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Guns from Powder Valley

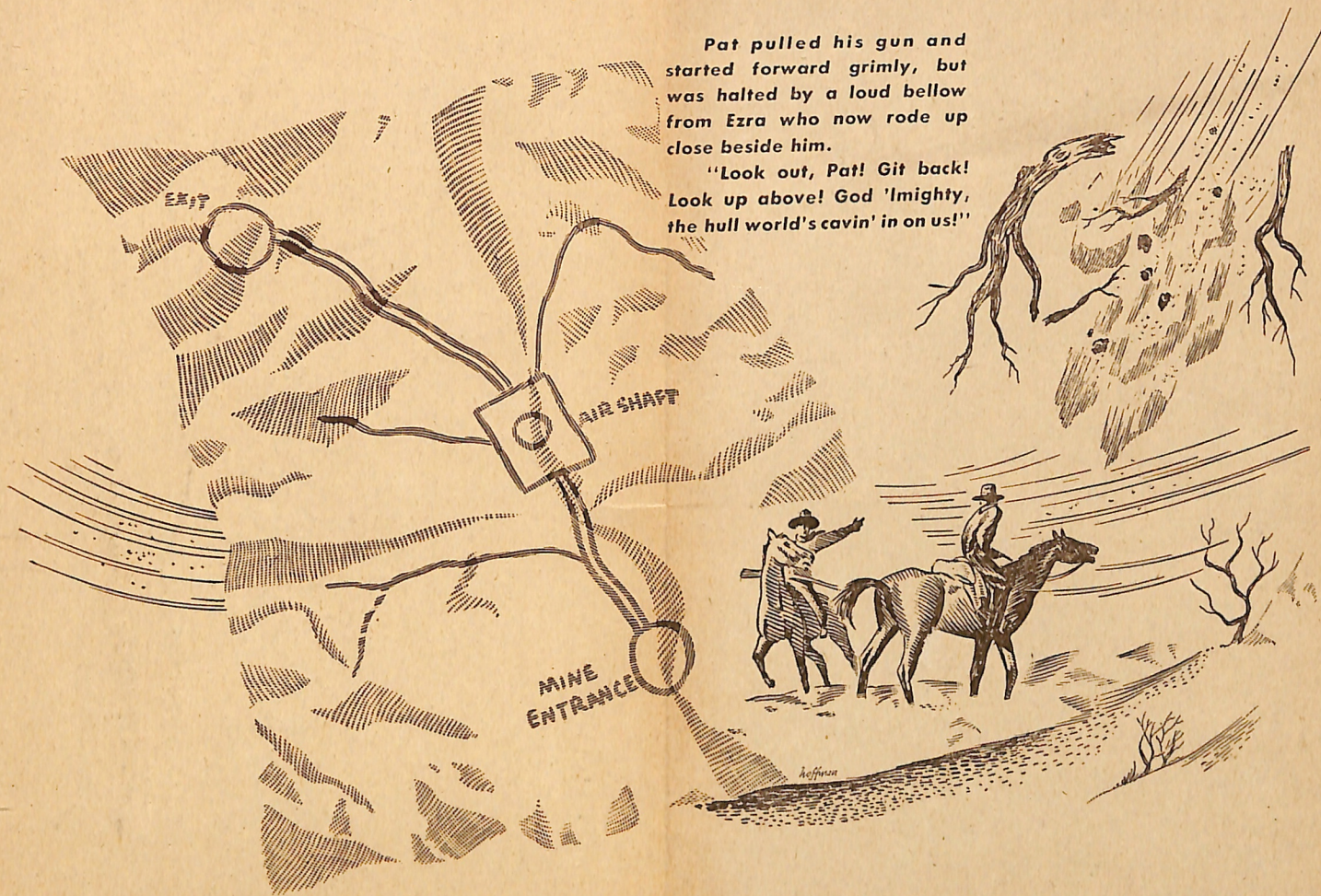
PETER FIELD

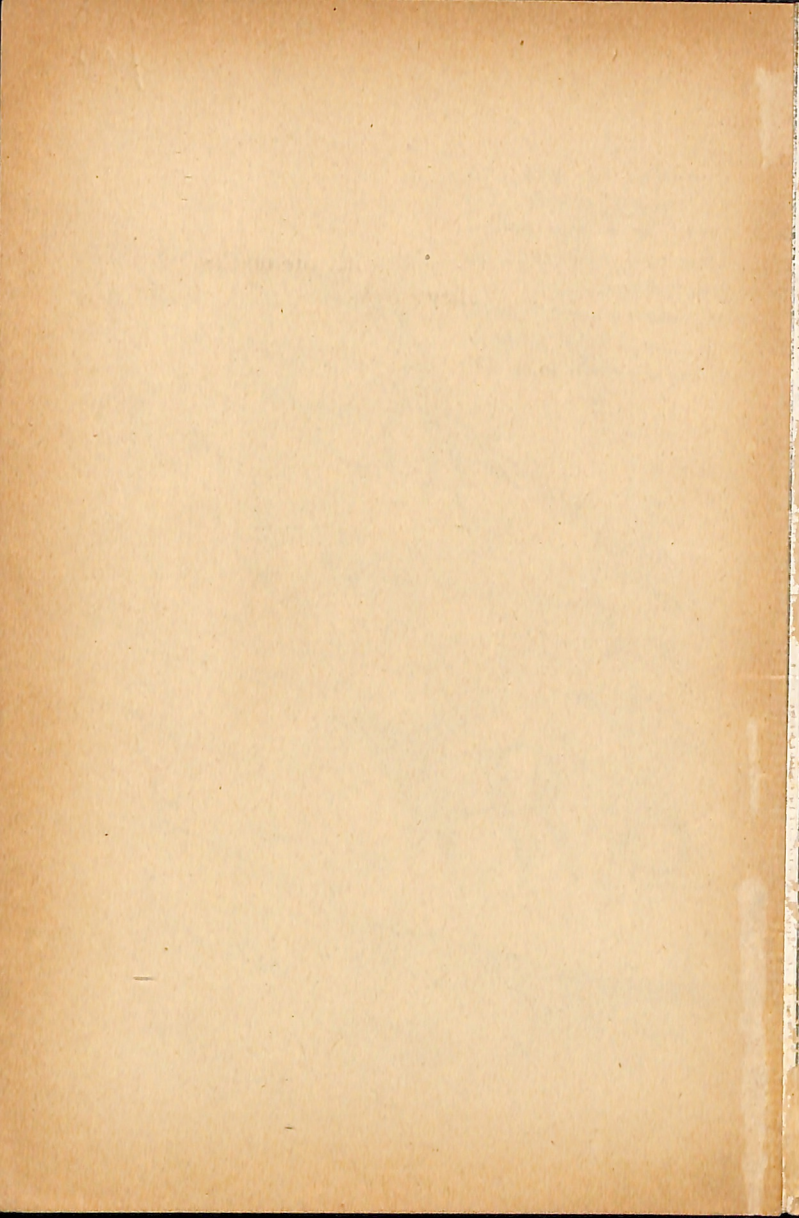


A BANTAM BOOK
COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

Pat pulled his gun and started forward grimly, but was halted by a loud bellow from Ezra who now rode up close beside him.

"Look out, Pat! Git back! Look up above! God 'Imighty, the hull world's cavin' in on us!"





About GUNS FROM POWDER VALLEY

The Stevens' peaceful and quiet life on the Lazy Mare Ranch in Powder Valley came to an abrupt and violent end when they learned why the Suttons couldn't come for dinner. First, Pat Stevens' disreputable but good-hearted cronies, Sam and Ezra, showed up with a terrifying letter from Dusty Canyon. Next, without warning, a black-hooded rider thundered into the Lazy Mare and thrust a crudely scrawled note into Pat's hand.

The two notes dynamited Pat and his pals into a deadly battle against the gang of hooded robbers, a battle which turned out to be a fight for their own lives as well as for those of their friends.



GUNS FROM POWDER VALLEY



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By Peter Field



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GUNS FROM POWDER VALLEY

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Pat Stevens thought his days of trailing thieves and bandits were over.

Sally Stevens was called by one and all the 'prettiest wife in Powder Valley.'

Dock Stevens, their seven-year-old gun-totin' son, who left home on the gallop.

Martha Sutton, Sally's best friend, was the belle of Dusty Canyon.

Mr. Sutton, her tough, gold-hoardin' paw.

Sam Sloan, small and crafty, loved a good fight.

Ezra, a red-headed giant, was famous as a tracker although he had only one eye.

Torrence, an expensively dressed young man who didn't make friends easily.

Bible Jim, a Bible peddler with a booming voice.

ONE

POWDER VALLEY straggles north and south some thirty miles, hemmed in by the Culebra Range and decorated to the southwest by the famous Spanish Peaks. To the east, low-rolling hills spread away to the farmlands. Above all, the Colorado sky is blue, the air clean and invigorating, while the sense of space and silence raises the spirit of man to indomitable heights.

The Lazy Mare ranch is situated in the northern extremity of the valley, a dark green bluff rising up from the yellow-gray prairie. Along the creek there are straggling lines of willows and clumps of cottonwoods, and near the low, rambling ranch house oaks and pinons and pines shut out the glare of the sun.

Pat Stevens kept telling himself on this Christmas morning that he should be the happiest man in Powder Valley, yet he was miserable. His ranch house, built on the spot where John Stout's blackguards had burnt the old one before he and Sally were married, was practically new, and comfortable. He had a stalwart son, aged seven, who was at the moment trailing cottontails with his .22 rifle, a Christmas present from his father. Pat had the prettiest wife within a radius of five hundred miles, and, he suspected, far beyond that. His ranch was well stocked with fine cattle and he had a start of blooded horses. In the big, low-raftered parlor there was a Christmas tree hung with presents and strung with red berries and white, fluffy popcorn. There was a roaring fire in the enormous fire-

place, warming the entire house against the chill December day.

Pat's nose and his conscience were his chief offenders, the cause of his unhappiness. It was two hours past dinner-time and the aroma of roast turkey emanating from the kitchen kept him gulping saliva and his stomach itching with hunger.

The letter in his pocket, received from the Sheriff of Dusty Canyon, burned and bored into his conscience . . . a letter which urged him to come at once and use his brain and brawn and Irish luck against a hooded gang menacing the miners in the Canyon. Sheriff Ross had been wounded, but was still valiantly driving his tough old body after the outlaws. Pat had not told Sally of the letter. He had sworn a solemn oath never to risk his life again by going after vandals who terrorized the country. Sally would not consent to his going, and there was no point in worrying her about the hooded gang in Dusty Canyon where one of her dearest girl friends, Martha Sutton, lived with her father.

He was alone in the room. Through the front window he could see Sally standing on the porch, bundled in a heavy coat and holding her hand to shade her eyes as she stared up the road. With one eye warily upon his wife, Pat went to the Christmas tree and took a string of popcorn from a limb of the spruce, snapped the cord and crammed his mouth full just as Sally came in the front door.

"Pat Stevens!" she cried. "What do you mean spoiling my tree?"

He gingerly stuffed the string of corn in his pocket, choked when he tried to swallow the mouthful, and said:

"Mrs. Stevens, if you wasn't the damnedest prettiest woman God ever made, I'd go out there and reduce that

turkey to a roasted skeleton. As 'tis, I'm starving tryin' to wait till your company gets here."

Sally took off her coat and sat down. She sighed deeply as she spread her full blue crinoline skirt out carefully and touched her blond hair with the tips of her fingers to smooth the tresses which the wind had blown awry.

"I don't know what could be keeping Sam and Ezra," she said in a troubled voice. "Even if the train *was* an hour late, they should be here by now with Martha."

"Next Christmas," Pat suggested somberly, "I'd invite visitors to come the day before, if I was you, Sally. It's not reasonable to expect a man to smell turkey dinner cookin' for six hours and be in a condition to be hospitable to company."

"That's no excuse for you spoiling the tree before they get here. That popcorn will only make you hungrier." She sighed again and looked at the clock on the mantel. "I do hope nothing has happened to keep Martha from coming. She doesn't have much fun stuck away up there in that rough mining camp since she finished high school in Denver."

Pat laughed and slapped his knee resoundingly. "I'd like to see Sam's and Ezra's faces when they get a glimpse of Martha. I told them she was an old-maid school teacher with a wart on the end of her nose when I asked them to meet the train and bring her out."

"You . . . didn't!" Sally scolded. "How will they know . . . ?"

"They were just to ask any female 'lightin' from the train if she happened to be Miss Martha Sutton from up Dusty Canyon."

"Dear me, I wish we had gone to meet her ourselves. There's nothing more miserable than sitting around waiting. . . ."

"Except to smell roast turkey and not be able to eat some of it," Pat interposed. He eased his hand in his pocket and brought out a fistful of popcorn, crammed it in his mouth.

Sally laughed in spite of her anxiety, looking up into her husband's clear gray eyes. She was proud of his tall strong body and his handsome face was bronzed by wind and sun. She teased him occasionally about his square chin, but she secretly knew that it indicated strength and tenacity.

After a moment of silent reflection she said, "It won't be long now before Martha and her father will move to Denver, thank goodness. She wrote that she had finally convinced him there was no sense hoarding all that gold dust and living like misers. Seems that Mr. Sutton wanted people to think he was poor as a church mouse for fear somebody would steal it."

"Accordin' to Martha, he must have half a million stored up," Pat reflected. "There'll be hell to pay if the greasers and outlaws get wind of it."

"Pat . . . I'm afraid," Sally murmured. She suddenly sat up straight and tense, with her head tilted slightly. "Sh-h, I think I hear them coming." She sprang lightly to her feet and rushed to the porch again. Pat came close behind her, picking up her coat and putting it around her shoulders. They both shaded their eyes against the bright glare of the sun on fresh white snow and looked up the road. "It *is* them," she cried.

"But I don't see anybody on the back seat of the buckboard, honey. You reckon Martha didn't come?"

Sally whirled to face him, her smooth fair brow puckered in a worried frown. "Something told me, Pat. I was afraid she wouldn't come. I have a hunch something is terribly wrong. . . ."

"You and your hunches," Pat grinned.

"It's woman's intuition," Sally maintained stoutly.

"Sam and Ezra will have some information, maybe. I expect she sent a letter by the conductor."

"I do hope nothing . . . has happened," Sally breathed. She shaded her eyes again and watched as the old buckboard lumbered down the rough trail which led from the ranch gates two miles away to the house.

The buckboard was close enough now for them to see. Ezra, red-haired and as big as Cyclops, with his disfigured face, held the reins laxly; while Sam, who was short, stocky and swarthy, with a crooked, hooked nose and a chin hidden by a blue-black stubble, lazily tapped the team with a whip. The two buckskins, however, were wholly indifferent to the tapping. They loafed along, Sally declared, like a pair of crippled snails carrying packs on their backs.

Pat and Sally went down the steps when the team finally stopped beside the porch.

"Merry Christmas, you old horntoad two-gunners," Pat greeted them heartily.

"Howdy, you old yaller mushroom," red-headed Ezra drawled. His one good eye roved to Sally's anxious face. "Howdy, Sally. Merry Christmas."

Sally's eyes shifted suspiciously from Sam to Ezra when she smelled a whiff of whisky. She returned Ezra's greeting, then asked quickly, "Wasn't Martha on the train?"

"No'm," said Sam. "They warn't a female in the whole caboodle that got off at Hopewell."

"Did she send any word . . . did you inquire of the conductor?"

"No'm. I asked two-three fellers had they seen a old lady with a wart on her nose anywhers. Nobody hadn' seen her."

"Well, I don't need to ask where you two have been since the train came in." Sally contemplated the tip of

Ezra's nose which was as red as his bushy hair, then turned to Sam's bloodshot eyes with a reproving, "Shame on you."

"Let's unhitch the horses and feed them so we can eat," Pat suggested hastily. He began loosening the traces. Sam, who sat fidgeting under Sally's accusing gaze, climbed stiffly down and helped Pat.

Ezra caressed the scar which ran diagonally across one of his eyelids, closing it flat against his cheek, and up his temple to the edge of his hair. "Waal, me an' Sam was feelin' plenty chilly, Miss Sally, so we set in Hod's bar for a few drinks. We shore needed 'em to make the trip." He unfolded his long legs and jumped over the wheel, then went to the rear of the buckboard and took out a big package. "I brung along a present for the kid," he told her hopefully and somewhat sheepishly.

Sally felt a chuckle in her heart, but she kept her face straight. "Thank you, Ezra. Dock'll be wild to see what it is. Are you *sure* there was no message from Martha?"

"Come to think of it, while we was settin' at the bar a man come in and asked Hod if he knew of anybody who was supposed to meet Miss Martha Sutton. Sam told him *we* was, so he give us the letter."

"A letter? Why didn't you say so?" Sally breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Where is it?"

Pat and Sam had the horses unhitched and were driving them toward the corral. "Hey, Sam," Ezra yelled. "You got that letter for Sally?" He kept searching through the pockets of his sheepskin coat.

"I give it to you," Sam called back. "You got it in yore pocket."

"No, I ain't," Ezra disclaimed.

"You didn't leave it in Hod's barroom?" Sally cried impatiently.

"No'm, I shore don't think so," Ezra said in a meek, apologetic voice. "Sam's lyin'. He didn' give it to me."

Sally caught up her skirt with one hand and, hugging her coat around her with the other, ran after Sam and Pat. "Wait . . . Sam! I want to have a look in your pockets. A fine pair, you and Ezra," she scolded when she came up to him. "Find that letter and hand it over, Sam Sloan. Martha might be coming on the next train."

Sam's swarthy face was covered with dismay as he dug into his pockets. At last he drew the letter from his hip pocket and handed it to her. "I woulda swore I give it to Ezra. That's sure a funny thing. I ain't got no recollection of puttin' it in m'own pocket."

"It's a wonder you recollected to come to Christmas dinner," Sally reproved. "Thanks for bringing it." She let go of the full folds of her dress and tore the letter open, reading it as she went back toward the porch, unmindful of her long skirt brushing the snow as she walked.

The men came in through the back door just as she finished reading the letter. She was sitting in a chair, rocking gently, her eyes staring into the fire. She lifted them to Pat when he came into the room and he saw that they were filled with fright.

"What's up, old woman? What did Martha say? Why didn't she come?"

Sally silently handed the letter to him when he crossed over to her, and Pat Stevens read aloud:

Dear Sally:

I'm dreadfully disappointed not to come to you for Christmas, but something has happened that makes it impossible for me to leave papa. I'm frightened out of my wits, Sally. There is a band of robbers in this part of the country who are stealing the gold dust of the

miners right and left, and our time is due any day, I'm afraid. I guess you heard about the train being held up last week and two of the miners' gold stolen. Our only hope is that they will not suspect us of having a hoard, but they *torture* the miners into saying who has dust stored away.

We feel utterly helpless now. *They have killed Sheriff Ross*. As you know, most of the men here are old and can't fight as they once could. No one has any idea what the bandits look like. They cover themselves with black hoods and capes which conceal their bodies.

Papa and I are desperate, and though God knows I hate to do it, Sally, I am asking you to let Pat come up here and help us. He is the only man anywhere near us who is smart enough to outwit them and bring them to justice.

Don't think I haven't considered the agony this will cause you and your son Dock, but if you can find it in your heart to send Pat to us, we will be forever grateful. Everybody here feels that Pat is the only man who can save us by capturing the bandits.

Wells Fargo is offering a five-thousand-dollar reward for their capture, and the miners are offering a big reward, too.

With deep regret that I cannot be with you this Christmas, and with fond love,

MARTHA SUTTON.

"Well, I'm damned," Pat growled.

Ezra and Sam turned slowly around before the fire, toasting themselves on all sides.

"I was meanin' to tell you," Ezra drawled, "the train was late today 'count of a hold-up just out of Pueblo. All the gold it was carryin' was stole."

"Yeh," Sam put in casually, "there was some excitement among the passengers and them in Hod's bar. It was that gang of black-robos done the job."

For the first time during the day Pat's stomach stopped

itching with hunger. A far greater hunger gnawed at his heart, a hunger to stamp out every black-hearted vulture that stalked the West, stealing and killing.

He invited Sam and Ezra to sit down and took a chair near the fireplace for himself.

"Now, if you hadn' of got as soft as a yaller mushroom, Pat," Sam rumbled, "you might go down there an' run them sneakin' coyotes out o' Dusty Canyon." He made a clucking sound with his tongue and rolled his black eyes sadly, then took out a handkerchief and blew a blast on his odd, crooked nose.

"Who's getting soft?" Pat demanded in a voice which a stranger would have heard as harsh anger. "If you weren't so short and fat I could tie you in a bowknot with two fingers and a thumb." His clear gray eyes twinkled at the swarthy-black, weather-beaten face of his old friend.

Ezra's one eye danced and burned hotly into Pat's face. "Me," he stated flatly, "I've got so used to bein' a lazy rancher wild hawses couldn' drag me off varmint-huntin' again."

"Who said anything about going after a gang?" Pat asked. He paused uncertainly, rubbing his chin. "'Nother train hold-up today, huh? With Sheriff Ross dead there won't be no stoppin' 'em."

"He was a mighty fine ol' man," Sam muttered sorrowfully. "'Member that time three years ago when he deputized us an' we rounded up the hoss thieves? When we finished that job, Pat, you promised him you'd be on call any time he needed he'p."

Pat steevens wriggled uneasily, conscious of the letter in his pocket from Sheriff Ross—the letter he hadn't even answered. Ever since he had received that appeal from his old friend he had been trying to decide where a man's duty lay.

Now, it was too late. The decision had been taken away from him. If he had acted sooner, Sheriff Ross might still be alive. Only half conscious of what he was saying, Pat muttered: "I didn't know it was so bad in Dusty Canyon. When he wrote he was wounded, he didn't say..."

He stopped abruptly, conscious of the strained silence, the staring eyes of the two men and his wife.

Sally leaned forward and asked intensely, "What are you mumbling about, Pat? Have you heard from Sheriff Ross?"

"Well, I . . . sorta. That is . . . I got a letter here in my pocket, Sally. I didn't tell you about it because I promised you I wouldn't go out man-huntin' again. Now, don't you go frettin'," he went on hastily. "It ain't up to us to worry about Martha an' old man Sutton an' their gold. How about gettin' dinner ready?"

Sally sighed and stood up slowly. "No," she agreed faintly, "I guess it isn't out worry." She turned and went into the kitchen, leaving the three old friends together, smoking silently and staring into the fire.

It had been many years since their first foray into Powder Valley, where they had rounded up a vicious gang of train robbers headed by John Stout who had murdered his own brother in an effort to grab the Lazy Mare ranch which rightfully belonged to Sally, and all three of them had settled in the valley after Pat married Sally.

But their reputation as gunfighters had been too strong to let them settle down peaceably, and time after time in the ensuing years they had been called upon to do their bit to rid the pioneer country of dangerous enemies to the advance of civilization, until the prowess of the trio had become almost legendary throughout the confines of Colorado and beyond its borders.

That phase of their lives was ended now. Pat had made

Sally a solemn promise he would never unlimber his guns again, and if Pat Stevens did not lead the way neither Ezra nor Sam would take the initiative in anything of that sort.

The smell of turkey became more pronounced when Sally opened the oven to take it out. Ezra lifted his head and sniffed deeply, then broke the silence that had held them so long.

"It makes me plumb sick to my stomick to see a man like Pat gittin' soft an' lazy an' livin' offen the fat of the lan' jest 'cause he finagled a gal with a ranch to marry him. A fine man like Sheriff Ross gettin' murdered right under his nose, an' him stuffin' his guts with turkey an' doin' nothin'." Ezra rolled his one eye solemnly at his swarthy partner.

Sam wagged his head mournfully. "You're shore es hell right. Old man Stevens raised his boy Patrick fer somethin' else besides settin' on his butt. I'm tellin' you he'd be rollin' 'round in his grave if he knowed how varmints was takin' over the country he fought to build up for decent folks to live in."

"Reckon he would," Ezra opined. "Take me, now, if I wasn't gettin' old I'd . . ."

"You wan't no good when you was young," Sam interrupted dourly. "Hard as I tried to teach you to shoot."

Sally appeared in the kitchen doorway and said, "Blow the horn for Dock to come in, Pat. Dinner's ready."

Pat jumped up as if coiled springs propelled him. He stretched his long arms, yawned, and on his way to the shelf to get the horn, said:

"It's a rancher's life for me. Turkey on the table and a soft bed to sleep in. No more fooling my belly chewin' jerky." He spoke loud enough for Sally to hear and chuckled as he passed between the two men on his way

to the porch where he sounded three long blasts on the old cowhorn.

A young boy's voice answered, "Coming, Pop," and presently Dock was running toward him with his new rifle on his shoulder and a cottontail swinging from his hand. "I got one," he cried. "I was hurrying to show you."

"Good boy," Pat bragged, and when his son reached the porch Pat took the limp rabbit and ordered him to wash up for dinner.

Sally was thoughtfully silent during the meal. Now and then a mist swam in her eyes, and Pat noticed that she held her chin very firm when it came. No mention was made of Martha Sutton's letter, but when dinner was over and Sally began stacking the plates, she said:

"Poor dear Martha, my heart aches for her. It's a shame," she ended, controlling her voice with an effort, "that something can't be done about those terrible bandits."

The three men looked uncomfortable but said nothing. Into the silence Dock poured childish questions, demanding to know why he couldn't go to Dusty Canyon and kill them all with his new rifle.

Sally answered all his questions at once. "You're too young to understand, son. Finish your dinner so I can have your plate."

Dock said, "Aw, gosh," rumpled his sun-tanned face in disgust and said no more.

After the table was cleared and the dishes neatly stacked for washing, the presents from the Christmas tree were opened. Dock's package from Ezra and Sam contained a pair of sheepskin chaps which he instantly put on, and after opening and exclaiming over numerous other small gifts, he went out and saddled his pony to ride the snowy range.

A semblance of Christmas spirit had been maintained while the boy was in the room, but after he had gone no one made any attempt to hide his thoughts and feelings. Sally left the room with tears in her eyes.

Pat opened a jug of wine and poured three glasses. For a while they drank and brooded. Then, as was inevitable when they were together, the talk drifted to their man-hunting conquests of other days and led up to the outlaws now menacing Dusty Canyon section.

Though all three of them vowed never to take up the renegades' trails again, there was a smoldering flame in Ezra's one eye, bright hope in Pat's clear gray eyes, while Sam's were cold and black and calculating.

Not long after dark came on, the ranch house became silent and was lighted only by the dying embers in the great fireplace. Sam and Ezra, at young Dock's insistence, occupied two bunks in the boy's room after stating that they would have to be on their way to the Bar ES before daylight broke in the morning.

TWO

PAT HEARD the clock strike five the next morning and eased himself from the bed to keep from waking Sally. The room was as dark as midnight, and his efforts to dress quietly were futile. He stumbled over a chair and it clattered to the floor.

There was no hint of sleepiness in Sally's voice when she said, "What are you getting up so early for, Pat?"

"I sort of loafed around yesterday celebratin'," he answered, "and I've got to get out early and attend to things. I'll bet not a one of the punchers will be back early after carousing in town."

"Pat Stevens, are you trying to rig up some excuse for going after that gang of robbers in Dusty Canyon? You didn't sleep much during the night."

Pat chuckled. "You didn't sleep much yourself, old woman. Reckon we both had the jitters."

"Well, let me tell you right now . . ."

"Sh-h-h," Pat whispered. The muffled pounding of a horse's hooves on snow interrupted their conversation. The sound rushed nearer and nearer toward the ranch house.

"That horse is being ridden too hard," Pat muttered. "I'll just check up and see which one of the punchers is doing it." He hastily struck a match and set flame to the wick of a lamp. By the time the horse was reined up at the front of the house he was on his way to the door.

A loud, insistent knocking sounded on the front door. Surprised and puzzled, Pat reached it in two long strides, flung it open wide.

The figure of a man stood in the pitch dark of the porch wearing a black hood and a long black robe. Without a word he caught Pat's hand and thrust a piece of paper into it, and before Pat could recover from the shock, the figure whirled, ran across the porch and leaped on the horse. The animal galloped away, as hard ridden as when he approached.

Pat's first impulse was to race to the corral, saddle his own fastest horse and go after the man, but the slip of paper in his hand seemed of first importance. He hurried back to the bedroom where the lamp was burning, opened

the crumpled note and smoothed it out on the table. He read:

Pat Stevens effen you valyu yore life keep away from
Dusty Canyon.

"The hell you say," Pat growled, addressing the black-robed figure whose horse's hooves were fading in the distance.

"What are you muttering about?" Sally asked from the bed. "Did something happen to one of the punchers?"

Pat hastily explained about the hooded and robed visitor, then read the note to Sally. "Sounds as if there's been talk about me going to Dusty Canyon," he ended. "Maybe Martha expected I'd come after you got her letter, and told it around."

Sally was out of bed, shivering and hugging a heavy robe around her. "Let me see that note. What did the man say?"

"Not a damned word," Pat said. "It was all done so quick." He hesitated thoughtfully while Sally read the note for herself, then he added, "It was so dark I couldn't see anything. His horse looked black against the snow, but I suppose it could've been almost any color except white." He spoke as though talking to himself, as if Sally was not in the room at all.

She stood beside the table with her face pale and her eyes tortured as they stared at her husband's angry face. "Pat . . . you're not going," she said softly, laying a trembling hand on his arm.

"What?" Pat jumped. "Oh . . . 'course not, honey. I promised you, didn't I?"

His answer did not ease her fright. Sally knew they

were just words and had nothing to do with what he was thinking.

Pat sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at his wife. He perceived that her thoughts were in a panic of indecision, and he waited silently, relaxed and hopeful.

Presently Sally said in an uncertain voice, "Maybe I ought to go . . . and be with Martha in this trouble. I might think of some way to help them get out . . . escape the bandits with some of the gold, at least."

"You?" Pat got up slowly from the bed and stood beside her. "Have you forgotten that you have a seven-year-old son to take care of? And do you think I'd let my wife go traipsin' off to a place swarmin' with bandits and killers? You'll stay right here, Mrs. Patrick Stevens."

"And so will you, *Mister* Patrick Stevens," Sally returned instantly and in a tone which brooked no argument.

Pat caught her shoulders and turned her squarely toward him. He started to catch her stubborn little chin and raise her face, but she beat him to it. She threw her head back and their eyes met and held for a long time.

He said, "Damn it, Sally, a man could go out and rid the whole world of thieves and then come home and have to back down before a little bit of a woman weighin' not more'n a hundred and ten pounds."

Sally's sense of humor surged up, drowning her determination. She laughed aloud and pulled Pat's face down to kiss it tenderly.

Pat said, "Why don't we both go? You could stay with Martha and comfort her while . . ."

Sally's bright blond head moved slowly from side to side. Her eyes were steady upon his and they were not laughing now. She said, "We could take the train tomorrow to Pueblo, take the stage from there and go to Dusty Canyon. We'll take what valises and carpetbags

we can find and bring back as much gold as we can, and bring Martha and her father here for a while. *But you'll not trail any bandits.*"

"**But there** are other old men up there, Sally," Pat argued, "who've worked as hard as old man Sutton. What about them? They're in danger as long as the damned devil killers roam the canyon."

"You won't take your guns," Sally said calmly. "That will insure your staying out of trouble. Dock has got to have a father to raise him to be a true Westerner." She flung her head back proudly and met his eyes levelly.

Pat started to reply, but held his tongue. He swept her into his arms and kissed her, then asked:

"What will we do with Dock while we're gone?"

"I'll send him to Dutch Springs. He can stay with Mary Calkins. If we don't get back before school starts, he can just stay on. I'll get his clothes ready and he can ride his pony in."

Further conversation was interrupted by sounds of life in the big front room . . . the crackling of a fresh log fire and the tramp of heavy boots. Pat opened the door and saw Ezra and Sam warming themselves before the fire. He turned back to Sally and said:

"While you get Dock's things together I'll build a fire in the kitchen stove and have it hot when you're ready. Sam and Ezra can help me some around the corral in case none of the punchers've come back."

He was grinning gleefully when he closed the door and went out to join his old friends. "Mornin', Sam, mornin', Ezra. Looks like you're goin' to have to give me a hand so Sally and me can get off on the train today."

"We got to get along to the Bar ES," Ezra stated flatly.

"So, you've took to ridin' them soft seats in trains 'stead o' ridin' leather," Sam mourned.

"Nex' thing you know," Ezra put in dolefully, "old

man Stevens' boy Patrick'll be settin' on a cushion teachin' school. Allus knowed he'd ort'nta had so much edjication. Where you and Sally goin' on a train?"

"Dusty Canyon . . . least we'll take the stage from Pueblo up the Canyon." Pat spoke on his way to the kitchen where he laid kindling in the range, struck a match to it, then placed solid round sticks of oak on top and replaced the iron lid. He looked up to see Sam and Ezra regarding him craftily and with some hostility.

"Dusty Canyon's sorter straight down from Blue Mesa where old man Richards breeds them blue hawses, ain't it?" Sam asked disinterestedly.

