

A HANDI-BOOK WESTERN



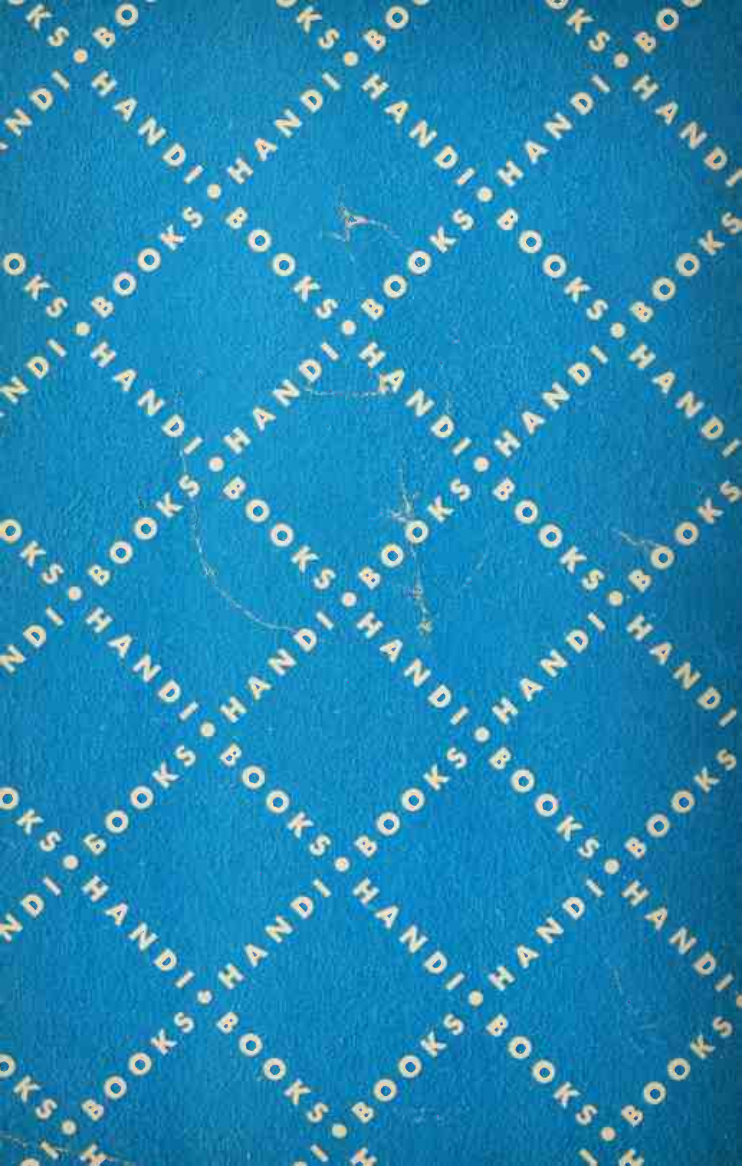
The Range Doctor

By the author of
GUN HARVEST



COMPLETE and UNABRIDGED

Oscar J. Friend





A HANDI-BOOK *Western*

The CAST

ROBERT LOGAN, young graduate doctor, who quickly found out that a Western cattle town set its own code of ethics—and they were a lot different than those of an Eastern medical school.

TOM GRIGGSBY, grizzled, crusading publisher of *The Gila News*, who had blasted more than one nest of angry hornets in his time and was now busy gathering facts on the worst one he ever tackled.

MOLLIE BARTON, pretty, dark-eyed daughter of the range, who could cook, ride a horse, tend a calf—or rope a struggling, yearling doctor.

SHERIFF MATLOCK, who lucked and loafed his way into office, who never did anything right, and never did anything wrong. He just let nature and outlaws run their course.

JACK OVERSTREET, fastidious gambler and owner of the famous Texas Tommy Saloon, whose work with his derringers was as neat as his vest.

JESS PLUM, staunch friend of the young doctor, who gave up rustling for moonshining.

JOHN NAYLOR, who was building his dream of empire on legal chicanery and the broken bodies of stubborn ranchers.

AGNES SIMS, lovely queen of Vallera's Mexican cantina, who fell in love with an outlaw gun artist and outlived him to put the finger of death on his killer.

The Range Doctor

Oscar J. Friend

Author of GUN HARVEST



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One

IT WAS LATE of a Saturday morning when Robert Logan got off the stuffy daycoach at Clearwater and set his two shiny suitcases down in the shade of the red-painted depot. A trifle above medium height, slender of build but with a pair of muscular shoulders which implied a youth of manual labor, he was nicely dressed in a dark-brown business suit. He carried himself with ease and poise, and there was a certain air of quiet dignity about him which seemed a bit odd in one so young. His intense blue eyes looked levelly out from a pale, narrow face. There was the unmistakable stamp of the big city about him.

He removed his brown derby hat and wiped his perspiring brow as he surveyed what he could see of this sprawling Panhandle town. So far he was not much impressed. The deeper he got into this Texas country the more dismal seemed the prospects. Griggsby had written him what to expect, but two thousand potential patients on a sheet of paper seemed a lot more than two thousand healthy people scattered over several hundred square miles of rangeland. There couldn't have been five hundred population 'all told at this railroad point, and this wasn't even his destination.

At the back side of the station six stringy, rangy mustangs were hitched to a weatherbeaten stagecoach which would have been the better for a new coat of paint. A grizzled man wearing lace boots and an armed express guard were busily loading express shipments, mail sacks, and the luggage of passengers on top and in the boot. Logan approached.

"Is this the stage for Gila City?"

The sweating, grunting driver glanced at him and answered without halting his work. "Shore is, younker."

"What's the fare one way?"

The driver broke off to look at the derby sharply. "From the East ain't you?"

"Saint Louis, Logan admitted.

"First trip, eh?" The driver pointed due west where a range

of mountains climbed into the sky to impose a barrier along the horizon. "See them hills? That's the east side of the Horseshoe Mountain Range. Gila City's smack dab in the middle."

Logan handed his ticket to the driver. "My name is Logan, and I'm stopping at Gila City. Please handle that tan suitcase carefully."

"Logan? Oh!" The driver's impatient attitude altered, while the express guard stared at the passenger curiously. "So you're that young medicine doctor Tom Griggsby's been expectin'."

"Yes. From what you say I take it Gila City isn't much of a place."

"Didn't say that. Gila's right smart of a town—bigger'n Clearwater, and the county seat of that range. Only there ain't much else in Horseshoes in the way of settlements."

"And Clearwater has the railroad," Logan pointed out.

"Yep. The railroad didn't want to tunnel through the Horseshoe Range. That's why Clearwater's grown. Ever hear of Oklahomy City?"

Logan looked at the driver with grave eyes. He didn't like to remember anything connected with Oklahoma. "Yes," he said quietly. "Why?"

"Oklahomy City was only a wide place on the prairie when the Santa Fe run a single-track line through. By nightfall the day they opened the Cherokee Strip there was ten thousand people there. Lemme see, that was on April the—April—"

"The twenty-second of April, Eighteen Eighty-nine," Logan supplied woodenly. And his face was bleak.

"By golly, that's right. You know yore dates, young feller," commented the driver admiringly.

Logan entered the coach and sat in moody silence for most of the twenty-mile trip. The Texas scenery was lost on him as it slid by the windows of the stage; he was seeing kaleidoscopic flashes of another and more frenzied twenty-mile drive he had made nine years previously as a boy of fifteen. He had thought he had got over the bitterness long ago, but now he found, to his surprise, that it still lingered. More, that it was stirring angrily within his heart.

He almost wished he had not come back to this rough and tough frontier country. He should have stayed in St. Louis, or returned to Little Rock to enter into practice with his preceptor, Dr. Devore. But he couldn't have done Tom Griggsby that way.

He sighed and returned to the present as the stagecoach topped the last rise and the driver pulled up to blow his sweating team. The Horseshoe range country! A wide, shallow valley on the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River, surrounded east, north, and west by the harsh granite mountains which had given the region name—a tortuous series of ridges, ravines, cliffs and canyons set down on the Llano Estacado like a mass of puckered scars on the carbuncled neck of a sleeping giant. Broiling under the hot Texas sun by day, freezing under the cold stars by night, cut and twisted like a bad dream—this was the new homeland selected by Tom Griggsby.

But the view was terrific. In the middle distance ahead, almost in the center of the wide, bowl-shaped valley, clustered a sizeable town. Gila City! Community of ten saloons, seven general stores, a variety of shops and small business enterprises, one rather pretentious hotel of two stories, one bank, one newspaper, and one thousand population. Was this the goal of a graduate doctor of medicine?

The sun was westering rapidly when the overdue stagecoach rumbled into town like a small avalanche. Amid the dying thunder of hoofs, a cloud of red dust, and the squealing of tortured brake shoes the driver pulled up before the Alamo Hotel with a flourish. Loiterers quickly congregated to view the new arrivals.

Folks from ranches and hills thronged the street, marketing and trading, for Gila City was essentially a Saturday town. Demure young women in starched gingham window shopped or cast sheep's eyes at presentable clerks. Bedizened hussies from all dance halls strolled along and appraised the influx of visitors with an eye to the coming nightfall. Wagoners and riders rattled and jingled their way about their affairs. Everywhere was laughter, noise, color, action.

Logan descended in turn from the stagecoach and fished his suitcases from the pile of luggage built up at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Yonder's the newspaper office, Doc," called out the driver, pointing with his chin. "Just a couple doors from the hotel."

Logan nodded his thanks and made his way through the crowd. He had a mental blueprint of the town. Across the street, occupying fully three times the frontage of the average store, stretched a two-storied building with gingerbread facing interscrolled with which was the name "Texas Tom-

my", the first floor subdivided into the Texas Tommy Dance Hall and the Texas Tommy Bar. Down on the next corner would be the red-brick bank.

Next door the sturdy rock-walled hotel was a prosperous-looking saloon, its false front decorated with a huge picture of a human fist holding the ace, king, queen, knave, and ten of hearts. This would be the Royal Flush, owned by Foghorn Jackson who used to be a backwoods preacher in Tennessee. The next false-fronted structure was the newspaper office, the front of which was oddly pockmarked with bullet holes. Logan noted this grim significance and raised his eyes to the screaming sign painted above in bold, black letters.

THE GILA NEWS

THE ONLY NEWSPAPER ON HORSESHOE RANGE
WE GATHER ALL THE NEWS—AND WE PRINT IT

A sudden shout brought Logan's gaze back to the entrance. A gray-headed, wiry little man was hastening out. A carpenter's apron, worn with the bib down, about his waist, a pencil stub behind one ear, sawdust in his shaggy eyebrows, and a beaming smile on his face, the editor limped forward to greet the newcomer.

"Bob, I missed you. I was making so much noise myself I didn't hear the stage. Welcome to your new home, son."

A lump gathered in Logan's throat. "Uncle Tom," he choked, dropping both luggage and dignity as he held out his hands.

They embraced in a bearlike hug that caused bystanders to gawk. Tom Griggsby had never been known to embrace anything publicly except a whisky bottle. Word flew from lip to lip that the young doctor so prevalent in the editor's conversation had at last arrived.

Soberly Logan drew back and looked accusingly at the older man. "I thought so," he commented grimly. "Right in the middle of things and still poking your finger into other people's business. Look at those bullet holes."

Griggsby laughed, bent over to pick up one of the suitcases. "Just souvenirs from outraged victims of the Press over at Frijole Flats. Sort of gives the office an antique air. Don't pay any attention to 'em. Come on in, son."

Logan followed into the building where he found a new partition closing off a generous front quarter of the house in

process of erection. A red-headed youth was carrying tongue-and-groove stock forward from a pile of lumber in the alley.

"Excuse the mess, Bob," Griggsby apologized. "I wanted to finish your office before you arrived, but we had to get the paper out yesterday. We run every Friday like we did in Blue Eagle. This is Nolly Sims, a better printer's devil than you were. Nolly, come shake hands with Dr. Logan."

Logan greeted the lad with a warmth that surprised the boy and then turned his gaze on Griggsby as the abashed stripling resumed his work. "Still championing the under-dog."

"Nolly's a good boy," defended Griggsby. "He sleeps in the back room where he can watch over things for us. I'll tell you about him later. Sorry I couldn't come to Saint Louis for your graduation. Where's your diploma? I want to see it."

"Just a minute," said Logan firmly. "You're practically crowding yourself out of here to build me a front office."

"I only needed a little room on one side for an office. The press, type, and paper stock's all in the back. A newspaper in the same building won't hurt your dignity any, will it?"

"Certainly not, but—"

"Then shut up and look around to see if you have any suggestions. She looks bare and rough now, but when it's painted and we get some fancy furniture from Hawkins it'll look real smart. We can paint the front window glass for privacy and still have plenty of light. We'll have your shingle right over the door and paint your name on the window glass in bigger letters than the *Gila News* sign."

Logan was a bit overwhelmed with emotion. "The shingle will be enough, Uncle Tom. A doctor doesn't advertise."

"The hell he don't!" Griggsby snorted. "Don't get too ethical."

"But you wrote me I'd be the only physician in town."

"With a medical diploma," the editor added. "That doesn't take into account the druggist and the veterinary. They still do all the practicing hereabouts. Here's a copy of yesterday's paper on my desk. How do you like it? I gave you a pretty good play-up on the front page."

Logan glanced at the *Gila News* and admired its make-up. His eyes caught a few glowing lines in the article about himself, and he sat down on a dusty chair, blinking the moisture out of his eyes.

"You leave me speechless, Uncle Tom."

"Nonsense. Where's your doctoring equipment?"

"My satchel and books are packed in that tan suitcase. I'll have to order stuff as I go along."

"Fine. Got a lot of shiny tools in it, I hope."

"You paid for it. I got the best," Logan answered simply.

"I want you to have the best. Hawkins promised me some picture moulding and glass to frame your diploma. You look sort of thin and pale, Bob. You've studied too hard. Want to eat something?. Or can you rest a while until I finish this partition?"

"We will finish the partition," said Logan, arising and peeling off his coat.

They got to work. Griggsby resumed nailing on the partition. With Nolly supplying him lumber, the doctor marked and cut it in proper lengths. Busy with his saw, Logan did not hear strange footsteps above its din until the editor uttered an exclamation.

"Mollie Barton! You imp of Satan!"

A young woman was behind the editor, gripping the hammer head which she had caught in its back swing. Lithe, sweetbreasted, tanned smoothly, with dancing brown eyes, low-crowned sombrero dangling by its latch strings behind her wavy brown hair—a golden girl in cowboy rigging. Beyond her stood a tall, iron-gray man with a white cowhorn moustache.

Griggsby kissed the girl affectionately. "Hello, Henry," he greeted the ranchman. "Didn't know you folks were in town."

"Mollie needed some special groceries for tomorrow. We're leavin' out now. Just dropped by to see if the doctor'd come."

"You bet he did. Bob!"

In his shirtsleeves, flushed and perspiring, Logan advanced with his carpenter tool gripped in his hand. Griggsby put a proud hand on his shoulder.

"Henry, this is Bob Logan," he introduced. "Son, this is Henry Barton of the Circle Bar and the squarest shooting old buzzard that ever cinched a saddle. If you both don't already feel acquainted it isn't my fault."

Quickly fumbling his saw out of the way, Logan gripped hands with the mahogany-faced plainsman.

"Don't mind what Tom says," drawled Barton as his shrewd eyes appraised the young physician. "He talks a lot, editorial instinct, I reckon. But he has sorta bragged on you to me once or twice. Glad to meet you, son."

"And this," went on Griggsby, putting his arm about the girl's waist and drawing her yielding form closer, "is Mollie. She and her sister Betty are the two prettiest girls in the whole Panhandle."

From the rancher Logan turned to be plunged into confusion by the dancing imps in the depths of Mollie Barton's wide brown eyes. He shifted his saw to his right hand and then quickly back again as she offered her own. He bowed wordlessly over her slim, tanned fingers.

"Welcome to the Horseshoe range, Dr. Logan," she said in sweet voice which stirred his pulse in spite of the faint undercurrent of laughter. "Do you always carry an emblem of your profession?"

He straightened up, glancing at his saw. "Er—no. Not always, Miss Barton."

In spite of his confusion his eyes drank in every detail of her fresh beauty. He had always thought a woman could not look nice in men's clothing, but this girl managed to do so. Murmuring an apology, he shifted the saw abruptly once more.

"Why don't you put it down?" Mollie suggested. "Are you in a hurry to get back to work?"

"No, no, not at all. I was just helping Uncle Tom with my office. He thinks of everything."

"Isn't he a dear?" she agreed as the two older men moved out of hearing. "I see he's stayed sober, too."

Logan's face became anxious. On the subject of Tom Griggsby he forgot his embarrassment. "He wrote me he'd just about quit."

"I'm sorry. He isn't very bad. Mostly on Saturday when he makes the rounds gathering news of the range for the paper."

"That's his greatest fault—if he has a fault. He's his own worst enemy."

Mollie shook her head slightly, giving him a searching look from which all levity had fled. "I don't think so. He makes enemies because of his fearless newspaper, his scathing editorials, his crusading for justice." Then, aware that the others were looking curious, she added in a louder tone: "I hope you'll like it here, Dr. Logan."

"He will," chimed in Griggsby. "He's going to grow with the country. And call him Bob; he's home folks to us."

Logan stiffened a trifle and flushed. The girl sensed his

embarrassment.

"We'll compromise on 'Doctor Bob'," she said easily. "Are you ready, Dad? Betty'll have supper in a mess."

"Let's go," Barton agreed. "Glad to have met you, son. Reckon you'll be out at the usual time tomorrow, Tom."

Mollie kissed the editor's cheek as she pulled on her gauntlets. "Good-bye, Doctor Bob. Remember we'll have dinner promptly at noon."

"I remember?" puzzled Logan.

"Shucks!" Griggsby said. "I was so excited I forgot to tell Bob we're invited out to Sunday dinner—every Sunday. We'll be there, honey. Don't forget my chicken gravy."

She nodded brightly and looked expectantly at Logan.

"Thank you, Miss Barton," he said. "We'll try to be punctual."

She held his gaze steadily, implying there was already a certain confidence between them as she offered her gloved hand. Logan reached for her fingers, halting to reshift the annoying saw, and bent stiffly over them, nicking his knee with the saw blade as he did so.

She smiled at his sudden start, and her joyous little laugh trailed back to him as she swung astride her horse. Red to the ears, Logan watched from the doorway and saw her slyly quirt her father's mount across the rump, causing the brute to jump before the rancher was seated in his saddle. As they cantered away, the doctor turned and hurled the offending saw through the opening of the partition.

"Hey! What's the matter?" the startled editor yelled.

"You wouldn't understand," Logan growled.

How the devil was a man to appear at his professional best in shirtsleeves and with a carpenter's tool getting tangled up in everything?

GRIGGSBY sat on the edge of the bed reflectively picking his teeth as he watched his companion unpack. His face glowed so with affection and pride that Logan was at a loss how to say what he felt he must say. Several times he opened his lips to speak and silently closed them. Finally, as he pushed the empty suitcase under the bed, he blurted it out.

"Uncle Tom, I wish you wouldn't be quite so—well, so free and easy about me to people I've just met. You fairly forced me on Mr. Barton and his daughter."

The editor's eyes widened in surprise.

"You're locoed! Henry Barton and his girls are home folks to us—plain as old shoes and true blue. Best friends I have in this country."

"I don't think the daughter so plain. She seemed educated, too."

"She is. Henry sent them both to school at Dallas. Wait till you see Betty. You've just got to be friends."

"Look, Uncle Tom," Logan said gravely. "Any friend of yours automatically becomes a friend of mine as far as I'm concerned. I'm only asking you not to rush the acquaintance for me."

Griggsby contemplated him in silence for a moment. Then: "Son," he said softly, "It seems to me you've changed some since you've been in medical school. Don't you like to be frank and open any more?"

"Of course I do, but I've a rather delicate position to fill now. A professional man—a doctor—can't act with the easy familiarity of—of a grinning cow hand."

"Oh," said Griggsby, and Logan knew he had bungled it. After a pause: "I'm sorry, lad. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You couldn't offend me. But I do have a sort of professional standing to consider, Uncle Tom. I must be a little dignified, or folks won't respect me as a doctor. It's—it's ethical, you know."

"I see," was the dry response. "I won't let it happen again. You don't mind if I call you Bob, do you, Dr. Logan?"

Logan flushed. He had felt the sting of Griggsby's irony before. He grabbed up his derby and turned to the dresser to brush it. "Forget it," he muttered. "I'm sorry I mentioned it."

There was an understanding twinkle in Griggsby's eye as he watched the hat go primly into position on his head. He nodded admiringly at the straight back in the neatly fitting brown suit and grunted his approval.

"You're a pretty likely-looking fellow, Dr. Logan. Danged if I don't believe I'll cultivate a bellyache just to have your attendance. Only one thing missing in your get-up. Where's your gun?"

"Gun?" Logan frowned at him through the mirror. "I haven't any use for a gun."

"In Little Rock or Saint Louis, maybe. But this is frontier

country. I'll rectify that."

Griggsby limped into his bedroom and opened his trunk. He came back with a yellow-butt .45, mate to the weapon he wore, and a serviceable holster attached to a cartridge-studded belt.

"Buckle this outfit around your waist, and leave your coat open," he ordered. "I'm giving you this gun. See that you never go without it."

Logan shrugged in resignation and buckled on the gun belt. "This is ridiculous," he said. "I'll never use it."

"Can you?"

Nettled by this sharp query, Logan executed a swift draw, spun the six-shooter around on the trigger guard to slap the butt against his palm once more, and then smoothly reholstered the weapon.

"Where'd you learn that trick?" asked the startled editor.

"From an old gunman who ran a shooting gallery in Little Rock."

"What business did you have at a shooting gallery?"

"I used to practise there regularly," Logan admitted sheepishly.

"Why?"

Their eyes met and held for a long moment. Logan was the first to look away.

"I—don't—know," he answered tersely. But he lied. Again he saw himself that day in Blue Eagle, Oklahoma Territory, as he watched his ambushed father going down in gun smoke.

"First time you're out on the range," Griggsby said quietly, "try that gun on a jackrabbit. Let's go visiting now."

"Where to?" Logan asked as they walked out of the hotel.

"First, we might as well call on Ted Hawkins and see about office furniture. Ted's a quiet sort who came here from the Pecos country. Squints with his right eye and shoots left-handed on that account. Suffers from indigestion at times which makes him seem grouchy to strangers, but he stands four-square. He'll make a good stomach patient for you. All Doc Bryant does is give him Epsom salt."

Logan met Hawkins and found Griggsby's description unerring in its accuracy and reliable as to diagnosis. The editor had the knack of packing a lot of graphic information in a few terse phrases. They selected some suitable office furniture, Griggsby made a date for Hawkins to have a stomach consultation the early part of the coming week, and they repaired

to the nearest saloon to have a drink with the solemn hardware and furniture dealer.

From here the young doctor trailed his mentor to place after place, doing his best to keep the editor sober, meeting all sorts of people who greeted him heartily on the newspaper man's endorsement. He was amused, amazed, interested, disgusted, attracted, and repelled in turn. He saw an astonishing variety of sights, and he puzzled more than once over the strange words of Mollie Barton. For everybody seemed to like Tom Griggsby.

At one point the sidewalk and part of the street was blocked by a pair of fist fighters surrounded by a ring of cheering spectators. Both combatants were gory, and both were quite drunk. A tremendous man with heavy jowls and a huge pot belly was leaning indolently with his elbows on a hitch-rail as he idly followed the progress of the fight.

"That's the sheriff," said Griggsby with scarcely more than a glance at the reeling pugilists. "He's made a science of loafing. He'll be a good diabetes case in a few years. Hey, Matlock! I want you to meet Dr. Logan."

The sheriff did not stir as he raised heavy lids to stare at Logan. At this instant the two fighters reeled against the hitch-rail, jarring it. Matlock turned his head slowly and slightly in their direction. "Take it easy, boys," he rumbled, returning his inscrutable black eyes to the puzzled physician. "Howdy, Doc. Griggsby's been tellin' us about you."

Logan acknowledged this introduction with some difficulty. He indicated the pair of brawlers with one hand.

"Pete Bailey and Frog Willers at it again," Griggsby explained briefly. "Sawyers from the mill. Fight every Saturday night over a trapper's daughter they knew twenty years ago up in Oregon. They nurse each other through the week. Nothing worth seeing. Come on." He almost dragged Logan around the spot.

"But why doesn't the sheriff stop them?" Logan protested.

"You don't know Matlock. And why stop them? They love to get drunk and scrap, and they can't hurt the street. I remember once they put on their fracas in the Royal Flush. They wrecked about ten dollars' worth of glass and furniture before Foghorn Jackson took a hand with a bung starter. Ever since then they've staged their exhibition outdoors. Might as well go in to see Foghorn now—a bushy-headed giant of a man with a full beard who reads the Bible. Has chills and

fever every summer. Doc Bryant doses him with quinine and he doses himself with whisky. He'll make you a good liver patient."

They entered the saloon where Logan shook hands with the proprietor and declined a drink. Griggsby did not, and Logan looked on helplessly. At the back end of the bar, apart from others, a middle-aged man was having a solitary drink.

"Well, what do you know about that?" Griggsby exclaimed. "I've had an eye out for the veterinary all evening. Come on back, son, and meet the horse doctor."

Logan surveyed the veterinary curiously as he obeyed. Bryant was a sparely built man clad in a rumpled and spotted black Prince Albert coat. He wore unpolished half-boots into which his dark trousers had been untidily stuffed. A heavy bulge at his right hip indicated the presence of the inevitable six-shooter. A battered plug hat with a green patina of age was shoved somewhat back on his unkempt gray locks.

"Hey, Doc Bryant," called out the editor genially. "Turn around and shake hands with Doc Logan. You saw yesterday's paper, I reckon."

"Yeh," grunted the man at the bar, setting down his liquor glass and wheeling almost truculently. He stared coldly up and down the trim figure of the young physician, making no move to offer his hand. "Humph! Can yuh bleed a hoss, young feller? Can you drench a cow?"

Taken aback, Logan smiled uncertainly. "Why, I've never tried."

"Humph!" repeated the veterinary sourly, expressively. "Waal, I hope yuh don't starve on this range."

There was a faint squeak in his voice. He looked as though his joints must creak when he walked. But his gnarled and bony hands were steady as rock, and his cold gray eyes had the quality of gimlets. Logan's face reddened at this hostile attitude, but he replied evenly:

"I hope not, Dr. Bryant."

"Perhaps you didn't read the right article, Bryant," suggested Griggsby in a gentle voice. "Dr. Logan isn't calculating on invading your field, but he'll be glad to give you a personal purge whenever you need it."

This irony got by the horse doctor. "Yep, I seen the article all right," he said curtly. Turning his back, he downed his liquor with a snap, and strode for the exit without another word.

Griggsby's eyes narrowed and began to gleam. Logan laid a conciliatory hand on his arm. Griggsby relaxed and glanced at his watch. "We'll go from one professional extreme to the other," he announced. "I want you to meet the county judge and his wife before it gets too late. Thad Steele is an old-time Texan. Has heart trouble and has to take things easy. Martha's a little apple-cheeked woman who mothers Mollie and Betty when the girls come to town."

The visit with the Steeles repaid Logan for the rest of the rather nightmarish tour. He learned that there were good women, children and babies, and a better element at work in Gila City—a fact he was beginning to doubt. They had a glass of port wine with the judge and his wife and chatted half an hour about gardens and national politics. When they left the white-haired couple cordially invited them back.

It was almost eleven o'clock when they wound up in front of the Texas Tommy. By now Griggsby was half-seas over, and Logan was for returning to the hotel and calling it a night.

"This is the last stop," promised the editor. "There's one more man I want you to meet. I've saved him till last. He's expecting us."

Dubious, Logan suffered himself to be led across the threshold where he was treated to his first sight of a western dance hall going full blast. The conglomerate crowd, a few of whom he had met earlier in the evening, the glitter and tinsel of décolleté dresses, the subdued roar of shuffling feet, the general noise and surprisingly good music dazzled him. As his eyes became accustomed to the glare of chandelier lights he observed that there were quite a few demurely-dressed women present.

"Finest dance hall in town," informed Griggsby. "Hardwood floors and everything. The regular girls come from all over the country and mostly live upstairs. They get good wages and are fairly decent. The others are respectable range and town women who like dancing. It's all right to come here because Overstreet doesn't allow any rough stuff."

A solid partition separated the dance hall from the saloon with only one archway between the two at the base of a flight of stairs which led to the floor above. The rear wall of the gilded and decorated hall was draped with a heavy material that looked like crimson velvet. In this windowless expanse there was a single massive door. Griggsby led the way like a homing pigeon to this barrier.

"Now then, son," he said as he knocked, cocking an owlish eye at his companion. "You think you've already seen things. I'm going to show you something that'll knock your hat off."

The door opened, and an olive-skinned giant of a man in a gold-braided maroon suit towered over them.

"Good evening, Mr. Griggsby," he greeted in faultless English, ushering them in. "You rarely use this entrance."

"Hello, Pierre. This is Dr. Logan. Bob, meet Pierre d'Auberge."

The giant bowed. "How do you do, Dr. Logan. I will inform the master of your arrival."

He closed the door behind them and hastened towards the rear of the huge chamber, seeming to flow along on resilient muscles.

"Pierre's a Cajun who came here with Overstreet," said Griggsby. "The strongest man I ever saw. Ties knots in horse-shoes for exercise. The Cerberus of this enchanted realm."

Logan stared around in frank amazement at this richly-carpeted chamber of lesser extent but greater elegance than the gilded dance hall. Along the right-hand wall was the most exquisite liquor counter and back bar. A single bartender in immaculate white functioned at this shrine to Bacchus while a pair of soft-footed attendants served the various players at the gaming tables scattered about the room.

There were no windows, but there was a barred and chained entrance which opened on the alley. Never had Logan seen anything like this lay-out even in St. Louis. But his social and night life had been neglected. An orphaned youth attending medical school on the generosity of an itinerant newspaper publisher had neither time nor money for such things.

