

SMOKE-WAGON KID

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COMPLETE
AND
UNABRIDGED

**Clem
Colt**



"It's Antrim!" Moelner shrieked, and let go his rifle, his right hand flashing to his belt.

The room rocked with the roaring jar of thudding weapons. Moelner half rose from his crouching posture, then seemed to be leaning forward to meet the twin bursts of flame that bulged from the middle of the door-framed figure. Then his body pitched forward, crumpling...

Antrim crossed the room, found the unshattered base of a lamp and struck a match. His eyes took in Lothrop's figure where it sagged against the wall and his grin showed satisfaction.

"I reckon you'll live to hang."

SMOKE-WAGON KID

Clem Colt



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CHAPTER I

THE MAN THEY HANGED

STUMPY HARKER's first concrete evidence that his boss was engaged in just that unlawful business for several months hinted by his neighbors, came while he was being hanged. He had been shown the telltale hide now rolled behind Stewart's cante, and had received the Crazy L owner's assurance that this little party was by way of being first payment on Two-Pole-Pumpkin's score.

Stretching hemp would not have been so bad, he was reflecting, had he known all along the risk he had been running. But he had not. Being himself of an honest disposition, he had taken Lothrop's honesty for granted. Loyalty to his salt, once these rumors had gotten round, had been too great to admit of any doubt.

In extenuation of Stumpy's credence and allegiance, let it here be stated that no faintest shred of evidence in support of the ugly rumors had ever come before his eyes. Yet this circumstance was scarcely strange; Stone Lothrop was a careful, close-mouthed hombre. The thing for wonder was that Stewart had gotten wise.

Someone must have slipped, reflected Stumpy. Yet he would have been willing to bet his neck against the hanging that the someone had not been Lothrop. Could there have been a defection among the riders of the Two-Pole-Pumpkin brand? Or had the slip been the sure result of overweening confidence? Stumpy wished he knew; it would have made him feel much easier in his mind.

"Rustlers," Lefty Corner of the Cinch Ring growled, "recognizes on'y one kinda warnin'—the lass-rope kind."

"This drought has been takin' toll enough without no help from cow-thiefs," was the pointed observation of Hootowl Jones. "An' said thieves is gettin' t' be a damned sight too numerous around these parts. It's time a few of the breed was weeded out."

Lefty Corner said, "Hell, let's string him up an' get it over with!"

If Stumpy heard the ominous words, he gave no sign. Be-

neath the lone cottonwood lifting gnarled branches above the little clearing in the chaparral, he sat his horse in stoical silence. Mid-summer had come to Gawdforsaken Valley, and the heat, although the day was nearly done, was stifling. Now and again, Harker raised a calloused hand to mop his sweating face.

No use kicking, he reflected. When you worked for an outfit and ate its salt you were expected to take its orders. That he had been the recipient of no such orders as he was about to be swung for made little difference; others had and, to judge by the grimness of these men's leathery faces, had evidently carried them out with fine perfection.

His mind dismissed his cogitations as the group surrounding him pressed closer. Getting ready for the kill, he mused, and an ironic humor glinted briefly in his eyes. He could almost picture the lazy grin that would tug at Lothrop's heavy lips when word came to him that these vengeful valley outfits had snuffed the light of an innocent man. Stone Lothrop would know how to make the most of such a fact.

"Got yore second crow-bait picked out yet?" he scoffed.

"You better be singin' low, fella. Yore time is nearly up," Jones told him in that solemn air that had earned for the Long H owner his "Hootowl" nickname. "You better be composin' yore thoughts in prayer——"

"I ain't never been the prayin' kind," Harker answered coolly. "I'm expectin' it's a mite late now t' start."

"Pretty perky, ain't yuh?" Corner sneered.

Stewart said, "Stumpy, you got any friends you'd like to send a partin' message to? Or any personal effects you'd be wantin' some gent t' have?"

"Shucks," Stumpy grinned, "I ain't got no effects worth botherin' with. You boys can hev anything I've got, an' welcome."

"Sure there ain't some friend or relative you'd be wantin' us t' get a message to?"

"Can't think of any," Harker answered slowly. "But was I you, I'd go kinda slow on namin' Stone Lothrop rustler. Even with that hide an'——"

"Heck," Corner snarled his interruption, "there ain't no other outfit in these parts whose brand'll cover ourn!"

"Pity yore eyes wa'n't open t' the Two-Pole-Pumpkin possibilities when yuh registered yore brands," Stumpy hurled right back.

The jibe stung, as was evidenced by the darker tinge on Jones' rough cheeks, and the baleful glitter that flashed from Corner's eyes. Only Stewart appeared unmoved. "Two-Pole-Pumpkin," he said, "was here first, an'——"

It was Harker's turn to do the cutting in. "All the more careless of you gents, registerin' brands that it could blot. But you're right. Lothrop was here first—an' he'll likely be here quite some spell after you fellas is long forgotten."

"They raise 'em modest on the Two-Pole-Pumpkin, don't they?" Corner jeered. "But talk's cheap. An' bein' so, yuh better be devotin' all the wind yuh got t' talkin' yourself outa that hemp necklace yo're a-wearin'."

Stumpy Harker chuckled, knowing full well the seriousness of his predicament. Cattle had been taking wings in right large numbers even before drought had hit this valley, and the drought had proved no stumbling-block to the bovine evacuation. Somehow and somewhere, the brain behind this wholesale exodus knew of a place where thirst and scarcity of feed did not exist—knew of the place, and the manner in which these cattle could be transported. The steal was slick as frogs' legs, because this range, including so far as was known all range beyond the valley's rim, was sweltering in the heat and desolation of this drought for a radius of more than one hundred baking miles. Stumpy Harker knew the futility of any plea for life; these men were out for blood—and meant to have it.

"C'mon," growled Lefty Corner soullessly; "let's swing this rustler up an' get it done with. I'm gettin' so damn hungry my backbone's rubbin' all the linin' off my belly!"

"Yeah," approved another. "Let's hang the low-down coyote an' hit the trail. Be gettin' dark 'fore long, an' I wanta see him wiggle."

The lips of Stumpy Harker curled. In one thing Corner was absolutely right: talk was cheap. But if he knew anything at all about his boss, these yapping coyotes—and only Ed Stewart was excluded from the category—would come to rue this day and the ready weapon they were getting set to place in the hand of big Stone Lothrop.

"Go to it, you mangy buzzards. Git on with yore gory work."

Stewart sighed and shook his head. "I hate t' do this, Stumpy. But I can't quite persuade myself that you could ride

for Lothrop all these months an' not be implicated in this stealin'. You must have known it was goin' on. In such a position a honest waddy woulda quit an' left for other parts. Yore stayin'——"

Stumpy's laugh rode through his words. Stumpy's tone was too sincere for the tag of bluster: "Ed, yo're gettin' soft."

Stewart shrugged and gave the order, "All right, boys."

"He won't be feelin' so darn chipper when his boot starts beatin' air!" Corner snarled, and threw his weight with that of another man's on the end of the rope where it dangled from the branch. In a twinkling they had secured it about the cottonwood's scraggy bole.

Yet even while someone lashed his wrists behind him and his neck was being strained by the tight-stretched hemp, Stumpy Harker's mind was alert and working. He was reflecting that Lothrop had never heard of Hoyle or Queensbury or any other of the tinhorn rulewriters; the only code that Lothrop played by was one of his own creation, one fashioned to suit his aims. Stumpy's great regret was that he wouldn't be around to witness the results of this necktie party.

With an abrupt movement of his arm, Hootowl Jones brought down his quirt in a whistling arc that ended on the steaming flanks of Harker's mount. With a resentful snort the startled beast lunged forward.

And then to the lynchers' ears came unexpected sound, came definite warning that their act might bring reprisal. Like an echo to the sounds of Harker's vanishing bronc, a swift rush of hooves beat out of the chaparral to the north.

In consternation the lynchers' eyes sought one another's faces, clung for a pregnant second, then swung to the north where the rolling drum of hoofbeats even now was fading to a far dim flutter.

With a curse Lefty Corner spun wickedly on his heels and went scuttling for his horse. With answering oaths the others sprinted for their own. Into saddles they swung, not one showing any wish to linger, not one failing to strike his mount with quirt and spur. Yet of them all, it was Corner with his ashen cheeks who left the clearing first.

Soon all were merged in the swirling shadows of descending night. The clearing loomed deserted save for the still and moveless figure dangling pendent from the branch of the cottonwood tree.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL WITH THE JET-BLACK HAIR

BRIGHT and hot the day had dawned, with a brass haze of heat shrouding the distant purple hills and playing in shimmering undulations twelve feet above the tawny earth. In no way, the girl was thinking, was this day different from the dragging others preceding it throughout a long-drawn fourteen months. Through all those days no single drop of moisture had fallen in Gawdforsaken Valley; nothing had fallen save the burning rays of the searing sun and the countless numbers of gaunt, bony cattle, whose mournful lowing had been a constant source of irritation.

Standing in the gateway of the *patio*, she drew a weary, heat-damp hand across her aching forehead. Heat and bawling cattle had filled those awful days. But now the doleful lowing was stilled, and the whole vast world was naught but heat and silence. A stealthy silence whose presence was nearly as unrelenting as the sun's, a monstrous stillness that filled Gawdforsaken Valley to the brim—a brooding hush that pressed against one like a living thing.

Silence . . . heat and silence. Heat that even darkness abated little, for the sands of the valley floor cooled slowly, and those precipitous hills rimming its blue distance kept out all but its own hot breath. And only the counter-irritant, of the cattle's ceaseless bawling had for a little time relieved its awful hush. Now that was gone, and there was nothing left but dust and heat and the solemnity of forgotten places.

Through the great gate, *la querta del zaguan*, Yolanda's slowly turning head focused a resentful stare upon those outside things that lay within her vision: those same depressing, insensate things, those all-too-familiar things which had hemmed and sought to stifle her ever since, as a bride of sorts, she'd come to this Two-Pole-Pumpkin rancho fourteen months ago.

Those same dusty, sand-scoured adobe outbuildings were smeared against the same dun background of blistering earth, uncared for and unchanged. The sun-bleached *vigas* of the ranch-house cast the same monotonous shadows. The great gate itself stood always open, yet she had the feeling that if

some poor fool had moved it, the thing would have taken voice to squeal a protest, so securely enwrapped was it in the slumbering peace of centuries. Perhaps its poles had even taken root, so heavily did they lean on the changeless customs of the land. And out yonder there, the bone-white poles of the aspen corrals loomed just as bleak in the blazing sun as on the day she had come. The same hock-deep dust lay about them, hardly stirred in all these months; and the same gnarled cottonwoods stood sentinel along the curling path that led to the outer gate.

This awful quality of suspended animation held the power to shrink one's soul. Too vividly these surroundings told the insignificance of man. Her heart cried out in protest. This country drove one in upon oneself . . .

As though sensing her thoughts from where he lounged against the wall, Lothrop said with a sneer:

"An' what of it? I expect it's about time something woke you up an' gave you a slant on yore relative importance in the general scheme of things. This is a big country; a *man's* country. 'F you ain't big enough to measure up, you're better out of it."

"I'd get out of it quick enough if I had the chance."

"Ho, ho!" Lothrop chuckled. "I bet you would. But this country's all right if you're big enough for it. Why don't you try makin' yoreself agreeable for a change? Fella can get a lot of fun out of life, if he's willin' to meet it halfway. Same with a woman."

She made no answer, knowing that in silence lay her greatest weapon to annoy him—to avenge the insults which he heaped upon her day after day.

Her lack of retort stirred resentment in him now, drove dull color into the bull-thick neck that bulged the open collar of his dusty flannel shirt, thinned to a tight straight line the sensual thickness of his lips, and pulled his black brows downward in a sullen scowl.

"What fool," he muttered thickly, "would believe you an innocent girl after fourteen months with me?"

Yolanda's rounded chin shoved higher. Turning, she swung into the *patio*, and from that into the main living-room in which were windows facing upon the outer yard. Lothrop followed. With an oath he dropped into a cowhide chair that creaked beneath his weight.

"Playin' the stone goddess this afternoon again, eh? I'd

oughta blister yuh with a bull whip! An' I may come to it yet! A man can take just so much of this fine lady stuff, an' I'm reckonin' to hev a bellyful right now. There's a heap of things that I may be, but not one of 'em's a blasted mat for a stuck-up filly to wipe 'er boots on! Hear?"

Yolanda continued without apparent perturbation her survey of the yard. The sum total of her observations was revealed in a leisurely, "You could easily improve this place by straightening the poles of those corrals. A coat of paint wouldn't hurt the fronts of the buildings, either, and could easily be applied by the crew in a day or two—even at the snail's pace your men customarily adopt when they work."

"Do you hear?" he persisted, with a softness that was ominous.

"Could I fail to hear?"

"Then answer, damn you."

"Certainly I heard that ranting you were doing. Were you calling the hogs or the ghosts of your dead cattle?" And the smile with which she curved the berry redness of her mouth whipped up Lothrop's stormy blood and drew a pronounced flush across his cheeks; curled the fingers of his hands about the chair arms with a tautened grip that bleached the skin about their knuckles. He contained his surging temper with an effort that laid new sweat across the paleness of his forehead.

"Some day——" And there he stopped, to listen with canted head. The drumming beat of sand-muffled hooves rolled in from the desert and brought him out of his chair and across the floor, to halt before the open window, from which one swipe of a calloused hand removed the curtains Yolanda had hung. He seemed to have forgotten her in the intensity of his interest in these sounds. His form loomed tense as he swept a probing glance across the valley's tawny reaches.

Looking through her own window, Yolanda beheld a distant horse and rider boiling headlong through those shimmering undulations marking the steady upward swirl of dust. The rider was crouched low down above the horse's outstretched neck, and his steady downward flogging arm bespoke a lashing quirt. What speed! she thought. The man must be mad to drive his mount so in that heat—mad, or crazy with fear.

She looked again at Lothrop, attracted by his smothered curse. He must have recognized the rider. His attitude seemed

to grow even more tense. The frown that crossed his brow put savage lines about his mouth, and jutted his chin with a stubborn belligerence that told of surging passions.

"Who is it?"

Yolanda hardly recognized the voice as her own; it was strained and filled with an excitement she assured herself she did not feel. What was it to her if some fool *vaquero* were bent on killing his horse? And what message—if any—could he bring that should so step up the pounding of her heart?

"Who is it?" she repeated.

But Lothrop did not notice. With determined stride he wheeled from the window and went stamping into the *patio*.

Yolanda's shifting glance discovered the rider pelting up the lane beneath the cottonwoods, and she hurried after Lothrop, stood behind him while he waited.

The horseman came through the open gate and slid down from his mount before them. She recognized him for Suggs, one of Lothrop's riders, a hard-faced man who, on seeing her, still kept his battered hat upon his head. He was breathing hard, as though he, and not the pony, had made that fearful run.

"There's hell to pay!" he blurted out in answer to Lothrop's question. "They've got Harker—hung 'im higher than a kite!"

She caught the start that stiffened Lothrop's shoulders. "Who?"

"Corner, Stewart, an' Jones!"

"Oh. Them three, eh?"

"An' some of their outfits."

"What did they say—or couldn't you hear?"

"I could hear well enough," Suggs grunted, and bit off a good-sized chunk from the plug of tobacco he brought up out of a pocket. "Could hear all I wanted, anyhow. They tol' Harker it was time the rustler breed was bein' thinned out, an' that they proposed t' start on him."

Yolanda's feeling of nausea swiftly changed to one of bitter resentment. How dare anyone hang that poor old man! He was the only one of Lothrop's crew who had ever expressed sympathy for her position here; the only one who seemed to have a spark of human kindness and understanding. Why, it was ridiculous to think of that old man as a rustler!

Suggs was speaking again: "It's a laff they shoulda picked on Harker. He wouldn't know how t' run a brand if his life depended on it."

"What else did them three roosters say?"

"Wal," Suggs grunted through his chew, "they ast Stumpy if he had any las' words he'd like t' hev passed on. He allowed as how they might tell her," and he jerked a thumb at Yolanda, "he figgered 'twas time she pulled her pin. Jones said it was too bad she'd ever hooked up with a dam' yellin'-bellied rustler, an' that she'd oughta had better sense."

Lothrop did not speak at once. Then he said:

"Them's harsh words to use against a man for maverickin' two-three puny dogies, seems like."

"Yeah," Suggs grinned, "it sure does," and laughed.

The brows of the black-haired girl arched inquiringly at this. Then her glance betokened sharp interest as Suggs drawled: "What we gonna do?"

"Nothin' . . . at the moment."

"Huh? *Nawthin'!*" Suggs seemed startled. "Great cripes! Mean t' say yuh're figgerin' to let them valley outfits get away with this dam' lynchin'?"

Yolanda listened tensely for Stone Lothrop's reply. Surely he never would let a man of his be hung for rustling and not avenge his death.

But Lothrop just stood there, eyeing Suggs derisively.

Then finally he murmured: "What's one man to get excited about. After all, Stumpy's death ain't botherin' us, an' likely enough Stumpy *was* a rustler. I've had it in my mind for quite a spell to get rid of him. I never did like his shif'less ways. Fella that'll steal a pie will steal a bull, given the opportunity. I reckon Stumpy was a plumb bad actor an' only got what he was askin' for."

Suggs' wide mouth hung open, but Yolanda did not see. Blindly she turned away. Sickened by such perfidy, she fled inside the house with an indignant click of her heels, slammed into her own room and closed the door with emphasis.

In that room at Two-Pole-Pumpkin in which Lothrop customarily corralled his hard-faced henchmen when laying plans for some new project, the subdued sound of voices mingled with the rasp of frequent oaths and the scrape of shifted chairs. The smoke of brown-paper cigarettes, splayed from expanded nostrils, rose blue above the table and writhed its swirling bulk about the great coal-oil lamp that hung from the beamed ceiling. Drawn together before each open window, Indian blanket curtains served to bottle the humid air, that

was close and reeking with the combined aroma of tobacco smoke, fumes from cheap whisky, the horsey tang of damp clothing, and the sweat of unwashed bodies.

This was the night following the one which had witnessed the hanging of Stumpy Harker, some seven hours after Suggs' arrival with the news. Till now the boss of Two-Pole-Pumpkin had been displaying a calm indifference to Suggs' fuming demands for instant action. Yet it was because of the hanging that this conference had been called.

Lothrop's range boss, Black Jack Purdin, had just returned from Rincon and he had the latest gossip on his chest; had, indeed, made several efforts to unburden himself, only to be thwarted in each instance by Suggs' blustery demands that Two-Pole-Pumpkin get immediately to horse for the purpose of upholding its honor and avenging itself on the valley out-fits for their untimely snuffing of Harker's light.

Tall and gaunt, Jack Purdin was a rawboned man with a jagged knife-scar across his left temple. A heavy drinker, the range boss had imbibed a considerable quantity of distilled cactus juice while at, and since leaving, town. He was, consequently, in a surly mood and of no mind to brook further interruption from Suggs.

"If you're all through with them suggestions," he growled malignantly, "favor me by shuttin' yore yap till I get my second breath." Suggs reluctantly subsided. "The Smoke-wagon Kid's at his didos again."

His red-rimmed eyes took on a glint of satisfaction as he beheld interest in their tautened postures.

"That fool," Mitch Moelner sneered, "is shore invitin' a window in his skull."

Tombstone, a pale cadaverous man with sunken eyes and great hollows in his cheeks, nodded gloomy agreement. "Can't no gent monkey with the gov'ment without getting his comeuppance sooner or later. Man'd think he had more sense."

"Sense—hell!" said Moelner scornfully. "He's jest a bob-tailed flush with a hankerin' for a rep."

"'F I was entertainin' them kinda notions, I'd keep 'em to myself," Purdin observed with a scowl. "First thing yuh know he'll be campin' on yore trail."

"That would worry me into a lather, I expect."

Moelner's talk was no harder than his looks. He was, like most brush-poppers of the region, tall. And he was lean with

a suggestion of fibrous toughness that blended well with the lithe smoothness of each deliberate movement. At some past date, smallpox had dug several pits in a countenance whose parchment-taut skin threw into prominence the narrowness of a skull structure that gave to his features a sinister sharpness, disagreeably emphasized by a lantern jaw.

"'F yuh had as many wheels in yore think-box as the Kid's got in his, it would," Jack Purdin said with malice. "Some day that spleen of yoren is gonna choke yore gullet."

"When it does, you won't be round t' do any laffin'."

"Them that spits in the dust brews mud."

At this point Stone Lothrop's drawl cut in upon the argument. "What's the Kid done now?"

"Yanked them two greasers outa the Socorro jail an' turned 'em loose."

"Them jaspers what robbed the Rincon bank?"

"Wal," Purdin answered, "that's what they been accused of. But the Kid tol' Sheriff Hausleman it'd be a good idee to arrest the right hombres fer a change. Claimed them greasers wa'n't no more guilty of that hold-up than Tuck Harniss was of lootin' the Overland las' week."

"He's takin' a lot on himself, cuttin' in on law business that-away."

"How much dinero they got plastered on his scalp now?" Lothrop made the query thoughtful-like.

"Five hundred U.S. dollars!"

"That's a heap o' money t' stick on one man's head," Suggs marvelled.

Mitch Moelner sneered. "It's a heap to stick on *that* head."

"What's wrong with that head?" Lothrop drawled, turning his heavy shoulders toward the speaker. "Could you have done the things the Kid's got away with in the las' ten months, an' kept yourself on the loose the way he has?"

"All he's done," Moelner said, "is shoot up Del Beecher, a bushwhacker what had a yaller strip a yard wide up his back; lift the scalp off'n five-six 'Patches that was so drunk they couldn't see anythin' but double; call the bluff of that gang what runs Rincon, an' let a coupla greasers outa jail. What's worth braggin' about in that?"

"How about the time he called Hausleman a damn fool to his face?" Suggs asked. "I guess that didn't take guts?"

"No more guts than a jackrabbit hops around with. Had his gun on Hausleman all the time he was talkin', didn't he?"

"He didn't hev no gun out when he got them greasers outa jail," Purdin growled. "The trouble with you is, yuh can't stand t' see no other gent gettin' a rep that rivals yoren."

"Ah, why don't you hire the damn grandstander t' help yuh steal cattle from these valley outfits, if he's so damn good?"

"It's an idea I've been considerin'," Lothrop said, and observed the swift looks his men exchanged among themselves. Most of them seemed pleasantly surprised. But no emotion was to be detected on the leathery mask of buried hopes Mitch Moelner presented to the world.

"If you do," he suggested, "yuh better find him sleepin' quarters that ain't inside the bunk-house. I'd no more think of closin' me eyes round that glory hunter than I would of shovin' my gun-barrel down my mouth an' pullin' the trigger!"

Black Jack Purdin laughed. "I don't guess the Smoke-wagon Kid could find time t' bother with such small fry as you."

The fingers of Moelner's right hand were toying with one of the silver buttons on his vest. His bold glance was fixed intently on the high-boned face of the range boss. A sour grin crossed his lips. "Sometime, Jack," he predicted, "you'll be makin' one of them funny cracks when I ain't in no mood to 'preciate yore humor."

Defiance mingled with the caution in Purdin's heavy stare; the defiance won and routed the other. "When I make a crack I stan' behind it all the way," he snarled, the liquor in him churning up his blood. "What I said goes as she lays—an' it wasn't figgered t' be funny. Yuh wantin' t' make somethin' of it?"

"I don't wrangle with fools," Mitch Moelner sneered.

Lothrop's voice cut coldly across the tightening silence: "I've heard enough of this yappin'—more'n enough. Leave off now 'fore the bunch of you get t' burnin' powder." He weighed the saturnine Moelner with a probing, steady glance. Smoothing down his tone, he added, "From all I've heard about him, Mitch, you an' this Smoke-wagon Kid might belong to the same breed of leather-slappers. You're both slicker'n the hinges of hell; don't see how any man could rightly say either one of you was better than the other. But it would be a smart hombre that would put the monickers of both you boys on the same payroll."

His glance was on the wiry Moelner closely, endeavoring to determine the effect his words had made. But that saturnine

visage was about as revealing of expression as would be a face beaten into a chunk of lead with an axe handle.

Moelner tucked his thumbs in his gun-belt, hitched his chair nearer the wall, and tilted back, swinging his booted feet against its bottom rung with a display of cool indifference. He did not speak.

Suggs said: "What're we gonna do about Stumpy's hangin'?"

Ruidosa, a thick-set swaggerer, leaned forward in his chair. "If there's goin' to be any powder burnin', the place for it is ol' man Stewart's spread." He looked to Lothrop for approval. "Stewart's the one that worked up Stumpy's finish. Stewart or Jones."

Lothrop's thoughtful glance took in the steeple-crowned sombrero, aglint with golden spangles that was worn by Ruidosa at a rakish angle atop features whose creamy innocence advertised the amount of time devoted to their improvement. The glance took in as well the aristocratic slenderness of the well-kept hand that raised to the little black moustache whose ends were greased and pointed as those of a Spanish captain's.

Suggs was saying: "What them range-hawggin' polecats has done t' one Two-Pole-Pumpkin rider, they'll do to the rest, less'n we beat 'em to the jump."

"Keep yore string rolled up," Moelner advised. "They wouldn't have the guts t' tackle a man they thought was guilty."

Suggs gave him a queer look, then turned to Lothrop. "What we gonna do, Stone?"

"Nothing . . . at the moment."

"*Nothin'*! Why, great cripes, we can't let 'em get away with that! They ain't got no right t' string up one of our boys!"

"Nope—" Mitch Moelner's grin was sly—"that hangin' was a insult to the entire Two-Pole-Pumpkin. Stumpy wa'n't guilty of misbrandin' anybody's cattle. Stumpy wa'n't no more guilty than the rest of us righteous cowprods what slicks saddle-leather sixteen hours a day, keeps our noses clean an' minds our own dang business."

CHAPTER III

STONE LOTHROP LAYS PIPE

STONE LOTHROP was the product of his wild environment, an adventurous spirit, and a complete lack of moral rectitude. No scruple had ever been permitted to become an obstacle in the path of his desires; no fear of possible consequence had held him back from any venture he had accounted profitable. In this rough locality, where men called each other "neighbor" who lived eighty miles apart, his rise to power and influence, if not spectacular, at least was steady. Already men were looking to him for guidance in their everyday affairs; some had been considering him as a possible candidate for office even, while a few—already holding office—were swayed considerably by his views. Of the latter was Sheriff Hausleman, a great hulking ox of a man who had never held an original thought in his forty-seven years of life.

It was in Lothrop's mind, as he covertly studied the faces of his men, that Hausleman's use—as a sheriff—had about reached its end. If the Smoke-wagon Kid had taken two prisoners out of the jail at Socorro, and turned them loose right under the star-packers' nose, it was about time Hausleman was being removed and a better man found to fill his place—at least a man better fashioned to Lothrop's ends.

Few were the men in this country who could brag of having crossed Lothrop to advantage; there had been several, but only three were still around—Jones, Corner, and Stewart. These men were the owners of the other big valley outfits. He and they had never gotten along, not from the moment of their arrival in Gawdforsaken Valley. First there had been trouble over water rights, never completely settled, and of late, political differences had aggravated the situation. Dealt staggering losses by this drought which had squatted, leech-like, upon this range, Lothrop had derived an ironic pleasure by recouping from these men's surviving herds. Other ranchers, from farther south, were driving north their stricken herds, and it was to these he had sold his rustled stock. But this practice, he was aware, could not go on indefinitely.

He spread a lazy grin across his mouth at Moelner's words.

A grin that stopped the sharp retort he could see was trembling on the lips of Suggs. "Whether Mitch is right or not," he said, "makes little difference. We're not goin' to fool with this two-bit rustling business any longer. There's plenty of other things we can turn our han's to . . . things that'll net us bigger profits. This is grand large country we're livin' in, boys. A country wherein opportunity abounds——"

"You sound," Moelner jeered, "like Hausleman pluggin' for election."

Lothrop grinned. "Well, it's true. This *is* a big country, an' it'll furnish plenty of opportunities to the man that's awake to his chances—a man, for instance, like me. Look at the silver mines bein' opened up in this territory. Look at the gold an' copper. Look——"

"Are you tellin' us t' go to work?" Purdin asked. "Honest-like, an' regular?"

Lothrop chuckled at his amazement. "Don't look so pained. Work, like confession, is good for the soul, Jack. You're gettin' soft."

Purdin was regarding him slanchways. "It's a cinch that hangin' ain't responsible fer that palaver. You—you ain't gettin' *religion*, are yuh?"

"What's wrong with religion?"

"Nothin', I guess. But it ain't fer the likes of us."

"You sure told the truth that time," Moelner remarked drily. "The only religion this crew could ever go for is the creed of Easy Money!"

"Exactly," Lothrop nodded. "An' there's easier money to be had than what we're gettin' out of rustled cattle. This is a sucker's game, an' I've only been piddlin' around in it till somethin' else opened up. Well, the somethin's opened."

"Such as what?" asked Purdin curiously. "Somebody startin' a new filibuster?"

"What I've got in mind will be easier than that," Lothrop said and, leaning forward, he lowered his voice. "Prospectors have been doin' pretty good in this region for quite a spell. What I've been thinkin' of will net us better, an' without walkin' behind no burro's rump. But it's goin' to take a little time to get organized."

"Just what you got up your sleeve?" Mitch Moelner asked.

"Did you ever stop to think what a profit could be made by goin' into silver?"

"Silver? You mean buy one of these fellas' mines?"

"Buy—hell!" Stone Lothrop drawled. "Look. Some of these mines are goin' to prove steady producers. Bound to. Law of averages'll take care of that. Most of these hole-diggers passes their ore over the bar or across the counter an' takes its worth in drink or grub. But there's mines at Silver City that are goin' to pay big dividends. An' they're goin' to start payin' quick. I'd say inside two-three months. Mines like the Golconda, the Silver Dollar, an' the Blood of Life."

Mitch Moelner nodded slowly, a feline glitter in his gaze. But Purdin, not comprehending, said: "They figgerin' t' give us half their finds?"

"They don't know it, but they're goin' to give us more than that. There's only one stamp mill been put in at Silver City. The men ownin' it have got a good thing. They can charge whatever they feel like, an' it's my notion they're goin' to charge a-plenty. Most of the outfits up there ain't goin' to be able to pay such toll, an' of the few that can there won't be many that will.

"Consequently, they're goin' to have to pack that ore to Socorro, an' to reach Socorro they're goin' to have to cross the Jornada." Lothrop's shrewd cold gaze swept the faces of his men while a sardonic grin tugged at the corners of his lips. "Does the idea penetrate?"

Black Jack Purdin wet his lips. "You mean they're goin' t' pack that ore across the Jornada on muleback?"

Lothrop nodded slowly.

"An' that we're goin' t'——" Suggs balked at putting the thing into words.

But Lothrop chuckled. "Such is the notion that's been millin' around in my head. How does she set?"

"By Gawd, it don't set so good!" Suggs said, and swore.

No definite change came over Lothrop's features, nothing a man might catalogue. Yet somehow his shoulders appeared more lumpy, hunched, and his cheeks seemed darker, harder, like parfleche-wrapped rock.

The belligerence fled from Suggs' eyes. A dampness that was not of the heat came out upon his forehead, and spread as Lothrop said:

"What?"

Suggs licked his lips. "Well, I know I ain't got no right t' be talkin' outa turn," he whined ingratiatingly, "but it looks to me like that would be a damn good way of gettin' our necks stretched—a heap surer an' quicker than rustlin' steers."

Lothrop's smoke-grey glance grew vacuous, expanded to watch each man. "Are you against it?"

The question probed Suggs softly. He gulped, attempted to speak, yet each time stopped short of words. He knew what lay behind that question, and he knew what answer was expected, was in fact demanded. The stuff of which martyrs are made had been left out of him. He wiped a sleeve across his face; the sweat was getting in his eyes.

"Are you against it?" Lothrop's repeated words drifted lazily through the smoke to spur his speech—succeeded.

"No," he almost whispered, "I ain't ag'in' it. But I sure ain't lookin' forward none."

Lothrop smiled. "There's nothing in the idea to get yore lather up. Takin' the ore from those pack trains when they try to cross the Jornada is goin' to be the easiest thing you ever did." His tone was definite, convincing to all but Suggs. "You'll find it easier than rollin' off a log. Nothin' to it. The Trail of the Dead," he savored the desert's name as another man might taste some old rare stimulating wine. "Even the name is goin' to be in our favor. I tell you, we've got this job licked before we start."

"What about the law?" Purdin wanted to know.

Lothrop's black brows rose sharply. "What law?" he said, and a tiny ripple of humor disturbed the cast of Moelner's cheeks.

The distant sound of hoofbeats checked whatever reply Purdin would have made. He stiffened, as did the others, and turned to face the door. The sound was beating nearer, drum-like in its throb. Louder and louder it grew, finally to cease with the slither of braced legs in the yard outside. A rider's boots hit dirt, came thumping down the *sala*. . . . The rattle of knuckles shook the door.

"Come in," Lothrop called in a calm flat voice.

The man who entered was tall and thin, typical of that arid range, booted and spurred and belted. Held by a chin strap, a dust-covered Stetson was shoved far back on his head. He was a man Lothrop knew in Socorro.

His glance took in the gathered men. He nodded curtly and shut the door.

"What's up, Rafe?"

Rafe's eyes met Lothrop squarely.

"Hausleman," he said, "is dead."

CHAPTER IV

"YOU COULD EASY GRAB THE SHERIFF'S STAR"

LOTHROP's eyes met Rafe's squarely. Far back in their smoke-grey depths a light of calculation kindled, but was not permitted to reach their surfaces. "Put your cards on the table where we can see 'em, Rafe. Let's see . . . when did this happen? Whose blade was responsible? Callares'? Boseman's? . . . I reckon it wasn't no accident."

"It wa'n't no accident, surely," Rafe said, tight of face. "An' nobody's knife slit his gullet, neither. He was killed deliberate . . . by the Smoke-wagon Kid."

"No!"

"Yes, by grab! An' right in the main street—right front of Melanchton Tiebalt's store. There was six or eight of us lookin' on. Damn me for a greaser if it wa'n't the quickest thing I ever seel!"

