

The
SHERIFF OF PECOS
H. BEDFORD-JONES



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THE SHERIFF OF PECOS

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BY
H. BEDFORD-JONES



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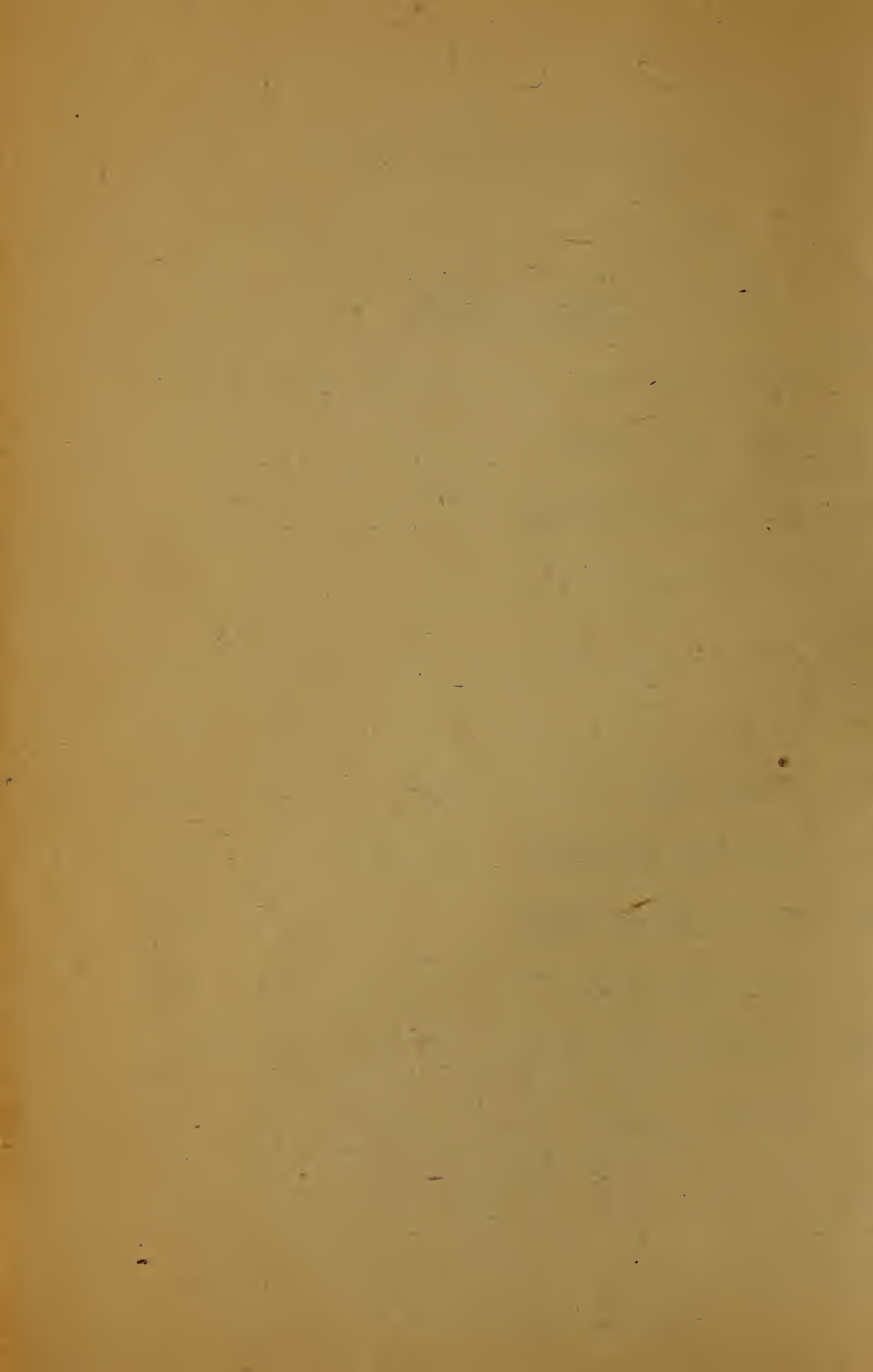
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THE SHERIFF OF PECOS

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CHAPTER I

JACK ROBINSON

BESIDES "Galway" Mike, who was reading the Pahrump County *News* behind the bar, there were three men in Mike's Place. One of the three was a stranger. He sat drowsily at the corner table, hat pulled over his eyes, whisky untasted. The other two stood at the bar.

The tall, dangerous man who had a rattler skin about his white Stetson was speaking:

"It's like this, Murphy. Right after the old man died, young Shumway went to the pen. He was caught dead to rights with a runnin' iron, y' understand——"

"So I heard." The large, red-faced man chuckled. "So I heard, Buck."

Buck grunted. "Well, Frank Shumway went to the pen; I was sorry, too——"

"Oh, sure!" commented Murphy sarcastically. "Made you weep a lot, huh?"

"Shut your blamed mouth!" retorted Buck, acid in his voice. "Here's the point: Young Shumway had mortgaged the hull place to some cussed bank over in Laredo County—some bank the ol' man had

knowed. Well, he give Estella the money, y' understand, and went to the pen. Estella, she's run the place since, but it ain't paid her."

"She's his sister, eh?" Mr. Murphy's red, aggressive features spread into a greasy grin. "Well, I reckon it ain't paid her, with you fer a neighbor! But go on, go on."

"Don't let your brain git too agile, Murphy," said Buck, tossing down his whisky and pouring another drink. "The place has run down. All she's got there now is Miguel Cervantes and his woman, helpin' her. Not a head o' stock left."

"You done well, then," put in Murphy, who stood in no awe of his companion evidently. "You sure done well! Ol' Shumway had a powerful lot o' cattle. Least, he had when I was down here, time the boy got caught and sent over the road——"

"Times have changed since then," said Buck hastily. "As I say, Stella can't make the place pay, in spite of everything. Cervantes——"

"Done heard of him in the Panhandle. Ain't he the greaser with a big rep——"

Buck emitted a lurid oath.

"He's the one, all right—the cussed greaser! Got a rep, and everybody's scared to lay into him. Well, they lost stock, y' understand; the place is run down; and now it's near time for the mortgage to be paid—which it won't."

Murphy touched his companion's arm cautiously, and glanced at the bartender.

"Him?" Buck grinned, then leaned across the bar. "Hey, Mike! Tell my friend Murphy here who owns a half interest in this joint, you understand?"

Galway Mike looked up from his newspaper,

grinning. His broad, flat face was unspeakably brutal, its brutality much aided by wide nostrils which at some previous date had been crushed flat and had never entirely recovered their beauty.

He looked at Buck, roughly elegant in his corduroys, fine boots, and handsome gun belt; then he looked at Murphy, whose elegance was more pronounced, but equally rough and ready.

"Same gent that owns the Runnin' Dawg outfit, yer honor," he responded. "More by token, he's the only wan, barrin' yourself, who does be wearin' a coat these days."

Buck, taking a handful of cigars from his corduroy coat pocket, laid them on the bar.

"C'rect, Mike," he assented proudly. "Smoke. And give us that new bottle."

The bartender obeyed. He cocked an eye at the stranger at the table, but the latter had allowed his head to droop. His mouth hung open. He was palpably asleep—dusty, worn out by hard riding, unkempt save for the gun at his hip, which was excellently cared for.

"Now, as I was sayin'," pursued Buck, who was no other than Templeton Buck, owner of the Running Dog and a big man in Pahrump County, "that there mortgage is due. I been keepin' tabs on things, y' understand? The place ain't even able to pay the mortgage interest, and I hear it's been advertised for sale likewise. All of which don't bother me none, because when I got your Denver wire that you'd come, I done bought in the mortgage in your name."

"Oh!" said Murphy, and nodded heavily. "I s'pose you got reason for being so roundabout?"

"Plenty. The reason's Stella, savvy? I ain't aiming to figger none in this, except as the rescue party. Y' understand, the Shumway place controls all the water supply on my east section, and I got to have it; but I got to have Stella, too."

"Oh, I savvy plenty," and Murphy nodded again. "But s'pose anybody with money buys in the place and pays off the mortgage?"

"He won't," said Buck, his thin, high-boned features showing a slight grimace. "I'm havin' it well understood that the place is mine. Nobody in these here parts is goin' to start buckin' my hand, y' understand? There's only one feller might try it; Sam Fisher, a guy who was a powerful friend of the Shumways in other times. But he's clear down to the other end the State, and I'm havin' him watched."

Murphy had straightened up a trifle.

"You don't mean young Fisher, the deputy sheriff o' Pecos County—him that's goin' to be sheriff there next election? I'll tell the world you'd better watch him, Buck! That gent is one hell ringer. Yes, sir, I've heard of him."

Buck grinned and lifted his glass. "Don't worry. He ain't goin' to butt into this here show, none whatever! That mortgage comes due the first of the month—two weeks. I figger to run her slow until then, watch Fisher so's he can't hear from the girl——"

"Don't monkey with the mails, Buck!" Murphy frowned uneasily.

"I ain't," and the tall rancher chuckled. "I got plenty friends, y' understand. Say, you take it easy here until I see about them hosses, and we'll

ride out. Mike, you 'tend to makin' Murphy plumb comfortable, and I'll see you in short order."

Buck left the place.

Murphy leaned over the bar and engaged Galway Mike in low-toned conversation. Of this talk, a few scattered fragments might have reached the ear of the stranger in the corner, had not the latter been utterly relaxed in shameless slumber.

"——that's the gent to be watchin', yer honor——ain't a bad greaser——divil wid a gun, they do be sayin'——some o' the byes ought to be layin' fer him some night——"

The swinging doors opened abruptly, silently. A man stood in the entrance, stepped swiftly to one side, and stood there with his dark-glinting eyes, looking about the interior. He was tall, rangy, his skin swarthy of hue; he was coated with dust and perspiration. Despite the high, sharp lines of his features, they were much given to smiling. The hair at his temples was gray, and deep lines were chiseled about lips and eyes.

Galway Mike grabbed a towel and began to mop the bar.

"The top o' the mornin' to ye, Miguel Cervantes!" he exclaimed. "What'll it be now?"

Murphy started slightly, turned, and surveyed the new arrival with insolent eyes.

"Thanks, nothing," said Cervantes, speaking perfect English—as indeed he ought to, since his ancestors had lived in the county for a hundred years. "I was looking for someone."

His eyes met those of Murphy. The latter spoke challengingly:

"Meaning me, maybe?"

“No, not you,” and Cervantes smiled, seeming to take no heed of the tone and look. “Another gentleman.”

He turned away as though to leave. The hand of Murphy dropped like a flash.

At this instant there was a crash from the corner where the stranger had been sitting, followed by a low yell. Murphy abandoned his gun, quick as lightning, and turned. Cervantes also turned. The stranger was standing there, rocking unsteadily on his feet, before his overturned chair.

“Thunderation!” the stranger cried with a perplexed air. “Blamed if I didn’t have the worst nightmare you ever heard of, gents; I’m a terrible person for them things! Sure’s my name’s Jack Robinson, I was goin’ through a reg’lar gun fight, and me the most peaceable man ever stepped! Ain’t it awful what can happen in your sleep?”

With his hat off and standing erect, he was revealed as a tall, slim young man, garbed in usual puncher style. Beneath his close-clipped reddish hair beamed a brown, laughing face which compelled smiles from those who met the steady eyes. That is, sometimes; behind the smile of those eyes there lurked something deeper.

His gaze met the scowl of Murphy, and forced the scowl into a half smile. Then his eyes went to Cervantes, who was staring open-mouthed.

“Hope I didn’t disturb you none, gents,” he said apologetically. Then he looked again at Murphy. The smile vanished from his face, which assumed a look of malicious recognition.

“Well, well!” he said briskly. “If here ain’t my old friend ‘Pincher’ Brady, what was asked to leave

Montana for his health's sake five years ago——"

"Look out you don't make a mistake, mister," said the voice of Murphy, biting and deadly. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, I done made a mistake," said the other at once, and shook his head. "I'm right sorry about it, pardner. You looked a heap like a gent named Brady who was up in Montana one time, but now I see you ain't him a-tall."

"No, he ain't," said Murphy, steadily observing him. "Now you've seen the mistake, let's have a drink, hey?"

"Cigar for mine, thanks." Jack Robinson stepped to the bar, picking up his hat as he came, and his genial smile brought a nod from Mike. He picked up one of the cigars laid down by Buck and pocketed it.

Miguel Cervantes unobtrusively left.

"I'm a stranger here, and mighty lonesome," said Robinson with an air of confidential inquiry. "I don't s'pose you gents could direct me?"

Galway Mike looked at Murphy, who made answer:

"We might. Where to?"

Robinson leaned one elbow on the bar, and surveyed Murphy with piercing, laughing, reckless eyes.

"Upon my word," he drawled, "your voice sounds a heap like Pincher Brady's, pardner!"

The two men looked at each other. The red face of Murphy became redder. With a laugh, Robinson flung about as though to face the bar—and the hand of Murphy darted down.

Crack! The bursting report of a revolver filled the place.

"I was looking for that," Robinson said coolly. "No, Mike, you leave that gun alone; I'd be right sorry to have to hurt you."

Mike straightened up. Clinging to the bar with his left hand, Murphy looked down at his right, which was wounded.

"You got quite a reputation for workin' that play," said Robinson, backing away toward the swinging doors. "You're lucky I didn't make it worse, Brady, but bein's I'm a stranger here I ain't taking chances on local prejudices——"

The swinging doors were burst inward as a group of men rushed into the place, holding the doors open. Robinson calmly stood behind the inner door, which had opened against him and held him concealed from sight.

"Who's shootin' here?" demanded the foremost man.

"I am," said Robinson, stepping out. "Got any objections?"

They faced around to meet his weapon. Over it his eyes held them; no longer smiling, those eyes were keen and bitter blue.

"Objections overruled," he went on coolly. "You gents oughtn't come busting into a place o' business like this. It ain't proper. Here I was just showin' Mike how the draw was done where I come from, and I get interrupted——"

"We ain't strong on learning things, stranger," said the foremost man. "I'm sheriff of Pahrump County— Tracy. These deputies of mine were in next door with me——"

"Right convenient, weren't you?" asked Robinson coolly. "Keep 'em up—*up!* That's right. Right convenient, as I said. And you come in a-runnin', gents. Lookin' for something special, were you?"

The sheriff changed countenance.

"Why," he stammered, "I understood a greaser was makin' trouble here——"

"And who might have gave you to understand such?" shot in Robinson. The sheriff made no answer, but bit his mustache. "Turned dumb, have you? It does beat all how things happen, don't it? Here I come in, plumb peaceable and lovin' my neighbors, and, first thing I know, a ruckus gets started. Now, you gents look at Mr. Murphy, over yonder, who done got his hand ripped a little. Ain't even busted, is she?"

Murphy was not hurt to any great extent, and proved it by his voluble cursing.

"Ease off steam; that's right," said Robinson soothingly. "Satisfied, sheriff?"

"Plenty," said the officer.

Robinson put away his weapon. "Glad to meet you, Sheriff Tracy. Mike, give the gentlemen a drink and charge it to Mr. Murphy. Guess I'll be on my way, gents. Got to be in Laredo in two days, and I sure have lost time here. So long."

He was gone. The sheriff and his two deputies looked at each other irresolutely, glanced at Galway Mike, and then retired likewise, without their drink. Mike gave Murphy a glance of scorn.

"You sure bungled it!" he said raspingly.

Murphy swore appropriately. "Bungled it!" he repeated. "I was a cussed fool ever to try it on

with that gent, I can tell you! Next time it'll be a Winchester and a hilltop!"

A sneer curled the bartender's lip. "Foine sort of a killer, you are!" he returned. "Oh, ye needn't to be scowlin' at me; I ain't bein' scart o' no man, and I got me fist on a gun to boot, Mister Murphy! Niver mind the scowl now. Have a drink an' forget it."

The doors were flung open again, and Buck strode into the place.

"The greaser!" he exclaimed sharply. "Did you get him?"

Mr. Murphy cursed.

CHAPTER II

EXIT MATT BRADY

TWO men were riding away from the town of Pahrump together. One was Miguel Cervantes, the other was Jack Robinson.

"You ran mighty close back there, Cervantes," said the younger man soberly. "That fellow was Pincher Brady—a killer. Only, he always kills in the back, savvy? He was going for you when I jumped up."

Cervantes nodded and flashed white teeth in a smile.

"I was not watching him," he confessed. "I was looking for someone, as I said. Every day I have come, but no luck."

"Maybe you drew a little luck to-day," and Robinson chuckled. "I don't suppose, by any chance, you were looking for Sam Fisher?"

Cervantes started. His dark eyes centered upon his companion.

"You know him?"

"Pretty well," said Robinson in an offhand way. "He was being watched and couldn't get away. So he deputized me to come along, as it were. You're the Lazy S foreman?"

"I used to be," said Cervantes bitterly.

They talked. Cervantes spoke quietly, changing

swiftly between smiles and anger. Three years previously young Shumway had been railroaded to the penitentiary. Estella, his sister, had run the ranch since then—and it had gone to ruin. Not her fault or that of Cervantes, who was devotion personified.

"Cattle have vanished," Cervantes said in a hopeless tone. "We have gone steadily down—let the men go one by one to cut expenses. Last year what remained of the stock was sold off to pay the mortgage interest."

"I shouldn't think your friends would let things go that way," said Robinson.

"Friends? We have none. There is only old Jake Harper, who has the Circle Bar up beyond us. None of the others help us or know us. New people have come into the country; times have changed. Besides——"

"Templeton Buck?" suggested Robinson.

"Yes. They have tried often to get me," was the statement, simply given, "but for the sake of Miss Estella I have avoided offense. The Running Dog punchers make what use they like of our place; their foreman, Matt Brady, has even dared to fence in the springs adjoining the Buck ranch."

"Brady?" said Robinson suddenly, his eyes narrowing. "Matt Brady?"

"Yes." Cervantes gave him a questioning glance.

"Uh-huh—thought so! Pincher Brady's brother. That explains how they came to hire Pincher for their dirty work. But they wouldn't bring Pincher here simply to get you, would they? No. Quite a nice, nifty little scheme on foot, Miguel. By the way, I don't suppose this Jake Harper is a decrepit

old party who was a scout for Reno during the Indian wars?"

