinning faces. He glared back at Jim Johnson. He picked up his gun.

“ You called me Sandy ! ” he snorted.

“ Well, it's your name, isn't it ? ”

“ Yeah, but I don't figure to stand no such familiarity from a loco, addled-brained, loony cowpuncher who says he killed Christopher Columbus ! There's a big house in Phoenix for such as you, Johnson. ”

“ But I did kill Christopher Columbus, ” Jim reiterated so stubbornly that he lifted his head, and his jaw thrust out. “ Have I got to prove my case after I come here and confess ? ”

“ You're a damned liar ! ” snorted Sandy. “ Columbus was an Eyetalian dago, and he was dead long afore your paw and maw ever thought of gettin' married. ” Then as if in a savage afterthought : “ If they ever did ! ”

Jim Johnson was unable to carry the deceit farther. He pushed back his sombrero. A grin spread over his face.

Slowly the hostile red faded from Sandy's



twitching features. His eyes opened, his mouth opened. He bent forward until he half lay across the old desk.

"Good God Al-mighty!" he ejaculated. "You're Jim McLeod's boy!" His trembling words gathered speed and momentum. "You're Dan! You're Danny McLeod!" He was on his feet now, shambling around the desk. "You did kill Christopher Columbus! He was my wife's old tom-cat. You done it with the twenty-two rifle I give you fer a birthday present when you was 'leven! Lemme take your hand, Danny. I can't seem to see so very well. Danny, Mandy's been dead these five years. She was turrible fond of that old tom-cat, but she forgive you, son. Turn round here to the light till I see your eyes!"

He jerked Jim Johnson toward a window, peered into his face. He blinked. Their hands were still gripped.

"They're McLeod's eyes," he declared brokenly. "They sure are, Danny! May the gods be praised for sendin' you when I needed you, lad! Set down! Set down!"

## CHAPTER IV

IT was hard for Sandy Naughton to believe that the smiling young man before him was the son of the sheriff who had been to him the embodiment of everything a man should be. He jerked off Dan McLeod's hat, looked at his wavy, unruly dark hair.

"You good-lookin' son-of-a-gun!" he said fondly. "You sure had me guessin'! You know I never was a man to see through things pronto. Tell me about Jim."

"Jim's dead," returned McLeod. "He crossed the divide three months ago. I put a good man on the ranch, and started driftin', Sandy. I wanted to come back and see what Las Animas looked like. It was always home to me."

Sandy swallowed hard.

"I'm sure sorry to hear that, Danny. Jim was the finest and squarest and bravest man I ever knowed."

"He was all that," agreed Dan. "He often talked about you, Sandy. I'll always believe his heart was down here, and that he would have rather continued as sheriff than turned into a rancher."



Sandy locked the door.

"Some son-of-a-gun'll be hornin' in here," he said, "and I want to talk, boy. I got a thousand questions to ask and you got to answer 'em."

They talked for an hour ; Sandy's eyes often misty with recollection, Dan's as often glowing with pride as the sheriff told of some heroic exploit of Jim McLeod's.

"But how'd you come?" Sandy demanded suddenly.

"Rode."

"Hossback?"

"Horseback."

"You don't mean to tell me you rode hossback all the way from the Humbolt up in Nevada, boy?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to ramble along and see the country."

"You could have took a train, at least part way. Well, well, you rode all that distance on hossback! How long'd it take you?"

"One day less than a month, Sandy."

Sandy's weathered face glowed with pride and affection. It was the next thing to the homecoming of his own son, if he had had a son.

"That ain't so surprisin' after all," he ruminated. "You always was the durndest kid for hosses. When you left here you could fork anything that wore hair and got round on four legs. What kind of a shot did you make?"

"Oh, I can hit a barn wall if I'm locked up inside," admitted McLeod with a grin.

"I'll bet you can," Sandy chuckled. "You

was the most promisin' kid with a six-shooter I ever seen. Can you handle a hog-leg like your father used to, boy? "

McLeod pondered this. He didn't want to boast, but he wanted to give an honest answer because he saw Sandy's pride would be hurt if he fell short of the ideal he had built for him.

"Yes, I think I can handle a Colt about as well as my father did, Sandy."

"Then that's good enough. Jim, he wasn't so all-fired fast, but when he let go his bullets went just where he wanted 'em to. You got your gun along, Danny? "

"It's with my roll at Dad Sanders's livery stable. I didn't want to make a show by totin' it about."

"It wouldn't have been a show, on you," Sandy announced. "Guns just naturally seem to belong on some men. They look plumb foolish on others." His face sobered. "Have you told anybody who you are, Dan? "

"I told Dad Sanders and Pete Hammond I was Jim Johnson, a ramblin' cowpuncher. Pete mighty near recognised me, but I stalled him on the Jim Johnson business."

"You would!" declared Sandy with a big laugh. "And you had me guessin' when you told me you'd come in here to give yourself up 'cause you'd killed Christopher Columbus, boy. I'd clean forgot that durned old tom-cat. Wasn't that a hell of a name to tag on to a tom-cat, Dan? Mandy named him. I sure wish Mandy could be here to see you growed up.



She'd more than forgive you for shootin' her famous cat. You ain't married, are you, Dan ? ”

“ Not yet, Sandy.”

“ Well, you ought to be. It ain't safe for unattached females for as fine a lookin' maverick as you to be runnin' round unbranded. Ain't you found the right girl yet ? ”

“ Not yet, Sandy.”

Outside the sleepy chirpings of the birds died away. Autumn gloom stole into the room. Sandy lit the bracket lamp, and pulled down the frayed shades.

“ This here's my night to set and visit with you,” he declared as he took his seat. “ If old Saint Peter'd opened the gates and sent out a couple of his best buckeroos to herd me into them green pastures I wouldn't be half as glad as I am to jest set here and talk with you, boy. My heart's been sort of heavy of late.”

“ Then I'm glad I showed up,” declared Dan. “ What's troublin' you, Sandy ? Maybe I can help out some.”

“ You know, Dan,” Sandy said doubtfully, “ I ain't much of a sheriff. I can't see through things like your father could. Boy, Jim McLeod could smell out a criminal fifty miles off, and when he smelt him he went out and got him ! I was appointed sheriff, as you know, when he resigned from the office and went north to go to ranching. The people hereabouts have kept on electin' me. I don't know why.”

“ Because you're a square-shooter, Sandy. That's why.”

"Yeah." Sandy shook his head. "People haven't never accused me of not bein' on the square, Dan, but there's complaints of late, especially since I failed to get the man who killed Ed Hailey over in Big Grass Valley. I done my best, but it was like buttin' up against a stone wall. If your father had been here he would have ridden over to Big Grass, took a keen look over the human herd there, and picked out the man we wanted, and either brought him back or killed him. Dan, on that case I was as helpless as an old woman without any teeth tryin' to chew jerked beef. I feel just that way now."

"Tell me about it, Sandy." McLeod's interest was quickened, for he had inherited from his father those traits and instincts which make a natural peace officer.

Sandy explained in detail. Hailey had been a nester who had settled on Marfa Creek a couple of miles above where the canyon broke into Big Grass Valley. Six months ago he had been shot out of his saddle, from behind. The rifle bullet had gone low, passing through the upper portion of the saddle cantle, but it had been powerful enough to sever Hailey's spine and bed itself in the fork of the saddle.

"You've got the bullet?" asked McLeod.  
"It'll be of some help."

Sandy shook his head.

"No, I ain't got the bullet, Dan. If I had it'd be a clue to the rifle that fired it. Somebody, yeah, the man that killed Hailey, had cut out the bullet."



Instantly it occurred to McLeod that there might be a sinister connection between this murder and the cold-eyed stranger he had met ten miles back. He told Sandy of the meeting and described the man.

"Yeah, I know him," said Sandy. "He's Bart Ruggles. He drifted into the country a year ago and squatted on a piece of range toward Azurite Lake. You know Azurite Lake is where Marfa Creek heads, Dan?"

McLeod remembered the small lake. He had gone there once with his father.

"So this Bart Ruggles had a good alibi?" he inquired.

"Water-tight and all sewed up," declared Sandy. "So did Buck Tassler and the feller that rides for him. This Tassler he settled on a section where Marfa Creek breaks out of the hills."

McLeod asked whether Tassler and Ruggles were the only other newcomers in the valley. Sandy screwed one eye down and the opposite corner of his mouth up.

"There's a couple of other men," he returned. "One is Borquin, who bought the bank in Prairie City, and a feller named Perry who come in about the same time and bought the old Maverick Saloon. Yeah, there's one other: he's Joe Tassler, a brother of Buck. 'Course there couldn't be even a suspicion against Borquin and Perry, them livin' in town."

For an hour McLeod asked questions, which Sandy answered to the best of his ability. McLeod felt a twinge of disappointment, for

he had held to his boyhood estimate of Sandy Naughton as a sheriff who would ably fill Jim McLeod's boots. There appeared to Dan some possible clues which Sandy had overlooked. He mentioned a few of them, but the sheriff shook his head, and said he had either investigated them, or that they were of no consequence.

"It's a puzzlin' case," he declared. "It's sure got me stumped. If I could find that bullet—or the man that dug it out of Hailey's saddle-fork——"

"It's that big little word again, Sandy," ventured McLeod.

"What you mean?"

"If. If the hound hadn't stopped to smell a cow track he might have caught the rabbit he was after, Sandy."

"You mean I ain't done all that can be done?" demanded the sheriff.

"Sandy," said the younger man affectionately, "you're a good, honest sheriff, but I don't believe you're worth your salt as a detective. You know it was that trait in my father that made him the officer he was. As you say, he could smell out a criminal."

"I reckon that's right," Sandy admitted, his face lengthening. "I always knowed I wasn't any good as a detective. Fact was I felt like a lost pup after Jim give up the office and left me to run it. But I had to make a livin' somehow, and the voters they just kept on electin' me. If I could find that damned bullet! Or if I knowed who fired it!"



"If you knew who fired it, Sandy," said McLeod, "you'd know who killed the nester."

"That's right, ain't it?"

"Sandy, would you mind if I sit into this game and see whether I can find out who killed Hailey?"

"You mean you want to help me out? I'd sure be proud to have you, boy!"

"I want to help you out, Sandy, but I don't want you to help me out until I call for your help. I reckon I'm my father's son. He never asked for help on a case like this."

"Yeah, he sure didn't. You had any experience at this officer business, Dan?"

"A little. I was deputy for a term up north. Now, if you don't want my help on my terms——"

"Now, now!" snorted Sandy. "Don't go off half-cocked! Who said I didn't? I'm willin' that you play a lone hand if you don't think I'll be of any help, but I want to warn you it's goin' to be risky business."

"I like risky business," Dan McLeod said with a faint smile. "My father played risks for twenty years, and he died a natural death. Don't you know that somehow I think it will make him feel good if I come back here and—well, sort of start in where he left off? I'd kind of like it myself. There are reasons I don't care to tell you about just now. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Ask 'em all night if you want to! We can get our supper when breakfast's ready. Do you know it's past eight o'clock right now?"

It would have been obvious to the casual listener, had one been there, that the younger man with his quick, analytical mind had already taken the initiative. Sandy bent an admiring gaze on McLeod.

"That look in your eyes, Dan, and that set expression on your face," he said, "is just like your father's when he used to be tryin' to puzzle out somethin'."

"I can't promise I can do as well as he did, Sandy. Now tell me, has anything unusual happened in Big Grass Valley since Hailey was killed?"

Sandy named a few happenings which he thought might be considered unusual. McLeod shook his head.

"I don't believe they amount to much," he declared, recalling again the veiled warnings of Ruggles and the girl that Big Grass Valley might be a good range for him to ride by. "Isn't there anybody over there who seems in trouble, Sandy, anybody who isn't actin' like he used to before this Hailey killin'?"

Sandy screwed up his features and pulled at an end of his moustache until it seemed he would haul that side of his upper lip down to a permanent slant.

"It might be Bill Garrett," he suggested. "From what I hear Bill's sellin' off cattle so fast he ain't got more'n a corral count left. But that don't seem reasonable. A year ago Bill Garrett was rated rich. Fact is, he told me he didn't owe any man, and that he had a thousand head



of white-faces on the Rafter G. I dunno, though. I don't see how he could be affected by this killin'. I made half a dozen trips into Big Grass in connection with this case and every time I have talked with Bill. He was as puzzled as I was."

It occurred to McLeod that possibly Garrett had wanted Hailey's claim, and to get it he had hired somebody to kill the nester, that now the killer was blackmailing Garrett. That would account for his financial straits. He did not, however, mention this surmise to the sheriff.

"When I came in here, Sandy," he said suddenly, "you were readin' a letter or somethin'. You sure looked puzzled over it."

"Yes, yes! So I was!" stammered Sandy. "Where in hell's that letter? Yeah, here it is."

Scanning the sheet to make sure it was the one he had been reading, he handed it to McLeod. It was apparent to the latter almost at once that whoever had written the letter had done so hastily, or under great emotional excitement. It was in pencil, on a sheet of cheap note-paper, like a leaf torn from a tablet. It read :

DEAR SANDY,

As you know I am not a man to ask for help till I have to, it may be I have waited too long, but now I am in desperate circumstances, and I hope to God when you get this missive you will ride over to Big Grass Valley and see if you can't be of some help to an old friend. If there is anything that will keep you from coming let

me know by return stage and I will try to hold up things till you get here. I would not have sent this if things had not been desperate——

Here the letter broke off abruptly. There was no signature. McLeod, re-reading it, thought he caught between its lines a desperation and need for haste not in the cramped words. It was dated Prairie City, Oct. 2.

"Well, who wrote it, Sandy?"

"Durned if I know, Dan. There might be several men who'd write it. You know how it is. There are men who think it's a sheriff's business to settle all their troubles, big and small. This here might be from some feller who's had a row with his wife, and he wants me to ride over and rub her fur down. If we just knew who ought to have signed it, Dan!"

McLeod smiled wryly.

"If we knew who cut that bullet out of the fork of Hailey's saddle we might not bother about who wrote this letter."

"Yeah, that's right," Sandy admitted dejectedly. "That little if's the biggest word in the human language. I dunno who could have written this here letter, boy."

"Do you suppose Bill Garrett could have?"

"I don't think so." Sandy shook his head. "I don't see why Bill Garrett'd want to ask me for any help this way. 'Course, from what I've heard, Bill's in a bad way for money, but I don't believe he's the man to write such a letter as that. No, he never wrote it."



"I think he did," declared McLeod. "I think it so hard, Sandy, that I'd be willin' to bet my saddle on it."

"No!" Again Sandy shook his head. "You don't know Bill Garrett as good as I do, Danny. There's a streak of pride so wide in him he'd get him a tin bill and peck feed with the chickens before he'd ask for help this way. He wouldn't do it lest he was plumb desperate."

"But he is desperate. Doesn't he say so in this letter?"

"Yeah, whoever wrote it says so," corrected Sandy. "In my time I've knowed men to get desperate like that over things that don't amount to an old cow track when they've had time to think 'em over. That there letter was wrote by some man that imagined he was the worst-off man in the world. Likely long before now he's sorry he sent it to me."

"I don't believe it," McLeod said doggedly. "I'll tell you why, Sandy. This letter was dated at Prairie City. Have you noticed that a Las Animas postmark is on the envelope? That proves it was mailed here, and mailed to-day."

Sandy took the envelope. He fished a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles from a vest pocket and adjusted them to his long nose.

"Well, by gosh!" he drawled slowly. "It was posted here in Animas, and on October third. But there ain't nothin' mysterious about that. Somebody brought it up from across the trail and mailed it here, or the stage driver picked it up

from somebody on the way and dropped it in this post office."

"Maybe you're right, but I don't think you are," argued McLeod. "Here's somethin' I hadn't told you about, and I believe it will explain how this letter got to Las Animas." He told now of his rescue of the girl at the forks of the road.

As Sandy listened his brows contracted until his eyes were almost shut.

"What'd this girl look like?" he demanded with quickened interest.

McLeod was possessed of the ability to describe a thing or person so graphically that it became a picture as he talked. He had not finished his description of this girl when Sandy interrupted:

"She was as purty as a yearlin' heifer on spring grass?"

"Somethin' like that," agreed McLeod.

"And she has eyes bluer than any you ever seen, boy? And she wanted to smile sweet as she looked at you?"

"The blue eyes, yes," said McLeod, "but she looked as if she was afraid to smile, Sandy. That girl was afraid of somethin', and it wasn't because she was scared by the runaway."

"Um-mm," mused Sandy. "You say she drove a span of roan mustangs hitched to an old buckboard? They looked like a couple of fuzz-tails caught out on the range and broke to harness, Danny?"

McLeod nodded.

"Do you know who that girl is, Danny?"



"She said her name was Amy Hall."

The twinkle faded from the sheriff's eyes.

"Danny, that girl was Nadine Garrett, Bill Garrett's daughter. It was her that brought this letter into Animas and mailed it, boy! It was Bill Garrett who wrote it! He was so desperate he forgot to sign it." He lapsed into brief meditation. "I don't see how Bill Garrett can have anything to do with the murder of Ed Hailey, though. No, it can't be possible!"

"Nadine Garrett!" McLeod exclaimed slowly and softly. "Yes, that was her name. I knew her when she was a little girl, Sandy."

"So you did, so you did," agreed Sandy. "I recollect once when you went over to Big Grass with Jim, and stopped at the Rafter G while he went on to Black Buttes after some rustlers."

## CHAPTER V

FOR twelve years McLeod had carried the memory of this girl in his mind. Now he knew the look he had seen in her eyes. It had been fear of strangers, suspicion of them. He wondered why he had not recognised her. The little girl at the Rafter G ranch had had eyes like violets, but then her face had been piquant and wistful, with a little pointed chin.

"But that ain't all," went on Sandy Naughton. "I was so upset by you comin' in here that I forgot about everything else."

Sandy took from a drawer five cheap manilla envelopes, which he handed to McLeod.

"Read what's inside 'em, Dan, and you'll see how damned desperate somebody in Big Grass Valley is."

McLeod took out the first enclosure, a ragged piece of cheap, yellowish wrapping paper. On it was printed roughly :

If you know what is good fer yur hide, Sandy, you will keep outen Big Grass and furgit all about this here Hailey case.

Through contracted pupils McLeod read the



other four missives. While somewhat differently worded, the missives were of the same import, and as crudely spelled. McLeod had a suspicion that whoever had printed them could have done much better with his spelling had he desired. He looked up.

"When did you get these, Sandy?"

"All within the past month."

"After you finished investigatin' the Hailey killin'?"

"Yes, all after that, though after I got the first warnin' I made another trip to Big Grass to see if the feller that sent me the friendly advice would make good by killin' me. Yeah, I rode over again after I got the second warnin'."

"That'd be like you, Sandy. You didn't want him to think you were bluffed out, eh?"

"Well," grinned Sandy, "I didn't want him to figure I was scared out of my boots. I sure wish I had some of them detectin' instincts. I'm up against a rock wall already, Dan, and now comes along this letter from Bill Garrett beggin' me to help him. Boy, much as I'd like your help, I can't let you ride over into Big Grass to tackle this job."

"No?" McLeod was rolling a cigarette, which he finished casually, a half-smile on his brown face. "Just why, Sandy?"

"You'd likely be killed, that's why! I can't let you take the risk. I'll go over and see what Bill Garrett wants myself. Maybe he can give me something that'll furnish a clue of this Hailey killin'."

McLeod lit his cigarette, puffed a few times.

"Sandy," he said, still smiling, "you'll have one sweet time keepin' me out of Big Grass. We won't argue about that. If the bullet with my name on it's over there, I'm going over to get it. I don't hear you a-tall. It's all settled."

"I know it," Sandy admitted. "You're Jim McLeod's boy. Jim wouldn't have asked anybody else to do his work. The hell of it is I'm askin' you to do mine."

"No, Sandy," denied McLeod. Then he told him why he had ridden back.

"Well, I'll be damned!" growled Sandy. "You a-rememberin' that little girl, and ridin' clean back here to see what she looked like when she was growed up. Dan, I'm afraid you're goin' to be disappointed. I'm mighty sorry."

"From the way things look so am I," said McLeod, "but I've got to go on through and see. I'm satisfied of one thing. Bill Garrett knows who killed Hailey. If he does, it's mighty near a cinch she does, too."

"I'm afraid you're right," Sandy agreed. "Where you goin'?"

"Just over here to do a little explorin'," returned McLeod. In his boyhood one of his greatest enjoyments had been to rummage through this very office, especially through the drawer in which the reward notices for the capture of criminals were kept.

He found that Sandy still used the same drawer of the dusty corner cupboard. It was now half



full of clippings, some new, others so yellowish with age that they were ready to crumble at a rough touch. He began patiently to sort them over, examining each. Sandy turned in his chair and watched, a fond smile on his weathered face.

"Like Jim," he mused. "He does things from the bottom up. I wish to hell I hadn't told him about this." Aloud he said: "There's notices in there that came even before your father quit bein' sheriff of Animas, Dan."

"Yeah, so I see," agreed McLeod. "Most of these hombres have crossed the divide."

"Yeah," said Sandy, "some by way of the rope, others by bullets. There's some as have done stretches, or are still doin' 'em. A few of 'em died natural deaths, I reckon."

"And a few are still ridin' the range," said McLeod.

"Yeah, likely."

For a half-hour they talked about the various criminals whose likenesses appeared on the reward notices. Then McLeod selected one, folded it surreptitiously and put it in a vest pocket.

Coming back to the desk, he placed one high-heeled boot on a chair and rested his elbow on his knee. He looked soberly at the sheriff.

"Sandy," he said, "I want you to put me in gaol."

Sandy's mouth snapped open into an O.

"You want me to put you in gaol? What'n hell you talkin' about? Even if you did kill Christopher Columbus, the statutes of limitations

have run on tom-cats. Don't try to be foolish, Danny ! ”

“ I'm not tryin' to be foolish,” said McLeod. “ I want you to lock me up as a horse-thief, Sandy.”

“ Hell, you never stole no hoss ! It ain't in the McLeod blood to steal hosses. I just won't do it ! There's some things I draw the line at ! ”

“ Not at this, Sandy. Now you listen to me.”

McLeod explained that if he remained at large in town some one of the boys with whom he had played years before would recognise him or think he did. Then if he rode into Big Grass Valley as the son of Jim McLeod, the famous sheriff, the people across the Miguels would know he was on some official business. This would be a handicap under which he did not want to be forced to work.

“ I ain't goin' to do it ! ” reiterated Sandy. “ I ain't goin' to lock up the son of the best friend I ever had in the whole world. There's some other way. Even if it ain't so, it'd be a stain on your reputation, and it's hard to wash such stains off.”

“ Yes, you are, Sandy,” McLeod declared very firmly. More explicitly he outlined his plan now. “ I'm Jim Johnson, cowpuncher, who's turned horse-thief. Nobody round here suspects I'm anything but Jim Johnson.”

“ All right, I'll do it if you say so,” Sandy agreed at last, greatly impressed by the clever-



ness of the plan. "But for God A'mighty's sake can't you be somethin' else besides a hoss-thief? A hoss-thief's the lowest critter on earth. He's one point lower'n a cow rustler, Danny!"

"I've got to be a horse-thief," insisted McLeod. "From now on you think of me as Jim Johnson. Savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy," groaned Sandy, "but can't I tell 'em Jim Johnson's a murderer or a train robber or somethin' else? I don't want it said the son of Jim McLeod was even locked up on suspicion of hoss stealin'."

"Come along," laughed McLeod. "Give me the best cell you've got, Sandy. Then hustle out to a restaurant and get me some supper. Got any other prisoners in your old juggedo?"

"Nary a one just now. I'll do as you say, Danny, but——"

"Jim Johnson," corrected the would-be prisoner. "Don't make a slip like that, Sandy. If you do, the jig's up. It just won't do for me to be even suspected by my right name. Now say after me—Jim Johnson, Jim Johnson, horse-thief."

"Aw," growled the sheriff. "I can recollect that much. Jim Johnson, Jim Johnson, hoss-thief."

"Fine. Now sure you don't forget it."

After Sandy had reluctantly locked up his voluntary prisoner, he went across the street to the Bon Ton Restaurant, where he told the slant-eyed owner that he wanted a tray of food for a prisoner.

"Make it a big one, Hip Suey," he added. "This feller looks like he's plumb hungry. Put on a whole pie if you got it."

"What for you so damn' lib'l?" asked the Chinaman. "Befo' you never want one piecy pie."

"Aw, this hombre, he's a hoss-thief, and as he comes in and gives hisself up without puttin' me to the trouble of ketchin' him, I figured he was entitled to something extra, Suey. Maybe you'd better make it two pies or a couple of dishes of puddin' and a big steak on the side."

"Ain't got two pie, ain't got no puddin'," said Suey.

"Then make it an extra steak on the side, and a double order of fried potatoes. This feller looks like he could eat a beef."

Sandy had had his instructions, and now that he had taken them, he meant to abide by them. Instead of waiting for the double order to be cooked, he went on to the livery stable. Dad Sanders had not yet closed up.

"Dad," said Sandy, "you got a big bay hoss here wearin' the Circle Dot brand?"

"Sure! Young feller rid him in this afternoon, late. What you askin' fer, Sandy?"

"I want that hoss," declared the sheriff. "He's stolen. Got a letter to-day from the sheriff of Rincon county across the line. He says a feller answering the description of this—er—Jim Johnson run away with a big bay hoss from the Circle Dot outfit. I want you to hold the saddle, too. I'll get 'em and take 'em up to my



barn later on. Reckon I better take along his war-bag now."

"Wal, drat durn me!" Dad Sanders emitted with a self-satisfied chuckle. "I knowed durn well that feller was a hoss-thief the minute he rid in here! He was too durn anxious to tell me he might 'a' stole that bay hoss. Yeah, he did say his name was Jim Johnson. Said he was a cowpuncher. How'd you git him, Sandy?"

"Just spotted him on the street," Sandy said with all the nonchalance he could muster. "I had a good description of him from the sheriff in Rincon. This his war-bag, Dad?"

"That's her!" replied the old liveryman. "Say, I'm sorter disapp'inted in this feller, Sandy. You recollect Jim McLeod? 'Course you do. Well, you recollect that tough kid of hisn? This feller Johnson reminded me right off of what that kid orter look like when he growed up. You don't suppose—— Sandy, that kid of Jim McLeod's was the nerviest boy I ever seen. I seen him whup three kids his own size one day right back there in my corral. Now mightn't it be that he's turned out hoss-thief and come back here under another name?"

"Hell, no!" snorted Sandy, angry all through at this insinuation that the son of Jim McLeod might be suspected of being a horse-thief. "This feller's name is Jim—Jim Johnson. Yeah, that's it. And if you don't think he's salty, Dad, you just ought to see his record!"

"Wal, I'm drat durned!" muttered Dad

Sanders, watching the sheriff go out, the war-bag across his shoulder.

Getting the supper-tray, Sandy took it across to his prisoner.

"Man of my heart," chuckled McLeod as he saw the repast. "Sandy, how'd you know I could hold two porterhouse steaks?"

"Figured you was hungry," said Sandy. "Besides, I sort of wanted to make up for keepin' you in gaol, Danny."

"Jim Johnson! Don't you call me Danny where anybody can hear it."

"All right, all right! Now I'll go over and put on the nosebag for myself. See you later."

After he had had supper at the Bon Ton, Sandy went back to the gaol, where he spent half the night with his prisoner, talking over old times, and discussing the plan by which they meant to find the man who had killed the nester of Marfa Creek.

"Dog-gone it!" Sandy declared about one o'clock. "I sure hate to go home to bed and leave you locked up, Da—Jim Johnson."

"What else could a horse-thief expect? Clear out, Sandy, and let me grab some slumber."

They had decided that Jim Johnson should not start for Big Grass Valley for another day. The news of the arrest of a horse-thief created a good deal of excitement in Las Animas, and when Sandy came down to his office about eight o'clock, he found a dozen men waiting to see the prisoner.

"Can't do it, boys," he told them. "I got



orders from the Rincon sheriff to hold this hombre incommunicado. He's just a ordinary hoss-thief. Rincon sheriff'll be after him in a few days."

At intervals during the day and into the evening men came to see the prisoner. Some were ranchers who claimed to have lost horses. The man back in the gaol might be the fellow who had stolen them. Sandy stubbornly denied them all. He declared again and again he was carrying out the orders of the Rincon sheriff. He dropped a hint that his prisoner was wanted for something more serious than horse stealing.

"Murder?" asked Pete Hammond. "Then he's killed somebody, eh? It ain't reasonable a common hoss-thief'd be held that what-you-call-it, Sandy. I'll bet my hat this jigger's some famous criminal."

"Criminals," corrected Sandy, "is never famous. They're notorious. Pete, you ought to learn to draw finer distinctions. Now I'm what might be called a famous sheriff."

"Like hell you are!" sneered Pete. "You may be bull-headed, but you ain't famous. Come on, boys."

Between denying visitors admission to the gaol, Sandy managed to make three visits to the Bon Ton, where he ordered such copious meals for the prisoner that Hip Suey's curiosity was aroused.

"Wha's malla?" he wanted to know. "This fella stealem hoss fliend of yours, Sandy?"

"I should say not! He gives me some money,

though, and tells me he wants plenty grub, Suey. A man's got a right to spend his own money, ain't he ? ”

George Berriman, the county clerk, lived next door to Sandy Naughton's house at the end of the street that led northward past the courthouse plaza. For years Berriman had stopped to call for Sandy, that they might walk downtown together. This morning about eight he called. There was no answer. Calling again, he went up the walk, and pounded upon the front door.

Alarmed at receiving no response from this and another shout, Berriman opened the door. The house was empty.

“ I wonder where he is ? ” he asked himself. “ It couldn't have been—— ”

Gripped by misgivings, he hurried down the street, and tried the door of the sheriff's office. The door gave way. The office was as empty as Sandy's house had been.

“ Sandy ! ” he yelled. “ Sandy, where the devil are you ? ”

There came an angry answer from the gaol. Berriman ran in there, and found the sheriff wrathfully shaking the bars of a cell in which he was locked.

“ Sandy ! ” gulped the county clerk. “ Sandy, how the hell did you get in there ? ”

“ Lemme out ! Lemme out ! ” roared Sandy. “ It was that piebald, white-livered, ungrateful son-of-a-sidewinder, that hoss-thief ! I come down here before daylight to see he hadn't got



away, and when I steps into my office I find him settin' there !” Sandy choked on his wrath.

“ Yeah,” said Berriman with a grin that did not subtract from Sandy’s rage, “ then what ? ”

“ Then what ? Then what ? Why, he up and covers me with one of my own guns and locks me up in the same damned cell I’d had him in. I swear to Moses I had that cell door locked ! ” Sandy shook his head. “ And after I’d fed him like he was my own son ! Ain’t that gratitude for you ? Well, a feller oughtn’t to expect anything more of a hoss-thief.”

## CHAPTER VI

OTHER officials, on their way to the courthouse, were attracted by the excitement. In a few minutes a considerable crowd had gathered. In it was Hip Suey, whose place of business was directly across the street.

"You feed 'em too damn' much," Suey announced. "You make 'em too damn' cocky, Sandy."

"Yeah, I reckon," Sandy admitted, "but I wanted to treat him right 'cause he comes in and gives himself up. Wish now I'd starved him!"

Pete Hammond and "Pop Eye" Hardy of the Two Spot ranch, rode by on their way out of town, and were attracted by the crowd before the sheriff's office.

"Well, I ain't surprised none a-tall," declared Pete when he had learned of the prisoner's escape. "That jigger had the hardest-lookin' eyes I ever seen. When he looked at me the other day it seemed to me his eyes was sort of cold ice that could see clean through a man."

"All ice is cold, ain't it?" asked Pop Eye. "I didn't see this hombre, but from what Dad Sanders tells me about him, he's bad."



There now arose the question of the direction the prisoner had taken in his flight. Nobody had seen or heard him.

"I took his hoss and saddle up to my barn," Sandy said doubtfully. "I wonder if he got them, too?"

"Mighty soon see," returned Pete Hammond. He galloped away.

In a few minutes he came thundering back, slid his horse to a stop, and announced there was neither horse nor saddle in Sandy's barn.

"Not even my own hoss?" gasped Sandy. "He didn't take my sorrel, too, did he?"

"Your saddle was there," Pete qualified, "but that long-legged sorrel of yourn was sure gone."

"The ungrateful, hoss-stealing son-of-a-gun!" swore Sandy. "He got his war-bag and gun from right here in the office, too. I ought to put leg-irons on that man."

"Leg-irons, hell!" snorted Pop Eye Hardy. "You orter shot him. From what I hear you treated him like a prize pet 'stead of a desperate hoss-thief."

"Yeah, I made a mistake," the sheriff admitted, "but seein' he gives himself up, I just wanted to play square with him."

Berriman now unwittingly aided Sandy's strategy when he said that shortly before daylight he had heard a rider dashing north past his house. Sandy was quick to grasp at this.

"That was him all right! It shows he's headed north. Come to think, he was askin' me about the country across the Harrison Range."

As the sheriff had reported about town there was a large reward for the capture of Jim Johnson, there was now a clamour for the organisation of a posse to take up his pursuit.

"Dog-gone it," said Sandy, "I'd like to go after him, but I got to telegraph the Rincon sheriff, and get his orders. I'm plumb humiliated to have to tell him I let his prize prisoner get loose."

"You mean your prize pet," sneered Pop Eye.

"Shut up and lemme think!" growled Sandy.

The result of Sandy's brief cogitations was that he deputised Pete Hammond and Pop Eye to take up the pursuit of the fugitive. These zealous worthies, while eager enough to accept the appointment, said they ought not to go alone. They soon found a half-dozen other cowboys who were willing to be special deputies.

It was little more than an hour after Berri-man's discovery of Sandy locked in the cell when Pete Hammond led his posse out of town and headed for the north, in the direction opposite that taken by the fugitive, which was exactly as Sandy had planned.

Less than a mile from town the posse found Sandy's sorrel with lead rope dragging, peacefully cropping the gramma grass. Here the tracks of the fugitive's horse left the road that led to the Two Spot ranch and took to the open country, making swift tracking impossible, yet leaving in the minds of the posse the conviction



that this was the line of flight that had been taken.

"I tell you that hombre's foxy," announced Pete Hammond, who was impressed with the importance of his leadership of the posse and ill-humoured because of the hangover from a three-day spree. "Here he ditches Sandy's horse so Sandy can't foller, and he takes to the grass country so's we can't track him fast."

