

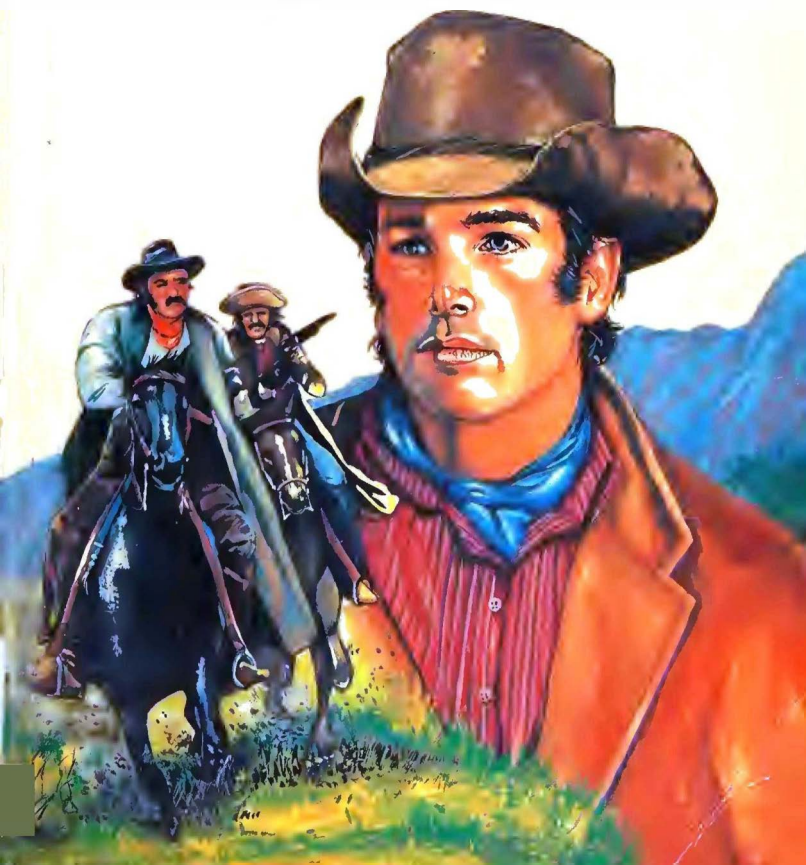


Large  
Print

Linford Western Library

# THE SADDLE WOLVES

Lee Floren





Floren, Lee  
Saddle Wolves  
Large print

8.95

## THE SADDLE WOLVES

The black loam of Montana was rich and seemed fertile. But appearances were deceiving: much of the loam was poisoned with black alkali, good only for cattle. The farmers could not know that though, and greedy men moved in to take advantage of their ignorance. Soon the outlaws were running most of the state and Sheriff Ike Powers knew it was time to make a stand against the mob . . .

LEE FLOREN

---

# THE SADDLE WOLVES

*Complete and Unabridged*



LINFORD  
*Leicester*

First published in the USA in 1985 by  
Lancer Books Inc.,  
New York

First Linford Edition  
published August 1987

Copyright © 1985 by Lee Floren  
All rights reserved

British Library CIP Data

Floren, Lee

The saddle wolves.—Large print ed.—  
Linford western library

I. Title

813'.54[F]

PS3511.L697

ISBN 0-7089-6409-5

Published by  
F. A. Thorpe (Publishing) Ltd.  
Anstey, Leicestershire

Set by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd.  
Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
T. J. Press (Padstow) Ltd., Padstow, Cornwall

# 1

THE night was a wild one. A hard wind, coming in strong gusts, came down from the Little Rock Mountains, driving the rain across these high Montana plains. This was the night that big Lon Mallory was boarding Number One at Curry Bend, handcuffed to Sheriff Ike Powers. For Lon Mallory was being transported to the new State penitentiary far to the west in the Deer Lodge valley.

The passenger train came to a stop with heaving cylinders and with the rain smashing across the yellow beam of the headlight. The conductor came down wearing a long yellow slicker and he put his box on the depot platform and hollered, "All aboard."

Then the conductor looked at the people huddled under the overhang of the depot roof and he asked, "Something special tonight?" for he did not see, at first, that these two men were joined together by a set of handcuffs.

And it was rawboned Lon Mallory who

answered that question. His voice held a jest but there was no humour in his heart.

"Yeah, this is the night they railroad an innocent man to the pen for life, conductor."

The conductor looked at him, the lantern-light glistening in his dark eyes. For a moment surprise was written across his face and then he said, "By gosh, it's Lon Mallory, huh?"

"Didn't recognize me right off, huh, Harry Short?"

"Those lanterns don't make much light. Howdy, Sheriff Powers. All aboard, and west we go."

Conductor Harry Short reached down, snagged his box, and the drivers spun, the train starting to move. He went into the day coach, but Lon Mallory and Sheriff Powers stood for a moment watching the depot slip into the rain and darkness behind them.

Lon had looked with wry disgust at the crowd that had come to the depot to see him off for the State penitentiary. He had watched them with a bitter smile on his wide mouth and he had felt pity towards them. With this feeling of pity had also been a feeling of deep and ugly disgust that had made his smile even harder.

"My neighbours," he had told the sheriff in



hard disgust. "Come down here out of warm beds—come into this cold rainy night—to see Lon Mallory off for Deer Lodge pen. Come to see an innocent man go to serve a life sentence. They were a big help to me when I needed them . . . like hell they were. They hid their heads in their hands and were trembling!"

And he had almost spat at them, he had been that disgusted. They were like a bunch of sheep that had wandered away from the shepherd. They were huddled in the cold, and you could almost see them shiver despite their raincoats and slickers.

Sheriff Ike Powers had spoken with a quiet certainty. "They're all afraid of Rolf Latoon, Lon."

Lon had sent the huddled group another quick hard look. Because of the distance and the rain and the dim lantern-light he could not identify faces.

"Sure, Rolf Latoon's got them all buffaloed—they're runnin' scared like mangy coyotes. It makes me sick to look at them, Ike."

"They aren't a very admirable group, Lon."

Now, going ahead of the sheriff, walking sidewise because of the handcuffs, Lon Mallory remembered the people huddled there, rain

and wind beating them; he remembered the flickering darting yellow light of the lanterns, hung under the eaves of the depot, and he remembered how that group had stood in silence, saying nothing, doing nothing, just watching an innocent man leave to serve a life sentence for a crime he had never committed. And Lon Mallory had a bad taste in his mouth as he walked ahead of Sheriff Ike Powers.

The passenger car creaked, the rain pounded on the wooden exterior. Lon swayed, almost stumbling; the sheriff also swayed. Then they were in a seat with Lon sitting next to the window that was washed with cold rain. He tried to peer out of the water-streaked glass but it was difficult. He saw a line of trees, dark and indistinct, and he knew then they were along Milk River, for the Milk made a bend and went around the town called Curry Bend.

Lon said, "The dirty devils."

Again there was patience in Sheriff Ike Powers' voice. "Rolf Latoon and his hired gunhands have those people under their triggers," the lawman again reminded.

"Are they cowards?"

Sheriff Powers shook his grey-thatched head.

"They're not cowards, Lon. They need but one thing, that is all."

"And that?"

"They need a leader. With a leader, they'll fight Latoon and his gang, and they'll win. You were their leader. Before you could really get your forces together Rolf Latoon had railroaded you into jail with false evidence. But let's not talk about it now, son. Here comes Harry Short."

The conductor had doffed his slicker. Rain had dampened his blue cap. He had a ruddy healthy face.

"Tickets, men?"

The sheriff gave him their two tickets. He punched them and poked the tickets in the bracket over their heads. Harry Short was just as his name implied—short and heavy. He was about sixty, Lon figured. He had known Lon Mallory ever since Lon had been a small boy for, prior to the coming of rails, Harry Short had run the stage-and-freight office in Curry Bend. But the railroad had put the stagecoaches out of business and Harry Short, who had in his youth been a street car conductor back in Chicago, had returned to his job of being a conductor, this time on the new railroad.

The conductor had been a good friend with Lon's father, old Hank Mallory. Many a time old Hank and Harry Short, shotguns under their arms, had hunted big mallard ducks and geese along the Beaver Creek sloughs, above the junction of Beaver Creek with Milk River.

Lon noticed then that the conductor carried a .45 pistol. The wide gunbelt and heavy weapon looked decidedly out of place on the man's heavy thigh.

Lon said, "Got to toting a gun, huh, Harry?"

"I got a reason."

Lon smiled bleakly. "I'm not that dangerous, Harry. Not to a friend of my old father, anyway."

"Not packing it because of you, Lon."

The conductor moved down the aisle, body braced against the pitch of the creaking coach with its sputtering kerosene lamps hung by brackets from the wall. The train was gathering speed. Rain hit the panes and ran down in rivulets of water. Lon wondered about the conductor's last words: "Not packing it because of you, Lon." Then what other reason had the man to tote a pistol? Lon did not know. He watched the conductor as he walked past the two other passengers in the car. One was a

heavy set man with a big belly who was plainly a salesman, for three heavy suitcases were on the seat opposite him. The drummer slept with his head back and his mouth open. He rode facing Lon and the sheriff. The other passenger was a grizzled man of about sixty—evidently a saddle-man, judging from his clothes and his weather-lined thin face with its grey whiskers. These men had been on the train when it had pulled into Curry Bend.

Now Lon said to the sheriff, "One thing I can't understand, sheriff."

"And that?"

"Why does Harry Short pack that .45?"

"I don't know."

"He acted right mysterious, sheriff."

"He must have a reason." Sheriff Ike Powers' eyes puckered in thought. "He must have a good reason for packing the gun." ✓

The word *gun* made Lon Mallory conscious of the .45 that was stuck under his shirt in his belt. His gun—his bone-handled old .45 Colt. His pockets were heavy with cartridges, too. These were good memories. And he spoke in a low voice to the grizzled sheriff.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I'm in debt to you, Ike."

The lawman glanced around to make sure nobody was listening or watching. "Heck, Lon, was I bein' railroaded to the State pen, and you were the sheriff . . . you'd do the same for me, Lon."

Lon rubbed his whiskery jaw with his free hand. "Maybe you shouldn't have done it, Ike."

"Why not? You're my friend—your father was my friend—"

"Sure, friendship is all right, but you got a wife. This could mean your job. It could mean a jail sentence for you. This could cause you a lot of trouble, Ike."

"I talked it over good with Nellie. She's behind us, Lon."

"Sure, but it might kick-back at you, and put you behind bars."

The lawman spoke in quiet sincerity. "Look, Lon, look. Records show that many a sheriff has been downed while taking a prisoner to the pen. Many a prisoner has made an escape from a train or stage. You never killed your father, Lon. You never killed good old Hank Mallory. I know that, Lon, and so does Nellie—we've known you since boyhood, and your father was one of my best friends. Rolf Latoon got liars—

paid liars—on that witness stand. They're railroadin' you to the pen on the charge you murdered your good father. And I know that is a damned lie—and Nellie knows it—and so does other people who are so afraid of Latoon they can't open their mouths."

Lon had a warm feeling inside of him. He had never before heard the sheriff make such a long speech.

"Sure good somebody believes in me, Ike," he said, throat heavy with emotion. "But I still am afraid for you, friend."

The train pitched, creaked; rain smashed against the windows, wanting to get inside. And these helped muffle the lawman's sincere voice.

"Lon, me an' your father come up the Powder River Trail together, two kids comin' north out of Texas. We trailed in N Bar S cows. I know your old pappy sometimes was hard to get along with, just as you know it, too."

Lon nodded, saying nothing.

"Sometimes when Hank Mallory made up his mind his head got as hard as a cannonball. Just as round and twice as hard. I know you and him had some spats. But hell, Lon, whenever you get two men together, you're bound to have

some misadjustments. I had plenty of arguments with Hank."

"He got awful bullheaded at times."

"But a man like Mallory don't breed a skunk son, Lon. Like produces like in this sorry old world. You get behind them bars in Deer Lodge and you'd never get out. You'd sit behind them bars in that little cell and you'd nurse a grudge and you'd think and think and your soul would grow sourer and sourer, and you'd die inside. The good in you would perish an you'd be black and musty inside."

"Yes, that's right, Ike."

"On the outside, you got a chance to clear your name. Now, Lon, never worry about me, please. I'm an old man and I've seen my life unroll. I've seen the cowtowns and the cattle-trails with your father, and I want Hank Mallory's son to live a good life, but first he has to clear his name."

"I'll do that, Ike. For you and Nellie and for my dead father."

"Son, I'll help all I can."

Lon Mallory put his head in his hands and tried to think. That process was painful because it was jumbled and coloured by violent hate.



Maybe it would be best he did not think, did not remember?

But how could he ever forget?

They had found the charred body of old Hank Mallory in the dark remains of a burned haystack. The day before the body had been discovered Lon and his father had quarrelled publicly in the Silver Dollar Saloon there in Curry Bend. True, old Hank Mallory had been drinking a little too much, and alcohol always made him bellicose and ornery. And Lon had just ridden in from the Andrews' farm out on Beaver Creek. He had been courting pretty Helen Andrews. Helen was the daughter of a farmer and old Hank, cowman to the core, hated the farmers. He called them "nesters"—they were like old hens, he said, and they wanted to *nest*. Their fences were cutting up open range, breaking the cowman. Now, when he had heard that his son had been courting a farmer's daughter, he had let his anger get out of bounds. Lon, head in his hands, could hear his father's angry bellowing voice.

"They's plenty of other gals you can spark, Lon." The entire saloon had watched on as father and son had argued. "Cowmen have daughters, too, you know. Stay with your own

kind, son. Them farmers ain't no good. Stay away from them. Remember you're a cowman, through and through."

Anger had run through Lon. "I'm over twenty-one, Hank. I can take care of myself. Keep your big mouth down, 'cause everybody is listening to you. Talk to me in private, get as mad as you want—but we're in a public place now, Hank."

Then old Hank's temper had really flared. He had turned on his only son and given him a real tongue lashing and Lon had taken it because they were before the public view and this old cowman was his father, slightly drunk but still his father. To-morrow remorse would be with the old man and he would almost get down on his knees and apologize.

"I'd rather see you dead, son, than to have you hooked up with a damned nester. Yes sir, I'd rather see you dead."

"You'll never see *me* dead!"

Bitter words—words not meant—words flung out by whisky and anger, a bad combination. But words heard by the gang in the Silver Dollar. And the next day they had found the old cowman's body in that black-ruined haystack. And those words, repeated from the

witness stand, had railroaded young Lon Mallory to the State pen.

Lon and his father had never been close. They had quarrelled many, many times. Old Hank was the stand-off type of father, the type who would not get friendly with his son. He was a disciple of the old trail driver school: *Learn the hard way, fellow. No books can teach you. Learn by hard experience. Don't come to me and bawl on my shoulder, boy.*

Lon knew what motivated most of his father's unrest and drunkenness. For three years ago his mother had died—and old Hank had never recovered from the blow of losing his wife, who had been more than a wife—she had been the mother and the entire universe, rolled up into good womanhood. Old Hank had taken her death hard . . . too hard.

Now both were under Montana sod.

Sheriff Ike Powers leaned over, peering through the window, hands cupped to cut out the light of the flickering kerosene lamps.

“Looks to me like its about ten miles yet to Cottonwood Bend, Lon,” the lawman said, sitting back. “You take a squint, boy?”

Lon held his head close to the window and

shielded his eyes from the lamplight. Through the rain he saw a line of hills to the south, and then he saw the cottonwoods along Milk River and he recognized a landmark.

"I saw the Miller ranch, Ike. Milk River is runnin' high, fellow. Sure hope Casey is there with the broncs."

"Casey will be there, Lon.

"Milk River is really boiling at its banks, Lon. This rain has caused a lot of run-off water to come down from the hills and mountains. But the rain will cover all tracks."

Lon nodded.

"After you escape . . . when we reach Dodson I'll wire up and down the Great Northern. I'll have to do that, Lon, to make it look good for me."

"That's right."

"Then in Dodson I'll organize a posse. Pick a bunch of scissorbills out of the saloon there. But we won't ride far in this wind and rain."

"Just give me time to get away, Ike. That's all I ask—a chance to get to the hills."

"You'll get that chance."

Lon realized that this old lawman was, in reality, closer to him than had been his father. When he had been a kid going to school he had

stayed winters in Curry Bend with Ike Powers and Nellie. Now it occurred to him that Ike Powers had always seemed more fatherly than had been Hank Mallory. This was a good thought. But it did not stay with him long for Conductor Harry Short came through the car and he bent down.

"Men, I got some news for you," the conductor whispered. "Rolf Latoon is in the car behind this one."

Then he went on his way, lurching against the pitch and rise of the old wooden coach.

And Sheriff Ike Powers and Lon Mallory exchanged glances.

Lon said, "He must have boarded the train from the side opposite the depot. 'Cause when we were standing on the depot waiting for the train, I never saw Latoon around."

"He must have got on from the water-tank side. I don't cotton to this one bit, Lon."

Lon smiled without mirth. "He's no fool. He's going to see me behind bars or kill me, Ike. He knows you and me are good friends. He might suspect something is going to happen."

"He's smart, Latoon is."

Lon forced a thin smile. "He aims to gut-shoot me. And he'd claim he killed me while

trying to escape. And from what I'd guess, you'd not live through it, either. He doesn't like you. If the time was ripe for him to kill you without getting himself in trouble . . . out of the picture you'd go, sheriff."

The lawman nodded. Conductor Harry Short came back and the sheriff reached out and stopped him.

"When did Latoon get on this train?"

"He come in from the water-tank side, the brakeman told me. He's got three men with him, sheriff."

"He's got a reason for being on this train," Sheriff Ike Powers said slowly. "Just like you got a reason for toting that gun, Short. And what is the reason, if it ain't too personal?"

Sheriff Ike Powers watched the conductor. The lawman chewed slowly and softly on his fresh cut of Horseshoe. Lon Mallory saw the conductor glance at the drummer and the other passenger, who was trying to read a newspaper despite the dim light and the jouncing and swaying. The salesman was asleep.

The conductor spoke in a low voice. "Men, there is sixty thousand dollars in this train, up in the express car."

"Gold?" Lon asked.

Short shook his head. "No, not gold—paper money. The paper money is going to the Helena bank where the bank president will sign it and make it legal. You see, it is still unsigned, coming from the mint in Washington, D.C."

Lon Mallory nodded. Sheriff Ike Powers was silent for a moment. The car swayed, journals protested; the rain and wind were busy on the outside.

"A double dose to-night," the sheriff said slowly. "Somebody could lift that paper money and forge the president's signature on it and pass it as lawful currency. Seems odd my office never got notified down in Curry Bend."

"Only notified the Wells-Fargo detectives and us railroad men," the conductor said. "Wanted to keep the shipment a secret, I guess. I wouldn't have told you two 'cept that I've knowed both of you for years."

"Your secret is safe," Lon said.

"Well," Short said, "got to make out my report."

He moved away, stocky body braced, legs wide as he walked. He went into the car ahead. At that moment a man came into this coach through the door at the far end, not the one taken by the conductor.

“Rolf Latoon,” Lon murmured.

He was a bony man of middle-age, this Latoon. Maybe younger than middle-age—maybe in his late thirties. He was the type of man of whom it was hard to judge his age. He was an inch over six feet and that six-feet-one was whale-bone, saddle leather and hardness. Rumour had many stories to tell about this tough, arrogant man. ✓

Some tongues claimed he was a *renegado* Texan who had been driven out of the Lone Star State and had come into Montana with the cattle-drives. One rumour had it that he had been a gambler on the steamers that had plied their way up the Missouri and the Mississippi and that he had killed a man with a knife and had had to flee to save his own hide. Others claimed he had a criminal record behind him and had broken out of a penitentiary. None of the tales jibed. But all people agreed on one point: this inan Rolf Latoon was tough. Tongues agreed on another point, too. Rolf Latoon and his gunmen held Curry Bend in hard toughness.

Now he came down the aisle, braced slightly against the lurching of the car, and his coal-



black eyes, peering out from under bushy brows, touched first the sheriff, then moved over and looked at Lon Mallory. They were stern and they held insolence and a challenge, and Lon felt the rub of these elements against him, making him a little angry. But he knew that anger had no place here. He said nothing but he watched the man with cat-quick vigilance in his eyes, his tough wiry body. Sheriff Ike Powers watched him, too, but he watched more with appraisal than with anger. Time had tempered him and Time still had to work on Lon Mallory.

Latoon said, "Howdy, men," and turned into the seat ahead of them. He put his knees on the seat and leaned over the back and looked at the handcuffs that bound Lon to the sheriff.

"That's the deal, Powers." The thin lips moved and the black eyes showed nothing. "Keep the bracelets on that murderer!"

"You mind your business, Latoon, and I'll mind mine," the sheriff said, not backing up an inch.

Latoon straightened, stood up, hands braced against the back of the seat. He looked at Lon and Lon Mallory answered his gaze and

wondered what thoughts—if any—lay behind those reptilian dark eyes.

They looked at each other with penetrating scrutiny, and Lon Mallory found himself thinking about this man. Outwardly Rolf Latoon posed as a land-locator. He was in the business of locating homesteaders around Curry Bend on Milk River and Beaver Creek. He had a surveyor who fixed section-lines and made land plots. From these Latoon settled the homesteaders on their homesteads. He made their homestead entries, took their homestead-filing fees, and also took a fee for his work. But one thing seemed wrong—terribly wrong.

Latoon settled these farmers on land that was almost worthless as farming land. Most of the people were from the eastern cities. They were of mixed nationalities—most of them from southern Europe—and some could not speak English. They might have known good land when they saw it while in Europe . . . but this was Montana. And most of this valley land held a black alkali. You could not see this alkali for it was the colour of the loam. A person could see white alkali, for it was a white crust; but a man could not see black alkali. But on this land few, if any, crops would grow. The alkali would

not allow them to grow. The ground was sour and the alkali was an acid.

He was doing a terrible injustice to these men. Most of them had wives and children and very few had any money. They were in desperate financial condition. Their crops were short and of little value. They needed money. They borrowed a little money from Latoon, but not much—they were almost all mortgaged to him. And that was what he wanted. Lon Mallory knew this; the entire range knew this.

Everybody but the poor farmers understood Latoon's game. Everybody saw through the dirty plot except the ignorant farmers. The settlers had legal deeds to their worthless homesteads. Dry winds, hard winters, no crops, black alkali—these would force the settlers to eventually desert their homesteads.

Then what would happen?

Everybody seemed to understand . . . with the exception of Hank Mallory. The farmers had settled on land over which Mallory Circle R cattle had grazed for years. Barbwire fences had cut up the Mallory grazing-land. To stay in business the Circle R, like all cow outfits, needed free grass. The margin of profit was so small the cow outfits could not exist if they had

to pay taxes on the range over which their cattle grazed. And the Circle R was running out of range. The farmers and their fences were seeing to that.

Lon had told his father, "Latoon will own all that land eventually. He's got every one of those pumkin rollers in debt to him. They'll leave and Latoon will own their homesteads. Latoon will, actually, own the land we used to run cattle on, and the Circle R will really go busted."

"What do you figure we should do, Lon?"

"Go to the farmers. Buy them out lock, stock, and barrel. Then we'll own their land. We'll have to pay taxes on it, yes. But it'll be ours. We'll get some good bulls—those long-horn cattle are no good—"

That was about as far as Lon had ever got. At this juncture his father usually blew up. He believed in only one type of cow—the bony Texas longhorn. Lon wanted to ship in good Hereford bulls and breed up good beef steers—steers with beef to the hock. With good cattle they could raise almost twice the beef on the same amount of grass. He had reached that conclusion by reading the journals put out by the packing houses. But his father was stubborn and also anything but far-sighted. He wouldn't

even talk to a nester—wouldn't even say hello—let alone talk with one to dicker to buy him out.

"All right," Lon had said, "I'll dicker with them."

"Not with my money."

"Mother left me one-half of this outfit, remember?"

So Lon Mallory had gone out and had dickered with some of the farmers. He had moved openly against Rolf Latoon. He had bought two homesteads—both on Beaver Creek and both having lots of water—by outbidding Latoon. Then had come the quarrel between him and his father in the Silver Dollar Saloon. Then had come the finding of his father's bullet-hammered body, burnt and ugly, in the haystack—a haystack owned by the Circle R.

Then had come the trial, the testimony about the quarrel . . . and here Lon Mallory was, handcuffed to Sheriff Ike Powers, going to Deer Lodge to spend the rest of his life. And here he was, looking at the man whom he was sure had railroaded him to the pen, who had ambushed and killed Hank Mallory.

But how could he prove it?

It had been Latoon and two of his men who

had found the burned body in the black ashes of the haystack there at the far end of Circle R range. Hank Mallory had not come in that night from riding the range and Lon had been saddling a horse to go out and look for his father when the sheriff and the posse had ridden in and had arrested him.

Lon knew that Rolf Latoon was afraid of him. Not so much being afraid in the physical sense, but afraid of him because he might possibly beat Latoon at his own game—that of buying out the nesters. Latoon wanted the Curry Bend country. Already he owned lots of property in town. He wanted to set himself up as the gun-king of that section of Montana. He had brains, too. With one well-executed blow, he had got rid of an enemy—Hank Mallory—and he had also got rid of another enemy by railroading Hank's son to Deer Lodge. The whole thing had centered around that uncalled-for quarrel in the Silver Dollar. Had not that quarrel taken place, the suspicion would never have been put on Lon Mallory. That had been a trick of fate, and it had come at the right time . . . for Rolf Latoon.

Now the sheriff asked, "How come you're on this train, Latoon?"

"Headin' for Great Falls," the land-locator said. "Got some business there—land business."

"Why didn't you get on the train on the right side, like we did?" the sheriff pursued.

"Just don't like to be like ordinary people, I guess."

At this, Lon Mallory grinned. "You're not ordinary," he assured. He wanted to beat in the thin, hard-looking face with its deep black eyes. He wanted to use both fists on this man whom he figured ambushed and killed his father. But he couldn't. There would be a time later . . . he felt sure.

Now Rolf Latoon looked at Sheriff Ike Powers. "You're going all the way through to Deer Lodge with this prisoner, ain't you?"

"That's my job."

"I'm checkin' once in a while," Latoon said, "to see that these handcuffs stay on this man, sheriff."

"Check and be damned, Latoon."

Latoon grunted, grinned, shrugged, and stepped out into the aisle. He braced his lanky body against the lurch of the train. He did not know that those handcuffs were unlocked. Lon could hold himself no longer. He knew he

should have remained seated, playing his game out calmly. But this he suddenly could not do. He came up out of the seat like an uncoiling spring.

“Latoon, I’m getting you!”

Hurriedly Rolf Latoon turned, surprise on his face as his right hand went for his holstered gun. But Lon’s shoulder, smashing forward, drove into Latoon’s chest, pounding him backwards.

Because of his backward step, Latoon’s clawing fingers missed his six-shooter’s handle, and Latoon went back, hitting a seat. He almost fell down. Already Lon had leaped into the aisle.

The salesman had suddenly come awake. The oldster forgot his newspaper. Lon heard the drummer holler something but the words had no meaning or purpose, and they did not register. Then the drummer ducked to the floor. He wanted no bullets to hit his gross body.

Lon figured, then, that the older fellow—the one that looked like a cowman and who had been trying to read the newspaper—might have been stationed in the car by Latoon for the purpose of watching him and Sheriff Ike



Powers. But apparently the old man was not getting into this trouble for he merely sat there and watched, an expectant look on his weather-whipped face. Lon saw these things with one glance, and then he had to concentrate his attention on Rolf Latoon. He heard something fall to the floor at his feet and he realized his gun had slipped out and had tumbled down. He had to control his wild fury, he reasoned; but this was hard for he had waited months to get Latoon alone and away from his gunmen—to get his hands on this man.

But now that moment had finally arrived.

The savagery of his unexpected attack had momentarily dazed Latoon, who was fighting for his breath. Lon smashed a fist into the land-locator's face, knowing all the time he would have to some way get his hands on Latoon's .45. But here he was too slow for Latoon had already pulled the big gun. A sickening fear speared through Lon Mallory. His anger had made him over-play his hand. Now Latoon could kill him. And, also, Latoon would have the goods on the sheriff, for all the time the handcuffs had been unlocked, and Latoon now knew this. No matter what happened,

Sheriff Ike Powers was on the spot, Lon figured.

But this thought also was not pressing at this time. The main thing was to get hold of Latoon's .45. Lon closed in, fear riding him. He lunged in close, every muscle in his body ready, and he got his fingers around the thick forearm. The anger had suddenly left and he was calm and tough. With both hands on Latoon's wrist, he pushed back, making the man's gun-arm point towards the ceiling. Latoon pulled the trigger; the bullet smashed harmlessly into the ceiling of the car. Lon's right hand went up and got the .45 by the barrel. Again the hammer fell and another bullet went upward. Lon felt the heat of the bullet passing through the thick barrel.

He used every bit of strength he had, twisting the gun back. With his free hand Latoon hammered him in the belly. The blows were hard and they hurt. Lon grunted in pain and stars and rainbows danced before his eyes. Lon saw the man's twisted, hate-pulled face—the drawn-back lips, the tobacco-yellow teeth, the narrowed ugly eyes. A new energy seemed to surge through him. This strength was too much for Latoon.