Pat nodded. "I got my first pair from him. You thinkin' about buyin' some blues?"

"Ezra's been pesterin' me 'bout 'em off an' on. He cain't stand it if we get a dollar and got nothin' to spend it for."

"I'd shore buy me a pair," Ezra said, "if I wasn't too old to collec' some o' that reward money for them Dusty Canyon robbers." His one eye burned with a strange light in its deep socket. "Reckon you ain't figgerin' on none o' that reward." His voice was casual, his fingers busy with the makings of a cigarette.

"Sally and me aim to go up there and bring Martha and her pa out of the canyon and get out ourselves." Pat lifted the stove lid, saw that the big wood was burning with a roar, closed it and started toward the rear door.

Sam was close behind. He said, dourly, "Sally shore is goin' to make a mighty pretty widdy lady. That yellor hair o' hern oughta go awful good with black."

Gray dawn was breaking over the ranch as they went down the slippery steps where fluffy snow had frozen into ice overnight.

"Come spring and the snow melts," Ezra spoke up, trailing Sam down the steps, "I'm goin' to take m'self

a trip up Dusty Canyon way to Blue Mesa and have a look at them blue hawses."

With his face averted, Pat grinned. They went on to the corral where two punchers were already busy with the work of feeding. Pat spoke to them, inquired about the other punchers, and asked whether they had had a good time, which he knew was merely a polite question, and scarcely waited for a reply.

Sam and Ezra followed Pat to another corral and as they pitched hay to the horses, Pat said:

"I'd sure appreciate it if one of you would keep an eye on the Lazy Mare while Sally and me are away. Old man Sutton is a stubborn cuss, and it might take longer'n we figure to get him to come away. Might not be a bad idea if one of you stayed here 'till we get back."

"Reckon they ain't many *young* men in Dusty Canyon, 'cordin' to Miss Martha's letter to Sally," Sam drawled, "but I reckon you could make up a posse 'round Pueblo."

"To hell with a posse," Pat snorted, tossing a pitchfork of hay to a black stallion.

By the time the feeding was finished Sally was ringing the breakfast bell. On the way back to the kitchen Pat talked volubly, while his eyes shone with glee. He gave explicit directions as to important ranch matters to be attended to in his absence. Just before they reached the steps, he said:

"Even if I was going after the train robbers and the old-man killers, I couldn't let you two go along. It'd be too dangerous. I got a note this mornin' early warnin' me not to go to Dusty Canyon."

Sam snorted, a trumpet sound through his crooked nose. He spat his contempt in brown tobacco juice on the ground, while Ezra drawled:

"That's shore mighty kind o' you, Mr. Stevens."

They went into the warm kitchen where Sally had

crisp bacon and fluffy scrambled eggs piled high on big platters in the center of the table. Young Dock was scrubbed and shining, dressed for his pony trip to Dutch Springs, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Sally was bending over the oven with the door down and the odor of freshly baked biscuits filled the room.

Sam was saying, "Where the devil is that note you say you got from one of them varmints this mornin'?"

Sally looked up, her face flushed from the oven's heat. "Pat! You just keep that note in your pocket. Don't go exciting Sam and Ezra about it. If either one of them gets on that train today, we are not going. All three of you would be in trouble in an hour after we got there if they went."

"Don't you worry none 'bout *me* goin', Miss Sally," Ezra spoke up quickly in assuring tones, and sat down at the breakfast table.

Sam glowered and dropped into a chair beside him. Pat sat at the head of the table, and presently the two punchers came in and silently took their places.

It was an hour later when young Dock galloped away on his paint pony with his clothes in the saddlebags flapping against the pony's flanks. His new chaps were warm against his stout legs as they urged the pony to go faster, and his shining new .22 rifle was lovingly and carefully balanced across the pommel.

Sally watched him until he was out of sight. A mother's prayer was on her lips when she climbed into the buckboard. She looked around for Pat but he was nowhere to be seen. She called to him and he answered from inside the house, "Coming, Sally."

Pat was standing before the fireplace smoothing the note which the mysterious hooded man had thrust into his hand early in the morning. He hastily propped it against an earthenware vase where Sam and Ezra could

easily see it and laid a .30-calibre saddlegun in front of it. He then picked up a battered valise and two carpet-bags from the floor and hurried out to take his place beside Sally in the buckboard.

His face was very solemn as he took up the reins, touched the team of horses lightly with a whip, and they lurched away.

THREE

SALLY NEVER looked upon the small boxlike station depot with its crooked tin stovepipe sticking jauntily above the roof without thinking back to the June day when Pat had met her in the buckboard with Blackie and Thander, the two coal-black mustangs that reared and bucked at being hitched to a conveyance for the first time. That was more than eight years ago, and though Hopewell Junction had a few more houses, outwardly it was just as deserted today, and the landscape was bleak with snow. The foothills guarding the range were white, and the Spanish Peaks were two bright snowy sentinels gleaming in the sun.

After helping Sally down from her high seat, Pat escorted her into the waiting room where a fat, squatty stove glowed red-hot in the center of the room. The air was smelly with stale smoke and the stench of two spittoons on the square of tin surrounding the stove, but its warmth was welcome to Sally's half-frozen face and hands.

Besides the station agent who sat in a cubbyhole behind a small window, there was only one other person

in the station. He was a young man with dark eyes and a clear complexion, wearing a Stetson pulled low over his forehead. He was dressed in expensive black whipcords and polished black boots. A bright woolen scarf lay loosely around the collar of his white silk shirt. On a chair beside him was a heavy black overcoat, and on top of it a canvas-wrapped bundle tied with a small rope had a loop-handle by which it could be carried.

Pat sized him up out of the corner of his eye while he drew a chair from a corner and seated Sally comfortably near the stove. The man was not more than twenty-three, he guessed, and was powerfully built without being stout. His hands were big, but the skin on them was smooth.

A dude, thought Pat, but no weakling.

Sally said, anxiously, "You'd better bring the valises and carpetbags in here before you put the horses and buckboard in the stable. They're . . . heavy to carry so far."

"Don't you worry about the bags," Pat told her, wondering about her sudden concern for his strength. He could carry the three bags with three fingers and she knew it. "You stay in here and keep warm," he added, "while I attend to things." It would never do for her to discover the two Colt .44s before they reached their destination, and the trip would end right there in Hopewell if she should get a glimpse of Sam and Ezra before the train left for Pueblo. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind that they had left the Lazy Mare within a few minutes after he and Sally left.

Stepping outside, Pat looked around for his two companions but they were nowhere in sight. He climbed in the buckboard and drove to the stables a few hundred yards from the station. After arranging for the care of the horses, he began taking the bags out. Sally's, he noted, appeared to be overly heavy, and a slow grin came on his face as he set it down and opened it. The grin changed

to a chuckle when he felt around and encountered the cold steel of her small pistol. She insisted that *he* go unarmed, but she had brought her own weapon along. That was like Sally.

When he entered the depot he found Sally talking animatedly to the young dude who had been there when they arrived. She introduced her husband with a smile to "Mr. Torrence, who's going to Pueblo too," and Pat hesitated a moment before shaking hands.

"Your wife tells me you'll be taking the stage out of Pueblo, Mr. Stevens. Going far into the mountains?"

Pat said, "Not far," turning to drop his carpetbags and Sally's valise in the corner.

"I understand it's dangerous traveling on the Pueblo stage these days," Torrence persisted. "Seems to me a man like you would be armed for a trip like that, Mr. Stevens. I've heard a lot of stories around these parts about your prowess with a six-gun."

Pat said, "Have you?" glancing aside helplessly at Sally who was twinkling at him maliciously.

"I certainly have. And your two partners, too. Before Sheriff Ross was killed there was some talk that he might ask you and your friends to help him clean out the band of hooded bandits that have been terrorizing Dusty Canyon."

"Out here in the West, folks don't get so curious," Pat cut him off curtly, not caring how angry Sally got with him. "I'm not packing my guns this trip, and I don't look for any trouble."

The chugging of the engine outside interrupted the conversation. Pat hurried outside and gave one last searching glance around for Sam and Ezra before Sally followed him. There was not a person in sight. Only the noise of wheels, the clanging of the bell and the shrill blast of the train whistle broke the cold silence.

Turning back into the room, he picked up the bags as the train creaked and groaned to a stop. The puffing little engine was pulling a baggage car, two passenger coaches, and a string of freight cars and gondolas which ended with a red caboose.

Pat caught Sally's arm and hustled her up the steps of the second passenger coach. Dropping the bags in a corner behind the door, he took her on to a seat and before leaving, admonished her:

"You'd better stay inside, honey. You'll catch your death of cold outside after sitting in that hot station room. I'll be in in a minute."

As he reached the steps, he encountered Mr. Torrence carrying his oddly wrapped bundle by the improvised handle. Standing aside to let him come up the steps, it struck Pat as very strange that a young man who was so expensively dressed should not pack his clothes in a valise, but his mind was too intent upon watching for Sam and Ezra to dwell long upon the thought.

He stood on the bottom step looking down the long row of freight cars until the brakeman called "All aboard," and until the train puffed mightily and chugged slowly away. Sam and Ezra did not show up. Disappointed, he went into the coach, shoved the back of a seat over so that he could sit facing Sally, and arranged the valise and two carpetbags beside him.

"Thank goodness," Sally breathed, "we won't have to worry about a hold-up going *to* Pueblo," and relaxed against the plush seat to enjoy the rare pleasure of a train ride.

Although Pat made several trips through the other passenger car and on through the baggage car, Ezra and Sam were nowhere to be found. He thought, gloomily, that if they had grabbed one of the gondolas as the train

pulled out they would freeze to death before reaching Pueblo. His only hope was that they were riding the caboose.

The stranger who had introduced himself as Torrence sat at the far end of the coach, apparently engrossed in a book. They were the only three passengers, and when Sally opened the lunch box which was stored in one of the carpetbags she insisted upon Pat inviting him to share it.

After much urging by Sally, he accepted the invitation, but his manner had changed from that of the first few minutes when Sally introduced him to Pat. He was dour and sullen and uncommunicative, but he ate heartily of the cold turkey sandwiches and Sally's special Christmas cake.

The stagecoach which was to carry them to Dusty Canyon was more than an hour late leaving Pueblo. The driver was plainly half-drunk, and there was no guard with him. The hulking figure in the driver's seat explained that the guards had done too much celebrating over Christmas and wouldn't accompany them back, but that it really didn't matter, because the stage never carried any gold *up* the canyon.

The sun was going down behind the serrated peaks to the west before they started. Pat waited for Sally to mention her pistol, hoping that she would urge him to take it and be ready to protect them in case they were attacked, but dusk came and she did not mention it. Inside the two-seated coach, it was quite dark. Talking volubly, Pat wormed his hand to the carpetbag beside him and surreptitiously opened it, felt inside and assured himself that his guns were within easy reach.

The stage was dipping steadily down toward the floor

of the canyon, rocking and reeling over small boulders in the trail while the driver alternately sang drunkenly and cursed the horses, lashing them with a whip.

Suddenly a shot rang out close by. Simultaneously the horses lurched over a huge boulder, tilting the coach perilously on the two right wheels. Sally was thrown hard against Pat, pinning his arm against the side of the coach. At that instant the right door came open. Grabbing for his wife with his left arm, Pat tried to free his right one to grab for the carpetbag and his guns, but just before the coach righted itself, the two carpetbags fell through the door and landed on the ground with a dull thud.

Then a hooded and robed figure appeared to dive from a rock into the driver's seat, and while Pat and Sally were being jostled from one side to the other of the coach as it settled, another tall, black, ominous figure pushed a gun inexorably into Pat's ribs.

"Make a move an' you're dead," a hard voice said.

After prancing back and forth, the horses subsided and the coach was still.

"Git out, you," the voice commanded. "Effen yuh don' make no fuss the gal won't git hurt, but ef yuh do, she'll git the same as you."

Pat said softly to Sally, "Be quiet. I'll get out and if they promise to let the driver take you on, I'll go with them."

Sally moaned, slumped low in the seat, pretending to faint while her hand frantically felt around for her valise. Pat got out and shut the door tightly behind him. She heard him arguing with the man and prayed that she would locate her pistol before they took him away, but already the coach was moving forward slowly and in the rapidly approaching darkness she saw that they were

rounding a sharp curve and that Pat was being led away between the two robed figures.

Before the stage had gone a hundred yards her fingers found the valise. Unstrapping it hastily, she took out her pistol and started forward to open the narrow door leading up to the driver's seat, but sank back in terror and despair when she realized that if she shot with the carriage moving she might hit Pat . . . and thought, too, that any fight on her part might cause the men to shoot Pat then and there.

The stage had rounded the curve and the high jagged wall of the canyon was between them. Deeper and deeper into the floor of the canyon they plunged, with the driver making no attempt to hold the team back on the steep decline.

Sally covered her face with her hands, pressed her fingers into her eyes to keep the tears back. This was no time for tears. Her only hope was to reach the Sutton cabin and send help back as quickly as possible. The bumping and swaying and lumbering of the coach was no longer uncomfortable and terrifying, for it carried her more swiftly to her destination.

The two black-hooded and robed figures walked menacingly beside Pat as they stumbled up a precipitous path which was scarcely visible. Occasionally he had a glimpse of a quarter moon through the tall pines, but already it was sinking low, and in a short time would sink beyond the canyon's rim. Now and then the path narrowed so that they were forced to walk single file, but there was always the muzzle of a gun against his body.

Not a word was spoken on the strange journey. Finally they came upon a clump of pines which hid a low log shack backed up against a projecting cliff. Pat's keen ears

caught the sound of running water, heard the whinnying of a horse, and knew that this was the end of the trail for tonight . . . perhaps the end of the trail for all time for him . . . unless the Stevens luck held.

Then he was cursing under his breath. Where the devil were Sam and Ezra? Why the hell hadn't he forced Sally to let him strap his guns around his waist where they belonged? He had been a blasted fool not to take matters in his own hands and do things his way. Maybe Sam's and Ezra's jokes about him getting soft were not jokes. Maybe he *had* gone soft.

One of the men pushed the cabin door open while the other stood relentlessly by with the muzzle of his gun against Pat's ribs. A light flickered inside as a lantern was lifted up to a rafter, then Pat felt the gun prodding him forward.

He stepped into a long low room with a plank floor. Cold dank air was in his nostrils, telling him that the cabin had not been heated or aired for a long time. A rough table stood in one corner and there were four straight chairs with cowhide bottoms. A kitchen range occupied another corner, and drawn up close to the fireplace were two larger chairs with rockers.

The man who had preceded them into the room was drawing a loop of rope from a rafter. Pat's gray eyes grew wary as he measured the distance from the floor to the rafters. They were not more than three inches above his head. He wondered how long he could endure dancing on his tiptoes if they hung him in here.

Relief spread through him when one of the men ordered: "Set down on that chear," pointing to one of the rockers with the muzzle of his gun.

Pat sat down and the shorter of the two men began winding the rope around his body, holding it fast against the chair, pinioning his arms against his side. In that

moment Pat knew, gloomily, what he would do if he didn't have a wife and a son. He would take the desperate chance of flinging his arms out in an effort to knock the gun from the tall man's hand. As it was, there was nothing to do but submit . . . and wait.

When the knot was securely tied behind the chair, the tall man holstered his gun and the shorter man went to the stove and started a fire.

Thankful that he would at least not freeze to death for the next few hours, Pat settled as comfortably as he could with the rope binding him.

Suddenly one of the men laughed harshly and said, "Reckon yuh won't be hankerin' a'ter messin' intuh what ain't none o' your damned bizness, Mistuh Stevens, a'ter we turn yuh over to thuh big boss."

So, Pat thought, the rumor *had* gotten around that he was coming to Dusty Canyon to clean out the gang of robbers.

"Shet your mouth," growled the taller man, "an' go fetch in some grub offen the haws."

Pat was thinking fast. Caught as he was, the only thing to do was try to reason with them. He said, "I had no intention of going after your gang. My wife and I were coming up to visit some friends. We meant to take the stage back to Pueblo tomorrow."

"We got our awders," the man snarled from the stove where a fire was roaring. Warmth gradually penetrated the cabin and Pat's bare hands were losing some of their stiffness.

"Seems to me," Pat argued, "you've done enough meanness without attacking a man who hasn't got anything you want to steal and who has no notion of trying to turn you and your gang in."

"You're lyin'," the other snapped. "They ain't nobody ever heerd o' yuh, Pat Stevens, that'd believe yuh."

"But I quit trailin' thieves and killers more'n four years ago," Pat contended. "All I want is to get back to my ranch and take care of my wife and boy. There's plenty others that'll go after you and your gang, *and they'll get you yet*," he ended doggedly.

"Shut up that threatenin' talk," the tall man growled. "You're wastin' some o' your last breath talkin' tuh me. I'm carryin' out awders." He laughed with an inhuman sound which seemed very odd to Pat. As if it was forced, as if the man tried hard to disguise his voice. His words, too, sounded queer. Unnaturally guttural and spoken from one corner of his mouth.

Pat's big hands writhed under the tight rope, itching to be free to jerk the hood from the man's face and have a look at it.

The shorter man came through the door with a bundle in his arm and it was not long before the aroma of frying bacon and boiling coffee filled the room. Pat was hungry. Sharing their lunch on the train with Torrence had cut his share down.

When the food was ready the taller man said gruffly, "Reckon y'might loosen that rope on his right han' a leetle, Buck, so's he kin hold ontuh a cup o' coffee. Allus fill up a man's belly jest 'fore yuh string 'im up to a cottonwood. It's the gen'lmanly thing tuh do, and it makes 'em swing heavier." He guffawed loudly.

Pat's eyes shone like bright coals of fire. He kept them lowered, waiting for the short man to loosen the rope. If he could get his right hand free while they both had their guns holstered, he would have a fighting chance.

"You gone plumb rantin' crazy?" the shorter man belowed. "Effen I loose that rope on his right hand it'll come loose all 'round. I'll cram some rations down his th'roat m'self."

Pat's hopes dwindled and he said crisply, "I'm not hungry." He knew this was foolish defiance. His big body required regular provisioning to keep it strong for an emergency, but he did not retract his statement.

When one of the men filled the stove with fresh wood, Pat had another hopeful thought. If the men should leave him alone even for a short time, he might be able to burn the rope on the stove, free himself to make a dash from the cabin. He might even find the path up which they had climbed . . . and find his guns lying in the stagecoach trail below.

As the night wore on, however, his hope became utter despair. Neither of the men had left the room. Neither of them dozed as they sat before the fireplace where a small blaze had been kindled as the night grew bitter cold. When the short man sneezed violently, Pat had a fleeting glimpse of his chin when he raised the black mask a little to get a handkerchief to his nose. His chin was covered with a black stubble.

Ruefully, Pat thought of Sam Sloan.

He decided it was about midnight when the taller man stood up, stretched himself, and announced that he was going outside and walk around for a while, warning the other to keep close guard over the prisoner. Before leaving, he bent down to examine the knot of the rope.

Listening keenly, Pat was certain he heard a horse being led away from the cabin. The clomp of his hooves against the rocks grew fainter, then they were running as the sound died away in the distance.

Glancing at the guard who sat in a rocker, Pat saw that he was dozing. He sat up suddenly and asked, "Did yuh hear somethin'?"

"I heard a horse running," Pat answered. "Looks like your friend has gone and left you."

"Dad-blast his guts," the man roared, "I'll teach 'im tuh leave me holdin' thuh bag." He jumped up, cursing angrily, and went hastily through the door.

The minute the door closed behind the short bulky figure, Pat began dragging the rocking chair toward the stove as hastily as was humanly possible, hoping against hope that there was still enough heat to burn the rope and that he could manage somehow to make the contact.

The shorter of the robed figures did not lead his horse away slowly as the first man did. Pat heard the rapid beat of hooves against the rocky slope, and knew that the frightened, surly coward was racing to apprise the "boss" of the fact that Pat Stevens was helplessly strapped to a chair in the cabin awaiting his final orders.

FOUR

LUCK HAD been with Sam and Ezra at Hopewell Junction. Instead of coming near the station, they had stabled their horses in a corral some distance from the depot, and when the train came near they made a dash across the track and were hidden by the cars until the caboose reached them. The train was moving slowly, and they swung up the steps of the caboose unobserved.

There were three punchers in the little red car who, to use their own words, were nursing three carloads of beef cattle to market. Sam and Ezra promptly engaged them in a poker game.

When the train stopped in Pueblo, neither of them made a move to get off. One of the punchers who had lost heavily in the game drawled, "I thought you'ns was

gettin' off here. Ez fer as I'm consarned, you won't win no more offen me."

Ezra answered him by calling and laying a full-house face up on the improvised table, and after the other hands were laid down, he raked in the pot. He then arose stiffly from an empty crate and took his stand by the window. He chuckled when he saw Pat and Sally going toward the depot. Pat was straining his eyes in every direction and stumbled over the plank curb separating the cinder path from the board walk above which hung a sign, PUEBLO.

"You see 'em?" Sam asked, watching him closely.

"Pat near about broke his neck lookin' fer us."

"He'll be comin' down here to the caboose lookin' fer us," Sam suggested.

"Nope. He won't. Sally'd shore know what he was up to if he done that," Ezra replied sagely.

The three punchers had left the caboose to walk around outside and the two men were alone. Sam asked, "How much'd you take in the game?"

"'Bout 'nuff to buy us a coupla wall-eyed cayuses, I reckon. How much you got?"

"Figger 'nuff to pack a little grub," Sam answered. "I could shore use a bite now." He hitched his trousers up, took a notch in his belt and picked up Pat's rifle from the corner. Handing it to Ezra, he said, "It's your turn to half-kill yo'self gettin' off a movin' train."

The punchers were coming aboard, and the train bell was clanging. Sam and Ezra moved to the door as the cars jangled with the first movement forward. When the train passed through the town, and just before it began picking up speed, they swung off the bottom step, steadied themselves, and stood for a moment or two looking around them.

Ezra sniffed the cold air like a hound hunting a scent.

Nodding to Sam, he walked back along the track a short distance, then turned left on a road which presently led them through a gate. After half a mile they could see a ranch house with corrals in the rear and they quickened their pace. There was no snow on the ground here, only a sharp chilling wind which froze their lips to silence.

The ranch appeared deserted except for smoke rolling up from a chimney in the big house, but inside they found the owner, a bluff, hearty man who was mellow from Christmas celebration. They lost no time bargaining with him for horses, and shortly rode away, Ezra astride a dun-colored mare and Sam's short thick legs prodding the sides of a sway-backed sorrel.

Skirting a thick wooded section to avoid the main road leading back to Pueblo, they reached the stagecoach road some two miles to the west. Ezra dismounted and examined the rough trail, then swung back into the saddle, saying:

"Stage mus' be late. It ain't been along yet. Maybe we'll get there 'fore Pat does."

"Hadn' we orter wait and ride 'long behind?" Sam asked. It was tacitly agreed between them that Ezra should take the lead when Pat was not with them.

Ezra considered the suggestion briefly and seriously, then decided, "If there's any of them varmints hid out 'long the way, they'll prob'ly show themselves when they hear hawses comin'. This way, we orta be able to skeer 'em away 'till Miss Sally kin get by safe in the coach."

"You shore Pat ain't got his guns?"

Ezra shook his head. "Not if Miss Sally done the packin'. He didn't have a shootin' iron on 'im when he was fixin' that note on the mantel for us to see. That's why he wanted to be certain we brung the rifle."

Settling matters as best they could without Pat's guidance, they stuck spurs to the horses and galloped away.

After traveling for an hour, Ezra's one all-seeing eye carefully watching the road, he brought his mare to a sudden stop. Dismounting, he examined tracks on the trail, then studied a precipitous path leading up the canyon wall.

"Somebody's been 'long here . . . two hawses . . . mebbe three." At the bottom of the trail there was evidence of a small, fresh landslide, and upon further examination Ezra added, "The hawses slid down from up yonder somewheres."

For a time they waited, listening intently, but there was only the sound of the wind sweeping through the canyon, shivering the gaunt bare trees and bending the tops of pine and spruce.

Examining the ground again, Ezra said, "The hawses went off the stage trail from here . . . straight 'cross the road."

"Hadn' we better turn out in the woods an' let the stage pass by 'fore goin' on? Them devils might be waitin' up ahead to 'tack it."

"We ain't got no idee how fur ahead they be," Ezra answered. "We cain't trail 'em and stay on the road too."

Ezra mounted his mare and they proceeded at a slow pace, guns loosened in their holsters, stopping occasionally to listen when the wind moaned and whistled around the jagged projecting rocks lining the walls of the canyon, then rode on again.

It was after dark when they came upon the first miner's cabin in the section known as Dusty Canyon. It was Sam who took the initiative here. He got off his sorrel and went up to knock on the door and inquire the way to the Sutton cabin. Ezra listened, and when Sam returned with the information he shook his head and said:

"Them directions is confusin'. Sounds to me like you couldn't he'p but miss it if you follered 'em."

"It's still a fur piece on," Sam said, "but it's just off the stage road a little ways."

"We been to Tola," Ezra said hopefully. "I heerd 'im say 'twarn't fur from there. Little this side, 'bout five miles."

"Yeh," Sam agreed. "It shore is gettin' dark down here in the bottom o' this canyon. A hour more an' hell won't be no blacker."

With almost an hour's start on the stagecoach, they reached the end of their journey while the quarter moon still shed a faint shaft of light through the trees. It was difficult to detect where the trails led away to the miners' cabins, but after stopping twice more to inquire, they were at last certain that the next trail led to the Suttons' cabin.

Turning off the road, they slowed the horses and made their way as silently as possible to a clump of willows some fifty yards from the stream which fell gently down the side of the canyon back of the Sutton cabin. Here they dismounted, dropped the reins to the ground and crept silently toward the house. No light showed from the cabin, for the miners' houses had wooden shutters for windows and these were closed against the bitter cold, but a flurry of sparks flew from the chimney occasionally.

Two enormous cottonwoods near the front porch made a perfect place of concealment for them and shielded them a little from the wind. Half-frozen, and afraid to speak, they waited.

After a long time, after Ezra had whispered that his ears ought to have a decent burial when they froze and dropped off, they heard the stagecoach coming down the road.

In a few minutes they heard Sally's running feet coming along the path.

"Pat ain't with her," Ezra felt compelled to whisper.

"Shut up," Sam warned.

Sally rushed up the steps and knocked on the door. It was instantly opened, outlining her slender, frightened figure in the blaze of light coming through.

"Martha!" she cried, and the two women fell into each other's arms. "They took Pat from the stage. . . ."

Ezra waited to hear no more. His long legs were running toward his horse tethered a few feet away, while Sam crept up under the window of the cabin to listen as Sally sobbed out the story of the hold-up.

Ezra overtook the stagecoach, rode ahead to grab the reins of one of the horses after commanding the driver to stop. The hulking figure appeared sober when Ezra rode back to question him. After hearing the story, he ordered the driver to turn around.

"I got to go on to Tola," the man whined. "They's passengers waitin'."

"You're goin' back to where you let them varmints take Pat Stevens off your damned coach," Ezra growled, "an' you better get your thinkin' cap on and remember the exac' spot."

When the man protested, Ezra whipped out his .44 and a bullet whizzed uncomfortably near his high-peaked hat and he began pulling the reins, frantically urging the horses back, cutting the rear of the coach between the trees near the road. After they were turned, Ezra rode abreast of the horses. He said, "Stop when you get to the Sutton place."

There was, however, no need for stopping. They met Sam on the road. He whirled his sorrel about, and Ezra trotted up to ride beside him just ahead of the coach team.

With only the tiny kerosene lights flickering on the front of the coach to guide them and with bright stars gleaming in the cold clear sky, seeming very near from

the depths of the canyon, they rode back over the rough rocky road at a steady gallop.

After a long time, the stage driver called out, "Whoa," to the team, and to Sam and Ezra, "Stop . . . this here's the place."

Turning about to face him, Sam asked, "How we gonna know you ain't foolin'?"

The driver came down from the high seat and strode past them to the big boulder at the side of the road over which the carriage wheels had rolled to tilt it up on the two right wheels. "I recollect 'twas jest aroun' this sharp curve," he said, "an' the pistol shot come from up there." He pointed up to the jutting rock above.

Ezra was off his horse, striking matches and examining the ground. "He's right," he called to Sam. "Here's the boot tracks. Them coyotes must've tied up their hawses 'cross the road somewheres and come back on foot."

Sam dismounted slowly and ground-tied his sorrel.

"One of 'em jumped from that rock onto the coach seat," the driver pointed out. "The other'n took charge of the passengers. Both of 'em was dressed up in black robes and hoods."

Ezra and Sam scarcely heard him. They were both striking matches and searching the area carefully. At last Sam said, "Damned if here ain't Pat's carpetbag with his guns in it."

"An here's where they went acrost," Ezra spoke up from the other side of the road. "They's a sort of trail leadin' up here, and *three* men've gone up it recent."

After holding a short counsel together, Sam and Ezra dismissed the frightened coach driver, who hoisted his bulk to the seat and after cutting the conveyance half a dozen times to turn it around, drove away cursing and lashing at the team.

Then the two men started up the narrow, steep trail on foot.

When Pat reached the stove by dragging the rocking chair forward a little at a time, he could only sit staring at it with an expression of futility on his face. Bound as he was, it was impossible to accomplish the task he had set himself.

At that moment his ears picked up another sound that made the blood throb in his temples. A long-drawn-out "Hoo-ooo-oo," broke the silence of the hills, in perfect imitation of an owl, a signal which the three men had used since their first escapade on the renegades' trail.

Pat drew in a deep breath and answered the hoot-owl cry until his breath was exhausted and his chest became flat, then began inching his way toward the door.

It came open before he got there. Ezra was the first to enter, with Sam following close on his heels. They both stood silently for a moment, then began walking slowly around Pat and the chair while funereal expressions covered their weather-beaten faces.

Presently Ezra drawled, "Damned if the old yaller mushroom ain't done got so soft he goes huntin' criminals in a rockin' chair."

Sam shook his head sorrowfully and spat a streak of tobacco juice into the fire. "If them hooded men had only of knowed it," he opined, "they could of jest tol' him a nice little fairy story and kep' 'im quiet 'thout no ropes."

"To hell with you," Pat broke out furiously, "if you don't get these ropes cut by the time I count three, Ezra, I'll twist your long neck in a spiral. I got to get away from here and find out what happened to Sally."

"Whyn't you just shake 'em off yo'self?" Sam suggested casually. "It ain't tied. The ends is danglin' on the rockers."

With disbelief in his eyes, Pat began straining at the rope. Gradually it loosened, and Sam lent a hand to help unwind it.

Pat stood up and clawed at his hair. "This is the damndest thing I ever heard of," he said slowly. "The tall man must've *untied* the rope when he was pretendin' to tighten it."

His gaze went first to Sam and then to Ezra, who returned his stare with mystification.

"I've got to get to Sally," Pat said. He saw the carpet-bag lying on the floor and reached down to examine it hastily. His belts and guns were inside, and as he slowly drew them out and fastened them around his waist, he demanded an explanation of his two companions' actions since they left the Lazy Mare.

Ezra was finishing the story, assuring him that Sally was safe in the bosom of the Sutton family, when a horse whinnied outside.

"Whose haws might that be?" Sam asked.

"One of yours, I reckon," Pat answered, relief at the knowledge of Sally's safety softening his grim features for a moment.

"No, 'tain't," Ezra told him. "We left ours down at the stage road. Reckon I better go down an' fetch 'em up." He got up from the chair into which he had dropped while telling Pat of their day's activities.

Loosening one of his pistols in the holster, Pat started for the door ahead of him. "I'm goin' out and see who our visitors might be."

Opening the door just wide enough to slide through, he went out, with Sam and Ezra pressing close behind him. There was only black silence, and they could see nothing in the faint starlight.

"That's damn funny," Pat muttered. "That horse didn't sound far away."

As if to answer the puzzle, another loud whinny came from around the corner of the cabin, and very close.

Without a word Pat strode toward the sound. Sam and Ezra followed cautiously with drawn guns. They came up to their leader at the edge of a pine clump, and he was muttering to himself as he examined a saddled horse tethered to a small sapling.

"This horse hasn't been ridden for a long time," Pat growled. "Not a drop of sweat on him. He must've been hitched here all this time."

"Prob'ly b'longed to one of them black-hooded heathens," was Sam's drawled suggestion. "They heard Ezra an' me comin' up."

Pat struck a match and shielded the flame in the cupped palm of his hand. By the tiny yellow glow he could see the saddled horse was a black, apparently a magnificent blooded beast.

"They ride mighty fine horses for outlaws," Pat muttered. Still shielding the flame from the wind, he lifted the leather flap of a saddlebag and burrowed inside.

"He's maybe 'spectin' to find a cache o' gold dust," Ezra opined to Sam. "Or mebbby the name an' address of the gang all writ down convenient."

"Here's somethin' else mighty funny," Pat said shortly, dragging out a long-barreled .44 Frontier Model Colt's.

The match burned down to his fingertips and he dropped it with an oath. He struck another to examine the weapon, found it fully loaded.