There was a short consultation, at the end of which it was decided to head straight across the Harrison Mountains after the fugitive, each member of the posse visualising a big chunk of money when they should bring back Jim Johnson, alive or dead. Sandy had told them to kill him if he put up a fight.

In giving this stern order, the sheriff had not only thought it absolutely safe as far as the escaped prisoner was concerned, but also that it would impress the members of the posse and the town at large of the sincerity of his story.

"Drat durn me!" he told George Berriman. "I hope they fetch that feller back. This'll sure be a stain on my record if they don't. George, he's the first prisoner I ever let get away. And imagine him a-pickin' the lock of his cell and waitin' for me!"

"What I can't figure out," said Berriman, "is why he waited for you, Sandy. Why didn't he strike out as soon as he got out of his cell?"

Sandy looked about to make sure the rest of the crowd had gone.

"I don't mind tellin' you confidential, George," he whispered. "He waited for me to find out where his hoss and saddle was. When I refused to tell him, he up and rams the end of a gun against my belly, and tells me he'll bore a hole in me a feller can walk through if I don't. I wish now I'd let him kill me, George. I'm mighty humiliated."

Berriman laid a hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"Don't take it so hard. Things like this will happen. He just out-foxed you, old hombre. Pete and the boys'll bring him back."

"Yeah, maybe they will," Sandy agreed, "but I'm worried just the same." He did not tell his friend that what he was worried about was the thought that the posse might somehow follow the real trail of the fugitive.

Sandy need have had no immediate worries, however. After leaving a trail that seemed to head straight for the heart of the Harrison Mountains, Jim Johnson had found a flat on which the gramma grass grew rank and thick. Here he had turned and headed westward, gradually making a half-circle of the town.

At the time Pete Hammond straightened out his posse and rode toward the foothills of the rugged range to northward, Jim Johnson was quietly riding up a canyon trail that led toward the gap through which horsemen went to and from Big Grass Valley.

It did not occur to him that his asserted gaol-break might have been a clumsy piece of strategy.



He and Sandy had talked this thing over at length as the best way to prevent anyone from suspecting he was going across the mountains into Big Grass to find the man who had killed Hailey, the nester, and if possible, aid Bill Garrett of the Rafter G ranch.

By the pass trail it was not much more than fifteen miles to the Rafter G, while via the wagon road it was twice the distance. The road roughly outlined a fish-hook with the ranch at the point, Prairie City in the curve of the hook, about six miles from the Garrett ranch.

There was a grim, yet pleased smile on Dan McLeod's sun-browned face as he followed the steadily climbing canyon trail. It had proved a good piece of luck when he had told the cold-eyed Ruggles that his name was Jim Johnson, and that he was merely a drifting cowpuncher. He would be Jim Johnson until the time came for him to reveal his real identity. He had one thought uppermost in his mind—to find the man who had killed Hailey. He looked forward with pleasure, however, to his next meeting with Nadine Garrett. How was she going to explain that she had been Amy Hall the last time they had met?

There had been an early frost. Now the big leaves of the canyon sycamores were a reddish bronze, and the smaller foliage of the ash was like flame. The black-walnut trees in the gullies had stood the cold better, showing only a few yellowed leaves among the green. Here and there upon the sage- and grass-panoplied slopes

small clumps of quaking aspens glowed golden in the distance.

Jim Johnson had ridden as fast as the trail would permit, and it was still early when he gained the level of the pass, which led like a winding gash through the summit of the Miguels. All the way from Las Animas, familiar landmarks had revived boyhood memories, though in the days ago the mountains had seemed higher, the canyons much more rugged.

One spot kept vivid in his memory. This was Azurite Lake, which, as he recalled it, was just across a ragged ridge from the middle of the pass. When he reached the point opposite which he thought the lake that was the head of Marfa Creek lay, he looked at his watch. It showed barely nine-thirty. He decided after a few moments' meditation that he would have time to ride to the lake and still make the Rafter G ranch early in the afternoon.

Holding in the eager bay and guiding him carefully among the rocks and brush, he climbed the easterly slope of the pass. He reined in on a narrow mesa with a hummock rising at one end and a rocky ridge at the other. There were a few scrawny pines on ridge and hummock. The mesa was dotted with boulders and stunted white-oaks and patches of chaparral.

As if it had been but yesterday he remembered this rough mesa. Just across it, at the bottom of a steep slope, was the small lake. He was half-way across the mesa when he heard a rifle shot echo among the ridges and peaks. He reined in,



suddenly alert. He knew there were deer here, but he also knew the riders who frequented this sort of range were seldom deer hunters.

"Uh-huh!" he muttered. "One lone shot. That doesn't sound so good." He slid from the saddle and dragged the reins over the head of the bay. Then he pulled the carbine Sandy had given him from its saddle-scabbard, and resumed his way on foot. Experience and range instinct had taught him that a single shot was something to be investigated, and warily. If that shot had been fired with sinister purpose, the man who had fired it might not hesitate to pot a man.

Half unconsciously Jim removed his spurs. Then despite his high-heeled boots he made his way quickly across the mesa, keeping to rocks and brush for cover. As he neared the rim he was on hands and knees. He gained the protection of a group of boulders and brush, peered through.

Below him at the foot of a rock-strewn slope lay the lake, like a plain of azurite, reflecting back the cerulean sky. It did not cover more than two or three acres. Marvelling at the deep blueness of its water, he recalled that his father had told him the lake was an extinct crater and probably almost bottomless. There was just enough easterly breeze to ripple its surface into streaks of silver that lapped against the rocks below him.

At the farther side, however, the land sloped gently away, and was thickly carpeted with grass, still green. Beyond the fringe of meadow

grass were some scattered cottonwoods, aspens and oaks, and beyond these an irregular grassy slope. To the left was the outlet, fringed with willow and brier and cottonwood, amidst which flamed scattered sycamore and ash.

In his admiration for the beauty of the lake and its surroundings, Jim momentarily forgot he had come to investigate a lone shot. Then his eyes were focused on the opposite shore.

It was empty of life one moment, then so filled with it the next that he gripped his rifle and raised himself a little to get a better view between two boulders.

A six-months-old red calf had darted out of some timber at the left and was headed frantically along the shore ; after it raced a man on a horse. One look told Jim it was the same buckskin horse the hard-bitten Ruggles had ridden, and that the rider was doubtless Ruggles himself. A thin, hard smile twisted Jim's lips.

Ruggles's rope sailed out. The loop settled about the neck of the calf, jerking it flat as the rider dallied the end of the rope and the horse set back to keep the slack out of the riata. Ruggles dismounted and ran to the calf, which was now on its feet, darting this way and that.

Grasping the rope, and working hand over hand toward the frenzied little animal, Ruggles managed to grasp it by an ear. Then his hand caught it by one foot. The next moment the calf lay on its side with the man's knee pressing it down. It began to bawl furiously.

"You might as well keep still, little fellow,"



muttered Jim. "Unless I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad your mammy won't come to your rescue."

The calf was soon hog-tied and helpless. Ruggles gathered some dry sticks and made a small fire that would give off a minimum of smoke. He went to the horse, untied something from the saddle, returned and thrust an end of it into the fire.

A man less cool and less deliberate than Jim would have interrupted things then and there, for it would have been obvious even to an inexperienced cowboy what the man across the little lake was going to do. Jim, however, watched through slitted, steely eyes as Ruggles took the running-iron from the fire. He saw the smoke curl up as the red-hot end of the iron was applied to the flank of the calf, heard the animal's pained, frantic bawl. The unsuspecting man on the other shore of the lake was putting the finishing touches to the brand when Jim Johnson silently poked his carbine between the rocks.

"If this gun ain't sighted right that hombre is out of luck," he mused grimly. "And if he's branding his own calf, maybe I am."

He drew a bead on a small rock about a foot to the right of the man's sombrero, and squeezed the trigger.

At the crack of the rifle there was a spurt of dirt a few inches under the rock. For a brief moment the man crouched as if petrified. Then he flopped over backward and scrambled to his

feet. He whirled and jerked out his gun, peered at the rocky slope across the lake.

Again the crags echoed with the report of Jim's carbine. This time there was a spurt of dirt almost between the man's boots. He leaped a foot into the air, and without a further look across the little lake ran for his horse. The shots had frightened the animal, but as it had had its reins down Ruggles managed to catch it. He scrambled into the saddle, and leaning low, dashed away down the creek.

He did not go, however, without impetus added to his flight. About every ten seconds Jim's rifle cracked and there was a spurt of dirt near the buckskin's flying rear hoofs. Rider and horse disappeared over a rise, thus affording Jim time to refill the magazine.

He was beginning to think Ruggles had managed to keep to cover when he and the buckskin appeared on a slope some three hundred yards away. Here Ruggles had no more than had time to rein in a little and look back when a bullet spat off a rock close at his right. He jerked forward, and rammed the rowels into the flanks of the buckskin so violently that the animal lifted behind and seemed about to buck before it straightened out for a run.

Jim had a clear view of horse and rider for a hundred yards, and as Ruggles covered that distance Jim dropped five more bullets too close to him for peace of mind. Then with the buckskin still at a break-neck run, Ruggles swept over a ridge and out of sight.



Though Jim could have killed the man with his first shot, he was grinning with the thought of work well done. He would not have said that even this piece of work was done. He waited for fifteen minutes to see whether or not Ruggles tried to reconnoitre in the hope of discovering who had put him to flight.

"He won't come back, I reckon!" Jim announced soberly. "Unless I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad he's goin' yet! I got to admit he can ride. Got a fair range horse, too."

Rising from his hiding-place, Jim started down the steep slope at an angle. He skirted the upper end of the lake and went down the shore.

The hog-tied calf, after a frenzied, but futile effort to regain its liberty, looked up with fear-glazed, yet appealing eyes.

Jim had known brands too long to be deceived by this one, which was now a large diamond with an O in its middle. It had originally been the Garrett brand, which was a G with an obtuse angle or "rafter" inverted over it.

The alteration, though skilfully done, was apparent. Ruggles had drawn another angle under the G, joining its ends with the ends of the rafter, thus forming a diamond. A few touches of the searing iron had converted the G into an O. A few more touches had sufficed to burn the hair on the original brand, thus making the entire brand appear to the casual rider as if it had recently been done.

Making a mental note to the effect that

Ruggles was a skilful rustler, Jim picked up the running-iron the man had dropped. It was about fourteen inches long, and of three-eighths-inch iron, with a crook like that of a small cane at one end. He hid the iron under a bush.

Next he shook the riata off the calf, cut the strings that bound the animal front to left hind leg. The calf struggled to its feet, and after a dazed look around dashed toward the lower end of the lake.

With a contemptuous look at the rope, which was a "Red Strand" cotton one, braided tightly, Jim flung it into some brush, and started after the calf, already knowing what he would find. Within two hundred yards he came upon a fat white-faced cow, lying dead. The newly branded calf was standing a little way off, bawling sorrowfully. At sight of the man it again took flight. For a minute Jim stood looking down at the dead cow that bore the Rafter G brand.

"The ornery, low-down buzzard!" he muttered through clenched teeth. "It isn't so bad, a man rustlin' cattle and drivin' 'em off, but when it comes to killin' good cows just to brand their calves——"

He recalled now that as he had ridden into the pass he had come upon a number of cattle which had worn the Diamond O brand. They had been mixed with stock belonging to the Rafter G and the Pitchfork.

"So that's what Mr. Ruggles is doin' on his little ranch near the head of Marfa Creek," he mused grimly. "I'll bet he's got steers that



have ten calves apiece every year. This accounts for why he didn't want any strangers in Big Grass Valley."

Jim's eyes closed to steely slits, and his wide mouth set in a hard line. This did not explain why Nadine Garrett had advised him to keep out of the Big Grass country.

## CHAPTER VII

**T**HOUGH he was sanguine that Ruggles was implicated in the trouble in Big Grass Valley, Jim had to admit he had not the least idea of how or to what extent. He was glad he himself had not been seen. It would not add to the peace of mind of any such rustler if he did not know who had discovered him in the act of rebranding a calf.

Subduing an urge to pursue the man and bring matters to a showdown, Jim compromised by hurrying to the ridge over which Ruggles had disappeared. He approached the ridge cautiously, for he realised he might be met by a bullet. Far down the canyon was a small valley in which a cabin and corrals made a dull spot. That would likely be where the rustler lived.

Hurrying back, the cowboy stopped for a few minutes to admire the mountain lake, comparing its present beauty with the picture of it he had kept in his mind since boyhood. Then he climbed the steep slope and cut across the mesa to where he had left his horse. The bay lifted its head and whinnied softly at sight of its master.

While he had a definite purpose, Jim's plans



were by no means complete. He must meet each emergency as it arose. Back in the pass trail, he quickened his pace. He had lost valuable time in the side trip to the lake.

It was noon when he reached the southerly end of the pass where the trail bent around the shoulder of a mountain.

Half-way along the rough slope, he reined in. Below him, across the broken foothills, Big Grass Valley extended westward to hazy infinity. Its other end was rimmed in by hills through which a canyon cut. Even from the distance Jim could see that the valley had been well named, for its wide floor shone brown from the very abundance of gramma grass. It was dotted by occasional lone sycamores and clumps of mesquite. Here and there a darker strip showed where the land was richer, or marked the route of some small watercourse or the source of seepage water. Beyond the valley extended another range of mountains, grassy and grey with sage in their foothills, dotted with sparse timber higher up. He could make out several canyons from which streams ran to join the main one that cut the middle of the valley. Against the blue westerly horizon a tall butte loomed.

Below, and not far from the edge of the foothills, was a dark spot which, from his own recollection and from what Sandy Naughton had told him, Jim knew for the Rafter G ranch. Toward the lower end of the valley was another blur which must be Prairie City.

Jim Johnson did not linger long in his survey

of the valley. After slanting steeply along the rocky slope, the trail dipped down a precipitous sidehill into a pocket that extended back between rough ridges. As he looked across the pocket he saw a band of wild mustangs break into flight on the opposite slope and disappear a few moments later over the far ridge.

He found the pocket to be a winding floor dotted with greasewood and cat-claw. It led into the head of a large arroyo, along the westerly side of which was the trail.

Accustomed to noting his surroundings, Jim saw that the region at his right was one of rolling hills, well grassed and dotted with sage. At the left, perhaps four hundred yards away, was a ridge abutting against the mountainside and tapering off into the floor of the valley a mile or more away. From this ridge several spurs extended to thrust their feet against the arroyo. These spurs, like the main ridge, were well covered with sage.

The trail in the arroyo was good, bending now and then to cross shallow ravines. Some two miles ahead Jim could make out more distinctly now the group of buildings and trees that marked his destination. Beyond the trees was a patch of green.

Jim had passed the tip of the second spur at the left when his meditations were shattered by the spat of a bullet in the dirt under the belly of his horse. Before he had time to act, the boom of a big rifle echoed and reverberated down from the ridge, but even while the dry air was still filled



with the silence-shattering report, Jim's spurs dug in, and he swung violently on the reins, sending the horse plunging down the gentle slope into the gravelly bottom of the arroyo.

A half-dozen strides, and horse and rider were screened by the end of the side ridge. Here Jim reined in. He was held by no illusions as to whom that bullet had been meant for. He glanced back to mark the spot where he had been when the bullet had spat so viciously.

"Wonder it didn't take off one of my boots," he chuckled harshly. "That hombre should have raised his sights a notch. Ruggles sure must have ridden like hell to get down here and try to bushwhack me."

He was certain that the shot had been fired from the crest of the long ridge four hundred yards to the east, and was just as certain it had been from a big-calibre, high-powered rifle. He was more than equally positive on one other point: he was going to find out who had fired that shot before he rode on to the Garrett ranch.

"The damn' low-down cuss!" he muttered. "It sure begins to look like those people knew what was what when they said it wasn't healthy for strangers over here in Big Grass."

He knew that even to reach the ridge he must expose himself and his horse to further shots, for the bushwhacker might well be waiting on the ridge for just such a move, after he had seen that his first shot had failed in its deadly purpose.

These cogitations and a survey of his immediate surroundings took but the fraction of a minute.

Then he spurred down the arroyo to the mouth of a ravine that entered from the left. In the lower end of the ravine were some cat-claw and stunted mesquite. After a quick survey of the grey slope Jim trotted his horse up the ravine, meaning to get in against the shoulder of the main ridge if possible before the man on the crest of it could reopen his fire.

He knew well enough that this plan was reckless to the point of stupid foolhardiness, but such recklessness and defiance of danger had more than once carried him safely through. What was more, his nature was such that he could not have turned and run had discretion commanded it. He had changed his mind about waiting to settle with the rustler.

"That hombre sure must have done some tall ridin' to circle round and get in ahead of me," he mused aloud, all the time scanning the irregular grey slope.

He was gratefully surprised when no bullet came singing down, when no booming report shattered the silence that had, after the rude and brief interruption, again settled over the rangeland.

He had the carbine in his hand now, ready to give shot for shot if only he could catch sight of the would-be assassin. Nothing moved on the grey slope, not even the flicker of a jack-rabbit or the blur of a coyote slinking through the sage.

"Well, now," he mused when the ravine became too narrow for further progress, "he may have figured his bullet went home after all."



He reined out of the ravine and headed diagonally up the side of the spur at the left, all the time scanning the main ridge and the crest of the spur. When he was within a few rods of the crest he slid from the saddle and dragged the reins over the head of the blowing bay.

Nearing the top of the spur, he flattened himself and crept on. From this screen he had a view of that part of the main ridge from which he reasoned the shot had been fired. It was empty of all life. High above it three buzzards circled against the flawless sky. The gentle wind that came out of the east barely waved the purplish plumes of the sage on the main ridge. Lying low, Jim traced an imaginary flight of the bullet down over the length of the side ravine.

"There's just one thing," he commented grimly. "That feller either got rattled or he wasn't used to handlin' a big rifle."

With this came a resolve to throw further caution to the breeze that sifted through the sage. Hurrying back to his horse, he stepped into his saddle, and headed eastward.

In little more than a minute he was looking across the main ridge into a basin about a half-mile in diameter. Its northerly edge abutted against the toe of the main range. Low hills thickly grassed and sparsely dotted with sage swung round its eastern and southern sides to join the ridge on which Jim sat his horse. It was like a great natural amphitheatre with the bed of a small dry lake in its middle.

Only subconsciously did Jim take in all these physical details, for he was watching a rider who had dashed off the hard floor of the dry lake-bed. The rider was mounted on a sorrel horse, and leaning low over his horn as he forced a breakneck pace up the grassy slope.

Twice Jim was tempted to send a bullet after him, but each time he was halted by the determination to catch him alive and make him do some explaining before he died. Then the rider was gone over the rounded crest of the grassy ridge.

"Why, the son-of-a-gun!" said Jim. "He didn't even have the politeness to look back."

After taking further note of the direction of the rider's flight, Jim rode up the ridge toward the spot from which he thought the shot had been fired.

He had little trouble in discovering it. A man had lain prone on the rough ground and laid his rifle across a rock under a sage. Two irregular depressions showed where the would-be assassin's boot-toes had dug in.

"Uh-huh," said Jim as his quick gaze caught the glint of something bright. He dismounted and picked up an empty cartridge-shell, sniffed it, then looked at its base. "Thirty-forty, and just fired. I knew damned well that was a big gun. Fool! He was too rattled at missin' me to stop and pick up this shell after he'd levered in a new one. Well, you wouldn't expect a rustler to have any better sense."

With the empty shell as at least a clue to the



identity of the gun, Jim Johnson mounted and headed toward the bed of the dry lake. He had gone but a short distance before he came to where a horse had stood. A glance showed the horse-tracks had come from the northerly side of the basin. This would have been the way Ruggles would have ended his hard ride.

Sending the bay down the slope at a trot, Jim gained the smooth lake-bed, galloped across it. He did not slacken pace until he neared the crest of the rounded ridge over which the fleeing rider had disappeared.

Expecting to see the rider still in flight, what Jim saw was another rounded, grassy ridge about a hundred yards ahead. Between the ridges was a shallow swale richly carpeted with tall grass. In it were several large mesquite trees, about the trunks of which the ground was tramped and wallowed bare by cattle that had sought shade, or reached up to eat the mesquite pods.

Without pausing, Jim headed across the swale, hoping to catch sight of the would-be bushwhacker from the other ridge. He had determined he would ride this man down or shoot him from the saddle if it took the remainder of the day.

Down the easy slope some two hundred yards a rider on a sorrel horse was slowly weaving back and forth behind a small herd of cattle. The ruse was so apparent that it forced a smile of pity to Jim's face.

In his flight, and probably sensing he would be

pursued, the man had come upon the cattle, and now was pretending to drive them toward the Rafter G ranch. Even from the distance Jim could see the stock of a rifle protruding from the scabbard under the rider's left stirrup-fender.

"Pretty crude," he commented sarcastically. "It wouldn't fool a kid." Then as he looked more closely, he was surprised and a little disappointed.

The rider was not Ruggles. He was shorter, slimmer. This added an entirely new and unexpected angle to Jim's problem. He had hoped he might take Ruggles in to gaol, or get a chance to shoot him.

Heading down the slope to intercept the small herd, Jim saw that the rider was little more than a boy of fourteen or fifteen. He noted the worn batwing chaps, the faded cotton shirt, the floppy sombrero drawn low. He was sure he had been seen, though the rider kept his gaze straight ahead.

Jim was within forty yards of him when a white-faced yearling broke away and started up the slope. Clamping in his spurs, he headed the runaway and turned it back into the herd. Then he reined sharply about and made straight for the rider, determined to find out right now what that big rifle meant.

His determination vanished suddenly, however, for a good look into the rider's face disclosed that of a girl—the same girl he had found with the disabled buckboard. Eyes steady, but with a little smile of amusement twitching his lips, he



rode slowly toward her. She had reined up, allowing the cattle to drift on.

Instead of the expression of fear and suspicion he had seen in her eyes the other day, they now registered defiance and a strange coldness. Jim reined up, and touched the brim of his sombrero.

"Hello," he said, "didn't think I'd meet you like this. How's Amy Hall to-day?"

She studied him coldly, steadily for a half-minute, her gauntleted left hand resting upon the rifle-stock as if by it she wanted to recall something to his memory.

"Howdy," she returned without a trace of cordiality. "I don't believe I have ever seen you before. What's this Amy Hall stuff?" Her red lips curled a little, and there was a twinkle of derision in her eyes.

As for Jim he felt as disarmed as if he had been weaponless in a bare plain with a ring of hostile savages drawing in. He knew it was she who had shot at him, and shot to kill, but he was powerless, even to accuse her of the cowardly act. His bronzed face assumed a puzzled expression.

"Didn't I help you the other day on the road a few miles east of Las Animas?" he asked. "One of the wheels of your buckboard had come off. I put it back on for you."

Giving him another steady, cool look, this time lightened by a faint smile, she shook her head.

"You must be mistaken, cowboy. I don't remember driving a buckboard the other day,

let alone losing a wheel and having a dashing buckeroo come to my rescue."

For a brief moment Jim thought he might be mistaken. The girl whom he had met at the forks of the road had worn conventional garb, though it had been a little shabby. He studied her face more keenly now, saw the same dark brows, the same deep-blue eyes, the same straight little nose and sensitive mouth, the same stubborn chin. She met his scrutiny squarely, even defiantly.

"You weren't in Las Animas day before yesterday?"

"Not that I remember," she answered quickly.

"Then you're not Amy Hall?"

Something blanched her face for a moment. Jim thought it might have been fear. He saw her gauntleted hand tighten upon the stock of the big rifle.

"Amy Hall? I never heard of anybody named Amy Hall. Were you looking for her, Mr.——"

"Jim Johnson," he supplied, "Jim Johnson, driftin' cowpuncher. Yeah, I was lookin' for Amy Hall. Sorry I didn't find her."

"There isn't a girl by that name in Big Grass Valley," she declared.

"Are you dead sure about that?"

"Of course I am," she tossed her head, and the brim of her old stetson flopped back, revealing a whiter streak of low forehead. "I ought to be. I know everybody in the valley, Mr. Jim Johnson."



He smiled broadly now, and there was so much amusement and unbelief in his narrowed eyes that colour flooded up from the collar of her faded shirt, to lose itself under the brim of her sombrero. Then he laughed softly.

"Well, I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad!"

"You certainly look it," she retorted with a quickness and contempt that made him wish he had forgotten his favourite ejaculation. "Now that you have found out I am not Amy Hall, is there anything more you would like to ask?"

His anger and embarrassment fled almost instantly. Back of the studied coldness and defiance in her eyes he saw trouble. What if, only less than a half-hour ago, she had tried to kill him? She must surely be in dire trouble to try to kill any man.

"That's a Model 1895 Winchester you have there, isn't it? Pretty big gun for a little girl like you."

"Is it? You see, I make my horse carry it so it won't strain a little girl like me, Mr. Johnson."

"Now look here!" he said, spurring closer. "I know you're kidding and so do you! What's the game?" His eyes were slitted and steely until her brave, defiant look became so fixed it made him smile. It was a smile so infectious that it brought a faint reflection from her lips and eyes.

"You know," he broke off abruptly, "I know a lake back there in the hills that's just the colour of your eyes when the sun shines on it right. It's the most beautiful little lake I ever saw."

"Am I to take that as a compliment?" she

inquired. "I never had my eyes compared with a lake before. Are you a poet? Or are you carrying the hangover of a night or two in town?"

"Neither one, dear lady," returned Jim Johnson. He laid a hand over his heart and bent over his pommel. "Adios, and vaya con Dios."

Reining about he headed up the slope, knowing well that he might get a bullet in his back any instant.

"Well, I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad!" he muttered as he slowed down near the rounded crest. "This here is sure one fine mess."

He turned in his saddle to look back. She was riding slowly after the cattle, now straggled out near the edge of a plain that extended westward to where a view of it was shut off by the foothills.



## CHAPTER VIII

JIM JOHNSON tried to keep before his eyes a picture of the girl. In that picture he saw the mortal fear and suspicion back of the mask of cool, contemptuous defiance. He was sure on one point : it was not of him that she had been afraid. He wondered if it would have been better had he revealed his real identity.

In all charity to her, he made himself believe that she had not shot to kill, but to frighten him and turn him back. Any good shot with a rifle of the size she carried could have dropped a rider or horse at four hundred yards. Having been born and reared in the range country she was likely a crack shot, even with such a large weapon.

He was so enshrouded in meditations that he was looking down into the basin of the small dry lake before he realised it. Now the unusual contour of this depression slowly drove away his thoughts of the girl and her troubles. The basin was like a broken-rimmed saucer with the dry lake-bed where the cup should have rested. It had no outlet, and he thought that at some prehistoric time it had been a good-sized lake. Looking northward, he saw the wide, rugged

mouth of Marfa Creek canyon a mile away, and studied it in the hope that somehow it might shed light on the strange geological depression before him. Slowly what seemed a possible explanation for this and other things dawned upon him. Presently he smiled and rode on.

He rode down into the basin, out on to the lake-bed. It was almost as smooth as a polished floor, and so hard it drummed under the shod hoofs of the horse. He climbed to the ridge where the would-be assassin had lain. His immediate purpose was to find, if possible, the bullet that had sped from this ridge, but before he began the descent toward the big arroyo he turned in his saddle to survey the region toward the middle of the valley. Presently he turned the other way and looked into the mouth of Marfa canyon. Next he surveyed the saucer-like basin. Then his gaze swept swiftly from the canyon to the floor of the valley, not unlike a panoramic camera, and he stamped on his brain a picture of this part of the Big Grass Valley country.

"Possibility," he said aloud. "Yeah, just a possibility. There must be a reason for everything, and right now there is one big reason why strangers are not wanted on this side of the Miguels."

There was one point in his reasoning that would not reconcile itself with the others. If Bill Garrett had written the letter of urgent appeal to Sandy Naughton, why had his daughter tried to kill or turn back the man Sandy had sent as his agent?



"Shucks!" he ejaculated after he had given this question more thought. "If she knew what was in that letter, she would have been expectin' Sandy himself, and not an ordinary cowpuncher. I wonder if she would have tried to throw a scare into old Sandy?"

Once in the big arroyo, Jim had no trouble in finding the place where he had sent the horse plunging down the bank a second after the bullet had thudded in the dirt. Nor did he have any difficulty in discovering the spot on the trail from which the bay had leaped. It took a little searching, however, for him to find where the bullet had ploughed a small hole into the dirt. With a stick broken from a greasewood he dug it out, rubbed the few fragments of dirt from it.

Schooled in the handling of guns since he had been a boy, he recognised its calibre as well as if he had callipered it. It was a long, shiny missile, metal-jacketed and hard-pointed. He had seen from the size and shape of the stock of the rifle Nadine Garrett had carried under her stirrup-fender that the weapon was a Model 1895 Winchester. He knew that this model was made in but two common calibres, 30-40 and .405, that on the western ranges ten of the former were used to one of the latter.

"Damn it!" he said bitterly. "This makes it a cinch she did it! I hoped this bullet would be some other size."

Before putting the bullet into a pocket he examined it critically, noting in particular the marks left on the metal jacket by the rifling.

Determined to supplant speculation and surmise with direct and, if necessary, aggressive investigation, Jim swung into the saddle and headed down the canyon trail, oblivious to other possible bullets.

When he reached the mouth of the arroyo which was about a mile from the ranch, the sun was beginning to gild the summit of the towering black butte miles to westward. From the patch of green beyond the ranch buildings a ditch led toward the mouth of a canyon two miles to west. Jim saw two riders approaching the ranch from that direction.

"Couple of Rafter G punchers comin' in from a day's ride," he told himself.

He saw that these riders would reach the ranch a little ahead of him. He was then four hundred yards from the nearest corral when the riders reined up at the barn and began to unsaddle. He had not covered half the distance when they reappeared and sauntered toward the bunk-house. Here they paused, and after a look in his direction sat down on the narrow porch.

With but a casual thought for the riders, Jim gave his attention to the physical details of the Rafter G. It was much like the picture of it he had carried in his memory.

Directly ahead of him was a broad yard, the farther end of which narrowed into a barbed-wire fenced lane between two small alfalfa fields. At the right of the yard were the corrals and stables, at the left the bunk-house, cook-house and dwelling. The last was a rambling one-



story frame building almost hidden by cottonwoods and umbrella trees. Before the wide porch, and some fifty feet from it, stood two great elm trees. Jim remembered vividly the big elms, for under them Nadine Garrett and he had played. Now they looked much larger than the elm trees whose pictures he had carried in his memory along with the image of the violet-eyed little girl. For a moment a feeling of despondency came over him, and he wished he had not kept the memory of this place and this girl so vivid. The Rafter G, though solidly built, and from its proportions once a great ranch establishment, looked run down and in need of paint and repairs.

"I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad if Old Man Hard Luck hasn't pitched his tent on this outfit," he mused. "And think of that little girl a-tryin' to dry-gulch me. Nice large reception, that."

With a gentle pressure of knee and bridle he guided the bay toward the bunk-house, where the two men waited his coming. He quickly surveyed them.

One was a short, knobby sort of man, well past fifty, grisled, faded-eyed, sun-wrinkled. Jim knew the school of cowboys to which he belonged, the old one that would punch cows until death, or until there were no cattle left.

The other fellow was young, not much more than eighteen or nineteen. His big, awkward frame gave more promise of strength than his broad, freckled face did of intellect. His round

blue eyes, however, held an expression that appealed to Jim ; honesty and candour. Mixed with this was evident admiration for the lithe rider of the bay.

"Howdy, boys," said Jim Johnson. "This here the Rafter G?"

"You come to the right place," responded the older man without any warmth of word or look. His mouth set grimly under his grisled moustache.

"Yeah, this here's the Rafter G, Garrett outfit," said the younger cowboy, getting up. "Where you headin' for, stranger?"

"I'm there," returned Jim with a smile.

"Then you was headed for here?" demanded the younger man.

"Seems so, don't it?" Jim rolled a cigarette, while from under the brim of his sombrero he regarded these two.

"You damn' fool!" counselled the other man, turning a sudden cold stare on his companion. "Won't you never learn range customs? Don't you know it ain't etikette to ask questions? If this stranger wants to tell us anything it's up to him!"

Such a flood of red surged up across the boy's broad face that it all but obliterated his big freckles.

"Durn it, Chuck," he stammered, "I didn't mean to be curious, just wanted to be sociable. Honest, I didn't mean nothin'."

"Sure you didn't, kid," said the man on the bay with a broad grin. "I savvy. Thank you, Mr.——"



"Me?" gulped the boy, evidently unaccustomed to being "mistered." "Oh, I'm Baldy Peters, and this here's Chuck Horn." Baldy shambled forward and reached up a hand that promised to grow to ham-like proportions.

"Sure pleased to meet you, boys," returned the man in the saddle. "I'm Jim Johnson, driftin' cowpuncher."

"Glad to see you, Johnson," said Horn. His expression did not substantiate his words.

"Step down, and give your saddle a chance to cool off," invited Baldy. "Sure glad to meet up with you, Mr. Johnson."

"That goes double, Baldy," returned Jim. "For you, too, Mr. Horn."

"More used to Chuck," growled Horn. "It'll suit me just's good if you take the rope off that mister stuff, Johnson."

"Just as you say, Chuck." Jim stepped from the saddle with an assumed stiffness. "It's a long, tough ride across those mountains yonder."

"You come from Las Animas?" blurted Baldy.

"Now maybe I did. Seems to me I recall a place by that name."

"Gawd A'mighty, Baldy," growled Horn. "Can't you stop askin' the man questions? If he wants to tell you where he hails from I reckon he'll do it!"

"Gosh!" stammered the awkward boy, his freckles again all but hidden in the brick-red that flooded up from his long neck. "I didn't mean to try to horn into his private 'fairs! Just

wanted to be friendly. Aw, hell, Chuck, can't a feller be friendly without breakin' the durned rules of range etikette you talk about?"

"That's all right, kid," said Jim, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I don't mind tellin' you I rode across from Las Animas to-day. Heard over there I might get on at the Rafter G. How about it, Baldy?"

"Shucks!" stuttered Baldy. "I ain't boss round here! I'm just the wrangler and sort of Jack of all trades. You'll have to see the old man, or Dick, I reckon."

Chuck's deep-set eyes had been appraising the stranger.