A sudden bellow of rage from one of the card tables drew their attention. A bull-necked man wearing livid yellow cowboy boots had leaped to his feet, upsetting his chair. He was leaning across the table and shaking his finger at the sharp-eyed but immobile dealer.

"You dirty skunk! So that's how you've been cheatin' me all night. Thought I was too drunk to watch, huh? But I've caught you now with a dead hand up your sleeve."

Instantly the huge Pierre d'Auberge reappeared in the doorway at the end of the liquor bar. His dark eyes took in the situation at a glance and he started forward in swift strides. The dealer did not move or speak, but the irate cus-

tomers did both.

"Damn you, Holcomb! I'm goin' to pistol-whip your ears down!"

His red fist peeled back his coat and gripped the butt of his gun before the still seated gambler could move. The weapon flashed into view, and Pierre leaped forward like a jungle cat. The dealer's face whitened as he tried to scramble to his feet. Logan thought it odd that he made no attempt to draw and defend himself.

At this moment a glittering object whizzed through the air past Pierre's shoulder and shattered at the base of Bull-neck's skull. The man groaned and lurched across the table, his gun clattering harmlessly against a pile of poker chips.

"Mr. Martin forgot he was in a house of gentlemen," said a cultured baritone voice. "I had to sacrifice my handsomest decanter. Most annoying."

Logan jerked his head around. Just within the casino was a hatless man, impeccably dressed. His garb was a symphony in gray, stylishly cut and fitting his slender figure excellently. A creamy waistcoat but half-concealed the tiny-pleated shirt front of fine cambric. His glossy black hair was brushed straight back from a classic brow. His features were almost severe in their regularity. He was clean-shaven and pale. No emotion showed on his face, and his coal-black eyes were as unfathomable as jet.

The huge Cajun halted and visibly relaxed. He looked back for instructions.

"Put Martin out—for good," said the man in gray. "Gentlemen"—he included the whole room with a graceful gesture—"I ask you to overlook this incident, but we do not permit gun-play in this house. None of the dealers or attendants in this room is armed."

"Yes, sir," responded the Cajun in a matter-of-fact way. He stepped forward and grasped the slowly recovering Martin as though he were a sack of potatoes. Then he did an amazing thing.

Letting the dazed man drop back to the table, he placed a vast hand beside him and lightly vaulted over the table. Before the startled dealer could flee, the giant had his arms pinned helplessly to his sides. Handling the now pasty-faced gambler like a baby, he extended the man's left arm and shook several cards out of the cuff.

"I regret to inform you, sir, that Mr. Martin was right," the Cajun said.

The atmosphere of the room seemed to drop a few degrees, but the facial expression of the man in gray did not change as he gazed steadily at the culprit. Cold sweat glistened on the dealer's brow, and he gurgled inarticulately.

"So, Mr. Holcomb?" the owner of the casino murmured. "You learned and pledged yourself to respect the iron-clad rules of the Texas Tommy. And you have deliberately broken the first law of this house."

The guilty man wilted. Futilely attempting to writhe free from the merciless grip that held him, he began babbling for leniency. "I made a mistake. I won't do it again. I swear—"

"That I know," said his judge, unmoved. Withdrawing his gaze from the card cheat, he nodded significantly at the huge Cajun.

The crooked gambler cried out in fear as the giant swiftly shifted him about and gripped only his right arm and hand. Even as he tried to pull free in his terror the monstrous Pierre heaved slightly. The great muscles rippled across his broad back and down along his vast biceps. There was a rapid succession of dull *plops*, a shriek of agony, and blood spurted from the ends of Holcomb's useless fingers. He fainted dead away in the arms of the giant.

Pierre quickly carried him out through the doorway to his master's private quarters behind the saloon. The man in gray crossed the room and personally assisted the still befuddled Martin to his feet.

"My deepest apologies for this unpleasant episode, Mr. Martin," he said earnestly. "But no man has to protect himself or his purse at the Texas Tommy. Holcomb was new here. He will never deal another crooked card in Gila City."

"Nor anywhere else if I know anything about bones," Logan murmured under his breath.

"Mr. Jenkins," the man in gray went on to another dealer, "take charge of this table and refund Mr. Martin his entire losses. Gentlemen, a round of drinks on the house."

That was all. Business was resumed as usual. Logan took a deep breath as his fingers bit deeply into Griggsby's shoulder.

"Who is that man?" he said.

The editor squirmed. "Eh? That's Jack Overstreet. You've seen a better picture of him than I could describe in a week."

The immaculate owner of the Texas Tommy approached

them and held out a slender hand which had a powerful grip despite its soft whiteness. A slow smile now revealed his even, white teeth.

"Dr. Logan? I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances. How are you tonight, Griggsby?"

There was no trace of the ruthlessness of a moment ago. Overstreet was an amazing individual. Logan shook hands wordlessly.

"What will it be, gentlemen?"

"Whisky sour," Griggsby ordered promptly, hooking one elbow over the bar rail.

"And you Dr. Logan?"

"Don't you want me to set that poor devil's fingers for him?" Logan burst out.

For an instant Overstreet's gaze was like ice. Then it warmed immediately. "Thank you, no," he declined. "Pierre will attend to the dog." He went on conversationally. "However, I understand from Griggsby that you are locating here. You may count on me for every bit of assistance within my means. Shall we drink?"

Logan shook his head. "I think I've drunk enough and seen enough for one night."

Overstreet nodded politely and signalled the barman. "Then let us split a bottle of ginger ale and drink to your success, Doctor."

Two

THE CIRCLE BAR outfit lay west of town, a wide section of triangular shape which ran back into the foothills of the Horseshoe Range. It was bordered on the south by Solomon Trent's horse ranch and on the north by George Pelham's young fruit farm. Sunday forenoon Logan and Griggsby rode out.

Logan was beginning to like this country. This particular region was lush and fertile, reminding him more of his native Missouri land than the flat prairies of Oklahoma had ever done. He took off his derby and let the wind dry the perspiration from his forehead. Throwing back his shoulders, he drew

such a deep breath of the clean air that his saddle creaked.

"Smells good, eh? But you're going to have to swap that kelly for a wide-brimmed hat if you don't want to sunburn your tonsils," Griggsby said dryly. "Where'd you learn to ride that good?"

"In Saint Louis. I got special permission to train with the police cavalry for exercise. I knew a range doctor couldn't ride trolley cars to call on patients."

"Smart lad. We'll get you a good horse of your own from Solomon Trent. His place is off over there to the left. Sol's a horse wrangler from the Black Hills country. Raises riding stock which he sells to cattlemen for their remudas."

Logan gazed off in the indicated direction. He saw a black dot spiralling in low sweeps in the distance, and he shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Hello!" Griggsby went on as his sharp old eyes discerned the vulture. "Looks like Trent's lost another horse. There are lots of draws and ugly little coulees on his place."

"You mean that buzzard flying low?"

"Yes. But flying buzzards just clean up the carrion. It's the two-legged buzzards prowling this range that we have to worry about. I'm figuring to talk with you considerable on that subject, son, when we have the time. We've got to doctor this range just like you're going to doctor the sick folk on it."

This was the first hint Griggsby had given of this nature, and Logan picked it up. "Meaning what?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Look over yonder to the right. See that tall tree in the gap? It marks the entrance into Pelham's valley, a couple of miles north of Circle Bar land. George Pelham's a queer duck—tubercular, I understand. He and his wife moved out here from Ohio. He fiddles around experimenting with fruit trees. Comes to town about once a month for supplies. Always pays cash. Gets a remittance twice a year from some investments back East and never puts his money in the bank. You might be able to do him some good with the latest ideas on consumption."

"I know this is rough country," pursued Logan, stubbornly adhering to his original line of thought, "but in spite of a lax sheriff you don't have to worry about bad actors when men handle them in the summary fashion Overstreet handled that crooked card sharp, do you?"

"I reckon not," said Griggsby noncommittally.

"Then what——"

Griggsby pulled up his horse and turned in his saddle to face Logan squarely. "Look, son, I wanted to ease this to you gradually. There are other ramifications besides individual polecats running wild on rampages. This is a big country with a big future. We hope to bring a railroad through here yet, for one thing. I have to be careful how much I agitate things in the paper. Already we've given other folk ideas. Within recent months a foreign outfit has moved in—a land development company, they call themselves. But I think they foresee a boom here and are out to grab all the land they can. Not only do they want to control the right-of-way, but they mean to take over the entire range and make a single cattle empire out of it.

"If I'm right, that means range war. The various folks here will fight to keep their land. They don't want to be crowded out, cheated of their homesteads, forced to accept a mere pittance for their holdings, have to move on. And these land grabbers won't work in any other way. They'll lie, they'll cheat, they'll steal, they'll kill to gain control. You ought to know what land grabbers are."

Logan's face hardened. "I do," he said through stiff lips. "But how do you know this land development company is of that calibre?"

The editor sighed. "Bob, you don't like to remember what happened up in Blue Eagle, but you're crowding me. Do you know who killed your father?"

Logan looked at him soberly. "Not for certain. It was either Charles Hohner or his field man, John Naylor. They were both there."

"Exactly. It's been nine years, but I'm afraid the past is catching up with us. This new outfit in Gila City is called the Hohner Land Development Company, and the local manager is a man named John Naylor. Let's ride on."

He jogged his mount into motion and trotted along the trail. Logan sat there like a stone statue for a long space, his eyes fixed on the receding back of the man who had befriended him on an ugly day nine long years before. His hands clenched the saddlehorn until they ached, and his face was troubled. Then he set spurs to his horse and thundered after the editor in a mad gallop.

Barton met them at the corral gate. Manlike, he led them into the house through the kitchen, where the appetizing aroma of cooking food engulfed them in a sensory wave.

"James Henry Barton!" exclaimed Mollie, trapped with her hands in a mass of biscuit dough. "You know better than this!"

"Don't mind me, Miss Barton," Logan said. "Remember you caught me in my shirtsleeves with a saw I didn't know what to do with."

She laughed prettily. "So I did, which makes us even. This is my sister, Betty."

Logan turned towards the stove where a second girl was hastily closing the oven door on a pair of simmering pies. He looked and continued to stare at a bewitchingly rosy face with the loveliest blue eyes, surmounted by a glorious pile of ash-blond hair. She hurriedly wiped her hand on her apron and offered it to him, and he bent over the delicately-tapered fingers in his best bow.

"You're improving," Mollie said critically. "But Betty has that effect."

"Ignore her, Dr. Logan," advised the younger sister, although blushing to the tips of her pretty ears. "She's a jealous creature."

"Don't forget I saw him first," was Mollie's mock warning as she pursed her lips to kiss Griggsby.

"Don't hold yesterday's awkwardness against me," Logan begged. "I can do much better today."

"Well, sir, prove it," Mollie challenged, holding his gaze and promptly putting out her hand.

Unsuspecting of the twin imps dancing in her brown eyes, Logan fell into the trap. He grasped her fingers to bow gracefully over them, and started slightly at the sudden clammy and sticky mass he found in his hand. At his ludicrous expression of dismay Mollie laughed merrily and put her hand back into the biscuit dough.

The older men roared and Logan joined in as Betty came to his rescue.

"Brat!" she said. "Here, let me wipe that dough off, Dr. Logan."

"Thank you," he accepted, thrilling to her deft touch. "Just wait until I'm called in professionally."

"That's a promise," Mollie said. "Now, out of the kitchen, all of you men. Dinner's in twenty minutes."

The day passed swiftly. After dinner the girls walked with Logan, showing him the ranch buildings and Mollie's rose garden. After supper they all sat on the big front veranda and

talked until moonrise. Betty brought out her guitar and sang a number of old ballads that somehow gave the doctor an indefinable ache deep inside him. He was conscious for the first time of a lack of something precious in his life.

As they rode back to town in the moonlight Griggsby asked: "Well, did you enjoy yourself, son? Was I right about the Bartons?"

"I never spent a more delightful day," Logan admitted soberly. "You didn't say half enough about the daughters. Mollie's your favorite, isn't she?"

"Eh? Why do you ask that?"

"It just seemed so to me."

Griggsby appeared to cogitate. "That's hard to say. I've always petted Betty like a child. She's imaginative, romantic. Mollie's more practical and capable. But they're both grown women. I guess I am kind of partial to Mollie's cooking. As for downright beauty, Betty's the kind of woman a man would go to hell for."

Logan considered this remark and nodded in agreement. They rode on in silence for a hundred yards. Then:

"And Mollie?" Logan prompted.

"Mollie," Griggsby said quietly, "is the kind who'd go to hell with you."

By the middle of the week Logan was installed in his office. The place fairly glistened in its freshness. New lumber and new paint matched the pristine glory of the framed diploma over the desk. The youthfulness of it all, priceless and unrecognized moments, chafed the young doctor. He felt like pasting a seal over the glaring recent date of his graduation as he checked and put to rights the little stock of medicines just arrived. An air of dignity was the only mantle he could find to cover his youth.

None of this was apparent to the excited and foam-flecked stripling in overalls who galloped up to the newspaper office and rushed into the building. Logan listened with rapid pulse and professional gravity to the young fellow's gasping words.

"Hey, Doc! Jess Plum's wife fell and hurt herself—purty bad off—lookin' fer the stork next month—bleedin' to death, Maw Plum says—want ye thar's quick as I can git ye thar."

"Where is the place?" Logan asked.

"Up in the north hills a few mile. I'll take ye. My name's Slim Tackett. I work fer Jess Plum. Hurry up, Doc!"

Logan dispatched Nolly Sims to the livery barn for a horse and methodically stowed a number of instruments and drugs in his satchel. It was not until they were halfway to their destination—eight miles from Gila City—that he learned from his companion that Slim Tackett had been sent for Dr. Bryant and, failing to find the veterinary, had sought out the new doctor. The irony of this pierced the young physician's soul, but he merely compressed his lips and rode on.

Jess Plum's place proved to be a tiny mountain settlement. There were four or five log cabins, a community well, and a large corral for stock. Logan read no significance in the fact that the settlement was well hidden in the hills, that it was advantageously arranged for defence, and that the stock corral was exceptionally large and strongly built for so unlikely a place.

His guide, a rather vacant-faced young mountaineer with a thin stubble of beard on his weak chin, led him towards the sturdiest and largest cabin of the group. A heavily-bearded man in corduroy garb and laced boots started up from the doorsill and advanced to intercept them in a hostile manner.

"Slim Tackett, what's the meanin' of this?" he demanded in a deep voice which rumbled like thunder in a cavern. "Who's this here feller? Whar's Doc Bryant?"

The simple young guide cringed slightly. "Doc Bryant warn't thar, Jess. This here is Doc Logan, the new medicine doctor to Gila City. Yore maw said not to come back 'thout fetchin' the doctor. Didn't I do right to fetch 'im?"

Logan halted uncertainly while Plum stared him up and down with hard black eyes.

"Humph!" the mountaineer grunted in harsh accents. "Air ye a reg'lar doctor, Mister?"

"Certainly I am," Logan replied stiffly.

Plum jerked his shaggy head towards the cabin. "In thar—since ye've come," he directed, his voice curt. "Maw'll show ye the woman. Slim, ye danged simpleton, I want to talk to ye."

Puzzled and rebuffed, Logan went on to the house. As he crossed the threshold he found himself in the midst of a colony of the dirtiest children he had even seen. There were at least six of them, ranging in ages from two to ten, and each bearing the unmistakable stamp of Jess Plum.

They scattered at his entrance, leaving him confronted by an old crone so filthy that he almost recoiled. Her dirty yellow-white hair, stringy and matted, was twisted grimly in a

combless snarl behind her begrimed ears. Snuff-stained dried saliva tattooed a Maori design from the corners of her toothless mouth. In one unwashed hand she held a reeking cob pipe.

"Hey?" she demanded shrilly, peering at him. "Who's this? Ye ain't Tobe Bryant. Be ye a doctor?"

"I am Dr. Logan, Madam. You are Mr. Plum's mother?"

"Ye mean Jess?" She cackled and nodded. Then she waved him towards a darker corner of the room, immediately taking him for granted. "Over thar. My son's woman. Fell offen the back porch. In her condition she hurt herself bad. She's porely, anyhow."

Dear God, Logan reflected, under these conditions who wouldn't be?

Amazement at his surroundings filled his mind so completely he forgot to be nervous at his first bedside. He approached the crude, home-made bed and looked down. A sallow-faced woman who might have been comely a few short years ago stared up at him from pain-drawn features. At sight of the strange, smooth young face bending over her instead of the familiar ugly countenance of the horse doctor she had expected her eyes widened, and she gasped.

At once Logan became all physician. He opened his satchel and directed the old woman hovering in the background to let in all the light possible. A brief examination, a few questions, and he knew all he needed to know.

He administered a sedative immediately, thanking God that his little supply of ordered drugs had followed him so quickly. Then bringing forth a small phial and a spatula from his kit, he deftly made up half a dozen rectal suppositories of cocaine and cocoa butter to quiet the action of the disturbed uterus. Dosing out a few more powders for the old chrone to give, leaving explicit instructions, he prepared to go.

The sick woman caught his hand and clung to it fiercely. "Doctor, air ye sure I'll be all right?" she demanded anxiously.

"If you will remain quietly in bed and follow all my directions, I am confident of it, Mrs. Plum," he assured her.

She tightened her grip. "Doctor, I trust ye. I like ye heaps more'n Doc Bryant. Will ye come back to wait on me when my time's up?"

"If you wish it, certainly." Logan felt elated.

"Swear it!" she said fiercely. "Swear ye'll come—that ye'll let nothin' on earth stop ye!"

Startled by her vehemence, he soothed her. "Don't fret, Mrs. Plum. Don't excite yourself now. Certainly, I swear I'll come back when you send for me."

"Ye heard him, Maw Plum," she said to the old woman. Without another word she released Logan's hand and relaxed obediently on the cornshuck mattress.

Frowning, Logan gathered up his paraphernalia and went out of the cabin. The bearded man was waiting for him on the little porch. Behind the mountaineer crowded his flock of soiled and staring progeny.

"Waal?" he demanded curtly.

"Your wife will be all right if my instructions are followed," Logan replied as shortly. He resented the fellow's boorish attitude. "I'd like a drink of water before I leave, if it isn't too much trouble."

"Slim!" Plum bellowed, leading the way off the porch and casually cuffing a tow-headed boy out of his path. "Bring a fresh bucket o' water from the well and then git yore hosses."

The lanky Slim Tackett appeared and went to the well some forty yards from Plum's cabin. While they waited, the mountaineer turned back to Logan.

"How much I owe ye?"

"The visit is five dollars—it's about a fifteen-mile round trip. The medicine was seventy-five cents."

"I'll send yore money to ye. Just don't come back here. Understand?"

Logan looked his amazement. "But your wife——"

"That's all," Plum cut him off in grim finality, poking him in the chest with a thick forefinger. "Don't forgit what I said. Don't come back."

Logan could not speak. He turned in perplexity to watch the approach of Slim Tackett, sloshing water and rattling the gourd dipper merrily at every step. Like a drove of thirsty cattle every one of the unwashed and runny-nosed children fled to meet him. Childlike, each had to have a drink.

Inwardly the doctor winced as Slim Tackett halted with a laugh and ladled out the water to them. He shivered as he watched them plunge their dirty little mugs into the dipper one by one, mouthing their way completely around the rim of the hollowed gourd.

Without troubling to rinse the container, Tackett dipped it once more into the bucket and handed it, brimming, to the reluctant Logan. As he accepted it, he noticed in vast relief

that the end of the handle had been pierced. Thankfully he tilted the gourd and drank through the handle.

As he took the vessel from his lips he heard the old crone cackle in friendly fashion from the porch. She expelled a stream of brown saliva as he turned.

"Thet's the ticket, Doc—*pee-tewey!*—thet's the end I allus drink from myself."

IT WAS Saturday morning and Nolly Sims was cleaning the press up from the previous day's run. Logan was putting the final touches to his private office pending the arrival of the special pieces of furniture ordered through Hawkins. The editor was busy with a can of white paint, painting the lower half of the front window.

"Bob," he said casually, "you remember what I told you last Sunday—about the Hohner land company?"

"Yes, sir." Logan paused in his work.

"Have you run into any of that outfit?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I've been doing some pretty heavy thinking, son. You've met Matlock, so you understand what sort of law enforcement we got here. We're having a private meeting in the back room tonight to discuss the situation and lay plans accordingly. Only a few of the solid citizens—Judge Steele, Hawkins, Jackson, and Overstreet."

"That's probably a good idea," Logan agreed. "What sort of plans?"

"You'll hear all about it tonight. We're facing a grave situation, possibly worse than the times you saw around Blue Eagle. We have to go sort of slow because every move the Hohner's outfit's made so far has been legal and above board. I—hello! Yonder comes Overstreet."

Logan looked out. The owner of the Texas Tommy, natty and trim in his well-tailored white linens and expensive Panama hat with a gray silk band, was crossing the street.

"He always looks like he just stepped out of a bandbox," Griggsby commented. "Very particular about his clothes. Has more hats than any three men in town. I saw him shoot a man through both ears once for knocking his hat off."

"I thought he never went armed."

"You're thinking of his house-men on duty."

"He's not wearing a gun now," Logan observed, glancing

distastefully at the six-shooter on his own thigh.

"Don't let appearances deceive you, son. Ever seen Jack Overstreet without his coat?"

"No, but I've only seen him a couple of times."

"If you see him a thousand times you'll never see that. He wears a pair of the slickest, slimmest derringers I ever saw up his sleeves. He can drop them into his palms like greased lightning, and his aim is deadly at short distances."

"I see Henry Barton's in town, too," said Logan, sighting a horseman farther along the street.

The two newcomers entered the newspaper building together.

"Morning, gentlemen," the vibrant voice of Overstreet greeted. "I was just dropping in on a courtesy call, but Barton and I agree we should all wet our whistles."

"Howdy, men," the rancher said. "Talkin's dry work."

Griggsby promptly put down his paint brush. "At times you're right sensible, Henry. The girls come to town with you?"

"Nope. I'm foot-loose and fancy-free today. Gus Fargo's sproutin' a boil on his neck, and I thought I'd speak to Logan about it."

"Give him sulphur and cream of tartar to clear up his bloodstream," Logan responded. "Get a package of senna leaves at the drug store for a laxative to cleanse his system. And get some flaxseed meal to poultice the boil he already has, Mr. Barton, and I'll lance it for him tomorrow."

"No prescriptions?" inquired Overstreet, smiling. "You're giving a lot of advice free, Doctor. You can't make any money in that fashion. By the way, I've already posted a bulletin at the Texas Tommy for all employees to consult you in the future for professional services."

"Thank you," Logan acknowledged, pleased. "I'll do my best for them."

"Which will be plenty good," declared the editor. "But this medical talk bores me. I'm interested in your first remark, Overstreet."

"Let's go over to the Tommy bar," said Barton, laughing.

"Why not next door to the Royal Flush?" suggested Overstreet pleasantly. "Jackson sells good whisky."

Calling Nolly Sims to keep his eyes open, Griggsby led the way to the saloon.

Barton and Griggsby ordered straight whisky, and the bar-

tender set out bottle and glasses. Overstreet dexterously spun a gold coin across the counter.

"While our stalwart friends pickle their entrails with that unimaginative preservative, Mr. Bartender, suppose you mix the doctor and me a pair of absinthe *frappés*. Ever drink one, Logan? It's a sort of cocktail I introduced here from New Orleans. An ideal drink for the hot weather."

Logan shook his head. "I'll try one on your suggestion."

The bartender was pouring the fancy drink when the batwing doors were suddenly flung violently open, and the horse doctor came striding into the house. Straight to the chatting group he came, his harsh old face as bleak as a blizzard.

"Hey, Logan!" he growled, confronting the young physician.

"Have a drink with us, Dr. Bryant," Overstreet offered.

Ignoring him, the veterinary came to the point of his business without preamble. "I hear you been ridin' my range, young squirt."

Logan frowned. "I don't understand, Dr. Bryant."

"Oh, yes, yuh do," Bryant said in a loud, harsh voice. "Jess Plum's wife. I reckon yuh don't know what it means in cattle country to graze another man's land."

Logan's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps I do," he said quietly. "But how do you apply this metaphor to yourself?"

The horse doctor snarled and twisted his head to one side like an enraged but baffled terrier. "You talk in riddles with all yore book learnin'. I'll put it plain. When a feller trespasses on fenced range it means war!" He spat out this last word and thrust his face forward as though he were snapping a chunk out of Logan's neck.

For its entire length the bar went silent, other customers of the place quitting their talk to look and listen. Logan felt embarrassed, then angry.

"It seems to me, Dr. Bryant," he bit out, "that you're overstepping the limits of your practice. I was called to see Jess Plum's wife, not his mule."

A mellowed bystander in the background, his soul attuned to a good jest, guffawed loudly. Bryant's face mottled with anger, and an ugly glitter appeared in his gimlet eyes.

"What's thet?" he squeaked.

Logan obligingly enlarged on the subject. "As you are not a doctor of medicine, you have no business practicing for human beings at all. Conditions being what they are in this country, however, I have no objection to you answering what

calls you receive. But the same consideration holds true for you. Wherever and whenever I go is none of your business. Do I make myself clear?"

The horse doctor's face was a study in rage and astonishment. He restrained himself with effort. His voice was chill and menacing, despite its squeak.

"Yuh're defyin' me? Yuh mean yuh're disregardin' my warnin'?"

Logan's steady voice carried to every corner of the saloon. "I mean, since you insist on it, that I'll go wherever I'm called to a sick-bed, and no illiterate horse doctor is going to prevent me. I mean——"

"You mean," and the veterinary's voice became hard and brittle, "yuh're retirin' from practice—permanent and immediate. Reach for yore gun, Mister M.D."

As he threw down his challenge, Bryant advanced one boot and leaned against the bar, resting his left arm along the edge. He peeled back his Prince Albert with a flourish and dropped his right hand to the black butt of his six-shooter.

The bartender sighed and glanced swiftly at his shining glassware on the back bar as he made ready to duck under the counter. The others, silent during the entire altercation, fell back out of the way. But Dr. Logan did not take up the gauntlet. He stared at the man unbelievably.

"Draw!" grated the veterinary. "You got a gun."

"Are you mad, Dr. Bryant? I have no quarrel with you, and I won't let you force one on me."

"Draw!" repeated the horse doctor, almost in a frenzy. "Draw, or leave town!"

"You're crazy. Listen, Dr. Bryant, our task is to save lives, not to take them. Have you forgotten that you and I are the only doctors of any sort in this country? We must work together, not against each other. If I've offended you, I'm sorry."

Bryant spurned this conciliation savagely. His rage became tinged with contempt.

"Work with a yeller-bellied coyote like you? Why, you ain't fit to be a buzzard doctor. You ain't got the guts to take a splinter from a dead hound's paw. Let me tell you somethin' you better not forget. You stay clear away from Jess Plum's place or I'll blow you clean to Kingdom Come."

Logan's face went deadly pale. His hand trembling, he turned away from the ugly veterinary and reached for his glass.

"Shall we drink, gentlemen?" he asked huskily.

Overstreet's enigmatic expression did not change; his lean, aristocratic features might have been carved of stone. Barton tugged at his moustache, staring at Logan through narrowed eyes. It was Griggsby who took up the horse doctor's challenge.

"I reckon you've said plenty, Bryant. Haul your freight—now—before somebody more careless of medical skins takes a hand."

The veterinary grunted. He glared at the editor and then at the other members of the silent group. Discretion proving the better part of valor, he flapped his long coat back about his angular form, jerked around, and stamped towards the street.

"Just a minute, Doc," Barton called. "I'm leavin' myself. You might ride out to Circle Bar this afternoon and lance a boil on my foreman's neck."

Overstreet calmly reached for his liquor. "I'm drinking with you, Dr. Logan," he said.

Logan shoved back his slender glass of emerald liquid.

"I can't drink it," he choked, and walked out.

Later, he tried to make Griggsby understand.

"I couldn't fight him, Uncle Tom. You saw how ridiculous the whole thing was. I couldn't have a regular saloon brawl with a horse doctor over a human patient," Logan cried out passionately. "What would the women of Gila City think? Why, they wouldn't let me come near their houses."

Griggsby shook his head. "Nothing should prevent a man from acting like a man. You needn't have killed Bryant, but you should have called his bluff."

The sorely tried young doctor studied his friend for a moment. "That's what you did for me, and I neglected to thank you," he said quietly. "But I don't know how to bluff, Uncle Tom; I'm not built that way. If I had pulled my gun I'd have killed Bryant. Surely I can explain to Barton tonight and—"

The pained expression on Griggsby's face stopped him.

"Son," the editor said soberly, "I'm sorry—it hurts me like hell—but I can't let you sit in on that meeting—now."

"You mean—" Logan faltered—"they will all—think I'm afraid?"

Griggsby didn't answer, and Logan went on.

"Do you think I'm a coward?"

Griggsby silently shook his head. Logan laughed shortly, bitterly.

"All right," he cried. "I'll stay away. Let Barton think what he pleases. Let them all think it! I'm a coward unless I shoot a blustering old fool to prove I'm a hero. So I'll stay a coward. Listen! I saw my own father shot down in a gun trap—butchered in cold blood. That lived with me for months like a horrible dream. I had awful nightmares about it. I brooded over it during the day. A good man's life destroyed just because of brutal greed over land. It took me years to get over it, and there's still a scar on my heart. If it hadn't been for you I'd have gone crazy. You helped turn my attention to medicine. And now I'm disgraced because I wouldn't shoot a man for less than Hohner and Naylor killed my father."

"Lad, I know, I know, and I'm grieved and sorry. Let's forget it for the present. I'll see if I can remedy the matter. Maybe no great harm's been done. But you've got to stand on your own feet, Bob. You've got to learn a working set of ideals to live by."

"A fine doctor I'd be, with a code of humane ethics I didn't follow."

Griggsby lost his patience. "See here, lad, let me give you a good definition of these ethics you're always talking about. Being ethical is just standing still while the other fellow cuts your guts out."

