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Piñon Mesa

Lee Floren

Guns and riders in the night!



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"THERE'S DANGER DOWN THERE!"

"There's danger down there, Ed," Bishop said, jetting tobacco smoke from lean nostrils. First, there's Villa. He's raisin' hell, you know that. He needs horseflesh for his army.

"Then there's the Cerveza outfit. They're on Chamiso Crick, west of you. That's a tough spread. They're renegade *Americanos*. Mack Colton runs the outfit."

Ed smiled. "That name's familiar. Ain't he wanted in the States?"

"Not exactly. Anyway, he's in Baja California now. And then there's Sean O'Henry."

"I know him," Ed said slowly. "We had a run-in out of Bishop, California—a little argument over a steer." Ed looked at his right fist and didn't say any more. He didn't tell how they'd fought for thirty minutes, there in that roundup camp in the desert.

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PINON MESA

Lee Floren

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To
Marie Lillian Burrage

CHAPTER I

Through the driving December rain, horses were going across the Border into Baja California. They trotted through the government gates at Tecate, spilling down through the rain into the Mexican town that lay in the valley, half obscured in the downpour on this afternoon. They were trotting down Tecate's main street and climbing into the southern hills.

Ed Garlan had hazed the leaders through town, mindful of the eyes of the residents who watched them from under the canopies of stores and business-houses. The horses, spooky from days on the trail, had boogered at the sight of the town. Ed and his punchers drove them hard, beating them with rain-soaked lassoes.

A ragged little Mexican had run out, calling, "Gringos! Gringos! Down with the gringos!" He was about eight, Ed had figured. The big *Americano* had turned his horse toward the boy.

"Get off the street, *hijo*," he said sternly. "If one of these broncs runs over you you'll eat no more *tortillas*." He spoke in fast Spanish.

The boy ran back to the sidewalk. "Gringos," he called angrily.

Ed looked for a long moment at the mother and father who stood under the canopy. The mother was a squat, heavy Mexican with two more *muchachos* beside her. The father was a tall man with black *mustachios*.

"Your son has poor manners, *hombre*," he told the father.

Skinny Marsh had ridden out of the rain. "Ed, we got

the leaders out in the foothills. About thirty miles south of here, I reckon, and we hit Hacienda Creek. You follow the creek south for ten miles and you reach the outfit, huh?"

Ed Garlan nodded. "You ramrod them out, Skinny. I'll ride back to the custom house and settle with the border patrol."

Skinny Marsh turned his pinto. He was a short man who weighed close to three hundred, and an ironic cowboy had once dubbed him "Skinny." The name and the fat both clung to Skinny Marsh. Ed Garlan watched him ride into the rain; then Ed turned and sent his bronc up the slope toward the custom house.

Ed Garlan was trailing broncs into trouble, and he was fully aware of that fact. *Americanos* were not welcomed in *Mejico*. Ed reined to one side as one of his Bar S cowboys rode up.

"Keep pushin' them, Hightail," he said.

Somewhere a stallion neighed. Horses were moving in the rain, and somewhere a dog barked. The sound turned from a bark into a sharp yip. The yip ran out as the dog ran into the distance. Ed let a smile touch his lips. One Mexican dog had stopped the hoof of an American horse. That cur would have a memento whereby to remember the American horse herd.

He swung wide of another rider. For the most part, the herd was made up of bay mares—good stock from the Imperial Valley and the mountains out of Escondido. Ed had raised them himself. The rest were mares he had purchased on the northern side of the line—a scatteration of sorrels, pintos and grays.

He rode to the custom house. A slender Mexican, dressed in the ornate uniform of the Mexican border patrol, stood under the overhang of the roof on the adobe building, a box of matches in one hand. Every time a hundred horses trotted past, he transferred a match to the windowsill beside him.

Ed did not break into the border man's count. He got

down and went under the overhang. Here the rain did not hit him. He was a big man, still in his twenties. The yellow oilskin slicker did not hide the bulk of his muscular body. His jaw was square, covered with three days of whiskers, and his eyes were a light blue. He wore shotgun chaps, and the heels of his bench-made boots were run over.

He walked to the high border fence and went through the gate to the American side. His men were funneling the herd out here, letting the mares trickle through the gate, thereby making it easier for the Mexican to count them. One lifted a hand to Ed, who nodded back.

An American custom officer squatted beside his office, protected from the rain by the canopy, and watched the herd.

"Nice horses, Ed."

"I think so, Tom."

Tom Bishop had known Ed for some time. They had gone to school together up in Indio. The Border man shifted his weight to his other leg. He dug in his pocket and came out with a package of cigarets. He extended it toward Ed.

"The new-fangled kind, huh?" said Ed. "Already rolled. Me, I always hit the Durham, the kind you twist."

"That's one curse of civilization," said Tom Bishop. "I live an easy life; you live a hard one. I get a small salary, and you own a couple of thousand head of mares."

"But you're not out in the rain," put in Ed.

Bishop looked at a pinto mare. "You're moving into trouble, Ed. They won't like you in Mexico. And then there's Villa and his bunch. Rumor says when they get out of Central Mexico, they're coming north toward El Paso, then swinging this way. They want to control Baja California."

"Part of the game," said Ed.

They had their cigarets going. Ed put his back against the wall and judged his smoke. "Not as good as

Durham," he said. He looked at the cigaret. "Mex brand, huh?"

"They smoke them strong there," supplied Tom Bishop. "How many more head you got, Ed? They been going by here for over an hour."

Ed smiled. He threw the cigaret away and rolled some Durham in a wheat-straw paper. "Not much more now."

Bishop said again, "There's danger down there, Ed."

"Put your cards out?"

Bishop jettied tobacco smoke from lean nostrils. "First, there's Villa. He's raisin' ned; you know that. He needs horseflesh for his army. He needs beef for his army. Of course, you aren't raising beef—that put you clear there."

"Si."

"Then there's the Cerveza outfit. They're on Chamiso Crick, west of you. That's a tough spread."

"Mexicans?"

Bishop shook his head. "Not Mexicans, Ed. For the most part, the Mexicans are danged nice people—oh, sure, there's some skunks among them, but there are more skunks per bunch among the Americans than there are among the Mexes. No, they're renegade *Americanos*. Mack Colton runs the outfit."

Ed scowled. "That name's familiar. Ain't he the gent that lifted the money out of the El Centro bank a few years back? He ran an outfit up on the Colorado, but when construction work started on the Canal, it drove him out of that section."

"We don't know whether he robbed that bank or not, Ed. Anyway, we got suspicions. Well, he's boss of the Cerveza iron. Cerveza means beer in Spanish, and he runs a beer bottle as a brand. He runs cattle."

✶ "Ain't he wanted in the States?"

"Not exactly. Anyway, he's in Baja California. We don't want him across the Line. He can stay down

there. And there's Sean O'Henry."

"I know him," said Ed slowly. "We had a run-in out of Bishop, California, up in the Owens Valley. I was ramroddin' old Ike Slattery's iron, the N Bar 5. Sean O'Henry ran a wagon for the outfit on the edge of Death Valley, the Lazy Y T. We got in a little argument over a steer. I said he had the wrong iron on him."

"Guns?"

"Never got that far." Ed looked at his right fist suggestively. He didn't say any more. He didn't tell how they had fought for thirty minutes, there in that round-up camp in the desert. How, when it was over, Sean O'Henry lay in the sand, bloody and beaten. "He's got a bend in his nose, ain't he?"

"Yes, he has."

Ed grinned. "I put that there."

"Pinto Martinez rides with them, too."

Ed shook his head. "Never heard of him."

"Part Apache, part Mexican. Worst blood of each race. You'll hear of him. He can separate a cow from a hide pronto, I hear. Reckon he never has eaten a piece of beef from a cow of the iron he runs. Always the neighbor's critter goes under his knife. And watch that 'breed's knife, Ed."

Ed was silent for some time, looking at the rain and the horses. "I was through here two months ago," he said. "You were over around National City then, I guess. I went through to Hacienda Crick and looked the spread over. Nice-looking outfit and a good graze for horses. Guess it used to belong to an old Spaniard, Don Cortez de la Riviera. He died with no heirs and it went to the territorial government."

"Colton tried to buy it," said Tom Bishop. "But you outbid him, I guess. He didn't like that either."

The last of the herd went by. Ed watched the horses trickle through the gate. He got to his feet. "See you again, Tom."

Tom Bishop joked, "Maybe."

"Not that bad." Ed Garton grinned.

Ed walked back across the line, boots in the thick mud. One of his riders, Kid Harris, pulled in, looked down. "I'm cold, Ed."

"Java."

"Java nothin'; tequila."

"We'll get a drink, in a little while," said Ed.

Harris rode to the Mexican custom house. The young official spoke in Spanish. "Count these." He handed the matches to Ed. "Add seventy-six head to that, *Americano*."

Ed counted the matches. There were twenty-eight of them. The Mexican had counted two thousand, eight hundred and seventy-six head of his horses. "Should be twenty-nine hundred even," said Ed. "We left the Imperial Valley with a few head over that. We lost three head in Carrizo Gorge out of Jacumba in rock slide. You take my count or do I take yours?"

The man smiled. "Mine is official."

Ed shrugged, grinned. "Won't argue, fellow."

They went into the office. Kid Harris sat his bronc outside, holding the reins of Ed's horse. Ed watched the man figure out the import duty on the horses, and he made out a check on the El Centro bank. "If that'n ain't no good," he joked, "I'll make out another."

"You go to Hacienda Creek?"

Ed nodded.

"That is a good *rancho*, *señor*. *Señor* de la Riviera took great pride in his *rancho*. I understand the territorial government sold his cattle to the Cerveza brand and the money was turned over to the treasury in Mexico City. That is what a man gets by not marrying and raising any sons." The Mexican smiled at Ed. "But they could not accuse me of that. *Por Dios*, Lupe is to have her sixth baby and we have been married only seven years. I have the heirs, *no es verdad*, but nothing to leave to them."

"You're young," said Ed. "You'll drink tequila for a

long time yet.”

The Mexican was looking out the dirty window. “The rain is stopping. That is the way it sometimes rains here. It comes all at once and rushes water down arroyos and then the rain is gone. That is one price one pays for living so close to the ocean.”

“How far to the coast?”

“To Ensenada it is about twenty miles.”

The last of the rain ran off the overhang. Already the sun was shining on the watersoaked adobe soil that was as slippery as wet marble. “You say I am young, *si*. But Pancho Villa has a way of changing things in the government service. He does not like the present government officials. Perhaps some day you’ll see me ride into your camp on Hacienda Creek and want a job for protection.”

“Why pick on us?”

“Villa will not like you, either. He does not like gringos—pardon me, *Americanos*—in Mexico.”

Ed Garlan’s face was sober.

CHAPTER II

Ed and Kid Harris rode toward a *cantina*. The street was hoof-marked and rough behind the horse herd. They rode at a walk, their shod horses sure-footed in the mud. Back of them, on the American side of the line, was the high lava ridge. Beyond that ridge was the Potrero Valley. To the west and the east were the chamiso-covered hills, rough with boulders and ridges. This was a mountainous desert country. Mount Tecate was to the northwest, half in Mexico and half in the United States.

Ahead of them lifted the Tecate hills. These were brush-covered—marked by chamiso and manzanita and buckbrush. Here and there the wide expanse of an oak or a cottonwood tree broke the evenness of the brush. Ed saw his horse herd trailing up the road that led to the top of the ridge, some four miles distant. Already the leaders were over the ridge, going toward Hacienda Creek.

Mentally Ed rode the trail with Skinny Marsh. The road would become a single trail a dozen miles out, a ribbon that ran through the rough hills. It would run south, straight south, and come out on the head of Hacienda Creek, a small stream that ran into the Pacific some twenty miles to the southwest.

This was a good horse country. And right at the present time, horses were low-priced. But in another year or so, the price would boom. Ed's logic was simple. War was raging across Europe. Slowly, surely, the United States was being pulled into the maelstrom.

Then the United States army would need broncs. Need horses for cavalry service. Ed had been running horses in the mountains out of Blythe, north on the desert. One day an army officer had ridden into his camp.

"Howdy, Ed Garlan."

Ed studied the man, then grinned. "Consarn it, Bill, I didn't know you in that monkey suit! You've got your loop out for something, huh? Mind telling a man what it is?"

"Over a drink," said Lieutenant Bill Carter.

They went into the log house set at the base of the mountains. Ed poured out two drinks and the lieutenant drank his straight. "Ed, got any horses? Good horses that would make cavalry stock?"

"A few. Why?"

"I'm an army buyer, Ed. We need cavalry horses bad. I looked over your herd when I rode in from Blythe. You got good stock with good legs. Ed, we're getting pulled into this war."

Ed was silent.

"We need broncs, like I said. We need them bad. I'm ordered to gather a bunch. Why not spread out, Ed? Rumor has it that in about three years, we'll be in this mess. That ain't nice to think about, but it might be true."

"I can't spread out, Bill. No range."

"Ever think of Mexico?"

Yes, Ed had thought of Mexico. In fact, he had just returned from a trip to Baja California, below Tecate. An old Mexican, one de la Riviera, had died down there; his *rancho* was for sale. But what would he use for money to buy it?

The upshot of it was that Ed had got a government loan. He had brought mares in the mountain region and started them south under a trail-brand. He and his men had trailed them along the south of the Salton Sea, heading across the desert for the Julian Mountains.

Once the Imperial Valley ~~had been~~ cow country. But the great All American canal ~~was going through~~, turning the desert into a flowering wilderness. There was no room for cattle or horses ~~there~~. California was through as a cow country except in the mountainous regions.

They had come out of the ~~desert~~ below Palm Springs, driving across the Painted Range for Carrizo Gorge. The drive had been long and hot, and sandstorm after sandstorm had whipped across the desert. Many times the sun was only a red ball hanging over a curtain of driving sand.

The element of time had been in their favor. Because it was December, the nights had been cold. One night, in fact, it had snowed. Next morning the ocotillo and Joshua trees had held snow in their branches. Barrel cacti sported white heads on them. By noon the sand was blowing again.

All this had taken the edge from man and beast. Horses had grown gaunt and bony. Stallions had ceased their endless neighing and prancing and had fallen into line, plodding through the thick sand. One water-hole had been bone dry. As a result, they made a three day drive, finally reaching Dos Cabezas Spring on the rim of the desert. Here was fresh water running through the date palms. And here too were the double mounds of earth that had given its name to this mountain spring. Dos Cabezas—two heads. Two skulls had once been found here. Skulls of unlucky prospectors beaten to death by sand and heat, victims of the California Imperial Valley.

But before making the drive, Ed had bought the land grant that had belonged to de la Riviera. Bought it out from under Mack Colton, according to the recorder who gave him the deed in the territorial capital, Mexicali.

"Colton will not like that," the man had explained. "But our orders from Mexico City are to sell to the highest bidder. Colton himself, when he placed his bid,

said he could go no higher. The grant is yours, *Señor Garlan*."

Ed had never met Mack Colton. But he had met Sean O'Henry, as he had told the Border man, Tom Bishop. He glanced at Kid Harris. "The Cantina del Oro, Kid." He translated it into English. "The Saloon of Gold. High-sounding name. This okay for your gentle tastes?"

"Another saloon," murmured the tall rider.

They left their broncs at the tie-pole and went inside. The air was cool in the saloon with the adobe walls. The floor was earth, hard-packed by endless boots and moccasins. The bartender was an aged man with the darkness of a Mexican. His skin was wrinkled and his eyes black pinpoints.

"Drink, *Americanos*?"

Kid Harris didn't know much Mexican, so Ed ordered two tequilas. The ancient slid a bottle across the plank bar. Ed poured and Kid Harris drank. He said, "That sure drives the cold out of a man."

Ed drank. "Embalming fluid," he said dryly. "Another?"

Harris nodded.

Ed glanced at the ancient. He was watching them, missing no move they made. He made no effort to get into conversation. Neither did Ed or Kid Harris. They drank, and Ed put four bits on the bar, and they turned to go.

Three men had ridden up to the tie-rail. They sat their saddles for a long minute, and Ed grabbed Kid Harris' sleeve. Harris looked at him and then at the men who sat on the broncs.

"Cerveza brand on those broncs," murmured Harris.

Ed said thinly, "Mack Colton, I guess. I know Sean O'Henry. And from what Tom Bishop told me, that Injun jasper is Pinto Martinez."

"I'll move down the bar a ways," said Kid Harris.

Ed was standing alone when the trio entered. They came with rowels chiming, three big rangemen. Chaps scuffled and boots hit the packed sod. Sean O'Henry was a squat, redheaded Irishman, stocky and thick of thigh. Mack Colton was tall, almost thin, and he carried himself stooped a little. Pinto Martinez was short and stocky, his swarthy face showing clearly his mixed blood. Ed remembered that Tom Bishop had told him about the Apache's knife. Ed could not see it. Evidently Martinez carried it under his flannel shirt.

Sean O'Henry stopped. He looked at Ed, who had his back to the bar, his elbows hooked over the rim. "This is him, Mack," he said. "This is the *Americano*." He looked at Kid Harris, who presumably was interested in his tequila glass. Ed saw a shadow cross the Irishman's big face. He knew that O'Henry was wondering if Kid Harris was one of his riders.

"You Ed Garlan?" asked Colton.

The man's voice was low, too quiet. Ed looked at him for a long moment, and he read his hardness. This man had been raised in the cow country and he had used his gun. Long hours in the saddle had warped his thin legs to the barrel of a horse.

"I'm Ed Garlan. I take it you're Mack Colton."

Colton said, "You're right." He jerked a thumb toward Kid Harris. "Your hand?"

Ed shrugged.

Pinto Martinez went to the bar. "Put out glasses, *hermano*," he ordered. "Tequila and whiskey. Open your private stock."

"No trouble in here, please, *señores*."

"Move fast, mozo," growled Martinez.

Colton asked, "Drink?"

Ed was wary. He glanced at Kid Harris. "One," he said.

Colton filled the glass with whiskey. Ed noticed that his hand was rock-steady. They lifted glasses. "To this range," said Colton. They drank. Glasses came down

to the bar. Colton asked. "Another?"

"No more," said Ed. "Empty belly."

Colton laughed. "Might not be empty long. Might get lead in it."

There was a silence. Ed let is grow. He fingered his glass carefully. Suddenly he had Colton by the shoulder. He turned him fast and hit fast. His fist smashed into Colton's jaw.

The whole thing was too fast, too unexpected. Colton hit and missed, and Ed followed in. He heard Kid Harris say, "I got them covered, Ed. Give it to him."

Ed drove Colton back. He hit him again, got him against the wall, and steadied him. Colton drove a fist against Ed's heart. Ed swung hard, swung savagely. Colton's head bobbed under the impact. Colton sat down. Ed had his gun. He tossed it aside, after taking the shells from it,

Harris said quietly, "Be good, you two dogs."

Sean O'Henry's face was the color of a sweat-stained saddleblanket. Only the Apache had his anger in check. Ed came up, his back to Colton. He took O'Henry's gun and unloaded it and threw it after that of Mack Colton. Colton sat there and looked at Kid Harris, and was silent.

"No gun on me," said the Apache.

Ed Garlan twisted him around. He ran his hand under the man's wide cowhide belt and came out with a knife. He juggled it and tossed it across the room. It hung by its tip in the frame of the window.

"I couldn't do that again in a hundred years," he said.

"You'll pay for this—" began O'Henry.

Colton said sternly, "Shut up, Sean."

Kid Harris juggled his gun up and down, the weapon never leaving the Apache. "Sounds like good advice to me," said the cowpuncher. "Yqu ready to go, Ed?"

Ed looked at Colton. "When you threaten me again, bring your fists or guns to back it up. I don't scare

easy.

"I'll remember that," said Colton.

Kid Harris moved to the door, gun steady. He stood there and said, "All right, Ed. You go out and get on your bronc. Then cover this while I make it outside."

Ed walked outside. He found his stirrup and went up. He took his Winchester .25-35 out of its boot and held it. "All right, Kid."

Kid Harris ran out, gun dangling. He forked his bronc and said, "Now let's get out of town," and he used his rowels. Ed turned his horse and followed, with the cowpuncher's bronc kicking mud and gravel back at him. They raced down the street. No shots followed them. They went four blocks, riding now in a brilliant afternoon sunshine. They turned a corner and Ed saw a sign that said:

CANTINA AMERICANO

"I'm hungry," he hollered.

Kid Harris turned his horse, following Ed into the alley. They dismounted and put their broncs in a small bam of four stalls and tied them to the manger. They entered the cantina by the rear door.

From all appearances, Mack Colton and his men would figure they had ridden out of Tecate. Ed remembered knocking the tall gunman down. He remembered that hard, terrible anger that had lighted Colton's dull eyes. He remembered that measured silence that had followed. And he knew Tom Bishop had been right. There was trouble here on this Baja California range.

Only one other person was in the cantina. And this was a girl, who stood at the door and looked out on the street. She heard them and she turned. The light, coming in the small window, ran across her, putting her in relief.

Ed saw dark red hair that lay in curls of burnished copper. He saw blue eyes and a snub nose and a wide mouth, too wide for beauty. But there was beauty in this girl. And then she moved out of the light.

"You are the two Americans?"

Ed noticed that she said Americans, not *Americanos*. That meant that she was an American. "Yes," he said. "We are them."

"I saw you go down the street on the gallop. You went by the front just a minute or two ago. What are you doing in here?"

"Hungry," said Ed. He was smiling a little.

She smiled, too. "So you decided to hide in here, is that it?"

"We don't hide," said Ed.

They took stools. She had *frijoles*—beans—bubbling in a pot and there were strips of bacon among them. She had coffee—American coffee, not thick Mexican coffee. The bread too was not dark; it was white.

She called the orders into the side room, and Ed heard a woman shuffling around in there, and once he caught a glimpse of her looking out covertly at them. He had one eye on the street and one on the girl.

"You're an American?"

"Yes."

"What do you do—why are you on this side of the Line?"

"My father was a mining engineer. He followed gold through the desert. Always there was a vein here, a vein there. He followed gold until he died three years ago, I stayed in Tecate."

"I'm Ed Garlan. This gent is Kid Harris."

"We have heard you men were trailing horses in," said the girl. "My name is Katie Ryan."

"Irish," said Kid Harris. "Sean O'Henry is Irish too, I guess. I got some Irish blood in me, but I don't reckon me or Sean will get along okay. How do you get along with him?"

"Sometimes they come in here. By they I mean the Cerveza men. I guess we get along all right." She laughed a little then.

Their orders came. Each tackled food with a great diligence. Katie Ryan took a stool and sat and watched the street. Three riders drifted by, loping toward the south. Ed saw them through the small window. They were Colton and O'Henry and Martinez. He saw the girl lift her hand a little, let it fall.

Evidently the trio did not see him and Kid Harris. Or, if they did, they did not stop. "Heading for the Cerveza, I guess," he said.

The girl nodded.

Ed and Kid Harris finished their meal. Ed felt better now. The tequila, coupled with the single shot of whiskey, had upset his nerves. Now, with his belly full, he settled down again to being his old self. They rolled cigarets and talked with Katie. Ed liked her, he decided.

They talked of little things, but Ed finally got around to something serious. Yes, *Señor de la Riviera* had fought with the Cerveza iron, too. But he had been old and tired, and death had overtaken him naturally, not through a bullet or knife. His punchers had drifted out, saying they would not ride for an *Americano*.

Ed smiled thinly.

"Have you met Don Diego Alvarado?" she asked.

Ed shook his head.

"He runs cattle south of you. He has an old land grant, given to his family by the King of Spain, centuries ago. He has one daughter, Zona, who is the oldest, and another daughter, Maria, who is younger. She is a hell-cat, that Maria."

"Does he fight Colton, too?"

The girl shrugged, a pretty gesture. "I don't know." She started gathering up the dishes and taking them into the kitchen. Ed paid for their meals and said goodbye. She looked at him and smiled.

"I'll see you again, maybe."

"Hope so," said Ed.

CHAPTER III

The rain had fallen back and the sun was shining. The sudden heat was lifting steam from the drying Mexican soil.

"I could go for a girl like her," said Kid Harris.

"You can go for all of them. I've noticed that. But danged few of them go for you. I've noticed that too."

Kid Harris grinned. "Plenty of them have made a fool out of yours truly."

Ed balanced himself on the edge of the dirt sidewalk. He was thinking of the *rancho* on Hacienda Creek. He remembered the hacienda, the ranch house. It was made of ancient 'dobe with a slack stake roof. The place was centuries old. Built in the form of a big U, it had a rock-floor *patio* between the wings. The floors were of hardwood, worn smooth by the endless parades across its surface.

He had liked the whole setup; the big bunkhouse with its beds hung by chains from the heavy adobe walls; its hardwood floors—hardwood that came around the Horn by sailboat from Boston and the mills in New England. He had noticed that there wasn't a nail in any of the buildings. They were all pegged instead of nailed.

He looked to the south. The last of his horse herd was showing in the distance as the animals climbed the long hogback ridge. He watched them go across the ridge and then they were gone. They were spilling over the southern slope, working toward Hacienda Creek.

"Better get some chow out to camp," he told Kid Harris.

They went into the general store. Because of the closeness to the border, many American goods were on sale. The storekeeper, a short, wiry-haired Mexican, looked at them in some surprise.

"Me, I thought you men leave Tecate."

Ed said, "Talk Mexican; we *sabe* it." He grinned widely. "We never left. Some people were just tricked into believing we pulled out."

"You want some supplies?"

Ed ordered groceries first. Sowbelly and jerky constituted most of the purchases. The storekeeper assured him the jerky was made of wild goat but Ed bit into it and knew from the taste it was Yucatan turtle. He ordered some of it, though. He bought *frijoles* and *enchiladas* and *tortillas* in addition to other necessities: baking powder, flour, dried eggs and sugar.

"You'll haul that out to the *rancho*?" he asked.

The man shrugged. "The distance, she is a long one." He looked off suggestively to the south.

"I'll pay you," Ed assured him.

They settled up the bill and Ed paid in Mexican pesos. One thing was in his favor: the cost of running a horse crew would be much less here as far as the chow line went. Chuck could be bought in Baja California for about one half the cost in the United States. And he needed every cent he could hang onto.

His mares would foal in a month or so. That meant that for three years, he would have no income except from the sale of a few scattered horses. Then his colts would be three-year-olds and they would break them to the saddle that spring. Of course, if things got too tight, he could probably get a government loan through Lt. Bill Carter. But he didn't want to do that unless necessary. For he had enough interest to pay on the loan he had borrowed to buy the Hacienda Creek *rancho* and his mares.

But, the way he figured, a man never made any money working for somebody else. If he ran horses—

or cattle—he might just as well run his *own* stock, instead of somebody else's. He had taken a big step and it involved money but, with proper judgment and lots of work, he was sure it would pay off in the long run.

Therefore he had made agreements with his men. On paper, each drew so much *dinero* a month, this sum to be payable to them with interest at the end of three years. None of them had wanted that interest clause but Ed had insisted on it. "I'm paying interest to the bank for the use of their money," he had said. "You get interest, too. Whether you like it or not."

The Mexican said the supplies would be hauled out in the morning by his boy, Pedro. Pedro, just ten, grinned, and Ed tossed him two-bits. Pedro bowed almost ludicrously. His father took the money.

"You are no beggar. Give this back to the man."

"I want it."

The father took the coin away. Ed said, "I'm sorry, *señor*," and pocketed the quarter. Pedro's dark eyes filled with tears.

Ed and Kid Harris went outside. They went down the street toward the *Cantina Americano* and their broncs. Suddenly Pedro darted out between two buildings. "I have come for the big peso," he said. "I ran out the back door."

Ed grinned and gave him the quarter.

They left Pedro and his rush of thanks behind them. A buggy wheeled down the street, and Ed turned and glanced at it. An old man, deep into his sixties, held the reins on a pair of dark sorrel geldings. Being a horse-man, Ed glanced at the broncs first. They were hotbloods crossed with hill broncs, he saw. They had the legs and build of thoroughbreds and the stamina of hill horses.