"Spill it," Lothrop said. Like that.

"Well, it was like this," Rafe confided slowly. "There was a bunch of us standin' round in front of Tiebalt's place chewin' the rag, yuh know, way fellas will? Well, some fool made a crack about all the rustlin' that's been goin' on." He stopped abruptly. "Say, where's Stumpy at?"

"Stumpy," Moelner drawled, "has got hisself a job with another spread."

"Get on with yore story," Purdin growled.

"Would, if yuh would give me haff a chance. Well, one thing led to another till some damn knothead remarks that it was pretty cute how the Kid had walked into Hausleman's jail an' sprung them greaser pris'ners. That opened things up fine, yuh bet. Hausleman, being sort of prideful-like, cuts loose a string of cusswords that woulda taken the hide right off a burro's rump. 'Lows as how he's aimin' t' turn that four-flushin' Smoke-wagon hombre inside out, next time he comes sashayin' into town, an' use 'im for a rag to clean 'is gun with. An' just about right then the Kid hisself eases through the crowd an' stands there eyein' the sheriff up and down like a plug hawss he might be figgerin' to buy."

When the man from Socorro paused to scan the faces of

his audience, enjoying the looks of interest they displayed, and his own importance, Black Jack Purdin—never a patient man—did some swearing of his own.

"Get on with it," Lothrop prodded. "We've got other things to do 'sides listen to yore gas. What happened?"

"Nothin' much, for a minute. The Kid just stood there real quiet-like lookin' him over. It fair give me the creeps! But when he spoke, it was worse—made a fella kind of think of hell, it was that harsh an' sinister. 'What was that ag'in?' he says.

"Hausleman got whiter'n the teeth of a nigger's smile. He was startin' to back away when the Kid's left hand reaches out an' gets him by the collar. 'Fore yuh could say 'Jack Robinson' the Kid's right smashes him in the jaw. Gawd, yuh could hear 'is teeth crack! The Kid smacks him ag'in an' lets him loose. Hausleman, like the fool he was, jabbed for his gun. It was the las' move he ever made, intentional. He got his gun, all right—Kid let him, purposeful, I guess. Just sat there watchin' 'im with 'is eyes glowin' like a panther's an' that mockin' grin on 'is han'some face. He never moved—I swear he never even blinked till Hausleman's gun cleared leather. I never seen 'im move then, even, but flame sorta jumped from 'is hand an' the sheriff went down with a winder through 'is skull."

For long seconds no one spoke. Then Suggs let out his breath like an old dog full of colic. Black Jack Purdin swore. Tombstone said:

"I been expectin' this. It's what comes of pickin' a scissors-bill with nothin' but air in his think-box. I warned yuh, Stone, that Hausleman wasn't the man."

Lothrop nodded. "He wasn't my choice; conditions, circumstances imposed him on me. But I'm not sorry he's out of the way." He turned his big shoulders back toward Rafe. "Where's the Kid at now?"

Rafe grinned sourly. "Yuh wa'n't expectin' him t' linger in Socorro after that, was yuh?"

"He's downed men before."

"A sheriff's a little different."

"I don't see no difference. Kid gave his man a break. That lets him out, so far's the law's concerned."

"So far's the law's concerned, yeah. But there's public opinion to consider."

The grin crooking Lothrop's heavy lips was derisive.

"Yeah?" His voice held a thin cynicism. "Public opinion's got a long way to go before it could worry me or the Kid. What did public opinion do about Curly Ives when he held Beck Colter up in front of the Rincon Bank, an' damn near beat his head in 'cause he didn't have more'n five cartwheels on 'im? What did it do about Moak when he loaded Jack Dunn with cusswords on the road between Rincon an' Radium Springs, and, seein' he wasn't armed, shot him through the head? An' this in broad daylight, right in plain view of two ranches, an' while several teams were comin' along the road! Public opinion—*Hell!*"

Moelner leaned forward, and the lantern light threw dark shadows across his lean-carved cheeks, emphasizing the prominence of his narrow bone structure. "You're right, Stone. But it's due for a change," he warned. "An' it'll change quick-like an' unexpected when it does. We don't want t' get caught with our pants down."

Lothrop's sleepy-lidded eyes swung round to Tombstone's lounging posture, played upon the gunman's cadaverous face with its sunken, brooding eyes and great hollowed cheeks; upon the dark crossed gun-belts whose holstered weapons were slung butt forward for the rare and deadly cross-arm draw. He said:

"Tombstone, let's hear yore views on public opinion."

Tombstone grinned in a way that exposed his snaggly teeth, then spat amber juice at the tomato can serving as a cuspidor. He shrugged when the shot went wild, and made a grimace. "Me," he said, "I don't waste no time figgerin' out notions on anythin' so damned unreliable. My motter's allus been: 'Shoot first an' do yore laffin after.' If follered persistent-like, it'll keep a gent above sod for a right smart spell."

Lothrop's answering grin licked a thin line across his mouth. Only last week, Tombstone, in need of money, had ridden his horse into Kelly's saloon and, flourishing a naked pistol, had tossed his buckskin purse upon the bar with the request that Kelly put two-three ounces of dust into it as "a temporary loan." Kelly had been quick to take the hint. And, to amuse himself while the saloon-man was weighing up the levy, Tombstone had emptied a gun at the bottles ranged along the back bar. So far, the episode had trailed no consequence in its wake.

Lothrop let his glance play over Ruidosa. The flashily

garbed road agent was smoking with a strange nervousness, his beady eyes uncommonly sharp. A vague look of trouble lay across his cheeks, it seemed to Lothrop. But perhaps this was but a fancy born of the way the smoke and the light threw shadows.

Lothrop's gaze lay on him heavily as he asked, "What do you think about it?"

It almost seemed that the gaudy ruffian started. The Adam's apple moved behind the dangling chin straps of his hat, and indecision delayed his answer. When it came it was couched in the form of a question:

"What about Stumpy?"

"What about him?" The rancher's high blood laid a definite flush across his cheeks. Darn Harker, anyway! Was the fellow's hanging to sow rebellion among these trusted men? With harshened tone he repeated, "What about him?"

"Seems like—" Ruidosa hesitated, then plunged on—"that necktie party might mebbe 'a' been a sort of warnin'."

Lothrop said coldly, "If there was any warnin' meant, it was in regard to rustling cattle. Well, we're through with that two-bit game. No need to get the wind up."

"Well, yuh asked my opinion, an' yuh got it." Ruidosa shrugged. "Yuh have got my backin', too. Yo're boss. You make the plans; we'll carry 'em out."

"Sure," added Black Jack Purdin gruffly. "The boss ain't never let a man down yet."

Lothrop relaxed. This was better. "Anyone think to cut Stumpy down an' plant him?"

Tombstone nodded "Suggs an' me." His brooding eyes stared back at Lothrop darkly. "What we goin' t' do about Corner, Jones an' Stewart? They'd oughta get their needin's. We'll hev trouble with them gents yet, less'n we stomp 'em out while the stompin's good. Leave a rattler be an' he'll multiply considerable."

Lothrop put him off with, "They'll be tended to, don't worry," and turned his gaze on Rafe, who had been restlessly shifting his feet.

Rafe said, "About that Socorro business, Stone. You could easy grab the sheriff's star. Don't know's you'd want it, of course, but I reckon you could get it if you did."

Lothrop's breath deepened noticeably. "You think so?" Though disciplined, his tone revealed the excitement kindled by the possibilities he glimpsed with himself as sheriff.

"You ain't fixin' to have me cut a big gut, now, are you?"

"Heck, no," Rafe said. "I'd never pick you t' run no sandy on, boss. What I said is straight. Two-three solid citizens was hintin' round last week that things would be a heap different if yuh was packin' the sheriff's star. If they didn't do another thing, the commissioners would sure appoint yuh t' fill out Hausleman's term."

Purdin's eyes were bright with anticipation. "Yuh could start for Socorro to-night——"

"By grab," Lothrop said, "I believe I'll do it!"

CHAPTER V

THE SMOKE-WAGON KID

AT that eastern university honored for so short a time by his presence, it was said of Guy Antrim that had he been with General Kearny that intrepid officer would have annexed all Mexico, instead of one lone province. Native sons expressed their admiration by calling him *El Tigre*. But it was Governor Axtell who showed deeper insight when he said, "Give the rogue lead enough, and he'll rid the territory of all the bad-men in it!"

Antrim was not a man to whom at first the casual observer would be apt to give great heed. He was quite boyish-looking and, at that time, could hardly have been much more than twenty-three, slenderly made, and with broad sloping shoulders that seemed a deal too large for the rest of his slender body. Lithe as a willow wand, his narrow-hipped waist held lines of speed, confirmed by the very quickness of all his movements.

Yet a closer look would have told the most casual of passers-by that here was no man to trifle with. The jaw of a fighter was slung forward beneath his long, wide, whimsical lips, and above those lips a Roman nose curved in the style of a vulture's beak. His eyes were curiously aloof, like those of some untamed animal, yet were never still an instant, perpetually probing his surroundings in a manner most embarrassing to others. His general appearance was best described as "foxy" though such a term would fall far short of doing him justice.

His face was dark from many suns, and his hair was red, like the waters of the Rio Colorado, and it—when taken in conjunction with the high, flat cheekbones and the cynical lines occasionally to be observed beneath his eyes—gave hint of violent passions and a dynamite temper not always under complete control.

He wore heavy leather chaps of the kind described as “bat-wings,” scarred, and black in color, and the ordinary cowboy dress consisting of a blue cotton shirt, black scarf pulled tight about his neck, dusty ten-gallon Stet hat, and fancy Hyer boots with three-inch heels and silver plated gut-hooks with Texas-star rowels and pear-shaped dangles that jingled as he walked.

He was walking now, pacing the room with a nervous stride, as though deep in the complexities of some troublous problem. There was, at times, a savage light showing through the cold blue depths of his roving glance, and a cynical curl to his lips. And more often than not, the lean fingers of his ungloved hands would stroke caressingly the smooth dark butts of the heavy pistols strapped to his thighs, as though promising them swift employment should things not go to his liking.

A shadow abruptly darkened the doorway. Antrim whirled like a cat, and both his guns were focused menacingly as, stooping, a big man squeezed inside.

The man straightened up, grinned sourly at the levelled guns, but lost his grin as his eyes encountered Antrim's gaze. He frowned, then said, “Howdy, Kid. Feelin' kinda proddy this mawnin', ain't yuh?”

Antrim ignored the question. “There's such a thing as knockin'. It's a healthy habit some of these knot-heads oughta learn—yourself included. Trouble with this country is, it's raw an' crude an' primitive; it's filled with all the scum run out of better places.” He paused to eye the intruder contemptuously. “It's a disgrace, Moak, to these United States.”

“Sure, sure—I know it is, Kid,” the big man said placatingly, “an' that's the truth. But you have got t' give us time. Yuh can't clean a country this size up in fifteen minutes—nor fifteen years. Takes time. We're doin' the best we can. We——”

“Was that why,” Antrim cut in coldly, “you killed Jack Dunn the other day?”

Moak's face went a trifle pale beneath its bronze, and he eyed his questioner uneasily. “Now what yuh wantin' t' bring

that up for?" he queried testily. "Jack Dunn was a hawss thief, an' yuh oughta know it. The fella was in need of killin' bad. I ast him where he got that piebald mare he was forkin', an' he tol' me it was none of my so-an'-so business. I might even 'a' let that pass if he hadn't started reachin' for his pocket. Did yuh think I was gonna stan' there an'——"

"That wasn't the way I heard it," Antrim's drawl was filled with sarcasm. "But let it go. What did you want?"

"They've appointed a new sheriff t' fill out Hausleman's term. Thought mebbe yuh would be wantin' to know. Special since he's lookin' for yuh. Got——"

"Who?" the single word cut through the other's talk like a knife through cheese, arresting him with its quiet force.

"Lothrop."

"That fella that runs the Two-Pole-Pumpkin?"

"Yeah. The fella some folks is callin' a cow-thief. An' he's huntin' yuh."

Antrim's brows drew down in thought. It was the only sign of reaction he gave to the information. His face showed no vestige of fear. Nor was apprehension discernible in the easy lines of his lounging posture.

The brows raised abruptly, revealing a cool determination in the blueness of his eyes. "Thanks, Moak. I'll look him up."

"Are yuh plumb crazy?"

"I've been called about everything else; why not that?"

Moak shook his head, and his hard face showed disapproval. "If I was yuh, and valued my hide, I'd get out of town as quick as Gawd an' a hawss' laigs would let me."

"An' thereby prove whatever suspicions are bein' entertained about you," Antrim said derisively. "Facin' him down will spike half an enemy's guns."

"While the other half," sneered Moak, "are blastin' windows in yore skull!"

Antrim's cold grin fired up his youthful face and made it reckless. "Just the same, I'm lookin' him up. It's never been my style to run from trouble."

The sheriff's office was located in a large adobe shack, the rear of which had been somewhat remodelled to serve as a jail. Behind the sheriff's desk, Stone Lothrop sat with a gleaming badge pinned on his shirt, and a lazy smile on his heavy lips as he eyed the man who stood, fingering a battered hat, before him. This man, George Hildermin, had been a deputy

of Hausleman's, and seemed to have a hankering to continue under the new regime in his former capacity. But, for reasons easily guessed, Lothrop was not certain that he wanted him.

Lothrop's heavy lips were still curved in their lazy smile, his smoke-grey eyes intently probing. Hildermin was not a prepossessing man, so far as looks went. His eyes were watery, with an unpleasant habit of bulging. Because of its width, his mouth was a deformity, and the double row of huge teeth set firmly in massive jaws gave to his countenance an animal-like aspect of expression truly repulsive. No longer young, Hildermin's skull was almost bald, save for the monk-like fringe of hair about its sides. He was known to be a notorious bummer and was oftener indebted to the coarse humor at his command than to his usually empty pockets to provide himself with necessary sustenance. His favorite feat, often indulged at the Grand Hotel, was so to spread his monstrous jaws as to bite clean through seven dried-apple pies at one time. Bets with strangers as to his ability to do this had often earned him tobacco money for a week. It was whispered in the trembling of the leaves that Hildermin had removed there from some place in the vicinity of Alder Gulch, whence he had been driven by a vigilante clean-up. And it was this suspicion that finally determined Lothrop to oust him from his office.

Looking him coldly in the eyes, Lothrop said, "I'm afraid you'll have to go, Hildermin. Hausleman let this country get into a pretty bad shape. It is high time someone set about cleaning it up. It will be better for all concerned if this office is completely rid of all the last incumbent's friends and allies."

Hildermin's popping eyes betrayed his reaction to such a speech. "B-But I thought——"

"Yore thoughts do not interest us in the least," Lothrop cut him off. Suggs snickered from where he slouched beside the window. And Hildermin scowled as Lothrop added: "You ever been in Nevada? Virginia City? Alder Gulch?"

Hildermin's surly shake of the head was negative, but his eyes revealed a trace of fear behind their narrowed lids.

"Ever been around Elk City? Or Bannack? . . . Haven't, eh? . . . Well, have you ever been in Rattlesnake or Brown Lodge or Cottonwood?"

Hildermin licked his lips and shifted his feet uneasily. "No,"

he grunted. "What yuh askin' me all them questions for, if yuh are goin' to kick me out?"

"You might say as how I was curious, George," Lothrop answered, and a grin licked a thin line across his mouth. "You see, I happen to know there was a George Hildermin up in that country who was connected with Plummer's gang, an' I just kind of wondered if mebbe you wasn't him."

Hildermin turned deathly pale. He began a stumbling backward movement toward the open door, one shaking hand disappearing jerkily inside his coat.

"Are you?"

Hildermin appeared undecided whether to flee or face the accusation out—for it was an accusation the way Lothrop said it. Keeping his hand inside his coat, the ex-deputy stopped. "Gawd, no!" he gasped. "I don't see why yuh should say such things. I never heard of no such man."

"Did you ever hear of Plummer?"

Hildermin reluctantly nodded. "I guess everybody's heard of him. He was hung, wasn't he—by vigilantes?"

"Was he?" Lothrop grinned as Hildermin shivered. "Well, I'm not fixin' to arrest you, so don't get lathered up. I expect you'll be lookin' for another job, now, won't you?"

Hildermin just looked at him. He seemed to be questioning himself as to what lay behind the sheriff's question. He was not left long in doubt.

"I was goin' to suggest that if you was short of funds, mebbe my foreman, Purdin, would put you on. I own the Two-Pole-Pumpkin outfit in Gawdforsaken Valley. If you get out that way, you might do worse than ask him." And still with that faint grin upon his mouth, Lothrop returned his attention to the papers littering his desk.

"More comp'ny headin' this way."

Suggs' comment drew Lothrop's gaze from the documents he was fingering. He watched an elongated shadow rock toward the door, strike the board walk outside and spill across it, lapping up against the step. The clank of spurs was plainly audible in the afternoon stillness. Now the scuff of boots rose from the walk and the comer's shadow slid inward across the floor.

Against his intentions, Lothrop got out of his chair at sight of the man who entered, and shoved his back against a wall. The man's features could be plainly discerned, for the

room's light was good. Unlike the casual observer, Lothrop was not deceived for an instant into thinking this boyish-looking stranger some ordinary hand. In that country a man had to stand certain hard tests before being considered by his fellows as an equal; he had to have certain worth-while qualities. There was but one known court in the land whose opinions carried weight, and it was expected that a man would—if crowded—go to it promptly and settle his case. Cases settled in such a court held no appeal; they were final and irrevocable. One could see that this stranger knew that fact, and appreciated it: it was disclosed in the way he packed his guns. Lothrop discerned all this at a glance; he observed that this man had "stood the acid," and so addressed him respectfully:

"Howdy, stranger. What can I do for you?"

"You are the new sheriff?"

"Yes. My name is Lothrop—Stone Lothrop."

The stranger appeared to be studying the floor. When he looked up there was a frosty, ironical light in his eyes. "I hear you been lookin' for me."

Lothrop's heavy face showed a thin smile, and he chuckled deep down in his throat. "I'm lookin' for a number of men. But not the way I been lookin' for you—an' not for that purpose, either. Kid, I want to thank you for doin' the people of this country a damn big favor."

Antrim's red brows arched. "A favor? How was that?"

"By removin' the former incumbent of this office. That crook, Hausleman. It was a public service," he said, and held out his hand.

Antrim eyed the hand quizzically, dismissed it, and his glance sought the sheriff's face. "You ain't been huntin' me just to tell me that?" It was more like a statement, the way he put it.

Without change of countenance, Lothrop hooked the hand in a suspender. "No," he said easily. "I want to hire yore guns."

A glint of amusement flashed from the blue of Antrim's eyes. "What makes you think they're for hire?"

"You *would* hire them, wouldn't you? If the pay was right?"

"Well, if the pay was right . . . Leastways, I'll admit to findin' you interesting. The last sheriff to hold down that chair was right anxious to see me swung. Would you mind explainin' the change of sentiment?"

"The last sheriff," Lothrop said brusquely, "was a fool. Things are goin' to be different now. This country's in bad need of law. I aim to see that it gets it."

Antrim drawled, "I see," and a grin curled his wide lips saturninely. "You figure to work on the principle that it takes a gunman to out a gunman. That it?"

"Roughly, yes." Lothrop's eyes met Antrim's squarely. "You got any objections to seein' this country cleaned up?"

Antrim's eyes met Lothrop's squarely. "On the contrary. I'd be plumb tickled to help in the cleanin'. Killin's are gettin' so common round here it's *time* someone was puttin' a stop to them—even if it takes more killin's to effect said stop."

Lothrop chuckled. "I see I ain't misjudged you none. You'll take the job, then?"

Antrim eyed the bit of metal gleaming in the lawman's hand. "A deputy's job?"

"Sure."

"What about those rewards—those bounties Hausleman tacked on my pelt?"

"You don't need to worry about them; I'll see they're struck off the records if you sign on with me."

Antrim's gaze was sharply probing. A lesser scoundrel would have flinched from it, but Lothrop met it steadily, and the bulldog grip of his heavy features was coldly earnest.

"It's Gawd's truth, Kid, I need you bad. An' I'll go any length to get you. This is a tough country, an' she'll take tough men to tame her. But she's a country that's well worth savin' for folks that will appreciate her. Are you takin' the job, or ain't you?"

"Since you insist," Antrim said, "I'll take it." And the ghost of a grin flashed across his lips.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE TWO-POLE-PUMPKIN

HALFWAY across the Jornada, Guy Antrim stopped briefly at a small rancho run by a Mexican. He was an old man, this rancher, frail and stooped of figure, and nearsighted, to judge by the squint of his peering eyes.

"*Buenas dias le de Dios, señor,*" he greeted Guy.

With true Spanish courtesy, Antrim answered the salutation in kind, "*Que Dios se los de buenos a Usted, señor.*"

"My poor house is as yours, *señor*," the old man said. "Will you rest?"

"But a moment," Antrim answered. "My way is long, and I am overdue. Do you find it safe in these troublous times living here alone in the desert?"

"I have nothing to lose but my life, *señor*, and that is in God's hands."

Antrim took the olla of water the old man handed him. It felt good as it trickled down his dusty throat. "Gracias," he said, when the rancher came back leading his horse, whose muzzle dripped moisture. "May God reward you."

"*Vaya con Dios.*" The old man waved his hand as Antrim rode off.

He stopped at noon at the Long H ranch of Hootowl Jones on the eastern edge of Gawdforsaken Valley. Only two hands were there at the time, and he ate with them and Jones. Smoking brown-paper *cigarros*, he and the rancher lingered a spell at the table after the punchers left.

"Yuh will find this country easier ridin' on a full stomach, I expect," Jones observed. "Guess the Jornada's pretty dusty."

"I reckon."

"Fore yuh shove off, yuh better fill yore water bags. No tellin' when yuh will get another chance. Water's scarce in this country—'bout as scarce as elephant tusks on the White Sands. Kinda bad country t' be ridin' in after dark."

Antrim smoked in silence. He could feel Jones' suspicion surging round him like a rope. It pressed against him with a wicked insistence. But no sign on his part disclosed his knowledge. Jones would ask no embarrassing questions, much as he might wish to know Antrim's business and identity. He would put no questions directly because to do so might be to invite gun-play. Personal questions were not popular in that part of the world.

Jones' glance was on him intently, probing, trying to tear the mask from his features. "Lookin' for a job of ridin'?"

"No . . . not especially. Just moseyin' around, as a man might say. Just hankerin' to know what's on the other side of the hill." Antrim suddenly grinned. "I just been broke out of the army. I'm kinda at loose ends. Isn't there a gent named Stewart runnin' a spread around here some place?"

He saw caution cloud the cold gaze of Jones. He watched

Jones crush out his cigarette and take a middling-big bite from a plug of black tobacco. Jones munched, much like a heifer, and through his munching said:

"There's a Stewart, I believe, that runs a ranch some place in this valley. Fella named Ed Stewart. His iron's the Crazy L. Yuh a friend of his?"

"Nope. I don't know the gent; just heard tell of him, is all. Heard he had a real nice layout over here."

"He ain't lookin' fer no riders, young fella, I can tell yuh that," Jones grunted sourly. "He's got more hands now than he savvies what t' do with. This damn drought has like t' put us valley ranchers plumb outa the cow business fer keeps—an' it may, yet. That or rustlers."

"Wouldn't hardly think a discernin' rustler would bother with such gaunted-up critters as I've been lookin' at this morning," Antrim observed.

"No, yuh wouldn't think so. It just goes t' show how ornery a human can get, I reckon. Cow-stealin's about the lowest thing I know of. Have much of it where yuh come from?"

"Quite a bit," Antrim said; "but we aim to make it right unpleasant for gents caught so engaged. We string them up usual-like without much fussin'."

He looked at Jones squarely. The rancher's face was a taut dark mask. But not swiftly enough did Jones conceal the glint that flashed in his sombre eyes at the mention of hanging rustlers. Antrim did not ponder that glint now, but stored it away in his mind for future consideration . . . there were other things stored there . . .

"It's the only sure cure fer such cusses," Jones grunted gloomily, spat, and changed the subject. "Any news up to the county seat? Or haven't yuh heard?" he added carefully.

"I reckon you've likely heard that Hausleman was killed," Antrim suggested, and, at the other's nod, said, "They've put in a man from down this way to fill out the rest of his term. Fellow by the name of Lothrop? Know him?"

"Lothrop!"

For an instant Antrim glimpsed the steel in Jones' soul. Then Jones' lids drew down and veiled his eyes. His face was solemn. "Yes, I know him . . . as well as I figger to want to. He's a neighbor, as yuh might say. Lives over near t'other side the valley. Runs the Two-Pole-Pumpkin brand. He—" Jones checked the sentence at its start and grimly closed his mouth.

"Not a friend of yours, I take it?"

"Not a particular friend," Jones said.

Antrim would have liked to ask Jones if he knew anything against Lothrop—anything about the rumors connecting the Two-Pole-Pumpkin owner with the rustling that was going on. But he well knew the value in reticence. This was not a land where questions could be lightly or safely put to any save one's closest friends, and even then questions were best left unasked. It was the code; a man's past belonged to himself until of his own volition he made it public property. Few men in that wild country had come there of deliberate choice; many of them had arrived "two jumps ahead of some sheriff," as the saying went. They assumed a different name, and the chances were good of their remaining undiscovered. However, what a man had done before coming there was little cause for concern; it was what he did *while there* that counted.

Under the covert scrutiny of Jones, Antrim felt glad he had pinned his badge inside his vest. No telling what type of hombre this gangling rancher might be; his rough, suspicious exterior might cover either the soul of an honest man, or the warped cunning of an outlaw. Many an honest man held the law in vast contempt, and would do his best to thwart it. When one worked on law business, it was profitable to keep the fact to oneself.

"So Lothrop's got to be sheriff now," Jones' voice held a thoughtful tone, a casual thoughtfulness that did not deceive Antrim any. He knew that he had roused Jones' interest in some way by the news. "Do yuh reckon he will clean up some of this hellin' round the boys are doin'?"

"Couldn't say—I don't know Lothrop t' more than nod to, hardly. I heard, though," Antrim added, "that he's aimin' to put a stop to some of these killin's. They tell me another mine owner's been dry-gulched over to Silver City."

"Dry-gulchin's are gettin' so common over that way," Jones said morosely, "that nobody pays 'em a mite of attention any more. This country's goin' to the dawgs, if yuh're askin' me. They orta send the troops in here an' clean it up."

"This country's big," Antrim observed. "It'll take some time to smooth it down."

"Yuh goin' to hit Corner or Stewart for a job?"

"Ain't been thinkin' of it. I might, though, if the pay was right."

Jones said: "Let me give yuh some advice, stranger. No one in this valley is puttin' on men now. The best thing yuh can do is to get on yore hawss an' head back where yuh come from. I tell yuh this with the best of intentions."

For a moment Antrim sat quiet and a chill came over the room. Then he crushed his cigarette upon a saucer and pushed his chair back. A cold grin curled his wide lips saturninely as he rose.

"An' with the best of intentions," he said, "I reckon I'll stay."

Dusk was just beginning to roll its sable blankets across the range when Guy Antrim came in sight of the adobe buildings of Lothrop's ranch headquarters at Two-Pole-Pumpkin. Though he had travelled across the valley all afternoon he had seen no other riders. Neither had he observed any cattle. He had seen nothing but scattered tufts of sunburned grass, parched earth, and in the distance the barrier hills that hemmed that place. During the afternoon they had been a palish sort of blue, but now they were limned deep purple against the darkening heavens.

The dark bulk of a man stepped out of a deep shadow by the gate leading to the *patio*, and blocked his path. The lighted windows of the rancho showed a glint of metal in his hand, and Antrim stopped in his dismounting with one foot still in a stirrup.

"Put it down," the other said, "an' name yoreself. An' do it quick or yuh can give it to Saint Peter."

"Guy Antrim. I think your boss is expectin' me."

"Yeah? Well, we'll be findin' out about that." He raised his voice, "Suggs!"

"That you, Mitch?"

The voice of the man with the pistol drawled sarcastically, "Naw—just one of the cows," then coldly growled, "Go tell Lothrop there's a pilgrim out here callin' hisself Guy Antrim which says the boss is expectin' him."

The scuff of retreating boots told Antrim that Suggs had departed on the errand. Standing hipshot beside his horse, Antrim rolled a cigarette. When it was made he placed it casually between his lips. "Mind if I light a coffin nail?"

"You can light a haystack, for all of me."

The cool insolence of that remark spoke volumes. It told Antrim that this man before him had a set of nerves under

beautiful control—beautiful. It was the sort of thing a man might say who, unarmed, would just as lief spit in a cougar's face. It was the remark of a man who had an utter confidence in himself and whom no circumstance could dismay.

For this reason, as Antrim's right hand brought a flaming splinter to his cigarette, his glance went searchingly to this Mitch's face. He found it a hard, bronzed mask—a mask of ironic humor. And there was a cold ironic humor in the tone with which he said:

"Satisfied?"

Antrim grinned. "Sorta. You Lothrop's major-domo?"

As the match went out he saw the fellow's bold glance register cynical amusement. Mitch said, "I would be if Lothrop had just a haff ounce more of savvy." And Antrim guessed that Mitch would just as soon have said that to Lothrop's face—or Purdin's.

Approaching footsteps and the jingle of spurs drew Antrim's gaze across Mitch's shoulder. Two men were coming from the *patio*, the lighted windows throwing their shadows elongated on the opposite wall. One was a gangling, loose-limbed fellow who walked with a limp. The other, by his breadth of shoulder, Antrim knew to be Lothrop.

As Lothrop came up he shoved out a friendly hand. "Glad to see you," he said, as Antrim took it. "You made good time. Hadn't hardly expected you until tomorrow."

"I left early."

"Let's go inside. Can't be no hotter in there than it is out here, an' it'll be a sight more comfortable if we do our palaverin' sittin' down. We just finished supper. Have you et?"

"Consid'able dust," Antrim answered drily. "Grub don't seem to flourish much on this valley sage. But don't go puttin' your cook out on my account. I can make out till morning."

"'Twon't be no trouble at all," Lothrop said peculiarly. "My woman does all the cookin' here. She won't mind."

As they entered the *patio* and Lothrop turned toward an open door, over a burly shoulder he called, "C'mon in, Mitch. Suggs can hold the gate down for a spell."

Back in the storehouse of his mind, Antrim deposited the fact that the Two-Pole-Pumpkin kept a sentinel posted. This Mitch had not just chanced to be standing in that shadow by the gate. Of course the Indians in this country *did* occasionally daub on a smear of warpaint, still . . .

They entered one of the lighted rooms off the *patio*. An-

trim saw in one comprehensive glance that it was well furnished for the times; it seemed almost luxurious with its Navajo and Hopi blanket rugs, its pine and cowhide chairs and settees. There was even an oil painting on one wall above the calico dado.

Lothrop called, "Yola—we've got company. One of my men from town. Fix him up somethin' to eat," and dropped into a chair, thrusting his feet out comfortably before him. He waved Antrim to a seat and began the manufacture of a brown-paper quirly. "Kid," he said easily, "this is Mitch Moelner. You'll find he'll do to ride the river with. Mitch, this here's the Smoke-wagon Kid." He watched them amusedly from beneath his sleepy lids.

Antrim, in the yellow light, could see that Moelner was a tall wiry man with a dark, lean-carved face. In each of Moelner's lazy movements was the smooth confidence of a panther. There was one gun strapped about his waist, but a bulge in the left side of his vest disclosed the presence of a shoulder gun. Antrim recognized a kind of surly strength about the man; not so much a swagger as a coldly arrogant indifference to the rights and opinions of others. He was clad in trousers of some dark material and wore a vest of the same sort with silver buttons over a blue flannel shirt.

Antrim said, "Glad to know you," but did not offer his hand.

Moelner's glance was mocking. "So you are the Kid, eh? I reckon you've teamed up with our new sheriff on the chance of gatherin' more scalps. Business gettin' bad?"

"It'll be gettin' better soon, I expect."

"That's not open to argument," Moelner said, and laid his shoulders against the wall. "Considerin' yore rep, you know, you don't look so tough. I've seen lots meaner lookin' hombres than you."

"I reckon you have. I don't go around makin' faces at folks, an' the rep wasn't of my seekin'."

Moelner said, "Well, we all have our peculiarities. I guess you had a lot of luck."

Antrim's cold grin fired up his face and made it reckless. "A gent that thinks so always has the opportunity of findin' out."

"Yeah," Moelner remarked, "I guess that's so."

What more might have been said was at that moment postponed by an unexpected diversion. A girl had entered the

room and stopped halfway to the table; stopped with swiftly indrawn breath. A slab of meat fell from the plate she carried, struck the floor and rolled.

Moelner looked and a saturnine humor brushed across his cheeks.

The girl was staring at Antrim. Her face was pale. Her wide glance revealed stark amazement, as though she asked herself what this man was doing there; dread stared from it, too, and recognition. Then a film of caution whisked between her thoughts and those who watched.

"That's one hell of a place," Lothrop's voice drawled coldly, "to put a fellow's grub."

"I'm sorry," she said breathlessly, backing toward the door; "I'll fix something else."

Antrim's features were immobile; smooth as marble, they reflected no slightest fragment of his mind. His long high body relaxed at perfect ease, made a quite impressive picture of indolence; a picture calculated to lure astray any suspicion the girl's strange actions might have created in the minds of his two companions. But underneath this cool exterior, Antrim was a seething mass of chaotic emotions; question after question rose and fell without an answer. A statement of Lothrop's came back to him now and heightened that wild turbulence rushing through his blood. Yet his poise was perfect, his outer calm unruffled, and the glance with which he scanned the various appointments of the room was utterly serene and tranquil.

Lothrop's stare was sharply probing. About him, though, was an air of indecision, of unsureness, reflecting the unsettled state of his temper. Moelner had settled his shoulders more comfortably against the calico wall and his thoughts were sheathed behind a deep inscrutability. Here, Antrim felt, was the more dangerous antagonist, should these men become aligned against him.

"She's been actin' kind of queer lately, Kid. You'll have to make allowances for her," Lothrop said, completing his smoke, placing it between his lips, and crossing toward a lamp. "I don't reckon she's feelin' right, exactly."