"You know him, then?"

"Know of him, more or less." Robinson chuckled silently. "Think I'll go over to his place and have a chat. What's that crossroads ahead?"

"Straight on to the Running Dog and Harper's," responded Cervantes. "We turn off to the left. You don't mean you're not going with me?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die—I'm not," and Robinson grinned. "But I'll be along in a day or two if I don't meet bad luck. By the way, who had anything to do with Frank's being sent to the pen?"

A black frown settled on the face of Cervantes.

"Nobody," he answered. "We don't know a thing against any one. Two detectives——"

"Oh, I see," said Robinson airily. "Well, I guess I'll be moving straight ahead, so don't sit up for me to-night. See you later."

They parted at the crossroads. Cervantes swung off to the left, plainly failing to comprehend this queer young man of strange impulses, and waved his hand in farewell. Jack Robinson jogged along reflectively, thinking of the man who had just left him.

"A faithful soul," he observed to his pinto. "Absolutely devoted boy, isn't he? Quick tempered, a wonder with his gun, and yet backing water all the time because he's afraid Estella would be left alone in the world if they wiped him out. Some man, Miguel! But none too bright. Give the devil his due, Johnny boy; a good man, only not quite good enough. He couldn't prevent the ranch

going to the dogs, although he's ready to die with it. No, they wouldn't bring Pincher just to rub him out. Matt Brady could do that. And they wouldn't bring Pincher just to handle that mortgage affair. There's a nigger in the woodpile, and that nigger is——"

His meditations were interrupted by sight of a rolling train of dust in the road ahead. He eyed it sharply and made out the forms of two riders coming toward him.

They met, and drew rein with casual nods of greeting, searching looks, and frank curiosity. Robinson beheld two rangy punchers who rode with Winchesters booted. Their mounts bore the long sear of the Running Dog. One of them was a ratty individual with protruding teeth, the other was a large man, red-faced, of aggressive aspect.

"Must be a heap o' war in this country," opined Robinson with a friendly grin as he rolled a smoke. "More rifles'n I ever seen before at one stretch!"

"You must ha' come from quiet parts, then," said the big man. "That cayuse bears a brand strange hereabouts."

"That's true. Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, friend, that's true! Still the old SF has been supportin' me for two years or so—down in the south country."

"I'm Matt Brady, foreman; this here's 'Lias Knute," introduced Brady. "If you've come out lookin' for a job at the Runnin' Dawg, we'd be right glad to have you turn in, Robinson. Need a few extry hands right now."

Robinson blew a cloud of smoke and shook his head regretfully.

"Later, mebbe. Me, I got business over to Laredo."

"Laredo?" The foreman stared. "This ain't the Laredo road, ye numskull!"

"Ain't it, now?" said the other sweetly. "I never 'lowed it was, did I?"

Brady scowled. "Where ye headin' for?" he demanded bluntly.

"Did I say? Guess I forgot to mention it." Robinson's slow grin was irritating in the extreme. Ratty little Knute edged his cayuse a trifle to one side.

"Better remember it pronto." Brady's tone was significant. His eyes were stormy.

"Well," said Robinson gayly, "I done voted twice already, I ain't roped to any brand, and, far's I can see, my skin's white. This here ain't no private road, is it?"

Brady stared at him murderously. Knute edged a trifle farther to the side. Robinson appeared quite unruffled and innocent of offense.

"Stranger, are you jest plain fool, or ignerant?" demanded Brady.

"Both," Robinson said with a grin. "By the way, I s'pose you ain't related to Pincher Brady? He was havin' considerable excitement in town when I come through."

The big foreman settled into a deadly calm. "Yes? How come?"

"Bein' a stranger and peaceable, I didn't stop to ask," returned Robinson idly. "Seems like some feller named Buck sent him to get a gent. He got the wrong gent, and him and Buck were shootin' it out."

From the two men broke startled oaths. The ratty little Knute saw the twinkle in Robinson's eye, and cried out shrilly:

"He's stringin' us, Matt! Somethin' fishy about this guy——"

Robinson was in the center of the road, Brady before him, Knute off to his left. He appeared entirely careless and off guard, cigarette between his fingers.

"Tryin' to ride me, are ye?" Brady queried. "Want trouble, do ye?"

"I'd welcome it," said Robinson.

"Then take it——"

Brady's gun flashed up. The miracle happened; Robinson's six-shooter seemed to leap out of itself, jump into his hand, spit fire. The two guns spoke almost together. Brady swayed in the saddle, clutched at the pommel, and rolled down.

But it had been a murder trap. Robinson had no chance whatever. Even as he fired, he saw from the corner of his eye that Knute, to the left, was tugging at a gun. He saw the gun come up, and tried to swing himself around in time. Too late! The gun in the hand of ratty little Knute belched once.

Incredulously, bewildered, deeming himself already a dead man—Robinson found himself unharmed. Nor was he given any chance to shoot. The whole affair had passed in the fraction of a second; Matt Brady's vicious attack and death, the third shot echoing treacherously from the side, almost with the first two. As he turned to the assassin, Robinson was amazed to see Knute sink forward, the weapon falling from his hand.

Knute said no word, but followed his gun to the dirt. He lay motionless, one spur in the stirrup; a splotch of red grew upon his chest. He had been shot—how? Not by himself; nor by Robinson.

As the fraction of a second passed Robinson's head jerked up to a sound.—He heard the crack of a rifle lifting to him—so swiftly had the whole affair passed! It was the shot which killed Knute; the rifle crack that followed the bullet.

Robinson stared around. The country appeared empty, the rolling hills desolate, the brown strip of road quite bare of any person. Whence had come that shot?

"Somebody quite a distance off had the pleasure of saving my life," said Robinson reflectively. "Well, if he doesn't want to show himself—I'm satisfied! I wasted a good lie on Matt Brady; too bad he didn't get to go to town and investigate his brother's trouble. Murder trap? Not the first these two gentlemen have laid, I'll bet! They sure caught me, all right. Would have had me, except for the unknown friend. Friend, I thank you!"

He swept off his black Stetson, waved it to the nearest hill, and rode on his way.

"Here's hoping the verdict will be that Knute and Brady killed each other," he thought. "Maybe it won't and maybe it will, depending on who the jury are and how well they can read tracks. Chances are that I won't be mentioned; this country seems to favor direct action rather than legal inquiry. Ho, hum! Matt came near to spoiling my nice new black hat by putting his bullet through it. That's what happens to a slow man. I'd sure hate to be slow around here, you bet! But I'd admire to

know who handled that rifle in the brush. Couldn't even make out where it was, what direction. Interesting country, Pahrump! I certainly think the geological formations are fine."

Two men dead—well, it was a serious matter enough, and promised to grow darker with time. Matt Brady and Knute were evidently used to working together; their trap had been well prepared, well sprung. Only the presence of some unknown watcher had saved Robinson from that side bullet. Who was the person? Not Miguel Cervantes, for the native had carried no rifle.

Robinson jogged along, his mind busy with the situation of Estella Shumway. There were some things he did not understand, but comprehension would come in course of time. Templeton Buck seemed to be the big power in the county, to judge from that conversation in Galway Mike's place, and Buck apparently had it all fixed to take over the Shumway ranch in the near future—and Estella likewise.

Upon passing the turnout that led to the Running Dog, Robinson drew rein and studied the ground in some surprise. He had followed the back trail of Brady and Knute, but to his astonishment saw that they had not come from the Running Dog at all. They had come from some point beyond it—and the only point beyond it that Robinson knew of was Jake Harper's ranch. This looked queer.

Robinson passed on, wondering why these Running Dog men had come from the Circle Bar, particularly as Jake Harper and Templeton Buck were not friends. That would mean bad blood between the two outfits.

"Time will tell that, too, and the afternoon's drawing along," thought Robinson. "We'd better travel along, little doggies! Hit her up, Johnny boy, and we'll feast to-night with the Injun fighter and frontier guardian. Oh, shucks! Here's another guy coming with a rifle and looks like business in his eye, too!"

He drew up at sight of a horseman who had suddenly appeared in the road ahead, riding toward him. On closer sight, this man appeared to be a young fellow, whose right leg had been freshly bandaged above the knee; chaps and trousers were bundled behind him on the saddle, and from waist to boots his costume consisted of red flannel. He reined in before Robinson and nodded greeting, his eye running over the stranger critically.

"Howdy, pilgrim! Jest out from town?"

"C'rect the first shot, sure's my name's Jack Robinson!" was the cheerful response. "And I'd admire to know who's settin' the new range styles this-away! I never did see such fine red color in all my days. I'll have to get me some underwear that same shade."

The young fellow chuckled. "My name's Arnold," he offered. "By that brand, you must ha' come up from the south, Robinson? Used to be down in Pecos County my ownself, last year; was ridin' for ol' man Zimmer."

"Then," drawled Robinson, "I reckon you done heard of Pete Hendricks?"

"Friend of yours?" queried Arnold.

"Yep."

"Shake." Arnold suddenly beamed in a wide grin and extended his hand. The two shook vigor-

ously. "Me and Pete was sure some bunkies. Say, I most forgot! Did you meet a couple of riders back a ways?"

Robinson inspected him quizzically.

"Friends of yours?" he retorted. Arnold flushed violently and pointed to his underwear.

"Does that look like it?"

Robinson began to roll a cigarette. "If I was you, cowboy, I'd waste no more time lookin' farther for them two gents. No, sir, it'd be an awful waste of time, and, accordin' to looks, you got no time to waste."

"Meaning what, pardner?" Arnold inspected him, narrow-eyed, cautious.

"Just this." Robinson finished his cigarette and tucked it between his lips. "Feller named Buck was in Pahrump to-day, meetin' a friend on the stage. Friend called himself Murphy, but his real handle was Pincher Brady, savvy? Them two gents was due to leave town shortly behind me, riding thisaway. Now, when they get to where I got, back apiece, they're going to meet up with them same two gents you made mention of—same being Matt Brady and a little rat name o' Knute. Do you fol-ler?"

"Right behind," said Arnold, thin-lipped, watchful. "Elucidate!"

"Why, that's about all of it, I reckon!" Robinson touched a match to his cigarette. "Only, when the first two meet up with the last two, there's going to be a heap of grief spilled. I don't guess Pincher Brady has much fraternal affection to spoil; same time, it's bound to be a shock, meetin' his brother like that."

"Oh!" said Arnold. "By gosh, d'you mean to say——"

"I ain't sayin' at all," and Robinson smiled whimsically. "Only I darned near got this new hat ruined. Somebody's goin' to get blamed for what happened. Maybe it'll be me, and maybe you, accordin' to which one Buck sees first. By the way, ain't that a Circle Bar brand on your hoss?"

"So taken and accepted." Arnold was staring at him hard now. "S'pose you and me ride back a ways, Robinson—same way you was heading."

"How come?" Robinson surveyed him with lifted brows.

"I got orders to keep with you, that's all." Arnold did not appear hostile—quite the contrary, in fact—but his attitude was determined. "You ain't been using your eyes real good, have you?"

"Seems not." Robinson frowned. "Orders to meet me? How in thunder did you get 'em?"

Arnold grinned. "Smoke signal. Do you agree? I'd sure hate to have any trouble with a red-headed gent that had knowed Pete Hendricks, but at the same time I aims to obey orders——"

"No apologies necessary." Robinson laughed softly. "Arnold, I guess you and I will hitch without any trouble. So Jake is using Injun smoke signals, is he? Same old boy as ever. Where is he?"

"Comin' behind you, I reckon," said Arnold dryly.

Robinson uttered a low whistle. "The darned old fox! So that's who it was! Let's ride, cow-boy; let's ride."

Arnold turned his horse, and they rode stirrup to stirrup.

CHAPTER III

ROBINSON'S PARTNER

JAKE HARPER had once been a very large man. Now he was a little bowed with age, a bit heavy with superfluous flesh, his hair quite white, his face seamed with heavy lines. The old eyes were keen as ever; the heavy mustache, fresh dyed a lustrous black, gave the beholder a decided shock when contrasted with white hair and brows. He rode a huge, rawboned beast whose eye was roving and vicious—a brute named Celestine. No man but Jake had ever ridden her, and no man wanted to. Celestine had a reputation.

When he came upon Arnold and Robinson waiting in the road, Jake Harper drew rein very abruptly. At sight of Robinson's laughing gaze, a shock of surprise crossed his seamed features. His eyes opened wide.

"For the love of Mike!" he uttered. "You!"

"C'rect the first shot as usual, Jake. Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, it's me! I been having quite a bit o' talk with Arnold; friendly and peaceable. How're you, Jake?"

They shook hands warmly. Suddenly old Jake broke into a storm of affectionate curses. His huge paw pounded Robinson on the back again and again.

"Boy, I'm glad to see ye!" he cried, lustily roaring the words. "Dog-gone it, I'm the happiest man in the Territory—State, I mean. Hurray! By gosh, if I'd knowed it was you under that black hat——"

"Uh-huh." Robinson's eyes crinkled. "I thought you was layin' up there in the brush, most likely. Right here and now, Jake, I utters heartfelt thanks. Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, I ain't a bit scart to explore the other world, but I don't aim to do it any sooner than I have to. If you hadn't attended to Mr. Knute, I'd certain sure be wandering lonesome and lonely the other side Jordan this minute. That's what comes of bein' a stranger, now. Say, Sam Fisher said to tell you he couldn't get away, so I come instead."

"Huh?" Jake Harper puffed out his cheeks. "Oh, he did, did he? Durned fool, that Sam Fisher! Got a big repytation and ain't got the nerve to live up to it! Hey, Arnold! What in time are you exposin' your flannels for thataway?"

Arnold grinned. "I got swiped by a long-distance bee, thirty-thirty caliber," he said. "If you ain't got no objections, Jake, where's Matt Brady and Knute?"

Jake Harper twirled his vivid black mustache. "I dunno," he responded thoughtfully. "I could make a blamed good guess where they ain't, though; they ain't reposin' on no fleecy clouds with a harp in each hand! This here Jack Robinson is severaal seconds faster'n Matt Brady was, Arnold; yes, sir, severaal! Guess I'd better give him a job, hadn't I?"

Arnold put out his hand to Robinson again, and

they shook. "Guess you had, Jake," he responded. "They tried the old game on the stranger, eh? Knute off to one side?"

"Uh-huh—blamed near got him, too, only I was watchin' the trail. Lét's travel, gents. We got to git home 'fore dark."

"You seem to have met before," observed Arnold.

"Once or twice," said Robinson, and chuckled. A huge billow of laughter shook the big frame of Jake Harper, as though there were some unuttered joke.

After this they rode on in silence. Jake Harper, old Indian fighter, ex-scout, plainsman, and borderer, was plainly in high fettle over the day's events. Every now and again his eye rested upon the slim figure of Jack Robinson, and a vast good humor rolled into his features. The presence of this young man appeared hugely gratifying to him.

"Ain't been so happy," he blurted, breaking the silence only once, "since me and ol' John Parker met up with Gen'ral Reno one day in San Francisco, all three of us plumb lonesome, and not knowin' they was a friend in ten miles. Sure is good to see ye, boy."

Robinson nodded, but did not respond.

It was dusk when they reached the Harper ranch. Robinson left his pinto at the corral, shook hands with half a dozen punchers whom he could scarcely see, and followed Jake Harper to the big house on the knoll. As soon as he set foot in the porch, Jake turned.

"The house is yourn!" he said emphatically. "Set an' talk! We eats with the boys when supper's ready. Meantime, talk!"

"Suits me." Robinson dropped into a chair. "You weren't in town to-day?"

"Nope." Jake Harper lowered his bulk into a groaning rocker. "I got so danged much rheumatiz lately it's knocked me up. You didn't meet Mig Cervantes?"

"Uh-huh. Met him and Buck and Mike and a man calling himself Murphy, only he was Matt Brady's brother—Pincher. Maybe you remember him? Bad to the backbone."

"You met 'em?" asked Jake Harper. "All of 'em?"

Robinson laughed softly. "Yep. Also Sheriff Tracy. I left town in a hurry. Pincher Brady has a sore hand, but no one was hurt. By the way, I had quite a long talk with Frank Shumway last week."

"My lord! You did?" Jake Harper was eager, incredulous, astonished. "How come? Thought Buck was keeping a close watch on things."

"Sam Fisher sent me up to the pen," Robinson chuckled. "Frank gets out next spring. He's in pretty fair shape, but badly worried. I bucked him up and promised we'd take care of everything here. By the way, Jake, Templeton Buck has a fine scheme lined out. He got Pincher Brady here to handle it. He bought the Shumway mortgage in Pincher's name—assumed name, I should say, of Murphy. He aims to let Murphy foreclose, then to step up and rescue Estella. I don't understand it all myself. Isn't Estella wise to him?"

Jake Harper tugged at his mustache.

"She is, and she ain't," he returned, rumbling his words. "Buck, he's played his cards mighty cute

with her, allowing he's done all in his power to git Frank out of jail and so forth. Between you and me, I suspicions that Buck has got a friend in the post office, and that he ain't above monkeying with letters."

"That's old stuff," said Robinson calmly. "You folks up here have a fine county organization, looks like."

The insistent banging of a tin pan interrupted them, and they hastily departed.

Seated about the chuck table with the half-dozen Circle Bar boys, Robinson sized up things without much trouble. Except for Arnold, the Circle Bar had no young blood at all. An old Swede and his wife took care of the place. The foreman was a grizzled, crippled person who had helped to run down Geronimo—and held his job on the strength of it.

The other men were much of the same stamp, all of them elderly, one or two efficient, but working for Jake Harper because they had appealed to his soft side, not because they were first-class range men. Jake introduced Robinson as a new hand who was going to do some special work for him, and let it go at that. Few of the men paid much attention or seemed interested.

To Robinson the meal was tragic. He had looked for help here, and found none. When it was over, he pushed back his chair and left. Out in the open air, he found Arnold at his elbow, with a quiet chuckle.

"Live bunch, ain't it?" opined Arnold. "Looks to me, Red, like you was some disappointed."

"What at?" queried Robinson.

"Ain't my business." Arnold rolled a cigarette with elaborate carelessness. "Only, I ain't seen you throw no war bag into a bunk. I been thinkin' more or less about quittin' here anyhow, and applyin' for a job over to the Lazy S."

"Oh!" said Robinson. "Call you Mister Arnold over there, would they?"

