

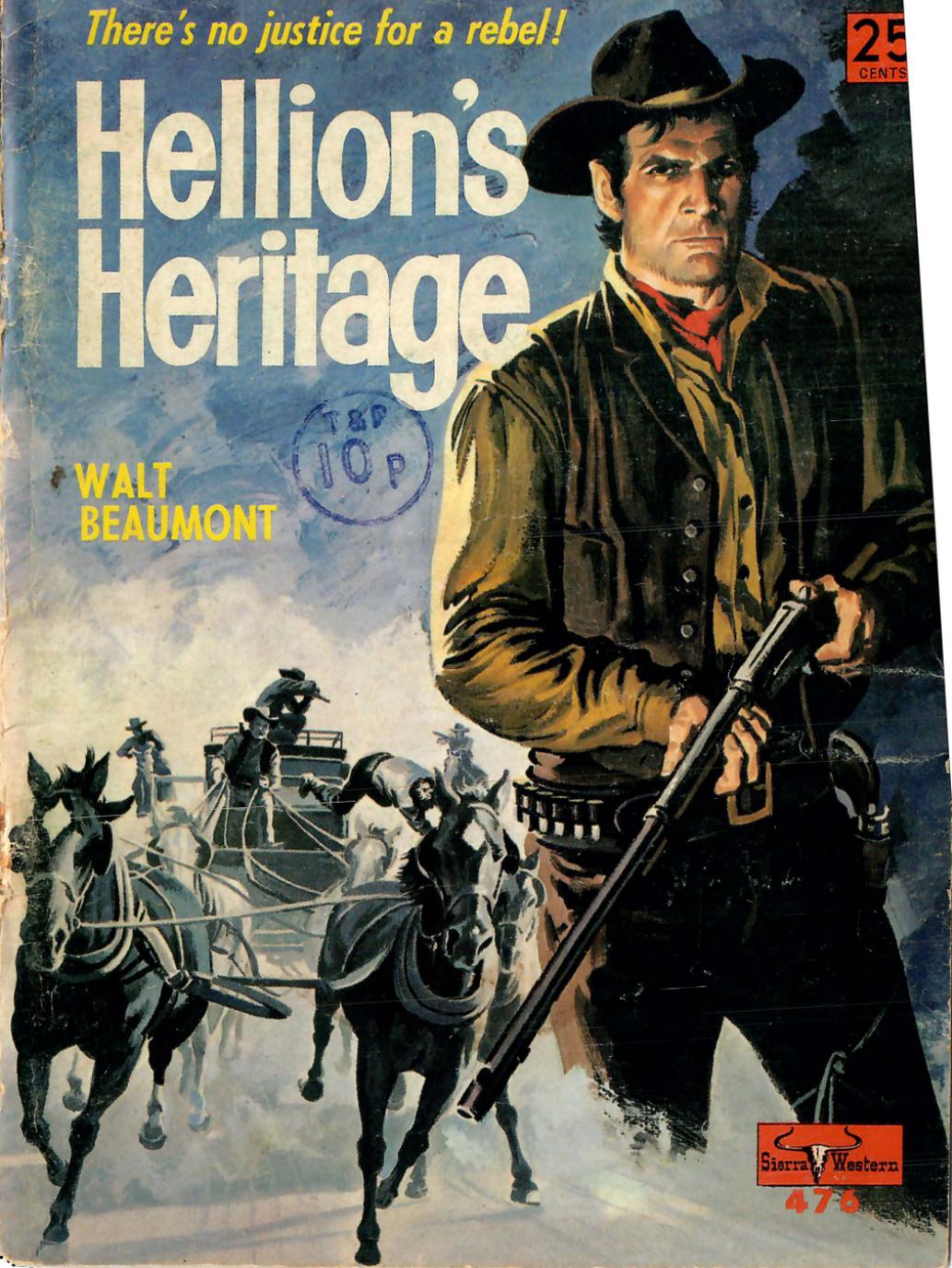
There's no justice for a rebel!

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Hellion's Heritage

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Sierra Western

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HELLION'S HERITAGE

by

WALT BEAUMONT

No. 476

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S I E R R A
W E S T E R N

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Hold Up!

"I'LL KNOCK that damned head of yours clean off your shoulders!"

The voice of big Tom Curry boomed out above the babble of the Friday evening crowd that thronged the Golden Nugget Saloon in Swamp Creek, California.

Curry stood with his feet spread wide apart and his bony fists bunching like cannonballs as he faced the blond-headed Stingaree Smith. Anger pinked his broad face and a storm flared in his hard green eyes, while Smith looked back at him with a cool indifference that irked him even further.

"You couldn't knock a maggot off a pile of dung," laughed Smith, cigarette pinned in one corner of his mouth, a dribble of ash spilling from it as he spoke. "You're just a big bag of wind. You can't take a joke, that's your trouble. No blasted sense of humour at all."

"Joke?" Curry indicated the chair that had been whipped from under him with a fierce wave of his hand. "I damned near broke my backside. I sure as hell don't call that any joke."

"I do," Smith chuckled. "You hit that floor so hard it seemed like you was gonna go clear through it. Made all the glasses jump on the bar, it did. Dusted every feller's beer."

"I'll dust you!"

"You've never done it yet," Smith said mockingly. He took the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it at his feet, ground it into the floor with his heel.

The miners of Swamp Creek pulled back, clearing a space for them. The wild clashes between Curry and Smith occurred often enough so that every man was familiar with them. They pulled tables and chairs out of the way, removed bottles from the bar and stowed spittoons out of reach. Harley Dennison draped a cover over the piano, while behind the bar Joe Forrester was fixing a screen over the mirror.

No one knew what prompted Curry and Smith to fight so much. No one understood why they stayed together. They had a claim out along the creek and they came to town

only every week or so, but when they did there was always a riot.

Dennison contemplated calling the law, then decided against it. The last time Sheriff Pickard had stepped in he'd had his nose broken. Pickard hadn't displayed a great deal of interest in the two battlers after that, stating that he didn't give a damn if they killed each other, it was only what they both deserved. Dennison took cover, close to the door where he could leap out if they took to throwing things. He looked from one to the other, waited for the pounding to begin.

They were well-matched. Tom Curry was a burly giant of a man with red hair and green eyes. He had a barrel chest and long arms that could snap a man in two. He drank whisky at a rate that would have choked most men, downed a quantity of it that would have killed others. He had a deep voice that boomed out like the bellow of a bull and was near to deafening when there was anger to add volume to it.

Stingaree Smith was of a similar build, though slightly shorter and with a little less lard around his belly. He had hair that was the colour of a ripe lemon, eyes like two brown coffee beads stuck in a face that was usually burdened with a bored expression. He wore the general garb of the miner, heavy hob-nailed boots, flannel work shirt and tough denim britches that were held up by a rope around his middle.

Neither man packed a gun when they came to town, though such was not the case when they were at the diggings. Any man who ventured too close to the claim of Curry and Smith was inviting himself a bullet, a fact that was firmly established from the day they'd first settled. The fact that they didn't wear guns in town had been discussed at great length behind their backs. The general opinion was that they had sense enough to know their arguments wouldn't stop at a fist fight if they did.

It was usually Smith who started the trouble with his practical jokes, such as pulling the chair from under Curry when the big man was about to sit down. There'd been a time when he'd set fire to the lavatory at the back, a time when he'd put a burr under Curry's saddle. There'd been many occasions when Stingaree Smith had aroused the wrath of Tom Curry, and each time they'd been at war with each other.

Now they stood nose to nose, glaring belligerence back

and forth, airing complaints against the character of each other in bellowing voices that rocked the room. Tom Curry took a swipe at Smith that connected against the side of his head, and Smith came back at him with a punch that smashed solidly into his paunch.

From then on the yelling and the cursing continued, punctuated by the thump of bony knuckles hammering home. Toe to toe they banged away at each other. Curry's nose streamed blood, Stingaree Smith spat out a tooth. They weren't daunted by the punishment they received, for the only effect it had on either man was to quieten him a little so that instead of wasting breath by yelling he saved it to add weight to the punches he threw.

Curry started a punch from behind him, travelled in an arc as he swung it. Smith ducked and the blow went past, but Curry kept on coming. They collided with a force that stunned both of them, crashing to the boards amid excited roars of applause from the crowd and a wail from Joe Forrester behind his bar.

Curry staggered to his feet, shook his head to clear it while he waited for Smith to climb back upright. He glared around him at the crowd as though wanting to pass the delay by banging a few heads together. They shrank back from him, and he wiped the blood from under his nose, gave his attention once more to Smith.

"This time I'm gonna really teach you a lesson," Curry growled. "I'm gonna teach you not to pull chairs out from under me, or damn near burn a man to death when he's got his pants around his ankles, or stick a burr under my saddle so's I went near to breakin' my blasted neck. I'm gonna wipe the floor with you, Stingaree. I'm gonna give you a thrashin' you won't ever forget."

"Quit bashing your gums and fight."

"I sure will, boy." Curry took a deep breath. "You're gonna be laid up for a week after I'm through with you."

A sizzling right from Curry sent Smith sailing back against the bar. He went after him, head down and both fists swinging. A left hammered into Smith's ribs, another right closed one eye. Smith went reeling away into the crowd, then came staggering back with a chair he'd grabbed. He held the chair high, brought it down with a shouted oath and crashed it to pieces over Curry's head. Curry gave a bellow, bowled a couple of onlookers out of the way and

hoisted up a table. With an oath that rang in the rafters, Curry hurled the table. It caught Smith as he was stooping to grab at a spittoon, carried him along and drove him head first into the bar.

Joe Forrester's protests were lost in the din. A chair sailed over his head and smashed against the shelves. A bottle followed it, and Forrester abandoned his refuge to go scampering out in a desperate bid to fetch the sheriff.

Wildly, Forrester worked his way through another crowd that had gathered outside on the walk. He looked frantically for Pickard but the lawman was nowhere in sight. He ran then, alternately swearing and complaining to himself that there was not one man in all of Swamp Creek he could turn to for assistance. He expected little help from the sheriff, but he had to do something, for the sounds from the saloon spelled ruination if they continued.

Forrester slammed open the door to Sheriff Pickard's office, stumbled in and hung onto the desk for support as he fought for breath, then gasped, "Damn it, it's Curry and Smith. They're bustin' up the place. Hell, you oughta be able to hear 'em from here. Why don't yuh do something?"

"I can hear them." Pickard leaned back in his chair, booted heels hooked on the scarred top of his desk. "The reason I'm sitting here right now instead of washin' some dust down is because I've been listenin' to that racket and knowin' damned well what it's about. If you don't want trouble then don't serve 'em any booze, that's the simplest way out of it."

"The hell it is." Forrester took another deep breath and shook his head with indignation. "If I refused to serve 'em they'd pitch me through the window."

"Then don't come cryin' to me because they get drunk."

"It's your goddamn duty to stop 'em!" Forrester swallowed more air, yelling when it filled his lungs. "You're the law in this town. You get out there and quieten those two hellions, that's what you're paid for."

"And get my nose busted a second time?" Pickard gave a grunt. "Not damned likely, mister. I'm stayin' right here, and I ain't gonna budge."

"They're not armed." Pickard began to pound on the desk, emphasising each word that he shouted, hoping that the rest of the town heard him. "You take your sixgun and you tell 'em to quit. You're the law. If they don't pay no

mind to you then I say you're quite within your right to plug 'em."

"It's an argument, a fist fight," shrugged Pickard. "You don't gun a man down because of that."

"They're smashin' my saloon. They're tearin' the blasted place apart. Are you gonna sit there and tell me you don't aim to do nothin' about it? Because if you are then we're gonna have a new lawman in this town mighty damned quick, and by hell I won't rest until we do."

Pickard heaved a sigh. There was no arguing with Forrester, and he finally had to accept that. He had law and order to uphold, and even if it meant chewing on a bunch of knuckles it was his duty to see to it. He stood up, took his gunbelt from a peg on the wall and strapped it on. He anchored it around a paunch that was becoming far too prominent, thonged the holster down, checked the Colt to assure himself that it was fully loaded.

Forrester went out ahead of him, scampering frantically back along the boardwalk and looking back all the while to make sure he was being followed. The sounds of battle from within the saloon had increased, while the crowd swelled on the walk as those inside beat a hasty retreat. A window shattered, there was another crash that might have been a table disintegrating, and a jangle that could have been the piano hitting the floor.

"Get in there, Sheriff," Forrester yelled, waved a thrusting finger at the havoc beyond the batwings. "Get in there and stop 'em!"

Bravely, Pickard made his entrance, with murmurs of awe from the crowd to accompany him. He palmed the batwings wide, stepped to one side in time to dodge a chair that Stingaree Smith ducked to escape from. He yanked at the Colt on his hip, aimed it above their heads and began to take pressure on the trigger.

"Hold it, the both of you!" Pickard shouted at the top of his voice. "I've got a gun here and I'll use it if I have to."

Tom Curry came up off the floor. His shirt was in shreds, there was sawdust in his red hair and blood all over his face. He had a spittoon in his hand, and he threw it with a reckless aim that missed Stingaree Smith by a yard—and put Sheriff Pickard to sleep when it clouted him squarely between the eyes.

Pickard went down, and neither man noticed him. Curry

went lumbering forward, thumped a raw fist into Smith's stomach. Smith retaliated with a right cross to Curry's jaw. They traded a few more punches, grabbed a leg of a chair each and whacked away at each other until the legs snapped and they were too beaten to grope around for anything else.

Smith swung a punch that missed, lost his balance and went down. Curry sagged next to him, seated amid the ruin while he allowed the blood to run unchecked from his nose.

"You figure we oughta quit?" Smith looked at him out of one good eye, barely able to lift his head clear of the boards.

"I guess so." Creakily, Curry got to his feet. He put down a hand to help Smith to stand, both of them staring dazedly at the wreckage around them.

"That's the sheriff!" Smith pointed. "How the hell did he get in here?"

"Beats me." Curry shrugged. "He's either drunk or he got in the way of somethin'. He'll only get under their feet when the boys come back. I reckon the best thing to do is to haul him back to his office."

"Yeah." Smith picked up the Colt that Pickard had dropped, stowed it carefully in the man's holster. He kicked the spittoon out of the way, grabbed one arm while Curry took the other. Between them they yanked the unconscious sheriff to his feet, bundled him through the doors and out to the walk. The crowd parted to make way for them, with Joe Forrester staring open-mouthed in the centre.

It was a battle-scarred trio who wended their way back along the dusty street of Swamp Creek. Curry and Smith wandered from one edge of the roadway to the other, dragging the limp form of Pickard with his toes trailing twin tracks in the dust. They hauled him across the walk, wrestled him inside and dumped him on a bunk in the cell. His eyes fluttered open and he mumbled something, though he didn't stay awake for long.

Curry staggered over to the desk, yanked open a drawer and located a bottle. He took a good, long pull at it, then handed it to Smith with a rueful grin.

"Some fight, eh?"

"It sure was. Better than the last one."

"What've you got planned for next time? A rattler down my back, maybe?"

Smith grinned. "I dunno. I'll have to think about it. I

guess we'd better get on home unless you want to wait and see the stage come in."

"It's late." Curry looked up, pondering on that. The Sacramento stage was due to arrive at Swamp Creek close on dusk. It didn't travel any further, returning to Sacramento with a fresh team of horses first thing the following morning. It was a new addition to Swamp Creek, the stage service, with arrivals every Monday and Friday and departures each Tuesday and Saturday. It was a service of which the miners of Swamp Creek were duly proud. It was putting their town on the map, and their gold safely in the Sacramento Bank.

Curry frowned, fingered the bruises on his face, wagged his jaw tenderly as he stepped to the door. He looked south along the darkened street, saw that there were others who worried about the safety of the stage as they began to gather outside the depot.

He was still standing there when Joe Forrester came striding along the boardwalk to confront him. Forrester was agitated, but it wasn't the lateness of the Sacramento stage that worried him.

"How about all that damage?" Forrester pointed back in the direction of the saloon. "What about all them tables and chairs that you smashed? What about my window, and my piano? What are you gonna do about 'em, eh?"

"You want compensation, is that it?"

"You're damned right I do." Forrester glared up at him, anger lending him courage. "Every time you two fellers hit town it's the same story. You still haven't paid me for the last time. I'm not gonna take no more, Curry. I want my money, you hear?"

"I don't know how the hell you're gonna get it," grinned Curry mirthlessly. "There's no more gold in that claim of ours. She's worked right out, and that's a fact. All we've got between us is a few lousy dollars, hardly enough for a pint of that poison you've been pushin'."

"My whisky's too grade, Curry," Forrester threw back at him. "You can't buy better than what I'm sellin'."

"And you can't buy worse, either." Curry gave a shrug, then turned away. "I'm sorry, Joe. I know you've got a beef and I know we've given you a rough time. But we can't pay those damages and you'll just have to face up to that."

"My partner's right," said Stingaree Smith as he came out with Pickard's bottle in his hand. He took a swig at it

before he added, "We're gonna move on further up the creek over the weekend. Maybe we'll get luckier then."

"There's no gold further up. There's been nothing found further than the bend."

"That doesn't prove it ain't there." Stingaree wiped his mouth, then surrendered the bottle to Curry. "Gold can be any place. I've heard of strikes bein' made where you'd never think to look. Anyway, we're gonna try, and if you figure on gettin' paid for that furniture then you'd better hope we get lucky."

"You'll pay!" Forrester yelled at them as he turned away, wagged a threatening finger when he was safely out of reach. "You won't get away with this. I'll take you to court, that's what I'll do. I'll have you arrested. I'll see you sent to San Quentin unless I get my money!"

"God, he raves on!" Curry turned his back, strode inside and shook the unconscious Pickard back to reality. "You'd better snap out of it, Sheriff. Looks like something's happened to the stage, it ain't showed up yet."

Pickard blinked up at him, not understanding a word. His last recollection was of a brass spittoon sailing at him while two men created havoc in the smoke-filled bar-room. He raised a hand to his head and felt the lump between his eyes, while Curry put an arm around his shoulders and helped him to sit.

"The stage," Curry said patiently. "It hasn't got to town yet. Maybe you should go look for it, eh?"

Pickard was still slow in comprehending. Curry held the bottle to his mouth, allowed him to sip at the dregs that remained.

"Thanks," Pickard muttered. "There's a bottle in my desk. I could sure use it if you'll fetch it for me."

"You've already got it," said Curry, then straightened up as Pickard threw the empty bottle away with an indignant oath. "We brought you home. I didn't figure you'd want to be unsociable."

There was a lot that was on Sheriff Pickard's mind to say, only he didn't know where to begin. He blustered wildly, complaining more to himself than the indifferent Tom Curry. He staggered to his feet, stumbled out to the office and stared dazedly around him. He went out then, to stand on the walk and stare down to where the crowd stood anxiously around the depot.

Curry joined him, stood beside him without a word and idly rolled himself a cigarette. He studied the crowd, saw the frown on the sheriff's face. He put a match to the quirley, dragged on it, let the smoke out slowly, in a way that seemed to increase Pickard's irritation.

"I don't know about you, Curry," said the lawman. "I'm damned if I know what gets into you. You come to town for a few drinks, then all hell breaks loose. If you can't get along with that partner of yours then why in blazes don't you just split up?"

"Oh, we get along all right," Curry shrugged. "I never met any other feller I could get along so well with."

"You were tryin' to belt each other's brains out awhile ago."

"Sure." A grin crept across Curry's mouth, and there was a twinkle in both blackened eyes. "That was about the best scrap we've had yet. It just goes to show. If it had been any other feller but Stingaree he'd likely be gunnin' for me right now. You don't think we're gonna break with each other when we can stage a fight like that? Hell, a man would never have any fun."

Pickard gave up trying to understand. He stepped off the walk, with Curry following and Smith squatting idly on the boards behind him. He strode on to reach the stage depot, the crowd parting for him when he walked up. It was dark, lantern light spilling out from the open door of the office, other lanterns secured on brackets on the wall.

"What do you think's happened, Sheriff?" Les Mitchell took care of the depot, and Mitchell was worried more than anyone. "You think maybe they've been held up? Out-laws, maybe?"

"How the hell should I know?" Pickard grunted sourly. "I guess we'll just have to go take a look, that's all."

"No need for that, Sheriff," Tom Curry drawled casually, pointed off down the street to where the bulk of the Sacramento stage came rattling out of the darkness. He stepped back, pulled Pickard out of the way as the coach came lumbering to a dusty stop outside the depot. He looked up and saw the grim face of the driver, reading bad news there before the driver announced it. "Road agents!"

The words swept through the crowd like a fire. "Two of 'em," the driver went on. "They held up the stage about ten miles out of town."

"Vandals!" cried a voice pompously and a man in a grey derby and a pin-striped suit stepped out of the stage. He looked around as he spoke and located the sheriff, stepped to confront him with an indignant wave of a fat little hand. "I have never been so outrageously treated in my entire life. I demand that you go after those men. I demand that they be brought to justice."

"Well, I don't see much sense in it myself," said Curry, butting into the conversation in a way that brought a sniff of indignation from the short man. "There's no chance of catching up with those fellers now, they've had too much of a start. It'd be daylight before anyone could pick up a trail, and where the hell would they be by that time?"

"I beg your pardon!" A haughty head came up and a dusty nose twitched disdainfully. "Do you know to whom you're addressing yourself?"

CHAPTER TWO

Stolen Agreement

Big Tom Curry had a lopsided grin on his face as he looked the little man up and down. From the crown of his derby to the toes of his patent leather shoes, Curry saw him as a man incongruously out of place in a town like Swamp Creek. He shrugged at the little man's indignation, turned partly away from him to make another comment to Sheriff Pickard.

