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TRACKS *of the* HUNTER

JOHN CALLAHAN

The price of
his boy's life
was seven
bandits' scalps

Across the border, the young son of rancher John Garrett was sitting in a Mexican jail waiting for the firing squad. He had been one of a band of desperadoes who had raided across the border—and the charges against him included robbery, kidnapping, and murder.

But the captain of *Rurales* wanted the real ringleaders and Garrett's son was to be the coin with which he would buy their heads. For he offered the tough rancher a bargain. Bring back the seven who had escaped and he would free young Garrett.

The seven were all alive in Arizona Territory, whooping it up around Tombstone, or planning more deviltry among the lawless camps of that frontier wilderness. They were all killers, all ruthless men.

But did John Garrett really have a choice?

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



TRACKS
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HUNTER
JOHN CALLAHAN

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RETURN TO RIO FUEGO

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I

AT FORTY-FIVE, a still good age, John Garrett was prosperous enough to indulge himself in any way he pleased except one: he could not afford to venture beyond the limits of his own range in a carefree manner. He would have been gambling with his life.

Traveling now across the forty miles of desert country lying between Anchor headquarters and the town of Valido, he rode in his topless, double-hitched buggy with a rifle across his lap and had two of his best hands along as outriders. He kept alert every second, and so glimpsed, while lighting one of his thin, black Mexican cigars, a flash of reflected sunlight among a jumble of rocks ahead.

"Esteban, pull up."

"Sí, Patrón."

The old *vaquero* reined in his team, a pair of lively little

Spanish mules. He was attuned to the dangers of this harsh and lawless land as keenly as his employer. Only Anchor Ranch was safe, and it was so because of John Garrett's ruthlessness in leading his hard-bitten crew of Mexicans and Anglos against marauding Apaches and even more savage white desperadoes.

Arizona was the last haven for men who lived outside the law, and they had made it a paradise for themselves and a purgatory for others. Some ranchers paid for protection and thus gained a measure of safety for their persons and property. But John Garrett, up from Texas with all he owned a half dozen years ago, would pay tribute to no man. He had, therefore, countless enemies among the outlaw fraternity; the score of rustlers, horse thieves and killers who had died before Anchor guns or at the end of Anchor ropes had many friends still living.

Conditions were such that from far-off Washington came reports that the President himself was concerned and considering martial law for the criminal-infested southeastern portion of the Territory.

Meanwhile, what lawmen there were—such as Deputy U. S. Marshal Wyatt Earp and Sheriff John Behan—feuded with each other and even consorted with the outlaws, and honest men had to enforce their own brand of law with the Colt's revolver and the Winchester rifle.

Garrett gazed steadily at the rocks, a towering maze of huge slabs piled one atop the other that reminded him of Devil's Den at Gettysburg where, more than a quarter of a century ago, he had taken part in some of the bloodiest fighting of the War Between the States. That flash he'd glimpsed . . . sunlight reflected from a gun barrel, unless he had just imagined it. No, it had been real enough. Some

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

sixth sense, some animal instinct, told him there was danger—that somebody was lying in wait there to ambush him.

Road agents waiting for a chance victim to rob?

Or a man wanting revenge on him, John Garrett?

If the latter, how had he learned that John Garrett would be traveling this lonely trace of a road today?

From Ed Lambert, the lawyer who had sent that letter by rider to Anchor Ranch yesterday? That letter asking him, Garrett, to come to Valido at his earliest convenience to discuss a matter of utmost importance . . . was it bait for a trap?

More than twenty years in the cattle business—a business that had a way of corrupting many men—had taught Garrett not to trust anyone completely. And this moment he had his suspicions about Ed Lambert.

Practicing law in a back-country town such as Valido was not the surest way to earn a livelihood, and Lambert was far from prosperous. Having called upon him occasionally for legal advice, Garrett knew that the lawyer was barely making ends meet—and Garrett had long suspected that some out-of-the-ordinary reason had caused him to hang out his shingle in such a place. Ed Lambert might be no more honest than he had to be, with a price for selling out a client . . .

Maybe if a man or a group of men went to him and said, "We want John Garrett, and we'll make it worth your while if you help us get him." Or maybe if that man or group said, "If you know what's good for you, you'll help us nail John Garrett's hide to the fence."

In either case, mightn't Lambert have agreed, out of ambition or fear, to send a message that would cause Garrett to set out for Valido—so he could be bushwhacked along the way?

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Another point, Garrett thought. Why didn't Lambert come to Anchor instead of having me go to Valido? He's the one down at his heels. He needs me more than I need him.

The two outriders had come up and reined in, one to either side of the buggy. The older, a man Garrett's age, asked, "You see something out there, boss?"

"A flash of sunlight, maybe on a gun barrel."

"We'll ride up and have a look, Tip and me."

Garrett said, "Not straight on, Matt." He wasn't one to let other men serve him as a shield. "Flank those rocks. . . . You from the east; Tip from the west. And take care, both of you."

He got down from the buggy with his rifle, the cigar still clenched between his teeth. As Matt Hagarchy swung off the road into the brush to one side and Tip Ryan to the other, Garrett looked after the latter with concern.

"You, Tip. . . . Don't you go off half-cocked and get yourself shot."

Ryan twisted in the saddle and looked back with a grin on his homely youthful face. "I ain't no bravo. Mr. Garrett. I don't take fool chances."

Garrett nodded, and wondered why he had thought it necessary to give the young rider that additional warning. Because Tip Ryan was the same age as his son, a mere twenty, and he needed to exert a parental influence upon him after having failed with Dave?

Scowling, he thought, *Maybe so.*

To the leathery faced *vaquero* in the buggy he said, "Follow along a little way behind, Esteban."

He worked the Winchester's lever, throwing a cartridge into the firing chamber, and started walking toward the mass of rocks a quarter of a mile ahead.

He was a tall, rangy man, angular of face, skin turned

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

bronze by sun and wind, hair gray at the temples. Having proved himself rawhide tough, he was known as a hard man—and his prospering during the past half dozen years had not softened him in the least.

In his usual attire, range clothes, he could have been mistaken for a raggedy-pants cowman or even a cowhand by a stranger. Today he was duded up, freshly shaved, close-cropped moustache trimmed, wearing his town-going clothes: pearl gray flat-crowned Stetson, dark gray broadcloth suit, white shirt, maroon string tie, handtooled black boots.

Since the death of Martha, his wife, four years ago, he seldom got duded up or took trips, and this morning old Sam Atkins, who had once been young Dave's tutor and was now the ranch bookkeeper, had said, chuckling, "A woman would say you look real handsome, John."

Garrett had laughed, knowing that a woman would have to like roughhewn men to call him handsome.

He was within easy rifle range of the rocks now, and his two riders were gone from his sight. That sixth sense of his, that animal instinct, triggered a warning in his mind. He knew—felt it—that an unseen eye watched him over the sights of a rifle. A quiver of mingled excitement and fear coursed through him, and he swerved abruptly off the road to the only cover at hand, a clump of cholla—poor cover at best. As he crouched down behind the spiny growth, the expected crack of the hidden rifle drove its whiplash sound against the desert quiet. The slug tore at the cholla and ripped away one of its pincushion branches, causing him to flinch and drop flat.

As he brought his rifle to his shoulder, a raucous voice belled from the rocks, "Got you, Garrett! This time you're a goner, you high and mighty son!"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Garrett knew that voice: Russ Maugher's. He remembered it from nine months ago, when the man had come to Anchor to claim the body of his son Luke. With a half dozen other hardcased riders, Luke Maugher had made a rustling foray onto Anchor range and had run off fifty head of Anchor cattle. One of the ranchhands had cut their trail by chance. With a dozen of his men, Garrett had followed the trail into the Sarbo Hills and then cut in ahead of the rustlers and the stolen stock.

Taken by surprise, the thieves had fled back onto Anchor and there Luke, his horse playing out, had made a stand of it alone. He'd killed one Anchor hand and wounded another before Garrett had managed to bring him down.

They'd buried Luke where he fell, and a week later the elder Maugher, also a notorious thief, had come, bold as brass, to Anchor headquarters with a wagon and team for his son's body.

Grieving for Luke, filled with hatred for the man who'd killed him, Russ Maugher had ranted wildly that he would have revenge. His booming, fanatical voice had filled Anchor's broad ranchyard as he swore that he would have John Garrett's life for that of his boy, the youngest and most favored of his four sons.

Garrett had heard him out, then warned him against such foolhardiness. "Don't throw your life away too, man," he had said, not unmoved by the outlaw's grief.

Nine months had passed, and Garrett had all but forgotten that tragic time. But now, as Maugher sought his revenge at risk of his own life, Garrett thought, *The man's loco for sure*, and was again touched by compassion. But the outlaw's rifle opened up again, the shots coming as fast as he could work lever and trigger. Garrett could not sustain

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

a feeling of pity for a man trying his level best to kill him. He had Maugher's position marked now. A haze of powder-smoke was rising from a ledge halfway up the staggered rock slabs. Garrett raised himself on his left elbow and drove three fast shots at a point just below the smoke. Throwing another cartridge into the rifle's chamber, he waited for the bushwhacker to reply. Two more shots came from the rocks, and he fired again—this time emptying the Winchester. He flattened himself after the last shot, reaching to his gun-belt for fresh loads and shoving the .44-40's into the rifle's magazine. No slugs probed for him while he reloaded, and he began to think he had nailed Maugher with a lucky shot.

Lucky?

It could be called that, of course. But it was senseless, the killing a man had to do to stay alive in this country.

Suddenly he heard a yell of alarm. It was echoed by a flurry of shots from farther away. Realizing that it was Tip Ryan who had yelled, that the youth was in trouble, Garrett rose from behind the cholla clump and ran along the road. A rider emerged from behind the rocks at a hard run, striking out to the west—in Ryan's direction. A bulky, bearded man on a big gray horse.

Maugher was using his handgun now, firing in the direction he was headed—at Ryan, of course. Garrett swung his rifle up, and in taking aim, tried to allow for the outlaw's traveling at a gallop. He squeezed off his shot—and missed. Maugher continued his flight, not shooting now. Tip Ryan wasn't shooting any longer, either.

Maugher looked back over his shoulder and shouted, "Next time, Garrett! Next time my luck will be better!"

An instant later he was lost to Garrett's sight in the rough,

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

brushy terrain to the west. Soon the pounding of his horse's hooves faded away.

Garrett again ran along the road, then turned into the brush opposite the rocks—looking for Tip Ryan and fearful of what he would find when seeing him.

He saw the cowhand's roan horse first, riderless now. Ryan lay on the ground, beyond the animal. He was on his back, his body in a twisted position. His gun lay close to his right hand. He had been shot twice in the chest, one of the slugs no doubt having found his heart. His mouth was agape, his eyes staring. His lifeless face had a wondering expression frozen on it, as though he were asking, "Why me? Why, when I was so young?"

Garrett swore under his breath, and when Matt Hagarchy came riding up, turned to him with his face bleak and angry.

"Another good man lost—only a boy, really. He'll be the thirteenth buried at Anchor. Thirteen in six years. Hell; no ranch is worth it!"

Hagarchy had a dark, tough face, but it was now saddened. "My fault, partly. He wanted to come along, and I let him talk me into letting him instead of bringing an older man. He was good with a gun, and plenty nervy. I figured he would do. Still, I've got to take some of the blame."

Garrett shook his head. "No use you and me feeling that way. It's this damn country; it spawns the worst kind of men. If not Apaches, then Russ Maugher's kind. That Maugher . . . I should have shot him for a mad dog when he came to Anchor that time."

"We'll get him," Hagarchy said with certainty. "Sooner or later, we'll get him. You still going to town, boss?"

Garrett was still badly shaken by Tip Ryan's death, and slow to reply. He kept thinking, *Only a boy . . . no older than*

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

my Dave. The heart had gone out of him, and right now he had no wish to discuss business with Ed Lambert. But the lawyer's letter had said, "A matter of the utmost importance to you." When reading it he had thought that Lambert must have had some word of his son. Only Dave, gone from home for nearly a year and his whereabouts unknown, was of the utmost importance to Garrett—and Ed Lambert knew that.

But maybe there was *no* matter of the utmost importance. Maybe Russ Maugher had gotten Lambert to write that letter, either by paying him or scaring him, to lure Garrett into that bushwhack trap.

Word of Dave or a trick? Garrett had to find out which—today.

"Yes, I'm going on to town," he said. "You take Tip back to Anchor, Matt. Have a coffin made and a grave dug. We'll bury him tomorrow."

"Esteban can take him," Matt Hagarthy said. "I'm going on to Valido with you."

His tone was flat and final, allowing no argument. He had been with John Garrett forever, and so could have his way in this.

II

AFTER GETTING Esteban started for Anchor with Tip Ryan's body, John Garrett and Matt Hagarthy drove on toward Valido. The latter now handled the reins, and the two of them traveled in silence, each lost in his own gloomy thoughts.

Garrett had to face the hard truth: despite his having

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

prospered, he'd otherwise had more than his share of bad luck since coming to the Territory.

He had left Texas after losing a large portion of his range in a dispute with a company-owned cow outfit. His title to the land had been none too clear, and he had come out loser when the big outfit contested his ownership in the courts.

With the Texas cattle country overcrowded, he'd had no hope of finding other range there at a fair price. So he had come to Arizona with his wife and son, his household furnishings and ranch gear, his cattle and horses, and his crew of good, tough men—and settled upon some of the free range that had actually gone begging at that time.

The range he had taken was lush with grass and well-watered, and his herd had flourished. He had gone into Mexico and bought more stock; he had trailed beef to the Army posts, the Indian reservations and the mining camps, and it had brought a good price. There had been no letup in the flow of money to Anchor Ranch, once it started. He had prospered here in the Territory as he had never done in Texas.

But his wife's health had begun to fail soon after they settled here. He had taken her to a doctor in Tucson, then to one in Denver. Neither had been able to help her, and finally she had to go to St. Louis, where she had been born and raised and still had brothers and sisters. He had taken her there, and Dave too. He had bought and furnished a house for them, and gotten Dave, then sixteen, into a good private school. Back among her kinfolk, Martha had seemed to recover her health. Certainly she had been happier—and Garrett had realized then, after their many years together,

that she had never liked ranch life, that she had tolerated it only because of her love for him.

He had returned to Anchor Ranch, happy over her seemingly improved health, but almost unbearably lonely. Then, after only three months, the letter had come from Dave. . . . Martha was ill again, very ill this time. She had died before Garrett reached St. Louis.

He had wanted Dave to return to Anchor with him, but the boy had been enjoying city life and school. It had always been Martha's wish that Dave receive a good education, and Garrett had been reminded of that by one of her brothers, Richard Logan, who had offered to take Dave into his home and look after him. Once Dave had finished school, Richard Logan had said, he could come into the bank the family owned.

Out of respect to his wife's memory, Garrett had let Dave stay on in St. Louis—but only to complete his education. He had gotten him to promise to return to the ranch after being graduated. Dave had not kept that promise. He had taken a job with the Logan bank, and that had been a terrible disappointment to John Garrett. Like most fathers, Garrett had not been striving to acquire an estate only for himself. His thought had always been that Anchor would one day be Dave's. With his son having turned his back on the ranch, he had felt that all his efforts were for nothing.

Then, a year and a half ago, there had been a letter from Richard Logan. Dave had quit his job and disappeared, taking with him two thousand dollars of the bank's money. The youth had gotten in with bad company, the letter had said, and taken to carousing night after night . . . drinking, gambling, running after loose women.

Garrett had made another trip to St. Louis. He'd paid the

bank the two thousand dollars Dave had taken, and he'd hired the Pinkertons to look for his son. The detectives had located Dave three months later in Chicago, the stolen money gone and Dave so hard up that he was glad to accept a train ticket to Arizona.

When Dave had arrived at Anchor, Garrett had simply said, "You've tried your way and it didn't work out. Now you'll try my way. It'll make a man of you—an honest man—or break you."

He had put him to work as a ranchhand, expecting him to learn to be one—and eventually learn the cattle business, so that when the time came he could take over the operation of Anchor.

Garrett broke the long silence between himself and Matt Hagarchy, saying, "Tip had good stuff in him. He grew up an orphan and hadn't any schooling worth mentioning, but he was making a man of himself. Why couldn't my son have turned out like him, with all the advantages he had?"

Hagarchy shrugged. "Maybe Dave just needs to sow some wild oats, boss."

"He sowed plenty before I brought him home."

"Some hombres spend their whole lives at it."

"A man who does that has a wild streak."

"Dave's just a little rambunctious."

"He didn't even begin to be a ranch hand the few months he was at Anchor."

Always a tolerant man, Hagarchy said, "That's understandable. He was the boss's son. He felt too good to do the dirty work."

Garrett swore under his breath. "I did the dirty work from the time I was big enough to handle the chores. If I shirked, my old man used a harness strap on me. Maybe that was

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

where I failed. I had a tutor for Dave and let him keep his nose in a book instead of putting him to doing chores. And I never used a strap on him."

He was blaming himself, but the truth was that he had given in to Martha on how Dave was to be raised. She had wanted the boy to be something more than his father.

Hagarthy said, "One thing you've got to face, boss."

"What's that?"

"Dave's not natured like you. He wasn't cast in the same mold. No offense intended."

"None taken," Garrett said, and fell silent again.

Dave and he had had a nasty row, just before the boy left Anchor for good. He had been paying Dave wages—not a top hand's wages, of course, since the youth wasn't one—but thirty dollars each payday so that Dave would be making good the money he'd taken from the Logan bank.

At Anchor, only one-fourth of the hands were paid at a time. This was so that most of the crew was always at the ranch, in case of trouble. On receiving his pay, each man was given two days off—to go to Valido, if he wished. The last time Dave had been paid, he'd set off for town with five other hands. He hadn't stopped at Valido but had gone on to Tombstone. He'd been gone not two days, but two weeks.

When he'd returned to Anchor, Garrett had given him a good dressing-down. Dave had lost his temper, called him some hard names: tyrant, slave-driver, Simon Legree. They'd had it hot and heavy until Dave, ordered back to work, had yelled that he was through nursemaiding a lot of stinking cows. He'd packed his gear, saddled a fresh horse, and ridden off at a hard lope.

Wherever he'd gone, he had stayed—and for almost a year there had been no word of him. This time Garrett

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

hadn't hired the Pinkertons to look for him, but he had written letters to Sheriff Behan at Tombstone and Sheriff Paul at Tucson, asking them to keep an eye on Dave if he showed up in their bailiwicks. Paul had replied some time later, saying that so far as he could determine the young man hadn't come to Tucson. Behan hadn't answered, but six months ago, in Tombstone on business, Garrett had made inquiries. He'd learned that Dave had been in that wild, tough mining town until not long ago. Where the youth had gone, nobody could—or would—say.

One thing that Garrett had been told disheartened him. While in Tombstone, Dave had associated with the sporting gentry. He had worked as a faro dealer and had been on friendly terms with a woman who operated a parlor house.

Bad company again, John Garrett had thought. *He'll end up in trouble, sure.*

Breaking the silence again, he said, "I'd give plenty to know where the boy is."

"If I were you," Matt Hagarthy said, "I wouldn't worry too much about him. If he gets in a jam, you'll hear from him. He'll want you to get him out of it."

"If he's able to," Garrett said.

He was thinking of Tip Ryan again, of how quickly and unexpectedly life had ended for him. It could happen to Dave too. . . .

They came to Valido shortly after four o'clock, Hagarthy reining in the mules at McDade's Livery Stable.

Getting down from the buggy, Garrett said, "Take a room and your meals at the hotel, Matt. I'll pay the bill. If I don't see you before, we'll start for home about seven in the morning. Need any drinking money?"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Hagarthy shook his head. Grinning, he said, "I don't hit the bars hard, don't gamble much, and don't pick the fanciest house in Burro Alley. I can make a few dollars go a long way."

Garrett had left his rifle in the buggy. He started along the main street. Valido was an old Mexican town, and much of it was still Spanish-speaking. The newer part, the Anglo part, was made up of jerry-built plank houses and buildings rather than adobe. The town was enjoying a small boom due to some low-grade silver-mining operations in the nearby Packsaddle Mountains. It had a full quota of saloons, gambling dives, dance halls, and other dead-falls. The business area was all hustle and bustle.

Ed Lambert's office was located on the opposite side of the street, and when starting across Garrett was forced to stop and let a freight rig pass. Then, starting on, he had to step quickly back to keep from being ridden down by three horsemen coming along at a hard lope. One of the trio yelled at him in patent insult.

"You, Garrett; watch where you're going!"

He didn't know the rider from Adam, but wasn't surprised that he was known to him. A rough-looking lot, the three were probably of the same stripe as the Maughers and so someone at sometime must have pointed Garrett out to them as an enemy of the entire breed. Anger stirred in him as he went on, not for the hard case's remark but for the ugly fact that there existed no force for law and order to keep such men—conscienceless brutes, he considered them—from acting as though the Territory were their private hunting ground.

Ed Lambert's law office was on the second floor of a small building, with an open, outside stairway leading to it. Reaching the landing above, Garrett knocked on the door and then

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

opened it when Lambert called out, "Come in, come in. Ah, John Garrett. . . . It's good to see you again."

The lawyer dropped the document he had been reading and rose from the chair at his rolltop desk. He came forward smiling, his right hand extended. He was a darkly handsome man in his mid-thirties, amiable of manner and possessing a certain air that should have inspired confidence. Shaking hands with him, Garrett was reminded of his suspicions of the man. He held to them for only an instant now, somehow convinced that Lambert hadn't told Russ Maugher about his coming to Valido today. He now suspected the rider who had brought Lambert's letter.

"Well, John, how have you been?"

This was something new. Always before he had been "Mr. Garrett" or "sir" to this man, never "John." There was more new, he realized. Ed Lambert was no longer seedy looking. He had gotten rid of his familiar shiny serge suit and scuffed shoes. He wore instead a black broadcloth suit with a vest of a gaudy flower pattern and shiny black boots. Always shaggy-haired before, he was now freshly barbered. And his office . . . once sparsely furnished, it was now adequately so. Since Garrett had been there last, Lambert had acquired a glass-doored bookcase for his law tomes, a couple of new chairs, and a table upon which stood a green-shaded student lamp.

Taking this all in, Garrett said, "I've been the same as always, Ed. But you—you seem to be doing much better by yourself."

Looking about his well-furnished office and even down at his new sartorial elegance, Lambert smiled hugely.

"Things are looking up for me somewhat," he said. "And

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

when I was on a business trip to Tucson, I went on a shopping spree. There's a lot of trouble over mining claims in the Packsaddles, and many of the disputants come to me for legal advice—since I'm the only attorney nearer than Tombstone. But sit down, John. Would you like a cigar?"

He produced a box of cigars from a drawer of his desk.

Garrett declined the offer, saying he would smoke one of his own. "I'm used to Mexican stogies. Good cigars are too mild for me." He took one of the Mexican cigars from his pocket as he sat down. "Tell me, Ed, that man you sent out to Anchor with your letter. Do you trust him?"

"Bill Dobbs? I consider him as trustworthy as most men hereabouts, though that isn't saying a great deal. Why do you ask?"

"I was bushwhacked on my way here," Garrett said. "By a hard case who bears me a grudge. I don't believe he just happened to be out there along the road—at the right place for an ambush. I think somebody told him I'd be coming to town today. I was wondering if that somebody was you—" he smiled over that, to take the sting out of it—"or the rider."

Frowning, looking concerned, Lambert said, "It could have been Dobbs. You'll recall that I told him to ask if you could make it today or tomorrow and that you said it would be today. Who was it tried to bushwhack you, John?"

"Russ Maugher."

"Kin to the man you shot some time back?"

"Father to that one," Garrett said. "There's a whole clan of them, and everyone's an ornery cuss."

"A serious state of affairs when a man can't travel from his home to the nearest town without his life being in danger."

"Maugher killed one of my men."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Lamentable," Lambert said, shaking his head. "Well, no honest man is safe in this country. I should have come out to Anchor instead of asking you to come here, since I haven't the enemies you have. I would have come, but there is another party involved and he wouldn't accompany me to Anchor. He insisted upon settling his business with you here in Valido."

Puffing on his cigar, Garrett said, "Who is he and what's his business with me?"

"His name is Hernandez Baca, and he's the *alcalde* of a town down in Sonora—Zaragoza," Lambert said. "His business with you, John, has to do with your son."

"With Dave? In what way?"

