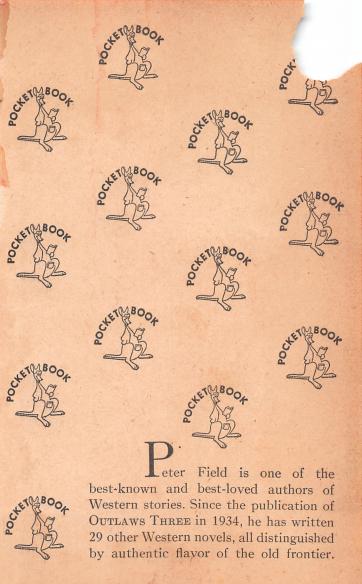
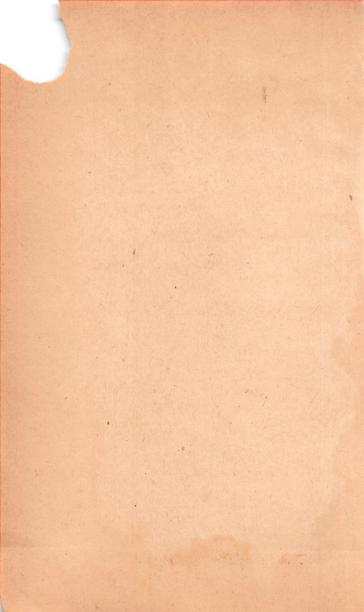


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Outlaws Three

By Peter Field



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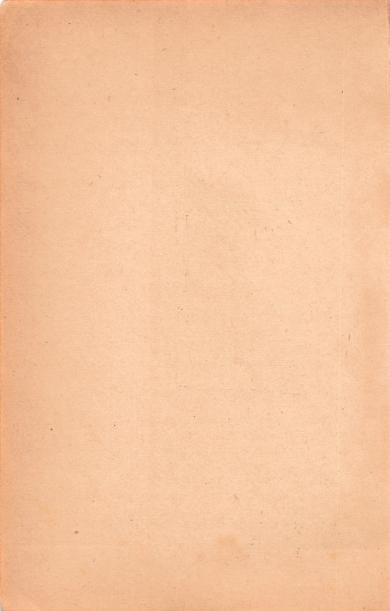
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Eighty-five Dollars and a Watch

PAT STEVENS lounged against the bar and brooded over

the smoky saloon.

It was late and there were only three customers left in the Golden Fleece, two miners that he knew by sight, with a bottle of whisky between them, and the stranger drinking in the corner alone.

He beckoned to the bartender. "Jake," he asked in a low voice, "you got a gun behind the bar, I reckon?"

Jake nodded.

Pat went on. "I'm leavin' you now. In about three minutes I'm comin' back, and I'll have to stick the place up. Thought I'd better tell you, so's you'd understand and not start grindin' your gat by mistake. I only got one gun with me, and—"

Jake looked alarmed. "What the hell, Stevens? You

can't--"

"It's the horn' toad in the corner," Pat grinned. "I'm just full of curiosity 'bout him. Been talkin' to him, but he don't open up at all, and I figured——"

"You ain't down on the range now. This here's Lead-

ville, a law abidin'--"

"Hell, Jake-more men get shot in Leadville than steers are branded down on the range."

"What about th' others?" His thumb jerked to the

corner.

"Oh, I'll leave anything I relieve 'em of back o' your

shack on the stoop. You can tell 'em the good news after I'm through."

"Better tell 'em first. Might make trouble, not knowing what it was all about. I could call 'em over an'—"

Pat shook his head. "No. This act has got to be good. I don't want 'em to suspicion this hold-up. If they was wise, they might give it away."

Jake grumbled. "It's risky, and if someone starts—"
But Pat was already on his way out. Jake began pol-

ishing a glass, but his eyes never left the door.

Suddenly there was a figure silhouetted in the black rectangle of the doorway, and in spite of himself Jake dropped his glass. The wide gray Stetson was pulled well down so that the brim almost met the black silk handkerchief that covered the lower part of the man's face. The blue flannel shirt was like a hundred others in the town. So were the corduroy trousers laced into the high miner's boots. Dangling from his right hand, just below his waist, was a Colt forty-five. Jake knew the barrel was only eight inches long, but it looked much longer.

"Put 'em up," the man said quietly.

The two miners swung around from their corner. The stranger started up. Jake's hands had actually shot skyward before the command.

"What the -!" and one of the miners let out a string

of oaths.

"Put 'em up—quick!"
They all obeyed.

"Now, stranger, move over and join the boys, and you, too, from behind the bar."

Jake and the stranger, their hands over their heads,

shuffled over and lined up with the miners.

Pat Stevens advanced a step into the room and kicked the door to behind him. Then he wandered over casually. Both miners packed Colts. He unfastened the cartridge belts one after the other and dropped them on the table behind him. He frisked Jake as a matter of form. Then he found himself in front of the stranger.

He was medium height, thin, with long greasy black hair. His face was a yellow leathery tan, and the shifty, malevolent black eyes were those of a cornered rat.

Pat slipped off his cartridge belt and gun. He reached inside the coat—a second revolver under the right arm, a thirty-eight with a sawed off barrel.

"An' where's your knife?" Pat demanded.

"Got no knife."

Pat sighed and without dropping the muzzle of his gun reached over and pulled a long vicious-looking blade out from behind the left shoulder. He straightened up and flipped the knife over his shoulder. There was a flash of steel, and twenty feet behind him it quivered in the wall.

"Stop playin' games and get it over," growled the miner who hadn't spoken. "My jack's in my hip pocket, and there's damn little left."

"Now that's just too bad," sympathized Pat. "But what there is, just you toss out onto the table there by the gats—That all? Thank you.—Now, one at a time, you next—Thank you, but what's that there lump up in your inside vest pocket?" The second miner pulled out several plugs of black tobacco and threw them over with a curse. "That ain't my brand, mister," chuckled Pat, handing them back. "You chew that—Now you Mr. Bartender. Don't you bother yourself with what's behind the bar. I'll pick that up myself. Just what you have with you—I 'preciate your generosity."

When he came again to the black haired stranger,

he paused.

"Just occurred to me, stranger, that you might be a friend I was waitin' to have show up here in Leadville today or tomorrow."

"Should think you'd know," the man sneered.

"That's just the trouble. I never have seen this friendonly heard about him."

"I'm not meetin' no one."

"No, he doesn't know he is either—otherwise he sure wouldn't be comin'." Pat's voice was almost a whisper from behind the black handkerchief. "You can't imagine how healthy it'd be for you if you could prove you ain't my friend. 'Cause you look like he ought to, and—"

"I ain't him."

"I'd like mighty well to know that," Pat pleaded. "I hate makin' mistakes, and this mistake would be harder on you than on me. Now exactly where do you hail from, stranger? My friend ought to be comin' up from Denver."

"Well, I'm from the south,--"

"So-o-o. Whereabouts?"

The man looked at him sullenly, but the eyes above the mask told him he'd better talk.

"Dutch Springs."

"Dutch Springs-where's that?"

"Powder Valley. Near Hopewell Junction."

"So-o-o-down by Spanish Peaks. Been in those parts long?"

"Three years."

Pat looked down at the thin-soled black boots with their high heels. "Who d'you ride for?"

"John Stout-Circle Cross."

Stevens shook his head as though in doubt. "You look mighty like my friend. An' he's supposed to carry a shoulder gun, too."

"I kin prove who I am."

"Well now that'd be just fine," purred Pat. "Save us all lots of trouble. Why didn't you say so before, stranger?"

The cowboy unbuttoned his shirt pocket, produced a dirty crumpled letter, and handed it over. Pat studied the illiterate writing carefully.

MISTER S. POINT CIRCLE CROSS RANCH DUCH SPRING, COLORADO

It was postmarked from Pueblo, two months before,

March 10, 1878.

"Your lady friend don't spell so good," he said casually, but his eyes were gleaming. "You 'round Dutch Springs two months ago?"

"Sure. I tole you. Three years."

"And what you doin' way up here in Leadville? There ain't no cows up here."

"I quit ridin'. Goin' to try mining."

"I certainly do hope you strike it rich—Well, I guess you're not my friend after all, so if you'll just hand over any valuables you got with you, we'll forget all about it."

Point's eyes were burning, but he tossed over a heavy sack that clinked. "That's my roll, and I hope you swing for it," he snarled.

"Thank you, Mr. S. Point. But you don't by any chance happen to have a *watch* on you, do you? You see I broke my watch, and—thank you." One quick glance seemed to do Pat worlds of good. "That's a right nice watch, and I'll enjoy ownin' it. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Bought it!"

"Bought it? 'Bout how long ago?"

"Five years back."

"So-o-o. He bought it—five years back. Well, well. Supposin' I just lighten that sack of yours *some* and give

you back the rest. Wouldn't seem right to leave a stranger in town without a stake to get started on."

Silence.

Pat slipped the ring over the mouth of the leather pouch, and dumped the silver and bills out on the table. "Just eighty-five dollars—and the watch," he announced. "Eighty-five is 'bout right, I reckon. The rest you can have."

"How long you goin' on jawin' and keepin' us here?"

drawled the first miner.

"Friend, you're right, and I feel like obliging—so turn around and keep your hands nice an' high." He sidled back of the bar, jingled the coins in the cash drawer, then banged it to. He swept his loot together.

drawer, then banged it to. He swept his loot together.

Then he was at the door. "I hope you gentlemen realize it'd be right dangerous to stick your heads out of that door before five minutes. I'll leave your guns down by the post office, but don't call for 'em too soon."

The door flashed open and he disappeared. He whipped the handkerchief off his face, and picking his way through the empty tin cans and bottles that lay everywhere, stole quietly around the frame building. He dropped the three leather money sacks by the back door, then, by an alley running parallel to the main street, ran east for a few hundred yards, and cut back just by the two story building that bore the sign "Post Office." The street was empty. He dropped all four guns on the ground in front of the locked door, and walked on slowly down the street.

"John Stout, Ćircle Cross Ranch, Dutch Springs," he kept repeating to himself over and over with satisfaction. "And who'd a thought I'd ever see my watch and that

eighty-five bucks again."

Fifteen minutes later he dove into a low, ramshackle hut on the outskirts of the straggling town.

There was a roar of rage from the blackness: "Of all ornery devils I've ever known. Why the hell can't you be quiet when you come home this hour of the morning?"

Pat lit a candle sticking in the neck of an empty bot-

tle. "Wake up, you two, I got news."

The flickering light showed a low-ceilinged room. There was a cooking stove, a rough table, three wooden chairs, and three bunks, two of which, built one over the other against the wall, were occupied. There was a litter of cooking utensils, picks, shovels, clothing, a sack of flour, a box of canned goods, three Winchesters standing in the corner by the pile of firewood.

The voice had come from the upper bunk, where a tousled, red head stuck out from under the blankets. Pat crossed the room and shook the sleeping figure be-

neath.

"Wake up, Sam, wake up."

The figure stirred and turned around.

"It'll have to be good news," announced an ominous voice from above. "Gimme some coffee off the stove."

Pat poured the cold black coffee into a tin cup and brought it over. "Ezra, don't you know coffee keeps you awake?"

"It ain't coffee keeps me awake. It's crazy fools." Ezra was sitting up now and his feet swung over the edge of his bunk. He was tall and rangy. His thick shock of red hair crowned a broad weather-beaten face. He was rubbing his one good eye. The lid of the other eye was closed and lay flat to his cheek. A jagged white scar cut diagonally across the eyelid, and up over the temple into his hair.

"Take yore feet out of my face," came a protest from Sam below. "Yu're right 'bout Stevens, Ez. Remember when his dad brought him out o' the ranch house to show him to us that mawnin', nothin' but a red-faced,

squealin' brat? Remember what I says?"

"Sure, you whispers to me, 'Ezra, I don't like his face. We oughta tie a rock round his neck and drown him before it's too late," the big man replied solemnly.

"An' there ain't been nothin' but grief for the last

five years since he come back to Colorado and roped us

Pat grinned. "How'd you bushwhackers like to make

some real money?"

"That's just what you asked us not so long ago when you said we was to leave the ranch 'n' come up to the mines with you," observed Ezra sarcastically. "But so far I___'"

"We was to clean up," nodded Sam. "What was the

use o' ridin' range at thirty a month when-"

"I'm talkin' about real money now. Listen. Remember two months back when I was on my way up from Trinidad and the train got held up?"

"An' yuh was relieved of a watch and eighty-five

dollars," snickered Sam.

"Ain't we been laughin' at you ever since?" de-

manded Ezra. "Caught without your gun handy!"

"Yeah—well, here's the watch and here's the eightyfive bucks, or eighty-five just as good," snapped Pat.

Sam looked up at Ezra solemnly. "He jest thought
he lost 'em. Must a bin in his other pocket all the time."

Ezra, however, was beginning to look interested.

"How come?"

"I spotted the watch this evenin' on a greasy lookin' puncher in the Golden Fleece, held up the joint, and took 'em away from him."

Ezra groaned. "You better git. You sure must have

been recognized, and you'll swing if they catch you."
"Why the hell did yuh stick up the whole Golden Fleece? Why not jest the greaser?" demanded Sam.

"Didn't want him to know what I was after-which wasn't just the watch and the dough."

"What then?"

"This puncher has just come north—alone," Pat said slowly. "I thought I might learn somethin' about what he left behind him—down south. That was a pretty job, that train stick-up. Kinda would like to find out some more about how they work."

"Sam, we're not in on this hand!" announced Ezra, shaking his head positively. "I see just where that mule's headin'. If he thinks we're goin' to help him clean out any gang o' train robbers jest 'cause they took his turnip

away---'

"Remember where it happened?" demanded Pat. "Sure. Yuh told us. Near Hopewell Junction."

Pat had crossed to the rough pine table and was clearing a space amongst the litter scattered all over. He smoothed out a piece of crumpled paper and picked up the stub of a lead pencil.

"Come here!" he commanded.

Reluctantly they left their bunks, and joined him at the table where he was bending over the sputtering candle. It was a curious group: big, lean red-haired Ezra with his disfigured face; Sam, short, stocky, swarthy, with a crooked hooked nose and his chin hidden by a blue-black stubble; and, seated between the half dressed pair, Pat Stevens, much younger than either, tall and supple, bronzed by wind and sun, with a square chin and clear gray eyes.

"I'm goin' to draw you some pictures, and show you

what I've been thinkin' over for quite a time."

"Probably that ole watch again," groaned Sam. "Can't

get it off his mind."

"Ever heard of Powder Valley?" demanded Pat, sketching rapidly. "Here it lays, running almost north and south, northeast of the Spanish Peaks. 'Bout thirty

miles long. Mountains west, the Culebra Range, I reckon, and some low hills to the east. Down near the foot is Hopewell. The railroad runs up like this from Trinidad and then skirts up the other side of the hills. 'Bout twenty, twenty-five miles up the valley is Dutch Springs. Stagecoach runs up from Hopewell twice a week."

"Always did like geography," Sam murmured. Pat ignored him. "Up here in the mountains, west, is Danville." He turned on them sharply. "Danville recall anythin' to your low mind?"

Ezra scratched his head. "Seems though it does-Why, ain't that the town that got raided six months

back?"

"Sure," chimed in Sam, "the gamblin' house, the store, the post office, everythin' got cleaned out, an' a lot of people got shot. Sims Brodie was tellin' me the girls in the joint up there all-"

"Yeah." said Pat drily. "And what do you suppose is up here outside the valley on the D. & R. G. where I've

put the cross?"

"Search me. Gimme a chaw o' tobacco, Sam."

"Nothin' much, except a right steep grade where trains has to slow way down. That's where another job was pulled off last summer, and the express car cleaned out."

Sam whistled. He was beginning to understand. "All

aroun' Powder Valley, huh?"

"That ain't all," Stevens went on. "I've been askin' questions the last two months-and studying geography, Sam. In the last three years there's been seven different hold-ups and robberies within fifty miles of Dutch Springs, and unless I'm loco, one gang--"

"Count me out." And Ezra spat defiantly toward the stove. "I been shot twice 'cause of your damn foolish-

ness, and I ain't lookin' for any more trouble."

Pat Stevens leaned back in his chair and rolled a ciga-

rette. His eyes were almost closed. "Three thousand dollars reward for information leadin' to the arrest an' conviction—"

"Not enough. I--" Ezra muttered.

"Oh, that's just the Danville raid," Pat broke in softly. "There's the two D. & R. G. jobs—two thousand each countin' both Wells Fargo and railroad money. Them are the biggest. Rewards still waitin' to be paid on the other little events comes up to another five thousand. If the same outfit pulled 'em all—"

"Twelve thousan' dollars!" Sam gasped. "There ain't

that much."

"I'm on my way to findin' out," Pat said grimly. "If you want to play, I'll deal you in."

"It sure looks like a busted flush to me, but I'll draw

one cyard."

"Not me," declared Ezra. "Not even with four big

thousand in the pot."

"Yo pore red worm!" Sam groaned. "I'm ashamed to know yuh.—He'll come along all right, Pat.—What the hell'd yuh do with that one eye o' yourn if Pat and me weren't around to take care of yuh? And who said anythin' about four thousand dollars? Yuh're lucky if Pat hands out enough grub to fill yo belly. We-all are goin' to take what he gives us—includin' orders! He's the bully boy with the glass eye, see?"

"Well__"

"Sure Ez'll stay with us," Pat said coolly. "He always starts buckin' when he sees a saddle, but once he feels it on his back he's sweet ridin'. On the split, how about half to me and the other half for the two of you?"

"Sure, I reckon that's fair," sighed Ezra gloomily. "After all, you've done a lot of mighty hard thinkin' about this, and now all Sam and I got to do is go down and get ourselves killed tryin' to clean up on a couple of hundred fast shootin'—"

"Prob'ly there ain't quite two hundred," comforted Sam.

"Don't make any difference to me anyhow how we

split. We'll never live to see the cash."

"It'll be right good to fork a hawss again," grinned Sam. "I've had enough o' this minin'. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow there's a train down. We can drop off at Colorado City and pick up the horses. Nigger and Darky and me'll start ridin' south right away—alone."

"Yuh goin' to take both o' those hawses along? Can't

yuh bear to leave one of 'em behind?"

"They don't like to be separated, Nigger and Darky don't. When I see how things lay, I'll send for you. Wouldn't do to go ridin' into Dutch Springs all together. Too suspicious. My idea is we drift into Powder Valley one by one and just sort of settle down and watch things a while. We got to play this game slow and cautious."

"The way you always does," grunted Ez. "I'll never forget the time you decided to show the Sheriff how

the town of Elkhorn ought to be run."

"I was still a kid," Pat grinned.

"Yore still plenty young enough," Sam pointed out. "I'm goin' to sleep. Ezra, yuh'd do well to sit up a while and practice yore draw. Seems to me yuh been slowin' up of late, and that won't do yuh no good where we-all are goin'."

Ezra's one eye smouldered. "Sam, I'll draw an empty gun and load it while you're fussin' around and won-

derin' why your holster's so sticky."

He turned and climbed up into his bunk. Three minutes later the shack was dark.

Concerning Several Aces

Early one morning a month later Pat Stevens pulled up by the hitching rack in front of the Gold Eagle Saloon in Dutch Springs. Only two other horses stood there, Ezra's pinto and a buckskin he'd never seen. He dismounted, dropped Nigger's reins to the ground, and slouched into the saloon. Ezra, apparently half asleep, was in the far corner. A ferret-faced boy in a red shirt and overalls was drinking at one end of the bar. He packed one gun, on the left. Pat took the other end of the bar.

Joe the bartender brought whisky without asking.

"How's things out at the Lazy Mare?"

Pat shrugged noncommittally.

"Too bad Dan Stout's had such bad luck."

"Why too bad?"

Joe looked surprised. "Why, Dan's all right in his way, ain't he?"

"You're saying it. I'm not."

"Well, you work for him. You ought to know."

"Yeah, I do know." Pat noticed that the drinker at the other end of the bar was sidling nearer. "He owes me most a month's pay," he went on more distinctly. "I'm sort o' tired—"

"I ride for his brother, John Stout," threw in the puncher.

"Yeah? What's he pay?"

"Twenty-five-an' extras."

"Extras?" Pat frowned. "What for, extras?"

"Oh, this an' that." The reply was vague. "Special

night work, mostly."

"Reckon I've had enough of the Stout family, and I don't like night ridin'.—I'm afraid of the dark," he added confidentially to Joe.

The ferret face suddenly flushed. "Yu bein' funny?"

he blustered.

Pat wandered over to him and looked him over minutely and contemptuously. "Yeah, I am, and why don't you laugh?" he challenged softly.

A sickly grin appeared on the boy's face. "Sure," he

said. "Sure."

"John Stout's a pretty good man to work for," the barkeeper threw in in a pacifying voice.

"How do you know?"

"'Cause I work for him, too. He owns this saloon

and the gamblin' house next door."

Pat's eyes opened wide with ingenious surprise. "You don't say. So-o-o Stout owns the saloon and the gamblin' house. Must be pretty rich."

"Sure he is. The bank is his, too, or most of it, and the store—and a lot of other things," Joe added with a leer.

Pat whistled. "For the love of Black Mike. Owns pretty near the whole damn town, don't he?"

"Yeah. I thought you'd a' known."
"Haven't been around town much."

Stout's rider was regaining his composure. After all, he worked for this man they were talking about. "Have a drink!" he suggested with a swagger. "My name's Fallon. They call me Cactus."

Pat just nodded.

"Where you from?" Fallon asked.

"South," Pat replied vaguely. "That's your boss comin' now, ain't it?"

A heavy set man was swinging off his horse outside. He booted an empty tin can out of his way and strode into the saloon.

"Hello, Joe.-Drink." He looked at Pat and nodded. Then he turned on Fallon. "Your horse is gettin' kind of restless outside, Cactus. I'd exercise him if I was you."

Cactus slunk out.

Pat had seen Red John Stout a few times the past month and each time he decided all over again that there was something about him he couldn't vote for. Plenty. He had carroty hair, rather thin, and eyes that were too dark to be called brown-small eyes, very sharp. When his lips drew back with his narrow smile, they showed a lot of yellow-brown teeth that looked as though they'd been soaking in tobacco juice. He was a tall man, like his brother Dan for whom Pat worked, but he didn't seem to be in fighting trim. Not enough hard prairie days and nights for him any more; too much sitting in this bank of his, and it was showing. He seemed a little nervous, too-just now he was twisting the lobe of his left ear. Every time Pat had seen him, he had noticed that ear-twisting gesture. Funny thing to do.

"Drink?" Stout suddenly asked.

"Don't mind"

"Where you from?"

"North a ways."

The barkeeper started. "Thought you told Cactus—" Pat had turned and the look in his eye lopped Joe's sentence off clear. "What did you think I told Cactus?" he asked softly.

"Nothing," Joe muttered.

"How did you happen to get down our way?" Stout

had been taking it all in.

"Oh, I reckon I heard Powder Valley was a pretty healthy spot."

"Depends what's ailin' you. We don't pester strangers with too many questions in the Valley."

"That's what I heard." "Your name Stevens?"

Pat nodded.

"You ride for Dan, don't you?"

"What ridin' there is." "Staying around long?"

Pat shrugged. Stout was taking a good deal of interest in him, he decided. Probably because he worked on his brother's ranch. He had reason to be interested in anyone who worked for Dan. Still it wouldn't do to run any chances, and he'd better follow the instinct that a few moments before had led him to build up the idea that he wasn't too anxious to have his past looked into. If John Stout thought he was a bad one, hiding out, it might lead to something.

"Trouble with this place, it's all cattle," he com-

plained.

18 What's wrong with cattle?"

"Cows!" Pat sneered. "Horses is my business."

"Canadian border's the place for horses."

Pat's smile was positively evil. Red John was following every lead. "Yeah, that's the place for horses." "Comin' and goin'," Stout grinned.

There was significant silence. Pat's eye had fixed on Ezra, apparently sound asleep in the corner, and a sudden idea struck him.

"Joe," he drawled, "who's your friend? Never seen

him before."

"One-eyed Ezra they call him.-Blew in about two weeks ago. Workin' in the feed store."

"Whisky seems to put him to sleep, so early in the

day, too."

Joe grinned. "He got paid yesterday."

"That so? Well, looks as how he'd drunk it all up."

The barkeeper snorted. "Naw. He's got lots of mazuma. Always has. Don't know why he works."

Pot looked interested. "Where's he get it?"

"Search me. But he gets it. He was flashing a wad today that'd make a horse fly!" Joe laughed at his own witticism.

"You don't say," Pat mused. "Tell you what, Joe. Go over and wake 'im up. It just might be that he is hankerin' to play a few cold hands of poker and don't realize it 'cause he's asleep."

"He's too drunk to hold his cards," Stout threw in. "Go on, Joe," Pat commanded. "Introduce us."

The barkeeper was hesitating, trying to catch Stout's eve for instructions. Stout nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Or I'll wake him up myself," Pat decided. He flashed his Colt up to his hip and churned out three shots so fast that the echoes followed the third shot.

"My floor!" groaned Joe.

"There only ought to be one hole," Pat pacified him. Stout crossed quickly over to where Ezra was sitting upright with a wild startled eye, and examined the floor.

"There is only one hole," Stout said grimly. "Stevens

you kin shoot."

"What the hell's the matter?" demanded Ezra. "And who is this crazy shootin' fool?"

"Thought you might like to examine a few hands of poker," grinned Pat.

"Who with?"

"Me."

Ezra shuffled out of his corner, rubbing his eye. He wore a pink checked shirt and corduroys tucked into high-heeled boots. The black handle of a knife stuck out of the top of his right boot, to the side and a little to the back. Like Pat, he packed two guns. "We play my cards," he said.
"Mebbe. Let's see 'em."

Ezra dropped down on an empty keg, pulled a greasy pack out of his hip pocket, and tossed them on the rough pine table. "These are straight," he declared, laying one of his Colts down on the table.

Pat examined the cards carefully. No pin pricks. No shaved edges. No missing corners. No suspicious spots.

He shuffled them. "A dollar makes her jump?"

Ezra nodded and dealt.

Pat found a pair of queens, and put down two silver

dollars. Ezra didn't look. Pat dealt, and lost.

John Stout was lounging against the bar watching the gamblers carefully as the luck wavered back and forth. Pat Stevens' manner was quick, sure, precise. His opponent, on the other hand, acted as though he still were half asleep.

"Let's go away at five 'stead of one. This is too slow,"

Pat grumbled.

The other nodded indifferently.

"Hell."

Pat had been shuffling, and a clumsy movement had scattered a score of cards face up over the floor. Stout watched him picking them up, and his eyes narrowed.

Two cards had slipped in between Stevens' knee and the table and not back into the pack. And Ezra had

missed it all. Stout waited for the play.

Four hands later it came. Ezra dealt, Pat picked up his hand and fanned his cards a scant quarter of an inch. "I'll play these," he announced, shoving out five dollars.

Ezra examined his hand carelessly. "Me, too," he mut-

tered, and bet ten.

Pat looked at him with open surprise, and covered. Ezra came again. Pat earefully laid his cards down on the table face down in a neat pile and scratched the back of his neck. That was with the left hand. The right hand had dropped into his lap.

Stout grinned. A neat job, and the sharper would get

away with it, too. The right hand was already casually slipping over the pile on the table with the two cards from his knee replacing those he'd dropped down inside his collar with his left hand. As pretty as anything he'd seen.

"Raise you five," Pat said.

"Raise you ten."

The pile of bills and silver in the center of the table was growing. Raise. Raise. Then Ezra dug down into his pocket and dragged out another roll of bills.

Pat motioned to him to put it away again. "I'll call

now," he drawled. "My money's about gone."

With a wide grin, Ezra laid down a full house, kings

up.

Pat flipped over his five cards one by one: the deuce of clubs; the ace of spades, the ace of hearts; the ace of diamonds; the ace of clubs.

"Will you have a drink on me?" he asked in an even

voice, as he reached for the pot.

Ezra kept staring at the four aces. When the glass of whisky came, he poured it down.

"Bring the bottle over," Pat commanded.

Stout's narrow eyes were on the pair. He twisted his ear and talked to Joe in a low voice. He watched Ezra, generously urged by Stevens, pouring down drink after drink and becoming more and more unsteady. Stevens was drinking very little.

A quarter of an hour later, Ezra seemed to be drunk as a lord. "Time to go home," he muttered, staggering to his feet. "It's late—late as hell. Bring my cayuse in here, right in here where I can get on." Then he sank back on the keg again.

"He'll never make it," decided Joe. "Stick him in the back room and let him sleep it off."

"Where's he hang out?" asked Pat.

"Over the feed store-Smokey Joe's feed store."

"That's right near here, ain't it? Come on, you," urged Pat, "I'll see you home."

Ezra staggered up and grasped the proffered arm. "You'll never get him on his horse," said Stout.

"I'll walk him and lead the horses. Come on, Ezra, ole

fellow."

They managed the door. Pat picked up the two horses, and off they went weaving down the street, the horses trailing.

Two hours later Ezra came roaring back to the Gold

Eagle.

"I been robbed," he yelled. "Robbed clean, I tell yu. When I waked up in my bunk, I felt for my roll and it was about gone. Who was that son of a —— who took me home?"

When Sheriff Parsons told John Stout about it a little later in the Dutch Springs Bank, Stout looked thought-

ful.

"And Joe, here, says that this Stevens from your brother's ranch is the guy who went out with him, and Ezra's raising the devil all over town and says—"

"Forget it, Stuffy," suggested Stout in a significant

tone.

"But we can't have this sort of thing happenin' around

town. First thing you know folks-"

"To hell with folks," snapped Red John. "I may want Stevens with my outfit and I don't want to have to take him out of your caboose. Wouldn't look good, Stuffy," he went on in a lower voice. "This Stevens is smooth as they make 'em—and he can shoot—and it might be a good idea to have a little something on him, eh?"

Sheriff Parsons nodded portentously.

"Everything to My Wife"

Par was still chuckling over the staged poker villainy as he rode the ten dusty miles toward the Lazy Mare Ranch. About halfway home, he suddenly saw something ahead that made him pull his horse down to a walk. He eased over in his saddle, slipped the long reins under his leg, and rolled a cigarette. His eyes, however, did not leave the straight stretch of trail across the mesa ahead of him.

No question about it. The bobbing speck had grown into a man coming toward him at a steady dog trot.