The old man was a thoroughbred, too. He wore a blue suit, neat and conservative, and his hair was trimmed closely. His hat was of black beaver, the brim flat. Ed looked at the girl beside him. She was about twenty, he

guessed. She was small and wiry, and Latin darkness was hers.

Kid Harris stepped between two buildings, heading back for the barn. Ed started to follow when a man's voice said, "*Señor* Garlan, I wish to talk to you."

Ed stopped and turned. The old man had pulled the team close to the sidewalk. Ed walked out to him, Kid Harris following. They stopped beside the buggy. Ed took off his hat and Kid Harris did likewise. The girl smiled slowly.

The old man said, "I am Don Diego Alvarado. You will pardon me the liberty I took in calling to you, a stranger."

"You took no liberty, *señor*. May I present my friend, Kid Harris? And myself, as you know—I am Ed Garlan."

"My daughter, *Señorita* Maria Alvarado."

Ed remembered Katie Ryan's description of Maria. His eyes were serious as they met her dark eyes. He bowed a little. "*Señorita* Maria, my friend, Kid Harris."

The girl said, "I am glad to meet you," in American.

"You speak American?" asked Ed.

"*Un poco*. A little."

Ed put his glance on Don Alvarado.

"We had heard your herd was coming through Tecate today," said the don. "We had never gotten a chance to meet you, our new neighbor, so we hooked the team and came in for some essentials, and to meet you. We saw your herd as it went over the south ridge. They are fine mares."

"We think so. *Gracias, señor*."

"We run cattle on our *rancho*. Of course, we raise some horses, but not enough for sale—just for our own use. Perhaps, when you have saddle-horses for sale, we shall purchase some."

Ed said, "The war."

The old man's eyes were thoughtful. "The thought

sickens me, if I may say so. I hate to believe my brother man is so mean that he puts innocent horseflesh into a terrible battle of his own making, not the horses'. But enough of that. This civil war raging in our own country is no asset to our welfare."

"You think Villa will come this way?" asked Ed.

Don Alvarado looked at the hills across the Border. "If he is successful in the south, yes. He will come this way then. Men are riding out of Baja California and Sonora to join his legions. Perhaps his cause is just; perhaps the peon has been violated. *Si*, we know he has. But Civil War is another thing—" He shook his head.

Ed looked at Maria Alvarado. "My stock will be safe," he said. "Men do not ride in armies with mares about to foal." He smiled slowly.

"But when the colts are born?"

"No," said Ed suddenly. "I think my stock is safe. Mares are no good for saddle-horses. Even a man from Boston would know that."

The old man nodded. "We shall see," he said. "Me, I would like to help Villa, and I shall when he comes to this section. Others of my class are fighting against him. They are trying to fight against the inevitable. Had they treated the peon as I treat him, there would have been no cause for a Villa to rise. But enough of this politics, *señores*. After you get settled, we want you all to come to a fiesta at the *rancho*. We shall name the date later."

"*Gracias*," murmured Ed.

Kid Harris said, in broken Mexican, "We will be there, *Señorita* Maria."

Don Diego Alvarado clucked to the team. But before the wheels could roll, Ed said, "Another moment, *señor*?"

The don held the reins taut. "*Si*?"

"You stand neutral in this, I see. You would be our friend. We are gringos, *señor*. We will put our cards on the table, as the *Yanqui* says. We are not wanted in Baja California. We know that; so do you."

"Perhaps that is true."

"There are other gringos here. I refer to the Beer Bottle iron, the *Cerveza rancho*. An hour ago, I smashed Mack Colton to the floor in a *cantina*. He looked for trouble; he got it."

Something showed in the girl's eyes. He caught it, held it, and later wondered about it.

"You talk to a point, *señor*."

"We do not want you, or your daughters, or your men, to think we came here to rob and loot. We came here to raise horses for the United States government and for whoever cares to buy our stock. If they leave us in peace, we shall respect the rights of our neighbors. We want you to know that, *señor*."

"I appreciate your stand. You shall have the respect and admiration of my brand, *señor*."

Maria said flatly, "Colton and O'Henry won't like this, *Señor Garlan*."

Ed smiled. "They'll like it or fight," he said bluntly.

The girl was silent, looking at a peon crossing the street. Don Diego Alvarado said, "*Buenos dias, señores*," and the sorrels moved ahead. Ed watched the team and rig leave Tecate. Once Maria glanced back.

"Pretty girl," said Kid Harris.

Ed said, "Another woman in your life, huh?" and they went to their horses. They got up and rode down the alley. A dog came on a mad lunge, aiming to bite the hamstrings of their broncs, and the hard end of Kid Harris' maguey rope went out. The dog yelped and rolled over and fled.

"He doesn't like us *Americanos*," said Harris.

They rode out at a quick lope, hoofs stirring the ancient soil of Mexico. They put their broncs against the long southern slant and let it wear them to a walk. Ed reckoned that the horse-herd was some fifteen miles or so ahead. They gained the ridge that was thick with scrub-oak and *chamiso* and *manzanita*. To the south ran the tumbling, brushy range that somewhere met the

rough Pacific. The beauty and desolation of the range thrilled Ed again, as it had done the first time he had seen it.

They loped down the slant, heading south. Mile after mile went by and neither man spoke, for each had his thoughts. Ed braced himself against his fork. He was tired of the trail, tired of the dust, tired of the desert. He appreciated the fact that Kid Harris did not talk to him. He had his thoughts. They were enough.

One thing seemed apparent. Don Alvarado wanted his friendship, not his antipathy. Ed Garlan was thankful for that. One foe was enough on any range, and Mack Colton was a tough foe. He let his mind dwell on the wiry don. Yes, the man was sincere; at least he sounded that way.

"Rider coming this way," said Kid Harris.

"Looks like Hightail Smith," commented Ed. "Now why did he ride back—"

Smith's bronc was lathered. He pulled in and said shortly, "Ed, we hit the *rancho*. Our broncs are along the crick, eatin'. But, Ed, the hacienda is shot. Roofs gone off the buildings, inside gutted by fire. Every building. Only the walls are standing."

Ed could hardly believe him.

"Us boys looked everything over. We figure somebody dynamited the house an' buildings. And they did a good job.

CHAPTER IV

Don Diego Alvarado and his daughter had dinner in Tecate. Then they put their team and buggy to the south, toiling up the high road that led over the ridge. The old man was silent, busy with his thoughts. Beside him his daughter sat, also without words. Now and then she tugged at her gloves, pulling them up closer around her fingers.

"You are silent, *hija*, and it is not like you."

She smiled. "Are there not some things a woman must keep to herself, Father?"

The don sighed a little. "I wish many times that your mother had lived to see her two daughters as women. But she had the pleasure of sharing your girlhoods with you."

She was suddenly soft. "Father, please don't talk that way. You sound as though you were thousands of years old."

The old man smiled a little. The sun was losing its heat. There had been a brush fire on the hills to the east when they had gone to town, but he saw that the thunderstorm had swept that way and put it out. He wished it had kept on burning. For, when fire took out the *chamiso* and *manzanita*, the grass grew green and high on the hills. Cattle and horses had an easier time to forage than when the grass grew short and brown in July and August.

It was almost fifty miles to the Alvarado Rancho. They would change teams at Piñon Creek camp. Where the don had a line-camp to turn back cattle that

wanted to drift north onto Bar S range.

Maria asked, "What do you think of the gringo?"

"What gringo? There are so many here." The don knew she referred to Ed Garlan, but he wanted to tease her. He glanced and caught the sparkle of her eyes.

"You know who I mean. *Señor Garlan*."

"Do you know how the word gringo came *hija*? The Irish were down in Sonora, or one of the provinces. They were loving and fighting there and they sang an old song, 'Green grow the lilacs,' and the Mexicans called them gringos. Green grow and gringo. Now they are marked with that, Irish and all the other *Americanos*. From such a simple thing, a misunderstanding of a language."

She pouted. "I did not ask you how the word began. I asked you what you thought of the *señor*."

"How could I tell you, daughter? Have we sat, he and I, across from a dinner table; have we spent hours in the saddle, riding together? Or have we sat at cards and matched the other in wit?"

"He did not look dangerous to me."

"Surely not to you. You are a woman; a woman cannot judge a man. A woman judges by her heart, not her head. Always, when a man is concerned, when he is judged, the woman must remember her heart. But he is dangerous. I am a man; I know the signs. He spoke quietly and to the point. He did not carry that gun to balance his weight against his right hip."

"Then he will fight Mack Colton and the Cerveza riders?"

Don Alvarado looked at the skyline. The sun was sinking behind the hills. Live oak and wild brush stood out against the dazzling splendor. "To me, the sunset is the most beautiful part of day."

"Sunrise is lovelier."

"To the young, yes. But to me, with my years, sunrise is beautiful, just as youth is beautiful. But the sunrise has no wisdom; it does not have the profit of old

age. When the sun sinks, he is wise. He had seen a day of folly and a day of wisdom."

"Let us talk about *Señor Garlan*."

"You like him?" The don smiled mischievously.

"Poof, Father!" She was silent. "He is a nice-looking man, though. But do you think he will fight the *Cerveza* iron?"

"He has already fought them, *hija*. Already he has knocked Colton down. I envy *Señor Garlan* his youth and strength. For I would like to do the same myself."

They were silent on the rest of the drive. The night was heavy when they reached the *rancho*. From the basin below, as they wheeled across the ridge, came the flicker of lights from the adobe buildings. They left their team to the *mozo* and walked to the hacienda. Don Alvarado was tired despite his wiry hardness.

"You will have wine with me, *hija*?"

Zona met them in the living room. She had a small fire in the fireplace and the light reflected on her dark brown hair. She was a little taller than Maria, and she did not have her sister's drive. She was more quiet, more thoughtful. She kissed her father and said she had waited for them. What had been new in Tecate? Maria told her, the words quick.

"There will be trouble," said Zona.

Maria's eyes were bright in the light. "There has been trouble, *hermana*," she corrected. "Already *Señor Garlan* has beaten *Señor Colton* down." She told about the fight.

Zona's eyes were troubled. "As if this land did not have enough trouble with Pancho Villa and his raiders ready to turn this way after they take Sonora."

The squaw had food on the table. She was a Campo Indian who had been raised around Jacumba, but had turned into Mexico with her white husband. Her man had died in a mine cave-in and for ten years she had been with the Alvarado family.

The tablecloth was of white linen imported from Cas-

tile. Wine reposed in tubular glasses and sparkled against the lamplight overhead. China glistened. They had roast kid and cheese, and the squaw paddled back and forth, carrying food in and the dishes back. It was close to midnight.

"You will sleep late tomorrow morning," Don Alvarado said to the squaw. "We are sorry we were so late, but the distance is far to Tecate."

"I all right."

The meal finished, the don toyed with his wine glass. He drank the muscatel and pushed back his chair. "I am going to rest, *hijas*. *Buenas noches*." The shadows played across his thin face.

He went down the hall.

"I go to my room," said Maria.

Zona said goodnight to her sister. Maria went down the hall; Zona heard the door close behind her the door close behind her. The squaw came in and the girl shoved out her glass. "Mas vino, gracias. More wine."

"You drink too much wine."

The squaw brought in a small pitcher of muscatel. Zona poured her glass and drank it fast, the way a man drinks whiskey; she filled the glass again. The wine was warm in her. Outside, the wind sang in the eaves. It was an endless sound; she remembered it from early girlhood.

She had a sudden thought; How many people had heard that sound before her? Here in this old adobe hacienda had lived hundreds of her ancestors. They too had known passion and hate and love and fear and ambition. They too had listened to this endless wind and the wind had lost them. But why did she think of that?

She finished her wine and the squaw went into the kitchen. Still Zona sat there, in her big chair, looking at the lamp and listening to the slow wind. The squaw rattled dishes in the kitchen for some minutes and that killed the wind. She came out, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Time for sleep, *hija mia*."

Zona shook her head. Shadows danced across her dark hair. "After a while, *señora*," she answered.

"You will turn out the lamp?"

"Si."

The heavy woman went down the hall, the shadows showing across her broad back. Zona heard her shut her door. The house fell quiet again. A horse squealed in the corral and she heard another horse trumpet loudly. Fighting again, she thought. That sound died, too. Silence again.

She sat there for an hour, drinking slowly. Finally she got to her feet and went out the back door. She went to the barn and saddled a black horse. The *mozo* had long since gone to bed. She led the black out and shut the barn door. She rode sidesaddle. The wind was a little cold. She had a robe and she put this around her shoulders. She snapped it in front and then the wind lost its biting edge.

She put the little black to a lope. He was a game little beast, and he was brush-wise and tough. He followed a tortuous trail that went to the west and north. He seemed to know the trail as though he had been over it before.

Zona rode close to the saddle. Once the beast shied, but she stayed with him. A mule deer danced across a park, his flag up.

"Concho," the girl scolded. "Are your eyes so bad you cannot recognize your friend, the deer?"

Concho loped on. Fine later rimmed the heavy Navajo saddleblanket and formed around the headstall and bit. Zona pulled him to a walk. She came down a long slant, the force pulling her slenderness against the fork, and at the bottom of this slant a man rode out of the brush, dark against the night.

"*Quien va?* Who goes?"

She said sternly, "Zona."

The man laughed quietly. He rode close and put his

arm around her. He held his horse in tight against Concho, and he bent the girl's head back and kissed her. They were one for some time; then he drew back.

"Why do you ride on this night, *linda*?"

"To see you, of course."

"To see an *Americano renegado*—an American renegade—a don's daughter rides. Surely this must be love."

He kissed her again.

She said breathlessly, "Sean O'Henry! Surely you have kissed too many other women, to kiss like that."

The Irishman was laughing again. "I cannot say that I have not, *hermosa*. But I can say this, and I say it with all my heart: I shall kiss no other but you!"

He dismounted and helped her from her horse. They walked to a cabin set in the piñons. On the outside, it looked as though there were no lights; that was because the two windows, small as they were, were sealed with oilskin. Zona felt warm inside. Sean O'Henry helped her take off her cloak. He laid it on the cot.

"You will have wine with me?"

"Yes," she smiled.

He poured two goblets from a jug. "I do not like this, Zona. I have told you that before. You are Don Diego Alvarado's eldest daughter; I am Sean O'Henry, Irish and of bad blood. Yet we love each other."

"Some day," she said, "we leave, Sean."

He looked across his wine glass. "When?"

She frowned. He liked her that way. "It had better be soon," she said. "Yes, it had best be soon."

They drank. He paced the floor. "You should not go with me. You should not go, I tell you."

She got to her feet, crossed the room and put her hands against his chest. She brought her arms up and held him. "I could stay here," she said. "I could marry someone of my own blood and lineage. But what would I have? Would I have a wild Irishman, a lover? No, Sean."

"I should leave without you, and not let you know."

She looked at him steadily. "If you do that, I will die. I will kill myself." He saw tears in the corners of her eyes.

"But we steal your father's cattle. You know that. We steal them and ship them out. We are stealing from you—and you love me."

"Even if you left, Mack Colton would still keep on stealing Alvarado cattle. You cannot stop that."

"I could."

Her eyes had fear again. "No, Sean, no. Do not pick trouble with Colton, please. For my sake, don't. Ride with him and get what money we can get together. Then, some day, we take the boat out of Ensenada for South America. Sean, we'll go together."

"You'll leave your father?"

"For you, yes. There comes a time when all the young must leave. He will grieve, of course, but he has not much time left. That may sound brutal, Sean. I am not cruel. You know that."

He paced the room. He stopped, bit his lip. "We'll do that," he said. Then his smile turned ironic. "We'll buy down there . . . on your father's money. You could call it his money. It will come from stolen cattle—cattle stolen from him. Has God ever looked down on such irony?"

"But if we went to him—he would not let us marry."

Again, O'Henry paused. He considered that, as he had considered it a dozen times before. "No, he would not consent. He would send you to the Sisters. I would never see you then. I think you are right."

"Then that is settled?"

"Yes."

She ran her finger over her chin. "There was trouble today in Tecate," she said. "Maria and Papa told me about it. I remember you said that you and this man, Ed Garlan, had fought before."

"Yes, we fought. I could not whip him." He pounded

one fist into the other. "I'd like to try again."

"Don't talk that way."

His eyes were sharp. "There might be gunplay here, especially if your father joins with Ed Garlan and his crew. I couldn't pull a gun against your father."

She was silent.

"We dynamited the Bar S hacienda," he said suddenly. "We dynamited it and then rode to Tecate to see Ed Garlan."

The girl sat huddled, silent. She remembered her father's hacienda, and she remembered the wind in the eaves, the memories of centuries measured by it. And she felt as though she had lost a friend. For she knew the Bar S hacienda well.

"Sean, where will this end?"

CHAPTER V

Ed Garlan walked through the remains of the hacienda with a tight feeling inside him.

The house was in ruins. The floors had been burned out and the roof burned off; only the thick 'dobe walls had weathered the shock of the dynamite. And in some places, the three-foot wall had even sprung under the impact of the powder. Windows stared at him with their panes broken.

The bunkhouse was almost as ruined as the house. Ed walked through it, a little grim. He wondered who had done this nefarious deed. Had it been Mack Colton and his Cerveza riders. Evidence pointed their way. Suspicion also thrust a long finger toward the west and the Beer Bottle iron.

"But that don't prove nothing," said Skinny Marsh.

Kid Harris spoke. "What'll we do, Ed?"

The Bar S men were hunkered on the ground. The wind was a little chilly. Although they were south of the Line, there would be snow sometimes during the winter on the higher reaches with their scrub-oak and dwarf-pine.

Ed smiled a little "Nothing much we can do, hombres. If we had some dynamite, we could finish proper what somebody else started, I guess. But we ain't got no dynamite. This hacienda is no good to us."

Skinny Marsh looked at long Hightail Smith, at Kid Harris, at Pedro Alonzo. He lifted his fat-rimmed eyes to Ed. "There's just five of us, Ed."

"We have to get a Mexican crew for construction,"

said Ed.

Pedro waved a brown hand. He was a fat, thick man, very short and with long arms. He walked the way an ape walks. "But my *compadres*—my co'ntrymen—they are all out fightin' with *Señor Pancho Villa* to liberate *Mejico*. Perhaps there are none of them to work on the buildings we build?"

"Probably not in Tecate," said Ed. "But there might be some in Ensenada. That's further west and the revolution fever might not have hit there yet. You ever been in Ensenada, Pedro?"

Pedro smiled widely. "Si, once I was there. For a week, too. This girl I met there—her papa—"

Kid Harris cut in, "Prob'ly run you out with a scattergun." He got to his feet and looked at Ed Garlan. "No use standin' here jawin', Ed. We got broncs on new grass an' they might drift."

They unloaded their pack horses back across the ridge on a creek that ran down to the Pacific. Because of the cloudburst, the creek ran rapidly; they spread their rolls at the rim of the hill, far enough from the creek to keep away from its waters if it rose suddenly and still on the level ground. But Ed knew there would be little sleep for him or his riders this night.

They put their mares the length of the creek. The rain had turned the mountainous desert into green grass that would last until about the end of May. Then the torrid sun would burn the grass down. By that time, the mares would have foaled and Ed intended to feed them a little grain to supplement their meager feed from foraging. One thing was in their advantage. The mares were tired. Some were very heavy with foal and would throw colts in a few weeks, some before that.

But days were short this time of the year; a long night lay ahead. By eight o'clock it was dark. The sun might be up by six . . . and it might be later. Ed divided the night into five guard-periods of two hours each. Pedro took the first lick; Hightail the second; Kid Harris the

third. Ed would take from two to four in the morning and Skinny Marsh would take the last period.

The obese man climbed into his bed rolled under a boxelder tree. "And here I thought I'd sleep like a king tonight on a soft feather tick in a hacienda. But here I am as usual, rolled up between soogans on the hard breast of Mother Nature."

"Shake the graybacks out of your tarp and hit the hay," growled Pedro, stepping into saddle.

Ed planned to keep the mares more or less bunched, just allowing them enough freedom so they could find plenty of grass. The grass at this time of the year was mostly water; it filled a horse but it had little energy. Later the hot sun would put energy into the feed.

The Bar S boss lay between blankets, the night thick about him. Up the creek he heard the dim tinkle of the bell on a lead mare. The destruction of the *hacienda* had set them back on their haunches. Now he would have to build another set of buildings. He wished he knew for sure that Colton had dynamited the spread. He would settle with Colton tomorrow then, for once and always.

But he had no definite proof pointing to the Cerveza boss. Drifting Villa raiders might have come through, working miles ahead of the renegade's army. They might have blasted the hacienda skyward. Or maybe the Apaches, pressed hard in Arizona, had slipped miles across the border. Ed doubted this, though. The Apaches were pretty well settled on reservations.

Of course, the Mexican Apaches—they were a different matter. He wondered if they abided by Mexican reservations rules now that Pancho Villa was on the prowl? Sleep was slow to come.

He was still awake when Pedro rode in. He said, "How goes the setup, Pedro?"

"The mares, they are quiet. Some have bedded down. Me, I will bed down, too, *sabe?* *Yo tengo cansado*. I am tired."

The mountainous man shuffled to his bed, sat down

and pulled off his boots and socks. The earth was damp under Ed's tarp and he caught the clean smell of growing things. The next thing he knew, Kid Harris was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Your herd, Eddie boy," said the puncher.

Ed yawned and pulled on his socks and boots and was fully dressed. The stars were shiny points suspended against blue silk. A chill was in the air. Ed got his brush-jumper and put it on. He had a night-horse staked out on picket—a top black horse called Whitey. He put the saddle on him and Whitey nibbled at his sleeve.

"You old sugar pirate," said Ed. "I ain't got no sugar for you. You're in Mexico now, fella, and your soft days are over."

Whitey nibbled again.

Ed went up, the saddle firm under him. He found his off stirrup and turned the big black. He rode up the creek, riding wide around the dark splotches that told him mares were bedded down. He did not want to ride them to their feet. He wanted his two hours to pass as quickly as possible. When he got to the rimrock, the wind was real sharp, seeming to cut through his buckskin jacket.

From here he could see his horses. Some were grazing along the edge of the hill. He rode to the end of the herd, some three miles away. This would be the darkest part of the night. When he reached the herd's end, he dismounted and settled in the brush, holding Whitey's bridle reins. Here the sandstones cut the wind from him and turned it.

His trick passed uneventful. He dozed. When his Ingersoll showed close to four, he started working back to camp. He got in about four-thirty. Skinny Marsh was lying under his soogans, smoking a cigaret. Ed squatted beside the huge man and watched the ebb and fall of the cigaret's ash as Skinny dragged on it. He caught a whiff of the tobacco.

"Mexican cigaret, huh?"

Skinny held it up and looked at it. "Got it in Tecate. Sure is tough; it'll bring another hair on my chest. Reckon they don't cure their tobacco down here, or something. Don't taste like Durham to me."

"No tobacco is Durham," said Ed. "Ground up corn leaves and molasses and some dried heifer dust out of a corral. No use me goin' to bed. You stay in an' I'll wait for old man sun to come up."

"I've had my nap," said Skinny.

Ed went back to Whitey. Ten minutes later, Skinny rode up to where Ed sat in the brush. The fat man yawned. "Night and day . . . night and day. You need nighthawks, Ed, not a crew."

"You grow fat on it."

Skinny sucked on another tailor-made cigaret. "I'll get used to them or die," he said. "Well, Ed, what's ahead? You're the ramrod of this outerfit."

Ed ran a finger through the dust.

Skinny waited.

Ed said, "We didn't come here to fight. We came here to raise broncs for the government. We had the hard luck to move into a territory that Colton and his Cerveza men run on. I've got a patented deed to this *rancho*. Colton will have to move his cattle. I own this land. If Colton has cattle on our grass, he has got to move them."

"He bought Cerveza cattle, I understand. They'll drift back to their old range, now our graze. He might claim he can't keep them at home. He might use that for an excuse. Cattle do drift back to their old graze, where they were dropped as calves."

"We'll put them back on Cerveza graze. Then it's up to him to keep them on his land. We'll put it up to him."

Skinny was silent for some time. "That might mean guns and gunsmoke, Ed." He was stroking his fat jaw. "They've got us outnumbered."

Ed considered that.

"I wouldn't like to be buried in *Mejico*," said Skinny.

He grinned, but Ed could not see that.

Ed said. "We'll run a drift fence. But first, we'll give him a chance. That's only fair."

"Nothin's fair to Mack Colton or Sean O'Henry," stated Skinny. "What about those buildings? They were worth money."

"I left a Mexican to guard the place," said Ed. "He must've pulled out. With Villa moving up and down, nothing is certain. He might be a machine-gunner over in Sonora now. Or he might be dead."

"Or married," finished Skinny.

They sat there until dawn and argued good naturedly. They had been together for years on roundup camps and in trail towns. Each understood and appreciated the other's abilities. When the sun colored the sky they rode down on the men who still slept. Skinny's bellow brought them awake.

"Come on outa 'em, boys, an' rustle some chuck!"

They rolled their beds again and put them on the side hill. Skinny had a fire going along the creek. The stream had settled somewhat in the night. The dawn was bright and clear and cold. Pedro Malone shook himself. "She is as cold in *Mejico* as she is in Arizona. Some people they think that all the time it is warm south of the Line. They are mistaken."

"Some people don't believe it snows on the desert, either," said Skinny.

The heavy man was a good cook and a fast cook. Soon he had the coffee poured and they nursed their cups, feeling the java drive the chill out of them. Then he had "saddle-blankets" ready—or so the punchers called his hotcakes.

None of them complained. They joked and kidded and swapped lies. For years they had all lived in roundup camps and they had eaten from tin plates filled with grub cooked over a greasewood fire. They did not ask for fancy food. They wanted good clean food and plenty of it.

"Bacon." said Skinny. "Sowbelly."

Ed sat crosslegged, plate on his chaps. They had traveled light without a mess wagon, toting their beds and grub in on pack-horses. Skinny's biscuits were not up to normal, and he was quick to tell his crew about them.

"You cook 'em," said Skinny.

That silenced Ed. They finished and tossed their pans in a pile for Skinny to scour in the creek with wet sand. Ed squatted again and rolled a Durham cigaret. Up the stream a mare nickered.

"Some horse has become a mama," said Hightail.

Kid Harris licked his wheat-straw. "Prob'ly that sorrel mare," he said. "She was awful heavy when we went through Tecate."

Pedro Malone looked at Ed. "What she ees first, boss?"

"You ride to Ensenada. Hire about six Mexicans to build a new house and outfit. Get hold of all the lumber you can, *sabe*? Get somebody to haul it out for us. We need carpenters. Get some hammers and nails and everything you think we need."

"We could build the place out of adobe. Or out of stone."

Ed considered that. "Both take a long time, Pedro. No, we'll build a small place out of lumber. If we can't get that, we can trim some of the straighter oak and pine. Use that for walls. Then we can build out of stone. What you can't get in Ensenada, try to get in Tecate. When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow. Noon, I'd say. Maybe later, if I go to Tecate, too."

"All right."

The Mexican saddled a gray gelding. Ed noticed that he had his Winchester .30-30 in his saddle boot, and he also noticed that Pedro Malone checked the gun before he mounted. The Mexican rode west.

Skinny Harris spoke. "What'll the rest of us do,

boss?"

"Look over the new Bar S range."

CHAPTER VI

Sean O'Henry said, "What about our cattle, Mack? They're running over on the Bar S range."

"Their old home range," said Colton.

O'Henry smiled quietly. "Sure, it is. I'll grant you that. Those cattle were raised on what is now the Bar S. But they are your cattle; they're not Ed Garlan's. Ed won't want them on his range."

Colton said, "We'll see."

The hour was late, some time past midnight. O'Henry had ridden in, left his horse in the barn, stepped out of the shadows. And Mack Colton's voice had said, "You ride late hours, Sean."

"Yes, I do."

O'Henry had not told him he had met Zona Alvarado this night. He was a border *renegado*, but his love for this girl was the one clean thing in his life. And he didn't want Colton to know about it. He wanted only two people to know: himself and Zona. Colton had the same as asked him where he had been, and he had indirectly told the Cerveza boss to mind his own riding.

"You want a drink?" asked Colton.

