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KINCAID

JOHN CALLAHAN

Burned out,
bushwhacked—
he was out
for revenge!



A DAY'S RIDE FROM DEATH

A man like Ed Kincaid couldn't just sit around like a licked cub after the things that had happened to him. The Apaches had slain his wife. His partner had been killed by rustlers. His son had been kidnapped, and he himself had been beaten up by every tough in Tucson for showing too much interest in what was called the Indian Ring.

This Ring—it was a bunch of townsmen and cut-throats who were peddling brand-new rifles to the renegade Apaches and making a handsome profit from this bloody trade.

No, after what had happened to Kincaid, he wasn't going to stop fighting. The army was inefficient, the sheriff was looking out for himself, and Kincaid's friends—well, Kincaid found out: *the only trustworthy friend a man had was what he packed in his holster.*

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



KINCAID

by

JOHN CALLAHAN

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THE OXBOW DEED

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I

KINCAID ROPED AND hogtied the calf, and said, "You do the honors, *amigo*," when old Matéo Garcia came with the branding iron. Matéo pressed the hot iron to the calf's side, touching off a stench of burned hair and hide. When he lifted the iron away, Kincaid removed the catch rope and piggin' strings from the animal. Bawling in plaintive protest against the cruelty of man, the calf scrambled to its feet and ran to rejoin its mother. Cow and calf vanished into the brush.

Moving out of the brassy glare of desert sunlight, the two men hunkered down in the dappled shade of a mesquite tree and rolled brown-paper cigarettes. Except for their horses and a few scattered cattle, they were alone on the range.

Lighting up, Kincaid said, "One more G-Bar cow, Matéo. But it goes slow. You ever think there must be a better way to earn a living than this?"

Matéo shrugged. "Sí. But not for me. I know only cows." He was sixty-odd, his dark face ravaged by the toil and trouble of his years. "You yearn for something better, Ed?"

Kincaid smiled ruefully. "I, too, know only cows."

He was half Matéo's age, and a bigger man. As fair as the Mexican was dark, he had faded yellow hair, smoke-gray eyes, a ruddy complexion. Heavy-boned but sparsely fleshed, he possessed the ruggedness of the land from which he had sprung and was akin to the mustangs and long-horns with which he worked. He dragged hard on his brown-paper cigarette and wondered at the dissatisfaction that kept nagging at him of late.

His hired hand days were behind him, and he had more than most of his kind . . . a wife and a four-year-old son, and the prospect of owning this ranch some day. His father-in-law was old, and failing in health.

Kincaid frowned, not liking to think of Hank Givens going down hill. He was fond of the old man, to whom he owed so much. So much?

"Yes, so much."

"*Cómo?*" Matéo said.

Kincaid only then realized that he had spoken those three words aloud. Shaking his head, he said, "Nothing. Talking to myself."

But it was so much. He had been a range orphan at thirteen, left to make his hard, lonely way in the world; working when he could find work a boy could do, begging for food and shelter when he found no work. At sixteen he had reached the height he had today, and had landed his first riding job—thirty a month and found. He had worked for a score of outfits between then and when he signed on with Hank Givens, six years ago.

Hank had been moving out of Texas because the little ranchers, the raggedy-pants cowmen of which he was one, were being crowded hard by the big, powerful outfits. Moving to Arizona, lock, stock and barrel. Having no job at the time, Kincaid had been glad for the chance to help drive the herd of twelve hundred G-Bar cattle west to the Territory. Before the outfit was out of Texas, he had fallen in love with one of Hank's two daughters—and she with

him. Martha and he had been married along the way through New Mexico, by a preacher in the town of Tularosa.

Here, to Estrella Valley, they had come and settled. Despite raiding Apaches and thieving white men, they had built solidly. Ed Kincaid found himself putting down roots for the first time in his life. A wife, a son, and a father-in-law he liked. A home of his own, instead of living in a bunk-house.

It *was* so much.

Why, then, his dissatisfaction?

Was it because in a short half dozen years Martha and he had lost their youth and gaiety—become middle-aged and settled, the victims of the monotony and drabness of their existence? Where had laughter gone? Love? Martha's tongue seemed to grow sharper with each passing day. At times he felt that she was cutting herself off from him. And he . . . when had he really laughed last and felt truly alive?

Again he spoke his thoughts: "This kind of life is no good. We're like outcasts." He thought of Martha's sister, his sister-in-law. "Louise was the smart one, going to live in town and staying there even after her husband's death."

"So you would be a town man, Ed?" Matéo said.

Kincaid wondered if he would, and doubted it. Chuckling, he said, "Me, behind a desk or a store counter?" He shook his head, unable to see himself in that fashion.

And yet there was his feeling of dissatisfaction.

What the hell do you want out of life, hombre?

He couldn't answer his own question.

Suddenly Matéo tensed, a frown on his leathery face. He jabbed his cigarette butt into the sandy soil and rose to stand quite still in a listening attitude. Alarmed, Kincaid too came erect—listened—but heard nothing.

"What is it, Matéo?"

"Shooting."

"Your ears are playing tricks on you, old-timer."

"No, *amigo*. Listen!"

Kincaid didn't wait to hear what the old vaquero heard. Fear had hold of him. He flipped his cigarette away, strode to his horse, a big dun gelding, and swung to the saddle. He turned the animal north, the direction of ranch headquarters, and lifted it to a hard run. Matéo came after him, on his sorrel.

Mostly, they were alone in the world—Kincaid and his family and old Matéo. They lived nearly forty miles from Tucson, their nearest neighbor a dozen miles away. Alone in the world, and yet danger always threatened. Renegade white men rode the back-country all too often, and bronc Apaches kept jumping the reservation to raid across the desert. Twice during the past six years the people of G-Bar Ranch had fought off outlaws. Seven times they had stood against hostile red men. Because danger was a constant part of their lives one or another of the three men always remained at headquarters with Martha and the boy. Today it was old Hank.

Kincaid still did not hear the shooting that had alerted Matéo. He heard only the drumming of the dun's hoofs and the pounding of his own heart. And the voice in his mind that said, over and over: *Let me be in time. . . . Let me be in time!* A prayer, from he who was not a praying man.

He topped a grassy swell and saw the adobe ranch buildings a half mile ahead. And the dozen horsemen milling about in the ranchyard.

To relieve the pressure on the three people there—if they were still alive—Kincaid drew his revolver and fired three shots into the air. As he had hoped, the raiders heard the reports and immediately went surging out of the yard and away from the buildings. They rode toward the hills a mile to the east, running their ponies . . . half-naked, coppery-skinned horsemen.

Apaches.

Kincaid holstered his handgun and pulled his carbine from its saddle boot. He levered a cartridge into the Win-

chester's firing chamber even though the hostiles were in flight and would not give him a fight. No. Five of the band now turned back and rode to challenge him and Matéo.

Kincaid jerked the dun to a rearing stop, shouted at Matéo, "Pull up and get down!" He knew that shooting from the saddle did not make for accuracy.

Swinging down, he dropped to one knee and brought the carbine to his shoulder. Matéo dismounted and took a prone shooting position. The five Apaches came on at a gallop, shooting their rifles and yelling wildly, creating an unholy din. Small, fierce men on half-wild ponies, coppery bodies agleam in the sunlight. Kincaid waited until they were within easy range.

Then, "Let them have it, Matéo!"

He had the lead rider in his sights, seeing the dark face contorted by bloodlust, the lank black hair held back by a red headband. The Apache was letting his piebald pony run free, gripping its heaving barrel with sinewy legs in boot-like moccasins. He raised his rifle, looked down its barrel at Kincaid.

Kincaid squeezed out his shot, drove the .44-40 slug true. The Apache was knocked from his pony as though by a giant fist. Kincaid jacked another cartridge into the Winchester's chamber and beaded a second warrior. Matéo's rifle cracked, and cracked again.

A second warrior went down, letting loose a piercing scream as he fell. A pony stumbled, began to fall, finally somersaulted. Its rider threw himself clear, hit the ground asprawl but was instantly up. Matéo pumped two slugs into him, dropping him again.

The two remaining Apaches whirled away, howling like thwarted demons. Matéo reared up and shot both through the back. One was not dead, and the Mexican shot him again as he tried to crawl away. Powdersmoke hung thickly in the still air. Around the five sprawled figures blood stained the

dun earth crimson. The other Apaches had reached the hills, were disappearing into them.

Kincaid was already going after his horse. The dun was spooked; it shied away from him. Cursing, he ran at it and managed to catch its trailing reins. Once mounted, he used spurs to get the animal over its nervousness. He rode at a hard lope toward the ranch buildings, fearful of what he would find there—knowing, somehow, what he would find. And, knowing, he felt that a man could be forgiven if he wept.

II

KINCAID SAGGED IN the saddle, numbed by the tragedy that his mind couldn't quite accept. Dead—all dead. A voice within him cried out that, no, such a thing couldn't be: that his reason for living couldn't have been taken from him so cruelly.

The Apaches had taken the place by surprise, catching Hank Givens near the barn. The old man had tried to put up a fight; at least he had drawn his gun. His old Colt's six-shooter lay beside his sprawled body, inches from his dead hand.

In death, Hank looked grayer and smaller than he had in life. He looked like a fallen scarecrow in a farmer's field. His blood had already been swallowed up by the thirsty soil, so that only a red-brown patch remained.

Martha lay in the open doorway of the ranchhouse, the rifle Kincaid had taught her to use—and use well—beside her. The house had heavy doors and shutters that were meant to be barred at the first sign of trouble. They were loopholed for gun ports. Because her father had been

caught outside, Martha hadn't closed herself in. She had tried to save him, shooting from the doorway in the hope that he could make it safely to the house. He hadn't made it, and she had died there. Died in her faded blue calico dress.

Died there, Kincaid thought dully, within a few days of her twenty-sixth birthday.

He looked at her still, crumpled body and was unashamed of the tears that blurred his vision.

Matéo came in, slow-walking his sorrel horse. For some reason he had gathered up the dead Apaches' rifles and brought them along. He dumped them to the ground, then looked at the dead, muttered something in Spanish, and crossed himself. Then he dismounted and walked to the house. Stepping carefully around Martha's body, he went inside. A moment later he came out, carrying Danny in his arms.

He brought the boy to Kincaid, saying, "At least they had no time to find the little one. He is unharmed. And we can be thankful that they did not take anyone alive."

Kincaid took his son, hugged him tightly, but said bitterly, "Thankful! What is there to be thankful for in this life?"

Danny was making small whimpering noises, and Kincaid, hearing them, said, "Cry if you like, son. . . . Cry for both of us."

Matéo again went into the house, and this time came out with blankets. He covered Martha first, then Hank. Afterward he went into the barn.

Reappearing with a shovel, he asked, "Where do you want them, Ed?"

Kincaid tried to lift himself from the morass of his despair. He got down from the dun, Danny in the cradle of his left arm.

"Around back of the house," he said. "By that palo verde tree."

They went to the tree and he selected the site for the two graves. He stood watching while Matéo started to dig,

still holding his small, towheaded son. Danny had stopped whimpering, but in his lingering fright he clung to Kincaid with chubby arms.

And once he sobbed, "Mommie . . . I want Mommie."

Kincaid wondered how he was to make the four-year-old understand that neither of them would ever have her again.

Finally he spelled Matéo at the digging, not because the old vaquero was tiring but because he, Kincaid, needed to do the job himself. He felt that if he didn't busy himself he would break down and bawl like a child.

Matéo said, "Maybe I can find enough lumber for coffins," and went off to the barn again.

After a time Kincaid heard the rasp of a saw and the pounding of a hammer. Matéo had found enough lumber left over from when the ranch buildings were erected. Danny stayed close to Kincaid, quieter than ever before in his young life. He did not even ask why his father was digging the two holes. *Maybe he understands*, Kincaid thought. And then he remembered burying the dog some months ago. . . . The mongrel that Hank had brought out from Texas, finally dead of old age. Maybe Danny, too, remembered the dog . . . and did understand about death.

Finally it was done. The two crude coffins were lowered into the earth and the graves filled in. No prayers were said, but Matéo Garcia made the sign of the cross. Danny cried piteously, and Kincaid could not comfort him. Finally he got the boy to help him gather small rocks from along the creek and they built a cairn at the head of each grave. By the time they finished with that, Danny was no longer tearful. But he remained subdued by sadness, by his sense of loss.

When they returned to the ranchyard, Kincaid saw that Matéo had hidden the blood stains with a covering of dirt. The vaquero had also off-saddled the horses and turned them into the corral. He was now hunkered down in the shade of the barn, smoking a cigarette. His leathery old face was morose beneath the wide brim of his sombrero.

The sun was lowering toward the mountains in the west. The sad day would soon be gone. Kincaid knew the night ahead would be the loneliest of his life. Guilt nagged at him for the dissatisfaction he had felt earlier in the day. Only now did he realize how well off he had been. Tragedy had opened his eyes.

The Apache rifles still lay in the middle of the yard, and Kincaid winced when he saw them.

"Get rid of them," he told Matéo. "I don't want them about the place."

"One look first, Ed, before I get rid of them."

Kincaid looked at the five rifles, not comprehending why Matéo should want him to do such a thing. His grief was a leaden weight within him, and anger, too, had hold of him. He wanted to rage against the world, against life itself . . . against whatever power it was that let such things happen.

Because of his anger, he lashed out at Matéo. "Why the hell should I look at them, when they took the lives of my loved ones?"

Matéo took no offense. Patiently he said, "Winchester repeaters, Ed—all new. So new that hardly a one bears any scuff marks—and Indians are careless in the way they handle guns. They are so new they must have come into the Apaches' hands only a short time ago. Maybe only days ago."

"So?"

"So they must have traded for them," Matéo said. "And the man who placed such rifles in their hands is as guilty as the Apaches themselves."

Kincaid considered that, and said, more to himself than to the vaquero, "Yes—or even more so."

Now he had someone against whom to rage: the white man who for profit gave the always-murderous Apaches the best possible arms for their bloody forays. If he knew that man, he would seek him out and kill him.

Always alert, sharp of eye and ear despite his age, Matéo rose suddenly and stared past the ranchhouse and north

through the valley. Kincaid swung about and looked in the same direction.

They had just come into sight over a rise of ground a mile away, a large number of horsemen moving toward the ranch headquarters in a column of twos. A cavalry patrol.

Kincaid swore under his breath. Here they came, three hours too late . . . enough blue-clad troopers to have wiped out the Apache band. Now Kincaid had something at hand against which to rage.

Why the hell couldn't they have gotten here in time!

The column approached at an easy canter.

"Soldiers!" Danny cried. "Look, Daddy—soldiers!"

Excitement had hold of the boy. Grief in the very young could be of short duration. Kincaid, looking at his son, was glad of that.

A detail of eighteen men out of Fort Lowell, commanded by a boyish-looking second lieutenant. Three pack animals came along behind, and a civilian scout rode ahead. Cavalry patrols had come through the valley a few times in the past, and Kincaid always wondered how the Army, marching along in such a leisurely fashion, expected to catch up with Apaches, who rode like the wind. Men and horses filled the ranchyard and Danny, turned shy despite his excitement, stared at them wide-eyed.

The scout reined in by the five rifles on the ground. He gazed down at them with a gloomy expression. He had been through here before, with other patrols. He was a lean wolf of a man named Tom Scarlett. He nodded to Kincaid and left it to the young officer to do the talking.

The officer said, "Lieutenant Carlson, sir—at your service. We trailed a band of renegade Apaches down this way. Did you see anything of them?"

Tom Scarlett slanted a look at Kincaid, gave him a mirthless smile. The scout was saying without words that Lieutenant Carlson was as inexperienced as he was young. Scarlett

knew something of what had happened here. He had seen the rifles. And there had been sign for him to read.

Kincaid burst out, "Damn it, Lieutenant! Why didn't you get a move on and catch up with them before they got this far? You've been moving along as though you're on a pleasure jaunt!"

Carlson went ramrod straight in the saddle, his boyish face turning cold and stiff. "For your information, sir, we have been traveling as fast as we could without running the risk of having our mounts play out. How long ago were the hostiles here?"

"Long enough ago that I've had time to bury my wife and my father-in-law!"

Now the lieutenant looked jolted, and in a concerned voice said, "They killed two people here?"

"Not just two people," Kincaid said, unable to keep his anger in check. "My wife and my father-in-law, like I told you."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Sorry? Hell, man; your being sorry won't bring my people back to life. I'm asking you . . . why can't the Army protect people from those bloodthirsty savages?" He shifted his angry gaze to Tom Scarlett. "What's wrong with the Army? Has it run out of experienced officers?"

"A lot of Apaches have jumped the reservation, Kincaid," the scout said. "Nearly a dozen bands are out raiding right now. The Army does its best. Mind if I get down?"

"Suit yourself," Kincaid said ungraciously.

Scarlett dismounted. He looked at Danny, his tough face softening. "Hello, son. Want to hold my horse for me?"

He didn't wait for the boy to answer, but picked him up and put him astride his grulla horse. Danny grasped the saddle horn with his small hands and beamed with pleasure. Once more Kincaid thought how short-lived grief was for a youngster, and again was glad that was so. Enough that he the adult would go on grieving.

Scarlett picked up one of the Apache rifles, examined it

with obvious interest. "Did you bury the red devils these belonged to?"

Kincaid shook his head. "They're lying out yonder." He gestured toward the south range. "About half a mile away."

Scarlett looked at Carlson. "A burial detail, Lieutenant? The least we can do. And the sun's almost down. Maybe we'd better bivouac now, other side of the creek. If Mr. Kincaid will give us permission, that is."

Kincaid knew now that Tom Scarlett was in charge even though Carlson was in command of the detail.

He said, "You've got my permission, of course. But, damn it all, when do you expect to catch up with those murderers?"

Nobody answered that.

Lieutenant Carlson sent a sergeant and six troopers out to bury the five Apaches, then led the rest of his command away from the ranch headquarters, to camp on the opposite side of the creek. Scarlett lingered, his gaunt face somber.

"Don't be too hard on the Army, friend," he said. "Or on that shavetail. The Army does the best it can, and young Carlson is just out of West Point." He held up the Apache rifle, gestured toward the other four on the ground. "All brand new. You noticed?"

"Matéo did. That's why he brought them in. Who is the man so hungry for money that he puts guns—the latest models, at that—into the hands of Apaches?"

"I'd give a lot to know. So would the C. O. at Fort Lowell. There's been a big trade in guns lately, and Colonel Byington is trying to find the trader. So far, he's had no luck. And he's lost one good man trying; Sergeant O'Reilly. He had the sergeant pretend his enlistment had run out and put up at Tucson to see what he could learn. O'Reilly ended up dead, shot in the back."

"The army ought to be able to do better than all that. If they can't catch a gun-runner, how can they expect to catch the Apaches?"

"We'll get the Apaches," Scarlett said. "We always do,

in the long run. We'll kill a few of them and herd the rest back to the reservation—where they'll stay until they start drinking *tiswin* again. Then they'll start raiding once more, provided they get more rifles. Which they're sure to do, unless the gun-runner is found."

"Unless," Kincaid said disgustedly.

"Soldiers ain't policemen, friend."

"What about the sheriff at Tucson?"

Scarlett smiled in that mirthless way of his. "He's more politico than lawman. He's hand-in-glove with the town's business people—and the gun-runner is one of them, of course. He promised Colonel Byington that he would do what he can to stop the trade in guns, but his word sure ain't his bond. You know anybody in town, Kincaid?"

"A few people. My sister-in-law, for one."

"Is the lady married?"

"She's widowed," Kincaid said. "She was married to Frank Hammond; he owned the Territorial Freighting Company. Why?"

Scarlett's left cheek bulged with a tobacco cud. Now he spat a stream of brown juice, and said, "I thought if you have friends or relatives there, you might make a trip in and see if you can learn anything about the gun trader."

Kincaid scowled. "You want me to end up with a bullet in the back like that sergeant?"

Scarlett didn't reply at once. He dropped the Apache rifle atop the other four, then turned to his horse. He lifted Danny down, reached for the grulla's reins, stepped to the saddle.

Looking down at Kincaid, he said, "My thought was that a man who lost his wife because of those rifles might be mad enough to want to do something about the hombre who put them in the hands of the Apaches."

He turned the grulla away and headed out to where the burial party was at work.

Kincaid looked after him with that half-angry scowl still on his face, troubled of mind. The scout was right, of course.

But he had his son to consider. If he tried to find the gun-runner and ended up dead like that sergeant, what would become of the boy?

III

MATEO CAME TO Kincaid in the darkness, asking concernedly, "What will you do now, Ed?"

Night had come, the first lonely night. Kincaid, deep in his depression, learned heavily against the corral fence. He couldn't bear it inside the house; it now, with Martha and Hank gone, had an empty feel. He could not, he knew, sleep in his and Martha's bed tonight—maybe not ever again. He hadn't been able to eat the supper Matéo had fixed, and had taken only a cup of coffee. It had been the old vaquero, a gentle man, who got Danny ready for bed, tucked him in, stayed with him until he fell asleep. Sagged against the fence, Kincaid felt lifeless.

What *would* he do now?

He didn't know, couldn't think. He was numbed by the tragedy, torn apart by his sense of loss. He was also tormented by a sense of guilt.

"I know what I should have done," he said. "I should have taken her and Danny away from here, to a safe place. I shouldn't have settled in this godforsaken place. Like I told you today, Matéo, this is no life for a man. And it's even less one for a woman."

"It was the only life she knew, *amigo*," Matéo said. "Anyway, it does no good to look back and think what should have been. The important thing is to know what to do now."

"What is there for me to do?"

"You've got to think of Danny, Ed. Tonight he was not

too sad because the soldiers' coming made him forget what happened. But tomorrow he will miss his mother. All the days ahead he will miss her."

Kincaid felt that at the moment the old vaquero was wiser than he, and so said, "Tell me what to do, Matéo."

"Take the boy to Louise, Ed."

"No, not that. He's all I have now."

"Just for a visit," Mateo said. "A few weeks. Until you both get over what happened here."

Kincaid shook his head, said flatly, "No."

"Danny needs to be with a woman," Matéo said in a reasoning tone. "Besides, how will you look after him when we are out on the range? Would you leave him alone, with the chance that the Apaches will come back?"

Kincaid said nothing.

Matéo went on, "Tomorrow. The sooner, the better. It will be good for you to get away. Maybe it will be easier for you, when you get back."

"It'll never be easier for me," Kincaid said. "But, all right. I'll take him to Louise tomorrow."

Matéo said, "*Bueno*," and drifted away.

Kincaid remained there by the corral fence, torn apart by grief and anger. *Those damned rifles*, he thought, blaming the Apaches less than the man who had armed them.

The soldiers across the creek had settled down for the night, but one campfire still threw a patch of flickering light against the darkness. Two shadowy shapes sat by it.

Kincaid roused himself and walked to the creek. He forded it, the water only inches deep. The men at the fire were, as he had expected, the scout, Scarlett, and young Lieutenant Carlson.

Scarlett said, "Join us, friend," and offered a thin, black Mexican cigar when Kincaid hunkered down. He was smoking; Carlson was not.

Kincaid accepted the cigar with a muttered, "Thanks, Tom," and lit it with a burning brand from the fire. Then,

to Carlson, "My apologies for using a rough tongue earlier, Lieutenant. I was upset."

"You had reason to be, Mr. Kincaid," Carlson said. "I'll always regret that we did not get here sooner."

"We're never in time," Scarlett said, sounding bitter about it. "All we're able to do is keep the pressure on the hostiles until we wear them down. By the time we catch them, they've cut a bloody swathe across half the Territory."

Kincaid said, "I'm going to Tucson tomorrow."

The scout looked at him with a lively interest. "And?"
"I'll see what I can learn."

Scarlett nodded, said, "Good." Then he warned, "Don't be too open about it. You can't trust any of those townsmen. The ones in business like the Apaches stirred up. Indian trouble keeps the Army in the Territory and the Army is a good customer for the merchants and contractors."

"I'll take care," Kincaid said. "I don't intend to end up with a bullet in my back. I'll talk with my sister-in-law. She may know what goes on. She still has an interest in her late husband's freighting firm. The man who bought it is paying her off so much a month, out of the profits. And she's on friendly terms with him."

"Even her," Scarlett said. "Don't trust even her too far."

Kincaid grimaced, thinking that if he couldn't trust Louise there was nobody in this world he could trust.

He said, "Her husband was murdered while freighting to the mines at Ojo. Not by Apaches, but by outlaws. There's no difference. A man is just as dead, whether killed by an Indian or a renegade white man. She has no reason to like what goes on here in the Territory." He chewed on his lower lip. "If I should learn anything from her, how will I get the information to you?"

"The Lieutenant is sending a courier to the fort in the morning," said Scarlett. "We can send word along that somebody from there should contact you while you're in Tucson."

"All right," Kincaid said. He rose. "Thanks for the cigar, Tom. Good night to you both."

He went back across the creek, knowing it would not be a good night for him . . . this, his first without Martha.

The night was as bad as he had expected. He spent it bedded down in the barn. He slept little, and that but fitfully, tormented by bad dreams. Upon waking at the first faint light of dawn, he sighed with relief that the night was gone.