"Good exercise, anyway," Pat muttered.

Lazily, his right hand slipped down to the Colt at his side and found it free in the holster

Suddenly, he straightened up in his saddle. The figure, now perhaps a quarter of a mile away, seemed to hesitate, then plunged off into a sharp gully running off to the left, and disappeared.

Pat frowned. Why hadn't the man seen him long ago

-a figure on horseback.

"Come on, Nigger." He urged the jet black bronco into an easy lope and cut off the trail in the direction the man had taken. "Let's look the gent over and see if he's been invited."

In a few minutes he spotted the fugitive, cringing behind a great yucca plant, as effectively hidden as an ostrich with his head in the sand. Pat reined in sharply and looked down. His jaw dropped. Then he grinned. "Why, Chink," he chortled. "What you doin? Couldn't you find no prairie dogs to play with near home?"

The little Chinaman's face was a ghastly hue and his

teeth were chattering.

"What's the matter, you yellow devil?" Pat snapped. "You look as though you'd gone loco."

Cholly Lee merely shivered.

Leaning over in his saddle, the horseman grasped his shoulder and shook him roughly. "What the hell's wrong?" he demanded.

Cholly Lee began to mutter.

"What's that?—Stout?—Did he give you a lickin'?" Cholly Lee shook his head violently. "He in barn, he got rope—" And he blubbered so that his words became incomprehensible.

"He what?-Come on, now-"
"Boss, he-me go 'way now."

His eyes darted about for escape. Pat laughed.

"Oh, no, Chink, you're not going away. You're coming back with me."

The Chinaman gulped. Then he flashed off and started

running across the mesa.

Pat sighed, untied his lariat, and loosened the noose for the throw. He watched Lee streaking away like a scared yellow rabbit, lazily he touched Nigger with the spurs, and loped after the ridiculous little figure. The rope swirled and settled around the Chinaman's chest, pinioning his arms to his sides. Nigger broke from the canter into a walk, and, without bracing, found a tuft of grass, and began eating as though he knew this game wasn't serious. Pat pulled the Chinaman in like a fish on a line.

"Got a knife or anything like that up your sleeve?" Pat drawled. The Chink shook his head. Pat ran his

hands over him to make sure. "All right, then, we'll take

the rope off. You can hang on better."

With apparently no effort, the horseman swung the puff ball of a figure up behind his saddle and wheeled back toward the trail. They made a curious picture: the jet black bronco, a little oversize, wide and deep in the chest, with a neck and head that suggested better blood than the average plains horse; the tall lean rider in his worn leather chaps, faded black shirt, and great battered Stetson, his face as brown as a Navajo; and behind him, the fat little yellow Chinaman in his flapping trousers and tightly buttoned coat, clinging to him for dear life.

"You'll be back to the ranch just in time to cook dinner," Pat observed. "And it'd better be good. I'm hungry."

Pat did not press Nigger with his double load, and it was well past noon before he pulled up in front of

the Lazy Mare ranch house.

"Rustle grub," he commanded, and Cholly Lee scurried into the kitchen. "Dan," he shouted. "Dan."

There was no answer. The whole place seemed dead. A broken rocking chair on the porch. A blackened corn cob lying by the stoop. And utter silence. A rusted, battered tin pail on its side. A cracked flower pot. An old broom standing stiffly by the door as a witness that once the porch had been swept. It was as though man had departed, leaving a few worthless, unwanted belongings behind him. The only sign of life was one rangy red hen hunting frantically for bugs in the parched yellow grass that lay around the house in wild and uncared for patches under the cottonwood trees.

Pat unbuckled his belts and dropped the heavy load

on the porch.

"Dan Stout," he called again. This time there was an answer, but not a man's voice—a horse's whinny from

the corral a hundred feet away behind the big barn. Nigger replied joyously. Pat muttered, "Darky's here, anyway, Nigger. Come on, let's get you undressed."

The black pony trotted over to the corral ahead of him, and when Pat turned the corner of the barn and came in sight of the corral gate, he stopped with a broad smile. The two prettiest horses in the state! They stood there, one on the inside of the bars, one on the outside, their heads close together. Black as coal, both of them. Almost the same size and weight. You could hardly tell them apart except for the white stocking on Darky's off foreleg.

He stripped off the heavy stock saddle, throwing it over the corral fence, then the silver mounted bridle, and turned Nigger into the corral. The pony immediately began to roll while Darky looked on in disapproval.

Pat swung back toward the house. The bridle needed a little stitching. He'd leave it in the barn and get at it after dinner. Maybe Dan was in the barn. He often puttered about there when he wasn't busy. And he hadn't had much to keep him busy lately, Pat thought grimly, except whisky.

He made straight for the barn door that faced the corral, the bridle in his hand. The door was closed, and as Pat flung it open its rusty hinges screamed in protest. After the glaring sun of the clear June day, he could

see hardly anything in the semi-gloom.

Then slowly, almost as though he were watching something being created before his eyes, as though the dark shadows around him were being gathered and congealed into a solid mass, Pat began to see the figure of a man. A figure which was not only ahead of him in the gloom, but also—and it was this that made the hair rise along the back of his neck—above him. A figure of a man above him in the gloom. A figure of a man—and then Pat knew it at last—hanging a few feet from him.

He took an involuntary step back. Then a quick step forward. It was Dan Stout. Dan Stout hanging by the neck from a beam over the exact center of the big barn floor. A chair lay on its side a few feet away. Dan's big gray cat slid out of a shadowy corner into the bright shaft of sunlight that streaked through the open doorway, and began licking itself happily.

Daniel Stout a suicide! Pat's mind could not take it in. It was crazy somehow. Pat had known him for the month since he'd first come to the ranch asking for a job, and he knew that Dan was in some ways a weakling, but he never would have guessed he'd ever take this way out of the difficulties that had beset him and his ranch

of late. Yet there he was.

He walked slowly around the hanging figure. Better not touch it or cut it down till the Sheriff had looked it over. Right after dinner he'd have to start off for

town again.

But at the door of the barn he turned around and stared hard at the gruesome spectacle. Something troubled him. He couldn't tell what it was. Something just kept sticking in his mind about this business, buried down deep where he couldn't quite figure it out. He walked up again to the center of the floor—the chair—the rope from the rafter—the slightly swaying figure. What was it bothering him anyway? Pat frowned and cursed softly.

He suddenly turned out of the barn and into the

sunlight, and strode up to the ranch house.

"Chink," he called sharply.

There was no answer. Only a slight sound of sizzling fat told Pat that the Chinaman was around.

"Chink, damn you, come out here." He strode into

the kitchen as he said it.

"Yes, me here. You see him?" He stood petrified and shivered.

Pat stepped close to him, towering above him.

"I saw him all right. Now you," he took Cholly Lee's shoulder under his strong palm and snapped the Chinaman to attention, "you come clean and tell me everythin' you know about it."

"Yes, boss, me tell." He licked his pale lips. "Quick—when'd you last see Mr. Dan?"

"Me see him this morning right after breakfast. He eat breakfast same always; then he go out; see he go down by barn; think I see he go around barn. Don't know if he go in."

"Of course not, fool. Door's on the far side. Stop that." He gave Cholly another shaking. The Chinaman was faintly whimpering with fear and nervousness; he

let go of him abruptly. "Go on, finish."

"That's all, boss-next thing me go barn too. There

Mr. Dan-there he was--"

Pat pushed him aside and stalked into the large room.

"Dinner," he called over his shoulder, "pronto."

What was he going to do next? He had to have some excuse for hanging around Powder Valley. He couldn't stay where he was. A puncher on a gutted ranch had been bad enough. A puncher on a deserted ranch whose owner had killed himself—that didn't make sense. Maybe Dan's brother John would be taking over the Lazy Mare, and he could stay on. That might be just a little too close to the fire for comfort, he reflected. Well, he'd go get the Sheriff and then John Stout.

Again in his imagination, he saw Dan's figure. And again he had the sense inside him that something didn't quite fit somewhere. He screwed his eyes close together

and thought hard.

Suddenly he shoved back his chair and started for the barn. This time the dimness didn't bother him. He rushed to the overturned chair and swept it upright under the dangling feet. There was no contact.

There were inches of space between the chair and those feet. Six, eight, ten inches.

Dan hadn't kicked that chair from under him. Dan

hadn't committed suicide. Dan was murdered.

Pat took the chair back and turned it over on its side. Then he stood very still and swore very quietly and seriously.

As he walked out of the barn, his eye was caught by a glitter of something on the hard-caked ground. He stooped and picked it up. It was a horseshoe, thrown from an off forehoof. That was queer. It didn't belong to Nigger or Darky, and no other horse had been around. Nor had that horseshoe been lying there yesterday. He'd swear to that. With a frown, he carried it up to the house and hung it on a nail inside the door. Maybe it would bring him luck.

Five minutes later he was prying open Dan's old desk where Dan had kept whatever letters and papers he had.

"I'll be cracking safes before I'm through with this valley," he thought grimly. Quickly he rifled every pigeonhole, every drawer. He piled up everything he found on a small table near-by. At first the search yielded nothing more startling than bank statements, creased old deeds, bills for lumber and feed, and occasional letters from someone Pat never had heard of. At last came a break in this uninteresting procession . . . a pale blue envelope, with fine feminine writing, obviously different from all the rough-looking he-man stuff that had gone before it. It was clean and fresh, too, dated four months ago, from Denver.

February 14, 1889.

DEAR DAN,

I can hardly believe it, even now. It all seems so strange, so unexpected. This isn't much of a letter,

because I feel very—well, shall I admit it?—very scared or at least, very nervous. But it is a lovely kind of nervousness and I find myself day-dreaming about June and the time when it will really come true.

I know you're busy—but write to me when you can. School seems even duller and more tiresome than it used to before—I can't say it aloud yet.

SALLY.

Pat read the letter twice. What was this anyway? Sally—so there was a girl in this. Might have known it. A girl at school—but it didn't sound like the letter of a school-girl. She couldn't believe what? She was nervous about what? Dreaming about June—couldn't say something aloud yet? Damn all this nonsense anyway.

He put the letter aside, and went on. More useless papers and bills. Then another letter on the blue paper. This one was shorter—"not written for so many weeks, but I suppose you're very busy. I hope you're not beginning to think it was a mistake. It was so impulsive. You remember at the last minute even, I still thought it was unwise, and that we should wait, but you were so impetuous—" It went on that way for a little longer, and Pat began to frown. Could it be possible that Dan—

He rifled through all the other papers for more blue envelopes. There was only one. That was funny—he somehow expected more. At least one more. But that was even funnier, his "expecting" anything. This letter was briefer yet—"my father is so ill that nobody can tell what the result may be. This may change all my—our—plans for June. Poor father, he is in such pain, and I can do so little. Teaching has become a torment—"

As he put the letter down, he suddenly understood why he was so sure there would be at least one more.

That morning when he had brought the mail back from Dutch Springs—he had forgotten the mail since the moment he had picked up the yellow and shivering Chink. But there had been a square envelope, not blue but white. It was in the same handwriting, though.

"Hey, Chink," he called.

The Chinaman came on a run.

"Chink, bring me the mail quick."

Chink barely slowed down to turn around. Pat's eyes were already pouring over his next finds—a thin paper clipped to a heavy one, official looking, both of them.

He opened the flimsy first.

"Hell, what do you know?" he politely demanded of the ceiling a few seconds later. He whistled softly, then re-read the paper from start to finish. It was—no doubt about it—a certificate of marriage issued by the Reverend Thomas Aquinas Belkin of Reed Boulevard, Denver, to one Sally Phillips and one Daniel Stout, on the fourteenth day of February, of that year. Married. Legally and completely married. Only four months ago—on that hair-raising trip Dan had told him about casually, riding through thirty miles of snow-drifts to Hopewell Junction, and then finding the train was ten hours late. . . . Pat glanced back at the first letter. February 14th. Married the day he left Denver!

But if Dan was married, then his widow. . . . Pat rushed back to the heavier document. It was very brief and to the point—"everything to my wife, Sally Phillips Stout." Duly signed and witnessed. Legal as all outdoors.

"That, gentlemen, changes the complexion of things considerable," Pat muttered to himself, with a faint smile. Suddenly he wanted to see John Stout's face when he heard—"Yes, everything to the Widder Stout," Pat said softly.

"Scusy, Mist Stevens, you say something?" Chink

had appeared again at his side. He carried the small pile of mail and papers and a large look of anxiety.

"No, Chink, wasn't talking to you that time. Va-

moose."

He took the mail, and tore open the square envelope.

He glanced at it and swore again.

"-and since he is out of his pain, and gone to rest at last, there is nothing to prevent my coming as soon as school closes on the tenth. I'll take the train that very day and arrive at noon on the eleventh. I'll try to be a good wife, Dan, dear, and I know I'll learn to love you the way a good wife should—as soon as I get to know you a little better! I'm happy at the very idea—and I

can't wait to begin our new life together. . . ."

The eleventh. That was day after tomorrow. This was a hell of a note. There was something queer about this marriage anyway. The girl sounded like a lady, wrote a nice hand, wasn't fly at all—and yet all this about not knowing him even though she was married to him, all about his being so impetuous—He'd have to meet her and turn her around as soon as he could and get her on her way back to Denver. Powder Valley wasn't any place for a lone woman.

Quickly he put everything back into the pigeonholes and drawers where he'd found them—everything but the letters, the marriage license and the will. These he

buttoned up in his shirt pocket.

In another moment, he was off for the Sheriff, Sheriff Stuffy Parsons, the reddest-faced, slinkiest-eyed, blustering-mouthed Sheriff it had ever been the bad fortune of Pat Stevens to come across in a wide career of coming across sheriffs.

Dan's Last Ride

ONCE again that day the barn door swung wide to let a stream of light pick out the sinister sight within. But it was a cold, steady light this time, for the three men had been a long time coming back from Dutch Springs.

"We'd better get John Stout. He's at the bank," Sheriff Parsons had muttered when Pat told him about Dan

hanging in the barn.

So they had gone to the bank to pick up Stout.

"Bad news for you, John," the Sheriff had announced loudly as he pushed open the door marked "President" that shut off Stout's box-like private office from the main banking room.

"Bad news about what?" John Stout had asked coolly.

"'Bout Dan'l."

"Yeh?" John started twisting his ear.

"Yeah. He's hung himself."

John Stout glanced at Stuffy Parsons and then at Pat. He saw slightly narrowed blue eyes watching him—eyes that weren't showing any special sympathy. Stout looked away; then he let a look of mild surprise spread across his face.

"Hell, you don't say."

"Yep," said Stuffy. "Stevens here just tole me."

"Well, where? When? Who found him?"

Pat was rolling a cigarette. There was silence for a

moment. He looked over the edge of the paper he was licking, and stared steadily at Stout.

"I found him-hangin' in the barn-this morning."

"Hell, you don't say," Stout said again.
Once more a painful silence filled the room. Nobody

met anybody else's eyes.

"Come on, we're goin' back to the ranch-and quick," said Pat abruptly. "Sheriff here's got to look things over. -Just to be sure," he added very slowly, "that there ain't nothing out of the way."

Stout's glance swung up and found a slight smile on

Pat's face above him.

"What do you mean 'out of the way'?" he demanded quickly.

"Oh, nothing," Pat drawled. "Just a manner of

speakin'."

"Well, we better get going at that," put in Stuffy

importantly, and the three set off.

They pushed their horses over the ten miles to the Lazy Mare, no one breaking the silence until they stood almost abreast in the doorway of the barn.

"Poor Dan," said Stout with a side glance at Pat. "Sure

has had a hard run of luck here lately."

"Yep, sure has," said Stuffy Parsons, "what with them losses of stock, and then that train wreck with his cattle on it, and all, no wonder he's been drinkin' pretty steady the last months."

"Not to mention bein' foreclosed out of everything

by the bank," put in Pat softly.

Stout looked at him again. But there was no sign of sarcasm on Pat's expressionless face, and his voice was very gentle.

"Probably drunk when he did it," Stout muttered.

Then with one accord, they all went in. Parsons examined everything with a great show of professional care-the chair, the relative positions from the door and the side walls, the odd pieces of equipment lying about. "Guess we'd better get him down," he said finally.

"Yeah, and better get him back to town tonight. We'll bury him in the cemetery tomorrow," added John.

"No sense in losin' any time, is there?" Pat drawled

thoughtfully.

Stuffy Parsons was busy with his task. He brought over the chair and clumsily clambered up on it. Obviously he didn't notice anything queer about his being unable to get anywhere near the rope. He looked about for something else to stand on. There seemed to be nothing movable in the whole barn.

"You're good and tall—why don't you get up, Stout?"
Pat asked pointedly. "Kind o' seems anyhow like some-

body in the family ought to help Dan down."

John Stout started—stared sharply at Pat once more. But Pat was innocently looking upwards. In a moment John shuffled across the loose boards in the floor, and cleared his throat nervously.

"Well, guess I can reach it at that. Give me your

knife over here, Sheriff."

He stood up on the chair; very near he was to Dan. Above him flashed the sharp gleam of steel as he reached far above his head to the particular inch of rope that stood just away from the heavy knot. He began a rhythmic sawing at the taut rope. There was a sudden lurch of the body.

"Hi, there, somebody stand by to catch him," called

John Stout.

Another moment and the limp body was sagging into Pat's arms. Stuffy Parsons helped, too—and at once began an examination of the body. John Stout came down from his perch, sweating from his tiptoeing exertion with the knife.

"Hurry up," he urged impatiently. "What d'you want

to look him over for? You can see he's dead, can't you?

Let's get out of here."

He strode out of the barn, with Sheriff Parsons trailing him like a dog. Pat followed to the door and watched them going toward the ranch house. He heard something about "town" and "right away" and "wagon." Then he ducked back again into the barn to where the body was lying. Quickly he began his search. For what? He didn't know; didn't really believe there would be anything; and yet—

He opened another button of the shirt; no sign of anything on the broad chest. He looked quickly over the now horrible face; no signs of violence about the forehead or jaws. He felt quickly of the thighs; the legs;

no sign of injury, no blood.

And then, with a sudden thought, he unbuttoned Dan's cuff and shoved up the loose sleeve of the flannel shirt.

Just above the elbow was a strange, narrow red-andblue welt running half around the arm. Swiftly he examined the other arm. There, too, in the same place, running around the whole outer curve of the muscular

looking, hard flesh.

Pat rolled Dan's sleeves down and buttoned the cuffs again. He had seen enough. He had seen marks like these before. He'd bet his two ponies against a sack of tobacco that those two half circles were just exactly the marks Cholly Lee would have had if that lariat he'd found around his arms that morning had been jerked tight and held, if when he had tried to struggle free, the binding rope had merely tightened more savagely, pinning him hopelessly—until another rope could be adjusted.

Pat slouched over to the barn door, and stood there rolling another cigarette. His eyes were very quiet and the shreds of tobacco that sifted out of the little cotton

bag drifted unerringly down into the white paper trough

his fingers held waiting to catch them.

"Better get going, hadn't you, if you're movin' Dan tonight?" he asked gently as the two men came back. "You'll have to send some horses over from the Circle

Cross. No drivin' horses here, you know."

"Stuffy'll 'tend to it," John answered. "Have that Chink of yours get Dan into that buckboard over there. We can use that. Stuffy, tell 'em at the ranch to bring over the buckskins, harnessed. I'm goin' to stroll around a bit and look things over." There was a new note in his voice, a note of mastery, a note of the new owner of a property lording it over the inhabitants who'd been there under a previous and all but forgotten proprietor.

Pat smiled to himself in the gathering dusk.

"All right." He started for the ranch house, calling for the Chinaman. Then he changed his mind. "Guess I'll put Dan in the buckboard myself. Hope it holds together till it gets Dan to town. Like everythin' else around here, it's pretty rotten."

"Yeah, that's so. Bad manager, Dan. But things'll be fixed soon enough, I guess," John said and waved his hand largely. "Lots of things will get fixed now. I'm going to turn this sinkhole into something good."

Pat stooped over the body of Dan, lifted it to his

left shoulder with some difficulty, and started off.

"Whoever brings the horses down," he casually threw over his shoulder, "can drive into town too; I'm pretty tied up right here tonight."

Sheriff Parsons looked surprised. Stout looked angry. "You're pretty busy, are you?" he blustered after the retreating figure. "As long as you're around here, Stevens, you're not a damn bit busy unless I tell you you are, see?"

Pat turned around. "How come?" he asked innocently.

"Who the hell's ranch d'you think you're on? Mine!" Stout snarled, "and the sooner you learn it the better

for you."

"Well, I didn't know. You see I'd a thought Danbut if you say it's yours it must be yours," said Pat lazily. "This is gettin' pretty heavy on the shoulder along about now. I'll just get on to the wagon."

As he straightened up after shifting his load as gently as possible to the floor of the buckboard, he found Red

John and Parsons at his elbow.

"What the hell do you mean by all this insinuatin' as to who this ranch belongs to?" Stout shouted.

"Why I wasn't insinuatin' at all," drawled Pat.

"John Stout's the only living relative Dan had," put in Stuffy, "don't you know that?"

Pat shook his head. "Well, now, tell you truth, I

didn't," he said.

"What the devil you driving at, anyhow?" shouted John. "You got something in your mind-come clean, I tell you-and come quick."

Pat shrugged his shoulders and started toward the

ranch house.

"Sure, I'll come clean. Keep your shirt on. Come on,

and I'll show you something-kinda interesting."

They went silently up to the house. Pat pulled out the thin sheet of paper from his shirt pocket—the only one of his important little packet that he hadn't cached before leaving for Dutch Springs.

"Here you are, Stout," he said, handing it over carelessly. "Take a look. You, too, sheriff-readin' matter's

scarce in Powder Valley from what I hear."

The two men stared at the flimsy legal paper for long minutes. Then John Stout began spluttering with curses.

"How do you-where-when the hell-you pull this

on me as though--"

"Easy there, Stout, easy," said Pat soothingly. "I didn't marry 'em you know. I'm just showin' you, that's alljust so's you wouldn't send any of your stock over in the morning. There's not too much grass around as it is."

Red John was looking at Pat silently, murderously.

Pat turned on his heel. "I got to leave you now," he said pointedly. "You and the Sheriff'll be wanting to be getting along after them horses, and I got some things to attend to, like I said."

"Why not leave him here to be buried?" muttered

Parsons.

"No!" John said decisively. "Come on, Stuffy."

Pat waited until they rode off. Then he started for the barn once more. There was one thing there he wanted.

He set the chair under the center rafter again. He piled an old saddle and a blanket on it to build it up. Then he climbed up on the rocky perch. By stretching very high he was able to cut down the dangling piece of rope that the Sheriff's knife had left hanging there. He was interested in that rope. He meant to keep it as a souvenir. For he'd noticed it was a new rope. And there wasn't any new rope around the Lazy Mare. There hadn't been in the month he had been there.

Then he strolled back to the ranch house.

"Chink," he called as he strode through the kitchen door. "What you thinking of, not coming down to the barn when I called you?"

"Me no hear, boss, honesantrue." Cholly Lee sounded plaintive and very unhappy. "Me busy thinkin' me go pretty quick tomorrow."

"You go where?"

"Me go away from ranch. Me no like ranch no more. Me go Dlutch Spings, find good job."

Pat laughed, as he dropped his guns and belts on the

table and slipped out of his chaps.

"You fine boss, Mis' Stevens," went on Chink in a supplicating voice. "But me no like ranch just the same. Me go."

Chink felt a strong hand on his shoulder, and he looked up uncertainly and unhappily into Pat's face.

"You know, Chink, it's damned lucky you didn't come when I called a while back." Pat shook his head sadly. "If you had, you'd probably be dead by nowjust like Stout, hangin' by the neck."

"What you mean?" Chink quavered.

"Why, you see, Sheriff Parsons's lookin' for you. Says you hung Dan Stout and-why, I wouldn't give a wooden nickel for your chances once you leave this ranch. Good as dead ten minutes after you leave here," Pat repeated.

"Me dead?" Chink's voice rose to a squeak. "Me dead man, Mis' Stevens-me no do nothin'-me no hurt Mis'

Dan-me no--"

"Hold on, Chink," said Pat indulgently. "I know you didn't hurt anybody-but they don't know it. They think you hung Dan. They told me so. And they said the minute they saw your round yaller face, they'd string you up sure. See?"

Cholly Lee could only whimper. "They catch me

here, too," he moaned.

"Oh, no. I told 'em you ran away. They'll never look for you here. I tell you, Chink, if you want to hide out here awhile, it's all right with me. You just do the cooking and take care of things, and I don't mind you stavin'."

Cholly Lee looked up eagerly. "You ploteck Cholly Lee?" he asked.

"Sure, I'll take care of you, Chink," said Pat. "I like you. And I like the way you cook. So you just stick around and be sure and stay inside and nobody'll get you. But you run away, now—and it'll be a dead Chinaman quick. Now get me some hot water to wash with."

Cholly Lee heaved the most enormous sigh of relief the prairie had ever heard. He went back to his kitchen, almost joyfully and in a few minutes one of his steaming suppers appeared. Pat, suddenly stripped of his lighter mood, ate in gloomy silence. Then he stood up, got a new sack of tobacco and checked his packet of papers; he got into his chaps again, slung on his guns and slipped into a leather coat. These June nights were cold.

"Chink, bring me my hat," he said. Then he headed for the corral.

"Sorry to disturb your pleasant dreams, Darky, my lad," he said softly as he saddled the pony. "But you

and I are goin' places."

He patted Darky's neck for a long moment as he stared off into the night. Far off he heard horses coming round the Bluff. That would be someone from the Circle Cross with the team coming to harness up the wagon and drive Dan on his last ride into Dutch Springs. He didn't specially want to see anyone just now.

So he swung Darky about and cantered off into the

black emptiness of the night.

Three miles to the south he pulled Darky into a grove of white birches and let him drink at the spring they both knew was there. Then he dismounted, led the pony well into the grove and dropped the reins.

"Ezra?" he inquired quietly of the scenery in general.

"And none other," came a voice from a flat rock near-by, which was Ezra's favorite chair for these frequent nocturnal conferences when they exchanged news of developments. "I ain't got much to tell you tonight you don't know already, Pat."

"You mean about Dan?"

"Yeah. Why'd he do it?"

"He didn't."

Ezra sat up with interest. "You don't mean-well, who did?"

"Red John-maybe," Pat said cautiously.

The figure in the dark gave a low whistle. "For the ranch?"

"Yeah, and maybe too because Dan knew too much."

"What's next?"

"Search me. His wife blows in day after tomorrow."

"Whose wife?"

Pat told the whole story. Frequent sounds of disapproval from Ezra. "That's a damn nuisance," Ezra decided when Pat had finished.

"Won't last long-Heard from Sam?"

"Yep. Pullin' in 'n three days.—Begins to look as if you might be right 'bout Stout after all."

"Sure-had him sized up the week after I hit Powder

Valley."

"Wa-al, we don't *know* yet. It'd be right hard to throw a rope aroun' these here parts and not just naturally catch somethin' that smelled like a turkey buzzard. Red John ain't the only one.—A sweet place you picked out to work in, Pat Stevens."

"We're goin' to pick up just twelve thousand in gold out of this valley before we move on," Pat said grimly, "plus whatever reward is set in connection with that

raid over west a week ago."

"If we don't pick up a few pounds o' lead instead."
"You're full of lead now. You could stand a little more."

"If I take in any more I'll have to stay away from water, else I'll drown," observed Ezra seriously. "What's next?"

"Well, I've been worryin'. In a few more days, soon

as Dan's widow starts back to Denver. I won't have much reason for hangin' around unless-"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I get myself a reputation pretty quick for bein' here 'cause it's a healthy climate for me."

Ezra nodded. "So that's what all the play actin' was about this morning. Give me back my roll before you forget."

Pat reached down into his trouser pocket and began

counting out money.

"You sure was slick with those cyards. I may only have one eye, but it's pretty good and it was watchin' to see what you was going to pull and I don't know vet--"

"Did you make a lot o' noise about being robbed like

I told you to?"

Ezra grinned. "That Sheriff, Parsons, was right indignant such things could happen in Dutch Springs and was goin' to get a posse together and arrest you. Then somethin' happened and he quieted down. Told me there wasn't enough evidence against you, that anyone might have hooked my roll. No justice in this here town." Ezra shook his head sadly.

"If I look rough enough, Stout might be thinkin' he

could use me."

"Pat, even if he is the man we're after you're on a blind trail about this here Dutch Springs Bank bein' the cache. I tell you, I been watchin' that bank for the ten days I been here like you told me to do and I ain't seen nothin'. It's just like every other bank."
"Ever happen to think it sort o' queer, a town o'

Dutch Springs size havin' a bank at all?"

"Well-I don't know. Lots o' cattle business 'round here, an' there used to be considerable minin' near-by."

"Find me another town with a bank in the whole

damn state that ain't twice as big as this two by four

water hole," challenged Pat.

"Well, if anyone's been in or out of that buildin' that didn't have business since the raid at Jones Hollow last Tuesday, I ain't seen him."

"You been sleepin' some, ain't you?"

"Not much. And nothin's been taken out either, ex-

cept stuff for the U.S. mail by the coach."

"Ever thought how easy it would be to ship stuff by the U. S. mail? Regular bank shipment, under seal?"

Ezra whistled softly.

"And," Pat went on, "don't forget what I told you. I been watchin' the Circle Cross layout from the Bluff. A lot of riders drifted away one by one the day before the raid at Jones Hollow. The ranch was plumb deserted on Tuesday."

"If it is the bank, we might as well go away. You

can't go breakin' into banks just for fun."

"If I was sure I was right, I'd get in," said Pat slowly.

"An' how yuh goin' to make sure?"

"We got to spot somethin' goin' in or comin' out. Then we'll know. Then we bust into the bank and it's over."

"Why ain't spottin' it goin' in or out good enough?"

"Two reasons. You don't pin nothin' on Stout himself unless you find what you're lookin' for on him or in his possession. That means his bank, or his ranch, or—"

Ezra nodded. "I recall now, 'evidence leadin' to th' arrest and conviction.' I'd kind of forgot 'conviction'."

"Another thing you clean forgot. Provin' the Jones Hollow raid won't do us no good in collectin' the reward for all the other jobs that's been pulled off. We got a lot to prove if we're ridin' out of Powder Valley with twelve thousand dollars."