Three

AS THE DAYS slowly lengthened into weeks the status of Dr. Logan showed no indication of change. Of medical practice there was little save that from the Texas Tommy. What hope he had that people would gradually come around to a sensible view of his clash with the veterinary withered away.

Griggsby, Judge Steele, and Overstreet remained the same towards him, but he seemed to make little progress with others. The editor continued his Sunday visits to the Circle Bar, and it became established routine for Logan to take dinner with the Steeles and spend the evening with Overstreet.

The owner of the Texas Tommy had cordially invited him over that first lonely Sunday night, and Logan had been grateful. He was amazed at the magnificence of Overstreet's private quarters behind the saloon, a spacious room with a large alcove containing a huge four-poster bed of hand-carved walnut. Three massive oak doors opened respectively on the alley, the rear of the saloon, and the gambling casino.

The big chamber was a dream of elegance and taste. The floor was covered with a Persian rug. Huge chairs and a deep divan, all leather-covered, invited repose. A well-filled bookcase and a liquor cabinet supplied stimulation to mind and body. Several ornate cabinets along the walls contained Overstreet's prized decanter collection. At one side, perpetually standing between two comfortable chairs, was a substantial table with an inlaid chess board of ebony and ivory squares.

Overstreet was a perfect host, and Sunday evenings proved a delightful mixture of good liquors, excellent sandwiches, cold salads, good cigars, conversation, and usually a couple of chess games with a handsome set of ivory pieces. Griggsby generally returned from the Circle Bar in time to join them in a nightcap.

He occupied himself during the day, when not engaged in his meagre practice or helping out with the newspaper, by diligent study of his medical works. He was thus engaged the morning that a mild-mannered man with faded blue eyes came into the building.

"Mr. Griggsby in?"

Logan shook his head. "No. He's over in Clearwater today on business. Can I help you? Is it something about the newspaper?"

"No," said the visitor, hesitating. "You're the new doctor, ain't you? My name's George Pelham. Judge Steele sent me over to talk with Griggsby. I got a letter here . . ." His voice trailed off as he waved the paper in his hand impotently.

"Yes?" Logan encouraged him politely.

"I don't know what to do," Pelham went on uneasily. "I got to see the Hohner land people, and—here, you read the letter."

Logan accepted the letter and looked at it. It was from the Hohner Land Development Company. In brief, it informed the perplexed Pelham that a flaw had been discovered in his title to the fruit ranch and requested him to call at the land office when next in town at which time matters could doubt-

less be satisfactorily straightened out. Logan's eyes came to rest on the bold signature at the bottom, and a queer feeling went through him. John Naylor! One of the men who had killed his father.

Full of his subject, Pelham talked. Dr. Logan pricked up his ears to listen, his face a mask.

"I own a place north-west of town—bought it from a man named Jennings. Been there nearly four years. I can't figure out what this land development company's got to do with my place at all. Judge Steele thought Griggsby might want to go over to the land office with me."

Logan folded the letter and handed it back. "I'm sure he would, but I don't think he will be back before tomorrow. Look, Mr. Pelham, I'm not very busy this morning. If you'd like, I'll go with you to see this man."

"Will you?" Pelham brightened in gratitude. "Thanks, Doctor."

The Hohner Land Development Company was three blocks beyond the bank. This was the first time Logan had ever crossed the threshold, and he looked with interest about the severely plain office. A counter bisected the front, behind which a pair of clerks were interviewing a small queue of persons being herded into line by two busy field men. A desk, a big table, a filing cabinet, a few chairs, and several wall maps comprised the rest of the visible furnishings.

One of the clerks glanced at Pelham's letter and called to the man seated at the desk. "Mr. Naylor. Two gents to see you."

Logan eyed Naylor as the man got up. He had wondered many times what he would do or say, how he should act, just what he would feel if he ever again came face to face with this man. And here it was. Naylor glanced at him without recognition. It was a flat meeting. But who could remember back nearly a decade to a fifteen-year-old kid he had only seen a couple of times?

Naylor had not changed much himself in nine years. He had turned a little grayer and put on a few pounds of weight, but he was still the active, wiry man who walked with the springy gunfighter's step that Logan remembered. His dark eyes were hard and his face was hawklike. His manner was smooth. Evidently he had come a long way since boomer days in Oklahoma, switching his tactics from six-gun to legal chicanery.

"My name's Pelham," the fruit rancher stated. "This is Dr. Logan."

Naylor glanced again at the physician. "Ah, yes," he said carelessly. "I've heard of Dr. Logan. What can I do for you gents?"

"This letter you wrote me," Pelham said. "I don't understand it."

Naylor's sharp eyes flicked at the paper. He looked up and smiled. "What don't you understand, Mr. Pelham?"

"I don't understand anything. I bought my place full out from Banner Jennings four years ago. Paid him in cash. He'd owned the land for more'n five years. All the transactions are recorded with the county clerk. I've never so much as had a mortgage on the place. I don't see where you people have anything to do with it. What business is it of yours what kind of title I got?"

"I'll tell you," Naylor said, smiling pleasantly. "It goes back another step. Banner Jennings bought the property from the Perley sisters. This pair of old maids had a brother who owned a third interest in the land. His signature is not on the deed given to Banner Jennings. The Hohner Company represents Malcolm Perley, and we have been instructed to make a settlement with you."

"I won't pay out another cent," Pelham declared promptly.

"Mr. Perley is not asking you to. On the contrary, he is prepared to pay you a handsome price for a quit-claim deed to the place. He wants the property back, and we are authorized to offer you a thousand dollars for your shaky title. Now, how's that?"

"Crazy," said Mr. Pelham. "I paid more'n twice that for the place and I've spent that much in improvements. Besides which, I don't want to sell."

A shadow crossed Naylor's eyes, but he continued to smile. "It isn't a question of whether you'd like to sell or not, Mr. Pelham," he said in a silken tone. "Sometimes folks have to do things they don't like. Your title's bad and Malcolm Perley can take your place away from you. But he don't want to do that. He's made you a generous offer, and if you're smart you'll accept it."

Pelham snorted so violently he had to cough. Getting his breath, he spoke angrily. "I wouldn't think of it. Me and my wife's settled there in Pelham Valley and we aim to die there. I'll fight you through every court in the land before I'll let you

run me off my property."

Logan, keeping an attentive ear to all this, found his eyes wandering towards the nearer shirtsleeved clerk who was completing an argument with another customer. He now opened a cash drawer beneath the counter and dug out a hundred dollars in folding money as his client laboriously scrawled his name to a legal-looking paper. The fellow counted the money sourly and stuffed it into his pocket. Scowling, he walked slowly out.

Shirtsleeves tossed the document over at Naylor's elbow. "The option on the Randall place," he murmured. Then, taking the pencil from behind his ear, he turned to a wall map and began to shade in a little section.

Logan watched him curiously. He suddenly recognized the huge chart as a scale map of the Horseshoe Range country, and his eyes widened at the number of shaded areas checker-boarded there. Fully a fifth of the country surrounding Gila City was darkened with graphite. The Hohner Land Development Company was industriously snapping up the easy places. What would come next—with obstinate men like George Pelham?

"I tell you I won't do it!" Pelham shouted angrily. "No land shark is goin' to skin me. I—"

"Take it easy, Pelham," Naylor warned him in a hard tone. "Insults won't help any. In view of what you said about improvements, I might get Perley to raise his offer to possibly fifteen hundred dollars—just to have a peaceful settlement."

"Not for five thousand dollars!" Pelham declined flatly. "I'll fight you every inch of the way. Let's go, Doc."

"Take time to think it over," was Naylor's parting advice, and Logan detested him for his vulpine complacency.

Outside, the doctor counselled the worried landholder. "I don't think they're bluffing, Mr. Pelham, but you sit tight and wait. I know Hohner won't try to drag the deal through the courts. Takes too long for his kind of game. Better check the county records with Judge Steele just to be sure where you stand."

"But what's the purpose of all this?" protested Pelham. "What is this real-estate outfit tryin' to do?"

Logan realized only too well what the game was, but he couldn't explain it to the perplexed Pelham. Nobody save he and Griggsby would believe a single group of land grabbers would try to take over an entire range. Promising to lay the

cards before Griggsby, he parted from the angry fruit grower and headed back towards the office.

He ran into the horse doctor in front of Hawkins' Hardware Store. He would have walked around the veterinary without speaking, but Bryant opposed his passage.

"See here, Logan," he sneered, "ain't yuh ever comin' to the conclusion the Horseshoe Range is too thinly settled for more'n one doctor?"

Logan turned white and began to tremble. "Dr. Bryant," he said hoarsely, "I've already apologized for hurting your feelings. I've tried to make friends with you. Now I'm warning you to leave me alone."

He stepped around his enemy and hurried on. Bryant, reading only fear in the other's actions, laughed in a nasty manner. His jeering, squeaky voice called loudly after Logan.

"I'll give Griggsby about another month to git sick of feedin' you free," he taunted derisively. "When he throws yuh out yuh better rattle yore hocks back to Missouri."

In telling Griggsby about the Pelham case the next morning Logan did not mention his encounter with the horse doctor. He saw no point in making a sore matter worse. It was Griggsby who brought up the subject.

"I'll talk to Pelham," the editor said. "As for you, son, you stay away from the Hohner outfit. You've got troubles enough of your own. I heard that you met Doc Bryant on the street yesterday."

"Yes, I did," Logan admitted, centering his attention on his desk.

"You let him insult you again." There was a reproving note in Griggsby's voice.

"No. He told me the plain truth. I'm living on your generosity. I'm not building up a practice. I guess Bryant is getting most of what there is."

"He is, and the way you're acting isn't going to help you any, son."

"I know. I've been thinking things over ever since I met Bryant, Uncle Tom. He was right. I ought to leave. Nobody is friendly to me except a couple of your own friends, and that's on your account. Barton has never come into this office since that Saturday morning five weeks ago. I've tried to be patient—"

"Listen, son," the editor interrupted him. "Don't go to feeling sorry for yourself. Henry's a fire-eater with strong likes

and prejudices. Most of these Texas folks are that way. I've tried to tell you."

"How about Mollie and Betty? They feel that way too?"

"How the hell do I know how they feel? All I know is that Henry's forbid them having anything to do with you until you prove yourself."

A pathetic little smile quivered about Logan's lips. "A rather harsh way to treat—home folks, isn't it?"

Griggsby blew his nose noisily. Then:

"Damn it, Bob, you just don't understand range folks. I can't cram your views, your past history, and your present ideas of ethics down their throats for you, either. You've got off to a bad start because people here don't know you like I do. I've been marking time, waiting for things to break so I can give you a boost. You've got to show folks what you are. As soon as you get the proper feel of things——"

The sudden mad drumming of galloping hoofs along the street caused them both to glance towards the window. They looked out the entrance as a blowing horse slid into view. The unforgettable lanky figure of Slim Tackett leaped from the saddle and legged it for the door.

"Doc Logan! Hey, Doc Logan!" he bawled out breathlessly. "Whar air ye?"

"Here," Logan called from the partition door. "What is it, Tackett?"

"Miz Plum's in a bad way agin—means business this time," the mountain youth blurted. "She's acallin' fer ye!"

"How about Plum?" Logan demanded. "Didn't Plum send you for Dr. Bryant?"

"Jess didn't send fer nobody. He ain't thar. He's gone——" Tackett broke off and looked from Logan to Griggsby in swift suspicion. "Nev' mind about Jess Plum," he finished. "Ye air the man I was sent to fetch. Miz Plum said ye would come."

Logan looked at Griggsby to find the other eyeing him queerly.

"I'm going," Logan said in a crisp tone. "I promised that woman I would."

"Hell!" bellowed Griggsby. "This is what I've been waiting for. Here—stick this bottle of whisky in your satchel; you may need it. Get going, son, and good luck!"

PROVIDING SLIM TACKETT had told the truth about conditions at the mountain settlement, things had definitely changed at Jess Plum's place during his absence. As they rode their spent mounts through the narrow gap which marked the head of the trail Logan was at once aware of unusual activity in the clearing.

Three men on horseback were busily herding some twenty snorting and bellowing steers into the stout corral. Before the doctor could note further, the stalwart form of Jess Plum rose from hiding near the gap entrance and stepped out into the trail with a rifle. He levelled down with a harsh command to halt and reach for the sky.

In some consternation they obeyed. Then, recognizing the pair, the mountaineer lowered the muzzle of his gun.

"Slim Tackett!" he cried in a terrible voice. "Now ye've gone and played hell!"

The slow-witted Tackett cringed as he slid off his horse. "Jess, now, Jess," he placated, advancing timidly. "Yer maw sent me to fetch 'm. Yer woman's bad off, and ye warn't here. I had to go. I had to go."

His face black with rage, Plum raised an arm in a swift motion to strike the youth. Then he thought better of it and addressed the silently watching Logan.

"Turn yer hoss, young feller, and light out of these hills lickety split. If ye ever come back, I'll——"

"Wait, Plum!" a familiar voice shouted from the corral. "It's the M.D. isself who's played hell."

Logan turned his head quickly. Leaving his two companions to bar the corral gate, the third man was running towards the gap. There was a silk neckerchief knotted over his mouth and nostrils, his garb was dusty, and his plug hat had been replaced by a battered sombrero, but Logan had no difficulty recognizing the veterinary from Gila City.

Bryant jerked the neckerchief from about his mouth and wiped his sweating face with it as he approached. Stuffing it into his breast pocket, he shoved back his hat and glared evilly up at the young physician.

In the ominous silence that followed Logan unbuckled his satchel from his saddlehorn and dismounted. Without speaking, he slowly advanced to confront the veterinary. From the horse doctor's ugly features his eyes strayed towards the corral of uneasy cattle and the two rough-looking men who were now walking towards the little group. The puzzled frown on his

brow was gradually lifting. A great many things were becoming plain to him.

"Yep," squeaked Bryant, following his glance. "Them's Circle Bar cows—if yuh can't read the brand. They was sick—sick of the Circle Bar—and I brung 'em here for a little skin treatment before the boys drive 'em through the mountains up Kansas way."

Things fell into a comprehensible pattern. Logan now understood the mystery of this fortified little settlement, Plum's harsh attitude, the horse doctor's belligerency. He brought his gaze back to Bryant's face, a contemptuous little smile forming about his lips.

"I see," he commented. "On the side, you're a rustler. Under the cloak of a veterinary you ride the range and select what stock you want and practically arrange for its removal. I presume you're the man responsible for all these small raids the ranchers have been complaining about, I see."

"Waal, look hard, for you're at the end of yore trail," Bryant advised in a menacing voice. "Them slick initials after yore name are acquirin' a new letter today. Yore title's goin' to be M-U-D, mud!"

The sudden wailing of a woman in pain came to their ears across the clearing. Logan started and turned towards the grim man with the rifle.

"Your wife, Plum," he said. "She sent for me. I've come to attend her."

"Nev' mind thet," Bryant grated. "We're goin' to attend to somethin' else."

Logan continued to look at the bearded mountaineer. Plum shifted uncomfortably under his gaze and spoke to Slim Tackett.

"Slim, go see if you can help Maw out till we settle this here matter."

"Get some water," Logan called after the reluctantly departing youth. "Tell the old woman to heat it for me."

He turned back to the vicious circle that loosely hemmed him in. Ignoring the two men in cowpuncher garb, he addressed himself to Bryant and Plum.

"I'm sorry I've blundered into your—er—unusual activities, but how was I to know? Of course, I'm opposed to such a business but, under the circumstances, I can forget what I've seen. I'm here in a professional capacity only."

The veterinary laughed coarsely, echoed by the two riders.

"Oh, yuh can, huh? We can't."

"Then we'll discuss it later," Logan said shortly. "I haven't time now. I came here to care for a sick woman."

This brought a snarl from the horse doctor. "I reckon I can take care of Ivy Plum 'thout any help from you."

"Then, for God's sake, get in there and do it!"

"There ain't no hurry," Bryant said callously. "No different from a cow droppin' a calf. First, we'll tend to yore case."

Another cry from the house. Slim Tackett running from the well towards the cabin with an oaken bucket dripping water. The snort of an angry steer in the corral. The *swish* of a horse's tail after an irritating fly. The hoarse breathing of the beetle-browed man on his left. The glittering gimlet eyes of the savage veterinary before him. Distinct words from the log cabin.

"Oh, Gawd, Maw! Ain't Doc Logan come yet?"

A phrase from the fiery pen of Thomas Payne, wrung from his heart by the stress of the American Revolution, leaped unbidden to the young physician's mind. "There are times that try men's souls." A queer glow began to dawn in the depths of Logan's blue eyes. He licked his dry lips. He calmly shifted his satchel to his left hand. His face white to the lips, he glanced up for an instant at the blue vault of heaven. Then he lowered his gaze to meet the ugly gray eyes of his enemy.

"Get out of the way!" he ordered in a toneless voice. "I'm going to the cabin."

Again he started forward, but this time he did not stop. The beetle-browed man on his left fell back uncertainly. Only the horse doctor barred his way.

"Another step," Bryant warned in a hiss from which all squeak had burned away, "and I'll drop yuh in yore tracks."

He stood as he had stood that Saturday morning weeks ago at the Royal Flush bar, one foot advanced before him, his coat peeled back, his gnarled hand on the black butt of his gun, the promise of death in his chill, gray eyes.

Without faltering Logan took that step, his right hand dropping to his own gun butt. He no longer responded to the stimulus of emotion. He was like a mechanical machine carrying out the operation set by a master hand. Resolutely he forgot he was facing a human being. Once again he stood in the shooting gallery of old Ben Bledsoe at Little Rock confronting a moving target.

Bryant drew his gun coolly, easing the hammer back to

full cock, tilting the barrel to drop down on Logan's breast. Logan fired from the hip.

A black spot that quickly turned red appeared magically in the exact center of the horse doctor's forehead. The veterinary's gun roared a split second later, the bullet whistled off through the tree branches overhead. Bryant swayed on his feet and pitched forward on his face. Even as he fell Dr. Logan was striding, unseeing, past his body.

The two startled rustlers came to life and uttered shouts of consternation as they jerked forth their own weapons and flung themselves forward. Plum's rifle made an ominous *click*.

"Leave 'im be!" was his terse command.

Unmolested, the young doctor strode on across the clearing.

Sick to death, white as a sheet, trembling like an aspen, Logan entered the cabin. The woman on the bed gave a glad cry that was half pain. The old crone merely looked up and stoically pointed at the iron pot of water which hung over the blaze in the fireplace. There was no sign of the brood of children or Slim Tackett.

"I sent the kids over to Buckner's ridge," she explained. "Lizzie Buckner'll feed 'em."

Logan did not answer. He set his satchel down and fumbled it open with nerveless fingers. The first thing he saw was Griggsby's whisky bottle. Tearing out the cork, he upended the flask at his lips and poured the fiery stuff down his throat as though it were water. At last putting the bottle down, he shuddered. Whisky and gunpowder, he thought. God, what a doctor!

Throughout the rest of the dying afternoon he worked, the old woman at his side and obeying instructions silently and continuously save for one queer variation. Like clockwork she left the bedside at regular intervals and went to the back door. Returning with a full bucket of water, she emptied the oaken pail off the front porch and returned to the kitchen with the empty bucket.

"What are you doing?" Logan finally found the words to ask her.

"Hit's thet nosey Slim Tackett," she answered. "I got him carryin' water to keep 'im away from the house."

The room slowly became littered with the contents of the medical kit. The ground before the cabin gradually became a mud puddle. But at last a new wailing little cry added itself to the moaning of the exhausted woman on the bed. And as

dusk was descending to gather the mountain hollows in its soft embrace Dr. Logan placed a tiny bundle in the arms of the old crone.

He began dumping his paraphernalia back into his satchel without regard for order, at the same time giving instructions for the proper care of the infant, knowing full well they would not be carried out. The child would no doubt survive anyway, growing up to become a first-rate cattle rustler. A final look at the spent but resting mother, and he staggered wearily out of the house.

Jess Plum was stolidly awaiting him, a team hitched to his flatbed wagon in which was an object shrouded in a wagon sheet. Of the two hard-faced punchers and the stolen cattle there was no sign. Slim Tackett, his shirt sodden with sweat that still poured from him, sat on the end of the porch, fanning himself with his hat.

"I want to talk with ye, Doc," Plum began with difficulty. "I'm sorry about what happened. I never meant any man harm. I've sent that stock back to the Circle Bar range. I'm retirin' from the cattle business permanent. I'm askin' ye to believe thet."

Logan met the gaze of the mountaineer steadily. A long look passed between them.

"I believe you, Plum," he said.

The mountaineer's face lighted up. Hesitantly he offered his hand. Logan clasped it, and with that act he knew he had made a fast friend. He glanced at the wagon and shuddered, rubbing one hand over his eyes.

"Don't worry none over that," Plum said not unkindly. "Ye couldn't help it. Ye can jes' forgit ev'rything like ye offered. Ye met Bryant here and had to shoot him over my woman. I'll take the body to town and testify fer ye."

Logan digested these words slowly. He nodded wearily.

"How 'bout some supper before we head out?" went on Plum. "Slim and me can rustle up some grub, I reckon."

"I couldn't eat a bite," Logan declined.

"Ain't hungry neither. How's the woman?"

"Oh—yes—your wife," Logan recalled. "She's doing nicely now. You have a nine-pound son. I was almost too late, but we saved them both. It was a dry birth, and——"

Slim Tackett arose from the porch in righteous indignation.

"Dry birth, hell!" he exploded. "I toted sixty-three buckets o' water!"

Four

UNDER THE SOFT GLOW of the lamp Griggsby studied the chessboard with a rueful expression. "Well," the editor grunted with a wry face. "That's a horse on me. My king's hemmed in by my own men. As he can't take your queen that's my finish. Checkmate."

Overstreet smiled. "I'm afraid so." He refilled their wine glasses. "I counted on your pressing your own attack so strongly you'd overlook that danger. Here's regards."

They sipped their wine, and the editor studied the game. "Yes, I should have taken that knight two moves back. I started to, but I hated to sacrifice a bishop and a defensive move for him. I guess I'm too Scottish at times. On the other hand, you're quite ruthless in your sacrifices to gain a position. You should have been in the War Office, Overstreet."

"I sacrifice when I've an objective in view," Overstreet admitted. "I suppose it's the gambling instinct in me. Yet, when an opposing player upsets my campaign, my sacrifices usually cost me the game."

Overstreet glanced at his watch. "A quarter after ten. Still early. Shall we have another game?"

They rearranged the pieces. Griggsby, now playing the white, had just made his second move when the alley door creaked from the impact of a body thudding against it.

"Overstreet!" the voice of Dr. Logan came faintly through the barrier. "Are you there?"

The owner of the Texas Tommy quickly unbarred the door. He swung it open, and Logan walked unsteadily across the threshold. Overstreet uttered an exclamation and reached out to support the unsteady doctor. Griggsby started to his feet in vague alarm.

"I'm all right," Logan assured them, waving them back. "I've just made a mess of things."

"You're tired," diagnosed Overstreet. "Sit down while I mix you a little pick-me-up."

Logan noted the gaping door of the liquor cabinet, walked over and picked up a whisky decanter and a sizeable goblet.

"I'll take it straight," he said, shakily pouring the glass to the brim. He tossed it off at one gulp.

"What's wrong?" Griggsby demanded sharply.

Logan dropped wearily into an armchair and refilled his goblet. He emptied it again before replying.

"Herel" remonstrated the editor in mild consternation. "Go slow there. What's troubling you, son?"

The doctor looked from one to the other with tragic eyes. "I've done it," he said thickly as the color began to return to his pale cheeks. "I've killed Dr. Bryant."

"What?" both men exclaimed.

"This afternoon at Plum's place. We just brought the body to the undertaker's. Plum's waiting at Haskell's place now."

"Take another drink," Griggsby advised. "I reckon you need it."

"Then tell us about it," Overstreet added, his manner calm.

Logan drained his glass again. The liquor began to kick mightily, and he found relief in speech.

"There isn't much to tell. You know I went to Plum's place. Tackett told us nobody was there, but Bryant was there when I arrived. We met outside the house. Bryant acted like he did that morning in the Royal Flush, threatening to kill me. When I heard that poor woman inside crying with pain and calling for me I lost my head. Bryant drew his gun. I shot from the hip."

The two men were silent. Their eyes met significantly. Logan got nervously to his feet.

"After I delivered the baby," he went on hurriedly, "I found Plum ready to haul Bryant's body to town. We just got in. Now I'm ready to give myself up to Sheriff Matlock." He poured himself another drink.

"Don't be hasty," Overstreet said. "Bringing a baby into the world, it strikes me that you broke even. That's more than many a doctor can say."

"Don't joke about it, Overstreet," Logan said harshly. "I've killed a man. I've marked myself with the brand of Cain. I must have been crazy. I can still see him with that ugly hole in his forehead as he keeps falling . . . falling . . . falling."

He reeled dizzily, and Overstreet was at his side at once.

"Get a grip on yourself," admonished Griggsby in a curt voice. "You'll be all right when the horse doctor has company. It's always that way."

"Good God, no!" Logan was aghast at the implication. "I'll

never kill another man! I—ohhhh! I'm sick."

As one man they grabbed him and rushed him out into the cool night air. After a few minutes of agony between them, his stomach emptied, he suffered them to lead him back into the house. He tried to mumble something as his knees buckled under him. He collapsed in their arms. He was out.

"I'd better take him to the hotel first," Griggsby said tenderly. "Then we can look into——"

"Put him on my bed, and we'll both see what's to be done."

They carried the inert form into the alcove, removed his coat, gun belt, and boots, and laid him on the great four-poster. Griggsby pulled a cover over him while Overstreet arranged the pillow-beneath his head.

"Well," Griggsby said a bit grimly. "He's come through."

DURING THE DAYS immediately following, Logan underwent a painful process of readjustment. He groped his shaky way through a black period of remorse while beside him in the shadows stalked the grim figure of the horse doctor. A thousand times he relived the events culminating in the death of Bryant, reviling himself for the act he could not have avoided. A thousand times he regretted his gun accuracy, cursing himself for having perfected his shooting ability. And more than a thousand times he bitterly wished he had never come to the Horseshoe range country.

Then, like a deluge, came the blessing of work. Almost overnight he was overwhelmed with medical practice. As usual, despite Griggsby's private disappointment at his temperamental eccentricities, the editor warmly championed his cause in the *Gila News*. As word of the horse doctor's demise spread across the range Logan's services became in growing demand.

Substantial people who, like Henry Barton, had held aloof until Logan proved himself, now called on him. The curious from every crossroad settlement to far-flung hide-out sent for him to view the man who had killed the redoubtable Doc Bryant over a mountaineer's simple practice.

Eagerly he threw himself at the task, answering calls anywhere at any hour of the day or night. His list of patients and circle of acquaintances grew until he knew people that even Tom Griggsby had never heard of. As the days stretched into weeks he learned the terrain of the surrounding country so well he could find his unerring way in daylight or dark. He

drove himself like a madman, finally having to buy a couple of rangy, deepchested saddle horses from Solomon Trent.

It became a game he played with himself. Each fever he broke, wound he healed, sufferer he eased, baby he helped usher into the world applied just that much on the debt he owed God and man for the killing of the veterinary. Gradually his bearing changed. He became scant of speech without seeming taciturn, grave without appearing morose, dignified without becoming reserved. From the first he made a lasting impression wherever he went. The cadaverous horse doctor with his harsh traits and harsher treatments had never been popular. On the other hand, Logan's gentle manner, tender patience, and kindly air completely won the confidence of every sufferer with whom he came in contact.

Supremely indifferent to consequences, he kept his vow to go unarmed. He walked or rode without hesitation into places where sometimes a Texas Ranger might have faltered. In due course his figure astride one of his chestnut saddlers became a familiar silhouette against the skyline near and far about the range. When Griggsby felt at last impelled to remonstrate with him at his terrific pace, he answered with a twisted little smile:

"It's the only way I can sleep at night, Uncle Tom."

"But look, son, you've proved your courage and that you keep your word. That's enough for anybody. You're killing yourself the way you go without question any place on the most trivial calls. You never mention money, taking what is offered you without comment. Half your patients don't pay you a cent. You don't even know how much money's due you."

"What does it matter? We're doing all right, aren't we?"

"That isn't the question. You're driving yourself to the breaking point. When there's nothing else to do, which is mighty seldom, you sit studying your books. The only time you take off is for Sunday dinner at the Circle Bar."

That first Sunday he had returned to the Barton ranch with a feeling of inner panic, but his trepidation proved needless. However stern and unyielding his opinions may have been, Henry Barton was no halfway individual. He greeted Logan heartily, grasping his hand in a horny grip that made the physician wince.

Mollie greeted him as casually as though he had been there the previous Sunday. Logan feasted his eyes hungrily on her

sweet face, flushed and framed in damp tendrils of brown curls from her efforts in the kitchen. One thing he noticed. She had dropped her jocose air toward him, and he wondered if it was because he had killed a man.

To Betty his heart went all out. As he hesitantly offered his hand he found her regarding him with her wide blue eyes swimming in tears. Suddenly, instead of taking his hand, she flung her arms about his neck and kissed him. The fragrant sweetness of her breath was like a celestial perfume.

"Oh, Bob," she cried, "I'm so glad to see you! I've missed you terribly!"

From that moment he was her vassal.

Logan was conscious of Mollie's motherly smile as she offered her own lips to Griggsby. But he was not aware that both girls quietly studied him during the meal, noting his wan features, gloomy air, and detached hesitancy of speech, covering all awkward pauses or silences with comfortable chatter to put him at ease.

At the conclusion of dinner Mollie deftly shoed the two older men out on the veranda to talk and smoke. She took a pair of gloves, shears, and a gardening trowel from a shelf.

"How about showing Dr. Bob our flower garden, Betty?" she suggested. "We'll do the dishes later."

Just how it happened Logan didn't know. He rather thought Betty responsible. But half an hour later he was sitting on a bench in the garden, Betty beside him and sympathetically holding his hand while he unburdened his heart of its grief. A few feet away, digging vigorously with her trowel or pruning a rose bush with firm, decisive clips, Mollie lent an attentive ear. Occasionally she paused to brush back a trailing wisp of hair with her forearm, at such moments giving him an encouraging little smile which warmed him unaccountably. Thus, Logan made his last reference to the death of Tobias Bryant.