"Now don't be upset, John. It's a serious thing, no doubt, but if we keep calm and—"

Garrett came to his feet, his face rock-hard. "Never mind how I take it, Ed," he said flatly. "Just tell me what sort of trouble Dave is in. It's got to be that: the boy in some sort of jam. What is it? Out with it, man!"

"John, I hate to say this but—well, the Rurales have him."

"The Rurales!"

Garrett looked as though he had been clubbed. He knew about those Mexican rural police. Ruthlessly disciplined, they were even more ruthless in their handling of prisoners. They were said to make captured outlaws dig their own graves. They practiced *ley de fuga*—the law of death for criminals who took flight. Two years ago, on a cattle-buying trip down into Sonora, Garrett himself had run afoul of the Rurales—and their treatment of him and his men had been rough indeed.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

In a choked-up voice, he said, "What have they got Dave for?"

He needed to know, of course, and yet was afraid to hear what his son had done.

III

GARRETT expected—feared—the worst, and braced himself for it.

But Lambert shook his head. "I don't know what sort of trouble Dave is in, John. Señor Baca wouldn't tell me. He just said the Rurales had your son and I was to get you here."

"Why didn't he come to Anchor?"

"He felt that if you and he met here in Valido you would be, as he put it, more reasonable. He seems to be afraid of you."

"Why did he come to you? How did he know you sometimes do work for me?"

"He didn't know," Lambert said. "He went to Mel Harper, the town marshal, first of all, and asked him to get you to town. Mel sent him to me."

"Well, where is this Señor Baca?"

"At a *cantina* over in Old Town. I'm to take you to him."

"He sure acts like a man with a good hand of cards," Garrett said, scowling. "But all right. . . . Let's get over there."

Lambert rose, reached for his hat on the top of his desk.

"A word of advice, John: hold onto your temper. Be diplomatic. Play it cagey. Baca does hold all the good

cards. You mustn't forget for a second that the Rurales have your son."

"I'm not likely to forget it," Garrett said, and turned to the door.

Descending the outside stairs, he realized that he was indeed upset. He was, in fact, scared. More scared than he had been out there on the road when Russ Maugher opened fire on him. He wanted to believe that the Rurales had arrested Dave for some trifling matter and merely wanted a stiff fine paid to release him from jail. He couldn't convince himself of that, however. Dave could be in a real jam. The boy could have committed some serious crime.

The boy?

I've got to stop thinking of him as that. If he's old enough to go off to Mexico and get in trouble, he's plenty grown-up.

He realized that another man might have no part of this affair. Another man might tell himself that Dave had made his bed of his own free will and must now lie in it. But he couldn't do that. Dave was his own flesh and blood, even though he wasn't natured like him—wasn't, as Matt Hagarthy had said, cast in the same mold.

As they started along the street, Garrett said, "It's a holdup. Dave got into a little scrape—maybe a drunken brawl—and they threw him in the *juzgado*. When they learned he was the son of a well-to-do *gringo* rancher, they decided to cash in on it."

"If that's all it is," Ed Lambert said, "you had better just pay up and forget it. You can't afford to antagonize these people."

"All right, all right."

As they passed a general store, Barton's Mercantile, a woman called from its doorway, "John—John Garrett!"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He strode on, having only half heard.

Lambert touched his arm. "Virginia Barton wants a word with you, John."

Garrett stopped, forced himself to look at Virginia Barton with a show of courteous attention. She was an attractive woman in her early thirties, and he knew her to be an extremely pleasant person. She was the one good friend Martha had made here in Arizona. That is, Martha and she had been as close friends as two women could be with forty miles of hostile desert between them. But they had visited back and forth frequently, Martha often in Valido and Virginia as often at Anchor Ranch. A year ago Virginia's husband, Jeff, had been murdered by holdup men while on his way to Benson by wagon to pick up some freight at the railroad. Now Virginia ran the store, and did so capably. Garrett always stopped in to see her when in town, but today he hadn't given her the slightest thought.

Widowhood had not soured Virginia in any discernible way, and smiling now, she said, "My, but you two look grim. Is your business so pressing, John, that you haven't time to say hello to an old friend?"

Impatience tugged at him, making him curt. "Our business is pressing, Virginia. I'll stop by the store after it's taken care of."

She nodded, turned grave by his grim manner.

Lambert and he went on, turning into Juarez Street. They crossed the plank bridge spanning Largo Creek and came to the Mexican part of Valido. Making their way along a narrow street of adobe huts, they came to the plaza with its church, *cantinas* and grubby stores. Dusky-skinned children, illy clothed and barefoot, stared at them with wondering eyes. Women gazed at them curiously from doorways. The few

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

men loafing in the shade of the buildings eyed them with lazy interest. A couple of mangy dogs barked at them half-heartedly.

Lambert guided Garrett into the largest of the *cantinas*. It was dim and cool, and smelled sourly of beer, tequila, and spicy Mexican food. The proprietor, a hugely fat man, lounged behind the bar. He had but three customers. Two played dominoes and drank beer at one of the tables. They wore *vaquero* garb: big straw sombreros, boots, cotton shirts and pants. They looked up, dark eyes searching, then dismissed the two *gringos* as of no consequence and returned their attention to their game. The third customer was at a table in a corner. He rose as Lambert turned Garrett in his direction.

Garrett's scowl returned. He remembered this man, this Señor Baca. During that cattle-buying trip two years ago, the Rurales had arrested three of his Anchor hands after a brawl with some natives in a *cantina*. He'd had to pay their fines to this man: A hundred American dollars for each of the three.

Baca smiled. "So we meet again, Señor Garrett." He held out his hand.

Garrett declined to shake hands. "And again you want to pick my pocket, eh?"

The man from Zaragoza looked pained. In his mid-fifties, he was heavy of body, paunchy. His face was pudgy, his skin lighter than that of most of his race. He wore a natty brown suit, and with it that air of pomposity characteristic of Mexican officialdom. As *alcalde*, he doubled in brass as mayor and judge of his home town.

"I've come on no such errand, Señor Garrett," he said, his English heavily accented but quite good. "Money is not

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

a consideration. Shall we sit down and discuss the matter in a friendly way?"

Garrett said nothing. He didn't believe money wasn't a consideration.

Lambert pulled a chair out from the table. "Sit here, John."

Eyeing Baca uncertainly, Garrett seated himself. The Mexican sat down. And Lambert, pulling out a chair for himself, looked at the fat man behind the bar.

"Whiskey, if you have it, friend," he said. "Tequila, if you haven't. Three glasses."

Garrett said, "All right, Baca. The Rurales have my son, and you're not here to pick my pocket. What is it you want of me, if not money?"

"Your son is in serious trouble, *señor*."

"What law has he broken?"

"Ah, that is the difficulty. So many laws were broken."

"Oh, come now, Baca. You can't make me believe that a twenty year old youth—"

Baca cut him short, saying, "It is not I who has made the charges against him. It is Capitán Ramirez."

"So it's Ramirez again," Garrett said. "The man I had trouble with two years ago. All right. What charges has Ramirez made against my son?"

The proprietor waddled up to the table, set out three glasses, a bottle of tequila, and a small dish of salt. He waited for his money, and Ed Lambert paid him. It was Lambert too who uncorked the bottle and poured the drinks. Baca reached for his as though needing a drink badly. He took a pinch of salt from the dish, sprinkled it on the back of his left hand, then licked it off with his tongue. Then, looking at the others, he said, "*Salud*," and gulped the tequila down.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Lambert too took salt before the tequila. Garrett let his drink stand. He kept staring at Hernandez Baca, still scowling.

"Come on," he said. "Get on with it."

"Señor Garrett, it grieves me to tell a man this about his son," Baca said. "But a big bunch of *gringos*"—he broke off, looked contrite and apologetic—"of *americanos* came into Sonora three weeks ago. They were heavily armed, and they led pack horses carrying provisions and camp gear. They traveled south to the Hacienda Estrella, a great ranch owned by a *rico* named Felipe Aragon. But first they stopped at Grazia Plaza, where the Mission of San Xavier stands. They killed some people and robbed the church of much money and many valuable religious relics. The next morning, at early dawn, they raided the hacienda."

Baca pushed his glass toward Lambert. "*Por favor?*" He was looking distressed.

Lambert refilled the glass, pushed it back to the Mexican.

Garrett sat there as though turned to stone. His face had grown bleak. *My God*, he thought; *this can't be. . . . My son couldn't be mixed up in a thing like this!* He didn't want to believe such a thing of Dave. But somehow he knew that Baca wasn't lying.

After more salt and tequila, Baca went on, "A terrible thing. . . . The bandits rode right up to the main *casa*. Since everybody was still asleep, the *gringos* didn't have to force their way inside. They had only to open the door and walk in. They dragged Don Felipe and his family and the house servants from their beds—held them as hostages so that the *vaqueros* and *peones*, of which there were many, would not fight them.

"The bandits terrorized these people all that day. They forced Don Felipe to reveal the hiding place of his money.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

They took all the gold and silver he had accumulated over many years. Before they left that night, they killed Don Felipe's son and two of the servants. Worse of all, Señor Garrett, they took away with them Don Felipe's daughter—as a hostage. Elena Aragon was only seventeen—and very beautiful."

"Was?" Garret said. "They killed her?"

Baca shook his head. "No, they didn't go that far. But you can imagine the sort of treatment she received. The bandits told Don Felipe that she would be released unharmed if he did not send the Rurales or the soldiers after them. But the Rurales had already been informed of the raid on Grazia Plaza—and were in pursuit of the bandits. They overtook them, and there was a fight. Six *gringos* were killed, and two captured. Capitán Ramirez lost seven men, and so had too few left to continue the pursuit. But the girl was freed later, at a ranch near the border. She is now back at Hacienda Estrella—but not the happy young woman she was before this terrible thing happened."

"My son was one of those captured, then?"

"Yes. He is now in jail at Zaragoza."

"And what do you want of me?"

"I want nothing of you, myself, Señor Garrett. I am here only as the emissary of Capitán Ramirez—because he commanded me to come." Baca's pudgy face showed a rueful smile. "Even an *alcalde* obeys when a *capitán* of Rurales gives a command."

"All right," Garrett said. "What is it Ramirez wants of me?"

"He wants you to come to Zaragoza and discuss the matter of your son's arrest."

Garrett's scowl deepened. "I'd made up my mind to go down there when I first heard that my son was being held.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

But what has Ramirez got up his sleeve? Why would he want to talk with me about it?" He gazed flinty-eyed at the Mexican. "Did he tell you I'm to bring money?"

"There was no mention of money, *señor*."

"What has he got on his mind, then?"

Baca shrugged. "I have no idea. He did not confide in me."

Garrett stared at him, and the *alcalde* was unable to meet his steady scrutiny. As Baca's eyes shifted away, Garrett felt sure he was lying and at that instant his terrible anxiety for Dave turned into savage anger. He reared to his feet, upsetting his chair. He reached across the table, grabbed Baca by the lapels of his coat and hauled him erect.

"Damn you; I'm in no mood to play games!" he shouted. "You're telling me what Ramirez wants!"

Ed Lambert too rose. "John, take it easy," he said. "You're not helping Dave by acting like this."

Garrett ignored him. "Talk, you!" he yelled at Baca. "Talk, or I'll beat it out of you!"

Garrett lost his temper completely. He let go of the Mexican, but only to strike him a hard backhand blow to the face. Baca cried out, reeled backward. He fell against his chair, toppled it over, dropped to the floor with it. Lambert shouted a warning, his voice sharp with alarm.

"John, watch it!"

Garrett swung around, but too late to defend himself either with his fists or by drawing his gun. The two domino players had left their table and rushed across the room. Each grabbed him by an arm. Realizing that they were not *vaqueros* from some nearby ranch but Baca's men, Garrett struggled fiercely against them. He managed to get his right arm free and drive a punch to the face of the one who held his left arm.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

All his might was behind the blow, and the hit man lost his hold and went staggering backward until he collided with the bar.

Swinging about, Garrett lashed out at the other man. That one ducked, and in missing his mark, Garrett reeled off balance. The Mexican closed with him before he recovered, taking a vise-like grip on Garrett's right forearm. He wrenched the arm back and up, instantly applying great pressure. Garrett experienced tearing pain in his shoulder, and was suddenly helpless. Before he could find a way to ease the leverage exerted against him, the other Mexican came at him and lay the point of a long-bladed knife against his throat.

"No more, *gringo*," this one said. "We will have no more trouble. You savvy?"

To make sure Garrett understood, he pressed with the knife and let him feel the bite of it.

IV

THEY WERE SMALL, wiry men, rawhide tough and deadly efficient.

John Garrett could sense the cruelty as well as feel the strength of the one who held him, and he could see the same animal-like savagery in the Indian-dark face of the one holding the knife. Sensibly, he was afraid of them. He knew they would kill him if he resisted them further or again used violence against Hernandez Baca. They had come from Mexico with the *alcalde*, of course. As his bodyguards. They were Rurales, certainly.

Baca had recovered from the blow Garrett had struck him. He came forward, saying, "No more anger and violence,

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Señor Garrett. Let us discuss this matter like reasonable men."

"Damn you, Baca; call off your dogs."

The *alcalde* spoke a few words of Spanish, and the two bodyguards released Garrett and backed off a few steps. They kept watch on him, however, their dark eyes alert but their faces expressionless. They would have killed him dispassionately, feeling nothing. The realization chilled Garrett.

He moved his right arm, working the pain out of it and his shoulder. With his left hand, he felt his throat where the knife had pricked him. He wiped away a drop of blood.

Ed Lambert had pulled a gun: a derringer pistol with an over-and-under barrel. His handsome face was set and pale. The small sneak gun was aimed at the Mexican with the knife. Garrett didn't doubt that the lawyer would have used the weapon; he did doubt that Lambert could have saved him with the derringer if the pair had wanted him dead. But of course they hadn't wanted that. Dead, he would have been no good to their *capitán*.

Garrett shifted his still angry gaze to Baca. Half apologetic, he said, "Just don't play games with a man after telling him his son is in danger of being 'dobe-walled. You expect me to go to Mexico with you and this pair?"

"It is Capitán Ramírez's wish."

"All right. I have things to take care of at my ranch, but you can come by Anchor headquarters tomorrow afternoon and we'll start from there. Or I'll meet you at San Luis, down on the border, tomorrow night."

Baca considered a moment. "It's better that we meet away from your ranch, I think. We will see you at San Luis."

Garrett said, "So be it," and turned toward the door.

Ed Lambert followed him from the *cantina*, and said, "I'll

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

go down there with you, John. It seems to me that under the circumstances an attorney will come in handy."

Before Garrett could reply to that, a voice called, "*Gringo!*"

They faced about. One of the bodyguards stood in the doorway, the one who had held the knife.

"*Gringo, el capitán's* orders are that you come alone. If there are others, they will be turned back at the border."

Garrett moved his head in a curt nod, then said, as Lambert and he walked on, "That means I have to turn your offer down, Ed. Thanks for making it, though. And for wanting to help me back there."

"I came damn close to shooting the one with the knife."

"They wouldn't have killed me. For a few seconds I thought they would, but they just wanted to show me I wasn't to get rough with Baca. They're Rurales, almost certainly."

"If they are that, they're stretching their authority beyond all limits. They have no right to come manhunting on this side of the border."

"We can't call it manhunting," Garrett said. "And we can't prove they are Rurales. Even if we could, who would we get to do anything about them? Deputy U. S. Marshal Earp? Not likely. That worthy is too busy trying to gain the upper hand over the sheriff and trying to be the big wind in Tombstone to bother about what goes on elsewhere."

"That's true. Anyway, I don't like your going down there alone, John. Why should I matter to those people if you have somebody with you?"

"Ramirez must be afraid that I'll come with my Anchor crew and end up trying to break Dave out of jail."

"What can he want of you other than money?"

"It's got to be money he wants," Garrett said. "And the

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

figure is so high he wants to show me how bad it is for Dave before he names it—so I won't balk."

They fell silent, and it was not until they were out of Old Town and across the creek bridge that Garrett spoke again.

"I feel caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, Ed. Have I the right to buy Dave out of this jam when it's a matter of murder, robbery, and carrying a girl off as hostage? Shouldn't I, as a law-abiding citizen, let him take his medicine?"

Lambert shook his head. "I can't give you the answer to that. You'll have to find it in your own conscience."

"My conscience says I should let Dave lie in the bed he's made for himself. But a man can't turn his back on his own flesh and blood."

"No, a man can't do that," Lambert said. "One thing, you can be thankful you have the money. If you were a poor man, the boy would probably have been shot before now."

Again they were silent, John Garrett gloomily so. The wrong of it was that Dave would be getting off scot-free, and Garrett could not justify that by any stretching of the parental love he had for the boy. He could not excuse Dave by putting it down to his having fallen in with bad company. His son wasn't dull-witted, he knew the difference between right and wrong. Garrett had to face the hard truth: he had sired a wild one. That hurt. It hurt like hell.

When they approached Barton's Mercantile, Lambert touched Garrett's arm.

"You promised Virginia you'd stop in, John."

Garrett nodded. "Thanks for reminding me." He smiled in miserly fashion. "I keep saying 'thanks' to you today, don't I?"

Lambert too smiled. "*Da nada*, as the Mexicans say. But

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

maybe I shouldn't have reminded you to see Virginia. Since my law practice is flourishing, I can allow myself to do some dreaming. I have hopeful plans for our lovely widow friend, John, and I wouldn't want you to upset them."

"No need to worry about my doing that, Ed," Garrett said. "I'm too old even to *think* of going double-harness again."

"I'm not so sure Virginia is of the same opinion."

"Oh, come now. . . . I'm just an old friend."

"In that case, you might wish me luck."

"I do that, Ed," Garrett said. "On my word."

"And luck to you on your trip," Lambert said. "If I can help in any way, just let me know."

Garrett nodded, and went into the store.

Virginia Barton was standing on a stool and stacking can goods on a high shelf. Her clerk, an elderly man, was waiting on the only customer, a sunbonneted woman at the dry goods counter. Garrett went behind the grocery counter, took several cans of tomatoes from a wooden case there, and handed them to Virginia when she turned.

She was startled, not having seen nor heard him. Then, taking the cans, she said, "Thank you. That's a big help."

"Tomatoes are a fast-moving item, aren't they?"

"Faster than a lot of other merchandise."

"In that case, why not stock them on a lower shelf and put something that doesn't move fast up there?" he said. "That would save you time and effort—and you wouldn't need to use that stool nearly so often."

Virginia laughed. "My, but aren't we smart? I would never have thought of such a thing." She gave him a mischievous look. "Maybe you just don't like seeing a woman on a pedestal."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

She had strength and character in her face, and so her attractiveness was, he decided, something other than classic beauty. A handsome woman. An extremely handsome woman. She had a wealth of auburn hair, amber-flecked brown eyes, a wide, expressive mouth. She was wearing a green gingham dress. Its color became her, and its snug fit hinted at the sturdy shapeliness of her still youthful body. He could understand Ed Lambert's wanting to put an end to her widowhood.

She placed the cans he'd handed her on the shelf and came down off the stool. "I was about to leave for home. Come along and have supper with me."

"I'd like to, Virginia, but I haven't a lot of time," he said, wondering at the invitation. He hadn't been a visitor in her home since Jeff Barton had died. "I have to get back to Anchor."

"Nonsense. You're your own boss, you can come and go as you please. Anyway, I'll fix something quick. I have some leftover roast beef, for one thing. All right?"

He nodded. "Sounds better than the hotel dining room or one of the hashhouses."

"And the waitress will be more pleasant, won't she?"

"Are you fishing for a compliment?"

"Why not?"

Grinning, he said, "All right. The waitress will be more pleasant—and prettier too. There's just one thing, though: a certain young man-about-town won't be pleased if he finds out you've taken me home with you."

"You mean Ed Lambert, of course," Virginia said, frowning. "Well, he'll just have to be not pleased. . . . Wait a second, John. I have to let Henry know I won't be back, that he'll have to lock up."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

She lived on a side street, and on their way there she kept glancing at Garrett in a wondering way.

"You're somehow not yourself today," she said finally. "Is something wrong?"

He hesitated to tell her about Dave, then reminded himself that he had told her about the boy's earlier wrongdoing in St. Louis, and she had been understanding and sympathetic then. She was a good friend to him, as she had been to Martha, he suddenly realized. He was also aware, that instant, that he needed to confide in someone who cared. So he told her, and she appeared as upset as he had felt upon learning that Dave was in jail in Mexico.

"How terrible for you, John. And for that poor, misguided boy."

"He's not a boy any longer, Virginia."

"But not yet a man, either. You've got to help him, you know. If those people want money, give it to them. Maybe such a thing is wrong. Maybe a person should be punished for his wrongdoing, but—well, you've got to stand by him."

"I intend to."

"It must be that he made the wrong kind of friends."

"He knows right from wrong. He didn't need to go down there with a bunch of riffraff. He got off on the wrong foot somehow. That thing he pulled in St. Louis . . ."

"Maybe it was losing his mother that is to blame," Virginia said. "Maybe it upset him so badly that he does these things because he feels hurt, cheated. Just as a small boy will be mean and spiteful when he's hurt in some way. Dave was so devoted to his mother, you know."

"It could be that," Garrett said, reluctant to tell her what he believed, that his son had simply been born with a wild streak.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

They came to Virginia's house, one of the few in Valido that wasn't of adobe bricks or unpainted planks. It was clap-board, painted white with green trim. They entered the small but comfortably furnished parlor, and Virginia told him to sit down and make himself at home.

"I'll have supper ready in no time."

"Let me come to the kitchen with you," he said. "I'll keep out of your way." He smiled a bit shamefacedly. "I don't like being alone with my trouble."

"Come along, of course. I'll be glad for your company."

He left his hat on the wall rack beside the front door, followed her to the kitchen. Taking a chair away from the table with its red-and-white checked cloth, he seated himself by the far wall and lit a cigar while she tied on an apron preparatory to fixing their meal.

He watched as she busied herself with starting a fire in the cook-stove, with filling the coffeepot, with slicing cold roast beef. Suddenly he was sharply aware of what an infinitely desirable woman she was, and found himself wondering what it would be like for a man to have her in his own kitchen and in his bed.

That same instant he realized she was not for him. His life was all hard work and much trouble, as it was for most cattlemen, and he felt old and hard-worn. At the same time she possessed a lingering bloom of youth that made him conscious of the weight of his years even as he felt the renewal of male hunger in himself. He had been right in saying to Ed Lambert that he was too old to think of going double-harness again.

But he found his being with Virginia comforting. While he watched her, his mind was eased of some of the shock and anguish over knowing that Dave was in a Mexican jail and

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

charged with terrible crimes. He was grateful to her for that, and for her friendship. With sour amusement, he reflected that for him to imagine she could be anything other than a friend to him was proof that there was no fool like an old fool.

While setting places at the table, Virginia suddenly looked at him frowningly. "I've a confession to make—a rather unpleasant one. In having you here, I'm making use of you, John. That's despicable of me, isn't it?"

"Making use of me in what way?"

"As a sort of shield against Ed Lambert."

"What does that mean, Virginia?"

"It means that Ed is so vain he thinks I simply must accept him as a suitor—because he sees me as a lonely widow. When you came to the store, I realized I could make him think he's not the only man in the world."

Garrett was surprised, puzzled. "I would have thought a woman would consider him a good catch. He's young, attractive. His law practice is prospering. Is it that you don't want to marry again, Virginia?"

"I would certainly marry again to the right man. I was married to a good man, as you know, John, and I wouldn't settle for one who didn't measure up to what Jeff was." She shook her head vigorously. "Ed Lambert doesn't measure up. Somehow, he doesn't quite ring true. I can't shake off the feeling that there is something counterfeit about him."

Garrett was reminded that he had once wondered why the lawyer had come to such a town as Valido to start his practice. He had supposed the reason had to do with something unsavory in his past. He could no longer think that, now that Lambert's practice was flourishing.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Garrett said, "Is your mistrust of him based on anything more solid than feminine intuition?"

"Well, there's his becoming prosperous all of a sudden."

"He told me he has work because of disputes over mining claims in the Packsaddles."

"He's away on trips more often than he's at the office."

"Business could take him away."

Virginia didn't say yes or no to that. She said, "Then there's his bullet wound."

Garrett stared at her. "He was shot? Recently?"