"Them're shore smart hombres," Sam said, "carryin' a loaded spare right in the saddlebag."

His remark was punctuated by the whiplash of a rifle shot from far above them on a ledge of the canyon. A bullet screamed into the pine over their heads.

Pat dropped the match as though it, too, had burned his fingers, and hastily jerked the rein loose from the

sapling. Another report and another sounded from above, but the succeeding bullets went wide of the mark without the match flame to aim at.

"Must be the gang coming back to wipe us out," Pat guessed. He hastily led the black to a place of safety behind the cabin, ordering Sam and Ezra:

"Get inside and don't do any shootin'. Let 'em come close. I can hear 'em ridin' down the shelf trail. I'll stay outside and give 'em a surprise."

"I ain't holin' up in no cabin whilst our hawses is staked out down there in the road," Ezra stated flatly. "You an' Sam hold 'em here while I go down an' bring 'em up."

Ezra's giant figure faded away in the darkness of the trail leading down to the stage road before Pat could remonstrate. The other two partners stood close together outside the cabin and listened intently to the sound of shod hoofs striking on rocks and echoing through the canyon.

"Two-three of 'em at least," Pat mused aloud. "Ridin' hell-bent down a steep trail. You get inside and shutter the windows tight. I reckon they don't know for sure how many there are of us. I'll Indian out here in the bushes and throw some lead when they get close."

Without time-wasting argument, Sam phlegmatically accepted the rôle assigned to him by Pat. It was this unquestioning co-operation between the three men that had made them unbeatable in the past, and again, after a lapse of nearly a year since their last man-hunt, Pat was assuming the leadership in a moment of danger and stress.

While Sam trotted inside the cabin and slammed the door shut, Pat slipped away silently through the underbrush and found a narrow rocky path leading upward to the overhanging ledge above the cabin.

Stationing himself behind a boulder overlooking the

path, he drew both guns to cover the starlit way which the riders must take.

They were closer now, slowing from their reckless gallop. Without Ezra's intuitive knowledge, Pat could only guess at the number as they approached, but he changed his guess to four or five as they drew cautiously nearer.

They slackened to a slow trot, and then to a walk when the sound of hooves was not more than a hundred yards distant.

Then, the sound ceased altogether. Pat silently cursed their caution between gritted teeth. They would be dismounting, he guessed, spreading out among the jack-pines and underbrush to surround the cabin where all the advantage would be with them.

And Ezra was still down the trail bringing up the horses!

He must, at all costs, prevent the unseen riders from getting down below the cabin and cutting Ezra off before he could reach safety.

Leaping up from his hiding place behind the boulder, Pat Stevens strode straight up the path, grim-faced and determined.

He heard cautious movement above him and bent low to make as small a target as possible, but continued doggedly upward. Panting up to the edge of a flat, rocky ledge he heard a gruff voice call out:

"Hey! Did yuh heah somethin' down thuh trail?"

Pat dropped flat to the ground and wormed forward as another voice answered:

"I didn't hear nothin'."

The voice sounded directly in front of him, and Pat raised his head to dimly see a dark cluster of horses and men grouped together at the back of the ledge.

He drew in his breath and then let out an ear-splitting Comanche war-whoop, driving forward and triggering both guns as he ran.

The dark cluster of horses and men dissolved in front of him, and lances of hot orange flame answered his attack.

The frightened horses bolted into the darkness, and Pat stopped in mid-stride, dropped to one knee. A shot blazed directly in front of him and he emptied one gun at the brief target. An agonized yelp answered the fusillade and he smiled grimly.

Maybe Pat Stevens was getting soft, but his gun-hand had lost none of its old cunning.

He waited tensely, straining his ears for a sound to shoot at, but the gang had scattered and there was only the cautious rustling of leaves to indicate their hasty retreat.

For a moment Pat was puzzled by the fact that he had not actually been able to make out any human figure in the night, though the starlight was strong enough to discern the outline of the animals.

He remembered then the black robes and hoods of the two men who had taken him from the stagecoach, and realized that their fancy costumes rendered them almost invisible at night.

Backing slowly to the rim of the ledge, he halted to listen intently. He heard the welcome sound of two horses coming slowly up the steep path from the stage road.

That would be Ezra returning he guessed, but to make certain he cupped his hands and sent an eerie "Hoo-ooo-ooo" floating downward into the velvety darkness.

For the second time that night his call was answered, and he plunged down the path to rejoin his comrades and make plans to repel the attack which he knew must be imminent.

FIVE

"THOUGHT I heerd a little gun-fire up this-away," Ezra said with casual cheerfulness when Pat panted up to meet him at the rear of the cabin. "You an' Sam orto've waited for me 'fore you started swappin' lead with them hyenas." He dismounted leisurely while Pat caught the reins of Sam's recently acquired sorrel.

"Scattered 'em, for the time being," Pat assured him as he led the sorrel into the narrow space between canyon wall and cabin. "Too dark for good shootin', but I plugged one. The others'll probably be sneakin' down to surround the cabin," he ended casually when his breath came easier.

"'Pears t'me like a good time for us to make tracks out of here," Ezra grumbled. "Where at's Sam, an' why ain't he out here ready to ride?"

"Fat chance you got of gettin' away," Pat answered. "If I hadn't herded 'em back the other way they'd have plugged you on the way up. Bring that cayuse on back here and tie him up so he'll be safe from stray bullets."

"He's a *she*," Ezra announced, characteristically refusing to show any deep concern over the situation. "I ain't so anxious to hole up behin' them logs an' wait for 'em to Injun up on us. Me, I like plenty of room to dodge an' spread my legs." But he dutifully tied the mare as he spoke, and Pat sprinted around to the other side of the cabin and led the saddled black to the place of security, explaining:

"By barricading ourselves in, we'll have all the advan-

tage. There's three windows we can crack open to shoot through."

Ezra led the way to the cabin door without further argument. He opened it an inch, sniffed and muttered, "Danged if that don't smell like bacon fryin' an' coffee boilin'. Mebby your idee of settlin' down here ain't so bad."

As he pushed the door open to enter, the crash of a pistol shot shattered the night silence from above and to their left. Ezra ducked as a bullet spanged into the door in front of him.

Three more guns blazed at the lighted doorway before Pat could leap forward through the opening. Sam was reaching hastily for a lantern hanging over the stove, and Pat grabbed the other lighted lantern hanging on a rafter near the door.

He swung it downward with a jerking motion that caused the flame to blink out, and his six-gun leaped into his left hand as if by magic. He whirled and fired through the open door while Ezra scuttled forward into the darkened cabin on his hands and knees, jerking the door shut behind him and barring it with a heavy timber that fitted into wooden niches on either side, then demanded: "How we gonna find our mouths so we kin eat in the dark?"

Pat struck a match and inspected the windows, then lit one of the lanterns and turned the wick low after assuring himself that the heavy logs were well thatched and no light would shine through.

"I'm thinkin' we've got to hurry if we fill our bellies before they Injun down on us."

The three men gathered around the warm stove and laid strips of bacon between cold hard biscuits which the hooded men had left.

With his mouth full, Ezra complained, "I'm still for gettin' out o' here soon as we eat."

"Nothin' short of dynamite will get to us in here," Pat answered comfortingly.

"Shore. All safe an' comfy like we was locked up in jail," Ezra agreed sarcastically. "We orto of made a run for it whilst we was outside."

Sam snorted loudly and wiped sweat from his swarthy face. Pointing a finger at his one-eyed ranch partner, he asked: "How many of 'em is there you reckon?"

Pat answered for Ezra. "Half a dozen, maybe. Less one I nicked up on the hill." Pat reached for another biscuit, split it with his pocketknife and put two thick slabs of sowbelly between the halves.

"You're actin' like it was a picnic," Ezra complained, following Pat's lead in the matter of a bacon sandwich. "Like you was plumb happy they got us holed up here."

Pat filled a tin cup with steaming coffee and moved away from the stove to squat on his heels against the wall. "It'll be two or three hours yet till daylight," he explained. "What chance would we have had of getting a look at the murderers if we chased off before they surround us?"

There was a moment of silence when they listened intently for sounds from outside, then Sam and Ezra exchanged glances and shook their heads over Pat's statement. "He's done slipped a cog," Sam said mournfully. "I've seed it comin' uh long time but I been hopin' maybe he'd get over it. An' him with a wife an' leetle boy to take keer of."

"Now what the damn hell does he wanta see what the varmints *looks* like?" Ezra supplied.

Pat Stevens grinned up at them from his sitting position. "If you're so hell-bent on not makin' their acquaintance, what're you two doin' so far off your home range?"

"God dammit," Sam exploded, "we ain't studyin' none 'bout meetin' up with 'em. Ezra an' me was on our way up to Blue Mesa to take a look at them blue hawses old man Richards is got. 'Twan't till we found out you was too old an' decrepit to take keer o' Sally that we took a hand."

"Thass right," Ezra agreed solemnly. "An' you said your ownself you wasn' figgerin' on none o' that Wells Fargo reward."

"I wasn't," Pat agreed promptly. "I promised Sally I'd stay clear of trouble, and I just come up here for her sake to try an' help old man Sutton get his gold out. But when trouble walks up and spits spang in my face it gets me riled. You two can slip out before it gets light, but I'm stayin' till there'll be a chance of trackin' down the varmints."

"Looks like we're in for it," Sam said lugubriously to Ezra.

"Yep," Ezra agreed, his one eye gleaming. "The sooner you an' me clean up the gang, the sooner we kin deliver Pat back to Sally safe an' sound."

Each of the trio knew full well that the discussion was ended. Beneath the light and whimsical words lay a solemn pledge to wage unrelenting war on the hooded and robed killers of Dusty Canyon until the gang was exterminated. After nearly a year of inaction the three men were taking the trail together, and inside the four walls of the little cabin there was a warm sense of understanding and comradeship stronger than could be expressed by words.

After another short period of listening and hearing no sound, Pat said, "Funny they don't attack us. They must be waitin' for the big boss to join 'em. Maybe one of 'em rode back to the hideout to tell the boss they had us cornered."

"Mebbe," Ezra agreed disinterestedly. He had been sitting in one of the rockers before the fire. Lumbering to his feet he went to a door opposite the fireplace, saying, "I'm gonna see ain't there some beddin' in the shed."

The tiny room was a lean-to constructed of split logs laid vertically and unthatched, leaving wide cracks through which the cold night air blew. It was bare of furnishings except a rough chest against the inside wall. Ezra opened the heavy lid and saw that it was filled with quilts and sheepskin coverings.

Reaching one big hand inside to gather an armful to take into the other room, he was interrupted by a rain of rifle bullets on the thick pine slabs of the shedroom. One bullet found its way through a crack and spanged into the thatched wall on his right.

Dropping to his hands and knees, Ezra crawled rapidly to the door, reaching it just as Pat was ready to slam it shut.

"What the hell did you do?" Pat asked in a low, furious voice.

"How'd I know that lean-to was full o' cracks," Ezra said, coming to his feet with the agility of a wild cat and loosening his gun in its holster.

All three men stood alert and listening, ready for action. Pat said softly, "I reckon they're back with the boss and ready to fight." He consulted his watch and added, "That means the hideout can't be too far from here. When we scatter 'em in the mornin', some are sure to ride that way. We'll trail 'em, and maybe finish this job up quick." He grinned wolfishly.

"*After* we scatter 'em in the mawnin'," Ezra interjected dolefully. "You figger they'll throw down their guns and run when you show yore ugly face out the door?"

"Let's worry about that when the time comes." Pat

Stevens yawned with boredom for the utter silence outside the cabin. "Day ought to be breakin' in another hour."

"That's right," said Ezra with a strange air of contentment. "We're damn nigh as safe here as we was in the bank at Dutch Springs. They couldn't get at us through the walls *that* day, neither."

"U-m-m," muttered Sam innocently. "That's the day I come ridin' in jest in time to keep you-all from burnin' alive 'fore your time. As I recollect, Red John's men went to work on the roof when they found out they couldn't get through the walls."

"I was put in mind o' that day when I heerd a funny fuss on the roof jest now," Ezra said calmly while his one eye burned hotly and appeared to dance with glee.

"You heard a noise on the roof?" Pat asked grimly. "I didn't hear anything." His face was strained as he stared up at the rough log rafters pressed against the flat mud-plastered roof.

"You and Sam," Ezra muttered ironically, "cain't keep yore mouths shet long enough to hear nothin'." With his fiery red hair almost touching the rafters he stared upward. "They'll have to do some scrapin' to git that layer o' sod off."

Pat swore softly as his straining ears caught the faint sound of cautious movement overhead. His hands dropped to his holstered guns and he drew them slowly, still gazing upward.

They spread out in a small triangle directly beneath the sound. "We'll all blast away at one time . . . soon as the first mud crumbles. . . ."

He was interrupted by a spattering of hard mud on the little cook-stove.

"The stove pipe . . . they're pulling a piece of it out!" Ezra bellowed like an enraged bull, and at the same instant a mass of flaming rags and twigs dropped through,

scattering in every direction to the dry board floor. Saturated with kerosene, the fiery debris quickly ignited the boards.

Leaping forward, Sam and Ezra stamped furiously as another, and then another flaming mass came down, filling the interior of the cabin with acrid smoke.

Pat Stevens backed away slowly toward the door. His eyes were bleak and cold and both hands caressed the worn butts of his guns.

The hooded men were shouting angrily and cursing, booted heels no longer moved cautiously on the roof, but raced and pounded as they hurried to supply the men at the stovepipe hole with more rags to fire and drop into the room.

Pat reached the door unnoticed by Sam and Ezra, who were working desperately to keep the flames from firing the floor. He slid the heavy bar back silently, tensing himself for a sudden desperate dash outside, his muscles taut to withstand the crashing impact of the bullet he expected the moment he jerked the door open.

He knew the gang would be waiting for just this move. They would be fools not to have the front door covered.

But it was his only chance. They would all suffocate and the cabin would soon be a blazing inferno unless something was done.

He crouched tensely by the side of the door, lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl, both guns free of their holsters. With the muzzle of one he edged the door open cautiously. A hail of hot lead crashed through the opening, spitting harmlessly into the wall beyond.

Sam and Ezra whirled about with a shout of alarm just in time to see Pat dive low through the door into the starlit night. Another flaming mass of twigs and cloth came through the opening and they were forced to turn their attention to it for the moment.

Pat hit the ground on his side and let his body roll over and over. He glimpsed the dim hulk of a crouching body beyond in the underbrush and fired from the hip as he rolled.

He heard a low grunt of surprise and the body pitched forward.

Pat staggered to his knees as a man came running around the corner of the cabin, shouting hoarsely from behind a black mask, "What's happening, Jake? What's all the shooting? . . ."

Leveling both guns, Pat triggered them. The hooded man's question died away in a horrible gurgle. He slewed sideways and staggered, then crumpled limply to the ground.

Leaping over the supine body, Pat jumped for the corner of the cabin, jerked his body back as bullets whined off the logs in front of him. Two men were firing, backing away as they emptied their guns, seeking the shelter of a clump of jackpines.

A sharp order cut through the din and uproar.

"Set the damned hut on fire outside!"

One last load of hot lead struck the corner of the cabin and a splinter gashed Pat's cheek as he drew back with a curse.

"Saturate the lean-to and burn the devils out," the same commanding voice rang out.

Crouching against the corner directly opposite from the lean-to, Pat's grim mouth broke into an exultant grin. He was near enough to the door to stop Sam and Ezra as they ran from the cabin, and here they would be in comparative darkness while the hooded gang backlighted themselves with their own fire. He could hear the trampling of feet on the roof, heard the men drop with a thud to the ground.

Sam and Ezra burst out of the cabin door just as a

bright flame leaped up on the other side. Pat muttered, "Don't move. Stay where you are till they start for their horses."

The flames licked greedily at the shedroom, lighting the canyon wall and shedding a dangerous glow over the three partners.

"They're making a run for their hawses," Ezra whispered, but Pat was already on his way with Sam close behind him.

Pat called back, "Unhitch the horses and lead 'em to a safe place, Ezra, while Sam and me go after 'em."

Hugging the cabin wall as they ran, Pat and Sam emptied their guns toward the clump of pines behind which the gang's horses were bunched, but it was impossible to take aim at a specific object without moving away from the wall and themselves becoming targets.

The hooded riders were galloping away on the shelf road, riding, as Pat expected they would, toward Tola.

The crackling flames licking at the pine boards of the lean-to made it impossible to hear the shod hooves at any distance. The dark green spruce and jackpine and the black night swallowed them up as they raced to their hideout.

Yelling for Ezra, Pat and Sam rushed toward the stream flowing from a rock in the wall and found a wooden tub overflowing with water. Together they lifted it and carried it toward the flaming lean-to. Dashing the water on the flame, they raced back to refill it. They met Ezra going toward the fire with a tin pail in one hand and the big coffee pot in the other.

For an hour they worked valiantly until the shed-room was a smoldering mass of charred wood, but as dawn broke over the canyon they saw that the cabin stood intact except for a few charred boards in the big room.

With the urgency of putting out the fire, Pat had not

had time to do much thinking. When they were inside the cabin with a fresh log fire burning, Ezra broached the subject which had been puzzling Pat by saying:

"Whut I cain't figger out is why didn' they wait an' pick us off a'ter they started the big fire."

"Yeh," Pat agreed absently. "I think the one that give the order to fire the cabin outside was the leader. He prob'ly turned tail and rode hell-bent for the hideout soon's he give the order. I'd plugged two of 'em off at one time, and I'm pretty certain I got another one. The ones that was left was cowards and run away when the boss left."

"H-m-m," Sam muttered. "Reckon that's the way it wuz." He got up from his chair and went to the stove where he stood examining the flue. The top section of pipe was missing, and without a word he went outside to climb up and fix it.

Pat stood up and stretched his arms, yawned expansively, and said, "I'm goin' out and have a look at the fellers I picked off last night."

Silently Ezra followed him. A short distance from the cabin two robed and hooded figures lay stiff and cold in a clump of spruce. Cursing in a low voice, Pat lifted the mask from the face of the short, stocky corpse and saw a bristle of black whiskers surrounding a thick, twisted mouth.

"This is one of the two that dragged me out of the stage coach," he said. Pulling the mask down, he stepped over the body to examine the other figure which lay crumpled just as Pat had seen it fall. Though he judged the second corpse to be much longer than the other, after lifting the mask he had no way of knowing whether this was his tall captor who had, undoubtedly, untied the rope before leaving the cabin to ride away.

Pat stood looking up toward the ledge back of the

cabin, trying to recall the exact spot where he had his first encounter the night before. Suddenly he started forward at a rapid pace with Ezra's long legs striding out behind him. Climbing up the slope, Pat carefully examined the rocks over a small area, but there was no third body here. Circling a trampled space through the scant underbrush, he bent down to examine a spot where it was evident a man had fallen.

He found a pool of dry frozen blood and knew that his shot had seriously wounded one of the gang. Rising from his knees, he said, "Maybe this'll help us to find at least one of the gang. He lost a lot of blood."

"Mebbe that was why they didn't get back no sooner," Ezra opined. "Had to be keerful gettin' him back to the hideout."

"Yeh," Pat agreed.

Back at the cabin they found Sam fuming because there was no coffee for the pot which he had brought in from outside where Ezra had left it.

"What the hell you mean, pourin' out them coffee grounds?" he growled. "They ain't another speck o' coffee left."

"If it hadn' of been for me and that coffee pot," Ezra countered sourly, "you wouldn' have no stove to cook bacon on."

"You'll get your coffee all right," Pat said briskly. "You're goin' to Sutton place and tell Sally not to worry about me. Martha'll give you coffee."

"Me?" Sam drawled indignantly. "Me tell Miss Sally? I shore ain't sticking my face out fer Sally to scratch m'eyes out."

"Ezra and me are gettin' on the trail," Pat went on mildly. "You better start thinkin' up a good story to tell Sally so she won't worry."

Ezra's one eye gleamed delightedly. "You know Pat

caln't find no trail 'thout I go 'long with 'im, Sam, and you know Miss Sally'd hogtie 'im if he went and tol' her hisse'f." He turned on his heel and started for the door. "C'mon, Pat. We got to git on that trail 'fore it gits cold."

They went out, leaving Sam dourly cutting thick slabs of bacon.

SIX

MOROSELY SAM turned the strips of bacon in the big black frypan as his slow-thinking mind pondered Pat's orders. The thought of tackling a gang of hooded murderers held no terrors for him, but to face Sally Stevens with the news that Pat was again on the renegades' trail struck fear through to his marrow. And to acquaint Sally with the fact that he and Ezra had followed Pat to Dusty Canyon was nothing short of disaster.

His swarthy-black face was grim as he heard Pat and Ezra ride away, and by the time he had eaten two biscuits with four half-cooked slabs of bacon pressed between them, he was choking in his haste to swallow the last of them.

An idea had penetrated his slow wits. Wiping his greasy hands hard against his corduroy breeches, he made a thorough search of the big room for writing material. Finding none, he opened the door to the lean-to. Though the outer walls and part of the plank floor were charred, the chest was intact. Lifting the heavy lid which Ezra had closed hastily the night before, he began lifting out the quilts and sheepskins and carrying them into the

other room. In the bottom of the chest he found a pencil stub among the litter. In one corner there was a carefully wrapped, flat package. Seizing upon the plain brown paper, he started to tear off a piece large enough to write a note to Sally, but curiosity prompted him to explore the contents of the package.

Inside the paper was a Bible bound in soft leather. The words "Holy Bible" and "Sarah M. Holland" stood out in dull gold letters. Running a rough forefinger over the words, he discovered that they were indented. He opened the book to the flyleaf and there were the two words, "Holy Bible," in the center.

Sam grinned ruefully over a fresh idea. If he wrote Sally a note on that page, maybe she would believe that Pat was all right and was not in danger. Without a qualm of conscience, he ripped the page from the book, replaced the Bible, and went out to the rough-hewn dining table, and laboriously wrote:

Dear Miss Sally

You dont need to worry none about Pat. He ain't in no trouble atall. He ast me to tell you he wud be at Suttons place come night

Frum a friend.

Carefully folding the note, he went out and mounted his sway-backed sorrel and began the precipitous descent along the narrow path leading to the stage road.

He hoped to encounter a traveler going toward Tola so that he could send the note and return to the cabin to follow Pat and Ezra before they had gone too far, but if he didn't have this luck, he determined to ride on to one of the miners' cabins, find someone to deliver it, and then circle back on the shelf road to meet them.

The harried creases in his face spread out into a broad

grin as the sure-footed sorrel picked his way along the path. Pat and Ezra would be somewhat surprised to see him without marks from Sally's fingernails on his face.

The scheme was pleasant in his mind, and he was undaunted upon reaching the stage road and seeing no sign of human life. He spurred the sorrel to a gallop and continued some five miles toward the Sutton cabin before riding up to a flock of sheep that filled the trail for fully half a mile and herded by four men. Behind the men a young boy rode a pony.

Riding up alongside the boy, Sam inquired, "How fur you goin' up Tola way?"

"Pa's herdin' the flock to Mr. Simpson's corral for feedin'," the boy answered.

"How fur's that?" Sam asked keenly.

"'Bout two mile this side of Tola."

Sam fumbled in his pocket and took out a coin. "Know where the Sutton cabin is?"

"Shore," the boy answered.

"Kin I git you to hand a note to Miss Sally Stevens at old man Sutton's place for two bits?"

"Shore." The boy's eyes sparkled at the coin in Sam's hand.

"An' tell Miss Sally a good-lookin' young man dressed up like a dude ast you to hand it to 'er? 'Thout tellin' 'er nothing 'bout how *I* look?"

The boy flashed a keen look at Sam, hesitated, then laughed spontaneously. "Shore, Mister, iffen you wanta play a funny trick on 'er."

"Yeh," Sam said, laughing with the boy. "It's jest a trick I'm playin' on Miss Sally. But you be shore and don't let on the truth, no matter how many questions she asts."

"I won't," he promised, seizing the coin from Sam's open palm. He had lagged behind the flock a little while

talking to Sam, and dug his heels against the pony's flanks.

Sam watched him trot away, then turned his sorrel up a steep embankment and was lost to view in the upsweep of pine and spruce.

Sally Stevens was filled with her own grief and terror when she fell sobbing into Martha Sutton's arms after leaving the stagecoach, but after telling her story, to which Sam had listened outside the cabin window, she was confronted by such fright and futility from Martha and Mr. Sutton that she quickly regained her calm and found herself in the rôle of the solacer instead of the solaced.

Mr. Sutton was a tall slight man with a narrow, weather-beaten face the color of old leather. His light gray eyes were weak and watery, his hands gnarled and knotted with rheumatism. His shoulders were stooped and thin, and Sally's heart wrenched with pain at the thought of this honest, hard-working man, who looked much older than his years, at the mercy of a gang of thieves and murderers. It was the first time Sally had seen Martha Sutton's father, and it seemed incredible that he had sired the beautiful young girl who was his only daughter, his only child.

Martha was tall and slender, with bright dark eyes, and a mass of golden curls tumbling about her sun-tanned face. Except for her mature curves, Sally thought she looked just as she did when Sally taught her in the grade school in Denver where they had become fast friends.

"It's all my fault that Pat was captured," Martha cried when Sally finished her story. "I wouldn't blame you for hating me for begging him to come, but we didn't know what to do. After they killed Sheriff Ross we felt so helpless."

"Martha's right," Mr. Sutton interposed before Sally could remonstrate with the girl. "It wasn't none of Pat's fight. He shouldn't of come . . . nor you either, Miz Stevens."

"But Pat *didn't* come to go after the outlaws," Sally declared. "We came to help you and Martha get away . . . and take all the gold we could all carry together."

"'Taint no use tryin' to get away," Mr. Sutton answered miserably. "They'd be watchin' and no tellin' what they might do to us if they caught us runnin' away with the gold. It's best to stay here and hope they leave us alone."

"But they'd be bound to come after you sooner or later. They know that all the miners around here have gold dust stored up. The only sensible thing to do is let Pat and me help you get out."

"Pat's not . . . here to help," Martha stammered, holding her soft chin set to keep her mouth from trembling.

Sally's heart was as heavy as lead and fear for his safety set her pulse throbbing in her throat. She said bravely, "I *know* Pat will come. He'll get away from those hooded men somehow." She lifted her head proudly and it helped to keep the tears back.

"Oh, I wish we had gone from here long ago!" Martha burst out in an agonized young voice. "I tried to get Papa to go to Denver. I *hate* this place, anyway."

"Hush," Sally commanded as sternly as she had rebuked the children in her school room. "You have a perfect right to live here, or anywhere else in the West you want to. *Nobody* has the right to run people away from their homes." Her deep blue eyes flashed fire.

"But what can we do?" Martha asked pitifully.

"Now, Marthy," her father chided gently, "you listen to Miz Stevens. She maybe kin teach you some things outside of what's in books."

Sally frowned and bit her lip while her eyes stared thoughtfully into space for a moment. She was thinking back to her own struggle when first she came to the wide open spaces of the West . . . of Pat's valiant struggle to rid her of a menace as terrible as that which now confronted the Suttons.

"It's experiences like this, Martha," she said finally, "that make a girl grow up. I was about your age when a gang of thieves headed by a supposedly respectable man tried to take everything I had away from me. You can't live here in the West without growing up at an early age. I see it all more clearly now. An hour ago I thought that all I wanted from life was Pat and Dock and the ranch, but there's . . . a lot more than that."

Martha bent forward interestedly, rested her elbow on her knee and cupped her chin in her palm. With her dark eyes wide upon Sally, she said, "Then . . . you believe Pat will get away . . . and come to help us?"

"I . . . of course I do," Sally answered with a certainty that she was far from feeling.

"Then why don't we start planning?" Martha cried. "Do you have any idea how we can . . . get away . . . take the gold with us?"

"Well . . . no, nothing definite," Sally acknowledged. "We'll have to wait until Pat . . ."

"We just couldn't go and leave the gold," Martha broke in. "Why, Papa has simply *slaved* all his life panning it out, and he wouldn't know how to do any other kind of work. What would we live on, even if we did get away?"

"Now, Marthy, it ain't as bad as all that," her father said hastily. "I could get a job . . . work."

Sally admired his spirit, but his tone was filled with futility. She said, "We'll think of something. By tomorrow, maybe."

Martha sprang up from her chair. "My goodness! You must be starved, Sally, and here I sit talking about our troubles when you have so many of your own . . . and all because of us . . . and I hadn't even thought of fixing dinner for you."

Sally felt that she would choke if she attempted to swallow food, but she knew she would need all her strength to cope with the situation . . . her own and the Suttons'. "Don't go to a lot of bother, Martha," she said. "Just give me something left over from supper."

Mr. Sutton arose from his low rocking chair before the fire. "I'll leave you and Martha to talk over old times and make the plans, Miz Stevens. "I'll turn in and get some sleep." He walked stiffly across the room and opened a door leading into a small bedroom and Sally joined Martha in the big warm kitchen.

It was very late when the two women retired to Martha's bedroom. Sally's body ached with weariness, and anxiety for Pat kept her tossing on the big comfortable bed until nearly dawn. She never knew whether the plan for the Suttons' escape was a dream or whether it came in those tortuous hours before sleep came, but when she was wakened the next morning by someone pounding on the front door of the cabin, the plan was clear in her mind.

At the sound of the knocking, Sally sat up in bed, then flung the covers back and got up, slipped hastily into her heavy robe and, with her heart pounding, was hurrying to the bedroom door when Mr. Sutton rapped.

"Come in," she called.

Mr. Sutton came in with Sam's note and handed it to Sally. She read it wonderingly two or three times, but she would not allow herself to believe the words scrawled on the flyleaf of the Bible.

"Who brought it?" she asked.

"Young feller ridin' by. Said a young man dressed up

like a dude asked him to bring it. He seemed right tickled 'bout somethin'."

"It's . . . a trick," Sally said sharply, but her eyes went again to the scrawl, and though her better judgment warned her not to believe it, her heart warmed with surging hope.

Mr. Sutton stood patiently waiting for her to tell him the contents of the note. She handed it to him and he took his glasses from his pocket, hooked them on his nose, and read it. Handing it back to her, he said, "We'll jest have to put faith in it, Miz Stevens. It don't seem like nobody'd play a trick with writin' on a page out of the Bible."

"Maybe you're right," Sally answered slowly. "I *know* Pat will come as soon as he can."

Martha was wide awake and demanded to know what was going on. Sally explained, and when Mr. Sutton went away and closed the door behind him, she sat down beside Martha on the bed and said:

"I have thought of a plan that might work to get some of the gold dust out."

"Oh! I knew you would. With you and Pat to help us I know we'll be able to do something."

"Have you any heavy material in the house that we could make a couple of dresses out of?" Sally asked.

"Why yes," Martha replied, her dark eyes wide with wonder. "I bought some heavy dark blue silk and some dark red the last time I was in Denver, but," she ended petulantly, "what's the use of making them? There's nowhere to wear them up here, and I've been afraid to try to go anywhere for months."

"That's fine," Sally went on. "You and I are going to do some sewing. Now, here's my plan. We'll make the material up . . . one for you and one for me. We'll

put ruffles on the skirts all the way down . . . double ruffles . . . and every one of them will have gold dust in them. Now, here's the way we'll do it. When the ruffles are sewed on we'll sift the gold dust in . . . enough to look like piping or folds, and just above the dust we'll run a seam to hold it in place tightly. When we put them on over hoops they'll stand out and no one will dream of them being worth their weight in gold." She paused to laugh, then added, "And I'll bet they'll be plenty heavy. And we might even tie some small sacks around our waists and let them hang down. Anyway, we'll carry all we can stagger under. Nobody will think anything of a couple of women riding to town, all dressed up, in the stagecoach."

Martha's eyes grew wider and wider with admiration, and when Sally finished she threw her arms around her former teacher's neck and crushed her with a strong-armed hug.

"That's simply marvelous!" she cried. "Just watch me walk as straight as a queen, no matter how heavy the dresses are. I'll bet I could carry fifty pounds!"

"My," Sally laughed, "that's a lot of gold, but we'll see how it works out. Get up and let's get busy. It's going to be a job cutting those ruffles, and they have to be sewed with mighty fine stitches."

SEVEN

PAT WAS not certain that he remembered the structure of the canyon walls correctly, but as he and Ezra rode along the lower shelf trail he looked about him and knew

that he had been right in his conjectures last night. Up above, and some distance below the canyon's rim at its highest peak, was another ledge which partially overhung the lower trail, and following it as far as the eye could see, it appeared inaccessible. Pat had an idea, however, that somewhere farther on it sloped down as the main rim sloped, to a point where bold, daring thieves might make use of it and thus gain a vantage point over anyone pursuing them.

Ezra was more concerned with the trail over which they rode. So far as they had gone, an amateur could not have missed the path of the night riders, for here was only thick underbrush with an occasional patch of stunted spruce and aspens. When Ezra looked up, it was to watch the gray clouds which covered the sky.

"Snow clouds," he muttered to himself.

"Let it snow," Pat returned jovially. "We couldn't miss their trail. It's plain enough that several horses've been along here."

