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Stand and fight, Sheriff!

A TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

(Original title: Renegade Guns)

EDWIN BOOTH

POWDERSMOKE RANGE

Johnny McVey's first introduction to Phineas T. Yates came in the shape of a bullet which knocked bark off a pine tree beside the trail. At the same time, a puff of smoke blossomed from the front door of the house.

When Johnny was halfway down the slope, a second bullet kicked up dust at his horse's feet, making the animal jump. Johnny quieted it with his voice and kept going.

As though the unseen gunman reached the limit of his patience, the air was suddenly filled with whistling lead, some of it so close that Johnny winced. On the heels of the last shot, a white-haired little man burst out of the house brandishing a carbine and glaring up at Johnny in indignation.

"Goldanged young fool! Ain't you got brains enough to know when you're being shot at?"

Johnny brought his horse to a stop some six feet from where the man was standing, touched the brim of his hat, and said respectfully, "Mr. Yates? I've come to see about buying your ranch."

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EDWIN BOOTH writes of himself:

A native of Nebraska, I attended public schools in that state and in Iowa before moving to Colorado, where I majored in Civil Engineering at Colorado College. During summer vacations I drove a milk truck, clerked in the post office, and guided in the Cave of The Winds. My first published writing consisted of letters (signed with fictitious names) carrying on a hot argument with myself on the subject of local taxation. These appeared in the local weekly newspaper, were not paid for, and had no noticeable effect on the tax setup. My next job was with a prairie dog exterminator on New Mexico ranches. The pay was slightly better, and the effect on the prairie dogs considerable.

I migrated to California, where I worked as a clerk in a chain grocery while studying accounting. Became store manager and then office manager of a wholesale grocery firm. I started my own accounting practice, which I still have. Married a Virginian, Irene, and we live in Oakland, California, overlooking the Golden Gate. I joined Western Writers of America in 1956, the same year in which my first novel was bought by Ace Publishing Company. For the last four years I have been secretary treasurer of WWA.

A TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

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A TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT (RENEGADE GUNS)

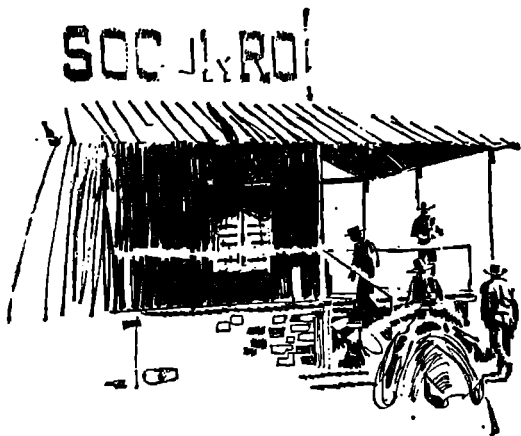
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I

SPRING HAD COME EARLY to the Ohio Valley this year of 1865. Or perhaps it just seemed so, on account of the long war finally being over. At any rate the weeds were growing too fast for a ten-year-old boy to keep up.

At the moment, Johnny McVey wasn't even trying, for some movement in the distance had caught his eye, and for a second he imagined it was his father, coming home at last.

Johnny's mother, working in the same field, called to him cheerfully, "Better keep at it, Johnny; we want things in good shape when he does get here."

"Yes'm," Johnny said, looking over his shoulder and noticing for the first time that she was wearing a freshly pressed ribbon around her head, bright green against the gold of her hair. He bent his back to resume hacking at the weeds. No one, least of all Johnny himself, would have guessed that before the day was over he would kill a man.

It was late afternoon when someone really did come in sight—two men wearing tattered remnants of Federal blue.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Despite their uniforms, Johnny knew immediately that neither of them was his father, who would be much taller. He continued working while, with part of his vision, he followed their progress up the road; but he didn't actually straighten up for a good look until they came to a stop beside the field and inspected him curiously across the fence.

"This the McVey farm, Buster?"

Johnny nodded, and from the other edge of the field his mother said, "I'm Mrs. McVey, gentlemen. Do you bring us word from my husband?"

This made both men look up, and something about their expressions made Johnny uneasy. However, the shorter of the two, a beetle-browed fellow with greasy black hair, said politely, "Well no, ma'am, not *from* him exactly. About him, you might say. You see, ma'am, he's dead."

Johnny was only dimly aware of his mother's agonized exclamation. His thoughts were in such a turmoil that for several minutes he didn't know what was going on. Then his mother was shaking him gently, and asking if he was all right. He nodded dumbly and looked up at her stricken expression.

Over in the road, one of the men said awkwardly, "It's too bad, ma'am . . . about your husband, I mean. Maybe we shouldn've broke the news different. I reckon we've seen so many fellers . . ." He came to a clumsy halt.

"It isn't your fault. Do you know how it happened?"

"Yes'm, we was right there." This time it was the taller man who answered, taller and with a scarred cheek that pulled his mouth out of shape. "The last day before the surrender, it was. All of us knew it was about over, so I suppose maybe we got a little careless. Your old . . . your husband was sitting up against a tree trunk, writing a letter, when one of them dirty rebs picked him off." He reached in his pocket and held out a soiled sheet of paper. "Here it is, ma'am; it was to you."

Johnny hadn't formed much opinion of the war before this, except that it was responsible for his father's being away so long, but all at once he hated the enemy so violently that

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

he was almost sick. Like someone with a fever he heard his mother inviting the two men to stay for supper, and suggesting that they spend the night in the barn before continuing their journey.

Perhaps if he hadn't been in such a fog, Johnny would have noticed the look which passed between the two men as they accepted the invitation. As it was, he was hardly aware of his own actions as he performed the usual evening chores and picked at his supper.

Afterward, when he was again able to think clearly, he realized how strange it was that the men should ask him to walk into town and buy them some tobacco when they had just come through the place that afternoon themselves. But at the time he was too benumbed to notice. Besides, he was a little young to understand how the sight of a pretty woman could affect men who had been too long away from civilized society.

When he came back with the tobacco, to find the cabin a shambles and his mother dead, he didn't fully comprehend. But he did know that the two soldiers were responsible, and that they couldn't have gone far in so short a time. Fully alert, now, he ran to the barn and took down the shotgun from the nails where his father always kept it.

The two men evidently hadn't expected to be followed, for they weren't moving very fast when he came within sound of their voices. It was dark by then, and all he could see was their silhouettes against the sky; but there was no mistaking who they were, especially when he came near enough to hear what they were saying, words which confirmed everything he had suspected. He thumbed back the hammer of the shotgun and ran toward them along the road.

Apparently they heard the click of the hammer, for when he drew close enough for a shot, one of them was running. Johnny had a brief glimpse of the other man's face as he turned to look back; then the shotgun roared and the man let out a horrible scream which ended in a gasp.

The neighboring farmers found Johnny on the road, still

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

clutching the empty shotgun. A few yards away, the greasy-haired man lay dead.

Under different circumstances, there would probably have been friends who would have taken Johnny in. But a boy who had killed someone . . . Not that they blamed him, exactly, but for a ten-year-old boy to blow a man's head off and not to feel any regret . . .

They were right in one respect: Johnny's only regret was that he hadn't killed them both. But stronger than regret was his feeling of loss at the deaths of both his parents. He couldn't force himself to live in the cabin any longer, nor to face his neighbors, who now looked at him so oddly. In desperation, he bundled up what belongings he could carry, pocketed the few coins his mother had kept on hand, plus two dollars a farmer gave him for the shotgun, and started walking.

It was natural for him to head west, since that was the direction in which everyone else was migrating. Unfortunately, many of the war veterans, their lives disrupted by the war, were also looking for new beginnings beyond the Mississippi, so it was hard to find work—especially for a boy like Johnny, who was small for his age, and who soon became skinny from missing so many meals.

He did find enough work to keep him from starving, but it wasn't until he reached Wichita, Kansas, that his luck began to change. This was almost six months after leaving Ohio, and with winter coming on, there were no farm jobs to be had; so of necessity he was forced to look for something in town.

The place he chose was on the outskirts of Wichita, a two-story house which looked as though it belonged to someone fairly prosperous. Johnny had learned enough by now so that he went to the back door, which was opened to his knock by a frizzy-haired woman wearing a pink wrapper. She stared at him a moment, then grinned and turned to speak to someone Johnny couldn't see.

"Ain't I been telling you, Virge? They're coming younger every day. Here's one that's hardly weaned."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

This brought the other one into sight, a blackhaired woman who looked as though she might be part Indian. Something about Johnny seemed to amuse them both, although he didn't know what it was. He could feel his cheeks getting red, but he didn't back off. The last six months had taught him a good many things, one of which was that you didn't get anything to eat by turning tail.

Surprisingly enough, when the two women finished laughing and gave him a chance to ask his question, they were more polite than a lot of the farm women he had spoken to. Without appearing to give it much thought, the frizzy-haired one guessed that there might be enough odd jobs around the place to keep a boy busy. She then took him into the kitchen and gave him the best meal he had had since leaving home. Afterward, she showed him a little lean-to woodshed where he could sleep.

Naturally, Johnny soon figured out what the place was, although it was hardly the sort of thing he had heard discussed in his own home. His instructions had been not to come into the house at night, but from his lean-to he could often hear men's voices in the main building. One night there were several gunshots, and the next morning the town marshal was around asking questions; but after a few nights during which everything was oddly quiet, business resumed as usual.

So far as Johnny was concerned, he would gladly have stayed indefinitely. The women treated him with easygoing tolerance; in fact, they seemed to consider him a sort of mascot. For some reason they were very careful what they said in front of him. He supposed they must be the "fallen women" he had heard a preacher talk about at a camp meeting back in Ohio, but they were certainly a lot easier to get along with than some of the respectable ones. All the rest of his life he would have a sympathy for their kind.

This sympathy wasn't shared by the straight-laced ladies of Wichita, and on the day after Christmas (incidentally, Johnny's eleventh birthday) a delegation came with the

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

marshal to close the place down. The women Johnny had been working for didn't seem especially upset; apparently they considered this one of the hazards of their profession. Before getting into the stagecoach which the town had thoughtfully provided, they tried to give Johnny a little collection which they had taken up.

Johnny thanked them, but refused the money. He didn't know why, exactly, except that they didn't owe him anything and he was too proud to accept charity. They didn't argue about it, and five minutes later the stagecoach whirled out of sight.

This incident brought Johnny into the limelight, and he was pointed out as the boy who had worked for a bawdy house. As a result of this notoriety, he became a fair target for the other boys in town, who considered it their Christian duty to beat him up.

Luckily, Johnny had begun to grow, perhaps on account of the good food he had been enjoying. His life since starting west had been a rugged one, with an abundance of hard work and few luxuries. As a result, what appeared to be skinniness was mostly bone and muscle. When a few of his tormenters found this out—to their sorrow, they began treating him with respect.

If the folks in Ohio had been reluctant to take in a boy who had killed a man, the ones in Wichita surely didn't want one who had worked for a houseful of harlots. However, one of the saloon owners had seen Johnny get up off the ground three times to finally defeat a bully half again his size, and thought he deserved a break, so for the rest of the winter Johnny worked in the saloon, sweeping up, emptying the spittoons, spreading fresh sawdust once a week, and keeping out of the way of drunks insofar as possible.

The saloon job didn't add much to his finances, but it gave him a lot of experience. Almost every kind of man came through the swinging doors that winter—honest ranchers, tinhorn gamblers, saddle-weary cowpokes, and outlaws on the dodge.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

In the spring he was glad to give up the saloon job and go to work for the owner of a nearby ranch. Although still only a boy, Johnny was soon doing a man's work, and it was apparent that this was the kind of life he was cut out for. He stayed on that job two years, then took a better one on a big spread near the Nebraska line. By the time he was nineteen, he was as tall as he would ever be, just a shade under six feet, and could hold his own with any top hand in the business.

This was the year of the big blizzard which swept down out of Canada, decimated herds in Dakota Territory, and practically wiped out the rancher Johnny was working for. It brought about the end of that job, so Johnny saddled up (he now had his own cow pony) and rode west, no definite destination in mind, but already beginning to look for the kind of land on which he hoped someday to have a ranch of his own.

Two days' ride into Nebraska he came to the town of Fort Davis. The name made him frown, for he still didn't like anything connected with soldiers, but he guessed he could stand it for one night, even though there would probably be an army post nearby.

There was, and two calvarymen were in the saloon when he stopped for a drink. Johnny took his glass to the far end of the bar and tried to ignore them.

This wasn't easy, for they were both a little drunk and seemed bent on making trouble. Not trouble for Johnny, however; they were sober enough to realize that he wouldn't be a good one to tangle with.

Johnny tossed off his shot of whiskey, and was being more deliberate with a second one when the town marshal came into the saloon. At least he was wearing a marshal's badge. Except for that, Johnny wouldn't have taken him to be a law man, for he was past middle age, and looked more like a doctor or parson.

The marshal's arrival was badly timed, for by now the two soldiers were in a belligerent mood. Furthermore, they apparently held a grudge against the man for having thrown

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

one of their friends in jail on a charge of drunkenness. This much Johnny gathered from their comments.

The marshal obviously regretted having come in, but he was too proud to turn around and go out. Instead, he ignored the two cavalrymen, nodded politely to Johnny, and motioned to the bartender for a drink, which he raised to his lips with a steady hand.

Johnny admired the man's composure, but he wished he would hurry up and leave while there was still time. It appeared that the marshal felt the same way, for when he finished his drink he turned and started toward the door.

This necessitated passing the two soldiers. As the marshal did so, one of them whirled away from the bar and smashed a whiskey bottle over his head, knocking him to his knees. The other drew a pistol, pointed it at the marshal's back, and thumbed back the hammer.

Johnny could remain idle no longer. He went for his gun, at the same time yelling to distract the man's attention. This made the soldier spin toward Johnny's end of the bar and trigger a shot which was only an inch or so off line. Before he could cock the gun and fire again, Johnny shot him in the leg, then swung the muzzle of his gun to cover the other one, who was about to join the fracas.

One look at Johnny's eyes was enough to make the second soldier drop his gun. Johnny moved close and kicked both men's pistols across the room, then holstered his own.

By this time several men who had heard the shots edged cautiously into the saloon. They listened to the bartender's version of what happened, which was substantiated insofar as possible by the marshal, who had recovered somewhat. The marshal didn't seem to be badly hurt, although there was blood on his head. However, the incident must have brought him to a decision, for he unpinning his badge, handed it to one of the new arrivals, and said grimly, "This ends it, Kroeger; when I'm too slow to handle a couple of ordinary drunks, I have no business taking the town's money."

The man he had called Kroeger didn't protest very strong-

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

ly, and the marshal left the saloon. This swung everyone's attention to Johnny, and Kroeger said curiously, "You're new around here, aren't you? Planning to stay a while?"

"Not likely," Johnny said, grinning. "Not if this is a sample of the welcome I'd get." He pointed at the man he had shot and added, "What about him? Shouldn't somebody be going for a sawbones?"

"We don't have one," Kroeger said. "But don't let it worry you. I saw someone running toward the fort, so by now Major Quillen likely knows all about it. He'll come charging in here pretty quick, claiming these two troublemakers are innocent as lambs." He looked at Johnny appraisingly. "By the way, I'm Hans Kroeger, the town mayor. I don't remember hearing your name."

"McVey," Johnny said, and accepted Kroeger's proffered handshake.

"Glad to know you, McVey. I like the way you took charge just now. These soldier boys have been giving the town a rough time." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't suppose you'd consider taking over the job of marshal?"

"Me? Not on your life, Mr. Kroeger. Thanks just the same."

At that moment the batwings were thrust apart and a man in uniform stomped into the room, his insignia identifying him as a major in the cavalry. He glared at the two soldiers a moment, then let his angry eyes swing to Johnny.

"You must be the one, mister. They said it was some stranger."

Johnny didn't answer, and this seemed to make the major more furious than before. His lips tightened and he said savagely, "By God, mister, I don't like having my men shot at!"

"And I don't like seeing anyone jumped from behind," Johnny said. "So we've each got something to complain about. I guess that makes us even." He laid a dollar on the bar and started toward the door.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"That's right . . . run," Major Quillen said. "Get out of here and start riding before word gets around the fort about what you've done. Otherwise, you're in for trouble."

Johnny turned to face him, all his dislike for soldiers boiling up in his throat.

"Is that a threat, Major?"

"You can call it that if you like."

"In that case . . ." Johnny turned and took the marshal's badge out of Kroeger's hand. "I've changed my mind about that job, Mayor. How soon can someone swear me in?"

"Right now, McVey," Kroeger said. "Just hold up your right hand."

II

AFTERWARD, Johnny had to admit that he had acted hastily in accepting the job of marshal at Fort Davis, but having made the decision, he had no intention of backing down. Despite Major Quillen's violent protests, his first act as marshal was to lock the uninjured soldier in a cell.

This didn't meet with the unqualified approval of the townsmen, either. Most of them hated the major and were uneasy about the men in his command, many of whom were the scourings of eastern gutters; still, the town derived a considerable portion of its income from the fort, either directly or indirectly, and didn't want the situation disturbed.

Johnny was aware of this contradiction and found it amusing, rather than letting it bother him. Somewhat of a bulldog by nature, he set his jaw and hung on, and even

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

his harshest critics had to admit that he did a good job.

Doing this job involved frequent clashes with the military, for there was always one more misguided trooper who had to be convinced that the new marshal really meant business. However, at the end of the month the town was so peaceful that a shapely young woman could have walked the length of the main street after dark without danger of being molested. On the other hand, the merchants were grumbling because business had fallen off, especially at the saloons and bawdy houses; and Major Quillen was almost ready to declare war on the marshal's office and personally lead a cavalry charge.

Johnny knew that something was going to pop, but he wasn't sure what it would be. Then one night he caught three troopers pulling down the wooden awning in front of the hotel, and shoved them into the two cells. It struck him at the time that they didn't seem very drunk, and that they hadn't offered more than token resistance. Before locking them up he searched them as usual for concealed weapons. He didn't find any, but one of the men made a great fuss about a twenty-dollar gold piece he pretended to think Johnny was going to take away from him.

The three troopers were unusually quiet, so Johnny suspected them of being up to something and was particularly alert. Nothing extraordinary happened, however, and in the morning Major Quillen and one of his aides showed up as usual to bail the men out.

Still puzzled, Johnny went back to unlock the cells. Major Quillen went with him, while the aide remained in the front of the office.

The three troopers were all on their feet, waiting. Before Johnny could unlock either cell, the man who owned the gold piece accused Johnny of having stolen it. The charge was so ridiculous that Johnny was going to ignore it, but before he could insert his key in the lock, Major Quillen reached out and stopped him.

"Just a minute, McVey. That's a pretty serious charge.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

I think we'd better get to the bottom of it." He turned to the man who had made the accusation.

"Let's get this straight, Corporal; you say the marshal took some money that belonged to you."

"Yes sir, Major. He woke me up with a gun in my ribs, and took it right out of my pocket. If you think I'm lying, ask *them*." He pointed toward the other cell.

"How about it, men? Is that the truth?"

From the promptness with which one of them spoke up, Johnny was pretty sure they had been expecting this question.

"Yes sir, it sure is, Major. It was too dark to make out exactly what was going on, but I sure as hell saw the marshal go into that cell in the middle of the night."

"That's a lie," Johnny said. "I don't know what kind of frame you're trying to build, but it doesn't fit." He looked around at Quillen.

"You don't like me, Quillen, and the feeling is mutual, but that shouldn't keep you from seeing what they're trying to pull. There was something fishy about the way they got in here in the first place. The whole thing looked like a put-up job."

"Maybe so, McVey, but I'm not going to let it drop without giving them a chance to prove it." He turned to face the front end of the room, where the aide was still standing beside Johnny's desk.

"See if you can locate Hans Kroeger, Sergeant, and bring him back with you."

Johnny's nerves began to tighten. Whatever the three troopers were up to, Major Quillen was evidently in on it, too. But just what did they expect to prove?

Kroeger was evidently in his store, for it took only a minute to find him. He came into the office looking puzzled and uneasy.

By this time Johnny had a hunch what was going on. He gave the major time to tell what had happened, then pushed in front of him and faced the man who claimed to have been robbed.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"That gold piece of yours, soldier . . . did it happen to have anything unusual about it. Say maybe your initials scratched on the surface or something?"

The trooper looked surprised and confused. He licked his lips nervously and would have sought some hint from the major's expression, but Johnny made it a point to stay between them.

"Did you hear me, soldier?"

"I heard you. And it so happens that it did. There was a little nick filed under the date."

"I thought so," Johnny said. He glanced around at Hans Kroeger.

"It's beginning to make sense, Mayor. I just bet if you'll look around the office you'll find a double eagle with a nick like he described. Probably somewhere in my desk."

"Good Lord, Marshall You don't mean they're telling the truth!"

"Of course not. It's a trick. Sometime in the night, that thief there" . . . he nodded toward his accuser . . . "must have handed the coin through the window to a man who was waiting outside. Just now, while the major and I were back here by the cells, the sergeant planted it somewhere up front. Go ahead and look; we may as well play this out to the end."

Kroeger pondered this a minute, then whirled suddenly to look at the men in the cells, catching them off guard. His chin came up, and he said angrily, "Not me, Marshal. Those men are guilty as Judas. There might be a dozen gold pieces in your desk and it wouldn't prove anything to me."

He faced Major Quillen. "Maybe you weren't in on this deal, Major, but if you were, and if you expected to trick me into suspecting McVey and firing him, you're out of your mind. Of course if you want to make a formal complaint, we'll turn it over to the circuit judge when he comes around."

Major Quillen seemed ready to explode. His face was flushed, and a muscle in his cheek twitched spasmodically.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

However, he evidently had sense enough to realize that this wasn't going to turn out the way he had planned.

"I don't trust your civilian judges, Kroeger. If you're too blind to see what's happening in this town since McVey started wearing that badge, I can't do much about it. But I'll tell you this: you'll either get rid of him or there won't be a cent of government money crossing your counters." He whirled on Johnny.

"All right, mister. I'll take my men with me. I suppose there's the usual bail?"

Johnny grinned. "Not this time, Major. I'll make it twenty dollars for the lot, and take a chance on finding that gold piece to cover it. If I don't, it's on the house." He took a key out of his pocket and turned toward one of the cells, but didn't immediately unlock it.

"Now what're you waiting for?" the major demanded.

"Nothing. I just want to remember what these men look like. I'll be hunting them up later."

Nobody said anything, and Johnny unlocked the cell. When everyone except he and Hans Kroeger had left, he said soberly, "You're quite a man, Mr. Kroeger, standing up to the major like you did. I suppose you know that what he said was true, about his being able to shut off the money that's been coming into your cash boxes."

"I know," Kroeger said bleakly. "But there's such a thing as principle, too. If it comes to a choice between knuckling down to that arrogant fool and missing a few meals, I'll just tighten my belt."

"I believe you would, but fortunately it isn't going to be necessary, because I'm resigning."

"Resigning! But I thought . . ."

"Oh, it isn't for fear of anything I think the major might do; it's on account of something I want to do myself. And it's not the sort of thing that should be done by a town marshal." He unfastened his badge and handed it over.

Kroeger took it and held out his hand.

"I suppose this is good-bye then?"

"Well, not quite. I have a few things to tend to before

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

I leave, but you can go ahead and look for a new marshal. When I go, I may not have time for a farewell party."

It was late March when Johnny *did* ride out, somewhat bruised and stiff, and with a loose tooth or two, but with the satisfying conviction that at least three troopers were in even worse shape and would hesitate before they again tried to frame anyone.

At a saloon in Ogallala he became acquainted with two Texas cowboys who were going home to help drive a herd of cattle up to Wyoming. At their suggestion he joined them on the ride south.

The trip was uneventful, except for a battle in a pueblo barroom where a crooked gambler mistook Johnny's mild manner for gullibility, but Johnny found Texas too big and windy (in more ways than one), and was ready to head north when the herds began to move in the spring.

The drive to Wyoming was as difficult as everyone had warned, except when they passed through a section of Colorado which was exactly the kind of country Johnny had always dreamed about. However, there was nothing he could do about it now, so he filed the impression in his mind for future reference.

Part of the herd was made up of stockers for the Big-H ranch near Laramie, an outfit belonging to Nathan Hardcastle, who proved to be a hearty, outspoken sort of man. Since Johnny was in no hurry to go back to Texas, he agreed to stay on and help Hardcastle move the stockers to a high valley where they would be held until fall.

Although they were opposites in type, Hardcastle big and loud, and Johnny still a compact hundred and sixty pounds, and inclined to be soft spoken, the two of them hit it off from the first. The rancher seemed in no hurry to get back to headquarters, so he and Johnny took their time moving the herd to the valley; Hardcastle then asked him to stay around a day or two until they could be sure the cows were really settled.

Neither man knew that the "day or two" would stretch out into years. And it wasn't until several days later that

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Johnny first heard about Kathie, Hardcastle's daughter, who was attending school in the East. Even when he did, it didn't strike him as having any significance. Which only shows how mistaken a man can be.

III

IN THE TEN YEARS since he had started west, Johnny McVey had not encountered anyone he had known in Ohio, nor had he ever talked about what had happened to his folks. Despite this, the recollection of that day of violence was never far away, and he frequently awoke wet with sweat from dreaming about it.

All this began to change when he went to work for Big-H. Nathan Hardcastle, for all his bluntness, was really a kind and discerning man. Johnny found this out after they had been together about a week, the revelation coming one night when they were stretched out on their blankets beside a dying campfire, smoking their last cigarettes of the day. Without preface, Hardcastle said, "I've been watching you, boy, and something's on your mind. What's eating you?"

Johnny's first reaction was to tighten up. What right did Hardcastle have to pry into his innermost thoughts? Fortunately, it was too dark for the older man to see his expression, and Johnny, following his usual custom of thinking before speaking, didn't blurt out anything which would have precluded further conversation. Instead, he remained silent for a minute, during which time he realized that Hardcastle was only trying to be friendly.

It proved surprisingly easy to talk, out there in the open,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

with only the stars as witnesses, and with too little light for anyone to read the emotions that might have shown on his face. Reluctantly at first, then with increasing ease, he recounted everything that had happened since those two soldiers had stopped to call to him across the fence.

Hardcastle didn't interrupt, and he remained silent so long afterward that Johnny raised up and asked, "Are you asleep?"

"Asleep? Good Lord, Johnny, after what you just told me I'll be lucky if I *ever* sleep again. What kind of skunks would do a thing like that to a woman, especially one who's just been told her husband was dead? I suppose you never did find out who the men were?"

"I didn't try. They were soldiers; that's enough. Put a man in uniform and he thinks he's God Almighty."

"Well now, I wouldn't say . . ." Hardcastle started, then let it drop. He was silent for a moment before adding in a lighter tone, "Those women you told me about, they must've been pretty surprised to find a ten-year-old boy knocking at their door."

"I guess they were," Johnny said, smiling to himself. "I would've been, too, if I'd known what business they were in. But it turned out all right; they treated me fine. In fact, most of the folks I've met were okay, except the soldiers."