"It's always been Steve around home."

"Oh! All right, Steve. You and me, what say we go ridin' for a change?"

"Your hoss look plumb wore out, Red."

"Maybe we can get Jake to lend us a bit o' flesh. What about it, Jake?" Robinson turned, as Jake Harper joined them under the stars. "Steve, here, he allows there's too much excitement around these parts to suit him. I agrees with him plenty. Can I put my rope on a couple of your broncs and get Steve to take me out and show me the country?"

Jake Harper inspected the two slender figures, hands on his hips.

"Dog-gone it!" he broke out plaintively. "Here I been ridin' and crawlin' in the bresh all day, and now you-all aims to go away, and figgers I'm too blamed wore out to trail along! Why don't you stick around and talk a while, Robinson?"

"What you want to go for, Jake?" queried Robinson softly. "S'pose Buck and Pincher Brady, or Murphy, comes ridin' along here in about half an hour to inquire about the red-headed stranger what took the wrong road to Laredo and met up with Matt Brady and Knute—huh? If you wasn't here, where'd I be? That's a conundrum."

"And what's the answer to the durned thing?" asked the old plainsman.

"That you're the fanciest liar ever I did see, Jake, when it's plumb necessary. Also, that you don't give a hoot for Buck—and if you was setting on your front porch with the lights out and a Winchester handy, Buck and his friends would be mighty slow about startin' any ructions with you."

"Oh!" said Jake, fingering his very black mustache. "I see! You think I'd lie to save your worthless neck?"

"You seen Matt Brady draw first, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh, now I think about it—he done so." Jake Harper chuckled. "That's all right, boy; I know what's stirrin' in your fool brain, too. Ye think the Circle Bar bunch is too old an' helpless to stir much, huh? Well, jest you go along. Take anything you fancy in the corral, boys, and remember me to Estella. I'll be over myself in a day or two."

Arnold and Robinson started away together, and lost themselves in the shadows near the corral. Robinson touched his companion's arm.

"Steve, any time you think old Jake is slow, guess again! Friend Buck is coming along here pretty soon, and he'll run into a surprise party. Meantime, we'll be elsewhere."

Steve Arnold grunted. "What you want to run for, then?"

"Me? I ain't running," and Robinson laughed. "I'm off to see the country, that's all. Maybe Miss Shumway will sort of take to me more, if you introduce me."

Arnold glanced at him suspiciously.

"You tryin' to run some joke on me, Red?"

"None a-tall, Steve; cross my heart! Sure's my

name's Jack Robinson, I'm a quiet and peaceable stranger what always gets took in. When Jake Harper gets done orating to Buck, that affluent gentleman will give up lookin' for me, except by accident. He won't be real sure whether I'm workin' for Jake or not, and the Circle Bar boys won't be sure neither. In fact, nobody will be sure of anything, except you and me. That's the best way to play her, ain't it?"

"Looks all right," vouchsafed Arnold. "Got your saddle handy?"

Ten minutes later the two were quietly drawing away from the Circle Bar, without making any effusive farewells. They had been riding for perhaps five minutes more, when both pulled up their horses suddenly. Across the night lifted the faint bang of a shotgun.

"That's Jake's old Brown Bess," said Steve. "Trouble back of us!"

Robinson held up a hand for silence. They sat motionless, listening. No further shot came, and Robinson relaxed with a soft laugh.

"Nope, no trouble. We slid out just in time, Steve. Buck comes riding up, and old Jake salutes him out of the darkness, then apologizes for the mistake. Savvy? Buck accepts the apology—otherwise we'd have heard real trouble a-starting. Let's go, cowboy!"

They merged into the darkness. The moon would not be up until midnight.

CHAPTER IV

BUCK LAYS PLANS

TEMPLETON BUCK did not particularly enjoy his call at the Circle Bar, nor did he find its occupants very slow in their reception. He did not see any one, in fact, nor did the dozen riders behind him. The buildings were dark and apparently deserted, until the blast of a shotgun ripped the night and Jake Harper's voice accosted the arrivals booming.

The ominous darkness, the more ominous silence, held the Running Dog men bunched up and nervous. Harper's words made them more nervous, when it became evident that Jake had witnessed the shooting on the road and was perfectly willing to testify to the fact. Buck made up his mind to go home and went.

With him went Pincher Brady, alias Murphy, and the dozen riders. Murphy displayed no great grief for his defunct relative, but he was savagely disposed toward one Jack Robinson.

Once at the rangy, rather unkempt buildings which served the Running Dog as headquarters, Buck called Murphy into consultation. He also summoned the newly promoted foreman, one "Sandy" Davitt, a scur individual marred by a cast in one eye.

"We've made a mess of things since this morning, y' understand," Buck said glumly. "Murphy failed in town, and this here Robinson gent ran into a heap of luck headfirst. He's a flash gunman from somewhere, and Harper has put him in the bunk house."

"Old Jake has got his back up sudden," observed Sandy Davitt with a sneer. "Hope you ain't lost any nerve lately, Buck? He sure handed you a mouthful to-night."

Buck swore under his breath. His thin, raw-boned features were etched with red.

"He pays for that," he responded. "You hear me tell it! They's two things to be done 'fore Murphy can foreclose on that mortgage. First, the greaser Cervantes has got to be 'tended to. Next, Jake Harper."

"Jake ain't what you'd exactly call a social favorite," said Davitt dryly. "Same time, Buck, he's considerable well known as an old boy and crippled up some. Public opinion ain't goin' to favor his sudden demise, none whatever."

"Oh, that's all right," grunted Buck. "You and Slim and Doggy take some grub about to-morrow afternoon, and lay up the trail a ways. Jake will be ridin' over to the Lazy S to-morrow night or next morning. You boys rope him, fetch him over here, and we'll let him cool off a spell while we run that outfit of hisn off the range, savvy?"

"That's good as she lays, Buck." Sandy Davitt looked relieved. "I thought you was goin' to remark that I might go wrastle with Cervantes, which same I ain't got no longin' for. Me, I got a wide sense of my limitations. Any gent what undertakes

the greaser in sober earnest has got to be born real lucky, and I wasn't."

"Who'd you suggest?" asked Buck, a lurking devil in his eye.

"You," said the foreman, grinning sourly. "Looks a whole lot like whoever wants the work done had ought to be able to handle some part of it his ownself, don't it?"

Buck was lounging in his chair as this veiled insinuation was uttered. Like a streak of light, he was up and in the air. Powerful as Sandy Davitt obviously was, he was taken by the throat and laid back across the table, gasping and strangled. Holding the man's lean throttle in one hand, Buck glared down at him.

"Some stuck up over sudden promotion, ain't you, Sandy?" inquired Buck's voice. "Feelin' your oats a heap, eh? That's twice you got sassy—ain't goin' to be no third time, Sandy. Or is they?"

"N-no," gasped the half-choked man. Murphy looked on the scene with interest, his red features quite calm, a cigar between his teeth. "Lemme up, Buck!"

Buck released his hold suddenly, and stepped back, smiling nastily.

"Sure. Git up, boy, and beat it. You can tell the others that Cervantes is my meat—quick meat, likewise. You and Slim and Doggy light out of here tomorrow, and if you miss bringin' in Jake Harper, I'll skin the three of you one-handed! Git!"

Sandy Davitt departed hurriedly.

"I see," observed Murphy, shifting the cigar in his mouth, "I see you ain't backward when it comes to action, Buck. What's the program?"

"You ride over to the Lazy S in the morning," Buck ordered, who was indeed suddenly displaying a new and alert manner. "Pull the mortgage stuff on Estella, polite but firm, savvy? I know about where Cervantes will be. When I'm done with him I'll drop along to the house and fire you off the premises. Now set still till I get a drink."

Buck departed. Murphy glanced after him, then lighted his cigar thoughtfully.

"Humph!" he growled. "I've heard biggity talk 'fore this, Mister Buck! If I knows you, which I'd ought to, you ain't ridin' up to that greaser and pullin' no gun on him—no, sir! If you git him, it'll be 'cause he ain't armed, maybe. Well, let her ride! All I want is to git another chance at that smart Aleck, Robinson, who recognized me for Pincher Brady, cuss him! He's run up a big day's score, and I aim to pay him. By Godfrey, I'd come close to givin' him an even break, I would!"

With this admirable sentiment, Mr. Murphy inspected his right hand, whose back was crossed by a big piece of sticking-plaster. He was not really injured—the bullet had only scraped his hand slightly. His black scowl was perhaps induced by memory of the fate which had overtaken Matt Brady that same day.

Buck was uneasy, and remained uneasy. He had gone to great lengths to stage his final play for the Shumway girl and ranch, and saw himself verging on disaster. It was all due to that fool Robinson. He had met Murphy and had drawn him into Mike's place for conference. He had taken the snoring stranger for granted—and the stranger had wakened in sudden nightmare, according to the

story told by Mike and by Murphy. What did it mean? Had Robinson overheard much of the talk? How had he chanced to recognize Murphy as Pincher Brady?

The fellow had not gone to Laredo at all, but to Jake Harper's. That was suspicious. Where had Robinson come from? The south, beyond a doubt; but Buck was unable to discover anything about the man. Being thus uneasy, Buck issued stringent orders to his men, and regarded Robinson's fate as settled.

Upon the following morning, Mr. Murphy mounted and rode away from the Running Dog by his lonely. A little later Buck and two of his riders departed in company. Later still Sandy Davitt, Slim, and Doggy rode away together. The day was clear, brilliant, fairly warm.

Buck and his two men did not follow the road, but made their way by easy stages to the rolling and wooded section of the Running Dog which adjoined the fine water springs on the Shumway ranch. They knew about what they would find there; it had been the same story day after day since Matt Brady had undertaken to fence in the Shumway water.

Every morning Miguel Cervantes rode over that way and spent an hour cutting fence. If any of the Running Dog men showed up, Cervantes would smile and take all that was said and would allow himself to be ordered away. If they did not show up, he would finish cutting the fence and then depart. Later, Matt Brady would repair the fence.

By this mute and inglorious scheme of tactics, Cervantes caused the Running Dog some irritation, avoided a row, and registered protest against high-

handed work. It gained very little, but it was at least a protest. It was about all Cervantes had to do on the place, since the remnant of the Lazy S stock was safely rebranded and herded with the Running Dog cattle.

Upon this particular morning, Miguel Cervantes was busily cutting wires while his pony cropped the lush grass about the springs, when he observed a single horseman approaching from the hills. At the same time his pony lifted its head and whinnied—in another direction where nothing appeared. Cervantes was puzzled, but, centering his gaze on the rider, he recognized the figure of Jack Robinson. He ceased work, lolled against a fence post, and began to roll a cigarette. He looked up with a flashing smile as Robinson drew rein.

"*Buenos dias!*" cried the rider gayly. "How goes it this morning, Miguel?"

"Well, señor. I am glad to see you again."

"The gladness is all mine," said Robinson cheerfully. "If you knew how close I came not to seeing you again you'd get me. How is the señorita?"

"Frying doughnuts." Cervantes chuckled. His keen eyes darted over the other's figure. "You slept out last night, yes?"

"C'rect, sure's my name's Jack Robinson! Look rumped, do I? Oh, I've been taking a squint at the country, Mig. Need any help here?"

The other shrugged. "No, thanks. It would be better if you rode on to the ranch."

Robinson gathered up his reins. "Then, *hasta la vista!* See you at dinner time."

Cervantes gestured assent, and watched the slender figure go riding off. Once more his pony lifted

its head, cocking its ears toward another quarter. Cervantes glanced at the hills, saw nothing, and returned to his labor.

The figure of Robinson rode out of sight. For a space Cervantes worked on, rolling up the wire with painstaking care. For the third time his pony looked up, and flung a whinny of greeting into the sunlight. Cervantes halted, straightened up, and surveyed the empty landscape with one hand over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

As he stood thus, motionless, a tiny puff of white spat out from a hillside to his right; a second puff became visible to his left. Two rolling reports followed. Cervantes, dropping his shielding hand, stood for an instant and then quietly fell on his face.

Jack Robinson meantime rode up to the old adobe house beneath wide cottonwoods that view the Shumway domain from its rounded knoll, and dismounted. The house had been built Mexican style, even to the flat, stone-rolled adobe roof; it was cool and restful, with its vines and flowers.

Since no one came forth to greet him, Robinson unsaddled, took his horse to the corral to one side, and then tramped around the house to the rear. He turned the corner and paused.

Before him portly Señora Cervantes was pinning clothes to a line, while from the near-by doorway of the kitchen issued a voice that made Robinson turn a trifle red.

"I do hope he'll come soon!" was saying Estella Shumway. "I don't see why he went on to Harper's, when he must have known we were dying to see him. Well, that's the last of the batch; I'd better bring them outside to cool."

The señora turned, beheld Robinson, and stood with open mouth. He made a gesture of silence, and stepped forward to the doorway. In this, a moment later, appeared a young lady who held a great platter of new-sugared doughnuts in both arms. As she came out, Robinson stepped forward and took the platter from her.

Something happened swiftly.

"Oh!" cried the girl, surprise and indignation in her voice. Her freed hand slapped Robinson's cheek smartly; then she stared at him with widening eyes and flushed cheeks. "Oh!" Her voice was suddenly different, vibrant with eager welcome. "Oh, it's you! My goodness, is that the way you show up?"

Holding the platter, Robinson surveyed her with twinkling eyes.

"That's sure the way to show up, isn't it?" he drawled. "I was afraid you might not give me the right kind of welcome, so I took it. Sort of forgot what I look like, since you and Jake were down in Pecos County last fall, haven't you? Who'd you think was kissing you, anyway?"

The girl's cheeks reddened again, then she broke into a glad laugh.

"If I'd known it was you," she cried, "why——"

Hastily Robinson set down the doughnuts and turned to the doorway—but Estella had changed her position and now stood outside, laughing at him.

"Too late!" she exclaimed, and then held out her hand. "Goodness, but I'm glad to see you. I knew from what Miguel said that——"

"You see, Stella," broke in Robinson, "there was a lot o' trouble down below. The sheriff had been

killed and Sam Fisher was filling out the job; he'll prob'ly be elected anyhow. So Sam being sheriff, he couldn't get away, and sent me up instead."

Estella frowned sharply at him for a moment, studying his face. She was brown-haired, hazel-eyed, healthily brown of cheek and arm. Robinson returned her gaze innocently.

"I always did admire the way those tendrils of brown hair sort of break loose and curl down around your ears," he said, cocking his head to one side and surveying her with critical stare. "Yes, ma'am, I always did, sure's my name's Jack Robinson! I met Miguel back yonder, where he's powerful busy with some wire, and he allowed you would be glad to see me——"

"You met Miguel this morning?" repeated the girl.

"Yes. Stopped for a chat, then came on. I've been doing considerable running around since yesterday."

Señora Cervantes came up, and Robinson was introduced. Then, grabbing doughnuts in each hand, Robinson followed Stella around to the wide veranda and with a sigh of relaxation settled down in a comfortable chair at her side.

"Sam was right worried over not hearing from you," he observed.

"Not hearing?" Estella regarded him with wide eyes. "Why, I wrote only two weeks ago—wrote a long letter and begged him to come up at once if he could! He knew all about the mortgage, and had promised to try and sell the ranch if he could——"

Robinson's eyes narrowed. "Who posted that letter for you?"

"I gave it to Mr. Buck to mail, as he was going to town."

"Oh! Well, I guess it got lost in the shuffle somewhere," said Robinson. "Anyhow, Sam hasn't heard from you in a month. Anyhow, he sold the ranch."

"Sold it! Sold this ranch?" The girl stiffened. "For how much? Who to?"

Robinson shook his head. "I dunno, ma'am. Sam, he made me promise not to say a word about it until he could get up here his ownself."

"Oh!" A trace of anger flamed in the girl's eyes. "I'd like to shake you——"

"I'd sure like to have you," Robinson said with a grin. "Go ahead, ma'am!"

Instead, Stella settled back in her chair and regarded him narrowly.

"What kind of a game are you playing, anyway?" she demanded.

"None whatever. Me, I'm a innercent pilgrim, a stranger, plumb peaceable," and his grin was more exasperating than ever. "As I remember it, Sam Fisher sold an option on the place, and the feller was coming up to look it over. He had your power of attorney to sell, but seemed like you had to consent to the deal."

"I had!" repeated the astonished girl. "Why, nothing of the sort! I wrote Sam that he had full power——"

"Sure, sure, but this was different. Seems like this feller wanted you to go with the ranch," averred Robinson innocently.

Stella looked at him a moment, then sprang to her feet. "What do you mean? How dare you!

Oh, I wish I knew when you were serious! Who bought the place? Tell me!"

"Feller name of Robinson—Jack Robinson. Got any objections?"

They looked at each other for half a minute, a slow tide of color sweeping over the face of the girl. As she was about to speak, there came an interruption:

"Hello the house! Anybody home?"

Both turned. There, sitting upon his borrowed horse, was Mr. Murphy, whose approach had been unobserved. Robinson hastily dropped out of sight, concluding that he had been unseen.

"Oh, Lord!" he murmured. "Stella, bring in this gent quick; I'm going to slaughter him. Friend of mine, sure. Bring him in and give him a doughnut."

"Good morning," said the girl, somewhat perplexed at the whole affair. "Weren't you looking for me?"

"Lookin' for Miss Shumway, if you're her," returned Murphy. He dismounted and came forward toward the veranda. "My name's Murphy, ma'am. I done bought a mortgage over to Laredo City las' week, coverin' this place, and, bein' in the vicinity, thought I'd drop in and ask about it comin' due the first of the month."

The girl's face whitened a trifle. "The—mortgage?" she stammered. "Why—why, I thought the bank held it——"

"Yes'm." Murphy took a paper from his pocket as he mounted the steps. "But I done bought her in. Maybe you'd like to look over this——"

He broke off suddenly, for his eyes had fallen upon Robinson. The latter grinned at him cheerfully.

"Step right up, Mr. Murphy; step right up. We're a whole lot glad to see you. Try a doughnut? Finest you ever seen, I'll bet."

Murphy looked paralyzed, and in this case looks did not lie.

CHAPTER V

BUCK'S LUCKY DAY

MURPHY really looked as though about to have a stroke. His red face purpled deeply, and his plastered right hand gave a slight, spasmodic jerk.