"You've nothing to regret," Betty assured him. "The veterinary asked for it. I never liked him, anyway."

Mollie agreed. "Grandfather used to say that a man has to do what he has to do. You did it, Dr. Bob, and you needn't look back."

Logan shook his head, but his manner brightened. Oddly, he was feeling better.

"I'm sorry Daddy acted so cool for a while," Betty went on. "He just didn't understand you. You should have heard Uncle

Tom lace it into him every Sunday. But you finally made a believer of him yourself."

"Which settles it for all time." Mollie dismissed the matter. "Dad, Judge Steele, and Uncle Tom all say you were right, Dr. Bob. So let's forget it."

"Please, Mollie," Logan said humbly, "just call me Bob."

On the way back to town Griggsby commented on the change in his companion. "Sort of enjoyed yourself after the girls dragged you out of your shell."

"Er—guess I did," Logan responded guiltily.

"Don't start acting like it was a crime. By the way, we're having a meeting of the justice committee at the ranch next Sunday morning."

Logan felt uneasy. "At the ranch? I promised Betty I wouldn't miss another Sunday."

"You're getting along faster than I thought. What did you promise Mollie?"

"Nothing," Logan said, flushing slightly.

Griggsby chuckled at his confusion. "Well, if you ever do, be sure to keep your word. She's like her daddy. You know, I'd better keep an eye on you. You're liable to steal both my girls."

"Never Mollie. She worships the ground you walk on. But what am I supposed to do next Sunday?"

"Go to the ranch with me. You already know Judge Steele's going to appoint you county coroner. We figured it would strengthen your standing with the committee and not hurt you any to accept the same office for the organization. You needn't participate in the rest of the meeting."

"All right." Logan's hesitation was imperceptible. "But why does the justice committee want a coroner?"

Griggsby warily glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Likely we don't. But there might come a time when it'd look better if the proper party signed a death warrant without bothering to ask embarrassing questions."

This jolted the doctor. "Figuring on taking the law in your own hands? It's an ugly business, killing a man. I think we can stop this cattle stealing without resorting to violence."

"Rustling is only a small angle to us, son. Our plans are to save this range itself from the land grabbers. Have you ever been to Frijole Flats?"

"That Mexican settlement south-east of town? No, not yet."

"Wait till you see that place before you talk. It draws toughs

and outlaws like a dead carcass draws flies. The main attraction there is a wide-open cantina called the Botella de Repleto, a regular breeding spot for crime."

"I still don't see the connection," Logan puzzled.

"Seen John Naylor lately?" Griggsby asked.

"Not since that morning I went with George Pelham to the land company office. I told you about that." Logan waited. Then, as the other said nothing, he prompted: "Why?"

"Naylor's discovered Frijole Flats," was Griggsby's stony reply.

The following Sunday morning the Citizens' Committee of Justice met in full force at the Circle Bar. Overstreet, immaculate in white duck, broad-brimmed panama, and soft doe-skin riding boots, rode out to the ranch with Logan and Griggsby.

Barton ushered them into the big living-room which had been closed off from the rest of the house. There were twenty-six men at the meeting, all of them honest ranchers and townspeople, and all of them there for an earnest purpose.

Judge Steele called the meeting to order. The first official act was to install Logan in the office of committee coroner. The doctor accepted the job soberly, shook hands all around, and promptly withdrew to leave them formulating plans in private.

Logan found the girls in the kitchen preparing the family dinner. Here he succeeded so admirably in getting in the way that Mollie, in exasperation, sent Betty out with him for a walk.

"Don't dare come back until I ring the cook's cow bell," she warned. "You'll hear it unless you stray all the way over to Pelham's valley."

To Logan that walk was like a stroll in the garden of paradise. Betty led him down the winding path to shady nooks along the creek. They watched the minnows swimming in the shallows and laughed at the antics of a frantic hen over a brood of ducklings she had hatched out for Mollie. They found a lovely spot to wade, and did so with the happy abandon of children.

They strolled down to the milch pasture to visit the dairy herd and inspect the calves. They fed sugar to Betty's favorite horses. Then they gathered wild flowers in the meadow, and the doctor lazed on a grassy hummock while the girl wove them into fairy wreaths. The mournful clanging of the cow

bell recalled them to earth too soon.

"Come on," Betty cried, springing to her feet. "I'll race you back."

She took the lead, the wind whipping the dress about her lissome figure and making a glorious tangle of her shimmering hair. His eyes shining in admiration, Logan contentedly trailed behind. He wouldn't have won that race from her for all of the Horseshoe range.

Inside the house there was a subtle change. The meeting had adjourned and all save Overstreet had departed. In the dining-room Barton introduced the owner of the Texas Tommy to his younger daughter. For the first time Betty and Overstreet met at close range, and the meeting struck fire.

His distinguished manners, culture, and charm made a deep impression. As for his profession itself, coupled with the stories she had heard about his mania for honesty, it simply enchanted the romantic girl. She listened, wide-eyed, to his anecdotes of old New Orleans, his comments on matters of general interest, and his observations on things outside the field of common knowledge. He fascinated her to the exclusion of Logan, and the physician listened and watched dumbly.

After dinner, when Betty took Overstreet down to see the brood of ducklings, Logan felt vaguely hurt. Without resenting Overstreet, he felt as though his private kingdom was being invaded. Which he knew was a silly, unreasoning attitude, but he sat glumly at the dinner table and picked aimlessly at bread crumbs while Griggsby and Barton talked and marked up the table-cloth with unused silverware.

Mollie, returning from the kitchen, took in the situation at a glance. She paused beside Logan's chair and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing in here with these old men?" she scolded. "Let's take a walk in the garden where I can cool off for a minute. I want to have a look at that red rambler bush I was pruning last Sunday."

"Of course, Mollie," he responded in gratitude. "Shall I get your gloves and shears?"

She looked into his eyes for an instant with a queer expression. He wasn't sure whether or not she was secretly laughing at him. Then she patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"You're precious naïve, Bob."

As they strolled into the flower garden side by side Mollie

bent her head to look up into Logan's sober face.

"You resent Jack Overstreet, don't you?"

He looked at her, startled, his lips framing a swift denial. "On the contrary. Overstreet has been a staunch friend to me."

"I said that awkwardly. I mean, you don't enjoy his monopolization of Betty."

"Not at all," he denied. "Why do you say that?"

Mollie turned to face him squarely. In secret alarm he gazed at her, subconsciously noting the creamy texture of her skin beneath its coat of tan, the soft pulse beat in her neck, the graceful curve from ear to shoulder. In her neat muslin dress with its bunched short sleeves and dainty-figured print, with the background of the rose garden about her, she was like a picture in a story book he had known as a child. But the cool depths of her glorious brown eyes disconcerted him badly.

"Let's not mince words, Bob," she said. "You're fond of Betty."

He stared at her in confusion.

"Aren't you?" she demanded as he remained silent.

"Of course," he answered. "I think she's wonderful. But so are you. I can't find words to tell you what your friendship means to me. I—where's that rose bush you wanted to see?"

"Never mind the rose bush. You're interested in Betty, and I love you for it. She sorely needs the steadying influence of a man like you."

"See here," he said desperately, "if you brought me out to talk like this—"

"I did, and you're going to listen. Betty nearly drove me crazy during all those weeks you didn't come to see us, and I'm not going to let a new and very real danger present itself without raising my hand. Jack Overstreet is a fascinating man, and Betty is wildly romantic. Right now she is dreaming extravagant dreams as he talks to her, imagining him as a bold knight, a dashing highwayman of old England, a swash-buckling pirate on the Spanish Main, or an Arabian prince rescuing her from a hundred perilous predicaments."

"What's wrong with that?"

"This! Betty is just about in love with you, if I'm any judge, and I'm not going to let Jack Overstreet spoil it. He's very nice, but don't you sleep on your rights. Understand?"

Logan was now in utter panic. "You—er—astound me," he gulped. "You read a meaning that isn't there. Betty hasn't—"

I never once——”

She smiled wisely. “Do I? I think not. Now you take my advice and find time to drop by occasionally during the week for a little visit.”

Logan was completely baffled. “I don’t know what to say, Mollie. Honestly, I never thought of Betty in that way. Really, you——”

“Well, start thinking before it’s too late,” she admonished crisply. “Now, take your knife and cut that pink bud there so I can pin it in your lapel.”

Five

SEVERAL MILES south-east of Gila City the Brazos River flowed through a section of country so low and flat the stream widened in surprise before crawling sluggishly across the spot. The ground was almost marshy, thick with cottonwoods and underbrush, and dreary with weeping willows. Damp of atmosphere, infested with mosquitoes and malaria, the entire place reeked of the pungent, spicy odor of willow branches trailing in river water.

Near the center of these flats, on a slight rocky outcropping where the ground was firmer, clustered a sordid group of shacks and adobe buildings inhabited mostly by Mexicans. Frequented by the Indians, breeds, and white ruffians of the Panhandle, Frijole Flats flourished like an ugly toadstool growth.

The most pretentious structure was the Botella de Repleto, the Full Bottle to gringos, a squat and ugly pile of adobe. The rear half was taller than the front, having a wood floor three feet higher than the hard-packed earth gracing the bar area. This served a threefold purpose, providing a sort of stage for special entertainment, semi-private booths for lingering customers, and a roof for a dugout wine cellar of considerable capacity.

The cantina was operated by the moon-faced and thoroughly villainous Manuel Vallera who claimed to be a political exile from points south of the Rio Grande. Actually the determination of rurales to put a stop to certain guerilla raids had

had a marked influence on his hasty departure from Mexico. Now he did his raiding under the dollar sign in a permanent location.

Any night was open night at the Full Bottle, but Saturday night was particularly hellish. Wild men came roaring in from the four corners of the range and spent their money like water, doing anything they were big enough to do and fearing no restraint save where their appetites and desires conflicted with those of bigger men.

On such an evening John Naylor rode over from Gila City. He tied his mount at the hitch-rack with the marvellous assortment of horse-flesh he found there and walked in to where an even more motley crew thronged the interior, drinking, gambling, and dancing with Manuel Vallera's bevy of entertainers.

He bought a drink at the bar and stood at the front end of the counter, twirling his glass with his left hand as his hard black eyes raked the house, coolly appraising man after man. A girl was singing a saucy song to the accompaniment of the sad-faced Mexican youth on the guitar when the proprietor spotted the newcomer.

"*Psst!*" Señor Vallera hissed to attract the attention of a young woman sitting alone in one of the booths. "Agnes!"

She got up and advanced to the edge of the platform, the long-haired, long-fingered guitarist casting dolorous eyes at her as she passed him.

"Agnes, he ees here again."

"Who is here?" she asked, looking down at her fat employer.

"That señor from Gila City I told you about—at the front of the bar. I theenk he ees up to no good. Go find out hees buessness."

The woman glanced across the smoke-filled saloon and shrugged. "I can't, Manuel. You know I'm expecting Rusty any time now."

"*El diablo* take Rusty Scanlon! Thees ees important. Go queeckly."

Almost sullenly Agnes descended the steps and sauntered through the milling crowd. She reached the end of the bar and leaned gracefully upon it, surveying Naylor curiously. He glanced at her, took a swift second look, and then let his eyes return to their restless roving.

"Want to buy a lady a drink?" she asked.

"Sure. Name your poison," he said with another cursory glance.

She signalled the nearest bartender. "A glass of wine, Pedro."

He poured the drink, and Naylor carelessly tossed a silver dollar across the bar. The woman took a sip, eyeing the buyer steadily over the brim of the glass.

"You're a stranger here, aren't you? What's your name?"

Naylor felt compelled to give her his attention. His hard eyes travelled up and down her figure in a cold way that made her feel like shivering. "No," he said, returning his gaze to her face. "But I've never seen you before. You're no Mex."

"No. My name is Agnes. What's yours?"

Again he was about to ignore her when he abruptly changed his mind and told her:

"It's Mr. Naylor. The first name's John."

"You're looking for someone, Naylor? Perhaps I can help."

"I'll know him when I see him."

She tried a new tack, nodding her head towards the rear, then moving closer. "How about sitting in one of the booths and having another drink—with me?"

He inhaled the fragrance of her hair without a tremor. "You mean the stalls back yonder where a man can make an ass of himself?" he inquired cynically.

"Are you the sort to make an ass of yourself?" she challenged.

"No. You're ten years too late. Lead the way."

Behind the rear end of the bar Vallera nodded his head and grinned. Scenting a profitable conquest, he lumbered out and climbed the platform steps ahead of them, a red tablecloth over one arm and a loaded tray in both hands.

"*El Toro* carries his own *bandera*," Naylor commented.

Agnes laughed as Vallera swerved into a booth and deftly spread his cloth on the table. She followed and seated herself with the sinuous grace of a cat as Naylor chose the chair which had its back to the solid wall. Vallera opened a bottle in great ostentation and started pouring wine.

"Wait!" Naylor ordered, and the proprietor paused while he picked the first glass and critically examined the liquid. He took one sip and his hard black eyes fixed the landlord in a manner to make Vallera shift uneasily.

"This isn't the same wine Agnes had at the bar," Naylor said coldly.

"I thought the señor would weesh to sample the old Bur-gundee," Vallera hastened to explain. "You see the old bottle

I have open."

"You mean you thought I would be paying so much attention to this woman I wouldn't know the difference," Naylor accused.

"No, no, Señor," protested Vallera, cringing. "Thees wine she ees wan hundred years old. She have come from the darkest spot een my cellar."

"Then it's too old. Wine too old is like an old woman—vinegar. Don't explain. Go get some good wine. And never try such tricks on me again. Savvy?"

"*Comprende*, Señor. Wan thousand pardons!" Vallera smirked as he removed the offending bottle, mentally doubling the score he intended presenting to this smart gringo.

Naylor turned his attention to the girl, surveying her in such a piercing fashion she felt he was taking her to pieces bit by bit and then fitting the parts together again. She became restless under his gaze.

"You're a strange man," she murmured. "You know wines."

"I know a lot of things. Is our greedy host your husband? You work well together."

"Of course not! I only work for him. I have no husband."

"Good. That's the first interesting thing you've said. Who's that man sitting across in the back booth?"

The woman looked over to where a sallow-faced man was manipulating a deck of cards. His right hand was lame and he was having an awkward time of it.

"His name is Holcomb. He used to be a gambler. Why?"

"He's one of the men I want to talk to. Tell him to come over here."

She resented his peremptory tone but called Holcomb. The gambler came over as Vallera appeared with a fresh wine bottle. Agnes introduced them, uncertain whether to make this her opportunity to withdraw. She was torn between her anxiety to get away before Rusty Scanlon arrived and her curiosity to learn about Naylor's business for Vallera. Naylor decided things for her.

"Sit down, Holcomb," he invited. "Don't get up, Agnes. Leave the wine, Vallera, and vamoose."

All three obeyed. Holcomb seated himself silently and watched Naylor open and pour the wine. He accepted a glass with his left hand. Not until he had tasted his own did Naylor speak again. Then:

"You'll never make a comeback at cards with that busted

hand, Holcomb," he said bluntly.

Holcomb flushed and started to his feet. "Why, you—who the hell are you?"

"I'm a man you can do business with. Sit down and drink your wine."

The gambler's ferret eyes stared suspiciously. "What sort of business?"

"A lot better than you ever did shuffling the pasteboards. You can still pull a trigger, can't you?"

Holcomb considered this and decided to answer. "I'm not fast enough for gunplay," he admitted, "but I can handle guns. What's your proposition?"

"Drink first."

They did so, and the woman leaned forward on her elbows, resting her chin on her laced fingers as she prepared to listen.

"I run a big land company over in Gila City," Naylor stated. "We do a lot of business. Sometimes we have a little trouble with people over property. I've got to hire some men with guts who'll evict nesters and squatters and other folks who won't get off our lands. I need a lieutenant to handle such details, taking charge of my deputies I'm going to hire."

The gambler digested this statement, reading between the lines. "You mean there'll be jobs you won't want your name mixed up in?"

"Maybe," was Naylor's brief reply. "The work's light and the pay's good. Interested?"

Manuel Vallera came waddling hurriedly into the booth, making the floor creak under his great weight.

"Rusty Scanlon's just come een," he announced, giving Agnes the eye. "He ees verree drunk and lookeeng for trouble I theenk."

The young woman started to her feet. "I'd better go talk to him."

"Wait," Naylor ordered. "Who's Rusty Scanlon?"

Vallera nodded his head at the girl. "He ees her hombre."

Naylor looked accusingly at Agnes. "You told me you had no husband."

"He's not my husband," she denied swiftly.

A heavy voice bellowed from the depths of the cantina. "Where's Agnes? Vallera! Where's my gal?"

"Just your sweetheart, eh?" sneered Naylor. "Then why'd you make a play for me?"

"I—I didn't. I have to go now."

"Sit down!" said Naylor so harshly that she obeyed automatically. Then, as she would have arisen in fury for having complied, he laid a restraining hand on her bare shoulder.

"Better let her go," warned Holcomb nervously. "Scanlon's a bad actor. Outlaw and two-gun man. Wanted by the Texas Rangers."

"Sounds like a gent I want to meet. Bring him here, Vallera."

Señor Vallera didn't have to. A hulking, sandy-headed man with a truculent chin came striding into the mouth of the booth. With one huge hand he shoved the bulky Vallera aside and glared down at the occupants of the table. His jealous eye instantly caught sight of Naylor's hand on the woman's shoulder, and he let out a roar of rage.

Prudently Naylor withdrew his hand and gently eased his chair away from the table until its back touched the wall. The marks of his fingers remained redly against Agnes' white skin.

"So you're Rusty Scanlon," he said in a crisp voice. "We've been waiting here for you. I'm John Naylor. How'd you like a gun job?"

His attempt failed to make sharp words bite through the alcoholic haze in Scanlon's brain.

"You're a bastard, and I already got one!" Scanlon roared, dropping both hands for his guns.

Holcomb promptly dived to the side out of his chair. Vallera lurched as though to tackle the enraged outlaw, and hesitated as he thought better of it. Agnes let out a stifled cry as Scanlon's guns cleared their holsters and the barrels tilted upward all in one incredibly smooth movement. And gun thunder echoed in the room.

But Rusty Scanlon was shooting blind, the two shots he triggered ploughing harmlessly into the wall. A single .45 slug had struck him squarely in the chest a fractional instant before he fired. He jerked, staggered back, swayed, pulled himself up to his toes, and fell forward to carom off the table and hit the floor beside the crouching Holcomb. Naylor remained seated in his chair, but his right hand now gripped a six-shooter from the muzzle of which a thin wisp of smoke spiralled upward.

It took a moment for the stunned spectators to grasp the situation. Naylor got to his feet with a catlike motion and peered at the fallen man.

"Too bad," he said curtly. "I was going to hire him."

Agnes uttered a broken cry and knelt beside Scanlon. She rolled him over and stared, horrified, at his bloody chest. Then she lowered her face into her hands to sob aloud. The lone wolf would trouble Texas Rangers no more; he had departed to howl his solitary way through eternity.

"You drilled him dead with one shot," Holcomb marvelled in awe. "You downed the slickest two-gun slinger that ever came to Frijole Flats."

"Sorry I had to," Naylor lipiped out, frowning at the sobbing woman as he reholstered his gun. "I need men like that. Guess she really was sweet on him."

"*Madre de Dios!*" Vallera groaned. "Thees weel again breeng here the unwelcome attention of the nosey Señor Greegsby. Why deed you have to keel heem? What are we to do now?"

"Do what I tell you from here out," Naylor said, "and I'll take care of Griggsby. What about you, Holcomb?"

The gambler cast his lot. "I'll take that job you offered, Naylor. I know several men you'll probably want to hire."

Naylor's hawklike features contorted themselves in a grim smile. "Your first job is to get rid of this body," he ordered. "Then we'll talk."

Holcomb turned and beckoned to three men in the curious crowd gathering at the edge of the platform. "Gabe Duncan! Zeke Lemley! Gip Knowles! Come up here."

Naylor bent down and raised the weeping Agnes to her feet. She did not resist, remaining passive and silent in his arms.

"Don't waste your tears on that scum," he said in the gentlest voice she had yet heard him use. Then he suddenly kissed her and added, "Maybe you're not ten years too late, after all."

MOST PEOPLE had to work hard or pay in some manner for what they got, but there was one person so favored of the gods he had only to wander aimlessly around to stumble on good fortune at every turn. This effortless child of destiny was Sheriff Hugh Matlock. It mattered not where he went or what he did, he was always in the right place at the right time to fall heir to the choice morsels dropped from the careless hand of fate. Hence, in the course of some fifty years of such gratuity, Mr. Matlock developed the quite logical tech-

nique of doing nothing.

In appearance the sheriff resembled the South American sloth. He was thick-barrelled without the grace of curves, bull-necked, long of nose, and dull of feature. His movements were slow and deliberate. He had never been known to walk more than fifty yards without stopping to rest. And he always stopped where there was a chair or bed or wall or prop of some nature handy for his support.

He was lounging on a courthouse bench the day his predecessor in office, an over-zealous man named Dobbs, came in to tell Judge Steele that every man he approached declined the honor of serving as his chief deputy. Thus Matlock was appointed to the job, and he was too lazy to resist. Six months later he was lounging in the most comfortable chair in Joe Haskell's barber shop when Dobbs was killed outside in a street duel with a road agent. Matlock aroused himself and slouched out in time to take the gun away from the mortally wounded bandit and handcuff him.

In his way, Matlock made a good sheriff. If he never did anything right, at least he never did anything wrong. He didn't stick his nose in where it wasn't wanted. He never molested bad men and they returned the courtesy. At the same time, his uncanny knack for being on hand after a storm to pick up the windfalls kept him in tolerable standing with the law-abiding citizens. A more detailed history of his life would simply be an exhaustive treatise on the art of loafing.

For no reason at all Matlock went fishing on Monday. "Catfish" Nelson had extolled the virtues of an exceptionally good hole some three miles below Frijole Flats, where the banks were shady and the grass soft. Throwing together enough grub for a couple of meals, the sheriff bundled up his fishing paraphernalia and struck out leisurely across country to meet the Brazos at the right spot.

The hole proved to be all Nelson had claimed as to comfort. The fishing—well, it was all right, but it required effort. By early afternoon he had caught two medium sized catfish and was about to call it quits when he gave a tentative pull at his line. Behind the elasticity of the cording there was a dead weight which told him he had probably snagged a piece of submerged driftwood. He deliberated whether to cut the line and let it go or take the pains to retrieve it.

Fortitude—inspired by the off-chance there might be a channel cat or soft-shell turtle on one of the hooks—won the

battle. With a prodigious sigh of patient weariness at the scurvy trick chance had played on him, he hauled away. Before the line was half in, his sleepy eyes were wide open in amazement and he was playing the line carefully against the current. He had snared the body of a man.

Whistling in astonishment, he waded out and landed his prize. Untangling the hooks which had fouled the dead man's garments, he examined his catch. There was a bullet hole in the chest. The pockets yielded nothing. There was no identification on the corpse, but this was needless. In spite of the swelling features, Matlock recognized the truculent chin and sandy-red hair. This was the body of Rusty Scanlon, and there was a five-hundred-dollar reward for this outlaw, dead or alive.

The sheriff did not stop to question this gift of the Brazos; it was enough that the stream had brought it as an offering to his feet. Methodically he caught his horse, lashed his find across the indignant animal's saddle, and set out for town afoot. Including his frequent stops, he made the six miles in the record time of three hours.

Joe Haskell came to the door of the barber shop at the sight of the sheriff on foot, a razor full of lather and whiskers in his hand. Wearily Matlock tied his horse to an awning post and entered the shop. Mopping his perspiring forehead, he dropped into his favorite chair and addressed the barber.

"Got a dead outlaw for you, Joe. Take him in and send for the coroner."

Promptly Haskell flipped the lather from his razor and stuck the tool in his vest pocket. Calling for help from the collecting loafers, forgetting the half-shaved man in the barber chair, he unlashed the dead man and superintended the body's removal to the undertaking parlour next door to his barber shop. Mr. Matlock relaxed in the serene assurance he had earned every cent of the reward money. He did not get up as Dr. Logan, accompanied by Griggsby, entered the shop.

The editor fired a crisp question at him. "Who's the dead outlaw, Sheriff, and where'd you kill him?"

Matlock eyed the newspaper man in frank distaste.

"The name's Rusty Scanlon, and I fished him out of the river," he answered heavily, transferring his attention to Logan. "Want to look him over, Doc?"

Logan nodded briefly and passed through the connecting

door between barber shop and undertaking establishment. Matlock slowly hoisted himself out of his chair to follow, eyeing the doctor's back curiously. The new coroner seemed to find his duty a considerable effort. Queer sort of chap, this Logan boy. Squeamish and weak stomached, despite his killing of the horse doctor.

"What's the matter, Doc? Go ahead and look the corpse over. You ought to know what a shot man looks like."

Logan winced. Biting his lip, he flung back the concealing blanket with a swift motion. As Haskell bent forward to assist, he proceeded with his unpleasant task without faltering.

"This man was killed by a shot in the breast which seems to have shattered the sternum," he announced after a moment. "I should judge he has been dead for more than twenty-four hours. What are the details, Sheriff?"

Briefly Matlock related the facts, never troubling to falsify the account. "And if somebody don't show up pronto with plenty of proof they killed him, the reward money's mine."

"And that's all you're going to do about it?" Logan demanded.

Matlock shrugged. "What more is there to do? As far as I'm concerned this inquest is closed. Write out your findin's, Doc. I'll notify Judge Steele and then see about lettin' the State Bank Association know they've spent their reward money. Haskell, you better get back to your shavin' job."

The loafers were trickling back to the barber shop, discussing the matter, and the sheriff was laboriously levering himself out of his chair when the thudding sound of running feet came through the front of the funeral parlour. A thin individual with a red and freckled face dashed into the room.

"Sheriff Matlock!" he panted. "They said I'd find yuh here. Hey, Sheriff!"

"Here I am, Gates," answered Matlock, dropping back into his seat. "What's eatin' yuh?"

Gates, a roving cowpuncher who worked a day and drifted a week, thrust himself past Griggsby to approach the seated man. His eyes fell on the blanketed form on the table, and he yelped in dismay.

"Another one?" he whispered.

"What d'yuh mean, Gates?" inquired the sheriff in amused contempt.

Gates tore his fascinated gaze from the shrouded figure and looked somewhat sheepishly at the enthroned might of the

law. He licked his lips as the color slowly deepened in his sunburnt face.

"I reckon I'm spooked," he said hoarsely. "But I jest run in to somethin' ugly. I found George Pelham and his wife dead."

"What's that?" ejaculated Griggsby so sharply that even Matlock stiffened in his chair.

"The Pelhams was murdered," Gates explained. "I found 'em welterin' in their gore. I dropped down offen the north-west shed jest before noon, figgerin' I'd take dinner with Pelham and mebbe work a day before makin' it to town. I found Pelham in the yard riddled with bullets. His wife was in the house in bed, her head laid open with a hatchet. Looked like a cyclone had tore through the house. I rode over to the Circle Bar and told Hen Barton. He took some of his men and went over, sendin' me on to town. He told me to be sure to tell you about this, Mr. Griggsby."

Waving his hand to silence the startled hubbub of comment, the sheriff heaved himself erect and leaned on the edge of the table.

"Reckon I'll have to ride out and look things over," he said. "You go back with me, Gates. Doc, think you can stand another inquest? Grab your tools and come on."

He grinned at the pale face of the physician, at the same time puzzling vaguely about the look of despondency which had crept into Griggsby's face. Danged if the editor didn't look like he thought the world was coming to an end.

"Go ahead with the sheriff, Bob," Griggsby said in a low tone. "I'll get Overstreet, and we'll follow immediately."

"It ain't necessary for you to go, and I ain't got any need for Overstreet at all," Matlock stated with a frown.

"Perhaps not," was Griggsby's short answer, "but we'll be going just the same. You may want to form a posse."

The sheriff shrugged. "Suit yourself," he conceded. "But don't get in my way and hinder me none."

It was sunset when the five riders from town reached the Pelham place. They found Barton and two of his punchers awaiting them on the front porch. The rancher's face was set and grim, while a look of horror was reflected in the eyes of his men.

"I'll take a look at Pelham first," Matlock decided. "Lead the way to the spot, Gates."

"Both bodies are in the house," Barton informed. "We took Pelham in out of the sun."

"Was that wise?" asked Griggsby.

Barton's glance was full of significance. "We read all the sign there was first. I'll tell you later."

Matlock frowned judicially as he stepped upon the porch. "Come on, Doc," he commanded. "And keep down your guts."

The body of the unfortunate fruit grower lay on the horse-hair sofa in the modest parlor. That of his wife lay across the bed in the next room, her clothing half torn from her and her head brutally cleft open. Everywhere was confusion and disorder. Chairs were overturned, pictures pulled from the walls and ripped from their frames, drawers standing wide open with contents scattered upon the floor, rugs and bedding strewn helter-skelter and slashed to pieces.

Leaving the coroner alone in the house, Matlock demanded to be taken to the spot where George Pelham's body had been found. He glanced noncommittally at the telltale dark stains on the ground and, finding no adjacent post or tree to lean upon, led the way back to the house. Herding the entire party into the parlor, he waved them to stations around the walls and looked about for a personal support. There being neither chair nor table convenient, he backed against the upright organ and settled down on the silent keys.

"Hurry up, Doc!" he called impatiently towards the bedroom. "Got anything to say?"

Logan appeared in the doorway. His face was white as chalk and his eyes were almost glassy. Matlock stared at him in contempt. White-livered baby! Was he going to faint?

The doctor passed a trembling hand across his forehead. Visibly he fought to get a grip on his emotions. When he spoke his voice was dull and flat.

"From all indications this crime was committed some time yesterday. The man there was literally shot to pieces. The— the woman was killed with a hatchet. There was more than one assailant."