"Well, at least that won't be a problem here," Hardcastle promised. "There isn't an army post within two days' ride, and I haven't seen a uniform for months." He stirred in his blankets, and Johnny could see that he had propped himself on one elbow.

"Why don't you stick around a while, Johnny? I can use another hand, and you've shown me that you're good with cattle. Maybe it's time you stayed put for a change."

"Maybe," Johnny conceded. "Althought I hadn't planned on it."

"There's worse mistakes you could make. This Wyoming country isn't as pretty as Ohio, but it's got a great future."

"You've been to Ohio?"

"Been through it, Johnny, a long time ago. Back in fifty-

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

eight, that was. It was supposed to be a business trip, but I brought me back a bride." He sighed. "Worst mistake I ever made, as it turned out. She hated it here from the day she stepped off the stagecoach."

"Didn't she know what it would be like before she married you?" Johnny asked.

"I tried to tell her, but from that distance she thought it sounded romantic. Besides, when Millicent wanted to do something, nobody could change her mind. Not that I tried very hard; she was the prettiest girl I ever saw."

"Was? Does that mean that she's . . . dead?"

"Two years ago," Hardcastle said. "But it's been longer than that since I saw her. You see, when Kathie—that's our daughter—was eleven, four years ago, her mother talked me into sending her East to get an education. Millicent went along to get her started, and was supposed to come back home, but it didn't work out that way. Not that I blame her much. Anyhow, two years ago Millicent took sick and died."

"I'm sorry," Johnny said. "And the girl? What about her?"

"Kathie's still in the East, going to some kind of fancy school. I send the money to pay for it, of course, and Kathie writes me real nice letters about once a month, but I doubt if she'll ever come back to Big-H."

"It seems like we all have our problems, doesn't it," Johnny said thoughtfully.

"Looks that way, Johnny," Hardcastle agreed, and chuckled softly. "I'll tell you one thing: if we lie here all night talking, we'll have a problem rolling out at daybreak to move those fool cows."

In the morning, Johnny accepted the job, and two days later they returned to the ranch headquarters. It had been practically deserted when Johnny had been there before, at the time he and the Texans had delivered the herd, and Mr. Hardcastle had explained that the crew was out rounding up strays. Now they were all present, four cowboys, a Chinese cook, and a foreman by the name of Pete Kettle.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Kettle and the crew greeted Johnny with the reserve customarily accorded newcomers, and for the first couple of weeks he knew he was being judged by a jury of critical experts. By the end of that time they had evidently decided he could pull his own weight, for they invited him to go along with them to a small settlement some twenty miles away for a Saturday night fling. When he demonstrated that he could hold his liquor with the best of them, his membership was secure.

Not that anyone said so in so many words, but the following day, Sunday, when he and Pete Kettle were sprawled in the shade of the bunkhouse, chuckling over some of the things that had happened the night before, the foreman mentioned casually that in the fall, after roundup, the whole crew would celebrate by riding to Laramie, where they would really have some fun. Since he said "we," it was plain that he expected Johnny to still be around.

Not only was Johnny still at Big-H that fall; he was there five years later, although two of the other members of the original crew were no longer around.

The five years had brought a few other changes to Big-H, too, the most important of which, from Johnny's standpoint, was that for the the last year he had been its foreman. The promotion had not been entirely unexpected, since Pete Kettle had been grooming him for something almost from the first; but when it happened, it came suddenly. Mr. Hardcastle hollered from the house for Johnny to come over, and when Johnny entered the room Hardcastle used as an office, he found Pete Kettle there ahead of him, looking uncomfortable as he always did when sitting in a chair instead of a saddle.

Mr. Hardcastle motioned for Johnny to sit down, then said without preface, "Pete tells me you're good enough to take over his job as foreman. Is he right?"

"Yes sir," Johnny said promptly.

"Well, I'll be!" Hardcastle exploded. "You're pretty sure of yourself, ain't you? Is that all you've got to say?"

Johnny shook his head.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"No sir, there's a lot of other things, now that you ask. For instance, I might point out that Pete knows twice as much about ramrodding this outfit as I do, maybe twice as much as I ever will, for that matter. But I imagine you realize that as well as I do, so I just answered your question. Besides, from what you said, Pete already told you I could do it, and he's the last man I'd want to call a liar."

This made Hardcastle grin, and he swung his eyes toward Pete Kettle. Johnny did likewise, and saw that the Big-H foreman was trying hard to keep from laughing.

"Didn't I tell you, Nathan?" Pete said. "This boy doesn't hem and haw before making up his mind. He'll do a good job for you."

"He'd better. I'm getting too blamed old to do it myself. Okay, Johnny, as of right now you're foreman. Any questions?"

Johnny turned to face Pete Kettle. "Is this all right with you?"

"Sure it is, Johnny. It was my idea in the first place. I've got some good years left in me, but not if I keep rocking around on a cayuse sixteen hours a day. The railroad's offered me a job buying beef for their construction gangs, and I've decided to take it." He held out his hand. "Good luck, boy."

Now, with the first year behind him, Johnny had things well under control. Or as least he thought so. Then something happened which completely upset all his calculations.

It concerned Kathie Hardcastle. After an absence of nine years, she decided to come home. Johnny drove the buckboard to Laramie to pick her up, and when Kathie stepped down from the train, he had some conception of how Nathan Hardcastle must have felt on first seeing her mother.

Unknown to Johnny, Kathie had been watching him through the grimy window even before the train had shuddered to a stop. Not that she knew who he was, of course; it was just second nature for her to single him out as the most interesting-looking man on the platform, and to give him her undivided attention.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

In Johnny she saw a man four or five years older than herself, one whose apparel was much like that of the others around him, and who was not the tallest in sight. Yet there was something about him which set him apart from the rest; for lack of a better word she put it down as character.

By then the train had come to a halt, and two of the male passengers were vying for the privilege of carrying Kathie's luggage. Kathie rewarded the victor with a dazzling smile, and by an almost imperceptible lift of the eyebrows managed to let the loser feel that she would have preferred for him to have won. She then made her way along the aisle, apparently oblivious to the attention she was getting, and stepped gracefully down to the cinder platform.

It was at this point that Johnny saw her for the first time. No one watching him would have detected any change in his expression, but for a moment he was too stunned to move. He hadn't expected her to be unattractive, in view of what Nathan Hardcastle had told him about her mother, but neither had he anticipated anyone as beautiful as this. Not only was she beautiful, she was democratic, looking around at the roughly dressed and unshaven bunch of bystanders as though she considered them her equals.

The men, on their part, could only stare at Kathie in gaping admiration—all but one, a hulking individual who had the job of bouncer at one of Laramie's saloons. This man, Slakey by name, was just drunk enough to lurch across the platform and grin boldly at the new arrival. He opened his mouth, but before there was time to speak, someone grabbed his arm and turned him around. He glared down into the eyes of Johnny McVey. Strangely enough, Johnny was smiling.

"Do me a favor, Slakey, and put Miss Hardcastle's luggage in the buckboard. It's around at the end of the depot."

Slakey scowled at Johnny from his greater height, and for a minute it seemed that he would start swinging. Then some part of his mind which was still sober warned him that Johnny's smile was only on the surface, and he thought

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

better of it. With a smothered curse he grabbed the luggage and stumbled toward where the buckboard was tied.

At this the crowd let out its collective breath in relief and everyone began to talk at once. Johnny turned to Kathie and took off his hat.

"I take it you're Miss Hardcastle. I'm McVey, your pa's foreman."

"How do you do, Mr. McVey," Kathie said politely, as though she were aware of him for the first time. "Is my father all right?"

"He's fine, Miss. He would've met the train himself, but I had to come in anyway, and we didn't both want to leave the ranch at once. He's real anxious to see you, though, and it's a long drive to the ranch, so we'd better start as soon as possible. Unless you'd rather have something to eat before we go, that is. There's a restaurant here in Laramie, and so far as I know, nobody ever actually died from eating their food."

"The Columbine?" Kathie said, and when Johnny nodded, "If it's just the same to you, I'd rather go hungry."

"You mean you've eaten there before? That's funny."

"Funny? Why so?"

"Oh, no good reason, I suppose. It's just hard to believe that you ever lived in this part of the country."

They had been making their way toward the buckboard, Kathie smiling pleasantly at the men who touched their hatbrims and spoke respectfully to Johnny. As he helped her into the rig, she said, "Well, I did live here once, Mr. McVey, up until the time I was eleven years old, and I don't mind admitting that I'm pretty thrilled to be coming back. I love Boston, but there's more excitement here in Wyoming."

Johnny had untied the team and climbed onto the seat. He looked around to see if she was joking.

"Excitement, Miss? You'll find Wyoming pretty dull after the East. Nothing much happens around here most of the time."

She laughed softly, and took hold of the handrail to

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

keep from falling against him as the buckboard jolted over a rock.

"Something exciting very nearly happened just a minute ago, Mr. McVey. That big fellow . . . what did you call him?"

"Slakey? He's not so bad; it's just that he has to stay sober nights, so he does his drinking in the morning. If he'd been sober, he would have stood there with his mouth open like everyone else."

"Just the same, I'm glad you were there."

Johnny shrugged, and pointed with the whip toward a distant range of hills. "There's where we're headed for. I guess you remember. And incidentally, we won't have to starve. Your pa had the cook fix up a sack of grub, just in case we got hungry."

"That was thoughtful of him," she said, studying him surreptitiously out of the side of her eye. She came to a conclusion, and added, "By the way, you don't have to be so formal. My name is Kathie. Okay?"

"Okay," Johnny said, smiling. "And my friends generally call me Johnny."

"Then that's what I'll call you. After what happened back there at the depot, I'd much rather have you as a friend than as an enemy."

Johnny grinned, and for a while there was no sound but the clopping of shod hoofs on the dirt. A hawk was drifting lazily overhead, and Johnny was watching it when Kathie said unexpectedly, "This may sound crazy, Johnny, but could I take the lines for a few minutes? I'd like to find out how much I remember."

Johnny hesitated briefly, then nodded and pulled the team to a halt.

"We'd better change seats. Those horses aren't used to a woman driving them, and if she did it from the wrong side of the seat . . ." He stood up to let Kathie slide past, then sat down where she had been sitting and handed her the lines.

Both horses twisted their necks to look back, and at first

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

they seemed a little skittish; but Kathie kept a firm grip on the lines, and after a bit the team settled down to a steady job. Johnny relaxed and made himself a cigarette. When it was burning properly, he said with appreciation, "You're doing all right, Kathie. I guess those years in the East didn't do you any harm after all."

"Thank you," Kathie said, and gave him a sideways look which he couldn't interpret. "I'm stubborn, Johnny. Once I make up my mind to do something, I usually do it." She frowned and added musingly, "Even if it turns out to be the wrong thing to do."

Which might have been a warning, but at the time Johnny didn't take it that way.

IV

EXCEPT FOR A few casual affairs with girls he had met on his trip to Texas, and whose names he forgot immediately, Johnny had never taken much interest in the opposite sex. This situation changed drastically on Kathie's return to Wyoming, for Johnny was convinced that Kathie was the only girl he would ever want for his wife.

It was a little presumptuous to contemplate, since Kathie was not only a beautiful, educated girl, but also the boss's daughter, and Johnny was only a hired foreman. Still, he had no intention of working for someone else all his life, and he had already managed to accumulate a fair amount of cash, part of it saved from his wages, and part as profit on a small herd of cattle which he was running on Big-H land under an arrangement with Nathan Hardcastle.

One thing in Johnny's favor was that Mr. Hardcastle

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

obviously didn't oppose the idea. He had appeared to like Johnny from the first, and he seemed pleased at the possibility that Johnny and Kathie might join forces to take over the ranch when he was ready to give it up.

Most of the time Johnny was content to let things take their course, since he wanted to be in a better position financially before he asked Kathie to marry him. Of course there were moments when he wanted her so badly that he could hardly control himself, for instance the day he and Kathie took shelter in a cave during a fierce thunderstorm. But Kathie on two or three occasions had made it evident that despite her Eastern polish she had all the natural desires and impulses of any other healthy young woman, and this helped convince Johnny that when the right time came her answer would be yes.

In July of that year Big-H was to deliver the cattle which Mr. Hardcastle had sold to the English-owned outfit in Idaho. The agreement called for the Big-H crew to drive the herd as far as Rock Springs, where it would be turned over to the new owners for the rest of the journey. The starting date had been set for July fifth.

Two days before, on the third, Johnny again ran afoul of the army.

It started when he received word that Mr. Hardcastle wanted to see him at the house, his first inkling of trouble coming when he saw three strange horses alongside the bunkhouse, their bridles bearing the hated insignia of the U.S. Army.

Masking his dislike, Johnny let himself be introduced to a Lieutenant Drake and two privates whose names he didn't try to remember. It was obvious that Drake was the important member of the trio, a handsome, dark-haired man about Johnny's age, radiating charm and self-confidence.

"Lieutenant Drake is buying beef for the government," Mr. Hardcastle explained. "I've already told him that we won't have any to sell this year, on account of making that deal with the outfit in Idaho. But the lieutenant says

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

. . . You tell him, Lieutenant; you can explain it better than I can."

"Thank you, sir," Lt. Drake said, and turned toward Johnny.

"As you probably know, Mr. McVey, the army has been saddled with the job of feeding those Indians who have been relocated on reservations. It's too costly to ship everything from the East, so we intend to buy as much as possible close at hand." He smiled. "By 'we,' I of course mean the Quartermaster Corps. Personally I couldn't buy enough to feed one hungry redskin, not on what the army pays a lieutenant."

It seemed to Johnny that Drake sounded bitter, but the lieutenant smiled and went on smoothly, "Mr. Hardcastle has already explained that he can't contract to deliver any cattle this year, but I've asked permission to make a temporary headquarters on the ranch, since it's approximately the center of the area I have to cover."

"That's up to Mr. Hardcastle," Johnny said. "I'm only his foreman."

"And a very good one, so he tells me," Drake said. "Which brings me to my reason for asking to see you. Actually he's already given me permission to set up camp on Big-H, but in order to accomplish our mission efficiently, I'll need to know a good deal about the local situation . . . where the various ranches are located, the approximate size of their herds, who's the man to talk to, and so forth. I was hoping you might be willing to give us a hand."

Johnny looked at Mr. Hardcastle, who said, "I told him it was up to you, Johnny. If you think you can work it in. . . ."

It was pretty clear that Mr. Hardcastle would like to cooperate with the army on this. Johnny wanted to please the rancher, but there was something else which influenced him even more. The sooner Lt. Drake and his men finished their business, the sooner they would leave. And perhaps if he gave Drake a hand, they could get done much quicker. He nodded.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Tomorrow's a holiday, Lieutenant, and I'm letting the crew ride into town for the celebration. If you don't object to working on the Fourth, I'll do what I can. It'll have to be just one day, because day after tomorrow we start delivering that herd.

"Thank you, Mr. McVey. I'm sure one day will be ample, and I appreciate your going to so much trouble." He shook Johnny's hand and turned toward Mr. Hardcastle. "You've been very helpful, sir. Now I'll take my men and clear out without using up any more of your time. We'll come back in the morning."

"Nonsense, Lieutenant. It's seldom enough we have visitors out here. Have your men pitch their tent over by the bunkhouse, and take their meals with the crew. As for yourself, you'll have supper with me and my daughter. She'll be glad to hear all the gossip from the East. She just returned from there herself."

"In that case, I'll be delighted," the Lieutenant said, and left.

Johnny wasn't especially happy at this turn of affairs, but some of his misgivings were relieved that night at supper, for Kathie didn't seem particularly awed by the guest. Johnny had been invited to eat at the main house, although he ordinarily took his meals with the men. Kathie looked as lovely as ever, her delicate oval face framed becomingly in soft brown curls. She was frankly interested in Lt. Drake, but it appeared that her interest was more in what he had to tell than in the man himself; and it was Johnny whose arm she took when they all went outside afterward to watch the two privates set off some fireworks they had bought in Omaha on their way west.

Later on, when the lieutenant had gone to his tent, and Mr. Hardcastle had retired, Johnny almost asked Kathie the question he had been delaying; but before he could put it into words, she said softly, "Not now, Johnny. Wait until you get back from Rock Springs. I want more time to think."

From her tone, and the way she kissed him good night,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Johnny thought there was nothing to worry about, and he went to the bunkhouse feeling confident. The feeling carried over to the Fourth, most of which he spent in the company of the lieutenant. Apparently it showed, for at noon, when they had dismounted for a smoke atop a small hill from which Johnny was pointing out the various landmarks, Drake said good-naturedly, "From the looks of things, I'd guess that you'll soon be Mr. Hardcastle's son-in-law, as well as his foreman. Am I right?"

Johnny's opinion of the lieutenant had improved considerably, so he didn't take offense at the personal question. However, he didn't want to tempt fate by sounding too sure of himself, so he merely said, "It's a possibility. There's nothing definite yet."

"Definite enough, I bet," Drake said, smiling. "Unless I'm a very poor judge of the way Miss Hardcastle was looking at you that is." His grin faded, and he added soberly, "You're a lucky man, McVey. Twenty years from now, you'll probably be living on this same ranch, raising a family. In my job, I don't know where I'll be next month."

"You can quit, can't you?"

"Quit?" Drake shook his head. "You don't know what you're saying, McVey. There's been a Drake wearing officer's bars for a hundred years or more. If I were to resign, I think my father would drop dead. He's a colonel, incidentally, on permanent assignment to the War Office in Washington."

"I can see you have a problem," Johnny conceded. "I take it you're not married."

"Good Lord, no! I couldn't drag a woman into a life like this, even if one would have me. It's a horrible existence army wives lead, being bounced around from post to post, bearing their children hundred of miles from their families. I've seen too much of it myself. In fact, I was born in an army tent." He grinned. "Let's change the subject. It spoils the day just thinking about it."

"Sure," Johnny said, dropping the stub of his cigarette

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

and grinding it under his heel. "What I was about to tell you, that big mound over there . . ."

They started moving the herd the next morning, and for six days there was little time to think about anything except work. One of the three men he had taken with him got thrown the second morning when he was taking the kinks out of a mean bronc, and wasn't much good the rest of the trip. Short-handed, the others had to work to the limit of their endurance to reach Rock Springs by the agreed time. They made it, and Johnny was given a receipt for the cattle. He would have laid over a day to rest, but with the herd off his mind he began worrying about what was going on back at Big-H. It wasn't the kind of worry he could pin down. Just a vague uneasiness which had something to do with Drake. He told the three punchers to rest up a day before following, and started back alone.

On his arrival at the ranch, he found that his uneasiness had been justified. Nathan Hardcastle was waiting for him, but without the usual smile.

"Kathie's gone, Johnny. She left two days ago."

"Lieutenant Drake?" Johnny asked evenly.

Hardcastle nodded. He had aged perceptibly in Johnny's absence, and his voice when he spoke was bitter.

"You were right about soldiers, Johnny. As soon as you left, the dirty . . ."

"I'd rather not hear the details," Johnny said. "It was Kathie's privilege to do what she wanted to. She hadn't made any promises."

"You're taking it a lot better than I would, boy. If you want my opinion, it was a hell of a thing to do."

"I know," Johnny said. "Well, there's probably something around here that needs taking care of. The others should be back tomorrow. When they get here we'll start moving those cows out of the valley, Speaking of cows, here's the receipt for that herd."

Big-H would never be the same for Johnny with Kathie gone, but he was mature enough not to brood over it.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

For a while he drove himself almost to the breaking point, then the first pain began to wear off, and his crew groaned with relief as things settled into their customary routine.

The next winter brought a repeat of the other big blizzard. Once again many of the smaller ranchers were wiped out, but Big-H, having had the foresight to bring in quantities of hay from Colorado before the storm struck, and by prodigious efforts on the part of its foreman and crew, managed to come through with only minor losses.

The worst result of that winter, insofar as Big-H was concerned, was its effect on Nathan Hardcastle. The ranch owner was no longer a young man, and for some time he had been under orders to take it easy; but he was too conscientious a cattle man to sit idly by when there was danger to his herds. Despite Johnny's protests, he exerted himself beyond his capacities. As a result, the doctor they brought from Laramie warned him that if he didn't slow down he hadn't long to live.

Hardcastle made an effort to co-operate, and for a while he seemed to hold his own. Then there was another severe winter, though not as bad as before, and he came down with a sickness which kept him in bed over a month. When he was able to get up, he called Johnny into the office.

"There's no sense in my fighting it, Johnny. Doc tells me another spell like the last one might put me under. Besides, I'm not doing any good around here. You're running the ranch, and we both know it."

"I'm not complaining," Johnny said. "You're paying me well, and I've been making a good profit on those cows of mine. Why don't you . . ."

"It's no use, boy. Doc says if I go to some place lower down, where the winters aren't so mean, I'll be all right, so that's what I'm going to do. California, most likely."

"Sounds like a smart idea," Johnny said. "I'll keep you posted on how things go here on the ranch, and you can send me your instructions by mail."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"No, Johnny; when I leave I'm going to make a clean break."

"You mean sell out?"

"That's right. And if you're interested in buying, we'll work out a deal somehow. I've always wished I had a son to take over, but it didn't turn out that way, although for a while there . . ." He made an impatient gesture. "Well, how about it?"

Johnny hesitated briefly. He had grown very fond of Nathan Hardcastle over the years, and didn't want to disappoint him, but for some time he had been thinking about that country down in Colorado. He shook his head.

"I appreciate your asking me, Mr. Hardcastle, but I reckon not. For one thing this ranch is worth a whole lot more than I've been able to save, and I wouldn't want to go into debt to the bank."

"That's easily taken care of. I'll be glad . . ."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Hardcastle. I can guess what you're going to say, and it's generous of you, but there's another reason. You've been mighty good to me, but to tell the truth, I've got my heart set on some land I saw down in Colorado. You won't have any trouble selling Big-H to someone who can pay cash. I'll stay on the job until you do, and then head south."

So that was how it was decided. As Johnny had predicted, it was easy to find a buyer for Big-H. The following September, Mr. Hardcastle boarded a train for California. Two days later, after selling his own cattle to the new owner and depositing the money in his Laramie bank account, Johnny rode south.

He turned once to look back at the line of hills which marked the location of Big-H, and recalled pointing it out to Kathie that day so long ago. For a few minutes he speculated on what might have happened to her since leaving the ranch, and where she was right now. No place where he'd be likely to see her again, he told himself, and put her out of his thoughts.

V

JOHNNY'S immediate objective in Colorado was the town of Pikeville, which he had visited briefly on that drive north from Texas. It was the nearest settlement to the ranchland which had appealed to him so strongly at that time, and seemed the logical point from which to start looking around.

The place didn't seem to have changed much since his last visit. There was still only the one block of business establishments, consisting of a two-story frame hotel, a squat brick building housing the Rocky Mountain Bank, a small café, two or three saloons, a sheriff's office, and half-a-dozen other stores catering to the needs of the surrounding ranches and the not too distant mines.

From habit, Johnny looked for indications that there might be a military post in the vicinity, but after riding the length of the street without seeing a uniform or McClellan saddle he decided that the place was uncontaminated. With a feeling of relief he dismounted in front of the last saloon in the block and took a twist of the reins around a well-worn hitchrail.

Before going in, Johnny paused at the edge of the wooden sidewalk for a long look at the surrounding country. Although it was only six o'clock, the September sun was already low in the western sky, and the air had turned sharp. A range of mountains which Johnny knew to be over forty miles away seemed close enough to touch, and in the opposite direction a faint purple haze softened the horizon. This haze was partly due to smoke from several nearby dwellings, whose occupants were presumably preparing their suppers.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

As Johnny was about to enter the saloon, a hulking brute of a man came out, almost crashing into him. Johnny side-stepped quickly to avoid the collision, but his grin brought only an ugly scowl and muttered curse from the big stranger. Even this failed to disturb Johnny's pleasant mood, and he was smiling as he approached the bar, where a gloomy-looking bartender stood watching him. Johnny nodded toward the batwings.

"What's itching your friend? Did he find a fly in his beer?"

"Coker? He's always like that, except when he's beating somebody up. And don't call him my friend. Coker ain't got any."

"My mistake," Johnny said, gesturing toward a bottle on the bar. "I'll have a shot of that, if you please."

While the bartender poured his drink, Johnny took a look around the room. It was much like numerous other saloons he had patronized, but something about this one reminded him of the place for which he had worked in Wichita. He was thoughtful for a moment, then picked up his drink and said curiously, "That café down the street . . . is it a good place to eat?"

"Best restaurant I've ever run across," the bartender said positively. "Madge Holloway ain't long on looks, but she's first rate with a frying pan."

There were already three patrons in the café when Johnny entered, a traveling salesman sitting alone, and two men who looked like merchants at another table. One of the latter looked faintly familiar from the back, but he didn't turn around far enough to present a clear view. The other glanced at Johnny curiously, as did the drummer.

Johnny chose a stool at the little counter near the back. As he sat down and dropped his hat on the floor, a woman came out of the kitchen carrying a plate of food in each hand. She gave Johnny a polite nod and went on to set the plates in front of the two merchants.

From the bartender's description Johnny assumed that this was the woman called Madge Holloway. As the man had

said, she wasn't notable for her looks, being rather plain-faced, and neither pretty enough nor homely enough to attract attention. Johnny hoped the bartender had been equally accurate about her ability as a cook.

This hope was borne out, and Johnny went to work with a will. About the time he was taking his last bite of apple pie, the scrape of chairs told him that the two storekeepers had also finished. He glanced around and saw one of them coming toward him, apparently to say something.

"No offense intended, stranger, but you look a lot like a man I once knew in Fort Davis, Nebraska. You wouldn't by any chance be named McVey?"

"Hans Kroeger!" Johnny exclaimed, breaking into a smile. "I'll be a son of a gun. What're you doing here in Colorado?"

"I live here now," Kroeger said. He took Johnny's hand in a firm grip, and turned to call over his shoulder.

"Come over and meet an old friend of mine, Brad. Johnny, this is Mr. Owens, who owns the bank."

Owens was a smallish man with graying hair and an air of quiet efficiency. He studied Johnny's face a moment, smiled, and said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. McVey. Kroeger's told me about the time you were marshal of that place in Nebraska."

Johnny grinned. "Don't hold it against me, Mr. Owens. I did some pretty foolish things in those days."

"That isn't the way Kroeger tells it," Owens said, and added, "Are you planning on staying in Pikeville a while?"

"It's possible. I'm thinking of locating in this vicinity if I can find a ranch that meets my requirements."

His eyes reflecting increased interest, Mr. Owens said, "Just what are those requirements, Mr. McVey? Maybe I can be of assistance."

"Well," Johnny said, "one of the first things is that it has to be priced within reason. I don't intend to work myself to death paying interest to a bank." He smiled. "Not even to yours."

"That's telling him, Johnny," Hans Kroeger cut in. "Don't

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

let Brad Owens get his hooks into you, or you're a goner."

Owens joined in the laugh, then said drily, "Well, I can't stay here and listen to insults, even from one of my depositors. If I can be of help, Mr. McVey, drop in and see me at the bank." He nodded, turned to say good night to Madge Holloway, and went out onto the street.