She nodded. "In the left arm. A bad crease. He told me not to mention it to anyone, but—well, I didn't promise I wouldn't. He came home four or five days ago after being away for more than two weeks. He wasn't himself, and when I asked if he was feeling well, he said he was a little under the weather. The next morning he came here early, when I was about to leave for the store. He looked ill. He said he needed help with a sore arm and had come to me because there was no doctor in Valido.

"He took off his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeve, and there was a nasty, festering sore on his upper arm. I treated it as best I could that morning, then again that evening and once more the next day. Fortunately, it did begin to heal. I questioned him about it, naturally. He was awfully reticent, but finally said, none too convincingly, that he had been shot when he refused to hand over his money to a tough who tried to rob him in Benson. He also said a bartender there had treated and bandaged the wound at that time and for a few days it hadn't bothered him."

"It could have happened as he said, Virginia."

"If it did, why was he so secretive about it?" she said. "Why didn't he mention it the first day I saw him after

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

he returned—when I asked if he wasn't feeling well? Why didn't he tell me how he'd gotten shot when I doctored him up the next day—without my asking him?"

"I wouldn't know," Garrett said. "It does seem a little strange. If he did lie about how it happened, it may have been because he got the wound in some way that would make you think less of him if you knew. In a barroom brawl, maybe. Or in a dispute over cards. Or maybe somebody objected to his attentions to some floozy. He's fond of you, and so wouldn't make himself look bad in your eyes."

Virginia shook her head. "I don't think that wound came of some trifling disagreement he had. I'm convinced that Ed Lambert is not what he seems—that there is something counterfeit about him."

"Oh, come now," Garrett said, grinning at her. "You don't suspect he got shot while robbing a stage or a train or a bank, do you?"

Virginia made a face at him. "Now you're having sport with me," she said accusingly. Then, sober once more, "Anyway, it's my distrusting him and his being so persistent in his attentions that made me do what I should be ashamed to admit—using you as a buffer against him. But I'm glad I did it, John. It's pleasant having you here."

Garrett told her it was pleasant for him to be there, and added, with a chuckle, "It's pleasant too for me at my age to act as Ed's rival."

"Your age?" Virginia said. "You're not exactly an old man, you know."

She went on with fixing supper for them, and Garrett, still watching her, decided that it was indeed pleasant to be there with her. He could even let himself fancy that he was actually her suitor—Ed Lambert's rival. There was some good

in that, for so long as the fantasy lasted, he wouldn't be brooding about Dave.

By the time they finished supper, darkness had come and Virginia had lighted the hanging lamp above the table. After finishing a second cup of coffee, he pushed his chair back and got to his feet.

"Sorry, Virginia, but I'll have to run."

"Maybe next time you won't be in a hurry," she said, rising. "You will let me know how things work out down in Mexico, as soon as you get back, won't you?"

He said that he would, and she went to the front door with him. As he got his hat from the rack, she laid her hand on his arm.

"John, do be careful down there."

The parlor was dark except for what light filtered in from the kitchen, but he could see genuine concern on her face. He could almost believe that she had some feeling other than merely one of friendship for him. He realized that he could find out if she did simply by taking her into his arms. For a moment he was tempted. Then he was reminded of the difference in their ages and knew it must seem great indeed to her. So, fearing a rebuff, he resisted temptation and again mocked himself with the thought that there was no fool like an old fool.

He told her, "I'll be all right. I won't try anything foolhardy. I've been across the border often enough to know the Mexicans."

He opened the door, said, "Good night, Virginia."

She let her hand rest on his arm a moment longer, then withdrew it. "Good night, John. Again, take care of yourself."

He nodded and went out, and now, walking back to mid-

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

town, a return of anxiety for Dave crowded thoughts of her from his mind. With anxiety came anger, an anger for his son having turned out to be one of that breed against which he had been waging war for six long years.

V

GARRETT found Matt Hagarthy playing poker at the Silver Lode Saloon. After calling him away from the game, he said, "Sorry to spoil your fun, Matt, but I want to start back to Anchor."

Hagarthy gave him a searching look as they left the saloon and turned toward McDade's.

"That lawyer have bad news for you, boss?"

Garrett nodded. "Dave's in trouble down in Sonora. The Rurales have him."

"Well, there's a way to fix that. We can ride down there with a dozen or so of the boys and take the kid away from those hombres."

"We'd have a full-scale war on our hands if we tried that," Garrett said. "I've got to go alone. That's the way those people want it, and so it's the only chance I have of getting Dave out of the jam he's in."

At the livery stable he paid the bill for the mules' keep while Hagarthy went to put the harness on them and hitch them to the buggy. When the cowhand drove the rig around to the front of the building, Garrett climbed aboard with him.

"Oh, John—"

Ed Lambert loomed through the darkness, came to stand beside the buggy. Garrett felt differently toward the lawyer

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

than he had a couple of hours ago, and knew it was because of Virginia. Her suspicions of the man had become his own, and that, he realized, was hardly fair.

Lambert said, "I've been looking for you all evening, John. Luckily, I just happened by the Silver Lode and heard that you had left there only minutes ago and left in this direction."

"Virginia invited me to supper."

"Oh, I see."

Lambert's voice had taken on a sudden sharpness. That of a man caught up by quick jealousy, Garrett was sure.

"What's on your mind, Ed?"

"The thought occurred to me," Lambert said, his voice normal again, "that you might need me to look after Anchor's business affairs while you are away."

"Thanks, but my bookkeeper will take care of things for me."

"Well, if he should need help . . ."

"Sure, Ed," Garrett said. "I'll tell him to get in touch with you if something he can't handle turns up. But I don't expect to be gone all that long."

Lambert nodded, said, "I hope you're not," then told him good night and turned away.

As Garrett and Hagarthy drove from town, the cowhand said, "Maybe it's because I've never known many lawyers, but that Lambert strikes me as a real tinhorn."

Garrett chuckled. "You too, Matt?" Then, sobering, he said, "We'll bury Tip Ryan in the morning, then I'll outfit for the trip south. You'll ramrod the outfit while I'm away, Matt. Six hundred prime steers are to be delivered to the railroad at Benson the first of the month. Get them on the trail early next week, if I'm not back by then. They're to go to the Mason Commission Company. Sam Atkins will give you the shipping

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

papers. And he'll tell you anything else that has to be done, if I'm gone longer than, say, a week."

"We'll manage," Hagarth said. "Don't fret about the ranch while you're away."

Garrett said that he wouldn't do that, and told himself he would probably have too many other problems, once he arrived at Zaragoza, to give the ranch any thought.

At hazy dusk the following evening he rode into the grubby little border town of San Luis with a spare horse under light pack. He was wearing range clothes, and beneath his shirt a money belt containing two thousand dollars in gold specie. His Colt's revolver rode at his right thigh, his Winchester rifle in a scabbard on his saddle.

A half dozen horses stood head-hung and hipshot at the hitchrail in front of the town's *cantina*, and two men, shadowy figures, lounged against the wall of the squat adobe building. One of these two moved to the lamp-lighted doorway to speak to someone inside. By the time Garrett had reined in, the short, rotund figure of Hernandez Baca appeared.

"Ah, Señor Garrett," the *alcalde* said. "You are a man of your word. You have not kept us waiting."

"Do we go on now or wait until morning?"

"We go now, unless your horses need rest," Baca said. "As for us, we have been here since midday—and our animals are rested."

"I'll give mine an hour," Garrett said, and dismounted.

He had taken half the day in riding down from Anchor headquarters, going easy on his horses because they would have to travel eighty hard miles across desert and mountains from here to Zaragoza. He watered them at the well in the middle of the plaza, using the wooden bucket there. He had

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

two canteens on the packhorse and one hanging from the horn of his saddle. Having drunk and made coffee from the one on his mount, he refilled it from the bucket. He gave each horse some grain in a nosebag, then lit a cigar and smoked it slowly.

Baca's two men had gone behind the *cantina*, and now reappeared with four horses. Three were saddled, the fourth under pack. Those two men were like shadows in the gloom, their features obscure and their voices, when they talked at all to each other, barely audible. Rurales, all right. Both wore gun-rigs, which they hadn't at Valido. There was a saddle gun on each of the three mounts they'd brought to the plaza.

When riding out, the four of them traveled in single file. One Rurale led off, Baca followed him, Garrett tagged after the *alcalde*, and the second Rurale, with the trio's pack horse, brought up the rear.

The night was thickly dark. A three-quarter moon was smudged over by clouds, and few stars were to be seen. The going was rough at this point, but the man in the lead knew the way and kept up a brisk pace. The desert's night chill came on a stiff breeze, and Garrett untied his ducking jacket from behind his saddle cantle and donned it.

They pushed on hour after hour, and none of them spoke at all. The only sounds were the creaking of saddle leather, the jingling of bit chains, the striking of shod hooves against rocks. Sometime after midnight Baca spoke in Spanish, saying that he needed to rest, and they made a halt at the base of some towering rocks. The Rurales off-saddled, so Garrett stripped the rigging off his mount and removed the pack from his spare horse. He staked the two animals on what grass

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

there was, then spread his blankets and rolled up in them. The others too bedded down, Baca with a great sigh.

"I am not used to traveling by horseback, Señor Garrett," he said. "I will be glad when I am back at Zaragoza."

Garrett said, "Now that I'm this far into Mexico you may as well tell me what Ramirez wants. No matter what it is, I'm not likely to turn back now—if these two watchdogs would let me. What is it he wants, Baca?"

The *alcalde's* hesitation to speak seemed proof to Garrett that he did know what the Rurale captain wanted.

Baca finally said, "Seven of the bandits escaped, señor. They made it back across the border to Arizona. Capitán Ramirez wants you to deliver them to him."

"He expects me to hunt them down?"

"Sí," Baca said. "In exchange for them, he will release your son from jail."

For an instant Garrett felt that he was being offered an easy way to get Dave out of his jam. But only for an instant. He then realized what an outrageous bargain it was. Ramirez was demanding the impossible. Find seven men who wouldn't want to be found—who had almost certainly split up and maybe headed for parts unknown? Not seven ordinary men at that, but seven desperadoes—thieves, killers.

Even if by some miracle he found them, one by one, would they let themselves be taken? Not a chance. They would put up a fight, each one of them. He would have to kill them, or be killed by them. There would be no way to deliver them alive to Ramirez.

Damn the man! Only a captain of Rurales would have the devious mind to come up with such a loco scheme!

"Baca . . ."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Sí?" The *alcalde* sounded half asleep.

"It wouldn't work," Garrett said. "I couldn't pull it off. No man could."

"Ah, but have you any choice?"

That jolted John Garrett. He had no choice, except to leave Dave to the tender mercies of Captain Ramirez. That he couldn't do. He would have to try to find and take and deliver those seven desperadoes across the border.

He would try his best, of course.

But he felt, with almost total certainty, that his best wouldn't be nearly good enough.

Garrett did not sleep. He lay in his blankets with his head pillowed on his saddle and gazed at the star-studded sky. This was one of the bad times of his life, and he suddenly realized how small a part a man had in shaping his own destiny. No matter how fiercely he struggled he never quite succeeded in making his own small world secure. He had prospered by standing firm against the human wolves who would have torn him down and picked his bones clean. Then his wife had been taken from him and his son had turned out to be a wrong one. It was as though these things happened to mock any pride he might take in having reached his goal in life. For perhaps the first time Garrett felt that there was indeed a Power that made the efforts of even a hard man like himself puny and all but futile.

One thing certain, he told himself. *A man can have no peace on this earth.*

He did sleep finally, in a fitful manner, but was soon awakened by the two Rurales stirring about. One was starting a breakfast fire, the other saddling their horses. He crawled from his blankets into the gray light of false dawn, facing the new day without much hope.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He rolled his blankets and saddled his dun gelding, then got his sorrel under pack. He wanted no breakfast, lacking an appetite and feeling that starting a fire of his own and cooking a meal was somehow beyond him. The Rurales roused Baca, and the pudgy man came grumblingly from his blankets.

When those three were gathered about the fire, the *alcalde* said, "Come and eat, *señor*. There is enough for all."

Garrett felt like saying he would choke on their food but realized that would be petty of him. He joined them and breakfasted on a taco filled with refried beans and a cup of coffee. Afterward he lit a cigar and was still smoking it when they set out, again heading southward.

Except for an occasional muttered lament from Baca, who found a saddle pure torment, they rode in continued silence through increasingly rugged country. Garrett was lost in his own gloomy thoughts, and the Rurales might have been mutes. There was, he decided, no comparing them with other lawmen, not even the Texas Rangers. An iron discipline made them a breed apart. They did their job of policing a wild land with a savage efficiency, and any man who ran afoul of them could expect no mercy. Ramirez would not be giving him the chance to save his son out of the goodness of his heart.

They came to a *tinaja*, a rock-bounded waterhole, an hour after sunup, and let the horses drink. They made their way across scorched, dust-dry desert the remainder of the day, coming at dusk to a tiny stream in the foothills of a mountain range. Towering saguaro cactus grew here, and there was grass for the horses. They went into camp.

Baca, done in, flopped to the ground the instant he dismounted. He sat flat, his back to a boulder, sagging with

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

weariness. Garrett himself felt shaky in the legs once he was off his horse, and had a nagging ache low in his back. The Rurales showed no signs of being tired from the more than twelve hours in the saddle. They off-saddled their four horses, gathered brush for a fire, began cooking supper. Garrett envied them their hardiness.

Me, I'm not as young as I once was.

And yet, as he stripped the rigging off his horses, he found that he had no wish to be back at Anchor Ranch—about to put his feet under his table and then have his bed to crawl into later. A change had taken place in him during the long day of riding. He had accepted the challenge of what he must do. Somehow, he would find those seven desperadoes and deliver them to Ramirez.

Somehow . . .

He had no real liking for Mexican food, and so built a fire and cooked some of the grub he had brought from Anchor. After eating, he sat by the red-glowing embers of the fire and smoked a cigar. Baca had taken to his blankets immediately after eating. The other two had kept their fire going, and by its flickering light, played a game of dominoes on a spread blanket.

The *alcalde* was having trouble sleeping tonight, dead-tired though he was. He kept up a restless twisting and turning, and his frequent sighs and yawns were audible.

"Baca . . . ?"

"Sí, Señor Garrett?"

"Captain Ramirez—how good is his word?"

"Of the best. He is a man of honor."

"He could double-cross me easily enough."

"In what way, señor?"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"By refusing to release my son if I do manage to deliver the seven *bandidos* to him."

Baca did not reply to that at once. He seemed to be thinking about it. When he did reply, he merely said, "It is a chance you will have to take, my friend."

They climbed into the mountains with daylight, went through their heights by way of a narrow pass. The country beyond was better than what they had crossed previously: rangeland, cattle and horse country. They saw riders several times during the day, and had glimpses of ranch buildings in the distance. At midafternoon they passed within a short mile of a sizable town. They camped that night by a wide stream.

The next day they struck a road and followed it southward. It took them through a number of villages, about which the land was farmed. Baca's horse and the Rurales' pack animal were faltering, and they made an early halt to rest them. They cooked and ate supper during this stop, then moved on again at sundown. Soon after nightfall they saw lights ahead.

"Zaragoza," Baca said, sounding vastly relieved.

Half an hour later the road became a street flanked by adobe dwellings. It led them to the plaza with its church and places of business. A lot of people were about in the cool of the evening: Men in groups in front of the *cantinas*; women congregated about the stores and shops; young girls promenading before the appraising eyes of youths; children scampering noisily about everywhere. A pleasant place, John Garrett thought. A peaceful place.

Midway across the plaza, Hernandez Baca said, "I'll go no

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

farther, *señor*. I have done what Capitán Ramirez wanted, and am no longer needed."

He reined in, got stiffly down from his horse, let one of the Rurales take it in tow. His brown suit was dusty and rumpled; he was limp with weariness. He smiled happily, however. He was glad to be home. He held his hand out to Garrett.

"If I can be of service, *el Capitán* will direct you to my office. *Vaya con Dios, amigo*."

Garrett shook his hand, then rode on with the two Rurales.

They left the plaza behind, and most of the town. They came to some barracks-like buildings, four of them, forming a square. One had lamp-lighted windows, and they reined in before it. A sentry stood by the door, a rifle in the bend of his right arm. Some rapid Spanish flowed, then one of the Rurales looked at Garrett.

"Capitán Ramirez has just returned from a visit to Hacienda Estrella. He is expecting you. You are to go inside, to his quarters. We will put up your horses."

Garrett dismounted, and the sentry opened the door for him. He entered a room where a man sat at a table-desk. This man, like Garrett's two escorts and the sentry, had a dark, hard face. He rose, his gaze running appraisingly over Garrett from hat to boots.

"*Quién es?*"

"John Garrett."

"*Bueno*. We have been expecting you. I am Sergeant Alvarez. Leave your gun on the table, and I will take you to Capitán Ramirez."

Garrett left his gun, went with him. They strode down a long corridor. The sergeant knocked on a door, opened it.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He said, "Señor Garrett, Capitán," and immediately withdrew.

Garrett entered the room beyond, pushed the door shut.

Captain Ramirez was at supper. A girl hovered about the table, serving him. She wore the costume favored by the lower-class women of her race, a rather immodest one to Anglo eyes: a full but very short skirt, a sleeveless, low-cut blouse, and sandals. The skirt was red, the blouse green. Both were heavily embroidered with gold and silver. Gaudy beads hung about her neck, loop rings dangled from the lobes of her ears, and on each of her wrists she wore several bracelets. She was a remarkably pretty young woman. She looked at Garrett with bold, knowledgeable eyes.

"Ah, Señor Garrett," Ramirez said. "It is good to see you again. Sit down, share my meal. There is enough for two."

"Thanks, but I've eaten," Garrett said, going to the table.

"But you will have some wine, no? Maria, fetch another glass and pour *el americano* some wine." He slapped her on the bottom. "Then, *muchacha*, leave us alone to talk business."

Garrett seated himself at the table, and the girl brought him the wine. She had lacquer-black hair, lustrous brown eyes and ivory skin. She gave off an overly strong scent of perfume. She set the wine down with a flirtatious smile at Garrett, then left the room. Ramirez reached for his glass.

"*Salud*," he said, smiling—but only with his lips.

His dark eyes mirrored no friendliness, no graciousness. They were chill and hard, telling of the controlled anger in him.

Anger and hatred, Garrett thought. *He's raging at me and hating me because of Dave.*

Garrett picked up his glass, said, "*Salud*," and took a sip

of the wine. It was very dry, and had a tart bouquet: a good wine.

"It comes from Hacienda Estrella," Ramirez said. "The *haciendado*, Felipe Aragon, is kind enough to keep me supplied. A fine man, Don Felipe. . . ."

Garrett lit a cigar, watching Ramirez the while. A man in his early thirties, with some Indian blood, but more Castilian. Chiseled features: a hawk's beak of a nose, a thin-lipped mouth, a too-small chin. Skin light, hair black but not coarse. A proud and haughty bearing. Ramirez could probably trace his ancestry back to *los conquistadores*.

Garrett said, "I regret what happened at Hacienda Estrella, Captain. And at Grazia Plaza. I'm a rancher, and know what it's like to have bandits come raiding. I've fought them and the Apaches for six years. As for my son—"

"Ah, yes, your son, Señor Garrett. . . ."

"He's hardly more than a boy. He ran away from home to sow some wild oats, as a young buck will. He got in with bad company and—"

Ramirez cut in with, "Don't try to excuse what's he's done because of his age, Garrett." His voice had turned harsh, his anger no longer held reined in. "He's old enough to ride with thieves and killers. And he's old enough to be 'dobe-walled!'"

Garrett too felt a stirring of anger. "Don't threaten me, Ramirez. You won't put him before a firing squad as long as there's a chance that I can do what you want."

"I want the seven *bandidos* who escaped, *señor!*"

"In exchange for my son's release—alive?"

"Since that is the only way I can get my hands on the seven—yes."

Garrett gazed at him levelly. "What guarantee have I that

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

you'll keep your word—that you won't refuse to release him when and if I deliver the seven?"

"You have only my word," Ramirez said. "It will have to do."

"It's damn little for me to go on."

"Listen, my friend." Ramirez had himself under control. His anger was submerged again. "I have heard much about you. It is said your word is as good as your bond. Do you think that you alone are a man of honor?"

Garrett saw the pride in him and was almost convinced that here was another man as good as his word. But he reminded himself that *el capitán* possessed the ruthless nature of the Rurales and would certainly use any means to an end. He might well break his solemn word.

Garrett said, "I've no choice but to take you at your word. We both know that. But if you double-cross me . . ."

Ramirez seemed curious, and a little amused. "If I do, señor?"

"Then you and I will have a personal score to settle," Garrett said, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet. "And I give you *my* word, Captain, that I will find a way to settle it to my satisfaction. I can be either a good friend or a bad enemy. Now I want to see my son."

Ramirez shook his head. "Not tonight. In the morning."

"Why not now?"

"Because I have a little something planned for the morning. Something I want you to witness, *señor*. It will be most enlightening, I assure you."

Garrett stared at him, scowling.

Ramirez was smiling again, this time with what seemed a wicked amusement. "Sergeant Alvarez will show you to your quarters. It will not be a cell, but you will be locked in.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

You must not think of yourself as a prisoner, however, but as our guest. If there is anything you want—more cigars, something to drink, a woman—just let Alvarez know. Your wishes are our wishes. And in the morning, Señor Garrett, after the little ceremony, you will see your son—and after that we will have another talk, you and I.”

Garrett gave him another scowling stare, but went out without saying more. He did feel like a prisoner, and was indeed that when the sergeant locked him in a room that was furnished with only a bunk and no bigger than a cell.

VI

THE ADOBE WALL was pocked by rifle fire. In the first faint light of dawn they marched the prisoner out, stood him against the wall, and blindfolded him. He was obviously a *gringo*, and as obviously terrified. His hands were tied behind him. Six Rurales made up the firing squad, and Sergeant Alvarez barked the order: “*Ready, aim—fire!*”

The condemned man had been offered no final cigarette. He had no *padre* to comfort him at the end. His knees buckled an instant before the volley crashed, but the bullets caught him before he could fall. He was slammed back against the wall. He slumped there briefly, then crumpled to the ground. The sergeant drew his revolver and went to administer the *coup de grace*.

John Garrett saw it through, then turned to Captain Ramirez with a look of mingled anger and disgust.

“That wasn’t necessary,” he said. “I already knew you execute prisoners. I know you have the power—if not the authority—to stand my son against that wall.”

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"An object lesson is always helpful," Ramirez said. "That *gringo*—his name was Al Stacey, and he was the only one of the bandits besides your son taken prisoner. He was a thief and a murderer—and a kidnapper of young girls. I delayed his execution until you arrived so you would understand that I am in earnest about having the seven who escaped delivered into my hands."

"And to show me what will happen to my son if I don't deliver them," Garrett said. "Captain, I'd like to be able to tell you to go to hell."

Ramirez smiled mockingly, a man sure of himself—of the cards he held. "You are thinking that I am no better than the bandits themselves, maybe? Let me point out that one of the things I heard about you is that you have had bandits shot and hung. So we are really one like the other—no?"

Garrett could not honestly say that they were not alike on that score. But the 'dobe-walling of Al Stacey had been cruel and inhuman because it had been made to serve a purpose other than to rid the world of a thief and a killer.

"Anyway, it is done," Ramirez said. "And now, Señor Garrett, you may see your son."

He seemed no way affected by his having cut short the life of another human being, and Garrett realized that he was a man obsessed. Nothing mattered to him except his scheme to get hold of the other seven men who had taken part in the raid—and to stand them against that same adobe wall.

Following him into the building with the bullet-pitted wall, Garrett faced the hard fact that he could trust Ramirez no farther than he could have thrown him. A man so obsessed was unlikely to permit one of the wild bunch to slip through his fingers even to get his hands on the seven who

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

had escaped. Dave, then, was in as great a danger of being executed as if he, Garrett, had not come to Zaragoza. To save the boy, Garrett told himself, he would have to find a way to beat Ramirez at his own game. No scheme could be entirely foolproof. Devious as the man was, he could certainly be outwitted.

There's got to be a way to get Dave away from him.

Garrett realized that if he didn't convince himself of that he would lose all hope of saving his son—and there would be no point to even try to find the seven bandits who had escaped.