They went to house together. Inside a lamp flickered, making wild shadows dance against the dark ceiling and walls. The wind was a fine distant murmur. "You're up late," said O'Henry.

"Thought I'd keep an eye open. Them Garlan men won't like the Bar S when they see what that powder of ours did. You can't tell about Ed Garlan. He might hit fast and hit suddenly."

"But you got a guard out. When I come off the rimrock, Pinto Martinez stopped me."

"Two pairs of eyes are better'n one pair."

Colton was a little drunk. He poured two water glasses full of tequila. O'Henry smiled and poured most of his back into the jug. Colton scowled and lifted his glass and drained it while O'Henry nursed his drink along.

Finally O'Henry said, "Funny thing Garlan wouldn't have driven in cattle. Then he'd been some use to us. Danged if I'd know about Villa wantin' horse meat for his men, 'stead of cow."

"They're hungry," said Colton. "Villa's got to feed them plenty of meat, or they'll leave him. When there's no steak, his army pulls out. And he can't win without soldiers. His cause is our cause."

O'Henry laughed. "Where do you get that pulp, Colton? *His cause is our cause*. Villa's fight is his own fight. We stand to gain nothing more out of it than we do—nice pesos for Don Alvarado's cattle, nothing more. When Villa's in the saddle, where will we be? *Quien sabe?*"

"His promises are no good?"

"No better than ours . . . Border *renegados*, the whole bunch of us. Play with him, Mack, but don't trust him."

Colton scowled. He poured more tequila. He held the bottle, looked questioningly at his range-boss. "More?"

"*No mas.*"

Colton set the bottle down. "Garlan will want me to move those cattle. I won't do it. He'll have to move them himself. They'll drift back as soon as he hazes them on our grass. They'll go back to their old range. A cow is that way."

"Garlan won't stand for that long."

Colton's eyes were bloodshot. "He's got two ways out, then. This is the way I figured it, Sean. He doesn't

want our cows on his grass; he won't stand for it. He can come to me. I'll do nothing. He can chase the cows on our land. They'll come back. Then he'll come to me again."

"With guns," finished O'Henry.

"That's what I meant. You know Garlan better than I do, I guess. Have I got him pegged right?"

O'Henry rubbed the plane of his jaw. He remembered that fight with Ed Garlan, up in the Owens Valley. "Yeah, that's about it, Mack. He'll come with guns, *maybe*,"

"Why the *maybe*?"

"We got his crew outnumbered. Garlan's no fool. No, I don't think he'll run his men against ours; we've got too many."

"What will he do then?"

"You tell me."

"He'll run a drift fence across the hills. That'll mean work and expense for him. And I don't think Garlan has too much *dinero*. And you know what can happen to a drift fence, don't you?"

O'Henry face was grooved. "It can be cut. And cattle can stampede against it and rip it out."

"Not cattle."

O'Henry studied Colton. "All right, horses then. Ed Garlan's horses. When horses stampede, they'd run into anything. I saw a bunch get away up in Thermopolis, Wyoming, some years back. They piled over a cliff and laid dead by the hundreds along a crick. So your play is to set back and watch for a while, huh?"

"Good as any." Colton got to his feet. "Where does Don Alvarado fit into this? Whose side is he on?"

O'Henry had a moment of indecision. Did this big man know about him and Zona? No, he couldn't. "How would I know?" he asked.

Mack Colton smiled. "You'd better get between soogans, Sean. That tequila is makin' you snuffy. Want another snort before you hit it?"

"I wanta sleep, not count elephants."

Colton sat and watched the rider go out. He heard O'Henry boots go down the hall, stop, a door opened. The boots sounded again and the door closed. The house was silent. Only the wind sounded, and it was a thin, lifeless sound. Colton poured another drink. Dawn was but hours away. He was not sleepy. He drank again and pushed his legs out and lookd absently at his boots. This thing was shaping up in his mind. There were still some shadows in it. But these would be gone in a few days, he knew.

Until the coming of Ed Garlan, he had controlled what was now Bar S range. True, Don Alvarado ran a few cattle on it; they were strays, though. As a rule, the don's riders were quick to take off any Alvarado stock that trekked to Bar S grass. But without Bar S range, Colton's cattle would be pressed for grass. He would either have to expand in another direction or cut the size of his herds. He didn't want to dó the latter. He wouldn't do it.

Where could he expand? He could move against Don Alvarado. He shook his head. A sudden image flashed across his memory. It was the image of the beating Ed Garlan had given him the day before in the *Cantina del Oro*. There had been more than physical pain that brief fist fight. He had lost some of the respect the local Mexicans had paid to his fists and guns. An *Americano* had come and whipped him. Whipped the man who had run this section of Baja California much to suit himself.

Colton didn't like to think of that. He got to his feet and walked to the window. Time had run faster than he had expected. Dawn was breaking across the *chamiso*-covered eastern hills. He waited until the thin ribbon of smoke trickled upward out of the cook-shack and then he took another drink, put the jug away, and went to the mess-shack.

The Chinaman grinned. "You up early, bossy man." Colton had brought him out of bondage from the smug-

gler who had taken him into Mexico.

"My liver, Wong."

"Tequila, him no good for the liver."

The Chinaman put hotcakes and coffee in front of Colton. Although the Cerveza owner had been up all night, he was not sleepy. Colton ate slowly, watching his men come in. Sean O'Henry was the last to enter. "One thing wrong with night," he said. "Sundown and sunrise is too close together."

They were all there. Colton looked at each man, appraising him. Finally he came to Sean O'Henry. There was no way of appraising this man. Colton knew he was faithful to the man who paid his wages. But did his loyalty go beyond that point? Colton did not know. You can never tell about a crazy Irishman, he decided.

He said, "We play our cards close, men. For a day or two, we do nothing. Garlan holds the key. We got him where we want him. He'll haze back Beer Bottle cattle; they'll drift over. Then he'll come to me."

They were silent.

"That's all for now. Sean, you ride with me. The rest of you go about your old jobs. Ride in pairs all the time. Pack short-guns and take rifles on your saddles. Keep plenty of ca'tridges. If you need more bullets, I got a couple of cases in the house. Are there any questions?"

"What if the Bar S jumps us?"

"Fight them back, of course."

They finished eating and went out. Only O'Henry and Colton and the Chinaman were in the cook-shack. Outside, the sun was gaining height and warmth. Soon the winter rains would be here. Then it would rain steadily for a month or two. Colton watched the bright light creep through the open door and glisten on the floor. The Chinaman gave them more coffee.

O'Henry leaned back. "Well, lost my appetite." His eyes were quick on Colton. "What's on the big mind now, sonny lad?"

"You talk like a fool!"

"Maybe I am one."

Colton looked at him. He rolled a cigaret. "You Irishmen! Born with a shamrock in one hand and Lady Luck in the other. You ride with me. We have a few calls to make."

Outside, Colton heard the squeal of a bucking horse. A cowboy was laughing, another shouting. The horse bucked into sight through the open door. The cowboy was putting up a ride, a good ride. The horse bucked out of sight.

"That old Baldy horse, he never learns."

"Reminds me of myself," said O'Henry.

They waited until the crew had gone out. Two men loped by, four long-legged hounds running ahead of them. They were going back into the rough country looking for a cougar that had cut deep into the calf crop. They would probably be gone for a week, getting grub from line-camps and changing horses at various corrals.

The *rancho* fell silent. Back in the kitchen, the Chinese was cleaning pots, banging them now and then to break the silence. O'Henry was restless, his fingers drumming on the table. He was thinking of many things, mostly of Zona Alvarado. He should get her and go; he should take her and leave this section. With gunsmoke ahead, a man's future wasn't very certain. For the first time in his life, Sean O'Henry thought of his future. He didn't want to spend it in a *Mejico* grave on the rimrock. He wanted to spend it in *America del Sur* on a *rancho* with Zona.

Colton said finally, "Let's ride."

They went to the corral. The *mozo* was just lowering the bars to let the *remuda* out on pasture. Colton said, "Hold it; we want horses."

The oldster grinned. "Figured you two scissorbills was still in soogans. Rope your cayuse an' I'll let the rest loose."

O'Henry laid his loop on a blue roan and pulled him in. Colton sent a loop out, missed his horse, pulled in his

rope.

"You stay up too late nights," said O'Henry.

CHAPTER VII

Don Diego Alvarado awoke early, as usual. He was up before any of his household or any of his hired hands. He had slept poorly. He tried to hide his worry. There was trouble here—and it might involve him and his.

Not that he would sidestep trouble. He had fought his share of *renegados* and warpath redskins in his sixty-odd years. He knew fear and he had conquered fear many times, as a brave man must in order to be brave. He had not great love for personal property. He had no desire to attain wealth, either real or personal.

But he wanted to be left alone. He had his *rancho* that had been handed down to him, generation after generation. For centuries, an Alvarado had lived on this land grant; he had raised his family; had treated his retainers with kindness, had tended to his crops and his herds. Always the eldest boy had inherited the *rancho* after provisions had been made for other sons or daughters, as the case might be. Now he was the last of the male Alvarados.

This did not bother him greatly. He was not proud of his name. Any name, he figured, was a good name, unless its owner violated his name's sanctity. His daughters would marry.

Therefore, after his death, another man—not an Alvarado—would rule this *rancho*. This did not disturb Don Alvarado. He would be dead. He only hoped that Zona's husband, be he an *Americano* or Mexican, be a good man—a hard worker and an honest man to carry on the *rancho's* heritage.

So far neither of his *hijas* seemed inclined toward matrimony. Maria was a pretty girl; so, for that matter, was Zona. But where Maria's beauty was flamboyant, brittle, Zona's was deep and with many facets. Maria took after her mother; Zona after him. Zona had hinted a number of times she might take the veil instead of marrying. Don Diego Alvarado had said he would be happy if she were happy in Sisterhood.

He went for a short walk in the dawn. The chill of night was still on the land. His terrier, *Muchachito*, ran with him, dancing and jumping.

"What are you so happy about, Little Boy?"

Muchachito started after a brush rabbit that eluded him in the *chamiso*. When the don came back to the ranch, men were stirring at the barn and the buildings. He went to the house and pounded on the doors of his daughters' rooms. Maria was smiling when she came into the living-room, but Zona was still sleepy.

"Two good-for-nothings," chided their father. "Sleep late when the sun is warm and fresh in the new sky. See the sun while you may, I say."

Maria kissed his forehead.

The girls chatted at breakfast. Don Alvarado remembered they had gotten along very well all their lives. Of course, in childhood there had been a few squabbles — they had not lasted long. Zona had spent two years in Mexico in convent school but Maria had lasted only half a term. She had pined away for the rocky slopes of Baja California and the *rancho*. So the Sisters had sent her home. Don Alvarado always figured they had been glad to get rid of her.

"That *Americano*," said Maria, "I could love him."

This was old talk to Don Alvarado. Maria was always saying, "I could love him." He winked at Zona who was busy with her coffee. "You mean the fat one, the one called Skinny?"

"You know who I mean, papa."

"The one called Kid Harris?"

Maria cocked her head like a bird. "Well, he looks nice, though."

Zona said, "You know who she means, Papa. Don't act so dumb."

Don Alvarado was serious. "You two girls had better make eyes at some good men. I'm getting old. I need a young man to run this *rancho*. Why did I ever have to be cursed with *dos hijas*? What did I ever do to God to get such punishment."

They had both heard this before, too.

Zona looked up from her oatmeal. "Would an *Americano* do, Papa?" Don Alvarado did not know she deliberately made her voice light. But Maria glanced at her covertly before looking back at her father.

"A good *Americano*, yes."

"We are out then," said Maria. "There are no such things as good *Americanos*." She considered. "Well, we will see how *Señor* Garlan is, and then there is always the fat man, Skinny." She laughed.

They finished their meal and took over the dishes, leaving the squaw to get things planned for dinner. They chatted and argued and stormed, but Zona's heart was not in it. And Maria saw this.

"You are ill, Zona?"

"I slept poorly."

The squaw said, "You are in love." She never knew how close her bantering talk came to the truth.

The dishes washed and stacked, Zona went to her room where she lay on the bed. Maria went to the barn and saddled her pinto. With *Muchachito* running ahead, she rode up to where Don Alvarado sat in the shade of the bunkhouse, talking with the old *mozo*. She waited respectfully for an opening in their conversation.

"I am going to see the cattle to the west, Papa."

"You don't ride alone, girl. You get Mono to ride with you. He is at the corral with a sick horse."

"Can't I ride alone?"

"No, *señorita*."

"But Mono is an old man."

"All the safer for you, then."

She stuck out her tongue. "You want me to get married, you say. Yet I ride with Mono. I'll tell you the truth. I was not going west; I was going east. I was going to call on the *Americanos*."

"I thought so. Mono goes with you."

"Oh all right." She loped down to the corrals. Soon she and the old retainer rode west over the hills. Don Alvarado and the *mozo* were sitting at the bench when Mack Colton and Sean O'Henry rode up.

"You two have left home early," said the don. "You will leave your *ensallados* and take a seat? Perhaps a drink of something?"

Colton shook his head. "We were over on the edge of Bar S range, Don Alvarado. You have some cattle over there. Not many head, but they have drifted on to that range, and Ed Garlan might turn them back."

"I have despatched riders over there. They will turn them back onto my range. My cattle will stay on the boundaries of my grass. Those that stray off will be turned back. I want you to turn back any Alvarado cattle you see, if they are on your land. I have asked you to do that before."

Colton looked at Sean O'Henry. The heavy Irishman did not meet his gaze. He was looking at the hacienda. He caught Colton's glance and jerked his eyes back to the old don.

"Then you will not fight Garlan?" asked Colton.

"We have nothing to fight about. He has his boundaries; you have yours. I respect you both as gentlemen. My cattle stay inside my own lines, the lines established by my ancestors. My vaqueros will ride that line and turn those back who want to drift."

Colton nodded. "Garlan might make trouble."

"What reason would he have?"

Colton shrugged.

O'Henry face was colorless. Don Alvarado saw his

eyes were on Zona, who had come out on the porch to water her geraniums. Colton was angry and tight inside, but he held this.

"What is your stand?" asked the don.

Colton spoke one word. "War."

The old man was quiet. The old *mozo* looked hard at the ground as though vitally interested in it.

Colton said, "We just wanted to know where you stood. Come on, Sean." He turned and rode off at a running-walk. O'Henry nodded at the don and the *mozo*, and followed his boss.

They rode for a mile or so, with Colton thoughtful in saddle. "We get no help there," he said.

O'Henry shrugged. "Did you expect any?"

Colton looked hard at him. "No, I guess not. But if we could get the Alvarado and Garlan men fighting each other, we could have an easier time. There might be a way to do that yet, you know."

The Irishman nodded.

They pushed east, riding stirrups. The sun came up and hung and the land knew heat. Colton was serious, lines pulled deep. Sean O'Henry was deep in leather, scowling. Colton was thinking of this land and this grass and what it meant. O'Henry was thinking of a woman. The Irishman stirred himself.

"We're on Bar S graze, Mack."

Colton said, "I can read sign."

They came to a ridge. Below them was a brushy valley. Two riders were hazing cattle along the west rim of it, and they went down. They rode in with their right hands high. Ed Garlan and Skinny Marsh sat silent saddles and watched the two Cerveza men.

Colton said, "You're working Cerveza cattle—my cattle."

Garlan looked at him, then at O'Henry. Skinny Marsh wiped his forehead with deliberate slowness. Garlan said, "They're on my graze. Are you taking them off, or do we have to run them off?"

"Your grass. Your duty to keep it free of outside cattle."

Garlan glanced at Skinny Marsh. The fat man had a slight smile across his thick lips. He murmured, "Nice neighbors, Ed," and Garlan caught his temper in time.

"They'll work back," said Colton quietly. "They'll come back because they were born and raised here. Cattle always return to their old graze."

"They might not get back, then" said Garlan. "They might not be able to travel. When you lift a hide off a beef—or put a bullet between his eyes—he can't travel far."

"You're in Baja California now, not Arizona. There's a law in *Mejico* that says you have to run a drift fence if you want to keep stray stock off your grass." Colton looked at Sean O'Henry. "Nothing here for us."

Colton turned his horse. O'Henry did the same. Skinny Marsh pushed his bronc close to the Beer Bottle segundo.

"Somebody dynamited the Bar S hacienda," the heavy man said. "Colton, we figure it was you and your riders. You're out of reach, so I'll give it to this gent." He drove his right fist forward. The blow was long and looping. The knuckles hit O'Henry hard and drove him from his horse. He landed on his side on the ground. His horse trotted away, stopped. O'Henry sat up.

Colton had his gun. Ed Garlan sat quietly with both hands on the fork of his saddle. Skinny Marsh was smiling. O'Henry spat blood. He looked up at Colton's naked .45. "Carry on for me, boss."

Garlan said one word. "Kid!"

Up on the slope, a rifle spat once. Colton's horse lost his knees and went down. Colton left the beast, falling. Now Ed Garlan had his own gun out. Colton turned, started to raise his weapon.

Garlan said, "Don't."

Colton looked at Garlan. Then he looked up at the

rocks. Kid Harris came down, rifle alert. He said, "I should've dropped him; not his horse."

Colton put his gun away. His face was the color of a dirty saddle-blanket. O'Henry got to his feet. Skinny Marsh was still smiling. The Cerveza segundo looked long and hard at Skinny Marsh.

"Know me next time you see me, O'Henry?"

"I think so." O'Henry's voice was low. "I know so."

Garlan spoke roughly. "Colton, get up on O'Henry's bronc with him. Then you two get off this grass. You can come back later for your saddle off this dead bronc. You can come on this graze on one condition. And that is that you work Cerveza cattle off my range."

"You got the top hand now." Colton spoke angrily. "But there might be another time, Garlan. I'm sure of that."

O'Henry got into saddle. He left a stirrup loose, and Mack Colton found it and rose. O'Henry turned the horse and they rode west again. Ed Garlan and Skinny Marsh sat and watched them, and Kid Harris stood with his rifle butt resting on a rock. "We outguessed them," said Kid Harris.

"This time," said Garlan. He smiled and looked at Skinny Marsh. "You ol' fat slob, I didn't think you had that much shove."

Skinny grinned. "I got mad," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

Kid Harris went back into the hills. He would run the cattle down, heading them toward the riders below. They would take them and push them west onto Beer Bottle grass. The cattle were wild.

They were of mixed bloods: wild stock, native to Mexico, and longhorns that had drifted down from Texas with trail drives. And to Garlan, it seemed they had inherited the worst traits of each breed. One thing was definitely in the favor of the Bar S: the cattle were so wild that when they sighted a rider, they would hightail for a distant range.

They were, of course, moving them west. Therefore, if the cattle sighted a rider behind them in the east, they would light out toward the Pacific, the direction the Bar S wanted them to run.

They had decided to work the north end of the range first. Over the ridge, Hightail Smith was toiling with horse and bullwhip. Garlan could hear the malicious crack of his cowpuncher's wicked bullwhip, although he could not see Smith.

He had expected no co-operation from Colton and O'Henry. Kid Harris rode up, "Some twenty head of Alvarado cows back yonder, Ed. They're tame stock. What'll we do with them?"

"Keep them separate from Cerveza stuff. Head Alvarado cattle into a separate herd. I got a hunch the old fellow will either come after them or send a foreman and riders over to work with us."

"Hope you're right. We're short-handed."

Skinny March was across the basin. Garlan glanced at the obese man, then grinned. Marsh had really dumped O'Henry out of saddle, and dumped him hard. He let his thoughts dwell on that incident.

O'Henry would never forget that. Garlan remembered the bleak hell in the Irishman's eyes as he sat there on the ground. He remembered how Skinny Marsh had looked, too. Skinny had been estimating this heavy Irishman carefully and reading the danger in him. Skinny was a veteran of these long trails.

The country was brushy with much *chamiso* and *mesquite* and *manzanita*. They wore leather breastshields on their horses to keep the catclaw from gouging their forelegs and shoulders. This was a country where a man had to have *papidores* on his stirrups too. These protected the rider and also the bronc.

Wild cattle moving through a rough country, with slants that a man could dump a bronc on and pick himself up yards away from his tumbling horse. This country needed touch broncs and good riders. And Garlan had them in his Bar S crew.

And all the time, you rode with one eye on the skyline. He had no trust for either Colton or O'Henry or their crew. Cattle were coming down off the hills and trotting west. Cows with calves and longhorn steers ready to fight if a bronc pressed them too close. Garlan uncoiled his bullwhip and lashed a big four-year-old steer over the rump. The whip beat the fight out of the critter. He turned and ran, bawling against the man.

Kid Harris hollered, "Two riders coming from the south, Ed."

Skinny Marsh was riding up on the slope. Garlan saw him go into a clump of olive trees; they hid him. The fat man was taking up a guard-post, hidden up there. Garlan drew in and waited. Harris could not be seen now; he too had sought hiding. Garlan grinned. These were good men to have in a tight.

Maria and Mono rode up. Garlan let himself relax.

The girl said, "Hello, *Señor* Garlan."

Garlan waved a hand. Maria watched Skinny Marsh and Kid Harris leave the brush and keep on hazing cattle. He said, "*Como estan, muchachos?*" and Maria introduced him to old Mono. The old man's eyes were quick across Garlan, then surrendered and held only the reflection of dull time.

Garlan looked at Maria. "The honor is mine, *señorita*. I am sorry that you came when we worked cattle. You were to the hacienda?"

"*Si.*"

"Dynamite did that."

She looked at him quietly. She was stunned, he noticed. The breath went out of her, came back. "That good old house. The people it has sheltered, has loved. They did that to that house. They broke it because of greed."

Garlan was silent. Mono was silent.

Maria said, "We saw some of your mares back toward the hacienda. They are nice horses. There was a little colt with them. His legs were still wobbly, he was so new." She looked at the cattle. "Cerveza cattle."

"Going home," said Garlan.

"You need riders," grunted Mono.

Garlan said, "I could stand a few more."

Mono spoke. "My *patron*, Don Alvarado, he will send over riders to gather his cattle. I see that you are cutting Alvarado cattle to one side. That is good. His men will come tomorrow, I understand."

"*Gracias.*"

Maria said, "Villa is fighting for Juarez, the reports say, Maybe by this time he has taken that place."

"Your father?" asked Garlan. "How will he stand, when and if Villa comes in Baja California?"

"He will be all right, *señor*. Already Villa has sent him personal assurances of that point. My *padre* has always treated his peons with great respect. *Señor* Pancho Villa well knows that. His spies have brought

him that information. Perhaps he will want some cattle for his army, but that is not a point to differ over."

Garlan smiled faintly. No, that would be no point to differ over; Villa would just take the cattle. "One thing is, he won't ride any of my horses. Not that I could stop him, but a rare about to foal is not much of a mount for a fighting man. A mare with a colt following her is no good, either."

"He has horses, I understand."

Juarez was way to the east. Many miles of desert and sand and mountain separated that city from Tecate and Ensenada and Tia Juana. But Villa, if he took Juarez, would run along the border to Mexicali, then go still west to the Pacific. This was a foregone conclusion. He had taken the rest of Northern Mexico.

There would probably be a few tough fights. One would beat Mexicali, where there were stationed a band of government *rurales*. Tecate also had a few *rurales*, but they would probably pull back west to Tia Juana, there to join the *rurales* of that town.

"The *rurales* are building a ditch around Tia Juana," said Maria. "They are getting ready to fight when and if Villa's men come."

"They will come, *señorita*." Mono shook his aged head in slow thought. "Villa will win. He will win because his cause is just, because his cause is the cause of the peon. Too long have large land-owners held peons in slavery. Too long have they treated them as a cowboy treats the slinking coyote. Too long have they worked them long hours for a straw pallet and a few *frijoles*. Only your father—God rest him—is good to his peons here in Baja California. *Dios* would that Villa not harm him."

"His is Papa's friend."

"Come," said Mono suddenly. "We talk enough. We will help the *Señor* Garlan, *hija*."

The old man rode up the slope, leaving Maria with Ed Garlan. They worked cattle the rest of the day. And

Garlan had to admit that Maria could sit a saddle. She had been raised on a horse and she knew horses.

The hours ran away into the distance. The sun stood straight up. They had jerked meat in saddlebags, and they shared this with the two Alvarado riders. They rested an hour on the banks of a nameless creek. Water purred and gurgled, rolling in swift little whirlpools.

"There will be much rain this year," said old Mono. "There are ways an old man can tell. It will come early and stay late and next summer will see much dried grass. You do well to get these cattle off your grass as soon as possible."

They did not change horses. They were sitting tough horseflesh and they did not press their broncs too hard. All they had to do was scare the Cerveza stock out of the brush and point them west. The frightened cattle did the rest of the work as they ran in wild disorder.

"They are afraid of men," said Maria.

Garlan looked at Skinny Marsh and winked. "You'd be afraid of men, too, if you had been treated as mean as those cattle have been. Every time a man has laid a hand on them, he has hurt them. Branding them and earmarking them and doctoring them for ringworm and blackleg. They have reason not to trust a man."

Maria smiled devilishly. "What man could be mean to me?"

"You said something there," agreed Skinny.

Sometimes they had a hard time cutting Alvarado cattle from the Beer Bottle stock, for some of the Alvarado dogies had grown wild, too. That was where the riding came in. They got into saddle and rode out again. By dusk they should have reached the western edge of Bar S range, according to Maria and Mono. Behind them they left the Alvarado cattle.

Garlan liked to work cattle. He was tired of the long trek with his mares. It was tiresome work trail-herding critters across a long distance. This work was different. This was fast work, a horse running across a flat; then a

man could pull in, take it slow until another wild bunch hopped out of the brush.

Some of the bulls were ringy and wanted to fight. One stomped and put his horns down. He had a wide set of horns, one of the widest Garlan had ever seen. But Maria was wise to working this type of critter.

While the bullstared at Garlan, horns swinging in anger, Maria sent her pony in from the side. Before the bull could whirl and face her, her doubled lasso had landed hard across his high backbone. The whack was loud as the rawhide *riata* stung the ornery bull.

The bull bawled in pain. He pivoted, ran for her, but her horse sidestepped. Garlan saw his cue. When the bull ran, Garlan came in with his bullwhip talking. He lashed the brute across the sides and over the back, the whip talking in the still air. The bull had enough. He broke.

Again Maria rode close, *riata* working. The bull had too much now. With both riders tailing him, he loped out of the brush madly. He tumbled over a boulder, landed on his chest, and then got up bawling and running.

Maria laughed until tears showed in her dark eyes. The wind whipped her dark hair across the back of her jacket. Her one braid had become undone and she swiftly rebraided her shiny hair.

"Poor Mister Bull. Now he has no faith in himself, or in man. He is like *Señor* Colton, now. He trusts nobody, not even himself."

Garlan looked at her. "You think Colton doesn't trust himself, huh?"

She waved a hand flatly. "*Si.*"

Garlan gave that brief thought. Maybe the girl was correct. They went back to working stock. But the Bar S owner kept her words in mind. He kept thinking of Colton and Sean O'Henry. O'Henry would never forget what Skinny Marsh had done to him, and he would never forgive.

For O'Henry, despite his laughing, blustering nature, was dangerous. Underneath, he was tough. He was like a vein of gray steel ore cropping out of a mountain. When the sun hit it, the rays were reflected; they danced and shimmered merrily. But under that glimmer, under that reflection, was the hardness of steel, cold steel.

And Ed Garlan knew that. While Mack Colton showed his toughness, Sean O'Henry hid his. And of the two *renegados*, Garlan wondered who was the tougher. He did not know for sure. Each reacted differently to set situations. Colton would be less apt to pack a grudge. When he fought, it would be in the open. O'Henry differed from his boss there.

For O'Henry, to gain a point, would use any means at hand—he would fight openly, he would fight under the board. While Colton had hardly any scruples. O'Henry had less.

"Your thoughts?" asked Maria. "Are they worth a peso?"

"Not one, *señorita*," replied Ed. "Not even a centavo."

Skinny Marsh waited up ahead, big on his horse. Mono sat beside him. "This is your boundary line," said the old Mexican. "This creek is your west boundary."