Kincaid saddled his dun horse and rode out into the ranch to catch up with the wagon mules. It took him nearly an hour to find them. Bringing the pair of jacks in, he saw that the cavalry detail was already moving out, heading toward hills into which the seven surviving Apaches had disappeared yesterday afternoon. He hitched the mules up to the spring wagon, then left them tied to the corral fence and went into the house.

He washed and shaved for the trip to town and put on the pants to his gray broadcloth suit, a white shirt, a maroon string tie, his good black boots. When ready to leave, he would don the suit coat and his pearl-gray Stetson. He hadn't worn his good clothes since Christmas, when he'd taken his family—and Matéo—to town for the holiday, to visit with Louise. That had been a happy occasion. Even Martha had shed her gloom for those few days. Now it seemed an eternity ago.

Matéo took Martha's place in the kitchen, fixing breakfast, while Kincaid went to his son's room, found him awake.

"Where's Mommie?" asked the boy.

Kincaid was at a loss for words. He thought to say that Mommie had gone away, gone to Heaven with Grandpa, but decided against it. He was sure that Danny, remembering the two graves, would not be able to accept such an explanation.

His small face puckering up, the boy said, "I want Mommie!"

"Look, son; the soldiers have already gone away—and we're going away, too."

"Where are we going?"

"To town, to see Aunt Louise."

"Without Mommie?"

"Danny, listen . . ."

Fortunately Matéo appeared at that moment, as though knowing that Kincaid would need his help. He brought a basin of water, soap, a towel.

"You've got to wash and put on your good clothes, Danny," the vaquero said. "And you've got to hurry. It's a long drive to town."

"Are you going, too, Matéo?"

"Sure, he's going," Kincaid said. Then, to Matéo, "You'd better come along. It's too risky, one man alone here. The same for one man alone on the road. Those Apaches could double back."

Matéo nodded, and said, "I'll get the boy dressed. You go eat."

Kincaid went to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. A tinplate of flapjacks and another of fried bacon stood on the back of the stove, keeping warm. He still had no appetite, but he forced himself to eat a little. The food seemed to stick in his throat. He washed it down with the coffee.

After eating, he left the house by the kitchen door and walked the fifty yards to the two graves near the palo verde tree. Looking down at the one that was Martha's, he felt choked up with grief and anger. And with guilt. He couldn't get it out of his mind that Martha had not been happy for a long time—and that he, too, had been dissatisfied with their lot. He should have done better by her. Certainly, he should have made a home for her in a safe place.

He walked heavily back to the ranchyard. The spring had gone out of his step, as though he had grown suddenly old.

He stowed his carbine and a box of cartridges beneath

the seat of the wagon. Matéo, when they were ready to leave, brought his saddle-gun along. The vaquero had turned Kincaid's dun out onto the range, to shift for itself while they were away, but he slipped a halter on his sorrel and tied the animal behind the wagon. He placed its saddle, blanket and bridle in the wagon.

"In case I'm ready to come home before you want to, Ed," he said, in explanation.

He had come from Texas with Hank and had no relatives in the Territory. He found himself growing restless after a day or two in town.

Matéo handled the reins, and Danny sat between him and Kincaid. The boy was excited over going to town. At the moment he seemed not to miss his mother. Kincaid wished that he could be as mercurial of mood as his son. As it was, he had to fight against the urge to look toward the graves by the palo verde tree as Matéo trotted the mules away from the buildings and north through the valley.

They were not far on their way when the climbing sun lay its heavy heat upon them, forcing Kincaid to remove his suit coat and unbutton the collar of his shirt.

Ruefully, he said, "I'd never make a dude, Matéo."

Chuckling, Matéo replied, "That takes a townsman, and you were not cut out to be one."

That was so, Kincaid reflected. He was born to be unconfined, just as were the mustang horse and the longhorn cow. He might yearn for an easier life than that of a rancher, but a town job would have made him feel a prisoner enduring a life sentence. He was trapped in the way of life to which he had been born, and he had let Martha be trapped with him.

"Matéo, do you think Martha would have been happy living in town?"

Matéo shook his head. "No more than you. She belonged on a ranch. Now Louise, she is different."

Kincaid knew that was true. Louise was indeed different. She was a gay, outgoing person who needed to live among

people. She liked to be where it was busy, where things happened.

But Matéo might be wrong about Martha. Maybe she, too, would have bloomed in a different background, come really alive in another environment. Maybe she had secretly wished for Louise's sort of life. If she had, and he had taken her elsewhere, she wouldn't now be in her grave.

Kincaid let his mind dwell gloomily upon that, blaming himself, along with the Apaches and the gun-runner, for her death.

By mid-morning they were out of the valley and through the seared Morado Hills. At high noon they came to a *tinaja*, a rockbound waterhole, midway across the stretch of *malpais* lying between the hills and the Largo Mountains. They stopped at the *tinaja* to rest the mules, which had come this distance at a steady, brisk trot.

Matéo let the jacks drink after allowing them a few minutes to cool off. He had brought along some leftover biscuits in a flour sack and he and Danny munched on them. Kincaid still lacked an appetite and so merely smoked a cigarette.

As they started out again, Danny asked, "When will we get to Aunt Louise's house?"

"Not for a long time, *muchacho*," Matéo told him. "Not until after the sun is down—when it's your bedtime."

"That's too long. Can I drive the mules?"

"Sure," Matéo said, and for a little while let him hold the reins.

They had traveled less than a mile from the *tinaja* when the rig topped a rocky hump of ground and Kincaid saw a movement east across the wasteland. Riders, where he wouldn't have expected riders to be.

"Pull up, *amigo*."

Matéo reined the team in, peered in the direction Kincaid was staring. "Three riders and four led animals," he said. "Not Apaches. What would white men be doing in the *malpais*, Ed?"

Frowning, Kincaid said, "You thinking what I am?"

"The men who trade rifles?"

"Yeah."

"It could be. Maybe the led animals carry packs. The outfit could be coming from a meeting with the Indians."

"I'm going to borrow your sorrel and have a closer look," Kincaid said, getting down from the wagon.

"You could be asking for trouble," Matéo said uneasily. "If they are gun-runners, they won't like being spied on."

Kincaid said, "I'll like even less their being gun-runners," and reached into the wagon for the sorrel's saddle blanket.

After saddling up, he got his Winchester from under the seat and then mounted. He thrust the carbine into the saddle boot.

"You keep moving," he said. "I'll catch up."

Danny said, "Daddy, where are you going?"

"Out to talk to those men, son," Kincaid told him, and turned the sorrel away from the trace of the road they had been following since early morning.

The land here was tortuous, strewn with rocks, some as big as houses, and cut by deep gullies and ravines. Its sandy soil grew only sparse clumps of greasewood and prickly pear. No road crossed it from east to west, and so far as Kincaid knew it had no places of habitation. Because of the broken terrain he lost sight of the riders as he rode to intercept them. When he sighted them again, from a slight elevation, he saw not three, as before, but only two.

Had he miscounted?

No, there had been three riders. They had seen him coming, and one had dropped back, gone into hiding, to have the advantage in case he meant trouble for them. That one would certainly be holding a gun on him when he faced the two. Would honest men take such a precaution? He thought not. He was convinced now; he had found the gun-runners.

He reined in, waited for the outfit to come to him. This would place the third rider at a distance unless he came from hiding. The two with the led animals were headed

toward the *tinaja*, and their course would bring them close enough to him.

Shortly he saw that the two were Mexicans. Not vaqueros, by their dress; merely *peones*. They wore straw sombreros, cotton shirts and pants, sandals. So far as he could tell, neither was armed. One led animal carried a tarpaulin-covered pack, another four water casks. The others were rigged with empty packsaddles, which suggested that they had delivered their burdens somewhere in the *malpais*. At a rendezvous with some Apaches, maybe.

Kincaid would have bet on that. Anger roiled in him as he put his horse across the outfit's path. The Mexicans reined in, gazed at him uneasily. Their faces were dark and blank beneath the wide brims of their sombreros. One had a straggly gray moustache; the other only a youth's black fuzz on his cheeks and chin. Their uneasiness increased under his hardeyed appraisal. The young one squirmed in his saddle, finally glanced back over his shoulder as though wishing their *compadre* would do something about the situation.

"Where are you going, hombres? Where did you come from?"

They looked blank, and the other one muttered, "*No sabe.*"

"I'll bet you don't savvy," Kincaid growled, quite sure they spoke some English.

Although neither carried a gun, the older of the pair had a sheath knife on his belt. Swinging his horse close to that one, Kincaid reached out and took the knife. Both men looked at him fearfully now. He rode to the first horse in the pack string, that with the covered pack. Using the knife, he cut the ropes and then pulled the tarpaulin off the pack and let it drop to the ground. The horse carried only a supply of provisions and the usual camp gear. He wasn't disappointed. He hadn't expected to find anything more.

Turning back to the Mexicans, he held the knife out to its owner. The man took it with a shaky hand.

"Call your boss up," Kincaid said, gesturing toward their back-trail. "Tell him to come out of hiding."

They still looked at him as though they did not comprehend, and he began to think they really had no English.

He pointed at the young one, then at the pack horse. That much was understood. The youth dismounted and went to repair the damage to the pack.

Looking at the other man, Kincaid pointed to the two animals rigged with empty packsaddles. "Guns? Rifles?"

He received only a shrug in reply, but a flicker of understanding in the Mexican's black eyes betrayed him. The man did understand those two words of English. Kincaid no longer needed to wonder; these two and the hidden rider had indeed taken rifles deep into the desert to the Apaches. And it might well be that some of those same rifles had killed Martha and Hank.

The younger Mexican got the pack shaped up again and remounted his horse. He had the lead-rope of the string of pack-animals tied to the horn of his saddle.

Again Kincaid gestured, this time in the direction of the *tinaja*.

"Get going," he ordered. "Vamoosel!"

It was the third rider he wanted, the one who was certainly the boss of the outfit—the actual trader in guns.

The pair understood that they were to go their way, and moved on with apparent relief. Once they were a little distance away, Kincaid drew his Winchester from its boot, dismounted, left the sorrel ground-hitched, and went to a cluster of boulders to wait for the third man to tire of playing hide and seek.

That did not take long, for within minutes a voice called out, "You there, hombre . . . what are you up to?"

The man was closer than Kincaid had thought. He had left his horse back a ways and come on afoot, taking advantage of the rough terrain to keep from being seen. He had sneaked up on Kincaid as stealthily as a bush-whacking Apache.

Taken by surprise, Kincaid was rattled and for a moment made no reply. Crouching down among the boulders, he levered a cartridge into the Winchester's chamber and tried to figure out the man's position. A jumble of rocks stood a little distance off to the southeast, and Kincaid supposed the man was hidden there.

"You, hombre—talk up! What are you after? What kind of a crow have you got to pick with me?"

The hidden man sounded bewildered, and curious. And not in any way apprehensive.

A *hardcase*, Kincaid thought. A tough hombre. Sure of himself.

"I want a word with you," Kincaid called back. "I want to know what you're doing in the *malpais*."

"What business is that of yours, bucko?"

"None, unless you've been selling rifles to the Apaches."

"And what if I have?"

"Then, by damn," Kincaid said, anger at work in him, "I'll turn you over to the military—or kill you!"

The hidden man must have been shaken by that, for it was a long interval before he replied.

Then, his voice devoid of bravado, he asked, "Just what's sticking in your craw, mister?"

"The Apaches raided my home yesterday," Kincaid said savagely. "They killed my wife and my father-in-law—and they were using brand-new rifles!"

"Now that's sure too bad," came the callous reply. "But you're not turning me over to anybody—or killing me, either."

With that a rifle cracked. By the heavy report, Kincaid knew it was not a Winchester. He judged it to be a Sharps buffalo gun. He had automatically ducked down at the sound, but realized the next instant that the shot hadn't been fired at him. No slug had struck any of the rocks about him. But his horse was making a commotion. Looking in its direction, he saw with a sense of shock that it was down, threshing about, dying. The gun-runner had shot the sorrel to set him afoot, so he could get away without risking a fight.

IV

KINCAID HAD TO FACE the hard truth: he had taken a hand in a game he didn't quite know how to play. He was a ranchhand, a law-abiding and peaceful man, bucking a hardcase who knew all the murderous tricks of surviving on the fringe of the law. A gun-runner and a bushwhacker. A *damn white Apache*, Kincaid thought sourly, and wondered what his own next move should be.

All the advantage lay with the other man; he had the edge of a more powerful, farther-reaching rifle, if he stood firm and fought it out; and a mount to carry him away if he didn't choose to make a fight of it.

Kincaid tried to reason as the gun-runner would. In the other's boots, he decided, he wouldn't let it develop into a duel. He would withdraw to his horse and ride away, swinging wide, out of rifle range.

Yes, that would be the gun-runner's logical move.

Kincaid's own move, then, must be to keep him from reaching his horse. That meant he would have to leave his cover, expose himself. And if he had gauged the other's reasoning wrongly, if the hardcase did make a fight of it, he would almost certainly stop a slug. A .50 caliber slug from a buffalo gun could tear a fearful hole in a man. He had seen what one had done to his horse.

Don't try to stop him, a voice in his mind urged. *Let him go. He's a tricky son, and you could end up dead here.*

He ignored the voice. Hatred of the man had hold of him, and he wanted not only to avenge Martha and Hank but also to keep him from putting more rifles in the hands of the Apaches, to murder more innocent people.

He moved to the narrow opening between two boulders and took a prone shooting position. He saw nothing of his man; he had no target, but he drove three shots at the other cluster of rocks, firing as rapidly as he could work trigger and lever.

The heavy rifle replied, the blast of it thunderous compared to the sharp crack of the Winchester. The slug from the buffalo gun struck one of the boulders behind which Kincaid lay and screamed as it ricocheted. He flinched and had to fight against the impulse to roll away from the opening. Steadying himself, he drew bead on those rocks above which a small fog of yellow-gray powdersmoke now hung. He drove slugs in among the rocks until his carbine's magazine was empty, then rolled away from the opening.

And none too soon. The other rifle blasted again. This time its slug found the opening and kicked up dirt where an instant before he had lain.

Expert with a rifle, the gun-runner. And he had chosen to make a fight of it, to risk his life rather than run for it. Why? Because he believed he had been seen and recognized, and would be identified to the military? That had to be it, Kincaid decided. The man felt that he must leave him lying dead there in the *malpais*.

Like hell he will.

Kincaid reloaded his carbine with shells from his gunbelt. The acrid odor of gunsmoke was strong in his nostrils; the sun was baking him. Excitement, and fear, too, had brought on a great thirst; his mouth felt cottony. The carbine's magazine filled, he jacked a cartridge into the firing chamber.

What now?

He removed his hat and tossed it to the ground in a line with the space between the boulders. Instantly the buffalo gun blasted for the third time, kicking up dirt near the hat. Moving to the opening, he drove three more shots into the other jumble of rocks.

Raucous, mocking laughter echoed the reports, and the

gun-runner yelled, gleefully, as though enjoying himself, "Save your lead, bucko. You're not even close!"

Kincaid drew aside, taking his hat with him. Again came the other rifle's report, and once more a slug plowed into the sandy soil to one side of him. He drew an arm across his face, wiping away sweat with his shirt sleeve. He put his hat back on, and wished for a drink. He wished more for a way to get at the gun-runner, facing now another hard truth: one or the other of them would die in this lonely place, and it would most likely be him.

He began to feel that he had played the fool in taking it on himself to try to stop the trade in rifles to the Apaches. After all, he was no lawman. He wasn't one of the military. He was just an ordinary man, with a ranch to run and a son to raise.

He took makings from his shirt pocket, and his hands trembled as he rolled a cigarette. He had his smoke, and felt somewhat steadier. Still hot and thirsty, but steadier. No more shots came from the other cluster of rocks, and when he fired at them again, there was no response from the buffalo gun. He fired again, and still the gun-runner failed to shoot back.

Cleared out?

A trick?

Kincaid debated with himself, then came erect with his carbine ready to shoot. This was his worst moment, but no shot blasted from the other cluster of boulders. He started walking toward them, then stopped upon seeing a rider off to the south. Well out of rifle range, the gun-runner was heading toward the *tinaja* at an easy lope. As though aware that he was seen, he waved an arm in mocking salute.

Kincaid swore under his breath, feeling let down and yet knowing that he should feel a sense of relief. Sure, the gun-runner had gotten away. But he, too, was alive and could leave the *malpais*. For a time he hadn't been at all certain that it would end like that for him.

Going to the dead horse, he worked the rigging off it.

He carried saddle, blanket and bridle to the boulders where he had made his stand and cached them there. Then, carrying his rifle, he started working his way northwest across the badlands.

He had a long, hot hike ahead of him, but he wouldn't have to hoof it all the way to Tucson. The XL Ranch lay just beyond the mountains. He could borrow a mount there for the remainder of the way. Once he reached the road, he looked back along it every now and then, fearful that the gun-runner would make another try at him. But no rider appeared in pursuit.

The weight of the sun bore down on him, sapping his strength with an intensity of heat. His boots were not made for hiking: they soon began to pinch. His stride shortened, became laggard. His thirst was now an aching thing, a torment. A man could die out here for lack of water. XL Ranch seemed an impossible distance, and even the mountains seemed to come no nearer. His carbine became a burden, and he considered discarding it, but knew that would be foolhardy, with the gun-runner mounted and able to overtake him.

When still perhaps a mile from the mountain pass, he saw a rig coming from the deep shadows of the narrow cut. For a moment he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. But no, it was a wagon and team. As the rig drew closer, he realized that it was G-Bar's own spring wagon and mule team. Matéo had waited for him, turned back when seeing him. He gave no thought to the fact that the old vaquero had disobeyed his orders. He was much too relieved to be annoyed. He stopped, waited for the rig to reach him.

As he climbed aboard, Matéo asked him, "Ed, what happened?" He was more than concerned: actually alarmed.

"They were the gun-runners, all right," Kincaid said. "Two Mexicans and a hombre I never did get to see close. He was too tricky for me. He killed the sorrel, first thing. I burnt a lot of powder, but he got away. Get me to water, pronto, *amigo*. I've been wrung out dry."

Matéo might have said it had been a foolhardy thing, but he merely nodded and put the mules into motion. Turning them about, he trotted them toward the pass.

Danny said, "Was there shooting, Daddy? Was it a bad man?"

"Yes, son," Kincaid told him, "it was a bad man, and he got away."

That really bothered him, the gun-runner's having gotten away. . . .

They came to Tucson long after nightfall and drove directly to Louise Hammond's house. Like all the town's buildings, it was of adobe. Unlike most of the others, however, it was large enough to be imposing. It had a gallery across the front, a tile roof, a walled patio, wrought-iron grillwork at the windows, and a wide door hand-carved in the Mexican fashion. Having prospered in the freighting business, Frank Hammond had been able to make a fine home for Louise when they married two years ago. Although he had been almost twice her age, the marriage had seemed a good one to Kincaid. Too bad that Frank had been killed, that Louise had been left a childless widow. And too bad that he, Kincaid, was now bringing her the sad word that her sister and father were dead. She would take it hard.

Getting from the wagon, Kincaid lifted Danny down and told Matéo, "Put the team up at Benson's Livery. Take a room at the Arizona House. I'll pay the bill."

Matéo said, "Sí," and drove away.

Holding his son by the hand, Kincaid walked to the house, stepped onto the gallery, knocked on the door. Lamplight glowed behind the curtained parlor windows. Louise was at home, and not yet abed.

Her voice asked, "Who is it, please?"

In town, too, Kincaid realized, one did not feel wholly safe. A door was not opened just to any knock.

"Ed, Louise . . . Ed Kincaid."

There was the sound of an iron bolt being drawn back, then the door opened and Louise, a rather tall and re-

markedly pretty young woman, looked out at them. She was smiling.

"Ed, how nice," she said. "And Danny, too!" Then, as though she sensed that something was wrong, her pleased smile faded and she asked, "Where's Martha, Ed? And Dad?"

He knew of no way to break the news gently, and so said, "Hold on tight, Louise. . . . The Apaches raided us yesterday. Only Danny, Matéo and I escaped."

Louise looked stricken. "Oh, no—no!"

"Martha and Dad went quickly," he hastened to add. "The Apaches didn't catch them alive."

"Thank Heaven for that," Louise said, and then was silent for a moment while fighting to keep control of herself. She did let the tears flow, however. And her voice was choked up, saying, "Come on in." Then, forcing a smile, "Danny, it's so nice to see you. You've grown inches, I'll swear."

"Mommie," the boy said. "She's dead. So is Grandpa."

Louise said, "Yes, darling," and picked him up. "You'll stay with Auntie, and I'll try to take Mommie's place. Are you hungry? I'll bet you are. Let's go to the kitchen and get some milk and cookies. Ed, come in and make yourself at home."

At home, Kincaid thought bleakly.

He would never again know the feeling of being at home. A house without a woman was never a home.

Alone, he looked about the handsomely furnished parlor and again felt a sense of guilt. Frank had done so much for Louise: he so little for Martha. Had Martha envied her sister? Had she wished for a home like this and been unhappy because he had not been able to give it to her? All he knew was that he had failed her.

Louise soon called him to the kitchen for sandwiches and coffee. The sandwiches were slices of fresh-baked bread heavily buttered and stuffed thickly with cold roast beef. The coffee was strong enough to suit any cowhand. Kincaid found that his appetite had returned.

Danny soon said that he was full, and Louise told him,

"All right, off to bed with you. Say good night to your daddy and come along."

He went with her willingly.

She returned before Kincaid had finished his coffee.

"Asleep so soon?" he asked.

She nodded. "The poor kid is tired out. Did he take it hard, Ed?"

"Not as hard as I expected. He's still too young to realize how final it all is."

"I'll try to be a mother to him."

"It's asking a lot of you."

She shook her head. "I wanted children of my own but wasn't so blessed. I'll make Danny mine." Tears glistened in her eyes. She wiped them away with the hem of the apron she had donned before fixing his coffee and sandwiches. "I'm trying hard not to cry. Poor Martha and Dad. And poor you, Ed."

"Go ahead and cry," he said. "I would, myself, if a man was allowed to."

She shook her head. "Not now. Later, in bed. I don't want to make you feel worse than you already do."

She refilled his coffee cup, then poured a cup for herself and sat opposite him at the table. While taking a sip of coffee, she regarded him with open curiosity.

"Something happened to you today," she said. "You didn't get your good clothes soiled by merely driving in from the ranch."

He told her about the cavalry patrol arriving after Matéo and he had buried Martha and Hank and about his talk with the scout, Tom Scarlett. He continued with his encounter with the gun-runners in the badlands.

A frightened look came to her face when she heard how close he had come to being killed.

"You shouldn't have gone after them, Ed. After all, you're not a lawman."

"I was sore about those brand-new rifles."

"That's understandable. Still, you took a terrible chance."

"Well, I came out of it alive. And, but for Danny, I wouldn't care much that I did. How am I to live with myself, knowing that Martha is dead because I didn't make a home for her in a safe place, as Frank did for you?"

Louise looked disapproving. "Now don't start blaming yourself. That would be as wrong as wrong can be."

"Why would it?" he demanded. Then, caught up by a need to confide in somebody, "Martha wasn't happy, Louise. Not for a long time. This past year she was moody, gloomy. Cross with me a lot of the time. She seemed to withdraw into herself, to close me out. I think she got to hate it out there—the loneliness of ranch life. She never said so, but she must have wanted something better. I didn't give it to her, and now she's dead. I failed her, and I don't much like myself for it."

Louise shook her head. "Ed, you're mistaken. You didn't understand her as well as I did. You were her husband, true. But only for six years. I was her sister for twenty-four. And I know this, she would never have left Dad. Mother passed away when Martha was fifteen and I thirteen. Right away Sis took her place, becoming Dad's housekeeper and a mother to me. If this terrible thing hadn't happened she would have gone on looking after Dad until the end of his days. She not only felt it was her duty, but found pleasure in being needed by him. Oh, no! . . . She would never have left the ranch."

Kincaid looked at her uncertainly, saying nothing.

She went on, "As for Martha's being unhappy: she was always a moody person. Even as a little girl, she never talked much and seldom laughed. When we were in our teens, she often became annoyed with me because I was gay—lighthearted. She would tell me to stop being so silly. When you came along, she did change; she came out of her shell. You did wonders for her. And if it didn't last, it wasn't your fault. She simply went back to being herself. She loved you, was content with you. That I know."

"But she must have secretly wished to live in town, to have a home like yours."

"Maybe she would have liked a better house," Louise said. "But she wouldn't have felt right in town. She was strictly a ranch woman. And as I said, she wouldn't have left Dad even if you had wanted her to."

"Well, that helps a little," Kincaid said, wanting to believe that she, the sister, had known Martha even better than he, the husband.

But was that possible?

He took out makings, rolled and lit a cigarette, then said, "Look, Louise; I promised Tom Scarlett I'd try to learn the identity of the man trading rifles to the Apaches. He figured I might be able to, being a civilian. I told him I had a sister-in-law here and knew a few other people I could talk to about it. Have you heard anything about the gun-running?"

She frowned, again disapproving. "I've heard that such a thing is going on, but I don't know anything definite. Anyway, I don't think you should involve yourself further. It could be dangerous."