This building was the jail, its windows barred and its door a massive, iron-banded affair. Ramirez turned Garrett over to a guard, a burly man with a heavy, brutal face. Carrying a single huge key on a metal ring, the guard led Garrett down a dark, narrow corridor lined with doors that were also reinforced with iron. Each door had a small, eye-level aperture set with bars. The guard unlocked and pulled one open, and Garrett, feeling choked up now, entered his son's cell.

Dave sat on the bunk, his head in his hands. He looked utterly dejected. He raised his head slowly, stared blankly—seemingly without recognition. And Garrett realized that if he had come upon the boy unexpectedly he would not have known him; Dave was that changed.

He had been a husky youth, still possessing at twenty a sort of boyishness. Now he was thinned down, gaunted. His face was haggard, and young no longer. His hair was long and unkempt, and it was long since he had shaved. Most distressing of all to Garrett was the dull look of despair in his eyes.

He thought, *Can this be my son?*

He said, "Dave, I'm here to do what I can for you."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

The youth had recognized him, for he said, "I'm wondering why you bothered."

"I couldn't not bother, Son."

"I figured you'd let me rot in this place before you'd lift a finger."

"Have I been that hard on you?"

A moment of silence, then: "No, I can't say that you have. I'm the one at fault."

Garrett took that for a good sign. There was hope for anyone who could accept blame, admit wrongdoing.

Dave went on. "Maybe it will make you feel better to know I've learned my lesson—even though it's too late."

"Maybe it's not too late."

"It is," Dave said. "They took Al Stacey out and shot him this morning. I'll be next. I'm wondering why they're taking so long to do it."

"Captain Ramirez has offered me a deal," Garrett told him. "He'll release you if I bring him the seven who got away."

Dave showed no hope at all. "How can you do such a thing?"

"I'll be honest with you, Dave. At the moment, I have no idea how I can pull it off. But I'll find a way. I have no choice."

"You've got a choice. You can turn around and ride home."

"I'd be a pretty poor father to do that."

"But I've been a pretty poor son, haven't I?"

Garrett didn't reply to that. He suddenly felt that he had to get out of that cell, away from Dave, or he would break down and become maudlin.

"I've got to talk with Ramirez now," he said. "But I'll come to see you again."

He turned at once to the door, where the brutal-faced

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

guard waited, but he paused to ask, "Is there anything I can bring you, Dave?"

"No, I guess not."

Garrett sought for a word of encouragement, of hope. He failed to find one, for at the moment he felt utterly discouraged and hopeless.

A detail of eight Rurales with two pack animals was riding out as he came from the jail. He waited for them to file past, then strode to the building where he had spent the night. He took this to be the headquarters building, since Ramirez occupied it. He found the Captain at breakfast, the girl again serving him. An extra place was set at the table.

"Sit down," Ramirez said, making it an order. "We will have a talk while we eat."

Garrett seated himself at the table, removing his hat and laying it on the floor beside his chair. The girl came with food for him.

"Gracias, señorita."

Her answering smile was the only pleasant thing about the morning.

Garrett said, "The boy is half-starved, Ramirez. If I leave money with you, will he be given other than jail fare?"

"It can be arranged."

"And a change of clothes?"

"That too."

Garrett felt a trifle better, and found that he could now eat despite his having witnessed the execution and finding Dave in such a lamentable condition.

"About the seven," he said. "It'll be no small thing to find them and take them alive."

"Alive or dead," Ramirez said. "I will not be choosy in the matter. But if you bring me a dead man, I want it to be the

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

right man. I won't have you palming off any ringers on me."

He picked up a paper from the table, handed it to Garrett.

"The names of the seven," he said. "There is no question about them. I got them separately from your son and Al Stacey. Each gave me the same names."

Garrett looked at the list. He was not greatly surprised to find these names on it: Russ Maugher, Gus Maugher, and Jake Maugher. The other four were new to him: Chris Bateman, Ollie Ward, Frank Langley, and the Dude.

Watching him intently, Ramirez said, "Do you know any of these men?"

Garrett nodded. "The three Maughers. And they know me. That will make it hard for me to take them. The one, Russ, the father of the other two, tried to bushwhack me only a few days ago. Well, knowing them, I should be able to find them. As for the others, finding them will take some doing."

"You have a crew of tough hands. You could use them to hunt down the seven."

"I haven't the right to turn them into manhunters and have them risk their lives to save my son."

"You are *rico*. You can offer rewards. There are always men eager to collect bounties—even on other men."

"The seven would hear of it and go into hiding—and maybe leave the Territory, if they haven't already."

"You can ask the law to help."

Garrett gave him a frowning look. "You probably know as well as I do how little law enforcement there is in Arizona."

"I have heard, of course," Ramirez said. "That is why I haven't asked the lawmen at Tombstone to arrest these men for me. But you, being an important *americano* . . ."

"My suspicion is that those Tombstone lawmen are in ca-

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

hoots with the criminal element," Garrett said. "If I asked their help, I'd risk their tipping off the seven that I'm after them. The cards are stacked against me, Ramirez. To begin with, I've been fighting the outlaws too long and my face is too well-known to them."

"A face can be changed."

Garrett said, with sarcasm, "With a false beard, maybe?"

"Consider," Ramirez said. "You are known as a big, rich, important rancher. You look the part. You have the manner. But if you made yourself look like a poor drifter, a saddle tramp . . . First, you shave off your moustache and then let your whiskers grow for a couple of weeks. And you make your clothes look old and shabby. Finally, you return to Arizona riding a horse without the Anchor brand—a Mexican horse. With your saddle as worn as the rest of your outfit. You see? You will have changed not just your face but your whole appearance."

Garrett frowned, made no comment. He went on with his breakfast. He had his doubts that such a skimpy disguise would fool anybody who had ever had a good look at him. Russ Maugher, for example. There was a hombre who wouldn't be fooled. Finally Garrett pushed his plate aside, drank the last of his coffee, and lit a cigar.

"You are not convinced," Ramirez said. "All right. There is something more that can be done. It can be arranged for John Garrett to be dead when you go back across the border."

"What kind of nonsense is that, Ramirez?"

Ramirez shook his head. "It's not nonsense. The *alcalde* has a cousin who is a merchant in Tombstone. The cousin could go to the newspaper there, with a letter from Señor Baca. The letter would say that John Garrett was killed by

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

the Rurales when he tried to break his son out of jail at Zaragoza. The newspaper—what is it called?”

“Tombstone has two, *The Epitaph* and *The Nugget*.”

“So,” Ramirez said. “Two will do better than one. Baca’s cousin can take the letter to both. They would print the news that a big, important Arizona rancher was killed in Mexico, no?”

“Most likely,” Garrett said dryly. “*The Epitaph* ran an item about my last big shipment of cattle over the railroad; my death should be news too.”

“*Bueno*. With John Garrett believed dead and buried in Mexico, nobody will take you for anything but a poor drifter, even if there seems to be a resemblance. You will be able to do your manhunting without any of the seven knowing you are after them.”

Garrett gazed at Ramirez with a grudging respect. “It just might work. I’ve got to hand it to you, *hombre*. . . . You have a tricky mind that the Devil himself would envy.” He reached for his hat, picked up the list of names. “I’ll talk with my son again, get him to give me a description of the four bandits I don’t know.”

He went to the door and faced about there. It had come to him this instant how he could keep Ramirez from double-crossing him.

“Did Dave or Stacey tell you who was the leader of that wild bunch?”

Ramirez nodded. “Russ Maugher got the lot of them together, but during the raid he took orders from the one called the Dude. It doesn’t matter who the leader was, though. I want all seven.”

Garrett smiled for the first time since crossing over into

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Mexico. "Maybe it doesn't matter to you," he said, "but it does to me."

Ramirez looked puzzled "In what way?" he demanded.

Garrett left the room without replying to that. He would let this captain of Rurales know the answer when the time was ripe. He was discovering that he could be devious, too, and he was rather pleased about it.

VII

GARRETT HAD to visit his son half a dozen times during the next few days to obtain descriptions of the four bandits he did not know. Dave was not unwilling to talk: he had no misguided sense of loyalty to the other members of the wild bunch. He had decided for himself that even if it did not save his life the seven should be delivered to the Rurales so they could pull no more raids. The trouble was, he had been left in a confused state of mind by what had happened to him. A part of him seemed to shrink from remembering the others with any clarity.

Understanding that, Garrett was patient with him. Little by little, he managed to get Dave to tell him what three of them were like. Only the Dude remained a shadowy, faceless figure, and seemed somehow sinister because the youth could not describe him at all.

Finally Garrett said, "All right, Dave. . . . We know that Chris Bateman is a big, red-faced man. You heard him or one of the others mention that he had been a bartender at Galeyville. Ollie Ward was a cowhand. He's young, not much older than you—tall and lanky. Frank Langley was a faro dealer at Tombstone, and you knew him pretty well. He was

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

the one who got you to join the wild bunch. He's about thirty-five, a fancy dresser and a sport. He has a scar on his left cheek. I should be able to track those three down. But I need to know what the Dude is like."

"I keep telling you I can't remember much about him," Dave said, his patience running out even if Garrett's had not. "I'd tell you about him if I could—but I can't, damn it!"

"Easy, Son. . . . Just take it easy."

They were outside the jail, walking slowly back and forth along the bullet-scarred wall. Garrett had won that concession from Captain Ramirez. He could take Dave out of his cell for half an hour each day. The youth had better fare now; his meals were being brought in from a nearby *cantina*. He'd been given a new shirt and pants, and a barber had been in to cut his hair and shave him. Garrett was paying for all this. But it was doing Dave little good. He was still in poor shape, mentally and physically—due in part, Garrett suspected, to a troubled conscience and in part to a fear that he would in the end be shot anyway.

Garrett said, "Keep thinking about him. It's important that I know what each of the seven looks like. You never heard him called anything other than the Dude?"

Dave shook his head. "I never did. Nobody but Russ Maugher seemed to know him. He didn't even talk with any of the rest of us—except maybe to Gus and Jake Maugher, and not much even to them. He was a loner."

"Was he dressed like a dude?"

"No, but Frank Langley was—like always."

"What color hair did he have?"

"Brown, I guess."

"Did he have a moustache?"

Dave shook his head. "He just hadn't shaved for a while."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He didn't have a beard, though—just stubble." He looked at his father. "Like you have now."

Garrett had clipped and shaved his moustache off, and afterward avoided using his razor. He was following Ramirez's advice, letting himself become seedy-looking in the hope it would disguise him. He was wearing a cheap blue shirt he had bought at a store nearby. He had made a rip in the one leg of his pants and sewn a crude patch over it. He was letting both shirt and pants get as dirty as possible. He had soaked his Stetson in a pail of water, then rubbed dust into it while still wet. He had taken a small rock and laboriously scuffed his boots until they appeared disreputable. John Garrett, owner of Anchor Ranch, was looking more like a down at his heel saddle tramp each day.

"Dave, listen. . . . Russ Maugher was leader of the wild bunch, but he took orders from the Dude. Is that right?"

Dave nodded. "That much I remember about him. Because some of the boys grumbled about it. They wondered who the Dude thought he was, to be saying what should be done all the time."

"A smart hombre, was he?"

"I—I guess so."

"Did Russ seem afraid of him?"

"Russ wasn't afraid of anybody," Dave said. "Not even of the Rurales—and he should have been."

Garrett finally let it drop. He became convinced that his son simply wasn't able to tell him anything about the Dude.

He had been at Zaragoza nine days when Ramirez, having returned after an absence of three days, tossed a newspaper across the table to him when they sat down to supper. It was a copy of the *Tombstone Epitaph*, four days old.

Going through the strange procedure of looking for his

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

own obituary, Garrett found this headline and subheadline:

PROMINENT CATTLEMAN DEAD IN MEXICO
Owner of Anchor Ranch Killed by Rurales

The story read:

Word has reached this newspaper of the slaying of John Garrett, the well-known Arizona rancher. He was shot to death by Rurales while attempting to break his son out of jail at Zaragoza, Sonora. The report from that place states that the younger Garrett was under arrest for banditry: another young man gone wrong.

John Garrett was one of our leading citizens and famed for being a hard customer in his treatment of erring cowboys who used a long rope and a running iron on Anchor cattle. He had many friends, however, and this newspaper has heard talk of a posse being formed to avenge his death.

The Epitaph warns against any such undertaking, for it would be an armed invasion of a sovereign state and certainly cause repercussions in Washington and Mexico City.

The deceased, whose remains lie at rest on foreign soil, was a Texan by birth. He was about forty-five years of age, a widower, and . . .

Garrett read no farther. He looked at Ramirez, who was watching him with an amused smile.

"So you are now a dead man, Señor Garrett," Ramirez said. "How does it feel?"

"I won't know that until I start my manhunting," Garrett told him. "I'm still not convinced that I won't be recognized.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

If word gets around that I'm alive and doing your dirty work, I will be a dead man."

"The newspaper says there is talk of avenging you."

"I've noticed that newspapers have the habit of stretching the truth," Garrett said. "Anyway, it's time for me to start for the border. It may as well be tonight."

"Sí. The sooner, the better."

"There's one thing that puzzles me, Ramirez. In all this time you haven't said anything about my trying to recover the loot the seven made off with."

"That is of no consequence," Ramirez said. "When we had the fight with the bandits, one of my men managed to capture two of their pack horses. Those two animals carried most of the loot. As far as can be determined, only about five thousand dollars is missing. To Don Felipe, that is not a great deal of money. Of course, if you are able to recover it we will be pleased."

"It's not likely that it can be recovered," Garrett told him. "Seven men could and probably did run through that much money in Tombstone in no time at all. Another thing: Where do I deliver the seven, when and if I take them? You don't expect me to bring them all the way down here to Zaragoza, do you?"

Ramirez shook his head. "That wouldn't be practical, unless you had help and managed to round up the seven all at once. I will station some of my men at San Luis, on the border. You can take the *bandidos* there."

"All right. And you have my son there when I deliver the last of the lot."

"I will have him there," Ramirez said.

Maria came in with a tray, and they were silent while she served them. As usual, Garrett made a point of thanking

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

her and she responded with a dazzling smile. He had become accustomed to her presence at mealtime. Her prettiness and cheerfulness relieved to a degree the depressing atmosphere of this barracks-like building and the jail across the way. He knew she was more to Ramirez than merely a servant, but that, he had decided from the start, was their business and theirs alone.

As the girl left the room, Ramirez said, "You have a way with her, *amigo*. She thinks you a fine gentleman. But in all this time you have not asked for a woman. You have one at home you are very fond of, maybe?"

Garrett shook his head. "No woman. Not since my wife passed away."

Ramirez started to say more but thought better of it. They ate their supper in silence, and shortly Maria returned with the coffeepot and filled their cups. Garrett was more keenly aware of her presence than usual, when she came to pour the coffee for him, and he found himself thinking how pleasant it would be to have a woman at Anchor—ridding the big ranch house of its lonely feel.

He thought: *But what woman?*

For the first time since that night at Valido he was reminded of Virginia Barton. His memory was of her fixing their supper and telling him she was making use of him so Ed Lambert would get over the notion that he was the only man in her life. The picture his mind held of her was pleasant indeed, but abruptly the realization came to him that by now Virginia would have read or heard of the report of his death—and believed it. As a good friend, she would be shaken by it.

Ed Lambert too must now believe him dead.

And the men at Anchor Ranch.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Garrett didn't like that, but there was, he assured himself, no help for it. He couldn't let any of those people know the truth, for one or more of them might, through a slip of the tongue, let it become public knowledge that he was not dead and buried at Zaragoza.

"Something bothering you, *amigo*?" Ramirez said. "You are frowning as though troubled."

"It's nothing," Garrett told him. "Nothing at all."

An hour later he was ready to ride out. The same two Rurales who had escorted him south from San Luis were to accompany him now. They had a spare animal under pack, and his mount was a grulla horse wearing a spidery Mexican brand that no Anglo was likely to decipher. Its rigging was also Mexican, the saddle having a saucer-shaped horn, and although looking old and worn, sound enough.

Ramirez was there to see him off. "You'll be using a new name, once you're across the border," he said. "Have you decided what it will be?"

Garrett had given that some thought. He had chosen the name of a man, now long dead, whom he had known back in Texas.

"If you hear of a Ben Larsen getting the worst of a shooting scrape," he said ruefully, "you'll know that John Garrett is really dead."

"I don't expect to hear such news, Señor Larsen," Ramirez said, smiling and offering his hand. "Good hunting, *amigo*."

Garrett hesitated briefly, then shook hands with him. At the moment he had no hard feelings for Ramirez. He could understand the man. Ramirez had a job to do, and rightly or wrongly he was doing it the only way open to him. He was a zealous lawman, and Garrett couldn't say as much for many of the badge-toters in the Territory of Arizona.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Keep my son safe, Captain," he said. "And have him at San Luis when I deliver the last of those seven bandits. As I told you the night I got here, I won't stand for you double-crossing me."

He rode away before Ramirez could reply to that, touching the grulla horse with the star-roweled iron Mexican spurs mounted on his shabby boots. The two Rurales came after him with the pack horse. He set the pace, and made it a brisk one. He intended to waste no time getting back across the border and starting his search for the seven men who would buy his son's life with their own.

He had gone to tell Dave goodbye, and made him this promise: "I'll do my best, Son. If I fail you, it won't be for lack of trying."

Dave had said, "You'll be risking your life for me every time you try to take one of them. I won't tell you not to take such chances, because I know you wouldn't listen. But Pa. . . Watch yourself. They're killers, all seven of them."

For a moment, John Garrett and his son had been closer than ever before. And John Garrett was convinced now that Dave was worth saving. Somehow, he knew that the youth had grown out of his wild streak and would become, if freed from that Zaragoza jail, the kind of a man a father could look upon with pride.

Garrett felt almost lighthearted as he rode through the night, even though he realized he was on a mission so chancy it seemed a fool's errand.

VIII

TWENTY-FIVE million dollars in silver bullion had already come from Tombstone's mines, and the Contention, the Grand Central, and the Lucky Cuss, plus numerous lesser glory holes, were still at the peak of production. Now riding the crest of its boom, the town had a motley, predominantly male population of fifteen thousand. John Garrett found that a man could become a part of this place without being noticed at all. Nobody looked twice at a down on his luck drifter, to see if anything else lay beneath the beard stubble and the shabby clothes.

As Ben Larsen, he was just another riding man come to rub elbows with the miners, bonanza kings, businessmen, freighters, stagecoach drovers, sporting gentry, and persons of no visible means of support. The town was a mecca for all sorts of horseback men: ranchers, cowhands, rustlers, horse thieves, and saddle tramps. They came and went, no questions asked, and Garrett, who couldn't have been mistaken for other than a horseback man, was as safe from discovery here as if he had indeed been dead.

He had been in Tombstone for the whole of a week now, and although he had seen numerous men who knew him, he had not been recognized. He had put his grulla horse up at Beeson's Livery Stable, and taken a room for himself at a boardinghouse on Third Street just off Tough Nut. This was close to Hop Town, the Chinese settlement, and being a low-priced neighborhood it was right for a man looking so down at the heels.

During the last three days, he had been keeping a close

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

watch on one of the seven men he must deliver to Captain Ramirez. He'd had a strong hunch that Frank Langley, Dave's *compadre*, would be back at his old haunts. He had spent four days looking for a man fitting the description his son had given him of the faro dealer turned bandit. Time and again he had made the rounds of the saloons, almost all of which had gambling layouts in operation. He gave special attention to those offering faro, such as the Oriental, the Crystal Palace, and Hafford's. None of the faro dealers he saw had a long, thin scar across his left cheek, as, according to Dave, Frank Langley had.

The third night he bucked the game at Hafford's, and after losing a few dollars, said, "I haven't seen Frank Langley about since I hit town this trip. Has he moved on?"

"Oh, Frank's around," the dealer said. "He's just not working right now."

"Not working?" Garrett said. "Why the tricky tinhorn must have struck it rich. Well, maybe I'll bump into him before I mosey along."

The dealer took in his shabby appearance, looked dubious, and said, "Maybe you will." His tone suggested it wasn't likely if Langley saw him first.

Now that he knew Langley was in town, Garrett did not ask anybody else about him. He couldn't risk having the man told, "Somebody's been asking for you, Frank . . . a rough-looking hombre." He didn't want Langley to get the wind up and go into hiding or leave Tombstone.

Since Langley wasn't working, Garrett now looked for him among the patons of the various deadfalls. Evidently the man hadn't yet run through his share of the five thousand dollars the seven had managed to bring back to the Territory—and was still living off it. That five thousand, Garrett reflected,

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

had been slim pickings for such a risky enterprise as a raid into Mexico.

While searching for Langley, he frequently saw Deputy U. S. Marshal Wyatt Earp, his brothers, and his friend Doc Holliday on the streets and in the pleasure palaces. He saw as well Sheriff Johnny Behan and his deputies. These opposing factions prowled the town like two packs of cross dogs about to pounce on each other. While they feuded, Tombstone and the whole of Cochise County continued to be a haven for outlaws—and a man calling himself Ben Larsen looked for one named Frank Langley, to turn him over to a lawman who would make him pay for his crimes.

The evening of his fourth day in Tombstone, Garrett passed by the Cosmopolitan Hotel and took a second look at a man lighting a cigar in its entrance. The man was well-dressed—black broadcloth suit, vest of a flower design, white shirt, string tie, narrow-brimmed gray hat. Garrett felt his heart give a lurch as he saw, in the glare of the match, that the man's left cheek was scarred in the way Dave had described.

He didn't doubt even for an instant. He knew he had found his man, the first of the seven.

Frank Langley strolled along Allen Street, entered the Bird Cage Theater. Garrett followed him inside and watched him join two men at a table. They welcomed Langley as though having expected him. Garrett looked them over, but neither fitted any of the descriptions tucked away in his memory.

The place was crowded, all the tables and boxes occupied. The show was on, the orchestra playing loudly if not melodiously for a bevy of scantily clad dancing girls on the stage. Garrett managed to find a place at the bar, which was also crowded. He bought a drink, to pay for his being there—and to celebrate his good luck.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He bought a second and finally a third, as the time passed and Langley seemed settled for the rest of the evening. After the third drink, he went outside and waited in front of the theater. He lit a Mexican cigar, smoked it slowly. Men came and went, in droves. More than two hours passed before Langley appeared, his companions with him. The three were feeling their drinks. Talking loudly, laughing boisterously, they moved a bit unsteadily down Fifth Street to Tough Nut. They turned there, and ended up at a parlor house in the red-light district beyond Sixth.

Garrett kept up a vigil there, hidden from passersby by the deep shadows of the ruins of a fire-gutted adobe house. He again waited for more than two hours before Langley and the others once more appeared on the street. They still hadn't finished their evening. Returning to midtown they went into the Can-Can Chop House. Garrett ventured inside and took a table halfway across the room from the one at which the trio seated themselves. He ordered a steak, and while eating it, studied the man he must deliver to the Rurales at San Luis.

How he was to get Langley away from Tombstone, he did not yet know. He did know this: it wouldn't be easily accomplished. He sized the man up as a tough customer. Frank Langley's liking for fine clothes and his inclination to carouse did not mean that he was in any way soft. The chances were, Garrett decided, Langley had come by that scar in a fight and the man who had given it to him hadn't lived to brag about it.

Langley parted from the other two when they left the restaurant, and Garrett followed him to where he had first seen him—the Cosmopolitan Hotel. Watching through a window, he saw him cross the lobby and climb the stairs. Satisfied

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

that his man lived there and he would be able to find him again, he went to his grubby boardinghouse room to sleep on it—or rather, to lie awake and wonder how to take Langley.

Garrett followed him on his rounds about town the next two nights, and on each of them, as on the first, his quarry returned, somewhat less than sober, to the hotel in the small hours of the morning.

Then, the fourth night, Langley was sitting in on a poker game at the Crystal Palace. Watching from the bar, Garrett saw that he was having a winning streak and so would almost certainly stay with the game as long as his luck held. The man was drinking steadily, and after a time the liquor and the stuffiness of the barroom got to him. His face became flushed, and he mopped it a time or two with his handkerchief. Finally he pushed his hat back off his brow, unknotted his tie, opened his shirt collar and unbuttoned his vest. Still trying to make himself comfortable, he pushed his coat a bit back off his shoulders—and Garrett saw that he wore a revolver in an armpit holster. As the man's winning streak continued, Garrett made his decision.

Tonight. . . It may as well be tonight.

He left the Crystal Palace and went to make his preparations. They took him more than an hour, but when he returned to the saloon he found Langley still in the game—and still winning.