"Reckon you got about as much chance of gettin' a ridin' job for this outfit as a snowball'd have of rollin' through hell, Johnson," he offered. "Sorry you had the long ride for nothin'."

Jim turned a quizzical grin on him.

"So you're the old man, eh?"

"Nope," Chuck returned unmoved, "but I know this spread ain't takin' on no new hands."

"Well, well," drawled Jim, his face registering momentary disappointment. "Looks like I had my ride for nothin', don't it?" He glanced toward the sun which was hanging like a red ball just above the irregular horizon. "I wonder if I can stop here to-night?"

"Bill Garrett ain't got the reputation of turnin' strangers away," Chuck said uninvitingly.

"Sure, you can stay all night," declared Baldy. "Come on, and I'll show you where to put your bronc, Mr. Johnson."



As they crossed to a corral Jim glanced up the trail along which he had come. A horseman was approaching from that direction. Suppressing a desire to ask Baldy if this rider were Dick Garrett, Jim realised that to do so might reveal that he knew something of the Garrett family.

"Turn your horse in there," Baldy instructed as they reached the corral. "I'll throw him some hay."

As Jim stripped off bridle and saddle Baldy hurried around to the far side of the corral where a small stack was fenced with barbed wire. He forked some hay into the rack inside the corral, and hurried back as if he feared he might be accused of lack of hospitality. The tired bay made a straight line for the hay when he was let in at the gate.

"So you don't think there is much chance of me gettin' a job here?" Jim asked.

Baldy screwed up his wide mouth and rubbed his fuzzy chin.

"I'm afraid there ain't, Mr. Johnson," he said with gravity. "I don't believe we're in any shape to take on a new rider. 'Course——" Again he rubbed his chin.

"We?" Jim asked naively. "You own part of this layout after all, Baldy?"

"Hell, no!" stammered the boy. "I didn't mean to say that. I was—you'll have to talk with the old man, Mr. Johnson."

"By the old man I suppose you mean Mr. Garrett, Baldy? Where is he just now?"

"Yeah, we call him the old man when he don't hear us. He went into Prairie City just after dinner. Orter be back 'most any time now."

With elbows hooked on the top board of the corral fence, Jim stood looking eastward across a strip of almost level land abundantly grassed and dotted here and there with mesquite and sage. He made a mental note that the upper side of the gentle sloping area lay against the low hills across which was the peculiar saucer-like basin over which the girl had fled after taking the shot at him.

Baldy, evidently taking the newcomer as a paragon whom he must imitate if he were to be a real man, assumed a similar attitude. He too, rested a boot upon the lowest board.

"Baldy," said Jim, "who owns all that level land yonder?"

"That land?" Baldy was rudely yanked out of his admiring reverie by the question. "Oh, that? That all belongs to the Rafter G."

"And the Rafter G belongs to Bill Garrett?"

"Yeah, sure. Sometimes it's called the Garrett ranch, Mr. Johnson."

"Jim," corrected the cowboy.

"All right—Jim," agreed Baldy with a pleased grin, "but I ain't knowed you long to be callin' you by your handle."

"Baldy," said Jim, turning to give the boy a whimsical smile. "It doesn't always matter how long men have known each other. I have a feelin' you and I are goin' to be friends if we ain't already."



"I'm sure glad you feel that away about it," Baldy stammered. "Seems to me we're already like old friends."

Baldy was so engrossed that he had failed to hear the sound of approaching hoofs. He turned so quickly that he half stumbled. Jim had swung about with a movement as agile as the boy's was clumsy.

Approaching was a man on a palomino horse, which for a moment Jim thought was the buckskin Ruggles had ridden. Only for the moment did he look at the horse, however. His gaze had swung up to the man in the silver-ornamented saddle.

The rider was tall, lithe, dark, and had an ease in the saddle like that of a Mexican born to it. The one look, however, had told Jim he was not a Mexican. Dark eyes under black brows regarded Jim casually. There was a trail of insolence in the rider's thin smile.

"This here's Joe Tassler," announced Baldy with a clumsy gesture toward the rider. "Joe, meet Jim Johnson."

"Howdy, Tassler," Jim said genially.

"Glad to meet up with you, Johnson," returned the man on the palomino. "Saw fresh tracks on the arroyo trail. It was you rode down out of the pass?"

"Yeah, it was me," said Jim, noting in the brief moment before Tassler stepped gracefully from his saddle that he wore a Colt, but that he had no rifle under his stirrup-fender. The man was jerking at the latigo when Baldy said :

“Jim, he’s figurin’ on strikin’ the old man for a job ridin’, Joe.”

Tassler removed the saddle, grasped it by the horn, and swung it across his shoulder. He did not glance at Jim until he had caught up the tasselled romal of the bridle. Then he smiled broadly.

“Is he?” he inquired. “Well, if you ask me I’d say he’s got one fine, fat chance of gettin’ on at the Rafter G. Wish you luck, Johnson.”



## CHAPTER IX

**T**ASSLER was in the barn but a few minutes. When he reappeared he took a worn whisk-broom from a nail beside the door and carefully brushed the dust from his overalls and shirt. Then without a glance toward the men who still stood beside the corral, he started for the cook-house. He walked with a brisk, arrogant swing.

“Good-looking hombre,” said Jim.

“And don’t he know it,” returned Baldy. “If ever I seen a feller as was stuck on hisself!”

“Why—yes,” Jim grinned. “He does seem to rate himself a little above par now you mention it.”

“Don’t know what above that means,” said Baldy, “but if it means he’s got the damndest case of swelled head you ever saw, then it fits him. Say, that jigger’s got the idea the old man can’t even fire him. Between me’n you, Jim, he gets away with about everything but murder round this here place.”

“Oh, I guess Mr. Garrett could fire him if he wanted to. Likely Tassler’s a better cowhand than you think, Baldy.”

"I dunno about that, but I mean the old man bein' able to fire him if he wanted to. Damn it, Jim, he does things as'd make the old man tie the can to the rest of our tails quicker'n a feller could wink if we tried it. He's got a drag somehow."

"Where did he come from? He wasn't raised here in the valley?"

"Drifted into Big Grass about a year ago. Naw, he wasn't brung up here. I hope to hell this here range turns out somethin' better'n him. He's got a brother named Buck as has a little layout yonder at the mouth of Marfa Canyon. Buck's noggin ain't swelled like Joe's. I reckon he's a real cowman. Looks like he was goin' to build hisself up a ranch over there."

With the eager curiosity of an entire stranger to the region, Jim asked where Marfa Canyon was. Baldy pointed out the gash in the mountains.

"Well, dog-gone me!" chuckled Jim. "I was pretty near over there this afternoon. Missed the trail and wandered off east. I ran into a funny thing over that way, Baldy. It was a little valley with a dry lake-bed on the bottom, all surrounded by low hills."

"Oh, that? That's Saucer Basin," Baldy explained quickly, as if grateful that he could give any information to this appealing newcomer.

"Is it part of the Rafter G range, too?"

"Yep," Baldy answered. "It's deeded land, too. The old man had some mighty great plans about that basin, but for some reason or other



they all got snarled up. Want to hear about 'em ? ”

“ I think I hear wheels,” said Jim.

“ Durned if it ain't the old man comin' now,” declared Baldy. “ Gosh, I sure hope to hell he gives you a job ! Got a good notion to quit myself if he don't.”

Jim gave the boy a sincere, quizzical smile.

“ Why do you so want me to stay here ? ”

Baldy turned red and fidgeted, hooking one big thumb in the waistband of his overalls. He grinned doubtfully.

“ I sort of got an idee if you stay round here you'll tangle up with Joe Tassler and take some of the swellin' outen his damned head,” Baldy confessed. “ The lopsided son-of-a-sidewinder rides me all the time. He makes fun of me and tells me I ain't no cowpuncher. If I was a little—aw—a little more experienced I'd hammer hell out of him ! ”

Jim did not smile at the boy's sincerity, though he wanted to. He knew that Baldy, despite his weight and bulk, would stand little show with a man like Tassler. Jim had seen a rig coming up the short lane between the alfalfa fields, and even at the distance recognised it as the same buck-board and mustangs the girl had been driving when he had recovered and replaced the wheel for her.

The great sweep of Big Grass Valley was now filled with the shadows of early twilight, until the sun shone only upon the peaks to north and south and on the higher hills at its easterly end.

In a tree near the ranch-house a mocking-bird was beginning to pour out his golden notes to the coming night.

"If you think I can do any good," ventured Baldy hopefully, "I won't mind puttin' in a word for you."

"That's sure square of you, kid, but if you don't mind, I'd like to tackle the old man myself. Never had anybody ask for me a job yet. Thanks just the same."

"You wouldn't," the boy declared admiringly. "Well, s'long." He slouched toward the cook-house.

Jim had seen a rickety wagon-shed beyond the barn, and reasoned that it would be where Bill Garrett would stop. He was standing before the shed when the rig pulled up. The man on the seat was large, raw-boned. He had a smooth, weathered face creased with wrinkles, yet a strong and handsome face, nevertheless. Deep-set eyes of faded blue looked from under shaggy white brows that were shaded by the broad brim of an old and dusty Texas sombrero. It was as if, in the long moment, those eyes were looking through the young rider who now stood beside the left front wheel of the buckboard.

"Howdy, Mr. Garrett," said the younger man. "Good span of fuzz-tails you have here."

"Howdy," returned the man on the seat. "Don't believe I ever seen you before, but damned if there ain't somethin' about you that makes me think I'm wrong. You ain't—No, of course you can't be!"



"I reckon you never saw me before, Mr. Garrett. My name's Jim Johnson, and I'm a ramblin' cowpuncher lookin' for a job."

"Jim Johnson, huh?" Garrett mused aloud, looking intently at the cowboy. "Knowed a good many Johnsons, but never one that looked like you. There's a Sven Johnson nested down below Prairie City. He calls it Yohnson, though."

"Yah, Ay bane Swade," returned Jim with a grin. "How about that job, Mr. Garrett? You need a top-hand rider, don't you?"

The intensity of the older man's scrutiny increased. His mouth straightened into a tight, puckered line. When it relaxed he said :

"Johnson, you come to a mighty poor place to get a job. The Rafter G ain't takin' on any more riders just now. Mighty sorry. Glad to have you stop overnight, though, if you care to."

Without any show of disappointment Jim reached for the outer trace of the near horse, unhitched it. He slipped in back of the fractious mustang, unhitched the other trace, reached across the tongue and loosened the left trace of the other animal. He leaned farther over and loosed the outer trace of this horse.

Garrett clambered stiffly down, and came around to the head of the team as Jim was unbuckling the neck-yoke straps. Jim dropped the tongue to the ground, and without a look at Garrett, began reaving a line which he shoved through a ring on the hames, and threw a loop

round it. His movements were quick, positive, as if all his life had been devoted to unhitching horses.

"Damned if I don't like the way you go at that, young feller," commented Garrett. "Can you punch cows as good?"

"Oh, hell, yes," returned Jim, shoving back his sombrero, his face as innocent as Baldy's. "I'm likely the best cowpuncher this side of anywhere."

"Yeah?" inquired Garrett, smiling a little and rubbing his chin. "I never did like a man that blows his own horn too loud, Johnson, but there's somethin' about you that makes me wish I could give you a try-out. You seem to have a knack of knowin' just what you are doin' and of wastin' no time doin' it."

"Them," said Jim very seriously, "are two of my main characteristics. Right now I happen to know just what I'm doin', if I don't know exactly how I am goin' to do it all."

"Um-mm," said Garrett, apparently amused, but somewhat puzzled. "I suppose you're goin' to find the proper stalls for them mustangs, and unharness 'em, and hang the harness on the right pegs?"

"All that presently, Mr. Garrett," returned Jim. "The main point is I'm goin' to work for you here at the Rafter G."

"The hell you are?" snorted Garrett, stiffening. Then his face softened and again he bent that intent scrutiny on the other man, who stood absently rolling a brown-paper cigarette. "John-



son, in spite of the way you act, the way you unhitched this team sort of appeals to me. I'm sorry I can't put you on as a top-hand."

"You know, Mr. Garrett," said Jim, stepping closer, "another of my main points is that I seldom take no for an answer. I rode many miles to get a job from you, and I reckon I must insist on gettin' it." His steady gaze seemed to disconcert the rancher.

There was that about Garrett that impressed Jim as a man who had once spoken forcefully. Now he seemed in doubt. He glanced over his shoulder as if he feared some eavesdropper. When he turned back he leaned forward.

"You don't exactly look like a boaster or a damned fool, Johnson," he announced.

"Another of my fine points, Mr. Garrett, is never to boast. I tell you again I'm goin' to work for the Rafter G as a cowpuncher. And when you have hired me you have sure put on one top-hand."

"Durned if I don't believe you're right," muttered the rancher. "But I just can't do it. Mighty sorry."

"I would be, too, if you meant it," said Jim. "I'd set my heart on this job, and I just can't stand disappointments."

"Boy," said Garrett, "by the time you're as old as me you'll have stood a lot of disappointments, some of which you ain't even dreamed about now." There was trouble in his voice, but vastly more of it in his deep-set, faded eyes.

For a moment they were the eyes of a man from whom hope has fled beyond recapture. He fumbled for the bridle of the nearer mustang.

"I wanted those hombres over there at the cook-house to think I'm arguin' with you about a job, Mr. Garrett," said Jim as he lowered his voice and took hold of the bridle of the other horse. "You wrote a letter to Sandy Naughton, didn't you?"

Garrett let go of the bridle, stiffened. His weathered face became blank for a moment, then was stamped with incredulity and sudden fear. He swallowed hard.

"Y-yes, I wrote a letter to Sandy," he stammered. "What about it?"

"Well, in the first place you forgot to sign it."

The rancher's look of bewilderment came back. He grinned sheepishly, and rubbed his forehead.

"Now—maybe I did forget to put my name to that note," he admitted. "I was some troubled and in a hurry when I wrote it. And you, Johnson?"

"I'm the man Sandy sent to help you out of whatever trouble you are in, Mr. Garrett. Excuse my apparent boastin', but I figure Sandy used good judgment."

For a few moments it seemed that all the remaining strength had fled from the old rancher's once-powerful body, and the remaining force from his mind. He glanced from side to side into the gathering twilight, as though he



expected to see some terrible phantom stealing upon him.

"Maybe you're right," he said with a voice that shook. "Maybe you're right. I appealed to Sandy because I didn't know of nobody else. Sandy Naughton's a good, square man, but between me'n you he ain't even a smart sheriff. Now if it was back in the old days—and Jim McLeod was only here——"

"And if Jim McLeod was here you wouldn't be quite so worried," supplied Jim. "I've heard a little about McLeod, Mr. Garrett. Sandy told me he was quite a sheriff."

"Quite a sheriff, quite a sheriff," repeated the rancher. "There's somethin' about you, Johnson, about them eyes of yours——" He leaned closer. "No, it can't be! I'm a desperate man. I've got to grasp at a straw like a drownin' man. If Sandy thought it best to send you 'stead of coming himself, I'll tell you all about it after a while and see what you can do to help us out. Before God we've got to be helped!"

"Good," said Jim. "Now let's put these mustangs away. It won't do for them hombres across yonder to see us talkin' too long."

Jim had recognised the buckboard, even to the frayed cushion and a broken spoke in the wheel he had replaced. He did not attempt to fathom the reason that had made Nadine Garrett give him a false name and later try to kill him, except to be sure that back of all this was some compelling motive.

He was certain now that if Bill Garrett had not killed Hailey, the nester, he had either inspired the deed, or knew to his sorrow who had committed the crime.

Neither he nor Garrett spoke as they unharnessed the mustangs and hung the harness on the pegs back of the stalls. They walked slowly toward the door.

"I think it'll be best for you to act as if you have hired me as a common puncher, Mr. Garrett," said Jim. "That way it won't rouse any suspicion as to why I'm here."

"Yes, maybe that's right," Garrett returned. "After a while I'll have you come over to the house to talk it over. I want a little while to think."

Though the sunshine tipped only the crests of the tallest peaks now, it was still light enough in the valley for objects to be discerned with fair clearness. Standing before the barn door, Jim noticed about the place an atmosphere of dejection. The look of it was like the expression he had seen in the rancher's eyes, like the momentary flashes in the eyes of his daughter. There surged anew through Jim's brain not only a determination to solve this mystery, but to do it because the solution must help those who now suffered because it was unsolved. But was it unsolved in the minds of those whom it most intimately affected? He grimly asked himself this question.

Jim was not so absorbed in his speculations that he failed to hear the soft thud of hoofs.



Looking around the corner of the barn, he saw two riders approaching. One was Nadine Garrett, still wearing the chaps and floppy sombrero.

The other was a man, tall, rangy, large of frame. He had a dark moustache but this did not keep Jim from recognising him as Dick Garrett, for he had the same rugged cast of features as his father. What Jim saw, and with a start, was that Dick rode a grey horse, and that now the rifle and scabbard were under his stirrup-fender. Had it been Dick and not his sister who had fired from the ridge?

Bill Garrett stepped around the corner, and there was a thin smile on his weathered face. Dick's jaw was set and his face was grim as he came on. He did not appear to see his father, all his attention being riveted upon the newcomer. There was a pallid little smile on the girl's tanned, pretty face. They reined up.

"Hello, Dad," said the girl a little wearily. Her smile vanished, and she looked at Jim as if she had never before seen him.

His look was as impersonal. He even fidgeted a little, like a cowboy about to be presented to a strange young lady.

"Nadie," said her father with evident pride, "this is Jim Johnson, a new puncher I've decided to take a chance on. Johnson, this is my daughter Nadine."

"How do you do, Mr. Johnson."

"Howdy do, Miss Garrett," Jim returned stiffly.

"And this here's my son Dick," went on Garrett. "Dick, I figured we might take a chance on hirin' Johnson, seein' we need another rider, and him sayin' he was ready to wait for his pay."

"You're the boss, Dad," Dick half growled, his cold blue eyes not shifting from Jim's impassive face. "He may have to wait a good while for his pay, I reckon."

With a sudden graceful movement he dismounted, took two strides, and reached out a big hand at the end of a long, muscular arm.

"Glad to meet up with you, Johnson."

"That goes double, Garrett." Jim pressed the big hand with a violence that made Dick's mouth twist. "I reckon I'm willin' to take a chance on the Rafter G. Got to work somewhere. Have a smoke?"

"Just threw one away, thanks." Dick turned, and detaching the scabbard from the saddle, set it and the big rifle against the barn wall.

Nadine had dismounted. After pushing some stray strands of her dark hair under her hat-brim with an instinctively feminine gesture, she loosened the belt about her slim waist and kicked out of the batwing chaps.

Standing there in her worn half-boots, her overalls, her faded cotton shirt, she would have been like a slim boy had it not been for her supple rounded curves of hip and bosom which even such garb could not disguise.

"I must get a move on if I'm to get on a dress



in time for supper," she said, and started toward the house. As she passed Jim she flashed him a smile of recognition, but in her eyes was the look of defiance and fear and suspicion he had seen there twice before.

"Get any mustangs to-day, Dick?" asked Garrett, but before his son could answer went on: "Johnson, the damned wild fuzz-tails have got to be so thick they're eatin' off our feed. Dick's killin' 'em off as fast as he can."

This seemed to Jim a weak excuse of some sort. If the Rafter G herds were so depleted as Sandy Naughton had said, Garrett should not worry about the grass wild horses would eat off the range.

"Didn't get a horse to-day," Dick said. "That old rifle is gettin' to be so worn it plays the bullets so I can't hit one at four hundred yards."

"At four hundred yards!" Jim muttered gratefully under his breath, vividly recalling that had been the approximate distance from the ridge to the trail. "Dick Garrett, I'm sure glad that rifle of yours has come to the point where it's not so very accurate even at four hundred yards."

As if impelled by curiosity prompted by the discussion of the weapon, Jim stepped to the wall and picked it up, drawing it from the scabbard. He saw that the barrel, receiver and magazine-case were shiny-bright with wear, that forearm and stock were scarred and abraded

and free of all varnish. He casually turned the weapon until he could see the barrel just ahead of the receiver. He saw stamped there the tiny numerals—30-40. He shoved the rifle back into the scabbard, and as he went to lean it against the wall, Dick reached out.

"Needs cleanin'," he growled. "I'll take it over to the house."

"It sure looks like it'd seen plenty service," said Jim as he handed over the weapon.

"She's done plenty of work," agreed Dick striding away.

"Dick's the best mustang hunter in this part of the country," said his father. "Reckon he's killed upward of five hundred wild mustangs with that rifle. No wonder it's not as akkerate as it used to be."

"They're good wild-horse guns, those 30-40's. All the professional mustang hunters up north use 'em," said Jim.

Garrett gave him a brief, but hard scrutiny.

"What part of the north was you referrin' to, Johnson?"

"Wyoming and Montana," Jim answered quickly. "They're the only part of the north range country I know anything about. There's still plenty of wild mustangs left up there in spots."

"You was never in Nevada, Johnson?"

"Why, yeah," drawled Jim. "I've ridden through the state a couple of times on trains. Never punched cows or shot wild horses up there if that's what you mean. Don't you reckon I'd



better ramble over to the bunk-house if I'm goin' to find a place to bed down? "

"Yes, I reckon you might as well, Johnson. I'll send for you when I want to talk things over. Tell Baldy to help you find some beddin'."

## CHAPTER X

JIM went to the corral and picked up his war-bag. As he started across the yard he saw something that did not add to his peace of mind. He had thought Nadine had hurried into the ranch-house, but she was talking to Tassler under a tree near the porch. Tassler had changed his clothes, and even in the twilight his silk shirt made a bright spot. There was something disconcertingly familiar about the pair. Jim could not catch what they were saying, but when Tassler laughed derisively he felt the laugh was meant for him.

"Damned pup!" he muttered. "He's the kind of hombre that thinks he knocks the girls dead at a cow country dance."

Walking to the cook-house, Jim called to Baldy to come and help him find a place to sleep.

"Sure thing!" replied Baldy. "Plenty of room."

In the long bunk-house Jim saw by the array of beds built against the walls what a big outfit the Rafter G had once been. He counted twenty-four bunks, which meant that the outfit had once employed that many riders. Now but



three of the beds were used, indicating that Dick Garrett slept in the ranch-house.

"That there's Joe Tassler's bunk," Baldy declared contemptuously, indicating a corner bunk well away from the ones Baldy and Chuck used. "It's more like a woman's bud-wor."

Jim had to smile, for the only strange things about the bed were that it had a clean coverlet and a white slip on the pillow. There was a table close beside it, and on the table lay some magazines and a brace of '45 revolvers.

"Kind of looks like Mr. Tassler was a gunman," ventured Jim.

"That's one thing he don't put on no dog about," returned Baldy, reluctant to make any concession to Tassler. "He's a dead shot and faster'n hell meltin' ice. If ever you mix with that hombre, don't give him no chance to get the break on you."

"What makes you think I'll mix with Tassler?"

"Well—I dunno. I was just wantin' to put you wise, Jim. Say, did you get the job from the old man?"

"I did," Jim returned soberly, selecting a bunk, under which he shoved his war-bag.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Baldy cried in admiration. "I'm the man that killed Ed Hailey if you ain't all right! How'd you work it? I bet Chuck a dollar against five the old man would give you a job, even if I did know he wasn't able to hire any men!"

"Then go and collect your five-spot, kid,"

said Jim as he sat down on the edge of the bunk. "What's this about you bein' the man that killed Ed Hailey? I never heard anybody by that name was killed."

"Aw, I didn't kill him," Baldy stammered. "I never killed nobody. Honest! I just happened to say that because I was so durned glad the old man had give you a job. Ridin'?"

"I reckon," drawled Jim. "Tell me about this killin'. I'm always interested in killin's, Baldy. Maybe this won't be a healthy country to stay in. When and how'd it happen?"

It did not take long for Baldy to tell all he knew of the murder.

"But don't they know who did it?" asked Jim.

"They don't know," Baldy answered, glancing fearfully about. "But there's suspicions."

"Yeah? Mind tellin' me, kid?"

Baldy turned red and fidgeted nervously.

"I'd ruther not mention them suspicions," he said warily. "Maybe when I get to know you better I'll tell you what's goin' round."

Jim had lit a candle that stood in the neck of a bottle on a shelf at the head of the bunk. Now in its light he eyed the awkward boy and open admiration showed in his eyes.

"Baldy," he asked confidentially, "did you kill this nester?"

"Hell, no! Aw—sure I didn't kill him! I—I never killed nobody! I'm tellin' you the Gawd's truth! There goes the supper bell!"

As if he had seen stark accusation in Jim



Johnson's grey eyes, Baldy stumbled over his own long legs in his haste to get out of the bunk-house. Jim blew out the candle, and grinned as he hurried after the boy.

When he reached the cook-house he found that Baldy was already seated and raking some beans on to his plate. Baldy's face was red, and his eyes were downcast. Bill Garrett was at the head of the long, oilcloth-covered table, only a small portion of which was set.

Tassler sat at Garrett's left. His apricot-coloured silk shirt and dazzling blue tie made a shocking contrast with his handsome dark face. His black hair was oiled and slicked down. Next to Tassler sat Chuck Horn, as careless of his appearance as Tassler was finicky.

"Set in, Johnson, and make yourself at home," invited Garrett. "Plenty of grub, such as it is."

Jim took a seat beside Baldy, leaving the one next to the corner vacant. Dick Garrett came in, and slid along the worn bench to a place beside Chuck.

Jim reached under the table and laid a hand on Baldy's knee, giving it a reassuring pat. Baldy jerked about, his cheeks pouched with meat and potatoes.

"Take it easy, kid," warned Jim with a chuckle. "It ain't good for the digestion to eat too fast."

Baldy gulped the great mouthful with such an effort that his eyes bulged and there was a descending lump down his throat to where it disappeared under the collar of his shirt. He

stretched, as if by spasmodic movement he could slip himself up on the bite. He made a last effectual swallow and drew in his breath quickly.

"Ain't it?" he asked.

"It sure ain't," returned Jim. "Nothin' worse for a feller's digestion than eatin' fast."

"Aw, hell," sneered Tassler, "if he wants to eat like a hog let him go out and hire himself a trough."

"Lay off the kid, Joe," warned Chuck with ominous softness. "It's his business how he eats."

Anger surged across Tassler's face as he turned to the cowboy beside him.

"Says who, Horn?" he sneered.

"You heard me, I reckon." After a long look Chuck turned back to his eating.

"That'll be about enough of that, boys," growled Bill Garrett.

Baldy was now staring across at Tassler. All the colour had drained from his broad face, leaving it pasty, with the big freckles standing out like embossed terra-cotta splotches. For an instant a desire to do murder shone in his round blue eyes.

Baldy, however, was not one to be long down-hearted or disturbed. He was soon attacking his meal with renewed zest. Jim was speculating on the evident bad blood between Tassler and the boy, when he heard a light, quick step.

The long, bare-walled room was illuminated by a large oil lamp that hung directly over the table. In its light Jim saw Nadine Garrett



coming in, but not the same Nadine he had helped day before yesterday at the forks of the road east of Las Animas, nor was she the defiant little rider he had met this very afternoon on the range beyond Saucer Basin.

She had on a starched, checked red gingham dress that made her look inches taller than the overalls and shirt. The dress had a wide, white collar under which a lavender scarf was drawn and knotted in a carelessly loose bow beneath the slight hollow at the base of her tanned and rounded throat. Her dark hair was done high on her head. Her lips were red and a little parted, and there shone a patch of crimson on each cheek. She was now as Jim Johnson had pictured she would be.

"Hey, Nadine!" shouted Baldy. "Set in and put on the nosebag!"

Though she laughed at the boy's awkward but sincere invitation, the crimson of embarrassment flooded her cheeks.

"I'll do just that, Baldy," she replied.

There was now no fear, no suspicion in her expression. Jim was trying to keep his thoughts from registering in his eyes when she stopped opposite him, and smiling faintly, said:

"I hope you are getting enough to eat, Mr. Johnson."

"Thanks, Miss Garrett," Jim returned, "I'm managin' to make out."

"That's fine." After a lingering look at him, she walked to the head of the table where she paused for a moment to rest one of her slim,

brown hands upon her father's mat of snowy hair. "All right, Dad?"

"Doin' all right, Nadie," he returned affectionately, reaching up a hand to hers for a moment. "Better sit down, honey. Ramon, fetch some hot vittles."

The Mexican cook came in with the coffee-pot and a broiled steak on a platter. He set the steak before the girl, and poured her cup of coffee.

"Ah, the queen gets something special as usual," commented Tassler a little ironically.

Nadine flashed him a look.

"Does it take any hair off your horse if she does?" she asked.

Before Tassler could make a retort she had lowered her head, and turned quickly to Baldy, who sat beside her.

"Baldy," she said with a laugh, "you should use your best manners to-night. Don't you see we have company?"

"What do you mean, Nadine?" Baldy tried to look at her.

"Why the way you yelled at me to come and put on the nosebag. Mr. Johnson may not know what that means, or that you said it just because you and I are old friends."

"Aw—aw. I reckon he knows what a nosebag means," stammered Baldy, reddening. "Shucks, he knows I—I didn't mean no—no unrespect."

"That's all right, kid," reassured Jim as he patted the boy's big knee under the table. "I like to see you so candid with your old friends."



She leaned suddenly forward so she could look past Baldy.

"You are used to cow ranch candour, then, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yeah," returned Jim, "this isn't exactly the first cook-shack I've put on the nosebag in, Miss Garrett."

Little was said during the remainder of the meal. Jim, watching closely, did not like the way Tassler looked across at the girl, or the way the colour mounted to her cheeks under the bold penetration of his gaze. She kept her eyes on her plate most of the time.

Tassler was the first to finish. He got up, carefully brushed any possible crumbs from his apricot shirt and blue trousers, rolled a cigarette, apparently oblivious of everybody except himself and the girl.

"Guess I'll be ridin' into town," he announced gravely. "So long." He paused, as if to get some response from Nadine.

"You'll be back for work in the mornin', Joe?" asked Bill Garrett. "I want you and Baldy to comb the range toward the head of Porcupine to-morrow."

"Yeah, I'll be back," Tassler answered arrogantly, and after another look down at the girl's bowed head, shrugged and strode out.

In a few minutes Baldy clumsily excused himself and followed. Jim was the next to go. As he stepped from the porch and stopped to light a cigarette, he heard those inside begin a conversation, as if they had been reluctant to

talk while he was there. He moved farther away so he might not hear what they were saying.

Pondering upon the possibilities of his job, Jim stood puffing at his cigarette. He saw a shadow move from the stable doorway. Then Tassler swung into the saddle and galloped toward the end of the lane between the alfalfa fields.

Jim sauntered to the bunk-house, where he made out a big, dejected figure huddled on the porch. Baldy was holding his head between his hands.

"What's wrong now, kid?"

"Aw, I gotta kill that hombre," groaned Baldy. "I just got to do it!"

"Kill? Kill who, Baldy?"

"Tassler. I gotta kill him sooner or later. Might's well make it sooner. Got a damn' good notion to foller him to town and call for a showdown!"

Jim sat down and laid an arm across the boy's big shoulders.

"Aw, he rides me all the time!" snarled Baldy. "He thinks he's so damned smart just because he's good-lookin'."

"Now look here, kid," said Jim, "you've got to learn to stand up and take it on the jaw. When Joe ridicules you, ridicule him. That shirt he's got on now is funny enough for a start. Why not tell him how much like a buck Injun he looks in it?"

"No," Baldy declared, "I ain't goin' to waste no joshin' on him."



Jim tried to point out that Baldy would have little chance with Tassler in a gun-fight.

"Maybe you're right about him bein' a gunman," Baldy conceded, "but that don't make no difference. I'll shoot him in the back if I have to!"

"Like you shot Hailey, eh?"

Baldy sprang up as if a hot tack had punctured him. He towered belligerently, big hands clenched.

"Damn you, Johnson!" he half shouted. "I didn't shoot Ed Hailey! You take back that there 'sination, or——"

"Sit down, kid," Jim ordered gently. "I didn't say you shot Ed Hailey. You just gave me a good opportunity to make sure you didn't. Besides, it doesn't matter a hell of a lot to me who shot him. Here's the rest of the folks comin' from the cook-shack."

Nadine and her father passed on their way to the ranch-house. She had an arm linked in his. Neither glanced toward the men on the bunk-house porch. Close behind them came Dick Garrett and Chuck. Chuck went on in. Dick stopped and said:

"Come on, fellers. We're goin' to have a little poker till time to roll in."

"Aw, I don't wanna play to-night," mumbled Baldy. "Don't feel like it!"

With a laugh Jim jerked him to his feet.

"Ah, come on. The biggest winnin's I ever made were when I felt the bluest."

"I don't wanna play to-night," whined Baldy. "Be-sides, I ain't got only two bits."

"Don't let that worry you," Jim counselled with another laugh. "I'll stake you. I'll stake any square guy with the blues." He forced a number of silver coins into the boy's big hand.

"All right, if you want me to play your dinero," agreed Baldy, "but I'm warnin' you now I don't feel lucky."

When they went in they found Chuck and Dick arranging the old table under the lamp in the middle of the room. Baldy kicked up a chair and thudded his big frame into it. Instead of sitting down, however, Jim walked toward the corner where Tassler's bunk was.

Though this end of the long room was gloomy, it was light enough for him to see that there was now but one of the big Colts lying on the small table, and that another object that had been in the corner near the head of the bunk was missing. He walked slowly back to the card-table, and was about to give Baldy some advice on how to skin cowpunchers out of their money, when he looked up to see Nadine Garrett framed in the doorway.

"Mr. Johnson," she called softly, "my father would like to see you at the house."

"Good!" Jim strode toward her, but turned his head. "Play 'em close to your vest, Baldy."



## CHAPTER XI

WHEN Jim reached the porch he saw Nadine on the ground. The dim light from the doorway fell squarely upon her. He thought she was going to speak but she turned and started toward the ranch-house. Jumping from the end of the porch, he fell into stride beside her.

For half the distance she almost ran, so fearful did she seem of him or some unseen thing. Then her pace slowed. They were in the shadow of one of the big cottonwoods when suddenly she swung in ahead of him and turned, blocking his path. He could hear the quick intake of her breath. Then her hands shot out and grasped his arms.

"Why are you here?" she whispered tensely, shaking him as if she would wring a truthful answer from him.

Her face made only a whitish blur but he could see the gleam of her eyes.