"The woman?" Barton demanded before Matlock could open his mouth. "Tell us about the woman."

The doctor did not answer; he merely looked, and the stark expression in his dark blue eyes answered the grim question more fully than words ever could.

"I knew it!" Barton cried, his voice trembling with rage. "There was three of the stinkin' dogs—big men and well-mounted. Two wore cowboy boots and one had a heavy pair

of shoes with hobnails. They headed north from here into the mountains. Well, what are you goin' to do about it, Matlock?"

"All in good time, all in good time," waved the sheriff calmly. "I'll accept your trail readin' as correct, but it's comin' on night and we can't do much after dark. I'll send Haskell out to get the bodies first thing. Logan, if——"

He broke off and stared at the coroner in amazement which slowly crystallized into contempt. The doctor had finally buckled under the stress of emotion like the weak-kneed jellyfish he was. The damned fool was crying.

Six

LOGAN WAS UNAWARE of his tears. Had he been conscious of them he would have been unashamed. The business of the outlaw's inquest and Matlock's do-nothing attitude had been bad enough. But the wanton, brutal atrocity committed here at the Pelham place and the sheriff's calloused acceptance of the deed was more than the doctor could take.

It came to Logan now that he himself knew absolutely nothing of the plans of the Citizens' Committee of Justice. He had deliberately shut himself off from the confidence of his friends, and now in this crisis he was helpless to aid them. There was nothing about this particularly vicious crime of robbery, rape, and murder to indicate the personal hand of John Naylor, but no one knew better than Logan that Naylor had been after this property and how ruthless were his methods. Lashed by a secret inner frenzy, casting desperately about in his mind for some clue to follow, some course of action to take, he listened attentively to what followed.

"Hold on, Matlock," Griggsby said flatly. "You're not closing this investigation like this. You don't have to trot back to town for the undertaker; Dr. Logan'll take care of that. You can stay right here and dig up more facts."

The sheriff relaxed against the organ. He crossed his feet and folded his arms. There was an air of pity and condescension about him that irritated Logan intensely.

"All right," he said magnanimously. "If you want to chew

the fat a while, shoot. What you got to offer in the way of evidence?"

"Have you figured out a reason for this crime?" Barton demanded.

Matlock indicated the littered room with his eyes. "Looks like robbery, don't it?"

"That's the obvious motive," Griggsby said. "It's possible there's something else."

"What, for instance?"

"Somebody may have wanted this land," said the editor. The sheriff laughed. "Meanin' who? Are you accusin' the Hohner land company of a thing like this?"

"I'm not accusing anybody—yet," Griggsby replied carefully.

"Well, you can chalk a monied outfit like that off your list," Matlock dismissed the idea. "Or take the matter up direct with Charlie Hohner hisself. I understand he's comin' down here next week from Oklahoma City."

Logan and Griggsby looked at each other in silence. This may not have been news to the newspaper man, but it was to the doctor. The buzzards were gathering for the kill.

"Let's consider the first possibility," Griggsby went on in guarded fashion. "The idea is to catch the men who committed the actual crime. There were three of the skunks, and they were no strangers. They knew about Pelham's habit of keeping his bank roll about him. They rode up and shot him without warning, never dreaming he might have had his money hidden. When they couldn't find it they took it out on the unfortunate woman. She wouldn't or couldn't tell where the money was. After they killed her they tore up the house hunting it. We can't name the criminals, but I'll gamble my hope of heaven we've seen them on the streets of Gila City more than once."

"Not bad," Matlock conceded. "But what makes you think Pelham had much money in the house jest at this time?"

"I can answer that," Overstreet broke his long silence. "I met Pelham in the bank Saturday morning. He had just cashed a draft for two thousand dollars. I saw him put the cash in his pocket and leave town with most of it. Dozens of people must have known about it. Draw your own conclusions."

"I will," Matlock promised calmly. "Anybody else anythin' to offer? It's gettin' dark."

"I reckon you got enough to make up a posse and start trailin' the murderers," Barton said.

The sheriff peered through the gathering gloom at the impatient rancher. "I ain't figurin' on trailin' any murderers at night, Barton," he announced. "At readin' signs you may be an Injun, but even you can't follow a night trail through the Horseshoes. I'm goin' back to town."

Barton turned angrily toward the others. Griggsby held up a dissuading hand.

"Matlock's right about that, Henry," he said. "Get your picked men together and, if you don't hear from me by daylight, start out. Overstreet, suppose you and I go have a talk with John Naylor."

"You check up on Naylor," said Overstreet. "I think I'll ride over to Frijole Flats as a visiting gambler and look around. We can confer later."

The sheriff chuckled and heaved himself back to the perpendicular. "You fellers are stewin' around like headless chickens. Didn't you figure out these here raiders are familiar with Gila City? Ain't it logical that they'll circle through the mountains and come back to town? Well, when they show up, I'll nab 'em. Come on, Logan, let's be ridin'."

Logan hesitated. He wanted to talk to the members of the justice committee, but he couldn't do it in front of Matlock. An idea had come to him whereby a clue to the possible whereabouts of the three criminals might be found. Jess Plum lived in the mountains north of the Pelham place, and Plum knew a lot of ugly people. But Logan suddenly remembered that he couldn't tell anybody all he knew about Plum without violating the mountaineer's confidence. This was a matter he had to attend to himself.

"I'll send Haskell out," he said, preparing to follow the huge sheriff.

"Thanks, Bob. Overstreet and I'll wait till he comes," said Griggsby, and the doctor knew they were remaining to talk with Barton.

Parting from the sheriff in town, Logan hunted up Haskell and discharged his melancholy errand. Then he went to the livery barn and got a fresh horse. Returning to his office, he got some money out of his cash box without disturbing young Nolly Sims who was by now accustomed to his comings and goings at all hours.

From here he went to the alley behind Hawkins' hardware

store where he used the key Hawkins had loaned Griggsby for emergency purposes. Entering the hardware store, he struck a match and made his way to the gun case. Here he unerringly selected a matched pair of nickel-plated .38 six-shooters which Hawkins had bought from a gun salesman in a moment of weakness. The guns were already fitted in a pair of hand-tooled black leather holsters and cartridge belts.

Procuring several boxes of ammunition, Logan loaded the weapons and filled the cartridge loops. Counting out a hundred dollars which he left in place of the guns, he departed as silently as he had come. Five minutes later he was riding through the night wind towards the northern hills.

It was close to midnight when he reached Jess Plum's place. The settlement was silent and desolate beneath the stars. All of the cabins were dark except the farthest one which shone with a blaze of yellow light through the open window. Logan opened his mouth to call, thought better of it, and silently dismounted.

Tying his horse at the corral gate, he walked towards the lighted cabin. He became aware of a pair of bounding shapes which sprang silently at him and then sniffed and whined. Plum's hound dogs. They had recognized him, and he patted their heads.

"Trying to scare me, boys?" he said softly.

There seemed to be more than the usual amount of stock in the corral. Logan had refrained from calling out so as not to disturb the woman and children. Now, yielding to a strong impulse, he resumed his approach to the lighted cabin with the stealth of an Indian.

He reached the window quietly and peered into the room. His eyes widened. Jess Plum was standing at the table, his back to the open door. Before him, seated drunkenly around the table were three men without shirts. A card game had been in progress and there were piles of greenbacks before the players. Before he had time to figure things out, Logan's ears caught words of the conversation and he listened in mounting revulsion.

THE DEATH of the veterinary, with its attendant complications had had a sobering effect on Jess Plum. Hard as the flint of the hills from which he had sprung, uncouth and uncultured, always under the pinching thumb of necessity,

there were yet soft fibres running through the rocky strata of his nature. Having passed his word to Dr. Logan concerning the dissolution of the cattle-rustling partnership, Plum cast about for a profitable and more honest livelihood. He became a moonshiner.

The need of housing facilities for transient cattle operators past, three of the five cabins fell into disuse. With the help of Slim Tackett, Plum built a still in the first of these and set about the manufacture of corn liquor. As the weeks passed the fourth cabin came into use as a storehouse and ageing room. Slim Tackett developed unsuspected possibilities as a whisky drummer and the returns, while slow, were on the increase.

And then one Sunday night Gabe Duncan returned. Rather, it was between one and two o'clock Monday morning when the erstwhile cattle rustler rode into the clearing and loudly halloed the Plum cabin. The two hound dogs began to bark, and a light appeared in the faithful Slim Tackett's cabin which he shared with the boys of the Plum tribe. The mountaineer himself started awake at the first shout and listened.

Duncan called again, impatiently, and Plum recognized the coarse voice in displeasure. Reluctantly he got up and lighted a lantern. His wife lay in bed and silently watched him pull on his trousers and grab up the light. Then she turned to hush the fretful baby at her breast as Plum went, bareheaded and barefooted, out onto the porch.

Just beyond the steps sat a horseman. Behind him loomed two other riders as Plum held up his lantern.

"Howdy, Plum," Duncan greeted in crude irony. "Thought yuh was dead. Yuh usta guard yore place better'n this."

Under the yellow gleam of his lantern Plum surveyed Duncan's burly figure and the stubble of black beard upon his long, sharp face. Both man and horse were sweaty and dust-caked. The animal's head drooped wearily, and his flanks were blood-flecked from rowelling.

"I'm out o' the cattle business, Gabe Duncan, and ye know it," Plum said. "I ain't got nary thing to guard. What brings ye back here? Ye said ye was leavin' this country after Doc Bryant got touched off."

"I did. Been up Colorado way, Jess. On the way now to ole Mexico to jine up with the rurales. We drifted by here, knowin' yuh'd put us up for the night."

"This ain't on the trail to Mexico from Colorado," Plum

said bluntly. "Ye're ridin' ahead o' some posse fer runnin' cattle."

"I ain't rustled a single cow since I left the Horseshoe range," Duncan declared solemnly. "I quit when you did."

"Ye've been ridin' heavy. Blowed yer hosses. How come?"

"We been pushin' hard even since leavin' Denver, Jess. Air yuh goin' to ast questions the rest of the night? Can't we talk in the mornin'?"

"I guess so," Plum conceded slowly. "Light down and dump yer saddles on the porch. Yonder comes Slim. He'll turn yer hosses in the corral and feed 'em."

"Thet sounds more like it," Duncan grunted, dismounting. "Climb down, boys, and meet Jess Plum. These fellers is Cip Knowles and Zeke Lemley, Jess. I've told 'em about yuh."

Plum swung his lantern higher to reveal a pair of heavy countenances if anything less prepossessing than Duncan's ugly features. "Ye can have this lantern, Gabe. And take the last cabin. The other two's in use."

"Who's here?" demanded Duncan swiftly, wheeling towards the mountaineer, his voice sharp and terse.

"Nobody. I'm usin' 'em fer a still and a likker storin' house. What difference does it make?"

"None," Duncan agreed, relaxing and giving a loud laugh which his companions echoed in obvious relief. "I thought mebbe yuh'd had another increase in yore pussonal herd and was spreadin' out mighty fast. So yuh're makin' moonshine? How 'bout a gallon? It'd shore hit the spot, hey, fellers?"

There was vociferous approval on the part of Knowles and Lemley. Plum looked perturbed, but he raised no objection.

"Slim'll get it fer ye," he said in a troubled voice and went back to bed to lie thoughtfully awake for an hour. He was more silent than usual at the breakfast table, and the two women forbore to question him. He brooded the rest of the morning as he idled his time away. A feeling that something was off-color, that all was not right, possessed him and gradually communicated itself to others. Neither his wife nor his mother crossed him, and the play of his children became hushed as it had in former days when strange men rode into the settlement behind cattle herds and branding fires were kindled under the harsh domination of Dr. Bryant.

It was noon before there was any sign from the last cabin. Then Duncan came out and went to the well for water.

"Hey, Jess," he yelled. "Reckon we kinda slept late. How

'bout a little grub? We're travellin' sorta light."

"The women's fixin' dinner," Plum answered heavily. "I figgered ye'd eat afore ye left. I'll call ye."

Plum was through with the likes of Gabe Duncan. He did not want such characters hanging around his settlement. At the dinner table as the five men were silently served by Ivy and Maw Plum he intimated as much.

"Ye fellers air gettin' a late start. How far ye figgerin' on makin' it afore night?"

The three glanced at each other. Duncan grinned lazily.

"Don't reckon we'll pull out today at all, Jess," he drawled. "Zeke's hoss is lame, so we thought we'd jest hole up with yuh fer a couple of days and rest. Breaks up the hard ridin'."

"I didn't notice one of yer mounts bein' stove up this morn'," Plum said in suspicion.

"Didn't yuh?" was the careless response. "Felt like all three was lame last night. Anyhow, we'll visit with yuh a spell—even if yuh ain't actin' real hospital. Pass me them greens, Gip."

"It ain't thet," Plum said gruffly. "But ye know I can't afford no trouble now. If I do, Doc Logan'll spill what he knows about thet cattle business. I can't up and move on like ye can."

"Who's goin' to get yuh into trouble?" demanded Lemley in a surly tone.

"I ain't used to bein' treated thisa way, Gabe," said Knowles in an aggrieved voice as he passed the dish. "I thought you said Plum was a friend o' yourn."

"See how yuh got the boys athinkin'?" Duncan complained. "We ain't goin' to trouble yuh none. All we ast the wimmen-folks is to cook some extra vittles. We got the money to pay fer boardin' us and our brons fer a few days. Ain't we, boys?"

"Plenty," Lemley and Knowles growled in unison, grinning wolfishly.

"Since thet's settled," Duncan went on, spearing a slab of corn dodger with his fork, "thet's purty good likker yuh're makin', Jess. What'll yuh charge us fer another gallon of it?"

Plum considered several things as he scratched and combed at his beard. Then, resigning himself to a situation he could not seem to help at the moment: "I been gettin' two dollars."

"We'll take it," Duncan agreed promptly. "Trot out a jug right after dinner, and keep tab on what we owe yuh. Got a deck of cards?"

Plum spent the afternoon on his porch smoking pipeful after pipeful of home-made twist, wrestling with his problem while the sounds of revelry at the far cabin grew louder under the loosening magic of liquor. By suppertime, as his three unwelcome guests fairly reeled to his cabin, Plum had reached no definite conclusion.

"Whar's yore son?" Lemley demanded.

"Slim'll be home soon," Plum said tersely, "but he ain't goin' to play cards with ye."

"How 'bout actin' sociable?" inquired Knowles. "I don't like sulky folks myself."

"Gip's right, Jess," Duncan said. "And the jug's dry. Bring over another gallon after supper and thaw out. The boys want to get acquainted with yuh."

"That's the ticket," endorsed Lemley, smiling sourly. "If yuh don't come—we'll come up to yore cabin."

Under this compulsion Plum went reluctantly down to their cabin. He found the door and both windows wide open. In spite of this attempt at ventilation the room fairly reeked of smoke, whisky fumes, and unwashed anatomy. The place was littered from one end to the other with articles of clothing, bedding, tobacco wads, and cigarette butts. Three rifles with bandoliers of cartridges festooned thereon had been racked in a corner near one of the bunks. Knowles, seeking greater comfort, had removed his hobnailed brogans and hung his six-shooter belt on a nail above the long guns. All three men were shirtless.

Plum's gaze rested on the table. There were stacks of greenbacks in front of each of the trio. Despite their earlier talk, this was the first indication of money Plum had seen—and this was too much money.

"Hurry up and get in this damn' game and change my luck," snarled Lemley in a vile humour. "Duncan's won half o' my share——"

He broke off as Duncan glared at him. In the brittle silence that fell the leader of the trio looked up at Plum, and his voice and gaze were at variance with his drunken appearance.

"Slim back yet, Jess?" he asked casually.

"Not yet. Ye ought to remember how he does when he goes over to Buckner's to court Lizzie."

"I do. I jest wanna be shore yuh didn't send him some'eres else."

"I know what ye mean," Plum said shortly, his suspicions

now crystalized into certainty. "Ye lied to me, Gabe Duncan. Ye three buzzards held up a stagecoach or robbed a bank, and ye're usin' my place fer a hide-out."

Lemley uttered an angry exclamation and struggled to his feet, reaching for his hip. But Duncan was quicker. He sprang erect and thrust the surly Lemley back into his chair.

"Cut thet out, Zeke," he ordered. "Yuh got us all wrong, Jess, and yuh can see the boys don't cotton to such ugly talk. I reckon it's my turn to come up in the collar. I been believin' you and trustin' you and defendin' you all this time to Zeke and Gip. Shore, I remember Slim's habits. But listen to this! If Slim Tackett ain't back here by midnight I'll know what yuh've done. Yuh won't double-cross nobody else, thet's all. Now uncork yore fresh jug and let's drink and play cards sociable-like the way ole friends ought to. Set down, Jess."

Unarmed, the only man on the place to protect two women and a brood of children, Plum was in a tight corner and he knew it. Without a word he slowly sat down opposite Duncan and poured their tin cups half-full of liquor. From that moment on he had become a hostage for the return of Slim Tackett.

Twelve o'clock crept perilously near, and Slim had not come. The latest jug was nearing the low-ebb mark. Knowles and Lemley had become loose-tongued and bleary-eyed. Duncan should have been as far gone as his companions, but there was a steadiness in his drunken bearing which matched the tense poise of the worried Plum.

"Yore deal, Gip!" Duncan said, shoving the cards across a corner of the table. "Gettin' late, Jess, and Slim ain't showed yet. Don't reckon he could of got lost in the mountains, do yuh?"

"Ye know he didn't," Plum rejoined steadily, glancing at the pair of loud talkers on either side.

Lemley and Knowles fell silent as they got the gist of the conversation.

"Begins to look kinda bad fer you, Jess," Duncan said, his tone taking on an edge. "I'm thinkin' there might be somethin' to the boys' suspicion."

Plum stood up and leaned across the table, moistening his lips as beads of sweat did the same thing for his forehead.

"I can see ye're aimin' to kill me, Gabe Duncan, and I can't stop ye," he said in a husky voice. "Furthermore, I'm plumb satisfied ye've been raidin' and ye're hidin' out here at my

expense. But I didn't know till I come down here after supper. And I come only because ye made me. I know Slim didn't go nowheres but over to Buckner's. I haven't crossed ye up. All I want is fer ye to saddle up and leave my place. I'll fergit I even seen ye. What could be fairer'n thet?"

"I say we've waited too long, Gabe," Lemley growled. "Yuh've rode us into a trap, and ev'ry time me or Gip started to object to somethin' you shut us up. We better close Plum's mouth fer good and shag outa here afore thet Tackett dummy rides in with a posse."

"Shore, thet's a smart idee," Knowles chimed in, hiccuping and reaching for the jug. "Plum's been worryin' ever since he come in over whar we got this money. Whyn't yuh tell 'im and ease his hankerin'? I'll tell yuh myself, Plum. We got it from a feller named Pelham, and we rode like hell last night all over these damn' mountings to hide our trail. They was nineteen hundred dollars and she wouldn't divide even. Thet's why we been playin' poker fer it."

"Pelham?" Plum was aghast. "Ye raided George Pelham's place and got all thet money?"

"Jest so," Lemley chimed in with brutal malice. "They warn't nothin' wrong in takin' the money was it? Whar Pelham and his woman went they didn't need it."

The mountaineer's face quivered so violently with emotion it was apparent through his beard. "Ye killed them? You damned murderin' dogs! And then ye brought yer bloody trail to my place."

"Yuh loose-mouthed fools!" Duncan roared. "He didn't need to know. Now we got to kill 'im!"

"If I don't kill ye first," Plum snarled, suddenly gripping the table and upending it at Duncan, sending rustler and furniture over backward with a crash.

It was the forlorn attempt of a desperate and outraged man. Even as he bowled Duncan over, Gip Knowles, who still retained his grip on the jug, drew back his arm and hurled the container with murderous aim at the mountaineer's head. The stone vessel caught Plum above the ear. He quivered, groaned, and crumpled blindly to his hands and knees.

"Finish 'im off!" Knowles yelled lustfully. "Plug 'im, Zeke, while I get my own gun."

He reeled to his stockinged feet and staggered back out of Duncan's way as he bawled encouragement. Duncan, shaken and furious scrambled erect beyond the overturned table, his

right hand clawing for his six-shooter. Lemley, slobbering and whining in his eagerness, tugged at his gun without getting up from his chair. On the floor the stunned mountaineer strove in vain to get up from his hands and kness.

"Stay down, Plum!" ordered a low, harsh voice from behind him.

Duncan's face went blank, and he halted as though turned into stone. Lemley did not complete the drawing of his gun, freezing with the weapon half out of its holster, his jaw sagging in ludicrous surprise. Still yelling, Knowles twisted his head in the direction of their stares. Instantly his own shaggy eyebrows slid up almost to his hair line and his bull below strangled in his throat.

In the open doorway in a slight crouch stood a pale-faced man with blue eyes that blazed like cold fire. A low-crowned black sombrero was pushed back from his forehead. A pair of black gun-belts crisscrossed his slim waist, and in each steady hand he gripped a long-barrelled .38 six-shooter of glittering nickel and pearl.

Duncan recovered first from his surprise, recognition of the stranger dimly stirring in the back of his mind. He snarled like a cornered wolf.

"I've seen you some'eres," he grated. "Who the hell air you?"

The blazin-eyed man answered in a rasping whisper. "To you my name is death! Draw, or die like the mad dogs you are."

That hateful whisper bit into their souls like acid, sobering them like intense pain. The basilisk glare of those glittering eyes warned them to expect no mercy, no quarter. Killer confronted by a killer, and they knew it.

The two armed murderers went into action simultaneously. Lemley completed his draw as he dived sideward out of his chair. Duncan snapped up his six-shooter in desperate haste. Neither of them fired a shot.

With the precision of a machine the madman in the doorway flipped up the muzzle of his left-hand gun to cover Duncan and dropped the barrel of the other towards the head of the sprawling Lemley. Displaying a cool co-ordination of eye and muscle that was almost deliberate, he tightened one hand and then the other. His guns kicked back smoothly against the recoil in one-two fashion and were silent. Before the horrified eyes of the paralyzed Gip Knowles the foreheads

of his two companions blossomed red.

As Duncan's body toppled to the floor the spell was broken. Knowles uttered a hoarse scream and leaped for the corner where the rifles were stacked. He snatched at his dangling six-shooter and in his panic knocked the gun-belt from the wall. Groaning audibly, he grabbed up one of the carbines and jerked it free of the tangle. Each instant he expected to hear the sharp bellow of one of those wicked .38s and feel a slug smash into his back. But nothing happened until he spun about to face the slayer, swinging up the barrel of his long gun.

The man in the doorway had not moved. He still stood in a slight crouch, guns loosely held, watching the outlaw's panic with a passive disinterest that was blood-chilling, simply waiting with the cold patience of the angel of death he claimed to be. Howling in terror, the frantic Knowles steadied his quivering muscles to fire. Then, and then only, did the other's right forefinger whiten under pressure. A single report, a belch of darting flame, and everything went black with eternal night for the last member of the infamous trio.

Jess Plum dragged himself erect, shook his head to clear it, surveyed the carnage, and turned to look at his saviour.

"Doc Logan!" he cried. "Doc Logan! Ye shot 'em like snakes."

"They were snakes," Logan said harshly. "And I'm not Dr. Logan right now. Tonight I'm the range doctor!"

Seven

MATLOCK WAS on hand late Tuesday morning when Jess Plum drove into town with his cargo of strange freight and his stranger tale. Lolling in a tilted armchair which had seen such hard usage since the present incumbent had taken office that the worn leather bottom had been reinforced with wire lacing, the sheriff had almost reached the pleasant state of suspended animation when the mountaineer's wagon rumbled into the courthouse yard.

"Hey, Sheriff!" Plum called. "I got something fer ye."

Matlock stirred unhappily, stretched, and lumbered over to the wagon. Thrusting one massive sole through the spokes of the near rear wheel, he rested an elbow on the steel rim and gazed at his caller with sleepy eyes.

"My name's Jess Plum," stated the mountaineer.

"I know it. Yuh brought in the body of Doc Bryant a couple months ago."

"Yep. I've brung ye three more today," Plum informed, indicating the lumpy appearance of his wagon sheet.

"Huh?" The Sheriff turned his head slightly to stare into the wagon. "Ain't this gettin' to be a habit with you, Plum?"

"I hope not. These air the Pelham murderers."

Matlock lost his lethargic majesty and stepped around to the wagon tailgate. He peeled back the canvass to reveal the shirtless bodies of three dead men. Affixed to the undershirt of each corpse was a playing card, an ace with writing across its face. The sheriff read the words with bulging eyes. The messages were identical.

The Range Doctor

"Wait right here!" Matlock ordered, sensing a situation with which he could not cope. "I'll call Judge Steele."

He almost ran into the courthouse, returning immediately with the white-haired judge in tow. With the air of a showman exhibiting a marvel of the age, he stripped back the wagon sheet.

"The Pelham killers, your Honor," he announced importantly.

The judge almost recoiled at the ghastly sight. He looked up at the mountaineer with grave eyes.

"Your name is Plum. I know of you. Can you identify these bodies?"

Plum nodded and pointed with his chin. "The ace 'o spades is Gabe Duncan. The ace o' diamonds was interduced to me as Zeke Lemley. The ace o' clubs was called Gip Knowles. They was shot about midnight up at my place by the man who wrote on them cards."

Judge Steele leaned closer and read one of the printed messages. His eyes widened, then narrowed. "Who was it?"

"He called himself the range doctor. He was a masked stranger and talked in a hoarse whisper," Plum answered steadily.

"Who told you these men were the Pelham killers?"

"They did. They got drunk and bragged openly about it to me. They was goin' to kill me then when the stranger walked in and shot 'em."

"I see." The judge nodded thoughtfully. "Did you—but we'll hear your evidence at the inquest. Matlock, go with this man to Haskell's. I'll try to find Dr. Logan and meet you there."

"My idea exactly," said the sheriff sagely, swinging up beside Plum in an officious manner. "Get goin', feller."

With grave eyes the judge watched the wagon rattle on out into the street. Then, pursing his lips thoughtfully, he directed his steps towards the newspaper office.

He had no difficulty locating the doctor. This morning Logan had arranged his affairs to be on hand for the occasion. He had set forth last night on his mission without any idea that he would meet the Pelham killers but, having taken a definite step in saving Jess Plum's life, he was prepared to see the matter through to its grim conclusion. He had spent considerable time with the mountaineer, building up a story that would hold water and yet which would completely absolve Plum of all blame.

Dr. Logan had developed a dual personality. He knew it was a dangerous game he proposed playing, but what was done was already done, and there was no sense involving anybody else in the mess. Assured of the doglike devotion, loyalty, and assistance of the grateful mountaineer, Logan was ready to shoulder a grave responsibility.

"Good morning, Judge. Need some more of those heart drops?"

The judge surveyed his pale, tired face. "No," he said. "But they're doing me a lot of good. Where's Tom?"

"I haven't seen him since last night. I think he's out on the trail with Henry Barton."

The old man nodded. "I'm afraid there's another disagreeable task before you. Can you go over to Haskell's with me?"

Logan looked steadily at him. "Another inquest? I'll get my bag."

When they reached the funeral parlor they found a small crowd gathered about the mountaineer's empty wagon talking in excitement. Sheriff Matlock awaited them, leaning guard in the doorway.

"I hate to keep botherin' you with dead patients, Doc," he offered in heavy humor, "but I got three more specimens for

yuh. Think yuh can stand it?"

"After the Pelham business I can stand anything," Logan told him. "Lead on, Matlock. You're wasting time."

The sheriff shrugged and preceded them into the back room of the place which was rapidly assuming the aspect of a city morgue. Rusty Scanlon, ready for burial this afternoon, reposed in a plain box mounted on trestles in one corner. Both work tables were in use for the mortal remains of George and Fanny Pelham. The three newest additions had been placed in a row on the floor by the window. Jess Plum sat in the only chair, his hat in his lap and a bloodstained bandage around his head. He was staring grimly at nothing. Joe Haskell, bubbling over with geniality, turned from his surveyal of the dead trio with a beaming face. Business hadn't been this brisk in months.

"Accordin' to Plum," announced Matlock, frowning in disapproval at the usurper on his throne of rest and gently easing himself into a comfortable stance against Rusty Scanlon's coffin, "them three corpses are the Pelham killers. Look 'em over in a hurry, Doc, so we can hear Plum's story."

Logan halted and glanced from the floor to the two sheeted forms on the tables. He removed his hat in silence. At once Judge Steele did likewise. This significance communicated itself in lesser degree to the others, and there was an awed quiet for a moment.

Then Logan knelt beside the dead outlaws and examined them without a tremor. The spell was ended, and Matlock broke the oppressive silence. "What's your findin', Doc?"

Logan glanced at the playing-card tags and arose.

"All three shot in the head," he said briefly. "Death must have been instantaneous. I'd say they've been dead no more than twelve hours. Any questions?"

"Killed the same way you shot Bryant, wasn't they?" commented Matlock.

"Yes," Logan said.

"Them spot cards signed 'The Range Doctor'," the sheriff pursued with a chuckle. "Don't reckon they was your patients, was they?"

"This 'Range Doctor' seems to specialize in last illnesses," Logan said levelly. "Have these bodies been indentified?"

"Yep," Matlock said, naming the trio. "And Griggsby was right. I seen Knowles in town last week."

Judge Steele spoke to the silent mountaineer. "All right,

Plum," he said not unkindly. "Let's hear your story. You can sign a deposition later."

The mountaineer cleared his throat. He obliged with terse but accurate account of what had happened, keeping back only the nature of his previous acquaintance with Gabe Duncan and adding the one fictitious detail that the mysterious Range Doctor had been masked.

"He picked out them aces and put 'em on their undershirts," Plum finished. "Then he told me to bring the bodies to town this mornin' and tell the truth. He said he'd find out if I lied. So, when Slim finally come home we cleaned up the mess. We loaded all their belongin's in the wagon with 'em. The nineteen hundred dollars is in Duncan's pants pockets. The only thing left at my place is their hosses and saddles. That's all."