The game went on past midnight and then after one o'clock. Occasionally a player dropped out, but there was always someone to take his place. Langley showed no signs of leaving the table.

Watching from the bar again, by way of the big mirror

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

behind it, Garrett began to wish the man's run of luck would break. Now that his decision and preparations were made, he found the waiting difficult. He was tense, becoming edgy. Impatience roweled him.

Finally, just short of two o'clock, Langley tossed in a hand that didn't please him and pushed his stacks of chips across to the house dealer to be cashed in. Leaving the table, he came to the bar and Garrett moved slightly to make room for him.

After taking in Garrett's seedy appearance, Langley stood with his back half turned to him. He was dressed with his usual care, and also looked as though he'd had a barbering only that day. He possessed a sort of handsomeness that was only slightly marred by the pencil-line scar running from the lobe of his ear almost to the corner of his mouth.

The bartender who served him said, "You're having a long run of luck these days, Frank."

Langley shrugged. "Yes and no," he said. "I still haven't hit it lucky with a big stake."

Garrett could only believe that the man was lamenting the failure of the wild bunch to bring the whole of their loot out of Mexico. He thought, with wry amusement: *Friend, you'll never get your big stake. Your luck is about to run out for good.* The next moment he wasn't at all sure of that. He still had the man to take.

Langley downed his drink, tossed a half-dollar onto the bar, and walked from the saloon. Garrett went after him, keeping close at his heels tonight. The Cosmopolitan was catty-cornered across Allen Street from the Crystal Palace, and he had to make his move before Langley reached the hotel entrance.

Langley crossed Allen, but walked along the side of the

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

hotel and on down Fifth. Garrett dropped back a little, but not so far that he couldn't close in fast. He followed Langley to Tough Nut, then east along it. He realized that the man was on his way to the red-light district again, and told himself, *So much the better*. It would be darker there, with few people on the streets.

Once through Hop Town, Langley turned into Seventh Street. When Garrett reached that intersection, he saw nothing of his quarry. He pulled up short, peered one way and another. Langley had caught on that he was being followed, and ducked in somewhere. Then Garrett heard the unmistakable click of a gun being cocked. Alarm knifed through him. He had known that taking the man wouldn't be easy, but he hadn't expected that the hunted would set a trap for the hunter.

He saw Langley now, half hidden in the dark doorway of some sort of store. Every instinct told him to grab for his own gun, but logic warned him against such a move. He would have no chance, drawing against a cocked and aimed gun. He needed to keep his wits about him. He managed to do that, and afterward, remembering how he'd played out his hand, he felt that some of Captain Ramirez's deviousness had rubbed off on him.

"Hold it, Frank!" he called out, letting his voice carry the very real alarm he felt. "It's all right. I mean you no harm. Russ Maugher sent me with a message for you."

He saw the obscure figure stir slightly, and saw too now the gun beading him.

Langley said, "Maugher? Who's Russ Maugher?" His tone was mocking.

Garrett raised his hands shoulder high and took two hesi-

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

tant steps toward the dark store building. "Come off it, Langley. Everybody in the Territory knows Russ."

"I'm not everybody, mister." Recognition had come to Frank Langley. "If you've got a message for me, why didn't you give it to me when I was standing next to you in the Crystal Palace? Why'd you follow me, like a damn bush-whacking Apache?"

"I wasn't taking any chances on somebody overhearing," Garrett said, taking another forward step. "I wanted to get you alone, to talk. Look, Frank; Russ said to pass word that he's got something big lined up. A sure thing, this time. He wants you—"

Langley stepped from the doorway, his gun steady on Garrett's chest. Garrett moved once more, and managed to close the distance between them to ten feet before the man gestured with his left hand.

"That's close enough, hombre. I don't know any Russ Maugher, and I don't want to know you—whoever you are."

"Ben Larsen's my name, Frank. Russ and me, we're *amigos*—*compadres*. He sent me down from Valido to look you up."

He was playing the role well. He sounded like the down-and-outer he looked. But his mouth had become dry, and the palms of his raised hands moist. His heart was slamming his chest with fast sledgehammer blows. He was scared, and sensibly so. A trifle more pressure of Langley's finger on the trigger of that gun, and he, John Garrett, would really be a dead man. He was close now, though . . . maybe close enough to jump Langley without getting shot. A handgun wasn't too accurate against a moving target, and any man, no matter how nervy, became rattled when rushed. He had no choice, at any rate. He couldn't talk Langley into putting his gun up. He braced himself to make the lunge. At that

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

moment Langley let him know he dared wait no longer.

"Friend, I'm going to blow your lying head off," the man said. "And I'll tell the law that you were sneaking up on me and I figured you meant to rob me." He laughed shortly, mockingly. "I saw Russ Maugher only three days ago, and he never mentioned having something big lined up. I take it you're a lawman and—"

Garrett thought, *It's now or never*, and hurled himself forward. The instant he began to move he dropped into a low crouch and aimed for Langley's legs. The gun went off—right in his face, it seemed. He was deafened by the blast of it, blinded by its muzzle flash.

IX

AS GARRETT had hoped, his sudden rush threw Langley off balance mentally. He got in close fast, and the man fired without lowering his aim. The slug went wild, and before Langley could shoot again, Garrett slammed into him. He caught him around the thighs with both arms, and lifted him bodily as he continued to drive forward with all his might. He gave a violent heave, and Langley, uttering a terrified yell, went hurtling over his back to hit the ground jarringly behind him.

Swinging about and straightening up, Garrett found him lying facedown and not yet making an attempt to rise. The gun had been knocked from his hand, and Garrett kicked it beyond his reach. He now drew his own gun, and was looking hard-eyed down its long barrel when Langley struggled to his hands and knees.

Due to the sort of neighborhood this was, the shot had

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

drawn no curious people to the street. No windows were thrown up, no doors flung open. No voice demanded, "What's going on there?" But the shot would have been heard all the way to midtown, and it was likely that one or another of Tombstone's lawmen would come to investigate. Garrett knew he must get Langley away from there in a hurry.

He said, "Now, friend, you and I are taking a little walk." He had dropped Ben Larsen's mumbling way of talking; was using John Garrett's rather authoritative tone. "You're going with me on your own two legs—or, by damn, I'll drag you. Now get up."

Langley was still shaken from his hard fall, and in his dazed condition he got to his feet without protest. He stood swaying, his legs wobbly, and stared dully at Garrett.

Then, in feeble protest: "Listen, you; you've got nothing on me. I haven't been away from town in months."

"You're going away from it now," Garrett said, and took a vise-like grip on his arm.

He hustled Langley away from the red-light district, and east along Tough Nut Street. Still unsteady on his feet, the man staggered and stumbled—and moved along only because Garrett was forcing him with that grip on his arm.

Here were few houses, and they all dark. Soon Garrett had him away from the town and was steering him north along the edge of a broad hollow that the town was using as a dump. They came shortly to the shacks of a diggings that had been turned out to be a *borrasca* instead of a bonanza and had been abandoned. Two saddled horses stood tethered beside one of the shacks: Garrett's grulla, and a sorrel he had rented at Beeson's Livery.

"Get mounted," he told Langley, untying the sorrel.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Langley had recovered from his fall and got some of his nerve back. He showed a sudden belligerency.

"Nothing doing. 'I'm not going anywhere—not alive, anyway. You'll have to shoot me, damn you.'"

"I can do that," Garrett said. "Alive or dead, it makes no difference to me." But not wanting to shoot, he lifted his gun and held it posed like a club. "In the saddle or over it," he said. "You make the choice—but remember that you'll have a mighty sore head."

Langley stared at him with hatred for a moment, then muttered something incoherent and stepped to the saddle of the sorrel horse. Garrett swung onto the grulla, which had two canteens of water and a sack of grub hanging from the saucer horn of its saddle.

"Now I'll tell you," he said. "You're safe as long as you're in my hands—provided you do as I tell you. But one tricky move, and you're a dead man. Ride on my left side, and keep up with me. That's all you've got to do. Come on."

They rode away from the shacks, headed southward through the hills surrounding Tombstone. They kept on the move through what remained of the night, traveling in a heavy silence that was broken only once.

At that time, Langley asked, "You're taking me to Mexico?"

"To the border, anyway."

"For the Rurales?"

"You've guessed it, mister."

"You're no Mex."

"That's right," Garrett said. "I'm no Mex."

"Then, why? What's it to you?"

Garrett saw no point in telling his reason, and so said, "Never mind."

They were riding through a stretch of extremely rough

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

country when dawn came, but two hours later they came through a range of low hills onto a flat, grassy area and saw some adobe ruins in the distance. They found a spring at this once-inhabited place, and Garrett pulled up and dismounted.

"Get down," he told Langley. "We'll rest the horses."

He off-saddled the two animals, watered them, staked them out on the grass. He gathered brush and started a fire, then filled the small coffeepot he carried in the grub sack and put it on to brew.

Langley lounged against one of the crumbling walls, a scowl on his scarred face. He wasn't despairing, Garrett knew. He wouldn't feel beaten as long as there was a single breath left in him. He would be hoping for a chance to jump his captor, and watching for it. That was as clear, Garrett reflected, as if the man had put it into words.

When the coffee was ready, Garrett filled a tin cup and took a couple of now-stale biscuits from the sack. He moved away from the fire, leaving a second cup and the grub sack by it. He sat cross-legged on the ground, alongside the saddles. He had his Winchester in the boot of his Mexican saddle, and he wanted to make sure Langley didn't make a try for it.

"Help yourself," he said.

Langley said dryly, "Thanks," and went to the fire. He filled the second cup and hunkered down. After drinking some of the coffee, he gave Garrett a searching look.

"You got Russ, eh?"

"Not yet."

"Some of the others?"

"No. You're the first."

"What are you—a bounty hunter?"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Garrett thought about that, and said, "In a way." It was true enough. He would collect a bounty, his son's life, if he brought in all seven of the bandits.

Langley stared at him. "In a way? What does that mean?"

Again Garrett told him, "Never mind."

Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to tell this man that he was buying Dave's life by turning him and the others over to the Rurales. Because he knew it was not entirely fair. Not when Dave was as guilty as the rest.

They were silent for a while, Garrett finishing his biscuits and coffee. He lit a cigar, savoring the strong taste of the Mexican tobacco.

Then Langley said, "The others won't be so easy to find or take. If you know Russ Maugher, you know he's rough and tough. His boys are, too. And the others—wolf-mean, all of them. Gunslicks, killers. Me, I'm just a professional gambler who sat in on the wrong game. I was easy for you. The others won't be."

"So?"

"A deal."

"No."

"I tell you how to find the others and you let me go."

"The Rurales want seven men."

"They'll be glad to get six."

"You don't know the Rurales, friend."

Langley frowned at that, his face turning gloomy. Garrett could almost see despair taking hold of him at last. The man wouldn't abandon his hope of finding a way to get the better of him, but it was beginning to be a pretty feeble hope.

Garrett said, "It was a fool thing for a man like you to take part in. You knew better. The others now, except for the Dude—wrong ones, the lot of them." He puffed thoughtfully

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

on his cigar, as though wondering about the others. "Who talked you into it, Langley?"

"What does it matter, now?"

"Russ Maugher or the Dude?"

"It was Russ, if you've got to know."

"He's not your kind. But the Dude now . . ."

Langley laughed suddenly, mockingly. "You're easy to see through, hombre. But it's no good. You're not getting anything out of me—not without a deal. It'll cost you to know about the Dude."

Garrett showed a rueful smile. "The price is too high," he said, and then let the silence return.

The sun was climbing, blazing in a pale sky. He moved out of its heavy heat, taking his rifle along to the shade of one of the tumbled-down walls. Langley too went to the shade, after finishing his cup of coffee. He'd passed up the food, but now, like Garrett, he did light a cigar. He was beginning to look dejected. After finishing his cigar, he sat with his head bowed and his shoulders slumped. His eyes were vacant, and his thoughts seemed far away.

Two hours later Garrett let the horses drink again and then saddled them. They mounted and rode on, seeing now scattered bunches of cattle. That afternoon they sighted a cluster of adobe huts to the south and took it to be a Mexican village.

"Mabe there's a *cantina*," Langley said. "I could do with a drink." He managed a bleak smile. "A last request . . . ?"

Garrett considered, then nodded. "I'll grant it. But no tricks. I'll be keeping a close watch on you."

They rode to the village, and found that there was a small, squalid combination grocery and *cantina*. Garrett told Langley to remain in the saddle. The proprietor had already come

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

to the doorway. A swarm of dusky-skinned children had gathered to stare at *los gringos*. They had brought with them several mongrel dogs and a couple of goats. Dark-eyed women watched from the doorways of the 'dobe huts.

"Whiskey," Langley told the man in the doorway of the grubby business place. He held up a silver dollar. "A bottle. Savvy?"

"No whiskey. Only tequila."

"Better than nothing. Fetch it."

When he had exchanged his dollar for a bottle of tequila, he looked questioningly at Garrett. "Can I stake you to a bottle?"

"No thanks."

Langley pulled the cork and took a long pull at his bottle before they rode on.

They had been traveling southeastwardly since their morning halt, and by late afternoon they were in rough country again. Coming to a small creek, they stopped and Garrett decided to give the horses another rest even though another three or four hours of travel would bring them to San Luis.

"We'll stay a while," he told Langley, and dismounted.

Langley got down and walked away from his horse. He leaned against a huge boulder and took his bottle from his coat pocket. Garrett began to strip the rigging off the grulla. A moment later, as he lifted the saddle from its back, a shot came from behind him. He started violently. The slug missed him, but nicked the grulla. The horse snorted with fright, then began a wild bucking. Garrett let the saddle drop, grabbing the rifle from its boot and letting himself fall to the ground.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He worked the Winchester's lever while squirming about and looking for Langley. He rested the rifle's barrel on the grounded saddle, let his finger take up the slack of the trigger. He was wondering: *Where'd he get a gun?* It had been close, and he'd had a bad scare; he was still shaky from it. He saw Langley now. The man was crouching alongside the big boulder, exposing little of himself. He was aiming his gun for a second shot.

X

GARRETT got over his shakiness the instant he saw the sort of firearm Langley held. It was a tiny pocket gun, a derringer pistol with twin over-and-under barrels little more than an inch long. The range was perhaps thirty feet, and at that distance, with such a weapon, Langley would have been lucky to hit the side of a barn.

Garrett decided that the man must have felt despairing and desperate to have made his play at so obviously a wrong time. Langley should have waited until dark, when they were in the saddle again, and then swung his horse close so he could fire pointblank. A mistake that, using a derringer at a distance of more than a yard or two.

But Garrett realized that he too had made a mistake. He should have remembered that many professional gamblers carried a sneak gun. He should have searched Langley before setting out on the trail with him. His mistake could have been fatal.

He called out, "All right, Frank, you made your try, and it wasn't good enough. Now throw that popgun into the

creek. You've got only one shot left, and you can't get me with it. Come on, damn it—get rid of that thing!"

"Maybe I'll just play out my hand here and now, friend," Langley called back, his voice off-key. "It'll be quicker and easier than playing it out once the Rurales have me."

"Suit yourself," Garrett told him, and opened up with his Winchester.

He knew that few men had the iron nerve required to hold firm under fire when caught in such a situation. An inaccurate gun, and only one shot in it. He almost felt sorry for the man. He fired as fast as he could work lever and trigger, putting the slugs all around Langley but not trying to hit him. He squeezed off six shots, then, with but one load remaining, he did take aim.

"Last chance, Frank!"

After a moment Langley said, with bitter humor, "If it's all the same to you, bucko, I'll have my shot."

He fired the derringer, and the slug kicked up dirt ten feet from Garrett. Langley tossed the empty gun into the creek, rose from beside the boulder, and moved into the open. He was smiling ruefully.

"You're right," he said. "My try wasn't good enough. What now? Are you going to shoot me down like a dog?"

On his feet again, Garrett said, "That gun must be the last you were carrying."

"As a matter of fact, it was," Langley said. "Well, this calls for a drink." He brought a bottle of tequila from his pocket, uncorked it, held it up. "Join me?"

"Why, I believe I will," Garrett said, realizing that he was still a bit shaky after all.

After taking a pull at the bottle, he started a fire and made coffee. He ate some of the stale biscuits and a piece of cold

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

fried beef. Langley too helped himself to the coffee, and this time also took some of the grub from the sack. After eating, each man lit a cigar.

Langley said, "The longer I'm with you, the more I have the feeling that I've known you—or at least seen you—somewhere in the past. I keep wondering what you'd look like without that crop of whiskers."

"I've been in Tombstone more than once."

"Always as a bounty hunter?"

"No, not always."

"I'll say one thing for you: you're close-mouthed."

"Knowing about me would do you no good."

"That I can believe," Langley said. "About the Dude . . ."

Garrett shook his head. "Still no deal, Frank."

"You won't find him without help—not in a lifetime."

"I'll get help. One of the others will talk."

"Don't count on it," Langley said. "Another thing I'm wondering is, don't you ever need to sleep?"

"I'll do my sleeping after I get to San Luis."

"When will that be?"

"An hour or so after nightfall."

"So soon?" Langley said, and then lapsed into a gloomy silence.

He remained silent during the remainder of their journey, and when they first saw the lights of the border town, he reined in his horse. Garrett drew his gun and swung close to him. He had a hunch the man was thinking of making a run for it—to invite a bullet in the back.

"Don't try it, Frank. I wouldn't like clubbing you down."

Langley gave him a look of mingled anger and hatred, and said bitterly, "Damn you; why didn't you shoot me back at that creek?"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Ride on, Frank."

Langley cursed him, but obeyed.

As they came into the plaza at San Luis, the clapping of their horses' hooves brought a familiar figure to the door of the *cantina*. One of the Rurales. He peered at them, not yet recognizing Garrett.

"*Quién es?*"

"Ben Larsen," Garrett said. "I've got one of the seven."

"Bueno. Bring him inside."

When they entered the lamp-lighted barroom, Garrett saw that Langley's face had become gray with pallor and his eyes mirrored something at least akin to terror. Now Garrett did feel sorry for him. He had to remind himself that the man, along with the others, had committed atrocious crimes.

A dozen men, all Mexicans, were in the *cantina*, most of them at the bar. The Rural led the way to a table in a corner of the room. His *compadre* sat there, and with him were Sergeant Alvarez and yet another of Captain Ramirez's men. The three came to their feet, and all gazed appraisingly at Frank Langley.

Sergeant Alvarez nodded. "He is one of the seven, Señor Garrett. I remember him from the fight we had with the *bandidos*."

Langley swung around, his terror of the Rurales swept aside by a sudden rage for Garrett. "Now I know you!" he said, yelling it. "John Garrett—the kid's father! So that's the kind of a bounty hunter you are! Hunting us down to save your son—when he's as guilty as any of us!"

He lunged at Garrett, striking out wildly with his fists. He was a man gone berserk. The Rurales closed in, grappled with him. They were still struggling to subdue him when Garrett strode from the *cantina*. He could still hear Frank

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Langley cursing him when he rode off with the sorrel horse in tow.

Later, rolled up in his blankets beside the creek where Langley and he had stopped that afternoon, John Garrett found himself as far from sleep as he had ever been in his life. This was a time when he needed to be a hard man, but he wasn't quite hard enough. Langley's words had cut deep. They had set his conscience to nagging him.

Without ever having given it any special thought, he had always been a man of principles. He had always drawn the line between right and wrong, and had tried to be fair in dealing with his fellowmen. He felt that there was no fairness in what he had done to Frank Langley. He wasn't a lawman. He hadn't the authority to seize the man, haul him off to the border and turn him over to the Rurales—for execution.

As a man, he was morally in the wrong.

But as a father . . . As that, he had been in the right, even though Dave was, as Langley had said, as guilty as any of the other members of the wild bunch. A parent looked after his offspring, no matter what it cost him in the way of principles.

I couldn't have done otherwise.

He finally slept, though only fitfully. He awoke at dawn, still troubled. And hating the identity he had assumed. He suddenly wanted to be rid of Ben Larsen, bounty hunter, forever.

He got his razor and a bar of yellow soap from his warbag, which along with his blanketroll had been tied behind the cantle of his saddle. At the creek he lathered his face and laboriously scraped away the stubble that was well on the way to becoming a beard. Afterward, he threw away the cheap Mexican shirt and dug a clean shirt of better material

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

from his warbag and donned it. Feeling slightly better, he began gathering brush for a fire.

Garrett found that time, even the lapsing of a few days, had a way of changing a man's feelings—and even of easing his conscience.

On the fifth night after having delivered Frank Langley to the Rurales, he rode into Benson. This town was twenty-five miles north of Tombstone, a shipping point for that and other towns of the silver mining area as well as for the surrounding cattle ranges.

Coming into Benson shortly after dark, Garrett turned through the wide doorway of Hanlon's Livery Stable. He looked little different from when he had been in Tombstone, for his stubble had had four days in which to grow again.

The hostler was a grizzled old-timer. Noticing the grulla's spidery brand, he said, "Mexican horse, eh?"

"It was once."

"You come from down there?"

"Not lately," Garrett said, and lingered even though he had no intention of satisfying the old man's curiosity. "Just came in from Texas, by way of El Paso, Las Cruces and Stein's Pass. Looking for an old friend, Ollie Ward. He used to work on a ranch near here. The Lazy Y."

"That'd be the Yeager spread," the hostler said. "Seems as though I know the name. What's he look like, this Ollie Ward?"

"Young bucko, tall and lanky," Garrett told him. "Talks loud and acts tough."

"Yeah. I know him. If he weren't a friend of yours, I'd say he was a sort of smart aleck."

"You can say it. Seen him around lately?"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

The hostler nodded. "Two, three days ago. Over at the Chinaman's, when I went there for supper. If I see him again, I'll tell him you're looking for him. What did you say your name is?"

Garrett decided to play the game in the open this time, since he was up against a man unlikely to be as cagey as Frank Langley. He had a hunch, because of what he'd heard about Ollie Ward, first from Dave and now from this old-timer, that the cowhand would be no more than curious if hearing that a shabby stranger was looking for him. Young men inclined to be smart alecks didn't scare easily. Instead of avoiding him, Ollie Ward might look him up—play right into his hands.

"Sure, you tell him," Garrett said. "My name is Ben Larsen."

He left the stable, walked along Benson's main street. It was a one-sided street, its buildings facing the railroad tracks across the way. He had shipped cattle from here numerous times, and so was known to some of the townspeople. Since the place was small, he would most likely run into somebody who would see, despite his grubby appearance, a resemblance to the supposedly dead owner of Anchor Ranch. He would have to look blank and shake his head if anybody asked if he wasn't John Garrett.

He came to the Chinaman's eating place: Lu Fong's Café. He turned into it. There were still a few diners, all of them railroaders or freighters. No cowhands. No Ollie Ward. Nobody he knew, either. He took a place at the counter and told the waitress that he would have roast beef, fried potatoes, a dish of canned peaches, and coffee.

Leaving the restaurant half an hour later, he lit a cigar and strolled along the street to the Silver Lode Saloon. Its hitchrack was lined with horses, and when he pushed through

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

the batwings, he found a heavy sprinkling of ranchers and cowhands among the railroad men, freight rig drivers, and assorted townsmen. He paused just inside the entrance, looking for a man fitting the description of Ollie Ward. Two or three of the men in range garb were young, tall, lanky, loud of voice, and tough-looking, and one or none of them could be the man he sought. He would have to sort them out.

Puffing on his cigar, he moved toward the far end of the bar where there was vacant space.

A man at one of the tables burst out, "Great Scot, it's John Garrett! Hey, John—!"

Prepared for this sort of thing, Garrett was able to keep from giving any sign of being aware that he was being addressed. He went on to the bar. The man who had called out left his place at the table, came to him, grasped his arm.

"John, it's like seeing a ghost! I read in the paper that you—"

Garrett turned, letting himself look both puzzled and annoyed. The man gripping his arm and staring at him wide-eyed was Henry Purcell, the Wells Fargo agent. He was a little man of about fifty who peered at his small part of the world, which was the express company's office, through silver-rimmed spectacles.

"Mister, you've sure made a mistake," Garrett said, using the rough side of his tongue. "My name's Ben Larsen, and I just rode into this town from Texas an hour ago. You don't know me, and I don't know you."

The two men remaining at the table Purcell had left were watching and listening. So were men at other tables, and some of those along the bar.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Looking taken aback, Henry Purcell removed his hand from Garrett's arm and moved off a step.