Johnny realized that he hadn't as yet offered to pay for his supper, so he turned to the woman and said, "However much I owe you, ma'am, that meal was worth it. The pie was wonderful."

A smile touched Madge Holloway's lips, but she controlled it almost immediately, and said, "Fifty cents, Mr. McVey. I'm glad you were satisfied." She nodded at Hans Kroeger, picked up some dishes, and hurried into the kitchen.

"What's bothering her?" Johnny asked. "Is there a law against smiling at strangers?"

Kroeger's only answer was a shrug. When they were outside, however, he said seriously, "There's nothing bothering her, so far as I know. She just tends to business, and all she wants is to be left alone."

"That ought to be easy. She's not exactly the kind of woman anyone would annoy. Has she got a jealous husband or something?"

"She's never had any kind of husband so far as I know," Kroeger said. Johnny thought he sounded faintly displeased, but then Kroeger grinned and added good-humoredly, "Speaking of laws, we don't need many here in Pikeville. Most of the folks you'll meet are decent, law-abiding citizens."

"Including the one called Coker?"

This erased Kroeger's smile, and he looked up quickly. "I thought you just rode in. How come you know Coker?"

"I don't," Johnny said. "Only, he almost walked over me in front of the saloon, and then acted like he wanted to shoot me for cluttering up the sidewalk. But let's not waste a nice evening talking about him. You haven't told me how come you're in Pikeville. From what your friend

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Owens said about your being one of his depositors, I take it you're in business."

"That's right; that's my store across the street." He pointed toward a building bearing the sign GENERAL MERCHANDISE. "After you left Fort Davis, things got too hot for me. The army just about took over, and with Major Quillen remembering how I'd stood in back of you about that frame-up, he really made things tough. When I had a chance to sell out, I did."

"I'm sorry, Kroeger. Probably if I hadn't butted in, things would have worked themselves out."

"Save your sorrow, Johnny. I'm a lot better off here in Pikeville. Business is pretty good, what with the ranches and the mines, and everybody gets along okay." He looked at Johnny speculatively.

"How about you, Johnny? What've you been doing the last ten years?"

"Oh, this and that," Johnny said. "There've been good times and bad, but I can't complain. Someday I'll tell you about it. Right now, though, I feel like a grizzly bear that's just had too much to eat and can't think of anything but sleep. Is that hotel over there fit to stay in?"

"It's all right," Kroeger said. "And if you're looking for a place to leave your horse, there's one right behind the hotel. Billy Coit owns it. Tell him you're a friend of mine and he may let you in anyway."

"Thanks," Johnny chuckled. "See you in the morning."

There proved to be no trouble about the stable arrangements, but when Johnny reached the hotel and banged on the bell he found on the counter, there was no response. After waiting a reasonable time, he chose a key from the rack behind the desk, and climbed the stairs. The upper hall was dark, but by striking a match he was able to locate a door whose number matched that on his key. He went in, tossed his war bag on the bed, and lit the coal-oil lamp which he found on a rickety dresser.

The room he had picked was on the front of the hotel, its open single window overlooking the street. There was

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

nothing about it to set it apart from a dozen others in which Johnny had stayed; even the bed seemed to have the same humps and hollows.

Fortunately, none of this made any difference to him now, tired as he was and feeling groggy after such a heavy supper. He slid a dresser over in front of the door as a precaution, took off his boots and outer clothing, blew out the lamp, and got into bed. Moments later he was asleep.

Sometime in the night a noise outside awakened him. He rolled carefully out of bed, at the same time reaching for his holstered pistol, which was hung on a bedpost. Kneeling beneath the window, he raised up slowly until his eyes were above the sill.

The almost full moon was at an angle, bathing this side of the street in light, but leaving the fronts of the opposite row of stores in their own shadow. It was from somewhere in this strip of darkness that the noise seemed to have come, but there was no way of pinpointing the exact source.

There were two or three things Johnny could do. The simplest and safest of these, of course, was to go back to bed and forget it. After all, it was none of his business what went on here in Pikeville.

Logical as it was, this solution had to be discarded. Johnny had held a position of responsibility too long to be able to close his eyes to the possibility of trouble.

The second alternative was to call out and demand to know who was fooling around in the middle of the night, but since Johnny's window was in bright moonlight, making him a good target, such a course was hardly prudent. There was a third possibility. If someone was up to mischief, perhaps breaking into one of the stores, he would eventually have to leave the shadows and come into the moonlight. Choosing this as the most practicable of the choices, Johnny settled down to wait.

For several minutes there was nothing to support his suspicions. Then a figure emerged from the shadow, that of a man who was bent almost double, as though carry-

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

ing something heavy. When he was well into the moonlight, Johnny called out.

"That's far enough, mister. What're you up to?"

With a startled cry the man pulled up so abruptly that he dropped what he was carrying, which proved to be an armload of rifles. As they clattered to the road, his head jerked up as if he were trying to spot the person who had yelled at him. Failing in this, he swung back toward the far side of the street and opened his mouth to shout, but before he could say anything intelligible, a rifle opened up from the darkness, and a bullet smashed through the window over Johnny's head, showering him with fragments of glass.

There was only one sensible thing to do, and Johnny did it, leaping away from the window and flattening himself against the floor. From this comparatively safe position he heard two more gunshots down in the street, then an anguished scream, followed by the sound of running feet. This in turn was succeeded by a door banging, and a man's voice calling, "Hey! What's going on out here?"

Johnny could feel blood on his face from the flying glass, but he was otherwise unhurt. He dressed hurriedly, strapped on his gun belt, and went down through the lobby into the street. By then quite a bunch of men had appeared, most of them with trousers pulled on hastily over night-shirts. They had formed a rough circle in the street, and all seemed interested in something on the ground. When Johnny pushed his way through, he saw that the source of their interest was two men, one lying motionless, the other kneeling beside him.

As Johnny came up, the kneeling man rose to his feet.

"He's dead, all right . . . shot through the heart." His eyes swung around the circle of faces. "Any of you men ever see him before?"

Apparently none of them had, for nobody answered. Then Johnny said calmly, "I was watching him just before he was shot, if that means anything."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Yes?" The man focused his attention on Johnny. "Suppose you tell me about it, stranger. I'm the sheriff."

"All right, Sheriff," Johnny said, and went on to recount everything which had happened. When he was done, the sheriff's extended his left hand.

"I'll have a look at your gun, stranger, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Johnny said, and handed it over. While the sheriff was sniffing it, and checking the loads, Johnny glanced around and saw that the group had added three or four more members, including Kroeger and the man called Coker, both of them showing signs of having dressed in a hurry.

"Okay, stranger," the sheriff said, handing back Johnny's pistol. "Chances are it happened just like you said. One thing for sure, he wasn't shot from that upstairs window, not according to the way the bullet went through him. Besides, I heard someone running just before I came out."

"Thanks," Johnny said drily, then looked around as Hans Kroeger moved into the circle and faced the sheriff.

"This man is an old friend of mine, Sheriff . . . Johnny McVey. Johnny, this is Tex Tobin."

They shook hands, and the sheriff said apologetically, "Sorry if I sounded suspicious, McVey; we don't get many strangers around here, and I like to be sure who I'm talking to."

"That's all right," Johnny said. He pointed at the four or five rifles on the ground. "What do you suppose he intended to do with so many guns?"

"I've been wondering the same thing," Tobin said soberly. "Well, whatever it was, they won't do him any good now." He motioned to one of the onlookers.

"They must be from your store, Feeney. You'd better get them back where they belong. Some of you other fellers give me a hand with this poor bugger. We'll put him in that old woodshed for the time being. Soon as it's daylight I'll look for the tracks of that other jasper, the one that ran. In the meantime, let's all try to get some sleep." He glanced around at Johnny.

"Better let someone look at those cuts, McVey. There

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

ain't any doctor here in Pikeville, but Madge Holloway, over at the café, does a pretty good job of patching folks up."

"Thanks," Johnny said. "I'll be okay, though." He turned toward the hotel, and saw that Coker was just entering the door. Apparently the man lived there. That being the case, why had it taken him so long to reach the street? It was something to think about.

VI

JOHNNY SLEPT LIGHTLY the rest of the night, and shortly after dawn he was up and shaved. As he finished dressing, footsteps out in the street made him glance out the shattered window. Sheriff Tobin was prowling around in front of the hardware store, evidently looking for tracks. Johnny strapped on his gun and went down to join him.

"You're up early, Sheriff. Find anything?"

"Just this, so far," Tobin said, holding out his open palm to display three brass cartridge cases. "Not that they'll be of much help; there must be a dozen guns right here in town that shoot this size bullet. But at least it bears out everything you told me. I don't suppose you've thought of anything else?"

By daylight the sheriff looked older than Johnny had taken him to be, but there was something about him which made Johnny feel that age would have little effect on his spirit. Like an old hunting hound whose teeth were worn smooth, but who would still face up to a bear if necessary, this man would continue to do what he considered his duty as long as he breathed. And since Johnny believed this to be true, he wished he could say something to make the job easier. Unfortunately, he had to shake his head.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"I'm afraid not, Sheriff. I had a quick glimpse of him when he fired, but he could have been Chinese or an Eskimo for all I could tell. I wasn't spending a lot of time trying to find out."

"I can imagine," Tobin said, smiling. "Well, whoever it was, he didn't leave town right away, at least not on a horse, or we would have heard it. And when it comes to identifying his bootprints that's hopeless. Half the men in town have crossed this street since the last rain." He dropped the cartridge cases into his pocket and dusted his hands on his pants. "You going to have some breakfast?"

"I'm looking forward to it, soon as the café opens."

"Oh, Madge'll let us in now, I reckon. She's always there early, and she's used to my crazy hours. Come on, let's go see."

As the sheriff had predicted, Madge Holloway was already there. She seemed a little surprised when Johnny followed the sheriff into the building. A little flustered, too, he thought. The friendly smile which she apparently intended for the sheriff vanished at once, and she greeted Johnny with a curt, "Good morning, Mr. McVey."

"Oh, so you two already know each other?" Tex Tobin said.

"Not officially," Madge explained. "Mr. McVey had supper here last night, and I heard his name mentioned. Excuse me; I'll get you some breakfast."

Johnny had the impression that she resented his being there, although he couldn't think of any logical reason. He turned to catch the sheriff looking at him oddly, but whatever it was the sheriff was thinking he didn't mention it. Instead, he sat down at one of the small tables and motioned for Johnny to take the opposite chair.

"I've been thinking about what you said last night, McVey. Something about that dead man wanting so many guns."

"Have you figured out an answer?"

"Maybe. How about you? I've got a hunch you've been mulling it over, too."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

This was true; Johnny had lain there quite a while after the shooting before falling asleep. He nodded.

"For what it's worth, which may be nothing, it strikes me that he didn't want all those guns for himself. Offhand, I'd think he might have been stealing them for someone else—for several others, that is."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, for one thing, if he'd simply wanted to get a rifle without paying for it, why take so many? And if he was stealing them for what they would bring, why take anything so hard to handle? There must have been other things more valuable in the store, maybe even some money. By the way, did you find anything else on him?"

"Just the usual stuff, nothing he'd stolen from the store. Go on."

"Well, of course there's the fact that there were two of them, him and the one who ran. Why did the other one have to kill him?"

"To keep him from talking. Is that what you're thinking?"

"Right. For a second, there, it seemed like he was going to yell back at his partner for help, but before he could say anything that gun started banging, and a second later he was dead. Was the gunman afraid he'd call him by name? If so, he must be someone whose name would be recognized."

"That's exactly the way it strikes me, McVey. In fact, you and I seem to have been thinking along the same lines. Tell me something . . . are you some kind of lawman yourself?"

"Far from it," Johnny said. "I'm just a rancher without a ranch." He remembered that Hans Kroeger might have mentioned his stopover in Fort Davis, and added, "For a few months, a long while ago, I made a stab at being town marshal up in Nebraska, but that's not worth thinking about."

Madge Holloway came out of the kitchen just then and

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

brought them their breakfasts. Johnny waited for her to leave, then resumed what he was saying.

"Just as a matter of information, Sheriff, has there been any serious trouble around here lately? Things like cattle-rustling or men being waylaid and robbed?"

"It's funny you'd ask that," Sheriff Tobin said. "As for the robbing, last night's the first time anything of the sort has been tried. But here lately I've been getting reports about cows being stolen. Not many, just five or six at a time. Of course, there was one pretty big bunch run off, big enough so I swore in a posse and took off after it. But before we'd much more than started, the cows started drifting back. I just can't figure it out."

"Me either," Johnny said, and picked up his fork.

About the time Johnny was finishing breakfast, Coker yanked his mount to a stop beside a weathered shack some seven miles west of town. Before dismounting, he raised up in his stirrups to squint back the way he had come, in case there might be someone following him.

Satisfied that he was unobserved, Coker swung down from the saddle, and tied his reins to an iron ring attached to the shack. Most men would simply have looped their reins over a branch, but the horses Coker rode were always so high-strung that they were liable to run off and leave him stranded.

At this a lanky, unshaven man came out of the shack, bleary-eyed, as if he had just awakened. He stared at Coker sourly a moment, then frowned and said, "Where's Creel? I thought you two was going to bring us some rifles."

"Creel's in hell," Coker growled. "The fool got himself killed."

"Killed? Who done it . . . the sheriff?"

"No. Some stranger staying at the hotel." Coker had no intention of admitting that he had killed Creel himself for fear of the effect it would have on the others. "Supposed to be a friend of the Dutchman that runs the mercantile. Calls himself McVey."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"I'll be! How'd it happen? Did this feller catch you stealin' the guns?"

"No, that was just like I said it would, but after we picked out the rifles, Creel lugged them right out into the moonlight, figuring nobody'd be awake at that time of night. This McVey poked a six-gun out the upstairs window and shot him without giving him a chance."

"The hell he did! Sounds to me like McVey needs killing."

"I'm with you on that, Mingus," Coker rasped. "And he'll get it, too, if he hangs around town. But that ain't why I'm here. Where's Tony and Pete?"

Mingus shrugged and made a vague gesture toward the south. "They rode off early this morning. Didn't say where they was going, but I figure they headed for that squatter's place over on Antelope Creek."

"Damn it, they was supposed to stay up here where nobody'd see 'em. What'd they go over there for?"

"A change of scenery, maybe," Mingus said. "It ain't much fun being holed up in this stinkin' shack twenty-four hours a day." He hesitated, then added sullenly, "This deal ain't working out the way we figured. We thought that by this time . . ."

"You getting cold feet, Mingus?" Coker cut in thinly. "Because if you are, there's a quick way out." He rested a hand casually on his six-gun, making his meaning clear.

Mingus was also wearing a gun, but he showed no inclination to use it. Realizing that he had gone too far, he said quickly, "Hell, boss, who said anything about wantin' out? I was just telling you what happened to Tony and Pete." He managed a weak grin, and added, "There's a pretty little breed gal over at the squatter's place, and you know how Tony is about anything in skirts . . . or out of 'em."

"Yes, I know. Well, before we're done, he'll be able to buy all the women he wants, but in the meantime he's got to follow orders. And that goes for Pete, too. You can tell them I said so."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"I sure will," Mingus promised, anxious now to please. "Have you got something lined up?"

"I'm working on it," Coker said. "This time, it won't be cows we're after. There ain't enough money in running off half a dozen, and a big herd's too hard to get rid of unless you've got someone waiting to take it off your hands. I'll figure out something, though, but in the meantime we've got to pick up some spending money. If we don't, I'm liable to get thrown out of that crummy hotel." He reached up to untie his reins, and climbed into the saddle.

"You leaving already?" Mingus asked. "I thought you'd wait for the others."

"Hell, they're liable to be gone all day. All night, too. I'd go after them, but if I'm missing from town too long right after what happened last night, someone might get curious. As it is, I had to sneak out the back door of the hotel without letting anyone know. Besides, Tony and Pete must be at that place by now, and the damage is either done or it ain't. It all depends on whether someone comes along that remembers seeing them in uniform. The army pays pretty good for information about deserters."

"You're telling me!" Mingus said. "They had me in the guardhouse three times before I broke out." He looked at Coker questioningly. "What do we do now, boss—just wait?"

Coker nodded.

"Sit tight until you hear from me. I guess you still ain't low on supplies?"

"We're still eating," Mingus said. "But we could sure use those rifles you was going to get. If anybody was to hook us up with them missing cows and find out where we're holed up, we'd play hell standing them off with six-guns."

"You'll get rifles, all right," Coker promised. Then he was fighting his horse, which as usual was acting spooky. Finally he got it under control and headed back toward town, cursing savagely as he rode.

Coker's ire mounted as he drew nearer to Pikeville. Everything would have gone as planned if that meddling McVey hadn't dealt himself in. They would have gotten

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

away with the rifles, and would have reached the shack in time for him to have kept Pete and Tony from taking off.

By the time Coker rode into town, he had convinced himself that Johnny McVey was to blame for all his troubles. Unfortunately, the first person he ran into in town was Johnny himself, just coming out of the sheriff's office.

VII

IT WAS STILL EARLY when Johnny and the sheriff finished breakfast and left the café, but Pikeville was already showing signs of coming to life. Down the street at the saloon which Johnny had patronized on first reaching town, the bartender was making a pretense of sweeping the sidewalk. Closer at hand, a glum looking little man was examining the door to the hardware store. He turned to watch them come up.

"Been waiting for you, Sheriff. Figured you'd want to look the place over before I moved anything."

"That's right," Tobin said approvingly. "I've already poked around outside, and it appears they entered by breaking a back window. If they'd gone out the same way, they might have gotten away with it." He gestured toward Johnny. "By the way, this Mr. McVey, the gentleman who broke it up. You probably couldn't see him very well in the night. McVey, meet Cal Feeney."

The two shook hands, after which Feeney said without much enthusiasm, "I'm obliged to you for what you did. Those guns were worth a good deal." He turned to face Tobin.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Any idea who the dead man is, Sheriff?"

"Not yet, Feeney. There's quite a stack of wanted notices in my desk drawer, but if one of them had the man's picture on it I think I'd remember. Now that it's daylight I'll take another look at him. First, though, let's see if they left any tracks in the store. Want to come along, McVey?"

Johnny accepted the invitation, but they were unable to pick up any clue as to the identity of the crooks. At Tobin's suggestion, Johnny went along to look at the dead man, then to the office to check through the dodgers.

Skimming through in search of the dead man's picture was simple, even though there was a several years' accumulation, but when it became necessary to read the detailed descriptions, it turned into quite a job. It was almost ten o'clock when Johnny found something which had possibilities. He read it twice, then tossed it across the desk.

"How does this one strike you?"

Tobin read it through and nodded thoughtfully.

"Could be. The dead man looks to be about forty, like it says, and the rest of it sounds pretty close. I didn't notice any scar on his wrist, but I wasn't looking for it. Anyway, it's worth checking." He glanced at the notice again. "I see that in addition to being a thief he's wanted for deserting from the army. That's a nice combination."

Johnny nodded without answering, his thoughts elsewhere. He couldn't forget Coker's belated arrival last night in the street. Was it possible that Coker and the dead man . . .

"Something bothering you, McVey?"

"Just thinking," Johnny said, and didn't elaborate. After all, you didn't accuse a man of murder just because you didn't like his looks. "Shall we go check on that scar?"

Tobin continued to look curious, but he got out of his chair and crossed to the door. Johnny followed, and stepped outside just in time to see the man he had been thinking about ride into the far end of the street.

The most direct way to reach the woodshed was to cut diagonally across the street. This meant that Johnny and the sheriff's route intersected that of Coker. The two men

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

slowed to let Coker pass, and Johnny was surprised and puzzled at the look of raw enmity which Coker gave him. On a hunch, when Coker was several yards past, Johnny said distinctly, "Just a minute, Sergeant."

The effect on Coker was automatic. He yanked on the reins and twisted in the saddle to look back. Then it came to him that he had been trapped, and his face colored. Shouting a curse, he jabbed spurs into the horse's flanks and whirled it on its haunches.

The startled animal plunged straight at Johnny and the sheriff. Acting instinctively, Johnny gave the sheriff a shove which sent him sprawling, and at the same time waved his arm to confuse the horse. It swerved just enough to miss running him down, and as it lunged past, Johnny reached up for a handful of cloth and hung on. Coker was jerked out of the saddle to land spread-eagled in the dirt. Before he could catch his breath, Johnny was on top of him, twisting his right arm behind his back.

"Don't move or I'll break it!" Johnny ordered, angry enough to do just that if Coker gave him any more trouble.

Coker was either too stunned to move or he had sense enough to evaluate Johnny's mood, for he didn't struggle. After a bit Johnny used his left hand to remove the pistol from Coker's holster, and rose to his feet.

"All right, Sergeant, get up!"

Coker got up off the road and turned to stare at Johnny truculently.

"What's the idea calling me 'sergeant'? Who the hell said . . ."

"You knew who I meant, didn't you?" Johnny said. Without taking his eyes off Coker, he added, "Are you all right, Sheriff?"

"Yes, thanks to you," Tobin said, coming into Johnny's range of vision. He moved up to confront Coker. "That was a pretty trick you pulled. You could've killed one of us."

Although the sheriff was twice Coker's age and much

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

smaller, he obviously wasn't afraid. Coker made an effort to look innocent.

"I didn't do nothing, Sheriff. That fool horse just bolted."

"Don't make it worse by taking me for a *fool*. You were trying to get one of us. I just want to know why. Was it because he called you 'sergeant'?"

Johnny thought Coker didn't know how to answer this simple question. He didn't seem like a very smart person; probably he wanted to deny it, but wasn't sure just how much Johnny really knew. At any rate, he hedged by demanding sullenly, "Supposing I was, there ain't no law against it, is there?"

"Not unless you're a deserter," Tobin said. He turned his attention to Johnny.

"How about it, McVey? It must've been you he was after; he's had a hundred chances if he was sore at me. Shall I lock him up?"

"Not on my account, Sheriff. You've got a nice clean jail—why dirty it?" He glanced down at Coker's six-gun, which he still held in his left hand. "Here you are, Sergeant. Maybe you're waiting to use it."

Coker reacted in time to grab at the tossed gun. He was fortunate enough to catch it by the butt, and for a second his thoughts were plain for anyone to see. The man who had just humiliated him was standing quiet and relaxed, his pistol still in its holster. Unless he had a lightning draw, he wouldn't have a chance.

"Something worrying you, Coker?" Johnny asked mildly.

Coker cursed, rammed the gun into its holster, and turned away toward the hotel. As he went in, the sheriff let out his breath in a gusty sigh.

"He's going to hate you for that, McVey, even more than for pulling him out of the saddle and rubbing his face in the dirt." He frowned. "By the way, what made you think he was a sergeant?"

"Just a hunch. I've met his kind of soldier before. I wonder . . ."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Wonder *what*, McVey? Whether Coker was the other man in the robbery?"

"It's occurred to me," Johnny acknowledged. "Just who is this Coker, anyway? What do you know about him?"

"Very little, to tell the truth. He rode into town about two months ago, and he's been in and out ever since. He's not the sort of person you want to get chummy with; but so far he's stayed out of serious trouble and paid his bills, so there's been no reason for me to question him."

"He does have money then, I take it. Does he do any work that you know of?"

"Not here in Pikeville. Of course he might be working somewhere else on the days he's gone."

"Sure," Johnny agreed. "Well, this is your problem, I reckon, not mine, although I'll be interested in finding out if the dead man had a scar on his wrist. Right now I'd better go over to the bank. Mr. Owens thinks he may be able to put me on the track of a good ranch. I'll see you later."

Owens was unquestionably eager to be of help, and he seemed to be familiar with every piece of property within a fifty-mile radius of Pikeville, but as Johnny had expected, most of the available ranches were either too big, too small, or grossly overpriced. After an hour of poring over maps, the banker said wryly, "I can see you're a man who knows what he's looking for, Mr. McVey. It's an admirable quality, but it's bound to make your search pretty difficult."

"I didn't expect it to be easy," Johnny said, preparing to leave. "Well, if anything turns up, let me know." He started toward the door.

"Just a minute," Owens said, pursing his lips. "There's one place I haven't mentioned, and it's barely possible you'll want to investigate. If you don't mind being insulted, that is, and maybe shot at."

"Sounds interesting," Johnny said, smiling. "Whereabouts is this place you're talking about, and who is it that's going to shoot at me?"

"It's about fifteen miles northwest of here. If you really

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

want to see it, I'll give you more specific directions, but I certainly won't go along to introduce you. Old Yates has no use for bankers."

"Yates? Is he the man with the itchy trigger finger?"

"That's right. Phineas T. Yates, the owner. He must be close to eighty, but don't let that fool you. The last time he came to town, which must have been six months ago, some misguided young fool made him mad, and ended up flat on his back."

Johnny chuckled.

"Now there's a man I'd like to meet."

"It's your funeral," Owens shrugged. "Here's how you get there."

The banker's directions were clear and accurate, and around midafternoon Johnny spotted a landmark which he had been told indicated the edge of Phineas T. Yates's property. By then, he wouldn't have turned back had there been a dozen men waiting to shoot at him, for this was exactly the kind of country he had always dreamed about. There was plenty of grass, an ample supply of water in the form of a fast flowing creek, and only enough hilliness to make the landscape more attractive. No wonder the old man was wary of trespassers.

The trail Johnny had been following became even fainter after it crossed onto Yates's land, being blotted out entirely in places by the tracks of cattle, little bunches of which could be seen grazing off to the sides. At the top of a small hummock Johnny got his first view of the ranch buildings, a neat log house and several barns and sheds, together with a sturdy corral.

Here also he had his first introduction to Phineas T. Yates, in the shape of a bullet which knocked bark off a pine tree beside the trail. At the same time, a puff of smoke blossomed from the front door of the house.

Having been forewarned, and having made his own guess as to the character of the man who chose this way to greet strangers, Johnny continued to ride slowly toward the group of buildings. When he was halfway down the

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

slope, a second bullet kicked up dust at his horse's feet, making the animal jump. Johnny quieted it with his voice and kept going.

As though the unseen gunman reached the limit of his patience, the air was suddenly filled with whistling lead, some of it so close that Johnny winced. On the heels of the last shot, a white-haired little man burst out of the house brandishing a carbine and glaring up at Johnny in indignation.

"Goldanged young fool! Ain't you got brains enough to know when you're being shot at?"

Johnny brought his horse to a stop some six feet from where the man was standing, touched the brim of his hat, and said respectfully, "Mr. Yates? I'm Johnny McVey, and I've come to see about buying your ranch."

The following morning, Sunday, when Johnny headed back toward Pikeville, he still hadn't definitely bought the ranch. However, Mr. Yates had promised to give the proposition serious thought, and to have an answer ready in a month. He even admitted that he had been thinking for some time about selling out. Not, of course, that he was to old to handle the work; it was just that he wanted to see a bit of the country while he was still young enough to enjoy it.

All in all, it had been a fairly successful visit, Johnny decided. The old man, once you got under his crust, was friendly and intelligent, and Johnny was reasonably sure the deal would go through. Of course he would have to find something to do while Mr. Yates was making up his mind; sitting around would just use up his capital.