"Cheeky little runt, ain't he?" Curry's words had a sting to them that was intended to arouse the wrath of the man even further. "I guess those road agents maybe stole his watch and his wallet. Now he's all steamed up, expecting the whole State of California to turn out and get 'em back for him."

"I am Alexander Bentley Lindmann," the little man stormed. "You, sir, are extremely rude."

"No, I ain't. I'm Tom Curry. This here's Sheriff Pickard."

"I'm an attorney!"

"So?" Curry raised his eyebrows, quizzed him silently a moment. He saw the anger begin to tumble from Lindmann's face, replaced by astonishment while the man studied him quickly from head to foot.

"Did you say Curry? Not Thomas Arthur Curry, from Waco, Texas?"

"That's my name and that's where I hail from," Curry agreed. "I'm a long way from home but I came here to find gold and I'm damned if I'm gonna leave until I get me some."

"Did you know a man called Delgado? Felipe Delgado?"

"Sure, I knew him." Curry gave a shrug, conscious of the curious stares of the crowd around him. "He married my sister. I remember my old man tried to talk her out of it but she was a strong-willed girl and once she made up her mind there was no way she'd ever change it."

Alexander Bentley Lindmann had completely forgotten his indignation. He was filled with an excitement as he took hold of Curry's arm and began to lead him away out of earshot. He looked up at Curry's battered face, his eyes shining in the gloom.

"We must have a long talk," Lindmann stressed. "I'm exhausted after the journey and thoroughly upset over my ordeal with those thieves. The moment I've checked into my hotel room we can get down to business."

"There's no hotel," Curry told him bluntly. "There's a bit of a dormitory behind Forrester's saloon, but it's Friday night so I guess you'll have to sleep on the floor. As for business, I'm damned if I know what you're talkin' about."

"No hotel?" Lindmann looked at him aghast. "But I was told there would be accommodation. I represent the Sacramento Stage Line. They should know if there's a hotel in this town."

"Well, there ain't." Curry shrugged. "You can doss with me and my partner out on Swamp Creek if you want. If you like to get yourself a bottle that oughta rock you off. Other than that it's the boards in the back of the booze pit."

"Oh, dear." Lindmann had no strength any more. He sat on the edge of the boardwalk, seeing the town of Swamp Creek as it really was, with its shabby collection of clapboard buildings and miners' tents, its rubbish-strewn gutters and its dusty, rutted street. Even the walk on which he sat was just planking secured on poles to lift it just high enough to clear the mud each time it rained.

"I don't see any future for this town," he said, with a sad shake of his head. "I'm afraid I just don't see any future at all."

"Then why the hell did you come here?"

"Business," Lindmann grunted sadly. "It's always business. However, that doesn't explain, does it? I mean about the Delgado rancho?"

"No, it doesn't."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, but your sister is dead, Mr. Curry. She passed away about six or seven months ago, God rest her soul. My associates and I did try to get in touch with you, but the last contact we had was Tucson and nobody seemed to know where you'd gone from there."

"Dead?" It was a blow to Curry. They'd been close, during their childhood, shared a lot of good times together. Only they'd grown up and gone their separate ways, with little correspondence between them and no letters at all since he'd teamed up with Stingaree Smith in Tucson and wandered here to this remote section of California.

He sat quietly, reflecting back to the days around Waco when they'd both been children. Helen had been a pretty wild young girl, not near the prim and proper young lady that her mother had hoped she might be. She'd been a tomboy, with her hair in pigtailed and a rash of freckles across her nose. She could ride like an Indian and she could stand up to most young men her age and belt the ears off them. Then suddenly, she was grown up. Still wilful, but beautiful in a way that the folks around Waco hadn't expected. Along came Felipe Delgado, dark and suavely handsome, to sweep her off her feet. They'd been married, despite stiff opposition from the elderly Currys, and that was the last he'd ever seen of her.

The attorney looked at him, remaining quiet. For the first time Lindmann took a close scrutiny of the bulky redhead that was not concerned with his rough exterior. He was seeing Tom Curry as no other man in Swamp Creek had seen him, save Stingaree Smith. Curry was big, tough, the kind of man who enjoyed a brawl. But it wasn't Smith that Curry really fought, and it wasn't only the whisky that fired his brain to make him do it.

There was another side to Tom Curry, a side that knew loneliness and frustration, that looked for something he'd left behind and wasn't able to find again. Curry fought back against futility, against the rugged life he led and the disappointments that went with the elusive search for gold.

He'd found little gold at Swamp Creek, had begun to

accept the fact that he would never strike it rich here. Now came news that meant a prominent piece of the life he'd once known was gone from him forever. Nothing that he could do or say would make it any other way. No amount of profanity or even tears could change it. He might have written more often, he might have gone out of his way to visit his sister. He might have done a lot of things that he hadn't, but the chance was gone from him forever now.

"How did she die?" Curry looked up, staring at the stars and avoiding the scrutiny of Lindmann.

"She'd been ill for quite awhile," Lindmann replied. "Her husband was killed, you know. She never seemed to quite recover from the shock."

"I didn't know." Curry gave a sigh and got to his feet. He stood waiting for Lindmann to make a move to follow before he walked to where the horses were tethered and began to slip the reins. He felt older than his years, his limbs aching from the pounding they'd received.

"Felipe Delgado regarded himself as quite a matador," Lindmann told him. "He was killed in the bull ring at Tijuana. Everything he possessed was willed to his wife, while she in turn bequeathed it to you. It's all yours, Mr. Curry, the rancho, the cattle, everything."

"And you didn't come here looking for me?"

"No." Lindmann gestured emphatically. "In fact I'd almost given up hope of finding you. I came to Swamp Creek on business for the stage line and I can assure you that I'll be leaving here just as soon as that business is completed. That doesn't mean you have to wait for me. I'll give you a letter to my associates in Sacramento, and they will provide you with the necessary papers to present in Mexicali. I'm sure you will find the Rancho Delgado a vast improvement on your living conditions here."

"It couldn't be any worse," Curry grinned at him, then went off to where Smith and Pickard sat on the walk outside the sheriff's office.

Lindmann watched him go, then retraced his steps to the stage office to collect his luggage and to sit down to the meal Les Mitchell's wife had prepared for them. He again became the important gentleman from Sacramento who demanded, and got, the attention he considered he deserved. The Mitchells were curious as to his conversation with big Tom

Curry, but Lindmann was a man who did not discuss business with anyone it did not concern.

He was critical of the meal, the lack of accommodation. He rebuked Les Mitchell for having failed to send men to investigate the delay of the stage, and he reduced Mrs. Mitchell to tears with his references to the state of the depot and the quality of her cooking. He threatened to have the stage service halted if conditions did not improve, and it was this which worried Les Mitchell more than anything because it seemed that the blame for everything was being laid solely on his shoulders.

Lindmann took one look at Joe Forrester's dormitory and pointed his nose skyward with disgust. His vocabulary was such that Forrester failed to understand most of it, save that if the town of Swamp Creek had any hope of attracting newcomers then something would have to be done about the disgusting conditions of the saloon.

He went out, with his luggage under his arm, demanding the direction of Tom Curry's claim. Forrester told him, then stood scratching his head and wondering while the little man from Sacramento went marching determinedly off into the night with a suitcase under one arm and a bottle of red-eye whisky held by the neck in the hand that swung free.

Curry and Smith were gone when Forrester went back to the sheriff's office. Pickard sat reading a newspaper that had come in on the stage, the sheets spread out over the top of his desk and a lantern moved close for his moving finger to pick out the words.

"What did he want?" Forrester wasted no time in coming to the point. "There's been all kinds of talk and nobody seems to know the truth. What would that feller Lindmann want with a blockhead like Tom Curry?"

"How the hell should I know?" Pickard yawned. "Get out of here, Joe, and leave me in peace."

"You can't talk to me like that!" Forrester brought his fists down together, shaking the desk. "I won't take it, you hear me? I'm sick and tired of the casual way you do your job in this town. I've had a bellyful of your incompetence and disrespect. We tried to put law and order in Swamp Creek, but with the kind of lawman you've turned out to be we'd be a damned sight better off without it."

"That suits me." Pickard got to his feet with a bound. He moved around the desk and thrust out his hand to knot

it in the front of Forrester's shirt. With an oath that bugged Forrester's eyes wide in sudden fright, Pickard bunched an angry fist under his nose, pulled the man closer so that bony knuckles rubbed against finching flesh. "I'm quitting this town, mister. As of here and now I'm throwin' in my badge and the whole damned bunch of you can go to hell."

"You . . . you can't quit," Forrester began to bluster. "You have to wait until another man is appointed to take your place."

"Like hell I do." Pickard gave him a shove that sent him staggering out through the open doorway to sprawl on the walk. "You've tried to put this town on the map, but you might have saved yourself the effort. It's had it, and not even a stage line can hold it together. The gold is running out, and you're finished, Forrester. The men will move on. There'll be no one to drink your filthy slops. You won't need a lawman, because the whole damned place will become a ghost town."

Pickard grew quieter then, stepping out to look up and down the single rutted street. There was contempt on his face, contempt for the town and for the man who sat on the boards at his feet. He went back inside, began to empty out the contents of his desk. He'd made up his mind to leave and he didn't intend to waste time doing it. He'd said his piece, and it was the truth, if Forrester bothered to think about it. There were a lot of towns such as Swamp Creek, towns that were destined to die when the gold ran out. It was happening all over California, and Pickard intended to find some place a lot more permanent.

* * *

"You're pretty quiet, Tom," Stingaree Smith said, poking at the fire, arousing the flames so that the glow reached down to the sluice box on the edge of the creek. "I guess that sister of yours meant a lot to you, eh?"

Curry shrugged. "You know how it is. We had some pretty good times when we were kids. I guess a man never really forgets, no matter how many years he puts behind him."

"You're gonna take over that rancho, and forget all about fossickin' for gold?"

"Why not?" Curry pitched a pebble into the creek, then rolled on his side and stared intently at his yellow-haired

partner before he went on. "I want you to come with me, Stingaree. Help me run the place. Partners, like we are now."

"No damned fear," Smith grunted. "I'll go along all right, since there ain't no future in stayin' here. I don't know much about cows but I'm willin' to learn. Only we're not gonna be partners and I won't agree to none of that. I'll work for wages. That's the only arrangement I'll come to."

"You mean that?"

"Sure, I mean it." Smith poked at the fire a second time. "We get along okay. We share what gold we find, we enjoy a good scrap with the knuckles. I'm keen to go with yuh. Hell, anything'd be better than scratchin' for a livin' the way we're doin' now. But it's your property and you sure as hell ain't turnin' half of it over to me."

"It's a deal."

They shook hands on it, then lay back to stare at the stars and wait for sleep to claim them. Smith gave a lazy re-accounting of the brawl they'd had, compared it with previous clashes. He was up to the final exchange of punches when there was a step that interrupted him and the dumpy shadow of Alexander Lindmann wound its way through the collection of shovels and sluice boxes to reach them.

Lindmann let his suitcase drop with a sigh, then brushed stones away to clear a space to seat himself. He sat down, nodded politely to both men before he began working at the cork of his bottle.

Curry grinned, not saying anything. He accepted the bottle which Lindmann had taken a short pull at it, handed it to Stingaree Smith with a warning look in his eye which Smith promptly ignored with a hearty swallow.

"I've prepared a letter," Lindmann suddenly announced. He reached in his pocket and handed it over. "This will introduce you to my associates in Sacramento. There are also some papers that I happened to bring with me. I've been carrying them around, just on the off chance that I might happen to meet up with you. You see there have been some legal difficulties concerning the rancho. It is situated right on the border, and quite a lot of the property is actually in Mexico."

"What about those papers you mentioned?" Curry grabbed the bottle from Stingaree Smith before it could be emptied. He handed it back to Lindmann, waited for the little man to take a second drink before he added, "Do they give title to the place, or are they unimportant?"

Lindmann wore an indulgent smile for the man who did not understand the legal technicalities. He opened his suitcase, began to rummage around in it as he endeavoured to explain. "The papers are really an agreement with the Mexican side of the Delgado family. You see, when Felipe Delgado married your sister, his father made him a presentation of quite a lot of the original Mexican property. This is still in the old man's name, even though the land is rightfully the Rancho Delgado which you've inherited."

Stingaree Smith looked blankly at Curry and began to scratch his head. It didn't make sense to him but he had no need to say so because it showed. He took the bottle from Lindmann without bothering to ask, tipped it to his mouth and drained it, then lay back with a hand on his stomach and belched.

"I think I know what you're trying to say." Curry glanced at Lindmann with a frown on his face. "Felipe Delgado struck out on his own, right? He established himself a rancho and the old man gave him right to land on the Mexican side of the border so's he could increase the size of his herd. When he died, that privilege was handed on to my sister. Now, the papers that you have also give me that right. Is that so?"

"Precisely," Lindmann was frowning, rummaging among the contents of the suitcase while the depth of his frown increased. "I don't seem to be able to find what I'm looking for. Yet I'm certain I brought them along—I know I couldn't have left them in Sacramento. They've just got to be here somewhere."

"Felipe Delgado's father? Is he still alive?"

"No . . ." Lindmann was preoccupied, and worried. "The younger son runs the Mexican rancho now. Luis Delgado. He's quite a figure around Mexicali. You'll get to know him soon enough, but I don't expect you'll care for him much."

"Why?"

Lindmann looked up, said, "He doesn't like Americanos."

Curry lapsed into silence as he watched Lindmann tipping out the contents of the suitcase and sifting through them item by item. In his mind was a picture of a rancho that wasn't much of a rancho at all, if there was no Mexican section belonging to it. He had a feeling that it might have been better if he'd never met up with Alexander Lindmann, that

the meeting would only result in a lot of trouble that would have otherwise been avoided. He kept quiet as Lindmann finally stowed everything back in the case and heard a baffled oath as it was clipped shut.

"The papers are gone," the attorney said. "I can't understand it. I'm sure I couldn't have mislaid them."

"You were robbed this afternoon, remember?" said Curry, lighting up a ready-rolled quirley. "They took your money, your watch. They might well have taken those papers."

"They didn't take all my money," replied Lindmann as he reached for a cigar, and dipped his head to the match that Curry applied to the cigarette. "I had some cash hidden in my shoe. But they did search my luggage, I remember that. They tipped everything out onto the roadway."

"They search the luggage of the other passengers?"

"There were only three of us." Lindmann thought about it, knitted his forehead with concentration. He closed his eyes and viewed the scene again in his mind. Two men rode down on them out of the timber and banged lead above the head of the driver until he drew to a halt. He'd been scared, both for his safety and his cash. He hadn't given any thought to the Delgado contract, for he'd been carrying it around so long he'd forgotten about it.

"They didn't search the other luggage," Lindmann added. "I'm quite certain of that. They took all the personal valuables they could find, but mine was the only luggage that was tampered with. I remember thinking that they showed very poor judgment, robbing the stage on its way to Swamp Creek. It would have been more to their benefit if they'd robbed it on its way back, when it might have perhaps been carrying a consignment of gold."

"Only it wasn't gold they were after," growled Curry, thumping a balled fist into the palm of his other hand. He got to his feet and paced back and forth, irritation nudging at him, growing to anger the more he thought about it. There were still a lot of facts that he was not clear on, yet the robbery of the afternoon left one that was plain enough. Someone had made certain that Alexander Lindmann was relieved of the Delgado land agreement.

It was a burr under big Tom Curry. He'd been born and bred in Waco, Texas, and raised among cattle though he never considered himself a cattleman. He was a drifter, a

man who answered to the lure and the call of gold. He felt no elation at having inherited a property worth more than the few ounces of gold he'd ever found, yet it sparked an anger in him that someone obviously was moving to cheat him out of it.

"Give it to me straight," he said to Lindmann. "The bulk of the ranch is on the Mexican side, is that right? And those papers you were carrying around represent the original agreement between Felipe Delgado and his father."

"I told you before——"

Lindmann didn't get a chance to finish as Curry went on. "So Luis has taken over the old man's property in Mexico. And Luis is gonna claim that there is no such agreement. Luis Delgado wants the whole damned lot. Isn't that so?"

"I didn't say that, but it would appear to be that way."

"Appear to be?" Curry stormed with a snort. "Stingaree, start packin'! We're gettin' out of this neck of the woods and headin' for the border. There's a few things I've got to say to that Mex, a few facts that I intend to ram down his greasy throat before I'm through. One thing I don't take to is bein' cheated, not by any sweatin' Mexican or anyone else. Helen left me that ranch, agreement and all, and by hell I'm gonna have it."

Alexander Lindmann saw yet another side to Tom Curry, a side that was nearer to that seen by the citizens of Swamp Creek. He saw the rage that built up in the big man, that grew in his voice until it boomed out along the banks of the creek like a roll of thunder. He watched lightning flash in the big man's eyes, saw the bony fists clench as though they were already gripped tightly around the unfortunate Luis Delgado. He shivered and drew back, pulled a blanket that he'd brought along close up around his shoulders and fought an urge to drag it all the way over his head. It was a long ride to Mexicali, but it didn't seem likely to Lindmann that the rage of Curry would abate on the way.

Curry and Smith were throwing things together, sorting out what they'd take with them, tossing picks and shovels aside because they had no use for them any more. Lindmann watched them with a protest he didn't dare to voice. They were riding out in the dead of night, leaving him there alone. He'd insulted Forrester, but now even the overcrowded dormitory seemed better than the isolation he faced. He didn't even have the comfort of a bottle with which to drug him-

self to sleep, and when he thought of that he was even more miserable.

And his misery was complete when Curry and Smith finished gathering their gear together, threw him a casual salute—and rode off into the night.

CHAPTER THREE

Riders In The Night

Tom Curry did not bother to contact the associates of Alexander Lindmann in Sacramento. He needed no papers of introduction to take along with him, and he was in no mood to argue with anyone who troubled to doubt his identity. Neither did he bother to ride to Mexicali for a word with the Mexican lawyers who'd been co-operating with Lindmann. He stopped at a farmhouse for directions, and that was all.

It had been a long, hard ride from Swamp Creek. Sting-aree Smith had been counting off the days as one way to dispel the boredom, but as one week passed and then another, he abandoned his efforts. He was tired, and his horse was tired. Yet while Curry's bronc also showed signs of weariness there was no such weakness evident in Curry. Curry rode with no slackening of his anger, just as Lindemann had silently predicted he would. There was no small doubt in his mind that Luis Delgado was responsible for the theft of the land grant. It was an old game and it had been played before, on both sides of the border. Felipe Delgado had taken up residence in California, while his father had remained in Mexico. Between them they controlled quite a spread of land, and now that both were dead the younger son, Luis, had gotten greedy.

"It won't do you no good pushin' these broncs this way," Smith complained. "Delgado ain't gonna run away, you needn't have any fear of that. Why don't you just slow down and take your time, stop for a beer someplace, rest the horses awhile?"

"If you can't keep up the pace that's your own damned fault," Curry growled. "You're not as tough as you thought you were, that's the truth of it. A few days in the sun and you're faint-hearted like a woman."

"A few days!" Smith roared. "We've been ridin' damn near day and night for weeks. Makes me wonder if you're

not tryin' to set some sort of record or somethin'. You'll kill the blasted horses, that's for sure. They can't keep this pace up, they'll drop in their tracks and then what'll we do? Walk the rest of the damn way?"

"If we have to," grinned Curry. It always amused him when Smith was bored, and it meant he had to be on his guard because Stingaree Smith always found a way to relieve that boredom at his expense. "I reckon you're gettin' saddle-sore, eh? Maybe you'd care to get down and walk for a spell?"

"Walk?" Smith grunted, spat a brown stream of tobacco juice over the side of his saddle. "I've got saddle-sores big as the flat end of a shovel, but I sure ain't keen on walkin' in this heat. No, I'll stick it out as long as the bronc can. How much further do you figure we have to go?"

Curry pointed to a low line of hills in the distance. "That old farmer said the Delgado rancho was to the left of those hills. There's a town there, close to it. Some place called Calexico, on the Californian side. I figure we'll call in at the rancho, tell 'em who we are, then collect fresh horses and ride on to Mexicali."

"You think there's a caretaker, eh? And you're crazy enough to believe that when two strangers ride up out of the dust he's just gonna accept what you say and hand over two perfectly good horses when he might never see them again?"

"I've got Lindmann's letter to those fellers in Sacramento."

"That ain't proof."

"It'll have to be," Curry muttered, making little of it, though he was aware there was sense in what Stingaree had stated. They were smothered in dust from the trail, their clothes stained with sweat. They might have been owlhoots on the run from the law. They might have been almost anything but what they were, with himself as heir to the Delgado rancho.

He narrowed his eyes, squinting into the distance. He made out a huddle of buildings that was the town of Calexico, buildings constructed of adobe, with thatched roofs. There were dogs barking as they rode closer, goats bleating on the outskirts of town, and several naked children playing in the streets when they finally rode in.

"Some dump!" Stingaree Smith looked the place over, searched for anything that might resemble a cantina. He

gave a low groan when he located it, and saw the doors and windows shuttered and a "For Sale" notice tacked to the front of it.

They rode on, curious eyes following their progress. The towners seemed predominantly Mexican, though there was a lawman's office mid-way along and the shingle that hung crookedly over the door had been printed in English.

Curry halted his horse by the rail, swung down and left its reins trailing. The door was open and he went on in, looked around for any sign of the lawman. The place was empty save for a table and chair covered with dust. There was a cell at the back, the doors leaning wide open. A rat scuttled away from Curry's feet and disappeared down a hole in the floor. It was obvious that the office had not been used in a long while, and that if they were to get any further information regarding the Delgado rancho then it would have to come from the townspeople themselves.

He went out, to where Stingaree Smith lounged lazily against a wall. Smith chomped away at a chew of tobacco, jerked his thumb casually at a tall man who was approaching from across the street. The man was an American, though he wore the cool and loose-fitting garb of a peon. He grinned at them as he drew nearer, thrust out his hand with a quick introduction.