"Sorry. I would have sworn—"

One of the bartenders came to serve Garrett, and he said, "A natural mistake, Henry. This hombre sure looks enough like John Garrett to be his twin. What'll you have, mister?"

Purcell stared a moment longer, unwilling to doubt his own eyes. He said, "Sorry," again, then went to rejoin his companions at the table. Garrett saw that one of them was F. X. Mowbrey, the station agent. He too seemed unable to believe this man calling himself Ben Larsen wasn't John Garrett.

Garrett said, "Give me a beer." That had never been his drink, and if these men remembered that about John Garrett, it would be all to the good. When the bartender brought him a glass of beer, he laid a silver dollar on the zinc-topped bar.

And asked, "Who's this John Garrett?"

"If he were alive, he'd be your double," the bartender said. "He owned a big spread over to the southeast. Anchor Ranch. He got himself killed down in Mexico a couple of weeks back. It was in the Tombstone newspapers."

"Too bad he's dead," Garrett said, forcing a smile he didn't feel. He found neither pleasure nor amusement in deceiving these men. "I'd like to come face to face with a man who looks all that much like me."

The bartender gave him a more careful look. "No offense intended, mister, but maybe he wouldn't have liked your being a dead ringer for him. He was a touchy sort, from what I heard. A real hard customer. You're from Texas?"

"Uh-huh. Brazos River country. Name of Ben Larsen."

"Pat Riley."

"Glad to know you, Pat," Garrett said, reaching for his beer.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He made it last quite a while, then had a second and dawdled over it too. He listened to the babble of voices around him, trying to sort out the cowhands' conversation but failing to hear the name Ollie Ward mentioned. Before he finished his second beer, the crowd had thinned out. The ranchers and cowhands drifted away to ride back to their spreads. The railroaders and freighters went off to their bunkhouses. Working men were early risers and so needed to turn in early. Finally only those townsmen who had office jobs or operated businesses remained in the Silver Lode. Garrett drank the last of his second beer.

Pat Riley came to him, asked, "Another?"

Garrett shook his head, then, after a moment of debate with himself, asked, "You know Ollie Ward, Pat?"

The bartender had a round, red face. It took on a look of distaste. "That hell-raiser? I know him, but would just as soon I didn't."

"Oh, what's wrong with him?"

"He tried to shoot up the place one night last week," Riley said. "He came in from the Alhambra down the street. He was likkered up and waving his six-shooter in the air. He scared the customers witless and shot out a lamp before the boss laid him out with a bung-starter. Yeah, I know the no-good. Why do you ask? Is he a friend of yours?"

"Not likely," Garrett said. "I just have some business with him. A crow to pick, you might say. Do you know where he holes up?"

Riley shook his head. "The town marshal threw him in the calaboose that night, to sleep it off. Turned him loose when he promised to pay for the lamp he broke. He hasn't been in here since. One thing, though . . . he's got plenty of money

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

for his hell-raising. Where he gets it, I don't know. He sure ain't holding down a job these days."

"Well, I'll find him," Garrett said. "See you again, Pat."

As he headed for the door, Riley called after him, "Try the Alhambra, Larsen. His kind hangs out there."

Garrett nodded, went out.

He walked along the one-sided street to the Alhambra Saloon. Entering it, he found a dozen men there. Most were at the bar, the others at tables with percentage girls. They were a rougher looking lot than the Silver Lode's customers. Judging them by their clothes, he took them all to be riding men. None fitted the description he had of Ollie Ward.

He stopped just inside the door, and called out, "Anybody know where I can find Ollie Ward?"

Every face turned his way, and he could feel a definite hostility leveled at him. He realized that this breed of men looked upon any stranger with suspicion and resented being asked the whereabouts of one of their kind. He would have bet that most of them were living on the wrong side of the law. He was as sure that he would not get an answer from any of them. He was right about that. It was one of the painted floozies who spoke.

"Who's looking for him?" she asked.

"Ben Larsen's the name," Garrett told her. "If you see him, tell him I've got a deal on the fire. Tell him I'll be around for a couple of days and he should look me up if he's interested in money."

He turned and went out, not sure that he was playing it right. Ollie Ward might come looking for him out of suspicion rather than curiosity—with a gun in his hand. If that proved to be the case, it wasn't likely that the cowhand-turned-bandit would give him an even break in a showdown.

XI

AT BENSON, as at Tombstone, John Garrett found the waiting difficult. Ollie Ward failed to show up the first day, the second and the third. This was midafternoon of the fourth, and Garrett had no feeling that his man would come today—or ever. He was half convinced that he had scared Ollie off, driven him into hiding or running.

Garrett was alone in the Silver Lode, playing solitaire endlessly with a greasy deck of cards and smoking too many cigars. The inactivity, the sitting around, had him edgy. His waiting was serving a purpose, of course. But he still felt that he was wasting time.

Finally he heard a rider come along the street and stop at the Silver Lode's hitchrack. The man came into the saloon, paused just inside the swing doors, and gave him a long, careful look. He then went to the bar and ordered whiskey. He had a harsh, chip-on-the-shoulder voice. Pat Riley, who was on duty alone, had no greeting for him, other than a curt nod, possibly because the man looked as though he should have taken his patronage down the street to the Alhambra. He had "hard case" written all over him.

He slapped a coin down on the bar, picked up and gulped his drink. Wiping his mouth with the back of a hand, he faced about and gazed at Garrett in a challenging way. He was a burly man with a broad face dark with stubble. He wore his gun on the left, low, with the holster tied down.

"You call yourself Ben Larsen?"

Garrett spoke around his cigar. "I do."

"What's your business with me?"

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"I have no business with you."

"You've been telling it around that you do."

"You're Ollie Ward, are you?"

"Damn right I am."

Garrett gave him a flat stare. "You, mister, are a liar." He was thinking that Ollie Ward was cagier than he had given him credit for being. "You go back and tell Ollie to quit playing games with me. Tell him to come himself—and to be here by this time tomorrow."

The hard case took the insult with nothing more than a black scowl. "All right. So I'm not Ollie. So he's being careful. But he won't come without knowing what you're after."

"I want to find a man and I think he can help me with it," Garrett said. "If he can, and will, there's a hundred dollars in it for him."

"What man?"

"You don't need to know," Garrett said. "Tell Ollie he's got until tomorrow afternoon to collect that hundred, if he wants it. After that, I'll be gone."

The hard case stared at him a moment longer, seeming to think he should say more but not knowing what. Then he walked out of the saloon. There was a brief drumbeat of hooves as he rode out of town at a hard lope.

Pat Riley said, "Mr. Larsen, I hope you know what you're doing. You're sure getting mixed up with a tough crowd."

Garrett showed him a miserly smile. "I hope the same thing, Pat. Fetch a bottle and a couple of glasses, and I'll buy us both drinks. I could use one."

The following afternoon he was seated at the same table at the same time. Again he was the only customer. At the sound of riders pulling up outside, Pat Riley took a look from a window.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"That tough hand again," Riley said. "And Ollie Ward with him, If it'll make you feel any safer, Ben, I've got a sawed-off scatter gun under the bar—and know how to use it."

Garrett shook his head. "Obliged to you, Pat, but there'll be no trouble."

He brought out five twenty dollar gold pieces, which he had transferred from his moneybelt to his pocket before leaving his hotel room, and made a little stack of them on the table.

When the two riders entered the saloon, the burly hard case went to the bar and stood with his back to it. The other, who did indeed fit the mental picture Garrett had of him, came to the table in the corner.

"All right, mister," he said, his voice loud and his tone tough, "what do you want?"

"Sit down, Ollie. Have a drink."

Ollie Ward hesitated briefly, then seated himself. "Do I know you from somewhere?" He was studying Garrett.

"Not likely," Garrett said, reaching for the bottle he'd had Riley put there earlier. He filled the two shot glasses, pushed one across to the bandit. "Drink up, Ollie."

Ollie Ward was a year or two or maybe three older than Dave, but there was something about him, Garrett felt, that was as old as crime itself. Garrett had known Ollie's kind before; such men didn't give a hoot about right or wrong, and violence was a part of their nature. The Ollie Wards of this world preyed upon their fellowmen. It was possible, Garrett reflected, that they did people injury as much for pleasure as for profit.

Ollie stared at him hard-eyed, a sneer twisting his lips. Finally he reached for his drink. After gulping it down, he

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

let his gaze rest on the little stack of gold pieces. Garrett moved the money to the center of the table.

"A hundred dollars," he said. "It's yours, if you earn it."

"Earn it how?"

"By telling me about the Dude."

"The Dude?" Ollie looked blank, puzzled.

Garrett made as if to pick up the money. "If you don't know him . . ."

"Hold on a minute."

Garrett waited.

Wary now, Ollie said, "What do you want to know about him?"

"His right name and where I can find him."

"What do you want with him?"

"You don't need to know that," Garrett said. He picked up the gold pieces, dribbled them from one hand to another.

"Is it a deal?"

"That's all you want, eh?"

"That's all."

Ollie reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. This time he sipped the whiskey, frowning with thought as he did so. A look of cunning had come to his face.

Then: "All right. His right name is Jake Marvin, and you'll find him at Tombstone."

Garrett shook his head. "I'll only pay for the truth. What you told me doesn't jibe with what Frank Langley told me."

"If Frank told you his name and whereabouts, why ask me the same thing? You loco, Larsen?"

"I'm just careful," Garrett told him. "I want to be sure. Frank gave me the Dude's name but couldn't tell me his whereabouts. If you give me both, and the name is the

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

same as Frank gave me, I'll figure you're telling the truth about where the Dude can be found. You follow me?"

Ollie nodded, and was silent—thoughtful—for a long moment. Watching him intently, Garrett could almost follow the workings of his mind. He had come to doubt that Farank Langley had known the Dude's name anymore than Dave did. He was convinced now that Ollie Ward didn't know it, either. But the cowhand wanted that hundred dollars and would try to string him along until he hit upon a way that might get it from him. Garrett decided to help him along.

"I might even go as high as two hundred, Ollie," he said. "But no later than tonight. I'll be riding out at midnight. You think it over, and if you decide to tell me where I can find the Dude . . . well, come see me before midnight."

"Where will you be heading?"

"Valido."

Ollie nodded, looking pleased—almost smug. "I'll think it over, like you say."

He got from his chair, turned away at once, walked from the saloon as though in a hurry. His partner followed him, and a clatter of hooves as they rode off sounded like they were eager to get elsewhere.

Garrett looked over at Pat Riley, gave him a wry smile. "Bring a glass and have a drink with me," he invited. "To celebrate Ollie Ward's outsmarting himself."

Once again the thought crossed his mind that he had become as devious, as tricky, as Captain Ramirez of the Rurales.

Shortly after nightfall he rode away from Benson without having waited for Ollie to return. He was convinced that the

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

cowhand wouldn't come back. *He doesn't know the Dude's name any more than I or Dave or Frank Langley knows it.* He was disappointed that Ollie hadn't been able to put him onto the Dude. That one, nameless and faceless, was going to give him trouble. Evidently his identity was known only to the three Maugher's, and getting them to talk wouldn't be easy.

Worry about that when the time comes, he told himself—and kept his thoughts on Ollie Ward.

He expected to encounter the cowhand again tonight. He was counting on it, in fact. He had offered him bait—the money he carried—and Ollie would certainly do more than nibble at it. His hard case partner would probably be with him, and that meant he would have to take the two of them on. It would be risky, for they would have it in their minds to murder him for his money.

He took the east road, riding across the bridge spanning the San Pedro River and up the long grade beyond it. Once he had made the climb, he lifted the grulla to a steady lope that dropped the miles in a hurry without tiring the animal. He passed a Benson-bound freight rig, but otherwise seemed to have the dark road to himself.

Two hours of steady riding brought him to his destination, an abandoned stage station. He turned in through the gateway in the adobe wall that had been a protection against Apache attack. He dismounted in the middle of the yard, off-saddled the grulla, and went in search of firewood. He found a sizable stack behind the house.

He built his fire larger than was necessary for cooking or warmth, so that anyone traveling the road could not fail to see it. More bait in his trap for Ollie Ward. He filled his little coffeepot and set it on a rock against the fire. When

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

the coffee had cooked, he poured some into a tin cup and stood sipping it. He kept listening into the night but heard nothing other than the crackling of the burning wood.

When the blaze began to die down, he added more fuel and shortly afterward heard the rhythmic beat of a horse being ridden at a lope. He withdrew to the shadows at the side of the barn, taking his rifle with him. The rider was coming from the east and soon loped past the station. About an hour later, Garrett heard more hoofbeats. This time the sound was of more than one ridden horse. But no more than two, he thought. The riders were coming from the west, from the direction of Benson. They too went past the station without showing any curiosity about the fire there. He had expected them to be Ollie and his partner, but those two would certainly have stopped to see if he was the person camped there. He began to think he was wrong in assuming that the pair would set out after him to rob him.

The sounds of the two riders faded in the distance, and the quiet closed in about him again. He felt suddenly alone and lonely, and decided that manhunting was a miserable business. He would be glad when he was finally done with it.

Half an hour passed, and he heard no more riders. His fire was dying down again, and he was about to go add more wood when some faint sound warned him not to leave the shadows of the barn. He listened intently, keeping still and at times holding his breath. He heard nothing more, and was unsure that one faint noise had been made by a man. A night bird, maybe. Or a prowling varmint. He was beginning to relax when a voice called out, causing him to start violently.

"Larsen. . . . You there, Larsen!"

Now he knew. Those two riders had been Ollie Ward and

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

his partner. They'd seen the fire, guessed that it was his, and feared a trap. They'd kept on going until sure he could no longer hear them, then, leaving their horses, they had In-junned up on the station. Cagey for sure, Ollie Ward.

Garrett couldn't tell from which direction Ollie's voice had come. But the man was close, just outside the adobe wall.

Garrett called back, "Come on in, Ollie, and we'll have a talk. Bring your partner with you." "No need to be edgy, friend," Ollie replied. "I've thought it over and made up my mind to tell you where the Dude is holed up. You should have waited in Benson. You would have saved me a long ride. Come out of hiding, and I'll meet you at your fire."

"You and your partner first, Ollie."

"I'm all by my lonesome, Larsen."

"You want that hundred dollars or not?"

"Two hundred," Ollie said. "You told me you'd go that high. Listen, friend; I'll come in and go to the fire—then you come out. All right?"

Nervy as well as cagey, Garrett thought.

"All right," he said. "Come on in."

A moment passed, then a shadowy figure appeared at the gateway in the wall. It moved toward the dying fire. A tall, lean figure. Ollie all right; Ollie with his gun in his hand. Only the whereabouts of the other one, the burly hard case, bothered Garrett now. Without him as a threat, he could have taken Ollie without much trouble—for the cowhand would need the Devil's own luck to outshoot a rifle with a revolver.

Garrett said, "It's like this, Ollie. . . . I doubt that you know the Dude's name and whereabouts. It was just a hope I had that you did. But I want you as well as him. I'm a sort of bounty hunter, Ollie. I've made a deal to deliver seven men to the Rurales. I've given them Frank Langley.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Now it's your turn. Drop your gun, Ollie—or I'll take you to them dead!"

Ollie had marked his position and now turned to face toward it. "I figured it was something like that," he said, his voice holding no trace of alarm. "I was on only one job with the Dude. So I figured—"

"Too much talk," Garrett cut in, worried about the other one. "Drop your gun."

"Not a chance," Ollie said. Then, lifting his voice, "Jake, you all set?"

"All set—and set good." The hard case's voice came from the part of the wall beyond the station house. "The jasper is at the side of the barn, and I've got him beaded."

"All right," Ollie shouted. "Let him have it!"

With that, he flung himself to the ground. The same instant Jake's gun blasted, and blasted again.

Garrett too dropped down, flat on the ground, and brought his rifle to his shoulder. Before he could open fire, Ollie's gun spat at him. He realized that he wasn't fighting to take Ollie Ward, but for his life. The pair had him boxed.

XII

WITH SLUGS probing for him from two directions, Garrett had to make a quick decision as to which man to try to bring down first. Jake had him in full view, but was farther away than Ollie—with the range long for accurate shooting with his handgun. His slugs were slamming into the barn wall, a foot or more too high. Garrett realized that Ollie, being closer, would hit him sooner or later if he took pains to steady his aim. He made his decision: Ollie. He cut loose with his

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Winchester, and the unequal duel went on for what seemed to him an eternity.

Finally Ollie stopped shooting, his gun empty. He scrambled away until he was beyond what remained of the fire and partially hidden by Garrett's grounded saddle. Garrett had fired five times at him, and now, while Ollie reloaded his revolver, he shoved fresh loads into his rifle's magazine. Jake fired at him twice more, then his gun too was silent—no doubt empty.

Garrett's heart was pounding as though he had been running. His fingers were shaky and all thumbs as he plucked cartridges from his belt and shoved them into the rifle. He was scared, and would have admitted it to any man. The chances that he would come out of this scrape alive were not good. It was quite possible that the tracks of the hunter would end right here, at the side of this barn in this abandoned stage station.

A hell of a place to die—with nobody to know and bury what's left of me.

Ollie yelled, "Larsen, listen. . . . You haven't a chance—not even a hope. Give us your money, and we'll call it quits. All right?"

Garrett didn't bother to answer. He knew better than to take Ollie's word for anything. He was lining his sights on the saddle, waiting for the cowhand to raise his head and gun to shoot again.

"Is it a deal, Larsen?"

"I'm not that much of a greenhorn at this game, Ollie."

"Well, you're a dead man, anyway," Ollie said, and opened fire once more—not over the saddle but from the side of it.

One slug kicked dirt into Garrett's face, another struck beside him. He began shooting again, and kept driving his

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

shots at Ollie as fast as he could throw loads into the rifle's chamber and squeeze the trigger. Ollie failed to get off a third shot. He was making himself small behind the saddle, hugging the ground. Jake started shooting again, but his aim remained high—his slugs still hitting the barn wall. On Garrett's sixth shot, a yell burst from Ollie. It was an animal-like cry, of pain and shock and terror. Ollie couldn't be faking, Garrett knew. The man had been hit.

Garrett fed more loads into his Winchester, then squirmed about, still belly-down, and drove two slugs at the muzzle flash of Jake's gun.

Jake shouted, "Ollie! You all right, Ollie?"

Ollie didn't answer.

Garrett called out, "He's done for, Jake. And you will be too, if you don't break it off."

Jake cursed him, fired another shot. Garrett gave him two shots in return, and the hard case's head and shoulders disappeared from above the wall. Garrett could hear him running through the brush in panicky flight.

Garrett got slowly to his feet, and finding his legs shaky, leaned against the wall. He had come through it alive, but he felt used up. The fight had been too close, and it had taken too much out of him.

When steadier, he went to where Ollie Ward lay. The fire still gave off a little light, and he saw at a glance that he would be taking a dead man to San Luis.

His conscience had troubled him after he had turned Frank Langley over to the Rurales, but he felt no remorse over having killed this man. Ollie Ward had been a mad dog, and the world was well rid of him.

This had once been Cochise's country, and now, with that

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

great Apache chieftain no more, it was outlaw country. John Garrett rode through it with a spare horse in tow. A dun mare, this animal carried the provisions and camp gear he needed to survive in enemy territory.

Night was at hand again, the fifth since he had killed Ollie Ward—and the third since he had delivered Ollie, wrapped in an old tarpaulin he 'd found in the stage station barn, to the Rurales. He had packed the body to San Luis on the dead man's own horse, which he had found tied a half mile from the station.

He had told the Rurales, "Here's the second of the seven," and left them to do as they pleased with the remains of Ollie Ward.

Now Galeyville lay behind him, in the foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains. An isolated place, a hangout for outlaws and other riffraff, there wasn't much to the town. The man he had chosen to be the third of the seven, the one Dave had said had once tended bar at Galeyville, hadn't returned there after the raid. Chris Bateman had been gone for weeks, Garrett had been told. But somebody, he'd also been told, had seen the man in Charleston only recently.

Charlestown lay southwest of Tombstone, a weary ride from Galeyville for a man who was spending too much time in the saddle and leaving his tracks across too much of southeastern Arizona.

Garrett now rode slumped in the saddle like a blanket Indian. He had grown haggard and gaunt, and he looked seedier than ever. He appeared rougher and more down on his luck than any man he had seen in Galeyville. He had seen several men there who had known the John Garrett who had been, but none had looked at him with recognition. He was

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

so changed that he doubted that any of his own Anchor hands would know him.

- He rode into Charleston late the following evening, having traveled steadily throughout the day. This town owed its existence to an ore-reducing mill. The extraction of silver required a plentiful water supply, which Tombstone lacked but Charleston possessed. Ore was freighted here from the mines, then stamped, or crushed, at the mill, and the silver removed from the worthless rock and cast into bars for shipment to the government mints.

Along with being a mill town, Charleston was also a hang-out, like Galeyville, for the outlaw fraternity. Here, Garrett knew, he might come up against the worst of the lot while looking for Chris Bateman: Old Man Clanton, Johnny Ringo, Curly Bill Brocius, or even Russ Maugher and his sons.

He put his horses up at Baylor's livery, then made the rounds of the saloons. Luck was with him this time. He did not have to search long for the man he had marked as the third to be delivered to San Luis.

The fourth saloon he entered was a mere hole in the wall. It had a bar made out of rough planks. A whiskey keg was set up on one end of this crude counter, and on a single wall shelf was a poor display of bottled liquor. The place was dimly lighted by two hanging lamps. Lacking customers, the proprietor was perched on a stool with a copy of the *Tombstone Epitaph*.

A big red-faced man . . . a bartender at Galeyville.
So Dave had described Chris Bateman.

And here was a big, red-faced man tending bar at Charleston.

The saloonman looked up from his newspaper. He had a sour, disgruntled expression, and upon taking in Garrett's

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

appearance, he got off the stool with no show of eagerness to serve him. His manner suggested that he suspected this drifter of being a deadbeat. He was as tall as Garrett, and half again as thick through the body.

Garrett placed a five dollar gold piece on the bar. "Whiskey," he said. "And have one yourself, friend."

Looking less sour, the saloonman took two glasses from under the bar and filled them at the keg. He was giving good measure, and more. The gold coin lying there had caught his eye.

"Just hit town?" he asked.

"Yeah. Came from Tombstone."

"Figuring on staying a while?"

"Nope. I'm heading for El Paso."

"You're taking the long way around, friend."

"For good reason," Garrett said, and gave him a broad wink. He was trying to take this man's measure. If this was Chris Bateman, he must have run through his share of the loot from the raid into Mexico. Otherwise, he wouldn't be wasting his time in such a place as this. "A step ahead of the Earps," Garrett went on. Then, picking up his drink: "Mud in your eye."

"Luck," the saloonman said, and drank with him. Almost furtively, he slipped the gold piece into his pocket—and offered no change. Then: "What was your trouble with the Earps?"

"No trouble—yet," Garrett said, beginning to see how he could take this man—if it was Bateman. "I just happen to have something they might want to get back from Wells Fargo. Ben Larsen's my name."

"Chris Bateman."

"Glad to know you, Chris. Give me a bottle to take along

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

on the trail. It's bad whiskey you're selling, but better than none at all."

Bateman brought an empty bottle from under the bar, filled it at the keg, pushed a cork into it. He watched Garrett intently the while.

"What's your hurry?" he said. "This isn't a bad town. Plenty doing. Big poker games. Lots of girls."

Garrett looked skeptical. "Your place is mighty quiet."

Bateman's sour expression returned. "Just opened it a couple of days ago. It hasn't caught on yet. The truth is, I should have a bigger, fancier place. But I was short of cash. I had some money, but I got mixed up with a woman who made off with most of it." He spoke now in a self-pitying tone. "Never trust a woman, Larsen. They'll steal your eyeteeth everytime."

Garrett suddenly realized that Chris Bateman had been sampling his own wares throughout the evening and perhaps during the day as well. Bateman was far from being sober. Garrett realized too that there had come to him, full-formed, a plan for taking the man. He had already, without conscious thought, dangled the bait before him: the five dollar gold piece and the talk of his having something that Wells Fargo would like to have back. Now it was up to the saloonman to grab at the bait.

Bateman leaned close, lowered his voice to a conspirator's whisper. "Now what would you have that belongs to Wells Fargo?" His breath was foul from too much rotgut whiskey. His skin was all blotches and webbed with tiny red veins.