"I gave Scarlett my word. Besides, I want the guilty man caught . . . or killed."

"It might be you who gets killed."

"If I learn anything, I'll pass the information on to the Army."

"Even so, you would be risking your life," Louise said, looking upset. "This is a rough town, Ed. It's full of dangerous men. The whole Territory is, for that matter. Even men who mind their own business and don't meddle in the affairs of the lawless element aren't really safe. Look what happened to my Frank."

"You're right about the danger, of course. But you're wrong in thinking honest people shouldn't do something about the lawlessness. The Territory will never be safe for our kind until the Apaches are kept from raiding and the outlaws are rounded up or killed. The Army does its best, but so

far that's not been good enough. The lawmen are too often dishonest or incompetent. Somebody else has got to take a hand, and I've decided that in this case that somebody is me."

"Well, if you must. But remember, you have a son to consider. Don't let Danny lose his father as well as his mother."

"I'll not run any unnecessary risks. I simply intend to ask the people I know and trust if they have any idea who the gun-runner is."

"If anyone does have any idea, he'll be afraid to admit it."

"That may be so. Still, I'll have a try at it. I'd really hoped that you would have heard something from Mark Amberton."

Looking surprised, Louise said, "Why from Mark, Ed?"

"Well, he's a big man in Tucson now that he owns the Territorial Freighting Company. Even though he's a Johnny-come-lately, he is one of the town's leading citizens. And you've still got an interest in the company, since he's still paying you for the business. Besides, you're on friendly terms with him."

She shook her head, smiled wryly, and said, "Not on as friendly terms as I once was. In fact, I see very little of him any more."

"What happened? Or isn't that any of my business?"

"Oh, I don't mind telling you. After all, you and I are kinfolk. And friends too, I hope. What happened is that Mark got the idea that I should marry him. When he suggested it and I wasn't agreeable, he took offense and became angry."

Kincaid gave her a curious look, and, though never having given it a thought before, he realized that there must be quite a few men who would like to end her widowhood. She was a pleasant, attractive young woman. She had a gleaming mass of red-brown hair, wide amber-flecked brown eyes adorned with long lashes, a wide mouth that smiled easily. Even now, in a plain green gingham dress and an apron,

she possessed an aura of loveliness. Kincaid could believe that Mark Amberton would want her for his wife. Had she loved Frank Hammond so much that she couldn't accept another man, even as a suitor?

Wondering about that, Kincaid said, "I'd have thought any woman would consider Mark a good catch. He's handsome, a man of parts, successful in business. He's bound to become important in the Territory."

"Oh, he's all of that," Louise said, smiling wryly. "I know more than one woman who thinks I'm very foolish for having stopped seeing him." Now she looked sober, frowned. "I do like him, but he seems just a bit too perfect. I keep thinking there must be a flaw somewhere in his character. What it is, I don't know—and I don't want to find out. Not as Mrs. Mark Amberton, anyway."

Still looking at her with curiosity, and with more interest than he'd ever before shown in her, he said, "It must be lonely for you, though."

"Yes, I am lonely. Memories aren't enough, believe me."

"You mustn't live with just memories forever."

"I won't do that—if the right man comes along."

"You'll know him, will you?"

"Of course, I will," she said. "Just as I knew that Frank was right for me—or at least that he would do for me."

Kincaid now looked at her wonderingly.

Seeming to need to explain herself, she said, "Yes, there was somebody else before Frank. But he wasn't for me. Or rather, I wasn't for him. Anyway, I'm not rushing into a second marriage—especially not with Mark Amberton. But I could talk with him for you, Ed, ask him if he has any idea who the gun-runner is." She smiled in that slight, wry way again. "We are still on speaking terms, even though I no longer let him come calling. And if anybody has even a suspicion of who the gun-runner is, he should. Shall I see him tomorrow?"

Kincaid recalled Tom Scarlett's warning against trusting anyone in Tucson—even his sister-in-law. He knew that his

life was safe in Louise's hands under any circumstances. But Mark Amberton?

He did not know the man well, but he had been impressed by him. On the other hand, Amberton had a big stake in the present state of affairs in Tucson and the entire Territory as well. His business depended at least in part upon the Government maintaining troops at the numerous Army posts, and those troops would remain only so long as their presence was required by the warlike activities of the Apaches. No, Kincaid decided, he didn't want Mark Amberton to know that he was trying to learn the identity of the gun-runner.

Shaking his head, he said, "No, don't ask him. Let it go. I'd rather not involve you."

"You mean you'd rather not have Mark know what you're up to, don't you?"

Before Kincaid could answer that, a knock sounded at the front door.

Louise said, "Who could that be, at this hour?"

As she got from her chair, he asked, "Want me to go to the door with you?"

"Oh, no. I won't unlock it until I ask who it is. I never do at night."

She left the kitchen and a moment later Kincaid heard her ask who was there and then open the door. A man's deep voice reached him, but he could not identify it. Then Louise brought the caller to the kitchen, and Kincaid, getting to his feet, thought, *Speak of the Devil!*

The caller was Mark Amberton.

V

OF ONLY AVERAGE HEIGHT but husky of build, Mark Amberton was in his mid-thirties. Something of a dude, he now, as always, looked fresh from the barber shop. He was, except for the broad-brimmed, flat-crowned tan Stetson he held in his hand, attired in the style of a prosperous city man: brown suit, white shirt, green cravat, vest with a flower design. Ordinarily, he was a smiling man. Tonight he showed a grave face.

"Ed, I ran into your man Matéo on his way to a *cantina*. He told me about the raid on your ranch. I had to stop by and tell you how sorry I am—and to see if there is anything I can do."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Mark," Kincaid said. "But there's nothing anyone can do."

"A terrible thing," Amberton went on, his voice taking on an edge of anger. "When the Army will get around to keeping those savages penned up, I don't know. I'm far from being a bloodthirsty person, but at times like this I feel strongly that something drastic should be done to end their depredations."

No man could have seemed more sincere, and yet something, some sixth sense perhaps, made Kincaid wary of him.

So he merely said, "I feel the same way, of course. But what can we civilians do?"

"Nothing, really. If the troops can't cope with the Apaches, people like us can do even less. I lost a freight rig to them only ten days ago. They killed the driver and his swamper, burned the wagon, ran the mules off. But that was a small loss compared to yours. What are your plans now? Will you go back to the ranch—you and your son?"

"I'm going back. I have no choice, with more than two thousand head of cattle on the range. But Danny is staying here with Louise, for a while at least."

Amberton looked at Louise. "The boy will be as good for you as you for him," he told her, his tone pointed. "As I've told you more than once, you live too much to yourself. You need an interest in life, a woman as young as you."

"Yes, Danny will be good for me," she said. "And thank you for being concerned about my welfare."

Her tone was so barbed that Kincaid knew the two must have had a real fallout over her turning the man down. They were still angry with each other, and one would have thought, from the coldness with which they looked at one another, that there was even hatred between them. Kincaid thought that strange, unable to understand a man being angry over being rejected as a suitor if he truly loved the lady in question. Hurt maybe, but not angry.

Looking wryly amused, Amberton said, "We're not on good terms at the moment, Ed—Louise and I. We've had a lovers' quarrel. As her brother-in-law, can't you reason with her, make her see that she's being foolish?"

"I've already told her that I would have thought any woman would consider you a good catch, Mark."

Chuckling, Amberton said, "Thanks for the recommendation." Then, sobering: "Well, I'll be on my way if you're sure there's nothing I can do."

"There's nothing," Kincaid told him. "Thank you, anyway."

Louise must have felt that she was being inhospitable, for she said tardily, "Would you care for a cup of coffee, Mark?"

"No, thank you. I'll not intrude longer."

"Oh, stop it," she said crossly. "Nobody said you were intruding."

"I feel that I am," he told her, then nodded to Kincaid and left the kitchen.

Louise went with him, to see him out. They were not

long in saying good night. When she returned, she looked at Kincaid and made a face.

"You see? He's just too perfect to be real, isn't he? So very much the gentleman."

"You think he's a tinhorn—a fourflusher of some sort?"

"I don't know what I think he is."

Regarding her soberly, Kincaid said, "You must have had a real spat. The two of you looked at each as though you'd go at it tooth and claw."

Louise was silent and thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged and said, "I may as well tell you the whole of it. Mark proposed marriage to me only after I refused another sort of proposition from him. I was furious that he should think me—well, cheap. I really gave it to him, and, yes, it was quite a scrap. We both have a nasty temper."

Despite his burden of grief, Kincaid was amused. He could not help saying, "I guess he hoped you would turn out to be one of those merry widows. And if that is the flaw in his character, it's not such a serious one. After all, he seems to be a man of the world and some women . . . well, you can't blame a man for trying."

Again she made a face, this time at him. But she didn't seem annoyed with him.

Then she said earnestly, "My fear is that he has a bigger flaw than that. I keep wondering about him. Why would a man of his apparently decent background and obvious ability not have been a success where he came from—wherever that was? Why did he come to a country that still has Indian trouble and is overrun by white outlaws?"

"Why did any of us come here, Louise?"

"People such as we came from places little different from this," she said. "Texas was just as wild a few years ago. But I can't help feeling that Mark belongs in a more civilized place—that he's a misfit here."

"So you do think he's a tinhorn."

She shook her head. "Not really. After all, he has been honest in his dealings with me. In his business dealings, at

least. But he has to have some sort of flaw. My woman's intuition tells me so. And I must trust it."

"I suppose you must," said Kincaid, thinking that he, too, felt a little leery of Mark Amberton. "Well, I'll say good night now. Thanks for taking Danny in. He's a good boy, listens real well. I don't think he'll give you any trouble. I'll stop around tomorrow."

"Come for supper," Louise said, as they left the kitchen. "I'd like to have you. About six."

He nodded.

In the parlor he picked his hat up from the chair where he'd left it. She unbolted and opened the door.

"Ed, if you go on with this thing about the gun-runner," she said, "do take care."

He nodded, said good night, and went away feeling hugely grateful to her for having taken Danny in so willingly. But for her kindness, he would not have known what to do with his son. A man would have a time of it, trying to care for a four-year-old boy while running a ranch.

The night was deeply dark, the moon smudged over by clouds and no stars at all. The other houses along this side street no longer showed lamplight, and no one else was abroad in the neighborhood.

Kincaid had just reached the edge of the business district, where the saloons at least were still lighted, when a voice lifted from the deep shadows of the alleyway between Benson's Livery Stable and Harmon Bros. Mercantile.

It rang out. "That's him! Get the bastard!"

A familiar voice . . . the one he had heard from the rocks in the *malpais*. That of the gun-runner.

Alarmed, Kincaid halted and swung around with his hand on the butt of his gun. He saw them come charging at him, three shadowy figures. Too late he started to draw. By the time he had his gun clear of its holster, two of the three had slammed into him and were grappling with him. One got a two-handed grip on his right wrist, kept him from either firing the gun or wielding it as a club. The other

grabbed his left arm and wrenched it behind him and hard upward, applying pressure so that he experienced an agony of pain all the way to his shoulder. This man drove a clubbing blow to his kidneys, and the pain all but paralyzed him. He lost his hold on the gun. His knees buckled. His gun dropped, but he was kept from falling by the pair who held him.

"Now, Durango! Rip his belly! Spill the meddler's guts! Hurry it up, before somebody happens along!"

That was the gun-runner, his voice charged with excitement. The third man, a halfbreed, a scarecrowish figure, moved forward to obey the frantic order. He had a knife in his hand, its long blade glinting. He came in at a crouch, the knife held low to cut upward from the abdomen. He was grinning wickedly, as though relishing the moment.

Fear of the cold steel drove Kincaid into a frenzied struggling, and he and the two who held him reeled one way and another as he fought to break loose and they strove to keep him prisoner. The knifeman maneuvered for an opening, failed to find one.

"Hold him, Jake—hold him! Durango . . . !"

Kincaid struggled more fiercely, and as they whipped about this way and that, the two against him, he saw the face of the gun-runner—a craggy, bearded, vicious face—and knew who the man was. Matt Hagarthy, a teamster for the Territorial Freighting Company when Frank Hammond was still alive.

"Damn you, Hargarthy; I'll have your—"

Kincaid's outburst was cut short by another hard blow to the kidneys. Again he was momentarily paralyzed. And now they had him, held him easily, so that Durango was able to close in again and this time jab with his knife.

Kincaid flinched visibly, anticipating the bite of the knife into his vitals. It did not come. Durango's jab had been merely a feint. The halfbreed was playing with him like a cat with a mouse, savoring his horror of the knife. Wickedly amused, he laughed low in his throat.

The men holding Kincaid swore, Hagarthy growling, "Get it done, you damned 'breed. Quite fooling around."

Kincaid struggled again, futilely. The blows to his back had sapped his strength. Durango again jabbed with his knife, and this time Kincaid felt the cold steel. The point pierced his shirt and pricked his stomach. He gasped and gave a violent jerk, more from fright than pain. Durango uttered another bark of mocking laughter.

Once more Jake and Hagarthy swore at him, and now, forgetting that the murder was to be silently done, the latter yelled angrily, "Do it, man—do it! I'm not telling you again!"

"Yeah, sure," Durango muttered. "Now I rip him apart."

He had fooled around long enough for Kincaid to recover somewhat from that second hard punch to his back. And now, preparing to strike deeply with his knife, he lost his chance.

With his returning strength, Kincaid threw himself back against the men holding him. Using them as a fulcrum, he kicked out with all his might. The toe of his boot found its mark, Durango's crotch. The halfbreed screamed, dropped his knife, grabbed himself with both hands. He went reeling away, bent double, still howling with pain.

Pressing his advantage, Kincaid gave a violent wrench and got loose of Matt Hagarthy. Jake kept his hold on him, however, but he whipped about and caught that one squarely between the eyes with a fist. Jake was staggered by the blow, but he was tough and game. He grappled with Kincaid.

From somewhere in the darkness a voice rang out, "Hey, what's going on there?" And another voice took it up, "A fight! Somebody's being robbed!"

This was what Matt Hagarthy had feared. He took flight, running toward the dark alley from which the trio had come. Kincaid caught a glimpse of him scurrying away while he struggled to free himself of Jake.

A rail-thin man, Jake, but rawhide tough. He took another hard punch to the face, then clubbed Kincaid alongside

the head with such force that his knees buckled. To keep from falling, Kincaid grabbed him about the middle. Before he could get set again, Kincaid took a battering about the face and head.

Hurting badly, dazed, Kincaid was gripped by desperation. He picked Jake up bodily and hurled him to the ground. The hardcase landed heavily, asprawl, but was up cat-quick. He started to close with Kincaid again, then thought better of it. Swinging about, he, too, fled toward the alley.

Kincaid turned groggily, expecting to find Durango recovered and coming at him again with his knife. But the halfbreed was also in flight, making for the alley. He was still bent over, still holding himself. His going was slow, painful. Kincaid shook himself mentally and physically, not quite able to believe that he had come out of it alive.

He looked about for his gun and his hat, which he had lost during the melee. By the time he had found both, several townsmen ventured near and wanted to know what had happened.

Kincaid shook his head. "I got jumped by some of your town toughs, is all," he said, and went his way with a slow, painful step. There was still a great ache in his lower back and he hurt badly about his face and head. He was all but out of steam.

He made it to the Arizona House, and registered for a room with a shaky hand. The clerk eyed him curiously but handed over a key without asking questions.

"Number Eight, sir."

Kincaid nodded jerkily, turned toward the stairs. He climbed them with an effort. He could have done with a drink or two, to ease the pain. And some liniment to rub on his back. But going after either was beyond him at the moment. Besides, the streets of this town weren't safe for him. Given another chance, Matt Hagarthy would almost certainly use a gun—from a dark place—and to hell with the noise.

When in Room Eight, Kincaid locked the door and drew

the window shade before striking a match to light the wall bracket lamp. He turned the lamp's wick low, since he needed only light enough to become acquainted with the room. A dingy, sparsely furnished room, it was just what he had expected. He removed his hat, coat, boots, and gunrig. He took his gun along to the bed, and stretching out he heaved a great sigh of relief. It was good to lie down. But soon anger came.

He had escaped with his life, and that was something for which a man with a son to raise must be grateful. But he'd had a chance at the gun-runner, Matt Hagarthy, and not been able to take advantage of it. His anger was for Hagarthy's still being alive.

Yes, he wanted Hagarthy dead—preferably by his gun.

Wrong though it might be according to the Good Book which old Hank, his father-in-law, had been given to reading regularly. But he, Ed Kincaid, wanted vengeance to be his, and right here on earth.

Despite a turmoil of angry thoughts, he drifted off into sleep. But he was soon awakened by a tapping at the door. He sat up with his gun in his hand, swung his legs from the bed, shook his head in an attempt to clear it of cobwebby strands of sleep. The tapping continued, but not loud. His caller was using some object, some metallic thing, against the wood. No noisy banging. Whoever it was, he didn't want to rouse anybody but the occupant of Room Eight.

Kincaid rose and moved silently on socked feet. He stood beside the door instead of by it, half afraid of a bullet through the flimsy portal.

"Who's there?"

"We've a mutual friend, Kincaid."

"Name him."

"Scarlett."

Kincaid was silent for a moment, thinking of his conversation with the Army's civilian scout. Deciding that the man outside had to be all right, he turned the key in the lock.

"Come on in, your hands out in front of you."

The caller opened the door, kept his left hand on the knob and held his right out before him. He had a silver dollar in the latter. With it, he had done his tapping. He was a lean, dark man of about forty, shabbily dressed in range clothes and badly in need of a shearing and a shave. He was nobody Kincaid had ever seen before, and he didn't look much like anybody the Army would send anywhere to do anything.

Still wary, Kincaid lifted the stranger's gun from its holster and said, "Shut the door, friend, and go turn up the lamp."

He thrust his own gun into his waistband, then ejected the loads from the other. He tossed the empty gun and the cartridges onto the bed.

"When you leave," he said, remaining beside the door and examining his caller with dubious eyes. "You're Army?"

A nod, and a name. "Forsythe. I was told to watch for you, and to contact you." A rueful smile. "I'm incognito, of course. A drifter, a saddle tramp. I was brought in from a post outside the Territory. Somebody is onto me, though. I've been watched the last couple of days. Been asking too many questions, I suppose."

"Officer?"

"Captain."

"A hell of a mission you're on."

"My sentiments exactly," Forsythe said. "And I'm getting nowhere with it. I hope you have something." A question, that.

They talked low-voiced, and their words couldn't have been distinguishable outside the room even though its walls were thin.

Kincaid nodded. "I have something. The name of the gun-runner. He and two other hardcases tried to finish me off only an hour or so ago. With a knife. A mistake, that. Next time he'll most likely try with a gun. Matt Hagarchy. He was once a teamster with the Territorial Freighting Company."

Forsythe nodded, indicating that he had the name and would not forget it. Then, "You work fast, Kincaid. How did

you get onto him so soon—and he onto you?”

Kincaid gave him a quick, sketchy account of his encounter with the gun-runner in the *malpais*. “Hagarthy was a little too smart for me then, but not quite smart enough tonight. Still, it was close. If he hadn’t left it up to a fool ’breed to do the actual killing . . .”

Forsythe regarded him with concern. “Better keep out of it from now on. Leave it to the military.”

“If you say so. But I’ve an even better reason than the Army for wanting to settle accounts with Hagarthy.”

“You’d be laying your life on the line, and the odds would be against you.”

Kincaid nodded but didn’t say anything. If he got the chance, though. If he could catch Matt Hagarthy in his gun sights . . .

Forsythe said, “We can’t pick him up just on your say-so, but at least we’re onto him now. We can set a trap and catch him at his gun-running.” He seemed to be thinking out loud rather than talking to Kincaid. “To be on the safe side, I’ll ride out to Fort Lowell when I leave here and give the C. O. the gun-runner’s name. The Indian Ring could decide to do me in any time, just on suspicion.”

Kincaid looked puzzled. “The Indian Ring?”

“Our name for any local people who do business with the Army posts and the Indian agencies,” Forsythe said. “The contractors and the suppliers. Even the saloonkeepers and the dancehall operators who get the enlisted men’s trade. The Ring also includes the politicians, since they are hand-in-glove with the business gentry. A necessary evil. The military and the agencies have to deal with such people—and at high prices, of course. For example, one contractor bid thirty thousand dollars to build a schoolhouse at an agency and put it up for six thousand. A twenty-four thousand dollar profit to him. I could give you countless such examples.

“The members of the Indian Ring are afraid the Government will kill the goose that lays their golden eggs. As

a matter of fact, orders have come from Washington to shut down half the Army establishments in Arizona Territory. The Ring knows that, and doesn't want the orders put into effect. So they stir up trouble with the Apaches . . . smuggle whiskey to them, run guns. When a bunch jumps the reservation and goes raiding, the local politicians have the telegraph wires sizzling with scare-messages to Washington, demanding more instead of fewer troops. That's what they're up to now, and maybe the powers that be will heed their pleas. It's a vicious circle, set in motion by men greedy for profit."

"Blood money," Kincaid said. "And Matt Hagarthy is only one of many, then?"

Forsythe nodded. "But he'll do for a start. We'll grab him the next time he sets out with a load of rifles. To get off easier, he may tell who is behind him. The chances are that he's not a trader but merely a hired man making the deliveries. It's possible that the Ring is furnishing the arms to the Apaches gratis."

Going to the bed, Forsythe picked up his gun and the loads from it. He holstered the gun, slipped the cartridges into his pocket. Then, coming to the door, he held his hand out to Kincaid.

"The Army isn't likely to pin a medal on you, but you have my thanks."

Kincaid gripped his hand, said, "*Da nada*," in the Mexican manner. Then, "Load that gun before you go, Captain."

Forsythe smiled faintly. "I wasn't sure you trusted me all that much." He took the gun out and fed the cartridges into it. Then he left the room.

Kincaid locked the door, but did not go back to bed. He built a cigarette and lit it, and had just taken his third puff on it when a gun blasted three times in quick succession. He went to the window, ran up the shade. Nothing. He couldn't see the street. The window looked out on the roof of the next-door building. He swung about, dropped his cigarette into the basin on the washstand, then sat on the

bed and quickly pulled on his boots.

He left the room in haste, went tearing along the hallway and down the stairs. In the lobby, the desk clerk showed a sleepy face from a doorway behind the counter.

"What's up? Was that shooting upstairs?"

"Outside," Kincaid said, not pausing.

He had a feeling. Bursting from the hotel, he saw that he was right. A man was sprawled face-down in the street, no more than ten steps away from the hotel entrance. Enough light came from the lobby door and windows for Kincaid to identify him.

Forsythe.

VI

KINCAID TOOK A quick look about the street. Dark doorways and alleyways everywhere. Forsythe could have been fired on from any of a dozen nearby shadowy places. The bushwhacker was not in sight now, of course. He would have hightailed it the instant his victim dropped. Some men were about, peering from the doorways of several saloons—curious, and yet hesitant about coming to see whom had been shot down. Or maybe they knew. Kincaid was ready to believe that everybody and his brother was a member of the Indian Ring.

He left his gun in his waistband, having no feeling that there was, at the moment, danger to himself. He went to the down man, knelt by him and turned him over. There was nothing he nor anybody else could do for him. Three shots in the chest. Dead. Killed in the line of duty, maybe; but he couldn't have been a soldier for this . . . dying out of uniform, in the shabby clothes of a saddle tramp.

Quick to anger these days, Kincaid swore bitterly aloud

over this cruel killing. Forsythe's gun was in its holster. He'd had no hint of danger, been given no warning. Maybe he hadn't even known what hit him. One, two, three. . . . All three slugs tearing into him while he was still on his feet. Expert shooting, that. Damn the man who was that handy with a gun.

The curious were venturing close now, gathering to stare morbidly down at the dead man.

"Who is he?"

"Search me."

"A stranger. . . . Some drifter."

"Just a saddle tramp," a know-it-all said. "Hanging around town for a week or more, just loafing—not even looking for work."

Nobody asking *why* somebody would kill a mere saddle tramp.

Thinking about that, Kincaid heaved himself erect and looked the crowd over. A baker's dozen, and more coming to stand and gape and be excited by a violent death. Some pale-faced, well-dressed townsmen. Several railroaders in their work garb. A couple of bearded, horny-fisted teamsters. Two or three lean, weather-beaten ranchhands. One member of the sporting gentry: a dapper saloonowner or gambler.

Was one of them the killer?

Could be, Kincaid decided, trusting no man any more.

The crowd swelled to a score and more. A lot of questions and the same answers. A stranger, the dead man. A saddle tramp. Drifted in from nowhere. Had enough money for meals and drinks. Somebody got around to asking, "Who did for him?"

"You know?" somebody else asked Kincaid.

He shook his head.

He was about to go back to the hotel, but the sheriff finally arrived. Milt Eberts was his name. A beefy, red-faced man with silver in his hair and a natty moustache. More politico than lawman; pompous, officious. His nickle-plated star glinted on the label of his black broadcloth

coat. Dragged from bed by the shots or by someone who had run to him with word of the killing, he stifled a yawn and put on a show of authority.

"Any witnesses?"

None.