In this pleasant frame of mind Johnny was within a few miles of town when he saw a rider on a buckskin come over a rise some distance ahead and turn toward Pikeville. Thinking to have company for the rest of the ride, Johnny lifted his mount into a lope.

He had narrowed the distance only slightly when the

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

other rider turned to look back, then did something which made the buckskin break into a gallop.

Curious as to who the rider was and why he disliked being overtaken, Johnny spoke to his mount, which stretched out into a fast run.

The buckskin was making a noble effort, but Johnny's animal was more than its match. Before long Johnny was close enough to see that the other rider was wearing blue Levi's, a yellow shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat. An ordinary enough outfit, except for the shirt, which seemed a little flamboyant for a working cowboy. There was something else about the rider which didn't seem quite right; the Levi's were a snug fit, and there were curves where you would expect flat surfaces.

As these thoughts passed through Johnny's mind, a sudden gust of wind whipped off the other rider's hat, leaving it dangling by a chin strap. This freed a plume of long dark hair such as Johnny had never seen on a man.

Astonished, he slowed his mount to a walk, then stopped it completely. Much as he would like to catch the other rider, whom he now knew to be a girl, and to find out why she was so afraid of him, he could picture the results if he were to be seen chasing her into town at a dead run. Chances were he'd be ridden out of Pikeville on a rail.

Grinning at the idea, he jiggled the reins and continued on toward town at a conservative pace. When he came within sight of the buildings, the girl was nowhere to be seen.

VIII

MADGE HOLLOWAY was disgusted with herself for having acted like a startled doe when Johnny McVey spotted her out on the trail. She had no doubt as to who he was, for even at that distance she could easily recognize his horse.

What she did have doubts about was her reason for reacting the way she had, and it was this which made her mutter an unladylike "damn" as she rubbed down the buckskin.

Being a rational person, Madge was forced to admit that it was all her own fault. The sensible thing to have done, when she looked back and saw who was following her, would have been to wait and see what he wanted—which was probably what she would have done, except for the yellow blouse.

A blouse, whatever its color, would seem to have little bearing on such a situation, but in Madge's mind this one had a special significance. To begin with, it was the only frilly article of apparel she possessed, being made of fine silk and with a touch of lace at the sleeves and collar. Added to this was the fact that this was the first time she had worn it since coming to Pikeville from California two years before, and that she had neglected to pull her hair into that horrible bun which made her look like a bitter old spinster.

Which was what she was, she told herself wryly, at least the spinster part, since in this section of the country an unmarried female of twenty-five was usually either ugly as sin or too generous with her favors to be tied to any one man. Neither of which applied to her, for she was honest enough to admit that there was nothing wrong with her face or figure except what resulted from her deliberate efforts to diminish her attractiveness; and certainly she didn't fit into the other category. On the contrary, most of the men in Pikeville hardly knew she existed.

Which was the way she wanted it, after what had happened to her in California. Or almost happened, to be more exact. She still shuddered when she thought how close she had come to marrying the beast. The experience had been enough to steer her clear of men forever.

The buckskin was now cooled down, and Madge herself had relaxed enough so that she was able to smile as she gave the horse an affectionate pat before leaving the stall and entering the back door of the café building. In the

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

privacy of her bedroom she removed the yellow blouse, held it in her hands for a moment to enjoy its smooth softness, then laid it with some things which she intended to wash. She stepped out of the Levi's and removed her undergarments, then bathed with water which she poured from a wooden bucket.

During this time, her thoughts kept going back to the newcomer, Johnny McVey. Hard as she tried to push him aside, he kept slipping in, his presence so real that she became embarrassed at her own nudity, as though he were actually watching her.

Why couldn't he have stayed where he belonged, instead of coming here and upsetting things?

The absurdity of this line of thought struck her finally, and she began to laugh. The way she was acting, you'd think he had tried to follow her or something, whereas all he had wanted was some company on the way to town. Even now he probably didn't know who it was on the buckskin.

Actually, Johnny had about decided who it was he had been chasing, mostly because he remembered the color of her hair. Hard as it was to reconcile his impression of the café owner with the peculiar actions of the one on the buckskin, he was inclined to believe that they were one and the same. Though why she had been so anxious to get away, he couldn't even guess.

Well, it was none of his business, and he certainly didn't intend to get involved. He still remembered his experience with Kathie Hardcastle.

On reaching town he rode directly to the livery barn and stabled his horse, noting as he did so that the buckskin wasn't here. He left the barn and walked to the sheriff's office, where he found Tex Tobin seated behind the desk. Tobin looked up at him inquiringly.

"I understand you've been out to see old man Yates. Did you get shot at?"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"More or less," Johnny told him. "He wasn't trying very hard to hit me."

"That's for sure," the sheriff said. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be here to tell me about it. I've seen Yates pick off a squirrel at a hundred yards. Of course that was some time ago. I suppose he's getting old."

"Not so that it shows, Sheriff."

"I'm glad to hear it. I've always liked the old buzzard, for all his orneriness. Which reminds me, that dead man has a scar on his wrist all right."

"That's what I came by to ask," Johnny said. "Well, I'm going over to the hotel and get cleaned up." He started toward the door.

"Just a minute; ain't you curious about Coker?"

"Not especially. Should I be?"

"If it was me, I would," Tobin said grimly. "Or have you already forgotten how he tried to kill you yesterday?"

"No. But I don't intend to lose sleep over it. Coker isn't the kind to come out in the open about anything; otherwise, he would have settled it out there in the street. And if he intends to shoot me in the back, there's nothing I can do about it except what I'd do anyway, like looking both ways when I step through a doorway, and staying out of dark alleys."

"You're a cool son of a gun, McVey. Still, I suppose you've got the right idea. Worrying yourself to death is a mean way to die. By the way, Brad Owens said you had a notion of buying Yates's spread . . . did you get anywhere with it?"

"He's promised to let me know in a month."

"Good. And in the meantime, what'll you do?"

"Well, for one thing I'll try to find some kind of work. I can't afford to sit around that long doing nothing." He glanced out the window and added, "Does Madge Holloway open on Sundays?"

The sheriff didn't seem to hear him at first, and Johnny repeated the question, whereupon he said promptly, "She'll

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

be open from one to three, mostly as an accommodation to folks like us that have nowhere else to eat."

"Good. I'll be there when she unlocks the door."

"In that case I'll be seeing you. Not that I'm especially hungry, but it's supposed to be a good idea to eat once in a while."

Johnny wondered about this last remark, but didn't comment. When he came out of the hotel some time later he found the sheriff waiting in front of the restaurant. They went in together and took a table next to the window.

Madge Holloway, looking as distant as usual, and showing no signs that anything unusual had happened earlier in the day, brought them their dinners. She seemed so composed that Johnny began to wonder if he had been mistaken. As a result, he paid more attention to her than usual, and, despite the shapeless dress she was wearing, thought he detected some of the curves he had noticed in the Levi's. Then his speculations were interrupted by the sheriff saying unexpectedly:

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier, that business about looking for something to do while you wait for Yates to make up his mind. How'd you like to take over my job for a month?"

"As sheriff? Thanks just the same, but that's not the kind of job I meant. I had all I wanted of that a long time ago, up in Nebraska." Johnny looked at the sheriff thoughtfully. "How come you need a substitute? Are you going fishing or something?"

"Nothing that pleasant," Tobin said. He looked around to make sure they weren't being overheard, and added quietly, "To tell the truth, there's been something wrong with me the last six months or so. I sort of figured to go to Denver and let one of those fancy sawbones look me over."

"I'm sorry to hear it," Johnny said. He remembered Tobin's comment about not being hungry, and a glance at the sheriff's plate showed that the food had hardly been touched. "Isn't there a doctor closer than Denver?"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Oh sure, there's one over in Coneyville, but I wouldn't trust him to treat my horse. Don't let it worry you, though. Likely I'll be all right in a week or two."

Johnny was silent while Madge Holloway picked up their plates and carried them to the kitchen. He was genuinely concerned about the sheriff's illness, and wished he could be of help. But the idea of pinning on a badge again . . .

Madge brought them each a piece of pie, then went back to the kitchen. So far they were the only customers, although Johnny supposed there might be others later. After a moment he said lamely, "Even if I wanted the job, which I don't, it isn't the kind of thing you step right into. There'd have to be an election or something, wouldn't there?"

"Oh, that's easily taken care of," Tobin said quickly, looking hopeful. "All I'd have to do is make you a deputy. According to Brad Owens and Kroeger . . ."

"Good Lord! You mean you're already discussed it with them? What made you so sure I'd even consider it?"

"I wasn't, McVey. I just figured you'd be reasonable, so I asked a few questions. You will do it, won't you? It'll give you something to do while you wait for Yates."

"Okay," Johnny said, shrugging. "I guess a month won't kill me. Besides, it looks like you've got it all settled anyway. When do I start?"

"Just as soon as you're ready," Tobin said, smiling with relief. His smile faded, and he added seriously, "What I told you about going to the doctor was on the level. Maybe now I'll get fixed up before it's too late. I honestly do appreciate what you're doing for me."

"Forget it, Sheriff," Johnny said. "Like you said, it'll keep me busy." He noticed the sheriff glance up, and turned to see Madge Holloway watching from the doorway. From her expression, she had evidently heard the last of the conversation and approved of it. For she smiled at Johnny in a way he hadn't seen her smile before. It almost made him glad he had agreed.

IX

AT THE TIME Kathie Hardcastle deserted Johnny McVey to become the bride of Lt. Drake, one of the things which had motivated her was the prospect of being constantly on the move, seeing new places and new people. Her conception of army life, based almost entirely on flirtatious conversations with officers she had met at fancy affairs in the East, bore little resemblance to the truth, which was that an army wife, even as pretty a one as she, faced a succession of cramped and uncomfortable quarters, dust, insects, and boredom, broken only infrequently by brief periods of tension and fear.

For the first month or so, of course, this didn't become apparent, since her new husband was unquestionably a romantic sort, with a masterful knowledge of everything which women consider important. He could be gentle or passionate as the occasion required, and his sole purpose in life seemed to be to make Kathie happy.

Unfortunately, Kathie was destined to learn that the lieutenant had another side to his character. This was brought home to her dramatically near the end of their second month of married life.

By then they had left Wyoming and gone down into Colorado, where the lieutenant was still engaged in arranging contracts to buy beef for the reservations. Also by then, Kathie was aware that it was strictly contrary to army regulations for an officer's wife to go along on such a mission, and that only the powerful influence of the lieutenant's father in Washington had made such a violation possible.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Not that the colonel approved, by any means; in fact, he had voiced his displeasure in a letter which had made the lieutenant furious.

Kathie's first inkling of her new husband's less romantic side came when she chanced to overhear a conversation between him and a cattle rancher in whose house they were temporarily quartered. Although she had little knowledge of business, she gathered that they were making an agreement for the lieutenant to be paid a bonus based on the number of cows bought by the government. Even then she wouldn't have given it a second thought except for the violent reaction from Drake when she innocently referred to it later.

The outburst was short-lived, and was followed by an apology, but she now realized that there was one facet of her husband's life in which she must never interfere.

Whether the lieutenant made other such deals Kathie didn't know, but from then on he seemed to have more money than could be accounted for by a lieutenant's salary. His interest in Kathie began to wane, too, becoming casual and sometimes almost perfunctory, as though the novelty had worn off.

At first, Kathie thought there was another woman somewhere. She subsequently decided that this wasn't the case, but not until she had committed a few indiscretions of her own.

If the lieutenant suspected her infidelity, he didn't say so. Probably he wouldn't have, anyway, since the other man was a higher ranking officer and in a position to influence Drake's career. Not that Drake seemed very concerned with that career; Kathie had the feeling that he was just marking time until something happened.

If the lieutenant ever thought about Johnny McVey, he didn't say so. As for Kathie, she thought of him often, generally with regret. But there was nothing she could do about it now, so she relegated him to some remote corner of her mind, and made the best of what she had, playing the part of a dutiful wife in public, and getting what pleasure she could elsewhere.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

About two years after their marriage, the situation was drastically changed when the lieutenant resigned his commission. He appeared to do so without the slightest compunction, and with no qualms about the future. In fact, he even hinted that he had made some sort of deal which would bring in far more money than he had ever received from the army.

Presumably it was his father's death which prompted him to choose this particular time to quit. At least that was the way he explained it, saying that he had been contemplating the move for a long time, but hadn't wanted to break the colonel's heart. Since news of Col. Drake's passing was posted on the bulletin board that same day, there was no reason to doubt it—not unless you knew Kathie's husband as well as she did, and were skeptical as to his being influenced by such humanitarian motives.

Kathie had rather expected that they would now quit their nomadic sort of life, but even with the army out of the picture they continued to travel, now by train or stagecoach rather than army ambulance, and staying in the best hotels available instead of at army barracks. For at least one portion of the lieutenant's story was true; he obviously was well fixed for cash, spending it lavishly on clothes for himself and Kathie, as though he were trying to impress someone. Not that Kathie needed new clothes in order to make an impression; she was even more beautiful than on her wedding day, with the added luster which sometimes comes with loss of innocence.

At the moment the Drakes were on a stagecoach rattling north across Colorado. Kathie had long since given up trying to figure out the reason for all this traveling, and was content to enjoy the cool September air, so refreshing in contrast to some they had experienced lately. She didn't ordinarily ask any questions as to their plans, but since they were headed toward Wyoming, which they had not visited since that day long ago, she risked breaking the rule. Making it as casual as possible, she inquired as to their destination.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Drake . . . he was *Mister*, now, not lieutenant . . . didn't seem annoyed at her sudden curiosity. He removed a cigar from between his full lips, turned to glance at her, and said politely, "A town called Pikeville, I believe, or something of the sort. And if this good weather holds out, we ought to be there by tomorrow night." A faint frown furrowed his forehead, and he added, "Why? Any special reason for asking?"

"No," Kathie said, lifting her shoulders in a dainty shrug. "One town's about like another, so far as I've been able to discover. I've never heard of Pikeville, but I doubt if it'll be much different from the last."

Drake nodded, put the cigar back in his mouth, and turned his mind to more important matters.

X

ALTHOUGH JOHNNY had taken the temporary job of sheriff with reluctance, his first week passed pleasantly enough. As Hans Kroeger had said, Pikeville was a peaceful town, its residents mostly law-abiding citizens.

One thing which contributed to the town's tranquility was the absence of Coker, who had ridden out shortly after his fight with Johnny and hadn't been seen since. Johnny remained watchful, but as the days passed he began to hope that Coker had left for good. None of the neighboring ranchers reported seeing him, and the stage drivers (there were two stages a day, one from Pueblo and the other from Denver) couldn't remember seeing him in any of the towns along their routes.

About the time Johnny decided that Coker was no longer

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

a menace, something happened which disturbed him considerably. It started with a visit to his office by Brad Owens, looking worried.

"There's something fishy going on, McVey. Didn't the sheriff say he planned on getting to Denver in three days?"

"That's right," Johnny agreed. "He could have made it on the stage in two, but he didn't like the idea of being cooped up, or of riding all night. Why?"

Owens took a piece of paper out of his pocket.

"Here's a letter that just came in on the stage from Denver. It's from a mutual friend of mine and Tobin's. I gave Tobin some papers to deliver to him, since he was going up that way. Tobin promised to take care of it the first thing, but according to this letter he hasn't showed up. It was written seven days after the sheriff left."

"Maybe . . ." Johnny started, then shook his head. "No, if the sheriff said he'd deliver them right away, that's what he'd do. He's not the kind of man to forget a promise."

"You're absolutely right, McVey. That's why I'm worried. It's beginning to look like he never got there. I'll tell you frankly, I don't like it."

Johnny didn't like it either, and said so. He looked at the banker speculatively.

"Those papers he was to deliver . . . were they valuable?"

"No. They were important to me and to the man who was to receive them, but they wouldn't be worth a cent to anyone else."

"Then they probably had nothing to do with what happened, assuming something *did* happen. It's always possible that there's a simple explanation. However . . ." He stood up and reached for his hat.

"What are you planning to do?" Owens inquired.

"Two things. First I'm going to send someone over to Coneyville to the telegraph station. Maybe the sheriff in Denver can locate Tobin and clear it all up. Meanwhile, I'll make a stab at following Tobin's trail, although that's

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

liable to be pretty hard after all this time. Would you happen to know someone who'd ride to Coneyville for me?"

Owens thought about it a moment, then said, "You've probably seen Linus Coit around town, Billy's redheaded youngster. He'd likely welcome a chance to earn two bits, and he's dependable. Incidentally, maybe you'd like to have Billy himself go along with you; he's supposed to be a good tracker, and he'd recognize hoofprints left by the sheriff's horse if you found them."

"Sounds like a good idea," Johnny said, and left the office. Twenty minutes later Linus was on his way to Coneyville to send a telegram, and Billy and Johnny were headed out of town in the direction the sheriff was presumed to have taken.

"We're just wasting our time," Billy Coit predicted. "Even an Injun couldn't follow a trail as cold as this."

"Which is why I asked you," Johnny said, grinning. "They tell me you taught the Indians everything they know."

Coit only grunted, but at least he kept going, which was an encouraging sign. They rode without talking for an hour, and then Billy Coit pulled up and swung out of the saddle. After squinting at the ground for a few seconds, he said pessimistically, "This here's the sheriff's horse, all right, but little good it'll do us; there's liable not to be another patch of soft sand like this in a dozen miles."

"At least we know he got this far," Johnny said, and stepped down to look at the print.

As Coit had warned, the ground became harder and there were no more tracks, at least none plain enough to identify. Even Johnny had to admit that what they were doing was a waste of time. He reined up and made himself a smoke. As he was lighting it, his attention was caught by a moving black speck in the distant sky. After watching it a while he decided that it was a buzzard. He turned to Billy Coit, who was waiting stolidly for further orders.

"What's over that direction, Billy, where you see the buzzard?"

Coit turned to look, and said presently, "Not much of

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

anything, I reckon, just some rocks and scrub pine, and likely a few rattlers. Oh yes, I believe there's an old shack of sorts, used to be slept in by line riders." He turned to peer at Johnny questioningly. "Why? Do you think it's got something to do with the sheriff?"

"Probably not. At least I hope it hasn't, on account of that bird. Just the same I'm going to take a look. By the way, do you happen to know if the sheriff had field glasses with him?"

Coit thought about it a minute and nodded.

"Must've had, unless he left them in his office, in which case you likely would've noticed 'em. I know he has a pair, because I've seen him use them. Why?"

"Just wondering," Johnny said. It had occurred to him that the sheriff might have seen something unusual and gone to investigate. He looked at Billy and added, "I'm going to ride over toward where that buzzard is, but there's no need for both of us to go; you head back toward town if you want to."

Without waiting for Coit's answer, Johnny set off by himself. After a bit he realized that Billy Coit was following him, and waited for him to catch up. At this, Coit said somewhat belligerently, "Reckon as long as I've come this far, I might as well go all the way. Me and the sheriff, we're pretty good friends."

"Suit yourself," Johnny said, secretly pleased that Coit had elected to come along, although he wouldn't have asked him to make the extra effort.

It was rough country, once they left the flatland. So rough, in fact that Johnny couldn't understand why anyone would pick it as the location for a lineshack. So far as he could see, however, there was no indication of anything wrong. Or was there? Johnny's nose wrinkled as he got a whiff of something putrid. The possible explanation struck him, and his lips drew into a tight line. He loosened his gun in its holster and pressed on, soon coming to a clearing with a small cabin.

Sheriff Tobin had evidently had barely time to draw his

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

gun, for it was lying only inches from his outstretched hand. Later on, after Johnny and Coit finished burying what was left of him, Johnny found that the gun hadn't been fired. Apparently the sheriff had scarcely managed to get it clear before being struck down by a volley of shots from the cabin door. This much Johnny could deduce from the clipped branches and scarred bark at the sheriff's back.

The sheriff's horse was dead, too, its carcass responsible for most of the stench. Since it had been a valuable animal, well worth stealing, the presumption had to be that they had shot it so it wouldn't break loose and run back to town.

Johnny thought of the killers as "they" because of the number of bullets which had evidently been fired—also because the shack bore evidence of having been lived by more than one man.

There was nothing to indicate who the killers had been, no discarded bits of clothing, empty cartridge cases, or distinct footprints. The only possible lead was that the sheriff's carbine was missing from its saddle scabbard. Johnny knew it had been there when the sheriff rode out, for he remembered seeing it. Since the killers had left the sheriff's pistol, and hadn't even bothered to remove the bridle from his dead horse, it seemed strange that they would take the carbine, especially when the horse was lying in such a way that getting the carbine loose must have been difficult. Were they part of the same bunch who had tried to steal rifles from Cal Feeney's hardware store?

Tight-lipped and grim-faced, the two headed back toward Pikeville. They were almost there before Johnny's anger cooled to the extent that he could think of anything except the sheriff's brutal murder. It came to him then that this senseless killing changed his own situation. Not only had he lost a friend whom he had already learned to like and respect, there would now be no one coming back from Denver to relieve him of his duties as sheriff. To all intents and purposes, and regardless of his personal preference, he now *was* the sheriff.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

The answer was of course obvious. He had never wanted the job, and everyone knew it. All he had to do was unpin his star and turn it in. But he knew it wasn't going to be that simple. Not only was he outraged at the sheriff's killing; he was afraid he might be partly to blame. Quite possibly it was an outgrowth of that trouble on Pikeville's main street, when Coker had tried to ride him down. What if it had been Coker the sheriff had seen, and that when he went to investigate . . .

Such speculations were pointless, Johnny told himself. Besides, they were now riding into town, and drawing considerable attention from the group of men who were waiting for the northbound stage to go through. One of these men moved away from the others to the edge of the sidewalk and said curiously, "Something wrong, Mr. McVey? The two of you look like you'd seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost," Johnny said flatly. "The sheriff's body. We just buried it."

"My Lord! What happened?"

"He was bushwhacked," Johnny said, and turned in the saddle to see Hans Kroeger coming out of his store. Kroeger had evidently heard what was said, for he looked shocked.

"Tobin bushwhacked? Who did it?"

"I don't know. There must have been quite a bunch, judging from the signs."

The rest of the men had moved close by now, and most of the merchants had come out of their stores to find out what was going on. Johnny told his story as briefly as possible, and was just finishing when Linus Coit rode into town and pulled up beside him. He seemed a little frightened by the crowd, but he managed to dig a piece of paper out of his pocket and hand it over.

"Here's the answer to your telegram, Mr. McVey. I came back as fast as I could."

Johnny accepted it automatically, took a silver dollar out of his pocket, and held it out. "Here you are, boy. I'm obliged to you."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Linus' eyes brightened at the sight of the dollar, but he said promptly, "Gee, Mr. McVey, it was just supposed to be two bits." However, he didn't protest when Johnny reached across and dropped the dollar into his shirt pocket. Instead, he said disappointedly, "Ain't you even going to read it, Mr. McVey?"

"Not right away," Johnny said, and bent down toward Hans Kroeger.

"Has Coker been in town while I was away?"

Kroeger shook his head. His lips moved, but the words were lost as someone yelled, "Here comes the stage!"

At this the crowd began to break up. Later on they would have a lot to say about the killing of Tex Tobin, but for the moment the stagecoach was more important. A little disgusted at this lack of concern for Tobin, Johnny nudged his mount into motion and rode to the livery stable. Billy Coit followed along behind, neither man finding it necessary to say anything. When Johnny tried to pay him, Coit wouldn't accept the money. He went through the doorway which led to his living quarters, shutting it carefully behind him.

Johnny finished caring for his horse, stood a few moments in somber thought at the mouth of the stall, then left the barn. By this time the stage had rattled out of town, leaving the street practically deserted. He stepped into the sheriff's office to make sure that everything was all right, then went across to the café. It had occurred to him that Madge Holloway might not yet know about the sheriff's death. The prospect of telling her didn't appeal to him, for he had the feeling that she was one person who would be genuinely grieved.

As it turned out, Madge had already learned of Tex Tobin's murder, and had taken it as hard as Johnny had expected. He could tell this as soon as he opened the door and saw her expression. Before he could think of anything suitable to say, however, he was stopped in his tracks by a familiar voice exclaiming, "Johnny McVey! Good heavens, I don't believe it!"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

For a second Johnny's muscles refused to function; then he turned and saw Kathie Hardcastle seated at one of the tables. Only of course she wasn't Kathie Hardcastle now, he reminded himself; her name was Drake. In fact, the lieutenant was sitting across the table from her, looking more handsome and confident than ever, and smiling at Johnny as though they were the best of friends. He even stood up and reached for another chair while he motioned to Johnny to take the one he had just vacated.

As Johnny moved over to join them, and tried to form his features into a smile, he heard motion behind him, and turned in time to see Madge Holloway look at him strangely before turning to disappear into the kitchen.

XI

As JOHNNY took the chair offered him by Drake, he remembered what he had said to Nathan Hardcastle years before, something to the effect that it was Kathie's privilege to do as she chose. Even then the words had had a hollow sound, and now, with Kathie facing him across the table, he was sorry they had ever been spoken. Better to have obeyed his impulses and gone after her, forcing a showdown with Drake and bringing her back.

Now, of course, it was too late. He could only return Kathie's smile, respond in kind to Drake's polite questions, and fight back the urge to forget discretion and take Kathie in his arms. For the years had done nothing to decrease her allure; on the contrary, she was even more desirable than before.

There was the usual exchange of queries as to what

had happened since they had parted. Johnny brought them up to date on his activities with a few terse sentences, all the time making a conscious effort not to stare at Kathie too openly. He would have preferred not to hear the details of their life together, but didn't want to make this obvious by avoiding the subject. He directed his question at Kathie; however it was Drake who answered.

"You may remember what I told you about my opinion of army life, McVey. A couple of months ago my father died, and I didn't lose any time getting out."

Johnny was looking at Kathie, and noticed a subtle change of expression, but she remained silent as Drake continued.

"It was the smartest move I ever made. The army offers a man nothing but bad food, uncomfortable quarters, and low pay." He showed white teeth in a smile. "Since I have a cast-iron stomach, and could sleep on a pile of rocks, I didn't mind the first two particularly, but I certainly don't intend to be poor all my life." He glanced across at Kathie and added, "Or have my wife lose her good looks as so many army wives do."

Kathie smiled, but didn't otherwise respond. It crossed Johnny's mind that she was unusually quiet compared to the way he remembered her. Of course time makes changes in people, Just the same . . .

She turned her head then, and Johnny saw that Madge Holloway was approaching their table. She had evidently recovered from the shock of Tobin's death, for her features were set in their customary emotionless lines. For a moment her's and Kathie's eyes met, and then Madge said evenly, "We have a little variety tonight, either beef or antelope steak. Which would you prefer?"

Drake hardly glanced at her before saying carelessly, "It really doesn't matter; restaurant food always seems to taste about the same."