"Why, I had to get a job somewhere," he told her. "I thought Big Grass Valley was about the best show."

"But didn't I tell you not to come here? I tried at least!"

"Then you are willin' to admit I'm the man that helped you with the wheel, and that I saw you out on the range this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you refuse to recognise me out there?"

"I—had my own reasons," she faltered, then: "Oh, I hated you so because you had refused to take my warning to keep out of this country, that I felt like shooting you!"

"Why didn't you, then?"

"I don't know." There was almost a sob in her words. "Maybe it would have been better if I had."

"Have you told anybody that you have seen me before?"

"N-no."

"Are you goin' to?"

"Not unless you make me. Won't you please ride away from Big Grass, Mr. Johnson? All the good you can do here will only bring us more—trouble!"

It took all his will to keep him from taking her in his arms and leading her to the old bench built around the bole of the cottonwood, the same bench on which they had played as children.

"Do you want me to hit the trail, Nadine?" he asked softly.

"Yes! Will you?" Apparently she failed to notice he had used her given name. "Please go!"

"Why?"

"I can't tell! But won't you believe me when



I tell you you can do us no good ? ” Her hands reached up frantically and caught his shoulders. Even in the gloom he could see the imploring, frightened look in her eyes.

“ Now look here, what makes you think I’m here to help you, or do you folks any harm ? I’m just Jim Johnson, cowpuncher, and I came to this ranch to get a job.”

“ You’re Jim Johnson all right,” she said bitterly. “ And I don’t doubt you are a cowboy, or that you managed to convince my father he ought to hire you, but he can’t afford it. Oh, I wish you would ride away ! ”

“ Tell me what you are afraid of here,” he said gently.

“ I can’t. Oh, I’m not afraid of anything, except that I know my father will never be able to pay you. Really he doesn’t know what he is doing these days. Please don’t impose on him ! ”

Reaching up, he detached her hands from his shoulders, held them.

“ Suppose we wait till I’ve talked with your father ? ” he suggested. “ If I think he won’t be able to pay me, I sure won’t linger long on the Rafter G. He sent for me, didn’t he ? ”

As they stepped upon the gloomy, wide porch, Jim instinctively glanced back, noting that directly across the yard was a corral, and that at its left the big barn made a black shadow against the level plain.

She opened the door and he followed her into a short hall. At the end an open door let in some light. Jim remembered this hall. It even had

the same hat-rack made of long, polished steer horns.

As she led the way into the room her father rose stiffly from a rocking chair.

"Here's Mr. Johnson, Dad," she said without stopping.

"Thank you, Nadie. Come right in, Johnson."

With head held high and hands clenched at her sides the girl went to the door at the rear of the living-room, slammed it after her. Jim thought he caught the sound of running feet.

"Set down, Johnson," said Garrett.

Before Jim took the chair the rancher indicated he glanced about the room. With its old furniture and worn rag carpet it was such a room as might have been seen in any ranch-house. The shades of the two windows were drawn. There was a large stone fireplace.

As Jim sat down he looked more closely at Garrett's weathered face. It was grimmer, more haggard than when he had seen it at supper. The faded eyes were deeper in their sockets.

"Johnson," began the rancher, "you say Sandy Naughton sent you?"

"Yes, just as I told you, Mr. Garrett."

"I don't want you to think I doubt your word, boy, but since I had time to think this over, I decided you ought to have somethin' to show what you are."

"Sandy gave me a letter to use in case you made a request like this," smiled Jim.

Garrett perused the letter slowly and handed it back.



"That's all right, Johnson. Don't be offended at me wantin' to make sure you are on the square."

"Is Sandy's word proof of that, sir?"

"Proof enough for me, I reckon. Sandy's a square man, even if he is a dumb sheriff. I guess, though, it's as well Sandy ain't such a sheriff as Jim McLeod used to be. This here country ain't been the same place since McLeod left it to go north somewheres. Johnson, do you know what I want you for?"

"Nothin' except what your unsigned letter to Sandy Naughton said, Mr. Garrett. You said you were in desperate trouble."

The changed expression of the old rancher's eyes showed that he was doubtful whether or not he should proceed. After a few moments his jaw clamped resolutely.

"Yes, Johnson, I am in desperate trouble. I reckon it's as desperate as any man finds himself in. I don't know whether you can help me. You look purty young."

"I'm sure I can't help you unless I know what the trouble is," declared Jim. "It's up to you whether you tell me or not."

"Tell you?" gasped the rancher. "Good God! I've got to tell somebody! I've got to have somebody help me—us!" He got up and walked to the door through which his daughter had gone. He opened it to a wide crack and looked through into a dark room. "Nadie!" he called softly. When there was no answer he came back to where Jim waited.

"I figured it would be better if Nadine didn't

hear what I got to tell you," he said as he lumped into his chair.

Jim waited, feeling the quickening of his brain, and was grateful to that sixth sense he had inherited from his father which had counselled him to keep on his gun. He touched the bulge of the handle of the Colt under his coat.

"Johnson," said Garrett abruptly, "did you ever hear of the killin' of a man named Ed Hailey?"

"Yes, Sandy Naughton told me a little about it. He said he had never been able to find out who did it."

"I've got to tell you who did it!" Garrett declared in a husky whisper as he leaned forward, gripping the smoothed arms of the old chair. "I've got to tell you who did it, to see if you can help me. Johnson, my boy Dick killed Hailey! Do you hear me? My boy Dick killed Ed Hailey!"

It was the fact that within the past hour Jim had considered Dick Garrett as one of the probable suspects that kept the shock from registering on his face. He rolled a cigarette with steady fingers.

"But why didn't you go to Sandy and tell him, Mr. Garrett?" he asked.

"I meant to, Johnson. I was goin' to tell Sandy as I'm tellin' you now, if he had come 'stead of you. Can't you realise my feelin's? Can't you see how hard it is for a man to be forced to confess his boy is a dry-gulchin' murderer?"

"Mr. Garrett, how many people besides you and Dick know he killed Hailey?"



Garrett glanced warily about, hesitated.

"Just one," he whispered huskily.

"Nadine? Your daughter, I mean."

"N-no," said the rancher, "I don't believe Nadine knows about it, though she may suspect. Nadie hasn't been the same for a long time. Her and her brother is mighty close. Dick might have told her or, she bein' a woman, might have wormed the secret out of him."

Jim clamped his jaw upon some bitter thoughts, which he reasoned were just now better left unsaid. He got up and walked slowly to the far side of the room, turned slowly, eyes on the irregular striping of the worn carpet. He was confronted by his sworn duty as a deputy sheriff and by his duty to the father and brother of the girl whose image he had carried in his brain for all these years. Which was the greater? Before sitting down Jim stepped to the fireplace and tossed his cigarette away.

"Mr. Garrett, who is the other man that knows Dick killed Hailey?"

"He's Tim Perry," replied the rancher. "Perry, he runs a saloon in Prairie City. He's got the bullet that was taken from Hailey's saddle." Garrett shook his head and groaned miserably. "Johnson, it wouldn't be so damned bad if Hailey hadn't been shot out of his saddle from behind! It more than breaks my heart to think a boy of mine would shoot a man in the back—no matter what ground he had."

Jim's lips fixed themselves in a grim, cold smile. He thought he knew now why the Rafter G was

selling off all its cattle, why Garrett was on the verge of financial ruin.

"Perry was up Marfa Crick that day, shootin' sage-chickens," Garrett went on painfully. "He happened along in time to see Hailey on the ground beside his horse. He found the bullet and dug it out."

"And——" prompted Jim Johnson.

"Yeah," groaned Garrett, "Dick was up that away the same day shootin' wild mustangs. He had his 30-40 Winchester as usual. The bullet tallies with the ones Dick uses in the rifle. That's the hell of it, Johnson! With Perry havin' the one bit of evidence, the bullet, and Dick bein' up that way the same day, can't you see the dead-wood's on my boy?"

"From what you say it sure looks like it," Jim admitted. "Had Dick and this Hailey ever had any trouble?"

Garrett's harried eyes seemed to retreat still deeper into their sockets.

"Yes, they did. Not a week before the killin' Dick and Hailey had trouble over a card-game in the Maverick Saloon—that's Perry's place. Dick threatened to kill him because Hailey claimed he'd caught Dick cheatin'. It wasn't but a moderate poker game."

"And Perry saw the trouble?"

"Yeah, he saw and heard it all."

"Tell me," Jim said, "all you know about this nester Hailey."

Garrett explained that as homesteaders had begun to settle in the valley, especially along its



easterly side beyond Prairie City, he had decided it was time to secure a valid water-right on Marfa Creek in order that he might use the water to irrigate the vast stretch of nearly level land east of the ranch buildings. By a mile-long ditch the water was to be diverted into Saucer Basin, and from there, by a tunnel through the southerly rim, out upon the level land.

"I'd had the plan in mind for years, Johnson, but as cattle raisin' was good I kept puttin' it off. You know it ain't exactly legal for a rancher to hire a man to homestead a claim for him, and buy him out as soon as he's proved up on his claim?"

"Yes, I know that. So you hired Hailey, financed him to homestead on Marfa Creek on the understandin' that when he'd proved up, he'd deed the homestead to you, Mr. Garrett?"

"Yeah, that's it," returned Garrett.

"Why didn't you let Dick file on the claim?"

Garrett said that Dick had used his homestead right to file on some land near the mouth of Porcupine Creek, to west, from where the water for the irrigation of the small alfalfa fields was brought.

"Dick knew of your deal with Hailey?"

"Yes, he knowed all about it," replied Garrett, "but he didn't approve of it. Dick, he never liked Hailey. I don't know just why. He took a dislike to the man when he first come into Big Grass as a cowpuncher two years ago. 'Course, Dick wanted us to get the Marfa Crick water-right, but he wanted us to get some man besides Hailey to do the filin'."

Jim's mind had the faculty of putting pieces of

evidence together as coolly as if he was solving a jigsaw puzzle. Now he realised he was working with a dual purpose, that of convicting Dick Garrett for the law's sake, and of exonerating him for the sake of himself, his father and his sister. In each instance the pieces must be fitted quickly and where they belonged.

"Sandy told me about a man named Buck Tassler," he said. "What do you know of him?"

"Brother of this feller Joe you saw at supper," replied Garrett. "Buck, he's filed on a place at the Marfa Crick canyon. Good cowman, I reckon."

"Uh-huh. When did these Tassler boys come into Big Grass, Mr. Garrett?"

The rancher said they had come to the country about a year ago. He did not know where they had come from.

"That was about the time Perry and Borquin came, wasn't it? The sheriff told me that a man named Borquin had come into Big Grass and bought the Prairie City bank."

Garrett's wrinkled lips compressed, and a deep furrow formed down his forehead.

"The Tassler boys come a little while after Perry and Borquin did," he decided. "Yeah, Borquin bought out the bank. He's sure been one good friend of mine. Johnson, I don't know what I'd have done without him! It ain't often a man finds a banker that's liberal and human-like. I want you to meet John Borquin."

"I hope to," said Jim. He asked what had become of the Hailey homestead.



Garrett replied that Slim Denver, a cowboy working for Buck Tassler, had filed on it. It was the supposition Denver would deed the claim to Buck as soon as he had proved up on it.

"Business is done that away all through the cow country," Garrett added apologetically.

"Yeah, I know," Jim agreed, "and I reckon it doesn't do much harm, as this sort of country is only good for big ranges. Nine out of ten nesters in the real cattle country starve out, and have to sell to the big outfits. There's another homesteader in Marfa Creek, Mr. Garrett? Isn't his name Ruggles, Bart Ruggles?"

Garrett suddenly bent a suspicious, inquiring gaze upon his questioner.

"It seems to me you know a hell of a lot about this Big Grass country, Johnson!"

"Sandy Naughton told me about Ruggles," Jim explained. "He wanted to give me all the points he had."

"I see, I see. Well, Ruggles, he don't amount to much. Just a worked-out rider, too old to punch cows for a livin'. He rustles some, I reckon."

"Your cows, Mr. Garrett?"

"Oh, I dunno. Reckon he brands one of my calves occasionally, Johnson."

Leaning back to ponder what he had heard, Jim saw again the harried, hunted look in Garrett's eyes. The muscles of the old man's face were twitching. His hands, which once had possessed the strength of a giant, shook as if palsied. He was trying to speak when Jim forestalled him.

"So Perry's blackmailin' you, Mr. Garrett?"

It looks as if with that bullet, and Dick havin' the only gun of the same calibre in this part of the country, he's been where he could put the screws down on you plenty hard."

"Plenty hard is right," Garrett answered. He leaned forward, shaking, but dramatically tense. "Boy, when this started I had some money. I've sold off twenty thousand dollars' worth of cattle and borrowed thirty thousand dollars on my ranch. It's all gone to Perry, every damned red cent of it, close to sixty thousand dollars!"

"Sixty thousand dollars!" echoed Jim. "Some dinero. And still you haven't got the bullet, eh?"

"I haven't got that bullet," Garrett groaned. "And the hell of it is it don't look like I would. Perry wants ten thousand dollars more by next Tuesday. He says if I get him this money it'll be the last and I can have the bullet."

"Can't you get the money, Mr. Garrett? How about your friend Borquin?"

Garrett shook his head.

"I can't get another cent from him, Johnson. You see, he's lent me more money now than my ranch is good for accordin' to bankin' practices. I don't hold it against him, but by God, I got to do somethin' before next Tuesday—or—or Perry swears he'll turn over that bullet and tell what he knows to the authorities!"

Jim asked if Perry could be put off, say for another week. Was there not some other source from which Garrett could raise ten thousand dollars? Again the rancher shook his head.

"There ain't a chance of puttin' Perry off. I



got him to put his demand off once. I was in town to see him to-day, Johnson. He's a hard man. There ain't a soul I could ask for another loan, and I haven't got five thousand dollars in cattle left on all my range. And they're included in the last mortgage John Borquin holds on me."

Strangely now Jim Johnson—Dan McLeod, son of the famous sheriff of Las Animas—was not thinking of bringing Dick Garrett to justice, but of how he could legally extricate the old friend of his father from this tragic dilemma.

The old rancher's hands reached out, clutching, as if in the strength of the younger man's he would find assistance.

"Can't you help us, Johnson?" he begged pitifully. "Can't you see what it means? My boy will be hung if this ever gets out! I'm not thinkin' so much of myself. I'm an old man and my remainin' years ain't many at best, and already my old head is bowed with shame. I was always a proud man. But there's Nadie! God, what'll happen to her if——"

Jim got up and laid an arm about the shaking shoulders. Garrett lifted a beseeching, twitching face.

"You'll help me, boy, help us, I mean?"

"I'll do the best I can, Mr. Garrett. You can bet your last white chip on that."

A momentary flicker of hope flashed in the old man's eyes, and a weary smile set on his strained face.

"Somehow I got faith in you," he muttered. "There are times when you've reminded me a

heap of Jim McLeod when he was young like you. McLeod and me was boys together. Boy, you missed knowin' a man when you missed knowin' Jim. If he was here, and he told me my boy was guilty of this terrible crime—somehow I'd muster the courage to abide by it, I reckon."

Jim's arm tightened about the old man's shoulders, and he laid a steady hand on the snowy head. For a long time they looked into each other's eyes.

"And if I find out that Dick is guilty, Mr. Garrett, you'll have to abide by it, I reckon, though I believe after what Perry's done we can save Dick from hanging."

"Hangin' ? Hangin' ?" mumbled the old man. "Yes, yes, hangin'. Johnson, I've thought of him hangin', dreamed of him hangin' ! Good God, you don't know what it has been—what it still is !"

"What does Dick say about all this, Mr. Garrett ?"

"He swears he didn't kill Ed Hailey. He don't know about Perry blackmailin' me."

Though a thin smile formed about Jim's mouth, and there was something like quizzical humour in his eyes, he did not speak even one of his sudden thoughts. Garrett managed to get to his feet, and stood holding the back of his chair, almost on the point of collapse.

"Just one more question, Mr. Garrett," said Jim, "before I go to do some hard thinkin'. How much would the Rafter G be worth if you had the Marfa Creek water on all the rich level land ?"



Garrett's head lifted. Something like pride flashed into his eyes. Jim did not realise the reason for this sudden transformation.

Bill Garrett was seeing, as he had seen so many times before, the fulfilment of his cherished ambition, water pouring into Saucer Basin, the basin a lake to its brim, water pouring out in ditches and laterals on a sweep of land rich and green with alfalfa where fat, white-faced cattle grazed, and brown haystacks stood like islands in an emerald sea. When he spoke there was the ring of pride in his voice :

"With all that the Rafter G would be worth a clean quarter-million dollars, Johnson. Yes, more !" Then his head drooped and the sparkle faded from his eyes. "It ain't no use talkin' about that, boy. It was only a dream I didn't have sense enough to wake up and grab."

## CHAPTER XII

**I**F Jim had obeyed his softer instincts, then and there he would have revealed his identity. That he did not was mainly because he knew he was in a hard country on a hard job, of which not the easiest part was to determine whether or not Dick Garrett had killed Hailey.

All the time he kept seeing the face of Nadine. There was no longer any mystery about the haunted, defiant look in her eyes. He did not blame her now for lying to him when he had first met her, or trying to kill him or to have her brother do it on the arroyo trail.

"Poor kid," he muttered as he moved toward the hallway. "It's sure hard enough on her as it is, but it may be a lot tougher."

When the rancher reached the doorway leading into the hall he clutched at its jamb for support.

"You'll lose no time in doin' the best you can for us, Johnson?" he asked. "This thing's got to be brought to a showdown before many days. There's Perry; and I don't think I can stand it much longer without losin' what little reason I've got left."



"I don't believe you'll have to wait much longer," returned Jim, little realising how very short a time he would have to wait before developments began to break about him and the Garrett family.

"That's good," said the rancher. "It's been hard—this thinkin' my boy's a bushwhackin' murderer, but I've steeled myself to it."

Now, as on a few other occasions in his life, that sixth sense in Jim McLeod's son was functioning acutely. It was this, and not his conscious mind, that sensed immediate danger, though it did not tell him from where or whom it would come. It merely bade him be alert, and in obedience to its demand he shifted his gun to a better angle, and tucked the side of his coat back into his belt. Then, grasping the door-knob, he flung the door open and stepped to the right out of the dull rectangle of light that came through the hallway.

He was still taking the side step when there was a flash of red light from across the yard. Jim heard the hiss of a bullet through the doorway. There was a cry from inside. The report of a gun shattered the dark silence.

Instinctively he threw himself forward, prone on the porch, and as he landed his .45 was in his hand, but not before there had come another shot from the corral. This time the bullet spat viciously against woodwork, shattering the edge of the door-casing.

Twice Jim fired at two more flashes from the corral. Then he rolled from the porch, and got

to his feet. As he started across the yard he fired again at where the flashes had been. There was no answering shot now. Jim quickened his crouching run, cursing himself because he had only one gun. This had but three cartridges left.

He had covered half the open space when beyond the corral he dimly saw the silhouette of the upper portion of a man against the eastern stars. He knew what it meant. The man was either climbing to the fence or getting into his saddle. Jim fired twice as fast as he could thumb the hammer. He would keep one shot for the final showdown in case he had no time to reload. He was running toward the corral when he caught the sound of hoofs.

"Damned murderin' bushwhacker," he snarled. "He's gettin' away!"

In a dozen long strides he was at the corral. He dashed around its northerly side, flung himself to the ground to get the silhouette of rider and horse against the stars. For the sixth time his Colt shattered the silence. The silhouette faded into the night, the hoof-beats melted into silence.

By the time Jim had begun to ram empty shells out of his gun and insert new cartridges, there were shouts from the direction of the bunk-house. Out of them rose Baldy's quavering bellow :

"Hey there ! What's the matter ? That you, Dick ? That you, Jim ? "

"It's me, Baldy!" shouted Johnson. "One of you get a lantern, pronto ! "

Baldy tangled up in his own legs and sprawled in



his haste to obey the order. Old Chuck Horn, a gun at his hip, ran swiftly toward the corral.

"That you, Johnson?" he snarled. "What's wrong?"

"Yeah, it's me," Jim called back. "If you've got a hog-leg, stick it in your belt, Chuck. The hombre who started the show's gone on a horse and gone fast."

Chuck, however, did not obey the command. When he came closer, Jim could see the gun in his right hand. His grisled head was thrust forward. His crooked arm was lifted enough to hold the big revolver level with his hip.

"What's the rumpus about?" the old cow-puncher demanded.

Jim explained briefly. Slowly Chuck's gun lowered. He shoved it into the waistband of his overalls.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "Somebody tried to get you, Johnson?"

"Sort of seems like it. Anyway he was sure shootin' mighty close to where I had been."

Baldy was now running across the yard, waving a lantern! As he slid to a stop he gave the lantern such a violent jerk that it was extinguished.

"Wha-wha-what'n hell's wrong?" he panted.

"Johnson says somebody tried to get him from the corral here," Chuck said without conviction.

"The h-h-hell!" stuttered Baldy. "Did he get you, Jim?"

"Not so you could notice it," Jim returned as he touched the flame of a match to the smoking lantern-wick.

In the light the big freckles on Baldy's ashen face stood out distinctly. His eyes were wide.

"But who done it?" he insisted. "Why'd he do it?"

Jim did not answer. He was going slowly along the fence, Chuck beside him, Baldy kept close behind.

"Uh-huh," muttered Jim as they came to the side of the corral that fronted the ranch-house. He shone the light upon the ground.

"Reckon you wasn't lyin' so far," grunted Chuck. "Them tracks look like a feller had squatted there against the fence fer some time."

Jim, carrying the lantern, led the way to the opposite side of the corral. Here the ground, upturned over a small area, showed that a horse had been tied for at least half an hour. The deep imprint of a man's boot in the soft dirt disclosed how he had put most of his weight on that leg as he had sprung into his saddle.

"Better keep off those tracks, boys," said Jim. "We may want to measure 'em."

"But good Gawd!" gasped Baldy. "Who could it've been? You don't suppose——"

"We ain't doin' no s'posin' right now," Chuck growled as he roughly grasped the boy's arm. "Talkin' ain't needed till a feller knows what he's talkin' about. You keep your trap shut, kid!"

Jim was wondering why Chuck did not want Baldy to talk, when there came a frantic scream from the ranch-house. Without a thought except to discover the meaning of the terrified, appealing



cry, Jim hit a run at the first stride. Baldy and Chuck came after him. As they neared the house Jim saw Nadine framed against the light of the hallway.

"What's wrong?" he shouted.

"Dick! Chuck! Baldy!" she cried, obviously ignoring him. "Dad's been shot! Oh, Dick, please hurry!"

As Jim vaulted to the porch and strode toward the doorway, she backed away from him. He followed her into the living-room where a glance showed him Garrett, slumped limply in his rocking chair.

Baldy and Chuck had now come noisily in. Jim looked at the girl. She was rigid, her hands clenched at her throat. Her face, her lips were without a vestige of colour. Her violet eyes were filled with loathing.

"Why did you shoot my father?" she cried tensely.

Jim gave her a smile that twisted up an end of his mouth. He did not speak to her, but to her father.

"Are you hard hit, Mr. Garrett?"

"No, not bad, Johnson," muttered Garrett. "Just along the right side. Where's Dick?"

"Where's Dick?" the girl echoed. "Oh, where is he?"

"He ain't here, Nadie," said old Chuck grimly.

"Dick, he rode off to town," stammered Baldy. "I—I skinned him out of two dollars on the first three plays and he got mad and said he was goin'

to town to play poker with real men. Honest, I couldn't help bein' lucky."

"Dick's gone to town?" Garrett gasped unbelievably.

"It's just like Baldy says," declared Chuck.

"Oh—I don't see why he had to do that!" moaned the girl. Then she whirled to confront Jim again. "Why did you shoot my father?"

Jim reached out and caught her wrists. He could feel her tremble with hatred.

"Miss Garrett," he said coolly, "I didn't shoot your father. What does he have to say about it?"

"Course you didn't shoot me, Johnson," declared the rancher, his voice firm but tremulous.

"Nadie, don't accuse him of that! It ain't fair! It ain't the way of the Garretts to be unfair."

"Un-fair," she repeated contemptuously, then with all the anguish in her soul: "God, but life has been unfair enough to the Garretts!"

In a moment she had hold of herself. "Excuse what I said, Johnson," she said. "I don't know——"

"That's all right, Nadine," he assured her gently. "I know how it is. Let's see how bad your father is hurt."

"Oh, yes! But why isn't Dick here?"

"Cause he got sore at losin' two dollars to me I reckon," put in Baldy. "We didn't want him to go."

"I don't see why he had to go," said Garrett.

"And he'll get drunk!" the girl cried. "Oh, I know he will!"



Jim stripped off the rancher's shirt, his flannel undershirt. The right sides of both shirts were soaked with blood. Jim pressed a clean part of the outer garment against the man's bloody side.

"Just a gash in between two ribs," he announced. "I don't believe it even scratched a rib or cut through inside."

"Told Nadie it wasn't nothin' worse'n a bob-wire cut on an old horse," Garrett chuckled. "It ain't anythin' to worry about. I'm a heap more worried about who done it, and because Dick ain't here."

Jim told Nadine to get some hot water. Nobody seemed to notice that he had taken command of the situation, or if they did, to question it.

"Here, Chuck," he said, "hold this shirt against Mr. Garrett's side so as to stop the blood."

As Chuck obeyed, Jim took Baldy by the arm and led him out to the porch.

"Kid, get my horse and saddle him. Have him here pronto!"

"But where you a-goin', Jim?" the boy expostulated. "What do you think? Who done it?"

"Never mind where I'm goin', or who did it just now. Hustle, or I'll give you a kick in the seat of the pants."

"A' right! I'm a-goin', but I'd like to know what it's all about."

"So would I," Jim agreed, and turned back into the house.

He saw Nadine entering from the rear door with a basin of steaming water.

"The kettle was still hot," she explained. "I was getting ready to wash my hair when I—I heard the shots."

"Any disinfectant in the house?" asked Jim.

"There's some carbolic."

"Please get it then."

With the assistance of Chuck they got Garrett to a couch and laid him down. Then with fingers as quick and accurate as those of a surgeon Jim cleaned the wound. They had neither bandages nor tape, and were forced to tear an old bed sheet into strips. The wound continued to bleed freely. Jim pondered over this. He looked up at the anxious girl.

"Have you any alum in the house, Nadine?"

"Yes, I think we have. Powdered?"

"Fine. Get it please."

She hurried back, carrying a small paper bag.

"This is goin' to hurt some, Mr. Garrett," said Jim.

"That's all right," returned the rancher, compressing his white lips. "Dog-gone, this is just like doctorin' a horse cut on bob-wire. Sprinkle her on, Jim. I treated more'n one horse the same way, and never even felt sorry for him."

"But we're sorry for you, Daddy," the girl whispered. "We're terribly sorry."

"Yeah, I know, Nadie. Don't look so scared. It's nothin' to worry about!"

"But it is! Oh, I wish I knew who did it!"

"I think we'll know before long," Jim declared grimly.

The alum, though momentarily painful, sufficed



to check the immediate flow of blood. Jim put a pad over the red gash, and wound strips of sheeting about Garrett's big, lean body.

By the time this work had been finished Baldy appeared and announced that he had Jim's horse in front of the house.

"Good," accepted Jim. "Now haze yourself over to the bunk-house and get my hat. There's a box of cartridges in my war-bag. Get me a handful."

Baldy turned and stumbled out :

"Where is your father's room, Miss Garrett ?" Jim inquired.

She pointed toward a door.

"In there. Where are you going, Mr. Johnson ?"

"I'm ridin' to town. We've got to have a doctor and some medicine for your father."

"Doctor ?" snorted Garrett, sitting up. "I don't need no doctor !" His appealing eyes rested for a long moment upon Jim's cool, inquiring ones. "Johnson, I don't want no doctor ! This here ain't any worse'n a bob-wire cut on a horse ! Tain't as bad, 'cause it ain't got hair on it !" He laughed feebly.

Jim turned to the girl, and asked her what she thought. She hesitated, a furrow between her brows.

"Maybe Dad's right," she assented. "It really doesn't look so bad—and maybe we'd better not have Dr. Thompson come out."

Though Jim thought the wounded rancher should have a doctor's attention, he did not just

now want the shooting to become public, and reasoned that Garrett and daughter were swayed by the same motive.

"Help me get him to bed, Chuck," he ordered.

In a few minutes they had Garrett comfortable in his bed, he meanwhile protesting the smallness of his hurt, and telling them not to make a fuss over him.

"Where's Nadie?" he asked suddenly.

"She'll be back in a few minutes, Mr. Garrett," replied Jim.

"Girl's plumb scared and worried," grunted Chuck.

Jim took the old rider by the elbow and forcibly guided him to the door.

"I want a word or two alone with him, Chuck."

Chuck made no comment. Jim closed the door and turned back to the bed.

"What you goin' to town for, Johnson?" demanded Garrett.

"I'm goin' to Prairie City to find the man that shot at us a while ago," returned Jim. "When I find him I'll have the man that killed Hailey."

"You don't—think it was——" whispered Garrett, and was unable to finish the question.

"To be square with you," Jim answered, smiling encouragingly, "I don't know, but a hunch tells me it wasn't. Don't play any money on my hunch just yet, though."

"God grant you're right!" whispered the old man, reaching out a shaking hand. "I'm a-trustin' you, boy."



Jim took the cold hand and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"There's one question I want to ask you, Mr. Garrett. It's about the letter you wrote Sandy Naughton. Did you tell anybody that you were goin' to write it?"

"Why, yeah, I told one man," replied Garrett candidly. "It was John Borquin who runs the bank in Prairie City. John's my best friend hereabouts. I talked the matter over with him before I wrote to Sandy."

"Did he advise you to write it?"

Garrett's forehead creased into more wrinkles.

"Come to think of it, John didn't commit himself one way or the other. Bankers is that away most of the time; don't like to advise on things not connected with their business."

"Yeah, they usually are," drawled Jim. "Now I got to be on my way. See you before daylight, Mr. Garrett."

"And may the Good Lord ride at your stirrup, as the Mexicans say," the rancher replied.

Opening the door, Jim came face to face with Nadine. She had changed the starched gingham for the riding habit and felt hat she had worn when he had met her at the forks of the road east of Las Animas. There were spots of colour in her cheeks now, and though her eyes were still clouded by trouble, there was in them no look of irresolution.

"Where are you goin'?"

"I'm going to town with you, Mr. Johnson. No, there's no use arguing with me. I know what

I'm doing." Her chin was up now, and her eyes were resolute. "Please let me past so I can see Dad for a few minutes!"

"But your horse?" Jim knew she could not be dissuaded. He blocked her way.

"Chuck's getting my horse. Please let me past."



## CHAPTER XIII

As Jim Johnson half consciously replied to Baldy's excited questions, he recalled again the advice of his father.

"Boy," the sheriff of Las Animas had said to his son many times, "always try to put yourself in the other fellow's place. If a man kills another man try to be the killer temporarily, so you can find out what made him do it. This doesn't apply to crimes done in the heat of passion. They don't require any ability in solving."

Jim knew that here was a crime, or rather series of crimes, in no way prompted by passion or anger. The plot was deep-seated, sinister. He thought he knew already the motive for the murder of Ed Hailey, and tentatively fitted this block into his puzzle.

That the stake was great was borne out by the fact that twice within a few hours two attempts had been made to take his own life. As surely as he was ready to meet further danger, Jim was certain that before another sun rose to flood the length and breadth of the rangeland he would have to face it in desperate form. The thought steadied him.

Chuck came with the saddled horse. Jim lit a match, ostensibly to light a cigarette. He saw that the animal was the same sorrel Nadine had ridden that day when he had found her beyond Saucer Basin.

Nadine appeared in the doorway.

"Have you got my horse, Chuck?"

"Yeah," returned the old rider.

As she came quickly across the porch and down the steps Jim saw her nervously drawing on her gloves.

"Hadn't you better get a coat, Miss Garrett?" he suggested. "The night's kind of cool already."

"Thanks, I don't need a coat. I'll ride fast enough to keep warm."

She flung the reins over the head of the sorrel and was in the saddle. Jim heard the jingle of her spur-chains as she struck the rowels against the horse's sides. She was off across the open toward the end of the lane before he could mount.

He knew his bay had a reaching stride not equalled by many other horses in the range country, and for a quarter of a mile he was content to pound along behind. They were nearing the lower end of the lane when he leaned forward and pressed the rowels against the sides of the bay. The horse flattened himself and quickened his stride. Soon his nose was at the flank of the sorrel, then at the saddle-skirt, then at the animal's shoulder. In another minute Jim reached out and grasped the bit-chain of the other horse.

"We can't hold this pace all the way to town, Miss Garrett," he said. "Better slow down."



"All right!" she assented tensely. "Let go my bridle!"

As the horses jogged on the ragged easterly horizon brightened with the light of a moon three days past its full.

At the end of the lane they turned to the left and began a gradual descent into a long, narrow bottom dotted with mesquite and sycamore trees. The road here was like most of those of the range country, avoiding natural obstacles. It wound lazily among the trees.

The early frost had evidently been severe here, for the road and the grassy ground on each side were thickly dotted with dry leaves. They were perhaps half-way down the bottom road when the moon rose with beautiful, eerie effect, painting the upper portions of the great sycamores in silvery light, and leaving their lower portions in shadow. The silvery illumination crept quickly down as the horses jogged on. Suddenly the girl spoke for the first time since he had checked her flight.

"How did my father come to get shot, Mr. Johnson?"

"Bullet meant for me came in through the door and creased him, I reckon. Lucky he wasn't standing full into the hall."

"I see," she said slowly, but without conviction. "Why should anyone want to shoot you, Mr. Johnson?"

"Search me," he replied with a hard chuckle. "Maybe you can answer that question."

"What makes you think I can?" She reined in a little and turned in her saddle.

"I didn't say I thought you could. I said maybe you could."

"Well, I can't." She touched her eager horse with a spur and set off at a gallop.

As they kept abreast Jim pondered. He must keep her from seeing Dick if this were possible. He wanted a few minutes' quiet, straight talk with Dick Garrett first. There persisted the belief, despite circumstances, that the motive he had tentatively fixed for murder of Hailey did not fit in with Dick Garrett as the murderer. Desperately he tried to convince himself this was so. He could not quite do it. If he could be the first to see Dick, he might be able to.