"You want to watch that there hand real careful," said Robinson with a solicitous air. "Real careful! Don't let it jerk thataway; it's a right bad sign, Mr. Murphy! Step up and have a seat, won't you? Hello—you must ha' scratched that hand or hurt it somehow; all plastered up, ain't it?"

"I—I didn't expect to be findin' you here," said Murphy, glaring viciously.

"Don't doubt it," was the cheerful response, while Stella Shumway looked from one to the other with suspicious scrutiny. "That's my specialty, bein' where I ain't expected. But don't let me interrupt your business talk none whatever. I'll just set quiet and be a good feller. Mr. Murphy's an old friend of mine, Stella; known him since yesterday afternoon. Set and rest yourself, Murphy. No ceremony here."

Murphy compressed his thick lips, removed his hat, and finally shook his head.

"I ain't settin', thanks," he returned, then faced the girl. "You don't mind if I look over the place

a bit, ma'am? Ain't aiming to make myself obnoxious none, if——"

"Why, certainly," faltered Estella, handing back the paper she had taken. "Since you bought the mortgage, you have a right to look over the property."

"Wait a minute," broke in Robinson. "It's awful to have a tongue like mine; just can't keep quiet two minutes. You started in a while ago, Murphy, to say something, then you switched off and started to look over the place. Let's finish and get cleaned up all fine. What was it you started to orate about the mortgage?"

Murphy gave him a savage glance.

"I was goin' to say," he said sullenly, "that we could make arrangements about it's bein' paid off at the Pahrump bank."

"Oh!" Robinson stretched out comfortably. His hand caressed the gun at his belt, and Murphy watched that hand with attention. "Oh! But s'pose it can't be paid off? Was you about to offer to renew the note?"

"I'm right sorry," and Murphy ignored his questioner, addressing himself to Estella Shumway. "Right sorry, ma'am, but I can't very well renew. Ye see——"

"Never mind goin' into the matter, feller," said Robinson. His voice had a sting to it. "You turn around and address them remarks to me. It looks mighty funny about you bein' so anxious to look around the place, after you got a glimpse o' me settin' here. What's your rush to look at land, huh? What you tryin' to kill time for? Expectin' to meet somebody else here?"

Murphy regarded him with veiled hatred.

"I dunno what you're talkin' about, Robinson," he said. "I rode over here square and open to transact business. That business ain't with you——"

"Oh, ain't it?" jeered Robinson. "Look here, you! I don't like your looks, and I don't like the name you're sailin' under, savvy? If I'd known as much yesterday as I know now, I wouldn't ha' scratched that hand of yours, not a bit of it! I was a blamed fool. Now, if you expect me to turn my back on you any more, you got another guess coming. You're the one that's going to turn your back, and do it pronto!"

"Are you threatening me?" demanded Murphy belligerently.

"Threaten you? My gosh, no!" Robinson chuckled. "You ain't worth it, you red hawg! I want to see you ridin' away from here in a hurry. Oh, never you mind, Stella! This gent isn't going to act as mad as he looks. That isn't his style. Murphy, go grab for your gun if you want; I'll give you till you grab it. Hurry up! Grab for it!"

Murphy looked down into those deadly blue eyes and made no move for his gun. His fat red features were perspiring a trifle. Robinson mocked at him.

"Oh, you ain't reachin' for it, huh? S'pose ye'd like me to turn my back, would ye? Nope, not no more, feller. Besides, they's ladies present, and I sure hate to expose my back and start you to shoot-in'."

"Two men coming up the road," intervened Estella quickly.

At these words a flash crossed the face of Mur-

phy—a flash of untold relief. Robinson did not miss the look. Then he glanced at the road, and saw the corduroy-clad figure of Buck, followed by another rider.

“Don’t mind if I smoke, Stella?” he drawled. “Thanks. Set down, Murphy. I’m real anxious to hear what Buck has to say to you.”

Murphy did not sit down, but eyed the approaching riders uneasily. Buck slid from his horse, looking visibly excited, and strode toward the veranda. He glanced at Robinson without surprise, then his gaze fell on Murphy. He doffed his hat to Estella.

“Morning,” ma’am! You sure look fresh as ever. Got visitors, I see.”

A smile on her lips, Estella stepped forward and shook hands.

“Just in time for lunch, Mr. Buck. Yes, we have visitors. My friend, Mr. Robinson, from the south, and this is Mr. Murphy——”

Buck glanced at Robinson, then turned to Murphy suddenly. A look of recognition came into his eyes. He was acting his part well.

“Murphy!” he said slowly. “That ain’t the name you went under when I seen you before. What you doin’ here?”

At this challenge, the girl started in astonishment. Robinson smiled thinly.

“Me?” Murphy faced the rancher aggressively. “None of your business, is it? But if you want to know, I done bought a mortgage on this place, and I aim to foreclose if she ain’t cleared off first of the month.”

“Oh, you do!” Buck’s hand flashed down and his gun looked at Mr. Murphy. “All I got to say

to you is—git, and git quick! The mortgage'll be paid. I'll lend Miss Shumway the money my ownself. Git, you varmint!"

Murphy turned and strode down the steps, passed to his horse, and rode away.

Buck gazed after him with narrowed eyes until he was well away. Then, without a bit of warning, he whirled and threw down his gun at Robinson.

"Hands up, you! Quick!"

There was deadly intent in his voice. Robinson, absolutely surprised, put up his hands. Buck leaned forward and jerked away his gun.

"Here! How dare you, Mr. Buck!" exclaimed Stella, darting forward. "What do you mean by this——"

"Miss Stella," said Buck gravely, "I got mighty bad news for you. Me and two of my riders was comin' here this morning by way of the spring. We were up on that knoll behind it when we crossed the track of a horseman, and a moment later we seen this gent," he motioned toward Robinson with his ready gun, "ridin' up to the spring. Cervantes was standin' there smokin' a cigarette. What passed we dunno. All we heard was two shots, and then this gent rode away quick. When we got up, Cervantes was dead. We come on here quick."

Horror filled the eyes of the girl, and a terrible grief.

"Dead—Miguel dead?"

"Shot twice, Miss Stella," answered the latter, regret in his tone. "We seen the whole thing. I left 'Chuck' Hansome to bring Miguel in, then I come on. Ye see, ma'am, we'd been lookin' for this gent since yesterday. Seems like he met my fore-

man, Matt Brady, and shot him down, out o' pure cussedness."

"Don't forget Knute," intervened Robinson, smiling a thin smile. "Don't forget him, Buck."

"Oh!" Estella turned to the speaker swiftly. "Tell me—tell him, you must! This isn't true!"

"Sho, of course it ain't true," said Robinson calmly. "Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, it ain't got a word of truth—except maybe that poor Miguel's dead. That's liable to be true."

The girl shrank away from him; then, with a burst of tears, ran from the veranda.

Instantly the manner of Robinson changed. He looked at Buck from narrowed steely eyes that burned.

"Buck," he said softly, "I'm tellin' you here and now—you'd better shoot while you got me, for you ain't goin' to have me long. You'd better shoot, Buck. I'm warnin' you, it's your best chance. After this, you and me——"

"None of your big talk, Robinson," sneered the rancher. "We have you dead to rights, and we'll see that the law attends to you. Hey, there! Come up and rope this gent! We'll take him in to the sheriff right off."

Buck's companion swung from the saddle, took his lariat, and came to the veranda. From inside the house came a shrill high scream of grief; the señora had learned the news. Then Estella appeared again, and saw the puncher with the rope.

"Oh, you mustn't!" she cried out, running forward. "He didn't do it; he couldn't have done it, Mr. Buck! Why——"

"Ma'am, we seen the whole thing," said Buck re-

gretfully. "And this gent is mighty slick, but we'll turn him in to the law to be dealt with. That's all we aim to do."

"Oh, tell them, tell them!" Estella turned her tear-stained eyes to Robinson. "You can make them believe when——"

"I'm afraid Mr. Buck is right stubborn and set in his ways," sighed Robinson. "Nope, they ain't a bit o' use in me spillin' any talk to him, Stella! Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, there ain't. I met Miguel on the way here, as I said, but——"

Buck nodded to his rider, who approached Robinson and deftly knotted his wrists behind his back.

"Put him on my horse," said Buck quietly, "and take him into town. Hand him over to Sheriff Tracy—and see that nothing happens to him. Don't tell any one but the sheriff what's happened, savvy? We don't want to rouse up any necktie party in town. This is a matter for the law—open-and-shut case."

"Quite so," observed Robinson ironically. "Quite so! We'll get to town all right, Buck—won't we, cowboy? Lead on, and don't pull too hard on that cord. My wrists is real tender lately. See you later, Stella; don't you worry none whatever about this deal. Trust Jake Harper to see that the cards are dealt honest."

The girl stared after him, stricken in her grief.

Without attempt at protest, Robinson mounted into the saddle of Buck, and allowed the puncher to tie his ankles beneath the horse. Then the puncher mounted, and started for town. The two figures rode away from the ranch, and lessened in the distance.

Buck, meantime, was speaking to Estella Shumway.

"This is a terrible thing, Stella," he said, his voice soft and pleading. "Poor Miguel and my boys has had some trouble, but it wa'n't nothing to mention. Gosh, this is pretty bad! And then this feller Murphy comin' along.

"Now look-a-here, Stella! You got to let me handle things for you a spell. I'll get rid o' this cuss Murphy in a hurry. Don't let the money part of it bother you a mite. I'll send in to town to-day and git the preacher, and we'll attend to a real funeral for poor Miguel, savvy? There ain't nothin' I wouldn't do for you, li'l girl, and you know it."

"Oh!" The girl turned to him desperately. "Are you sure—are you sure about what you saw? It isn't possible, I tell you!"

Her vehemence shook Buck despite himself.

"Why, Stella! You ain't friends with this gunman Robinson? He's a stranger up here—sure, you don't know him?"

The girl shivered slightly and turned away. She was silent for a moment; then:

"No," she said. "I never saw Robinson before to-day, Mr. Buck—only he seemed such a nice man! And he knew some friends of ours——"

A flash of relief crossed the features of Buck.

"Well, looks is deceivin'," he averred stoutly. "Now, Stella, you leave things to me. Chuck will be in pretty quick with the body, and I'll take care of it. Poor Miguel! This here news will be a mighty big shock to everybody who knowed him. Want me to send for Jake Harper? Him and me ain't overly friendly, but he's mighty true to you, I

guess. We'll overlook our differences and 'tend to your affairs."

"It's—it's good of you, Mr. Buck," and the girl glanced at him quickly, then turned to the doorway. "Yes, send for him, please. You—you must excuse me now; I'll have to be with poor Tia Maria——"

She vanished into the house.

For a moment Buck stood motionless. His gaze followed the tiny dots that were the figures of his puncher and Robinson, and a smile curved his wide lips. Then he glanced down and picked up one of the doughnuts that Robinson had dropped. He regarded it, then bit strongly into it.

"Gosh, these is sure fine doughnuts!" he observed. "I'll sure be playin' in luck when Stella comes to cook for me. Lucky catchin' Robinson thataway, too, y' understand. And darned lucky Stella didn't think to look if his gun'd been fired twice. Plumb lucky!"

CHAPTER VI

PROOF

AFTER leaving the Lazy S behind, Robinson rode in silence for some time. He was in the lead. The puncher behind held the lariat which bound Robinson to his horse.

"You got that gun of mine with you?" asked Robinson. No answer from behind. "Well, I seen Buck hand her to you. Be mighty careful with her; she's got a special easy pull. I'd be right sorry to have you point her my way."

No answer. The puncher was a sullen brute of a man.

"You fellers made one real mistake," went on Robinson, undaunted by the silence, his voice cheerful as ever. "You should ha' fixed that gun o' mine. Miguel was killed by two bullets, wasn't he? But that gun ain't been fired, cowboy. You'd better set that right 'fore turning me in to the sheriff. Otherwise Tracy would have to fix the gun his ownself, and he might forget it."

An oath from the rider behind apprised Robinson that his words had taken full effect. He grinned slightly. A moment later his horse started as a gun was fired in the air. Looking over his shoulder, Robinson saw the puncher in the act of firing the second time.

"Two shots is plenty," he observed. "That's real friendly of you, cowboy. I'd hate to spoil everything by not havin' fired that there weapon."

The sullen rider gave him a malevolent glance and motioned ahead. Robinson turned and made no further overtures.

They jogged on in silence, the hoofs raising a slow cloud of dust that followed and drifted over them with the breeze of noonday. For half an hour neither man spoke a word, and then Robinson again ventured an effort:

"You three gents must ha' been planted when I rode by and spoke with Cervantes. Ain't that the way of it now?"

No response at all. Robinson chuckled.

"I guess that's it, feller. Buck seen me, and got a great idea. Looks like he was dead right about it, too. Only thing that worries me is this: Who fired the two shots? Each o' these hosses has a rifle, but they was a third puncher along with you. However, that don't matter right now. The three of you was planted, seen me, and let me go past. That was actin' real clever toward me, as they say down south. Ever been down thataway, feller? You come down some day and get you a job on the SF Ranch below Pecos City. I'll help you get it any old time. Sam Fisher owns her. He's a smart young feller, they do say, only he don't justify his reputation much. Least, that's what Jake Harper says."

"Hold your jaw!" came the savage command from behind.

Robinson glanced over his shoulder and beheld another cloud of dust far behind them. His captor jerked on the lariat, and continued:

"Robinson, you start any talkin' and you'll never reach town alive. I means it. When that gent comes up, if he ain't Buck you lay low."

"Conceded," returned Robinson. "I'll not say a word, providin' you tell me where Murphy went to."

"What you so dummed curious about Murphy for?"

"Born that way and can't help it. Tell me, and I won't say a word."

"Well, Murphy he went to town, I guess. Satisfied?"

"Plenty." Robinson looked straight ahead at the road, and grinned to himself.

Behind the two the cloud of dust moved rapidly closer. The Running Dog rider turned often in his saddle with uneasy scrutiny, but to make out the figure of the rider was impossible, for the breeze was stiffly behind them and blew the dust ahead.

Thus it was not until the drum of hoofs behind was distinctly audible that Robinson heard a low oath issue from his captor.

"It's that fool Arnold from the Circle Bar! You, Robinson, keep your trap shut!"

Robinson grinned and made no response. But a moment later he looked over his shoulder, and remained looking.

Arnold was spurring his cayuse after the pair. Now he sent a hoarse yell ahead—a yell which caused the Running Dog man to jerk up his mount and turn, hand on gun.

"Put 'em up!" yelled Arnold again.

"Take it, if ye want it," growled the puncher, and drew.

Before his gun spoke, Steve Arnold fired—and fired again. Then Arnold came riding up to the plunging horse and fallen man, swearing huge oaths as he did so; the vivid flame of hatred in his face was terrible to see.

"Steve, I'm right s'prised in you," said Robinson calmly. Arnold whirled on him.

"You didn't see it!" he cried, his voice cracking. "You didn't see it—I did! This here guy was one of the two—him and Buck done it. They shot down Miguel, murdered him, never said a word, jest let drive from the brush! By gosh, it was all I could do not to let drive on 'em—not a mite of warning, but two shots!"

The face of Robinson was grave, sternly set, ten years older.

"Was it as bad as that?" he queried. "Turn me loose, Steve!"

Arnold came up and fumbled at the knots. Tears of excitement were on his dusty cheeks.

"The dirty skunks!" he cried. "It was low down, Red—the worst I ever dreamed of. This guy was one of the two. But I give him warning; you heard me? I warned him 'fore I shot him down."

"You done so, Steve," affirmed Robinson, rubbing his freed wrists. "What happened after they shot Cervantes?"

"They left Chuck Hansom with him, and folloed you. I snuck past Chuck and follered them, lay up and circled around the Lazy S house. Seen Murphy go, then seen you put into the saddle. After that I follered along until I heard the two shots, and that was all."

Robinson reached for the rifle that was booted at the saddle before him.

"This is Buck's horse, Steve," he said gravely. "And Buck's rifle. Now, lookin' down the barrel, you'll agree with me that she's been fired real lately—and there's a trace o' fumes to prove it. That's proof aplenty for Buck. Let's look at this gent's rifle."

The rifle from the other saddle had also been fired recently. Robinson looked down at the dead man and shook his head sadly.

"You fellows," he observed, "have been sowing the wind up in this county—and now you're going to reap the whirlwind. You'll reap it good and plenty, and she'll strike sudden; she always does. Steve! Can you swear to it that Buck fired one of the shots?"

"I seen him rise up with his gun a-smokin'," averred Steve Arnold.

"Then let's you and me lay off of Buck entirely." Robinson smiled harshly at the dead man. "We'll get him when the time comes—and let the law deal with him."

"Law?" Arnold swore scornfully. "Lot o' law in this county! You'd never get Tracy to arrest Buck even!"

Robinson regarded him a moment, the blue eyes keen and hard.

"C'rect the first shot, sure's my name's Jack Robinson! But I don't aim to have Tracy do any arrestin'. The main thing right now is that Buck is back at the Lazy S fillin' Stella full o' fancy lies, and she thinkin' I'm in jail for the murder of poor Cervantes."

"Oh! So that's why they had you tied up?" queried Steve Arnold.

"Somethin' like that." Robinson smiled. "Steve, can I trust you to turn in back there and say nothin'—keep your head level—just be nice and polite to Buck and his man Chuck Hansom? Can ye do it, cowboy?"

"Can if I got to. Why?"

"Then go do it, and stick around till you gets a chance to wise up Stella to the facts of the case. Take Buck's rifle; we may need a real gun 'fore we get through. I'll ride this feller's hoss and take his Winchester. Buck's hoss we'll send home by his ownself."

Suiting action to words, Robinson took the bridle of the dead man's mount, then with a slap and a wave of his hat sent Buck's beast careering down the road. Arnold sat looking down at him darkly.

"Where you goin', Red?"

Robinson's old quizzical smile broke forth. "Me? I got to get to town in time to call for some mail——"

"To town, ye durned fool! Ridin' a Runnin' Dog cayuse? Here, you take this hoss o' mine and I'll take——"

"And give our game away to Buck? Not on your young life, cowboy! I want Mr. Buck to think I'm safe behind the bars—until he gets home and finds his own hoss, anyhow. Nope, you amble along and don't waste worry over me. Your job is to take the worry off Stella's mind, savvy?"