The judge refrained from cross-examination. "Have you searched the bodies, Matlock?" he demanded.

"Ready now, your Honor," the sheriff said, moving with alacrity at mention of money.

He unearthed the nineteen hundred dollars.

"What is your opinion, Dr. Logan?" the judge asked.

"I believe Plum is telling the truth."

"So do I. I think Farnsworth can come near enough identifying this money as Pelham's to corroborate Plum's statement that these three men confessed their crime before they met their death. I'll see him about that. Matlock, take Plum over to the courthouse and get his deposition in writing."

"As soon as you're free, Jess," Logan said, "come over to my office and I'll dress your head for you."

Thus, the first hurdle was taken successfully. For the next two days the doctor went carefully about his practice, keeping his ear to the ground and watching for possible repercussions. Nothing else was talked of but the amazing man of mystery who had simply dropped out of existence while the whole range flamed with the news of his exploit.

What the various members of the Citizens' Committee thought Logan did not know, and he was too wise to ask questions. Then, on Friday, Judge Steele took matters in his own hands. He came to the newspaper office and asked Griggsby to call a special meeting with Hawkins, Overstreet, and Barton.

"Tonight, at my house," he added. "Can you manage to send word out to Barton?"

"I've got a call to make over that way this afternoon," Logan volunteered. "I'll tell him."

"And you come with him," said the judge. "I want you present also, son."

This slightly worried Logan as he rode out to the Circle Bar. What could the old jurist possibly have up his sleeve?

He found Mollie and Betty alone at the ranch house. As everywhere else, the subject of the Range Doctor was of paramount interest. He obliged as briefly as possible with the details of the affair as Jess Plum had related them.

"Dad's out with some of the boys fencing in a bad water hole," Mollie said. "While Bob's waiting, why don't you show him the new rock wall, Betty, we're building around the flower garden?"

Logan rose to his feet.

"Bother the wall," said Betty petulantly. "Sit down, Bob. Ever since we've heard the news I've been dreaming about the Range Doctor and his high courage."

Logan eyed her askance, prudently holding his tongue.

"You know it took bravery to face the odds of three to one, saving Plum's life and avenging the Pelhams," she persisted.

"Well, he did save Plum's life, the way Plum tells it," Logan admitted.

Betty became indignant. "Don't you believe it? Do you deny his bravery?"

"Nothing particularly brave in getting the drop on three drunken outlaws."

"Why, Bob Logan! How can you say a thing like that? That man did this whole range a service. He reminds me of the crusaders of old. We need more men like the Range Doctor."

Logan shuddered involuntarily. "God forbid!" he said.

Betty surveyed him in disapproval, an ominous glint in her eye. "You're jealous because I admire him."

This was more than the young physician could take. "Me jealous of a ruthless killer. For a lovely girl like you to applaud him makes me sick. I detest him!"

The girl's eyes filled with angry tears, and she stamped her foot. Shaken at the intensity of his own emotion and realizing that he must set a stricter guard on his tongue, Logan stared miserably at her. He held out a tardy olive branch.

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching forth his hand. "Forgive me, Betty."

"Don't touch me!" she whispered fiercely. "Forgive you for slandering a brave man? For all you know, you may be talking about my own father. Oh, I hate you, Bob Logan!"

"You're both silly," said Mollie. "Stop quarrelling over an abstract issue and go outside to cool off."

Betty burst into tears and fled from the room. Logan looked at the other girl ruefully.

"I'm really beginning to hate that Range Doctor," he said.

Mollie rested her slim hand for an instant on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Bob, but you know how incurably romantic Betty is. She'll be over it by tomorrow. Come to the kitchen and help me fix supper. You'll stay, of course."

After the meal, which Betty refused to eat, Logan rode back to town with Barton. The old rancher was in an affable mood. It was tantalizing to ride in such warm friendship with the father while reflecting bitterly on the perversity of the daughter and the aberration of women in general—Mollie excepted.

"So you had a spat with Betty." Barton chuckled. "Forget it, son. I'm takin' a trail herd up to Kansas in a couple of weeks and the girls will be stayin' in town with the Steeles. You'll have plenty of time then to mend your social fences."

"Thanks. I'll try."

When they reached the judge's house they found the others already present. Judge Steele wasted no time coming to the point as soon as Logan and Barton were seated.

"Men," began the old jurist gravely, "I've asked you here tonight for a little heart-to-heart talk. We have embarked on a hazardous undertaking, gladly shouldering a grave responsibility for the sake of the future of this country. But sometimes things get out of control of the most careful organization."

"What are you driving at, Thad?" Barton asked sharply.

"Just this. Somebody within this organization has taken matters into his own hands. I refer to the action of that anonymous party last Monday night who called himself the Range Doctor. That man obviously lacks confidence in our body. My purpose is to clear up that misunderstanding. I may be mistaken, but I'm satisfied the Range Doctor sits in this room this very minute."

Overstreet spoke. "What reason have you, Judge Steele, for drawing such a conclusion?"

The judge smiled in weary wisdom. "We're not children, Overstreet. Why did he wear a mask? Why did he speak in only a whisper? Where did he get the idea for the name he

assumed? The Range Doctor! No less than three of you present tonight have used that expression in my hearing, giving it precisely the meaning that Monday gent put into effect. Understand, I'm not censuring, but isn't it time the Range Doctor stepped forward and admitted his identity in the secrecy of this body?"

No one stirred except for Hawkins. The hardware dealer fidgeted in his chair.

"I reckon I supplied the guns he used," he finally offered, and told about the disappearance of his two .38s. "If the Range Doctor had left a note statin' why he took the guns, he could of had 'em for nothin'."

Griggsby fastened sharp eyes on him. "How do we know you didn't take them yourself and go night ridin'?"

"I thought——" Hawkins began lamely. "I mean—I wonder if the Range Doctor didn't limp slightly."

Judge Steele looked at Griggsby. "What did you do Monday night, Tom?" he asked.

"Sorry, Judge. After I left Henry at Pelham's place I came back to town to see Naylor."

"Did you see him?"

"No. I found he'd moved his lodgings over to Frijole Flats. I went back and joined Henry. Overstreet covered Frijole Flats."

The judge said, disappointment in his tone, "This is getting us nowhere, gentlemen."

"What difference does it make?" Barton demanded. "The job's done and I for one approve of it. Why not forget the whole thing?"

"In this case, Henry," Judge Steele said gravely, "the work of the Range Doctor and the duty of this committee are one. But who knows when, if he decides to reappear, the Range Doctor's ideas may run counter to our own? I'm trying to see into the future for us all."

Logan got to his feet. He looked around with an apologetic smile. "Probably I'm to blame for this stalemate. You all know how I feel on the subject of killing. I don't belong here. I'll say good night and leave so you men can talk freely."

"Stay," said the judge, coming to a decision. "I guess it isn't necessary for us to know the identity of this man. We'll just forget the entire episode, and from now on our committee will function as a unit. That's all, men. Let's have a little snort and call it a night."

DR. LOGAN CONFINED himself zealously to the practice of medicine for the next ten days. He made his peace with Betty Barton in due course, but on the subject of the Range Doctor they maintained an armed truce. In fact, Logan maintained a discreet silence on this subject with everybody. He realized he had made a mistake in his summary handling of the Pelham killers. Swept out of himself by his loathing and anger and the deadly danger of Jess Plum's predicament, he had closed mouths for ever which should have been made to talk.

Then one night Logan was called to the lower end of the town near the coachyard on an emergency. Whit Reynolds, the blacksmith, had been stabbed over the heart. The knifing had occurred inside his shop. Robbery, apparently, the motive, as his pockets had been rifled and his heavy gold watch, chain and all, had been torn from his vest. Left for dead, Reynolds had rallied sufficiently to crawl out into the street where he had been found by two passing men.

Logan rendered first aid and administered a hypodermic. But he was too late. The aorta had been nicked and the knife blade had penetrated the left lung. Haemorrhaging internally, Reynolds was bleeding through the mouth. Just before he died the blacksmith managed to whisper two words to the physician, the name of a man.

Matlock finally arrived and got away to his usual sluggish start of finding no clues to act upon. Griggsby, on the other hand, possessed some interesting information. He knew that Reynolds had owned a small stretch of land along the proposed right-of-way of the railroad and that the blacksmith had refused the ridiculous price of one dollar per acre offered him by the Hohner Land Development Company.

"And now Reynolds is dead," Logan said. "What are you going to do about it, Uncle Tom?"

The editor looked grim. "This isn't proof enough, son. Can't do anything until we nab the party who killed Whit Reynolds and find out if he was hired for the job."

Logan compressed his lips silently. He knew what he had to do.

It was a couple of days before he located Cherry Russell at the old abandoned Hondo horse camp. Russell, a half-breed Indian knife and dice artist of unsavoury repute whose usual haunt was the Botella de Repleto at Frijole Flats, was cooking supper over a campfire. The doctor rode up and dismounted,

taking his satchel from his saddle.

"You're Cherry Russell?" he asked, approaching the fire as the breed got suspiciously to his feet.

"Yeah," Russell said in a surly voice. "Why?"

"I'm Dr. Logan," the physician said, opening his bag and rummaging therein with one hand. "I want to ask you a few questions."

The breed remained silent, narrowly regarding Logan with inscrutable black eyes.

"Who hired you to kill Whit Reynolds?" Logan asked bluntly.

Russell stiffened and instantly dropped his hand to his knife hilt. "Who says I killed Reynolds?"

"I do. No use denying it. Reynolds told me before he died."

Russell made no attempt to deny the charge. He tensed himself for a spring. "So now I kill you," he grated out.

"Wait!" Logan said sharply. "It's not you I'm after. If you'll only talk I'll see what can be done——"

The half-breed was not a talking man. With a grunt, he whipped out his knife and lunged viciously at his accuser. Logan leaped backward, dropping his satchel and raising his right hand. In it he gripped a gleaming, long-barrelled .38.

Neither his movement nor the gun deterred the savage killer. Russell sprang at him, striking viciously with his knife. Logan shot him through the head just as the knife descended. He had to fall over on his back to escape the whistling blade. The breed finished his leap on his face beside the doctor.

Heartsick and shaken, Logan rode back to town. What an infernal mess of things he had made. He should have imparted his meagre information to Griggsby and let the justice committee handle this business their own way. But the whispered name of the man had not seemed sufficient evidence to go on. He cursed himself for a fool. But now it was too late. He was in too deep to follow Judge Steele's suggestion and confide in anybody.

The next day a pair of horse wranglers found the body of the half-breed and brought it to town. In one pocket was found the thick gold watch which had belonged to the blacksmith. On the dead man's chest was pinned a worn playing-card, the ace of hearts and printed across the face was:

Logan despondently made out the death warrant. Sheriff Matlock, quickly adapting himself to the new order of wind-falls, was placidly by way of collecting a full deck of marked aces.

Judge Steele was fit to be tied. He went back to the newspaper office with Logan, stopping by the Texas Tommy to get Overstreet. In Logan's office the judge confronted Overstreet and Griggsby with the evidence.

"This card definitely ties the Range Doctor up with both cases," he said. "It matches the Plum deck."

"I hope he has run out of aces," Logan said earnestly. And he meant it.

"That's a small detail," Overstreet commented. "We discard a dozen used decks at the Texas Tommy every week."

"I don't like this," the judge went on bitterly. "Granting that this Range Doctor is nailing the right culprits, this is not getting at the root of the evil."

Griggsby was getting a little hot under the collar. "What do you suggest that we do about it, Thad?" he demanded.

"You ought to know. You realize, of course, that I think either you or Overstreet must be the Range Doctor. Why don't you come to your senses? It's this land company we're after—not their hired killers."

"I'm working on that," Griggsby said in some heat. "I haven't been able to get a shred of evidence against Jack Naylor yet. As for Charlie Hohner, that slick land shark has been just sitting in his office handling legal details since he came to Gila City last week."

"He filed papers on Monday to reclaim the Pelham place on that Malcolm Perley title flaw," the judge reminded.

Griggsby snorted. "Judge, you know that isn't proof he was behind the Pelham killings, although we know damned well he was. I'm laying plans to trap Hohner. He won't stay inside the law. As soon as we catch one of his ruffians that'll talk we'll have enough for the justice committee to act on, even if we don't have enough to take him into court."

"Have you talked with him yet?" the judge asked. "I mean, simply as a citizen and the editor of the newspaper?"

"No," Griggsby admitted, glancing at Logan. "You see, we sort of locked horns once in Blue Eagle, Oklahoma, over one of these land deals. It's a delicate situation."

The judge frowned thoughtfully. "This isn't like you, Tom."

Logan, conscious of a sense of guilt about the whole thing,

felt constrained to come to Griggsby's defence. "What Uncle Tom means, Judge Steele," he said, "is that he befriended me when Hohner and Naylor made me an orphan. He couldn't bring my father back, but he forced Hohner to pay a bigger sum than he intended to for a quitclaim deed to Dad's staked homestead."

Overstreet looked at the doctor curiously. "Hohner killed your father, Logan?"

"He or Naylor. I never knew which one. They guntrapped him together."

"That's all the more reason, I'd say, to call on Hohner," Overstreet commented. "Let him know where you stand. Open up on him in the paper. Warn the people against him and what you think to be his aims. Warn him personally that you understand his purpose here and that you intend to fight him to the finish. He knows you're here, Griggsby, and he must be wondering what keeps you so quiet. Tell him openly, and that will tend to blind him to your private activities and the justice committee."

"By God, I will!" said Griggsby, jamming on his hat.

"But not by yourself," Overstreet added softly. "I'm backing your play."

Logan said nothing. He merely picked up his own hat.

"You stay out of this, Bob," Griggsby said sharply.

"I reckon it's as much my trouble as yours," Logan said. "I'll be seeing it through with you."

Judge Steele motioned towards the door. "I think we'll all four call on Mr. Hohner as a matter of civic duty."

Save for the two shirt-sleeved clerks busy with their book-keeping and Hohner himself going through a sheaf of papers at his desk, they found the land company office deserted. The legitimate land sales seemed to be over. And about time judging by the wall map. Nearly a third of the Horseshoe range had been shaded with lead pencil. On a second map, an enlarged chart of the township of Gila City, a good number of sections had been darkened. Like a creeping blight that Hohner Land Development Company had already fastened itself firmly upon the range.

Charles Hohner was a big man with a bulbous-tipped nose and a round, fat face. His coloring was so high he had the complexion of a spanked baby. His head of hair was snow white, through which his pink scalp could be seen here and there. He had mild-looking pale-blue eyes with slightly red-

dened lids. He had narrowly missed being an albino, Logan reflected.

He stared blankly at his four visitors, then smiled in belated recognition of Judge Steele. Logan noticed that he was addicted to the ostentatious display of gold. He had a gold tooth, a massive gold watch chain hammered out of tiny nuggets across his vest, and his two six-shooters were gold mounted.

"I was just thinking about you, Judge Steele," he said, arising and coming forward to shake hands.

The judge sidestepped this gesture by quickly introducing his companions. "Mr. Overstreet, Dr. Logan, and Mr. Griggsby."

Hohner's pale eyes flickered over the group, coming to rest on Griggsby. "Ah, yes, I believe I remember Griggsby. How are you?"

"Exactly the same as you remember," Griggsby answered shortly. "Where's Naylor?"

"Naylor? I think he's over at the courthouse right now filing a bid for some land owned by the late Whitcomb Reynolds. I believe such land can be bought from the county, Judge Steele?"

"It reverts to the state providing Reynolds had no kith or kin to claim it and pay the taxes," the judge admitted. "It can be handled through the county assessor."

"I wouldn't try to buy that land if I were you, Hohner," said Griggsby. "You've bought too much Horseshoe range land already."

The editor and the judge faced the land operator squarely. Overstreet moved casually to one side and stood poised on the balls of his feet, silently looking on. The two clerks stopped their work to listen. Logan remained prudently in the background.

Hohner smiled nastily. "And what is wrong with acquiring land under one development? I intend to create a boom here. This country——"

"Like you did around Blue Eagle some years ago?" Overstreet interrupted, his voice heavy with irony.

Hohner looked at him sharply. "You run the Texas Tommy, don't you?"

"I own the Texas Tommy," corrected Overstreet.

"If you want to stay in business, I suggest that you mind your own business then," Hohner advised.

"Look here, Hohner," Griggsby said, claiming his attention again. "I've not printed much in my paper about you and your outfit, but you know I know how you operate. I'm telling you now to draw your horns in while there's time. You're not going to take over the Horseshoe range like you did a certain section in Oklahoma. I'll expose your aims and your methods in my newspaper. I'll arouse the countryside against you until the people run you out of the Texas Panhandle."

"You make one libellous statement about me," Hohner warned, "and I'll take that flimsy sheet away from you. I'll break you like a matchstick."

"Like you broke Pelham and Reynolds?" Overstreet asked softly.

Hohner's ugly mouth twisted down in an uglier grimace. He whirled on Overstreet, dropping his hand to his gun butt. Then noting the other's lack of weapons, he laughed curtly. "Only a fool or an unarmed man shoots off his mouth. Another word out of you and I'll pistol-whip you."

"Don't let appearances deceive you," drawled Overstreet. "Make your play."

"Gentlemen," the judge implored.

"We didn't come in here for a gunfight, Hohner," Griggsby said tersely. "I just want to give you a fair warning. That's why I asked for Naylor. I wanted to tell you both that you're walking dangerous ground. The *Gila News* is going to fight you, and it won't be libel."

"Murder," Overstreet said distinctly, "is not libel."

"Jack," Griggsby groaned.

Goaded beyond endurance, Hohner completed his draw and lunged at Overstreet's taunting face. Whether he meant to strike him or shoot him nobody could tell. Overstreet did not move. He just twitched his shoulders. Like magic there appeared in each of his slim white hands a single-barrelled derringer which looked like a toy. Flame belched simultaneously from each before the dazed witnesses could stir or cry out.

Hohner shuddered so that his double chin quivered grotesquely. He swayed backward, dropping his gun, his hands clawing at his breast. Then he fell behind the counter.

Overstreet half raised his arms and twitched his shoulders once more. His derringers disappeared in mid air.

"Now why," he murmured regretfully, "did he make me do that?"

Griggsby instantly placed his hand on his own gun and whirled to face the two petrified clerks. They showed no signs of moving.

Logan came to life and stared at Overstreet with mingled emotions. This was certainly one way to cut the Gordian knot, but why had the gambler forced the play? For the justice committee? To protect Griggsby? Or for the sake of Logan's dead father? Advancing, the doctor hastened behind the counter and knelt beside the fallen land operator.

Judge Steele, his face grave, spoke in a low tone to Overstreet. "Now I know who the Range Doctor is. You shouldn't have crowded him like that."

Logan swiftly opened Hohner's vest and shirt which were rapidly staining red, exposing the man's chest. "He's dead," he announced, looking up.

"Better go on back to the Texas Tommy," the judge said to Overstreet. "We'll take care of things here."

"Just as you say, Judge," Overstreet agreed obediently.

Griggsby and the judge joined the doctor, looking down at Hohner's bared chest. There, just left of center and right above the heart, were two bullet holes almost tangent to each other. A silver dollar would have covered them both.

Eight

AT THE CORONER'S inquest Overstreet was acquitted as having killed Charles Hohner in self-defence. Contrary to Logan's fears, John Naylor did nothing about the death of his employer. A great load rolled off the physician's mind. Things were ironing themselves out smoothly, and he plunged into his medical practice with a fervent vow to attend henceforth to his own work and leave judicial matters in more capable hands.

Fall came to the rangeland. Henry Barton set out for Kansas with his trail herd, and the girls came in to stay with the Steeles. Then one morning Logan passed the land company office and found the place closed up and deserted. A For Rent sign was in the window. He told Griggsby.

The editor shook his head. "The land company isn't exactly defunct, son. Naylor's just moved over to Frijole Flats completely."

"How can he operate without Hohner's money?"

"I don't know. Likely he has some of his own. He had an interest in the scheme. He'll try to limp along somehow. I'm afraid we haven't heard the last of him."

Griggsby spoke with prophecy. Logan recalled his words the Saturday morning he came upon Nolly Sims blubbering miserably beside the dirty press. The boy looked as though he had lost his last friend, and it came to the doctor with a touch of remorse that he had paid scant attention to the apprentice printer.

"What's wrong, Nolly?" he asked in quick sympathy. "Hurt yourself?"

The printer's devil started guiltily and looked around with a woebegone expression.

"No, sir," he faltered. "I—I just feel bad."

"Your face is flushed. Come here and let me see if you have a fever. Been eating something that didn't agree with you?"

"Oh, no, sir, I ain't sick. I'll be—I'll be all right."

Logan studied the lad's reddened eyes, remembering that he had been a lonely orphan himself. He reflected that he knew surprisingly little about Nolly's affairs, considering their close relationship. Griggsby had told him Nolly had come to Gila City a couple of years previous in company with a handsome young woman several years his senior. The girl, Nolly's sister, was desperate by the time she reached the newspaper office and poured her story into the editor's kindly ear.

It was commonplace enough. A pair of orphans without other kin, they were drifting from one place to another. In this particular instance the girl had found a job for herself at one of the range settlements, but she couldn't keep her brother with her. She was seeking a safe place to leave Nolly while she went back and took the job.

Needless to say she looked no further. Nolly remained with Tom Griggsby. For the first few months the sister had come regularly every Sunday to visit her brother. Then there was a change of some sort, and Nolly started going Saturday afternoons to see his sister, returning Sunday night. This arrangement had been in force since before Logan came to Gila City.

"Nolly, come here," Logan said kindly.

Reluctantly the lad approached, sniffing once and blinking

his eyes to clear them of mist. He stood, ill at ease, before the physician.

"Tell me your troubles, Nolly. Perhaps I can help you. Is it anything about your sister?"

The printer's devil burst into tears and dropped his cleaning rags. "I wasn't to let anybody know," he sobbed.

Logan waited a moment. Then:

"What sort of trouble is she in, Nolly?" he probed gently. "Maybe we can fix it."

"I—I don't know, sir. Maybe she ain't in trouble. But she sent me word this mornin' she—she couldn't meet me tomorrow at Grammaw Pierce's place. She don't know when she can see me again. She said I wasn't to worry, but to wait till I heard from her. I wasn't to talk to anybody about her. But I want to see Agnes once in a while. She's the only kinsfolk I got in the world."

"Grammaw Pierce's place?" Logan mused. "Does your sister work there?"

"No, sir. We just meet there on Sunday. Agnes works at the Full Bottle in Frijole Flats, and she won't ever let me go there to see her. I—I don't know what I'll do tomorrow."

Logan did not betray his surprise at this information. He smiled at the boy. "You know, Nolly," he said in a sort of brotherly philosophy intended to comfort the lad, "things always seem to work out for the best in the long run. I'll be making some calls over that way during the week, and I'll stop by to see your sister for you. As for tomorrow, we got a letter from Mr. Barton telling us he won't be home for another week and asking that somebody ride out to tell the boys at the ranch and see how they're getting along. How'd you like to ride one of my saddlers out to the Circle Bar on this mission?"

"Gee, I'd love to, Dr. Logan!" Nolly cried, his eyes beginning to shine in anticipation.

"It's a deal," Logan said solemnly, clapping the lad on the shoulder.

Logan meant to tell Griggsby of the incident later, but the tardy arrival of the Clearwater stage knocked all lesser things out of his mind. A hostler came running for the physician.

"Doc Logan! The Clearwater stage's been held up and Frank Nichols was shot!"

About nine miles out of Gila City and four miles across rough country from Frijole Flats the Clearwater road ran

straight as a taut string for two miles. Near the center of this stretch a lone hill, low and wooded with scrubby timber, lay across the way. The top of this elongated mound was flat, the trail being visible for a mile in each direction.

It had been the custom for the stage driver to stop on this high point to give his team a breather. He did so this afternoon. And a masked man with a rifle stepped out of the brush in front of the lead horses and threw down the driver and express guard.

"Reach for the sky, driver!" he ordered. "You, too, guard! Pronto does it!"

Nichols, the driver, uttered a startled exclamation and almost swallowed his quid of tobacco as he hastily obeyed. Carter, the guard, made one involuntary motion to snatch up his rifle from between his knees, but the rustle of a movement on each side of the stage halted him in time to save his life. From the sage and chaparral bordering the trail, six more masked men arose, covering the windows of the coach with drawn six-shooters. As Carter elevated his hands one of these men jumped forward and yanked open a door of the coach.

"Pile out, everybody!" called the man with the rifle. "This is a hold-up. Get busy. You two men on top kick down the express box and the mail sack."

Nichols was frowning. "I know that jasper's voice," he said to Carter. "And his right hand is stiff."

"Shut up, Frank, and help me dump this stuff," Carter muttered.

But Nichols, trembling on the verge of recognition, would not be silenced. "By gravy, I know 'im, Ralph. That's Jake Holcomb who used to deal at the Texas Tommy. Pierre d'Auberg busted his hand and he's turned road agent. I——"

The man with the rifle calmly pulled the trigger. The gun cracked sharply, and Nichols jerked convulsively. He toppled backward, a bullet hole drilled through him. A woman passenger screamed, and was promptly stifled by the burly bandit nearest her.

White and tense of face, not daring to see about his companion, Carter worked the heavy express box out from under his feet and awkwardly shoved it overboard. It bounced from the wheel rim and thudded to the ground where one of the robbers quickly grabbed it and hauled it aside to shoot off the locks. The mail sack followed.

With thoroughness and dispatch every passenger was de-

spoiled and stripped of visible jewelry. The loot was gathered up in two canvas sacks. One bandit collected all weapons. Then the passengers were herded back into the coach while a pair of bandits hastily went through the luggage Carter was forced to kick off the coach top.

The leader never relaxed his vigilance for a second, giving crisp orders now and then as occasion warranted. Then he whistled, and an eighth masked man rode out of the brush with seven spare mounts and a couple of pack animals. The loot was loaded quickly. As a final precaution the leader approached and cut the traces of the coach horses, driving the animals away with a slap of his gun barrel. Then the entire gang mounted and rode southward along the flat top of the ridge.

Not until then could Carter turn his attention to the badly wounded driver while the men passengers got out and rounded up the scattered coach horses. It was after sundown when the despoiled stage rolled into Gila City, the express guard holding the reins and Frank Nichols coughing his life away on a blanket behind him.

Logan had the driver carried into the hotel where he set to work trying to save his life. Nichols had been shot clean through, the rifle bullet piercing the right lung and narrowly missing the spinal column. The man was unconscious and weak from shock and loss of blood.

The doctor saw that his condition was grave as he cleansed both ends of the ugly hole, staunched the flow of blood, and dressed the wounds. He gave a heart stimulant, a saline injection, and deplored the fact that he had no glucose. Then he put the patient to bed in warm blankets and with hot-water bottles about him. Having done all that he could for the time being, realizing he must wait to see how Nichols came out of the shock, Logan went down to the lobby.

It was late, but he found Griggsby waiting for him with the details of the hold-up.

"I couldn't prod Matlock into doing anything tonight," the editor said, "but we're going out to the scene of the robbery in the morning. How's Nichols?"

"I can't tell yet. If pneumonia doesn't set in, he may have a chance. As soon as I have a bite of food and some coffee I'll go back. I'll have to watch him all night."

Griggsby ate with him, and Logan told him about Nolly Sims and his sister. The editor became thoughtful.

"There may be a connection there of some sort," he said. "I don't doubt that this Holcomb fellow has been hived up at Frijole Flats. I must ask Overstreet if he saw him over there."

"You mean a connection with the stage robbery?"

"Maybe. Frijole Flats is the closest settlement to the spot."

"But would Holcomb be that brazen?"

"Why not—if his gang is strong enough? The whole thing was pulled mighty smoothly. The spot selected showed knowledge of the driving habits of Nichols. The day chosen was when Farnsworth was receiving a gold shipment. The job shows brains. Lucky that Nichols recognized Holcomb. He'll be a marked man now."

Logan finished his second cup of coffee. Then he voiced a thought in both their minds. "You think Naylor might have had a hand in this business?"

"I don't know, son, but we're going to find out. Killing Charlie Hohner put a crimp in his tail. We'll talk tomorrow. You try to get a little sleep if you can."

The stage driver lay in a coma all night. Regularly the doctor checked his pulse and temperature, twice administering hypodermics. Worn out, he finally fell into a doze in his chair at the bedside.

He was aroused by a tapping at the door, and started up to note that it was broad daylight. There was little change in his patient's condition. He opened the door, and Mollie came in.

"Uncle Tom told me you had no nurse, Bob," she said. "Will I do?"

"Mollie, I can't ask you to—" he protested.

"Nonsense! You're all tired out. Just explain what I must do, and then you go get some sleep. I want to help. I've known Frank Nichols all my life."

Logan felt a surge of tenderness. Tom Griggsby and Mollie Barton. He didn't know what he could have done without them.

Leaving Mollie at the bedside, Logan snatched an hour's rest. Then, cleaning up and shaving, he looked in on the patient for a moment and went out on his round of calls. Griggsby had gone to the hold-up spot with Matlock, and Logan didn't see him all day. Thanks to the two girls, he got a few hours' sleep early in the evening and then took up his lonely vigil beside Nichols the last half of the night.

Before dawn Monday morning the stage driver became

delirious. He came out of that about sun-up, and his mind cleared.

"Howdy, Doc," he whispered weakly.

Logan checked him again and found his temperature below normal. He gave him a heart stimulant quickly and felt the weak pulse beat step up a little. "Hello, Frank," he greeted. "Feeling better?"

"No use, Doc," Nichols whispered. "I've made my last trip. Four dollars a round trip. Two and six bits one way."

He subsided in a coughing spell, and died without speaking again.

Logan stood beside the bed for a long time without moving. Then he sighed, closed the dead man's eyes and folded his arms.

"Doctor," he murmured bitterly. "Doctor! How little a doctor can really do."

He went to his room, found no trace of Griggsby or word from him. Down in the lobby he left notification of Nichols' death and sent word to the undertaker. He went out into the morning light. The air was chill and sweet, but he found no glory in the morning.