He had to confess that Dick's abrupt departure for Prairie City was at best suspicious, more suspicious than had been Joe Tassler's going. Whoever had fired those shots from the corral had either known or strongly believed that he, Jim, would be in the ranch-house talking with Bill Garrett.

He definitely eliminated Baldy and Chuck from all suspicion. He was virtually certain on one point: that Bill Garrett had written a desperate appeal to Sandy Naughton was known to more than Garrett and Borquin. Only in this way could he account for the bullet that had so narrowly missed him and his horse on the arroyo trail.

They reined down to a walk as they reached the short ascent to the plain. As they rode out upon the level it was bathed in moonlight as silver-hazy as if a thin, transparent sheet of water were upon it. To left and right the mountains



loomed unreal, almost spectral, strangely beautiful, like shadows that might fade in a moment. The moon, hanging like a distorted disc just above the notch between two peaks, shone full in the faces of the riders. Jim heard the girl draw a quick breath.

"Did you ever see anything so beautiful?" she asked softly, as though words might shatter the beauty of the night. "It—it almost makes me forget our troubles."

He looked at her. Her profile was etched in the mellow light. It was to him the most beautiful profile he had ever seen. Their knees brushed against each other on the narrow road. A thousand times more than before he wanted to tell her who he was, why he was here. She must have caught at least a part of his thoughts, for suddenly she demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Jim Johnson, driftin' cowpuncher, Miss Garrett."

"Yes, I know that. You have told me before. But why are you here?"

"Because your father was good enough to give me a job, I reckon."

Her eyes, now narrowed, searched his. In the moonlight her face was strained and drawn. She sighed wearily and slumped a little in her saddle.

"I want to believe you, Jim Johnson," she said. "Something tells me I ought to. Does—does my father believe in you?"

"If he didn't he wouldn't have hired me, would he?"

"Hired you for what?"

"To punch cows, of course. I didn't know all this was goin' to happen. I'm always willin' to help out a friend."

"Do you consider us, the Garrett family, your friends?"

"You bet your life I do!"

"Why are you so positive about that?"

"Oh, I'm quick at selectin' my friends."

"I don't know whether I'm glad or not," she said thoughtfully. Again she smote her horse with the rowels. Jim held the bay half a length behind. She let the sorrel run furiously for a mile, then reined in beside him.

"Jim Johnson," she said, "I don't believe my father hired you for a rider. He can't pay the riders he has. Only day before yesterday he told me he would soon have to let Baldy and Chuck go."

"You were in Las Animas day before yesterday," he corrected.

"Yes, I know I was. It was after I got home that night. I'm sorry I lied to you when you were kind enough to help me after the wheel had come off, Jim."

He reached across and put a hand upon her arm.

"What made you lie to me, Nadine?"

"I—I was afraid," she whispered.

"Are you still afraid?"

"Terribly!"

"Of what? If I knew I might help you."

Dropping the reins she clutched his wrist con-



vulsively with both her hands. Her white face, turned to him now, seemed all wide, imploring eyes. He caught the quick intake of her breath.

"Oh, if I only knew we could trust you, Jim Johnson! If I only knew! Something keeps trying to tell me that somewhere, perhaps in another life, I have seen you before. I could tell you so much—if—if I only knew I could trust you!"

Jim thought he saw a way of keeping her from trying to see Dick first. He decided to risk a revelation. His big hands captured hers and held them. The range-trained horses maintained their steady gait.

"I can tell you one thing, Nadine," he declared.

"Yes—what? I wish somebody would tell me something I can really believe! Please, what is it you want to tell me?"

"That I'm not just a common rider. I'm here in Big Grass to help the Garrett outfit, if that's possible!"

"Then you're an—officer—of the—law?" she gasped as she jerked her hands free.

"Put it that way if you like," he told her gently. "Sandy Naughton sent me."

She stared at him.

"Was—was that letter I took to Animas for Sandy Naughton to send somebody to help us?" she whispered.

"It was for Sandy himself to come," he returned. "But Sandy, bein' an honest but sort of dumb sheriff, he sent me. I just happened along."

She leaned toward him quickly to see him better. Her body was balanced to the quick step of her horse. Jim saw a smile break the tensity of her face.

"Sandy Naughton's a good man," she declared candidly, "but, Jim Johnson, I believe I'm glad he sent you. Have you known Sandy a long time? You must have."

"Never saw him till day before yesterday," he lied magnificently, "but my bein' in town, and havin' what might be called a little reputation, Sandy decided I could do more over here than he could."

"That's strange," she mused aloud. "I mean Sandy sending you when you barely knew him."

"Oh, it wasn't hard for him to get my rep," he assured her.

"Then you've been an officer before?"

"I've had what might be called a little experience, some good trainin' at least."

She was silent while the horses travelled a hundred yards. Again she turned toward him. He caught her pleading smile, saw it fade.

"Then will you tell me whether you think——"

"Wait a minute!" he checked her. "I won't tell you anything more till you give me your word on one point!"

"My—word? You want me to promise something?"

"Yes, I want you to promise me you'll let me see your brother first, Nadine."

"But why do you want to see Dick first? Don't you know that's why I'm going to town?"



"I think it will be best."

"Why?"

"I can't explain now," he told her. "Fact is I can't tell you anything more till you've given me your word. I'm afraid, little girl, if you insist on seein' Dick first it will queer the whole game."

"Please let me ask you one question?" Her beseeching eyes, her tragic face were too much for him to deny.

"All right, girl."

"Do you think Dick killed Ed Hailey?" She put the question directly, seemed to steel herself for the answer.

"I don't believe he did, Nadine."

"Thank God!" she whispered. "Thank God! Somebody believes!" For a long moment she looked at him. Then she put her hands to her face and leaned forward sobbing.

Reaching out, Jim caught the bridle of her horse with one hand, while with the other he patted her shoulder. They had travelled for some distance before she took away her hands and looked at him.

"I'll—I'll promise," she said. "I'll let you see Dick first if you think it's best. Will you let me ask you just one more question now?"

"Shoot 'em as fast as you like from now on," he told her.

"Thank you," she cried, half laughing, half sobbing. "Oh, I wish your name wasn't Jim Johnson! It's such a hell of a common name! Do you think it was Dick that shot at you and hit my father?"

"I don't believe it was." He tried to make himself believe he was not lying. "But if he did he didn't know what he was doing."

"But who could have done it?"

"I don't know, but I expect to find out."

He told her that time was pressing, and struck off at a fast gallop. She kept alongside, riding magnificently and with new courage. Thus they rode for more than a mile, and when they slowed to allow their horses to get their wind he began to ply her with questions.

Before they quickened pace again he had learned several things, among which were that she knew Dick was suspected of the murder of the nester, that Dick denied it stubbornly, and that she and Dick knew their father was almost impoverished, but not why. By tactful, subtle questioning he became convinced that neither she nor Dick knew anything of Perry's villainous blackmail scheme.

"I don't see what my father has done with the money he had, and what he got from the cattle he has sold," she declared. "He doesn't tell Dick and me everything."

Jim suggested that perhaps her father, realising that Dick was likely to be arrested, was keeping the money to hire a good lawyer for his defence.

"Now maybe that's right!" she agreed. "Dad wouldn't let Dick down if it took his last hoof."

Apparently she knew nothing of the mortgage John Borquin held on the Rafter G. Jim did not enlighten her. For some distance he had seen a dark line of timber at the right, and another



coming in from the foothills and at the left. He waved an arm to the right.

"What's the stream yonder?"

"Big Grass Creek."

"And off there?" He could make out low, irregular hills beyond the slanting line of timber.

"That's Marfa Creek. It was up there—where Ed Hailey was shot."

Jim looked back at the moon-flooded plain stretching away toward the Rafter G, and sloping easily to the foothills. There were miles of it. Presently they turned to the right toward a wooden bridge across Big Grass Creek. As the hoofs rattled on the loose planking Jim saw downstream a long pool that looked like a plain of molten silver, and at its head the moonlight made silvery fire of the riffles that surged out of the rapids under the bridge.

"It's a darned pretty night," he said.

"It's beautiful!" she whispered. "Oh, I wish life could always be as beautiful, as peaceful as it seems here now."

He laid a hand on her arm, but stiffened, trusting himself to go no farther lest he should confess his identity and tell of the real purpose that had brought him back to Big Grass Valley.

"Maybe it will be after to-morrow," he ventured gently.

She turned her glowing, hopeful face toward him.

"Oh, I hope it will! Do you think it will help any if I pray a little for it?"

"If you believe in prayin', Nadine," he said

soberly, "a whole lot of it won't hurt any!" Jim Johnson's tender and reassuring words belied the thought behind them, for again that strange sixth sense of his was telling him that it would take more than praying to bring him safely through the next few hours.

They rattled off the bridge, turned along the timber. Beyond it the creek bawled in musical accompaniment to the moon-flooded night. They came to a clump of cottonwoods and sycamores that thrust the road on to an elbow. At the point of the elbow, Nadine said, lifting an arm toward a huddle of buildings where two lights shone dimly:

"There's Prairie City, Jim." She laughed faintly. "Some city."

"Some city," Jim agreed, feeling again that premonitory tingle up and down his spine. "You stay here in the timber. I'll be back with the medicine in a few minutes."

"And if you find Dick you'll bring him to me?" she whispered.

"If Dick's there I'll bring him." He galloped away, leaving her a waiting shadow against the timber.



## CHAPTER XIV

THE main thoroughfare of Prairie City could hardly be called a street. It opened out of the plain and in a hundred yards was back in the plain again. Jim saw a low, squarish building on the right as he rode in. Beyond this were some smaller structures, all dark, then a larger building from the front of which light shone dimly. Several horses were tied at a hitching-rack in front of this building. Across from them was the largest structure in the town, a store. It also had a light.

Leaving his horse in the shadow beside the store, Jim took a quick look about, and went in. He was back where he had left Nadine within twenty minutes after he had ridden away. At first he thought she had broken her promise and ridden into town to search for her brother. Then she rode out from a shadow into the moonlit road.

"Did you find him?" she demanded tensely.

Long before he had left her Jim had made his plans. Now, though he had not changed them, he was soured with self-contempt because they meant he must deliberately lie to her. He consoled himself with the argument that it would be a good lie and soon atoned for.

"Dick isn't in town, Nadine," he told her.

"Dick isn't here?" she gasped. The moonlight was shining on her frightened, incredulous face. "Where is he? What——"

He told her that Joe Tassler and Dick had ridden for Buck Tassler's ranch at the mouth of Marfa Creek canyon half an hour before.

"But who told you?"

"The man at the store where I bought this arnica and ointment and bandages. Got some tape, too." He held out a package. She took it absently.

"Oh, I wish they hadn't gone there," she cried. "Why did they go?"

"I can't tell you that." He was afraid she would not believe him, and that she would ride in to see for herself. Her white face recalled to him the tortured, haggard face of her father as he had last seen it. "What's so bad about their goin' to Buck Tassler's place?"

"Buck Tassler's a no-good hombre!" she declared vehemently. "I've tried to get Dick to stay away from him, but he won't——"

"Take your advice," he supplied.

"He won't take my advice. The trouble is, Jim, he won't take anybody's advice. I ought to ride to Buck's after him."

There was in her tone more doubt and fear than desire or purpose. He told her he saw no good that could come from her going to Marfa Creek in search of her brother. He tactfully suggested that, as she had the medicine and had found out that Dick was not in town, her place was with her father.

"Yes, I know," she whispered. "Of course I



should be with him. But aren't you going back—now ? ”

“ Not if you're not afraid to make the ride alone, Nadine.”

“ But why do you want to stay here if Dick isn't——”

“ I think the clue that will solve this whole case is here in Prairie City,” he declared. “ I'm sort of glad Dick rode out on us. It'll give me a chance to work without any interference.”

She stared hard at him for a long moment.

“ Then you sure must believe Dick didn't kill Ed Hailey ! ” she said.

“ I'm sure Dick didn't even have a hand in it, Nadine ! ” he returned, hoping she would believe him.

“ It gives me courage to hear you say that. No, I'm not afraid to ride home alone. I've done it before.”

The purchases he had made were in a small parcel. Dismounting, he tied it securely behind her cante. As he reached up his hand he saw tears glistening on her long lashes.

“ I wish you'd smile,” he said, laughing softly. “ I like you better that way, and things are not so darned bad after all.”

She smiled and pressed his hand.

“ There's something about you, Jim Johnson,” she said softly, “ that makes me want to smile.”

“ Am I that dog-goned funny ? ”

“ No, no ! It's because you make me believe everything is going to come out all right. Something makes me have faith in you. Now I must

be going. Don't worry about me. I know this road, every foot, and there isn't anything any more dangerous than a coyote on it." She started, but suddenly reined up. "Are you going to ride to Marfa Creek, Jim?"

"Why, yes," he answered. "I had thought I might ride up that away, and cut across to the Rafter G. Why?"

"I wish you wouldn't. Besides, Dick may be back home by this time. He and Joe'll cut across."

Jim did not mount until he had heard her horse clatter off the bridge. Even then he listened for the sound of galloping hoofs, because he believed she would ride fast to get home. If he could have watched her for the first two or three miles he would have seen her riding at a walk, wrapped in gloomy, fearful thoughts, and oblivious to the gorgeous splendour of the moonlit night.

On Jim's brief visit to the town he had seen that Dick Garrett's and Joe Tassler's horses were at the rack with two others in front of the Maverick Saloon, which was opposite the store. Now as he rode back, the store was dark. The four horses were still tied at the hitching-rack.

Instead of riding to the rack, Jim turned into an alley between the store and a smaller building where the shadow was dark. Dismounting, he drew the reins over the head of the bay, dropped them. Then he swung his arms and kicked his legs to restore good circulation. Taking his gun from its holster, he rolled the cylinder and worked the action. Restoring the Colt to the holster, he



shifted it to the angle he wanted. Then adjusting his stetson, he started directly across the street toward the Maverick Saloon.

At the edge of the board walk he stopped, listened. There were voices inside. He thought he recognised Dick Garrett's. He stepped quickly across the sidewalk and pushed open the swinging doors.

The room was about twenty by forty feet. With one sweep of his alert eyes Jim took in its main details. The bar was at the left. Beyond it stood a good-sized safe in the corner. Along the rear wall were a window, then the cue rack, then a door. The door and window were closed.

With its farther end some six feet from the rear wall, stood a pool-table. At the other end of the pool-table was a card-table at which four men sat, their faces now turned questioningly. Two men were behind the bar. Jim recognised Dick Garrett and Joe Tassler at the card-table. He was a little amused at the look of displeasure on Dick's face. There was surprise in Tassler's look, but he did not seem displeased.

"Hello," growled Dick. "What'n hell you doin' in here? Anything wrong at the ranch?"

Jim sauntered toward the card-table, stopped near it. Dick, who had sat with his back toward the front doors, was still turned.

"Everything fine at the ranch when I left," Jim declared, shoving back his hat. "You fellers rode out on me, and I decided to follow and see what this town had to offer."

"I reckon you see about all," said Joe Tassler

with a hard smile. "Johnson, this here's my brother Buck. This's Slim Denver."

Without rising Buck Tassler reached out a hand.

"Glad to meet up with you, Johnson," he rasped harshly.

Jim shook the hand, which he felt as cold and clammy as the belly of a frog. Then he reached across the table and touched Denver's hand. Denver was tall and skinny, and had a sallow, hatchet-face, with cold-blue, protruding eyes. If he had had a chin he must have lost it early in life, Jim thought.

There was but slight resemblance between Joe Tassler and his brother. Joe was undeniably handsome in a hard, arrogant way. Buck was anything but good-looking. He was of medium height and build. He had a blunt, pugnacious face, now stubbled with a few days' growth of dark beard. His eyes were black, deep-set, calculating. His nose was slightly twisted. His wide, thin-lipped mouth was all but hidden by a scraggy dark moustache.

Joe Tassler had on a blue coat over his apricot shirt. Jim saw a suggestive bulge under the right skirt of the coat. He was not surprised to see that the other three men were armed.

"Set in and take a hand?" Dick invited without cordiality.

There was mild invitation in Slim Denver's pop eyes. Jim scanned the table. There was perhaps fifty dollars upon it. Joe Tassler had as much coin and as many chips before him as the other three players together.



"Not just now," drawled Jim. "Reckon I'll have a drink first. You fellers have somethin'?"

"Don't mind," grunted Buck. "Take some whisky."

Joe, Dick and Denver said whisky would be their choice. As Jim started for the bar, Dick said :

"That's Tim Perry and Fred Milander. Tim owns the joint."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Johnson," said Perry as he thrust a hand across the bar. "You're the new puncher at the Rafter G? The boys mentioned you a while ago."

"Yeah, Garrett was good enough to put me on," returned Jim. He was coolly appraising the man who was blackmailing Bill Garrett.

Perry was of average height, and heavily built. He had a heavy jaw that jutted around from each ear to end in a rounded, solid chin. His small, tight mouth was partially hidden by a sandy moustache. His eyes were deep-set, amber in colour, and under shaggy brows that rimmed the edge of a low, bulging forehead.

"Milander here's my bartender," said Perry, jerking a thumb to the right.

Jim smiled faintly as he reached a hand across to Milander, who was tall and thin. His taffy-coloured hair was slicked down and parted in the middle into two parabolic waves, the outer edges of which almost touched his eyebrows.

"Got about as much brains as a sieve has water, and his greatest ambition is to be a gin-slinger," Jim commented under his breath.

Aloud he said : " Glad to know you, Milander. I'll have a little squirrel-poison. Join us, Mr. Perry ? "

Milander, with a flourish, set a bottle upon the bar. He slid a glass before Perry, twirled another toward Jim. With another flourish he filled two glasses with water and slid them along the bar.

Slowly trickling some whisky into his glass, Jim had hard work suppressing a chuckle as he watched Milander swiftly and meticulously fix the tray with bottles and glasses. Then, trying to look as dignified as though he were head waiter in a metropolitan hotel, he balanced the tray on the ends of the fingers of one hand and pranced out from behind the bar. The smirk on his long, pasty face was as vacuous as a sallow mud puddle.

" Your pleasure, gents," he announced as he lowered the tray and extended it to the poker-players. He brushed some imaginary lint from his spotless white coat, and dabbed a hand over one of the parabolic curves of his hair.

" Flossy barkeep you got there, Perry," Jim said.

One of the saloon man's lids lowered, and a thin smile slackened the tension of his face.

" Good boy, Fred," he said softly. " He's just learnin' the business."

" Learnin' ? " inquired Jim in simulated surprise. " He'll sure make a finished product when he's through."

" Well," admitted Perry, " maybe he does overdo it a little."



Jim laughed softly.

"Take it from me, Mr. Perry, that bartender's an artist. Here's lookin' down your throat."

"Here's how." Perry lifted his glass and smacked his lips over the thimbleful of whisky. "Like it out at the Rafter G, Johnson?"

"Tell you better after I've been there a few days," drawled Jim, beginning to roll a cigarette. More pronounced now was the prickling up and down his spine. Though he had felt this premonitory warning many times, he did not know just from which direction it came. He was looking past the card-players to the window. Somehow it struck him as significant that the window was raised about a foot.

He watched Milander take the empty glasses from the players and set them dexterously upon the tray, while out of the tail of an eye he kept watch in the back-bar mirror to see what Perry was doing.

"From what I hear, Bill Garrett's a damned good man to ride for," said Perry.

"Strikes me that away," answered Jim. "Must have had a big outfit once."

"Yes, biggest in this part of the country. I hear Garrett's been havin' a streak of hard luck, though. Guess that's why the place looks run down at the heels."

"Yeah? What sort of bad luck? Ain't had a drought down this way?"

Their voices were lowered. Jim was appraising Perry as he felt he himself was being weighed.

"Just a combination of circumstances, I guess,"

said Perry. "You know how it is once in a while with a cowman, sort of can't be explained."

"Yeah, I savvy. Too damned bad. Always hate to see an old cowman go bust. Now if it was some damned nester——"

Perry leaned across the bar, his features setting in a confidential grin.

"Between you and me and the gate-post," he declared in a gruff whisper, "Dick there ain't done anything to help his old man lay up any lot of money; not that I should mention the fact, bein' in the saloon business. Hate to see a young feller like Dick waste his money, though. You savvy?"

"Sure I caught your rope," Jim agreed. "Thinks he can play poker, and can't, eh?"

"Yeah, that's it. I hope you are a good influence on him, Johnson, out at the ranch. You look like a steady fellow."

"Oh, I reckon I'm steady all right," Jim answered, wanting to laugh. He was as cool as a chunk of ice and his nerves as steady as taut fiddle-strings. "I don't reckon I'll try to have any good influence over any man, though. My business is punchin' cows, not reformin' people, Mr. Perry."

"No offence meant," Perry apologised. "Just the same I hate to see a good boy like Dick wastin' his money. Look at him now."

Dick had lost a pot and was cursing loudly.

"Damn it!" he ended. "This ain't my night!" He turned a glowering face toward the bar. "Johnson, damn you, you put the Injun sign on me by stakin' Baldy at the ranch! Even



that freckled, bald-faced kid trimmed me. That's why I rode into town."

"Sorry you didn't tell me you were comin', Dick," Jim returned unruffled. "I'd have ridden along with you."

Dick turned sourly back to the play. Milander was now carefully polishing glasses and arranging them in glistening rows upon the back-bar. Then to Jim's surprise Buck Tassler and Slim Denver, as if animated by common thought, pocketed their money, shoved back their chairs and started toward the bar.

"Plenty of poker for me for one night," grunted Buck, "Slim and me's got to high-tail it for the ranch."

"Have something on the house before you go, boys," said Perry. "Here, Fred, see what the gents want."

They all took whisky. Jim cupped his hand about his glass so the others would not see how little he poured into it. He saw that Joe Tassler drank as sparingly, that Dick filled his glass to the brim.

Buck and Denver gulped their liquor, and with only gruff good nights, headed for the front doors. Before they pushed through, Jim noted that Buck walked with a feline swagger and wore his gun low on his right thigh. He had seen that Slim Denver's gun was worn in front with the handle slanting to the right.

In apparent nonchalance Jim stood, left elbow on the bar, left foot on the rail. Almost his entire attention was now on the open window.

With seeming unconcern he answered questions put by Perry and Milander, even ventured an opinion on the possibilities of the Big Grass country as a great cattle range. His tension did not relax perceptibly until he heard the sound of hoofs. He had not expected that Buck Tassler and Slim Denver really meant to ride for the Marfa Creek ranch. He was not sure they had done so now ; and was puzzled as to their destination, as he still was by the abruptness of their departure. He thought he had caught a meaning glance from Buck to Perry and back again.

Dick Garrett and Joe Tassler were continuing the game single-handed. Joe said :

"Better set in and make it three-handed, Johnson. You can take Slim's chair." Joe shifted his chair around slightly.

"Reckon not," Jim drawled, noting that if he took the chair he would have his back to the open window. "Don't feel lucky to-night. Never buck against a hunch."

"Guess you don't," snarled Dick, half turning. "You gave all your luck to that freckled-snorted kid ! Baldy sure put the Injun sign on me. Wish to hell now I'd stayed at home."

"Better take a hand, Johnson," said Joe suavely. "Then we'll all ramble for the Rafter G in an hour or so."

Though Jim's second refusal to sit into the game was not uncordial, it carried a note of finality.

"Where're you from, Johnson ?" asked Perry.

"Well," returned Jim as if pondering, "I used



to ride for the XIT, rode for a few other spreads, though, on my way out here."

"XIT?" mused Perry. "That's the world's biggest cattle ranch, back in Texas, ain't it?"

"Back in Texas," agreed Jim. "She's a good-sized outfit, I reckon."

Joe Tassler, whose head had been bent over a hand, now looked up. His handsome features were twisted into a derisive sneer.

"You pick 'em big, don't you, Johnson?"

"Yep," said Jim with a broad, unruffled grin. "I picks 'em big. That's why I rode into Big Grass Valley, hearin' there was big outfits here."

It was apparent that Dick had drunk to the point of being maudlin. He turned and stared at Jim.

"You sure rides into one hell of a place to find 'em big, Johnson," he mumbled. "Lift you two dollars, Joe."

## CHAPTER XV

APPARENTLY more interested in watching the game than in anything else, although he kept up a desultory conversation with Perry and the bartender, Jim was seeing everything, especially the open window. He had not explained to his own satisfaction why Buck Tassler and Denver had so precipitately left the saloon. Their ride out of town might have been a ruse. His sixth sense persisted in its warning.

Tassler was steadily winning. Jim saw him deal himself two cards from the bottom of the deck, and glance casually up to see whether he had been detected. Jim's expression gave no indication that he had observed the cheat.

Perry began gathering up some papers. There was a hinged shelf from the rear end of the bar to the wall. The saloon keeper lifted it, went through and put the papers in the safe. Perry was at the safe for perhaps a minute, but on account of its door Jim could not see all he was doing. Apparently he was taking something from the safe and transferring it to his pocket. He sauntered back, stopping at the card-table. Tassler glanced up.



"Goin' to hit the hay, Tim?"

"Yes, it's time for me to turn in," returned Perry. "You boys riding back to the ranch to-night?"

"Just as soon as I break this cock-eyed side-winder," Dick growled. "Hell, I never seen such a run of luck!"

"Buy yourself a black cat," Tassler advised ironically.

Going to the bar Perry suggested to Jim that they have another drink before he departed.

"Sure!" agreed Jim rather jovially. "Don't care if I do have a despedido with you. Give me a little more of that stuff that makes heroes out of sissy boys, Milander."

"Righto," answered the vacuous bartender. "Yours, Tim?"

"Same old thing, Fred."

As Perry went toward the front doors Jim glanced after him, a thin, speculative smile about his lips, and his eyes steely. Then he began talking to Milander, who after industriously rubbing the top of the bar, began polishing the glasses that had just been used.

Though Jim's hearing was tuned to the highest pitch, his eyes were watching but one thing now. This was the part of the back-bar mirror in which the open window at the opposite side of the room was reflected.

"I'll bet my chaps Perry's a mighty fine man to work for," he ventured.

"There's none better," Milander agreed. "Tim Perry's sure one real gent, Mr. Johnson."

"Well, now," drawled Jim, "I'm sure glad to hear that. Sized him up the same way."

The next instant he spun to the right as if he had been pricked by a red-hot needle, and as he spun his right hand flashed to his gun. He fired from the hip a split second after the roar of another gun shattered the stillness of the room. The two shots were like one drawn-out report.

The bullet that rent the side of the bar ranged slightly upward and passed through the spot away from which Jim had spun. It shattered a bottle on the back-bar within a foot of Milander's hand. The "flossy" barkeeper did a back flop, stumbled, and in falling upset the slop-tank under the bar. Its dirty contents deluged him.

Jim Johnson gave but one flashing thought to the bartender as he leaped away from the other side of the bar, surmising that the bullet meant for him had hit Milander. The room was still vibrating with the reports when Joe Tassler leaped backward, reaching for his gun. He half stumbled over his chair as he sprang, but fired simultaneously with the crash of Jim's gun. Jim felt a bullet hiss past his head. Tassler reeled back, fought vainly to lift his smoking Colt for another shot. The gun slipped from his limp fingers and clattered to the floor.

It required a second or two for Dick Garrett's whisky-befuddled brain to grasp what had happened. Then he uttered a roar and scrambled to his feet, drawing his gun as he clumsily turned. He was jerking his .45 up when Jim called sharply :

"Look out, Dick! Look out there behind you!"



It was a trick so old that it had moss a foot long on it, but it worked. As Dick whirled to see what danger menaced him, Jim leaped in and brought the frame of his Colt crashing down upon the side of Dick's head. Uttering a groan Dick tottered, dropping his gun. He staggered to one side, and fell as if he had been dropped by an axe.

In all not ten seconds had elapsed since the firing of the first shot. Joe Tassler lay dead, Dick Garrett as good as dead. The face and part of a man's body Jim had caught at the open window by the convenience of Milander's polished back-bar mirror was no longer there. Leaping away from a possible line of further fire from the window, Jim ran along the wall, reached out and with the end of his gun-barrel tripped out the stick that held up the window-sash. The window fell with a crash. Jim reached out again and drew down the shade. Irregular spirals of powder-smoke eddied about the middle of the room.

Swiftly, automatically, he rammed out the two empty shells, inserted cartridges in their places. He held the Colt at his hip as he stood in the middle of the room, surveying every possible point from which another shot might come. The silence was absolute. Jim was considering the advisability of shooting out the lights when he heard a clatter of metal and glassware on the floor behind the bar. His first quick thought was that this commotion was caused by the dyiny bartender. Then a shaky voice stuttered :

"Is—is—it—a—all over?"

"For the present, I reckon," drawled Jim, holstering his gun. "Hurt, Milander?"

"N-n-no, I guess not," stuttered the barkeeper. "Is it s-s-safe for me to g-get up?"

"As far as I'm concerned I reckon it is," said Jim, suppressing a chuckle, despite the tragedy just enacted. "I'm the only one left."

As the dude bartender got to his feet and held on to the edge of the bar, he made a spectacle that reminded Jim of a rooster that had been dipped in a pan of dishwater. The contents of the slop-tank had struck Milander in the face and thoroughly drenched his head and entire upper body. Dirty water still ran down his face, which was white as chalk. The parabolic bands of which he had been so vain were now stringy wisps, sticking close to the skin. He leaned over the bar, his eyes widening as he stared at the two men on the floor.

"They're dead?" he whispered.

"One of 'em at least," returned Jim.

"But—b-but who done it? Who started it? Who tried to kill me? I didn't do any-anything to make anybody want to kill me!"

"Nobody tried to kill you," Jim said seriously. "That bullet was meant for me. Hell, brace up! You look like a ghost had just wanted to kiss you, Milander!"

The drenched, pasty-faced bartender stared wildly at the men on the floor, at Jim.

"Uh—uh—uh—I ain't scared!" he stuttered.

"Of course not," drawled Jim. "It's the water that makes you shiver."



Milander stared down at his bedraggled white bar jacket.

"Ain't it terrible?" he groaned. "And I just put it on clean!"

Jim smiled contemptuously, wanting to reach across and slap some nerve and sense into the fellow's head. He heard the sound of voices, then of quick steps on the board walk. Spinning about he hooked his thumb into his belt conveniently close to his gun-handle.

The doors swung inward, and four men tried to get into the room at the same time. A glance told Jim that two of them were cowboys or ranchers, another apparently a townsman.

The fourth was short and slight to the point of skinniness. He was not more than five feet, two inches tall, and could not have weighed more than a hundred and ten pounds. He might have been taken for a masquerading boy had it not been for his grey "walrus" moustache and his short, bristling goatee. His small head was covered by a great Texas sombrero that shielded him like an umbrella. Two big guns and a filled cartridge-belt sagged his small waistline, making his striped jeans wrinkle above the tops of high, laced boots.

The other three men, like the one under the great hat, had stopped just inside the room. The three were staring incredulously, but not the little man. His blue eyes were as cold as ice, his small body as rigid as stiff rawhide. He menacingly grasped the handles of his big guns with his little hands.

"What the hell's been goin' on here?" he

demanded in a cracked tenor that was almost shrill. "I'm Flick Peebles, constable of this here town !"

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Peebles," returned Jim.

"Sh-sh-shootin'," stuttered Milander. "Flick, there's been sh-shootin' !" He waved a shaking arm toward the men on the floor.

"So it would seem," said Flick, his voice keyed a note lower. "What caused it ?"

He advanced now, the other three men trailing in doubtful skirmish formation.

Milander tried an explanation, but his voice refused to function. He leaned against the bar and breathed hard. Flick stopped within ten feet of Jim, his little hands still gripped like claws about his gun-handles. His cold blue eyes seemed to bore into Jim's cool grey eyes. His goatee bristled belligerently.

"You done it ?" he shrilled.

Jim caught no fear in the shrill treble, none in the blue-ice eyes. He knew a dangerous man when he saw one.

"As for what you see, Mr. Peebles, I did it," he confessed.

"Gawd !" gasped one of the men.

The men on the floor were not good to look upon. There was a small pool of blood under Dick Garrett's head. The front of Joe Tassler's apricot shirt was crimson.

As Jim explained coolly but quickly, he thought he saw menace and doubt in Peebles's eyes. With brusque little steps the constable walked to the bar, looked hard. The damage done by the bullet was



evident, also its course. He turned toward the window.

"That there blind's down!" he piped. "I don't see how a feller shot through it!"

"I pulled it down," said Jim.

"Just why?"

"I didn't want another bullet to come from where the first one did."

"It all sounds fishy to me," muttered Flick. He almost ran across the room and loosed the shade. It went sizzling up with a clatter. "The winder's down! There ain't no bullet-hole in the glass!"

Milander found his voice and explained that he was sure the first shot had been fired through the window. Didn't the course of the bullet that had almost killed him prove as much? He said he had seen Perry raise the window soon after the poker game had started.

Flick now opened the window and leaned out. The three men who had come with him crowded close.

"There's somethin' on the ground down there!" Flick's tenor shrilled. "Looks like a man! Fetch a lamp, Fred."

Before the shaky bartender could begin to obey Jim struck a match and held the flame into the opening.

"Good crackety criminy!" wheezed Flick. "It's Tim Perry! He's dead!"

"I thought it would be him," drawled Jim.

"I was sure I recognised his face."

"But why?" Flick demanded. "Why should

it be Tim Perry, and what'd he want to shoot at you for, stranger ? ”

Jim did not answer. The three men were running toward the front doors. They disappeared, but immediately reappeared below the window. Milander had found a candle. Jim took it from him and held the light through the open window.

“ Just a minute, boys ! ” he warned the men outside. “ I want you to see if there is a gun still in Perry’s hand.”

“ Yeah, we see it,” said one of the men. The others attested to this evidence.

“ All right now,” said Jim, “ you might as well bring him in.”

“ Hold your horses there, feller ! ” commanded Flick, his voice like a file rasping over hard, rough metal. “ You’re givin’ orders round here like you was an orficer.”

“ Maybe I am,” Jim returned coolly. “ Fetch him in, boys.”

Under his great hat Flick bristled with authority and artillery. He was at the doors to escort the three men as they bore in their gruesome burden. Perry’s head hung grotesquely. He had never known what hit him, for Jim’s bullet had struck squarely in the small V below his throat, where the collar-bones join. The men laid him on the pool-table. Milander ran to the safe and grabbed the table-cover, which he wadded into a ball. Then his nerve failed him. He flung the cloth to one of the cowboys.