Ezra shook his head gloomily. "If we don't bring it off and get caught, we'll be hangin' higher than Dan

Stout," he muttered. "You ain't no officer of the law, and as for me—Great snakes, if Sam knew what he was gettin' into he'd never show up! Poor Sam'll look funny danglin' at the end of a rope, won't he, Pat? I hope they string him up first so we can watch." That thought seemed to cheer him up.

"We'll bring it off. Keep your ear close to the ground

an' see if you can find out what's comin' next."

"Sure. That's so easy. I'll just go ask the postmaster to let me know," snorted Ezra.

"Watch everybody in the Circle Cross gang."
"Well, if I find out somethin? Then what?"

"Sam'll be here and--"

"Three poor tramps goin' after—How many gun-totin' riders has Stout, anyway?"

"Twelve or fifteen, maybe."

"That'll be fine! Just fine! I certainly am glad I signed up with you, Pat Stevens. Twelve hard-faced lads and the Sheriff—don't forget the Sheriff, Pat—"

"He's yellow as a canary-"

"And just as many deputies as he wants to swear in."

"Shut up, Ez, you're just talkin' to hear yourself talk," grunted Pat, rising from the ground and yawning. "And when Sam blows in, just let anyone see you talkin' together an' I'll skin you both alive. You better stay away from Sam altogether in town. I'll meet you two here the night after he comes unless somethin' happens first. Turn that rock over on its back down by the gate posts if anythin' happens an' you want to see me before that."

"Say, Pat!" Ezra was looking worried.

"What?"

"What you said about shippin' out by the stagecoach, and spottin' stuff goin' into the bank or goin' out. You ain't figurin' by any chance on holdin' up the stage and playin' with the U. S. mail, are you?"

"Yeah, unless you can spot 'em puttin' things in, we'll have to get 'em takin' it out. That's what I said."

"Well you can count me out. I'm not--"

Pat grinned. "If you keep that eye of yours peeled,

maybe we won't have to. So long."

Ezra watched Pat gather up Darky's reins and lead the horse away through the trees. "He'll be wantin' to go east and rob the U. S. Treasury next," he grumbled, and started off to find his own horse.

"The Prettiest Girl He'd Ever Seen"

"Hopewell Junction," the brakeman bawled, grinding down his hand brakes.

The train slowed down, stuttered jerkily for fifty yards, gave one tremendous heave, then tired of the

argument and stood quiet.

"Hopewell Junction," said the weatherbeaten gray sign outside Sally's window. She looked about her for a bewildered moment and then picked up her two great suitcases herself, and started slowly down the car. Something was disappointed in her; perhaps she had half expected to see Dan come leaping on the train before it even drew to its ratchety stop.

Belatedly the brakeman helped her down with her bags. He plopped them down on the cinder stretch that was the station platform and swung back onto the train.

Sally looked about her. Dan wasn't around, nor was anyone else except the station agent way down the track looking at some freight. There was a small boxlike station with a crooked tin stove pipe. Down the line were the cattle corrals and one gray shed, all deserted and lifeless. Beyond, the prairie rolled out, yellowish green, already parched by the hot June sun and lack of rain, stretched out for miles until they found the green foothills that guarded the range, and further south the Spanish Peaks about which she'd heard so much. In spite of her wonder at not being met, in spite of the sudden

fear at the future, the girl felt her heart beat faster at the sense of space and silence, at the blue of the sky. She had known the prairie, but this was different.

The train had at last pulled away. Her gray eyes lit

up again. Perhaps on the other side of the track-

But Dan wasn't there either. There was, however, such a scene of concentrated, violent, exploding activity that she forgot her own problem and watched in fascination.

For there before her were two big jet black mustangs harnessed to an old two-seated buckboard, from which the back seat had been removed. The broncos did not belong in harness, and they knew it. And they didn't like trains. Their heads stretched out and their ears flat, plunging, rearing, bucking. The off horse had two legs over the pole. All Sally could think of was two writhing black snakes, and she wondered how long the buckboard would hold together. It seemed impossible that such raging power could be controlled. And the tall slim man was doing it.

His back was to her. But she could see he was young and lean and bronzed. His hat lay on the ground. His white silk shirt was whipped against his body by the wind. He was grasping the bridle of each horse. His body yielded this way and that, but the grip of steel never relaxed. There was something casual, almost lazy, in his whole attitude, as if he knew that eventually the

horses would listen to reason and behave.

As the rumbling and hissing of the train died out, the horses began to calm down. The man casually turned half about, still holding the horses. He saw her and was silent for a moment. She stood still, waiting.

"How about them bags?" he said in the deepest voice

she'd ever heard. "Pretty heavy?"

"Yes, pretty." She wondered at herself for answering

him so promptly. Who was he? Why should he call across the tracks at her in this quiet, authoritative way?

"Guess you'll have to manage them anyhow," he said with a shrug. "Bring 'em over here. I can't leave these broncs yet."

He turned back to them. Sally stood perfectly still, wondering if he expected her to get in behind those two black fiends.

"Who are you?" she called after a moment. "Did my

husband-did Mr. Stout send you for me?"

Pat turned around again. He had assumed that he'd meet a gaunt school marm with big thick glasses and thin stringy hair. This one was small and young, and her hair blowing out a little from her bonnet looked like corn silk. He rather wished she had turned out to be gaunt and stringy. What he had to do would be a lot easier if she weren't so pretty.

"Yeah," he drawled. "He couldn't come himself."

She stooped to the bags and started across the tracks. Her long black skirts swished into her way and she stumbled over the rails. Her arms ached and she wanted to put the bags down and rest. But something about that indifferent back made her want to be even more casual than he was. She reached his side, and set the bags down without a word.

"Know anything about horses?" he asked gruffly. She nodded. "Come hold 'em then. They won't hurt you.

Quiet there, Nigger."

Gingerly she took the bridles. "I'm more at home with horses when they've got saddles on and I can ride

them," she heard herself saying.

He lifted the bags into the wagon, easily and surely. "Same as these devils," he said. "They've never been in harness 'til today—don't think much of it." Then he leaped to his seat and took up the reins.

"Get in," he commanded, and Sally was left to clam-

ber up herself. On the floor of the buckboard, she felt her feet twisted up in something and looked down. Coiled around her feet like snakes were what seemed liked yards of loaded cartridge belts and two holstered six shooters. She moved her feet gingerly. Her companion was rolling a cigarette with his free hand, apparently indifferent to the fact that his horses seemed intent on backing the buckboard over the tracks.

He lit the cigarette and took command. A flick of the whip and they started off in a mad careening run straight across the prairie. For five minutes he made no attempt to check their flight. Then as the blacks exhausted some of their wild energy, he pulled them down to a trot. It was, Sally realized, a superb performance of horsemanship. But where was Dan? Come to think of it, she wasn't even sure she was on her way to Dan! She waited minute after long minute. Why didn't he explain? Her furtive glances at the man beside her showed a cleanly chiselled profile, a strong jaw, and clear, steady eyes paying no attention to anything but the team and their rough way over the prairie. At last she couldn't bear it any longer.

"What about Dan?" Her voice attempted to sound

casual.

"He-well, he had a kind of accident; couldn't come."

"What do you mean a kind of accident?"

There was a silence again. There was something strained in his face now. She could see the muscles tense around his jaw. His head turned toward her a little, but his eyes remained fixed on the horses.

"To tell the truth," he said quietly, "Dan had an accident and-and it's nothing he's goin' to get over

quick either."

He heard her gasp and turned to look fully at her this time. She seemed shocked but not in any sense out of control. Lord, she was pretty. How much had she loved that guy Dan anyway?

"What do you mean?" she asked, and her voice, too,

was steady. "You can tell me."

"Dan is-dead," he muttered. And then, "I'm sorry."

The only sound was the soft plop of the horses' hooves on the soft prairie, the swirling of the wheels, and the rattling of the old buckboard.

When Sally finally spoke, Pat wouldn't have recognized her voice. It was expressionless, impersonal, far away. Her words came very slowly. "Did—you say—that Dan—was—dead?"

He nodded. "Yes. I reckon I didn't tell you, well,—as I ought to of."

"That's all right," she said mechanically.

There was another long silence.

"I suppose I-I can't take it in. It doesn't seem as though it could be true. Here I am and—"

Pat said nothing. "When did—?"
"Two days ago."

"Then he didn't-did he know I was coming?"

"No. Your letter came that morning. I opened it," Pat explained.

"Where are we going now? To the ranch?"

Pat nodded.

"How did it-What--?"

"Why, he-I--"

"Tell me the truth!" she cried. "Now, all of it."

"I found him hanging in the barn."

"He killed himself?" she whispered in horror.

Pat did not answer. He couldn't tell her Dan had been murdered—yet.

"But why, why?"

"He's been having pretty tough going. First one thing, then another. Then a few weeks ago, just after I

came, the bank called in a note they was holdin', and took all his stock and horses and stuff. Then he started—drinking."

"He didn't write me about all this," she murmured.
"No, he wouldn't. But there's not much left at the

Lazy Mare, just the ranch and me and the Chinese cook. These are the only two horses left on the place, and

they're mine."

The girl had begun to sob, and her weeping was becoming more and more violent. Great spasms were racking her whole body and Pat had no idea what to say or do. She was getting really hysterical now and he looked down at her in alarm. Something had to be done.

He had been cutting straight across the prairie to save a few miles, but by this time they had joined the narrow stage road from Hopewell Junction to Dutch Springs. Pat fingered his whip thoughtfully, then gave Darky a nasty flick under the belly. The outraged bronco leaped into the air with all four feet and then forward, and Nigger, nothing loath, followed his teammate's lead. The pair stretched themselves out close to the ground in a dead run.

"Get down on the floor," Pat said curtly. "This seat's

loose as hell and may fly off."

"What's the matter?" Sally gasped between sobs.

"Can't you see the broncs are on their way?" he snapped. "Get down on the floor, I tell you, and hang

on."

They were rocking from side to side, careening in and out of the ruts, and crashing over every hump of the rough dirt road. The light buckboard was skidding on every slight turn. The horses had the bits in their teeth, and Pat let them go. It was strong medicine and a bit risky but he noted with satisfaction it was working. The girl didn't look too happy but she had quieted

down. Apparently she was too scared to cry. Then he

got his first surprise.

"This buckboard won't last much longer," she announced calmly. "I'm coming up to watch the smash." And she pulled herself up beside him on the lurching seat. "Lovely horses you have. Do you always drive them this way?"

"I told you they'd never been in harness before," he growled. "Hang on, we're going to skid on the turn

ahead."

"Or turn over," she said calmly. "—Well, we made it." Pat decided the trick had been turned, and began to saw at the broncos' mouths. He didn't like to do it, but they were really bolting and it was the only way to stop them now. In a few minutes he had them down to a trot. Their sweating flanks were heaving and foam was flecking away from their mouths.

"You could have stopped them before," Sally ob-

served.

"Thought you needed something to think about," he explained a little sheepishly.

"I-I guess I did. Forgive me for making a scene. It's

over now."

Pat nodded, and handed her the reins. "You've got nerve. Drive while I roll a cigarette. Hold 'em in tight and they'll be all right."

"What's your name?" she asked after a minute.

"Pat-Pat Stevens."

"Well, Mr. Stevens, what am I going to do?"

"What you want to do?"

He had lighted his cigarette and was picking up the arsenal that was under the seat. Casually he buckled on one belt after the other. The guns hung low on each side, and bumped against the seat. As he took the reins back from her she wondered why he'd put on his

guns. Obviously the cigarette was a blind, for he had already tossed it away. She decided to say nothing.

"I don't know what I want to do," she said slowly. "Father—just died. I've resigned from the school, and my place is already filled for next year. There's nothing in Denver for me now."

"Got any relatives?"

"No. I suppose—who—who will have the ranch, Mr. Stevens?"

"It's left to you," Pat said shortly. "So's everything else, but there ain't nothing else."

"Poor Dan," she whispered.

She noticed that he was driving with his left hand and that his right was hanging idly at his side.

"What's the matter?" she demanded, pointing to his

guns.

"Nothin' much. Just thought I'd be more comfortable with 'em on. A couple o' birds saw us coming a while back, and dodged into that arroyo just ahead there by the scrub oak."

Sally's eyes widened.

"Maybe they just don't want to be seen," he reassured her.

"What sort of a place is this?" Sally cried.

"The hell of a place for a lady to own a ranch," Pat answered grimly, his gray eyes intent on the spot he'd

indicated. "You'll have to get rid of it."

They were passing the scrub oak and the arroyo. There was no sign of life anywhere. For a few minutes Pat kept looking back over his shoulder, and then he seemed to relax.

"False alarm.-Yes, you'll have to get rid of the ranch."

"I'd thought I was going to love it."

"It's a sad ranch now. Nothing left. Would take thousands of dollars to get it goin' again."

"And I've only got a few hundred!"

"You couldn't live there alone, anyway-not in this valley."

"What's the matter with this valley?"

He looked at her curiously. Then he pointed with his whip to the high mountains on the left, and swung his whip around to a rolling spur of foothills a dozen miles away on their right. "Powder Valley," he said softly, "has got grass as good as any. There's water everywhere. There's gold up there in the mountains. There's a railroad. Powder Valley's got everything—including more wrong 'uns than any corner in the state. It's a lovely place except for them who live here. No, you sell the ranch."

"Dan didn't tell me this. He just said it was-sort of

rough," she murmured.

"You didn't know Dan very long, did you?" he blurted our.

She shook her head. "Only a few weeks. We—we only got married the day he left Denver. It was all very sudden."

Pat saw that her eyes were filling up with tears again,

and turned back to his driving.

For miles they drove on in silence. Pat tried to figure out why this girl had ever married Dan Stout. He had liked Dan-but why a girl-years younger, the prettiest girl he'd ever seen-she must have wanted to get away

from things pretty bad.

Sally, too, was trying to figure things out. She felt a pang of conscience because she was more numbed than grief-stricken at the news. Dan had always seemed unreal because she'd known him so short a time; now the horrible news merely made the unreality more like a dream than ever. It was as if she'd heard of the death of some friend or relative.

She shuddered. On her way to a deserted ranch she'd never seen, in country where she knew no one except—

a curious person, this Pat Stevens, not what you'd expect to find working on a run-down ranch. She stole a glance at his strong profile-

"Mr. Stevens," she said abruptly. "You're going to have to help me."

"With what?"

"With-I don't quite know-everything. Will you?" Pat looked around to find her staring up at him. Her mouth was firm and resolute; her eves, gray eyes, were

unafraid but frankly pleading.

"Yeah-I'll help you-all I can," he said quietly, and for the first time saw her smile. It wasn't a very big smile, but it expressed much more than her simple "thank you." Then he pointed ahead with his whip. "There, by the fork and the two posts, is where your land begins. The ranch house is under the Bluff-about two miles more."

As they swerved off the main road between the two white-washed posts, Sally looked around her with interest. She saw clumps of cottonwoods here and there. As they topped a rise she saw, rising out of the yellow gray prairie, a dark green bluff. The air was so clear that she could distinguish the individual trees, the oaks, the piñons, the pines. She almost imagined she could see their branches and count the leaves of the oaks. Close by, cutting across their path ahead, was a straggling line of willows that must mark a creek. With a thrill she realized that for the first time she owned something, land, good land, and she was on it. Then the light faded out of her eyes. She had remembered suddenly that she couldn't hold it.

"Beyond the Bluff a couple of miles is your brotherin-law's ranch, touchin' yours."

"My brother-in-law?" Sally gasped. Pat looked at her in surprise. "Yeah, John Stout. Didn't Dan tell you about his brother?"

"No."

"They wasn't very friendly. Telling the truth, they didn't even speak. Maybe that was why Dan didn't mention him." Then Pat grinned. "Red John didn't know about you, either. Thought he got the ranch—until I told him Dan had a wife,"

"What did he say?"

"He was sort o' upset."

"Oh! Does he know I'm here?"

"I didn't tell him you was coming."

"Why?"

Pat was silent. He was trying to decide how much to

tell this girl about John Stout-and Dan.

"'Cause I thought he'd find out soon enough by himself," he said curtly. "Not much goes on in this valley John Stout doesn't know about."

They both became silent when they came into view of the ranch house and its buildings nestled in the cotton-woods at the foot of the bluff. The spirit of Dan Stout

seemed to be there, waiting for them.

"Cholly Lee," Pat shouted as he swung around and pulled up in front of the porch. Cautiously the Chinaman peered through a crack in the door. "He'll take your bags and show you around."

Sally sat there without moving, her eyes riveted on the ranch house. "It looks so empty," she said dully. "So

desolate.-I-I don't want to go in."

"Supper ought to be ready for you pretty soon," Pat

said briskly.

She looked up at him beseechingly, her eyes asking if there wasn't some other way. His gaze was fixed on Nigger's left ear and stayed there. Very slowly she climbed out of the buckboard. Then she turned back to him.

"You-you live in the ranch house, or-?"

"I did. But I had my stuff moved down to the bunk-

house. Thought it'd be better."

"You'll come in and eat supper with me, won't you?"
"Yeah, I'll be in for supper," Pat replied absently. He was trying to decide which he wanted more, what he'd come to Powder Valley for, or this girl.

Sally Does Some Shooting

"What's the matter with Cholly Lee?" asked Sally when Pat appeared an hour later in the big room that provided dining, living, and office quarters at the Lazy Mare. "He's driving me nearly crazy. He's got the windows in the kitchen all covered up with paper. He won't cross the hall unless the front door is closed. It's as though he were afraid and hiding from someone."

"He is."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin'—but the Chink thinks there is." And Pat explained his ruse to hold Chin Lee at the ranch.

"How horrible of you! I've never heard of a meaner

trick."

"I didn't know how else to keep 'im," protested Pat mildly. "Got to have a cook, don't we?"

"I'm going to tell him right away. I'll do the cooking

for the few days I'm-we're-here."

"Wait 'til after dinner, anyhow," urged Pat. He couldn't help but wonder at this girl's calm acceptance

of such a strange situation.

Cholly Lee appeared at that moment with a huge bowl of stew in a rich brown gravy. Then he brought in steaming boiled potatoes, hot biscuits, and a black pot of coffee.

They sat down at opposite sides of the small table that had been brought in from the kitchen.

"The table that used to be here the bank people took away along with most of the rest of the furniture," Pat explained.

"Yes-the house is-pretty empty."

"Cleared out, almost. They left Dan just enough to get along with. Nice of 'em."

"This stew is marvelous," Sally threw in hastily.

"Tastes like--"

"Venison. Shot it yesterday. Thought we'd have somethin' better than sow belly for your first dinner."

There was a long silence, but finally Sally pulled herself together. "I—I don't quite understand how Dan lost everything he had," she said shyly.
"Dan didn't either." Pat's voice was grim.

"Please tell me."

"Most of it happened before I hit Powder Valley. I only know what Dan would drop now and then. It goes back some time."

"Tell me what you know."

So Pat told her the story he'd pieced together: of Dan's settling in Powder Valley years before and how everything at first had seemed to be going well. Then John Stout had moved in, and soon the brothers had quarrelled, Pat didn't know about what. They were different as night and day: Dan open handed, generous, an adventurer, not very practical and not very wise; John, a schemer, shrewd, ambitious, and unscrupulous. John had prospered mightily, but Dan's luck, according to what he had told Pat, had turned soon after John Stout hit Dutch Springs. Dan started down. John started up.

Then rustlers had become active, and year after year Dan lost a lot of stock. And nothing, it seemed, could be done about the rustling. The Sheriff and his posses not only couldn't catch the band of rustlers, but they

couldn't stop the rustling itself.

"Is it still going on?" Sally broke in.

"Not if you're a member of the Powder Valley Protective Association," Pat grinned.

"What's that?"

"Why, about three years ago your brother-in-law decided that rustling must stop, so he formed the Association. He's President."

"Well?"

"If you join the Association and pay the dues, and turn around on a half dollar every time you're told to, it's funny, but the rustlers don't bother you much. But Dan, he wouldn't join.—Would you kindly pass the molasses?"

"And he lost cattle?"

"Yeah, it don't pay not to join up—in Powder Valley. The rustlers don't seem to have no respect for ranchers who aren't members. Other things happen, too."

"I see," said Sally thoughtfully.

"Well, then came the train wreck. That was last year. Dan loaded over a thousand head of cattle at Hopewell Junction for Kansas City. A few miles out of Hopewell the train got wrecked—the most mysterious train wreck this state's ever had, I reckon. Nobody ever could discover any good cause for it. The cattle that weren't killed or injured escaped and never showed up again."

"Poor Dan."

"Then Dan borrowed from a rich rancher down the valley and started over again—with a small lot of horses this time. He figured he could watch the horses if he kept 'em near the ranch. But they started dying off on him. His loan came due just after I hit the Valley and he'd taken me on. He finds that the bank has taken the loan over. Of course he can't pay it off. The bank steps in and takes whatever's left—leaving Dan a gutted ranch."

"Poor Dan," Sally repeated softly. "And you, Mr. Stevens, why are you here?"

"Workin' for Dan."

"Yes, I know, but you're not a regular cowpuncher. At least you don't seem like one."

"Horses is my business. I'm a horse wrangler."

Sally shook her head. "Why did you come to Powder

Valley?"

Pat was silent, wondering just how much to explain. Then his native caution came to the fore. "Well, Mrs. Stout, things got a little uncomfortable where I was, and I figured I might as well look over Powder Valley and see if there was anything here for me. They don't ask you many questions around these parts."

"I see," Sally said again. Her eyes were troubled.

Pat dug down into an inside pocket of the vest he'd slipped on over his shirt. "Here's the will," he muttered. "It will have to be filed, or whatever you do with wills."

The girl nodded absently. "Keep it for me.-I suppose I'd better get rid of the Lazy Mare. Who'd want the ranch anyway?"

"John Stout seems to," Pat said drily.

"What would it bring?" Her voice was listless. Her

mind was obviously on something else.

Pat shrugged. "Not much—as things are. You know, Mrs. Stout, if I was wanting to sell this ranch, and wanting all I could get, I'd pretend I had money, that I was going to stock it and run it myself."

"All right.-Will you go now, please, and tell Cholly

Lee he's safe and no one thinks he-"

Without a word Pat went toward the kitchen. In five minutes he was back.

"The Chink is leaving pronto. Says he's going to walk into Dutch Springs tonight," he said. "Doesn't like it here. Says he-" He stopped, realizing that Sally wasn't hearing a word he was saying. She was sitting with her head buried in her arms, sobbing her heart out. He turned quietly and left the room. Down by the corral he whistled softly. Nigger and Darky heard him and came trotting over to the gate that he'd opened.

"Good lads." He talked to them confidentially as they followed him out. "No, I guess we don't ride tonight. And I guess we hang around Kidney Bluff a while longer. Seems as though we can't go off and leave the girl alone. She might be a whole lot worse, that girl."

He led the horses up to a small lean-to shed that adjoined the bunkhouse, and shut them in. He always did that now. If anyone came during the night looking for horses he would hear them. Then he went to bed.

Hours later Sally found herself suddenly wide awake. At first she couldn't remember where she was. Then she remembered—remembered dragging off to bed in the small bedroom at the back of the deserted ranch house—remembered the one stiff chair and the narrow cot with the worn blanket, the hooks on the wall where she had hung her clothes, the smoky oil lamp that had reeked long after she had blown it out.

It was pitch dark. She wondered what had waked her up so suddenly. She heard a mournful coyote baying at the moon—far away, and nothing else. Then a noise that wasn't far away—a stealthy noise, like someone

moving around in the front part of the house.

Tense, she sat up in bed and listened. There it was again. It couldn't be Cholly Lee. She had heard him start off for Dutch Springs hours before. It couldn't be Pat Stevens. She had watched him going to the bunkhouse followed by the horses and had seen his light go out a few minutes later.

She was afraid. The door to her room opened into the hall and the hall led to that noise. There was the window, though. She could slip out through the win-

dow and wake Pat.

Quickly and silently she got up, and slipped into her dress. Lifting her skirts high she clambered over the sill of the open window and dropped to the ground. Then she waited breathless to see if anything was going to happen. The coyote again. That was all—except her heart; she could hear that beating. She could see the bunkhouse a hundred yards away. Pat was sleeping there. She started running.

At the door she hesitated, then opened it, stepped inside, and swiftly closed it behind her. It was black and

silent, almost as though there were no one there.

"Mr. Stevens-" she whispered.

No answer.

"Mr. Stevens-wake up-Pat!" she cried desperately into the silence.

She groped her way forward, and then stumbled over something hard. She leaned over. It was a cot bedempty, with the blankets thrown back. He wasn't there.

Terror swept over her, and she sank down on the cot, trying to think. Should she stay there, or return to the ranch house, or flee into the night? Then she became conscious that her right hand was touching something hard and cold on the bunk beside her. She explored. It was a cartridge belt, with a holstered revolver. Mechanically she pulled the gun out and ran her hand over it. It seemed so big in the darkness, the biggest gun she'd ever known. As she felt the weight of the heavy Colt in her hand she felt less helpless. She was armed now. And she knew how to shoot. As her fear subsided, she began to feel angry. After all, this was her ranch, and whoever was sneaking around the ranch house didn't belong.

A Colt .44. She'd practiced with one often, at targets; too stiff for her to hit much with if she tried to pull

it over with trigger, but if she cocked it first—. The fighting instinct to protect what belonged to her swept every other thought out of her mind. She even forgot to ask herself what had happened to Pat Stevens. And if anyone had reminded her that she was going out with a gun in her hand to shoot, not at a rusty tin can, but at what might be a man, she would have dropped the Colt in horror. As it was she jumped to her feet, made for the door, and slipped out into the night.

Pat never was able to say afterwards what had waked

him up.

When he sat up in his bunk, the night was still. But he trusted his instinct too much to slip back into the blankets without investigating. He jumped out of bed, jerked on a pair of trousers and a shirt, and reached for his guns. He buckled on only one; tossing the other on his bunk he reached for his 44-40. A rifle might come in handy.

He started first to check on the horses—they were undisturbed. He stood still, listening. Only a coyote's weird baying came to him. He could see nothing in the blackness, only the deeper shadow of the ranch house ahead of him. He might check that up, too. He

started across the open space.

Suddenly through the night came the whinny of a horse. Pat crumpled to the ground as silently as a falling leaf. That hadn't been one of his horses whinnying. It had come from beyond the barn, probably the gully that ran off toward the creek. And that was no place for a horse right then. Just a look around the house and then he'd go into that strange whinny in the gully.

Every sense alert, he began crawling toward the big cottonwood halfway to the ranch house, his rifle dragging behind him through the grass. Once shielded by the tree, he rose cautiously. The whole front of the house looked as usual, except for one square blacker than the others—The girl must have left the living room window open. He hoped she was a sound sleeper.

Suddenly his nerves clicked like so many triggers. From that black square had come a faint grating sound, a strange halting noise. Pat knew that sound—someone was stealthily pulling open the drawers of the desk.

Searching-

He dropped to the ground again, propped his rifle against the cottonwood, and inched his way toward the black square. Twenty-five yards. Twenty yards. Then there was a blinding flash from the bushes hard by the house—the bark of a gun. Pat shot back into the bushes once—rolled swiftly to the right, leapt to his feet. In great zig-zag jumps he made for the near corner of the house. Once sheltered, he shoved his hand around the corner and sent two shots singing down the side of the house, low into the bushes. Then he waited. There was no answering fire. With a panther-like spring he went through the kitchen window and made straight for the living room, re-loading as he went.

The house was as still as death. Pat moistened his lips. Was there still someone bending over that desk, or hiding behind a door? And someone outside on guard? Each

waiting to kill?

He wondered about the girl. Hoped to hell she'd had the good sense to crawl under the bed and stay there.

The living room door was wide open. Pat froze again, and stood there hardly breathing. One minute. Two minutes. Then he began edging into the room—and at that instant came the sound of galloping hoofs from beyond the barn. One horse.

Pat dashed into the black living room. It seemed empty. From where he stood far back in the room he sent a shot through the window just above the sill, then

ducked. On his hands and knees he found the wall and followed it around to the front window. He stood there breathless, sheltered for the moment, waiting for the man in the bushes below him to make some movement. There was nothing except the fast fading sound of galloping hoofs. Perhaps one of his first shots had actually hit the man in the bushes! He'd only had the flash of a gun to shoot at, but—

Recklessly he stepped in front of the window to look out. A second later there was a blinding flash from the right and as he dropped to the floor he felt his left arm tingle, and cursed himself for a damn fool. Served him right. He felt his arm. Just nicked a bit of the skin, apparently. Lucky he wasn't dead, at that point blank range. That gun had only been about eight feet away.

Cautiously, he started for the back hall window, the blood from the wound in his arm trickling down his arm as he crawled. He slipped out through the window, and skirted the house like a shadow, till he came to the

corner.

There, six feet away, crouched down by the bushes was a dark form. From its outline Pat could tell it was watching the window. It stirred, and he could see a revolver. The hand that held it didn't seem very steady. No wonder he'd only been winged in the arm. Pat felt a sense of disappointment. This was too easy. He was making out more and more of the figure now. There was something peculiar about it. Then suddenly he knew. It was a woman—in skirts. He almost dropped his gun.

He thought rapidly. If he spoke to her, she might lose her head. There was only one thing to do. He dropped his Colt into its holster and with two quick steps forward seized her wrist in a vise-like grip.

"It's all right," he said quietly, as she gasped in terror.

"It's Pat."

"Oh, you—I——" she murmured incoherently. Then she pulled herself together. "Quiet, Pat, there's someone in that room."

"The man you shot at just now?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"That was me," he snapped.

"Oh!"

"We both seem to have been potting at each other. Didn't hit you in the bushes, did I?"

"In the bushes? I wasn't in any bushes."

Pat swore. This was getting too involved. "You didn't fire at me, coming across from the cottonwood, from these bushes?"

"No."

"How long you been here?"

"I-I don't know. I slipped around the corner of the house just after someone shot twice in front."

"Where did the man in the bushes go?"

Sally shook her head. "The only one I saw was a man who ran across the open space down there by the barn. I thought he'd come from back of the house."

Swiftly Pat plunged into the waist-high growth under the window, and leaned over. In a moment he was back

beside her.

"He's still there," he said grimly. "Dead."
"Oh! I've never-What's it mean-what--"

"Don't know. It seems to be over, though. Where'd you get the Colt?"

"It's yours. Here--"

"For the love of Black Mike!—Well, come on inside. We got to get—"

"That man in the bushes!" she broke in.