Johnny was surprised to see a faint flush come into Madge's cheeks; he hadn't suspected her of being capable of resentment. He was even more surprised to find himself

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

a little offended by Drake's supercilious tone. On impulse he stood up and said, "Miss Holloway, I'd like you to meet Mr. and Mrs. Drake, who just came in on the Pueblo stage."

"How do you do," Madge said, looking first at Kathie, then across at Drake.

Drake seemed somewhat taken aback, but he recovered at once and said suavely, "My pleasure, Miss Holloway." He smiled and added with disarming candor, "My remark about restaurant cooking wasn't intended to be personal. I'm sure this café is as unique as its proprietor. As to the choice of meats, I'll leave that decision to you."

Kathie had been watching Madge appraisingly. She now smiled and said, "Make mine the same as my husband's, please; I'm sure you must have very good taste."

Madge nodded and turned toward Johnny, who said bluntly, "I'll settle for the beef, thanks."

"Very well," Madge said, and left to fill their orders.

Johnny watched her enter the kitchen, then turned and saw Kathie studying him thoughtfully. As their eyes met, Kathie said, "This Madge Holloway, Johnny . . . is she a friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't say so," Johnny told her. "Except in the sense that she keeps me from starving. She seems to spend all her time right here in this café."

"Oh? Is there something wrong with her?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"It just seems odd. I mean for a woman as attractive as she is to live like a hermit. She is attractive, you know, in spite of those ungodly clothes. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"Not especially," Johnny said, not liking the way the conversation was going. To get away from it, he asked Drake, "What are you planning on doing, now that you're out of the army?"

"That's a natural question," Drake said. "You might also ask how it happens that I haven't had to go to work before now. To tell the truth, I inherited a little money from my father. With this, plus some back pay I had coming,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

I can take my time deciding what to do. We've been riding around looking the country over, while I made up my mind. However I think I've settled on what I'm going to do; it's now simply a question of where I'll do it."

Johnny wasn't really interested in hearing Drake's plans, so long as they didn't involve staying in Pikeville. That would be more than he could stand, seeing Kathie every day and having to act as though they were just casual acquaintances. But it was pretty unlikely that Drake would waste much time in a dull little place like Pikeville. Just to be polite, Johnny said, "If it isn't a secret, what have you decided to do?"

"Oh, there's no mystery about it, McVey; I intend to enter the mercantile business."

"You? A shopkeeper?"

"What's so strange about that?" Drake demanded. "After all, it's practically what I've been doing in the quartermaster corps, except that I wasn't using my own money. Besides, I don't plan on just selling thread and crackers, as you seem to imply. With the west opening up the way it is, there are going to be opportunities for a man with a little initiative. For instance, it might be possible to make contracts with the mineowners to supply them with food and other necessities. The way it is now, they pick up their supplies with their own wagons wherever they happen to. I'd like to establish regularly scheduled freight service right to their mines. If that works, I'll do the same for the ranches."

"Sounds like a big undertaking," Johnny said, genuinely impressed. "Who's going to drive the wagon . . . Kathie?"

This made both Drake and Kathie smile, and Drake said lightly, "How about it, my dear, would you be interested in the job?"

"I could handle it if I wanted to," Kathie said, looking directly at Johnny. "Remember what you said about the way I drove the buckboard?"

It was one of the things Johnny was trying *not* to remember, but before he could answer, Madge Holloway

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

came in with their suppers. Nothing more was said about Drake's plans until they had left the café and walked to the hotel, where the Drakes would be spending the night. Before entering the building, Drake glanced along the street and said thoughtfully, "I see there's only one general store in Pikeville. Do you know the owner?"

"His name's Hans Kroeger," Johnny said. "But if you're thinking of trying to buy him out, don't waste your time. He was telling me just the other day that he's more than satisfied with things as they are."

"Good for him," Drake said. "However, I've known men to become dissatisfied in a hurry when they heard the jingle of money. Maybe this Mr. Kroeger is no exception."

"Maybe," Johnny conceded. "But don't count on it. Well, I'll tell you good night now, since I have some things to tend to at the office before I turn in."

"Good night, Johnny," Kathie said. Drake only nodded, and they entered the hotel. Minutes later, when they had reached their room and closed the door, Kathie said uneasily, "You weren't really serious, were you, about trying to buy out that storeowner?"

"Supposing I were?" Drake demanded. "Is there any reason I shouldn't be?"

"Of course there is," Kathie said. "You know perfectly well what I'm thinking about. Maybe it's just coincidence that we happened to come to the town where Johnny McVey is sheriff, but . . ."

"That's exactly what it is," Drake cut in. "Coincidence. I hadn't the slightest idea we'd run into him again. But since we have . . ." He smiled. "Well, there's no law against taking advantage of opportunity. I think I just might learn to like this town."

"Well, I won't. When tomorrow's stage leaves for Denver, I intend to be on it."

Drake smiled coldly. "You'll get on the stage if and when I tell you to, and not before. Is that clear?"

Kathie's fists clenched, but experience had taught her the futility of losing her temper; so instead of flaring up,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

she said coolly, "All right, we'll do as you say; we always do. But if you're planning on staying here just to see Johnny and me suffer, it's liable to hurt you more than it does us."

"Oh, come now! Surely a respectable married woman like you . . ."

"Good heavens, I'm not going to throw myself at him, if that's what you're driving at. He wouldn't have me if I did; he's too decent. And that's what I'm talking about. You never do tell me what you're up to, but I'd have to be stupid not to guess that it wasn't what you pretend. Whatever it is, you'll be making a mistake if you try it in the town where Johnny McVey is the sheriff. He's smart, and he can't be bribed."

"By George, you're still in love with him, aren't you?"

"Of course not," Kathie retorted. It was the first time in years she had stood up to her husband like this, and she was a little afraid of what he might do. However, instead of becoming angry, he seemed amused. Even more surprising, under the circumstances, he was looking at her with an expression she had seen many times, but which still made her feel naked. Without taking his eyes off her, he began unbuttoning his shirt. And when he again spoke, it was in an entirely different tone.

"Maybe you're right at that, Kathie. This might be the worst town in the world for what I have in mind. Anyway there's no sense in our arguing about it. It's been a long day, and I daresay you're eager to get out of those dusty clothes. Here, I'll give you a hand."

Down in the street, Johnny McVey came out of his office and glanced up at the second floor of the hotel. He could guess which room was being occupied by the Drakes, since it was sure to be the largest in the place, having two windows on the street instead of the usual one. Lamplight showed now through the two pairs of curtains, telling him that the Drakes had reached the room. As he watched, the windows suddenly went dark.

Johnny swore under his breath and looked quickly away.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Unfortunately, this didn't prevent him from imagining what was going on up in the bedroom. He cursed again, this time out loud, and struck out swiftly toward the saloon at the far end of the block.

There was no one there except the same gloomy bartender Johnny had met on his first day in town. If he noticed anything unusual about Johnny's demeanor, he didn't say so, but without waiting for Johnny to ask, he shoved out a glass and filled it with whiskey.

Johnny emptied the glass, slid it across for a refill, and laid a silver dollar on the damp counter. While he was pocketing his change, the batwings squeaked and Brad Owens came into the room.

"Been waiting for a chance to talk to you, Mr. McVey. That was a terrible thing, what happened to the sheriff."

Johnny nodded. He was in no mood to talk about the sheriff's death or anything else, but he realized that Owens had a legitimate interest, both as a prominent citizen and as a personal friend of the murdered man.

"It was pretty bad, Mr. Owens. I suppose you've heard how they did it, at least two or three against one, and apparently shooting at him from inside the shack. I'd give a lot to know who they were."

"Any ideas?"

"Nothing I can prove," Johnny admitted glumly. "It wouldn't surprise me if there's some connection with that attempt to steal Cal Feeney's rifles, but that's only a hunch. I'm also curious as to where Coker was at the time; he tried to kill me out in the street, you know, and it's possible he killed Tobin just for being a friend of mine."

"Maybe you're right, Sheriff. I don't know Coker myself, except to see him at a distance. He's not the kind of man to come into a bank, unless it was to hold the place up. By the way, you *will* stay on as sheriff for a while, won't you?"

"I almost have to, at least until I find the men who killed the sheriff. That's something I want to tend to myself. Of course if nothing develops before Mr. Yates makes up his

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

mind about the ranch, and if he agrees to sell it to me, I'll have to turn in my badge. But I'm hoping to get somewhere before then."

"I hope so, too, Sheriff. Incidentally, I understand you had supper with a couple who came in on the stage. Are they friends of yours?"

"Former friends," Johnny said, after a brief hesitation. "Why?"

Mr. Owens smiled. "You know me, Sheriff, always looking for business. They appear to be prosperous, and I was hoping they might be planning to buy property in this neighborhood."

"I doubt it," Johnny said. "Mr. Drake recently resigned from the army, and they're just passing through on their way to Denver."

"Well, no harm in asking, was there? Now that I've found out, I'll leave them alone. I'll also go home to bed. See you tomorrow, Sheriff."

"Good night," Johnny said. He supposed the sensible thing for him to do would be to go to the hotel and turn in, but the idea of being so close to Kathie and yet so far was more than he wanted to face at the moment. He ordered a third drink and took it to one of the tables. Before it was gone, Hans Kroeger and Cal Feeney entered the saloon with a stranger. Kroeger spotted him and came over to his table.

"You must feel pretty bad, McVey, after what happened this afternoon. How about joining us in a few hands of poker to take your mind off it?"

Johnny started to decline, then changed his mind. His troubles weren't exactly what Kroeger supposed, but he knew that they would keep him from sleeping.

"Okay, if it's understood that I'll drop out at ten o'clock. I've got a busy day ahead of me."

"Of course," Kroeger said. He beckoned to his two companions and introduced Johnny to the stranger, who proved to be a drummer just staying in town overnight. The bar-

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

tender produced a greasy pack of cards and they cut for deal.

Johnny's mind wasn't on the game, but at the end of an hour he was a few dollars ahead. He continued to play conservatively, and at a quarter to ten had added slightly to his stack. At this time the batwings were jerked almost off their hinges, and Coker strode into the room. Before he could reach the bar, Johnny stepped in front of him.

"Your drink can wait, Coker. I've got a few questions to ask. Come over to the office."

Coker had evidently already had a drink somewhere else, for his face was redder than usual. He glared at Johnny and said harshly, "Like hell I will! You got anything to say, say it here."

"Okay. Where have you been for the last ten days?"

"None of your blooming business, mister. Just because you're wearing that tin star don't mean I've got to tell you everything I do. Now get out of my way or I'll walk right over you!"

"You're welcome to try," Johnny said. He realized that this was no way for a sheriff to act, but at the moment he didn't care.

Coker scowled at him for a minute, and as so many others had done, came to the wrong conclusion. Moving surprisingly fast for a man of his bulk, he lashed out with a roundhouse right.

To Coker's surprise, and probably that of everyone else in the room, his fist found nothing more solid than air. At the same time, a mule kicked him in the chest, and lightning landed on the point of his jaw. He let out his breath in a "whoosh" and fell across one of the tables, collapsing it to the floor.

Johnny felt good for the first time since before finding the sheriff's body. He turned to the bar, motioned for the bartender to fill a glass with whiskey, and moved back in front of Coker.

"You wanted a drink . . . here it is."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Coker sputtered and pawed at the whiskey which Johnny had flung in his face. He tried to get up, but couldn't make it until Johnny grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet.

"All right, Coker, maybe now you'll answer my question. Where have you been the last ten days or so?"

It was plain that there was no fight left in the brute, but he still didn't answer. Instead, he looked around wildly as if hoping someone would come to his assistance. When nobody did, he said sullenly, "No place that's any of your business, mister."

Johnny was aware that the door had opened again, letting someone into the room, but he kept his attention on Coker. "Come on, you're under arrest."

"Arrest? For what? I didn't have nothing to do with what happened to the sheriff."

"Now that's interesting," Johnny said. "Who said anything about him?"

"Feller over at the other saloon," Coker rasped. "Hell, the whole town's talking about it."

Which was no doubt true, Johnny supposed. He shrugged, and said coldly, "All right, I'm arresting you for what you just did to that table. There's an ordinance in this town against breaking up a saloon. Come on, let's go."

"Just a minute, Mr. McVey," Drake said, moving to the center of the room and smiling pleasantly. "I'm sure you're absolutely right about that ordinance, but unless I'm badly mistaken, anyone arrested on such a charge is entitled to post bail. Isn't that a fact?"

"It is," Johnny acknowledged. "But unless Coker has fifteen dollars, which I doubt, it hasn't much bearing on the case." He turned to face Coker.

"How about it? Are you prepared to put up bail?"

Coker was looking at Drake in a peculiar fashion. Without turning, he said, "You know damn well I ain't."

"In that case," Johnny said. "It looks . . ."

"I'll put up the fifteen dollars," Drake said, taking a wallet out of his inside pocket. "You see, I happen to know this

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

man. In fact he was under my command in the army. I wouldn't want to see him thrown in jail."

"Since you know him," Johnny said, trying to conceal his disappointment, "maybe you can tell me this: was he honorably discharged or did he desert?"

Drake hesitated a second, and Johnny thought there was an exchange of glances between him and Coker. Then he said smoothly, "Coker desert? Heavens no, Mr. McVey. He got out of the army as honorably as I did. And now will you give me a receipt for the fifteen dollars? You see, I expect Coker to pay me back. Eventually, that is."

XII

THE MORNING AFTER Coker's return to town, Drake slipped out of bed without awakening Kathie, dressed and shaved with his usual meticulous care, and quietly let himself out of the room. To reach the stairs he had to pass Johnny McVey's door, and his lips curved in a sardonic smile at the thought of Kathie and Johnny lying in beds separated by only a thin wooden partition. For a moment he speculated on what would happen if McVey knew that Kathie was alone. Probably nothing, he decided. McVey was one of those puritanical fools who believed in the sanctity of marriage, something which had never given Drake a moment's pause.

At the café, where he was Madge Holloway's first customer of the day, Drake was very circumspect, restricting his conversation to such subjects as the weather, which showed signs of changing for the worse. Johnny's interest in the café owner had aroused Drake's own curiosity, and he

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

watched her surreptitiously while she worked. As Kathie had said, Madge could be an attractive woman if she tried, which she obviously didn't.

From the café, Drake walked to the livery stable, where he rented a horse, explaining to Billy Coit that he needed the exercise after having ridden so long in a stagecoach. This sounded reasonable enough, and Billy didn't even watch him as he headed out of town toward the south, backtracking the same route which had brought him in the day before.

About three miles out, the road crossed a low hill. Drake paused at the top to look back and make sure he wasn't being followed, then went another hundred yards or so and reined up. As he did, a solitary horseman rode out of a clump of trees some distance away, looked around cautiously, then crossed over to where Drake was waiting.

Ordinarily, Drake wouldn't have considered Coker worthy of notice, but since this rendezvous was his own idea he forced a smile and said pleasantly, "Good morning, Sergeant; I see you still know how to follow orders."

"Yes sir, Lieutenant, that's something a feller don't soon forget. But that business of calling me 'Sergeant' . . . if it's all the same to you, I'd as soon you didn't. You see since I got my discharge . . ."

"Since you deserted," Drake cut in, still smiling. "It's all right to fool the sheriff, Coker, but don't try it with me. You see I happen to know that the army still has you on its list." He held up a hand as Coker started to protest. "Now don't get excited; I'm not planning on turning you in unless I have to."

Coker didn't seem to know how to take this reference to the army, which was what Drake had intended. Drake studied him a moment, then continued:

"The reason I told you to meet me here, Sergeant . . . I mean, Coker, was to ask you a few questions. In the first place, what's this trouble between you and McVey?"

"Oh that," Coker grunted. "It don't amount to nothing.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

McVey's been pushing me around ever since he hit town, and I just got a bellyful of it."

"Hold it, Sergeant," Drake said, this time using the title deliberately. "Remember what I said about trying to fool me? McVey has his faults, but he wouldn't push anyone around without a good reason. I happen to know about the mix-up you and he had out in the street when you tried to ride over him. Also about the sheriff being killed, a killing in which McVey suspects you of being involved. If we're going to get along, you'll have to stick to the truth. To start with, how did you happen to come here in the first place?"

Coker's face showed the mental strain he was going through. Finally, he shrugged and said resignedly, "Okay, Lieutenant, I guess it don't make much difference, since you already know enough to get me in trouble. You see there was five of us that walked off the post, me and four others. We had it all figured out ahead of time, how we was going to come north and pick up some easy money stealing cattle. One of the fellers had worked around here before he signed up, and said it'd be a cinch, with no law to speak of except a beat-up old sheriff that we could handle easy enough."

"Sounds like a reasonable idea," Drake said. "Tell me, did it work out the way he predicted?"

"Hell no! Oh the sheriff didn't give us much trouble. And like Tony said . . . he's the feller that used to work here . . . rustling the cows was easy. But after we got 'em we couldn't turn them into cash, except for half a dozen at a time, maybe, that we'd sell to some two-bit butcher. That wasn't worth the risk, and when we tried to drive off a bigger bunch, there was no place to hide 'em while we found us a buyer."

"So what did you do? Split up and go your separate ways?"

"No sir, we're still together. All but one of us, that is. A feller by the name of Creel got himself shot."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Oh? How did that happen? And remember now, no lies."

Telling the truth didn't come easily to Coker, but he had the feeling that Drake would catch him if he tried to lie, so he said sulkily, "All right, damn it, it was me that killed him. But I had to, or he would've yelled my name for the whole town to hear. You see, me and him was borrowing some rifles from the hardware store, and McVey heard us and raised a fuss. Creel started to holler, and I plugged him."

"Did anybody see you do it?"

"No. It was nighttime and I was in the shadow of the store. I managed to get back to my room in the hotel, and acted like I'd been asleep. Nobody caught on."

"I'm not so sure of that," Drake said drily. "However, we'll let it ride for the moment. What about the sheriff? Did you kill him, too?"

"We all did," Coker said, as if that made it right. "We had to. He was heading straight for the place we was holded up in, and if he'd found us, even an old galoot like him would've known we was up to something."

"So you just left him lying there and rode off," Drake said disgustedly. "I suppose it never occurred to you to bury him and cover the tracks?"

"We didn't dare," Coker mumbled. "Hell, with all that shooting going on, it sounded like a thunderstorm in a canyon. All we wanted to do was get away."

Drake looked at him pityingly and shook his head. "You know something, Coker? I'm afraid you aren't very bright. The original idea wasn't bad, but everything you've done has been wrong. However, where are the rest of the men now?"

"Over there about ten miles," Coker said, pointing west. "That is, they are if they ain't got sore and rode out. We was running low on supplies, and I came to town to get some. If I don't show up today, they'll probably vamoose." He cursed. "The way it's going, I don't much care if they do. The whole business was a mistake."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"You're wrong, Coker. The only mistake was in trying to swing it without proper planning and supervision. You've gone about it like a bunch of schoolboys trying to catch a greased pig. Before you steal a herd of cattle, you should arrange a place to dispose of them." He paused to think for a moment, then took out his wallet and extracted two ten-dollar bills.

"Here, take this and pick up the stuff you need. Don't waste any time, because I don't want any of your partners to ride out. I may be needing them. And you, too, of course. Now get going before someone comes along and sees us."

Coker took the money readily enough, but he looked at Drake uncertainly.

"I don't get it, Lieutenant. How come you give a damn what happens to me and the others?"

"Let's say it's because I may have the answer to your problems, a place to dispose of the cattle I steal. If it turns out that I don't, all I'm out is twenty dollars."

"And if you *do*?" Coker persisted.

"If I do, we'll all be ahead. In the meantime just make sure your friends don't leave. And don't say anything to them about me. Not by name, that is. If you do, the deal's off. In which case I might feel obliged to get in touch with the army."

"Don't worry, Lieutenant. I'll keep my mouth shut."

"See that you do. Oh, one more thing: if this works out the way I expect it to, there's something you have to remember. I'll do the thinking, and I'll give the orders. Okay?"

"Okay," Coker said. From habit he started to salute, caught himself, and grunted. Yanking roughly on the reins, he swung his horse and headed west.

XIII

WHEN JOHNNY WENT to the café for breakfast, he got the impression that Madge Holloway was less withdrawn than usual. The only explanation he could think of was that she appreciated his gesture in introducing her to the Drakes. Whatever the reason, she greeted him with a friendly smile, and even stopped at his table a moment to talk, mentioning that Drake had already eaten.

"Alone?" Johnny asked, and Madge nodded.

"Mrs. Drake wasn't with him. I suppose she's tired after riding on the stage yesterday."

"Probably," Johnny said. He waited for the questions you might expect from one woman about another who had just come to town. To his surprise, Madge let the subject drop, merely mentioning that she had noticed Drake riding by on one of Billy Coit's horses.

While Johnny was drinking his second cup of coffee a stranger wearing a badge came into the café, looked around until he spotted Johnny, and came over to the table.

"Sheriff McVey?"

Johnny considered explaining about his temporary status, decided it wasn't necessary, and said, "That's right. What's on your mind?"

"I'm Tom Gleason, from Santa Fe. As you can see, I'm a deputy U.S. Marshal."

Johnny had already noticed the wording on the badge, also that the man who wore it needed a shave and looked tired. He gestured toward the other chair.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Sit down, Mr. Gleason. You look like you could use a cup of coffee."

"Could I?" Gleason said. "I haven't tasted anything hot for the last twenty-four hours. Or closed my eyes except to blink, for that matter."

Johnny called to Madge to bring another cup of coffee, and took a closer look at the man opposite him. There was ample evidence that he had gone without sleep for a considerable time. In fact, he seemed on the verge of dozing off right now, although he revived somewhat after drinking the cup of steaming coffee which Madge placed in front of him. Johnny waited for him to finish, then said, "If you've gone without coffee that long, how come you're drinking it now?"

"That's your doings, Sheriff," Gleason said, grinning apologetically. "You see, your office was open, and the keys to the cells hanging right there in plain sight, so I put my prisoner in a cell and locked it. I was hoping you wouldn't mind, but to tell the truth, I was too doggoned tired to let it worry me."

"If I'd been in your position I'd have done the same thing," Johnny said. "But this prisoner of yours . . . where are you taking him?"

"To Denver, Sheriff. I figured on going right on to Coneyville and the telegraph, but I'm afraid I'd fall out of the saddle. Which is why I want to ask you a favor; could I keep him in one of your cells while I get a little sleep?"

"Help yourself, Gleason. I'm not using them for anything. But getting back to this prisoner . . . I suppose he hasn't eaten either?"

"No more than I have, Sheriff. That's another thing; I reckon I'll have to figure some way of feeding him."

"Excuse me," Madge Holloway said. She had been clearing another table, but now moved over beside them. "I couldn't help hearing what you were talking about. There's been no reason to mention this before, Sheriff, since you haven't had any prisoners except overnight, but I had an

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

arrangement with Tex Tobin to provide food for the prisoners. If you want me to . . ."

"I certainly do," Johnny said. "How did you and Tobin work it? Should I take the food over, or will you deliver it yourself?"

"I'll bring it, Sheriff. If he's gone this long, I guess he can hold out for another hour. By then I'll be done serving breakfast and can get away." She looked at Gleason.

"What has he done, Marshal? Your prisoner, I mean."

"Killed a man," Gleason said bluntly. "That's what makes the whole deal so cockeyed. I've got to feed him and look after him all the way to Denver just so he can hang. Thank the Lord when I get to Coneyville and the telegraph I can arrange for another deputy to meet me." He yawned and turned bloodshot eyes toward Johnny. "I've got another favor to ask. Would it be all right if I bedded down in the other cell for an hour or two?"

"Sure it would, but I've got a better idea. Here's the key to my room at the hotel. Go over and make yourself at home. If Gibbs—he's the owner, but he's seldom around—says anything, tell him I said it was okay. Don't worry about your prisoner; I'll see that he's still there when you wake up."

"Thanks, Sheriff. You've probably just saved my life."

Johnny grinned, and watched the marshal weave across the street. When he entered the hotel, Johnny turned to find Madge watching beside him, her eyes troubled.

"You know, Sheriff, I don't think I could stand it if I had to take a man somewhere to be hanged."

"Someone has to do it," Johnny said. "You can't just turn a murderer loose."

"I know. But hanging him . . ."

"Suppose it was Tex Tobin he'd killed," Johnny asked. "Would you feel the same way?"

Madge frowned, then slowly shook her head.

"No, I suppose not. But I still wouldn't want to be the one who did it. Which means I don't envy you, either,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

I suppose, since you're the one who will have to do *that*. When you catch the men who did it, that is."

"That's one job I'd *like* to do," Johnny said grimly. "Which doesn't mean I'm crazy about this job I got euchred into. I'm a rancher, not a lawman. But things don't always work out the way you want them to. Of course with you it's probably different. Anyone can see that you're cut out to run a café. Why with your ability, you could really make a killing in a decent-sized town. Have you ever thought about it?"

Madge smiled at him oddly.

"Do you want to know what I really think about, Sheriff? Piling all these tables in the middle of the floor and setting the place on fire. If I never saw another café, it'd be too soon."

Leaving Johnny to mull this over, she turned and went into the kitchen. After a bit he shook his head, laid a fifty-cent piece beside his plate, and went out into the street.

There was a man in front of the office, and when he turned, Johnny saw that it was Hans Kroeger. Johnny angled across the street, stepped onto the sidewalk, and said, "It isn't what you're hoping, Mr. Kroeger. That's just a prisoner some U.S. Marshal is taking to Denver, not the man who killed Tex Tobin."

"I already knew that, Sheriff. I happened to be here when the deputy brought him in."

"Then what're you looking so upset about?"

"Well . . ." Kroeger rubbed a hand across his jaw, blew his nose, and in general acted as though he didn't know how to begin. Finally he said, "I've got something to tell you, and I'm not sure you'll like it. On the other hand, maybe it won't make a bit of difference. If I could only . . ."

"Why don't you tell me first, and worry about it later?" Johnny suggested. "I can't do any worse than kill you."

"I suppose that's right," Kroeger admitted, managing a grin. "Okay, I just sold a half interest in my store."

"That's hardly any business of mine," Johnny said. "If

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

you want a partner, I guess that's . . ." He broke off suddenly as a new thought struck him.

"You wouldn't by any chance be referring to a man named Drake?"

"That's the one, Sheriff, the feller that paid Coker's bail last night. An hour ago if anybody had said that I'd take in a partner, I would've thought he was loco. But Mr. Drake made such a good offer I just couldn't turn it down."

So this was how it was to be. For some reason Drake was determined to stay here in Pikeville. It didn't make sense. There were a dozen towns Johnny could think of which offered better prospects for a merchant.

"Aren't you going to say anything, Sheriff?"

Johnny had temporarily forgotten Kroeger. He focused on him now and shook his head.

"It's your store, Mr. Kroeger, not mine. But tell me, what made you think I wouldn't like it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something Mr. Drake said, I reckon. He mentioned that you and his wife. . . . before she *was* his wife, that is . . . well, I just thought . . ."

"You thought wrong," Johnny said, forcing a smile. "I don't know what Drake was talking about, exactly, but the only connection between me and Mrs. Drake is that I once worked for her father. That was a long time ago, and it has no bearing now. So if that's what's worrying you, forget it. I hope your new arrangement works out just fine."