Ed looked at the waters. "Tomorrow we work north of here." He looked at Skinny. "Wonder how Pedro is making it in Ensenada."

"Too early for him to be back," said Skinny.

Mono spat. "We go a *casa* now, *señores*. Tomorrow, as I said, our riders will come. Tomorrow you will see us."

Garlan thanked them for their help. Maria looked at him, and he caught her glance, and she looked away. Skinny Marsh noticed. While the two Alvarado riders rode south, Skinny nudged Garlan in the ribs.

"Wish she'd a smiled at me thataway," he said.

CHAPTER IX

When Mack Colton and Sean O'Henry left the Bar S, they rode north toward Tecate. O'Henry rubbed his jaw slowly, and Colton grinned. "Hurt?"

"Ever have a horse kick you?"

"Not in the jaw, no."

"Well, maybe he kicked you in the seat of your levis. Transfer that kick to your jaw, and you'll know how I felt. And how I still feel, for that matter."

Colton smiled.

"Nothing to laugh about," said O'Henry testily.

Colton growled. "Don't ride a tall horse, Irishman. 'Cause if you do, somebody'll front foot him out from under you. A bullet can stop a man as big as Skinny Marsh just as well as it can stop a man the size of Ed Garlan. Fact is, Skinny'd be a mite easier to hit than Garlan"

O'Henry glanced at him. "What about our cattle? They'll come back. He can pen them up. There ain't much law around here. Fact is, the closest law officer is the *jefe* in Mexicali. And he never gets this far away from his jug and doorstep. But under Mex law, I understand he could do that."

"Let 'im pen 'em," growled Colton. "We'll bust them loose, and we might pry a horse or two out from under one of their men. That would be to our advantage, I figure. Dark night and dark riders and guns."

O'Henry shrugged. He kept thinking of Zona Alvarado. He kept thinking, I should leave her. She's too good for me. She's got good blood and she's a good

woman. She deserves something better than I can give her. Yet all the time he knew he wouldn't. He had known his share of women. He had loved just one. When he had met her the others had become names, and names only. Then these faded into memory, as flowers fade when the sunshine and water has left them forever.

They would go on this way. For how long? He didn't know. He knew only one thing: one of them—or both of them—would have to break this pattern soon. That was one of the laws of life. Nothing endured. Men changed, the w rld changed, situations changed. And this had gone too long.

She was worried about him. And she had justification for such worry. There was trouble here in Baja California. He packed a gun and others carried guns, and no grass was free. Each claimed land and grass, and each was right to a degree. Cattle didn't care whether they grazed on Bar S grass or Beer Bottle grass. Only the men who claimed this grass cared.

Dark night and dark riders and guns . . . A bullet could cut a man down and dump him dead on this grass. And then what about Zona? What about the Argentina? For one second, Sean O'Henry thought, I'm afraid, I'm a coward. And then he knew this reasoning was false.

He was thinking of Zona. He was thinking of her future, of her love for him. That filled him with a great pride. And then he thought of Skinny Marsh. He remembered how Marsh had knocked him to the Mexican sod.

"You'll pay for that, you fat devil, he thought.

Colton said, "Come out of it, Sean."

Anger flared across the dark Irish eyes. "You hire me and my saddle and my gun. You don't buy my thoughts."

Colton glanced at him. "You got a cockleburr under your blanket," he said.

O'Henry thought, Does he know about me and Zona? He thought not. He wanted nobody to know but himself

and Don Diego Alvarado's daughter. He did not want to hurt the girl. She had conceded him enough. Maybe too much, he realized.

They loped along the trail. A roadrunner came out of the brush and traveled ahead of them, his leg working as he ran. When they got too close, the bird lifted his wings and glided a little. Then he would settle down again to his old job of running ahead. They watched him without speaking.

They came to the ridge, and Tecate lay straight north, five miles away. Mount Tecate had a brush fire at its base. Neither did more than glance at the smoke along the foot of the mountains. Brush fires were common occurrences in this section. Sometimes they were started by lightning. Other times, peons started them to burn off the brush so they would have more grass for their goats and few cattle. Also, with the tops burned down, the tuberous roots of the *chamiso* plant lay easy victim to adze or hoe.

The Mexicans would grub these roots for winter fuel in their 'dobes. The easiest time to get them was ahead, when the rains would make the soil wet and the roots could be easily pulled out. On a clear day, after the rains, you would be able to see entire Mexican families—papa, mama and the *muchachitos*—out on the sidehills grubbing the roots and piling them in baskets to be transported back to the cabin.

They met the woodcutter, a giant dark man, who came with two empty burros. Colton asked, "*Como esta?*"

"Esta bueno, *Señor Colton.*"

O'Henry said, "Why waste breath on him?"

Colton scowled. "A man can't play too many cards," he said. "Felipe is out alone, day after day, cutting piñon for sale in Tecate. And he might see something sometime that a man might like to know about."

"You do miss no angles," said O'Henry.

The seller of *dulces* — the candy peddler — was cross-

ing the main street when they rode in at a lope. He carried his sugar candies on a tray on his head. Colton almost ran him down. The man dodged, his tray slipping. Colton laughed and rode on. The man raised a brown fist and cursed him.

"He'll have a job picking up that candy," growled the Beer Bottle owner.

They went into the *Cantina Americano*. Redhaired Katie Ryan was washing glasses. She said, "Hello, men."

They went to the bar. Colton said, "Mescal, honey, for me. Give my partner here a shot a whiskey."

Katie looked at O'Henry's jaw. The Irishman grinned. "Horse kicked me," he said. "Horse by the name of Skinny Marsh."

Katie looked at him with make-believe disgust. "You boys, you'll never grow up." She poured their drinks and restored the bottles back on the shelves. "They fooled you the other day. They never left town. They ducked through the alley and came in the back door. They were standing here when you rode out."

Colton growled. "Why didn't you get word to us?"

"How could I?"

Colton glanced around. He saw nobody. He walked back into the kitchen. The place was empty. He looked in Katie's bedroom.

"Stay out of there," said Katie.

Colton shut the door. He grinned like a big boy. "All right," he said. He came back, went behind the counter, poured himself and O'Henry another drink. Then he walked back around to the front of the bar. "What'd you know, Katie?"

"They need beef," said Katie. "Villa needs beef."

"How do you know?"

"One of his scouts just walked out of here ahead of you. Juarez has fallen; the *rurales* have given up. Villa's turning this way. He's heading for Mexicali. But he needs beef in the bellies of his peons."

O'Henry grinned. "We'll furnish that beef, Katie. Where is this scout now? Did he leave town?"

"I saw him an hour ago, I guess. He intended to ride to the Beer Bottle, but I told him to wait until dusk and see if you two didn't drift into town. He'll be back directly."

"Give me a bottle," said Colton

With the Beer Bottle man carrying the whiskey, they went to a back room, Sean O'Henry walking behind his boss. Katie stayed with her counter. They took chairs and drank out of the bottle, not using glasses. The place had a desk and four chairs and was clean, the floor without dirt. Pictures hung on the wall. Colton looked at one that showed a heavy man wearing long mustaches.

"Looks like John L. Sullivan."

O'Henry smiled. "Prob'ly one of Katie's relatives. When you see pictures on an Irishman's wall—or an Irishwoman's—you can bet your last peso they're pictures of his ancestors. The Irish are worse than the Chinks that way."

Colton looked at the other pictures. "Sure a homely bunch to have hanging on the wall each day looking at you. Suppose some of them hung from the end of a rope, Sean?"

O'Henry shrugged. "Might be."

Time ran by. The line on the bottle steadily sank. They got a deck of cards from the desk and played seven-up. Colton was growing disgruntled, the whiskey showing in him. O'Henry was the same: happy, good-natured, heavy. Katie came in. She had another bottle. She set it down beside the almost empty one.

"Where is this hombre?" asked Colton.

"Siesta."

Colton swore. "You mean he's sleeping while we wait for him? And him with a revolution going on?"

Katie smiled, patted his head. "Be good, mama's boy. This is Mexico, not Arizona." She left.

O'Henry took a hand. The wait went on. Finally they

heard boots in the hall and the door opened. Katie and a dark, small Mexican entered. He was a dandy with a thick bandolier over one shoulder, a red and green and yellow *serape* over the other. He had a pistol stuck inside his silk shirt and his boots were polished. He bowed. "Señor Antonio Mario at your service, sir."

Colton growled, "Sit down, Tony, and forget the acting. You're not on the stage now; you're in a revolution."

The Mexican looked at Katie, spread his hands, and sat down, visibly annoyed by Colton's brusqueness. Katie winked at O'Henry.

"You want beef?" asked Colton.

"Si, we need *carne*. Need it immediately."

"Where do you want it delivered?"

"Tres Pinos."

"Three Pines." Colton rubbed his hands together slowly. "That's a hundred and a half miles from here. We can't take time out to drive these cattle that far. Not with this *Yanqui* Ed Garlan pounding us on the rump."

O'Henry grinned. "On the jaw, you mean, Mack."

Mario scowled darkly. "All right, we do this. You take the stock to Canyon Creek, *si*? My hombres, they take over from there. Is that all right with you two?"

Colton nodded. "*El dinero*? The money?"

"When the cattle are delivered." They argued over prices. Colton had them, he knew; Mario gave in, took his price. O'Henry listened with half an ear, watching Katie Ryan, who missed nothing.

O'Henry said cynically, "You figured out your cut yet, Katie?"

"To hell with you." declared the woman.

Mario got to his feet and bowed again. O'Henry yawned and said, "You missed a good set-up there, Colton."

Colton looked inquiringly at him.

The Irishman yawned again. "How about some horse meat, Mario?"

The Mexican studied him. "Down in Sonora, Villa's raiders ate horse meat. *Bonita*, they liked the steaks, too."

Colton said, "You got something, Sean," and his eyes showed admiration. He spoke to Antonio Mario. "We deliver horses at the same price—not a cent a pound less. There's more weight to a horse, too. One horse'll feed more bellies." He looked at O'Henry, who was dozing in his chair.

"Easier to drive, too," said Mario.

The Mexican sat down again and they bargained again. Shadows were long when the Villa man left the *cantina*. Colton and O'Henry went to the lunch counter where Katie served them.

Colton looked at the shadows creeping across the rutted street. *Muchachos* were hollering as they played hide-and-seek in the dusk and the coolness. Colton was quiet and thoughtful. He liked this time of the day with its coolness, its loneliness.

"Your grub," said Sean O'Henry.

Colton took his fork.

Katie said, "Pedro Malone is in town, men. He rode over from Ensenada. He bought some lumber here, and Miguel Conchas and his son are going to freight it out to the Bar S."

"Building up again . . ." murmured Colton.

Katie said, "You finished a deal with Mario?"

Colton looked at her red hair. The light shimmered on it and gave her face an almost wistful look. She seemed girlish suddenly. He wanted to lean across the counter and take her hand, but he didn't.

"He's taking horse meat, Katie."

CHAPTER X

Pedro Malone had had a long, hard ride. In Ensenada, he had met with little luck. There had been a little sawed lumber in the single lumber-yard. The proprietor had told him it had come from the *Estado de Washington*, up next to Canada in the United States. It had come from the State of Washington by boat.

Pedro didn't care how it came or where it came from. He looked at it and scowled—it was a meager supply, a good wagon load. But it wasn't bad lumber. Resaw stuff for the most part; but it would make good finish lumber. A man could use it for door jambs and window frames and casings.

He bought that for Ed Garlan. He made arrangements to have it hauled to the Bar S, and the man who hauled it said he and his *hijo*, a sleepy-looking boy of twenty, would work for *Señor Garlan*. *Tres pesos* per day, he said. Pedro bargained him down to two pesos. That was a dollar a day in American money. Besides, the Mexicans would bring their own tools and wanted only that *Señor Garlan* give them a bit of *pan*—bread—and some beans. Pedro agreed to those terms, too.

He bought everything he thought they would need—nails, spikes, some door hardware, some window panes. He left his tired horse with the workman and got one of the man's *caballos*. The workman, Carlos Estaban, said he would lead the horse to the Bar S. Pedro checked the list of things he needed, found he had filled all he could in Ensenada, and hit across country to Tecate.

Darkness found him close to the Mission de Santa Clara. He spent the night on a bed furnished by the *Padres*. Next morning, he took off food given him by the Fathers, and was on his way again, his horse refreshed by a night's rest and plenty of hay and a mess of oats.

The ride was long, the terrain rough, and he did not press his bronc too hard. He was glad to be back in his native *Mejico*. Here people knew how to live and enjoy life. When the hot part of the day came, then there was the siesta.

Up North, people worked too hard. Their lives were too hurried up, too jumbled. They worked when the sun was roaring hot. Pedro remembered the old saying, Only a fool or an *Americano* works when the sun is high and warm.

He reached Tecate at the start of the siesta. Peons lay in the shade of the oaks and *manzanita* brush and dozed. A woman called, "*Come, compadre*, and rest, for the sun is wicked."

"You are too fat," said Pedro. "when I come to a good-looking young girl, then will I leave my horse."

She cursed him good-naturedly. When he reached Tecate, peons dozed with their backs against the 'dobe walls, the canopies of plank shading them. There was no wind, no sound. Dogs and men slept.

Pedro went into a *cantina* and ordered cold Mexicali beer. "I am not used to this siesta business," he told the barkeeper. "I am from across the Line, and there we work during the heat."

"Can you run a gun?" asked the man.

Pedro studied him. "*Si*, I can shoot."

"I do not mean the *pistola*. Can you run the gun called the machine-gun?"

Pedro joked, "I have one in my back pocket."

The man went down the bar to tend to the wants of two *Americanos*, each of whom carried a pack and a rifle. They talked for some time and Pedro caught a few words: *Villa . . . Juarez . . . Mexicali*. The two drank

and paid with American coins and went into the hot sunshine.

The bartender returned. "Villa needs men to run machine guns, *señor*. Those two men—those *Americanos*—they go to join him. I am getting men for him."

"Not me," said Pedro. "I have enough trouble as it is, without getting more. I work for Ed Garlan."

The bartender nodded understandingly.

"I have enough war," declared Pedro.

"You will have more, when Villa comes."

"No," corrected Pedro. "We will work with Villa. We came here to raise horses; there is no grass for us in the States. Villa will leave us alone; we have nothing he wants. *Por Dios*, a man would not ride a mare about ready to foal!"

He learned from the bartender where the lumberman lived. When he went down the street, he saw Mack Colton and Sean O'Henry come in from the south. Tecate was stirring back to its slow tempo. He came to the lumber-yard at the edge of town. The owner had one small pile of lumber and he dozed in its shade. Pedro stirred him a little with the top of his boot.

"You sell lumber?"

"I have some, yes."

Pedro looked the lumber over. He bought it all. They wrangled, as usual, over the price. Pedro remembered that in the States a man set a price, a fair price, and held by it. Here they set an exorbitant price and then wrangled down to a fair price. This was tiresome, he figured, and a waste of breath and of time.

"Who will haul it for me?"

The man scratched a match on the hardened sole of his bare foot. "Miguel he does that kind of heavy work. He has a strong back."

Pedro found out that Miguel's last name was Conchas, and that he lived on *Calle Roosevelt*. He found the adobe and found Miguel greasing the wheels of his

ancient wagon. Dirty children stared at Pedro. One asked, "You bring us *dulces*? You bring candies?"

Pedro had purchased some sugar candy from the candyman and he distributed that evenly among the happy kids. Miguel pushed a wheel on an spun the nut on the axle before tightening it with the clevis pin.

"You like the *muchachos*?" asked Miguel.

"At a distance," said Pedro. He added, "At a great distance."

"They are like the rain," said Miguel. "They just come."

Pedro had to wrangle again. Finally, Miguel agreed to haul the lumber out. He would start in the morning.

He would be out to the Bar S with it at night, anyway. He would stay sober and get the lumber out there.

Pedro went to a *cantina* and had another beer. The place was cool—the floor had just been sprinkled with *agua* from the well. Pedro had another beer. He felt as if he wanted to fight. He got off his stool and took a chair and broke the leg on it. The bartender stared at him.

"Now I break other leg," said Pedro.

One by one, he broke the legs. He took them and snapped them between his hands; he did not bend them across his knee. This finished, he threw the ruined chair into the corner, took out an American dollar and laid it on the bar. "For another beer and for the chair."

The bartender's scowl changed to a smile. "You are a strong man," he said. "I have never seen a man stronger."

Pedro smiled widely.

He stayed longer in the *cantina* than he had intended. When he stepped outside, it was getting dark. He got his horse and headed south toward Hacienda Creek and the Bar S, forty miles away. He should reach the ranch sometimes around midnight, he figured. He had taken five bottles of beer along. He opened one with his teeth on the outskirts of Tecate. Before he could drink out of it, a voice called from the *chamiso*. He stopped and

looked at Miguel Conchas, who had come out of the brush.

"You hide from your wife?"

"I wait for you," said Miguel. "I have bad news."

Pedro joked. "Your woman going to have another *muchacho*?"

"More serious than that, *señor*. I cannot haul your lumber."

Pedro scowled. By some verbal prying, he got the information out of Miguel Conchas. Colton had been to see Miguel. With him had been the wild Irishman, Sean O'Henry. They had talked to Miguel.

"They tell me not to haul this lumber," finished Miguel.

Pedro Malone was angry. He drank deep of his bottle and Miguel looked at it hungrily. "You get none," stated Pedro flatly. "You are not a man; you are a louse. If you were not a louse, I would step from this *caballo* and break your back with me two hands."

"But, *señor*—"

"You are a coward. You are afraid of Colton and the Irishman. Me, I have Irish in me, too. I am afraid of nothing."

"I am afraid not for myself. I am afraid for my *esposa* and children."

Pedro snorted through his beer. "Get out of my sight."

Miguel disappeared back in the brush. Well, he'd been man enough to tell him anyway. Most men would have dodged around and lied until they had been pinned down to the truth. Pedro looked back down on the slow lights of Tecate. He debated about riding back there and trying to hire somebody else. But he doubted if he could. Probably all the peons were afraid of Colton.

Then he remembered Carlos Estaban in Ensenada. Estaban would haul to the Bar S from Ensenada; he would go into town for this lumber. One of the Bar S men would go with him for a rifle-guard. Pedro killed his

beer and flung the bottle into the brush and gave his pony the spurs.

Night was with him when he gained the high ridge. From here he had his last look at Tecate before going down the southern slope. After that, he rode the pony for all he was worth. He was a tough *grulla*, with a lineback, and he was as ornery and hard as a burro.

With the advent of the night, the *grulla's* pace shortened. But Pedro Malone was in no hurry. He finished another bottle of beer. The desire to break things had passed. The beer was pleasant but not driving. He tossed the bottle into the brush. The hour was growing late, the night dark.

He got sleepy. He had not slept well at the Mission de Santa Clara. For one thing, there had been a roof over his head; he had not liked that too well. He wanted to see the stars when he woke up at night, not look up a dark ceiling. Then he had been in a church, and that bothered him.

He let the *grulla* fall to a fast walk. He dozed with his head limber on his chest. Another hour went by and the time for another beer was at hand. He opened the bottle by bracing his teeth against the cap and loosening it. He spat the cap out on the trail. An ironic thought touched him. A man could trail him by those bottle caps.

He heard a rider ahead.

The rider came from the south. He called, "*Quien va alli?*" and added in American, "Who goes there?"

The rider drifted past. There was no answer. There in the darkness, Pedro Malone thought he recognized the rider as a woman. But *por Dios*, no woman rode a range at this hour, what with Pancho Villa and his raiders always in the background.

He did not know that the rider had been Zona Alvarado. Zona had been to a distant line-camp, acting on the chance that Sean O'Henry might have been in that vicinity. But he had not been there; the ride had been useless. She was tired and without hope. She rode hard

and used her spurs. What if Don Alvarado had had occasion to call into her room and found her gone? But if this occurred, she could make some fabrication, a convincing tale.

She came into the Alvarado hacienda at midnight. She did not take the pony into the barn. She stripped him by the lower corral, put the saddle on the corral rail, and turned the horse into pasture.

There was a dim light in Maria's room, despite the hour.

Zona drew back into the shadow of a pepper tree and looked at that light. It went out. She stood there for some time. She went on the long, dark porch. She took off her boots and carried them down the hall. Her room was locked and she opened it and went inside, and slowly undressed.

She lay in bed for some time before sleep came.

CHAPTER XI

Pedro Malone came into the Bar S shortly after midnight. Kid Harris challenged him on the rimrock and Pedro gave him his last bottle of beer. The Mexican saw a cigaret coal glowing in the shadows as he stripped his bronc. He laid his saddle on the ground and the *grulla* trotted off to drink and graze. Pedro walked toward the cigaret, long arms swinging.

"Whose *grulla*?" asked Garlan.

"Carlos Estaban's *caballo*. Tomorrow Carlos and his *hijo*, Carlos *Segundo*, haul out lumber from Ensenada. They work on new houses, too."

Squatting beside Garlan, the Mexican rolled a cigaret, wrapping the raw tobacco in a corn husk. He told him about his trip to Ensenada and its results; his ride to Tecate, and how Colton had scared Miguel. There was silence.

Pedro took his eyes away from the glowing cigaret and looked around him. That huge mound under the blankets, over by the *chamiso*, would be Skinny Marsh. Beyond him was another pile of bedding, a smaller pile. That would be Hightail Smith. Pedro returned his gaze to the cigaret.

"*Los caballos*, the horses? Where are they?"

"Scattered around the range," said Garlan.

"Maybe Colton, he run them off."

Garlan drew on his cigaret, then threw it away. "We have to take that chance. We ain't got crew enough to hold them in a bunch. Besides, they've got to graze; they're leg-tired."

Pedro wished he had a beer.

"You go to bed," said Garlan. "I'm sitting here debating whether to wake Skinny up or let him sleep. We need somebody on guard."

"I'll stay up."

"You hit the soogans."

Pedro moved off. Garlan said, "Barbwire? You find any of that?"

The Mexican stopped. "You mean, we build a drift-fence?"

"We'll have to. Beer Bottle cattle are coming back on our grass."

Pedro debated. Beer Bottle cattle . . . that made his thirst worse. Well, he'd settle for a drink out of the creek before going to bed. "There's wire in Tecate. Lots of it, I understand. We could cut straight piñons for posts. When Carlos Estaban comes, he can haul it out."

"This Estaban? You think Colton can scare him?"

Pedro considered. "He's too dumb to be scared," he said.

Garlan settled back. He watched the Mexican go to his bedroll, unstrap it and roll it out on the grass, the tarp between the blankets and the damp ground. The creek murmured and sang. Pedro went and got a drink and then pulled off his boots and slid into bed. He rolled over a number of times and then settled down. Skinny Marsh was snoring softly.

Garlan rolled another cigaret. He drew in the smoke and liked its taste and odor. He heard a horse neigh in the distance. He looked at the outlines of his sleeping hands. He rolled the cigaret between his fingers and thought.

When morning came, Alvarado men would drift in, according to Maria. And he was glad of that. One enemy on his grass was enough. He wanted peace; not war. All his life, he had lived on the edge; he had known danger and its companion, death. He had hoped by moving into

Mexico that he would get on peaceful graze. The opposite had been true. Colton was here.

But there had been nothing for him in the States. True, he was mortgaged to the ears; but here, he had some future. He did not care to build wide. He only wanted to hold what he had bought, the old Riviera land grant. He had no greed. He had seen what greed did to a man. He wanted none of that.

But when they pushed you, a man fought back. He got to his feet and got his horse. There was no sleep for him now. He rode to the rimrock where Kid Harris called to him. He got down and walked to where the cowpuncher hunkered in the rocks. Harris still had a little beer, and he offered it to Garlan.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Pedro."

Garlan sighed, "Pedro and beer. Pedro and *cerveza*. He ought to get a job on the Beer Bottle iron for Colton."

"Wish we had a hand there," said Kid Harris.

Garlan sat down flat. He had his back against the oulder. He pulled his palm flatly across the dust. The soft smell of the wet sandstone lay in his nostrils. He liked that smell. He liked the feel of dust on his hand.

"That would be a good idea," he said slowly. "But who would it be? Colton knows us all now. None of us could hire out as a spy."

"Just a thought," said Harris.

They were silent for an hour. Garlan let his head fall a little, and he slept a few minutes. He came awake suddenly. Harris was still there, hunkered and dark. "You snored yourself awake," the rider said.

Garlan was silent.

Harris picked up a handful of dried dust. Here the rain had not landed, due to the overhang of the rocks. He let this run through his palm onto the ground. The odor of it was musty in Garlan's lungs.

"When a man gets silent in the night, it makes him

think." Harris spoke carefully. "And sometimes I think a man thinks too much for his own good."

"You couldn't accuse Pedro of thinking."

Harris turned that. "He's smart enough," he said.

They sat then in silence. The night slipped across the span of time, moved aside to let daylight come in. Shadows crept out and broke up and turned into light. It was chilly, and Garlan felt the bite of the weather. Rain would come soon and break up that chilliness and turn the range green.

Now the men were stirring below them along the creek. And the ruined walls of the old hacienda stood like sentinels in the dawn behind them. Kid Harris got to his feet and gave the range one long hard look. Horses were grazing in the distance, and beyond that was another bunch, down in the east.

"This grass'll put fat on them," said Kid Harris.

Garlan pushed his hand out. "Cerveza cattle drifting back," he said.

The cattle were moving east again. They had crossed the creek and were on Bar S ground again. Harris said, "They might be Don Alvarado's stock."

Garlan let his shoulders fall. "Don't think so, Kid."

Skinny Marsh hollered, "The chuck is ready, gents," and waved to them. They went down the slope, sliding a little. The big man hunkered over his pans on the open fire. The fire was good and warm. The coffee warmed a man, too.

Hightail Smith said, "Riders coming."

They broke over the ridge at a long trot. Garlan recognized them: Don Alvarado, Zona, Maria, and two other riders. He lifted his hand and they came in. The don held his horse and looked at them.

"Yoo left home early," said Garlan.

Garlan looked at Zona, who had lines around her mouth. Maria smiled and looked across the hills. The two vaqueros sat motionless saddles.

"It was still dark when we left," said the don.

They came down and had coffee. They had saddlehorses in the rail enclosure below the old hacienda, and Maria ran them into a corner where the Bar S men caught them. Skinny Marsh washed the tin pans in the creek and poured the remainder of the coffee on the fire.

"That might explode," said Kid Harris. "It's strong enough."

"Get outa here," said Skinny.

Don Alvarado was range-boss. Garlan had asked him to boss the work. He did this for two reasons; he wanted to cement a deeper friendship with the old don, and he wanted his advice on working this strip. For the don knew this country well.

They decided to work south, putting Alvarado cattle south and Beer Bottle stock to the west. Many Cerveza cattle were on Bar S range, but they were close to the border line, not having had time to drift in deep. The old man split up the riders and they went to work.

"Your daughters?" asked Garlan. He winked at the old man.

"We can work cattle," said Maria.

Zona only smiled.

Kid Harris said, "Come on, Zona," and they loped north to their ground. Skinny Marsh rode up. His household chores were done. Each carried jerky and *pan* for the noon meal in his saddlebag. Skinny and Hightail rode as a pair, and Pedro Malone, scowling widely, rode off with Don Alvarado.

Garlan looked at Maria. "You and me ride together, I guess."

"Will that be hard to do?"

Garlan smiled. "Not too difficult, lady."

He took the ridges that were thick with buckbrush and wild rosebushes. She took the valleys. They started working cattle. They worked well as a pair. Garlan put them down slope and she turned them and cut them, taking Cerveza cattle away from Alvarado stock. She

rode a fast, sharp-turning horse and she sat a close saddle. Garlan watched her from a hill. She would do.

The dawn changed into forenoon; the sun lifted across a sky without clouds. Sweat rolled down the shoulders of Garlan's pony. He held the horse, conserving his strength; the afternoon would be gruelling. He rode down to a creek and watered the horse. Maria saw him and came across, riding under live-oak with spray rising from her horse's hoofs.

"You are tired?" Her brows rose. "Already?"

Garlan said, "Don't tease me, woman."