Antrim nodded with an apparent indifference.

"You haven't noticed a leathery old coot, about six-foot-six, hangin' round town, have you?" Lothrop asked. "Fellow by the name of Harker?"

"Can't say that I have. Friend of yours?"

"One of my hands." Lothrop pulled a deep draught of smoke into his lungs, and exhaled it slowly while his brows took on a thoughtful frown. "Funny thing about that. Har-ker's been workin' for me upwards of four years. Good, steady, hard-workin' type. Can't understand it. He left for town about ten-twelve days ago."

"Didn't he turn up there?"

"Not that I know of. None of the saloons has seen him an' he hasn't been to the store."

"Mebbe," Mitch Moelner offered, "Lefty Corner or Stewart or that damn Hootowl Jones could give a pretty good guess where he's gone to."

Lothrop smoked moodily. At last he said, "That's what I'm afraid of. Been bad blood between 'em ever since that trouble over Salt Springs. I don't include Stewart in anything that mighta happened to him; Stewart's a pretty square-shooter. But them other two . . ." He shook his head. "I'm prob'ly wrong," he added hopefully. "Like enough Stumpy will come joggin' in one these evenin's lookin' fat an' sassy. He mighta gone to Silver City. He seemed kind of excited like about the ore they been takin' out of some of those mines up there."

"Don't you never believe it," Mitch Moelner said darkly. "It ain't like Stumpy to stay away like this without saying somethin'. You know it. I'm bettin' one of them damn bush-whackers has put a window through his haid."

Antrim pondered these things briefly, and put them back in that portion of his mind where other things were stored.

"Do the soldiers from Fort Craig ever come through here?" he asked irrelevantly.

Lothrop looked at him with an alive interest, and then some thought laid a shadow across his cheeks. "You're wonderin', I reckon, about some of the robberies that have been goin' on. We been doin' considerable speculation along them lines, too. The soldiers ride through occasionally, yes. But I don't know's they've ever caught any road agents. Whoever's back of these stick-ups an' the gen'ral cussedness that's goin' on is plenty smart. But I'm keepin' my eyes open, you can bet on that. Like the soldiers, though, I can't be more'n one place at a time."

CHAPTER VII

A WOMAN PLEADS

ANTRIM nodded. "I guess that's so," he said, and let his glance go round the room, noting the way the lamps' mellow light picked out shadows and emphasized the bony sharpness of Moelner's features and rounded the stubborn heaviness of Lothrop's face into a smooth mask of earnest determination. It was curious, he thought, the way an angle of illumination could play tricks with a man's character.

In the thoughtful silence a coyote's wail drifted out of the desert's deep stillness, one mournful drop of sound in the vast immensity of space; a long-drawn, brooding pulsation, lonely and changeless as was the desert waste itself. Used as he was to those open lands, Antrim felt a stricter sense of isolation, a greater feeling of personal insignificance in the ultimate scheme of things. Yet his reaction to the sound, as to most other things with which he came in contact, cast no shadow across the serene tranquillity of his outward appearance.

Lothrop said, "The first thing I aim to do is catch that fellow Moak, the man who shot Jack Dunn, the prospector, in broad daylight right in plain view of two ranches, an' with several teams comin' along the road. That hombre's got to go. It's gents like him that's giving this country its bad name. We can't expect to get no decent citizens into this country while killin's an' robberies are so common that folks don't even talk about 'em hardly."

"Is he still in the country?" Antrim asked. "I thought he pulled his picket pin right after the Rincon Bank was robbed."

Mitch Moelner's dark and narrow countenance hardened, and a soft oath left his lips. "So he's the saddle-blanket polecat that pulled that deal, is he? I'd admire t' meet up with him. I had five hundred dollars in that crib."

"So Hausleman knew it wasn't those two bean-eaters he locked up, did he?" Lothrop murmured.

"Can't say, as to that," Antrim answered. "But they weren't the first two innocent gents he put under lock'n key, so I shouldn't wonder but what he had a pretty good idea

that—" He let the rest of the sentence trail away and, with his dark blue glance on Lothrop, said:

"Wasn't Hausleman a friend of yours?"

Lothrop fetched a wry grin. "Appearances are apt to be deceptive, but I'm beginnin' to be afraid he wasn't. I helped put him in office, though, if that's what you mean."

"Hausleman," Moelner said, "was anybody's dawg that would hunt with him."

Lothrop met Antrim's glance. "It's men like that," he declared, "that give politicians a bad name." He stared at the rafters thoughtfully. "I'm hopin' things'll be different, now. It's time this lawless element was weeded out. I'm goin' to do my best, an' I'm countin' on you boys to help me. We'll arrest every road agent we catch. Them we can't prove nothing on, we'll warn out of the country. Those that don't go, we'll plant."

Antrim grinned a little wryly. "When I think of all the hell-raisin' goin' on round here, it gets me riled. This is a fine country—God's country—an' I hate to see it contaminated by the kinda trash that's been driftin' in. These tracks the Santa Fé's been layin' across the country are signs of progress. They're goin' be a big help to the country; going to open it up. But they're attractin' a passle of mighty undesirable citizens, an' some way has got to be found to get shut of 'em."

"Seems t' me you are talkin' mighty sassy for a fella with yore rep," Mitch Moelner remarked. "How do you know but what these damn vigilante committees you are talkin' for so strong won't mebbe string you up alongside the rest of the gore-dabblers yo're runnin' down so hard?"

"Perhaps they will," Antrim answered coldly. "But what I do's between me an' my God, an' what happens to me'll be in the same category. I've never robbed any man, an' I've never driven my lead into any man's back—nor talked across gunsmoke to any man that wasn't needin' that kind of talk."

Mitch Moelner spat. "Humph!" he said with a scepticism that whitened Antrim's cheeks. "Wal, you've sure got plenty of tongue oil. Hootowl Jones oughta hire you t' keep his windmill goin'. If you go round expressin' them kinda sentiments in wholesale lots, like you been doin' here, you are goin' to be about as popular in Socorro as a preacher on payday night."

"You wantin' to make somethin' out of it?" Antrim asked

with dangerous softness, laying down his knife and fork preparatory to pushing back his chair.

"Hell," sneered Moelner scathingly. "I don't pick quarrels with fools."

Lothrop said with surprising swiftness, "That'll be enough of that wranglin'. We've got work enough on our hands—an' trouble enough, too—without stirrin' up hard feelin's at home. Go on an' finish yore supper, Kid. Mitch, you go out an' keep an eye peeled for the boys."

After Moelner, grinning twistedly, had gone, Lothrop said, "The Santa Fé's plannin' to lay track to Deming. Did you know?"

Antrim shook his head, and through a mouthful of food, said, "I hadn't heard. Why Deming?"

"Well," Lothrop pursed his heavy lips thoughtfully, "I'd say to connect with the Southern Pacific from California. That's the story that's been given out up to the capital. May be the right one. But I've got a sneakin' hunch that the main thing them railroad men have got up their sleeve is Silver City, an' the minin' camps. That country up there is a treasure vault. But, to realize on their finds, them miners have got to have some way of gettin' the ore to where they can get hard cash for it. Tradin' in ore an' dust is all right on a small scale, but it ain't no account when it comes to buyin' a ranch, or a store, or a herd of cattle. Them things needs cash. The railroad will provide them miners with a quick way of gettin' cash for their diggin'."

"You figure the trail through the Sierra Caballos will be abandoned?"

"Not abandoned," Lothrop said, "but a lot less used than it's bein' right now. Most fellas will ship by rail, once the Santa Fé runs track down this way." He paused to regard Antrim curiously from beneath his shaggy brows. "Do you know," he said softly, "that trail is goin' to provide some enterprisin' scoundrels with the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Yeah? I expect you mean the mule trains packin' silver ore through those mountains when travel slackens on that trail are goin' to be temptin' bait for gents with easy consciences, eh?"

"Exactly. That's wild, rugged country up there in those mountains, Kid. Kinda lonely-like an' desolate. I've got a hunch there's goin' to be some ruckuses on that trail."

"I expect your hunch is right," Antrim said. A cold humor

glinted from his eyes. "One way you can make that country safe for the miners' pack trains, though."

Lothrop's glance was a question, and in it there was just a tiny trace of concern. "What way is that?"

"By sendin' me up in that country as your deputy. I'll guarantee to get those trains through for you."

Lothrop shook his head; definitely, yet with seeming reluctance. "Can't be done, Kid. 'Twould be an uproarious move, sure enough. But I can't spare a deputy up there in those mountains; you, least of all. Nope, them miners will just naturally have to take their chances. I need you too bad around here. May even have to use you in town, if things get worse. Right now, though, I'm figurin' to have you keep your eye on things here in Gawdforsaken Valley, an' out on the Jornada."

"Put Mitch Moelner to watchin' the valley."

"I ain't quite sure I trust Mitch, Kid. Some ways I do. Then again there's times when I could almost swear he's in with the toughs. Nope, I couldn't put Mitch in charge here; I want Mitch where I can watch him."

They talked on awhile longer about this and that, mostly range conditions, the price of cattle, and suchlike; then Antrim picked up his hat and headed for the door. "I'll take care of my horse, I reckon, an' then turn in."

Lothrop nodded. "Put yore bed roll in the bunkhouse. Don't expect many of the boys'll be in tonight. Anyway, Mitch or somebody will point you out a empty place. See you in the mornin'."

As Antrim moved across the moonlit *patio*, a shadowy figure detached itself from the blue gloom beneath a pepper tree, beckoned, and once again grew indistinct in the darkness. Antrim swung aside, strode into the murk and beheld the vague, blurred figure of Yolanda.

"Well?"

He heard again the sharp, sucking sound of breath drawn through her teeth, as when she'd nearly dropped the plate in front of Lothrop. He could sense the stiffening of her slender form as she drew back. He could not make out the expression of her face, but he could guess it.

"Is that all you have to say to me, Guy Antrim? To me, the woman you swore you loved that night in Santa Fé? After all these awful months, is that all you can find it in your heart to say?"

"What else?" he asked derisively. "That tone you're usin' would have moved me once, I reckon. But your talent's wasted now. A lot can happen in fourteen months."

"You're hard," she said softly; "hard and bitter, Guy. But don't blame me too much. I was young; my head was easily turned. Lothrop came. You were away, and he seemed such a *grande caballero*. He— Do you know what it is to be born of a good family whose fortunes have been so reversed by a change in government as to leave it penniless; as to leave it owning large estates mortgaged to the boundaries? Do you know what it is to watch foreign pigs and even your own people taking advantage of your straitened circumstances to steal your birthright? Do you know what temptation is?"

"We were facing ruin, Mother and I," she said fiercely when Antrim did not answer. "Ruin! Lothrop had painted pictures for us of his verdant acres, hundreds of thousands of them, well-watered, teeming with servants, trod by countless herds of sleek, fat cattle! Can you blame me, young and impetuous as I was, for seeking to escape the ruin I saw before me? With those grand pictures of wealth and position under the new regime as the wife of El Señor Lothrop, I left my home one night—ran off with him. I was a fool; I do not deny it. But I have reaped my reward."

She leaned toward him and her almost-whispered words were seared with bitterness: "Do you know what it is to be caged on a blistering desert for fourteen months with a man like Lothrop?"

"I know what it is to be described as a 'killer'—to sleep by fits and starts when opportunity for sleep permits, with one eye always open, and one's hand curled round a gun. I know what it means to owe one's life to unceasing care and unremitting vigilance; to a quick draw, and a steady glance. I know what it is to live in the constant expectation of some mongrel bushwhackin' gun-packer drivin' his lead through my back for the doubtful glory of bein' able to boast that he's outsmoked the Smoke-wagon Kid. I know those things," Antrim answered evenly.

"But those things you spoke of—no. I have no knowledge of your life, nor of the events that may have figured in it since you left Santa Fé. When I started East for college, I too was young. Oh, yes—and filled with fine illusions and high ideals. You say you were a fool. Well, you were no greater fool than I, Yolanda. I can see that now. But I have

no knowledge of those things you mention. And frankly, ma'am, I have no curiosity concerning them."

He touched his hat, bowed and, wheeling into the moonlight, stiffly strode away.

"Wait!" Her voice was like a broken bell. "Guy! You can't go like—" The arm she'd raised dropped impotently to her side. The taste of ashes was in her mouth. The proud head drooped as a muffled sob shook the slender form within the pepper's blue-black shadow.

CHAPTER VIII

"DON'T SHOOT!"

WHEN Antrim entered the mess shanty for breakfast with the hands, he appeared completely oblivious to their presence. One brief, all-encompassing glance he vouchsafed them, then turned his attention strictly to the task of tucking away the food with which his plate had been laden by Yolanda. He was staring thoughtfully at the ceiling when she served him, and for all the sign he gave she might never have come near. Her lips curled scornfully as she moved away, but he was not watching. His manner was reserved, grimly preoccupied, forbidding.

His meal was nearly finished when a swelling thunder of hoofbeats drew his eyes from his plate. The glance he flung at Lothrop was coldly questioning. Lothrop shoved back his chair, wiped his mouth on a sleeve, and strode outside.

The hoofbeats suddenly terminated in the yard. Antrim could hear the subdued mutter of voices. Then footsteps, accompanied by the clash of spurs. Lothrop stuck his head in the door. His eyes flashed to Antrim's meaningly. And to Mitch Moelner's, too. Then he disappeared, and those within the mess shanty could hear him go striding away across the yard with the newcomer.

Leisurely Antrim rose and as leisurely followed Moelner outside. He saw Stone Lothrop and a short, heavy-set man heading toward the corrals. The stranger was gesticulating excitedly. Antrim's glance swept the yard, came to rest on the stranger's horse. The animal stood still, head down and body quivering. Sweat plastered its flanks in gobs. Antrim's glance reached out across the yellow earth, and his eyes were

squinted, thoughtful. When he swung them back to the strange rider, who was swinging open the gate of the main corral, they were kindled with live interest.

"Looks like that hombre's been ridin' hell-fer-leather," Moelner said, his glance on the stranger curiously. "That's a Broken Stirrup bronc he was forkin'. Ol' man Catling's brand—his spread's the other side of Eagle."

Antrim strode toward the corral. Moelner grimaced at his broad back and followed, one thumb hooked in his gun-belt.

The stranger had shaken out his lasso and was approaching the milling *remuda* when Antrim came up. Antrim remained silent, leaning indolently against the bone-white poles while the stranger cast his rope, missed, and swore. Antrim watched while he hauled it in and built another loop. The fellow's second cast was luckier. He snared a short-coupled blue roan weighing near a thousand pounds; with the feel of the lasso about its arched neck, the animal stopped with braced legs, big body quivering. The man walked down the rope and, slipping a bridle over the horse's head, led him toward the gate.

"What's up?" Antrim said.

Lothrop turned and regarded him strangely. "This fella," he said, "tells me Moak showed up at Catling's ranch last night while the boys was away an' attacked Catling's fourteen-year-old girl. Her yells brought the ol' man on the scene. Moak shot him through the stomach."

"That's right," the man said dustily as he led his captured mount through the gate and picked up his saddle. "The rat drove four slugs through his guts before the ol' man could aim his hawg-laig!"

"Moak? The man that riddled Jack Dunn?"

"Yeah, *Moak*—the yellor-bellied sidewinder!"

Antrim studied the man's white face and bloodshot eyes. "What happened then? When'd you find out about it?"

"Happened close on to ten o'clock, I guess. Kid told us about it when we rode in this mawnin', early. We'd been to town. Ol' man had given us our forty per the afternoon before. She was pretty much upset, cryin' an' laffin' all to oncet. Moak had pulled out a coupla hours 'fore we got there. I left the boys huntin' his trail an' come on here. Figgered the sheriff had orta know."

Lothrop and Mitch Moelner exchanged significant glances. Antrim saw, but gave no sign. He picked up the cowboy's rope and began coiling it. His jaws were clenched and his

mouth was a grim-lipped line. Cold fury brightened his hard eyes. Without words he strode into the corral. He built a loop without lost motion. The cavvy swirled with a rush of dust, pressing the far side of the pen. Inexorably Antrim closed the interval. His loop was twirling now above his head, growing larger with each undulation of his wrist. It left his hand, darting forward with an uncanny precision that dropped it over the arched head of a bay whose long slim legs promised speed. The abruptness of its stopping sent up little bursts of dust.

Antrim gathered in his slack and led the horse from the corral. Still leading it, he walked past Lothrop and Moelner to the kak-pole, slipped a bridle over the bay's head and removed the rope. His centre-fire saddle slapped loudly on the bay's smooth back.

"Texas man, eh?" Broken Stirrup spat.

So did Moelner, and said, "In some ways, mebbe. He *looks* the part."

Antrim shoved one booted foot against the bay's distended ribs with a force that knocked the wind from its barrel. A swift tug jerked the latigo tight. He stepped into the saddle and the bay went into the air. It struck earth on bunched feet with bone-snapping violence.

Antrim flung the plunging horse around, soothed it down with the same display of quiet confidence with which he performed the slightest chore, and sent it cantering toward the bunk-house. Dismounting, he trailed the reins and stepped inside to get his rifle, a buffalo gun with a revolving cylinder.

When he emerged, Lothrop and the salty Moelner had roped horses and were leading them toward the kak-pole. He thrust the rifle into his saddle scabbard, an affair that was slung butt forward in an almost horizontal position along the bay's near side and passed between two leaves of the stirrup leather. Gathering the reins in his left hand, he climbed aboard.

While Lothrop and Moelner were gearing their mounts, Antrim lounged in his saddle with his leg crooked about the horn, and rolled a cigarette. As he lit up and inhaled great draughts of the fragrant smoke, he watched the Broken Stirrup puncher lead his own winded broomtail to a small corral, turn it in, and raise the bars. Antrim continued to watch the man as he strode back to his borrowed roan and swung into the saddle. A black scowl on his face told plainer than any words his anxiety to be gone.

Antrim urged his bay to where the man sat waiting. He observed the impatience that marked the fellow's every movement. He said, "How far is it to your place, pardner?"

"Twenty-five mile."

Antrim considered. "You made good time."

"I figgered to," the man said shortly. "You Lothrop's range boss?"

"Not hardly. There seems to be a doubt about my official standing. Lothrop said he was hiring me as a deputy sheriff. But yesterday I overheard one of his riders tellin' another that I was his heavy artillery."

The heavy-set rider joined in Antrim's laughter. "You kinda look the part, as that hombre," he jerked a thumb at Moelner, "jest remarked. I'm called Pronto Joe—I'm top screw over to the Broken Stirrup. Don't believe I caught your name."

"Don't believe you did. It's Antrim."

Pronto Joe regarded him curiously, a light of speculation in his faded eyes. "Seems like I heard Lothrop referrin' to yuh as the 'Kid.' Yuh don't happen t' be the Smoke-wagon Kid, I don't suppose." He was right careful to handle his tone so that it did not form a question.

Antrim smiled mirthlessly. "Some gents prefer to call me that."

It was odd to witness the homage the Broken Stirrup foreman's eyes paid the owner of that cognomen. To him Antrim seemed suddenly to become a magnetic figure, a man to look up to—a person of consequence, one might almost have said, whose slightest wish was a thing to cater to.

But Antrim, seeing, smiled derisively. "Reputations," he told the puncher, "don't mean much. They flare up overnight, an' vanish just as swift. Only a fool would call a rep like mine an asset. Be thankful you haven't got one. It's bait for ambush lead."

Pronto Joe appeared unconvinced. Then, seeming to recall his errand, he scowled across a shoulder toward where Moelner and the sheriff sat their horses conversing in low tones. "Them gents sure take their time."

"The law can't be hurried. You'll have to keep your shirt on."

Lothrop must have noted the Broken Stirrup foreman's look, for he abruptly urged his big horse forward, Moelner following suit. "Do you reckon," he asked, coming up, "yore men have cut Moak's sign?"

"If they haven't, they're still ridin' herd on it," Pronto Joe said grimly. "When you figgerin' to git under way?"

Lothrop gave him a sour look. "You ain't no more anxious to catch up with that killer than I am. Let's go."

The soft muffled pound of horses' hooves was a steady, even rhythm. Only the tinkle of clinking spur chains and the occasional creak of saddle leather gave it company. There was no talking. The time for talk had passed. These men's faces were grim, forbidding as Antrim's own.

Antrim's bay horse set the pace at a swift running walk that broke occasionally into a trot, a pace that guaranteed to put many miles behind a man between now and dark, and yet leave him with a mount that could do as much again tomorrow. The killer, if not yet captured by the Broken Stirrup punchers, or aware of their pursuit, would be overtaken in due time. There was no sense in ruining horseflesh. Determination and persistence, not speed, would run their man to earth. At least, such was Antrim's thought.

A half-hour passed, an hour, and only the soft muffled cadence of the horses' hooves, and the dust that rose behind them, gave evidence of their presence. The sun beat down with molten rays. The bits of metal in the men's equipment grew hot to the touch. The trapped heat of the valley enveloped them.

Three hours slipped behind them, and the rhythmic cadence of steadily trotting hooves still beat against the sand, drummed gently on the stillness. They rode abreast to avoid the dust that billowed up behind. Off in the distance to the left the high shoulders of the San Andres Mountains loomed pale blue against the brassy sky. To the right rose Elephant Butte. In the southwest the Sierra Caballos shimmered in the heat haze. The desert floor grew rolling.

The low adobe structures of the Long H showed off to the right against the base of the red cliffs hemming the southern end of Gawdforsaken Valley. The riders dipped down into a dry wash and the buildings were lost to view.

In another half-hour they were out of the valley and on to the dun expanse of the stifling *Joranda del Muerte*. The Sierra Caballos drew closer; mysterious and sombre they loomed above the desert, a maze of tangled light and shadow, grim and awe-inspiring.

The powdery dust rose about the riders now in choking billows. Though they pulled their neckerchiefs over their

faces, burning particles of alkaline grit got into their nostrils and throats. Their eyes became inflamed and watery, and their heads ached with the awful heat.

Gradually a breeze sprang up, hot as the draft from some mighty furnace. Dust devils swirled across their path, enveloping them, drenching them with the fiery particles. Yet they kept doggedly on, nervily holding their sweating horses to a trot; the easy jog-trot of the cowboy.

About four in the afternoon they saw the bleached buildings of Engle pushing up out of the tawny earth. Lothrop turned to the man from Broken Stirrup.

"Reckon we better push straight on to the ranch?"

"Might be a good idee," said Pronto Joe, "if we stop off at town a spell. No tellin'. Moak mighta lost the boys. If he never knowed they was after him, he mighta gone to town."

Lothrop nodded. "Might have, anyway. We better see."

They swung their horses a little to the left. Slowly, as they rode, the distant false-fronted structures climbed above the desert floor, assumed their actual size. It was nearing five when the posse clopped through the dust of Engle's single street and pulled to a halt before a paintless building which bore in crude lettering across its front the words:

CANTINA CABALLEROS

"We'll take a look in here," Lothrop said. "Joe, you an' Mitch go in. Me an' the Kid will wait here with the hawsses."

Moelner and the Broken Stirrup foreman swung to the ground, looked at their guns, then swiftly parted the cantina's swinging doors and entered.

Lothrop and Antrim sat their saddles in the sun. It was as hot there as in the desert; there was no difference. Vagrant breezes riffled the hock-deep dust of the street. A dust devil swirled off the Jornada, spun between two buildings, crossed the street and broke upon a store front, covering everything with alkaline grit.

"Reckon we'll catch up with Moak?"

"Sure we'll catch him," Lothrop said with emphasis. "I was appointed sheriff to cut down crime an' criminals. I sure aim to oblige." He quirked his heavy lips. "When——" He broke off with a ripped-out oath as a thunder of hooves burst out from behind the saloon. His spurs cut deep as they raked his pony's flanks. But Antrim's horse was already lunging forward.

Down the street they pounded. They could not see the other horseman, but they could see his dust between the buildings. Antrim flung a look behind. Moelner and Pronto Joe were sprinting for their mounts.

Antrim saw, as they left the town and went speeding into the desert once more, the fugitive horseman half a mile away. He was bent far forward in his saddle; his raking spurs and flailing arm were working in unison to wring the last ounce of speed from a horse that looked built for endurance.

Now they were pelting directly in his wake, and all they could see of him was an occasional glimpse of his back and his horse's rump through the dust he was ripping up.

Antrim's cold eyes keened beneath his puckered brows. "You reckon that's him?"

The wind of their pace whipped words from Lothrop's answer. But Antrim gathered that yonder rider was their man.

He drew the rifle from its boot. Unless something were done swiftly, this race was going to prove a long one. Moak was steadily increasing the interval between himself and his pursuers.

Antrim rode with his rifle lying across his legs. He leaned his upper body forward, ran one hand along the bay's arched neck caressingly, coaxed more speed with gentle knees. Slowly they left Lothrop, cut down Moak's lead. But Antrim knew his pony could not keep up that pace for long. Ahead on the desert showed the squat outline of a cabin. Some two miles away it was, yet he knew that if Moak got there he would put up a fight, would sell his life as dearly as he could.

The rush and slap of the wind beat against his face as Antrim hoisted his boots from the stirrups, riding sharp-shooter fashion as he'd seen old Indian fighters do. The steady flogging gait of Moak's pony beat against his ears as he raised the rifle to his shoulder. Long experience had taught him the correct elevation for work of this sort, yet he knew that shooting from a pony's back was chancy work at best. Reckoning the windage as best he could, he squeezed the trigger gently. Sand spurted two feet ahead of Moak's sombrero.

Lips tight, eyes squinted against the glare, Antrim fired again. The fugitive's pony faltered, recovered, and went on. Yet its pace was uneven now, and slowed.

Antrim relaxed. A half-mile sped by without event, while steadily he overhauled the fleeing Moak. The fugitive's horse was reeling now, and Moak was belaboring it cruelly, raking

it viciously in an effort to get from it a last desperate ounce of strength that might possibly take it to the cabin before . . .

Again Antrim took his feet from the stirrups. Again he brought the rifle to his shoulder. Three slugs jerked at Moak's sombrero, and the man shook his head like an angry wasp. Once more Antrim squeezed the trigger. The fugitive's pony dropped.

Moak landed on his feet and immediately broke into a lurching run toward the cabin, now a scant four hundred yards away.

Ramming the rifle into his scabbard, Antrim unloosed his rope from the saddle and shook out a loop. Twirling it above his head with gathering speed, he urged his pony in the other's wake. Closer and closer he drew to the running man. Swifter and yet more swift became the wiggling loop's gyrations.

Suddenly the rope left Antrim's hand. Straight and true the singing noose sped out to trap the fugitive. Moak's right foot lunged fairly in it. The next instant he was flat on his face as Antrim's bay slewed to a stiff-legged stop.

In one smooth movement Antrim was out of the saddle and sprinting forward to where Moak struggled furiously to free himself. Moak saw him coming, and clawed for a gun. But even as the pistol's muzzle levelled, Antrim's boot sent the weapon spinning from his hand. Vile curses spewed from the killer's mouth.

Coldly Antrim said, "Get up on your hind legs."

The fugitive glared. "Yuh go to hell!"

Antrim grabbed him by the collar and yanked him upright. "When I say stand, you better stand." The bunched knuckles of a hard right fist stopped squarely against Moak's yellow teeth. The sound was like a bull whip cracking. Moak sagged, but Antrim's firm left hand kept him on his feet, suspended. A muffled beat of hooves came up from behind. Antrim relaxed his grip on the gunman's collar and stepped back.

It was Lothrop. Something in the sheriff's eyes must have warned Moak. His face went pale as ashes as he thrust trembling arms above his head.

"Gawdlemighty, Stone! Don't shoot!" he cried. "I ain't got no gun! I——"

What more he might have said was drowned in the flat sharp crack of Lothrop's pistol. Moak grabbed convulsively at his chest. His knees buckled and he toppled forward in the sand.

With tight lips Antrim swung into the saddle. Moelner and Pronto Joe topped a distant rise. Antrim wheeled his horse. "Hey!" Lothrop growled. "Help me with this carrion."

"I always make it a point to bury my own dead. Seems to me like others could do the same," Antrim said, and kneed his horse into motion. "I'll be seein' you in town."

CHAPTER IX

RINCON AFTER MIDNIGHT

ANTRIM sat in the *Cantina Caballeros* and stared morosely into his glass. Reflecting upon the ruthlessness and calculated cruelty of which humanity is capable, he came to the considered conclusion that the world was a scurvy place. His faith in man had almost reached the vanishing point. It was at this moment that a mutter of hooves outside announced the coming of further patronage. The bartender mopped a soggy rag across his counter and surreptitiously wiped a used glass dry upon his apron.

A Mexican in a steeple hat slid inside, crossing himself nervously. "*Madre de Dios!*" he exclaimed. "A dead man ees coming!"

"Huh?" The bartender stared, while a left hand automatically went beneath the bar in search of the sawed-off. "Where?"

"Down the road. Three *caballeros*. One has a dead man tied across hees saddle!"

When spurred boots clumped across the veranda, Antrim looked up. The swinging doors parted and Lothrop entered, followed by Pronto Joe and Moelner. The latter sneered and nudged the sheriff. Lothrop turned, and his eyes met Antrim's. He crossed to Antrim's table. He pulled a chair out, and it creaked beneath his weight. He rested his elbows on the table's edge and supported his chin with cupped hands.

"In this country, Kid, when a scorpion crosses a man's trail, the man's a fool if he doesn't squash him."

Antrim regarded his still full glass in silence. When he looked up, his eyes held a steely glint like sun on sharpened spurs. "I been thinkin', Lothrop. I——"

"Now don't tell me you've decided to turn in yore star," the sheriff cut in swiftly. "This is a hard country, an' it'll take

hard measures to enforce the laws an' make this territory a place for a man to raise his kids. Mebbe I was a little hasty in downin' that coyote. But what of it? He deserved what he got ten times over. You know that! If we'd brought him in, he'd never got to trial—either some damn fool woulda turned him loose, or a mob woulda yanked him out an' hung 'im!"

"That may be so," Antrim admitted. "But I been thinkin', Lothrop, an' I wasn't thinkin' of turnin' in my star. I was thinkin' that a liar was about as low-down an article as a thief—or a killer. And I hate thieves an' killers, Lothrop, the way some folks hate work."

Lothrop looked at him intently; the smoke-grey surfaces of his eyes were hard, opaque. His manner became reserved, thoughtful, and when he spoke his voice was serious:

"I hate 'em too, Kid. A killer is like a mad dawg. No community can afford one. When more than one gets to prowlin' round it's time something was done about the situation. Now this Curly Ives hombre—I've been doin' considerable thinkin' about him. He's the fella that beat Beck Colter to death in front of the Rincon Bank after holdin' him up an' findin' Beck didn't have more'n five cartwheels on him. Smashed his head in with his pistol barrel an' rode on outa town without no one liftin' a finger. A disgrace to the Territory! The black shame of Rincon!"

He flashed a covert glance at Antrim, but Antrim's high, flat cheeks were giving no portion of his thoughts away, and his eyes were vacuous, baffling.

Lothrop said, "It wouldn't surprise me to learn that Ives is the leader of this gang that's terrorizin' the country, that's robbin' miners an' prospectors, and raidin' isolated ranchers. It's my belief that Moak was a member of that gang."

Antrim said, "Moak might have been."

Lothrop nodded. "Well, I've a hunch that Ives is the leader. Killin' Beck Colter ain't the only piece of devilment he's done. He's boasted more than once, an' right here in this saloon, of things he's done that would hang him if folks weren't so damned busy tendin' to their own affairs an' keepin' a eye skinned for Injuns."

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"I propose to fetch him in."

"The way you brought in Moak?"

Lothrop's high blood laid a pronounced flush across his cheeks. He quit smiling suddenly, and a change of thought

flung a long shadow across the brightness of his eyes. "If necessary," he said dustily, "yes."

"In other words," Antrim suggested, "you aim to fight fire with fire."

"I aim to rid this Territory of badmen!"

"The Territory, eh? That's takin' in quite a jag of land."

Lothrop lowered his voice. "The day may come when I'll be governor, Kid," he confided meaningly.

Antrim's eyes gleamed with a cold amusement. "You've a deal more nerve than I figured you for. An' consid'able more ambition."

"Why not? This country's new, it's big. There's a scad of opportunity goin' to waste round here; it's jest cryin' for a man that's big enough to grab it. That man's me—I'm no saddle-blanket gambler. You string with me, Kid, an' you'll be sitting cozy as a toad under a cabbage leaf in Texas." His glance at Antrim was searching, and his tone grew very earnest. "You lay yore bets with mine an', by cripes, we'll show some folks a thing or two."

"I'm packin' your star."

"Yeah." Lothrop said it oddly. "Let's get a drink."

Lothrop set down his glass and turned to the Broken Stirrup foreman.

"You seen anything of Stumpy Harker down yore way lately?"

"Nope. You lost him?"

"I ain't sure. But there's somethin' right funny about his disappearance. I don't get it. Nobody's seen him. It's damn peculiar. He never stayed away like this before. He did go into town on a drunk occasionally, like most hands. But he never stayed this long. An' what's more, he ain't been seen around town."

"Which town?"

"Rincon. But he ain't been to the county seat neither. I'd give somethin' to know right where he is." He turned to the barkeep. "You ain't seen any of my riders down this way, have you?"

"Not me," the man denied. "Only man I know on yore outfit's Purdin. An' *he* ain't been here in Gawd knows when."

"Mebbe he quit," Pronto Joe suggested. "Fellas will do that sometimes."

"Not when they got a month's pay comin'," Lothrop snorted.

"Well, no; that don't seem likely," Pronto Joe conceded. "That makes it look kinda bad, don't it? Y'u s'pose he's layin' out on the range some place, bad hurt?"

"What would he——" Lothrop began, then said, instead of completing the thought, "The blasted drought ain't left me hardly enough critters to bother ridin' herd on. I had t' let three of my boys go las' month. Anyway, I thought of that, too. Had the fellas take a look, but they couldn't cut his sign."