Somebody volunteered, "That big hombre without a hat and his gun sticking in his pants . . . he was here with the dead man when I came running out of the Frisco Bar."

The sheriff stabbed Kincaid with a suspicious look. "Don't I know you, mister?"

"Ed Kincaid. From G-Bar Ranch."

"Oh, yeah. Apaches raided out your way. I heard about it from Mark Amberton just tonight. What about this killing? You have anything to do with it?"

"No. I didn't even see it happen."

"Where were you when it did happen?"

"Up in my hotel room."

"Yet you were first one here?"

"Nobody else was in much of a hurry to come."

"But you were, eh? Why?"

Kincaid shrugged. "Curiosity." A time for lying. "I was awake and heard the shots. Three of them. This man took them all. He didn't even have a chance to get his gun out. A bushwhacking, pure and simple."

Eberts said, "So it seems. Let's see your gun."

Kincaid hesitated ever so slightly, not liking to let the long-barreled Colt's revolver out of his possession even for a moment. But he handed it over, saying, "It's not been fired."

"We'll see," Eberts said. "Somebody strike a match."

Somebody did, and in its flickering glow the sheriff opened the gun's loading gate and turned the cylinder until he was certain the weapon held only unspent brass.

Handing the gun back, he asked, "You know the deceased?"

Again a time to lie. "No," said Kincaid with emphasis. He didn't trust even the law in this town.

Sheriff Eberts looked around. "Anybody know the dead man?" Getting only headshakes and some muttered noes, he added, "Well, I saw him around. A no-account loafer. A couple of you boys tote him over to Doc Marvin's. I'll go through his pockets there and see if he's carrying anything to tell who he was or where he was from. Won't find anything, most likely. Just another drifter. . . . Come today, gone tomorrow."

Kincaid started toward the hotel, then swung around. He had to say it, couldn't help himself.

"Sheriff, if he was no more account than what you say, why did somebody want him dead?"

"Well, now," Milt Eberts said, "that's something I'll have to look into. I'll dig into this, all right. Investigate it all I can."

Kincaid decided that he wouldn't have bet money that Eberts would come up with anything—certainly not the killer. Before tempted to put that into words, he went his way.

The hotel clerk was at the doorway, in pants, undershirt and carpet slippers. He didn't say anything, and Kincaid, going in past him, knew that Forsythe had looked at the register for the number of his room when the clerk was gone from the desk. Otherwise, the clerk would now be spilling it out . . . *That drifter was asking what room this Kincaid was in!* A careful man, Forsythe, but not nearly careful enough.

Kincaid locked himself in his room and pulled the shade all the way down again. He turned the lamp flame low and rolled and lit another cigarette. He smoked it stretched out on the bed, thinking how sudden death could be at the hands of his fellow men and how final it was. Martha . . . old Hank . . . Forsythe.

That damned Matt Hagarchy, and that double-damned Indian Ring.

He couldn't keep out of it, as Forsythe had said he should.

He knew what he had to do: go out to Fort Lowell

and report Forsythe's murder to the commanding officer—and give him the name of the gun-runner. A man couldn't keep out of it, not when people were being killed all around him.

Martha, girl . . . God, how I miss you!

Fort Lowell was six or seven miles to the east. All of adobe, it was a walled place of numerous buildings and houses arranged with military precision. The sentry at the gate asked Kincaid's business; when told it was with the commanding officer, he directed him to the headquarters building.

Kincaid rode in on his livery stable horse. The post was all orderly hustle and bustle. A cavalry detail was sallying out into the desert; some recruits were being drilled by a loud, profane and seemingly disgusted non-commissioned officer. A clamor rose from the farrier's shop as a horseshoe was pounded into proper shape. Troopers were busy on stable detail, wielding pitchforks. Women gossiped as they hung out wash behind the tiny 'dobs on Suds Row. A couple of officers' ladies strolled past the only slightly larger houses of Married Officers' Row. A trooper was having trouble with a bucking mount. All in all, it was a stirring place to a non-soldier—to a ranchhand.

Kincaid dismounted in front of Headquarters Building. The door stood open and he stepped inside to find a corporal busy at one desk and a captain at another.

The corporal said, "Yes, sir," in inquiry.

"I'd like to see the commanding officer."

"The Colonel is busy at the moment, sir. Maybe the captain here . . ."

The captain rose and came forward, a short, pudgy man with thinning brown hair. Although neat in his blue uniform, he looked sweaty and uncomfortable with the morning's mounting weight of heat.

"Captain Macklin, Officer of the Day. If I can be of service . . ."

"Maybe you can, Captain. My name is Kincaid. I had a talk with your scout, Tom Scarlett, and your Lieutenant Carlson just after my ranch was raided by the Apaches."

"Oh, yes. We know about that."

"Well, last night a man named Forsythe came to my hotel room in town. You know about him?"

Captain Macklin nodded, waited.

"He's dead," Kincaid went on. "He was shot from ambush when he left the hotel. He had planned to ride out here because I gave him the name of the man who is running guns to the Apaches."

Macklin muttered, "Forsythe dead!" He swore under his breath. Then, "Come along. The Colonel will want to hear this."

The colonel's name was Byington. He rose from behind the big plank table that served him as a desk to shake Kincaid's hand. He was an old man, snow-white of hair and moustache. His once handsome face was eroded by nearly a half century of serving his country . . . a country that rewarded him with a mere colonel's rank and duty in Indian territory. He looked weary as well as old, and harrassed to boot. Only his china-blue eyes showed any lingering hint of the man he had once been. They were bright and alert and they sized Kincaid up knowledgeably. Afterward, as he heard about Forsythe, they seemed saddened.

Kincaid ended up, "I don't suppose you can arrest Hagarthy on just my say-so, but now that you know he's doing the gun-running—"

The Colonel broke in, "We certainly will pick him up on just your say-so, Mr. Kincaid." His face had taken on a wrathful look. "We're not law officers and therefore don't need to build up a case that will sway a jury—which would most likely be made up of friends of the guilty man. With Captain Forsythe murdered, we have two reasons for bringing Hagarthy in. Two very good reasons. We'll throw a scare into him, make him do some talking.

"I remember a time, up at Fort Russell, when his kind

were spreadeagled on cannon and left there until they mended their ways, no matter how long it took. There'll be a way to break him, too. I want more than the gun-runner and the murderer of Captain Forsythe. I want to smash the entire Indian Ring. Captain!"

Macklin snapped to attention. "Yes, sir."

"An ambulance to town, to fetch Captain Forsythe's body," Colonel Byington said. "We'll lay him to rest in the post cemetery, with proper honors. And a ten-man detail, with Lieutenant Drogan commanding, to bring this Matt Hagarthy in. The lieutenant is to contact Sheriff Eberts and insist that he help take the man."

Macklin said, "Yes, sir," again and marched from the office.

Some of the anger leaving his craggy face, the Colonel said, "Nothing I can say will make it easier for you to bear the loss of your loved ones, Mr. Kincaid. But I will say that I deeply regret that the Army can't make the Territory safe for its people. A frustrating business, this being permitted to deal with the Indians only after they've gone raiding—and then merely to round them up and return them to the reservation. My opinion bears no weight at all, of course, but I have always believed that our policy of dealing with the Indians as tribes—as separate nations, actually—is utterly stupid. They should be dealt with as individuals and those guilty of raiding should be punished. Our neighbors to the north, the Canadians, follow that more enlightened policy. And the Indians, fearing arrest by the Mounted Police and the punishment that follows, cause a great deal less trouble there. Is there anything I can do for you, other than to express my appreciation for your reporting Captain Forsythe's murder and giving us the name of the gun-runner?"

Kincaid shook his head. "Nothing at all, Colonel."

"Then thank you again."

Kincaid grasped the proffered hand, then left the officer. In the Duty Room, Captain Macklin was talking with a

not-so-young lieutenant. He turned to Kincaid, introduced the other officer as Lieutenant Drogan.

"Maybe you'd better give us a description of Matt Hagarthy, Mr. Kincaid," Drogan said.

"I'll do that, and more. I'll ride with you and your men, Lieutenant, and point Hagarthy out to you, if he's still in town."

"You think he'll have cleared out?" Drogan asked. He was in his late thirties, maybe even forty. His face was the color of bronze from desert sun and wind.

"He's cleared out or gone into hiding in town," Kincaid said. "He knows I'm onto him. And his friends are certainly keeping an eye on me, and must know that I rode out here to report that he's the gun-runner. What surprises me is that they didn't try to keep me from coming here." He smiled wryly. "Maybe they only do their bushwhacking under cover of darkness. You ready to head out, Lieutenant?"

Drogan said he would be as soon as his detail had saddled up.

Kincaid and he walked outside. The post was awash with golden sunlight. The sky was a deep blue, with here and there a patch of fleecy white clouds. The surrounding desert and the towering mountains, to the north, were harshly beautiful and as peaceful as God had made them. It was left to man to defile, to corrupt, thought Kincaid, and then, watching the ten troopers ride out from the stables onto the parade ground, one leading the lieutenant's mount, he knew, as certainly as he stood there in the hot, bright sunlight, that in the end he would have to settle with Matt Hagarthy.

These soldiers moved too laggardly, for all their smartness. They would no more catch Hagarthy than they could catch the Apaches until, tired of raiding and bloodletting, the savages were ready to go back to the reservation.

VII

SO IT TURNED OUT, Lieutenant Drogan's detail failing to find the gun-runner.

With Kincaid along and Sheriff Milt Eberts putting up a fine show of cooperation, Drogan and his troopers fine-combed the town. They talked with saloonkeepers, dance-hall operators, house gamblers, teamsters for the Territorial Freighting Company and the head of that firm, Mark Amberton. They talked with workmen over at the railroad. They canvassed the Mexican quarter. Men, women, even children . . . they questioned everybody they came across. Nobody admitted having seen hide nor hair of Matt Hagarthy in ever so long, and some people denied even knowing him. Patently, the word had been passed around by members of the Indian Ring: *forget about Matt Hagarthy.*

Kincaid was not surprised that the gun-runner was not found. Disappointed, maybe; but not surprised. In Hagarthy's boots, he, too, would have made tracks or holed up.

Lieutenant Drogan and his men spent most of the day at their futile search, and then the officer admitted that it was hopeless.

He told Sheriff Eberts, "You learn his whereabouts, you let us know. We want him bad."

"I'll do that, Lieutenant," Eberts, said, and went off to his office with the air of a man glad to call a bad job quits.

Drogan looked at Kincaid, his expression sour. "We'll never hear a word from him about Hagarthy. But if you, Mr. Kincaid, come up with anything, let us know."

"I'll do that, Lieutenant," Kincaid said, grinning as he mimicked the sheriff's words and officious tone.

Drogan seemed to sense something of how Kincaid felt. "Remember, a live Matt Hagarth is worth a lot more than a dead one. He could be forced to do some talking about the men he's in cahoots with, other members of the Ring."

Kincaid nodded and kept his thoughts to himself. A dead, silent Matt Hagarth would suit him better than a live, talking one. The man's paying with his life for having armed the Apaches would only be fitting and might as well serve as an object lesson to the entire Indian Ring.

As the calvary detail cantered out of town, Kincaid went to the office of the Territorial Freighting Company. Except for the bookkeeper, a bald, bespectacled little man, Mark Amberton was alone there. He was busy at his rolltop desk, and turned from his work with a faint frown of annoyance over being interrupted. He was in his shirt sleeves and his fancy vest hung unbuttoned. Otherwise, he looked his usual dapper, handsome self.

"No luck, Ed?"

Kincaid shook his head. "But I didn't really expect those soldier-boys to find Hagarth all that easy. The Army has a clumsy way of going about things. Me, I would have put the Lieutenant into civilian clothes and sent him out with a scout and let the two of them hound-dog for that gun-runner. What do you think, Mark; did he clear out or is he hiding here?"

Amberton shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea."

"How long ago did he quit as teamster for your company?"

"About three months ago. And he left because I caught him pilfering goods from our warehouse."

"You figure he's in the business of trading guns, for himself, or that he just makes deliveries for somebody else?"

"My guess would be that he's merely a hired hand."

"Who would he be hired to? Can you guess that?"

"To any one of a dozen merchants. Or even to somebody who's not a merchant. It could be a man in any line of

business, who sees gun-running as an easy way to make some quick money."

"Forsythe, the man who was killed last night, figured the Indian Ring might be furnishing the rifles free to the Apaches."

"The talk is that Forsythe was an Army officer. If that's true, he naturally would have had such wild suspicions." Amberton was curt now, seemingly impatient to end the conversation. "My opinion is that some opportunist simply saw a way to turn a profit. This Indian Ring talk, as though there is some sort of secret organization, is nonsense."

"You've got to admit," Kincaid said, eyeing him intently and wondering how deeply he might be involved with the Ring, "that much of the business done here is with the Army and the Indian agencies."

"Sure, I've got to admit it." Amberton sounded angry now. "The entire economy of the Territory is dependent to a great extent upon that sort of business. My company, too, profits off it, but that doesn't mean that I like having the Apaches raiding—killing, torturing, burning. No respectable businessman does."

"Not all businessmen feel the way you do, Mark."

"Well, maybe there are a few."

"A few is all it takes to keep the Apaches stirred up."

Amberton opened a drawer of his desk, took a cigar from a box. He bit off the end, spat it out, struck a match. He scowled while puffing the cigar alight. Definitely, he was angry. So much so that he wasn't his customary courteous self. Otherwise he would have offered his caller a cigar.

"Listen, Ed; this Indian trouble is a nasty thing," he said, once the cigar was burning properly. He was blunt, and still scowling. "You'd like to see the situation corrected because it's personal with you—you lost your wife and your father-in-law to the savages. I would, too, in your place. But let me give you some friendly advice: leave it to the Army. Don't get into a private vendetta with Matt Hagarth and his hardcased friends. You could get hurt."

"Are you telling me now, in an around-about way, that there is an Indian Ring?"

"Damn it, man; I'm just warning you that you're asking for trouble with your meddling."

"A man loses his wife, he figures he's got all the trouble there is."

"I'm talking about your life, Ed."

"The way I feel, I'd risk it to get at that gun-runner."

Amberton made a curt gesture, indicating that he had lost patience with Kincaid. No reasoning with a fool, it said.

"If you don't place any value on your own life, give some consideration to that of your son. Do you want him to be without a father?"

Kincaid did not reply to that.

Amberton went on, in a less angry tone, "Be sensible, Ed. Go back to the ranch and forget Matt Hagarchy and his crowd. Leave them to the Army." He got to his feet, managed a seemingly friendly smile. "I mean well, Ed. I'm talking straight from the shoulder like this because I look on you as a friend and I am concerned about your welfare. All right?"

He held out his right hand.

Kincaid smiled faintly, realizing that he had worn out his welcome and was being sent on his way.

He said, "Sure, Mark—all right." He grasped the proffered hand briefly, then added, "So long," and turned toward the door.

He paused outside the building to roll and light a cigarette. And to weigh Mark Amberton in his mental scales. Like his sister-in-law Louise, he felt that the man was just a bit too good to be true. Was it simply a friendly warning Amberton had given him—or had he been threatened?

He didn't rightly know. One thing sure, he couldn't accept Amberton's word for it that there was no such thing as an Indian Ring. It didn't have to be a chartered organization, with weekly meetings, initiation rites, passwords, and secret handshakes. It needed only to be a group of men with a mutual interest—financial gain—bent on maintaining

the present state of affairs in the Territory, even though it meant unleashing the Apaches to make bloody forays across the countryside.

Kincaid was just about convinced that Amberton was a member of the Ring and had warned him off to keep him from interfering with its activities.

Hell; I'm not likely to do any such thing, Kincaid thought, moving along the street with his cigarette drooping from a corner of his downcast mouth. *No chance of me doing what the U. S. Army isn't able to do.*

He would still like to get a crack at Matt Hagarchy, though. . . . Just one good, clear shot. That would jack up his sagging spirits.

Maybe.

He remembered supper was to be at Louise's house. He went around early, bearing gifts. A red rubber ball for Danny, an inexpensive cameo brooch for Louise. He had been shopping at Gus Feinberg's little notions store on Main Street.

Louise protested, "Oh, Ed, you shouldn't have," but she glowed with pleasure. Danny, too, glowed, and begged, "Hey, Daddy, come out and play ball with me!"

Kincaid went outside with his son and they threw the ball back and forth between them, missing it more often than not and having to chase after it, until Louise called that supper was on the table.

She had made roast chicken with stuffing and golden gravy. Mashed potatoes, too. For another vegetable dish, she served that wonderful Mexican stew, *colaché*. For dessert, there was dried-apple pie. And finally milk for the boy and coffee for the adults.

His grief pushed to the back of his mind for the moment, Kincaid ate until he was stuffed, pleasing his sister-in-law with his appreciation of her cooking. She was in a cheerful mood, determined not to let him wallow in sorrow. That she was succeeding caused him to be annoyed with himself. A man shouldn't have such a lusty appetite so soon nor

enjoy the company of another woman—even that of his sister-in-law. He was nagged by a sense of guilt, as though he were being unfaithful to Martha's memory.

After the meal, Louise sent him and Danny off to the parlor while she cleared the table and stacked the dishes. He settled in a comfortable chair and smoked a cigarette while his son played on the floor with some lead soldiers. Louise, too had been shopping at Feinberg's, Danny with her.

Louise's parlor was luxurious to Kincaid's eyes, and a heavy sadness crept into him for his not having been able to give Martha as much. He felt an extra measure of sadness for Louise, since she no longer had her husband to share this fine house. How was she able to bear her widowhood so well? Was she stronger than he?

She came in from the kitchen, having removed her apron and tidied up her red-brown hair. She was wearing a dark green silk dress, one of her good dresses, as though tonight were a special occasion. She seated herself on the sofa and reached for some embroidery work she kept there. Her hands kept busy as she talked.

"Mark Amberton stopped by for a minute just before you arrived," she said. "He wore a solemn face and made out that he's worried about you. He said I should get you to go straight back to the ranch and stop playing lawman. He also said he had tried to reason with you but doesn't think you took him seriously."

"I appreciate his being concerned, I suppose."

"Whatever his reason for being concerned about you, he is right. You shouldn't go on trying to catch that gun-runner."

"I'm not likely to have any luck at it, anyway."

"And you could get hurt, just as Mark says."

Kincaid had not told her about the attack on him last night. He didn't tell her now, since he didn't want to upset her. But he thought about it, remembering how close it had been. Next time, if there was a next time, he might

not be so lucky. Yes, he should give up on Matt Hagarchy, forego vengeance.

"I'll go home in the morning."

"Not that I'm anxious to see you leave," Louise told him. "But I think you'd better, for your own sake. And Danny's and mine, too, for that matter." She gave him a faint smile. "You and Danny, you're all the family I have now, you know. And I do need to know that I have somebody, Ed."

"Yes," he said, realizing that he needed to know that he had her, although he had a sudden doubt that a man should cling to his sister-in-law after his wife was gone. Was Louise still a relative of his? That was another thing he didn't rightly know.

They didn't talk any more, but just sat there comfortably in a companionable silence while Louise embroidered, Danny played with his soldiers, and Kincaid did nothing but smoke an occasional cigarette.

Finally Louise said, "Time for bed, Danny," and Kincaid decided that he had better leave before he wore out his welcome here too.

"You don't have to go," Louise said, as he rose.

"I'll get to bed early," he said, "and get an early start in the morning."

He picked up his hat, then interrupted Danny's play to tell him goodbye and that he should be a good boy and mind Aunt Louise.

"And don't you wander too far from the house," he added. "Always keep in sight, like you did back at the ranch."

Danny promised he would do that. Louise went to the door with Kincaid. She stepped outside with him, pulling the door closed after them.

"He'll be all right, Ed. Don't worry about him."

He told her he wouldn't worry, and said again that he was grateful for her taking Danny in. He thanked her for inviting him to supper, saying once more how good it had been, and then he found it difficult to say good night. He

lingered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and turning his hat around and around in his hands. He had become ill at ease in her presence.

"Well . . ."

"You could have stayed longer."

"Maybe next time."

"Don't let next time be too far off."

"I won't."

How the hell did a man say good night to a young woman? He realized that he didn't want to say it; didn't want to leave just yet. A lonely place, a hotel room. The ranch would be lonelier still.

"Well," he said again. And then, awkwardly, "Best be on my way."

He turned away, had gone a dozen steps when Louise called, "Ed . . ." He stopped, faced about expectantly. She merely said, "Good night," but in such a way that he had the impression she wanted to say more. He told her good night, then went his way.

Although it was still early evening, he kept alert and once, when passing the alley way from which he had been attacked last night, he even laid his hand on the butt of his gun.

He had no need to be uneasy, for tonight no attempt was made on his life while he walked the dark streets.

It was too early for bed, and sitting idle in his hotel room did not appeal to him. He went on past the Arizona House and turned into the Frisco Bar.

This was one of Tucson's biggest and most popular saloons. Tonight, as usual, it was well patronized. Storekeepers and various other businessmen, ranchers, cowhands, freighters, and railroaders, plus a few men of uncertain occupations. Respectable gentry rubbing elbows with hardcases, working men with loafers. The gambling layouts at the rear of the big room were having a good play. Percentage girls in spangled dresses mingled with the drinkers and encouraged

them to have another round. One of the community's social centers, the Frisco Bar.

Kincaid found a place at the far end of the long bar and ordered a whiskey of one of the bartenders. He had noticed that his entrance had caused a little ripple of interest to course through the crowded room; now he saw in the back-bar mirror that he was still the object of much attention. More than a few men were gazing his way, some of them putting their heads together to discuss him. A marked man, by damn. Everybody and his brother knew that he had come with the cavalry detail to look for Matt Hagarthy that morning. To hell with the lot of them. Tomorrow he would be clearing out, going home. He reached for his drink.

He gulped that first one, and ordered a second. He made it last, sipping it between puffs on a cigarette. He gave up looking in the mirror, there being no point to his glowering at the reflection of the men staring at him. He gave himself over to brooding, although he knew that self-pity was no good. He was lost in his bleak private world when somebody came up behind him and jabbed him in the back.

The man said in a loud, belligerent voice for the whole crowd to hear, "Just the hombre I've been hoping to run into. Turn around, you lying son, and I'll fix you for what you did to my partner, Matt Hagarthy!"

Kincaid roused himself, turned, and saw the hardcase Jake, one of the three who had tried to do for him last night, planted there primed for trouble. Jake was not alone. Flanking him were two men as boot-tough looking as he. All three stared at Kincaid with a malicious eagerness, waiting for one word or one move from him so they could open the ball.

Kincaid sighed resignedly, knowing he was in for a bad beating at the very least. The Indian Ring had no intention of letting him getting away with his having informed on Hagarthy. Anger began to roil in him, and he would, he

promised himself, give the trio reason to know they were in a fight before they finished with him.

"All right, you want a brawl," he said, "get on with it."

He struck the first blow, a hard punch to Jake's gaunt but solid middle. The next instant the three of them were battering him savagely, and he was cornered against the bar with no escape possible.

VIII

ALREADY GROGGY, Kincaid saw the three blurredly, through a shimmering red haze of pain, as they got in each other's way in their eagerness to pummel him. Jake, a wicked grin on his gaunt, bristly face, yelling gleefully, "Get him, get him! Tear the sneaky son apart!" The other two were a redheaded, buck-toothed youth with a wild look, and a bull-bodied man with a vacuous smirk of a half-wit on his gargoyle's face.

Riffraff. Dregs of the human race.

Kincaid struck back at them clumsily, ineffectually. Through a roaring in his head, he heard one of the bespangled floosies shriek, "This is awful! Somebody stop it!" Nobody else, so far as he knew, uttered a single protest against what was happening. He hadn't a friend here, and there were no good Samaritans.

By nature he was slow to anger, but suddenly he let out an enraged bellow and hurled himself as though gone berserk, away from the bar and blindly into them. A startled yelp burst from the red-haired kid as Kincaid's arms caught him in a bear-hug. Lifting him, whipping about with him, Kincaid slammed him against the bar with all his might. Red screamed, went abruptly pale and limp. When released,

he sagged to the floor as though his bones had turned to jelly.

Kincaid did not pause in his violent motion. Turning about, he drew his gun and swung it like a club. He aimed the blow at the dullard's head, but missed and caught him on the shoulder with the revolver's long barrel. There was so much force behind the blow that the impact jolted the gun from his hand. The hit man, stunned by pain, fell against him and bore him backwards so that Jake, coming in from behind, was able to clout him hard in the back of the neck.

Kincaid's brain reeled, his vision splintered. Everything spun giddily for him, appeared oddly disjointed. Nausea churned in him, gorge coming up his throat. He was near collapse but his terrible rage kept him on his feet. He tried to wrench loose of the burly hardcase, but without success. Now Jake was on his back, and the redhead, crawling to him from the bar, wrapped his arms about one of his legs. By sheer weight, they tried to drag him down, but still he refused to go. Hurting, his senses blunted, he still possessed the strength of his maniacal fury. He carried the three of them this way and that. In the wild melee they knocked over chairs and toppled a table.

The crowd was in an uproar, drinks, gambling, and floosies forgotten. Kincaid now had some rooters, if not friends. Some men yelled encouragement to him, for his being the underdog.