Latoon loosened his fingers and the gun tumbled to the floor. Now they were even—both unarmed, both having only strength and fight at their command. Lon remembered the gunmen in the other car. He had to work this man over fast, or not at all.

A blow from Latoon, plus the lurching of the coach, drove Lon back and Latoon was on him like a wildcat, hammering him in the face and around the heart. Lon had to get room to swing his arms. But Latoon clung to him—mauling, hitting, fighting. His fists were like hard-swinging mallets. They mauled Lon, sickened him, drove blackness before his eyes. And then the thought came that Rolf Latoon was whipping him!

“Watch out for them thumbs!” Sheriff Ike Powers’ words seemed to come from a great distance. “He’ll gouge out your eyes, Lon! Work on his belly, boy! Hit him in the belly!”

Lon did as told. His fists went in and out, regardless of how much punishment his face and head absorbed. And this won the fight for him. Latoon ate too much and drank too much, and these things had softened his belly. Lon worked with great and savage enjoyment and concentration. Then it was over with Latoon

lying in the aisle, blood on his mouth, gasping and choking as he grabbed his belly, a man almost knocked unconscious.

The sheriff said, "Get his gun, Lon."

Lon reached and got two .45s—his own and the one dropped by Rolf Latoon. Latoon's short-gun went under his belt but the other was in his hand, hard and solid. He waited for the Latoon gunmen to barge in, pistols in their hands. But evidently this had worked out in his favour. Evidently the noise made by the wheels, the coupling, the rail joints—to say nothing of the storm raging outside—had kept the sounds made by the fight from penetrating to the other coach. Lon grabbed air, lungs heaving; he thought again of Sheriff Ike Powers.

His anger had really got the lawman behind the eight-ball. They had had their own plans and this fight had not been one of those plans. Casey waited with getaway broncs, there along the Milk River, where it made its bend. Because of the high waters lapping against the right-of-way bank they had figured the train would have to slow down, for the grade might be soft. At this point Lon had been due to kick out a window and drop into the night, making it look

like he had overpowered the sheriff and made good his escape.

Then the thought came that that plan could still be carried out. He would make it look like the sheriff had unlocked his handcuffs to make it easier for him and he had taken advantage of this fact. Still, the sheriff had hollered encouragement to him; this did look bad for Sheriff Ike Powers.

Suddenly Lon saw his way out. He swung his gun in a short, vicious arc, covering both the lawman and Rolf Latoon. And when he spoke he spoke for all four of the men in the car—the drummer, the old-timer, Rolf Latoon, and Sheriff Ike Powers. And his voice was coarse and ugly.

“Sheriff, you made a mistake. You unloosened them handcuffs too soon. I lied to you when I told you I’d be good and just sit there . . .”

Sheriff Powers caught on quickly. “You gave me your word, Mallory. I thought your word was good. You’re putting me in a hell of a deal, son.”

Latoon sat up, spitting blood. He looked at the sheriff, then at Lon. He studied the gun in Lon’s hand.

“Where is my—gun?”

Lon said, “I got it, Latoon. And what is more I aim to keep it, fellow.” He spoke again to Sheriff Ike Powers. “Sorry I had to double-cross you, Ike. But I had to get my freedom.”

Latoon said, “You two is in cahoots.”

Latoon got to his feet, and, without warning, rushed Lon. Lon hacked with his gun, the barrel hitting Latoon behind the head, and, with his right knee, he came up hard, hitting the man in the face.

This time Latoon went down for good. He rolled over on his back, arms spread out, and he was out cold.

Lon spoke to the drummer, who peered from between the seats, on his hands and knees. “You be a good boy or I’ll send a bullet through your fat gut, salesman. Get up on that seat and sit down.”

“Don’t shoot!”

The man sat down. He moved very quickly despite his lard. He sat like an old maid—hands clasped on his lap. Lon looked at the old timer.

“I want no share of this,” the old timer said. “I’m taking no part. This is none of my business.”

“That’s a good way to look at it,” Lon said.

He started to turn, vaguely aware of something moving into the corner of his vision, and then the man's voice, rough and hard, stopped him half-turned, gun drooping in his hand.

"Just stay as you are, Mallory, or I'll kill you!"

The voice came from the door leading to the car holding Latoon's top gunhands. Gun still sagging, Lon turned and saw a man standing there, his .45 level and hard and covering him.

The man was Pock Malone, one of Latoon's killers. He was a short and wide and swarthy gunman whose thick face was pocked by smallpox pits. Now he had a hard glow in his dark and narrowed eyes.

"Almost got away, huh, Mallory?"

Lon summoned a grin he did not feel. "I might still get away." He looked at Sheriff Ike Powers. Malone stood behind Powers and evidently the sheriff had not seen him until his words had aroused him. For Powers had a look of surprise on his face.

Lon looked back at the gunman. Malone moved ahead and the other two Latoon killers came in on his heels, also armed. Fear speared through Lon Mallory. He still held his gun, but they had three guns against his one. Of course,

the sheriff would get in it, but by that time one Lon Mallory might be dead—stone dead, too. This thought was far from pleasing. A moment before the high fires of victory had been in his blood, burning with wild pleasure. Now that fire had suddenly died under these guns and had turned to turgid ashes.

Malone waved his gun towards the drummer and the old timer. "Get out of this car," he ordered. "Both of you . . . and make it fast."

"Don't shoot," the drummer squealed, and ran down the aisle. Behind him walked the old cowman. The door closed behind them and six men were in the car. One was a sheriff, one a convicted murderer, one was Rolf Latoon, and three were Latoon's gunmen.

Lon had momentarily wondered why Malone had chased the drummer and the old timer from the car, but this puzzlement was of short life for the truth hit him with harsh clarity. Malone and the other gunmen aimed to murder him and Sheriff Ike Powers! With the two out of the car, there would be no witnesses!

Lon glanced at the sheriff. The man's face was ash-grey and his hand was close to his holstered gun and he sat stiffly in the seat, ready to pivot and turn and draw and shoot.



The thought came to Lon Mallory that soon Rolf Latoon would come to, and then there would be four guns . . . not three. He had to act and act fast and act he did, and while he moved he hollered, "Gun them down, Ike!"

"With you, Lon!"

Lon turned, then, going to one knee, the movement deceptively swift. His gun came up and he fired as he sank down. But hard upon the roar of his pistol came the snarl of the gun in Pock Malone's fist. Lon's bullet landed first, throwing wide the gunman's aim, and then Pock Malone was going down, screaming as he fell. Behind the man, the other two guns roared.

By now, Lon was between two seats, lying on the floor. They could not see him now. By some miracle he had not been wounded. He gave this predicament quick thought. He saw only one thing to do, and he did it. He shot out the kerosene lamps that hung from the brackets. He broke the bowls on them and kerosene raced down and fire sprang into life in the coach.

"Let it burn!" a gunman hollered.

Then, Lon was on his feet, moving across the aisle. His sudden manoeuvre had had its effect.

The gunman had darted back out of the door, for the kerosene had splashed across them, and the end of the car was on fire. Fire ran along the old velour of the seats, aided by kerosene.

"Ike, we got to get out of here!"

Sheriff Ike Powers sagged in the seat, body limp. A bullet had hit him on the right side of the head. For a moment Lon thought his old friend was dead. Then he realized the bullet had merely dug through the hair and hide and had knocked the man out. That much he hurriedly discovered despite the blood. He got the lawman across his shoulder and started down the aisle. The coach was afire with dancing flames; it seemed to burn in savage glee. Lon stepped over the inert form of Rolf Latoon. He dashed forward, his friend draped over his right shoulder. Just before he reached the flames, he glanced back.

Latoon was sitting up, a wild look in his eyes. Malone was stirring, trying to get to his feet. Then, taking a long breath, Lon plunged through the flames, heading for the vestibule. At this moment, somebody broke an air-hose; the train piled to a stop, wheels scraping the rails, timbers creaking. The force threw Lon and the sheriff through the flames and into the

vestibule. Lon jumped down off the train, landing in the soft mud. He slipped, fell, and lost the sheriff.

Rain roared in. The right-of-way grade was soggy mud. He stood up and then realized the train had been stopped at the right place. Here the river ran close to the grade—he could hear the water gurgling despite the rain. Casey was at this point with the getaway horses.

Up ahead, he heard a man holler. “They’re robbing the train!” He knew then why Latoon and his gunmen had been on the train, for he remembered Harry Short’s story about the sixty thousand dollars in unsigned currency.

He gave his attention over to Sheriff Ike Powers. And all the time a voice inside said, “Mallory, talk about luck. You went through that whole mess without a wound. Old-Lady Luck rode with you to-night.”

The thought of the gunfight left him almost limp.

But this was of short duration. He could not afford to stop and think. But one thought stood out; Rolf Latoon had, in some manner, got wind of the shipment of this unsigned currency. How? Lon did not know. But Rolf Latoon and his men were robbing this train. From up ahead

he heard the shattering of glass. He heard a man scream, "Don't kill me. I'll open the door!" and then he was moving through the brush, the sheriff still on his shoulder.

The body was limp, the hands and arms dangling, the feet and legs like jelly. The thought came that perhaps the sheriff had died. At this moment, Lon Mallory had one of the bleakest moments in his life. It was almost as bleak as the feeling he had had the day his mother had died. He doubted if Latoon's men would try to follow him. The rain was thick, the night dark—besides, they were busy robbing the train. They wanted that sixty thousand dollars. He wondered if Latoon had got out of the fire. The coach was burning with diabolical glee, crackling and sending sparks high into the rain. It seemed odd that it could burn so rapidly despite the tons of rain falling. But it was old and dry inside, he knew. He had to find Casey. Casey would have a horse for him. He needed a horse. He was in the deep underbrush, working towards the river. He knew there was a huge spreading cottonwood tree in this vicinity. He knew this area of the river well—he had fished here and had gone swimming when a boy—and he worked towards

the cottonwood. He realized then that his left arm was bloody. He did not remember being shot. The thought came that the wound must be only a flesh wound. Maybe just a scratch. He had been lucky—very lucky. He ran ahead, the sheriff idle on his shoulder. He went through buckbrush and wild rose-bushes, following a trail made by cattle. And then, he came to the big cottonwood tree—it reared up out of the night.

“Casey?”

He stood there, panting, legs tired, body numb. He could see no horses tied to the low-hanging branches, see no sign of Casey. And fear went through him, making him sick.

“Casey? Casey, boy—this is Lon!”

He waited, breath sobbing; he got no answer. Only the howl of the wind in the trees and the smashing pelting pound of the rain. Maybe Casey had selected the wrong bend in the river, the wrong cottonwood? No, this was not logical. He figured that Latoon and his men would have somebody here with get-away horses for them after they had robbed the express-car. Had that particular Latoon killer met Casey, also here with get-away horses? And had he killed Casey?

Lon knew one thing for sure; Latoon had

really figured on killing him and Sheriff Ike Powers. Then there would be nobody left behind to tell about the identity of the gang that robbed the express-car. Latoon had aimed to kill two birds with one stone. He had failed to kill him and the sheriff.

Suddenly, Lon Mallory stumbled, boots catching in a bare root of a tree. He spilled to the ground, crashed through some underbrush, and then he was kneeling beside the sheriff, who had slipped off his shoulder.

From this low point he could not see the train because of the thick brush. He knew that sudden fear again—the fear that Sheriff Ike Powers had died. He put his hand on the man's throat. His own nerves were not too steady, so it was hard to find a pulse; he could find none. He put his hand over the man's heart. The heart did not beat.

"You're not dead, Ike—"

He put his ear to the man's heart, hoping against hope he was wrong. But he was not wrong. Sheriff Ike Powers was dead. The wound had looked like a minor thing; still, it had killed the lawman. Latoon had killed this man just as Lon Mallory figured Latoon had murdered Hank Mallory. Maybe the bullet had

not come directly from Latoon's gun, but it had come from the revolver of a Latoon man, and that made both the man and Latoon killers.

Cold, trembling, Lon Mallory got to his feet, left arm limp, sore. He could hardly believe that Sheriff Ike Powers was really dead. Then he realized he could do nothing. It would do no good to tote the sheriff any further. The man was dead—he knew nothing, he would never walk again, eat again, run again, smile again. This would be hell on Mrs. Powers. Would she blame him? He hoped not. He had to find a horse—find Casey—get out of here—

He saw another big cottonwood to the east, outlined against the dark sky. He started for it. By accident he found Casey—by sheer accident. And he found him by falling over him, for Casey lay bound hand and foot, there in the mud.

Again, Lon hit the mud, skidding to a stop. But he had not tumbled over a root this time. He got to his feet and ran over to where the man lay bound.

“Casey!”

The man was gagged. Lon ripped the dirty bandanna from his mouth. Casey sputtered, said, “They jumped me. They got a man staked

out with horses. He jumped me and knocked me out and tied me—Lon, what in the name of hell is going on?”

“Latoon and his men are robbing the express car.”

“Now?”

“Yes, of sixty thousand—paper money—unsigned—Harry Short told me. They killed Sheriff Ike.”

“Where is he?”

“Back in the brush—” Lon’s knife was cutting the spot cord ropes from Casey’s hands and feet. As he worked he told about the fight. “Go up to him and you see if you can find his heart beating?”

“All right. But we got to get out.”

“Where are our horses?”

“They took them—When they knocked me out, they took our broncs. Lon, man, we’re on foot.”

Lon Mallory thought, *another mess of hard luck*. Everything had gone wrong. He took Casey back to where the form of Sheriff Ike Powers lay on the wet ground. Casey went down beside the man. He stayed there for some time. Lon Mallory wanted to pray, but he was too choked up. Then he would know the



blinding sting of anger, hot and mad, and then this would go. Latoon would pay for this. Finally Casey got to his feet.

"What do you say, Casey?" Was that his voice—deep and terrified and a long, long distance away?

"He's dead, Lon."

"Latoon will pay."

"We'll make him pay, Lon. They'll pay me for banging me over the head, too. Wonder why they didn't kill me?"

"Wonder why they never killed you? Latoon and those killers—they ain't got no heart. Casey, we got to get out of here."

"How?"

"They got hideout horses staked somewhere. They got our two horses. We find their horses—find the man holding them—and we get our broncs back, maybe?"

"Our horses got turned loose. They stripped the saddles off them and threw the saddles into the river."

"Did you see them do that?"

"Yeah, one man—couldn't tell who he was—too dark. Our broncs are miles from here. But they got getaway horses."

"We get them," Lon said.

"They took my gun."

"I got my pistol."

Casey said, "Let's look to the west—closer to the holdup area."

"Lead the way, Casey."

Casey went ahead and Lon followed. It was good to have a friend, even under such dire straits. Latoon was working this slick. He and his men would be masked. But their plan had backfired on one point. Sheriff Ike Powers was dead . . . but Lon Mallory was very much alive.

Suddenly, they both stopped.

Up on the track, black powder had exploded. The sound was dull, sounding as though it came from the interior of a car.

"They've blowed up the safe in the express car," Lon said.

Casey said, "Guard probably wouldn't open it for them. There they come off the track, Lon. Look at them come—guns talking. They're really killers, Lon. They're running into the brush."

"Heading for their broncs, I'll bet."

The bandits came down off the grade with their pistols lashing out flame. The railroad men had dived under the ruins of the express car. Gunflame cut the rain and gunroar smashed

against the wind. Lon reckoned that when they rode past they'd go past the point where he and Casey were crouched there in the underbrush. Here ran the trail that went down to the crossing in the mud-filled river.

"Here they come, Lon."

"I'm droppin' one out of saddle, Casey, or dyin' in the attempt."

"Take the last one."

"I'll take Latoon, if I see him."

But Latoon took a short cut through the brush and, for a moment, it looked like no rider would hail past them. They heard horses crashing through the undergrowth, heard the curse of riders. Back on the track the train burned and it looked ghostly and far away against the backdrop of rain and darkness.

"Don't look like nobody is comin' this way," Casey said.

His assumption seemed correct, too. Lon wondered just what they would do if they got no horse. As for himself, he would head out for the southern hills on foot. He was an escaped convict and the charge was murder. They'd never take him alive. He would see to that. And before they took him dead he'd take Latoon and some of Latoon's gunmen with him, he vowed.

"They're all ridin' through the brush," Casey mourned. "They ain't takin' no trail—they're makin' their trail."

Lon said, "Listen, friend."

They heard him, then—a rider coming towards them. He came sweeping down the path, riding bent—over in saddle, quirt working with each jump of his horse. He roared out of the darkness, not seeing them, and then it was that Lon Mallory shot. He was on both knees, the barrel of his pistol over his forearm, and he shot by instinct, not by sights.

"You—you missed him—" Casey was almost bawling.

Lon said, "I thought I hit him," and then the rider left his saddle, sprawling out to land in the brush about thirty feet away. His reins fell and his horse slid to a halt, not wanting to step on the reins and throw himself.

"We got a horse," Casey said.

Somebody hollered, "You all right, George?"

Casey answered, "Just fine, Latoon. Be right with you."

"We're crossin' the river. And damn you, man, I told you not to call my name. Hit the muddy water, horse."

Already Lon and Casey were in saddle, Casey

riding behind the cantle on the skirts. Lon turned the horse towards the west.

"We'll cross the river up above," he said. "Then drift south for the badlands, Casey."

"Give this old pony the steam," Casey said, and his voice was shrill and happy. "A man on foot isn't worth a dang."

"You said it, Casey."

Lon had handed Casey the pistol, for he had only one good arm. So he rode away from this spot with the terrible light of the burning train etched in gaunt red lines behind him. Behind him also was his friend, dead—Sheriff Ike Powers. He wondered if he had killed Pock Malone. The man had staggered to his feet, there in that burning railroad car. And the man he had shot from his horse? Had he killed him? Who had this man been?

There were many questions to be answered. But right now Lon Mallory was not interested in getting answers—he was interested in getting distance between him and this spot. The answers could come later.

He moved his left arm. It was numb but he could move it rather freely now, and that meant, he guessed, that no bones were broken.

He had a good horse, a good friend, a .45 and some cartridges, and he was all in one piece.

He had, indeed, been lucky. There were many questions he could not at this time answer. But one he could answer for sure.

From now on out, Lon Mallory would be a hunted man.

Dawn found the pair south of Milk River in the badlands. They had crossed the river at Parrent Crossing, the stolen horse swimming high and strong. Then they had cut through the driving rain across the prairie lands and had reached the rough country, about eight miles south of Milk River. Actually this was the foothill region of the Little Rocky Mountains, about forty miles to the south-west. Both of them knew this country well for they had run wild horses out of these brakes and had helped on round-ups gathering cattle. They made camp in the sandstones for here it was drier with a quick run-off and from this point they could watch the range below. Dawn came at last, and both were glad for that.

The dawn was miserable—wet and chilly and the wind seemed to come off glaciers, it was so cold. Casey had shot a cottontail rabbit and they

had made breakfast out of him, and it was not the best breakfast in Montana. The stolen horse grazed on picket, back in the security of the boulders. They lay in the overhang of a gigantic boulder and this turned the rain from them but could not keep away the ice-cold Montana wind.

Lon shivered. "I might just as well have gone to the pen," he joked. "At least, the railroad car was warm and it turned the rain, and the State had a nice new cell waiting for me—even my name over the door."

"They'll have to change that name-plate," Casey joked.

Lon glanced at his partner. He and Casey Jones had been friends all their lives. They had gone to the same school, had found books hard and tough; they had fought together shoulder to shoulder. What had started out to be a simple break-away had turned into a rout. Casey's job had been merely to bring a get-away horse to the bend in the river. But now Casey was marked in the Law's book. For surely the man who had slugged him—the Latoon man—had identified him as Casey Jones? Lon now put this mental question into direct words.

"That man that slugged you and tied you,

Casey—you figure he knew who he was tying up?”

“I figure so. I was out quite a spell. He might have lit a match an’ seen who I was.”

Casey lowered his head into his hands. His head hurt him with sharp rocket-like flashes of pain. Lon was worried about his partner. He was sure Casey had a skull fracture. Sympathy flooded the lanky cowboy. He cursed himself for getting Casey Jones into this mess.

“Dang, but I’m sure sorry, Casey.”

“Just worked out this way, Lon. You’re not to blame. At least we got our freedom, which is somethin’ you never had on that train. How is your arm?”

“Doesn’t feel bad. That was a shallow wound.”

“We cleaned it out good, even if we had only water to use. Wish we had some peroxide, Lon.”

The arm was feeling okay. It throbbed a little but Lon did not figure the wound serious, for it was shallow—not much more than a rip through the skin. But he was worried about Casey.

“You’re thinkin’ of somethin’, Lon?”



"You should get into Curry Bend and see Doc Goss."

"Hell, I'm all right. Headache a little, nothing more."

Lon said nothing about the time when but a few hours ago Casey had talked irrationally and had slipped into a coma. Casey did not know this. He thought he had merely been asleep.

Lon had found a pair of fieldglasses in a case tied to the saddle of the stolen grey. Now he focused these and put them on a group of riders moving across the floor of Milk River valley. These riders were about a mile below them, riding towards the badlands. They would enter the rough country about two miles to the west, Lon figured.

"A posse," he said.

"They'll never find us, Lon. The rain washed out our tracks. I wonder if Latoon and his men returned to Curry Bend."

"Why ponder on that?"

"Look, Lon boy, they held up a train. They stole federal money. Besides having the country Law against them they ran against Uncle Sam. Would they dare go back to town and parade openly?"

"I think so."

"On what do you base that?"

"First, they were masked. That hid their faces."

"But everybody knew they were on the train, Lon. Sheriff Ike Powers knew—you knew—Harry Short knew—"

Lon tried to keep bitterness out of his voice. "Ike Powers is dead. He can't talk. For all we know they might have killed Harry Short. I'm an outlaw and the Law wants me. We'll say that Short is alive. He can't prove Latoon and his gang held up that train. Masked men look all alike. Latoon could claim he and his men fought the robbers. He could blame it on a gang of outlaws—Kid Curry or Butch Cassidy or Dutch John."

"How about that dead man?"

"Which one?"

"The one you shot out of saddle? The one on the grey?"

Lon shook his head. "Casey, that man might not have been dead. But, we'll say he is dead—we'll say I killed him."

"Yes?"

"Latoon could look at the corpse and say he had seen him once or twice around Curry Bend—if this man has ever been in Curry Bend—"

and then shrug. How could they prove this gent was drawing down Latoon gun-pay?"

Casey nodded, eyes on the posse. "That's right. By heck, Latoon might do that—parade openly; he's got the gall."

"He's got something else, too?"

"And that?"

"Well, first he is kingpin in a town without a sheriff. A town with no Law. Second, he's got guns and brass to back him up. Third, he's got a smart head on his shoulders—he wants that Curry Bend country, and he's on his way to get it. He wanted our outfit. He got it."

"Not yet he ain't."

Lon grinned mirthlessly. "He the same as owns the spread. He killed my father and put the blame on me. He got me sentenced to life imprisonment. A man sentenced for life loses his citizenship. That means he cannot hold property. By Law the spread goes up for sale. Latoon aims to buy it for a few cents on a dollar. So . . . he gets the Mallory outfit, which is what he wanted all the time."

"My head . . . it throbs."

Casey put his head into his hands. Lon focused the field-glasses on the posse. He wondered if some of Rolf Latoon's killers were

riding with the law-group. The ironic thought came that maybe Latoon himself was in this bunch of horsemen. But they were too far away for accurate vision. He watched them ride into the mouth of a canyon and so go out of sight.

He looked at Casey. He had to get Casey down to Doc Goss. Either that, or get the doctor out to see Casey.

Casey spoke from between his fingers. "A day or so of rest, Lon, and Casey Jones will be all right."

"That's right, friend."

"A day or so, Lonnie boy."

Casey clung to that thought. His voice showed he put faith in this thought. But Lon—Lon was not so sure . . .

"Wonder where that stolen money is right now, Casey?"

"Maybe down in Latoon's saloon?"

"Might be. They said it was unsigned. They'd have to ship in a pen artist to sign it, or ship the stuff out for signature. Oh, Lord, Casey, think of it—they think I killed Sheriff Ike. One of my best friends."

"We'll prove otherwise, Lon."

Lon rolled a cigarette and pushed it between

Casey's teeth. He grinned and said, "If you can inhale, son, I'll light it for you."

"Thanks."

Lon lit the cigarette.

"My hands . . . they don't trail good," Casey said.

Lon said, "You'll get over that soon. That blow on the head did no good. I wonder what Helen is doing?"

"She'll be worried about you, Lon."

"You think—she'd go for me?"

Casey grinned, blew smoke. "Go?" he joked. "She's gone, brother."

Lon said, "Sure wish I could see her."

A picture flashed across his mind: Helen Andrews, the farmer's daughter. Helen, nineteen, full of fun, with sparkling bright eyes. Lon had seen her come down off the boxcar when the Andrews family had shipped into Curry Bend, and he had known then she was for him.

And she had seemed to have the same idea.

Lon knew she would be worried. He and his father had had their bitter quarrel because he, Lon, had been out sparking with Helen. She had even asked Lon not to see her. She had not meant that, of course, but she had not wanted

to cause trouble between a father and son, even if she loved the son. She was that big, Helen was—and she was that good and sweet. To Lon Mallory she was as sweet and as good-minded as another woman he had known, loved and lost—his mother. Now the desire to see the woman who someday he wanted to mother his children came over him with surging hunger. Then the thought came that he was an outlaw now, and a wanted and hunted man—and they would watch her, hoping he would come to her.

“We’re out of chuck, too,” Casey said.

Lon got to his feet. He was restless and he demanded action. He looked down at Casey.

“You want me to take you to Doc Goss?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“In the first place, I don’t need a doc. Second place, you’d put your head into a noose—or there’d be bullets waiting for you.”

Lon nodded. “We need another horse. I saw a bunch of broomtails grazin’ along the base of the hills. I could lay a rope on one and leave the grey with you.”

“Good idea.”

“Maybe you want to come with me, Casey?”

“No, I just want to sit here, and rest.”

Lon said, "I'll try to get us another saddle-bronc."

He saddled the grey and rode down the slope, taking down the catchrope. Within ten minutes, he was close to the band of horses, and here he had some luck. He was surprised at his luck. Up to now everything had run against him. But this bunch of horses was a group of saddle-horses belonging to the Quarter Circle T, a horse-outfit. They were all well-broken horses put out on pasture until fall roundup. Lon got them up against a cut-bank. He had his snare built. He let the broncs run past him and he laid the loop on a sorrel that looked like he had good hill-legs and good wind and a strong bottom. The loop hit the sorrel and he plunged to a halt, leg braced in the mud. He did not even get the rope taut. He had been roped before and he had hit the end of a rope and had been thrown. He wanted no more rough treatment. Lon pulled him in and he came in and Lon rubbed the horse's bony nose. Then he led him back to Casey.

Casey was sleeping on his side with his back against the boulder. He did not look up as Lon rode in and a stabbing fear touched the

rawboned cowpuncher and he dismounted hurriedly.

"Casey."

Casey looked up, eyes not too steady. "Heard you ride in," he said slowly. "You got a bronc in fast time. That's a good horse. I rode him one roundup . . . about two years back."

Lon said, "I'll leave the grey with you."

Casey sat up, stretched, eyes normal. "Had a good nap. You take the saddle, though. I'll be here when you get back. They'll never find me here."

"I ride bareback."

Lon made a halfbreed hackamore out of his catchrope and mounted the sorrel bareback. The horse made no attempt to buck. Lon neck reined him around and said, "Take it easy, Casey."

"Watch your backtrail, friend."

Lon gave the man a searching long look that Casey did not see for he was busy shaping a cigarette. Lon felt a sense of high futility—the sense of bafflement a man feels when he's up against a wall he cannot crawl over or under or go around. Then this left and the thought came, *What is ahead . . . is ahead?* So thinking he touched the sorrel with his bootheels and rode



down the slope, the horse gingerly picking his surefooted way through the mud and around rocks over which he might fall.

Lon did not like to ride bareback. But he had no other choice. He kept to the ridges and moved between sandstone boulders whenever possible. He was still worried about his friend. Once he had to hide in the high buckbrush as two riders rode past. This was down along Beaver Creek. He was following the Creek to reach the Andrews' farm. The riders passed about forty feet away. Both of them were farmers he had seen occasionally in Curry Bend. He did not have their names in his mind. He doubted if he had ever heard their names.

There were quite a few farmers in this area. He figured they were not here to stay. Drought and the alkali would drive them out. He felt sorry for them. He watched these two ride around the bend. They rode the way inexperienced horsemen ride—bouncing with each step of their mount, whether the mount is walking, trotting, or loping. They were lambs being led to the slaughter by Rolf Latoon who was using them to get this range. But they apparently did not realize this at this stage of the game. They had faith in Latoon.

He rode through the buckbrush. He jumped a mule-tail buck deer who leaped away on stiff legs. The Andrews' house was set in a clearing. He dismounted in the high brush and moved to the edge of the clearing and squatted there and watched the house. He knew somebody was at home for a wisp of grey smoke hung from the chimney, kept low to the earth because of the oppressive heavy skies. Chickens were in their hen house, not venturing out in this rainy day. The dog—a tawny collie—caught his scent and came to him without barking. Lon had raised him as a puppy and had given him to Helen.