Garrett too lowered his voice. "Just between you and me, Chris, a part of a shipment of bullion. Ten silver bars."

"Where do you have it?"

"Stashed away a half day's ride from here."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Which direction?"

"South," Garrett said, imagining that he could see greed at work in him. "I hid it about three months ago, after the Dude and I pulled the job off. We divided the loot, and split up. The only thing I've got to fear is the Earps getting on my trail, which isn't likely after all this time. Or the Dude himself. He was in Tombstone when I pulled out, and I've a hunch he may try to bushwhack me on my way to El Paso with the bars." He paused, watched Bateman closely to see if he was accepting the lie. "You know the Dude?"

Bateman nodded. "I was on a job with him once."

"A tricky son. I never did find out what his real name is. Did you ever?"

"No, I never did," the saloonman said. "Look Ben. . . . Since you're scared of him, I'd be glad to ride with you—to see that you make it safe to El Paso. For a cut of the loot, say, one of those silver bars."

"You fast enough with a gun to go up against the Dude?"

"Shucks; he's no gunslinger."

"Well, I don't know, Chris," Garrett said, looking uncertain even though he was pleased—almost jubilant. "You're a stranger to me. How can I be sure I can trust you?"

"Why, I'm trusting you, ain't I?"

"That's so. Well, all right. You help me get the bullion to El Paso safe and sound and I'll give you one bar of it. Only one, though. How soon can you be ready to ride out?"

"Just as soon as I can change my shoes for boots and gather my gear together. But I've got no horse. You'll have to stake me to one."

"No sooner said than done, partner," Garrett said. He picked up his bottle of whiskey. "Meet me at Baylor's Livery."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Sure, Ben," Bateman said. "Let's have a drink on it before you leave."

"Don't mind if I do," Garrett said, willing enough to see the man stay likkered up.

They rode out of Charleston half an hour later, headed south through the darkness. Garrett was on his grulla horse, which was by now almost a part of him. He was leading the dun mare with its pack. Bateman was mounted on a stocky chestnut that Garrett had hired and on which he had made a sizable deposit because the liveryman had been dubious about risking the animal to a shabby stranger. Bateman seemed to have had several more drinks during the time Garrett and he had been apart. He appeared less sober than when they had made their deal.

"That bar of silver, Ben," he said, his voice thick and his words slurred, "will put me back on my feet."

Garrett would have bet that the man was hoping to come by more than one bar of silver. Bateman had brought a rifle along, and it was riding in the boot on his saddle. He had a revolver holstered at his right thigh. Garrett had the impression that he could use both well. He made up his mind not to give him the chance to use either.

"How far did you say the cache was, Ben?"

"We'll reach it by dawn, if we move along all night."

"Good enough," Bateman said, chuckling.

They kept on the move until well after midnight, and then Garrett called a halt. He estimated that they had put fifteen miles behind them.

"We'll give the horses a rest."

"Suits me. My rump's getting blisters."

As soon as they were dismounted, Bateman seated him-

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

self on a slab of rock and took a bottle from his pocket. Garrett waited until the man had uncorked the bottle and was drinking from it, then took his rifle from its boot and jacked a cartridge into its chamber. He moved off until there was a full ten yards between them.

When Bateman finished his pull at the bottle, Garrett said, "Chris, unbuckle your gun-rig and let it drop."

Bateman stared at him. "What's the idea?"

"Never mind. Just do as I tell you."

"Now, Ben, there's no need for you to be spooky," Bateman said, but he did as he had been told. When his gun-rig lay on the ground, he got up from the rock. "You've no reason not to trust me, partner. I wouldn't cross you up. You'll see that I'll stand by you when the Dude shows up—all the way."

He started walking toward Garrett, who gestured with his rifle.

"Keep your distance from now on, Chris," Garrett said. "The Dude won't show up and there is no bullion."

Bateman halted, gazed at him with bewilderment. "What is this, anyway? What are you pulling on me?"

"I'm taking you to Mexico, Chris—to the Rurales," Garrett told him. "They want you for that raid the wild bunch pulled at Grazia Plaza and Hacienda Estrella."

"Why you—"

Bateman shouted an obscenity, then hurled his bottle at Garrett and came charging at him like a walleyed, mossy-horned bull about to be roped for the first time in its life. Garrett braced himself, and when the man was close enough, used his rifle as a club. Chris Bateman dropped at his feet, unconscious.

XIII

EIGHT DAYS after delivering Chris Bateman to the Rurales, John Garrett rode into Bowie. This was a little cluster of houses and business places on the railroad, a town of little consequence and few prospects. It did some trade with Camp Bowie, the Army post a dozen miles to the southeast.

Garrett was on the trail of the Maughers now. He had tracked Russ' sons, Jake and Gus, to this place, but they had a five day lead on him. He had little hope of overtaking them here. He had grown dispirited, for he was a hunter for whom the chase had neither excitement nor satisfaction.

This too kept his spirits at low ebb: a manhunter, he had come to realize, became in time like his quarry—no better than the men he hunted. Frank Langley, Ollie Ward, Chris Bateman—Renegades they may have been, but he had taken them, each in turn, by means that shamed a decent man.

After putting his horses up at the livery stable, he walked along the short street and noticed a barber shop. He stopped, debated a moment, then went on to a general store. He bought a shirt, Levi's, undershirt, drawers, and socks, and took them to the barber shop. He asked the barber for the use of his back room tub, and took a leisurely bath in it. Dressed in his new clothes, he seated himself in the chair out front.

"A haircut," he said. "And trim my whiskers in a beard, if you can."

Twenty minutes later, smelling to high heaven of bay rum, he examined himself in the wall mirror. He looked as much better as he felt. He also looked ten years older, he imagined,

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

then when he left Anchor Ranch to go to Zaragoza. His face was thinned down almost to boniness and had a strained, haggard look. The short, curly beard now adorning it was shot with gray, much to his surprise. All in all, he hardly knew himself.

"Suit you?" the barber asked.

"No complaints," Garrett said. "What do I owe you?" Then, paying his bill: "Do you know the Maugher boys, Jake and Gus?"

"Only by sight," the barber said, suddenly wary. "Friends of yours, are they?"

"Not likely. I've just got some business with them. Are they in town, do you know?"

"They were a few days back, but they took the train."

"Which way?"

"West."

Garrett nodded his thanks, and leaving the barber shop, walked to the little yellow-painted depot.

Bowie was a whistle stop. The trains stopped there only on signal. Having little to do, the station agent welcomed the chance to talk.

"Sure, I know Jake and Gus Maugher," he told Garrett. "They were here for a couple of days, hanging around the Frisco Bar, then they bought tickets for Tucson and took the train. Outlaws, ain't they?"

"So I hear," Garrett said. "When is the next westbound?"

He had to wait until the next morning, and then had his trip for nothing. At Tucson he searched for the Maughers without any luck. They were nowhere to be found in the town, and they had not hired horses to ride away from it. Finally he made inquiries at the railroad station and learned that two men answering their descriptions had bought tickets

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

for Bowie and boarded the eastbound at noon that day. He realized that his train had passed the one carrying the pair somewhere on the desert.

He had become inured to the setbacks of manhunting, but again the waiting was difficult for him. He had to hang around until the next day for a train back to Bowie.

Arriving back at that place, he learned that the Maughers had ridden out only an hour earlier. They had been bound for Galeyville, the hostler at the livery stable told him.

He left the pack horse stabled, since it would slow him down, and set out along the Camp Bowie road with his grulla traveling at a lope. He rode through Apache Pass at dusk, and came shortly afterward to the Army post. He dismounted at the sutler's store and went inside. The place was filled with soldiers, and a civilian stood out like a sore thumb. The man behind the bar nodded in reply to Garrett's inquiry when serving the drink he had ordered.

"Two rough customers," the bartender said. "They had a couple of drinks, then bought a jug. They pulled out maybe ten minutes ago."

Garrett said, "Thanks," and downed his drink.

He crossed the room to the merchandise counter and bought some provisions and a handful of cigars.

When riding out, minutes later, he had a sack of grub tied to the horn of his saddle and a lit cigar clenched between his teeth. A trace of a road led southward to Old Agency and beyond to Galeyville, and he was counting on overtaking the Maughers on it. When his cigar was smoked short, he threw it away and drew his Winchester from its boot. He levered a cartridge into the chamber and rode with the rifle across his saddle.

He had covered perhaps half a dozen miles when he saw

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

a light not far ahead. He reined in, peered at it for a moment and decided it was the glare of a campfire rather than the lamp-lit window of a lonely ranch house. As he watched, it suddenly flared up bigger and brighter. More wood had been thrown onto the flames. It was a larger fire than a man needed for either cooking or warmth.

He rode on at a slow walk, and then, within a hundred yards of the fire, dismounted and led his horse. Halving that distance, he left the grulla behind with its reins trailing. Two men were seated by the blaze. Intent upon drinking from the jug they passed back and forth, they were not yet aware of his approach.

He could make them out now: Jake and Gus Maugher. They were big, rawboned men in their late twenties, raw-hide tough in appearance. Apparently they had stopped here merely to do some drinking, for they had not off-saddled their horses, which stood ground-hitched nearby. Some joke passed between them, and they burst into raucous laughter.

Garrett called out, "Just keep still and do as I say, and I'll hold my fire. Otherwise, I start shooting. Easy now!"

Both men jumped to their feet and faced in his direction. The jug had been dropped and was spilling whiskey onto the ground. For an instant Garrett thought he would be able to take them without gunplay, but Gus, the younger, let out a wild yell and grabbed for his gun.

"Get him! Get the sneaky son!"

His revolver threw its heavy blast again and again into the night's quiet as he fired with frantic haste. Garrett's rifle cracked once and a second time. Gus let out another yell, an agonized cry this time, and sank to his knees. Jake whirled about and ran toward their horses. Garrett sent a shot after him, a warning shot followed by an order to halt, then swung

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

his rifle to bead Gus once more. Although hit dead center in the chest, Gus was trying to shoot at him again. He now held his revolver with both hands, and the effort required to steady it had his face tight with strain.

"Damn you; I'll bring you down yet!"

Garrett feared the man would do just that, and drove another shot at him. Gus was hit a second time, and now knocked flat by the impact of the slug. His gun went off, harmlessly. Garrett turned to line his sights on the other one again but was too late. Jake had flung himself onto one of the horses and already had it running. He raced away through the darkness, and soon the drumming of the horse's hooves faded in the distance.

Garrett walked toward Gus's sprawled figure and saw by his gaping mouth and vacantly staring eyes that the outlaw was dead. The fourth of the seven . . . the second to be delivered as a corpse.

Garrett felt suddenly sickened. His stomach heaved, and he retched painfully. But he hadn't eaten since Tucson and there was nothing to come up. After a moment the nausea passed, and he merely felt shaken. He picked up the jug. Not all of its contents had spilled out, and he drank deeply of the raw-tasting whiskey. He choked on it, and his throat felt seared. But soon he was steadier and able to think of what he must now do.

Got to move on in a hurry—Jake will be after me with half the tough hands in Galeyville.

He had his blankets tied behind the cantle of the grulla's saddle, and he wrapped the dead man in one of them. He got the body onto his shoulder and carried it to the ground-hitched horse, a big steel-dust gelding. The animal caught the

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

scent of blood and turned skittish, and he had difficulty laying his heavy burden over its saddle.

"Easy, boy. . . . Steady now."

Once he had the body in place, he tied it down with the catch-rope he took from the saddle horn.

He led the still spooked steel-dust over to his grulla, and mounted the latter. Striking out southward, he kept on the move throughout the remainder of the night, pushing the horses hard, and made a halt at first dawn to rest them. He had only one canteen with him, and pouring half its contents into his hat, he let the grulla drink. He gave the rest of the water to the steel-dust. He slacked his own thirst with the contents of a can of tomatoes among the few provisions he had bought at the sutler's store.

He had a smoke while the horses cropped what grass they could find, then set out again at sunup. Now, with daylight, he began to watch his back-trail even though realizing that no one could have tracked him during the night.

Late in the morning he came by chance upon a water hole. The sun blazed in a cloudless sky and an oven-hot breeze blew. Heat haze shimmered on every distant point. The horses were suffering, had begun to falter. He felt parched to the core. Knowing how quickly death could come on the desert, he looked upon the water hole as a godsend.

He removed the stiffened body of Gus Maugher from the steel-dust, then off-saddled both horses. He let them drink, and afterward put them on a common picket-stake where some grass grew. He drank, then ducked his head into the water. He ate some of the grub he packed in the sack, and afterward stretched out in the shade of some bushes. He gave the horses—and himself—two precious hours of rest.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He let the animals drink again after saddling up and getting the body back onto the steel-dust. He too drank more, then rode on. Topping a rocky rise a little distance from the water-hole, he looked back across the way he had come.

Nothing. . . . No riders in pursuit of him.

They'll come, though—soon enough.

It was strange that they did not come—and their failure to appear on his trail puzzled him. He was leaving tracks a half-blind man could have followed, and Jake Maugher, if no tracker himself, could certainly have found someone who could read sign. Hadn't he gone back for Gus's body? Hadn't he set out with some gunhands to hunt down his brother's killer? Garrett was mystified.

There was still time, of course. More than half the day remained for them to run him down. But the hours passed, with mile after mile of rough, scorched country falling behind him, and he still saw no riders.

Late in the afternoon he found water again, a small stream, and made another halt. He went on at sundown, and breathed more easily as dusk came—feeling that he would be safe during the night. He rode on through the darkness until the horses seemed close to being done in and he caught himself dozing in the saddle. They needed a long rest, and he, sleep.

He overslept, not waking until the sun was already half up. He came stiffly from his blankets, facing the new day with a feeling of unease. He went first to a hump of ground and scanned the surrounding area, fearful that he would see riders. He saw none. He seemed alone in this immensity of broken country. He returned to the horses, saddled them and once more went through the unpleasant and difficult chore of getting the corpse onto the steel-dust.

When underway, he lit a cigar and smoked it with relish.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He'd long indulged himself in this one way, and these days smoking gave him a respite from the pressure under which he existed. He had begun to feel that he had been on his manhunt forever, that he had never done anything else. He seldom gave a thought to Anchor Ranch any more, and in a way its owner, John Garrett, had indeed become Ben Larsen. The faces of his men were blurred in his memory, and strangely the only face he saw clearly at the moment was that of Virginia Barton.

For a little while, as he enjoyed his cigar, he thought of Virginia as she had seemed to him that night he had eaten supper at her house. He felt a stirring in him and suddenly knew that if he had it to do over he would take her in his arms and find out if she might not want more than merely to use him as a buffer against Ed Lambert. He found it strange that he should want a woman at a time he wasn't sure he would live to see her again.

When he caught sight of his pursuers, toward midday, he was surprised that there were only two of them. He had been sure that Jake Maugher would come with enough men to overwhelm him quickly and with little effort. Even so, the odds of two-to-one were something for him to worry about when the showdown came.

XIV

GARRETT crested a rise and saw familiar landmarks in the distance: a pair of small buttes, and beyond them a range of craggy bluffs. He knew from them that he had only half a dozen more miles to go, to reach San Luis. *Might as well*

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

be half a hundred, he thought. His pursuers were coming on fast, no more than a long rifle shot behind him. *Time to throw a scare into them.* He rode halfway down the south side of the rise, then dropped from the saddle with his Winchester. Climbing back to the crest, he bellied down and drove two shots at the pair. They pulled up short, gazing in his direction. One was Jake Maugher, as he had expected. The other was a bulkier man, and bearded: Russ, the head of the clan—the one who had bushwhacked him the day he made the trip to Valido.

The two dismounted with their saddle guns, took cover, and began shooting up at him. He fired twice more, one shot at each man, then, hoping he had given them reason to be cautious, he drew back from the top of the rise and descended to his horses. Riding on, he found that he had bought himself a little time. The Maughers were slow to show themselves atop the rise. When they finally appeared there, he had increased his lead to perhaps half a mile.

But they came after him, pushing their mounts hard even though the horses they rode could not have been in any better condition than Garrett's. Twice more during the next hour he stopped to throw lead at them, to make them wary of him. At last he saw the cluster of dun-colored houses and buildings that was San Luis. He began to think that he would make it safely to that place with Gus's body. But Jake and the elder Maugher now attempted to cut him off from the border village. Pushing their horses hard, they swung around to his right while keeping out of reach of his rifle. He lifted his grulla and the steel-dust to a lope, even though aware that they were in too poor shape to continue at such a pace the mile or so to San Luis.

Finally he saw that he couldn't make it, couldn't avoid

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

a showdown with them: they were between him and the village now. Dismounting among some scattered rocks, they took cover and immediately opened fire on him. One of their first shots did for the steel-dust. Hit in the head, the animal was dead before it dropped.

Garrett ran the grulla into a fairly deep arroyo, where it was less exposed to the Maughers' guns. He swung down from the saddle and ran, bent low, along the wash to draw the pair's fire away from the horse. He didn't want it killed, for he might in the end have to try to run. He had no real hope of outshooting Jake and his father. Those two would be expert at this sort of game, and having the odds on their side, they weren't afraid of him. He crouched by the bank of the arroyo, his rifle leveled.

Russ Maugher called out, "You, there. . . . Where do you think you're packing my boy off to, anyway?"

"To where I'll be taking you, Russ—and Jake too," Garrett called back. "To the Rurales."

"You're that Ben Larsen who baited Ollie Ward into a trap outside Benson and then was looking for Chris Bateman at Galeyville, ain't you?"

"That's right, Russ. I delivered those two and Frank Langley to the Rurales. And after you and Jake, I'll turn the Dude over to them."

"They paying you a bounty, Larsen?"

"You could call it that."

"Well, damn you," Russ yelled, sounding wild with rage, "you'll never collect on Jake and me!"

The two of them began shooting again. Russ fired like a man gone berserk, driving shot after shot in Garrett's direction without trying to sight on what little of him was exposed. Jake remained calm, even though he too must have

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

been full of rage and hatred, and laid down a slow, careful fire that was more of a threat to Garrett than the father's wild, hasty shooting. But it was Jake who made the mistake.

He suddenly darted from one cluster of rocks toward another that would have put him on Garrett's left flank. By the time he was midway to where he wanted to be, his father's rifle fell silent—no doubt gone empty.

Russ yelled, "Jake, come back! Damn it, boy; come back!" He sounded frantic.

Garrett reared up and lined his sights on the running man. He knew this was almost certainly his one and only chance of cutting down the odds, of coming out of this fight alive. He couldn't afford to miss, for if he did Jake would reach those other rocks before he could shoot a second time. He squeezed off his shot, and Jake's stride broke. He took two stumbling steps, then pitched forward to the ground. He lay still for a moment, then began crawling—toward Garrett. He had dropped his rifle, and now drew his revolver. Russ let out a howl of anguish. So terrible was Jake's rage and hatred that he continued to crawl in Garrett's direction even though he was leaving a trail of blood and his face was contorted by pain.

Finally he stopped and took aim with his gun. Garrett ducked down behind the bank, not having it in him to shoot Jake another time. Jake fired, his slug coming so close it showered dirt down on Garrett. He began crawling again, and Russ's rifle opened up once more. Bullets were tearing the bank apart around Garrett. He realized that he had no choice but to finish the wounded man off. If he didn't, one or the other Maugher would bring him down. And if he tried to run now, his back would be an easy target for Jake's gun.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He shoved himself erect and squeezed off his shot, and flinched as his slug tore into the crawling man. Jake still found the strength to fire another shot, but it was a wild one. The gun then fell from his hand, and he collapsed face-down. He did not move again.

Russ shouted, "I'll get you, bounty hunter! I'll turn out a hundred men to gun for you! No part of the Territory will be safe for you!"

His voice was filled with a bitterness that John Garrett could understand—that of a man seeing the last of his sons come to a violent end. He would be putting the entire blame on the man who had killed Jake and the other two, letting himself be blind to the fact that he had led them onto the trail that had brought each of them to such a death.

His anguish was greater than his rage, and he made no further attempt to bring Garrett down. He rose from behind the rocks and walked heavily to his horse. He pulled himself to the saddle, then looked again in Garrett's direction.

"I'll take you alive, bounty hunter, then put you to a slow death—like the Apaches do their prisoners!"

He rode away then, walking his horse.

His broad back was an easy target, but Garrett couldn't bring himself to fire the shot that would bring him down.

Not at the moment.

Another time, but now now.

He just wasn't hard enough.

Three riders were approaching from the direction of San Luis, coming warily. Garrett recognized them as Rurales—one, Sergeant Alvarez. They were almost certainly on the wrong side of the poorly defined international boundary, and aware of it. They looked at the dead Jake Maugher, then

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

at the downed steel-dust gelding with the blanket-wrapped body tied across its saddle.

Alvarez said, "Two this time, Señor Garrett?"

Garrett stared at him, silently cursing him and all his kind—and especially Captain Ramirez. He didn't spare himself, either. Or his son. He felt bitter toward everyone connected with this whole ugly business. At the moment John Garrett was very close to calling it quits, even though it would mean that his son would have to take his medicine.

Finally he nodded. "Two this time. Jake and Gus Maugher."

"And the one who got away, *amigo*?"

"Russ Maugher, the father of these two."

"Ah, the leader of the *bandidos*," Alvarez said. "He is the one Capitán Ramirez wants most. He and the *gringo* called the Dude."

Garrett went to where the grulla horse stood with drooping head and widespread legs. The animal looked as done in and dispirited as Garrett felt. He led it from the arroyo, started toward San Luis. He would have to put up there for a while. He as well as the horse needed a long rest.

He stopped and said, "Sergeant, you've got five of the seven now. You'll get the other two. But not here—not at San Luis."

Alvarez stared at him blankly. "*Cómo*?"

Garrett was remembering that he had decided at Zaragoza on a way to keep Captain Ramirez from double-crossing him.

"You send word to Ramirez," Garrett said. "Tell him that when I take the last two bandits he can collect them by bringing my son to Anchor headquarters."

"But, *señor*, we have no right to ride into your country."

"You tell him," Garrett said, and again started leading his done-in horse toward the Mexican village.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

Early in the evening of his fourth day at San Luis, Garrett saddled the now rested grulla and prepared to ride out. He had two canteens of water and a sack of provisions hanging from the saddle horn. He felt fit enough physically, but the prospect of embarking on his manhunt again filled him with a sense of dread.

Sergeant Alvarez came to him through the darkness, saying, "Take care, *señor*. Five men are camped on the other side, watching for you."

Garrett struck a match aflame with his thumbnail and held it to the long, thin cigar clenched between his teeth. His face was bleak, almost grim. The cigar burning properly, he rose to the saddle.

"Anchor headquarters," he reminded the sergeant, and rode from San Luis.

He headed south, deeper into Mexico, but after a few miles turned west. Letting his horse travel at a walk, he considered his chances and decided they were slim indeed. His posing as Ben Larsen was no longer an advantage. Russ Maugher would have spread a description of Ben Larsen among the outlaw element. It might be, if the man had any loot stashed away, that he had offered a bounty for him.

Garrett faced up to the fact that the game he played had taken a different turn. From now on it would be a matching of wits between him and Maugher. The outlaw's not being with the men camped across the border was patently a move on his part to entice Ben Larsen back into the Territory—and into a trap. Maugher meant to give plenty of rope. He hadn't expected him to come directly across the line from San Luis and risk being killed or taken prisoner by the five men on guard there. What, then, did the outlaw plan for him?

He wants to make me edgy, first of all. He wants to force

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

me into taking a roundabout way across the border, figuring I'll then feel safe and become careless. He wants me deep in the Territory, so I won't be able to run for Mexico when he springs his trap.

Garrett was convinced that Maugher did mean to take him alive and then put him to a lingering death. Only that sort of revenge would satisfy the outlaw. Garrett could visualize Maugher spreading word that he would pay a bounty only for a live Ben Larsen.

He would now be fair game for the entire lawless element in southeastern Arizona. He could no longer ride into any town without running the risk of being jumped by hard cases. He could no longer ride where he would, for any rider he encountered might be looking for him. He realized it was time for Ben Larsen to disappear and John Garrett to reappear among the living. Only as John Garrett would he now have a chance against Russ Maugher, and to become that again he must get safely back to his own part of the Territory.

That, he knew, would take some doing.

XV

EVER SINCE learning that his son was a prisoner of the Rurales, John Garrett had felt that he was living a bad dream. Now life became truly nightmarish for him.

He traveled only at night after leaving San Luis, and the third night, far west of that place, crossed over into Arizona. That same night, before starting out, he ran out of provisions.