"It's gettin' rockier. Look ahead there. Ain't nothin' but rock shelf with gradu'l slopes where they might've gone down any place. We got a right fur piece of it, and if it snows we ain't got a chanct to trail 'em."

"H-m-m," Pat murmured. "I feel somethin' cold and wet hittin' me in the face."

"Snowin'," Ezra answered dourly.

Suddenly Pat laughed aloud. "Wonder how Sam's gettin' along with Sally?" Then he added seriously, "If he don't get word to her I'll smash his black whiskers in."

"Might's well have 'em smashed in as scratched off," Ezra responded with a broad grin.

A sudden swirling wind whipped in their faces, bringing the sting of small, sleety snowflakes. At the same instant Pat strained forward in the saddle, his gray eyes narrowed and disbelieving, for far ahead he glimpsed a

hooded rider on a black horse. The figure had his arms outstretched and waving, as if he signaled to someone above or below.

Without a word Pat stuck spurs to his horse's flanks and the animal raced forward. In a flash Pat's gun was in his hand and a shot re-echoed through the still gray morning.

Prodding the dun mare with spurs, Ezra dashed ahead to keep pace with Pat. "What the hell you shootin' at?" he demanded.

"A black devil," Pat answered grimly, urging his horse faster. They rounded a curve which immediately straightened out and brought them back into view of the spot where Pat had seen the black-robed rider. But he had disappeared from sight.

Pat reined the magnificent black stallion in and cursed the rocky trail which caused his shod hooves to echo around the canyon walls. Ezra, whose one eye had been watching the ground and scanning the slopes leading down, was puzzled.

"You ain't gettin' halloosinashuns, be you, Pat?" he asked anxiously. "I ain't seen hair ner hide of a black-hood."

"I did," Pat snapped, "but damn it to hell, if we gallop up on 'im he'll hear us comin', and if we ride easy like, he'll get away."

"How you 'spect me to find out where they went down the slope if you keep on ridin' hell fer leather this-away?"

"I tell you one of 'em is up ahead of us," Pat said impatiently. "Damn these curves, can't see a thing."

"I ain't found no straight trails on a crooked canyon ledge yit," Ezra retorted soberly and somewhat caustically.

The snow was coming down in thick, wind-blown flakes now, covering the cold rocks before them. Ezra's

deep-socketed eye dulled with disappointment as he watched the gentle slopes leading away from the shelf road being covered.

Cursing gruffly, Ezra said, "Reckon you seen a ghost, Pat. Ain't no tracks in the snow ahead."

As he spoke, a shot rang out from below, striking against loose gravel at the edge of the slope and precipitating a small pebble-slide.

Pat was off his horse, leaping past Ezra and answering the shot. Leaning over the edge of the trail he saw a narrow path leading down to the spruce-studded flat below.

The snow was gaining in thick intensity, drifting over the path. Hugging the canyon wall, they rode downward until the trail ended in a thick upsweep of spruce and white-barked aspens rising from the canyon's floor.

"Reach fo' your guns!" a voice shouted.

Pat and Ezra whirled in their saddles toward the sound of a familiar voice, but could see no one.

Then, a swarthy-black face peered around the trunk of a giant spruce and Sam's deep-throated chuckle was blown toward them. Plodding up to them, Sam said, "You shore don't keer how good a target you make of yourse'fs on a shelf trail. I could of shot your good eye out from where I was standin', Ezra."

"Did you see Sally?" Pat asked quickly.

"Shore I did. Didn't you tell me to take her a message?"

"How is she takin' it?" Pat queried.

"She ain't worryin' a mite," Sam lied, "but I couldn' he'p thinkin' how purty she's gonna look, all dressed up in black. It shore made me feel sad." He waggled his head sorrowfully.

"Did you see one of the hooded men come down that slope jest ahead of us?" Ezra asked.

"I didn' see nobody but you-all."

"Did you throw that hunk of lead up at us when we stopped a minute ago?" Pat demanded.

"Shore. I wuz afeard you'd ride on past an' I wouldn' never be able to ketch yuh. But I knowed you'd come hurtlin' down if I took a shot at you."

"You decoyed us off the trail," Pat groaned. "We've got to get up on the shelf again and pick it up before the snow gets any thicker." He touched spurs to the black's flanks and neckreined him up the steep slope, with Ezra spurring along at his heels and Sam bringing up the rear as fast as the sorrel could make it.

When he gained the ledge again, Pat stopped and grimly motioned to the snow-covered ground, asking Ezra, "Can you tell whether they passed here or not?"

Ezra swung to the ground and trotted forward, stooped low and appeared to sniff the rocky ground. He dropped suddenly to his knees, yanked off his hat and carefully swept a small spot clear of snow.

Sam came puffing up behind Pat and laughed loudly. "By gum, look at 'im. He'll rise up on his hind laigs in a minute an' tell us the color o' the hawses an' 'spect us to b'lieve he knows what he's talkin' about."

Pat made no reply. He watched Ezra hopefully, knowing from past experience that the one-eyed man's ability to read a trail under the most trying circumstances was positively uncanny.

Ezra came slowly to his feet and put his hat on. He nodded and his eye gleamed through the thickening flakes as Pat and Sam moved closer to him.

"Sam's dumbness didn' ruin things . . . quite. We're still on the trail. Five of 'em rode this way when it started to snow. Ridin' fast an' strung out like they knowed where they was headed."

He swung into the saddle, paying no heed to Sam's loud snort of pretended disbelief.

"We'll have to follow the shelf trail and hope they didn't turn down off it." Pat spurred his black into the lead, ducking his head low over the saddlehorn to keep the stinging snowflakes from his eyes.

The trail wound around the side of the canyon at about the same level and the storm grew more violent as they rode on. The rocky slopes above and below were quickly carpeted with a thick white covering and it was impossible to tell whether any other trails led up or down, but Pat pressed on as swiftly as he dared, trusting to luck that there would be some indication of the turn-off when they reached it.

He reined his black in suddenly as the ledge made a sharp turn to the left and cut through a stand of aspen. He turned in the saddle to Ezra and gestured ahead.

"There's forks here. Looks like the ledge goes on along the main canyon, but here's a deep gulch comin' in from the left. Can you tell which way they went."

"I dunno," Ezra responded phlegmatically. "I kin try." Again, he slid from his horse and cautiously picked his way ahead, bending low and examining the surface of the snow, pausing now and then to brush away a cleared space which he studied intently, sniffing all the while.

"He cain't do nothin' but guess this time, fer shore," Sam scoffed as he reined up beside Pat. "An' I'm hopin' he guesses they kep' on the shelf. That trail leadin' up the gulch looks plumb bad to me. Once we get in there 'round the bend they won't be no gettin' out. If I was choosin' a ambush, I'd shore choose it there."

"We've got to chance it if Ezra says they went that way," Pat responded briskly. "That is, I'll risk it to come

to grips with the hooded gang. You weren't invited along, nohow."

"Better let 'im ride 'long with us, Pat," Ezra put in with a malicious gleam in his eye. "No tellin' when we might want some more messages delivered."

"You want I should stay behind so's you-all kin collect the reward," Sam growled. "Nothin' doin'. You cain't get rid o' me that easy."

Pat turned his face away to hide the broad grin spreading involuntarily over it. He knew the talk of a reward was just a sham to hide the swarthy man's intense loyalty, though neither of them would have mentioned the subject aloud.

Then Ezra was beckoning to them, stamping his feet in the snow to keep them from freezing to the ground.

"They turned up this here gulch," he stated positively. His eye glared up at Sam. "An' if you ast me how I know I'll take a sock at you."

"I'll ride ahead," Pat said quickly. "You fellers string out behind at a good distance. If it's a trap I'll spring it on myself, an' you fellows can clean up behind me."

He swung his horse past Ezra without waiting for a reply, turned sharply to the left between the yawning rock walls of a precipitous gorge, followed the twisting course of a boulder-strewn stream-bed that snaked along the floor of the chasm.

He spurred his horse to a reckless gallop, for there was no longer the need of watching for a fork in the trail once a rider turned into the narrow gulch.

The snow came straight down in great sodden flakes in the protected ravine, and it was less bitterly cold than out in the open where the cold wind blew furiously.

But the snow was much deeper here, where no sunlight ever penetrated, piled in drifts along the steep rock walls which extended up hundreds of feet, bulging men-

acingly in places so that the slightest reverberation might bring the great mass tumbling down to block the chasm floor.

Pat Stevens rode on at the same furious gait, with no thought of personal danger, warmed by the slow-burning anger that had been fused to flame within him by the indignities he had already suffered at the hands of the hooded gang.

There was only one thought in his mind, one implacable purpose that drove him on . . . to get the gang at gunpoint and have it out with them. It appeared certain that this was a blind chasm, for it was very unlikely that there could be another trail out from the gorge that cut deeper and deeper into the very heart of the mountain. If it was a blind chasm, that meant the hooded terrors of Dusty Canyon were trapped and could not escape.

A sudden snort and a sidewise swerve of the black brought Pat's head up with a jerk, and one hand went to the butt of a six-gun.

He could see nothing untoward through the heavy curtain of snowflakes ahead, but the black was prancing uneasily, snorting through distended nostrils, and Pat glanced up uneasily at the towering walls rising sheerly on either side which had been gradually closing in on the gulch until it was now no more than a slit in the side of the mountain.

Then, he heard a loud hoarse warning from Ezra. Turning in the saddle he saw them dimly through the snow as they hurried toward him. "Hey . . . whoa . . . turn back!" Ezra shouted again.

Pat raised his voice in a loud oath. "I told you two rannies to stay back a good ways so's you'd be in the clear if anything happened. Why the devil? . . ."

The concerted blast of half a dozen six-guns from a few hundred feet ahead cut Pat's angry shout short.

Yet, there was no sound of bullets, no evidence that the shots had been directed at the trio.

Again and again the salvo rang out through the silence while echoes were thrown back and forth between the steep walls of the narrow gorge. Through it all, Pat could hear Ezra shouting, but could distinguish no words above the uproar.

Pat pulled his gun and started forward grimly, but was halted by a loud bellow from Ezra who now rode up close beside him.

"Look out, Pat! Git back! Look up above. God-'lmighty, the hul world's cavin' in on us."

His final words were drowned out in a thunderous, groaning roar from high above. A precariously hanging wall of snow had been loosened by the vibrations of the gunshots from ahead, and a huge avalanche was thundering down upon the three men trapped in the gorge, uprooting trees and loosening huge boulders as it rushed downward.

Pat whirled and spurred desperately away, yelling to Sam and Ezra to follow him. But he knew it was too late . . . he could never lead them out of the path of the mountainous snowslide before it reached the bottom.

There was a chance that they might have escaped if they had left Pat alone to his fate, but instead of turning and making a run for it, Sam and Ezra had spurred forward to warn him, a reckless and mad gesture of defiance in the face of death, made without thought and without reason.

In that terrible instant while the world was tottering and threatening to collapse upon them, Pat's desperate gaze caught sight of a small round opening in the side of the gorge not ten feet above the floor.

Yelling for Sam and Ezra to dismount and follow him, he leaped from his saddle into the snow.

A huge boulder crashed past the mouth of the tunnel as Pat reached it. He bent low and leaped inside, turned and saw Sam knocked sprawling by another boulder in the vanguard of the thundering avalanche. He darted out again, past Ezra, and gave him a shove to safety, then caught Sam's hand and dragged him inside.

Other rocks crashed past the opening and jammed into the snow at the other side of the gorge, followed by a great slab of frozen snow.

The three men stood helplessly inside the cave and watched the horses being crushed by ice and rocks and debris, watched while the very mountain itself seemed to tumble down until at last the opening was closed solidly.

Frantically Pat worked to keep a small opening for air, but as the deafening roar continued, the shaft was shut off from the outside world and became impenetrable.

EIGHT

SALLY FELT a little foolish about her plan to smuggle the Sutton gold out of Dusty Canyon when she had time to think it over. It seemed too simple, too easy of accomplishment, and she feared that her imagination had run away with her common sense. Besides, the more she thought of it the more she believed she had dreamt it instead of working it out logically.

Martha, however, was bubbling over with enthusiasm as she hurriedly dressed and linked her arm in Sally's to lead her to the big home-made chest where the silk was laid away.

Sally sniffed when Martha lifted the heavy lid and a puff of clean cedar odor rose up, and made a sharp exclamation of admiration when Martha placed the red silk in her arms.

"What a rich color!" she cried. She caught one thickness of the material between thumb and forefinger and said, "It's heavy, too. I'm sure the gold dust won't sift through. Maybe the plan will work after all."

"Of course it'll work," Martha said with assurance. "I would never have thought of such a marvelous idea. What do you think of the blue piece?" she asked, holding the material out to Sally.

"It's a heavenly blue," Sally breathed.

"It matches your eyes," Martha declared gaily, holding it close to Sally's face. "I'll take the red, and we'll make the blue for you. I have two petticoats with hoops. One was Mother's and I've kept it all this time."

"It's perfect," Sally said, her eyes shining. With woman's work at hand and the prospect of having a new blue silk dress, she forgot, for the moment, to worry about Pat. She smiled to herself thinking of what Pat would say when he saw her wearing it.

They took the silk into the bedroom and spread it out on Martha's bed. While the younger girl went for the scissors, Sally creased one end of the material, then doubled it over, gauging the width the ruffles should be. She then measured the yards off by stretching one end out between her fingers, using her nose for a yardstick.

When Martha returned, Sally said, "I think there'll be plenty to put ruffles from the hipline down. But we'd better test some of the gold dust in a scrap to see if it'll hold. Have you got a pouch of it handy?"

Martha didn't answer at once, and Sally looked up to see her face pale and her eyes frightened. "Why . . . Papa has it hidden. He moved it from under the loose

floor board. That's where nearly all the miners kept it, and Papa thought . . . it would be safer some place else . . . if the *black-hoods* came."

"If our scheme is going to work," Sally said sensibly, "we'll have to get him to bring some of it out."

"Maybe Papa won't approve of it," Martha said dubiously. "I'll go ask him. What'll we do if he doesn't think we should?"

After a moment of deep thought, Sally said, "Maybe I'd better talk to him about it."

"I think you'd better," the younger girl assented, the dark fright still in her wide eyes.

"Here . . . you can be cutting the ruffles for the blue dress while I'm gone. I've creased the material there at one end for the width. Be sure to measure them."

As Sally went past the window she saw that a light snow had begun to fall. She put on a heavy coat and went out the kitchen door, calling Mr. Sutton.

He answered from the small corral where he kept a span of blooded horses for the purpose of drawing an old top-buggy and for Martha to ride.

Sally told him of her plan, keeping her voice convincing, hoping that she would not betray any of the small inner doubts assailing her.

Mr. Sutton listened with interest, but she could see that he did not approve. When she finished, he said:

"I don't think you should orta take the responsibility, Miz Stevens. Them low-down murderers'll be a-watchin' ever' move anybody makes away from here. They'd be shore to suspect somethin' if they saw you an' Marthy all dressed up an' a-goin' to town."

"But even if they did see us . . . if they tried to search us," Sally argued, a bright flush creeping into her cheeks at the thought of being searched by the bandits, "they wouldn't find any evidence that we were smuggling the

gold out. I'm trying so hard to help you, and I can't think of a better plan."

"I cain't quite see how you 'spect to hide the gold in dresses," Mr. Sutton acknowledged with a puzzled frown.

"If you'll let me have a pouch of the dust I think I can convince you," Sally said quickly when he displayed such interest and appeared to be relenting slightly. "We can even conceal quite a bit of gold dust in the bands of puffed sleeves. What I want to do now is test it to see whether any will come through the material."

The old man shook his head sadly. "I don't like it, Miz Stevens. Murderin' an' thievin' ain't the only crimes them devils has committed here in Dusty Canyon. There ain't a man dares to let his women folks out o' his sight."

"Mr. Sutton, I've got a gun and I can shoot it. I believe I can protect Martha and myself against them from here to Pueblo. I won't be caught as I was on the way out here. I'll keep my gun in my hand."

"Well, awright," Mr. Sutton conceded, "but I don't want you nor Marthy to see me a-gettin' it out. If them devils comes here I don't want neither one o' you to know where the dust is. Then they cain't possible make you tell."

"That's a good idea," Sally said. "I'll go on in the house and wait. We'll work it out together, and if you still think we shouldn't do it, we'll have to try to think of something else."

Returning to the bedroom, Sally found that Martha had cut the ruffles neatly and had the rest of the material on the floor with a pattern spread over it. Looking up at her, Martha said, "We're about the same size. I think my pattern will do for both of us."

Sally laughed. "I'm afraid some of my curves have gone slatty, working on the ranch, but we can take the seams in. You were sweet to give me the blue, but you can have

it back after we've finished the job. We probably will have to cut off the edges of the ruffles, anyway, to get the dust out. Both dresses may be ruined."

"If we get the gold out safely," Martha replied with an earnestness and seriousness beyond her years, "we can buy more silk for dresses."

"Good girl," Sally cried. "You're growing up already."

When Mr. Sutton came in with a pouch of gold dust concealed beneath his heavy jacket, Sally had a trial ruffle ready to demonstrate. He eased the buckskin pouch out and opened it. Sally took a few pinches at a time and sifted them into the double ruffle, worked it smoothly across the bottom of a small portion of cloth. She then ran her needle along the ruffle to hold the dust firmly.

Her finished product was a rounded, fat piping which looked as if a cord had been run through it.

Martha exclaimed proudly, "It's perfect!"

Mr. Sutton looked on in amazement. Reaching in his pocket he took out his spectacles and examined Sally's handiwork. He rolled the gold filled portion of the ruffle between his rough fingers and assured himself that it would not cut through. He then added his compliment to Martha's:

"It shore seems like it'll work. Right smart idee you got there."

"If we can only get through to Pueblo," Sally breathed earnestly. "With Pat guarding us, nothing can happen once we get on the train."

"And that note," Martha reminded her gaily, "said that Pat would be here by dark. Isn't it wonderful!" She had left her cutting to see the experiment and now fell to her knees before the blue material and began cutting.

Sally's fingers flew over the ruffles. Occasionally she went to the window and looked out to see the snowstorm increasing in intensity and returned to her work with

a worried frown between her eyes. She hoped that Pat would come before it assumed blizzard proportions.

When the first pouch of gold dust was emptied into the ruffles she was not surprised to see Mr. Sutton coming in with another.

"My goodness," she exclaimed, "these ruffles certainly hold a lot. I'll bet I've got ten pounds in these already, and I'm only half finished. I believe we can each carry fifteen or twenty pounds, and that's a lot of money, Mr. Sutton."

The old man seemed to have absorbed some of Sally's and Martha's enthusiasm. "I shore hope it's goin' to work, Miz Stevens," he said soberly. "I wouldn' never forgive myse'f if anything happened to you and Marthy."

"Now don't you worry," Sally laughed. "Just wait till Pat gets here and we tell him about it. He's going to laugh himself sick. I doubt if he will approve it, but I'll take care of that part of it."

Martha finished cutting the blue dress and laid it carefully aside while she busied herself with the red silk for her own dress.

They worked busily all morning, taking time only to prepare a noonday meal, but shortly after that, when they resumed their sewing, Martha exclaimed:

"We're going to run out of thread, Sally. This extra sewing at the bottom of the ruffles has run us short."

"H-m-m," said Sally, glancing at her second spool of blue thread. "You're right. We'll have to make a trip into Tola and get some more."

Martha was silently thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Papa won't like us going in alone, but we'll just *have to*."

"It's only a few miles," Sally said. "We'll have to risk it."

Mr. Sutton had disappeared shortly after the midday dinner and as Sally and Martha were dressing warmly to go into Tola, they heard running feet on the rock path leading up to the cabin porch.

Thinking this would be Pat, Sally hastily went to the door with a high flush of happiness on her face.

A sudden pallor replaced the flush when she saw old man Sutton running and dragging a young Indian boy along with him. She could see that the boy was terribly frightened and that Mr. Sutton was in a high state of excitement. The boy kept pulling back, but the old man dragged him relentlessly toward the house with all his strength.

"What has happened?" Sally cried.

"This Injun," panted Mr. Sutton, "he's been tellin' it around that he saw three men trapped in a slide. From what he says, one of 'em sounds like it might be Pat Stevens."

Sally caught and held fast to the door jamb while Martha rushed up to peer over her shoulder. "Bring . . . him . . . in," she said in a smothered voice.

The boy broke loose from Mr. Sutton's relaxed grasp and started to run away, but the old man raced after him, grabbed his arm again and prodded him up the steps. Here, Sally got a grip on his other arm and together they dragged the frightened redskin inside.

"Tell me about the men," Sally coerced in a kindly tone. "Did you see the accident?"

"Me ride 'long behind men. Saw horses killed. Men run in mountain."

"How did the men look?" Sally asked.

The boy shook his head sullenly, his black eyes darting everywhere for a place of escape.

"Open up thar," Mr. Sutton demanded. "He kin talk

plenty good when he wants to. He kin understand what you say, too."

"Was one of the men tall . . . with two guns strapped on . . . and a black hat?" She knew it would be futile to describe Pat's clothing. It was too much like that of every other man in the high country.

The boy nodded solemnly. "Two guns," he said. "One man have fire hair." He ran his fingers through his long coarse black hair and held it up on end. "Beeg man . . . fire hair . . . eye . . ." He held two fingers over one eye and stared at them with the other.

"Ezra!" Sally gasped. "And did one have black whiskers?" She ran her hand over her chin.

The boy nodded.

Sally backed away from him and sank into a chair. Her face was very white. "Sam . . . and Ezra," she said weakly. "They followed us up here . . . and got Pat into trouble."

Mr. Sutton began questioning the boy. "Where did you say this place is they got kivered up? Kin you take me to it?"

"Uh," the boy grunted, nodding vigorously. "In gulch. Men gone . . . happy huntin' ground . . . gone. Men got guns."

"Oh God!" Sally moaned, while Martha stood over her with tears of sympathy.

"Come on, boy," Mr. Sutton said. "Now Marthy, you and Miz Stevens stay here. I'll find out all 'bout it. Prob'ly ain't Pat and them men you think they are a-tall."

"No!" Sally cried, springing up. "I'm going with you."

The snowstorm was lessening in intensity, but the wind was damp and bone-chilling. Mr. Sutton ordered the Indian lad to bring his pony to the corral while he saddled the two blacks for himself and Sally.

As they started away, Sally showed the boy a coin and

made him understand that it was to be his if he led them straight to the slide.

The boy grinned perfect understanding and his eyes gleamed. He prodded his pony and led the way across the rough canyon floor which was strewn with boulders and matted with dead underbrush. There was no man-made path leading toward the lower shelf road, and progress was slow. Snow covered the ground and weighted the limbs of spruce and pine. Snow swirled in Sally's face and eyes, but the iciness all around her seemed warm compared to the lump of ice weighting her heart. She thought of young Dock but she was too numb for pity. She was unable to censure Sam and Ezra for following Pat; and there was not even a spark of hope that they might be alive.

After several miles, which seemed a hundred to Sally, they rode into a clearing where a rocky slope led upward toward the narrow ledge. The Indian boy galloped his pony toward the slope and up it, with Mr. Sutton following and Sally close behind him.

On the shelf trail the boy led them on to the forks where Pat and Sam and Ezra had turned into the narrow gulch. The horses slowed their pace in the deep snow, and after a while the boy began pointing excitedly ahead to a point where the narrow way was piled with rocks and dirt and snow from the slide.

Sally stared at the mountainous tomb and could not speak. The boy slid from his pony and raced up the slide to the top. Mr. Sutton yelled out:

"Any sign of an openin' up there?"

The boy shook his head. "Men buried."

"Look around," Mr. Sutton called out as he dismounted stiffly and started up the slide to join the boy.

Sally watched the boy lower his head and yell, "Oo-woo-ooo-ooo," turning his ear to listen.

"Hear anything?" Mr. Sutton asked loudly.

The boy shook his head slowly, then tumbled down the embankment.

Sally called up: "Is there any sign they're alive?"

Descending, Mr. Sutton said, "I think this damned redskin is lyin'. He didn' see nobody get caught in that slide. See . . . it come from way up, an' anybody'd of had time to get away. He's jest plain lyin', tryin' to make a leetle excitement."

"Do you really think so?" Sally asked.

"I'm shore of it, Miz Stevens. I shouldn' of listened to 'im in the fust place."

Sally felt warmth coming to her body. "I think you're right, Mr. Sutton. I believe Pat would pull out somehow even if he had one foot in purgatory. Maybe," she added after a moment's thought, "the hooded men hired the Indian boy to tell that story."

They looked around for the boy, to question him further, but boy and pony had slipped away unnoticed through the gulch.

Feeling greatly heartened, Sally swung into the saddle and followed Mr. Sutton on the perilous trail back toward the cabin.

NINE

THE SILENCE between the old man and the young woman grew ominous, or it seemed so to Sally. Mr. Sutton seemed far more worried than she had noticed at any time since her arrival at the Sutton home.

While she had hung upon his heartening conclusions drawn at the slide, as a drowning person grasps a straw, it became clearer as they rode along that he had spoken them in an effort to dissipate her own heartache and terror.

On the return trip the old man was not so quick to pick the path as the young Indian had been and they rode much slower, in spite of the fact that the snow had almost ceased falling.

Upon reaching the rear entrance to one of the miners' cabins which were scattered through the canyon, Mr. Sutton suddenly reined his horse in and said:

"I'm gonna stop here and see Jeb Dawson 'bout gettin' up a posse. I'm plumb shore that slide wasn' caused natural. It was them black devils frum hell . . . prob'ly shootin' at a place way up on the ridge, knowin' it would start snow slidin' an' take ever'thing else 'long with it." It was as if he held a bomb inside his own heart which exploded with a bang of words.

Sally's eyes widened in surprise. "But I thought . . . you said you didn't believe Pat . . . and the others . . . were trapped."

"Waal, now, mebbey they wasn' trapped, Miz Stevens, but they's somethin' powerful funny 'bout the hull thing. Ain't been no slides up that-a-way long as I kin recollect'."

"You mean you're going to get a posse and try to catch the hooded men . . . again?"

"We ain't never quit tryin' here in Dusty Canyon," Mr. Sutton replied with stolid pride.

Sally narrowed her eyes and sent the old man a sharp look. "You're sure you aren't organizing a party to dig into the slide and bring out . . . bodies?"

"We'll do whatever the fellers think best," Mr. Sutton parried.

"You do believe they're trapped," Sally said evenly, "and you believe they're all dead."

"Ain't no doubt 'bout 'em bein' dead *if* they was caught in the slide," Mr. Sutton answered with averted eyes.

With her horse impatiently stamping in the deep snow, Sally sat quietly thoughtful for a while. She knew she would have to keep a strict guard over herself henceforth in order to refrain from hysterical frenzy. She would have to go ahead on her own, not even thinking of having Pat's guidance. Pat had shown her the way years ago. She could not fail him.

In a choked voice she said, "If Pat and Sam and Ezra are . . . dead . . . Mr. Sutton, it's up to us to carry on . . . do what . . . Pat and I started out to do . . . get you and Martha and the gold out. You'll have to help us."

"'Tain't much I kin do to help women sew," he argued. "It ain't goin' to be easy to carry out that plan o' yourn. Looks this-a-way tuh me. If you an' Marthy try to git out by yourse'fs, ain't no tellin' what them black devils might try to do to you, and if I went 'long with you, they'd be shore tuh suspec' we was takin' the gold out." He waggled his head slowly back and forth.

Sally straightened her shoulders and lifted her head high. "Well, I'd better go on. Martha and I must go to Tola this afternoon to get thread to finish the dresses. We'll work on them all night if we have to, so we can start for Pueblo on the stage tomorrow."

"You an' Marthy goin' to Tola . . . this evenin'?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes. We haven't nearly enough thread to finish up." Sally spurred her horse forward. She did not look back, but could hear Mr. Sutton's mare, Pansy, racing to catch up with her mate.

It was only a short distance to the Sutton cabin, and he did not catch up with her until they drew up at the corral gate.

Stiffly dismounting, Mr. Sutton went rapidly to Sally's side as she, too, dismounted, stepping from the stirrups.

"See here, Miz Stevens, we cain't all go off an' leave the cabin not guarded. If you and Marthy're boun' to go to Tola, I'll have to wait till you get back to git the men o'ganized."

Sally considered his harassed old face, then in a calm voice she said, "You can't possibly do much this afternoon. By the time you and your men reached the slide it would be too dark to . . . do any digging, and too dark to see the hooded men even if they were anywhere near there. I still believe my plan is best for you and Martha, and if you'll hitch up the team to the buggy, Martha and I will start for Tola at once. We've no time to waste."

Mr. Sutton nodded his gray head slowly. His voice broke when he said, "Reckon you're right. The men hereabouts 've been fightin' the blackguards fer months. We ain't smart 'nough to ketch 'em. Reckon our eyes are old an' blinded by gold dust. I'll hitch up and stay till you-all git back, then I'll round up some o' the men an' we'll try ag'in tomorry mornin'." He turned his watery eyes away from Sally's piercing blue ones and added, "Reckon thar ain't no hurry . . . now . . . noways."

"No," said Sally bravely, while her heart ached for the old man. "All we can do now is carry on . . . for Pat's sake. I've got to get back home to Dock . . . and the Lazy Mare ranch . . . just as soon as possible. It's all we've got left."

Mr. Sutton looked at her now. He said, gently, "You're a brave woman, Miz Stevens. Braver than most."

Sally's smile was pathetic, but she smiled and said, "Many women who were much braver than I could ever be came . . . out here . . . long before my time," as the old

man lifted the wooden latch of the corral gate and opened it for the horses to go through.

Turning slowly, Sally went into the house.

Martha, who was busily sewing ruffles for the red dress, looked up at her with agonized dark eyes. "What did you find out?" she asked breathlessly.

Sally slumped into a chintz-covered bedroom chair and closed her eyes. In a strange monotone she told Martha all the details of the trip.

When she finished, she heard the team stamping at the front, and said:

"We're going to take the ruffles with the gold in them with us. We'll have to take small samples to match the material with thread. I don't think we should leave the ruffles lying around here. So much has happened, I have a strange feeling the trouble has just begun."

"You mean . . . you think *our* time has come?" Martha asked in a strained, frightened voice.

Sally was busily wrapping the gold-laden ruffles securely in papers. Looking about her, she saw the two buckskin pouches she had emptied. Picking them up, she stuffed them inside her jacket under her heavy coat.

"Do you think . . . they're coming *here*?" Martha persisted.

"I wouldn't say that," Sally responded, keeping her voice as calm as possible, "but don't you see . . . they've got Pat . . . and they know we're friends of yours. If they should come and find these ruffles they'd be certain to get suspicious if they lifted even one of them, and if the hooded men ever got any idea of our plan it would be absolutely worthless."

"Then . . . it's just a precautionary measure?" Martha asked anxiously, her big dark eyes looking trustingly into Sally's sorrowful blue ones.

"Come on," Sally said hastily. "We've got to hurry. The team is waiting for us." Taking a last look in her handbag to be sure there were small scraps of the red and blue material for matching the thread, Sally led the way out to the buggy.

Mr. Sutton was patiently holding the team, his watery eyes looking at the foot of snow which had drifted into the driveway. When Martha and Sally were in the buggy with the sheepskin robe tucked warmly around them, he said:

"Git back fast as you can, Marthy. *I* got some matters to settle, too." He looked up at his daughter pleadingly.

Martha took the reins in her gloved hand and said, "We'll get back just as fast as possible, Papa, with all this snow on the ground. Thank goodness it has quit coming down."

As they drove the spirited team away, Martha took up the conversation where Sally had left off telling her about Pat and Sam and Ezra.

"You say those two men . . . Sam and Ezra . . . just followed you and Pat up here?"

Sally's brow puckered in a frown. "I just can't see how they got herè so fast. I didn't see them at the station at Hopewell Junction, and I looked for them, too. They always follow Pat when there's trouble in sight. I might have known they'd get here somehow. For the last seven years or more, the three of them have teamed up when there were criminals to be caught." In spite of herself, admiration for the swarthy-black Sam and one-eyed, red-headed Ezra crept into her voice. She sighed and her eyes filled with tears. "I suppose somebody else will have to take over the job of getting rid of the terrible characters who come West along with honest men."

With quick sympathy, the younger girl's tears came.

"It's all my fault, Sally. I had no business to ask Pat to come."

"No," Sally said flatly. "Pat had a letter from the sheriff after he was wounded, asking him to come and help him. If Pat hadn't been afraid to show me Sheriff Ross's letter we might have both come sooner . . . before the snowstorm came . . . before it was possible for the slide to bury them in that gulch."

"Pat . . . afraid?" Martha took her eyes from the crooked road and widened them at Sally in confusion.

"Yes," Sally acknowledged. "You see . . . I thought that Pat should give up trailing criminals when we were married . . . especially after we had Dock . . . but everybody seemed to depend on him. They kept calling on him and he kept going, with Sam and Ezra trailing him every time there was trouble. But last April, when they trailed that mob of cattle rustlers into Mexico and Pat nearly got killed, I made him promise he wouldn't ever go after any criminals again. He . . . didn't want to break his promise," she ended gallantly.