Lon moved through the brush for the thought had come that a guard might be staked out to watch the homestead in hopes that he, Lon Mallory, would try to see his sweetheart. The dog went with Lon. Neither of them found a guard in hiding. They were again at the back of the house. Lon kept thinking of Casey. He could not leave Casey for too long. He wanted to talk to Helen and find out the news. Accordingly he walked boldly across the clearing towards the back door wondering if a bullet would come from the brush and kill him. He had searched the brush, yes, but a man could have been hidden there just the same . . .

But no bullet came. He entered the back door without knocking. Helen was at the wood range and her back was to him and she heard him enter and she turned.

“Lon, you shouldn’t have come here.”

“I know that.” He tried to speak without bitterness. “But I had to get some supplies. And I had to see you.”

“Latoon—he has a man staked out—in our barn.”

Lon nodded. “I looked through the brush. He never saw me come in the back door. The house was between me and the barn.”

They looked at each other.

She was not beautiful, as beauty is judged. Her lips were too full, her jaw too square, her nose too long. But she was clean and she had good thoughts and she was wholesome, and she loved to cook and keep house and she would love him and cook for him and wash his clothing, and she would be a good mother to their children. He had these thoughts, and he liked them.

He wanted to walk over to her, put his arms around her. But he held himself back, for he was wanted and hunted and it would only make

matters worse. So he leaned against the door jamb, his .45 dangling from his hand.

He did not tell her about his wound.

"I want some grub, Helen, and some iodine and peroxide." He told her about Casey. She got a flour sack from a bin. She had intended using it for pillow-cases. She had bleached the print out of it and it was snow white. She started taking canned goods from the shelf. Beans, peas. She had canned these herself from her garden, for she had been here a year and had managed to raise a little garden, but vegetables had not grown good because of the poor soil and lack of rainfall.

"Where is your mother and father?"

"They went to Curry Bend this morning."

"My friend Ike Powers—he's dead, honey."

She shook her head. "Ike isn't dead."

"But we felt his heart—both Casey and me—"

"He passed out. He's in town now. He's in his own jail."

Lon had a moment of complete surprise. Then he realized that he and Casey had been hurried in their examination of the sheriff; also, they had been rattled and their nerves had not

been too steady. This surprise left under the glad news his old friend was alive.

"He got shot in the head," Helen told him. "Doc Goss has been treating him. Two farmers rode by here a while ago. They came out from Curry Bend. They told me this. You must have seen them ride up the creek?"

"I did." Lon smiled at her. "Latoon held up that train. How can he walk around town now without going to jail himself?"

She shoved two loaves of home-made bread into the sack which was now full. She explained that. Rolf Latoon had blamed the holdup on the Kid Curry gang. He claimed the Curry gang had robbed the train. He also claimed that the gang had had inside help, this help being given by Sheriff Ike Powers and one Lon Mallory.

"The town—it believes that, Helen?"

"The people have to swallow it. Latoon and his gunmen are the bosses. Some people figure he is lying—lots of them, in fact. But would you go out and call him a liar, if you were a man with a family and didn't know how to handle a gun? Those men won't buck those Latoon guns, Lon."

"But they stole currency—federal money. That brings in Uncle Sam."

She tied the top of the sack with twine. "The money is gone. In order to prove the identity of the people stealing the money, the money has to be located first. No, Lon, Rolf Latoon is riding on the crest of a wave."

Lon did not dispute that. The fellow at the bottom of the wave, getting soaked with water, was a young gent named Lon Mallory.

"What about Pock Malone?"

"Malone is dead. Latoon says you killed him."

"I shot him," Lon said, "and I did it in self defence."

She watched him, her eyes serious.

"This may sound odd," he said, "but I'm not sorry I killed Pock Malone. He would have gladly killed me."

"I'm sorry I caused you and your father to quarrel, Lon."

Lon grinned boyishly. "We fought long before I met you, Helen. Don't worry a bit about it, girl. Some day you and me will carry on our own private little feud. This will all blow over . . . sometime."

"I wonder, Lon. The charges against you—Lon, what are you going to do?"

The answer to that was simple. There was

one man behind this whole thing. That man had either killed Hank Mallory or had him killed. That man had railroaded him, Lon Mallory, and he had received a life-sentence. The thing to do was get Rolf Latoon./

“And then what, Lon?”

“Make him talk—sign a paper—anything to clear me. I got to clear my name. I’ve got to come back with you, Helen. We have to have faith in that, Helen. If we haven’t faith . . . we have nothing.”

“I’ll work with you, Lon.”

He spoke with grave consideration. “And in so doing you’ll get into trouble. You are helping a criminal escape and stay away from the Law. I need a rifle and some rifle bullets and I need a saddle. Like I told you I roped a horse. But I do need a saddle.”

“Dad’s saddle is in the barn.”

“Yes, and so is a Latoon man.”

She frowned for a moment, busy in thought. “I got an idea. I’ll call the Latoon man into the house. You sneak to the barn and get the saddle and go out the hay window and keep the barn between you and the house and then he won’t see you.”

He gave this approval. "I'll go out the back door when he comes in the front. Now, a rifle."

"I'll get you Dad's rifle."

She went into the living room and returned with a Winchester .30-30 lever action rifle. She also had a box of .30-30 cartridges. While he checked the rifle—the magazine was loaded but there had been no cartridge in the barrel—she broke open the cartridge box and put the cartridges in his pocket. He jacked a cartridge into the barrel and put the hammer on safety-position.

"I'm all set, Helen."

"I'll call the guard—"

She never got to finish her sentence. His lips saw to that. She pressed against him and her young full body was complete with promises. Then they broke and she smiled and rubbed his face with her hand.

"You need a . . . shave, Lon."

"Not as bad as I need being with you," he said.

"We'll be together some day, Lon. Have faith in that. Now, there are your groceries—I tied the sack as tightly as I could. I'll call the guard for a cup of coffee. You can hear him when he comes on to the porch. Then you duck out the



back door. I'll take him into the kitchen so he can't see you go to the barn. When will I see you again?"

Her eyes searched his face and he got the impression she was holding her emotions in sharp check so she would not weep.

"I don't . . . know."

"Be careful, honey."

"I will. I got to get back to Casey. You put iodine and peroxide in the sack, too?"

"Yes, and some Epsom Salts, too. You can use it on his skull. Mix the Salts with water. And Lon?"

"Yes?"

"If Casey gets worse—or if your arm bothers you—come to the house. Dad and Mother will work with us and get Doc Goss out. Don't go into town and look for Doc. They'll . . . they'll kill you."

"All right."

So he promised. But he did not mean this. He would not endanger them. But he did not tell her this, of course. No use adding to the burdens of this girl and her parents.

"Call the guard, Helen."

She went to the front door and he heard her holler to the man who hollered back. She asked,

"Come in for some coffee," and he hollered, "I shouldn't . . . but I will." And she came back and said, "He's coming, Lon."

"Kiss me again, honey."

She did. "I have to get to the front room."

She left and he waited, heart pounding like a steam-engine. Rifle in one hand, he took the sack of chuck, placing it outside the door, for with both hands full he might have slammed the door. He heard then the boots on the porch and he heard Helen talking to the guard, inviting him inside. This was his cue and he went out, slowly shutting the screen door behind him. He picked up the sack and went around the west corner of the house and he stood there a moment, listening to them talk inside the house, the sound coming through the thick cottonwood logs making up the wall. When they were in the kitchen he boldly walked across the yard and entered the barn. The saddle hung from a peg driven in a log, stirrup hooked over the peg. He got the saddle down and got it over his shoulder. He had quite a load. He put the saddle out the hay window, the sack came down beside it, and, carrying the rifle, he crawled out the window, wishing the Andrews family had built a back door to their

barn. Then, sack and saddle again with him, he started for the brush.

The guard could not see him now, even if he were in the living-room. For between Lon and the house was the barn. Lon reached the brush and circled and came to his stolen horse. He threw the saddle on the horse, wishing he had had a saddle-blanket, but he had none, so the saddle would have to sit next to the bronc's hide, and he hoped the saddle would not gall him. The horse had already collected saddle-sores but they had healed and he had the marks of a saddle-horse—two light splotches of hair on either side of his backbone where the new hair had grown out after his saddle-galls had healed.

Lon had hooked a bridle over the saddle-horn, and he adjusted this to length, for the horse had a long head. He had had to lengthen out the off-latigo to fit the horse, for he was rather thick through the barrel. He also had to adjust the stirrup leathers, for Helen's father did not have legs as long as his. He was glad the saddle had a rifle-holster tied to it. He tied the sack across the back of the skirts, pulling down hard on the saddle-strings; he was ready to move. He did not put the rifle in the scab-

bard but he carried it across the saddle. He had coiled his catchrope and strapped it to the off-fork of the saddle.

Thanks to Helen, he had an outfit, a rifle, and some grub. He hoped he would not get her in trouble. She was a good woman and he did not want to cause her trouble. He debated about going back to see Casey. He consulted his dollar American watch. He had not been long away from Casey. He thought of Sheriff Ike Powers in his own jail down in Curry Bend. He had learned a lot from Helen. But the sheriff would have more to tell him. The thought came that maybe he could stage a jail delivery and break the ex-lawman out of his jail. But with this was another thought—Powers was wounded and he needed medical care and it was best maybe he stayed in jail. He wished then he could get Casey to Doc Goss' office. But maybe Casey would turn out all right. He *had* to think that. He *had* to believe that.

He swung into saddle and rode towards Curry Bend. He followed a trail through the brush and worked his way down Beaver Creek. Curry Bend was close to the point where Beaver Creek, coming from the southwest, joined Milk River, which came from the west, flowing east

until it joined the Missouri, about eighty miles down the basin.

Once he saw a gang of riders. They were pushing towards the hills—there were five horsemen in the group—and he judged them to be Latoon riders. They were looking for two people, he knew. Lon Mallory and Casey Jones. Again, he felt fear for Casey's safety, but with this was another thought. Casey knew this range and he would surrender before being shot, Lon knew. He and Casey had reached that agreement. No use fighting a battle against overwhelming rifles. Casey was not wanted for murder. Or was he? Lon did not know. Maybe Latoon had also tied the name of Casey Jones into this. Latoon overlooked no bets. ✓

The riders did not see him and Lon held his hand over the nose of his mount to keep him from nickering. Then the riders were around the bend in the timber, riding at a lope, and almost every man carried a rifle. Lon mounted and continued on towards Curry Bend. From the Andrews' farm to the town was about six miles. He made a plan of action. One thing was in his favour: The jail was set on the edge of town behind the courthouse. Behind the jail grew high sagebrush there on the flat lands. Not

high enough to cover the coming of a horse but still rather high, about to the bottom of a man's saddle-skirts. A coulee ran across the plain at this point, angling into the creek bottom. Lon knew that this coulee, which was deep enough to hide a horse, ran at an angle about a hundred yards behind the jail. His plan was to ride down this coulee, leave his horse there, and then go in on foot, carrying his rifle. This was the best plan.

So he left Beaver Creek—left the protection of the cottonwoods, the boxelders, the buckbrush—and rode across the sagebrush, and he came to the coulee. He put the horse in it and rode towards Curry Bend.

Some places the coulee widened out to become two hundred feet wide—in fact, a small flat; then again it pinched down until there were only a few yards on each side of the trail. The trail had been made originally by buffaloes going to water; with the buffaloes gone, cattle had taken up the same path. Lon crossed the wagon road which led to Curry Bend. The wagon road dipped into the coulee on a wide spot, moved across this, then lifted and ran out of sight. This told him he was close to the town. He knew where the town dump was. It was

right below the court-house. Because of the depth of the coulee at this point he could not see the buildings of the town. A feeling of apprehension came over him. Were Latoon or his men to jump him in this coulee there would be but one way to flee and that would be either up or down the coulee. And they would ride the rim and shoot down on him. But he had to take this chance.

He came to the town dump and he knew, by the gathering of tin-cans, old wagons, old broken down buggies, he had ridden past the jail by about a quarter mile. Accordingly he turned his horse. He hid the animal in a clump of brush and dismounted, carrying his rifle. He tied the horse to a stump and moved ahead, peering over the rim of the coulee.

He was directly behind the jail. Beyond the jail was the court-house. He remembered standing there in that courtroom listening to Latoon and his men lie him into Deer Lodge penitentiary. He had been lucky, in one way: He might have been hanged. Hanged in the town square of the town in which he had been reared and in which he had gone to school. Hanged like a common rustler or horse-thief.

He gave the area a quick but good scrutiny.

He saw no danger so he moved ahead, running across the strip with its high sagebrush. Within a minute, breathing heavily, he was against the rough wall of the stone jail, rifle in hand. He stood there and watched and waited and looked and the sky was leaden and grey and his thoughts were of the same hue.

He looked up. He was directly under a cell. And his voice was low as he said, "Ike. Ike Powers."

He waited.

He heard nothing from inside the cell. From somewhere came the sound made by a barking dog. The dog was across town. From main-street came the sound of voices. Children coming home from school for noon, he figured. He reared up so his voice would be clearer to the occupant of the cell . . . if that cell had an occupant.

"Ike Powers."

Suddenly he heard a man ask from inside the jail, "Who's there?"

Lon's heart jumped. It was good to hear his old friend's gruff voice. He remembered how he and Casey Jones had given up the lawman as being dead.



"This is Lon Mallory, Ike."

"Good God, Lon, be careful."

He heard boots move to the window. He wished the window were lower so he could look in. He looked around for something to stand on but could see nothing. He decided to leave things as they were.

"What you doing, Lon?"

"Came in to talk to you."

"What happened after you left me?"

Briefly, with one eye alert for danger, Lon told what had happened. The sheriff then did some talking. Lon and Casey had done right by leaving him behind. Even had he been alive—and he chuckled here, a deep and hearty chuckle—the three of them could not have made an escape on one horse.

"Been kinda crowded, son."

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, not too bad, Lon. I'll come out of it. Kinda bad to be locked in my own clink, though. But I might get out on bail. The charge is aiding and abetting a gang rob a mail train and also helping a prisoner to escape."

"Latoon has them believing that, huh?"

"He's got the judge under his thumb. But the judge always did sway with the wind. And

the wind is blowing hard right now against him, Lon. Son, if you got any sense, hightail out of this country. Send later on for Helen. She'll wait. But, Lon, get out, son. They'll kill you."

"Won't go, Ike."

"Why not?"

"First, I'm not running away from a fight. Second, Latoon has framed me. I aim to get revenge, even if I do it outside of the Law like he is. And another thing, Latoon ain't getting my Circle R spread. Hank and my mother worked too hard to build up that iron. I'm going to run that outfit and I'll die before Latoon gets his mitts on it, Ike."

"Latoon will figure out a way to get it, legally, too."

"He sure can make a lie stick. Hell, anybody should know he and his men robbed that train, not Kid Curry and his riders. Tell me what you know about the holdup?"

"You prob-ly know as much as I do. The men were all masked. They wore long slickers. They used dynamite—the fool mail clerk locked the door. They blew the door off and got the money. Nobody can identify a man with a heavy hat pulled down low, a mask that covers even his eyes, and a big yellow raincoat to hide

his body. You and me know it was Latoon and his gang, but who else beside us cares, actually."

"How about the conductor, Harry Short?"

"Harry got shot, Lon. Got shot bad, too. He's in the hotel almighty sick, so Doc Goss says."

"Them other two that was in the car with us—that old timer and that fat drummer. They'd make good witnesses."

"Not them. They never saw nothing, heard nothing, did nothing. They've already got out on the next train. Nobody even took their names and their addresses. They was rearing to go . . . away from Curry Bend."

"Latoon sure got us where the hair is short."

"He sure has."

"What else do you know?"

"Well, the railroad company is gettin' in two Pinkerton detectives, I understand. But I look for them to do nothing. Just ride blind trails. Latoon blames it on the Curry gang. Well, that is logical—the Curry gang has held up a number of trains, both in Montana and Wyoming lately. Latoon says he was on the train to make sure I never turned you loose. Which he was, in one sense."

“Wonder where the Curry gang is located right now?”

“Nobody knows, I reckon. But you and me know one thing, even if we can’t prove it—the Curry gang did not rob that train. That train was looted by a gent named Rolf Latoon and his gang.”

“But we can’t prove it, Ike. Wonder where that stolen unsigned currency is right now?”

“I sure don’t know, Lon. I can’t even guess. Hey, there is somebody comin’ down the cell aisle. Lay low and listen if you can, and I’ll report back to you if you’re still around when the talk is over. Looks to me like the jailer.”

Lon could hear the jailer and the ex-sheriff talk. Sheriff Ike Powers talked rather loud so the words could get to Lon. The upshot of the conversation was that in the morning the sheriff would get his preliminary trial. Soon the jailer left and the sheriff returned to the window.

“Hear our conversation, Lon?”

“Sure did. Judge Hosteller ain’t your friend, either. Well, do the best you can, Ike.”

“You drifting, Lon?”

“Not out of the country. Out of town maybe.”

“I’ll try to get out of here. I got Smith as a

lawyer. He ain't much, but he is the only attorney in town except the county-attorney, and his job is to prosecute my case. Quite a twist in fate, Lon."

"Don't worry, Ike."

"Don't risk coming here to the jail to see me again, Lon. If you got anything to see me about go over and see my wife."

Lon had a momentary vision of motherly Nellie Powers. Nellie would be worried sick. This memory did not help him any. Therefore he shoved it from his mind. What had happened had happened . . . and they would have to work to remedy the events of the last week or so.

"Seeing you won't leave the country, Lon, let me give you some advice, huh?"

"Shoot."

"Keep free at all costs. Even if you have to kill a Latoon man to do it. Don't let them get you behind bars. Die before surrendering. Outside of that, I dunno what you should do first."

"Wonder where that stolen money is?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well, if a man got his hands on those unsigned bills and tied them in with Latoon,

he'd have the big bear right where he wanted him."

"Hell, this is a big country. Them bills could be in a million places. But a guy could work on that angle, Lon."

"You think the dinero would be in Latoón's safe in the Broken Spur?"

"Might be. I doubt it, though. He's a fox, the devil is. He won't want anybody to tie him up with that stolen money."

"So long, Ike."

"Sit tight, Lon."

Lon looked around carefully. He saw nobody. He went along the wall and came to the courthouse. He still was in the clear. He moved across the alley and came in behind the Broken Spur Bar. He scurried into a shed and watched the alley, rifle in his grip. He had seen one man and that man from a distance. The man had been carrying a box of what was apparently rubbish and he was heading for the town dump. Lon wondered if the man would see his horse. He doubted that. The man would not find the horse unless he wandered up the coulee and ran across the beast tied in the brush. And that was not logical. On a day with the wind this raw most people kept close to home unless

some urgent errand or business took them out into the open. This was a break for Lon Mallory.

He watched the alley through a dirty mud-streaked window. Evidently this was a chicken-house—or had been at one time—for the smell of feathers and chicken manure was strong. But there were no hen-roosts or nest-boxes. There was a pile of scrap iron in the corner. He decided he was in the shed behind Bill Allison's blacksmith shop. He went to the pile of scrap iron and rummaged through it and found what he wanted—one half of a broken buggy-spring. The spring was about two inches wide and tapered to a sharp end and was very strong. Again, he looked up and down the alley. His heart was literally in his throat. His hands were dry and his legs trembled. He was a long, long way from his horse. He saw nobody in the muddy alley. He went across the alley, slopping in the mud, and came to the back door of the Broken Spur. This door, he knew, led to Rolfe Latoon's office, which was separated by a partition from the saloon proper, the hangout for the Latoon gang.

He tried the doorknob, figuring all the time the door was locked; the knob turned, the door

would not open. It had a night-latch snapped inside. He put his weight against the door and from the sag judged the approximate location of this night-latch and at this point he drove the sharp end of the spring between the jamb and the door. He hoped nobody was in the office; if there were somebody there, the noise would bring them to the door . . . and maybe with a gun in hand.

He was riding a hunch. A hunch as poor and as weak-kneed as a range horse after the end of a month-long blizzard that had covered the grass with deep snow that made it hard for a horse to paw through. But the safe door might be unlocked. But if the stolen money were in the safe . . . well, Latoon would keep it locked. But he had this bare and remote chance. And he had to grab at every straw that floated his way in this ocean of muddy trouble.

He got a good purchase and then, sore arm and all, leaned on the spring, making it bend. His spring slipped and he almost fell, but he caught himself in time, although he did bang his sore arm against the door.

He waited, listening. He heard nothing but the sounds of two women walking out on the mainstreet and talking. He could not make out



what they were saying because of the distance. Their voices trailed off. He jabbed the sharp end again between the door and the jamb. He had to work fast and recklessness took him; he slammed the point home, driving it in with urgent haste. Again he put his weight against the spring. The spring bent, wood creaked; there was this moment when things were in balance. The thought came, *I can't open it. The tongue of the latch is too long. I can't spring the door enough to make the tongue move out of the cover.* And then, without warning, the door flew open.

It popped without warning. He almost fell into the office. But he caught himself, hope spiralling through him. He had won for once, even though the victory might amount to nothing! Quickly he entered the room. He was in a room about fourteen by twenty, he guessed. A bunk was in the far corner. Here was a roll top desk, a few spittoons unpolished and tobacco-smeared, some chairs, and the safe. The safe was against the far wall. He stood there, closing the door behind him after he had locked out the latch. He might have to make a fast get-away. Therefore the door had to be open-locked, ready for an exit.

His wounded arm throbbed. He had bumped it rather hard. He moved across the room, still carrying his rifle; he had dropped the spring in the alley. He turned the key in the door leading to the saloon's main portion. The door was locked. Latoon had locked this from the inside, leaving the key in the slot, and then had gone out the back door, the latch shutting behind him. He put his ear against the thin door panel. He could hear the sound of pool balls colliding and he heard men talking. He could make out some of the louder words but the words spoken in average tone were wasted on him.

But he had no time for eavesdropping. Gradually the room became clearer to his eyes for it was dark in here. He went over and knelt before the safe. It was an old safe, the blue worn off it, and it was dull and grey with time. It had a dial combination and a big handle. He tugged down on the handle. He heard machinery grate and to his surprise the safe door started to open.

The safe, then, was unlocked. That meant there was nothing of importance in it. He remembered that the local bank had added some safety-boxes a few months ago. Maybe Latoon kept important papers and money at the

bank? It would be ironical indeed if the stolen unsigned currency was stored in the bank. He lit a match and looked through the safe. It did not take more than two matches. A few letters, some other trivials—even a bottle of ink. But not a cent of hard money or paper money. Disgusted he shut the door. He got to his feet. He went to the desk and pulled the drawers open. Some papers he did not have time to read, nor did he have the desire. Still no currency. He pulled down the blinds and boldly lit the kerosene lamp he had taken from the bracket-wall-holder. The yellow light clearly outlined objects in the room. The thought hit him that perhaps the room had a secret hiding place. He looked behind the two pictures on the wall. Only a blank space, nothing more. He stood there, lamp in hand, realizing his work and the danger he had risked had all been for naught. This office held nothing valuable to him.

This trip to Curry Bend had netted him nothing. Oh, a little information from Ike Powers; nothing except danger, outside of this. He stood there and held the lamp and tried to do some thinking, trying to outline the trail ahead. This brought him nothing. He looked at

the lamp and speculated on something. Then he took the chimney free, despite it being hot, and put it on the desk. He unscrewed the wick from the lamp. The bowl was full of kerosene. It was a big lamp with a flat-bottomed round bowl. The bowl had been made big so the lamp would require less frequent fillings. He poured kerosene over the bunk. He poured it along the base of the walls. The stink of it was strong.

Then he lit a match. First, he applied the flame to the saturated places along the baseboards; these leaped into quick life. The tongue of flame ran to the bunk. Soon the interior of the office was a ribbon of flame. The flame ate up the blinds, snarling upward.

*Time to go, Lon Mallory.*

Lon left the door open so the flame could have some air. He went down the alley and he heard a man hollering somewhere. The voice must have come from inside the Broken Spur Saloon.

"Fire!" the voice screeched. "Fire, in Latoon's office!"

Lon had no compunctions about burning down the office. He only hoped the fire would also destroy the adjoining saloon. A man ran past him carrying a bucket. He had come out

of the back door of the Mercantile Store. He hollered, "Fire in the Broken Spur," and then he halted and said, "By hell, if it ain't Lon Mallory," and Lon's rifle came down and hit the man across the head. It ripped his hat from him, split his skull, and knocked him unconscious to the mud.

But the town was on the move—hollering, yelling, screaming. He had never seen a town snap so into life. One moment it had been dead, washed by weeks of rain, surly and cold; the next moment it was alive with people running, screaming to each other. The main-street had people on it. Lon thought, *I have to make it out of here, and fast.*

He ducked between the Mercantile and the Morgan Hardware Store and came out on Montana Avenue, which was Curry Bend's main-street. A glance told him a black horse was tied to the hitchrack in front of the Mercantile. He did not know who owned the black. He did not care. He needed a horse. The black was a horse. Such was his simple logic.

The townspeople were running towards the Broken Spur, which was about halfway down the street, on the same side of the thoroughfare. They were carrying buckets and making a great

racket. Lon knew he could not ride out that direction. To do so he would have to ride through the stream of people. He was sure some of the people were not sorry to see the saloon burn. The older people in this town—those who had built this range by tearing it from the hands of the redskins and the prairie marauders—were not in accord with Rolf Latoon and his high-handed methods, he knew. But they were in the vast minority. The others kowtowed to Rolf Latoon, and they had reason to be subservient. Lon realized he would have to ride south, reach the corner of the Town Hotel, then turn to the west, heading for his horse in the coulee. The thought came that perhaps somebody might have stumbled across his stolen horse. If this had happened he had lost his grub and supplies. He had been in town almost an hour. Schoolchildren had been going home for dinner when he had talked to Ike Powers. Now they were trekking unwillingly back to school but stopping, of course, to watch the fire.

He decided upon a bold venture—he would not dash out to the black but he would walk out. Speed might attract too much attention. Accordingly he told himself, *Lon Mallory, here goes nothing*, and he walked across the plank

sidewalk, heading for the black horse. Two men rushed by him but apparently were too busy to recognize him; for this he was thankful.

He walked up to the black and said, "Nice boy," and he noticed the bronc carried the brand of the Latoon spread. He wondered if Latoon were in town. He heard somebody hollering Latoon's name, as if summoning him. He untied the black. The owner had looped the reins around the tooth-gnawed pine-pole hitching-rack. He unlooped them now. The owner had tied his reins together. Lon did not untie them but looped them over the black's ears. Then he found a stirrup and lifted himself into the saddle. He had a roaring in his ears. His throat was dry. He wondered if a bullet hit a man in the back and went through his ribs and heart if the man would die instantly! He hoped and prayed this would not happen. He thought of Helen Andrews' grave and thoughtful eyes, her prettiness and womanly cleanliness. But he did not dare think of his betrothed. He fitted himself in the saddle and neck reined the black around. He rode into the middle of the street, his muscles demanding he put the black to a fast lope, but his logic demanding he control his senses and keep his

muscles in check. Brains were worth more than brawn at this time. He was jogging away from the people. He still was afraid he would get a bullet in his back. He was about a hundred feet from the corner of the hotel. Once around it and he would be safe. The fear of the bullet still persisted. He had fought his emotions enough. He had to turn around to see if anybody was raising a rifle, lifting a shotgun against him. Accordingly he looked back.

And there, in doing that, he made his error.

For somebody behind him hollered, "Hey, there goes somebody on Curly's horse, and Curly is standin' here beside me! Curly, somebody is stealin' your horse, man!"

"That's Lon Mallory!" another man screamed.

But Lon was already on the move. He did not dare fire back—to do so would endanger innocent women and children, not to mention men. The black left his tracks like a racehorse leaving the starting-gate.

"Gun him down!" a man hollered.

Lon Mallory thought: *That was Latoon hollering*, and then he heard a gun roar, the sound smashing through the running-roar of the black's hoofs. Even though the soil was wet it



was gravel hauled in, and the hoofs made their sounds. Bent low, a jockey riding a hard saddle, Lon Mallory sent the black forward, the corner of the hotel slowly inching towards him. He swung the black then, for victory was in sight; a jump or two, and the jutting corner of the hostelry would be between him and the guns—a solid hunk of material that would hide him and turn the bullets. And then, the black screamed, and he fell.

Lon thought: *He stopped a bullet*, and he hauled on the reins desperately, trying to lift the horse, but this he could not do for the bronc had his head bent, rolling over. Lon left his saddle just in time. He had ridden dozens of bucking broncs, breaking them to a saddle, and these horses had sometimes fallen, just as this horse was doing. Lon kicked his boots out of the stirrups and left on the run. He was just in time. The black went completely over and he heard the crushing and snapping sound of wood breaking. That would be the saddle-tree snapping across its thinnest part, the bars. Lon skidded in the mud, caught himself; he hit the side of the hotel. He still clung to his rifle. The black scrambled upward and Lon hit the saddle again, grabbing the reins. The horse had merely

stumbled in the mud. He had hit a tin can and had slid and had gone down. Lon said, "Get moving, pony," and the horse responded. But he limped in his off front-leg. He had pulled a tendon or muscle. Despite this handicap, he made a strong gesture. Lon rode down the alley. He heard men holler and he knew it would take some time to organize a posse. The open door of the livery-barn was ahead and he boot-pounded the black into the dark maw of the building.