She held her horse in close. Garlan got up. He put his horse around. "Now we'll—" He looked at her suddenly. Her lips were open a little. He didn't intend to kiss her, but he did.

She said, "Please, *señor*."

Garlan sat quietly. He said finally, "I'm sorry, Maria." Her lips had been cold.

He said, "You're worried about something?"

"You can tell?"

"I've watched you closely the last few days. I think you are worried. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I don't know you well enough."

"I am easy to know."

He waved an impatient hand. "You're a woman, Maria. No woman is easy to understand. My father told me that years ago. I didn't understand fully then what he meant. I do now."

She put her hand on his and said in mock sympathy, "You poor man! I feel sorry for you."

He looked at her. "You'll forgive me?"

"For what? For doing what you wanted to do? Heaven forbid, that is nothing to ask forgiveness from!"

Garlan smiled. "We better work cattle."

There were not many Alvarado cattle on Bar S range. Evidently the don saw to it that his stock stayed on his grass, not on the feed of his neighbors. They worked the

range fast. They covered twenty odd miles the first morning. When they met at noon, their horses were tired.

Garlan said, "They won't have much this afternoon. They left most of it back yonder."

They were on the three-way boundary of the Bar S, the Cerveza, and the Alvarado *ranchos*. Zona said, "We have horses across the creek. I saw a herd there the other evening. Saddle-horses." She looked at her father.

"Find them."

Maria rode with her. The men loafed in the shade of the oaks, and soon Skinny Marsh was snoring. Kid Harris shook him. "Not that, Skinny. It's enough to have to look at you without listening to you."

"The devil with you," said Skinny.

But he didn't go to sleep again. They waited about twenty minutes. Then Zona and Maria came over the hill, driving about twenty head of Alvarado horses. They were all well-broke saddle-stock and therefore rather tame. They held them in a bunch while the don walked up to them, one after another. He put ropes around their necks and led them back, giving each of them a fresh mount.

They turned their spent Bar S broncs north onto range, hazing them toward the general direction of their headquarters. The ponies of the two girls and the don were driven south with the rest of the horse herd found by Zona and Maria. They rested and hit leather again. The don was wiry in the saddle as he gave out orders in his quiet voice. Again Garlan took to the buckbrush and the ridges. Here were fewer Cerveza steers and more Alvarado stock. They worked the country quickly, and by dusk Garlan and Maria was riding toward the scheduled meeting place, a peon's adobe on a creek:

"Sell your thoughts?" Garlan asked the girl.

"You were right, *señor* Garlan. I am worried. I am afraid to tell my father. I am the only one who knows."

Garlan was silent.

"You are my friend?"

He said, "I hope so, Maria." He wanted to tell her he would like to be more than a friend. But he had made one rash, impulsive step this day, and didn't want to make another.

"Maybe you can help me."

"I'd like to try."

She bit her lip and looked at her hands. "I feel so helpless, *señor*. I love Zona so much. I am afraid she will be hurt, and the pain will be great."

She talked in a low voice.

CHAPTER XII

Zona met Sean O'Henry in the darkness of the beginning night. They sat along the bank and listened to the quiet murmur of the creek. The Irishman laughed deeply, hands around his knees, for he was happy with the woman and the night.

"They have horses," said Zona, "on the east fork of Manzanita Creek. They have a few hundred head there."

O'Henry nodded.

"I saw them yesterday," said Zona.

O'Henry said, "One more week, *muchacha*, and we go. What will your father say to you leaving with me?"

"He will not like it."

The Irishman considered that. "We could run away and write him from *America del Sur*. We could let him know by letter." He cocked his heavy head to one side as though listening to some unheard counsel. "But that would not be right. I would not want our daughter to do that to us when we get old."

"We have no daughter yet, simpleton."

"You had better ride back," he said. "The night will be late when you reach your *casa*. I will go partway with you."

She kissed him.

He said slowly, "Please *muchacha*, do not make it too difficult for me. After we are married, this will be different. But until then—"

She drew back. "I'm sorry. I like you because you are so clean and good. You will be good to me. I know that. We shall be happy together if—"

"We shall be happy," he assured her.

She was cold, and the night was warm. She was afraid of tomorrow and the day after that, and she would be afraid as long as they were on this range. He was laughing again, laughing almost silently.

"I am not good," he said. "I am a *renegado*, a thief. I am not clean. I have fought and used my gun."

"Those days are gone."

"Are they?" He spread his thick hands. "No, they are here. They will be gone only when we point our ponies toward Ensenada and the boat that will take us out of *Mejico*. They are not gone."

"Come, we must go."

They rode for miles in silence. The night was dark, but they knew these trails, and their horses were old to this country and its turns. They came to Boundary Creek and the man drew in there. "*Buenas noches, Zona.*"

She said, "Goodby," and put her pony into the water. He watched the darkness of her move into the night's darkness, and he heard the splash of her horse's hoofs until she reached the far bank, and then there were only the night and his thoughts.

The night was dark and so were his thoughts.

Two hours later, he rode into the Cerveza yard. Men were standing beside horses—horses saddled and ready—and he left his bronc and found earth. "A fresh mount," he told the *mozo*.

Colton found his stirrup. He went up, saying, "Well, Sean?"

"Manzanita Crick. About two hundred head, I guess."

"You rode over there?"

O'Henry looked at him. "How would I know they were there if I hadn't?"

"Just a question. Hang onto your saddle."

"You talk like a damn fool," said O'Henry.

The *mozo* led up a black gelding. "Here he is, *señor*." O'Henry reined him and found his seat. "This way."

They rode out on a lope, four men. They all rode dark horses. There would be no moon. The stars were clear. They looked so close that they seemed only a few miles away.

They were silent. O'Henry led with Colton behind and to his right, with another man abreast him. The fourth trailed. They reached the hills and these enfolded them. They crossed a foaming creek that pushed toward the ocean. They were on Bar S grass. They swung south of the ruined, blasted hacienda. Still nobody spoke. They ran across a flat and came to more hills. Wind was in the piñons. They scared a drove of wild hogs that had been grazing on acorns dropped that fall and now deep in the moist earth. The hogs squealed and ran and went into the *manzanita*.

"Pork," said a man.

He got no answer. Still they rode on, riding at a lope. This ran on, and another man said, "Will they have a guard out, Sean?"

"No. The range is too big."

"That is good. I was thinking of my Lupe."

Colton laughed with a flat meanness. "You men and your heifers! A woman only gets a man in trouble."

The rider shook his head slowly. "I know that, Mack. I knew it then, but what good does it do a man to know something, and then not use that knowledge?"

Sean O'Henry kept thinking of Zona.

Colton said, "We've been on the trail long enough. We should be there."

O'Henry was laughing. He sat in his saddle and laughed. Colton looked at him in wonder. "Why do you laugh, you fool?"

"I am happy tonight. I thought of those soldiers of Villa, and that they would eat Bar S mares. Tough chewing they'll make. They'll think it is tough longhorn beef. They'll never know they are eating a horse."

"What's funny about that?"

"You're not Irish," said O'Henry. "You couldn't

see humor in it. You live too close to the ground."

"A bullet won't hit me so easy, then."

They reached the ridge and the wind whipped in, cold with the night. Clouds were moving in and blotting out the stars. Wind sang in the scrub-oak and the piñons; a nightbird whirred across space with wild freedom. O'Henry pulled in and waved his arm. The wind pressed his buckskin jacket close to his heavy body.

"They are here close?"

One man said, "I heard a horse neigh."

Colton spoke. "Mares with colts are to be left behind. We run them hard for a few miles; that will take edges from them. O'Henry, take Jim and ride the right; Mike and I take left flank."

"Hope there are horses ahead," said Mike.

"There'll be broncs." O'Henry spoke with assurance. Zona had said there were horses here and there would be horses. He was suddenly glad they were stealing Ed Garlan's broncs and not Don Alvarado's cattle. He had never liked that idea; neither had Zona. But both had agreed that they would be together. And Sean O'Henry knew that he could never ask Don Alvarado for his daughter. The don was liberal-minded, but not that liberal. They had no other choice than the one they were taking. They had discussed the situation thoroughly, viewing it from all angles. There was no other alternative. With money, they could travel to *America del Sur*, without it, they could never reach a land where they could start together, with one of them starting anew.

Colton said, "Ride tight and keep your guns close," and he and Mike went to the east. Jim said, "All right, Sean," and they went ahead, riding toward the north. They came to a draw. A horse moved ahead, and way ahead another neighed. More horses moved. They rode this way for a mile or two. O'Henry saw the dark bulk of a rider and waited hand on his gun.

"Colton coming in," a voice said.

O'Henry drew his hand back. "Sean," he said.

Colton pulled in close.

"You're an idiot," said Sean O'Henry. "What if this wasn't me—what if I had happened to be a Bar S man? Here you ride in and announce yourself. What if guns had come out, and you'd got away? They'd still have known who you were. You would have told them."

"You got an imagination."

"I darned near dumped you with a cartridge."

"Save that lead for Skinny Marsh."

O'Henry rocked in leather. He rubbed his jaw. "I'm forgetting that," he said. "I'm not pushing it."

"Cold boots?"

O'Henry rode close. "You run your thoughts, fellow; I'll handle mine. You hire my saddle and gun, nothing more."

Colton knew this Irishman, and it was his turn to laugh. "You ride on cockleburrs, Sean," he said. He put his arm around him and hugged him. "Too bad you aren't a woman. If you were a lady, I'd marry you."

Sean was laughing now. "If I was a woman," he said, "I wouldn't be a lady. And I wouldn't be the marrying kind."

Colton said, "Let's hit stirrups."

They swept out then, partners in the dark. Somewhere a loafer wolf howled his loneliness. O'Henry thought of Zona. She would sleep now; sleep like a little child; she was his woman, he had her. That was the lightness that cut the night with clearness only he saw.

Horses were on the move. Brush crackled and mares neighed. Mike came in and said, "We got them, Colton," and moved into the night. They headed them east. They were riding quick and fast, beating them when they came close enough. There was no interference save that nature provided in form of brush and arroyo. Colton's bronc stumbled and he brought him up with his weight against the reins. They ran the Bar S horses hard and ran some great distance.

Riders weaved in and out, shadows among shadows. Colton stayed close to Sean O'Henry. He liked the wild, laughing Irishman. He wondered how and when Sean O'Henry would repay Skinny Marsh. For he knew that, despite O'Henry's seemingly casual surface, the Irishman would tangle with Marsh, someday and some place at an opportune time.

Or would he?

Colton pulled the damp night air into his lungs. He did not like the way things were going with Don Alvarado and Ed Garlan and the Bar S riders. He wanted them to fight; he did not want them friends. How could he turn them against the other?

That would be hard to do. Both Ed Garlan and Don Alvarado were level-headed. Both had learned to control their tempers, and because they had learned this lesson, their urge for violence had diminished.

A rider came in and said, "The herd is bunched good, Colton. You take the lead, huh? O'Henry an' me'll work the flanks and Jim'll take the drags. We take them to Canyon Crick, no?"

"That's the place."

"When do we get the *dinero*?"

"Tonight, I suppose. Villa hit some heavy looting in Juarez, Mario told me. I said it took gold."

"Who cuts in?"

Colton felt irritation. This man asked too many questions. "The four of us, of course. And Katie."

"She makes her money easy."

Colton glanced at him. "She plays a close hand. She's a gambler. God help the man who falls for her. Her veins have ice water in them."

They ran the horses hard for miles. Then night winged past and dawn was coming, and soon morning would be here. Piñons began to stand out on the hillsides, and the wind had fallen back the way it does when sunrise is near. They were tired; their horses too, were tired.

They were fifty miles from the Cerveza. They were on the desert south of Jacumba. Ahead reared the rough hills that separated them from Mexicali, to the northeast. They put the broncs around the southern slope of these hills. The Bar S horses had lost their energy. The long trek south from California had taken most of their freshness. The few days on Mexico grass had given them some poundage and strength, but it was of short duration.

O'Henry said, "Not far now, Colton."

The night had pressed on Colton. He had been tough and gay when they had left the Beer Bottle *rancho*. Now he was tough and morose. A man gets too much of the saddle sometimes, and when he had to ride through darkness, with maybe a rifle talking somewhere—

"Be good to get there, Sean."

"You'll have time for rest, Colton. They'll cover you some day to keep you in a small spot. They'll put tons on you to hold you down."

"You're cheerful, Sean."

"Long ride back," murmured the Irishman.

A rider came back. "Horseman ahead," he said.

Colton spurred out. They heard his hoofs leave and finally there came his call. "This way, men."

They circled the herd and stopped it. Riders came out of the dawn with Colton, and Mario nodded to O'Henry. O'Henry moved close to Colton and Mike and Jim loafed in saddle, watching the mares who grazed along the canyon. The Villa man tossed Colton a sack of buckskin and O'Henry heard the soft clatter of coins inside.

"Gold," said Mario. He added, "It came from a great *rancho* in Sonora.

Colton did not open it.

Mario waved his hand and his men started the herd east. The Cerveza men helped get the herd rolling and then they turned back to the west. The dawn was clear. They day would be hot.

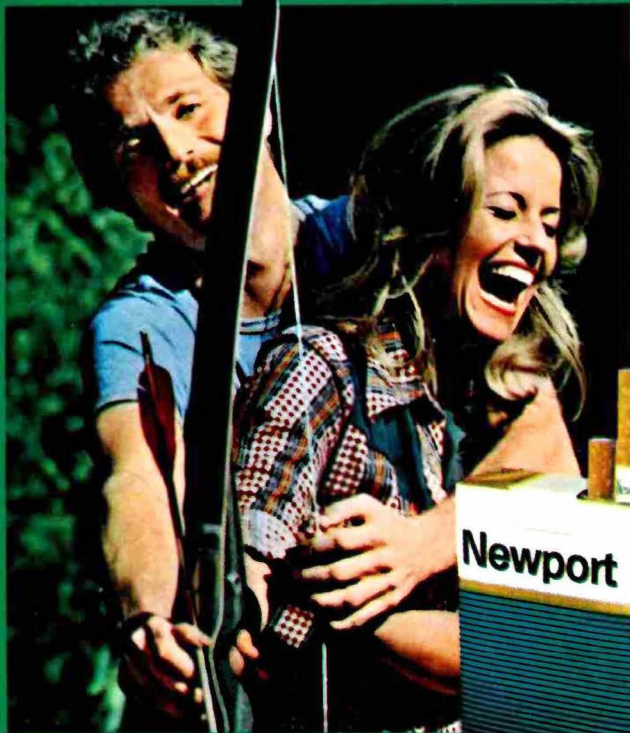
O'Henry said, "I noticed you didn't open that sack, Colton, and count the money. For all you know it might hold iron washers."

Colton grinned crookedly. "I'm no fool, Sean. I'm taking Mario's count. Me, I don't cotton to that fellow's guns, and he had too many riders." He opened the sack and looked at the gold pieces. "There's enough."

"There's never enough," corrected O'Henry.

*Alive
with pleasure!*
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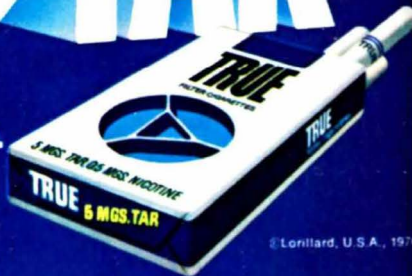
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CHAPTER XIII

Ed Garlan and Skinny Marsh were riding the south edges of Bar S range when Marsh said, "Four riders over yonder, Garlan."

Garlan took his glasses from their case and put them on the men. He looked for some time and then handed the field-glasses to Marsh.

Marsh looked.

"Beer Bottle riders," said the heavy man. "Colton and O'Henry and two others. Wonder why they're crossing our range so early in the morning and so far from their home spread?"

"They've been out all night," said Garlan. "That much is certain. They haven't time enough to ride from their buildings and reach this spot so early."

They looked at each other. "I don't *sabe* this!" stated Marsh.

"Might've been to Mexicali and spent the night there," said Garlan. "Well, let's drift."

They were looking to see if any Cerveza or Alvarado cattle had drifted back on Bar S grass. They found only one Alvarado steer, but Beer Bottle cattle were coming back. Garlan had hoped they would stay on their own range, now that they had been turned back twice. But such did not seem to be the case.

He was fully decided now to put in a drift fence. That seemed to be the only way they could keep Beer Bottle cattle on their own grass, not the Bar S's feed. They swung round and came into the camping-grounds sometime before noon. Garlan looked at his heavy friend.

"Time that Mexican should have got out here with the lumber from Ensenada, Skinny. Fact is, he should've been out here last night. If he isn't in camp when we get there, we'd better backtrack and see if he's had some trouble."

They loped around a bend. Marsh said, "There's a wagon in camp now; that must be him. Yeah, that has to be him, Ed."

Estaban was a small man with a wrinkled dark face. He had eyes as sharp as points of a gimlet. His son was taller, a little heavier. They shook hands with the Bar S owner, and Marsh and Estaban smiled widely.

"Pedro, he tell me that thees Señor Colton, he does not want the lumber hauled from Tecate. We will unload and go after the lumber, Garlan."

Garlan smiled and lifted his hand. "Not so *pronto*, *amigo*. We'll have to unload this lumber first." He walked to the wagon with Estaban following. The *hijo* struck up conversation with Skinny Marsh. "This is good lumber," said Estaban. "All my life, I have built things, and I know my lumber."

"We'll unload after we eat," said Garlan.

Estaban looked at the smoky walls of the ruined hacienda. He wanted to know what had happened. Garlan told him that Colton, or somebody else, had evidently dynamited the buildings. The Mexican spread his hands flatly and grimaced. "Such a historical old hacienda, *tambien*. Thees Colton, he is a *mal hombre*. Come, let us walk through it and look at it."

They walked through the walls. Estaban ran his practiced eye over the interiors; he pounded against walls. He called to his son to bring his square and level. He tested window openings for trueness and he leveled the wall for straightness. He went from one building another. Skinny Marsh called, "Chuck's ready, men."

"We eat later," said Estaban. "I want to look at this place more carefully."

Garlan watched the Mexican with interest. He was no

carpenter. He knew how to drive a nail, but beyond that and the ability to use a saw somewhat, he had no real knowledge of carpentry.

They went through the last building, the bunkhouse. Estaban rubbed his hands together thoughtfully.

"There is no use in building new buildings," he said slowly, "I cannot see that use, *señor*. But of course, you are the boss—what you say goes with me."

"What do you think?"

The Mexican squatted and squinted his aged eyes. "You can repair these buildings much faster than building new ones, and it will take less lumber. You have walls here. All you have to do is to put new roofs on them and new windows and finish the interiors again."

He elaborated further. With the exception of one building, the granary, the wall were true—they had stood the fierce power of the dynamite because they were so thick. Estaban pointed out that the walls, at their bases, sometimes measured three feet thick. From this thickness they tapered to two feet.

"That is a lot of 'dobe, *Señor* Garlan. The weight is immense. 'Dobe is like cement; it sets solid. A pick would bounce off these walls. Those walls have turned back Indian attacks. The dynamite could not move them because the charge was not big enough. I would repair and rebuild these walls if I were you."

"The granary?"

Estaban shook his head. "It is beyond repair. The walls on it are sprung and cannot be straightened. There is much work to do, though. Ceiling beams need be cut out of piñon and doors and windows must be put in. But it would be cheaper and quicker to repair these buildings than to build new ones."

"They're smoked up bad."

"Whitewash will clear that. Or paint will cover that smoke."

Garlan said, "Repair these then."

They went to the campfire where Skinny doled beef

out of a kettle. "Beer Bottle beef," he said. "Killed it myself with my little pen-knife."

Garlan ate with enjoyment. He had wanted to save the old hacienda but he had not thought it possible. He liked the old buildings—they were a thing of the past, and they were still good. He turned the entire building over to Estaban and his son. The Mexican liked that.

"We would like a helper," said Estaban. "And could we get Pedro to help us?" He added, "My back is not so strong, and Pedro could lift the timbers."

Garlan looked at Pedro.

"I'll work with them," said the rider. "Only one thing—I do not want to be responsible for any timbers that I break with my bare hands."

Garlan spoke. "Looks as though we'll all have to take our boots out of stirrups and plant them in the ground. We've got to string wire and build this drift fence."

They ate and then unloaded the lumber. While the lumber was being piled, Estaban was looking over the mess hall. They had decided to rebuild this first because it was so essential.

Estaban's horses were tired. Hightail Smith hooked two big mares to the wagon. They reared and pawed and tried to run away, but Skinny Marsh rode on one side and Garlan on the other. When the mares reared, one of them grabbed a bridle and jerked her to earth. Hightail swung the wagon in a wide circle. Evidently one of the mares had been driven before, for she soon caught on to pulling the wagon. The other had tasted the bridle under a saddle, and she also fell into good behavior. Hightail grinned, the freckles standing out on his dark face.

"Reckon I'm about ready to hit for Tecate, Ed."

Garlan said that Skinny Marsh would go with him. They got their rifles and hit out, running the team north at a wild gallop. They left camp with a yip and a cloud of dust behind them.

Estaban wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Those *caballos* they will not hit that stride for too many miles.

The heat will get them and slow them down."

The mares would stand the trip all right. They were hard from the trail and they still had some months to carry colts before foaling. The long run and hard haul would not hurt them any. Skinny and Hightail would be back tomorrow with a load of lumber and some spools of wire.

Estaban and his *hijo* went to work with saw and hammer. Kid Harris had had some work with a carpenter as a kid, and he toiled with Pedro and the Estabans. Garlan got a fresh horse and rode out. He wanted to scout the country thoroughly to run definite boundaries for the drift fence to take. He did not like barbed-wire. For one thing, a horse or cow could get cut badly in it; another thing, barbedwire brought the end of open range, and that fact, to a rider, was not very welcome.

But the fencing of this grass was necessary. Otherwise Beer Bottle cattle would graze his range bare, and his mares, who needed grass badly, would not have enough feed.

He turned back some Beer Bottle cattle on Boundary Creek. They had just crossed the stream. He choused them across the water with spray flying and his double lass-rope pounding them across the rumps. They hit the far bank on the end and he rode back.

He rode the ridges. From this high point he could see the range below. He had a tough vigilance. Colton would never forget that blow he had given the Beer Bottle owner in Tecate. Nor would Sean O'Henry overlook the beating Skinny Marsh had handed to him. From now on Bar S men would be ridge riders.

But he saw no trace of the Beer Bottle men. From a butte marred by *chamiso* and *ocotillo*, he watched the Beer Bottle hacienda through his glasses. A few riders stirred, coming from the western range. He was so close he could see the geese swimming in the pond back of the barn. Hens clucked in the dust.

He saw no sign of either Mack Colton or Sean

O'Henry. He saw Pinto Martinez drift in from the south. The man stripped his horse and turned him into pasture. Then he walked through the evening to the mess house. Smoke came up lazily from the chimney on that building. The cook came out and hollered. Garlan heard the man's bellow. His belly told him that he, too was hungry. He went to his horse and rode down the east side of the butte.

The horse braced himself in the loose shale. Garlan looked toward the south. A rider was coming from the direction of the Alvarado hacienda. Garlan reached the base of the hill and looked again. He had expected the rider to swing east, but the rider came straight toward him. Evidently the horseman was heading for the Boundary Creek.

Garlan pulled his horse into the brush. When the rider came closer, he recognized Maria Alvarado. He put his horse out into the trail.

"Night will catch you far from home," he said.

She smiled childishly. "Maybe I like to be out late," she said.

Garlan looked at her calmly. He didn't understand her. But he didn't push the subject any further. He looked at the thick braids of dark hair and like the way they glistened in the sunset.

"I was over to the east this morning," said the girl. "I saw horse tracks cut across a strip of our range."

Garlan frowned. "Maybe some of my horses are drifting."

"I thought so, too. So I followed them. They went straight east into the desert. There had been a wind across the sand, and I could not follow the tracks. The wind had drifted them away."

"Then my broncs went across the desert?"

She shrugged. "So it looked."

He considered that. That didn't seem logical. Horses might drift to the edge of the desert, but they would not cross it unless they were driven. Horses went where

there was grass and water. And the desert had neither of these.

"How far away was that?" he asked.

A frown showed on her forehead. "Not too far. Five miles, I guess. That is where our land juts up into your graze."

Garlan glanced at the sun. Twilight would hang on for some time. He was curious. They rode hard to get to the spot before darkness. Maria rode a pace behind him, her horse running evenly. They dipped through an arroyo—this was matted with buckbrush and wild rosebushes—and reached the other side. There was a long level draw and then the desert.

Maria said, "The tracks are up this way," and rode north.

Soon Garlan was looking at the trail. It ran out a way into the desert and then the sand covered it. He rode north and looked for tracks. Maybe the broncs had turned and come back. But he found no other tracks.

He was puzzled.

Two things bothered him. These horses had traveled bunched, and range horses do not graze in a bunch—they spread out. The other thing was that they had turned into the desert.

Had Colton run off some of his broncs? He might do that just for meanness. They turned west again. The night was thickening rapidly. They cut the trail and followed it, and they reached Manzanita Creek in thirty minutes.

"Here's where the trail starts," said Maria.

Garlan knew then that the herd had been driven. For he saw the hoofmark of a shod horse . . . a saddle-horse. His mares were all without shoes. He looked at Maria.

"It will be late when you get home, girl."

She spoke slowly. "It will be morning, *señor*. You see, I am going to watch the Beer Bottle hacienda, and Sean O'Henry."

“You wait to see if Zona comes to him?”

“Yes.”

“That is not a nice job,” said Garlan slowly.

“I know it isn’t. But I have to make sure they are meeting.”

“Then what do you intend to do?”

“I do not like Sean O’Henry. Neither does my father. But evidently Zona does. I think it best that my father know they are meeting.”

“What will he do?”

She was silent and thoughtful. “I have given it a lot of thought. I still think it best that he know. Of course, it will hurt him. But it would hurt him worse to have Zona leave without saying goodbye to him. And that might happen.

Garlan’s tongue had a wry, bitter taste.

CHAPTER XIV

After leaving Ed Garlan, Maria Alvarado turned her pony's head to the south. She didn't like the job ahead of her. But she thought her father should know; then, when and if O'Henry and Zona left, the shock would not be so great on him.

For Don Alvarado's heart was not too strong. Zona did not know this, but she knew it. The winter before, the don had been ailing. She had taken him to the medico in Mexicali. The doctor had held him three days for examination. He had called in a specialist from El Centro, across the Line.

Together they had compared their diagnoses. Don Alvarado had not heard their combined verdicts. Only Maria had been informed of her father's health. The old man's heart had a slow beat and a leaky valve. They would not tell him he was ailing. There was no use in his worrying. Maria had decided against informing Zona, also.

Now she wondered if she had not done wrong by not telling her sister. Zona was the old man's favorite; or so Maria thought. He liked Zona because she was the older, and she was quiet. Maria had been a regular tomboy. When Zona had been working in the house, Maria had been riding the range.

The girl had definite suspicions that Zona was meeting O'Henry. She did not like to spy and pry; she was not that type. But she wanted to make sure before she went any further. Then she would tell Zona that she knew. They would talk it over and decide on what to

do—whether to inform Don Alvarado or not.

She was sure that Zona was going to ride tonight. She had had her top horse in the stable all afternoon, feeding him an extra mess of ground barley and lots of green hay. She had polished her riding boots and worked on her split buckskin riding skirt. She had ironed a dark silk blouse, humming as she worked.

“You are happy, *hermana*,” Maria had said.

“I’m always happy.”

Maria had been disturbed by her own thoughts. She had ridden out on the open range to think. Now she was going toward the Beer Bottle. She would follow Sean O’Henry out of the *rancho*. She would follow him instead of her sister. Then when she confronted Zona, she could say she followed O’Henry, not her sister. She did not like this task, but she figured it was necessary.

Although she had a gay exterior, she was deeper than her sister credited her with being. She reached the hill behind the Beer Bottle. Below her buildings had kerosene lights. Shadows danced and the yellow lamp light pushed them back again.