His name was Hamilton, he told Curry. He owned a general store at the further end of town, but his interest was really as a botanist and farmer.

"The store is really a sideline," he went on. "Even though the standard of living here is very simple a man still has to have some money to keep himself going. I suppose you are here about the sheriff's job. It's about time somebody showed up. I've been advertising for months. It doesn't pay much, but there's a house and a granary business to go with it. These peasants respect an American, but they'd pay absolutely no attention to one of their own people."

Curry shook his head, explaining briefly that they'd come to inspect the Delgado rancho and were not interested in applying for the position of lawman. "I figure a town like this wouldn't have much need of law anyhow." He looked around him. "It sure seems mighty damned peaceful to me."

"Usually it is," Hamilton nodded. "Now that the cantina is closed we don't have too much trouble, but occasionally there's a few wild young fellers ride over from Mexicali.

They play hell, then they ride back again. But if we had a man to stand up to them, maybe slap them in a cell to cool off awhile, then they might be prepared to leave us alone."

"Yeah." Curry gave a grunt and felt for tobacco. "What about that rancho? You know if there's a caretaker out there, maybe?"

"There was a Mexican couple by the name of Questa," Hamilton said thoughtfully. "I haven't been out there, not for months now. The place was beginning to show signs of wear, though. I don't think Luis Delgado is inclined to bother about it at all."

"Maybe not about the ranch-house." Curry reached for the reins of his horse, swung himself astride the animal as he added, "He's got ideas about the land though. Ideas that he's soon gonna learn will have to be changed."

Hamilton stared in their wake, wondering over that. Finally he shrugged, closed the door of the law office, then walked slowly back towards his store.

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Curry rode in silence as the dusty town of Calexico dwindled into the heat haze behind them. He kept his eye on the hills until finally he sighted the ranch-house. It was a low, sprawling building constructed mainly of adobe. There were shade trees planted around, a few black dots of cattle grazing on the flat lands beyond it.

He saw corrals, and a bunkhouse, but they had the look of having stood empty for a long time. He'd thought that there might have been something about the place that might have reminded him of his sister, but there wasn't. It stood as a shell of stone and mud, silent and impersonal, as though it had always been that way.

He glanced idly at Smith, saw that Smith's interest had been taken by a number of young bull calves that roamed by the gateway. For some reason the sight of the calves seemed to bother Smith, though he made no comment and Curry didn't take the trouble to enquire.

They rode through to a broad courtyard. There was a well in the centre, several rose bushes that had run riot sprawled along an adobe wall. The shod hooves of the horses clipped hollowly in the silence, accompanied by the creak of harness as they swung down to look around. Stingaree Smith

tipped the stetson back from his head and ran horny fingers through his thick mop of yellow hair. He saw where tumbleweed had bowled through the gateway, piled itself against one side of the well. He turned in a full circle, surveying the scene, then faced back to Curry.

"You won't do any good outa this place," he grunted. "It'd cost a fortune for repairs to start with. If you take my advice you'll turn around and head back where we came from."

"To swamp Creek?" Curry gave a determined shake of his head. "Not a chance. It's six or seven months since Helen died, and that feller Lindmann said she'd been sick for some time before that. I guess it's only natural that the place got a bit run down, but we'll fix it up, soon as we point that Delgado feller in the right direction."

Stingaree Smith made no other comment. He led his horse into the shade, drew water from the well for himself and the animal to drink. He mopped the sweat from his face and took another look at the rancho, noted that the roof had collapsed in several places, that there was dirt inches thick along the length of the front verandah. There was a grape arbor at the side, the vines growing wild like the roses. There was also a vegetable garden that had become choked with weeds, and a few fruit trees that were badly in need of pruning.

The house itself was long, with a number of rooms all confronting the broad verandah. Many of the rooms were lit with sunlight that streamed through holes in the roof, filled with dust and tumbleweed and harbouring rats and snakes and anything else that cared to crawl inside.

Smith shook his head doubtfully, while Curry left his mount with its reins trailing and moved to take a closer look at the place. He kicked open a door that led to the main section of the house, totally unprepared for the sight of two startled brown eyes that stared up at him out of a small and grimy face.

On the instant there was a commotion. The boy spun away from Curry, then changed his mind and tried to duck through the big man's legs. Curry gave a yell, took a grab at him and missed, and the kid ran headlong into the bulky figure of Stingaree Smith.

"Grab him!" Curry shouted, as Smith swore and strove to catch hold of the wriggling form.

Smith locked his fingers in the back of the kid's shirt and held him up, dodging the small fists that thrashed at him, and the bare feet that didn't care which section of anatomy they connected with. Smith had recovered from his surprise and was laughing at the wild antics of the boy, the sound of his laughter only serving to infuriate the youngster even further.

"Let him down before you choke him," said Curry as he took hold of the boy, held him out at arm's length to study him. "Who the hell are you, eh? Where are the people who are supposed to be looking after this place?"

The kid tugged to get away, shaking his head fiercely and muttering in Spanish so that Curry had no notion of what he was saying. Curry let go of him then to show that he meant no harm, though Smith blocked the doorway so that there was no escape.

"We don't intend any harm to you, son," Curry said. "Do you understand what I'm saying? We're not going to hurt you."

There was a long moment of hesitation before the boy finally nodded, said, "Si, senior. I speak good Americano. I understand."

"Then can you answer my questions?"

"The Questas have gone, senior. Senor Delgado, he tells them they are not needed here any more and so they have returned to Tijuana."

"What's your name? I guess you've been takin' care of them calves, is that it?"

"My name is Pedro." The boy gave a shake of his head. "I do not take care of the calves. Senor Delgado, he does not know that I am here. He would send me away if he knew."

"And you've got no place to go," said Curry, knowing exactly the way it was. The boy was a homeless waif who'd taken shelter in the abandoned rancho, hiding from Luis Delgado or any of the Mexican's ranch-hands who wandered near. He was clad in rags, and filthy, still scared as he looked from Curry to Smith and back again.

"We aren't gonna chase you away, son." Curry grinned at him, placed a big hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "I'm the feller who owns this place. It was willed to my sister and she willed it to me, but I guess you wouldn't understand that."

"I understand." The boy nodded gravely. "The Questas,

they told me about it. They were good people, senior. They wanted me to go with them to Tijuana, but I preferred to stay here. Here I can practise with the bull calves so that some day I will learn to become a matador. Then I shall become famous. I shall fight in the bull rings of Mexicali and Ensenada. In all Mexico they will speak my name."

"And you'll end up with a horn tip in your belly like Felipe Delgado," said Curry with another grin, as he turned the boy around and aimed him back into the house. "We're gonna look the place over, then we'll see about a clean-up and a bite to eat. You got any food around here?"

"There are some eggs and some fruit." The boy looked back over his shoulder with a frown on his face. "Does the Senior Delgado know that you are here to take over the rancho?"

"He soon will, son," Curry said sternly. "As soon as those horses are rested he's gonna learn all about it."

* * *

They did not ride on to Mexicali that afternoon. Curry passed the time wandering from room to room, familiarising himself with the layout. He took a look at the bunkhouse and the corrals, saw that the calves that roamed were fat and healthy though they were a different breed from the wild longhorns of Texas. They were blocky and sleek, with powerful forequarters and a tapering rump. They had strength and agility, with a mean temper, so that even the calves were dangerous.

The boy had a tattered blanket for a cape and a length of wood that acted as a make-believe sword. He dared the calves, taunted them unmercifully until one of them charged. With a mocking yell he leapt to one side, twirling the cape as he spun about to face the calf a second time. The game kept up until the animal got tired of it and trotted off, then he began to torment another one.

Stingaree Smith stood with Curry and watched the antics of the boy until concern got the better of him. He charged forward, ignoring the irate calf at his rear while he stooped over the eager-eyed kid and wagged an admonishing finger under his nose. He gave no thought to the inviting target that his broad rump represented, his mind centred solely on delivering advice.

"And another thing——" Stingaree was shouting in mid-sentence when the calf was suddenly galvanised into action. There was an irritated snort as the animal pawed dirt up under its belly, a grunt as it took aim and lowered its head to charge. The kid saw it coming and had time to duck clear, but such was not the case with Stingaree Smith.

Two budding little horns met Smith's backside with a hefty whack. He went up and forward with an uplifting swing of the head, nose-dived into the dirt when he came down amid a riotous explosion of profanity.

Curry laughed, doubled over and clutched his stomach. He viewed the haughty, satisfied lift of the bull calf's head as it trotted disdainfully away. It was as though the animal was telling Smith to stay out of the games they played, but while Curry roared with hilarity Stingaree saw no amusement in it at all.

"That damned, block-headed little runt!" Stringaree cried. "He's broke my blasted spine, that's what he's done."

He accepted the hand the kid extended to him, got to his feet and scowled at the tears of merriment that were streaming down Curry's face. There were grazes on Smith's chin and nose where he'd connected with the dirt, and a sting in his tail that increased the wrath in him.

"You see what I mean?" He glared at the youngster. "You can get yourself hurt foolin' with them critters. You stay away from 'em from now on, you hear. Forget that crazy idea of becomin' a matador and play marbles or somethin'. It's a hell of a lot safer."

Curry was still laughing when they walked back into the house, unable to restrain himself each time he thought about it. The boy tagged along behind, while Smith rubbed his rump with the flat of both hands, complaining of saddle blisters that had also been damaged.

They cleaned out one of the rooms, shovelled out much of the dust, broomed the floor as clean as they could get it. The boy showed them where the kitchen was located, brought them eggs to cook and a few grapes to chew on.

They'd finished their meal and were sitting quietly to smoke awhile when there was a chortling snort from Curry and then a howl of mirth.

"If you could have seen yourself!" he spluttered. "Hell, if yuh could've just seen the look in that damned calf's eye! He never had himself such a fat target in all his short life!"

"Go to blazes!" Smith grunted sourly. "Lay off me, will yuh? For hell's sake, let it alone. Yuh keep on and on about it, and you're gettin' on my blasted nerves."

"You want a fight?"

"I'm too damned tired." Smith got up creakily and moved to the edge of the verandah. He stood looking out at the haze of dusk and his gaze took in the calves that wandered idly by the gateway. "You notice anything about the brand on these young bulls, eh? They're all the same. Box D, every one of 'em."

Curry shrugged, "What's so unusual about that? Box D. D for Delgado. It makes sense."

"Yeah." Stingaree Smith turned slowly to face him. "Only which Delgado, have you thought of that? Felipe, or Luis?"

There was no answer from Curry, the mirth slipping away from him as he pondered about the statement Smith had made. It was something he hadn't paused to consider until then. He'd left Swamp Creek in a hurry and he'd been eager to set things straight with Luis Delgado, but there was a lot of checking to be done and a lot of facts that he had to set straight with himself before he could take any real action. The robbery of Alexander Lindmann was proof enough that Luis Delgado intended to leave no loose ends in his move to take over both ranchos. Delgado had had plenty of time in his favour, and there was no doubt in Curry's mind that the man had made use of it.

Curry sat there, the shadows growing around him while he remained deep in thought. The initial wild rush of anger had finally faded from him, with a realisation that he would need to think each move out very carefully if he was to turn the tables on Luis Delgado. A show of anger wouldn't avail him anything save perhaps a taste of lead when he considered the many guns Delgado was bound to have backing him.

He turned it all over in his mind, sifted through the little that he knew and wondered about all that he didn't. He had a ranch, but it wasn't much to boast about. He guessed that the calves were the property of Luis Delgado, and since the house was practically devoid of furniture it was evident that everything else of value had been taken over, too.

He glanced idly to where the boy sat with knees drawn up pensively beneath his chin, met the big brown eyes that

were quick to note the movement of his head and swung to look at him.

"It's getting dark," he said. He got to his feet, turned towards the door. "I guess we'd better rustle up a light for inside so's we don't go treadin' on any scorpions or rattlesnakes."

"I do not light the lamp, *senor*." The boy was quick to move after him and to catch at his arm. "Sometimes the riders of Luis Delgado travel through here on their way to Calexico. They would make me leave if they knew I was here."

"Not any more they won't," Curry told him. "Delgado's got no say from now on, son. This is my rancho and you can stay as long as you want. Okay?"

"Si, *senor*."

The boy nodded falteringly, watched as Curry went on through the darkened hallway to the kitchen. There was fear in his dark eyes when he saw the flare of a match, and the glow of a lantern as it bobbed back towards him. He looked up at Curry, about to say something, when a muttered oath from Stingaree Smith interrupted.

"There's someone comin', Tom." Smith's bulky figure erupted from where he'd been sitting. His hand thrust out, indicating a group of horsemen as they came rattling through the gateway.

"It is *Senor Delgado*!" There was a frightened cry from the youngster as he dived for the protection of big Tom Curry. He crouched behind Curry, ready to turn and dart back into the safety of the house at any moment.

Slowly, Curry set the lantern down, moved a little away from it so that its glow failed to spotlight him. He forgot the boy who went scooting back inside the house, his attention fixed on the stony face of the man pointed out to him as Luis Delgado.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wild Plan

Luis Delgado raised a hand as a signal to his men to spread out facing the two *Americanos*. He did not bother

to dismount, sitting straight and arrogantly proud in the saddle as he laid cold eyes on the solid face of big Tom Curry. He remained silent for a long moment, judging the worth of the man, noting the size of him, and the sixgun that dragged low against his hip.

He shifted his glance only briefly to where Stingaree Smith stood with a broad palm covering the butt of an old Peacemaker, but it was in the eyes of Curry that he'd found the strongest challenge, and it was to Curry that he looked back now.

"This rancho is private property," Delgado said in clipped, hard tones. "I suggest that you take your horses and leave peacefully, otherwise you may expect very serious trouble."

"Guns, eh?" Curry spread his feet wide, rocked back on his heels a moment as he glared up at him. "You'd use force? Have your men gun us down, is that it?"

"Precisely." Delgado gave a curt nod. "You are trespassing, and there is no law in Calexico."

"In other words you figure you can get away with murder, even if this does happen to be California and not Mexico." Curry mocked him with a sour grin. "You've got a shock comin', because this is one time you're not gonna have your own way. The name is Curry. I guess that means somethin' to you, eh? It means this damned rancho belongs to me and that makes you and your crew the fellers who are trespassing. Back off, Delgado. Back off, and get the hell out of here. You've overstayed your welcome."

Luis Delgado stayed silent. The news that the man he confronted was indeed Tom Curry did not surprise him. He'd known that the lawyer, Lindmann, had been trying to locate the man, guessed that Lindmann had finally succeeded. A mocking grin crept onto his face when he thought of the land agreement that was even then folded in his pocket. Curry had laid claim to the rancho, but without that agreement the claim would never be proven.

The grin stayed on Delgado's face. He sat lithely in the saddle, a darkly handsome and suave young man, just as his brother had been. He was slender without being lean, wide-shouldered and narrow-hipped, with cold brown eyes that were almost black. He was not bluffed by the angry words of Curry, but rather amused that a man with the odds stacked so heavily against him should dare to be defiant.

tly, he studied the big, red-headed man, sought to find the resemblance between Curry and his deceased sister-in-law. Helen Curry's hair had been more auburn than red, her eyes a paler shade. Yet he saw the same expression of defiance that she'd had for him, sharper and more distinct, in the eyes of her brother.

She'd always scorned him, never tried to conceal her dislike and never bothered to make him welcome. He knew she'd deliberately kept the papers the old man had signed over to Felipe as a means to defy him, that the signing over of the rancho to her brother had been done to prevent him from getting control of it. He'd defeated her, and he was confident of that. There were no papers, and there was no proof now that there ever had been.

It was just as it should be, Luis Delgado told himself. It had not been a wise move on his father's part to donate Mexican land to Felipe, but since he'd seen fit to do this, there should at least have been a proviso that it revert back to the Delgado family with the death of Felipe. He'd approached the widowed Helen Curry and stated his case, but she'd always been scornful of him and refused to listen. Manuel Delgado had favoured Felipe, she told him. The old man meant the agreement to carry on and it would go on, regardless of any efforts to stop it.

Recollection banished the smile from Delgado's face, replaced it with a scowl on it instead. He shifted irritably, his stony hands driving at Curry with a sudden stab.

"You have proof that you are who you claim?" Delgado turned his head to one side as he spoke, his eyes narrowed as he met the defiant glare of Curry. He had no doubts, yet he asked the question nevertheless, as a ruse to put the big man on the defensive. "You expect me to take your word for you are Thomas Curry? You are an Americano, a gringo. You are the kind of men as you I have learned never to trust."

"Show him Lindmann's letter," Stingaree Smith grunted. "Show him, then tell him to blow before he gets a bullet in his back."

"I'll show him nothing," Curry growled. "He knows all about it. He's sittin' there smug, figurin' he's got us licked before we start. He's gonna know somethin' else before long—gonna learn just how damned wrong he's been."

Delgado laughed, a smooth, oily sound that had no malice in it. He tugged at the reins, pulling his horse around,

hen glanced back scornfully over his shoulder. The laugh came again, but hard and mocking, with a confidence that pronounced the anger in Curry and brought his hand reaching for his gun.

It took a great effort of will on Curry's part to allow the sixgun to slide back into its holster. He watched Delgado and his riders go clattering through the gateway and heard their progress as they swung away to the south. He cursed, going angrily at the paved yard, with a whole lot more still to be said that Delgado hadn't stayed to listen to.

Stingaree Smith cleared his throat, wiped sweating palms on the seat of his pants. The boy came timidly out of the house, stared in the wake of the riders, then glanced from one big man to the other. Curry trod back and forth, as angry bull of a man with no one to charge. It might have helped him to trade a few punches with Stingaree Smith, but Smith was in no mood for that.

Smith moved to get in step with him, treading back and forth across the courtyard. "What are you gonna do? You can't use force, because you wouldn't have a hope against that bunch and there's probably a whole lot more. You could ask advice from Lindmann, only where the hell is he? You don't know whose cattle are whose. You don't know how much land you're supposed to have. How in blazes do you expect to make a go of things anyhow?"

"I'll ride to Mexicali," replied Curry. "There are law men there who are working in association with Lindmann. Maybe they can set me straight on a few things. At least they will be able to let be know what brand my beef are supposed to be wearing."

"It won't be a Box D, you can bet all you've got on that!"

"I guess it won't." He gave a rueful shrug, then turned towards the house. "I'm gonna get some sleep. I want an early start in the morning. I aim to find out all there is about this blasted set-up, and I'm not comin' back here until I do."

"You talk like you aim on riding to Mexicali alone?" Smith followed him in, looked at him anxiously as he said and began to tug off his boots. "You wouldn't be such a fool as to try a stunt like that? If Delgado gets wind of it we'll have you shot."

"He might." He looked up at Smith, with determination

written all over his face. "Nevertheless, you're staying here. There's work to be done. You and the boy can get busy cleaning the house, maybe you'll even get around to patching the roof. Don't argue about it, Stingaree, because I just can't damned well listen."

Smith swore and argued despite the warning. He took no notice when Curry rolled on his side and turned his back on him, kept right on stating the stupidity of it all until a man came and told him he'd only been wasting his time. He continued to himself, pared off a chew of tobacco and lay down to chomp on it awhile before he blew out the lamp. He lay there, staring at the dark patch of the ceiling, listening to the sounds that scuttled through the house. It was a far cry from Camp Creek, but Stingaree Smith would have turned round and headed all the way back there if only Curry would have come along with him.

It was a useless fight, Smith told himself. Curry couldn't expect to win because Luis Delgado held all the aces. Curry was too mule-headed to accept that for the moment, but the man was fast approaching when he'd have to, and there was no telling which way his wild temper might swing him when it happened.

Smith chewed on his cud of tobacco for an hour, then spat it out and allowed sleep to claim him. He was unaware of the boy who got up to retreat from the slumber-destroyer's snores to curl up outside on the verandah. He went into sleep so deep he was unaware of anything, until a slap of light woke him and he found that Curry had already gone.

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They worked hard, Stingaree Smith and the Mexican boy. They began at one end of the house, worked their way systematically along, shovelling out the sand and the dust, pulling the tumbleweed in the centre of the courtyard and setting it to it. It was a way of keeping busy, though worry for the safety of Tom Curry nagged at Smith regardless. Time and time again he walked to the gateway, stared away at the rolling hills that reached on to Mexicali. Somewhere between where he stood and the foot of those hills lay the borderline between California and Mexico, but there were no fences that he could see and nothing to indicate just where the line was to run.

He went back and resumed his shovelling, swearing at the boy for raising too much dust in the room. The kid grinned at him, with a twinkle in his big brown eyes that said he was still remembering the incident with the young bull. Smith ignored the grin, flattened a rat with the blade of the shovel and pitched it out to roast among the ashes of the tumbleweed.

"What's your name, son?" He squinted through the dust at the slim figure, grinning despite himself at the industriousness of the boy. "I mean, what do they call you apart from Pedro?"

"Just Pedro," the kid said casually. "I do not know the best. It has always been just Pedro."

"Yeah, well, 'Just Pedro' had better go easy on the broom for a spell. You're chokin' me with all that damned dust. You're makin' it so's a man can't breathe in here."

"Si, senior." The boy leaned on the broom, allowing the dust to settle slowly around him. A trickle of sweat ran down the side of his face, carved a trail through the grime that covered it. He grinned at Smith, white teeth flashing although they'd been polished. "I will rest for awhile, then we will fix the roof, no?"

"To hell with the roof, we'll leave that till another day." Smith set the shovel against a wall, paused to mop at the sweat on his face. He stared through the door, across the verandah towards the gate. The day was growing older and Curry had not returned. He worried about it, and each minute that dragged by increased his anxiety.