"Well, thanks, Sheriff," Kroeger said, looking relieved. "I think it will. Me and Mr. Drake didn't get very well acquainted yet, but I sure we'll hit it off. He's already got some ideas about building up the business, and I think he'll be able to do it. He's a pretty convincing talker."

"He is," Johnny said, hoping that Kroeger wouldn't notice the irony.

Too damned convincing, Johnny added mentally, as Kroeger hurried off to start getting rich. Already Johnny was beginning to get an inkling of Drake's reason for choosing this particular town. There was no way of guessing the man's plans, but if they included anything shady, and if he could

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

spread the impression (as he already had with Kroeger) that there was something between his wife and the sheriff . . .

Johnny whirled and entered his office. He had forgotten for the moment about Gleason's prisoner, and was surprised when a surly voice demanded. "Hey! Ain't I supposed to get something to eat? What the hell kind of joint is this, anyway?"

Johnny strode to the back of the office and looked between the bars. The man who stared back at him was as unshaven as Gleason, but was also dirty and vicious looking. In his present mood, Johnny had trouble holding back some words which came to mind, but he managed to say civilly, "Just take it easy, mister; there'll be some grub directly."

"There better be!" the prisoner grumbled. Johnny turned and walked to the front of the office. After a bit he got control of himself. Whatever it was that Drake was up to, there was something else more immediately pressing, the identification and capture of the men who had killed Tobin. Johnny still felt that Coker was involved in it somehow. But where was Coker now? At the hotel, maybe? Johnny got up and left the office.

There was no sign of Coker in the lobby, and Gibbs, the proprietor, who was available for a change, stated that Coker hadn't been inside the place for a week. However, sometimes when he was broke, he talked Billy Coit into letting him sleep in the loft. If Johnny wanted to try the stable . . .

Johnny did, and learned that Coker had been there but had left.

"Must've rode out real early," Billy Coit said. "His horse was gone when I woke up. Danged bugger didn't pay for the use of a stall, either."

"If that's the way he operates, why do you let him sleep here?"

"Scared not to," Coit said. "He's a bad one, that Coker. Just as soon burn the place down as not, was I to get him riled. It's cheaper getting along with him."

"Maybe," Johnny said. "Well, let me know if he comes back."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Sure will," Coit promised, and went back to cleaning the stalls, while Johnny returned to the main street to make further inquiries. As he approached the hardware store he saw Kathie come out of the hotel. His first inclination was to cross over and speak to her, but he remembered what Drake had told Kroeger, and merely waved before he entered the hardware store.

"Coker?" Feeney said. "Sure I saw him. Fact is, he was in here not an hour ago. Bought some supplies and left. Strikes me he went to Kroeger's place, too." Feeney moved over to the window and looked out. "Not there now, though. At least I don't see his horse."

"Well thanks," Johnny said. "By the way, what did he buy?"

"Cartridges, mostly. Forty-fours. Bought quite a lot. It came to over six dollars."

"Did he have the cash?"

"Sure did. He handed me a ten-dollar bill. Had another one, too, I think."

Johnny left and crossed to the mercantile. Last night Coker had been unable to raise fifteen dollars bail; this morning he had at least twenty dollars. There was one obvious answer; the man who had posted his bail. But why would Drake give or lend money to a good-for-nothing like Coker?

Hans Kroeger reported that Coker had been there, and had bought enough food to last a man a week.

"Claimed he was going hunting," Kroeger said. "Maybe he was, for all I know. Deer meat's getting good now, and folks are glad to buy it after eating beef all summer. I wouldn't mind getting hold of some myself."

Johnny turned and left the store. He was just in time to meet Madge Holloway in front of his office, about to go in with a tray on which there was a plate of steaming potatoes and eggs and a cup of coffee.

"Here, let me take it in," Johnny offered. "No use you're being exposed to that murderer."

"I'll do it," Madge said, refusing to surrender the tray. "As

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

I told you, I've done this before. None of the prisoners ever tried to bite me. Besides, I believe the marshal said he locked the cell."

"I wasn't worrying about his biting you, exactly," Johnny said. "But he might get other ideas. Here, at least let me go first."

"Don't bother, Sheriff. I'm able to look out for myself."

"Have it your own way then," Johnny said, moving aside to let her pass. He listened to the tap of her heels as she crossed the floor, then the rumble of the prisoner's voice. This was followed by a brief silence, then the sound of breaking china and a man's startled curse. Before Johnny could leap through the doorway, Madge came racing out. She didn't seem to be hurt, but her dress was ripped from neckline to waist, and she was making a poor job of holding the edges together. She brushed past Johnny without speaking, and walked rapidly toward the café, her head held high.

As the café door swung shut behind her, Johnny entered the office and stomped angrily toward the cells. No one, not even a prisoner condemned to hang, could pull a stunt like this and get away with it. Killing a man was one thing; attacking a defenseless woman was something else. In a murderous mood, Johnny jerked to a stop close to the cell door. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again as a strange sight met his eyes.

"My Lord, man, what happened to you?"

"That wildcat of a woman!" the prisoner exploded. He interrupted trying to wipe the eggs and potatoes off his face long enough to favor Johnny with a nasty scowl. "Why didn't you tell me she was loaded with dynamite?"

"To tell the truth," Johnny said, beginning to grin, "I didn't know it myself." He shook his head wryly. Defenseless woman? Not much. He looked again at the prisoner.

"You'll never get that mess off with your bare hands. Wait a minute and I'll get you a bucket of water."

"It ain't the mess I'm worried about; it's my eye. She reached through the bars and like to knocked my block

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

off." He turned his head, and Johnny could see the beginning of a beautiful shiner. "Say, who the blazes is she, anyway? John L. Sullivan's sister?"

"I can't say," Johnny told him. "Fact is, I'm just beginning to realize I don't know much about her myself. But what I do know, I'm beginning to like."

XIV

THE WEATHER, which since Johnny's arrival in Pikeville had been almost perfect, was beginning to turn bad. By the time he came out of the mercantile, where he had bought some cheese and crackers to replace the prisoner's ruined breakfast, it was starting to rain, not one of those abrupt brief showers so common at this altitude, but a cold steady drizzle which threatened to continue indefinitely.

Johnny eyed the leaden sky unhappily, realizing that this rain would wash out any possible tracks leading away from the scene of Tex Tobin's murder, as well as those of Coker riding out of town.

The prisoner accepted his substitute breakfast with poor grace, and Johnny couldn't blame him much for feeling bitter, since the side of his face where Madge had hit him was turning purple, and his eye had swollen completely shut. Rather than stay and listen to his complaints, Johnny put on a slicker and cut across to the saloon, on the chance that the bartender would have some idea as to where Coker might have gone.

The bartender either didn't know or was afraid to talk. He did, however, volunteer the opinion that Coker wasn't industrious enough to go hunting with the idea of selling

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

the meat, a view shared by Johnny; and that the rain which was falling would soon turn to snow.

This latter prediction, at least, was accurate, for when Johnny left the saloon there was already a thin white coating on the wooden sidewalk. He turned up his collar and went back to the office, where he was surprised to find Gleason waiting for him.

"Couldn't sleep," Gleason explained. "Reckon I've been guarding that prisoner so long it's got to be a habit. Every time I dozed off I dreamed he was getting away." He gestured toward the cell and added curiously, "Speaking of the prisoner, it looks like you had to work him over; did he try to bust out or something?"

"Nothing like that," Johnny said. "And I'm not the one who tangled with him. Believe it or not, that shiner was caused by a lady's fist . . . a lady who didn't like having her clothes torn half off. You remember Madge Holloway, over at the café?"

"Good Lord! Is she all right?"

"Except for having a sore hand," Johnny said, grinning at the recollection. "Well, our friend back there had it coming. Maybe it'll teach him manners."

"Not much chance of that," Gleason said sourly. "The only thing that'll straighten him out is a piece of quarter-inch rope. Well, I'll get the horses and take him off your hands."

"You mean you're planning on leaving now? You can't do that, Marshal, not with a storm starting, and you half-dead for sleep."

"Got to try," Gleason said doggedly. "Denver's expecting to hear from me; if they don't, they'll figure something went wrong and send some men to look, and Lord knows we're short-handed already."

Johnny glanced out the window at the falling snow, which was becoming thicker. He looked at Gleason's red-rimmed eyes and came to a decision.

"Tell you what, Marshal; I'll ride over to Coneyville and

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

send any message you want me to. Meantime, you can stay and watch your prisoner."

"I can't let you do that," Gleason protested. "There's no need . . ."

"Forget it, Marshal. I've got some business to tend to over there anyway, and this gives me a good chance to get away."

"Well, if you put it that way, Sheriff."

Johnny actually did have a reason for visiting Coneyville, although he would have preferred to make the ride under more favorable conditions. He went to Bill Coit's for his horse, and a few minutes later was headed out into the storm.

Fortunately, there was not much wind, so it wasn't hard to follow the road; yet by the time he got to Coneyville and located the telegrapher, who had gone out to repair a break in the wire, it was too late to get back to Pikeville before dark. Johnny sent Gleason's message, and one of his own to the Denver sheriff, then rented a room in the town's only hotel.

Johnny ate breakfast while he waited for the telegraph office to open, then stopped by to pick up the answer to his wire. This proved to be disappointing, since according to the Denver sheriff, he had never heard of anyone named Coker, nor did he have any wanted notices describing such a man.

It was nearly noon when Johnny rode back into Pikeville. *By then the sun had broken through, and it was a relief to enter the gloom of his office, where he found Gleason. Gleason had shaved, and looked rested. He also seemed relieved at seeing Johnny again.

"Glad you're back, Sheriff. When you didn't show up last night I was afraid something had happened."

"Nothing did, except I had a little trouble locating the telegrapher. How's our friend behaving? Did he get anything more to eat?"

"He sure did, Sheriff. That young lady from the café brought it over herself. Insisted on taking it right back to the cell, too, and he never said a word. By the way, a

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Mr. Drake was inquiring for you. Said he'd appreciate it if you'd look him up at the mercantile."

"Thanks. I will," Johnny said, wondering what Drake was up to now. He waited until Gleason and the prisoner rode out, then went over to the mercantile, wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible. Drake saw him come in, and stepped out from behind a counter to greet him.

"Welcome to the grand opening, McVey. Have a pickle on the house."

"Thanks," Johnny said, "But I'm not much of a pickle fancier. Marshal Gleason said you wanted to see me. What's up?"

"Nothing to sound that serious about," Drake said lightly. "I just dropped by to let you know that we've moved out of the hotel. Kathie would go crazy cooped up inside those four walls, so I've rented a two-story house on the north edge of town."

"I know the place," Johnny said, thinking how like Drake it was to rent the biggest and best house in town. "Won't it be sort of big, for just you and Kathie?"

"Oh, we'll have to hire a servant or two," Drake said. "Kathie isn't much of a housekeeper, you know. She's more ornamental than practical. Fact is, I've already hired an Indian woman the hotelkeeper recommended. She and Kathie are out there now, cleaning the place up."

"I'm glad you're comfortably settled," Johnny said, feeling hypocritical. "Is that all you wanted to see me about?"

"Not quite, Sheriff. As I may have mentioned, I intend . . . that is my partner and I intend, to drum up some business with the mineowners."

"So?"

"So? Oh, you're wondering what this has to do with you. Well, I just wondered if you'd happen to know a good man I could hire to drive my wagon."

Johnny noticed that it hadn't taken Drake long to start saying "I" instead of "we," but he let it pass.

"Not right offhand, Drake."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Well, I thought I'd ask. I've been thinking about that fellow Coker, but he seems to have disappeared."

"Coker? I doubt if you'd want him working for you."

"That's right, you and he had a little difference of opinion, didn't you? I know how you feel about him, Sheriff. Coker has made me sore more than once, in his army days, that is, but he's a hard worker when he puts his mind to it, despite his other faults. However, as I said, he's disappeared."

"If you want my advice, don't look for him. You can do better than that."

"Maybe you're right," Drake conceded. "Say, why don't you go out and visit Kathie? She'd love to see you."

"Later, maybe," Johnny said. "Right now I have some work to tend to."

"You're always welcome," Drake said, loudly enough so that everyone in the store could hear. "After all, she considers you one of the best friends she has." He grinned, and added, "Come to think of it, you've known her longer than I have. On second thought, maybe you'd better *not* see her. She might decide she'd picked the wrong man."

There was an appreciative chuckle from the customers, and Johnny made himself smile. Drake's strategy was getting clearer every minute. If he could get these folks to thinking of their new sheriff as a disappointed suitor, anything Johnny did contrary to Drake's wishes could be twisted to look like the vengeful act of a jealous man. Curbing an impulse to knock the smile off Drake's face, Johnny said wryly, "That's always been a problem of mine, Drake, beautiful women throwing themselves at my feet. But somehow they always seem to get over it. I'll let you know if I find a good driver for you."

"Do that," Drake said, and Johnny thought he sounded a little let down.

About all Johnny actually had to attend to at the office was glance at some circulars which had come in during his absence. They didn't amount to much, and he was ready to go to his room and clean up when a stranger came in,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

a tall skinny man bundled in an old Civil War overcoat. He turned down his collar to reveal hawklike features.

"You the sheriff here now?"

"At the moment," Johnny said. "What can I do for you?"

"Name's Gooden," the stranger said, holding out a big knuckled hand which proved to be hard as old oak. "Jake Gooden, that is. Got a ranch about fifteen miles thataway." He pointed.

"Glad to know you, Gooden. I'm Johnny McVey. What's your trouble?"

"Trouble, Sheriff Hell, I'm used to trouble, been having it all my life, one way or another. But when it comes to cold-blooded murder . . ."

"Murder? Who's been killed now?"

"Young feller that works for me. *Worked*, that is. Don't know his name myself for certain, being's I just called him Bud. Anyway, he didn't show up for supper last night, and when I found him, he'd been shot through the head. Deader'n a doornail, as they say. Would've told you sooner, but the drifts was too deep."

"Where did this happen? The actual shooting, I mean?"

"Not over a mile from my house, Sheriff. There's something else, too. Whoever done it, they killed one of my heifers. Left it lyin' right where it dropped, all but one big chunk they hacked off with a knife." He scowled as though this bothered him more than the death of his hired hand. "Damn 'em, if they just wanted something to eat, why didn't they ask for it. I wouldn't've sent 'em away hungry."

"I suppose there weren't any tracks?"

"If there was, they've been snowed over." He shook his head gloomily. "Hell of a note, Sheriff. That feller Bud had no business being killed. Reckon he just happened onto 'em, and they was afraid he'd talk."

"Probably," Johnny said. "Well, I'll go back with you and see what I can turn up."

"Not today you won't. I bulled my way through them

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

drifts once. I sure don't hanker to do it again without a night's rest. Go with you in the morning if you say so."

"Make it early, then," Johnny said. "I'll be waiting for you."

"Fair enough, Sheriff. I reckon Billy Coit'll let me sleep in his barn. Right now, though, I'm going to get me a nip of whiskey. Maybe it'll melt some of the ice out of my bones."

"You could've at least given me time to get back from town," Coker said savagely. "For a stinkin' piece of dead cow you went and killed a man."

"Oh cripes!" the one called Tony said disgustedly. "He wasn't nothing but a dumb kid cowpuncher. What difference does it make?"

"None, so far as he's concerned. But whoever he worked for is liable to start screaming for the law, and the first thing you know, that hard-nosed sheriff'll be poking around."

"So what if he does?" Tony persisted. "He's no harder to kill than the puncher. Or the cow, either. They're all made of the same stuff, ain't they? What's so special about the sheriff?"

"Nothing," Coker said. "Nothing that's going to keep me from gut-shooting him when the time comes."

"And when will that be, Coker?" Mingus asked uneasily.

"Whenever the boss says," Coker told them. "Any objections?"

Tony and the other two men exchanged glances, but none of them spoke. When it was evident that there would be no objections, Coker said with an attempt at humor:

"Look at it this way: this feller I call the boss ain't been around only one day, and already we're eating good and got plenty of bullets for our guns. Give him a little time, and we'll be riding high . . . good grub, fancy clothes, and first-rate whiskey instead of that sheep-dip you brought back from the squatters."

"You're forgetting something, Coker," Tony said, turning to wink at Pete. "How about women?"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Women, too," Coker promised. "Tall ones, short ones, red, black, or white. Just take your pick."

"I ain't particular," Tony said. "Just give me one of each."

"Why not?" Coker shrugged. "But for right now, just sit tight and keep your guns out of sight." He reached for the door latch to let himself out, then turned for a parting remark.

"I'm going to town now, and maybe I'll find out more about what we're going to do. If you get any crazy ideas while I'm gone, just remember that this boss of ours ain't no dummy. He spotted me for a deserter right off the bat, and chances are he's figured out about the rest of you. So don't do anything stupid, or we'll all end up in some lousy army jail."

XV

As JOHNNY had anticipated, there was no possibility of tracing the men who had killed Jake Gooden's puncher. All he managed to pick up in the way of evidence was a misshapen bullet which he dug out of the heifer's carcass.

On his return to town, shortly before suppertime, Johnny was given a little information by Billy Coit.

"Coker was over at the saloon today, Sheriff. Did you get to see him?"

Johnny explained that he had been away since early morning, and had just returned.

"That's too bad, Sheriff, if you still want to see him, because he's probably gone again by now."

"He doesn't stay put long, does he?" Johnny said drily. "Any idea where he's gone to now?"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Nope. You might be able to find out from Hans Kroeger's new partner, though. They was talking together when I seen 'em."

Johnny thanked him and left the livery barn. He wasn't surprised that Drake had ignored his advice about hiring Coker; army men weren't inclined to accept suggestions from civilians, and the habit would probably carry over after they returned to civilian status themselves.

Well, there was nothing to be done about it now. Besides, Johnny was feeling the pinch of hunger. He headed for the café.

Johnny hadn't seen Madge since her run-in with Gleason's prisoner, so he entered the café with some misgivings as to how he would be received. To his surprise and relief, Madge acted the same as usual, greeting him politely, and making no reference to what had happened at the jail.

One thing she couldn't hide, though, was the damage to her right hand, which was wrapped in a clean white bandage. When she brought him his dessert, Johnny asked her about it.

"It's nothing serious, Sheriff. Just a little sprain."

"I'm glad to hear it. That man you hit wanted to know if you were related to John L. Sullivan. I think you made quite an impression on him."

"That's nice," Madge said, forgetting herself long enough to grin. Then the grin disappeared and she said soberly. "I still feel sorry for him. Is he really a murderer?"

"He doesn't even deny it," Johnny said. "He really doesn't deserve your sympathy."

"Maybe not, but he still has it. I think he was acting mean just to cover up how scared he was."

"Could be," Johnny conceded.

"Your friend Mrs. Drake left just before you came in. She's a very beautiful woman."

"That's right," Johnny said, and added quickly, "You said *she*; wasn't her husband with her?"

Madge shook her head.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"I supposed you knew, Sheriff. Mr. Drake took the afternoon stage for Denver. Excuse me."

Johnny watched her move off toward another table, his thoughts on what she had just said. It seemed odd that Drake should find it necessary to leave town so soon after arriving. You would think he could at least have waited until they were settled in their rented house. Maybe it would be a good idea to drop by and see Kathie after all, and offer his moral support.

No. That wouldn't do. You didn't call on a woman you had once expected to marry, and spend the evening discussing the price of beef. Not that anything was liable to happen. Kathie was respectably married now, and Johnny had taught himself self-control. But just the same . . .

There was another thing, too. After the half-joking remarks Drake had made in the mercantile, and possibly elsewhere, everyone in town would be watching to see if there was anything back of it. All Johnny had to do was head toward the north edge of town, and a dozen pairs of eyes would be following him. Whatever happened, he and Kathie mustn't be together without witnesses.

Johnny's thoughts were interrupted by Hans Kroeger, who entered the café and came over to his table.

"Mind if I sit down, McVey?"

"Glad to have you," Johnny said, shoving out a chair with his foot. "How's the new partnership working out?"

"Fine, just fine," Kroeger said, a little more emphatically than necessary. "Have you found out anything about what happened to Tex Tobin?"

It struck Johnny that this wasn't what Kroeger had had in mind when he came in, but he let it pass and answered the question, adding a few details about the killing of Jake Gooden's man.

"What're you planning to do next, Sheriff? About Tobin's killers, I mean?"

Johnny had been asking himself the same question. Whatever was going to be done, he was the one who had to do it, and he certainly couldn't wait for someone to come

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

in and confess. The logical course still seemed to be to start his investigation where the killing had taken place, despite his failure to find anything worthwhile there before. He pointed this out to Kroeger.

"I'll ride out in the morning. It'll mean leaving the town without a sheriff for a few days, but that can't be helped. Unless you know someone who would act as deputy, that is. Which might not be a bad idea; I intend to turn in my badge when Mr. Yates brings me his answer, so it wouldn't hurt to have a man ready to take over."

"Even if Yates's answer is no?"

Johnny nodded.

"You know I didn't want this job in the first place. I'm a rancher."

"Yes. Well, I'm afraid there's no chance of finding a deputy here in Pikeville. Tobin tried it, when he decided to go to the doctors in Denver, and nobody was interested. As for leaving the town unguarded a few days, I doubt if anything will happen. I wish you luck."

"Thanks."

The following morning, as soon as the store opened and he could get some supplies, Johnny rode out of town. As he had guessed, the snow didn't last long, but in melting it obliterated any tracks which might have been there before. He did find a broken whiskey jug not far from the lineshack, and the heel off a boot, either of which might have been there for months.

This was pretty much what he had expected. He left the shack and spent the next two days covering as much ground as possible. Most of the ranchers he talked with had no information to offer. One puncher reported having seen two unidentified riders at a distance several days before. From the direction they were going, he thought they might have been heading for the cabin of a squatter who was known to operate a whiskey still. Johnny located the cabin, but the squatter, a suspicious and surly old man, claimed that no strangers had been there in a long time. This des-

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

pite the fact that Johnny had taken the precaution of putting his star out of sight.

"That's funny," Johnny said, hoping to draw the man out. "They were supposed to meet me here. Claimed you made the best whiskey in Colorado."

"Don't know who you're talking about, mister," the squatter insisted. "They was right about the whiskey, though. I can take care of you on that." He went out the back door and returned with a jug. "A buck fifty is all it'll cost, and you've never tasted better."

"Well, at least I made the ride for something," Johnny said, laying out the money.

Sight of the silver produced quite an improvement in the squatter's manner. He winked and said slyly. "Whiskey ain't the only thing I've got to sell, friend. Come back to-night and get acquainted with Ruby."

"What's the matter with bringing her out now?" Johnny asked, thinking she might give him a lead on the two men. "Maybe I won't like her looks."

"She ain't here. Besides, what's looks got to do with it? They all look alike in the dark. Only this one's different. You'll find out."

Johnny rode away without looking back, but when he was across a hill he dismounted and crawled to the rim, from which he had an unobstructed view of the cabin. After a bit the squatter came out and began chopping kindling. Since he didn't seem like the sort to engage in menial labor if there were anyone else around to do it for him, Johnny decided that the girl really wasn't there. Chances were she wouldn't tell him anything even if he waited. He backed off from the hummock, mounted his horse, and headed toward Pikeville. After a bit he uncorked the jug, tasted the whiskey, and spat it out. The first crevice he came to, he dropped it in.

Pikeville looked the same after four days, except that the snow was gone, but Johnny had barely reached his office when he discovered that things were not as placid as they

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

seemed. He was building a fire to warm the place up when Cal Feeney burst into the room, his face flushed.

"It's about time you got back, Sheriff. Riding all over the country while things here in town go to pot."

Johnny felt his own face beginning to get hot, but he said mildly, "What sort of things, Mr. Feeney? Has someone broken into your store again?"

"Broken in? It's worse than that. That dirty Coker . . ."

"Coker's back? What's he done now?"

"I'll say he's back! He was bad enough before, but now that he's working for Drake, he's ten times worse. Hell, he struts around this town like he owned it. Comes in the store and picks up whatever strikes his fancy. If I say anything, he tells me to take it up with Drake."

"And what does Drake say about this?"

"Drake ain't here. Ain't come back from Denver yet."

This was a surprise, but the immediate problem was Coker. Johnny looked at Feeney appraisingly.

"These things he's stolen . . . if I arrest him, will you repeat the charges in front of a judge?"

This quieted Feeney at once. He licked his lips nervously, tugged at his ear, and finally nodded.

"I'll do it, Sheriff. It ain't that I'm brave. Coker scares the daylights out of me, but things can't keep on like this. Hey! Where're you going?"

"To arrest Coker," Johnny said, and stepped out into the street. Seconds later he was inside the mercantile, facing Hans Kroeger.

"Where's Coker?"

Kroeger looked worried, but pointed toward the rear door.

"Out back, Sheriff. What do you . . ."

Johnny had already turned away. He opened the door and saw Coker sprawled out on the loading platform, dozing in the sun. Without giving him time to think, Johnny reached down and yanked the pistol out of his holster.

"On your feet, Coker. You're under arrest."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Coker made a grab at the empty holster, cursed, and scrambled to his feet.

"What the hell's the matter with you, mister? Are you plum loco? You can't arrest *me*."

"I just did," Johnny said. "The charge is disturbing the peace. There'll be others when I get time to look them up. Do you want to come peacefully, or do I have to drag you?"

"Neither one. You can't . . ."

That was as far as he got before Johnny's gun barrel crashed down on his skull. Johnny caught him before he could fall, took a good grip on his collar, and dragged him across the platform and into the store. For the first time in a week, Johnny really felt good. He grinned at Hans Kroeger, who stared back at him in white-faced consternation.

"Good Lord, McVey, do you know what you're doing? Coker's a friend of my partner's. In fact Drake's got him working for us right now, driving a freight wagon."

"In that case, my advice to you is to find yourself someone else, because Coker isn't going to be available for a while."

"Drake ain't going to like this, Sheriff."

"That's too bad," Johnny said. "Because I like it just fine. This skunk's been asking for a jail cell for a long time. If Drake comes looking for him, you can tell him I said so."

"I'll tell him," Kroeger promised, and moved ahead to open the front door.

Cal Feeney was standing outside Johnny's office door. He stared at Coker wordlessly as Johnny dragged him into the building and back to a cell. When the door clanged shut and was locked, Johnny turned to see Feeney hurrying back toward the hardware store, putting his feet down as though he were walking on broken glass. Johnny felt a little sorry for the man. No doubt he was already regretting his promise to testify. Maybe he would even back out, in which case Drake could probably make Johnny turn Coker loose.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

But at least it had been demonstrated that Coker could be put in jail.

Johnny was halfway to the stove when another figure darkened the doorway, this time that of a woman. She hesitated on the threshold a moment, then took a step into the room and said haltingly, "You sheriff?"

"That's me," Johnny said. "And who are you?"

"Sarah," the woman said, pointing at herself. "Work for Mrs. Drake. You know?"

"I know Mrs. Drake, if that's what you mean. Is she in trouble?"