A dog was barking. She knew he had not scented her, she was too far away. She left her pony, and the horse fell to grazing despite the bit in his mouth. She sat beside a rock, her back to the stone. The rock was still hot, although coolness was coming in.

It started to rain. The drops were large. She had a slicker on her saddle. She put on the dark, shapeless oilskin raincoat. The coat came to her spurs. She settled under the overthrust, and the rain dripped down from the rock. Her pony came over and muzzled her and she patted his wet nose.

“Soon, *Pepito*, we will go home.”

The rain lost its first anger and settled down to an intermittent shower. She waited for over two hours. Time was endless and moved on slow feet across this land and its people. She thought of Ed Garlan and that he had kissed her. She smiled. She had wanted to return

his kiss, but she had played hard to get. She didn't know just what to think about herself since Garlan had come to Baja California. She seemed to have changed somehow. She wondered if she were in love with him.

"*Por Dios,*" she thought. "Me, in love?"

Below her, a door opened in the cabin. Light streamed out, and then the door shut again, and she could not see the man. She got her pony and worked down the slope. A man rode by, heading west. But it was not Sean O'Henry.

She sat the horse in the darkness, protected by a shed. More time passed and she thought, I am wasting my time, and turned to ride off. She didn't know whether she was glad or sorry. Evidently Sean O'Henry, if he were at the Beer Bottle, was not going to meet Zona.

Somewhere, she heard a rider. The horseman was coming toward her. He was going into the Beer Bottle yard and he rode ten feet away. He wore a slicker. She could not identify him in the rain.

She waited as he rode by. The man went into the barn, and soon she saw the light of a lantern there. Two figures came and stood in the doorway and watched the rain. The lantern light distorted them and made them almost unreal. They talked for a while. One was the old *mozo*; she could not see the other clearly.

They talked for some minutes, looking out at the rain. She was cold and her legs were wet below her slicker. Then the old man turned and went into the barn. For once, she saw the other man clearly. The lantern's light happened to land on him flatly. The man was O'Henry.

Maria turned her pony toward home. She felt a little relieved. O'Henry had probably been in Ensenada and had just returned to the Cerveza. He had come from that direction. She rode at a long trot. The going was muddy and the road dark and the rain ran across it. Rain poured in angry squalls that made her pony almost turn around. And it was a cold rain. Probably it was snowing

on the high peaks south of High Pass.

She was cold when she reached Walnut Creek. The stream, usually dry, was rapid with water, but her pony took it. Suddenly she wanted to be warm. It was still ten miles to home. There was a line-camp up the creek a few rods. There would be a stove there and dried oak for a quick fire. She could make some coffee there and warm up. She turned her pony in that direction.

Now the rain was behind them. She put the pony in the lean-to barn and went into the small cabin. Line-camps were always left open for any cow-puncher or rider to spend the night in. He was only asked, upon leaving, to have the dishes washed and the place as clean as he found it.

She caught the smell of tobacco smoke.

She had closed the door behind her. She thought, Is there a man in here? and that caught at her throat in sudden terror. Her hand on the doorknob trembled. She called, "Who is here?"

There was no answer. She repeated the question. Then she remembered there had been no horse in the barn when she had ridden in. That meant the place was empty except for herself.

She lit a match. The flickering rays showed the lamp. The match went out but not before she saw that she was alone. She crossed the room and lit another match and the lamp took on from there.

She stood still, smelling. Yes, somebody had just been here; he had smoked a cigaret. Who would stop and then ride off into the rain? Why hadn't he spent the night here? Maybe one of Villa's raiders had gone through. Villa scouts were working this range. The *bandido* should be close to Mexicali now, she thought.

That was it. A scout had stopped here, cooked supper—She went to the stove. It was cold. Well, he hadn't cooked anything. Then why had he been here? She put oak twigs in the stove and wadded an old newspaper up and put it in with them. She lit the bunch,

and fire caught. She held the coffee pot under the hang of the roof and filled it with rain water. She came back and put it on the stove. She needed more wood. She went to the woodbox.

She stopped. Something lay on the floor. She picked it up and turned it between her fingers. It was Zona's brooch, formerly owned by their mother.

She understood, then. O'Henry had ridden in through the rain. He had come from this direction. She put the brooch in her jacket pocket. She waited for the coffee to boil, the lamplight dancing from her dark hair. She was frowning a little.

Well, she did not have to spy on them, anyway. She had blundered in on the brooch. Wouldn't the coffee ever boil?

The coffee drove the chill out of her. She nursed her third cup, looking blindly at the lamp. The night had gone far and it was time to go. She washed her cup and dumped the remainder of the coffee out on the wet ground. She washed the pot, using the water that ran from the overhang, and put the pot away. She glanced around the place and found it the same as she left it. There was a pile of straw in the corner. Here the cow-punchers threw their blankets. She saw a mouse sitting on it looking at her.

"Go away," she said.

The mouse ducked into the straw. She went over, intending to kick the straw apart, when she heard the cries of small mice. She has her family there, she thought. She would not disturb them.

The rain was still savage and strong. She rode faster, pushing *Pepito* with her spurs. She did not have pointed star or saw rowels in her spurs. She had had the blacksmith make her spurs, and he had put a peso in each one. They would be blunt against a horse; not sharp. Nor would she ride a horse with a spade bit. She thought them too cruel.

The rain came with a burst, wind pounding it across

the hills. She was wet again and cold. Her pony slid and she pulled him down to a slow trot. He knew the way home; she gave him his head.

Hours later, so it seemed to her, she came to the hacienda. The place was dark and the dogs did not bark, for they slept in the saddle-shed this sort of weather. She rode into the barn where she left her pony untied in a manger munching oats. When he had finished his oats, he would go outside to graze in the storm in the shelter of the oaks and aspens. Or, if he wanted, he could stand in the barn and eat hay the rest of the night.

When she got to her room, her teeth were chattering. She had hung her raincoat in the barn and her riding-habit was wet. She had not wanted to take the raincoat into her room, for that would tell her father, if he saw it, that she had been in the rain. And she didn't want him to know.

She undressed slowly. She hung her clothing over chairs at the foot of her bed so it would be dry in the morning. She did not light the lamp. Rain sounded on the shake-roof and dripped to the ground. She had a feeling of security; this house was old and staunch, and it would turn back the elements.

The blankets were warm to her cold body. She lay and waited for herself to warm. The night was dark and the rain was her only company. She remembered the brooch in her pocket.

She had many thoughts. She was so cold she was not sleepy. Yes, this house would turn back anything; rain, snow, sleet and hail. It had turned back the arrows of angry redskins. But it could not stop love or death.

Sleep took her thoughts.

She awoke late. Her father was knocking at her door. She said, "Papa, I am just dressing," although she was still in bed. She did not want him in her room, for her clothes might not be dry yet.

"Wake up, heavy head. Your sister has been up for two hours."

"Is breakfast ready?"

"*Si*, and the cook is angry."

"She is always angry," said Maria.

Her father's voice was droll. "Most women are that way all the time, child."

She heard his footsteps go down the hall. She found that her riding-habit was still damp. She put on a house-dress and *huaraches* and went down the hall, her heels slapping the floor.

"Must you make so much noise when you walk?" Don Alvarado was in a bad humor. "You sound like a water buffalo in the mud."

She kissed his forehead. "You're an old grouch. I thought you said only women were grouches. Be careful the way you speak to me, or I'll marry and leave home."

"Who would marry you?"

"Oh, *Señor* Garlan, for one. Then One-eyed Carlos, for another."

"Stop with the first man," said her father. "I like him."

Zona was doing some needlework. She looked up from her crocheting. "If he doesn't treat us right, we'll both marry and run away." She was smiling.

Maria felt suddenly lonesome. She had the brooch in her pocket. She gave it to her sister.

"Where did you find that?"

"In the hall this morning."

Zona put it in her pocket. "I must've dropped it sometime last night, I guess. *Gracias, hermana.*"

Maria noticed that her sister's hand, usually strong and capable, trembled as she used her crochet hook.

CHAPTER XV

Sean O'Henry liked the rain. He liked it because it was turbulent; it had no form or limitations. He thought of it hitting the sand out across the mountains, and he thought of the wild flowers that it would bring to the surface to shine and glisten a few days before returning to the desert for another year.

When he left the Walnut Creek line-camp, he sat his horse and watched Zona ride toward her father's hacienda. He thought, Sean, you shouldn't meet that girl, and he knew his mental scoldings were of no use. Nothing could keep them apart. He had promised her one promise.

"One more raid, *linda*, and we go."

"And when will this raid be?"

He listened to the rain on the roof. "Soon," he said. He got to his feet. "Maybe tomorrow night. This rain will help. What man in his right mind—unless he goes to rob—rides the hills when rain runs mad across it?"

"There will not be so much danger for you then. Are you going to get cattle?" He noticed she did not mention *whose* cattle.

He lied. "Horses, Zona."

They went outside and got their horses and went into wet saddles. Zona turned her horse and rode off, and he watched her go. A million thoughts ran through him, and one stood out. She was his woman. That was enough for any man. Even an Irishman, he thought, and smiled.

He neck-reined his horse and pushed toward the Beer Bottle. He rode as fast as the trail and the weather

would permit. He was restless and pushed by many thoughts; he was disgusted with himself. Not for letting Zona fall in love with him, but for the way he treated her. He wondered if there was a bit of manhood in him. He stole her father's cattle; she knew it, too. They were both rather low, and he had said it that night. One raid; no more. One raid, and then *America del Sur*.

But they would not sneak away. He was sure of that now. He would go with her to Don Alvarado, and he would tell her father before they boarded the boat at Ensenada.

He had already bought tickets on the boat. It would be a lumber boat, coming down from Seattle, and it would stop for a minute, if a launch hailed it out in the channel. It was bound around the Horn for Buenos Aires.

He rode into the barn. The *mozo* asked, "*Madre de Dios*, what do you do out on this mad night? No man in his right mind—"

"*Estoy loco*. I'm crazy." Sean O'Henry cocked his head as though listening. The old man stared at him. "Hear those wolves howling in the distance? Hear them through the rain and storm?"

"I don't hear no wolves."

"Can't you hear them? Banshee wolves, running the mountains. Their teeth glisten and saliva drops from their fangs!" He was rocking with quick laughter. The old man looked at him suspiciously and sniffed.

"You been drinking odorless whiskey?"

The Irishman stood silent while the old man took the leather from his horse. The hostler had a bottle and they drank, with O'Henry drinking long.

"Want some of that for tomorrow," said the old man.

The rider put down the bottle. "Sure weak stuff." He blew with pursed lips. "Got a match? See if my breath won't catch on fire."

"Get out in the rain and cool off."

They stood and talked, and finally O'Henry went to

the house. He was pulling off his boots when Mack Colton came in. "There's a Villa man," said the Beer Bottle primero. "He came in a couple of hours ago. Where you been?"

"Out spotting cattle. The rain caught me."

Colton was smiling. "Where are they?"

"Over on Piñon Mesa."

Colton said, "Villa's taking Mexicali. Sure, the *rurales* are putting up some fight; not much though. Not enough of them. Kosterlitsky ran out of Juarez into the States, and the *rurales* are done."

"Villa's got Baja California, then." O'Henry placed his boots upside down so the water could drain out of them. "How will he treat Don Alvarado and Garlan?"

Colton lifted his thick shoulders. "From what I've heard, Don Alvarado is clear—he's been good to his peons. Garlan is raising horses. Villa will need plenty of horses, even three years from now. I think he'll like Garlan, unless Garlan crosses him."

O'Henry hung his shirt across the back of a chair. "Garlan's too smart for that, Mack. He's got fists, sure, but he's got plenty between the horns. And it isn't just hot air."

"Garlan *might* cross him, though."

O'Henry hung his wet levis across another chair. He knew what Colton meant; Colton might see a chance to fix things, make Villa believe that Ed Garlan was against him. Well, let him do it. He'd be gone by then, with Zona. Still, a man had to keep up appearances; no use letting Colton know he'd drift soon.

O'Henry slid between the blankets.

"You want to talk with this Villa man?" asked Colton.

The Irishman had his last cigaret going. He funnelled out twin streaks of smoke. "T'hell with that border raider. I'm in bed. He wants cattle. All right; we'll deliver them. He wants cattle, not to look at my homely mug."

“You’re blunt, Sean.”

O’Henry turned his back to Colton. The Beer Bottle primero got to his feet and walked out. O’Henry heard the door close. He rolled over, held his flat hand upright over the lamp chimney, and blew hard. The palm reflected the wind downward and the lamp went out. The Irishman rolled over again.

Things had played the way he had wanted. Tomorrow night and riders would move through the dark and cattle would run east into the desert. Tomorrow night and the last raid, tomorrow night and cattle on the move. Then he’d see Don Alvarado. He’d talk to him as a man talks to another, and they’d settle this. That made him feel better. He closed his eyes and slept.

When morning came, he ate a late breakfast. The forenoon was clear, and he rode to Piñon Mesa. There was no need to check Zona’s word. She had said there were cattle there, and cattle would be there. He just wanted to get away from the Beer Bottle spread. Riders sat around the bunkhouse and gambled and quarreled, and tobacco smoke hung in the air. He wanted none of that.

The trail was clear ahead of him. But the toughest bends, the roughest parts, were still to be traversed. But he would meet them when he came to them. There was no use in pulling at the bit. Only a raw, unbroken horse did that. No use wasting nerves and energy thinking about something.

He made a line-camp and cooked dinner there. He dozed on the bunk, and the sound of rain pulled him out of a dim sleep. Rain was running off the roof. He lay and listened to it. His horse was in shelter in the barn.

He was restless, but he held that. He found an old magazine and read it through. Some of the stories were good; some bad. He dozed off again. There was no use returning to the Beer Bottle. The riders would still be playing cards and grousing and the usual hooraw would be in order. Not that he objected to horseplay. Usually

he was the leader in the rough cowboy sports. But today he wanted to stay close to himself.

Once the rain fell back. He got his bronc and saddled and rode toward camp. He did not know that Don Alvarado was also in this rain. That, even as he rode, the old don was high above him, hidden in the pines on the slope.

Don Alvarado knew he losing cattle. Although he ran immense herds, he still could tell that, little by little, his stock was being whittled down. He had a hunch that runners were operating ahead of Villa's army. These runners would be on the outlook for beef. They were free-lancers, small type cow thieves. They would steal a few head—about fifty at a time—enough for one man to handle easily on a dark night. But he had lost too many to blame them on runners. He had lost more head than he cared to admit.

One time, a few weeks before, he had seen one of his cows, a brockle-faced roan, grazing with a small herd. The next day, the herd and the roan were gone. He had thought they had doubled back into the hills, but he had not found them. He had given his riders orders to watch for the stock and especially the roan, but the cow had never been seen again.

The day before, he had seen Sean O'Henry and another Beer Bottle rider on a rim, looking across the country with fieldglasses.

Now he had definitely arrived at the conclusion that Beer Bottle men were stealing his stock. Not that he had ever caught them hazing his steers off his range. But he had certain points in his favor; he had seen Colton on his range and then cattle had disappeared; and now O'Henry was scouting his grass.

He knew that the Bar S men were not stealing his cattle. His cattle had been disappearing long before the Bar S came. Once he had hinted to Colton that he thought he had lost some head of stock. Colton had grinned and said he must have been wrong. Anyway, he

said he wasn't losing cattle; if rustlers were working this range, he'd lose some too. That stood to reason.

Colton was tough. The old don was well aware of that. He had watched Colton at times when the man did not know he was being watched. He had seen the big *renegado's* eyes harden and read the terrible hardness of the man.

And he knew, too, that sooner or later, Colton and Ed Garlan would clash. And the next time, it would be more than a fist fight. Because of Colton's greed and nature, there was no place for Garlan and his riders on this range. Don Alvarado hoped that Garlan would win.

A number of times he had cut sign of cattle moving off his range. He had followed this sign and usually lost it in some stream or river or out on the desert where the sand was whipped by the wind, thereby covering all tracks. He had not mentioned this to either Maria or Zona. No need, he reasoned, to worry them. But he had taken to carrying a rifle on his saddle and he always had an extra box of short-gun and rifle cartridges in his saddle-bags.

Unknown to Ed Garlan, the don had also watched the Bar S. Don Alvarado was taking no chances. Every man on this range was under his suspicion. But he soon cleared the Garlan ranch of any doubt. Garlan was on this range to stay, unless Colton drove him out. And Colton would use a bullet to do that job with. And a bullet has a way of retaliating when another man can also handle a gun.

Two and two made four . . . Sean O'Henry had been on Piñon Mesa and there were Alvarado cattle there. That could mean a raid. Don Alvarado was miserable and cold, and the rain beat against him. It hit his slicker and that turned it, but the cold come through the oilskin and went into his bones. He watched Sean O'Henry ride into the distance.

Don Alvarado sat his saddle and stroked his spade beard slowly. Back of his iron gray brows his dark eyes were thoughtful. Thoughts were forming in him, group-

ing and shifting, building a dim, uncertain plan. Why not stake out riders and watch the Piñon Mesa herd?

Some of his choice steers were in that region. They were good beef and would bring good prices at the selling-pens in Mexicali and Tia Juana. Logic told him that if thieves did strike, the herd would be one of the best of his to steal. Besides, it was handy to the desert; it was also far from his hacienda.

But his men were not gunfighters. Most of them were elderly men; they had been with him for years. Some even had families that lived in Alvarado adobes on various parts of the grant, where they were stationed to watch over cattle. A few of them, of course, were young and adventuresome; they would look forward to such a night venture as this. The don mentally counted these and found he had only three others besides himself. He smiled wryly. He was not adventuresome. When night came, he wanted to go to bed; he didn't want to ride a windy, rainy range. But the venture would be worth the price and something might come out of it.

Then he remembered the crew at the Bar S. All single men and riders who had shaped their destinies, and the contours of their legs, to the barrel of a bronc. They would help him, he felt sure. He rode toward the *rancho* on Hacienda Creek. He could not ride fast; the ground was too wet, too slippery. The day was late when he reached the hills south of the ranch. Below him men moved in the dim, uncertain light. He rode down the slope, once lifting his horse by his reins when the animal slipped.

Although it was raining, men were working on the ruined hacienda. Garlan looked up. "Villa has taken Mexicali," he said. "He is going against Tecate with his men."

"How do you know?"

"A rider just went through, carrying the word south. They just got it over the railroad telegraph in Tecate. Villa has his men and guns loaded and is coming in by

flatcar. Some are riding across the desert."

"There will not be much trouble in Tecate," said Don Alvarado slowly. "The big fight will be in Tia Juana."

"We'll have chuck soon," said Garlan. "Light down and have a bite with us?" He hollered, "Hey Pedro, put the don's bronc away, will you?"

Pedro Malone shrugged. "That would do no good," he said. "The bam, she has no roof. I could tie him under a big oak tree, though."

CHAPTER XVI

The mares left camp at a high mad lope, with Hightail Smith hitting them with the free end of the reins. Skinny Marsh hung to the spring seat, bouncing and jouncing as the wagon lurched toward Tecate.

Very few wagons went over this road. Therefore one trail was worn smooth from saddle-horses; the other, hardly ever traveled, was rough and bumpy. Skinny was on the side where the wheel traveled over the bumps. Once the wagon sagged in a badger hole, and the team snapped the wheels out, the first wheel hitting the hole hard, the back wheel hitting it harder.

Skinny lurched ahead, grabbed himself. He braced his feet against the head-gate, boots jammed hard for balance. He swore in Mexican and American.

"What's the matter?" growled Hightail Smith.

"Take it easy!"

Hightail grinned and lashed the team harder. They ran even faster. "They named me 'Hightail' 'cause I could hightail a team faster'n any man on a construction job, over on the other side of the Imperial Valley. I'm just living up to my name. How does this pace set with you, Skinny?"

"The pace sets all right," said Skinny. He grabbed another hand-hold on the seat's edge. "The trouble is with me—I don't set so well. I figured you'd bust the journals off'n these wheels back yonder when you hit that badger hole!"

"These axles are strong. Checked them before I left."

The mares seemed to gain speed and strength. Skinny saw the prairie dog hole coming. The fat man did two things at once. He braced his boots and grabbed with his right hand for the seat and reached wildy for the reins with the other, hoping to pull them out of Hightail's grip. As it was, his plan would have worked, had he reached the reins.

But Hightail pulled the reins sharply to one side. Skinny Marsh missed; the wagon wheels on his side hit the hole. Skinny lost his grip and his balance. He rolled out and landed on the gravel. He hit the ground sitting down. The last thing he heard when he left the wagon was, "Hey, Skinny, stick aroun' —!"

Hightail swung the wagon in a wide circle and came back to where Skinny stood, brushing the sand from his pants. Hightail stopped the team and started to laugh. The mares, for some reason, stood silent. The next thing Hightail Smith knew, he was down on the ground, with Skinny Marsh sitting on him. He looked up at Skinny's huge fist poised over his face and ready to descend.

"Get off me! You're heavy as a moose!"

"I'll *moose* you!" panted Skinny. "You going to be good!"

"Why, I ain't done nothin' yet! I —"

"Answer me!"

Anger flushed Hightail's long face. He was getting his knees braced, ready to push Skinny off, when the mares started to move. "Grab 'em!" he hollered.

The wagon's wheels turned. Skinny had to leave Hightail to hang onto the reins. He caught them just as the mares really got under way. He stuck his high heels into the sand and held them, jerking them to a rearing halt. He was grinning, his temper gone.

"Get up on the seat," he said to Hightail.

Hightail was grinning, too. "All right, *papa*," he said.

He climbed up into the driver's side and held out his

hands for the reins. But Skinny didn't hand them to him. He told him to move over and do it pronto. Hightail said, "Can you drive a team?" an irony.

"Move over."

Holding the reins tight, Skinny put a boot on the off hub, and went up into the seat. He settled his heaviness on the springs, sending them almost flat. He adjusted his foot on the brake and loosened the lines a little. "Giddap, blast you!"

The mares had had their run. The fat man also held them under a tight rein. They started off at a long trot; Skinny held them down a little. Hightail Smith spat tobacco juice on a sandstone rock.

"Nice weather," he said.

Skinny squinted at the sky. It'll rain," he said gloomily.

They went for a quarter-mile or so. The mares, recognizing that their play-day was over, settled down and became good horses. Hightail kept glancing at Skinny. "There's a rock ahead," he would say. "Be careful. Swing to the right. Now, that's it. A little more —"

"I'm driving this team."

"You're doing a poor job."

Skinny had his humor back. He shifted the subject for safety's sake. "The boss was sort of worried about them horse-tracks he saw go out into the desert. Sure as I'm a pound in weight, them horses have been stolen. Now who do you figure got off with them?"

"Who else would it be but Colton and his crew?"

Skinny swung the team around a rock.

"You did all right dodging that one," said Hightail.

Skinny overlooked that remark. "Looks to me like we'll have to have a showdown with this Colton spread, Hightail. Yes, sir, it sure does."

"Garlan's an odd fellow," said Hightail reflectively. "Sometimes he seems to take an awful lot off'n a man; other times, he flares right up. But he's always sure of his ground before he hits, and then he hits hard. But he's

been too easy on Colton, I'd say."

"He's got something up his sleeve. When the time comes, we'll hit. Can't be too soon for me, either."

Their banter was light and easy, but underneath it was serious. Both knew how that showdown would be staged; with guns and smoke. The rain came in and hit them. They pulled on slickers and hunched over and let the rain hit them. They met a rider coming out of Tecate, about ten miles south of town. The man rode by fast in the rain.

"That gent looked like a Beer Bottle hand to me," said Skinny.

Hightail grunted. "Rode a Beer Bottle horse." Rain went down his neck and he strapped his slicker tighter, cursing in a monotone. "Guess we'll have a month or two of this, huh?"

"So they tell me."

"That's the trouble with California and this country. They get plenty of rain, but it all comes at once. Now if was just scattered around over the year, with each month getting a little rain, instead of it all coming at once—"

"You do something about it."

They drove in silence the rest of the way. They clattered across a wooden bridge that had turbulent water running under it. The rain ran with an angry hiss across the soil. Then it would stop as suddenly as it started. It seemed to be saving energy to pelt them again.

"Wish I had a drink," said Skinny.

They came into town finally and Skinny stopped the team into town finally and Skinny stopped the team at the livery barn. They helped unhitch and then led the broncs inside. The hostler had hay and two stalls, and they put the mares into these. He also had a drink of tequila. It was a vile brew; yet it was hot.

They decided to stay in town overnight. They could not make the long trip back because of the mud and the tired condition of the mares. They got rooms at the

Casa Alvarez and then went to the *Cantina Americano*. A Mexican was drinking alone at the bar with Katie serving him. Skinny introduced himself and Hightail Smith to the red-haired girl. The Mexican glared at him through bloodshot eyes.

Hightail ordered mescal and Skinny took whiskey. He admired Katie's pretty back as she reached up for the whiskey bottle. Hightail jabbed an elbow in his partner's ribs. He shook his head in make-believe disgust. The Mexican still glared at the fat man.

Hightail said, "To the rain," and drank. Skinny just drank and said nothing. He caught the Mexican looking at him.

"You know me?" asked Skinny.

The Mexican just looked.

Skinny refilled his glass. He drank again. Katie leaned across the bar and was pretty close to him. Hightail drank again, too. Again, Skinny caught the Mexican's steady gaze.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked Katie.

"He gets so much mescal, and he gets an idea he can put an evil eye on a man. He only does it when he's drunk. He never gets mean or quarrelsome; he just fixes his stare on somebody he dislikes. Once or twice he did it to me because I wouldn't give him any credit."

"The eye work?" asked Hightail.

"Not that I know of."

Skinny looked at the Mexican. Their gazes locked and held. The fat man moved close to the dark man, their eyes still locked. "Look hard," he said, "because soon you'll be looking some other place."

"What you mean, *señor*?"

Skinny grinned, eyes still locked with the Mexican's. "Just this." He suddenly picked the smaller man up. Holding him high, he carried the kicking, hollering hombre to the door. He stepped outside. He pushed, and the man sailed and landed out in the sticky street mud. Skinny turned and went back inside.

"Got a little rain on me," he said, brushing one wide shoulder.

Katie walked to the window. "He's getting up. He's shaking his fist at the saloon. He's trying to get mud out of his ear. Now he's limping down the street." She giggled. "He's all mud and wet."

Skinny smiled. The whiskey was hitting him. He remembered that he was hungry. He ordered ham and eggs, and Katie called the order to the cook. Hightail ordered too. Katie took a drink.

"How do you like the new ranch?" she asked.

Skinny answered. "The grass is good and so is the range. Of course, you know that Colton and his gang blew up the buildings, don't you?"

"I heard of that. Are you sure it was Beer Bottle work?"

The whiskey was working on Skinny. "We're danged sure, Miss Katie. And when we move against the Beer Bottle, there'll be glass flying! And that won't be long now, I reckon."

Hightail poured more mescal.

Katie was scowling, looking out the window. The cook called and she went in after their orders. They all took a table and sat down, Katie with them. She had a whiskey bottle and a glass for herself.

The place was warm and clean. Both Hightail and Skinny felt the radiance and heat of their drinks. Their clothing was drying out. The memory of the long drive into Tecate faded back before the pressure of good food and good drink. Skinny talked a little too much. He told about the missing herd and how it had gone into the desert.

"Who do you figure stole your horses?" asked Katie.

Skinny said, "Who do you think, miss? Who else could it be but Colton?"

"That's a serious charge."

Skinny said he didn't care either way. They ate and drank and then went to their rooms where they got a fire

going in the heater. They had brought a bottle with them. Katie watched them go down the muddy street.

Her eyes were thoughtful.

After some time, she went back into the kitchen. She asked the cook how much wages she had coming. The cook told her she was a day ahead of time; tomorrow was pay-day. Katie smiled and rubbed her hand against her red hair.

"I'm selling out," she said.

The cook stared. "Who to?"

"Juan Gilzon wants to buy the *cantina*. He was in yesterday asking me if I wanted to sell. I knew you wouldn't want to work for him."

"I won't work for him."