"You've got mighty well acquainted, Red. Callin' her Stella, huh?"

"That's my specialty." With a laugh, Robinson

was in the saddle and turning his horse toward town. "See you later. If you take a notion, I'll prob'ly be in town until about eight o'clock to-night. And mind, you leave Buck be! He'll hang for that murder!"

With this he put spurs to his cayuse and careered down the road in a cloud of dust. Steve Arnold looked after him, scowled down at the dead man, then reined about and started on the back trail. He was quivering, tremulous with a stern excitement.

"My first man!" He looked back at the motionless figure, then straightened in the saddle. "Well, I s'pose it had to come some time—and I'm glad I paid out the cuss for what he done at the spring. Question is, can I git to town 'fore eight o'clock to-night? Red, he's sure aimin' to raise Cain with somebody there."

When at length he dismounted at the Lazy S, he was met by Buck and Chuck Hansom, the latter a cheerful scoundrel who sported an Indian beadwork vest and was credited with an aptitude for any deviltry.

"Howdy, Steve!" greeted Buck. "Jest come from town? Meet anybody?"

"Uh-huh." Arnold busied himself unsaddling. "Done heard the news. Met that hombre of yourn with his pris'ner in tow. Brought in Cervantes, have you?"

Buck nodded gravely. "Where's Jake Harper, d'you know?"

"Home, I reckon. His rheumatiz was right bad this mornin'," said Arnold coolly. "Miss Stella inside? I got a letter for her."

"I'll take it in," proffered Jake. "She's right cut up about Miguel. I don't guess you'd better bother her now, Steve——"

Arnold's hand fell to his gun. So deadly was his face in that moment that Buck instinctively took a step backward.

"I'm carryin' my own mail," said Arnold. "You fellers object?"

"Of course not," said Buck hastily. "What ye tryin' to do—stir up trouble a time like this? Miss Stella wants to git Jake here. Goin' over to the ranch real soon?"

"I don't aim to." Arnold gave him look for look. "If she's done asked you to fetch Jake, you fetch him. I got business of my own; I ain't ridin' for Jake no more."

"You ain't!" exclaimed Buck, staring. "Listen! I got room for you——"

"Not for me, you ain't!" and with a slow laugh Steve Arnold went into the house.

The other two looked after him, then glanced at each other. Chuck Hansom uttered a chuckle, and touched Buck's arm.

"I guess you 'n' me had better go find Jake ourselves, Buck. What say?"

Buck nodded. His work here was done for the moment. He was well satisfied with it.

CHAPTER VII

MASKS OFF

IT WAS late afternoon when Jack Robinson rode into the town of Pahrump, county seat of the county of the same name. The town was deserted apparently; somnolent and sleepy. The afternoon stage was not yet in with the mail. The courthouse square, with its long hitching rail, seemed abandoned to flies and sunlight. Even the jail and sheriff's office looked desolate; across the street from this last, Mike's Place showed not a sign of life.

Robinson went to the hotel and turned his horse into the corral there, leaving his saddle and bridle in the hotel office for safe-keeping. He then made his way to Main Street and sought the telegraph office. There was no line in Pahrump, but the telephone exchange handled messages. At the exchange, Robinson smiled at the young woman in charge.

"I left a message here yesterday, ma'am, askin' you to hold up any answer. Name of Fisher."

Without comment the young woman handed him a message. Robinson pocketed it, returned to the street, glanced at the message, and chuckled.

"What I need is grub, a bath, and a shave," he reflected. "Fresh shirt wouldn't hurt anything, not

to mention a clean handkerchief. Grub can come last."

The stage and express office, an integral unit with the Johnson Merchandise Company, lay across the street. Robinson betook himself thither and confronted a listless clerk.

"What's all the excitement about in town?" he demanded. The clerk saw no humor in the question, but answered it seriously:

"Two men shot up yesterday; sheriff's gone out with a posse. Dunno why."

"I don't know why, either," said Robinson cheerfully. "You ought to have a pair of saddlebags sent up by express from Pecos City. Name of Fisher."

"Come in last night," was the response.

The saddlebags over his arm, Robinson went to the barber shop. There he obtained a shave, followed by a bath, and from the saddlebags he spruced up with a clean shirt and handkerchief—also a second gun.

His pilgrimage now took him to the nearest and only restaurant, where he put away a huge order of ham and eggs, with other things. This done, he dropped his saddlebags at the hotel, loosened his belt, bought a cigar, and sauntered down the street again. Thus far he had seen no signs of Mr. Murphy, and he rightly concluded that the gentleman was sequestered in or about Mike's Place.

These errands had taken up considerable time. The stage was nearly due, and the town showed some symptoms of animation. Horses fringed the long hitching rail in the square. A number of loungers about the sheriff's office showed that the posse

had returned. Unhurried, Robinson sauntered to the post office and presented a smiling face at the window.

"Mail for Fisher, please," he requested.

The postmaster fished several long envelopes from a box, glanced at them, then gave Robinson a hard look.

"Nothin' fer you, I guess."

"Your mistake, mister," and Robinson smiled. "Those letters are for me, I believe."

"These here is for Sheriff Sam Fisher o' Pecos County."

Robinson drew a flat metal object from his pocket and laid it on the shelf.

"Does that satisfy you? If not, I'll come around and get my own mail."

The postmaster glanced at the sheriff's badge, silently shoved out the letters, and stared at Robinson as that young man departed.

Without looking at his mail, Robinson took his easy way to the sheriff's office. He nodded to the loungers outside, and passed in. At the door which bore the sheriff's name he paused. Turning the handle, he walked in.

Sheriff Tracy was seated at a desk, alone in the room. He looked up, saw who his visitor was, and gasped. Then his hand slid across the desk.

"Don't!" said Robinson, and Tracy looked into a gun. "Set back; I dropped in for a quiet talk. Also, I aim to use your office a spell."

"You impudent scoundrel!" gasped the sheriff. "Look here! What d'you know about that shooting on the north road yesterday?"

"Know all about it," responded Robinson coolly,

closing the door and drawing up a chair opposite the sheriff. He sat down and laid the gun before him. "In fact, I done it. Now, set still and don't call in anybody just yet. We got to have a talk. First, I want to look at this here mail, if you don't object."

He put the letters on the desk and spread them out. Tracy's glance fell to them. A start of surprise, and his gaze returned to Robinson's face.

"Whose mail you got there, Robinson?"

"My own." Robinson smiled thinly, knowing that Tracy had read the name on that mail.

There was a moment of silence. Tracy surveyed his cool visitor with frightful uneasiness, licked his lips, tugged at his mustache. Then:

"Well, what you want here?"

"Several things, sheriff. I'll be real busy to-morrow, so I thought we'd better get all fixed up to-day. Got to go out to the Lazy S to-night with the preacher and attend to the funerals to-morrow."

"Funerals? At the Lazy S? What in time d'you mean?"

"Shootin'; somebody murdered Miguel Cervantes this mornin'. Shot him twice in the back."

The sheriff leaped from his chair. Robinson's hand went to his gun, and Tracy sat down again, breathing hard.

"Who done it?"

"Now, sheriff, don't go to askin' me unpleasant questions. One of the gents that done it is real dead. The other gent is going over the road for it—in my care."

Tracy bristled.

"You may be Sam Fisher and you may not," he said aggressively, "but you ain't walkin' into my

county and givin' no orders, stranger. That's plumb final. You got no authority here; not a mite."

"I know it," said Robinson sweetly. "But I aim to get that authority real sudden. Now don't go to causing any trouble, Sheriff Tracy. In about ten minutes from now you got to saddle up and take quite a journey, and I'd hate to make you take a longer journey than is necessary."

"Saddle up! Me?" queried Tracy, red-faced.

"Yep. First thing, you look over this here telegram. It's about a gent named Murphy, which same is sojournin' in our midst. Since somebody wants him bad enough to offer three hundred dollars for him, you'd ought to be interested in picking up the money."

He laid his telegram on the desk. Tracy read it. His face was a study in mingled emotions. Finally he looked up at Fisher with a complete change of front.

"I guess you're Sam Fisher, all right," he observed. "They say he's got the devil's own nerve, and you sure show it. But you're making a terrible mistake butting into things like this, Fisher. You don't know this here county——"

"Here's my badge for proof, and my mail," said Robinson. "I'm Sam Fisher—fact is, I never said right out that I was Robinson. Folks just took that for granted. You and the old gang are plumb out of luck, Tracy. I got no hard feelings against you, and I'm going to give you the chance to slide out of town, avoid trouble, and pick up three hundred iron men. In other words, take Mr. Murphy to the railroad and go away with him. By the time you get

back the trouble will be all over and you'll have a clean slate."

Tracy, breathing hard, surveyed his visitor with anxious eyes.

"Don't get hasty now," warned Robinson—or, to use his real name, Sam Fisher. "And don't get to thinking about Templeton Buck and how much power he has. He ain't going to have much left when I get through with him, Tracy. I s'pose he's given out orders that poor Jack Robinson has got to be eliminated. Fact is, he thought he had me eliminated a few hours ago. That's all right; we'll leave Jack Robinson out of it. Sam Fisher has drawn cards in this game, and he's going to stick for the pot."

"Why don't you take Murphy, if you want him, and go?" demanded the sheriff.

"I don't want him. Three hundred bones means nothin' in my young life. Also, and moreover, I don't aim to go in that direction." Fisher's smile was cherubic. "You are gettin' off mighty easy, Tracy. All you got to do is to swear me in as a deputy and turn over the jail keys to me, then start travelin' with Murphy. I'll even go so far as to help you arrest him."

Tracy reddened again.

"Leave you here?" he said. "Not much! I ain't going to do no such thing——"

"I said not to get hasty, didn't I?" Fisher's eyes hardened into blue steel.

"You can't run no raffle on me, Fisher!" blustered Tracy. "If I don't do it, then what?"

Fisher surveyed him a moment with that bitterly cold gaze.

"If you don't do it," he returned slowly, "then you got to make a heap big war talk, and do it sudden. Balance her up now, and make your play. I'm talkin' turkey."

In those tense features Tracy read the truth—this man was in to play the limit. And Tracy dared not back his hand; he could not trust his own cards. There was too much he did not know. He had been unable to find Buck that afternoon, and he was facing this crisis on his own backbone—which did not amount to much.

He had heard of Sam Fisher often and often. The sheriff of Pecos had a reputation, and stood behind it hard. Tracy could not tell just what this man would dare do, and he did not care to take chances on finding out.

On the other hand, he was offered a trip with a prisoner which would net him three hundred dollars reward money. He would be safely away while Fisher was playing his game. It would be certainly all right to leave Fisher, the sheriff of the next county, in charge of Pahrump while he was gone. And if Fisher got killed, what loss? None. If he did not get killed, he was apt to kill off several people who were behind Tracy. That would be no great loss either.

A grim smile curved the lips of Tracy.

"Sam, your arguments are powerful good," he said. "There's a couple o' deputies outside. If you want to have the ceremony over right away

Fisher nodded, rose, and went to the door.

"Hey, fellers!" he called to the group outside. "Come inside; sheriff wants you."

Five men trooped in, eyeing Fisher with uneasy glances. Sheriff Tracy, having made his decision, lost no time in putting the job through.

"This here," he said, motioning to his visitor, "is Sam Fisher, sheriff o' Pecos County. I'm about to swear him in as deputy and leave him in charge of things here. Fisher, you want these deputies to work with you?"

Sam Fisher eyed the group and smiled.

"Nope, I'm satisfied to play a lone hand, Tracy. Much obliged for the offer."

"Very well. You boys can bear witness to this here affair, then you're free. Hold up your hand, Fisher——"

Sam Fisher was duly sworn as deputy sheriff, and Tracy handed him a badge. Fisher put it in his pocket with a grin. The startled, staring men behind him were dumfounded. Tracy then shoved over the jail keys.

"They's four brand-new cells," he said, "just installed, all the latest fittin's. The others ain't worth much 'cept for looks. Four will be plenty, I guess?"

"One," said Fisher significantly, "is all I figger on using. I'd hate to cause the county a lot of expense, Tracy, when you're treatin' me so wide and handsome."

"You want to move into the office here while I'm gone?"

"Nope, thanks. I'll just lock her up; I expect to be plumb busy for a few days. Now what say to you and me going after that bad guy? I reckon we'll find him down to Mike's Place. Boys," and he turned to the ex-deputies, "Sheriff Tracy has discovered that there's a feller here badly wanted for

a holdup and murder—and he aims to light out with him right off. That is, providin' we gather him in without any gunplay, which we hope to do. You might spread the news, so folks won't think it funny that Tracy is out o' town."

"What about that killin' up on the north road?" asked somebody. "Matt Brady?"

Fisher looked at the speaker.

"Oh, him?" he asked in surprise. "Why, I done that myself. No objections?"

"Gosh, no!" was the response, hastily rendered.

Sam Fisher smiled grimly as he left the office with Tracy at his elbow.

"Any of the Running Dog outfit in town?" he asked when they were crossing the street.

"Not that I know of," said Tracy, jingling the handcuffs in his pocket. "But if I was you, Fisher, I'd sort of keep my eye skinned for Buck."

"Thanks." Fisher chuckled. "That's the best little thing to do, Tracy. Well, here goes for the big show! Bet you a dollar we don't even have a rumpus."

He pushed open the swinging doors of Mike's Place.

CHAPTER VIII

EXIT MR. P. BRADY

THE saloon was deserted, except for Galway Mike and Mr. Murphy, who were closely engaged in conversation across the bar. In another half hour the place would be rushed; the stage would be in, and the usual evening's business would be opened up.

Sam Fisher wasted no time on preliminaries. When he stepped inside the place it was with a drawn gun.

"Hands up, gents!" he said quietly. "Move quick, Mike!"

Two pairs of hands were swiftly elevated. Murphy saw in the bar mirror who had come in, and he stood petrified. Mike grimaced angrily.

"This ain't a holdup, is it?" he uttered. "Sure an' all——"

"Nope, and you aren't in it, Mike," responded Fisher. "So long as you keep out of it, you're not in it; get the idea? All right. Better iron this gent, sheriff."

Tracy appeared, to the amazement of Mike. He produced handcuffs and stepped forward. From Murphy broke a string of oaths.

"Shut up!" ordered Fisher. "One more word out of you, Pincher Brady, and I'll drill your hand

—should ha' done it yesterday. You're going to the capital for robbery and murder. Guess I'll take a look at his pockets, Tracy, if you don't mind."

Gyved and backed against the bar by Tracy, the prisoner was helpless. Sam Fisher stepped forward, removed his gun, and then swiftly searched him. He took from Murphy's breast pocket a number of papers, and hurriedly glanced over them.

"Most of these have bearings on my case, Tracy," he announced. "You'll have no objections if I take charge of 'em?"

"None whatever, Fisher," said the sheriff amiably.

At this response Murphy gave a violent start. Galway Mike, behind the bar, opened his mouth and started with a drooping jaw.

"Fisher!" stammered Murphy. "Who you callin' Fisher, sheriff? This here gent——"

"Is the sheriff o' Pecos County," said Sheriff Tracy. "And he's takin' my place here for a few days, gents. Now, Brady, march along!"

"I'll run along and see yo off," said Sam Fisher languidly.

Tracy grinned. He was beginning to feel that he had chasen the wiser way out of a very bad dilemma, and was fully as anxious to depart from Pahrump as Sam Fisher was to have him gone. He had nothing to gain by staying, and much to lose.

"If I'd knowed you was Sam Fisher," said Murphy ruefully as they went out, "I wouldn't have monkeyed with you no ways."

"But you didn't, and you did," returned Fisher cheerfully. "And now you're in the soup, Pincher. But cheer up; you'll meet some friends of yours be-

fore long, as soon as I get time to round 'em up and send 'em along. Where are your hosses, Tracy?"

"I got a couple in the hotel corral."

Sight of the two men with their obvious prisoner quickly assembled a small crowd, which drifted along to the hotel. On the porch Sam Fisher seated Mr. Murphy in a chair and stood guard over him while Tracy went for the horses. The crowd eyed the two men and offered many comments and questions, to which Sam Fisher only replied with a smile. News of his identity having been spread by the ex-deputies of the posse, he was at length confronted by a direct question.

"Are you Fisher o' Pecos County?" demanded one of the crowd about the porch.

"C'rect the first shot, pardner," responded Sam Fisher.

"What ye doin' here?"

"Workin'," was the laconic retort. "Any objections?"

"You wait till Buck hears about this!" came in quick response. "Him and the Runnin' Dawg will certainly take down your hide. Hey, fellers! Let's run this Pecos sheriff out o' town! We don't want him here!"

There was a general, although by no means hearty, assent to the proposal. At this moment Tracy rode up with a spare horse. He grinned at Fisher and addressed the crowd.

"Gents, I've swore in Sheriff Fisher as special deputy and am leavin' him in charge of things here. Adios! Gimme the prisoner, Sam."

Fisher led the wilted Mr. Murphy to the waiting horse and assisted him into the saddle rather ener-

getically. He waved the pair an ironic farewell.

"Hearty travelin' to you gents! See you later, Tracy."

The two rode down the street. Sam Fisher turned to the crowd surrounding him, and all the laughing geniality had fled out of his face.

"Boys," he said gravely, "I don't blame you for not wanting strangers butting into your affairs. I'm not going to do it for long—but while I'm doing it I aim to do it thorough and proper. Miguel Cervantes was murdered this morning; shot from ambush. I'm going to get the man who did it, and I'm going to send him to the pen. That's all. Now will some gent kindly direct me to where the nearest or next preacher resides?"

Dumfounded by this information, the crowd split before him. Somebody volunteered the desired direction, and Sam Fisher strode off to arrange for the funeral at the Lazy S on the following day, also for a coroner's jury. The latter gave him some trouble, but mention of his name and present position proved sufficient to obtain what he desired. Also, tale of the murder of Cervantes and the manner thereof was a tremendous shock. Sam Fisher was careful to make no mention of the murder, and merely shook his head to all queries.

It was seven o'clock that evening when Chuck Hansom, rider for the Running Dog, came into town from the north alone. Before he had ridden a block he was hailed eagerly and brought to a halt, where a small crowd gave him the astounding information about Sam Fisher. Now Chuck was a quick-witted rascal. He readily saw the general sentiment of puzzled wonder and resentment against

Fisher's intrusion into Pahrump, and inside of two minutes he took prompt advantage of it.