"Delgado will know all about those lawyers in Mexicali," he said absently, addressing himself rather than the boy. "He'll know damned well that Curry's first move will be to contact them. He'll have men out scoutin' for him, ready to plant a bullet in his back the first chance they get."

The Mexican boy was staring, wide-eyed and open-mouthed at a rattlesnake that slid quietly out of a corner. His mouth was dry as the dust that covered him, too dry to yell, allowing only a small croak that was no warning at all as Stingaree Smith rambled on with his predictions of dire misfortune for Tom Curry.

"He'll never listen to anyone," Smith complained. "You can't talk sense to him, he's just too damned stubborn. He's got no chance of beating Delgado. He'd have to take it to

and even if he had the cash he's got no case. I never a man who could be so blasted blind to the facts. He only what he wants to see, that's his trouble."

"Senor," the kid managed to whisper, pointing in horror the snake wound forward between Smith's legs. He saw had lift up, its tail begin to twitch. The snake was fat, old, and like most old rattlers there were no rattles beneath the rats had chewed them off, yet it was just as deadly had ever been.

"We should have stayed in Swamp Creek," Smith concluded his complaint. "We might have struck it rich sooner er. There's no damned future in stayin' here."

"Senor!" The boy's cry was louder then, enough to interrupt the disgruntled ramblings of Smith and to bring a of irritation to his face.

"What the hell do you want?"

"A snake, senor. Between your feet!"

"Snake?" Smith looked down, blanched white as he beneath the diamond back. With a howl he lifted both feet off the floor, saw the head of the rattler strike at him and leapt a second time, then made a wild grab at the shovel as a means to protect himself. The snake unwound from its coils in a hissing lunge even as Smith swung frantically with the

There was a thump as the blade took the head off the snake but its coils still thrashed around the feet of Stingaree, and he wasn't aware of the damage he'd done to it until the kid poked it away from him with the handle of the shovel. He'd kept on yelling and dancing, making frantic motions with the shovel, and there was hardly a breath left in him when he finally realised that the snake was dead.

"Why didn't you warn me?" Warily, he glanced around, making sure there were no other snakes ready to wriggle up on him. "Why the hell did you wait until the damned thing was right under my feet? You was just standin' there mumbling so how the blazes was I to know there was a rattler?"

A lump bobbed in the throat of the boy. He saw anger on the face of Stingaree Smith, a blaze of colour creeping into it. He opened his mouth in an effort to explain, but couldn't think of what to say and Smith didn't give him a chance to work on it.

"It could've killed me, you realise that? You should have

elled, pointed it out before it got so close. Damnit, kid, anyone with any sense would've known that!"

Still there was silence from the boy. There was a tremor on his mouth, a hurt expression on his face that he tried desperately to hide. A tear glinted to betray him and he turned away quickly so that Smith would not see.

"I was talkin' to you, son," Smith called after him. "Now you come back here and listen to what I have to say. I figure you might have been a bit amusin' to yuh when that calf butted me in the rump. Only there wasn't anything funny about this business with that rattler."

"I was not laughing, senior."

"No?" Smith reached out a big paw, laid it on the bony shoulder of the boy and felt the tremor running through him. He turned him around, scowling at him. "Then what was you doing? Answer me that!"

The kid gave no answer, but the tears spoke for him. It was a sight that wrenched an oath from Stingaree Smith, the thought of a small grimy boy who'd felt the lash of his tongue and then strove valiantly to conceal the hurt it brought.

"Aw, hell, come here." Smith caught hold of him, squatted down on his heels to meet the kid face to face. "This is no way for a feller called Just Pedro to behave. Come to think of it it was a pretty lousy way for a feller called Stingaree Smith to act, too. I didn't mean to bark at you, son. I guess I'm just a loud-mouthed old goat and it would've served me right if that damned snake had sunk its fangs into me, huh? Will yuh let me say I'm sorry and shake hands on it, like a man?"

"Si," the kid said timidly, then grinned and thrust out his hand. "We are friends, amigo. Good friends, no?"

"Sure we are." Smith held the small brown hand in his hard hand, applied only a gentle pressure that was nevertheless sincere. "Now, let's get on with our chores. We'll see how much we can get done before Curry comes ridin' back."

The kid was happy again, and industrious as ever as he roomed at the dust. He raised swirling clouds around him, and while Stingaree Smith went near to choking he didn't venture to complain. They worked from one end of the house to the other, ridding the rooms of dust and windblown sand, bundling the rubbish in the centre of the courtyard and setting fire to it. It was a job that kept them both busy, but it

stop Stingaree Smith from wondering about what
be happening to Tom Curry.

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It was just on dusk when Curry rode back. Smith and
boy were in the kitchen, stoking the fire and preparing a
vegetables for the cooking pot. They heard the clip
od hooves, and there was a yell of delight from the
gster as he went sprinting through the house to meet the

"What kept yuh?" Smith stood on the verandah, both
s on his hips as he watched Curry dismount. "You've
gone all damned day, so what the hell have you been
"

"Gettin' a few facts, just like I told you." Curry lifted
addle from his horse and removed the blanket. He stow-
em both on the verandah, then straightened, meeting
curiosity of Smith with a casual lift of his shoulders. "I
d to the lawyers, and according to them I haven't got a
o stand on. The land in question is still listed as the
rty of Don Manuel Delgado, even though title has now
to Luis. Any agreement that the old man had with
e is no longer binding, since both of them are dead. It
be argued in court of course, but only if I had the
s that Lindmann had stolen from him."

"That's it then, you're beaten." Smith gave a grunt of dis-
nd spat a stream of tobacco juice into the yard. "There's
nse hangin' around, so we might as well pack up and
and forget about it."

"I'm not gonna quit!" Curry roared. He left Smith
g an indignant protest while he led the horse away to
rral, then took up where he'd left off before Smith
chance to get a word in. "I'm stayin', and I'm gonna
I don't know how I'm gonna beat Delgado, but I know
what Helen wanted when she left me this place and
all that's what I'm gonna do."

"What about the cattle? Did you check on the brands?"

"Yes, I checked on 'em, they're all Luis Delgado's."

"I told you so. I told you, didn't I? I said that's the way
e."

"You told me," Curry sighed. "Felipe Dalgardo branded
a simple D. The old man's cattle carry a D in a Box.
made it mighty simple for Luis to blot every brand on

every head of beef that he wanted. I doubt if there's one animal left that he hasn't laid claim to, and every blotched brand will be healed by now so what chance do I have of proving it?"

They went into the house, with Curry quick to note the absence of dust. He raised his eyebrows, walked from room to room, and was grinning when he came back and said, "You've been busy. A few days' hard work like today and we won't know the place. I figure tomorrow we'll start patching the roof, then we'll scrub out every room and slap a coat of whitewash over the lot of it."

"Aw, Tom, you're not serious, are you?" Smith faced him with a hopeless expression. "What's to be gained by it? You don't have any cattle. You'll never get the cash to buy any and you just can't go out and rustle them. All you've got is this tumblin' down old ruin, and you sure as well aren't gonna make any money out of it."

"Maybe not." There was a grin that crept slowly across the face of Tom Curry, that put a spark of mischief in his green eyes so that they shone when they met with Smith's. "Delgado cheated me by changing those brands. I figure I'll cheat him back, by changin' them a third time."

"You can't rub out a brand, you damn fool. How the hell can you change them?"

"By adding to them. By adding a C to the D so that it becomes a boxed O with a dividing line down the centre. Sort of a symbol of the way things are, with the border dividing my property and that of Delgado's."

Smith stared at him, shaking his head as though he couldn't believe that any man could be stupid enough to come up with such an idea. He followed him back into the kitchen, watched him straddle a chair and build a cigarette, and still there were no words he could find to express himself.

"Those calves are mine," Curry told him. "I'm not stealing them. I'm just taking them back. Besides, Delgado wouldn't allow me to run cattle on his land, so why the hell should he have the use of mine?"

"That's just it." Smith finally broke his silence with a helpless gesture. "How much land do you have between here and the border?"

"Enough." Curry dragged on the weed, drew in a deep lungful of smoke. He let it out with a satisfied sigh, an indication that he was well pleased with his plan to outwit Lui

Delgado. He wasn't fooling himself that it was a plan that would not have repercussions. Delgado would be hopping mad when he found out about it, and it could well develop into a gunplay. He had the odds stacked heavily against him, but this was a gamble he was prepared to risk. He wanted to try Luis Delgado, to find some chance to catch him off guard. The man was smug, sure of himself, but if he got nervous enough there might be a way to trick him.

"There's enough land for the few head I plan to run," he said calmly. "If they drift back across the border it won't worry me. I want Delgado to see those altered brands. I want him to know what I'm up to."

"Then you're crazy. You'll get us both killed, do you realize that? Delgado will come stormin' over here with a bunch of riders and he'll raze this damned place to the ground."

"I thought you liked a fight?"

"Not that kind. I'll face up to any man, sixguns or bare knuckles, it's okay with me. Only how the hell can the two of us stand off a crew like Delgado's got? They'll put daylight through the both of us, the kid, too, for that matter. It's a crazy idea, Tom. Too damned crazy, and it's about time you understood that."

CHAPTER FIVE

Uninvited Guest

Big Tom Curry listened without interruption to all that Garee Smith had to say, but it had no effect on his decision. He couldn't prove that Delgado had slapped his own hand on the cattle, but he knew it, and he would not be deceived.

Next morning found him rounding up a bunch of calves outside the gateway. He herded them to a corral and closed the gate on them, then tossed a rope over one and hauled the giggling animal over to the rails for a closer inspection of the brand. He measured the size and height of the D that had burned into its rump, and calculated the size of the C that would be needed to convert it.

He went back and rummaged around in a toolshed by

the bunkhouse. There was a rusting array of tools that were covered with dust and spiderwebs, but he found the iron he wanted, together with a file to cut it into shape.

Stingaree Smith came over to watch, continuing a hopeless shake of his head and voicing dire predictions that were unheeded as before. Several times, Curry tested the brand. He carried it across to the corral and compared it with the burnt-in D until he was satisfied, then got his fire going in readiness.

"You won't get away with it," Smith grunted irritably. "It's suicide to try a stunt like this. Delgado's not the kind of feller to take it lyin' down and you know it."

"Give me a hand, will yuh?" Curry grinned at him. "Hold this little devil still a minute. I want to see just how well this works out."

Smith complained, though he did as directed. Curry moved in with the iron, applied it carefully while the calf gave a bawl of hurt and struggled to break away. There was the smell of burning hair and singeing flesh, then Curry removed the iron and waited for the smoke to curl away before he stooped forward for a closer look.

"Perfect." He straightened up with a nod of satisfaction. "Okay, let's hit the rest of 'em."

The kid came out to watch, perched himself on top of the rail and viewed the proceedings with a longing look in his eye. It was obvious that he was eager to resume his torment of the young bull calves, but he wondered about the wrath of Stingaree Smith and didn't venture a try at it. He stayed atop the rail, brown eyes following the activities of both men as they sweated through the morning, and he was the first one to notice the approach of a rig as it rattled in from the direction of town.

"There is someone coming, senors!" the kid shouted, and straightened up to point.

Curry gave a curse, his hand dropping automatically to the gun that was slung on his hip. He had the weapon almost clear of leather when he recognised the lean, brown-haired man who was driving. It was Hamilton, the storekeeper who described himself as a farmer and botanist at heart. There was a girl with him, though a shady bonnet hid her face until Hamilton hauled on the reins to bring the rig to a stop. Hamilton saw what they were doing, a frown lodging itself

between his eyes as he stepped down and turned to aid the girl.

Curry looked at her, stared, though he tried not to. She was young, with long brown hair that curled down from beneath her bonnet. It was hair that caught the sun, and shone as though there was gold in it. Her face was heart-shaped with a tiny dimple on either side of her mouth. Her eyes were a deep blue, so deep they were almost violet. Her figure was slight, yet well-moulded, and enhanced by the simple cut of the dress she wore.

"This is my daughter, Eileen," Hamilton told Curry and Smith. He looked curiously at the boy perched on the rail, then glanced meaningfully back at the calves. He acted as though about to say something, then shrugged as he looked back to Curry. "Eileen thought it would be neighbourly if we drove out to see how you were managing. She's packed a hamper. I guess you'll appreciate a woman's cooking for a change."

"We sure will," Curry said to the girl. "If you'd like to refresh up, Pedro will show you where. We'll be right with you, soon as we get through."

She smiled at him, laughed at the boy who went scampering down to take her hand. He watched her striding cheerfully towards the house, then turned to Hamilton, said, "It's just the way it looks. We're blottin' brands. We're gonna work over every head of beef that wanders this side of the order."

"That's asking for trouble," muttered Hamilton. "Luis Delgado will kill you the moment he finds out."

"That's just what I keep tellin' him," Smith cut in with a grunt. "But he won't listen to you. He won't listen to anyone. He's a stubborn damn fool and he won't be happy till he's carryin' lead in him."

"They're my cattle," Curry explained to Hamilton. "Delgado thought he was going to get away with it. Now I'll show him how wrong he's been."

Hamilton kept silent. He stood and watched while the rest of the branding was completed, then walked with them back to the house and sat in the shade of the verandah. The girl came out, spread a checked tablecloth beneath a peach tree, set down her hamper and arranged everything neatly while the boy watched her with an eager anticipation.

There was worry in Hamilton as he watched his daugh-

er, and it was a worry that was prompted by fears for her safety. He understood the situation between Curry and Luis Delgado, knew that when the trouble did flare it could well involve all of them. They were here at the rancho. All that was needed was for one of Delgado's riders to spot the altered brands and there'd be a wild bunch howling up from across the border to exact vengeance. There'd be guns blazing and it wouldn't matter to Delgado if any innocent party was caught in the middle. Lead would fly and men would be killed, and in Hamilton's mind Curry was already beaten.

"Come and get it!"

Eileen Hamilton was smiling as she turned to call. She saw the frown that shadowed her father's face, frowned herself because she failed to understand the reason for it. She motioned each man to his place around the table, then tucked her long dress neatly around her ankles as she sat down to join them.

Curry watched her, unable to take his eyes off her. It embarrassed him that he stared, and it put colour into the cheeks of the girl when she became aware of it. He wanted to apologise, but couldn't, found himself suddenly without appetite for the food that she'd gone to so much trouble to prepare.

There was cold chicken, salad greens picked fresh from her father's garden. There were cakes and biscuits that she'd baked, creamy butter and home-made jam, bread that had been taken from the oven only moments before they'd left town.

"I didn't know your sister, Mr. Curry." The girl startled him when she spoke, in a voice that was sweet and gentle as the smile she wore. "I have only been in Calexico several months. I was at school in Los Angeles when dad bought the store, then at a finishing school in Pasadena. From what I've heard, Helen Delgado was highly respected on both sides of the border."

"Not by her brother-in-law," Curry grunted, then returned the smile with a lopsided grin. "Helen was quite a girl. I'm only sorry she didn't get word to me sooner. If I'd been here to help her, then Luis Delgado wouldn't have had things so easy, and maybe Helen might not have died."

"Do you know what killed her?"

"She loved a man." He said it simply, told it as he knew it. "He was her life and when she lost him there was nothing

She just pined away and died, lost interest in everything even in the struggle against Luis Delgado. Yet she knew what was happening, that's why she contacted the lawyer. She wanted me here to fight Delgado and even though I got here late that's exactly what I intend to do."

Hamilton cleared his throat, breaking the pensive mood into which the girl had fallen. She glanced across at him, then back to Curry, with a smile again as she said, "Dad is very anxious to have a roam around. There are some old shrubs and things he's keen to study. I suppose he told you of his hobbies. He's sort of a botanist, and geologist. I think the truth of it is he just likes the wide open spaces."

"Sure." Curry nodded to her, then looked to Hamilton. "Wander all you like, it's okay with me."

Hamilton thanked him, got to his feet with a leg of chicken to keep him company. It was more than just a study of the vegetation that appealed to him, and he was anxious to explain that. His interest also covered the land formation, the placement of sierras and valleys, and the location of certain rocks and minerals in relation to the nature of the terrain.

"The land here is much more fertile than it is a few miles to the east," he told them, trying to put it simply so they would know what he was talking about. "Here, we have sturdy brush and reasonably good grass. There are cottonwoods and oaks that grow tall and strong. Yet within a few miles all that changes, and there is nothing but creosote bushes and mesquite, while between the Sierras de Juarez and de Cucapas there is another change with rich soil that is ideal for any number of crops."

"He'll go on like that for hours if you let him." The girl got to her feet, with a good-natured laugh as she hugged her father's arm. "He'll talk about ocotillo, or cholla. He'll rave on about the amount of alkali in the soil. He'll tell you how the sierras roll this way, and that way, until you're absolutely bored to death and have to insult him to shut him up."

"I don't think I'm quite as bad as all that," Hamilton laughed. "But it is an interesting subject and I admit I do get carried away a little. However, take the land formation for instance. You would think, from the route you followed to get here, that you would be well to the south of Calexico. Instead, you are very much to the north, with the road wind-

ng as it does to follow the contour of the sierras. There are
nnumerable fascinating features about this land, if a man
only takes the trouble to seek them out."

"I'm sure there are," Curry grinned as Hamilton went
off. He gave the girl a hand to gather up the plates and stov
everything back in the basket. He admired the way she tilted
her head a little to one side when she looked at him. He
liked the sound of her voice, the musical quality of her
laughter. Once, when her hand accidentally touched his, he
found it cool and soft while at the same time it sparked
fire in him.

"I sure appreciate you goin' to all this trouble, Miss,
Curry said awkwardly. "I'm sure Stingaree and young Pedro
feel the same way about it. It was a real fine picnic, it sure
was."

"I enjoyed doing it," she smiled. "I'd like to help you
with the house, too, if you feel you wouldn't mind. Sort o
dd a woman's touch to things?"

"That'd suit us." He walked with her back to the veran
dah. "Stingaree and Pedro did some broomin' but the plac
s still pretty shabby. It'll take a lot of time and effort to ge
t anywhere near like it used to be."

"I love it." She stood and looked at the house, admirin
the broad, cool verandah, the rooms that opened out onto it
he twirled around and surveyed the courtyard with the well
n its centre and the roses growing wild along the wall. "You
ister must have been very proud of it, Mr. Curry. Dad
tells me that Felipe Delgado had it specially built for her
t's such a shame that their lives ended so tragically. In a
way I seem to sense their presence . . . seem to feel them
moving in the shadows, watching us. They must be sad tha
the house has been allowed to become so run down. I'm sure
they're waiting for you to restore it, and that they'll be very
happy when you do."

"Yeah." He was silent for a moment, wondering where
all his efforts were going to lead. He'd branded a few calves
and he'd brand others. He'd mark every head of cattle tha
trolled on his side of the line, and he reasoned that was fair
enough in view of the fact that Luis Delgado had had time
to steal a whole lot more. There'd be trouble, and there
was no law in Calxico that he might turn to, though it was
doubtful if any lawman would be inclined to help him, any
way, in view of what he'd done.

He gave a sigh and toed the dirt a moment, then took the arm of the girl and led her off along the verandah on a tour of inspection. He saw the light in her eyes as she wandered from room to room, as though in her mind she was seeing it as it had been. Like the girl he experienced an odd sensation of detachment, as though it was another time far in the past. There were lanterns strung across the courtyard, a violin played sweet music that was only faintly audible. There were laughing voices, footsteps chasing through the hallways. Helen was there, smiling and radiant with happiness.

"Will you come to dinner next Sunday?" The girl broke into his thoughts, looked up at him with a light of earnestness in her eyes. "We'd love to have you, and it will be some thing of an occasion. Dad had a letter from a man regarding the sheriff's job. It seems Calxico is going to have the benefit of law and order at long last. I thought if we had an informal little get-together it would give him a chance to know people and feel more at home. After all, the townspeople are mainly Mexican and they do tend to keep to themselves a lot."

"I'll be glad to go." He grinned down at her, a warmth growing inside of him when he saw how pleased she was. "I'll start counting the days as from right now. Only you've got to stop calling me 'mister'. The name is Tom, and I'd sure like that a whole lot better."

"And I'm Eileen." She linked her arm with his, laughed as she led him on into another room. "I'll be looking forward to Sunday, too, Tom. I'll be counting the days, just like you."

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They were days of back-breaking work for Tom Curry and Stingaree Smith, with the boy pitching in to help them whenever he could. Curry branded as many calves and cows as he could round up, turned them loose again with their bell-tale mark that was calculated to arouse the wrath of Luis Delgado.

Yet no action came from across the border, and it puzzled Curry. He stood by the gateway and stared to the south, but there were no riders to be seen and he had to wonder why. He guessed that it was because Delgado dismissed his efforts as puny, that Delgado understood it was a ruse to provoke him.

By day they worked with the cattle, and in the cool of dusk and night they toiled at the renovations to the house. Stingaree Smith climbed up on the roof with a lantern and patched the holes one by one. The boy scrubbed the walls inside and out, killed every spider and scorpion and rat he could find. Curry unearthed a nest of rattlesnakes, mashed them with the flat of a shovel. By the end of the week they began to see something for their efforts, though when Sunday dawned Stingaree Smith was in no mood for the ride to town.

"You and Pedro go ahead without me, Tom," he told Curry. "I reckon I'd just as soon spend the time lyin' around in a bed for a spell. Besides, I seen the way you looked at that gal. I don't want to go marchin' in there to cramp your style any."

"You won't be cramping my style, you damned fool. She's invitin' other folks to dinner besides us. It's a welcome for the new sheriff. You'll be actin' downright unsociable if you don't go, you realise that?"

"Nevertheless, I'm stayin' here," Smith said firmly.

"I would like to stay, too, senor," the boy told Curry. "The senorita is very pretty, but I would rather stay with my good friend at the rancho."