"I don't blame you," Martha said warmly. "Sheriff Ross must have let it out that Pat was coming before they killed him."

"I suppose so," Sally answered, her voice listless. "Anyway, I can't let Pat down now. I'm going to do everything I can to help you and your father. That's what Pat and I came up here for. I can't disappoint him."

Sally's mouth tightened suddenly into a straight tight line and she gritted through her teeth, "If only I were a *man*, I'd take Pat's place in the posse Mr. Sutton is making up."

"Do you think we could?" Martha asked, youthfully matching her strength with Sally's. "I can ride and shoot as well as any of the old men here in the Canyon. We

ought to go after those murderers," she ended, aping Sally's grim-voiced statement.

"The only thing that holds me back is Dock," Sally went on, "and I'm not sure I ought to let that stop me. If we don't teach thieves and murderers that they can't invade this country and take what they want by force, it won't be safe for the children who are growing up now."

Martha was too young to cope with the problems of posterity. The horses were galloping along at a remarkable speed considering the depth of the snow in the rough trail. She was surprised to see landmarks near the small village of Tola so soon. She called Sally's attention to a huge boulder ahead. "Tola is just a mile from that rock. We're almost there."

As Sally bent forward to peer around the side of the buggy top, she gasped aloud. Her fingers opened her handbag as she cried out, "Look, Martha! That hooded man on that black horse!"

"Where!" Martha strained her eyes as Sally pointed.

Sally's small pistol exploded toward the disappearing horseman. She said, "He's gone. Disappeared into the spruce over there."

The horses lurched forward when Sally fired and raced around the boulder.

"If you'd stop the team," Sally said frantically, "maybe I could get a better aim at him. I might hit him."

Martha tugged at the reins, but the horses were frightened and raced on toward Tola.

When at last they slowed at the edge of the town, Sally said:

"It's strange the black-hood didn't shoot back. We made a fine target for him."

"If there was only one of them," Martha said caustically, "he was probably just scouting around. They're too

cowardly to work alone. The whole gang gets together when they go after somebody. Nobody knows how many there are, but when they're torturing a man to tell where his gold is hidden, they all join in."

Sally shivered violently as Martha guided the horses to a hitch-rack in front of a false-fronted building with large dusty black letters which read:

TOLA POST OFFICE *and* GENERAL STORE.

TEN

AFTER THE STORM abated, the sky remained overcast and gray, murky with the threat of more snow; and the thick pall of twilight gathered quickly over Dusty Canyon as night approached.

Alone in the little isolated cabin after the two girls had set out valiantly for Tola, Mr. Sutton was oppressed with a sense of unease and foreboding. He moved about the cabin mechanically, bringing in firewood and filling the water pails for the night, pausing each time he passed over the threshold to stare up at the bleak snowy slopes beyond with watery eyes. His attitude was one of utter dejection, as though his thin shoulders bore a burden far too heavy for his years.

And, indeed, the weight of three deaths upon his conscience was the heaviest burden the old miner had ever borne. Though he had maintained an attitude of cheerfulness with Sally, pretending that he didn't believe the Indian boy's story of seeing three men perish under an avalanche, he knew the story must be true. The Indian's

description of the men was irrefutable evidence. Besides, he had never known an imaginative Indian.

Mr. Sutton felt a measure of relief when Sally had gone with Martha to Tola, for it was not easy for him to look her squarely in the eyes which she turned on him as levelly as a man's. She was the most amazingly courageous woman he had known since his own wife lived and fought the cruel hardships of the West. Sally's faith in her husband's ability to avoid death was at once pathetic and a miracle of strong resolve which had been broken only by his certainty that the men could not have escaped alive.

It was all his fault. Mr. Sutton saw that clearly now. He should not have urged Martha to write the truth to Sally and Pat. He should not have been a stubborn old fool all these years, hoarding his gold dust and refusing to leave the canyon until the last bit of color was panned from his claim.

It was too late now for anything more than horrible regret. That was the tragic part. Three fine men had already given their lives in payment for his stubbornness. And now two girls were planning a perilous risk for themselves in a reckless attempt to get the gold . . . his gold . . . to safety in the Denver mint.

He slammed the cabin door shut behind him as he entered with his last armload of firewood and stalked to the big wooden box beside the fireplace where he dumped the wood into it.

"Damn the gold," he muttered in a thin, shaky voice, then glanced around quickly at the empty, shadowy corners of the room as his words seemed to echo mockingly.

It was too late to damn the gold now; too late to bring Pat and Sam and Ezra back to life. He turned slowly away from the fireplace and sank into his old familiar rocking chair.

If there was only something he could do . . . some way he could get rid of the curse of the yellow stuff for which men had been murdered since the beginning of time.

But he knew, even as he rocked gently back and forth, that he would do nothing, even if he could. The taint of gold was in his soul. Greed for the stuff had mastered him as it had mastered thousands before him, and all those who lived around him. Now, after three men had made the supreme sacrifice in an effort to save his hoard from the black-robed murderers, he could not do less than his part to see that the sacrifice had not been made in vain.

He tried to convince himself that he had hoarded the gold for Martha's sake, for as he stared into the fire and tried to think of the future, he knew that the things it would buy in Denver meant nothing to an old miner like himself. He was no better than a miser.

But Martha was different. She was young. She had endured privation and fear ever since she was old enough to understand.

He sank into a queer sort of reverie as the logs burned and eerie shadows licked at the walls. Martha's face became that of his wife, young and gay, unbelievably beautiful. She had had such faith, had dared so much with him. She had never lost faith that some day he would strike it rich. Her full-lipped rounded face was there in the flames, nodding encouragement to him, pleading with him to carry on for Martha's sake.

He didn't turn his head when he heard the doorknob turn, but remained bent forward staring into the fire when the door creaked open and he felt a cold draft on his back. He thought it was the girls returning from Tola, and it was not until a brusque voice barked, "Hello there, old man," that he realized an intruder was inside the cabin.

He jerked his head around and his jaw sagged open at

the sight confronting him. His pipe thudded to the floor unnoticed.

The man who stood just inside the door was clothed wholly in black, with a hood of black cloth covering his face like a sack with a drawstring, with three small slits to fit the eyes and mouth.

The eyes that glittered behind the slits seemed black, and the brusque voice came again from behind the hood.

"Jest set where you are, old man." The masked man's arms were folded beneath the cape, and the muzzles of two guns showed menacingly, pointing toward him.

"Damn your soul to hell!" Mr. Sutton growled, leaping to his feet, his aged face contorted with honest rage. "I ain't afeard of you nor both your guns." He jumped forward to the mantel where a hunting rifle hung on wooden prongs, but the intruder snarled deep in his throat and stepped toward him, flailing out with the heavy muzzle of a Navy .44, bashing it against the side of Sutton's head.

The old miner staggered back under the impact, went to his knees, where he crouched like a cornered animal, a whimper of rage and frustration drooling from his thin lips.

The masked man laughed harshly and backed toward the door. "I'll drill yuh through th' guts next time," he warned. "If yo're smart, you'll be good an' mebby won't git hurt."

He jerked the door open and whistled shrilly. After a moment he was joined by another figure dressed in black, a broad-shouldered, hulking man whose eyes gleamed red behind the slitted mask.

"Jest the ol' man here by hisse'f, huh? That's sorta too bad. I hoped mebbe . . ."

"Shut up," the first man grated. He shut the door and

barred it. "You know the boss said the gals wuz in town. We want this old devil's gold . . . nothin' else."

"Mebbe that's all you want," the other said brutally, "but me, I cud shore . . ."

"Shut up." The taller man whirled back on Sutton. "All right. Where's yore dust hid?"

Mr. Sutton was still crouched back in the corner. The dancing flames flickered over the strained whiteness of his face, over the grimly set lips and the sunken eyes that gleamed back defiantly.

When he made no answer the second man strode forward eagerly. "Lemme at 'im. I know how tuh jar these old codgers loose from info'mation. 'Member how Jake Hargrove begged us to take his gold a'ter I worked 'im over?"

He stopped in front of Sutton on wide-spread legs, huge hands dangling open almost level with his knees. "Come on, ol' man. Start talkin' afore I choke it out o' you."

Sutton bared his yellowed teeth in a snarl. He shook his head doggedly and his wispy gray hair glinted like silver in the dancing flames.

The heavy-set man chuckled with brutish anticipation and cuffed the miner lightly on the side of his leathery face. Behind him his taller companion warned, "Don' hit 'im too hard, Grizzly. Knockin' him out ain't gonna find us no dust."

"Shore, I do'n aim tuh hurt 'im none. I'll jest squeeze his goozle a leetle. . . ."

The big man made a grab for Sutton's scrawny neck. The miner jerked his head sideways and sank sharp teeth into the broad palm that sought to encircle his throat.

The big man yelped with pain and outraged anger. He jerked his hand away and drove the other fist into

Sutton's face. The old man went down to the floor in a crumpled heap and the leader swore angrily:

"God dammit, Grizzly, I tole you to watch how you handled him. Now you've done knocked 'im out cold. The boss ain't gonna like that a-tall."

"What the hell could I do? He snapped at me like a mad coyote. Wouldn't s'prise me none if them dirty teeth o' his'n was pizen an' I ketched lockjaw er sompin." The big man drew back, sucking on his lacerated palm, while the other strode forward, got a pail of water, and threw it in Sutton's face.

The old miner moaned when the cold water struck him, but made no other movement. The tall man disgustedly kicked him in the ribs, and when that elicited no response from their unconscious victim, he ordered briskly:

"Find an ax and start rippin' up the floor. Nine outta ten of these old codgers hide their dust under the floorboards. I'll be lookin' in the kitchen and through the beddin' an' in all them places."

He went into the big clean kitchen and began jerking pots and canned goods from the shelves, piling them indiscriminately on the floor and cursing loudly when he failed to find any trace of the cache.

At the same time there was the sound of chopping and the ripping of boards in the front room, and when the tall hooded man had reduced the kitchen to a wreck of its former neatness, he stuck his head through the door and got a disgusted shake of the black mask inside.

"Got ha'f thuh floor pulled up an' ain't found narry a sign," the second man reported. "Found some loose boards that looked like they mighta been pulled up afore, but not a smidgen o' dust."

"Keep tryin'," the tall man ordered. "Prod the old man

with your toe ever' time you get close to 'im. We'd make 'im tell mighty quick if we could get 'im to wake up."

"Shore. I been proddin' 'im. But you know how old men is."

The tall man nodded morosely and strode across the torn floor planking to the bedroom on the left. Unmindful of the daintiness of the room which was Martha's, he began tearing it savagely apart, jerking out the drawers of the homemade dresser and dumping the contents on the floor. He tore the mattress to pieces, dumping the filling on the floor.

From Martha's room he went into the smaller room on the right, and with even more thoroughness proceeded to demolish and empty everything that might possibly serve as a hiding place for the treasure they sought.

His companion had finished ripping up the floorboards and was prying up the rocks of the hearth with a rusty crowbar when the taller man stepped back into the living room.

Mr. Sutton still lay crumpled in a heap in the corner, breathing gently and unevenly, his eyes closed and his thin mouth lax.

"Goddam ol' bastard," the heavy man muttered, throwing the crowbar aside and darting a venomous glance at the relaxed figure. "We done damn nigh es much work lookin' es he done pannin' that thar gold. Got me all tired an' sweaty. 'Tain't no way fer uh man tuh do with his gold."

"That's jest too bad," the tall man mocked. "There orta be a law that miners shouldn' hide their dust where we can't find it easy. But we ain't through with 'im yit." His voice was cold and authoritative. "Put 'im on yore shoulder an' carry 'im out to yore haws. We'll take 'im on uh little trip."

"To the hideout, huh?" The heavy man's voice drooled

with pleasure. "Where we kin work 'im over good 'n proper 'thout no interference a'ter he comes to."

"That's right. The boss'll be there tonight an' he allus gets a kick outta seein' 'em squirm. If we put on a good show fer the boss he won't be near so likely tuh give us hell fer not gettin' th' gold first off. Heave 'im up an' let's get goin'. No tellin' how soon them gals'll be back from town."

"Thass right." The big man paused with his hands gripping Sutton's shoulder preparatory to lifting him. "Couldn' we wait a leetle while fer the gals tuh come? Mebbe they know where thuh gold's hid at. It'd be real fun to muss 'em up an' make 'em tell."

"You know the boss's orders. We've stayed healthy this long by leavin' the women folks alone. Killin's bad enough, but there's other things. . . ."

"There's other things the boss mebbe don't know 'bout," the short man boasted. "Whut he don' know don' hurt 'im."

"Shut up," growled the tall man. "H'ist 'im up an' le's go." He turned and led the way to the cabin door, opened it cautiously and peered out.

Outside, the misty gray of dusk was swiftly turning to dark. When the man was satisfied that the way was clear he stepped out and went hurriedly to a clump of spruce back of the cabin where their mounts were tethered. His companion followed with the light, prostrate body of Mr. Sutton tossed carelessly over his shoulder.

They tied the old miner behind one of the saddles and mounted, then rode straight down to the bottom of the canyon where a little-used path wound around through thickets of bare willows that screened them from the view of any of the other cabins dotting the bleak side of the canyon.

For half an hour they rode steadily eastward, and the

thick darkness of night was closing in when the leader turned to the right along the bottom of one of the numerous small ravines which were like fissures in the wall of the main canyon.

This was a narrow, rocky defile, deep enough to conceal the heads of the riders, and it was crossed by a narrow wooden bridge carrying the stage road directly over their heads.

It climbed sharply beyond the stage road, gradually widening out and flattening just beneath the ledge trail over which Pat had led Sam and Ezra that morning.

They pressed directly up the side of the canyon after crossing the ledge trail, came at last to a deep crevice that yawned in front of them, then turned abruptly to the right and sloped steeply down to intersect the larger gulch into which the pursuing trio had been decoyed into the path of the avalanche.

When it debouched finally into the larger ravine it was at its blind end against the canyon wall, a small sheltered park with corrals and sheds perfectly hidden away in the isolated gulch, and now rendered twice as inaccessible as before by the blocking of the main ravine caused by the snowslide.

A bearded man came to the door of the largest slab structure when the two black-robed men pulled up in front. He grunted with surprise at sight of the limp body of Mr. Sutton strapped behind the saddle.

"'Nother tough un, huh? Bring 'im in an' we'll thaw 'im out an' git 'im ready fer thuh boss. He's due right after dark an' he'll find a way tuh make him talk if any hooman bein' kin."

Rough hands untied the straps binding Sutton's limbs and his unconscious body was tossed inside the large untidy room to thaw out and await the pleasure of the mysterious boss of the hooded bandits.

ELEVEN

WHILE MARTHA got out of the buggy and tied the horses to the hitchrack, Sally carefully gathered up her heavy bundle of ruffles and tried to get herself and the package out as gracefully as possible so that anyone looking on would not suspect its weight. Martha rushed around to see if she could assist her, but Sally held tight to the bundle.

"You'd better let me carry it," she said. "I hope nobody can tell from my face that I'm scared half to death some one will suspect I'm carrying about twenty pounds of the Sutton gold." She spoke the last words in a whisper.

Both girls looked up anxiously at the gray sky and Martha said in an awed voice, "We'll have to hurry to get back home before dark."

"It shouldn't take but a minute to get the thread," Sally told her.

"Suppose you get it while I ask if there's any mail," Martha suggested. "That'll save a little time."

They started across the boardwalk toward the door of the building. Suddenly Sally gasped in surprise. She was looking up into the face of a tall handsome young man who was coming toward them.

"Mr. Torrence," she said, when he stopped before them.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Stevens," he returned, but the expression on his face belied his words.

Martha nudged Sally gently while her dark eyes beamed for an instant upon Mr. Torrence, then turned modestly away.

"Oh . . . Mr. Torrence, I want you to meet my friend

Martha Sutton. She's the girl I told you we were coming to visit here in the Canyon."

Mr. Torrence's expression underwent a change. He said, extending his gloved hand, "This is indeed a pleasure, Miss Sutton," and his eyes beamed into hers.

Martha was studying him intently. She said, in some confusion, "Haven't I seen you somewhere . . . before . . . Mr. Torrence?"

"Perhaps we had a glimpse of each other when I visited here when I was a small boy. About seven, I believe I was. But you would have been too young to remember."

"You visited here in the canyon? Do you have relatives living here?"

Torrence's face darkened. "My grandmother lived here," he said shortly, and to the surprise of both girls he bowed slightly and strode past them as though he suddenly remembered an important engagement.

Martha and Sally looked at each other and Sally said: "Well . . . he certainly got a gleam in his eye for you, Martha. Then he acted as if we were both poison and ran away."

"He did act strangely," Martha murmured, and without another word they went into the store.

The post office occupied a small square at the front and to the right of the store. Sally started to ask Martha where the thread counter might be when a little old lady came up and squinted, then asked, "What kin I do fer ye, Miss?"

"Some thread, please," Sally answered, and followed the thin bent form toward the rear.

Martha went over to the post office window. Just as she reached it, an incredibly tall and lean man turned away. His deep-set black eyes saw Martha and his wide thin mouth broke into a pleasant smile.

"Why, Miss Martha," he said, grasping her hand which

she lifted at once and held toward him. "I haven't seen you nor your father at the meeting house for several Sundays. Thought you might be away on a visit." His voice had a soft, pleasant rumble. He lifted his black Stetson hat from his thick black hair, leaving his head bare as he stood before her.

Martha laughed happily. "I'm so glad to see you again, Bible Jim. No, we haven't been anywhere for a long time. Papa's afraid to leave the house with the black-hoods raiding so many of the miners' cabins."

Bible Jim's mouth tightened in firm and righteous anger. "It's a terrible thing, Miss Martha. I've been in the West for a number of years and have lived for a time in several different communities, but I've never heard of a gang of outlaws so hard to catch." He moved his long solemn face sadly from side to side. "Folks around here ought to get right with God. *'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.'*"

"But Papa is a good man," she contended. "He reads the Bible every night . . . the one you sold him with his name on it. The miners the outlaws have killed were good men, too. You know that as well as I do."

"It's not enough, my child, just to be good. *'The Lord thy God is a jealous God. . . .'* Men should learn the first commandment and abide by it, and they must come to the House of God for inspiration. The trouble is, people around here set up the false idol of gold when they should remember, *'Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me.'* They seek earthly riches when the Bible says, *'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.'*"

There was admiration in the girl's face for the man's profound wisdom voiced in his deep, solemn tones, but her face lost some of its bright happiness. "Yes, but every-

body works to try to make money, Bible Jim," she argued. "They're not committing a sin to do that. There's a lot in the Bible about good works, too. If anybody suffers it ought to be the outlaws . . . not the men who work for an honest living."

"I grant the crimes are terrible, hideous in the sight of God and man, Miss Martha. Every able-bodied man around here has tried to do his part tracking them down. I have personally led several posses. I'm afraid we've failed because we have been unable to cast out all fear and trust wholly in Him. Why don't you bring your father to meeting next Sunday? I might be able to say a few comforting words to him."

"I know," she murmured absently. "Papa always feels uplifted when he goes to church." She became confused and fidgety. Removing her heavy gloves, she twisted her fingers, looking up into the long benevolent face of the man who had moved into Tola over a year ago for the purpose of selling Bibles and preaching in a deserted dance-hall which was called the Meeting House. There were few homes within a radius of twenty-five miles who did not possess one of Bible Jim's leather-bound bibles with their names etched in gold dust.

"I . . . don't think we'll be here next Sunday," Martha finally confided. "We are moving to Denver . . . as soon as we can."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he rumbled in his deep, sincere voice. "I hope you won't let the evils of the city corrupt your pure young life, Miss Martha. There are many pitfalls of sin for the young in the city. Remember Sodom and Gomorrah."

"At least we won't have the black-hoods after us there," she said earnestly. "I do hope they'll get up another posse right away and try to catch them. Something has hap-

pened that I'm sure will make Papa get up a posse . . . tomorrow morning."

"So?" he asked. "Perhaps I can persuade some of the men here in Tola to join him and try again."

"Would you?" she cried breathlessly. "I'll tell him when I get back home."

Bible Jim glanced out the window to see the gray of twilight pressing close. "You're going to have a dark ride back. You shouldn't have come in so late . . . with so much terror abroad."

"We had to come," she responded. "We . . . Mrs. Stevens and I . . . were making some new dresses for our trip and we ran out of thread. We wanted to wear them tomorrow, and . . ."

Sally's voice spoke behind her. "I'm ready to go. I had a time matching the thread. I'm afraid it isn't as nice a color as the other. Have you gotten the mail?"

Martha turned quickly. "Not yet. I met Bible Jim and we got to talking. Sally, I want you to meet Mr. . . ." She hesitated, then laughed in confusion.

"Bible Jim," he supplied, smiling gently down at Sally from his spindling height. "Some of the folks here call me their Sky-Pilot, but I like Bible Jim better, Mrs. Stevens, because that's my business . . . Bibles."

Sally returned his smile and said, "There certainly seems to be a need of Bibles around here right now."

"Martha was telling me you and she are engaged in the pleasant pastime of making new dresses," Bible Jim went on, as Martha left them to go to the post office window.

"Why . . . yes, we are. But under the circumstances it isn't as pleasant as it might be," Sally said.

"News has gotten around here that your husband has met a tragic and untimely death, Mrs. Stevens," he said

in a funereal voice. "I offer my deepest sympathy. I presume it isn't a pleasant task to make a mourning outfit."

"No . . . it isn't," Sally whispered as Martha returned from the window empty-handed. She offered her hand to the man and said, "I'm glad to have met you, Bible Jim," then, "Come on, Martha, we must be going. It's getting awfully dark outside."

Bible Jim frowned, the creases forming a vee between his eyes and continuing up to the edge of his black hair. "I don't like for you young ladies to ride home alone. Perhaps I could persuade one of the men hereabouts to ride along with you."

Martha laughed gaily. "Now you're not practising what you preach, Bible Jim. I've been thinking about what you said about casting out all fear. So, you see your sermons don't have to be preached on Sunday to take effect."

Sally said, looking levelly into the man's black eyes, "I have a gun, Mr. . . . Bible Jim, and I can shoot straight. We'll get home all right . . . alone."

"May the Lord be with you," he returned earnestly and held out his remarkably long thin hand first to Sally, then to Martha.

"Good-by," they said simultaneously, and went out the door.

In the buggy with the horses going at a rapid pace, Martha said, "That man you introduced me to . . . Mr. Torrence . . . isn't he the handsomest man you ever saw?"

"He looks all right," Sally answered shortly, "but he acted queerly. I . . . don't trust him," she ended slowly.

"Why?" Martha asked, a note of surprise in her voice.

"I . . . don't know . . . exactly."

They were silent for a short while, then Martha said, "Isn't Bible Jim the nicest man? I just love hearing him preach. I'll bet if he ever caught up with that gang of

thieves and murderers he'd have them all on their knees at the Meeting House. He travels all around selling Bibles and everybody buys one whether they believe in it or not, just because they like him so much. He has organized several posses to hunt down the black-hoods, too. He quit when two of the men in one of the posses got killed. He declared he wouldn't be responsible for the violent death of another citizen. I told him I was pretty sure Papa'd organize some of the men tomorrow morning and try again and he said he'd send over some of the Tola men to join them."

"I hope they'll succeed this time," Sally said fervently from her dark corner of the buggy. "You'd better get the horses going faster. It's getting darker by the second."

Martha flicked the black stallion lightly, then continued enthusiastically. "Bible Jim acted terribly sorry when I told him we were moving out of the canyon to Denver. He warned me of all the dangers of the wicked city. . . ."

"Martha!" Sally cried. "You didn't . . . tell him we were going? . . ." There was genuine alarm in her voice.

"You don't think Bible Jim? . . ."

"Of course not," Sally broke in, "but you shouldn't have told anyone. He wouldn't think anything of telling people you know in Tola you were leaving, and the news will get around . . . maybe to the black-hoods. You shouldn't have done it."

"I never thought of that," Martha admitted in a chastened voice. "I'm sorry . . . I just didn't think." Her fingers trembled when she reached out to take the buggy whip to touch the stallion's flanks again. The team lurched forward at a gallop. Night was catching up with them. The trail was as silent as the grave with the dark green spruce pressing close to the narrow, snow-covered road, and the great white boulders stood out boldly against the background like fantastic corpulent ghosts.

They rode silently, with Martha holding the reins in tight, nervous hands, guiding the horses over the dim, crooked trail.

When they turned off the stage trail to go up to the Sutton cabin, Sally saw a bright light shining through the spruce clump on her left.

"It looks as if Mr. Sutton had the door open," she said. "He must have gotten the room too hot."

Martha looked quickly and exclaimed, "He . . . never does that! He's so thin and cold-natured."

"Stop the horses," Sally said hastily, laying her hand on Martha's. "I'm going to get out here and see what's going on. I'll leave the ruffles here in the buggy. You wait. . . ."

"Do you think . . . something's wrong?" Martha asked through chattering teeth. Sally's sudden fright had chilled her through.

"I don't know, but I've got my pistol. I'll ease up to the house and see what's going on."

In a few minutes she was running back down the path, calling to Martha:

"Something terrible has happened. Your father is not there and the whole place has been torn up . . . ransacked. They've . . . come . . . at . . . last."

Martha climbed from the buggy, her body stiff with fright. Sally took the heavy bundle from the buggy seat with one arm and slipped the other around the younger girl's slim waist, and together they went up the path.

The team followed slowly and went on to the corral gate. The girls, their faces terror-stricken, went into the cabin where a big log still burned brightly in the fireplace, casting weird dancing shadows on the walls. Walking carefully on the loose boards after closing and barring the front door, Martha sank into a rocker and covered her face with her hands.

Sally made the rounds of the windows, bolting them fast, then went to sit beside Martha. She said, "I'm thankful we took those ruffles with us. We've got to work all night now to finish those dresses. We have to get out of here tomorrow. I'll go down to the Dawson cabin and tell them . . . what has happened. There's nothing else we can do except get the gold out."

"But we don't know where it is," Martha wailed, tears streaming down her young face. "He never told me."

"We'll get out with what we have," Sally answered practically. "We've at least twenty pounds, and that's quite a lot of money for you."

"For . . . me?" Martha asked piteously. "You . . . think they'll *kill* my father?"

Sally shook her head miserably. She stood up and said, "I'll go tell Mr. Dawson. Bar the door when I go out. I'll be right back."

With her pistol in her hand, she went out and down the dark rear trail leading to the back of the Dawson cabin.

TWELVE

THERE WAS utter silence and complete blackness inside the small opening into the mountain. The three men trapped by the sliding avalanche of snow and debris were too stunned by the suddenness of the tragedy and by their almost unbelievable escape from what had looked like certain death to do more than slump back on the rock floor while they sought to make a mental readjustment to the desperate situation into which they had been flung.

As usual, it was Sam who recovered his speech first, and, characteristically, said with a pessimistic growl:

"Whyn't you leave me lay out there where I was at? Hell, it'd all be over now an' I'd be flappin' m'wings an' listenin' to harp music if you hadn't drug me in here, fool like."

"Harp music hell!" Ezra snorted through the thick darkness. "You'd be shovelin' coal fo' the devil's cook-stove if Pat hadn' of drug you in here, and you know it."

"That wouldn' be so bad neither." Sam's teeth chattered violently as he spoke. "A man'd be warm down in them regions. 'Tain't no wuss bein' b'iled in oil an' turned over on a pitchfork than to freeze t'death in this here damn cold hole."

"Shut up, both of you," Pat grated through set teeth. "We're not dead yet. We've been in tight places before an' always got out."

"But we ain't never had no mountain a-settin' on top of us afore. You reckon this here's a b'ar's cave, Pat? It'd make things jest right if a ol' mama b'ar was to git mad at this introoshun we're makin' an' come woofin' out from 'er bed."

"Let 'er come," Ezra put in sardonically. "I'll skin 'er an' git me a fur coat." He paused, then added plaintively, "You reckon it *is* a b'ar cave, Pat?"

"No," Pat said shortly. He moved cautiously back from the blocked opening on his hands and knees. "You'd know it, too, if you weren't so busy lookin' on the dark side of things. The air in here is fresh . . . not musty like a cave."

Sam chuckled hollowly. "The dark side, sez you? What other side is there hereabouts? I don't see no rays o' light. But I reckon I got the livin' daylights knocked outta me when that rock hit me and knocked me down."

"My guess it it's an old mine tunnel," Pat said, rising

slowly from his crawling position and feeling upward with his hands. Thinking there was standing room, he stood up, swore volubly when the top of his head encountered unyielding rock. "Dug by somebody that more'n likely hired belly-crawlin' Cousin Jacks to wiggle through it and get the gold out." He fumbled in his pockets for a match, found one and struck it. The light burned clear and steady, illuming the jagged walls and roof, showing an opening which ran straight back into impenetrable darkness.

"I shore wisht I'd of hung aroun' and got some o' that bacon Sam was fryin' when we left this mawnin'," Ezra grumbled.

"Look there," Pat called briskly. "This isn't a natural cave. It's been blasted out. A drift tunnel." His match flickered and went out, leaving the darkness thicker than before.

"Cain't see it matters much," Sam complained. "Freezin' to death in a mine tunnel ain't gonna be no more fun than dyin' in a nat'ral cave."

"Didn't you notice how the match burned?" Pat demanded angrily. "That proves the air isn't fouled even with the opening shut off. There must be an air vent. A shaft down from the surface, I reckon."

"Like a chimney," Ezra grunted. "An' if Chris'mus wasn' all over, mebbe we could look fo' Sandy Claws to come down with a bottle of rye whisky fo' a Chris'mus present." His teeth chattered uncontrollably as he ended, and he got to his feet, began flogging himself with his long arms, his long body bent in an arc.

"A chimney means we can light a fire without smokin' ourselves out," Pat responded tersely. "An' that's some-thin' we couldn't do if it was a regular cave."

"Ef you think mebbe you could smoke *me* out," Ezra groaned, "I shore wisht you'd get a good smoke goin'."

"Shore, mebbe we'll find a vein o' coal to burn up in here," Sam put in sarcastically. "Then if we come on a cache of canned stuff we might could stay 'live two-three days." Despite his pessimistic attitude, however, he followed Ezra's example of standing up. Being several inches shorter than his companions, his head missed the rock ceiling, and he stamped around to restore circulation to his body.

"How many matches you fellers got on you?" Pat demanded. "I can't find but three in my pockets and I don't want to waste 'em unless we've got plenty."

"I'm plumb out," Sam admitted, but after a search of his pockets, Ezra had cheering news: "Here's a whole han'ful, but they won't do much 'bout warmin' us up."

Pat struck another match and led the way slowly along the tunnel, ducking to avoid contact with the low roof. It was impossible not to laugh inwardly at Sam's and Ezra's grumblings, but he managed a disgusted tone when he said, "A man'd think you two were a couple of city dudes that've been raised civilized an' didn't know how to get warm without steam heat. I'm bettin' this tunnel hit a streak of mica or some other shiny mineral stuff somewhere. When we come to that, we'll have firewood."

"I reckon a boulder got *him* on the haid when he was draggin' me in," Sam commented mournfully to Ezra as they followed the faint light cast by Pat's match, "else'n why'd he think mica or shiny mineral'd turn into firewood?"

"Jes' humor him along," Ezra said in a loud whisper, "till we get a chanct to grab 'im an' get his guns. Reminds me of ol' Dad Becon up Gunnison way. He got lost fer a week on Monarch Pass an' when they found 'im he claimed he'd been livin' on fried aspen branches. An', b'gorry, he died a coupla days later on an' afore they got

'im buried danged if a aspen hadn' started sproutin' in 'is belly."

Pat was careful not to turn around and show the grin on his face. It was this sort of chatter between his companions that kept fear from creeping into them when danger was imminent and death stalked their path. He stopped ten feet in front of them with an exclamation of satisfaction. His last match flickered out as he waited for his companions to reach him, and he turned impatiently.

"Strike up a light, Ezra. Here's a sidecut they made lookin' for a vein, I reckon. But all they hit was a heavy streak of mica. Now, we'll have a fire."

Ezra was slow getting the match struck. Sam nudged him and said, "Go ahaid an' humor 'im. I'll slip up behind an' be ready to grab 'im when he finds out mica won't burn."

In a soothing tone, Ezra said, "Shore, Pat. That's fine. It'll shore be nice to have a nice warm fire outa mica rock. I reckon that makes 'bout the hottest fire they is."

He scratched a match on his pants and stepped to Pat's side. A right-angled cut had been made in the wall of the tunnel, extending back for ten feet or more. Glittery mica reflected the faint yellow light, and the floor of the cut was strewn with slivers of the shiny stuff that had been splintered off when the work was in progress.

Then Ezra's one eye was gleaming crazily, for piled neatly along the wall of the sidecut was a stack of dried aspen limbs ready for burning. While Ezra continued to stare, Pat seized the burning match from his shaking fingers and bent down to separate some of the twigs and smaller pieces from the main pile.