"Give it to 'em, cowpoke!"

"Knock their heads together, bucko!"

"Use your boots—stomp that redhead!"

The percentage girl who had cried out in protest earlier now shrieked, "Help him, some of you low-lifers! Give him a hand!"

For all his desperate efforts, Kincaid was unable to break loose of the three. And gradually they bore him down to his knees. Jake got an armlock on his throat from behind, and the redhead shifted his hold from the leg to an arm.

Jake yelled, "Now, Largo—now! Let him have it!"

The burly one, he with the ox-stupid look, scrambled to his feet and prepared to use them. He drove a kick to Kincaid's stomach and was about to launch another when the hubbub was drowned out by the blast of a shotgun. After the deafening report, the Frisco Bar was tomb-silent. Kincaid felt the pressure upon him ease and then let up entirely.

As the trio backed off, he remained on his knees and dropped onto his hands as well. In that position, he went after his gun, seen fuzzily ten feet away. Closing his hand about its butt, he thumbed back the hammer and reared to his feet. Not yet comprehending that the fight was over, he had every intention of ending it by shooting his assailants. Every damned one of them.

He swayed like a drunk and everything spun more crazily for him than before. His vision was so blurred, he couldn't sort the hardcases out from the spectators.

A voice of authority slapped at him. "You, Kincaid—put up that gun!"

The law. Sheriff Milt Eberts.

"Not a chance," Kincaid said. "I'm shooting the next son that lays a hand on me!"

"Nobody is going to lay a hand on you now," Eberts said, coming closer. "I've another load in this scatter-gun, and it won't go into the ceiling like the first. It'll do for you or for them. Now put up that gun!"

Kincaid could see him almost clearly now. The broad, florid face with the neat silvery moustache. The nickle-plated star on his coat lapel. The shotgun held ready, the hammer of the unfired barrel cocked. Kincaid eased the hammer of his revolver off cocked position, shoved the weapon into its holster. He now saw Jake and his partners, backed off and wary of the sheriff. He took a long, hard-eyed look at them.

"Next time," he said. "Next time I'm pulling my gun right at start."

"Never mind the next time," Eberts said. "Who started it this time?"

"I was having a drink, minding my own business," Kincaid told him, "and these toughs jumped me."

"A lie," Jake put in. "He started it—hit me in the gut."

One of the bartenders said, "This big hombre did land the first punch, Sheriff, but Jake there baited him. Three to one. He sure put up a real fight."

Nodding his acceptance of this eye-witness account, the sheriff said, "All right. We'll let it go at that. Kincaid, you come along with me. I'll walk you to the hotel. You've got no friends and too many enemies. This town's not safe for you. Come along."

"Now, hold on; I don't need a nursemaid."

"Not if you want to end up like that other meddler, Forsythe, you don't need one."

That got to Kincaid, and he nodded. "All right. In a minute."

He turned unsteadily to the bar, fumbled in his pocket. "Give me a pint of your rotgut." He put down a silver dollar.

Somebody handed him his hat, which he had lost during the melee, and he put it on, then took the bottle of whiskey and walked limping out of the Frisco Bar with Sheriff Milt Eberts.

On their way to the Arizona House, Eberts said sourly, "Head back to your ranch, Kincaid. Next time you get into a jam, I might not be handy. A lot of people are peeved because of your informing on Matt Hagarchy. Some of them important people."

"Yeah, the Indian Ring."

"Just so you know what you're bucking."

"You a member, Sheriff?"

"If I was," Eberts said, "I'd have been busy elsewhere when you were getting the daylights beaten out of you."

That could be true, Kincaid decided.

When they reached the Arizona House, he said, "Thanks

for breaking up the party, Sheriff. It was becoming pretty rough. I'll be riding out for the ranch in the morning. Good night to you."

He limped inside, and for the second night climbed the stairs slowly and painfully. Once in his room, the door locked, the shade drawn, and the lamp lit, he removed his hat, shirt, boots, and gunrig, then filled the washstand basin with water from the big china pitcher and washed his battered face. While gently drying himself with the towel, he examined himself in the wall mirror. He looked as though he'd been mule-kicked a couple of times. His left eye was swollen almost shut and discolored; it would be black by morning. The skin was broken and raw looking at his right cheekbone. His lower lip was split, his left jaw puffed and sore. He'd been in a fight, all right.

He turned the lamp low and took his gun and his bottle to the bed. Propped up with the pillow behind him, he uncorked the bottle and took a long pull at it. It was rotgut, all right. It burned like acid, going down. But it spread a glow all through him. Maybe, by the time he'd killed the bottle, his aches and pains wouldn't bother him so much. And maybe he wouldn't be so bitter about what kept happening to him. Or miss Martha so desperately.

Maybe.

It was a lot to expect from a pint of rotgut whiskey.

The bottle was still half-full when a step sounded in the hallway and a demanding knock on the door. A hand rattled the knob.

"Ed, open up . . . it's Mark Amberton."

Kincaid got up with a grunt of annoyance, turned the key, swung the door open. Looking grim, Amberton came in without waiting to be invited. He said, "Can't we have some light?" and went to turn up the lamp before Kincaid could reply.

Shutting the door, Kincaid looked at him with no great pleasure. Right now, he was soured on the whole world and didn't welcome a show of friendship from a man he

couldn't quite consider a friend by any stretching of the imagination. The assumption that they were friends was all Amberton's.

Holding up the bottle, Kincaid said, "Can I offer you some of this? It's far from the best to be had, but it's good for what ails a man—I hope."

Amberton shook his head. "I've had the two drinks I allow myself in an evening. Anyway, I only stopped in for a moment. I came because I heard what happened to you in the Frisco Bar."

"And you're all friendly concern, of course."

"That's a pretty nasty tone you're using."

"Nasty is the way I feel."

Amberton frowned, seemingly stung. "As a matter of fact, I came because I saw Louise this afternoon and she asked me to keep you from getting into trouble. Getting hurt—maybe killed—was what she meant. I said I would do what I could, but I'm damned if there is anything I can do if you keep looking for trouble. Why the hell did you show yourself in a saloon, anyway?"

Kincaid realized that he had jumped to the wrong conclusion. Tonight the dapper, handsome Mark Amberton was not assuming they were in any way friends. The man didn't like it that Louise had extracted that promise from him. Why not? It wasn't all that binding. She would never know whether or not he lifted a finger to keep Ed Kincaid out of trouble.

Kincaid didn't bother to explain why he had gone to the Frisco Bar. After all, it should be obvious; a man sometimes needed more than his own company.

He said, "No need for you to worry about your promise to Louise. I'm leaving town bright and early in the morning."

"To go to the ranch?"

"Sure. What else?"

"You could have some fool idea of going gunning for Hagarth."

"Would I have any chance of finding him?"

"That I wouldn't know," Amberton said. "Anyway, take my advice and forget about him."

Kincaid couldn't help but say it. "What's wrong? Is the Indian Ring scared I would have some dumb luck and stumble on him?"

Anger stiffened Amberton's face, roughened his voice. "All I know is that your life isn't worth anything so long as you meddle in this thing. You've made dangerous enemies, as you should realize by now. Can't you take it that you did enough harm when you named Hagarthy as the gun-runner to the Army?"

"Mark, you know how it seems to me? As though you're doing some worrying yourself. Maybe you're afraid I'll catch up with Hagarthy and get something out of him that you don't want known."

"Now don't get any loco ideas that I have anything to do with Hagarthy and the gun-running," Amberton said. "I'm concerned about your safety only because Louise asked me to look out for you. In my opinion, you're a meddling fool." Then, as though losing all control, he burst out, "If you want to know what else I have against you, it's your tomcatting around Louise!"

Kincaid said, "Now hold on, you—"

Amberton wasn't to be stopped. "I'll tell you one thing. I decided a long time ago that I wanted her, and I won't let any man come between her and me."

Here was a man in a jealous rage, and a senseless one at that. Kincaid hadn't suspected that Mark Amberton was all that stupid.

Anger gripped him too. "Listen; my wife has been dead only a few days. I'm not likely to forget her that quick—if at all." He jerked the door open. "Clear out, you—before I throw you out."

Amberton stared at him with hatred, all pretense of friendship between them cast aside.

"Don't think you're fooling me. Her, maybe—but not me. Playing on her sympathies. Asking her to be a mother to

your son. Hoping she'll take pity on you because you're a widower. I'll tell you one thing more, Kincaid: when I came to this town, I knew what I wanted and had made up my mind to get it no matter what it cost or who got in my way. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm soft. I can be as hard as I need to be."

Too much had happened to Kincaid these past few days. More than a man could bear. As at the Frisco Bar earlier, he flew into a wild rage. He hurled the bottle of whiskey from him. It struck the floor with an explosive crash, shattering. He lunged at his tormentor with a shouted oath. Knocking aside the hands that Amberton raised to protect himself, he grabbed him by the coat collar and hustled him to the door. He gave him such a violent heave that Amberton went hurtling off balance across the hallway and slammed against the door opposite.

"I warned you," he said savagely. "And I'm warning you again. Come to me with any more such talk and I'll knock your teeth down your throat."

Amberton was stunned, and it was only with an effort that he pushed himself away from the door. He gave Kincaid another hate-filled look, then started toward the stairs.

He had to have the last word, however. Facing about, he said, "I warned you. Keep away from that woman. Just keep away from her!"

Kincaid slammed the door shut, turned the key in the lock. He found that he was trembling violently. Hell. There seemed to be no end to a man's troubles. He wondered now if Louise herself felt that he had designs on her. With that bothering him, he went to bed.

He slept, but not soundly.

IX

HE AWOKE IN THE morning with the feeling that everything was wrong. Rolling to the edge of the bed and dropping his feet to the floor, he was reminded by assorted aches and pains of the fight in the Frisco Bar. Next he remembered Mark Amberton's visit, and his own fear that Louise, like the man, would regard his bringing Danny to her as an attempt to insinuate himself upon her. Everything was wrong, for sure. All wrong.

The thing for him to do was to get out of town and back to the ranch, as he had planned, and try to forget the whole mess. Let the Army deal with Matt Hagarth and the Indian Ring, if it could. Let Mark Amberton believe what he would, and be gnawed at by his senseless jealousy. As for Louise . . . well, she certainly knew him better than to think he had forgotten Martha so soon.

He got up from the bed, dressed, went downstairs. He banged the counter bell, and said, when the clerk appeared, that he would pay his bill.

Handing over the money, he asked, "Matéo Garcia: has he a room here?"

The clerk shook his head. "Greasers, we don't have room for them. Try the *posada* over in Mex town."

Kincaid gave him a sour look for that and went out to get breakfast before looking for the old vaquero.

Once upon a time, before the dry-rot of dissatisfaction set in to plague him, he had welcomed each new day with a special zest. But no longer. And probably never again, now that Martha was gone. He walked through the warm, golden sunlight with a bleak expression, and at the Welcome Cafe

he breakfasted without relish. The food could have been tasteless. He ate these days simply to keep body and soul together.

Coming from the cafe, he found Matéo sitting on the edge of the plank sidewalk.

"Como 'sta, amigo."

Rising, Meteo said that he was well and inquired politely if Kincaid was the same. His dark eyes studied Kincaid's battered face, wonderingly.

"I look worse than I feel," Kincaid told him, though it was hardly true. He took out makings, started to roll a cigarette. "I had a couple of go-arounds with some town toughs. Because of the gun-running. The gun-runner wanted me dead. He went off half-cocked, thinking I'd recognized him out in the Badlands. When he tried to do me in the other night, I did recognize him. A hardcase named Matt Hagarth."

"The man the soldiers were looking for yesterday, eh?"

"Yeah."

They turned toward the livery stable when Kincaid's cigarette was lighted.

He said, "Your visit to town was more peaceful, I hope."

Matéo chuckled. "Peaceful and pleasant. I ate my fill of good Mexican food, drank a barrel of tequila, and even had a woman. At my age, a woman. I am still a good man, no?"

"I never doubted it, *amigo*."

"She was nice and fat."

"Ah?"

Kincaid had the hostler at Benson's hitch up the mules to the G-Bar wagon as he paid the bill for their keep. Matéo and he drove out of Tucson, the vaquero handling the reins. But for one piece of unfinished business—Matt Hagarth—Kincaid was glad to see the last of the town.

Matt Hagarth.

He still had the feeling that the soldiers would fail to catch the gun-runner and that he should try to find him. He had always disliked leaving a job half-finished. It would

bother him for a long time that he had given up on Hagarthy.

They came at mid-day to XL Ranch, in the shadows of the Largo Mountains, and stopped to water and rest the mules. XL's owner, Sam Mowbrey, was at his headquarters and invited them to the cookshack for dinner. Like all ranch people, he was always glad for company and eager for any scant morsel of news. Kincaid paid for the meal by telling Mowbrey his tale of woe.

An hour at XL, and Kincaid and Matéo drove on. The mules maintained a brisk, tireless trot and soon they were through the mountains and into the barren *malpais*. They left the road to pick up Matéo's saddle from where Kincaid had cached it, then continued southward to the *tinaja*. They let the mules have some more water and another rest. Hunkering down in the shade of the rocks about the waterhole, they had a leisurely smoke. They did not talk. Each man was contented with his own thoughts.

Kincaid's were bleak, for he was contemplating the empty days and weeks and months and years ahead. And Matéo . . . maybe his thoughts were pleasant, since he had on his visit to town discovered that he was still a whole man.

"Let's get along," Kincaid said in due time.

They moved on, rolling steadily across the wasteland and then through the Morado Hills.

Here Matéo murmured, "Just so the Apaches didn't come back."

That thought was in Kincaid's mind too. The Apaches might have given the soldiers the slip, doubled back, burned the G-Bar buildings. Adding insult to injury.

But, no, the buildings were intact. And the two new graves were still there by the palo verde tree.

When they drove into the ranchyard, Kincaid did not say, as a man did upon returning home, "It's good to be back." It would have been a fool thing for him to say.

For Ed Kincaid, the days that followed were indeed

empty. He slept more than was his custom, turning in earlier and rising later. He would have gone off his feed but for Matéo's doing the cooking and insisting that he eat square meals. He got into the habit of shirking at the ranch chores. He felt that his life was without purpose, although he did at times remind himself that he had his son to live for; for the boy he must keep G-Bar Ranch a going concern and even build it bigger.

During this period of don't-give-a-damn, Kincaid took to riding the range alone, not to keep an eye on the cattle, but because he desired solitude and also needed to keep on the move. He was restless, driven this way and that by something within himself, something he did not understand.

One morning he met up with Matéo, who was also doing some riding alone. The vaquero looked troubled.

"Ed, come have a look."

"What's up?"

"Rustler sign."

Kincaid roused himself from his lethargy. "All right, I'll have a look."

Matéo led him west across the valley for five or six miles, to a stretch of broken country. There, in a brush-fringed hollow, the vaquero showed him that somebody had killed and rough-butchered a fat G-Bar steer. Since the coyotes and buzzards had also been at the carcass, it was impossible to tell how much beef the human predator had used. But not much. Not much at all, Kincaid decided. Only enough for one meal, maybe. A damned expensive meal. The ashes of the fire over which it had been cooked lay only twenty feet away.

"One man?"

"Five," Matéo said. "If I can still read sign."

"White men?"

"Sí."

"Not long ago, I'd say. Yesterday, maybe?"

Matéo nodded. "About noon."

"Well, some drifters," Kincaid said. "They happened along and cost us one steer."

"It's not just one steer, Ed," Matéo said. "After eating, they took a bunch away with them. By the tracks, I'd say ten or twelve animals." He waved a hand toward the long, high escarpment that rimmed Estrella Vally at the west. "They took them that way. Plenty of nerve, those hombres. Taking the time to eat our beef right on our range while rustling our cattle."

Kincaid nodded. "One thing sure, they're not scared of us. Unless they traveled all night, which isn't likely, they can't have gotten far with those stolen cows. Let's see if we can catch them."

They set out along the trail the rustlers had left. It was almost plain enough for a blind man to have followed. Hoof marks of both horses and cattle. Droppings, too. The thieves could not have hidden their trail had they tried. They had headed directly toward the escarpment, as though knowing of an easy way up it. The trackers could do their tracking while riding at a lope.

When a scant half mile from the wall of red rock and gray shale, Kincaid said, "This way," and turned from the tracks.

Their approach had frightened a half dozen buzzards from a meal off yonder among a tangle of greasewood, cholla and prickly pear. The ugly birds had risen sluggishly, as though unwieldy from gorging themselves. Now they soared lazily overhead, waiting until it was safe to return to their feast.

Their feast was another fat G-Bar steer.

Kincaid as well as Matéo could now read the sign. Not far from this second carcass he spotted on the ground a bit of brass gleaming in the sunlight. A spent cartridge shell.

Anger roughening his voice, he said, "A bunch-quitter, that steer. One of the thieves rode after it. When he couldn't turn it back, he shot it. Why? Why the hell would a man do that?"

"Because of a grudge, maybe?" Matéo said.

A man with a grudge. Five men with a grudge against him. Or an even larger group, Kincaid thought. Like the Indian Ring.

"We'll see," he said, turning his horse back toward the rustlers' trail.

He had become alive again, once more a man with a purpose in life. Maybe Matt Hagarchy was one of them out there, making off with those G-Bar steers. He wanted him to be. Another chance at the gun-runner was purpose enough for being alive.

The rustlers had indeed found an easy way up the escarpment. Some ancient upheaval had broken away a vast portion of the wall and tumbled the debris to the valley floor in a great pile, forming a slope up which men and animals could climb.

Kincaid climbed it afoot, leading his horse to save it for the travel beyond. Matéo followed his example. Gaining the rim of the escarpment, they looked out across an expanse of table-flat desert that reached to a distant range of sawtooth hills. Empty country, so far as Kincaid knew. The rustlers almost certainly had it to themselves. Their tracks led northwest across it.

"They could get to Tucson this way, Ed."

"A long way around, though."

"Rustlers like the long way, the lonely way."

"Could be they have a hideout somewhere short of Tucson," Kincaid said, getting back in the saddle.

They rode again at a lope, following the sign easily, covering distance far faster than men driving cattle could do. In almost no time at all they came to a tiny stream snaking its way across the thirsty land; its flow diminished considerably every mile of its course. An old campsite was near the trickle. Matéo dismounted and nosed around.

"They spent the night here," the vaquero said. "Part of it, anyway. They turned the cattle loose, gathered them up this morning." He kicked a bottle from beneath a cholla stalk. "Did some drinking."

"We'll get them," Kincaid said, peering out across the immensity of sand and cactus.

Several miles farther on the trail veered due north, aiming for a gap in a range of low hills. Coming through the gap half an hour later, Kincaid and Matéo saw their quarry on lower ground, no more than a mile ahead. Eleven head of cattle; five riders, one leading a pack-horse. They were drifting along as though they hadn't a care in the world.

"If they do have a grudge against me, they'll fight," Kincaid said. "If they're just good, honest cow thieves, they'll run for it. Either way, we won't take any chances. No sense in your getting killed for thirty a month and found, *amigo*. And I've got my boy to raise."

"If we don't fight," Matéo said, not unreasonably, "why did we come after them?"

"Well, to get those critters back, I guess," Kincaid said. "And to show them they can't keep on stealing from us."

He started down from the hills, drawing his rifle from its boot and levering a cartridge into its chamber. Matéo again followed his example, knowing from much experience that a rifle was to be trusted far more than a handgun under such circumstances.

At least one of the five had been keeping an eye on their back-trail, for suddenly the rustler's actions told Kincaid that they were spotted. The five stopped their forward movement and abandoned the cattle. Gathering in a tight group, they faced their back-trail.

"Ed, they're going to make a fight of it."

"Yeah," said Kincaid, slowing his horse from a lope to a walk. He wondered if he would back down from the fight—if he could backdown. Anger and hatred would not let him.

One thing he knew for sure: ordinary rustlers wouldn't lay their lives on the line for so few cows. Not when they could run for it. Those five were men bearing Ed Kincaid a mighty big grudge. And one of them could well be Matt Hagarchy.

Fight or turn tail? Take on the odds of five to two? Five to one, really, since he had no right to ask Matéo to side him in this.

Kincaid's decision was made for him by the rustlers. They gave up peering at them and rode toward the little bunch of cattle. Then they drew their guns and began firing at the animals at pointblank range.

Kincaid could see the puffs of powdersmoke, hear the tattoo of shots. He could see the cattle dropping, one by one. Now he could have no lingering doubt. This wanton slaughter was grudge work. The Indian Ring was making him pay for having informed on Matt Hagarthy.

Rage overcame reason, swept away caution. He drove his horse toward the five at a hard run, wild to do some killing of his own.

X

KINCAID KNEW WITHIN a part of himself that he was a fool. The greater part, however, wild with rage and hatred since the Apaches had raided G-Bar, drove him recklessly on toward the five cow-killers. Aware that Matéo was coming along behind him, he shouted, "Keep out of it, man! Keep away!" Enough that one of them was a fool.

The rustlers waited until he got close enough to see that Matt Hagarthy was indeed among them. Burly of body, blackbearded, craggy of face, and bold as brass.

All but blind to the others, Kincaid kept his angry gaze on Hagarthy while jerking his horse to a sliding stop and dropping from the saddle. Matéo, too, reined in. As he swung down, the rustlers opened fire.

Kincaid heard an incoherent grunt escape the old vaquero,

and glancing at him, saw that he had been hit and was collapsing. Matéo's horse spooked, began to buck wildly. The wounded man's left foot was caught in the stirrup, and he was being dragged; bounced and jarred this way and that. Kincaid ignored the guns throwing lead at him. As the frightened horse began to run, he brought his rifle up and shot it through the head. While the animal was going down, Kincaid threw another cartridge into the Winchester's chamber and sank to the ground.

Matéo down, wounded—maybe dying. Sick at heart as well as full of rage and hatred, Kincaid tried to catch Matt Hagarthy in his sights. Always wily, the gun-runner had backed off so that his companions were between himself and Kincaid's rifle, making him a difficult target. Kincaid drove a shot at him but knew even while squeezing the trigger that it would miss. Now he cut loose with the Winchester, firing as fast as he could work lever and trigger, spewing lead at the bunch of them.

He got one. The rider with the pack-horse in tow spilled from his saddle, sprawled face-down in the dirt, and did not move again.

Except for Hagarthy, the others turned tail and ran for it. Down off his horse, crouching behind a rock, Hagarthy took careful aim while Kincaid, hugging the ground, fed fresh loads into his weapon. Hagarthy fired, the deep blast of his buffalo gun booming across the land. The Sharps was a single shot rifle. Realizing that, Kincaid raised up on his left elbow and drove three fast shots at the gun-runner's position. It was a waste however. His slugs bounced off the rock.

Hagarthy's voice boomed like the Sharps. "You, Kincaid! You hear me?"

"I hear you, Hagarthy. Have your say."

"You shouldn't have meddled, bucko," Hagarthy yelled. His tone was mocking. And amused, as though he was enjoying this throwing lead back and forth. "Too bad you're a meddling old woman, because it'll get you killed now."

"You first, though, gun-runner. I'll stay alive long enough to get you first."

"Your only chance is to run for it, hombre. To clear out of these parts—out of the Territory!"

Now, why that? Why did Matt Hagarthy—the Indian Ring, too, maybe—want him to clear out? The G-Bar cattle? Easy pickings, with him gone. Round them up, sell them a few at a time to the butcher shops in Tucson or at the scattered mining towns. Or even to the Quartermaster at Fort Lowell. Pocket a nice juicy profit.

"Hagarthy . . ."

"Yeah, Kincaid?"

"You'll die of old age, waiting for me to clear out," Kincaid said. "You'll get the G-Bar cattle only over my dead body."

He began shooting again; in his rage he fired until the Winchester's magazine was empty. As soon as that happened, Hagarthy fired once more with his Sharps and then was up and running. He ran to his horse, caught up its trailing reins, swung to the saddle. With a wild yell to taunt Kincaid, he loped away to join his companions. He was out of range before Kincaid completed his reloading.

Kincaid cursed, low-voiced but bitterly. Damn a man who made a sport of shooting, killing. What ailed the Matt Hagarthys of this world, anyway? He rose and walked leadenly to where Matéo lay, still connected to the dead horse by the umbilical stirrup. Matéo's gaping mouth and glassy, staring eyes told him that the vaquero was beyond help.

Another of the bad moments of which life was made up, and again Kincaid blamed himself. If he hadn't gone berserk and charged at the hardcases, Matéo would still be alive.

Damn Hagarthy to Hell, and me along with him.

Kincaid put his rifle down and worked Matéo's lifeless foot from the stirrup. He moved the body slightly, so that it wasn't so grotesquely twisted. He knelt by the dead horse, untied the latigos to loosen the cinches, the entire saddle, then pulled the saddle blanket free. He wrapped the

dead man in the blanket. In death, Matéo seemed much smaller.

Lifting him, Kincaid carried him to his own horse. This was the big dun he preferred to all others. The dun caught the smell of blood, or maybe of death itself, and didn't like it. Turned skittish, it shied away. Laying his burden down, Kincaid went after the animal.