"Don't know. She just say have to see you. Okay?"

"Okay, Sarah. Thanks."

Johnny watched the Indian woman slip silently through the doorway and disappear. He didn't like this at all, the idea of going to the Drake house when Drake was out of town. But Kathie wouldn't have sent for him unless it was something urgent. And if she was in trouble . . . if she needed help . . .

He looked back at the cell, saw that Coker was beginning to stir, and left the office. Most of the folks who had come out to watch him drag the unconscious man to jail were still on the sidewalk. Within ten minutes everyone in town would know that he had gone to see Kathie.

Including Madge Holloway, who saw him from the window of the café.

XVI

ALTHOUGH SHE HATED herself for doing it, Madge went into her bedroom behind the café and looked out the window to see where Johnny would go. It was the sort of trick she

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

despised in other women, and she was too honest to pretend that in her own case there were any extenuating circumstances. She was just being snoop. What went on between a woman she had seen only twice and a man who was nothing more than a customer was certainly none of her concern.

Nevertheless, she was more than a little disturbed when she saw Johnny mount the three steps to the Drake porch and use the knocker. Without waiting for the door to open, Madge whirled away from the window and went back to the café, where for the next few minutes she bustled around doing things which didn't need doing. By then she could laugh at her own folly, so she stopped wasting her energy and moved over to the front window, her attention drawn by the racket which signaled the arrival of a stagecoach. Something she saw out there made her frown, and after a moment's hesitation she hurried back to the bedroom.

Johnny wasn't aware of what was going on at the café or out in the street, but he was very sharply aware of Kathie Drake standing in the doorway. Kathie was wearing a modest dark wool dress with long sleeves and a high neck, but it fitted so snugly that he could see every curve of her lovely body. She greeted him with a warm smile, and reached out impulsively to draw him into the hallway.

"Thank you for coming, Johnny. It's been horrible here these last few days, all alone except for that Indian woman, who can hardly speak English."

"I've been wondering about that," Johnny said. He let Kathie lead him across the hallway into the parlor and take his hat, which she laid on a chair. When she turned to face him, he added, "The Indian woman said you wanted me. Is something wrong?"

"Wrong, Johnny? Does it have to be, for you to come and see me?"

Some quality in her voice awakened a tiny doubt, but Johnny pushed it aside and said quietly, "You know the answer to that, Kathie. But there's one thing you may *not*

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

know; half the people in Pikeville are wondering what I'm doing calling on a married woman. The other half think they already know."

"Oh, Johnny, you must be joking! Why would anybody imagine . . ."

"Mainly because Drake put the idea in their minds," Johnny said bluntly. "For some reason he wants everyone to think that we're just waiting for a chance to pick up where we left off."

"Good heavens, I believe you *mean* that! If I'd known this, I wouldn't have sent for you. I'm sorry."

"It's a little late for that, I'm afraid. I just wish I knew what he was up to."

"You'll never find out," Kathie said bitterly. "I quit trying to guess his motives a long time ago." She frowned, and added soberly, "You're probably right, though; he has some reason for wanting to make us look guilty. I almost feel like . . ."

She didn't finish, and Johnny wondered if she was thinking the same thing he was, that as long as everyone expected them of wrongdoing, they might as well live up to expectations. Trying to get on safer ground, he said, "I suppose you know that your father went to California. Have you ever written him since you left home?"

"What would be the use? He'll never forgive me for what I did."

"It wouldn't hurt to try. Your father is a proud man, and maybe a little stubborn, but he still loves you."

"And you, Johnny? Have *you* forgiven me?"

"There was nothing to forgive."

"And the other part? You did love me once, didn't you?"

"Good Lord Kathie, do you have to talk about it? Of course I did. What difference does it make now?"

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny! Can't you understand? I made a terrible mistake." She reached up to take Johnny's face between her hands. "You're the only man who could ever make me happy."

Johnny's pulse had begun to pound, but some small

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

inner voice warned him against taking her in his arms. When he hesitated, torn between prudence and desire, they were both startled at the sound of footsteps on the porch. Johnny's first thought was that Drake had returned, and he groaned with relief when the knocker sounded. Drake obviously wouldn't have to knock before entering his own house.

There was an unfathomable expression on Kathie's face, a blend of fear and frustration. Then she got control of herself and said calmly, "Now I wonder who that could be." She left the room and crossed the hallway. A moment later Johnny heard her say surprisedly, "Why Miss Holloway! Do come in."

"Thank you, Mrs. Drake. I just decided it was time to drop by and welcome you to your new home. I won't stay long."

"You're more than welcome," Kathie said, ushering Madge into the parlor. "You already know Johnny McVey, of course."

Madge nodded, giving Johnny a casual smile, which he acknowledged with a nod. She seemed to accept his presence there as perfectly natural, and immediately began exclaiming on the attractive way in which the room was furnished. The two women wandered off to inspect the rest of the house.

Johnny shook his head perplexedly and sat down to await their return. The ways of females were sometimes beyond his comprehension. Take Madge Holloway, for instance. Of all the women in town, she was the last he would have expected to make this uninvited call.

While he was trying to figure it out, steps again sounded on the porch. A key rattled in the lock, and Drake strode through the hallway and into the parlor, breathing hard as though he had been running. He took a quick look around, then focused his eyes on Johnny.

"By God, McVey, once the coast was clear it didn't take you long . . ."

"Is that you, dear?" Kathie called from the next room, cutting off what Drake had been about to say.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Drake's expression changed from anger to surprise as Kathie and Madge Holloway appeared in the doorway. It seemed to Johnny that he also looked a little chagrined, but he recovered quickly and became his usual debonair self. Smiling, he moved across to kiss Kathie on the cheek, then made a little bow to Madge.

"A pleasure to see you again, Miss Holloway. I was afraid Mrs. Drake would be lonely while I was gone, and now I find that she's already begun to make friends. Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you," Madge said. "I'm sure you're eager to tell Mrs. Drake about your trip to Denver. Besides, I have to get back and start preparing supper. Johnny and I just dropped in to see if Mrs. Drake was getting settled."

Johnny jerked at her use of his first name, and he thought Drake noticed it too. Then Kathie said, "Not Mrs. Drake, Madge; call me Kathie. I think we're going to be good friends."

"I hope so, Kathie," Madge said, and looked over her shoulder. "Shall we go, Johnny?"

"Right away," Johnny said, and followed Madge into the hallway. When they had left the house and the door had closed, he looked sideways at Madge's face and was surprised to discover that it was livid with anger. He wisely refrained from commenting, and when they were well away from the house it was she who broke the silence.

"Of all the stupid things to do, that takes the prize. Going to that house alone, when everyone in town knows you two were once lovers."

"Now just a minute," Johnny said, experiencing both guilt and anger. "I didn't think . . ."

"I'll say you didn't! If you had, you would have realized how it looked. Didn't it every occur to you that you might be walking into a trap?"

"A trap! Good Lord, you don't think Kathie had anything to do with this! Why that's ridiculous! Even if she were that kind of person, how could she know that Drake would come back just when he did?"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Maybe he . . ."

"Maybe he *what*? Go on; say it!"

"Nothing. I've said too much already."

Which was an unsatisfactory way to end the argument, Johnny thought, but nothing he could do would make Madge add anything else. They came to the main street, and he was surprised to see that her face showed no sign of her recent emotion. He managed to compose his own features for the benefit of anyone who might be watching, and said mildly, "Regardless of who's right about this, I'm obliged to you for preventing an embarrassing situation. If Drake had found Kathie and me there alone, he might have thought something was wrong."

"Yes, he might," Madge agreed, and added ironically, "although of course he would have been wrong. Kathie Drake is the kind of woman a man would spend the evening playing checkers with."

She entered the café without giving Johnny a chance to answer. For a few seconds he considered following her in and continuing the argument, but he decided against it and cut across to his own office. Somehow, he had the feeling that he would have lost the argument anyway.

To Johnny's surprise, Drake made no attempt to bail Coker out of jail. Perhaps this was partly because the circuit judge was expected shortly; at any rate Johnny had the dubious pleasure of Coker's company for several days and nights. This made it necessary for him to sleep in the office, in order to prevent any attempt to turn Coker loose, and before the judge arrived, Johnny had had about all of Coker he could stand.

An additional aggravation was the knowledge that so long as he had to stick close to the jail he could do nothing about catching Tex Tobin's killers. Not that there was much he could do anyway; he had already run down every lead he had. Unless he got an unexpected break, the murder might go unsolved, and the murderers unpunished.

Nothing special happened during those few days, at least nothing on the surface. Johnny saw Madge Holloway

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

more frequently than usual, since she came to the jail twice a day with food for the prisoner. However, no reference was made to their argument about the Drakes, and she seemed more distant than before.

As for the Drakes, he didn't see Kathie except at a distance, and only on those rare occasions when she visited the mercantile. His contacts with Drake were more frequent but strictly impersonal. Whatever had been behind that fiasco at the house, Drake no longer carried on the masquerade of being Johnny's friend. And it was inevitable in a place the size of Pikeville that the whole town knew about it, and was determined to remain strictly on the sidelines.

One thing that did happen was the arrival of a huge wagonload of merchandise for the mercantile. The rig pulled into town about suppertime, and was unloaded after dark, even Drake lending a hand to the operation. Johnny ran into Hans Kroeger at the café the following morning, and was given the explanation that the driver had to hurry back for a second load; Drake had succeeded in selling a big order to the mines, and they needed the additional stock. Kroeger had lost weight and looked harassed, which Johnny mentioned.

"Oh, I'm all right, Sheriff. Just been working harder than usual." He looked around to make sure they were alone, and added unhappily, "Funny thing, McVey; you'd think that with two of us running the place it'd be easier, but nowadays it seems like I'm lucky to get time to eat."

"Maybe you're getting rich and don't know it," Johnny suggested jokingly. "With all this stuff you've been bringing in, you're likely to end up a millionaire."

"I sure hope so. But the truth is, I don't see how it's going to work out. I reckon Drake knows what he's doing, but some of the prices we're charging are so low I can't figure out how we'll break even. It's no wonder the mineowners are glad to buy from us; they're getting the stuff dirt cheap."

"Maybe the low prices are just to get them started," Johnny said. "And later on you'll begin making the profit."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Maybe," Kroeger admitted. "But when we start raising our prices, the mineowners are going to kick like mules. They know what they're doing, or they wouldn't be in business."

"That's true," Johnny agreed. "I don't know anything about your kind of business, but isn't it possible that Drake's found someone who'll sell you the stuff at rock-bottom prices?"

"Could be, Sheriff. He handles all the invoices, so I can't say."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it," Johnny told him. "As I understand it, you and Drake are in this on a fifty-fifty basis, so what hurts you would hurt him just as bad, for his own interest. Just stick with it, and you'll come out all right."

"I hope so, Sheriff, but just the same . . ."

Kroeger never did finish the sentence, and it struck Johnny that this was getting to be a habit. It was beginning to look as though the merchant regretted his deal with Drake. Johnny was sorry for him; Kroeger would be no match for his new partner if it came to a showdown.

To Johnny's relief, Judge Britt finally arrived. He held court in the hotel lobby, and promptly found Coker guilty as charged. However, his sentence called for only a fifty-dollar fine and five days' imprisonment in the county jail, with time already served to apply against the sentence. This meant that Coker was free to go as soon as Drake paid his fine, which he promptly did. An hour later Coker drove out of town in a wagon which Drake had purchased from Billy Coit, and which was loaded with goods for the mines.

Johnny sluiced out Coker's cell, heaved a sigh of satisfaction at being rid of him, and moved back into the hotel. With Coker out of town, everything was quiet for three days, during which time Johnny followed up a few more leads which he hoped might put him on the track of Tobin's killers. None of them panned out, and after three days Coker came

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

back with an empty wagon. Two hours later Jake Gooden made his second appearance at Johnny's office.

"They done it again, Sheriff!"

"Killed a cow?" Johnny asked, since it seemed unlikely that they would have shot another puncher.

"No, by damn! If that was all, I wouldn't've rode all this far to tell you about it. They run off a whole bunch of steers, Sheriff, somewhere around ten or a dozen. This time you got to do something."

Johnny got up from his chair and reached for his hat. While Gooden paid a visit to the saloon, he went to the livery stable for his horse. Billy Coit was sitting on an upended nail keg, mending some harness.

"Going somewhere, Sheriff?"

Johnny told him about Jake Gooden's visit, and Billy Coit frowned.

"Bad business you going alone, Sheriff. Gooden won't be any help. He's as shiftless as they come. Probably rode in mainly for a drink in the first place." He looked at Johnny narrowly. "How about me going along? My youngun can watch the stable."

"Come ahead if you want to," Johnny said, pleased at the offer. "I'll swear you in as a deputy, and pay you a dollar a day."

"Hell, Sheriff, I don't aim to get rich; I just want a change of scenery. Wait while I tell the boy."

Shortly thereafter they rode out of town, together with Jake Gooden. As they passed the back of the mercantile, Johnny noticed Coker loading the wagon. Something about the way Coker looked at him made Johnny's scalp crawl. It struck him then that Coker had been away long enough to set up some kind of trap. Maybe that was what they were riding into.

XVII

AS SOON AS Johnny and his two companions were out of sight, Coker stuck his head in the back door of the mercantile, waited for Drake to look up, and said loudly, "Can you come out here a minute, boss? There's something about this load I don't understand."

Drake's face showed displeasure at the interruption, but he crossed to the door and stepped outside. Before he could express himself, Coker said excitedly, "He just rode out, boss, him and Billy Coit and that skinny rancher named Jake."

Drake's irritation vanished, and he took Coker's sleeve and drew him to the far corner of the platform. Keeping his voice low, he said, "It's nothing to get alarmed about, Coker. We couldn't expect a rancher to lose that many cows and not do something about it. If you handled it the way I told you to, they'll have their ride for nothing."

"Oh I did, boss; don't you worry about that. Them three partners of mine know how to move cows, so long as they've got some place to take 'em."

"I'm not worrying," Drake said, smiling coldly. "No matter what happens, there's no way of tying it to me. I don't even know those three men you're talking about. I'm counting on you to make sure that they do what they're supposed to."

"Sure, Lieutenant. I'll keep 'em in line."

"See that you do, Sergeant. Now about that load . . . is there really something you wanted to ask me?"

Coker shook his head. He had noticed that Drake had

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

once again addressed him as "Sergeant," and he wondered if the slip had been intentional.

"Very well, then. Finish loading and be on your way. Look me up as soon as you get back. I may have further orders." Without waiting for an answer, Drake turned and went back into the mercantile.

Coker didn't immediately start carrying out Drake's instructions. He was still mulling over what he had just heard. Drake was pretty smart, all right, letting someone else do the dirty work, without getting involved himself. But on the other hand this promised to be a good proposition for all of them, a lot better than they had been able to figure out for themselves. Also, before it was over there would likely be an opportunity to get even with that sheriff.

Billy Coit had been right about Jake Gooden. The three of them had scarcely started on the trail of the stolen cattle when Gooden began complaining that his horse was developing a limp. So far as Johnny could see, there was nothing wrong with the animal, but he pretended to be taken in, despite Billy Coit's muttering. After Gooden left, Johnny said mildly, "We're better off without him. If we didn't run into trouble, he'd just slow us down, and if we *did*, he'd light out like a turpentine dog. Let's go."

It was an easy trail to follow, at first, because the ground was still fairly soft from the recent thaw. Also the stolen cattle appeared to number closer to twenty than to a dozen, thus leaving more prints. Just before sundown, however, the job became more difficult, partly because of the diminished light, but mostly on account of the ground, which had become rocky as they approached the foothills. It finally reached the point where Johnny called a halt.

"No use blundering around in the dark; we'll have to make camp and wait for morning."

Making camp consisted of picketing their horses where there was water and a little grass, and unrolling their sugans beside a campfire. After a supper of beans and bacon, washed down with strong coffee, they were glad to roll up

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

in their blankets. Johnny couldn't help being reminded of the time many years before when he and Nathan Hardcastle had done the same thing.

The similarity became even more pronounced when Billy Coit's voice came out of the darkness.

"As you've likely figured out, Sheriff, I'm a crabby old buzzard that don't give a damn what anyone else thinks. Just the same, I can't help hearing what folks say."

Johnny didn't dispute this assertion, and after a bit Coit continued.

"This ain't none of my business, but it's being said around town that the reason you threw Coker in jail was because he was supposed to go to work for Drake—just a way of getting back at Drake for stealing your woman."

"Stealing her?" Johnny said. "Who gave them that idea?"

"Danged if I know," Billy Coit admitted. "But that's what they're saying, that you had to leave for some reason, and while you was gone Drake took her away. You mean it ain't so?"

"Not exactly," Johnny said. "But that isn't the point. The only person besides me who knows anything about what happened in Wyoming is Drake himself. And Kathie, of course, but she surely wouldn't talk about it."

"That being the case, Sheriff . . . but why would Drake want to start a thing like that? Seems to me he'd be a little ashamed of it. Unless . . . Hey! Do you suppose he's doing it just to get you over a barrel, so that any time you so much look at him cross-eyed, folks will think you're trying to get even?"

"Could be," Johnny said, surprised at hearing Billy Coit express an opinion which had been gaining strength in his own mind. "However, that's something to worry about later. Right now our job is to locate those missing cows, and Drake surely hasn't anything to do with that. Let's get some sleep."

Even in daylight the trail was now hard to follow, but the cows seemed to be headed in a straight line, so it was obvious that they were still being driven. About midmorning

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

their trail came to a stretch of shale and practically disappeared. It took an hour to find the place at which they had left the shale, and even then Johnny wasn't satisfied. After a bit he reined up.

"Something's wrong here, Billy. There don't seem to be more than half as many tracks as there were. The rustlers must have divided the herd back there in the shale."

"Danged if you ain't right," Billy agreed. "They figured on us finding these tracks and following them, while they use the extra time to take the other bunch someplace and hide it."

"I'm not so sure of that," Johnny said. "It's a cinch they split the herd back there in the rocks, but who's to say which bunch they really intended to steal?" He pointed the way they had been heading. "What's up there . . . anything besides the mines?"

"That's about all, Sheriff. Oh, there's a reservation, but them Injuns sure ain't buying any cows. Why should they be, when the U.S. Army gives 'em to them free?"

Johnny didn't answer immediately. As Billy had said, it was unlikely that there would be any market for cattle at the reservation, since the tribe was being fed by the government. But suppose there was a crooked agent, and that someone had made a deal . . . He looked around at Billy Coit.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Billy, but there's one thing in our favor those rustlers may not have counted on, the fact that we can split up too. Here's what we'll do: you go back and try to locate the other bunch, while I keep on after these. Whichever bunch is the decoy, they'll begin to drift apart as soon as the rustlers quit driving them. When one of us finds the tracks breaking up, he'll know he's on the wrong trail. Okay?"

"Okay, Sheriff, but supposing it's me, what shall I do, try to catch up with you?"

"Depends on how soon it happens," Johnny said. "If you figure there's time to overtake me before dark, come

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

ahead. If not, camp out somewhere and head back to town."

Billy Coit nodded his understanding, and they separated. Several hours later Johnny was still able to make out the sign left by the bunch he had been following, but he had seen nothing of Billy. About four o'clock, Johnny crested a hill and saw the reservation. It seemed certain that that was where the herd was headed, so he lifted his reins and covered the last mile at a canter, pulling up in front of what appeared to be the agent's office. The door opened, and a yellow-haired man came out to stare at him with pale blue eyes.

"You looking for something, Marshal?"

"Not Marshal," Johnny said, touching his badge. "I'm the sheriff over at Pikeville. Are you the agent here?"

"That's me, Sheriff . . . Mort Cooney. Speaking of reservations, if you ain't a U.S. Marshal, you're a little bit off yours. This here's United States property, and that badge don't mean a thing."

Johnny could see that this conversation wasn't going to be cordial, but he grinned and said good-naturedly, "You're probably right, Mr. Cooney; however, I wasn't planning on using the badge for anything; I just want a little information. I guess you wouldn't object to cooperating to that extent, would you?"

"Depends," Cooney said cautiously. "I don't mind telling you I get sick and tired of folks telling me my business. What is it you're trying to find out?"

"Something about some cows, maybe ten or a dozen of them. When I lost their trail, they seemed to be headed this direction. Have you seen anything of them?"

"Cows? Of course not. Why would anyone drive cows into this place? We get our supplies from the army, brought in from up north."

"I see," Johnny said. He lolled back against the cantle and rolled a cigarette, meanwhile letting his gaze move around casually. There were certainly no cattle visible from here, but he could see half-a-dozen places where a small

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

herd could be hidden. He returned his attention to the agent.

"Just the same, I hate to go to all this trouble and not be dead sure. Any objections if I take a look around?"

"You're damned right I've got objections! You heard what I said about outsiders coming in and bothering me. Maybe you don't know it, but the Indians I'm looking out for don't cotton to whites; they're still sore at being cooped up on this reservation. I ain't going to let anybody get 'em stirred up. The only place you're going to go is back where you came from."

Johnny had already noticed furtive movements at the window behind Cooney's back. This might indicate merely that Cooney's wife, if he had one, was watching the proceedings. Or it could signify the presence of half-a-dozen hostile Indians. In any case, Johnny realized that he lacked the authority to make any demands.

"Well, Mr. Cooney, no doubt you're right. However, if you hear anything about some cattle being offered for sale, I'd appreciate your letting me know."

"I'll do that, Sheriff," Cooney promised, relaxing a little.

Johnny nodded and rode out, watching the ground as he went. He didn't actually see any cow tracks leading onto the reservation, but he had no doubt that they were there, if he could only take time to look closely. Without glancing back he turned toward town. When darkness fell he stopped and made camp. Since there had been no sign of Billy Coit, it seemed safe to assume that he had found himself on a false trail and had gone back to town.

Inasmuch as he no longer had to watch for tracks, Johnny made it to Pikeville by the following evening. He found Billy Coit at the livery stable, and learned that his supposition had been correct. Billy had found the tracks leaving the south edge of the shale, but after he had followed them about two hours they began to break up. Johnny thanked him for his help and returned to the main street. Most of the merchants had closed for the night, except of course the saloons, and the street was nearly dark.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Johnny's own office was as dark as the others. He went in and was feeling for the lamp when something crashed down on his head, knocking him to his knees. As he fought to retain consciousness, a strange voice said savagely, "Maybe by God this'll teach him not to stick his damned nose in other people's business!"

This was followed by a familiar voice, that of Coker, growling, "Take it easy, now; we're just supposed to rough him up, not kill him. That part can wait."

It was the last thing Johnny heard before he passed out.

XVIII

EACH TIME Johnny started to come to he would involuntarily move an arm or leg, and the resulting pain would send him under again. Finally his befogged brain accepted this fact, and he managed to lie still and come fully awake. Even so his body was a mass of aches, and his head felt as though it had been used for a battering ram. One of his eyes was stuck shut, but with the other one he could see that the place he was in was dark except for a little square of gray over to one side. It was some time before he realized that the gray square was a window, and that he was still in his own office.

Encouraged by this discovery, he gritted his teeth and rolled slowly onto his stomach. After battling nausea for a while he succeeded in pushing himself to hands and knees and got hold of the edge of his desk. Using this as a support, he stumbled to his feet.

By now he knew that no bones had been broken, except perhaps a rib or two, which he didn't consider ser-

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

ious. As soon as his head stopped spinning, he fumbled for a match and lit the lamp.

The office was pretty badly messed up. Evidently Coker and the others had occupied their time while waiting for him by dumping the desk drawers and upsetting everything they could. Papers were scattered all over the floor, some of them spattered with blood which Johnny knew to be his own.

Mounting anger helped drive the fuzziness from his brain, and he became lucid enough to realize that the first thing he ought to do was let a doctor patch him up. A little tardily it came to him that there was no doctor closer than Coneyville. It was then that he thought of Madge Holloway, and of what Tex Tobin had said about her ability in such emergencies.

The idea of calling on Madge for help didn't please him, but he swallowed his pride and limped across the street. With the last of his strength he banged on the café door. After a bit a light appeared inside the building, and Madge came out of the back room, carrying a lamp in one hand and a huge horse pistol in the other.

She came close enough to the glass to see who he was, laid the pistol on a table, and unlocked the door. Without asking a lot of silly questions she helped him in and locked the door, then put an arm around his waist and guided him into her bedroom.

"You'll have to sit on the bed, Sheriff. If you faint, I don't want you falling on the floor."

Johnny was conscious of his unsightly appearance, and of how out of place he was in this bedroom, which to his surprise was as feminine as anyone could contrive, something which he found hard to reconcile with his evaluation of Madge Holloway's character. Dirty and blood-spattered as he was, he balked at sitting on the bed.

"Damn it, Sheriff; sit down!"

Johnny was so startled that he obeyed without protest. The next thing he knew, Madge had picked up a pair of scissors and split his shirt and jacket up the back. While

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

he sat as mute as an embarrassed schoolboy, she gently peeled away his upper clothing, throwing it in a heap on the floor. She backed off to survey him for a moment, then disappeared into the front of the building, from which she returned with a bucket of water.

"This is going to hurt, Johnny. If you feel like you're about to pass out, for heavens sakes try to fall on the bed. I'm not sure I could lift you."

"Yes'm," Johnny promised, too groggy to notice that she had again used his first name, but not so far gone as to fail to appreciate the view when she passed between him and the lamp.

As she had warned, there was plenty of pain when she got to work; but Johnny was determined not to yell or lose consciousness, and when she finished bandaging him he was still sitting up.

"Now for your face," Madge said. "And if you're worried about that eye, I think it's just covered with dried blood from a gash on your forehead, but let's find out." She dipped a cloth in the water and laid it carefully, against his closed eye. When she took the cloth away, Johnny found that the eye was all right.

"Thank the Lord for that! I was beginning to think one of them had poked his thumb in it."

"*Them*, Sheriff? Did you see who they were?"

Johnny shook his head.

"I heard their voices, is all. There were at least two of them. Say! Are you all right?"

Madge had suddenly lost most of her color. She started to crumple, and Johnny grabbed her under the arms, forgetting his own pain for the moment. He was conscious of the softness of her body, and sharply aware of an enticing smell of soap and warm flesh. Then Madge was pushing him away, and instead of being pale she was pink right down to the neck of her nightgown. Probably a lot farther, too, Johnny thought irrelevantly.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff. I guess I'm not as tough as I make out to be."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Don't apologize," Johnny said. "Most women would have swooned when they first saw me. Well, it seems that once again I'm indebted to you."

"Don't worry about it," Madge said. Her color was more nearly normal now, but she seemed to be struggling not to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Johnny demanded.

"Nothing. I was just thinking; now we're even. The other day you saw me with my clothes ripped half off, and now the shoe's on the other foot."

"Yes'm," Johnny said, and left the room. When he was outside the building and halfway across the street, he heard the bolt slide.

Fortunately, Johnny's body was tough from the kind of life he had led, so when morning came he was able to crawl out of bed. He even managed to shave such portions of his face as weren't too tender, and to put on clean clothes. Even so, when he ran into Brad Owens in front of the hotel the banker stared at him in astonishment.