"Yeah, that drought ain't doin' the Broken Stirrup no favor, neither," Pronto Joe grunted heavily. "Now Catling's been killed, I dunno what'll happen to the spread. Don't seem like Gert will be wantin' to stay on after all this hellin'. Mebbe she'll sell out. Stewart made the ol' man a offer last week. Gert's got some kinfolks back East, case she decides t' take him up."

Lothrop turned to Antrim. "Kid, I want you to go to Socorro. Blanding, the deputy there, may need some help. Town's gettin' kinda wild. I'll be along in three-four days——"

He broke off suddenly as there came a rushing clatter of hooves. The sound was muffled at first, but swiftly swelled to terminate thunderously before the cantina veranda. The group inside stood silent, facing the batwing doors, as they heard the rider hit dirt and cross the boards with dragging spurs. The doors bulged and Suggs came clanking in, his hair disordered beneath his shoved-back hat, excitement sparkling in the eyes he turned on Lothrop.

"Yuh better git to Rincon quick! Hell's gonna pop!"

"What's up?"

"Some damn liars claim they caught Ruidosa stickin' up a coupla desert rats."

"Are they crazy?"

"Well," Suggs growled, "accordin' to that fella, Hildermin, who brung the news, they are some riled. He seemed t' think Ruidosa's goose would sure be cooked if yuh didn't show up right sudden."

"When did Hildermin get in?"

"'Bout two hours after you boys left."

There was a dull gleam of anger in the glance Lothrop turned on Moelner. Dull color too, burned visibly in his heavy cheeks. "We got to have fresh hawsses. Go get us some, an' don't waste no time arguin'."

Moelner went out at a clanking run.

"Reckon I better go with you," Pronto Joe offered seriously.

"Raise yore right hand," said Lothrop gruffly, and swore

him in. "You," he said to Suggs, "go on back to the ranch. I can't afford to leave it short-handed with all this talk that's goin' round 'bout Geronimo makin' medicine. Keep the boys in close."

Antrim, who was watching Lothrop at the moment, thought he saw the burly rancher lower a significant eyelash. He could not be sure, but he stored the thought away.

Ten minutes later they rode out of Engle, heading south. Lothrop had said no more about sending Antrim to the county seat. The Kid rode with them.

They swept into Rincon shortly after midnight. From open doors and windows great bars of golden radiance pooled out across the hock deep dust of Rincon's unpaved street, radiance that made the great lopsided bucket of a moon seem pale by contrast. Oil and pine-knot flares affixed to the high false fronts of the town's flimsy structures illuminated fitfully the misspelled legends scrawled unevenly across them, and served to some extent to light the rough plank sidewalks under them. Rincon was an all-night town, boasting at that time half a dozen saloons and gambling halls, one hotel, two or three blacksmith shops, two stores, and four honkytonks.

Lothrop led the way to the Coffin Bar, the town's largest saloon, and the four dismounted before the hitch pole fronting it, racking their mounts among the horses of the resort's patrons. Judging by the noise coming from the place, there were still a good many customers inside.

"This is Hodine's dive," Lothrop muttered softly. "Watch yoreselves. He hates officers like poison. Kid, you an' Mitch come in with me. Joe, you stay here with the horses. If anyone gets gay, shoot first an' *habla* about it later."

He shoved through the half-leaf doors, Moelner and Antrim following. They got their back to a wall while they accustomed their eyes to the glare of the many coal-oil lamps bracketed about the barn-like room. The place was thick with tobacco smoke and crowded with men. Cowboys and miners rubbed elbows at the three-deep bar.

Moelner said, "What's the lay?"

The smoke-grey eyes beneath Lothrop's sleepy lids scanned the crowd intently. "There's a lot of excitement in the air. These fellas know it an' are reactin' to it. They know it; but they're not in on it. They're restless, wantin' to be doin'. I reckon Ruidosa has still got his lamp lit. You fellas ease out an' circulate. See if you can find where they're holdin' him an' who is in charge. I'll wait here."

Outside the resort, Antrim let Moelner take the lead. They headed up the line, walking through the dusty road because the sidewalks were already filled to overflowing, and progress through such a mob would have been well-nigh impossible, without arguments—things to be carefully avoided at the present pitch of the crowd's temper. There had been plenty of noise inside the Coffin Bar; a sort of forced gaiety, feverish, taut-strung. But out here on the street it was different. Men moved sluggishly along the packed walks, moved in groups of twos and threes, with their heads close together. The subdued mutter of their voices was like an ominous drone, ever present; heard even through the blatant sounds flowing out from the saloons and honkytonks.

Antrim said in Moelner's ear, "It's like I told Lothrop back at the ranch. Times are due for a change. Folks have about reached the point where their resentment toward conditions is goin' to take an active expression. The toughs had better pull in their horns, or they'll get 'em knocked off."

"You ain't tellin' me a thing. I've seen this comin'." Mitch Moelner turned his head. A peculiar grin twitched his saturnine lips. "You an' the rest of the gunslicks better be huntin' new pastures. Yore days is numbered."

"Where do you figure that leaves you?"

Moelner chuckled. "Me, I'm adaptable to change," he said, and flicked a sweeping glance across the crowd. "Besides, I'm on the side of law an' order. I'm packin' a star."

Antrim, as he strode along at the other's side, his eyes restlessly probing the faces going past, considered this enigmatic remark, but could make nothing of it. He thrust it back with those other things he meant to ponder over when leisure afforded opportunity. He was packing a star himself.

There was no regular jail in this town, he recalled. Whoever had Ruidosa—and Antrim could not quite decide who Ruidosa was—in charge must be holding him either in some private dwelling, or in some store taken over for the purpose.

Moelner said, "Let's lounge over here against this buildin'. Might be listenin' would be a faster way of gettin' places than walkin'."

Antrim looked around. They were opposite the mouth of a dark and narrow alley running between a general store and a blacksmith shop. The place Moelner had his eyes on was the latter. A pair of blazing pine knots, affixed to the posts supporting the wooden awning on the store, played a murky light across the crowd. "Suits me," he said, and followed Moelner's

panther-lean figure as it wove a sinuous path through the muttering groups.

Reaching the blacksmith shop, they got their backs toward the wall and loitered there, letting their gaze wander across the surging throngs. Purple gusts of smoke from the flares spread darkly over the walkers, drove alternate lights and shadows across scowling, grinning, sullen, taciturn, wooden faces, gave hints of their different nationalities, revealed and hid the covert flashes of their eyes, and mingled among them farther down the walk. Various breeds and races were among this restless crowd, but tonight their blood was one—deep black.

Antrim stole a look at the man beside him and found that the gunman had pulled his hat brim low across his eyes, shrouding his face in gloom, and that one ungloved hand lay against the holster on his thigh. That ungloved hand told Antrim something, for in that country only riders who were lightning on the draw, and hence had something of a reputation—with its attendant disadvantages—omitted to glove their hands. The low-pulled hat brim told Antrim something, too. This was *buscadero* country.

"There's plenty of tornado juice loose in this crowd," Moelner grunted. "Workin' itself into a ringy mood. Pretty soon they'll be ready to dig up the tomahawk. See anyone yuh reco'nize!"

Antrim shook his head.

"That gent that just went past with the fat man—he took one squint at you an' shut his mug hard enough t' bust his nutcrackers. Yo're gettin' t' be a celebrity. Better pull yore hat down 'fore some of yore dead men's kinfolks comes along an' spots you."

"I can——"

Moelner snapped, "You can shout, too! Yuh fool! You wanta jam the Chief's play?"

Antrim lowered the hat brim. There was logic in the gunman's words.

Three men went past abreast; big fellows, dark of garb, determined of mien, men who carried sawed-offs and appeared oblivious of their surroundings. Groups parted magically before their progress. Not once was their measured stride interrupted; not once were they forced to leave the crowded walk.

Moelner looked after them suspiciously. He touched An-

trim's arm. "C'mon, Kid. Neck meat or nothin'." And he swung into step behind them. Antrim followed.

The men they tracked left the walk abruptly. Wheeling into single file, they passed through the batwing entrance of "THE GOLDEN GUN—Pecos Rourk, *Prop.*"

Up the same steps moved Moelner with Antrim at his back. He reached the doors, and there a hand stretched out to stop him, a hand whose wrist projected from the black sleeve of a gambler's neat frock coat—a hand that held a gun.

"Yore business, friend."

"Is my own." Moelner's glance flashed sharply against that chiselled countenance. "Can't a man get a drink when he wants one?"

"Not here."

"What's the——"

"Dust, hombre—make tracks!"

Antrim felt Mitch Moelner's long frame stiffen; could see the muscles swelling in Moelner's neck, and the surge of red that dyed it. He put a hand on the gunman's shoulder. "T'ell with it, Mitch. Their whisky's diluted anyway. Let's go up to the Coffin Bar."

The gunman's form relaxed, but he snarled as he turned away, "'F I ever take another snort of Rourk's bug-juice, I hope I bust a gut!"

The gambler's laugh floated after them.

Antrim said, "Never throw away the key to a door, *compadre*, till you know what's on the other side."

Moelner gave him a hard stare, said "Humph!" and swung into step beside him.

They reached the Coffin Bar. Pronto Joe still sat his saddle before the hitch pole. His eyes played over the crowded street significantly. "Sheriff's goin' to grab this brandin' iron by the hot end ef he ain't careful," he commented shrewdly.

Antrim untied his horse and stepped aboard while Moelner went inside for Lothrop.

The doors of the resort bulged outward, spilling light across the steps. Two men emerged. Lothrop's rock-like figure and rolling stride were easily recognized, though his features were deeply shadowed by the light behind. He came up to the rack, jerked loose his reins and swung stiffly to the saddle. Moelner followed.

Without words Lothrop swung his big horse into the busy street. Antrim rode on his right, Moelner on his left. The range boss of the Broken Stirrup brought up the rear. They

walked their horses through the dust. Men got out of their way. Some cursed them, but they moved.

CHAPTER X

FOUR AGAINST THE MOB

DOWN the center of the street they rode and stopped before the Golden Gun. They swung out of their saddles in unison, racked their mounts and ducked under the hitch-rail. Their long spurs chimed as they crossed the rough plank walk. The resort's steps groaned beneath their upward tread. Metal on Lothrop's vest threw fugitive, slicing sparks. The sentinel's eye was caught and he scowled blackly, but made no move to stop them. Lothrop shoved wide the swinging doors and they followed him in.

The great barroom of the Golden Gun was crowded. Men stood about the bar six deep; they packed the space between the gaming tables, and were spewed out in clustered knots upon the gleaming dance floor. Lothrop seemingly cared nothing for this fact and went striding forward, cutting a trail with his burly shoulders, shoving men off his elbows, deliberately bowling them from his path, and saying never a word, never looking to right or left, his smoldering eyes fixed grimly upon that black-clad man who stood atop the bar. Pronto Joe had left them at the door, and now stood with his grey-shirted back against it, his rifle cuddled in the hollow of his arm, his cold glance alertly roving, watchful, saturnine—almost inviting, one might have said. Antrim and Moelner strode in Lothrop's wake, their right hands swinging, brushing laden holsters at each firm step.

Men turned at the commotion and the murmurous drone of many conversations dropped sullenly. A tautened stillness rose through which the three men strode unhurried, their measured tread resounding strangely in that crowded place. Men more distant from their trail swung startled faces in the smoky shadows. Their eyes lit with the expectancy of a hasty reckoning.

Yet the last man lurched aside from Lothrop's shoulder without challenge. He stopped before the bar, got his feet wide apart and firmly planted. His arms hung akimbo, their doubled hands resting on his hips, the right a scant two inches

from the smooth dark butt of the holstered pistol he had not deigned so far to draw. The sleepy lids lifted in his heavy face; his smoldering eyes peered upward and met the frowning stare of the man atop the bar.

"You, up there! What's the big idea?"

The fellow straightened; his frown grew blacker. "This is a meetin' of the Citizens' Protective Committee an'—" He suddenly stopped, his widened eyes revealing his discovery of Lothrop's official identity. "How'd yuh get in?"

"I walked in," Lothrop drawled. "I've come for the prisoner. Fetch him."

A gasp went up from the gathered crowd. The man on the bar growled, "I—I—you—— This prisoner, sir, is goin' to be hanged. We're tryin' him now."

"Then where's he at?"

"We've got him under guard. He's in the back room."

"Mean to say he isn't present at his own trial?"

"What would be the use?" the man snarled back defiantly. "He's guilty, an' by Gawd he's goin' to hang!"

"You've got the gall to tell me that?" Lothrop's voice came softly through his teeth. "To my face? Mister, you fetch the prisoner here right now."

Antrim's glance revealed a grudging admiration for Lothrop then. It took real nerve to stand there in that crowded room of grim-faced men and demand the surrender of their prisoner. The chairman's face was white with rage.

"Sheriff or no sheriff, we caught the fellow, an' we're a-goin' to keep him till we're done with him. If you'd been 'tendin' to yore duty——"

Lothrop's big right fist shot out, got him by the ankle, and jerked. The chairman left the bar with a squeal like a stuck pig, crashed to the floor and lay there groaning. Lothrop stooped, grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him upright, "If I'd *what!*"

"You dirty, schemin', yeller-bellied——!" Still snarling epithets, the chairman's hand slid inside his coat. But it didn't come out; not then! Lothrop smashed a hard right fist against his jaw, and the man reeled backward, sagging.

Oaths, shouts, pandemonium broke loose in that packed saloon—was suddenly stilled by the flat sharp crack of a rifle. A man staggered sideways, dropped his pistol and sat down, clutching at his ribs. The rifle cracked again; another man dropped. Antrim flung a hasty glance across his shoulder even as his hands dragged his pistols clear of leather.

Through the scattering crowd, which was swiftly awakening to its danger, he saw the Broken Stirrup foreman crouched beside the doors, the weaving muzzle of his long gun a grim challenge to the mob.

Lothrop's voice rang out curtly above the running clump of boots. "Git up them hands an' back against the walls! The next damn man to put his mitt to gunbutt is goin' to hell on a shutter!"

That stopped them squarely in their tracks—all but three. Those were diving for the window. The rifle cracked again. One of the three crumpled across the sill. Moelner's gun added its spiteful voice to the roaring echoes; the second man fell outside the window, and the third spun shrieking, took three steps and crumpled sideways across a table, taking it with him to the floor.

The acrid tang of burned powder drifted among the stiffly rigid men who were holding their hands at arm's length above their heads, their faces blanched, their eyes appalled at the havoc ten seconds had witnessed in the room.

"Vigilantes, eh?" sneered Lothrop. "You back up ag'in' them walls an' keep them hands right where they are or you'll get a bigger dose of the same medicine. Vigilantes—hell! Not in my county, you ain't! Two of you go fetch Ruidosa in here. I'm the gent that'll decide what's to be done with prisoners."

During that interval while the two were gone, their companions regained some measure of their old belligerence. They stood more loosely along the walls. Their faces were grown more wooden, more completely expressionless, and a darker, restless light had come into their watchful eyes. Their hands, by degrees, had slipped down lower until now several pairs were hardly even with their owners' shoulders.

Antrim saw these things where he stood with his lean hands folded across his chest, and his back against the bar. He saw them, read the signs correctly, yet his face hid his knowledge well; his long wide lips retained their whimsicality, and his blue gaze appeared to be completely absorbed with the strata of wavering smoke drifting lazily just below the raftered ceiling.

Outside, the night seemed to have taken on a deeper silence, a sort of brooding hush. He could hear men moving on the walk that lay between this room and the street; their voices seemed insufferably loud by contrast with the thin tight stillness, and yet he knew their tones were cautious,

filled with a kind of repressed excitement that spelled devilment. In their tread he read a stealthiness he did not like.

His broad sloping shoulders swayed a little. A chill rubbed along his back, and he looked toward Lothrop to see how the sheriff was taking it. Lothrop's mouth still showed its lazy smile, but the smoke was thickening in his eyes. Moelner's body looked taut. Pronto Joe was getting pale. . . .

Antrim sent his stare back toward the men. A ripple ran along that line from wall to wall; only their bulk in numbers, Antrim felt, was holding things even. One swift word or a sudden motion. . . . A leader was all they lacked.

The thought drew Antrim's glance to where their old one still measured his length before the bar. In moments now he'd be coming to. But there was no hope for them in him.

This thing could not last; something was bound to break. He could feel the tension like a knife. Those men still had their guns. Another five seconds of sustained inaction would surely snap the spell.

Antrim started forward. One man against the wall had dropped his hands below his shoulders; another five seconds of this would convince him of his chance. His hands would be a little lower. He would make the fateful plunge. Antrim moved straight toward him, slowly, inexorably. The man's face whitened. A tremble started up his arms.

Antrim said, "You! Step three paces forward."

The man hesitated. His chance was lost. Mechanically he moved from line.

"Go find what's keeping your friends. If you ain't back inside a minute, I'll come after you."

Lothrop said, "If that prisoner ain't here inside of a minute, it'll be too bad for the bunch of you! Git!"

Just as the man reached the back room door, it opened. Ruidosa, followed by the pair who had gone for him, stepped into the room. The last man closed the door behind him. Lothrop waved the three vigilantes back in line. "Who," he said, "next to him," and his boot prodded the chairman's outstretched form, "is in charge?"

The men along the walls looked at one another uncertainly. No one seemed to know. Lothrop's lips curled as he started at them. "A fine organization," he jeered. "Well, somebody come up here. I've got to make medicine an' I can't do it alone."

The man Antrim had called from line stepped forward sullenly.

"Where's the two burro men this fella," jerking a thumb at Ruidosa, "is supposed to have tried to stick up?" Lothrop asked him.

The man shrugged. "Damfino. I didn't see 'em."

Lothrop snorted. "Well, where's the gents that brought him in? The fellas that claim that they caught him red-handed in the act?"

The man pointed toward the window. "That's one of them," he said. "The man across the sill. The other one is the chair-man, Shane."

"All right," Lothrop said, and took an official-looking document from his coat pocket. "When Shane comes to, you tell him he'll be wanted at the county seat to testify inside two days. I'm taking charge of the prisoner on this writ of habeas corpus, in the name of the civil authorities of this Territory. Get a bucket of water and bring Shane to. The rest of you clear out."

The vigilantes stared at him uncomprehendingly. One of them said, "You mean we're free to go?"

"Yes. The next time I find a vigilance committee tryin' to operate in this county, though, it'll be a dif'rent story. If you're wise, you won't entangle yoreselves with one again. Now clear out 'fore I change my mind about lettin' you off."

CHAPTER XI

LOTHROP PULLS THE STRINGS

WHATEVER else Stone Lothrop might be, Antrim reflected as the frustrated vigilantes slunk from the place, he was neither fool nor coward. He had handled this tough situation with an unexpected adroitness; almost, one might have said, with cunning. With a minimum of bloodshed, he had taken the prisoner of the Citizens' Committee away from them, had clearly and definitely put them in the wrong, and had then magnanimously dismissed them with a mild rebuke. He had stage-managed it well, and had withal shown himself so completely master of the situation, this crowd would not be apt again to try this. He had given them an abundance of food for thought. His satisfaction with himself was revealed in the glowing good nature with which he took the bucket of water the man had brought and dashed it over the still recumbent, yet

now groaning, form of the vigilantes' unfortunate leader.

Shane spluttered, gasped, blinked his eyes open, and struggled to an elbow. From this vantage point he peered up owlshly at the grinning sheriff.

"Feelin' better?" Lothrop queried.

The man gingerly felt his bruised and swollen jaw. "W—what hit me?"

"I did," Lothrop said with his lazy smile. Somehow his words conveyed the idea that he was sorry. "I had to," he went on. "You was practically foamin' at the mouth. Couldn't make out whether you'd been bit by a hydrophoby skunk or if someone had mixed rattleweed with yore smokin'. I hit you 'cause I didn't want no harm t' come to you. You're feelin' better?"

Shane peered up at him uncertainly. "I—I guess so," he muttered thickly.

Lothrop helped him up and brushed him off. Then he stood back, allowed the man to recover somewhat. When Shane's eyes appeared to be less befuddled, Lothrop said:

"I've disbanded yore Committee an' given 'em a lecture. 'F you're as smart as I think you are, you'll not try organizin' them again—you'll leave law business to them that's appointed to administer it. I been lenient to yore outfit. A damn sight more so than they deserve." He gestured toward the window. "Only three of 'em got killed. A couple more was wounded, but their friends has taken them away. Remember: it costs a heap more to revenge injuries than it does to bear 'em. I'm not censurin' you. I figure you done yore duty accordin' to yore lights. I don't want no more of this vigilante stuff, though. Next time I'll smash 'em flatter than a wet leaf. That's a fact you'll be wantin' to keep in mind. You go take a coupla burnin' sensations now, an' you'll be seein' things with a calmer eye."

White and trembling, Shane was ogling the dead men by the window. Lothrop had left them as they fell, and they provided a fine object lesson—particularly since none of the lawmen had been so much as scratched. With an audible gulp, the wilted vigilante boss wheeled to the bar.

Lothrop turned his big shoulders toward the man Antrim had called from the line. The fellow's eyes were fixed on Shane, and they were filled with scorn.

Lothrop said, "A fella that'll bed down with dawgs has got to expect t' get up with fleas."

Still looking at Shane, the fellow sneered. His glance met

the sheriff's then, and he said, "I guess you're right. I'd ort to of had better sense."

"You're learnin' fast," Lothrop commended, then showed the cunning that had brought him up from nothing to his present powerful status in this border country:

"What do they call you, friend?"

"Brazito," the man said suspiciously.

"Well, Brazito," Lothrop suggested, "would you like an easy bunk as deputy?"

Brazito started, and rasped his jaw with a sun-browned hand. "Such a job wouldn't make me mad," he admitted, grinning.

"Well, I'm goin' to make you my deputy at Rincon. Raise yore right hand."

When the lawmen, leaving Brazito to dispose of the dead men inside the Golden Gun, stepped into the street, they found it darker and not nearly so crowded as it had been when they'd arrived in town. They located a horse for Ruidosa, put him on it with his hands securely lashed behind his back, and climbed aboard their own ponies. Then Lothrop turned to Antrim.

"Kid, I'm sendin' you to the county seat with this prisoner," he said slowly, as though considering something in his mind. "I've got to get after Curly Ives, an' I can't be bothered luggin' this Ruidosa around with me. An' I can't leave him here. There ain't no sure facilities for guardin' him. I don't think that bunch of vigilantes will get together again—at least not for some time—but some other gang might get their mind set on a lynchin'. This prisoner has got to have a fair trial. If we take him to Socorro, he'll get it. It's time this county got a taste of law an' order. I'll be seein' you at the county seat in a few——"

He broke off as a thick-set man who had been moving along the walk wheeled and came over. Standing by Lothrop's horse, the man looked up and said, "Ain't you the sheriff?"

"That's what I been appointed."

The man regarded him curiously. "My name's Thatcher," he said at last. "I run the Star brand, east of here a piece. I'd like to know if that rumor's true?"

"If you mean the rumor that I took their prisoner away from yore damned vigilance committee an' packed 'em off to bed, it certainly is."

"My eyes told me that much," Thatcher said with a grin. "No, I mean that story that's been goin' round about Corner an' Hootowl Jones bein' on the make—rustlin' other folks' cattle?"

"Corner an' Jones swingin' wide loops?" Lothrop looked surprised. "I hadn't heard."

"Well, there's a story goin' the rounds that their outfits has been sleeperin', maverickin', an' actually brand-blottin' high, wide an' han'some. You're from Gawdforsaken Valley, ain't you? Don't you own the Two-Pole-Pumpkin outfit over there?"

"I own the Two-Pole-Pumpkin, all right," Lothrop said. "But I'd hate to think my friends Jones an' Corner was on the rustle."

"Well, yore foreman, Purdin, rode into the county seat the other day an' swore out a warrant for 'em."

"You don't say!" Lothrop looked perturbed. "I hadn't heard of this. Still——" He paused, apparently lost in thought. At last he said, "I ain't been to the ranch for more than a few hours in the last two weeks. Ain't seen Purdin at all—like enough he's been out on the range tryin' t' save what scant stuff this drought has left me. Still an' all, him swearin' out a warrant don't hardly convict Jones an' Corner of anythin', Thatcher. Anyway, I ain't seen him an' don't know anythin' about it. Far as I know, Jones an' Corner is upright gents, square-shooters. I'd hate to learn different. They've always seemed as much ag'in' rustlin' as I am."

"That's the way I've always regarded them," Thatcher said. "Square an' upright men. But that rumor was goin' round before Purdin swore out his warrant. I don't like the looks of it. I been dickerin' with them two t' buy a herd of two-year-olds they been aimin' to dispose of. But I'll be damned if I cotton to the notion of buyin' stolen beef."

"Well, I don't blame you there," Lothrop said seriously. "I wouldn't want to, either. But all I know is I ain't never been given no warrant to serve."

"When you get to the county seat, you'll prob'ly find it waitin'," Thatcher remarked morosely. "Why can't men stick to the straight-an'-narrow? Seems like this country gets into a man's blood. Either it makes a monkey out of him, or else a plain thief!"

Lothrop shook his head. "No sense holdin' the country responsible for a man's didoes. You might's well call Gawd accountable; He made the country, remember. In my experi-

ence, a man's what he is: square or ornery accordin' to circumstances, an' sometimes underneath he's a heap diff'rent than he seems. Man," he added oracularly, "is a strange mixture of good an' bad. Some is square an' upright, like a good hawss; some is lamb-like, meek as Moses; then there's them that leans towards the wolfish side; an' others is just plain two-legged coyotes. Yep, coyotes—like this fella Ives I'm goin' after. The kind that likes to catch gents unarmed an' salt 'em down without no risk."

"Well," Thatcher said, preparing to leave, "I reckon it takes all kinds to make a world. Though it does seem this Territory's got more than its share of the less desirables. Glad to've met you, Sheriff. Drop round to the ranch sometime. An' keep a strict eye on them hombres over to Gawdforsaken Valley."

"I'll sure aim t' do my best," Lothrop said.

A silent observer of this conversation, Antrim's eyes, as they rested on Stone Lothrop, held again that light of grudging admiration. The man was smooth as a gun-fighter's gun barrel.

While Lothrop spoke with Pronto Joe, Antrim sat with one leg crooked about the saddle-horn, reviewing a number of strange things he had filed away in his mind—things, that is, which had struck him as strange at the time of their happening.

First there was that curious meeting he had had with Mitch Moelner, on the night of his first visit to the Two-Pole-Pumpkin. Why had Lothrop felt it necessary to station sentinels about the place? Because of Indians? Antrim did not think so.

Secondly, there had been Lothrop's casual mention of Yolanda as his "woman," signifying, as it did, that he had not married her.

Thirdly, Antrim's meeting with Yolanda in the *patio* was still vivid in his mind, and the things she had said about Lothrop, although he had hidden it well, had aroused in him a fierce resentment toward the man, a resentment to which little things from time to time had added fuel.

Lothrop's voice interrupted his whirling thoughts: "When you get to Socorro, Kid, see if you can find out anythin' about that warrant Thatcher was speakin' of. After all, if Purdin's really swore one out, he must have somethin' definite ag'in' them fellas. Friendship's friendship, but duty comes

first. If Corner an' Jones have been rustlin' cattle, I ain't got no option but t' bring 'em in."

Nodding, Antrim dismissed his speculations.

CHAPTER XII

HELL ON THE TRAIL

HIGH up in the Sierra Caballos, along a rough untrustworthy trail that tortuously wound about great frowning crags and upthrust buttresses of rusty stone, oft-times dipping crazily down declivitous slopes that only a goat—or a burro—could manage, and that rolled one's stomach nauseously as it clung to precipitous cliffs, crawled a pack train of forty burros. This outfit, owned by Craig Smith & Company, and from it taking its name of Smith's Train, had thirteen days previously left Silver City en route for Socorro, by way of Fort Bayard, San Lorenzo, Hillsboro, and the Sierra Caballos. Once they descended these, they planned to cross the Jornada just east of Elephant Buttes. Two days back Smith's Train had turned its back on the Rio Bravo's muddy waters and had this morning crossed the divide. With Smith and two smaller owners—Shinkle and Laidley—in the lead, the train now was threading its dangerous way down toward the foothills, dim seen blue smears against the Jornada's fiery sands.

Smith, Shinkle, and Laidley were energetic business men who had in the course of the past three months disposed of their stores of merchandise in the mining district centering around Silver City. In exchange for this merchandise they had received a considerable amount in gold dust, nuggets, silver ore and currency, which they intended taking back with them to Saint Louis, and with a part of which they hoped to square their accounts with Eastern creditors. True, they were not planning to take this dust and ore so far as that, but expected to exchange it at Socorro for its equivalent in currency and minted coin. Theirs had been a risky venture, and they were rightly jubilant at the successful disposal of the wares they had brought through such dangerous and Indian-infested country.

But they were wary even now. Many a chilling tale had come their way before leaving Silver City: accounts of road agents, renegades, and other desperadoes who preyed upon

small parties crossing the mountains and desert, yarns calculated to curl tenderfoot hair tightly; knee-shaking stories of Apache torture, death at the stake, and the pleasant pastime of feeding a man to the ants.

These tales had had some influence in persuading Smith, Shinkle and Laidley into combining forces and making the trip in one caravan. Smith's Train, they felt, was sufficiently large and strongly guarded to discourage such marauders as might obtain information concerning their prospective overland trek. Yet they had exercised care and circumspection in approaching and picking men for the journey. The ten they had finally hired were as good as money could buy, men known for their discretion, raw courage, and integrity. These men were well armed and, fully expecting an attack by either Indians or robbers, were prepared to fight their way through.

Ore and dust and nuggets, amounting roughly to some eighty thousand dollars, was packed in buckskin sacks and evenly distributed through the packs of the forty burros. Besides this great treasure, Craig Smith's personal saddle-bags contained around fifteen hundred dollars in treasury notes enclosed in letters to people in the States, and entrusted to Smith's care by the friends and kinfolk of these persons at the mines.

Despite all Smith's care and caution, however, news of his train, its route and destination *had* leaked out. Because of the fear of some such possibility, Smith's men had exercised great vigilance during the first ten days and nights of the trip. On the eleventh night, worn out by this constant expectation of unfulfilled attack, their watchfulness relaxed somewhat. Reaction set in, and on the twelfth night only one guard was posted, although relieved every hour. During this, the thirteenth day, much badinage had been passed between the members of Smith's fighting force concerning the dire peril of this journey. A complete let-down was resulting. When they pulled up for camp at five o'clock on the evening of this day, no precautions were taken beyond a cursory inspection of the juniper- and pinon-dotted shelf selected as a camp-site. Satisfying themselves that one side of the forty-foot shelf dropped sheer to a bed rock some ninety feet below, and that the other rose in a bald escarpment for an almost equal distance above, they removed the packs from the animals, penned the latter in a hastily-erected rope corral, and busied themselves about the more important task of getting supper.

Lothrop, Moelner, and Pronto Joe rode out of Rincon on the Engle trail almost fifteen minutes before Guy Antrim was ready to leave with Ruidosa for the county seat. Antrim had been detained by some instructions Lothrop had asked him to pass on to Brazito, the newly-made Rincon deputy. It had taken Antrim eight minutes to find Brazito and deliver the sheriff's message. Eight uncomfortable minutes, in fact, for almost any second among them might have witnessed another attempt at mob justice, or an effort on the part of the prisoner's friends or pardners in crime to release him from the grasp of the law. Evidently Lothrop's bold move in obtaining possession of Ruidosa had thoroughly cowed, for the time being, all belligerents in the vicinity, for no overt moves were made.

Just as Antrim had gotten his prisoner once more astride a horse and was himself preparing to mount another, a gaunt red-haired man in faded Levis appeared from the shadows.

"You are the Smoke-wagon Kid, ain't you?" he asked, his keen eyes probing the surrounding gloom as though desiring to make certain his conversation with the deputy remained unobserved.

Antrim nodded, watching the man closely.

"Well, look," this fellow said, reducing his voice to a merest mumble, "I got something I reckon you oughta know. You are a depity of that new sheriff, I take it? . . . Thought so. Well, what I wanta say is this: I got a small spread over near Lake Valley. Friend o' mine just got back from over round Silver City. He mentioned that he seen one of Lothrop's men over in that neighborhood. Been hangin' round there for quite a spell."

"No law against that, is there?" Antrim looked at the man curiously. The fellow his friend had seen was probably the missing Stumpy Harper.

"No law ag'in' it, no," the man said quietly. "But there's a right smart chance there oughta be. Happens there's been a trail outfit formin' there. Craig Smith an' Company. Figgerin' to go 'crosst the Sierra Caballos to Socorro with a big pack train of dust an' ore." He paused as though to let these facts sink in, then—"The train pulled out o' Silver City on the first of August. This here's the twelfth. Does that signify?"

Antrim's face rid itself of all expression. His glance was cold, inscrutable. "What does it signify to you?"

"Just this: Smith's Train hadn't oughta be more'n fifty miles or so from here this minute."

"Unless," Antrim pointed out, "they've had troubles with Indians or road agents."

"Yeah," the man said dryly. "In which case we've likely heard the last of 'em."

"Just what was your reason in mentioning that your friend thought he saw one of Lothrop's men at Silver City?"

The red-haired man grinned twistedly. "That's for you to figger out. An' my friend didn't *think* he saw one of Lothrop's men; he *saw* him. An' it wasn't the one the sheriff's doin' all the gassin' about, neither."

"Just which one *was* it?"

The eyes of the red-haired man were mocking. "I'm not cravin' any plantin' yet, nor I ain't anxious to put the neck of some innocent gent in no noose. I'm tellin' you what my friend told me. You can do as you see fit about it. I don't know yore friend there," and he shot a fleeting glance at the interested Ruidosa, "nor I don't know you, either—except by yore rep. But if you're as int'rested in seein' justice done as I hear you are, why . . . in case Smith's Train don't get through, you'll mebbe have some idees on the reason. I figger that train had oughta hit Engle day after tomorrer."

And without further words the red-haired man slid off into the shadow between two buildings and disappeared.

Antrim turned to Ruidosa and regarded him thoughtfully. "Well," he said with a shrug, "time we was gettin' on. Let's go."