There, he dismounted.

The black stood with heaving flanks, mud oozing from him. He held his off front-leg up, the tip of the hoof touching the ground. Lon said, "Good horse," and he ran down the aisle between the stalls. He headed for the back door. The hostler was not around, it seemed—he had probably been attracted to the fire. Which was all right, Lon agreed; the old man might have tried to lift a gun against him. Horses were in the stalls, some unsaddled, others with saddles. It was a lazy cowpuncher who would not unsaddle his horse, Lon thought. This was an idle thought, meaningless—just a thought, nothing more. Coming out of

nowhere as thoughts do, returning to its mystic dark source.

Lon smelt the good smell of horseflesh. He smelt gear and horse-manure and the sweet aroma of bluejoint hay. He came to the back door and slid it open. It went open on protesting rollers that squeaked against their runners in oil-less protest. He was within a hundred feet of the coulee wherein his horse was tied. He ran and disappeared over the edge. At this point, the coulee was about fifty feet deep, and its sides were steep. Lon slid through greasewood and sagebrush, sliding like a child down a toboggan chute, sitting down flatly, legs held together. It was hard on his rear. He tore his levis on a rock. But he managed to hang on to his rifle, holding it to one side, holding it over his head. He finally came to the bottom. He was wet from the mud but he wasted no time brushing mud from his pants. His horse was up the coulee; he headed that way, running as fast as he could. He wanted to keep on breathing good air. He wanted to marry Helen Andrews and have a home and cattle. To achieve these goals he had to stay alive.

He wondered how far it was to his horse. He judged about two hundred yards. He came to

the dump and had to jump over the tin cans. The place stunk of garbage; it was not like the odours of the barn—good and strong to a horseman's nostrils. He cleared the refuse in wide leaps, but he was getting very tired.

His lungs did not ache—they were agonized and tortured sections of his body. His legs were getting stiff. He fell once and got up and looked at the rifle; no mud was in the breech. He pulled down to a slower pace. He doubted if they would find him in this coulee. They would find the black and look around town for him? They might do that. They might think they had him penned in Curry Bend. That thought was good; it brought new strength to him. If they looked for him in Curry Bend, then he would have time to make his escape into the hills. He floundered around a sharp bend and there was his horse standing there in the brush.

Never in all his life had he seen such a welcome sight. Had he had time he would have put his arms around the bony ugly head of the stolen horse and hugged him. But he had not time. He untied the horse and the horse wanted to play and nibble him. But Lon Mallory had to bat his head to one side. The horse got mad and put back his ears flat to his skull and tried

to bite him. Lon got the reins over his neck and found his stirrup and lifted his muddy and bruised body into the saddle.

*Come along, horse, you got a ride ahead.*

He turned the bronc and the horse reared, angry at the bit although it was only a curb bit with a small port. Then Lon's boots drummed on the ribs in hollow tattoo, making the horse lope up the coulee. He wished he had spurs. But he had no spurs. When they sent a man to a penitentiary for life they did not let him wear spurs on the train. You don't need to spur a passenger car. Nor do spurs mean anything when you got a long lifetime to spend behind the bars of the Montana state prison in Deer Lodge and look out at the beautiful cones of the Powell Mountains with their snow and free streams and dark timber. So Lon Mallory had no spurs. He had hard heels though; he used these. The horse wanted to run. He levelled out, dodging the brush, sure-footed as a Rocky Mountain goat. He sped up the coulee, tail streaming; he made good time.

Lon realized that again Old Lady Luck had swung her loop and pulled him in. Now on his shoulders would be put the blame of setting Latoon's saloon on fire. He had stolen the black

horse. Even though he had left him in the town livery, Latoon might try to put the charge of *horsethief* against him. Lon grinned with boyish humour. One more charge, whether it were stealing a horse or arson, meant no difference; it made no never-mind. He had so many charges against him a few more made no extra weight.

He wondered where Rolf Latoon had been when he had set the man's office on fire. Had Latoon been on the other side of the door in the saloon? Lon had figured the man would be somewhere in Curry Bend. He was not one to ride out heading a posse in such weather. This job was for his gun-hirelings. Latoon was wise and Latoon would stay close to Curry Bend and listen and watch and scheme. Another thought came to Lon: *Would Latoon organize a posse and try to catch him?* Or would he stay and fight the fire demolishing his saloon? He did not debate long on these questions for only one answer seemed logical.

Latoon wanted to kill him and Latoon would leave others to battle the flames and Latoon would get his bronc and some of his men and head out to try to run to earth an escaped convict.

By this time most of the shock had left Lon

Mallory. He had youth and youth is resilient; he was tough again, and his muscles were wiry. He was coming to the point where the coulee zigzagged into the rough hills with their sparse brush and big sandstones. The coulee also was becoming narrow and levelling out. He left it, then, riding into the hills. He circled a hill, the horse breathing heavily, and then he was on its high crown, looking at the valley below him. The rocks hid him and he dismounted and got on the flat top of a boulder and looked at the basin below him—this basin of intrigue, of drizzling rain, of mud and grey sagebrush and, in the distance, the town of Curry Bend and the river.

Two things attracted his attention down on the flat. One was the group of riders moving off towards the west, dark spots dodging through the sagebrush, across the alkali beds white with alkali and grey with greasewood. About a mile ahead of this group of horsemen rode a single man, plainly heading for the Double Diamond Ranch, about twelve miles from Curry Bend. He rode at a lope. Lon Mallory had to smile. The posse was following a Double Diamond rider. Evidently the Latoon riders had cut his sign, and had mistaken this sign for the tracks

left by one Lon Mallory. They could not see the cowpuncher yet—they were about a mile behind him, and the country was rolling. They would have a surprise when they finally overhauled the cowboy. And the cowboy would be surprised, also.

Lon looked at Curry Bend. Over the town was a pall of smoke and occasionally through this grey blanket could be seen the licking red tongues of flame, even at this distance. The Broken Spur was going up in flames. Lon hoped none of the other town buildings would catch fire. The Broken Spur had a vacant lot on each side of it and the mainstreet in front, a wide alley in the back. And there was little, if any, wind down there on Milk River valley. A bucket-brigade would keep the fire in bounds, he figured. He glanced at the posse again. The men rode fast, sweeping across the palm of the basin, and soon they would be even with the cowpuncher, who apparently did not know he was being pursued, for he rode at an easy gait now, having slowed the pace of his bronc.

Lon slid down off the boulder and went to his horse and mounted. He had best get back to Casey Jones. He had been some hours away from his sick partner. He let the horse run,



and sweat came out on his heavy shoulders, and corded dirty ropes of lather gathered from his bit. The edges of the saddle were thick with grey sweat. Lon wished again he had had a blanket for the trusty horse, but he had none . . . so that was that.

He swung into the hills, and inside of about half an hour he drew rein, there on the ridge, hidden by the high underbrush, and he looked at the ranch below him. Within him was a great homesickness. This was the ranch where he had been born, where, to date, he had spent his life. This was the home ranch of his Circle R spread. He was about a quarter mile from the outfit. He knew Latoon had men out watching it in hopes he would try to contact the cowpunchers on the ranch. The thought came that maybe Latoon had run off the old Circle R hands. He had heard such a rumour during his short and tragic trial. This was the spread that would soon belong to Rolf Latoon, and probably already the legal wheels were grinding down in Curry Bend, the legal moves that would give him possession of this spread for a few cents on the dollar.

So young Lon looked down on this ranch and a great sorrow was in him. He saw the two corrals, big enclosures that could hold a herd of

horses or cattle, and he saw the six haystacks, long and yellow, and then he saw the blacksmith shop, the bunkhouse, and lastly the house itself. This was a big rambling house with a long porch. His father had built it from the design of a Texas ranch-house. Made of native adobe, it was solid against the wind; snow and rain could not touch it. The sod roof was solid and protective. This was the house that he had planned to bring Helen Andrews to as mistress, but her name would not then be Andrews . . . it would be Helen Mallory. He had these thoughts and they bent him and made him almost ill, but in this malady was a strong vein of revenge. He had had this dream, he had looked forward to it, and they would not—they could not—drive him from it. He would make it come true.

Latoon . . . or no Rolf Latoon.

Latoon had won every hand—all the important hands. True, he had fired the man's saloon, but this was almost of no importance. Maybe, in fact, when he had surrendered to the sudden whim, he had actually lost prestige in Curry Bend. Then he smiled with harsh wryness. He had no prestige in Curry Bend. And so he had lost nothing.

The desire to ride down the slope and go to his home was strong in him, pulling at his personality with hard cords. But this he knew he could not afford to do. The brush would be spiked with Latoon men waiting for him to make just such a foolish move. Again he remembered the fire leaping along the baseboards of the room and licking up the wall. Would Latoon in turn burn down the Circle R? This fear made him feel cold, made a hand knot in his belly. Then logic moved in and broke the fingers of this hand apart.

No, Rolf Latoon wanted the Circle R, and therefore he would not fire the buildings. He wanted this ranch as the home ranch of his vast scheme to control the unlimited boundaries of Milk River range. And a man did not destroy something he could have. If he could not attain his goal, then he worked not to perfect but to destroy. This was, after all, only human nature, Lon knew. So Lon rode on, letting his bronc climb the ridges. And from this high point he could see the homestead shacks of the nesters, there along Beaver Creek. They were small squares set against the greenery of the cottonwoods and boxelders. Around these squares were patches of greenery. These were fields of

wheat and rye and barley and corn and alfalfa. This rain would do these crops much good. But this was a wet year. He had seen times when it rained very little for as long as four years at a stretch. Times when the hot blistering summer-winds moved across the parched earth and sucked every iota of moisture from it leaving the grass brown and dead and leaving cattle skin and bones. Cattle had died and horses had stood in bands, ribs shiny under their sagging skins. These days would come again. Dryland farming in this area would never pay. His father had said that; he thought the same.

Irrigation was the saviour of this country. He and his mother had once gone to visit his uncle back in the Rockies in Colorado. There had been drought on the high ranges but his uncle's alfalfa fields had been green and high. That was because they had been irrigated.

Although only a boy in his teens, the theory of irrigation had intrigued him. His uncle had made check-dams back in coulees. These dams had been made of earth pulled in by horses hitched to a fresno and had been faced with rock and had had a run-off and head-gate. When the alfalfa had needed water the head-

gate had been opened sufficiently to allow the right amount of water to run into the ditches. When spring came and the snow melted too fast, or it rained hard, the excess water went over the run-off area, thereby not overtaxing the abilities of the dam. He had outlined a similar idea to his father but Hank Mallory, a cowman of the old school, had immediately vetoed the plan, saying Nature would provide. But he had intended to put in dams and irrigate parts of the Circle R later on when he ran the ranch. Now it seemed that that day would never arrive or materialize.

Old Hank had been terribly bullheaded.

Riding towards the rocks where he had left Casey, young Lon Mallory decided he might have to stay away from Helen Andrews, if not for his comfort and safety then for hers. For her farm would be watched night and day. He had been lucky this day; other times, his luck might run muddy.

He wondered how long he would have to be a human coyote. How long he would have to run, to dodge, to hide, to fight? He had had enough of it as it was. It could stop right now. But he knew it would not stop until he had the evidence on Latoon, had either killed Latoon

or had put him behind bars. Only then would he be a free man to ride with Helen over the Circle R range and check on the Circle R cattle.

He wondered about the two railroad detectives, the Pinkerton men who were supposed to come to Curry Bend. Rolf Latoon would immediately take them under his wing, he knew. The detectives might not be aware of the fact, but Latoon or one of his men would watch them night and day.

They would come into Curry Bend, talk with Rolf Latoon, take a few drinks, talk some more, make out their report, and then the pair would catch a train out, probably about half-drunk. And for them the incident would be closed. An insurance company probably had insured the shipment of unsigned currency. Let the insurance company pay. No use a man riding his tail-end to a nubbin to get the Curry gang. Hadn't been done yet.

On Willow Creek he drew into the brush and let a Latoon man ride by. Evidently a posse had split back in the rough country and this man was heading alone across the range for Curry Bend. He did not see Lon sitting his horse in the brush. Lon recognized him as a man he had seen hanging around the Broken Spur.

Evidently the fellow's throat was dry for a drink of whisky. But one thing was certain—he would not get that whisky in the Broken Spur. The man carried a rifle and he rode at a lope, apparently in a hurry to get to town. Lon let him ride by unmolested. Time was slipping away. Casey would be worried about him. Lon waited a few minutes and then rode on. He crossed the ridge and came down on a broad coulee. Here was another rider and he saw Lon and drew rein. But he did not reach for the gun in his holster or the rifle in his saddle-boot.

Lon recognized him and said, "Hello, Mr. Andrews," and then he smiled, but the smile showed no amusement. "You out hunting down your future son-in-law, too, Jake Andrews?"

Jake Andrews was a solid, stocky man of about fifty, wide and substantial, and his outstanding feature was his long moustaches, which he seemed always to tug when worried. He rode a blocky roan horse.

"A lot of trouble on this range, Lon. A man has to ride a light saddle and keep his hand close to his gun. When did you last see Helen?"

Lon debated momentarily. He did not know how he stood with this man. So he used caution.

“Why ask that?”

Jake Andrews watched him, guessing at his deceit. “She ain’t home now,” he said. “I’m out huntin’ her right now.”

Lon didn’t know what to say. When he had talked to Helen she had said her parents had gone to town. They must have come home and found her gone. But where had she gone? She had not mentioned going away from home when he had visited her. He decided to tell the truth. So he told Jake Andrews about visiting his daughter that morning.

“She mention to you she aimed to ride out this afternoon, Mallory?”

“No.”

The farmer rubbed his whiskers, the sound rough. “My missus never come out of town with me. She stayed at the Turner farm. Mrs. Turner has had a kinda rough time after that last one of hers was born a month or so back so the Missus stayed to help her do her house-work an’ Turner was goin’ to fetch her home this evenin’. When I got home Helen was gone. Thought maybe she had gone out lookin’ for a milk cow we lost last night but I found the cow along the brush but no Helen.”

“Latoon had a man stationed in the barn



when I was there," Lon said. "He never seen me because I had the house between me and him. Helen called him in the front door and I went out the back. We never had no tussle. Never even met. She must be out lookin' for cows or ridin' the brush. Maybe she's down along the crick a-fishing?"

"Water too muddy and too high for catfish or pike to bite. You know, Mallory, I kinda like you, but you're a wanted man—an outlaw—and I wish you'd stay away from my daughter. You'll bring her nothin' but trouble."

Lon had been pushed rather hard by circumstance and fate and hard luck in the last few hours and these combined almost made him give Helen's father a fast retort, but his good logic came in and held his tongue.

"I sure can see your point there, sir," he said, "and until this is over with, until I am a free man, I won't try to meet or see your daughter."

"I'd appreciate that, Lon."

Lon gave the surroundings a raking glance and decided no danger existed. He was getting like a wolf, he realized—all he needed was a stronger sense of smell and he would be sniffing the air for danger.

"Can't you see what is ahead of you, Andrews?"

The grey eyes watched him and a hand tugged one end of the man's moustache. "What do you mean by them words, Mallory?"

"Latoon is out to get my spread the Circle R. Run me out of the country or kill me. Then, when he has my outfit, he'll turn against you farmers. In that sense *my* cause is *your* cause, too."

But the man shook his thick head in solid negation. "We've talked that over before, Mallory, and I still don't believe in it. I don't think he really needs to move against us. This black alkali and drought is drivin' us out faster than Latoon could even if he moved against us. This rain come a month too late. Wheat done sprouted, died an inch above the ground; some might grow a little with this rain—late seeded crops, that is—but they'll not make any kinds of a head-crop. Tumbleweeds will grow like all billy-hell after the sun comes out."

Lon nodded. "The saviour of this country will be irrigation."

"Cost money and work."

"You sound like my dad used to talk, Andrews. Well, you know these farmers person-

ally and I don't. Latoon settled them on worthless homesteads. Now when the time comes to leave and they got to sell for little or nothing who do you suppose will offer to buy them out?"

"Latoon, of course. He's already offered to buy out Miller and Johnson and Smith. They're broke to their last farthing."

Lon smiled grimly. "He won without firing a shot. He made good money locating you poor people. He got money off you in his saloon. Then he buys back your land for a dime or so. That will give him clear title to Beaver Creek the length of it, huh?"

"That's right."

"And Beaver Creek never goes dry. Neither does the Milk. But the Milk is north and the one who owns Beaver Creek controls the south side of this basin. Controls water, and water is what counts."

"He worked it smart."

"What do the other farmers say?"

The man spat tobacco on a sagebrush. "Some are hot under the collar. All of them admit they been swindled. But hell, Mallory, it was our own fault—we was so damned stupid we didn't know good land from bad."

“You don’t consider fighting him?”

The farmer shook his head. “We ain’t gunmen. Most of us would have a hard time hitting a jackrabbit at fifteen paces with a .22 rifle, let alone a sixshooter. We got families—wives, kids. Hell, we been done in and the best thing we can do is get what little Latoon will pay us and drag our behinds out of this Milk River basin. Charge it up to experience.”

Lon could only nod. The man spoke only the truth. He was alone in his fight against Rolf Latoon and his men. He had hoped he might enlist the farmers to his side. But such would not be the case, he saw now.

“Well, so long, Jake.”

“You see Helen anywhere, Mallory, switch her hindside with a willer and send her home. She ain’t got no call to ride this grass with all this trouble an’ these gun-riders poundin’ over this sagebrush.”

Lon smiled. He could just imagine himself paddling Helen’s pretty derriere. “I’ll do that little thing,” he promised.

The farmer loped away. He bounced in his saddle. His horse was a big plough horse with marks of collar sores on his shoulders. Back east he had been a machinist in a railroad shop. He

had even inquired at the division point on the Great Northern, about sixty miles east at Havre, to see if he could go back to his old trade. The roundhouse foreman there, so Helen said, had promised him the first opening. But times were tough in this dollar panic and when a man had a job he hung on to it like a leech.

Lon rode high in his saddle, heading for the rimrock and Casey. Seemed like everybody or everything delayed him. His partner would be hungry and would need hot food in his belly. The grub he got from Helen would prove a god-send. He was worried about Casey. If the man showed no improvement he would smuggle him down to Curry Bend this night in the dark and turn him over to Doc Goss for treatment. That would be better than getting Doc Goss out to tend to him on the rimrock camp. Down in Curry Bend the medico could put Casey to bed in the hotel and keep him warm and fed, and Mrs. Halberston could nurse him. Even if they put Casey under arrest, he would be much better off.

But now, riding for the rimrock camp, Lon Mallory hoped against hope that Casey would feel better—he *had* to be well, by now. He would ride in and Casey would come out of the

rocks and be grinning wide and happy like he had all his life. This *had* to come about.

About two miles from the rimrock camp a rider came towards him and when he saw who it was he shoved his horse out of the hiding place in the brush.

"Helen!"

"Lon! You—scared me—"

"Your father is out looking for you. Where have you been, honey?"

Her face was pale, despite the brushing of the cold wind. Words tumbled from her. She had ridden to the rimrock camp to see Casey. She had doctored him and fed him and then ridden back and about half a mile from the camp she had heard the sound of rifles.

"Yes, Helen?"

"I rode back, Lon. They were all gone by then—all except Casey. Latoon and his gunmen had stumbled on the rimrock camp."

"Casey?" His voice was a hoarse rasp.

"They circled him. They shot him down—killed him!"

For a moment Lon Mallory almost broke under the strain. All the troubles of the last few weeks seemed to converge into one terrible load and smash down on his shoulders. He bowed

his head and wanted to pray but no words would come. He built it in his mind's eye. Casey, trying to fight; Casey, wounded, sick, almost out of his head. Latoon and his gunmen firing down on him. He lifted his eyes and he hoped he kept the red hell out of them. He did not want this girl to see his terrible hate. She was going to be his wife. She was going to spend her life with him. She was going to see him smile, joke, grumble, bellyache—but he hoped she would never see him like he was at this moment.

“How long ago was that?”

“Not more than—oh, twenty minutes.”

Lon spoke in short sentences. He told about burning down the Broken Spur. About the posse that had followed the Double Diamond rider. He reconstructed the happenings. The posse, finding its mistake, had swung into the hills, and had run across the rimrock hiding place. And Latoon and his men had killed Casey Jones. Casey, who would smile and joke no longer, freckled face full of fun . . .

“Casey had no weapon,” he told her.

“Yes, he had a rifle, Lon.”

“Where did he get it?”

“I brought it to him. My little .25–35

Remington. He killed one of them before they got him."

"How do you know? You never saw the fight, did you?"

"No, but I saw them trail out. I got up on the ridge and watched. They buried the man down in the canyon. They put him under a cutback and got on top and kicked the dirt down on him. The rain had softened the soil and it slid right down over him."

"Good for Casey," Lon said. "Did you ride up to him and make sure he was dead, Helen?"

She shook her head. "I watched through my glasses. They left a guard behind in the boulders. Had I gone down, he might have jumped me, Lon. Lon, Casey is dead—Latoon wouldn't ride off and leave him living. They got the guard stationed there for just one purpose, too."

Lon nodded. "That guard is there so he could shoot down a man named Lon Mallory. That guard is stationed there to catch Lon Mallory when he rides in. But this Lon Mallory gent is warned ahead of time, thank God. When you look at it that way, Helen, you have saved my life."

"What do you aim to do, Lon?"



"I got only one plan in mind. I'm going to bury Casey. Give him a grave that I have picked out."

"The guard?"

"I'll kill him."

But Lon Mallory did not kill the guard. He could have killed him. He came in behind him for Helen had shown him where the Latoon man was located in the boulders. And when he moved in on the guard Lon had his rifle on the man. All he had had to do was let the hammer drop after taking aim and the man would have had a rifle bullet through his brain and would have died without knowing what had happened to him. But Lon, when the showdown came, could not do this, even though the bullet-hammered body of his friend lay in the distance, murdered by the bullets of Latoon and his killers. It just wasn't right. It just wasn't the way a man fought.

So he said, "Turn around, killer!"

The man had been leaning against a sandstone boulder and he had just lit a cigarette. He turned as though propelled around by a strong set of hands grabbing him by the shoulders. He was so surprised he dropped his cigarette and

it fell to pieces, sending down sparks. He had loose lips and his eyes showed fear.

"Lon—Mallory!"

Lon said, "The same. Your boss murdered my friend there. You're going to pay for it, Wilson. You got a gun and now reach for it!"

Hack Wilson had his emotions somewhat under control by now. Fear had washed away the paralysing hand of fear. His mouth came closed and the lips sought their usual line of hardness. His eyes widened somewhat and then went down again in thought. He looked at the rifle.

"Not with that rifle on me, Mallory."

Lon said, "Then I kill you."

And he brought the rifle barrel up. Hack Wilson screamed and his hand went down. His .45 came up. Before he could fire Lon had shot him through the high ribs on his right side. Wilson was right-handed and this knocked his gun out of commission. He dropped the gun, his face took on an agonized expression—it grimaced in pain, and with this pain was terror.

"Don't—kill—me—!"

Lon could have killed the man and he probably would have killed him had not at this moment Helen run out and grabbed the rifle.

He did not wrestle with her for Hack Wilson was out of this, lying on his side and groaning.

"Don't let him kill me, Miss Helen!"

Helen said, "Please, Lon, please. Killing him wouldn't bring back Casey. And you'd have the mark on your soul. It would be there forever and you and I would remember it always."

She was right. Her words seeped through the turmoil in his brain. They brought comfort and clarity. He handed her the rifle. He went forward and bent down and got Wilson's .45.

Wilson said. "My ribs—they're busted—I got to get to Doc Goss."

"Get to your feet," Lon ordered.

He hauled the man upward, slapping him hard across the face. Wilson stared at him, the shock leaving somewhat.

"What are you going to do?"

"Helen," said Lon, "get his horse from back there in the rocks."

"Yes, Lon."

Wilson repeated, "What are you going to do?"

Lon spoke in measured tones. "You're getting on your horse and pulling out. You can head out of the country if you want."

"I got to see Doc Goss."

Lon grinned without mirth. "You ride to Curry Bend and Rolf Latoon will kill you for layin' down on this job. He'll take up where I left off."

"I might bleed to death . . . if I ride anywhere but to town."

"That's your lookout."

Helen led the horse close. Lon smashed the man across the mouth and bodily lifted him to saddle. He took the rifle from the scabbard on the saddle and laid it across the bronc's rump with the barrel and magazine coming down. The horse jumped and Hack Wilson grabbed the reins and the horn at the same time. The horse took the down-hill trail on the run. Lon emptied the rifle. He shot behind the horse, shot at the boulders beside the horse, and he heard the savage ricochet of lead even above the snarl of the Winchester. The horse ran with wild abandon. Slack was in his reins and Wilson held with both hands on to the horn. He was bent over and he bounced with each jump. Then the hammer of the Winchester clicked on an empty barrel. Lon lowered the rifle and watched and grimness was on him. For the moment he forgot the body of his dead saddle-pal lying over there under the ledge of the

boulder. He forgot this and he watched the horse run. He forgot that Helen stood beside him. She was not watching Wilson and the running horse; she watched him. And it was her low voice that brought him back to sanity.

"Lon, your face—Honey, you scare me."

He looked at her then, read her womanly strength, and he summoned a smile. He leaned the rifle against the boulder.

"Forgive me," he said.

She said, looking now at the horse disappearing in the grey afternoon, "What will become of him?"

"He'll reach town or a farmer's house, I suppose."

"What if he—falls off the horse?"

"He won't. He's not hurt that bad, honey. I'm sorry you had to see that. It wasn't nice to look at. But if you hadn't been watching . . . I'd have shot him through the head and killed him."

"I was afraid of that."

He left her and walked to where Casey's body lay there against the sandstone boulder. This was the hardest part of it all. He went to both knees and rolled the body over. Their bullets had done savage wreckage. He had this

thought: *Casey would be alive to-day if it were not for me.* But strangely this did not add height to the pile of grievances he held against Rolf Latoon. Nor did it fire his anger with fresh fuel. He had long ago made up his mind he would kill Latoon. It was that simple . . .

He stood up and looked around and the thought came that they had, of course, taken the grey horse he and Casey had stolen, there at the scene of the hold-up. He walked back to Helen who had moved around the boulder to be out of the wind and to not have to watch him and his dead friend.

"I have a spade tied to my saddle," she said.

He looked at her. "How come you tote a spade?"

"Yesterday I was out looking at the pasture fence. I thought maybe I might need a spade if a post needed re-setting. It's one of those war spades—the kind they dig trenches with—Dad bought it in Chicago when we came out. Not big, though."

He nodded. "Big enough."

He led the sorrel over and he got Casey's body over the saddle. The horse did not like the smell of blood and he rebelled somewhat, wanting to rear or to run. But there was no

fooling around with Lon Mallory. He got the body looped over the seat of the saddle; he speared a stirrup and he put in his boot; he lifted his body and fitted it behind the cantle. Helen was already in her saddle. They rode down the slope and Lon held the body secure with one hand and guided his horse with the other.

Neither he nor Helen did much talking. The day had stretched out into a grey dismal afternoon broken spasmodically by intermittent splurges of driving rain. Now one of these swift rainstorms hit them, wetting them and bending their heads. Lon glanced at Helen. She rode with her head bent and water dripped from her old hat. She had put on her dark oilskin slicker. For a girl reared in the city she soon had fallen into rangeland ways, Lon realized. He realized also he was lucky he had found her. Fate has odd ways of moving towards its end, its goal. Yesterday this time Casey had been alive—he had been smiling, joking, scowling. He had known fear, and anger, and happiness; now, he knew nothing. Lon shook his head in slow disagreement with the harshness of this thing.

And all the time he had to keep his eyes on the skyline and watch for danger. This would

be his way out, now—the way of the wolf. He was the lobo and the coyotes wanted to tear him down, and the coyotes were led by a wolf. Some day it would be wolf to wolf. He welcomed that day.

They came to an area where a spring came out of the rocks. By magic, it seemed, it leaped out of the dim fissure in the granite, and it made a little pool before going down the coulee, which was about fifty yards wide at this point. Now the coulee ran with rain water, a surly little stream that, if it stopped raining, would soon die, letting the natural waters of the spring resume their slow seepage. Here Lon slid from saddle, going over the back of his horse.

“You going to bury him here, Lon?”

Lon nodded. “We used to play here when we were kids.” He grinned then, memory busy. “We must have killed a thousand Indians here with wooden guns.”

“I’ll be on the ridge.”

Lon said, “I’d like to cover him.”

She nodded, understanding. It is one thing to have to bury your best friend. And it is another to put the dirt directly on his face. You want to have something material between his face and the dirt.



She said, "Take my saddle blanket." She dismounted and he loosened the cinch and pulled the blanket free. Then he re-tightened the latigo strap. She mounted and said, "I'll watch from the ridge to see nobody sneaks up on us," and she rode off, horse climbing the long slope of the hill.