The cook names the amount she had coming. Katie paid her from the cash register and the cook left. The girl packed her belongings in an hour. She sent a *muchacho* to Juan Gilzon, who also owned a *tienda*, a store. The short fat Mexican was puffing from the rain and the mud.

"You want to see me, *señorita*?"

"You offered me a price yesterday for my *cantina*. I'll take it today."

The man's eyes became shrewd. "But today, I would not give as much as yesterday. Today I would give—"

"Get out," said Katie.

Juan Gilzon was silent. Katie went on with her packing. "You leave?" asked Gilzon. "I pay you—"

Katie straightened. "You heard me. Pay what you offered me yesterday or get out of here."

Gilzon sighed. "All right, I pay. I write check."

"You'll pay cash. Gold."

"All right."

The heavy man left. Katie looked around the room for the last time. She had lived here for some years. Now she found herself loath to leave. She disregarded that feeling with anger. Trouble would start here between the Bar S and the Beer Bottle. Trouble that might

drag her into it.

Villa? Sure, she worked for his cause. But what did that mean? Nothing. When Villa got into power who knew how he would act? Would he remember past favors, old courtesies? Maybe. And maybe not.

"Here is the gold," said Gilzon.

"Count it."

He put the coins on the table and she counted them. She took the bag and got a piece of paper and scrawled a bill of sale, writing it both in American and Mexican. Gilzon left.

She gave the room a last glance. She had sent her gold out—the money she had gotten from Beer Bottle raids—and she had only the money Gilzon had paid her. She got her raincoat and went outside, leaving the door open. Let Gilzon shut it when he came. Carrying her suitcase, she walked the quarter-mile through the ankle-deep mud to the Border.

She merely nodded at Mexican officials. They had no business with her. She crossed through the Gate and went into Tom Bishop's office. He was working on some papers and looked up and said hello.

"Going to visit in the States for a while, Katie?"

Katie stood and looked out the window and down into the valley where Tecate lay in the mist. "No," she said, "I'm on this side of the Line for good. I'm an American citizen, you know."

"Quitting Tecate, huh?"

Katie nodded slowly.

CHAPTER XVII

With Estaban in charge, construction work started in earnest at the Bar S. When morning came, men climbed out of water-soaked tarps and huddled around a fire built in the shelter of an old wall. There were only five of them: Kid Harris, Pedro Malone, the two Estabans, and Ed Garlan.

"Lucky stiff's, Skinny and Hightail." Kid Harris cupped his coffee cup in his hands to get some warmth. "Bet they slept in a soft bed last night with no rain to keep them company."

"And probably a bottle on the table," finished Pedro Malone.

Estaban was already thinking of the work ahead. "First we will have to get a roof on the mess hall," he said. "Then we can use that for living quarters and cooking quarters. This rain will continue for two months, maybe. Well, it is the same across the Border in California."

Garlan made the Mexican boss of the construction work. He and Pedro and Kid Harris saddled stout horses and rode to the ridge where the piñons grew. Estaban had brought two axes from Ensenada. He selected some of the taller pines and marked them as being fit for ceiling beams.

"They will do the job for now," he told Garlan. "Later, when we get on the other buildings, you will want stronger and better beams. The lumber-yard in Ensenada will have some fir and long pine from the States in a week or so, and we will haul out some of

them for the other buildings. But now, to get a roof, we must use these pine, although they are not as straight as we would want."

Pedro went to work with an axe, cutting down the trees marked by Estaban. The carpenter also fell to chopping timber. Kid Harris and Garlan got *lassos* on the fallen trees and dragged them down the slope to the hacienda where young Estaban was trimming the branches from them.

The ground was wet and slippery and therefore the trees were easier to drag, although a horse did not get as good a footing as when the soil was dry. They were pulling the trees down-hill, too: that made it easier on man and horse.

They got four logs down by the building and Ed Garlan took an axe to help young Estaban peel the logs. Kid Harris rode back up the slope for another log. The rain came and went and the men worked on. Young Estaban was good with an axe, peeling a log much faster than Garlan. But Garlan was catching on. Kid Harris rode back and forth, dragging logs down; up on the slope, the ring of axes was heard.

"This is a good log," said the youth, axe poised.

They worked that way all morning, with the older Estaban and Pedro felling beams, with Harris dragging them down, and with Garlan and the younger Estaban peeling them. Garlan and the young man even placed a few beams across from wall to wall, letting them fall into niches formerly occupied by the original spans. One end was too large, but they trimmed it and it slid into place.

They put tarps across from beam to beam and built a fire in the old cookstove that had, by some miracle, escaped being completely demolished. The tarps kept most of the rain off except where they joined, and here the rain solemnly dripped to the burned out floor. But it was some form of shelter, and the stove got hot. Garlan made hot cakes and cooked some bacon, even though it

was dinner instead of breakfast. He also warmed up some canned beans and made some biscuits. Kid Harris juggled a biscuit. "Feels like you got ground up lead for baking powder," he ventured.

"Eat it and be glad you got it," growled Ed Garlan.

They rested a little, backs against the wall, the stove's heat good, and they smoked cigarets. But the older Estaban was restless. His sharp eyes kept roaming around the building, his plans for construction forming in his mind. Garlan saw that he liked this type of work; that it was a challenge to him and his skill. And, seeing that, he knew he would get a good job of reconstruction of the *rancho's* buildings.

He kept remembering Don Alvarado's story of Sean O'Henry riding Piñon Mesa, and of the fat Alvarado steers that grazed there. The don was playing a wild hunch, but Garlan had seen more than one wild hunch play out successfully and repay its owner. Now he told his two riders that, come dark, they would drift out to Walnut Creek, where they would meet the Alvarado men.

Kid Harris rubbed his whiskered jaw. "Might work, Ed." He added, "I sure hope so."

Garlan knew what the lanky rider meant. This weight, this pressure, was wearing them down, was bearing down on all of them. The two Estabans were silent. They were carpenters, the older said; they were not gunfighters.

Garlan smiled. "We didn't expect you to sling a gun, men."

Pedro Malone spoke. "Hope Skinny and Hightail are back by then. We'll need them, I figure."

"They should be in this afternoon," said Garlan.

The men started to work again. Enough piñons had been cut for some time, according to the older Estaban, so Kid Harris got an axe and he and Pedro started skinning the bark from the poles. The two Estabans put more of them into place and also started cutting the rafters. They would put sheeting over this and use straw

for a roof until either tile or shakes could be obtained in sufficient numbers to make a substantial roof.

Garlan asked where they would get the straw. According to Estaban senior, wild grass would grow fast; in a week or so, the grass would be tall along the creek, and they would pull it, mat it into bunches, and cover the sheeting, which would be one by twelves placed with six inches between them.

"You do as you think best," said Garlan.

He had seen pictures of such roofs, usually in some geography when he had been a kid in school. He had also seen a few houses in Tecate with red roofs. There was little he could do here; four men could handle this job as well as five. He got a sorrel and put a saddle on him and rode out on his range.

He was nervous inside. Would Don Alvarado's plan work? Secretly he hoped it would prove successful. This waiting, this planning, was getting tiresome; it was eating into his good nature. So far, each time he had moved against Colton, he had hit a blank wall. Something had to give soon.

The rain left suddenly and the sun swept out, shooting light across the hills and the wet brush. He got a ridge and saw the road that led north to Tecate. No rigs moved along it.

Skinny and Hightail would have a tough time hauling lumber over that wicked, slippery road. But they would not reach the *rancho* until late afternoon. They would have to load the lumber and haul it almost forty miles. And that was a big distance in weather like this and on such a road.

Garlan swung his horse riding toward the Alvarado *rancho*. He came out of the *mesquite*, water dripping from him and his horse and hit a trail. He followed this for a few miles. He was still on Bar S grass. Then the trail took a turn and he swung west, riding some unseen hunch. He huddled an hour later and watched the Beer Bottle yard below him through glasses.

Rain came in again, sweeping across this land. No

men moved down there, but horses were in the horse-pasture. Even as Garlan watched, the jingler came out and circled the broncs, hazing them into the barn. Garlan counted the horses and found out there were nine of them. Would nine riders leave the Beer Bottle at dusk and head for Piñon Mesa?

Surely something was afoot. Otherwise, why would the horse-wrangler take in these saddle-broncs? Surely somebody was going to ride them. But when? Maybe he was taking them into the barn to feed them for tomorrow's saddle work.

While he was watching, a rider came along the road that led to Ensenada. He rode into the yard and left his horse and walked to the hacienda. About ten minutes later, he came out, a man accompanying him. This man wore a yellow slicker, and he and the man stood by the man's horse and talked for a few minutes, despite the rain. Garlan's glasses told him that the man in the slicker was Sean O'Henry. But the other man was a stranger to him.

The stranger got on his horse and rode back toward Ensenada, twenty miles or so distant. Garlan went to his bronc and found stirrup and put the horse down toward the trail. He was waiting, horse blocking the trail, when the rider came along. He was a small, dark-skinned man with thick lips that bespoke of Negroid blood.

"*Como esta?*" he asked hurriedly.

Garlan saw that he was surprised, and he hardly blamed him. To come around a bend and find a stranger blocking the path on a rain-swept day —

"Who are you?" he asked.

The man gathered himself. "I come from Ensenada. I work for the Wilson Steamship Line."

"You went to the Beer Bottle *rancho*."

Dark eyes studied him. "How did you know?"

Garlan said sharply, "I know. That's enough. What did you do there?"

"I had a message for *Señor* O'Henry."

"What was its nature?"

"That, *señor*, is our business."

Garlan had his .45 out. He was playing every straw, every whim. Something might pay off. "That's my business, too." He cocked the gun.

The man had nerve. He was silent for some time. He said, "I do not think it will violate my trust if I tell. *Señor* O'Henry's boat is ahead of time; tonight it will be in the channel, and our launch will be ready to take him out. As I said, the boat came ahead of our schedule."

"Where is it going?"

"*America del Sur*."

"How many tickets did O'Henry buy?"

"*Dos*, I believe. Two. I could not say for sure."

Garlan holstered his weapon. "I want to thank you, *señor*," he said seriously. "I thought you had information I needed. You had none. Your trust is secure."

The man murmured, "*Gracias*," wiped his forehead with his hand, running the palm under the rain-helmet. "Now I ride for town."

Garlan watched him ride away. Then he turned and rode toward the Alvarado *rancho*.

Maria, the *mozo* said, was in her room, he thought. Don Alvarado saw him and came to the porch and called. He had wine in a glass and he wanted Garlan into the living-room. The Bar S owner glanced longingly at the warm fire in the rock fireplace and said he wanted to see Maria.

"She is in her room, I believe."

They went down the hall. Don Alvarado knocked on a door and said, "Maria, you have company." He looked at Garlan's wet slicker. "He is as wet as a cow that has swum *el río*."

Maria's eyebrows rose. "You will come in, *Señor* Garlan?"

"I want to talk to you for a moment or two."

Don Alvarado excused himself, and went back to the living-room. Garlan did not enter the room. Standing in the hall, he told Maria about the man from the steamship company. "I thought you would like to know, Maria."

Maria bit her bottom lip. "That means that he will come for Zona soon." Garlan saw the lip tremble. There was a solemn chore ahead of this girl, but he could not help her. He was almost a stranger to this family. He did not ask what she intended to do. That was not his business. He had no right to intrude unless she asked him to. And she did not ask.

He went back to the big living-room where he had a small glass of wine with the don. He was impatient, restless. He could not stay. He got his bronc again and rode out. He headed north toward the Bar S. He swung wide of the hacienda. He remembered Don Alvarado's words: "*We will meet on Walnut Creek, your men and mine. From there we will ride to Piñon Mesa.*" This range was stirring with harsh undertones planted on it by man and his scheming and greed.

He cut the Tecate road, read it, saw that Skinny and Hightail had not driven past. He frowned and wondered, "Where are they? We need them tonight." He rode the trail with the late afternoon rain smart against him. He remembered the rider he had seen leave the Beer Bottle when he had ridden north from the Alvarado *rancho*. That rider had been Sean O'Henry and he had been going toward the Alvarado spread.

Garlan had held his horse in the deep brush and watched the man below. He knew he was seeing Sean O'Henry for the last time. He felt no antipathy toward the man. His philosophy had little room for hate. He felt, rather, a pity toward this man; he had almost wrecked his life, and now his love for Zona Alvarado was straightening him out, taking him away from his birthplace. O'Henry had a rough afternoon ahead.

He came out of the hills; ahead of him, lurched to one

side, was a wagon loaded with lumber. Skinny and Hightail were unloading the lumber.

Skinny scowled and swore. "Damn' little bridge went out under us. Look at those uprights, Ed."

Garlan looked at the four by four posts. They had been sawed more than half way through. When the wagon had gone over, they had snapped and shoved the lumber into the muddy draw.

"Sawed off," said Garlan slowly.

Hightail grinned, his face dark with mud. "We met a Beer Bottle rider on the road when we went in. He's sawed these timbers, just to dump us in the ditch. He might've got a saw from some local Mexican woodcutter."

"Somebody sure sawed then," said Skinny.

"We got to get to camp." Garlan came down. "Looks to me there's only one thing to do: that's unload this lumber enough so the wagon can be pulled back in on the road. Then we tote the lumber through the mud and load it again."

Skinny said, "I could cut Colton's throat for this, Ed."

"Save that, Skinny, for tonight."

They unloaded almost all the lumber before the tired mares could pull the wagon back on the road. The team was not used to a steady pull and the mares did not work together; they see-sawed and jerked but got the wagon back on the road again. Then came the job of loading the lumber. They carried planks and two-by-fours and nail-kegs and the spools of barbedwire through the mud and reloaded the wagon. The drizzle had turned into rain and the afternoon into dusk before they had the wagon rolling again.

Skinny got on the seat, heavy with mud, and took the lines. The mares had had a rest and they took up the collar again. The wagon lurched ahead and Hightail caught on the end. Ed Garlan loped beside it and holloed, "We'll see you in camp in an hour, huh?"

“Hope so,” yelled Skinny.

CHAPTER XVIII

After Ed Garlan had left, Maria Alvarado went back into her room. She stood at the window and looked out at the rain but she did not see it. She could hear Garlan talking with her father in the living-room. She heard him leave and saw him get on his horse. He turned the bronc and rode north at a lope.

She watched him until he was out of sight. That was not a long distance: the wind and rain came in and took him from her vision. She had expected this moment for some months. But she had not expected it to come so suddenly.

Circumstance was moving fast across this grass, piling up and taking significance. The peak was coming; the crisis was ahead. After that, there would be a lull, a period of rest. Grass would grow and cattle would graze and mares would whinny to their new colts. But that would all be afterwards.

She went into the hall and knocked on Zona's door. The girl was crocheting, her needle working fast. Maria closed the door and stood against it. She let some time pass. Zona looked up, wondering. Maria sought for a way to open the conversation. Finally she found it.

"You still have your brooch? You have not lost it again?"

Zona looked up. "Yes I have it. Why do you ask?"

"I thought perhaps you lost it on Walnut Creek again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I found the brooch there, Zona. Please, let's get to this. I know you meet Sean O'Henry. I know you love

him."

Zona looked at her. "Does father know?"

Maria shook her head.

"How did you find out? And when?"

"I did not mean to pry into your affairs, to spy. But I found your room empty a few times, and I wondered. Then—" She spread her fingers suggestively. She leaned back against the door. "Do you love him?"

"Yes, I love him. I am going with him."

Maria said, "He comes for you at this minute, *muchachita*. The boat is coming tonight. You will leave tonight."

"How do you know?"

"*Señor* Garlan stopped the man who came to tell Sean. I had to have somebody to share my troubles, so I told *Señor* Garlan. When he heard Sean was leaving, he came to tell me. He was just here."

"I saw him ride away." Zona got to her feet. Her needlework dropped to the floor. She put her arms around Maria and hugged her. "What should I do?" She answered the question herself. "I am going to tell Father now."

Maria shook her head slowly.

Zona paused, "Why not?"

Maria said, "I will tell him."

Zona said, "*Gracias, hermana*," and kissed her. She sat down and put her head in her hands. "He will be hurt, my father. And I love him."

Maria went outside and went down the hall. Don Alvarado was reading in the big chair. He looked up. "You are pale," he said. "You will drink with me?"

Maria poured into the glass.

"Too much for you," said her father.

"Not enough." She put lightness in her words. She drank a little; the wine was good. She drank some more.

"You have something bothering you?" he asked.

She said, "You know me too well."

"You are my daughter," he said. "You are a little

hell-cat." He was smiling at her. She kissed his forehead.

"What would Mother say if she were here to hear you call me such names?"

"She'd say I was correct."

Maria sat on his lap, her arms around his neck. She laid her head on his shoulder, her hair spilling across him. She looked like a big child, a sleepy child. She got her mouth close to his ear and whispered.

"Daddy, the Book says that when you grow old enough, you leave your father and mother—you leave your home—and you go with a man that is almost a stranger to you, and you make your own home."

"*Si*, the Good Book says that." He chuckled. "I see through it all, now. You are in love with Ed Garlan. He works fast, that man. He works almost as fast as when I and your mother married—I had known her three days and it seemed like forever. *Si*, I like him."

"You once told us—oh, you told us many times—that when the time came that we took husbands, you would be satisfied with our choices?"

He frowned. "*Si*."

"It is not for me I speak," she whispered. "It is for Zona."

"Zona?"

"Yes. She is in love with Sean O'Henry."

She felt a stiffness touch him, then leave. He was quiet, breathing heavily. "He is a *renegado*, a Border jumper. The law does not want him, but he rides close to the edge. Are you sure of this?"

"Yes."

"Zona told you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't she come and tell me?"

"I asked her not to. I made her let me tell you. She goes with him today. Their boat comes into the Channel off Ensenada at dark. *Señor* Garlan just told me." She told him the rest. The tension had left him and she was

glad. The shock had passed and he was normal again.

"Maybe he will not come for her? Maybe this is just a passing whim for him?"

"He will come."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am. He loves her. She loves him. He will come. He has bought two tickets to *America del Sur*."

"I will go see her. Come with me?"

Maria hugged him. "You're grand, Papa."

They went down the hall. Zona was deep in her chair, small and without form. She did not look up. She was crying a little, crying softly. Maria had tears in her eyes but she made her voice natural.

"Company, Zona."

The girl looked up. "Daddy," she said.

Don Alvarado went to her. He knelt beside her and put his arms around her and lifted her face and kissed her. "Maria has told me," he said. "Why didn't you come to me and tell me?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of whom? Me?"

"No, I was afraid of myself. I was afraid for him, for myself, for what we had."

"You are going to South America?"

"Yes. What chance has he here? He has some money, enough to buy a *rancho*. He has to leave. I am going with him. For weeks I have packed my things, taking only what I need. Each summer I will come up and spend weeks with you and Maria. I promise you that, Daddy."

He was silent.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No."

"Are you dissatisfied?"

"Yes."

"Because I am to marry an *Americano* whose record is not too clean?"

"No. You are a woman. You know your mind and

heart. I am sorry because you are leaving. I shall miss you much. But I shall not intrude upon your life. I love you too much to do that. Now go on with your packing. I want to be ready when O'Henry comes."

"What will you do?"

The don smiled. "He'll be surprised. But it will be a welcome surprise, I think. Now, Maria you help your sister."

He went to the hall and got his raincoat. He put it on and went to the barn. He told the old *mozo* to hook their best team to the springwagon, the one with the cover to keep off the rain.

"You are too old to drive out in this rain," grumbled the *mozo*.

"It is not for me. It is for somebody who is young and strong—and in love."

The *mozo* stared at him in wonder as he left the barn. Don Alvarado looked toward the west, but no rider came into view. The rain limited his vision to a short radius. He went into the house. He poured another glass of wine and sat down and sipped it slowly and there was a wide smile across his wrinkled face. He could hear his daughters in Zona's room, and they were laughing, but the laughter was, he thought, rather thin and without depth.

Maria came in and left again, carrying something. He did not look up. They had a trunk in the middle of the room, a heavy trunk bound by hammered copper bands. It had been made in Spain by patient workmen centuries before.

"You were just going to take a handbag?" asked Maria.

"No, we intended to tell Papa."

"Where are you to be married?"

"In Ensenada."

"Papa was just to the barn. He sent a rider out and the man rode north. Wait here a minute."

Maria got her raincoat and went to the barn. The old

man was shoveling hay into a manger.

"That rider?" she asked. "Where did he go?"

"To the Mission. Surely your father is going *loco*."

He want Father Gomez here. Does Don Alvarado expect to die and does he want the Father to deliver unction to him?" The old man's voice was cynical.

"He wants him for a marriage ceremony."

The *mozo* stared at her in wonder as she left.

Zona hugged her. "He wants us to marry in the hacienda, Maria. Oh, that will be wonderful! But where is the groom? Where is Sean?"

"He will be here."

Maria returned to the packing. She knew what was troubling Zona. Had Sean O'Henry had trouble breaking with Mack Colton? Or had he just ridden off, telling the Beer Bottle owner nothing about his plans?

Maria consulted her lapel watch. Not more than an hour had passed since Ed Garlan had told her about the steamship clerk going to the Beer Bottle iron. Sean O'Henry would have hardly had time to ride over from the Colton *ranch*o.

Maria put up a swift line of running chatter designed to take the rawness from her sister's nerves. Outside the rain dropped and then poured as a sudden squall hit the range. Soon green grass would break from the soil and provide feed for cows and horses and mule-deer and other small range inhabitants. Zona went often to the window and looked into the rain.

"You cannot see far in the rain," said Maria.

"He has a long ride," said Zona.

"You take this?" asked Maria.

The afternoon ran on.

"There is a rider now," said Zona.

But the rider was Father Gomez. He was riding a burro. He left the animal at the barn and came into the house. He was a short, fat man with a flat black hat. They could hear him and Don Alvarado talking.

An hour went by.

“There comes a rider now,” said Zona. Her face was very pale as she watched. Then she said, “Here comes Sean now, Maria.”

CHAPTER XIX

Colton came in. "Who was that gent that was lookin' for you, Sean? That citified fellow?"

"A fellow I know."

They were in Sean O'Henry's room. The Irishman was filling a suitcase with his clothes. Colton watched him for some time and then asked, "Where you going?"

"I'm leaving. I'm jerking stakes. I've had enough of you and your thieving spread."

Colton's face hardened. He went over to the dresser and looked at the two slips there. "Steamship tickets, huh? For two people. South America bound. Who they for?"

"Me for one."

"The other?"

O'Henry picked up the tickets and put them in his pocket. "None of your business, Colton."

Colton's face was the color of dark agate. "You runnin' out on me, Sean?"

O'Henry looked up. "You could call it that," he said. "But I wouldn't call it that. Look, Mack. You hired my gun, that's all. I'm leaving. I've got a belly full. I'm so low I could crawl under a bullsnake, and he wouldn't have to be travelling over a wagon rut, either."

Colton was dark. "We've got a raid for tonight."

"I'm not in on it. By that time, I'll be out on the Pacific. I'll be going south. Look me up sometime when you hit *America del Sur*. You won't find me. The country is too big and Sean O'Henry's dying tonight. That

name is gone."

Colton laid his hand on the Irishman's shoulder.

O'Henry swung low. Colton went back against the wall. He reached for his gun, but O'Henry's gun was on him.

"Don't do it, Mack. I'll kill you."

Colton said, "You hit hard."

"Not as hard as a bullet."

Colton took his hand up.

O'Henry had his suitcase packed. He had on a blue suit and a flat-brimmed hat, and he'd shaved and put on a clean shirt. He had a red neckscarf with the loose end tucked under his vest. And there was no joviality in his heavy face.

"Mack, I've met the girl I want, the one I want to spend my life with. No, don't laugh, you two-bit renegade! I'm leaving, Mack. I'm never coming back. I'm going south with her tonight."

"That little Mexican hasher in Ensenada?"

O'Henry laughed inside at that, laughed silently. But then he sobered suddenly. Far better to let this man think he was running off with the hasher instead of Zona Alvarado. "That's the girl," he said.

Colton smiled. "You're a fool. She won't stay with you. She's known too many men." He went outside.

O'Henry pulled down the straps on the suitcase, looked around the room, and felt a tightness pull across his back. He grinned, took the valise, and went to the barn. He had his own horse saddled, and he tied the grip behind and went up. The rain pounded against his slicker. He met Colton, who stood beside the corner of the bunkhouse. O'Henry drew up.

Colton said, "Well, good luck, Sean."

O'Henry held out his hand. Colton took it. He gripped it hard and stepped back. "I'm sorry about what happened in there, Sean." He jerked his thumb back at the house. "My nerves aren't the best."

Sean said, "I'm sorry, too, Mack."

Colton put his hand down. "Save a range for me down below, fellow. I might need it the way things are shaping up here."

"You'll never leave here."

Colton looked at him inquisitively.

"They can't run you out. Your roots are too deep. You'll either come out as top-dog or you'll be dead. The sign points that way, Colton."

Colton was quiet. Then, "I reckon that's right, Sean."

They had known each other for years. They had shared blankets, grub, and fights, and they had known thievery together.

Colton said, "Don't mention the raid tonight."

O'Henry looked evenly at him. "Wild horses would never pull that from me. You know that, Mack. You shouldn't ask such a question."

Colton nodded.

O'Henry turned his horse and rode out. The tight spot had left his spine and he felt gay and carefree. He was leaving the whole mess. Then he thought of Don Alvarado. He would have to face him. And he had stolen the don's cattle.

The rain swept in, smashing hard at times, light and fresh at others. He rode a slow walk. Progress was slow in this mud. He was like a small boy going to apologize to a neighbor for pulling the tail of the neighbor's cat. He was afraid and he wasn't afraid to admit it.

The bright thought was Zona.

Once away from the Beer Bottle hacienda, he turned southeast. He rode faster, too, for the day would soon run out. He saw a rider on the ridge; he recognized Ed Garlan.

The day was dying when he reached the Alvarado hacienda. He rode into the barn, noticing the burro of Father Gomez, not knowing it was the Father's animal; he glanced at the team hitched to the buggy. Don Alvarado was evidently driving somewhere. That meant

that Colton's raid on Piñon Mesa would receive no interference from this *rancho*, anyway.

"I'll ride out again, soon," he told the *mozo*.

The old man looked at the suitcase. "You are leaving?"

"You ask too many questions."

Sean O'Henry went to the hacienda. The porch cut off the rain. The wind whipped around a corner, swinging rain under the eaves. He lifted the heavy iron knocker and let it fall. Don Alvarado came to the door.

"Come in, *señor*."

The room was warm inside, the fireplace cheerful. O'Henry found himself thinking, Hope we have a home like this down in South America, and he bowed to Father Gomez. "You ride far on such a day, Father."

"The ride was good, my son."

Don Alvarado took his raincoat and hung it up. O'Henry stood beside the door and wondered where Zona was. He looked at Father Gomez. "May I speak to the *Señor* Alvarado alone, Father?"

The Father said, "Certainly, my son. I will go and tease my *hija*, *Señorita* Maria." He left the room.

O'Henry said, "Sir, I am a rider for Colton, as you know. I don't know quite how to say this to you, but I am in love with your daughter, Zona."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Some months, now." The Irish came through with a crooked smile. "Time flies fast when you love somebody. I do not exactly remember."

"And why are you here?"

He told him about the boat that would reach the Channel that night. Now the dam was broken, and words rushed out. They tumbled over one another and got tied up, and he hoped they made sense. The don did not seem angry.

"Where will my daughter and you be married?"

"In Ensenada. The clerk—the one from the company—he will have a Father there. He will marry

us." There was a silence. "Then you have no objections?"

"Will you be good to her?"

"Yes."

"Why did not she tell me?"

"I asked her not to, *señor*. I wanted to tell you. This is hard for me; it is hard for you."

"She is a good girl," said Don Alvarado. "All her life she has been a good girl." He held up a hand to cut O'Henry's words off. "No, she has not slipped. I have only one request—and that is that you name a son after me."

Father Gomez had not gone to Maria's room. He had been listening in the hall. He came in. "I thought you brought me out here to conduct a marriage ceremony, *Señor* Alvarado? Yet you stand here and talk to this young man—"

O'Henry saw through it then. He came across the room and grabbed the don. He was laughing, laughing as only the Irish laugh, and he was hugging the man, shaking him and hugging him. "You had this cooked up," he accused Alvarado. "Who told you?"