When daylight came, he was crossing a stretch of grassland and saw small, scattered bunches of cattle. He looked

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

in every direction across the range but saw no ranch buildings, where he might have gotten a meal and even some grub to carry with him. Even though hunger gnawed at him, he was too set against thievery even to consider killing and butchering another man's beef animal. He kept on the move, because of his hunger, despite his having planned to travel only under cover of darkness. Late in the morning he saw a little town several miles off to the northwest. After some debate with himself, he turned in its direction.

It was a crossroads town consisting of a general store, a saloon, a blacksmith shop, and a few houses. Two saddle horses stood tied at the hitchrack in front of the saloon. Their owners did not show themselves when he rode in. Nor did anybody else. He dismounted at the store, and took his grub sack, which now held only his coffeepot and frying pan, inside with him.

The storekeeper was a small, gray, sad-faced woman of sixty-odd. She waited on him with no show of curiosity about him, but when he left the store two men stood beneath the wooden awning of the saloon and watched him tie the now bulging sack to his saddle horn. They were definitely curious about him. When riding past them, he let his right hand rest on his thigh—close to his holstered gun. Once he was away from the town, he headed northeast. He had gone only a short distance when he heard one of the pair riding off at a lope. Looking back, he saw that the man had taken the road leading east. He also saw that the second man had mounted and was coming along after him, holding his horse to the pace of the grulla.

One going for help, Garrett thought, and one keeping me in sight.

He knew then that it hadn't been a mere coincidence that

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

the two had been there when he came along. They had been posted there, to keep watch for him. No matter where he might have stopped, there would have been men watching for him. Russ Maugher was leaving nothing to chance.

The rider following him kept well back, out of rifle range, but he stuck like a shadow. He watched from a little hill when Garrett, having come to a creek, stopped to cook and eat a meal. He followed along again when Garrett started out once more.

That one did not worry him to any great extent. The other did cause Garrett some uneasiness, for he would almost certainly show up sooner or later with other riders . . . enough riders to close a trap.

Late in the afternoon Garrett came to a range of craggy rock hills that seemed from a distance an unbroken wall many miles long. Drawing closer, he saw a narrow break in the sheer cliffs and headed for it. Entering this shadowy defile, he rode through it for about fifty yards and then reined the grulla in and dismounted. Taking his rifle, he returned to the entrance to the cut and crouched behind a boulder. He lined his sights on the rider keeping tabs on him. The man was approaching the cut slowly, peering up at it warily, as though fearing an ambush. Garrett shifted his aim slightly, wanting only to put his bullet close enough to scare the rider. He squeezed off his shot, and the rider instantly swung his horse about and rode off at a hard run until he was well out of range.

Garrett chuckled with sour amusement, then propped his rifle against the boulder and lit a cigar. He would wait until dark; then ride on at a faster pace and lose his shadow.

So he planned it, but a little later, before the sun was down behind the mountains, he looked out across the expanse

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

of grassland and saw some tiny moving specks in the distance. For a brief moment he thought—hoped—they were cattle. Then he realized they were moving too fast for anything but riders. Eight of them, and coming directly toward these hills. One of them was almost certainly the partner of the man who was waiting out there, beyond reach of a rifle shot.

Garrett picked up his rifle.

Time to move on. If he waited for nightfall, he would probably never leave there.

That was when matters changed from just a bad dream to a nightmare for John Garrett. He was the hunter no longer, but the hunted. And a hunted man seemed to leave tracks that were easily read, and the hunters, their numbers constantly increasing, seemed everywhere. He had the feeling that every rider in southeastern Arizona was out gunning for him. For three days and nights, he was driven one way and another—with riders always ahead of him as well as behind.

He traded the played-out grulla horse to a Mexican sheepherder for a pinto, paying ten dollars to boot. He gave the herder another dollar for the meal the man had on the fire. He traded the pinto to a raggedy-pants rancher for a sorrel, adding twenty dollars to get the cowman to go for the deal. He bought some stale biscuits and cold meat from the rancher's wife.

He exchanged shots at long range on several occasions with his hunters, and just before dark of the third day after they had gotten on his trail, he had a glimpse of Russ Maugher and four other riders traveling along the base of some low hills among which he had paused to rest. The hunters were all about him, a tightening noose.

In spite of the pressure they exerted on him, Garrett man-

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

aged to work his way in the direction he wanted to go—northeast. Finally, at midmorning of the fourth day, he turned due east—toward his own part of the country. The sorrel was playing out, however, and when he drew close to the town of Craley, he decided that his need for a fresh mount was great enough for him to risk running into some of the manhunters there.

The livery stable was at the edge of town, and as far as he could tell nobody paid him any attention when he rode into it. The liveryman, who seemed somehow familiar, did give him an appraising look but made no comment beyond asking what he could do for him.

Dismounting, Garrett said, "Twenty dollars and this sorrel for one of your horses. No crowbait nag, though. I'm traveling far and fast, and need a good mount."

"Make it thirty dollars, and I'll give you a bronc that'll get you where you've got to go."

"All right. Fetch it."

The liveryman went back the runway between the stalls, returned leading a big dun gelding with a broad black stripe along its back. He didn't wait for his customer's approval of the horse but immediately began removing the rigging from the sorrel to transfer it to the dun. Garrett was keeping watch along the street, from the wide doorway.

While saddling the dun, the liveryman said, "You'd be that Ben Larsen everybody's chasing around half of creation after, wouldn't you?"

"That's right."

"You know that Russ Maugher's offering a thousand dollars for you dead and two thousand for you alive?"

"I figured he must have offered a bounty for me," Garrett

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

said: "Don't you get the notion you'd like to collect it. I wouldn't like shooting you."

Chuckling, the liveryman said, "I'm no hero, friend."

When bringing the saddled dun to the doorway and taking the thirty dollars Garrett held out to him, he said, "I know you from somewhere, don't I?"

Garrett didn't answer. He caught up the reins, swung onto the dun.

"Valido," the liveryman said. "I was partners with Tim McDade in the livery stable there a couple years ago. Bought in with him, then sold out. Couldn't get along with the ornery cuss. Yeah, saw you around Valido, Larsen. Me, I never forget a face."

Garrett said, "So long," and rode out of the stable.

As he headed away from the town, he saw five riders enter it at the other end. He lifted the dun to a lope, and after traveling for about half a mile, he looked back and saw the five coming after him. He held the dun to its lope, and it was indeed a good mount. He lengthened his lead, and soon his pursuers turned back.

The liveryman would tell them he'd once seen him at Valido, of course—in the hope of sharing in the bounty if they ran him down.

He would try to make it that far today, anyway. . . .

He didn't make it during the day, for late in the afternoon he lost more than two hours shaking off a bunch of riders who caught sight of him on the road to Valido. Darkness had come when he rode into the town, a tired man on a tired horse. His plan had been to get a fresh mount at McDade's and head for Anchor Ranch, but now he found himself thinking of Virginia Barton. He felt a need to see her. It had been too long since he had looked upon a friendly

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

face. He left the dun with the hostler at McDade's, and taking his rifle, walked to the side street where Virginia lived.

Matters became confused and somewhat unreal when he reached her house. When knocking on the door, he felt as excited as a youth going courting for the very first time. Then there was Virginia staring wide-eyed, knowing him at once but crying out with disbelief. And drawing him inside, where she threw her arms about him as he shut the door. Crying, actually shedding tears, with her face against his shoulder. Crying due to shock, but with relief and happiness too. He leaned his rifle against the wall and dropped his hat onto a chair, then put an arm about her and held her to him as though she belonged to him—and knowing somehow that she did.

Then her anger: "How could you do such a thing to me—not let me know? Are you so unfeeling—or are you so blind you never saw what you mean to me?"

Next, her concern: "John, are you all right?" And when assured that he was: "You look terrible, though . . . like the ghost you must be." Finally, laughing: "You'll have to get rid of that awful beard, you know."

He told her, as briefly as possible, all that had happened and why he hadn't let her know. She had heard of Russ Maugher's turning the outlaws loose to hunt down a man named Ben Larsen. She hadn't imagined that Ben Larsen could be John Garrett. She had read in the *Tombstone Epitaph* that John Garrett had been killed in Mexico.

"What a terrible time you've had," she said. "But now. . . . Now you're safe." Then, in woman-fashion: "You must be hungry."

Smiling, he said, "I'm never not hungry these days."

He went to the kitchen with her, and she added wood to

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

build up the fire in the cookstove. Midway in her fixing a meal for him, she took the tea kettle from the stove and started from the kitchen with it.

"Come along," she said. "I'll not have you at my table looking like an old man."

She led him to her bedroom, where she lit the lamp and poured the warm water from the tea kettle into the china basin on the washstand. She laid out soap, a towel, a pair of scissors, and her late husband's razor.

"Once the beard is gone I'll know it's really you," she told him. "But leave the moustache—like always."

She left him, and he did as she had ordered. He snipped away with the scissors, scraped away with the razor. He left his moustache, trimming it as neatly as he could. He made quite a mess for her to clean up, but knew she wouldn't mind. He returned to the kitchen with Ben Larsen gone forever. And if John Garrett's face was thin and haggard, it was able to smile again.

His pleasure over being with Virginia was tempered by his awareness that even though he would be safe when back at Anchor Ranch, he still must hunt down Russ Maugher and the Dude before he could be at peace. While he was eating, he told Virginia that he must somehow find those two.

"You'll find them," she said. "Somehow, you'll find them."

He wasn't so sure. Taking Russ Maugher would now be difficult, if not impossible, and he still had no idea of how to find the Dude.

Virginia was pouring a second cup of coffee for him when she said, her tone bantering, "Maybe I shouldn't be so happy that you've returned from the dead. It has cost me Anchor Ranch, and I rather fancied being a lady ranch owner."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

He looked at her blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, naturally I don't inherit Anchor with you alive."

"Inherit Anchor, Virginia?"

She looked at him strangely. "Your will, John. . . . When Ed Lambert read of your death in the newspaper he asked me to come to his office so he could read your will to me. I was flabbergasted when I learned that you'd named me as your heir."

"Virginia, I made out no will. I always intended to but somehow never got around to it. You mean to say that Ed. . . . You actually saw such a document—signed by me?"

She gazed at him wonderingly. "John, if you didn't—?"

"I didn't. Ed must have forged my signature."

"But why? He gained nothing by it—having me inherit."

"Look, Virginia; he hasn't given up trying to get you to marry him, has he?"

"No, he hasn't. Even though I discourage him."

"There you have it," Garrett said. "He figured it would look like a steal if he named himself in that forged will. He was afraid my men would take it for a swindle. But he believed they would go for it if you were named my heir."

"They did, John. They didn't question the will at all."

Garrett nodded. "So now he still hopes to marry you—and Anchor."

"Yes, that must be so."

"Well, he's due for an unpleasant surprise. I'll look him up before I leave town."

"He's not in Valido, John. He moved out to Anchor. To look after my interests, as he put it. He said someone should, and he offered to be that someone for a ten percent share of the profits at the end of the year."

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Generous of him," Garrett said, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet. "I'll get out there and—"

He broke off, a startled look on his face.

"What is it, John?" Virginia said. "What's wrong?"

"The Dude," he said, more to himself than to her. "Ed is the Dude. Remember his coming back from a trip with a bullet wound that he didn't tell you about at first and then didn't explain convincingly? That was shortly before I got word that Dave was being held by the Rurales. That wound, and his having been away from here at the time of the raid in Mexico. Then too late there's his suddenly becoming prosperous when he began going off on trips. And we have proof that he's dishonest, in that forged will. He's got to be the Dude."

"If he is, John, wouldn't Dave have told you?"

"Dave didn't know. He probably never ran into Ed when he came to Valido. After all, the boy hadn't been back at Anchor long before he got peeved at me and left for good. He hadn't been to Valido often, and so never saw Ed Lambert until he threw in with the wild bunch."

"But Ed would have known Dave, at least by name."

Garrett nodded. "That's true. But it wouldn't have mattered. Once they went on that raid, one was as guilty as the other. Ed wouldn't have feared that Dave would point an accusing finger at him if the boy did find out who he was. Anyway, I know Ed is the Dude. I feel it. And he's where I can get at him. He's outsmarted himself, made it easy for me."

He turned, left the kitchen.

Virginia followed him into the parlor, watched him put on his hat and pick up his rifle. She looked worried.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"John, be careful," she said. "He'll be dangerous when he realizes he's been found out."

Garrett slipped his arm about her, held her close. "I'll be back when it's over," he said, then released her and went out.

On his way to McDade's through the darkness, he realized there was something more. It could be that Ed Lambert had arranged for Russ Maugher to bushwhack him the day the lawyer had sent for him to come to town to talk with Señor Baca. Even then Ed might have had it in mind to draw up a fake will in his name. A wrong one, all right, and even on evidence he had to admit as being pretty flimsy, Garrett was certain that Ed Lambert and the Dude were one and the same.

He was so completely lost in thought as he approached the livery stable that he was less alert than he should have been as a hunted man. He did see the two saddled horses standing in front of the building, but gave them no real thought. So he was taken by surprise when one of the two men talking with McDade's hostler, just inside the doorway, swung around and called out to him.

"You, there. . . . Who are you?"

The second man also turned, and Garrett saw with a sense of shock the burly, bearded figure of Russ Maugher. He halted in confusion ten feet from the doorway, and Maugher, standing in the glow of a hanging lantern, stared at him uncertainly. Each of them was unprepared for this showdown, even though each had sought it.

Working the lever of his rifle, Garrett said, "I'm John Garrett, and you, mister, had better step aside. You too, hostler. Move away, while there's still time."

The hostler ducked away, but Maugher's partner stood

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

there and looked uncertainly from Garrett to the bearded man.

"This ain't him, then, eh, Russ?"

Maugher ignored him, said to Garrett, "By damn; it was you all the time! You were that Larsen! Now I savvy it!"

He already had his hand on his gun, and now he brought it clear of its holster and lined it on Garrett. His partner also drew, and the reports of the two revolvers and the rifle shattered the night quiet. John Garrett felt himself hit, as by a giant fist, and knocked down. He kept on shooting as he crumpled to the street, but he was growing numb from pain and shock—and all he could think was that Russ Maugher had finally finished what he had started that day on the desert.

XVI

ALTHOUGH DOWN in the dirt and numbed by pain, Garrett was able to function for a moment longer. He saw that Maugher's partner was down, sprawled in the stable doorway, but that Maugher himself still stood and had his gun posed for another shot.

Garrett focused his blurred eyes on the bearded man, mustered his remaining strength to line his rifle on the burly figure. They fired together, the crack of the rifle blending with the heavier report of the revolver. Garrett was not hit again, but he saw that his shot had found its mark. Maugher had reeled backward off balance under the impact of the rifle slug. Now, recovering, he bellowed an oath and came lurching from the stable with his gun leveled for a finishing shot. He squeezed the trigger, but there was no report. The

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

hammer had fallen on a fired cartridge or an empty chamber.

Maugher cursed again, then hurled the gun with all his might. It landed beyond where Garrett lay. Maugher stood swaying for a moment, mouthing vile curses with a weakening voice, then he collapsed and lay silent and still.

Garrett struggled to get up but found it beyond his strength. Voices sounded. People were on the street now, coming along it. The hostler ventured from the stable and started yelling for help. Finally Garrett became aware of two people bending over him. He saw their faces dimly. One was Virginia's reflecting her fear for him, the other was leathery, gray mustachioed—that of Valido's town marshal, Mitch Evans.

Evans said, "He's alive."

Virginia said, "Help me get him to my house, Mitch."

Garrett heard himself say, "Give me a hand up, and I'll make it on my own."

He did make it on his own, with Virginia supporting him on one side and Vince Marvin on the other. Valido had no doctor, but Vince, a storekeeper, doubled in brass as one when there was a bullet wound to patch up or a broken bone to set. He had once been an orderly in an Army hospital and had picked up some medical lore. In Virginia's kitchen, he cleansed and bandaged the wound in Garrett's left side—a matter of nothing more serious than deeply gouged flesh. The slug had not lodged in the wound.

"A bad crease," Vince Marvin said. "Nothing to worry about."

Garrett sat astraddle a chair, bare to the waist. His arms rested on the top of the chair's back. His gaunted body sagged, he felt all in. He kept marveling that he was alive.

Marshal Evans came in after a while, bringing a bottle of whiskey. He handed it to Virginia.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

"Give him a dose, for medicinal purposes," he told her. Then said, to Garrett, "You did for Russ Maugher, and a good job that was." He turned to Vince. "The other one is in the lockup with a bullet in his right shoulder. Maybe you can do something for him."

Vince Marvin departed, and Garrett drank some of the whiskey from a glass Virginia insisted on holding for him.

Mitch Evans said, "This calls for an explanation, John—your coming back from the dead and all."

"Virginia will tell you the whole story," Garrett said. "I haven't got the time. I'm heading for Anchor."

"Oh, no, you're not," Virginia said. "Mitch, help me get him to bed."

Garrett returned to Anchor Ranch the next day, even then over Virginia's protests that he was in no shape to go. He went by buckboard, with a man named Al Perkins driving the hired team and Mitch Evans on the back seat as gun-guard. The marshal had also hired two good men to come along as outriders. He wanted Garrett to get to Anchor safely.

They got a late start, and it was dark when they clattered into the ranch yard. The trip had seemed as long as any Garrett had ever made, for he was weaker than he admitted even to himself. Strangely, he had no sense of homecoming. He looked at the lighted windows of the bunkhouse, cook-shack and ranch house as though he had never seen these buildings before. He felt that he had been away for years rather than for weeks.

Two of the cowhands appeared at the bunkhouse door, looking across at Garrett and the others.

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

The marshal called to them, "This is Mitch Evans, boys. . . . Just stay where you are for now."

He helped Garrett down from the buckboard.

The door of the big adobe ranch house opened, and Ed Lambert stood limned against the light of the parlor.

Like the lord of the manor, Garrett thought sourly.

"Who's there?" Lambert demanded.

"It's John Garrett, Ed," Mitch Evans called back. "Returned from the dead, so to speak."

"John Garrett!"

Garrett said, "I'll see him alone," and walked slowly, on wobbly legs, to the doorway.

Lambert stared at him with widened eyes and gaping mouth, utter disbelief on his face. He backed into the room, and Garrett entered and pushed the door shut. Lambert had a blaze going in the fireplace. He had been sitting by it in the armchair. On a small table beside the chair was an opened book, a glass of whiskey, and a burning cigar in an ashtray. The lawyer had been spending the evening relaxing. He now had a dazed look, showing how badly jolted he was.

"John, I don't understand," he said awkwardly. "But this is wonderful . . . you back safe and sound when we've all believed you dead."

"That will needs explaining, Ed."

"Oh, yes. . . . I acted on it because of the newspaper account of your death. You made it out in my office after you talked with Señor Baca. You feared you might not come back from Mexico."

"Ed, I'm not only alive but I still have my memory."

"Are you accusing me of fraud?"

"Come off it, Ed," Garrett said. "You're as clever as you

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

are crooked, but not clever enough to convince me I've become half-witted."

"Well, if you've lost your trust in me," Lambert said, "there is nothing for me to do but leave Anchor."

"You're not leaving," Garrett told him. "Not until the Rurales come for you."

Lambert flinched visibly, then managed to look bewildered. "The Rurales? What have they to do with me?"

"You don't need me to tell you that, Ed."

"You're talking nonsense, John. All the evidence points to your having lost your reason—because of what happened to Dave, I suspect."

Garrett was becoming weary of this. He was in no shape to argue, or even to hold a conversation. He decided to settle it, and so was devious one last time.

"Russ Maugher talked when he was taken," he said. "He identified you as the Dude. And the Rurales will know you from the fight they had with the wild bunch. If they don't, the people at Hacienda Estrella will surely remember you. No, it's not nonsense, Ed."

Lambert burst out, "You're buying Dave's release! You made a deal with the Rurales. That's what you've been up to all this time!"

Garrett knew that was as much of an admission of guilt as he could expect. It was enough. He could now turn Ed Lambert over to the Rurales without wondering afterward if he had made a mistake.

Lambert looked stricken. He had turned pale. He lifted a hand and drew it over his face; the hand trembled violently. His eyes had taken on a look of despair. He had gambled twice for high stakes, first by taking part in that raid into Mexico and then by trying to seize Anchor upon the report

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

of its owner's death, and he had lost each time. Now it was to cost him his life.

Lambert turned, walked across the room and picked up the glass of whiskey. He downed the whiskey, then set the glass back on the table. Facing about, he thrust his hand into his coat pocket and brought out the derringer pistol he had drawn that day Garrett had tangled with the Rurales in the *cantina* at Old Town.

Garrett had been watching for such a move. He drew his revolver, and its heavy blast echoed the report of the derringer. Lambert's bullet went far wide of its mark, shattering some bric-a-brac on a wall shelf. Garrett's went where it was aimed, taking Ed Lambert in the upper part of his right arm. Lambert dropped his sneak gun, reeled backward and collided with the table and chair. He toppled both over, and fell with them.

Mitch Evans burst into the room, his gun in his hand. Matt Hagarth followed him, staring at Garrett with disbelief.

"He's not dead, Mitch," Garrett said. "Not even hurt bad. Matt, it's good to see you. We'll have a talk, then I'll want you to ride to San Luis. But first see if you can find me a drink . . . drinks for everybody. We all need one, including Lambert."

He did indeed need a drink.

He had finally come to the very end of his tether, and was ready to admit it.

Eight days later five riders with a pack horse arrived at Anchor headquarters. They came up from the south. All five looked uneasy: Dave Garrett because he was arriving home under a cloud, plagued by guilt, Captain Ramirez and

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

his three men because they were on the wrong side of the border.

Garrett faced them in the ranch yard, merely nodding to his son in greeting and then saying to Ramirez, "I have the one called the Dude. The other one, Russ Maugher, is dead and buried at Valido. If you want to go there with me and have him dug up, I'm agreeable."

"I'll take your word for it that he's dead, Señor Garrett," Ramirez said. "And you should have taken my word that I would release your son. A word with you in private, *por favor?*"

Garrett nodded. "Step down and come inside."

He took Ramirez to the room that served as the ranch office. He told Sam Atkins, who now kept his accounts and had once been Dave's tutor, to go outside and talk with the youth. Then he looked inquiringly at the Rurales Captain.

"You have a right to know why I would have kept my word about releasing your son," Ramirez told him. "You see, I did not tell you about his behavior during the raid because I feared you wouldn't deliver the seven who escaped if you knew I had no plans to punish him."

"His behavior?" Garrett said, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"First of all, at Hacienda Estrella the young man tried to keep the others from killing Don Felipe's son. Second, he kept two of the *bandidos* from ambushing Elena Aragon while she was in their hands. Third, they did not release her. He helped her escape from them—and was captured while leading her to safety."

Garrett heard this with a vast sense of relief. He said, more to himself than to Ramirez, "Then he's not all bad."

"No, he is not all bad, *señor*. And because of his good

TRACKS OF THE HUNTER

behavior, I would not have executed him. I would have kept my word and released him at San Luis. As for my forcing such a bargain on you—well, a man does what he must.”

“Yes,” Garrett said. “A man does what he must, if he’s a man at all.”

“There are, then, no hard feelings?”

“No hard feelings,” Garrett told him.

That same day, after Ramirez and his men had ridden away with Ed Lambert, John Garrett set out for Valido. He took Matt Hagarthy and a hand named Petey Jones along, since he had forty miles of desert to cross and there were still outlaws to make it unsafe for a man to travel alone. The three of them had traveled half a dozen at a lope, and now Garrett slowed his horse to a walk and gestured for Hagarthy to ride beside him.

“Matt, I believe the boy has learned his lesson,” he said. “I have hopes he’ll make a hand now—and maybe some day a cowman.”

He needed reassurance on that score, and he trusted Matt Hagarthy’s judgment of cattle, horses and men.

“He’ll do,” Hagarthy said. “Like I told you some time back, he just wanted to sow some wild oats. He did his sowing, and he reaped his harvest. He’ll make a hand—and a cowman, boss. No need to worry.”

Garrett felt better for those words. In fact, he felt in high spirits suddenly. He had his son back safe and sound, and he was on his way to see Virginia Barton. If his luck held, he would take her along when he returned to Anchor Ranch—as Mrs. John Garrett. And at the moment John Garrett had, for good reason, complete faith in his luck.

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