“ Put—put it under his head,” he ordered, “ s-so he won’t get the green cloth bloody.”



Jim lifted the upper portion of the body, and the man put the oilcloth cover under it.

"Gawd!" gasped Milander. "Ain't it terrible?"

There was no doubt about Joe Tassler. He had dealt his last cards from the bottom of the deck. Dick Garrett was beginning to groan and thrash his legs and arms.

Jim felt keen, demanding eyes upon him. He looked up and coolly returned the little constable's stare. Flick tentatively gripped the handles of his big guns.

"So you say Tim Perry fired the first shot?" he piped.

"Yes, he fired first."

"Sure, Tim shot first," broke in the drenched bartender. "But damned if I know what he was shootin' at. Say, maybe he was a-tryin' to scare Dick and Joe!"

Jim gave him a cold, sardonic smile.

"Pretty boy," he drawled, "Perry wasn't tryin' to scare anybody. He was shootin' to kill me."

"Why should Tim Perry want to kill you, stranger?" demanded Flick, rising on tiptoe and half drawing his guns. "You hadn't ever saw him before, had you? Speak up!"

For a quarter of a minute the eyes of the tall cowboy and the diminutive constable locked. Then a faint grin broke the tension of Jim Johnson's mouth.

"No, I had never seen him before, Mr. Peebles. The reason he wanted to kill me will come out

later. Right now I haven't got the time to explain."

Again Flick lifted to the toes of his tiny boots. Again his little hands half drew the big guns they clutched. Then slowly he settled back to the floor, and though he still gripped the guns, he let them down into their holsters, the lower ends of which barely missed his knees. He bobbed his head toward the men on the floor.

"So you say Joe tried to shoot you, and you up and killed him?"

"That's right, Mr. Peebles. Maybe the bartender can tell you that."

"N-no, I can't tell nothing!" broke in Milander. "I was down behind the bar. I thought I had been killed! I ain't sure yet!"

"Aw, shut your scared mouth, Fred!" shrilled the constable. "I don't want none of your chicken-hearted evidence! What about Dick there, stranger? You say that when he tried to shoot, you up and pistol-whipped him alongside the head?"

"That's the way it happened."

After chewing hard on an imaginary wisp of tobacco, Flick clamped his jaw till his goatee bristled straight out. He took two steps toward Jim.

"And now, stranger, since you done all this killin' and 'tempted killin', me—Flick Peebles—regular-ordained constable of Prairie City, and orficer of the law, want to know just who you are and why you done said shootin'!"

"My name's Jim Johnson."



"All right, Jim Johnson, what made you kill 'em?"

"Because they tried to kill me, Mr. Peebles."

"'Tain't enough! 'Tain't enough! There had to be somethin' to start it! Speak up before I arrest you, Johnson, and start investigatin'."

Jim wanted to laugh at the little constable's authority, which though it enveloped him like an aura, made him appear even smaller than he was. Jim hooked a thumb into the arm-hole of his vest, and smiled. The smile did not detract from Flick's rising anger and suspicion. He was beginning to feel as though this cool Mr. Johnson had somehow stolen his role in a big show.

"Suppose I tell you I'm a deputy in here to get the man that killed Ed Hailey, the nester, Mr. Peebles?" he suggested dryly.

"Good Lord!" gasped one of the other men. "You're after the man as killed Hailey? We'd 'most forgot about that killin'."

"Are you a-claimin' all that, Johnson?" demanded Flick's tenor.

"Yes." As Jim looked down into the pinched little face, so grotesque with its great moustache and bristling goatee, he saw cupidity and jealousy there.

"What you got to prove it?" Flick's hands were again lifting the big guns.

Smiling, Jim turned back one side of his vest, revealing a badge.

"Where'd you get that star?" snarled Flick.

"Sandy Naughton gave it to me, Mr. Peebles."

Flick's eyes became even more like orbs of blue

ice, his lithe little body more rigid. Jim had a sudden desire to reach out and smash the great sombrero down over the arrogant bantam's head, but Flick's guns came out with speed entirely unsuspected. They flipped up, and the muzzles of the big Colts were aimed steadily at Jim's broad chest.

"Stick 'em up!" shrilled Flick. "And stick 'em high and quick! Take his gun and belt, boys!"

Jim Johnson had seen death too many times to fail to recognise it. He lifted his arms while he suffered the other three men to take his gun-belt.

"And just why are you doin' this, Mr. Peebles?" he asked coolly, though he despised himself for thus being trapped by a man no larger than a good-sized rooster.

Flick's retort was a high-pitched cackle.

"I'm arrestin' you, Mr. Johnson, 'cause you're the hard-bit, slick hoss-thief that got outen gaol over in Animas yesterday!" He paused to cackle shrilly, like a rooster just victorious. "How'd I know about it? Well, Andy Jones that drives the stage fetched in the news this afternoon!"

For a moment Jim's amazement and humiliation were complete. He had not thought that news of his escape as a horse-thief would have come in this direction. He had apparently fled the opposite way. But through this brief and humiliating turmoil of mind he kept his wits. He even smiled agreeably, but when he spoke there was the ring of courage and authority in his words:

"All right, Mr. Flick! I'm willin' for you to



take me along as the escaped horse-thief, but I'm gaolin' Dick Garrett as the man that killed Hailey, the nester."

"You're what?" Flick shrilled, his mouth momentarily freezing into a small O. Then something keen and covetous flashed in his eyes. "I reckon not, Johnson! I always had an idee Dick was the man as killed Hailey! I'll do the arrestin' of him, too. Boys, you all pick Dick up and lug him over to the calaboose. I gotta keep this damned hoss-thief covered. He's salty!"

## CHAPTER XVI

THE lantern-jawed cowboy who had come in with Flick took Jim's gun. As the other two men stooped to lift Dick Garrett, Dick wriggled to a sitting position and began to mumble inarticulately. The men helped him to his feet.

"Hurt bad, Dick?" asked one of them. "This here damned maverick slammed you over the head."

"What maverick?" mumbled Dick. Then his bloodshot eyes caught sight of Jim, and he began to curse and fight to get to him.

The bartender, suddenly ambitious to display even a little courage, ran behind the bar and grabbed a shotgun. At sight of it Flick shrilled:

"Put that there thing up, you damned fool! First thing you know you'll let it go off and shoot somebody!"

"All right," Milander whined, and laid the gun on the bar. "I just wanted to be of some help."

"When I need help I'll ask for it!" Flick declared. "Don't you see I just caught the desperatest man that ever hit this country, and got the feller as killed Ed Hailey at the same time?"



"That's right," Milander agreed, smiling vacuously. "What you want me to do, Flick?"

"Nothin'!" said Flick. He poked the end of a gun against Jim's back. "March, hombre, and march pronto! If you try any monkey business on me I'll make a hole in you that looks like a well."

Out into the silent, moonlit street they marched, Jim ahead with the prodding end of a Colt at his back, the bantam-like Peebles on the other end of the Colt. Two men half carried Dick. Milander and the man with Jim's gun trailed alongside. Dick's mind was still incapable of much thought, except that he wanted to kill Jim Johnson. As for Jim he was doing some quick, hard thinking. He was in a mess out of which he must extricate himself, and quickly. He had one great, consoling thought. He had got Perry, thus putting an end to the blackmailing, unless there were somebody to carry it on from where Perry had left off.

They headed diagonally across the street, and along the side of the store opposite where Jim had left his horse. Jim saw a low, but formidable building. As they stopped before it Flick growled:

"Door's unlocked, Tom. Go in and light the lamp! I ain't takin' no chances on this here murderin' hoss-thief!"

The man with Jim's gun entered the gaol, and a few moments later the interior was illuminated by the smoky bracket lamp. The other men shoved Garrett in. As Jim was prodded in he saw a room about twelve by sixteen feet, with walls of rough

stone laid in cement mortar. It held two narrow cots and a rude table. It was dirty and smelly.

"Lay down on that there bunk, Dick," Flick commanded officiously. "Tell you all about what this means as soon as——"

Flick did not finish, for his prisoner had leaped to one side, and whirled. The next instant Flick's arms were pinioned to his body by one of Jim Johnson's long ones. Jim's other hand wrenched the gun from the little constable's hand, shoved it into his own waistband. Almost in the same movement he snatched Flick's other gun from its holster, and gave the constable a push that sent him spinning. It had been done so quickly, so unexpectedly, that Flick did not have time to resist, even to shrill an order.

"I'll take my gun now, friend," Jim drawled as he levelled Flick's worn '45 at the lantern-jawed, gasping cowboy.

The cowboy stupidly handed over the gun. By this time Flick was raving blasphemously, and hopping up and down like a little rooster. On the cot Dick was sitting up, staring at this new development.

"Cut out the racket!" snarled Jim. "I got some talkin' to do!"

"What you mean?" shrieked Flick. "You condanged, low-down hoss-thief, what you mean by takin' my guns away? Gimme them guns!"

"I mean," returned Jim, "to keep you where you won't do any more harm, Mr. Peebles. I have work to do."

The three men who had accompanied the con-



stable to the saloon apparently knew when a man behind a slowly swerving gun meant business. Milander was leaning in through the door, and did not yet fully comprehend what was happening. With his left hand Jim reached back and grasped the bartender by the neck and jerked him into the room.

"Get over there in that corner!"

"A-a-all right," stuttered Milander, and got.

"But I'm ready to listen to you now, Mr. Johnson!" sputtered Flick. "I'm the reg'lar oficer of the law in Prairie City! Maybe I did act a trifle hasty. What you got to say?"

"Aw, shoot him!" roared Dick. "Or give me a gun and let me do it!" He scrambled shakily to his feet but was shoved back to the cot by the lantern-jawed cowboy.

"Shoot him? Shoot him?" gibbered Flick. "How'm I a-goin' to shoot him when he's got all the guns? Johnson, what you want to explain? I'm ready to listen. Maybe——"

Without relaxing his vigilance Jim shoved Flick's gun alongside the other one, and buckled his own belt about his waist. There was a twinkle in his grey eyes now as they looked at the fuming, impotent little constable. Then the humorous smile vanished from his lips and his mouth drew up at one end.

"You little, sawed-off runt, wearin' a man's hat and man's whiskers, you and all the others like you never got up early enough to put Jim Johnson in the jugado! Savvy?"

"It begins to look that away," whined Flick.

"And it's just as it looks, you little game rooster! I rode into Big Grass Valley to get the man who killed Ed Hailey, and no little makeshift like you is a-goin' to stop me!"

"Stop! Stop right there!" shrilled Flick, jumping up and down and sputtering tobacco juice and indignation. "I don't 'low no man to talk to me like that! I'll have——"

"Easy there, Flick!" warned one of the other men. "Ain't you seen already this hombre's salty?"

"Yeah, and so'm I, by Gawd!" declared Flick.

"Why, you little sawed-off runt!" said Jim with a chuckle. "If I took all the salt out of you I wouldn't have enough to season a fresh egg!"

Flick brandished his little fists and sputtered tobacco juice like a spray machine. His futile indignation was such that even Dick gave a maudlin chuckle and Milander grinned. The rancher and the two cowboys were laughing outright. Flick whirled upon them.

"Shut your fool mouths," he shrieked, "or I'll gaol the whole kit and kerboodle of you!"

"Which is just what I had planned on," drawled Jim.

Flick turned, his goatee dropping like the crest of a defeated little game cock. He stared unbelievably.

"You mean me, too, Johnson?"

"You, too, Mr. Peebles," grinned Jim. "I think you're where you'll do the least harm for a time. Little men with big hats and big whiskers



and big ideas they can't ride, ain't safe to be let run at large. I'm leaving Milander, too, so you boys won't be lonesome."

Flick's authoritative mien had by now vanished. He begged to be let out. He was sure now that if Jim were a horse-thief he was a good one and knew just what he was doing.

"I'll do anything you ask, Johnson," he ended in a feeble sputter. "I'll carry out any orders you see fit to give me!"

"Fine!" Jim grinned. "Then it's my orders that you stay right here till I see fit to let you out, Mr. Peebles. That goes for the rest of these boys, too. And there's one thing I want to remind you of!"

"Yeah, yeah?" whined the constable. "What is it? I'll do anything you say! Please let me out to help you, Johnson!"

"Nix on that. I want to remind you that Dick Garrett there is the man who killed Ed Hailey and that I and Sandy Naughton will hold you personally responsible if you let him get away."

"I won't let Dick get away!" Flick promised.

Dick started to get to his feet. He was a gory spectacle, for the blood from the side of his head completely smeared half his face. He slumped weakly back and groaned as he covered his face with his blood-smeared hands.

"B-but I got to get back to the saloon!" pleaded Milander. "The lights is still burnin'!"

"I'll tend to your lights, Pretty Boy," said Jim. "Hand over your keys, Flick!"

With a shaking hand the constable surrendered

his keys. Stepping out, Jim slammed the door, and snapped the big padlock.

"Now I want to tell you hombres one thing more," he warned through the bars. "I don't want any racket. I'll be round town till after daylight. Savvy?"

Flick was now grasping two bars between which his pinched little face peered.

"Please let me out to go with you, Mr. Johnson!" he whispered shrilly. "I admit I was a bit hasty in my——"

The constable's humiliation was such that he did not even flinch when Jim playfully chucked him under his pointed chin.

"Flick," said Jim with a laugh in his voice, "if you ever grow to that hat and that moustache, you'll make one sure-enough man. Sorry I got to leave you. Buenas noches."

"You—you go to hell!" sputtered Flick in sudden renewed fury. "When I get out I'm a-goin' to fill you so damned full of holes you'll—you can't tell yourself from a soup strainer!"

It had been Jim's purpose immediately after the shooting to find a rider and dispatch him to Las Animas for Sandy Naughton. Now Flick's belligerent and arrogant actions had eliminated this purpose. There was in Jim a streak of stubbornness to make him actually revel in the cocky little constable's being a prisoner in his own gaol. Now he had decided to get back to the Rafter G and send a messenger from there.

Hurrying to the saloon he put Flick's revolvers on the bar and extinguished the lamps. He was



sorry to leave Perry and Joe Tassler as they were, but there was no time to waste on dead men.

The bay horse would have stood a day and a night with his reins down. He whinnied softly as his master approached. Jim gave the sleek head an affectionate rub, and tightened the latigo. Instead of mounting, he led the horse in back of the few buildings and came out to the road a hundred yards west of the saloon.

Though he rode fast now, he kept to the grassy level alongside the road. When he reached the bridge he dismounted and led the horse slowly across, knowing well that the noise of rattling planks carried far on a still night. He wanted to leave the impression with his prisoners that he was still in town, or have them doubtful of his direction if they discovered he had gone.

Off the bridge, Jim stepped into the saddle and headed across the moonlit plain. He had seen on his ride with Nadine that there should be a short-cut trail to the Rafter G but now he did not take time to look for it. He wanted to follow the road to make sure no harm had come to the girl, who, during the hectic hour in town, had not been long out of his thoughts.

So much had happened in so short a time that the moon was barely past the half-way mark to the zenith, when he turned down the short grade into the lower end of the bottom about a mile and a half from the ranch.

Down there the moonlight was searching out everything. It cast the shadows of mesquites and sycamores in grotesque patterns on the ground. It

pried with silvery fingers among crooked branches. It splotched tree-trunks, lay in irregular pools about them. It shimmered the dead leaves on the grassy borders and in the winding road.

On the swift ride across the plain Jim had kept a vigilant watch. He had not been sure about Buck Tassler and Slim Denver except to reason that if they had doubled back after riding out of town, they would have doubtless heard the shooting. If they had ridden straight to Marfa Creek, then all was well in regard to them, at least temporarily.

He had proceeded perhaps half the length of the bottom when he thought he heard a cry. He had been allowing the bay to walk in preparation for a final gallop to the ranch. He reined in sharply, ears keened.

There was only the murmur of the breeze through the foliage of the mesquite, the rattle of it amid the dry leaves of the sycamores. From far off came the faint, doleful howl of a coyote.

He rode on, alert now, for the thought that he had heard a strange sound again set the warning sensation tingling up and down his spine. He had not travelled a hundred yards when he jerked the bay to a stop. His hand dropped to his gun. He had heard a cry !

Reining off the road into the tall gramma grass, he dismounted, dragged the reins over the head of the horse. There was a big sycamore just ahead. He stole quickly to it, peered around.

From here he saw a large dark object about fifty yards away. He was on the point of creeping



out to investigate it when from it came a frantic cry :

“Jim ! Help ! Please come and help me !”

For just a moment his blood ran cold, for he had recognised the frantic voice. Then it flashed into his amazed brain that if Nadine could call for him, she was still alive. He ran to the road, sped along it. What he saw was a horse lying dead, with the girl pinioned under it. Her white face was twisted toward him. He could see the reflection of the moonlight from her pleading eyes.

“Good God !” he shouted. “What’s happened ?”

“Somebody shot my horse !” she sobbed. “I think—they tried to kill me. Oh, Jim, my foot’s so dead I’m—I’m afraid to struggle any more for fear I’ll break it off !”

Like a blinding flash there swept through his brain the explanation of this dastardly attempt upon her life, and for a brief moment he stood tense, his eyes like steel, lips white and taut, and out of his quick, grim thoughts came the resolve that somebody had to die for this.

“Jim ! Please, Jim, help me get loose ! I had my ear to the ground, and when I heard hoofs—I was sure it was you !”

He bent over her.

“Leg isn’t broke, is it, Nadine ?” he demanded gently.

“No, I don’t think so, but—but it’s dead enough to break if I pull at it any more.”

A quick examination disclosed that the neck of the horse had been broken by a bullet. The

animal had fallen so quickly to the right that the girl had not had time to withdraw her foot. The stout stirrup, fitted with a box tapadero, had saved her leg from being crushed as it had held up most of the weight of the dead animal. Aside from the discomfiture of her predicament, her leg was only seriously pinched and her foot twisted.

"Can you get him off?" she asked tremulously.  
"Please, Jim—it hurts like hell!"

"Sure! I'll have you out in three shakes of a calf's tail, Nadine."

He ran down the road and was quickly back with his horse. Detaching the riata from its strap, he worked the rawhide rope in under the shoulder of the dead horse and ran a loop over the left foreleg. Then drawing the rope tight, he brought it back across the saddle. He paused to give a few words of cheer and consolation to the now quiet girl. He thrilled as he heard her patient answer.

"Can you crawl out when I lift the dead horse?" he asked as he tightened the latigo.

"Can I?" she cried. "I've got one good leg left!"

Holding the riata in his left hand, he mounted and rode at right angles to the dead horse for about twenty feet. Then he took a dally around the horn, and spoke softly to the bay, at the same time touching him with the rowels.

"Dig in, old boy. It's goin' to be some pull."

In short, quick, explorative steps the bay went ahead till he felt the rope tauten. Then he dug in his toes and stubbornly surged ahead.



Dirt and grass flew from under the digging hoofs as the bay strained forward to an angle that would have pitched him on to his nose had the rope parted. For a few seconds it seemed to Jim that the horse would not be equal to lifting the ponderous load, then he felt the bay making headway.

"Crawl, Nadine ! Crawl !" he shouted.

There was a few seconds when it seemed the bay could lift the weight no further. Then with a surge that almost dropped him to his knees, he went forward. Jim saw the dead horse flop over. There came a glad, hysterical little cry :

"I'm out ! Oh, I'm out—Jim Johnson !"

## CHAPTER XVII

WHEN he got back to the road Jim found Nadine sitting down, holding her right foot. She was in that mental condition as near tears as laughter, and ready to go either way. The moonlight showed her face twisted into a grimace as she looked up.

"Pull my boot off!" she sobbed. "And be careful you don't break it off."

As Jim bent to obey he asked her from where the shot that killed the horse had been fired.

"Oh, never mind the shot!" she exploded. "Let's get my foot awake first! Jim, why don't you rub it?"

"Sure," he agreed, "I'll rub it."

He tried to put himself in the impersonal position of a physician treating a patient. It was only a few minutes before he had the circulation sufficiently restored to lift her to her feet. Then holding her with an arm he walked her slowly up and down the road for a few minutes.

Though he was deeply grateful at finding her practically unhurt he was impatient at the time he was losing in the dispatching of a messenger for Sandy Naughton. There was no way of telling what was happening in Prairie City.



Presently Nadine dropped to the ground and pulled her boot on.

"Now tell me what happened," Jim said.

"They came from over there," she replied, pointing to a thicket of brush at the northerly side of the depression. "There were two of them."

"You mean two men?"

"No! I don't know how many men there were, crazy! I don't know whether they were men or not. I mean shots."

"There were two shots then? One killed the horse. The other missed?"

"Not quite," she returned with a grim little smile. "Look at my back."

He bent and saw where a bullet had gashed the jacket of her khaki riding habit just above her shoulder-blades."

"God!" he ejaculated. "It almost got you, girl!"

"Almost," she echoed. "But who could have wanted to kill me, Jim?"

"Nobody wanted to kill you, Nadine."

"Then why did they shoot at me?"

"Case of mistaken identity, I reckon. Whoever fired those shots thought he was shooting at me. You see, there are a lot of shadows along here, and it'd be hard to tell a bay horse from a sorrel in this light."

"Yes, but who would want to kill you?"

"Hanged if I know," he equivocated. "Maybe it was the same man that tried to get me from the corral."

He saw her face grow whiter in the moonlight, and her eyes large and round with doubt.

"It couldn't have been Dick?"

"Shucks, no!" he declared. "It wasn't Dick! Say, Nadine, the fellow at the store was all wrong about Dick. He was in town after all. I sent him to Las Animas for Sandy Naughton."

"Dick was in town?" she gasped. "You have sent him for Sandy? Why?"

"Well," he drawled, unperturbed, "I believe I have found out who killed Hailey, and I want Sandy over here to help close up this little matter." He knew he must tell her some lie, and thought this one as good as any other. He had decided to say nothing of the shooting in town, and especially nothing about her brother being locked up.

"Then if you have sent Dick for Sandy Naughton," she cried, "he couldn't have had anything to do with the killing of Ed Hailey!"

"Not a thing!" Jim shivered a little at the thought of what might come when he told the truth, and hated himself for the deceit. "As soon's we can get Sandy over here we'll clear the whole thing up, I think."

Lest even here in the moonlight she see the lie in his eyes, he hurried to his horse. He untied the parcel of medicine from back of the saddle-cantle on the dead animal, managed to remove the saddle.

In the meantime Nadine had risen and was hobbling about. Before she realised what he was doing he had picked her up and placed her in his own saddle. One of her hands clutched his arm.



"Jim Johnson, what are you doing?" she cried. "Let me down! I can walk!"

"Sure you can," he agreed, "but you ain't goin' to. If there's anything I'm good at, it's walkin'. Let's ramble."

He grasped one of the saddle-strings as the bay started off at a brisk walk and thus managed without much effort to keep pace. They had climbed the gentle slope from the bottom and were out where the full flood of moonlight shone pale green on the alfalfa fields when suddenly she reined up. He felt that in the long silence she had done some very deep thinking.

"Jim," she said. "I was terribly worried. I know Dick didn't kill Ed Hailey, but there was something that made me afraid they would pin it on him."

"Who do you mean by they?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she whispered tensely. "It was just intuition, a hunch that somebody was trying to make us the goats."

He laughed harshly, yet with satisfaction.

"Your hunch was right, little girl. Somebody was trying to make the Garrett family the goat of the whole rotten deal."

"But who? Who was it, Jim?"

"I don't exactly know yet," he told her steadily, "but as soon as Sandy gets here I can prove it."

"Are you—dead sure?" she breathed, leaning toward him. "Oh, after all that has happened it is hard to believe!"

"Dead sure, Nadine."

"Jim Johnson," she declared vibrantly, "if you

can prove my brother had nothing to do with the killing of Hailey, I'll do anything you ask of me."

He looked deep into her violet eyes.

"Anything?"

"Anything," she answered resolutely.

"Then you might as well begin by kissing me," he suggested, a little smile lighting his face.

As if she had not expected her promise would be so quickly challenged she flinched back. Then she leaned over and pressed her warm lips to his, jerked back and straightened in the saddle. Even the shadow of her hat-brim could not hide her blush.

"What do you think of me?" she whispered, aghast.

"If that was a sample," he drawled, "I think you're about the sweetest little thing that ever was, Nadine."

"Don't try to kid me," she warned, laughing softly.

"Kid you? Say, I'm goin' to ask big things of you within the next few days. Will you be ready to pay?"

For a half-minute she looked down into his upturned, inscrutable face. Then she said:

"Yes, if you can prove Dick is innocent of the crime, I'll pay any price you ask."

"Even to loving me a little?"

"Yes! Even to loving you a little, Jim Johnson! Now don't you think we'd better hurry on and see how my father is?"

The moon was almost directly overhead when they reached the ranch-house. Jim lifted her



from the saddle. When they went softly in they found Chuck dozing in a chair. Baldy, on the sofa, was snoring in profound slumber.

"Hello," growled Chuck. "So you're back? Where you two been all this time?"

Jim had suggested to Nadine that it might be better if they said nothing of the attempt on her life.

"We've just been to town, Chuck," she answered. "Have we been gone long?"

"Long enough, I reckon," mumbled Chuck.

"How's Mr. Garrett?" Jim inquired, unperturbed.

"Sleepin' the last time I looked in."

There came a call from the other room. Nadine hurried toward the door, Jim close behind her. They found Garrett awake. Though he had a fond, grateful look for his daughter, his eyes swung imploringly upon Jim.

"Anything happen, Johnson?"

"Not much," returned Jim, "but the way things look, plenty's goin' to before to-morrow night. I sent Dick to Animas after the sheriff, Mr. Garrett."

The old man raised himself to one elbow. His look was incredulous, demanding.

"You sent Dick to Animas for Sandy Naughton? Why?"

"Don't get all excited now, Daddy," Nadine commanded as she sat down upon the edge of the bed. "Jim says he is sure Dick didn't have anything to do with—with—Ed Hailey."

"Is that right, Johnson?"

"Plumb correct, Mr. Garrett. If I'd even thought Dick had anything to do with this dirty business, do you think I would have sent him after the sheriff?"

"N-no," answered Garrett, a deep furrow forming between his white, shaggy brows. "No, 'course you wouldn't. Nadie, you clear out while Jim tells me what happened in town."

She rose slowly.

"Not to-night, Mr. Garrett," Jim said. "You need rest and no excitement. Besides, I won't have the whole story before morning. You may rest assured that everything is all right."

Before Garrett could protest or ask another question Jim had gone. He closed the door and strode to the couch, where he stooped and shook Baldy.

"Aw, gwan away and lemme sleep," whined Baldy, still slumbering. "Tain't time to git up."

Sweeping the boy's big boots off the couch with a stroke, Jim grasped him under the arms and hoisted him to a sitting position. He cuffed him on the side of his head. Baldy snorted, opened his eyes. He yawned prodigiously.

"Aw, what yuh want?" he mumbled. "Can't let a feller sleep? Oh—it's you, is it?"

"Who'd you think it was?" Jim retorted grimly. "I want you, kid, and pronto!"

Baldy was not fully awake until Jim had led him half-way to the bunk-house.

"What happened?" the hulking boy now demanded. "Where's Dick and Joe? Find out who shot at you from the c'ral yonder?"



"Never mind the cross-questionin'!" Jim growled. "Baldy, have you got a good horse?"

"Sure I got a good bronc, Jim. Want to borrow him? You can have any damned thing Baldy Peters owns."

"No, I don't want to borrow him," Jim said more gently. "I want you to saddle him and lead him up there behind that farther corral. Remember I don't want any noise. Take him out of the other end of the barn."

"But what you want me to do all them secret things fer?"

"Damn it! Never mind what I want you to do 'em for! Are you goin' to get your bronc, or do I have to kick you across to the barn?"

Baldy needed no physical impetus. As Jim saw him disappear into the barn he turned and hurried toward the bunk-house where he lit a lamp. Writing a brief note he sealed it in an envelope. His one fear now was that he could not get Baldy away without being discovered.

Hastening outside Jim glanced toward the ranch-house. Nobody was in sight. Then he ran across the open yard and around the end of the corral where he had told Baldy to wait. The boy was leading a saddled horse from the direction of the barn.

"What you want, Jim?" he demanded. "Here's the best bronc in my string."

"I don't want your horse, kid. You're the one who's goin' to do the fast ridin'. Here's a letter to Sandy Naughton, and I want you to hit the high places gettin' it to him."

“ You want me to ride to Animas—to-night ? ” sputtered Baldy. “ What you want me to do it fer, Jim ? ”

Reaching out Jim grasped him by the collar, shook him.

“ Baldy, do you want me to soak you on the jaw, or bend a gun over your head ? ”

“ Naw, ’course I don’t, Jim, but I wanna know why you want me to ride to Animas in such a hell of a hurry.”

“ To get that letter to Sandy Naughton, you damned fool ! Find him the minute you get to town even if you have to tear his house down to wake him. You know where that big rock by the dead juniper is, up yonder on the trail toward the head of the big arroyo ? ”

“ Sure,” agreed the boy. “ I know where that is.”

“ Then tell Sandy to wait at the big rock for me ! Savvy, Baldy, the big rock ! Tell him to kill a horse gettin’ there if he has to ! Here, kid, here’s a hundred dollars for your trouble.”

“ Hundred dollars ? ” gasped Baldy, drawing back. “ What you want me to take all that dinero for, Jim ? Honest, I’m willin’ to do anything fer you fer nothin’ ! But can’t you wait till daylight ? ”

“ Daylight hell ! ” sneered Jim. “ Baldy, this moonlight’s as good as day ! Do you want me to soak you ? Take this money and do what you like with it. Get drunk, buy yourself a rig, or paint the town red for all I care ! All I want you to do is to get this letter to Sandy Naughton before



daylight ! If you don't I'm goin' to kill you, Baldy Peters ! Are you on your way ? ”

“ Ye-ah, ye-ah,” stammered Baldy, “ but don't git all het up about it. I just wanted to know why I was—I don't want all that money ! ”

“ Take it whether you want it or not,” retorted Jim, shoving the money into one of Baldy's pockets. “ There's plenty more where it came from.”

“ Gee ! ” Baldy chuckled as he raised a foot toward the stirrup. “ I wish I was rich enough to give hundred-dollar chunks to durn fools ! What I don't do to Animas town won't be worth seein'. S' long, cowboy.”

Whatever Baldy's shortcomings, he was a good rider, and to-night, through the splendour of the silvery moonlight that flooded the Miguels, he rode as though the devil himself were clutching at the horse's hindquarters. Baldy had two reasons for haste. First, to deliver the mysterious and urgent message to the sheriff. His other reason was the incredible possession of a hundred dollars.

As soon as he had seen horse and rider merge into the moonlight toward the arroyo, Jim got his own horse and took it to the barn. He then went to the cook-house where he proceeded to make a fire in the kitchen stove. As he was not ready to depart on the rest of his dangerous venture for an hour or so, and not knowing when next he would eat, if ever, he had decided to fortify himself.

Putting on the coffee-pot he began a search which culminated in the discovery of some cold

meat, beans and potatoes. He had barely sat down to the "feast" when Chuck came in.

"Saw the light and wondered what was makin' the greaser git up so durned early," said Chuck.

"Sit in, cowboy," Jim invited.

"Don't care'f I do have some of that Java with you, Johnson. Thank you just the same, but I'll ride 'er bareback. Just wanted to talk with you."

"I'm listenin'."

"I've been doin' a lot of thinkin' about who took them shots at you, Johnson, from the corral," said the grisled rider. "Do you figure it might have been Dick Garrett? This is confidential, savvy?"

"What makes you think it might have been Dick?" Jim was debating whether or not he should confess what had happened in Prairie City. He decided it was not advisable.

"Well, I dunno," frowned Chuck. "I'd hate like hell to think it was Dick but the more I been worryin' over it, the funnier it looks to me how he quit the poker game and said he was goin' to town soon after Nadine comes to tell you the old man wants you."

Jim pondered this suggestion. Then he shook his head.

"I figured when I got to town I'd find some-thin' to shed a little light on that shootin', Chuck. I didn't find out a thing. I'm not goin' to waste any worry over it."

For a half-hour they discussed the shooting, Jim tactfully avoiding any positive or committing



assertion. Chuck said that a mysterious and harried atmosphere had overhung the Rafter G for months.

"Well, I reckon I might as well turn in and get two, three hours' shut-eye," said Chuck. "You?"

Jim looked at his watch. It showed five minutes of four.

"No, I reckon not. Couldn't go to sleep if I turned in. You go ahead, and as soon as daylight comes I'll tend to the chores."

"You ain't 'fraid somebody'll take another shot at you, Johnson, if you go to sleep?"

"Maybe," returned Jim, grinning. "You go on, and I'll stretch my legs on one of the benches in the dining-room."

Giving Chuck a few minutes to get settled in the bunk-house Jim went to the barn and led his horse out the farther door.

The first flush of dawn was rubbing out the pale stars along the eastern horizon as he rode toward the foothills, his immediate destination Saucer Basin.

## CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Jim reached the crest of the ridge from which the bullet had been fired at him the previous day, he was met by the brilliant glare of the sun. It had been a morning close to frost, and the warmth was welcome. Hooking a leg about the horn, he rolled and lit a cigarette as he studied the basin.

If it had been Dick Garrett who had fired the shot, and Dick had met his sister and given her the big rifle and ridden away, it should not be difficult to find the spot where the transfer had been made. It would require some good tracking, however.

Crossing the basin to where he had seen the fleeing rider disappear, Jim began a careful examination of the grassy ground. He had barely got out of sight of the basin when he found that the marks of the running hoofs turned sharply to the left. This must mean that the rider had not proceeded toward where Jim had discovered Nadine driving the band of cattle.

With interest quickened by this discovery, and with a mounting hope that neither Dick nor his sister was implicated in the shooting, Jim followed



the trail, as for a time the rider had kept his horse at a run, thus making the hoofs plough deeply into the grassy surface.

Beyond the upper end of the swale, however, the trail became difficult, for the rider had slowed down. Here Jim made little headway. Finally he took the general direction and started on. In about two hundred yards he came into a region more sparsely grassed, and dotted with sage and greasewood. Here the earth was softer. Again he picked up the trail.

He had not followed it far before he saw it was veering steadily away from where he had come upon Nadine, and toward the mouth of Marfa Creek canyon. This steady course made it seem reasonable that if Dick had fired the shot he had kept on for some distance before handing over the rifle to his sister. If such were the case, after she had got the rifle she could have ridden hastily southward under the shelter of a line of low hills to the point where he had found her.