"Lucky for us," he observed, "that the trade rats here in the mountains've been raised honest and won't carry off nothin' without leavin' something in its place."

"I'm danged," Sam said, awe-struck. "They been tradin' wood for pieces of mica all these years jest so we wouldn' freeze t'death tonight. The little darlin's. I'll shore kiss the nex' trade rat I meet up with."

"An' me," said Ezra gallantly, "I'll take back all the cussin' of 'em I done 'round camp when I woke up an' found the spoons gone and a hunk o' mesquite wood left behind."

Pat had a small blaze going and was carefully adding slightly larger sticks to the fire. "We'll have to go easy on this supply until we can scout around and see if there are any more caches like it. Chances are we'll find plenty if we look close."

Flame licked greedily at the dry wood, sending out cheerful rays of heat which quickly warmed the rock walls and reflected back from the shining mica.

While the three men crouched close, warming themselves, Pat pointed out that the smoke was being drawn off in a direction opposite the blocked exit while the air they breathed remained fresh and clean.

"That shows my guess about an airshaft was right. It must be down the tunnel a ways and it's drawin' off the smoke just like a chimney. Soon's we get thawed out we'll look for it an' see if there's any chance of climbin' out."

"It's right cozy here by the fire," Sam sighed. "If we do get out we got a long lot o' walkin' to do. Don't ferget our hawses was all killed and buried under a hunnerd feet o' snow."

Ezra sighed and hitched up his breeches, took a notch in his belt. "If one o' them packrats was to show up 'bout now, I'd shore eat m'se'f one o' the frien'ly little critters."

"In the meantime, the black-hoods are getting away," Pat said to Sam, ignoring Ezra's statement.

"I wonder if they are," Ezra questioned. "They was up

the canyon in front o' the slide. She shore looked like a blind un t'me. Mebbe they're trapped jest as tight as us."

Pat Stevens shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I thought it looked like a blind canyon, too, but there must be another trail out of it. Stands to reason they wouldn't trap themselves behind the slide they caused."

"You allus find the wrong answers," Sam grumbled. "I wonder if they know 'bout this here mine tunnel an' that we got inside of it."

"They probably know about it," Pat replied thoughtfully. "And they may have seen us dive into it in front of the slide."

"Which means if there's any way out they'll have it blocked," Ezra put in dolefully.

"Yeh . . . if," Sam retorted. "I never heerd o' but one way out of a mine tunnel, 'ceptin' mebbe where some o' them Cousin Jacks dug theirse'fs out at the end of a gold vein."

"Lots of mines have two or three ways out," Ezra argued. "Up 'round Leadville they's mines that start in under the side o' one mountain an' tie into half a dozen other mines that mebbe come out the other side o' the Divide. Fellers that know their way 'round under the ground kin travel for weeks 'thout ever coverin' the same groun' twict."

"An' fellers that don't know their way 'round kin travel plumb to hades and don't *never* find no way out," Sam reminded him caustically.

"Sittin' by a warm fire and guessin' never got anybody anywhere," Pat said. "Let's pile a little more wood on and start lookin'."

He laid three more sticks on the glowing embers and then led the way down the tunnel which was faintly lit by the glow behind him. About fifty feet from the fire he stopped at another cut angling off from the main tun-

nel. He struck a match, but could see nothing but blackness ahead.

"I'll sashay down here a ways," he muttered. "You-all stay here so we won't lose the main tunnel."

He moved away from Sam and Ezra into the inky blackness of the side tunnel and they waited and listened to his receding footsteps.

After a long interval, Pat returned bearing another armful of dry wood, but shaking his head dubiously when they questioned him about a possible exit.

"Can't tell a thing. There are two other sidecuts leadin' off, then it makes a fork. A man'd sure get lost easy not knowin' where they led. If we had a few miles of string, one of us could go ahead an' then foller the string back. But we haven't got the string, so we'd better stick together."

Pat deposited his load of wood against the wall to be picked up on their way back to the fire, then the three men followed the main tunnel together.

Ezra carried the match-light now, his one keen eye watching narrowly, scanning the walls and the floor of the cave. He called attention to two more caches of dried wood obligingly left by the trade rats. He suggested that Sam fill his arms with the branches and take them along so that they would be sure of having it when they went back, but Sam snorted disdainfully, and they moved on.

They came upon a huge wide room which had been cut out of the very bowels of the mountain.

"H-m-m . . . it's light in here," Ezra muttered, "else a cat's done swapped a eye with me."

"It is lighter." Pat hurried forward to the center of the big room and stood looking upward hopefully. "There's the air shaft," he exclaimed. "You can see a little blob of gray sky at the top."

Ezra stared upward dejectedly. "Not more'n a mile up

to it, I'd say, an' it's fifteen or twenty feet up to the roof here. Don't look big 'nuff fer a man to get through, nohow."

"It prob'ly isn't," Pat agreed quietly. "Looks as though they struck a rich pocket here, and prob'ly followed the vein away."

A circuit of the large area showed three tunnels leading away from it, with no evidence to show where any of them went, nor any reason for them leading anywhere.

Sam stopped all at once and exclaimed, "Which one of these openings did we come out of?"

"This'n *right* here," Ezra stated positively.

Pat turned and considered the opening which Ezra pointed out. He shook his head doubtfully. "I'm all turned around now. I don't know which one we came through."

For the first time, stark terror showed on the faces of the trio, with the thought of being lost in the devious system of underground passages. Pat saw Ezra's and Sam's faces just as Ezra's match, which he was holding high, flickered out.

In the moment of thick blackness before Ezra frantically struck another match on the seat of his breeches, Pat reminded them:

"We left a fire going. We'll be able to see the glow if we look down each tunnel carefully."

When the match flared up, Ezra had regained confidence in himself. He said, "Sam had me plumb scairt the way he looked. Don't you do that to me no more," he warned. "I know which one of them passages we come out of. Come on."

Again he held the match high and long-legged it before his companions. Coming upon the first pile of firewood, Pat and Sam filled their arms. Retracing their steps to the main chamber they built a fresh fire almost directly

under the air shaft leading to the surface, in the hope that the column of smoke going up might attract attention and bring help.

When the fire was going, Ezra sat down on his boot-heel and gazed upward at the opening. "I dunno what kind o' he'p you expect to get from up there," he opined.

"Anyway, they could throw us down some grub," Sam said plaintively. "It'd shore take a whoppin' lot o' rope to reach down from the top, an' then we don't know if the hole's big 'nough for a man to climb up."

"You got the guts to gripe 'bout eats," Ezra growled, "when you had yore belly full o' bacon and biscuits this mawnin' an' Pat an' me ain't had nothin' a-tall all day."

"You'd both better stop thinkin' about food," Pat warned, "or you'll think pack rats are gnawin' at your innards."

With that cheery prospect they grew silent, and all through the long hours of the afternoon they kept their fire burning brightly, sending up a feeble smoke signal to the heights above them where the opening kept hope kindled within them.

The opening was high above the mountainous debris piled up by the slide . . . far above the point where the Indian boy had sent out his war-whoop. The men imprisoned in the cave had no way of knowing that no eyes would see the smoke in the high reaches of the mountains.

With the coming of darkness, Pat ordered the fire extinguished to conserve their precious supply of wood until morning when, as with every new day, fresh hope would come.

By lying close together and covering themselves with their lined sheepskin coats they passed the long sleepless night. When the light of day again showed dimly, high above at the tip of the airshaft, they started their fire

again. Again they waited, and though no one spoke of it, hope was on the wane.

They were dozing before the fire and the new day was not more than an hour old when there was a loud clatter on the rock floor beyond the fire.

Jerking their heads up, the three men stared at each other apprehensively. Then, Pat leaped up and lifted a round stone the size of his fist. He stared at it disbelievingly when he saw a piece of brown wrapping paper tied to the rock with a string, then looked up at the airshaft from whence it had come.

He shouted, "Halloo-oo-oo," loudly and frantically.

His voice was thrown back from the rock walls of the chamber but there was no other response, no slightest evidence from above of the agency that had thrown the rock down the shaft.

Sam and Ezra rushed forward to peer over Pat's shoulder impatiently as he tore the string off and unfolded the paper.

Pat knelt down close to the fire and examined it, rumpling his brow at the lines drawn on the paper with a heavy black pencil.

Suddenly he sucked in his breath and exclaimed excitedly, "It's a map of this mine or I'm a ring-tailed high-behind. See, it's plain as daylight. Here's a circle markin' the place where we came in . . . with a double line markin' the course of the main tunnel, I'll bet. And right here is the side drift where I turned off yesterday. See," he shouted, as though his companions were deaf, "it's even got the turns where I told you, and the forks."

Ezra's eye danced gleefully. "Look-a-there," he said, his long knobby finger tracing the heavy double lines, "is where we are now. See the big square with the circle in the middle? That fo' the airshaft, and there's two single lines leadin' 'way . . . that's the side drifts . . . and jest

one set o' double lines. That means the main tunnel keeps goin' on . . . it's the openin' over there to the left. An' here's a side tunnel leadin' off from it . . . and a right-hand turn . . . an' 'nother right turn . . . then a forks with the double line leadin' to the lef' . . . an' it ends in *another circle* . . . meanin' another way out o' this God-damn tunnel."

Ezra sank back on his heels as if exhausted. He hadn't spoken so many words at one time in his life before.

"All we gotta do is foller the map," Sam said caustically, but his black eyes were rapt in his bewhiskered face. "B'Gawd, I betcha a angel flew over an' dropped that there map. Hereinafter I ain't gonna make no more fun o' angels an' harps an' sich. No sirree, from here on out . . ."

"We're gettin' out," Pat interposed. He had been looking sharply at the map, his quick wits running ahead of Ezra's clumsy finger as he traced the course. He swung to his feet. "We'll check each opening and turn as we come to it. That way, we can't get lost. You got all this straight in your mind?" he asked, turning to Ezra.

"Ain't I jest been showin' you the way?" Ezra retorted.

"All right," Pat answered.

It was a long and nerve-racking journey through the black maze of underground passages, but with the crude map to guide them, and with matches to strike for reassurance, Pat went ahead of Sam and Ezra to lead the way with confidence.

They were finally rewarded by the cheering sight of a dim rectangle of daylight far ahead at the end of a straight passage.

Breaking into a trot as they emerged into a snow-filled, deep-walled canyon with bright sunlight blazing blindingly upon the crest of the western slope high overhead, Sam said happily:

"B'Gawd, she looks like a angel wearin' white robes."

Ezra scoffed. "Looks like the same li'l ol' canyon we wuz lopin' 'long on yestiddy t'me. Sam must o' got religion when he was shut up in that cave."

"I didn't know that sun on snow could look so good," Pat interposed happily.

"She *is* the same canyon," Ezra stated positively after sniffing the air and studying the terrain with his searching eye. "We come out mebbe a mile fu'ther on from where we went in yestiddy. We musta walked nigh on to twenty mile under that mountain."

"Then we're going to keep right on walkin' up the canyon where we started yesterday," Pat said grimly. "The outlaws were on *this side* of the snowslide when it hit. It's a cinch they're still on this side of it . . . or we can find where they went out and follow 'em from there."

Pat plunged down the hillside to the snow-blanketed canyon floor and turned determinedly up the canyon, following the same trail they had been on when the slide thundered down upon them.

Sam and Ezra followed on his heels without the slightest hesitation.

THIRTEEN

TRAMPING OVER the icy trail was difficult for men who were accustomed to straddling horses for any journey of more than a hundred yards. In the high reaches the snow was congealed and slippery on top after a night of below-zero temperature. A sleepless night and lack of substantial food since the preceding day had drained the three men of their normal vigor and energy.

Sam and Ezra plowed along behind Pat without question, accepting his leadership as they always did. Primitive and uncouth, they had no conception of the wisdom acquired by education which had been Pat's good fortune in his youth under the guidance of his Irish father.

They knew, however, that in the wild, uncharted country over which they plodded there was only one direction to go, for the way was blocked behind them.

The trio was the only sign of life visible in the snow-steeped gulch, and the crunch of their booted feet crushing through the frozen surface of the three-foot drift was the only sound breaking the virgin stillness of the mountains.

In the lead, Pat felt a tremor of uneasiness as he plodded along and the canyon walls kept closing in sharply with no sign whatever of the presence of the hooded murderers.

Yet, his sense of logic told him that the bandit hideout must lie ahead between those jagged, frowning walls, or there would have to be another trail leading out by which they had escaped after causing the snowslide.

Pat dreaded to consider what the alternative would mean to his companions if there should be another trail. And to himself, too. He felt fagged already, hungry for food and weary for sleep. It might be miles and miles through the frozen fastness of the high country before they could reach human habitation, and without horses he doubted their ability to continue on up the canyon.

They had no choice except to continue and trust they would surprise some of the outlaws at their hideout . . . with horses which they could commandeer to ride back to the Sutton cabin.

That was all Pat Stevens prayed for as he made slow progress ahead. A chance to come to grips with the hooded bandits who had taken all the pots in the game thus far.

He tried not to think about Sally and young Dock . . .

about Sally's worry for his safety and Dock's need of a father. Sally was all wool and a yard wide, he thought, and she would understand that he had been forced to go after the thieves and murderers.

Dock would not suffer much at his age, he thought facetiously, for he would be too busy boasting of his father's bold daring, just as Pat had boasted of his own father's fighting Irish spirit.

But Sally was so feminine, so clinging, and yet so brave. She would understand, but there would be little woman's happiness for her if anything happened to him. She would carry on at the Lazy Mare ranch, but her bright laughter would be gone. She would evolve into another woman fighting for the West; she would become masculine and domineering through necessity, running the ranch with the competence of a man.

He felt a strange contraction somewhere beneath the wool shirt next to his skin, but he tightened his mouth and his gray eyes stared straight ahead. A determination to come to grips with the bandits who had terrorized Dusty Canyon caused him to increase his speed by a super-human effort.

Pat was grateful for the relieving questions which came to his mind. Thinking back and pondering over the identity of the person who had saved him and Sam and Ezra from certain death in the abandoned mine by throwing the map down the airshaft, he was spared the agony of thinking of Sally and Dock.

Someone knew, quite obviously, that they had been caught by the slide. But why had he acted in such a mysterious manner . . . not identifying himself by a word written on the map or yelling down through the shaft?

There were a lot of mysterious angles to the whole situation, starting with the fantastic ease of his rescue the preceding night . . . the untied rope behind his chair . . .

the sudden departure of the guards, the saddled black waiting to be ridden away outside the cabin.

Was it the Stevens luck still holding?

Pat's half-frozen face ached as it crinkled up with laughter. He knew that the Stevens luck was only an expression, the outgrowth of his successful man-hunts when Sam and Ezra stuck to him through thick and thin. There was no luck connected with it. Their fights and man-hunts had been the natural outcome of law-abiding citizens against blackguards from which the trio had emerged victors because they were in the right.

The more he pondered over the curious train of circumstances in the present crisis, the more certain he became that some one person was responsible for the breaks he had got. Someone who was lurking in the background and acting as a guardian angel without showing his identity for some secret reason of his own.

A member of the gang, he thought, whose conscience had turned him against his murderous, thieving companions. Perhaps one who couldn't endure witnessing the cruelty the gang imposed upon honest citizens.

That was his most feasible conjecture, though it still left a lot of questions unanswered . . . questions that would have to wait until the hooded men were rounded up and could do no more harm.

As Pat rounded the first turn in a hair-pin curve, a sudden shrill shriek of agony and of terror brought him to a dead stop. He jerked his thoughts back from their far-wandering reverie and listened tensely for a repetition of the wild cry.

Another shriek came, re-echoing in the narrow gorge, the eerie cry of a human being in torment; a frightful, piercing scream that was both human and inhuman. Blood-curdling and ominous in the desolate heart of the

mountains which appeared to be uninhabited by living creatures.

"God'lmighty," Ezra yelled, stumbling forward and hurtling against Pat. "What was that?"

"A howlin' hyena, sounds like," Sam ventured, crowding up to join Pat and Sam. He made the suggestion in a pessimistic voice, as if he had little hope his companions would agree.

They didn't. Pat shook his head while Ezra grunted with disdain for Sam's opinion. "That ain't no animal cry. You know as well as me that . . ."

Another blood-curdling cry stopped his words. In the narrow confines of the gulch it was impossible to tell from which direction it came. The sound was all around them, lingering, filling the air with piteous entreaty, maniacal and inhuman in its piercing shrillness.

"A banshee, then," Sam suggested as the echoes died away.

"Sound's like a woman to me," Ezra opined. He did not look at Pat. "Come from right ahead of us," he stated flatly. "Three, four hunnerd yards up the canyon, mebbe."

Pat Stevens sprang forward without a word, leaning low at the waist and running swiftly, both hands darting to swinging holsters and sinewy fingers straining around the butts of his six-guns.

Ezra followed at a slow, long-legged trot and Sam panted behind him. "You reckon . . . it kin be Sally? Hey! Ezra! Is that what you're thinkin'?"

Ezra put on a spurt of his best speed and Sam worked his short legs desperately to keep pace, but Pat's flying feet drew him swiftly ahead of his older companions. He spun around a bend and disappeared from their sight.

He did not slacken speed when the secluded mesa of the bandits' hideout spread out in front of him. He was

goaded on by that shrill cry of distress from a woman's throat . . . from Sally's throat . . . his own wife . . . being tortured by a band of fiends from hell.

His straining eyes took in the corrals and sheds, the quartet of saddled horses hitched in front of the larger log building. A black plume of smoke drifted up from the chimney.

His heart pounded a loud tattoo against his ribs, and each cold breath sucked in through his set teeth was like a knife stabbing his tortured lungs, but he ran on.

The door of the log house swung open while Pat was still fifty yards away in a clearing and in plain sight.

A figure appeared in the doorway, and at that distance Pat heard a grunt of surprise when he was sighted.

A gun flashed in the man's hand.

Pat drew and fired from the hip as he ran.

The figure in the doorway toppled forward as other men came rushing out of the open door.

A slug through his hip slowed Pat's speed and slewed him sideways. He was twenty feet from the building when he dropped to one knee and leveled both guns.

The milling figures in the doorway dissolved back inside the log walls . . . all but two who remained outside in the snow and who would never move again.

Pat lay on his side with his back to the building. He wriggled to a position where he could reach his cartridge belts and began reloading his guns.

A rifle cracked viciously behind him and a steel-jacketed bullet plowed into the snow under his right elbow.

He glimpsed movement at the edge of the aspen grove to the rear, caught sight of Sam's swarthy face peering out while he sized up the situation.

Pat cautiously waggled his fingers to signal that he wasn't out of the fight yet, but couldn't tell whether Sam saw and understood or not.

The face drew back and Pat watched tensely. Presently he saw the bare gray limbs of the aspens shaking in two widely separated spots, and knew that his companions were skulking around to encircle the bandit hideout.

Another rifle bullet spanged into the ground, this time uncomfortably close to Pat's ear; so close that the tip of the lobe was seared.

He sternly held himself against making any revealing move to indicate to the men inside the cabin that he was still alive while he carefully tested his wounded thigh to see if it was still in working order.

It appeared to be only a flesh wound, and as he mentally debated whether to continue to play dead in the hope of decoying the killers into the open, or to risk everything on an attempted rush, his mind was made up for him by a reiteration of the agonized scream which had brought him rushing in search of the sound.

In his tense state of mind it seemed to Pat that he could distinguish the timbre of Sally's voice in the long-drawn wail, and the sound galvanized him into a surging movement.

Whipping his body over he staggered to his feet. Two bullets thudded softly into the snow-covered ground he had just quit. He darted sideways, then forward, desperately searching for a sight of the rifle barrel that was firing at him.

A puff of smoke and another whiplike report indicated the muzzle protruding from a hole in the chinked wall.

Pat stopped short and blasted away with both guns at the small target, then drove his body forward toward the doorway. A black-robed figure opened the door and filled it as Pat leaped over one of the stiff prostrate bodies outside.

The two men fired in unison, point-blank, and then

fell together in a writhing heap of wounded flesh over the threshold.

Pat's left arm was without strength, but he gripped his gun with his right and desperately fought to disentangle it from the threshing weight on top of him.

He dimly sensed movement inside the cabin, saw the butt of a rifle being driven at his head.

He wrenched aside enough to take the sickening force of the blow on his shoulder, but was half-dazed by the blow and felt himself going supine.

Closing his eyes, he lay quietly, fighting grimly to hold onto the remnants of consciousness, goaded to desperation by the thought of Sally being inside . . . so close to him and yet so completely beyond him.

Rough hands grabbed him and dragged him out from under the sodden weight of the dying bandit.

Pat's lax fingers would not grip the butt of his gun any longer. A nauseating sense of defeat racked him as his body was dragged over the rough pine boards of the floor.

Forcing one eyelid open a crack, his reeling senses refused for a moment to believe the reality of what he saw.

In the center of a large bare room the pitifully beaten body of an aged man was suspended to the rafters by an ingenious arrangement of ropes looped about his thumbs and under his scrawny neck, holding him a few inches off the floor where he writhed and twisted in an effort to keep his bare feet above a pan of glowing coals set directly beneath him.

As Pat stared in horrified disbelief, old man Sutton's strength betrayed him again and one of his feet went low enough to contact the searing coals.

The unearthly shriek that broke from the old man's lips sent the red blood surging through Pat's veins again, and he knew that was the sound he had heard outside.

Mingled with the agonized scream was the acrid odor

of burning flesh, and a loud guffaw of pleasure from the human fiend bending over Pat attested to his enjoyment of the proceedings.

A rush of feet at the front and back brought the man to an erect posture. Two six-guns blasted in unison from somewhere near by. The human fiend slumped down with blood pouring from his bullet-riddled belly.

Then, Sam and Ezra were jerking him aside, and Pat was muttering feebly:

"I'm all right. Cut that old man down. For God's sake, let me alone and tend to him. If he yells again I'll go screechin' mad."

It was only an instant before his companions had the old miner cut down from his horrible and torturing position, and Sam found a bucket of water which he sloshed over Pat's face.

Pat sat up, sputtering and spitting. The old man was the only one of the five men originally occupying the cabin who was alive, and he was so near death from the torture he had endured through the night that it was at least half an hour before they were able to bring him to a realization that he had been saved.

Finally, when he mumbled his first coherent words, they sent a chill through the trio:

"Get after . . . the boss. He's goin' to . . . to . . ."

"The boss?" Pat bent over the old man, shaking him gently. "Are you sure he isn't here? They're all dead, you know."

"Not all . . . there's . . . more. The boss . . . left . . . half a hour . . . ago. The gals . . . he's gonna . . ."

"The girls?" Pat cried desperately again. "Sally and Martha?"

"Yeh. He knows . . . they're . . . what they're plannin'. He's . . . goin' to stop . . ."

"What does he look like? Who is he? You've got to

tell me." Pat shook him gently once more and poured cold water on his face. "You've got to tell me!"

"Bibe . . . Bibe . . ." The old man's last vestige of strength deserted him. His head lolled back laxly and his shrunken eyes were tightly closed.

Pat straightened up and turned slowly to Sam and Ezra. "I've got to get to Tola in a hurry. The girls . . . have some plan and the boss knows about it. They're in danger. You bring Mr. Sutton along."

"You gonna stay here," Sam put in strongly. "All shot up. What kin you do? I'll ride to Tola."

Pat shook his head and his eyes gleamed angrily. "I've still got one good shootin' arm. That's all I need to go shunk-huntin'."

He limped out of the cabin to the hitchrack where he selected the best of the horses tethered there, and swung into the saddle with difficulty.

The hidden trail leading into the head of the blind canyon showed clearly from this end, and Pat leaned forward in the saddle and spurred the horse up the steep ascent, gritting his teeth against the pain in his arm and leg, holding himself stiffly while his right hand gripped the saddlehorn.

FOURTEEN

WHEN SALLY was returning from the Dawson cabin she heard one of the horses nickering and remembered that they were still hitched to the buggy. Martha unbolted the door and Sally stepped into a brightly lit living room

where a big fire was roaring up the chimney. Martha had already begun sewing ruffles on the blue dress.

"I'll light a lantern and unhitch the horses," Sally said, "and feed them."

Laying her sewing aside, Martha said, "I'll help you."

"No. You keep sewing." Sally went to the kitchen and lighted a lantern and left by the back door for the corral.

When she came back, she picked up the red dress, sat at the other end of the table, and reported, "Mr. Dawson is going to round up a posse tonight and they're starting early in the morning. He thinks maybe the black-hoods captured Pat and Sam and Ezra and then caused the slide so people would think they were buried under it."

Martha's eyes glowed with the dry brightness which comes after tears, and her soft young mouth drooped in sorrow. "What do you really think . . . about everything?" she asked.

"I don't think they captured Pat and Sam and Ezra *alive*," Sally replied, "but let's not talk about it. Let's *try* not to think about it. All we can do is keep working until we finish the dresses and just . . . hope for the best."

Before starting her sewing, Sally took her pistol from her handbag and laid it on the table. Martha looked at it and asked, "Do you think they . . . might come back tonight?"

"If your father is forced to tell where the gold is, I'm sure they will."

Martha shook her head slowly. "He'll never tell them."

"It's not a bad idea to keep the pistol handy," Sally returned, and bent her head over her work.

The clock on the mantel clanged off the hours as their needles flew. Just after the stroke of twelve, Sally stood up and shook the red dress out and laid it over a chair.

"While you're finishing up, I'll pack the carpetbags. Then I can help you pack. We can't take very much baggage, so maybe you'd better put all your things in mine. They're practically empty."

"I'm almost finished," Martha said. "You can just put in a couple of my dresses and some of the underclothes out of the drawer."

"We ought to get a little rest before starting," Sally said sensibly. "I know we won't sleep."

"Right now I don't feel as if I could ever sleep or eat again," Martha replied, her lips trembling.

"We never know how much we can stand until we're put to the test," Sally told her young companion stoutly.

By one o'clock the packing was finished and the new dresses, sagging under the weight of gold dust, were laid across the backs of chairs. The underskirts with the stout hoops were spread out on the big chest. Leaving the fire burning brightly with two fresh logs, they blew out the lamps, left the connecting door open, and went to bed.

Sally stopped Martha when she wanted to talk. With her pistol under her pillow, the older girl lay quietly listening to Martha's muffled sobs, and straining to hear any sound from without. Some time after the clock struck two, she could hear the girl's even breathing and knew she was asleep.

Going into the living room, Sally placed two more logs on the fire and went back to bed, intending to get up at four to start the kitchen fire going.

She was startled to awake and see the bright sun streaming through the cracks around the one window in the bedroom. She flung the covers back and sprang from bed after rousing Martha from a sound sleep.

"Get dressed in a hurry . . . just slip on anything until we've had breakfast and hitched up the team," Sally said,

swiftly getting into her own clothes and a rough jacket. She rekindled the living room fire from the coals and started one in the kitchen stove. Calling to Sally as she went out the rear, she said, "Whip up something for breakfast while I hitch the team."

Outside, the air was much warmer than yesterday and the sun was nearly an hour high in a clear blue sky. The snow had melted into a brown slush in the corral. Boggling through it, Sally found the horses crunching on hay left over from her generous feeding of last night. She led them to the buggy and deftly harnessed and hitched them.

Returning to the kitchen she found Martha furiously stirring scrambled eggs. The stove was red hot in spots and coffee was boiling.

A few minutes later they were experiencing a certain feminine pride and happiness in the new dresses, in spite of their fears and sorrows. Martha put on her hooped underskirt and Sally helped her get into the heavy dress. Turning the younger girl around, Sally said,

"I don't believe anybody would ever notice any difference. The hoops hold the skirt out just right. The red is very becoming to you, too."

"Oh . . . thank you," Martha replied. "Now let me help you. You can certainly feel the weight of the gold, even if you *can't* see it."

When they were ready to go to the buggy Sally waited patiently and anxiously while Martha walked aimlessly around the rooms with her eyes misted over and her mouth held tight. Sally's throat was constricted with pity, but she said calmly:

"You'd better leave a note . . . for your father. Tell him we'll be in Denver at the Windsor Hotel. We'll have to get these dresses to the mint as soon as we can."

Martha's face brightened. "Then . . . you think Papa *will* come back . . . here?"

"I *hope* so," Sally answered, keeping her voice free of the turbulent emotion she felt.

Martha went to the table and sat down. With a stubby pencil she wrote:

Dear Papa: Sally and I have taken the buggy and started for Pueblo. We will be in Denver at the Windsor Hotel and you must come as soon as possible if you escape, and I pray God you will. With love and hope, Martha.

Looking over her shoulder, Sally nodded approval. Martha found an ore specimen on the littered table and laid it on the note. After another brief, sorrowful look around, she followed Sally out the door, which they left unbolted, and on to the buggy.

The snow had turned to slush on the slight incline leading from the cabin to the stage road. Turning from the spruce-lined path onto the stage road, they found the snow rapidly melting under the bright sun. The air was cool and revivifying as they urged the horses into a trot, and with their bulging skirts carefully covered with a big sheepskin rug they felt a sense of security and satisfaction. There was nothing in the silent fresh morning to warn them of trouble ahead.

They were two miles on the way to Pueblo when they heard the rapid clatter of a horse coming behind them. Sally had difficulty with her hoops when she tried to turn her body enough to peer through the dingy isinglass peephole behind her.

She saw a man riding hard on a black horse with white forelegs and a long white mark between his eyes. She kept her position while her right hand fumbled in her handbag for her pistol.

Suddenly she said, "Stop the horses, Martha. That looks like Mr. Torrence. I think he's trying to catch up with us."

"Torrence?" Martha asked, amazed. She reined the horses to a dead stop and in a moment Jack Torrence was pulling his prancing blazed-face horse to a stop beside the buggy.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stevens . . . good morning, Miss Sutton," he said, and let his eyes take in Martha's flushed cheeks beneath her little red bonnet tied under her chin.

Martha lowered her dark eyes under his admiring gaze, and Mr. Torrence said:

"I've been riding hard to catch up with you. You've got to turn back. It's dangerous for you to go on."

Sally bristled. Her mouth was tight when she asked, "What sort of danger?"

Torrence did not answer at once, averting his eyes. Then he said, gruffly, "You've got to get back to the Sutton place as fast as you can."

"Is Papa? . . ." Martha began.

"Your father is alive," he cut in sharply. "You're going back right now." He moved toward the horses' heads and started to grab the reins. He was turning them about when Sally snapped:

"Let go of those reins, Mr. Torrence, or I'll shoot. I know what you're up to. You think you'll get Martha back to the cabin and make her tell where the gold is. I'm certain, now, you're one of the hooded gang."

Torrence's eyes blazed in his handsome face as he stared at the little gun which Sally held steadily leveled at his heart. He dropped the reins and rode back to her side of the buggy.

"Maybe I *am* one of the gang," he said harshly, "but we don't deal in kidnapping. I tell you there's a plot to capture you and Miss Sutton before you get to Pueblo."

"I don't believe you," Sally maintained stoutly, still

covering him with the pistol. "Now you ride on and let us get on our way."

She was leaning out of the buggy, and in a flash Torrence's hand snatched the gun from her gloved hand. At the same instant his horse reared and pranced a few yards to the rear of the vehicle.

Sally saw him whirl the animal around and gallop back toward them. She was surprised when he stopped beside her again and with a flourish handed the weapon back to her.

"I'm sorry I was so rash, Mrs. Stevens. If you insist upon going on, you'll probably need this. But I'm warning you for the last time . . . you'd better turn back."

Sally frowned thoughtfully, studying Torrence's angry face. Then she said, "Start the horses, Martha."

Torrence galloped ahead of them for a few yards, turned, and the white forelegs of the black horse raced past them, going back toward Tola.

"Well, that's that," Sally sighed deeply.

Martha had not spoken a word except her first brief response to Torrence's greeting, but had sat wide-eyed and flushed and disbelieving of all she heard. Now she said, "I don't see how a man with such a fine face could be a . . . criminal," in a wondering voice.

"You've got a lot to learn, then," Sally said curtly. "Some of the biggest crooks in the West are handsome men. That doesn't mean a thing."

Martha winced. "But . . . maybe they *have* brought Papa back home. Maybe Mr. Torrence *does* know something."

"We can't risk going back now," Sally said flatly. "We've got to get to Denver as quickly as possible."

The horses were racing around the sloppy curves under Martha's continued flips of the whip, slewing the light buggy sidewise and spattering it with mud.

Both girls regained their calm after another half-hour's ride without meeting anyone or hearing any sound except that of their own rig. As they approached a hairpin curve on the trail Martha slowed the team to pass over the dangerous turn. Here the road rose over solid rock, turned sharply, and dipped down precipitously to lead through a rocky, barren waste. Martha knew the stage trail well, knew that the rock was slippery and treacherous when wet.

She pulled on the wooden brake, and the team was moving slowly, hunched back, at the turn near the bottom.

As they rounded the sharp-angle turn, a black horse galloped from behind a huge boulder, ridden by a black-robed and hooded figure.

Sally cried, "Speed up . . . as fast as you can," swiftly opening her bag and taking out her pistol again.