Matlock, he learned, was still abed. So was Overstreet. Getting one of his horses, he rode by Judge Steele's house where he found the family at breakfast. They invited him to join them, but he wasn't hungry.

"I just wanted to ask about Matlock, Judge," he said. "What has he done about the stage robbery?"

The judge snorted. "You know Matlock. He went out with Tom to the hold-up spot yesterday and came back with the shattered remains of the express box and told me the band had fled to the south."

"He didn't form a posse and go after them?"

"He hasn't gone anywhere. I suppose he figures the outlaws will ride north in the spring, and he can arrest them then."

Logan did not smile at this bitter irony. "Where's Uncle Tom?" he asked next.

The judge shook his head. "Haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon."

"Bob," Mollie asked anxiously, "how is Frank Nichols?"

"He died an hour ago," Logan said.

He didn't wait to see how they took this news. Leaving the house, he mounted his horse and rode out of town, instinctively heading north towards Jess Plum's place. He was filled

with unrest. The Range Doctor was stirring in his grave. But where the hell was Griggsby?

SUNDAY EVENING Griggsby had a talk with Jack Overstreet.

"What do you make of this mess, Jack?"

Overstreet was sitting at ease on his divan, a tapering wine glass held on the point of his crossed knees. He stared moodily at the high lights in the amber liquid. Then his dark eyes flashed angrily.

"The shooting of the stage driver was a stupid act," he said. "I guess there's no doubt Holcomb was the man."

"Sure, but I meant whether or not John Naylor is mixed up in the business. Whether Frijole Flats is headquarters for this gang of bandits."

"Frijole Flats?" Overstreet was sharply surprised.

Griggsby told him about Nolly Sims and his sister's message. Overstreet nodded slowly.

"Your hunch might be right," he said. "Do you want to call the committee together and raid Frijole Flats?"

"No. We can't do that without more positive proof. I might be wrong. Here's what I think I'll do. I'm going to Frijole Flats myself and look around. I may have a showdown with Naylor."

"I think you'd make a grave mistake doing that, Tom," Overstreet said. "Better track Holcomb down first."

"I bet I'll find him there. I know Matlock will never turn up any evidence. Somebody has to. I'll go peaceably, of course. I won't ask for trouble."

"Very well," Overstreet agreed. "I'll go with you."

"Not this time, Jack," Griggsby declined. "You wouldn't be safe from Naylor, anyway. Besides, with Henry away and me out of town, somebody's got to be on hand to take active control of the committee if need be. Thad Steele can't handle things because of his heart. So you're elected."

Overstreet shrugged and took a sip of his wine. "When do you intend to go?"

"First thing tomorrow. I reckon I'll be back before night, but you'll be here to take charge of things if I'm not. Don't tell anybody where I've gone, particularly Bob. I don't want him running into the mess."

"I don't like this," Overstreet objected frankly. "I think——"

He broke off as there sounded a discreet knock at the door. "Yes?" he called.

The huge Cajun entered the chamber on noiseless feet. He bore a tray containing Overstreet's late supper which he placed on a small table near the divan.

"Good evening, Mr. Griggsby," he said pleasantly. "I didn't know you were here. May I prepare a salad and some sandwiches for you?"

"No, thanks, Pierre," the editor declined. "I'm leaving right away. You might let me out. How about it, Jack? Obeying my orders?"

"You're the doctor," Overstreet conceded reluctantly.

Then they both looked startled at each other, at his chance choice of words. They smiled wordlessly, tight-lipped poker smiles. Without further speech Griggsby limped to the alley entrance, and the immobile Pierre silently opened the door for him.

It was still gray dawn when Griggsby, muffled up against the chilly wind like a grizzled old bear on the prowl, rode out of town. The sun was bursting over the eastern rim of the Horseshoe Range while he was yet a mile from his destination. Jack Frost had splashed his prodigal paint pot, and the withering hand of winter was already reaching out like a miser's claw to gather in the colors. Far off in the distance a cowbell tinkled faintly, the sound carrying like an elfin chime on the clear, frosty air.

A movement down the trail against the sun caught the editor's eye, and he sat quietly as the giant figure of Pierre d'Auberg came swinging along like a pacing horse. Clad in tweeds and a turtleneck sweater, carrying a heavy walking-stick as lightly as a malacca cane, the huge Cajun halted in surprise.

"Good morning, Mr. Griggsby," he boomed in tones never heard at the Texas Tommy. "Aren't you out exceptionally early, sir?"

"So are you."

"Early but not exceptional. I always take a morning jaunt. It's the only exercise I get, you know."

"I wouldn't have thought you needed any," Griggsby said dryly. "Do you travel at that fast pace all the way?"

"It depends on how much time I waste in loitering. This morning I got interested in the pattern of a spider's web I

found jewelled with dew. I am hurrying now to get back in time to prepare Mr. Overstreet's Creole-style coffee."

"I didn't know you were a nature student, Pierre."

"It's my only hobby, sir. I could talk for hours on the subject of birds and flowers. Yesterday morning, for instance, I followed a flight of geese for a couple of hours until I lost them in the wild country below Sandy Lake. Did you know—but I am detaining both of us."

"It's all right. Good morning, Pierre. And, by the way, don't mention to anyone that you met me this morning."

"Certainly not, if you wish it, sir. Good morning."

Griggsby watched the giant resume his way, bounding along on his rubbery muscles which seemed tireless, whirling his great stick as lightly as a child would play with a reed. Then he rode on.

The morning was still young when he tied his horse at the hitch rack in front of the Full Bottle and paused to look around. Across the way from the Botella de Repleto stood a small two-storied ramshackle hotel with a small wooden awning shading the front of the first floor. By all rights at this hour of day things should have been dull and lifeless at Frijole Flats. On the contrary, the cantina was open, and a cluster of saddle horses were tied before the hotel. A number of men were busily trooping back and forth between the two establishments.

Griggsby limped into the Full Bottle and ordered a whisky at the bar. The proprietor himself waited on him.

"Ah, amigo," Vallera greeted with a smile. "You come far?"

"Far enough," Griggsby grunted. He knew Vallera and knew that the other knew him. "I'm looking for a man named Jake Holcomb. Seen him lately?"

"Jake Holcomb? Si, Señor," Vallera answered readily. "He leeves over at the hotel. You weel find heem een room twenty-seex."

Griggsby downed his liquor, dropped a quarter on the bar, and went across to the hotel. Nobody paid any particular attention to him as he climbed the stairs to the second floor. Room twenty-six proved to be at the front of the house overlooking the street. At his second knock a sleepy voice growled for him to come in.

He entered, and saw too late that he had walked into a trap. This was not a bedroom, having been fitted up like an office. He recognized some of the furniture and maps from the

land company's former office in Gila City. He also recognized the man seated at the desk before him. Before he could speak the door swung shut at his back and he became aware of a pair of armed men flanking him.

"Well," said John Naylor at the desk. "If it isn't my old friend from Blue Eagle."

"You're making a mistake, Naylor," Griggsby said coolly. "I came here in peace to talk with Jake Holcomb."

"You made the mistake," Naylor corrected. "Take his gun, boys. You don't wear the two guns like you used to, Griggsby. Slowin' down in your old age?"

Griggsby's temper began to simmer as he was disarmed and thoroughly tied up with short pieces of rope. "You're acting a fool, Naylor. When I go back to Gila City—"

"Shut up!" Naylor said savagely. "You ain't goin' back to Gila City for a while. Always stickin' your nose in somebody's business. I'm goin' to cure you of a bad habit, Griggsby. I haven't time to mess with you now. I'll tend to you later. Fred, you and Mitch put him in the visitors' room. Mitch, you're to stand guard. I'm puttin' this man in your charge."

The two men growled an assent and roughly picked up their burden. Ignoring his protests, they carried the editor to the rear of the house and dumped him on the bed in the tiny room at the exact end of the hall. Fred promptly departed. Mitch, a hulking chap with badly bowed legs and a red wart on his curved nose, paused at the door and grinned evilly at his prisoner.

The door slammed and locked. Griggsby heard a chair being placed against the portal and the noise of Mitch settling down for a stretch of guard duty. The editor wriggled around to as comfortable a position as possible on the lumpy mattress and surveyed his prison.

It was a narrow room, hardly more than the sealed-off end of the hall. The one window had been barred by a number of two-by-fours nailed across it. A rickety washstand, the bed, and one chair comprised the furnishings.

The morning dragged along interminably. His game leg ached terribly but gave up the unequal battle by noon and became dead from the hip down. About noon Mitch came in to see how his bonds were holding. His bitter complaint against the chill of his fireless cell netted a slight concession. The guard brought in a blanket and covered him with it.

Shortly thereafter Griggsby heard the sounds of departure

of quite a cavalcade, and his anxiety increased twofold. The gang must be riding forth on a fresh errand of devilment. Or had his coming flushed the covey, and were they pulling out of Frijole Flats for good? None of this made any sense to him.

Frijole Flats quieted down after this and the hours dragged on. It grew late in the afternoon, and Griggsby was dozing feverishly when a feminine voice in the hall awakened him. It was a provocative, seductive voice with a familiar timbre to it. The rumbling bass of Mitch responded dubiously, gradually changing to a more confident tone. The occasional words he heard informed Griggsby the woman was seeking to lead his guard astray.

There was the gurgle of a bottle several times. Then a renewal of cajolery on the part of the woman. Mitch finally capitulated and got to his feet. Perfunctorily the door was tried, and then two pairs of footsteps retreated along the corridor.

It must have been an hour later that the lock clicked. A crack widened slowly along the jamb. Then a woman slipped into the room. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it as she faced the bed, breast heaving rapidly and disarranged black hair tumbling down over one eye.

"Agnes Sims!" Griggsby exclaimed softly in recognition.

The woman swiftly placed one finger on her lips to enjoin silence. In one hand she held the key to the door, in the other she carried a naked knife. About her waist was buckled Griggsby's own cartridge belt, the bone butt of his .45 jutting reassuringly out of the holster. Agnes locked the door and hurried to the bedside. As she bent over him, Griggsby noted her flushed face and the smell of liquor, but her eyes were bright and hard, and her sullenly pretty lips were drawn in a determined line.

"*Sh-h-h!*" she cautioned as she peeled back the blanket. "I couldn't come sooner. I've been trying to find a way to get to you ever since I found out you were here. You must hurry and get away before Naylor comes back. Why did you come here?"

"Nolly was worried about you."

"So he told you. Naylor made me send Nolly that message."

"I thought as much. But I had other business here, too. I was looking for Jake Holcomb."

"About the stage robbery? He told Naylor he shot the man who recognized him."

"So Naylor is mixed up in that."

"Yes," she whispered emphatically, slashing at the rope about his wrists. "He's taken over Frijole Flats. They hid the loot in the wine cellar of the Full Bottle. He's turned the Full Bottle into a robbers' roost. God knows it was tough enough before!"

"Then why did Naylor make me a prisoner here? He should have been anxious to get rid of me."

"Don't you know that? They think you're the Range Doctor, and they wanted to keep you out of the way while they raided Gila City this afternoon."

"What? In broad daylight?"

"Of course. They went to rob the bank, the hotel, and the Texas Tommy. There's more than fifteen of them. And they had their orders."

"What do you mean—orders?"

"Their chief," Agnes explained rapidly as she went to work on the bonds about his legs. "The actual leader of this gang stays in Gila City. He works in cahoots with Naylor, doing most of the planning and furnishing all the necessary information. He's a devil. I'm afraid of him."

"Do you know what you're saying, Agnes? Do you know who it is? What is his name, girl? Tell me his name!"

"It's that smooth-talking giant who manages the casino at the Texas Tommy. Pierre de-something. Oh, we must hurry. Naylor will be back any time now. I had to waste so much time getting Mitch drunk and out of the way. Oh, your legs are swollen."

"You mean Pierre d'Auberg?" Griggsby was incredulous.

"That's the man. He comes here in the small hours of the morning to plan with Naylor. He was here this morning and told Naylor to hold you prisoner. I think they mean to kill you. There! You're free. Can you get up?"

Griggsby tried, but he couldn't move. Tears welling to her eyes, the young woman flung herself to her knees and began massaging his legs briskly.

"I can't believe it," Griggsby murmured. "That Cajun is faithful to his master."

But he did believe. He remembered meeting d'Auberg this morning. Pierre had frankly stated that he was out before daybreak every morning. Everything dovetailed so neatly. In Overstreet's confidence, the big Cajun knew a lot about Griggsby and his activities. Just before leaving Overstreet's

quarters last night Overstreet had called him the "doctor" in d'Auberg's hearing. The man had jumped to conclusions.

It was easy to understand the thoroughness of each planned raid now. And what a clever touch to use Jake Holcomb. No one would ever have suspected a collusion between the maimed gambler and the man who had broken his hand.

The resumption of circulation shot needles of pain through the editor's legs. Uttering no sound at the agony which gripped him, Griggsby fumbled his leaden feet to the floor and staggered erect. He reeled drunkenly across the narrow room, back and forth in the gathering gloom as he strove to limber up his stiffened muscles.

"Here! Your gun," Agnes reminded, unbuckling the belt from about her waist. "Oh, hurry, hurry!"

"You're going with me, of course, Agnes."

"No. I've still got something to do. I'll get away later. Your horse is over behind the Full Bottle. I'll drag Mitch back to his chair after you leave. He'll be afraid to tell on me because—because I'm Naylor's girl."

She fell silent upon making this admission. In the pause which followed they became aware of the sounds of many hoofs and the shouts of men outside. The building echoed with the tread of heavy feet. Agnes Sims stared at the editor through the gloom with startled eyes.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered. "We're too late."

Booted feet came tramping up the stairs. "Mitch!" shouted Naylor's voice. "Where are you, you fool?"

The trapped pair swept the bare walls of the room despairingly. Griggsby thought fast. As Naylor rattled the door-knob he called out weakly.

"Mitch isn't in here, Naylor. When are you going to tire of this joke and let me go?" To the girl he whispered, "Stand in the corner. I'll try to keep their attention so you can slip out."

"Open this door!" roared Naylor. "Who's in there? Fred, go find Mitch."

Griggsby got back into the bed and pulled the blanket up to his chin. Agnes drew back into the corner nearest the door. Footsteps ran along the corridor. The whining voice of Mitch saying, "Agnes got me to take a coupla drinks. I didn't see no harm in it. . . ."

The door quivered under the impact of a heavy body.

"Bring a lamp, damn you!" Naylor yelled at somebody.

Then a booted foot crashed against the door and the lock

snapped off with a splintering sound. The door quivered wide open in a fit of ague, and Naylor hurtled into the room, followed by two men with lamps. At sight of the immobile form of Griggsby beneath the blanket Naylor relaxed.

"Where's Agnes?" he grated.

"I don't know, Naylor. Tell me what all this——"

"Here she is!" yelled one of the men with lamps. "Tryin' to sneak out."

Naylor whirled from the bed. He shot out a hand and grabbed the struggling girl by the wrist, brutally yanking her to her knees.

"What are you doin' in here, Agnes?" he demanded harshly. "What did you tell Griggsby?"

The girl cried out in pain, and Griggsby answered for her.

"She didn't have to tell me anything, Naylor. The way you've treated me has told me plenty."

"Shut up, you!" Naylor snarled, twisting the girl's arm.

Agnes Sims threw back her head and shook the hair out of her face. She laughed in spite of her agony.

"I told him everything I know about you," she said in defiance. "I told him about the stage robbery—where you went today—about Pierre d'Auberg—where you hid your——"

With his free hand Naylor struck her across the mouth, felling her to the floor. "You dirty little traitor," he raged. "Now I've got to kill him, and to hell with d'Auberg's plans."

"Naylor!" Griggsby called out sharply. "What did you do over in Gila City?"

"What difference does that make to you?" Naylor snarled, turning again towards the bed. "Since you're so damned curious and already know so much, yes, we raided the bank, the hotel, and the Texas Tommy. Sure, I planned the stage robbery. And as sure as you're that damned Range Doctor, you can take all this knowledge to hell with you!"

He snatched at his gun to pump his helpless victim full of lead, and Agnes Sims screamed in despair. But the blanket over the editor's form flipped back, exposing a six-shooter levelled at the raging killer's breast. Before Naylor's gun more than cleared its holster Griggsby's weapon spoke once, and once again. Then it leaped to cover the astounded lamp-bearers.

"Freeze!" Griggsby commanded as he swung his feet to the floor and stood up.

Neither man moved. Naylor, his hard eyes going blank,

swayed and crumpled down like a spilling sack of potatoes.

"I should have done that nine years ago," Griggsby said. "Are you all right, Agnes? It's time to get out of here."

The woman flung herself at the dead man's body and snatched up his six-shooter. Blood trickling down her chin from cruelly bruised lips, she got to her feet.

"Run, Mr. Griggsby! Down the hall and through Naylor's office. You can climb off the front porch. I'll hold them till you get away."

"I can't leave you here," the editor snapped out.

"Never mind me. I'm free now. Hurry!"

Griggsby backed into the hall, turned, and ran towards the front. He heard the inquiring shouts of alarmed men below and the sound of many feet racing up the stairs. Gunfire had drawn all the outlaws into the house.

Bursting into Naylor's office, Griggsby locked the door behind him. He stumbled across the dark room to the gray oblong which marked a window. He raised the sash and stepped out onto the porch awning. Holstering his gun, he crept across the flat roof to one corner, lay down, gripped the edge, and rolled off. His swinging legs found and wrapped themselves around the corner post. Panting, he slip rapidly to the ground.

Back in the hotel Jake Holcomb was in the van of men who crowded into the prison room. He took in the situation at a glance and confronted Agnes Sims.

"You she-devil," he said. "You've killed Naylor."

She began to laugh. She tossed her gun at the still form on the floor, and instantly one of the men grabbed her. She did not resist.

"I hated him," she said. "He killed the only man who ever really loved me. Do you hear that, John Naylor? Why don't you say something? I'll tell you why. Because you're dead, you dog! You're as dead as Rusty Scanlon!"

She collapsed, sobbing, in her captor's arms.

"Mad as a locoed steer," this fellow muttered uneasily. "What'll I do with her, Jake?"

"Lock her up in a room," Holcomb directed. "Fred, ride like hell to Gila City and tell d'Auberg what's happened. The rest of you men come with me to head off Griggsby. We've got to kill him. He knows everything."

Nine

STOPPING ONLY to make a few obligatory calls Monday morning, Logan reached Jess Plum's place before noon. He ate dinner with the mountaineer and his family. Ivy Plum served the table in silence, beaming on her honored guest with gratitude. Plum sat across from the doctor and hung on his every word like a faithful dog.

As he ate, Logan related the latest news in brief and concise fashion.

"Frank Nichols died early this morning," he finished significantly.

"Uummm," Plum murmured. "Thet means a murder charge on top o' the robbery, eh?"

"Yes—if Matlock ever arrests Jake Holcomb. Thanks for a nice dinner, Mrs. Plum. I've got to be getting along now. Jess, I'd like to talk with you a bit before I go."

Plum followed him out to the corral. "What's on yore mind, Doc?" he asked anxiously.

"Jake Holcomb," Logan told him. "Also, John Naylor. Naylor has moved his land company over to Frijole Flats. I think Naylor's mixed up in this outlawry. Have you heard any rumor or talk among the mountain men, Jess?"

Plum frowned thoughtfully. "No, not yet." He fixed his black eyes on the doctor's face.

"I know this is a tall order, Jess, but I've got to find out. I'm after Holcomb, but I'm deeply interested in Naylor. He's one of the men who killed my father."

The mountaineer whistled softly. "Tod Ramsey's the boy to find out fer ye. He's Buckner's nephew from Oregon, a stranger in these parts. I'll send him to nose around Frijole Flats. Ye'll be ridin' back this way later, Doc?"

"Not today. I've a number of calls to make. Ed Calkins' wife salivated all three children, and I have to get over there this afternoon. I'll be back in Gila City by night."

"Ye'll hear from me tonight," Plum promised simply.

Logan mounted his horse and rode away. He put in a strenuous afternoon, and it was considerably after dark when he turned onto the main trail close to town and urged his weary horse past the thickening dwellings with their twinkling window lights bespeaking cheer and warmth within.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he rode up to Judge Steele's white picket fence and dismounted. To his surprise he found a number of saddle horses lining the fence. The house was ablaze with lights. There was a subdued roar from over on the main street, and horsemen were galloping here and there in excitement. In alarm Logan hastened up the walk.

Hawkins met him at the door.

"Hello, Doc," the hardware dealer greeted, squinting. "We was wonderin' if you'd get back in time."

"In time for what?"

"Hell popped here in town this afternoon. Barton just got home, too. Go right on in the parlor. We're havin' a meetin'."

In the judge's parlor Logan found fully half the members of the Committee of Justice assembled. At one side Henry Barton stood talking with the judge and his two daughters. The room was a bedlam of conversation and argument. The uproar died down somewhat at the appearance of the doctor, and Barton came swiftly to greet him.

"Hello, son. Looks like I came home to a mess. Where's Tom?"

Logan frowned, and a nagging little worry leaped to the front of his mind. "Hasn't he shown up yet? I haven't seen him since Saturday night. What's happened?"

"The town's been held up. Judge Steele will tell you."

The doctor looked quickly at the old jurist.

"That's right," Judge Steele said. "It happened about four o'clock this afternoon—the bank, the hotel, and the Texas Tommy. There must have been between fifteen and twenty men in on the triple robbery. It took the town by surprise."

"How did it happen? Where was everybody?"

"Nobody saw a large band of men until it was over," the judge explained. "It was a slick job, beating the stage robbery all hollow. The bandits must have drifted into Gila City separately and then gathered according to plan at the three points. At four o'clock a pair of strangers got into a heated argument in front of the hotel. This turned into a gunfight. They emptied their six-shooters at each other. Neither was

hit. Then they engaged in a knife fight in the middle of the street. It drew all the loiterers into a crowd of spectators."

"Where was the sheriff?"

"In his office taking a nap," the judge said shortly. "Anyway, as I gathered from later inquiry, at this point several masked men materialized in the hotel lobby and proceeded to hold up the place. The same thing happened at the Texas Tommy. They knew where the main supply of cash was kept in each house, the disposition of guards, and all that.

"At the same time five more men were holding up the bank. Just about the time the hotel and Overstreet's place was gutted, the iron safe in the bank was blown up with dynamite. This explosion drew the attention of the crowd. People ran towards the bank building. And the hotel and Texas Tommy bandits promptly made their escape almost unnoticed. The two knife fighters sheathed their weapons and disappeared.

"The bandits made off down the side street and met another pair of confederates with horses for them all. They rode down the alley and picked up the others at the back door of the bank. All of them made off towards the south before any sort of resistance could be organized—before most folks knew exactly what had happened."

Farnsworth took up the recital. "The bank was closed, but two clerks and I were there. The bandits broke in the back door as cool as you please and tied us up. We were taken completely by surprise. Comparison of notes indicate that everything was timed to the second. My safe was blown up the last thing to serve as a counter-attraction to let the other bandits get away from the hotel and the Texas Tommy. Not a dozen shots were fired during the entire raid, and these only by the two street fighters. In the absence of Tom Griggsby I took it on myself to call a committee meeting. Matlock is wasting his time inquiring around the hotel and the Texas Tommy, but I've gathered the pertinent facts. Luckily, Henry here, came in on the stage in time to help."

The rancher nodded grimly. "I was on the Clearwater stage while it was happenin'," he told Logan. "I left the boys in Kansas to trail home while I took the train. I wish now I'd brought 'em on with me. I've sent Nolly Sims out to the ranch to bring in the rest of the men to make up a posse. But where in hell is Tom Griggsby? We can't wait on Matlock for action. We're goin' to ride after them galoots tonight."

Logan, having finally assimilated this staggering information, voiced a pertinent question. "But do you know where you're riding, Mr. Barton?"

"Not exactly," the rancher admitted reluctantly. "But fifteen or twenty men leave a pretty clear trail. We're just arguin' now about the most likely place the outlaws'll head for—if they don't split up, and they probably won't do that before dividin' their loot. I can't understand what's happened to Tom."

"Where's Overstreet?" Logan inquired, looking around the room again and missing the distinctive figure of the gambler.

"I left him at the Texas Tommy checkin' up on his losses," Hawkins informed. "He'll be along shortly."

"It was fortunate nobody was injured," Mollie put in soberly.

Logan turned his attention to the two girls. "And you didn't hear or see anything of Uncle Tom?"

They shook their heads. Betty's eyes still danced with excitement. It was Mollie who added:

"I'm beginning to worry about him, Bob. What do you think could have happened to him?"

Logan started to say he had no idea when a stray thought struck him. The idea appalled him and he looked sickly from one girl to the other. Before he could speak a man came in from the hall and called to him.

"Doc Logan, there's a feller at the door askin' to see yuh."

Logan excused himself and went out. He found Jess Plum on the porch.

"Couldn't find ye at yore office," Plum apologized. "What's this I hear about a town hold-up?"

"There was a big one here this afternoon," Logan told him, quickly giving the main details. "Did your man go over to Frijole Flats?"

"He did, and ye was right on the nail head, Doc. Tod Ramsey went over and learned there was a reg'lar gang workin' with this Holcomb feller and thet John Naylor. He let on like he wanted to jine up, but he couldn't 'cause the whole bunch was away on business. So Tod come back and reported to me. Ye reckon thet was the bunch thet raided town?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it, but that may take some proving, Jess."

"Thet's what I figgered," Plum said. "'Course I didn't know about this town raid, but I got eight mountain men with

me, countin' Slim and Tod. You and me make ten. What are yore orders, Doc?"

Logan was startled. "I haven't any orders for you men, Jess. I only wanted you to get information that I couldn't. I'm very grateful for—"

"Hold on Doc," the mountaineer interrupted. "I know ye got the guts to do it, but if ye think we're goin' to let ye ride into thet outlaw nest by yoreself ye got another think comin'. Me and the boys are ridin' with ye."

"Have you told them anything about—about me?"

"Nary a word. Thet's a secret between ye and me. I jest told 'em thet Holcomb is wanted fer murder and Naylor was the man who killed yore paw."

Logan thought swiftly. It wouldn't do any harm for the justice committee to have the additional strength of the Plum contingent.

"Good men," said Logan. "Tell them to get ready to ride. I must go in and tell the judge and Henry Barton."

He went back into the house as Plum faded into the darkness. He got his two men off to one side.

"I just got word that Naylor and Holcomb have organized a gang over at Frijole Flats," he told them. "They were away from that settlement this afternoon. You can put two and two together, and you'll save a lot of time by sending the posse straight to Frijole Flats."

"Who told you this, son?" the judge inquired.

Logan told him. "I do a lot of practice among mountain folks," he explained. "They tell me everything they hear."

"That's all we need to know," Barton declared. "We'll start with Frijole Flats. Tell the boys, Thad."

Judge Steele rapped for order and made his announcement. There were shouts of enthusiasm and calls of inquiry. The confusion was so loud that nobody heard the knocking at the door. Finally Hawkins answered the call, admitting Overstreet and Sheriff Matlock.

Overstreet hurried into the crowded parlour. Matlock followed as far as the threshold, where he halted to survey the gathering in faint astonishment and came to rest against the door frame.

"Sorry I'm late," Overstreet said, "but I had to check everything at the Texas Tommy myself. My man d'Auberg is unaccountably missing. And—"

It was the first time in Logan's recollection that Overstreet

had appeared visibly disturbed or annoyed.

"Speak up, man," the judge urged.

Overstreet made a deprecatory gesture. "I should have mentioned this before, but Tom Griggsby made me promise to keep silent. Griggsby went to Frijole Flats early this morning, and I'm afraid something has happened to him."

This statement created a stir. Barton waved down the noise.

"Tom went to Frijole Flats?" he repeated. "Alone?"

Overstreet nodded silently.

"You should have told me sooner, Overstreet," the judge rebuked.

"I realize that now, but Griggsby swore me to secrecy," the gambling-house owner said, glancing at Logan.

Logan stared at the man who had substantiated his sudden hunch as to the whereabouts of Griggsby. He felt like groaning in the anguish of his spirit for not having guessed before. He himself had told Griggsby about Nolly Sims and his sister. He should have known that the fiery little editor would investigate, would not have depended on the slothful sheriff. Now, in view of the latest developments, he feared for Griggsby's life.

THE LARGE POSSE rode in comparative silence, grim men bent on a grim business. Logan and Barton rode in the van, Mollie between them. Close at the doctor's heels followed Jess Plum like a guardian angel. While the mountain men looked to Logan for guidance, the ranchers and punchers to Barton, and the men from town to Farnsworth and Hawkins, the entire party rode under the banner of Sheriff Matlock. Only Judge Steele and Overstreet remained behind.

"Plum watches over you like a dog," Barton commented briefly to the physician. "You should have armed yourself."

"There's an understanding between us," Logan admitted. "You warm enough, Mollie?"

"Quite," she said. "Matlock will talk about this posse to his dying day."

Logan was not interested in Matlock. He glanced at the girl under the pale starlight. Oddly, he was thinking of something Tom Griggsby had once said about her. "Mollie's the kind who'd go to hell with you." She was, indeed. How could

he have been so blind all this time?

"Mollie's wearin' a six-shooter," Barton grumbled. "Even young Nolly borrowed the judge's shotgun."

"I'll be all right," Logan said shortly. "The thing to do is get there."

They found the settlement wrapped in darkness, the outlying shacks closed and lifeless. At the Botella de Repleto and the hotel only were there any lights, and these two places were quiet and practically deserted. They advanced cautiously, fearing a trap at the ease with which they had penetrated Frijole Flats, and flung a cordon of men about both establishments.

Their caution proved needless. The settlement was taken in typical Matlockian fashion. Not a shot was fired.

With Mollie and Jess Plum flanking him, Logan walked boldly into the cantina. Matlock, equally indifferent to possible danger, lumbered after them. Barton, Hawkins, and Farnsworth followed closely, spreading out fanwise as they crossed the threshold.

There were not half a dozen men in evidence, including Manuel Vallera. There was no sign of the usual nightly activity. The entire place seemed steeped in gloom. The woes of the world appeared to rest on Vallera's fat shoulders.