"In a few years you won't be sayin' that," Curry grinned at him, then shrugged. "If that's the way you both feel about it, then I guess I'll just have to go alone. But don't expect me to apologise for yuh. When the Hamiltons ask why you stayed at home I'll tell 'em the truth, the pair of you are just too damned lazy."

"Lazy!" Smith's roar followed him as he walked towards the corral. "You lousy, ungrateful son of a side-windin' snake! You come back here and say that again! I've broke my blasted back for you all this week. I've been kicked in the shins by your cattle, I've risked my neck climbing up on the roof. I've worked like a confounded nigger, and what thanks do I get? You come back here, Curry. You come on back and I'll knock that damned head clean off your shoulders!"

Curry ignored him. He strode to the corral and threw his saddle on his horse, tightened the cinch as Smith and the boy came out to the verandah to watch him leave. He swung in a stride the bronc, raised his hand as a brief gesture of farewell, and there was another blistering bellow of profanity that followed him as he guided the horse towards the road.

woman stood still and listened to what they had to say. They were two tall, stubborn men, and while as yet they played a waiting game, there was no one who had any doubts as to how it all must end.

"You had a long time without interference, Delgado," Curry said loudly, choosing his words to needle the man. "My sister was in her grave and there was no one to stand in your way. You took the cattle, removed every article of value from the ranch-house. I guess you figured I never would show up, but you took precautions nevertheless. You had some of your men trail Alexander Lindmann, paid them to steal that old agreement your father signed with Felipe. I reckon you had the notion that that about wrapped it up, but you were wrong, because I haven't even started to fight."

Pickard threw puzzled glances from Curry to Delgado and then back again. He glanced at Hamilton, quizzing him with his eyes, but Hamilton could only shrug because it was no time for explanations and Pickard was forced to piece it together as best he could.

"I branded your beeves," Curry told Delgado defiantly. "I'll put my mark on any others that cross the line. As far as I'm concerned I'm doin' no more than layin' claim to what is mine anyhow. And I don't need any lawman to back me up so you're wrong about that, too."

"What's goin' on here?" Pickard got a word in. "I might have known the moment I clapped eyes on you, Curry, that there'd be trouble of some kind. What's all this about a ranch? The last time I saw you you had nothin' in your pockets but holes."

"My sister willed it to me." Curry offered no more information than that, other than to impress upon him his dislike for Luis Delgado. "This feller is figurin' to squeeze me out but the only squeezin' that'll be done is when I get my hands round his throat."

"Tom, please!" Eileen Hamilton got between them, looked up in desperation to Curry, then swung about to catch hold of the Mexican's arm. "Senor, if you will come and meet the other guests? I'm sure you know most of the people here. There's Mr. and Mrs. Poole and Mr. Drago. And you know my father . . ."

Curry scowled in the wake of Delgado as he allowed himself to be led away. Anger pulsed through him, together with a bitterness that he knew was unreasonable but which

more men than big Tom Curry who regarded it with obvious reluctance. He heard muttered comments that it was high time someone reopened the cantina, and almost immediately there was a rumour spreading that somebody did intend to give the business another try as soon as negotiations were completed.

Curry listened to the chatter, becoming bored when he was unable to find more time alone with the girl. He wandered around, took a look at the vegetable garden that Hamilton was rightly proud of. Hamilton had everything planted in neat rows, well-watered, and with not a weed to be seen. He'd set down a border of rock around the edges, much of it petrified wood or boulders of agate that had been broken to show bands and swirls of colour.

Curry became aware then that heads were turning and Hamilton called for attention. A man stood behind him waiting to be introduced as the new sheriff of Calxico. He was a man of medium height, with brown hair that was thinning a little. He had spidery arms and a paunch that was beginning to become prominent. He turned his head slightly to one side, so that those nearest him could see that his nose had once been broken.

"Pickard!" Curry gasped, unable to believe his eyes. He took a step forward for a closer look, forgetful of the woman as he stared up at the man on Hamilton's back verandah. "Well, I'll be damned! What the blazes brings you to this neck of the woods?"

Pickard looked back, recognised Curry and blanched at the prospects ahead. He shook his head, threw a quick look of appeal to Hamilton as though he was about to change his mind, but he didn't have time to say a word. Curry took the steps with a bound, thrust out his big hand to crush the limp fingers that were representative of the zeal that had faded from the ex-sheriff of Swamp Creek.

"Tom Curry!" Pickard spoke the words as though he was pronouncing his own death sentence. "I guess Stingaree Smith is here, too, eh?"

"He's out at my ranch," said Curry. He grinned at Pickard, looked him up and down, still unable to believe his eyes. There were horses clattering in the street, but he was preoccupied with Pickard and the house blocked his view of the riders who were drawing to a halt. "Stingaree'll be glad to see yuh," he told the lawman. "We'll have to get together

for a talk about old times. We won't give you no trouble in this town—there's no damned saloon to tempt us."

It was some consolation to Pickard, but he had little time to congratulate himself. A murmur ran through the crowd, and Eileen Hamilton hurried to Curry's side to place a restraining hand on his arm.

"It's Luis Delgado," she said urgently. "I didn't invite him, but I have to make him welcome, you realise that. Please Curry not to start any trouble, -Tom. I'll move him around among the guests and I'll do everything I can to keep him away from you. I just don't want any arguments or embarrassment."

CHAPTER SIX

Big Man's Anger

Anger touched Curry, sparking in his eyes as he glared above the heads of the crowd to the tall and arrogant figure of Luis Delgado. It meant nothing to Delgado that he'd received no invitation for he was curious about this new lawman who'd come to Calxico and so he'd ridden in to take a look.

Despite a move by the girl to divert him, Delgado trod directly to where Pickard and Curry stood on the verandah. There was a smile on his mouth as he looked from one to the other, though it was framed with mockery and not mirth. He nodded to himself, his appraisal of both men assuring him that they were already acquainted with each other. The smile narrowed as he drew his own conclusions, his eyes growing hard as stone as he looked up.

"It would seem you have false hopes, senior," Delgado said to Curry. "Your lawman friend will be of no help to you, unless he can declare it is legal to alter the brand on another man's cattle."

"They're my cattle, Delgado," Curry grated. "All I did was take 'em back."

"They wore the brand of the Delgardos."

"And now they're wearin' mine."

They faced each other, knowing that every man and

woman stood still and listened to what they had to say. They were two tall, stubborn men, and while as yet they played a waiting game, there was no one who had any doubts as to how it all must end.

"You had a long time without interference, Delgado," Curry said loudly, choosing his words to needle the man. "My sister was in her grave and there was no one to stand in your way. You took the cattle, removed every article of value from the ranch-house. I guess you figured I never would show up, but you took precautions nevertheless. You had some of your men trail Alexander Lindmann, paid them to steal that old agreement your father signed with Felipe. I reckon you had the notion that that about wrapped it up, but you were wrong, because I haven't even started to fight."

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Curry scowled in the wake of Delgado as he allowed himself to be led away. Anger pulsed through him, together with a bitterness that he knew was unreasonable but which

ed at him regardless when he saw the way in which Hamilton clung so tightly to Delgado's arm. He swung heel, strode to the door and stamped back through the to reach the front. Pickard went after him, treading heels until he finally drew to a halt.

"I don't know what this is all about," Pickard said as he stepped from the walk and strode angrily to his horse. "There is one thing I do know. You're makin' a damn fool of yourself, like always."

"Get butt out of it." Curry reached his foot to the stirrup, swung himself into the saddle and dragged on the reins to turn the horse around. "Hamilton will explain it to you, if you're interested. Only don't go telling me I'm wrong. I'm doin' things my way, and I'm gonna keep doin' that, whether you figure it's legal or not."

"If you've been blotting brands, you don't need me to explain the consequences."

"I'll take the blasted consequences, and anything else that Delgado figures he's man enough to dish out. I want to see you both good and mad. I'm counting on that."

"Are you gonna count the lead he throws at yuh?"

"I'll be waiting for it." Curry grew calmer then, looked down from his perch and gave a rueful grin. "Not much of a bargain for you, was it? Walkin' into a town, findin' me, and trouble into the bargain."

"They go together."

Curry laughed. "Ride out when you get time. If you can't get a bottle then so much the better. We've got a big, open range, nothin' to throw, nothin' to smash. Okay?"

Pickard nodded, grinned back at him. "If it wasn't for Delgado feller you'd be bored to death. I'll be out, soon as I get settled. Sorry if I didn't seem so overjoyed about gettin' up with you—it's just that I wanted to get all mem'ry of Swamp Creek right out of my system."

"Yeah." Curry knew how it really was, though he made no comment about it. He gave a brief nod to Pickard, tossed his head in a gesture of disdain at the riders of Luis Delgado who sat their horses and waited, then dug his heels to the flanks of the horse and set it trotting briskly back towards the rancho.

He had one regret, but he would not ride back to rectify it. He'd left in anger, and some of it had been directed towards the girl. It had been wrong, and he was sorry, but he

ouldn't tell her that when Luis Delgado was there to hear
 hat he had to say.

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"Pickard!" Stingaree Smith leapt up off the bunk he'd
 been lying on in one bound when Curry returned to relate
 the incident. He burst into laughter as he recalled the last
 time they'd met. "Well, what do you know! All we want now
 for Joe Forrester to open that cantina and we'll be back
 here we left off."

"There's talk about that," Curry grinned at him. "May-
 be it's only a rumour. It wouldn't be Forrester, though. Joe
 Forrester won't ever get out of Swamp Creek."

"You mean Pickard is prayin' he won't." There was a
 hint of wishful thinking in the eyes of Stingaree Smith as he
 thought about it. In his mind he could see Forrester opening
 up the old cantina, scrubbing and polishing to get everything
 slick and span, only to have two wild men like himself and
 Tom Curry walk in to wreck it all. He could hear Forrester
 laughing in Pickard's ear, and his belly bounced with laughter
 that would have been uproarious if he could have made it all
 come true.

He quietened down, reached for a small pat of butter
 that was on a shelf above him. He smoothed it on the palm of
 his hand, and winced with the sting of it.

"What happened?" Curry glanced at him sharply, frown-
 ing when he noticed Pedro beginning to move away from him.
 "What have you two been up to while I was in town? You
 were going to lie around, take it easy. If that's the case, how
 come you burned your hand?"

"I didn't just burn it, I cut it."

"How?"

"Sterilising a knife," Stingaree said cautiously, threw a
 quick look at the youngster, then licked his mouth as he
 looked back to Curry. "It was rusty. I cleaned it up as best
 I could, and I heated it up just to be on the safe side."

"The safe side for what?" Curry drew a deep breath, re-
 minding himself to the fact that whatever Smith had been up
 to it had not worked out right.

"Well . . ." Smith hesitated, looked to the boy once more,
 then back to Curry. "Pedro says I done wrong, but I say it's
 just plain commonsense. You've got a whole heap of young

calves runnin' around out there. They're wild, and too frisky. Besides which, what can yuh do with bulls? You nem get too old and the meat's no good at all."

"Get to the point, Stingaree." There was ice in Curry's eyes narrowing and his mouth growing thin as he d for Smith to tell him the rest of it. "What happened ose young bulls, eh?"

"I cut 'em."

"You what!"

"Castrated the damned things." Smith moved around, get-to the far side of the bunk where Curry couldn't reach "Hell, it's not gonna gain you anything to have all them . Yuh want steers, any fool knows that."

"You idiot!" Curry made a bound at him, while Smith ed around the bunk and made for the door. "Do you r what you've done? Those are fighting bulls, specially Felipe Delgado raised them to fight in the bull rings, o grace somebody's table."

"I told him, senor," the kid piped up in a small and tened voice. "The Senor Delgado will be crazy mad a he finds out. The branding, it was nothing. But this! will put Senor Delgado in a fury!"

"Not just Delgado!" Curry knotted his fists. "There'll be than those bulls left with nothin' but a memory before hrough. I'm gonna fix you, Stingaree!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Smith put out a hand, moved along the verandah. "Don't go doin' anything crazy, Think about it for a minute. I did it in your interests, know that. I wasn't thinking about myself. I told you, t't want shares. I'll help out, and when you get on your maybe you can pay me somethin'. Now, you've got some s, and pretty soon you'll be able to sell 'em. That means y in your hand, and that's what you want, ain't it?"

"Not at the moment it isn't. I know what I'm after right and by hell I'm gonna get it!"

"No!" There was a wild yell from Stingaree Smith as he ed on his heel, a yell that continued as he fled across ourtyard. He reached the gateway, gulped when he saw ulk of Curry bearing after him. He ran out, to blunder a mob of unhappy young calves that were gathered stiff-d outside. With a howl, Stingaree Smith tripped over alves. He fell flat on his face, struggling to sit up when y caught hold of him.

"Don't, Tom! Quit it, will yuh!" Smith was shouting, wrenching at hands that were tugging at his belt. "For God's sake, have some sense! Leave my blasted pants alone!"

"They're comin' off!" Curry roared. "Right off, Stingaree! Like you did to those calves!"

"Yuh can't do that!" Stingaree yelled. "Aw, hell, leave me alone!"

Viciously, Curry tugged at the belt of Smith's britches. Despite all of the big man's efforts he ripped at the cloth, buttons popping to the accompaniment of bellowed protest and profanities that almost drowned out the shrieking of the Mexican boy as he came racing to try and stop it.

"Please, senior!" There were tears in the youngster's eyes and fear on his face as he grabbed at Curry. "Stingaree is my friend, please do not hurt him. He did not understand. He was only trying to help. Please, listen to me. Please . . . Please!"

"It's okay, kid." Curry released his hold, ruffled the boy's hair with his big hand, then grinned at him. "It wouldn't make much difference to this old goat, anyhow. He can keep what he's got. Maybe when he gets another bright idea he might think to ask me about it first."

Smith sat up, scowling, clutching at his trousers as he staggered to his feet. He looked at Curry and saw the grin, grinned ruefully back when he realised it had been no more than a ruse to scare him. He'd done wrong, and he'd realised that, but not until it was too late to do anything about it. He turned away, accepting the small brown hand that the boy thrust out to him, applying a gentle and reassuring pressure to it as they began to walk back towards the house.

"Are you all right, amigo?" The kid looked up at him, anxiety wrinkling his forehead.

"I'm fine, boy," Smith said sombrely. "Don't you worry your head about me, or about Curry either. We've had more fights than a dog has fleas, but we get along okay and that's the way we like it."

"It was wrong to cut the young bulls. I told you Senor Curry would not like it."

"I know you did." Smith looked down on him. "He got good and mad, eh? Did you see his face, dark as a thunder cloud. Mad as a bagful of cats, that was Curry. Spittin' chips and breathin' fire, like a wild old bull himself the way he come chargin' after me."

The boy laughed, relaxing then, able to see the humour in it just as Smith was doing. He let go of Smith's hand, reeled away from him, his small body shaking with laughter that echoed back and forth along the broad verandah.

"Yuh don't have to get hysterical," said Smith with a knock scowl. "It wasn't all that funny. At the time I had the notion that it was kind of serious."

The words wrenched further laughter from the kid, sent him scooting on ahead so that his merriment rattled through the empty house. Smith checked his pace, waited for Curry to catch up with him, then nodded ahead to where the sound of laughter still continued, and said, "He's a good kid. I reckon that's the first time he's laughed in a long time."

Curry nodded, then said, "I'd feel better if he was stayin' in town. I'm sure the Hamiltons would take care of him."

"You want to send him away?" Smith stopped, stared hard at Curry. "He likes it here. He can roam around, do as he pleases. He doesn't have any damned female tellin' him to put on a clean shirt or wash behind his ears. He's livin' like a boy wants to live, why would you want to go and spoil all that?"

"Because he is just a kid." Curry shrugged, toed the dirt before he looked up. "Kids need schoolin', someone to care for them decent. What can we teach him, eh? How to throw a punch, draw a sixgun? He'd be better off in town. Even if he didn't want to stay with the Hamiltons there must be some Mexican family who'd take him in. God knows where he wandered from, but there's one thing certain, he's had it tough wherever he's been. I just figure it's time he started to let things a bit easier."

"You're a poor liar, Curry."

"I guess I am." He gave a sigh, feeling for tobacco as he went on. "We both know there's trouble ahead and he'd be safer in town. If Delgado's men start throwin' lead they won't give a damn who gets in the way of it."

"That's true enough." Smith was chewing at his lip, fretting over it. He'd grown fond of the boy, warmed to the simple trust the youngster placed in him. "But let him stay, Tom. He wouldn't stay in town, you know that. He'd just run off and no tellin' where he'd go. Here, he's got a roof over his head and food in his belly. He's happy, and that's the main thing. Besides, he can always run and hide if any shooting starts."

Curry nodded finally and said, "Yeah, I guess so. Okay, she stays." Suddenly he gave a quick tug at Smith's britches that brought them down around his knees, then swung a broad palm to a white cheek with a slap that brought a sudden howl of shock. "Let that be a lesson to you," he laughed. "From now on stay away from those blasted calves."

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It was night. Curry sat on the step and gazed at the moon, his thoughts on Eileen Hamilton and the hastiness of his departure. He cursed himself for all kinds of a hot-headed fool, scolded himself for not having kept a tighter rein on his temper. The struggle between himself and Delgado did not involve the girl and he'd had no right to embarrass her in front of her guests. He should have turned his back on Delgado, walked out quietly and without any fuss. It had been an ugly scene and it hadn't helped any.

Delgado had remained cool, smug with the knowledge that he continued to hold the winning hand. There were calves that had been branded, but they remained where they were. They would still be there when Curry had been forced out, and a change of brands meant little to Luis Delgado. Delgado had the land, or the bulk of it. All that was left to Curry was the rancho and a narrow strip north of the border. A man couldn't make a living with so little grazing land. Sooner or later he'd be forced to quit, and that would be the end of it.

"He won't fight!" Curry slammed his fist to his thigh. "Damn it, nothin' will prod him into action. If he'd just make one move, we could settle it."

"How?" Smith surprised him, stepping out into the cool of the night to stand quietly beside him. "Is that what you've been planning? A shoot-out with Delgado? You think you can rile that Mex enough so's he's willin' to trade lead with you? How crazy can you get? If there's any gunplay it'll be from those riders of his, not from Delgado. He's not gonna risk his skin when he's got men on his payroll to do that for him."

Curry gave no answer, staring moodily into the night. He couldn't deny that it had been a desperate scheme, knew that there'd been only a slim chance of making it work. But he'd had to try something and he'd been prepared to risk it. He

and use a sixgun, reasoned that Luis Delgado was no ch. They might have faced up to each other, and let win-take all, save that Delgado was too cunning to be prod-into taking the risk.

He got to his feet, began to pace irritably back and forth. He felt frustrated because Delgado had made no move, refused to rise to the bait he'd thrown. There was no one who could state that Delgado had given him any trouble. His neighbors had kept away from the rancho, there'd been no violence of any kind to attract the attention of the town. At the Hamiltons', Delgado had remained cool despite the heated conversations tossed at him. Hamilton's guests had heard what Curry had to say, but there was nothing to substantiate his claims of being cheated.

"How do I get at him?" He swung back to Smith, both hands clenched tight in anger. "There's got to be a way to fix this. He can't back out. Him and me, face to face, and hot to decide who wins or loses."

"There's no way," Smith shrugged. "Not until Delgado himself decides to make the move."

It was the waiting that chewed at Curry. He was impatient for action, eager to tangle with the Mexican and have one with, one way or the other. He'd done what he could to provoke Delgado, and while he anticipated violence it hadn't come. He paced the yard, swearing irritably to himself. He craved action, and if it wouldn't come to him there was only one solution.

"Where are you going?" Smith called after him as he rode away towards the corral. "What the hell are you planning now?"

"I'm riding to Mexicali."

"Tonight?" Smith came hurrying to catch up. "Hell, are you crazy or what? You can't go fronting up to Delgado like that. He'll have you filled full of lead the moment you show your face. For God's sake, Curry, have some sense for a change. Come on back to the house and forget about it."

"Let go of me, Stingaree." Curry looked down at the hand on his arm, then faced up to Smith with a stern expression to show that he meant it. "Let go of my arm and get out of the way."

"Hell, it was more than an arm you was grabbin' at me a while ago."

"I'm riding to Mexicali," said Curry firmly. "I'm sick

and tired of fooling around. I'm gonna settle things with Lu Delgado. I want every article of furniture returned to the house, I want the cattle back, I want the right to graze my herd across the border the way his old man agreed. I want all those things, and if I don't get 'em there'll be lead flyin'.

"I'm goin' with yuh." Stingaree Smith released his hold on the stern expression of Curry with a look that was equally determined. "Don't try to talk me out of it because I won't listen. If you're fool enough to go through with this, then I'm damned if I'm gonna sit at home coolin' my heels. I'm goin' along, and if I can stop you, I will. Make no mistake about that."

Curry had no more to say. He turned away from Stingaree Smith, strode on until he reached the corral. He threw his saddle on his horse and tightened the cinch, led it out without a word while Smith did likewise. He swung himself astride the bronc without bothering to wait for Smith, clipped the horse away at a steady pace across the moonlit flats in the direction of Mexicali.

He'd avoided the Delgado rancho on his previous visit though he knew its location and now he aimed directly towards it. The flats gave way to low hills that marked the serrated humps of the Sierra de Cucapas, and he found himself forced to follow a trail that wound back and forth so that at times he was riding into the moon and at other times away from it. Smith caught up with him, reined his horse alongside and took one look to assure himself that the fierce determination still lingered. He made no comment, chewing away at a cud of tobacco, then leaning sideways to spit a thick stream at some bush or rock to test his accuracy.

Anger was in big Tom Curry, a wild and unreasonable anger that could not be swayed. He was out for action, and determined to get it, and there was nothing that Stingaree Smith could have said to change his mind.