The black horse dashed past them and a harsh voice ordered: "Stop, damn yuh! or I'll blast yore hawses."

Sally leveled the pistol and took aim just as the team was jerked around, cutting the buggy wheels sharply and throwing Sally against the iron rods supporting the buggy top. Her elbow struck a rod and a sharp pain shot through her arm. The pistol fell from her limp fingers, caught for an instant on her hooped skirt, then slid to the floor.

Martha sat pale and helpless as the robed figure pulled at the bridle reins, leading the team from the road and across a barren stretch of rock along the floor of the canyon, heading toward the great boulders to the north.

Sally recovered quickly from the blow on her elbow and leaned down to retrieve the pistol, but with the jostling of the rig it had slid from sight. The stiff hoops billowing her skirts out and the folds of the robe hid it securely from her frantically searching fingers.

The buggy was careening perilously over the jagged rocks, but the hooded figure did not once turn his head

to look back. He raced the three horses forward, finally cutting sharply around a projecting boulder.

A hundred yards beyond was an upsweep of spruce and gray aspens toward which they rushed. At last they drew up before a path where the robed man brought the horses to a stop.

"Git out o' thuh buggy," he commanded brutally, "er I'll drag yuh out."

Stiff with fright and anger, the girls sat staring at the figure as it came menacingly toward them with long strides. Before he reached them, Sally made another futile effort to find the pistol, but the man had grabbed for Martha and was lifting her roughly from the seat. He set her on the ground and ordered, "Foller that path up tuh thuh shack whilst I git t'other un out."

Sally had her gloves off and her fingers clawed for fighting when the tall, burly figure reached for her.

"Naw yuh don't," he snarled, his voice grating deep in his throat. He caught her hands and held them in a vise-like grip, finally forcing both of them into one of his own. He then caught her around the waist and swung her from the seat.

Martha had not moved. She stood staring at Sally as if she had grown to the rock.

"You gals shore er heavy 'uns," the man complained as he stood Sally on her feet, grabbed Martha with his free hand and forced them along the path with Sally fighting every step of the way.

In the dense woods they came upon a deserted log cabin high up the canyon walls on the north, and beside the cabin was a great yawning hole . . . an old abandoned mine.

The door of the cabin sagged open, and the man dragged them inside, gave them a rough shove and

turned to lock the door. He then took a pistol from his pocket and flourished it before them.

"Effen yuh make a move tuh git away, I'll shoot. They's coupla chears fer yuh tuh set on effen yuh want."

"Coward . . . murderer!" Sally said coldly.

Martha turned her head and stumbled backward to sink into one of the chairs. Sally stood staring at the man defiantly. Then, with a sudden quick step, she went forward, her deft fingers catching the bottom of the black mask.

As she started to give a quick jerk upward the man's iron hand clamped her fingers. When he let go, her hand fell limply to her side and she sank into a chair exhausted.

The hooded man laughed harshly, stretched his arms above his head and yawned. He grated, "I'm gonna go hide thuh buggy an' thuh hawses. 'Tain't no use fer yuh tuh try tuh git away. Thuh do'll be locked with a key. Then I'm a-comin' back an' git me some rest. Ho-hum!" he yawned again.

Sally sprang to her feet as he closed the door, but sank in the chair when she heard the key click in the lock. She could hear him leading the horses away, heard the rumble of the buggy wheels over rocks.

Her eyes scanned the walls of the little room, but there was no window. The dimness was suffocating, with only a few tiny points of light coming through a few cracks in the chinking between the logs. Sally shivered with cold. She got up and walked around the room. In one corner was a cot bed covered with blankets and sheepskins, and in another a small cookstove. On the floor beside it there was a large box filled with dry wood. On a narrow shelf above it were several cans of food and a paper-wrapped bundle which she supposed contained bacon.

She found matches on the shelf. Lifting the stove lid she put in a few sticks of wood, struck a match to it. The dry kindling caught up quickly and by the time the burly figure returned, the little room was growing warm.

He chortled in his throat and said, "They ain't nawthin' lak havin' a 'oman aroun' tuh make things warm an' cozy. Reckon I oughta light up a lamp so's I kin admire m'women fo'ks."

"Please . . . don't," Sally gasped. "It's all right . . . like this. It's still early in the morning."

"That don' make no diffunce. Me, I don't git tuh admire sech purty women much." He struck a match and put flame to a small glass lamp with a chimney, and as he bent over the light, Sally could see that his eyes were black behind the tiny slit.

He strutted over to where Martha sat cold and listless with her hands folded in her lap and her fingers showing white around the knuckles from their tight interlacing.

"Me, I lak 'em young, like this un. Got spunk, too, jest lak her ol' daddy. He shore didn't come ercrost with no info'mation 'bout whar at his gold wuz hid."

Martha came to life enough to hug her coat around her and shiver. The bright red of her dress billowed all around the chair beneath her coat.

"Hits a-gittin' warm in heah, Miss," the man said, then gruffly commanded, "Take off that coat."

"I won't," Martha flared, then shrinking away from him she said pleadingly, "I'm . . . cold," and shivered again.

The man's tone changed when he said, "Waal, open hit up jest a mite. I shorely am fond o' red."

Martha did not move, but Sally did. She was out of her chair and bending protectively over the younger girl. "If you touch her, I'll tear that mask from your face and scratch your eyes out."

He chortled again. "Naow, don' git me wrong, Miss.

I ain't gonna git mushy when they's *two* women 'roun'. I like tuh do muh co'tin' sorta private lak."

Sally stood up straight and rigid, folding her hands across her diaphragm. In moving, she flirted her skirts around, and the keen eyes of the masked bandit evidently observed the sluggish movement of the silk which should have swished and billowed.

He moved ominously toward Sally, bent down quickly and caught one of the precious ruffles between his fingers, lifted it slightly.

Sally grabbed at his hood and pulled, but he was too quick for her. His big hands shot upward and held the hood on tight.

Loosening her fingers from their grasp on the hood with difficulty, the man backed away. "Shore sumpin' powerful funny 'bout you gals. Fust yuh weigh a ton when I lif' you outta thuh buggy, an' now . . ." A gleam shone behind his eye-slits. "Whut's them frocks made outten, nohow?"

"Silk," Sally responded, but her face went white and her eyes watched him warily.

Leaning against the wall he kept his eyes upon the skirts of their dresses. In a moment he said, "So . . . that's thuh way yuh're takin' thuh ol' man's gold out, huh? Sewed up in dresses. H-m-m. Didn' never know women wuz purty an' smaht all ter oncet."

While Martha and Sally looked at him in wonder and amazement, the man bent double with laughter . . . whole-hearted, substantial laughter which seemed very strange after the ironic chortle. He flapped his hands together beneath the black robe and looked not unlike a huge buzzard flapping his wings for flight.

"An' thuh boss thinks he's smaht," the man went on when he caught his breath. "Jest wait 'til he heahs 'bout this. An' thuh boss . . . he don' 'low no messin' 'roun' wit

women cause he sez they's too dum' an allus gettin' a feller in trouble." He burst into a fresh spasm of laughter which lasted a full minute.

He stopped laughing as suddenly as he began. Leaning for a while against the wall as though too weak to move, he finally strode across the room and stood before Martha and said,

"I done fell plumb in love wit' yuh, Miss Sutton. Yo're thuh damndest purties' gal I evuh seed. I shore hope t'marry yuh one o' these days. Yuh got spunk 'n ever'thing."

Despite Sally's wrath and fright, she had, when the man was laughing, felt flattered. With both his laughter and his words he had complimented her, and for a moment he seemed almost human.

But now they both could only stare in blank amazement. The man sounded earnest making love to Martha, and Sally was outraged. Martha sat with her lips slightly parted and her face was crimson. Her dark eyes were lowered to her hands in her lap.

For a while there was utter silence in the little shack. Sally was thinking fast. It seemed to her that the gruff outlaw had softened before Martha's golden beauty.

Perhaps she could make use of it . . . goad him into allowing them to escape and go on their way!

It was a slim chance, but she decided to take it. She could explain to Martha later.

She said, "Why don't you let us go? You seem to be . . . not all bad. Maybe you don't like that gang of thieves and murderers very much. Why don't you clear your conscience by letting us escape? Then . . . maybe you'll have a chance to . . . win Martha's . . . love . . . afterwards, when everything is . . . settled."

Sally felt like a fool. She dared not look at Martha.

Utter futility settled over her when the black-hooded man snapped:

"Not a chanct, Miz Stevuns. I don' aim tuh let you nor Miss Martha git outta m'sight. I'm a-holdin' yuh right heah 'til thuh time comes t'take yuh away."

FIFTEEN

SWAYING WEAKLY in the saddle but with his gaze fixed always grimly ahead, Pat Stevens pushed the commandeered horse up the narrow winding trail at a reckless gallop. He knew Sam and Ezra would follow as swiftly as possible with Mr. Sutton, but the fact that he knew nothing whatever about what had occurred since he had been pulled from the stage yesterday afternoon gave a driving impetus to his fear that Sally was in terrible danger, that her need for him was urgent.

What had happened at the Sutton cabin when the gang had seized the old miner and carried him away to their hideout? If the girls were present at the time, Pat knew Sally would put up a fight, even against overwhelming odds. But there hadn't been any evidence of the girls' presence at the hideout. And old man Sutton's faltering words after being rescued indicated that he had some knowledge of the girls' present danger.

At least the black-hooded thugs hadn't found the hoard of gold dust, Pat comforted himself grimly. They wouldn't have continued to torture Sutton that way if he had told them his secret.

But that made the situation of the girls even more dan-

gerous. Having failed to extort the secret from Sutton it was natural that they would turn to Martha for the truth. That was probably why the leader of the gang had left the hideout early . . . after deciding that no amount of torture would open the old man's lips.

Pat's blood ran cold at the thought of Sally and Martha being in the clutches of the vicious fiends. Bending lower in the saddle he drove his spurs cruelly into the ribs of his laboring horse, for the first time in his life not caring whether he killed a horse to obtain his objective.

When they topped the crest and started down the long slope leading to the floor of Dusty Canyon, he found strength to sit erect in the saddle and snatch brief glances of the terrain each time the sides of the gully were low enough for him to see over.

He could see that the snow had melted somewhat in the lower region. It was a wholly peaceful scene, with bright sun on the trees and smoke pluming from the chimneys of cabins dotting the slope, and with no hint that violence and death stalked the isolated community. A consuming rage gripped Pat Stevens that such a thing could be.

It was always like this when Pat neared the end of a man-hunt. In the beginning he had the faculty of being coldly impersonal, remorseless and logical in his determination to track down and stamp out a certain gang, but by the time the end of each long trail was reached, all feeling of impersonality had departed and he was transformed into a raging nemesis motivated by an unreasoning ferocity into a deadly fighting machine that swept everything before him.

That point had been reached in the present campaign, and Pat knew there would be no more give and take, no more jockeying for the advantage. Four men lay dead in

the bandit hideout, making six of the gang that had been wiped out thus far.

That was probably the majority, but there was still the leader to be reckoned with. Mr. Sutton had muttered . . . "There's more . . ." and every leaping stride of Pat's horse was carrying him closer to the final clash which he savagely desired.

His tiring mount carried him at a gallop down under the stage road to the canyon bottom, and he began to see dimly remembered landmarks as he neared the Sutton cabin.

It had been years since he had last visited in Dusty Canyon, but he had a clear mental picture of its location. Presently he reined the horse to the left up the slope, feeling a vague sense of relief to see the weather-beaten log structure still standing with everything outwardly in order and undisturbed.

The horse was blowing hard and Pat slowed him to a walk approaching the cabin, then pulled him up in front of the door.

Dismounting stiffly, wincing as he put his weight on his wounded left leg, he limped to the door and knocked loudly.

Silence answered his knock.

Chill fingers of fear clutched at him when he suddenly noticed that the door was latched outside.

He quickly turned the wooden knob and pushed the door open, stood transfixed staring at the wrecked interior of the living room. He leaped forward, shouting his wife's name hoarsely, but his own voice echoed back at him from the bare walls.

A hasty circuit of the empty cabin gave the story of Sutton's capture and the unsuccessful search for gold by the bandits, and in Martha's bedroom he was heartened

by signs that the girls had been there since the search, had packed hastily and departed, for neither of the carpetbags which he and Sally had brought with them were to be found.

Returning to the living room he saw a sheet of paper lying on the center table and weighted down with an ore specimen.

Grabbing it up, he read Martha's penciled note to her father. After reading it, he dropped it back on the table and strode back to his horse, the pain of his wounds forgotten in the urgent need for action.

This was what old man Sutton had tried to tell him. Somehow, the leader of the black-hoods had learned of the girls' plan of escape . . . probably with the gold, if Pat knew Sally, and he thought he did.

That's why the leader had left the hideout early, Pat's racing thoughts assured him. To waylay the girls on their trip to Pueblo and take the treasure from them.

He swung into the saddle and reined his tired horse around by the corral, picked up the fresh tracks of the buggy wheels leading up the slight slope to the stage road.

He spurred the horse on to a fresh show of speed, leaning from the saddle to follow the wheel tracks and assure himself that they turned to the left in the main road.

Following the tracks through the slush was simple until he reached the hairpin curve, but the wheels had carried enough mud to see that they had started around the curve, but here the trail was completely lost on the wind-swept, rocky slope which had been dried by the sun.

Holding the horse back down the steep slope he went on, his hopes rising when there was only one trail which turned at an angle to the right.

Swinging off his horse he carefully examined the ground. There was a gradual slope here and the melted snow had trickled down and the rocks were dry. He

studied the giant boulder from which the black-hood had darted, studied the ground around it.

His only reward was the print of a shod hoof in a crevice filled with coarse pebbles. Someone had ridden from behind the boulder, he was certain.

Heartened, he mounted again and rode on until the rocky barren road gave way to soft slush once more, but there was no sign of buggy tracks.

Racing back to the angling curve he started all over again. Here and there atop jagged rocks were slight indications that buggy wheels might have gone over them, and he followed them hopefully a few feet to the barren waste spreading out to the north, but as he viewed the spread it was filled with a honeycomb of gulches which led away, and the buggy might have gone through any one of them.

Ezra was the only man he knew who could hope to trail the buggy across the rocks and determine into which ravine the vehicle had gone, and the quickest way to find Ezra was to ride back to the Sutton cabin.

Stiff of limb and sore of flesh, with fear gouging at his insides for the safety of the girls, he climbed once more into the saddle astride the tired animal's back. He was too weighted down with fear to notice that the horse was limping, and urged him on with spurs.

He hallooed hopefully as he neared the Sutton cabin, and was rewarded by the sight of Sam Sloan stepping out the door into the bright sunlight.

"Where's Ezra?" Pat demanded harshly. "Stuffin' his belly? Get him out here quick!"

"He ain't here. He rode to Tola to git a sawbones fo' ol' man Sutton. I reckon he'll be back purty soon. He was ridin' hell-fo'-leather when he lef'. C'mon in an' eat some chow. . . ."

Pat slid off his lathered horse with a stifled curse. "The

black-hoods have got Sally an' Martha. I've got to get Ezra on the trail." He went past the gaping swarthy man and picked up the reins of the bandit horse which Sam had ridden in from the hideout.

"Wait," Sam yelled, "I'll be ridin' with you," but Pat spurred the horse away, shouting back:

"That hunk of hide an' bones'll have to have a long rest before anybody rides him much. No time to wait."

He drove the fresher horse on at a swift gallop toward Tola, watching each side of the road carefully to see that he didn't miss Ezra on his way back. Ezra had a way of taking trails which might turn out to be short-cuts, and sometimes were.

He reached the village of Tola without meeting anyone, jumped off in front of the general store, forgetting his wounds until they clutched and held him in a bent position. Slowly and painfully he straightened and strode up to a group of men sunning themselves on the steps of a rustic building which proclaimed, in bold black-and-white, COUNTY COURTHOUSE.

"Where does the doctor live hereabouts?" he inquired.

"Doc Brown?" One of the men spat across the boardwalk and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Doc Brown's doin' a rushin' bizness," he drawled.

"'Nother feller wuz lookin' fer 'im few minutes ago."

"Did he find him?" Pat demanded. "Where did they go?"

"Cain't say whether he did or didn't. Reckon he did, if he's got that far yit, findin' the way with that one eye o' his'n. The Doc's tendin' the Widder Hawkins up the road 'bout ten mile er so."

"And the one-eyed man," Pat interrupted impatiently, "did he go on for the doctor?"

"Shore did. Said es how ol' man Sutton was right bad

off. Me an' the rest of us got to wonderin' who he was an' howcome he knowed 'bout Sutton. He's a stranger hereabouts, an' a tough hombre from his ugly looks. Wouldn' s'prise us none if he'd been coverin' it up behind a black hood. We was thinkin' mebbe we'd git us up a posse an' . . ."

Pat snorted angrily and strode inside the building.

A short, bald-headed man jumped up from a chair and blinked near-sighted eyes at Pat. "Well, I'm dinged," the man said. "If I didn't know you got killed in a snowslide yesterday I'd sure say I was lookin' at Pat Stevens from Powder Valley."

"And you'd be right, Norton. Takes more than a snowslide to finish me off." Pat's white teeth flashed in a smile as he shook hands with an old friend, the Mayor of Tola, Frank Norton. But he sobered quickly. "Is there a good tracker in these parts, Norton? A man that can follow buggy tracks over solid granite?"

The bald man shook his head dubiously. "Nary one I could name, Pat. Only fellow I ever knew could do that is your one-eyed pal, Ezra. Where is he? There's talk around that he and Sam were with you when the snowslide got you yesterday."

"He was. And now just when I need him worst he's gone up the mountain lookin' for Doctor Brown. It's my wife and Martha Sutton," he went on swiftly. "They started to Pueblo this morning and I'm afraid . . . I'm sure . . . the black-hoods intercepted them and they're in danger."

"By God, Pat, that's too much!" Norton pounded a fist into his fat palm. "We'll get a posse and go after 'em. How about me swearin' you in as sheriff? I'm Mayor here, and . . ."

Pat cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I won't

need a badge to finish up the gang if I get my hands on 'em. In fact, a badge would be in the way for what I intend to do."

"Your wife and Martha Sutton, eh?" Norton shook his head sadly. "That must've been Missus Stevens in with Martha last evenin'. I never met her, but she sure is right pretty, Pat. I saw her talkin' to Bible Jim in the post office, her and Martha, just before they went out. I recollect how that Bible Jim asked me if the stage was runnin' today after they left for home. They must've mentioned to him they were leavin'. I just happened to be in the store. . . ."

"Bible Jim?" Pat stared at the mayor of Tola through slitted eyes. He repeated the name again and again, stressing the first syllable. Was that . . . could that have been what Mr. Sutton had tried to say before he passed out?

"Who the hell is Bible Jim?" Pat asked harshly.

"He's a harmless geezer . . . sells Bibles around the minin' camps. Sort of nuts on religion. Preaches when he can get a sinner to listen. . . ."

Pat was listening intently. "Where is he now?" he burst out. "Where could I see 'im?"

"Well, now, I dunno." The mayor got up from his chair and reached for his hat. "If you want to see 'im, we'll go out and look for 'im."

He led the way toward the post office and general store, then shaded his eyes with his palm and said, "Looks like Bible Jim comin' yonder . . . ridin' in on the stage road. He must've been out sellin' Bibles early this mornin'. . . ."

Pat pushed ahead, saying, "Riding in on the stage road, eh? I've got some questions to ask Bible Jim."

SIXTEEN

PAT STEVENS reached the hitchrack in front of the post office and general store and stood on the boardwalk watching, through narrowed eyes, the approach of Bible Jim. Behind him, Frank Norton was talking to a few wall-loungers in jerky whispers.

The tall cadaverous figure of the man of God was mounted on a spirited sorrel and he rode sedately at a little jog trot. It was the first time Pat had seen the long, thin, sober face of Bible Jim, and for a moment he had serious misgivings, for the man's expression was solemn as a priest's, and his deep-set eyes burned as with a holy light.

Pat transferred his gaze to the horse who tossed his head impatiently against restraining reins, and snorted flecks of foam from his nostrils. The animal's withers and flanks were wet with sweat which no jog-trot could possibly produce on a chilly morning . . . not even under the bright sun. Pat knew the animal had been ridden hard, and recently.

Bible Jim pulled his sorrel up to the hitchrack and swung to the ground with a lithe agility surprising for one of his incredible height. His full corduroy riding breeches were sucked against his legs, outlining them for an instant and exposing their skeleton-like proportions. He wore a bloused buckskin coat which hid his thin torso, and his breeches billowed out as he walked toward the hitchrack with one end of the bridle in his hand.

He looped it over the hitchrack and Pat was conscious of a tense, strained silence behind him. The hoarse whispers had ceased. He had heard the Mayor telling the loungers his name and hinting that the meeting between Bible Jim and Pat Stevens from Powder Valley might have a deeper significance than appeared on the surface, and the deep silence of men waiting and watching for action hung in the air.

The seller of Bibles was completely at ease as he stepped forward to the boardwalk. His deep-set eyes twinkled pleasantly at Pat, who stood solidly between him and the threshold of the store. He halted to tilt his black Stetson back on his thick black hair, and Pat noticed that his high forehead was smooth and unwrinkled.

"Greetings, Brother." Bible Jim's resonant voice was like the deep-toned tolling of a church bell. "You're a stranger in our little community. Allow me to extend you the hand of fellowship in the name of the Lord and with the hope that you have come to stay in our midst."

Pat was a tall man, but he found his eyes level with Bible Jim's bony chin. He ignored the emaciated hand held down to him.

"I'm not your brother," Pat said with harsh emphasis, "unless *your* name happens to be Stevens."

"Stevens? You're not . . . Pat Stevens by any miraculous dispensation of Providence?" Bible Jim's eyes glowed as they lowered to take in Pat's two guns, his disheveled appearance and the streaks of blood which had seeped through to dry on his sleeve and pants-leg. Blood that had flowed from Pat's wounds at the hands of the hooded gang.

Pat nodded curtly. "The same. Maybe Providence looks after men who don't sell Bibles and preach the Scriptures, too."

"This is a miracle," Bible Jim rumbled in his deepest tones. "A veritable miracle. It was reported yesterday that you and two comrades perished miserably beneath an avalanche in the mountains. No longer than last evening I sought to offer words of comfort to your dear wife in her sorrow."

"Do you mean to say . . . Sally thinks I'm dead?" Pat blurted out unthinkingly, then quickly tried to cover up by saying, "I know. That's one of the things I want to talk to you about. My wife and Sutton's daughter told you they were leavin' for Pueblo this morning."

The decisive manner in which Pat spoke made it more an accusation than a question. He hesitated a moment, then said, "Your wife was making a black dress . . . preparing to bury herself in mourning. Her grief was so deep that she couldn't speak of it. She only nodded when I spoke of it."

"Did they tell you they were leaving?" Pat demanded, while a cold chill ambled slowly through his injured body.

"Why . . . yes. Miss Martha told me. I did my best to help her . . . warn her of the sinful city and its consequences. In my humble capacity as a servant of God I tried to make them realize they were children of the Almighty. . . ."

"And you're the only person they *did* tell around town," Pat said harshly. His keen gray eyes bored into Bible Jim's big deep-set dark orbs harshly, demanding. "How do you explain the fact that the leader of the black-hoods knew about them going? How do you explain the fact that they were held up and kidnaped a few miles down the road this mornin'?"

There was a concerted and audible gasp from the group of listening wall-leaners and whittlers behind Pat. They had drawn close together, seeking to grasp the significance

of the challenging words of the two-gunman from Powder Valley thrown in the face of their respected fellow townsman, their minister and sky-pilot.

A quick flush of anger darkened Bible Jim's cadaverous cheeks. A dullness came over his usually lustrous black eyes, then both were quickly dissipated. His chuckle was a bubbling outburst of real mirth.

"I do declare, Brother Stevens, it sounds as though you're trying to point out some connection between me and those devil bandits. If I were not a follower in the footsteps of Christ who spoke from the Cross and said . . ."

"Don't come at me with that sky-pilot stuff," Pat urged. "Maybe you can pull the wool over the eyes of the fellows around here, but I've got your number this time, Bible Jim. *It happens that old man Sutton is still alive an' talkin'.* He saw you at the hideout last night when he was being tortured. He told me himself this mornin'."

Bible Jim's eyes glowed like great dark coals. "Mr. Sutton is still alive? That's a miracle from Heaven. We should all be humbly grateful that our Brother has been spared. Poor old man, the agony he endured must have touched his mind if he made any such preposterous accusation against me." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and asked, "Are you sure he didn't ask you to come to me for help in the name of the Lord?"

For a moment, Pat hesitated. He had such a vague clue to go on. The old man's faltering words might have meant something entirely different from implicating Bible Jim.

But the thought of Sally and Martha kidnaped . . . undergoing torture as prisoners of one of the hooded gang in a lonely mountain prison drove him on.

"Where were you last night if you weren't out with the gang torturin' old man Sutton to make him tell where the gold was hidden?"

"My dear man," Bible Jim said in his deepest sanctimonious voice, "I was engaged last night in taking the printed Word of God into far places as directed by our Lord. I was on my knees most of the night praying for the soul of a misguided man sorely in need of spiritual aid."

"With no way of proving it, I reckon," Pat countered uncertainly. "Where have you been this morning?" he asked doggedly.

"I have just returned from an isolated hut where my labor in the Lord's vineyard took me last night," the tall, thin man told him with simple dignity. "And now, Brother, if you will stand aside I should like to enter and inquire about my mail. I never know when I will receive an urgent call for help."

Pat gritted his teeth in frustrated anger. He stepped aside painfully . . . just enough to let Bible Jim stalk austere past him, then turned a grim and strained face to Norton who nudged him and whispered in his ear:

"By God, Pat, I'm wondering if you've hit on something. Is what you said about Sutton true? Did he accuse Bible Jim?"

"I don't know . . . for sure," Pat muttered. His face was bleak with frustration, and he added, "Soon as we get a doctor to Sutton we'll know for sure. He went dead on us when we tried to find out. But I'm thinkin' about what may be happenin' to my wife and to Martha Sutton while we're waitin'."

Norton drew him farther aside and whispered hurriedly: "I'm ready to swear on a stack of Bible Jim's own Bibles I saw a light in his cabin down by the Meeting House early this morning . . . about daylight. I was up to see what'd happened to the dog when he kept whimperin' and all it was turned out to be pole-cat stink. The dog couldn't stand it, and I couldn't either, so I put him out. That was when I saw the light at Bible Jim's house. He

lives by himself, and I couldn't figure him staying up all night just to pray . . . like he says he does."

Pat jammed his right fist into his left palm, then swore at the pain in his wounded shoulder. "That cinches it," he said savagely. "Here he comes out again. I'm goin' to get the truth out of 'im if I have to wring his long scrawny neck."

He strode forward swiftly to block Bible Jim's way as he emerged from the general store. "Not so fast," Pat growled. "Cut the preacher talk and let's get down to cases. You were in Tola at daylight this mornin'. The mayor saw a light in your cabin."

Bible Jim turned a hurt and reproving gaze on Norton. "So, you, my old friend, are casting stones. Is this my reward for following the will of God and striving to bring the sinners of Tola to His fold? But, even as Christ, I cannot feel anger against you in my heart. 'God loveth whom he chasteneth,'" he quoted.

"To hell with that stuff!" Pat shouted angrily while a low murmur of resentment welled up from the crowd of rough miners who had been gathering slowly since Pat first confronted the Man of God. Men whose women folks had dragged them to the Meeting House against their will . . . men who toiled and slaved against the formidable and unyielding rocks belched up in the dark ages when God made the world and all that there was therein and hid the gold in treacherous vaults. Gold which was their constitutional right to purchase food and clothing . . . gold which evaded them instead of showing itself when they labored so hard for it.

Men who were weary of tyranny and defeat, and who longed to live a peaceful life without comforts . . . men who would revel in bare necessities, content with the stars at night and the sun by day as they roamed in the great open spaces of the West.

When their low rumblings had ceased, Pat demanded: "How'd a light get in your cabin if you weren't up late last night and come home at dawn?"

Bible Jim drew himself up to his full height of six-foot-seven-inches. His eyes flashed around the circle of suspicious faces backing Pat Stevens. In a ringing, resonant tone he declared:

"Like the yapping of coyotes at a feast of carrion your voices arise to assail me who have done no evil. A light in my cabin during my absence? Why not? Has my door ever been locked against the wayfarer seeking refuge? I have many friends in the length and breadth of the great open spaces of the West. No doubt one of those availed himself of my hospitality and now awaits my coming. Or, perhaps he has gone on his way after replenishing his body with food which I keep for the hungry. '*Feed my sheep,*' saith the Lord of Hosts."

Bible Jim started resolutely forward.

Pat, singularly impressed with his outburst of speech, stepped aside to let him go to his horse, but he spoke in an angry voice loud enough for the others to hear:

"All right, Mister Bible Jim, but I'm trailin' along to your cabin to check up on that unknown friend myself . . . an' if there ain't anyone there to explain that light you'll have to do some fast talkin'."

Bible Jim swung onto his sorrel and rode away with an air of aloof and outraged dignity, not deigning to reply to Pat's statement.

Pat set his teeth grimly and limped down the boardwalk to follow the rider in stony silence.

The crowd had grown to twenty or more by this time. Men who were bored with sitting on their spines and whittling while waiting for winter to be over so they could go back to their mining or other occupations, men who were drawn as if by a magnet toward trouble or

excitement, followed Pat. Not that they had any suspicion that Bible Jim was guilty, but they were curious to see and hear the outcome of Pat Stevens' accusations.

Down the street the strange procession moved in ominous silence, and Bible Jim did not once glance back to see whether Pat was carrying out his threat. He rode stiffly erect, with the outward appearance of a patient man whose good humor had been sorely tried.

He turned to the left at the end of the block of straggling business houses which constituted the main portion of Tola, up a steep road to a small cabin set high on the hillside and far removed from any neighbors.

There was a whitewashed picket fence around the yard, and a neat gravel path led up to the front door.

Bible Jim dismounted at the front gate and strode up the path in austere silence.

Close behind him, Pat Stevens led the small parade of roughly clad and booted miners who were awed by the turn events had taken, yet grimly resolved to see it through.

Bible Jim stopped on the small porch and fumbled with the doorknob, turning for an instant to sweep the gathering with a burning glance from his black, deep-set eyes.

Pat stopped just in front of the porch with folded arms while Bible Jim disappeared inside. Mr. Norton stopped beside him and asked uncertainly, "What are you going to do if he comes out and says someone has been here but is gone now?"

"In that case," Pat replied in a loud voice that could be heard inside the house, "I aim to have a look around inside. If he is the leader of the black-hoods I reckon there'll be evidence to prove it . . . an' if he's an innocent man I reckon he won't mind us searchin' the cabin."

An instant later the cadaverous figure of Bible Jim re-

appeared in the doorway. He carried a double-barreled shotgun with the muzzles pointed carelessly at Pat Stevens' belly and his resonant voice vibrated with righteous anger:

"The Lord saith: '*Woe to them that devise iniquity and work evil upon their neighbors*' and to them '*that decree unrighteous decrees against others*,' and in the Book we are told to be '*slow to wrath, for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*.' I say to you that I am an instrument of righteousness, and as a servant of the destroying God, I bid you beware. . . . Away, lest I discover my cup of anger running over and there be acts of violence unseemly in the eyes of God."

Pat Stevens moved forward a step, his left arm dangling helplessly, his right hand hovering above the butt of his holstered gun. "I can't quote Scripture back to you," he grated, "but I'm willin' to put my six-gun up against your shotgun. *I'm comin' in*, Bible Jim."

"Don't force me to commit an ungodly act," Bible Jim panted, "and I beseech you not to come farther."

Pat swung about and roared at the crowd of gaping men. "Move aside, you fools. If he triggers that scatter-gun he'll plug a dozen of you. All I ask you . . . if he gets me . . . make him take you to where he's got my wife and Martha Sutton hid."

"He ain' gonna git you, Pat," a cool voice called out unexpectedly from the rear of the throng. "I've had 'im kivered ever sinct he stepped out on the porch an' I'll blast 'is guts out if his finger gets tight on the trigger."

It was Ezra's ominous drawl, and Pat had never heard anything that sounded so good in his life. He craned his neck to see the one-eyed man seated carelessly astride a horse with a rifle trained from his shoulder on the tall thin form in the doorway. Pat grinned happily and nodded:

"Time you was puttin' your oar in, Ezra." He swung around to face Bible Jim and his voice was cold with contempt:

"It'll take more'n Scripture-quotin' and a shotgun to stop us now. I'm comin' . . ."

Bible Jim jerked the shotgun to his shoulder but the crack of Ezra's rifle sounded with his first movement. He staggered back with an oath that sounded queer on the lips which had previously been quoting from the Holy Book.

Pat leaped forward like a panther and wrested the shotgun from the man's long, thin, lax hands while the crowd surged forward with a deep-throated roar of anger.

"Quick," Pat panted. "Tell me what you did with the girls. Mebbe I can hold off the mob and keep your neck from stretchin' if you come clean."