"He don't mind waiting. I want to get my arm fixed."

"Your arm?"

"Where you plugged me."

"Oh, Pat, did I hit you?" Sally cried in horror.

"Just a nick," he grinned. Then he stopped suddenly in his tracks. "What about that guy's horse? Only one horse went away."

"Come in quickly and let me see your arm!"

Pat, paying no attention to her, started toward the barn. "Wait here. I'm going to see about that horse."

"I won't stay here alone! I'm coming with you."

"Quiet then. Don't come beyond the barn."

Silently they crossed to the far corner of the barn. "Take the gun, and wait here," Pat whispered. "I'll be back in a minute."

He stole on, and down the rocky gully where he thought he had heard the whinny. Yes, there ahead, with reins dangling on the ground was a horse, ears alert, watchful. Pat began singing softly so as not to startle the nervous beast, came up slowly, and grasped his bridle.

He led the horse back to the barn where Sally was waiting.

"Does your arm hurt much?" she asked.

"No. Seems we've won a horse in this war. The bird who got away must have left it hoping his pal could make a getaway, too."

"But what did they want? There's nothing here to

steal."

"They came for something all right, but they didn't get it, I bet. We'll put this horse away in a shed where no one will see it for a while."

"Your arm—"
"It's all right."

Sally went with him while he unsaddled the pony and shut it in a lean-to shed by the barn. Then he retrieved his rifle from the cottonwood tree, and finally they entered the ranch house kitchen.

While Sally busied herself building a fire to boil water,

she told him of hearing a noise in the house and running

to the bunkhouse for help.

"It begins to make sense," he nodded. "There's two of 'em. Maybe after the will. One goes through the window and the other watches outside. I must have got him by bull luck the first time I fired. Then the man inside thinks it's all up, and skins out the back way and away for his horse. I go in through the kitchen, and you and I start shooting at each other. Glad you're not a better shot."

"I-I was nervous. I'd never shot at a man before."

Sally began washing his arm and bandaging it.

"What's that you're using?"

She flushed. "Part of a petticoat. I couldn't find any-

thing else clean."

"If we're going to entertain often, we'll get some bandages," Pat grinned. He picked up a lantern. "I'd better see about the guy who's stayin' overnight," he said and disappeared.

In ten minutes he was back. "Never saw him before,"

he announced.

"I-I can't get used to how casual you are about it all," Sally murmured. "It's-horrible."

"Sure; this is Powder Valley."

"Where-what did you do with him?"
"Put him in the barn." He flung a strange cartridge belt and a six-shooter down on the floor. "Well, I guess

everything's safe for tonight. Better get to bed."

Sally looked at the gun and turned quickly away. "Would you mind—would you, please," she asked with unhappy embarrassment, "stay up here at the ranch house just for tonight? I'm still—sort of shaky."

"Sure. I'll bed down in the big room." She looked her gratitude and left him.

Sam Comes in Handy

Drowsily Pat opened his eyes and drew his arm free of the blankets that were covering him. It was his left arm. At once he was wide awake and cursing left arms roundly. Flesh wound or no flesh wound, the damn thing hurt when flung around.

He stood up and grinned as he remembered where he was and why he was sleeping on the buffalo robes in a corner of the big room. And then he grinned some more as the welcoming smell of coffee and frying meat assailed his nostrils.

There was a sound of bustling activity in the kitchen. He liked that. Six in the morning apparently was quite natural to Sally.

He went out and doused his head in good icy water. Should he shave? No, that would be too much, but he did go down to the bunkhouse for a clean shirt and a fresh handkerchief for his throat. Then he came back to the kitchen door.

"Morning."

She wheeled around. Her face was flushed from the fire and her hair wasn't very tidy—spilled around her face in small curls. She smiled and pointed to the things on the stove.

"Good morning . . . and how hungry are you?"

"Plenty. What'd you find to cook?"

"Oh, plenty for one breakfast, I guess." She laughed.

"Some oatmeal, one egg, and biscuit makings. One single egg. Where--"

Pat grinned.

"We got one hen, that's where. One single hen." He pointed out through the window. The old red hen was solemnly pecking at the gravel outside the kitchen door. "Susy Rose I call her," Pat said, "and she's a darling, sure enough. When you least expect it, you have another egg in your kitchen."

Breakfast was good-humored and hearty. Pat couldn't believe his eyes-the oatmeal was flaky and firm, not the pasty glue that Cholly Lee used to ladle out; the fried salt pork in big thick slices was golden crisp at the edges; the hot biscuits were the fluffy light-brown variety that a man disposed of by the half-dozen; the coffee was strong and black and fragrant.

"The valley folks give strangers a warm welcome, don't they?" drawled Pat. It was the first mention of

the preceding night's affair.

"How's your arm?" she said quickly. "I worried all night about that."

"It's nothin'. Probably won't even need a bandage

after today."

"I can't believe it happened, really, or that there's a

dead man lying--"

"Don't forget the live horse," urged Pat. "Worth more than a dead skunk any day."

"But he isn't yours-ours."

"He sure is. Findin's keepin's. An' this ranch needs stock bad. Funny thing, there's no brand on that horse."

"The whole thing's funny to me-and terrible. If it was the will they wanted-but why-who-could want that will bad enough--"

Pat changed the subject hastily.

"Guess I've got to get down to Dutch Springs and tell the Sheriff 'bout the lad outside," he said.

"Will they do anything about it-to you?"

He grinned. "No-o-o. I don't think the Sheriff will decide to do much investigatin' of last night's shootin', and no one in the Valley will identify the bird that got shot. Probably'll have him buried pronto."

Sally drew back. There was a pause. Then she rose determinedly. "We need some more food," she said. "Until I decide what I'm going to do, we've got to eat."

Pat nodded. "There's another thing, too. I want that will of Dan's to get going away from here today. Even if I have got it cached pretty smart—"

"My lawyer. I'll send it to him."

"What lawyer?"

"Bill Freeler—back in Denver, I mean. He's been lawyer to everybody in my family for about twenty years. Why don't we send it today?"

"Good. That's just what we do. Registered mail right from the post office at Dutch Springs. Then this Freeler

can do whatever you do with wills."

"All right. Let's get started." Sally was gathering the tin cups and plates together, and noticed that Pat was staring at her. She went on silently, carrying the dishes to the kitchen, coming back for more. All the while he sat and watched her, a frown on his face.

"You figurin' on going to town, too?" he asked at

last.

"Why not?"

"I was aimin' to ride-not to drive."

"Well, I've got a horse," she grinned. "You said so yourself."

Pat shook his head. "You're not goin' to ride him to town, though, for lots of reasons. Besides, he may be mean. I suppose you might be able to ride Darky," he said at last, doubt all over his face. Women were problems in lots of ways.

"I can ride," she said shortly, "and I've got riding clothes."

"Oh, I don't mean like city riding," he said. "I mean

ride "

Her eyes flashed. "And I mean ride."

"What you ride in?" He surveyed her long house dress dubiously. "Darky's never had a woman on his back, and I don't think he'd like those fancy flappin' riding skirts you women wear. Likely he'd go clean crazy."

"All right, then. I'll wear boots and-trousers." She was flushing. "I brought some-for walking."

"You can't ride through Dutch Springs in pants," said Pat decisively.

"Oh, yes, I can," she laughed, and was gone.

Ten minutes later she came back. She had on a flannel shirt and a pair of corduroy trousers tucked into boots that laced up to her knees. Her hair was bound down with a red bandana. Pat looked his amazement. It was the first time he had seen her in anything but voluminous skirts. Suddenly he realized how small and slender and young she was. Why, she looked like a boy-sort of. Only her curly hair peeping out from under the red bandana and her delicate complexion, and the soft curves of her body didn't seem like a boy's at all.

"You look like a man-almost, and kinda tough," Pat

chuckled.

"Come on, stranger, let's git," she growled in a deep voice out of the corner of her red mouth, jerked a thumb over her shoulder, and swaggered toward the door. Pat followed her, but when he reached the door, he stopped. Far off down the road a single horseman was approaching. They watched him come nearer.

"It looks like John Stout," decided Pat. "Probably comin' to welcome you to Dutch Springs-and maybe see if you're wantin' to sell him a ranch for a plugged nickel. Also to see what kind of girl his sister-in-law is."

"How in the world does he know I'm here?"

"He knows a lot. Told you that once."

"Oh, dear, I don't want to talk about the ranch now. I don't know yet—"

"Well, hold your cards close to your chest. Remember what I told you last night. Maybe you'll like him, anyhow—"

She made no answer. A few minutes later she was greeting Dan's brother politely but coolly. His face and manner were so unlike Dan's, and she didn't like the way he was staring at her riding get-up. She didn't even smile when he began to tell her that as she was a sort of relative he wanted to do everything he could for her. He and Dan—

"We're just starting off for town for some supplies," she cut in.

"Supplies?" Red John looked genuinely surprised. "For what?"

"For the ranch," Sally answered, looking just as surprised. "It's going to take a lot of stocking up to get the Lazy Mare in running order." She felt Pat's approval though she didn't meet his eyes.

"Running order?" asked Red John. "You fixing to

stay awhile?"

"Oh, of course." She sounded very breezy and confident. "I'm going to stock up and run the Lazy Mare. I've always wanted to live on a ranch. I don't know much about it, of course, but Mr. Stevens here has said he'd be my foreman. He says it's one of the best ranches in the Valley."

"Oh, I see." Red John's face was like a mask but he had begun twisting his red ear. "I kinda thought—" He stopped. "Could I talk to you alone, Mrs. Stout?"

She nodded carelessly. Her eyes were bright and confident.

"Will you get the horses saddled, Mr. Stevens? I'm

sure what Mr. Stout has to say won't take long."

Pat strolled out slowly, and disappeared in the direction of the corral.

"Well?" demanded Sally.

"I-well, nothin' much. I thought maybe, bein' Dan's own brother, and feelin' sorry for his widow, I'd try to help out by buying the place-sort of takin' it off your hands."

"Buy it right off, as is?" Sally sounded mildly in-

terested.

"Well, of course, it ain't worth much, as is," he replied. "But my ranch is right next, and it'd be worth more to me than anyone else."

"No, I don't suppose it is worth much," admitted Sally, a slight note of discouragement creeping into her

voice.

Red John sounded more interested.

"No, sure as you're alive it ain't. And what would a girl like you do with a ranch? I was figurin' we might get together and talk business right away. You'll probably be wanting to go back to your folks soon as you can."

"Oh, no, I won't. I'm in no hurry," she said firmly.

John Stout decided on another tack.

"You know much about this man Stevens?" he asked in a suggestive tone.

"No, why?" The unexpected question caught her off

guard.

"'Cause, maybe you should. I'm sort of worried at the idea of my brother Dan's widow—wa-al, this Stevens's a pretty bad actor from what I knows of him."

"What do you mean?"

"Wa-al--" Stout was examining his nails now.

"Sheriff Parsons thinks he come to Powder Valley hidin' from trouble. He don't tell a straight story about where he's from."

"That doesn't prove anything!"

"An' I seen things myself. I seen him cheatin' a poor drunk cowboy out of about forty dollars at poker—"

"It's a lie," flared Sally.

John Stout looked at her in real surprise. "No, it ain't a lie," he said. "I tell you I seen it. So did Joe at the Gold Eagle. And what's more, this Stevens starts to take the drunk home, knocks him over the head, and robs him of the rest of his jack."

"I suppose you saw that, too," Sally threw in sarcas-

tically.

"No, I didn't see that, but I know he did it."
"Then why doesn't the Sheriff arrest him?"

"The Sheriff's waitin'—to get him cold. I tell you, Stevens is a bad egg."

There was the sound of steps outside the kitchen.

"Sorry to break in, ma'am, but we ought to get goin'."
Sally couldn't tell from Pat's voice whether he'd heard
Stout's last words. She turned to him. "I was just telling
Mr. Stout I plan to run the ranch awhile myself."

Pat nodded.

Red John's face worked. "All I can say is," he said significantly, "there's nothing good been goin' on around the Lazy Mare for a long time now. I hate to see a lone girl bucking up against the run of hard luck that's follered this here ranch—and prob'bly will keep on follering it for some time."

Pat's eyes narrowed. "I guess Mrs. Stout ain't goin' to be scared off by any talk of hard luck," he said

quietly.

"No," said Sally, "I'm not."

"And anyway," Pat drawled, "maybe there ain't goin'

to be so much more hard luck comin' this way from now on, either. Matter of fact, after last night——"

"What happened last night?" asked Red John a little

too quickly.

"Nothin' much—we just had visitors—and I had to be kinda rude to one of 'em."

"Meanin'--"

"Wa-al, now-I had to shoot a little--"

"You're right free with your guns, Stevens."

"Maybe I am. Specially when folks come crawlin' around the middle of the night and start shootin'. Perhaps you'd like to come down by the barn and give a

look-see. Might be you know the bird."

"Why-would I-know him?" But he followed after Pat. They passed Red John's fine mustang on the way, where he was grazing calmly, and Pat sized the animal up quickly, but made no move to stop. In another moment they stood over the body of the dead rider.

"Nawp-never seen him in my life," said Red John. He turned away indifferently. "What you aimin' to do

with it?"

Pat seemed equally indifferent. "That's up to the

Sheriff, I guess," he said. "It's not my business."

"Seems a lot of trouble for everybody," said Red John. "I could send a couple of the boys down and carry him off somewhere and stick him under, theirselves."

"Sheriff'll want to see him and ask questions, seems to

me."

"I'll fix it with Stuffy. Just leave it to me, Stevens. You needn't say nothin' at all. The Sheriff's sort of upset

about what happened to Pete th' other day."

The two men looked at each other steadily. Pat was doing some quick thinking. Settling the matter this way suited his plans, too. He'd gain nothing by making trouble about last nights' affair. He'd learned one thing,

incidentally. Red John didn't tell Stuffy everything that went on. That was interesting.

"All right, Stout, you send a couple of boys over for .

him. It'll save everybody lots of time."

Pat looked around as he heard a rustle in the grass behind him. The horse had wandered over, lazily grazing as he came. Pat stroked his neck and looked him over with an experienced eye.

"Seems like he's got a swelling here on the fetlock," he said sympathetically, stooping quickly and raising the off fore foot a few inches. "No, it's all right."

The shoe was new, and showed almost no wear.

"Well, got to get goin' for town," said Pat, and started for Nigger and Darky.

"Stevens!" Stout called after him. "What happened to

this man's horse?"

Pat turned around. "Search me," he said, shaking his head. "Must have gone home."

Red John mounted and rode away thoughtfully-

headed for the Circle Cross.

A few minutes late Pat and Sally were galloping to-

ward Dutch Springs.

The minute Sally had gone near Darky, Pat knew it was going to be all right. She had met him halfway up to the ranch house as he was leading the horses up. She glanced at the stirrups, and shortened them herself. Then with one swift movement she was in the saddle.

Darky hadn't been so sure about this strange rider. As Sally's light weight swung onto him, he promptly started his protest. Up and up and up went his forelegs. Sally wasn't wearing spurs, but her heels dug into him and she brought him down with a sharp cut of the quirt that hung from her wrist. Then he tried bucking, but Sally didn't touch leather, and in a mad dash they were

off across the prairie, Pat following on Nigger, and for some reason feeling as pleased as though he'd taught Sally to ride himself. Finally she pulled Darky up, and from then on he listened to reason. Sally rode as easily as a man, thought Pat, glancing at her with appreciation. That helped. Suppose he'd have been unlucky enough to draw one of those city girls who couldn't be left alone on the ranch, couldn't take care of herself on a horse,—well, no use imagining. He had plenty of trouble ahead, anyway. But it was a piece of luck having Dan's wife turn out like this.

"Is that all there is to Dutch Springs?" asked Sally as

they came in view of the town.

"What did you expect?"

Sally saw two rows of gray, weather-beaten frame buildings straggling along the sides of what was obviously the main street. Off to the sides a few side streets, with a scattering of shacks and adobe huts, wandered off

until they disappeared into the prairie.

"There's two stores," said Pat, "and a saloon, a gamblin' house, a feed store, and tool house. That one brick building's the bank—your brother-in-law's bank. He had the bricks sent all the way from Denver. There's the hotel, over there to the left by the post office. Yonder's the saw mill. Dutch Springs's right proud of its saw mill."

"I was wondering where the lumber for the ranch building was cut. Where's the saloon?" demanded Sally.

Pat looked at her curiously. "Down at the far end of the street. Why?"

"That's where you play poker, isn't it?" she asked

guilelessly.

"What d'you mean?" demanded Pat.

"Mr. Stout says you're a right smart poker player." "So-o," he drawled. "So Red John's been climbin' up that tree. Told you other things about me, too, maybe?"

"Some."

Pat was silent. He found himself caring more than he wanted to admit what this girl thought of him, and yet strangely unwilling to explain. If she wanted to believe what she heard, why let her. He felt a surge of anger, and his eyes narrowed. "I told you Red John knows a lot," was all he said.

"I've never seen so many empty tin cans! They're

everywhere."

"Folks here eat mostly out of tin."

"And empty bottles!"
"Yeah, they drink, too."

And that was all they said to each other until, after mailing the letter with the will, they came to the general store.

"How long will you be?" Pat demanded.

"A few minutes."

"I reckon Nigger and I'll mosey over to the saloon. Saw a horse of a friend of mine outside, and I'd sort of like to speak to him."

"Will you come back here?"

"Sure. Get 'em to put your stuff in two sacks, loose in the middle, and we'll sling 'em back of the saddles."

Pat waited to see if she'd drop Darky's reins to the ground. She did, and he nodded with approval as he

wheeled Nigger around in his tracks.

Outside the Gold Eagle he counted seven ponies. Busy day. At the door he halted. Six figures in a group at one end of the bar, two of whom he recognized as Circle Cross punchers. One man at the other end, alone, facing the door. A dark, swarthy man, with a blue-black stubble on his face, and a very crooked nose. Squat and broad, dressed in dirty blue overalls. A filthy tan vest completed the picture. He and Pat stared at each other without a change of expression on their faces.

Pat went up to the bar, and Joe shoved him a bottle of whisky. Pat poured out three fingers. One of Stout's riders that Pat had recognized nodded to him. Then he turned back to his companions and whispered something in a low voice. There was a guffaw of laughter from the group. Pat was reflecting that Red John didn't keep his punchers very busy.

"Say, Stevens!" It was the man who had nodded to him. "I heah yuh got a housekeepah out at the Lazy

Mare."

Pat's eyes narrowed but he didn't answer. He realized he'd been a fool to come in here today, but he'd wanted to find Sam.

"Was that her ridin' by with yuh?"

Still Pat said nothing.

"The boys and I was just remarkin' we never seen a gal wearin' pants before on a hoss. And such a good lookin' wench, too! Yuh wouldn't hog it all, would yuh, Stevens, and not evah ask us ovah—"

Pat had taken two swift paces toward the speaker, cut up with his left in a short, ugly jab to the jaw, and the

puncher crumpled onto the floor and lay still.

The group of five men was stirring uncertainly and Pat watched every move. He didn't want to go for his guns, but if he had to—

"Stevens." It was the lean pock-marked rider, and there was a snarl in his voice. "You've made a mistake."

"Who says so?" Pat drawled.

"I do."

"You couldn't prove it, could you?"

"Maybe I could," and the puncher's right hand started casually wandering up across his chest toward his left arm pit.

Pat's two guns flashed out of their holsters as he sprang back to cover the group. "Put 'em up, you, way up—all of you," he snapped. "And you, too, Joe."

Twelve hands went up, and fast. They'd seen Pat's

eyes. They were murderous.

"You're a lousy stinkin' litter, ain't you?" Pat observed scornfully. "Polecats with white bellies shouldn't talk about ladies."

"You'll blister for this, Stevens," muttered one of the

men.

Pat regarded them for a moment, then contemptuously crossed to the bar, dropped one gun back in its holster, and with his free hand drank off his whisky. The Circle Cross men watched him in sullen silence. Joe, behind the bar, was white as a ghost. He'd seen this man shoot.

With his Colt still on the group, Pat half turned toward the swarthy man behind him who had watched the scene with darting eyes but had not even shifted his elbow off the bar. "Hey, you!"

Sam shuffled forward without speaking.

"What's your name?"

"Sam Sloan, an' what's it to yuh?"

"Keep calm, stranger. Might be worth your while. Ever seen you before?"

"Not that I know."

"From these parts?"

"Naw."

"Workin'?"

"Naw."

"You know which end of a gun goes off?"

The man grinned, showing yellow, wolfish teeth, and

tapped his left armpit.

"Yeah?" Pat nodded. "That's where the guy over there with the spotted face who tried to draw on me carries his, too. Got a horse, I reckon?"

The stranger pointed to the hitching rack outside.

"Want a job?"
"What doin'?"

"You're damn particular.-Thirty a month."

"When?"

"Right now."

"All right.-Yuh want 'em lightened?"

Pat nodded, and, without further word, Sam slouched over to the group and began methodically stripping them of their guns.

"You'd better start ridin' when you leave, and keep goin'," growled the pock-marked puncher. "Powder

Valley's goin' to be mighty hot.".

"Don't forget that shoulder holster," suggested Pat, ignoring the remark, "and see what Joe's got behind the bar."

Sam had pulled a bandana off one of the riders and was stringing the guns on it like a lot of fish. "What'll

I do with 'em?" he demanded.

"Tie 'em to one of the cayuses, and start him off," grinned Pat. "Might turn all those ponies loose. The boys say they don't want to ride today."

When Sam returned, he looked at Pat for instructions. "Now just entertain 'em for a few minutes till I come

back. You ride with me."

Sam pulled a mean, short barrelled pistol out from under his arm, and took his place at the bar. "Don't hurry. Hey, yuh, Joe, a shot o' whisky while I wait."

Pat holstered his own gun, and, with one look behind him, left the saloon, vaulted into the saddle and started

for the store where he'd left Sally.

She was waiting.

"Sorry I was so long. Here, let's get these sacks tied on right so they'll ride."

"Did you find your friend?"

"Yeah. I found him. He's comin' with us. His name's Sam Sloan."

"Coming with us?" frowned Sally. "What for?"

"He's goin' to work for you."

"But I don't need anyone to work. There's no work to do."

"That's what you think," Pat said grimly. "Sam'll come in very handy. Has already."

"I don't understand."
"You will sometime."

In silence they rode over to the Gold Eagle. Pat rode around the hitching rack and right up to the saloon door and whistled. Sam backed to the door. Pat pulled out the gun on the side away from Sally so she wouldn't notice anything wrong, and covered the Circle Cross group.

"I got 'em, Sam," he said quietly. "Fork your horse, and then we ride. Don't say anything to the girl."

An instant later, Sally found Darky following the two other horses on a run down the main street of Dutch Springs. For two miles the pace lasted, and then they slowed down. Sam had dropped behind to tighten his saddle girth.

"He's the most horrible looking man I've ever seen,"

Sally whispered to Pat.

Pat grinned. "He looks ornery, but you'll learn to like him. You can always count on Sam. I've known him for years."

"I don't understand," she repeated helplessly.

"You will.-Keep quiet, here he comes.-Glad you're here, Sam?"

"Might be if I knew what game we was playin'," Sam said pointedly.

"Seen Ezra?"

"Not to speak to. He looks me ovah like I wasn't there. How'm I goin' to get my regular guns? They're at the hotel."

"Ezra can bring 'em along. Let's get home, and we'd better get going a little faster, just in case—"

He set the pace, and kept at that steady gallop that eats up mile after mile.

Pat's phrase, 'Let's get home' kept ringing in Sally's mind as they rode. Queer, but she had already identified herself with the ranch, and that was a funny way to be thinking about it under the circumstances. Sally Phillips going home to a deserted ranch in company with a card sharper and a strange blackish man who looked as though for two bits he'd commit any sin in the Decalogue. What would her father have said? What would Dan have said? Poor Dan. 'Let's go home.' Home for a couple of days, perhaps. Home till she could plan what to do next, where to go. The sensible thing, the sane thing, was, as Pat had said, to get any kind of price she could get from John Stout or any other purchaser for the ranch, and go back to Denver—and to school. She shuddered at the thought.

The ranch house *could* be fixed up, though, to be a real home. And with some **stock!** The whole place could be transformed from the skeleton it was now to a living, breathing place. She would love it. It would be home

then. But what a job for a girl alone-

"What's that smoke way ahead?" called Sam suddenly.

"Someone clearing behind the Bluff somewhere and burning brush, I reckon," replied Pat absently. "It's not

grass smoke."

They rode on in silence through the hot sun, and it was well past noon when they came to the white posts that marked the Lazy Mare. They swept between the posts with slackening pace. Then suddenly as they came up on the little rise Pat jerked Nigger back on his haunches to a dead stand-still. Sally and Sam turned their horses in surprise. Pat was peering ahead intently. Sally followed his eyes but could see nothing except some smoke by the Bluff which the wind had apparently caught in a pocket and swept down from the other side.

Then she heard Pat curse, and he was off on a dead

run. Sam was close behind him, and Sally followed as if they were all in some queer fantastic race.

And then she saw.

Flickering here and there in the cloud of smoke were tongues of flame. Her heart seemed to stop beating. The smoke was drifting up from where the ranch house had been. She could see it more clearly now as they raced on—a few gaunt black timbers still standing, with the flames licking lazily in and out among the charred remains of what a few minutes before she had been thinking of as 'home.'

They halted a hundred feet from the gutted house and sat there on their horses in silence. Sally looked at Pat as though he could help her. She had never seen his face like that before—so grim and hard. She was almost afraid of him. Sam, she noticed, was also looking at Pat

curiously.

Then he turned to her. "I'm—sorry. My fault—I guess. I—should—of—known." The words were ground out one by one.

"It doesn't matter, I suppose," Sally managed to mut-

ter. "I reckon I must have left the kitchen fire-"

"Kitchen fire, hell!" Pat exploded. "It was almost out."
"Then what—"

"I'll get him! And when I do--"

"Who?"

"Who? Don't be a fool! That God damn, skulking brother-in-law of yours. That's who!"

"Oh!"

"That ain't language to use 'fore a lady, Pat," said Sam mildly.

"Go to hell!" raged Pat. Then he began to quiet down. "Well, that ends it. Stout wins *this* pot. I'll drive you over to Hopewell Junction in the morning, Mrs. Stout. But I'm stayin' around and—"

Now Sally's mind had been whirling. Gradually the

realization came to her that someone had deliberately burned her out, that someone was trying to drive her away from the Lazy Mare, from her own place. And she felt her anger rising and with it a new determination was born, a white hot decision that she knew was more elemental than anything she had ever felt before.

"I'm staying here," she announced.

Pat and Sam stared at her in amazement. Her red mouth was set and uncompromising.

"You can't!"

"My ranch, isn't it?"

"Yes, but if Stout'll do this to you he'll do anything. You got to go before anything else happens. Besides, there's no place for you to stay."

Sally pointed to the bunkhouse and the barns beyond. "Plenty of room down there. He forgot to burn those!"

Sam groaned. "You're plumb crazy, ma'am," he said

politely.

"I'm not going to sell this ranch, either," Sally cried stormily. "Understand? Not selling it—to anyone. I'm holding it. And if you're afraid to stay yourself, why go on off—now, both of you."

She wheeled Darky round on his haunches and rode

straight toward the bunkhouse.

"Now Will You Go Back to Denver?"

"Well, you two certainly don't seem very talkative,"

said Sally tauntingly.

It was ten minutes later. Pat and Sam, having turned the horses into the corral had just appeared at the bunkhouse.

"No, ma'am," offered Sam.

"Hmph," said Pat.

"I've thought it all out," Sally announced briskly, "and since you both seem still in a kind of daze because I propose to stay around—"

"I only think-" Pat started.

"Well, if you'd only not," she said, more softly. "Stop worrying so about me."

Pat turned away. Sam fidgeted.

"Anyway, I've decided that you two better move the cook stove out to the shed—that'll be the kitchen. It'll give you the big room and I can have the cubbyhole."

Suddenly Pat grinned.

"All right, ma'am," he said in Sam's lazy voice. "We'll fix things as you say—and get you moved in proper."

"Moved-I haven't a thing to move," Sally laughed

ruefully. "All my clothes burned up."

"Yuh sure look fine in those," Sam said gallantly.

"We'll find yuh a pair o' chaps now, and-"

"Lucky we got food in town, though, or we'd be hungry," she put in with a flush. "If you'll move the

stove, I'll start dinner. You can be shifting things around in here. Sam, you carry all those supplies around to the shed."

It was an order, and Sam started to obey. As Sally

disappeared, however, he turned to Pat.

"I'm not ordinary curious," he drawled. "Maybe I shouldn't ask. But if it ain't too much trouble and if yuh've got time, would yuh tell me what in hell yuh've got us into and what that spitfire's got to do with what we come to Powder Valley for?"

Pat grinned sheepishly.

"O' course," went on Sam, "I'm not sayin' she ain't worth a lot more than twelve thousand dollars to some, but—"

"It's all right," reassured Pat.

"No doubt. No doubt. Everythin' has been fine ever since we met up. First that little show in the Gold Eagle. Then the fire and what that means. Now we're goin' in for housekeepin' and movin' furniture. I ain't seen no train robbers yet, and speakin' of such things, what happened to yore left arm?"

"Got shot-by mistake," Pat grinned.

"Yeah? By whom?"

Pat jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the shack.

Sam stood there with his mouth open.

"I'll talk to you later," whispered Pat. "Nu-mi-nish!"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"That's Cheyenne for 'get going'," Pat snapped.

"Yuh sure can cook, ma'am," said Sam appreciatively

as he rose from the table two hours later.

"That's dinner and supper, both," Sally warned. "It's late, and I've still got too much dirt to clean out of the

bunkhouse to cook another meal today—and this shack! It's too much like a stable to suit me as a kitchen."

"I nevah need to feed again," Sam assured her.

"Reckon I'll water the hawses, Pat."

"Not the creek back of the corral," Pat said quickly. "There's a spring up under the Bluff beyond the ranch house. And there's an extra cayuse in the big barn. He'll

need feed, too. Lock him up again, afterwards."

Sam's left eyebrow went up, but he made no comment, and disappeared. He was wondering when Pat was going to explain things. Ever since the girl had taken command she'd had them working like niggers, cleaning, scouring, moving. He hadn't known how to refuse, and as for Pat, he hadn't seemed to care.

As soon as they were alone, Pat turned to Sally. "You can't stay here. I been waiting to talk to you until

Sam was out of the way." His voice was earnest.