Into Jim's hopeful mind, which wanted Nadine to be entirely exonerated of any complicity in the attempt on his own life, even if her brother had actually fired the shot, there came a brightening thought. It was that the time for any very long ride had been too short.

Across a series of gently undulating ridges and shallow ravines he followed the horse-tracks. When in a ravine which he thought was the last between him and a low ridge that would afford him a view of Marfa Creek, he dismounted and left his horse. He approached the ridge

cautiously, and had barely looked over when he flopped to the ground. He had seen a horseman riding fast from the direction of Prairie City.

The course the rider was taking left no doubt in Jim's mind of his purpose. He was carrying the news of the shooting in town to Buck Tassler and Slim Denver. Farther on, and a little to the left, Jim could see a small ranch-house and a new corral half hidden among some trees on the bank of Marfa Creek.

The rider drew up before the house. Immediately two men appeared. Even from the distance of a quarter-mile Jim knew the two were Buck Tassler and Slim.

They seemed to be holding a short conference with the rider. Then the two men hurried into the house, and almost immediately reappeared. They went to the corral, and it was not more than ten minutes after the messenger had arrived until the three of them galloped back along the trail to Prairie City.

"Uh-huh!" muttered Jim, chuckling grimly. "If I was in town in about an hour, wouldn't I sure get smoked up? Well, this is just what the widow ordered."

It had been his intention to make a reconnaissance of Buck Tassler's place during the early forenoon. Now, with the place deserted, this should be both easy and safe.

As soon as the three riders were out of sight Jim got his horse, and rode straight for the ranch. Approaching the house, he saw it was a new two-room structure. He could hear the rumble of the



creek not far behind it. One of the many details he noted was a large cottonwood standing in the yard about twenty feet from the western corner of the house. Riding to the other corner, he dismounted. He led his horse around the corner, and dropped the bridle-reins.

Jim had seen that there was but one door at the front of the shack. Now as he came back and looked in he saw that this door led to the kitchen.

It required but a few minutes for him to make an examination of the kitchen, which was dirty and scantily furnished. He found two board bunks and a rough table to be the main furnishings of the other room. Here, too, he spent but a few minutes in search. He scowled in disappointment and was about to turn back to the kitchen when he saw a ladder nailed to the partition and at the head a rough trap-door.

Grasping the ladder, he had to take but two steps before he could reach up and press the door to one side. He pulled himself through into a low attic, illuminated only by the light through the trap and that coming in the narrow openings at the eaves. With the aid of this light and a few matches Jim made a quick examination. He was sitting on the edge of the opening, idly swinging his legs and wondering what next he would do, when his alert ears caught the sound of hoofs. Without stopping to drop the door into place he went down the ladder.

On the floor he paused to listen. The hoofbeats were nearer, but apparently from the direction opposite that taken by the three riders.

Realising that if he went out by the kitchen door he would likely come face to face with the approaching horseman, Jim glanced about. The bedroom had two windows, one at the back, the other at the end.

Choosing the end one, he raised the sash, slipped through, and was on the ground within a few feet of his quizzical horse. Noiselessly he dropped the sash into place.

Moving his gun quickly to a better position, Jim listened. The rider was stopping at the kitchen door. Then in two long, silent steps Jim was at the corner. In another he was clear of it and facing Ruggles, the rustler, on the buckskin horse.

Ruggles's eyes registered surprise for a brief moment as they turned upon the lithe cowboy. His right thumb was hooked into his belt within a few inches of his gun-handle. His left hand lay on the horn of his saddle. For a half-minute the men surveyed each other.

"What'n hell you a-doin' here?" snarled the man on the horse.

"Now, now, Tex," returned Jim with a smile, "that isn't any way to welcome an old friend. How are you, anyway?"

"My name ain't Tex," snarled the other. His hand lifted from the horn, but dropped back when he saw Jim Johnson's gun flipped out of its holster. "I'm Bart Ruggles. Fact is I'm purty good. H'are you, stranger?"

"Me?" drawled Jim. "Well, the last time I took my temperature I wasn't runnin' any fever to speak of but I'm one of those men that get excited



easy. Better keep your hand clean away from your gun, Tex."

Furious as a trapped panther, but reluctant to go for his own weapon in the face of the steady gun in the hand of the grinning young cowboy, Ruggles spat out a mouthful of profanity before he declared :

"I'm not Tex anything, stranger. I'm Bart Ruggles, by Gawd, and the man as says I ain't has got to fight !"

"Now ain't it funny how a man sometimes lets his memory trick him ?" Jim asked. "That last time I heard anything about you, paisano, your name was Tex Rackerby, and you were wanted for horse stealin' and murder down in Cochise."

Something like an incredulous smile broke over the hard-bitten, grisdled face, but there was not a vestige of mirth in it.

"Young feller," he offered harshly, "I don't want to call you a damned liar to your face, but you're sure a barkin' up the wrong tree. Name's Bart Ruggles, and I got me a little ranch up toward the head of this here crick."

Without relaxing his vigilance, Jim advanced until he was within ten feet of the snarling rider.

"Remember seein' me before, Tex ?" he drawled.

"Yeah, other day east of Las Animas. I orter killed you then !"

"Then why didn't you ?"

"Dunno ! Reckon it was a case of pore jedgment ! It struck me then you needed killin' ! What's yer name ?"

"Jim Johnson, driftin' cowpuncher."

"You're a damned liar, Johnson! What's yer business? What you got that hog-leg trained on me fer? I ain't done nothin' to you 'less it's I used bad jedgment in not shootin' you the other day!"

"Yeah, you sure did," Jim said seriously. "Now tell me, don't you recollect seein' me?"

Ruggles shook his head. The crooked hand on the pommel twitched in its eagerness to reach the gun.

"I ain't seen you but the onct, Johnson. That was the other day east of Animas. You recollect?"

"Oh, sure, I remember that time, but polish up your memory, Mr. Rackerby. How about yesterday up at Azurite Lake?"

Tex's mouth jerked open, then snapped shut. The hand on the horn twitched up, settled back. Again he loosed a volley of profanity.

"Was you up there yesterday?" he finished.

"Sure," agreed Jim. "You did a fairly good job on that Rafter G calf, Tex, but right here I want to tell you that any man who'll kill a cow just to rustle her calf is so damned low-down he'd have to stand on a ten-foot ladder to reach a snake's belly."

"Them's hard words, feller! I ain't used to takin' sech unresented, by Gawd!"

"Then go for your gun, and begin resentin' 'em," retorted Jim. "There's nothin' I'd relish more than shootin' you through the left posterior lobe of your ornery gizzard! Ready?"

"You think you're damned funny, don't you?"



snarled the man on the horse. "You're brave as hell 'cause you got the drop!"

"Funny?" Jim chuckled softly. "Why, Tex, I was born laughin', and the funniest thing I ever saw is you. Brave? Say, hombre, I'm the bravest feller in the whole wide world."

"I s'pose next thing you'll be claimin' is that you're the fastest man in the world with a gun," sneered Tex.

"Sure!" agreed Jim. "If you want to test me out, I'll leather my gun and start at scratch with you. Anythin' to oblige an old amigo."

For a few seconds Tex grimly considered this suggestion but it did not seem to appeal to him, for he kept his hand on his saddle-horn.

"What yuh want, Johnson?" he growled.

"Well, in the first place I want to know what you're doin' here!"

"You mean here at this outfit?"

"Yeah, that'll do first, Tex."

"Look here!" the rider snorted. "I want you to stop a-callin' me Tex! Name's Ruggles!"

"Ruggles, the rustler," Jim mused aloud. "Mr. Rackerby, do you happen to know what an alliteration is?"

"Naw, I don't, 'less you're one of 'em!" snorted Tex. "If you think you're funny, I sure don't."

"Ruggles, the rustler, rustled ruthlessly," said Jim. "That's an alliteration."

"Well, what if it is?"

"You might tell me what you're doin' here," returned the provoking Jim Johnson.

"I'm here to see Tassler. Does that take any of your hide off, Johnson? Where'n hell is he?"

"You mean Buck?"

"Yeah, I mean Buck Tassler!"

"He's in town, I reckon."

"What's he in town fer?"

"I think he went to town to make arrangements for his brother's funeral."

For a moment Tex's hard-bitten countenance froze into a sardonic sneer. Then he jerked forward.

"Is Joe Tassler dead?"

"Yeah, Joe's dead."

"Who'n hell killed him?" Tex jerked back, and it seemed he was going for his gun, but under the spell of the unwavering Colt he kept his right hand on the horn.

"I did! And if you don't unbuckle your belt and drop it and your hog-leg to the ground, I'm goin' to kill you."

Tex lost no time in obeying the grim order.

"If you was fast enough to get Joe Tassler before he got you, feller, you're sure too fast fer me," he apologised as he stepped away from the horse. "In my younger days I wouldn't have took water from no man like you, Johnson."

"Say back in the days when you used to rustle cattle and dry-gulch prospectors down in Cochise?" ventured Jim.

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," growled Tex, shooting him a look which might of itself have killed.

"What you want with me, now?"



"I want you to step over and kiss that tree," returned Jim, gesturing toward the cottonwood.

"Aw, hell! Stop tryin' to be funny! I stood jest about all I'm goin' to stand from you."

Jim took a pair of handcuffs from a hip pocket. Bidding Tex extend his right hand, he snapped a link on the wrist.

"Now get over there and face that tree!" Jim prodded the man in the belly with the end of his gun.

When Tex profanely obeyed, Jim snapped the other link of the handcuff to the left wrist.

"You ain't a-goin' to leave me here, are you, feller?" the captive wailed.

"I was thinkin' of it," Jim grinned as he holstered his '45.

"But I can't do nothin' but stand up and hug this here tree!"

"You can gnaw it down like a beaver if you want to," Jim consoled. "I'll take your gun. See you next Christmas."

As he rode away he was followed by Tex's profane curses and threats. He headed westward along the foothills and had not gone far before he came to a dim trail in which were fairly fresh horse-tracks leading in the same direction.

Dismounting, Jim bent over the tracks. He had noted certain peculiarities in the tracks he had followed from the rise east of Saucer Basin. When he stepped into the saddle he felt no mystery about the shot that had been fired at him from the ridge the previous afternoon.

Jim did not materially alter his course until he

reached the trail by which he had crossed the Miguels the day before on his way to the Garrett ranch. He turned up the trail. Near the towering rock with the dead juniper at its base he dismounted and stripped bridle and saddle from the bay. Tying the end of the riata about the neck of the horse, he slipped the loop about his left wrist and lay down, resting his head on a rock.

It was a piece of strategy he had used before. If the grazing horse were alarmed, or tried to feed beyond the range of the rope it would tug at the wrist. Drawing his hat over his eyes to shield them from the glaring sun, Jim began to sum up what he had accomplished.

He had lain thus, part of the time half dozing, for an hour when he caught the click of a shod hoof on a rock. He moved his hat enough to see a rider coming down the trail.

"Sandy's right on time," he chuckled. "Baldy must have hit the high spots all right."

He sat up as if surprised when the sheriff stopped.

"Howdy, old-timer." Jim got lazily to his feet. "Get off and give your saddle a rest."

Sandy tumbled from his horse and reached out a hand.

"Lord, I'm glad to see you alive and safe, boy! From what the big, freckled-faced kid told me you sure must've started somethin' over here in Big Grass. What's happened?"

"Sit down on that rock, and I'll tell you about it, Sandy," said Jim.

Sandy listened, sometimes smiling in affectionate appreciation, sometimes shaking his head in



bewilderment. He listened through, however, before he exploded :

“ You’re sure a chip right off the old block, boy ! There ain’t no longer any doubt you’re the rightful son of Jim McLeod ! ”

Presently Jim saddled his horse. Side by side he and Sandy rode down the trail to the lower end of the pocket. Here the trail forked. Sandy turned to the left, along the foothills toward Buck Tassler’s ranch. Jim continued down the arroyo trail to the Rafter G.

## CHAPTER XIX

As Jim Johnson rode down the arroyo trail his heart was light for he had no immediate fear of another bullet. He knew to a moral certainty who had killed Hailey and the motive ; though he still had to prove all this. He was going first to the ranch to tell Nadine and her father they need have no more anguish over the fear that Dick had been the murderer. Then he would ride on to Prairie City and finish his grim business with the aid of Sandy Naughton.

It would not be long, perhaps but a few hours, until he could disclose his own identity. He smiled as he wondered how Nadine and her father would receive the news. Had they suspected ? But what about Dick Garrett ? Dick was in gaol with a sore head and with an unofficial accusation of murder against him. It might not be so easy to explain to him.

When he was within a half-mile of the Rafter G he saw a rider turn away from the house and gallop toward the lane that led between the alfalfa fields. The rider was likely old Chuck on his way to town, perhaps for a doctor. He hoped Garrett had not developed any serious symptoms from his superficial wound.



As he did not want Chuck to reach town and return with the news of Dick's incarceration, he decided he would stop at the ranch only long enough to assure Nadine and her father that their worries were about over. Then he would hurry on, try to overtake Chuck before he reached Prairie City. Chuck would be amenable to reason and would see how it had not hurt Dick to remain for a while in the calaboose.

Striking up a good gallop, Jim approached the ranch. As he neared the open space between corrals and buildings he glanced toward the house in the hope of seeing Nadine. There was no one in sight.

"I wonder if Mr. Garrett can be hurt worse than I thought," he muttered as the bay horse swerved toward the corral in which he had been fed on his arrival. "I don't like the looks of this."

He was so wrapped in thought that he did not notice where his horse was going until the animal stopped at the corral. Jim glanced toward the ranch-house and saw Nadine framed in the doorway. He waved a hand but she did not return the salutation. There seemed something strangely tense in her attitude. He thought her face looked very white. He was about to start toward the house when she whirled and disappeared. Jim dismounted and drew the reins over the head of the bay.

He had not taken six steps before he stopped short. Nadine had appeared, followed closely by her father. She sprang down the steps, reached back to help her father down. Bill Garrett had a

shotgun in his right hand and as he reached the ground he flung the barrels of the weapon into the crook of his left arm.

Like a streak of lightning there flashed through Jim's brain the explanation of this. The rider he had seen leaving had not been Chuck, but someone who had brought the news that Dick was in gaol and accused of the murder of Hailey. Well, this could be easily explained.

But for a few seconds Jim was not so sure it was going to be easy to explain to this grim, silent pair advancing upon him. He knew that the most dangerous thing on earth was an old man driven to desperation by despondency and the assurance that he had not long to live.

Jim did not try to conjecture Nadine's state of mind. He was watching Garrett and the shotgun. The old man was coming with barely a limp as he favoured his wound. His step was slow, deliberate, his whole body tense with emotion and resolution. His white head was forward and his eyes glowed from under their shaggy brows. Beside him walked the girl. Her hands were clenched upon two extra cartridges. Her lips were set in a sneer of hate. Contempt glowed in her violet eyes.

Garrett stopped when he was within thirty feet of where Jim stood. He cocked the big hammers of the weapon, and the clicks sounded to Jim like the clattering of iron weights.

"Well, what you got to say for yourself, Johnson?" Garrett growled as he grasped the forearm of the gun with his left hand, and half swung it



around. In his eyes was the cold satisfaction of a man that has tracked down and trapped an enemy who deserves nothing better than swift death. "I'm waitin' to see what you got to say before I blow you to hell !"

"Oh, kill him now, Dad !" the girl cried. "What's the use of talking to a skunk like him ? Give me the gun and I'll do it if you won't !" Her hand reached for the shotgun, but he swung it away from her.

"If you'll tell me what you want me to explain, Mr. Garrett, I think I can oblige you," Jim said slowly. His mouth was twisted a little and his eyes were like steel. There had surged up in him that inherent streak of stubbornness which made it impossible for him to obey when he knew he was being forced by threat of violence. "It seems to me you're takin' a good deal on yourself, sir, by comin' at me this way."

"Taking a good deal on ourselves !" the girl sneered. "I suppose you didn't take anything on yourself when you said you were going to get us out of all this terrible trouble, you low-down son-of-a-sidewinder ! Dad, why don't you shoot him ? Damn him, he asked me if I could—love him !"

"Yes," agreed Jim, "and what did you say, Nadine ?"

"Don't call me Nadine !" she almost screamed. "I'm not anything to you, you low-down skunk ! Yes, I said I could love you ! But I was a fool for believing what you said !" Again she lunged for the shotgun but her father swung it away from

her. She took two steps toward Jim as if with her hands alone she would throttle him.

"What you mean by slammin' my boy over the head with a gun and puttin' him in gaol, Johnson?" Garrett rasped. "Didn't you tell me Sandy Naughton sent you here to help us out?"

"You saw the letter Sandy sent, didn't you, Mr. Garrett?" Jim was not trying to deceive himself into believing that he was not face to face with death. The problem was how to side-step it. He was sure that even now he could get his Colt and kill the rancher but his hand kept away from the gun.

"Yes, I saw that letter!" Garrett growled. "But how am I to know Sandy Naughton give it to you? I'm damned sure now he didn't. What you got to say for yourself?"

"Oh, Dad, stop asking him questions! Shoot him! Shoot him!"

Garrett crouched and thrust his head farther forward as he slowly brought the shotgun muzzle around. His eyes seemed coated by a film of red as they looked from their deep sockets.

"Johnson," he demanded, with a softness that was little more than a rasping purr, "are you goin' to explain why you deceived us this way?"

"Have I deceived you, Mr. Garrett?"

"You have, by God! If tellin' me and my girl my boy hadn't nothin' to do with the killin' of Hailey, and all the time you had him in gaol for that same crime, ain't deceivin', then just what is it?"



"Did it occur to you that I might have had a reason for wantin' Dick in gaol?" Jim went on.

"No, it didn't!" growled Garrett. "If you told me you had a reason, I wouldn't believe it!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Daddy, shoot him!" the girl shrilled as she flung out her arms. Her white lips curled, but they registered no more loathing and contempt than did her flashing eyes. "Why, you double-crossing, lying fool, did you think I could love you?"

Though Jim did not shift his eyes from Garrett, a warm, confident smile for a moment broke the tension of his features.

"I still think you are goin' to love me, Nadine," he said seriously.

For a few moments it seemed that she was about to laugh at the utter absurdity of his desperation.

"I'm waitin'," said her father.

"For what, sir?" returned Jim, putting most of his weight on his left leg, and leaning a little in the other direction.

"For you to tell us why you lied to us, Johnson!"

"I haven't anything to explain, Mr. Garrett. I came to Big Grass Valley to get you out of this trouble, and if you can't trust me long enough to let me finish the job, I reckon you might as well go ahead and finish me, and then see what you can do from where I left off."

"You ain't goin' to try to explain nothin'?" rasped Garrett.

"That's right," returned Jim. "Under the

circumstances I'm not goin' to explain, Mr. Garrett."

"Johnson," demanded the old man, "do you know I'm goin' to kill you for what you have done to us?"

"I believe you are goin' to try it, Mr. Garrett."

As if this were the final pennyweight on the old man's load of desperate and reasonless rage, he swung the gun forward. As both its barrels roared Jim leaped to the right. The double charge of birdshot splintered a board on the corral fence twenty feet away.

Even as the boom of the shotgun beat against his eardrums Jim was leaping forward. He grasped the gun and wrenched it from Garrett's hands. His failure to kill seemed to have taken all the old man's strength. Flinging the gun aside Jim gave Garrett a shove. He stumbled, fell heavily.

Jim had no more than time to turn when the girl was upon him like a tigress, white teeth bared. As she struck out he grasped her wrists. Then hooking a foot back of her ankles he sat her on the ground, held her rigid for a moment.

"You little fool!" he said with just a little tenderness mixed with the bitter.

"And you filthy, lying coward!" she hissed. "I didn't think you were ornery enough to strike an old man! Let me loose!"

"And I didn't think you and your father were quite ungrateful enough to try to kill a man that was trying to help you," he retorted bitterly.

"Trying to help us? Let me loose—or I'll——"



Out of the tail of an eye Jim saw Garrett struggling to his feet. He released the girl and ran toward his horse. Before he reached the animal Nadine was scurrying toward the shotgun.

Jim vaulted into the saddle as she found the gun. In her frantic attack on him she had dropped the cartridges. Now she ran toward them. Digging in his spurs Jim sent the bay in a half-circle around the girl and her father, and headed toward the end of the lane.

He had covered perhaps eighty yards when the bay horse, which was already in its long, low stride, almost jumped out from under him as the bulk of a double charge of birdshot smote its hind-quarters. Jim felt the sting of shot on his back. One that struck his neck a glancing blow felt as if it had drawn blood.

Straightening in the saddle he turned to glance back. Nadine was reeling from the staggering kick of the shot. She flung the gun away, and crying out something Jim could not understand, ran toward the shed at the side of the barn. As Jim looked back again, this time from the end of the lane, he saw her dragging the old buckboard from the shed. Her father was shambling toward the barn.

Jim needed no one to tell him what Bill Garrett and his daughter meant to do. He must reach Prairie City as far ahead of them as possible, for he had work to do before they got there.

He let the bay run down the lane, down the slope into the bottom where stood the big mesquites and the bigger sycamores. The buzzards

had already discovered the dead horse. They surged upward with a terrific beating of black pinions as horse and rider bore down.

Through the bottom the bay ran in long, low strides, and up the short grade to the edge of the level plain that shone grey and mirage-like in the distance. Under less trying circumstances Jim would have thought of his horse. Now he took no consideration of the animal, except that it was an instrument to bear him to Prairie City in the briefest possible time.

He was sure that even now Nadine and her father were after him, and that if she were driving she would keep the mustangs at a run.

"I hope," he mused, "that old buckboard don't go to pieces and kill 'em both!"

Out across the road that cut the plain the bay went in its distance-devouring strides. Jim now and then looked toward the trail that led to Marfa Creek. It was empty of life. He had trusted he would find Buck Tassler and Slim Denver in town. He still hoped he would.

Jim had covered half the distance to town when from the crest of a long roll in the plain he saw a dim, moving dot far back, and above it a dust-cloud. He knew he had a good three-mile lead over Garrett and Nadine, and that, though he held in the bay a little, he could lengthen it.

It was not, however, until he approached the bridge over Big Grass Creek that he pulled the bay down to a walk. He rode slowly over the bridge, lest the sound of rattling planks carry into the town.



The townsite promoter who had laid out Prairie City had been an ambitious man. Blocks and streets had been staked even as far westward as the bridge. Now only an occasional black-tipped stake showed amid the grass and sage that had overgrown this part of the town.

Instead of turning toward the short main street, Jim cut diagonally across unused streets and lots. He was soon screened by brush from sight of the town itself. Presently he turned and rode toward the end of the main street, stopping on the westerly side of the low, stone building he knew was the bank.

Here he dismounted, and dragged the bridle-reins over the head of the blowing and sweat-streaked bay. He hitched his gun around to a better position, and jammed his sombrero over one eye.

Striding to the corner of the building he peered around. There was a small crowd of men in front of the store this side of the gaol. He saw Buck Tassler's and Slim Denver's horses at the hitching-rack at the Maverick Saloon.

Slipping quickly along the wall to the door which was near the other corner, Jim pushed it open and walked in. He found his way barred by a counter that ran across a large room. One-half of the counter was topped by a latticed grille-work in which there was one wicket. Beyond the counter was a desk and a vault in the wall. The door of the vault was open.

A man rose slowly from behind the desk. He was a tall, almost emaciated man, who looked all

the more cadaverous because of his dingy black suit. The sides and lower part of his face were covered by long black whiskers streaked with grey. His long, clean-shaven upper lip accentuated the grimness of his face. Deep-set black eyes regarded the visitor. Jim Johnson wondered why Bill Garrett had thought this man could be a friend.

The man came slowly, almost furtively toward the counter.

"Good day," he said. "Is there anything I can do to accommodate you, my friend?"

"Are you John Borquin?"

"That is my name, sir." The thin mouth compressed, the deep-set black eyes were cold. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, Mr. Borquin," Jim drawled, as he laid his left hand on the edge of the counter, "there may be quite a lot you can do for me. What you say we begin this way?" His right hand flashed up, and in it was his big, worn revolver.

"By any chance is this a hold-up?" Borquin demanded, unflinching.

"That all depends on how you act up, Borquin," returned Jim. "Just back off there a way while I hop over this counter."



## CHAPTER XX

IT took less than five minutes for Jim to transact his business with Borquin. He went to the door, looked out. The group of men was still in front of the store. The horses were at the Maverick hitching-rack.

Jim reasoned that if the saddled horses were in front of the saloon it was likely their owners were inside the place. He could not see Tassler and Denver in the crowd in front of the store.

The bank building stood on the corner, with a side street entering the main one between it and the block in which the saloon and store were located. Not caring whether or not he was discovered Jim emerged from the bank and started slowly across the side street.

He had crossed it and was a short distance along the board walk when a man detached himself from the crowd in front of the store and ran across the street. He disappeared into the Maverick.

Jim slowed his pace. He had intended to enter the Maverick in search of Buck and Slim. Now he decided it might be better if they came out to meet him, which he was certain they would. He

was within thirty yards of the saloon when the doors burst outward, and Buck Tassler leaped to the middle of the board walk.

Tassler's gun was in his hand. He fired as he swung about. Jim felt the bullet rip through the left side of his shirt. He fired as the crash of Tassler's shot was still in the air. Tassler reeled back, but fired again. This time the two reports were as one. Tassler flung up his arms and tried vainly to brace himself for another shot. He slumped, face foremost, to the walk.

As he fell, Slim Denver leaped from the door, but after taking one look down the street at the crouched figure with the smoking Colt in his right hand, Slim evidently decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Leaping for the edge of the walk he started zigzagging across the street, sending two shots in Jim's direction as he ran. Jim did not take the trouble to return the fire, reasoning that if Denver had had any part in the sinister plot that had all but wrecked the Rafter G, it had been a minor one.

As Slim ran he kept his gaze down the street, so was not able to see what was occurring in the direction of his line of flight. He was within ten feet of the store when he stopped so abruptly that he almost tumbled over backward. Barring his way was Flick Peebles. The end of the little man's big revolver prodded the hatchet-faced cowboy in the belly. Slim emitted a loud grunt.

"Drop that there gun and get your hands up!" Flick squeaked. "You want me to put a hole in you a feller could drive a bull team through?"



What you mean by shootin' off firearms in this here town ? ”

“ I—I was shootin' at Johnson,” whined Slim. He dropped his gun and stared at the belligerent little constable. “ I ain't done nothin', Flick, 'cept to take a couple of shots at Johnson ! ”

“ I dunno ! ” Flick declared judiciously as his goatee tilted upward. “ You was runnin' away and that looks like you had somethin' to run away from. Here, some of you men come and take charge of my prisoner ! ”

To a man the group in front of the store surged into the street and surrounded Slim and Flick. It seemed as if they were eager to do something to divert the attention of the man and the deadly gun on the other side of the street.

Jim could have wished for nothing more auspicious to his plans. As the men surrounded Flick and Slim he hurried diagonally across, and was at the rim of the crowd as Flick broke belligerently through.

Flick had holstered his gun. Now his little right hand darted for it but paused before touching the handle. Jim's cold grey eyes were sardonically smiling.

“ I wouldn't do it if I were you, little rooster,” he drawled.

The smile, the humorous drawl had the effect of making Flick so senselessly angry that he began hopping up and down and waving his arms.

“ You damned lyin' cut-throat ! ” shrilled the little constable. “ You cold-blooded, murderin' ”

killer ! What you mean by lockin' me up last night in my own gaol like I was a common pris'ner ? ”

“ You a common prisoner, Flick ? ” Jim asked incredulously. “ Little rooster, you're the most uncommon prisoner I ever put behind bars. Honest, it ain't often a prisoner makes me want to laugh. ”

“ Don't you laugh at me, you—you—— ” Flick screamed. “ I ain't goin' to stand it from you, by Gawd ! I stood about all I'm goin' to stand ! What you mean by comin' in here and killin' another man ? Tell me that. ”

“ You mean Buck Tassler, Mr. Peebles ? ”

“ Yeah, I mean Buck ! What you mean by shootin' him ? ”

“ He needed it, ” drawled Jim. “ At least, I figured he did. ”

“ You figured he did ? ” Flick repeated in a shrill falsetto, while his goatee quivered with impotent rage. “ Are you jedge and jury and ex'cutioner in this here valley ? ”

“ In this case I happened to be, ” returned Jim, closely watching the group that had surged away from the irate little constable. “ Where's Dick Garrett ? ”

“ In gaol, where he orter be ! ” snorted Flick. “ You s'pose I'm goin' to turn loose the man as killed Ed Hailey ? ”

“ Fine, ” agreed Jim. “ That's the best place for him for the present. ”

“ For the present and the entire future ! ” squeaked Flick. “ And that's where you're a-goin' ”



right now ! Hand me that there gun before I drill you clean full of holes, Johnson ! ”

“ And if I don’t ? ”

“ I’ll kill you so dead you won’t be worth skinnin’ ! Hand over that there gun ! ”

Flick repeated his shrill demand when Jim leaped and grasped him by the wrists. Before the little officer had time to realise what was happening his wrists were pinioned and Jim had jerked the big revolvers from their holsters. Holding the fighting, cursing Flick with one hand, Jim shoved the captured guns into the waistband of his overalls.

“ Here, some of you men ! ” he commanded. “ Take this bantam and hold him before he gaffs somebody.”

“ Gaffs somebody ? ” sputtered Flick, pausing in an attempt to bite Jim’s arms. “ Johnson, you’re the man I’ll gaff ! I’ll kill you deader’n hell ! ”

“ Take him ! ” commanded Jim. “ Take him before I lay him over my knee and spank him ! ”

Before the grim command in Jim’s eyes three men ran forward and took possession of the fighting little constable.

“ What’s the meanin’ of all this here, feller ? ” demanded a man when he could make himself heard. “ What you mean by comin’ in and killin’ men broadcast ? ”

“ Have any of you heard of me killin’ anybody who didn’t try to get me first, stranger ? ” Jim asked, a cold, brittle edge to his words.

"I don't know as I have," the man admitted grudgingly.

"There's been too much promiscuous shootin' round this town," declared another man.

"There certainly has," Jim agreed with a cold grin. "If I told you men how many times various people have tried to kill me since I hit Big Grass yesterday, it would take more than the fingers on one hand. Now, you hombres, listen to me! I'm a deputy of Las Animas, sent here by Sandy Naughton to get the man that killed Hailey, the nester! It's not my fault if several men tried to block me, to their own sorrow, is it?"

"I reckon not, provided what you're tellin's the truth," grumbled a rancher. "How do we know it's the truth?"

"And how do you know it isn't?" countered Jim, keeping well away from the crowd, and his hand near his gun. "If you men are willin' to wait a few minutes, Sandy Naughton ought to be here. If Sandy don't back my play, I'll stand up and let this whole town use me for a target!" His cold gaze swept the crowd. "Does that sound like I was givin' it to you straight, gents?"

"Sounds straight, I reckon," admitted a man.

"Straight, but sort of fishy," chuckled another. "What I want to know is why didn't Sandy come hisself 'stead of sendin' you?"

"You can ask Sandy about that when he comes," Jim replied.

There was now a violent and profane commotion in the crowd, and Flick, by his very fury, managed to drag his captors to the edge of it.



Here he stopped, rigid, his goatee bristling like the feathers along the neck of a game cock.

"You a tellin' the truth when you say you comes into Big Grass to git the Hailey killer, Johnson?"

"The whole truth and nothin' but."

"Did you git him?" squealed Flick, his goatee dropping. "Did you get him?"

"Yeah, I got him."

"Then who is he?" Flick fought to get free. "I'm the reg'lar orficer of the law in Prairie City, and I got a right to know."

"You'll know before very long, Flick. Let him loose, men!"

As the three big men released their grasps on the little constable, he stood amazed and bewildered. He was more amazed when Jim drew one of the Colts from his waistband and extended it. Flick's little hand reached doubtfully for the weapon.

"What you want me to do, Johnson?" he piped. "You givin' me back my authority?"

"Take Slim Denver and lock him up, Mr. Peebles," ordered Jim. "Three or four of you men help him! And by the way, don't let Dick Garrett out!"

Bristling with renewed importance, Flick forced his way to where two men held Denver. He grasped Slim by an arm and with the other hand poked the end of a gun against his back.

"Come along, you slabsided hunk of buzzard meat!" he shrilled. "I'll show you and your kind how to run this here town!"

The three men who had delegated themselves to

Flick's assistance fell in behind. Everybody in the crowd except Jim and one other man was smiling. This man said seriously :

"I just heard a rig clatter across the bridge. Somebody was comin' like the devil beatin' tan-bark, from the way it sounded."

"Yes," drawled Jim. "I heard it."

Turning, he looked up the road. The team was rounding the bend of the timber where last night he had left Nadine while he had ridden into town. Even at the distance he could see she was plying the whip cruelly on the weary mustangs. Even under this urge they could do no better than a weaving gallop. Beside her sat her father.

On they came, the dust-cloud whirling out behind the wheels. Nadine's dark hair had come down and trailed like a veil. Jim could see the shimmer of sunshine from Bill Garrett's snowy head. Neither of them had stopped to get a hat. The buckboard lurched and careened as each stride of the mustangs looked as if it would be their last.

"Durned if it ain't Bill Garrett !" cried a man. "And that girl's drivin' them hosses to their death !"

"Old Bill's got a gun !" ejaculated another. "They're comin' after Dick !"

"More'n likely after the man as put Dick in gaol," corrected a third. "I know how them Garretts are to hang together. It'll be hell when Bill and the girl learn Dick killed Ed Hailey, boys."

Jim did not turn his head. He barred the path



of the tired team, forcing the girl to pull the mustangs to their haunches so close that the tip of the tongue barely missed him. Nadine was pale, but out of her chalky face her dark blue eyes blazed. Beside her her father crouched, gripping the shotgun. His weathered face was as free of pity as a granite mask.

"There he is ! There he is, Dad !" the girl panted. "Shoot him ! Give me the gun !" She gripped the lines in one hand and reached for the gun, but he jerked it away.

"I'm goin' to shoot the lyin' dog !" Garrett growled shakily. "Get out there away from the horses, Johnson, so's I won't hit one of 'em. You ain't worth even the price of an ornery fuzz-tail !"