Antrim and his prisoner were two miles out upon the Jornada when it happened. They had just dipped into the heavy gloom of a deep arroyo where the blue-black shadows swirled like smoke, and spread across the trail as it led between a handful of stunted trees where a humus covering veiled the earth and muffled footfalls.

"Halt," a gruff voice bade, "an' throw up yore hands!"

Body taut, Antrim peered through the sultry murk, caught the vague chill gleam of metal and, stifling an impulse, obediently raised his arms. A flexure of his knees stopped his pony. The led horse carrying Ruidosa also stopped.

Three men emerged from the deeper shadows, indistinct blurs in the heavy gloom. Afoot they were, and masked. Each man held a levelled gun.

"Been takin' good care of our friend, Ruidosa?" jeered a drawling voice.

"Well, I been takin' the best care I could of him," Antrim

answered equably. "Stone Lothrop couldn'ta done better himself."

One of the men chuckled. The man who had asked the question said, "I expect that is so," at which his companions laughed uproariously. The man went on, still in that lazy drawl, "You've done yore duty as you seen it. An' we are glad to know so careful an officer. If we are ever tailed up, I'm hopin' you'll be handy t' take us in tow. But yore jurisdiction, friend, ends right here. We'll be takin' charge of this hellion right now. Ben," he said to one of the others, "be so kind as to get a holt on Ruidosa's reins. . . . Now lead his horse back there among them junipers whilst we finish our business with this Smoke-wagon Kid."

As Ben led the prisoner's horse off into the black gloom beneath the trees, Antrim tensed his body for instant action should the occasion demand it. He could not see any sense in risking his life to save Ruidosa from a fate he probably well deserved, but he was in no mood to act as target for dry-gulch guns without lifting a hand to protect himself. The chances were long against him emerging triumphant from any gun fight which might ensue; but at least he could have the satisfaction of taking one of these hombres with him.

Fortunately, perhaps, for all concerned, he was not called upon to do so.

"Kid," the leader said, "you are not goin' to like this. You have still got yore gun, but I'd advise you not to resort to it. You are goin' to have to get down off that cayuse."

"Why, sure," Antrim said, preparing to sling his left leg over the horn.

"No, you don't!" drawled the masked man softly, "You slide off the *near* side or you are apt to slide into hell."

"Listen," Antrim said coldly. "Listen. You be thankful I've let you take possession of my prisoner, an' let well enough alone." A hard gleam was coming into his dark and narrow eyes. "There's a limit to what I'll take from the sort of coyotes that hide behind masks."

"Don't try to get rough," the spokesman jeered, and twirled his gun suggestively. "You can't cut it—not just now. There ain't no man can beat a levelled Peacemaker."

Antrim shifted his weight tentatively in the worn saddle and saw how quick and unerringly this fellow's pistol focused into black stare upon his heart. He showed a hard and instant grin. "I guess that's so." He slid down from the horse's back.

"That's better," the leader told him mockingly. "Now just step back about four paces an' turn around."

"What's the big idea?"

"You'll find out in due course, as them newspapers say."

"If I'm goin' to be shot I prefer to meet the lead head-on."

"You ain't goin' to be shot if you behave an' do like you are told. But we ain't got all night to wrangle here. Back up an' turn round."

Antrim took several halting backward paces and turned his back upon Ruidosa's new captors. Before he realized what was happening, almost, he felt a jerk at his hip and his reaching hand found his holster empty. "I'm just figurin' to take the precaution of tossin' yore hawleg over under them trees," the drawling voice informed him. "Temptation's a awful hard driver, an' you are much too valy'ble to us alive. Mebbe we'll be meetin' some time again, Kid. *Adios.*"

Vaulting swiftly astride their horses, and grabbing the reins of Antrim's and Ruidosa's mounts, the masked men spurred into hurried motion. Antrim's hand sped to his boot-top and rose spouting flame. The leader's mocking laugh floated back through the swirling shadows, and then they were gone in a rush of hooves.

Antrim stared bleakly across the lifeless arroyo. Above its southern rim the stars shone big and bright against the purple sky. He prowled beneath the trees until his foot encountered the gun that had been taken from him. He picked it up, broke it and took the cartridges from its cylinder. He snapped the hammer several times to learn if it was working right. Replacing the cartridges then, he slipped the weapon in its holster, reloaded the smaller gun and returned it to his boot. Then he climbed up out of the arroyo and turned his eyes toward Rincon. Two miles away it was; its lights were like tiny sparks.

Antrim struck a match and looked at his silver watch. Three-thirty. He broke the match in two and dropped it while the starlight came creeping back, pale and blue in contrast to the orange of the vanished flame. Between that place and Rincon a slumbrous sea of sand, shot here and there with the dagger forms of cacti, stretched faintly gleaming. He turned his head. The moon hung low above the dark shoulders of the Sierra Caballos. Somewhere in that desolate waste a lobo's howl thickened the land's deep monstrous hush. Antrim's mind rebelled against the mysteries and plain-felt currents of turbulence that country held for him—rebelled futilely against

the realization that the nearest horse was back in Rincon, that shanks' mare must carry him across those intervening miles. With a bitter oath he squared his shoulders and started walking—no cinch in high-heeled boots.

"The night of the thirteenth—an' Friday t' boot!" one of Smith's men had derisively told another as they'd sat about the campfire smoking before turning in for an early start on the morrow. "I reckon that Lothrop man we saw near Fort Bayard was just a whizzer, Jed."

Jed looked a little uncertain in the flames' red glow. "Wal, I don't know. That fella Lothrop is a heap uncertain to monkey with. Don't you reckon, Charlie?"

Charlie Shinkle shook a grizzled head. "There's folks," he said, "as calls him some mighty hard names."

"Yeah—an' which they're right careful not t' spout within his hearin'," Laidley scoffed. "No matter where yuh go, yuh will be hearin' hard things said about gents that's middlin' fair successful by other gents what ain't."

"Well," the first man remarked, "we've got mighty nigh haffway to Socorro. An' we ain't had no trouble yet."

"No—not yet," Craig Smith said grimly.

He was sitting alone now. He had his back to the towering wall that rose above them to the right of the trail. The men had long since wrapped themselves up in their soogans and stretched out, their feet pointing to the fire that now had died to a few faint embers.

Craig Smith sucked on his battered pipe and stared off into the distance, thinking of his wife and the two kids back in Saint Louis, thinking how glad they'd be and how their faces would light up when he told them of his good fortune on this trip. It had been a dangerous undertaking and a tough journey, but it had been worth it. Eighty thousand dollars was a sizable sum of money, and worth a bit of risk.

The eternal silence of that vast country wrapped the mountains round him. Naught disturbed it but the wind soughing through the dark tracery of the pines. Down through the penetrating chill of mountain air a bright moon shone, bathing the needle-carpeted shelf in an argent glow.

What startled him, Craig Smith never knew. He hadn't moved, and even now he did not bat an eyelash. But somehow a taut jumpiness had gotten into the night stillness of the lonely places. It wasn't nerves, for Craig Smith was not that kind of man. He did not think it was imagination, ei-

ther; though in justice he admitted that he had not been lulled to the state of false security enjoyed by his companions. Still, his questing eyes could discern no cause for the sudden alarm that had come upon him.

He got up and stretched his legs by walking around. He skirted the sleeping men sprawled about the ashes of the campfire; got a notion to inspect the rope corral that penned the tired burros, and sauntered leisurely in its direction.

He had strolled, perhaps, to within ten feet of where the makeshift enclosure was anchored to a gnarled juniper stump against the dark outline of the towering wall. There he stopped, rigid, staring. From the far end of the corral a number of slowly-moving elongated shadows were thrusting their thin blue shapes out across the bare whiteness of the moonlit rock.

Without sound, without even the creaking of his leather boots to betray his movement, Craig Smith lowered his crouching form to the ground, drew the pistol from his holster and stretched out slowly with the weapon held before him. There was something fierce and blazing in his narrowed eyes as, between the legs of the motionless burros, he saw the creeping legs of an unknown man.

Smith did not lose his head; he waited, watching closely as the man passed out of his vision and another took his place. This man, too, was moving stealthily. Elsewhere a swift blur of motion showed. Tugged, Smith's gaze swung edgily; he saw a man cross soundlessly the bare patch of rocky trail. He was a tall man, lean and gaunt as a timber wolf; a man whose face was masked to the eyes. Merging with the deeper gloom, this man stopped and crouched half forward, listening. Another followed, and another. Two other blurs of movement drew Smith's eyes, one to either side. Flitting shadows against the murk.

Bitter lines warped Smith's dark features. A curse rushed against his teeth. He jerked his lips apart and threw his voice across the silence recklessly:

"Boys! Bo——"

That much was heard. The rest was lost in the roar and smash of leaping guns. Their thunder bulged against the cliff, recoiled and rolled out over the chasm, shattering against the yonder rocks. Craig Smith had come to his feet as he yelled; he was reeling backward now, blood from his riddled torso daubing his shirt. He crumpled suddenly. His hat fell off and rolled a little way. But he did not move. He lay

there with his yellow hair against the pinions' fallen needles.

Smith's companions and their men were scrambling from their soogans; terror stared from their sleep-filled eyes, and the hands that sought their guns were trembling. Frightened oaths were on their lips.

Up the shadow-dappled trail the dim forms of crouching men were advancing through a fog of powdersmoke, jets of livid flame spurting from the weapons in their hands.

Panic-stricken, the guards of Smith's Train broke and scattered, striving to reach the darkness of the trees. The rip of bullets whined among them, dropping them like quail. Here a runner doubled up, and pitched forward. Dust and powdersmoke filled the murk with a pungent, acrid odor, foul and choking. It swirled up about their scuttling bodies, clogging lungs and nostrils, bringing tears. To the right of Laidley a man clutched suddenly at his middle and fell. To the rear of him another staggered, lurched sideways and vanished in the gloom. Before him was a smear of moonlit rock. He thought he swerved his steps to miss it, but the thing came up and struck him in the face. It took him seconds to realize that he was down, that something was prodding his ribs like a white-hot iron. But he wouldn't die that way. He got his weight up on his elbows, got a knee under him and one foot firmly planted. He heaved himself erect. Something struck him in the back, smashing him like a hammer. He went swaying to his hands and knees. There was blood in his sobbing voice.

Shinkle saw him from a patch of juniper; started back to aid him. Four steps he took, and tumbled.

"I reckon that's all," a calm voice drawled across the dimming uproar. "A thousand dollars a second, boys. I'd call that right good pay. Throw this carrion off the shelf an' we'll get busy packin' the burros. We wanta be off this trail by mornin'."

CHAPTER XIII

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

RUIDOSA, who rather fancied himself as something of a lady killer, came to the conclusion that this occasion was especially designed for a demonstration of his talent. Finding another

man's woman in an empty house was a direct challenge to a man of his accomplishments. The way a slender olive hand rose gracefully to caress a greased end of his little black moustache advertised as much; and if more proof were needed, it would easily have been found in the leer of his appraising eyes.

His lips smirked a grin as with a swagger he put his black-silk-clad shoulders against the *patio* wall and chuckled, "Well, *nina de los ojos*, I had not expected the great good fortune of finding you here alone. Surely the hand of God is in it. I shall burn a thousand candles, presently. Have you no welcome for me? Come, come—speak up. There need be no shyness between us."

He made a picturesque figure as he leaned against the *patio* wall, *cigarro* dangling from his grinning lips. His close-fitting jacket was profusely ornamented with finest lace, a bit bedraggled and dusty now, but fine for all of that; his pantaloons were a bright blue and superbly decorated with silver buttons; his boots, though dusty, as was the rest of him from his long hours on the trail, were of finest stamped leather, and richly worked with silk; his *armas*—protectors—were of panther skin; while his scarf, which he wore loosely knotted about his neck, was of a lively lavender. His *sombrero*, a-glitter with golden spangles, lay against the back of his neck and shoulder blades, held there by the buckskin thongs of the chin strap passed through the slits of a great silver concha. His tousled curls, damp with sweat, were tumbled boyishly about the smooth whiteness of his forehead.

Picturesque he might be, but Yolanda's lips curled as she eyed him scornfully. "You'd best have a care how your tongue swings, hombre. These walls have ears, and Stone Lothrop may return at any moment. You ought to know how jealous——"

Ruidosa cut her off with a deprecating wave of his *cigarro*. "Somehow," he said, relapsing into English, "Lothrop's jealousies don't seem to interest me overmuch. Let's make the talk ourselves—of you an' me. Let us, in fact, be sensible and not waste time in talk at all. Actions speak loud enough, an' I've a notion you can be right entertainin' if you've a mind to."

The delicate brows that overarched Yolanda's dark, full, lustrous eyes rose sharply. "You dare say these things to me? You—a saddle tramp? And in my own house?"

Ruidosa laughed. "Yore house! Say, quit the play-actin'—

hell, you don't even own the dust around this *casa*! You tryin' to cut a shine? You don't like Lothrop no more'n I do. Take a tumble to yoreself, kid! Where you goin' t' find a better Don Juan than me?"

"Don Juan—you?" Her white teeth gleamed in a mocking laugh that matched his own of a moment before. "Bah! You make me retch! Such brazen impudence. *Mira*—you watch out or you will find your neck in trouble, *mozo*. In this country you cannot treat a woman like this with impunity; at least, not a lady. *Vamos!* an' take your love-making with you!"

"*Jesus-Maria!* That I should listen to such lip from your kind of baggage!" Ruidosa swore, and levelled a malignant glare upon her as he shook himself free of the wall. "For that I'll get some lovin' outa you whether you like it or not. Come *pronto*, or I'll give you something you ain't lookin' for!"

A paleness came into her cheeks as she read the purpose in his eyes. A pulse throbbed nervously in the ivory column of her throat; the full breasts pushing against the thinness of her clothing heralded the agitation that suddenly gripped her as she backed away.

"Come here, by Gawd, or I'll come an' get you!"

"*Santa Clara! San Jose!*" Still backing from him, she crossed herself. Her eyes flew wide as he began advancing. There was a slow grin on his full lips now; she watched his burning black eyes—— "*Sangre de Dios!*" she cried, one hand before her as if to ward him off, the other at her bosom. "Have you taken leave of your mind?"

He sneered. "Not yet I ain't. You goin' to show sense an' be obligin', or am I goin' to have to gentle you?" While he spoke, he was closing the interval between them, not fast, but inexorably. "Well?"

"You—you wouldn't——?"

"You're wastin' breath," he grinned at her meaningly. "That patter might hold off some fool dude, but not me. You're dealin' with a man what knows his woman an'—Hey! C'mere, you little baggage!"

Choking a husky prayer, Yolanda turned and fled. Straight for the hall door she ran, her skirts swishing about her legs and impeding her progress. She could hear the clatter of his boots behind her—so close! But she got first inside the house and sped panting down the hall. His thundering curses seemed almost at her ear; his foul promises spurred her on and lent her strength to reach her room. She lurched inside,

her breath coming in great gasps. She sagged her weight against the door, but it would not close. Ruidosa had a boot between it and its frame. She was driven back as he hurled it open.

Her lips, as she faced him wide-eyed, were great red splotches against the alabaster paleness of her face. Her breasts rose and fell, and with each sobbing breath threatened anew to burst their covering. The sight whipped a febrile glow into the renegade's lecherous gaze. She stood leaning against a heavy table, breathing panicky prayers.

Ruidosa, sure of her now, approached with a great show of leisure, his cynical lips framing an exultant grin. His grin grew wider, mocking, as she slid around the table, placing it between them. He laid the flats of his hands against its edge, and stood thus supporting himself while his avid stare devoured her.

She tried to speak, but her words were choked with panic. She felt paralyzed beneath his baleful gaze. She saw the bunching of his muscles, beheld them swell against his shirt. She saw the gathering of his weight; but she wasn't quick enough. His hand shot across the table's barrier, caught in the shoulder of her *camisita*—ripped!

With a low cry she broke free, and she backed against the wall—— What it was that drew her gaze she did not know, for there had been no sound; but suddenly she was looking across Ruidosa's shoulder at the open doorway. She went tired and limp with an access of reaction. For the doorway was not empty, and the sun of noon that before had brightened the hall was now dimmed.

Grim and cold, Antrim stood there in the portal. His jaws were stiff, his mouth was a straight line. Never had the girl seen such fury, such cold white fury, in a man as she saw in Antrim as he stood there eyeing Ruidosa.

Frightened, she still had to watch; she could not pull her glance away until a blur of movement told that Ruidosa had read his danger in her face. Ruidosa had, and turned. He was a sullen lump against the table. His lips were sagging loosely.

Antrim rolled and lit a cigarette while the stillness thickened. And all the time his glance was on Ruidosa closely; it blazed like sun on windswept ice.

Ruidosa's cheeks were like weathered lead. The brooding silence deepened, became insupportable. Ruidosa snarled,

cursing softly. A flame sprang into his eyes and his forehead showed pulsating veins.

Antrim's voice came low and dusty, "Ruidosa—this is it."

The renegade's hand flashed back to leather. Not until it touched did Antrim move. Then both hands jerked and livid flame stabbed outward from his hips. Ruidosa leaned forward as if to meet those swift twin bursts of light. He crumpled suddenly, pitching forward to measure his length at Antrim's feet.

For long moments Antrim's eyes stayed on that motionless form while Yolanda stood uncertain, silent. There was a kind of horror in her gaze, but there were other things there, too.

But Antrim did not look. He sheathed his weapons abruptly, wheeled, and went dragging his spurs down the stone-flagged *sala*.

She saw his shadow on the yellow dust of the *patio*. Then only the dust.

CHAPTER XIV

"YOU CAN PASS THE WORD AROUND"

"THERE's just one reason I've got for livin'," Antrim told Stone Lothrop that evening. He had met the rancher at *la puerta del zaguan*, evidently on purpose, for he had been lounging by the great gate for at least two hours prior to the latter's arrival. Lothrop, accompanied by a number of his men, had just ridden in. The men, having unsaddled and turned their weary horses into one of the pole corrals, had departed for the bunk-house; Lothrop had headed for the ranch-house, to be stopped by Antrim's detaining hand and a strange agateness of glance.

Lothrop regarded him curiously. "Yeah?"

"That's right. I live for just one reason—to afford outlaws an' other hard cases the shortest route to hell."

Lothrop stopped in his tracks, and his breath deepened. Then he grinned. "That's a laudable aim, Kid, an' one I'm glad t' hear you express. It was a damn good day for Socorro County when you an' me teamed up. Our intentions—yores

an' mine—sure foller the same unpopular trail; we're both a heap anxious to put a permanent end to this hell-raisin' an' general lawlessness that's givin' this great country such a bad rep. An'," he declared impressively, "we'll do it, too."

Antrim turned his shoulders toward Lothrop squarely.

"There was a time," he remarked softly, "when I had an ambition to set the world afire—for a woman naturally. Felt like I had ought to go to college an' get myself an education." He noted that Lothrop appeared to be more interested in his tone than in his words. While the rancher rolled and licked a cigarette, he resumed in the same soft evenness of voice; "I went. When I got back from the first term I found that the woman had run off with another man."

"That just goes to prove the folly of a man gettin' education," Lothrop said, but his glance swept Antrim's face with a risen vigilance as he put a match to his smoke. "Education's got a lot of drawbacks. I say the man's happiest who follows in his daddy's footsteps, carryin' on the old job an' the old traditions."

"It may be that you are right," Antrim admitted. "However, like I said, while I was gone this woman hooked it with another man, who was prob'ly doin' what you suggest an' fol-lerin' in his ol' man's footsteps. She slipped off in the night with this fella and disappeared. Nobody much seemed to know where she'd gone—or if they did, they kep' it to themselves. With her gone, I didn't see much sense in resumin' college. I spent a deal of time practisin' with a pair of Colts. Then I took up my present career of dishin' out lead to needy hellions."

The ensuing stillness was thick with baffling, unexpressed thoughts and conjectures. Both men stood looking out over the tawny earth for several moments. Antrim's eyes turned first, and he saw how Stone Lothrop's thick wide chest made a heavy shadow against the failing light—a large plain target for a Colt's .44. And he saw that Lothrop was smoking with a strange nervousness, and that his eyes—when they swung round—were very sharp.

"Seems sort of curious," Lothrop said, "that you should have felt a hankerin' for huntin' outlaw scalps."

"My folks," Antrim said coldly, "were victims of outlaw lead."

Lothrop's shoulders made an expressive gesture. "Well, I'm sure flattered some by yore confidence, Kid, but I don't just see why you should be tellin' me all these things."

Antrim could understand that. Folks out there seldom said much concerning their past and their personal problems. "You go and take a look in the lady's room," he suggested. "There is somethin' there you had ought to see."

When Lothrop returned from his visit to Yolanda's room there was a film of moisture on his dark face that even the fierce heat of that stifling valley could not have put there. He looked at Antrim for a long moment without speaking. Then he said, "Let me be the first to congratulate you on a damn good piece of work. Of course he should have gone to trial, an' that was what I had in mind when I started him to the county seat in yore care. I—"

"He had a trial."

"Umm, yes, I suppose he did. Still, you ain't hardly been elected judge yet, Kid. Understand, though," he added hastily, "I ain't criticizin' you for shootin' him. Like enough I'da done the same if he'd tried to escape whilst he was in my charge. One thing I can't see, though, is yore reason for bringin' him here an' catchin' him in Yolanda's room. That don't hardly seem the—"

"In her room," Antrim said dustily, "is where Ruidosa took the plunge."

Lothrop started. Some unrevealed thought laid a strict reserve across his gaze. "You mean you shot him in her room?"

"You've called the turn."

"But you was takin' him to Socorro——"

"That's where we *started* for."

"Then what in hell was he doin' in there?"

"I didn't ask. It didn't seem important. I shot him because he *was* in there." Antrim looked squarely into Lothrop's smouldering eyes, "I'm aimin' to shoot the next skunk I find there, too. You can pass the word around."

Antrim, nursing a bitter mood, was perched on the top pole of one of the empty corrals. He was reflecting grimly on his actions of the past few hours, and in review he found them far from satisfying. It wasn't that he regretted the killing of Ruidosa; that renegade had more than deserved the fate that had overtaken him. His dissatisfaction came from something else; he had just made two discoveries that made him out a fool in his own estimation!

Turbulence rocked gustily through his arteries. It took him minutes to cut adrift of his smoky passions. He got a check-

rein on his temper finally and grinned derisively as he recalled how, not so many hours ago, he'd been calling Thatcher a fool. "Well, it takes all kinds," he muttered wryly.

From that first day in the sheriff's office at Socorro he had known that some time he and Lothrop were due to clash. And he'd been made increasingly aware of it with each passing day, with each new bit of mystery, suspicion, evidence. It had been inevitable from the day someone had laid him tenderly in a cradle; perhaps before. Fate, Destiny—call it what you would—long since had cast the die and decided on his rôle in life. Just as long ago it had been decided that on some dark night Yolanda would so far forget her breeding and obligations as to drop from ken with some unknown adventurer. Just as hundreds of other things had long since been decided, such as Ruidosa's death—and the manner of it. It had not been written that Antrim's trail and Lothrop's could cross and part again without significance.

He was a fool for censuring the girl the way he had; certainly he had been less than just. Who was he to have judged and found her wanting? Hell must have laughed at the idea of Guy Antrim setting a pace in morals!

The first of his discoveries that had placed him by the side of fools had been the realization that he was still in love with Lothrop's woman! Still in love, that is, with Yolanda, who *now* was Lothrop's woman! As a discovery it was distinctly undesirable. His affairs were far too complicated now to afford a new entanglement.

But the second of his discoveries was worse. The first had betrayed him into the second, and the second concerned Stone Lothrop—that man of keen perceptions, that fellow of iron nerves. The damage might not be irreparable, but the fact remained that he had placed a trump in the rancher's hand. The next move was up to Lothrop, and that it would be speedily forthcoming Antrim did not doubt.

It came even sooner than expected. Suggs' voice whined across the yard:

"Hey, Kid! *Kid!* The boss has work for yuh!"

Antrim lowered his lean form from the corral, headed cautiously toward the voice. He made out the rider's figure, a deeper shadow against the murk. He halted ten feet distant, and each hand rested on a gun. "Yeah?" he said it softly.

"That yuh, Kid?"

"Well, you can start oratin', anyway."

"Listen: The boss says fer yuh t' hit the trail fer Socorro—pronto."

"How come?"

"Wants t' make sure things is runnin' smooth an' easy with a scarcity of violence. Says fer yuh t' get there quick an' hold the lid on, no matter what yuh find. He'll be along with extra deputies inside two days. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Git goin', then."

In that room at Two-Pole-Pumpkin where Lothrop customarily gathered his hard-faced supporters and retainers when laying plans for some new project, the great coal-oil lamp that hung from the beamed ceiling was lit again. The door was closed, and the curtains drawn across the windows. Much smoke from slender *cigarros* was being splayed through divers nostrils; rising and drifting, it lay in layers between the table and the lamp. At the table's head stood Lothrop, coldly surveying the gathered company from beneath his sleepy lids. Apparently content with what his gaze had taken in, he pulled up a chair and sat down, resting his massive elbows on the table's edge.

"Well," he said, "let's get to business, gents. Suggs, were you——"

"Just a minute, Chief," a dark-faced man with a close-cropped black moustache and heavy sideburns said. "Have you heard anything from Ruidosa?"

Lothrop said drily, "Not directly. But he won't be riding with us any more."

"The damn bunch-quitter!" Mitch Moelner sneered. "He——"

"He didn't quit from choice. He's been shot."

"Shot!"

"Yes, Keldane, shot."

"Was he bad hurt? He ain't dead, is he?"

"He ain't never said he was. I found him in 'Landa's room. The Smoke-wagon Kid claims he potted him there. There was two bullet holes in Ruidosa's skull—one through each eye-socket."

Keldane gasped, "By juniper! That guy could shoot the buttons off a caterpillar's belly!"

Moelner said, "Where's he at?" and got up out of his chair.

"No sense you paintin' up for war," Lothrop told him.

"He's gone. You might's well sit down. I sent him off to Socorro."

"You would!"

"Did you think I wanted to see you put a chip on his shoulder an' get yore light blowed out?"

"Humph! It'll take more'n a blankety-blank Smoke-wagon Kid to blow it out!"

"That's a wranglin' subject," Lothrop said, "an' we ain't here to wrangle. Time may come when that fella will be worth more to us dead than alive. But right now ain't exactly that time. You string with me an' let my brains do yore thinkin', an' you may be somethin' better than a saddle bum when they plant you."

He waited until Moelner had sullenly resumed his chair. While he waited, the sharp eyes beneath his sleepy lids roved over the faces of his men. A few were not there, but Keldane was, and Purdin, Rafe, Tombstone, Daggett, Suggs, Moelner and Hildermin were, also. They were a hard-faced lot, and tough as mesquite. A more scoundrelly crew would have been hard to imagine, and yet these men, despite their hard leathery faces, for the most part were accepted on this range as honest men. Suspicion attached to a few, such as Moelner, Tombstone, and Hildermin, yet nothing had ever been proved against them, and Lothrop did not believe that anything ever would be—so long as they trusted themselves to his guidance, and played their cards at his direction. Of course, they might be killed in some nefarious enterprise. But they would entail no special risk for him, and while they were alive he felt fully capable of extricating them from any situation, however grave it might appear.

He did not believe himself infallible, but considered that he was more so than any of his opponents—and a damned sight more adroit. Scanning the present members of his crew, he mentally picked a number for the things he had in hand. But before he could get on with these plans, Purdin asked:

"When you reckon them two new hands will be comin' in?"

"Not for quite a spell. I've given 'em a job over in another section—a special scouting job," Lothrop answered, and grinned to himself. In truth, the only place those fellows Purdin referred to would be doing any scouting now was hell. Lothrop had taken them with him to cache a big haul just taken by the gang. Indeed, he had signed the fellows on

with that very chore in mind. When it had been completed, he had ruthlessly shot the pair and thrown their carcasses into a gully for the buzzards to finish off. It was the sort of adroit step in which Stone Lothrop took a deal of pride.

He cleared his throat and turned to Suggs. "Pete—you recollect Stumpy's lynching?—D'you reckon you was seen around that park by any of them valley outfits?"

Suggs grinned, and blinked his squinty eyes. "Hell, no. They damn well heard me, an' I won't say they didn't, but as fer reco'nizin' me—cripes, they didn't get no chance. An' besides, it was gettin' pretty dark when I quit that hangin' bee."

"Hmm." Lothrop ran a tongue across his heavy lips and put a lazy half-smile on them. He looked at Mitch and Purdin. "I expect it's about time we got after Jones an' that yellor-bellied Corner. You swore that warrant out for them, didn't you, Black Jack?"

"I put that over slick as bear grease, Boss."

"I heard you did. Just wanted to make sure there hadn't been any hitch. Was talkin' to Thatcher, the other day—he runs the Star, over east of Rincon. Told me you'd sworn it out an' wanted to know if I reckoned Jones an' Corner really was on the rustle. I told him I would hate to think so."

The men sniggered their appreciation.

"I expect the stage is set enough by now. Rafe an' the other boys have been passin' the word around through influential quarters. By now, half the men who count in this country have got a vague idea that Jones an' Corner really are up to some ornery business. We'll smash them outfits flatter than a leaf. Then we'll lay pipe for Stewart."

"Why didn't yuh aim to bust that ol' hombre with the others?" Moelner jeered. "You'd of saved us boys a lot of time an' energy that way, not to mention the savin' in lead. When we take after them pals of his, he's goin' to grab the tomahawk sure as hell!"

"I guess not." Lothrop looked his lieutenant over coldly. "Like I've said before, the trouble with you, Mitch, is that you haven't got any savvy. You're a reg'lar hell-bender when it comes to spoutin' lead, but every time you open that trap of yores you put yore damn foot right in it. If I'da gone after Stewart same time as Jones an' Corner, a number of hombres around this stretch of cactus would have smelled a powerful strong odor. We'da stirred up a hornets' nest that all the lead in the Territory couldn'ta quieted. When I lay pipe, I

look ahead. An' I look careful. You should know by now I don't pass up any bets."

He let his glance rove over the men once more, wondering if better hands could be picked for his purpose. It seemed unlikely. These were tall men, of a characteristic leanness of body in the aggregate, and a squintiness of eye. They were garbed in more or less traditional style, wearing similar boots, vests, pants, and wide-brimmed hats. They had a characteristic woodenness of face and watchfulness of glance. They were tough, and ready for any deviltry; they were skilfully shaped to his touch and would, he believed, go through hell for him, despite their constant wrangling. One or two, perhaps—if the price offered were big enough—might sell him down the river. A recollection of Ruidosa drove a fleeting scowl across his cheeks. He would take care in future to keep less trusted men where their weaknesses could be discounted.

"We're ready," he said abruptly, "to open up the ball. The first thing to be opened is Stumpy Harker's grave. Tombstone, you an' Keldane here go out an' stumble across it, accidental-like. Keldane better find it. You go with him to the county seat to help him break the news an' to swear to the identity of the body. I want this thing done right. Me an' some of the other boys will happen into town three-four hours behind you."

Suggs and Moelner began to grin. Someone sniggered. Keldane said, "What's the rest of it?"

"When I get in an' hear yore news about findin' my missing puncher," Lothrop smiled, "as man an' sheriff I'll get out a prompt reward for information leadin' to the arrest of Stumpy's murderers."

George Hildermin stirred restlessly. "Ain't there somethin' I can do?"

Lothrop nodded. "Yeah. This is your part, George. When that reward goes out, you step forward to claim it. I'll question you as to why you hadn't come forward sooner, if you knew about this lynchin'. You'll say you were scared of the lynchers an' their friends. I'll ask you if you could swear to their identity. You say yes; the men who swung poor Stumpy were Hootowl Jones an' Lefty Corner and their outfits. Got it?" Hildermin's repulsive countenance showed he had. He looked well pleased at the part he'd been picked to play. His huge jaws spread his wide lips in a grin. "You bet!" he said emphatically.

"How come I didn't get rung in on that job?" Suggs asked. "I'm the gent that ackshully saw the lynchin'."

"Yeah, an' you work for the Two-Pole-Pumpkin. So did Harker," Lothrop said. "That wouldn't do at all. Folks would get suspicious quick. Now Hildermin, here, ain't known t' have no connection with this outfit. He's a outsider, plumb entire. You get the picture?"

CHAPTER XV

SAUCE FOR THE GANDER

BEFORE the Grand Hotel a crowd was breaking up as, on the following afternoon, Guy Antrim rode his tired horse into Socorro. Antrim cast a searching glance across the solemn faces of such men as chanced to pass him. He remarked a certain determined kind of gleam that had not entirely faded from their eyes. He grew aware of a paucity of words; most of these men were silent, tight of lip, and he discerned that as they caught his gaze the eyes of most grew wary, focusing inscrutable looks upon him, and upon his dusty horse. He turned these things over in his mind as he nudged his horse on slowly. He deduced from his cogitations of these things that something serious was afoot, and came to the conclusion that his errand here might not be quite the waste of time he had been deeming it. The very air seemed to hold a sense of tension, of reserved turbulence that recalled to his mind other scenes like this from the past—scenes that made of sleep a restless nightmare, scenes of ominous calm that boded trouble——

He saw a man he recognized, and beckoned him over; waiting with one knee crooked about the horn while he rolled and lit a cigarette, careful to break the match before he tossed it in the dust.

"What's goin' on?" he asked as the man came up.

The fellow shook his head. "The devil's doin's, Kid," he said, and spat disgustedly. "They've organized a Citizens' Protective Association—vigilantes, I call 'em. Stewart's been elected leader."

"Ed Stewart? The owner of the Crazy L, over in Gawdforsaken Valley?"

"That's him. I say he's takin' a lot on himself to come over

here stirrin' up trouble. There'll be some vacant saddles come out of this now, I can tell you. I've seen these things in Alder Gulch. Only reason them fool miners at *Santa Rita del Cobre* ain't organized is on account of Fort McLane bein' so close. An' there's talk of a vigilance committee gettin' under way at Silver City. Imagine that! An' with them soldiers at Fort West bein' practically over their damn noses!"

"I expect maybe those Fort West troopers are plenty busy, what with keepin' their eyes peeled for redskins an' keepin' down mortality at that *Pinos Altos* gold camp," Antrim surmised.