Riot In Calxico

The rancho of Luis Delgado was very impressive. There was a high wall surrounding it, an archway of stone above the gateway. There was a fountain in the huge courtyard, shining like silver in the moonlight.

The house itself was a two-storied building with the lower rooms all opening onto a wide verandah, and the upper rooms all having big windows that opened to balconies where roses bloomed and latticed trellises had been carefully secured against the brick and adobe walls. There were lanterns strung across the courtyard, though only a few of them had been lit when Curry and Smith rode boldly through the gateway and pulled their horses to a halt by the main arch.

"Come on out, Delgado!" Curry shouted. "Come on out and face me like a man. No more name callin'. No more nothin'. Just you and me in a straight and fair shoot-out."

"You damn fool." Smith tossed a harsh whisper at him when he lapsed into silence when he realised it would do no good. "You'll get the both of us killed, then you'll be satisfied."

"Delgado!" Curry raised his voice, straightening in the stirrups to yell and paying no heed to anything Smith had to say. "I'm callin' you! Are you gonna come on out, or slink away with your tail between your legs like the mangy hound that you are?"

There was movement near the house, the rustle of long skirts as a woman moved fearfully out. She was old and brown and fat, filling the archway as though to prevent them from entering.

"The Senor Delgado is not at home," she announced. "If you wish an appointment, then you will have to come back some other time."

"You tryin' to tell me he's still in Calxico?"

"He is in Mexicali, senior. He has business there, with his lawyers and a Senor Lindmann."

"Lindmann?" echoed Curry, then yanked the horse round and dug in his heels. "Let's ride. I want to see Delgado try to deny the existence of that agreement in front of

Lindmann. We'll see how he reacts to what Lindmann has to say about it."

There was no reply from Smith and they rattled out of the yard with Curry setting a hard pace as they bore away across a valley in the direction of town. Moonlight lit the way for them, softening the harshness of a land that alternated between grassy hills and barren hollows and bore out everything that Hamilton had had to say about it.

As before, the teeth of the Sierras balked them, caused them to keep changing their course. It put the moon on one side and then the other, and it puzzled Smith a little, though Curry had made the trip by daylight and knew exactly where he was heading. The trail meandered back and forth, doubled back on itself on occasion. There was low desert growth, then all oaks and cottonwoods where the soil became rich again.

"Some country, eh?" Smith complained. "How the devil do you know which way you're aimin'? A man could be on one side of the border or the other, it's all the damn same to me."

Curry made no comment. He saw the lights of Mexicali ahead and his mouth tightened at the prospects of facing up to Luis Delgado. The hour was not late, the streets busy as they approached. He presumed that the first place to look would be the lawyer's office, but he was wrong about that because Delgado and Lindmann had already left.

"They are at the cantina, senior," they were told by a clerk working late. "The Senor Lindmann was anxious for a meal and a little wine and Senor Delgado accompanied him."

"Actin' pally, eh?" Curry grunted, turned on his heel and walked out. He led his horse across the street with Smith trailing behind, slipped its reins to the rail and stood for a moment to take a brief look at the cantina.

There were tables set out along the footpath and beneath the awning of the white-walled cantina. A few lanterns had been strung around, while candles burned in the centre of each table. There was no one still dining, but a girl was clearing plates away from one of the tables and her actions attracted Curry's attention so that he was quick to note the figures of Alexander Lindmann and Luis Delgado sitting close together. They had a bottle of wine between them, Lindmann sitting back to puff at a cigar while Delgado toyed elegantly with a cheroot.

Both men looked up at Curry's approach, and a look of

astonishment swept the face of Lindmann while a cold smile quirked the corners of Delgado's mouth.

"Tom Curry!" cried Lindmann as he stood and extended his hand, then looked worried when the big man's grip lacked the friendliness he'd expected. "I sent a letter to you only this morning. Business brought me to Mexicali, and I have to rush back to Sacramento tomorrow. I've been most anxious to hear how you've been making out."

"Have you?" Curry looked him up and down, played a hard eye on Luis Delgado before he went on. "I figure you know the situation well enough. You're the lawyer, remember? You know damned well where I stand."

"Yes, I know it." Lindmann sank back on his chair, reached for the wine glass and sipped at it a moment. "The Mexican lawyers advised me that you'd been here, and that was really why I wrote to you. You have no claim on lands on this side of the border, none whatever. I suggested to Senor Delgado that you both get together and negotiate something, but he informs me that he is not prepared to do that."

"The hell he does!" Curry stormed, stepped around Lindmann and made a grab at Delgado. He failed to see the men positioned back in the shadows, but it would not have stopped him if he had. He caught hold of Delgado by the shirt front, hauled him forward and threw a punch at the same time. The blow crashed full into the protesting mouth of Luis Delgado, staggered him, until Curry hit him again.

Delgado went back, treading on his heels to fall into the arms of his men. There were others who came at Curry until a warning yell came from Stingaree Smith and a bullet howled above their heads to bring them to a halt.

"Nobody move!" Smith waved the smoking sixgun over each man. "The first feller who gets ambitious wins himself a bullet in the gut. Curry? Back off and let's get out of here."

"Not yet," growled Curry, fists balled tight. He spread his legs wide, daring Delgado as the young man fought to gather his senses. Curry's head lifted up, the challenge unmistakable in his eyes, but Delgado just wiped a smear of blood from his mouth and made no other move to tempt him.

"What kind of a feller are you, Lindmann?" Curry spoke out of the corner of his mouth, addressing the lawyer yet still keeping a ready eye on Delgado. "You know I was cheated

You know damned well it was Delgado's boys who held up that stage and robbed you of that agreement."

Alexander Lindmann took a long time to answer. He'd been taken aback by the big man's actions, fearful that Curry might turn on him. Finally he murmured, "I'm a business man." He took another sip of wine to lubricate a mouth that had suddenly gone dry, then licked his lips before he went on, "I can accept that Senor Delgado saw fit to relieve me of that paper. The enquiries I've made have convinced me that that's all it really was—just paper, without any legal value at all."

"Then you're on his side!" Curry swung around threatening the Mexican who wouldn't fight, transferring his anger to Lindmann just as the little man had feared he would. He stood over the attorney, fighting the urge to throw a punch, grinding his teeth against the rage that welling up inside of him. "You're lettin' that Mex get away with robbery and I figure I know what kind of business brings you here. How much did he pay you, eh? How much to button your lip and say nothing about it?"

Lindmann's face grew purple and he forgot his fear as he climbed to his feet. He was blustering, fumbling for words, unable of expressing his indignation, when Curry caught him by the front of his white shirt and yanked him high on his heels.

"How much?" Curry roared down the gasping man's throat. "What price did you get for selling out, eh?"

"Nothing," Lindmann croaked, his eyes bugging in his head. He was aware of the crowd that was gathering, the excited babble of spectators exchanging opinions as to what was happening. He waited until Curry put him down before he tried to speak again, his voice a wheeze from the pressure on his throat. "I haven't been paid anything. You're quite wrong about this, Mr. Curry. I can understand your disappointment that the property isn't as extensive as you thought, but I'm afraid there is absolutely nothing you can do about it."

"There is one thing I can do," grated Curry. He swung back to confront Delgado, a hand hovering over the butt of his sixgun while he made one more try. "Man to man. We could settle it that way, if this lousy sidewindin' snake ever finds the guts."

There was no answer from Luis Delgado. He stood dab-

bing at his cut mouth and meeting the heated eyes of Curry with a cool stare. His men held back, not simply because of the gun Smith waved at them, but because this was the way Delgado had directed. He wouldn't fight, not the way Curry wanted him to.

"Let's get the hell outa this dump," Curry said in disgust and backed off while Smith kept him covered, forked his horse and pulled it around to glare back at both Delgado and Lindmann. "There'll come a day, maybe sooner than you expect. I'm not beaten. I'll hire myself a real lawyer. I'll fight, and I won't quit. Paper or no paper, that land is mine and I'm gonna get it."

Smith waited until they were well out of town and heading back towards the border before he bothered to intrude on Curry's angry silence. "Where the hell are yuh gonna get the money for a lawyer? If you try to sell any of those cattle, Delgado will claim you worked over his brands and he'll have you in court before you know it. You can't beat him, Tom. I reckon Lindmann is right — the best thing to do is to accept things the way they are and forget about Delgado."

Curry said nothing. He knew that Smith was right. He had no money, and he couldn't hope to raise any. All he had was his anger and his stubbornness, and a sixgun that had lain silent on his hip for too long.

He rode stiffly in the saddle, the rage holding him straight. He'd been rough on Alexander Lindmann though he refused to regret it. He'd accused Lindmann of taking money from Delgado, and that had been a wild statement prompted only by anger. Lindmann had had business to attend to in Mexicali, and it was business that might even have been part of his association with Luis Delgado. But the man was honest, and Curry knew that, when he took the time to reconsider.

He let the steel out of his body with a sigh and slumped in the saddle. It was late, and the moon was gone, leaving them to find their way home the best way they could.

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It was two days later when Pickard saddled himself a horse and rode out to renew acquaintances. There was a shiny new star on his vest, and he polished it with his sleeve as he halted the horse by the front of the rancho and stepped down to take a look around. He was impressed by

what he saw, turning with a friendly grin for the wide-eyed boy who came out to stare at him.

"This Tom Curry's place, son?"

"Si, senior." The boy nodded hesitantly, eyeing the badge Pickard wore, and wondering if it meant trouble.

Pickard laughed, interpreting the look, then laid a gentle hand on the youngster's shoulder as he added, "I'm an old friend. I'm not here to arrest anyone for anything. Where can I find, 'em, eh?"

"Right here, Sheriff." It was Curry who spoke, grinning as he emerged from the well. He swung a leg over the side, reached down a hand to aid Stingaree Smith, both of them climbing out to wipe dust and mud from themselves before they strode forward to greet him.

"There's been a lot of fixin' to do," Curry explained with a casual shrug. "The place was sort of run down when we came here. We're gradually gettin' things shipshape, but it hasn't been easy."

"I never figured you as a rancher, Curry." Pickard gave an amused wag of his head. "From what I saw of you in Swamp Creek I never expected you to make a go of anything. You and Stingaree, brawlin' all the time, spendin' the little gold that you did find on Forrester's booze. I wish you luck. I guess you've given up tryin' to beat that Delgado feller, eh?"

Curry's chin tilted higher, his eyes hardening at the very mention of Luis Delgado. "I haven't given up," he growled.

"This here's Pedro," said Stingaree Smith quickly as he sought to change the subject. "Just Pedro, that's what we call him. He sort of went with the house, if yuh know what I mean."

Pickard nodded, grinned at the kid, his grin widening as he turned back to Curry, and said, "Joe's in town. I haven't told him about you two fellers yet. I've been savin' that, so's I can watch the expression on his face when he sights you."

"Joe?" Curry and Smith exchanged glances, speaking in unison. "Joe who?"

"Forrester." Pickard rocked back on his heels, laughing at the way they reacted. Stingaree Smith let his jaw sag, sat on the edge of the well as though the words had knocked all the air out of him and he hadn't the strength to stand. Tom

Curry was shaking his head, with a grin that banished all thoughts of Luis Delgado and brought back vivid recollections of the wild brawls in Swamp Creek.

"Don't tell me he's bought the cantina?" Curry was still shaking his head, the grin broadening until it became a chuckle. "You're not gonna say he's moved permanently to Calexico?"

"He's bought it all right," said Pickard, suddenly sober. "He's got it all set up, and he opened for business this morning."

"Let's go!" Stingaree Smith yelled. He danced around Curry and gave the big man's shoulder a whack with the palm of his hand. His face was shining, his eyes alight with a wild anticipation. "Don't stand there twiddlin' yuh damned thumbs, let's get in there and say hello!"

Curry hesitated. There was work to be done and he was loath to leave it. Yet they'd had no relaxation since they'd arrived, and no taste of whisky. It meant an opportunity to meet Eileen Hamilton again, and it was this that helped to clinch his decision. He glanced at Pickard, noting that the new sheriff of Calexico was showing signs of having grave misgivings about the reunion, but the news was out now and nothing Pickard could have done would have stopped either of them.

"Stay here and keep an eye on the place, Pedro," Stingaree told the boy solemnly. "If we get a bit too damned rowdy when we come home you just fetch a bucket of cold water to throw over us. Okay?"

"Si senor."

The boy watched them stride away to saddle their horses, stood at the gate and waved to them as they heeled away in the direction of town. He stayed there until they were gone from view, then turned and walked slowly back to the house. It was the silence that he didn't like, though he'd been accustomed to it until the Americans had arrived. He felt lonely, and he'd been used to that also. He sat on the edge of the verandah with his chin cupped in his hands, feeling miserable because they hadn't thought to take him with them.

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The girl was not in the store when Tom Curry called in. Her father was behind the counter, weighing out sugar for

a woman customer and Curry stood awkwardly until the woman had left before he ventured to speak up.

"I came to apologise about the trouble with Delgado the other day," he told Hamilton clumsily. "I guess Eileen is kind of mad at me about spoiling her party. I'd like a word with her if I could, so's I can tell her I'm sorry."

Hamilton shook his head. "She's not here. She went to En Centro with some friends. She'll be home this evening, when the day starts to cool off a little."

"I'll be around." He stepped to the door, then paused a moment. "If I don't get to see her, will you apologise for me?"

"Sure." Hamilton shrugged. "If you think it's necessary. Only if I was a young feller who's keen on a girl I reckon that's somethin' I'd rather do myself."

Curry coloured a little, caught by the astute gaze of the man, then gave a rueful grin and trod out to where Smith and Pickard sat astride their horses and waited for him.

"Come on, Curry," Smith complained. "At a time like this you want to go off sparkin' some dang female. This is one time when a feller's got better things to do. You might at least show some blasted consideration."

"Go to hell." He swung into the saddle, nudged the horse on in the direction of the cantina. He was thinking of what Hamilton had said, wondering if his feelings were as obvious to the girl as they were to her father. He was in love with her—he'd known that almost from the first moment they'd met. It was a feeling that increased with each day that passed and he accepted that, even if it was a love that would not be returned.

They lined the horses up to the tie-rail outside the cantina along with those of other thirsty ranchers in the district who'd come to celebrate the re-opening. There was a crowd that thronged the small adobe building, and a lot of jostling and good-natured profanity that went on as they thronged around the bar and kept the sweating Joe Forrester working at full pace.

Pickard slammed money down to pay for the first round, and Forrester thrust the glasses forward without wasting time to look up. He turned back to grab a bottle from the shelf, and in the mirror there was a reflection that sent the whisky bottle dropping from his fingers. He saw two grinning faces looking at him, and all the elation and excitement

of having found himself a small and prosperous little business went tumbling from him with a wretched moan of complaint.

"No!" Forrester turned around, shaking his head, refusing to believe the fates could be so cruel. "No, it isn't true! It's gotta be the heat. I've been workin' too hard—I'll just have to take it easy for a spell."

"Howdy, Joe." Stingaree Smith reached out a big hand, slammed it to Forrester's shoulder with a force that went near to toppling him. "It's good to see yuh. Just like old times, eh? Just like we was all back there in Swamp Creek."

"Why did you do it?" Forrester confronted Pickard, seeming to be assured that Pickard had deliberately conspired against him. "Why did you have to go and tell 'em I was here? I figured this'd be the last place where I'd be likely to run into those two, or you either for that matter. If I'd known, I'd never have considered buyin' the damn place."

"How come you pulled out of Swamp Creek?" Stingaree Smith asked, helping himself to the bottle on the bar. "The business go bad on you, eh?"

"They stopped the stage service." Joe Forrester signalled a man to take over from him, then stumbled around to the far side of the bar and mopped at the sweat on his face. "It was that feller Lindmann from Sacramento. He said Swamp Creek wasn't a payin' proposition, so the stage line dropped it. I packed what booze I had left and headed south. There was an advertisement in a newspaper—I guess it was the same paper that Pickard read. Only I wasn't looking for a job, I was lookin' for another business."

"And you both picked Calexico." Curry gave a nod and a grin, took the bottle from Smith and tilted it to his mouth, then handed it to the sheriff. "You don't seem real pleased to see us. What's the matter, you scared we'll smash the joint or somethin'?"

"You wouldn't do that?" Forrester threw an imploring look at Curry, anxious eyes roaming over his face, fearful of any threat that he might find written there. "You're not gonna give me any trouble, are yuh, Tom? You're gonna be peaceable, drink your booze without raisin' any ruckus. I put myself in hock to get this place, and if I don't make a go of it here I'm ruined."

Curry laughed, promised nothing as the bottle went the rounds another time. Smith banged down enough to cover the cost of a second, ignoring the glasses as he tugged at the

cork and poked the neck well down his throat. He drew it out slowly, making gurgling sounds as the whisky slopped into him. He belched, handed the bottle over to Curry, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand while he waited his turn again.

Following the demise of the second bottle there came a third. Stingaree Smith insisted that Forrester join them, leaving the lone bartender to cope the best way he could. Forrester tried to argue but Smith refused to listen, waited until Forrester's spirits had been bolstered a little by the effects of the redevye before he cunningly suggested that the next bottle ought to be provided with the compliments of the house.

"For old times, Joe!" Stingaree bellowed above the din. "One more quart of that rotgut and we'll ride out and leave you in peace."

Forrester relented, removed a bottle from behind the bar and stumbled over to a table. He set it carefully down, then slumped into a chair, while Pickard, then Curry and Stingaree Smith moved casually over to join him.

Pickard sat down, dragged out a chair for himself and stuck his legs under the table. Curry hauled back a seat, lowered himself, and then suddenly it was not under him any more. There was a wild whoop of triumph from Stingaree Smith and a blistering curse from Tom Curry as his broad rump slapped solidly to the floorboards. The room vibrated with the thud, dust spiralling down from the ceiling to add to the cloud of disturbed tobacco smoke.

Joe Forrester gave a defeated howl and Sheriff Pickard was ducking long before there were any punches thrown. Curry lumbered to his feet, swung about with a sting in his tail and both fists balled tight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Peril For Pedro

Curry flung the table to one side as he stood up, unmindful of the fact that it took Forrester and his chair with it as it went skidding away from him. Air and rage

swelled his broad chest as he paused a moment to draw breath, his long arms swinging. Smith met the glare of fury tossed at him with a grin of combined satisfaction and anticipation, cleared a space for himself with a wave of his hand and waited to do battle.

"You heard what Joe said—he didn't want any trouble," Curry thundered as he took a step nearer and raised his fists. "Why the hell can't you be peaceable for a change? Why do you have to go beggin' for a fight every time you get a bellyful? What's the matter with you, Stingaree, have you got rocks in your head or what?"

"Shut up and fight," was Stingaree's only reply as he took another swig at the bottle.

Curry's first punch skidded past Smith's ear, and the second rammed into a stomach overladen with whisky. Smith gasped and sprayed a mouthful of whisky into Curry's face.

"Now look what you've done," said Stingaree ruefully as he rubbed his stomach. "All that good booze wasted."

Curry had no ear for Smith's complaint. He wiped the whisky out of his eyes, then lowered his head and went charging in with both fists swinging. He slammed a right to Smith's jaw, a left to the side of the head that sent the man reeling back against the bar. Smith straightened, grabbed a bottle, and sent it hurtling back only inches above Curry's head.

"Stop them!" Joe Forrester shouted frantically to Pickard. "Get 'em out of here before they wreck the place."

"Get 'em out yourself," muttered Pickard, already backing to the door. "If you think I'm buyin' into that you're crazy."

"You're the sheriff! It's your duty to stop 'em."

"Go to blazes." Pickard reached the door, flinching at the sound of punches thumping home as both big men clashed again. "I'm gettin' out of here while I'm still upright."

"Oh, no you're not!" Forrester went after him, grabbed hold of Pickard by the front of his shirt and struggled to heave him back into the centre of the room. Pickard took a swing at him that connected with the side of his head and Joe Forrester saw red.

"You lop-eared goat!" Pickard shouted down Forrester's throat. "What the hell do you think you're doin'?"

Forrester didn't answer. One punch, then another, sailed into Pickard's stomach, hurled with all the weight of Forres-

ter's new-found fury. He pounded away at Pickard without caring or planning where his punches landed, until Pickard recovered from the shock of the attack and decided to throw a few himself.

They stood toe to toe, the crowd parting to make room. On the one side Curry and Smith hammered away at each other, while on the other Pickard and Joe Forrester provided similar entertainment.

Curry picked up a chair and smashed it over the head of Stingaree Smith. Smith retaliated with another chair that splintered to pieces against Curry's chest. They staggered around to recover from the blows, then came together with another exchange of punches that left Curry with a black eye and Smith with blood pouring from his nose.

"Hold on awhile, Tom," said Smith, as he tilted his head back to stem the flow of blood, then gestured with a grin to the battling sheriff and Joe Forrester. "Let's watch this awhile. Damn me if they ain't doin' too bad for themselves."

Joe Forrester was a man who wasn't accustomed to strenuous exercise. He smoked too much, and drank too much of his own liquor. He was winded almost before he started, but there was too much fury in him to quit. He pounded away at Pickard and it hurt him when his punches connected, but he was determined to know victory. He kept on slogging away at Pickard, completely unmindful of the fact that Curry and Smith had ceased their battle in order to watch him.

Like Joe Forrester, Pickard was a man with an aversion to exercise, and a fondness for liquor that had swelled his paunch to a point where it had become uncomfortable. He cursed Forrester, because many of the punches thrown connected with his paunch. He swung a punch that caught Forrester over the heart and sent him dropping to his knees, stood over him while there was a deafening cheer from the onlookers.