"What in the world happened to you, Sheriff?"

"Nothing much; just a friendly little argument with some anonymous visitors."

"By George, I hope they never decide to visit me," Owens exclaimed. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"As right as I'll ever be, Mr. Owens. Tell me something: have you noticed any strangers in town the last couple of days?"

Owens thought about it and shook his head.

"Why? Were you expecting someone?"

"No. Just curious. Well, I've got some business to take care of. I'll see you later."

Owens looked as if he wanted to ask what sort of business Johnny was referring to, but he didn't, and Johnny went around the corner of the hotel to the livery barn, where he found Billy Coit spreading clean straw in a stall. Before Billy could start asking questions, he said, "There was a reception committee waiting in my office last night, but I don't have time to tell you about it now. It's something that

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

happened two days ago that bothers me. You remember I told you about my conversation with that Indian agent?"

Coit nodded.

"Well, before I passed out last night, one of the men who jumped me made a remark about my butting in on other people's business. I have a hunch he was referring to my visit to the reservation."

"Could be," Billy Coit agreed. "What're you leading up to?"

"Just this. Somehow or other, that agent managed to get word to town before I got back. I wasn't wasting much time on the trail, so whoever he sent with the message must have been in a powerful hurry. Which brings up a point; did you see any strangers in town yesterday?"

"Yessir I did," Billy Coit said. "A hard-looking galoot with the marks of a gunslinger. But he couldn't have brought word from the reservation, because he came in on the stage from Denver. Except for him, I didn't . . . wait a minute! I did, too. A young Indian buck left his pony here yesterday noon. Come to think of it, he was supposed to pick it up the first thing this morning. I reckon he took on too much redeye and ain't woke up."

"I wonder," Johnny said grimly.

"Wonder what, Sheriff?"

"Whether he'll *ever* wake up. If he brought a message from the agent, maybe someone doesn't want him alive to talk about it. I'll be back."

"Where're you going?"

"To find that Indian."

Finding the Indian was easier said than done, Johnny discovered. Finally, he located a boy who had seen three men go into an abandoned shack, and couldn't remember seeing them come out. Ready by now to follow almost any lead, Johnny had him point out the shack.

It was easy to understand why the young Indian had not returned for his pony. He had been stabbed in the back three times, and was lying in a pool of blood. Johnny examined him briefly then went for Billy Coit.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Billy took one look at the dead man and cursed. He swung to face Johnny.

"The poor feller probably didn't even see it coming. Any idea who did it?"

"An idea . . . that's all. Nothing I can prove. Will you help me move him out of here?"

"Sure, Sheriff; what're you going to do, just stick him in the ground, or try to get in touch with his family?"

"Neither one, right now. We're going to carry him to my office and put him in one of the cells. If anyone asks, he's just unconscious."

"Put a dead man in jail? Good Lord, Sheriff, what in the . . ."

"He's my only lead, Billy. Whoever stabbed him left him here for dead. If word gets around that he's still alive, and might possibly be able to talk, they'll have to do something about it."

"Okay; I don't like it, but whatever you say."

Between them they managed to carry the Indian to the jail. A number of curious townsmen gathered around the office door, but Johnny kept them outside.

"Give him a chance, men. He's had a rough deal. Three stab wounds in the back would've killed most men."

"Good Lord!" someone gasped. "I'll get Madge Holloway. She'll fix him up if anyone can."

Johnny hadn't counted on this, but he could think of no logical reason to object. To further the impression that the man was not dead, he said soberly, "Madge will do what she can, but the man needs a real doctor, Billy, could your boy Linus ride over to Coneyville again?"

"No reason he can't," Billy said, falling in with Johnny's plans. "I'll go get him."

"Tell him to come and see me first," Johnny instructed. "I'll send a note to the doctor so he'll know what to expect." He turned to motion to the men on the walk.

"Step aside and let Miss Holloway through. Then go on about your business. You've all seen wounded men before. That's right, break it up."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

Madge's calm appearance helped, and the onlookers began to drift away. For their benefit, Johnny said clearly, "Do what you can for him, Miss Holloway. I'm sending to Coneyville for the doctor, just in case."

"Very well, Sheriff," Madge said, moving quickly to the back of the office.

Johnny closed the door and followed her. As he reached the cell door, Madge straighted up and turned to face him.

"What's going on here, Sheriff? This man's been dead for some time. It doesn't take a doctor to figure out that."

"I know. He was dead when we found him. But no one else knows, just you and me and Billy Coit. This is a terrible thing to ask, but can you go along with the bluff that he's still alive?"

"Pretend to take care of a dead man? Merciful heavens, Sheriff, I don't see how . . . what do you expect to accomplish?"

"If it works, whoever tried to kill him will come back to finish the job. I hope to catch him."

Madge stared at him thoughtfully a long minute, then made a wry face.

"Very well, Johnny. I've never played nurse to a corpse, but there's a first time for everything. If we're going to make it look good, though, I'll need a pan of water and some cloths."

XIX

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for word of the Indian to spread along main street, but Drake was one of the last to hear, since he had gone home for his noon meal, and no one had considered it necessary to take him the news. In fact, Coker

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

was the only one who had reason to think he would be interested, and Coker was in no hurry to face Drake's wrath.

As it turned out, Drake heard about it from Hans Kroeger when he returned to the store. He managed to control himself until he was alone with Coker out behind the building.

"You're a fool, Coker. I've known that from the start, but now I find that you're also a blunderer. How in the devil could you be so stupid as to leave that Indian without making sure he was dead?"

"Damn it, boss, we thought he *was*. A man can't stay alive after he's been stabbed three times with an eight-inch blade."

"This one did," Drake said icily. "So far as I know he isn't able to talk yet, but if he ever does, God help us!"

Coker scratched his chin uncertainly.

"I admit that leaving him alive was a mistake, but I don't see how it can make trouble for you. Like you said, there's no connection between you and them cows. All anyone can prove . . ."

"All anyone can prove is that I'm the person Mort Cooney sent the message to. Once that gets around, anything can happen."

"I don't get it, boss. Why should . . ."

"Just take my word for it, Sergeant. It's barely possible that there are things going on which you don't know about. The important thing right now is to get rid of that Indian before he talks."

"Leave it to me, boss. I'll fix it so he won't say anything. All it'll take is one bullet. Soon as it's dark, I'll sneak up behind the jail and plug him through the window."

"That would be just fine, wouldn't it?" Drake said sarcastically. "If you get caught, everyone knows you're working for me. Good God, man, don't you ever use your brains? When the Indian gets shot, you're going to be out in plain sight, with witnesses to swear you didn't do it."

"Then who is going to do the job?"

"Never mind about that. What worries me most is the possibility that the Indian might talk before we get to him."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

If he does, we may have a fight on our hands, in which case we'll need help. How long will it take you to get to your partners and bring them back to town?"

"Two or three hours, I reckon. Each way, that is."

"Then get moving. Bring them close to town and get them out of sight. Then go to the saloon by yourself and stay there until you hear that the Indian is dead. And this time don't make any mistakes."

Johnny could think of a dozen pleasanter ways of spending an afternoon than by staying in the same room with a dead Indian, but he couldn't help thinking how much worse it must be for Madge Holloway, who had no personal interest in the outcome, but who still played her part perfectly, leaving the jail only long enough to cross over to the café and pick up a bundle of fresh bandages.

He himself didn't dare leave the building at all, lest some well-meaning citizen enter the place and discover the subterfuge—or some not-so-well-meaning person, such as the knifer.

Madge left to take care of her supper customers, and when she returned, she brought along a plate of food and placed it on Johnny's desk.

"You have to eat, Sheriff. Folks might understand your refusal to leave the office, but they don't expect you to go hungry, even with a critically wounded man on your hands."

"I suppose you're right," Johnny acknowledged. "Although I can't say I'm very hungry. As soon as I finish eating, though, you can take the dishes back to the café, and you won't have to come back any more tonight. I don't want you around if anyone starts shooting."

Madge studied this a moment and shook her head.

"I appreciate your concern for my safety, but it wouldn't work. Anyone who knows me at all knows I wouldn't go home to bed and leave a patient who's supposed to be in such serious condition. Sending me home would amount to tipping off the whole scheme."

Johnny could recognize the validity of her argument, but

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

he still didn't like the idea of Madge's being around if trouble started. He compromised by saying positively, "Okay, if you've got the nerve to come back, I won't try to stop you, but if you *do*, you're going to stay up here in the front of the office, and if anything starts, you're going to get out fast. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, Sheriff. Now why don't you eat that supper before it gets cold?"

Johnny's supposed dispatch of a request to the Coneyville doctor had of course been a ruse, so he wasn't surprised when Linus Coit came riding in alone just at dusk. The boy pulled up beside the office door, waited for Johnny to come out, and handed him a piece of paper, and the same time saying stiffly, "The doctor was out, Sheriff, but his missus said she'd get hold of him as soon as she could. She wrote down what you ought to do until he gets here."

It was the speech Johnny had told him to deliver on his return, for the benefit of anyone who might be listening. Johnny feigned disappointment, thanked the boy, and gave him a dollar, sending him on home.

Shortly thereafter, Billy Coit showed up at the office. A few minutes later, Madge Holloway returned from taking Johnny's dishes back to the café. Johnny closed the door, and the three of them went back to the cell, Johnny taking the lamp along and setting it on the floor beside the dead man's bunk. In this way there would be plenty of light in the cell, but the body itself would be partially in shadow.

Billy Coit's puzzled frown changed to comprehension as he figured this out, and he said softly, "Supposing someone shows up to finish off the Injun, Johnny, how do you reckon to catch him? Chances are he'll just poke a gun through that window"—he pointed toward the small barred opening above the cell—"pull the trigger, and take off. You'll have to be mighty fast to get out of here before he's to hell and gone."

"That's the way I figure it, too," Johnny said. "I'll just have to think of some way of outsmarting him. Come on,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

let's get away from this light before someone outside takes a shot at us."

"What about Madge?" Billy asked. "She ain't going to be here is she?"

"Now don't *you* start on me," Madge said. "I had enough trouble convincing the sheriff."

"She's promised to stay up front," Johnny explained. "And to beat it if there's trouble. Also, I'm going to hang a blanket across the front window, so that nobody will have a shot from that angle. I guess she'll be safe enough."

"Won't that tip folks off, Johnny? Covering the window, I mean?"

"I don't see why. After all, most of the town knows I was beat up last night. Also that whoever tried to kill that Indian is still alive. It's natural for me to take a few precautions."

"Okay, I guess you know what you're doing. Anything you want me to do?"

"Just one thing," Johnny said. "I'm going to hang this blanket over the window now. I'd like you to step outside and see if it does the job. Then you can go home."

"Okay, Johnny."

Billy Coit left, and Johnny hung a blanket over the window. He stepped to the door, and Billy's voice said from the darkness, "It's all right, Sheriff; I can see there's a light inside, but I can't make out anything."

"Good. I'll see you later."

"I hope so," Billy said. He waited for the door to close and the bolt to click, then headed for the livery stable. In his preoccupation with what might happen before morning, it was no wonder that he didn't notice the man pressed tightly against the back of the hotel.

The man in the shadows watched Billy go by, but didn't do anything about it, because it was none of his business. An hour passed, then another, and by that time most of the citizens of Pikeville had gone to sleep, except for the ones in the saloons. To be on the safe side, he waited half-an-hour longer before moving away from the building and

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

stepping into the saddle of a horse which had stood patiently all this time. Drawing the pistol out of his holster, he rode over beside the back of the jail, which was plainly marked by the lamplight showing through the bars. He raised up in his stirrups, aimed the gun between the bars, and squeezed the trigger twice. He was about to fire a third shot for good measure, when a voice above him said sharply:

"Drop your gun, mister! This thing I'm pointing at you is loaded with buckshot."

XX

THE TWO GUNSHOTS were enough to arouse the town. Billy Coit arrived at a run, clutching a rifle, and Johnny hailed him from the roof of the jail.

"Hold your gun on this man while I get down, Billy. He just shot the Indian."

"You bet!" Billy yelled. "When I heard them shots, I was afraid it was you and Madge."

In the few minutes it took Johnny to drop to the ground, take charge of the gunman, and lock him in the vacant cell, several others arrived at the jail. Among them was Coker, who came from the saloon with Cal Feeney and the bartender. He stuck his head in the door, stared at the gunman angrily but with no sign of recognition, and immediately withdrew. Ten minutes later later Drake made an appearance, fully dressed, but looking somewhat less smug than usual. He didn't stop at the door, but came all the way back to the cell. After glancing at the dead Indian and shifting his gaze briefly to the prisoner, he turned to Johnny.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"What's going on here, McVey? I heard the shots at home, but so far nobody's told me what started it."

Before answering him, Johnny turned to speak to Billy Coit.

"Get some of these men to help you, and haul this Indian out of here. There's no question about his being dead now, not with those two slugs in him." He swung around toward Drake and added, "It's pretty easy to figure out, isn't it? The man I just locked up must be the one who knifed the Indian and left him for dead. To keep him from talking, he came back and finished the job. I sort of expected something like that, and was waiting for him on the roof."

Drake looked at him suspiciously.

"You mean you saw what was happening, and still gave him time to fire two shots?"

This was the weak spot in Johnny's plan, and he knew it. Trust Drake to point it out. However, it was a risk which had to be taken. Without batting an eye he said, "The man was too fast for me. Before I knew he was there, he'd killed the Indian." He turned to face the prisoner.

"What's your name, fella?"

If the man was afraid, he didn't show it. From his looks, he had probably been in tight spots before. He shrugged and said coolly, "It's Smith, Sheriff. John Smith."

"I just bet it is," Johnny said. He looked around at the others who had crowded into the office.

"Do any of you know this man?"

None of them answered, so Johnny turned to Drake.

"How about you? You seem to be taking quite an interest in this. Is he a friend of yours?"

"I never saw him before in my life," Drake said coldly. "As for my interest, it's only that of a citizen of this town. It seems mighty unlikely to me that you would set a trap, and then give the man time to fire two shots. Also I doubt that you'd bait such a trap with a live Indian. Do you want to know what I *do* think?"

"You'll probably tell me anyhow," Johnny said drily, "so go ahead and get it over with."

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"All right. I think that Indian has been dead for a long time. Perhaps ever since before you brought him in here."

"Everyone's entitled to his opinion." Johnny shrugged. "I reckon the final decision will be up to a judge. All I'm doing is holding this man John Smith for murder."

"It's impossible to murder a man who's already dead, McVey."

"That's another thing that'll have to be decided by the judge. Anyway, there are several other charges I can use for holding him, such as disturbing the peace, destroying public property, or firing a gun inside the town limits. Of course, if you're concerned about it you can say your piece at the trial. In the meantime, it's just possible that this stranger may decide to talk, and save us a lot of trouble. At any rate I intend to give him a chance."

Drake started to say something, changed his mind, and stalked out of the room. He hurried to the livery barn, threw the rigging on his horse, and rode out of town. A few minutes later he pulled up beside a clump of trees.

"Coker?"

"Right here, boss," Coker called, riding out of the shadows. "All four of us, like you said. What's up?"

"Plenty! That fool McVey's got Dugan in a cell, and claims he can hold him until he talks."

"Dugan?"

"The man who shot the Indian. I brought him in from Denver, just in case something like this should come up. After you muffed that business with the knife, I told Dugan to finish the job. If he talks now, he can do more damage than the Indian."

"How come you're telling all this to me?" Coker demanded suspiciously. "How do you know I won't sell you out?"

"Because you're afraid to, Sergeant. Everything I know about you is in an envelope in Brad Owens' safe. The same goes for the rest of your bunch. We're in this together, and it's going to stay that way. Is that clear?"

"I guess it is," Coker rasped. "But now that it's gone sour, how're we going to get out?"

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Like this," Drake said, and proceeded to tell him.

It had taken a few minutes to clear everyone out of the office, but now none were left except Johnny, Billy Coit, and the man who called himself John Smith. Johnny had sent Madge Holloway home, with orders not to come back. He was almost sure now that Drake was at the bottom of everything, including the shooting of the Indian. If the supposition was right, it was a cinch that Drake wouldn't sit back and wait for the man to talk. Which meant that there would be violence before morning, and Johnny didn't want Madge around. Or Billy, either, for that matter, but Billy refused to leave. Since he was determined to stay, Johnny was more than happy to have him. Defending the jail was more than a one-man job.

Waiting was always the hardest part, Johnny told himself—especially when you didn't know exactly what you were waiting for. It didn't make it any easier that they didn't dare have a light, or speak more than a word or two at a time for fear of drawing a bullet from someone lurking outside one of the windows.

In the ominous silence, Johnny was beset by doubts. Maybe he should have gone about this differently, say sworn in a posse and ridden back to the reservation, thereby saving the life of the Indian. Or even right now, perhaps the thing to have done would have been to solicit the help of the townsmen. But no, on that score he could find no fault with himself, for he doubted that anyone would have helped had he asked. Their minds had been too well poisoned by Drake. If Johnny tried to convince them that Drake was a crook, they would think it was his way of settling a personal grudge.

From the back of the room, the prisoner called unexpectedly, "You've got no business doing this, Sheriff. If there's going to be any shooting, I want my gun."

It was the first time the man had broken his silence since telling his name. Maybe it was a good sign. Johnny let him stew a minute, then said bluntly. "Tell me who

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

hired you to shoot the Indian, and I'll see what I can do. Was it Drake?"

"Drake? Who's he?"

It was evident from the man's tone that he wasn't about to break down and start talking. Rather than give away his position by prolonging the conversation, Johnny didn't answer. After a bit his doubts began to return. Suppose the townsmen were right? Was it possible that he was unconsciously misjudging Drake because of personal animosity over Kathie?

Kathie. With something akin to guilt, Johnny realized suddenly that she had hardly entered his thoughts since they had last parted. Good Lord! Was it conceivable . . .

At this exact second a gun roared out in the street, and broken glass ripped a hole in the blanket hanging across the window. Almost simultaneously another gun opened up out back, one of the bullets ricocheting off an iron bar and smacking into the wall.

Johnny grabbed the shotgun which he had laid across his knees, ran to the empty cell, and raised the gun over his head, shoving the muzzle between the windows bars. He squeezed the trigger, and recoil almost tore the gun from his hands. At the same time someone out behind the building cursed.

From the darkness behind him Billy Coit let out a joyful yelp.

"You nicked one of the coyotes, Johnny. Keep . . ."

The rest of what he said was drowned in a volley of shots from out front. When there was a pause, Johnny called anxiously, "Are you all right, Billy?"

"Fine as silk, Sheriff," Billy said. "Fine as silk."

Johnny was immensely relieved, for it had seemed impossible for both of them to avoid being hit by the shower of bullets. Rather than risk Billy's life again, he said sharply, "Get up there in the corner by the window, and stay as low as you can. They'll have a hard time hitting you at that angle."

Billy's only answer was a curse as he stumbled over

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

something in the dark. Then he called matter-of-factly, "Okay, Johnny, I'm all set. God help the first man that tries to come through this window!"

It was none too soon, for the firing increased in intensity. Johnny huddled against the wall and waited for a lull. Actually, there was little he could do except wait for one of Coker's bunch to try entering through the door or front window. If they meant to do that, it would have to be soon, for it was almost time for day to break.

When the lull came, it lasted so long that Johnny began to think they had given up. Then his hopes were shattered by a voice which he recognized as Coker's.

"You've got thirty seconds to turn the prisoner loose, McVey."

"No deal," Johnny shouted. "If you want him so bad, come and get him."

Surprisingly, this made Coker laugh. Then he yelled tauntingly, "Have it your own way, Sheriff, but don't count on seeing Madge Holloway again, because we've got her hog-tied."

Madge! Johnny started to rise to his feet, then sank back on his haunches. How in the name of God had they thought of pulling a trick like *that*?

From across the room, Billy Coit called savagely, "Those lousy renegades! They figured out the one way to make you give in."

"With Madge?" Johnny protested. "Why we're almost strangers."

"Don't talk like a fool, Johnny. Anyone with half-a-brain could see how you two look at each other."

"My Lord, Billy! If they really have her . . ." He jumped to his feet and moved up beside the window. Staying behind the wall, he yanked down what was left of the blanket.

"You're bluffing, Coker. You don't have her."

"No? Take a squint at the café if you think it ain't so."

Johnny risked a quick look, and there was enough daylight for him to see that the café door was hanging drunkenly from one hinge. He hesitated only a second.

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

"Okay, Coker, you win. Let her go, and I'll turn this man loose. I give you my word."

From somewhere out of sight came the rumble of voices raised in argument, then Coker yelled, "Okay, Sheriff. I guess you're just dumb enough to stick to it. We're letting her go."

"Madgel" Johnny yelled. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Johnny. But don't worry about me. Do whatever you think you should."

"Get off the street, Madge. I'm turning this killer loose."

It was already light enough so that Johnny could see the prisoner standing up in his cell. He reached in his pocket for the key, went to the rear of the room, and unlocked the door.

"You're free to go, Smith. Beat it before I change my mind."

"Glad to, Sheriff. Soon as you give me back my gun. I don't aim to go out there unarmed."

"Afraid Drake will kill you to shut you up?" Johnny asked. "Okay, I guess you're entitled to a chance to defend yourself." He took the man's gunbelt off a nail and handed it to him.

Smith strapped it on and left the building, ducking to one side as soon as he was through the doorway. Moments later there was the sound of a running horse. Johnny loosened his own gun in its holster and stepped outside.

It was fairly light now, and he saw that a number of townsmen had ventured out into the open. Surprisingly, two of them were clutching rifles. Coker was standing in front of the café, along with three men Johnny didn't know, one of whom was holding his left arm as though it were hurt. Then Drake came out of the hotel and said loudly, "This was none of my doing, McVey, and I can't say I approve of the way it was handled; but you had no right holding that man in jail. Everyone knows the whole deal was just a scheme of yours to get even with me over my wife." He turned to face the group of townsmen and added, "All right, friends, it's over. All that's left is to get rid of this

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

crooked sheriff and find yourselves an honest one. You might as well go back home."

"Just a minute, Drake," Johnny said. "I'm not so sure it is over. Maybe they'd like to hear you explain how come you're selling merchandise to the mines for just what it's supposed to cost you. And why the Indian agent was in such a hurry to let you know I'd been asking questions about stolen cattle."

"Good Lord, McVey, don't you ever give up? The price I charge for goods is my own business, and as for what you said about the Indian agent, that's just another of your wild tales."

"That isn't what the army thinks," Johnny said, reaching in his pocket for the scrap of paper Billy Coit's boy had brought him. "At least it doesn't jibe with this telegram. They've got an idea you may be stealing government supplies and selling them to the mines, that it's part of a deal you worked out with a crooked supply officer before you quit the army."

"That's a lie," Drake shouted, but Johnny thought he sounded a little unsure of himself for once. "I've never made a crooked deal in my life."

"No? Not even the one that got you kicked out of the army? The one your father managed to hush up before he died of shame and disgrace? Of course if you're telling the truth, you'll have no trouble convincing the army man who's on his way here right now. Oh, incidentally, when Billy Coit's boy rode over to Coneyville yesterday he wasn't looking for a doctor; he was sending a telegram to the adjutant general. This is the answer."

Johnny expected a reaction from Drake, but it was Coker who yelled, his fury directed at Drake.

"Why you dirty lying crook! Here you've been threatening to turn us in as deserters, and all the time you've been pulling something a hundred times worse. Why damn you . . ."

Coker was clawing for his gun when Drake's bullet hit him, knocking him to the dirt. Then Johnny's gun belched

flame, slamming a warning bullet into the wall above Drake's head.

"Drop your gun, Drake, or so help me I'll kill you!"

Drake's face was so twisted with hate that he looked like a stranger, but he had sense enough to preserve his life. However, instead of dropping the gun he slid it back in his holster.

"You're not scaring me, McVey. In about a minute I'll ride out of here and you won't try to stop me. If you did, all the rest of your life you'd be asking yourself if it was because of Kathie. As it is, you'll always be wondering how soon I'll come back and kill you."

With bitter certainty Johnny knew that for once Drake was telling the truth. Behind him, Billy Coit said hoarsely, "Don't listen to him, Johnny. Kill him!"

But Johnny knew that Drake was the one man he couldn't kill. He stood motionless as Drake walked to the first horse in sight, and pulled himself into the saddle. Moments later he was too far away even if Johnny had changed his mind.

Johnny had been too concerned with Drake to pay attention to Coker's three companions. Now that he was free to shift his attention, he was surprised to find them still in the same spot. The explanation came when he saw that Kroeger and another merchant were covering them with their rifles. Without looking around, Kroeger said grimly, "We've been pretty dumb, Sheriff, letting Drake pull the wool over our eyes, but when he stood by and let them grab Madge Holloway . . . By the way, you'd better go see if she's all right."

It was the one thing Johnny wanted to do, but before he could talk to Madge, he had to settle things with Kathie. It was a distasteful job, the kind he wanted to get over as soon as possible. Ignoring the stares of the townsmen, he walked the length of main street and turned north. He came to the Drake house, climbed the three steps, and used the knocker.

It was the Indian woman who opened the door. When he asked for Mrs. Drake, she shook her head.

"She go away, Sheriff. Not come back, she say."

"Gone! Did she leave any message?"

"Message? Oh, she say to give you this."

Johnny took the folded paper she held out, and slowly opened it. When he finished reading, he said uncertainly, "Is this true; did she really leave?"

The Indian woman nodded. She was silent a moment, as though groping for the right words, then said carefully, "She take stage to Denver, Sheriff. Say she go place she call California. She not write that on piece of paper?"

"She did," Johnny said. "I just wanted to be sure." There were other things Kathie had said, too, things which at one time would have been crushing blows. Now the only emotion they evoked was pity. He turned and started back toward the main street, walking slowly at first, then faster and faster until by the time he reached the saloon he was almost running.

Hans Kroeger came out of the mercantile and yelled at him. He pretended he hadn't heard, but the merchant shouted again and ran up to grab his arm.

"Hold on, McVey. Something you ought to know."

"Later," Johnny said. "Have you seen Madge Holloway?"

"She's back in her room, Sheriff. Confound it, listen to what I've got to say! Old Man Yates just rode in. He's decided to sell you his ranch."

"That's good," Johnny said, and tried to pull away.

"Damn it, Sheriff, that ain't all. Yates ran into Drake out on the trail, and Drake's horse had gone lame. Drake tried to take Yates's away from him, probably figuring an old man like that wouldn't give him any argument. It was the worst mistake he ever made, and the last. Yates killed him."

"My God!" Johnny said, but even this didn't seem important now. He rushed past the broken door of the café, and through into the bedroom, where Madge was standing in front of a looking glass combing her hair. Such beautiful hair, Johnny thought, hanging softly around her smooth, bare shoulders. There were other things worth noticing, too,

TIME TO SHOOT IT OUT

since she was not expecting visitors and was only half-dressed.

Johnny saw all these delicious details and appreciated them, but it was the expression on her face which made his heart leap, a look first of surprise, then relief, and finally complete surrender as she melted into his arms.

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