"Mebbe so," the fellow said dubiously. "But it looks to me like this country is gettin' ready t' go t' hell. I reckon I'll cut my stick an' drift to newer pastures."

Antrim observed that it "might not be a bad idea," and earned a hard stare from the man, who growled:

"Them that sows brambles better not be goin' around with bare feet!"

Antrim looked down at his dusty boots. "I still got two-three miles of cowhide under me," he chuckled mirthlessly, and urged his horse toward the Pinto Bar.

When Antrim entered the resort, bent on washing some of the alkali from his system, a lank, rawboned man at the farther end of the bar was keeping savage time with his glass to a raucously howled:

*"Brigham Young is the Lion of the Lord.
He's the Prophet and revealer of his word.
He's the mouthpiece of God unto all mankind,
And he rules by the power of the Word!"*

"Mormon Joe" abruptly stopped and left his music hanging in the air. Nearly every man in the Pinto Bar turned to see what he was peering so ludicrously at. It appeared to be the man who had just pushed inside the swinging doors: a beardless youth, at least six years Antrim's junior, who was clad in blue "store duds" of some Eastern cut. His feet were encased in bright yellow shoes and his head was topped with an elegant light beaver hat, tilted jauntily to display his yellow curls. He was a handsome young fellow, and very nattily dressed.

He looked about the room good-naturedly, bowed to all the company, and started toward the bar. He had almost reached it when his progress was blocked rudely by Mormon Joe, who lurched in front of him with a drunken swagger.

Joe's bloodshot eyes surveyed the youth as though he were some new dance hall girl.

"Well!" he exclaimed, planting hands on hips. "Jes' whar in hell did yuh blow in from?"

The young stranger said, "Why, I just come down from Santa Fé."

"Didn't raise yuh thar, did they?"

"No, indeed. I was not reared in Santa Fé. I came from the East, originally."

"Yuh don't shay! Well, I don't savvy nawthin' about that there East yuh talk about, but I'd allow yuh shure come 'original,' all right." He laid a derisive glance upon the stranger. "I allow that East yuh brag about is some place round the ocean whar they jerks the sun up like they does a anchor. Ain't that right?"

"The sun never sets on Boston, sir."

"Huh? Say! How would yuh like to fight?"

"I don't believe I'd care to," the young stranger replied politely.

The broad grin on the face of Mormon Joe grew huge and wicked. "Listen," he snarled, "I'm the 'riginal wild lobo of the fair Cibolas. When I says 'Fight!' no man in pants denies me!" He glared at the youthful stranger, affecting a ferocious scowl. "I'm the orneriest man in this whole damn country! I'm a bob-tail wouser, than which there ain't no worst any-mile in the whole Apache Nation! I've drunk blood with Victorio; I've spit on Geronimo; I taken more scalps'n Dan'el Boone an' Davvy Crockett rolled inter one! I killed me a depity three months back, an' defied the sheriff t' take me up. I ain't killed no man in this stinkin' hawg-waller yet, but I'm a-goin' to kill yuh if yuh jest open yore mouth!"

The stranger placed a hurried hand across his lips, and Mormon Joe guffawed. Sobering, he snarled as he glared around at the watching faces. Then he swung his glance again to the stranger and gritted: "I'm thinkin' o' feedin' yuh to the ants. Yuh better cut a caper quick! Serve up one o' they eastern jigs, an' cut 'er proud. Hey, Mex—strike up that guit-tar?"

Antrim was minded to step forward and put a stop to this dude-baiting. Anyone acquainted with Mormon Joe knew that only one thing amused him as much as his *singing*—getting a laugh on some stranger. Neither were particularly popular with Socorro's better element. But Antrim was aware that up till now, few citizens among the latter element had

ever dared come between Mormon Joe and his amusement. And for good reason: Mormon Joe was suspected of belonging to the hard case crew who ran things. So now Antrim was minded to interfere in this youthful stranger's behalf.

But as he would have started forward, he caught a curious glint in the young man's eye that made him decide to wait a bit. The stranger seemed no speck perturbed by the bully's threatening bluster. Indeed, Antrim thought, he appeared to relish it.

"If you are intending to use that pistol you are holding, please be careful where you fire. I would hate to have my shoes or clothes damaged."

"You *what!* Damn my eyes, I'm a sight more apt ter puncture yo' mortal tintype! By cripes, I'm a Spanish lobo from the burnip' Jornada. I cut my teeth on Satan's gun barrel. I'm a killer from the headwaters of Bitter Crick, an' by Jericho, I'm like t' kill yuh while I'm at it! Yuh fling a fancy hoof, an' fling 'er quick!"

As Antrim eyed the youth he began to doubt the accuracy of his recent impression. This business should be stopped before someone got badly hurt. He shoved free of the bar and told the Mormon to pull in his horns before they got knocked off.

The stranger looked wonderingly at Antrim. He bowed politely from the waist and thanked him for his good intentions. "But," he said, "this fellow isn't bad. He's just a big overgrown boy that wants to play. A bit full of animal spirits, of course, but——"

Mormon Joe swore loudly. "Git outer my way!" he belowed. "I'm a-goin' to shoot me a man!"

A headlong charge, on the part of the patrons, was instantly precipitated toward open windows and swinging doors. The only ones to hold their places were Antrim, the four members of the vigilance committee, and the youthful stranger.

Antrim's lip curled as he stared after the departing patrons, who were leaving in such precipitous haste. Such scenes as this were nothing new in his experience; he had witnessed many. But his sneer abruptly ironed out as he noted the proposed victim still standing indolently in his tracks, not having budged a fraction. This was new! And there was another difference, he found. The vigilantes were still there and showed no signs of leaving. Well, well. Antrim hunched his shoulders more comfortably against the bar and waited.

The stranger stood quietly, a faint smile on his mouth, watching the cursing Mormon Joe. Nor did he so much as move until the bully's weapon began to focus. In the twinkling of an eye, then, he took a long step forward, with his left hand seizing the desperado's gun-hand at the wrist while his right presented a large-calibred derringer whose muzzle he planted firmly against Joe's quailing stomach. It was swift work and efficient.

In this pose the stranger, as though about to ask a blessing, said, "My dear fellow, stand fast and release your pistol or I shall spill your life blood like dirty water—and just as quick."

Reluctantly Mormon Joe let his gun drop to the floor.

The stranger stepped back a pace. "Now take up your position again at the far corner of the bar where you were when I came in."

As Mormon Joe, muttering abortive curses, obeyed, the stranger beckoned the barman and asked for a cigar. Quietly lighting it, he began to puff enjoyably. The crowd, noting the lack of fireworks, had returned as far as the doors and windows, and from these vantage points stood looking in. Ignoring them, the stranger said:

"Mormon Joe, if you move from there till I call you, it'll not be long until you are shaking hands with Saint Peter—or the keeper of another place."

For several moments longer the stranger puffed appreciatively. Then he strode down the bar and halted before the scowling badman. "Shove your hands above your head and keep them there. I am going to shove the fiery end of this up your nose, my friend, and if you value your life you had better leave it there till it goes out."

He did so and stepped back, presenting the muzzle of his derringer at the bully's stomach in a deadly aim. His eyes were cold as flint, belying the gentle smile upon his lips.

Mormon Joe went pale as ashes. Sweat broke out upon his face and ran down it in great streams that mingled with his tears. But he dared not move his hands.

A great cheer went up from the onlookers, in which was mingled a number of hoots and cat-calls. Antrim saw a few scowls among the audience, but when the eyes of the four vigilantes swept that way, the scowlers vanished.

Antrim passed the vigilantes on his way to the swinging doors. "Who is that young fellow?" he asked guardedly. As guardedly, one of the four said, "That's Ted, ol' Stewart's son."

Jest back from College. Looks like a education can be right handy, sometimes, don't it?"

"If he's wise," Antrim answered, "he'll lose no time in gettin' outa town. Joe's friends'll make mincemeat out of him for this."

The vigilante smiled bleakly. "I don't reckon they will, Kid. A new day has dawned for Socorro. We're aimin' to make this town a place where men won't be scared to bring their wimmen an' kids. Hard cases has run this country long enough. Their number's up, an' if they don't pull stakes right quick, they're not goin' to be in any way to travel."

Antrim shrugged. "Their number's up, but they won't be travellin' yet. It'll take more'n this to scare them out. There'll be blood spilled a-plenty before this country's tamed."

CHAPTER XVI

LOTHROP READS THE SCRIPTURES

LOUNGING on the porch of the Grand Hotel, Antrim, awaiting supper, observed a pair of determined-looking riders jogging their dusty ponies up the road. The drooping sun hung low above the southern shoulder of that yonder mountain, and flung their bobbing shadows on ahead. Antrim watched them absently. His mind was turning over the latest news from Lincoln County, retailed to him by a drummer with "plenty of tongue oil." This news tallied rather closely with that disclosed by a letter from Santa Fé which he'd been handed by the Grand's proprietor half an hour before. He had been wondering, too, why it was he had never met but three of Lothrop's riders during his visits to the Two-Pole-Pumpkin; he'd met Mitch, Suggs, and a man named Rafe. He'd not seen Lothrop's foreman, Purdin. But the Lincoln County matter had been uppermost in his mind when he spotted the pair of riders. "Poor Axtell," he mused, and shrugged. "Middle of a stream ain't what I'd call a rightful place to swap horses."

He dismissed his musings and conjectures then and turned a more careful attention on the two approaching horsemen. He had his badge pinned plainly in sight, and he saw the two men's eyes flick towards its gleam, swing their mounts and make directly toward him. With that canny ability he pos-

sessed to feel out latent values, he sensed a veiled excitement in these newcomers.

The elder was a pale cadaverous man with sunken eyes that were dark and brooding, and great hollows in his cheeks. His companion was a dark-faced man with heavy sideburns and a close-cropped black moustache. Both were hard and capable, efficient-seeming men. He watched them dismounting before the hitch rack. They swung under it and came to a stop at the edge of the three steps leading to the porch.

The elder said in a flat, challenging way, "You the sheriff of this here town?"

"Well, not exactly," Antrim smiled. "I'm one of the deputies. I reckon you'll be findin' the other at the office—it's up the street a place. The sheriff's name is Lothrop."

"That so?" the younger said. "Now I'll be damned if we didn't cover one dusty smear of territory plumb for nawthin', pard. That is, onless the sheriff's here?"

"No, he isn't here right now. Expectin' him, though, in a coupla days."

The pale, cadaverous fellow seemed to be sizing him up. Now he said, as though weighing his words, "I expect you'll do, like enough. You are one of his depities, you say?"

Antrim nodded. "What's up?"

The elder looked at the younger, then both took a guarded glance about. "Well, I'll tell you," the gaunt man said. "Buck here's found a stiff."

Antrim regarded the dark-faced man with a closer interest. "A dead man? Where?"

"Well—" the dark-faced Buck appeared to hesitate. His roving eyes flicked round suspiciously. "Mebbe we better take a walk over towards yore office, sort of. What we're figgerin' to tell hadn't ort to be overheard."

Antrim shrugged. "Just as you please, gents," he agreed, and swung into step beside them as he came out into the still-hot smash of the sun. "My name's Antrim," he said conversationally.

"That so?" Buck asked.

The cadaverous man said, "Glad to meet up with you, Antrim," but did not offer his hand.

These men were cagy, Antrim thought. And yet they seemed to have ridden far to pass on their information; possibly from the neighborhood of Gawdforsaken Valley, judging from what the younger one had let fall. Of course, he could not blame them for being careful; plenty of gents were filling un-

marked graves because of a careless tongue. He studied them covertly with a sidelong glance. There was something—

"This dead man," Buck said abruptly, "had been under sand about ten-twelve days. You know what kinda climate we got here. There was some rocks piled atop his body, but a coyote or some such varmint had got one leg out for a meal. We stumbled across the place accidental-like—I did, rather. It was in what you might call a out-o'-the-way sort of stretch. Seein' that leg sort of roused my itch fer nosin'. I pitched off them rocks an' took a look."

He squinted reminiscently into the sun-flecked distance. When he turned back to Antrim his face was sober. "My pard, here, had been out huntin' some strays. Fact is, we both was. In different direckshuns. When we met up, I told him about this stiff, an' he allowed as how he'd like to take a look. We went back to the place an' I showed 'im. He took one squint an' swore. Why, that's—"

"Ease off," the cadaverous man snapped testily. "Only a fool would name names in this town, an' not even a fool would be so plumb brainless as to go shootin' off his mouth in the middle of the street! Think I wanta play target to hard case lead? What yuh got t' say will keep till we git to the office."

A dull color flushed Buck's cheeks and he shut his mouth.

The journey was completed in a stilted silence. Reaching the adobe building serving as sheriff's quarters and jail, Antrim shoved ahead and led the way inside. Farley, he saw, was still behind the desk where he had left him almost an hour before. Farley was the Socorro deputy; a kind of spineless sort to all appearances.

He roused himself sufficiently to glower at Antrim. "Yuh back again? Cripes! I sh'd think you would be ashamed to show up here after refusin' t' serve that warrant—"

"I," Antrim cut in coldly, "didn't refuse to serve the warrant; I suggested that the matter could wait till the sheriff got here. An' we wore that subject out some while ago. Right now we're figurin' to talk about a dead man. You better listen."

Farley had been a sullen lump against his chair, but Antrim saw him straighten with a swift alacrity when the words "*dead man*" struck his ears. He shot a startled, probing glance at the two men who had followed Antrim into the office. For an instant he seemed paralyzed. Then he gulped and swept a moistening tongue across his lips. "I got t' go uptown a spell," he muttered, getting up. "Got to see Jess—"

"Jess can wait; these strangers mebbe can't. Sit down," Antrim said, and turned his shoulders to the man Buck. "Proceed."

Buck, with an unflattering look at Farley's whitened face, said, "It was like I told you, Antrim. After I'd stumbled across that grave an' got a squint at the stiff's mug, I got to thinkin' mebbe my pard might want to have a look-see, too. He did. He'd been through this country before, two-three years back, an' allowed it might be some fella he knowed. So I took him to the place. He took one look at that stiff an' says, 'Hell! I know that jasper! That's Stumpy Harker, what used t' work for the Two-Pole-Pumpkin brand.'"

"Just like that, eh?"

"As Gawd's my witness, jest like that exackly."

Antrim swung a probing glance on the gaunt man's face. "You couldn't be makin' a mistake, by any chance?"

"Not a chance, Mister. I played stud all night with that gent in Rincon oncet. Two years back come grass, it was. He darn near took my shirt."

The silence thickened with unspoken thoughts, while Antrim weighed the statements carefully. If this tale was true, Lothrop could quit fretting about Stumpy's extended absence; in fact, if this tale was true—Antrim left the thought there. "Two years is quite a spell," he suggested.

"If you ain't figurin' to take my word for it, why that's yore business, I reckon, Antrim. It was Stumpy, though. Come on, Buck, let's get outa here. We was fools t' waste our time."

"Keep your shirt-tails in," Antrim's voice reached out to stop them. "Whether it's Stumpy, or not, it seems like you found a dead man. In which case, you fellows are apt to be needed as material witnesses—"

"To what?" Buck snapped out instantly.

"A coroner's inquest. The law is aimin' to take hold round here an' put a end to some of these killin's. Whenever it gets half a chance, it likes to do things accordin' to Hoyle. You better—"

"To hell with that," the gaunt man growled. "We done our duty as honest citizens by reportin' our find. Whatever else is up t' yuh. We got work of our own to tend tuh. C'mon, Buck."

The pair started for the door, but stiffened to a halt with the muzzles of Antrim's guns against their bellies. Their

faces paled and they stepped back a pace or two. Buck jerked up his chin. "What the hell you mean by that?"

Antrim said, "Just this: You gents are goin' to stay right in this office till Lothrop passes the word that you can go. Better sit down an' make yourselves to home. I ain't expectin' him before tomorrow."

A rousing anger flashed a touch of color into the pale man's cheeks. His bony hands were resting on the crossed gun belts that circled his skeleton hips; gun belts whose holstered weapons were slung butt forward for a cross-arm draw. "Look!" he growled. "I've come more'n fifty miles outa my way an' across a damn' part of that blisterin' Jornada jest to pass on that information. Do you think I'm goin' to be kept from my work another day jest to favor a loco star-packer that ain't got savvy enough to recall he's only the people's servant?"

"That's about it. You an' your friend are goin' to wait till the sheriff gets here."

"By Gawd, we ain't! Yuh can't hold us here like this!" Antrim gave them stare for stare.

"Can't I?"

"The law don't give—"

"The law," Antrim said with a hard and instant grin, "has been altered."

Sheriff Stone Lothrop, accompanied by a number of other men, among whom were Moelner, Rafe, Daggett, and Suggs, rode into town about two hours after dark. They dismounted and racked their horses before the sheriff's office, and observed that there was a light burning inside. They strode to the door, and Lothrop pushed it open. He stopped with indrawn breath upon the threshold. "Well," he drawled. "Well!"

Deputy Sheriff Farley was a sullen lump in the chair behind the desk. Across from him, on a bench against the wall, sat two men in dusty range garb, their faces screwed in scowls that plainly advertised ill-humor, their eyes a-smolder with resentment. Across from them, against the opposite wall, sat Antrim, with a rifle across his knees. There was a lurking gleam of capricious humor in the glance with which he favored the newcomers.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he said, "an' the same to your friends. Come in an' set awhile."

The cadaverous man started to spring to his feet. The crack of Antrim's rifle whipped across the silence. The would-

be riser sank back on the bench with a stifled curse. He put a hand to his ear and it came away red. He stared at the blood with bulging eyes.

"You ain't hurt," Antrim told him soothingly. "I just clipped your ear to remind you that orders is orders in this country—specially when they come from the law. You was told to set till the sheriff give you leave to go. I ain't heard him countermand the order."

The lazy half-smile parted Lothrop's heavy lips. "Hmm," he drawled, "you was prepared to keep 'em quite a spell, I'm thinkin'."

"I was prepared to keep them till you came. They've found a dead man that's like to interest you a heap—they've found the corpse of Stumpy Harker."

A dark flush ran across the bulldog grip of Lothrop's features. His big, rocklike figure seemed to swell and heighten. "They've *what*!"

"They stumbled across the grave of Stumpy Harker," Antrim told him evenly. "Leastwise, they claim it's Harker's body they've found. Allowed it has been under sand twelve days. In this climate, I'd say recognition was easily possible that long—providin' wolves an' buzzards was busy elsewhere. But I figured you'd be wantin' to talk to them yourself."

"You figured right." Lothrop's tone ran wickedly even. He rolled his shoulders round on Buck and Buck's companion. He stared at them, and the smoke-grey surfaces of his eyes showed a hard opacity. "Names—let's have 'em quick!"

"Keldane," said Buck, without reluctance. "My pardner's known as Tombstone."

"What you doin' in this country?"

"Huntin' hawsses. Strays. We work for Cachildo. He runs a hawss ranch beyond Black Mesa."

"An' what makes you think this stiff you found was Harker?"

Antrim, while Buck was explaining, looked at Mitch Moelner's pitted countenance, just in time to catch a peculiar look that passed between the gunman and Buck's pardner, who had been occupying his leisure by tying his neckerchief over his bullet-nicked ear, and grimacing mightily.

Lothrop seemed to be weighing the details of that poker game in which Tombstone had claimed to have been trimmed. A change rippled across his heavy cheeks suddenly and he

drove a suspicious glance at Tombstone that put a cloud of caution across the latter's restless gaze.

"What," Lothrop demanded softly, "terminated that friendly game of draw?"

Tombstone stopped fiddling with his neckerchief abruptly, and the lamplight seemed to accentuate the sunken hollows of his cheeks. The jade green of his glance took on a brighter sheen that hid his thoughts entirely, but did not relax the tautness of his pose. He watched Lothrop with a risen vigilance, Antrim thought.

"Come," Lothrop said. "I want an answer. If you played draw with Stumpy one night in Rincon two years ago, the game must have wound up some way. How?"

"Why, like he told you," Tombstone said, as though surprised at such obtuseness. "Stumpy damn nigh took my shirt."

"Let's see," Lothrop mused. "There was you, an' Stumpy, an'—who else was in that game?"

A slow wind stirred the hair that fell to Tombstone's open collar. He shoved his hands in his pockets, then pulled them out. The lines of his graveyard face etched deeper and a pulse throbbed against his bony forehead. "There was a couple saddle tramps. I don't recollect their monickers."

"One of them was a big fella, wasn't he?" pressed Lothrop, smiling. "A big Mex known as Concha? A fella that was gettin' trimmed even worse than you was an' that made a ugly sug—"

"Great Gawd!" Tombstone gritted, and his frame slouched lower and tensed.

Lothrop's grin licked a thin line across his mouth. "I thought so. Well, it's past an' gone. No need to go into it now. I just wanted to be sure you was the fella I had in mind. I reckon you would know Stumpy if you seen him. I'm acceptin' yore identification of the corpse. I s'pose you buried him again?"

"Yeah," Buck answered, when it seemed his partner was too amazed. "We covered 'im over an' piled rocks atop to mark the spot. Tombstone whittled a little cross of greasewood. Said it wasn't right that a gamblin' fool like Stumpy should be forgot."

Details, Antrim was thinking. Corroborating details; the little things that a less careful mind would have overlooked.

"That's right," Lothrop told Buck grimly. "He ain't goin' to be forgot. How was he killed?"

"There was marks on his neck," Buck said, "that looked like rope scars. We figger he was dragged by a rope from wherever they caught him to where they aimed to plant him. There was little bits of sagebrush in his clenched hands— There was a bullet hole between his eyes an' no gun in his leather. We figger they shot him after they'd dragged him into the gulch."

Antrim could picture perfectly Stumpy's outthrust hands clawing at bushes, rocks, prickly pear—anything, in the fierce agony of that awful progress at the end of some skunk's rope. He could visualize the murderer, too, as with a sneer the fellow put a Colt's slug between his moaning victim's eyes. The pair had been well drilled.

Lothrop's lips drooped dangerously at the corners; the eyes beneath his heavy lids were bitter bright. "By Gawd," he swore hoarsely, "this killin's got to stop! We'll see whether lives can be snuffed like guttered candles! *Farley!*" The change in Lothrop's tone made that deputy jump. "You go get that damned printer out of his bed an' have him run off a bunch of handbills. We're offerin' five hundred dollars for any information that'll lead to the arrest or death of Stumpy's murderers. If the county won't stand for it, I'll foot the bill myself. *Jump!* damn you! I want action!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE HAIR ON A FROG

KELDANE and Tombstone were told that they might consider themselves at liberty so long as they stayed within the confines of the town. But Lothrop warned that if they attempted to leave Socorro, and were caught in such an attempt, they would be placed under immediate arrest and locked in jail for safekeeping. They were, he said, material witnesses, and as such he proposed to have them handy.

Farley had been gone on his errand ten minutes when the rest of them filed from the office. They gathered by the hitch rack where a man in merchant's garb stood facing Lothrop enquiringly.

"I expect you are the gentleman I'm seeking," this stranger said. "You're Sheriff Lothrop, aren't you?"

Lothrop made a high and bulky shape where he stood be-

side the soldier-straight erectness of the merchant. The light from the office windows lay strongly on the latter's face, while Lothrop's was in the dark, and was made even more unreadable as to expression by the downpulled brim of his Stet-hat. But Antrim guessed at the close scrutiny Lothrop was giving the man, and was not surprised when Lothrop nodded with a sort of saturnine indifference and started toward his horse.

The merchant laid a detaining hand on Lothrop's arm. "Just a moment, sir," he said politely. "I have a little matter I'd admire to discuss with you, if you can spare a moment for a stranger. I'm Thaddeus Fischer. I own the Freighter's Exchange over to Carrizozo."

Lothrop turned his big shoulders slowly. The light played across his features now, and Antrim could see the lazy half-smile on his lips. But his sleepy lids were lower and effectively concealed the expression of his eyes. "Sure," he said tolerantly. "What can I do for you, Fischer?"

Fischer faced him earnestly, and Antrim now saw that he had a small carpet bag tucked under his off arm. "Lothrop," the merchant said, "I've been told that the life of a man with money in this town ain't worth the flick of a bull's tail. I don't know whether some practical jokers have picked me as a gullible sucker or not, but I think it best to take precautions. I've got twelve thousand dollars in this bag that I'm figuring to take to Santa Fé."

Lothrop's face was inscrutable, the half-smile still fixed upon it. "Well," he admitted, "I expect this town may seem a little wild, perhaps, to a stranger. But it ain't so bad to folks that know it. I do my best to keep it civilized. I expect you'll be all right."

"Maybe so. But you are the sheriff, an' I'd take it as a mighty big favor if you'd condescend to take care of this money for me till I'm ready to leave."

Lothrop massaged his bristly jaw with one big hand while eyeing the merchant dubiously. "I'll tell you, Fischer; I'd like mighty much to oblige you, but I'm not expectin' to be here overlong. I'm hopin' to start out on a manhunt right soon."

"No matter," Fischer said with perseverance. "I'm not expectin' to stop here overlong myself. An' I'd feel a heap easier in my mind if you'd take care of it for me."

Lothrop studied him briefly. "Well, shucks," he said. "If you feel that way about it, I'll oblige you. You'll want a receipt, I guess?"

Fischer laughed. "No, let's not be bothered with a receipt, Sheriff. I'm not reckonin' a writing will be necessary between you an' me. I couldn't imagine any gent with gall enough to try stealin' it from you."

Lothrop chuckled, tucked the bag under his arm, and started down the walk. "Any time you want it," he called back over a shoulder, "just let me know." Moelner, Suggs, Rafe, and the others started after him. Keldane looked at Tombstone, Tombstone shrugged, and they too turned and went striding after the others. A number of onlookers stepped out of the shadows and clustered about Fischer. Antrim heard one of them contemptuously call the merchant a fool. He saw Fischer grin. "Oh, I don't know," the merchant said, "I couldn't think of no other place where t'would be as safe. He'll hand it back, all right. I can go get some sound shut-eye, now."

Antrim breakfasted early the next morning, then headed for the sheriff's office to learn what might be scheduled for the day. As he dragged his big silver spurs along the plank walk, his roving eyes saw how the bright metallic sunlight washed the walls of the frame and adobe buildings, and provoked sharp contrasts of white and black. The sky at that early hour was a broad smear of flawless blue, but as the day advanced he knew the rising heat would throw a lead-colored haze between it and the earth. It was always so. Already there was a dry smell to the air—a burned-out dryness, wherein were mingled the odors of oil and sweaty leather. A faint tangy wind blowing off the sage stirred the tawny locks beneath his hat.

He paused on his way to enter the Pinto Bar. The place was deserted save for a half-asleep bartender and a swamper who was lethargically resting on his broom. The air in there was close and sultry and contained a sour smell that was disagreeable to Antrim. He went out and continued toward the sheriff's office. There were three horses hitched to the rail before it; Moelner's, Lothrop's, and a strange piebald mustang. "Lothrop must be huntin' the proverbial worm," was Antrim's saturnine thought.

He entered and lounged against the wall beside the door. Lothrop's thick wide chest made a heavy shadow against the opposite wall. On one corner of the desk sat Moelner, thinly smiling. A stranger stood between them and turned curiously at the sound of Antrim's entrance. He was not a prepossess-

ing man; he had pale, watery eyes that were bulgy and a mouth whose width was like a sabre slash across his wrinkled face. His jaws were truly massive, and when the fellow spoke Antrim decided that "repulsive" was the kindest term one could apply to him.

They had evidently been awaiting him. Lothrop said, "I told Mitch you'd be along here any minute. Knew you wasn't the one to laze yore life away in a bed. Too much get-up-an'-go about you, Kid. Look, I want you to meet this gent. His name's Hildermin. He saw Stumpy's killin'."

Antrim pulled his attention from Lothrop, laying it on Hildermin with a cold, deliberation insolence. "Some folks take a long time to realize a thing," he said.

"All fellas ain't as quick on the trigger as you are, Kid," Lothrop murmured soothingly. "Besides, Hildermin was scared if he talked the killers' friends would blow a winder through his skull. You can't hardly blame him for that."

Antrim's mouth took on a thin, sardonic curve, and his red brows lifted mockingly. "Is the five hundred bucks reward goin' to stop them?"

"You're kinda proddy this mornin', ain't you, Kid? Somebody step on yore pet corn?"

"I got a notion someone's fixin' to," Antrim's drawl rolled back an answer. "This town's full of fools." He crossed to the desk and sat down on the corner opposite Moelner, stretching his lean frame forward, hooking his bootheels over an open drawer, resting his sinewy arms with their long slender-fingered hands across his knees. Hunkered there, he flicked a cynical upward glance at Hildermin's face. "Who you claimin' downed that puncher?"

"Lefty Corner an' Hootowl Jones between 'em."

Antrim made no answer to that for the moment. He sat there quietly, his hands idle and his head inclined toward the floor. In that position he asked, "Where's Farley? An' Suggs an' Rafe?"

"They've gone down to swear out a warrant—two of 'em in fact. No use puttin' this off. I've still got that rustlin' warrant t' serve," Lothrop muttered, slapping his pocket. "It goes against the grain, sort of, to think yore own neighbors could be that kind of skunks, but facts is facts. I reckon Jones an' Corner have gone plumb bad. Tell him, Hildermin, what you told us."

"I was ridin' through Gawdforsaken Valley, twelve days ago come tomorrer, on my way back here from Fort Craig. I

guess you know where Stumpy was buried? Well, I was ridin' along the far side of a ridge. Jest as I topped 'er, I seen two fellas down in a gulch on the other side heatin' a iron in a little fire. They had a calf hog-tied close by. I was screened from their sight by a handful of dwarf pines, so I decides to watch awhile an' see what's up. Them fellas was Corner an' Jones.

"All of a sudden, Jones drops his iron an' wheels, draggin' at his gun. Corner pops offn that calf's head an' reaches for his rifle. I'd been watchin' 'em so plumb interested I hadn't heard a thing. But now I hears horse hooves comin' hollity-larrup. It was Stumpy—yuh could see his elbers flappin'. He had a way o' ridin', Stumpy had, which was all his own. I reaches fer my long gun an' then recollects that I'd left the fool thing to home. A six-gun, at that range, wouldn'ta been no more effective than a pea-shooter! I seen there was nothin' fer me t' do but watch in the hopes o' bein' able to bring them devils to their just reward later."

Hildermin cleared his throat and looked slanchways at the others to see how they were taking it. Lothrop and Moelner seemed impressed. Antrim had his head down and it was not possible to guess at his expression.

"Them rustlers was layin' lead all around Stumpy now. Seemed impossible they could miss so frequent. I was beginnin' to wonder if they was only tryin' t' scare him when his horse took a sudden stagger an' went end over end, throwin' Stumpy clean away. I figgered t' see Stumpy up an' givin' 'em tarnashun fury, but he never moved. Just lay there stunned-like. I reckon he musta struck a rock or somethin'. Jones an' Corner comes runnin' up with their guns held ready. I couldn't hear a thing they said, but they was sure doin' a pile of talkin'. Then Jones goes over to Stumpy's dead nag an' gits his rope from the saddle. Corner grabs it outen his hand an' slips the noose round Stumpy's neck, Stumpy never liftin' a finger—which proves t' my mind he wasn't conscious. Jones goes an' gets their broncs then an' they climbs aboard 'em an' heads on down the gulch, draggin' poor Stumpy after 'em. They hadn't gone ten steps when they stops an' Corner turns round in his saddle. He looks back at Stumpy an' laffs. Then they kick in their spurs an' off they goes again. Stumpy had come to by now, all right—yuh could tell it by the way he was clawin' at anything that come within his reach. It was pitiful, I can tell yuh, gents, an' it fair made my heart bleed for him. When they

got down by that place where them two fellas found him, that damned Corner draws his pistol an' lets him hev it!" Hildermin dragged a grimy sleeve across his face. "Only the distance kep' me from goin' down an' revengin' Stumpy then an' there. I tell yuh gents, that scene's been hauntin' me ever since!"

Antrim stared long at the floor. When he looked up there was a frosty, ironical glint in his hard blue glance. "For sheer hauntin' power," he remarked dustily, "I'd say a fat reward had it all over a scene like that."

Hildermin's face bloated with anger, going red and white by turns. Yet, seemingly, he hadn't the guts to show an active resentment, though his right hand rested not three inches from his holstered weapon.

Uncurling, Antrim slid off the desk. His lean, hard shape made a high presence in the room. Moelner's gaze was on him, returning his mocking look sneer for sneer. But Lothrop's tough and heavy cheeks registered no change. Lothrop said in his soothing drawl, "No use goin' off like that, Kid. He done his duty accordin' to his lights—"

"Yeah." Antrim's dusty tone was wicked. "Their wicks need trimmin' bad." There was a sultry anger in the glance he drove at Lothrop. "An' they ain't the only ones that do, by Gawd!"

Lothrop's high blood laid a dark flush across his cheeks. His burly shoulders tautened visibly, and a savage restlessness stirred his heavy lips. Yet he did not speak at once, and when he did his tough face smiled thinly and the expression of his eyes and mouth changed instantly.

"Shucks, Kid," he said, "because this fella didn't do what you or me mighta done under them circumstances is no reason for us to go on the prod. You an' me see too much alike for us to fallin' out over some other hombre's peccadillos. Go take a ride an' cool yoreself off. What you are needin' is time for reflection. You meet us here at ten o'clock. I'll have a posse rounded up by then an' we'll be ready to go."

Mockery swam in the hard glance Antrim swept across the three of them. Then he turned his back contemptuously and went striding through the door and out into the hot morning sun.

When the clank of his spurs had died away, Mitch Moelner snarled, "I'm goin' to gut-shoot that cocky son yet!"

Lothrop said, "You talk too much, Mitch. Keep still now for a minute while I think—"

"He's onto us," Hildermin growled, but Lothrop shut him up with a heavy look. He had seen Antrim's temper burning like a white flame in his eyes, and he had suddenly realized the utter recklessness of this man he had to deal with. He had sought originally to align Antrim with his purposes as the safer of two dangerous courses. It was patent that if Antrim was not for him, the youthful leather-slapper would most certainly be against him. It had been recognition of this fact that had caused Lothrop to make a deputy of him at the outset. As to his identity Lothrop had had no reliable knowledge, nor at that time had he cared. Now, however, he was beginning to wonder. In the last few hours he had seen that in Antrim he had to do with a two-edged tool, a powerful weapon that might cut either way. And without warning. Antrim was a man, he found, who could not be led, and a man whose latent antagonism was now become a visible thing. Was it born, he wondered, of jealousy, or of some deeper thing?