"Easy, boy . . . I don't like it any better than you."

He caught hold of the trailing reins, talked some more while rubbing the dun's neck. He got hobbles from one of the saddlebags and placed them on the uneasy animal's forelegs. After that, with little trouble he got the body over the saddle and secured it with his catch-rope. He went back to the dead horse for his rifle, then had a look out across the hostile land.

Hagarthy and the others were reined in atop a distant rise, keeping an eye on him. When he moved out, they would doubtlessly come back for the pack-horse and their dead companion's mount. Maybe they would even bury the dead man. They just might have that much decency, though Kincaid wouldn't have gambled on it.

He shifted his gaze, more defeated now than angry, to the wantonly slaughtered G-Bar cattle. Too bad that bunch had such a grudge against him. They could have let him take the cows back to the G-Bar range and then stolen them again another day. One thing sure, they weren't good, honest thieves.

He removed the hobbles from the dun, and then, leading the burdened horse, started back toward G-Bar Ranch. Step by slow step . . . mile after long mile. The day was dying, night on its way. It didn't matter, he was in no great hurry. Matt Hagarthy and the other three would keep.

Late the following afternoon he buried Matéo García by the palo verde tree. The grave filled in, he built a cairn of rocks as a marker. Three graves now. A stiff price already paid for a patch of desert land. He mourned Matéo

as a good friend of long standing, as a *compadre*. At the same time he reminded himself that the old vaquero had had himself a time during his visit to town. Better for a man to come to the end of the trail while still a whole man than to linger on until he was a dried-up empty shell.

Up early the next morning, Kincaid cooked his breakfast and made it a filling one. Afterward he outfitted for a long trip into the desert. A pack-horse, provisions; camp-gear; canteens for water; cigarette makings. And ammunition. Plenty of ammunition.

Moving out before the sun was high, he traveled at a leisurely pace along the trail that Matéo and he had followed at a steady lope. At sundown he reached the gap in the hills from which they had spotted the rustlers. He turned into these uplifts to look for water, and just before night-fall came to a bit of a creek. He made his night camp by it. After off-saddling, he hobbled the dun he had ridden and the sorrel that had toted his pack. Wearing the hobbles, the horses would not stray too far and yet could move about to find what grass there was.

He built a fire, then cooked and ate his supper. Afterward he smoked a cigarette by the handful of red-glowing embers that remained. A coyote howled distantly, and mournfully; another answered from elsewhere in the darkness. He felt alone in the world, and his loneliness was a misery. He tried to think of his son, but all he could think was that he wanted better for the boy than what he himself had in life.

But did life get any better, from one generation to another? From his own experience, he could not say that it did. He had had it no easier than his parents, nor Martha than hers.

Still, Louise had improved her lot. And there were plenty of people in Tucson, and certainly in other towns as well, who lived comfortably and without fear. Mark Amberton, for example.

That life must be for Danny, Kincaid decided. The boy

must learn a trade other than herding cows, and live out his life other than where he would be the prey of men—white as well as red—more vicious than wild animals.

Rather have him a pale-faced store clerk than what I am.

At this low point of his life, Ed Kincaid could see no better future for men such as himself. In Texas, there had always been danger. At first from the Comanches then from renegade white men, and finally from the arrogant, all-powerful big cattle outfits. Here in Arizona it was from the Apaches and other renegade white men. And he supposed that the big outfits would one day come, to squeeze the two-bit ranchers like himself.

He could not see that time might possibly work a change, that the Army might one day get the upperhand of the Apaches as it had of the Comanches. He could not foresee a time when the lawless whites would be harried and hampered by law officers forced to act by a growing and outraged citizenry. As he sat by the cooling, blackening embers of his fire, lonely to the point of being forlorn, he could see only that life was merely a survival of the fittest and that a man had to kill or be killed. There was no freedom from danger, no peace on earth. The only trustworthy law was what a man packed in his holster and in his saddle boot.

Gloomily, he spread his blankets and rolled up in them. In time he slept.

At mid-morning, well beyond the place where he had had his fight with Matt Hagarchy and the other rustlers, Kincaid saw the sky grow black in the northwest. The wind began to blow gustily, sweeping up great clouds of dust. He sought cover for himself and his horses. The day had turned to night by the time he gained the base of some craggy bluffs and with his animals cowered among some boulders that offered a measure of protection from the storm.

He off-saddled the dun, removed the pack from the sorrel. Both horses were nervous, skittish. He hobbled them, and

as an extra precaution put each on a picket rope. He huddled in a hollow among the boulders, his hat pulled low and his neckscarf drawn up over his mouth and nose. The air was choked with gritty dust.

He expected rain, but not a drop fell. There was only the dust, driven by gale-force wind. The entire desert seemed on the move, in upheaval. Tumbleweeds hurtled past in profusion, carried every which way. They filled crevices among the rocks so thickly they formed a sort of matting. The wind pounded, battered; it howled and shrieked. Despite his neckscarf, Kincaid breathed in the dust. His mouth became gritty with it, his eyes scratched from it. But his discomfort was as nothing compared to the other thing the storm was doing to him. It was sweeping the desert floor clean, wiping away the tracks of Matt Hagarth and his companions, making Kincaid's search difficult.

One more stroke of bad luck for a man already down on his luck.

Nature was a woman, by spells a harridan and then again a lady. The tantrum over, the wind died, the dust settled and the black clouds gave way to an azure sky. The calm was as extreme as the fury of the preceding hours. An unpredictable wench, Nature.

Kincaid crawled from his hole, shook and beat the accumulation of dirt from his clothes and worked the circulation back into his arms and legs. With water from a canteen, he washed out his mouth and bathed his eyes. He coughed and hacked and spat. He cared for the horses, using a wetted piece of flour sacking to wipe their eyes and nostrils. He gave each a little water to drink.

He unloaded, cleaned and reloaded his guns, then saddled the dun and put the pack back on the sorrel. He rode out from the bluffs, headed north. The desert was indeed swept clean; he had no tracks at all to follow. He traveled alone in the world, wondering where to look for the men who bore him a grudge, the killers of Matéo Garcia.

He still had the notion that the rustlers had a base, a

hideout somewhere in this godforsaken country. They wouldn't have come all the way from Tucson just to pick up a handful of G-Bar cattle. A place to work out of, from which to nibble away at the G-Bar herd. But where, in this immensity of space? A man might wander about the desert for a lifetime without finding what he sought. Prospectors often did just that, seeking an outcropping of paydirt once seen and then dimly remembered.

Kincaid dry-camped that night, but at mid-morning came to a water-hole, a mere seep that somebody had deepened and lined with rocks. His horses drank it dry but it slowly refilled while he rested there. He drank again, and let the animals drink more. They would be thirsty again soon enough, with perhaps no other source of water to be found.

Late in the afternoon he topped a rise and all but bumped into a band of Indians. They were Papagos, not Apaches; peaceful people. Mission Indians. He stopped and looked at them uncertainly. They halted and gazed at him in the same fashion. A score of them, they were a ragtag bunch: men, women and children. They had half a dozen ponies between them and a rickety wagon drawn by a crow-bait team, piled with their belongings. The women wore calico, the men odds and ends of white men's clothing. The smaller children were mostly naked.

Kincaid made what he hoped was the sign of peace, of friendship. He raised his empty right hand high. When one of the men made the same sign, Kincaid dug a sack of tobacco from a saddlebag and held it out in offering. One of the Papago men—there were three adult males and a tottery ancient for a fourth—kneaded his pony forward and took the tobacco.

Kincaid tried to converse with them, using English, a little Spanish and some makeshift sign language. The Papagos stared at him blankly, then one called over his shoulder and a boy of eight came forward. The youngster look at Kincaid expectantly.

"You ask about white men, mister? White men with cattle?"

"That's it, son. You and your people see any?"

The boy nodded.

"Where? When?"

The boy pointed full-armed, to the east. "Only yesterday. In the hills, where there was once a place."

"A place? A plaza? A Mexican plaza?"

"Yes, mister."

Kincaid looked to the east. He peered, squinting. Some jagged hills, hazy in the distance. *Could be*, he thought. But the Hagarchy crowd or a ranch crew?

"How many men? How many cattle?"

Kincaid received no satisfactory answers to those questions. The Papago boy first held up all ten fingers to indicate the number of men, then, looking uncertain tried eight and finally seven. As for cattle, there were many . . . more than could be counted. Nor could the boy say what the white men looked like. He and his people, it seemed, had started through the valley where the plaza was located. Always before it had been an empty place, but now there were men and cattle and horses, too. The men had ridden out with guns and turned the Papagos back.

"That is all I know, mister."

"Well, it's a lot," Kincaid said, and dug into a pocket. He handed the boy a silver dollar, and was thanked with a huge grin.

He rode away from the Indians, heading toward the hills to the east. A change of luck, maybe? It could be that a cattle outfit had recently moved in there, of course. But it might be the Hagarchy crowd. He had a feeling it was: a strong feeling. He lifted his horses to a brisker pace, impatience suddenly a spur.

At sundown he stopped to cook supper, and to rest his horses. Two hours later, back in the saddle, he aimed toward an enormous, blood-red moon coming up behind the hills. Long before he reached his destination, the moon had climbed

high, become smaller, lost its ruddy hue. With it lighting his way, he rode into the hills and finally came—near midnight, he judged—to a narrow gorge where a spring flowed into a sizable pool. There was grass here for his horses. A good place for a base camp. Maybe his luck was indeed changing.

He made his camp, started a small fire and put the coffee pot on it. He smoked a cigarette while the coffee brewed. Although it was no less lonely than previous nights, he was almost at peace with himself. He knew through some sixth sense that it was the Hagarthys here in the rock hills, at the abandoned Mexican village. If there were cattle, too, as the Papago boy had said, they were G-Bar cattle, stolen during those days he had prowled about the range with unseeing eyes, without giving a damn.

Hagathy and the others would either be there or gone to raid his range again. If they were at the plaza, he would settle with them at once. If they were away, he would sit and wait and deal with them on their return.

He would kill Matt Hagathy. The others too, if he could manage it. But Hagathy, certainly.

He was as sure of that as of the fact that he was sitting there in the middle of nowhere, puffing on a cigarette and waiting for his coffee to boil bitter black. He felt it within himself.

He slept soundly during what was left of the night and was up at the first gray light of dawn. He fixed his breakfast, making with it a batch of frying-pan biscuits to carry along for his midday meal. While at his cooking, he put a pan of water on the fire to heat. After eating, he removed shirt and neckscarf and got a bar of yellow soap and his razor from his saddlebags. He used the hot water to work up a lather and scraped the wiry bristle from his face. Afterward, he felt ready to face the new day and whatever it might have in store for him.

Leaving his provisions, gear and the sorrel horse behind, he rode from the gorge on the dun while the sky was still

mottled pink and gold with sunrise. As the sun climbed and the sky turned to a pale blue, he worked his way slowly and warily through the maze of hills, looking for the valley where the abandoned plaza stood.

He still knew with certainty that he would kill Matt Haggarthy, but now, with the clear light of day, caution had come to him. He wanted to be alive after.

At high noon he crouched among a jumble of rocks, on a steep slope overlooking the valley. A small valley, maybe a mile long, a quarter of that at its widest point. Perhaps a hundred head of cattle were scattered across its grassy, brush-grown floor. For water, there was a tiny creek in a deep, meandering bed.

The ruins of the village were at the valley's south end, not too far from Kincaid's position among the rocks. A dozen or so adobe buildings still stood, most with their roofs caved in and their walls crumbling away. One was of considerable size, doubtlessly the *casa grande*—the house of the long-gone *patron*. The others were hardly more than huts, homes of *peónes*. They all faced a square, a central plaza. In the center of the plaza was the circular rock wall of a well, telling that even long ago the nearby creek had sometimes dried up. An ancient palo verde tree shaded the well. Everywhere was thorny growth. The entire place was being reclaimed by the desert.

A wispy banner of smoke rose from the chimney of a 'dobe that was in better condition than the others. A little distance from the buildings, five horses cropped grass. None wore a saddle.

Five men in the 'dobe, getting their noon meal? Or only four? The fifth horse, Kincaid decided, could have belonged to the hardcase he had killed. But if Haggarthy and the others had brought it *and* the pack-horse in, there should be six horses down there. One man and one horse away somewhere, maybe. That left three men in the 'dobe, by Kincaid's mathematics. Odds of three to one. Not too great, since he would have the advantage of surprise.

How to play his hand?

The range was too long for accurate shooting, even with a rifle. He might fail to pick Hagarth off when the gun-runner and his companions came from the 'dobe, and then the odds would tell. If he moved closer now, they might spot him too soon and the element of surprise, which he must have, would be gone. Wait for nightfall, then. Move in under cover of darkness.

He was still mulling it over in his mind when he heard a furtive footfall behind him. Scrambling about in his crouching position, he saw the scarecrowish figure of Durango above him on the slope. The halfbreed held a rock over his head with both hands. Before Kincaid could bring his rifle to bear, Durango hurled the rock down at him.

Kincaid ducked, but too late. The rock struck him at the left shoulder. The impact alone knocked him over backwards. There was pain: numbing pain. He lost his rifle in falling, and now, badly dazed, fumbled trying to draw his handgun.

The next instant Durango was bending over him. He took the gun, tossed it aside. Then he pressed Kincaid down with a foot on his chest and made sure he stayed down by holding a knife to his throat.

"This time I rip you apart for sure, no, hombre?"

Durango grinned wolfishly and the point of the knife pricked at Kincaid's throat, causing more pain and drawing blood.

XI

ALTHOUGH DAZED, Kincaid decided that he would not lie still for Durango to carve him up. He would be fighting when his throat was cut. He grabbed at Durango's wrist

with his left hand and the halfbreed's leg with his right. He gave a violent heave; miraculously the knife was gone from his throat and Durango was falling away from him.

He struggled to rise before Durango could, but he was on his back with his head downslope. By the time he maneuvered himself to hands and knees, the halfbreed was up and coming at him with a gun. His gun, Kincaid saw. Durango swung the weapon like a club, caught him alongside the head. Another burst of pain, and again Kincaid went down. A gunshot blasted. For a moment he could not understand why he was not hit. A miss at pointblank range? He lifted his head and saw blurredly that Durango had fired the shot into the air.

His head was too heavy with pain to hold up, and he dropped it to the ground again. He was at the end of his rope, and all he could think was: *Why doesn't the son finish me off?*

He heard a voice from below yell, "What are you up to, you loco 'breed?"

Chuckling, Durango called back, "Come on up, Jake. I've got a surprise for you."

While the other hardcase, Jake, climbed the slope, Kincaid managed to push himself to a sitting position. His head throbbed with pain. His shoulder hurt, and the entire arm was numb. He didn't know why he had bothered to sit up.

At sight of Kincaid, Jake let a huge grin crack his gaunt, bristly face.

"You've caught a fine mess of fish, Durango," he said. "But why fool around? Why not finish him off?"

"You forgetting what Matt said?"

"Matt says so much I don't listen half the time."

"He said the day this hombre killed Mitch that he'd give a hundred dollars to get his hands on him."

"Aw, that was just so much hot air."

"Maybe, maybe not," Durango said. "Anyway, I'm keeping him alive until Matt gets back."

"You're taking a fool chance," Jake said. "This is one

tough hombre. It ain't safe to keep him alive, unless you hold a cocked gun on him every second. You figuring on doing that?"

"Not me," Durango said, showing his wolfish grin again. "I've got a place to put him where he can't bite." He came close, kicked Kincaid in the side. "On your feet, hombre!"

Kincaid struggled to his feet. He picked up his hat, which he had lost when knocked down by the rock. Durango picked up his rifle and held it along with his revolver.

"His horse is on the other side of the hill," the halfbreed said. "Mine, too. I'll get them after I put him in a safe place."

"There ain't no safe place around here," Jake grumbled. "If you weren't a dumb 'breed, you'd know it and do for him."

Durango said, "You'll see," sounding as though he were being clever and was pleased about it.

He jabbed Kincaid in the back with the rifle, starting him moving down the slope.

Kincaid went stumblingly, once falling to his hands and knees, picking himself up only with difficulty. Through the haze of pain in his mind, he was bitter about having blundered so hugely. Only two men here, and he had let himself be taken by one of them—a worthless 'breed, at that. He, who had been so sure he would settle accounts with Matt Hagarchy. A real babe in the woods, he was.

They reached the crumbling adobe buildings. Durango, still goading him with jabs of the rifle, took him across the brush-grown plaza to the well.

"Down you go, hombre," the halfbreed said. "That's your cage until Matt Hagarchy gets back."

Kincaid faced about, started to protest. Durango put the stock of the rifle to his chest and shoved with all his might. Still far from steady on his feet, Kincaid went reeling off balance. He struck the well wall with the back of his thighs, began to fall backwards over it. He flailed his arms, trying to save himself. Durango shoved hard again with the rifle, and Kincaid went over the wall and plummeted down-

ward. His head struck the side of the well, and mercifully he was knocked unconscious before he hit the bottom.

Once he regained consciousness, he was a long time orienting himself, recalling what had happened. He lay twisted on his right side. Overhead was a round patch of blue sky, which he saw through some of the yellowish leaves of the palo verde tree that stood beside the well. He forced himself to a sitting position, hurting badly in far too many places. He was in a space about six feet in diameter, down about ten feet. If the well had ever given water, it was merely a dry hole now.

He did not rest on its true bottom. Over the years, rubble had collected down there: some rocks from a break at the top of the wall; some tinder dry, rough-hewn boards that must have once roofed the well; a layer of dead leaves from the tree up there; a deposit of gritty dust dropped by countless desert winds. He also discovered a couple of tin cans and an empty whiskey bottle, these doubtlessly having been dumped by the hardcases who had taken over the place.

He began to wonder if he might not be able to use the rubble to get himself out. But for what purpose? If he did manage to get out, he would still be at the mercy of the two hardcases—and the one, Jake, wanted him dead right now. He needed a weapon, an equalizer.

He had a pocketknife. And a belt filled with .44-40 cartridges. And there was an empty bottle.

He was far from sure that what he had in mind would work. He could only hope. Though a bit large, the bottle would do. He stuffed some dried leaves into it, dropped in some small stones. When it was half-filled, he set it aside and got his knife from his pocket. With the point of the smaller blade, he pried the lead from a cartridge. He poured the black powder into the bottle.

He did this with a second cartridge, and continued until he had used up all the cartridges in the loops of his

gunbelt. He added a dozen of the lead bullets, shaking the bottle to mix them with the powder.

It was now filled to the bottom of the neck. He filled the neck with a mixture of leaves and cigarette papers.

Now he had a weapon. Or so he hoped.

He set his crude bomb aside, and sized up the circular well wall. The afternoon had passed while he was working and the light was failing. From what he could make out, the wall was none too promising. He couldn't jump high enough to get a hand hold on the top and the whole thing might cave in on him if he removed any of the stones.

He had heard nothing from Jake and Durango all this while, but suddenly the latter was looking down at him, grinning.

"Hombre, how do you like it down there?"

Anger flared in Kincaid but caution warned him against letting it show. He didn't want to invite any further battering of himself. Play it cagey. Grovel a little. It was a time to swallow his pride.

"Not so good," he said. "How about letting me have some water?"

"Why should I do you a favor, hombre?"

"I've got a couple of dollars in my pocket."

"I'll take it later."

"Maybe Matt Hagarchy will have something to say about that."

Durango seemed to give that some thought. Then, "How much you got?"

"Three silver dollars and some change."

"Pitch it up."

Kincaid also had a couple of goldpieces in his pocket, but he brought out only the silver coins. He jingled them in his hand for the halfbreed to hear. Then he tossed one of the silver dollars upward. It fell somewhere outside the well, and Durango went scrambling after it.

Looking down again, the halfbreed said, "Pitch up the rest."

"Later," Kincaid told him. "After I get the water."

Durango merely grunted in reply but went away. When he returned, he let a wooden bucket down on a rope. It was half-full of water, and Kincaid, telling himself that this was even better than he had hoped for, quickly untied the rope. He wanted the bucket even more than the water. He tossed up his remaining coins as the halfbreed hauled up the rope. After gathering up the money, Durango looked down once more.

"Hey, hombre," he said slyly, "you hungry, too?"

"Yeah—wolf hungry."

"We've got plenty of grub."

"Well, send some down."

"It'll cost you."

"All right. But I'll have to owe you."

Durango laughed. "You won't live for me to collect, hombre," he said, and then, satisfied that Kincaid had no more money, went away.

Kincaid could endure his hunger, but on the desert thirst was another matter. He drank his fill but he was even more grateful for the bucket than the water. It would be his means of getting out of the well—if he had a bit of luck. Hopeful, he settled down to wait for darkness, for Durango and Jake to go to sleep. While waiting, he rolled a cigarette. Lighting it, he kept at the far side of the well, away from his home-made bomb, so as not to risk blowing himself up.

He waited a full two hours after nightfall before beginning his preparations to escape from the well. He drank more of the water, then dumped the remainder and upended the bucket. By standing on the bucket, he raised himself more than a foot toward the top of the wall. He still needed to raise himself higher so he used the rotted boards and the rocks among the rubble to build a small platform. He set the upended bucket on it, and found he had raised himself another foot toward freedom.

When raised up in this fashion, he could just barely reach

that portion of the wall from which the stones had fallen. He worked another stone free, taking care not to bring more tumbling down on him. He put the first stone down, then worked a second loose. A third fell of its own accord, throwing a scare into him. Finally he had built his platform to a height of three feet, and broad enough to hold the bucket. And strong enough to bear his weight, he hoped.

He picked up his loaded bottle, found that it just fitted into his hip pocket. He stepped onto the bucket, bracing himself against the wall with his hands. So far, so good. The bucket and platform wobbled a little but did not collapse. Reaching up gingerly, he grasped the broken portion of the wall and heaved himself upwards.

His heart lurched wildly as the wall began to give, and for one desperate moment he thought it would collapse and carry him down with it. He gave himself another hard thrust, and then was belly-down over the wall. He hung there for a moment, off balance and helpless, with the ancient stones eroding away and dropping with a great clatter to the well bottom. His hands clawed at the ground beyond the wall. He managed to drag himself away as most of the wall caved in with a thunderous roar.

He lay gasping for breath, his heart pounding wildly. Then his fear of the two hardcases lifted him to his feet and started him running. He was almost to one of the adobe ruins when voices sounded somewhere in the darkness.

Then Jake's voice bellowed, "There he is! He got out! Damn you, Durango; I told you you should have killed him!"

Durango yelled back, "I've got him," and a rifle cracked three times in quick succession.

The slugs went wide of Kincaid. He gained the inside of the crumbling 'dobe hut.

Jake shouted, "Come on, get him! He ain't got no gun!"

Kincaid took the bottle from his hip pocket, a match from his shirt pocket. He lay the bottle down on its side, struck the match with his thumb-nail. He touched the flame

to the cigarette papers in the neck of the bottle. As soon as the paper was burning, he rushed across the room and all but threw himself through the sashless window at the far side. He crouched by the hut's rear wall, listened to the hardcases' running footsteps slow as they approached the front of the 'dobe.

"Watch it now," Jake cautioned. "He's up to something!"

Durango replied, "I'll get him—fix him right." A moment later, he burst out, "Hey, what's that burning in here?"

He was answered by a tremendous clap of thunder. The entire 'dobe seemed to heave. The wall by which Kincaid crouched buckled and began to topple. As he scrambled away to keep from being buried by the falling adobe, a piercing scream rang out, as though someone was in terrible agony.

Jake called hoarsely, "Durango, what happened? Durango . . . ?"

Kincaid waited, listening intently. There was no reply from the halfbreed. There was no more screaming, either.

One down, one to go. But he had to find another weapon in a hurry, before Jake came after him again. However, Kincaid himself was badly rattled due to the explosion. He really hadn't expected his bomb to work so well.

XII

GATHERING HIS WITS about him, Kincaid worked his way around the buildings until he reached the one used by the hardcases. He slipped inside.

A faint red glow came from some embers in the fireplace. An untidy array of cooking utensils lay on the hearth, and to one side was a huge, haphazard stock of provisions.

Beside one spread blanket on the earthen floor, he found a revolver—his own, by the feel of it. By another blanket, he found a rifle, an older model Winchester than his own .44-40. He shoved the handgun into his holster and levered a cartridge into the chamber of the rifle. Now he could take on Jake.

Standing to one side of the doorway, he peered out into the darkness with the rifle held ready. "Jake! You hear me, Jake?"

Jake's reply came feebly. "I'm done for, Kincaid. You might as well come finish me off."

A trick, maybe. Kincaid remained where he was.

"What about the 'breed?"

"Dead, I guess."

Kincaid debated for a moment, not trusting the hardcase at all. Finally he moved out, bent low. He went as far as the palo verde tree and crouched by its trunk. Only a small portion of the nearby well wall still stood above ground. He could see somebody lying in front of the 'dobe where his bomb had gone off. Like the side wall of the hut, the front one had been buckled and partially toppled by the explosion. Some of the adobe was piled atop the downed man.

"Jake?"

Jake's voice was still feeble, and bitter. "You got me, I tell you."

"Throw your gun out."