Forrester stumbled to his feet, blinked to focus a blurred vision on Pickard's face. Though he didn't know it there was a crowd gathering outside that had been attracted by the din, faces pressed to windows and doors in an eagerness to see what was going on. It was quite a day for Calxico, with the opening of the cantina and now a fight to round off the evening. There were some who shook their heads and predicted a lot of trouble for the town, while others saw the brighter

side of things and hailed the prospects of similar brawls as a means to break the monotony.

Eileen Hamilton came out of the store and stood on the boardwalk, gazing towards the cantina and the excited crowd with a frown on her face. She'd been told on her return from El Centro that Tom Curry was in town, but he hadn't come to see her and she was too much of a lady to consider flushing him out of the cantina. She caught hold of a boy who went scooting past and asked him what the trouble was.

"The Americanos, *senorita*," the kid grinned. "The two from the rancho. They are fighting each other."

"Fighting?" She let go of the boy, stepped down to the street as her father came out to follow her. She took several faltering steps in the direction of the cantina, then turned and ran hurriedly back the way she'd come.

She was crying when she reached the walk, dodged the hand that her father put out to her and ran up the steps and into the house. Hamilton saw the door close on his daughter, then glanced towards the cantina as the noise continued. He didn't need to be told what it meant, anger putting a spring in his step as he strode away to put a stop to it.

Grimly, Hamilton brushed aside the crowd that had gathered, elbowed his way through in his determination to bring a halt to the fight. He saw Curry and Smith leaning calmly on the bar, blood smeared and bruised but apparently at peace with each other. He stared opened-mouthed at the new sheriff and the still more recent owner of the cantina, until indignation sent him striding forward to haul them apart.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" Hamilton shouted above the clamour. "You were hired to keep the peace in this town. What do you mean by creating a riot like this? Just what the hell do you think you're up to?"

He didn't know it, but he was standing between two men who were too dazed and enraged to realise that he wasn't their opponent. Joe Forrester put all his strength behind one last punch and Sheriff Pickard did likewise with the one that he delivered. Hamilton stood innocently in the middle, fists crashing like cannonballs to either side of his head.

The yelling stopped and, awestruck, the crowd watched Hamilton drop. He lay flat on his back in a pool of blood, arms spread-eagled, mouth hanging open. He was out cold,

and there was no one who was quite sure how it had happened.

Joe Forrester grabbed hold of Pickard for support, steadied himself, then blinked down dazedly on the unconscious Hamilton. "It's your boss!" he cried. "Where the hell did he come from? He wasn't here awhile ago."

Pickard wagged his head uncomprehendingly, allowed himself to be led away to the bar by Curry while Stingaree Smith gave a helping hand to Forrester.

"You did well," said Smith proudly, as he made a motion to the scared bartender for another bottle. "Get some of this into you, it'll spark you up again. I never knew you could fight like that. I always figured you as a quiet sort of feller. It sure surprised me to see you swingin' those punches into Pickard."

"I showed him, didn't I?" Forrester wiped his nose, clanked the bottle against his teeth as he raised it to drink. "From now on he'll do his job properly or he'll have me to answer to. There'll be no more slackin' from that lead-bellied lawman, not while I'm around."

"Why don't you give him another thumpin' for good measure?" There was a wicked gleam in the eyes of Stingaree Smith as he coaxed more whisky into Forrester. "You've got him licked; he won't be any trouble to you at all."

Forrester shook his head, put the bottle shakily on the bar, said, "I think I'll close the place. I've had about all I can take for one day."

It was a calamity that Stingaree Smith would not even consider. He found a chair for Forrester, eased him carefully down onto it. He fanned him with a sheet of newspaper, loosened his collar and dabbed tenderly at the bruises on his face. He gave no thought to Curry or Pickard, ignored the still unconscious Hamilton. He devoted all of his attentions to Forrester, and it was a harassed bartender's abrupt decision to quit that finally brought an end to the proceedings.

"Aw, hell!" Smith gazed blearily around him as a door banged and Forrester's hired help vanished into the night outside. He travelled his blurred vision around the smoke-filled room, saw the few unsteady drinkers that were left stumbling in the wake of the barkeep. Pickard was sprawled in a chair with his mouth open. Curry sat with his head resting on a table. Hamilton sat propped in one corner, still dazed.

Unsteadily, Stingaree Smith got to his feet, took another look around, then veered away to reach the bar. He heard a thump as Forrester slid out of his chair and hit the boards, the thump and the following silence disturbing Curry who looked up at him.

"Where's everybody gone?" Curry slurred. There was a sharp ache in his head, and a dryness in his throat. He had one eye closed, a lip that was split. He'd been asleep for awhile, with no notion of what time it might be.

"The help just walked out," said Stingaree as he served himself. "I guess there's nothing to do now but ride on home. Joe can lock the place when he wakes up."

Curry nodded, nursing his head as he stood. He looked to where Hamilton was trying valiantly to get to his feet, then walked over to lend a hand. Hamilton thanked him with a mumble, allowed himself to be led to the bar and accepted the drink that Smith put in front of him. He swallowed another and a third before there was any trace of colour creeping back into his face.

"I'm not quite sure what happened." He looked dazedly at Curry, then down at the blood that smeared his clothes. "I was trying to stop a fight, and that's the last thing I remember."

"You stopped it all right," Curry told him, explaining briefly how the fight had started, and how it had concluded. "We'll help you home, then I reckon we'd better be on our way ourselves. There's gonna be some powerful heads in the morning, and that's somethin' I ain't lookin' forward to."

"I don't have to wait until morning," Hamilton grimaced. "My head feels like it's been split wide open. God knows what Eileen will say if she sees me like this."

"It's late, and she's probably in bed by now," said Curry, and took him by the arm, guided him past a blissful Forrester and a snoring Pickard to reach the door. Smith came after them, bottles stuffed in his shirt and clanking with each unsteady step that he took.

They went out onto the walk, meeting the cool air that immediately increased the effects of the whisky. Hamilton staggered, held on to Curry as they negotiated the two steps to the street. In the gloom of the night none of them noticed the girl until she stood in front of them.

"Dad!" Eileen Hamilton could say no more for the moment. She smelled the whisky, looked her father up and down

and saw the state he was in. She had never seen him that way before, and shock froze her speechless.

"He's okay," said Tom Curry. "He hasn't had all that much to drink. He got in the way of a couple of punches, that's all."

"I've been worried sick," said the girl sharply. "Look at you—all of you. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Do you have any idea how people will talk? My father is highly respected in this town, or he was, until this happened." Her face was pale with anger so that the dimples didn't show any more. "It's all your fault, Tom Curry. You started it, I heard all about that. I was wrong about you. I thought you were a decent, hard-working man and instead of that you're just a drunken, brawling, good-for-nothing."

"Now, steady on, Eileen," said Hamilton in an attempt to placate his daughter. "It wasn't Tom's fault. It was an accident."

"Accident!" she sniffed, then turned on her heel and began to stride angrily away. She paused when she reached the store, faced back to them with an angry toss of her head and fought to regather her composure as she looked at Curry. "I don't suppose it would occur to you to say 'I'm sorry'? It probably means nothing to you at all that I've been half out of my mind with worry about dad. You wouldn't care that I've been standing in that street for hours, wondering what had happened to him."

"You could have asked someone. You could have poked your head in the door to take a look." Curry didn't want to get angry with her, but he couldn't help himself. "I can understand that you were worried, but your father is a big boy now. He's entitled to get drunk if he wants to, or to get mixed up in a brawl if that appeals to him. You can't rule him. That's one thing a woman has to learn, and learn well. The day she starts usin' apron strings for a halter is the day she starts losin' a man's respect."

Eileen Hamilton gasped, anger and indignation sweeping through her while she thought furiously for words to throw back at him. She saw him turn away from her father and make his way back to where the horses were tethered. She watched him mount up, and there was still nothing she could say when he drew level with her. Her face was crimson as her father climbed the steps, and while he made no com-

ment she sensed that he approved of what Curry had said so that her anger increased even further.

Tom Curry and Stingaree Smith were about to nudge their horses on when Hamilton straightened suddenly and pointed away into the night. It was in the direction of the rancho that Hamilton pointed, to a glow in the sky that might have been the moon coming up—only it wasn't. The glow pulsed a little, seeming to grow stronger even while Hamilton pointed at it.

"Tom!" Hamilton's throat was dry as ash when he spoke. "That looks like a fire to me and it could be that ranch of yours."

The girl gave a small cry of alarm, her eyes growing wide as she stared at the distant glow. She looked at Curry and saw his face blanch white, then grabbed at her father's arm as there was a shout from Stingaree Smith that drove a wedge of fear deep into her heart.

"Pedro!" Smith cried. He flung the encumbering bottles from his shirt as he whipped his heels to the flanks of his horse and sent it thundering away at a gallop. Over his shoulder he shouted, "We left the kid alone. If he's asleep in that house he'll burn to death!"

Her anger gone, Eileen Hamilton ran down the steps and out into the street. She called out to Curry but the big man was already galloping in pursuit of Smith. With a sob, she ran around the back of the store, wrenched and heaved at the shafts of the rig until her father went to help her.

"Take it easy, girl," Hamilton said gently, dragged the rig out and moved to back the horse between the shafts. He adjusted the harness, turned to rest both hands unrestrainedly on his daughter's shoulders. "We'll drive out there, and I guess others will, too, if they see the blaze. It'll take awhile, and I don't figure there'll be much left when we get there. But even if we were there right now there's nothing we could do to check it."

"I'm thinking of the boy." There were tears in her eyes that spilled and trickled down her cheeks. "I know how much regard they have for him. I know what it will mean to them if he's caught in that fire."

"Don't think about it." He gave her his hand, helped her into the seat, then climbed up beside her. His face was stern as he gave a sharp flick of the reins to send the horse trotting briskly out to the street. He gave the leathers a sec-

ond and a third slap until they were travelling at a pace that was more than dangerous though he didn't think about it. In his mind there was the small, thin form of the little Mexican boy among the embers of the gutted rancho. He heard the helpless swearing of big Tom Curry, and he viewed the mortal anguish of the man called Stingaree Smith. He wore a lump in his throat, a tight band around his heart. He felt the wind whipping against his cheeks, flicking tears out of the corners of his eyes. He viewed the glow of the fire, brighter than as its light spread to the serrated tips of the Sierras.

The rig was lurching and bouncing as it rattled at a breakneck speed over the rutted trail. It wound in and out of the hills, aimed first to the south, then north, as he'd indicated to Curry. It was steep in places, and narrow, so that at times the spinning wheels almost smashed against a rock, or sank into soft sand by the side so that the rig went near to pitching over.

Hamilton clung to the reins with sweating hands, peering into the night as he tried to guide the galloping horse. He didn't look at his daughter, clinging for a hold as best she could, but she would not have asked him to slow down even had their pace been faster.

Behind them, the town was waking up. Word of the fire spread until the main street was filled with people staring away at the glow. There were several who ran to saddle a horse, but the majority shrugged resignedly with a knowledge that by the time they got there it would be all over anyway.

The talk finally disturbed Pickard, who in turn woke Forrester. The two of them stumbled bleary-eyed out into the street, viewed the glow and heard the talk. They staggered to a horse-trough, soaked their heads and rinsed the sour taste of whisky from their mouths.

"You'd better lock up the cantina, Joe," Pickard said. "Me, I'm gonna ride out there and see if I can help any."

"I'll go with you."

Forrester didn't know why he said it, didn't stop to think about it. He found a horse for himself, saddled up while Pickard made ready, and then rode out of town.

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Curry was swearing as he rode, the wind whipping the curses back into the night. He watched the glow brighten as

the horse galloped headlong into the night, saw a shower of sparks that drifted up when a sudden swirl of wind caught at them.

"Across the hills!" he yelled to Smith, pointing briefly as he yanked at the reins and spurred the mount off the trail in a direct line with the rancho. It was a rough climb and a hazardous one, but it was shorter than following the trail and that was all that mattered.

He heard the horse snorting under him, felt the foam from its muzzle whisking back into his face. He heeled it wildly, his heart thudding like a hammer against his ribs. It was blowing under his weight, stumbling when it reached the top of one hill and staggering when it skidded down the other side.

Gone were all the effects of whisky, all thoughts of the brawling. There were big brown eyes looking at Curry, begging him for help and growing muddled with fear. There was a small figure wandering through the blazing rancho, blinded by smoke and heat, unable to find a way out.

It was Delgado's doing, Curry knew. He didn't bother to ponder on what might have finally prompted the Mexican to act, but there wasn't the smallest doubt in his mind that it was Delgado who was responsible. He cursed the Mexican, vowed vengeance on him, with another fear taking hold of him that had not occurred before.

Maybe the boy isn't in the house, he was thinking. Maybe he saw what Delgado and his riders were up to and tried to stop them.

They wouldn't let one small boy stand in their way. They were armed, likely to gun the kid down on the spot if they caught sight of him. It wouldn't mean anything to Delgado and his crew, not now that Delgado had finally declared open war.

Grimly, Curry glanced sideways at Stingaree Smith. Smith's face was like stone, pale and hard in the glow from the fire. His horse was blowing, ready to drop dead under him though Smith was too determined to let it die. He was leaning forward in the saddle, raking the animal mercilessly with his heels, slapping it with the flat of his hand. It was as though by his own strength alone, Stringaree Smith kept the beaten horse going, as though the moment he relaxed a pounding heart would finally explode and bring the unfortunate animal crashing to its knees.

There was a voice in the ears of Stingaree Smith — a small voice that had said to him, "Just Pedro, senior."

CHAPTER NINE

War!

The rancho was engulfed in flames when Curry and Smith finally checked their beaten mounts and hit the dirt. Smoke billowed across the courtyard, swirling this way and that with the whim of the wind. There were sparks raining down and ash drifting like snow to rest on the head and shoulders of both men as they made a dash to get nearer.

"Pedro?" Stingaree called at the top of his voice, stumbling when a blast of heat washed out at him, reeled back as his clothes began to scorch. He shielded his face with his arms, lowered his head to make a frantic effort to get inside.

"You can't go in there," yelled Curry, as he caught hold of Stingaree, fought to drag him back. "It's hopeless."

"No, it isn't!" There were tears on Smith's leathery cheeks. "It isn't, Tom. I can get him out. Let go of me, will yuh. For God's sake, let go!"

Curry hit him, with a force that desperation alone could give. It was a blow that landed squarely to the point of Smith's chin, rocked him back so that he went sprawling. Then Curry turned to race to the well.

Working quickly, he drew water from the well, doused himself with it from head to foot. He took a bag and soaked it, draped it across his head and shoulders. The ranch-house burned from one end to the other, but at the furthest end the flames as yet lacked the fury of the rest of it. He stumbled towards it, even as Stingaree Smith was climbing dazedly to his feet. There was a yell from Smith but he paid no heed to it, ducking his head as the flames roared out as though to swallow him.

Heat singed Curry's red hair, withered his eyebrows and lashes as he faced into it. It was like a blast from a furnace, overpowering in its intensity, roaring in his ears and filling his head like the voices of a million devils. There was no air to breathe, and the glare and smoke blinded him so that he

couldn't see. He kept going and the flames seared him with a roar, eager to add his body as fuel.

A rafter crashed down amid a fresh flurry of flame and a shower of sparks. A wall of flame reached above and around Curry, all of it encased in the blackening shell of adobe. He called out, hoping for an answering cry that would tell him the boy still lived. Yet amid the clamour within his head there was a voice which told him beyond all doubt that no one could have survived.

He was forced back, the bag burning when the heat dried it out. His clothes were smouldering when he reeled away into fresh air. He rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames—and through the glare he sighted a small figure running.

"Senor! Senor!" The kid came to a halt in front of Curry, looked down at him with his brown eyes wide and filled with terror. He dropped down and slapped at Curry's clothing where it still smouldered, and Stingaree Smith came legging it forward to lend him a hand.

"Of all the crazy stunts to try and pull!" Smith scolded Curry, clouting him harder than was necessary to put out the flames. "You stopped me from goin' in there, and yuh go and do the same damned thing yourself!"

Curry sat up and wiped the tears of relief from his cheeks as he looked at the boy. "Where the hell did you get to? Didn't you see us ride up, or hear us yelling for you?"

The kid drew back, cringing closer to Stingaree Smith. "I was on the other side of the rancho, senor. I ran there when the men came looking for you. I heard them calling out, smashing things. Then the Senor Delgado gave the order to set fire to the house. It was because of the calves that they came. The Senor Delgado was furious—he would have had you killed if you had been here."

A look of guilt spread across the face of Stingaree Smith, while fury frew on the singed countenance of Tom Curry.

"I tried to put out the fire, senor," said the boy. "After Senor Delgado and the men rode away I tried to stop the flames from spreading. I carried out your bedrolls, and a few other things that were not too heavy. I stowed them all at the back where the fire could not reach."

"You did your best, son." Curry ruffled the youngster's hair, grinned down at him gently. "I'm just glad you didn't get hurt. For awhile there I figured you must have been

trapped. We sure didn't want anything like that to happen to yuh."

They stood back, watched the last of the flames devouring the rancho. There was a rattle across the courtyard as the Hamiltons drove in with the rig and a badly winded horse, reminding them that they hadn't attended to their own animals.

Curry fetched water from the well, while Smith and the boy soaked bags with which to wipe the exhausted animals down. They trudged away as Hamilton drew to a halt and the girl went hurrying to meet them.

"Is the boy all right?" She ran an anxious gaze over the kid, then looked up at the blackened and dishevelled figure of Tom Curry. It was a sight that told her a lot, but Curry was not concerned with himself.

"He's fine," Curry mumbled, suddenly awkward when he recalled the angry words in Calexico. "He had the good sense to hide until they cleared out. He's had a bad scare, otherwise he's fit as a fiddle."

"Was it Delgado and his crew?" asked Hamilton, looking at Curry as though he prayed there might have been another answer.

"Pedro recognised him," Curry said sternly. "It was Delgado all right, still layin' claim that those cattle I branded are his own personal property. Stingaree made steers out of a lot of them young bull calves and Luis Delgado only just found out about it. I did all I could to force that feller's hand, and now I guess I got more than I bargained for."

"What will you do?" It was the girl who spoke, a tremor in her voice as she viewed the cold fury in his eyes. "Surely you're not foolish enough to consider going after him? He'd have you killed the moment you crossed the line."

"He can try." Curry turned away from her. He dragged the saddle from his horse, began to sponge the weary animal down. It had had a hard gallop, standing there winded and trembling, proof enough that it would be useless to him until it had been rested.

He stared over the back of the horse, his gaze reaching to the south and the distant rancho of Luis Delgado. There was bitterness in him, but no defeat. The war had been brought out into the open where he wanted it. Delgado had men to back him, but even a hundred riders would not have

swayed Curry's mind at that moment. He vowed to go after Luis Delgado, to put a bullet in him as a means to end it. The squabble over land was unimportant to him then. There were principles involved and Luis Delgado had broken all the rules. Delgado had moved in and helped himself to cattle and household effects alike. He'd dishonoured the agreement his father had made with Felipe, and stolen the papers that Helen had entrusted to Alexander Lindmann. There'd been no way for Curry to get at him, but now all that had ended.

"There's no need for violence, Tom." Hamilton stepped nearer to him, glanced earnestly into his face. "You have a witness that it was Luis Delgado who set fire to your property and we have law in Calexico now. Let Pickard take care of things, that's what he's being paid for."

"Pickard!" Curry grunted scornfully. "You don't know that feller like I do or you wouldn't have said that. Besides, who's going to take the word of a boy Pedro's age? Delgado could claim we put the kid up to it, that it was an accident and we're tryin' to frame him for it. No, there's only one way to deal with Luis Delgado, and that's with a gun. As soon as that bronc of mine is fit enough to bear my weight I'm goin' after Delgado, and I'm gonna kill him or he's gonna kill me. There's no other way out of it."

"You never learn, do yuh?" growled Stingaree. "You've been eager to get your brains blown out from the time you first heard about Luis Delgado. He's blocked every effort you've made to get at him, and he'll stop you again, only this time with a hail of hot lead."

Curry refused to comment. He went on, tending to his horse and mentally swearing vengeance on Delgado, as the first of the few citizens of Calexico began to arrive. Men stood around, listening to Pedro's account of how the blaze had started. There were mutterings when they looked at the storm on Tom Curry's face, and there was one man who stepped forward as spokesman for the rest.

"I am Jose Calientes, senior." The man was tall and thin, with dark hair that was greying around the temples. "I do not agree with what Luis Delgado has done. I feel that Delgado should be punished. You are a stranger in Calexico, an Americano who did not know Don Manuel Delgado. Don Manuel was a fine man, as was his son, Felipe. Luis is not like them. Luis is proud, but arrogant. A greedy man. We will

help you fight him, senor. We will ride with you and burn the rancho of Luis Delgado to the ground, just as he has done to yours."

"Thanks, Jose," Curry told the man and extended his hand. He glanced sideways and saw the expression of alarm on the face of Eileen Hamilton, then shrugged as he looked back at Calientes. "I didn't plan on developing this into a war involving the town. I can appreciate your offer, but this feud is between myself and Luis Delgado. I can't ask you or any of the others to risk your necks on my account."

"You do not have to ask, senor." Jose Calientes gave a broad smile. "We have volunteered. When a Mexican offers his help, it is not polite to refuse it."

"He's right, Tom," Stingaree Smith butted in quickly. "They want to join in the scrap, so why not let 'em? You know the odds. You wouldn't stand a chance with just the two of us."

"Okay." Curry grinned, nodded to the Mexican and told him to pass the word. "We'll head across the border as soon as it gets light. By that time these broncs of ours ought to be recovered enough to carry us."