Lothrop shook his head. Somewhere along the line he, the man who admitted of no mistakes in judgment, had certainly made one. Yet having witnessed how the Kid's violent impulses could drive and get the best of him, how wrath could swell the long lean muscles under his shirt, and how his passions were capable of carrying him past all caution, Lothrop saw how he still might bring the man to heel—or bring him down, should it seem the wiser move.

"We won't be breakin' with him just yet," Lothrop said evenly. "He's a good respectable gent to help keep up appearances. Folks know he's a gun slammer, all right, but they kind of look up to him, seems like, on account of him bein' so quick to aid the underdogs, an' bein' so almighty anxious to see that every gent gets a square break. That's the way I gave that fool Brazito at Rincon a star to pack; he was hellimoneous strong on the same subject, an' a damn sight more dangerous to me than Shane, the vigilante leader."

He swung his big shoulders to the door as Rafe came in. There was an excited glint in Rafe's keen eyes. Rafe said, "Them damn things are takin' hold, Stone. Thirty of the law-an'-order fools in this town subscribed to an obligation of mutual support an' protection yesterday afternoon in front of the Grand Hotel. That means—vigilantes! They've adopted resolutions an' call themselves the Citizens' Protec-

tive Committee. An' Ed Stewart has been elected leader! Stewart's kid an' four of the members of this precious gang made a monkey out of Mormon Joe in the Pinto Bar, an' he's pulled out of the country—left last night!"

Lothrop's laugh had no mirth in it. "So they want law an' order, do they? All right, we'll give 'em a bellyful!" He lifted his chin from his chest, and his glance was filled with a hard determination. "We'll kill several birds with the same shot. We'll get Curly Ives an' show him men can't hold other gents up in public an' then beat their heads in with a gun barrel because their pockets didn't have enough change to satisfy. We'll get Ives an' see him hung; it'll discourage competition an' win back the public trust. We'll make an example of him, an' mebbe by then I'll have thought of a fitting way to deal with the Kid."

"If you'd listened to me, you'd never have got mixed up with him," Moelner sneered. "An' if you hadn't brought him into the roost, Ruidosa would still be alive. By Gawd, I'll pay him for that yet!"

Rafe, expecting a sharp rebuke, swung his glance on Lothrop and was surprised to find that the sheriff was not listening. He was sitting very still with a faraway light in the eyes behind his sleepy lids. And then, even as Rafe watched, the familiar lazy half-smile formed on Lothrop's heavy mouth, and his leonine head began an almost imperceptible movement as though in agreement with something that was in his mind.

Rafe said, "What is it, Chief?"

"I was thinkin' of a number of things the Kid has let drop in his palaverin' with me," Lothrop answered with a chuckle that came from deep inside him. "Mitch jogged my mem'ry when he mentioned Ruidosa. I reckon the Kid's packin' some grudge he hasn't advertised— Yes," he nodded with a definite satisfaction, "I believe I've got that hombre pegged."

"Well, then what?"

"I'll tell you, Mitch. If I'm right, an' I've got a hunch I am, I sabe how we can wind him up any time we want."

"I can wind him up right now, if you'll give the word," Mitch said with a harsh malignity.

A slow humor mellowed the bulldog grip of Lothrop's features as he rose, adjusting his gun-belt. "Well, well, there'll be time enough for that when we get these other matters tended to. Go fetch the boys, Rafe. We're goin' after Curly Ives."

"How you figgerin' to come up with him?" Moelner eered. "Goin' to spread salt around?"

Lothrop laughed in a pleased manner. "I can find an' *get* anythin' I want in this country, Mitch. What the hell do you think I've been payin' spies for?"

Striding past the public corrals, Antrim sought the rear of the livery stable owned by Clem Holt. There he found a weathered bench against the wall and sat down, placing his broad shoulders against the hot wood to take advantage of what little shade the eaves afforded. The burned-dry air held the mingled and familiar odors of dust and hay and horse manure, of harness leather and gun oil. He folded his arms across his high chest and squinted his eyes against the glare off the baking desert. He considered the things that were in his mind.

He recalled what the man in Rincon, the rancher from Lake Valley, had told him concerning Smith's Train and the Lothrop rider who had been seen around Silver City and Fort Bayard. Smith's train had not arrived in Socorro, nor had it reached Engle even. He had made discreet inquiries of a man just recently come from there. It was not hard to put fact and fact together now, in the light of what the Lake Valley rancher had told him. Smith's Train, beyond a doubt, had fallen either into the hands of the gang that was terrorizing this country, or had been ambushed by Geronimo's warriors. Antrim did not consider the latter possibility more than two seconds.

He recalled the chase of Moak, and Moak's screamed, "Gawdlemighty, Stone! Don't shoot!" *Stone*—a kind of familiar form of address that seemed to Antrim as he turned it over in his mind. It savored of past association—

The mutations of his exploring thoughts next took his mind to that scene of half an hour before when Keldane and the gaunt Tombstone had told Stone Lothrop of their finding of Harker's body. When recounting that episode to *him*, the game Tombstone had played with Stumpy that night in Rincon had been *stud*; but when going over it for the sheriff's benefit, the game, curiously enough, had become *draw*. Yet the pair had been well drilled—he gave them credit. The whole thing had run off as smooth as butter. The only real mistake that any of them had made had been the over-thoroughness of the precautions to effect an air of disinterest on the part of Tombstone and his partner.

But why should they feel the need of being clothed with

an air of disinterest? Or of having their acts so clothed? Antrim's eyes sharpened thoughtfully as he considered the matter.

With suspended judgment he proceeded to the matter for Purdin's accusation of Jones and Corner. Purdin was Lothrop's foreman—did that hold any significance? Well, whether or no, the accusation appeared to have been well bolstered by current rumors. And Purdin had sworn out a warrant; Antrim had seen it there on Farley's desk.

A part of the testimony concerning Harker's death had definitely involved Jones and Corner—not alone in a killing, but in rustling, too. And rustling was what Purdin accused them of.

Antrim slid off the bench with a queer look in his suddenly narrowed eyes. He was well aware of how the practice of "sleepering" calves was carried on, and knew that it required no altering of brands. Nor did the gentle art of mavericking. Such practices were indulged on animals which had never worn a brand. He understood that a sleeper was a calf which had been ear-marked with its owner's proper mark and left to run with its herd until after the round-up, when the thief would cull it out, slap his own brand upon it, alter the ear-marks and drive it off to some spot where his own critters ranged. And a maverick, he knew, was an overlooked and therefore unbranded critter whom the first gent that came across it was very apt to regard as his own property, and so mark it. That many a man mislaid a maverick on purpose was common knowledge. But such practices, in that country, although unpopular, were not considered downright rustling.

Purdin had called Jones and Corner rustlers. And his charge was borne out of Hildermin's testimony—if a man could put any faith in it. Which Antrim did not. But it was Antrim's notion that none are so quick to point the finger of guilt at others as the guilty.

Squatting on his bootheels, and still with that peculiar glint in his squinted eyes, he sketched four brands in the sand with an index finger: a Long H; a Cinch Ring; a Two-Pole-Pumpkin; and a Crazy L. He regarded these marks for some time in a thoughtful silence. Then, leaning forward, he superimposed one brand upon the other three. None of those brands would cover Lothrop's, but—as a result of his alterations, Antrim now had not four brands before him, but four more or less perfect specimens of a single brand.

Slowly, as he got to his feet, a sardonic grin twisted the

width of Antrim's lips. "I reckon," he muttered softly, "I better go take a look at Stumpy's corpse."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LONG H JAMBOREE

Two weeks passed; two dusty, hot, and busy weeks through which the tempers of men flared high and frequently, and their nerves drew taut as bow strings, and the wicked violence of their acts increased almost in proportion with the number of newcomers to the Territory. Chuckwagon fires lit the nights in forty places as the fall round-up gathered beef for market and branded late calves and those overlooked in the spring work. The gather was accomplished without that deliberation and care traditionally exercised upon such occasions, for no man knew when or where rustlers might strike, and none cared to take one single more chance than necessary. Troops of cowboys rode the range, breaking into small parties, and breaking again until these units were scattered and each man was separated by distances that varied according to the country. Cattle were gathered by ones, twos, groups, and bunches; all being shoved to the designated holding spots where later these herds were worked. Day by day more beef was cut. Each coulee, canyon, foothill, and flat was culled with a feverish speed and the combings driven in. A few mavericks might be missed in this rush—but they were being missed anyway. These circle riders worked on the principle that the few gotten on the run were a damned sight more than would be gathered if they worked more carefully, and consequently more slowly.

Each passing night saw more reps and straymen, as the riders from distant outfits were called, cutting their drifts from the day herds, catching up their strings from the remuda, packing camp beds and personal plunder, and "dragging it for home."

Each herd had its picked guard at night: killpecker, graveyard shift, and cock-tail. Each man stayed wide awake on his job, and it was no sinecure. The rains had come, the long drought was broken. The punchers sang their "hymns" as in opposite directions they circled the bedded herd, not daring to smoke, for the cattle were restless and the sudden

flare of a match might set them off. A stampede was damned expensive, in beef, in cash, and in body. In these nights of sheeted rain, the cattle were so spooky that a man might ride a mile to spit. The most commonplace thing would startle them.

While the round-up progressed, old friends would meet and yowl at each other; pranks and horse-play were common, despite the seriousness of the occasion and the shortness of men's tempers. Bad blood boiled with irritating frequency, and gun fights were not uncommon. The outfits moved on from place to place, leaving behind their blackened campfires, their tin cans and broken bottles, and the ground deep-cut with the scars and furies of the chore.

Nor were things at a standstill on the trails. Many a venturesome man traveling across country with a loaded poke was left in an unmarked grave, and none the wiser. In the towns the shootings grew more brazen, barroom brawls increased in frequency till not a night passed without a dozen on each bill of fare. It was an age of turbulence and only the tough survived.

Lothrop and his posse were off scouring the country for sign of Ives; they found much "sign," but Ives proved as elusive as the rainbow's end—or the pot of gold supposed to be in its vicinity. Always the posse would arrive upon the scene of his latest adventure after the wily renegade had yanked his pin.

The rancher had gotten his bag of money from Lothrop and departed with three companions on the trail to Santa Fé. Along that trail two days later, he had been found by a freighter with his head bashed in, the bag gone, and a bloody axe laying across his body. The bodies of his three companions were also there, and likewise.

Antrim, on his way to have his look at Stumpy's corpse, found a dead man hanging to a cottonwood at the valley's edge. A note had been stabbed to the tree with a bowie knife: "We don't savvy how many examples are goin' to be necessary to learn gents to keep their irons off other gents' critters, but all will be provided that are needful."

Antrim had cut the man down and buried him, leaving the rope hanging from the limb and the knife with its grizzly message still impaled. He piled rocks atop the grave to mark it. When he mounted, then, he headed straight for the Long H of Hootowl Jones.

Jones was not glad to see him, if the expression on his bony face was any criterion. His eyes swept the backtrail and returned to Antrim grimly. He did not invite him to dismount, as he had upon a previous occasion, and there was a sulky brilliance to his eyes. His lips were a white-rimmed gash, so tightly closed did he hold them.

Antrim said, "Jones, you been losin' any cattle?"

The rancher gave him a long cold stare. His voice came light and frosty. "It's none of yore damn' never-mind, but you might's well know. My tally shows I'm short six hundred critters."

Antrim listened beyond the words for those things Jones wasn't telling. He could feel unseen eyes boring hotly on him, and guessed they peered above the sights of rifles. He let his glance drift casually about and observed many places where a man—or men—might lie concealed with a long gun cuddled to his shoulder.

There was a cold crick in Antrim's back; he hunched his shoulders a little forward, but it would not leave nor diminish. It was born of his knowledge of the temper of the times and of the hatred these men must bear anyone connected with Stone Lothrop. It made his skin crawl with expectation of the spat of lead, and of what that spat would bring him.

There was a rider coming across the flat at a steady lope, but Antrim's glance hung fixedly on Jones. "Been hangin' any cow-thieves lately?"

Jones faced him stiffly, hands at sides, his fingers spread; his gaunt form threw a dark, foreshortened shadow on the hard-packed ground. Smoke stirred in the sulky brilliance of his gaze. "I don't do fool things, Mister."

"Meanin' you ain't been 'tendin' any necktie socials?"

"Meanin' I ain't answerin' any questions," Jones said drily.

Antrim heard the approach of a horse behind him, but did not turn. Not even when he heard its hoof-pound cease, nor when its rider growled:

"Yuh want I should pot 'im, Hoot?"

Jones appeared to consider. "No," he said, "Not yet, I guess. Know him, Lefty?"

The newcomer wheeled his bronc around the horse of Antrim. He sat his saddle, a fat tub of a man, eyeing Antrim insolently. "No. What's he doin' here—who is he?"

Jones' eyes flicked the question straight at Antrim. Antrim's left hand drew his vest apart. The sun smashed re-

flections from the metal there. He watched the narrowing of Jones' thin lids. "The name's Antrim—if that means anything to you."

Corner snorted, "The hell it is!"

On Jones' forehead a vein pulsed heavily. He said, "That piece of tin you're packin' don't mean a thing to us. I never did cotton to one-man law—particular the kind Stone Lothrop stands for. It's time this country got a new deal—an' it's goin' to get one."

"I expect you mean a vigilante deal," Antrim said, and caught a blur of motion off to the left. He turned deliberately in his saddle and sent a long keen stare in that direction. The bunk-house door was standing open. In it lounged a big man, a man almost as big and tough and solid as Lothrop. A man who met his stare and returned it, smiling grimly.

Antrim said, "You might as well come over here, Ed." Like that; then he added with slow irony, "An' bring your friends—they won't want to miss this."

Stewart came trotting across the yard, his big shoulders rolling heavily. Six others came behind him: dark clad fellows with sombre faces and a cold, efficient look. Stewart halted to the left of Antrim, and his men deployed to either side.

Jones said with an audible touch of insolence, "Get on with it."

"I guess that warrant ain't been served."

Corner growled, "What warrant?" and stood eyeing him suspiciously.

"The warrant chargin' you an' Jones with swingin' wide loops."

"Rustling!" bellowed Corner. "Who the hell says we been?"

"Purdin—the Two-Pole-Pumpkin foreman."

Corner swung with an oath. "I told you fools that outfit wouldn't take that lyin' down——"

"*Slap a latigo on that dam' jaw!*" Jones snarled, and Corner subsided sullenly.

Antrim grinned. "No sense takin' his head off. I know a sight more than he could tell me, now. Anyway," his eyes swept the ring of watchful faces as he paused to get their full attention, "this rustlin's a side issue now, as far as you're concerned. A warrant's been sworn out chargin' you with murder. I kind of reckoned you might be surprised."

All at once the stillness of those men went thick and cur-

dly; there was a feeling there that scraped the nerves like a rasp. Antrim felt it, and a cold grin fired up his face and made it reckless. "You don't cotton much to that, I reckon."

Behind the spiralling smoke of his cigarette, Jones' eyes stared sharply from angular, squeezed-down lids. He snapped the butt away, and his mouth showed a stiff, grim line. "That's a hell of a joke," he said.

"Yeah—ain't it?" Antrim swung his grin on Stewart where he stood with half-closed eyes. "Some gents found Stumpy Harker. Found him buried about two miles from here. There was a window in his skull."

That startled them. Jones' sombre face went blank. Corner's mouth fell open. The glint in Stewart's eyes changed, and changed again—brashly. The forms of Stewart's men slumped lower, the muscles flattened along their jaws.

"So you come here figurin' to trail us in." There was dust in Jones' tone; there was smoldering flame in his brittle glance.

Antrim said evenly, "I don't condemn a man until I have the proof. But you haven't got the picture yet. Harker's neck showed a rope burn— An' his neck was broke. In fact, he was dead when that bullet struck him."

Antrim's face raked each tautened face with close interest. He caught a risen vigilance in Jones' pale eyes. Corner's jaw had closed, but his cheeks were ashen and there was a tremor in the hands across the horn. Stewart's men were steady, watchful, dependable—they were waiting for Stewart's sign. Stewart's glance at Antrim showed a grim amusement.

"Well?" Jones grunted.

Antrim's eyes met Stewart's coldly. "Why was Harker hung?"

Stewart's glance had been on him with a covert speculation. But with Antrim's words, the expression of his eyes and mouth changed instantly. Corner let out a frightened bleat. With a vicious oath Jones drove a curling hand to his hip.

Antrim's voice struck the stillness with an impact: "First man touchin' leather'll take on lead poisonin' 'fore he can yell 'Jack Robinson.' Now go ahead an' draw!"

The men's eyes dropped from Antrim's face to the guns staring wickedly from his hands. No man had seen them shucked from leather, yet there they were, coldly naked and darkly gleaming.

A chill wind ran its icy breath across the valley, pasting the shirts across men's torsos, stirring the hair that hung beneath their hats, cooling their gathered anger.

Antrim jeered, "C'mon—draw, if it's fight you're wantin'." "I guess it ain't just now," Stewart drawled.

"You show good sense," Antrim murmured as, with a swift blur of motion, he returned his guns to their holsters. A grin streaked across his lips. "May interest you to know that Lothrop's got a witness to Stumpy's killin'. A man who claims to have been watchin' Jones an' Corner taggin' a calf with a runnin' iron when Stumpy came chargin' hellity-larrup onto the scene. This gent claims Corner an' Jones opened up an' downed Harker's bronc, throwin' Harker clear an' stunnin' him. He says Corner then slipped a noose round Stumpy's neck, then they got aboard their cayuses an' dragged 'im down the gulch a piece. He claims Stumpy came to durin' the process an' begged for mercy—that Corner just laughed an' shot him through the head."

"That witness is a liar!" Jones snarled.

In the subsequent hush Antrim watched the men's faces toughening up, saw the turgid rage that lay behind each narrowed pair of eyes, felt the tempestuous surge of the hot blood roaring through their arteries.

He saw Jones' eyes gleaming through a scarlet fog, and heard Stewart's soft, "An' so?"

"So I'm hankerin' to know," he answered evenly, "why you boys hanged Stumpy."

After a pause during which the tension slacked a little, Stewart observed, "That means you ain't puttin' a heap of store by Lothrop's witness."

"Might mean that."

"An' since you ain't," Stewart went on, ignoring his interruption, "I'd admire to know just what give you the notion we hung Stumpy."

Antrim's slow smile uncovered a gleaming line of hard white teeth. "You ain't denyin' it, are you?"

Stewart cleared his throat. "Right now we're fixin' to get at how you got the notion that we did. From what things did you draw that opinion?"

"Stumpy's dead, ain't he?"

Stewart's shoulders stirred impatiently. "Quit dodgin', Kid, an' give me this thing straight——"

Jones broke through his words with a sudden curse. "Did I hear you call him 'Kid?' " Jones' tone was brittle. "Kid what?"

"Smoke-wagon Kid," Antrim said, and matched the closeness of the other's glance.

Jones' face went a little greyish under its deep bronze; sweat gleamed suddenly along his cheeks, and his eyes were full of a straining care. His lips went firmly shut, and he kept them that way grimly.

Antrim's gaze swung to Stewart. "Is it a trade?"

"I'll swap," Stewart said, and reached up his hand as he stepped in beside Antrim's horse. Antrim knew that old trick of the Texas gunmen, but he believed he'd measured Stewart correctly and did not hesitate to grip the rancher's hand. Stewart stepped back and Antrim explained:

"Two gents came into Socorro couple of weeks back an' handed out a fancy line about stumblin' over the grave of Stumpy Harker. They found the grave; I've checked up—seen it myself. One of them swore to the corpse bein' Stumpy, an' to prove his point—him being more or less a stranger to this country—mentioned having been trimmed at poker by Stumpy some two years ago. They told the story to me the first time, an' the game this fella played with Harker was stud. When they recounted it to the sheriff, the game had become draw. The sheriff threw in some substantiatin' incidents to bolster the thing more. All three of 'em was razor-slick in their parts. An' all three of 'em," he finished dustily, "was lyin'."

"It wasn't Stumpy?" asked Corner.

"It was Stumpy. I buried him deeper, but you can look if you've a mind to. The point is, I knew Stumpy myself—an' I never knew him to play cards."

Stewart nodded thoughtfully. Jones breathed, "An'——?"

"I kept my suspicions to myself. Lothrop puts up a reward of five hundred bucks for information leadin' to the arrest or death of Stumpy's killers. Next mornin'," Antrim's eyes met Jones' with a cold humor, "a fella named Hildermin comes to the office to claim the reward. He tells how he witnessed you an' Corner polishin' Stumpy off."

Jones' mouth twisted and the sulky brilliance of his half-closed eyes sharpened up. Stewart chewed at his moustache. Corner snarled, "The lyin' pole-cat!"

Stewart said, "I'm surprised they ain't had a posse here to serve their warrants."

"They're busy chasin' Curly Ives right now. After they get Ives they'll be comin' after you boys. Leastways, that's what Lothrop's plannin'."

Stewart eyed him shrewdly. "You think different?"

Antrim scowled, and shot Stewart a keen look. He drew a long breath. "Lothrop's goin' after Ives first because he's a thinkin' man who keeps an uncommon sharp eye for details. He's got pipe laid pretty well for you gents. But he wants to be certain there ain't no hitch or kick-back. He's goin' after Ives now because he figures that destroyin' Ives will discourage competition, and because it will win over to his side a large measure of the public trust. He's got to have that behind him if he's goin' to stay in business."

"Business?" Stewart's gaze was quizzical.

Antrim's lips streaked a smile. "You know well as I do what I'm talkin' about, Ed. A leader of vigilantes has got to have a head on his shoulders. Now look—in catchin' up Ives——"

Antrim let his voice trail off as Jones grunted, "Rider comin'."

"Let him come," Stewart snapped testily. "Go on, Kid, you've got my interest up."

"In catchin' Ives," Antrim repeated, "Lothrop figures to have a hangin'; it's the only way to put the fear of God into the hard-case crowd that's runnin' things. Lothrop don't want competition. He aims to run the Socorro bunch to hell-an'-gone. He aims to get the public confidence with the same move."

The rider Jones had seen arrived. His horse was lathered—half out on its legs. The rider himself looked as though he'd been dragged through a knothole; his face was grey with alkali, and his clothes were powdered with it. He slid wearily from his horse.

"What is it, Happy?"

The rider drew a grimy hand across his cheeks. "Lothrop's caught Curly Ives! There's goin' to be a lynchin'."

Stewart's glance met Antrim's. There was admiration there.

Antrim said, "We'd better ride. Lothrop's goin' to overreach himself sure as God makes little apples. He don't know the temper of that crowd."

Stewart asked wonderingly, "What crowd?"

"A crowd of honest ranchers I've advised to be in Socorro," Antrim answered shortly. "Just let them fellas get one bad actor hung, an' they'll get the fever quick."

He lifted his chin from his chest and saw Jones watching him narrowly. There seemed a new boniness to the rancher's dark face, and in the cooling wind flowing off the San Andres his gaunt form looked as tough as saddle leather. He was leaning it forward on the balls of his feet, and the pale eyes beneath his puckered brows were keenly searching. "Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"Just a fool that's hell for justice," Antrim drawled.

Corner sneered, "There ain't no justice!"

Antrim's voice was as light as down. "That's why I drew cards in this game."

Stewart said briskly, "Get your broncs, boys. We'll trail along."

"Just a second." Antrim looked at Stewart carefully; widened his gaze to include the others also. "You fellas haven't answered my question yet. That was part of the bargain."

Stewart said slowly, "We found evidence that Two-Pole-Pumpkin was rustling our cattle. There's a coupla hides inside the house now, if you are interested. We caught Harker off his range; we found a cinch ring on his saddle that was pretty warm. He wouldn't spill his guts, so we hung 'im as a warnin' to the rest of them."

Antrim knew the penalty for rustling was hanging. He found no fault with that. It was the fact that Stumpy had been hung without a trial. He said, "Stumpy never rustled a critter in his life. He wasn't built that way."

Corner rasped, "He sure showed pore judgment in pickin' his companions, then."

"So your smart jokers hung Stumpy because you figured his outfit was on the steal——"

"Yuh fool," Jones broke in hotly. "Yuh don't reckon a square waddy would be beddin' down on the Two-Pole-Pumpkin, do yuh?"

"Well, Stumpy was," Antrim observed, and slid coldly from his saddle. He started slowly toward Jones; there was a sultry anger in his glance that told plainly of the rising turbulence in his blood. Jones didn't lose his nerve. But Corner did—and his left hand went streaking hipward. Jones caught the move. With twisting lips he followed suit.

Twin bursts of flame rolled out from Antrim's hips. The reports banged loudly on the chilling air. They shook the powder smoke stretching across that interval, and smashed against the yonder buildings flatly.

Corner was down, grotesquely writhing, tiny whines of sound dripping from his drooling lips. Jones was staggered back, his twisted face a fish-belly white, his gun discarded and the hand that had momentarily held it now clutched to the stained shoulder of the limply hanging arm. A malignant hate glared from the squinted eyes above his clammy cheeks. Stewart's men stood stiff and silent. A cold amusement showed in Stewart's eyes.

"The next time," Antrim told them dustily, "you boys see to it that you hang a guilty man, or I'll come back an' give you somethin' to remember me by." His glance flashed briefly to Stewart. "You'd better get to Socorro an' keep your bunch in hand. I'll be seein' you," he finished, and broke from his rigid stillness, backing watchfully to his horse.

No man spoke while he got aboard; there was no sound save for the creak of saddle leather and the monotonous whine of Corner's groans. The group held motionless while he whirled his horse and streaked away. They stood like statues while his horse sent back its diminishing hoofpound, until that sound fluttered off to silence.

CHAPTER XIX

"THEM WOLVES ARE OUT FOR BLOOD!"

YOLANDA had definitely made up her mind. She had thought about this thing carefully, and had weighed each step that she must take, each lonely mile that she must cross. She had balanced the discomforts and likely dangers of her plan against the slavery, abuse, and close confinement of her life with Lothrop; and freedom—no matter what its price—seemed utterly desirable. Antrim wouldn't have her; that much was patent and showed her plainly the folly of longer staying there. There had been a time, after his shooting of Ruidosa, when she had again begun to hope. But too many days had now passed without sign from him, and hope was gone back into the dust from which it came.

She had in these past months been given many an opportunity as good as this, for the opportunity was really so in name only—a mockery from which Stone Lothrop drew sardonic amusement. Neither he nor any member of his tough-faced crew was now on the ranch; that constituted what semblance of opportunity there was. Many times she had witnessed Lothrop's smile when, on returning after some protracted absence, he had found her there. She had found its smugness maddening, the suaveness of his greeting a fiery irritant, and the blandness of his suggestion that perhaps time had hung a little heavy on her hands had made those hands itch with the desire to curl their fingers about a gun. His compliments on her looks on such occasions had been both unctuous and oily, and his compliments on her culinary art accursedly fulsome. She was determined to surprise him truly this time.

It was impossible for her to leave the valley without crossing some small portion of the terrible Jornada; it doubled the risk she ran in leaving, and was the thing that had thus far discouraged all thought of flight. But she had weighed her chances well and had counted the cost. Death on that burning desert was infinitely preferable to living there longer. Surely the saints had not forgotten her entirely!

She would go northwest from there, pointing her way across the lava beds by the yonder sombre outline of Black Mesa. There, somehow, she would manage to ford the Rio Bravo's muddy waters and reach Fort Craig. There, she would see the commandant and demand an escort to Socorro.

Her pack was made and her water bottles filled. All that now remained before her on the ranch was the capture of one of those half-wild mustangs in the big corral and, once captured, the getting of a saddle on its back. Then, turning her back on this place of misery and painful memory, she would place her life in God's hands and go.

She returned to her room for one last look at the spot where Antrim had stood when he'd shot Ruidosa. She knelt upon that spot and prayed. She stumbled blindly down the *sala*. In the living-room she wiped the mist from her smarting eyes, hoisted the pitifully small bundle of things she wished to keep, and stepped out into the sunlight of the *patio*.

At the great gate, *la puerta del zaguan*, she stopped briefly, tugged by an intangible something she could not compre-

hend. She put one hand out slowly and touched those patient timbers which had seen so much of life and love and hatred. Perhaps it was because so often she had seen Guy Antrim lounging there that she placed the softness of her cheek against them and lovingly patted their warm, rough surface. Perhaps—but *Quien sabe?* Who knows the things that are hidden in a woman's heart?

It was at a panicky pace that she left the gate behind, moving hurriedly across the open yard toward the watching horses in the pole corral.

It was a dim starlit night and a lantern was a necessity if one would see the path before one's feet. It was a wild and blustering night, and a crisp, dank air flowed off the *Manzanos* and whirled in bitter gusts about the corners of Socorro's buildings, plastering the shirts and vests of the gesticulating throngs against their torsos, and flapping the wide brims of the men's sombreros, and driving grit and dust into their savage faces. It was a night of omen; Socorro was "arching its back like a mule in a hailstorm, and heading hell-bent for trouble."

Yesterday afternoon Stone Lothrop and his tired but triumphant posse had succeeded in bringing their man back alive, and at this very moment he was awaiting trial in the ramshackle county jail. If appearance counted for anything, it was a trial that bade fair to be short and potent.

Lest the town and its people be wrongly judged, it seems best here to mention that the county's citizens—the cattlemen, the miners, the horse raisers, and the merchants—had endured much at the hands of men like Ives; swashbuckling, gun-toting desperadoes and outlaws, the riffraff from civilization's backwash who were ever alert to the opportunities of new frontiers, and were ever to be found at each successive "end of steel."

The name of Curly Ives had become synonymous with evil; the fellow had truly run amuck and was definitely known as a heartless killer. No man could leave his house without leaving anxiety behind while such a menace roamed the streets unchecked. Yet only Lothrop had dared take steps by which Ives' suppression of destruction might possibly be encompassed. Through entirely personal motives, Lothrop had done more; he had caught the renegade and locked him up in jail.

Ever an opportunist, though, Lothrop had not been content to let matters run their course. In the barrooms of town last night, he had let it become known through words dropped here and there that should an attempt be made to remove the man from his custody, he would shed no blood to prevent the enterprise's fruition.

Lothrop, as he saw the rising temper of the crowds now swarming before the Grand Hotel, smiled to himself and considered his work well done. Everything was running smoothly. As soon as this particular episode should be relegated to the past, he meant to take such steps as would bring the Smoke-wagon Kid to heel. And after that he would crush the valley outfits that had dared dispute his rise to power. Yes, events were shaping nicely.

Antrim, idling in the Pinto Bar, observed the mob's growing agitation and nodded wisely to himself. This was what he had suspected. Lynch law was about to be put in operation—and this time, with Lothrop's sanction.

Yet he was definitely surprised when he saw the sombre group of horsemen start uptown from the jail. They were coming too quietly and too determinedly to be any part of that gesticulating, raucous, swearing mob. As they approached nearer he observed that they rode in such a manner that their three-deep ranks formed a hollow square, and he saw that in the hollow rode a solitary horseman, with arms bound behind his back.

The cavalcade rode straight up the center of the street, the cheering pedestrians moving from their path, and closing in again behind to follow. The crowded space resounded to the gusts of noise; then all that turbulence fell away as the cavalcade of black-garbed horsemen halted before the Grand Hotel. Antrim saw men hurriedly approaching the spot with lanterns to dispel the gloom, while other men came up carrying packing-boxes and other burnable waste. This latter was swiftly made into a growing pile and ignited to furnish additional light. In the comparative quiet which now obtained, he could distinctly hear the rumble and rattle of an empty wagon. He swung his glance about and saw it. Four men were propelling it toward the gathered company.

Antrim left the resort. Mingling with the crowd, he gradually threaded his way forward till he held a spot of vantage close beside the now opened front of the horse-formed square. He saw a man unlash the prisoner's arms. He did not see

Lothrop, though, nor had he expected to; the sheriff knew better than openly to appear at such a proceeding. But several of his crew were there. Two men whom Antrim recognized as Mitch Moelner and Tombstone stood among the watching throng not far away. He found a place where they would not be too apt to notice him in the event they glanced his way.

Stewart seemed to be in charge of operations. The wagon was drawn inside the lighted square and its tongue upended. Ives was dismounted from his horse and sitting at a packing-box table facing another and bigger box which served Stewart as a platform.

"Wonder where the Great Seizer is at?" a man near Antrim muttered.

The man's neighbor said, "I hope yuh ain't fool enough t' think he'd come pokin' round here at a time like this. He ain't nobody's fool—not Lothrop! An' yuh mark my words, kid; there's more t' this than meets the eye!"

A man across the way shouted, "Let's git a-goin'! I hone t' hear thet slat-sided son gurglin' on a ropel"

But mostly, these men watched in silence. They seemed satisfied to let the vigilantes do their work in their own way, just so the work was done.

Ives, while things were warming up, conducted a facetious chatter with those members of the crowd who stood nearest, and even had the gall to exchange repartee with a number of his captors until sternly bidden to keep silent or suffer the indignity of a gag. Antrim, marveling, thought him the coolest man among the crowd.

Curly Ives was a hard one, and continued outwardly unmoved throughout his trial. Not once could Antrim catch a sign of worry on his sardonic features. He seemed as unruffled as an eleven-times widow contemplating matrimony, as the man next to Antrim told his neighbor. Ives must have known his fate was sealed, yet no sign of the fear such knowledge might have been expected to engender ever touched the weathered roughness of his cheeks. Staring out across the stern and frowning visages of those men gathered to determine his guilt and punish it, his gaze was caustic and defiant.

But his wasn't the only nerve apparent; Antrim could not help but admire the cool, self-contained manner in which Stewart with quiet simplicity was conducting the desperado's

trial. His uncompromising yet dignified bearing was bound to earn the respect of all discerning honest men. No man could guess how many of that assembled company might any moment decide to rush the vigilantes and, in bloody carnage, attempt to free the prisoner. The true test must come when Ives' fate should be announced.