Lon dug the grave at the base of the hill, hacking out the gravel with a vengeance, shovel ringing on rocks. He tried not to remember but he had to. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever dreamed of burying his best friend. But such was the case. He dug the grave about three feet deep and it was hard work. The rain had not penetrated to this depth because of the slope of the hill. It had run off too quickly to soak in. Here it was bone-dry. He laid Casey in the grave and put the sweaty saddle blanket over him. Then he refilled the hole. When he had finished the ground looked almost natural. The rain would bring grass and flowers to cover the grave. Only he and Helen would ever know where the man was buried. Casey had no relatives, he knew that; his parents had reared him. They had been like brothers, not friends. Lon went to his horse and rode up the slope and

Helen smiled at him. It was a slow nice smile and it helped him.

"You go home, honey," he said.

She shook her head. "You're almost dropping out of your saddle you are so tired, Lon."

"There's no sleep for me."

"There will be. You get some rest and I'll watch over you."

"Where?"

"Back in the boulders."

He was tired. He was more than tired; he was fatigued. He turned his horse towards the rimrock and she followed him. When they got there they dismounted and hid their horses in the boulders. Lon found a dry spot under the overhang of a rock. He went back into this and put his back against the boulder. Without covers, cold and wet, he slept the sleep of the miserable, but just the same it was sleep . . . and sleep meant rest.

Sleep came immediately. When he awakened the moon rode the sky and there were no clouds. The wind was cold, cutting across the damp earth, bringing a chill. He shivered and sat up.

"I must have slept hard," he said.

She said, "You did, Lon."

“Any riders?”

“No.”

He stood up and stretched. He beat his arms against his body. Then he said, “You’d best head for home. Your folks will be worried sick. And besides, it ain’t proper for a young woman to spend a night out with an unmarried man.”

“You’re going to be married,” she threatened, smiling. “Yes, I should go home, but I’ll be worried, Lon.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me, please!”

She watched him silently for a moment. Then she said, “How can I help but worry? They ride the hills and they have rifles. They’re wolves—saddle wolves—and they—Lon, you know what?”

“What?”

“You could leave Milk River, Lon. Ride out and I could ride with you. We could be married somewhere and start out new. Build up another outfit and work together, Lon. I’d work my hands to the bone for you.”

He took both her hands. His touch was reverent. “I know you would, Helen. But Helen, what if we ran? Could we find any peace? We’d always remember running, we’d remember Casey shot like a tied-down coyote,

we'd always remember Hank Mallory's body, burned in that haystack, shot from ambush? I'd still be a murderer in the eyes of the law. The law would hound me, hunt me, want me. By running I would admit a crime I did not commit."

She was silent again. Then she said, "You're right, Lon. Forgive me for saying it. I guess I just love you so much."

"And I'm sure glad for that."

He got her horse and helped her into the saddle.

He wanted to cinch his case. "There's more than grass involved in this, honey. There is more than the murder of my father and of Casey. There is more than the fact that I have been sentenced to serve a life term. Running would never work. Each night when I closed my eyes I would remember this Milk River country and I would think of my Circle R ranch in Rolf Latoon's hands. My father had a reputation as a just and fair man, and as a fighter. Family prestige counts a lot to some people. It means much to me. Do you see my point?"

"Yes."

He looked at her. She was, at this moment,

the most wonderful woman in the world, and he felt this, and he liked this.

"You be as careful as you can be, Lon."

"I sure will be. For you . . . and for me."

Suddenly she turned her horse and rode away, galloping along the trail, the high boulder momentarily hiding her. Then she came into the moonlight again, a horse and a rider, and she rode off the ledge, following the downward trail into Milk River valley, and she was out of sight but not out of memory. Lon Mallory had a terrible aching in his throat. He had had lonely moments before—moments when he seemed pitched against the world alone, against humanity. One of those moments had been when he had stood before Judge Hostellar and heard himself condemned to spend the rest of his life behind bars with no chance of parole. But that moment and its terrible tragedy did not seem as drastic as was this one. He was lonesome to the core of his being, to the centre of his soul.

He went to his horse. His sleep, such as it had been, had brought new life to his cold body. He still hoped to somehow find the stolen money. With it as evidence he could pin the

deadwood on Rolf Latoon. He had to clear his name. These were his aims; how to achieve them, he did not know. He had ridden about a mile when he saw a rider below him, pushing across the wide basin. He was riding towards the rimrock. He came at a fast pace, a dark point running under moonlight. He headed for the point where he had left Helen. He thought: *That is Helen coming back*, and he turned his horse. The rider took the upward trail down which Helen had ridden, and Lon Mallory pulled his horse into the shadows and from this point he could watch the trail. He waited. The night had sounds. Then through these came the rising sound of a shod horse. Then the rider came into view, moonlight etching him in strong lines.

Lon watched, seeing for sure now it was not Helen; this was a man. He rode high in his saddle and the outline of him rubbed against Lon's memory demanding attention and recognition. He got the strong image in his memory, and placed it there. Still the identification did not seem positive; this was illogical. But finally, as the man passed, the identification was sure.

Lon grinned, called loudly, "Hey, Ike. This way, Ike Powers!"

It was good to have a friend. Somebody to talk to and somebody that was in as bad a kettle of fish as you were . . . well, not quite as bad but in bad, too. Fate had played an odd trick on Ike Powers. Lon realized with bitterness that the sheriff was in this predicament because he had been good to a convicted murderer, one Lon Mallory. Somehow he would have to repay the ex-lawman for his help. But he did not know how and in what form this payment would be. Maybe time would tell that, too.

They sat with their backs against a smooth sandstone boulder and they watched the moonlit basin below them. Lights had gone on and the kerosene lamps in the homes of the farmers looked like fireflies stationary there on the bosom of the prairie. Lon could see the lights of his Circle R ranch. Over all this was the soft moonlight, filling in the coulees and ravines, touching the flat areas with soft fingers.

They had worn the first flush of their meeting thin and now both faced the future. Ike Powers had broken out of jail. When Lon had set fire to the Broken Spur's office the town had gone

wild with excitement. Luck had been with Ike Powers. At this moment the jailer had been taking him a tray of grub. The jailer, in the excitement, had got too close to the bars; the ex-sheriff had long arms and a long reach.

"I done pulled him right up to the bars, Lòn. Held him in the crook of one elbow—got it around his neck—and with my free hand I got his gun. We spilled chuck all over the floor but who cared at a time like that!"

"Yeah," Lon said, "who cared?"

"Well, he got scared—turned white as a sheet is supposed to be—He knew damned well I'd kill him if he didn't open that door. Well, he unlocked it and I got him inside, gagged and tied him with the blanket on the bunk, and locked him in. Even snagged a piece of pie off the tray on the floor as I hurried out. Nobody in the office so I got my six-shooter and Winchester and some cartridges in a sack and went out the back door like a cottontail hurrying for his hole with a hungry ma coyote on his tail."

"Yeah?"

"One of Latoon's men—that Smoky Harrison gent—saw me and I gave him a bullet from my rifle, right in the shoulder. Knocked him kicking. He went down and hollered in that



alley but nobody paid him any mind because everybody was hollerin' an' fightin' fire."

"About that time I left town on a borrowed horse and got as far as the livery-barn," Lon said.

"They didn't know whether to fight the fire or get after you." Ike Powers rubbed his whisker-stiff jaw. "I pulled out on a horse I got out of old man Chester's barn. So . . . if they want it that way they could get me for hoss-stealing." The man smiled grimly. "I knew that Helen would know where you were located. So I stuck around the Andrews' homestead. Watched it from the brush and waited for Helen to go out and feed the chickens or go to the barn or something like that so I could call to her. Never dared walk right in. Figured there was a Latoon guard watching the place. There was. I bent my rifle barrel over his head, I do believe—I hit him so danged hard."

"Helen was out here with me."

"So I found out. She came riding in and I talked with her and she told me where she had left you here in the rimrock . . . so, here I am." The sheriff glanced at his young gun-pal. "How come you burn down the Broken Spur?"

Lon told the sheriff about looking for the

stolen money. "Never found it so thought I'd have some fun. Never burnt down no other buildings, did I?"

"None others caught fire. No wind and the rain helped, but the Latoon joint burned to the ground. But talking about this stolen currency, Lon, Latoon rode into town a while back with around four thousand bucks of it—did that this morning sometime."

"Yeah?"

"Said he had found it out at your Circle R outfit, in the house."

Lon asked, "*He—did—what?*"

"Jes' like I done said, boy. He come ridin' in yesterday mornin' with the money. I never knew about it until I busted jail. Then I talked with a Double Diamond rider over on Willer Crick and he told me."

Lon had caught the significance of this new act by Rolf Latoon. Latoon was planting more evidence against him . . . as though he did not have enough now.

The sheriff said, "Latoon claimed one of the Curry bunch stopped in there and left the money to pay you off for helping rob the train."

"Do the people believe anything that raw?"

"I don't know. But I do know this. That

money is stolen property. It was found on your ranch. The county-attorney is powered to step in and impound the ranch. Put it in county hands. He never was no friend of your father's. Your dad and that attorney had a run-in once over taxes. I'll bet right now the Circle R is impounded and in the custody of this county?"

"Then what?"

"Well, here's what Latoon figures to do. He figures to kill you and bury you in some secret grave or else run you out of the country for good. Or capture you and send you on to Deer Lodge, whichever comes up the handiest. Then your spread goes up for public auction in six months."

"Good scheme . . . for Latoon?"

"Well, he buys it then for a few cents. Nobody would dare bid against him, Lon. Oh, he's got brains . . . and guns, that man."

"He's sure got you and me behind the eight ball, Ike."

"That he has. I've thought this thing from stern to aft, boy. And I can come out with only one proposition. But first, you tell me what you think we should do, Lon."

"Well, I know what I got to do. I got to make Latoon or some of his gang confess that

they murdered my father. He can't make that charge stick that I was in with that gang that robbed the train. It was his gang and you and I heard enough conversation to prove it was his bunch."

"Our word would be no good. Latoon would get witnesses against us. They'd outnumber us. If we could locate that fat drummer and the old timer that was in that car that night—they heard the talk, too. But they're gone—they went on with the train."

"Harry Short is on our side."

"Yes, but that just makes three of us, against Latoon's word and that of his men. If Latoon didn't have the guns and the power . . . well, we might be able to do something in court."

Lon thought this over. He realized the lawman was right. The main thing was to get the evidence and then break Latoon's power. That meant gunsmoke. He was not deluding himself or telling himself anything else. Latoon played for keeps. He would either win or die.

"I wonder where that stolen money is, Ike?"

"Well, might be down in town. Banker Gordon is a good friend of Latoon's right now, 'cause Latoon is riding high in the saddle. He's got those new safety-deposit boxes. He can't

open one without a court order. He hasn't a key to them, in fact—if he was going to open one, he'd have to call in a locksmith, or break the deposit box with a sledge.”

“He's got brains enough to know that if stolen money is in his bank the bank examiners will close it, ain't he?”

“Sure, Gordon is smart enough. But what if he didn't know there was stolen money in his bank? Latoon wouldn't let him know if he did put it in the safety deposit box.”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“Maybe we could talk to Gordon and get him to let us break into that deposit box, Ike?”

There wasn't a bit of pause. The sheriff knew the banker; he had known him for years.

“Gordon would never agree to that. If we got into that deposit box we'd have to break into the bank first.”

“Then we'd have a bank robbery charge against us, if we didn't find the money and this backfired.”

Powers said, “Just another charge.” He laughed boyishly. “I've got so many piled on me now that if I don't win this thing I'll be in Deer Lodge with you and we'll both spend our

lives lookin' out at the Powell Range of the Rockies. What a life, what a life."

"Betcha your wife is worried."

"Golly be, son, don't talk about Nellie. Of course she is worried. Nellie has worried about me all my life. She's worried about you, too. Used to worry about why you didn't come direct home from school. Nellie even worries about herself. She's got the symptoms of every disease known to man, and lots of them man don't know about. She'll just have to worry." Then he added, "She's a good woman. Best in the world."

Lon had another plan. "What say we get one of these Latoon gunmen and roast the bottom of his little pink feet for a while. We might be able to get his feet so hot it will melt his jaws and he might talk."

Ike powers doubted if this would do any good. Rolf Latoon played a close hand; he kept his mouth shut. Powers doubted if anybody but Latoon knew the location of the money.

"He's not close to any of his hired hands, Lon. The friendliest he ever got with anybody was Pock Malone."

"And he ain't around no longer."

"He," said Ike Powers, "should be referred

to as the *late* Pock Malone. We must remember that in future conversations, son.”}

Lon studied the valley for some time. The night had run out and it was getting chillier. Back in the rocks a horse moved as he grazed on picket-rope. The moon was setting. Lon hated to see the darkness come. He couldn't keep from thinking about Casey. Last night this time Casey had been alive. Now his friend slept in his grave with the saddle blanket over him and over it the piled up dirt and gravel. But he knew he should not think about his old pal. The memory of Casey and his wide grin made Lon want to get to his feet, to hit against something, to fight and get into action. But wild action would not bring about the answer to this. This required thinking and careful movements for Rolf Latoon was using every instrument and man in his command—he was using the big lie, the big gun, the long ride. He had brains. It would take brains to manoeuvre him into a position where the guns would talk.

“I got an idea, Ike.”

“Yes?”

“The nesters.”

“You mean, Lon, whether or not we could

unite them, get them to fight against Latoon with us?"

"That's the idea."

Powers said, "They won't line up. They're whipped . . . and they know it. Latoon used them for suckers and they swallowed his line hook and sinker and all. He'll buy them for a few cents—he's already bought out Rush and Miller and Watson. The rest will sell in time. They're all ready to get out of Milk River. They won't fight. Even if they felt like fighting they'd be darned little help. Most of them couldn't whip their old grandmother if she had an arm broken and in a sling. Harmless gutless bunch."

Lon grinned.

"Andrews is about the only one with enough guts to move," the sheriff said. "And he doesn't want trouble. He told me that one day down in town during your trial."

"I've heard him say that, too." He reported his conversation with Andrews.

"No help there," Powers stated.

Lon tried another angle. "Curry Bend," he said. "What about it?"

"Those people down there are old timers in this area. The two merchants have been here for years. The other people have mostly been



raised here, too. What do you think of that, Powers?"

"Now you got your teeth in somethin' solid, son. I know those people in that town. For years I was their sheriff. They knew your father. Hank Mallory was well-known and well-liked, even if he had a head as solid as a cue-ball bouncing on a pool table. Right now they need but one thing, I think."

"And that, Ike?"

"A leader."

Lon considered this. He matched personality against personality, and sought his answer.

"I don't know, Ike."

"Well, they are afraid of Latoon. He's got them buffaloed, I'd say. But he can't hold them through fear and force long. No dictator has done that in the history of the world. Sooner or later a crack gets in his armour. And then, watch out—gunsmoke ahead."

"I think," said Lon slowly, "I'm going to try to kill Latoon. He might kill me, but I hope I kill him."

Sheriff Ike Powers looked sharply at him. Lon heard his old friend suck in his breath. There was a short silence.

"You mean you're going against his gun—

even with no evidence to clear you, Lon? You're going to kill him to get rid of him?"

"I feel that way, Ike."

The lawman shook his head. "That could be done, of course. Then again, he might kill you. But where would you stand then?"

"No worse off than I am. Just another murder charge against me."

"Be tough."

"I could endure the pen, if Latoon was dead. That's a rough thing to say and I'm not proud of it one bit. But this can't go on this way, Ike. Some of us has to break, make the move."

"How about . . . Helen?"

"Don't mention her, please, Ike."

The youth had a pleading note in his voice that struck the sheriff deeply. He had to talk Lon out of this idea and he went to work. Lon looked upon him as a second father and he knew that Ike Powers was a mature and level-headed man, and he listened and was silent.

"We'll work out of this, Lon."

"Hope you're right, Ike."

"No use rushing into something. This is a big bubble to break. Well, won't be long until dawn, so why not take it easy? Sit back and

sleep a little, maybe? I had a good night of sleep."

"When?" Lon asked, cynically.

"Three nights ago," the sheriff said, and laughed.

Lon got to his boots. "I had some sleep. Helen stood guard while I pounded my ear. I'm for movin', Ike."

"Where to?"

"The Circle R."

"Look for the stolen money there?"

"As good as any place. A hunch is still a hunch, nothing more. Hell, this isn't even a hunch. We're facin' a blank wall. If we are both alive when this is over maybe the warden will let us be cell-mates."

"We'll talk to him about that," Ike Powers said.

They got in saddles and rode off the rimrock. The moon had died and darkness held the range in mystic silence. Lon took the lead for he knew this country, even in the dark. This valley was his home and despite its wide borders he knew it as well as most men know their backyards. Maybe better. Ike Powers followed, bony in his saddle. They rode off the rimrock. Lon followed a trail made by cattle going down to

Beaver Creek for water. His horse was not too fresh. Still, he was a tough horse; he had reserve. Lon had reserve, too. Now he called on this reserve to see him through. And it came out of nowhere and gave him a lasting tough endurance.

The rain started again, coming without warning. The storm blasted in, hit them, added to their misery, made the trail sloppy and slippery. Once Powers' horse started to fall, and he ran into the rump of Lon's mount; this held the sheriff's mount upright.

"Why don't you steal good horses?" Lon joked, rain pounding him. "Like me. I done laid my twine on a good bronc."

"This damned rain," the sheriff grumbled.

The rain drove them to cover. It got too hard, too savage. They pulled into some high cottonwoods along Beaver Creek. Their wide leaves did much to break the rain. There was no use trying to ride on. The combination of darkness and rain made riding almost impossible. A man could ride, of course, but when he didn't know where he was going, why keep on wearing down a horse? Horseflesh was worth gold in a deal like this. A fresh fast horse could save a man's life; a jaded leg-tired mount could cost him his

life. Lon gave up the idea of reaching the Circle R before day break.

The wind howled in, bending willows and smaller trees, but not moving the thick boles of the cottonwoods. Overhead branches creaked and bent with the wind, and, once a big branch fell but another branch turned it, and it dropped off to one side, lifted there by the wind. The storm was a humdinger. They hunkered at the base of a big cottonwood tree. Lon could feel the rough bark through the back of his slicker. Despite the wet ground he finally shoved his legs out in front of him and sat flatly on the soil. He couldn't get any wetter. Their horses stood humped against the wind, rain hitting them. He hoped the sack holding their grub would not get so wet, some of the grub—the flour, especially—would get soaken. Then he didn't care. He didn't care about anything.

Later on, he found out he had gone to sleep.

When the first touch of dawn came it seeped through the rain. The wind had died down a little but the rain fell with its old intensity.

"We'd better move, Ike."

"Head for the high country, eh?"

"That's the deal."

The rawboned man got to his feet. "You

snored louder than the thunder there one time. We'd best change horses somewhere or get where these can graze. We can't afford to run out of broncs."

"We'll picket these out, back in the hills."

So they headed south again. They left Beaver Creek and rode boldly across the flat; it was about three miles to the foothills. They reached these and then the rain stopped. It stopped just as suddenly as it had begun. One moment it had been pounding down seemingly having a grudge against the sopping earth. The next moment the cloud had moved on and the edge of sunshine hit them. They came out of darkness into light. It was a weird feeling. They were riding across a coulee when Lon Mallory saw the riders coming down off the hills.

"Riders up there, Ike."

"Get in this high brush."

They rode into a motte of high underbrush. Wild rosebushes clawed them and their mounts. A few cottonwoods grew here—young trees and not too spreading. Still, they covered them. They dismounted and Lon went to the edge of the brush and watched. The riders evidently had not seen them. They rode past them by about a quarter of a mile. Three horsemen

constituted the group, Lon judged them to be Rolf Latoon men—their outlines seemed familiar. But they wore formless slickers and it was impossible to identify them. He recognized one of the horses—a bay and white pinto—and he knew this horse belonged to Latoon. He gripped his rifle and his knuckles were tight despite the cold. But he did not fire. It would have been foolish to fire. That would attract their attention, of course, and there might be a pitched battle, and he and Ike Powers might not win . . .

So he let the men ride by without trouble. They rode at a trot and they were high on their stirrups as they headed towards Curry Bend. Lon judged they had been caught by the storm in the hills while looking for him and Sheriff Powers. The storm had tied them up as it had tied-up him and the lawman. Now they were pushing towards town and a hot breakfast and scalding hot coffee. Gallons of coffee at Molly Anderson's Clean Spoon Cafe. He could see Molly—clean in her housedress, hair piled just so, serving her customers. He and Molly had gone to school together. She had always smiled on him. But when Helen Andrews had moved into the Milk River valley . . . well, Molly had

to take the back seat on the spring-wagon. And he figured it had not hurt her much. She had a good sense of humour. You needed a sense of humour to run a restaurant.

He pulled his mind off bacon and eggs and fried spuds and returned to Ike Powers, and he swung into saddle saying, "Three men riding for town. Prob'ly got caught out in the hills."

"Latoon men?"

"Looked like it, Ike. Too far away to make sure—all of them wore slickers, too. But that white and red pinto was in the bunch—the one with the four white stockings and the blazed head."

"Latoon's horse."

They rode out of the brush. Ike Powers took the lead. A rosebush branch flopped back and hit Lon across the jaw. The prongs hurt but they did not draw blood. He paid it little attention. He was cold and numb and he wanted only a warm bed and lots of hot coffee. Or just the bed under a roof. He thought maybe they should hole up in a line-camp. The Circle R had line-camps strung across the hills. These were one room cabins made mostly of sod or logs. They had a bed and wood and chuck and a stove. There cowpunchers lived in the winter



time and turned cattle back when blizzards drove them towards the rough country, for in the rough country they would starve to death.

But he knew that every line-camp in this region was watched whether or not it belonged to the Circle R. To ride down on one of the cabins was to ride into the gunfire of Latoon's rifles. Accordingly he forsook this idea, not even mentioning it to his companion. They saw two other bands of horsemen leaving the hills. Latoon had every man he could hire or threaten in the saddle. None looked like the king pin himself, though. But distance and slickers hid identities. They had to ride with great caution.

Lon said, "There must be a lot of money on my head."

"Around ten thousand, I think."

"Railroad company and Latoon and probably the insurance company that had the unsigned currency insured, huh?"

"That's right."

"Prob 'ly got money on your skull too, Ike."

"Reckon so."

"Must seem odd bein' the hunted man instead of bein' the man who is doin' the huntin'."

"I know how he feels . . . now."

“When this is over,” said Lon, “and if I’m alive I’m going to go to bed and sleep for a month.”

“I’ll be in the next bunk.”

The sun was rising and steam was lifting from the sodden earth. The sky was clear and the sun held a threat of heat despite the moistness. Lon felt the push of unrest. Mingled with this was a bone-tired weariness. Both were not good. The idea was to get in the hills and hole up somewhere and wait for the first of the next night, for during that period the moon would be bright.

They reached a coulee known as Tank Coulee. They threaded up this towards the benchland. The rain had washed the trail out, and they moved along the edge of the cliff. Sometimes they walked and led their animals. Service berries were ripe. They were blue and they tasted good but they made your hands stained. Choke-cherries hung in clumps and they were not ripe. They were turning a bright red. They were close to the top and the basin was stretching below them.

Ike Powers said, “Let’s rest.”

Lon was anxious to rest, too. He looked

around and said, "Let's get in that mess of big rocks first, eh?"

"Not too far off. Okay. I'm getting old, I guess."

Lon said, "You couldn't be any tireder than I am."

They reached the rocks and Powers sat down, holding his reins. His face was blue and long and his whiskers were grey. Lon said, "I'll mix some chuck of some sort," and he took down the sack from his saddle. The sun was gathering heat; this felt good.

He glanced at his saddle-pal. Powers was sitting in the sun. He had gone to sleep. He must have gone to sleep the moment his muscles loosened. His head lopped and he breathed softly.

Lon smiled. He got the man lying on his side. Then he took off his own slicker and threw it over the sheriff for warmth. Powers kept on sleeping. Lon built a small fire and he had a hard time getting the twigs to start to burn for they were almost all damp except those under a bunch of buckbrush. He got the fire going and he fried bacon and spuds. He wished he had something to make coffee in but he had no pot.

After a while, Powers suddenly sat up, clawing off the slicker. He looked around and then sanity turned his eyes to normal.

"Had a terrible dream," he said.

"Women?" Lon joked.

"Yeah. They wore levis. They had rifles. One looked like Rolf Latoon. Do I smell bacon and spuds?"

"Breakfast is being served in the main dining-room."

They ate from the little skillet. Helen had outfitted Lon with only a knife and fork so Lon used the knife and Powers used the fork. It was not the world's best cooked or best served meal. But it was something hot to eat and it hit the spot. They joked occasionally.

Lon said, "Been ten years since I ate at a table. Honest Injun, Ike, it does seem that long."

"This," said the sheriff, "is the best meal I ever et."

"You've said that after ever meal you've ate," Lon said. "When I was a kid stayin' at your place goin' to school you said that every time. And then you would kiss Nellie."

"Wish I could kiss her now."

Lon smiled. "I wouldn't mind hugging and

kissin' her myself. She's my second mother, you know."

"She thinks the world of you, son."

"I'm sure not goin' make her sorry she thinks that," Lon said soberly. "Shall we leave the dishes on the table for the hired girl to wash?"

"Sure, why not."

They repacked and tied the sack back over Lon's saddle and then they continued on again, plodding along the side of the canyon. They reached the summit and were in the rimrock boulders.

This was an odd area. For about two miles the boulders were scattered around, with small flats in between rocky clumps. Cottontail rabbits lived here, scampering into holes dug under the rocks, and little sand owls had holes dug into the sides of the sandstones, where they nested and lived.

Not so many years before two boys had ridden their saddlehorses up the grade and they had ridden bareback and the grade had been so steep they had leaned forward and hung on to their horses' manes to keep from sliding off their rumps. They had held wooden rifles in their other hands, their free hands. Their horses had been lathered and sweaty from

racing across the bottom of Milk River valley and this made it harder to sit on them but sit they did until they reached the top. Then they went into the rimrock area with its sandstones and its hidden secret passages.

"You be Sitting Bull, Lon."

"Who you goin' be, Casey?"

"Custer. The gink with the long yellow hair. Look at my long hair?" And Casey had rubbed his shingled head. "Get ready, Sittin' Bull. I'm trailin' you, you danged Sioux."

"I don't wanna be Sittin' Bull."

"Why not?"

"He was no chief. Hell, he was a medicine man, hell."

"Hank would tan you if he knowed you said *hell*."

"He don't know it, and don't you squeal. I'll cut out your liver and catch a catfish with it outa the river."

"Hell, I ain't gonna tell him."

"I don't wanna be Sittin' Bull, though."

"Who do you wanna be?"

"Oh lemme see . . . I got it. Rain in the Face."

"Why him?"

"He was a chief. He rode out at the head of

his war bunch. Sittin' Bull sat home and talked with the old women."

"All right, you're Yellow Tail."

"Rain in the Face, damn it."

"All right, Rain in the Foot, make your play."

"Gimme ten?"

"All right. I start countin' right now. One, two . . ."

"Wait a minute. Hold the count. How about the rifles?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, if I shoot first, you got to die. You never wanna die. You have to die. You always shoot after me an' then holler 'cause I won't fall."

"I'll die."

"Count."

And so it had gone. You stalked your foe. You walked on bare feet that had callouses like a boot sole. Later on you couldn't walk barefooted across a hardwood floor without yelping. Now you walked barefooted through spiny prickly-pear cacti that hugged the ground and sent spines into your soles and you noticed the pain but you kept on stalking because Rain in the Face wouldn't stop to pick out cactus. You

walked on tiptoe and you stubbed a toe on a rock and it hurt until you said *hell* under your breath, and you thought of Hank. But this thought did not stay with you long because you thought you had heard something. And just then a long-eared jackrabbit, running four ways from Sunday, streaked by and that told you Custer was somewhere up ahead, looking for Rain in the Face.

And so the campaign went on and the Indian Wars were fought over again. How many times had Rain in the Face killed Custer? And how many times had Custer shot Rain in the Face dead? Well, it didn't matter now, Lon thought somewhat bitterly. Nor would it ever matter again.

Custer was dead.

Ike Powers said, "You picket out the broncs, Lon. Then stretch out on some boulder and let the sun warm you. I'll watch the trail."

"I'll leave the saddles on the horses so we can get away in a minute if we get pressed."

"Loosen the cinch on my horse, huh?"

"On both broncs, Ike."

Ike Powers pulled his rifle out of the saddle boot and went out of sight in the rocks. Lon took down the catchropes and picketed the



horses in a clearing. He tied the ropes around a bullberry tree that grew flush against one of the boulders. The grey bullberry tree was tough as desert ironwood. The berries were still green; they hung in spiny-filled clusters. The leaves were grey and prongs dotted the branches. Lon stuck his thumb while making his tie. He sucked his thumb and wondered how anything could hurt this bad. He thought of Ike Powers' advice. But he was not cold now, nor was he sleepy. He got his rifle and went to the edge of the boulders. The sheriff sat with his back against a rock that had overlapped another boulder, and from this vantage point he could see the range and the plain below. Boulders stretched out on every side but the north.

"A couple head of muletails down in Wish-bone Gulch," the sheriff said.

Lon looked. His eyes ran over boulders, clumps of brush, dips. "No can see," he said.

"See that big boulder—the black one?"