"It's under the wall—and so am I." Jake swore with his bitterness, but not with vigor. "Come on, get it over with. Put a slug through my head, like you would a crippled horse."

Kincaid thought sourly, *Quit pitying yourself. You asked for what you got.* He risked moving to where Jake lay.

The hardcase had spoken the truth. He had no gun, and he was made helpless by the adobe piled on his legs. He also had a wound in his left side. His shirt was stained with blood.

Kincaid went past him, peered over what remained of

the wall. Durango, too, was partially buried. He was silent and unmoving. Striking a match, Kincaid saw that he was dead. Horribly dead. The halfbreed had taken the full force of the blast and was badly mangled. Just as the match flame died, Kincaid saw the stock of his own rifle protruding from the rubble. He retrieved the weapon, hoping it was undamaged.

Turning to Jake, he said, "Look; I've got no more love for you than you have for me, but I'll do what I can for you—provided you give me no trouble."

"I ain't asking any favors of you, Kincaid."

"I'd do as much for the Devil himself," Kincaid said sourly.

He dug the hardcase out, helped him to the 'dobe across the plaza. In the light of a lantern he found among the hardcases' gear, he examined Jake's wound. A big, nasty one. Badly torn flesh. He found a bottle of whiskey among the provisions, and used the rotgut to cleanse the wound. He bandaged Jake heavily with strips of cloth torn from a flour sack. The bandaging done, Jake flopped on his blanket with the whiskey bottle. His gaunt, whiskery face was gray with pallor.

Kincaid threw some wood onto the embers in the fireplace; when it began to burn he set about cooking himself a meal. Coffee, bacon, frying-pan biscuits. His enemies' grub tasted as good as any other. With a second tin cup of coffee in his hand, he turned the lantern flame low and went to sit against the wall at the far side of the room. All this while, he had been listening for the sound of riders, expecting Matt Hagarthy to show up, perhaps with some more hardcases.

Between sips of coffee, he cleaned his rifle. Durango had fired three loads from it, and one from his revolver. He would, Kincaid told himself, have to find his saddle bags and get more cartridges.

Jake had finished the whiskey and was lying quietly. Now

he stirred, and said, "Hey, bucko . . ." The bitterness was gone from his voice, but not the weakness.

"Yeah, Jake?"

"How bad off am I?"

"That hole in your side needs a doctor."

"Ain't never been to a sawbones in my life."

In your misspent life, Kincaid thought. He rolled and lit a cigarette, took it to the wounded man and put it between his lips. Returning to his place, he built another for himself. He kept listening for riders. The night was utterly quiet.

Jake said, "You know, Kincaid, you're not a bad hombre, patching me up and all, when you could have left me out there, or even finished me off. If I'd been a step inside that doorway, I'd have got it like the 'breed. What was it you did, anyway?"

"I made a firecracker out of a bottle."

Jake actually chuckled. "Some joke on us, eh?"

"Where's Hagarthy, Jake?"

"Gone to Tucson."

"What for?"

"Search me. We were over on your range, figuring on making another big haul of G-Bar cattle like we did earlier. Four of us. Matt, Durango, Mitch Yates and me. Then a rider comes along and talks to Matt. Afterward, Matt calls off the raid and says we'll just take what few cattle we've got. He has to go to Tucson with this hombre. And he went, after we had the fight with you and the Mex—when you killed Mitch."

"He won't be coming back here?"

"He said he'd be back," Jake replied. "But there's one thing about Matt Hagarthy . . . you can't ever count on anything he says."

"I'll hang around, anyway. Just in case he does keep his word."

"You want him bad, eh?"

"Yeah, I want him bad."

Jake smoked his cigarette in silence for while. Then, "You're

bucking more than him, Kincaid. According to him, some big men in Tucson want you dead if they can't run you out of the Territory. It wasn't his idea to steal you blind. Those town hombres put him up to it. They told him to kill you or ruin you. They're sure set on getting rid of you, one way or another."

"Because I told the Army that Hagarthy was a gun-runner?"

"It must be that."

"Name those town men, Jake."

"Couldn't if I wanted to," Jake said. "Matt never mentioned any names. He's a big talker most of the time, but he can be closemouthed too."

"That damned Indian Ring," Kincaid said, more to himself than to the other man. "That bunch sure holds a grudge. Where's my saddle, Jake?"

"Durango dumped it out behind. And turned your horse out with our bunch. You changed your mind about staying?"

"Nope," Kincaid said, rising. "I need some cartridges. I'll need plenty, to go up against that buffalo gun Hagarthy carries."

He found his saddle behind the 'dobe, along with Jake's and Durango's. He replaced the spent brass in his Colt's revolver with a fresh cartridge, then filled the magazine of his Winchester and the loops of his gunbelt. He was ready now to fight a war.

He listened to the night's heavy quiet for awhile, then went back inside. He extinguished the lantern's flame and settled himself across the room from Jake again. His best chance of taking Matt Hagarthy by surprise, he decided, was by staying where he was. If the gun-runner came, he would ride in with no suspicion that anything had changed at the plaza. The showdown had to be at short range, so that Hagarthy couldn't stand him off another time with his long-ranged Sharps.

Jake was asleep, his audible breathing shallow sounding. Kincaid slept too, by snatches.

Jake was feverish in the morning and kept to his hard bed on the floor. Kincaid eyed him anxiously, finding that he did have some feeling for him after all. He couldn't get around the fact that Jake was a human being. He soaked a folded piece of flour sacking with water and placed it on the ailing man's burning forehead. He examined his wound, shook his head over it, washed it anew with whiskey and applied a fresh bandage. He gave him water to drink. The fever hadn't yet taken Jake's reason, and he was appreciative.

"Thanks, bucko . . . I'm sure obliged to you."

Food wasn't for him just now, and Kincaid cooked breakfast only for himself. He kept an eye out for riders, but still none appeared in the valley. After giving Jake some water, he went outside, took the axe that the hardcases had brought along for cutting firewood, and went around behind the blast-shattered 'dobe to open a grave. He did this partly to keep busy and partly because he didn't like the thought of the dead 'breed unburied.

Without a shovel, the digging went slowly. He could break the earth with the axe, but scooping the dirt out with his hands was a slow, laborious chore. Finally he went after a frying pan and used it as a makeshift shovel. Even so, it was nearly noon before he had a shallow grave ready.

He was another hour digging the halfbreed's body out from under the fallen wall, and a third in laying it to rest, blanket-wrapped.

He kept alert while working, his rifle within easy reach. But Matt Hagarthy still hadn't put in an appearance. After washing up at the creek, Kincaid carried a kettle of water into the 'dobe and set about getting his evening meal.

Jake's condition had worsened. He was burning up with fever and out of his head. He moaned constantly, sometimes talking jibberish, occasionally crying out as though terrified deep within himself. Kincaid could do no more than give him a little water and wipe his hot face with a damp cloth.

Thus the day passed. Kincaid spent the night watching

over the sick man. Toward dawn, Jake's fever broke and Kincaid, hoping the crisis had passed, built a fire and put a kettle of water on to boil. He dropped some strips of jerky into the water, let it simmer for a couple of hours, and finally spoon-fed some of the broth to his patient.

Jake managed a faint grin. "I ain't had such care since I was a young sprout and my maw nursed me through a bad case of measles. Matt ain't come yet?"

"Not yet," Kincaid said. "And I'm beginning to think he won't."

Late in the afternoon he was cutting firewood in the brush along the creek when Jake called to him from the rear window.

Resting the axe, he called back, "You want something?"

"Watch yourself, bucko," Jake said. "Matt's coming."

Kincaid dropped the axe, picked up his rifle. He had been so intent upon his woodcutting that for a little while he hadn't been alert. Now he saw three riders coming down-valley. They were already halfway through it. Going to the 'dobe, he felt a pressure building up in him. Excitement, and fear, too, maybe.

Stepping inside, he said, "Thanks for the warning."

Jake was back on his blanket, still sickly looking. "I owe you," he said.

Kincaid stood squarely in the doorway as the three riders came loping into the plaza. It was Matt Hagarthy, all right. The other two men Kincaid did not know. The burly, black-bearded Hagarthy was instantly down off his horse. He had taken two long strides toward the 'dobe when he saw Kincaid. He stopped in his tracks, jolted. One of the other riders dismounted but stood suddenly frozen, sensing from Hagarthy's manner that something was wrong. The third man caught on too, and remained still in the saddle.

Recovering from his surprise, Hagarthy uttered a bark of laughter. "Now ain't you the foxy one. What did you do with Jake and Durango, Kincaid?"

Kincaid was conscious that his heartbeat had quickened.

He could also feel a sudden sweat on his forehead, and on the palms of his hands as he gripped his rifle tightly. He had Hagarthy close enough, for sure. The man's Sharps was on his saddle, and his horse was behind him. He would have to depend on his sixgun. He knew that, and his right hand was already posed close to its butt.

"Durango is dead and buried," Kincaid said. "Jake is inside, in bad shape. There's just one thing before we settle this, Hagarthy: I want the names of the men who put you up to making war on me."

"Not men—one man, friend," Hagarthy said. "And smart as you are, you should know his name."

"I'll hear it from you."

"That you will. No harm in telling a dead man what he wants to know. A sort of last request being granted a condemned man." Hagarthy gestured with his left hand, indicating the two men behind him. "Odds of three to one, Kincaid. And handguns at this range are faster than a Winchester. Where'd you bury the 'breed? We'll plant you beside him."

Kincaid had never before known a man like Matt Hagarthy. A hell-raiser. A wild one. Welcoming gunplay as though it was a sport. Didn't he realize that he might be the one killed? That *he* was the one to die here?

Kincaid said, "Name the man, Hagarthy."

"Sure, sure . . . he's somebody you know. Matt Amber-ton."

XIII

KINCAID'S GAZE never wavered from the threatening shape of Matt Hagarthy. But, badly jolted, he was off guard for an instant. If Hagarthy forced the showdown now, Kincaid would have no chance at all.

Mark Amberton, he was thinking.

Maybe he should have known. Louise had said that there was a flaw in the man's character. Having tangled with him, he had certainly known that Amberton was his enemy. But to go so far as to try to have him ruined or killed . . . the man must indeed be eaten up by jealousy and hatred.

Hagarthy said tauntingly, "Amberton wants to be rid of you for more reasons than one, Kincaid. He was in on the gun-running. He furnished the rifles. I only delivered them to the Apaches. He likes the way things are here in the Territory—Injuns raiding and the Army busy chasing them. It's good for his freighting business. Makes money for him. He aims to be rich and important, and he won't let anybody stand in his way.

"Me, I'm his partner, you might say. I knew the dude back in St. Louis, years ago, and he was a sharp one even as a young buck. I got him to come out here, telling him there was plenty of opportunity if we worked together. He saw I was right as soon as he got here." Hagarthy laughed, as at some hilarious joke. "And he decided to get into the freighting business, once he got a look at Frank Hammond's wife."

Recovering from the jolt, Kincaid gazed at the bearded hardcase with the renewed certainty that he was going to kill him. That he must kill him for more reasons than he had known until this moment.

"So the outlaws who murdered Frank Hammond were you and Mark Amberton, eh, Hagarthy?"

"A quick, easy way to get into the freighting business," Hagarthy said. "Dicker with the owner's widow, take the firm over from her. Amberton pulled it off real slick, and she never even suspected. Only one thing didn't work out for him. He wants the widow, too, but she's being stand-offish. Because of you, Kincaid."

More to himself than to Hagarthy, Kincaid said, "That's just something the tinhorn imagines. Frank Hammond's widow is nothing more to me than my sister-in-law."

"That ain't what she told Amberton when she was on friendly terms with him," Hagarthy retorted. "That pretty little widow gal told him that Frank Hammond was her second choice—that you were her first, but you up and married her sister. Now you know all the reasons for Mark Amberton's hating your guts, Kincaid."

With that Hagarthy yelled, "Get him, boys—nail him!" He grabbed for his gun.

His draw was gunfighter fast, and he got off the first shot. It barely missed. Striking the decaying doorjamb of the 'dobe, the slug showered Kincaid with splinters.

His Winchester's sharp crack echoed the sixgun's blast, and its aim was true. Hit in the chest, Hagarthy reeled back a step. A look of astonishment came to his craggy, bearded face. It was as though he had not believed that such a thing could happen to him . . . that there was a bullet made for him.

He recovered his balance, tried to line his gun on Kincaid again. He needed both hands to steady it, but before he could squeeze its trigger, Kincaid drove two more slugs into his burly body. Now Matt Hagarthy went down, no more mocking laughter in him. As he collapsed, he fired his second shot into the ground.

Kincaid threw another cartridge into the Winchester's chamber as he swung the weapon to cover Hagarthy's companions. The one still mounted held his empty right hand high to show that he wanted no part of the fight, but the one on the ground had his hand on his gun and looked of a mind to draw.

Kincaid rapped out, "Don't, friend. You haven't a chance."

That one jerked his hand away from his gun. At the same time the mounted man said, "I'm out of it," and reined his horse about to ride away. Kincaid let him go.

"Now I'll tell you," Kincaid said to the remaining man. "You gather up Hagarthy's gun and his rifle and dump them, along with yours, into that well yonder."

Like all of the Hagarthy crowd, this man looked boot-

tough and now showed a wolf-mean scowl. But after a moment of hesitation he saw something in Kincaid's manner that decided him to do as he was told.

Kincaid shifted his gaze back to Hagarthy. That one would run no more guns to the Apaches, ever; he would steal no more cattle, nor join Mark Amberton in any more murders. He would make no more attempts to kill or ruin Ed Kincaid. He was as dead as he would ever be.

Over his shoulder, Kincaid said, "Jake, take care of yourself."

He stepped out from the doorway, went around back for his saddle and then after his dun horse.

He rode to his camp in the gorge, caught up his sorrel, and got the pack on it. He rode out from the gorge at sundown, and continued to ride toward G-Bar Ranch as darkness came, on through the night. He rode with a question in his mind: what was he to do about Mark Amberton?

The law, as represented by Sheriff Milt Eberts, would do nothing about the man merely on Kincaid's claim that Amberton had, with Matt Hagarthy's help, murdered Frank Hammond. The Army wasn't likely to move against him, either. Mark Amberton was a big man in Tucson, one of the Territory's more important citizens. His word carried weight. He could deny such charges and be believed. The only evidence against him was the braggy talk of a now-dead hardcase, with only Ed Kincaid to testify that any such statement had been made.

Sure, a man packed his own law in his holster and in his saddle boot. But that kind of law served only against men like Matt Hagarthy. The Mark Ambertons of this world couldn't be forced into a showdown fight. Kill him, anyway? In cold blood? That could get a man hanged by the neck until he was dead, dead, dead.

What to do about Mark Amberton? Just nothing?

Let him get away with having murdered Frank Hammond, with having furnished rifles for the Apaches, with having

sent Matt Hagarth and his companions to kill or ruin him?

That question was still unanswered at midnight, when Kincaid made a halt to rest his horses and to brew a pot of coffee for himself. Then he found himself pondering another question. Had Louise really told Mark Amberton such a thing as Matt Hagarth had claimed? That Frank Hammond had been her second choice for a husband, and he, Ed Kincaid, her first? If such a thing had been so, Louise had never given any sign that she was interested in him. Of course, he had been able to see only Martha. . . .

Not that it really mattered. It had been Martha he wanted, and it was losing Martha that made him an embittered man: an angry, hating man.

Once back home at G-Bar Ranch, a man utterly alone, Kincaid still puzzled over what he should do about Mark Amberton. He woke up the second morning and knew he had to do something, if only confront the man with his knowledge of what he was. He set out for Tucson at mid-afternoon, holding his dun to an easy pace, altering between a lope and a walk. He crossed the *malpais* and was halfway through the Largo Mountains when he saw a rider coming toward him at a hard run. The man's haste struck him as odd, since there was nowhere to go in that direction except G-Bar Ranch.

Seeing Kincaid, the rider slowed his horse and then came on at a walk to face him. A ranchhand, but a stranger to Kincaid.

"Mister, would you by any chance be Ed Kincaid?"

"I would. What's up?"

"It's your boy. A lady in town, Mrs. Hammond, sent me to fetch you. I ran my own horse into the ground and got this one from XL Ranch. I've been making tracks for sure and—"

Kincaid broke in, "What about my boy, man?"

"He's gone—lost on the desert."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday afternoon, the lady said. Everybody's

out searching, the sheriff and all. But she wants you to come."

"All right," Kincaid said. "I'm obliged to you."

He kneed the dun into motion and lifted it to hard run. Fear had its icy hold on him. Fear for Danny, and fear for himself. His son was all he had left. If he had lost the boy, he had nothing to live for . . . nothing at all.

Nightfall overtook him still far short of Tucson. When he finally arrived there, the big dun horse was faltering in its running stride. He pushed on to Louise's house, clinging to a feeble hope that his fear was groundless—that Danny had been found, alive and unhurt. Several horses standing outside the house and the lights behind all its windows dashed even that half-hope.

Anger surged through him as he swung stiffly from the saddle. He wanted to rail against the whole world, against the unfairness of life. Not even a hardy man, much less a small boy, could be alive after so long on the desert, unless he found water. Which wasn't likely to be the case with Danny.

He entered the house without knocking on the door. Three men, townsmen, stood in the parlor looking gloomy. Voices sounded from the kitchen, one of them Louise's. Hers was loud, touched with hysteria. He went back and found two women and Sheriff Milt Eberts with his sister-in-law. She stood at the far side of the room, as though at bay. The Sheriff was talking to her in a low, cajoling voice. One of the women kept saying that she, Louise, must be sensible.

Louise was in her riding clothes: mannish blouse, divided skirt, boots. Her broad-brimmed hat hung at her shoulders by its chin-cord. Her hair was disheveled. There was a smudge of dirt on her left cheek. Her clothing was dusty. She looked tired and more: done in. She also had a frantic look.

"I've got to go, I tell you," she burst out. "I can't stay here and do nothing!"

Stepping into the kitchen, Kincaid said, "Louise, calm down—ease up."

She stared at him with stricken eyes. "Ed, I'm so sorry. I—"

"Never mind," he cut in. "It couldn't have been your fault."

The sheriff's ruddy face was troubled. "Ed, she wants to go out searching again and she's in no condition. She's been out there almost the whole time, without rest or even food. Hell, she could get lost herself in the dark."

"She'll stay home," Kincaid said. "Louise, sit down. Have some coffee." He looked at Eberts. "Have you called the search off?"

"Not a chance," the sheriff said. "I won't until the boy is found, dead or alive. I've got riders out, and men afoot with lanterns. Some have dogs. I'm going out again, myself, as soon as I've had supper."

Louise said, "Ed, I didn't watch him closely enough. I let him stay outside while I was making supper. He wandered off and—"

Kincaid shook his head. "Don't blame yourself. He knew he shouldn't go out of sight of the house. He was told that so often I don't know why he did different. He was never a boy to disobey and—"

He broke off abruptly, giving in to the thought that had been pushing at him all during his ride in from the mountains. Danny wouldn't have disobeyed. He wouldn't have wandered away. He had been taken away.

"Look, Louise; did you see anybody about yesterday afternoon—anybody who didn't belong in the neighborhood?"

She shook her head. "Nobody at all." Then, staring at him wide-eyed, "Ed, you don't think that somebody carried him off?"

One of the other women said, "There was that wood-seller. Remember, Louise?"

"Woodseller?" Kincaid said. "What about him?"

"Well, it wasn't the regular one—not old Señor Amado," the woman said. "It was a new one."

"A Mexican?"

Louise answered that. "There were two men. One was Mexican. The older one. The other was an Anglo."

Looking dubious, Sheriff Eberts said, "Now, Ed, why would anybody carry your boy off?"

Kincaid shook his head, knowing the explanation would take too long and probably not be believed. Dividing a look between Louise and the other women, he said, "What time in the afternoon were the woodsellers in the neighborhood?"

"About four o'clock," Louise said, and the other women nodded in agreement. "I didn't buy any wood from them, since I'd just bought half a cord from Señor Amado last week. Danny was out front when they came along with their wagon and—" Her voice broke, then was shaky and off-key when she continued. "I didn't see him after that. Ed, do you really think they took him away?"

"It's possible," Kincaid said. "I'm going to find out for certain." He turned, started from the kitchen, then paused to look at Milt Eberts. "Sheriff, you ask around. Maybe somebody in the neighborhood knows who those two are. If anybody does, it'll make things easier for us."

"I'll do that, Ed. But where are you going?"

"I'll be back shortly," Kincaid said, and left the kitchen and the house, not wanting the sheriff along to interfere with what he must do.

He rode the tired dun horse to Benson's Livery Stable and turned in through the wide doorway. A lantern on a post just inside made a little patch of light in the deep darkness of the big building.

Even before dismounting, he yelled, "Hostler! Lend a hand here!"

A burly colored man came from the tackroom. "Yes, sir. You want that horse cared for? He sure looks done in."

"I want him cared for," Kincaid said, down now and beginning to off-saddle. "But first I want two fresh mounts."

"Two, sir?"

"Two," Kincaid said. "My saddle on one, a saddle of yours on the other. Hop to it, man."

Ten minutes later he rode the one horse from the stable and had the other in tow. He headed for the office of the Territorial Freighting Company. Its buildings were located away from the business district, along the railroad right of way. He had seen that the office was lighted when riding into town, and found it still so. The shades were drawn on the windows, however, and he could not see if it was Mark Amberton or his clerk still at work.

Let it be Amberton. . . . Let me have just one stroke of luck.

That was a sort of prayer, even though of late he was a man of little faith.

Dismounting, he tied his horses at the hitch-rail and took his catch-rope from the horn of his saddle. He slipped the coiled rope about his left shoulder and went to rap heavily, demandingly on the office door.

Mark Amberton opened at once, a cigar clenched between his teeth and an account book in one hand. He was his usual dapper self, and showed no surprise at sight of his visitor. He held the door wide, silently inviting Kincaid inside.

Shutting the door, he said, "I've been expecting you. Been waiting for you, in fact, so we could have our talk in private."

He moved away, laying the account book on his rolltop desk.

Kincaid stared at him incredulously, not quite able to believe that the man had the gall to admit, even in this fashion, to having had Danny kidnapped. The tinhorn was always a step ahead of him. And the frightening thing was that if he, Kincaid, wasn't careful—wasn't hard enough—Amberton would still get the better of him. The man's manner indicated that he was confident of doing just that.

Amberton took the cigar from his mouth, flicked the ash from it. He was as casual as though Kincaid had come to

discuss nothing more important than a trifling business deal.

"When that rider got back with word that you'd killed Matt Hagarthy, after Hagarthy had done all that talking," Amberton said, "I knew you would come gunning for me sooner or later. So I took a precaution, to be able to bargain with you."

Kincaid still stared at him, realizing that the flaw in the character of this handsome, undeniably intelligent man was nothing more or less than a total lack of conscience. Mark Amberton was rotten to the core, corrupt—a savage beneath his fancy clothes and fine manners. A white Apache, by damn.

There was, Kincaid decided, only one way to handle him. Only one means of getting the upperhand of him. Well, he had come prepared to do what must be done. He could be as hard as he needed to be—as barbaric as an Apache drunk on *tiswin*.

He struck without warning, a clubbing blow to Amberton's jaw. All his might, all his rage and hatred, all his fear for his son, were behind the blow. Amberton went hurtling backwards, striking the desk, bouncing off it, then dropping loosely to the floor and sprawling face-down.

Not caring that the man might be seriously hurt, Kincaid rolled him over with his foot. He did have one moment of alarm, thinking he had killed him, and placed his son's life in jeopardy. Then he realized that Amberton was merely unconscious.

Taking his knife out, he cut a two-foot piece from his rope. He bent over Amberton and bound his hands. Then he hauled him upright, took him over his right shoulder and carried him outside. He lay him over the saddle of the spare horse, secured him with his catch-rope. He untied both horses, rose to the saddle of the one and caught up the trailing reins of the other. An agonized groan came from Amberton as they started away.

A man coming from the warehouse next door called out in a voice of alarm. "What's going on there?"

"Don't concern yourself," Kincaid called back, and rode off into the darkness with his prisoner, heading away from town, into the desert.

XIV

WHEN THE TOWN'S LIGHTS were hidden by a brush and cactus-grown rise, Kincaid called a halt in the sandy bed of a deep dry wash. He dismounted, removed the rope holding his now-conscious prisoner on the second horse, and gave him a shove that spilled him to the ground. Amberton again lay sprawled. He groaned piteously. Coiling his catch-rope, Kincaid remained untouched by the man's real or fancied suffering. He hunkered down at the far side of the wash, rolled and lit a cigarette, waiting for Amberton to pull himself together.

After some minutes Amberton struggled to a sitting position.

"Damn you, Kincaid! My jaw could be broken."

"That's only a small thing compared to what will happen to you if you don't take me to my son."

Amberton lifted his head, stared at him with a return of cunning. "I don't throw away an advantage that easy. I told you I intend to bargain."

"You're in no position to bargain, tinhorn."

"You don't seem to understand that if anything happens to me you'll never see the boy again."

"You'll change your mind about that," Kincaid said, holding up his rope. "My idea is to put my loop on you, mount up, and drag you until you beg for mercy."