"I'm staying."

"You don't know what's goin' on around here."

"A lot of things I don't understand. All I know is that everyone wants me to quit and I'm not going to. Even you want me to go."

"'Cause it's dangerous."

"That the only reason?" Her eyes were veiled.

"Of course."

"What are you doing here? You're not just a cow-

puncher looking for a job."

Pat was silent. It wasn't that he didn't trust her, but he remembered the stories she had heard from John Stout that morning, and he felt that she would have to learn to trust him.

"I can't tell you," he said shortly.

"It's because of what you're here for that you want me to leave," she challenged.

He rose suddenly and stood in front of her, legs apart,

hands on his hips.

"Sally!" His voice was curt, and she heard him call her by name for the first time with a strange sense of excitement. She looked up at him with a half smile.

"Yes-Pat."

"Get ready to chew on some tough grass. Can you stand it?"

She nodded, wondering.

"I told you how Dan's cattle was rustled away."

"Yes."

"All right. Well, that train wreck. That wasn't no accident.—Dan's horses that died. They were poisoned—right from that creek back of the corral that runs down through the Circle Cross. That's why I told Sam not to water there.—The bank callin' the loan. That was John Stout.—And Dan hangin' in the barn there across the way—"

Sally's face had gone white. Her eyes were glassy

with horror.

"That was murder!" Pat finished grimly. "Now, will

you go back to Denver?"

Frozen, she stared at him moment after moment as if trying to take in what he had said. Pat turned away abruptly across the room and returned to hand her a dipper full of water. She drank it mechanically. Color began to come back into her face.

"I'm staying here," she said in a low voice. "You and your Sam can go. No reason you should get mixed up in my troubles. I'll get someone else—from Dutch

Springs or somewhere," she finished lamely.

Pat was pacing angrily up and down the dirt floor of

the shed.

"You and Sam go on about your business-whatever it is."

Suddenly he halted in front of Sally and looked down at her. He realized at that moment that he loved her and that nothing else in the world mattered to him. He'd bring her through this mess. He'd dig John Stout out. He'd have enough money to stock the ranch, if his plans worked out, and—But she'd have to learn to trust him.

"Sally, I reckon Sam and I'll stay on. Chances are we can do what we have in mind right from here, an' keep

an eye on you, too. Two birds with one stone."

He flung out of the shed, and down by the corral hastily flung his big full-skirted saddle on Darky's back. Night had come. Except for the fireflies the only light in the world seemed to be the yellow flicker of a candle from the bunkhouse window.

Sam ambled up from the barn.

"Now, listen, Sam, I've no time to chin now. I'm tellin' you! We stay here. Sabe? I'm off right away for a couple of hours. Got to meet Ezra like I told him I would. Soon as I get back, we'll have a showdown. Hell's loose 'round the Lazy Mare. In that bunkhouse, and if you let anyone who ain't got good business get within a hundred yards—"

Sam nodded. "I get yuh. No loiterin' allowed." "Don't mind shootin'. I'm leavin' my rifle,"

"I'll clean it for yuh. Prob'ly needs it. And say-that rear cinch is mighty loose."

"You teach me how to saddle a horse! And there's

a Sharp's over my bunk."

"Yuh expectin' the whole U. S. army to call heah this evenin'?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," grinned Pat as he vaulted

into the saddle. "So long."

Sam watched him disappear, and then shook his head dolefully. "Skewed in the haid, if I ever seen one," he confided to the piebald pony that was nuzzling his hand. "Wait'll Ezra hears about me playin' nursemaid."

Tonight Pat reached the birch grove first. He rolled and lit a cigarette and lay down on his back to wait for Ezra. He had plenty to think about. Women weren't a new experience for him, but it was the first time that he'd ever admitted to himself that he was in love.

All too soon he heard hoofbeats, then a moment of quiet, followed by the rustle of branches as someone broke through the leaves leading a horse. Lazily Pat was thinking how surprised he'd be if it weren't Ezra.

But it was.

"Fore long Powder Valley's goin' to be too hot for comfort if you puts on many more Wild West exhibitions," Ezra announced drily. "The Circle Cross gang is plenty mad about your morning show in the Gold Eagle. Why the hell can't you keep out of trouble that don't consarn you, Pat?"

By the time Pat finished talking fifteen minutes later, Ezra had a very definite impression that whatever concerned the Lazy Mare and its new owner concerned

Pat Stevens rather vitally.

"Wa-al, that bein' the case, I reckon Sam and I can move on."

"What the hell d'you mean?"

"You sure can't guard the Lazy Mare and the gal night and day, and catch any gang of train robbers. -Unless perhaps you goin' to buy some cheese and set traps for 'em! But I'm just as glad. I never did--"

"We're gettin' what we came after, and don't bet against it."

"Oh, hell," sighed Ezra. "It's like a game I used to play when I was a kid. The Circle Cross boys are after you; you're after Stout; and Stout's after the Lazy Mare. Ought to be a lot of fun before we get straightened out. 'Fore I forget it, there's some news blowin' 'round town. I'm getting right intimate with Dobe and some of your friends from the other side of the Bluff."

"What kind of news?"

"Oh, nothin' much, only night after next old man Marshall down the valley's goin' to have callers."

"Meanin'?"

"Run off whatever horses he's got left around the ranch, I reckon. Mebbe burn him out some, too. Folks say he's been right stubborn about not contributin' as he should to the Protective Association. 'Bout time for another example, they say."

"The Circle Cross gang, of course."

Ezra nodded. "Marshall's two hands are away, drivin' a lot o' stock up to Pueblo. All he's got left at the ranch is a boy, and it seems to be a good time to clean him out on what he's got left without too much trouble."

"Know how many of 'em plannin' to attend?" Ezra sat up suddenly. "What's that to you?"

"Dan Stout always spoke of old Marshall as the only white man in the valley," Pat mused. "Hardly seems

right to sit by and see him ruined."

Ezra groaned. "Ain't there ever goin' to be an end of this? Aw, Pat, stay in the clear for once! Just to please me. There'll be a big gang on the job. What the hell could you do?"

"I sure hate to see that dirty blacksnake gettin' away with anything-Ez, you meet up with me here tomor-

row night early."

"Tomorrow night? Day after, I said."

"Tomorrow, right after dark."

"What for?"

"Don't know yet. Got to sleep on it. But better come ready to haze a few horses—just in case.—'Night."

A few hundred yards away from the bunkhouse Pat reined in, and put his hands up to his mouth. He didn't want Sam to do any experimental shooting in the dark.

"Whoo-Whoo-Whoo."

Pat frowned. His owl hooting wasn't as perfect as it once had been. Out of practice. But Sam would catch it.

He waited. And then again, "Whoo-Whoo-Whoo."

"Whoo-Whoo," from up by the bunkhouse.

He grinned. Good old Sam. It was a year since they

had used that signal. Now once. "Whoo."

A few moments later by the corral, a black figure emerged from the shadows. "Pretty sick owl somewhere out yonder," Sam drawled. "More like a bull frog."

"Anything stirrin' 'round here?" demanded Pat, drop-

ping out of his saddle.

"Naw-'cept chicken snakes. Been huntin' 'em out o' the bunkhouse all evenin'. She don't like snakes, Pat, even pore little chicken snakes.—An' I've been learned how to make beds right. Bet yuh a dollah yuh don't know how to make a bed right, Stevens. First yuh—"

Pat laughed.

"She gone to bed?"

"An hour ago. Pat, don't yuh go spittin' any 'bacca juice 'round the bunkhouse no more. Mrs. Stout and me, we've decided that it's not—"

"Listen, funny man, we've got no time for clownin'.

I got to explain to you."

"I'll say yuh have!"

"And it's late. This is as good a place as any. Sit down."

"Get on then," sighed Sam, sinking down on the ground and leaning against a fence post. "How 'bout some makin's?" He began to roll a cigarette.

"Sam, we're goin' to hold this ranch, we're goin' to put a halter 'round John Stout's fat red neck, and we're goin' to put that twelve thousand of rewards in our jeans, and I'll tell you why an' how."

And then Pat Stevens proceeded to tell him why and

how. Sam's eyes shone as he listened.

"And what does Ezra say?" he demanded when Pat finished at last.

"Talks like a sheep man, as usual."

Sam nodded. "Ez gets more kick out o' scarin' hisself to death than he would from a barrel of whisky. Just the same, it ain't no Sunday School picnic, Pat, an' if yore cat ain't up the tree yuh *think* he is, there's goin' to be hell to pay."

"Oh, sure."

"This heah waitin' 'round is what gets me, wonderin' if the Circle Cross boys are fixin' to call. If Ez is right about their turnin' ugly over today's little saloon-argument, one of us better keep watch most of the time."

"Yeah—and Ezra'll have to snake us out food from Dutch Springs. Won't be too healthy in town for a while, and we don't want any real trouble—at least in the open. But, Sam, you needn't worry 'bout nothin' to do. Tomorrow night we're goin' to rustle some horses."

Sam eyed his companion suspiciously. "We got four

hawses. Ain't that enough?"

He listened to the story of the Protective Association and old Marshall in silence. Then he sighed. "Guess Ezra's right. Yuh have gone loco."

"It's easy as saddlin' a three-legged mare. I ride over and talk to Marshall in the morning. Tomorrow night

we run his horses off--"

"Sure, we can hide 'em in the bunkhouse," snorted Sam.

"There's a natural corral up in the hollow on the Bluff, and there's water up there, too. A couple of hours' work would make it so's a hog couldn't break out."

"And then?"

"Then the next night Ezra and I go over and serve on the reception committee at Marshall's ranch. Without havin' any horses to worry about holdin', we can devote ourselves to being hospitable." "And what does it get yuh?"

"Well," meditated Pat, "it might put some of Stout's gang in the hospital for a time, and that's no waste of lead. Then, it's a pretty powerful scent crossin' the real trail and might keep Stout thinkin' about his local problems. Besides, it might not be so bad havin' Marshall for a friend from now on. And, Sam, I reckon I just naturally want to crack down on that skunk Stout every time he lifts his tail up."

"No more use talkin' about this, I suppose, than it was that night I tried to keep yuh from crossin' the floodin' Cimarron," grumbled Sam. "I kin see we're goin' to run hawses tomorrow night. And that bein' the case, we'd

better turn in."

"Only one of us sleeps at a time from now on," warned Pat. "I'll take it first. You hit the hay."

Sam rose with a yawn and started for the bunkhouse. Then he stopped and turned to face Pat, who was still lying in the shadow of the corral fence.

"And what happens to Ezra and me when yuh get

yuhrself married?" he demanded.

"Go to hell," snapped Pat.

The Sheriff Calls at the Lazy Mare

"Where's Sam going?" demanded Sally the next morning after breakfast as she watched the squat figure waddling down to the corral, his head and body thrown forward, his arms swinging, and his toes pointing in on his short steps—the typical walk of a high-heeled cow-

puncher in need of a horse.

"Sam?" Pat's tone was casual as he looked up from where he was sitting in front of the bunkhouse. In front of him, spread on a blanket, was an impressive array of firearms and ammunition: his own two six-shooters; his Winchester; a short, ugly-looking rifle that Sally had noticed slung on Sam's saddle the day before; the two guns Pat had brought into the house that first night after the fight; another brace of revolvers and a murderous-looking rifle Sally had never seen before. "Sam?" he repeated. "Oh, he just thought he'd like to have a look 'round. He'll be back before long.—That's a Sharp's rifle you're starin' at. Used mostly for buffalo."

"What'd he take that roll of wire for, and the tools?"
Pat grinned. "You've no idea how useful wire can be on a ranch, Sally. A man can do most anythin' with wire.
Guess Sam thought it just might come in handy."

"And what are you doing with that arsenal?"

"Just takin' stock of what's on hand and seein' how long we could keep 'em workin'," Pat replied mildly. "We're right short on some items." Sally shuddered. "Seems as though you had enough

there to wipe out an army."

"Well, Sam hasn't much ammunition for his rifle, and this blunderbuss that belonged to Dan don't fit anythin' else."

"Someone's got to go into town for some more supplies," observed Sally. "There's no pork left and all the flour got burned, and lots of other things and I've got to get some clothes." She looked down at her flannel shirt and the trousers and high boots.

"No one from this outfit's goin' to Dutch Springs for

a time."

"Why not?"

Pat shook his head. "Unhealthy town. Don't like to have nothin' to do with it."

Suddenly Sally remembered the story of Pat and the poker game, and the robbery, and the waiting Sheriff; the story Pat hadn't denied. She looked at him queerly. "If you're afraid to go into Dutch Springs, Sam and I could ride in."

"No, reckon not," Pat said definitely. "You make a list o' what grub we need and I'll have Ezra tote it out in a couple of days."

"Ezra? Who's Ezra?"

"Oh, just a friend of mine. You may meet him some day. He can't go buyin' no woman's clothes, though. He'll have to get you men's stuff."

"You've got a lot of queer friends," Sally flared up. Pat chuckled. "Thought you were beginning to like

Sam."

"Well, what if I am? I don't trust him, though."

"You don't trust me, either, do you?" Pat's eyes were on the barrel of his rifle where he was rubbing an imaginary spot of rust.

"I-I-oh, I wish I knew," she turned on her heel, dis-

appeared into the bunkhouse and slammed the door. In a few minutes she was back.

"Sorry I got mad, Pat."

"S'all right."

"But I'm-all mixed up. I don't understand. And what's going to happen? We can't just go on living here on this ranch like this, you and Sam and me, doing nothing."

"I wouldn't worry none, if I was you. Plenty's likely

to happen before long."

"What?"

"I don't know, Sally. But enough. Just hang on."

Sally's eyes were brooding over the rolling yellowgreen prairie, hot under the sun, relieved here and there by dull zinc colored sagebrush, frequent and dark patches of scrub oak, or the light green spots of yucca and cactus plants.

"Reckon I'll go for a ride," she announced suddenly.

"I wouldn't, if I was you."

"Why?"

"'Cause Sam's off and I don't like to leave the ranch alone."

"You don't have to come. I can go alone."

He shook his head. "You don't do any ridin' alone around these parts."

"What could happen-in the daylight?"

"I'm tellin' you." Pat's voice was curt. "You don't go anywhere without Sam or me, see?"

Sally flushed. "I can take care of myself! You're treating me like a baby—or a prisoner."

Pat shrugged. "Prob'ly won't be for long."

The door slammed again and this time Sally did not reappear. Pat slipped his own guns into the empty holsters at his side, gathered up the rest of the firearms, and followed her into the bunkhouse. The door to her room from the box-like hall was defiantly shut. He passed into the larger room where Sam and he had their bunks, and disposed of the heavy load. The rifles he put in a rack by the door. The extra revolvers with their belts he hung on the wall. He stood there a moment looking at them, and then took down one of Dan Stout's belts. He broke the Colt open, filled the six empty chambers, went out into the hall again.

"Sally!"

Her door opened, and the angry look on her face softened a little when she saw his twinkling eyes.

"Thought it might be a good idea if you had a gun o' your own to pack.—Then you wouldn't always have to be borrowin' mine when you wanted to do some fancy shootin'," he added.

Without speaking or looking away from his face, she took the heavy belt from him, and stood there with it

dangling in her hand.

"Put it on. Let's see how you look with a gun on your

hip."

All at once that radiant smile that Pat had only seen once or twice before transformed her face. She slipped the belt around her slim waist and buckled it on.

"Too big for you. The gun hangs too low. You'd

never get to it."

In a few moments Pat had a hole cut in the proper place, and the black holster hanging where it belonged. "I don't have to wear it, do I?" Sally asked.

"Depends how aggressive you're feeling." She jerked the gun out of the holster.

"A little slow on the draw," Pat grinned. "Ought to practice that. You might want to beat me or Sam to it

one of these days."

Impulsively Sally put her hand on his arm. "Pat, you're nice. You knew giving me this gun would make me feel better, didn't you,—less helpless?"

"I wouldn't give a gun to a baby or a prisoner," Pat

admitted. "But I'm tellin' you, you'd better practice that draw if you want it to do you any—— Say, that's horses! Someone's comin'!" In a flash he was at the door. "Someone on the road."

"Who is it?"

"Can't see yet. Looks though it might be—yes, it is—it's the Sheriff with someone else."

"The Sheriff!" gasped Sally, her mind on what Stout had told her.

"Yeah, Stuffy Parsons himself."

"What'll you do?"

"Do? Why, be hospitable, what do you think? When the Sheriff comes callin' you got to—But you, Sally, you tuck yourself away in that room o' yours and stay there."

"Why?"

"'Cause I say so," snapped Pat. "Hurry up."

The door slammed again.

Pat rolled a cigarette and waited. As the two horsemen came by the barn they halted. Parsons dismounted and advanced alone. Pat strolled down a few feet from the bunkhouse and waited for him, his thumbs caught in his belt, his cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"Stevens, I came out here to see you," the red-faced

man began blustering.

"Right nice o' you, Sheriff."

"What the hell you been doin' in Dutch Springs?" Pat's eyes opened wide. "Doin' in Dutch Springs? Nothin' special. Why?"

Parsons snorted. "Nothin' special, huh? What sort of

town you think we're runnin', anyway?"

"Waal, now that you ask me right out," Pat drawled, "seems to me Dutch Springs is one of the dirtiest holes I've ever watered a horse at. It's full of slimy bellied toads."

Parsons' face grew purple. "So you think you kin

disregard law and order! Well, you can't, Stevens."

"What the hell is bitin' you, anyway?" Pat's voice had grown softer as the Sheriff's voice had become

louder.

"I'll tell you what's bitin' me! A few days ago you was seen cheatin' at cyards. That's enough to keep you out of town. Then you knocks the man cold and lightens him of his wad--"

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes, I--"

"Then why don't you just arrest me and save all this palaver?"

"And yesterday you holds up the boys in the Gold

Eagle at the point of a gun and-"

Pat heard a gasp behind him from the bunkhouse. He grinned as he realized that Sally's window must be open and that she was overhearing everything that was said.

"So the boys sent you out to talk to me, did they?

What they want me to do, apologize?"

"No. sir. I came out here to tell you that you got just twelve hours to get out of Powder Valley, taking that black monkey you picked up yesterday with you."

"So-o-o. And if I shouldn't happen to want to leave

town?" Pat asked softly.

"Then," stuttered Stuffy Parsons, "you'll learn that this here is a law-abidin' community."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' you'll be 'rested and tried for robbery and

breakin' the peace."

"So-o-o. Well, now, Sheriff, I'll tell you somethin'." Pat's eves had narrowed and he leaned forward a little from the hips. "You get back on that horse o' yours and ride right back to town. You know where the bank is?"

"What d'you mean, askin' me if I know where the

bank is?"

"Cause I want you to stop in at the bank and give a message to the fella who made you ride way out here on such a hot day. You can tell Red John Stout for me that I'll bet him my two black broncs against that cayuse of his that he gets tried for murder before I get tried for robbery."

"What do you mean?" stuttered Parsons.

"Just tell him that. He'll understand. An' what's more, tell him that before he sends you out here with any warrant for me he'd better double the size o' his outfit and hope to rope in some *men* so's to back up your warrant, 'cause the dozen or so yellow dogs he's got yelpin' around his heels now ain't worth the powder and shot it would take to stretch 'em out."

Parsons was staring at Pat as though he couldn't be-

lieve his ears. He was beyond speech.

Contemptuously Pat swung on his heel and without paying any more attention to Parsons strolled slowly back toward the bunkhouse, entered, and closed the door behind him. Soon two horses galloped away.

Sally was standing in her doorway, her face like chalk.

"So it's true!"

"What's true, Sally?"

"That you-Oh, you know. I can't even say it."

Pat regarded her gravely, but did not reply.

"And yesterday—that's why we had to get out of town so fast—because you held up the saloon—while I was in the store!"

"Yeah, that's when it was," Pat admitted with a wry smile.

"I can't bear it," she cried. "You-you're just as bad as John Stout!"

"Maybe not quite."

"You can't stay here now. I understand now why you didn't want me to stay and have to be taken care of. Now you've got to go, of course."

"Why?"

"Because they'll come and get you."

"That the only reason?"

"You've got to go," she repeated dully.

"No, Sally, I'm stayin'. I reckon you don't quite understand. The only reason John Stout is *really* after me is 'cause I've signed on with you. He don't care what happens 'round here as long as you get out of his way.— That's Sam back. I got to talk to him."

"Oh, I can't bear it," Sally cried and disappeared in

the direction of the shack.

Swiftly Pat slipped into his chaps, buckled on his spurs, and picked up his big battered Stetson.

"Got the corral on the Bluff good and tight?" he de-

manded as Sam slouched into the room.

"It'd hold gophers," Sam assured him. "Who was that pair that I seen ridin' off as I came around the Bluff?"

"-and he called you a black monkey," Pat finished

his account with a grin.

"An' you stood right there and let him!" sputtered

Sam.

"Sam, if I pulled a gun on every man in Colorado I've heard calling you bad names, I'd be governor of the State. Only you an' me'd be left alive, and I'd never vote for you."

Sam snorted.

"Wa-al, what we goin' to do?"

"Do? I'm ridin' over to see Marshall. I'll pick up Ezra later. You're stayin' here," said Pat.

"Sure, but I mean do about Stout's latest play."

"You guess."

"An' if he comes in on us with about fifteen of the boys? Some of Stout's riders are mean when they ain't got their hands over their haids. Don't forget that."

"Stout don't look for wholesale trouble unless there's a big stake. He wouldn't even send the gang to Mar-

shall's tomorrow night if he didn't think it was like takin' candy from a baby.-And say, while I remember it, Sally Stout thinks we're crooked as snakes. If she tries to pump you, don't let on nothin'."

"Why not? She's a right one if I ever seen one."

"I got my reasons. Get our horses in the barn, and have the corral ready. Ezra and I'll run the herd in, and then we'll drive 'em up the Bluff trail in small bunches to the corral. 'Bout one o'clock, I'd think. So long."

A moment later he appeared in the doorway of the lean-to shack where Sally was bending over the cook

stove.

"Any chance of somethin' to eat?"

"Dinner's not ready," she said shortly.

"Yeah, I know, but I can't wait. I got business."

Sally turned, and Pat could see that she'd been crying. "Pretty tough, ain't it, findin' out the world ain't made to order?" he said gently. "What's wrong in particular?"

"You-you and Sam," she blurted out. "I just can't

stand thinking of you as-not straight."

"Yeah, it's too bad about old Sam," Pat nodded soberly. "He sure got a bad start in life."

"Oh, I hate you," she cried, stamping her foot. "You don't take me seriously. Go on and saddle up. I'll have something ready for you when you're ready to ride."

"—Just Like You Would Any Other Rustler"

Par had been right. Once he was out of the way, Sally did try to pump Sam. They were sitting there over dinner when she began.

"You've known Pat a long time, haven't you?"

Sam nodded guardedly and buried his face in the tin

coffee cup.

"I'm—I'm sorry you've got so mixed up in my affairs. It must be interfering with—your business in Powder Valley."

Sam waved a hand magnanimously. "It's a pleasure,

ma'am."

"I suppose Pat told you about the Sheriff."

"Sure, but Pat he don't care nothin' for Sheriffs. Why, once I seen him—" Sam cut himself off sharply.

"Seen him what?" asked Sally grimly.

"Why I sort of forgot, but Pat's not afraid of nothin'. Why once he—" Sam swore to himself. He'd almost talked again. "Pat's right quick on the draw," he finished lamely.

"So? He was telling me this morning I ought to prac-

tice."

"Pat is fast," Sam said reminiscently. "So fast he don't often have to shoot."

"I reckon you have to be fast if you're a gambler," observed Sally bitterly.

Sam looked surprised. "Pat ain't no-Did Pat tell yuh he was a gambler?"

"No, but I heard about a game he was in a few days

ago down at the Gold Eagle."

"I'll bet he lost his shirt," chuckled Sam. "He always does."

"No, he won a lot-by cheating."

The table went over with a crash as Sam sprang to his feet. His face was working.

"Who the hell tole yuh that lie? Pat Stevens'd cut

off his right hand before he'd cheat at cyards."

"He didn't deny it himself," said Sally in a low voice. "Pat knows yuh think he's a crooked gambler?" demanded Sam incredulously.

The girl nodded miserably.

"And he—See heah, ma'am. I don't know what this all's about, an' I shouldn't be sayin' nothin'. But you like Stevens, don't you?"

Sally nodded again.

"An' yore sort of worried 'cause yuh don't like to think of him as a cyard sharp?—Well, yuh go right on likin' him, yore on the right side of the line. I rode for his dad 'fore he was born. When he was six, I set him in a saddle and walloped the hawss so's he'd run—that's how the Indians teach a boy to ride. I saw him shoot his first antelope. I waited for him to come back from that fool school, an' I been trailin' him ever since."

And Sam stamped out of the shack not at all sure he had not disobeyed orders and not caring if he had. Ste-

vens was a fool.

Sally had trouble getting to sleep that night. The last three days seemed like some strange dream as she lay there wide awake. The first news about Dan seemed so long ago. She'd lived years since she'd heard that Dan was dead. Then that first night, and the shooting, and John Stout, and the visit to town, and the ranch house in ruins. And strange, swarthy Sam with his rolling eyes. Queer how much better she felt about Pat after Sam's outburst at dinner about the cheating. Sam had avoided her ever since, and had been almost silent all through supper.

And where was Pat? Gone all day, since noon. Sam didn't seem worried, but she was. There was so much she didn't understand. Sam was stirring around outside now, keeping guard. Was this Sally Phillips, school

teacher?

Finally she drowsed off.

A few hours later she awoke with a cry. She'd been dreaming that she was riding Darky, racing over a flat mesa, and all around her were other horses racing, thousands of wild black horses pressing in on her, and the thunder of their hoofs was deafening.

But that was the rumble of horses' hoofs, many horses.

And she was wide awake. It was growing louder.

She jumped out of bed and ran to the window. But everything was dark, and she could see nothing. She could hear, though. The noise came from the left, the roar of many hoofs, unmistakable, indescribable.

"Sam," she called, as she pulled on her trousers. "Sam."

There was no answer.

She started for the door, then remembered the Colt Pat had given her. She groped around on the floor by her bunk until she felt the leather belt and the cold cartridges, and buckled it on. A moment later she was out in the cool night. Instinctively she had known that Sam wasn't in the bunkhouse. But she didn't know where to go or what to do. The horses were almost at the ranch now. She could hear them. Sam must have fallen asleep somewhere. How could she find him before it was too late? Perhaps the noise of a shot—

She pulled her Colt out, and pointing it in the air shot twice.

An answer came from down by the barn-a roar.

"Put that damn gun up!" The command was followed by a burst of profanity.

A figure rode out from the shadow of the barn, and came toward her. Sally recognized Sam and realized that he was still cursing.

"I thought you were asleep somewhere and I'd wake

you up," she explained apologetically.

Sam threw up his hands in disgust. "Go back in the house, or yuh'll get ridden down."

"What is it?" Sally demanded.

"Hawses that has been hazed for fifteen miles and it's goin' to be hard enough to get 'em in the corral without yuh and that gun, ma'am. Yuh'll stampede 'em if yuh let off any more fireworks. Heah they come now! Git in there, quick!"

Sam wheeled and took up his station halfway between the bunkhouse and the heavy corral gate which was swung way out blocking most of the passageway.

Then suddenly around the corner of the barn came a horse, his muzzle stretched out in front, his tail straight out behind, his ears flat, and his legs working like jack knives under his body that lay close to the ground. At the sight of Sam's gesticulating figure, he ground to a stop in a cloud of dust, and stood there trembling. Then more horses, running, trotting, galloping, until Sally could see nothing between her and the corral but a seething mass of horses, one by one straggling reluctantly into the corral as they were pushed on from behind.

Sam had his hat off and was swinging it in great circles.

"In thar," he urged softly. "The gate's open, yuh fools. Don't yuh know a corral when yuh see it?"

Now another mounted figure swung in from the rear and weaving in and out among the herd hazed the leaders toward the wide open gate. And they began to trot in. Then more and more followed their lead, until the corral seemed full of nervous, milling animals. And still they kept coming around the corner of the barn. Then the stream thinned out, and finally another mounted figure that Sally recognized as Pat.

"Sam, was that shootin' I heard?" she heard him call.

"It was shootin'!"

"Who?"

"Who's always shootin' 'round here night times? Yuh ought to know.—Yuh couldn't pick up any more brones, could you, Pat?" Sam demanded sarcastically. "This here little batch ain't scarcely worth botherin' with. How many you got, anyway?"

"Oh, about two hundred, I reckon. We'll have to run

'em up in small bunches."

In the excitement of what was happening Sally hadn't stopped to wonder what it was all about. They were crowding the last few stragglers into the corral now, and then she heard the gate close and the bars shoved home. The men had dismounted, and were coming up to the bunkhouse together.

"Sorry we disturbed you so late." Pat was grinning.
"This is Ezra. Remember I told you about Ezra?"

"Yes," Sally answered quietly. "I remember."

"We all are right tired and we ain't half through yet. Some hot coffee would go mighty good," Pat said tenta-

tively.

Without replying Sally started for the shack. As she lit the lantern that hung over the crude table Sam had knocked together for her the day before, she realized that someone had followed her. Pat was slouching in the low doorway.

"I'll fix the fire," he offered.

"Don't bother. I'll do it."

But he entered, and began putting kindling into the stove.

"What's the matter?" he asked without looking up from his task.

"Whose horses are those?" Sally's voice was choked.

"Oh! I see." Pat subdued his laughter. "Why, Sally, weren't we figurin' that we'd have to have some stock for this ranch?"

"Not that kind of stock!"

"What d'you mean, not that kind of stock?" he demanded indignantly. "There's some of the best horse-flesh out in that corral I've seen in—"

"I'm sure of it." Her voice was acid. "And where did

you get them?"

"Why, Ezra and I was out ridin' and we came across a herd that looked as though they needed someone to take care of 'em, and I says to Ez, 'Ez, those horses—'"

"I thought so! Pat, you can't use this ranch for your

crookedness."

"Sally, I'm surprised at you. We found those horses."

"You're nothing but a rustler and a thief!"

Pat turned around slowly and looked at her in admiration. He'd never seen her as lovely as she was standing there, her eyes blazing, her cheeks flushed, her slim body tense as she leaned toward him over the table.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I'm—I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, but this is too much. Either you get those horses out of my corral by morning, or I'll ride into Dutch Springs and notify the Sheriff what you've done."