"Listen here!" he cried out hotly. "This here guy ain't Sam Fisher at all. He's a feller named Robinson, pretending to be Fisher. He's the guy that murdered Mig Cervantes. Me and Buck seen him do it—seen him! You boys go git your guns and we'll 'tend to him."

There was a howl as his words became understood.

Meantime, from the south, two other men came riding into town on jaded, staggering beasts. They were two Running Dog riders who had been absent from the community for some weeks; so unkempt, so dust covered and weary were they that they arrived at Mike's Place without recognition.

Sliding out of the saddle with groans of relief, they staggered into Mike's Place, which was comfortably crowded. They were too fearfully tired with hard riding to note the startled silence which fell on the crowd as they were recognized.

"Liquor, Mike!" croaked the foremost, wiping his dust-rimmed eyes. "A drink! Buck been in town to-day?"

Galway Mike set out a bottle and made a grimace, but neither man noticed it. Both seized for the bottle at once, pouring drinks with shaking hands.

"Nope," said Mike at last. "Ain't been in."

"Gosh, that feels good goin' down!" rejoined the foremost man. "Say, you got to get word out to Buck to-night; we can't ride another mile. Done killed two hosses on the way up. Tell Buck we done lost our man——"

At length the dead stillness of the place struck home. The two riders glanced at each other, then turned to survey the crowd. Despite the fact that the general sympathy was with them, nobody could keep back a grin at their perturbed wonder. Then, from the end of the bar, a voice spoke up—a drawling, whimsical voice:

“You ain’t lost him, cowboy. You just follered him. Ain’t it the truth?”

There, thumbs in his vest and leaning back in his chair, was Fisher. The two stared at him, petrified. Fisher sat at a table just beyond the lower end of the bar, where he was practically hidden from view of any one at the door, yet had a clear field of vision.

“Sheriff Fisher!” exclaimed the two astounded riders in unison, as though they were staring at a ghost.

There was dead silence for a moment.

Every one in the room sensed the peculiar tenseness of that moment—a moment of crisis, of taut nerves, of impending disaster, as the two riders stared at Sam Fisher and he smiled back at them. Perhaps he saw how their fingers stiffened, yet he did not move. If he did not see it, Galway Mike did. Mike’s hand fell, inch by inch, below the edge of the bar on which he leaned.

These were the two men who had been keeping watch on Fisher down in Pecos City. They knew without telling that the presence of Sam Fisher here meant danger to the Running Dog. Perhaps they had been too closely in touch with Fisher down below to retain much awe of him, and, besides, they were dead tired, nerves on edge, and reckless.

As with one accord they reached for their guns. Sam Fisher came to his feet, gun in hand. He had no intention of shooting unless so compelled, but he was watching the two riders and not Mike.

Before any shot sounded Mike's hand had completed its motion—a swift, underhand fling of deadly accuracy that sent his bung-starter down behind the bar unseen. It crashed into Fisher's forehead and sent him down like a felled steer.

Two shots came. That bung-starter saved Fisher's life, for it dropped him beneath the bullets. He lay quiet, momentarily stunned. In another five seconds the crowd had fallen upon him; he was trussed hand and foot and bound in a chair.

Amid the pandemonium that ensued, with wild yells for ropes and much loud cursing, Galway Mike mounted the bar with a gun in each fist, fired into the ceiling, and evoked comparative silence.

"Byes, this gent is my meat!" he roared. "'Twas me dropped him, and it's me that'll have the say, moind that! There'll be no lynchin' party yet a while. Two of yez carry him into the storeroom behint and lave him rest a bit. We'll be talkin' this over, and maybe Buck will be in town to-night."

The mention of Buck's name carried weight. Besides, Sam Fisher had opened his eyes and was looking around. It was one thing to tie up a man—it was another thing to murder a bound and helpless prisoner. The crowd hesitated.

"Take him into the back room wid ye now," repeated Mike, flourishing his guns. The gaze of Sam Fisher dwelt upon him for a moment.

"Mike," said the prisoner calmly, "you're interfering with justice, and you know it. Inside of an hour I'll get you for this. Be ready."

That was all. The brutal features of Galway Mike reddened, then turned deathly pale under the intent gaze of Fisher. One of his hands jerked up; for an instant it looked as though he would shoot the bound man. Perhaps he would have done so but for the crowd. Instead, he motioned to the back room with his weapon, and jumped down from the bar.

Two men picked up Sam Fisher, still bound to his chair, and carried him into the storeroom behind the main room of the saloon. It was a good-sized room, stacked with barrels and cases of liquor, with a single window. A lantern, hung to a peg, illuminated the place dimly. Stowing the prisoner here, the men closed the door again and joined the clamorous throng around the bar.

The two arrivals from the south were hurriedly apprised of events—the departure of Sheriff Tracy, the killing of Matt Brady and 'Lias Knute, the rumored murder of Miguel Cervantes. In the midst Steve Arnold pushed open the doors and entered. At sight of him everyone pressed forward eagerly.

"Here's Arnold of the Lazy S now! Hey, Steve, is it true Cervantes was shot to-day?"

Arnold swept the place with his eyes, nodding curtly. He saw nothing of Robinson.

"Yes," he said. "Not shot—murdered."

"Who done it?" went up a mad clamor of voices. "How? Where?"

"Ain't for me to say," returned Arnold.

His attitude would have provoked instant hos-

tility had not two men rushed into the saloon at this moment with a loud shout.

"Hey! Chuck Hansom of the Runnin' Dawg is comin' a-smokin' with a crowd; he says this feller ain't Fisher at all; says he's a feller named Robinson; murdered Cervantes! Chuck says him an' Buck seen it done——"

Uproar filled the place, and mad confusion. For two minutes pandemonium reigned supreme. Then somebody thought of appealing to Steve Arnold to confirm the tidings, but when things quieted down Arnold proved to have vanished.

Hot upon the heels of this arrived Chuck Hansom and a yelling crowd. Standing in the entrance, Chuck showed a gun in each hand.

"Where's the feller calls himself Sam Fisher? I'm lookin' for him."

Finding no prey awaiting him, Chuck strode forward, greeted his two brethren, and found himself confronted by Galway Mike, who held a sawed-off shotgun across the bar.

"Far enough, Chuck! We got Fisher in the back room, tied up. Hold on, you byes in the doorway! L'ave us be, will ye?"

Silence was obtained, leaving the center of the floor to Mike, Chuck Hansom, and the two Running Dog riders.

"Now, me lad," pursued Mike over his shotgun, "what's this tale ye been tellin'?"

"It was Robinson murdered Cervantes, and we're aiming to 'tend to him," returned Chuck. "He ain't Sam Fisher at all, ye numskull Irisher! His name is Robinson——"

"It ain't!" spoke up one of the two returned

men. "He's Sam Fisher, all right. Ain't we been follerin' him for two weeks? You're locoed, Chuck!"

This staggered Chuck for a moment, then he recovered.

"You durned fools!" he cried wrathfully. "Let him be Fisher, for all I care. Anyhow, we seen him shoot down Miguel Cervantes. Shot him in the back, I'm tellin' ye. You, Mike! Lay down that gun!"

From behind Hansom went up a low, surging growl. Every man there saw red at the tale he heard; the story of Miguel Cervantes shot in the back. For only an instant did Galway Mike hesitate; then his shotgun fell.

"You win, byes," he cried. "If he done that, go git him and have a party!"

There was a swelling roar as the crowd surged to the doorway of the storeroom.

CHAPTER IX

FISHER RIDES NORTH

MIKE'S PLACE was lighted into the semblance of day by two huge acetylene lamps in the center of the ceiling.

As the foremost of the crowd entered the store-room there came to the others a howl of baffled rage. The entire rear of the long room was a surging mass of men, all fighting to be first. The front of the place was quite deserted, except for the figure of Mike, who stood behind the bar, hand still on his shotgun.

About the rear doorway centered a wild struggle. Nobody knew just what was taking place until Chuck Hansom leaped to a chair and dominated the mob.

"He's gone!" roared the cowboy with the gay beaded vest. "Gone! Somebody's cut him loose. Got out the windy——"

"C'rect the first shot, Chuck," drawled a quiet voice from the front.

Every man there turned, to behold Steve Arnold in the doorway, a gun in each hand. To one side of the swinging doors, thumbs in his vest, was negligently posed Sam Fisher.

"I've come for you, Mike," he said in the moment of dead silence. "Chuck, you and your friends will

be attended to by Mr. Arnold, here, so be careful. Mike, go for your gun——”

Mike had already gone for it, merely switching around the shotgun atop the bar. It burst into a shattering, deafening roar that drowned the words of Sam Fisher. Under the roar came the whiplike crack of a revolver.

There was a crash and crackle of falling glass; the double load of buckshot took out the front window with admirable unanimity. Silence fell, dread and ominous. Galway Mike had fallen over his bar, and lay there motionless. Sam Fisher jerked his gun into its holster again, his face hard and flinty, his eyes burning.

“Sorry about this, boys,” he said, “but it’s time that Mr. Buck and his friends were put out of business.”

“Who killed Cervantes?” yelled somebody. Sam Fisher held up his hand.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, and there was silence. “Three men hid in the brush and shot Cervantes, ambushed him, murdered him without a chance. Two of those men did the shooting. The third man was Chuck Hansom, yonder. One of the actual murderers is dead. The other was Templeton Buck—and I’m going to send him to the pen for it.”

“You lie!” cried the shrill voice of Chuck Hansom. “You lie! You done it yourself——”

“You devil, I seen the whole thing!” shouted Steve Arnold, breaking loose. “I seen it all——”

Chuck Hansom flung up his gun. Arnold shot him before the hammer fell.

Two shots echoed—Fisher fired twice at the ceiling, blew out the lights, and was gone through the

doorway, dragging the raging Arnold with him. Behind them the crowd began to mill in wild confusion, not realizing what had happened, engulfed in darkness, fearing more shots from the doorway.

"Confound you!" exclaimed Sam Fisher as he dragged his companion along. "What'd you drop him for? We'd have had a confession out of him later."

"I seen red," panted Steve. "I jest couldn't help it, thinkin' of the way they'd downed Miguel. He was one o' the three."

"Duck in back o' the hotel, Steve; hurry up! We got to make those horses; there's going to be a string of hornets on our trail in a hurry."

Five minutes later the two had ridden out of town. Behind them the lights and confusion died down, but both knew that parties of riders would be on their trail ere long. For a space they pushed their horses in silence, then Fisher reined in.

"Long trail ahead, Steve; no use overdoin' it," he said. "I got to thank you for snaking me out of that storeroom. How'd you find out?"

"Heard 'em talk in the front." Arnold drew in at his stirrup. "Listen! Why in thunder didn't you tell me you was Sam Fisher?"

"I was aiming to keep it dark a while, Steve," returned the other apologetically, "only things got to moving too lively and I had to make the play. Did you see Stella?"

"Yep! And say! I ain't had a chance to tell you yet; things have busted loose aplenty! Buck must ha' got Jake Harper."

"What!" The word broke from Fisher like an explosion. "What? How come?"

"I ain't certain." Steve became calmer as he spoke. "Right after I got back to the Lazy S, Buck and this feller Chuck rode home, savvy? I aimed to come right to town, only Stella was badly broken up about Miguel, so I had to stick around a while. Finally I had a chance to tell her the rights of the whole business, so she up and tells me that you was Sam Fisher himself: It took us quite a spell gettin' straightened out. Then the poor ol' señora took to throwin' fits and I had to give Stella a hand with her, which ate up considerable time.

"Well, I was gettin' saddled up, when in rode one of our veterans from the Circle Bar, seekin' Jake. Seems like Jake had started for the Shumway place early this mornin' alone. Must ha' clear dropped out o' sight. Stella told me to ride in and git you, which I done. That's all we know."

Sam Fisher studied over this information for a time, gravely perturbed.

"Steve, we're in for it, up to our necks!" he said at last. "Buck is makin' a great play for the Shumway place and Stella; at least, he started that way.

"He knows nothing of what's happened in town. He thinks that I'm in jail, safe to be put away for the murder of Cervantes. Cervantes is dead and out of his way. The only other obstacle in his path was Jake Harper, and he must have arranged to handle the old man. If he has, by Heaven, I'll get him! No—I won't get him. I'll still send him over the road."

"A bullet would simplify things a heap," and Arnold sighed.

"No, Steve." Fisher's voice was grave, heavy, stern. "Buck is the prime mover behind all the dev-

iltry up here. It was Buck who sent Frank Shumway to the pen—and that fellow Murphy, or Pincher Brady, framed the deal from the capital. I found a letter in Murphy's pocket from Buck referring to it—clear enough evidence to free Shumway."

"Glory be!" ejaculated Arnold with a sudden yell of delight. "Is that the truth?"

"It's the truth. That letter is locked in the sheriff's desk—and nobody knows about it. Now, Murphy is safe out of the way, and we'll get Frank loose from the pen in no time. But Buck—give him a quick, hot bullet? Not much! That devil is going behind the bars for life, if I can send him!"

"I'm right sorry about Chuck Hansom, Red," Steve said slowly.

"Don't worry. I don't believe Chuck would have squealed, anyhow. Now, I have to be at the Shumway place to-morrow to handle that coroner's jury; so do you with your evidence. If we're going to clean up this county, we have to do one thing at a time. This affair to-night has mussed up everything pretty badly. If that gang from town is allowed to come after us, it means a lot of shooting and killing—which I want to avoid if possible. Chuck and Mike deserved what they got, but we can't shoot up a lot of hysterical fools who think they're chasing a murderer. With Buck and his gang it's different. Where Buck made his mistake was in murdering Cervantes; that murder is going to cost a lot of blood."

"What about Jake Harper?" exclaimed Steve suddenly.

"I'm thinkin' about Jake right now—but if he's

dead I can't help him. If he ain't, he's all right. That coroner will be out to-morrow morning with his jury; so will the preacher. Until noon to-morrow, I'm tied up. And we've got to stop that mob. Here, Steve, let's tie the hosses and have a smoke."

Fisher dismounted abruptly and began to lead his horse off the road. Arnold reined in and stared at the darkness.

"My gosh, have you gone crazy or what, feller? We got no time to smoke——"

"All the time in the world, cowboy!" came the whimsical, laughing response. "Get down and roll me one, will you? Done lost my makin's in the confusion back yonder."

With a sigh of resignation to what he considered utter folly, Steve dismounted and joined his friend. Fisher said nothing until a cigarette was rolled and lighted; then:

"Steve, I've been thinking about those boys who are behind us. Who's leading them? Nobody. They'll cool off mighty quick after leaving town. They ain't sure just what has happened or who I am. When they strike trouble in the darkness they'll be all confused and imagining things. Now, all we got to do is like this——"

He spoke for a moment, low-voiced.

The crowd of men who rode out from town on the north road was headed by the two Running Dog riders, who now had Chuck Hansom to avenge. Only their savage spurrings had availed to rouse the crowd, in fact; nobody was quite certain whether Miguel Cervantes had been murdered by Fisher or by Templeton Buck. The fall of Galway Mike and Chuck Hansom had considerably cooled the enthu-

siasm of the mob, and by this time many tales of Sam Fisher were being circulated.

Thus, by the time the crowd of riders came toward the crossroads, not a few of them had trailed off back to town. Under the starlight the men rode in a clump at a steady jog. Hereabouts the road was edged by a dense thicket of manzanita. From this thicket came a drawling voice that caused every rein to jerk sharply at the bit.

"That's far enough, boys; halt! You fellers from the Circle Bar—got the front ones covered? We'll attend to the rear."

"We got 'em, sheriff," came a deep bass voice.

"Leave 'em to us!" said a sharp falsetto. Steve Arnold laughed from somewhere.

"Sure, Fisher; sure! Go ahead with your palaver."

The crowd halted as one man. Their imaginations painted a dozen voices from the clumps of brush. They saw themselves trapped, surrounded. Men cursed and drew rein.

"I want a little talk, boys," said the invisible sheriff of Pecos. "We don't aim to have any more bloodshed than we got to, and you fellers are honest enough in your convictions. Willing to listen a minute?"

"Sure," said a nervous voice from the crowd.

"That's sensible." Fisher's tone was grave, steady, holding them spellbound. "I'll be at the Lazy S to-morrow to meet the coroner and the preacher. This Cervantes murder is going to be handled by the law. You may think I did it; all right. To-morrow the coroner's jury will decide that little matter, and I'm spilling no secret when I

say their verdict is going to be hard on Templeton Buck.

"But I don't want a mob of you out there, messing things up and starting trouble. I want to propose a fair and square deal all around. You boys elect a committee of three to accompany the coroner; the rest of you stick around town and wait. If that suits you, go on back home. If it don't, then ride ahead—and take your medicine.

"You two Running Dog men! Come on alone a dozen steps. I want a personal word with you boys, and I'd advise you not to pull for any guns. Come on!"

There was a moment of hesitation. Then the two punchers urged their horses forward. Into the road ahead came the figure of Sam Fisher on foot. Cowed, startled, fearful, the crowd watched to see what would happen.

"If you two boys want to go on to the Running Dog," Fisher said quietly, "you're free to go ahead. But I warn you here and now that your boss is facing trouble. Every man with him will become an accessory. You know me, boys, and you know I mean what I say. I'm giving you fair warning. Buck, it appears, got Jake Harper to-day, and the Circle Bar outfit is behind me to the limit. You know what that means—every man of 'em a sharp-shooter, out to kill! The roads are watched; your outfit will be shot down the minute you reach the Running Dog buildings. Ride on if you want to—but you can't come back, boys."

The two riders sat motionless, drinking in his words. Most of those words had reached the crowd. News that Buck had "got" Jake Harper

was paralyzing; it meant war to the finish with the Circle Bar. Few in the crowd doubted any longer that it was Buck who had murdered Cervantes. This sheriff of Pecos was too steady, too composed, too certain of his position. He was no murderer.

The two Running Dog men glanced at each other. A word passed between them; they knew full well what it meant if they rode forward. But they were men, unafraid.

"Much obliged, sheriff," said the foremost coolly. "You're sure actin' white. Jest the same, we're workin' for the Runnin' Dawg and we don't aim to lay down on the job."