Even in the gloom, he could see the alarm come to the man's face.

He went on, "I'll drag you at a run, tinhorn. Through the cactus. Your clothes will be ripped off you and every inch of skin. You'll beg, all right. You'll plead with me to let you take me to my son."

Amberton shuddered visibly. "You wouldn't. It would be inhuman."

Kincaid took a final drag on his cigarette, then thrust it into the sandy soil. He rose and played out the loop of his rope. Amberton struggled to his feet, a badly frightened man. He backed off but came up against the back of the wash.

Panicky, he burst out, "You'll kill me even if I do give the boy back!"

"It's a thought, all right. Trouble is, I can't see myself killing even an ornery son like you in cold blood."

Amberton quickly seized on that. "Give me your word that you'll not harm me and I'll tell you where the boy is."

"You'll take me, not tell me."

"I've got to be sure I stay alive."

Kincaid swore. "Look, you; I said you are in no position to bargain."

Amberton seemed to think he was. He said, "Give me time to sell out my business and then I'll leave Tucson—clear out of the Territory. All I want is your word for that."

"I'll grant you this much," Kincaid told him. "Once I have my son back, I'll let you leave—but empty-handed. You're not hanging around to cash in on the business that you murdered Frank Hammond to get."

"I paid his widow good money for it," Amberton said, sufficiently sure of himself again to sound angry. "I'm still paying her. It's mine, and I've got the right to sell it."

Kincaid didn't reply to that. He went to his horse, stepped to the saddle. As he turned the animal about, swinging his loop, Amberton panicked and began to run. Kincaid sent his horse after him. He made his throw, catching his quarry about the ankles. Amberton went down hard. Turning his horse, Kincaid began dragging him back along the

wash. Amberton began a wild yelling. Kincaid took him to where the second horse stood.

"Now pick yourself up and get mounted."

Amberton slowly obeyed, removing the rope and rising. Kincaid coiled the rope as the man mounted.

"All right, lead out."

"I—I don't know if I can find the place."

"Tinhorn, you'd better find it," Kincaid told him. "Because the next time I drag you it will be in earnest."

Finally, after most of the night was gone, Kincaid decided that the man was not stalling—that he really could not find the place where Danny was being held. They had ridden far out the road leading to Benson and failed to come to the turnoff to the ranch they sought. According to Amberton, the ranch—Mexican owned—was just south of the road and could be seen from there. It could be farther along, but, too, they could have missed it in the darkness.

"All right," Kincaid said, dismounting. "We'll wait for daylight."

Getting down from his horse, Amberton sagged weakly against it. "I'm sick," he muttered. "Really sick."

"So be sick," Kincaid said, without pity.

He off-saddled the horses, and hobbled them. He lifted his rifle from its boot and kept it with him, thinking that by now his prisoner might have designs upon it. He sat crosslegged on the ground, some distance from Amberton, who now lay flat with an arm over his eyes. He tried to be patient but it wasn't easy. He kept thinking of Danny. Danny in strange hands, badly frightened and maybe being mistreated.

At dawn, Kincaid roused Amberton from sleep with a boot in the ribs. The man rose grumblingly and stiffly to his feet. He did look sickly. He wasn't used to roughing it, to hardship.

Kincaid saddled both horses. They mounted and rode on along the Benson road. They came to water shortly, a

small creek. Kincaid let the horses drink, and drank his fill too.

"You too," he told Amberton. "Or you won't make it."

Amberton bellied down and drank. He was listless due to his suffering which was real enough now. Kincaid himself had hunger gnawing at him. He hadn't eaten since mid-day yesterday, back at G-Bar Ranch. They rode on again, watching for adobe buildings to the south. By mid-morning Kincaid was of a mind that they had passed the ranch during the early part of the night. He was considering turning back when he saw a mere trace of a road leading off from the main one. He reined in, peered across the desert. A small cluster of buildings stood at the base of some hills about two miles to the south.

"That's the place?"

Amberton's reply was a mere grunt, but an affirmative one.

They turned into the trace, which twisted through the desert growth.

Kincaid said, "Listen, tinhorn: I'll have my gun in my hand, and if these people give me trouble, you'll stop the first slug."

"They won't give you trouble," Amberton said. "The old man here in my employ is Tip Ryan, the rider who brought me word that you'd killed Matt Hagarchy. And he's no fighter. The others are just Mexicans, some of them women."

Kincaid gave him a wondering, suspicious look. Amberton was perking up. Maybe he still had an ace up his sleeve. Maybe it was merely that he was looking forward to it being over and done with; to getting out of the saddle and having a handout meal.

Kincaid said, "What kind of a ranch is this, anyway?"

Amberton shrugged. "It's just a hangout."

A *hangout*, Kincaid thought sourly. For men outside the law or on the fringe of it. Toughhands, gunfighters. The women would be floosies. A miserable place for a small boy to be taken. And it might well be a trap for the boy's

father. That could explain Amberton's suddenly being more himself.

"Remember, my gun will be cocked and aimed at you."

"I'm not likely to forget," Amberton said.

They were within a half mile of the buildings when a rider came over a rise at a dead run. He was headed in their direction, and was almost at once close enough for Kincaid to recognize him as the Army's civilian scout, Tom Scarlett.

Scarlett lifted his right arm in signal. He had his rifle in his hand. Kincaid reined in, and motioned for Amberton to pull up. In a moment the scout brought his blowing horse to a stop facing them. His lean face showed one of those miserly smiles that Kincaid remembered from the man's visits to G-Bar Ranch with the cavalry patrols. Scarlett always seemed to be wryly amused, as though he found life a grim sort of joke.

"You're far off your range, ain't you, Kincaid? Howdy, anyway. Let's not tarry to pass the time of day. This time I did find the 'Paches. Stirred up a hornets' nest, and they're buzzing right behind me. We need cover. Let's make a run for it to yonder. Looks like you're headed for there, as it is."

He put his horse into motion again, and at that instant Kincaid saw two half-naked horsemen appear atop the nearby rise. As he set out after Scarlett, yelling at Amberton to come along, three more Indians came onto the hump of ground and halted there. Looking back again, as he and the other two men approached the buildings, he saw that about twenty Apaches were gathered on the rise. Enough to raid the so-called ranch, if they were so inclined.

Whooping and hollering, Tom Scarlett galloped in among the buildings. Two men came from the largest 'dobe, one a Mexican and the other an Anglo. The latter was Amberton's man, Tip Ryan. A woman stood in the doorway, and Kincaid, coming in behind Scarlett, had a glimpse of two other women at a window.

Scarlett shouted at these people, "Injuns! Take cover!"

The two men turned hastily back toward the main building. The scout rode past the corral, where a couple of horses were penned, and into the barn. Kincaid went in there behind him, and swung down with his rifle in his hand.

"Where is the cavalry, Tom?"

Scarlett showed another wry, stingy smile. "Too far behind."

Kincaid said, "Like always," and went out into the yard.

Amberton had left his horse out there and was on his way into the main building. The Apaches were coming, walking their ponies. Kincaid went after Amberton. So far as he was concerned, the Indians were the lesser evil.

The room he entered was roughly furnished as a saloon. Plank tables and benches; a bar also knocked together out of planks; a few bottles on display upon shelves behind the bar. A whiskey barrel was set up back there, and fitted with a spigot. A doorway opened into a kitchen. The door to another room was closed. A rickety stairway led to a second floor.

Kincaid lay a rough hand on Amberton's shoulder. "Stay put, tinhorn."

Tip Ryan was at an open window with his gun in his hand, peering out at the Apaches. He looked scared, which seemed to confirm Amberton's statement that he was no fighter. The Mexican, a fat man with a *bandido* moustache, came from behind the bar with a double-barreled shotgun. He went to the window where two of the three women stood. He shoved them aside, raised the window sash, poked the twin barrels of his gun through the opening. Tom Scarlett was at the doorway, his rifle in the bend of his right arm.

"Five of us, and eighteen of the red devils," the scout drawled. "Fair enough odds, I reckon. Kincaid, better give your friend your sidearm. We'll need every gun in action that we've got."

Kincaid said, "He gets no gun of mine."

"Behind the bar," the Mexican said. "Plenty of guns there." Amberton gave Kincaid a questioning look, and the latter nodded.

"Get yourself a gun. But don't try using it on me. I'll be watching you closer than I will those Apaches."

Two of the women were Mexican, but the one who had been at the door earlier and now lounged against the bar, was an Anglo. The others were chattering excitedly, fearfully, but this one looked as calm as though an Apache raid was nothing at all to be alarmed about.

Kincaid walked over to her. "Where is the boy?"

She looked at him blankly. "Boy? What boy?"

She had hennaed hair and a painted face, but she failed to appear as young as she tried. Her body in a too-tight calico dress had the cushiony bulge of middle-age. Her eyes were as knowledgeable of men as those of the most wayward of Eve's daughters, but something about Kincaid got to her. She dropped her gaze from his face.

"What's he to you, mister?"

"He's my son."

"Well, in that case. . . . He's upstairs."

"Show me."

She nodded and started toward the stairway. As Kincaid followed her, he saw that Amberton, behind the bar now, was shoving cartridges from a box into the cylinder of a revolver. He would have to keep an even sharper eye on him, now that the man was armed.

When he started up the stairs, Tom Scarlett called to him, "You, Kincaid! This is no time to be going off with a floosie."

The scout's laughter was echoed by a frightened yell from Tip Ryan.

"Here they come!"

The woman opened the door to an upstairs room. "In there," she said.

Kincaid stepped through the doorway and his heart gave

a wild, joyous lurch as he saw his son sitting crosslegged on a rumpled bed.

At that instant the Apaches launched their attack with a chorus of unholy yells and a ragged volley of rifle fire.

XV

DANNY HAD BEEN frightened all this while, but at sight of his father his fright was forgotten. He shouted, "Daddy!" and scrambled off the bed and flung his small self at Kincaid. Dropping his rifle, Kincaid scooped him up and hugged him tightly. The feel of chubby arms about his neck again was comforting. A small, smooth cheek once more pressed against his hard, bristly face.

"Daddy, I was afraid." His fright wasn't entirely gone, after all. A shudder ran through him. "Why did that man bring me here?"

"It's all right now," Kincaid said, his voice choked up and his eyes brimming with tears. "We'll go home soon—back to Aunt Louise's house."

"Will you stay there with me and Aunt Louise?"

"Well, we'll see," Kincaid told him, unable at this moment to say that, no, he couldn't stay with them. "Right now, I've got to do some shooting. Those are Apaches outside." He put the boy down. "Look, Danny; you get under the bed—out of harm's way."

"All right, Daddy."

Kincaid picked his rifle up, went to the window. A small opening, it had no glass. It was covered over by a burlap sack nailed to the frame. He ripped the burlap away, looked out. The Apaches had dismounted, left their ponies far back. They were crouched behind rocks, bushes,

clumps of cactus, and firing steadily at the building. Plenty of ammunition, Kincaid reflected. Furnished by Mark Amberton, no doubt. The men downstairs were returning the fire, without any luck as yet, so far as Kincaid could see.

He had the better position, here at the second-floor window. He drew a bead on a warrior half-hidden behind an ocotillo, and drove a careful shot at him.

The Apache reared to his feet, took a few wobbly steps, then fell to the ground and lay still. First blood. Kincaid saw a naked, coppery figure snaking its way along a shallow arroyo, making for the barn. He lined his sights on it, fired once and then again. The copper figure crawled no more.

Downstairs, the Mexican's shotgun roared. A waste. He could not reach the attackers with such a weapon. A rifle and two handguns kept up a steady fire, with the latter weapons probably doing no better than the shotgun at such long range. The rifle was Tom Scarlett's, and upon seeing a third Apache hit, Kincaid knew the scout had accounted for that one.

Kincaid fired at another warrior, and missed. Fired once more, and once more missed. Now one of the Apaches spotted him, began sniping at him. Another joined him, and soon three rifles were spewing lead his way. Poor shots, the Apaches. Most of the slugs hit the outside adobe wall; only a few came through the window. Keeping to one side of the opening, Kincaid was safe enough.

"Daddy, I'm scared!"

"It's all right, Danny. The Indians will go away soon."

He hoped they would. But they persisted. He exposed himself to return their fire. And below, Scarlett, Mark Amberton, Tip Ryan, and the Mexican continued to shoot as steadily as the Apaches. Then there was a lull. The silence was jarring.

Danny's small voice came from under the bed. "Now are they gone, Daddy?"

"Not yet, son. Stay where you are."

The Apaches had stopped shooting on some signal, and after a few minutes, on another signal, they came from their cover and charged in a ragged wave. Fifteen howling, shooting savages, driven by bloodlust. They surged into the yard, where Amberton's forgotten horse went into a frenzy of bucking as, fear-crazed, it fled before them. They seemed about to sweep right on into the building.

Along with the other defenders, Kincaid began shooting at what was now almost pointblank range. He had fearful visions of a massacre, of those taken alive being put to a slow, agonizing death. He fired with care, making sure of each shot. The wave dwindled away, and suddenly what was left of it surged no farther. In a moment the surviving Apaches were in retreat, dragging away with them their wounded but not their dead.

Weary of killing, Kincaid held his fire, willing to let them go. But downstairs two guns—a rifle and a revolver—kept hammering away until the Indians were out of bullet range. Eleven warriors took to their ponies and rode off, several of them wounded. They left seven others behind, dead.

Kincaid drew a deep, relieved breath and wiped sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve. The stink and taste of powdersmoke was not as easily gotten rid of as the sweat.

Turning from the window, he said, "All right, son. It's over now."

Danny crawled from under the bed, jumped up, ran to him.

Kincaid carried the boy downstairs. The people in the room below had not come through the fight unscathed. Tip Ryan lay dead beneath one of the windows. No fighter, maybe, but he had died fighting. The Mexican had been hit in the left arm. He sat on a bench, his fat face contorted by pain. One of the Mexican women was working his shirt off, and the other came hurrying with a basin of water and cloth for bandages. Tom Scarlett lounged in the doorway, lighting a thin, black cigar. The red-haired woman came from the side room and covered Tip Ryan with a blanket. Mark

Amberton was behind the bar, pouring a drink. The revolver he had used against the Apaches lay on the bar, within easy reach of his hand. Kincaid put Danny down on a bench.

Looking at Amberton, he said, "So Ryan got it. If there was any right in this world, it would have been you."

Amberton gave him a look that had pure hatred in it. But he said nothing, merely picked up his drink and took a long pull at it.

Scarlett said, "Now that's interesting. Why should it have been him, Kincaid?"

"He furnished the rifles that Matt Hagarchy delivered to the Apaches."

Amberton said, "That's something you'll never prove."

Scarlett eyed Kincaid with a lively interest. "Won't you? Can't you?"

Kincaid shook his head. "I only have Hagarchy's word for it, and he's dead. Still, it's true." Then, to Amberton, "I'll keep my word. I'm letting you get away with what you've done to me and my boy and with your having murdered Frank Hammond—providing you leave the Territory."

Amberton finished his drink, reached for the bottle to pour another. He was far from being his dapper self. His clothes were dirty, rumpled, torn in places. His hair was straggly, his face stubbly with beard. But he had regained his nerve and now grinned with a show of cockiness.

"I've been doing some thinking about that, Kincaid. You can't prove that I furnished Matt Hagarchy with rifles for the Apaches or any of the other charges you make against me. I deny that I had anything to do with Frank Hammond's murder and with your boy having been brought here. Hagarchy's dead and so is Tip Ryan, and dead men make poor witnesses. We'll just go back to town, and you can tell your story and I'll tell mine. We'll see which is believed."

He took some of his drink, and when setting it down again, he let his hand rest on the bar within inches of the gun. And the gun was, Kincaid saw, already cocked.

Now Kincaid knew how it was to be. Amberton had no intention of letting him tell his story in Tucson. He had too much to lose—his business, his promising future. Maybe in his conceit he still believed that he had a chance with Louise Hammond. He feared that Kincaid's word would be taken over his own. Or at least that Kincaid's accusations would make him forever suspect, even in the eyes of the other members of the Indian Ring. So he had decided to lay his life on the line, here and now. And he was confident that he had the edge—the cocked revolver close to his hand against the rifle that Kincaid held low at his side, unready.

A part of Kincaid was heartily sick of killing, while another part of him realized that he could not win the showdown Amberton wanted. His period of not giving a damn was over. Life seemed precious to him again, now that he knew how important it was in this hard world that a boy have his father to watch over him. For Danny's sake, he must stay alive.

"All right, you'll take me," he said. "But before I go down I'll nail you. I promise you that. This is a game neither of us can win."

"I'm not as sure of that as you are, Kincaid."

"You'd better be, before it's too late."

Too late already, Kincaid realized. Amberton had made his decision, committed himself. His hand moved the few inches to the gun and closed on its butt. Now he had the complete edge, and for him it was no longer much of a gamble. He could feel sure that Kincaid couldn't bring his rifle into action with .45 caliber slugs slamming into him, tearing him apart. A feeling of sadness took hold of Kincaid. His fear of death was not all that great, but for Danny to be without him . . .

With his left hand, he gestured to the red-haired woman. "Take the boy outside," he said. And to his son, "Danny, go with the lady."

From the doorway, Tom Scarlett said, "Your word is

good enough for me, Kincaid—without any proof. You say he furnished rifles to the Apaches, and I believe you. So if he kills you, I'll kill him to keep him from putting more guns in their hands."

Quick to realize that he had lost the edge, Amberton jerked his hand away from the gun. He gave Scarlett a long, bitter look, then shifted his gaze back to Kincaid. Seeing that Kincaid had not raised his rifle by even a quarter of an inch, he grinned with a show of bravado.

"So I lose this hand," he said. "But when I deal myself another—"

"Get out, man," Kincaid cut in. "Consider yourself lucky and clear out."

"Out of the Territory, like he's already told you," Tom Scarlett added.

Amberton came from behind the bar, crossed to the doorway, and Scarlett moved aside so he could go through it. He paused there just long enough to give Kincaid one last hate-filled look, then went out. A moment later he had caught up his horse and was riding away from the place.

Kincaid relaxed, breathed more easily. It had been close, too close. Looking at Scarlett, he said, "Thanks. Beyond all doubt, you saved my life."

"I owed you," Scarlett said. "Or the Army did. For finding out who's been doing the gun-running. Just for a second or two, I had a notion to let him have it. It still bothers me to have let him ride out. Rifles to the Apaches, murdering Frank Hammond, having your boy taken away. He doesn't deserve to get off scot-free."

They rode out an hour later, after Kincaid had eaten the meal he asked the red-haired woman to fix for him. His hunger had finally gotten the better of him. While he ate, three Mexicans had ridden in and the proprietor of the place, still looking sickly from his arm wound, had hired them to dig graves for Tip Ryan and the dead Apaches.

Kincaid rode with Danny sitting sideways in front of him and supported by his right arm. Scarlett was going along

only as far as the Benson road, then would turn west to rejoin the cavalry detail with which he was serving.

"Those boys will do some bellyaching when I tell them they missed out on a fight."

Kincaid chuckled. "Don't they always miss out on the fighting?"

"Now don't be so hard on the boys in blue," Scarlett said. "They do their best. Without them this Territory would be in worse shape than it is."

They were halfway to the road when Scarlett jerked his horse to a sudden stop and pulled his rifle from its boot.

"A horse yonder. In a hollow. A saddled animal."

Kincaid lowered Danny to the ground. "Lie down, son, and keep still." He reached for his rifle and swung down.

A rifle cracked from the brush ahead, and Tom Scarlett uttered a grunt, dropped his weapon, reeled in the saddle. As the scout fell from his horse, Kincaid, bent low, started running toward a clump of prickly pear. The hidden rifle cracked again; he felt the slug tear through his left pants leg. Another shot, the slug ripping through the cactus clump an instant after he dropped prone there.

Amberton, he thought.

Amberton using one of the dead Apaches' rifles that he had picked up when riding out.

Scarlett called, "You'll have to take him on your own, Kincaid. He got me through the right arm. It's our friend, eh?"

"Yeah—our friend," Kincaid called back. "He wants us both dead so he can go back to Tucson and have things the way they always were."

Amberton fired again, and again the prickly pear was ripped by a slug. Kincaid flinched, hugged the ground. The tinhorn was expert with firearms, and he never stopped trying. No loser, he. He shaped his own destiny. And he paid his way with other men's lives. Anger and hatred kept Kincaid from fearing for his own life.

Amberton's position was marked for him now by a little haze of powdersmoke that wafted up on the still air. The man was in a tangle of greasewood and cholla. Kincaid raked the tangle with slugs. He heard an outcry, and a thrashing about. A trick? He kept down, waited. Now there was only silence.

After a time, Scarlett called, "Think you got him?"

Kincaid didn't know. There was never any knowing with an enemy as tricky as Mark Amberton.

The silence lasted, outlasted Kincaid's patience.

He rose, sprinted toward a gully. No shots probed for him. He crawled along the gully until flanking Amberton's position. When rearing up, ready to shoot again, he saw the man lying face-down, unmoving. His rifle lay beside him.

Kincaid got up, walked toward him. He kicked the Apache rifle aside, then turned the man over onto his back. A slug had caught Amberton between the eyes. A lucky shot—for him, Ed Kincaid.

Walking back to his son and Tom Scarlett, Kincaid felt tired to the core. His weariness was as much of the spirit as of the body. He had experienced too much violence.

"You can get up now, Danny."

"Is the bad man shot?"

"Yes, he's shot," Kincaid said.

A hell of a thing for a four-year-old boy to have witnessed.

Scarlett's wound was a bad crease, but he considered himself lucky. If Amberton had been a little more patient and waited until they were a bit closer, he would certainly have killed Scarlett and perhaps Kincaid as well.

The scout carried cloth for bandages in his saddlebags. Kincaid bound his wound and made a sling for the injured arm. While so occupied, he wondered aloud what they should do about the dead man. His hatred for Amberton was gone. He didn't like leaving him there for the buzzards and coyotes.

"I'll have the soldiers take him to town," Scarlett said.

"And I'll explain to the sheriff how he got killed, so nobody can raise any questions about his death."

They got mounted again, and at the road parted company. Scarlett turned west, Kincaid and Danny east.

Late in the evening of that same day, Kincaid sat in the parlor of Louise Hammond's house while she, having put Danny to bed, was in the kitchen making a fresh pot of coffee. She had asked him to stay longer, saying that there was something she wanted to discuss with him.

He had been reluctant to leave, anyway. He had come for supper on invitation, and he was at ease now in a comfortable chair. He was freshly barbered, and he'd had a bath in the barber's backroom tub. He was wearing a clean shirt and pants, having bought them before going for his shave, haircut and bath. He had indulged himself farther with some cigars. He was smoking one now and relishing the extravagance.

He was still deeply tired, but his weariness was no longer of the spirit, merely physical. Only one thing troubled him. Tomorrow he must return to G-Bar Ranch. He did not know if he would be able to bear the loneliness. But he had no choice. A man had to earn a livelihood.

He would have to hire a rider, to help him bring the stolen G-Bar cattle back from that valley where he had killed Durango and Matt Hagarchy. What had happened there seemed a long time ago. Even the morning's happenings already seemed remote in time. A man had a faculty for forgetting, once trouble was past. It was good that he had. Otherwise, he would be constantly tormented.

Louise came with two cups of coffee. He was much too aware of her as a woman tonight, and a sense of guilt kept him from looking directly at her. He took one of the cups of coffee, thanked her for it.

Settling herself on the sofa, she said brightly, "Now we'll talk business, Ed, if you don't mind. There is a clause in the contract I signed with Mark Amberton. It is that in the event of his death the ownership of the Territorial Freighting

Company reverts to me, provided I haven't been paid in full. I insisted upon the clause because Frank's death had occurred while he was operating the business, driving one of the company's rigs. I feared that the same thing might happen to Mark."

Kincaid nodded. "That was a wise move on your part."

Louise smiled ruefully. "I believed then that ordinary holdup men had killed Frank," she said. "Anyway, I now own the company again and I'll need a man to operate it for me."

Now Kincaid did look directly at her, with surprise. "You don't mean me?"

"Yes, you, Ed."

"I don't know a thing about the freighting business."

"You can learn it. You'll have Sam Evans, the book-keeper, to teach you. He was with Frank as well as with Mark, and he knows all the ins and outs of the business."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"I can trust you, Ed. And it would be a fine opportunity for you. I'm not trying to arrange your life for you but . . . well, I think you should sell your cattle and give up that lonely ranch. And have a better life for yourself."

Kincaid frowned, but only with deep thought. He hadn't even imagined that such a thing could be for him. He had believed he would always be bound to the raising of cattle, to living out in the middle of nowhere and knowing only hardship and danger. This offer seemed too good to be true.

There was, he realized, more to the offer than she had put into words. He sensed that from her manner. Some day, after a decent length of time, she would be more to him than his sister-in-law turned employer. He did not need her to tell him that. He had indeed been her first choice, and her feelings toward him had not changed. Some things a man knew because he felt them.

"Ed," Louise said uneasily. "Ed, I haven't offended you?"

He shook his head that she hadn't. He couldn't say it with words. At this moment, at this turning point of his life, he was too choked up with feeling to speak.

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