"Yeah."

"All right, you got it for a focal point. Then move west about a hundred feet until you come to that clump of wild rose bushes and underbrush. See it?"

"Yeah."

“That’s where the muletail are.”

Lon looked and looked. Finally a deer moved. He was browsing off the higher branches of the buckbrush.

“You got good eyes, Ike. Yes, ma’am, for an old man about to fall into his grave you sure got good eyes.”

“Maybe eyes are like a man’s second wind. He thinks he’s goin’ out and then his eyes come back.”

Lon said nothing. He looked across Milk River valley. He started at Beaver Creek where it came out of the hills, then where Larb Creek came from the south and joined Beaver on the meadow, then he followed Beaver Creek to its junction with the Milk River, right outside of Curry Bend. He could see Helen’s house. It looked small and wet down there on the floor of the gigantic basin. Over to the east a few miles, down on the valley floor, moved a group of horsemen, angling towards the southern hills. They would come on to the hills at a distance about eight miles from where Ike Powers and the convicted murderer were stationed. Evidently they were Latoon men riding out for the bounty on one Lon Mallory. Yes, and the

money on the head of the former sheriff, Ike Powers.

"Valley's alive with horses," Powers said.

Suddenly Lon saw a rider come into sight, moving along the lip of the hills, and he was about a mile away, coming towards them. If he kept on moving in their direction he would pass on the trail about a quarter of a mile north, right along the rim of the hills.

"A lone rider over that way, Ike."

The sheriff squinted as he watched the horse man. Lon hurried back and got his field-glasses from their case on his saddle. The glasses reached out and dragged the rider close. Lon could not clearly see his face. But he did see something significant: The rider had a white handkerchief fastened to the crown of his black hat. The white patch stood out clearly against the ebony coloured flat-brimmed stetson hat.

"He's got a white flag tied to his hat, Ike."

"Let me have the glasses?"

Lon handed the glasses up to his partner who watched the man. "There's something vaguely familiar about that man," Ike Powers said slowly. "I know him but he's still too far away. Like you say, he's carrying a white flag. Must want to see us and talk to us?"

"No other reason I can see for a man riding around with a handkerchief tied to his hat-band. No mosquitoes up here to scare away. Keep watching him, Ike, and maybe you can tell who he is. He's a stranger to me."

The rider came closer. He rode a grey horse and the horse was on a running-walk, that gait peculiar to saddle horses in the West. It is halfway between a walk and a trot; a rolling easy-riding gait. But Lon was not interested in the horse. Powers watched until the man was about a quarter-mile away. Then Lon, who was watching his partner, saw a wide smile light the rugged rawboned face. And the glasses came down at last.

"I know him now, Lon."

"Who is he? Latoon hand?"

The sheriff shook his head and slid down off the rock, landing on his feet. "He's a railroad detective. A year or so ago he went through here to investigate some yard trouble in Havre. He stayed a couple of days with Nellie and me. His name is Art Truitt."

"He must want to see you."

"I reckon so, lookin' at that white handkerchief."

"Is he honest?"

The lawman shrugged, eyes twinkling. "I think he is. Of course, I don't know him too well. But I think he really wants to see us."

"Think he'll try to bring us in?"

"No, not with that flag tied to his hat."

Lon said, "You go out and talk to him. I'll keep a rifle on him all the way. This might be a trap set by Rolf Latoon."

"Good idea, Lon."

Art Truitt turned out to be a heavy-set man of about fifty. He looked decidedly out of place in a saddle. He had the somewhat bewildered look of a town-man suddenly transported out into the wilderness and placed on a horse. When Ike Powers walked out of the rocks the range-detective raised his right hand high and pulled it down sharply, balled fist clenched. This was the old sign of peace used by the local redskins.

"Howdy, sheriff." The detective had a deep voice that rumbled out of his cavernous chest.

"Maybe you should say '*ex-sheriff*,'" the lawman joked. "I don't know for sure whether or not I'm sheriff of this county or not. First time I've done heard of a sheriff breaking out of his *own* jail by strangling down his *own* jailer. I take it you're out ridin' for your health, Art?"

"Oh, sure, I love this saddle. That gent coming out of the rocks yonderly is your saddle-pal, I take it? Young Lon Mallory?"

"The same, Art."

"He's a suspicious cuss, what with toting that Winchester."

"He's got reasons. Life ain't been a-treatin' him too well the last few weeks. Lon, meet Art Truitt."

Lon leaned against a boulder. He set the Winchester butt down beside him, leaning against the boulder too. He nodded but did not shake hands.

"Out looking for some train robbers, Mr. Truitt?" he asked.

"That I am."

"You find the stolen unsigned currency," Lon said, "and you got the robbers."

Truitt watched him, blue eyes without thoughts. "They sure found some of that *dinero* at your ranch, Mallory."

"Planted there by Rolf Latoon," Lon said, "to make it look even worse for me. Latoon wants me off this range so he can have my Circle R spread. You've talked to this Rolf Latoon, I take it?"

"He was on the train the night it was

robbed," the detective said slowly. "He fought like a madman against the robbers, he relates. Lots of shooting, he said, to keep you from robbing that train. You worked in with the Curry gang, he said, to complete the robbery."

"He lies, and he knows it,"

"Where is the Curry gang?" Sheriff Ike Powers asked.

Art Truitt looked at the sheriff and he had a little smile. "Two days ago the Curry gang held up a mail train in Colorado, which is a long long way to the south. If they held up this train and then went to Colorado to hold up that mail . . . they must have big eagles trained to transport them, because no human could ride a horse that fast from one spot to another."

"You mention this to Latoon?" Lon wanted to know.

"The less this Rolf Latoon knows, the better off he will be," the detective said. "He had a misfortune, they tell me. Somebody burned down his saloon. Well, he's moved across the street now, and has bought another saloon. He's moved his safe in this saloon, they tell me."

Ike Powers said, "So he bought the Silver Dollar from old man Morton. Well, the old fellow wanted to sell, anyway." He looked up

at the detective. "Where you heading for now, Art?"

"Oh . . . just riding . . . around."

Lon watched the wide face. It had gone wooden, for an intrusion had been made on his job, and this had turned the face dead and without thoughts.

"Sorry I put the wrong boot forward," the sheriff said softly. "Just what do you think about this affair, Art?"

"Somebody around here has a faculty of getting information he shouldn't hear," the man said. "How word ever got out about that currency being shipped through is beyond me. We had an airtight globe around it . . . yet word gets out. And how it got to these parties is more than I can understand. But it got there. The main thing for me to do is find that money. That's my job. When I get my hands on that unsigned currency, I got me some suspects, too."

"That's what I think, too," Lon said.

"How about the bank?" Powers asked, squinting up at the rider.

The thick head shook. "I searched that bank. And when I say I searched it, I did just that. I spent yesterday going through it from wall to



wall. The banker seems to be a friend of Latoon's. He got mad at me. I had to wire to the attorney's office in the capital to get permission to search. This I got. The banker claims he has no keys to the new safety deposit boxes."

"That maybe is where the money is cached," Lon said.

The head shook again in negation. "That money is not in the bank, Mallory."

"How do you know?" the sheriff asked. "You say the banker never unlocked the deposit boxes for you."

"No, he never unlocked them. But I'm bonded so I could stay in the bank while he went home for dinner. While he was gone I opened them with a pass-key the company furnished me. I went through every one of those boxes. Latoon had nothing in his except a couple of diamond rings he had evidently taken in as security. Those and a few confidential papers. Even had a will in there."

"He'll use that," Lon said, "if he runs into me."

"No money there?" the sheriff asked.

"Not a cent," the detective said.

Lon looked at his partner. "Well, this knowl-

edge saves us the trouble of taking the bank apart, Ike."

"Where would the money be?" Powers wondered.

Art Truitt smiled. "This is a big area," he said, sweeping his hand in a circle. "Thousands and thousands of miles of rocks and rough country and basins. The bundle of currency is a small one. A man could ride over it and never see its burial place. This case may take months—yes, even years—to crack, men."

Lon said, "I can't play outlaw that long. I got a woman to marry and a home to build."

Art Truitt looked at him. "That's your problem." He seemed to possess imaginary boundaries and beyond these he could not step. Lon got this impression and realized the man was a wolf sniffing out scent. There was something solid and reliable about this man and mixed with this stolidity was a bulldog tenacity. He had his teeth in this, and he was hanging on, and he was shaking his thick neck and growling. Something would have to give . . . in the matter of time. Lon was glad the man was not after him. Or was he? He was a friend of Ike Powers. Would the words of Ike Powers keep him from turning against one Lon

Mallory? Now Lon listened to the detective and the sheriff talk.

Ike Powers started at the beginning when he and Lon had climbed on to the train bound for Deer Lodge. He even admitted he aimed to turn Lon free when the train reached the bend of the Milk. Lon looked at Art Truitt. The man slumped in his saddle, body limp; yet, in this limpness, there seemed to lurk a sudden tension—the man could come out of this sleepy pose with lightning-like response. He was as deceiving as a dozing bobcat.

“This Latoon is a smart cookie,” the detective said, the tale finally concluded. “The thing to do is get some evidence.”

“Sure,” the sheriff said, “but how?”

Lon cut in with, “We’ve got to get that money.”

“But where is it?” the sheriff said.

Truitt shrugged, said, “Well, I got to ride on, men. Maybe the next time I see you it will be under better circumstances.” He turned his bronc. “Well, so long, Powers. So long, Mallory.”

And, with this, he rode away, horse loping. He headed south, following the twisting line of the rimrock, and soon he was out of sight in

the boulders. Only then did Lon Mallory look at his partner.

"Ike, we found out practically nothing."

"Only that the money isn't cached in the bank."

Lon nodded. "Let's change that statement, huh?"

"In what fashion?"

"Well, the dinero was not in the bank *when* Truitt searched for it."

"You mean . . . it might be there . . . now?"

"Could be. Could be at the Circle R, too. Hid somewhere so if things got hot, and it *had* to be found, it *could* be found there. Latoon wants that currency, yes—but there is something he wants even more than to retain possession of that unsigned money."

"And that?"

"The Circle R ranch."

Sheriff Ike Powers silently chewed his tobacco. His faded eyes were watching the basin below them, watching the riders moving back and forth like ants scurrying across a flat board.

"That's right, Lon," he finally said.

The Circle R was set in a small basin. Hank Mallory had selected the site with a good eye.

Water was in the creek and the land never flooded, even when the creek reached its highest point. And the recent rains had made the creek boil with muddy water. Dirty sticks and mud marked the high-water line. Sheriff Ike Powers took a position on the west slope and Lon Mallory secreted himself in the brush on the east slope. He had his field-glasses and he swept them over the spread where he had been reared. Where, as a boy, he had played in the haymow; where, as a stripling, he had broken to saddle his first bronc. Slowly he moved the glasses over the buildings.

The long house lay in silence, sleeping under the sun. From the wet earth came the smell of roots and growing plants. Lon saw his big collie lying in the yard in the sun. The collie was sunning himself. Lon was glad the wind blew towards him, therefore the collie could not get his scent. For if the dog got scent of his master he would come into the brush and betray Lon's hiding place.

When he had gone to jail for murdering his father he had left two men at the Circle R. Now the buildings seemed deserted. Even the corrals were empty. Lon knew, though, that Latoon had men staked out in the brush, watching the

Circle R. Watching to see if Lon Mallory would try to return to his home.

Lon had a moment of sudden homesickness. He was tired of being a hunted man, darting from one clump of brush to another. But he had to shove these thoughts to one side. He looked at the slope on the west side of the house. He could see no trace of Ike Powers. But the brush there was rather thick.

He heard the sound of boots behind him. He put his back against the boulder and listened. The boots came closer; they were stealthy. He swung his gun against the sound. Then the owner of the boots came into view. And he let his .45 sag and he smiled.

"Helen!"

"Lon!"

He looked down on her. It was good to see her again.

"What in the name of thunder are you doing here, Helen?"

She had been watching the Circle R. She had wondered if the stolen money were hidden on the ranch. She had been on the crest of the hill when he and Powers had ridden in.

"I saw you . . . but you never saw me, Lon."

"You must be part Indian."

“Why?”

“I never saw you . . . or heard you until right now. Have you spotted a guard yet? I haven’t.”

“I know where both of them are.”

“Where?”

“I had a hard time locating them. I was here for about an hour before I found them in the brush. One is right over there—in those big boulders.”

Lon put his field-glasses on a bunch of sandstone boulders on the edge of the yard. When a child he had played for hours in this mess of rocks. He finally made out the form of the guard. The man was squatting in the shade. He wore brown clothes, almost the colour of the boulders.

Lon lowered his glasses. “He looks like John Ringo to me.”

John Ringo was a Latoon man. He had reportedly been shipped into Montana from Texas or somewhere from the southwest—his past was a shady thing. And John Ringo, tight-lipped and ugly in mood, said nothing about his past days. He had killed a man since coming to Curry Bend some year or so back. He had given him the edge and then made his draw and had shot the man through the heart. The other man,

a good hand with his pistol, had not had time to fire a shot.

"A dangerous man," she murmured.

Lon said, "I wish Powers would get his man. Then I could move in and get Ringo. But if I go in, Powers' man can see me because he is higher than I am in the brush. And he'd fire."

"Where is Ike?"

"Back in them boulders on yonder hill. Or he was there when I last seen him—Hey, where you going?"

"I'm going to get hold of Ike and tell him where the other guard is, Lon."

"Be careful. You'd better stay here."

But she had already moved out of sight in the brush and boulders. He watched for her and saw her once; she had darted across a small clearing. She ran in a stooped position and then was gone. He put his field glasses on the point where she had said the second guard was posted. He watched but he saw no sign of a human. About a half hour later, the guard came out of the brush. Ike Powers walked behind him, a rifle in his back.

Lon thought, *My move now*, and his throat was dry. He realized he should shoot Ringo down and kill him, but this he could not do



from the brush. He moved bent-over and he carried his .45. He came to a clearing and looked out but Ringo was no longer in the boulders. He had moved. Lon stood there and had the disturbing thought that maybe the gunman had spotted him and was working in behind him. This was not a happy thought and it told him he might receive a bullet from behind through the spine. But this had to be tolerated and expected in a bushwhack game such as this, he realized.

Lon stopped.

Ringo had moved. Had Ringo heard him coming? Back yonder he had slipped and almost fallen over a half-buried rock covered with slimy moss . . . Had Ringo heard this noise? Suddenly Lon heard a man behind him.

He turned, pistol raised.

Ringo had come out of the brush. He had his .45 level, too. They stood there and appraised the other. Ringo had the edge—his hammer was back, thumb holding it cocked. All he had to do was let the hammer fall . . .

Lon would have to ear-back his hammer.

Dark, squat, was this gunman John Ringo. Some claimed Ringo was not his real name. Rumour claimed he had taken the name from a

gunslinger killed in Tombstone down in Arizona Territory. But now Lon had no interest in whether or not the name *Ringo* was assumed or genuine. His interest lay in the big .45 pistol.

A hand held that pistol with rock-hard steadiness. Lon lifted his eyes to Ringo's unshaven dark face. A scar stood out on his right jaw. Vivid, new, about three inches long—a knife had left that scar, Lon figured.

"So you figured you'd sneak behind me, eh, Mallory?"

"That was the deal." Was that Lon's voice—so distant, so dim. Had to be his voice.

"I saw your field-glasses," Ringo said, watching him.

"What do you mean?"

Ringo laughed. But the laugh had no sound. His lips parted, his eyes shot facets of light; he laughed.

Lon knew he had to stall for time. His only hope was that Ike Powers would move in behind Ringo. He doubted if Ringo knew that Powers was in this brush, also. He was afraid. He was close to death.

"My field-glasses?" he asked.

"They made a reflection against the sun."

Lon said, voice getting steadier, "Not

much sun to-day . . . Seems odd they'd make a reflection."

"But they did."

"What do you aim to do with me?" Lon's voice was louder now. He might have to work out this predicament by himself. Time was running out and the hour glass was rapidly spilling sand. That was the maddening part of it. His plan came. He would move rapidly to his right. John Ringo was right-handed. By moving to his right Lon would make the gunman swing his gun in a short semi-circle. He would have to move the gun *in* and not *out*. Was there any advantage in this direction of movement? Lon hoped so. Then, as he moved, he would fire, throwing his lead fast. The time was now. But, he never shot.

For suddenly Ringo was turning, gun dropping from his grip. The bullet had hit him in the shoulder. It had come from the gun of Ike Powers who now stepped out of the rocks, gun smoking.

"We saw him shift positions, Lon. We knew because of the brush you couldn't see him move. So . . . I came in."

Ringo was leaning against the boulders. His face was drained of blood. Lon moved forward

on wooden legs and got the gunman's .45. Ringo had let the hammer fall. The bullet had hammered into the soft earth and spent its violence there. Lon automatically shoved the gun, barrel down, under his own gun-belt. He looked up as Helen came out of the boulders.

"Thank God for you, Ike," he said.

Powers said, "Not for me, Lon. Helen was the one who saw him shift positions. She's got eyes like a cat. She can see you when you try to sneak in some dark night after a poker game with the boys and you have lost your socks."

"I can hear good, too," Helen said. She smiled; the smile was not gay.

Lon said, "In a case like that I'll not come home." He was almost himself again; he felt only a little shaky now. He looked at John Ringo. "What do we do with this fellow, Powers?"

"He has a horse in the barn, I reckon. We put him on it and let him head back to town where he can have a heart to heart talk with his boss, Rolf Latoon."

"He might meet some Latoon men and come back with them."

Powers nodded, said: "All right. We take him down to the house and hold him there.

While you and me look, Helen can have her gun on him."

"What happened to the other guard?"

"Slugged him cold back yonder and tied him spread-eagled to a tree. He couldn't get loose even if he tried. Looked funny, him tied around that tree—he's Will Jamison. Helen thought of it."

Lon said to John Ringo, "Get along, man."

"I'm bleedin' bad," Ringo said.

John Ringo had an even voice. His face was pale and set and his lips were bloodless; blood showed around his fingers. He had his hand inside his shirt and the shirt was open enough to show the blood and part of his hand.

"We'll fix you at the house," Lon said. "Get movin', man."

John Ringo walked ahead of them. "Take my gun with you," he said. "I've had that pistol for a number of years now. Sort of an attachment between me and it, I reckon."

He grinned. Not a bit of life in that grin; just cold mirth. You could feel its grating surface.

Lon asked, "Just two of you guards posted here, Ringo?"

"You go to hell."

"You come with me," Lon said, "and keep me company?"

Ringo did not answer this.

Helen said, "Only two, Lon."

"Did you gag Jamison?" Lon asked.

Helen said, "Yes."

Ike Powers grinned. "I took off his boots and gagged him with his socks. Jammed both of them in his mug and tied a neckscarf around his head. His socks were not too clean."

"Ugh," Helen grunted.

"She wanted me to use his shirt," the sheriff said, "but I sort of liked the idea of using those sweat-stiff socks, Lon."

Lon smiled.

They made John Ringo sit on the bench on the porch. They took off his shirt and found that the bullet had broken his collar bone. The bones made a grating sound when moved and he almost fainted. Sweat stood out on his forehead and he was ice cold. Lon went into the house and came out with a dirty towel.

"What can we do?" Helen asked.

"Just keep him from bleeding. Doc will have to set his shoulder. Here, Ike, help me tie this towel around his shoulder."

"We need two towels," the sheriff said.

"I'll get another." Helen went into the house.

"There's another at the washstand," Lon said, "And I guess I should have taken it out too, but I figured one was enough."

They tied the towels around the shoulder. Ringo gasped and said, "Let me lay down," and he lay full length on the bench. They tied the knot and he kept his eyes closed.

Lon spoke to Helen. "Sit with your gun on him. If he groans or wants help don't get close—he might be usin' that as a trick to grab your gun. And if he gets it you'll get killed. This rat has no mercy. If he tries anything funny holler for us and then shoot and shoot to kill."

She was silent. Then she said, "All right, honey."

Lon and the sheriff went into the house. Nostalgia struck Lon and he felt the pull of homesickness. But he did not waste time on this emotion. He had a job to do. He and the sheriff worked together. They started at one end of the long rambling house and worked towards the other. They turned mattresses and looked every conceivable place the money might possibly be hidden. But they found nothing. Lon's father had had a safe. They opened this but there was no money there; just some papers. Evidently

Rolf Latoon and his men had not been able to open the safe. The outside bore hammer marks and the dragging scratches left by a crowbar. They worked with fast dispatch. Lon, who knew the house, was the boss; he told the sheriff where to look.

But the money apparently was not cached in the house or in the cellar. They went out on the porch. John Ringo still lay on his back but his eyes were open now. Helen sat and watched him, the pistol in her lap.

Ringo said, slowly, "Lookin' for somethin'?"

"Money," Lon said. "Unsigned currency."

"Not here," the gunman said.

"Where is it?" Lon asked.

Ringo watched him with cat-hard eyes. "That's a good question," he told the wind.

Ike Powers said, "You could save us lots of time."

"I don't want to save you any time. I don't like you two. I'm going to kill you, Powers, for shooting me."

"You won't be able to use your right hand," the sheriff reminded.

Ringo said slowly, "I'm left handed, too. I can shoot just as fast and as accurate with my



left hand. I'm going to kill you, Powers. Mark that in your book, will you?"

Powers nodded. "I sure will, gunman. You're not the only man who has sworn to kill me. They've headed for prison swearing to come back and get me. So far none of them have."

"I'll not go to prison. I'll get you, Powers."

"You're repeating yourself," Powers said.

Lon asked, "Where is the money, Ringo?"

The eyes moved in wet sockets and touched Lon Mallory. "I wish I knew," the lips said. "I'd lift it myself and skip the country."

Lon thought: *He seems to be speaking the truth.* Then he thought: *He wouldn't tell me if he knew, and I was a fool to ask.* He looked at Helen. "We search the outbuildings."

"It might not be hidden here," she said.

"They found part of it here," he said. "Of course Latoon might have just said he had found it here, and had not even taken a dime of it on to this ranch. How about that, Ringo?"

The question had been shot out fast. But it did not faze John Ringo.

"You go to hell," Ringo said.

Lon motioned to Ike Powers and they moved into the yard out of hearing. "He seems to be talkin' the truth, Ike. Anyway, I'd so judge . . .

though a man can't tell what runs on inside another man's skull."

Powers smiled. "I'll tell the world. I got a hard enough time trying to keep up with my own thoughts . . . We search the outside, huh?"

"Might be a waste of time."

"But we got to, Lon."

They divided the chore. Lon would take the barn and the blacksmith shop while Powers searched the root cellar and bunkhouse. They were both on edge. There was always the chance that a Latoon man—or Latoon himself—might ride unexpectedly into the yard. Lon gave this some thought. He hoped that if such a thing happened either he or the sheriff would hear the coming of the rider. But if each was in a building at that particular time the sound of hoofs might not come to them. And Helen was only a woman—and she had enough responsibilities, as it were. But Lon did not waste any more time on his thoughts. He went through the barn. He looked in the hay-mangers, digging into the loose hay. He looked in the haymow. He realized this was an enormous task. He jabbed into the small mound of hay with a four-tined fork. Then he pitched it

to one side. He found nothing. He went down the ladder and left the barn. He went to the blacksmith shop. On the way he passed the haystacks. They had not been disturbed. He could have easily told if they had been disturbed for the sun had turned their outer surfaces dark. Had a pitchfork pulled out hay the spot would have been easy to see. He looked in the forge, first; he ran his hands through the lumpy dead coals. For his efforts he got only dirty and sooty hands.

He looked everywhere he could find—under some scrap iron, through the small pile of charcoal. But he found no money. He was discouraged. But then the thought came that this was, at its best, a vain gesture, and it had turned out wrong. Therefore he should not feel such a degree of discouragement.

He met Ike Powers as the man went back to the house. Powers said, "I found nothing," and he looked at him.

Lon said, "Nothing for me, too."

"Not on this ranch," Powers said.

Lon shook his head. "Could be cached here, Ike. But Lord, how would a man ever find it?"

"Small bundle against this wide area."

Lon said, "Only one thing to do, Powers."

Powers looked at him. "And that, Lon?"

"Keep an eagle-eye on a man. Trail him night and day. He'll lead us to the money, eventually."

"And that man?"

"Rolf Latoon."

Powers nodded and mature wisdom was in his eyes. "About the only thing we can do," he said. "What about Ringo and the gent we tied to the tree?"

"Turn them loose."

Powers rubbed his whiskers. "I'll go over and untie Will Jamison and herd him into camp."

"Leave him tied to the tree."

"Why?"

"Make Latoon or one of his men do some extra work by riding out here and turning him loose."

"They might let him starve."

"Might not be a bad idea," Lon said.

"What about John Ringo?"

"He can ride into town and report to Latoon," Lon said.

They went to the house. Helen asked: "Find anything?" and Lon said, "Not a thing," and he looked at Ringo. "You ride out, son," he said.

Ringo lifted his head. He had his confidence back now. With this gunman confidence was a savage desire for revenge. This glistened in his narrow-set eyes and showed in the harsh planes of his face.

"Yes?"

"Your horse is in the barn. So is the bronc belongin' to Will Jamison. We'll leave Jamison tied there for a while. Ike, pull the gunbelt off the boy, huh?"

Powers unbuckled the thick belt and said, "Why?"

"Take the cartridges out of the loops."

Powers nodded, understanding. He took the big cartridges out and put them in his own pockets.

"We need more cartridges," he said.

He had the belt empty. He buckled it again around the thin hips of the gunman. Lon took the gunman's .45. He unloaded it and juggled the gun.

"You like this gun, Ringo?"

The gunman had beady and suspicious eyes. He wet his lips. "Yes," he said, "I've had it for years." He added, "It's saved my life a couple of times."

"You can have it back," Lon said.

“Right now?”

“Later.”

Powers said, “I’ll get his horse,” and he went towards the barn. He walked with a bow-legged saddleman’s gait.

Helen had a question in her eyes; now she put it into words.

“What do you intend to do, Lon?”

Lon grinned. “Send this boy back to his boss.”

She watched him. She was suspicious. But she said nothing. Powers came back leading a sorrel gelding.

“I guess this is his horse,” he said. “Both of them got saddles on.”

“Too lazy to unsaddle their broncs,” Lon said.

“Hard on a horse to stand and try to eat with a cinched-tight saddle,” the sheriff said. “No courtesy towards a good horse. Sign of a no-good man.”

“He’s no ’count,” Lon said.

“I judged it was his saddle from the short stirrups,” the sheriff said. “Will Jamison has got long legs. Long enough to wrap around a tree and tie at the ankles.” He smiled at this memory.

Lon gestured towards John Ringo with the empty gun. "Get on your horse," he said.

Ringo walked towards the horse and some of the swagger had gone from his stride. He sent a sidewise glance at Ike Powers.

"Just don't forget what I told you, Powers."

"About you killin' me?"

"That's it."

"I'll remember, Ringo."

Ringo got his left boot in stirrup. He reached across his body with his left hand and got the horn, for his right hand dangled. He tried to lift himself but found it difficult.

"Help me, Mallory?"

Lon unceremoniously and roughly pushed the man upward and John Ringo was in his saddle.

Lon said, "Kick your left foot out of stirrup."

"Why?"

"Kick it out, damn it."

Ringo moved his foot free. Lon's boot went into the stirrup. Grabbing the cantle, he lifted himself upward; he was behind the cantle riding the saddleskirts. He carried the empty pistol.

"I'll start him out," he told Powers and Helen.

"We'll wait," Powers said.

Helen still showed puzzlement, but she said nothing.

"Move the pony along," Lon ordered Ringo.

Ringo asked, "You ridin' into town with me, Mallory?" The words came over his shoulder.

"Sure," Lon taunted, "sure."

They rode out of the yard at a walk. Ringo put the horse past the barn, past the haystacks, past the horse-corral, and into the brush. They crossed the creek on the bridge; the water was close to the top. They went across the bridge with the shod hoofs making sodden sounds on the water-soaked planks. They left the brush and reached the hill.

Lon said, "Now I give you your gun, Ringo."

Ringo said, "Thanks," and he said no more. For Lon had laid the barrel of the .45 solidly across the man's skull. He heard a thud and Ringo caved over the saddle. He did not fall because Lon held him. Lon slid to the ground and took Ringo with him. Blood came from the gunman's flat ugly nose.

Lon thought: *Maybe I hit him too hard . . . and killed him?*

This thought held nothing disturbing. A few



months ago the thought of killing a man would have been terrifying. But now it strangely held no terror, no fear, no reproach.

He felt inside the man's shirt.

Ringo's heart was a pump sending solid blood through arteries. He had a heart as tough as a switch-engine piston.

Lon looked down at him and grinned.

The horse stood close by. Lon tied him to a small clump of sagebrush. Then he went back to where Ringo lay in sleep. He laid the empty .45 on the man's chest. He smiled.

"Tell this to Latoon," he said.

He left the man and the horse there and he walked back to the ranch that he had once owned and hoped to own again. The trail was old to his boots; he had walked it hundreds of times. He came to the plank bridge. He and his father had built that bridge after the old one had been washed out in the waters from a flash-flood. His mind went back. How many years ago had they driven these pilings? About five, no—four years.