To the surprise of Garrett and his daughter, and to that of the crowd, which had instinctively sought to get out of possible line of fire, Jim stepped away from the team.

He did not pause to be made into a close-range target, however, as he cleared the drooping head of the near horse. He turned in beside the animal and made straight for Garrett and the raised shotgun. His lips were set in a grim smile and there was something paradoxically hot and hypnotic in his cold, grey gaze. His step was slow, but it did not falter. Garrett held the shotgun before him, its muzzles swung fairly upon the oncoming cowboy. Jim's right hand lifted as he stopped beside the front wheel.

"Give me that gun, Mr. Garrett," he said gently, yet with an unmistakable note of command. "Pass it over."

"Don't you do it, Dad! Don't you do it!" the girl cried. "Give it to me if you haven't got the sand to shoot him!"

Jim turned his head enough to look squarely into her burning eyes.

"You keep out of this, Nadine," he advised gently. "The reason I ran from you two at the ranch was because I saw you were too wrought up to listen to explanation. Now both of you cool down! Dick's all right."

"Then where is Dick? Where is he?"

"Dick's all right," replied Jim. "He'll be here in a few minutes. I told you last night he had nothing to do with the Hailey murder."

"Thank—God!" muttered Garrett as he allowed Jim to take the gun from his suddenly limp fingers.

Nadine had slumped in her seat. The lines slipped from her hands. A man from the crowd stepped in and grasped the spent mustangs by their bridles.

For a short moment the girl tried to meet Jim's eyes. Then she turned her drooping head and stared toward the saloon before which a distorted dead man lay on the walk as he had fallen with one of Jim Johnson's bullets through his heart. Milander, the vacuous-brained bartender, clung limply to a post.

"Howdy, Nadine," he mumbled.

"Who—who is it, Fred?" she cried, raising a shaking arm.

"Buck Tassler," he managed to tell her. "He—he—Johnson—just killed him."



Nadine had sagged lower in the rickety seat and hidden her face in her trembling hands when Sandy Naughton rode out of the narrow alley where Jim had left his horse the previous night. Sandy was not alone, for he led a buckskin horse on which rode Tex Rackerby, or Bart Ruggles as he was known in Big Grass Valley. Rackerby was handcuffed. His feet were tied under the belly of the buckskin.

All eyes were turned on the sheriff and his prisoner, but Bill Garrett was not seeing the sandy old sheriff. He was staring at the big rifle Sandy held across his saddle.

"Howdy, Bill," saluted Sandy as he reined up. "Howdy, Jim Johnson! Howdy all you boys! Seems I got here just about in time, eh?"

"Hello, Sandy," said Jim as though he had not seen the sheriff less than two hours earlier. "The show's just about over. Sorry I had to kill Buck Tassler."

"That's all right," Sandy growled grimly. "If you had to kill him, I'm dead certain he needed it."

"He needed it," Jim agreed, smiling thinly.

"Sandy Naughton," demanded Garrett, "where did you find that there gun?"

The bewildered crowd had surged toward the sheriff and his prisoner. Sandy was about to reply when Jim interrupted crisply:

"We'll take all that up later, Mr. Garrett. There's a good deal to explain. Let me help you down."

As Jim and one of the bystanders were helping Garrett down over the wheel, Flick appeared around the corner of the store officiously leading Dick Garrett. Flick's renewed authority more than buoyed him up against the sagging weight of his big hat and big guns. He looked boyishly small, however, beside the tall cowboy with the white bandage around his head.

At sight of her brother Nadine uttered a glad, yet fearful cry and leaped over the wheel. She sped across the dusty street.

"Dick! Oh, Dick!" she sobbed, and flung herself into his arms.

"Looky here, young woman," Flick squeaked, "what you mean by takin' my prisoner this away? Don't you know he——"

Nadine lifted her face just enough from her brother's breast to smile through her tears at Peebles. Then her eyes flashed.

"Get away from here, you little squirt," she advised, half laughing, "before I get mad and put you in my pocket!"

This was the last straw upon Flick's already heavy load of indignities. He flinched back as if slapped in the face and his goatee bristled. What he might have said or done was never to be known, for Sandy Naughton shouted from the back of his horse:

"Hey, Flick! Come here! Got another prisoner for you, old-timer!"

The command from the sheriff, the intimate term of old-timer, instantly restored Flick's dignity, and as cockily as a victorious bantam



he pranced toward where Sandy was now dismounting.

Beside the sheriff Flick stopped, tilted up his belligerent goatee and glared at Tex Rackerby, alias Bart Ruggles.

"Now who'n hell'd you kill?" he demanded in his squeaky voice. "It don't matter. I'll put you away where you'll keep like a hawg on ice. Git outen that saddle before I drag you out!"

Jim had slowly followed Nadine across the street, and stopped just short of where her brother held her in his arms, one of his big hands fondly but clumsily stroking her hair. When Dick's gaze was brought up by the penetration of Jim's look, his face hardened for a moment, but twitched into a wry grin.

"I'm mighty sorry I had to lambaste you last night," said Jim, "but it was that or see you do somethin' worse."

They searched each other's eyes for a few moments. Then Dick reached out a hand.

"I think I savvy, Johnson," he declared huskily. "I was some lit up last night. Want to shake, to show the old hatchet's buried, amigo? I been doin' some hard thinkin' there in the juggado."

Their big, strong hands locked in a grip of friendship and understanding.

"I'm sure glad you look at it the right way, cowboy," Jim declared. "See you later. Take good care of the little girl."

"Won't I?"

As the trembling girl heard the sound of quick,

retreating footsteps, she clutched her brother's arm, and buried her white face against his breast.

"Oh, Dick!" she sobbed. "I've made a terrible, terrible mistake! I accused him of——"

Tenderly, with his big range-roughened hand, he stroked her shining hair.

"He'll understand, I reckon," he tried to console her.

"No! No, he won't understand. I tried to kill him!"



## CHAPTER XXI

PRESENTLY Nadine lifted her smiling, tear-streaked face.

"Are you hurt much, Dick?"

"Just a sore head," he answered; "I had it comin'."

The crowd, led by Jim, Sandy Naughton and Bill Garrett, was moving toward the Maverick Saloon. Little Flick Peebles was arrogantly escorting Tex Rackerby to the calaboose. Somebody had tied the blown mustangs to the hitching-rack in front of the store.

Nadine flinched as she saw the big rifle in Sandy's hand.

"Is that your gun, Dick?" she whispered.

"Not mine unless somebody's varnished it. Looks like new."

As the crowd reached the walk Jim grasped Milander by an arm.

"Come along, Pretty Boy," he commanded.

"We want you inside."

"What you want with me?" whined the bartender. "I ain't done nothin' to you, Johnson."

"Get some sense into your head," sneered Jim. "Nobody's goin' to hurt you!"

"Th-thanks," stuttered Milander.

As they entered the saloon Jim turned and demanded :

"How'd you and Flick and the other men get out of gaol?"

Milander replied that Flick had set up such shrill yelling about daylight that Pete Simpson, who lived not far away, had been roused. Simpson had hurried to the gaol, then run for a crowbar in obedience to Flick's fiery orders. He had pried out the hasp, and liberated Flick, Milander and the three other men, leaving Dick Garrett in gaol.

"Milander," Jim asked, "do you know the combination to this safe?"

"Yeah, Tim Perry showed me how to open it. What you want it open for?"

"Never mind what I want it open for. Get busy!"

The curious crowd stood back while the bartender, with shaking hands, turned the dial this way and that until he could drag open the thick door.

"Now get out of the way," ordered Jim. "I want to go through that strong-box."

At one side of the inner compartment was a tier of small drawers. In the second one Jim examined he found what he looked for. Getting up, he pushed the heavy door shut with a knee. He extended a hand toward Bill Garrett.

"There's the bullet that killed Hailey, Mr. Garrett. Pretty expensive slug for you, eh?"

"Damned expensive!" the old rancher muttered as he took the bullet. His jaw was set and



his faded eyes glittered in the cold scrutiny of the pointed, metal-jacketed cylinder. "That's it, I reckon, Johnson. I knowed Tim Perry had it hid somewhere."

Backing to the bar Jim leaned his elbows against its edge and hooked a heel over the iron railing. There was a sad, whimsical smile on his bronzed face. He had hoped when he had ridden into Big Grass Valley that he would be able to solve the mystery of Hailey's killing and bring the killer to justice without having to do any deadly shooting.

There were puzzled, expectant looks on the sun-browned features of the score of men ringed in a half-circle. They had very little to say, for some of them were still unconvinced even though the sheriff was here, and appeared willing and eager to back Jim Johnson's play. As for Naughton, there was a broad grin of satisfaction on his weathered face.

"Where'd you get that new Winchester, Sandy?" demanded Garrett.

"Found it in Buck Tassler's loft," returned Sandy. "Or at least Jim Johnson did. He told me where to find it and some other things bearin' strongly on this here case. It was him, too, as shackled Bart Ruggles to a tree and told me to get him. Boys, did you know there's a five-thousand-dollar reward on that feller for murder and rustlin' down in Cochise? And him a-runnin' loose right here in my county for months and posin' as a respectable little rancher! Now ain't I one hell of a sheriff?"

"You're all right, Sandy," growled a white-bearded rancher. "Even if you ain't such a great shakes as a peace officer like Jim McLeod used to be. By Gawd, I tell you there was a man!"

Though Jim thrilled with pride at this mention of his father, his face was inscrutable.

"You may not be such a great sheriff, Sandy," declared another man, "but we got to give you credit for pickin' a man as can do things. Johnson, how'd you spot this feller Rackerby?"

"I found a reward notice with his picture on it in Sandy's office," Jim replied. "It was just a piece of good luck, I reckon."

"Good luck, my grandmother's red petticoat!" snorted Sandy. "Boy, don't you be makin' no excuses for me!" His admiring eyes asked a question. Jim shook his head a little as if to say: "Not yet."

Now Bill Garrett limped forward and peered hard into Jim's calm face. He grimaced, shook his head.

"By gosh," he muttered. "I see you or your picture somewhere before, Johnson, but I can't for the life of me tell where or when it was!"

"Might have been in some rogues' gallery," suggested Jim.

"Nope! I never investigated one of them things, Johnson." For another long moment the old rancher's faded eyes probed. Then into them came a twinkle, and he turned quickly away. "Sandy, what does this here mean, you a-findin' this new Winchester in Buck Tassler's loft?"

"You better ask Jim Johnson," returned



Sandy. "I don't know much about this thing yet myself."

All eyes were now turned upon the tall young rider who leaned nonchalantly against the bar. Old Sandy put an arm about Garrett's shoulders.

"Lean on me a little if you like, Bill. That side of yourn must hurt some."

"Some," Garrett answered. "Thank ye, Sandy."

"We had better begin as far back as possible," said Jim. "Borquin and Perry, though that's not their real names, had done a stretch in Leavenworth for usin' the mails wrongfully. It was a fake oil promotion scheme on which they made a pile of money. They somehow managed to cache the money before they were sent up. Well, when they got out they dug up the dinero. The way I figure it they wanted some place to hide out for a while, and they happened into Big Grass. Perry bought this saloon and Borquin bought the bank as soon as they saw there was big money to be made here."

"But wait a minute!" gasped Garrett. "Was John Borquin in on this murderin' deal?"

"Was he?" drawled Jim. "Borquin was the brains of the whole thing with Perry runnin' less than a neck behind. They saw what could be done with the Rafter G by ditchin' the water from Marfa Creek into Saucer Basin, and then bringin' it out through a tunnel on to the level plain this side of the ranch. It was a pretty big game, eh? Mr. Garrett, didn't you tell me that with the plain planted to alfalfa and under irrigation, the Rafter

G would be worth upward of a quarter of a million dollars ? ”

For a half-minute Garrett could only stare.

“ And I thought John Borquin was my friend ! ” he muttered. “ Yeah, Johnson, I told you that last night at the ranch. How’d you find out all this, though ? ”

“ Partly from what I found in Buck’s loft and partly from what Borquin himself told me a little while ago,” answered Jim.

Garrett jerked away from the support of Sandy’s arm, and paled to the colour of dirty chalk.

“ Where’s John Borquin now ? ” he demanded with a curse. “ I’ll kill him if it’s the last act of my life ! ”

Jim reached out and laid a hand upon the irate rancher’s arm.

“ Borquin’s all right for the present, Mr. Garrett. I took the trouble to lock him in his own vault a while ago to make sure he didn’t get away.”

“ In his own vault ? ” Garrett chuckled harshly. “ I hope to hell you sealed him up like one of them Egyptian kings ! ”

“ He’s sealed for the present,” grinned Jim. “ I made him give me the combination so we can get him out of storage when we want him.”

Jim now explained how, after Borquin and Perry had discovered the potential value of the Rafter G, they had planned to kill Hailey and make the evidence look conclusively as if Dick Garrett had done it. Buck and Joe Tassler, professional gun-men, had been imported for the



job. Letters found in an old valise in Buck's loft proved this beyond a doubt. To bring Garrett to a state where he would part with the ranch without protest, Perry had resorted to the blackmail scheme.

"So that's why you was about broke, Bill?" gasped the sheriff. There were other incredulous exclamations, for all Prairie City had been puzzled at the impoverishment of the Rafter G.

"That's why," said Garrett. "They had just about took off my whole hide, boys."

"You'll get most of it back," said Jim. "It's practically all in Borquin's vault at the little bank and he told me he was willin' to make restitution."

"Restitution hell!" snorted Garrett. "I'll send that man up for life if it takes my last red cent! Go on, Johnson, go on."

Jim explained that Buck Tassler had been the man who had actually shot Hailey. It had probably been he who had discovered that Dick Garrett used a 30-40 Model 1895 Winchester to shoot wild mustangs. Tassler, or Borquin and Perry, had sent out for a new gun of the same calibre and some of the same type of ammunition.

They had selected a day on which Dick had been out after mustangs in the Marfa Creek country. Perry, ostensibly hunting sage-hens, had been on hand as a convenient witness to swear that Dick Garrett had wantonly shot Hailey.

"I don't know whether it was an accident that the bullet went low and, after goin' through Hailey's body, lodged in the saddle-fork," said

Jim. "I rather think it was done purposely so they could get the bullet."

"Well, by golly!" cried Garrett. "It was as clever a plot as I ever heard of. How do you know all this, though, Johnson?"

Jim took the bullet he had got from the safe and pointed out, by the clean-cut markings of the rifling on its metal jacket, that it had been fired from a new rifle. He told them a bullet shot from a rifle as old and worn as the one Dick used would have had the rifling markings rounded on their upper edges and in the corners at the bottoms of the lands.

"But that ain't all, Jim," prompted Sandy. "Tell 'em about that other bullet!"

Handing the bullet to the sheriff Jim took another from his vest pocket.

"This slug tried to get me yesterday as I rode down the arroyo trail beyond the Rafter G," he said coolly. "The man who fired it ought to have raised his sights a notch."

"But you didn't tell us you was shot at, boy!" gasped Garrett. "Why didn't you? Who done it?"

"I didn't see any use talkin' about it," drawled Jim. "Joe Tassler was the man who fired this bullet. I tracked him from where he had lain on the ridge east of the arroyo to Buck's shack. He left the rifle there and cut back along the foothills to the arroyo trail, and followed me to the ranch as if he had been comin' in from a day on the range."

"Joe Tassler?" Garrett muttered in slow



amazement. "That was why John Borquin insisted, as one of the conditions of lettin' me have the money, that I give Joe a steady job ! They wanted to keep tab on things that way. I see it all now. Considerin' Borquin my best friend I consulted him about writin' to Sandy Naughton for help. Then when Sandy sends in Johnson they are layin' for him ! Well, by——"

"Let me finish," said Jim as calmly as if he had been saddling a horse. "It was Joe Tassler who tried to get me last night at the ranch, Mr. Garrett, and shot you instead. He had let on like he was ridin' for town and doubled back and waited for me to open the front door and show myself. Then he high-tailed it for Prairie City. I have found out that he got here less than twenty minutes ahead of me and that his horse was sweated to a lather. Saw the horse myself."

"Joe Tassler?" muttered the old rancher. "So it was Joe as shot me, tryin' to kill you?"

Jim nodded.

"Yeah," he drawled ; "when Joe found he had failed to get me, folks, he rode plenty fast for town to tell the sad news to Perry and Buck. I don't figure Slim Denver had much, if anything, to do with the plot. Slim ain't got sense enough.

"Then when they all saw me right here, and alive, Buck and Slim left for Marfa Creek," Jim went on. "They wanted to make sure they would get me in case Perry failed from the window yonder. That accounts for the dead horse you likely saw in the sycamore bottom, Mr. Garrett."

"Nadie told me about it," said her father in a harsh, dry voice. "Buck Tassler and Slim Denver didn't know she had come to town."

"They didn't know she had ridden in with me," agreed Jim. "They cut across country to get in ahead of me if Perry failed to kill me. Then when they saw a rider on the road in the sycamore bottom they up and killed Nadine's horse and thought they had killed me. From there they likely headed across country to Buck's place."

This was the first inkling of the girl's narrow escape the other men of the crowd had had, and now a rancher shouted :

"Tried to kill Nadine Garrett, did they? It don't matter whether they knowed it or not! So long as they're all dead now let's get John Borquin and hang him! Borquin was at the bottom of this entire murderin' business."

As the other ranchers, cowboys and townsmen took up the cry for Borquin's life, and were stilled only by Sandy's threat to kill the first man that made a move toward the bank, Jim continued to lean upon the bar, smiling sadly.

"There ain't goin' to be no more killin'," declared Bill Garrett as he blocked the way of the last man who was bent on hanging Borquin. "All this blood that's been drawn here's just because I was a damned fool and didn't fully trust my own flesh and blood! Dick told me time and again he didn't kill Ed Hailey! I should have listened to him!"

Jim was telling that he believed Tex Rackerby



had had no part in the sinister plot woven around the death of Hailey when the front doors surged inward to admit Flick Peebles. The little constable, after a quick glance around, pranced toward the crowd.

Milander had been leaning half across the end of the bar, drinking in every word of what was said. He jerked his head about now to face the constable.

"Good gosh a'mighty, Flick!" he exploded. "You don't know what you missed. It's worse'n any plot you ever read of in a book!"

"Aw, shut yer mouth! You ain't got no guts a-tall!" snapped Flick. "Never in all my active c'reer as orficer have I seen a man set up sech a howl as you done at bein' in gaol."

"Aw," the bartender whined, his pasty face turning red, "I hadn't ever been in gaol and didn't know how to act!"

A grin had crossed Jim's face and there was a humorous light in his grey eyes.

"Well, I'm a freckled-faced horned-toad!" he chuckled softly. "Banty's back, spurs and all!"

Flick bustled through the crowd and confronted Jim, whose face was now drolly serious. Flick cocked his head to one side as he rested his hands upon the butts of the big guns that sagged his narrow middle.

"Hm-mm," he squeaked. "Sorry I wasn't here earlier, Mr. Johnson. Now tell me all about it!"

As Jim briefly sketched what he had done and the plot that had led to it, he could look over the

constable's big hat to the half-circle of grinning faces. Even Bill Garrett was smiling broadly.

"Hm-mm ! Hm-mm," Flick mused in his shrill tenor as Jim paused. Then his short arm shot out, and Jim grasped the little hand firmly, yet with thoughtful care lest he crush it. "Mr. Johnson, I sure beg your pardon all to hell ! This was just as I figured it from the day Ed Hailey was killed. They thought they had caught Bill Garrett with his britches off, eh ? Johnson, you and me have sure done some good work in clearin' up this here case."

"We sure have, Flick," Jim agreed soberly. "I certainly appreciate your help."

"Don't mention it," returned Flick with a gesture so grandiloquent it nearly upset his great hat. Then he whirled, thrust his goatee forward. "Did I hear one of you durned fools laughin' ?"

"Nary a one of us," drawled Sandy Naughton. "I was just mentionin' to Jake Enright here as how we orter go see how John Borquin's gettin' along."

"And so we should !" squeaked Flick. "Come on, men !"



## CHAPTER XXII

**E**VEN here amid tragedy there was humour, as there is in all life; Flick was supplying the comedy, entirely unconsciously. Like a bantam squiring a flock of hens to some good feeding he led the smiling crowd out of the saloon and turned toward the bank. As Jim emerged from the Maverick he saw Nadine and Dick sitting on the edge of the store porch across the street. Bill Garrett waved a hand to his son and daughter and limped after Jim and the sheriff.

"I wonder where they are going now?" Nadine asked. "They must be going to Borquin's! There's nothing else that way."

"Guess I'd better go see," said Dick, getting to his feet. His sister grasped his arm.

"Don't go, Dick. I feel so alone. Please stay here with me!"

He looked down into her wan, wistful face.

"What makes you feel so alone, kid?" he demanded smiling. "Everything's turned out all right, though I don't know just how. I'd feel like shoutin' if it wasn't for my head. It thumps plenty when I move."

"Then stay here with me," she pleaded. "It

won't do your poor head any good for you to run about, Dick."

"Yeah?" He sat down beside her.

"If I didn't want to cry so bad—I'd—I'd laugh. Just look at old Flick."

"He's sure struttin' high, wide and handsome," Dick chuckled.

"It must be terrible to be so small and so want to be big," she murmured. "You'd think the rest of those men didn't know where to go unless Flick showed them. I'd like to run and see what they are going to do."

"Come on then, let's go!" He was getting up when she again grasped his arm.

"No! I don't want to, Dick. I can't face anybody."

He gave her a more searching look, and saw that her lips were trembling.

"Say, kid, what's wrong?"

"I—I wish I could crawl into a hole and hide," she half sobbed. "Oh, what a fool I have made of myself!"

"About the way you treated that hombre, Johnson?"

"Y-yes. I don't know why we tried to kill him, Dick; why we distrusted him when he was risking his life to help us. I just went crazy when Jake Enright came with the news that you were in gaol—charged with Hailey's death."

"I reckon Johnson'll understand all right," Dick encouraged, patting her shoulder. "I felt just like you till I put my head to work."

It was not five minutes from the time the score



of men had disappeared into the bank before some of them emerged. They began to straggle up the street, talking earnestly. Bob Porter, a rider from the 121 Ranch, up the valley, saw Nadine and Dick, and crossed to them.

"Too durned bad about John Borquin," he ventured lamely.

"Why, what's wrong with him?" asked Nadine.

"He's daid," declared Porter. "When that hombre, Johnson, opened the vault door from some numbers he had on a piece of paper, they found John crumpled up on the floor. He had a short-barrelled Colt in his hand. He was shot clean through the head."

The girl stared, wide-eyed. Dick's look was as surprised, but far more searching.

"Why? What made him do it, Bob?" Nadine whispered.

"Didn't you know?" the cowboy blurted.

"We don't know anything," said Dick. "Tell us about it!"

Porter explained in detail what he knew of the sinister plot and its purposes.

"Well, I'll be de-horned!" muttered Dick. "Say, cowboy, I never did like that man, Borquin! He was too hard and slick and oily."

"But," the girl added, "Dad thought he was his best friend." She looked up the street to where her father, Sandy Naughton and Jim Johnson had come out of the bank. The three men walked very slowly. When they were

opposite, they stopped and talked for a few minutes. Then Garrett crossed the street to where his son and daughter waited, and Sandy and Jim cut diagonally across toward the corner around which was the gaol. Sandy waved a hand, but Jim did not even look in the direction of the store porch.

"Oh, I wish he had only come, so I could at least try to explain!" Nadine whispered. When she looked up at her smiling old father her eyes were filled with tears.

"What's wrong, honey?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, Dad. If you're all through, I'd like to go home. I'm tired."

"Fine," he agreed. "That's just where we're goin'. Sandy left Flick to guard the bank. I reckon we'll get back practically all the money Borquin and Perry stole from us. Sandy's goin' to send me a lawyer soon as he gets to Animas."

"But where have Sandy and Mr. Johnson gone now?" she wanted to know.

"They've gone to talk with that feller Ruggles and Slim Denver," her father answered. "Johnson told us we'd better head for home."

"Are—are you taking orders from Jim Johnson, Dad?"

"I sure am, Nadie. Us Garretts have got a whole lot to be thankful to him for, and I want to get back home where I'll have a chance to think things over. Dick, you unhitch the mustangs."

As Dick obeyed, Nadine got wearily to her feet.

"Did he say anything about—about you and I



trying to kill him?" she whispered. "Did he, Dad?"

"Nary a word, Nadie. I reckon he ain't a man to hold a grudge."

She shook her head wearily.

"I don't know. I suppose we might as well get back to the ranch." She was a dejected little figure between her father and brother as they drove out the creek road and disappeared around the bend of timber where last night she had waited.

It was not until they had clattered over the bridge and turned across the plain toward the Rafter G that she got the courage to ask if Jim would come to the ranch.

"Yeah, I reckon he'll come," replied her father. "Him and Sandy have a good deal to tend to, though."

The sun that hung low above the black butte far to west was flooding its rays down the length and breadth of Big Grass Valley when Jim rode out of the lane between the small alfalfa fields and headed up the yard at the Rafter G. A tender and half-whimsical smile softened the tenseness of his sun-browned face, for he was coming now to the Garrett ranch as he had planned to come from the first, except that he was coming from the other direction.

As he passed the ranch-house he glanced toward it and saw Nadine in the doorway. There was an expectant, frightened expression on her pretty face, but when he did not wave or call

out, it disappeared. She turned quickly and went back into the house.

Jim rode on to the bunk-house, where he saw Chuck sitting on the edge of the low porch. The old rider rose and reached up a gnarled hand.

"Howdy, Johnson. You done some good work in the short time you been in Big Grass, and I take off my sombrero to you. Didn't fully trust you at first, though. Bill and Dick, they was tellin' me about it."

"Thanks, Chuck," Jim returned, and swung from the saddle. "Where were you all day?"

"Ridin' the range off toward the head of Porcupine. I sure wish I'd been along with you in town, Johnson. You sure killed a lot of men as needed hot lead."

"Well, I reckon it had to be done," Jim said slowly. "It was a case of them or me, Chuck. I'm glad if I have helped out the Garretts to some extent."

Chuck, after a long, appreciative look at Jim, turned and gazed up the arroyo trail. Slowly a broad grin spread over his face.

"Ain't it sure funny what hosses'll bring sometimes when they come home?" he chuckled.

"Yeah, I saw him," answered Jim, turning.

The object of their new interest was none other than Baldy. His horse was walking carefully, as if to make sure it would help its rider in the saddle, heading for the bunk-house.

Baldy swayed wide in his saddle while one hand gripped the horn and the other tried to wave a



black bottle. He had on a hat larger than the umbrella-like sombrero that shielded little Flick's head. His new silk shirt was a flaring crimson that shamed the afterglow of a desert sunset and over it was a richly embroidered jacket. His new grey trousers, the lower ends of which were tucked into the tops of shining, high-heeled boots, were held up by a concha-studded belt six inches in width. Behind his cantle was tied a pair of new magenta-haired chaps, a garish leg hanging down at either side.

"H'lo," muttered Baldy as the horse stopped. "Glad seeyuh, boys. Feelin' well?"

"Finer'n gnat's hair," Jim returned soberly. "How're you, Baldy?"

Baldy tried to straighten with dignity but almost toppled off the horse. His eyes were bleary, half closed, but filled with an assumed reckless intelligence and bravado. His broad, round face, except for a bright spot on each cheek-bone, was pallid and its big freckles stood out like raised splotches. He tried to wave the bottle.

"Dr-drunk and all dressed up!" he chortled. "I'm a she-wolf from Bit-Bitter Crick, and this's my night to howl!" He tilted back his head, dislodging the great new hat, and the howl he emitted was more like the good-natured woof of a playful bear than that of the traditional wolf of the Bitter Creek country. He managed to regain his equilibrium without falling, but dropped the almost empty bottle. "Ain't I had one helluva time? Didn't I—hic—didn't I put one coat of red paint to that town, though?"

In the midst of his jerky description of his hectic visit to Las Animas, Baldy suddenly stiffened. Then he shivered and slumped in his saddle, frantically clutching the horn with both hands. The bright spots fled from his cheek-bones and the pallor of his face became so intense that the big freckles stood out like sickly, yellow-red dots. The middle of his big frame twitched spasmodically. He swallowed an imaginary lump that surged up in his throat.

"Uck!" he grunted to the spasmodic jerking of his overwrought diaphragm. "I b'lieve I'm s-sick. Uck! I ain't been feelin' right for a mile."

Jim and Chuck caught him as he tumbled from the saddle, and held him while he "jettisoned cargo."

"The durned fool!" growled Chuck. "He went and drunk purty near that whole quart! And he wasn't used to it."

"And the Lord Himself only knows what he ate on the way home," added Jim.

They carried the limp body into the bunk-house and laid it on a bunk.

"D-don't let me die!" Baldy groaned. "Don't go 'way, and——"

"Aw, shucks!" growled Chuck. "You ain't goin' to die. Trouble with you is you took the first initiation a little too strong. Here's a bucket if you need it."

"Yeah, I am goin' to die!" moaned Baldy, clamping his eyelids tight, as if to shut out the sight of the grim reaper. "Jus' wanted to drown



my sorrers and plumb kill m'self. Chuck ! Chuck ! Where's that bucket ? ”

The Rafter G was shrouded in the first shadows of twilight when they got Baldy settled in some comfort in his bunk, though he was still convinced that he was dying.

“ It was all my fault,” Jim said. “ I staked him to a hundred dollars when I started him for Sandy Naughton.”

“ A hundred bucks ! ” gasped Chuck. “ Well, he didn't spend it all on booze and peanuts and popcorn. That rig he's got'd make a rainbow clean shamed to look him in the face. You go take care of your hoss, Jim. I'll look after him.”

At the corral, Jim stripped off the heavy saddle and flung it on to the top rail. As he took off the bridle and opened the gate he gave the bay an affectionate slap on the neck.

“ There, old hoss, I reckon you and I can find time now for a square meal. Go to it ! ”

He was starting back across the dusty yard when he saw Nadine coming from the ranch-house. At first glance he hardly recognised her, for she had on a dress of some soft blue material that made her look slimmer, taller than before.

She came slowly, yet there was no hesitation in her steps. When they were a few feet apart she stopped and extended her hands a little way.

“ I'm sorry, Mr. Johnson,” she said tremulously.

He smiled as he shoved his sombrero to the back of his head, and looked down into her pretty, pale face.

"For what, Nadine?"

"Because we tried to kill you," she faltered. "If you will accept our apologies—I have come to pay."

He took her hands. They were cold. She kept her eyes fearlessly on his.

"Nadine," he said soberly, "it's likely to be a big price you will have to pay."

"I'll pay—anything, as I agreed last night," she whispered. "You have saved Dick. You have saved all of us."

She did not resist when he laid an arm about her shoulders. He thrilled with pride in her and himself as he realised she had grown into the woman he had pictured. Slowly he led her toward the old bench built about the rough bole of the cottonwood. There he stopped her and took her hands again.

"Nadie, you're ready to go a long way to keep your word, aren't you?"

"We Garretts try to keep our words," she replied. Then her eyes fell. She looked up quickly. "Why do you call me Nadie? It sounds as if you had known me a long time, instead of just a day."

Gently he forced her to the old bench and took a seat beside her, still retaining her hands.

"I'd like to tell you a story," he said, "if you have the patience to listen."

"I'd like to listen."

"Once there was a boy and a girl," he began seriously. "He came from across the mountains to the ranch where the girl's father lived. He



could not stay long, only a day or two, but the boy and the girl seemed to like each other from the start." He paused to see that colour was mounting from her slim, bare throat, and that there was a little smile in her violet eyes.

"Please go on," she prompted. "It sounds like a pretty story."

"Well," he resumed, still serious, "there wasn't much more to the story except that the little girl—she was about nine then—and the boy played on a bench that was built round a cottonwood tree."

"Was the bench anything like this one?" Her parted lips were red now, and there was a new look in her eyes.

"Now that you remind me of it, it was," he returned, soberly looking down at the notched and whittled seat. "Well, as to the story, it has a beginning but no end, Nadie, for the boy asked the little girl if she would marry him when she grew up to be a pretty lady and she said she would."

"And you are that boy?" She drew back to see him more clearly. "I knew there was something about you——"

"And you are that girl?" he countered.

"I am that girl, Danny McLeod," she whispered, looking down to where her hands were held in his.

"And you haven't forgotten, Nadine?"

She looked up now, a smile on her lips, a look in her eyes that even in his dreams he had not imagined. Her chin came up.

"I never forget a promise like that," she declared vibrantly. "And you?"

"Do you think I have forgotten?" Before he could take her in his arms she jerked away and ran toward the porch. She stopped and cried:

"Dad! Bill Garrett! Come here quick! Dick!"

Her father limped out.

"What you want, Nadie?" he grumbled good-naturedly. "Dick's asleep. Says his sore head hurts."

"Dad! Dad! He's not Jim Johnson! He's Danny McLeod, Sheriff Jim McLeod's boy, and——"

Dan came now and put an arm about her and she nestled close. Bill Garrett limped down the steps and extended a big, work-worn hand.

"I knowed you there in the saloon to-day, Danny," he said huskily, "but I figured for some reason you didn't want to make yourself known, so I kept still. It was them grey eyes of yours and that smile, and the way you got what you went after, boy. Them were Jim McLeod's characteristics. What's this you wanted to tell me, Nadie?"

She did not look up for a long moment, and when she did her face was crimson.

"Why—I'm going to marry him," she whispered tensely. "I promised to twelve years ago, Dad." Then half turning, she flung her arms about the neck of the tenderly smiling cowboy, and drew down his head. "Kiss me, Jim Johnson! When I want to think of all you've done



and how I love you, you'll—you'll always be Jim Johnson ! ”

After a long look at the pair, who were entirely oblivious of him, Bill Garrett turned and climbed the three steps. There was a look on his weathered face that had not been there for many moons.

“ Well, well,” he chuckled huskily as he went into the short hallway, where the night before he had so narrowly escaped death. “ Knowed that feller was a fightin’ fool the minute I saw him but I didn’t figure he’d take my girl as pay this quick after he’d cleaned all the bad hombres out of Big Grass. Well——” He stopped, leaning against a door-jamb, rubbed his chin. “ It ain’t goin’ to be such a bitter pill takin’ old Jim McLeod’s boy as a son-in-law ! Reckon I better wake up Dick and tell him.”





THE LADY  
of the  
NIGHTWIND

VAN ARDY

MACAULAY