Bible Jim had one hand clapped weakly against his shoulder where Ezra's bullet had drilled him. His face was waxen, drained of all color.

"I don't know anything about them. I swear I don't," Tola's sky-pilot answered earnestly.

"All right." Pat's lips curled back from his teeth in a wolfish smile. "Maybe a lynch rope will stir up your memory."

He swung about and held up his hand for silence, then shouted:

"I've always stood for law an' order, men, but this is one skunk I reckon'd be better off at the end of a rope. Get one an' I'll show you how it's done by pullin' him up myself."

SEVENTEEN

"Good God, Stevens, you mustn't talk that way," Mayor Norton panted, grabbing Pat's arm and pulling him back. "These men look to you for leadership . . . even if you haven't been sworn in as sheriff. Tola hasn't had a lynching for more than ten years. Why, we don't even know that Bible Jim is guilty of anything. Not for sure." With a worried frown and casting his protruding eyes over the intense crowd around him, he added, "We haven't found a man who was willing an' fitten at the same time to be sworn in as sheriff since Ross was murdered."

"This man came out with a shotgun," Pat pointed out. "An innocent man doesn't try to shoot his way out of trouble. Your wife ain't been carried off, Norton. Maybe that makes a difference in how we feel."

Pat's voice was harsh, with an unnatural note of savage ferocity that vibrated through the throng of men, appealing to their blood-lust, welding them into a mob eager for vengeance. His face was impassive, stamped with the stony calm of an executioner ready to perform his duty.

"Yep." Ezra patted a coiled lariat hanging from his saddle-horn, spurred his horse through the gate and to Pat's side. His one eye was bleakly fixed on the cringing form of Bible Jim as he loosened the coiled rope, expertly flipped out a small noose. "Reckon we'll hafta hang 'im up to Jacob's ladder to git 'is feet offen th' ground."

"I can't believe you mean to go through with it," Mayor

Norton pleaded again. "Your name stands for law and order in the West, Stevens. Think what a blot it'll be on our community."

"Are *you* standin' up for this skunk in man's clothin'?" Pat demanded angrily. "He deserves hangin' an' he's goin' to be strung up."

"Perhaps he does, Pat. If you can prove his guilt I won't interfere. But he should have a trial. Let the law deal with 'im. But you've got to act quick. You can't stop a thing like this once the mob is aroused. Look at 'em . . . millin' around with fire in their eyes. They'll be wanting to burn him at the stake next."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea after the way his gang've tortured some of the miners aroun' here." Pat swung around to grimly survey the crowd which was pressing forward about the porch. He saw loathing and hatred in every eye fixed upon Bible Jim. There was no loud demonstration. The miners were quiet, inarticulate men, but the low, ominous murmur from their packed ranks was more impressive than hysterical shouting would have been from another mob.

Over their heads Pat encountered the single eye of Ezra, who sat in the saddle lazily twirling his loop, ready to cast it over Bible Jim's head at a signal from Pat.

Ezra shook his head and drawled loudly, "Don't let 'em talk you out o' lynchin' the damn coyote, Pat. He'll 'fess up quick 'nough when we pull the rope tight 'roun' his goozle."

For a moment Pat hesitated, then he ordered thickly, "Slide down an' bring your rope here, Ezra. We'll take a look around inside the cabin for some proof, an' by God if we find it, nothin' will stop me . . . nothin' but him tellin' where my wife's hid," he added in a harsh voice. He turned on Bible Jim ferociously. "Tell me that and I'll see you get jailed instead of lynched."

The tall thin man was slumped back against the wall having difficulty holding himself erect. His face was bloodless, pinched with terror. "I told you I didn't know. I swear I don't," he reiterated. "I beseech you not to desecrate my humble dwelling that has been canonized through constant prayer. Yea, verily I say unto you, *'The Lord is my Shepherd . . . I shall fear no evil. . . .'*"

"Shut up that prattlin'," Pat snarled. He grabbed the rope from Ezra's hand and dropped the loop over Bible Jim's shoulders, tightened it and jerked him forward. "Come in with us, Norton," he directed. "And you stay in the door an' keep the others out, Ezra. We'll have a trial here an' now."

Pat strode inside the small cabin and Bible Jim shambling along behind him, with the mayor of Tola bringing up the rear.

The tiny living room was immaculate and cheerful, with Indian rugs on the floor and religious prints adorning the walls. A long shelf extending out on either side of the mantel was neatly stocked with Indian relics from every tribe of the West.

Pat stood in the center of the room, staring around moodily, while Bible Jim repeated the Twenty-Third Psalm in a whimpering chant behind him.

Gritting his teeth, Pat strode into the small neat kitchen, and then into the single bedroom. Nowhere was there any sign of disturbance, no evidence that a mysterious visitor had spent the night and made the light which Frank Norton had seen early that morning.

Returning to the living room, Pat addressed Bible Jim sternly: "This proves you're lyin'. No one else was here last night. Nobody slept on the bed. This is your last chance to tell me where to find Sally and Miss Sutton without gettin' your neck stretched . . . which I swear I'll 'tend to if you don't start talkin' quick."

"I can't tell you anything," Bible Jim moaned. "I don't know what you're talking about. Am I to be hung because a chance visitor to my abode cleaned up all traces of his visitation before he departed?"

"Bible Jim's right," Norton put in. "You haven't *proved* anything, Pat. Don't be too hasty. Most fellows clean up their mess when they visit a cabin."

Pat glared at him balefully and Norton subsided to silence.

"Damned if it don't sound to me like maybe you're in cahoots with Bible Jim, Frank," Pat commented in a sour tone.

"Not at all. I merely want to see justice done. This isn't like you . . . to take the lead in lynching a man who may be innocent. I've never heard of you acting this way before."

"You've never seen me before when my wife was in the hands of some murderin' bastards," Pat snapped. He hesitated, then strode to the door of a room he hadn't inspected, jerked it open, growling, "What's in here?"

"Nothing," Bible Jim whined. "Nothing at all. Merely a small storeroom where I keep my extra supply of Bibles handy so I will never be without a copy when the need arises."

"I'll say you won't ever be without a copy," Pat agreed, surveying the tier of heavy wooden cases lining the wall of the small room. "Never saw so damn many Bibles in my whole life before. There's enough here for all of Colorado."

Pat stepped forward and stared down at an open packing case neatly filled with layer upon layer of Bibles, picked one up and ruffled through the pages, then slammed it down disgustedly.

"All the other cases full of Bibles, too?" he demanded

over his shoulder. "You sure that's not where you cache the gold you been stealin' from the miners?"

"I beg you to open the boxes and satisfy yourself," said Bible Jim with simple dignity. "Perhaps when you realize the great and noble work I am doing in the service of the Lord you will rid your mind of the evil thoughts that are like maggots, and will fall upon your knees to beg forgiveness from Him who said, '*Come to me all ye who are . . .*'"

"That's exactly what I aim to do," Pat interrupted. He reached up and got hold of a packing case in the top tier and dragged it forward.

The enormous weight of it toppled it to the floor with a crash, splintering the boards along one side. A number of Bibles tumbled out on the floor.

"My God, I didn't know printed books were so heavy," Pat muttered, half ashamed of his action which had resulted in spilling the volumes. He stooped and awkwardly started to gather them up, frowning suddenly and rising to heft one in each hand.

"Heavy as lead," he muttered. "Or . . . *as gold . . .* by God!" He dropped one of the books and turned the other over and over in his hand, trying to ruffle out the leaves.

It didn't fly open as a book should, and Pat suddenly realized that what he held in his hand was not a Bible at all, but a small wooden box cleverly covered with leather and inscribed HOLY BIBLE.

He searched for a way to open it, found a concealed catch that let the cover swing back on small brass hinges . . . and stared down at a box packed solidly with gold dust.

Frantically he examined others and his blood boiled when he saw a box lying face up. On a paper pasted under

the words HOLY BIBLE there was an ink-printed inscription which read:

From the hoard of Sarah M. Holland.

Beneath this was a line of Scripture: "*Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.*"

Pat's consternation outstripped his wrath. Not only had the fiend in sheep's clothing murdered and robbed, but he had actually kept accounts. He had salved his conscience by the Scriptures.

Quickly turning over other volumes he came upon other names and other scriptures.

Whirling about, Pat strode into the living room with a portion of his find, his face livid with wrath.

"There you are, Norton," he snarled. "Did you happen to know a Mrs. Sarah Holland?" He handed the false Bible to the mayor.

"Of course." Norton's face was ashen. "Mrs. Holland . . . was murdered . . . about three months ago. Lived in a cabin up near the ledge."

"There are other boxes and some more names in that room. The loot that the black-hoods have been stealing for months. That's how he planned to get the stuff out to Pueblo and to the Denver mint. Inside of Bibles! The psalm-singin' hypocrite! But he wasn't satisfied with that. He had to grab my wife and Sutton's daughter after he'd tortured the old man and he wouldn't tell where his gold was. He'll swing for it as sure as my name's Pat Stevens."

He swung savagely on the unmasked leader of the hooded gang. "You got this one chance. Start talkin' . . . or else."

"I admit everything. That is . . . I admit stealing the gold . . . and leading the black-hoods. But we've never

preyed on women. I never allowed the men to go that far. I did plan to stop your wife and the Sutton girl this morning, but only to search them for gold. I was waiting on the road but they didn't come along. They must have become frightened and turned off . . . or took some other road. . . ." His words tumbled out in a frightened stream as the miserable wretch sought to convince Pat that he was not responsible for the plight of his wife. But Pat would have none of his protestations.

"There isn't any other road to Pueblo," he thundered. "An' they didn't turn off of their own accord. I saw tracks where a horse had stopped 'em. Tracks that'll fit your sorrel, I reckon."

He stalked to the door and jerked it open, shouted loudly:

"Come in an get 'im. He's confessed an' we've found the gold. There's a rafter here that's just about the right height to lift 'im to meet them angels he's always shoutin' about."

Pat drew off to one side grimly as the mob poured through the narrow doorway and quickly surrounded the hapless seller of Bibles.

Ezra squeezed through and pushed his way to Pat's side, his single eye gleaming brightly.

"You gonna let 'em string 'im up, Pat? After all you done said 'bout the law takin' its due course?"

"Why not?" Pat's gray eyes were murky with anger. "He won't tell what's become of Sally. Let 'im swing. Maybe he'll talk when the rope gets tight."

Mr. Norton sidled up to Pat and asked, "What about the rest of the gang, Pat? I wish you'd let us swear you in as sheriff and go after the others."

"That won't be necessary," Pat told him. "We've already fixed six others so they won't do any more stealin' and murderin'."

The mayor's protruding eyes bulged. "That so?" he asked in amazement. "That makes seven, including Bible Jim. We thought there were eight of 'em."

Pat's eyes narrowed on the short, stocky mayor. "Then there's another one at large?" A deep frown formed between his brows.

In the meantime eager hands were adjusting the loop about Bible Jim's long scrawny neck, throwing the other end over one of the rafters near the peaked rough ceiling of the cabin.

One of the miners jerked his belt off and roughly trussed Bible Jim's arms tight to his sides, then stepped aside while three men swung their weight on the other end of the rope.

The incredibly long lean body was jerked upward with ease and his frame dangled beneath the rafter, kicking spasmodically and twisting while his deep-set eyes began to bulge and his mouth gaped open. A swelling purple tongue licked out over his bloodless lips.

"Wisht I had me a pan o' hot coals to hold to his feet," Ezra growled.

"Leave the devil do *thet* tuh 'im," an angry voice replied.

Pat Stevens sprang forward suddenly and to the complete surprise of every one present shouted, "That'll be enough. Let the rope go! Let 'im down for a minute or he'll be choked so he can't talk. I reckon he'll tell what he did with the girls now."

The men holding the end of the rope reluctantly let go, and Bible Jim's body slithered to the floor in a grotesque, writhing heap.

Pat pushed close to him and dropped to his knees beside the figure and loosened the noose around his neck so that the half-choked leader of the black-hoods could get his breath.

"Now you know how it feels to get close to heaven. Tell me where Sally is an' I promise I'll see you locked up safe in jail for trial. But if you don't talk fast you'll never see the sun set again."

Bible Jim was gurgling and retching. "I can't," he choked out. "I tell you I can't. I swear I don't know. I waited for them down the road and they didn't come. I'd tell you if I knew. Why should I refuse . . . now?"

Pat rocked back on his heels, his face set in hard lines. "I reckon he's tellin' the truth this time. No man that close to hell would waste his last breath lyin'. The party's over, boys. I was tryin' to scare him into tellin' what I wanted to know. None of us want the lynchin' of this worthless skunk on our conscience. The law'll hang 'im just as dead as we could."

"No!" one of the miners shouted. "We want 'im now. We'll take care of him. To hell with the law!"

The cry was taken up by the mob, a blood-curdling howl of atavistic wrath from men determined to mete out frontier justice in the immemorial way.

"Sorry, boys." Pat came to his feet lithely and both hands sprouted six-guns. "It was a dirty trick to play on all of you, gettin' your hopes up for a hangin', but I had to be *sure* he was tellin' the truth . . . an' I had to make him believe he was goin' to hang if he didn't tell. But you better back out that door slow an' let me and Mayor Norton lock 'im up. Lynchin's too good for 'im, anyways. Leave him rot in jail while he meditates on his sins. Back on out! I ain't foolin' now. I got no time to waste. Ezra an' me have got to trail my wife and Martha Sutton."

He motioned with his guns, moved forward slowly, and the front rank of the mob backed away from him, pressing the others back. The men came to a semblance of sanity and finally found their good humor. They filed out of the cabin room quietly.

"Good Lord," Norton exclaimed. "This is certainly a relief, Pat. I thought you'd lost your mind for a while."

"I did," Pat snapped. "Come on and help pick 'im up and lug 'im over to the jail. You better deputize some of the older men," he went on to Norton. "Me an' Ezra can't stay around here to guard your jail. We got a job of work to do."

Within a few minutes they were mounted on fresh horses and galloping away from Tola on the stage road toward Pueblo to pick up the faint trail of the buggy wheels and the horse tracks of the mysterious gunman who had intercepted the girls before they reached the trap laid for them by Bible Jim.

EIGHTEEN

"How you makin' it with them bullet holes in you?" Ezra asked anxiously as they neared the spot where Pat thought he had seen the signs of the girls being intercepted. He noticed that Pat was swaying in the saddle and his face was white, with beads of perspiration standing out on it despite the chilly wind they rode against.

"I'm all right," Pat grunted back. "It's not much farther an' I can make it. Worst thing," he went on jerkily, "is all this ridin' with my belly empty. I haven't swallowed a bite since that sowbelly an' biscuits night before last."

"You oughta take time out to eat, you dang fool. I stayed behin' at the Widder Hawkins' fer a snack after I sent the Doc ridin' to Sutton's. She fixed me a mess o' venison steak with cream gravy an' . . ."

"Shut up," Pat snapped. "We're 'most there an' it ain't

goin' to help my guanin' any if my belly is tyin' itself in knots with me thinkin' about venison and cream gravy."

When they reached the beginning of the hairpin curve, Pat pointed out the muddy wheel tracks which led a short distance up the rocky incline where they were shortly lost. Topping the highest point and going down the steep slope Pat said, "Down there by that big boulder is where I saw the hoof-print and just about where the road angles looks like buggy tracks where wheels turned sharp."

When they reached the spot Ezra swung from his horse and examined the spot by the boulder. After a few minutes he straightened up and nodded. "That's the way she reads. A feller waited here on a spirited haws an' had a time of it keepin' 'im still . . . er else his haws had fleas on 'im. See where the stone is nicked up?"

Pat nodded and they went back to the trail, where Ezra got down on his hands and knees and crawled around. Suddenly he leaped up and said, "Headed up into that side o' the canyon, I reckon. Lead m'haws 'long while I go on foot so's not to lose the trail."

He started up the slope at a dogtrot, bending forward and searching the ground. Pat caught up the reins of Ezra's horse and followed slowly, tense and stiff in the saddle, refusing to let his mind consider what he might find at the end of the trail Ezra was following.

As unerring as a trained bloodhound on a hot scent, Ezra scrambled up the slope toward the twisting gulch. Stopping at a point far up the wall, he examined several trails leading away. When Pat caught up with him, Ezra reached for his horse's reins, saying:

"Might's well both ride from here on. The rider an' buggy turned up here. Ain't no signs of the gals gettin' out 'long the way. Reckon they can't be far."

Without a word Pat relinquished the reins, then struck spurs to the flanks of his mount. Once in the narrow

gulch there was no path leading off, and as Pat dashed away, Ezra shouted:

"Hey! Wait fer me, you dang lunkhead," frantically clambering on his horse.

But Pat Stevens was in no mood to wait for any one. It had been two or three hours since his wife and Martha Sutton had been forced up this small gully by an unknown fiend who had waylaid them, and only God knew what had happened to them during that time.

He bent low in the saddle to avoid the whipping branches of naked aspens, making no attempt to hide his approach, totally unmindful of the thud of his horse's hooves which would apprise the girls' captor of his coming long before he could reach them.

A cold killing rage had possession of Pat Stevens, and he would have stormed the gates of hell with no more hesitation had he thought Sally was imprisoned there. He had his guns and a few remnants of his splendid strength left, and he was eager to pit them against whatever odds awaited him up the gulch. Ezra was behind him to finish up whatever he started, and Pat drove his horse over the path with the same reckless disregard of his personal safety that had made his exploits legend in the West.

He saw the path through the spruce long before he reached it, and spurred his horse faster.

Pulling himself erect in the saddle, a strange madness surged through him to drive away the physical faintness that had recently assailed him. His wounds and the loss of blood were as nothing, now, and the pangs of hunger were forgotten in the rush of hungry emotion that overcame him.

He came upon the cabin in a serene and isolated spot. Smoke curled lazily from the crooked pipe above the

roof. The silence was broken only by the clatter of his own horse's hooves and those of Ezra's mount swiftly striking rock behind him.

A strange new fear welled up in him when he saw that the cabin door was closed. No challenging crack of a rifle sounded and no leaden slugs sang their deadly song about him through the still, serene forest.

The very silence and seeming desertion of the cabin was evil and frightening, and Pat was cursing hoarsely in his throat when he jerked his horse up in front of the closed door and leaped to the ground.

He twisted the knob to find the door locked. He heard Sally's voice crying out to him inside . . . heard a joyous scream from Martha.

Painfully, he lurched against the solid door, but it did not give. Then Ezra's long legs were running toward him. With a powerful lunge of his body, which had not slowed from running, Ezra broke a plank of the door. Lunging again, another splintering crash made an entry way for the two men.

Long strong arms enfolded Pat in a bear hug as he went through the opening and he caught one brief glance of Sally's face across the cabin, which was still lighted by the small lamp. Then the robed figure and Pat went to the floor together.

Ezra had the butt of his gun raised, ready to strike the black-hood as soon as he came on top, but Sally was standing at a strategic point with an iron frypan in her hand. Leaning low, she cracked it against the hooded man's head, and he stopped struggling.

As Pat slowly and painfully raised his injured body, Ezra reached a long arm down and pulled the black hood from the still man's head. He was lying with his face down.

Sally ran back to the shelf and brought a tin dipper of water which she dashed over him.

Slowly the figure rolled over.

Jack Torrence sat up with a silly smile on his face, ruefully rubbing his head where the frypan had landed.

Martha and Sally stared at him in amazed silence when he lifted his hand and begged:

"Don't let your husband shoot me, Mrs. Stevens. Not until I've had a chance to explain everything."

Sally looked straight at Pat for the first time and saw his pain-ridden face. She ran to him and threw her arms around him, crying, "Pat . . . what have they done to you."

"Pat don't need to do no shootin' aroun' heah," Ezra said grimly, raising his gun and leveling it at Torrence's heart.

Martha flew at him, caught his arm and dragged it down. "Don't . . . shoot . . . please. He hasn't harmed us a bit."

Pat's gray eyes were staring at Torrence as Sally gently pushed him backward toward a chair. Slumping into it, Pat grated: "You'd better talk and talk fast. It'll probably be the last talkin' you'll ever do."

NINETEEN

"I WAS AWAY at college when my grandmother, Mrs. Sarah Holland, was murdered and robbed here in Dusty Canyon. We could never persuade her to leave her cabin after my grandfather died, except to visit us occasionally in Denver. But I determined to come here and avenge her death as soon as the holidays rolled around."

Martha Sutton found a chair, drew it a little closer to the handsome young man who still sat cross-legged on the floor, and sat down. Ezra stood menacingly over Torrence, and Sally was standing back of Pat's chair with her arms around him, holding his head against her.

"I had heard a great deal about you, Pat Stevens. I came up here to Dusty Canyon before Christmas. My grandmother never let me visit her after I was about six years old, and no one knew me. I managed to get in with the hooded gang, but they never trusted me completely. I think I overdid their method of murdering the English language, and a few times I forgot to use their lingo."

Ezra relaxed slightly. Pat closed his eyes for a moment and the room spun around him. He opened them quickly. The fright had gone from Sally's and Martha's faces, and Martha bent forward a little, sat with her eyes shining and her lips parted as Torrence continued:

"It was risky leaving here and going to Powder Valley to take that note to you, but from what I'd heard of you, Mr. Stevens, I thought a threat like that would be a challenge you couldn't resist. The black-hoods were naturally suspicious of me, and after I returned, my only chance to check up on them was to come up on them with my hood and robe on and try to imitate some of the gang when I spoke."

Pat lifted his head from Sally's diaphragm and stared at Torrence. "So . . ." he began, but Torrence interrupted:

"I was afraid you wouldn't come, so I waited in the depot to make sure. When you said you had no intention of going after the gang, I had to do something to force you. When the train pulled into Pueblo I found one of Bible Jim's gang in town drunk, and persuaded him to help me with the hold-up. I knew you weren't armed." He paused and looked at the two six-guns buckled around

Pat's waist. He grinned widely. "At least I didn't *think* you were."

"So it was *you* who untied the rope before you left the cabin that night . . . and you left the horse saddled and the gun in the saddlebag?"

Torrence nodded. "I didn't know until last night that Bible Jim was the leader of the gang, though I had tried awfully hard to find out. That was my grandmother's cabin I took you to, and I didn't dare go back there again, so I found this deserted shack and equipped it for my own personal hideout.

Pat let out a sudden whoop of laughter. He raised his head from his wife's diaphragm and slapped his knees with his palms, then winced with pain and settled back again.

With her hand on her husband's forehead, Sally said falteringly, "I hope you'll forgive me . . . for the way I tried . . . to shoot you this morning, Mr. Torrence. I should . . . have listened to you."

"Maybe I wasn't shivering in my boots!" Torrence returned. "You certainly looked grim, Mrs. Stevens. But I hope you'll forgive *me* if you try to shoot that pistol again and find it unloaded. The cartridges are scattered along the road. I emptied it when I grabbed it from you and spurred my horse away for a minute. But I'm surprised that our sleuth, here," he said, nodding toward Ezra, "didn't find them when he was trailing you."

Ezra's one eye danced and the red bristles of a two-days' growth of beard around his wide mouth crinkled with a shame-faced grin. "I'd orta of seen 'em," he acknowledged, "but Pat was goin' so fast I couldn't look and keep up with 'im."

"I told Sally," Martha put in brightly, "we ought to do what you said. . . ."

"I'm glad you didn't . . . now," Torrence said, turning his fine black eyes toward her. "This is the most fun and excitement I've had in all my life . . . being here with you . . . and Mrs. Stevens." A red flush spread over his face and he looked away from her.

"Go on," Pat said impatiently. "I'm interested to hear the rest of your story."

"Well, there's not much more to tell. I'm positive I'll never grow any more after the scare I got when I deliberately dropped behind the rest of the hooded gang to show you the way to the hideout yesterday. Believe me, I did some hustling after I found out you'd been trapped in that old mine after the gang shot their guns and rifles into the snow above and caused the landslide. I had a hard time getting that map I threw down the shaft to you."

"Waal I'll be gol-darned," Ezra muttered. "I'll bet Sam'd give 'is shootin' right arm to be heah listenin' to this."

"Oh. . . ." Martha cried. "My father . . . is he all right!"

"Reckon so. I sent the Doc hi-tailin' it to take ker o' him."

"Mr. Sutton is going to be all right, Martha," Pat said in a positive tone. "We'll go back and get 'im and get both of you to Denver. And the gold, too. An' that reminds me, Torrence, your grandma's gold is all safe at Bible Jim's cabin, an' Bible Jim's in jail."

"What about the others?" Torrence asked quickly.

"All dead as do'nails," Ezra drawled.

"Then . . . you were trying to find that map when we saw you in Tola," Sally said apologetically.

"I was desperate," Torrence admitted. "I only wish I'd known *then* that they were going after . . . Mr. Sutton. I might have saved him from . . ."

"He's all right," Pat interrupted hastily. "Say, is there anything in this damn place to eat?" He got up agilely and started toward the stove.

"Now you just sit down, Pat Stevens," Sally said with authority. "There's plenty to eat, and I'll fix it right away."

"The best luck I had," Torrence insisted, "was learning of the plan to kidnap Miss Sutton and force her to tell where her father's gold was hidden after he refused to tell."

"I would never have suspected that the black-hood was you," Martha said thoughtfully. "You were riding a black horse with white forelegs and a blazed face when you stopped us the first time."

Torrence laughed. The same hearty laugh as when he discovered the gold in Sally's skirt. "I just washed the whitewash off of him. It was the same horse. There was lime in the whitewash, and it must've irritated his hide. I had a time holding him still while I was waiting at that boulder after cutting across the canyon floor to head you off."

"H-m-m," Ezra grunted. "I thought mebbe yo' haws had fleas when I seen the way he was so fidgety. I tol' Pat a powerful impatient haws'd been pawin' the rocks aroun' there."

"You haven't heard the best part of this whole thing, Mr. Stevens. I think your wife should tell it. Her scheme for getting a part of the Sutton gold out is one of the best tricks yet."

Sally's face was flushed when her eyes met Pat's questioning and puzzled gaze.

"Oh . . . it's nothing. It didn't turn out to be so smart."

Torrence felt the lump on the back of his head and pulled himself to his feet. "I've got a quarter of venison

hanging back in the woods with some good steaks on it. There's canned milk on the shelf to make cream gravy. You can tell *your* husband *your* part of the story while I go bring in the venison."

Torrence stood looking down into Martha's shining eyes, and Pat said, "Hurry up . . . I'm hungry as a wolf."

"Would you go along with me, Miss Sutton?" Torrence asked. "Mrs. Stevens is certainly handy with a frying pan, and I still feel kind of dizzy from that lump on my head. I might need some help."

Martha laughed brightly. "I'll take along a dipper of water to pour on you if you faint," she said.

Pat looked pointedly at the black robe Torrence still wore. "Maybe," he jested, "you'd be safer in the woods around here if you took off that black thing."

Torrence ripped it off and flung it aside. Martha stood at the splintered door, smiling and waiting. Taking the key from his pocket he unlocked the remaining portion of the door and opened it wide, then turned to Pat with an explanatory apology for the locked door:

"You can see what I was up against, Mr. Stevens. I had to lock them in. If Bible Jim had intercepted them up the road . . ."

"Go get that venison," Pat interrupted with a broad grin spreading his mouth. He caught Martha's eye and winked as she turned to go with Torrence.

The bright sunlight of midday filtered through the spruce grove as they walked along the path leading up an incline back of the cabin. Torrence stopped suddenly and turned to face the girl.

"I hope you'll forgive me for being so brazen when I made crude love to you in the cabin. But . . . I meant every word of it, Martha. I knew you were the girl for me when I met you in town yesterday."

Martha lowered her eyes for an instant. Her cheeks were flaming. "I hope you'll come to see us . . . when we move to Denver," she said. Then, looking up the slope, she saw the quarter of venison hanging high on a tree limb. She lifted her heavy skirt clear of the ground and started toward it, saying gaily:

"We'd better get those steaks cut for Pat's supper or he'll be out here to get them himself."

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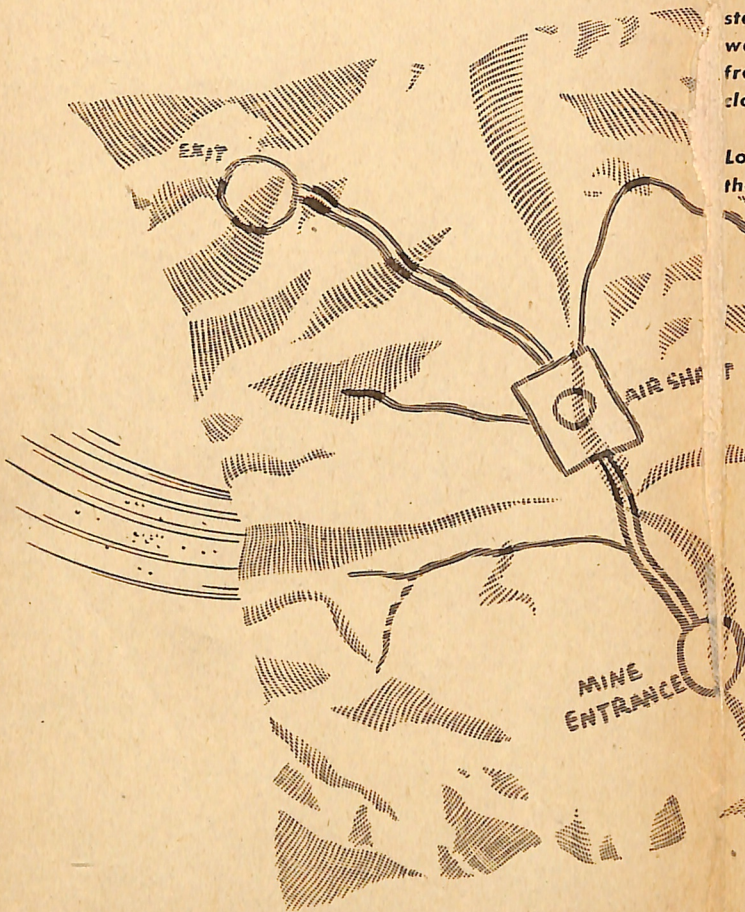
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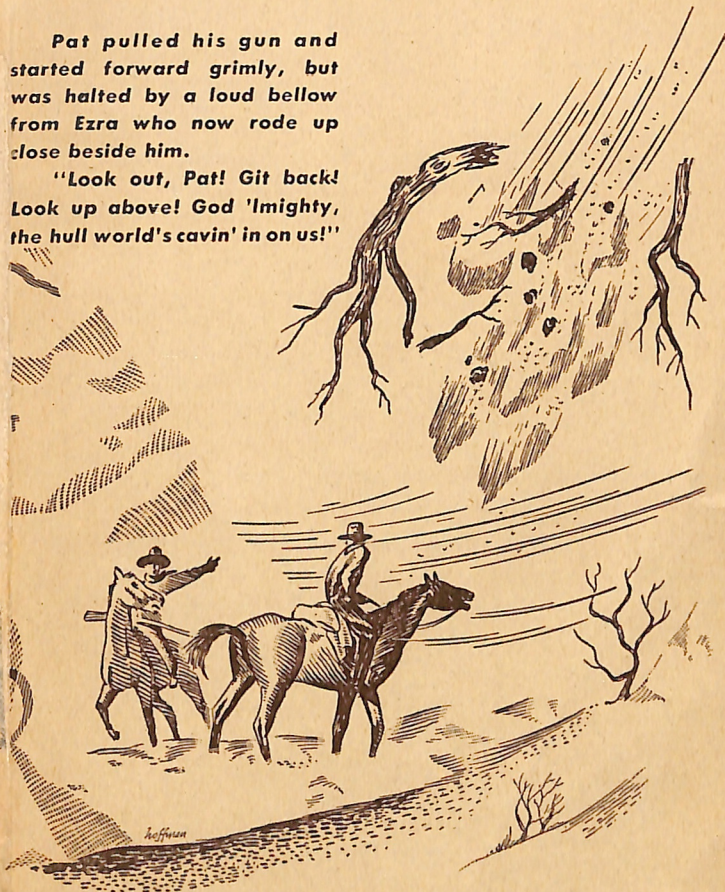
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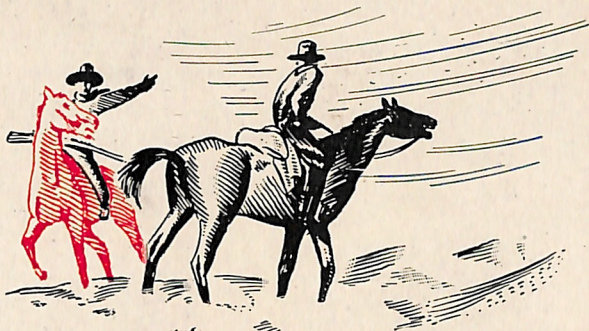
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Pat pulled his gun and started forward grimly, but was halted by a loud bellow from Ezra who now rode up close beside him.

"Look out, Pat! Git back! Look up above! God 'Imighty, the hull world's cavin' in on us!"





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