They had cut straight cottonwoods about a foot diameter and had driven these into the creek bottom for piling. Then the spans had been thick cottonwood boles split with the flat

side up. Over these had been placed the twelve by two planks now worn by wheels and shod hoofs.

He glanced at the muddy water. He had caught dozens of catfish and pike and carp fishing off this bridge with Casey. He thought then of Casey. He forgot about catfish and pike and carp and because he thought of Casey he thought of Rolf Latoon.

He came to the house.

Helen asked, "What did you do to Ringo?"

"Not a thing," he fabricated. "I saw him a distance, then dropped off his horse. He loped towards town hell-bent for election."

Helen did not see him wink at Ike Powers.

When John Ringo regained consciousness he sat up and looked about him in a dazed manner and he remembered being slugged. Through his aching head then went a shaft of anger directed towards Lon Mallory. But his head pained so much the anger was of short duration for pain demanded he pay full attention to its anguish. He lowered his head to his hands and sat there and fought the pain. But it would not leave; it only subsided a little. He looked about himself. His horse stood tied to a sagebrush and then he

noticed his gun on the ground beside him, for when he had sat up the .45 had slid to the ground.

He reached automatically for the Colt pistol.

The butt of it felt good; it fitted his hand. His mind reconstructed the movements that Lon Mallory had made after he had slugged him. This done, he got to his feet, still holding the .45. He staggered as nausea hit him but he held his knees under him. He shook his head with a slow doggedness that brought some measure of clarity to his brain. The thought came that he would load the .45 and ride back and kill a man named Lon Mallory.

Then he remembered that Ike Powers had pushed the bullets out of his gunbelt, and his hand went down to verify his memory—the loops were without cartridges. Usually he carried an extra box of cartridges on his saddle, tied to the saddlestrings in a sack. But for once he had not taken this precaution and he had no other bullets. Logic told him maybe this was a good thing. Had he some extra bullets he might have ridden back and called the gun of Lon Mallory. And Mallory had a man siding him—a good shot—and there was also the woman, Helen. Ringo staggered to his horse and stood

for a moment leaning against the beast with his head down on the seat of the saddle./

Again, he did some thinking.

He and Will Jamison had had a job to do. They had failed. Now Jamison was tied with his hands and feet around a tree. A smile touched the gaunt lips—Jamison would be fighting mad. Yes, and so would another man be fighting mad.

Rolf Latoon.

He turned his thoughts over to Rolf Latoon. He did not like the rawboned man; neither, for that matter, did he hate him. Nor did he fear him. But Latoon had one thing that John Ringo wanted, and this was a bundle of Uncle Sam's currency. Sixty thousand dollars worth, in fact. Yes, it was unsigned, but little difference did that make—there were pen-artists who would forge the signature of a bank president for a few dollars and a few drinks. Or maybe a shot of heroin, down along the Mexican border?

Ringo wanted that money.

Accordingly, he gave this matter some thought, despite the throbbing of his head. He debated about reporting this to Rolf Latoon. He decided it would be best not to report this affair to his boss. His mind went ahead and built a

plan. He figured even at this moment he was being watched by either the girl or Ike Powers or Lon Mallory. Watched from some high hill, some promontory. He had best then make a pretence of riding towards town, presumably to contact Rolf Latoon. He got his reins and slowly lifted his aching body between the fork and the cantle. Then he rode into the brush and was out of view along a coulee. He stayed here, hidden and silent, for about an hour, then he rode back towards the Mallory ranch. He would free Will Jamison and they would talk it over. They would probably agree not to mention this to their boss and keep it a secret between them. A glance told him that Powers and Mallory and the woman had left, for there were no horses around the yard.

He went to where Jamison was tied to the tree. Jamison was still sitting there in his uncomfortable position, feet and hands trussed to the tree. Ringo went out of saddle saying, "Will, you must be damned tired and stiff from sitting there tied like that," and then he stopped and looked at the man. Jamison had not raised his head. He had not answered.

"Will?"

Still no movement; no answer.

Ringo saw the blood then, and he stood there and thought with dull regularity, and the thought was this: *Somebody has murdered Will Jamison*. For now he could see the blood that had come out of the man's mouth. He came closer and he lifted the hat from Jamison's head and he saw the hole in the back of the man's skull. Somebody had shot him through the back of the head and then, probably in an ironic gesture, had restored his hat back on his head.

Will Jamison was dead—as dead as a man could ever get.

John Ringo stood there with his legs spread out wide and his face pale under the blue-grey whiskers and he shook his head like a bull who had collided head on with another bull with a thicker skull and more weight behind him. Because of the sodden blow on his skull his thinking was still not too clear. But he searched through the maze of his thoughts and found one that fitted this circumstance. Powell or Mallory had murdered Will Jamison when they had ridden away from the Circle R ranch. But that still did not seem logical.

He walked around the dead man and his boots made slippery sounds on the sopping wet leaves and twigs. Was it logical that the sheriff

or the convict would kill this man? He doubted that. They would gain nothing—except another murder charge—by murdering Will Jamison. Who then had shot him through the back of the head, and why?

These questions were answered by the sound of boots behind him and he turned, hand going to his unloaded gun. Then remembrance broke through the pain, and told him the gun was of no use.

“Latoon,” he said.

Rolf Latoon had his .45 in his hand, the gun on him. Beyond Latoon stood a man known as the Bearpaw Kid, and why the monicker Kid was tacked to him John Ringo did not know, for the man was in his late forties at least. The Bearpaw Kid also had a weapon; he held not a six-shooter, though; he held a Winchester .30–30 rifle, and it had a silencer on it. That silencer told John Ringo something of importance. He had wondered why he had not heard the report of the bullet that had killed Will Jamison. He had not been beyond the limits of the sound, he knew; yet he had not heard it.

Will Jamison had been killed by a bullet from a rifle with a home-made silencer that had been wrapped around the breech and had muffled the

explosion somewhat. Either the Bearpaw Kid or Rolf Latoon, then, had murdered Will Jamison. And fear was hard and cold in the belly of the killer called John Ringo.

"You two killed Will Jamison?"

"I killed him," Latoon said.

John Ringo had himself by now. He shoved a smile to his lips. "Who the hell tied him to the tree thataway?"

"Why ask me?" Latoon demanded.

They looked at each other. Latoon, bony, deadly, gun in hand; Ringo, squat, ugly, with an empty gun, with dead beltloops. Ringo had that feeling again, and he looked past Latoon at the Bearpaw Kid. But the rifle had no sympathy, nor did the dark eyes under heavy brows show anything but hard scrutiny.

"I'm wondering what happened," Ringo said with measured words. "I was in the brush across the area and I came over to check up on Will and here I find him tied to a tree and shot through the head and you admit killing him. And for why did you do all this, Rolf?"

"You don't know?"

At this moment John Ringo knew he was just wasting his breath. The thought came that they had searched the brush for him but had not



found him or he would have been dead now also. He would have been shot through the head while lying unconscious out there in the brush. He was glad that when Lon Mallory had knocked him out Lon had not done this close to the house. Had Lon knocked him cold closer to the Circle R this pair of wolves would have found him and sent a lead fang through his brain, just as they had done to Will Jamison who now sagged on the ropes that bound him to this tree.

Ringo said, "They jumped us. Powers and Mallory and the woman. Hell, they shot me—look at my shoulder, man. I can't use my right hand." He made an effort to lift his arm, and he could have lifted it part way, but this he did not want to do. He wanted sympathy—if this pair had any such thing—for only by sympathy could he save his life, or so he reasoned. But it was hard to tell what Rolf Latoon would do. Sometimes the man was a savage, eating raw meat; the next hour he was civilized, using a level unbiased brain.

"Your bullet-loops are empty," Latoon said.

"They didn't unload my gun though," Ringo said.

Latoon said, "If they took the bullets out of

your loops they unloaded your gun, and they went through your saddle-bags to make damned sure you had no ca'tridges there. Do you think we're that dumb, Ringo?"

Ringo said, "Just let me ride out."

"Why?"

"Just let me go," Ringo said.

"Why?"

Ringo said, "We got caught from behind. I saw his field-glasses shine and I laid a trap and I caught Mallory but the lawman came in behind and shot me. I did my share. They never caught me flat-booted like they did Jamison."

"Just the same—they caught you."

"That's a thing . . . of the past."

Latoon nodded. "Yes . . . a past happening. The only thing we have to watch is to see it never happens again."

"That's right."

"What did they do at the ranch?"

Ringo looked at the Bearpaw Kid's rifle. He looked back at Latoon. He was speculating and wondering and gauging. He told about Helen Andrews holding a gun on him and keeping him on the porch. He told about Ike Powers and

Lon Mallory searching the house and outbuildings.

"Searching for what?" Latoon asked.

"For the stolen money, they said."

Latoon smiled bleakly. "Why, hell, we never stole that money, did we, Ringo? That was stole by the Curry gang."

"Hell, yes."

There was a silence. Latoon watched Ringo. Latoon had cat-fast eyes. Bearpaw Kid played with the front sight on his rifle. He seemed amused with the front sight. Yet he kept his eyes on John Ringo. A magpie chirped in a cottonwood tree. His chirp was a hard metallic sound. This and the slight sound of the wind in wet leaves were the only sounds for a long moment. Uneasiness began to gnaw at John Ringo. He put this into words.

"I'll ride out and keep my mouth shut, Rolf."

Latoon shook his head. "You might keep your mouth shut," he said, "but you won't ride out . . ."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You make a guess."

"I'm unarmed," said Ringo, and his voice

held a queer note. "You can't kill a man without givin' him a chance."

"I've done it before."

"Yeah, but I'm your friend, Rolf."

Latoon shook his head. "I have no friends, Ringo. I have only gunmen and their friendship is false . . . it is bought friendship. When a man runs an outfit like mine he can't afford to make mistakes in judging another man—a gunman, like you. When he makes a mistake on the judgment of a man's make-up, then he might lose his life—or go behind bars—because of that mistake."

"I'll kill Powers for you. Powers shot me. I swore to kill him. Latoon, I told him that—let me live and I'll kill Powers for you."

Latoon watched him. His lips barely moved. "I'm going to make an example of you, just like I made an example of Jamison there. My bunch is sort of slacking up—discipline, you could call it. Bearpaw, kill him!"

Ringo looked at Bearpaw. John Ringo had a twitching on his lips.

Bearpaw said, "I can't do it, boss."

Latoon said, "Kill him."

Ringo turned. He started to run. He ran as fast as he could. He zigzagged, he tried to get

to a big tree. He was almost there when the bullet hit him in the back. It seemed to push him ahead, as though a hard hand had hit him. At the same time, his head flew back; he landed on his belly in the mud. He did not move.

Latoon said, "He almost got away, Bearpaw."

"I—I had a hard time doing it, Rolf."

Latoon walked over to the limp man. He looked down at him. "Wonder if he is dead?"

The Bearpaw Kid had come over, also. He put his rifle butt down on the ground. "I'll feel for his heart," he offered.

Latoon said, "You got him right through the heart, I think. No use us wasting any time here. Even if he isn't dead, he can't move—he's got a busted shoulder and a broken heart." He smiled. "Quite a combination." He looked at the Bearpaw Kid. "Thought for a while you were runnin' weak on me, too."

"Not me, boss." Rather hurriedly.

Latoon smiled. "We'd best look the spread over and then head out for town, Bearpaw."

They left and behind them lay John Ringo, belly-down in mud. Behind them was the corpse of Will Jamison pulling inertly against its bonds. They were both suspicious of the other.

Therefore neither walked ahead; they walked abreast. They came to the house. While the Bearpaw Kid stayed outside to watch Rolf Latoon walked through the house. He smiled with grim amusement at the sight of the wreckage made by Ike Powers and `Lon Mallory. Well, they would never find the money here. He went out on the porch.

The Bearpaw Kid said, "Blood over there, boss."

Latoon looked at the porch. "Must have come from Ringo," he said. "Well, let's get our horses and go, Bearpaw."

"Nobody to watch this spread."

Latoon said, "Mallory won't be back. Those two were here to trap him if he came in. He's looked for what he wanted and didn't find it. He won't be back so why waste man-hours?"

"We should burn the spread, huh?"

Latoon led his bronc from the barn and mounted. "Why burn it?"

"It belongs to Mallory, remember?"

Latoon said, "For a few more days, and then it goes over to Rolf Latoon, lock and stock and barrel . . . and deed. I'm not burning my own property, you fool."

The Bearpaw Kid put his boot in his stirrup

and lifted himself into saddle. "Oh," he said, "I see . . ."

"We head for town," Latoon said.

They loped across the bridge, hoofs making ringing sounds. They went down the wagon trail, riding abreast. The Bearpaw Kid had jammed his Winchester into the saddle-holster under his left leg. He was thinking of John Ringo's horse and saddle. They had left the saddled horse there where he had shot down the running gunman. The Bearpaw Kid aimed to go back that night and get that saddle and keep it. It was a good saddle; much better than his worn kak. He looked at the flat fork of his saddle and remembered the swell fork of the saddle on John Ringo's horse. Besides, a horse should be unsaddled and unbridled; the horse would stand there until somebody stripped the leather from him and took the bridle out of his mouth. And that man would be the Bearpaw Kid.

He glanced at his boss. He wondered what thoughts were running through the brain of Rolf Latoon. He remembered how Latoon had shot Will Jamison. Blasted the life out of him with the rifle by putting the barrel to the man's head. He remembered how Jamison had tried

to move his head back and forth so the bullet would not find him and he remembered how the man had tried to scream and he had opened his mouth but no words had come. That had been odd—he had been screaming, but no sound had come from his gaping mouth. Latoon had held the blanket over the breech of the rifle. Latoon was taking no chances. Latoon had been afraid that the rifle report might bring either Ike Powers or Lon Mallory to the scene. And so Jamison had died because he had muffed the ball.

Suddenly, he was afraid of Latoon. Deadly afraid of him, and this drained blood from his face, making his cheekbones stand out. Latoon would kill him or anybody else who made an error. Kill them as he had murdered Jamison. The Bearpaw Kid at this moment and at this point made a decision: He would get Ringo's horse and saddle and leave this country, good job or no job. Money was not worth getting killed over.

Come night, he would sneak out of Curry Bend, ride to this point and get the horse and the saddle, and then ride south. No use going north. Be foolish to try to go into Canada. Mounties would pick him up and he was



wanted in Canada. Murder was the charge . . . and a gallows would be waiting.

This decision made, he watched his boss. He did not let his boss get behind him. He wondered if John Ringo and Will Jamison had known where the stolen money had been hidden. He doubted that. He had not been in on the raid himself. But Ringo had, and so had Jamison. Well, if they knew now . . . they would never tell. Dead men don't talk.

He wondered what Rolf Latoon was thinking about. At this particular moment, Latoon was thinking of a bundle of fresh and crisp currency—almost sixty thousand dollars worth. Not quite sixty thousand dollars, because he had cached about four thousand dollars worth of the stolen unsigned currency at the Mallory ranch to pin the blame on Lon Mallory.

Only Latoon knew where that money was hidden. John Ringo had not known. Neither had Will Jamison. Only one man knew and his name was Rolf Latoon.

Latoon rode high in his saddle, bent over his fork as his horse trotted towards Curry Bend. Things had worked the way he had planned. Word had come along the grapevine—that mysterious sounding board known only to the

lawless—about the unsigned currency. Had the truth been known, the Walker gang had aimed to jump the train, too, but they had not acted soon enough—they had waited to the west about a hundred miles, and therefore had missed. Now he had this money. Luck had worked his way. He had made an outlaw out of Lon Mallory and had stripped Ike Powers of his badge and had driven the sheriff out on the hoot-owl trail. Soon he would own the Circle R. The nesters would leave and he would buy each out for a few cents on a dollar. He would own outright the town of Curry Bend and the south half of Milk River Valley.

Luck had been with him in another sense—a grim and bloody vein. Three of the men who had helped him rob the train were now dead. Pock Malone had died before the actual robbery had begun, with one of Lon Mallory's bullets in him. Now Jamison was dead and so was Ringo. There had been one other man. He had headed out the next morning for Canada. He had never reached Canada. John Ringo had ambushed him from the rimrock for two hundred bucks. Now only one man was alive who had robbed that train and his name was Rolf Latoon.

So far, so good.

But there was still a fly in the ointment. He was buzzing and raising a hum; his name was Lon Mallory. Mallory had to be run out of the country or killed. But sooner or later a group of his men would run across the young rancher. And Mallory would join Malone and Jamison and Ringo.

He let his mind dwell on Ike Powers.

The sheriff, too, would have to go.

These conclusions reached, he thought again of the money. He would get the money soon and transfer it to a drier place. He sought for such a place. He decided on his safe in his new saloon. Then he discarded this hiding place. Mallory and Powers might try to crack the safe and succeed. They were on the right track, he had to acknowledge grudgingly. If they got hold of this stolen currency—and could prove he had hidden it—well, the jig was up. Art Truitt was riding this grass. Another detective was walking around Curry Bend. The thing to do was lay low. But still, the desire came to see the currency again, to feel it, to see if it was dry and all right. They said, so did the sages, that a criminal always returns to the scene of his crime. He wanted suddenly to see this money, to feel it. What if water seeped into it and got

it wet despite the oilskin it was wrapped in? This bothered him. This rain had penetrated far into the earth.

So he and the adult known as the Bearpaw Kid said little on the ride into Curry Bend. Only when they were entering the town did the Bearpaw Kid open his mouth and then he asked, "What about the other guys?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, Jamison and Ringo has disappeared, and the boys will ask why and wherefore. A man just ain't here one minute and gone the next."

"I still don't get your point?"

"What will I tell them if they ask about them?"

Rolf Latoon had known all the time what the man had meant. But he had played dumb to antagonize the gunman.

"Tell them the truth?"

"That we killed them?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Ringo has a good friend. Wad Ballence is a hard man with a gun, boss. I'd hate to match lift and pull against him."

"Then tell Wad I killed them both."

"He might move against you, Rolf."

“Let him.”

“I’ll keep my big mouth shut,” the Bearpaw Kid finally said. He was scowling a little but it was from fear. He wanted to turn his bronc and ride away and not come back. “I’ll leave it all up to you, Rolf.”

“All right.”

They rode into the livery barn and went down and turned their broncs over to the hostler.

“I’m hungry as all get-out,” Latoon said.

They went into the Silver Dollar. The stale odours rushed to meet them—the stink of unwashed flesh, the smell of old sawdust and old whisky, the rank smell of beer, the ugly smell of old cigars. Smoke had seeped into the walls, giving them taste and dullness; the place smelled of evilness.

Latoon got a drink and went back to his office and shut the door behind him without a word more to his hireling. The Bearpaw Kid went to the bar and got a beer and the bartender asked, “Out for a ride, Kid?”

“Out for a ride.”

The Kid finished his beer and went down the street to the cafe. Latoon sat alone in one of the two booths. The Bearpaw Kid thought:

*He's washed in his office and gone out the back door and down the alley,* and he nodded at Latoon but Latoon apparently did not know him, for he did not nod back. The Bearpaw Kid put his bottom on a stool and ordered. While waiting for his meal he moodily stared out the front window. The day was changing into dusk and it looked like rain again. He wished it would stop raining. He got his steak and ate it and Latoon walked by and paid at the cashbox and went outside into the rain. The Bearpaw Kid paid and went to the Silver Dollar. Joe Monday came over and said, "The boss never sent no new guards out to the Mallory spread," and the Bearpaw Kid merely nodded, picking a pool cue from the rack.

"Seems odd to me," Joe Monday said. "I figured me an' Smitty would ride out there an' spell off Jamison an' Ringo like we did last night."

"Shoot a game of rotation?"

"Yeah."

"Flip for the break."

The Bearpaw Kid won the flip and broke and slopped in two stripes. Joe Monday kept yapping about the changing of guards at the Mallory ranch. The Kid said nothing. Latoon

was not around. The night came on and the rain increased; lightning rolled yellow against the clouds and thunder spoke in hoarse tones. About ten o'clock, the Bearpaw Kid ate again, got a quart of Old Saddle, and said, "Me for my hotel room, bartender."

"Bad night, Kid."

"I'll stick under the awnings," the Kid said.

He went to his room and gathered his stuff in his bedroll and went down the back stairway. He wore a long dark slicker and rain hit him and the slicker turned it. He went to the barn and saddled his horse and thought of Ringo's saddle, and Ringo's horse. The hostler had passed-out from too much whisky. He lay on his back on his bunk and his mouth looked like a yawning small cave. The Bearpaw Kid rode out of town by the alley-route. Once out of town he put the horse to a trot. He rode high on his stirrups and the wind smashed across the sagebrush, rolling it and bringing hard rain. Lightning made its ghastly whiteness reveal the hills, the brush, the rain-filled road.

The Kid seemed not to mind the rain, the thunder, the lightning. He was glad to be leaving Curry Bend. He had seen Rolf Latoon send a bullet through a man's head, and that

man had been tied to a tree—helpless and beseeching. The thought that he had later sent a bullet through a defenceless man's back did not bother him. He gave it little if any thought.

When he came to the brush where the bodies were, he moved slower and finally he dismounted, walking and leading his horse. Lightning showed the Mallory ranch and from its location he deciphered the spot in the brush where the horse and saddle would be. He came to this clearing and then he stopped and waited for more lightning. Finally it came.

The clearing had no horse, no saddle, no dead man. The lightning flared out and the Bearpaw Kid said, "What the hell?" He went to the tree around which the arms and legs of Will Jamison had been tied.

His hands went down the tree, but there was no dead man. His hands went unmolested to the ground.

He fumbled, reaching around the tree. He was about half-drunk and the bottle was about half-empty. Did he feel the wrong tree? He waited for another flash of lightning.

This washed in, showing the tree, the land, the earth. And then it was gone, the thunder



dinning in his ears. Ringo was gone. The horse and saddle were gone. Even Jamison was gone.

Lightning hit a cottonwood down along the creek. It made a roaring cracking sound and the tree flamed like a candle soaked in gasoline. It was too much for the Bearpaw Kid.

He ran for his horse. He found him and hit the saddle and headed out, drifting south. Dead men had walked away from the spots where they had been murdered!

At least, he had the rain at his back, now.

Lon Mallory and Sheriff Ike Powers had buried John Ringo and Will Jamison. They had taken Ringo's horse from the clearing and had turned him loose and they had cached his saddle back in the barn in a Circle R out-house. They had been about three miles from the Mallory ranch when they had seen two riders in the distance, riding for the Circle R.

And they had pulled rein in the boulders and watched the men below them, mere dots on the basin's wet floor. Helen had ridden for her home and the pair sat there and Lon focused his glasses on the two riders. The field-glasses reached out and grabbed them and pulled them within range and recognition.

Lon said, "One is Rolf Latoon."

Powers said, "The curly wolf hisself, huh," and asked, "and the other, Lon? Who is he?"

Lon had been silent for a moment. "I don't know him." He handed the glasses to Powers. "You look, Ike."

Powers turned the focusing screw. He said, "My hands are numb with cold," and then he looked at the pair. "Like you say—one is Latoon. And the other is the Bearpaw Kid."

"Oh, sure," Lon said.

"Heading for the Circle R," the sheriff said. "We could cut down and intercept them and have it out with Latoon."

"No," Lon had said.

The sheriff had considered this, head back slightly. "You're right. We'd gain nothing; maybe just get shot . . . or killed. We got to get that money. Then we got evidence."

"So it seems to me, Ike."

They watched the pair ride out of sight around the toe of a hill. For some reason they seemed reluctant to move on. Lon gave this some thought and decided there was no place for them to go so they were therefore in no hurry to move on. He swung his thoughts back to Rolf Latoon.

"Wonder what will happen when he sees Jamison tied to that tree?"

"He won't be happy," Powers said.

Lon said, "I wonder."

They dismounted and sat on a boulder and from here they could see all directions—ahead, behind, to the two sides. Nobody could sneak up on them.

Lon said, "Wish I could smell like a coyote. I feel like one. A wet coyote, Powers."

"Maybe we will develop a dog's nose," the sheriff joked.

From where they sat they could not see the Circle R ranch. Misty rain and the folding hills hid the spread. But it was not long until two riders came back along the trail that led to Curry Bend. Again the glasses came into use.

Lon said, "Rolf Latoon, heading back. The Bearpaw Kid is with him. I figured they might stay and guard the spread for a shift."

"They might not post a guard at all."

Lon handed the sheriff the glasses but he did not use them.

"That's right," Lon said. "With us searchin' the place they might figure we won't come back again, which is logical. But then, why aren't four men ridin' out, not two?"

"That's right, Lon. Ringo and Jamison should be with them, if they're abandoning the idea of watching the outfit."

"Maybe Ringo and Jamison drifted out," Lon said.

The sheriff nodded. "Logical idea. They'd know Latoon would be spittin' mad against them for us outwittin' them. Ringo might have come back and cut his partner loose and drifted."

Lon shook his head.

"What's wrong with that theory, Lon?"

"I might be wrong, Powers, but it seems to me we'd have seen them head out, and we haven't seen them in the distance."

"By golly, Lon, that's right."

"I wonder," Lon mused, "I wonder."

They had waited until the two riders were out of view in the distance and then they had ridden back to the Circle R and had come upon the grisly scene of the killing. The sight had made Lon almost sick.

Sheriff Ike Powers had sworn under his breath in amazement and horror. A dead man, tied to a tree, sagging and inert; another man, dead on the ground, blood on his back. And the horse standing there, reins trailing.

Lon said, "A massacre."

"A Sioux full of whisky would have more mercy."

They looked first at Will Jamison. "Big hole in the front of his forehead, small hole in the back." Sheriff Ike Powers had regained his composure now. "Means he was shot from behind."

"Brave men."

They looked at Ringo. They rolled him over. They tore off his muddy shirt. Powers stood up and said, "Same thing here. Big hole in front where the bullet tore out and small one where it entered. Shot from behind while running, because he had his head bent under him, if you noticed. Momentum has carried him on and doubled his neck."

Lon nodded.

"Nice Latoon," the sheriff said.

Lon said, "He must've really been mad. Ringo must have come to and rid back to see Jamison and cut him loose and he run smack-dab into Latoon and that overgrown gunman called the Kid."

"Looks that way."

Lon studied his partner. "I got another idea."

“And it?”

“Latoon robbed that train. He had help. I took one of them out of this world of sin with a bullet in the brisket, one Pock Malone. Maybe Latoon didn’t kill these two just because he was mad.”

Powers watched him.

“These two could have been in on that train robbery,” Lon said. “Latoon might have killed them to silence them for once and for always.”

“Might be so.”

Powers looked at the ranch which could be seen through a break in the brush and timber.

“No new guard . . . Means Latoon has given up guarding this ranch. Since we searched it he prob-ly figures we won’t be back.” The sheriff held his head in his hands suddenly. “My head has a pain. That bullet did me no good, I reckon.”

Lon looked anxiously at his partner. Powers had acted queerly a number of times. Lon remembered Casey’s skull fracture.

“Hay in the barn haymow and grub in the house,” Lon said. “And my collie will bark if anybody strange comes around. Good place to spend the night.”

The sheriff raised his head. "I'm all right now. But we should bury these two men."

"We'll do that."

The burial was a simple one. They dug two holes about three feet deep and buried the two murdered men. They then unsaddled the horse and turned him loose and took the saddle to the barn where Lon hung it on a peg.

"I'll cook supper, Lon."

But Ike Powers could not finish the cooking chore. He had to sit down at the table and Lon finished the cooking. Lon was not a good cook. They ate with one eye on the door and windows and then it was dark and they went to the haymow. The collie wanted to get up the ladder to the haymow and sleep with his master. But Lon made him stay down below in the barn.

The rain hit the roof. The thunder rolled; lightning coloured the earth. They had some blankets from the bunkhouse. They were in the haymow when the Bearpaw Kid had ridden up, then bolted.

Below them their horses were in stalls. They still had their saddles, though; the cinches hung loose. They were ready for a get-away if one were demanded. All a man had to do was grab

for a hackamore rope, tighten a latigo strap, and ride out either the back or front door.

Lon said, "Buster will bark the minute a man shows up, either on foot or horseback. He wanted to sleep with me but he sure couldn't climb that haymow ladder." He smiled in the dark. "Jumped part way up and tried to get up here with me."

"How is your arm, Lon?"

Lon said, "I guess it is healed. Anyway, it gives me no trouble. I ain't so free with it as with my right arm, but Helen looked at it right afore she headed for home, and she said it was okay."

"You got out lucky, boy."

"How is your head, Ike?"

"Oh, kinda sore, 'cause that bullet sure cut a groove. Took a tunnel right out of the bone, Doc Goss said. No concussion, though, Doc said."

"I guess we'll live."

"Until we die."

"You cooked a good meal, Ike."

"I'm not much of a cook. Nellie is much better."

Lon lay back. He thought of Helen Andrews. She had hated to leave him. But . . . she



couldn't run, hide, fire, dodge, run some more. He had a lot of charges against him. According to Latoon he had helped the Curry gang steal the currency. He had broken from custody of the sheriff. He had killed Pock Malone. He had shot Hack Wilson.

He thought of Casey.

This thought was with him when sleep finally came. He had a debt to pay Latoon, a debt he owed Casey.

Sleep—merciful sleep—came and possessed him.