"You wouldn't do that!"

"Yes, I would."

"Know what they do to rustlers when they catch 'em?" Pat asked quietly. "They hang 'em."

Sally blanched. "I-I can't help it," she muttered.

As Pat came slowly around the table to where she was standing, Sally turned to face him. He stopped just in front of her, towering above her and looking down seriously into her defiant face. Then his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"You've never been in love before with a man you knew was crooked, have you, Sally?" he asked softly.

"I-why, you're mad."

"And you don't just know what to do about it," he went on. "You're fightin' it hard as you can, an' you tell yourself that you're not in love with him, and that you'd turn me—him—over to be hanged just like you would any other rustler, but I wonder—."

"You've gone crazy! What do you think I am? In

love with a thief!"

"It has happened, you know," he assured her. And then suddenly diffident, quite clumsily, he added, "You see, I've fallen pretty hard for you."

"Oh!"

Sally turned away abruptly and was busy over the coffee pot. He couldn't see her face.

"Bout those horses, since they worry you so, suppose

we move 'em."

Still no answer.

"I wasn't figurin' on leavin' 'em in your corral for long, anyway."

The lid of the pot clattered to.

"You reckon if we moved 'em on right quick, tonight, say, that you could forget you'd ever seen any strange stock 'round here?"

He waited for her reply a long time. When she finally

answered, her voice was muffled.

"I reckon I'll have to."

"That would be mighty kind."
"What will you do with them?"

"I reckon we can find someplace to hide 'em out."

"I suppose you'll-be gone some time." He could

scarcely hear her words.

"Oh, no, I'll just start Ezra out with 'em, and he can handle 'em all right," he said, praying that Sally didn't know what it took to handle a herd of two hundred strange horses.

"Well-I'll call you when the coffee's ready."

And later on, from her window, Sally watched Pat and Sam cutting out a few head at a time from the corral, and driving them quietly off around the bluff, only to return half an hour later for another lot. The man Ezra never left the corral gate. And she wondered why they took the trouble to take the horses off in small batches when they'd brought them all in together.

The first gray light of dawn stole on as they slipped off with the last lot, and the corral was quiet and empty once more. Wearily, Sally dropped down on her bunk

and closed her burning eyes.

Half an hour later she heard the men return. They halted not far from the bunkhouse, and Pat called Ezra up from the corral.

"All safe and sound," he announced.

"I don't like it," Sally could hear Ezra grumbling.

"As I remember yuh didn't like it none the *last* time we run horses into a corral," gibed Sam.

"What you mean?"

"That night we had two thousand head in the Red Fork Ranch corral an' the lightnin' was playin' 'round the ground like prairie dogs, an' yuh was afraid——"
"Ez, you'd better be off now," broke in Pat. "Tomor-

"Ez, you'd better be off now," broke in Pat. "Tomorrow night or tonight, rather, and early, my lad. Just as soon as it gets dark. I'll meet you at the ranch. An' don't forget your rifle."

A horseman galloped off.

"Ez ain't dared to go out without his Winchester since he was old enough to shoot it," drawled Sam. "Hi, Pat, yuh better roll in. I'll watch a while."

"You been up all night, too," objected Pat.

"But I ain't been wrastling with hawses all night. All I had to do was set and enjoy the fireworks."

"Well, let's toss to see who sleeps."

Suddenly without knowing quite why, Sally found herself at the window.

"Pat!" she called.

"Great guns! You still awake?"

"I'll keep guard a while. I slept a lot, earlier. You can both turn in, and I'll call you if anything happens."

"Now, that is what I calls a lady," marveled Sam.

Pat came up to the window. She could see that he was frowning.

"Sure you're not tired?" he asked doubtfully.

"Not a bit," she lied.

"Well—all right, then. I wouldn't let you, except—"
Sam was already on his way in to bed. "Mrs. Stout,"
he called through the door, "when yuh want to wake me
up, jest shoot off that Colt o' yours. twice. Like las'
night, ma'am."

Shadows in the Night

It was nine o'clock when Pat Stevens rode up to Mar-

shall's low, rambling ranch house the next night.

Marshall was at the door waiting, a quiet little man in his late sixties, with mild blue eyes, but a strong chin. He carried a Colt on each hip, and trailed a rifle.

"Howdy, Stevens."

"Evenin'."

"Any trouble with the horses?"

"A little. Some of 'em were sort o' wild, and got nervous 'cause we had to drive 'em pretty fast. But they're all up on the Bluff, happy as a Mex with a tamale."

"I don't rightly know what I can do to show you boys what I think of all you're doin'. I don't yet understand why you're playin' my hand for me."

"I'll tell you one of these days, Marshall. Time may

come when you can do me a favor."

"You'll get it," replied the old man simply.

"Ezra turned up yet?"

"No. I've got the boy up on the hill watchin' like you told me to. You think the four of us can handle things all right?"

"Easy, and with the extra punchers your men are bringing back with them you'll be all right after to-

night."

"I guess there comes your friend," Marshall broke in

as he heard hoofbeats rapidly approaching.

"We'll lock our brones up in the barn where they'll be out of the way. You get the rest of your stock in there?"

"Just as you told me to."

"Yeah-there's Ez.-Hello, Wall Eye! All right?"

Ezra nodded morosely, and pulled his Winchester out of the saddle holster. "I left the stuff you wanted in the Willows. Folks in the store thought I'd gone crazy, one man buying so much grub, and pants and things anyone could see I couldn't get one leg into. Cost me eighteen bucks."

"I'll pay you later," Pat grinned.

"Better pay me now. Maybe you won't be able to later with all this damn foolishness goin' on. And by the

wav I hear-"

"Later," broke in Pat. "The reception committee has got to plan this thing out before it's too late. Now the way I figure it is this. The Circle Cross gang will come pretty early, 'cause they'll be figurin' on driving Marshall's horses a right smart distance before morning. There'll be at least nine or ten coming over, three, say, to drive the horses and half a dozen to liven things up here at the ranch. That the way you see it, Ez?"

He nodded sourly.

"God knows I've no use for John Stout," muttered Marshall, "but it's hard for me to believe that he and his outfit are really the crowd that's been terrorizing

this Valley."

"You'll see," promised Pat grimly. "Now they know you're keepin' your horses around the ranch while your riders are away, so they'll come right here without wastin' any time. When they don't find the horses in the pasture or the corral, like as not they'll come up to the house and see if they can bully you into sayin'

where they are. When you don't tell 'em, the trouble'll start. Ez, you figure Stout comes out on these raids himself?"

"Hell, no. He just sends his boys. Stout only takes a

hand in big games."

"Glad o' that. I want to be able to shoot without worryin' about what I'm hitting, and I sure would be unhappy to plug Stout—yet. Marshall, you know your layout here. Where's the best places for us to be so's to cover the house and the barns? You see we mustn't start no shootin' until somethin' happens."

"Well," the rancher said thoughtfully, "I reckon one man lyin' up on that flat roof over the smithing shed could rake over the ground around the corrals and the barns and there's just enough pitch to give some shelter. Another man among those big rocks yonder would have

sort of a bird's eye view of the house."

"That sounds good. You'll have to stay in the house, Marshall, in case you have to talk. Ez, you get in those rocks. I'll take the roof. What about the boy?"

"Put him up in the big elm," suggested Ezra.

Pat shook his head. "You damn fool. It's too easy to wing a bird sittin' on a limb. He can't move around enough. No, the boy better take the bunkhouse. That gives him three windows to shoot out of. Ez, beat it up on the hill and tell him where we'll be so he won't be taking any beads on us. Soon as he hears anything from the hill, he's to cut for the bunkhouse and lay low until he hears one of us shoot. Then he's to drop everything in sight."

Ezra shuffled off.

"Lights out in the house, Marshall, just like you were asleep."

"Time for some coffee?" invited the older man.

"I'll say so."

A quarter of an hour later all was quiet and dark.

Ezra was among his rocks, Pat was lying flat on his back on the flat tin roof of the blacksmith shop, and Marshall had closed the door of the ranch house behind him. The stars were out, and a crescent moon hung low over the hills to the east. In the clear June night, Pat could see quite clearly for some two hundred yards.

Another half hour passed before he heard the soft pad of running feet, and turning he saw a slight figure racing down the hill toward the ranch. That would mean they were coming! The lad gave a low whistle and ducked into the bunkhouse. Pat could hear him

barring the door behind him.

Pat pulled out one of his Colts and laid it down on the roof beside him. No way of knowing now which he'd need first, his Winchester or his Colt. He took off his Stetson so as to show as little as possible when he put his head up. And now he could hear the pounding of horses' hoofs coming on at a fast gallop. He guessed there would be about twelve men, from the sound. A few more than he had expected. Well, that was all right. He thought of Ezra, and grinned in the darkness. Good old Ez, with all his grousing, usually ended up by making more real trouble than everyone else put together.

The horsemen were near now. Cautiously he lifted his head. There they were, down the road, coming along in a solid mass. Would they stop by the corral where

he was, or ride right on up to the house?

As they thundered up he lowered his head to avoid any possibility of being seen. They halted by the corral fence not fifteen yards away from him. He could hear the horses milling around, and low voices, even the jangle of steel bits, and the sound of stirrups knocking against stirrups.

"And where the hell are his horses?" came a voice a little louder than the others. "The chief said he'd have

'em in the corral."

"Mebbe in the pasture," suggested another. Pat grinned at the accuracy of his prophecy.

"Slim, you circle 'round the big pasture and see. We'll wait here.—We don't want to start nothin' 'til the horses are on their way, otherwise the first will panic 'em. Who's got the coal oil?"

There was an answering grunt. Then Pat could make out nothing more for several minutes until the scout

rode up from his search of the pasture.

"What? Not in the pasture? Well, there's only one thing to do. Slim, and Dobe there, and Cactus. Slip up your handkerchiefs, and we'll go up to the house and talk to the old son of a —. He'll say where his God damn horses are before we git through. They always talk if you treat 'em right."

There was a nasty laugh from the speaker in which several of his companions joined, and Pat wondered savagely how many of the curs he could drop before they turned tail and ran. He felt about it just as he would have if he'd come to wipe out a nest of vermin. He'd seen most of the Circle Cross outfit, and there wasn't a man among them that the world couldn't do without. Stealthily he pulled out his other Colt. This was too short range for a rifle, and he'd have to shift around fast on that roof between shots.

Four men had ridden up to the ranch house and there was a loud hammering on the door. Pat could hear shouting, but couldn't hear what was being said. He could guess, though. They'd try to get Marshall out in the open and threaten him. Probably tell him they'd burn him down unless he told them where he had his herd. And if he wouldn't talk, they'd begin working on him. But Pat knew Marshall would stay behind the barred door.

The shouting grew louder and more angry, and in

a few minutes the four horsemen came riding back to the main group, the leader cursing the night blue.

"That old buzzard won't come out and just tells us to go to hell," he snarled. "Here, give me that oil. We'll touch off a couple of the small sheds first just to show him we mean business. Maybe then he'll talk, thinking to save the big barn and the house."

Pat grew tense. This was what he'd been waiting for. He waited a few moments, then stuck his head up cau-

tiously to see exactly what was happening.

Two men had dismounted, and were crossing over to a low ramshackle hutch a little away from the main group of barns and sheds. One of them carried a round can. The other raiders had ridden their horses off a way and had dismounted. They were scattering around generally, some toward the house, others around the main barn. Picking them off wasn't going to be so easy now.

That hutch was pretty far away for a Colt at night. Gingerly Pat rose to his elbows, and, raising his rifle so it wouldn't scrape on the roof, brought it forward and up to his shoulder. He'd wait until they'd put the

oil on, and as the match was lit-

There was a flicker.

Crack!

The light went out as the figure spun around, his arms wide. Must have hit him in the shoulder, Pat reflected.

Crack!

And the second figure collapsed on the ground. Pat had dropped down and was hugging the roof. Excited cries from the raiders came from all sides. "Down there-It's a trap-God damn Marshall-Where'd it come from?-What the bloody hell!"

Someone had spotted the flash of the rifle, and a bullet sang close over Pat's head. He'd have to shift before he took another look, and he'd have to rely on his sixshooters from now on. He dropped his rifle and with a gun in each hand rolled over and over three times. Then he heard the report of a rifle from the direction of the rocks and grinned happily. Ezra had come into action!

Cautiously from his new position Pat raised his head again, one arm in front of him and free. He could hear rustling here and there in the otherwise deathlike stillness, but could see nothing moving. A hundred yards away were the Circle Cross horses, but the puncher holding them was shielded by their bodies. Pat waited.

A flashing crack from the bunkhouse, and a grunt from the shadows by the barn told him that the lad had spotted something. And then old Marshall's rifle spoke

from the house.

He'd see if he could draw fire. Stretching his left arm out as far as he could reach, he crooked his hand around so a flash of his gun would cut diagonally across and seem to be coming from a right hand of a body far over to the left. Then with his eyes narrowed, watching intently, he fired. An immediate retort came from some low bushes thirty feet away and winged way to the left as he'd planned. Not knowing from which side the man was firing, Pat bracketed the point of light with four slugs, and ducked down again before a storm of bullets raked his roof. If he lay plastered down, he was safe unless someone sneaked up on the high ground in back of him. That wouldn't be pleasant. This roof, Pat decided grimly, as he reloaded, had its bad points. For one thing, he had to stay there.

Most of the raiders had found shelter, and they started a more steady barrage, concentrating on the bunkhouse, Ezra's rocks, and his own roof. Pat knew they were firing at random, but it made things more difficult. Without a sound he worked his way to another position. He could sense the eyes that were glued on that roof line, waiting for a sign of life so as to blow it out. Damn

old Marshall for suggesting the roof.

So slowly that it was scarcely movement he raised his head until he could just look over the edge. Now he could just make out a dark shadow creeping stealthily toward the horses. Recklessly he fired from the line of his body, and flattened out as a hail of bullets swept over him. He hadn't even had time to see whether he'd

got the creeping shadow.

A moment later that was a ping as a bullet drove through the tin roof three inches from his side. That meant someone above him on the high ground behind! He rolled quickly, but too late. Even as he jerked over, he felt a stinging tear in his thigh, and cursed softly. He pulled himself around to face the other way and waited for the man who had spotted him to fire again. He was like a rat in a trap. Only luck could save him now.

Then came the flash from above, and Pat emptied his Colt on the spot. He must have hit, for there was no

further sign of life.

Gingerly he felt of his thigh. A flesh wound, and not so bad. It was bleeding quite a lot, but that was all right. In a minute, however, someone else would find that high ground. He could hear Ez and Marshall firing oftener now, too often to be firing at anything. Most of the action seemed to be around the roof over the black-smith shop! But the invaders seemed to be quieter. In fact they didn't seem to be wasting any ammunition at all.

He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard horses moving around! Forgetting his caution he raised himself and peered out into the night. There was considerable stir where the horses were stationed, and suddenly, as though timed by a command, shadowy figures swung into the saddles, and the whole cavalcade, seven or eight

mounted men, and several riderless horses, swept away down the road and into the night.

"Well, that's that," said Pat aloud, and as a gesture

sent one bullet singing down the road after them.

Twenty minutes later Marshall was bending over Pat in the ranch house bandaging his leg. The slug from his thigh lay on the table beside them. Pat's face was drawn and white.

"You'll be all right in a few days, Stevens. Sorry it was so tough getting that bullet out, but I reckon it's clean and safe now."

"Yeah, I reckon it is," Pat agreed through his clenched teeth. "After that horse liniment you poured into it."

"You better lay up here for a time, though. You can't

ride with that leg."

"The hell I can't! There's those ridin' tonight with worse legs than that."

"But--"

"I tell you I got to get back. And you forget that Ez and I was ever near your ranch tonight. Where the hell is Ez, anyway."

"Checkin' up to see just what they left behind."

"They sure fooled me. They must have been working toward the horses for ten minutes before we knew about it."

The door opened and Ezra rambled into the room, shaking his head sourly.

"Well," Pat snapped.

"Only five. One over where they started to fire the hutch; one up on the hill—the bird who nicked you, I reckon; and one in that clump of bushes; a greaser who tried to stalk me in the rocks; and one more Marshall must have caught out in the open."

"I know I hit two!" protested the boy in a shrill voice.

"Sure you did, Sonny," Marshall soothed. "Probably wounded 'em. A number of them who rode off ain't feeling exactly healthy."

"Ez, I'm glad you didn't shoot to kill," drawled Pat.

"Must upset you, that greaser you did hit."

"Go to hell! You had the best place."

"I sure did," agreed Pat grimly. "Marshall, if you got a shot of whisky, I'll be hitting the trail, I reckon. Ez'll stay the night, just in case—"

"I sure have. Boy, go down and bring up Stevens'

horse while I get the jug." Their host disappeared.

"Pat, you all right?" asked Ezra anxiously the moment they were left alone.

"Sure. It's nothin' serious."

"Lay you up long?"

"Won't lay me up at all. Why?"

"'Cause I got on to somethin' in town today. I started to tell you earlier, and you shut me up. Guess you didn't want Marshall to hear."

"What?"

"The stage pulled into Dutch Springs today with a special guard."

"Well?"

"And they didn't bring nothin' particular with 'em."

"So-o-o."

"That means that when she goes out day after tomorrow she'll be taking a load from the bank. They always has a special guard up when they're makin' a shipment."

Pat's eyes were bright. "Ez, old man, you're all right!"

"An'," went on Ezra, "far as I know there ain't been no big cattle sales the last few weeks or anything else that would a brought in any big money so's they'd be shipping out cash deposits. But they sure is unloading somethin'."

"Day after tomorrow, that right?"

He nodded.

"What time does she pull out?"

"'Bout ten in the morning, usually. You goin' to crack it?"

Pat nodded.

"Risky as hell, Pat. You'll swing for that, sure, if you're caught. And explanations won't help."

"It's what we've been waitin' for. It'll tell us what's

what."

"You and me?"

"No. You got to hang 'round town as usual. Sam an' I'll pull it off."

"Two enough?"

"Plenty. You watch what happens in Dutch Springs, and better make the willows every night 'bout eleven o'clock. No tellin' what will happen afterwards."

"Anythin' else?"

"No. Except, if anythin' should happen, you get Sally Stout out of Powder Valley quick as hell. Ssh. Here comes the old man.—I reckon I can use a swig of that, Mr. Marshall, then I got to go."

"You can have anythin' I got, after tonight."

Pat filled a tin cup half full of the whisky, and poured it down.

"That'd carry three bad legs," he grinned, walking stiffly over to the door. "So long. Just as soon as your boys get back, send 'em over for the horses—at night, mind you—'cause there isn't too much grass up on the Bluff. And, remember, keep your mouth shut about tonight. Let folks think your riders got home ahead o' time. So long, Ez—and Ez!" he called from outside, "If you're not too busy, take some time and practice up your shootin'. It's gettin' worse than a bushwhacker's.—Whoa, there, you black devil, can't you see I got a bad leg. Steady there, Nigger."

Two hours later, having picked up the food and cloth-

ing Ezra had left cached at the willows, Pat rode wearily up to the Lazy Mare. His leg ached. He was dead tired, and fairly dropped out of his saddle.

Sam rose sleepily from the doorway of the bunkhouse.

"Took yuh plenty long to clean 'em up," was his

greeting. "Yeah.-Take this stuff, will you, and take the pony, too. My leg's not so good. Your guns are there, somewhere. Ez brought 'em out."

"They git yuh?"
"Yeah."

""Bad?"

"No, and it's fixed up good, but it aches like hell and it's stiffened up."

"Rough on yuh, Pat. Everything else go on all right?"

"Smooth. Five decided they'd had enough before it was time for 'em to go home."

"Get to bed, quick."

"Reckon I will if you can see through the night."

"Sure. Nothin' I can do?"

"No, Sam-'cept bring the rifle in when you come."

He sank down on his bunk too exhausted even to pull his boots off or unsling his guns. But at a rustle by the door, he turned his head. It was Sally with a blanket thrown around her, holding a candle. Her face was pale in the candlelight.

"You got shot! I heard you talking to Sam."

Pat managed a grin. "Yeah-again, and he was a better shot than you are, Sally. It's nothin', though. I'll be all right tomorrow."

She came on into the room. "I'd better look at it," she

decided.

Pat shook his head and his eyes closed. "No, it's all dressed and fixed. And I wouldn't get up off this bunk to take my pants off for a hundred dollars."

"Let me pull your chaps and boots off, anyway," she urged gently.

"You're sweet as hell, Sally."

Without saying anything more, she unbuckled his guns and hung them up over his bunk. Then she worked his chaps off as gently as she could. Then his boots.

"You look ghastly, Pat," and she shuddered. "Sure

your leg is all right?"

"It's just—I'm—tuckered bad—ridin' so far with it," he muttered drowsily, his words coming slowly. "Seems to me—you're mighty worried—just about a horse thief."

"I'd take care of anyone who was wounded no matter

what he was! Want something hot to drink?"

"No-reckon all I want is-to sleep."

Sally watched there until his breathing became deep and regular. Finally she tiptoed to the door. She turned at the threshold and stood for a long minute watching the man on the bunk. And then she sighed.

"About as Wrong as They Come"

PAT awoke into the middle of a hot June day. The first thing he did was to put his hand down and feel of his thigh. It was sore, but not too sore. Apparently there wasn't any infection or inflammation. Then he moved his leg. It was stiff, but he knew by experience that it would limber up.

He got up, grabbed some clean clothes, a towel, some soap, and started for the stream. A bath would make all the difference in the world in the way he felt, but he'd have to be careful not to get that bandage wet.—

Then he'd shave.

He saw Sam whittling a stick down by the barn and

waved to him.

"I used to sleep pretty good myself when I was young," Sam called out in a plaintive voice.

Twenty minutes later he was back, and headed for

the cooking shack.

"Sally!" he called. "Sally!"

"Ain't no use wearin' out yore lungs callin' Sally," advised Sam from the interior of the shack. "'Cause she can't hear yuh. How's yore leg?"

"Where is she?"

"She'll be back soon."

"I said, where is she!"

"She rode into Dutch Springs."

"What?"

"Here's yore coffee. Never thought I'd live to do yore cookin' for yuh, but—"

"You let her go into Dutch Springs-and alone?" Pat

raged. "God damn you, Sam!"

"Easy there, Pat. Easy."

"But what the hell do you mean? Don't you know—"
"She'll be all right, Pat. Trust that gal. She went off
packin' that six gun yuh give 'er, most as big as she is."

"I told her she wasn't to go anywhere alone-much

less Dutch Springs."

"Yeah, sure, I tole her that, too," nodded Sam reminiscently, "and ended by saddlin' my own horse for her. Yore Sally has a way with 'er."

Pat groaned and dropped onto a cracker box.

"What time did she go?"

"Early. Ought to be back 'fore long."

"If she's not back in half an hour, I'm goin' after her. I'll never forgive you, Sam, if anythin' happens."

"I'm tellin' you nothin'll happen."

"What did she go for?"

"Waal, it seems as how the pants Ez picked out for her, and you-all brought home last night, didn't please her no-how. Said they didn't fit. She didn't like those checked flannel shirts, either. Too fancy."

"You're lyin'. She never rode into town because of no

shirts and pants."

"Come to think of it, she did say somethin' about needin' some clean bandage and salve and things like that. Said there wasn't nothin' here to take care of yore laig with, and she seemed right worried."

"So-o-o."

"I tole her yore damn laig was all right, and that you wasn't worth botherin' about anyhow, but she rode off just the same. Said somethin' nasty about there bein' no reason why *she* couldn't face honest folk even if we-all was afraid to poke our nose out of a gopher hole."

"I'll give her half an hour," muttered Pat.

"Tell me 'bout last night."

"Later, plenty of time for that. There's somethin' more important than last night."

"More hawsses?" drawled Sam sarcastically.

"No. Tomorrow you and I are goin' to stick up the

stagecoach."

Sam went on rolling his cigarette but he frowned. "Never done that before. Not right sure I know just how yuh do that. What yuh want with a stagecoach, Pat?"

"I told you, once, as I told Ezra. The evidence we want is in that bank. I'm sure o' that as I am that you got flat feet. But we can't go breaking into no bank unless we know, an' the easiest way of findin' out is to look over what trickles out—through the mail or express. That's the way Stout floats his load away—probably down into Mexico."

"How'll yuh know what is evidence and what ain't?"

"I got the description of most of the bonds that were stolen, and the numbers of lots of the bills, and if there's much minted gold you can bet your hat it didn't come into Powder Valley honest."

"Then we have to bust the bank," Sam sighed.

"No-not necessarily. I told Ez we had to, 'cause I don't mind worryin' Ez some. But if we get real proof out o' that mail coach tomorrow, like as not we can go to the state authorities and they'll walk into the bank for us with a search warrant. Got to play the game a little careful so as not to do any sharing of the rewards with no marshals, but I reckon we're in the clear."

"How the hell yuh know there's anythin' goin' out

tomorrow? Stage goes twice a week, don't it?"

Sam listened in silence to the news Ezra had brought Pat the night before. "All right," he agreed sourly when Pat had finished. "Twenty years to life, I reckon, but yore the boss. And what then?"

"If we get what we want, then we cut out of sight fast. One of us hangs around layin' low, the other strikes for the State Attorney's Office in Pueblo. He's straight, I've always heard. Ez stays right in Dutch Springs, watchin'."

"And yore Sally?"

"Hides out at old Marshall's till things clear up. Told

you he'd come in right handy."

"Yuh can think things out, sometimes, Pat. Yuh better shave, though. Won't be no decoration for a rope tomorrow lookin' like you do." Sam shook his head slowly. "I remember yuh when you was a soft pink-faced cub, even before yuh decided yuh'd go away to school and get yoreself an education. Times has changed."

Pat grinned. "You used to tan my hide for racin' your

horse into a lather, remember?"

"Waal, that education of yourn never did yuh no good. Here yuh are out on the range with me just like you would have been if you hadn't been to school and learned how to talk, and likely to hang tomorrow. I'm right glad yore dad's dead."

Pat leaped up, wincing a little because he had forgot-

ten his wounded leg. "I hear a horse!"

"Tole yuh she'd come back safe," Sam called after him, for Pat was already out of the shack headed for

the front where he could see who was arriving.

It was Sally. She rode right to the corral, and, slipping off her horse, began to unsaddle. As Pat walked down from the bunkhouse he realized that she had taken no notice of him.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said as he came up to her.

Her face was away from him, and she did not reply.

"I told you not to go off alone."

Still no answer.

"What's wrong Sally?"

Then she turned, and her face was white and set. "You are," she said contemptuously, "about as wrong as they come!"

She slipped her horse into the corral, and without another word strode up to the bunkhouse. Pat followed her bewildered. At the doorway she turned.

"There are your bandages and salve. Sam can fix your

leg."

And she disappeared into her room and closed the door behind her.

Pat stared at the closed door for a full two minutes, then he sought out Sam, who was still in the shack.

"Sam, was Sally all right when she left this morning?"

"Looked right healthy to me."

"I mean, she didn't act as though nothin' was the matter?"

"Told yuh she was worried about yore laig. Nothin'

else that I noticed."

Without explanation, Pat left and walked quickly around to Sally's door and knocked.

There was no response.

"I'm coming in," he announced, waited a moment, and opened the door.

She was sitting on her bunk, her hands in her lap, her face still white and cold as he'd seen it by the corral.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

She did not reply at once. Finally, as though with a great effort, her lips opened.

"I'm going away-tomorrow."

"So-o-o. And why?"
"I've had enough."

"Did anyone do anything to you in town?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, no.-But I'm leaving tomorrow-on the stage."

"On the stage!" Pat muttered involuntarily. Then, "Why you going, so sudden?"

He waited for her reply.

"Why?" he insisted.

"Because you're rotten, clean through—that's why!" she cried,

"What makes you say that?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, I knew you were crooked, and I saw with my own eyes that you weren't above rustling—" the words were pouring out—"but I heard in town what happened last night."

"And what happened last night?"

"Not content with stealing an old man's horses, you go back and attack him and try to burn his place down. Why, you're not a man, you're a—a——"

"How do you know it was me?" His voice was dan-

gerously calm.

"How do I know? Because I'm not a fool. As soon as I heard today in the store about poor old Marshall losing his stock two nights back, and about the raid last night—What do you think I am? Where were you last night? Whose are those horses? How did you get shot?"

"So-o-o. I rustled Marshall's stock, and then raided

him, did I?-And you're leavin'--"

Pat wandered slowly over to the window and gazed out thoughtfully. It would be so easy to tell her everything. The skies would clear as though by magic. Why not?

But something held him back. All his pride was roused because she didn't trust him blindly. Illogical, but he wanted her to love him regardless of what she thought he was. If he was once sure of her love, he'd tell her—Well, she'd be safer out of the way until things cleared up, anyway. He could follow her after everything was all over. He turned.

"Maybe you're right—to go. But you can't go tomor-row—by the stage."

"I'm going tomorrow-by the stage."

"Listen, I'm dead serious. You're not takin' that stage tomorrow. I'll tie you up here on the bed if I have to. Tomorrow evening I'll ride you over to Hopewell Junction—or Sam, maybe—in time to catch the last night train—but you're not leavin' tomorrow by the stage. I've got reasons, important reasons. Understand?"

"You can keep me from going if you want to, I

reckon," she said bitterly.

"Yes-I can."

"Oh, Pat, I thought, I thought when—" The piteous cry broke off as she burst into sobs. "Go away, please,

go away," she sobbed. "I want to be alone."

And because he did not know what else to do, Pat left her alone, and in his own room gloomily began to clean his guns.

"I Don't Know Nothin' bout Robbin' Stagecoaches"

The atmosphere at breakfast was tense the next morning. There was scarcely a word spoken. But everything had been strained at the Lazy Mare since Sally had returned from her unfortunate visit to Dutch Springs the day before.

"How's yore laig this mawnin'?" Sam finally asked. "All right," said Pat shortly. Then he pushed back the cracker box on which he'd been sitting, and cleared his throat.

"Sally, Sam and I've things we got to do this morning. We'll both be away but I reckon you'll be all right here alone. Like as not folks in Powder Valley'll be right busy with other things to think about today."

"Yes, I'll be all right," she replied listlessly, without

looking up from her plate.

"I don't know just when Sam or I'll be back-maybe this afternoon, maybe not until after dark-but it'll be in time to ride you over to Hopewell so's to catch the

train. You can count on that.-Come on, Sam."