"We've come to get Tom Griggsby," Logan said to the proprietor. "Where is he?"

"He ees gone, Señor," Vallera responded dully. "He escaped two hours ago."

Sheriff Matlock came to rest with his broad hands gripping the edge of the bar. "Where's Naylor?"

"He ees dead, Señor."

"Where's Jake Holcomb?" Logan pursued.

"Out hunting Señor Greegsby," Vallera said with a weary sigh.

"What in hell happened?" demanded Barton.

Vallera told them. Logan listened with mingled feelings.

"Come along with us to the hotel," he ordered.

Vallera waddled out from behind the bar.

"You're under arrest," said Matlock. "Everybody in this house is under arrest." He called in several men to take charge and followed Logan over to the hotel.

There was no trouble at the hotel. Calling in more reinforcements from outside to take possession of the lower floor, they followed Vallera upstairs to the little room where

Griggsby had been held prisoner. Nothing had been disturbed since the outlaws had scattered to search for the escaped editor.

Logan entered the room and stood there for a long moment looking down at the body of John Naylor. Life, he reflected, was a queer business that did not always work out according to standard rules. By all rights it should have been he who confronted this man who had killed his father. Instead, it had been Griggsby. Once again the protecting hand of the newspaper editor had reached forth and spared him this ordeal. Just one more item to add to the many obligations he owed the little man.

Logan compressed his lips and shook his head slightly several times. Then, winking back the moisture which filmed his eyes he turned on Vallera.

"Where's the girl?" he asked sternly. "What has become of Agnes Sims?"

Vallera hastily led the way to a locked room down the hall. Agnes, unharmed save for her cut and swollen lips, was produced. Nolly rushed forward and put his arms about his sister, beginning to blubber like a baby.

After a few minutes the girl told her story, and the entire picture became clear to them.

"So Holcomb sent this Fred feller to Gila City to warn d'Auberg," Matlock summed it up. "Since he didn't come back, and d'Auberg is missin', I'd say them two went on the scout together. In fact, I don't reckon half the gang who took out after Griggsby'll return here. That is, unless they're lucky enough to skag him out on the prairie."

They returned to the Cantina, where the loot was removed from the wine cellar. While the banker inventoried the stuff the others held a brief discussion. Logan listened impatiently for a few minutes. Then he made a flat statement.

"I'm going on," he said. "I've got to find Tom Griggsby."

"Aren't we all going on?" Mollie asked in surprise.

"The posse ain't, young lady," Matlock announced firmly. "We're stayin' right here till mornin'. No use buckin' a cold wind to lug this stuff and these prisoners back to Gila City this late at night."

"But what about the gang and Holcomb?" Barton demanded. "What about Pierre d'Auberg?"

"No use gettin' excited over d'Auberg. Didn't Overstreet say he was already missin'? Come daylight it'll be plenty of

time to search for him. As for the outlaws scoutin' around for Griggsby, they've already found him or they ain't goin' to catch him. Them as come tricklin' back here I'll arrest as they come in. They might even bring Griggsby back with 'em."

There was a certain amount of logic in this.

"Do as you please," Logan said. "I'm leaving."

Jess Plum picked up his rifle. "Me and the boys are goin' with ye, Doc," he stated.

Mollie said nothing. She started for the door. Barton looked after the departing trio and buttoned up his coat.

"I'll leave my men here under your orders, Matlock," he said. "I'm ridin' with the doctor."

Accompanied by the silent band of mountain men, Logan and Mollie and her father took the trail. They forded the Brazos and rode north, making a wide sweep around Frijole Flats to the east and south. Not a sign of Griggsby or his pursuing outlaws did they find.

Gila City was quiet and dark under the cold stars and the streets were devoid of life. They halted in front of the newspaper office while Logan dismounted and went in to see if Griggsby had returned and left any message.

Unlocking the door, the doctor entered the dark building and struck a match. He cupped it in one hand until the flame brightened enough to hold it above his head. He advanced as the tiny torch pushed the shadows back, peering across the paper office. Seated at his customary desk, slumped down in his chair, was Tom Griggsby.

"Uncle Tom!" Logan called sharply. "Are you asleep?"

The editor did not stir. The dying flame burned Logan's fingers as a queer sensation burned into his spine. He dropped the match and sniffed at the air of the room as he struck another. There was the odor of powder smoke, but it might have been the sulphur from the match.

In the light of the second match Griggsby did not move. His eyes stared sightlessly through and beyond the doctor.

"Merciful heavens!" Logan exclaimed dropping his satchel from his nerveless left hand.

The match flickered out, and he turned blindly. "Oh, my God!" he groaned again as he groped along the partition for the front door. "Mr. Barton! Come in here, quick!"

He collided with somebody at the threshold. It was the grimly alert Jess Plum.

"What's wrong, Doc?"

"It's Uncle Tom," Logan said brokenly.

Plum pushed on into the building and lighted a lamp. Logan stopped Mollie at the door as Barton edged around them.

"Not you, Mollie. You—you wait outside."

"No!" she said in swift anxiety. "What is it?"

Then, in the light of the lamp, she saw. She uttered a choking cry and ran forward. As she caught hold of Griggsby's arm his head rolled drunkenly.

"He's dead!" Barton cried, aghast.

"Oh, he's still warm!" Mollie said, turning her white face desperately towards Logan. "Do something, Bob! Can't you give him a stimulant? Won't you try to—"

She broke off at what she read in Logan's face. Going down on her knees, she bowed her head against the dead man's thigh and gave way to her grief. She wept quietly, sobbing in a shuddering, tearing manner which was dreadful to see.

Logan moved forward and raised her tenderly to her feet.

"Don't, Mollie," he muttered. "Don't cry like that."

In the manner of a tired child she turned to him, resting her head against his shoulder as she continued to sob. Slowly she quieted in his arms as he gazed down over her shoulder at the body of his staunchest friend. At last she raised her head, biting her lip to keep it from trembling.

"I'm sorry to give way like this, Bob," she whispered. "I know you are hurt more deeply than anybody else, but—but I loved him, too."

Logan heard this without a quiver. His world was already crumbling beneath his feet. All of his life, he reflected bitterly, he had been fated to lose the priceless things. His mother, his father, his code of ethics, his best friend, and now the woman he loved. It was ironic to think he had lost something before he had gained it, but to find and lose this woman in the same night was simply the final straw. There was nothing left but his life, and he realized that he was very weary of it.

Logan relinquished Mollie to her father and bent over to unbutton Griggsby's vest. As he did so, a card dropped out. It was a playing card—the joker. Printed across its face was a single phrase:

*A little knowledge is a dangerous thing—for
the Range Doctor.*

"Holy smokel!" Plum exclaimed and glanced at Logan.

Barton looked at the card, and his face clouded. "He was killed! They killed him because they thought Tom was the Range Doctor."

"Pierre d'Auberg," Mollie said fiercely. "He lay in wait here after he got word that Uncle Tom had escaped from Frijole Flats. He used that joker as a grim jest."

"Or thet feller Holcomb," Plumb suggested.

Logan said nothing as he continued to unbutton the editor's clothes, but his hands were trembling. This was another cross to bear. He alone was responsible for Tom Griggsby's death. The editor had been killed because his murderer feared the Range Doctor. Griggsby had been the logical suspect.

A small spot of blood was on the editor's shirt. A larger spot was on his undershirt. Neither was quite dry. Then Logan bared the chest. There, just under the heart, were two bullet holes almost tangent to each other. A silver dollar would have covered them both.

Logan bent close and then recoiled in sudden horror, uttering a choking sound.

"What is it, son?" Barton asked. "What's the matter?"

The doctor did not answer. His eyes felt like burning coals in their sockets and he covered them with his hand to blot out the terrible recognition that was eating into his brain.

"Bob!" Mollie cried in distress. "Say something."

Logan lowered his hand, revealing a face that had gone gray and haggard. He was no longer aware of the others around him. His eyes searched the floor, located his satchel where he had dropped it, and he stepped over to pick it up.

They watched in strained and puzzled silence as he approached the desk and stood there. After a while he turned towards the door, and his eyes fell upon Jess Plum.

"You've been a loyal friend, Jess," he said. "Do one more thing for me. Keep them here out of harm's way. I'm going to kill Jack Overstreet."

He passed out into the night.

"Bob!" Mollie cried after him. "Are you crazy?"

Barton recovered from his stupefaction and started forward.

"Kill Overstreet? In Heaven's name, what for?"

Jess Plum backed towards the door ahead of father and daughter. "If Doc Logan means to kill him," he said briefly,

"he needs killin'."

"But he wouldn't have a chance against Overstreet. Not against the Range Doctor."

"Leave be," Plum ordered, and his voice was stern. "Doc Logan is the Range Doctor!"

His rifle barrel dropped to bar the way before the frantic Mollie.

Ten

AT THREE O'CLOCK in the morning the Texas Tommy was silent and dark. The gambling casino was closed and locked. The windows of Overstreet's living quarters were tightly shuttered, the doors were barred. Not a ray of light escaped the sumptuous chamber.

But the gambler had not retired. Fully dressed, he was pacing his Persian carpet with a savage unrest. Secure in his privacy, the mask had slipped from his inscrutable face, revealing features drawn in agony. His black hair had been worried by his nervous fingers until it had lost its customary sleekness.

He paused occasionally in his tigerish pacing to pour himself a tiny glass of brandy from a slowly emptying decanter on the taboret. Tossing off the liquor at a single gulp, he resumed his striding back and forth. Once he halted beside the chess table and stared gloomily at the board. If ever Dr. Logan had suffered bitter remorse over the death of the veterinary, this strange man was damning himself for all eternity.

Again and again he went over the steps of his downfall, the developments of the past few months marching through his mind in stark review. How had he erred? How could he have changed the course of events? He found no loophole. The final bitter sacrifice, once having set his feet on the path chosen, had been inevitable.

He cursed the hour he had first gone to Frijole Flats in his honest attempt to investigate the Pelham murders. If only he had not gone. If only Griggsby had assumed the avenger rôle and killed the three murderers before that catastrophic visit.

For it was in Frijole Flats that he had met John Naylor on an equal footing, and an evil idea had been born between them. Nothing less than the removal of Charles Hohner—who deserved to die—and the taking over of the land company on a fifty-fifty partnership basis.

But regrets, like good intentions, were vain. There was nothing for it now but to keep on until the string was played out. He poured another thimbleful of brandy and gazed sardonically down at the chessboard.

Once, with flawless clarity, he had analysed his own character for Griggsby over a chess game. Definitely committed to a certain course, he sacrificed ruthlessly to win an objective. In the present crisis of realities he had done the same. He had won only what he had had before teaming up with Naylor, and at what a price!

He laughed aloud, and there was crystal bitterness in the sound. He would have given his hope of heaven to recall that fatal partnership. He halted again, ran both hands through his hair with a despairing gesture, and seized the brandy decanter. A knock on the alley door startled him.

"Who's there?" he called.

"It's Dr. Logan," the voice of the physician answered him.

An impenetrable mask settled over the gambler's features. His hand steadied, and he smoothed his hair. With a firm step he went to the door and opened it.

For a moment doctor and gambler stood face to face. Both were pale and haggard, both were weary, but burning blue eyes met burning black eyes in a long dynamic glance.

"Back so soon from Frijole Flats?" Overstreet broke the silence in surprise. "Come in. I hardly expected you before morning."

Satchel in hand, Logan crossed the threshold and advanced into the room while Overstreet closed and barred the door. The doctor walked past the chess table and turned to face the gambler across it.

"Sit down," Overstreet invited, "while I pour you a drink."

"I want nothing, thanks," Logan declined, sitting behind the table and placing his satchel between his knees. "I have bad news for you, Overstreet."

"You were unsuccessful?"

"We were signally successful. We took Frijole Flats without firing a shot. We recovered all the loot of the robberies."

"Good. Tell me about it. Did you find Griggsby?"

"Yes. Is d'Auberg still missing?"

"Yes, he is. Why do you ask?"

"Sit opposite me, Overstreet," Logan said, indicating the board with his left hand, his right remaining in his lap. "I can illustrate better by using these men."

Overstreet shrugged and took the opposite chair.

"A chessboard can be likened to a map—a sort of battle-field," Logan went on, leaning forward. "It can also represent the checkered lives of people."

Overstreet frowned slightly. "True, but what has that to do with Pierre d'Auberg?"

The hanging lamp overhead shed a soft, mellow glow which relieved the weary lines in the doctor's face and pinked the pallid features of the gambler.

"I'll open by moving my king's pawn to king four," Logan said, moving the piece with his left hand.

"The king's gambit," Overstreet murmured.

"Yes. That can represent the coming of the Hohner land company to the Horseshoe Range. Will you make the logical counter move?"

Overstreet obliged with a duplicating move of the black king's pawn.

"That," said Logan, "is symbolic of your meeting with John Naylor at Frijole Flats."

Instantly Overstreet became tense. He looked across the table with tragic eyes. "Why do you say that, Logan?"

The doctor let him have it straight. "There's no point in beating around the bush, Overstreet. You, not d'Auberg, were the partner of Naylor. The Cajun was just your contact man. Don't make me explain what you know better than I."

Overstreet didn't bat an eye. All of his former nervousness had disappeared, leaving him as cold and steady as a glacier.

"Just how do you arrive at this amazing conclusion?"

"The way you killed Tom Griggsby. You shot him exactly as you shot Charles Hohner.

For the first time Overstreet started slightly. He opened his mouth to speak and then closed it silently. He relaxed and let his arms slip easily to his sides. He stared at the tense face of his accuser, a queer little smile gathering about his classical lips. Then:

"Go on," he said quietly.

"I could have forgiven you everything but that," Logan said bitterly. "You killed my best friend—and yours. You

were afraid of Tom Griggsby's sharp mind. But you shot him needlessly, Overstreet. He would never have suspected you. Have you anything to say before I pass judgment on you?"

The accused man sighed in resignation.

"You are surprisingly close to the truth, Logan, and all because of a little telltale shot pattern. I guess you won't believe me, and it makes little difference now, but I didn't intend for a single person to suffer violence when I took over the Hohner outfit. That's why I planned every detail with such care. The shooting of the stage driver was the senseless panic of a vicious man. I still intend to bring Holcomb to a reckoning for that. And I'm glad now that Griggsby killed Naylor.

"I've liked you, Logan. I should have thought of the possibility of your recognizing my gun technique, but it's too late now. I'll have to kill you, of course. But I want to explain about Griggsby. You're wrong there. That was the ugliest thing I ever did in my life, but the Range Doctor was far too shrewd to leave on my trail. I could have let Naylor be the scapegoat, but after the treachery of that Sims girl the Range Doctor would have been smart enough to see beyond Pierre d'Auberg. I had to do it. Anything else?"

"Just one thing," Logan told him solemnly. "Overstreet, you're a sublime fool. I am the Range Doctor."

There was a ghastly silence. For a long space the two men stared into each other's eyes. An expression of disbelief flicked across Overstreet's face and was gone.

"You're lying," he said. "You're not even armed."

"Being armed is no protection against your derringer draw, Overstreet. I have had you covered under the table ever since you sat down."

The gambler looked as far into Logan's lap as the table edge permitted. All he could see was the end of the doctor's gaping satchel. He raised his eyes and met Logan's steady gaze. He read implacable purpose in those burning blue eyes, and he knew they had come to the end of the road.

"I see," he said calmly. "I understand—everything. You carry your guns in your satchel."

"I do, but I'm giving you an even break. I know how fast you are with your trick pistols, and you can't miss at this range. If you're ready, draw and die like a man instead of a dog!"

The play was ended, and Overstreet accepted the fact. He shrugged—and this time his deadly little guns appeared magically in his hands. He fired across the table top even as the butts slapped into his palms, and twin streaks of flame darted towards the doctor's heart.

Logan did not move. There was a bitter little smile about his lips as he invited death. But, coincident with the gambler's shrug, he squeezed the trigger of the long-barrelled .38 he held between his knees. The slug tore into his adversary's vitals, blasting him back in his chair just as Overstreet fired his own derringers.

By a scant margin this deflected that deadly aim. One bullet broke Logan's collarbone. The other ploughed along a rib and buried itself in the back of the doctor's chair.

Neither man fired again, each sure the other was mortally wounded. Like marionettes they sat there staring into each other's eyes. Wisps of gun-smoke curled fantastically up between them to caress with gentle, almost timid touch the base of the hanging lamp overhead.

Logan's gun thudded to the carpet along with his gaping satchel. Overstreet's hands dropped leadenly to his sides, the muzzles of his short guns kissing the silken nap of the rug. It was a grim scene, but somehow both men looked happier. The tragic expression was lifting from the gambler's face; the stony bitterness was melting from the bleak features of the doctor.

IT WAS THREE DAYS before Logan made a complete return to consciousness. During this period of alternate deep sleep and delirium there were occasional semi-lucid intervals when he became hazily aware of his surroundings. He spent hours adrift on a billowing sea, he was lashed to a stake in the midst of savage Indians, there was snow on the ground with a church steeple in the distance behind stately trees. He revisited patients he thought ne had cured, he lived over scenes with Griggsby and Overstreet, he mingled again with people he nad known and persons he had killed. And over it all there presided a strange man with white hair, wrinkled cheeks, and bright, birdlike eyes.

On the third day he became fully awake to find himself in one of Judge Steele's bedrooms on a huge feather bed with a white counterpane. The snow and church and trees resolved

themselves into a large picture beyond the foot of his bed. The recurrent but not unbearable nagging pains in his chest brought to his attention that his left arm had been neatly bandaged across his breast.

The door opened softly, and the white-headed man with the birdlike eyes came in. He was a stocky little man with a brisk, professional manner.

"Ah!" he beamed at sight of the patient's open eyes. "How d'you feel, Dr. Logan?"

"As well as could be expected, I guess," Logan answered weakly. "I didn't think to wake up here."

"You're doing nicely," said the energetic little man, feeling his forehead and counting his pulse. "I'm Dr. James from Clearwater. They sent for me the day before yesterday. You've got a broken left clavicle and all the cartilage gouged off the sixth rib, but you'll be as good as new in a few weeks. You need rest as much as anything. You've been wearing yourself out. Feel strong enough to have a little company?"

"Day before yesterday?" Logan croaked hoarsely.

"Don't start fretting. I've been looking after your most urgent cases. You've had a mighty fine pair of nurses. Comely girls, too. But Judge Steele and Henry Barton want to talk to you. Feel up to it?"

Logan nodded. "Bring them in," he said in a weak voice.

Dr. James bustled out and returned with the judge and Barton. The two men advanced and shook hands.

"I guess you'd like to know what the tally is, son," Barton said, "so we won't waste any time. We've caught d'Auberg and Holcomb. And we finally pieced the whole story together with what Jess Plum told us."

"Jess Plum told you—about me?"

"He did, Bob," the judge said. "Your name is on everybody's tongue. I guess you're the most talked of man in the whole state about now. You've even made a believer of Matlock. But why didn't you tell us that night you were the Range Doctor?"

"Because I was a fool. I was already deep in the mess and I didn't see how it would help to involve anybody else. I tried to handle Cherry Russell differently, but I had to shoot him in self-defence. I've made a mess of everything."

"We don't think so, son," Barton contradicted. "In the light of all we've learned we think you've done a mighty fine job."

Logan shuddered slightly. "Overstreet?" he asked.

"Haskell planted him and Naylor Wednesday. We buried Tom yesterday. We didn't know how long you'd be out of your head, son." Barton was apologetic.

Logan regarded him in silence.

"I think we've talked enough for the first visit," the judge put in tactfully. "Come on, Henry. The girls want to see Bob."

They withdrew over Logan's protests. He lay there staring at the wall after they had gone, wondering just how he was going to gather up the shattered bits of his life and carry on. Damn it, Overstreet should have shot a little straighter!

A short while later he heard a lighter step at the door, and he braced himself to receive Mollie. Instead, it was Betty who came into the room. She approached the bed, her blue eyes filling with tears as she bent over and kissed his forehead.

"Hello, Betty," he said, smiling wanly up at her.

"Hello, yourself," she said, sitting on the side of the bed. "I thought you were never going to wake up. I want to have a little serious talk with you, Bob."

He became apprehensive. "What about?"

"You and me—and Mollie. First, I've a little confession to make. In spite of Mollie's matchmaking, I'm not in love with you. Don't ask me why. I don't know. I think I'm crazy not to be, but that's the way it is."

"Betty! Please——" he protested, and she laid her slim fingers across his lips.

"Let me finish," she went on earnestly. "Since you've been injured I've made a couple of interesting discoveries. First, you've been babbling about Mollie in your delirium. I think you love her. But the most——"

"Betty, for heaven's sake!" Logan exclaimed, catching her hand and pleading with her with his eyes. "You haven't heard me raving anything like that? You haven't told anybody?"

"Not yet," she said, her eyes twinkling. "And here's the strange coincidence. Mollie has betrayed herself in her anxiety over you. She's mad about you and doesn't know it. Need I say more?"

"No," he groaned. "You've said too much."

"Well? What are you going to do about it?"

He looked at her, pain in his eyes. "You're mistaken about Mollie. She loved Uncle Tom. I know. She said so."

"When?"

"That night—when we found him."

She pursed her lips and wrinkled her brow thoughtfully.

Then her face cleared. "And what about you? Am I wrong about your feeling?"

"Listen, Betty," he evaded. "Don't meddle with things you don't understand. I'm not the marrying kind. I'm in love with my work. I'm a doctor—and a pretty awful one at that."

"Cowbells!" she jeered. "Don't start that noble abnegation routine. I asked you what you're going to do about this?"

"Nothing," he said stubbornly.

"I see I can't get anywhere with you," she said, springing up in swift decision and going to the door. "Mollie! Mollie, come in here, will you?"

"Here—what—Betty——" Logan spluttered helplessly, and broke off in dismay as Mollie appeared in the doorway. All he could do was lie there and stare at her with hungry eyes.

The same swell Mollie. She glanced from Logan to Betty and back again with a warm little smile. "What's going on in here? Is she teasing you, Bob?"

"We're settling a little family matter," Betty said firmly, "and we need your advice. Come." And she took Mollie's hand and led her towards the bed where she reached for Logan's free hand.

"Now listen, Mollie," she continued. "Bob and I have just told each other frankly that we're not in love. It was such a relief to both of us that Bob confessed to me he is hopelessly in love with you."

"I did not," Logan almost roared, unsuccessfully trying to pull his hand away. "Why do women pick on a man when he's down?"

"He's bashful as a cowboy, Mollie," Betty went on calmly. Then she added brazenly, "But one confidence called for another. I told him how crazy in love you are with him. I hope I haven't given any secrets away."

Mollie didn't speak. Her face slowly reddened, but she looked from her sister to Logan with wide, solemn eyes.

Logan was inarticulate with panic. His heart was pounding and the blood was roaring in his ears. He wished he could sink out of sight in the feather bed.

Betty, her eyes dancing impishly, went on without mercy. "Now you two will have to figure this out," she said, joining their hands together and stepping back. "I want Bob for a brother-in-law. I'm the baby of the family, and you'll have to humor me."

Having wrought all the havoc she could, she left them like

that and walked out of the room. They didn't even hear the door closing softly behind her. They were still looking at each other, and what they saw in the other's face left each breathless.

Mollie went slowly to her knees beside the bed. She rested her face against his good arm and began to weep softly.

"Mollie," he whispered. "Don't cry, Mollie. I—I thought you loved Uncle Tom. You said so."

"I did. I do!" she answered, her voice muffled. "But—but not that way."

"Look at me," he begged, a new note in his voice.

Almost reluctantly she raised a tear-stained adorable face and permitted him a brief glance into her eyes before her lashes covered them. He released her hand to raise her chin.

"Mollie, darling," he murmured. "Knowing everything, would you—could you become the wife of a berserk fool like me?"

"Of you only, my beloved," she answered tenderly.



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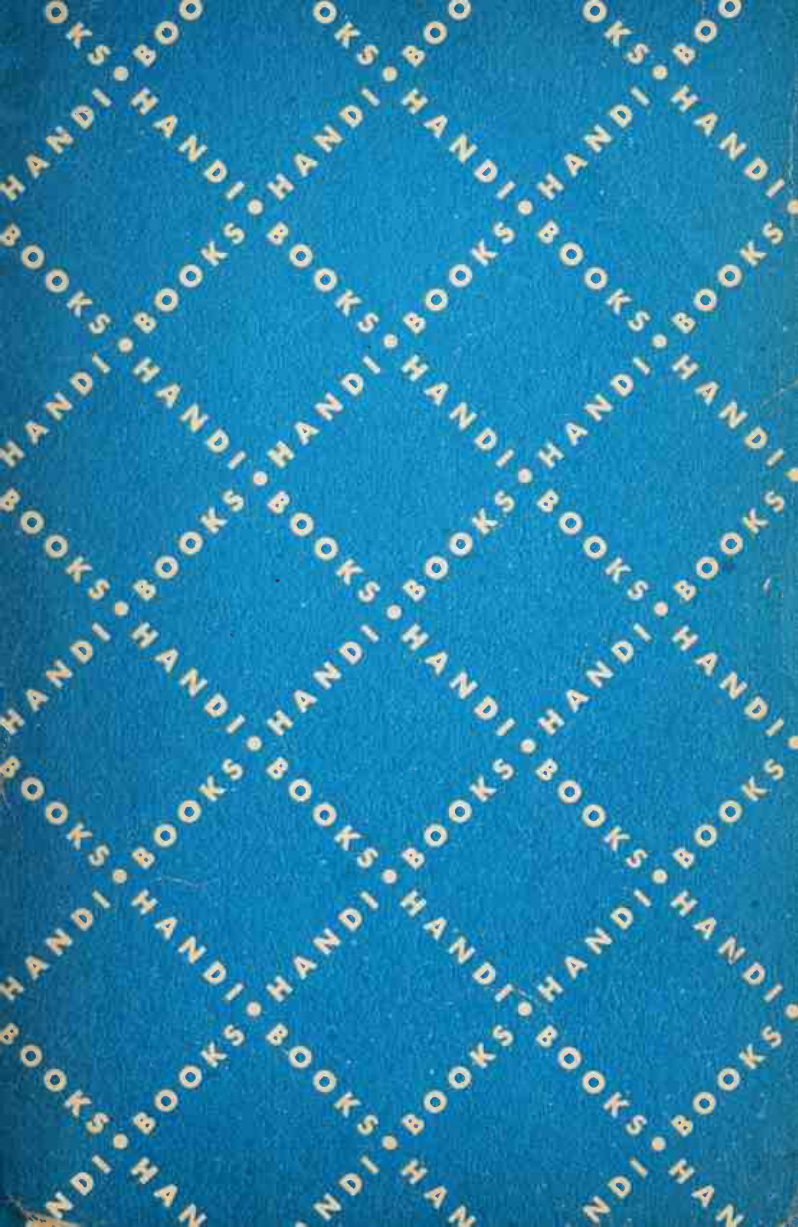
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WHEN DOCTOR ROBERT LOGAN hung out his shingle in Gila City, he expected to practice peacefully and gainfully among the people of the town and cattlemen of the rangeland. But a firm belief in the higher ethics of his profession promised short life of his expectations.

Doe Bryant, gimlet-eyed veterinarian, whose crude and cruel horse-doctor methods applied to humans as well as animals, had good reason for resenting Logan's competition and ordered him off the range. Because he refused to fight, Bob was called a coward and his few prospective patients promptly forgot all about him. Trouble with a vicious land development company didn't help any, either—for it was the organization responsible for the death of his father years before. On top of all this there were a couple of girls . . .

Old Tom Griggsby finally lost patience with the young doctor. "Being ethical," he said, "is just standing still while the other fellow cuts your guts out!"

So Bob Logan put a six-shooter into his medicine kit, dropped an ethic or two, and became a range doctor—on a range where a doctor was needed—in more ways than one.

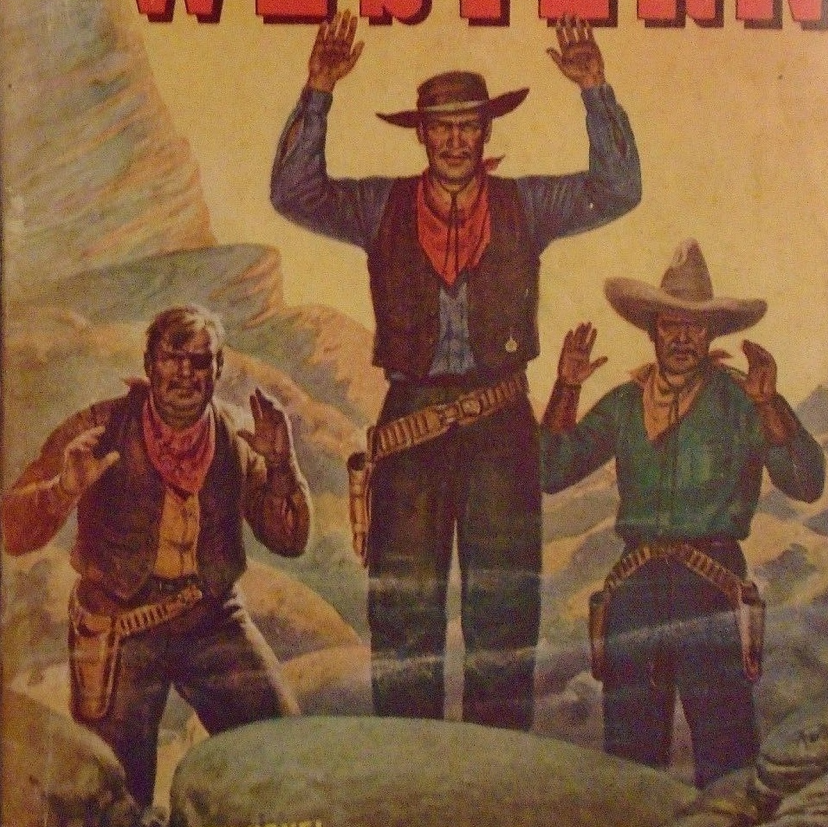
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