The time came. Stewart cleared his throat and a guard touched Ives' arm. "Brother, you had better take this standin'," the guard advised. "An' you'd better be lookin' forward to another world. You are played out in this one, sure."

Ives got to his feet with a sneer. "This business is goin' t' make yuh uncomfortable as a camel in the Arctic Circle."

"That's my lookout," snapped the guard. "Button yore lip; the boss is goin' to pronounce yore sentence."

"I'd like a couple of burnin' sensations first."

"You'll get all the burnin' sensations you are lookin' for in about five minutes," the guard predicted grimly.

"Hell," Ives snarled. "What kind of trial's this, where a gent's last request don't git no damned attention?"

Many persons in the crowd appeared shocked by the demand, but the drinks were sent for and Ives put them down with evident satisfaction. It was possible he was seeking in this manner to bolster up a failing courage, though Antrim did not think so. The talkative man next to Antrim said, "Ol' Stewart looks solemn as a tenderfoot trapper skinnin' his first skunk!" This fellow's friend grunted, "I reckon he's thinkin' of what Ives' cronies is goin' t' do about this business if Ives gets hanged. I'm sorta wonderin' along them lines myself."

Stewart said, "Curly Ives, the jury has turned in its verdict. They have come to the considered opinion that you are guilty——"

The rest was drowned in sudden uproar as the crowd shouted its hearty agreement with this just verdict. But as the tumult subsided there could be heard from the shadows along the fringes of the mob guttural curses and vicious maledictions, and abruptly several sharp *clicks*, as of pistols being made ready, were plainly audible. Someone shouted, "By grab, the stranglin' murderers'll never dare to hang 'im!"

An unwonted quiet followed on the heels of this threatening remark. There was a momentary lull in the progress of Ives' trial. He smirked suggestively at the expressions of

anxiety he discerned upon those faces nearest him. To Antrim it was apparent that this critical moment held the necessity for prompt action. His face expressed approval as Stewart raised a hand and, as he got the crowd's attention, said, "It is this jury's recommendation that Curly Ives be now hanged by the neck until dead."

A blur of motion to one side swung Antrim's glance in that direction. He saw Tombstone struggling to raise the gun his fingers gripped. And he saw Mitch Moelner's sinewy hands exerting pressure to restrain him. Even as Antrim watched, he saw the tension drain from Tombstone's frame, saw the man's malignant features smoothed by returning caution; saw the pair of them abruptly wheel and unobtrusively leave the crowd. But if those two did indeed adjourn, there were many others who did not, and everywhere Antrim could see the flash of naked weapons in the red glow from the roaring flames of that pile of combustibles gathered in the center of the square. The crowd began to bellow approval of the sentence, and through that upward surge of voices hoots could be detected and not a few outright threats and jeers. The dark-garbed horsemen held their double-barrelled guns in readiness and presented a determined front. Stewart said coldly through a lull:

"The first man moving a finger to obstruct the ends of justice will get a load of buckshot through his guts. I reckon most of you know me well enough to sabe that when I say a thing I mean it." Then to his aids: "Proceed with your duty, men."

The wagon tongue was broken off, and one end of it thrust into the ground. The other end rose slantingly across the wagon body, projecting above the packing box by the side of which Ives stood. He was ordered to stand atop the box.

"If you hang me, you'll be hangin' a innocent man!" he cried. "Gawd, I'm innocent as a babe unborn! I never killed no man, nor woman, nor child—why, I'd swear to it on a Bible!"

Stewart took a Bible from his pocket and handed it to one of his men, who strode to Ives and offered it. The renegade grasped it eagerly and kissed it. Then, with owlish solemnity, he repeated his denial and called upon every saint in heaven to witness his absolute innocence.

Stewart said disgustedly, "You had better save your breath, Curly. We've got positive proof of your guilt in con-

nection with the deaths of three men. You are going to stretch hemp. Have you any last words?"

"All I got to say," snarled Ives, "is that I'm innocent. An' I hope every last one of you rots in hell for this!"

Hardly had those words left his mouth when two burly vigilantes hoisted him ungently onto the box. The noose was adjusted swiftly. Stewart said:

"Do your duty, men."

A lariat snaked the box from under Ives. Death took him with hardly a struggle.

Moelner, followed instantly by a panting Tombstone, entered the sheriff's office and shut the door. His eyes went at once to the girl who stood against the wall; then they went to Lothrop inquiringly, sternly. "What's she doin' here?"

A ripple of sardonic humor disturbed the heavy set of Lothrop's cheeks. "Got tired of waitin' for me at the ranch, I reckon, an' come to town to hunt me up. She come across Daggett an' he brought her here."

Yolanda met his mocking glance with frigid composure and cold indifference. She did not speak.

Daggett snickered from his place beside the desk. Black Jack Purdin frowned uncertainly. Lothrop said, "Feelin' her oats a little. But I'll take that out of her when I get her home." And a sour grin crooked his heavy lips.

"Where's the rest?" Moelner grunted.

"Down at the corral, ropin' out fresh broncs. We're goin' to leave pretty quick."

"You are damn' right we are," Moelner said. "We're goin' to leave quicker'n that."

Lothrop eyed him with risen vigilance, his big shoulders hunched a little forward. "Ain't they hung Ives yet?"

Moelner said, "They've hanged Ives——" and was checked by Lothrop's curt:

"What the hell's gone wrong? If they've hung Ives we've got Stewart where we want him, ain't we? What the hell's gone wrong?" he repeated wickedly, and there were flecks of flame coalescing in his eyes.

"They've got necktie fever," Moelner gritted. "Tularosa lost his nerve an' tried t' bolt. Some of that crowd recognized 'im an' them vigilantes piled all over 'im. You've overreached yoreself, Stone. You furnished 'em with an example, an' now them wolves are out fer blood!"

Lothrop, with his glance on the brightness of Moelner's slitted eyes, drew one long breath and swore.

"But yuh ain't heard——" Tombstone started.

"Heard what!"

"They put another box alongside Curly's danglin' body an' made Tularosa sit there while they tried 'im," Moelner snapped in a wire-tight voice, "An' Tularosa's squealed!"

CHAPTER XX

THE VIGILANTES STRIKE

WHILE the jury was off to one side determining the fate of Tularosa, Antrim saw the tall, gangling figure of a frock-coated frontier sky-pilot step up to where Stewart stood with arms folded across his high chest. The parson gestured toward Ives' dangling body with a bony hand. "To hang a boy that age!" he spoke indignantly. "It is an outrage, sir, I tell you—it is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Two wrongs never make a right. The Scriptures bid us turn the other cheek——"

"We've run plumb out of other cheeks to turn!" shouted an irate merchant.

The parson ignored the interruption. "Didn't you sympathize with that poor lad? Didn't you feel for him?"

"Well, yes," Stewart answered, eyeing the man solemnly. "The boys felt for him more or less—they felt for him round the neck."

Those men who had been especially selected to form the jury of the impromptu court now filed back into the square and returned a verdict of guilty.

Tularosa's cheeks were as white as snow. He turned to Stewart composedly, however, and said quietly, "I know that my time's arrived. You are figgerin' to hang me, an' I deserve it. I've got no kick. I knew what I was doin' when I got into this. The gang's a black-hearted bunch of vultures an' I'll be glad to see it broken up. I come of decent people, an' should ought to have gone straight."

Stewart nodded. "I'm sorry about this, Tularosa. But I've got to do my duty as I see it. The law here—what we have had of it—has been corrupt. It is time the folks of Socorro

County got a new deal. You have been found guilty of participation in a number of infamous robberies, two of which affairs compelled the killing of honest citizens. You will have to die."

"I know that," Tularosa said. "But I would like to tell you about this gang so you can clean it up proper. I'm not saying this to get off, either."

"You have information for us as to the identities of the men belonging to this gang that has been terrorizin' this country?"

"Yes. Lothrop is the leader. He organized the gang and runs it. I hope to hell you get him. I know most of the other men who are important. They are Black Jack Purdin, Tombstone, Mitch Moelner, Ruidosa, Rafe, Mormon Joe, Brazito, Daggett, Suggs, Hildermin, an' Buck Keldane."

A man pressed forward from the crowd as Tularosa finished. He said, "Mr. Stewart, I been prospectin' over in the Sierra Caballos. Five-six days ago I seen some buzzards flyin' over the canyon I was workin'. They was further down. After a time I got curious an' headed that way. I found a bunch of skeletons an' some papers in a bag. The papers were addressed to Craig Smith at Silver City. I allow them skeletons is what's left of Smith's Train."

The crowd surged forward with a roar; only the levelled shotguns of the mounted vigilantes held them back. When some measure of quiet had been restored, Stewart demanded of Tularosa, "What do you know about Smith's Train?"

"Plenty—it was our gang that stopped it."

"Where? An' when? We must have names."

"On the night of August 13th," Tularosa said without bravado, "Stone Lothrop, Purdin, Moelner, myself, Tombstone, Keldane, Daggett, Rafe, an' a couple others whose names I never heard jumped Smith's Train near the top of the divide where the trail overhangs Cripple Canyon at Dead Man's Drop."

"Where did you put the money?"

"Stone Lothrop took those two fellows whose names I didn't know an' the three of 'em went off some place to cache it. Lothrop come back alone an' allowed he'd sent the others off to another section on a job."

"Do you know where they went?"

"I got an idee," Tularosa admitted drily, "that they went to hell. I'll look 'em up pretty quick."

"Did Lothrop's gang kill the whole crew of Smith's Train?"

"Yes. We killed Craig an' the other two others, Laidley an' Shinkle. We was scared to leave any man alive."

"Who are on Lothrop's ranch aside from those men you've named?"

"There was a puncher named Stumpy Harker, a feller what limped. He was a pretty square hombre. I reckon you know what happened to him, Stewart."

"Yes," Stewart said. "What happpped to Harker might be described as the fortunes of war, an' the result of bein' found in bad company. Was there any other person besides Lothrop's wife?"

"Hell—she wa'n't Lothrop's wife! Nor yet his 'woman' even," Tularosa said, and spat. "Only reason she was on the spread at all is cause Lothrop tricked her into comin' to the valley, an' once there wouldn't ler her go. She might have tried to clear out when no one was in the ranch. But you know that stretch of the Jornada, Stewart. You couldn't hardly expect a woman t' brave that all by her lone self."

The revelation slipped like a knife's cold bade up Antrim's back, and the firelight, striking his eyes, showed a dark fierce glitter as he wheeled; showed his high flat cheekbones pressed rashly against the tightdrawn skin. His glance, as he ploughed his way through the muttering groups, struck back with a brittle hostility; the wicked turbulence in the Smoke-wagon Kid unsteadied him, made him blind to the danger of the crowd. He did not wait for a path, but made one, his broad sloping shoulders deliberately smashing men aside with an utter indifference that did not heed their after movements, and that registered through that assemblage like a trumpet's blare. No man staged nor tried to stem that cannonball progress.

He put the trial behind and strode deliberately to the hitch rail fronting the Pinto Bar, where he jerked loose his claybank's reins and swung into the saddle. He swung his cold-jawed bronc around and sent it toward the sheriff's office. Dismounting before that building's darkened windows, he went up its steps and kicked the door wide, flattened himself against the wall with both guns drawn.

But nothing happened, and only the echoes of his thumping footsteps and the door's loud striking bang came back. He slipped one gun in leather and struck a match, shielding its flame with cupped hand. "Lothrop," he said with a frozen

clarity. "Lothrop." But no man was in that building, nor in the jail; not even Farley, as he found upon inspection. Lothrop and his men were gone.

He holstered his other gun with a sleek, grim motion and retraced his steps, his hard teeth gleaming in a white, cold line. He swung into his saddle and sent the claybank toward the desert in a fast run.

It was half an hour before Antrim's rage cooled sufficiently to allow for clear reflection. He knew, then, what he had to do. The vigilantes would be onto Lothrop's trail by daybreak, and they would stay with it until they ran him from the Territory or left him and his followers strewn across that harsh land in unmarked graves. They might even attempt to do the like for him, yet this he doubted, for Stewart and many of the others were too keenly aware of what they chose to consider his love of justice and marked adherence to fair play. He had been ever known to give his men a break. His danger now, he knew, must come from Lothrop's men, and from such other turbulent souls as might wish to claim the doubtful glory of having "downed the Smoke-wagon Kid."

Antrim's desire now was to come up with Lothrop's riders before the vigilantes. Not that it would make a great deal of difference really whether those desperate men were wafted from this world of lead poisoning or by way of hemp. But the tempestuous surge of his roaring passion had abated, and he could view all things again in their true perspective. The pounding of his quickened pulse had slowed to a wicked smoothness, to an evenness of tempo that revealed his determination as fully as did that unswervable stubbornness that lay along the forward throw of his jaw. He was again cognizant of his mission in that country, and was recalling the bitter fact that he was not a free agent now, as he had been while courting the impulsive Yolanda those long nights ago in Santa Fé. Freely, as he rode through the blackness of the night, he damned both Axtell and those others—"includin' that scribblin' nitwit, Wallace!" Because he'd been uncommonly fast with his lead-dispensing, he'd let them persuade him against his judgment. Well, they need not worry: he'd perform to the letter this chore they'd set him. Then he would put that country behind him, and try to wash its odious taste from an outraged memory.

Hardly had the hoofbeats of Antrim's buckskin faded beyond the edge of town when three vigilantes swung down before the sheriff's door. They mounted the steps and pushed inside the office, exploring it even as Antrim had done before them, and with equally barren result. "Looks like the bird has flown," said one.

"Well, I dunno about that," replied one of his companions drily, "but I'll hev to admit that he sure is on the wing."

In another part of town four roving members of the Committee came upon the trail of a citizen whose stealthy movements roused their instant suspicion. Called upon to halt, this citizen opened fire, downing a vigilante. The other three took after him with a stern determination that shortly landed him upon one of those boxes in the center of the square. A rope was swiftly noosed and the noose fitted to his neck.

At another place, Chips Dorado, a tinhorn gambler, was hailed by a pair of dark-garbed riders.

"Hello, Chips," said one. "You had better come with us."

"What for?"

"Well, we are conducting an investigation in front of the Grand, and we'd like for you to be there."

"What have I done now?" demanded Dorado testily.

"We aren't sure. But we know what you've done in the past, and I am afraid you must consider yourself under arrest."

Quick as a flash, Dorado drew a derringer. But a swinging vigilante boot knocked it from his grasp before he could fire. "If you make another move like that," softly purred the owner of the booth, "we shall shoot you where you stand. Come along now; you're not the only pebble on this beach."

"I'm awful cold," Dorado muttered. "Do you mind if I get my coat?"

"No need to bother. You'll be warm enough directly."

CHAPTER XXI

GAWDFORSAKEN VALLEY

THE noonday sun was slanting brightly down across the colored adobe buildings when Guy Antrim reached the Two-Pole-Pumpkin. Its lazy yellow warmth gave them a slumbrous,

deserted appearance—a suggestion of having been vacated in a hurry which the ten stolidly motionless horses in the big corral bore out effectively. But Antrim had trailed too long with danger to put any faith in appearances, and he approached the place with high caution. Behind the angling smoke of his cigarette, his eyes stared sharply with a close attention for the minute details of this scene. But he could discern nothing of an alarming nature.

He swung from his horse by the big gate guarding the *patio*, and threw one keen swift glance at these smaller buildings' backs. No single thing was moving, yet he could not shake the feeling of menace which had fastened on him with his entrance to this place. The ranch was too quiet—there was a brittle quality to its hush that dragged like a file across his nerves.

His lean-sinewed shape throwing its long shadow across the ground before him, he strode into the *patio* with a springy step—and stopped. Then he knew. His breath deepened, and the fingers of his tapering hands splayed out to either side. His blue glance beat hard against the toughened features of the big man lounging in the nearest doorway. And he stood there that way, knowing that one further move might betray his purpose in returning to the ranch. "Howdy," he drawled. "I guess you are Purdin, the foreman, ain't you?"

"I guess I am," the big one said, and told Antrim by his tone that longer subterfuge would be wasted effort. Somehow he felt a little glad. He said:

"Well, Purdin, I've come for——" and was checked by the range boss' oath.

"What you've come for," Purdin snapped, "an' what you'll get is two different things, you slat-sided, sneakin' b——!" And with the words the foreman's fat right hand slapped downward.

The adobe walls batted the echoes of those shots back and forth with a hellish racket. Purdin's knees buckled and sprawled him forward across the sill.

Antrim's glance raked brightly round, and he did not break from his rigid stillness, nor did he raise the muzzles of his lowered pistols. Each doorway into the *patio* framed a watchful man, and each man's hand held a levelled weapon.

A cold grin curled Antrim's wide lips saturninely. "I guess that is it."

"You are wrong," Mitch Moelner jeered, striding toward him. "Shootin' would be too easy, an' I never was keen on firin' squads. Don't think yo're passin' out that neat—though you will wish you was before we're through, I shouldn't wonder. Toss away them peace-makers."

Antrim said, "I'll lay them down," and did so, carefully. "All right. Now back away from 'em, smart fella."

Antrim backed half a dozen paces. "What's the big idea of all this?"

"You know well enough what the idee is," Moelner growled. "But just to refresh yore mem'ry I'll say that we heard from Santa Fé."

Antrim's face showed a study in bewilderment. Moelner thrust his thumbs inside the armholes of his vest in a way that made its silver buttons flash. His lips cracked in a hard and instant grin. "We heard about that letter you got," he jeered. "You ain't kiddin' no one. Farley had some talk with the Grand's proprietor yesterday mornin'. They're great friends—Farley puttin' him in the way of makin' some quick money off an' on. He told Farley all about them fancy seals that was on yore mail."

The sense of impending disaster spread a shadow across that interval. The silence grew thick and clogged. His hard restraint put an ache in Antrim's muscles. He relaxed them suddenly, and let his breath out, too. He swung his sloping shoulders toward where Lothrop's form made a broad and solid shape against the wall. Lothrop's face hung like a black cloud in the sun.

Antrim laughed. The sound was a shocking thing in all that curdled stillness. He poured rash words after it recklessly:

"Why, you bunch of imitation badmen! You wouldn't scare a three months baby back where I growed up! Just let me get my guns an' I'll take the whole yellow-bellied crew—one at a time or all together. Makes a fella laugh to think of you saddleblanket coyotes settin' up to be like them hard cases in Lincoln County! It's a joke!"

The muzzles of Tombstone's guns tipped upward viciously. But Lothrop's cold words rattled across his intention like chunks of ice. "You fire them guns an' I'll smash every bone in yore body!"

Sweat gleamed on Tombstone's hollowed cheeks, but he put

his guns away and stood with his lank arms folded across his bony chest.

Lothrop watched him a moment longer, then his glance swung back to Antrim and his lids slid up a fraction and a sour grin curled his lips. "Almost, Kid—but not quite good enough. You ain't goin' out that easy, bucko. 'Landa," he said sharply, raising his voice. "'Landa!"

The girl came, and her slender form made a long, willowy shadow in the door. "Ain't this," Lothrop asked, "the curly wolf I took you away from in Santa Fé?"

Yolanda did not answer, but her eyes met Antrim's squarely.

It was as though, in that one instant, a veil had been stripped from his eyes, and for the first time he saw her clearly as she really was—tall and slim and straight and proud. He discerned the reckless slant of her cheeks, and marked the rash impulsiveness of her nature that at last she'd learned to check. He recognized the fine generosity that was in her, and the stalwart courage, too. He observed how her lips with their fierce, proud lines were in scarlet contrast with the whiteness of her face. Then he looked into her level eyes—and caught his breath. All the gravity of his strict countenance softened as he looked at her, and the cynical mocking twist left his mouth.

For that one moment he was like a boy; like that boy she'd known back in Santa Fé. Then Lothrop's lazy drawl broke the spell with insolence. "Take a good look at him, girl. He won't be so much to look at next time you get a chance to see him . . . if there is a next time, which I doubt."

He tipped his head at Antrim, and his sleepy lids squeezed down with a sly, sardonic humor. "I've a hunch that you're not goin' to be around this Territory much longer, Kid. The Apaches are pretty expert at redressin' their wrongs. I've thought a lot about them redskins lately. I've learned a few of their tricks. . . . Like their ways with burnin' splinters, f'r instance. An' with knives. An' ants, an' such-like. I've been wonderin' if them tricks would work as well for me. You said a minute ago, Kid, that it makes you laff to think of coyotes like us settin' up to be like them hard cases over in Lincoln County. Seems like you said it was a joke." His long smoke-colored eyes were filled with a sulky brilliance as they rested on Antrim probingly. He said:

"I'm goin' to give you time to find out if the joke was worth the laff."

Lothrop, Moelner, Daggett, and Tombstone lounged in the room Lothrop used as an office and waited while Yolanda fixed up a snack of grub to cut their hunger. Lothrop seemed unable to make up his mind whether to quit the country quickly, or stick around a spell longer and clean up a few loose ends that were left in his business, brought about by the sudden sense of civic conscience he had unwittingly roused in the breasts of Socorro's citizens. His effort to trap Stewart had been ill-timed. His plan had succeeded far beyond his expectations—too damned far, in fact. He had not even dreamed of such an outcome. He had thought to get Stewart to hang Ives for him, and then make Stewart pay the price of such an illegal lynching. Like his successful plotting against Jones and Corner, the position into which he had maneuvered Stewart held no advantage for him now.

He well realized that once the vigilantes got on his trail he'd have to pull his pin and drift. He had not sufficient men at his disposal successfully to defy Stewart's swollen force. But he did not expect any move from Stewart yet; the man would be too busy cleaning up the county seat and its environs. As long as he kept away from towns, Lothrop decided, he'd be safe enough for another week, and much might be done in the length of seven days.

But he was not figuring on passing up any bets. He had Suggs, Farley, and Hildermin out scouting now with orders to report immediately if they saw any dust in the direction of the Jornada. He considered that should any such dust be sighted, he would still have a leeway of time in which to get himself and his men away on the fresh horses that were saddled and ready inside the 'dobe stable.

Tombstone swung his cadaverous shape completely around and started for the door. After him Lothrop drove a cold, "Where the hell you goin'?"

"I'm goin' out an' see that lobo suffer!"

"Keldane can watch him without yore help."

Tombstone pivoted with a sultry curse. There was a cruel and glittering balefulness in the slitted eyes he flashed on Lothrop. "That may be so. The ants won't be needin' my help, neither. But I like t' watch 'em workin' an'—— Hell!

What's the sense in spread-eagling that smokeroo a-tall, if a gent can't watch him squirm?"

Lothrop drawled coldly, "You may be needed here. An' anyhow, I'm not trustin' you out of my sight, Tombstone. I'm goin' to take a look at him myself, soon's I eat. You can go with me."

CHAPTER XXII

"WALLACE"

LOTHROP looked up from his plate abruptly, and his intent stare fastened on Daggett and instantly drew that burly rufian's gaze from his food. "What's up?" he growled, wiping a greasy hand across his moustache.

"You sure you locked that filly in tight?"

"Hump," Daggett said. "I reckon I know how to bar a door an' block a window. Seems like you're gettin' kinda nervous, Chief."

Lothrop grunted. "Mebbe I am," he agreed, and resumed his eating. But a few seconds later he looked up again. "Seems like I keep hearin' sounds," he muttered, sending a sharp glance round the room.

"Sounds? What kinda sounds?"

Lothrop scanned the faces of his men with that probing intentness that was becoming a habit with him lately. The language of looks and signs and movements was as familiar to him as a printed page, and in these mens' bearing he had discerned since early morning that his leadership there was at an end. His men now appeared to trust him no farther than he trusted them; distrust had begotten distrust. One opportunity was all they'd need; his name was written on their lead, and they meant to use it if they could. He read the intention in their covert looks and furtive stares, in their visible restlessness and tautened cheeks. The vigilantes had cast the shadow of the noose upon them, and they were blaming him. He found it significant that Mitch Moelner's eating was being done with his left hand, while his right lay conspicuously idle on the table's edge. It was like a shouted warning. From now on, Lothrop knew, unremitting vigilance would have to be the price of his life; not one beat of these men's pulses must

be allowed to escape his notice. He had witnessed the mercurial temper of these savages far too often ever to dream they'd leave him quick and bolt. No—they'd leave him dead, or not at all.

Once again his thoughts were scattered by those elusive, grim, deceptive sounds. A repetition of those sounds he'd heard before; as ghastly as the hollow pounding of a man nailing down a coffin lid, and quite like it.

Lothrop felt a shiver run through his burly frame. Lifting his chin from his chest, he found Moelner watching him. The gunman's eyes were sharply, suspiciously on him and with a strange intentness. The laden knife his left hand wielded was poised midway between his mouth and plate. The fingers of his right began a nervous drumming of the table's edge.

Lothrop snarled, "Stop that, Mitch!"

A wildness threaded the air of the room. Moelner stopped his drumming, but his eyes returned Lothrop's scowling stare with a sulky brilliance. The hollows of Tombstone's gaunt, cadaverous cheeks looked sinister in the failing light.

"I heard them sounds myself this time," muttered Daggett irritably. "What you s'pose they are, Mitch?"

"Hell, I ain't no mind-reader," Moelner snapped. "'F you are so damned curious, you better go out an' see."

But Daggett was not, apparently, that curious. He shoved his chair back a bit from the table, but he did not get out of it. Lothrop flicked a slantways glance through the window at his side and remarked how the shadows were long across the range. The rough and distant shoulders of the Elephant Buttes were turning purple; a sure sign that dusk was near. That business with Antrim had taken longer than he'd thought. The sun wouldn't have done the fellow much mischief in such a short while. But those ants . . .

Lothrop jerked his eyes around to Tombstone immediately when that man moved a hand. Tombstone brushed the hand across his bristly, bony jaw and gave the watcher a snaggly-toothed grin. Reaching out that skinny hand, he picked up the chew of tobacco he'd deposited on his plate edge at the commencement of the meal and thrust it into his mouth. He masticated with a sort of bovine pleasure that grated on Lothrop's wire-taut nerves.

Yet, despite the crazy fluttering of his pulse, Lothrop kept outwardly calm and placid; only the glittering sharpness of his glance showed the strain that he was under.

Then a faint, far spatter of sound drifted across the desert's silence and collected in the room, laved against its walls like the ripples of a pool disturbed by some tossed rock.

"Gunfire!" Mitch Moelner's tone was cold.

Tombstone and Lothrop each shoved back from the table and paused; the eyes of each watched the other with a straining care. The danger in that place would come from Tombstone—Lothrop knew it. Moelner was the worst antagonist to be faced among his men, but Tombstone's was the more erratic temper. Tombstone would be the first to crack.

Moelner said, "We better get outside. That sounds like trouble."

Daggett grunted and rose, the eyes of every man upon him. "I'm goin' to get them broncs from the stable. We better have 'em handy."

Lothrop thought, "He's goin' to try a sneak an' cut for the timber." But aloud he said, "Yeah. Bring them into the *patio*. No tellin' what that firin' meant, but it sounded off toward the southern end of the valley—off towards Corner's place. We'll wait here."

"You can wait here," Moelner said. "I'm goin' outside. If that's trouble an' it's comin' here, some of us ought to hole up in these other buildin's. We'd hev anyone who came between a crossfire then."

"Wait," Lothrop breathed softly. "Listen!"

To the ears of all was now audible the far fast flutter of drumming hooves. Rapidly they neared, growing to a thunderous rolling beat as they swept into the yard and ceased. The rider's boots hit dirt, thudded across the hard packed ground of the *patio* and came toward the door.

Daggett backed to one side, his attention divided between that opening and the men about the table. A man came through the opening, breathing fast. That man was the dusty, leather-faced Rafe. "Boss," he said, "I passed Hildermin, Suggs, an' Farley up the valley a half-hour back. Then I damn near run into a big crowd of riders from the Long H, the Cinch Ring, an' the Crazy L. You heard that firin'? I reckon Suggs an' Farley an' Hildermin is out of luck. I——" he broke off short as the strangeness in the men's attitudes became apparent to him. "What's up?"

"Nothin'," Lothrop said. Then—"Daggett's goin' after fresh broncs. We've got 'em saddled in the stable. You better . . ."

His voice trailed off and each man tensed as the vibrant drum

of many sand-muted hooves came floating through the swirling dusk. With an oath Rafe bounded to the window. They could see him start, could see his fingers tighten on the window ledge. A foul tide of curses came spilling from his lips. He wheeled and put his back to the wall; his face was grey. "Too late," the words came bitterly. "We're cut off. There's dust bulgin' in the north pass. By Gawd, I don't see why I ever joined this gangl!"

Moelner sneered. "Get hold of yourself. We ain't licked yet. Get out of the bunk-house an' gather all the rifle fodder you can find. When that crowd comes pourin' in, you let 'em have it for all you're worth. Daggett, you do the same, an' hole up in Purdin's shanty. That way we'll have them night-ridin' vigilantes right where we want 'em—we'll send the whole damn crew to hell on shutters!"

The two men went out, and when the sound of their dragging spurs had faded Lothrop said heavily, "Boys, we'll never cut it. Stewart's got too many——"

"Hell!" Moelner sneered. "You never let odds worry you before. You've lost yore grip, Stone. Yo're saggin' like a ol' man in his dotage. You——"

"By grab," Lothrop drawled, "I don't have to take that kind of talk off any man, Mitch. An' I ain't takin' it from you."

Mitch Moelner jeered, "What you figgerin' t' do about it?" and got out of his chair.

Lothrop rose, too; and Tombstone. Tombstone seemed to see his chance and took it. Both clawed hands flashed hipward in a vicious cross-arm draw. But only Lothrop fired. Flame spurted from his thigh and the room glowed redly. Tombstone smashed backward across his chair; both struck the floor in a jarring impact whose sound was lost in the rolling echoes of Lothrop's shot.

Lothrop turned his smoldering gaze on Moelner. "You was sayin', Mitch——?"

Moelner's lips cut a tight grin across his teeth. "I was wrong," he said and, crossing to the wall, he got a box of cartridges and took a rifle from the rack. "Which window shall I take?"

"I reckon it won't make much diff'rence." Lothrop slipped a fresh load into his gun and thrust it back in leather. "We can't stand them fellas off long. Take any one you want."

The approaching horsemen made a heavy sound in the night outside.

From his aperture across the blackness of the room, Mitch Moelner grunted, "My cartridges are gettin' low, Stone. How many you got left?"

"Damn few," Lothrop muttered heavily. "Not more'n a handful. We've done well to last three hours. Flashes still comin' from that bunk-house window?"

"Not for haff an hour."

"Daggett's still on the peck," Lothrop said. "But he's usin' his six-gun now. He won't last much longer."

Moelner pumped a whining slug at a blotch of movement behind the gate. The shadow jerked larger, then flattened with abrupt finality. "I guess I got one that time." Moelner growled with satisfaction. "No, Daggett can't last much longer, an' I reckon we can't, neither. You was right. There's too many of 'em for us."

What caused him to turn then must have been that sixth sense given by an all-knowing Providence to men who have ridden long on the gunsmoke trail. Standing in the open doorway like some dark ghost in the smoky murk stood a hatless shape.

A startled oath leapt from Moelner's lips. "Stone! You got yore hat on?"

"Sure," came Lothrop's voice from the other window.

"Then——Gawd! *It's Antrim!*" Moelner shrieked, and let go his rifle, his right hand flashing to his belt.

The room rocked with the roaring jar of thudding weapons. Moelner half rose from his crouching posture, then seemed to be leaning forward as though to meet the twin bursts of flame that bulged from the middle of that door-framed figure. Then his body pitched forward, crumpling.

Lothrop's ripped-out oath was a thing hurled in fury: savage! Flame tore from the upswinging muzzle of his pistol in a livid arc. Then the pistol clattered from his hand, its fall as unheard as the strangled sob that came welling from his throat as his burly shoulders sagged back against the wall.

The shape in the doorway crossed the room, found the unshattered base of a lamp and struck a match, applying it to the oil-soaked wick. The yonder firing dropped away to a vast, enfolding silence as the wick flared up. That wavering light showed Antrim in Keldane's trousers, his upper body bare and raw and swollen, as were his face and arms. His wheeling figure sent a crazy all-chest shadow gyrating across the raftered ceiling, and his cracked lips streaked a wicked grin

as his eyes met Lothrop's glance. His eyes took in the latter's figure where it sagged in a sullen lump against the wall, and the grin showed satisfaction.

"I reckon you'll live to hang, at that."

Antrim found Yolanda where she had been fastened by Daggett in her room. She had no words to offer him, nor had he need of words when he saw and interpreted the light that was in the brightness of her eyes. He said, "Yolanda, I've been the biggest fool in all this Territory. I—I've treated you worse than dirt. I been a stiff-necked damned coyote an' I ain't fit to wipe the dust from your boots. If ever a man deserved nothin' better than a hidin', I'm the man, an' I want you t' know that my eyes are open now to all these facts I . . ." His voice trailed off, and a higher color came into his bloated cheeks.

She came toward him then and stopped before him when only the breadth of one hand could be placed between them. "I know, Guy. You are all those things you've called yourself, and more." She looked up at him and smiled through sudden welling tears. "We've both been the worst kind of fools, Guy. But, oh, my dear——!"

And then she was in his arms.

At noon, on the fourteenth day after their marriage, Antrim received a wire from Santa Fé:

GUY ANTRIM

SOCORRO NEW MEXICO

GOOD WORK ALL ROUND HAVE SPOKEN FAVORABLY OF PART
PLAYED BY YOU IN HIGHER CHANNELS APPOINTMENT AS U.S.
MARSHAL FOLLOWING BY POST

CONGRATULATIONS

WALLACE

THE END

BORDER RUSTLERS

Stone Lothrop hated strangers. He made damn sure they stayed away from his spread. It was untamed border country, and most of the men who passed through were just one fast jump ahead of the law...

Sure, the Smoke-Wagon Kid was a stranger, but he had the fastest guns in the Territory. When Stone took over as Sheriff, he was glad to make him his deputy. Together they had to fight the toughest gang of rustlers in the West and everyone knew the Kid was the only man who could bring them in...