There were still in the bunkhouse when Sally returned to her room, but a few minutes later she saw them start down for the corral. Her lips tightened when she saw that they were both carrying rifles, and there was something queer about their appearance, she didn't quite know what. Then she suddenly realized. They were

going to ride, but they weren't wearing chaps. Their trousers were tucked into their boots. Each had something rolled up under his arm, and they wore colored shirts and handkerchiefs she'd never seen before. Deeply disturbed she watched them catch and saddle their brones, then tie the rolls they carried behind their saddles. Pat was finished first, and while he waited for Sam, he kept staring up at the bunkhouse.

Then they galloped off, and Sally dropped down on

her bunk and buried her head in her pillow.

Before they reached the high ground that ran along the main road from Dutch Springs to Hopewell Junction. Pat swerved sharply to the left. For another three miles they skirted the mesa, keeping down along the low ground. Then Pat motioned to the right, and they swung into the shelter of a steep, rocky arroyo.

"We'll leave the horses here," Pat said curtly.
"I sure don't approve of leavin' my brone," muttered Sam, "but then I don't know nothin' 'bout robbin' stagecoaches."

"My pony's been seen too often in these parts-and besides those rocks up by the road I was tellin' you about aren't big enough to shelter a man on horseback. Bring your rope, though."

"Rifle?"

"No. What the hell would we do with rifles?"

"What the hell are we doin' heah at all?" Sam grunted. "Yuh know me, Pat. I usually ain't skittish, but I sure don't like this-a-one."

Laboriously in their high-heeled boots, the two men made their way up through the scrub oak and brush that filled the steep ravine, until it flattened out at the rim of the mesa. There before them was a cluster of great, strangely shaped, colored rocks, gray, and red, and white. On the other side of the vivid stone mass lay the road.

"Damned if them rocks ain't right pretty," Sam marveled. "They reminds me--"

"They're better than pretty. They're useful," Pat said

grimly. "Fine for hidin' behind."

"Yuh sure know the lay of the land 'round here. How come?"

"Been doin' a lot of choice sight-seein' in Powder Valley the last few weeks."

"Waal, heah we are. Too bad Ezra ain't 'mong those present. How long we got?"

"Half an hour; maybe an hour. Remember how it

works?"

"Would I be likely to forget it? Yuh is swingin' yore rope as she comes along—wish to hell yuh'd use a white man's rope 'stead of that leather string yuh always play with. As yuh drops it over the guard, I plug one of the horses. Then—"

"Then use your head! Let's see how you look with your face covered."

Obediently Sam undid the red bandana from around his neck and slipped it over his face as a mask, knotting it in the back.

"Higher up, right up to your eyes, and pull your hat down. The less they see of your black face the better.— That's good. Better leave it fixed.—No more shootin' than absolutely necessary, Sam."

"Huh! I'm the one who's always doin' the shootin'!

That comes good from yuh, Stevens."

Pat had masked him own face, and was uncoiling his lariat.

"Hope to hell yuh're in practice with that rope," observed Sam. "I'd hate for yuh to miss and have that guard start helpin' me over the mesa with his rifle. Them are mean, bad actors, them express guards."

Sam, squatted on the ground, pulled out a plug of tobacco and bit off a generous corner. He chewed re-

flectively, watching a horned toad crawling over the gray caked alkali. He let it get three feet away, and then drenched it with tobacco juice.

"Too bad about Sally," he offered. "Pity she's got yuh sized up like she has. Seems to me yore a fool not to put

her wise."

"I'll find her up in Denver when this is all over. Hear anything?"

"Naw, outside the wind in them rocks."

"Reckon I'd better climb up where I can see a little further."

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes they waited in tense

silence.

"Mebbe yuh got mixed about the day," suggested

Sam at last in a hopeful voice.

"Shut your trap! I think I hear it now. Yeah, there she comes, Sam, 'bout a quarter of a mile away."

Sam clicked to attention. "How many outside?"

"Driver, guard, and two passengers."
"Huh. Prob'ly plenty more inside."

For a minute Pat watched the bright yellow Concord coach rumbling toward him down the road, its topheavy body swaying from side to side suspended only by the broad leather straps. He could see the figure of the driver yielding easily to the lurching of the coach, and now and then he caught the glint of sunlight on a rifle barrel lying over the guard's knees in the back.

John Stout was a fool to ship anything out with just a driver who had his hands full of horses and only one guard, but he must have come to think of Powder Valley as his own backyard, and therefore safe. Probably he figured no one would dare to pull anything on him

in his own territory.

Two light gray broncs as leaders, and behind them the two bigger wheel horses, bays, seemed to be making heavy work of it. By rights they ought to have had six horses on that load, Pat reflected. Well, it was about time—

He scrambled down from his perch, grabbed his lariat, and took up his stand well away from the rocks and a little back, where he'd be shielded from the stage until it actually passed the rocks.

"Rollin' along?" asked Sam, moistening his lips.

"Fast trot, but those horses'll slow up as they hit the rise yonder."

"For God's sake, make that thing behave right!" Sam muttered as Pat began to work his rope into a slow, gradually widening circle.

"Nervous, Sam?" grinned Pat. "They'll be alongside any minute.—Remember, don't crack down on the horse

'til my rope settles."

Now he had his rope swinging in a bigger loop, at just the sweet angle he liked, over his head and to the right—just a big enough loop to hit and catch, not big enough to slip. As the rumbling of the stage grew louder and louder, his rope circled faster and faster. It began to whirr, and, just as it seemed as though the stage must burst out on them from behind those rocks, his rope found the whistle that meant that a long throw was almost there.

And now—from behind the big gray rock—at a jog trot—the grays—the wheelers—the yellow coach—driver lighting a cigarette, reins between his knees—the two passengers—and the guard looking the other way.

His rope swirled through the air, caught the guard just below the chest, snapped down over his head, and caught. As he was jerked from the back seat into the air Sam's gun cracked

air, Sam's gun cracked.

The near wheel horse threw his head up, stumbled, fell.

The stagecoach rose on one side as the front wheel

hit the prostrate animal—lurched—buckled—and toppled over with a crash and splintering tearing of wood that drowned any cries from the men hurled from the roof. The off wheel horse was down, entangled in the mass of harness, terrified and kicking. The leaders plunged and reared wildly, trying to free themselves.

Pat raced toward the unconscious guard lying in the road where he'd landed on his head fifteen feet behind the wreckage. Pat pulled out the man's guns and flung them deep into the thick brush. Then he turned to the

stage.

The driver and one passenger stood there, their hands over their heads. The driver's face was streaming blood from a gash above his eye. The other outside passenger lay quiet in the grass a few feet off the road. From the inside of the coach came groans. And there stood Sam, surveying the scene, a gun in one hand covering his men,

the other hand set rakishly on his hip.

Pat dropped one Colt back into its holster, crossed quickly to the two prisoners and stripped off their guns. Then he picked his way among the boxes and luggage and sacks that had broken out from the boot all over the road and cautiously peered down into the coach. A little gray-bearded chap was securely wedged into the corner by a big box that had slid over on him. Pat recognized him vaguely—he'd seen him in Dutch Springs.

"Come on out o' there!"

"I cain't get out," the little man wailed.

Pat wrenched open the stage door and, reaching down, seized him by the collar and began to pull him out. The man's hands clawed blindly above his head for something to grab. One hand found the door jamb. The bent fingers of the other caught in the folds of the bandana that covered Pat's face. The next instant Pat stood there unmasked, all hope of concealment gone.

"Stevens," gasped the graybeard.

"I'll be God damned," muttered the stage driver.

"Shut up, the two of yuh!" growled Sam.

Grimly and silently Pat frisked his prisoner who now stood trembling on the road beside him. Then he motioned him to join his fellow prisoners.

"Never mind the lad lyin' over there in the grass,"

Sam said. "He's still sleepin' nice an' sound."

"Get his guns and tie his hands under him," Pat ordered quietly. "I'm on the others." With alacrity Sam obeyed, using the man's own belt for the job. "Now cut them horses free before they kick themselves to deathmight as well turn 'em loose."

When Sam returned, Pat turned the three prisoners

back to him. "Take 'em over behind the rocks."

He followed, picking up Sam's rope. Beyond the rocks, out of sight of the stage and the road, he tied each man's hands tightly behind his back.

"Now get together in a huddle, face to face," he

snapped.

He wound the rope around and around them, lashing them together, helpless.

"You goin' to leave us this way?" protested the driver.

"I sure am."

"We're likely to die out here behind these rocks before anyone finds us," whined the graybeard.

"They'll find the stage, and yuh can yell, can't yuh?"

snorted Sam. "What the hell's bitin' you?"

The two men walked swiftly back to the road. The guard was still oblivious of everything. Pat followed Sam's example and bound his wrists back of him with his own belt.

"That's bad, 'bout yore mask," muttered Sam. "They both spotted yuh."

"Yeah, but can't be helped."

"Too bad we-all's such good kind fellas," said Sam dolefully, "or we could help it."

"Come on, Sam-let's rip into the mail sacks pronto."

And Pat started to the stage.

"What I mean," Sam went on, as he followed Pat's long steps, "we could so easy just do a little shootin' and not worry about these birds tellin' tales afterwards." He sounded a little wistful. Pat's uncompromising back ignored him.

"Give a hand with this express box," said Pat. "Take off your bandana now-and stop soundin' blood-thirsty

when you ain't that-a-way inside."

They worked rapidly. In a few minutes, Pat had the lid pried off the Wells Fargo box and began tossing the contents out on the road. Almost at once he found something that looked like what he wanted—a heavy wooden container about a foot long, a few inches high, about four inches wide. It was nailed and sealed. It was heavy, very heavy. It was addressed to Mr. John Tyler, El Paso, Texas. It was from the Dutch Springs Bank, Dutch Springs, Colorado.

"Sam," he called exultantly, "I've caught somethin'-

sure! It's gold, or I'm a greaser."

"Yeah? Well heah's a couple of mighty bulky lookin' letters with a lot of red wax on 'em addressed to Sonora, Mexico."

"Let's see-God, Sam, we've got 'em cold. This'd probably be some of them bearer bonds I'm looking for, or bank notes."

Quickly Pat ripped open one of the big envelopes.

"See 'em, Sam? See 'em? We win! Brand new bank notes! Fifties and hundreds! Brand new money bein' shipped out of Dutch Springs! Let 'em sunfish that off. Stick that other envelope in your pocket. I'm so sure o' what's in that wooden box I'm not goin' to wait to open it here either. We got what we want."

Then his face clouded and he swore.

"S'matter now?" demanded Sam.

"Sort o' hoped Red John's name would be on some of this stuff. It ain't."

"It's from the bank. Says so. What more yuh want?"
"Lots. We got to trace evidence to Stout himself if we want to hang him. Who the hell wants to string up a couple of bank clerks? But let's get goin'—fast."

"Nothin' would suit me better," said Sam fervently, starting for the arroyo they'd come up an hour before.

"I don't like this spot at all."

They tore down the arroyo, plunging through the

brush until they reached the horses.

"Now what?" demanded Sam, reaching for the poncho rolled up in back of his saddle. He pulled out his worn leather chaps and slipped into them with a sigh. "Never seen anything looked as good as this heah windbroken pinto o' mine," he sighed. "Now I kin ride an'—"

"We got to do some thinking first," Pat cut in: "Yuh do it. I can't."

Pat lit a cigarette. He'd been spotted. That meant they'd be combing the country for him in a few hours; for Sam, too, for they knew that they worked together. Those envelopes and that box had to be got out of Powder Valley fast. And at the Lazy Mare was Sally—waiting. Taking her over to Hopewell by daylight would be too dangerous now even if there were time before they got a posse together. By night, though, he could sneak her through—at least within sight of the station. Then he—

"Sam, listen careful. Take this box, and this here sealed envelope. I'll keep the other just in case you break your neck. Start ridin' and keep goin' till you hit Pueblo. It ought to take you maybe two days, dependin' on how steady you can go. Find the State Attorney, give him these, and tell him what's happened. Make him get a search warrant to search Stout's bank and send you back

with a marshal and enough men to make the warrant good. Four days ought to see you back."

"And what about yuh?" drawled Sam.

"I'm layin' low right around here. I got to get Sally out of this, and then I'll strike for the hills."

"How do we meet up when I get back with you hidin'

out?"

"I'll be watchin' hard for you—four days from now. Put up some smoke from the Bluff behind the Lazy Mare, an' I'll ride in on you there. Remember the old smoke signals?"

Sam nodded.

"And," went on Pat, "if it works out different some way, I'll leave a message under the stone by the corral gate."

"Right."

"An' don't waste time on nothin' fancy in Pueblo,

mind," smiled Pat.

"Knowin' a posse's on your trail? Oh, sure. Say, why not let Ez take care o' Sally and yuh come with me."

"No. I'd better hang around-just in case."

"Waal, yore the cat up the tree, not me. Anythin' else? I wouldn't mind startin' any time now."

"No-that's all. So long."

"S'long."

Sam wheeled his pinto, and swung out of the arroyo, heading north.

"You Won't Need No Skirt"

PAT finished his cigarette slowly and did some fast thinking. Then he tossed away his cigarette, and, with his left hand on the pommel, vaulted into his saddle.

"Nigger, reckon we're goin' to keep on the move to-

day," he observed.

Riding at about the same pace Sam had taken, he followed his faint trail for about three miles straight across the prairie. Then he halted.

Escaping from a posse was one thing. Playing hide and seek was another. He didn't know whether there were any top-hole trailers in Powder Valley, but he wasn't taking chances he didn't have to. It must look as though they had left the ravine together and had separated later on. When he stopped he wheeled Nigger around a few times and rode him back and forth over both his and Sam's trail.

"This is where we stopped and said goodby," he informed Nigger with a grin, "always supposin' they don't notice that Sam's horse didn't bother to slow down for the ceremony. Prob'ly we thought it over about here and decided we'd separate and play lone hands so's to make it harder for 'em. Now we'll find water."

He struck off to the left at a forty-five degree angle headed for a creek he remembered. It was nearly one o'clock, he judged by the sun, and he was hungry. Water would help, though. It was hot as hell out there in

A quarter of an hour later he saw the line of willows he was looking for. Nigger smelt the water, threw his ears up, and quickened his pace. In a few moments he had his nose down in the clear cool stream sucking it up happily. Pat pulled him up before he'd had too much, then dipped up quarts of water in his deep Stetson and buried his face in it.

"Now we'll lose 'em," Pat announced, and mounting, turned the bronco into the stony creek. For only ten or fifteen feet they picked their way through the water. It ran about two or three hands deep. Then Pat threw his leg over the saddle and slipped into the stream.

"Whoa, there, boy. Gimme your foot."

From out of a pocket he had slipped a short iron tool, and bending down over Nigger's off fore hoof he pried off the iron shoe. Then he pulled the other three shoes,

and tied them to his saddle.

Mounted again he continued up the stream another ten yards and then cut out on to the same bank that he'd left a few minutes before. At a slow jog trot he bore off for a quarter of a mile on an angle away from the trail he'd made as he approached the creek. Then he cut straight back, crossed his own trail at the same slow pace, and bore toward the creek further down. Once more he crossed it, and putting Nigger into an easy lope headed straight for Marshall's ranch.

An hour later he was there. Apparently Marshall's outfit hadn't returned, for the place seemed deserted except for two old brood mares in the corral, a few chickens foraging around in the Timothy grass, and a wisp of blue smoke rising from the chimney of the

ranch house.

Pat rode right up to the door.

"Marshall!" he called.

There was a noise inside, and the old man appeared, a Colt in his hand.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he cried, dropping the gun back in its holster. "Glad to see you, Stevens. Come in."

"Maybe. Got any shoes down in that blacksmith shop

of yours that I forked th' other night?"

"Sure, I have, lots of 'em. Horse throw a shoe?"

"No-not exactly," Pat grinned, pointing to the four shoes dangling on his saddle. "I pulled 'em off, an' I'd like fine to put on some others."

"What the hell for?" frowned Marshall. "Those forged shoes of yours are worth ten of what I've got. Mine are so soft you can bend 'em with your hands."

"Sure, I know. I never use soft shoes myself. Today, though, it just happens I like the pictures they leave on the ground better than mine," drawled Pat.

Marshall whistled. "Oh-I see."

"Like as not, folks may come your way today or tomorrow and ask you if you've seen me."

"Well, I ain't seen you."

"Not even when they tell you that Sam and me stuck up the stage this morning?" asked Pat quietly.

"Hell, no.-Did you?"

"Yeah-for a reason. Tell you 'bout it someday when there's more time."

"You don't have to, Stevens."

"All right, but just forget me, eh?"

"Sure."

"Any chance you fixin' those shoes on Nigger while I find some grub inside? I'm in a hurry an' I'm hungry an' I don't just know where I'm havin' supper.—Nigger'll behave."

"Sure as you're born. You can hide out here if you want."

"No, that wouldn't be so good. Thanks, though."
"Well, pack up some chow to take with you. You'll

find almost everything in the kitchen. Take anything

you want.-I'll get this horse shod."

Half an hour later Pat and Nigger slipped away from the ranch, striking for the low range of hills that ran up the valley on the east, and the tracks they left would certainly never have reminded anyone of the trail out of

the arroyo by the mesa.

Enough time had passed, however, for them to be combing the country for him, Pat realized, and he'd have to watch where he was going from now on. He remembered what his father had once told him as a child. "Pat, if you want to play hide and seek, the safest place is lying down on top of a hill. Nobody can see you, you can watch all sides. And whichever way you see someone coming, you can go the opposite."

So Pat made for the hills. He'd skirt along just below the crest on the far side, and by dark he'd be pretty near the Lazy Mare—and Sally. It was some risk stealing back there tonight, but not much, for they'd never dream of his returning to the ranch. They probably figured him miles away by now. He'd pick up some of his outfit, just enough for a few days in the hills until Sam got back, and take Sally over to Hopewell Junction. That would be easy, too, for they'd never spot them in the dark. Then he'd have to take Darky into the hills with him.

Pat began to whistle. And in a week or ten days, he'd be on his way to Denver to find Sally and bring her back to Powder Valley for good. They'd rebuild that ranch house and—

So, if I chance to sing or dance
I hope I won't intrude.
An' if I chance to sing or dance,
I hope you'll not think me rude.
Oh, my. Don't you wish you was me?

For I feel as happy as a big Bumble Bee, Bum-Bum-Bul-Bee.

It took Pat almost half an hour before he'd sung Nigger the whole of "Pianner Fortay."

It was past nine when, like a dark shadow, Pat glided around the Bluff from the east and halted as he came in view of the ranch buildings two hundred yards away.

It seemed peaceful enough. There wasn't a sound. Sally must be there waiting, for there was a soft glow

of light from the south window.

"All clear, I reckon, Nigger," Pat whispered, and turned the pony out into the open. He rode right up to the door of the bunkhouse.

"Sally," he called softly.

There was a rustle and a slender figure in trousers and boots stood framed in the doorway. She wore the Colt he'd given her.

"They've been here-after you," she said.

"Told you about the stage hold-up, I reckon?"

"Yes.-I didn't think you'd come."

"I said I was coming."

"It's dangerous. They may come back."

"No, they think I'm miles away.-Lord, I'm glad to see you!"

"This is the last time, Pat, ever."

"So-o-o?"

"I'll never see you again, once I get on that train at the Junction."

"You think I'm pretty low, don't you?"

"You're the—you—you're the—worst man I've ever known." She turned away from him. "I'm all ready to go. I saddled Darky earlier. That other horse you've been keeping in the barn is gone." "Yeah, I turned him in with Marshall's stock."

Pat swung off Nigger, and entered the bunkhouse. "I've got to get a few things first," he muttered.

"You're goin' to look mighty queer on that train in that

get-up."

"I bought a skirt and some things in Dutch Springs yesterday. I'll change after we get there.—I reckon I don't need this any more," she said, unstrapping her gun belt and hanging it up on a nail just inside the little box hall.

Pat lit a candle in the big room, and picked up a

blanket from his bunk.

"What you goin' to do when you get to Denver, Sally?" he demanded over his shoulder.

He began to shake the blanket violently, preparatory

to rolling it up.

Sally made no answer. Listlessly she turned toward the window.

Resting there on the sill, she saw two long black gun

barrels. She stared at them, petrified with horror.

Pat had his back to the window. He was holding the blanket out, examining it, his hands well above his head. As she opened her mouth to scream, the gun barrels moved a little.

"Keep your hands up, Stevens!" a harsh voice barked from the window. "Two of us got you covered! We'll

drill you if you move!"

Pat stood there without moving a muscle. For a long

moment there was a dead silence.

"Sounds reasonable," he admitted in a casual voice. "Come on in."

"Go on in, Al, and strip him. I'll hold the gun on

him."

There was a rustle in the grass outside, a step in the hall, and a tall gangling cowpuncher entered the room with a gun in each hand.

"So yuh came back to see the girl, eh, Stevens?" he purred. "Shorty and I just thought you might, so we waited for you."

"Right smart of you," Pat drawled. "Can I drop this

here blanket?"

"Yeah, just so long as yuh don't drop yore hands with it."

The puncher came up behind Pat, and undid his two gun belts from the rear. He tossed them over on a bunk in the far corner of the room.

"Tie his hands, Al," came from the window. Al picked up a piece of rope from the table.

"Drop yore hands behind yore back," he snapped. Pat obeyed, and felt the rope biting into his wrists.

"What are you going to do with him?" whispered Sally. It was the first thing she'd said. Her face was ghastly.

"Do with him? What d'yuh suppose we-all do with bad actors in Dutch Springs?" he jeered. "Shorty, I've got my gun on him if yuh wants to come around."

A moment later Shorty was in the room. "He sure won't hold up no more mail stages, Miss," he offered. "By tomorrow noon he'll be jerkin' at the end of a new rope."

"Pat-it isn't true, is it?" Sally gasped wildly, holding on to the doorway as though she needed support. "Say

they're just-talking."

Pat smiled wryly, and shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe not. I don't feel no rope 'round my neck yet. Don't

worry, Sally."

"No, that's right," agreed Shorty with a leer. "Absolutely nothin' to worry about.—Al, git them hosses. We'd better git goin'.—We left our ponies 'round th' end of the Bluff, Stevens. Thought there was less chance o' bein' seen, and I guess we was right."

"Takin' the woman along, too?" demanded Al.

"Hell, no, what'd we do with the gal? Ain't no price on her head.—Ever been worth five hundred dollars to anyone before, Stevens? 'Dead or alive,' Stout said."

Across the room Pat could hear Sally draw her breath

in with a great sucking groan.

"That's who you boys ride for, I reckon," Pat observed, making it a statement more than a question.

"Right, the first time," sneered Shorty, "and he's been saving up plenty bile against you, Stevens, so he can get it all worked off good with one smart jerk of that rope."

"Hurry it up," Pat ordered.

"Oh, we will. Won't take Al more than ten minutes to get our hosses, and then we're off to town.-Ride

Stevens' hoss, Al, to fetch 'em. It'll save time."

Al disappeared, and outside Pat could hear him jerking Nigger's head, as the pony pulled away from him, then the creak of saddle leather, and galloping hoofs that disappeared into the distance.

"Where'd yore pal go?" demanded Shorty.

"Where you'll never get him."

"Waal, you don't have to worry," Shorty grinned evilly. "You won't know whether we get him or not." He turned suddenly to Sally, who stood there in the doorway as though frozen. "Ma'am, why don't you come into town for the necktie party? It'll be a right good show—probably first thing in the mornin'."

"Leave her alone, damn you!"

Shorty turned back to Pat with an insulting smile. "You sure was a fool to come back, Stevens. No woman's

worth hangin' for."

Over his captor's shoulder Pat saw Sally stir. She was moving, very slowly. She seemed to be backing out into the hall. Mechanically, he wondered where she was going. Now she had disappeared.

A moment later she was back again in the doorway.

She must have changed her mind about whatever it was. Shorty had said something he'd missed, and seemed to be wanting an answer.

"What was that?" Pat asked.

Sally's hand was moving. It was coming out from behind her back. It held a long black Colt. Pat watched, as though hypnotized. The barrel was coming up—

"I said," repeated Shorty, "that we all thought you

an' yore pal had--"

There was a roaring flash, and Shorty crumpled over. His gun clattered as it fell from his hand and hit the floor.

"My God, you shot him!"

"Yes-I shot him."

Pat was bending over the figure on the floor.

"Is he dead?" she muttered.

"Yes."

"I aimed for-" She couldn't finish.

"Cut me loose! There's a bowie there on the table."

A moment later he was free.

"The horse I saddled-still in the corral, Pat-You can get away if you hurry," she cried.

"And leave you here?" Pat looked at her wonderingly.

"You killed a man-for me!"

"I had to," she said simply. "But go-quickly."

"We're pullin' out together!"

"No, Pat.—I love you—I couldn't just let them—but you're still—It's good-by."

"You can't stay," exulted Pat. "They'll hang you for

murder. We're both in the same hole now."

"But--"

Pat crossed to her swiftly. "Listen, Sally, it's all right. I'm not what you think. I'll explain everythin' just as soon—"

There was a sound of horses-three of them.

"-and there's Al, bringin' back Nigger so's we can get away."

"Pat, I can't stand another killing tonight," she cried.

"I'd rather--"

"All right, all right," he soothed. "I promise you-Do what I say. Get into your room and blow out the candle. As he rides up, begin shriekin' loud as you can and keep it up. Understand?"

Sally nodded and fled.

Pat buckled on his guns, and took up his position just behind the door to the hall. He pulled one gun out, and grasped it grimly by the barrel. Al and the horses were near now-

Terrified shrieks suddenly rent the night. Al galloped up, cursing. He leaped from the saddle, leaving the

horses to take care of themselves.

"Shorty," he roared, "what is it?"

He came plunging into the little black hall, his guns drawn, glanced toward the lighted room, then turned to the door from behind which the horrible shrieks were coming.

Pat dropped him to the floor with the butt of his gun. Then he flung Sally's door open. "S'enough," he

snapped. "For God's sake, shut up."

Quickly he pulled the unconscious puncher into the big room, and tied him hand and foot.

'Just knocked out," he reassured Sally, who was in

the doorway.

"Listen, Sally, get grub together pronto-all we can carry in a sack, a fryin' pan and a coffee pot. I'll get blankets and other stuff."

"I'm not going with you!"

"The hell you're not! I haven't got time to argue-go get that grub!"

A quarter of an hour later Pat swung into the saddle.

"What's that package you're carrying?" he demanded of Sally, who was already mounted on Darky.

"My skirt. I forgot to put it in the sack."

Pat leaned over, took it out of her hands, and tossed it back through the open window of the bunkhouse.

"Won't need no skirt in the hills," he chortled. "We're

goin' campin'."

A Girl with a Price on Her Head

It was almost dawn, before Pat called a halt. They had been riding for hours through the night, doubling back and forth, cutting through creeks, and often swinging back toward the point from which they'd started. Finally Pat had seemed satisfied that he'd broken their trail and he pushed the horses hard on a straight line for the mountains.

For an hour they had followed a broad valley through the foothills. It was thick with blackjack timber, so dense that it was all they could do to force the horses through it. Then Pat had swung sharp west into a can-

von that twisted up into the mountains.

They had hardly exchanged a word since they had galloped off from the Lazy Mare. Pat's entire attention had been focussed first on the problems of throwing any pursuers off the track, and then on finding the spot he

was searching for.

The going got rougher and rougher as they ascended. There was no sign of a trail, but they followed the roaring creek that cut through the canyon. In half an hour it became actually impassable. Their way was so blocked by boulders and underbrush and scrub pine that the horses were absolutely checked. Sally's shirt had been torn to shreds. And she understood for the first time from her own personal experience why chaps were necessary.

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"Tough goin', Sally," he said as they halted. "Not much further, now."

"Not much further! A rat couldn't get an inch further

up this canyon."

"No, that's right—but we're going right up the side o' that rock to the left and along up there for a piece, and then drop down again into the bed of the ravine."

Sally looked at where he was pointing. He was mad. No horse could possibly make its way up over that

rock.

"Not me," she said quietly. "I'll stay here and get hanged."

"You're goin' to do it on foot," he grinned. "I'll tend

to the ponies."

"You'll kill yourself!"

"Pooh! You don't know these mountain goats o' mine. That rock's sugar for them. I'll go first. You can follow."

"I'll ride it if you can."

Pat frowned. "No-you climb it on foot."

"It is dangerous, then."

"Would be for you. Get off."

Sally dismounted. Pat took Darky's reins, and turned toward the rock. Nigger grunted protestingly, but, as Pat drove his spurs home, Nigger dug his toes in, as only a cowpony can, and followed by Darky started

the wild scramble up over the rock.

Sally could hear her heart beating as she watched the tortuous ascent. Time after time the horses slipped and almost went down. Pat, bending low in the saddle, let Nigger find his own path, encouraging him now and then with a light touch of the spur. They wove back and forth, following fissures that Sally could only guess were there. Finally they halted.

"There's a right nice little pocket up here," Pat called down. "Reckon we'll wait here for you. Want me to

come after you?"

"No. I'm coming," she answered.

In five minutes she was beside him, breathless and panting.

"Now we'll cut along here a couple o' hundred yards, and drop down in some nice easy place," Pat grinned.

Sally groaned. "And going down's always worse than climbing up."

"That's right, but we'll make it."

And they did. Fifteen minutes later Pat was looking

around with satisfaction.

"We'll clear us a little spot right here by the water and be right cozy," he said. "And, Sally, all the posses in the state won't find us, even if we are only about fifteen miles from Dutch Springs."

"Fifteen miles-heavens, is that all after this night's riding?-I'd have guessed we'd hit California at least."

Pat laughed.

"Most of the ridin' was only so's to mix up any posses," he said. "I got to be where I can get to Ezraand Sam-and everything."

"Oh—I thought——" she broke off suddenly. "I'm hungry as hell, darling," she said fervently.

Pat turned swiftly and swept her into his arms.

"I love you so, Sally," he muttered huskily. "And

you're mine now, all mine."

"I suppose so," she murmured, her hands creeping up over his shoulders. "I love you, too. Everything's just the way it was as far as I know and I still don't understand-but you said it was all right. Is it, Pat?"

"Yes, sweetheart. It's a long story, but everything is

all right-even Sam."

He found her lips and they stood there for a long time motionless in the dark. Finally she stirred and dropped her head back. "I'm still hungry as hell, darling," she reminded him with a low, happy laugh.