The man known as the Bearpaw Kid did not ride far from the scene of the murder. Within two or three miles logic came and pushed away his wild fear. He pulled his hard-breathing horse to a halt in lee of an overhanging cliff where the wind and rain could not hit him. And, sitting there, he gave this matter slow and deliberate thought.

Maybe he was running away from something good?

He checked the bad points against the good. He was pulling down a hundred and fifty gold each month. And doing little or nothing for it. Sure, Latoon was a murderer—he had proven

himself such that day—and he had proven himself a murderer the day he had ambushed Hank Mallory.

The Bearpaw Kid had seen him ambush the cowman. Quite by accident, it had occurred—the Bearpaw Kid and John Ringo had been cutting across country, for they had been checking on the plight of the nesters along Beaver Creek. And they had seen their boss shoot Hank Mallory from his horse. They had seen him transport the body to a Circle R haystack and set it on fire to burn it in an attempt to hide its identity, which was only a farce to lay the blame on young Lon Mallory. He remembered looking at John Ringo.

“For hell’s sake,” Ringo had said huskily, “we stumbled on to something big, man.”

“He’s framin’ Lon Mallory.”

Ringo had shrugged. “So he is. But we’d best not breathe a word about this to Rolf. Hell, man, he’d gut-shoot us both. This is a secret only one man should have, and the owner should be Rolf Latoon.”

“We’d best duck back in this coulee and ride on and hope he doesn’t see us, Ringo.”

“Good idea.”

Now Ringo was dead—and now only two

men knew who had murdered and mutilated the body of the cowman Hank Mallory.

So the man known as the Bearpaw Kid thought now of John Ringo, the man he had killed with a bullet from behind. Somebody had found the bodies of Ringo and Jamison and had taken them either to town or had buried them. They had unsaddled the horse and turned him loose or had led him to town, too. There was, after all, nothing to worry about. The lightning and the thunder and rain had spooked him, nothing more. He turned his horse and rode back to town. He was thinking of that unsigned paper money. Where was it? He'd be a fool to leave. He might trail his boss, find out where the money was cached, then steal it and drift. That made more sense, and he smiled as he rode into the livery-barn. He had let his fear, his emotions, over-rule his logic. But he had done that before, and he was too old to change now, he reckoned with a wry smile.

Next morning, Rolf Latoon asked him to ride to the Mallory spread. "Bury them," Latoon said. "Not a good idea to leave them layin' around like that. Don't look good for me—they was in my hire. There'll be a shovel out there, Bearpaw."

“As you say, boss.”

When he had ridden into the yard of the Mallory Circle R that cold and drizzly morning he did not know that young Lon Mallory watched him through a crack in the wall of the barn. Had he gone towards the barn, Lon would have shot him down. But the Bearpaw Kid did not go to the barn. He had not a bit of use for a shovel. He would report back to Rolf Latoon that he had buried Ringo and Jamison. Latoon would never know that somebody else had already buried the two murdered men. So the Bearpaw Kid, more out of curiosity than anything else, had ridden to the place where the massacre had taken place, and he hoped to trail the men who had buried Ringo and Jamison, if for no other reason than to see where their graves were—for the bodies had never been taken to town.

He had thought that possibly a farmer might have ridden through this area looking for a stray milk cow and he might have found the bodies. Had such been the case, the farmer would have undoubtedly ridden into Curry Bend with the news, or have transported the bodies to the town in his spring-wagon; such, though, had not been the case.

Then who had spirited the bodies away?

The Bearpaw Kid never found out. He looked for tracks and found some; he followed these a distance before the rain had obliterated them, and he lost the trail. He was cold and wet and miserable; he wanted a hot slug of whisky and a warm stove. No use looking for a grave in this wilderness. It had limitless boundaries. Just as foolish as looking for the hiding-place of the stolen currency. The best way to find that was to trail Latoon.

He decided to do this.

So, he headed back towards Curry Bend, riding again through the yard of the Circle R. Buster barked at him and Lon Mallory watched him. The Bearpaw Kid did not know that Ike Powers lay in the haymow wild with fever. He did not know that the men sought by Latoon were so close at hand. He missed being one of two things—dead or a hero. But what he missed, he did not know about, of course. Lon watched him ride away. Then he climbed the haymow to where his partner lay taken by the fever and ague.

“How do you feel, Ike?”

“Lon, boy, I don’t want to scare you, but this old man is gettin’ pneumonia. I had it twice

before; my lungs are weak. And we've spent some cold nights and days, Lon."

"I'd best get Doc Goss out to see you?"

The sheriff shook his whiskery head slowly. "That would do me good, yes. But the fact remains, Lon, that a sick man can't ride, can't fight, can't run. I need a warm bed and good food. I'm only a detriment to you, Lon. And if I died out here—without Nellie—"

Lon said, "I see, Ike."

The sunken hot eyes watched him. The hoarse breathing was a harsh sound. "Don't ride into town yourself, Lon. Don't throw yourself against their guns for my old carcass. Get a farmer or Helen to ride in and get a rig to come out with Doc and Nellie."

"I'll look up Helen, Ike."

The eyelids had come down. "She's a good girl, Helen. She reminds me a heap of Nellie . . . at her age. Sensible, reliable, a shoulder to lean on. Lon, she's a long way, and it has lots of turns."

"I'd best go then, Ike."

"Get me a bucket of water first. Leave it here beside me. Get me some more blankets from the bunkhouse."

"I got a better idea. You get in the bunkhouse. Warmer there, Ike."

"All right. I might not be able to make it down the ladder, after a while . . . if I get sicker."

Even then, the sheriff could hardly descend the ladder, as it were. Buster wanted to play but Lon rudely batted him to one side. The collie walked behind them as Lon got his partner into the bunkhouse. Ike Powers was heavy on the young cowpuncher. Lon got him in bed, heaped covers on him, got some headache powders and mixed him a drink, put water within reach, and then stood up, heart tight and stern in his breast.

"Have I forgot anything, Ike boy?"

"My rifle. I want it close."

"I'll get it."

Lon brought the Winchester in and placed it on the bed beside his partner. Sheriff Ike Powers' voice held a savage undertone.

"I'll kill the first Latoon man what puts his head in that door, son. Now you get on your horse and find Helen."

"She said she'd meet me at Chimney Rock."

"Then go there, son, and good luck. But for hell's sake don't head into town by your lone-

some. They'd cut you down like a rat walking into a terrier den. If you don't see Helen . . . then come back to me."

"All right, Ike."

So young Lon Mallory that blustery cold day headed out from the ranch that had seen his birth. He rode into the raw chilly wind and driving rain and he rode away from the best friend he had ever had outside of Casey Jones, who now slept in a badland grave. He rode to meet Helen at Chimney Rock. And, twenty minutes and three miles later, he came to the Rock. Here Nature had pulled a gigantic shaft of stone out of the rocky soil. Nature had tugged and lifted this spire of igneous rock to a height of five hundred feet or so. But Helen did not await him there in the lee of the rock where the wind and rain could not hit him. Helen did not come and young Lon Mallory waited with fear running like mice across his thoughts. He tried to be calm. He squatted and rolled cigarettes and watched the terrain that spilled to the north. Far in the distance was a town he could not see. Down there Latoon men were warm, they drank and played pool; they laughed and cursed. There arose in him a hard rebellion against this thing called Fate. An hour



went by, dragging its steel-shod hoofs; another hour started to move into eternity. Then a pinpoint of a rider came across the mist and pushed towards the high-lifting rocks. And he stood there and used his fieldglasses and then he recognized her and warmth came into him to push to one side momentarily the biting chill of the day and his thoughts.

“Helen, girl, Powers is deadly sick.”

And so she had turned her horse and had loped for her home where she would get a fresh horse and ride into town for Doc Goss. They had barely time to say a few words and then she was trailing out, her horse at a harsh lope. And Lon Mallory rode back to the bunkhouse at the Circle R. He came in on the slant, first looking and circling, and Powers lay on his back and did not open his eyes. Had Lon been an enemy, Powers would not have seen or noticed him. Lon stood there beside the bunk and said, “Ike,” and shook the man who slowly opened his eyes. The gaunt lips did not move; the eyes were blank.

“Joe Morgan,” the sheriff said, and closed his eyes.

“Not Joe Morgan,” Lon corrected. He raked

his mind; he knew nobody named Joe Morgan. "Your friend, Lon Mallory."

The eyes did not open. The lips moved. "My old friend from Texas, Joe Morgan. Howdy, Joe."

Lon realized the man was delirious. He put cold water packs on the forehead but these did no good. He could not afford to be caught at the Circle R ranch. He worked against time. He worked with one eye on the window through which he could see the rain-filled yard. But there was nothing he could do except keep the body filled with water and try to hold down the consuming fever. When the rig came two hours later he was up on the slope watching from the safety of the boulders. Latoon and one of his men rode with the spring-wagon that was driven by Doc Goss and beside the medico was Nellie Powers. The spring-wagon had a canvas cover to turn the rain. Lon watched them get the sheriff out of the bunkhouse. They took a cot from the back of the wagon and carried this inside and brought it back with the sheriff on it. Then they rolled it into the buggy and the cover hid Lon's friend.

Lon had tied Buster so he would not follow

him. The dog pulled on the leash and Lon could hear his whimpering.

The rig moved away, going into the drizzling rain, and Lon had a pinched feeling. He was alone—definitely alone. Rolf Latoon and his man stayed behind and searched the spread. Lon's glasses recognized the Latoon man as the Bearpaw Kid. Their search completed, they freed Buster. The dog started up the slope, nose to the ground; he was following Lon's horse. Lon knew he would have to move for the two men were riding behind the dog. Lon went back into the boulders and mounted and rode down the slope and forded the creek. He rode in and out of the creek for a mile or so, and the brush hid him. Then he rode across the range, following the ridges. He could not see the two because of the rain and the distance. But he knew Buster could not follow him. Buster would lose his scent at the creek. He wished he could have taken the collie with him for company. But he had a rough enough time keeping his own hide without bullet-holes, without having to look after the collie. The dog would have been both an asset and a liability. And more of a liability than an asset, Lon was sure.

He did not see Rolf Latoon or the Bearpaw Kid again. The desire to go down and shoot it out with the pair had been strong but it would have accomplished nothing in the line of freeing himself from the charges against him. He had thought this thing over and over and he had reached one definite conclusion, and one only: He had to catch Latoon with the goods—catch him with the stolen currency. This act, if brought about, would not of course acquit him, Lon Mallory, of the murder of Hank Mallory, but it would put Latoon behind bars and break his power, and maybe some of his men would be forced to talk. Or maybe Latoon might be forced to confess. For Lon was sure the man had murdered Hank Mallory. Either he had personally ambushed the pioneer cowman, or one of his men had killed Lon's father. Lon was sure of that—dead sure. For the sign could point no other direction.

About ten minutes later he saw a rider coming his direction, and the glasses identified him as the detective Art Truitt. Lon rode down and Truitt watched him, silent in his saddle, and alertness draped across his wide shoulders. Lon came in with his hand up and he told about Ike Powers.

Truitt nodded, and Lon knew, then, this was not news to the detective. "I was in town when Helen's father rode into town with the news," the short man said. He pulled a tailor-made cigarette from a package and Lon took one. "Maybe you don't know it yet, but Harry Short died this morning."

"Damn," Lon said.

"Infection set in and killed him."

Lon said, "He was an old friend of mine. Him and my father used to go duck-huntin'. They had lots of fun jokin' over their beer."

Truitt nodded.

Lon said, "From now on, it's dog chew dog."

"Been that way for some time."

Lon wanted to ask him if he were making any advancement. But he knew the question, if put into words, would not be answered; in fact, it would die a premature death. He got a cold sensation. This man was a human wolf, nose to the trail; he was deadly, sure, competent. He hid these things under a coat of something that was almost indifference. There was no use asking him questions: He would not answer. When the time came he would ask the questions and find out the answers. But by that time he would know the answers already, and possibly

would not waste time asking questions to which the answers were already apparent.

Lon hoped the man would not hit his trail. Because if Art Truitt tried to bring in one Lon Mallory, somebody would die. One of them, or maybe both of them, would be dead.

They talked for another few minutes, and the talk was of no importance, and then the stocky man turned his horse and said, "So long, Mallory."

"So long, Mr. Truitt."

Then the detective was riding into the rain, heading to the south-east, and where his destination was, only he alone knew . . . and he would not tell. Lon Mallory scowled and felt mystified. The man was a ghost in a saddle, a human machine on horseback, and he was driving towards his goal. Not fast, not headlong; slowly, surely, steadily.

As for himself, his way was clear.

For a month or so the rain continued. Old timers to-day point to that rainy spell as one of the longest rain-spells that had ever, within the history of redskin or white, been on this high Montana range. Most of the time the rain fell in a cold and miserable drizzle that wet man

and beast alike to the skin—a cold and slow rain that soaked into the soil and had little run-off water. And during this month Lon Mallory was a running and dodging gunfighter. He had to shoot, run, hide, shoot some more; he had to hope he would not stop a bullet. The only person he had on his side was Helen Andrews. And then the Latoon men trailed her, knowing she would bring them to him; for two weeks, then, he did not see her. He lived off the country. He grew flat-flanked, his whiskers turned to a beard; down in town, Ike Powers, under arrest, fought for his life, and fought hard. Then, because he had no outside contacts, Lon heard no more about his friend until one day, on Warm Creek, he jumped a Latoon man, held his gun against the man's heart, and he got word from him that Powers was sitting up, on his way back.

“Latoon is out to kill you, Mallory.”

“Nothing new to me, Cusker.”

He saw no more of Art Truitt. Once, in the rainy distance, he thought he saw a rider that looked like the detective; he was not sure. Truitt never contacted him again. Had the man left this range?

Lon doubted this.

He slept as best he could in the rimrock area and in caves and one night he slept in a line-camp on the bunk and under covers, a luxury he had often wondered if he would again enjoy. He figured he could ride out of Milk River Valley either south or north and could live his life in some other area where he was unknown, but this thought held no temptation. He had made up his mind to live or die in this area of northern Montana.

He trailed Rolf Latoon, but the trail led him nowhere—most of the time the rain would come in, hiding the riders ahead of him and washing out their tracks. Always Latoon rode with other men. Lon hoped and prayed the man would some day ride alone. Then he would ride down and challenge him and get this over with. But a gunfight, even if he won, might prove little, if anything. He had to prove that he had not murdered his father.

From what he heard, one of Ike Powers' deputies was now sheriff. He was a fat heavy man, almost stupid; he could not be pushed, but he could be led. After a couple of weeks, the posses riding for him became fewer and further between. Indeed, so Helen once told him, there was a rumour he had run out of



Milk River Valley. And at this information Lon Mallory had rubbed his beard and grinned.

He clung to one hope.

That was to trail Latoon, catch him with the stolen money, or, if this failed, to make him talk, even if he had to torture the man.

To trail Latoon, he had to hang around close to the man's headquarters, the Silver Dollar in Curry Bend. This added to the danger for he was close to the core of the danger when around the cowtown. He cursed the rain. He did not, at that time, realize the rain was an ally, not an enemy.

For it was the rain that drove Latoon out of Curry Bend and it was the rain that inadvertently brought them together, gun against gun.

Latoon was worried about the stolen currency. He had wrapped it first in oilskin and then around this he had wrapped canvas and he had buried the loot back in the hills. Now a rough thought came through his mind time and time again. Had this rain—this damned never-ending rain—soaked through the canvas, through the oilskin, and was it destroying this money?

Sixty thousand dollars, less a few dollars he had planted at the Mallory ranch . . . A lot of

money. Enough to buy this town of Curry Bend. And, if he owned all of this town, owned the south half of Milk River Valley . . . Latoon was worried.

For weeks he debated. He even reconstructed the bundle. He got paper and made it the size of the bundle of currency and he wrapped this in oilskin and then canvas as he had done with the stolen currency and he had buried this behind the Silver Dollar. Behind the saloon in the yard was a root cellar where barrels of beer and bottles of beer were stored in the summer to keep cool. The roof of this cellar consisted of thick timbers with dirt piled over them. It had a slant about similar to that of the side hill wherein he had buried the loot. He buried this bundle in this man-made side hill. Each week or so he would dig it up and check its safety. First, the canvas soaked; the oilskin, though, turned the water. Then, when he had dug this out for about the sixth time, he found that water had penetrated the oilskin; the *money*—the make-believe money—was damp around the edges of the bundle.

Latoon had thought: *I got to get that money out of that side hill*, for sixty thousand dollars, even if in unsigned currency, was and is a lot

of money. So Rolf Latoon decided that when night came he would ride out and dig up the money and transfer it to his safe, if necessary.

He figured it would be safe in the safe.

From all indications, young Lon Mallory had left the country. But you could never tell about Mallory. He was a stubborn son. Seemed odd he would run. But Latoon had a series of guards watching the Andrews' homestead. Helen Andrews had not ridden out of the yard except to haze in the work-horses and the milk cows. Had Mallory been in the country she would have had a meeting with him, Latoon figured.

Rawboned and tall, tough and saddle-hard, Rolf Latoon had stood there in his office, holding the sack of synthetic currency, and his thoughts had gone to the real McCoy, buried out there in the south hills. He was standing there when the door that led to the saloon suddenly opened and the Bearpaw Kid came in.

"What you got there, boss?"

Latoon had a moment of blind anger. This drew blood from his high cheek-bones. "Get t'hell out," he stormed. "I've told you if you ever come in my office, for hell's sake knock first. Get out of here."

A smile hid the Bearpaw Kid's thoughts. He

saw the paper and canvas and oilskin and said, "Sorry, but I just came from the Andrews' outfit. Curly spelled me off. The girl left once."

"She meet Mallory?"

The Bearpaw Kid let his eyes remain on the wet mass. Then said, "No, she went after the milk cows, down along the crick."

Latoon walked to the pot-bellied stove and stuffed down its throat the canvas, the oilskin, the shreds of newspaper.

"Now get out," he said over his shoulder.

He heard the Bearpaw Kid move to the door, heard the door close. Only then did he turn. His thoughts were still on the heavy-set gunman. The Bearpaw Kid was too cocky; he'd have to get rid of him.

The Bearpaw Kid got into a game of pool with Matthew Phillips. But he kept remembering that bundle he had seen his boss cram into the stove. The bundle didn't make sense.

"You shot the wrong ball, Bearpaw. You shot the nine and the seven is the ball."

"Gettin' so ol' I can't read, Matt."

The Bearpaw Kid was not interested in the game of rotation. He was interested in only one thing: a batch of unsigned United States paper money. He knew a man down in Texas who

could forge anybody's signature. That man would sign those bills with the signature of a bank president for a few thousand. And a man could get the copy of the signature he wanted forged from any piece of paper money. It would be that simple. All he had to do was find out where it was cached. To do this all he had to do was trail Rolf Latoon.

Simple.

There was one fly in the milk. What if Latoon had already shipped the money out for signature?

Well, a man had to chance some things in life.

So the Bearpaw Kid waited.

Back in the high country, another man waited, too, and this man was not Lon Mallory. This man was a detective. He was cold and he needed dry clothes and he needed hours of sleep and a shave and warm food; these things, though, could wait. He slept in the rimrock. He avoided Lon Mallory and he avoided Latoon and his men; he avoided, in fact, everybody. He had a contact with a depot-agent on a railroad sixty miles to the south. From this source—from the magic of the telephone wire—he had learned, from his head office, that the

stolen currency was not being circulated anywhere in the United States or Canada.

So Art Truitt waited.

The Bearpaw Kid waited.

Lon Mallory waited.

Latoon needed the moon. You couldn't locate a spot in the wilderness without a moon or daylight. And he dared not ride to this spot in daylight. So he rode out that night, for there was a moon. You could see it occasionally when the clouds scuttled across it and laid it bare and yellow and round. There was not a steady flow of light but there was light, and that was what counted. So that night Rolf Latoon left Curry Bend alone. He rode a black stallion that moved like a sure-footed wraith through the drifting moonlight. He had a short-handled shovel tied across the back of his saddle and he had a Bemis grain sack around the shovel. The Bemis sack was seamless and was made of good canvas and it could turn the rain. And it also disguised and hid the shovel. People might see him—who knows what eyes are in the dark—and they might wonder why the boss of Milk River rode with a shovel tied to his saddle. He would use the shovel and then throw it away. A shovel was a dispensable item.

So he rode out, and he thought he rode alone. But he was not alone. For the man known as the Bearpaw Kid trailed him. He rode on Latoon's left hand, keeping about a half-mile between him and his man. He wanted that money. Maybe Latoon was heading for the cache?

There was this hope in the Bearpaw Kid. He would kill for that currency. He trailed Latoon, then another man trailed them both. And this man was a young man with a dark set of whiskers and a raw-burn in his soul. And he rode with a rifle free across the front of his saddle, one hand on the Winchester and one on the reins.

He was flat-ribbed, gaunt; so was his mount.

Lon Mallory had been on the butte behind Curry Bend when he had seen Rolf Latoon ride out of town heading south. Then he had spotted the man who trailed Latoon, but he did not know who this man was for he knew Latoon by the way he sat a horse, the way he rode—but he did not know this second man. When you hate a man you know his every mannerism in time—how he talks, uses his hands, and how he rides. Latoon rode at a long trot. He had a habit of riding on his stirrups and body bent

forward as his hands were braced on the fork of his saddle. From this pose, Lon could recognize him; the other man rode flat in his seat, not bouncing—or so it seemed, but the moonlight and distance were deceptive.

So Lon rode the outside of the circle, and he had a feeling of tension inside of him, and he looked at the moon and voiced his wishes to the moon, but the moon did not answer—the moon had only its dark spots and a benign stupid look. Maybe the Man up there had heard, but chances were he had not.

Lon knew why the other man trailed Latoon, for he knew the man also wanted this money; he did not want it, though, for the same purpose Lon wanted it—he wanted it so he could flee the country a wealthy man.

Latoon rode south and reached the foothills. Lon lost him then but he went higher, and then he found the man again. Latoon had followed Stinking Springs Coulee, and now he was on a sidehill, and he had dismounted.

Lon was about a quarter of a mile away and he thought, the time has come, and he was trembling. He tried to blame it on the cold drizzling rain, but he knew it came from his



thoughts, his fears, his hope. He rode towards this spot, following a draw.

He came to some brush and he dismounted and walked then, carrying his rifle. He was on the hill over Latoon. He worked downward, moving through the brush; occasionally he stopped and looked and listened. He could see Latoon digging there ahead of him, but the man who had trailed Latoon was not around.

The fact that Rolf Latoon was digging there ahead in the clearing told him he was close to the stolen currency and this thought warmed him. But where was the man who had trailed Latoon?

Lon squatted, watching Latoon, and he rubbed his jaw with his free hand, for he was worried. Maybe the man who had trailed Latoon had been hired by Rolf Latoon to ride out and be his bodyguard? Maybe the man had not been a threat to Latoon, as he had first imagined; maybe he was, in reality, Latoon's bodyguard, playing it foxy by keeping distance between himself and his boss?

Maybe the man was somewhere in this brush, watching over his boss?

Lon circled the brush, moving silently; he found nobody. Once he thought he heard a

sound to his right. He went that way and two cottontail rabbits bounded out of the rocks. They crossed the clearing and Latoon dropped his shovel, hand going to his gun. Then the cottontail rabbits were gone and Latoon stood there and looked at the brush as if wondering what had driven out the rabbits. He looked directly at the boulders and brush hiding Lon Mallory. Lon watched, crouched, ready; evidently Latoon did not see him, for he went back to work. He got the package out of the soil and shook it. Then he put it in the sack and he was starting for his horse, carrying the sack.

Lon knew it was now or never; he could not afford to let Latoon climb into saddle. Once on horse the man would have speed and could escape. Lon knew he had to challenge him while he was on the ground.

He walked forward then, rifle in hand, and Latoon heard him. Latoon dropped the sack and turned fast and his hand was on his holstered gun.

Lon said, in a squeaky voice, "Throw up your hands, Latoon, and surrender."

Latoon looked at him. Lon wished the moonlight were brighter. They stood about

thirty feet apart. The wind moved the sack slightly, there on the ground.

Latoon's horse stood motionless, completely uninterested.

"Mallory, huh?"

Lon repeated, "Put up your hands, and we ride into Curry Bend. I think I got the goods on you."

"What do you mean—by that?"

"That currency—You dug it up and put it in the sack."

Latoon watched his rifle. He seemed concerned with that rifle. Lon wondered if the man would pull his gun and fire against the threat of the rifle. A rifle is a slow implement, especially when a man jumps to one side. For you have to swing the rifle and fire fast—and you might miss.

Lon wondered: *Which way will he jump? Right or left?*

From down the canyon came the sudden sound of a shot. It rang out, hitting the clouds, and then it was gone. One shot, no more—Lon remembered the guard. But why just one shot? If the man had run into trouble—into a gunfight—Surely there would be more than one shot.

Latoon said, "Somebody—fired?"

"A man trailed you out," Lon said.

"Who was he?"

Lon thought: *He was no bodyguard*, and he said, "I don't know." Savagery flooded him. He remembered the scarred body of Hank Mallory, of Casey dying under this man's gun—Casey sick, delirious. Casey had needed medical care, not a .45. He remembered these things and his voice was savage and low and animal. "I gave orders. Obey them, or fire."

And then, Latoon made his play.

He moved like a big cat, for his life was at stake; his empire hung in the balance. He jumped to his left. And, as he moved, his .45 came up quickly. Lon fired and missed and Latoon fired from the hip and hit Lon in the right leg. This knocked Lon back and terror was in him, not because of his wound but because he had been shot, and Latoon might kill him. Then he remembered firing and he remembered Latoon walking a few paces, gun in his fist and pointing to the ground.

He remembered thinking: *I'll not shoot again, because he's dropped his gun.*

He remembered other things, too. The moon was bright now, and it had not a bit of dark-

ness; the wind was in the trees, and the trees responded in low sounds; Latoon walked to one of these trees. He walked away from his .45 and his knees were weak and he grabbed the tree.

Latoon said, "I'm sick."

Then he slid down the tree, hands trying to grab the bark, and he lay on his belly, face in the mud. Lon remembered sitting down, and he remembered looking at his leg; it hung there, bent and crazy-looking. Then he must have been in blackness for a while for soon there were two men beside him. One walked ahead of the other and when they got in the clearing the man in the rear lifted his gun and knocked the other senseless to the damp earth.

Lon said, "Art Truitt."

Truitt said, "You're better than I am, Mallory. I never saw the Bearpaw Kid trailing Latoon. I saw you but I missed Bearpaw, and I walked into his gun down yonder, but I got him. He never got to fire a shot."

Lon said, "One shot."

He looked at the Bearpaw Kid, who was sitting up and moaning. The Bearpaw Kid was holding his head. Then he saw Latoon and he said, "He's dead. His nose and mouth—in the mud that way—He'd choke."

Lon said, "He broke my leg. Look how it bends to one side. He came to dig out the money. I thought you had pulled stakes, Truitt." He looked at the Bearpaw Kid. "I beat you to the money, huh?"

The Bearpaw Kid groaned and lay on his side.

Art Truitt stood there, gun in his hand. "I told the Kid I'd kill him. He got right scared. He saw Rolf Latoon kill your father, Mallory."

"He told you—that?"

"He really blew his mouth. Him and Ringo saw Latoon ambush Hank Mallory and burn the body in a Circle R haystack to make it look like you tried to get rid of his body. He even told about Latoon killing Will Jamison and he claims Latoon killed John Ringo, too."

"I don't give a damn about those two," Lon said, holding his leg. "We got the evidence I needed. This should make me a free man, shouldn't it?"

"I'd say so."

Lon said, "Cut my pants leg open and look at my leg. It's bleeding a lot, man."

With the pants leg, the detective made a tourniquet. He seemed competent at his job. This stopped the flow of blood.

“I’ll ride to a farm and get a rig out for you, Lon.”

“The closest farm,” Lon said, “is the Andrews’ farm.”

Art Truitt got to his feet. “I’ll take the Kid with me. He got shot in the ribs—more shock than danger of his dying. You sit right here—loosen that tourniquet every five minutes or so—then tighten it down. I’ll be back in a little while.”

“All right, Truitt.”

The two left the clearing and Lon heard them ride out, their horses hidden by brush. He felt sick and yet he felt somewhat good. He looked at the dead man, lying there in the mud; this sight was not pleasant, so he looked at the hills. Helen would come running. She would kneel beside him and kiss him and hug him. He thought of her high colour, her eyes, her lips. He thought of what she meant to him, and he to her. And so, thinking these good thoughts, young Lon Mallory waited. And, because of these thoughts, he forgot his pain.

*Hurry, Helen, hurry.*

*Books by Lee Floren  
in the Linford Western Library:*

BLACK GUNSMOKE  
LOBO VALLEY  
DEADLY DRAW  
THE SADDLE WOLVES





# THE SADDLE WOLVES

The black loam of Montana was rich and seemed fertile. But appearances were deceiving: much of the loam was poisoned with black alkali, good only for cattle. The farmers could not know that though, and greedy men moved in to take advantage of their ignorance. Soon the outlaws were running most of the state and Sheriff Ike Powers knew it was time to make a stand against the mob . . .

ISBN 0 7089 6409 5