There were two late arrivals in the courtyard that night, two weary and still slightly inebriated men who wore the cuts and bruises of battle. Joe Forrester climbed down from his horse and limped forward to where Curry and the others were sprawled around the well. He stared at the blackened, smoking shell of the rancho, looked at Curry and gave a shake of his head. He'd had his share of troubles with big Tom Curry, but he could sympathise with him, even though he lacked the words to express himself.

Hamilton got to Pickard before the man had time to dismount, eager to impress on him his duties as sheriff. He caught hold of Pickard's arm, explained what had happened and ended by saying emphatically, "It's your duty to arrest Luis Delgado, to lay charges against him for deliberately destroying this rancho. I don't care if he is on the other side of the border. The crime was committed here and Delgado must be held responsible."

"You want me to ride across the line and throw a rope on him?" Pickard stared at Hamilton as though he wasn't quite certain that he'd heard correctly. "You really think Delgado would stand still and let me do that?"

"I'm not thinking anything. I know what has to be done and you're the man to do it."

"Then you're crazy!" grated Pickard. "I've known a lot of fellers like you. They pin a badge on a man's vest and they pay him a salary, and they figure that gives them the right to order him to go out and get himself killed. I'll ride across the line all right, but not alone. Where I ride, mister, a posse rides with me."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to prevent, damnit, can't you see that?" Hamilton cried. "They're planning an attack on Delgado's rancho. So far there's been no shots fired, and no blood spilled. I want it to stay that way. I want Luis Delgado arrested and put in prison. I want the whole thing settled without the need for violence."

"Then you're out of luck, mister." Pickard shrugged free of Hamilton, strode over and seated himself near to Curry. "The best way to fight fire, is with fire. Right? That's just what we aim on doin'."

Hamilton saw it was useless. He turned away and headed for the rig, only to be halted by his daughter when she moved in front of him.

"I'm not going home, Dad," Eileen Hamilton stated flatly. "I'm staying here. I want to be here when they leave, and here when they come back . . . if they ever do."

"I understand, girl." He put an arm around her shoulders, hugged her close a moment. "We'll both stay. I'm an old fool, and I guess I knew I'd never talk them out of it. I'll go along with them, crazy though it may be. I hate for you to worry, but I'm afraid that's the way it will have to be."

She was silent, chewing at her lip and remembering the words of Tom Curry in reference to her domination of her father. He'd exaggerated, but it had been partly true nevertheless. She did worry, and she did scold him sometimes when he came in late for meals or when he returned with his clothes filthy from tramping around the Sierras. She didn't mean to tie him to her apron strings, but she loved him and it was this love that was the basis for her concern.

Sadly, the girl turned away from her father. She walked into the night, smelling the odour of smoke that was strong in the cool air. She looked at the ruined shell of the house,

remembering it the way it had been. It was ugly now, with none of the magic and romance that it had held for her. There were no smiling spirits who looked down on all the efforts of big Tom Curry. There was only a pile of ash and rubble for the wind to worry at and gradually whisk away.

She sighed, brushed a tear from her cheek as she looked at it. There was a step behind her, and she turned, recognising the familiar bulk of Curry.

"Eileen?" He spoke quietly, with a catch in his voice, his hand reaching out as though he was afraid she might run away from him. "I'm sorry about all I said tonight. I had no right to talk to you like that. I should have shut my mouth and said nothing at all."

"You had a right to defend yourself." She gave a small shift of her shoulders, then lifted up her eyes to meet with his. "It isn't often that you hear any woman admit that she was wrong. Even now I wouldn't say it, only I know what you plan in the morning and I'm so afraid, Tom. I'm so afraid I feel sick inside. Couldn't you please settle it some other way, through the courts like dad asked you to? Wouldn't that be so much better than trying to kill each other?"

He gave no answer for awhile. He saw what lay in her eyes and it bumped his heart, caused his blood to race. There was no other way for him, Delgado had seen to that. Delgado had left him one choice only, and he'd been striving for that far too long.

"I'm sorry, Eileen." He put both big hands on her shoulders, looked down on her gravely. "There are only two ways that I know how to fight, fists or sixguns. Fists won't settle Delgado, so that only leaves a bullet."

She nodded, accepting the fact that nothing would alter his decision. Then with a low cry she moved closer to him, laid her cheek against his chest and allowed her tears to flow unchecked. She felt the strength of his arm around her, but it was of small comfort. There'd be blood spilled when the dawn came. Guns would crash and men would die, and one of them could well be the man she'd fallen in love with.

Neither Curry nor the girl were aware of how long they stood there, and there was no need of further words between them. They held close to each other, lost to time and their surroundings. The night was dark, cool and soft now that

the wind and the fire had died down. There were men snatching a few hours' sleep on the paved yard, others content to sit around smoking while they waited for the dawn. There was none who cared to intrude on Curry and the girl. Those who observed the two shadows so close together promptly looked the other way and found something else to take their interest. Violence had come to the border lands of Calexico, but love had also come with it.

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Dawn revealed the blackened shell of the rancho in all of its stark ugliness. Pale grey light crept across the humps of the Sierras, dispersed the shadows in all the winding, twisting folds of the land. In the courtyard, men were stirring, coming awake to yawn and stretch themselves, stamping around to restore the circulation to cramped limbs.

Tom Curry moved among the men, checked the guns they carried and the amount of ammunition available. Jose Calientes and his Mexican allies had not come prepared for battle, but Hamilton had remedied that by returning to town and loading the rig with enough guns and shells to begin their war. Hamilton's face was pale and haggard when Curry looked at him, weariness and a reluctant acceptance stamped there for all to see. He nodded briefly to Curry and Curry returned the nod without a word being said. They understood each other. Hamilton did not approve but he was determined to go along nevertheless. Delgado's actions called for retaliation, so this was the way it had to be.

"Take care," murmured Eileen as she clung to her father a moment before they made ready to ride out. There were tears in her eyes, trickling down her cheeks when she turned to Curry. She kissed him quickly, then stepped back to take hold of Pedro and hold him as the men prepared to leave.

"We can't take you along, son," Curry told the youngster. "We need someone to take care of Miss Hamilton. Okay?"

"Si, senior." There was reluctance in the tone of the boy.

He looked to Stingaree Smith as though in the hope that Smith would over-rule Curry's decision, and when Smith remained wooden-faced the kid bowed his head in mute acceptance. He stood near to the girl, held her hand tightly in his, while there came a grim command from Curry that sent the men clipping their horses past him.

Hamilton rode next to Curry as they rode out, with Stingaree Smith trailing close behind him, followed by Pickard and Forrester and the Mexicans. Hamilton made no reference to his talk with Sheriff Pickard, but Curry knew how it was and grinned tightly when he thought of it. Pickard was no coward, but he was no hero either. He was a practical man who knew his limitations, and he wasn't so proud he wouldn't admit to it. He wasn't the type of man Hamilton had had in mind for the job, but he was as good as a town like Calexico would get, and Hamilton had been forced to realise that.

"You think Luis Delgado will be waiting for us?" Hamilton tossed a brief look to Curry, with worry etched deeply across his forehead. "You think he'll expect a force to come gunning for him?"

"He'll be expecting me, that's for sure," Curry grunted. "My guess is that he's already got us in his sights right now, waitin' for us to get well within range. A show of guns won't deter him, for he's got enough men to keep the odds well in his favour. He's called the tune, so I figure he'll start the music."

Hamilton was quiet then, sitting tense in the saddle as he studied the lie of the land ahead. The trail wound back and forth, in and out of the ridges and valleys, doubling back on itself as did the trail from Calexico. It bent around the steep hillsides clothed with healthy strands of cottonwood and oak, thrust out to sandy flats dotted with mesquite and creosote bushes. Tom Curry pointed out the border line between his property and that of Luis Delgado. He marked it with a stab of his finger from the top of the Sierra de Cucapas back to the serrated ridges of the Sierra de Juarez, and while the frown increased in depth on Hamilton's forehead he made no comment about it.

They rode on, following the winding trail that would bring them eventually to the rancho of Luis Delgado. There was a ridge ahead, crowned with rugged rocks and a few

stunted trees. Curry eyed it warily, cautious of an ambush. He slowed his mount, the animal already showing weariness as proof that it had not yet recovered from its wild gallop of the night before. Stingaree Smith pulled up near to him, narrowed his gaze as he took in the scene. The others also drew rein, began to edge their horses over to the side of the trail.

"What do you make of it, Tom?" Smith spoke out of the edge of his mouth, keeping his gaze on the rocks as he spoke. "You figure they're lyin' in wait for us, eh?"

"They're there all right."

Curry had sighted movement. He studied the lie of the land, nodded as he made his decision. "We'll spread out. There's a fork near the foot of that ridge. You take Calientes and his boys to the left, the others can follow me. Don't wait for any signal, just start blastin' the moment you have a target."

"That suits me." Stingaree wheeled back to pass the word and eased the sixgun from his holster in an eagerness to begin.

"This is it." Curry looked at Hamilton, nodded to Pickard and Forrester. "I appreciate you comin' along. I know I've been a stubborn fool. I guess I've riled the three of yuh from time to time, and it'd serve me right if you turned around and headed back into California. It's not far, three or four miles and you'll be across the line."

"And you're every bit the fool you claim to be," Forrester grinned at him. "We've come this far, so do you think we're likely to run out on you now? Face up to it Curry. In times of trouble friends come in mighty handy."

He didn't have time to answer. A gun barked, and a bullet spanged spitefully from a rock above his head. He caught a glimpse of a handsome face below a wide-brimmed sombrero, dark eyes, and flashing teeth. Luis Delgado had fired the first shot, and the battle was on.

CHAPTER TEN

Losers Land In Hell

With a yell, Tom Curry dug in his heels to the weary bronc. He spurred it towards a pile of rock, leapt from the saddle and ran forward in a crouch with his sixgun filling his broad palm and gripped ready to fire. There was a second shot that kicked splinters of stone and a puff of dust in his eyes, the bang of the weapon rolling back to blend with the echoes of the first and to be joined moments later by a thundering barrage of gunshots that ripped the quiet of the morning violently asunder.

On one side of the ridge, Stingaree Smith and his crew were hurling lead into a section of Delgado's band, while on the other Curry's group were also moving to take action.

Smoke swirled among the rocks, broken by stabs of flame and the hurtling passage of lead. A man yelled, came to his feet and clutched with both hands at a throat that suddenly gushed blood. He twirled around, a target for Joe Forrester, his body twitching as another slug hammered into it. Forrester's gun ran hot, and while every bullet had driven into the Mexican the man still refused to fall. He sprawled back against the rocks, his shirt hooked on a sharp spur that held him erect. He hung limp, body streaming blood, while Forrester rammed fresh shells to his sixgun and sought himself another target.

Pickard and Hamilton huddled side by side, each man blazing away the moment they saw movement. Pickard nailed one rider with a bullet through the shoulder. He gave a yell of triumph as the man staggered out into full view, raised his sixgun to finish him when a bullet from Hamilton beat him to it.

Hamilton's slug took the man in the middle, doubled him over as it chewed its way through him. He gave a bubbling howl of agony, sank to his knees and stayed there, until Pickard yanked on the trigger a second time and blew a hole neatly between his eyes.

The fact that there were two groups attacking at the one time gave Curry an edge that he would not otherwise have had. He'd been quick to note the ambush, and he'd divided his forces, which was something that Delgado had not ex-

pected. Delgado had the odds, but when it came to a gunfight he and his men lacked the knowhow of big Tom Curry and Stingaree Smith. He was caught in a crossfire, disorganised for the moment, while lead poured in to exact a terrible toll.

"Keep low, and keep hurlin' it into them!" Curry shouted above the din, yelling back to Hamilton as he began to worm his way forward. "I'm gonna get Delgado. He's the feller I'm after and I'm gonna settle with him once and for all."

"You'll get yourself killed."

"Maybe." Curry gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes. "I'll take Delgado with me if I do, right here on his own land, where he should have damned well stayed."

"But this isn't Mexico!" The shout from Hamilton came in a brief lull in the shooting and it was loud enough for all to hear. "We're still in California," he went on. "It's the lie of the land, I told you that. We're north of the border. You get your land surveyed and you'll find I'm right."

"You're sure of that?" Curry came scrambling back, crouching down as he studied the seriousness on Hamilton's face. "You mean this is my land, not Delgado's?"

"We're nowhere near the border," Hamilton said firmly. "Remember I told you the rancho was well to the north of Calxico when it seemed it was more to the south? That's exactly the way it is. If old Don Manuel Delgado reasoned this was his property then he had it all wrong, and it's a mistake that Luis and Felipe made, too, because this is California."

A wild grin of triumph spread across Tom Curry's face. He came to his feet, cupping a hand to his mouth as he shouted up at the ridge above.

"You hear that, Delgado? What about that agreement now, eh? What about my rights to my own land, you lousy snake? You saw red when we cut some of your precious bulls, but they weren't your damned bulls at all, they were mine."

A bullet came back at Curry, struck him in the chest and spun him around. He hit against a rock, stunned for a moment by the impact of the slug. He looked down at the hole in him, saw the blood beginning to well out of it, then

shook his head to clear away the haze of hurt and began to curse. In his eagerness he'd provided Delgado with an opportunity to plant lead in him, and while the bullet burned in his chest he voiced a savage vow to return it.

There was another barrage of shots, the howl of lead ricocheting from rocks and the rattling echoes combining to form a bedlam of noise that filled the ears of every man. Horses were snorting and squealing with fear. A man cried out when a bullet smashed his face, another bounded from the ridge and ran in panic, cut down before he'd gone a few yards.

The voice of Stingaree Smith could be heard bellowing above the din as he yelled encouragement to Calientes and the others. It was like the voice of doom to the riders of Luis Delgado, for they now knew they were fighting for a cause that had already been lost. They'd presumed the Americano had no one to help him, that it would have been a simple matter to kill him when he tried to take revenge. They lacked the stomach to fight any more, preferring to run, even while Luis Delgado stood and screamed abuse in their wake.

"Cowards!" Delgado yelled and ran after them, then stopped defeated as the last man galloped off in a cloud of dust. He looked back over his shoulder, watched the Americans and the towners from Calexico beginning to emerge from cover, then sobbed as he braced himself for the blast of lead that he was certain would follow.

"Back off, all of you," shouted Curry as he scrambled up the slope, wincing with the bite of the bullet in him. He slapped his sixgun back to leather and he moved to position himself between Delgado and the others.

"I've been waiting for this," Curry grated coldly. "Man to man, feller. Winner take all, and let the loser go to hell."

"I am not a gunfighter, senor," Delgado pleaded, and backed off a pace with both hands well out from his sides. "I am a man who breeds bulls, not a man who is skilled with a sixshooter."

"You pack a gun." There was a fire in Curry's green eyes, a chill in his words that was a threat in itself. "I'm no gunfighter, either. I'm a man who damn near broke his

back diggin' for gold, until my sister left me that rancho. You tried to cheat me out of that, so now we settle."

Panic prompted Delgado's move. He saw the bullet-hole in Tom Curry's chest, relied on it to give him an edge. He gave a cry of desperation and reached for the gun on his hip, his hand clamping over the butt and dragging it clear. He hauled the heavy weapon up, began to crush his finger over the trigger, his eyes wide as he followed the matching play of Curry.

Curry's broad paw dropped, whacked hard over the butt. He sidestepped as he brought the iron flashing upward, tightened his mouth as he squeezed the trigger. There was a roaring punch of sound. Lead struck Delgado above the heart, burrowed through him, and howled into the rocks behind. The sixgun crashed in his hand, bored a hole in the ground and marked the spot for him to fall. He fell heavily, bounced, and then lay still, with no breath of life left in him.

"Are you all right, Tom?"

It was Stingaree Smith who broke the silence that followed. Smith stepped forward, caught hold of Curry's arm to steady him, then made a quick inspection of the hole in his chest. "We'll get you back to town and I'll dig that bullet out. You'll need someone to take care of yuh, but I'm damned if I know who we can get."

Curry grinned at him, allowed himself to be helped back down the ridge to where the horses were waiting. He looked at Hamilton, caught the brief nod of approval that the man afforded him, then grinned because it was the first time he'd ever welcomed a bullet in his chest.

* * *

"There's someone to see you." Eileen Hamilton pulled the curtains back from the window, letting the sun shine in to match her smile as she turned to where Curry lay propped

up in bed. "It's a man called Alexander Lindmann. He says he has something important to tell you."

"That makes two of us." Curry grinned at the girl, reached out his hand to her. "I've got somethin' important to say, too, only not to Alexander Lindmann."

"I know." She laughed, kissed him quickly, then straightened with a blush of colour on her cheeks as Lindmann pushed open the door and entered.

"I hope I'm not intruding," the attorney said awkwardly, fumbling with his hat before he went on. "I don't blame you for drawing the wrong conclusions about me. I suppose I deserve that for being friendly to Luis Delgado after he'd afforded me the indignity of being robbed. But I really did have business in Mexicali."

"Forget it." Curry shrugged, waved him to a chair though he would have preferred to be left alone with the girl. "It's over and done with now. I've got the rancho and Stingaree and the boy will give me a hand with things. I'll make out okay."

"Just to make sure you do I took the liberty of having the area surveyed." Lindmann cleared his throat, looked up at the girl, then back to Curry. "You might consider that as my wedding present, if I may be so bold as to say so. Mr. Hamilton's theory has been proven right. The border is where he said, and that gives you all the land you're ever likely to need."

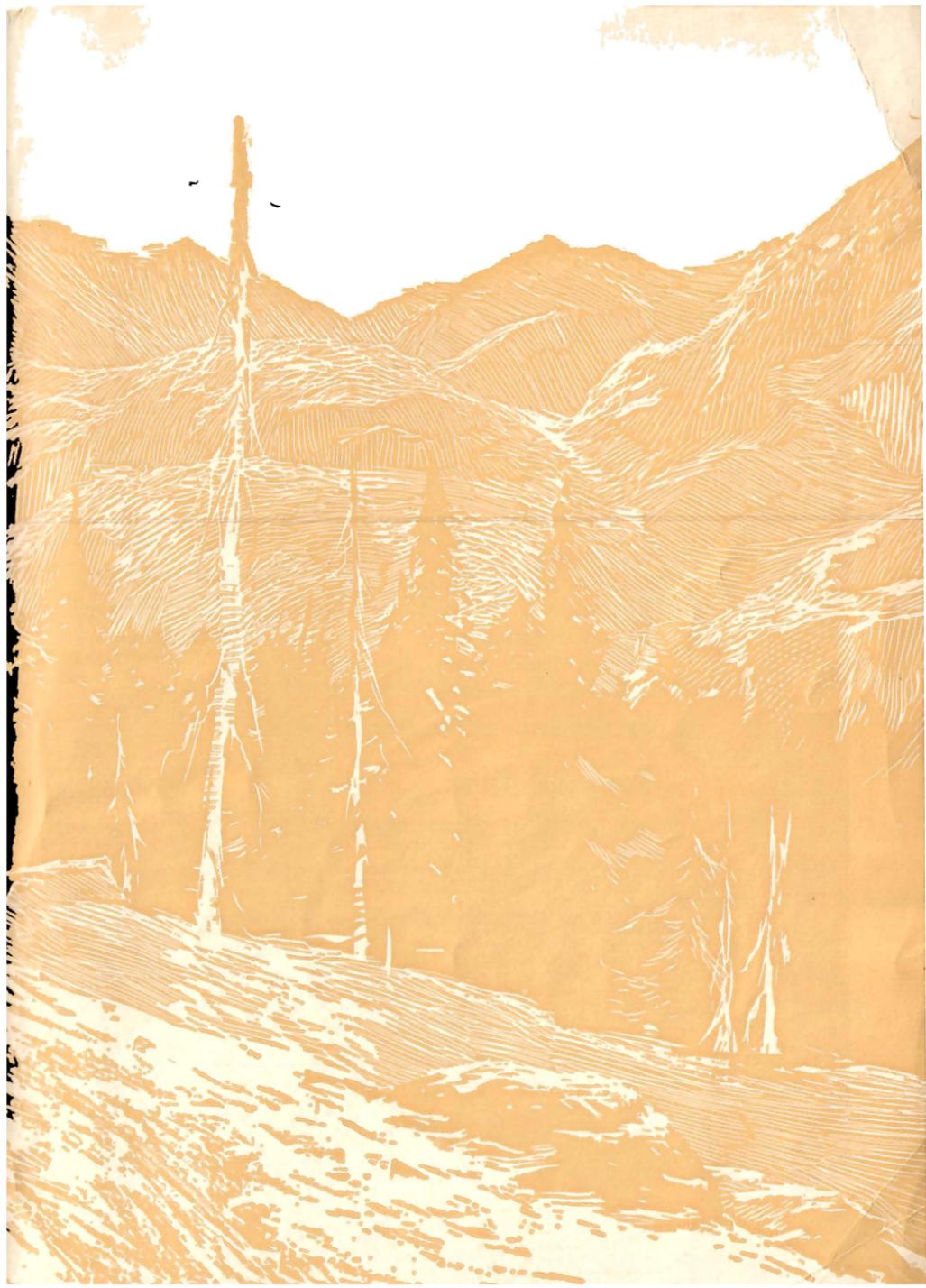
"Thanks." Curry lay back and closed his eyes. He didn't hear Lindmann go out, but he knew they were alone when warm lips pressed against his mouth, and a hand that was cool and gentle moved to caress his cheek. He opened his eyes and smiled up at the girl.

A matter of importance was on Tom Curry's mind, and it had been there since he'd first laid eyes on the girl. It was spoken quietly, and falteringly, because it was the first time he'd ever said it, but it brought the response he'd hoped for.

A man and a boy called Pedro visited the Hamilton house a few minutes later. They called in for a report on the pro-

gress of Tom Curry. And from what they saw before they backed quietly out of the room, Curry was progressing in a manner that was more than satisfactory.

THE END



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