"You can't expect much of a dinner if I have to cook over that fire," Sally announced, looking scornfully at the tiny fire Pat had built between two flat stones.

"An Indian squaw could cook a steer over that fire. It's all you get, anyhow. We don't want any smoke

risin' up," explained Pat.

It was high noon. Their camp was established in the little clearing Pat had hacked out with a hatchet. Darky and Nigger were tethered a few yards away. A poncho stretched over a rope strung between two saplings, and pegged down with sticks, formed a low but waterproof tent over Sally's blankets. The creek was near, with its icy cold, clear water. A coffee pot, a frying pan, two tin cups and plates lay there ready for use.

"That ground's hard, but how I slept!" Sally exulted.

"How long do we stay there?"

"Four days, maybe more. Depends. I'll fix you a real bed out o' pine boughs for tonight."

"I reckon it'll be just plain beans and coffee today

without even any molasses.-Depends on what?"

"Guess I'd better start at the beginning," Pat said slowly, and, while she prepared and they ate their simple meal, he told Sally all that had happened since he'd seen his watch that night in the Golden Fleece at Leadville. He ended by producing the precious evidence he'd found the day before when he'd held up the stage.

"Worth just twelve thousand dollars, a ranch, and a wife," he grinned. "An' you see, Sally, when I saw how you felt about me my pride was sort of hurt, and I told myself I wouldn't explain until you yourself learned to trust me. Then last night when you shot Shorty—"

"Oh, Pat," she whispered, "I'd-I'd forgotten. And

how could I forget? I-I killed a man."

"You didn't kill a man. You killed a snake! That Shorty was one of Stout's dirtiest workers."

"It was him or you," she said thoughtfully. "I reckon

I can forgive myself."

"You saved my life. They had me cold, and Stout and the Sheriff would have strung me up without givin' me time to whistle."

"Yes-I'm glad." There was a long pause. "How'll

you know when Sam gets back?"

"He's goin' to make smudge signals from the Lazy Mare. I can see 'em from the ridge."

"Then you can just wait here, watching?"

"No. I'll have to sneak down to meet Ezra in the willows."

"Oh, Pat, you'll get caught!"

"Not on your life. Not in the dark. I'll have to get down there tonight. Ezra'll know whether Sam made a clean getaway. Everything I've been workin' for all these weeks depends on that—if anything went wrong with Sam I'll have to—well, never mind that now. Also I got to tell Ezra my plans for the finish."

"Yes, I understand. I'm not afraid here."

"I hate to leave you alone—but it's really about as peaceful as a church—except for wild cats, and they'll run if you shout at 'em."

"I'll be all right-Pat, darling!"

"What?"

"Please kiss me."

And he did.

It was midnight when Pat rode into the willow grove. "So you're not dead," Ezra grunted from the shadows.

"Not yet. Close call, though, at the Lazy Mare last night."

"Yeah. Heard about it. There's a reward out for her now, too. Helpin' a prisoner to escape. Nice mess you made o' things, getting a gal mixed up in this."

"A reward for Sally?" grinned Pat. "How much?" "Two-fifty."

"It was she shot that Circle Cross puncher, you know."

Ezra whistled. "No-o! I'll be God damned! They don't know that. Thought it was you, of course."

"Wait'll I tell her. Any news of Sam?"

"Naw. Must be all right. Get what you wanted from the stage?"

"Everything except Pike's Peak. Listen, where they trailin' us?"

"Everywhere. Lucky they're not here in the grove now. Thought sure they'd catch you."

"Give me some tobacco. I'm low."

"And," announced Ezra in a gloomy voice, handing over a sack of tobacco, "it's all shot to hell anyway. You've had all your trouble for nothin', Pat."

"What's bitin' you?"

"When's Sam get back with his warrants and his marshals?"

"Maybe day after tomorrow, late.-Maybe the day after that."

"Thought so. Too late."

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Pat snapped.

"Matter with me is I just can't help overhearin' things," Ezra complained.

"What now?"

"Waal, one of Stout's boys was drinkin' with me this afternoon, and we must have had a couple too many, because he let out somethin' that was on his mind. Said he couldn't figure it out. He couldn't quite savvy why a man should want to clean out his own bank."

"Wha-a-t?"

"Seems as how Red John Stout has got it all fixed for about eight of the boys to put on masks and bust into the bank day after tomorrow, clean the place out and disappear."

"But why?"

"Smells a rat, I reckon. Beats me why he don't clear out just what he wants hisself."

Pat swore roundly.

"He's so damn smart he don't want to be identified with takin' anything out of the bank. This way no one'll know Stout's behind it. He'll be the innocent victim."

"What's more I gathered the boys had been told that if they just happened to shoot them two clerks in the

bank it wouldn't be held against 'em."

"So-o-o-I get it. Stout's scared with that stagecoach' stuff stolen from him. Decides to clear out the rest of the evidence, and at the same time the only witnesses to what's been goin' on in the bank the last couple of years. Pretty slick."

Ezra nodded. "He could make it seem as how the same gang robbed his bank as pulled the other stuff

'round about these parts."

There was a long pause.

"Well, Ez, that puts it up to you and me."

"What d'you mean?"

"You and me are going to get in there first."

Ezra gazed at him in horror. "You and me r-r-rob the bank?" he stammered.

"Sure."

"For God's sake, why?" groaned Ezra.

"Because anybody's crazy who thinks I'm goin' to let that skunk beat me at the last move," said Pat in sudden fury, "by clearin' out the evidence that's goin' to tie this stinkin' mess right up to him."

"Yeah, I see that—but you cain't bust into that bank. Just cain't—not without rousin' the whole town. You'd have to pull a wall out, or dig up through the floor and

there ain't time."

"I'm not goin' to bust in. I'm goin' to walk in," Pat grinned, "and, Ezra, you're goin' to be on the inside

already, waitin' for me."

"You ain't forgettin' that you're a notorious character, are you? Why, you couldn't get within five hundred yards of the place. Town's full of folks. They all know what you look like. You'd be pulled off your horse on the edge of town."

"When's Red John plannin' this robbery?"

"Day after tomorrow-early."

"That's all right. Now here's what we do, Ez--"

Ten minutes later Ezra groaned again—but with a yielding note in his voice. "Sam had it easy with that stagecoach. Not one chance in ten of gettin' out of this horner's nest."

"Ezra, once we're in that bank, if it looks as how it's goin' to be too tough gettin' out, we'll just stay there," drawled Pat. "You said yourself it was hard to get into. That goes for the other fellow, too. Be pretty safe for us, I reckon."

"Sure, like a picnic."

"I'm goin' back to Sally now," said Pat. "Sure you know where we're campin' up in that canyon?"

Ezra nodded.

"If I don't make it in two days, you get her out o' Powder Valley. Understand?"

"Yeah. I understand."

"Remember, just as soon as the doors open flip a half dollar up on the roof so's I'll know you're on your way in."

"Might as well waste a dollar. I won't have no more

use for money."

It took Pat and Nigger three hours to reach the top

of the canyon and scale the rock he and Sally had

climbed the night before.

Sally heard them as Nigger settled back on his haunches and began sliding down the steep, smooth rock above her. She gave a low whistle.

Pat whistled back, his heart pumping at the realization

that she was there waiting for him.

"Oh, darling, I'm glad you're back," she whispered as he slipped off his horse beside her. "I worried so."

"Told you I'd come back."

"Everything all right? Sam? Ezra?"

"Yeah.—Sally, my girl, I don't know just how I'm goin' to go on associatin' with you. I've always had a right good reputation. If anyone had ever told me I'd be aimin' to marry a girl with a price on her head..."

"Pat! What d'you mean?"

"Well, if I was to take you in to Dutch Springs and turn you over to the Sheriff, he'd have to give me just two hundred and fifty silver dollars. You're outlawed," Pat grinned.

"O-o-h!" she gasped. "What'll I do?"

"Do? Do nothin'. What are you thinkin' of doin'?"

"But I've never been-Shouldn't I--"

"Go to sleep and forget it," he soothed, seeing that she was really upset. "Of course two-fifty's a nice tidy sum, but I reckon it ain't quite enough to tempt me to turn you in, things bein' how they are."

"Oh, Pat, you've got me into an awful fix," she wailed,

half laughing.

"Wait'll we start life over at the Lazy Mare—and start buyin' horses instead of rustlin' 'em."

"I've never said I'd marry you," Sally pouted. "We'll have Sam and Ezra around, and—"

"I'm a little jealous of Sam and Ezra."

"You needn't be. Couldn't leave 'em to go it alone,

though. They'd get into trouble first thing you know. Those boys need me to keep 'em quiet."

Sally snorted. "I'll tell them what you said. They'll be interested!"

Pat grinned, and pulled her toward him.

"Listen, I'm goin' to kiss you harder and longer than you've ever been kissed before. Then we're goin' to turn in. An' don't you wake me up, either, 'cause I don't just know when I'll be sleepin' again."

"I fixed you a comfortable bed, too. But what do you

mean?"

"I'll tell you when I wake up," he promised, and closed her lips with his.

It was late the next afternoon before Pat opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Sally sitting on a rock by the stream, dangling her bare feet in the water. She looked about sixteen years old. She was humming happily.

"Mornin', Sally."

She turned with a low laugh. "Morning indeed! You've been asleep for twelve solid hours!"

"Reckon I needed it," Pat admitted sheepishly.

"I'll cook up some coffee."

"Make it as hearty a meal as you can. I'm hungry."

"I wish you could see your face!"

"S'matter with my face?"

"A shave wouldn't hurt you."
"No razor. Would washin' help it?"

"Might."

Pat pushed his way through the thick bushes down the stream a few yards, stripped off his clothes, and dropped down into the icy water.

In a few minutes he was back. Sally handed him a

tin cup of steaming black coffee, and looked at him closely.

"Now what's up?" she demanded. "You said last night

you'd tell me."

"I got to go down and meet Ezra again."
"To keep him out of trouble, I suppose!"

"No, it's this way--"

She listened with growing terror to his account of Stout's plot to rob the bank and his own plan to circumvent it.

"But you can't, you can't, you can't, Pat," she

pleaded. "It's mad-You'll never be able to do it."

"That's what Ezra says," Pat chuckled.

reward and all the money go. It doesn't matter. We'll go somewhere and start all over. We'll go today."

"Sally," he said slowly. "I love you—more than you know. But when a man starts out to do somethin'—well—he's got to do it. I swore to get that gang o' cutthroats, and I'm goin' to get 'em. I swore to myself to get John Stout, and I'm goin' to see him hang.—A man can't live with himself and respect himself if he quits when the goin' gets rough."

There was a long silence.

Finally Sally looked up at him. Her eyes were clear. Her mouth was firm.

"All right," she said quietly. "Tell me just how you're

going to do it."

"Well, tonight when it's dark I'm goin' to sneak down into Dutch Springs. I'll climb up on the flat iron roof over the bank, and wait there for morning and the bank to open. Ezra'll be hangin' around, and the minute the door swings open, Ezra'll wander in as though on business. I drop down off the roof in front of the door and duck in. We close the doors and chances are there won't

be anyone outside that early to see anything or suspect anything wrong for a time."

"With the doors closed?"

"They'll just think the bank's late in openin' or something.—We get what we want for final evidence against Stout, open the doors, and Ezra walks out bold as brass—"

"And you?"

"Hidin' behind the door in the bank.—Ezra cuts up to the feed store where's he's got a lot o' shavings soaked in coal oil waitin' and touches it off. Everyone runs to the fire, and I ride out o' town on Nigger, who's been tied up behind the bank, meetin' Ezra here."

"And what if someone sees you—dropping down from the roof. What if any one of a hundred things goes wrong?" Sally asked thoughtfully.

"Then we lock ourselves in the bank 'til Sam comes

along with the army."

"Hold the bank? Against all of Dutch Springs?" she

demanded incredulously.

"Sure. It's brick. Iron roof, Heavy oak door. Barred windows that you can shoot out of. That's a good bank Stout's built himself. Bricks came all the way from Denver, Ezra tells me. Two men could hold it for days."

Sally cross-questioned him about every detail of his plan. What time he'd reach Dutch Springs; what the route was; what time the bank would open; how many men there'd be in the bank when he and Ezra entered; what they'd do with the men.

"Ezra and I ought to get back here some time before tomorrow night," Pat finished up. "If we shouldn't get here by day after tomorrow, Sally, you got to get yourself and Darky over that rock and head south for Hopewell. Chances are no one will recognize you down there." He went on to give her specific directions both for avoiding notice and for finding the Junction. "We'll

get here, though. Don't worry."

"Pat," Sally broke in thoughtfully, "it looks to me like one chance in ten of your getting clear of that bank without someone spotting something wrong."

Pat shrugged.

"Am I right?" she persisted. "You're going to have to stay in that bank, once you get in. Tell me the truth."

"Probably," he admitted. "I didn't tell Ezra, though.

He was worried enough."

"And Sam can't possibly get there before night-or the next day," she mused. "Taking food along, Pat?—Be a pity to starve to death," she added with a nervous laugh.

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. Can't pack much, though."

Sally got up and wandered over to the creek.

"Lets' talk about something else—until it's time for you to go," he said.

Fire and Smoke—and a Warrant

Par halted Nigger on a rise above Dutch Springs and looked down with satisfaction on the dark, quiet town.

"No one expectin' us at all, Nigger," he said. "Even

the Gold Eagle's gone to sleep."

A few minutes later the bronco was hitched in the alley behind the brick bank building. By standing in his saddle, Pat could easily reach the overhanging roof. He slid his rifle up and then pulled himself after it. He lay down in the exact middle of the roof, put his hat under his head for a pillow, and went to sleep. He knew he'd wake at sunrise.

Soon after dawn he crept as near the front edge of the roof as he could get without being seen from the windows of the one-story shack across the street. For an hour and a half he lay there. Only an occasional passer-by on foot or on horseback broke the silence. Once two men had passed, talking about him, and the stage hold-up, and furious because stupid Stuffy Parsons and his posse had absolutely lost the bandit's trail.

He lay there motionless, every sense alert, waiting for some noise that would in dicate that the bank was being

opened up, and then that-

The town was really waking up now. He heard windows being opened, and someone sweeping out the store next to the bank. And more people were passing back and forth. Ezra must be out there somewhere, by now.

There wasn't much of a chance, really, that he, Pat, could drop off the roof without being seen. Well, he just hoped Sam would show up in time. It was just a question of time. It was tough on Sally, waiting up there in the canyon—

Two men had stopped—just below him. There was a fumbling with locks, then the squeak of a door, the

bank door.

Pat waited breathless for the clinking sound of a coin on the sheet iron roof. Maybe there were too many people around, and Ezra was waiting.

Clink.

Pat was up and over. His rifle held clear, he hit the ground with the lithe control of a cat. A figure was just entering the bank. That would make three to take care of inside. A man down the street stared stupidly. Too bad, but he'd never really expected to escape notice.

The next moment he was in the doorway, his rifle in one hand, a Colt in the other. Ezra was there, both guns ready. The clerks hadn't noticed anything strange. The other person who'd just entered had his back

turned.

Pat wheeled and slammed the door behind him. He shot the heavy bolts.

"Put 'em up," he snapped.

The two clerks turned simultaneously, and after a moment of paralysis, their hands shot up. The third figure turned around slowly.

"Hello."

"You!" gasped Pat.

"Thought you might need a third," Sally explained nervously. "Tell me what to do!"

"What to do? Get out o' here!" Pat roared. "Ezra,

can we sneak her out?"

"We cannot," Ezra drawled. "They're runnin' around out there already."

"I brought some extra food," Sally observed.

Pat merely glared at her.

"Might as well get started," advised Ezra. "Shall I rope 'em up?"

Pat nodded, still too staggered for action. "Damn you, Sally! Don't you know—"

Sally's blazing eyes stopped him.

"If you can get out of here alive, so can I! If you can't, I don't want to. Understand?—You said you had to get what you started after. All right, let's get it."

"You're-you're--"

"And I might be some use."

A pane of glass shattered from one of the windows,

and a bullet buried itself in the back wall.

"All right," Pat muttered. "You and Ezra watch those two windows. I'll see what I can find around here that'll stop lead. Don't let anyone get up close, and for God's sake keep moving and keep way back where they can't see you."

Pat glanced around quickly. A big heavy pine table he hauled it across the floor and tipped it over on its side so that the top faced the window like a shield.

"Get behind that," he growled to Sally.

He found another smaller table to face Ezra's window. He spotted the Turkey carpet in John Stout's little office, jerked it out and flung it over Sally's table.

"Pretty," grinned Sally.

"It'll keep the wood from splintering," he said grimly.
"I wish to hell they wasn't so quiet out there," muttered Ezra.

"That's all right," said Pat. "They just don't know what to do yet. Someone'll arrive pronto and tell 'em. Don't worry."

He wrenched a counter loose from its floor mooring, and improved his barricade. The desk from Stout's office, chairs, boxes, everything movable Pat built into his defenses. In ten minutes they had an inner fort commanding the door and the windows.

The glass in the other window crashed ominously as someone threw a rock through it, and Pat edged around the room to examine the iron bars at the windows.

"Half an inch thick and set in brick," he announced.

"How's the door?" asked Ezra.

"It'll stop anything except a batterin' ram."

"No windows in back?"

"Two little holes way high up. Too high for 'em to get up to without building a platform—and they don't cover us anyhow.—Sally! Stay behind that table, will you?"

Pat crossed to one of the bound men, and untied his

feet.

"Get up-you're goin' to open those two safes," he commanded.

His teeth chattering, the man arose. Pat frisked him for a gun, then loosened his hands.

"Open the safe," he commanded again.

There was more shouting outside now, but no more

shooting.

"What the hell's the use of playin' with them safes now?" complained Ezra. "If Sam gets here in time, you'll have all week to open 'em. If he don't, you won't have no use for what's in 'em."

"Might as well be doin' somethin' till things liven up-

What's your name?" he demanded of his prisoner.

"White."

"Well, White, you and your friend don't know how lucky you are. If we hadn't slipped in first, you'd a had some visitors who'd a wiped you out.—Get goin' on that safe."

White's trembling hand was fumbling with the com-

hination.

"That crooked boss o' yours is a double crossin' skunk," Pat went on.

The doors of the big safe swung open. It was filled with ledgers and books and papers. There was a big tin box. Pat wrenched it open. It contained a lot of silver money, and a pile of bills in different denominationsperhaps three hundred dollars in all.

"Hell, there isn't anything there," Pat growled. "Get

at the other one."

Ezra's Colt barked twice.

"Someone foolin' around that window," he sighed.

He was answered by a fusillade from outside, half a dozen slugs plopping into the walls and ceiling. Pat and White, who were in range of the window, had instinctively dropped to the floor.

"Now-that other safe." Pat insisted.

"I can't," said White. "Why the hell not?"

"Stout's the only one who knows the combination."

"You're lyin'."

"That's right," piped up the other figure still trussed up on the floor. "All the big stuff's in the little safe, and Stout didn't trust no one. He kept just a little in the big safe for ordinary business that we handled."

"What do you do in this bank?"

"I'm the bookkeeper.-Wish you'd roll me over behind the table with the girl. I'd feel safer."

"It'll take dynamite to get that safe open," muttered

Pat, examining it carefully.

"Sure-settle down and take it easy," counselled Ezra.

"You all right over there, ma'am?"

"I-I guess so. I-I can just see a man across the street. He's not doing anything particular. Just standing there."

"Let him be," grinned Pat. "No point in shooting wild at everyone you happen to see."

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs outside, and loud voices.

"That might be Stout," said the bookkeeper. "Usually gets here about this time when he ain't away. Reckon he's surprised."

"He just might be," agreed Ezra.

Pat had crossed to Sally's barricade, and dropped down on the floor beside her.

"This isn't so bad, Pat," she whispered.

"Nothin's started yet. Just a few town folks around outside, not knowing what to do, and not much lookin' for trouble. Wait'll Stout gets his boys into action, and the Sheriff gets his clothes on. It'll get plenty hot then. Ezra, tie up White again and drag 'em both back into the little office."

"Can we hold them off?" asked Sally.

"Sure, for a while."

"How long?"

"Depends," he said shortly. "I'd give that twelve thousand and then some if you weren't here."

"I-I had to come. I decided that yesterday."
"So that's why you asked so many questions!"

Sounds of greater commotion on the street silenced them.

"Hey, you, inside!"

Pat motioned Ezra and Sally not to reply, and waited.

"Hey! In the bank!"

Silence. Then someone sent four wild shots through Ezra's window.

Pat emptied his Colt in return.

Then a voice that sounded like Stout's. "You'll never get out o' there alive if you go on this way! If you open the door and walk out without your guns, you'll get a fair trial and I'll do what I can to make it easy for you. You ain't got a chance in there—might as well give up."

Pat grinned delightedly, picked up his rifle, took a bead on the running horse weather vane on the shack across the street, and cut it down with three quick shots.

There was silence outside for a moment.—Then Red John ripped out an oath, "—All right, you son of a —,

you asked for it, and you'll get it, damn you!"

"He's getting angry," sighed Ezra with a strange air of contentment. "Wish we had more than the one rifle, Pat. If they get off a ways and begin plugging—"

"Pat," whispered Sally, "I thought Ezra was always

afraid of things."

"That's just talk—beforehand," Pat chuckled. "Once he gets that one eye of his *into* trouble, he don't give a damn for anything."

There was a crashing thud on the door.

Like a flash Pat was up and around by the window, peeping out at an angle toward the door. There were eight men there, with a long heavy beam as a ram. They were drawing back for another onslaught.

He cracked down on them four times, aiming low. Two men dropped, grabbing their legs. The two others ran limping off out of his range. The four remaining

fled, dropping their ram on the ground.

The next instant a hail of lead splattered through the windows. The singing slugs were coming lower now. Some of them were plugging into the tables and desks.

"They're on the roof 'cross the road," announced

Ezra. "Shall I clear 'em off?"

"Yeah, we'll have to. Pretty soon one of these bullets'll ricochet and hit someone.—I got the rifle. I'll do it."

The 44-40 slid forward again over the table edge. It spat once, twice, three times.

"Get 'em?"

"Don't know. They've stopped shootin', though. That's all I care."

"Do you think Sam'll get here soon?" asked Sally in a low voice.

"Don't know, Sally. Pueblo's quite a ways, an' he may

have got delayed there."

"Will night be worse than day?" she asked.

"No," Pat lied.

"Wish to God I had some water," Ezra interrupted. "I brought a canteen full," said Sally. Ezra grabbed it.

"Don't you ever rob no bank without Miss Sally," he

chortled to Pat.

"Go easy," Pat ordered. "We might need that bad. Sally, take a look at the two lads in Stout's office and see if their cinches are tight." In a few minutes Sally was back.

"Pat, did you notice the trap door in the floor in

there?"

"What?"

"It must have been right under Stout's desk. Of course

the rug hid it."

The next instant Pat was in the cubicle, bending over the black seams that marked a two foot square in the wooden plank floor. There was an iron ring sunk in the center of the square.

"What the hell's this?" he demanded of White.

"Search me. Never saw it before."

Pat wrenched at the ring, and the square block of floor gave way. He peered down into the black hole.

Carefully he let himself down through the opening. Before his head was below the level of the floor, his feet touched the bottom. He crouched down, and lit a match.

It was a cellar, perhaps eight feet square. Pat looked first to see if there was a passageway leading away. There wasn't. Then he saw some boxes piled in the corner: some small, of tin; others larger wooden cases.

He smashed open one of the tin boxes. Feverishly he

examined the contents. Then he pried open another and another. At last he was satisfied and pulled himself up

into Stout's office again.

"It's all there, even receipts for old shipments with his name on 'em—enough to hang him twenty times over," he whispered to Sally and Ezra. "There's stuff there that goes back to last year's robberies. Ez, what'd I tell you?"

"Sam can come along any time he likes as far as I go," said Ezra inconsequentially. "Since you been underground, there's been some mighty queer noises on that roof overhead."

"What kind of noises?" asked Pat quickly.

"About six pairs of feet. Listen to 'em yourself."

"They can't do anything through that sheet iron roof."

"No-but sheet iron roofs can be ripped off."

"God damn! I never thought of that. Well, it's as

easy to shoot out as it is in."

The noise on the roof was growing louder. There was a clatter of iron tools and a sound that might have been a pick-ax being driven under the edge of sheet iron to pry it loose. That was followed by silence. Then there was the sound of chopping and splintering wood.

"You'll see sky in a minute. Reckon we'd better start

shootin' then," said Pat.

"Yeah."

Quickly Pat picked up the heavy table and set it up on its legs by the door into Stout's private office.

"Sally, get under that table and stay there," he

snapped.

"I'm going to stay here and shoot, too," she said.

"You are like hell!"

He pushed her roughly under the table.

At that instant Ezra fired at the spot of light showing in the roof. There was a cry of pain, and a pause. Then the chopping recommenced. Ezra fired again. There was the ring of metal but the chopping went on.

"They're shieldin' themselves behind the iron."

Pat fired. The chopping went on. Now the hole in the roof was big enough for them to see the blue of the

sky.

They were both firing steadily, moving around, trying different angles, hoping for a chance hit. Once they must have scored, for the chopping stopped. But then some one else took up the axe, and it went on.

Chop! Chop! Chop!

To Pat there was something inexorable about the sound, something even horrible because Sally was there.

The opening was a ragged foot square now. Suddenly a flaming, furning black mass dropped through the hole.

It hit the floor. Smoke was pouring up.

Pat hurled a small table on top of it, upside down, and jumped on the flat top, half smothering the burning mass.

"Burning tar!" he shouted. "Find something for the

next," he cried to Ezra.

There was a jeering laugh from above and the second flaming ball dropped down on them. Ezra took care of that. Then came a third.

The bank was filling with strangling black smoke. It

was getting hard even to see.

"We'll have to run for it," choked Pat. "There won't be a chance."

Ezra nodded. His one red eye was streaming.

Without a word, Pat reached under the table and pulled Sally out.

"The hole," he gasped, pushing her into Stout's office and slamming the door behind her. It was clearer in there.

She was fighting him now. "No-I don't want to leave you-no-" He picked her up, and holding her arms

to her side, dropped her down into the black hole, and settled the floor over her head.

"Listen, you two," he croaked to the prisoners. "In five minutes I'll be dead. I wouldn't be lyin' to you now.—Stout planned a double crossin' raid of the bank for today, and you were goin' to get shot, 'cause he thought you knew too much.—You know about what. I'm cuttin' you lose, so you can get out of here when we open the door. If you want to get even with Stout, don't tell him that girl's down there. Forget the girl. Ezra and I was here alone. See? If you don't swear you'll do it, I drill you now."

"We'll keep quiet," gasped White.

Swiftly Pat cut them loose and opened the door into the main room. Ezra was lying under one of the windows, waiting. The smoke wasn't so thick there.

Half suffocated, Pat moved blindly toward the door

to open it for a dash into sure death.

He stopped suddenly. There was the sound of firing outside—rifle fire, Colts, and the clatter of hoofs. There was firing from the roof—at something in the street.

Ezra was up, standing by the window, peering out recklessly. Again there was a crashing at the door. He turned toward Pat, who had staggered over. His lips moved. No sound came, but Pat read his lips. He was trying to say "Sam." Then Ezra keeled over.

Before Pat could reach the door it burst open in his face with a splintering crash. He stood there swaying,

a gun in each hand, waiting.

"Put 'em away, Pat! It's all over! It's me, Sam!"

Pat heard the voice vaguely. It seemed to come from a long way off.

"Come on in," he choked as things got black. "Sally -in there-under the floor."

Ten minutes later Pat opened his eyes. He was lying out in the street. Ezra was lying there, too, still coughing tar smoke out of his lungs. Then Pat saw Sally crouching over him.

"All right?" he whispered.

"Of course. I thought you'd never come to-Sam, come here! Pat's-"

Then he saw Sam and a grizzled man with a badge

leaning over him.

"All that's left is tied up in the post office," Sam grinned.

"Stout there?"

"Large as life, and usin' very objectionable language. Meet Marshal Corrigan, Pat. He brought the boys that pulled yuh out o' yore fiery furnace."

Pat nodded weakly. "Thanks. You got here just about right-didn't even hope for you till night. How the

hell--"

"When we was boys, we learned how to ride, eh, Corrigan?—Suppose yuh do less talkin' an' more breathin' for a spell, Stevens."

"Bring the murder warrant for Stout?"

"Sure."

That revived him as if by magic. He sat up. "Corrigan, do me a favor, will you? You could appoint me a deputy right off, couldn't you?"

"Yeah, but what the devil for?"

"Ain't you had enough?" wheezed Ezra weakly.

"I mean it, Marshal," Pat persisted. "Right now. Right here."

"All right."

Quickly Pat was sworn in.

"Now give me that warrant," he said, getting upon his feet with difficulty. "I'm goin' to serve it on Stout myself." "Ma'am," Sam said to Sally as they all watched Pat staggering toward the post office, "I'm afraid I can't recommend that man Stevens to anyone who's aimin' for a peaceful married life."



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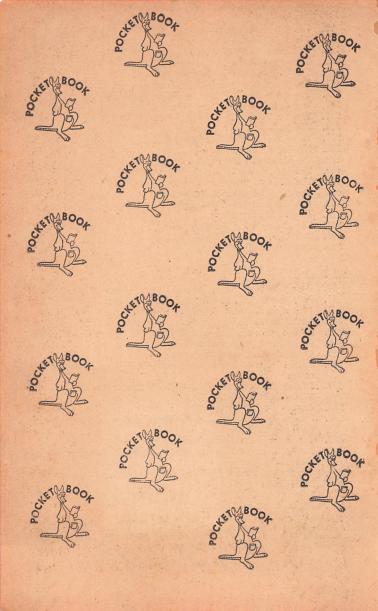
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THE BODY OF A MAN

hung from the rafters

The eerie silence bristled the hair on Pat Stevens' neck. He took an involuntary step backward. It was Dan Stout!

But things didn't add up. The chair upon which Dan had presumably stood did not reach his feet. And Dan's brother, Red John Stout, only became excited when Pat told him, "You know of course that Dan left everything to his wife."

"Damn it man, you're lying!" Red Iohn shouted.

But Pat knew what he was talking about. And he and his two friends also knew the unconvincing suicide blazed a sinister trail to a six-gun showdown.

Front cover illustration by Harvey Kidder

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