"Maria."

"She knew?"

"Yes." Don Alvarado called, "Zona."

They were married in front of the fireplace. Don Diego Alvarado gave his daughter away and Maria stood with her sister. Afterwards they signed the Bible that had been handed down through centuries. Sean O'Henry signed slowly, and then he looked back through the pages and saw the names of other couples, now dead and forgotten except for the name they had inscribed here. It left him a little awed.

"You have money to buy a *rancho*?"

"Si, Don Alvarado."

The don smiled over his wine. "Zona has a fund left by her mother. You may write me and draw on it when you run low, if you do."

Sean O'Henry remembered how he had obtained that money. He remembered that in a few hours Mack Colton would raid Alvarado cattle on Piñon Mesa. For the first, he felt without honor; for the second, he would never tell Don Alvarado. He had a friendship for Colton, and the don would not want him to violate it. He would lose strength in the don's eyes if he told him about this raid. So he was silent.

The boat would arrive in the Channel somewhere around midnight, the clerk had said. They still had time. They had a wedding supper where Father Gomez became filled with wine and laughed and talked. The wine loosened Sean, too. But he knew that, underneath, both the don and Maria were not their usual selves.

This he had to accept. He assured himself that under normal conditions the pair would have felt much the same. He himself knew the fullest measure of happiness he had ever experienced. It was as though a new world were starting for him; he was being young and walking into the sunshine again for the first time.

"Is it the wine or ourselves?" he asked Zona.

"What do you mean?"

"Outside the rain comes down. Soon we will be in its cold. But I don't mind it. The whole thing is new—"

Don Alvarado looked at the big clock. "It is time you go. Maria and I and the Father will go with you to Ensenada."

"Not me," corrected the Father. "I would only be in the way."

Don Alvarado frowned. "I remember now, I cannot go. You two will have to go alone unless Maria goes with you."

"Where are you going?" asked Maria.

Don Alvarado had no answer.

Sean O'Henry wondered if the don were going to raid Colton; he remembered the cattle on Piñon Mesa.

Maria said, "I'll stay at home, too."

Ten minutes later, Zona and Sean O'Henry drove off,

the rain thick around them. Don Alvarado looked at the sky. Night was with them. Maria was sobbing a little. "You are sad?" he said.

"I am happy."

CHAPTER XX

The three Bar S men—Garlan, Skinny Marsh, Hightail Smith—came into the Bar S grounds with darkness quick on the earth. The rain had started again. The heavy wagonload of lumber made for hard pulling. The mares were winded, tired.

Hightail Smith cursed the elements. He swore at the rain and the mud. He cursed himself for being such a fool as to venture out in them.

"He's happy," said Skinny.

Garlan glanced at the heavy man. Skinny was tired. His thick face was smeared with mud, and rain ran off his slicker and hat.

"We got a long ride ahead," said Garlan.

Hightail Smith stopped cursing. "You think they'll be there, Ed?" he asked.

Garlan shrugged. "Darned if I know, fellow. But we gotta hope, don't we?" He looked at Skinny. "Villa ought to be in Tecate by now, huh?"

"You remember that filly that ran the *Cantina Americano*, Garlan?" Skinny rubbed his nose. "She sure was an odd gal, that heifer. Katie Ryan was her name, huh?"

"So she said."

"Well, me an' Hightail et in there. We was high with everything, and maybe we talked too much; maybe not. Anyway, right after we walked out, she sold the joint. She went across the Border and got a gent to drive her to San Diego, I guess. Tom Bishop was telling us about it."

"Wonder what happened?" asked Hightail.

Garlan shrugged. "Who can understand a woman?"

Skinny grinned. "My ol' pappy always used to say that. Guess it held good in his day, too. Get along, you swayback old critter!"

The rain continued. The wagon slipped and lurched, almost losing its load. They reached the top of the ridge and the slope down to Hacienda Creek lay tumbling below them, slippery as a hound dog's tongue.

Now the mares were forced to brace themselves to hold the load. They skidded in the mud, rumps against the breeching-straps. Hightail had stopped cursing and reconciled himself with Nature. Skinny heaved on the lines, now this way, now that; he guided the mares downward. Garlan was quiet.

"Well," said Skinny, "we finally got here."

He threw the lines to the older Estabari, who caught them. He drove the wagon over to the shelter of a wall, and he and his son unhooked the mares, peeled the harnesses from them, and turned them loose to graze. With the wall breaking the rain, the lumber would not get so wet.

Pedro Malone was cooking some beef stew. Skinny and Hightail got plates and settled down, chewing on Pedro's biscuits. Garlan settled down and thought of the Alvarados. He wondered how Sean O'Henry had fared with the old don. He hoped that the Irishman got out of the old don. He hoped that the Irishman got out of the country. Because if he didn't leave, sooner or later he'd get killed, or he'd kill a Bar S man.

Garlan thought of the night ahead.

He had no taste, no desire, for a pitched gunfight in the darkness and rain. He had seen enough trouble in his life. He had come to Baja California to raise horses; he had come to settle down and become a rancher.

He stirred and drank the hot coffee. The heat of it lifted the chill a little, pushing the coldness out of him. He remembered things; he remembered the tracks of his horses, going into the desert, the tracks that never returned. He knew that Mack Colton had run off those

horses. Who else could it be?

His logic was simple and complete. Don Alvarado was losing cattle. He, Ed Garlan, wasn't stealing them. Then the thieves must be the Beer Bottle riders. He sipped coffee again. He was wet, cold, miserable. Yet there was a ride ahead and there was darkness. He tried not to think of these.

Pedro Malone scoured a pan, face lined in the lamplight. Water dripped down from a seam in a tarp. Hightail Smith cursed the drops. Kid Harris hunkered and drew little pictures in the dust. Skinny Marsh sat with his back against the wall—the wall marred by soot and marked by the dynamite blast. The heavy man was quiet, waiting for the next dawn.

Skinny got up. "Where do we meet Don Alvarado, Ed?"

Garlan said, "Walnut Creek," and got to his feet. "My knees are stiff."

Hightail Smith had a bottle. He passed the quart around. "Put a fire inside us that'll keep us warm." He got directly under the drop of water and it hit him in the forehead as he drank. "Damn it!"

"Your broncs," said the older Estaban. "We have them against the far wall, *señores*. They are waiting there, and we have already saddled them. We have put a little jerked-beef in each saddlebag along with the bullets."

"Might be a false alarm," muttered Skinny.

Kid Harris was pulling on his slicker. "Might be, at that." He was walking out in the rain, following Garlan. They went to their horses, five men in the rain.

They took a length of time tightening *cinchas* to their proper tightness. Kid Harris fumbled with his latigo strap. Garlan took his stirrup and rose. Pedro's bronc was cold and mean and wanted to buck. The Mexican turned him hard by the bit and Garlan rode close, quirt falling. He beat the bronc and this took the fight out of him.

Pedro said, "*Gracias, señor.*"

They left the place on a lope. Garlan glanced back and saw the outlines of the Estabans against the puny fire. The walls of the ruined hacienda were dark and heavy behind them, beaten by wild rain, and then distance hid them under the cover of night. Garlan glanced back again. He could see the red coal that was the fire, and then rain hid it, too.

The night would be dark. The Bar S owner felt a futility; he felt as though they were running against something they would not see, could not hear. The rain and darkness were complete, pressing them in; the night had an aid in the rain, for what the darkness did not hide, the rain did.

Kid Harris said, "I wish there'd be a moon."

"On a night like this!" Skinny Marsh was laughing. "What good would a moon do? This rain—"

Again, Garlan felt futility. The night was too dark, and rain too thick. And how would they know that Colton would hit the Piñon Mesa herd? Only a wild guess, as wild as the wind, as wild as the uncontrolled rain. A run in the dark, a cry in the wilderness, a guess in water . . .

They were passing the bottle again and it came to him. He drank sparingly; he had small use for hard liquor. But it warmed him and brought heat into his belly. He found himself thinking of Maria Alvarado. She was like this night, wild and without fear, and because of that, she was attractive. She was a magnet pulsing and drawing him, and he knew he would go to her. And he knew that she knew it, also.

He tried not to think too much. He let his thoughts swing out, covering this range; he thought of other ranges. They were cutting through *mesquite* and *chamiso*, and Garlan followed a trail that would lead them to Walnut Creek. The ride was long and Skinny and Hightail had held them up, due to that broken bridge and the slide of the trail. Don Diego Alvarado

would wait with a dark impatience, men on horses that pawed the mud and reared in the rain.

They went down the ridge in the darkness, riding recklessly. They were riding against time and against distance. Garlan was tired, and he remembered what a saddle-bum had told him once. There had been a roundup camp in Nevada on the rim of the desert, and the bum had come in for chuck, riding a tired old burro. And the men had started ribbing him good-naturedly.

"Why don't you ride a horse, 'stead of that old mule?"

"He's fast enough for me."

"You won't never get no place on that burro."

The bum had reached for another biscuit. "Cowboy, I'm no hurry to get no place. You gents can ride fast hosses an' cut across great distances. Not me, fella. I'm no fool. Nobody's won over time or distance yet, and man has tried to win ever since the first caveman run a log under a load, making a wheel out of the log."

Garlan was remembering that, and smiling.

They came down off another hill, riding through the brush. They rode by instinct and saddle-savvy. Their horses were tough, hill horses, raised to rocky slants and brush-covered terrain.

"Walnut Creek," said Garlan.

Here on the level they loped faster. Garlan saw the ride of horsemen ahead and called, "Bar S men coming in."

"This way," said Don Alvarado.

The elderly man had six riders. Horses reared and fought their bits.

"You are late," said the don.

Garlan told them about Skinny and Hightail getting into camp late. They were already moving through the night. Saddle-leather creaked and hoofs hit rock and mud. The rain slanted in and beat their slickers.

Garlan asked, "Sean O'Henry?"

"He is my son-in-law," the don said. He laughed, but

Garlan found no mirth in the sound.

CHAPTER XXI

Mack Colton watched Sean O'Henry ride away from the Beer Bottle hacienda. Colton's eyes were a little too tight. He got a horse and followed the Irishman and watched him ride into the yard of the Alvarado *rancho*.

"No hasher for him to marry," he said. "He's after Zona Alvarado."

Colton had suspected this for some time. Unknown to O'Henry, he had seen the Irishman and Zona meet, back in the hills. Colton didn't give a damn then. But now this took on an added twist. O'Henry knew that Beer Bottle men were to raid Alvarado cattle tonight. What if he told Don Alvarado?

Colton rode back to the Beer Bottle. He called his riders and told them to saddle and get ready.

Martinez asked, "A daylight raid, Mack?"

Colton looked out into the swirling, mucky rain. "Call it daylight if you want to, Pinto. But a man can't see very far in this weather."

His men came up, already wet in leather. He glanced at them and reckoned their power; he was satisfied. He swung his arm and they rode out, hitting their bronses. They came across the flat and rode into the hills. Pinto Martinez rode close and asked, "Where's Sean?"

Colton waved an arm across space.

Martinez fell back, frowning. The gesture could have meant anything. He did not press the question any further. They came to Walnut Creek and the stream was roaring. They crossed it with their horses braced against the swiftness. On the other side, they came out

of the muddy water, looking like overgrown beavers.

"Blast this rain," said Martinez.

Colton stood on his stirrups. "Thank God for it, Pinto," he said. "It might cover you so a bullet can't find you."

Martinez rubbed his hand on his saddlehorn. He was riding a flat-horned, flat-forked Mexican saddle with a low cantle. He asked, "Is it getting that tight, Mack? Will it break soon?"

Colton had no answer.

When they reached the high foothills, the day had changed to darkness. They swung around Caballo Mesa and reached a canyon. They put their horses down this and it ran out, running into a giant plain. At the end of this stood Piñon Mesa.

The wind was whistling in pines and the rain had changed to sleet here in the high altitudes. Behind rocks hung wisps of snow that was more sleet than crystals. The wind was cold and the riders were cold. Only the horses were warm, and they had traveled fast.

"Cattle ahead," said a rider.

Colton said, "Up with your reins, men," and they grouped around him. He looked at them again, weighing their toughness, and again he was satisfied. "Split up. Martinez, you take the south; I'll handle the north. Push them toward the desert. Run them hard for a way to take the power out of them, then they'll settle down."

"Where's O'Henry?" asked a man.

Colton said flatly, "O'Henry's out of this. He's out, see? He's gone." He added, "Or he'd better be gone."

Martinez turned his horse. Three men rode with him. They fanned out wide and cattle came through the brush. They were wild. A man and rider would come out of the rain, and the cattle would run. They ran the way a deer runs; they had their horns back and their heads out, splitting the *chamiso* and *mesquite*.

Colton reached a rocky point. He could see the herd forming below him; soon darkness would be in. He

came down, his horse sliding, and Martinez rode out of the night, calling as he came.

"We have them, Mack."

"I'll take the lead. Drift them east, and fast. Send two flankers out and the rest of you push. All right."

Brush popped and cattle moved. Riders talked to the cattle and a bullwhip sounded, flat and mean and sharp. Colton took the lead and the steers were behind him. He ran at a lope, and behind him came the cattle. They went this way for three miles or so, and the cattle lost their winds and slowed down. Colton swung around and let them go by and fell in beside Martinez.

"Not too fast, Pinto. That Villa will need some beef on them, or it's no sale."

"They won't lose much; they're hard. Well, come daylight we'll be back home, and this will be over."

"Before daylight," said Colton.

He loped back and took the point. An hour passed, and the cattle were walking, not running. They reached a wide trail and they came to the desert. The sand was hard under the wash of the rain and the bumps of cacti and *ocotillo* were dark in the darkness. And still the rain came in.

Colton was cold. A man had a bottle of mescal. He drank a little and handed the bottle back. "Of the two, I take the cold weather."

Now let Sean O'Henry tell Don Alvarado if he wanted! Now let the Alvarado men hit at Piñon Mesa. They would find no cattle there, nor would they find Beer Bottle riders. There would be but darkness and boulders and the wash of the endless rain.

Colton thought, But Sean won't tell. The Irishman was square; he was no squealer. Maybe this precaution was unnecessary. Anyway, the drive was almost over; the end was in sight. There would be other drives, for Villa needed beef.

Martinez came up and rode beside him. "They don't need me back there," he said. "They're enough now

that the cattle have slowed down."

"We leave the desert soon," said Colton.

An hour later, they came off the flatness, and went into the hills. They were south and east of Jacumba, the town across the border. Colton put spurs to his horse and rode ahead. He was gone a few minutes, and then Martinez saw him coming out of the rain.

"Right ahead," he said.

The cattle came into a natural park. They were tired and they started to graze. Colton and Martinez rode to the small fire that glowed safely under the overhang of a sandstone boulder. Mario stood there, scowling fiercely. Another man stood beside him, and four more loafed back in the darkness.

"How many head, Colton?" asked Mario.

Colton said, "Two hundred and six."

Mario looked at the man beside him. He gestured with his head, and the man got on his horse and rode to the herd.

"My count's right," said Colton angrily.

Mario murmured, "Villa's orders." He sighed with great ado. "Tecate went down today, and the big part of the men come along tomorrow to move against Tia Juana. We need more beef soon."

Colton thought.

"We need more beef, lots of beef," repeated Mario.

Colton said, "I heard you."

"Or horses?" asked Mario. "Those made good chewing." He was smiling with the fire showing his smile. "They didn't know the difference. They thought they were eating a cow."

"Not for two weeks," said Colton.

Mario looked at him steadily. Colton had the sudden idea that something was moving out in the rain; this was taking form and piling up, and there was danger in it. Mario spoke. "You fool. You think men do not need to eat for two weeks? We need beef, horses, anything—and in two days."

"This range is ready to break open," said Colton.

"We need meat."

Colton said slowly, "Allright, Mario. Where at?"

"The other side of Tecate."

"That means we drive across Bar S grass."

Mario shrugged. "Get horses, then. Take those to the north of Bar S grass. Put them across the hills. Two nights from now. Not tomorrow night, but the next?"

Colton nodded.

Mario's man rode back and said, "Count correct. Good stock, fat." He spoke to the men in the shadows and they got to their feet and went to their horses. Mario handed Colton the buckskin bag and Colton heard the clink of coins.

"Gold again," said Mario.

Colton said, "Two nights from now, then?" and got on his horse. His men came back, and one said, "Just midnight. That was a fast one," and he laughed.

Colton turned and they followed. Their tension was broken; they laughed and talked, and Colton grew morose, silent. He did not join in. Time was heavy across him, and he felt its great weight.

They reached the desert again. The rain died a little and stars showed indistinctly. Their horses were tired, but they pushed them with their rowels. When they reached the western hills, the rain had died completely. Stars showed clear and there were few clouds. Those there were traveled in the high altitude wind that was breaking them apart.

Colton watched the wind break up the clouds into wisps of vapor that hung across the stars. Gradually the clouds disappeared and in time the stars held complete sway. The Milky Way was a band of silver points. He looked at it and remembered that he had once read that there were planets or stars in the Milky Way that would make the earth look like a pinhead. That there were suns there, endless across space and time, that would make the center of the world's universe seem small in

comparison.

He let himself think of these facts. Were there people there, and were there cattle, and were there horses? Did men fight over grass? These thoughts were too big; too strong; he reasoned, should not think them. He should not think too much about something he could never hope to understand.

"There'll be a moon toward morning," said Martinez.

Colton said, "We'll be home first."

But he was wrong. The moon-rise caught them ten miles or so from the Beer Bottle *rancho*. The silver of it lay across the brush and brought out objects clearly. The air had turned cold and it came through their slickers. That meant that the rain was done for some time, for it would not rain with such a chill in the atmosphere.

Martinez said, "Grass will grow green, now. Spanish daggers will shoot out on the desert along with yucca and painter's brushes."

"You're Latin," said Colton. "You think of such things, even as you steal."

Martinez frowned. "It is the poet in me."

They were tired. The night and the ride had cut them to the bone with the dagger of weariness. Yet vigilance was with Colton. His eyes were on the ridges, on the high spots, and he missed nothing.

"There's that cougar," he said.

Martinez caught a glimpse of the big mountain lion running across a park in the piñons. He was dragging his rifle from the saddle-boot, but Colton pushed his arm down, holding it. He said, "None of you shoot, *sabe?*"

They watched the big cat run into the brush.

Martinez said, "I could have killed him."

Colton said, "Let him live." They were like the cougar; man's hand was against them. Only there was one difference. They had invoked the hand of their neighbors to rise against them by their acts; the cougar

had been doomed to be hunted by his accident of birth.

They gained the last ridge. The Beer Bottle hacienda lay on the creek below. Buildings lay somber under the moon.

Colton said, "It'll be warm down there," and his horse braced himself as he went down the steep, slippery trail.

CHAPTER XXII

When Don Alvarado and Ed Garlan and the riders reached Piñon Mesa, the rain was falling with a mad hardness. It seemed to bear a grudge against itself and against man and beast and shrub. The wind whipped against their slickers and held the oilskins tight against them as the rain beat across the terrain.

They had built a plan of action. Each man would act for himself. They would branch out, finding hiding spots, and waylay the Beer Bottle men if and when they came for the herd. The whole plan was built on the assumption that the herd would be raided. But when riders came back, plainly perplexed, Garlan knew something had gone wrong.

"They ain't no cattle here," said Skinny Marsh. "What I wouldn't do to be able to suck a cigaret!"

Don Alvarado rode in. "We can't find cattle," he said. "They were here, too, when I saw them."

Other riders reported the same. They gathered under the protection of a giant live-oak whose wild arms sheltered them from the rain. One man had found three cattle—and they were bogger-wild.

"Looked to me like somebody'd hazed them lately. They were wild as a turpentine coyote."

"I saw two," said an Alvarado *vaquero*.

"They might have drifted," said the don.

The wind, they all agreed, might have driven them off the mesa, putting them to the east, what with the rain pounding against them. One thing seemed certain: the cattle would not drift into the face of the wind. They

would drift with it. They split up again and rode east. The rise of the mesa behind them broke the wind a little. They rode for two hours, working the country. And when they met again, their talk was the same. A few cattle, wild as deer, and that was all.

Garlan suddenly caught the drift. "They've already hit," he said. "Colton probably saw O'Henry ride up to your hacienda, Don Alvarado. He might have suspected O'Henry would tell you about his raid, so he hit early."

The don nodded slowly. "That must be it."

There was no use looking for tracks. The rain would see that none were left. Garlan felt beaten, confused. They had keyed themselves up high; the heights were tumbling under them. And to a man, it left them angry with circumstance. Don Alvarado was swearing softly in Spanish.

"We go home?" asked Pedro Malone.

A horse stirred.

"The rain is breaking," a man said.

Skinny Marsh spoke. "Wild goose chase. That Colton's smart. Stole the whole shebang right from under us." He laughed quietly.

"What we do?" asked Pedro.

Don Alvarado looked hard at Ed Garlan. "We could ride after them and maybe catch them?"

The wind came in again, angry in the bows of the oaks. This whipped in cold, then suddenly died.

"No use in following them, I guess." It was the don speaking again. "We could never locate them."

Garlan turned his horse. He looked toward the west and lifted his eyes. "This storm is breaking. No, we could never follow them. We haven't even got any idea where they'd deliver the herd. We know for sure it's going to Villa, I guess. And we do know when the raid is over, they'll return home."

Men glanced at each other.

Skinny turned and said, "All right."

There was no need for haste now. They rode at a walk or a trot. When the going got tough, they pulled to a walk. The rain came again, but there was less wind with it. Hightail said, "The ocean must be above us. It must be hanging up there in them clouds."

Kid Harris said, "What next, Hightail?"

Garlan was silent. They reached a flat and he watched the clouds run across the sky, pushed by a mad high wind. There was no wind on the earth now. The clouds were breaking against this force and the stars were coming clear. Five miles further, and a man said, "Here comes the moon."

"We got one help," said Don Alvarado.

They came down a slant, horses jogging. "Boundary Creek ahead," said a man. They put horseflesh into it. Water splashed and wet them but they were so wet now they didn't care. The far bank showed ahead and their horses came to it and the water receded. They were but a few miles from the Beer Bottle hacienda.

Garlan said, "Hold up."

They held a council. Don Alvarado would stay back, a mile or so from the hacienda, and he would keep his men there. When and if the Beer Bottle men came, the don would send a runner ahead to warn the Bar S men. Then he could move in from behind and hold there.

A man said, "Maybe they're home in bed, for all we know."

"We'll find out," said Skinny.

Garlan and his men rode ahead. They came into the piñons over the Beer Bottle and set boots to earth there. Garlan said, "Skinny and I will go down, see. You three, take spots. We'll look around good. If you hear any shooting, come down quick. On the run."

"They might be in bed," said Hightail. "Why, they might not even be out raiding. Those cattle might have drifted."

Garlan said, "Skinny, get your rifle."

"If they're not home?" asked Pedro. "What then,

boss?"

"We won't come back until it's over. We'll settle down there and use our rifles. Is it clear? If they are there, we come back; if they are not there, we stay."

Skinny said, "I got my rifle."

With Garlan leading, they went down the slope. Garlan followed a trail that ran back and forth, and behind him Skinny labored to keep footing in the mud. They went back and forth, following the trail, and they came to the flat. They were in the shadow of an outbuilding on the *rancho*.

"The bunkhouse," said Garlan.

Skinny murmured, "I'll stay outside."

Garlan went to the door and turned it and went quietly inside. A few minutes passed and he came out.

"Nobody there," he said.

"They're out, then. They're raiding."

They hunkered beside the building. The wind had died completely and the moon was bright. Skinny said, "I wish I could light a smoke."

"Chew it," said Garlan.

"Not me. I tried it once. It made me sick."

Garlan smiled at that.

A horse stomped in the barn. Garlan wondered where the dogs were. Probably sleeping somewhere and in out of the rain. Skinny shifted and raised his rifle a little, then settled back.

"Be easy," said Garlan.

Skinny became a dark, heavy ball. Garlan felt the chill creep into him. Still he was silent. He thought of Don Alvarado and his men out there. He thought of Zona and O'Henry—they would be on the boat now, and the moonlight would be on the whitecaps. They were out of this forever.

"That damn' cricket," said Skinny.

Garlan became aware of the cricket's song. He was somewhere under a log, he supposed. They settled there and chirped. The song was sharp and without tune

and rubbed on his nerves, too.

"You're touchy, Skinny."

More time went by. Garlan tried to keep from thinking. Dawn was but a few minutes away, less than an hour.

"Wish I was home in my soogans," murmured Skinny.

Garlan had no answer.

Skinny turned his rifle. "Man coming."

Garlan looked at the man hard. Then he called, "This way, *muchacho*."

The man was an Alvarado rider. He was panting, half from his run, half from excitement. "They come. Don Alvarado sent me. He comes behind them."

"Colton there?"

"*Si*. He rides ahead, with Peento Martenez."

"Go back," said Garlan. "You've told my men on the ridge?"

"*Si*."

The shadows came out and jerked the Mexican into them. Skinny got to his feet and grunted. "Got a leg muscle pain," he said. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth and finally opened them. "Had them ever since I was a kid."

Garlan said, "Riders are coming."

Across the hoof-packed yard, two men rode in. They would have to pass the bunkhouse to get to the barn. Garlan heard the high whine of the cricket as he moved ahead. Skinny Marsh pulled off to one side, standing there in darkness. The riders came closer and were twenty feet away.

Garlan said clearly, "All right, Colton. Step down."

Colton and Martinez jerked in their reins. Skinny Marsh came out, rifle up. "We missed you out there on Piñon Mesa. We figured we'd come in and get you here at home."

Colton said, "For what?"

The sound of guns firing came from behind them.

Martinez turned and looked back, and Garlan saw his eyes were wide.

"That's Don Alvarado and his men," said Garlan. "They're fighting your men, back there. You've played your string out, Colton."

"You have nothing on us," Colton spoke evenly.

The gunfire died for a moment and Garlan noticed that it had silenced the cricket. "Both of us have had enough of you, Colton. We're taking the law into our own hands. We'll hang you and your men."

"It's been done before," said Skinny Marsh.

Martinez said huskily, "You aren't hanging me —" and his gun was turning. Garlan glimpsed Skinny's rifle ball knocking Martinez from leather. The Mexican was falling over the horn and his bronc was rearing.

Other rifles were talking, too. Garlan brought his rifle around and shot, but Colton had left his horse. He was beyond the animal, shooting under him, and Garlan took his sights down. Colton's horse ran off, reins pulling in the mud. Colton sat down, and bent over at the waist. He dropped his gun.

Skinny Marsh said, "He get you, Ed?"

"He shot too fast," said Garlan.

Colton went down, breaking in two. Ed Garlan loaded his gun, shoving fresh cartridges into the magazine. He was not aware of this action. Later, he remembered it.

Skinny said, "Let's get out of here."

Garlan glanced at Martinez. The man had his nose deep in a puddle of water. He couldn't breathe that way. They left the two men there and walked into the moonlight and so met Don Alvarado.

Garlan asked, "You get them all?"

"Some got away. Some are dead. Some are wounded."

Garlan went to the don's horse and put his head against the bronc's mane. He stood like that, and the old man ran his hand through Garlan's hair. "You have lost

your hat, my *hijo*."

"It's back there," said Ed Garlan. "Back there with Martinez and Colton." He got his strength again. "They'll never steal again."

Don Alvarado crossed himself.

Hightail Smith came riding up, leading Garlan's horse and Skinny Marsh's. "We missed the fun, Ed," he said. "That was no fun," said Garlan.

Don Alvarado was speaking tonelessly. "My men, they will take charge here, *señor*. I have talked with a Beer Bottle man. Colton has no living relatives to take his iron. The land and cattle will probably go to the territory. I did not tell Maria where I rode this night. Perhaps you would ride with me to the *rancho*?"

Garlan found stirrup.

They rode, the two of them, toward the south. The wind was cold and the stars clear. Garlan found again his old assurance. He kept thinking of Maria. He would see her soon, and he was glad of that.

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