"All right, boys; I'm sorry." Fisher stood aside. "The road's yours! Let these two boys pass, fellers—and plug the first to follow."

"All right, Sam," came the voice of Arnold.

The two cowboys rode on. Not a man followed them. When they had vanished into the darkness, Fisher stepped up and addressed the crowd.

"Well, gents? Going to break through, or take my advice about sending that committee?"

There was an uneasy laugh from the crowd.

"Guess we'll send the committee, sheriff."

With a surging of turned horses, the crowd headed about and started back for town. Fisher gazed after them until the darkness had swallowed up the mob; then he turned, and found Steve Arnold at his elbow.

"Red, you're sure a wonder!" exclaimed Steve admiringly. "You done it. What next?"

"Riding," replied Fisher. "Hard riding, Steve. You know the country better than I do. You have to go ahead to the Circle Bar and get every last

one of Jake Harper's boys out around Buck's place; no fighting, understand, but the Running Dog outfit must be cooped up. Tell 'em to drop any man that rides out."

"Ain't enough of 'em," objected Arnold dubiously.

"Sure there is." Fisher laughed. "Those old fellows are dead shots, Steve; you don't know 'em. They'll circle out around the Running Dog buildings and close up things tighter than a drum. Anyhow, they have to do it. Tell them I'll be over tomorrow, after getting cleaned up at the Lazy S. And tell them to wait, understand? Wait! No foolishness. Then you come ahead to the Lazy S yourself. I'm going there now."

"S'pose Jake's all right?" suggested Arnold. "We ain't certain that Buck got him——"

"The orders stand. If Jake's there, tell him it's a clean-up of the Running Dog."

"Suits me, feller. Adios!"

Arnold climbed into the saddle and was gone.

CHAPTER X

THE LAST STAKE

TEMPLETON BUCK might have a dirty streak in him, but he was no coward.

If the man's make-up held a large amount of deliberate criminality, of cold and unscrupulous evil, it also held a large amount of strength and resolute purpose. Otherwise, Buck could never have remained the leader of such men as followed him.

And on this bright and sunny morning Templeton Buck was facing the hardest battle he had ever faced—a battle with himself.

On the previous night he had learned of the disaster which had overwhelmed all his craftily laid plans.* True, he had Jake Harper a prisoner, tied into the big chair before the fireplace. But Robinson had turned out to be Sam Fisher—and the roads were watched by the Circle Bar men.

The story told by the two men on the previous night had been utterly incredible, but with daylight it had been backed up when Sandy Davitt undertook to ride forth. Sandy's horse had been killed under him. No one else tried to leave the Running Dog buildings.

Here in the living room of the ranch house, alone with the old man tied into the chair, Buck paced up

and down, fighting out his battle. Would he lie to his men, or tell them the truth? That was it.

From the chair old Jake Harper watched him with terrible, intent eyes.

"Give me your word to act gentle, and I'll loose you, Jake," said Buck.

"I'll give you my word," said Jake, his voice deadly, "that all I want is to git my hands on a gun, and I'll fill ye full o' lead, ye mis'able coyote!"

So Jake Harper remained where he was. Buck continued his steady pacing back and forth, then suddenly came to a pause before his captive and shot out a remark:

"Where I made a mistake was in killing Cervantes. I should have given him a chance."

Jake Harper swore at him angrily.

"Where you done made your mistake, Buck, was in tryin' to covet the Shumway place. You stole the Lazy S cattle, and you should ha' stopped there."

Silence again. Buck went on with his uneasy stride. It was a difficult decision which faced him.

At this moment, while he stood on the brink of disaster, Templeton Buck for the first time saw clearly how things had come to this pass. He was rich in money and land. He did not need the Shumway land added to his own. He was powerful.

Being rich and powerful, he had thought himself secure, had determined to get both Stella and the Lazy S; and had been careless as to his methods. Back in the old days, when Frank Shumway had knocked him down, he had revenged himself by sending young Shumway to the penitentiary—deliberately framing him.

He had not stopped there. One thing had led to

another—little things, most of them. Like a rolling snowball, the affair had gained impetus. The one man Buck had feared was Sam Fisher, the sheriff of Pecos, and he had tried desperately to keep Fisher out of the way. Even now, he perceived, Fisher was the one man who threatened him.

If he could only be rid of Fisher! With Fisher out of the way all would yet be well. The murder of Cervantes could be met and faced down; with Sheriff Tracy handling the affair, no jury in the county would dare to convict Buck. Jake Harper could be held a prisoner until the mortgage was foreclosed. Lies and false witnesses would still serve to smooth the way.

Buck strode from the room, left the building, and passed over to the corrals. Here his entire outfit was lounging about as though waiting for his coming. Not until he met their nods and greetings did Buck come to a full decision as to what he would do.

For, as yet, these punchers knew nothing of the Cervantes killing beyond what had been reported from town. None of them had witnessed it. All of them, beyond a doubt, held strong suspicions. It had been a despicable act, even in their eyes.

Buck came to a halt, beckoned to the men, and met their curious stares with a flame of resolution in his eyes.

"Boys," he said quietly, "the story that Sam Fisher told in town was true. Steve Arnold must have seen the killing of Cervantes. We could have made it stick on Fisher, at that, if he hadn't been too smart for me."

Every man there appreciated what this confession meant to Buck.

"Now, boys," went on the rancher, "Sam Fisher is no fool. As things stand right now, he's playin' a strong game and a winnin' game. He's got us blockaded here, and the only thing left for me is to take my med'cine without a whine. I aim to do it. Still, that's no reason for draggin' you boys into the same noose, so I'm here to give each of you his time. You ain't workin' for me no more."

An outburst of protest was quieted by Buck's uplifted hand, in which was a roll of bills.

"Sandy Davitt! Come an' git it, puncher."

Davitt stepped up, started to speak, reddened, and checked the words. He took the money placed in his hand, and waited. One by one the other Running Dog men stepped up to Buck and received their wages. When it was finished Buck smiled thinly.

"Now, I reckon, you-all can git past the Circle Bar men."

Nobody moved. Of the eleven men who stood there in the sunlight around the tall figure of Templeton Buck, none budged. Sandy Davitt glanced around, hitched up his belt, and grinned at the rancher. His cast eye gave the grin a baleful aspect.

"Buck," he said, "I opine we ain't workin' for you no more. Is that c'rect?"

"You said it, Sandy."

"Then, far as I'm concerned, I don't give a durn about Cervantes. You've spoke out to us like a man, Buck, and by thunder I'm stickin' right here!"

"And me!" chimed in a voice. Then a chorus: "Me, too! We stays here, Buck!"

Buck stood in silence a long moment, his thin, high-boned features flushed darkly. It was a mag-

nificent tribute these men paid him—a tribute of which he was unworthy. To the last one they were men; reckless, scoundrelly if you like, but men unafraid.

“Ain’t none of you ridin’ to town?” asked Buck.

“Nary one, I guess,” Sandy Davitt made response. A growl of assent backed him up.

“I appreciate this, boys; I sure do!” Buck’s tall figure straightened up. “Well, I give you the worst end of the talk on the start. It’s true that Sam Fisher is playin’ a winning hand so far, but he ain’t raked in the pot by a long sight! He’s bluffed out Tracy, and he’s got Pahrump buffaloe—but all he’s got behind him is the Circle Bar, and we’ve got Jake Harper here. That means we got to wipe out Sam Fisher to win the pot!”

“And Steve Arnold,” corrected Davitt. Buck nodded.

“Yep. Them two, y’ understand. They’re over to the Lazy S, as I get it, while Harper’s bunch has us held up here. Also; we can’t afford to drop Fisher when he comes to arrest me; it’d look too much like he was killed in the performance of his duty, y’ understand? We want to fix it so nobody won’t know jest what happened. Do you foller me?”

“You bét!” came the admiring response. “How ye goin’ to work it?”

Buck was silent for a moment, his eyes searching the surrounding country. Not a sign of the Circle Bar men was in evidence, but well he knew that they were waiting, grimly hidden.

Almost any man, given the opportunity, will shoot rather than be sent to the penitentiary, and Buck

was now perfectly cool and steady in his resolute air. He had everything to gain and nothing to lose, and a single bold, well-planned stroke might yet save him from the brink of disaster.

"Twelve of us," he murmured. "We might work it! How many horses in the corral, Sandy?"

"Close to thirty," returned Davitt at once.

"And the Circle Bar lays right up the valley from the Lazy S. Anybody at Shumway's would be sure to see the Circle Bar if she was burnin', I guess?"

Davitt straightened up in surprise.

"Certain, Buck, certain! They'd see the smoke sure. But how ye goin' to reach the Circle Bar to fire her?"

Buck smiled weakly. "That's the easiest part of it, Sandy. This here Sam Fisher, he never wants no crowd; it's always a lone-hand play with him. If him and Arnold seen the smoke from the Circle Bar, what'd they do?"

"Light out to investigate where we were," was the response. "They'd know we'd got away from here and was busy. And they'd come a-smokin'."

"Exactly, Sandy," was Buck's triumphant return. "Jest what I figger my ownself."

"But how in time are we goin' to git away from here?"

Buck laughed and clapped his ex-foreman on the shoulder.

"Jest ride, cowboy, ride!" he exclaimed. "All right, boys; rustle up some grub and git saddled. Bring out every hoss in the corral, rope 'em together, and wait. Saddle an extry hoss for Jake Harper. Sandy, come along and give me a hand with Jake."

Comprehending, at least in part, the bold scheme which Buck planned, the men leaped into action.

Thirteen of the horses were saddled, the others were hastily strung together; rifles were booted, packets of grub made up, canteens filled. By the time the punchers were mounted they had not long to wait; Sandy Davitt and Buck appeared, shoving forward the figure of old Jake Harper, hands firmly bound behind his back. They could not bind his tongue, however, and he cursed the entire gang with vitriolic emphasis as he came. The hearers smiled and grinned, making no response.

"Climb or we boosts you, Jake," said Buck, reaching the spare saddle.

The boost was necessary, and was given; following which the old scout was firmly lashed in the saddle. At Buck's orders a reata was put about his neck, the loose end of which Buck took over when he had mounted. Then, revolver in hand, Buck gave the word to ride north.

"Take it easy, boys," he ordered. "No hurry."

His strategy became only too apparent to friend and foe alike. Any shots from ambush would draw an instant bullet into the body of Jake Harper; the menace of the rope and Buck's drawn revolver were entirely obvious.

Buck himself rode in the van, Jake Harper a little in front. Behind, the Running Dog men spread out, the extra horses crowding up in the rear. As they wound out on the way, Jake Harper perceived how he was being used, and he sent a booming roar of command at the empty spaces around, where he knew his men were hidden.

"Fire into 'em, boys! Shoot! Don't ye mind me! Shoot!"

No response was made. None could be made; the Circle Bar outfit dared not call the silent bluff that Buck was running. Well they knew that the bluff would be backed up.

Without a shot being fired, without an enemy being sighted, the Running Dog men rode off in peace. After them, undoubtedly, would trail Harper's men, but it would take some time for the latter to collect and follow.

Immediately upon reaching the highway, Buck halted and lifted a hand.

"I want two of you boys to take all the spare hosses and ride on to the Circle Bar. Fire her, barns and all, and kill your beasts gettin' there. It's got to be done quick. Harper's outfit will likely foller your trail. Four stays here to hold 'em up half an hour, no more. The rest goes with me."

Two of the men at once gathered in the lines of the spare horses, waved an adios, and went north at a gallop. To the four who announced themselves as ready to hold up the pursuit, Buck gave a few brief words.

"No killin' if ye can help it. Shoot the hosses. Then make your get-away to town and wait for news. If I win I'll join ye there to-night. If not, then beat it into Laredo County and lay low. Good luck to ye, boys!"

"Same to you!" they rejoined, and scattered out to take position.

Five men with him, besides their captive, Buck turned from the road and led the way toward the hills.

Old Jake Harper cursed luridly as he perceived the really admirable strategy that was under way, although its object was hidden from him. When the Circle Bar came up, they would be delayed appreciably by the four men. When at last left free to take the trail, they would naturally follow that left by the largest number of horses, leading toward their home ranch. And in the meantime Buck would be somewhere else.

"What's the big idea, Buck?" asked Sandy Davitt, riding at the rancher's stirrup. "Where we off for?"

"Git through the hills, hit the valley trail beyond, and lay up," said Buck with a grin. "Sam Fisher and Arnold are bound to come that way from the Lazy S when they see the smoke, ain't they?"

Sandy Davitt slapped his thigh with a loud guffaw.

"Whoop-ee! Buck, you sure wins the deal! And while we gathers in the sheriff o' Pecos and his pal, the Circle Bar outfit is millin' around tryin' to find out what's done happened, eh?"

"Somethin' like that, Sandy," and Buck grinned confidently.

Jake Harper fell silent from sheer desperation.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

IN LESS than an hour Buck and his party were assured that they had nothing to fear from any trailing Circle Bar riders. They rode through the hills and gained the farther slopes of the divide, with the rolling river flat beyond.

Here Buck drew rein, pointing.

There was no need for words, although Jake Harper, with recovered vocabulary, spilled pardonable curses upon the air. To the north was assending a stream of heavy smoke that rose straight into the windless sky.

"They done it," said Sandy Davitt briefly.

"Two of you boys stay here with Jake," ordered Buck to his five. "If you don't get no word from me by dark, turn Jake loose and make your get-away. If I win, I'll send word to ye 'fore dark."

Nobody wanted to remain, so straws were pulled. The losers, disgruntled, took over the prisoner's bridle and sat their horses while Buck, Sandy Davitt, and the remaining two men rode on.

"Good luck!" they called. Buck responded with a wave of his white Stetson.

The four men who were left in company now pushed their horses ahead at a good clip. Two

miles away was the river trail, which Arnold and Sam Fisher would follow, provided they did the expected thing.

"Gosh, she's sure a-smoking!" observed Sandy Davitt, his squint gaze flitting to the smoke in the north. "They done it, all right. Fired everything in sight! I'll bet Jake will curse over losin' his first cuttin' of alfalfa. He only laid it in last week."

Buck smiled weakly, but made no response. If he lost his stake, he would lose more than alfalfa.

Knowing to what manner of work they rode, the four pressed on warily, eyes searching the landscape ahead. They were unlikely to meet any one here. The Lazy S and Circle Bar lands ran together at a short distance, and the river road was only a trail used by the few riders of the two ranches.

They came upon it at last, and simultaneously drew rein. The trail told them a plain story; no one had passed this way within the past few hours, at least.

"What you aim to do?" asked one of the punchers as they sat motionless. "Rope him?"

"Rope him?" Buck spat a vicious oath. "We'd look fine ropin' that gent—and Arnold! What would we want to rope 'em for?"

Sandy Davitt laughed harshly. He swung up his arm to a bend in the road fifty yards to their left.

"Stick right here, Buck, and drop 'em as they come around that bend. Don't need the rifles to do it. Better hobble the cayuses in this bresh."

Buck nodded assent. A better place for the ambush could not be found.

The four men dismounted. One of the punchers led off the animals. The other three went to the river bank, here a scant hundred yards distant, and slaked their thirst. Upon rising, Buck gave his orders.

"We'd better spread out jest far enough to keep an eye out in both directions. I'll watch the south for 'em, Sandy, attend to the Circle Bar end; ain't likely any one will come, but we'd better watch that way, too."

Sandy Davitt swung off, followed by his companion.

Buck sought a position whence he could obtain a fair view of the valley in the direction of the Shumway ranch. He did not need to have the winding road in view. Even this slightly used trail was deep in dust, and any rider would leave a brown smudge that would rise into a trailing wedge to be discerned afar.

The horses were hidden away from sight among the trees that fringed the river. To the north the great splotch of smoke had lessened into a thin trail; Harper's place was burned out. It could not be long now before Fisher would come—if he came at all.

"Hey, Buck!" rose the cautious voice of Davitt. "Rider from the north!"

"Comin'," responded Buck hastily, and ran to join his men.

The north trail was nearly hidden from them, but they could make out a trail of dust, and presently the swiftly moving object which had drawn the attention of Davitt. As this object came closer Davitt uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Ain't no rider at all! By gosh, it's a hoss!"

"It's Jake Harper's hoss, Celestine," added Buck, watching the approaching beast.

"He got away from us when we nabbed Jake yes-tiddy," said Sandy Davitt. "Git a rope, boys

"Stop!" ordered Buck. "Git off the trail, quick; leave the brute go through! It'll fetch Sam Fisher jest that much quicker."

They hastened to clear the way. A moment more and the pound of hoofs came to them, and along the trail dashed the rawboned brute at a mad gallop, his vicious eyes rolling wildly, panic driving him. He was past them like a whirlwind, and went pounding away to the south.

"Fire scart him," said Davitt, emerging into the road again. "Good idee to let him go, Buck. Scatter out, everybody! Keep yer eyes skinned!"

It was only a moment later that Buck's voice rose warningly:

"Dust a-comin', boys! Git together!"

Excitement spurred them as they ran in to the place of ambush. From here they had a view of the road farther down the river; they stood motionless, guns drawn, tense with expectation. Davitt and Buck were together on one side of the road, the other two men opposite them.

Into the patch of road down the river crept a moving object, dust trailing it. From Davitt broke one astounded oath.

"Look out thar, boys! It's Stella Shumway comin'; out o' sight, quick! Duck, you devils, duck! Let her go through; likely they'll be behind her."

Davitt and Buck plunged down into the brush, the

others following suit. Hoofs came pounding; around the bend just ahead plunged Stella Shumway, wildly spurring her horse forward. The Circle Bar smoke had drawn her as well as others. Her strained and drawn face showed the girl's inward anxiety.

"Hurry, boy, hurry!" she cried to her mount. "We're ahead of the myet; we've got to find Uncle Jake! Hurry, hurry——"

Her voice died into the distance. Almost before she had gone, Davitt was out in the road, then swinging himself into a tree for a swifter view of the lower valley.

"They're comin' behind her," said Buck, his voice steady. "Now the only question is—who's a-comin'? If it's a hull blamed crowd, we got to lay low. If it's them two——"

"Hey, Buck!" Davitt came sliding down, plunged into the dust, sprang eagerly to his feet again. "Two comin'—no more that I can see. Likely they stopped to halt Harper's hoss, or try to, and the gal went on ahead. Them two'll be our meat; couldn't be no others. Watch the road now ——,"

The four craned forward, intent. Into the patch of road down the river slid the forms of two horses, galloping neck and neck.

"Got 'em!" cried Buck triumphantly. "Git set, boys; let 'em have it as they come around this here bend."

They scurried to their places, eager with the trembling thrill of the man hunt, fired out of themselves by the hot lust for blood, careless of the thing they were about to do. Hidden, they waited, guns

at the level, bloodshot eyes trained on the bend of the trail.

Came a furious drive of hoofs pounding the dusty trail. Through it lifted the voice of Steve Arnold gayly, boyishly:

"Whoop-ee! Out o' my way, cowboy! I'm crowdin' you for room; gimme air! Go git a good hoss if ye want to ride with me——"

Buck's lips curved cruelly; they were coming together, racing neck and neck!

And then—they came. Plunging around the bend together, Sam Fisher and Arnold, low in the saddle, driving their white-flecked horses, racing to catch up with the girl ahead and reach the cause of that smoke reek in the sky.

Crack! Pistols roared from either side the road. The two riders caromed together, a horse sent up its horrible scream, men and beasts went flinging down in a terrible crash.

Mad with the killing, Buck's two punchers leaped into sight across the road, ran forward. From the great cloud of dust cracked a shot, and another. The foremost man fell on his face; the second coughed, spun around, and dropped.

"Got you!" yelled Arnold.

At the same instant Buck shot, Davitt close behind him. Arnold, dimly visible amid the dust, fell back and straightened out. But, as though in echo to those two shots, came another from the dust. Buck's hat jerked from his head.

"By gosh, Fisher's still kickin'!" cried Sandy Davitt in stark amazement.

An oath burst from Buck. He fired into the dust again and again, frenzied. One shot answered

him, and one only; the bullet seared across his face, sent him down into the grass wiping at his cheeks, swearing, death frightened. Yet he was unhurt.

Both Davitt and Buck crouched low, peering forward, waiting for the dust to settle. It seemed impossible that Fisher could have gone down in that awful welter of death and yet have remained alive; but he was not dead. The shot had shown that.

Little by little the dust subsided. Arnold's horse, its shoulder smashed by a bullet, raised a shaking head and emitted another frightful scream, then fell back. The other horse lay behind, kicking feebly, trying to grip the ground with its fore hoofs; the poor beast's back was broken.

Midway between the two animals lay the body of Steve Arnold, face to the sky. But of Sam Fisher there was no sign.

"My gosh!" breathed Davitt incredulously. "He ain't there. Ah, behind his hoss, Buck! There he is!"

Buck fired, and swore at the miss as he ducked to escape an answering shot. None came. Sandy Davitt, unable to bear the sight of what had been done, deliberately leaned forward and shot the two horses. He, too, ducked low, but no shot answered.

"The son of a gun!" muttered Buck hoarsely. "He's playing possum, Sandy. Watch out! He wants a good shot at us."

"I'll bet he does," assented Davitt fervently.

For long moments the two men crouched there, peering forward, seeking any sign of movement. None came. The sun beat down on the scene, flooding with pitiless light each terrible detail on the

shot-up Steve Arnold, the two horses, the two Running Dog men who had paid the price. And still Sam Fisher remained silent.

At last Buck, unable to stand the strain, went suddenly to his feet.

"All right, you can have your chance!" he cried, and flung himself forward.

Davitt watched, ready to fire at Fisher's shot. But, to his amazement, he saw Buck check his rush, lower his pistol, and turn.

"All right, Sandy." Buck's voice was hoarse. "It's all over. We got 'em."

Davitt slowly rose, still half fearful of a trap. Then he put up his gun and stared at his work in silence.

"We win," said Buck softly, and there was none to say him nay.

CHAPTER XII

THE CLEAN-UP

A LITTLE later Buck and Sandy Davitt sat in the dust, cigarettes in their still tremulous hands, and watched their victims.

"After all, we bungled it a heap," said Davitt morosely. "Now there'll be hell to pay and no pitch hot! Buck, we'd ought to finish it."

Before them lay Steve Arnold, shot through the leg and with an ugly scalp wound; unconscious, but far from dead. The sheriff of Pecos lay beside Arnold, and was equally unconscious. His right knee had been dislocated in the fall, he had a bullet through the right shoulder, another had broken his right wrist.

"We'd ought to finish 'em for our own sake now," repeated Sandy Davitt.

Buck shook his head. He was white to the lips.

"Do it if you can, Sandy. I can't."

Sandy Davitt picked up his gun, compressed his lips, then with an oath thrust the weapon away. It was more than he could do. Buck smiled ironically.

"It ain't so bad, at that," he observed. "They're both put out o' business and in our hands; anyhow, it's better'n if we'd killed them, Sandy. Here's the story. They come on us and started shooting; downed them two boys yonder 'fore we could git

into action. Savvy? So we let 'em have it in self-defense. How you goin' to prove otherwise?"

Davitt nodded, and his face cleared. "All right. But I see plain how come Sam Fisher missed us with them two shots; he done the work with his left hand."

"He didn't miss far at that." Buck shivered a little.

"Thanks," said Sam Fisher, opening his eyes. "So it ain't a dream after all, Buck? Say, I'd appreciate it a lot if you gents would do somethin' to my right knee."

Buck looked at his companion. By tacit consent they rose and approached their victims, who had been thoroughly disarmed. Fisher turned his head and inspected Steve Arnold.

"Well, this ain't so bad!" he observed. "Look after Steve first, Buck. His leg is sure pumping out a lot o' blood. Tie him up good."

"You shut up," said Buck roughly. "Catch on here, Sandy."

They rudely bandaged Arnold's leg, found that his scalp wound was not serious, and turned to Sam Fisher. Investigation confirmed his previous schedule of injuries.

"She's dislocated," announced Sandy. "Buck, catch hold of the ankle; I got the thigh. Go to it."

Sam Fisher lay back, his fingers gripping at the dirt, a sweat of agony beading his brow. It was done. He said no word as the two men effected a hasty bandaging of his broken right wrist and wounded shoulder. Then they stood erect above him.

"Sandy," said Buck, steady and calm once more,

"you got to ride on the back trail in a hurry. Find the boys we left with Jake Harper and bring 'em on."

"You can't stay here with 'em," said Sandy Davitt roughly.

"I don't aim to. We got two extra hosses. Tie Arnold in one saddle; Fisher can ride without bein' tied, I reckon. Anyway, he's got to! You help me with 'em, then ride on hard for the boys. We'll put these two with Jake and hold 'em safe for a spell, then I'll clean up everything here and light out. A week will do it."

"You aim to light out, do you?" asked Davitt in surprise. Buck nodded.

"Yep. It's that or kill Sam Fisher, and I guess I've gone my limit to-day, Sandy. We've done a-plenty."

"Suit yourself." Sandy Davitt shrugged.

"Besides, Tracy will be back soon. We'll lay charges o' this murder," and Buck pointed to the two dead men, "against 'em both and lock 'em up. We'll git clear off 'fore they are able to travel. Dog-gone it! If Fisher was whole, I'd say shoot, but he's too much shot up, Sandy. Dogged if I can do it now!"

They led out the horses. Into one saddle they lifted the unconscious Arnold, and then lashed him firmly in place. With an effort, Sam Fisher gained his feet, his right hand dangling in its bandage. The ghost of his old whimsical smile touched his lips.

"Put me up, gents, and I guess I can ride," he said quietly. "And I still got one good hand for the reins——"

"The reins ain't goin' to trouble you none," intervened Buck. "Ready, Sandy!"

Once he was placed in the saddle, Fisher clung to the pommel, his face livid; the pain of the operation was intense. However, he would be able to ride fairly well.

"All right, Sandy," said Buck as he strung together the reins of the two horses. "Git off and on your way, cowboy! And use them spurs."

Sandy Davitt leaped to his saddle, yelled at his cayuse, and was gone in a mad rush.

For a little Sam Fisher could only cling to his pommel, faint with pain, his head swirling. When he came to himself he found himself riding beside the still senseless Steve Arnold. Buck rode in front, their reins fastened to his saddle, his rifle across the pommel. He glanced back and glinted a hard smile at the sheriff of Pecos.

"You're luckier than most, Fisher. Yes, sir, you sure are. If it'd been anybody else you'd be dead this minute."

Sam Fisher tried to smile. "I don't see, Buck, why in thunder you didn't finish the job. It isn't like you to weaken at killing a man."

"I may yet." Buck eyed him morosely. "Reckon I got sentimental for a spell."

"Then you'd better do it quick," said Fisher, "for I'll sure get you, Buck. Yes, sir, I'll sure——" His words ended in a groan of anguish and he clutched at the pommel.

Buck smiled. "I reckon you won't do no gettin' for some while to come, sheriff; you with a bum laig, a busted arm, and a bullet through the shoulder!"

"I've still got one good arm." Fisher tried to

smile, but his lips twisted in pain. A groan was torn from him again. "This knee! I can't ride with it, Buck."

"You got to," said Buck shortly.

At this time, from the wooded hills ahead of them, came a single rifle shot that echoed and died away. Buck frowned and vainly searched the hills with his eyes. Nothing was in sight.

For ten minutes the three pursued their slow course. Fisher clung to his saddle; every movement of his horse caused him torture. At last a cry burst from his lips—a cry so bitter, so desperate in its suffering that Buck drew rein.

"Buck! I can't do it! I can't do it! You got to put your coat or somethin' under my knee; it's more'n I can bear."

The man reeled in the saddle as he spoke; he was bent, broken, all his iron nerve shattered by the agony of his tortured body. His blue eyes, dulled with pain, stared horribly at Buck.

The rancher, a trace of pity in his harsh features, silently nodded. He put the rifle in its boot and took off his corduroy coat. This he rolled loosely, then edged his horse beside that of the swaying Fisher.

"Ease up on your laig now while I shove her underneath."

Fisher reeled, caught at the shoulder of Buck as the latter stooped. Another groan broke from his lips when Buck thrust the rolled corduroy beneath his leg. Then suddenly——

Fisher's left hand caught the revolver from the holster of the stooping rancher. Swift as light he slashed the front sight across the head of Buck.

"Still got one hand, Buck!" lifted his voice.

Buck hardly knew what had hit him. That front-sight blow stunned him, raked his skull almost to the bone, left a grisly wound. Blindly putting one hand to his head, Buck uttered a hoarse cry, plunged forward, and rolled to the earth senseless.

For a moment Fisher sat gazing down, the revolver in his hand.

"Good work, Sam!" lifted a roaring voice from the trees. "Good work! I was jest gettin' a bead on the skunk when you riz up."

Jake Harper urged a horse into sight, uncocking his rifle as he came. Fisher stared at him weakly, hardly realizing what the man's appearance here meant.

"You go away?" he murmured.

"You bet! Any time I can't git out o' buckskin thongs when they's water handy to stretch 'em—— Good gosh, Sam! What's happened?"

Sam Fisher reeled a little. Jake looked at the limp figure of Arnold, perceived that Fisher himself was swaying in the saddle.

"Me, I'm about all in, Jake," said the whimsical voice. "You got to do the rest. Don't hurt Buck, mind; he's got to go to the pen. I have the goods on him. You have to take us back to the Lazy S—— but look out! Look out for that man Sandy——"

Jake Harper dismounted, rushed to Fisher's side, and caught the sheriff of Pecos as he went limp.

"Don't you worry none about Sandy Davitt," he said grimly. "That's his hoss I'm ridin' now. Didn't ye hear a shot a while back?"

But Sam Fisher could make no response.

CHAPTER XII

FINIS

IN A room of the Lazy S ranch house Sam Fisher lay upon a cot; another held Steve Arnold, both men bandaged, splinted, and smoking sheerfully. Beside the sheriff of Pecos sat Estella Shumway, in her eyes a glow of happiness such as they had not known for months.

Jake Harper, caressing his glossy black mustache, stood in the center of the room. He was just leaving for town. Behind him stood his half-crippled foreman, surveying Sam Fisher with a wolfish smile on his ancient features.

Jake clapped his foreman on the shoulder.

"Listen, Sam!" he said earnestly. "This here old relic, which same has fit more Injuns than kids like you ever seen, is agoin' to camp outside the door of that there cell we puts Mr. Buck into. Three more of my outfit camps in the jail likewise, until you gits there in person. If you figger Buck gittin' away from them four you guess again."

"C'rect, Jake," and Sam Fisher laughed softly. "Hold Buck there until I can reach town, that's all. You don't think any one will try to rescue him?"

Jake Harper pursed up his lips.

"Rescue him? Not much. The coroner's ver-

dict will guarantee him a quick trial for the murder of Miguel, won't it? And I'm goin' to stick around town my ownself. Don't you worry none about any rescue. Them decrepit Injun fighters of mine is runnin' his whole outfit, or what's left of it, out the county."

"All right," said Fisher, nodding. "You take the keys to the sheriff's office—they're with the others I gave you—and look inside the sheriff's desk for those papers about Buck and Murphy. They must go to the governor at once; I'll have to go with 'em, I guess, so that puts it off a few days. Those papers are more important than anything else, Buck; they prove that Frank Shumway was framed and that it was done through Murphy. We'll get a full confession out of Murphy, beyond a doubt. So we want to get the matter up to the governor and get a pardon for Frank at the earliest moment."

"I'll attend to them," promised Jake. He stepped forward and held out his hand. "So long! *Hasta la vista!*"

"Say, Jake!" Over their clasped hands Fisher looked up, a twinkle in his eye. "One thing more! Send that preacher out here to-morrow, will you?"

"What for?" demanded Jake in surprise.

"Never mind. You send him."

"All right. So long, Stella; see you later!"

Jake and his foreman stamped out. Stella Shumway looked at the sheriff of Pecos, her face very red.

"Sam, what do you want that preacher for?"

"Wait a minute." Fisher lifted himself on his good elbow, and looked at the adjoining cot. He met the grinning features of Steve Arnold, and made a fierce grimace. "You, Steve! If I was you, cow-

boy, I'd look the other way—right at that wall. It's a heap interesting."

With a chuckle Steve obeyed and turned his head.

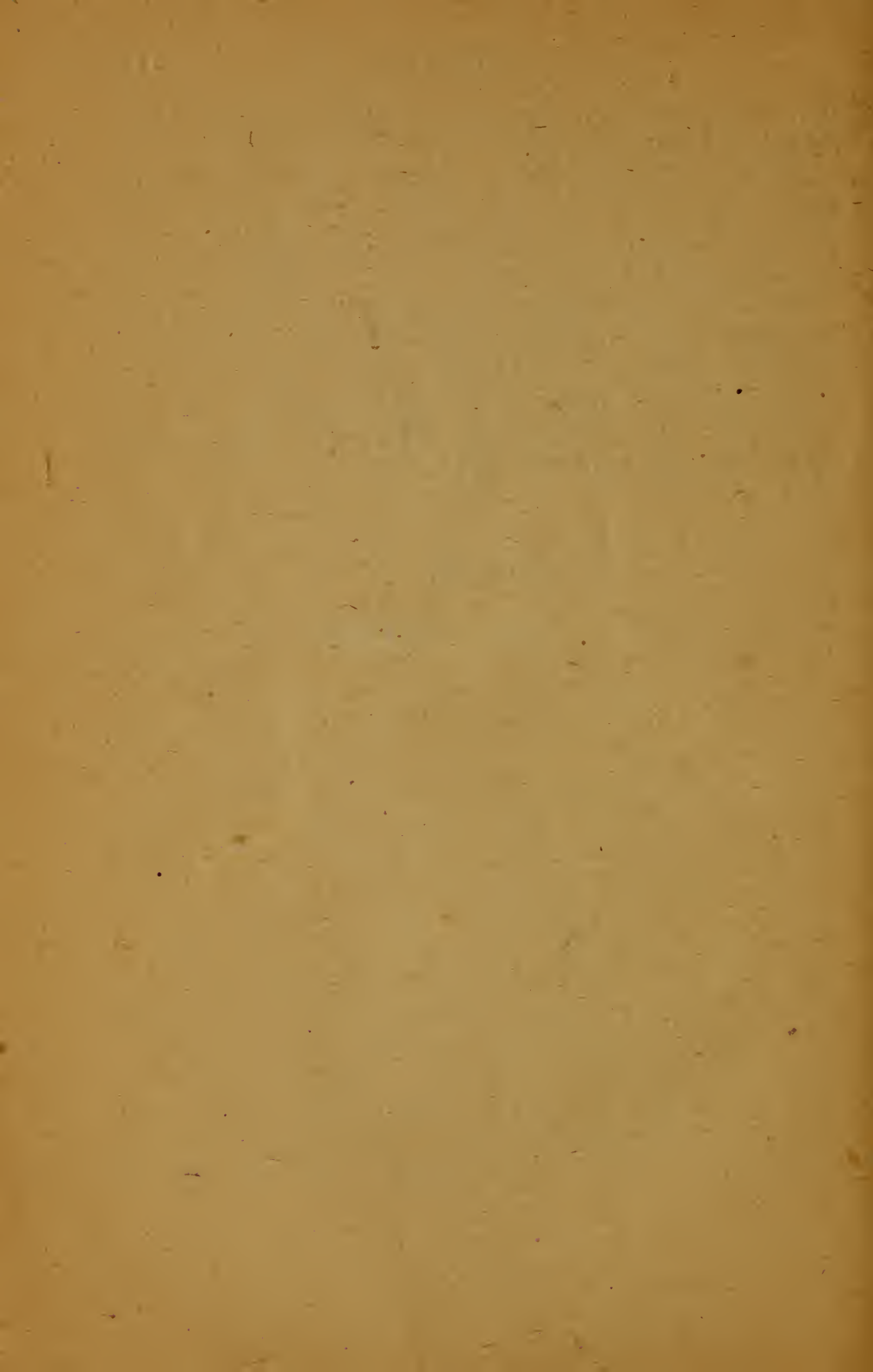
Fisher dropped on his pillows, and reaching out, seized the hand of the girl.

"Stella, I done bought the ranch, and I'll pay that mortgage, too—but you ain't told me yet if it's done with your consent. You know, Stella——"

The girl's eyes met his in a smiling glory.

"I don't aim to leave the old place, Sam," she said softly, and bent her lips to his.

THE END









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